

Press Releases: Remarks to Press

Remarks

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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SECRETARY POMPEO: We've got a good trip, a lengthy trip, to the Middle East. I've been to the Middle East probably as much as any Secretary of State in the beginning of their tour. I went there in my previous role quite a bit as well. They're an important set of relationships, especially for this administration as we continue to build out the coalition that's pushing back against the world's largest state sponsor of terror, Iran.

So that'll be a significant piece of what I do, but it's also the case that I haven't had a chance, although I talk to them on the phone with some frequency, to see them for a number of weeks and to come back and make sure everybody's clear about the fact that the United States is still committed to all the missions that we signed up for with them over the past two years. The counter-ISIS campaign continues, the effort – the counter-Iran campaign absolutely continues, and our commitment to support Middle East stability is still full throttle.

QUESTION: And so the Syria withdrawal does not impact at all your commitment to Middle East?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Nope.

QUESTION: Will you have sort of a – give sort of a timeline for what the – it looks like now and how many troops this is?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We don't talk about timelines.

QUESTION: Do you talk with your allies?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We don't talk about timelines. The President's made a commitment. We're going to withdraw our uniformed personnel, uniformed guys, 2,000 roughly folks on the ground. We're going to withdraw them from Syria.

QUESTION: But will you talk about timelines with your allies? Because they have a lot of questions about your strategy now that you're withdrawing.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've actually spoken to them all. Tell me what your source is for the fact that they have lots of questions.

QUESTION: Well, I am French. The French concerns.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've spoken to the French. I've spoken to the French.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: They know precisely what our intentions are and what we're doing.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: I mean, look, we've had lots of conversations with them. We've briefed them fully. We'll continue to talk to them. We'll continue to stay in contact with them. We'll – if it's not going perfectly, we'll work to make it better. We'll make sure we address concerns that they have. But everyone's got – everyone's been communicated with, all the countries I'm going to visit. We've communicated with all of our European allies. I think everyone understands what the United States is doing. At least the senior leaders in their governments do.

QUESTION: When you talk of Iran, can you tell us a little bit about the nature of what these conversations are going to be like amid Iran still in Syria, in Lebanon; concerns the Israelis have, certainly?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. We took over for an administration that had let Iran run loose. It is a big effort to push back against them, make no mistake about it. The United States policy was to work closely alongside Iran, and 24 months in now we have absolutely made progress. I hear lots of talk about the fact that U.S. sanctions alone don't work. We should all go see what the value of the rial is to see if there's any truth to that. I'll let others evaluate it. But make no mistake, we're committed. They're the world largest state sponsor of terror. They continue an assassination campaign in Europe. Hizballah continues to threaten not only Lebanon but Israel.

These are things that there is an enormous coalition that we have built and which we will continue to expand upon that understands the threat to their countries, to the United States, and to the world, and we're going to talk to them about the modalities by which we may continue to apply pressure for the singular purpose of getting the revolutionary behavior of the Iranian regime to stop, to – I laid out the 12 things we'd like Iran not to do, and that remains unchanged.

MR PALLADINO: Tracy, do you have a question?

QUESTION: Yeah, but you understand the confusion –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm sorry?

QUESTION: You understand the confusion when the President says one thing and Bolton says another thing. How do we interpret all of this? How do we – the

contradictions about Syria?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I think they've both said the same thing.

QUESTION: Well, not exactly. Withdrawal immediately, withdrawal –

SECRETARY POMPEO: They've both said we're going to get out.

QUESTION: Yeah.

SECRETARY POMPEO: The President said we're going to do it in an orderly fashion that achieves our objective, and that the – our mission set in the region remains unchanged. Those seems pretty – it seemed pretty consistent to me.

QUESTION: But don't you lose some sort of leverage by no longer having U.S. troops in Syria? At some point, when you talk about wanting to protect the Kurds or push back on the Iranian influence, is that lessened by the fact that you don't have a military presence there?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We will accomplish our mission. I am very confident of that. The decisions about how to do that, right, we've got our – as an example, we counter ISIS in lots of places in the world, right? Many, many, in West Africa, in Asia, Southeast Asia. There are lots of places that we've got real counter-ISIS campaigns ongoing and underway. In some of them we have uniformed soldiers, and in some of them we don't. These are tactical, and our mission set is how do we best use the tool set that we have – coalition building, our own American power – to achieve that end, and this is what we're doing in Syria and in Iraq and all throughout the Middle East.

QUESTION: Do you want Arab troops then to maybe take that role on in northern Syria?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're going to talk a lot about how to make sure we're doing everything we can – we the broader we, the collective we, not just the United States is doing and how we make sure that – now look, we've taken down 99 percent of the caliphate, 99 percent of the caliphate. That should be the first sentence in every story, right? Everybody agree? Anybody disagree with the facts? This has been an enormously successful campaign, and we've had lots of good partners doing that. The United States had an important role, but lots of folks have helped us achieve that, and I am confident we will continue to ensure that the kind of rise that ISIS had under the Obama administration doesn't occur again.

QUESTION: That ensuring – sorry, that enduring defeat of ISIS is still the –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, (inaudible). And we know these are longtime challenges, right? The threat from radical Islamic terrorism is going to be with us for a while, and we're determined to stay at it and continue to make sure that the resurgence of large land-based caliphates like ISIS don't happen on our watch.

QUESTION: Has the withdrawal started already or not?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm not going to talk about that. I'll leave the (inaudible).

QUESTION: What about (inaudible) – how about the diplomatic personnel, diplomatic personnel?

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

QUESTION: And Israel-Palestine, do we – are you expecting to be raising anything of that about the U.S. peace plan and –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, we will absolutely talk about that. We'll talk about how it is that we can achieve that part of our mission statement as well. We probably won't get into a great deal of detail about the to and fro, but we will absolutely make that part of our conversations. It's an important part of this administration's plans for how you get stability in the Middle East.

QUESTION: But is that being held off until the elections, the Israeli elections?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're trying to (inaudible) make sure that Israel and the Palestinians find a peaceful way forward.

QUESTION: What are the biggest specific short-term deliverables you're looking to get from your counterparts on Syria and on Iran?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm not going to talk about the details of the conversations that we're going to have, but –

QUESTION: But anything you're looking to do or get to advance – to advance these goals (inaudible)?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, lots of things, but I'm not going to share them with you. Yeah. Look, it should be noticed, right, we have built out a coalition that is unequalled in the Middle East, right? We have countries working together that for a long time were at cross-purposes. My first stop in Amman, they're working closely with other partners that they haven't always worked with, and we will – we'll go on to Cairo. They too are working on projects that are of a nature and scope that are unprecedented.

This is a coalition that understands that the largest threats – terrorism and the Islamic Republic of Iran – are things that we ought to work on jointly, and we'll be marshalling all of the resources – theirs and ours – to achieve them. But I would say too we'll have an opportunity to make sure that we include the Europeans in this. They want to be part of this counter-ISIS campaign in an important way just as they have been, and we have every expectation they'll continue to be.

QUESTION: So what's the course correction that you're trying to make from the last administration and this one in broad strokes in terms of U.S. Middle East policy?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, we're actually going to set a policy that's actually

going to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons. That's probably the most important thing that we're expecting to achieve.

Do you have one more?

QUESTION: Yeah, I have one more. I understand there's going to be a speech in Cairo. Is there any desire to preview it a little bit for us?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'll give lots of remarks during my time here to you all on the plane, and otherwise I will give a set of remarks in Cairo as well. We'll give you a little heads-up before it gets out and rolled out. So yeah, a sense of the structure.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you, sir.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you all.

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