

Remarks by Vice President Pence in a Press Gaggle | Erbil Air Base

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Remarks

Issued on: November 23, 2019

Erbil Air Base

Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan

Q (In progress.) Did he give you any assurances that he'll have more leniency towards the peaceful protestors in the streets?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, before I address that, let me just first say what an incredible privilege it is for Karen and me to be here in Iraq at the beginning of Thanksgiving Week.

As I said to our troops at Al Asad Base, and here at Erbil earlier, the American people will pause around the Thanksgiving table and remember what they're thankful for this week. That, at every Thanksgiving table, I know that every American will be grateful for our armed forces and particularly for those who have been on this frontier of freedom.

When you think about the progress that these soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have accomplished in this region in the last year, it's truly extraordinary. And when several years ago ISIS had overrun vast areas of Syria and Iraq, but our armed forces working with our allies turned that around. And, in March of this year, with many of the troops stationed here at Erbil and at Al Asad we saw the last inch of ISIS territory captured. The ISIS caliphate's territory is gone.

And just one month ago, we saw the leader of ISIS taken out by American forces. And the world is safer, America is safer, because of that. The region is more stable and more secure.

And to be able to be here to make sure all of these great Americans know how grateful the American people are for their service is a great, great privilege for us.

With regard to our conversations with Prime Minister Al Mahdi, we spoke about the unrest that's been taking place in recent weeks here in Iraq. He assured me that they were working to avoid violence or the kind of oppression that we see taking place, even as we speak, in Iran. And he pledged to me that they would work to protect and respect peaceful protestors as a part of the democratic process here in Iraq.

I also encouraged him to listen to those who are protesting and their calls for reform. It was something President Barzani and I also spoke about — issues of governance here.

We have a strong partnership with the Iraqi people, forged in the fires of war. We liberated Iraq from dictatorship. With our allies, we've liberated Iraq again from the clutches of ISIS. And they — as I told Prime Minister Al Mahdi, as I told President Barzani here in the Kurdish region, the United States is prepared to partner with them further to ensure that their governance and meeting the needs of their people is achieved, and those objectives for long-term security and prosperity happen.

In the midst of all of that, I reiterated our commitment. President Trump's commitment is to an independent and sovereign Iraq. We continue to be concerned about the malign influence of Iran across Iraq. President Trump has been very clear about that.

I spoke with Prime Minister Al Mahdi about that, as well as the leadership here in the Kurdish region government, just to make sure they understand that our commitment is to the Iraqi people, but we want to see an Iraq that is free of the malign influence of Iran and is also respecting the rights and the voices of all of its people.

Q A question about your meeting here just now. Obviously a lot has happened recently in the region after Vice President — after President Trump's decision and then your trip to Ankara. Was the President reassured by your visit? Is he concerned about broader threats to the Kurdish people and the Kurdish forces?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, what I heard from President Barzani today, as well as the Prime Minister here and the rest of their officials, was that they are — they are greatly encouraged by President Trump's decision to maintain troops in Syria to secure the oil fields so that they don't fall into the hands of either ISIS or Iran or the Syrian regime, but rather that those oil resources are available for the Kurdish people in Syria.

I was encouraged to hear from President Barzani of how — President Trump's resolve in holding Turkey to the ceasefire that they agreed to, when our delegation went to Ankara last month. And my sense is that — that now, with our troops in the region and in the air, that Kurdish forces, Syrian Democratic Forces, as well as the Kurdish population here in the Kurdish region, know that the American people are with them. And these are allies who fought shoulder to shoulder with us and bravely sacrificed greatly to defeat ISIS not only in Iraq, but in Syria.

And they know now that while President Trump is absolutely determined to bring our troops home — and that was the basis for the President's decision in moving our troops out of the border region on the Syrian-Turkish border — that, nevertheless, we're going to continue to maintain a presence in Syria and, of course, here in Iraq that reflects the strong and enduring partnership that we have with the Iraqi people, including the Kurdish people in Iraq and in Syria.

Q Did you have to smooth over any sense of betrayal though? Because there was certainly a sense of betrayal after that initial discussion.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think that — let me just say that I didn't — I don't think there was any confusion now among the leadership here in the Kurdish region that President Trump's commitment to our allies here in Iraq, as well as to those in the Syrian Defense

Forces, the Kurdish forces who fought alongside us, is unchanging.

But look, President Trump is always going to look for opportunities to bring our troops home and to take these men and women out of harm's way, but making it clear to our allies in this region, as the President has done, that those who fight alongside us, that we will stand with them and ensure their ability to create the kind of stability and long-term opportunity for prosperity will continue to be a goal.

But I could tell, in speaking to President Barzani and his team, that they know the American people are with them. And we're going to continue to build this long-term relationship with all the people of Iraq, including in the Kurdish region. And we're going to continue to ensure that our Kurdish allies in Syria have access to those oil reserves that will make it possible for them to see to their interest and their security.

Thank you.

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