

Press Releases: Press Availability With Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah

Remarks

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Secretary of State

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FOREIGN MINISTER AL-SABAH: (In Arabic.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you. I just want to say again that it's a pleasure to be back in Kuwait today. And first, I want to thank his highness the emir for bringing us all together here in Kuwait (inaudible) in the region. Kuwait has long been a critical partner for regional security and their willingness to host today's Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ministerial, as well as the Iraq Reconstruction Conference, is a reflection on their leadership on these very important issues.

Yesterday I had very constructive meetings with Foreign Minister al-Sabah, and today I had a very productive meeting with his highness the emir. We discussed the ongoing Gulf disputes, we discussed Iran, Iraq, and other important regional and bilateral issues.

As the Gulf dispute enters its eighth month, the United States firmly believes that reconciliation and the restoration of Gulf unity is in the interest of all parties in the region. This type of division is counterproductive to security for the region.

We want to thank Kuwait again for playing a central role in its own diplomatic efforts to find a resolution. The United States will continue to encourage a settlement and support Kuwait in our shared priorities and goals of restoring GCC unity.

We also discussed how we will make progress on the important initiatives that were undertaken during the emir's visit to the White House, and our Strategic Dialogue which was conducted last September to address a number of important issues related to defense, security, trade, investment, and education. And we welcome Kuwait assuming its seat at the UN Security Council, and know that we will value their consultation on a number of important issues that will come before the Security Council.

We also want to recognize and thank Kuwait for its contribution to the maximum pressure campaign on North Korea to encourage North Korea to take a different path, to give up its nuclear weapons, and engage in dialogue and discussions with the United States and others to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

Today's meeting of the 74 members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS – and we were able to announce today it's now 75 members because we welcomed the Philippines – this hosting by Kuwait is the kind of leadership that marks Kuwait's efforts throughout this entire campaign. The global coalition has made outstanding progress, but the fight is not over. ISIS's so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria has crumbled, but ISIS remains a very determined enemy and is not yet defeated. We remain committed to destroying ISIS wherever it may be, denying its ability to recruit, move foreign terrorist fighters, transfer funds, and spread their false propaganda across the internet and other social media vehicles.

As ISIS has evolved, so has the coalition. The guiding principles that were adopted by the coalition today lay out our vision for the future role of the coalition to continue this fight against ISIS. These principles affirm our common determination to continue our cooperative efforts using all available means until we have achieved the full and enduring defeat of ISIS. The enduring defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria means all members of the coalition must support and sustain the post-ISIS stabilization efforts. This means continuing to provide essential aid and services to communities which are only now starting to rebuild. It also includes the presence of effective forces to help secure liberated areas and facilitate the safe return of internally displaced persons.

On the defeat-ISIS campaign and other endeavors, Kuwait is one of the United States's most important strategic partners for regional peace and stability, and it's evident through Kuwait's long-term willingness to host multiple U.S. bases and thousands of U.S. troops. Kuwait also has responded to President Trump's speech in Riyadh last year with greater commitments to confront terrorism and violent extremism.

Kuwait is also a global humanitarian leader, generously providing critical assistance to refugees throughout the region and to those countries hosting them. In doing so, Kuwait is making critical investments in the stability of this region. The United States looks forward to continued close cooperation between our two countries, and I want to thank the foreign minister again for hosting today's activities. Thank you.

MODERATOR: We shall open the floor now for questions.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Iraq newspaper. Excellency, minister, during the opening of the meeting today, you had referred to an important point that was quite concerning to the Iraqis, mainly stopping the spread of federalists. What are the mechanisms that you've been working on in order to achieve that goal, and have you achieved part of it in coordination with the Iraqi Government?

FOREIGN MINISTER AL-SABAH: (Via interpreter) The global coalition led by the United States of America has covered everything that is related to this terrorist organization. We have focused a lot on the foreign terrorist fighters, and we have a special working group that has been established to follow up on this particular topic.

We also have information sharing, and we also benefit from the practices and the experiences of the 75 countries that are members of the coalition. So we're focusing on dismantling and destroying this criminal organization and we are also mainly focusing on the foreign terrorist fighters, as well as the countering of its financing.

QUESTION: Yara Bayoumy from Reuters. Secretary Tillerson, you're urging countries, as you just said, to contribute to rebuilding Iraq not just to – not just for the enduring defeat of ISIS, as you say, but also in part to weaken to Iran's influence in the country. But what more can the U.S. do to help Iraq on that front and in the region in general? And do you see that the Turkish operation in Afrin as a detraction from being able to focus these efforts on an enduring defeat of ISIS so that you can focus on countering Iran in the region?

And your Excellency, do you think that a GCC summit slated in Washington, D.C. for May could help bring an end to the Gulf dispute, and has Kuwait confirmed that it will go? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, with respect to Iraq, I think the most important work directly in front of us, as we discussed today, is stabilization, ensuring that we can put security forces around communities. And then begin the task of demining, removing mines that prevent people from returning to

their homes, reestablish services such as water, power, reopen hospitals and get schools functioning again. And that's what the components of our stabilization activities are comprised of, and so the funds that we've announced, that we've already committed, and the additional monies that we announced today that we are committing, are all around stabilization in Iraq and Syria.

This is the first step that then provides the conditions for reconstruction. It's – we have to first restore those basic – the utilities, and keep the area safe and secure in order for reconstruction to begin. And that reconstruction will be the subject of discussions that are ongoing with private sector entities as well as public sector, so I think that's the most important thing we can do for Iraq.

As to the situation in Afrin, it has detracted from our fight to defeat ISIS in eastern Syria. As forces have diverted themselves towards Afrin, we have been in discussions with our NATO ally Turkey, (inaudible) that they are mindful of the effects this is having on our principal issue, which is the defeat of ISIS. So I will be traveling to Ankara later in the week. We'll have further discussions with them about how do we continue to work together on the essential mission, which is to defeat ISIS, recognizing, as we all know, there are other terrorist elements operating inside of Syria, including al-Qaida, which is a threat to the United States, Nusra Front, and others. So we want to work together to maintain our focus on the essential mission of defeating ISIS.

FOREIGN MINISTER AL-SABAH: (Via interpreter) With regards to the Gulf summit, the Gulf American summit, as you know, we had a summit meeting in – last May in Riyadh, during which the GCC leaders and President Trump also agreed on holding regular meetings regularly amongst different countries. We highly praise the interest of President Donald Trump and the strategic relationship with the different member countries of the GCC, and we appreciate his call for the GCC to organize a summit in the U.S. in order to make sure that we have such high level meetings, have regularly, to preserve the strategic relationships between the GCC and the United States of America.

QUESTION: Excellency, this is (inaudible), representing Pakistan's largest newspaper, *Daily Jang*. My question to Honorable Secretary of State is that you are going to fight and defeat ISIS. My question is very simple: Who has created ISIS? Which country or which elements (inaudible)? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, ISIS or Daesh emerged out of circumstances both in Iraq and Syria that were due to the conflicts that had been underway – territories that were not secure, conditions that made people vulnerable. And so they really have emerged out of conflict and disarray in both countries. And as they emerged, they were able to take large swaths of territory and create the safe haven for them to carry out their operation. That is why the first task is to deny them their caliphate, deny them the territory and safe haven they control in order to undermine their ability to recruit fighters, to raise financing, to train and to plan and carry out attacks.

QUESTION: Thank you. I'm Michelle Kosinski with CNN. Mr. Secretary, I wanted

to ask you questions on two pressing topics today. First, as the U.S. is seeing a number of even its allies around the world making moves away from democracy, and some feel that U.S. influence is slipping, why do you think it's a good idea for this administration to again want to cut at least 20 percent from the State Department's budget, including two thirds from the National Endowment for Democracy?

And on Israel, how would you assess its reliance on Russia to try to keep the situation in Syria from escalating further? And how would you respond to Israel's comment that the U.S. has virtually no leverage on the ground and is not in the game?

And Your Excellency, Mr. Foreign Minister, today, as you announce that the Philippines is joining this coalition, they also announced that they want to pull all their foreign workers out of Kuwait. Do you think that points to a problem here and in the Gulf as a larger issue? And do you think that move will lead to some changes? Thanks.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, the budget that's been submitted by President Trump's administration and for the State Department specifically represents basically returning to budgetary levels that were in place before the run-up during the last administration. I think when we quote percentages, it's important to reflect on what we are measuring from. And the percentages that you quote are all historic record-high budgets for the State Department, which – I would tell you when I arrived at the State Department, what I observed was the State Department was quite frankly unable to fully deploy those resources and a lot of that money was carried forward into future years.

So I think the Trump administration and the OMB takes a different view of being more disciplined about how we budget and how we request funds, and ensure that we're able to deploy those funds in a very productive way, and deploy them quickly. I don't think the American people want their tax dollars tied up, sitting idly because we're unable to fully execute programs.

So we're confident that we have the resources we need to execute against the President's foreign policy objectives.

As to our position in Syria, I would just make a couple of observations. The United States and the coalition forces that are working with us to defeat ISIS today control 30 percent of the Syrian territory, and control a large amount of population, and control a large amount of Syria's oil fields. So I think in terms of this observation that the U.S. has little leverage or role to play is simply false. We are very active in the discussions that are moving, all the talk toward Geneva, both in terms of working with the opposition voices to unify them and have them working toward an objective, and we're working very closely with Russia, who has the greatest influence on the Assad regime and can bring Assad and the regime to the negotiating table in Geneva. So our participation, which is also in conjunction with and cooperation with a large group of partners now actually see things the same way we do, in terms of a unified Syria, a democratic Syria, with the Syrian people deciding their own future through a new constitution and election. We

have enormous support from our approach in terms of seeking a future for Syria.

So I think our position is one that is supported by many partners in the region with many common objectives.

FOREIGN MINISTER AL-SABAH: (Via interpreter) We actually condemn the statements of the president of the Philippines. And you know we are communicating with the president of the Philippines and with the minister of foreign affairs of Philippines to try and explain the conditions of work of all Philippines workers. We have 130,000 Filipinos working in Kuwait, and they are the community that makes less problems. Of course, there are individual accidents that happen; however, we collaborate in the investigations with the Filipino authorities. So we are in direct communication.

However, this escalation will not serve the interests of either Kuwait or the Philippines. The only solution is to cooperate and collaborate on the details of the very sad and unfortunate events that happened. Only this can help us get to the bottom of it, can help increase the cooperation between the two parties, and increase the number of foreign Filipinos working in Kuwait.

MODERATOR: (Via interpreter) Thank you. I bid you farewell.

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