

Press Releases: Briefing With Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey

Special Briefing
James F. Jeffrey

Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS

Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
March 25, 2019

MR PALLADINO: Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming. A special guest today, we've got the Special Representative for Syria Engagement and our Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. He has a few remarks at the top, and then we'll be happy to take some questions.

Ambassador Jeffrey.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you very much. Thank you for all coming today. This is obviously, for those of us who have worked on the Middle East and worked on Syria and worked on the efforts to defeat ISIS, a great day, a great weekend, with the victory over the last ISIS territorial caliphate positions along the Euphrates in Syria.

This is not the end of the fight against ISIS. That will go on, but it will be a different kind of fight. ISIS has lost much of its capability to project terrorist power and to have a recruiting base in an area that it controls, so it's a very, very important development. The development was carried out by a coalition of 79 countries and organizations led by the United States. At the height of ISIS's power it controlled 40,000 square miles, at the beginning of this administration 20,000. It lost all of that territory. It had almost 8 million people under its sway. Now it has no one. It had somewhere between 35,000 and 100,000 fighters. They're all in prison or dead or fled.

And now we're working to deal with the immediate situation – humanitarian, reconstruction, and stability – and essentially counterinsurgency against ISIS in the northeast of Syria as well as in neighboring Iraq. Let me mention before we get to the questions the sacrifices of our partners in the Iraqi military, in the Syrian SDF, among other coalition members, and of our own forces in the fight against ISIS. Thank you very much.

MR PALLADINO: Associated Press, Matt.

QUESTION: Thanks. Ambassador, I'm just – now that the territorial caliphate is no more, the SDF have been saying that they do not really have the capacity to deal with the prisoners, who you mentioned, and had talked about – at least today, started talking about an international tribunal or some kind of mechanism to deal with these people. What's the administration's position on that? Are you open to it? Because the administration has been quite hostile or contemptuous of mechanisms, particularly the International Criminal Court, so I'm just wondering is this something that you think is a viable way to go forward, and would you support it? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Right now the focus is on getting countries to take back their own foreign terrorist fighters. A large percent of the total that have been captured by the SDF are Iraqis or Syrians, and those people – there is a process underway to get those people back to Iraq and back to their Syrian communities for deradicalization and reintegration or in some cases punishment, and we're focused on that as our first priority.

The second priority is to pressure countries to take back their own citizens who may or may not have committed crimes under their systems. We think that's vital, and that's what we're focused on.

QUESTION: So not an international tribunal?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We're not looking at that right now.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to al-Hurra, Michel.

QUESTION: Yeah, Mr. Ambassador, what's the future of the U.S. military presence in Syria and a political solution there?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay, that's a broad question. First of all, the political solution. The U.S. policy in Syria is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We're a big step closer to that today, but ISIS still lives on in various cells and in the minds of many of the people in the areas that we've liberated. Secondly, to ensure a political process that will give us a different kind of government that will encourage people to come back and be a decent player in the international arena, unlike what we've seen from Syria in the last eight years. And then thirdly, the removal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria.

So our forces will stay on in very limited numbers in the northeast and al-Tanf to continue our clearing operations and stability operations against ISIS for a period of time not to be determined at this point.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to AFP, Francesco.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Is the withdrawal of the forces will leave starting right now, or when this is going to start? And also can you tell us more about what will happen to protect the Kurds, if you have an agreement for a multinational force, with who, and how this buffer zone will – would work if it is the plan?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yes. One, the withdrawal has begun right after the President announced it in December, first with priority on equipment but now beginning armed forces are being withdrawn. We had to reinforce initially to bring in more combat power, and now we're going back down towards what the final number will be.

In terms of the Kurds, what we're working with is with Turkey to have a safe zone of some length along the Turkish border where there would be no YPG forces, because Turkey feels very nervous about the YPG and their ties to the PKK. We understand that. President Trump has made that clear to President Erdogan. But we also do not want anyone mishandling our SDF partners, some of whom are Kurds. And so therefore, we're working for a solution that will meet everybody's needs.

We're not really looking at a coalition to be peacekeepers or anything like that. We're asking coalition personnel to continue to contribute and to up their contribution to our D-ISIS operations in Syria, and we're getting a pretty good response initially. But the mission is D-ISIS, Defeat ISIS. It's not to operate in any safe zone.

MR PALLADINO: Reuters, Lesley.

QUESTION: Ambassador, I wanted to come back to the prisoners. A lot of these countries that you mentioned have said that they don't want their prisoners back. What happens to those prisoners? And if you do give them back and, as you know, countries like Tunisia that can – don't have the capacity to try

these prisoners. What happens to them then?

And then can I –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure.

QUESTION: Just one follow-up? What has happened to the prisoners, including a British journalist and I believe a Japanese hostage? Have – since the elimination of the caliphate, have you had any signs of any of these hostages?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: On the second, no, not yet. On the first, this is something that we simply continue to press our partners and allies to do. It's the right thing to do.

QUESTION: And if they don't have the capacity to do it, though? Do you – would you – I mean –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: They have the capacity in the end if they put the effort into it to do it.

QUESTION: Is there no sign that you could maybe use Guantanamo?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: If they have the – if they put the effort into it, they can deal with it.

MR PALLADINO: Laurie.

QUESTION: Last month, you visited Erbil and had discussions with senior Kurdish officials there about Syria. Could you summarize those discussions and their results?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure. We see Iraq and Syria, as do our partners and friends in Erbil and Baghdad, as part of, first of all, in the fight against ISIS, one campaign; and secondly, as part of the center or core of the Middle East. It's very important to everybody what happens next door. And what we do is we work with people in Baghdad, we work with people in Erbil, we work with the Turks, we work with the Jordanians, the Saudis to try to come up with solutions to all of these problems that we're talking today. That's what we do in these conversations.

QUESTION: Thank you. And do you see the threat in – the ISIS threat that remains in peoples' minds and in sleeper cells the same in Syria and the same – as it is in Iraq, or do you see differences between the two countries?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is developed more in Iraq from, my understanding, for several reasons. First of all, the fight is fresh in Syria, and ISIS elements are in shock from having lost this terrain. In Iraq, they've had more time to reconstitute. But again, their reconstituting in small groups operating in the shadows as a low-level insurgency. They're not holding terrain, they're not controlling populations.

MR PALLADINO: USA Today, Deirdre.

QUESTION: Can you tell us how many – back to this question of prisoners – how many ISIS fighters are being held right now? What’s the most up-to-date number? And then secondly, related, how is the administration’s decision not to bring Hoda Muthana back here for prosecution affecting your ability to persuade other countries to take these fighters back?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: In her case, we don’t consider her an American citizen, so therefore it’s not an issue. It’s not somebody who we stripped the citizenship of. We just don’t consider her an American citizen. We have taken a few people back who have been American citizens.

In terms of – your first question was on –

QUESTION: The numbers.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The numbers.

QUESTION: The latest numbers of –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The numbers are tricky. What people are reporting to me were in the 7,000 or more, but it may have gone up over the weekend. It’s very hard to maintain communications when people are floating around in temporary holding camps. There was a very large ISIS force in Baghouz.

QUESTION: But all those not foreigners, right?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No, no. Most – well, most of them are Iraqis or Syrians, which by the mindset are considered different than the foreign terrorist fighters who we identify as people who have come from outside the region.

QUESTION: Can you – do you have an estimate on those?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The majority are Syrian and Iraqi.

QUESTION: And you can’t go any further? You can’t be more specific? I mean –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Pardon?

QUESTION: You can’t be more specific about a number of foreigners?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I mean, no. I mean, look, most of you have been in chaotic war zones.

QUESTION: Yeah.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Come on, nobody’s out there. People are trying to avoid getting shot up until two days ago and moving forward on a combat operation; they’re not too careful about counting.

MR PALLADINO: ABC, Conor.

QUESTION: You talked at the top about the importance of preventing a resurgence of ISIS, a lot of the work to stabilize the area. Some of the funding that the U.S. provided is starting to run out for programs like

demining and other things. Is the U.S., is the administration, willing to contribute more funding for those things?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: For now, we have \$325 million that we received from coalition partners for stabilization in the northeast. Overall, since this campaign has begun throughout Syria and areas the regime doesn't control, we've spent over \$900 million on stabilization, and of course \$9 billion on humanitarian aid. So we'll continue the humanitarian aid program. I just pledged 400 million in the Brussels donors conference last week while looking for new sources of stability funds.

QUESTION: When you announced that funding, I was struck by the fact that it was for humanitarian programs sort of outside of the country, so no additional funding for the stabilization part of this.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, the stabilization programs that I talked about, the 325, are for activities inside northeast Syria. The humanitarian funds go everywhere. They go outside of Syria, they go inside of Syria, they go to regime-held areas, they go to non-regime-held areas.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Bloomberg, Nick.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, the Secretary has suggested that as U.S. troops come away from the field in northeast Syria the U.S. would ramp up its reliance on airstrikes and the like to control ISIS. Do you – can you describe that a little bit, and would there be sort of more reliance on airpower in Syria and potentially Iraq on stemming the flow of (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Airpower has been an important component of our entire campaign against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. When the President made the decision to conduct the step-by-step withdrawal from Syria, he made clear that he did want to maintain the air control and presence, and now we're doing that plus maintaining some people on the ground. So airpower will continue to play an important role. Again, it's a military question whether you use airpower. For example, in some areas, we are using artillery fire from Iraq, in other areas artillery fire from Syria.

MR PALLADINO: NBC, Abbie.

QUESTION: Hi. Hi, Ambassador. What do you see as the practical significance of the declaration signed today recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights? And how does that affect your job given some of the criticism that it's a violation of UN resolution?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The Assad regime is considered a pariah by almost all of the countries in the Middle East. It will continue to be considered a pariah. I don't think I'm going to have a lot of problems with this.

MR PALLADINO: Fox.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. Just a follow-up on that. I think there are still thousands of ISIS fighters at large in Syria. You've mentioned sleeper cells a lot. Do you have an estimate on the figures of how many ISIS fighters are

still in Syria?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. Once again, I'll throw out figures, and they're not worth the paper they're printed on or the air, the breath used to say. We've heard 15 to 20 between Syria and Iraq, and that's part of the problem. There is no border. There – I mean, there's a technical border, a line on a map, but these areas, the al-Jazirah desert and other areas, people wander back and forth all the time in.

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: One more on Turkey? Were you able, Mr. Ambassador, to make any progress in the talks with Turkey regarding the presence there, the protection of the SDF and the S-400?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I don't do the S-400. In terms of the – I wouldn't put it "protection of the SDF." I would put it that we have – Turkey has concerns about the danger to itself. We understand those concerns. We've been involved for many years dealing with the threats to Turkey out of the Qandil Mountains. We don't want to see another Qandil Mountains in Syria.

So therefore, we're working with them to come up with options to try to assuage their concerns without, again, leading to actions that we would not – President Trump would not approve against our fellow SDF fighters.

MR PALLADINO: CBS, Christina.

QUESTION: Thank you. Sir, could you talk about the financial resources that ISIS still has, which, by a lot of estimates, are significant, and how the U.S. plans to go after them considering a lot of them are in places that may not be reachable by sanctions or measures like that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yeah. We have a financial action center in Saudi Arabia and it's a major part of the overall coalition, essentially, infrastructure, if you will, bureaucracy, is to go after it. We've been very, very successful tracking it down. As you saw – I think it was a *New Yorker* piece or *Atlantic* – you have these hawalas and other basically informal banking systems that we always – it was a problem during the al-Qaida era; it's still a problem with al-Qaida, it's a problem with ISIS as well.

QUESTION: Can you quantify what you think their financial assets are?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No.

QUESTION: In the millions?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, certainly in the millions.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Switching back there, please. Yes, you.

QUESTION: Hello. Kathy Gilsinan with *The Atlantic*, where that piece ran. Do you have any update on the whereabouts of Baghdadi, and to what extent is it a priority to do the man-hunting now?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No, we don't know where he is, and finding the top leadership of ISIS or other terrorist groups is always a priority.

MR PALLADINO: PBS, Nick.

QUESTION: Thanks, Ambassador. Just one logistical question first: When you say the withdrawal has begun, you mentioned that the numbers went up, of course. Are the numbers as of today down compared to where they were in December?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I'm not sure, but again, I mean, I don't worry about numbers. I know, as well as I know my name, that President Trump has ordered a step-by-step withdrawal of our forces with the exception of a small contingent. That's underway. That will occur in the relatively near future. Where we are today, where we were yesterday, I have no idea.

QUESTION: Okay. And then a larger question on Iraq: As you know, there is yet another effort to either oust U.S. troops from the country or restrict what U.S. troops can do inside the country. How seriously do you take that effort within the Iraqi parliament and how concerning is it to you that it might restrict your ability to continue your efforts in not only Iraq, but, more to the point, northern Syria, northeast Syria, as that withdrawal happens?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all, let me make clear that our forces and the rest of the coalition in Iraq have one mission. That mission is the defeat of ISIS. That is a mission that has been cleared by and approved through the Iraqi Government. That can involve operations in Iraq. It can involve operations across the border in Syria. But we do this in close conjunction with the Iraqi Government. Any government has the sovereign right to determine whether it wants foreign troops on its territory. Iraq is a – is a healthy democracy, if you will. These issues are something that are debated. We're pretty sure that the Iraqis will recognize that our forces and those of the rest of the coalition are there to help them, not to threaten their sovereignty.

MR PALLADINO: CNN, Kylie.

QUESTION: Hi, Ambassador. I'd just like to follow up on Conor's question about stabilization and humanitarian funding. You cited some pretty high figures for what the U.S. has spent, writ large, over the past few years. But the Trump administration zeroed out the budget for stabilization in Syria going forward, so what message does that send when you're trying to advocate for burden sharing if the U.S. has completely abdicated itself?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. How can I handle this question? The United States put together, when the rest of the world was running for its lives, a 79-country and organization coalition, took the lead, and smashed this organization in Syria and Iraq where it controlled much of those two countries and was the major theme in the Middle East for almost two years. That's the kind of thing only we can do, and we did it, and we did it brilliantly.

I think this administration's point of view is can't other people – the rest of the coalition, you add it up, has a GDP I'd say – check me on this – double that of the United States, all of Europe, Japan. So we would look for them to help us, and they are: Saudi Arabia, the Emiratis, and the UAE. I don't think there's any question of America's commitment to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, elsewhere, and to maintain stability in America and in our allies' interests throughout the Middle East. I don't – I mean, I spend two-thirds of my time out in the region. Nobody raises that question and says, "Well, we don't know."

QUESTION: And can I just have one more question?

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead.

QUESTION: I don't know how much you can speak to this, but given the recent talks with the Taliban on counterterrorism issues in Afghanistan, do you have anything to share about what ISIS looks like in Afghanistan right now, or does that not fall under your umbrella?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: In a general sense, yes, but I'm going to duck that question because it's handled by another operation in the State Department.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Kim Dozier. There are something like 200- to 300,000 ISIS families in internment camps/IDP camps inside Iraq and there seems to be a mood among Iraqi officials I've spoken to not to rehabilitate them or reintegrate them, but to scour them for people to prosecute, yet every Sunni across Iraq seems to know someone who's in one of these camps. What are you recommending that the Iraqi Government do with them?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Our recommendations, which aren't necessarily followed, is to pursue reconciliation and reintegration. And the Iraqis have been pretty successful. Of the 3.5 million internally displaced persons, almost all of whom were Sunni Arab, that they had three years ago, over half have come back. So we're hoping they'll try harder.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Lesley, go ahead.

QUESTION: Please, can I – Mr. Ambassador, what are your steps now as far as the political process? Do you start engaging directly with Assad? Where is this going so that you can move that process beyond the military one if that's the stage you're at? And number two, did the Secretary of State in his discussions today by phone with his Russian counterpart discuss Syria at all?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: You can assume that Syria is usually on the agenda when the Secretary talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov. And –

QUESTION: How do you move beyond the military stage if it's there already?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, first of all – and this is a theme of the questions coming at me, is – what’s America doing to lead everything? In my rejoinder, which I was most, I hope, eloquent with, and the response to you is: Hey, there are things that we really do, like contain China and put together 79-country coalitions. A lot of this other stuff we think the international community should do. In this particular case, the UN has a mandate; it has a new Syria envoy, Geir Pedersen. We support him 100 percent. We have worked very closely with him. We also reach out constantly to the Russians to try to get them to be supportive of the UN process. So that’s what the Security Council has decided, and we’re moving forward on it. And we think in the end that will be how this thing resolves itself, because right now, you have frozen basically the conflict with the lines that we’ve had since last summer.

QUESTION: Yeah, okay.

MR PALLADINO: Last question, back here, please.

QUESTION: Follow-up on that?

QUESTION: Kristina Anderson, AWPS News. So I’m interested in how we see the D-ISIS campaign as it winds down and humanitarian aid kind of builds up and the reconciliation of fighters goes ahead – how that all will dovetail with some of these other – these diplomatic efforts to resolve the – in a political agreement that stabilizes the region.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is a very –

QUESTION: Can you say a little bit more about that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: It is a very complex job that I and many others who work with me are involved in. But we think we have, on a given day, an idea of where we are and where the international community is on the 18 or 20 major things that you just discussed.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Just a quick follow-up to Lesley?

MR PALLADINO: All right, go ahead.

QUESTION: Can you just describe whether Russia’s being helpful at all in the political process that you want to see before –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: The Russians right now are working on a constitutional committee to come up with a 150-member group composed of regime people, opposition people, and neutral people that would start the political process. The Russians have been fairly – I would say forthcoming in ideas and other things. I think the problem is that the Russians are hamstrung by the Syrian regime, which doesn’t want to have anything to do with this. And that puts a crimp in what the Russians may want to do.

QUESTION: Sounds like they’re being helpful then?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I would say helpful. For example, the Russians just approved a UN resolution in January that allows us to continue shipping humanitarian aid into Syria through opposition that is non-Syrian Government held areas. That's the helpful thing, and it flies in the face of Assad's sovereignty to some degree.

QUESTION: They've been working on the committee since last year.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Right, and – do you want me to start counting frozen conflicts that the UN has been working on since the 1940s? I'm thinking of one right now that almost blew up a couple of weeks ago. That's the way things are in the world of diplomacy.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: That's good, great. Thank you very much, Ambassador Jeffrey.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Thanks, guys.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Thank you.

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