

Statement by the President on Progress in the Fight Against ISIL

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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THE PRESIDENT: Good evening, everybody. As President and Commander-in-Chief, my top priority, above all else, is the security of the United States and the safety of the American people. And that means preventing terrorist attacks and, at the moment, it is focused on making sure that we are dismantling and destroying the ISIL network. I just met with my National Security Council as part of our regular effort to review and constantly intensify our campaign against ISIL. And I want to thank Director Brennan and everybody here at the Central Intelligence Agency for hosting us and for their critical contributions to this fight.

In late February, at our meeting at the State Department, I directed my team to continue accelerating this campaign on all fronts. And we have. This remains a difficult fight, and a complex one, involving many countries and different communities in Syria and in Iraq. It is a military campaign and a counterterrorism effort, but it also depends on a whole range of political issues that face these two countries.

As we've seen so tragically -- from Brussels to Istanbul to Iraq, where ISIL slaughtered children watching soccer -- these depraved terrorists still have the ability to inflict horrific violence on the innocent, to the revulsion of the entire world. With attacks like these, ISIL hopes to weaken our collective resolve. Once again, they have failed. Their barbarism only stiffens our unity and determination to wipe this vile terrorist organization off the face of the Earth.

Today, on the ground in Syria and in Iraq, ISIL is on the defensive. Our 66-member coalition, including Arab partners, is on the offensive. We have momentum, and we intend to keep that momentum.

Our air campaign -- more than 11,500 strikes so far -- continues to pound ISIL targets. It's harder than ever for them to move and for them to mass forces. When they try, we take them out. ISIL still has managed to advance in some areas of Syria and Iraq, but it

has not had a single successful major offensive operation on the ground there since last summer. So it's been nearly a year since they were able to mount a major successful offensive operation.

We continue to take out their leaders, their commanders and those plotting terrorist attacks. For ISIL's leadership, it has been a bad few months. Coalition forces captured Abu Dawud, a leader of its chemical weapons program, giving us critical information that's allowed us to unleash more strikes against those sites. We have removed Abu Sarah, an ISIL financier in Iraq; Haji Iman, their finance chief; Ezat al-Jabouri, an ISIL figure in northern Iraq; not to mention a number of top foreign terrorist fighters. They are off the field. And in the days and weeks ahead, we intend to take out more. Every day ISIL leaders wake up and understand that it could be their last.

With coalition support, local forces continue to push ISIL back in Iraq. In Anbar Province, Iraqi forces have consolidated their gains around Ramadi and pushed up the Euphrates River Valley, liberating several villages from ISIL and retaking parts of the town of Hit. In a recent offensive in the Tigris River Valley, Iraqi forces have pushed toward Mosul. And as Secretary Kerry made clear in his visit to Baghdad last week, we will continue to assist Iraq -- and so must the entire world -- as it works to stabilize liberated areas and promote governance and development that is inclusive of all Iraqi communities so that ISIL cannot return.

Meanwhile, in Syria, a coalition of local forces -- some backed by U.S. Special Operations Forces -- continue to make progress, pushing ISIL out of the strategic town of al-Shaddadi. ISIL was dug in there, and that battle was expected to last several weeks. Instead, ISIL was defeated in several days. With this, we've severed a critical supply line between ISIL strongholds of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, tightening the squeeze on ISIL in both areas. In this offensive alone, these local forces in Syria have pushed ISIL out of about 2,800 square miles. In the north, fighting continues as local forces fight to eject ISIL from its last pocket along the border with Turkey.

In other words, the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq continues to shrink. Their ranks of fighters are estimated to be at the lowest levels in about two years, and more and more of them are realizing that their cause is lost. Our cyber operations are disrupting their command-and-control and communications. We continue to target ISIL's financial infrastructure, including its oil wells, refineries and supply lines. We've reduced their oil production and their oil revenue. And every dollar we deny them means one less dollar to pay their fighters and to fund their terror.

As I've said repeatedly, the only way to truly destroy ISIL is to end the Syrian civil war that ISIL has exploited. So we continue to work for a diplomatic end to this awful conflict. The cessation of hostilities in the Syrian civil war has largely held for about six weeks. It has reduced the violence, although not eliminated it, but that reduction is meaningful and it's allowed some humanitarian aid to reach the Syrian people. So the cessation has saved lives. But as we're seeing around Aleppo and other areas, the

cessation is tenuous and under strain. We've seen repeated violations by the Assad regime, continued attacks by al Qaeda's al-Nusra affiliate, and many Syrians continue to be deprived of desperately needed food, water and medicine.

Talks are now resuming in Geneva. And the United States will continue to do everything that we can to help the cessation succeed and to advance a political solution to the Syrian civil war. And that includes a vision endorsed by the U.N. Security Council, including Russia -- a process that brings all Syrians together under a transitional governing body, a new constitution, and free elections. The United States recognizes, as do people all across Syria, that such a process must include a transition away from Assad. And the future of Syria will be on the agenda when I meet with our Gulf Cooperation Council partners next week in Saudi Arabia.

Beyond Syria and Iraq, we continue to go after ISIL wherever it tries to rear its ugly head. We're helping partners strengthen their security forces, from Africa to Afghanistan. As we, our allies and partners have made it harder for foreign terrorists to reach Syria and Iraq, we've seen an uptick in the number of ISIL fighters heading to Libya. So we're going to continue to use the full range of tools to roll ISIL back from Libya while assisting the new and nascent Libyan government as it works to secure their country.

I do want to point out that even as we work to destroy ISIL, we continue to go after the remnants of al Qaeda that still pose a significant threat to U.S. interests, our allies and the homeland. In Syria, we targeted a senior leader of

al-Nusra, Abu Firas al-Suri. In another strike in Syria, we took out five other al Qaeda operatives. In Yemen, our recent strike against a training camp used by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took out dozens of terrorist fighters. In Somalia, we took out a senior leader of al-Shabaab, Hassan Ali Dhoore, who was responsible for the attacks that killed innocent civilians, including Americans. So once again, we're sending a message: If you target Americans, you have no safe haven. We will find you.

And finally, we will continue to work closely with our allies and partners, including in Europe, to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters and prevent attacks. I want to point out that our intelligence professionals and those of other nations have stopped numerous terrorist operatives in Syria and Iraq from entering Europe, thereby preventing attacks and gaining valuable intelligence. The world does not always hear about the success of our intelligence services, but it's a testament to the skills and tireless efforts of our intelligence professionals -- and I want to make sure that the world does not forget it -- our teams of experts, surge teams, recently returned from Brussels and Athens.

And we're going to be sending teams to other countries so that we keep improving border security, and screening of travelers, and share more information. Because even the smallest gap when critical information is not shared or when a potential terrorist slips through the cracks can be deadly. And building on my invitation at our Nuclear Security Summit, we're going to continue to look for ways for intelligence services around the world to share more information against terrorist threats.

So it's appropriate that we're here today. It gives me a chance to thank all the dedicated men and women across the CIA and our intelligence community, as well as every level of federal, state and local government agencies who are involved in this effort. They are working around the clock to keep us safe. They don't get a lot of attention, but their work is tough and it is critical, and I rely on it, and everybody up here relies on it in order to make informed decisions and to protect the American people.

As the stars on the Memorial Wall here attest, many have given their lives so that we can live free. We're safer because of their patriotic service. And tomorrow, my National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, will address all the elements of our comprehensive strategy to destroy ISIL. That includes working with partners around the world to counter ISIL's hateful ideology, as well as protecting our homeland and working with communities here at home so that we stay resilient.

In closing, I want to note that we're about to mark the -- three years since the bombing of the Boston marathon. Once again, we'll remember the lives we lost and the survivors who continue to recover -- to walk, and, in many cases, to run again. And I just want to remind the American people once again of what Boston taught us: How to be strong. How to be resilient.

In the face of terrorists who try to spread panic, we have to refuse to give in to fear. We have to stay true to our values of liberty and diversity and openness. In the face of madmen who only know how to kill, we're going to keep on living our lives and trying to lift people up. We go to our stadiums. We cheer for our teams. We thrive in our cities. We run our races, as they will next week in Boston.

In other words, we carry on. Terrorists like ISIL and al Qaeda, they can't destroy a great nation like the United States of America. I spent time before I came here at a science fair at the White House. You want to get a sense of why I'm always confident about America, meet some of those young people and what they're creating, what they're inventing, and the diseases they're trying to cure, the energy they're trying to generate, the hope that they want to bring and the light they want to shine to the entire world. That's who we are. You can't beat that.

Across more than 200 years, we've prevailed over much greater threats than the one we pose now. So we are focused, and we are going to win, in large part because of the outstanding work of individuals who are here today. But we should be confident about how effective not only our military and our intelligence and our diplomatic teams are, but the basic character of the American people. As long as we hold to that, we're going to be just fine.

Thank you very much, everybody.

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6:15 P.M. EDT