

Press Releases: Senior State Department Officials Previewing the Ministerial Meeting of the Coalition To Defeat ISIS

Special Briefing
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MODERATOR: Thank you, sir, and good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for this background call to preview the ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS that will take place at the State Department on February 6, 2019.

As a reminder, this call is on background. We are joined today by [Senior State Department Official One]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number One. We have [Senior State Department Official Two]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Two. We have [Senior State Department Official Three]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Three. And [Senior State Department Official Four], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Four.

Again, today's call is on background. With that, I am happy to turn it over now to our senior State Department officials. The first two will give brief remarks and then we'll start – we'll take some questions. So I'll turn it over now to Senior State Department Official Number One.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, thank you. It's great being Official Number One. Thanks for joining us for the call today and thanks for being here to allow us to update you on the D-ISIS ministerial on Wednesday.

I wanted to really start, first of all, by talking a bit about the reorganization that is happening in the D-ISIS team. As maybe you know, Ambassador Jeffrey, besides being the senior representative for Syria, also took on the team associated with the Defeat ISIS here in the State Department. So we're not – we're under new management, but we've worked with Ambassador Jeffrey really since he came on board back in the summer.

First of all, a bit of context about the coalition's 10th ministerial meeting and its 21st senior-level meeting overall since we formed this coalition back in September of 2014. As you probably remember, it started out with about 12

members, and we're now 79 strong, and that 79 includes 75 nations and four international organizations. We've also continued to grow. And since 2017 we've welcomed 11 new members. Five of those came in 2018, and many of those nations were from Africa and Asia. So we continued to expand and to reach out with our cooperation against this dreaded enemy.

You also remember that back in 2014 – it seems like a long time ago – ISIS or Daesh had taken over about 110,000 square kilometers of territory across Iraq and Syria, and it was a pretty despicable situation in terms of what they were doing, in terms of persecuting and torturing and killing thousands who disagreed with the ideology. And that was – they were also positioned to threaten to overrun Baghdad. And so you all remember that as you rewind the tape and think your way back through that, but it is – it was quite a situation then, and they were plotting vicious attacks against the United States, our partners, from Raqqa and Mosul. They were amassing an enormous amount of wealth, and the extortion of the population generated enormous income as well, as the hate that they were spewing in cyberspace.

So today, while there's a lot to do to achieve this enduring defeat, we really have a much different story. And what we're going to try to talk about in the ministerial is the determination of this truly global coalition as we near the end of ISIS territorial defeat. So when you think about that, that involves the liberation of eight million people that were under Daesh's brutal rule, about four million who were displaced in Iraq, as well as hundreds of thousands in Syria. And they have safely returned to their homes, and we think that's a success story. Equally important is taking away Daesh's oil and revenue from taxes and oil and natural gas proceeds. Their wealth has been significantly diminished, and I know many of you have followed that over the years.

Equally important, the partners are dramatically increasing their global pressure on Daesh's branches, and a lot of that's done through information sharing, through enhancing border security, through strengthening the legal regimes, adopting strategies to counter violent extremism, and interdicting known ISIS facilitators who want to plot against the homeland, our homelands, whether it's the United States or others.

We couldn't have achieved any of this without an unwavering commitment and the unity of that coalition that I've already talked about and the tremendous sacrifice, obviously, of our Iraqi and Syrian partners on the ground, who have lost thousands of lives taking back their homelands and helping to protect the coalition partners' lands at the same time. And that fighting continues, as you well know.

The ministerial that we're going to kick off on Wednesday will provide an opportunity for the partners to discuss our continued cooperation but most importantly the resources that will be needed in 2019 to build on the military and diplomatic gains. It comes at a critical time in our mind because we're near the end of the military operations against Daesh and as you – as has been announced, U.S. troops will be departing Syria. So we're entering a very critical phase in which we need to expand the diplomatic cooperation to assist the populations in Iraq and northeastern Syria recovery

from Daesh's rule but also maintaining the significant pressure on ISIS as it increasingly turns to insurgent tactics to destabilize both northeastern Syria and Iraq.

Also important is to prevent it from reinvigorating its recruitment and financing and the support that Daesh is trying to push into the worldwide branches, affiliates, and some of the lone actors. The territorial defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria will mark this significant milestone against the war against ISIS, but we really have been clear that it doesn't mean that our campaign against them – them being Daesh – is over, and both the President and the Secretary have been forceful in saying that we will do what is necessary across the globe to ensure that defeat.

So with this kind of overview, let me walk you through a little bit of the day's objectives and the meetings to outline how we plan to move forward with the D-ISIS campaign. There are really four themes that bracket how we're approaching the ministerial.

The first is to recognize the final liberation of Iraq and Syria from Daesh control and what must be done to ensure an enduring defeat. The second theme is to affirm the coalition's ties and commitments with the new Iraqi Government. Thirdly, it's to map out the requirements for Coalition 2019 and to maintain pressure in the global fight, and we've been really working that intensely since early November. And then fourth, ensuring that Daesh is held accountable for the crimes it's committed.

The day will start with a Syria Small Group meeting that the Secretary will host, and my colleague, number two, will have a bit more to say about that shortly. At mid-morning we will then move into the first plenary session of the ministerial, and that will focus on the four-year effort to liberate Iraq and Syria from Daesh-controlled territory and delivering Daesh an enduring defeat.

The delegates will discuss the next phase of the core campaign, which will focus on protecting against a resurgence both in Iraq and Syria through stabilization and security assistance. The Secretary will deliver the opening remarks to the session, and they will be open to the press, as you've probably heard. The morning plenary – after the morning plenary, there will be a family photo opportunity, which will also be open.

Following that, there will be a working lunch for the head of delegations where the topic will be holding Daesh accountable for its crimes and the protection of minorities in liberated areas. Think about theme number four, if you will. And the Secretary will deliver remarks at lunch and acknowledge two prominent figures working for justice, Nobel Peace Prize recipient Nadia Murad and then the UN Special Advisor Karim Khan.

Ministers will then open the afternoon session, which will be focused on Coalition 2019, which will include reviewing anticipated and possible resource requirements in the next phase of the global effort of the D-ISIS campaign. Counterterrorism Coordinator Nathan Sales will deliver remarks on our counterterrorism efforts through the UN and the importance of global

partnerships and certainly the law enforcement efforts as we continue to work to cut the connective tissue that is all part of ISIS support for foreign terrorist fighters, financing, and really the narrative that enables the branches and affiliates.

We anticipate as we wrap this up there will be a joint statement that will be released following the afternoon plenary. And I think with that you've probably got a few questions, but I'll turn the microphone over to Senior Official Number Two.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Okay, thank you. So as Senior Official Number One mentioned, on February 6th on the margins of the larger Defeat-ISIS ministerial meeting, Secretary Pompeo will participate in a Small Group ministerial meeting. Now, to remind folks, the Small Group is a group of the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. This is the same group that met at the ministerial level during the UN General Assembly last September and has spent – and established a basis for coordinating policies in support of the UN-sponsored political process to try to find a solution to the Syrian conflict.

This group last met formally at the envoy level on December 3rd as part of a continuing effort to support then-UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura's objective of establishing a constitutional committee under – for the Syrian political process. Now Staffan de Mistura has departed and has been succeeded by a new UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, so with the new UN special envoy on the job, this meeting at the ministerial level will be an opportunity for the Secretary and his ministerial counterparts to reiterate some key points. First, that the Small Group is united, there's a consistency in the Small Group on the judgment that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict, that settling the conflict requires a political solution. And secondly, that the Small Group nations throughout have reiterated their support for the UN-sponsored political process under UN Security Council Resolution 2254. And lastly, to emphasize support for the new UN special envoy Geir Pedersen and his mandate to undertake activities under UNSCR 2254 to try to reach a political settlement. So that'll be the – those'll be the themes of the ministerial meeting on the 6th.

MODERATOR: Thank you both. And now we'll start taking questions.

OPERATOR: We'll first go to the line of Carol Morello with *The Washington Post*. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Thank you for taking this. I see the Saudis have RSVP'd. I was wondering if you know if it's going to be the foreign minister or the new minister of foreign affairs, Adel Jubeir. And if they come, will Secretary Pompeo meet with them on the sidelines and urge the Saudis to cooperate with the special rapporteur from the UN who's investigating the Khashoggi murder and ask them to let her visit Saudi Arabia? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, it's – so right now, the RSVP, as we've received it, is supposed to be Adel Jubeir. He is supposed to represent the Saudis. But we will continue to update and I think we'll release the list

of delegates – head of delegations on Wednesday.

MODERATOR: Go to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: That will come from the line of Matt Lee with the Associated Press. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks a lot. I'm just wondering, since the last ministerial meeting and since – even since the last Core Group meeting, it's not just the UN envoy who has left. We've had the President's decision to withdraw, the resignations of Defense Secretary Mattis and of Brett McGurk. So what I'm wondering is – this conference is being – has been planned for some time. I'm wondering if pre – if what you're hoping to achieve, or the goals are the same as what they would have been pre mid-December, pre the withdrawal decision. And if they are the same, or – sorry, if they're not the same, if they've changed somehow, what exactly – is there a different focus now since the U.S. is withdrawing? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, so I would open up and then go to Senior Official Number Two. I think I would open up by saying you're exactly right, this ministerial has – was scheduled back in the fall, and there were – the objectives I highlighted have not changed. Certainly as you have described a number of events have transpired, and we will use the opportunity when the delegations are here to continue to amplify that and continue to amplify how things have changed and certainly how we frame the withdrawal announcement. And we can do that face to face a little differently than on the phone.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: The Secretary has made clear certainly to us that U.S. goals in Syria – notwithstanding the Defeat ISIS campaign, which remains – the goals remain there, the campaign goals remain the same, but also U.S. strategic goals for Syria haven't changed either. Our top three priorities – which are mutually reinforced – continue to be to secure an enduring defeat of ISIS, to see the exit of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria, and to reach a political settlement of the conflicts under UNSCR 2254. Those haven't changed. So a withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeast Syria is the change in the way we employ our military means under our broader strategy. It's not a change in the strategy.

MODERATOR: Thank you. And that was Senior State Department Official One and Two, in that order. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will come from the line of Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Good afternoon. Number one: How much funding are you looking to raise during this coalition meeting? And number two: We had a statement earlier from Robert Palladino regarding the Islamic State prisoners. I was wondering which countries are those that are you – you're asking to take these prisoners in from? And number two: How many prisoners are we talking about, and what about the cases, have you booked cases against these prisoners, and based on what?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So first of all, this is not a pledging conference. At other times, we have used part of the foreign ministerial to focus on pledges, and we have made that the showcase, if you will. As I highlighted in the four themes, we have some other business that we have to do and get to. Having said that, we still are experiencing a bit of shortfall in a couple of different areas, and there are three that we always are concerned about and you've been tracking on this for a long time. First is the humanitarian assistance requirements in northeastern Syria and in Iraq. I'll use Iraq as the example. It's over \$500 million, which is the humanitarian assistance requirement or pledge request from the UN. That helps and supports the IDPs, and as you know, there's still 1.8 million that are not – have not been able to return to their homes.

Secondly, we've asked nations of the coalition to contribute demining, and so with the remnants of war removal and things of that sort. We raised several hundred million dollars between April and July that went into all three of these accounts in northeastern Syria. We're asking nations to continue supporting these three tasks: humanitarian assistance, demining, and the last is stabilization. We still have a shortfall in Iraq of somewhere in the neighborhood of \$355 million to support the funding facility for stabilization, and so we will ask nations to continue contributing to that as well.

So there are three areas in the non-military spaces which are incredibly important, and we think that we'll be able to continue these efforts in northeastern Syria but also in Iraq. So there are some shortfalls, and we have talked to the coalition partners about continuing to reach into their pockets and contribute.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: And on the specific point or question about ISIS prisoners held, or detainees I should say, we are asking countries of origin to repatriate those individuals and where appropriate and where they have legal authorities to do so to prosecute them.

MODERATOR: Thank you. That was Official Number One followed by Official Number Four. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will be from Shaun Tandon with AFP. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, thanks for doing this call. I wanted to actually follow up on Lesley's question about the foreign fighters in Syria. What is the motivation for the call that came today? Are there concerns that perhaps with the SDF or more broadly in Syria without the U.S. troops that there would be a risk for these foreign fighters getting out? Are you concerned that they – considering their backgrounds, that they could cause some mischief if they return to Europe or wherever it is regardless of the charges against them?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL FOUR: Yeah, I think you rightly identified one of the areas of concern, which is that we're obviously dealing with a very fluid space in northeast Syria at the present time, and that as events evolve there are any number of scenarios under which positive control of some of the individuals currently in custody could change. And there is concern

more broadly with the issue of outflows of foreign terrorist fighters from northeast Syria to other more permissive places around the world from which they could seek to carry forward the fight, and that would include, if they were able to get out from under positive control, the detainees that are currently held in SDF custody.

MODERATOR: That was Official Number Four. We'll go to the next question.

OPERATOR: From Barbara Usher with BBC.

QUESTION: Thank you. Could you just clarify the – what role you see Iraq playing after the military withdrawal from Syria? The President has mentioned it a number of times. When he visited in December he said we could be basing some of the troops here and having them used for special ops. Now he's said that there's going to be observation of Iran from there. So is Iraq seen as the sort of military hub then after Syria and to be used – in what way to be used?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Hey, there. Our relationship with Iraq is grounded in the strategic framework agreement that was signed more than 10 years ago, and it's based in respect for mutual sovereignty. I think we've said, and fairly consistent, that the troops are in Iraq – our troops are in Iraq to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We have coalition advisors, our own folks and more than a dozen other nationalities, supporting (inaudible) request of the Government of Iraq, (inaudible) fully supporting (inaudible). I will say that the – ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS requires focus on Iraqi stability and regional stability. We can't turn a blind eye towards the malign activities of Iran throughout the region. We expect Iran to fully respect the sovereignty of Iraq and other regional states, to cease their destabilizing activities, and to refrain from actions that enflame sectarian tensions – these are the very factors that led to the rise of ISIS in the first place. So I see a consistent mission going forward.

MODERATOR: Thank you. That was Official Number Three. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: We'll go to the line of Joel Gehrke with *Washington Examiner*. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. I'm not sure who's best for this question, but I was wondering, do you expect the counter-ISIS coalition in the weeks and months ahead after the withdrawal to retain control of the oil fields in Syria?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Well, the – I would just say the counter-ISIS coalition doesn't have control of the oil fields in Syria. The local – those local resources are under the control of local security forces, and so that's likely to remain the case.

MODERATOR: Thank you. That was Senior Official Number Two. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will be from David Wainer with Bloomberg News.

QUESTION: Thank you. While the ISIS caliphate is largely defeated, al-Qaida still controls significant territory in Syria. Is it too soon for the U.S. to be celebrating victory over ISIS, and how concerned are you over the – over al-Qaida's control of territory there?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I'd just start by saying that U.S. is not saying that ISIS is eliminated as a threat. In fact, that's why we've continued to say that our overarching goal is an enduring defeat of ISIS. What we are saying is that we're on the cusp of the end of the territorial caliphate that ISIS enjoyed not that many months ago, where they were governing territory, enslaving people, taxing people, conscripting people from almost northeastern Syria all the way over to the Tigris Valley in Iraq.

So that is what is coming to an end, but we're not intending to let up on the pressure on ISIS as it evolves into a different kind of threat, the kind of threat that we've seen from, for example, al-Qaida in Iraq in the past. So that's why we're going to continue to work through the coalition partners and other local forces to make sure that we can bring about an enduring end to that threat.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: And then there's also a tempo of security operations that you see occurring inside of Iraq which are generated by the Iraqi Security Forces, and even though Prime Minister Abadi announced the defeat of Daesh in Iraq last – November of 2017, the Iraqis have generated a tempo which has continued to go after these clandestine cells. And we expect that that will continue, and we're starting to see that sort of tempo generated by our Syrian Democratic Force colleagues as well in spaces that have been liberated but still need to be cleared because sleeper cells are starting to fire up or occur there in some manner, shape, or form.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Those were Officials Two and One, in that order. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will be from Jennifer Hansler with CNN. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks so much for doing this call. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to the 20-mile safe zone that President Trump raised last month, whether that will be a topic of conversation at all during these meetings.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Certainly in the discussions about Syria, what's always part of the discussion is that the United States takes Turkey's security concerns into account in our activities in Syria, and we're going to continue through the course of the various discussions to promote as stable and secure a security arrangement for northeast Syria as possible.

MODERATOR: That was Official Number Two. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will be from Nick Schifrin with PBS News.

QUESTION: Hey, guys, thanks very much for doing this. I actually want to go back to Barbara's question and try and drill down a little bit more. I understand that you said Iran must request – sorry, respect Iraqi

sovereignty, but you've got two very specific responses today to President Trump's statement that U.S. troops will be watching Iran from Iraq: one, Barham Salih, as you saw, who said, "We will not allow this," quote; and perhaps less surprising, Hassan al-Kaabi saying that we'll use this as an excuse to try and end the presence of U.S. troops in the country.

So just to ask kind of point blank: Have there been any requests considered or made to the Iraqi Government about U.S. troops presence in Iraq vis-a-vis staying there in order to monitor Iran like the President said? Or, the other side I suppose, is: Is there no official acknowledgement perhaps from the U.S. that U.S. troops will be monitoring Iran from Iraq?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: I'm sorry, what was the second part? The last sentence?

QUESTION: Just a different version. So is there any kind of official request coming for the Government of Iraq so that the U.S. troops presence can be kind of officially in part about monitoring Iran, or no, is there no plan to talk to the Government of Iraq about that? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: So our troops are there in a relationship with the government – as – by invitation of the Government of Iraq, articulated by the strategic framework agreement. They're there for the enduring defeat of ISIS. That hasn't changed.

MODERATOR: That's Senior Official Number Three. We'll now go to the next question.

OPERATOR: That will come from Jessica Donati from the *Wall Street Journal*. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing this. I was wondering if there is going to be any specific discussions during this on Iranian presence and within the context of Iran contributing to instability there. Will there be any conversations specifically to address that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL THREE: I think the Iranian presence in Syria at least is something that's of ongoing concern to us, and it is part of a pattern of malign Iranian behavior throughout the region that destabilizes nation-states like Iraq and allows the conditions for ISIS to fester. That's really the key here.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: In every – this is Senior Official Two. In every discussion we have about the strategic situation in Syria, there is a thread of the destabilizing and provocative role that Iran plays in Syria. When we're talking to the Small Group, when we're talking to others outside the Small Group, it's a constant theme. No one – it's so prominent that no one can ignore it, and it's why one of our three overarching goals in Syria is to see the exit of all Iranian-commanded forces from all of Syria because of the way in which they are an accelerant to the local conflict in Syria, they're an accelerant through their provocative actions to a potential regional conflict, and they're destabilizing to regional and even

international security. So for sure Iran is a constant theme in these Syria discussions.

MODERATOR: Okay, those were Officials Three and Two, in that order, and we've got time for one last question.

OPERATOR: That will come from Nadia Charters with Al Arabiya. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this. The President said that 99 percent of the territory that's been under ISIS control has been taken back and almost 100 percent. Can you give us an assessment of ISIS strength as we speak now in Syria? How many fighters are there? Are they able to mount a lethal attack like we have seen in Manbij? Also, on the political front, you keep saying that everybody agrees that it has to be a political solution, there's no military solution to the conflict in Syria; but practically, I mean, is it any realistic chances for Assad and the oppositions to get together?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So Senior Official Number One. We get to a very interesting numbers game, and the numbers game are fighters versus supporters, and what you end up seeing repeated often are a higher number, which talks about numbers of fighters and supporters together. If – you highlighted the Manbij attack. Well the Manbij attack was done by just a couple of folks, a very small cell, and so that's the concern about the clandestine – the clandestine numbers.

What we are trying to figure out is: Are some of those supporters really not very good supporters? In other words, they're doing it for whatever reason possible. Sometimes it's for money, sometimes it's because they're really not believers and they're seeking – they're just seeking other opportunity. And the more of that we can do in the non-military side of this equation, we try to separate some of the supporters away from the hardcore fighters.

The hardcore fighters are a small number for sure, and certainly you may have seen the SDF talk about, maybe three weeks ago, they thought there were less than a thousand hardcore fighters down in the lower Euphrates River Valley between Hajin down to the Iraqi border. So again, it depends exactly where you're talking about. It's really where the cells are starting to fire back up. And then, can we deal with pulling supporters away from the fighters?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Concerning the – your question about the prospects for a political solution, I think the way we view it is that it's unrealistic to think that the Syrian conflict is going to be resolved in any kind of stable, sustainable way without a political settlement between the Syrian regime and its opposition. So it's not as though – it's not as though there's another stable outcome in the offing without that kind of political settlement. It's a kind of conflict where the kindling is sufficient for it to burn for decade after decade and continue to be an engine of jihadism and instability for the entire region and beyond until there is a political settlement. That's why we're focusing on it as intensely as we are, and that's why there's a Small Group ministerial meeting on Wednesday.

MODERATOR: Well thank you, everyone. Those were Senior Officials One and Two, in that order. That concludes our call now. I thank everyone for taking the time to join us, and I thank our speakers for being part of this conversation. Thanks, everyone. Have a good afternoon.

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