

Briefing on the Secretary's Upcoming Participation in the Meeting on Syria, The D-ISIS Ministerial, and the G20

 state.gov/briefing-with-acting-assistant-secretary-for-near-east-affairs-joey-hood-acting-director-of-the-office-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-patrick-worman-and-office-of-monetary-affairs-director

MR ICE: Yes, thank you. Hello, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. It's my pleasure to welcome you to this call previewing Secretary Blinken's trip to Italy for meetings on Syria, the D-ISIS coalition, and the G20. The trip was announced officially on June 18th.

Before we get started, I would like to give you a quick reminder that this call is on the record, but that the contents are embargoed until the call is completed. I'll also add that we will be focusing on answering questions and giving information related to this trip. As always, a transcript of this call will be posted on state.gov.

And again, as part of that focus, we're looking at the Syria meeting, the D-ISIS coalition, and the G20, so I'd ask that you limit your questions to those topics.

Now, it's my pleasure to let you know that we have with us today Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Joey Hood; Acting Director of the Office of the Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS, Patrick Worman; and the Director of the Office of Monetary Affairs in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Susannah Cooper. These are the three who will be briefing you today. Here at the top, I'm going to ask our briefers to give an overview of these segments of Secretary Blinken's trip, and then we'll take some of your questions.

And with that, I'm now going to hand it over to Acting Assistant Secretary Hood to start us off.

MR HOOD: Thank you very much, JT. Good afternoon and good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us today.

The Secretary and Italian Foreign Minister De Maio will co-host on June 28th a ministerial on Syria to discuss the crisis there.

The meeting will be an opportunity for the Secretary to hear directly from key allies and countries as we continue to discuss the best way forward for a resolution toward that crisis.

And during the meeting, the Secretary will underscore the importance of meeting humanitarian needs throughout the country, including through the provision and expansion of the UN cross-border mechanism.

The United States supports all forms of assistance for the Syrian people – we want to make this clear – including cross-line assistance from Damascus. But the truth is that cross-line assistance alone cannot meet the current needs in Syria. Cross-border assistance is critical to avoiding a greater humanitarian catastrophe there.

The Secretary will also make clear our support for an immediate nationwide ceasefire to ensure the safe delivery of aid and to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people.

We intend to retain a limited military presence in the northeast for the sole purpose of defeating ISIS in partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces and to stabilize areas liberated from that group.

Stability in Syria, and the greater region, can only be achieved through a political process that represents the will of all Syrians. We're committed to working with allies, partners, and the UN to ensure that a durable political solution remains within reach. The international community must renew its shared resolve to ensure the protection, dignity, and human rights of the Syrian people.

There can be no sustainable end to the conflict without progress in this area.

We're grateful to Italy for co-hosting the ministerial. Italy's commitment to Syria has been key for coordinating international efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and access to – for millions of Syrians who desperately need our help.

And now, it's my pleasure to hand over to Patrick Worman from our Office of the Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS and to the coalition – the ISIS – Defeat ISIS coalition, sorry.

Patrick, over to you.

MR WORMAN: Joey, thanks, and hello, everyone, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Since complete territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019 and the end of major combat operations, our work has continued steadily. ISIS remains a determined enemy. There is still much work to do in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS continues to conduct attacks and sow fear among local populations.

We continue to strengthen our efforts to counter ISIS's global network of branches and affiliates, as well as its twisted ideology and capability to plan terrorist attacks.

The Biden administration is committed to carrying forward the important mission to defeat ISIS. The 83-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS remains critically important to our efforts to ensure ISIS's lasting defeat.

This is why we are so glad that the coalition can meet in person once again. It will be the first time in-person full coalition ministerial since February of 2019. During our meeting in Rome, we will discuss key objectives in our continued efforts. At this meeting, ministers will discuss ways to sustain pressure in Iraq and Syria and counter ISIS networks globally, including in Africa.

The coalition's mission in Iraq is to support the Government of Iraq's efforts to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS.

We are committed to working with the Government of Iraq to target remaining ISIS cells, deny ISIS sanctuary, and to eliminate ISIS media, finance, and facilitation networks. This includes providing support to Iraqi counterterrorism operations and continued support to the Government of Iraq's development of a professional and capable Iraqi security force. Our deep political and military partnership with the Government of Iraq has been essential to our recent successes and will be key to any future successes.

In addition to security, we must also address remaining humanitarian stabilization and early recovery gaps to help victims of ISIS atrocities and others impacted by the conflict recover and thus minimize ISIS's recruitment and resurgence capability. As part of the civilian effort, ensuring ISIS members are held accountable for their crimes and promoting community-based reconciliation will be critical to countering ISIS messaging and combating ISIS's depraved ideology. Accountability efforts must be accompanied by support for survivors of ISIS atrocities to increase their access to legal and psychosocial services needed for their journey to healing, but also to amplify their voices in all discussions on justice and the future of Syria and Iraq. We will continue to provide targeted assistance to bolster justice and accountability efforts and provide survivors of ISIS crimes with the support they deserve.

While we have succeeded in facilitating the safe and voluntary return of over 4 million Iraqis to their homes, 1.2 million remain displaced. Some of those will need to be reintegrated into local communities; others will need resolution of complex political and security challenges before they are able to safely return home.

The coalition will continue to press the Government of Iraq to do more in support of recovery, reconciliation, and increased decentralization in liberated areas to address this challenge.

In Syria, working "by, with, and through" the Syrian Democratic Forces, the coalition effectively secured the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria at an exceptionally low cost and with a very small number of casualties for coalition forces, though we must recognize the toll paid by the SDF, which is over 11,000 killed in action and tens of thousands more wounded.

President Biden has expressed support for maintaining our small number of U.S. forces in northeast Syria to support local partners and prevent an ISIS resurgence.

We are continuing to monitor ISIS activity throughout the country and assess that ISIS has continued its efforts to regroup and carry out attacks, but has been able to do so more effectively in non-SDF-controlled areas, particularly in the Badiya Desert. We continue to advise and support counterterrorism operations against ISIS remnants in the northeast and conduct strikes on ISIS and al-Qaida targets across Syria. We also rely on the SDF to

ensure the security necessary for the delivery of humanitarian and stabilization assistance in the northeast, which is needed now more than ever to support locals' needs amid the northeast's struggling economy, and stabilize liberated areas to allow IDP returns.

Two key areas of concern in the northeast remain the 10,000 captured ISIS fighters in makeshift SDF detention facilities and tens of thousands of women and children in humanitarian camps subject to significant security issues and ISIS efforts to exploit the camps.

On detainees, the coalition is working to ensure that 2,000 foreign terrorist fighters and 2,000 Iraqis in SDF custody are ultimately returned to their countries of origin and face accountability. U.S. and coalition support to SDF detentions is critical, but this should not be misunderstood to be the long-term solution. Repatriation, then prosecution or rehabilitation, as appropriate, is the only long-term solution for the non-Syrians.

For better long-term security, we continue to encourage repatriations and support IDP returns via stabilization assistance. Humanitarian agencies are providing basic psychosocial support to some camp residents with a focus on more than 40,000 children. But more in-depth psychosocial support, child-focused services, protection, and education activities, especially in the areas that Syrians leaving al-Hol return to, are needed as a foundation for any future disengagement and reintegration efforts.

We are working with our partners to consider how they might support humanitarian agencies providing to these populations. These issues are exceptionally complex and span counterterrorism, security, and humanitarian imperatives. We will continue to work diligently with our partners on the breadth of issues raised by this challenging problem.

Despite territorial setbacks in Iraq and Syria, ISIS is actively expanding globally. We are keeping our focus on the continuing efforts in the core, but simultaneously putting increasing pressure on ISIS's global networks. It has worked to make its branches and networks more resilient and continues to exploit areas of local instability and conflict to recruit and train new generations of terrorist fighters.

The coalition is going to discuss new challenges ISIS is posing in Africa, with a focus on West Africa and the Sahel.

Not one of its branches has renounced its allegiance to ISIS, despite its territorial setbacks. These branches have also served as trans-regional enablers, providing support to organize, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, produce media, maintain local terrorist activities, and plan operations.

While each branch remains unique, with local and opportunistic motivations, coalition information and intelligence sharing, as well as the exchange of expertise and lessons learned from Iraq and Syria, are maintained and encouraged between coalition partners and through select working groups to address ISIS's threat at the global level.

The 83 members of our global coalition will continue to draw on all elements of national power – military, intelligence, diplomacy, economic, law enforcement, and the strength of our communities to defeat this brutal terrorist organization, while acknowledging that there is no single approach to the global defeat of ISIS; indeed, most approaches will not mirror the military-centric efforts in Iraq and Syria.

Well, thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to answering your questions.

And with that, I'll now hand it over to Susannah.

MS COOPER: Thanks very much, Patrick. During President Biden's participation in the G7 summit in Cornwall, the President underscored the U.S. commitment to multilateralism, a theme which Secretary Blinken will reinforce during his June 28-29th trip to the G20 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meetings in Bari and Matera, Italy.

G20 members account for more than 80 percent of global gross domestic product, three-quarters of global trade, and at least three-quarters of global emissions, and two-thirds of the world's population, so it is an important forum for international economic policy coordination.

This engagement is an opportunity for the Secretary to encourage greater cooperation in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the climate crisis, supporting and promoting food security, advancing democracy and human rights, and building back better with global partners, including the world's largest advanced and emerging economies, in support of an inclusive and sustainable economic recovery.

Secretary Blinken will travel to Matera on June 29th, where he will participate in several events including the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the Joint Foreign Affairs and Development Ministerial. This will be the first in-person meeting of G20 foreign ministers since 2019, and we thank Italy, which currently holds the G20 presidency, for its leadership in hosting this event. The United States fully supports Italy's focus for its G20 presidency on combating COVID-19, tackling the climate crisis, and fostering a strong, equitable, and sustainable economic recovery.

At the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Secretary Blinken will stress the importance of multilateralism as our best tool for tackling global challenges while highlighting U.S. leadership in the multilateral response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address the climate crisis, Secretary Blinken will encourage G20 members to work together toward ambitious outcomes, including a recognition of the need to keep a 1.5 degree celsius of warming threshold within reach, the importance of actions this decade that are aligned with that goal, and taking other steps like committing to end public finance for overseas unabated coal.

In support of building a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery and building back better worldwide, Secretary Blinken will call upon members of the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework to join consensus in building a global tax system that is equitable and

equipped to meet the needs of the 21st century global economy, including an ambitious global minimum corporate tax rate.

The Secretary will also urge G20 creditor nations to fully and transparently implement the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatments.

During the foreign ministers' working lunch, Secretary Blinken and his G20 counterparts will discuss supporting inclusive economic development and prosperity in Africa, including addressing ongoing humanitarian and human rights challenges, such as the conflict-induced famine and ongoing abuses and atrocities in Ethiopia, youth engagement, gender equity, and regional integration.

Finally, at the Joint Foreign Affairs and Development Ministerial session, the Secretary will join G20 foreign and development ministers to discuss global food security. USAID Administrator Ambassador Samantha Power will join Secretary Blinken virtually from Washington to jointly represent the United States at this session. Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, who is serving as the department senior official for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment and acting assistant secretary for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, will accompany Secretary Blinken to the G20.

I'm happy to take your questions on the G20 aspect of the trip during the Q&A, but for now we'll give the floor back to JT.

MR ICE: Thank you so much. Okay, at this point I'm going to ask the operator to give the instructions again on how to get into our question queue, and then we'll get started.

OPERATOR: Of course. And ladies and gentlemen, once again, if you wish to ask a question, please press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad. You may withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1 then 0 command. Once again, if you have any questions at this time, please press 1 then 0. And one moment, please, for our first question.

MR ICE: Okay. Let's go to the line, please, of Arshad Mohammed.

OPERATOR: And Mr. Mohammed, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. This is a question for Acting Assistant Secretary Hood. As I'm sure you're aware, IAEA Director General Grossi today said Iran has not responded to its letter about continuing the technical understandings agreement on monitoring its nuclear program, and he has asked for an immediate response from the Iranians on this. As you know, that understanding expired yesterday. Is the U.S. Government going to reconsider its participation in the Vienna talks if Iran does not respond and ultimately extend the monitoring agreement? Thank you.

MR HOOD: Well, Arshad, I'm going to refer to JT to get you someone to address that question after the call, because my – I'm prepared to talk about the Syria ministerial here, and I'm also on the road in Europe, and so probably I'm not the best place – person to address that.

MR ICE: Yes. Thank you, Acting Assistant Secretary Hood. This is JT. Yeah, Arshad, we can take that question – we can take that question for you.

Okay, at this point let's please go to the line of Jared Szuba.

OPERATOR: Mr. Szuba, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. I'm just wondering if the Syria policy review is still ongoing, or is the policy, as stated on this call, that which Secretary Blinken will be presenting to allies (inaudible)?

MR HOOD: Thank you for the question, Jared. The policy that I laid out here is what the Secretary's going to be talking about. He's going to be talking about how we are very much focused right now on meeting the immediate needs of the Syrian people, which includes not just the provision of vital humanitarian assistance, but also maintaining ceasefires around the country and ensuring the defeat of ISIS, because we don't want to drop the focus on these issues and see more people start dying again.

We also – he's going to talk about how we're committed to the political process led by the Syrian people, as envisioned in UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and in holding the regime accountable for the innumerable atrocities it has inflicted on its own people. So that's what ministerial attendees are going to hear about from the Secretary.

MR ICE: Okay. Let's go to the line of Jessica Donati.

QUESTION: I was wondering – a question about ISIS. The U.S. is leaving Afghanistan; there are no plans for bases in Pakistan or the general neighborhood. What is the plan to deal with ISIS emerging in the east?

MR WORMAN: ISIS-Khorasan, or ISIS-K as they're referred to within the halls of the USG, is something that we've remained focused on for some time. They remain one of the more lethal and active ISIS branches that are in Afghanistan. And I think that you can be assured that the attention of the administration through our continuing security partnership with the Afghan Government is going to remain focused on making sure that ISIS-K is not able to conduct attacks and threaten populations in Afghanistan. And that's what I can provide for now outside of the constructs of the ISIS ministerial itself. We could get you further information after the briefing.

MR ICE: Okay, let's please go to the line of Paolo Mastrolilli.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for the briefing. During a recent briefing in view of this trip, Ambassador Norland spoke about the activity of ISIS in Libya. Do you see the risk, the possibility, that Libya could be used by ISIS to do terroristic activity in Europe?

MR WORMAN: Yes, we remain closely focused on all ISIS branch and network activity worldwide. And suffice to say it is of particular concern – the ISIS branch and network threat across West Africa, to include portions of North Africa, including Libya. That's something that we and our partners, particularly our Western European partners, as you

note, are particularly focused on. But yes, that clearly encompasses our continued and growing secure – concern, I’m sorry, with the ISIS branch and network threat across West and Northern Africa. Thank you.

MR ICE: Let’s now go to the line of Eric Schmitt.

QUESTION: Thank you. President Macron recently announced the end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel will be coming soon, reducing the French military presence in that region. How will that affect the U.S. military presence in the Sahel, which is now roughly 1,100 troops, which has largely been in support of the French? Thank you.

MR WORMAN: Hi, Eric. Yes, that’s something we’re definitely paying close attention to and have been in close conversations with our French and as well as our other Western European counterparts about. But since that is rather, as I think you know, a more encompassing issue than just the ISIS threat and there are other malign terrorist actors across West Africa, I think we prefer to take that one offline, but we can certainly get you an answer after the briefing.

MR ICE: Okay, let’s go to the line of Elizabeth Hagedorn.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) and of course to see the resolution renewed. But has any consideration been given to scaling up direct U.S. funding to the local Syrian NGOs in the event that they lose their UN funding with a non-renewal? Thanks.

MR HOOD: Well, Elizabeth, I think you’re aware that the reason why we’re relying on the UN for the major part of humanitarian assistance to Syrians is because no one has the scale and scope and logistical backbone of the United Nations system. So that’s why we’re putting our efforts toward renewing the Security Council resolution and expanding the access points to not just Bab al-Hawa but Bab al-Salam and Yarubiyah as well. And we think that’s what’s vital and that’s what we need to push for.

MR ICE: Let’s now go to the line of Jonathan Landay.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. I’d like to go back to the question of ISIS-K. Your response was that the United States will continue to work with its counterterrorism partner in Afghanistan on ensuring that you keep the ISIS-K – you can control the ISIS-K threat. But your partners in Afghanistan, the CT forces that have been trained by the United States in particular, are deeply engaged in combat with the Taliban, who are on a spring offensive. How do you propose to work with them and keep a efficient eye on ISIS-K when they are at – they are deeply involved in combat? And I recall the head of the CIA testifying earlier this year that the United States will lose intelligence on threats coming out of Afghanistan when the U.S. – when the U.S. military drawdown is done. Thank you.

MR WORMAN: Yeah, thanks for the question. I think we’re going to have to take that one offline as well, as it’s almost certainly going to include getting – gathering some information with other bureaus within the department in order to get you a more comprehensive answer.

MR ICE: Okay, let's go to the line of Laura Kelly, please.

QUESTION: Hi, can you hear me?

MR ICE: Yes, we have you, Laura. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you so much for taking my question. Following President Biden's meeting with Russian President Putin, is Secretary Blinken optimistic that the border crossing between Turkey and Syria will remain open for humanitarian assistance?

And if I may, another question. How many U.S. forces are remaining in Syria, and does Turkey's opposition to Kurdish forces in that area hurt or harm the U.S. presence in the region? Thank you.

MR HOOD: Okay, I'm going to try to remember all three of those. I would defer to DOD on the number of forces in the region, but they are remaining there, as I said, solely focused on the defeat of ISIS. The relationship between the Turks and our Kurdish partners and Arab partners in the northeast is something that we're obviously very concerned about, and we want to make sure that Turkey understands our intentions with regards to northeast Syria and exactly what our focus is. And we want to continue to focus on not just the defeat of ISIS but also the remaining of the humanitarian access points across the borders.

I think you asked at first whether we were confident that we would be able to maintain the border crossing at Bab al Hawa, and the answer is yes. I think that we see here an opportunity to work constructively with Russia on this issue of getting humanitarian assistance to Syrians all across the country, especially now that we have the COVID pandemic to deal with and there has been virtually no assistance to battle COVID that's gotten into the northeast in particular. So it's a growing humanitarian problem and one that I don't think anyone wants to see exacerbated.

MR ICE: I think we have time for just a couple more questions. Let's please go to the line of Joseph Haboush.

QUESTION: Hello.

OPERATOR: Mr. Haboush, your line is open. Please, go ahead with your question.

QUESTION: Thank you. I wanted to ask if there is any comment on what's perceived to be changing climate in the Middle East for traditional U.S. allies to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Assad regime. And also, is there a concern that these pockets of ISIS could re-emerge in neighboring Lebanon with the ongoing crises there? Thank you.

MR HOOD: Hi, Joseph. Sorry, it's taking me a couple of minutes to deal with the buttons on my phone, so sorry for the pause.

But with regard to normalization, we are – do not intend to normalize the Assad regime absent a major change in behavior on its part. And with regard to others who may be considering making moves, we are asking them to consider very carefully the atrocities

committed by the regime on the Syrian people over the last decade as well as the regime's continuing efforts to deny much of the country access to humanitarian aid and security.

And I would also, of course, add that we also have the Caesar Act sanctions. This is a law that has wide bipartisan support in the Congress, and the administration is going to follow the law on that. And so governments and businesses need to be careful that their proposed or envisioned transactions don't expose them to potential sanctions from the United States under that act.

MR ICE: Okay, and I think we have time for one more question. Let's please go to the line of Mitch Tanaka.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for taking my question. My question is on G20. Are there any plans to have any bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the meeting, especially with the Russian or Chinese and Japanese counterparts?

MS COOPER: Thank you. I don't have any additional meetings to announce at this time. Obviously, we can refer you back to JT and the spokesperson about this. I can say there is no meeting planned between Secretary Blinken and the Chinese foreign minister at the G20 Ministerial. Thank you.

MR ICE: Okay. And I think with that quick one, we can take just one more. Let's go to the line of Noor Zahra.

QUESTION: Hello, thank you very much for your time. I was just wondering with the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, did that help in decreasing Iran's influence in the region, or does it actually help with increasing the presence of ISIS? Thank you.

MR ICE: Patrick, can you take that question?

MR WORMAN: Yeah, could you just repeat the end of that really quickly? I think I lost that. My apologies.

QUESTION: Yes. Was the assassination of Qasem Soleimani – I was wondering does that help in decreasing the presence of the interference of the Iranian influence in the neighboring countries like Bahrain and Iraq, or did it help increase the number of ISIS fighters?

MR WORMAN: I'm not sure we see really necessarily any clear connection per se. ISIS branches and affiliates both within the region and beyond continue to pose a somewhat persistent threat. But we feel quite good both within the coalition and within – with our – with the international system more broadly on the sort of scheme and effort that we have set out, which is highlighted by close intelligence and information sharing, border security efforts, rule of law, and efforts to counter ISIS's malign narratives. So I think those efforts continue apace, and I think they continue successfully quite independent of any implications emanating from the assassination of Soleimani. Thank you.

MR ICE: Okay. And with that that's all the time we have today. I do want to take a moment to thank our briefers, Acting Assistant Secretary Joey Hood, Acting Director Patrick Worman, and Director Susanna Cooper, for being with us today. And I'd like to thank everyone who dialed in for their participation. With that, the call is ended, and the embargo is lifted. Everyone have a nice weekend.