

Press Releases: On-the-Record Briefing

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

Washington, DC
July 13, 2017

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hi again, everybody. We were just here so thanks, everyone, for sticking around. We've had a big week here at the State Department, as you know. Thank you so much for coming today.

As I mentioned earlier, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS had a series of meetings in Washington this week. Brett McGurk, the President's special envoy to the coalition, was the host of those meetings, and we have him here right now to talk with you this afternoon to talk about what came out of the meetings, the latest in the campaign to defeat ISIS, and to answer some of your questions.

Brett has another meeting, so he has to keep it pretty tight, so let me go ahead and introduce him. And he'll take your questions, and then I'll just let you know when he has to go. Okay?

MR MCGURK: Okay. Thank you, Heather. Thank you. So I think I spoke today with pretty extensive remarks. I also had a press conference in Baghdad a couple days ago, and we linked to that full transcript, so if you want to hear some things I've talked about the campaign, I think it's all out there. So I really want to focus on questions today.

But we had a pretty significant week here for the coalition. This is now one of the largest coalitions in history. We welcomed today Ethiopia as a new member. The Ethiopian foreign minister, Foreign Minister Workneh, was here, and we're very pleased to welcome him. We had countries from the Lake Chad Basin in a very special session this afternoon to talk about the unique aspects of counter-ISIS, counter-extremism in West Africa. And of course, we were focused on the recent events in Iraq and Syria, a very detailed discussion this morning about Mosul, what comes after Mosul, helping to prepare for that.

This has been a yearlong campaign in Mosul; it kind of culminated just over the last few days. I was in Iraq last week working on some of this, and very, very strong response from our coalition to support the Government of Iraq,

the people of Iraq. And the Government of Iraq made very important presentations not only to the coalition but to the World Bank earlier this week about its longer-term reform effort and reconstruction needs.

In Syria – I was in Syria a couple weeks ago as the Raqqa campaign gets underway. Raqqa and Syria is much more complicated than Iraq, but fairly similar model: working by, with, and through partners and preparing the ground for basic humanitarian and stabilization relief efforts, which I discussed today.

So important meeting. The coalition continues to grow. We remain united against this threat. This thing is not over at all. We have some ways to go. And that's why we had the meeting today, really to coordinate our efforts for the next phase.

So with that, why don't I take some of your questions? And I have about 20 minutes.

QUESTION: Not to take away from the military victory, but many people believe that actually it is the political reconciliation that is more difficult. How confident are you that actually the Iraqi Government is able to get everybody together and to prevent ISIS from forming again using the grievances that the Sunnis has been complaining about as being marginalized for a while?

MR MCGURK: So thanks. I would look at a couple indicators in Iraq. So as we mentioned today in the meeting and I think my opening remarks discuss this, we have had almost 2 million Iraqis, 1.9 million Iraqis – almost all of these are Sunni Arabs – who have returned to their home after ISIS was pushed out of their communities. So reconciliation from the bottom up, the actual where it really matters, is happening. People are voting with their feet and returning home, and that's really critical.

In terms of the return of ISIS, there will be political difficulties in Iraq for the rest of our lifetimes. That's something that they will deal with through their political system. We had very important meetings with the Kurds over the past couple days, and we were very encouraged by an important ministerial delegation from Baghdad that went to Erbil yesterday to discuss issues of oil, electricity, bank exchanges – all sort of things.

But what is important here is that what really fueled ISIS and fueled the rise of ISIS were 40,000 foreign fighters poured into Syria over the course of about four years. These are the foreign fighters, the hardcore terrorists, the suicide bombers. And so you had in Iraq a situation in which 2010, '11, '12, about five to ten suicide bombers a month, which still – I mean, that's kind of extraordinary to think about. That went up last year almost to a hundred suicide bombers a month, and even in 2014, it went up to 60, 70 a month.

Any country, if you have all these people coming from all around the world to blow themselves up in mosques, ice cream parlors, killing children, killing children in soccer games – this is what was happening in Iraq. So long as you have that going on, from all these people from all around the world, it's

very difficult to talk about political progress, quite frankly.

So as we defeated ISIS on the ground and we pushed them out of their territory, we have also worked to shut down the flow of those foreign fighters. And the foreign fighters are not coming into Syria anymore, and those who are already in Iraq and Syria we've been working very hard to make sure that they can never get out.

QUESTION: Just –

QUESTION: Sorry.

QUESTION: Sir, just very quickly. We asked Heather this question. But what kind of mechanism do you have in place to make sure that the Iraqi Security Forces are not involved in killing civilians, as we just discussed an hour ago the human rights report?

MR MCGURK: So if you look at the Mosul campaign, this was one of the most difficult military operations since World War II, according to our military experts. And this was a campaign in a city of one and a half million people with an enemy that has barricaded themselves amongst the population. In the Old City of Mosul, in these final weeks of the battle, we had hundreds of foreign fighters from all around the world. I mentioned in my comments this morning we heard on the radios ISIS talking, speaking Chinese, French, Arabic with non-Iraqi dialects, Dutch, Russian – barricaded, killing civilians, in high-rise buildings.

And one reason, Nadia, the liberation was delayed a couple – for a couple days was that ISIS terrorists were holed up in a building, and they had a number of civilians trapped in the basement. And the Iraqi Security Forces could drop a bomb on that building, and it decided to work methodically to try to root out the terrorists from that building to save the civilians.

Throughout the campaign in Mosul, we have seen – and our people have been on the ground advising Iraqi forces – we have seen them put protection of civilians at the top of their campaign plan, and Iraqi soldiers have died because of that focus on protecting civilians.

Now, whenever there is an allegation, we take it extremely seriously. We make sure the Iraqi Government takes it extremely seriously. We make sure that they are doing all they can to uphold their own high standards. And some of these allegations and incidents are under investigation now. So we take all this extremely seriously, but I think you have to keep in mind how difficult – this is one of the most brutal, vicious enemies we've seen in decades. We've really never seen anything like it, particularly what they've done in the last month right in the center of the old city of Mosul.

QUESTION: Can – can we broaden that out a little, okay? So you talked about political reconciliation in Iraq. Clearly, that's – while there still needs to be improvement, there's – they're still a lot more further along than they are in Syria. And as you look at the offensive against Raqqa, how are you going to – given that there's no political situation at hand and there

doesn't look to be one anytime soon, how are you going to ensure – while there's an agreement for no party to kind of assume territory as it's liberated by ISIS, how do you ensure that ISIS doesn't come back or that another group continues to take advantage of the vacuum? Because you've said many times that yes, there's the issue of foreign fighters, but it's the kind of climate and vacuum and chaos that allows terrorists to have a safe haven.

MR MCGURK: So, thanks, Elise. Look, I think these are all great questions and they're the kind of questions we ask ourselves every day. But we're not just getting started here, so you look at the record of what we've done against ISIS, and I alluded to some of these statistics today. So 65,000 square kilometers have been cleared of ISIS. Four million people have been freed from ISIS. In Iraq alone, 1.9 million people back in their homes. Again, we have never seen anything like that in a post-conflict environment.

ISIS has not retaken a single square kilometer that has been freed in coalition-enabled operations. This is not a situation in which we have a military campaign, we're going to clear territory, and then it can't be held. Every single speck of land that has been retaken in coalition-enabled operations has held. ISIS has not retaken any of it. Other extremist groups have not come back to retake any of it.

So the record is pretty strong and I think the reason for that is because before we launch a military operation, we work for months very quietly and behind the scenes with local actors to make sure we know the local people who can take charge of the community afterwards, make sure we have stabilization plans in place. That means demining, making sure electricity, water, the basic elements get back for people to come back to their homes organically.

So you take Anbar province – a year ago, a major war zone, now a million people back in their homes – a ton of problems in Iraq and Syria, but the record where our coalition is operating by with and through local partners, we have seen not only ISIS defeated, but they are not able to come back, and people come back to their communities to restore life to their communities.

Look, this is extremely difficult. I was in Tabqa two weeks ago, a town that had just been liberated. We were able to get in there because the landmines had been cleared from the roads only days earlier, a devastated community where people had been living under ISIS for over three years. And they talk about the children and the brainwashing and all that has to happen for these communities to recover. So there's a very long way to go, but that's why we built this global coalition to do all we can to help.

So it's hard, every day is very difficult, but the record – I think right now the trend lines are moving the right way.

QUESTION: But isn't it a little bit different in Syria than it is in Iraq given the civil war that's going on there, and also your agreement that no party is going to kind of take advantage of the area liberated by ISIS?

MR MCGURK: Syria is far more complicated than Iraq. It's far more complex. As I mentioned earlier this morning, we do not have a government to work with.

That's not going to change anytime soon. What we are trying to do is make sure that in areas in which we are operating, in which forces we are working with, we have de-confliction arrangements in place so that the territory – there's a clear delineation of territory so we don't have incidents like happened a few weeks ago where we shot down a Syrian plane.

So we are working very hard with the Russians on those types of arrangements and we're actually fairly encouraged by what's happening there. But again, everything that we have in Syria, working with the Syrian Democratic Forces, that they have taken from ISIS, is not only holding, but you can see people returning to their communities. And what we want to do is get things in place in Syria – if you think in phases, if we're in phase one, we want to defeat ISIS and make sure that they are not holding territory anymore, no longer a threat to us – defeat ISIS and de-escalate the overall civil war. And that's through – in arrangements of ceasefires, of de-confliction areas, so you can then begin a real, credible process to actually have a political settlement. So this will not happen in the immediate term, but that's kind of the phased approach we're taking.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mohammed Hammed with Rudaw. So just on the Kurdish independence referendum, can you give us, like, United States clear position on this, please? Is the United States opposed to the timing of the referendum or opposed to the actual referendum itself as a mechanism for people to decide what they want for themselves?

MR MCGURK: So I spoke to this in Baghdad last week. I saw Prime Minister Abadi, I saw President Barzani, we consulted with everybody. We do not think the referendum should happen in September. We think that under the Iraqi constitution there is an important process of dialogue that has to take place. And having a referendum on such a fast timeline, particularly in disputed areas, would be, we think, significantly destabilizing and we've made those views very clear. So we are in consultations with all parties. I think the delegation that came from Baghdad to Erbil yesterday to talk about some of these very difficult issues is a positive sign. That's the type of dialogue I think we need to see.

But right now ISIS is not finished. We have to be very clear about that. They're in Tal Afar, just south of the Kurdistan region. They're in Hawija, just south of Kirkuk. The Hawija operation will be very, very complex. It'll involve Iraqi Security Forces, it'll involve Peshmerga. So this is not the time to hold a referendum in these areas, and I think we've made that very clear and I think we've – right now I think there's a dialogue process going on and we're going to leave it – we're going to leave it there.

QUESTION: As a follow-up –

QUESTION: You talked a bit about the Saudi coalition this morning and you pressed the Saudis to get 72 countries together, and they don't always agree on everything. Has the issues between the GCC countries affected the coalition at all?

MR MCGURK: So it's a great question. I think I mentioned in my remarks this

morning when you have a – the nature of a coalition is that not everybody agrees on a lot of things, and the reason we have these coordination meetings is to air out views and air out differences and try to narrow them wherever we can. But in terms of the situation within the GCC, we have had no impact on the counter-ISIS campaign, and we've tried to make sure that the political disagreements that are ongoing there that Secretary Tillerson is now working on – that when it comes to professional military relationships within the GCC that there should be no impact, and so far we have had no impact on the counter-ISIS campaign and that's quite important.

QUESTION: Thanks, Brett. The President's been talking today about a second ceasefire that he'd like to see for Syria. Can you tell us what part of the country that would be in, and assuming that it may be in northern Syria, can you say when – Secretary Tillerson, for instance, last week in Hamburg was talking about building on the progress of this ceasefire reached with Russia and Jordan, are you guys talking about building on our progress with Russia to expand that or are you talking about building on lowered violence in general, leading possibly to ceasefires that we would reach with Turkey or other countries that might be more intimately involved in other parts of Syria?

MR MCGURK: So it's a great question, and your last phrase just hit on the complexities of Syria. So you can't take Syria – look, our position is we have to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria under Security Council Resolutions 2254. But you cannot take Syria as just one problem set, because there are different problems in different areas. So if you take the southwest, what we did there – and I think quite successfully – is a very painstaking negotiation with Jordan and with Russia and with us trilaterally to map out a very detailed – we call it a line of contact – between opposition and regime forces. And everybody agreed on that line of contact, and that is the ceasefire line.

This is the first time we have had a ceasefire with a very detailed negotiated line. It's a very different endeavor than just declaring a ceasefire in a particular area. So we have a very detailed, painstakingly negotiated ceasefire line. The Russians have made clear they are very serious about this and willing to put some of their people on the ground to help monitor from the regime side. They do not want the regime violating this ceasefire, and President Putin and President Trump in Hamburg had a very important meeting to kind of lock all this down. So what we've done in the southwest is different than what has been tried in other areas, and the jury is still out, but so far we're very encouraged by the progress over the last five days.

In terms of additional areas, I think we recognize that, particularly as forces converge – in the counter-ISIS campaign in particular as forces converge, we have to find arrangements – we call them de-confliction arrangements – so we do not have the types of incidents we had a few weeks ago. And since we shot down that Syrian plane, by necessity given what that plane was doing, we have had very constructive discussions – military-to-military discussions – with the Russians about de-confliction arrangements. So I was in Tabqa a couple weeks ago, and just south of Tabqa – about 15

kilometers or so – is a de-confliction line that is holding quite well. And those are the types of arrangements we want to get in place to just bring some more stability to Syria.

So I think the President's referring to a very constructive discussion that he had with the Russians and building from this southwest agreement. There might be other areas in which we can find arrangements to just kind of settle down the overall situation, which is a necessary condition, we think, to an overall political settlement. You're not going to – it's hard to envision a major political settlement when ISIS still controls major territory as part of its so-called caliphate and in which violence is continuing to increase. So if there's a way to work with Russia to get the violence down through de-confliction arrangements and ceasefires, we're obviously very open to that.

QUESTION: Have you guys made any more progress on the monitoring of this area in southwest Syria that you talked about?

MR MCGURK: Yeah. So that's a very active and ongoing discussion, and it's also a very detailed discussion in terms of where monitors would go and how it would work. There are sensitivities in this area. There are some spoilers on the ground that neither side can control. So I would just say, given we have this very detailed kind of de-confliction arrangement or detailed line of contact, we're now looking at kind of where the monitors would go. So that discussion is very much ongoing, and I'm hopeful over the next week or so we can get somewhere.

QUESTION: Can you speak to how strong the ISIS presence is in that region as well? And I'm just wondering how you think the Assad regime's assault just outside of As-Suwayda would affect the agreement, if you see it sort of violating at least the spirit of the agreement or influencing rebels' decisions to agree by it?

MR MCGURK: There is an ISIS presence in the southwest. It's right in the corner on what we call the tri-border. It is – it's an extremist group called Jaysh Khalid bin Walid and they have moved into some areas, particularly some months ago, done terrible atrocities, which ISIS does. And one reason we want to see a ceasefire in the southwest is to root out those extremist remnants. So that's something we're very much focused on.

As you get east of Suwayda and kind of the unpopulated areas, it's desert. It's just a whole different situation. So the line of contact which we have is really focused on the populated areas and does not go that far east. So some of those arrangements in the desert, it's just a different – it's a different situation. I would say right now the spirit of the ceasefire agreement is holding.

MS NAUERT: There's time for a couple more questions.

QUESTION: We've been talking a lot about Syria and Iraq, but you can talk about any kind of other areas that the coalition has talking – I mean, obviously there's been discussion about Libya and Yemen and Somalia, Shabaab and their connections to ISIS.

MR MCGURK: Yeah. So as a military coalition, we're focused in Iraq and Syria. But what we've done as a coalition is about – it's not just about that. It's about protecting all of us and our homelands. And so – Interpol – we've talked about this before, but Interpol is there, one of the newest members of the coalition also. They've built a database now of 19,000 names. When we find a foreign terrorist fighter, when we find his phone on the battlefield, we have a whole system to analyze that, confirm the names, share them with host – with coalition partner nations.

And we're building a database for who these people are. So any of these guys that came into Syria and slipped out before we really tightened the noose, we're going to try to make sure that not only now but in the years ahead they can be tracked; they can be stopped at border posts; they could be stopped on a routine traffic stop. So that's something we're working very hard on as the coalition.

Look, different parts of the world are different, but today we focused a bit – a little bit on West Africa. We have had coalition sessions focused on Libya. You might remember in Libya there was kind of this hockey-stick-like growth of ISIS in Libya, that we have helped root out those areas. And we'll continue to work with the Libyans on that. So this –

MS NAUERT: Last question. I'm sorry.

MR MCGURK: No –

QUESTION: What are your major concerns about Mosul's holding the same in the post-ISIS era? And is there a concern that the governance of the city has a potential to be a controversial issue between regional powers like Turkey or Iran and U.S. and Iraq?

MR MCGURK: I would – on Mosul, it's a huge city, so 1.5 million people. And let me say a couple things. Sometimes – one of the most poignant remarks was made in the meeting today by the ambassador of Iraq to the United States, a good friend of ours, Fareed Yasseen, Ambassador Yasseen. And his father is from Mosul, and ISIS blew up the mosque – the Grand Nuri mosque which stood there for 700 years. And he said it would be like in France if terrorists took down the Eiffel Tower or here if they took down the Washington Monument, trying to put ourselves in the shoes of what that is like, and you can compare it to the Twin Towers on 9/11, waking up – anyone who lived in New York, you wake up every day and the towers are no longer there. That's what's happening in Mosul right now, so a tremendously traumatic experience for 1.5 million people who lived under these terrorists, and the city is changed forever obviously, the landscape of the city.

But if you look in the east side of the city, where the battle ended about five months ago – and I discussed this today – we have 220,000 people are back in their homes. We have over 300,000 children that were living under ISIS are back in schools. I mean, these are the types of trend lines that, when we looked at this in terms of best-case scenarios, are way above what was our best-case scenario. So anyone who goes into east Mosul now, and our people are going in from time to time to talk to folks, it has really come

back to life. That's about six months after the battle ended. West Mosul, there are parts of it which are slowly coming back to life. The dense core of the old city, for the reason that I mentioned, we had hundreds, hundreds of foreign fighters from all around the world wearing suicide vests barricaded in high-rise buildings, using civilians as human shields. It was a brutal, vicious, house-to-house, room-to-room battle and it'll take a long time for that old city to come back to life, but it will. And we're committed to that. And the Iraqis have laid out a pretty ambitious long-term reform plan for how they intend to do that.

But I think if you look at the progress on the east side of Mosul, which was also a very intense battlefield only six months ago, I think there is room for some encouragement. And the reason I think that progress has been made is because we work very hard on the ground at the local level on these stabilization programs. We've kind of pioneered how to do this. It's not nation building, it's not big ticket reconstruction, it is empowering local people at the local level to take charge of their affairs – local people who know how things work, empowering them to get things up and running again. And so far, I think the record is pretty good, but one theme of today is that this isn't over. We cannot suffer from fatigue from within our coalition. The Iraqis still have some other areas to clear and the stabilization and humanitarian will be a very long-term effort, so – I'm sorry that's all the time I have, but I want to thank you.

MS NAUERT: Thanks, everyone. And thanks, Brett.

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