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Press Statement
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
March 26, 2019

The United States condemns the attacks on Interim President Juan Guaido's caravan and the harassment of National Assembly deputies and members of the media. We are monitoring reports of these and other acts of intimidation by Nicolas Maduro's lawless, armed gangs, known as *colectivos*.

It is the responsibility of the security forces to protect the democratically elected National Assembly. The security forces should be the guardians of peace and civility and quickly end the violence and intimidation of these irregular armed groups, which threaten the security and sovereignty of the people of Venezuela. These acts of intimidation will not succeed in delaying the inevitable—the peaceful restoration of democracy, stability, and prosperity to the people of Venezuela.

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Briefing – March 26, 2019

Robert Palladino
Deputy Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
March 26, 2019

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:49 p.m. EDT

MR PALLADINO: A couple things from the top. Next week, we welcome the Democratic Republic of Congo's president, Felix Tshisekedi, on his first official visit to the United States. That'll be April 3rd through 5th. We share President Tshisekedi's interest in developing a strong partnership between the United States and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and we're committed to working with him to advance his agenda to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law, enhance security, protect human rights, and promote economic growth through increased foreign investment and trade, particularly with the United States.

During his visit, President Tshisekedi will meet with Secretary Pompeo as well as other United States Cabinet-level and high-level officials to discuss United States-Democratic Republic of the Congo cooperation on a range of issues, including efforts to contain the Ebola outbreak in Eastern Congo. We support President Tshisekedi's commitment to delivering change that the Congolese people desire and deserve, and we share a common interest in realizing Congo's potential and in creating a better and more prosperous future.

Secondly, while staying on Africa, yesterday the United States announced nearly 3.4 million in emergency humanitarian food assistance in response to Cyclone Idai and related flooding in Mozambique. This is the worst natural disaster in Southern Africa in nearly two decades.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, you said 3.4 million what? Dollars, pounds, tons?

MR PALLADINO: 3.4 million dollars –

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: – in emergency humanitarian food assistance. This is the

worst natural disaster in Southern Africa in nearly two decades. The United States Agency for International Development is already on the ground. They have a 13-person Disaster Assistance Response Team that is delivering relief supplies to inaccessible areas. The Department of Defense is also supporting the response by providing airlift and logistics support.

The United States Government continues to assess humanitarian needs and coordinate response efforts with the Government of Mozambique and humanitarian organizations. More than 440 people have died as a result of the storm, and more than 600,000 people are in need of assistance. Our thoughts are with the people of Mozambique.

And finally, team on the field: Today Secretary Pompeo sent a note to all staff announcing that Stuart McGuigan has joined us yesterday as both our new chief information officer and head of the Bureau of Information Resource Management. The Secretary said that, quote, "Every aspect of the department's information technology capabilities and operations now falls under Stuart's oversight, including architecture, infrastructure, cyber security, data management, software, and application development and acquisition," end quote. Mr. McGuigan joins us after nearly seven years as CIO of Johnson & Johnson, where he was responsible for information technology strategy there and operations for the company's 130,000 employees around the world.

At the same time, the Secretary – we also want to express our thanks to Karen Mummaw for her service these past 15 months as the department's acting CIO. Karen is a career senior Foreign Service officer with a distinguished record of service both at home and abroad. And after 31 years of public service, Karen has elected to move forward on retirement plans that were put on hold, actually, when she assumed the acting role of CIO back in December 2017. So her service exemplifies what our team is all about, and we thank her for her service.

And finally, I would just note that our back row is filled with interns from our Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Welcome. You're not allowed to ask questions, but you're – (laughter.) Okay.

QUESTION: I'm sure they'd have some good ones.

MR PALLADINO: They might have some good ones, though.

QUESTION: Can I ask you a logistical question on the Congolese president? Since the White – unless I missed it while we've been here, I haven't seen any kind of an announcement from the White House, which usually announces heads of state visits. Since you're doing it, does that mean that he won't have any meetings at the White House or –

MR PALLADINO: Nothing to announce at this time. The Secretary of State looks forward to hosting him, and he will have a series of high-level agencies throughout the interagency.

QUESTION: Right. But I mean, he is the president of the country that is in –

MR PALLADINO: Nothing to announce at this time, Matt, no.

QUESTION: North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead, Lesley.

QUESTION: I – do you want to go to North Korea?

QUESTION: Is that okay?

QUESTION: That's – if you want to continue the conversation.

QUESTION: Okay. What was President Trump talking about when he tweeted about revoking sanctions that have been imposed? There seems to be much lingering confusion about that.

MR PALLADINO: This is the United States State Department, and for secretaries – we speak on behalf of the State Department from this building, of course.

QUESTION: Well I thought you might know something about this.

MR PALLADINO: Of course we do.

QUESTION: Well, you also speak on behalf of the administration, the entire administration.

MR PALLADINO: Of course. And the point here is that our position hasn't changed in the least, and that the international community will continue to implement United Nations Security Council resolutions to underscore to North Korea that the only way to achieve the security and development that it seeks is to forsake its weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. That remains our policy and that remains what we're pursuing.

QUESTION: Well are there sanctions that are being withdrawn or not?

MR PALLADINO: For sanctions I would refer you to the Department of Treasury. That's not something that we address from the State Department.

Please.

QUESTION: Just thought I'd ask.

QUESTION: Wait a second.

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: That's not true. You guys address sanctions all the time.

MR PALLADINO: Well, the status – I would refer you for details on –

QUESTION: You can't – you know what, look, you got to be consistent.

MR PALLADINO: – department of – sanctions – I would refer you to the Department of Treasury.

QUESTION: You can't pick and choose when the President lets loose with a tweet about sanctions, which you talk about all the time, on Venezuela, on Iran, on North Korea, in fact. So what's going on here? Are they –

MR PALLADINO: For the details of the Department of Treasury sanctions that were announced last week, I would refer you to the Department of Treasury. But –

QUESTION: As far as you understand, as far as this building understands, those sanctions are still in place?

MR PALLADINO: Absolutely.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Please.

QUESTION: One more (inaudible) Steve Biegun.

MR PALLADINO: Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes. Special Representative Biegun said that he ask the China to cooperate with sanctions against North Korea, but why President – there has been lift new sanctions – I mean additional sanctions? It's kind of a little confused, one or the other is – they say we going to cooperate with the UN sanctions, but he say (inaudible) sanctions no longer – no.

MR PALLADINO: We consult regularly with China and other partners on these matters, and our goal remains the same. That's the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea. That hasn't changed, and that's something that we are – continue to pursue with China and other partners as well as our allies.

Please.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Is there more North Korea?

QUESTION: Yes, sir.

MR PALLADINO: All right. Let's go one more North Korea.

QUESTION: So President Trump tweeted that he said he ordered withdrawals new, large-scale sanctions. And you just mentioned that all sanctions are still in place.

MR PALLADINO: Our policy, yeah, has not changed, and that is, the international community is going to continue to implement the United Nations Security Council resolutions to underscore to North Korea that that's the only way to achieve the security that they seek. The pressure campaign is what has been instrumental in creating a diplomatic opening, and the President has made clear throughout the process that that will continue until denuclearization is complete.

Let's move on, moving on.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead. Laurie, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. Could you clarify a point from yesterday's briefing about the forces that are to maintain the safe zone in Syria? I've got three questions. That – will the forces in the safe zone in Syria include U.S. and other coalition forces like Britain and France, even if their main mission, as Ambassador Jeffrey said, is to defeat ISIS? They're going to be in the safe zone? Will the Syrian Democratic Forces be involved in protecting the safe zone? Will Turkish or Turkish allied forces be involved?

MR PALLADINO: Okay, thanks. Yeah, Ambassador Jeffrey spoke about this yesterday at length. What I would say is that the – ISIS, while the territory's – been defeated – we said this often now – it remains – and that is a big accomplishment. It's a big deal, to use Ambassador Jeffrey's words. They remain a threat throughout northeast Syria, and as long as they're a threat, this is what we're focused on. We are going to – as Ambassador Jeffrey said, we're going to have a small residual force of the United States military. They're going to remain in northeast Syria, and that will be as part of a multinational force. And they will be there to prevent an ISIS resurgence, and, related to that, to provide support, to provide stability in northeast Syria so that our partners can do everything to maintain pressure on ISIS and those networks that exist.

Now, regarding composition and the more detailed things, we – we're consulting. We are planning proactively with other members of the global coalition who have identified their intent to support this transition phase of operations in Syria. That continues. As far as – we're going to continue to work, as Ambassador Jeffrey said, on the details of this matter, and we're optimistic. We're confident that we can achieve a good outcome on that front.

QUESTION: Would that include forces from the Syrian Democratic Forces?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything further to provide beyond that with – to what Ambassador Jeffrey alluded to yesterday at this point. We're talking about it. We're looking at it, and I don't have anything further

beyond that at this point.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: On Syria still?

MR PALLADINO: Yes. I'll take the water, thank you very much. All right.

QUESTION: On Syria still, Robert? On Syria?

MR PALLADINO: Syria.

QUESTION: Very quick.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Today the Secretary of State issued a statement on the 40th anniversary of the Egypt-Israel Camp David Accord, the peace treaty, which was premised on Resolution 242 and the principle of land for peace. So I guess now there is no land to sort of trade between Syria and Israel. Is that the case? Do you consider 242 to have been fulfilled, null and void? What is your take on that?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. Well, the decision that the President announced was a critical strategic and of security importance to the state of Israel and to stability of the Middle East. So to allow the Golan Heights to be controlled by the likes of Syrian and Iranian regimes would be to turn a blind eye to threats emanating from a Syrian regime that engages in atrocities, and from Iran and terrorist actors, including Hizballah, that would seek to use the Golan Heights as a launching ground for attacks against Israel.

QUESTION: I understand all that, but the principle of land for peace –

QUESTION: Well, hold on just – sorry, Said. You might understand it. I don't understand it at all. Was there some threat that Iran and Syria were actually going to control the Golan Heights?

MR PALLADINO: Without –

QUESTION: If there was, I missed it.

MR PALLADINO: There have been –

QUESTION: Maybe I'm –

MR PALLADINO: There have been many efforts threatening –

QUESTION: Yeah, not to control it, though.

MR PALLADINO: But a lack of Israel's ability to defend that area would be to undermine Israeli security, and enhancing the Golan Heights is to enhance Israel's security and which strengthens, frankly, our ability to partner with Israel to fight the common threats that we face.

QUESTION: I don't understand what is different three days ago about Israel's ability to defend the Golan that – what is different today than it was three days ago? And you talk about the regional stability, but every single country in the region except for Israel, every single one of them, all of Syria and Israel's neighbors, have come out against this and say it's bad for stability. So this is a case where you and Israel are right and everyone else, including the neighbors, are wrong?

MR PALLADINO: Not a popularity contest.

QUESTION: Well, that's good because if it was –

MR PALLADINO: Standing up for what is right oftentimes is not. This is something that the President has been considering for some time. As he made clear, the statement on the Golan Heights fully reflects our understanding of the unique circumstances that makes it appropriate to recognize Israeli sovereignty at this time.

QUESTION: I get that. But is it your position that Israel's control of the Golan without this announcement by the President would have been somehow threatened or that it was in jeopardy that –

MR PALLADINO: It was a recognition of reality that the President moved forward on this position.

QUESTION: And do you think that it will change Iran's efforts or Syria's efforts to infiltrate terrorists or fighters into the Golan simply because there's a U.S. – the U.S. President has signed a proclamation saying that it's – that it – recognizing Israel's sovereignty over it?

MR PALLADINO: It certainly makes things clearer, and Israel's security is something that, of course, they're going to continue to defend –

QUESTION: Oh, I know.

MR PALLADINO: – and something that we're going to continue to support.

QUESTION: And this administration has made it clear, as have previous administrations, but this one has made it clear – say, with Gaza, with the border with Lebanon, and that the land that Israel has there is Israeli sovereign territory, and that hasn't stopped Hamas or Hizballah from trying to – from either launching attacks or – so I'm just curious as to why you think that the proclamation actually changes conditions on the ground to the point where – that some kind of threat to Israel's control over it is now done.

MR PALLADINO: We're not saying the threat is over in any way. The threat, of course, continues, and Israel's need and our need to help support continues, of course. That affects all the stabilization.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah, I just want to finish my question, if I may. So to be

clear, so do you consider 242 to be null and void, completely fulfilled? There is no land to trade since the whole premise of that is land for peace. So that land is no longer, as far as you're concerned, is no longer Syrian, correct? So 242, is it null and void? Is it – and 338 as a matter of fact, the other UN resolution, is it considered fulfilled, null and void? What is your designation to the resolutions 242 and 338?

MR PALLADINO: The administration has made clear that it supports negotiation towards a comprehensive peace between Israel and its neighbors.

QUESTION: Including Syria?

MR PALLADINO: This administration, unlike previous administrations, is willing to acknowledge the reality that there can be no comprehensive peace agreement that does not satisfactorily address Israel's security needs in the Golan Heights. This is an area that is vital to Israel's national security.

QUESTION: Gaza. Real quick on Gaza. I just want – things are heating up again, and the Israelis now are saying that a ceasefire can only be implemented if it's somehow conditioned on ending the demonstrations, the demonstrations that take place every Friday in Gaza. Do you agree with that premise or agree with that principle that they ought to be tied – the ceasefire and ending the demonstrations?

MR PALLADINO: We condemn the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel.

QUESTION: I'm not talking about the rockets. I'm talking about –

MR PALLADINO: It's important to say this. We condemn the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, and we strongly support Israel's right to defend itself. The attacks are outrageous and unacceptable.

QUESTION: So you –

MR PALLADINO: Our position is there must be a complete and permanent halt. We welcome efforts by regional allies that are seeking to restore calm and prevent further attacks. And I have nothing further on that.

QUESTION: That's all excellent, but is it – should it be tied to the demonstrations and ending the demonstrations?

MR PALLADINO: We welcome efforts by regional allies that are seeking to restore calm and prevent attacks.

Go, please. Rich, Fox.

QUESTION: Robert, very briefly on Mexico City, the Secretary mentioned this morning that perhaps you would have some more specifics, maybe even a ballpark, on how much the U.S. is withholding from the OAS. And this is the second expansion of the policy that the administration has announced while it's in office. Do you see that perhaps there is more

room to tighten this policy going forward?

MR PALLADINO: Give me a second here. Right. So regarding your first question on the specific numbers, this has to do with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which is part of the Organization of American States, and in light of concerns regarding certain of their activities related to abortion. The Secretary of State directed the withholding of part of the Fiscal Year 2019 U.S.-assessed contribution to the Organization of American States. Specifically to your question, that withholding is \$210,000 and that is the equivalent to the United States proportional share of possible OAS costs in question.

QUESTION: Robert, India?

QUESTION: Is that money directly supposed to go to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, or was it just to the OAS more broadly? In other words, is the entire OAS being hit with this because of something that the Inter – the Commission did?

MR PALLADINO: My understanding is it's specific to the – let me get the acronym right – IACHR. Correct.

QUESTION: Perhaps you're familiar with what country actually led the charge to create this commission. In fact, former Secretary Powell was in South America on 9/11 pushing for the charter to be adopted that that charter created this. So are you saying now that because this commission that you, in fact, created – you meaning the United States – has taken a position against the criminalization of abortion, which is what I understand they did, that you're now going to withhold money from it? Is that right? You don't see any kind of irony there?

MR PALLADINO: We work tirelessly to ensure –

QUESTION: You created this thing.

MR PALLADINO: – United States support for the Organization of American States to make sure that it's used for purposes that align with United States foreign policy objectives and national interests. We continue to support –

QUESTION: So it's gone rogue? Is that right?

MR PALLADINO: We continue to support the Organization of American States as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. That supports a number of important United States and shared regional foreign policy objectives in the hemisphere, including those in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. We also take our obligation very seriously to ensure that activities implemented with U.S. funds are consistent with what the Secretary discussed this morning, this Siljander Amendment. And so we see no inconsistencies.

QUESTION: What was the total – 210,000 of how much?

MR PALLADINO: Two hundred and ten thousand, correct.

QUESTION: Of how much?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have the full budget, but this is the proportional part directly related to those activities in question.

QUESTION: And then on just room going forward to tighten, is the administration looking at other ways?

MR PALLADINO: Don't have any information in that regard. Nothing to announce at this time.

QUESTION: I have a follow-up on that.

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead, Shaun. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Different part of the world, on Thailand. If you have a follow-up, then –

QUESTION: I have a follow-up on Mexico City. Is that okay?

MR PALLADINO: All right, let's – okay, one more, sure.

QUESTION: Great. So speaking to what Rich was asking, are there other multilateral institutions that you believe the U.S. would be in violation of the Siljander Amendment if they continued giving them funds? Are there other multilateral institutions that you think are lobbying for or against abortion?

And also, do you have any estimate of the amount of programs that you think will be affected by the expansion announced today of the Mexico City Policy, and are there specific groups that the U.S. is looking at who they believe are funding or financially supporting other groups who are promoting abortion?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. I don't have anything on specific groups that – to announce at the podium, and as far as future actions that we may be considering or take, nothing to preview at this time.

QUESTION: Should other multilateral institutions be on the lookout, be warned? Are you issuing –

MR PALLADINO: I think the United States – I think Secretary Pompeo made pretty clear this morning that this administration is a pro-life administration and that we're going to continue to seek to advocate our values strongly and globally.

Now, Shaun, I'm going to go back to you, because you –

QUESTION: Thailand. Thailand had elections over the weekend, first since the military coup. Do you believe that these were free and fair elections? Do you believe that this represents a restoration of

democracy? There's been concern, notably from former Prime Minister Thaksin, who alleges widespread irregularities.

MR PALLADINO: Right. We congratulate the tens of millions of Thai citizens who participated in the long-awaited March 24th election for demonstrating their strong support for return to elected government. The voting, along with, we note, robust media coverage of the process and open debate of its merits – those are positive signs for a return to a democratic government that reflects the will of the people. We stand with the Thai people in calling for the expeditious announcement of voting results and a fair and transparent investigation of any reported irregularities. The United States looks forward to working with Thailand's newly elected government to advance values that bring our countries closer together, including democracy, security, and prosperity for all citizens.

QUESTION: Just following up briefly on that, the – are you – are there any concerns about representation of parties? One of the major parties was disbanded legally ahead of the election. Do you think that there is a broad enough spectrum represented in the political process?

MR PALLADINO: We are interested in a result that reflects the will of the Thai people. The United States does not support any candidate or political party. We support the democratic process.

QUESTION: What about Algeria? Do you have any comment on the military calling for the presidency to be vacated now?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have – I haven't seen that and I don't have anything for you on that.

Please.

QUESTION: Robert, Robert.

QUESTION: On Bangladesh.

QUESTION: India.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Nike, please.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you very much. If I may, I would like to stay in Asia. On Tibet, yesterday, the State Department release its report to Congress on Section 4 of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018. Could you please elaborate some of the details? What is the U.S. asking from China? And you may speak Mandarin if you want.

MR PALLADINO: (In Mandarin.) Okay?

QUESTION: Fair enough.

MR PALLADINO: (In Mandarin.)

QUESTION: Very good. (Laughter.) Very good, very nice. (Applause.) How about in English?

MR PALLADINO: All right, all right. We'll do it in English, exactly. All right.

QUESTION: Wonderful.

MR PALLADINO: So pursuant to the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, as you allude, yesterday, the State Department submitted its first annual report to the Congress regarding United States access to Tibet. The report concludes that the Chinese Government, quote, "systematically impedes travel to the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan areas outside of the Tibetan Autonomous Region for U.S. officials, journalists, and tourists."

What we seek here is reciprocity – reciprocity from China regarding open access that China enjoys in the United States. We're going to continue to work closely with the Congress in pursuit of that shared goal and make sure that Americans have access to the autonomous region and other areas as well.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: The Chinese Government has pushed back. How do you respond to the Chinese Government's assertion that this report is – quote, "disregards the facts, is full of prejudice, and the Chinese side will never accept it"? How do you respond? Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: We – this is a well-documented report, statistics were kept, and we would note that when the Chinese Government did allow access, the access was infrequent and highly restricted and scripted. We're asking for reciprocity. That's not something that the Chinese Government would be subjected to in the United States. It's not something that we think Americans ought to be subjected to in China. We'll continue to advocate for shared reciprocity. And you know what? It reminds me of the recent decision by the European Union to decline a visit to Xinjiang Province (inaudible). We were – their rationale was that they wanted to see – they wanted more time to plan a trip and to ensure that – in fact, that they were allowed to have access and they would be allowed to – for unscripted view of what was taking place in Xinjiang Province, and we support their decision.

QUESTION: A follow-up, China?

QUESTION: Robert, on Asia, the Secretary will meet the Egyptian foreign minister this afternoon. What's on the agenda?

MR PALLADINO: We'll be sure to put a readout out after that. I don't have anything to preview on the meeting of –

QUESTION: And what's your view regarding the constitution amendments in Egypt? Do you have anything on this?

MR PALLADINO: Nothing. Nothing today for you, Michel. Please?

QUESTION: A follow-up, China?

QUESTION: Robert?

MR PALLADINO: More on China?

QUESTION: Yes, sir.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Let's go – let's try, please.

QUESTION: Robert, thank you very much. Chinese president said that Dalai Lama is a terrorist and Masood Azhar is a spiritual leader. And where do we go after China voted against the UN resolution and supported this Masood Azhar, most wanted terrorist by the U.S., India and Israel and other countries? And he's the mastermind of – or what you call – Pakistan is supporting him and he was kept by the Pakistani military in a hospital. But after the Chinese vote in favor of him, he said why they kept me in hospital, I'm fine, nothing is wrong with me.

So where do we go after this most wanted terrorist was protected by China, and they continue to protect him?

MR PALLADINO: Well, our policy on Tibet respects China's territorial integrity, and we consider Tibet to be a part of China, but at the same time, we have been clear we're deeply concerned by the lack of meaningful autonomy for the Tibetan people, the deteriorating human rights situation in Tibetan areas, and severe restrictions on religious freedom and cultural rights there. So we will continue to urge China to cease restrictions on the human rights of Tibetans as well as their religious, cultural, and linguistic identity.

QUESTION: Can we go to India?

QUESTION: And as far as this –

QUESTION: India?

QUESTION: – protecting the Masood Azhar and the UN vote by China?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything further on that today.

India? Sure, Tejinder. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Is there a shift in U.S.-India defense relationship? There has been denial of visas to Indian defense officials and that also after extending an invite to them. I have two examples from last three weeks. One is the secretary DRDO, Dr. Satheesh, and he was here even in December with the Indian defense minister. And the second one is Dr. Guruprasad, DG production, and out of a team of five he was only one who was denied visa. So these both were not coming first time or any clearance issues. So is there a shift in the policy? Because I know that

you don't talk about visas from the podium, but please, is there a policy why these people are getting denied the visas after then invite?

MR PALLADINO: The United States – no, okay. The United States-India defense and security cooperation is rapidly expanding as part of our deepening strategic partnership, and India is one of the premier security partners in the Indo-Pacific region. So as part of that effort, exchanges, reciprocal visits between American and Indian defense officials – they're increasing at an unprecedented pace. We – the United States, we seek to expand our defense and security cooperation with India, and that includes defense and security officials. And I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Pakistan. Can you take one question on Pakistan too, please?

MR PALLADINO: A question on Pakistan. Sure.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Sir, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said that there are five big issues that threaten the American security and one of them is Pakistan's nuclear program. So can you a little bit elaborate that how Pakistan's nuclear program is a threat to America?

MR PALLADINO: Nuclear proliferation is a – one of the very first national security concerns articulated in our National Security Strategy. It's at the very top of the list. So that absolutely remains something that this administration thinks about often, because the level of – the level, the impact, of what could happen is simply so great. So that remains at the very top of our national security considerations.

As far as Pakistan itself, the Secretary has also emphasized that – the need to deliver outcomes and to build confidence and trust between our two nations, and we do want to see a prosperous Pakistan that contributes positively towards regional stability and security. And I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Anything on Pakistan's role during the – on the peace process in Afghanistan?

MR PALLADINO: Pakistan could play an important role in bringing about a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, and something that we're thankful for.

QUESTION: Sir, I have a follow-up.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Tejinder, sure.

QUESTION: China?

QUESTION: Sir, I have a follow-up.

MR PALLADINO: I don't mean Tejinder. I did not mean to say Tejinder, all right? (Laughter.) Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, mister.

MR PALLADINO: All right. We're going to stay in South Asia? Is that what we're going to do?

QUESTION: Yes, on Bangladesh. In two days, our national independence day.

MR PALLADINO: Is it? Happy independence day.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Very good.

QUESTION: The recently released Human Rights Report stated that Bangladesh election was not considered free and fair. And obviously, the opposition party rejected this election result. So I am wondering what steps are – is the U.S. going to take to restore democracy in Bangladesh and voting rights, as U.S. position is that election was not considered free and fair and credible?

MR PALLADINO: Well, Mushfiqul, I would just point out that, as you correctly note, we recently released our Human Rights Report and we noted that the December 2018 election was not free and it was not fair given widespread reports of irregularities, including ballot box stuffing and intimidation of opposition polling agents and voters.

That said, we have a – the United States and Bangladesh have a long history of cooperation and a vision for a tolerant, democratic Bangladesh that strengthens its democratic institutions, respects human rights, and seeks to improve its governing structures and institutions. Bangladesh has an impressive economic development – impressive record of economic development – and respect for democracy, freedom of expression, human rights. These are not competing objectives and these would in fact reinforce economic growth. So United States looks forward to continuing to work with the ruling government as well as the opposition to continue to advance these interrelated goals. I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: Robert, can I ask you – that trial in Turkey. One of the consulate employees –

MR PALLADINO: This is the last one. Let's go to Turkey. Last one, sure.

QUESTION: Do you have any concerns about – this is one of your consular employees has been charged with terrorism-related – I believe the trial opened today. Do you have any concerns about the process?

MR PALLADINO: What I would say is we are following this very closely. Our – the trial, as you point out, has opened. It'll go on this week,

several days, and I can confirm that our charge, Hovenier, attended the hearing. Beyond that, at this point, nothing to add to that. But we're watching this very closely.

QUESTION: Okay, and presumably, a guilty verdict or something that you think is not fair would be met with a response, correct?

MR PALLADINO: At this point we're going to continue to watch this trial closely.

QUESTION: And then just lastly, there's a story that just came out on Politico and – about – it's a profile of the Secretary. You're quoted as saying – this is in response to criticism about the Secretary's trips, recent trips, domestic recent trips – you're quoted as saying, "Every recent secretary of state has taken trips inside the United States – Secretary Pompeo simply visited Iowa, Kansas, and Texas, places often flown over by his predecessors, instead of Martha's Vineyard, Boston, and the Hamptons." Is that an accurate quote? Did you say that?

MR PALLADINO: I said that.

QUESTION: And you're a career Foreign Service officer. Secretary Pompeo's immediate predecessor, Secretary Tillerson, actually lived in Texas, and spent probably – every couple weeks spent a good deal of time there and in Colorado. So exactly which predecessors are you referring to in this statement?

MR PALLADINO: I think – this kind of information is publicly available. You're able to put those to –

QUESTION: So you're referring to James Baker and George Shultz and Condi Rice and Colin Powell.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. So the point remains there's been an awful lot of questions that have come our way about this Secretary of State's ability to communicate to the American people in his role as the nation's top diplomat, to actually explain to American citizens what it – what the State Department – what State Department employees are doing and staff are doing to advance their interests.

QUESTION: Right.

MR PALLADINO: This is a challenge for the State Department. Everybody understands what the Department of Defense does.

QUESTION: Yep.

MR PALLADINO: Explaining to the American people how this building is advocating its interests – this is something that needs to be done.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR PALLADINO: This is something that we are proud that the Secretary is

doing, and it's about time.

QUESTION: It's nice that you're – you're absolutely right, 100 percent, but that's not really the point of my question. When these predecessors you refer to went to Martha's Vineyard, Boston, and the Hamptons, were they going there to talk about what the State Department does, or were they going there on private trips?

MR PALLADINO: There has not been any scrutiny of those kinds of trips. And this is the point that we're trying to make here. Would anybody be – why is it that when the Secretary wants to speak to the people of Kansas –

QUESTION: No one is –

MR PALLADINO: – that it becomes of such great interest? That's the point we're trying to make here.

QUESTION: Have you gotten any questions about the Secretary's personal travel?

MR PALLADINO: This is a secretary of state –

QUESTION: You're turning this into something that –

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: – that I have never once asked you about these domestic trips, okay, and the suggestion that it's improper for other reporters to ask about them is wrong. And yes, there is a role for the Secretary of State to try and get out, to create a base of support for the State Department, which is something that most Americans – a large percentage of Americans – don't have enough about. But I kind of wonder if you're – how comfortable are you when you're talking about clearly Secretary Tillerson's immediate predecessors in this, given the destinations that you list, which were all not for public diplomacy events or to educate, but private trips. Those secretaries under – in the Obama administration also traveled domestically and did these kind of outreach things that the Secretary is doing now and should be doing now without criticism. I'm just curious how comfortable you are saying – I mean, is this intended to be humorous? Is it snark or are you going to claim that it's just a statement of fact? Well, they went to the Hamptons or they went to Martha's Vineyard, and therefore it's appropriate for me, a career Foreign Service officer who has worked under administrations of both parties, to say this.

MR PALLADINO: Of course, and I will work under both administrations. The point remains this Secretary of State has made a concerted effort to reach a portion of the United States that –

QUESTION: And no one is saying –

MR PALLADINO: – traditionally has been neglected.

QUESTION: No one is saying he hasn't.

MR PALLADINO: Something beyond the west coast and the east coast. We are trying to communicate to more Americans. This is a good thing. This is something –

QUESTION: I'm not saying it's not a good –

MR PALLADINO: – that needs to be done.

QUESTION: No one is saying it's not a good thing.

QUESTION: No one's saying that.

QUESTION: I'm just wondering why you're comparing his trips, which are business trips to the Midwest, which are good and fine and there's nothing wrong with them, to former secretaries of state who went on vacation over the summer. Look at officials in this administration, starting at the top, who spend time at golf courses and country clubs. I – no one's begrudging that, right? He goes there for private visits, which is what these are. So I just think – how is this not apples and oranges, you comparing Iowa, Texas, and Kansas to a vacation in Martha's Vineyard or Boston and the Hamptons?

MR PALLADINO: The level –

QUESTION: And I would also point out that one, Secretary Kerry, actually had meetings with Chinese officials and others in Boston, so how is it – how is it not apples and oranges?

MR PALLADINO: Certainly, certainly, certainly possible to have meetings in the good town of Boston. The point remains, this Secretary is making a concerted effort to expand what the State Department has traditionally done beyond the coasts and to reach out to the American people and explain what it is that this United – this U.S. State Department is doing to advance their interest, to talk about how we are expanding economic opportunities; we are opening places to increasing trade for them, to advance American values. It's been neglected. We're glad that the Secretary is taking that to the people.

QUESTION: I – and I agree with you. It has been neglected, and I'm glad that he's doing it. My question is not to question the motives of his travel. It's to question your quote in this and wonder – and to question whether you think it's actually appropriate to compare private trips to work trips. That's my question. It doesn't have to do anything at all with this Secretary and his travel habits. It has to do with you as a Foreign –

QUESTION: May I – then may I –

MR PALLADINO: Secretary's travel –

QUESTION: Let me ask another question on that, because isn't it valid,

don't you think, that to ask a question about the Secretary going to Kansas, when there is a lot of speculation out there that the Secretary could be campaigning to actually – even though he denies it, although in some interviews that he did in Kansas, he didn't completely deny it. So isn't it valid that the press ask about that, that whether he's going back to Kansas, like some secretaries of state would go back to Boston, or whether to – whether he's campaigning. I mean that is a very valid question, so I don't sort of see why you need to criticize the press for asking just that very valid question, given that the Senate seat is coming open.

MR PALLADINO: Of course.

QUESTION: So is he go – did he go there to campaign as well?

MR PALLADINO: No. He was there to explain to the American people what it is the United States Department of State is doing for the American people, and he did that in different ways. Texas, Kansas, Iowa. Frankly, it's something that we'll be looking for more opportunities to do in the coming future. It's not something we're going to shy away from. It's important that Americans understand what role the State Department is playing in national security and in the economic lives of average people. It's important for average citizens to understand what their government is doing to advance their interests.

This is something that the Secretary feels strongly about. And if you talk to Foreign Service and Civil Service and the State Department, you go around the country, you meet your aunt in Iowa, and you say the State Department, quite frequently there's confusion. Is that the Forest Service in Iowa or – it's important for us to explain what we are doing globally on any given day to promote their interests, and that's something that's going to continue. I'm going to stop there.

Thank you very much, guys.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Sir, I – sir, I have come all the way from Dallas. Can I get one question in?

MR PALLADINO: Come back.

QUESTION: All right.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:41 p.m.)

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Press Releases: Remarks at the AIPAC Policy Conference

Remarks

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Walter E. Washington Convention Center

Washington, DC

March 25, 2019

SECRETARY POMPEO: (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, everyone. It is truly wonderful to be here tonight.

I want to thank AIPAC President Mort Fridman, Board Chair Lillian Pincus, and your CEO Howard Kohr for inviting me to be a speaker here tonight.

And thanks to you for that incredibly warm welcome.

As some of you may have seen, my wife Susan, who's here with me tonight, and I just returned from a trip to Israel. (Applause.) And we made a little news. (Laughter.)

I've been to Israel many times, but it was the first time I had the privilege to visit our new embassy in the eternal capital of the Jewish people and the Jewish State, in Jerusalem. (Applause.) Thank you. It was incredibly moving to be there.

I also became the first American secretary of state to visit the Western Wall and the first – (applause) – and the first – the first high-ranking American official to do that with an Israeli prime minister. (Applause.)

I then traveled to Beirut to speak with Lebanese leadership about a big problem, the Iranian-backed threat of Hizballah, the threat to Lebanon and to Israel, and we minced no words. (Applause.)

And of course – and of course, it was a great honor to be on Israeli soil and to celebrate with Prime Minister Netanyahu at the very moment President Trump boldly recognized the Golan Heights for what it is: a part of Israel. (Applause.)

As most of you would have seen by now, just a short while ago, President Trump – alongside Prime Minister Netanyahu – signed a decree, a decree affirming Israel's sovereignty over the Golan. (Applause.) What a truly great two days for two great nations. (Applause.)

That recognition ties in with my own personal connection to Israel, and more importantly, to America's connection with Israel.

As a former West Point cadet and a former tank officer, I've had a chance – (applause). All right, for all you tank officers in the Army – in the audience. (Applause.) I had a chance – I had a chance both while I was on active duty and while I was a student to study the great and historic tank battles that took place on those very heights. And it was really lucky for my family, on my first visit I took them to the Golan Heights and I had my son stand in each of the positions so we could feel exactly what it looked like to those soldiers on that day. My son reminds me it was muddy and wet and his clothes were dirty, but he'll never forget the walkabout that we all took on the Golan Heights.

I mentioned this in my press conference that night with Prime Minister Netanyahu that Susan, Nick, and I had had a chance to gaze out of the Golan into the "Valley of Tears," named for the vicious fighting that took place there in 1973. We saw what those brave Israelis soldiers would have seen.

On the morning of October 9th, Commander Avigdor Kahalani and the 7th Tank Brigade had been fighting for three days.

They were totally exhausted. They were totally outnumbered. They didn't know what would happen next. Syrian tanks were indeed on the cusp of breaking

through their lines. Yet they held on. Just when it looked like all was lost, a miracle took place – tanks, reinforcements swooped in and the Syrians retreated. (Applause.)

As the dust settled – as the dust settled, the voice of General Kahalani crackled through the radio. “You have saved the people of Israel.” (Applause.)

How can you – how can you not be completely awed by these brave men, their defense of the Golan Heights, and their commitment to the country? (Applause.)

And how – and how can we also not be proud here in America, proud to know that their relentless defense of Israel – of Zion – was aided by the United States of America? (Applause.)

In Israel’s hour of need, in support of these great battles, America launched Operation Nickel Grass. It provided Israel with tanks, with artillery, with munitions, and all the other supplies that were needed to continue the defense of the homeland.

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir later said, “For generations ... all will be told of the miracle of the immense planes from the United States bringing in the materiel that [brought] life to our people.” (Applause.)

Without that battle at that valley, the Battle at the Valley of Tears, and without the American support of Israel, there would not have been an Israel to recognize as the proper sovereign over the Golan Heights. (Applause.)

And this relationship from Truman to Trump is a tradition of supporting Israel deeply, and I think about that every day as I serve as America’s Secretary of State. (Applause.)

But I want to talk to you tonight about something that I am very worried about. Indeed, I am deeply worried about an old threat that is re-emerging to Israel and Jews all around the world: the threat of anti-Semitism.

It’s a cancer metastasizing in the Middle East, in Europe, and indeed, sadly, here in the United States as well.

In Britain, the Labour Party’s tolerance of anti-Semitism in its ranks is a national disgrace. And France’s Jews are under attack. The incidence of anti-Semitic attacks in Germany is also on the rise.

Indeed, hate crimes against Jews in this country have risen by one-third since 2017.

And we don’t have to go far, but to consider attacks on the Orthodox Jewish community in Crown Heights, Brooklyn over the past year.

And none of us, none of us, will ever forget the 11 Americans murdered while praying one Shabbat morning at the Tree of Life synagogue. May their memories be a blessing to all of us. (Applause.)

Every – every – decent human being has the responsibility to fight anti-Semitism. It's an affront to religious liberty. It denies the rights of Jews to worship their God. It attacks what it means to be Jewish, ethnically and religiously.

But Americans – Americans have a special responsibility to combat this scourge, because religious freedom sits at the core of our founding. It's in our Bill of Rights as the very first freedom.

It's the essential freedom upon which all others that we enjoy here in America are built.

And it's because I'm a champion of that religious freedom, and because I'm an American, that I am here today to tell you: The United States stands with the Jewish people and Israel in the fight against the world's oldest bigotry. (Applause.)

This bigotry is taking on an insidious new form in the guise of "anti-Zionism." It's infested college campuses in the form of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement. It's discussed in our media. It's supported by certain members of Congress, I suspect none of whom are here tonight. (Laughter.)

Now, don't get me wrong, criticizing Israel's policies is an acceptable thing to do in a democracy. It's what we do. But criticizing the very right to exist of Israel is not acceptable. (Applause.)

Anti-Zionism denies the very legitimacy of the Israeli state and of the Jewish people.

Zionism reflects the determination of the Jews to live as a free people in their ancestral homeland. It grows out of the Jewish faith.

Zionism was born in the Old Testament, crystalized under Theodor Herzl in the 19th century, and was realized in May of 1948, when David Ben Gurion read aloud a declaration of independence proclaiming the establishment of the modern state of Israel. (Applause.)

And yet, and yet today, only one country at the 192-nation United Nations has its right to exist routinely questioned.

So, friends, let me go on record: Anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism. (Applause.) The Trump administration opposes it unequivocally and we will fight for it relentlessly. (Applause.)

I want to talk about why anti-Semitism is on the rise. I have a few thoughts on the reasons.

First, Western civilizations – and our youth, in particular – are losing first-hand experience with the Holocaust and its survivors as the postwar generation dies out. I saw that clearly and thought about it on my most recent trip to Israel, when I visited Yad Vashem.

Second, professors teach our children that Israel is the epitome of

imperialism.

Third, journalists, who help drive our public debate, don't always take the time to consider facts or think critically. And I'm being polite. (Applause.)

But frankly, worst of all, some politicians think anti-Semitism can actually win them votes.

And we have to correct the record. We all have an obligation to do so because Israel should be admired, not attacked; embraced, not vilified; and emulated, not ostracized. (Applause.)

President Trump has made the fight against anti-Semitism a top priority. You can see it in our actions.

In June, we left the fever swamp of the UN Human Rights Council, which since its creation has adopted more resolutions condemning Israel than all other nations combined.

At the State Department, I reinvigorated the position of special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, and we have a real fighter in that role, Elan Carr, who I'm so proud to have on our team. (Applause.)

Last year, it was my honor to host the first-ever religious freedom ministerial at the State Department. I'm proud to say we will do it again in July. (Applause.)

On March 15th, just a few days past, I took action to deter the lawless International Criminal Court from targeting Americans and Israelis alike. (Applause.)

And the Trump administration and my team at the State Department is confronting the world's number one proponent of anti-Semitism, the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Applause.)

You've seen it not just in promises the President made, in our actions. We pulled out of the incurably flawed Iran nuclear deal, which put more than \$100 billion in the pockets of the ayatollah and funded the Islamic Republic's violent quest for regional domination.

In its place, we've enacted the strongest pressure campaign in history against Iran and its proxies, and they are feeling the pain. (Applause.)

As I said a bit earlier, I was in Beirut less than 48 hours after – 48 hours ago. There, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's terrorist-in-chief, recently begged for contributions from the very people in Lebanon that he and his Iranian masters have subjugated and terrorized. Hassan Nasrallah passing the tin cup is good news. (Applause.)

Meanwhile, we're supporting Israel's right to defend itself with current 10-year military support to the tune of \$38 billion a year, and more importantly, with the moral clarity that Israel deserves and demands. (Applause.)

The list is long. Just a few weeks ago, we deployed one of our most advanced anti-missile systems in Israel, and you've seen the work of Mr. Kushner and Mr. Greenblatt and our team, hard at work in devising a proposal to help Israelis and Palestinians find a just and lasting peace. (Applause.)

Importantly, too, my team is working to mobilize and rally nations all across the Middle East to find common ground.

In February, our Polish friends partnered with the State Department for a conference in Warsaw. Over 60 foreign ministers attended, and Arab leaders from all around the world sat with Israel's leaders.

It was truly historic. But uniquely, frankly, in spite of its historic nature, it didn't feel historic. It simply felt right. (Applause.)

Jews, Muslims, Christians working together to defeat Islamist terrorists, defeat the vociferous anti-Semites in Iran, and protect each of our nations was the right thing to do for each of those countries. (Applause.)

We live in dangerous times. We have to speak the truth. Anti-Semitism should and must be rejected by all decent people. Anti-Semitism – anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism, and any nation that espouses anti-Zionism, like Iran, must be confronted. We must defend the rightful homeland of the Jewish people. (Applause.)

We must see to it that the old dreams of Moses, of Herzl, of America's poet laureate Emma Lazarus – who wrote the verses inscribed on our Statue of Liberty – never fades. (Applause.)

Indeed, we're reminded of the consequences if we fall silent. As I close, I want to return to my visit to Yad Vashem.

At that memorial, those of you who have been there know, there is a list of people called the "Righteous Among the Nations." These are non-Jews, non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. (Applause.) Forty years ago this year, a man named Tibor Baranski was added to the list.

Tibor repeatedly risked life and limb to save 3,000 Jews in Hungary during World War II. (Applause.) He later immigrated to America, became a citizen. He passed away this January at the age of 96.

In the course of his heroic labors, a Nazi officer held a gun to Tibor's head and said the following: "Why do you, a Christian, help Jews?" Tibor answered, "You are either silly or an idiot. It is because I am Christian that I help the Jews." (Applause.)

Know with confidence that the Trump administration will not grow weary of the fight. To abandon it would mean to abandon our principles.

And as Secretary of State and as a Christian, I'm proud to lead American diplomacy to support Israel's right to defend itself. (Applause.) And I am proud to stand with the Jewish people and to champion the cause of religious liberty in Israel and in America. (Applause.)

These are special times, amazing times, and I want to thank each of you, and may God bless each of you, Israel, and the United States of America. Thank you. (Applause.)

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Press Releases: Briefing With Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey

Special Briefing
James F. Jeffrey

Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS

Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
March 25, 2019

MR PALLADINO: Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming. A special guest today, we've got the Special Representative for Syria Engagement and our Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. He has a few remarks at the top, and then we'll be happy to take some questions.

Ambassador Jeffrey.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you very much. Thank you for all coming today. This is obviously, for those of us who have worked on the Middle East and worked on Syria and worked on the efforts to defeat ISIS, a great day, a great weekend, with the victory over the last ISIS territorial caliphate positions along the Euphrates in Syria.

This is not the end of the fight against ISIS. That will go on, but it will be a different kind of fight. ISIS has lost much of its capability to project terrorist power and to have a recruiting base in an area that it controls, so it's a very, very important development. The development was carried out by a coalition of 79 countries and organizations led by the United States. At the height of ISIS's power it controlled 40,000 square miles, at the beginning of this administration 20,000. It lost all of that territory. It had almost 8 million people under its sway. Now it has no one. It had somewhere between 35,000 and 100,000 fighters. They're all in prison or dead or fled.

And now we're working to deal with the immediate situation – humanitarian, reconstruction, and stability – and essentially counterinsurgency against ISIS in the northeast of Syria as well as in neighboring Iraq. Let me mention before we get to the questions the sacrifices of our partners in the Iraqi military, in the Syrian SDF, among other coalition members, and of our own forces in the fight against ISIS. Thank you very much.

MR PALLADINO: Associated Press, Matt.

QUESTION: Thanks. Ambassador, I'm just – now that the territorial caliphate is no more, the SDF have been saying that they do not really have the capacity to deal with the prisoners, who you mentioned, and had talked about – at least today, started talking about an international tribunal or some kind of mechanism to deal with these people. What's the administration's position on that? Are you open to it? Because the administration has been quite hostile or contemptuous of mechanisms, particularly the International Criminal Court, so I'm just wondering is this something that you think is a viable way to go forward, and would you support it? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Right now the focus is on getting countries to take back their own foreign terrorist fighters. A large percent of the total that have been captured by the SDF are Iraqis or Syrians, and those people – there is a process underway to get those people back to Iraq and back to their Syrian communities for deradicalization and reintegration or in some cases punishment, and we're focused on that as our first priority.

The second priority is to pressure countries to take back their own citizens who may or may not have committed crimes under their systems. We think that's vital, and that's what we're focused on.

QUESTION: So not an international tribunal?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We're not looking at that right now.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to al-Hurra, Michel.

QUESTION: Yeah, Mr. Ambassador, what's the future of the U.S. military presence in Syria and a political solution there?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay, that's a broad question. First of all, the political solution. The U.S. policy in Syria is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We're a big step closer to that today, but ISIS still lives on in various cells and in the minds of many of the people in the areas that we've liberated. Secondly, to ensure a political process that will give us a different kind of government that will encourage people to come back and be a decent player in the international arena, unlike what we've seen from Syria in the last eight years. And then thirdly, the removal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria.

So our forces will stay on in very limited numbers in the northeast and al-Tanf to continue our clearing operations and stability operations against ISIS for a period of time not to be determined at this point.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to AFP, Francesco.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Is the withdrawal of the forces will leave starting right now, or when this is going to start? And also can you tell us more about what will happen to protect the Kurds, if you have an agreement for a multinational force, with who, and how this buffer zone will – would work if it is the plan?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yes. One, the withdrawal has begun right after the President announced it in December, first with priority on equipment but now beginning armed forces are being withdrawn. We had to reinforce initially to bring in more combat power, and now we're going back down towards what the final number will be.

In terms of the Kurds, what we're working with is with Turkey to have a safe zone of some length along the Turkish border where there would be no YPG forces, because Turkey feels very nervous about the YPG and their ties to the PKK. We understand that. President Trump has made that clear to President Erdogan. But we also do not want anyone mishandling our SDF partners, some of whom are Kurds. And so therefore, we're working for a solution that will meet everybody's needs.

We're not really looking at a coalition to be peacekeepers or anything like that. We're asking coalition personnel to continue to contribute and to up their contribution to our D-ISIS operations in Syria, and we're getting a pretty good response initially. But the mission is D-ISIS, Defeat ISIS. It's not to operate in any safe zone.

MR PALLADINO: Reuters, Lesley.

QUESTION: Ambassador, I wanted to come back to the prisoners. A lot of these countries that you mentioned have said that they don't want their prisoners back. What happens to those prisoners? And if you do give them back and, as you know, countries like Tunisia that can – don't have the capacity to try these prisoners. What happens to them then?

And then can I –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure.

QUESTION: Just one follow-up? What has happened to the prisoners, including a British journalist and I believe a Japanese hostage? Have – since the elimination of the caliphate, have you had any signs of any of these hostages?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: On the second, no, not yet. On the first, this is something that we simply continue to press our partners and allies to do. It's the right thing to do.

QUESTION: And if they don't have the capacity to do it, though? Do you – would you – I mean –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: They have the capacity in the end if they put the effort into it to do it.

QUESTION: Is there no sign that you could maybe use Guantanamo?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: If they have the – if they put the effort into it, they can deal with it.

MR PALLADINO: Laurie.

QUESTION: Last month, you visited Erbil and had discussions with senior Kurdish officials there about Syria. Could you summarize those discussions and their results?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure. We see Iraq and Syria, as do our partners and friends in Erbil and Baghdad, as part of, first of all, in the fight against ISIS, one campaign; and secondly, as part of the center or core of the Middle East. It's very important to everybody what happens next door. And what we do is we work with people in Baghdad, we work with people in Erbil, we work with the Turks, we work with the Jordanians, the Saudis to try to come up with solutions to all of these problems that we're talking today. That's what we do in these conversations.

QUESTION: Thank you. And do you see the threat in – the ISIS threat that remains in peoples' minds and in sleeper cells the same in Syria and the same – as it is in Iraq, or do you see differences between the two countries?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is developed more in Iraq from, my understanding, for several reasons. First of all, the fight is fresh in Syria, and ISIS elements are in shock from having lost this terrain. In Iraq, they've had more time to reconstitute. But again, their reconstituting in small groups operating in the shadows as a low-level insurgency. They're not holding terrain, they're not controlling populations.

MR PALLADINO: USA Today, Deirdre.

QUESTION: Can you tell us how many – back to this question of prisoners – how many ISIS fighters are being held right now? What's the most up-to-date number? And then secondly, related, how is the administration's decision not to bring Hoda Muthana back here for prosecution affecting your ability to persuade other countries to take these fighters back?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: In her case, we don't consider her an American citizen, so therefore it's not an issue. It's not somebody who we stripped the citizenship of. We just don't consider her an American citizen. We have taken a few people back who have been American citizens.

In terms of – your first question was on –

QUESTION: The numbers.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The numbers.

QUESTION: The latest numbers of –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The numbers are tricky. What people are reporting to me were in the 7,000 or more, but it may have gone up over the weekend. It's very hard to maintain communications when people are floating around in temporary holding camps. There was a very large ISIS force in Baghouz.

QUESTION: But all those not foreigners, right?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No, no. Most – well, most of them are Iraqis or Syrians,

which by the mindset are considered different than the foreign terrorist fighters who we identify as people who have come from outside the region.

QUESTION: Can you – do you have an estimate on those?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The majority are Syrian and Iraqi.

QUESTION: And you can't go any further? You can't be more specific? I mean –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Pardon?

QUESTION: You can't be more specific about a number of foreigners?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I mean, no. I mean, look, most of you have been in chaotic war zones.

QUESTION: Yeah.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Come on, nobody's out there. People are trying to avoid getting shot up until two days ago and moving forward on a combat operation; they're not too careful about counting.

MR PALLADINO: ABC, Conor.

QUESTION: You talked at the top about the importance of preventing a resurgence of ISIS, a lot of the work to stabilize the area. Some of the funding that the U.S. provided is starting to run out for programs like demining and other things. Is the U.S., is the administration, willing to contribute more funding for those things?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: For now, we have \$325 million that we received from coalition partners for stabilization in the northeast. Overall, since this campaign has begun throughout Syria and areas the regime doesn't control, we've spent over \$900 million on stabilization, and of course \$9 billion on humanitarian aid. So we'll continue the humanitarian aid program. I just pledged 400 million in the Brussels donors conference last week while looking for new sources of stability funds.

QUESTION: When you announced that funding, I was struck by the fact that it was for humanitarian programs sort of outside of the country, so no additional funding for the stabilization part of this.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, the stabilization programs that I talked about, the 325, are for activities inside northeast Syria. The humanitarian funds go everywhere. They go outside of Syria, they go inside of Syria, they go to regime-held areas, they go to non-regime-held areas.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Bloomberg, Nick.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, the Secretary has suggested that as U.S. troops come away from the field in northeast Syria the U.S. would ramp up its reliance on airstrikes and the like to control ISIS. Do you – can you describe that a little bit, and would there be sort of more reliance on

airpower in Syria and potentially Iraq on stemming the flow of (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Airpower has been an important component of our entire campaign against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. When the President made the decision to conduct the step-by-step withdrawal from Syria, he made clear that he did want to maintain the air control and presence, and now we're doing that plus maintaining some people on the ground. So airpower will continue to play an important role. Again, it's a military question whether you use airpower. For example, in some areas, we are using artillery fire from Iraq, in other areas artillery fire from Syria.

MR PALLADINO: NBC, Abbie.

QUESTION: Hi. Hi, Ambassador. What do you see as the practical significance of the declaration signed today recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights? And how does that affect your job given some of the criticism that it's a violation of UN resolution?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The Assad regime is considered a pariah by almost all of the countries in the Middle East. It will continue to be considered a pariah. I don't think I'm going to have a lot of problems with this.

MR PALLADINO: Fox.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. Just a follow-up on that. I think there are still thousands of ISIS fighters at large in Syria. You've mentioned sleeper cells a lot. Do you have an estimate on the figures of how many ISIS fighters are still in Syria?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. Once again, I'll throw out figures, and they're not worth the paper they're printed on or the air, the breath used to say. We've heard 15 to 20 between Syria and Iraq, and that's part of the problem. There is no border. There – I mean, there's a technical border, a line on a map, but these areas, the al-Jazirah desert and other areas, people wander back and forth all the time in.

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: One more on Turkey? Were you able, Mr. Ambassador, to make any progress in the talks with Turkey regarding the presence there, the protection of the SDF and the S-400?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I don't do the S-400. In terms of the – I wouldn't put it "protection of the SDF." I would put it that we have – Turkey has concerns about the danger to itself. We understand those concerns. We've been involved for many years dealing with the threats to Turkey out of the Qandil Mountains. We don't want to see another Qandil Mountains in Syria.

So therefore, we're working with them to come up with options to try to assuage their concerns without, again, leading to actions that we would not – President Trump would not approve against our fellow SDF fighters.

MR PALLADINO: CBS, Christina.

QUESTION: Thank you. Sir, could you talk about the financial resources that ISIS still has, which, by a lot of estimates, are significant, and how the U.S. plans to go after them considering a lot of them are in places that may not be reachable by sanctions or measures like that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yeah. We have a financial action center in Saudi Arabia and it's a major part of the overall coalition, essentially, infrastructure, if you will, bureaucracy, is to go after it. We've been very, very successful tracking it down. As you saw – I think it was a *New Yorker* piece or *Atlantic* – you have these hawalas and other basically informal banking systems that we always – it was a problem during the al-Qaida era; it's still a problem with al-Qaida, it's a problem with ISIS as well.

QUESTION: Can you quantify what you think their financial assets are?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No.

QUESTION: In the millions?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, certainly in the millions.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Switching back there, please. Yes, you.

QUESTION: Hello. Kathy Gilsinan with *The Atlantic*, where that piece ran. Do you have any update on the whereabouts of Baghdadi, and to what extent is it a priority to do the man-hunting now?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No, we don't know where he is, and finding the top leadership of ISIS or other terrorist groups is always a priority.

MR PALLADINO: PBS, Nick.

QUESTION: Thanks, Ambassador. Just one logistical question first: When you say the withdrawal has begun, you mentioned that the numbers went up, of course. Are the numbers as of today down compared to where they were in December?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I'm not sure, but again, I mean, I don't worry about numbers. I know, as well as I know my name, that President Trump has ordered a step-by-step withdrawal of our forces with the exception of a small contingent. That's underway. That will occur in the relatively near future. Where we are today, where we were yesterday, I have no idea.

QUESTION: Okay. And then a larger question on Iraq: As you know, there is yet another effort to either oust U.S. troops from the country or restrict what U.S. troops can do inside the country. How seriously do you take that effort within the Iraqi parliament and how concerning is it to you that it might restrict your ability to continue your efforts in not only Iraq, but, more to the point, northern Syria, northeast Syria, as that withdrawal happens?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all, let me make clear that our forces and the rest of the coalition in Iraq have one mission. That mission is the defeat of ISIS. That is a mission that has been cleared by and approved

through the Iraqi Government. That can involve operations in Iraq. It can involve operations across the border in Syria. But we do this in close conjunction with the Iraqi Government. Any government has the sovereign right to determine whether it wants foreign troops on its territory. Iraq is a – is a healthy democracy, if you will. These issues are something that are debated. We're pretty sure that the Iraqis will recognize that our forces and those of the rest of the coalition are there to help them, not to threaten their sovereignty.

MR PALLADINO: CNN, Kylie.

QUESTION: Hi, Ambassador. I'd just like to follow up on Conor's question about stabilization and humanitarian funding. You cited some pretty high figures for what the U.S. has spent, writ large, over the past few years. But the Trump administration zeroed out the budget for stabilization in Syria going forward, so what message does that send when you're trying to advocate for burden sharing if the U.S. has completely abdicated itself?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. How can I handle this question? The United States put together, when the rest of the world was running for its lives, a 79-country and organization coalition, took the lead, and smashed this organization in Syria and Iraq where it controlled much of those two countries and was the major theme in the Middle East for almost two years. That's the kind of thing only we can do, and we did it, and we did it brilliantly.

I think this administration's point of view is can't other people – the rest of the coalition, you add it up, has a GDP I'd say – check me on this – double that of the United States, all of Europe, Japan. So we would look for them to help us, and they are: Saudi Arabia, the Emiratis, and the UAE. I don't think there's any question of America's commitment to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, elsewhere, and to maintain stability in America and in our allies' interests throughout the Middle East. I don't – I mean, I spend two-thirds of my time out in the region. Nobody raises that question and says, "Well, we don't know."

QUESTION: And can I just have one more question?

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead.

QUESTION: I don't know how much you can speak to this, but given the recent talks with the Taliban on counterterrorism issues in Afghanistan, do you have anything to share about what ISIS looks like in Afghanistan right now, or does that not fall under your umbrella?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: In a general sense, yes, but I'm going to duck that question because it's handled by another operation in the State Department.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Kim Dozier. There are something like 200- to 300,000 ISIS families

in internment camps/IDP camps inside Iraq and there seems to be a mood among Iraqi officials I've spoken to not to rehabilitate them or reintegrate them, but to scour them for people to prosecute, yet every Sunni across Iraq seems to know someone who's in one of these camps. What are you recommending that the Iraqi Government do with them?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Our recommendations, which aren't necessarily followed, is to pursue reconciliation and reintegration. And the Iraqis have been pretty successful. Of the 3.5 million internally displaced persons, almost all of whom were Sunni Arab, that they had three years ago, over half have come back. So we're hoping they'll try harder.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Lesley, go ahead.

QUESTION: Please, can I – Mr. Ambassador, what are your steps now as far as the political process? Do you start engaging directly with Assad? Where is this going so that you can move that process beyond the military one if that's the stage you're at? And number two, did the Secretary of State in his discussions today by phone with his Russian counterpart discuss Syria at all?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: You can assume that Syria is usually on the agenda when the Secretary talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov. And –

QUESTION: How do you move beyond the military stage if it's there already?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all – and this is a theme of the questions coming at me, is – what's America doing to lead everything? In my rejoinder, which I was most, I hope, eloquent with, and the response to you is: Hey, there are things that we really do, like contain China and put together 79-country coalitions. A lot of this other stuff we think the international community should do. In this particular case, the UN has a mandate; it has a new Syria envoy, Geir Pedersen. We support him 100 percent. We have worked very closely with him. We also reach out constantly to the Russians to try to get them to be supportive of the UN process. So that's what the Security Council has decided, and we're moving forward on it. And we think in the end that will be how this thing resolves itself, because right now, you have frozen basically the conflict with the lines that we've had since last summer.

QUESTION: Yeah, okay.

MR PALLADINO: Last question, back here, please.

QUESTION: Follow-up on that?

QUESTION: Kristina Anderson, AWPS News. So I'm interested in how we see the D-ISIS campaign as it winds down and humanitarian aid kind of builds up and the reconciliation of fighters goes ahead – how that all will dovetail with some of these other – these diplomatic efforts to resolve the – in a political agreement that stabilizes the region.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is a very –

QUESTION: Can you say a little bit more about that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is a very complex job that I and many others who work with me are involved in. But we think we have, on a given day, an idea of where we are and where the international community is on the 18 or 20 major things that you just discussed.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Just a quick follow-up to Lesley?

MR PALLADINO: All right, go ahead.

QUESTION: Can you just describe whether Russia's being helpful at all in the political process that you want to see before –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The Russians right now are working on a constitutional committee to come up with a 150-member group composed of regime people, opposition people, and neutral people that would start the political process. The Russians have been fairly – I would say forthcoming in ideas and other things. I think the problem is that the Russians are hamstrung by the Syrian regime, which doesn't want to have anything to do with this. And that puts a crimp in what the Russians may want to do.

QUESTION: Sounds like they're being helpful then?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I would say helpful. For example, the Russians just approved a UN resolution in January that allows us to continue shipping humanitarian aid into Syria through opposition that is non-Syrian Government held areas. That's the helpful thing, and it flies in the face of Assad's sovereignty to some degree.

QUESTION: They've been working on the committee since last year.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Right, and – do you want me to start counting frozen conflicts that the UN has been working on since the 1940s? I'm thinking of one right now that almost blew up a couple of weeks ago. That's the way things are in the world of diplomacy.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: That's good, great. Thank you very much, Ambassador Jeffrey.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Thanks, guys.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you.

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Press Releases: Secretary Pompeo's Meeting With the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Joseph Aoun

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 23, 2019

The below is attributable to Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino:

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo met today with Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Joseph Aoun, in Beirut. They discussed the importance of the U.S.-Lebanese security partnership and how the United States can further support the Lebanese Armed Forces. The Secretary also raised U.S. concerns about the destabilizing role of Hizballah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, within Lebanon and throughout the region, and the U.S. commitment to bilateral counterterrorism, counter smuggling, and border control cooperation.

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