

Secretary Michael R. Pompeo With Arash Aalaei of Iran International - United States Department of State

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for your time. I understand it's been a very busy day, so we really appreciate your time.

SECRETARY POMPEO: You're most welcome. It's great to be with you.

QUESTION: So last November, during protests in Iran, reportedly people had been killed – somewhere between 400 to 1,500 people. And the regime in Iran did not allow the people to mourn the dead, the people that – they've lost their loved ones. At the same time, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, just announced the three days of mourning for the death of General Soleimani. What is your response to that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, it's sad, it's hypocritical. In fact, I would describe it as evil. Not allowing parents to mourn the death of their child, especially when it came at the hands, oftentimes, of organizations led by Qasem Soleimani. That is, he was responsible for the death of those people, and the leadership wouldn't allow them to mourn, and now this evil man, this terrorist, Mr. Soleimani, he's going to get three days. That's not right. It's inconsistent with what we all know to be the right way to treat human beings, but sadly, it's reflective of the nature of the way the Iranian regime has behaved for far too long.

QUESTION: So the Qods Force and Mr. Soleimani has been on the terrorist list, that U.S. terrorist list, for a while. The question is: Why now? Why did the United States – chose to take him down right now?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, there's always multiple reasons for timing of events. In this case, we had watched Soleimani and his IRGC forces, as well as their proxies, the Shia militias in Iraq, engage in ever-escalating activities that threatened American lives. We've seen it for months. We saw them take ships from the Straits of Hormuz. We saw them engage in activities that led to the downing of a United States UAV. And then, in the end of December, we saw them take what would have been maybe the 10th or 15th strike, this time killing an American contractor. The escalation was taking place. We needed to stop it. This was all happening as a result of the orchestration of the terrorist, Soleimani, so we had a need.

Second, we were watching, and Soleimani was planning future attacks – attacks that might have resulted in the death of dozens or hundreds of American citizens, as well as many Iraqis, many Muslims, people of Shia faith or Sunni faith. We would not allow that to happen, and so we did everything we could to disrupt it. So we continue to do that work, but last night we took the strike that took down the man that was orchestrating and leading the charge to conduct these imminent attacks.

QUESTION: So both you and President Trump has indicated before that when it comes to attacking U.S. interests in the region, or U.S. allies, you don't distinguish any difference between Iran and its proxies. What's going to happen if Iranian proxies or the regime in Iran retaliates against the United States?

SECRETARY POMPEO: President Trump's been pretty clear. We don't telegraph precisely what we will do, but as we saw this past week, we will hold accountable the proxy forces – you saw the strike that the Department of Defense took in Syria and Iraq in direct response to the events of December 27th, where the American contractor was killed. And then when we saw, too, that there were future attacks being planned, we did everything we could to take it down. We will continue to respond. We will impose costs. The process of the days of appeasement by the United States for terrorists are simply over.

QUESTION: Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, just said yesterday that Iran will take revenge. And so what has the U.S. done in anticipation of an Iranian attack? Are there any contingency plans? I know that the President has just ordered the deployment of 3,000 additional troops. What else is the United States willing to do in order to protect its interests in the region?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So it's important, I think, to put this in context. We've been working on this project since the President was inaugurated back in January of 2017. What did we do? We flipped the – we flipped the narrative. Where the previous administration chose to fly pallets of cash to underwrite, to pay these terrorists, we took a different approach. We applied economic sanctions. We denied them the capacity to continue to underwrite and fund terrorism around the world to the same degree they were. Where the previous administration said we're going to give a free pass to terrorists, this administration has taken down the caliphate. There's a broad set of activities in the Middle East, each of which is aimed at doing precisely what you described: protecting America's interests.

As for the moment, we have been preparing for this by making sure we have the right resources in place, all of the elements, which include building out a big coalition, not just the United States – our Gulf partners, the Israelis – all with a similar set of interests designed to protect America's interests in the region, and we've made sure that the United States, through its Department of Defense and our great diplomats who are serving in embassies in the region, are prepared as well.

QUESTION: Iranian people have heard the reaction from the regime there – it's from the ayatollah and also the president. They would also like to hear the reaction straight from the U.S. secretaries. What is – do you have any message for Iranian people? What is your message to Iranian people?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've been talking about this for an awfully long time. We love the Iranian people. We hear the Iranian people. We support the Iranian people. I know that the protests against the death of Soleimani aren't what the Iranian people really believe. I know that in the end, most Iranian people are glad – glad that this terrorist is gone. Because he not only impacted their fellow Muslims around the world, but he was responsible for the very protests – protest attacks on the people of Iran. He was responsible for the Basij forces that were moving in. He was driving that. He understood that if the people of Iran's voices could be heard, it threatened his very existence.

And so, my message for the people of Iran is very clear: demand what is rightfully yours, the dignity that comes from the fact that you're a human being, the freedom to live, the freedom to worship in the way you choose. Demand those things. Require the leadership in Iran to give those to you, because you deserve them and they are your rights.

QUESTION: We saw that you shared a video on Twitter of Iraqis celebrating the death of Qasem Soleimani. We also saw videos coming from Syria. Do you think Iran's influence in the countries – so-called countries of “Axis of Resistance” are diminished now?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I do, and I actually think the act that we took last night further diminishes their capacity. This – look, this guy was coordinating this stuff all across – all across the region. He was fomenting what was taking place in Lebanon, the 6 million people displaced in Syria, the tragedy that we've seen in Iraq. Soleimani was at the center. He was the center of the spider web, and now he's gone.

We've seen this over these past few months. We've watched protestors in Beirut. They're not protesting against America. They're protesting for the freedom to get their government to stop behaving in ways that are corrupt. They want – they simply want to eat and take care of their families. This is what the people of Lebanon have been protesting for. The same for the people of Iraq. While there were people at our embassy funded, underwritten by Soleimani, there were people protesting in other parts of Iraq, demanding just the simple things that life requires and which they're duly entitled do.

I am very confident that we are turning the corner, that in fact the people in these regions, not because they love America but because they love their countries, because they want their countries to be sovereign and independent, are going to continue to demand that the corrupt politicians that have been running these places, and the theocrats and kleptocrats that are leading in Iran, no longer engage in that kind of behavior, which they know harms the life that they'll have and that their children and grandchildren will have.

QUESTION: Secretary Pompeo, thank you very much for your time. We really appreciate it.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much, sir. Great to be with you.