

Press Releases: Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, Coordinator for Counterterrorism on the Conference on Mobilizing Law Enforcement Efforts to Defeat ISIS

Special Briefing
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MR GREENAN: Thank you, and thank you, everyone, for joining us today for this call. It's an on-the-record conference call about the just-concluded two-day International Conference on Mobilizing Law Enforcement Efforts to Defeat ISIS. Ambassador Nathan Sales is with us today. Ambassador Sales is the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism. He's going to share some of the highlights from the event with us. He'll have some opening remarks, and then we'll take your questions.

And as a reminder, this briefing will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. Now I'll turn it over to Ambassador Sales.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, thanks very much, and I'd like to say a word of thanks to all of the journalists who are on the call today. Thanks for taking the time to have this conversation. This week we hosted a conference on international efforts to defeat ISIS using civilian tools and law enforcement tools. We hosted this conference in coordination with INTERPOL as well as the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law in Malta. We welcomed about 90 countries and organizations to the Harry S. Truman Building here in Washington to address this critical issue.

And here's what we're trying to accomplish in this conference: As we defeat ISIS on the battlefield, the group is adapting to our success. It's important to understand and to emphasize that the fight is by no means over. It's simply moving to a new phase. We're moving from a predominantly military effort to an increasingly civilian and law enforcement effort. It's increasingly important for us to supplement our military lines of effort to

defeat ISIS with civilian tools, civilian initiatives that can ensure the group's enduring defeat.

So yesterday I opened the discussion by sharing an overview of what the United States has been doing in this space to counter ISIS using law enforcement and other civilian capabilities. So let me give you a summary of three of the key tools that we highlighted.

First of all, terrorist designations and sanctions; second, the use of passenger name record data to secure borders; and third, biometrics to screen for terrorists who might be trying to board planes or cross borders.

So first of all, I announced the decision by Secretary Tillerson to designate seven ISIS-affiliated groups and two ISIS-affiliated leaders. The groups are ISIS-West Africa, ISIS-Somalia, ISIS-Egypt, ISIS-Bangladesh, ISIS-Philippines, the Maute Group, and finally, Jund al-Khilafah Tunisia. The two individuals are Mahad Moalim, who is a leader of ISIS's Somalia affiliate, as well as Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who is a leader in the ISIS West Africa affiliate.

These terrorists, both groups and individuals, have spread ISIS's bloody campaign to all corners of the globe. I'll give you a few examples. In December of 2016, ISIS-Egypt bombed Cairo's Coptic Christian cathedral, an attack that killed 28 people. ISIS-Bangladesh murdered 22 people in a July 2016 assault on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka. The Maute Group is responsible for the siege of the Philippines city of Marawi and the September 2016 Davao market bombing, which killed 15 people and wounded 70 others.

Yesterday's designations joined the eight other ISIS-affiliated groups that we previously designated. We have listed these groups and individuals to illuminate ISIS's global network and to emphasize once again that the campaign against ISIS is far from over. These designations will deny ISIS the resources it needs to carry out terrorist attacks because we don't just want to stop the bomber, it's also essential to stop the money man who buys the bomb.

Second, during the conference, we also discussed passenger name records, or PNR. PNR is the information you give an airline when you book a ticket – a phone number, an email address, a seat assignment, and so on. It's an incredibly powerful counterterrorism tool. PNR can help analysts identify suspicious travel patterns, flagging threats that otherwise might have escaped notice. It can also illuminate hidden connections between known threats and their unknown associates. Let me give you just one example.

In December of 2009, a U.S. citizen by the name of Faisal Shahzad received explosives training in Pakistan for people affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban. In February of 2010, Shahzad arrived to JFK on a one-way ticket from Islamabad. He was referred to secondary because he matched a PNR targeting rule, so customs officers interviewed him and released him. Three months later, on May 1st, 2010, a car bomb failed to detonate in Times Square. Investigators tied Shahzad to the car. Customs then placed an alert for Shahzad in its system. So when he booked a flight to flee the country, the

system flagged it and he was arrested at JFK as he attempted to fly to Dubai. He was convicted, and he's now serving a life sentence.

The PNR system that the U.S. uses, and indeed pioneered, is now an international obligation. Last year, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2396 – unanimously, by the way – and at the instigation and urging of the United States. This new resolution requires all UN members to develop the same kind of system that the United States has been using for years. We used this week's discussions at the conference to urge other countries to live up to their obligations under this new Security Council resolution and develop and deploy those systems quickly.

Finally, at the conference we discussed biometrics. Biometrics are a critical tool for verifying that travelers really are who they say they are. Terrorists will try to mask their true identities using any number of subterfuges, aliases, fake passports, and so on. It's a lot harder for them to fake their fingerprints, and that's why we collect biometrics from visitors to this country. We take their fingerprints, we take their facial scans, and we use that data to run against our watch list of known and suspected terrorists. Here's one example. Just a few weeks ago, authorities arrested a man in Oklahoma who was suspected of trying to join al-Qaida. They were able to identify him because his fingerprints matched those taken from a document retrieved in Afghanistan. It was an application for al-Qaida's Farouq camp, which is where four of the 9/11 hijackers were trained.

Again, thanks to UN Security Council Resolution 2396, this civilian tool is now a global norm. The resolution requires all UN members to collect biometrics to spot terrorists if they attempt to board planes or cross borders. We're urging our partners to implement this obligation as quickly as possible.

So in conclusion, our discussions this week covered these three tools and a number of other civilian capabilities that we're using along with our partners to defeat ISIS. ISIS is a resilient organization, and it's an organization committing – committed to continuing its fight against us notwithstanding the loss of its so-called territory – so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq. It's incumbent upon us in the United States, along with our international partners, to adapt to meet that new challenge. As the military phase of this struggle in Syria and Iraq winds down, we'll be standing up and reinforcing our civilian and law enforcement capabilities to defeat this group in an enduring way. Thank you all, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

MR GREENAN: Thank you, Ambassador. We'll now go to our questions.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your touchtone phone. You will hear a tone indicating you have been placed in queue. You may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the # key. If you are using a speaker phone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you have a question, please press *1 at this time. And one moment, please, for your first question.

Your first question comes from the line of David Clark from AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. I just wanted to ask about the new designations you announced as part of this, the ISIS affiliates. Does the decision to list them all separately from the general ISIL designation reflect the belief that they are more autonomous than they used to be? And can you speak to how closely they – you believe they cooperate with sort of like an ISIS-central if there is still one?

AMBASSADOR SALES: Thanks for the question, David. I think what we're seeing is ISIS becoming increasingly decentralized. I mentioned a moment ago about how ISIS is evolving and adapting, and I think their trend towards decentralization is a good example of that. You're seeing groups from all corners of the world motivated by the same bloody and deadly ISIS ideology who are using the same sorts of techniques targeting innocent men, women, and children, targeting soft targets, and so we wanted to designate groups across the world to remind – well first of all, to reflect reality that ISIS is a global network that spreads its propaganda and spills blood on a global basis, and also to draw attention – to draw the world community's attention to the fact that just because the false caliphate in Iraq and Syria has fallen, that doesn't mean that ISIS is powerless. And it's very much to the contrary. We're seeing a decentralized network fan out across the globe to continue the bloody work.

MR GREENAN: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Lalit Jha from PTI. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Hi, Ambassador. Thank you for doing this. Can you give us a sense of whether ISIS presence in Bangladesh? And also in Afghanistan and Pakistan, how you are coordinating with the countries in the region, in particular India, to address the challenge of ISIS in South Asia?

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, thank you for the question. South Asia is one of the areas of the world where ISIS has an increasingly robust presence. Bangladesh is a good example of this. As I mentioned before, the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July of 2016 in Dhaka killed 22 people. We're also tracking in South Asia the ISIS Khorasan affiliates of ISIS becoming increasingly ambitious and increasingly active.

We are working with our partners in the region to develop a shared understanding of the threat that these organizations pose to us in the United States and pose to local governments, and we're also working with those partners to develop a set of responses. Those things – those responses include things like information sharing, exchanging data about known and suspected terrorists, improving border security efforts to spot terrorists as they travel from conflict zone to conflict zone. And I'm confident that by bringing together partner nations who have a common understanding of the threat we face that we'll be able to address this.

MR GREENAN: Thank you. The next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Conor Finnegan from ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. Two questions, if I could. Did you make any progress in the past two days convincing these other countries who attended the conference to take their captured foreign terrorist fighters and prosecute them? I know that's been an issue for a lot of them and they're hesitant to do it. And then you mentioned in your speech yesterday morning that prosecution isn't always appropriate and that was why the President announced keeping Guantanamo Bay open. Has the administration made any sort of determination of when it is and isn't appropriate to prosecute versus to send someone to Guantanamo Bay? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Conor, thanks for those two questions. First of all, on the international front, we've been very clear here at the State Department with our friends around the world that they shouldn't look to other countries to solve their problems for them. If a country sees its citizens traveling to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS, it's up to that country to prosecute those individuals rather than expecting the SDF to do it or the Iraqis to do it or, ultimately, the United States to do it. So we've been consistent in our expectation, in communicating our expectation to our partners that they shouldn't look for other people to solve this problem, but rather should conduct these prosecutions of their citizens themselves.

As far as the domestic piece of your question, the U.S. approach going forward on detentions: As you know, the President's executive order in which he directed that the Guantanamo Bay detention facility remain open included a requirement that the Secretary of Defense, along with other interagency partners, conduct a review of the criteria for transfer to Guantanamo Bay in the future. That process is underway right now, so we don't have anything to announce at this time, but stay tuned.

MR GREENAN: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Tejinder Singh from IAT. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, good afternoon. Thank you for doing this. Ambassador, you mentioned Bangladesh, Pakistan in your comments and in your answers, but you do not seem to focus at all on India or Sri Lanka. What is the threat level you feel from India, especially the second biggest Muslim population, second biggest global population? So is that – there is no threat from India or you are – what are the steps you are taking in that respect?

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, thanks for the question. India is an incredibly important, incredibly valuable, and incredibly close counterterrorism partner of the United States. As you know, the President and the prime minister held a very, very productive series of meetings earlier in the administration, and in response to that set of meetings, the U.S. Government and the Indian Government have forged ahead to create a really powerful partnership. We've

announced in the United States a number of designations related to terrorist threats that India faces. Previously, we entered into an arrangement with India to share information about known and suspected terrorists, bilateral exchange of information about these known and suspected threats. I think the future is very bright for U.S.-India counterterrorism cooperation, and I look forward to working with my counterparts in the Indian ministry of foreign affairs to bring to fruition the vision of President Trump and Prime Minister Modi.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Robin Wright from *The New Yorker*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. I have two questions. First of all, you talked about decentralized control, and that brings up the question of the leadership of ISIS and Mr. Baghdadi. Do you have a sense how much control he or those around him have? There have been a number of reports about his injuries. Can you give us a sense of how much you think he actually is running ISIS today?

And secondly, have you seen the movement of ISIS fighters who are within – who once were within the caliphate to – for example, to places like Idlib, where they joined other groups, whether it's al-Qaida or other militias? Do you have a sense that there is a kind of graying of who is ISIS and who is al-Qaida?

AMBASSADOR SALES: Thanks for the questions, Robin. Let me address that second question or group of questions first. So ISIS was born out of al-Qaida in Iraq. The relationship between ISIS and Iraq – or, sorry, al-Qaida in Iraq and ISIS has been a complex one over the years. But as ISIS has lost territory, we're concerned that battle-hardened veterans who've experienced combat in the war zone might take their talents to other organizations. Whether their units were destroyed or whether they became disenchanting or demoralized or whether they became persuaded by other strands of terrorist ideology, there's always a risk that they might migrate to other organizations, al-Qaida included. I don't have any intelligence to share with you on the extent to which that is actually happening, but it's certainly a general concern that we have and that we're very much focused on.

Remind me what your first question was?

QUESTION: About Baghdadi and –

AMBASSADOR SALES: Oh, yeah.

QUESTION: – how much control he has and the reports of his injuries or incapacitation.

AMBASSADOR SALES: On the second part there, I have to defer to colleagues in the Intelligence Community who could speak more authoritatively than I could

on that – or not, as the case may be. As far as the relationship between ISIS core and ISIS networks and affiliates around the world, we're facing a really complex series of threats because in addition to those regional entities like ISIS-Bangladesh or ISIS-Philippines that have a measure of autonomy in planning operations, planning attacks, we also have to continually worry about core ISIS's ambitions to carry out attacks outside the conflict zone – the external operations of the sort that we saw in Paris in November of 2015 and in Brussels in the spring of 2016.

So as ISIS metastasizes around the world, the threat becomes more complex, and that's exactly why we had this conference here in Washington this week to remind our allies and partners of the need to continually take action now in a civilian space to take the fight and keep the pressure on the dispersed tentacles, but also the core as well.

MR GREENAN: Okay. Thank you very much. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Jeff Seldin from the Voice of America. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks very much for doing this. One quick follow-up to the question Robin just asked: Do you have a sense that ISIS core is still – despite the fact ISIS is spreading out, still maintains a significant degree of command and control that would allow them or is allowing them to plan and carry out attacks?

And then my questions were: What has the use of the PNR and the biometrics – what is it showing you about the patterns of movement for either foreign fighters or would-be jihadists in terms of how they're flocking to these different groups around the world and where they're going? And in Africa specifically, to what degree are groups like ISIS and al-Qaida affiliates competing with each other for operatives or competing with each other to get more jihadists to their side, more experienced fighters to their cause? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, on the movement question, I think some of the countries to which ISIS fighters might travel or from which they might come, a number of those countries have not yet stood up PNR systems of the sort that we have in the United States and of the sort that a number of our close partners have. So it's difficult for those countries to authoritatively track the movement of persons across their borders, especially including the movement of possible foreign terrorist fighters or other terrorists. That's one of the reasons why the United States led the effort in the UN Security Council to make mandatory the obligation for all UN members to collect and use PNR data to develop those systems that we have here in the United States, and that Europe – the European Union has directed EU member-states to implement by May of this year.

As far as the competition between ISIS or al-Qaida is concerned for recruiting new members or peeling off disaffected members of the other organization, that's certainly a concern. The schism between, the split, the difference between the two organizations' tactics – all of that heightens the

sense that they are competing for one – against one another for adherence.

And from the United States standpoint, that's not a great position for the rest of the world to be in. We live in a world where we confront the threat of ISIS core, we live in a world where we're increasingly seeing a dispersed ISIS network that's capable of mounting attacks whether independently or in coordination with each other. And to that we add a resilient al-Qaida that has largely been out of the headlines in recent years, but that certainly has the capability and intent to conduct mass casualty attacks of its own.

Again, one of the reasons why we are so keen to host this conference here in Washington this week was to draw the international community's attention to precisely that dynamic. We confront a dangerous security environment in which multiple terrorist threats face us and in which those terrorist threats might be competing against one another. All the more reason for us to get serious about things like biometrics and PNR, law enforcement capabilities, and so on.

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much. The next to the – to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Ellen Nakashima from *The Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. And thank you, Ambassador Sales, for doing this. I might have missed the first – a little bit of the beginning. I came in late. But I wanted to get back to the question about prosecutions, especially because you were talking about how we're mobilizing law enforcement to counter terrorism. And you mentioned you were communicating your expectation to partners that they should be able to conduct prosecutions themselves, and at the same time, the Justice Department, which you were a part once, has had a very successful track record in prosecuting international terrorists. To the extent you're talking about mobilizing law enforcement to counter terrorism, how much of a role should the civilian prosecutions play, how effective are they as a deterrent? And then, I have a follow-up question about the Beatles.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Thanks, Ellen. I appreciate the question. I think law enforcement can be an incredibly effective tool. Prosecution can be an effectively – an incredibly effective counterterrorism tool. There are circumstances where prosecution is the first option. Of course, it's not the only option, and there are other tools in the counterterrorism toolkit that we have to consider using on a case-by-case basis. One of those tools might be military detention. If you capture somebody on the battlefield, and for various reasons you assess that a law enforcement response is not appropriate, then the President's executive order makes clear that we will use military detention as one of several possible options.

Law of arm conflict detention is a tool that the U.S. military has used in armed conflict from time immemorial, and the President is preserving that tool for use here. And there's other non-prosecution, non-military responses as well that may become especially important as we deal with the problem of FTFs returning home with their family members. When somebody comes back to

Europe from the war zone in Syria and brings a six-year old child with them, what do you do with that child? This is somebody who's been, in many cases radicalized, in many cases exposed to violence, whether on the internet or observing atrocities firsthand. A law enforcement response probably doesn't look appropriate there, so you're going to need to look at non-prosecution options to include things, like, medical interventions, community interventions, interventions by religious organizations to try and alleviate some of the suffering that that child experienced, some of the trauma that that child experienced in the war zone.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. But with the case – going back to the hardened terrorists, in the case of the two remaining Beatles, el-Sheikh and Kotey – the ISIS guys, your – the State Department's position has been that they should be tried in the UK. And at the same time, we know that prosecutors here are eager to take a case and try them. Why would you want to see these guys going back to the UK to be prosecuted when two – some of the – there are American hostages who were beheaded by them, and there's a strong (inaudible) American interest in seeing them brought to justice? And we have the tools here in the civilian courts, as you've noted.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Yeah, thanks for the question.

QUESTION: Explain your – yeah.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Yeah. So I'm not in a position to describe any diplomatic conversations we may be having with the Brits about a way forward for these particular detainees. What I can tell you is that courts in the Anglo-American legal tradition are quite capable of dealing with these sorts of cases, and our interest in the United States is seeing that justice be done. You have a pair of battle-hardened terrorists who committed atrocities against citizens of a number of countries. American citizens were victims, British citizens were victims, and other citizens of other countries were victims. And so our commitment is to ensure that they face justice for the crimes they committed.

MR GREENAN: All right, thank you very much. We'll go to the last question, please.

OPERATOR: Your final question comes from the line of Abigail Williams from NBC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thanks for doing the call. I just wanted to follow up on one of my previous colleague's questions regarding some of the affiliates in Africa of ISIS and their connection to groups like Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. I wondered if you could speak more generally about the trends that you're seeing there as far as whether or not they are becoming more closely aligned with ISIS, and then also, given that you said that the tools – the U.S. tools that you hoped everyone would implement under the UN Security Council resolution – aren't effective there or aren't in place there, what it is that you're looking from those countries to slow that association with ISIS.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Yeah, thanks very much. Let me take the first question

first. The relationship between ISIS entities and al-Qaida entities in Africa – well, as I'm sure you can expect, it's a rather fluid situation. There are times when you see groups in alignment and there are times when previously aligned groups split off and separate, and ISIS-West Africa and its relationship or lack thereof to Boko Haram is a good example of that. Previously unified groups splits with the remnants, aligning themselves with different international leadership.

So what are we doing about the situations – and I don't mean to limit this to Africa in particular, but what are we in the United States doing to help other countries implement their obligations under the UN Security Council resolution? Well, one thing that we're doing is when it comes to, for instance, passenger name record data, we have offered to make available our system to countries that want it. It's known as ATSG, Automated Targeting System Global, and for years we have made that available to countries that want to deploy a capability to keep track of people crossing their borders. We're not the only ones. The Netherlands also is exploring ways to make their own system available through international channels. So that's one example of what we're doing to help stand up the capabilities of partner nations that have the political will to act but may not have the full resources they need to act.

MR GREENAN: All right, thank you very much, and thank you everyone for joining us today. We are now lifting the embargo on this call. Again, it was on the record to Ambassador Nathan Sales, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism. Ambassador Sales, thank you very much, and thanks, everyone. Enjoy the rest of your day.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Thank you all.

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