

# Press Releases: Press Availability With Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri

Remarks

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Secretary of State

Grand Serail

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**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** I'll speak in English, so –

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Okay.

**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** I welcome Secretary Tillerson to Lebanon and thank him for the excellent discussion we had earlier. His visit is a clear testimony of the United States commitment to Lebanon's political and economic stability and the security of my country. By far the largest donor to the Lebanese Armed Forces, the United States of America is a key strategic partner in

countering and fighting terrorism of all kinds. I thank Secretary Tillerson for his country's support and faith in our security institutions. The U.S. has demonstrated that investing in Lebanon yields quick and fruitful results.

This support is directly aligned with my priority to build our state institutions. It is the only way to guarantee our stability and our democracy – our democracy, which will be reaffirmed in free and fair elections 12 weeks from today.

As I pointed to Secretary Tillerson, the commitment by all in Lebanon to the policy of disassociation is today a collective responsibility. It is closely monitored by all state institutions to ensure it is executed to Lebanon's national interest in keeping the best relationship with Arab countries and the international community at large. We discussed the ongoing preparation for the Rome II, Cedar, and Brussels II conference – conferences. And we agreed that a successful outcome of all these meetings would safeguard Lebanon's social, economic, and financial stability.

I also stressed to Secretary Tillerson Lebanon's right to explore, exploit, and develop our natural resources in our territorial waters. We both agreed that the Lebanese banking sector remains the cornerstone of our economy, and I reassured Secretary Tillerson that the sector is solid and sound, well supervised, and fully compliant with international laws and regulation.

Lebanon is committed to Security Council Resolution 1701 and 2373. We want to move to a state of permanent ceasefire, but Israel's daily violation of our sovereignty hinders that process, as does Israel's escalating rhetoric. This needs to stop. Lebanon's southern border is the calmest border in the Middle East, and I asked Secretary Tillerson to help keep it that way.

I thanked him for his country's continuous support to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which we are confident will put an end to impunity for the perpetrators of political assassination in our country.

Once again, Mr. Secretary, welcome to Lebanon and thank you.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, thank you as well so much, Prime Minister Hariri, for the warm welcome to Beirut. I was told by my staff when I arrived, I think it's been a little more than four years since the last visit of a secretary of state, and so I couldn't be more pleased to be here to represent the United States.

This trip is really an important opportunity to reaffirm that there are very strong bonds between our two countries, but also to have very important exchanges about what can – what we can do together to address the many critical challenges that this region is confronted with. In addition to the prime minister, I also had the privilege to meet with President Awn, Foreign Minister Bassil, and the Speaker Berri. In all of these meetings, I've repeated the United States message that we stand firmly with the Lebanese people and Lebanon's legitimate state institutions as Lebanon faces formidable challenges as well as threats in the region.

From foreign conflicts and efforts to drag Lebanon into such conflicts, to terrorism and violent extremism, to economic strains, Lebanon has been under enormous pressure. We are engaging with the government of both Lebanon and Israel to ensure Lebanon's southern border remains calm. And we remain committed to helping Lebanon and the Lebanese people prosper through the development of their natural resources in agreement with all of their neighbors. If an agreement can be reached, it truly has the ability to help Lebanon and the neighboring countries prosper, both now and in the years to come.

Despite all of these challenges, it is clearly a testament to the resilience of the Lebanese people and Lebanese communities around the world that Lebanon perseveres. We're grateful to our close partnership with Lebanon's security services, particularly the Lebanese armed forces and the internal security forces, as they fight on the front lines against ISIS/Daesh and al-Qaida, and they stand ready to safeguard Lebanese stability. We've built a very strong relationship with these state institutions, and we remain committed to supporting them in advancing our common goals.

We also commend the extraordinary generosity of the Lebanese communities which are hosting over one million Syrian refugees. The United States has provided nearly \$1.6 billion in humanitarian assistance that delivers basic services to refugees and the openhearted communities here in Lebanon who welcome them. The United States stands with the Lebanese people as you face these challenges, and we will remain strongly committed to Lebanon's security, stability, independence, and importantly, your sovereignty.

But it's impossible to talk about stability, sovereignty, and security in Lebanon without addressing Hizballah. The United States has considered Hizballah a terrorist organization for more than two decades now. We neither see nor do we accept any distinction between its political and its military arms. It is unacceptable for a militia like Hizballah to operate outside the authority of the Lebanese Government. The only legitimate defender of the Lebanese state is the Lebanese Armed Forces. Hizballah is not just a concern for the United States. The people of Lebanon should also be concerned about how Hizballah's actions and its growing arsenal bring unwanted and unhelpful scrutiny on Lebanon. Hizballah's entanglement in regional conflicts threatens the security of Lebanon and has destabilizing effects in the region. Their presence in Syria has perpetuated the bloodshed, increased the displacement of innocent people, and propped up the barbaric Assad regime. Their presence in Iraq and Yemen has also fueled violence, and the consequences of their involvement in these far-off conflicts – which have nothing to do with Lebanon – are felt back here at home.

That's why we're urging all Lebanese leaders during my visit to uphold the Government of Lebanon's commitment to disassociating itself from foreign conflicts. The international community expects all parties in Lebanon to fulfill this commitment, including Hizballah, which should cease its activities abroad in order to help reduce tensions in the region.

The United States looks forward to building on these strong ties and working together to ensure a bright future for the Lebanese people. And thank you

again, Prime Minister, for the luncheon today and very important discussion and exchanges that we had.

**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Thank you very much.

**MODERATOR:** Our first question is from Yara Bayomi from Reuters.

**QUESTION:** Good afternoon. Secretary Tillerson, if President Trump pulls out of the nuclear deal by the May deadline as he has said, critics say that would make it even easier for Iran to spread its influence in places like Lebanon and could alienate European allies whom you need in this region to counter that threat. What happens if the U.S. pulls out?

And to both of you, how serious is the oil and gas maritime dispute with Israel? And Secretary Tillerson, did you ask the Lebanese to yield part of the disputed waters to Israel in order to settle this dispute? Thank you.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, with respect to the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear agreement, as the President has indicated, he would like to see the defects in that agreement addressed along with Iran's other malign activities in the region. As such, we have been engaged with our European partners, the other signatories to the JCPOA, for some time now to chart a way forward to address these particular flaws. We've had very fruitful meetings with the Europeans. We're not through with that work yet and so I don't want to conclude or suggest any conclusion to a decision to exit the agreement. It is important that these areas be addressed, in particular the intercontinental ballistic missile program that Iran continues to carry out, as well as their export of weapons and foreign fighters that is destabilizing other countries in the region.

And I'll go ahead: In terms of the offshore agreement, we had very good discussions in all of our meetings today. This is an extremely important issue to Lebanon, it's important to Israel as well, to come to some agreement so that private companies can go to work offshore and determine what, in fact, might be available in terms of natural resource development and how to get started moving forward. We had a good exchange over our lunch meeting thinking about creative ideas of how to break this stalemate and move forward, and so we will continue to be very engaged with both parties, but we've asked no one to give up anything. Rather, we're looking for a solution.

**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** Well, for us, it's like Secretary Tillerson says: We want to be – what is ours is ours and what's the – Israel's is Israel's. And I think this is – we're trying to find the solutions that will be fair to us and fair to everyone. And I think we had some very good discussions on this and there are some new ideas, and I think we're going to explore those ideas to finally exploit for oil and gas. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Question (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** It'll be in English. Mr. Secretary, among the reasons for your visit, if not one of the main reasons, is to discuss the dispute over Block 9

and the controversial wall being built along Lebanon's southern border as we speak. What guarantees can be given to Lebanon that Israel will respect any solution that may come out of this visit?

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, the U.S. is not in a position to guarantee anything for another sovereign country. What we are here to do, though, is to be constructive in finding solutions to a final border agreement along the Blue Line. There are, we think, very constructive discussions going on. We've urged the Israelis to also be constructive in these discussions and let's get the border agreed first, and then people can think about if they need a security wall or not at that point. But we're hopeful that the current talks around establishing an agreed-upon border will yield a final resolution of that. We think it would be very, very important and useful to lowering the tensions along the border if the two sides could agree to that.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** (Via interpreter) My question goes to Prime Minister Hariri. Did you talk about the flaring up between Iran and Israel and Syria? And in case this kind of escalation goes – happens again, are there any guarantees that there will be no spillover in Lebanon?

**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** (Via interpreter) For us, any tensions and any flaring up of the situation in the region does not serve the region. We are in favor of calming down the situation in whatever form because we do not need further tensions and further conflicts and wars in the region. In our view, it is in the interest of the region to calm down the situation to reach stability and security because the region is in dire need of such a policy because we've suffered for the past seven years. And therefore, Lebanon should not be the prey or the victim of any threats or problems surrounding us. For us, dialogue and solving problems and issues among ourselves is the best solution to move forward, and we hope that Lebanon will be part of this dialogue.

**MODERATOR:** Finally, we'll go to Michelle Kosinski from CNN.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Secretary Tillerson, as you're about to travel, the situation between the U.S. and Turkey over Syria looks to be a stalemate from virtually every angle, so what would you say is your level of worry that Turkey will force some kind of showdown over Manbij? And in your mind, what would a compromise even begin to look like, and also, when is the U.S. going to start taking heavy arms back from the YPG? And today I should also ask you, as you've been traveling the world and visiting countries – and many of them talking about ways to try to end violence within them – how do you have these discussions or how do you explain in light of the fact that the U.S. cannot control its own very unique problem of children getting shot in schools and other mass shootings?

And Mr. Prime Minister, it was mentioned today, the fact that you're still dealing with more than a million refugees. Well, as you see the U.S. cutting back its own numbers as well as foreign aid, even though the U.S. is very generous in terms of contributing to humanitarian causes, what do you think of this shift in U.S. policy? Is it enough? Thanks.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, first I want to comment on the horrific school shootings in Florida, and I'm not going to answer your question on the heels of what many people are dealing with. We have mourning parents, we have people that are in really difficult circumstances dealing with that, so I think we need to just keep them in our thoughts and prayers at this time, and we can have conversations about other things later.

With respect to the meetings upcoming in Turkey, Turkey is an important NATO ally of ours, they're still an important partner of ours in the fight to defeat ISIS. They have performed admirably and, in all ways, have been supportive. And your question of from any angle you look at it, all – you don't see any closure, well, you must be looking at a flat wall, because there are so many aspects of the Turkey-U.S. relationship which are very important and very positive, and we intend to build on the areas that we do share common interests, common concerns. I would tell you our endpoint objectives are completely aligned; there's no gap between them.

We have some differences about tactically how to achieve that endpoint objective, but our objectives are to defeat ISIS, to defeat terrorism, to reduce the violence, protect people and support a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Syria, which will bring great benefits not just to Syria but it will bring enormous benefits to Lebanon and to other neighboring countries. We have never given heavy arms to the YPG, so there's none to take back.

**PRIME MINISTER HARIRI:** Well, I think the United States has been extremely generous with its humanitarian aid in the region, and I think this is an internal issue for the United States. We would like to see more humanitarian aid. This is our wish because we are doing a huge public service for the international community vis-a-vis when it comes to the refugees. We have more than a million, by the way. We have almost 1.5 million refugees, and I think the international community needs to – needs to help Lebanon, not only the United States. And I think a combined effort on this issue can give us the right amount of money. We talked about this issue with Secretary Tillerson, about reducing what are the donations – or whether it's UNRWA or the humanitarian aid, other places. And I think he explained it very well, and we will work together on seeing how we can subsidize this kind of humanitarian aid from other countries. Thank you so much.

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