

Pompeo warns Biden against warming relations with Iran

US Secretary of State championed efforts to ease relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks to the media in Washington. Reuters

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned the incoming Biden administration against warming relations with Iran, during an opening address at a Bahrain security summit on Friday.

President-elect Joe Biden has signaled an interest in re-engaging with Iran by returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement that President Donald Trump withdrew from.

“I think it’s fundamentally the wrong direction,” said Mr Pompeo.

The move would be a significant pivot from Mr Trump’s Iran policy, which has created a “maximum pressure campaign” to isolate Iran diplomatically militarily, and economically.

Mr. Pompeo made the remarks at the Manama Dialogue, organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The annual gathering brings together policymakers in the Gulf region and beyond to tackle the most prevalent security challenges in the Middle East.

Amos Yadlin, who used to head Israeli military intelligence, was in attendance and questioned Mr Pompeo on whether the maximum pressure campaign has been successful considering that Iran has “more enriched uranium and more centrifuges,” putting it closer to the threshold needed to build a nuclear weapon.

Mr Pompeo said “turning off a few centrifuges,” wasn’t a significant enough reason to remain in the nuclear agreement as he downplayed the recent escalations in Iran’s nuclear programme.

“The Iranians are desperately signalling their willingness to return to the negotiating table to get sanctions relief,” Mr Pompeo said. He did not elaborate on what signals Washington has seen.

The Manama Dialogue is being held at Bahrain’s Ritz Carlton hotel, but many sessions will be broadcast virtually. In-person attendance will be limited, in line with the government’s Covid-19 safety measures.

Officials from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other countries are expected to deliver addresses during the three-day summit.

The event comes on the heels of recent trips to Israel and the Gulf region from both Mr Pompeo and White House senior adviser Jared Kushner.

The Trump administration is using its final weeks in power trying to strengthen the president’s Middle East policy initiatives.

The crown jewel of Mr Trump’s Middle East policy is the Abraham Accord, which normalised relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain.

“We think that’s important for peace throughout the Middle East,” said Mr Pompeo.

Mediator nation Kuwait has signalled progress in recent days on talks over the decision by the Arab Coalition to freeze ties with Qatar. “We’re going to keep working to do what we can to facilitate conversations and dialogue,” said the US secretary of state.

“We are very hopeful that the dispute between the Saudis and the Qataris can be resolved.”

In the waning days of his administration, Mr Trump has also been pushing for other countries in the region to establish ties with Israel.

Mr Pompeo said he was confident more countries will move to normalise ties with Israel.

“A lot of influential people in the world would have said that even hoping for these achievements was pure fantasy,” said Mr Pompeo about the Abraham Accord signing.

“We show that the real fantasy was the bankrupt conventional wisdom that said there couldn’t be progress until the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians was solved,” he added.

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