

Press Releases: Senior State Department Officials Previewing Secretary Pompeo's Upcoming Trip to the Middle East

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
January 4, 2019

MODERATOR: Thank you and good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for this background call to preview Secretary Pompeo's upcoming trip to Amman, Cairo, Manama, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Riyadh, Muscat, and Kuwait City.

We are joined today by [Senior State Department Official One]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number One.

We have [Senior State Department Official Two]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Two.

[Senior State Department Official Three], he will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Three.

And [Senior State Department Official Four], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Four.

As a reminder, today's call is on background and will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. With that, I'm happy to turn it over to our senior State Department officials to give a brief outline of each stop in the order of each – of the trip itinerary. We'll start with an overview of the trip and then we'll open it up for your questions.

All right, so Senior State Department Official Number One, over to you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Thanks, folks. The Secretary's trip to the region centers on two main themes. First, the United States is not leaving the Middle East. Despite reports to the contrary and false narratives surrounding the Syria decision, we are not going anywhere. The Secretary will reinforce that commitment to the region and our partners.

Second, the Iranian regime is the dangerous actor in the region. There is no greater threat to stability than the Iranian regime. The 12 demands that the United States has asked for remain. The Secretary will continue his work on

galvanizing our regional partners and allies to counter the regime's destabilizing activities.

MODERATOR: And now we'll go to Senior State Department Official Number Two.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Thank you. In Amman, the Secretary's trip will be an opportunity to reinforce our commitment to Jordan's stability and security which remains as strong as ever a commitment from us, and to continue to enhance our partnership with Jordan for the benefit of broader regional security and stability.

To that end, Jordan, of course, has been a key partner in the campaign to defeat ISIS and has long been a key stabilizing element in the broader region. And this is why the United States continues to be the single largest donor of economic security and humanitarian assistance to Jordan, providing \$1.3 billion in bilateral foreign assistance to Jordan and \$200 million in DOD support to Jordan's armed forces in Fiscal Year '17. And the United States' largest (inaudible) AID program is in Jordan as well, and our foreign military financing with Jordan is the third largest in the world.

The point to all these is that this isn't just altruistic support for Jordan.

By providing this kind of support, we're actually helping to preserve the U.S. interests and allied interests in regional security and stability.

MODERATOR: Thank you, and now Senior State Department Official Number Three.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Thank you. The U.S. relationship with Egypt is one of our longest-standing, deepest and broadest partnerships in the region for over four decades now, and Egypt continues to have a vital role in contributing to regional security and stability, including through counterterrorism efforts, supporting the UN-facilitated political process in Libya, Middle East peace, and of course countering the Iranian regime's dangerous activities.

There is also the – its importance for regional economic growth and prosperity, and under President al-Sisi's leadership, Egypt is undertaking many important initiatives, especially on the economic and energy fronts.

There are also broader socioeconomic – social issues such as President al-Sisi's efforts to advance religious tolerance and reform religious discourse in the region, and we look forward to seeing the fruits of this broadened and deepened bilateral cooperation, which of course also includes emphasizing the importance of the protection and advancement of human rights and the vital role that civil society plays in giving a voice to citizens to help address their country's challenges and contribute to stability and prosperity. And the Secretary will be engaging on all of these issues while he is there.

MODERATOR: And finally, State Department – Senior State Department Official Number Four.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: Good morning. The Secretary is going to underline the key theme of U.S. leadership in the region by visiting all six of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

This is highly unusual for a Secretary of State to visit all of the countries on one particular trip. He's visited several of them already as the Secretary of State, and of course, numerous of them previously as the CIA director. He'll be able to underscore the importance of maintaining key partnerships as we tackle common regional challenges like Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, and it will – his trip will also follow up on the President's summit in Riyadh in May 2017 and regular, consistent travel by Cabinet officials to the Gulf such as former Secretary of Defense Mattis, Secretary of Treasury Mnuchin, Secretary of Energy Perry, who all had strong engagements in the Gulf.

He will convene two strategic dialogues, the first in Doha and the second in Kuwait, so he will keep alive for – on an annual basis the strategic dialogues that we've engaged in with both of those countries.

Very briefly, in Bahrain, the Iran policy will be front and center. Bahrain is a front-line state, if you will, in our Iran strategy. Iran seeks to agitate the Shia population in Bahrain through weapons trafficking and various other means. The Secretary will be able to thank the Bahrainis for their continued provision of a key platform for us through the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. He will also thank the Bahrainis for the excellent work that they have done on human trafficking, moving up to a Tier 1 status, which is terrific for a country of the Middle East.

In the UAE, he will reinforce counterterrorism partnerships with the Emiratis. He will look to underscore our partnership with the UAE in Yemen.

In Doha, as mentioned, he will convene a strategic dialogue. The last one was convened in January 2018 here in Washington; our turn to go there to meet with the Qataris, and we'll have a full range of discussions in that strategic dialogue on multiple areas of cooperation. He will also talk about aviation with the Qataris, which is another issue that is on our bilateral agenda.

Saudi Arabia's been an important pillar for regional stability on a multitude of issues. We'll certainly talk about the Yemen conflict and Saudi Arabia's support for the outcomes of the Sweden process that took place last month. He will raise the case of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and continue to push for accountability and credibility from the Saudi leadership as they move through the legal process that began earlier this week.

He'll thank the Omanis in Muscat, the sultan in particular, for the strong efforts that the sultan has made on Middle East peace by hosting both Israeli and Palestinian leaders earlier this fall. Oman plays a critical role on Yemen, so that will feature in his discussions there. And the Omanis will just have hosted a meeting of the economic and energy pillar of the Middle East Strategic Alliance – that's January 9th. The Secretary will thank the Omanis for that. It's also the 10th year of the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement, so that's been a milestone in our relationship with the Omanis.

Finally, in Kuwait, he'll be able to underscore our strong partnership with the Kuwaitis. Kuwaitis have been very helpful on regional challenges

including Iraq reconstruction, support for refugees in Syria. He will have the aforementioned strategic dialogue, which would be the third annual strategic dialogue with the Kuwaitis, and he'll thank the emir for everything that the Kuwaitis have done to push Gulf unity under the leadership of the emir of Kuwait.

MODERATOR: Thank you, and now we'll go to the first question.

OPERATOR: We'll go to the line of Karen DeYoung with The Washington Post. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello. I have a question. I'm not sure who would answer it. But there's been a lot of discussion in the Arab world about the possibility of the United States organizing groups of troops from Arab countries to go to Syria, particularly in the northern part of Syria. Could you talk about whether that is something the Secretary will be addressing? And also, the previously planned GCC summit in this country, is that still on the calendar and is it going to happen?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, on the question of Arab troops to Syria, of course we're exploring a variety of options – I won't go into details on those – but we don't have any plans right now to facilitate Arab forces going into Syria.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: It's our hope that a GCC summit would take place in 2019, preferably even in the first quarter if it can be arranged. You remember that from the summit in Riyadh in 2017, it was agreed that there would be an annual summit. We haven't exactly kept to that calendar due to a lot of regional dynamics, but it is a commitment of the United States to host the GCC, and we envision that the steps that have been taken both through Secretary Pompeo hosting a GCC+2 meeting in New York in September, plus this MESA working group continues to build the kind of unity within the GCC countries that will make a summit very productive.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: The line of Lesley Wroughton from Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, good morning. I wonder if you can get a little bit more into what the Secretary is going to push. You spoke about more accountability on the Khashoggi murder, but exactly what is it that he's going to be seeking from the Saudis during his discussions? And number two, on Syria, is the Secretary going to discuss any sort of timeline of a troop withdrawal – U.S. troop withdrawal in Syria?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: The Secretary's been very consistent in engagements with the Saudis, including his trip to Riyadh in the middle of October two weeks after Khashoggi's death, to really press the points – the two points of accountability and credibility, which is that the Saudis should have a credible narrative for what happened in the consulate and subsequent events, and that there is full accountability, that the perpetrators and planners are identified by the Saudis and that appropriate punishments are

meted out. As you know, we have placed visa restrictions on 21 individuals.

A court proceeding began this week in Riyadh in which the 11 individuals who have been indicted were brought to the court. As you've seen, the Saudis and – the prosecutor tends to pursue the death penalty for five of them. We're not attempting to get into the weeds of how all this is done, but we do think there needs to be a credible legal process, that it should move along with alacrity, and that – as I say, that accountability is very important for the United States for the perpetrators and the planners.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Concerning Syria, we have no timeline for our military forces to withdraw from Syria. The President has made the decision that we will withdraw our military forces from Syria, but that it will be done in a deliberate, heavily coordinated way with our allies and partners. It will be done in such a way that we maintain – we and our allies and partners maintain pressure on ISIS throughout, and that we do not open up any vacuums for terrorists to exploit.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you. On to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: It's the line of Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much. I just wanted to follow up on that last question. You said there's no timeline, so, I mean, that would suggest that troops will be in there indefinitely. And yes, the President has made a decision to withdraw, but all of the indications were, when that announcement came through, that troops would be withdrawn fairly imminently, if not in 30 days then maybe within four months. But now I just want to confirm. You're saying there is absolutely no timetable on when they would come home. Can you give a sense for – would it be a year, six months, something else?

And then also, [Senior State Department Official Four], on the Khashoggi situation, when you say you think there needs to be a credible legal process and a credible narrative, are you saying that you don't believe the narrative so far on what happened to Jamal Khashoggi has been credible? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, just to clarify, we do not intend to have an indefinite military presence in Syria. The President has made the decision that we will withdraw, and we are formulating the plans to do that right now, as I said, in a deliberate and heavily coordinated way, but we will be leaving. But as I said, we will be leaving in such a way that we do not open up vacuums for terrorists to exploit and that we do not allow for the possibility of a resurgence of ISIS anywhere, and that we continue to maintain the pressure against ISIS remnants now that the ISIS territorial caliphate is essentially defeated.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: Nick, I don't think from our point of view that the narrative emerging from the Saudis or the legal process is yet – has yet hit that threshold of credibility and accountability, so we have continued to work this issue with the Saudis, underscoring that it's in their interest to pursue this as aggressively as they can to get this albatross off their backs and to get out from under the shadow of this incident which has

caused such an outcry.

So I think we're – we were pleased to see the legal process get underway.

We're very keen to see that continue, as I say, it should be done in a way that adds to the credibility and accountability issues. We would like to see this process move as quickly as possible so that the Saudis can hit that threshold sooner rather than later.

MODERATOR: Thank you, on to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: To the line of Francesco Fontemaggi with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this call. The White House announced, I think, late December that the Secretary will also go to Baghdad on January 11. Is that Iraqi part of the trip still planned? And another question is that this trip is quite broad, visiting – actually it's like eight countries – I was wondering if there is a reason why he's not going to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So I'll just say on the Iraq side, this is – the schedule we've laid out is the trip as it stands. This is the countries he is planning to visit. If that changes, we'll update you as it happens.

MODERATOR: On to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: That's Michele Kelemen with NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. There are a couple of questions. One is: How is he going to handle the Qatar-Saudi split on this? Is he – the split in general, what's his message on that? And also, does the U.S. have any position on Syria returning to the Arab League? Is that going to be a topic of conversation?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: Michele, he will underscore the importance of GCC unity, so in that sense, the rift is unhelpful to what – to our broader goals, and we've argued that even to the region, the Gulf region's own goals. As we said at the beginning of the call, Iran is viewed – we view as the key threat, the key destabilizing actor in the region.

We've long said that the Gulf dispute benefits Iran. We'd like to see Iran not derive benefit from divisions and cleavages within our Gulf partners. So to the extent that we are able to close those divisions, build confidence among the blockading countries and Qatar, the Secretary intends to do so.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Concerning the question of Syria and the Arab League, I think writ large, it continues to be our position that political isolation and political pressure is the appropriate approach to take to try to press the Syrian regime to make the kind of meaningful changes necessary both to settle the Syrian conflict in a peaceful way and also to try to achieve the other U.S. objectives in Syria, including the exit of all Iranian-commanded forces and for Syria not to be a safe haven for terrorism and for ISIS and other terrorists to be defeated as a threat there.

So I think we would respectfully disagree with some of the Arab countries that are adopting a different approach or advocating a different approach of re-establishing political relations with the Syrian regime at this time.

MODERATOR: Thank you, and we'll take the next question now.

OPERATOR: To the line of Tracy Wilkinson with the Los Angeles Times. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. [Senior State Department Official One], you described as a false narrative this idea that the United States was sort of disengaging a little bit from the Middle East. Given both that Trump has announced the withdrawal from Syria, which gives space to Iran, and followed it up by saying Iran could do whatever it wants to in Syria as far as he was concerned, how do you convince the allies that the United States is truly still as forcefully committed to challenging Iran and to being engaged in the Middle East beyond rhetoric and sanctions and a few measures like that? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Hey, I think our policy of maximum pressure on Iran hasn't changed. We are achieving a tremendous amount of economic pushback on Iran in response to its destabilizing regional activities, far more than perhaps people expected us to. And this, I think, is having an effect on the Iranians. So these are not just rhetoric and sanctions. This is a tremendous whole-of-government approach that is really putting effective pressure on Iran for the first time in a long time.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, and I'd add to that by saying our military posture in Syria may be changing, but our overall goals in Syria remain the same, and key among those is, as Secretary Pompeo has said many times, to see the withdrawal from Syria of all Iranian-commanded forces. And we continue to have other means, other tools beyond just our military posture in northeast Syria to bring to bear on that problem, and we'll continue to do so.

MODERATOR: And that was senior official number one and number two who were just speaking. We'll go to the next question.

OPERATOR: The line of Barbara Usher from the BBC. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. Most of my questions have been answered, but I wanted to just follow up with the speech that Mr. Pompeo is giving in Cairo. Is there a reason why he's doing it in Egypt? I mean, is it supposed to sort of emulate or counter Obama's appeal to the Muslim world from Cairo? Is there any thinking about that? And then just to follow up on Khashoggi, again, you said that – that you had not yet hit the mark in terms of credibility, so you were looking at the legal process. So what is your take on the government shuffle last week that didn't touch Mohammed bin Salman at all, whereas the criticism is that he's the main culprit in this? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Well, as far as the choice of Egypt

goes, I mean, I think Egypt, with its geostrategic location and demographic weight and importance in the region, is the perfect location to make a speech about our regional issues and considerations. And all I really can say is the Secretary's going to speak about America as a force for good in the region, and beyond that, I'm going to leave it to him to elaborate on that theme.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: We don't see the government reshuffle in Saudi Arabia as related to Khashoggi. We think it's something that had been planned or was in the works for some time, and according to the Saudis, was very much in keeping with their reform process, so shifting a couple of individuals around key portfolios, et cetera. So we do not see it as related to a Khashoggi matter.

MODERATOR: So those were officials three and four. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: It's the line of Joel Gehrke with the Washington Examiner. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing this call. I was wondering – I'm not sure who's best to answer this, but how do you see the goal for Turkey in terms of forfeiting or rolling back Iranian presence in Syria, particularly in light of their – Turkish rhetoric about U.S. sanctions on Iran and also some of the barbs that have been traded between Erdogan and Netanyahu?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I think Turkey shares our concerns about the destabilizing Iranian influence across the region. This is something that's not new to them and it's something that we remain in close consultation with about.

Do you want to add anything about the upcoming engagement?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I think – I mean, one of the – of course, we've been in close consultation with our Turkish allies throughout the course of the Syrian conflict, and most recently, of course, that's been something that Ambassador Jeffrey has been very heavily involved in.

And throughout, the Turkish side, as they've talked to us, have made it very clear that they see the expansion of Iranian malign influence in Syria as a highly destabilizing dynamic in the northern Middle East and one that touches on and is – poses risks for Turkish security. And they've expressed repeatedly that they agree with us that Iranian-commanded forces should exit Syria, that they're – that it's in no one's interests for the IRGC to be able to continue to try to build out a power projection platform within Syria that they can use against Syria's neighbors. So I think we're pretty closely aligned in the strategic end with Turkey on that count.

MODERATOR: And those were officials number one and two. We have time for one last question, we'll go with that.

OPERATOR: And that's the line of Jennifer Hansler with CNN. Please, go ahead.

Hansler's line has accidentally disconnected, sir.

MODERATOR: Okay. Let's take the next one.

OPERATOR: And there are no other questions at this time, sir.

MODERATOR: All right. Well, then we'll conclude now. I thank everyone for joining us today. I thank our speakers for taking the time to speak with us. The call is now concluded, so the embargo is lifted. We thank you all. Enjoy the rest of your day.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.