

Press Releases: Interview With Shannon Bream of Fox News

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Treaty Room
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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you for your time today. We're here to talk about an historic meeting that you've gathered next week on persecuted religious minorities around the globe, but first I want to get to some news of the day.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Let's talk about Russia. What do you make of the assessment our President appeared weak standing next to President Putin in Helsinki, and even allegations by lawmakers that he must, quote, "have something" on our President for him to be acting this way?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, Shannon, thanks for having me on today. I think those allegations are absurd. This administration has been relentless in its efforts to deter Russia from its bad behavior. We inherited a situation where Russia was running all over the United States. These last few days have been, frankly, more heat than light. This administration has been strong in supporting the Ukrainians, strong in making sure that we're protected against Russian expansion in other parts of the world. We all recognize that that threat is real, and President Trump has been strong in protecting America from Russian aggression.

QUESTION: *New York Times* is reporting that the President was fully briefed a couple of weeks before the inauguration about meddling, presented compelling evidence about that. Do you worry as a member who has deep roots in the intel community that it appears he continues to equivocate on this issue of whether or not there has been Russian meddling?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm in a position to know. I did have the chance to talk to the President about this. Frankly, over the last – goodness – almost year and a half now, the President's consistently been briefed on this issue. He understands that the Russians have interfered in our elections. He, frankly,

understands that's been going on for an awfully long time. It wasn't just the 2016 elections. Somehow America seems to forget the history of Russia's efforts to undermine Western democracy for decades now. It gets confused because there are those who want to make a partisan case out of this with respect to the Mueller investigation. The President understands what Russia did in our elections in 2016, but he has empowered each of us to make sure that it doesn't happen again in the 2018 or 2020 elections here in the United States as well.

QUESTION: And looking at those things moving forward, the President was asked repeatedly yesterday by a member of the press corps about whether he believes meddling is still ongoing. He responded, "Thank you. No." The White House says he was saying no to any further questions. Do you believe Russia is still meddling in our elections?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I have great confidence that the Russians will try and undermine Western democracy in 2017, 2018, 2019, and for an awfully long time. It is our responsibility as leaders of the United States Government to do all that we can to deter them from interfering with us, not only in our elections but more broadly as well.

QUESTION: The Russian ambassador to the U.S. is now saying that there were, quote, "important verbal agreements" made in private conversations between our presidents. Can you tell us anything about those?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, I'm not sure I'd take the Russian ambassador's word for a whole lot. From time to time they are wont to tell stories. Here's what I know. I'd have a chance to talk with President Trump about his discussions with President Putin. There was progress made on a handful of fronts: agreements to try and work more closely on counterterrorism, an effort to begin conversations around arms control to prevent the spread of nuclear proliferation. There were lots of things discussed. There remains a great deal of work to do, but the President accomplished one of his goals, which was to create a way where the two leaders of these important countries can have positive, constructive conversations that surround these incredibly important issues. There'll be lots of places our two countries' interests and values diverge. President Trump's deeply aware of that.

QUESTION: Any chance this administration would actually entertain the idea of allowing Putin or his – anyone from his team to have the ability to question or have physical custody of people like our former Ambassador McFaul or other DHS officials who've clearly been investigating things that are not beneficial to the Putin regime?

SECRETARY POMPEO: None.

QUESTION: Okay. Let's talk North Korea, because tomorrow you head to the UN to have –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I answered that question, Shannon, that quickly because it – I've watched the noise these last few days. The President's been very resolute. He understands precisely who it is we're dealing with in Russia. He

gets it. He's trying to take opportunities, places where we find we can work together, and put America in a position to do the things he wants to do on behalf of the American people.

QUESTION: Okay. North Korea. Tomorrow you to the UN to have discussions about our ongoing conversations with them. What do you make of the reports and assessments that North Korea has no intention at all of getting rid of their nuclear ambitions or their program?

SECRETARY POMPEO: No one's been closer to that than I have, so everyone else is simply speculating about what's taken place to date. I've been there. The North Koreans have consistently reaffirmed their commitment, the commitment that Chairman Kim made to President Trump. No one was under any illusion that this was going to happen in hours or days or even weeks. It's going to take time to achieve this outcome. We hope for a brighter future for the North Korean people, and if Chairman Kim continues to follow through on his commitment, the people of North Korea will have a brighter future.

QUESTION: Let's talk about the historic meeting that you've put together, the ministerial-level meeting addressing religious freedom and persecution around the globe. Why was it important to you to do that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. The State Department of the United States of America ought to be in the lead in promoting that religious freedom around the world. Shannon, not every country has the religious freedom we have here in the United States. Individuals are punished for their beliefs or, frankly, the absence of their beliefs. We ought to promote that around the world. I want the United States and our State Department to be front and center talking about religious freedom. Not every country will get to the place we want, but I'm confident that if we focus on this as part of American diplomacy, we can make the religious freedom for individuals all across the world at least a little bit better.

QUESTION: We have the case of the American pastor, Andrew Brunson, who is being held in Turkey, again yesterday denied freedom as what many are calling a sham trial continues on with him. Turkey is a NATO ally of ours. What can we do about that situation?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's been enormous work done by this administration to try and gain the release of Pastor Brunson. We also have others held in Turkey, other Americans that – excuse me – others who worked for the United States held in Turkey today. We're working diligently on that case and, frankly, every place an American is held.

This is one example of why religious freedom matters, and so we're going to have over 80 delegations here at the State Department in a handful of days, 40 of my counterparts, foreign ministers. This is a historic opportunity. The Vice President will be speaking at the event. We believe that we can increase the capacity for human dignity and religious freedom by gathering the nations of the world and working together to get outcomes so we can prevent situations just like the one that Pastor Brunson is experiencing today.

QUESTION: Do you think that there are – you mentioned, obviously, our country is unique when it comes to the issue of religious freedom. How much do you think you can cut across some of those biases and other theocratic areas around the world where this is a real issue, life and death for many people?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It is indeed life and death. That's why this ministerial gathering is so important. We're under no illusions. We don't think we're going to change each of these countries to become as religiously tolerant as the United States is. But we've seen this every time we take an action to protect from anti-Semitism or protect Christian freedoms or protect others from across a broad range of religious faiths. Every time we act in that way and gather the nations of the world to talk about why that matters to make their country better, we think it's real progress and we think every little increase in religious freedom is better for the world.

QUESTION: I wish you great success in that, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Shannon.

QUESTION: Thank you for your time.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wonderful to be with you.

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