

Press Releases: Briefing With Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk

Special Briefing
Brett McGurk

Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS, Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS

New York City, NY
September 22, 2017

MR GREENAN: Hi, everybody. Thank you all for coming today. As you know, the Secretary led a ministerial meeting this morning on the Global – for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS’s Small Group on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The meeting focused on Iraq and how we work together to shape the peace there. Brett McGurk, of course, the President’s Special Envoy to the Coalition, attended the meeting, and we have him here to provide a readout and answer your questions about what was discussed. So Brett has another meeting I know we have to get him to in about 25 minutes, so I’ll turn it over to him right now. As a reminder, this is on the record but embargoed until its conclusion. Thank you.

MR MCGURK: Okay. Thank you, everyone, for joining me. I think this is – we’re capping off here what I think has been a very, very successful UNGA week, and we just concluded a very productive and constructive meeting at the ministerial level of our small group of the coalition. We had about 24 countries there, including the EU and NATO, and this was really a follow-on to when the Secretary, Secretary Tillerson, convened the entire international coalition, which is now one of the largest coalitions of its kind in history. It was 69 countries plus four international organizations: NATO, the Arab League, the EU, and INTERPOL.

So this was a follow-on to that important meeting in March. Of course, the focus of the meeting in March was Mosul and what we had to do to follow through on Mosul; and the focus of this meeting, as we’ve come out post Mosul where now the end is really in sight in Raqqa, and about the next phase of the campaign.

The Secretary led the meeting by thanking our coalition partners for really their incredibly generous support, their ongoing support, and also

emphasizing that while we're making extraordinary progress – which I'll go through – we need to make sure we keep our foot on the gas and follow through. There was a real commitment in the room, an atmosphere of camaraderie. We are – this coalition has strengthened in so many ways, and the fact that while we've come a long way, we still have an awful lot to do. That includes the focus of the meeting today. And we had the Iraqi foreign minister there. It was largely on Iraq and Syria, but we also focused, of course, on the counter-messaging, the counter-finance, making sure we counter the ability of terrorists to travel – everything our coalition does, if you're familiar with our – the way we're organized and our lines of effort.

Again, I say the atmosphere in the room was one of resolve and determination to make sure we not only continue the defeat of ISIS, of Daesh, but also the follow-through to make sure that they cannot come back.

Let me just give you some statistics of kind of where we are. I think the progress in terms of what has happened in Iraq and Syria when it comes to Daesh is really quite extraordinary and I think is due to the fact that we did pull the entire international community together to work together collectively to accomplish this.

So far, about 80,000 square kilometers that used to be controlled by ISIS are no longer controlled by ISIS, but more importantly are the people that used to live in these areas. So now about 6 million people – about 4 million Iraqis, 2.2 million Syrians – who used to be living under ISIS are no longer living under ISIS. And for those of you who go and travel to Iraq and Syria and meet these people, that statistic is the most important one.

Also returning people to their homes in areas that have been cleared of ISIS. When we began this, we knew that that was one of the most difficult things to do. Therefore, we worked very hard to make sure that any military operation is backed up by a comprehensive humanitarian and stabilization plan. So in Iraq, we have very good figures now. About 2.1 million people have returned to their homes in areas that have been cleared by ISIS. That figure, again, historically in a post-conflict environment like this, is almost entirely unprecedented.

Another key statistic: All the territory that has been retaken (inaudible) ISIS to date has held. This is not a situation in which we're working with military forces on the ground that go in and clear territory and then ISIS or terrorists come back. All the ground has held, and we want to make sure, obviously, that we keep it that way.

One-third of all of these gains, very importantly, have come really in about the last eight months. And we've spoken about this before; we spoke it about it today in the meeting. We did make adjustments in January in the new administration, and President Trump ordered an acceleration of the campaign. A lot of authorities were delegated downwards so that we could move faster and move more effectively, and I think that's made a difference on the ground.

We have not however – and Secretary Mattis obviously speaks to this – we have

not changed our rules of engagement and the precision with which we apply military power. But we have also increased, as I mentioned in the opening, and this has been a real focus of Secretary Tillerson's, making sure that all of our military efforts are followed through with humanitarian and stabilization efforts. So in Syria, for example, we now have a team of diplomats on the ground working these problems every single day.

I'll just give you some brief updates of where we are in certain parts of Iraq and Syria. Of course, Raqqa, really the end is now in sight in Raqqa. ISIS – not too long ago, ISIS was not only planning, but they planned and then carried out – sent teams from Raqqa to carry out massive attacks, terrorist attacks, in Istanbul, in Paris, in Brussels. All of that was going on in Raqqa. We also knew in Raqqa they were planning major, significant terrorist attacks, the type of September 11th-type events that they aspire to. All of that was going on in Raqqa. They were taking advantage of the infrastructure of a major city to do that, and that is why we had to focus on getting ISIS out of Raqqa.

They are now really down to about their last three neighborhoods in the north-central part of the city, and it is a matter of time until the operation in Raqqa is finished. As soon as the city is finished and the military phase is completed, we have a very significant post-conflict stabilization humanitarian plan that is ready to launch with about a hundred sites identified for immediate de-mining. And then these are water, electricity nodes, those sorts of things that we've done elsewhere.

The Secretary gave one statistic in the meeting today. I think it's a poignant one because we have teams on the ground now that go to critical sites. This is unglamorous work. I've been to some of these places, with the water-pumping sites, places that used to be under ISIS, to get returned life to these communities. And in one little water treatment facility just north of Raqqa, when our team went we first sent in a de-mining team. They found about 240 or so IEDs on that one site alone – IED meaning a landmine explosive device left by ISIS. And this is what they do when they know they're going to lose; they just strew the ground. It's like a salt-the-earth tactic with IEDs. So when families come home and they go and open a closet, there's terrible casualties. So we have really emphasized the de-mining effort, and some particular members of our coalition – Norway and others – have really stepped up to help with de-mining.

So that's Raqqa, and we have a pretty significant program underway to make sure the follow-through on the military phase goes about as aggressively as we possibly can with all the challenges, uncertainties, and difficulties of working in a place like Syria.

We also talked about the situation down the Euphrates Valley and Deir ez-Zor. This has been in the news lately. This is where forces – Syrian regime forces enabled by the Russians – have come into close – some close proximity to forces enabled by the United States and our coalition. We think now we have that fairly well worked out. We've had very good discussions with the Russians at the military-to-military level and here in New York at the level of Secretary Tillerson and Foreign Minister Lavrov, and a whole – additional

discussions at different levels here in New York this week on that issue. And I think – I think we'll be able to work that out, with the focus being we both want to maximize the pressure on ISIS and hasten the defeat of ISIS as soon as possible.

If I go over to Iraq, a focus on Mosul. So Mosul – the battle in Mosul, of course, is over, and it's the stabilization phase. And there was a number of events here in New York throughout the week, not only the coalition event we had – we just concluded, but also the EU sponsored a stabilization and humanitarian event with a large focus on Mosul. And while I can't speak to numbers now because I will leave it to certain coalition members to announce their contributions, we heard today in the meeting very significant, very significant contributions from some key partners focused directly on Mosul.

When we were here – when we were here last year, but also most importantly when Secretary Tillerson had the meeting in March at the State Department – we were looking in Mosul at a worse-case – a worst-case scenario, and we said we want to plan – you can hope for the best but you plan for the absolute worst: a worst-case scenario of about a million IDPs, displaced people, from the battle of Mosul. We ended up having, actually, more than a million IDPs from Mosul.

Because we did the work as a coalition, we worked very closely with the UN team on the ground, with NGOs on the ground, with the Iraqi Security Forces, with the Iraqi Government, with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and Peshmerga – an incredibly coordinated plan. Nearly all of those IDPs, all of those IDPs received aid when they came out of the City of Mosul. They eventually received housing and they received aid. That is an extraordinary statistic. I defer to my humanitarian experts, but they tell me they've really never seen anything like it. And we're now focused on returning people to their homes.

In east Mosul, where the battle ended sooner, obviously, than the very difficult fighting in west Mosul, about 97 percent of all the IDPs who've had to flee the battle are now back in their homes in east Mosul. West Mosul is more difficult. The destruction in the center part of the Old City in the final weeks of the battle, due importantly to hundreds of ISIS foreign fighters and suicide bombers wearing suicide vests and just fighting to the death, obviously will take a longer time to recover. But we had a discussion about that.

We also discussed the next steps in Iraq when it comes to ISIS. So what is really remarkable now is that the Iraqi Security Forces – and we have now as a coalition, we have now trained well over 100,000 Iraqi Security Forces – not a single Iraqi Security Force unit or Peshmerga unit that has fought ISIS with coalition training has lost a single battle. And what they're doing now is simultaneous operations across the country. This is something we always wanted to aspire to, but we're now there. So as we speak, the Iraqi Security Forces have launched a very important operation in Hawija – that's just south of Kirkuk – that launched two days ago and is already far ahead of schedule.

And at the same time – and this caught ISIS by surprise because they thought

we would have to choose, but actually we did both at the same time – significant operations in the Western Anbar province, Western Euphrates Valley region where ISIS remains holed up in these towns – al-Qaim, Ana, and Rawa – the town of Ana, which had been a garrison town for ISIS, a stronghold we thought would take about three weeks, the entire operation just the other day took about 12 hours. So there are signs that we have momentum, but the focus of this meeting was to make sure that we have a follow-through. We cannot be fatigued. We have to make sure we keep our foot on the gas. And everybody in the room was fully committed to that.

I would also say we've spoke a little bit about the diplomatic arrangements in the region and the post – making sure the post-ISIS phase, we increase the odds as much as possible for post-ISIS stability, recognizing how difficult the region is.

But really significantly, I thought the comments today from the Iraqi Foreign Minister and also the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir about the rapprochement between Iraq and Saudi Arabia – and this is really a sea change we've seen here just in the last four to five months, obviously a lot of work to get to this point – but they talked about – they've already opened one border crossing, talking about opening a second border crossing, beginning direct flights, and a number of very important initiatives that are now underway between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. That's a significant change and that actually – that opens a commerce route from the Red Sea right into the heart of Anbar province, which used to be controlled by ISIS, and that's something that we will be working on very hard and we're encouraged by.

Similarly with Jordan, border crossing with Jordan, about a \$1 billion-a-month commerce route going from Amman to Baghdad, that has been closed now for three years. It's now reopened. And we're working very closely as a coalition with both countries to make sure that that route opens and really becomes a stable and steady commerce route.

Finally, Kuwait, another critical neighbor of Iraq. Kuwait has announced before but they really emphasized today – it was a big part of the discussion – that they will be hosting a reconstruction conference for Iraq early next year. And so coming out of this meeting, our coalition, we were all united on the fact that we want to make sure we do all we can to make that initiative a success. The Iraqi Government is working very closely with the World Bank and the IMF to stabilize their macroeconomic situation and Prime Minister Abadi's done a great job with that, and the Kuwait reconstruction conference will build on all of that. So that will be early next year.

So I thought a very good meeting today, basically take stock of where we are, look ahead and set the road, and the Secretary really emphasized to everybody now is the time to really accelerate our efforts and not take our foot off the gas.

With that, I have time for a couple questions.

MR GREENAN: Michele Kelemen, NPR.

QUESTION: You talked about the humanitarian plan, but what about the political plan for Raqqa? I mean, who do you support there taking control of the city? And then what happens if the Kurdistan – if the Kurds go ahead with this referendum? I know you guys don't want to see it, but what happens if they do?

MR MCGURK: So in Raqqa, we have – there's a Raqqa Civilian Council. It's based in Ayn Issa. It is about a hundred Syrians, a mix of individuals from the area. They have proven now to be incredibly effective at delivering humanitarian assistance and at delivering some of the stabilization assistance that we need. So we're working with them very closely. This is a temporary council. It was formed in May. And by their own decree, by – they will only exist for one year, and by next May, there will either be an election or some other formulation in Raqqa for a new council. So we have confidence in the Raqqa Civilian Council as an interim step to make sure we bring stability to Raqqa, and we found – I found on my last trip to Syria particularly the Arab sheikhs and the tribes in these areas who are now working directly with us to make sure we have stability in Raqqa after ISIS. Again, though, I want to caveat that: This is, like, the most difficult, complex thing imaginable, so this will be extraordinarily hard. But – so we will work with the Raqqa Civilian Council, again, to deliver basic necessity stabilization.

De-mining – de-mining is number one, as I mentioned. Rubble removal, you got to get rubble out of the streets to get humanitarian supplies in. Water, electricity, some health sector, and we have also helped to refurbish some schools so that children who have been living under ISIS – and if you've met these children, it's just tragic to imagine what they've been through and what they've seen – but to get them back in school as much as possible. So that is Raqqa.

On the referendum, I think I – President Trump spoke with this last night with President Erdogan. A statement was issued after that meeting, so I think our position is very clear, and I would just say we continue to work with all sides because there's a number of good ideas on the table now. And for that, I will leave it there and we'll have our discussion behind closed doors.

MR GREENAN: Dave Clark, AFP.

QUESTION: Hi. Just to follow on from that, your – the civilian council, as you say, will last for a year. Does the coalition have a view as to whether it will then – the area will come under the sovereignty of the Damascus government?

MR MCGURK: So all I can say, when you go to Syria, nobody in these areas wants the Damascus government to return – meaning flags, army. That would be, I think, something that would not be stabilizing. I'm just stating the reality that happens on the ground.

Let me give you an example. So we're working with the Syrian Democratic Forces. Where they go and clear an area of ISIS, we now see a clear pattern. IDPs, displaced people – they flow north into camps or they stay in temporary

shelters. This is really difficult. It's better than it was three months ago. We put in a lot of resources to help the humanitarian situation, but they flow north, and then after the battle, after the de-mining, they go home. So we've now seen this pattern time and again where Syrian regime forces clear an area from ISIS, the IDPs also flow north into the areas of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and they don't go home. So we're finding the pattern for a stable aftermath of ISIS is the Syrian Democratic Forces.

That said, we have to make sure we deconflict the space. We always knew Deir ez-Zor city, for example, where Syrian army forces have been surrounded for three years, about 10,000 of them, that was an area that Syrian regime forces ultimately would reach. So now we're working to sort that out.

There is a desire for the return of some state functions, such as paying teacher salaries, things like that. And those are things that'll have to be worked out by Syrians. But no, in terms of areas that are retaken (inaudible) ISIS, they will be controlled by the local people who know the areas, pending a longer-term political settlement to the civil war.

MR GREENAN: Felicia Schwartz, *Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. At the top of the briefing, you said that there's a team of diplomats on the ground in Syria. Where are they? Who are they? How long have they been there?

MR MCGURK: So I'm not going to speak exactly to who or where, but this is – this was an initiative of Secretary Tillerson, really from his first week at the State Department, to say that we have our military people on the ground, and we need to make sure that we have our development and humanitarian experts on the ground to do follow-through.

So one individual is one of our foremost experts in humanitarian response plans. He's led our humanitarian response in some major disasters around the world, and he's now working very closely with our military team and the Syrians to make sure that humanitarian aid gets to the right place. So we have some of our most experienced people who are working on this. It's a small team, and I want to make clear: It's not the United States coming in and bringing all the aid. What we do is we bring an expert in who knows how this works, who knows how to connect dots, who knows how to connect the World Food Program with that program and make sure this is where the needs are. And we can do pretty good assessments from our information, working with our military teams, where the needs are, where people are flowing, to make sure we have a managed humanitarian process.

So they've been on the ground now for, I think, about three months, and it's made a real difference. I was in Syria in March and saw – you could see thousands of people sleeping on the sides of the road in, like, dirt fields. And went back a month ago after we did an awful lot to bring in our experts and to unleash some immediate emergency funding, and you had established camps set up, particularly north of Raqqa and in Ayn Issa.

QUESTION: And – I'm sorry. And just – and this is, I guess, the first kind of

like longer-term diplomatic presence in the country since the embassy was closed?

MR MCGURK: These are people who are working closely with our military team to make sure that the civilian side of the mission, the humanitarian aid and stabilization – this is nonpolitical work. This is to make sure that after ISIS is cleared, we have conditions in place for people to return to their homes.

QUESTION: And do you have a number? Like, how many? A handful?

MR MCGURK: Small, small teams of experts.

QUESTION: A handful?

MR MCGURK: Sometimes less is more in this type of situation, the right people who have the experience who know how to do this.

QUESTION: We just haven't had diplomats in the country for a sustained amount of time.

MR MCGURK: These are development experts.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR MCGURK: Yeah. It's development experts, so don't – it's – we're not –

QUESTION: USAID.

MR MCGURK: Yeah, right. Development experts.

QUESTION: But do they have diplomatic status or –

MR MCGURK: They're working closely with our military team.

MR GREENAN: (Inaudible) from RIA Novosti.

QUESTION: Yeah. Thank you. Can you talk a little bit more about the situation in Deir ez-Zor? Are you continuing airstrikes there? And are there any concerns about the possible clashes with Russians?

MR MCGURK: So I think – both of – U.S. and Russia, we're committed, we want to defeat ISIS and we want to avoid accidents. And so we deconflict space. That means you deconflict in the air and you deconflict on the ground. And we have had very good open channels of communication with them. There have been incidents from time to time. In June, for example, near Tabqa, U.S. military forces shot down a Syrian plane that was in violation of a deconfliction arrangement. We had an incident near Deir ez-Zor about two weeks ago, in which we immediately have worked with the Russians to deconflict that space.

So all I would say is the deconfliction arrangements – I think there is good open channels of communication, both sides want to avoid accidents, both sides want to defeat ISIS. We have some different ideas from time to time about how to go about things, but that's why we have this open channel of

communication. Those channels are very important and we'll continue to work through them to make sure we avoid any accidents.

QUESTION: Was there improvement on that this week?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR MCGURK: Improvement –

QUESTION: Improvement on deconfliction –

MR MCGURK: I think it's fair to say yes, there's been an – there's been a significant improvement on the ground in terms of mutual understandings and mitigating the risks of any type of accident.

MR GREENAN: In the back here.

QUESTION: Thank you. Nabil Abi Saab from Alhurra TV Station. What about the situation in Idlib where al-Nusra from the – is very – controls the ground? Is the Turkish operation there endorsed by the coalition? And do you have contingency plans for IDPs and the humanitarian situation?

MR MCGURK: Yeah, thanks. So Idlib was another focus of the – of a meeting Secretary Tillerson hosted earlier in the week, the ministerial meeting on Syria. And I think we put out a joint statement of all 16 countries yesterday, so of course, we support the de-escalatory aims of that arrangement, which Turkey is leading through the Astana process. We've had a number of discussions here this week with the Turks and with the Russians about what that arrangement will be.

We, the United States, are very concerned about Idlib province because of that al-Qaida presence there. And so we support – obviously we fully support what Turkey is doing. I think they still have some more details to work out, but we support what Turkey is doing there. And of course, anything we can do to help our ally, Turkey, when it comes to getting a handle on the Idlib province problem, I think we're prepared to do that.

So those discussions will be continuing, I think, between Turkey and Russia technical teams. And we'll obviously be consulting with them. It's a very complex picture up there in the northwest.

MR GREENAN: Okay, right here in the third row.

QUESTION: Hi. Yara Bayoumy from Reuters. What is the conversation about reconstruction for Syria, and specifically for areas that are either liberated now from ISIS? I mean, is this still – is the conversation for those areas about the – the friends of Syria countries will not – will not put up any aid pledges unless kind of the political process is back on track, or is that separate to sort of the overall countries' reconstruction efforts? And is that really enough leverage to get Assad back on track to the political process in Geneva?

MR MCGURK: So – and I'd encourage you, all of you, to read the statement that

came out again from 16 countries yesterday from the Syria meeting. I'll say a couple things. So where U.S. military coalition forces are helping to liberate areas from ISIS, we do feel we have a responsibility to focus on the follow-through on stabilization. I want to emphasize that's a – that word really means something. That means the basic necessities to help people get back to their homes and to their lives – de-mining, rubble removal, water, electricity, the basics. So we will be helping with that in the areas that we as a coalition have helped liberate from ISIS.

The reality is that nobody in the international community that we have spoken to is prepared to invest in any significant way for the reconstruction of territories under control of the Syrian regime absent a credible political horizon that's going to lead to a political transition. And right now, we do not have that. So the statement that came out yesterday from 16 countries I think is important because it addresses this, and that is the consensus view of everybody who was in that room of the EU and everybody who is focused on this problem. Absent a credible political horizon that can lead to a transition that's supported by a majority of the Syrian people, the reality is the international community will not be coming in with significant reconstruction assistance. So we encourage the Russians and everyone else to try to really get on track through Geneva so that we can establish a real political process that has some meaning.

MR GREENAN: Okay, we'll take one last question here.

QUESTION: Yes. Ambassador, what if the Kurds don't listen to the U.S. and go with the referendum on Monday? Will we see any cuts in the – whether military or financial aid to the Peshmerga or others?

MR MCGURK: So again, I want – on that issue, President Trump saw President Erdogan last night and a statement came out of that meeting, so the position is very clear. We're in constant discussions with all sides here and remain hopeful, because there is a very good package on the table that – I think if you look at what the Kurds have accomplished by this referendum process in terms of reunifying their parliament for the first time in 22 months – it had been basically dormant – in terms of helping to pull the Iraqi Kurds together, they've already achieved a great amount, and they have the international community prepared to fully support and endorse a very intense process of negotiations. And that's something now that is being discussed.

The referendum, to get to your question, just carries an awful lot of risks, and that's not something that – that's not something the United States can control. Other actors here will make their own decisions, including neighbors – Turkey, for example – and so that is why we remain in very close consultations with all of our friends in the Kurdistan region, and they're very close friends of ours and partners, and also with the Iraqi Government. And I remain hopeful that there is a very good package on the table in which an alternative might actually be the better path for all sides, but again, we will see. And in terms of the consequences of the referendum, it's not something that we can fully control. It just carries a lot of risks, as we've mentioned.

MR GREENAN: Okay, so thank you very much, everybody.

QUESTION: Mr. McGurk, do you have partners working in –

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much, Brett. I appreciate it.

QUESTION: Mr. McGurk, do you have partners that are working in harmony?

QUESTION: They will have crisis another 15 year or –

MR MCGURK: I have to say on these issues – and we had, of course, all the partners in the room, and we had a real sense of unity of purpose because particularly ISIS is a threat to everybody, so –

MR GREENAN: Thank you all. Thank you for coming. So this has been – the embargo is lifted.

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