

Press Releases: Briefing on the President's Trip to the Middle East

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Hi, everyone. Hope you're doing well and you all had a nice weekend. Welcome back to the State Department and thank you so much for joining us today. We know a lot of you are interested in the President's trip overseas, so we wanted to provide you with a briefing on that today.

Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Stuart Jones joins us once again. Stuart accompanied the President and the Secretary on their first leg of the trip, to Saudi Arabia and also the Middle East. In Riyadh, the President was warmly welcomed by the Saudi king and leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as more than 50 Muslim-majority nations. In speaking with those nations and members of those nations, the President asked the leaders to confront and cast out promoters of violent extremism, and also close off avenues of their support. The President's messages were warmly received, and the assembled leaders expressed their gratitude to the United States for taking a leadership position once again, and the promise of unyielding commitment to the fight against global terrorism.

A few agreements from that trip that Stuart will highlight today:

First, the U.S. commitment to expand our decades-long security relationship with the Saudis. That culminated in the signing ceremony that pledged more than \$110 billion worth of foreign military sales. They also talked about \$80 billion worth of commercial sales. In addition to supporting the long-term security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, this will bolster the kingdom's ability to contribute to counterterrorism operations across the region, and that will reduce the already heavy burden on the United States.

Next, the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology – ETIDAL, as it is known in Arabic – has now been established in Riyadh. The program is now in its infancy, but it's important to note that that program is Saudi-led and Saudi-financed. The goal is to combat, expose, and refute extremist ideology

in cooperation with other governments. That program will partner with the United States and other nations. When it's fully operational, it will host visiting experts from cooperating nations.

And with that, I'll turn it over to Stu Jones, who can provide additional color on the trip with the President and the Secretary.

MR JONES: Thank you, Heather. Good morning, everybody. How's everybody? Thank you.

So it was my great honor to accompany the President on the first four days of his trip, first to Saudi Arabia and then to Israel and the West Bank. So in Saudi, there were – I think there were three components to the visit: there was the bilateral component; there was the Gulf Cooperation Council/GCC component; and then there was the OIC component.

Bilaterally, as Heather mentioned, the United States and Saudi Arabia affirmed a strategic partnership for the 21st century. And underneath this, we've agreed to establish a Strategic Joint Consultative Group which will meet at least once a year, and this will bring together all the elements of the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship: security, commerce, and cultural engagement – everything that we do with the Saudis. There's going to be a working group, and this will be under the Joint Consultative Group.

Also, as Heather said, \$110 billion in defense deals and \$80 billion in commercial agreements. The \$110 billion includes \$6 billion, for example, for Lockheed helicopters, Blackhawks. That's a done deal. That's fixed. Many of those deals are also represented in MOUs and letters of intent, which are more forward-looking and haven't been concretized, but will be. Same thing with the \$80 billion in commercial agreements. This includes \$12 billion, for example, in GE power plants, but it also includes the \$20 billion that the Saudis have committed to Blackstone Group for investment in the United States in infrastructure, and that's intended to be a \$40 billion fund aimed at investment in U.S. infrastructure.

So that was sort of the commercial component of the trip.

As you know, the President inaugurated the ETIDAL center, which is the Global Center for Countering Extremist Ideology, and that center will monitor online extremism; do its analysis; it'll do counter-messaging. So the United States is still working out exactly how we're going to participate in this. As Heather said, this is a Saudi project. They've invited our participation. We need – the ball is in our court. We need to come back to the Saudis and say how we're going to participate in this and what we're going to contribute. But we certainly will benefit from the Saudi expertise in this area.

Secondarily, there was the GCC component. You've all read a very strong communique coming out of that meeting. It was a strong statement against terrorism, including against counterterrorism – excuse me, against terrorism, including against terror finance. And in that communique, it makes reference to – sorry – in addition to that communique, there is a multilateral MOU which establishes a center for countering terrorist finance. Now, at this

point, that center is a virtual center, but it's envisaged that that will become a brick-and-mortar center as well. And in the communique, there's a strong commitment by all the GCC countries to combat extremism through counterterrorism financing, through counter-messaging, and through countering the ideology.

And very importantly, in that communique, the last provision, the last article in the communique says that all the GCC leaders will reunite in Washington in a year to review how we're doing. And this is in particular an issue of the Secretary. The Secretary wanted to make sure that there would be follow-up in all the elements to these agreements.

Also in the GCC summit document, there's a very strong statement expressing concern about Iranian malign interference in the region. This speaks specifically to Bahrain, to Yemen, Syria. And this is a very strong message to deter this sort of Iranian interference.

Then, as you know, the last part of the day on the second day of the summit, on Sunday, the Saudis convened the Organization of Islamic States^[1]. They had 55 states represented, 33 heads of state. It was a tremendous event; you saw the President's remarks – very strong statement, very strong statement by King Salman, but also by the prime minister of Indonesia, by King Abdullah of Jordan. There was a tremendous spirit in the room, very positive statements against extremism.

So this was the entire Islamic world coming together, the United States expressing our respect for Islam, and all these states coming together with the United States and jointly condemning extremism.

So that was the Saudi portion, then the next day we flew on to Tel Aviv. Of course, the President had bilateral meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and with President Abu Mazen, Mahmoud Abbas. Message there was a very clear message to – of support for Israel, support for Israel's security, and also eagerness to get going on the peace process.

At the time of the visit, the Israeli side presented a series of economic measures to improve economic conditions in the West Bank. You've seen the White House statement welcoming those measures. Those are very positive measures. We look forward to more.

MS NAUERT: Any questions?

QUESTION: I have a question.

MR JONES: Sorry, I'll let – Heather's supposed to do this. So my –

QUESTION: Okay. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: I'll just – I'll facilitate. Forgive me, I'm still getting your names (inaudible). Thank you.

QUESTION: No worries. Yeganeh, with Reuters. Hi, thanks so much. So regarding the Saudi portion of the trip, what would you say to critics who say that

President Trump's speech basically served to give Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region a free pass on human rights abuses, a dynamic that a lot of people say actually contributes to growing extremism and that sort of repression actually leading to extremist ideologies taking hold and resulting in the attacks that we're seeing?

And also, there seemed to be not a ton of discussion of Saudi Arabia's role in spreading the Wahhabi or extremist visions of Islam. What would you say to those?

And then I think we reported a few weeks ago that you had planned to retire, if you wanted to give any comments on your impending retirement, why that is coming about? I believe it was pretty unexpected.

MR JONES: So on the issue of Saudi and other human rights, I mean, the human rights continues to be part of our bilateral dialogue with Saudi and all the other countries in the region. But the fact that it wasn't featured in the speech doesn't mean that it's not part of the bilateral dialogue, and that it's not part of what we're constantly talking about. And I think the fact that – you can argue that by taking it out of the public debate and having those conversations directly and quietly will be more effective.

QUESTION: So you're continuing to have those conversations directly and quietly?

MR JONES: Absolutely.

QUESTION: And then on your retirement?

MR JONES: On my retirement, this was a personal decision that I made over a year ago when I was coming back from Baghdad, and I decided that I want to do other things after public service. So I've been delighted to serve the previous administration. I've been delighted to serve this administration during this period. This is just a personal decision, and I've tried to avoid any media attention to this matter because I didn't want this to be confused with anything else.

QUESTION: Just on the Wahhabi question.

MODERATOR: We've got to move on. Josh.

QUESTION: Sure. Thanks for doing this. Of the \$110 billion in approved sales, can you say what portion of that represented new agreements that were struck since the President took office in January as opposed to ones that were kind of already in the pipeline under the previous administration? And I have a follow-up on that.

MR JONES: Yeah, a fair question. I can't tell you because there were so many deals, and obviously some of them were in gestation well before the change in administration. Some of them have come into focus since the change in administrations. But I couldn't – I haven't – we haven't racked and stacked those.

QUESTION: Okay. And by approving a lot of these sales to Saudi Arabia, is the U.S. asserting that in the last however many months Saudi Arabia has taken some specific steps to address satisfactory U.S. concerns about the high numbers of civilian casualties in their effort in Yemen and in other protections that we wanted to see them take prior to giving them those kinds of weaponry?

MR JONES: So the reason why the United States is eager to go into these arrangements is because we want to partner with Saudi Arabia in the security realm to face this – the threats in the region, specifically from malign Iranian influence. As you know, the day of the summit the – there was a ballistic missile shot into Saudi Arabia from Yemen by the – presumably by the Houthi forces. So we want our security partner, the Saudis, to have the – what they need to secure their borders and to secure their region, and also to send a strong message that we will stand by our security partners.

Now, there's – again, we are constantly discussing quietly our understandings with the Saudis about how these are going to be used. We provide a lot of technical assistance about how these systems are going to be managed. Right before the visit, the Secretary authorized us to notify Congress on the sale of precision guided munitions to the Saudis, which will help enable them to precisely target enemy targets in the conflict that they're now having with Yemen, which is – so, but I wouldn't – but what you seem to be saying is: Are there conditions? And I wouldn't say that –

QUESTION: No, the question is: Have the Saudis done anything to improve their targeting and lessen the chances of civilian casualties since we initially cut off those PGM sales over that concern?

MR JONES: Yeah. And I would say that's a continuing source of conversation between us, and we're constantly trying to improve that process.

MODERATOR: All right. Nadia.

QUESTION: Thank you. I have two questions, actually. You referred to GCC countries and the memo of understanding about drying the funds for terrorism, I'm sure you've been following this rift between Qatar and the rest of the GCC. Some have been accusing them of funding Jabhat al-Nusrah, which is a terrorist organization. How does this complicate your work, and this has happened just after the President's visit?

And on the Israeli-Palestinian question, after meeting with Netanyahu and President Abbas, is this any framework for the peace forces to go forward? Is there any talk about direct or indirect talks between Netanyahu and Abbas?

MR JONES: Yeah. So in regards to Qatari – Qatar joined the communique on countering terrorism finance. They joined the MOU on countering extremist financing. So we see Qatar as a partner in this effort and we look forward to working with them. And of course, for all of us, for all of us in the MOU, the GCC members and the United States, we are going to continue to meet and to hold each other to a high standard of performance.

MODERATOR: Barbara.

MR JONES: On the – sorry, real quick on the Israeli-Palestinian process, I would say that there's no formal mechanisms that have yet been established.

MODERATOR: Barbara (inaudible).

QUESTION: Just to follow up on the – on this issue with the Israel-Palestine format, there's reporting in the Israeli press and Middle Eastern press that there's going to be a summit organized in the next month. Is there discussions about the possibility of a summit involving Mr. Trump, Mr. Netanyahu, and Mr. Abbas in the wider region?

And secondly, a question about Syria since we're talking about the Middle East. This movement – the conflict along the southern border with the Syrian regime backed by the Iranian moving towards areas where the U.S.-backed forces are stationed, what do you see as the goal there? There's suggestions that the Iranians are behind this, wanting to get a path through to Damascus into Lebanon. And how big of a point of conflict do you expect this to become?

MR JONES: So I don't know how much of a conflict it's going to become. I think as we have said repeatedly, we're very concerned with Iranian influence in Syria. We don't see the Iranian presence there as enabling a political solution or a security solution for Syria.

In regard – again, I don't have any information on a summit on the peace process.

QUESTION: That means nothing being discussed, or you can't say anything?

MR JONES: I don't have anything on that. I'm sorry.

MS NAUERT: Final question. David.

QUESTION: Thank you. While you were over there, the Secretary criticized the conduct of the Iranian elections and Iran's record on democracy. He did so standing next to Saudi officials. How do you characterize Saudi Arabia's commitment to democracy, and does the administration believe that democracy is a buffer or a barrier against extremism?

MR JONES: I think what we'd say is that at this meeting we were able to make significant progress with Saudi and GCC partners in both making a strong statement against extremism and also – and also putting in place certain measures through this GCC mechanism where we can combat extremism.

Clearly, one source of extremism, one terrorism threat, is coming from Iran, and that's coming from a part of the Iranian apparatus that is not at all responsive to its electorate.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

MR JONES: Okay, thank you.

MS NAUERT: Let's wrap it up. (Inaudible.) Everybody, thank you.

[1]Organization of Islamic Cooperation

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