

Press Releases: Briefing on Syria

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Good morning. Thank you, sir. Good morning, everyone, and thanks for joining us for today's background call on U.S. policy on Syria, and specifically the implications of the Secretary's speech that took place in California earlier this week.

We're joined today by [Senior State Department Official], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official. As a reminder, today's call is on background and will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. With that, I'm happy to turn it over to our senior State Department official for some brief opening remarks, and then we'll open it up for your questions. If you could please try to keep your questions to one a time so we can get around to as many journalists as possible. Thank you.

Sir.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you, [Moderator]. I'd like to open with a recapitulation of key themes on Syria policy, all of which were touched upon by the Secretary in his remarks. But I'll go over them again and perhaps cast them in a slightly different way, and then you all can ask your questions on these and we'll try to answer.

And I want to talk about an issue which has prompted, I think, the most comment after the Secretary's speech, and that's our military presence in Syria. And I'll start with the point that the Secretary has underlined, because it is the fundamental piece of policy here. Our military presence, the activities of our military, support policy in Syria overall by ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS. What do we mean by this? ISIS is still present. The military campaign against the so-called caliphate in the Euphrates Valley is not over. There is heavy fighting; it's going on as we speak. But beyond the Euphrates, ISIS elements in northern Syria, also in northern Iraq, have chosen not to fight and die but have moved out of the combat area, regrouping. They're still a lethal force. They still have the potential to disrupt and more than disrupt any attempts at stabilization, much less political transformation and transition in Syria. And so the enduring defeat of this malignant presence is an absolute requirement in Syria, as in Iraq, for any future progress.

Now, what is that future progress? We talk about political transition, a

political process under UN auspices in Geneva in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Why is that important? Is it a hopeless goal? Well, it's important because without a transformation or transition in the models of governance in Syria, Syria becomes predictably a source of generation of future radicalism, future threat, future challenge. Whether under the name of ISIS or some other movement, it will be back to being what it was in 2012 and in the sad years since – a source of violence, extremism, radicalization. It threatens Syria's neighbors, it threatens Europe, it threatens the homeland. It's why a political transformation is essential.

Now, we look to the UN to guide this process, but the UN doesn't stand alone. The UN has our active support. It has the support of other key parties in the region and the international community. And that's not a rhetorical or a theoretical concept; it's very real. We are working with key partners now. We are working with the UN and the UN special representative on how we can constructively engage through and with the United Nations – we hope with Russia as a constructive partner. That's a challenge of its own, but we hope with Russia as a positive element in helping move the Syrian regime to serious engagement in Geneva with the Syrian opposition to see a political transition take place. A very hard challenge, but one that is absolutely essential to see advanced.

On the military side, as we work to defeat ISIS in an enduring fashion, as we work to support the United Nations on a political transition, we're also well aware of the need for basic stabilization. This is not Iraq in 2003. This is not nation-building. This is basic demining, removal of explosive devices, basic restoration of essential services that allow populations to return to their homes. That's a critical element of any stabilization or political transition, getting displaced persons within and outside Syria to come back safely to their homes. That, we're working on. And our military presence in the north and northeast helps sustain that basic stabilization.

And finally, another concern. And that is Iran's malign activities in and through Syria. By "through Syria" I mean the qualitative enablement of Iranian and Hizballah threats and threat presence in Lebanon. We're concerned about Iran's malign activities in the region as a whole. We are particularly concerned with their presence and activities in Syria. They're playing a destructive role there. They claim to be a guarantor of ceasefires. They are no such thing. They support this regime. They continue to engage in activities which we believe present an enduring challenge beyond this fight, beyond ISIS, to regional states – to Israel, to Jordan – to U.S. interest, to the interest of all our friends and allies, and to the interest of the international community. And we need to have a cogent approach to that threat.

Now finally, we're not alone in looking at allies, friends, and support. And I want to turn here to the northeast. The Secretary has made clear; the Department of Defense has made clear that language about a border security force was a misstatement. We are working, Department of Defense is working on providing assistance, development, and training to internal security forces, internal security elements drawn from all of the ethnic populations of the north and northeast of Syria to better allow security for the stabilization

efforts I referred to, hopefully to provide a stable platform in the north for positive engagement by all ethnic groups – Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and others in the political process the UN is leading in Geneva.

There is no desire, no strategic intent to go beyond that purpose, and there is certainly no threat against Turkey in this development and training of internal security elements. And the Secretary has explained this to his Turkish counterpart. We will continue to engage with the Turkish Government on this. We fully understand Turkish concerns about the PKK. It's a terrorist organization. We appreciate that. But we need to stabilize the north, and we very much hope that Turkey works with us and the international community in ways that we think advance Turkish interests. That would be a goal that serves regional stability and security in the broadest sense, and it's a goal certainly that this administration would support.

And with those opening remarks, I am happy to take your questions.

MODERATOR: All right, sir, thank you. First question, please.

OPERATOR: It comes from the line of –

MODERATOR: Josh, go right ahead.

OPERATOR: Josh, your line is open for us.

QUESTION: Hey, thank you guys for doing the call. I'm wondering about the – this box that you have backed yourselves into where you actually now need a continuing threat from ISIS in one form or another to justify everything else you're doing in Syria, both from a policy perspective but especially from a legal one. I mean, we're talking on this call about stabilizing a country that's still in a civil war, limiting Iran's influence, keeping the country sort of going until some type of election many years down the line. But how do you – does that then require you to continue to say that there's a threat from ISIS even once the group is essentially defeated in order to be able to do the rest of those things, and is there any discussion about trying to actually get some type of a new authorization for us to be there to do all of these things that seem on their face to go quite a bit beyond fighting a terrorist group? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: When did you stop beating your wife? Look, we are not seeking a pretext or a justification to remain in Syria, and we are not constructing any false reality involving ISIS. The fact is the fight against ISIS continues. It is real. It is not contrived or imaginary. Whether you look at the Middle Euphrates Valley and the remaining elements – territorial elements of the so-called caliphate, it is a brutal fight on both sides of the river. We're continuing in that.

The presence outside the Euphrates Valley of coherent ISIS elements, who have repeatedly reemerged as a military threat is genuine, not imagined. So the 2001-2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force are absolutely real and absolutely germane; they're not constructs. And I am certainly not going to speculate on a hypothetical of where we might be, what authorities might

exist were ISIS truly to no longer exist. The fact is they do; the fight continues. The authorizations are absolutely germane to what we are doing.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you. Next question, please. Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. I'd like to ask about the Jerusalem embassy decision. Have you conducted any sort of security posture review to prepare for a possible response to this decision, and also are you concerned that the decision to use the existing consular facility would essentially prejudge negotiations? Because as far as I understand, it essentially straddles the green line. Thanks very much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me deconstruct the issue and your question first. What the President decided and articulated was two things: Recognition of Jerusalem as the capital state of Israel and determination to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. That was the President's decision. The Secretary of State, in the context of the President's decision, said that the department was working on executing the President's intent with respect to an embassy move. Now an embassy move has two dimensions to it anywhere in the world, and we have moved embassies from one physical location to another in the past. It's not new and it's not unique to this situation.

The two dimensions are this: one is the construction of an appropriate, permanent embassy. That is a process that takes, anywhere in the world, time. Time for appropriate design, time for execution. It is a matter of years and not weeks or months, and the Secretary has spoken to this on several occasions in terms of the general timeframe for a complete construction of a permanent facility in Jerusalem. If he were talking about any other state in the world, he'd be looking at the same timeframe. But the other aspect of this is, is it possible to have an interim facility which meets all of the overseas security and functionality requirements – safety, security, function – for our personnel? Can that be done on a shorter timeframe than a permanent construction project?

And the decisions with respect to that second course – the interim facility – are with the Secretary, have not yet been taken. So what you have been seeing, reading, talking about is speculation on decisions still pending, but there was never – and I want to be very clear on this point – there was never any policy intent to slow-roll the issue of an embassy move. At all times – the Secretary has made this clear – the focus is on executing the President's decision in a manner which assures the safety, security, functionality of any premises occupied by U.S. personnel and those locally employed staff working with us in Jerusalem, as with any other diplomatic mission in the world. Full stop.

MODERATOR: Okay, next question, please. Dave Clark from AFP.

QUESTION: Oh, hi. Yeah, on the Syria point, the Secretary also mentioned that it would help Assad if the troops were to leave too early. Could you envisage any situation in which the U.S. troops would leave with Assad still in power? And the U.S. troops in Iraq – there were more than 140,000 of them for eight

years and when they left, al-Qaida in Iraq transformed pretty quickly into ISIS and we ended up where we are. Why would 3,000 troops in eastern Syria make any difference in terms of the long-term defeat of ISIS?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me take your first question, which is: Is the departure of Assad, as I read your question, a condition for departure of U.S. forces? We have talked about our goal of supporting the United Nations effort to see the initiation of a credible political process in Syria. Now, that's a process that we believe at its end – and it's a long-term affair, not short-term – should produce a free and fair election under UN auspices, which we don't believe Assad can win. From a policy standpoint, we don't think he should be there at the end of the game. We don't think he merits in terms of his and his regime's behaviors staying in power. So that's one question: What's the goal of the political process; what are we doing to help the UN work with Russia, work with other parties to see that move ahead?

To tie the outcome of that process to our physical presence, military presence in Syria is a different matter altogether, and that is not something which the Secretary or the Secretary of Defense have spoken to at all. We are there to defeat ISIS in an enduring fashion. And your challenge of comparing the Iraq situation in 2011 when U.S. forces left – a decision, by the way, which we have been extremely critical of and have desired not to repeat in the case of Syria – that precipitate removal of forces – isn't apposite to the situation in Syria. In fact, the back of ISIS is broken. The territorial so-called "caliphate" is a fragment, a fraction, of what it was even six months, eight months ago.

What we're after now is the enduring remnants of ISIS as well as the bits and pieces of that territorial entity still present in the Euphrates Valley. This is a fight which they are going to lose and we are going to win. It is a very different circumstance than prevailed in Iraq in that period between 2011 and the sweeping emergence of ISIS in the spring and summer of 2014. It is a military campaign already highly, highly successful, but it isn't over yet. And we will not leave until we are convinced that that enduring defeat, which we see as a very achievable goal, has been accomplished.

But I would like to take a moment to talk about Iraq since you have raised it. The defects in the structure of the Iraqi Security Forces that were manifest in 2014 – hollowness, lack of commitment, lack of will – by dint of U.S. efforts, the efforts of our coalition partners, the Iraqi Government itself, in the period after the disastrous events of 2014, early 2015, have been addressed and addressed in highly successful fashion. The Iraqi Security Forces of today are not what they were in 2014. It is a far better, far more motivated force and that has produced the victories in Iraq that parallel the successes that we have achieved and hope to continue to achieve in Syria.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question. Carol Morello from *The Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hi. I've been seeing some early reports of a – of the Turks starting to advance against in the Afrin area, and that was something that the Secretary specifically said he was urging restraint on. So clearly it's not working too well, working with getting Syria to get on the same page as

you are. I was wondering how that's going to hurt what you're trying to do there.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Like you, I have just seen summaries of these same reports, and frankly, I do not have any details of what is going on. But I can speak echoing the Secretary's own comments about the broad issue. We do not believe that a military operation, whether in Afrin or directed against the self-defense – or rather, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF in the north and northeast of Syria, serves the cause of regional stability, Syrian stability, or indeed Turkish concerns about the security of their border. And I really can't comment further beyond those general points in the absence of more specific information on what is actually going on.

But both we and our other partners in the international community have been quite consistent in our messaging to the highest levels of the Turkish Government. We support them in their concerns about a safe and secure Turkish-Syrian border. We support them in their concerns regarding PKK terror in Turkey, no question. But the kind of threats or activities which these initial reports may be referring to, we don't think advance any of these issues. They are destabilizing.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Next question, Kylie Atwood from CBS News.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you so much. I just have two quick questions for you.

The first is: I'd like to know kind of what the U.S. has been doing over the past week or so to encourage the integral players to get to the table next week in Vienna for the meetings hosted by de Mistura and who the U.S. will be sending.

And then my second question is: The Department of Defense says that in the event of a shutdown, DOD will still carry out its operations against al-Qaida and ISIS, and I wonder if that's the same for the State Department employees who are now on the ground in Syria, if they will carry on despite a government shutdown. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: With respect to the last part of your question, I am going to have to punt on this. That is a management decision and it assumes a shutdown takes place. I really can't comment one way or the other, save only from my own experience in the past in combat zones where, if the U.S. military continues to function, those U.S. civilian elements, whether from Department of State or other agencies, continue to perform their functions alongside them. We don't walk away.

First part of your question, though, we have been – and the "we" here is the Secretary of State, other senior officials in this department, elsewhere in the U.S. Government have been working quite closely, a day-by-day basis, with the UN, with UN Special Representative Staffan de Mistura, with other parties in the region and outside engaged in backing the UN to see to it that whatever course the UN embarks upon in trying to engage Russian support, in trying to engage the Syrian regime in credible political discussions in Geneva succeed.

This has been a matter of highest priority and importance for the Secretary personally, it's been of importance to all of us here in the building, and we will remain engaged literally day by day with the United Nations to assure that we are doing everything to give them practical support.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, Nick Schifrin from PBS.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, [Senior State Department Official], for doing this and thanks, [Moderator], for organizing this. I just want to go back to Carol's question and ask not specifically about what we're seeing Turkey do across the border, but the larger question: You said that the words "border force" were a misstatement, so let's call it "internal security," but the SDF itself is saying the force will be 30,000 people, they'll be trained as border guards, and they'll essentially be a restructured version of the Kurdish force that overthrew Raqqa. I mean, Turkey has seen this in the area, as you know, and seen both sides of the border as Kurds getting more autonomous and sees that as a threat. So do you think that it's just Turkey misunderstanding what your intention is? And therefore, how do you convince Turkey that this force, no matter what it's called, is not a threat? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We have made at senior levels as clear as possible to the Turkish Government that nothing we are doing with respect to security elements in northeast northern Syria should be viewed as a threat or a challenge to Turkey or to its border. Rather, these are elements drawn from all of the ethnic communities in northern Syria, not just the Kurds, to achieve, to help facilitate basic local security which is a key element of stabilization. That stabilization is in turn a very positive element in any long term security arrangements for the north, which ultimately serve Turkish purposes. We will continue to explain what we are actually doing, what our intentions are, what's happening on the ground to Ankara. We believe what we are doing shouldn't be seen as challenging or threatening. It is not a reconstruction or a sustainment of those heavy forces required to fight house by house in Raqqa. That fight's over. And the whole nature of our military relationship with provision of military support to arms to the SDF has changed as the nature of security and security needs in northern and northeastern Syria have changed now to local and internal purposes.

MODERATOR: Okay, last question. Jonathan Landay from Reuters. Jonathan, I'm sorry I missed you earlier. Go right ahead.

QUESTION: No worries. Can you hear me?

MODERATOR: Yes, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Great, thank you. So the Secretary made it clear that not only is there no longer – is there an open-ended commitment now of our deployment now of U.S. forces in Syria until – northeastern Syria – until the defeat of ISIS, but also appears to have taken any time limit off Mr. Assad's continued – continuation in power. And I'm wondering what U.S. policy is now, because we've seen a diminution in that period beginning when the last administration – that he had to go almost right away and then it was six months, and now there appears to be no time period whatsoever. So can you talk about the U.S.

vision of how long in – Mr. Assad would remain in power? And what role would he play, if any, in the political transition?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me talk first to the statement you made at the beginning of your question, because I think it deserves another clarification. Secretary in his speech reiterated what Secretary Mattis, DOD spokespersons announced in December: The U.S. military presence in Syria will be conditions-based, not calendar-based. It will combat ISIS, it will prevent the resurgence of ISIS – that’s what we call enduring defeat – it will facilitate stabilization and it will try to make easier the challenges before the UN in Geneva in supporting a political process. We do not want a vacuum to exist from which ISIS or other radical groups will reemerge. That’s the purpose of why we’re there. And it’s very different from using terms like “open-ended presence” or “Forever War,” very popular slogans, but that’s not what we’re talking about here.

Now, the question of Assad and whether Assad’s departure from power was or should be a precondition for political talks, rather than the desired or necessary outcome of political talks. Last fall, the Secretary in New York discussing with the like-minded community of nations on Syria, and with the support of that like-minded group, reflected where U.S. policy, where international like-minded policy, in a consensus fashion had moved on Syria. And he stated recognition of reality to insist, given the changes on the ground in Syria over the course of the year or two years that preceded summer, fall of 2016, that Assad had to go before you could have a political discussion was simply not practical or realistic. And we could open up questions, which I will not do, of whether the previous administration’s declarations on this were or were not realistic. But this administration is focused on what can actually be done on the ground.

And so with full support from the like-minded community, what we’ve articulated is the need for a credible political process – credible – credible means, UN lead, accordance with UN Resolution 2254, supported by the Syrian people within and outside Syria, that lead to free and fair elections under UN supervision. That process ought to lead to the departure of this regime. That’s our policy view. We don’t see how a free and fair election can produce any other outcome. But that’s an end state; it is not a precondition for the political process. And that is a policy which the Secretary and others in the administration have been articulating now for quite a long while. It is not in any way something new, unless you want to go back to the previous administration, which is now some time in the past.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you everyone. Sir, thank you so much for your time. The call has ended, the embargo has now been lifted. And as a reminder please, references to him as senior State Department official. Have a great weekend. We’ll talk to you again real soon. Thank you.

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