

Press Releases: Interview With Lauren Ashburn of EWTN

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Treaty Room
Washington, DC
July 19, 2018

QUESTION: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, welcome to News Nightly. Thank you for joining us.

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

QUESTION: This has been quite a week. President Putin and President Trump gave a press conference that was condemned by the left and right. Was that press conference criticism warranted?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's been a lot of heat and very little light following that press conference. I was there. I watched the President's interaction with President Putin after their one-on-one meeting. The President had the objective of taking two countries that'd been on a bad path and trying to redirect that. There's no illusion about the challenges that Russia presents to the United States. But in places like counterterrorism and – these are two nuclear-armed nations, if we can reduce the risk from those nuclear weapons. The President was aiming towards creating a channel for communication and dialogue, and he achieved that.

QUESTION: Did you advise him to retract his statements?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't talk about the things I give the President advice on. But I'm always very candid about what it is I think we need to do to make sure to keep America safe. And the President has always been gracious in allowing me to say my piece.

QUESTION: Will we see transcripts from either the North Korea meeting or the Russia meeting?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'd be very surprised if we see transcripts from either. That would be ahistorical. There are conversations that I've had with the North Koreans, conversations that government officials have all across the

USG that aren't appropriate for public release.

QUESTION: Let's move on to religious freedom. You have convened a ministerial to talk about religious freedom all around the world. Let's start with Russia. Russia, especially when it comes to Jehovah's Witnesses, is very bad at allowing people to practice their faith. Will religious freedom be on the table when negotiating with Russia?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, thanks for mentioning the ministerial that's going to (inaudible). It's truly historic. It's the first time the State Department has led such a discussion. We'll have over 80 delegations from countries around the world, many, many religious organizations, NGOs. It should be a great gathering where we will make the point that religious freedom is a human right and that every individual ought to have their right to practice their particular religion, or if they have no faith, to not be punished for that either.

QUESTION: Will there be sanctions if they do not come to the table with religious freedom changes?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So with Russia in particular, we have a very complex set of relationships. There are many things that are on the table. I think your viewers ought to know that the State Department takes this issue of religious freedom very seriously. In conversations with countries that don't live up to the standards of religious freedom that they ought to have, we raise that issue, sometimes privately if we think that's the most effective way to achieve the change that we're looking for, and sometimes publicly if we think that will accomplish our goal.

QUESTION: When you announced this ministerial, you said that you would bring like-minded countries together. People made a big deal about that. Will Russia be at the table? Will Syria? Will Iran?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's lots of folks coming. I haven't seen the final RSVP tally. And I'm sure there'll be countries here that we have deep disagreements with. But the – when I said like-minded, I meant those countries that are prepared to begin their walk towards the religious freedom that we have enshrined in our Constitution and that our nation so values and cherishes.

QUESTION: American pastor Andrew Brunson is imprisoned in Turkey on false charges of terrorism and espionage. He's awaiting his fourth hearing.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, we need to get him out. He needs to come home.

QUESTION: Well, you brought the North Korea hostages home. Why can't we bring Brunson home?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're working it. It's a priority. We're in conversations every day in the State Department with elements of the Turkish Government. We are – we remain hopeful and prayerful that Pastor Brunson will be able to return home before too terribly long.

QUESTION: I visited the Nineveh Plains in Iraq. We've seen the destruction in a place where the U.S. declared genocide. I walked into bombed-out churches. People have nowhere to live. Total towns are decimated. The U.S. is providing aid to that area, to both Christians and others. How does the U.S. convince governments, not just in the Middle East, to respect religious freedom for all citizens, including Saudi Arabia, where you're not allowed to practice another religion?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, ma'am. The Trump administration has been incredibly strong in promoting religious freedom. It is the case that there are many countries – indeed countries that we often work alongside, who are allies in other places – we work to demonstrate to them that religious tolerance and freedom is good for them. It's good for their country; it's good for their government. It'll bring investors; it'll make their people more productive. We think these are all – this fundamental human right, this concept that every individual ought to have the right to practice their own faith, we think makes their countries stronger too. And we work to make that case both by speaking to them about it and, in America, demonstrating that in the way that we act and operate and the way that when U.S. Government officials are out and about we respect each of their capacity to worship in the way that they desire.

QUESTION: There are issues of religious freedom here in the U.S. How can you take the moral high ground unless those are addressed?

SECRETARY POMPEO: My faith teaches me that imperfection is all around us, and when it comes to government that's certainly the case as well. I think the United States stands as an enormous beacon of religious freedom. I'm confident that we can always do better. We ought to do that here as well. But we stand strong here in the United States for religious tolerance and freedom, and I think that's an important demonstration to the world of how valuable that fundamental human right can be to a strong and successful nation.

QUESTION: U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, thank you for joining me.

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

QUESTION: For coming on EWTN News Nightly.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

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