

Transcript of US Embassy Algiers Press Conference

January 7, 2021, 2:00pm

Embassy Spokesperson: *Asalamu 'alaykum.* Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. I'm Khaled Wulfsberg, the official spokesperson of U.S. Embassy Algiers. Today we have a special guest in attendance, namely David Schenker, who has been the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs since June 2019.

Before joining the Department of State, Mr. Schenker was director of the Arab Politics program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Mr. Schenker studied at the American University of Cairo, so he understands Arabic well. Let me give the floor to Mr. Schenker to give some short remarks, and after that we'll open it up for questions. Given time constraints, we're going to only allow one question per journalist for the Assistant Secretary of State.

David Schenker, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs: *Asalamu 'alaykum.* Good afternoon. It's good to be here, in this city's history, culture, and dynamism. The same can be said for all of Algeria. The United States has long had important political and economic ties with Algeria and I am here to underline and reaffirm them. Let me start by sending my best wishes to President Tebboune following his return to Algeria. I hope he has a speedy and full recovery. Algerians, Americans, and the rest of the world are in the midst of a terrible struggle against the coronavirus and, on behalf of the United States, I send my deepest condolences to those Algerians who have lost friends and family to this terrible disease. *Allah yarhamhum.* The United States has committed \$4.1 million to support Algeria's fight against COVID 19 and we will continue our important partnership in the months and years ahead. I am proud about our partnership in countering the virus, and note that it is based on a long history of U.S.-Algeria cooperation.

In this residence behind me, Algerian diplomats helped us release 52 American diplomats after 444 days of being held hostage by Iran some 40 years ago this month. In 2000, we worked with Algeria to help broker an end to the Ethiopian – Eritrean war, which had claimed tens of thousands of lives. In 2015, American diplomats supported Algeria's leadership in concluding the Algiers Accords which sought to curb the violence in Mali. Algeria is a leader on the international stage and both of our countries have a shared interest in ensuring a safer, more stable, and more prosperous region.

And our partnership is much deeper than politics and security cooperation. And if the circumstances permit given the global pandemic, the United States would be privileged to be the country of honor at this year's Algiers International Fair where American firms will once again

explore win-win partnerships with their Algerian counterparts. Indeed, American companies are in Algeria, creating jobs and economic growth, from the pharmaceutical sector to energy production, and everywhere in between. Each and every day we are building people-to-people ties in education, culture, the arts, and so many other areas.

In sum, we have a great deal in common and a deep and abiding respect for the Algerian government and people. We look forward to continuing our valuable partnership in the years ahead.

With that, I look forward to taking your questions.

Al Jazeera: Will the Biden administration reverse Trump's proclamation of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara? The second part of the question: Does the three-party deal between the United States, Israel, and Morocco, provide for U.S. boots on the ground in Western Sahara either directly or indirectly?

Assistant Secretary Schenker: As for the first question of whether the Biden administration would retract or reverse President Trump's decision over the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, This is not a decision I can speak to. I was appointed to work in the administration for Secretary Pompeo. Every administration has the prerogative to set foreign policy and to determine the administration's initiatives. What I can tell you is that the United States continues to believe that political negotiations are capable, that only political negotiations are capable of resolving the issues between Morocco and the Polisario. We believe negotiations should occur within the context of Morocco's autonomy plan. On the issue of whether the U.S. will have boots on the ground in Western Sahara, let me be clear: The U.S. is not establishing a military base in the Western Sahara. AFRICOM is not talking about moving its headquarters to the Western Sahara. In that regard, I've seen the articles in the Moroccan and Algerian press and they're incorrect.

Ennahar: First of all I would like to welcome you to Algeria. My question is can you tell us about ways and means of cooperation in both security and economy between our two countries, Algeria and America?

Assistant Secretary Schenker: Thank you. You know I am here following up on visits that former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in October, the AFRICOM Commander General Townsend was here in September and of course my counterpart, my colleague, Secretary of the Air Force Barrett, who was here for a daylong visit and leaving today. We are all here for the same reason. That is because the United States is committed to its relationship with Algeria. It's rich, it's multifaceted. It includes a security dimension obviously but also an economic dimension. And we're looking to grow both those elements. I'll leave the defense side to the Secretary of the Air Force who is here today. She engaged in productive conversations with her counterparts talking about ways in which we can cooperate, perhaps military sales, perhaps

additional training, IMET, all sorts of things that we work together and of course the most well-known aspect of this productive military agreement has been just excellent counterterrorism cooperation. Something the U.S. and Algeria are dedicated, just totally committed to. I met also today with the Minister of Finance and with Foreign Minister Boukadoum. With the Minister of Finance we talked about areas of increasing trade, areas of technical assistance, ways of increasing US foreign direct investment in Algeria, where just incredible developments are taking place in terms of productive legislative reform and new legislation that is making Algeria an even more attractive place to investors. And a place of course where we look forward to doing more work here. It's in both of our interests.

Echourouk: Two questions. First question: President-elect Biden will be inaugurated in a few days. So your opinion on what will be your criteria on what the new administration will use or will take into consideration regarding economy, politics and investment? And the second question is related to the new administration. How will the new administration react to Algeria's leadership role in some regional issues including Libya, Western Sahara, and Algeria's support of the Sahwari people's right to self-determination?

Assistant Secretary Scheckner: Well, thank you, those are two interesting questions. As I said a moment ago, every administration has its own prerogatives. You have Democratic administrations, you have Republican administrations. They differ. But they also remarkably are pretty consistent throughout the years in many of their policies and approaches to the region. In particular, in countries like Algeria, in which we have deep, historic relationships. You remember, it was Senator John F. Kennedy who gave a speech on the Senate floor in 1957 calling for Algerian independence. Since then we have had Republican administrations, Democratic administrations and we have built on strategic cooperation, partnership, economically that I think has been very productive for both sides. I would anticipate that the Biden administration would continue along these lines. I don't have any specifics for you; I can't really comment on that. As for Algeria's role, so I'm going to address how this would change under a Biden administration, I can say that the United States and Algeria have a plethora of shared interests in Libya. That is we both believe there has to be a political solution to the problem. We are both supportive of the UN-led process, this is the five-plus-five military talks, this is a UN-led political dialogue forum. We believe that the UN-led facilitated political negotiations is the best way to achieve peace in the region. We have very good counterterrorism cooperation in Mali. We think that Algeria is playing a productive role. Across the board, we think these are areas where there is a remarkable consistency. So I'll leave it at that.

El Bilad: Two questions. The first question is on what happened yesterday in Washington DC at the Capitol. Images of protesters storming the capitol. Don't you think that what happened yesterday will tarnish the image of the U.S., especially when it comes to the promotion of democracy and peace around the world. The second question is related to Western Sahara and the U.S. proclamation recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Some U.S.

officials and former officials have condemned the proclamation, including former National Security Adviser John Bolton. They characterized it as a tradeoff that may compromise decades of U.S. endeavors. Don't you think that the Trump administration has entangled the U.S. in the region, on a long-term?

Assistant Secretary Schenker. Thank you. On the first question, I think for all of us, it was troubling to watch the developments. I'd like to quote for you a bit of what Secretary of State Pompeo tweeted yesterday. And I quote: "The storming of the U.S. Capitol is unacceptable. America is better than what we saw today." And I think that sums up his thoughts and certainly my thoughts. As for what certain former politicians or Republicans or Democrats said about the Western Sahara, I'd like to just say, reiterate I think, what I said before, which is that the Western Sahara, the United States has always and continued to believe that only political negotiations are capable of resolving the issues between Morocco and the Polisario and that those negotiations have to, should occur within the context of the autonomy plan. Beyond that, I have to say that the status quo in the Western Sahara has not worked. It has benefited no one. I think what we, what the administration has done, has made a move toward a more serious, and more realistic and more credible solution to the conflict in the Western Sahara. So finding that solution I think requires bold, creative, and unorthodox approaches to the problem, and that's what the administration did. We continue to urge all participants to constructively engage with the UN. We support the appointment of another UN special envoy and we consider, as we all consider and back the UN in moving toward new and creative ways to find progress on the peace process. So I'll leave it there.

APS: Two questions, the first question is what's the U.S. approach to build constructive peace in the Sahel, especially that some countries are seeking to take control of the region by imposing their own security plans. The second question is on American-Algerian business partnership. Where does Algeria stand in the Prosper Africa initiative?

Assistant Secretary Schenker: Well thank you. I wish I could offer you words of wisdom on the Sahel. My counterpart and my colleague over at the State Department, Tibor Nagy, he's the assistant secretary for Africa, he's mostly responsible for that. I can refer you back to him. I do know that Algeria is, and this pertains to the second question as much as the first, is a member of the African Union, an important member, a leader in Africa, and plays a critical role of the security in the region and is a respected voice. And also, by nature of its population, educated population, young population, size, location, *entre pot* to Africa. It's changing in a productive way its legislation, making it a more attractive place for investment, can serve a real positive role in terms of trade and entree to both Africa and to Europe. It's an important element of how the United States looks at trade and development in the region.