

Press Releases: Interview With Michel Ghandour of Al Hurra

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for your time first.

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's great to be with you.

QUESTION: Thanks so much. How would this Warsaw conference help counter Iran malign activity in the Middle East and push the peace and the prosperity and the security of the region?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So you had a historic gathering of 60-plus nations. We saw for one of the first times in recent history the Israelis and the Arabs sitting together talking about how to deliver Middle East peace and security in the future. That's a wonderful advance and real progress.

We certainly talked about all the issues, whether it's Yemen or Syria, and we talked about the threat Iran poses. There was complete unanimity among – there were no objections from any country that didn't understand the real risk that the Islamic Republic of Iran presents to the Middle East and the greater world, and there was a real commitment to help every nation push back against that security threat.

QUESTION: And Mr. Secretary, do you consider Warsaw conference as a major step towards normalization between Israel and the Arab countries?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It was a remarkable thing to watch these leaders meet and gather and have conversations. It seemed – what was great about it is it didn't seem, feel historic. It felt right – nations coming together to work against a set of risks that present real risk to their own people, every country there to protect its own sovereign interest. And whether they were Arab or Israeli or European or from Asia, these countries all recognized the threat and made real commitments to come together to figure out the best way to address each of these security issues.

QUESTION: And what do you think about Palestinians boycotting the conference?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I regret it. I wish they had been here to be part of the conversation. There were many different voices here. There was lots of places where countries disagreed, and they voiced those concerns. I think we each learned from them, and it was cumulative, additive. It was better because there were different voices. I regret that the Palestinians rejected the invitation that was extended to them. I wish they had come here. I think the Palestinian people are a little worse off because their leaders chose not to participate.

QUESTION: And have you discussed the deal of the century in details and when you will be able to present it to the region and to the parties?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So Mr. Kushner was here along with Mr. Greenblatt. They shared a little bit of the outlines of the deal, really the central tenets of what we're hoping to achieve. And we hope we are able to roll out the full plan, all of the details of that plan, in the weeks ahead.

QUESTION: On Iran, Mr. Secretary, critics say that your Iran strategy is not working. You also expected that Iran's economy will fall into recession by spring. Is that still your expectation, and how will the recession affect the Iranian regime behavior?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, on the economic front, the one that you've focused on in that question, our objective is simple. We want to ensure that Qasem Soleimani has as few dollars as possible to create death and destruction throughout the world. And so we are attempting to choke off the regime's money that is going towards terrorism. That's the objective.

We have a second objective in our plan. It's to support the Iranian people. We have humanitarian exceptions to the sanctions so that food and medicine can get to them, and we want that. We want the Iranian people to have their voices heard. These are our objectives. Look, we brook no ill will towards the Iranian people, indeed just the opposite. We care more about the Iranian people than many of Iranian leaders – the Iranian leaders have demonstrated. We want them to be successful. We want them to thrive. And to do that you can't squander resources, money, all around the Middle East conducting terror campaigns.

QUESTION: But is the strategy working, Mr. Secretary?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We think it's working.

QUESTION: It's working.

SECRETARY POMPEO: And we think it will continue to work in the future as well.

QUESTION: On Syria, what kind of progress have you made with the Turkish – or with Turkey regarding the security zone in Syria? And who will fill the vacuum in northeastern Syria after the U.S. withdrawal?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Remember President Trump's commitment to the destruction of ISIS/Daesh is real and it is continuing. The decision to withdraw our 2,000 U.S. uniformed personnel from northeast Syria remains. We're going to do that. This is a change in tactics, not a change in our mission. Our mission was the destruction of the caliphate, and that's almost complete. And then we have a continuing obligation to make sure that ISIS or other radical Islamist terror groups can't conduct a resurgence, can't retake that real estate. We remain committed to achieving that goal as well.

We're in discussions – ones that you referred to – about how we will manage that. We're in discussions with the Kurdish forces. We're in discussion with the Turks. We are hopeful that that political process under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 will begin to yield results before too long.

QUESTION: But it will take time after the U.S. withdrawal. Meanwhile, who will replace the Americans?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I am confident that the mission remains unchanged and that the United States will continue to do all that it takes on the mission we are set about – the complete destruction of the caliphate and making sure that the threat from ISIS remains mitigated.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, on Lebanon. Lebanon has a new government that decided to boycott the Warsaw conference. How do you assess that? And Hizballah is more powerful now in Beirut.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yep, Hizballah is definitely more powerful than they were four or five years ago. I think that's a true statement, and I regret that. In the same way, I regret that the Lebanese leadership didn't come here today to express their views, their objectives. We want good things for the country of Lebanon. We want it to be unified and we want Iran out. And the fact that they are in Lebanon under the guise of Hizballah is plain to the world. It was plain for all 60-plus countries here to see today. We talked a great deal in one of the subgroups about how we would contain Hizballah illicit finance and push back against their money laundering, some of which takes place through Lebanese financial institutions. We are partners with Lebanon to achieve a good outcome for the people of Lebanon.

QUESTION: On the GCC, Mr. Secretary, to what extent is the reconciliation between Gulf states essential to launch the Middle East Strategic Alliance, and when should we expect the launch?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So I don't know when the launch will be. We're working towards it. We're making progress. I think there was a little more progress made during this ministerial as well, although it wasn't the primary focus of the gathering. There's no doubt that the GCC rift makes that a little more difficult, but I am confident too that as we work on this process – we call it MESA – as we work on this strategic alliance, this fundamental reframing about security in the Middle East, that that effort as well will lead towards reducing some of the tensions that's created by the rift. At least we're hopeful that that will be the case.

QUESTION: My last question will be on Sudan, Mr. Secretary. Demonstrations are still going on asking for regime change there. What's your assessment?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, much like I talked about in other places, it's very difficult for the Sudanese people today. We're hopeful that their voices will be heard and that the transition, if there is one, will be led by them and not by outside influences.

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

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much, sir. Thank you.

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