

Press Releases: Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Hi. Thank you, sir. And good morning, good afternoon, everyone. Thanks so much for joining the call on the status of Syria stabilization assistance and our ongoing efforts to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS.

I have two colleagues joining me at this time: Brett McGurk, our Special Presidential Envoy for the Defeat of ISIS; and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, David Satterfield. They're both on the call this morning. This call will be embargoed until the end of the call, but before we begin that discussion I have two announcements to bring to you this morning related to our continued efforts in Syria.

First, I want to say we remain committed to our efforts in Syria and continue to build our team to work on this issue. The State Department and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are both pleased to announce that Jim Jeffrey, a retired Foreign Service officer who most recently served as U.S. ambassador to Iraq, will rejoin the State Department as the Secretary's Representative for Syria Engagement. This is a new position that was created by Secretary Pompeo. Jeffrey will serve as the Secretary's advisor for and the department's primary contact on all aspects of the Syria conflict, apart from the Syria components of the D-ISIS campaign, which will remain with the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Brett McGurk.

Jeffrey will work closely with the under secretary of state for political affairs, once confirmed, as well as the Near Eastern and European bureaus on this issue. Given all the countries and the issues involved, from terrorism to refugees, these matters obviously cut across geographic bureaus, and therefore this requires a high level of coordination. Jeffrey is a 35-year veteran of the Foreign Service with extensive Middle Eastern and conflict zone experience who is being called upon, once again, to serve his country.

Today, we'd also like to announce that Joel Rayburn has joined the State Department as the – from the National Security Council, where he served as senior director of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. He is now serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Levant Affairs and Special Envoy for Syria. DAS Rayburn is focusing on issues related to ending the Syrian conflict, emphasizing our strong opposition to Hizballah and the importance of a strong Lebanese Government, and the coordination of our strong bilateral ties with Jordan. Rayburn is a retired U.S. Army officer who served in a variety of assignments across the Middle East. He's a graduate of and taught history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and is the author of several books and articles on the Iraq War. And we're thrilled to have both of them joining us at the State Department.

Now, for today's call, we'll focus on the future of stabilization assistance in Syria and the ongoing efforts to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS. As many of you have seen, we issued a statement earlier today announcing the diligent work that we've done to elicit significant contributions from our coalition partners, and how that has played into recent decisions that have been pending on Syria assistance funding. So in order to provide more details on those matters and to address your questions, I'll introduce both my colleagues.

I should mention that this call is on the record, attributable to the three of us – myself, also David Satterfield and Brett McGurk. And I just want to make one other thing clear, and that is that this decision represents the success of our administration's efforts to execute the President's direction that we mobilize the international and regional support for the critical stabilization efforts in northeastern Syria. This allows us to free up our tax dollars, U.S. tax dollars, to use on other key foreign policy priorities.

And with that, I'd be happy to introduce Brett McGurk and also David Satterfield. Gentlemen, go right ahead.

MR MCGURK: Thank you, Heather. This is Brett. So I just want to fill in a little bit of the – of stabilization work in Syria. I just returned from Syria with Special Envoy Rayburn. We had a very good trip to Raqqa, seeing some of our stabilization initiatives up close, firsthand. And really, since the start of this campaign against ISIS, our military campaign has been planned in close coordination with humanitarian and stabilization plans to follow on military operations. That's why all the territory that has been retaken from ISIS – it's about 99 percent of what used to be the physical caliphate – has all held. Our stabilization programs are targeted, they're prioritized, they're focused on saving lives, demining, water, electricity, and the basic necessities.

In April, we identified really the need to focus on coalition burden sharing and to focus on coalition funding for the stabilization efforts in Syria. And just to put kind of a cost figure on this, because stabilization is so prioritized and focused, we've spent a total of about \$90 million in northeast Syria on the counter-ISIS stabilization initiatives, and we determined that we really wanted to pick up the future – going forward from the coalition.

So two meetings over the last six months or so – one in June in Morocco, and then with Secretary Pompeo on July 12th on the margins of the NATO ministerial. We managed from the coalition really to dramatically increase our burden-sharing contributions to a total of about \$300 million, which is above the target that we were hoping to hit. And these contributions come from a variety of partners. They include, just by example, Australia, Denmark, European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Kuwait, Norway, Taiwan, and the UAE, and Saudi Arabia with the very significant total of \$150 million in contributions. So these contributions will allow us to continue at pace in our stabilization programming and to continue really for the foreseeable future. And we're confident this is really just the start. We have a very committed coalition to this effort.

And I can go into some of the details of what we're doing. Just an example, in Raqqa we set a goal a few months ago to get water to every district of Raqqa, and now all 26 sectors of Raqqa City have access to safe drinking water, 150,000 Syrians are now back in the city of Raqqa, despite the enormous effort we have to bring that city back to life. So all these programs are remaining apace, and the coalition contributions actually not only offsets what the U.S. Government was going to spend but actually increases the amount that we will be able to spend on the ground and make a difference to stabilize these areas going forward.

MS NAUERT: Okay, Brett, thanks. Ambassador Satterfield.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Yeah, I will just make one comment here. We have – on mechanics, we have just notified the Hill of our intent to reprogram this money away from Syria. There will be a rolling series of specific reprogramming notifications going out on funding destinations. I would ask those on this call to understand that we are not prepared at this time to discuss those destinations. That is something that will be preceded by our interaction with the Hill.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. I think we'll open it up for questions now, and our first question from our first reporter will be –

OPERATOR: The first question will come from the line of Michele Kelemen with NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: I wanted to talk about that money, because I know you say it's going to be redirected, but this week State and USAID had a report to OMB on unused money that could be rescinded. Is it possible that this money could be part of that rescission package?

And just to clarify, I'm wondering if the money coming from the coalition partners is actually going to be used for these very same projects or if they have their own ideas on how it should be spent.

MS NAUERT: Michele, it's Heather here. I'll take the first part of that question regarding what has been reported as a possible rescission. We simply don't have anything for you on that at this time. If and when we have any announcements, we'll let you know, but for now we just have to refer you to OMB.

MR MCGURK: So on the second point – this is Brett. So some of the contributions are being made directly through U.S. mechanisms and others through other multilateral mechanisms with international organizations, but all of them are supporting critical stabilization initiatives. And I would say all of the programs that we had identified – and these are irrigation canals, these are demining efforts, these are water pumps, these are everything that our team is doing on the ground – we will have funding for those going forward. And I would just say to our team we have a small State Department team on the ground working hand-in-glove with a small U.S. military team, and it's really an innovative, creative approach building on a lot of lessons learned. But it's working, it's sustainable, and thanks to these generous coalition contributions we're actually going to be able to increase some of what we had planned to do over the coming months.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question goes to – I'm sorry, I don't have the reporters' names in front of me. So, sir, could you please just direct me to the next reporter?

OPERATOR: Yep. It goes to the line of Michael Gordon with *Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, just I'd like to ask for a few more specifics, please. One thing that's unclear to me after the last question: Is there anybody in overall charge of the stabilization effort, or – of these 300 million that you've rounded up, who is in charge of this as a whole, or are these just a number of individual efforts? Also, how much of this money do you already have in hand as of today, and how much is a matter of pledges that have yet to come in? And does this effort include training security forces for Raqqa or for these other areas? Who's going to do that? Is that part of your concept here?

MR MCGURK: So – this is Brett. So these are not pledges. These are very hard contributions from these partners, particularly the \$100 million from Saudi Arabia, which they announced yesterday, and we put a statement about that last night.

In terms of the training, the training local security forces, which is going apace, all the training courses are full, and that is primarily coming from DOD. So this is focused, again, on prioritized stabilization needs – the demining, the water, the basic health, basic essential services. It's a very prioritized, focused effort. I mean, Michael, we could give you the whole list of projects and everything. We have all that. We have a START team which

is on the ground, and we have a START team that goes up through NEA to basically make sure that the projects are identified, they're vetted and coordinated with coalition funding going to the most high-impact projects.

QUESTION: Brett, could I just ask you – this doesn't include reconstruction obviously – what is your estimate of the reconstruction needs for a city like Raqqa and who's going to undertake that?

MR MCGURK: Yeah, so it's a great question. So no, stabilization is a focused – priorities, get people back into their homes. And so as we've kind of – as we've organized the campaign – I'll give you an example. I'm in Iraq right now. Iraq stabilization from the beginning of the campaign, we've spent a total of about \$806 million on stabilization initiatives. About 190 million of that was U.S. The rest is coalition. That is separate from long-term reconstruction. Long-term reconstruction will be led by World Bank and international financial institutions. We had a conference in Kuwait about a year ago which raised \$30 billion for the long-term reconstruction. This is focused on Iraq, so Syria, a much more complicated situation. And we are focused on stabilization, getting people back to their homes, retaining a permissive environment. But long-term reconstruction needs are tied very much to the political process in Geneva, which Ambassador Jeffrey will be working on. And we've made very clear that international reconstruction assistance for Syria will not be coming in until we have a – really an unalterable progress on the Geneva track, moving towards a political transition.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question, please.

OPERATOR: Okay, that comes from the line of Matthew Lee with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. I get that this is a success for you guys, at least in terms of encouraging the other members of the coalition to step up and to pull their weight, pay their fair share, but are you not concerned that by eliminating this funding from the U.S. that you're going to lose some kind – lose the leadership role that you had been playing, not just in the coalition but with the opposition itself?

MR MCGURK: This is Brett. I don't think so. I think it's actually quite the opposite. Again, if you look at Iraq, the ratio on stabilization, much more intensive overall campaign over the years, but about 806 million, 190 million of that was U.S. We run that through the U.S., through the Iraqi Government, through the UNDP. In Syria, we very much have the overall lead on the stabilization because we have a team on the ground, although we are joined by some key coalition partners on the ground. And the project list is something that we have. So I think the overall leadership is actually quite the opposite. I think Secretary Pompeo, when he convened about 54 partners in Brussels on the margins of NATO, there was a unanimous endorsement to make sure that this continue, that the coalition picked up the burden sharing. So we feel pretty good about it and a significant portion actually of these contributions are coming directly into the U.S. account, which oversees the overall stabilization in Syria. So we think the way we've organized it is pretty good. It maintains U.S. leadership of the coalition, which has been a

success, but the emphasis is on burden sharing from other partners. And the other partners have really stepped up.

MS NAUERT: And if I can just add to that, Brett, this will be on the Secretary's agenda when he goes to the UN General Assembly in New York in September. And the Secretary looks forward to engaging with his counterparts at UNGA on this issue, and also looking for ways to reinvigorate the Geneva process. And that is something that Ambassador Jim Jeffrey will be involved with. He'll continue our close monitoring of the situation there, and will work to manage our relationships with the various departments at the United Nations to try to reinvigorate the process there – Geneva.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Comes from the line of Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, good morning. The Secretary said recently during testimony that he felt that the U.S. didn't have the leverage yet to push forward on the political process and a transition in Syria. So how do these appointments change that, if anything, and does the negotiations at all involve – would the negotiations or have you received any indication from Russia and even the Assad regime that they are willing to proceed with the Geneva process? Because it looks like from the outside that they're proceeding with something completely different.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Lesley, this is Dave Satterfield. We are in close touch with Staffan de Mistura, who just met with the Secretary a day before yesterday and had discussion with other officials here. Staffan is prepared to move forward, and has said so formally, with the convening of a constitutional committee in accordance with resolution 2254. But the issue here is is the regime slow-rolling, or worse, simply stonewalling this, and quite frankly, are the Russians prepared to assume their responsibilities to assist in the critical movement forward on the political process that the Security Council and the broader international community strongly supports. Your query may be why should the regime or Russians want to see any of that, and there is a very simple and a very open answer: There is not going to be, by international agreement, reconstruction assistance to Syria unless the UN – not Moscow, not Washington, not any other capital, the UN – certifies, validates that a credible and irreversible political process is underway. That's the door to getting what we believe the regime, the Russians very much want, which is international money flowing into the wreckage that is presently Syria.

MS NAUERT: And I think I would just add – this is Heather here – that there are some issues at the State Department that obviously require intense management that don't fit into any one particular bureau. I think this is an example of one where you have the influence of Turkey, Russia, Iran, other nations and actors, and so that is part of the reason the Secretary made the decision to bring on or bring back Ambassador Jeffrey to be able to handle some of this issue – some of this so that we can better manage these issues and work across the various bureaus that have equities.

And next question, please.

OPERATOR: Comes from the line of Kylie Atwood with CBS. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much. Ambassador Satterfield, you just mentioned Russia, so I'm wondering if there's any talk between the U.S. and Russia, or the coalition and Russia, to see if they can play any role in these stabilization efforts given that when President Trump and Putin met last month, they declared that they would be working more closely together in Syria.

And then my second question is on Manbij. I understand that you guys said local training of security forces has been going on pace and all that, but with the recent tensions with Turkey, while we've got you on the phone, is that impacting any forward movement there? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Okay, Kylie, you've got a couple different pieces here that I'll try to break out. The United States Government, U.S. military has a web of detailed and senior-level contacts with Russian counterparts both on the political side, Kremlin and foreign ministry, as well as on the military side at levels that extend to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Dunford and his Russian counterpart General Gerasimov. These contacts range from discussing the political situation and the need to mobilize the Geneva political track to questions of deconfliction and common military activities in a single tight battle space, particularly in the Euphrates Valley in the northeast. All of these topics remain very much part of these contacts.

And with respect to Russia and reconstruction, I'd like to reaffirm here: We have been very clear – as clear as it is possible to be – with the Government of Russia that there will be no international reconstruction assistance for Syria without the irreversible political process validated by the UN that the UN and – has spoken to and that I mentioned earlier. There should be no ambiguity about that.

Now, on the question of – your final question, which I think was – if you could repeat, please, the last piece of your question.

OPERATOR: One moment here and I'll reopen her line.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Yeah.

OPERATOR: Okay, Kylie, your line is open.

QUESTION: Can you hear me now? Yeah, it was about Manbij and –

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Sure. Yeah, absolutely.

QUESTION: – Ambassador, you mentioned that –

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Yeah, yeah.

QUESTION: – training is on pace, but I'm wondering with the recent awful

tensions with Turkey if that's impacted it at all.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Sure. It's a question I can answer very briefly: No. There has been no impact. The proceeding upon the Manbij roadmap by all parties involved has been smooth and extremely encouraging. There has been no consequence or impact that we can discern of the other bilateral issues in play here.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Ambassador Satterfield, I know you have another meeting to attend, so you're going to have to jump off. Any last thoughts or comments for our reporters here?

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: I would only make one further comment: There should be no doubt as to the position of the President with respect to the broader issue of the U.S. enduring presence in Syria. We're there for the defeat, the enduring defeat of ISIS. And that's a message which the President has conveyed to President Putin, which all of us in the U.S. Government have conveyed to all of our interlocutors. What we have done, and the reason for this announcement and this discussion, is we have mobilized the critical international support that the President very much wanted to see and which the international community has responded to quite positively.

MS NAUERT: Ambassador Satterfield, thank you so much for joining the call. We'll talk to you again soon.

AMBASSADOR SATTERFIELD: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: We can take one more question, so thanks.

OPERATOR: Okay. And the final question will come from the line of Paul Handley with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: My question was asked. Can you pass it on to someone else, please?

MS NAUERT: Okay.

OPERATOR: We'll move on to Gardiner Harris with *The New York Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm sorry that Ambassador Satterfield left, because, I mean, he's implying that there is a carrot to the Geneva process in some promise of spending the billions of dollars needed to reconstruct Iraq – or Syria. But why would anyone believe that we're going to pony up billions for that reconstruction when we won't even spend the 200 million for some fairly small stabilization efforts? And you all are all sort of talking about this as if this is a recommitment from the United States to the Syrian conflict. Almost everyone I've spoken to has seen it as part of an American retreat from Syria and the broader conflict there, one that President Trump has certainly talked about. How do you respond to this sort of widespread perception that the United States is walking away, not recommitting?

MS NAUERT: Gardiner, I'll start with that one (inaudible) Brett.

MR MCGURK: Yeah, thanks. I can – yeah. Oh, go ahead, Heather.

MS NAUERT: I was just going to say the entire the reason that the United States is involved in Syria is because of the defeat of ISIS, for the defeat of ISIS, and that's one of the reasons that we've really focused our efforts on the defeat of ISIS. So this announcement today is something that the President has spoken about many times, and that is trying to get other countries in the region, whether it's this conflict or others, to commit more. And we have been successful through Brett's efforts at getting other countries to agree to commit, to commit more money to programs. And we remain firmly committed to the fight against ISIS, which is why we're there in the first place.

Brett, go right ahead.

MR MCGURK: Yeah, I can answer that and the first question. It's not just a U.S. position, it is a – really almost unanimous position by the friends of Syria. Secretary Pompeo had a meeting with what we call the Small Group on Syria in Brussels – U.K., France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Jordan – a unanimous position that reconstruction assistance for Syria is tied, as David explained, directly to the Geneva track with the UN imprimatur on that. That's the position of the EU. That's the position of countries really around the world. So it's not just about U.S. funding, it is about unlocking international reconstruction assistance which Syria is desperately going to need.

And just to reinforce what Heather said, it's in a statement that we released today. We're remaining in Syria. The focus is the enduring defeat of ISIS. We still have not launched the final phase to defeat the physical caliphate. That is actually being prepared now and that will come at a time of our choosing, but it is coming. That will be a very significant military operation, because we have a significant number of ISIS fighters holed up in a final area of the Middle Euphrates Valley. And after that, you have to train local forces to hold the ground to make sure that the area remains stabilized so ISIS cannot return. So this mission is ongoing and is not over.

MS NAUERT: Okay. And that concludes our call. The embargo has now been lifted. Brett, thank you so much for joining. And to our reporter colleagues, thank you so much for calling in today.

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