

Press Releases: Remarks With Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil

Remarks

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Secretary of State

Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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FOREIGN MINISTER BASSIL: Welcome, Mr. Secretary. Welcome in Lebanon, friend of Lebanon.

(Via interpreter) I was honored to welcome the U.S. Secretary of State Mr. Mike Pompeo in a visit which is first of its kind to Lebanon. It showcases the importance and the depth of the relationships between the two countries, and it indicates the importance of the Lebanese stability. This is in terms of the form.

In terms of the content, it shows the depths of these particular relationships between the two countries. As such, we have established today a

positive and constructive dialogue based on the depth of the relationships between the two Lebanese and American people. Usually, when you establish ties between countries, it is more difficult to concretize this at the level of both peoples, but the bilateral relations between the two peoples are very deep. We have more than 1 million Lebanese who are well-integrated in the American community, and they were exceptionally hosted by the American community. And Mr. Pompeo experienced this when he was a congressman from the Kansas state.

The U.S. supports the legitimate institutions in Lebanon, most importantly, the Lebanese Army, which is the basic pillar and major pillar, and the guarantee of the stability in Lebanon. That is why we appreciate this. We thank this and we thank the Americans for their assistance to the security institutions, to the Lebanese Armed Forces. We thank the USA for the assistance granted to a large group of Lebanese communities.

We have discussed the border issues, and Lebanon is showing a lot of positivity in this regard. And as basic for that, the Lebanese sovereignty, and as you know, my position, personal position, is very clear, and the position of whom I represent is a positive position, and there is an opportunity to recover the rights of Lebanon, the lands of Lebanon, without any concessions. And this allows Lebanon to achieve a diplomatic and political victory. The political and diplomatic victory is equivalent to any kind of other victory. On such a basis we can achieve this without making any concessions, whether on the land or in the sea regarding the oil and gas resources, and we will exert a lot of efforts with internal parties in order to secure the rights of Lebanon.

As for the oil issues, it is a personal issues that I work on as a former minister of energy for a certain period and at a certain time, and we were able to convince the U.S. companies to take part in the bidding processes. And when they were eligible to do that, they did not want to participate anymore, then a consortium of European and Russian companies have won the bidding. They were coming, of course, from different countries, and as you know, there are sanctions imposed between the EU and Russia.

As such, I invited the American companies to take part in the bidding processes related to this field in Lebanon, and we invite as well the American companies to take part in the light of the alliance between Russia and the USA. But of course, as this would increase the stability and this would secure more stability in Lebanon. Lebanon, with multi-diversity, is open to – with its diversity to all. I have related our commitment to 1701 resolution and to secure tranquility at the southern borders and to stop the recurrent Israeli violations which are around 1,800 per year. And I reiterated the natural right of Lebanon to defend itself and to resist the occupation of its land and any aggression against its people, and it is a sacred right in the international treaties and instruments.

We discussed as well the diversity of Lebanon. And this Easter – and the USA invites us on a yearly basis to an interfaith dialogue conference. That is why I reiterated our desire to cooperate with the USA in order to hold this conference and to reject the unilaterals and to secure the diversity of

Lebanon, which is an unprecedented model, in order to counter terrorism. We cannot counter terrorism with unilateralism but with diversity, and the crimes perpetrated in New Zealand show the legitimacy of our position. The extremism leads to extremism, while tolerance coupled with international laws and instruments is remedy for extremism. It is the one that paves the way for dialogue, for peaceful coexistence and sound coexistence between populations.

I also discussed the issue of the displaced, and I explained to His Excellency Mr. Pompeo the risk and the danger of the presence of the displaced to the presence, the unique presence of the Lebanese identity, and I established a comparison with regards to the presence of the Syrian displaced in Lebanon. For Kansas, that has 2,700,000 U.S. citizens, if I apply the number of the Syrian displaced and the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, which are 200 per square kilometer, they – it is equivalent to around 2 million Canadians in Kansas. And this is not related to the bilateral ties between countries; this shows that one American state would have to host 1.5 the number of the inhabitants of Canada, and this is unbearable for any country, especially for Lebanon.

As such, we have requested your support for the safe and decent return of the Syrian displaced without having it as a voluntary return, because the requirements for the return and the completion of these requirements do not give the displaced any choice to stay. When such requirements are fulfilled and secured, the return should take place. All in all, we did not talk about a forced and collective return. We are hosting those displaced, but it is time for their return, and this is in the interest of Lebanon. This is in the interest of all brotherly countries.

In Syria, the solution that we are striving for is a political solution. It is a solution that leads to democratic and free elections that gives to the Syrians the right to choose their own representatives. As such, Lebanon disassociates itself from all these issues and is willing not to intervene in the affairs of others so as to disable others from interfering in its own affairs.

At the end, we discussed the Hizballah issue from our own side – from both sides as well. From our side, we reiterated that Hizballah is a political party, that it is not terrorist. His deputies are being elected by the Lebanese people, and they garnered a huge political support. As for the classification of Hizballah as a terrorist group, it is not our classification. It is a classification of the country that wants to do that, but we are attached to our national unity and we are attached to the fact that this should preclude good relations with the USA.

As such, we do not want our relations with the USA to be impacted or influenced by this, and we want to work together in order to solve all these problems, including the issue of Hizballah and the perception of Hizballah and how to deal with Hizballah.

At the end, the stability of Lebanon and the preservation of the national unity of Lebanon is in Lebanese interest and is in American interest. It is a regional interest and it is an international interest because there is an

interest in keeping Lebanon as a paradigm able to fight and counter terror and to show that it is a vital model.

Mr. Secretary, I would like to conclude with the following. I would like to address you and the American Government and the American people. Maybe geography separates us, but what unites us are human principles. What can separate us is the principle of resistance, but what unites us is the struggle for freedom. What separates us is unilateralism, but what unites us is the acceptance of the other. That is why Lebanon will be – remain unique in its diversity, in its rebellion, in its freedom, and it won't be at any time a fertile soil for terrorism, but a resistance to such terrorism. We won't change our nature, our diversity, and Lebanon won't be unilateral, but it will remain diversity. Please, show priority to the friendship with Lebanon and let us work for its stability and unity.

Thank you, Your Excellency.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Foreign Minister. Thanks for hosting me here today. It's great to be returning to Lebanon to – and for I think the third or fourth time, but the first time as Secretary of State. As the foreign minister said, I represented southcentral Kansas, home to a thriving population from – that came to the United States in the 1890s – successful entrepreneurs, doctors, leaders, capable immigrants that came to the United States and integrated successfully. It's that same flourishing that we see of the Lebanese people in southcentral Kansas that we hope for everyone here in this great country.

I had the chance to meet today with President Aoun, with Speaker Berri, with the prime minister, and now with the foreign minister. I have other meetings on my schedule for later today and tomorrow. In each of my discussions, Lebanese leaders conveyed their hopes for a better future of peace and security and prosperity for their country and for their people. Every citizen of Lebanon should know that the United States wishes precisely the same.

But we have to confront the facts. Hizballah stands in the way of the Lebanese people's dreams. For 34 years, Hizballah has put the Lebanese people at risk with unilateral, unaccountable decisions on war and peace, and life and death. Whether through political promises or outright intimidation of voters, Hizballah sits inside the national assembly or other state institutions and pretends to support the state. Meanwhile, Hizballah defies the state and the people of Lebanon through a terrorist wing committed to spreading destruction.

Hizballah's armed campaigns are squarely opposed to the interests of the Lebanese people. How does the expanding of – expending of resources and lives of those constituents in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria help the citizens of south Lebanon, Beirut, or the Bekaa Valley? How does stockpiling tens of thousands of rockets and missiles in Lebanon territory for use against Israel make this country stronger? Moreover, Hizballah does these nefarious activities at the behest of the Iranian regime. Its foot soldiers serve at Tehran's bidding. Hizballah and its illegitimate militia put the entire country of Lebanon on the front lines of Iran's misguided proxy campaigns.

Rest assured, Hizballah's Iranian patrons don't want the status quo in Lebanon to change. They see peace, prosperity, and independence for Lebanon as a fundamental threat to their political interest and their hegemonic ambitions.

Finally, Hizballah's global criminal networks – its drug smuggling, its attempts to launder money through the international system, and its interference with customs and other trade controls – place Lebanon under the microscope of international law enforcement. Indeed, Hizballah robs the Lebanese state of resources that rightfully belong to its people.

The Lebanese people should no longer be made to suffer for the political and military ambitions of an outlaw nation and its terrorist affiliate. It will take courage for the nation of Lebanon to stand up to Hizballah's criminality, terror, and threats. It will take effort to ensure full respect and independence for the Lebanese Armed Forces and other national security interests.

To be clear, we understand the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This is another dimension in Iranian aggression, and we support their return to Syria in a secure and voluntary manner as soon as conditions allow.

I want everyone in Lebanon to know that you will continue to have a friend in the United States. We will continue to support the legitimate state institutions of Lebanon and all of its people. In 2018, this year past, the United States provided more than \$800 million in assistance to Lebanon. A fair question: What did Hizballah and Iran contribute? They contributed coffins of young Lebanese returning from Syria and ever more Iranian weapons. Qasem Soleimani and Hizballah's other Iranian backers continues to undermine Lebanon's legitimate security institutions and jeopardize the safety and security of the Lebanese people. It's plain to see which country is a force for good in Lebanon.

The United States will continue to bring unprecedented pressure to bear on Iran until it ceases all malign behavior, including that which is carried out by Hizballah. Iran's support of Hizballah poses a threat to people – to Arab people of all faiths, it weakens the Lebanese state, and undermines the prosperity of future generations. It also increases the likelihood of conflict and undercuts opportunities for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The clerics in Tehran provide Hizballah with as much as \$700 million each and every year. This is a staggering sum, especially given that up to 90 percent of Iran's labor force has long lived before – below the poverty line.

Our pressure on Iran is simple. It's aimed at cutting off the funding for terrorists, and it's working. On March 8th, Hassan Nasrallah begged Hizballah supporters to make new contributions. And we believe that our work is already constraining Hizballah's activities. The United States will continue to use all peaceful means – everything at our disposal – to choke off the financing, the smuggling, the criminal networks, and the misuse of government positions and influence that feeds Iran and Hizballah terror operations, and we will not hesitate to call out those who active –actively and passively support

these activities and betray the trust and hopes of the Lebanese people.

I've had a chance to discuss each of these issues with Lebanese leaders. I expressed hope that the new Lebanese Government would be able to meet the needs of the Lebanese people. In that regard, I shared concern about both external and internal pressures upon the government, including coming from some of its members which do not serve an independent, thriving Lebanon.

Frankly, Lebanon and the Lebanese people face a choice: Bravely move forward as an independent and proud nation or allow the dark ambitions of Iran and Hizballah to dictate your future. You all know the history. Lebanon has paid a terrible price over the past half-century for the sake of its independence. As I traveled from the airport, I was reminded powerfully of this past suffering. I passed the site where 35 years ago the predecessors of today's Hizballah murdered U.S. Marines on a peacekeeping mission. I passed near the site of the U.S. embassy where the same terrorist thugs killed America's diplomats as they worked. I viewed the memorial to Mr. Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, brutally assassinated for his courageous opposition to cruel tyranny of the Assad regime over Lebanon.

But from that bitter past a better future beckons, and it is all around us. Neither Iran nor its partner Hizballah have the right to exact more suffering from the Lebanese people. Beirut is rightly seen as a symbol of rebirth out of ashes; of coexistence out of separation; of mosques, churches, and synagogues rebuilt side by side in what was once a bitter green line that divided family from family and friend from friend.

Mr. Foreign Minister, you should know and I want all the Lebanese people to know the United States will continue to stand with the Lebanese people as they seize the opportunities they so richly deserve, to live as a free people.

Thank you.

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