

Top U.S. diplomat makes secret Iraq trip amid Iran tensions

BY MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a lightning visit on Tuesday to Baghdad aimed at showing support for the Iraqi government as the United States has been picking up intelligence that Iran is threatening American interests in the Middle East.

The top American diplomat's unannounced trip to the Iraqi capital began and ended after nightfall under heavy security following the abrupt cancellation of a visit to Germany.

Journalists from The Associated Press and other organizations accompanying Pompeo were not told of his new destination until his plane left for Baghdad and were not allowed to report on his whereabouts until after his plane had taken off for London.

The secretary told reporters on the flight that his meetings with Iraq's president and prime minister were intended to demonstrate U.S. support for "a sovereign, independent" Iraq, free from the influence of neighboring Iran.

Pompeo also said he wanted to underscore Iraq's need to protect Americans in their country.

"We wanted to let them know about the increased threat stream that we had seen and give them a little bit more background on that so they could ensure that they were doing all they could to provide protection for our team," he said. "They understood, too, it's important for their country."

Pompeo's visit came as the Trump administration intensified its pressure campaign against Iran. The U.S. said this week that



AP Photo/Mandel Ngan
Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, right, walks with Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the State Department David Satterfield, left, and Charge D'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad Joey Hood upon arrival in Baghdad on Tuesday.

it was rushing an aircraft carrier group to the Middle East to deter or respond to any Iranian attack.

U.S. officials have said there were indications Iran was planning to retaliate for the Trump administration's stepped-up sanctions on the country, although the threat information remains vague.

Pompeo would not be specific about the more recent threat information involving Iran except that they involved "imminent" plans for attacks. "We're taking every action to deter them," he said. "Other than that, I just can't say any more."

Before landing in Baghdad he said that that he would make clear in his meetings that any attack by Iran or its proxies on American forces in Iraq would affect the Iraqi government too.

In Washington, an American official said the decision to deploy the carrier group and a group of Air Force bombers to

the Middle East was based in part on intelligence indications that Iran had moved short-range ballistic missiles by boat in waters off its shores.

Iran, meanwhile, was expected to announce Wednesday that it would partially withdraw from the nuclear deal it struck with world powers in 2015.

As tensions rise between Washington and Tehran, Baghdad is caught in the middle. Iraq has a close relationship with the U.S., which is leading the international coalition in the war against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. More than 5,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Iraq.

But Iraq is also tightly enmeshed with Iran in trade, security and political matters, and it has been loath to antagonize its larger neighbor. Iran won the ear of many top Iraqi politicians after it stepped in to fill the political vacuum following the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Housing: Pendleton market 'slim'

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necessarily need perfect credit to secure a mortgage and a house's value was more likely to rise than a rental unit's rent was likely to fall.

Galloway's latter point sunk in for Lowell and Carolyn Britt, who are in the process of finalizing the purchase of a house in town.

Lowell said the Pendleton couple had learned many of the lessons discussed at the conference the "hard way."

Lowell had access to a home loan through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, but he was stymied from getting a mortgage until he could establish more work history.

He was able to do just that when he got a new job, but the couple still faced a competitive market when they looked at houses. When they bid on their future house in the McKay Creek area, it had been the second bid in the two days the house had been on the market.

Lowell and Carolyn said they were more interested in buying into the neighborhood than the house itself, which they plan to fix up (the Britt's said their new house was unaffected by the April flooding).

Abel Lozano is earlier along in the home buying process, but he was glad that he could get some more information at the conference.

Lozano said he's applying for a home loan through the U.S. Department of Agriculture because of its low-money-down allowances.

A single parent, Lozano said he wants to move out of the trailer park he lives in so his daughter has room to grow.

The challenge for Lozano is finding a suitable house in a market where many homes were built in the 1930s and 1940s and are in a state of deterioration.

"The market is kinda slim," he said.

While the conference got several positive reviews from the audience, it also got a thumbs up from a real estate agent in attendance.

Jef Farley, a broker/owner at Coldwell Banker Whitney & Associates, praised conference organizers for getting good turnout on a Monday evening.

In an interview after the conference, Farley agreed that Pendleton was a seller's market.

He added that Pendleton has two months of available housing inventory, meaning all houses that are currently available for sale would be sold in two months if no new houses come onto the market. A neutral market would have five months of inventory.

Although the city has been active in selling lots for housing development, resulting in new housing at Sunridge Estates and on Westgate, Farley said the next challenge is building new lots for housing.

Kevin Hale, another real estate agent for Coldwell, echoed Farley's statement at the conference.

"If you think housing is tight and you think rentals are tight, then just try to find a lot to build on in Pendleton, Oregon," he said.

Farley said he's been studying a recent boom in real estate interest in The Dalles and he thinks Pendleton is poised to become the next hot real estate market, but the city needs to be prepared to create the capacity.

Before attendees left for the evening, the city collected a housing survey they issued to the audience.

The survey asks respondents about their current housing situation, the challenges they face in finding new housing, and their interest in city-sponsored home loan programs.

Play: 'Almost, Maine' explores all kinds of love through nine short plays

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They've probably only been on group dates before."

The show's wide-ranging look at love also includes a married couple whose relationship is on the rocks, a woman who lost her husband and two women falling in love with each other.

The latter scene is one that has drawn controversy at some high schools. Director Beth Anderson said when the play was first announced she had some concerned calls from people who disagreed with having LGBTQ characters in a high school play, and one adult who had previously helped her with shows declined to volunteer with "Almost, Maine" due to the scene.

The scene is chaste compared to some of the other couples' performances featuring kissing or sexual innuendos. It uses characters literally falling down as a metaphor for falling in love.

"It's absolutely the most benign of all the plays," Anderson said.

She said the students involved in "Almost, Maine" had been mature, respectful and professional about dealing with the more grown-up



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Marcia Carrera applies makeup on actor Isabelle Herrera backstage while getting ready for the dress rehearsal for the Hermiston High School production of "Almost, Maine" on Monday in Hermiston.

moments of the show, and no one was being asked to do anything they weren't comfortable with (some students, for example, chose to fake "stage kisses" while other scene partners decided together that they were comfortable actually kissing each other during rehearsals and the show.)

Anderson asked the students if they wanted to

remove the scene between two women in order to avoid controversy, but she said they were adamant that it was important to include representation of LGTBQ couples in a story about all kinds of romantic relationships.

The scene was originally written for two men, but Anderson said few male students tried out for the

play and she couldn't find any interested in playing those roles, so the scene was gender-swapped.

Jessica Ferguson, a senior who plays one of the women in the "gay scene," said she appreciated the "wide variety" of love shown in "Almost, Maine." She said was playing her role to the best of her ability and wasn't concerned about possible

negative reactions as people watched her character process her feelings for another woman.

"If you're uncomfortable with it, that's a 'you' thing," she said.

Many of the scenes use symbolism for love, such as a woman who can't tell a painting is of a heart, just like she doesn't pick up on the artist's attraction to her.

Samuel Serber, who plays three different men in the show, including the artist, said he loves that even though the play uses so many metaphors, there are moments that feel very true to life.

"I just loved the awkwardness of certain scenes," he said of the first time he read the script. "It's very real. It's not like TV drama all the time, it's just awkward like real people."

Other students said they also liked that the show was broken up into many smaller plays, so they could focus on perfecting one scene. Allison Galdamez, a senior who plays a woman who wishes her boyfriend would propose, said she liked that

she could participate without having to memorize "a whole bunch of parts."

Isabella Herrera and Bridget Wizner both said they related to their characters when they got the part. They said if there was a downside to their roles, it was that their scenes took place outside in the dead of winter, meaning they were sweating under layers of winter coats and scarves and sweaters under the hot stage lights.

Beyond the actors, the play uses a bevy of student crew members for lighting, sound, props, makeup and more. Patty Sandoval, a sophomore, is acting as assistant director for the production and has directed rehearsals at times that Anderson was not able to make it.

She said her favorite scene of the play is "Where It Went," which shows a husband and wife arguing. It contrasts with the comedic tone of most of the other scenes.

"It's sad, but I think it's the best because it shows the other side of love," she said.

Graffiti: Police get more reports

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are seeing, and right off Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan responded. The two agencies plan to meet as soon as next week to discuss the matter, exchange information, including from school resource officers, and consider how to stop it.

Pendleton this season is experiencing more non-gang graffiti, police Chief Stuart Roberts said, such as spray paint displays of hearts, hashtags and love notes, as well as comments on the walls of restroom stalls. And, he said, there is bound to be graffiti under bridges where it could take a while before anyone sees and reports it.

The Cyclones, a local Sureños gang, has been quiet on the graffiti front.

"We know the group pretty well," Roberts said.

"We haven't seen any of their stuff for a while."

Pendleton also has an "aggressive graffiti abatement program," he said. Like similar local laws, the ordinance puts the onus on property owners to clean up the mess.

Pendleton's version gives property owners three days to remove or cover graffiti from the time of a notice. The owners can take that notice downtown to Sherwin-Williams or Zimmerman True Value Hardware to get supplies to deal with the graffiti. Roberts explained if someone is unable to remove or paint over it, the city's code enforcement officer works with local contractors, volunteer groups or others to lend a hand.

"Even officers have gone out and done it before," Roberts said.

Hermiston gives owners

seven days from the date of a notice to remove graffiti. If they don't, the city will and can charge them for the cost.

"We didn't want to bog abatement down with too much red tape minutia," Edmiston said, "and what we have has worked well."

Edmiston also said his department will continue to cite parents if their children are responsible for graffiti. That strategy in the past helped clear some cases.

Gina Miller, code enforcement coordinator for Umatilla County, said cities tend to have more problems with graffiti, so Hermiston and other local towns are not alone. She serves on the board of the Oregon Code Enforcement Association and attends its conferences twice a year. She said cities regularly request presentations for dealing with graffiti.

EQUIPMENT

10

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