

Remarks on United States Efforts To Combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization at the Department of State

February 25, 2016

Good evening, everybody. I just met with my National Security Council as part of our regular effort to review and intensify our campaign to destroy ISIL. And I want to thank Secretary Kerry for hosting us and for his leadership of American diplomacy, not only in the Middle East, but around the world. Secretary Carter and Chairman Dunford updated us on our military campaign, and Brett McGurk, my Special Envoy to our coalition, helped lead a review of our overall strategy.

At the outset, I want to say again that this remains a difficult fight. The situation in Syria and Iraq is one of the most complex the world has seen in recent times. ISIL is entrenched, including in urban areas, using innocent civilians as human shields. Even in places where ISIL has been driven out, it leaves behind utter devastation: communities in ruin that need to be stabilized and rebuilt, which will take years and tremendous international resources. Because, certainly in Iraq, they're hard pressed to come up with everything that they need to rebuild, and in Syria, the regime there still is not constituted in such a way that it is investing in civilian populations.

Countries, communities, and groups that agree on fighting ISIL in the short term often don't agree on broader, long-term goals. Indeed, the fight in Syria is not only a civil war, but it's also a proxy war between regional powers, reflecting deep sectarian and political rivalries. Russia's intervention and airstrikes have reinforced the Asad regime and made a humanitarian catastrophe even worse. And the entire world has been horrified by images of starving Syrians, including children, reduced to near skeletons.

So this is a tough situation with a lot of moving parts. And as a consequence, I want to thank John for his tireless efforts, along with his team, to reach a cessation of hostilities in the civil war. None of us are under any illusions. We're all aware of the many potential pitfalls, and there are plenty of reasons for skepticism. But history would judge us harshly if we did not do our part in at least trying to end this terrible conflict with diplomacy.

If implemented—and that's a significant "if"—this cessation could reduce the violence and get more food and aid to Syrians who are suffering and desperately need it. It could save lives. Potentially, it could also lead to negotiations on a political settlement to end the civil war so that everybody can focus their attention on destroying ISIL. And that's why the United States will do everything we can to maximize the chances of success in this cessation of hostilities. At the same time, I want to make totally clear that there will be absolutely no cease-fire with respect to ISIL. We remain relentless in going after them.

About 2 months ago, at the Pentagon, I said that we had to squeeze ISIL's core in Syria and Iraq—its heart—to make it harder for these killers to pump their terror and their propaganda to the rest of the world. And over the last 2 months, the good news is, we've done exactly that. We've continued to intensify our efforts, and we're seeing results.

Today I directed my team to continue accelerating this campaign on all fronts. Our 66-member coalition, including Arab partners, continues to grow stronger. Over the past 2 months, thanks to Secretary Carter's good work, just about all of our military partners have

agreed to increase their contributions, buying into our conception of how we ramp up the pressure on ISIL. Dutch aircraft are now striking ISIL targets in Syria. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are expanding their role in the air campaign. Canada is tripling its personnel to help train and advise forces in Iraq.

Every day, our air campaign—more than 10,000 strikes so far—continues to destroy ISIL forces, infrastructure, and heavy weapons. ISIL fighters are learning that they've got no safe haven. We can hit them anywhere, anytime, and we do. In fact, ISIL still has not had a single successful major offensive operation in Syria or Iraq since last summer. And we continue to go after ISIL leaders and commanders, taking them out, day in, day out, one after another after another.

With coalition training, equipment and support—including our special forces—local forces continue to push ISIL back out of territory that they had previously held. After intense block-by-block fighting, Iraqi forces recently succeeded in pushing ISIL out of Ramadi. ISIL has now lost a series of key Iraqi towns and cities, more than 40 percent of the areas it once controlled in Iraq. And today we discussed the next phases of this fight, including moving against ISIL in the city of Hīt, and the resources needed to retake Anbar Province and Mosul. And as we approach the G-7 this spring, I'll continue to work with the international community so Iraq gets the financial support it needs to sustain this campaign, rebuild communities that have been devastated by ISIL presence, and pursue critical economic reforms.

Meanwhile, in Syria, a coalition of local forces continues to push ISIL back, including out of the strategic Tishrin Dam area. Now they're battling ISIL at al-Shaddadi. And they're continuing to squeeze ISIL's stronghold of Raqqa, cutting off highways and supply lines. So Raqqa is not the capital of a growing caliphate; it's increasingly under stress as ISIL territory shrinks.

Thanks to our wave of strikes against its oil infrastructure, tanker trucks, wells, and refineries, ISIL's oil production and revenues are significantly reduced. We're destroying the storage sites where ISIL holds its cash. Its money is literally going up in smoke. As a result, ISIL has been forced to slash the salaries of its fighters, which, increasingly, diminishes their morale. We continue to hear reports of defections and executions of those who try to defect.

At the same time, thanks to the coordination of many nations, including Turkey's continuing work to tighten its border, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into Syria finally appears to be slowing. The bottom line is, there are few—there are fewer ISIL fighters on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, and for those who are there, it's harder for them to recruit and replenish their ranks.

As its finances shrink, ISIL is also imposing more taxes and fines on those under its brutal rule. That, in turn, stokes even more resentment among local populations. More people are realizing that ISIL is not a caliphate, it's a crime ring. "It's a criminal gang pretending to be a state," said one Syrian refugee. "They turned out to be thieves," said another. ISIL, said one Syrian, "has made an enemy of almost everyone."

So they're not winning over hearts and minds, and they're under severe pressure. But as we've said all along, the only way to deal with ISIL in a way that defeats them in a lasting way is to end the chaos and the civil war that has engulfed Syria. That's how ISIL was able to thrive in the first place. The cessation of hostilities that's scheduled to take effect at midnight tomorrow is a potential step in bringing about an end to the chaos.

Now, even under the best of circumstances, we don't expect the violence to end immediately. In fact, I think we are certain that there will continue to be fighting, in part because not only ISIL, but an organization like al-Nusra, that is not part of any negotiations and is hostile to the United States, is going to continue to fight.

But everybody knows what needs to happen, and that is, all parties that are part of the cessation of activities need to end attacks, including aerial bombardment. Humanitarian aid must be allowed to reach areas under siege. And a lot of that is going to depend on whether the Syrian regime, Russia, and their allies live up to their commitments. The coming days will be critical, and the world will be watching.

More broadly, this is going to be a test of whether the parties are truly committed to negotiations. The process agreed to in Vienna is clear: a transition toward a more inclusive representative Government, a new constitution, followed by free elections.

I will say it again: Such a future, I am convinced, cannot include Bashar al-Asad. It's clear that after years of his barbaric war against his own people—including torture and barrel bombs and sieges and starvation—many Syrians will never stop fighting until Asad is out of power. There's no alternative to a managed transition away from Asad. It's the only way to end the civil war and unite the Syrian people against terrorists.

Now, this is an area where there's still significant dispute between us and the Russians, between us and the Iranians, between us and some of the other players on the ground. And the question is going to be whether the cessation of hostilities gives all the parties concerned an opportunity to reflect and assess what, in fact, will be required in order for us to see an end to the fighting in Syria.

Beyond Syria and Iraq, I want to point out that we continue to go after ISIL wherever it tries to take root, working with partners from Nigeria to Afghanistan. As we showed last week with our strike on an ISIL training camp in Libya, which targeted a senior ISIL operative, we will continue to use the full range of tools to eliminate ISIL threats wherever they are. Meanwhile, the United States will continue to support the Libyan people as they work to form a new Government and regain control of their country, as we've seen in recent days with Libyans celebrating in the streets as ISIL was driven from parts of Benghazi.

Even as we continue our military and counterterrorism efforts, we also recognize that it's not enough to defeat ISIL on the battlefield. We're going to have to defeat its ideology, which radicalizes, recruits, and inspires people to violence. The United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia are stepping up their efforts to discredit ISIL propaganda.

Here at the State Department, our new Global Engagement Center will do more to lift up voices that expose ISIL as the murderers that they are: killers of innocent Muslim men, women and children. And my administration is working with high-tech leaders in Silicon Valley—including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—to help counter ISIL online and to empower more people, especially young people, to use their talents and technology to push back on ISIL's propaganda.

Finally, we had an opportunity to discuss the importance of us staying vigilant here at home. Lone actors or small groups of terrorists like those in San Bernardino are very hard to detect. And they continue to pose a serious threat. So at every level—Federal, State, and local—law enforcement needs to be working together, 24/7, sharing information and connecting the dots to prevent attacks.

As we do, we'll continue to partner with communities to help them stay strong and resilient. That includes upholding our values, including freedom of religion, so that we stay united as one American family.

So, to summarize, the fight against ISIL will remain difficult, but we will continue to draw on all elements of our national power: military, intelligence, diplomacy, homeland security, law enforcement, and the strength of our communities. And I am confident that we will prevail. We are in a better position now than we were last month and a better position last month than we were 3 months ago.

In the end, brutality of ISIL is no match for the yearning of millions who want to live in security and dignity. I think of the Syrian who returned to his home in Kobani, a city that was in ruins but liberated from ISIL. "Despite knowing life would be tougher here," he said, "I chose to come back." And I think of the tens of thousands of people of Tikrit in Iraq, who have returned home, including students back at their university, focusing on a better future.

So the road ahead will not be easy, but our coalition continues to grow stronger. The ISIL core in Syria and Iraq continues to shrink. With allies and partners and the service of our dedicated personnel, our diplomats, our civilians, and our military, we will destroy this barbaric terrorist organization and continue to stand with people across the region who seek a better and a safer future.

Thanks very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:58 p.m. in the Treaty Room. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; Mohammed Saad and Abu Salem, Syrian activists now living in Turkey; and Nouredine Chouchane, a senior ISIL operative who was killed in a U.S. airstrike targeting ISIL training facilities in Sabratha, Libya, on February 19.

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