

Press Releases: Interview With Mina Al-Oraibi of The National

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for making the time to speak to *The National*.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Of course, wonderful to be with you.

QUESTION: Thank you. I want to ask you about Iran, basically, because of course, here in the region, we have a lot of concerns about Iran's expansionist policies, and you recently said that Ayatollah Khamenei has to be held to account for destabilizing the Gulf's security. How can he be held to account?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So there are lots of ways. First, a united opposition is very important, and it's one of the reasons I'm here. We have great partners here in the United Arab Emirates, we have great partners with the Saudis and the Bahrainis, many countries pushing back, demonstrating that what we're asking is pretty simple: Iran to become a more normal country.

The tools we'll use will be varied. They'll often be diplomatic. You see the U.S.-led efforts on sanctions, so economic tools. And then it's also the case that we will be prepared to make sure that when Iran does things like launch missiles that come here or go to Riyadh, that we're prepared to defend the region as well militarily.

QUESTION: The recent threat of closing the Strait of Hormuz is one that, of course, the whole world cares about. Is that a realistic threat?

SECRETARY POMPEO: The United States has made very clear we're going to make sure that the sea lanes remain open. It's been a longstanding U.S. policy and we're prepared to make sure that that happens.

QUESTION: Now, if we look at Yemen, we see an uptick of activity from Hizballah and from Iran's support for the Houthis. What can the international

community do to stop that and how can we see an end to the war in Yemen?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So I do hope that there ultimately is a political resolution there. The UN, through Mr. Griffiths, is working hard to achieve that political resolution. But at the end of the day, it's going to require a global effort to convince the Iranians that this kind of meddling, this kind of interference, this kind of promotion of violence directed at Arab countries outside of Yemen doesn't make sense for them. And so all the same tools that I described previously are the ones that will ultimately lead to the Houthis and others in Yemen realizing that the war is not worth continuing, that a political resolution is the one that's best for the people of Yemen.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) sorts of actions that can be taken in addition to, of course, the sanctions to convince the Iranians to change their behavior? Because what we've seen in the last few years is whatever pressure has not wielded the results you're hoping for so far.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, remember the last few years, the sanctions were lifted. And so much of this malign activity, this increase in resources provided to Hizballah, the increase in resources provided to the Shia militias fighting in Iraq and in Syria, the support for the Houthis in Yemen, the efforts in Bahrain, those all took place against the backdrop of a relief from sanctions as a result of agreements that were entered into in the JCPOA. America has now withdrawn from those. These sanctions are returning. And I am convinced that the combined effort of the Gulf states and the United States and the Europeans will ultimately achieve a good outcome and convince the Iranian people that this is not the kind of activity their government ought to be involved with.

QUESTION: Are you working on an alternative deal when it comes to the nuclear activities of Iran? Do we expect another deal, a different type of deal?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, if there's another deal, it'll be completely different. It will be of permanent duration and not temporary. It will have a verification regime that is sufficient to ensure that nuclear weapons aren't being hidden or developed in a clandestine way. And equally importantly, it won't just be about the nuclear program. It'll be about their space program, which is really a proxy for their missile efforts. It'll be about their missile program, it'll be about the malign activity, it will be a comprehensive effort to convince Iran to behave in a way that we ask every other country in the world to behave.

QUESTION: Iran's presence in Syria is one that causes concern for Syrians and the region. Are you in talks with the Russians to work together to push out Iran and Hizballah's influence in Syria?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So we have spoken with many parties in Syria, including the Russians, and made very clear, as have the Israelis, that the Iranian presence in Syria is not appropriate and won't be tolerated. So we're working diligently to develop a political solution that not only achieves America's goal of defeating ISIS that's still there, still a challenge for us in Syria,

but leads Iran to the place where they conclude it's not worth the candle for them to be in Syria. There's no reason for them to reach out to that country. There's no reason to have military forces on the ground there. And we're going to undertake, along with our partners, a comprehensive program to diminish that activity.

QUESTION: We've seen some Iraqi militia forces in Syria under the leadership of Iranian military commanders or the IRCG commanders. What do you say to the Iraqi Government on that role that they're playing?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So yes, Qasem Soleimani is causing trouble throughout Iraq and Syria, and we need to raise the cost for him, for he and his organization and for him personally. With respect to the Iraqi Government, we're working closely with the Iraqis to make sure that as they move through their government formation process – as the election is now over, as they move through the government formation process, what America wants is an Iraqi – Iraq for Iraqis, not influenced by Iran but rather comprised of the various groups: the Kurds, the Sunnis, the Shias. We want everyone to have a voice in an Iraqi national government that leads to an Iraq that is strong and independent and robust and economically successful as well.

QUESTION: If we go back to Syria, is the U.S.'s position still that Assad must go?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Our first step is to take down the violence. The first thing that America's working on politically is to reduce the level of violence. We have six million-plus displaced persons. We've got to restore the opportunity for the Syrian people to begin to engage politically and develop a stable, non-violent Syria. At that point, the political decisions, the constitution of Syria will be sorted out by the Syrian people.

QUESTION: And I want to ask you finally, on the issue of Qatar, as the Qatar crisis has developed, they've gotten closer and closer to Iran. So as this coalition is put together to face off on Iran's activities in the region, what is your message to the Qataris on that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: My message and the President's message to the entire Gulf (inaudible) is that we hope that they will begin to have discussions and resolve this dispute. We understand there are differences of views. This happens among countries with great frequency. But we do also recognize that these disputes lead to a strengthening of Iran, it allows Iran to create a wedge between Gulf states that have a shared threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran. And so we are hopeful and we are prepared to try and help facilitate to the extent we can a resolution of this set of disputes.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you very much for your time.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Mina.

QUESTION: I appreciate it.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wonderful to meet you.

QUESTION: You too. It's great to meet you and best of luck on your trip.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Eagerly anticipated.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes.

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