

# Press Releases: Background Briefing on the Joint Statement by the President of the United States And the President of the Russian Federation on Syria

Special Briefing  
Senior Administration Officials  
Via Teleconference  
November 11, 2017

---

**MODERATOR:** Thank you so much, and thank you, everyone, for joining us this weekend on a call to discuss this joint statement that was released earlier today on Syria by President Trump and also President Putin. The call will be on background attributable to senior State Department officials. Today we have [Senior State Department Official One], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number One, please, and also [Senior State Department Official Two], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Two. We have about 30 minutes for the call. I'd like you to please limit your questions to one question per journalist so we can try to reach as many reporters as possible. The call will be embargoed until the conclusion of that.

And with that, let me turn it over to Senior State Department Official Number One for his opening comments. [Senior State Department Official One.]

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Great. Thank you, [Moderator]. So let me provide some background, opening about six or seven minutes or so, provide some background on the joint statement on Syria that issued today following the discussion between President Trump and President Putin on the margins of the APEC conference.

And this statement really builds on months of fairly intense discussions with the Russians and a lot of behind-the-scenes diplomacy led by Secretary Tillerson with the support of our military teams. And another round of those discussions took place last week in Amman and made some progress on some of the areas underlying the joint statement that issued today. And Secretary Tillerson and Foreign Minister Lavrov were able to close some gaps that remained over the course of the discussion on the margins of APEC.

I would describe these discussions with the Russians as quite intense, difficult, but also professional and ultimately constructive. And we've been able in recent months to work through some extremely difficult issues on

Syria, which remains one of the most complex foreign policy challenges we confront.

So let me break down the statement with some background. I think as you'll recall, shortly after taking office Secretary Tillerson set forth a vision for a new U.S. approach on Syria really grounded in three key elements. First, we must and we will prioritize the defeat and the enduring defeat of ISIS, and President Trump directed early on that we streamline the decision-making process to free up our military commanders to accelerate the campaign on the ground.

The strategic review, under the direction of Secretary Mattis, then led to a dramatically accelerated campaign, the results of which are now visible on the ground. And Secretary Mattis, during a coalition meeting in Brussels earlier this week, on Thursday, noted that 95 percent now of the territory once held by ISIS is now freed, and our partners are continuing to secure more territory each day.

Second, the second area, we must work to consolidate these military gains through stabilization assistance and critically de-escalate the civil war in Syria. The underlying civil war threatens American interests by driving extremism, increasing Iranian influence, undermine the security of Syria's neighbors including Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, and increasing refugee flows.

In April, the Secretary discussed a vision for de-escalation zones during a Moscow visit with President Putin, and that overall vision has really defined subsequent international diplomacy on Syria. It resulted in a reduction of violence throughout the country and unprecedented pressure on ISIS and beginning to set the conditions now for a meaningful political process.

The third area, we must facilitate UN-led efforts to effect a political resolution to the conflict. As the Secretary has stated a number of times, it remains our view that a new and stable Syria under a more stable – and a more stable region will ultimately require new leadership in Damascus and the departure of President Assad from the scene. This must occur, however, as part of a political process that allows the entirety of the Syrian people, including the millions displaced by this horrific conflict, to determine their future free from threat, intimidation, and all foreign interference, and ultimately through UN-supervised and organized parliamentary and presidential elections.

So if you think of this in phases, phase one is really the defeat of ISIS. It's hard to see Syria stabilizing when ISIS retains a so-called caliphate in what used to be about a third of the country. The second phase, and working in parallel, is to establish de-escalation zones and bring down the levels of violence in the country, with the third phase then leading to the political process to ultimately end the overall civil war.

So the joint statement approved today by President Trump and President Putin codifies areas of agreement in each of these three areas. It also does not sugarcoat differences that remain, and we still have work to do as we emerge

from the primary focus on ISIS to the next phase of the campaign, locking in de-escalation areas to set conditions for a meaningful political process through Geneva to take hold.

The statement also reflects our view, as the President discussed earlier today, that despite our many differences with Russia, our two countries are capable of working together on difficult problems where interests converge and our doing so is profoundly in our national security interest. Perhaps nowhere is that more true than in Syria. The reality on the ground in Syria and those with influence is something we must take account of when developing our own approaches. We have made clear we will not work with the Assad regime, we will not obviously work with the Iranians who share fundamentally divergent interests from ours, therefore we must find opportunities to work with Russia where we can, seek to narrow differences where possible, mindful of the gaps that will inevitably remain.

So turning to the details of the statement, I'll discuss each of the three areas I just outlined: military deconfliction to accelerate pressure on ISIS, strengthening the southwest ceasefire and de-escalation zones, and agreeing on key principles of the Geneva-based political process.

So the first area – the statement is really kind of divided into these three areas. The first area – deconfliction and the counter-ISIS campaign. As the campaign against ISIS has progressed, coalition-backed and Russian-backed forces have increasingly converged on the battlefield, necessitating a greater degree of operational deconfliction to prevent accidents and unintended escalations of force. Over the past 10 months we've worked to strengthen professional military channels of communication with Russia at the tactical and operational levels. This is to ensure that we can protect our people and our partner forces and focus maximum focus where it belongs, on the defeat of ISIS.

While not without challenges, these arrangements have served its purpose to date, thanks to the leadership of Secretary Mattis, General Dunford, General Votel, and our commanders in theater – Lieutenant General Steve Townsend till around September and now Lieutenant General Paul Funk, who recently assumed command. And they're doing a great job, a remarkable job, and we remain closely latched up between military and diplomatic channels as the campaign has dramatically accelerated over the past year.

So today, importantly, President Trump and President Putin expressed their satisfaction with these arrangements and confirmed that they would continue until the final defeat – the final defeat of ISIS – is achieved. The joint statement reflects our shared commitment and agreement from the highest levels that military discussions and deconfliction channels has remained professional, served to avoid misunderstandings, and maximized the pressure on ISIS.

And this pressure on ISIS cannot be overstated. For the first time, the end of the physical caliphate, the so-called ISIS caliphate from where terror attacks were planned and launched around the world, is clearly in sight. While this will not end the threat of the ISIS, it is a significant milestone

in the campaign and the result of the accelerants put in place at the direction of the President and Secretary Mattis earlier this year.

The statement also affirmed understandings that these deconfliction arrangements as well as de-escalation areas are interim measures to create conditions under which terrorists can be defeated, military gains consolidated, our partner forces can be secure, and the political process can advance pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which I'll discuss in a minute.

Both U.S. and Russia finally, as the statement states, are firmly committed to the territorial integrity of Syria, a principle the presidents affirmed today in the joint statement. De-escalation zones, for example, and deconfliction arrangements are designed to reduce violence and create conditions for Syrians to return to their homes and a political process to take hold. They are not aimed at partitioning Syria or dividing Syria into spheres of influence.

The second area of the statement is the de-escalation of the civil war and de-escalation zones, particularly the southwest. The presidents welcomed and endorsed, importantly, the U.S.-Russia-Jordan Memorandum of Principles, what we call the MOP, for de-escalation in southwest Syria. And this document was initialed on Wednesday night, November 8th, in Amman, Jordan. This understanding builds on and expands the July 7th ceasefire arrangement finalized during the last meeting between President Trump and President Putin in Hamburg, Germany, in July.

So the memorandum builds on the ceasefire arrangement really in three important areas. Let me just break them down.

First, the memorandum initialed in Amman earlier this week gives greater definition to the rules and mechanisms to monitor and strengthen the ceasefire and related efforts like humanitarian assistance. And while not perfect, the ceasefire that was put in place in July has largely held. Violence in this area has been significantly reduced, and thousands of Syrian families have returned to their homes. The presidents also recognized the work of U.S., Jordanian, and Russian military and diplomatic professionals and what we call the Amman Monitoring Center, which maintains contact with the many actors on the ground to prevent violations of the ceasefire and address them when they occur.

Second, the memorandum initialed in Amman and endorsed by the presidents today reflects the trilateral commitment that existing governance and administrative arrangements in opposition-held areas in the southwest will be maintained during this transitional phase. In other words, the opposition is not surrendering territory to the regime, deferring those questions of longer-term political arrangements to the political process under UN Security Council Resolution 2254. So this is an important principle that the memorandum initialed in Amman memorializes and the presidents confirmed.

Third and perhaps most important, the MOP, what we call the MOP, enshrines the commitment of the U.S., Russia, and Jordan to eliminate the presence of

non-Syrian foreign forces. That includes Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias like Lebanese Hezbollah as well as foreign jihadis working with Jabhat al-Nusrah and other extremist groups from the southwest area. These elements – these extremists groups and these foreign-backed militias – have used the Syrian conflict over the last five years to increase their presence in this part of Syria, which has undermined the ceasefire and poses a threat to Jordan and Israel. So we think this principle is quite important and it is enshrined in the agreement reached this week.

So on this last point specifically, the Russians have agreed to work with the Syrian regime to remove Iranian-backed forces a defined distance from opposition-held territory as well as the borders of the Golan in Jordan. For our part, we have agreed to work with Jordan and the opposition to reduce and ultimately eliminate the presence of foreign jihadis such as those fighting with Jabhat al-Nusrah from opposition-controlled territory. The bottom-line principle is that all foreign terrorists and militia fighters must leave these areas and ultimately leave Syria altogether.

The third part of the statement is focused on the political solution, the long-term solution to the conflict. So finally, the statement reflects agreement that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict; the conflict can only be resolved long-term through peaceful political negotiations, which, as the statement says, must, must be grounded in Geneva and the Geneva-based political process. So the presidents reaffirmed their commitment to the blueprint for a political transition outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and that means negotiation under UN auspices in Geneva to draft a new constitution and hold UN-supervised elections to the highest international standards with the Syrian diaspora. That means the millions of Syrians who have been displaced in this terrible civil war will be eligible to vote, as the statement states very clearly.

The statement also expresses Assad's recent commitments, for what they're worth – the Geneva process, constitutional reform, and elections – and importantly makes clear that those commitments must be grounded in Security Council Resolution 2254.

The statement affirms that the political process, including constitutional reform and elections, therefore, must occur under the detailed blueprint outlined in the Security Council resolution through UN-led negotiations in Geneva and culminate in UN-supervised elections.

So why is that important? Secretary Tillerson felt that it was quite important to get President Putin on the record in this regard. We have started to see signs that the Russians and the regime wanted to draw the political process away from Geneva to a format that might be easier for the regime to manipulate. Today makes clear and the statement makes clear that 2254 and Geneva remains the exclusive platform for the political process, which, as the statement reaffirms, is the only way, long term, to end the Syrian civil war.

So the goal of the Geneva process under the auspices of Staffan de Mistura is to move as quickly as possible towards a new constitution and especially UN-

supervised parliamentary and presidential elections. And at the end of this political process, as I stated at the opening, Syria and the broader region cannot be stable nor can there be any significant reconstruction assistance to regime-held areas, importantly, so long as Assad remains in power.

So just to sum up Syria in terms of these phases: Phase number one, maximizing pressure and defeating ISIS, defeating the physical caliphate, which is now – the end of the caliphate is clearly in sight; the second phase, working to establish de-escalation areas and deconfliction zones to bring violence down to set the conditions for the third phase, which is a meaningful political process focused in Geneva under 2254. That is the exclusive basis for legitimacy for the political process, at the end of which there has to be a transition in Damascus.

And with that I'll turn to [Senior State Department Official Two] for any additional thoughts before taking questions.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** No, that sounds fine. Why don't we go straight to questions.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Operator, if you could introduce our first reporter, please?

**OPERATOR:** Our first question will come from the line of Arshad Mohammed with Reuters. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this. Two questions. Is it your view then that the so-called Astana process, that Russia has agreed to abandon the Astana process and will now focus exclusively on the Geneva process, such as it is?

And then secondly, Resolution 2254 in its first action point makes reference back to the June 2012 Geneva – so-called Geneva communique. That, in turn, called for the formation of a transitional governing body by mutual consent, which it was always the U.S. position that that meant that since the opposition would never accept Assad's continuing in any role in such a body, that he was excluded or would be excluded from power. Is that still your view? And if so, what makes you think that Assad will willingly engage in a process which, even in its transitional phase, is designed to exclude him from power?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Let me say a couple things quickly and turn it over to Official Number Two. First on Astana, Astana – obviously we don't – we're not participants in Astana. We are observers. Astana with our partners, Turkey, has served a purpose in establishing de-escalation areas, which we support in principle, and that Astana should remain a focus for that purpose, the de-escalation areas. The political discussions have to remain in Geneva through the Geneva process, and that's a principle, again, that we confirmed today.

On the second question, I would just reiterate what Secretary Tillerson said earlier this week that our approach to this is that at the end of the political process we don't see a future for Assad and that the Syrian people through a UN-supervised process with all of the diaspora being able to

participate should be able to select their leadership in Damascus.

But let me turn it over to number two.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah, thanks. Thanks, Arshad. And just to elaborate, Astana began and it's continued to be a forum principally to talk about ceasefires and de-escalation. Although there's been some discussions there that have veered into political topics, it's clear that most of the participants, and certainly in the Syrian opposition, don't want it to become such a forum.

So one of the virtues of the agreement that Presidents Trump and Putin reached is that it firmly anchors the Russians in a paradigm in which all political discussions, all political negotiations, are very clearly in Geneva. So whatever happens elsewhere and whatever other efforts are afoot, it's clear that the ultimate political resolution and the serious, substantive discussions between the parties are going to be under UN auspices with the legitimacy that that brings in Geneva.

And then as my colleague just said regarding the substance of the political process, we're not putting any preconditions to how this process begins. We're giving wide latitude to the UN envoy, to Staffan de Mistura, and what's clearly important is where it ends up. The process by which it gets there has to be ultimately through UN-administered and supervised elections, and that's the mechanism through which we're going to see some new governance in Syria.

**QUESTION:** And is it still your view, though, that, as the June 2012 statement said, that there should be a transitional governing body and that that should be formed by mutual consent and therefore it's your view that that can include Assad? I mean, you refer to 2254. That's what it says in its first action point. It reaffirms that – the Geneva communique. I mean, is that still your position? And if so, why do you think – why do you think Assad's going to get involved in such a process except to maybe slow-roll it or subvert it?

**MODERATOR:** Arshad, then we're going to have to move this along. We have other people on the call that need to ask questions too. Go right ahead, guys.

**QUESTION:** You don't seem to have an answer to that, though.

**MODERATOR:** I just stepped in. Guys, go right ahead. Feel free to answer and then we'll move on to other people.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Okay. Again, let me just quickly answer Arshad's question, which is that, again, one of the virtues of the statement, the agreement that the presidents agreed to, is that it puts Russia firmly in the camp of support for 2254 as the blueprint for the political process and all that 2254 involves. But rather than get into the details of how we get from here to there, I think the key is that Russian support and our support, we're going to get the parties to Geneva to talk about that process, and the key to that process is going to be constitutional reform and an election which ultimately is going to decide the future of Syria's form of government

and the future of Assad.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Let's move along to the next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** As a reminder, if you'd like to ask a question, please press \*1 at this time. Next we'll go to the line of Elise Labott with CNN. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, guys. Just to kind of follow a little bit on Arshad, I mean, I understand the first two, the deconfliction and the ending of the civil war and all, which has to do obviously with coalition and ISIS and Russian and Syrian actions on the ground. But when you go to that third area, I mean, I think once again one of the issues is that you're agreeing to things that have (a) already been agreed to and (b) you're – who is speaking for the opposition and who is speaking for the Syrians?

I mean, there's no – obviously it's important for the U.S. and Russia to agree, but one of the problems with all these agreements is that there has never been a guarantee that either one – either the U.S. and the coalition is going to be able to bring the opposition to the table on this, or that the Russians are going to be able to guarantee that the regime will follow through on this.

So kind of piggybacking on Arshad, what are the guarantees that Russia (a) has the influence and (b) the will to bring the Syrian regime through this Geneva process for a political transition? I just don't see how that – how does that – is that triggered.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yes. So, Elise, that sounds more like an analysis than a question, but again, the Russians – I don't want to give – none of us want to give the impression that any of this is going to be simple or even quick, and it could very well be a very time-consuming process. It has thus far. Up until now, the political process in Geneva has not borne the sort of fruits that anybody would have liked, certainly not the Syrian opposition, certainly not us or our partners.

But what we've gotten out of this agreement is a very clear and probably the clearest articulation by the Russian president to date that 2254 is a roadmap for the political process, is the only game in town. I think the best we can do at this point is to get the parties – all of the parties – to Geneva to give the UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, wide latitude to how that's configured, and effectively to hold the Russians and hold everyone else to their commitment to pursue this as long as it takes.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** I would just add a point. I think that the context is significantly different in an atmosphere, as the President specifically said in the statement today – if you're talking about saving thousands of lives. If you look at the southwest ceasefire since we put it in place, again, it's imperfect, particularly in one particular area, but it has dramatically brought down violence. We had a pretty detailed briefing in Amman about rates of violence, and since it was put in place until now is a dramatic difference. And that sets conditions for a far more meaningful and



realistic process than when the country is completely burning down.

Second, made very clear at the UN General Assembly when we had about 18 countries together with influence in Syria that there will not be any international reconstruction aid for Syria until there is a meaningful political process moving along this timeline that can ultimately allow a majority of the Syrian people to choose their own leaders. So that's important because I think if you were to ask the regime in Damascus, they would say, well, this is over and let's all get together and reconstruct the country, and that ain't going to happen. And so that's something that was very clearly stated in the statement that came out of the UN General Assembly meeting there, and that remains true today. And that – I can't speak for the Russians, but I think it might be one reason why they clearly committed to the fact that the ultimate resolution to the civil war will run through the Geneva process with the culmination being the UN-supervised election process.

Over.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Let's move along to the next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Our next question will come from the line of Ryan Browne with CNN. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yes, I just wanted to follow up on that first point on deconfliction. I understand you've talked about how much success there has been against ISIS and how little territory they have left. So the actual need for operational deconfliction seems a lot less. Is this really just establishing de facto no-fly zones over opposition areas in the east?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Yes, this is Official Number One. I think the reason it's particularly important is the convergence of forces, particularly in the east. And so we had a couple close calls about six weeks ago which we were able to work through. We had an incident in July where we shot down a Syrian plane which was violating arrangements we had put in place, and we worked through that. And so as you can see the kind of lines developing, nobody is kind of drawing lines on a map or anything or talking about deconfliction to make sure that forces we work with are safe and that our people are safe, and we don't – and we avoid accidents.

I would just say this has worked better than I think anyone anticipated, and I think it's due really to the professionalism of our military personnel who have worked through this. And on the Russian side, again, they have been quite professional and constructive in these deconfliction channels.

So we had a pretty fulsome discussion in recent weeks about where the situation lies, where the trends are going, and how we can work out this final phase through deconfliction channels. And it was important to get the endorsement – the full endorsement from President Putin today that those channels have to remain open and working, because it's quite critical. And I think both presidents expressed their satisfaction for how this has been going.

So as we look at the next phase, I think it's very important that we maintain these channels, they keep open, and that we build on the foundation that's been set.

**MODERATOR:** Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** As a reminder, if you'd like to ask a question, please press \*1 at this time.

Next we'll go to the line of Sylvie Lanteaume. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hello. You said earlier that the Russians agreed to eliminate all foreign fighters from Syria, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Hizballah. How are they going to do that? They are going to ask them and the Iranians are going to leave like that?

**MODERATOR:** Sorry, Sylvie, which organization are you with?

**QUESTION:** AFP.

**MODERATOR:** AFP. Thank you. Go right ahead, guys.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Yes, this is Number One. I'll turn it over to Number Two.

So we're talking there about the southwest zone, which is a – which was a specific negotiation not done in Astana but done really under the auspices of Jordan. And this is right on Jordan's border. This is an area that's very, obviously, important to them and our ally, Jordan. So we've engaged in – over many months now with Jordan and Russia on the details of this very sensitive area.

That started with a comprehensive negotiation for a ceasefire line, and that was negotiated almost meter by meter over the course of many months. And that was actually inaugurated and finalized the last time President Trump and President Putin met on July 7th. And I think because that was such an extensive negotiation, the ceasefire has held fairly well.

What we did this week was kind of extended that progress to really turn the area into a de-escalation area, and there is an agreement – because there's tension where you have foreign, non-Syrian fighters facing off against each other. They don't really have the interests of the Syrian people at heart, and that's how ceasefires begin to fray. So there is an agreement that in that area, in specific areas, there will be removal of these foreign elements.

Number Two might have some more to add.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** I'd only add that we have a very clear view on the presence of all of these foreign forces in Syria, which is that they shouldn't be there at all. Syria should be free of Iran, free of Hizballah, free of all these militias that the Iranians have imported. We have the foreign jihadis, all of these groups have come in and they've not

only exploded the chaos of the civil war, they have been in many cases the principal drivers of the violence.

So the effort in the southwest is a first step in that direction, and it's an area where the Russians have taken upon themselves an obligation within a defined area, according to the negotiations that we undertook, to ensure the departure of those Iranian and Iranian proxy elements in that area. And at the same time, those who have been supportive of the opposition in that area also understand the need that the foreign jihadis – Nusrah particularly, but also Khalid bin Walid, the ISIS affiliate in that area – so the foreigners of those to be out of that area as well.

And if this works, this is an auspicious signal, would be an auspicious signal, that our policy objective – the objective that I think so many of us share of getting these guys out of Syria ultimately – that there's a path in that direction.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** There are no further questions in queue.

**MODERATOR:** Pardon me?

**OPERATOR:** There are no further questions in queue, [Moderator]. You may proceed.

**MODERATOR:** Oh, okay. [Senior State Department Official Two] and [Senior State Department Official One], do you have anything else you'd like to add? Otherwise we can just wrap it up if we don't have any other questions.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** That's great. Good here.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah, I'm good.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. All right. Well, everyone, thank you so much for joining us on this Saturday. We certainly appreciate it. The embargo has now been lifted. And just as a reminder, on background, senior State Department officials one and two, as you can refer to them, if you want to handle it that – if – senior State Department officials.

Thank you.

*The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.*