

Background Conference Call on the President's Address to the Nation

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Via Telephone

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MS. HAYDEN: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. This call tonight is on background with senior administration officials to discuss the speech the President is going to be giving later today. This call is embargoed until 9:00 p.m. until delivery when the President speaks tonight.

You'll be receiving shortly some excerpts that are embargoed until 6:30 p.m., but everything on this call is embargoed until 9:00 p.m.

With that, I'll turn it over to our first senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, everybody, for jumping on the call. Before I turn it over to my colleague who will walk through the speech in more detail, I want to spend about three minutes just walking through the context in which the President is delivering this speech to sort of give everybody a good sense about where we've been and why this is important inflection point here.

The first is, it's important to remember, back in June, when ISIL first made their pretty dramatic advance across western and northern Iraq, that the President had a pretty immediate reaction. The first was to increase our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance resources so we had a better sense of what was actually happening across that country.

The second, the President ordered military personnel, military advisers, to go into Iraq to staff joint operation centers, to work closely with Iraq security forces to assess the capabilities of those Iraq security forces, but also to assess the capability of ISIL fighters and to get a good sense of what exactly was happening on the ground.

Shortly thereafter, the President ordered the military to take some action to accomplish essentially two goals. The first is to protect the American personnel that were in Iraq. That military action had some pretty immediate benefits. It was successful in supporting Kurdish fighters as they retook the Mosul Dam. It was successful in supporting Kurdish fighters in blunting an ISIL advance on Erbil, where there were a significant number of American personnel. And what we saw were essentially military actions that were used to defend Americans in that region of the country.

Back in June, the President said that he would be prepared to do more, only after Iraq's political leaders made the decision to form the kind of inclusive government that would unite that country so that they could face the existential threat that they had been confronted with.

Earlier this week, the Iraqi cabinet was appointed, and we saw a functioning, inclusive, diverse, central government take hold. And the President all along has set that up as the key to the next step of our strategy. And as the President described it to Chuck Todd in "Meet the Press" over the weekend, we're not ready to shift to the next phase of our strategy, to ultimately accomplish our goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. This next phase will be more offensive.

And before we sort of walk through what the strategy is for this next phase, there are two key principles that I want to highlight here. The first is, while the military actions get a lot of attention, it's critically important that you not discount the significance of our diplomatic efforts. The President is determined to ensure that the United States is not acting alone. Again, this starts with the formation of an inclusive Iraqi government.

It will be the responsibility of Iraqis to secure their own country and take the fight to ISIL on the ground in their own country. It includes engaging regional Sunni-led governments. After all, these governments have more at stake in the resolution of this situation than even the United States does. This mayhem and the havoc that ISIL is wreaking across that region of the world is in their backyard, and in some cases along their borders. So the United States, as we lead the international effort here, is committed to engaging these regional governments that do have important capabilities that can contribute significantly to the success of this broader strategy.

So understanding that our coalition-building efforts are critically important is key to understanding where the President's head is as he approaches this.

And finally, it's important for you to also understand that the strategy that the President will lay out tonight is consistent with the counterterrorism strategy that this administration has implemented in other places in the world. In places like Yemen and Somalia, the United States has taken steps to build up the capacity of forces on the ground to take the fight to terrorists in their own country. You've also seen the United States military and our intelligence capabilities being used to support the efforts of these security forces as they take the fight to the terrorist organizations in their countries.

Each of these situations is different, and the situation in Iraq and Syria is also different than those two. But in terms of trying to understand how the President and his administration and his national security team are approaching the situation, it's important for you to understand the successful counterterrorism strategy that was implemented in other places.

So with that, I'm going to stop and turn it over to my colleague here who is going to walk through the speech and walk through the elements of the strategy that's included in the speech that the President will deliver tonight.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, thanks. So just working through what the President is trying to achieve in his speech tonight, he is laying out a comprehensive strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, working together with a coalition of friends and allies.

Of course, it's important to have the threat appropriately contextualized. We have pursued a very robust counterterrorism strategy over the course of the last several years against al Qaeda and its affiliates, and that includes action that we've taken in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Yemen and Somalia, as well.

What we have seen with ISIL is the emergence of a growing threat emanating from Iraq and Syria over the course of the last several months. However, it's important to note that ISIL has its roots in al Qaeda in Iraq; it was formerly the al Qaeda affiliate operating in Iraq for many years after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. But we have seen it gain in strength as it has taken advantage of sectarian strife in the region and the civil war in Syria to operate more freely in the border region of Iraq and Syria, to gain territory that has allowed it access to resources, funding and weapons in recent months to seek to make further advances, particularly inside of Iraq.

We assess ISIL to be, of course, a grave threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, potentially to the broader Middle East. Clearly, it poses a threat to any American personnel and facilities who are citizens in that part of the world as well.

We have not yet detected specific plotting against the United States homeland. However, we take very seriously the threat emanating from ISIL leaders, and we are very concerned about the foreign fighters, including Europeans and Americans, who have traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside ISIL, and the potential for them to return to their home countries to conduct attacks.

So again, this is a threat from an organization that poses a lethal risk in Iraq and Syria, and poses a potential threat to the U.S. homeland from foreign fighters in particular, even as we have not yet detected a specific plotting.

My colleague walked through some of the actions we've taken to date. There have been over 150 airstrikes inside Iraq that have been effective in protecting our facilities, our personnel in Baghdad and Erbil, that has given space to Iraqi and Kurdish forces to go on offense, and that have also performed important humanitarian missions in saving thousands of lives on Mt. Sinjar and the Iraqi town of Amerli.

Now we are poised to go on offense. The Iraqi government has formed an inclusive and broad-based coalition led by Prime Minister Abadi that is committed to bringing together the country against this threat. That was an essential precondition to further U.S. action, because we believe an inclusive Iraqi government is necessary to get the buy-in from all of Iraq's communities -- importantly, Sunni communities -- in evicting these terrorists from their lands.

We have also done consultations over the course of the last several weeks with close allies and partners. Recently, at the NATO Summit, the President was personally engaged in that. And Secretary Kerry is in Iraq and traveling through the region to further enlist partners. And I'll talk about that in a moment.

So tonight, the President will make clear that we are prepared to lead this broad coalition, to roll back the threat from ISIL. And our objective has been clearly stated by the President: We will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy. I'll just highlight a number of the key elements of that approach.

First, the President will underscore that we will be taking a systematic campaign of airstrikes forward against these terrorists. And I'd separate that into a number of important categories for you to focus on.

First of all, in Iraq, we are going to expand the efforts of our air campaign beyond the two missions of protecting our personnel and facilities and the humanitarian missions that the President has pursued. So in other words, we are lifting the restrictions of our air campaign from those two missions to a broader effort to roll back ISIL, and to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces as they are going on offense. If there is an ISIL target that we need to hit in Iraq, we will hit it. And that will essentially allow for Iraqi security forces to go on offense; that includes Iraqi security forces, it includes Kurdish forces in the north. And we are also very heartened that the Iraqis are taking steps to stand at national guard units who can help secure Sunni communities.

The President will also make very clear that we will go after ISIL wherever they are, and that includes Syria. We are dealing with an organization that operates freely across the border, so we will not be restrained by that border in our determination to conduct airstrikes against ISIL. The President has made very clear that he will not tolerate safe havens for terrorist organizations that threaten the United States. He will not tolerate a safe haven for ISIL in Syria.

And so we are working very methodically with the Department of Defense to develop and advance whatever options are necessary to take targeted action against ISIL, again, wherever they are in Iraq, but also in Syria.

This is something that will be taking place over a period of time. This is a sustained and systematic effort, and we're going to continue to take the time to get this right, as we have done in Iraq, for instance, in developing targets. So this is an effort that is ongoing, but

there should be no mistake that the United States is prepared to take action on both sides of that border to take care of the threat from ISIL going forward.

Second, we will be increasing our support for the forces that are fighting on the ground. We are bringing unique capabilities to bear from the air, but we are also training and equipping Iraqi security forces who are going on offense, and we have been providing military assistance, of course, to the Syrian opposition who has been fighting against both ISIL and the Assad regime.

With respect to the Iraqi security forces, we have already had assessment teams in the country who have been determining what additional support could be necessary for Iraqi and Kurdish forces. We have been able to work with partners around the world to expedite the provision of security assistance to Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

The President, with his announcement tonight, will be sending an additional 475 U.S. personnel, servicemembers to Iraq to assist in this effort. And these additional military personnel build on the work of these assessment teams, and they will be divided between the joint operation centers that we have established in Baghdad and Erbil; the teams that we have embedded with Iraqi security forces; and our efforts to support the ISR, the intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance that we have developing targets inside of Iraq.

So consistent with the Iraqis forming a new government and our commitment to increase our support, we are not only expanding the air campaign in Iraq, we will also reinforce our ability to train, equip and advise Iraqi security forces. However, these will not be troops introduced into combat in Iraq. So consistent with the President's pledge back in June, we are not reintroducing U.S. forces into combat on the ground in Iraq; we are there to support the Iraqi security forces who are going on offense.

We are also calling on Congress to authorize and resource a train-and-equip mission for the Syrian opposition. The President first called for this in his speech at West Point, but it is even more urgently needed today. And let me just make a couple of points about this.

We had been providing military assistance to the Syrian opposition, but clearly we need to expand our efforts because the Syrian opposition is the counterweight to both ISIL and to the Assad regime. We are not going to work with the Assad regime in going after ISIL because they have no legitimacy in the Sunni communities.

This effort, very importantly, against ISIL is not simply a U.S. effort. We are joining a regional effort with partners on the ground in Syria and in Iraq and across the region in going after these terrorists. And we cannot do that without a stronger partner inside of Syria. So it is very important for Congress, as a part of their commitment to support efforts to go after ISIL, to support the need for additional training and equipping of Syrian fighters who can carry out that mission on the ground inside of Syria. So the President will underscore the importance of moving forward with that.

I would note that we have support from other key partners in this effort. Today, the President spoke to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis made very clear that they support this mission. They will join us in this mission. So this is not simply a U.S. effort to train and equip the Syrian opposition; we are joined by very important Arab partners as well.

Third, the President will indicate that we are going to draw on the range of our counterterrorism capabilities, which we have developed over the last decade, to prevent attacks from ISIL. And I won't dwell on these, but clearly we need to take efforts to cut off ISIL funding, to develop our intelligence on this terrorist group, to ensure that we have the right homeland defenses in place to counter the ISIL ideology, and also to deal specifically with the threat of foreign fighters who are flowing into and out of Syria and Iraq.

And as you know, in two weeks the President will chair a meeting of the U.N. Security Council that will be focused on the issue of foreign fighters, how we can share intelligence, how we can work with INTERPOL and other law enforcement to make sure we have the right defenses in place and protocols in place to cut off this flow and this pipeline of fighters going into and out of the region.

Finally, it's important that we continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by ISIL. Clearly, there's a significant refugee outflow from Syria that is in part due to ISIL, in addition to the Assad regime. We've also seen the displacement of tens of thousands of people inside of Iraq in recent months, including vulnerable minority populations like Iraqi Christians. It's very important to us that we not allow ancient communities to be driven from their homelands as we've seen with, for instance, Iraqi Christians. And this is something that we're going to work with the international community on going forward.

So this is the comprehensive strategy that we have in place to target ISIL, to go on offense through a systematic air campaign against ISIL, to strengthen and empower partners on the ground in both Syria and Iraq so that we are squeezing the space where these terrorists operate, to ensure we have the right counterterrorism tools in place to protect our homeland and to work with our allies, and to mitigate the humanitarian challenge in the region.

With respect to the coalition, I would just say we've already had significant participation in Iraq with a variety of our mission. But as we move forward, we're quite confident that we will be joined in each of these areas by coalition partners. Secretary Kerry is going to Saudi Arabia tomorrow, where he will meet with key Arab foreign ministers, and to advance their participation in this effort. He will continue to travel across the Middle East and Europe, where he will be able to connect the effort we've done with European allies and other international partners with the coalition that we're putting together in the region.

And then by the time of the United Nations General Assembly, I think it will be clear the variety of commitments that are being made by individual nations, which will run the spectrum -- from kinetic action, to intelligence support, to airlift and logistics, to humanitarian assistance, to training and equipping and resupplying security forces on the ground. There are a range of things that different countries can do. But we are very confident that this will be a broad-based coalition with countries from the Arab world, from Europe, but also other key allies around the globe, like, for instance, Australia, which has joined us in humanitarian airdrops already in Iraq; or Canada, which has already put advisers on the ground.

So with that, why don't I stop and take your questions. I'd just note one other thing, and I think this is in the excerpt we sent around. We are obviously taking this action in Iraq, a country where the United States has significant history, as well as in Syria. However, it's very important to note the differences in approach from previous U.S. engagements in Iraq. We will not have U.S. forces fighting in combat on the ground. So an effort where we have a systematic air campaign and support for partners on the ground is quite different from an effort where you have a 100,000-plus U.S. troops occupying Iraq and fighting and patrolling daily in that country. This is more in line with how we've approached the counterterrorism challenge from al Qaeda and its affiliates in different parts of the globe. And it's consistent with the notion that we will be relentless in denying safe haven to terrorist organizations that we determine pose a threat to the United States.

And with that, we'd be happy to move to questions.

Q Thank you very much. Can you describe the dynamic of going after ISIL, or ISIS, in Syria without unintentionally at the same time helping Assad when the President said he needed to leave three years ago? And secondly, in Iraq, Secretary Kerry was asked today about the fact that Iran is also fighting ISIL in Iraq. And he said that there would be no cooperation or coordination with Iranian military forces. But how is it possible to both be going after ISIL without at some point having coordination with Iranian militias? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Andrea. I'll say a couple words, and my colleague may want to add. First of all, we do not think that our efforts in Syria will provide an opening to Assad because, frankly, the areas where ISIL has a stronghold in Syria would simply not accept Assad's rule. These are Sunni-majority areas in the eastern part of the country.

We, frankly, believe that if ISIL was degraded in these areas, the forces that are most likely to benefit are other opposition elements, particularly the legitimate Syrian opposition who we work with. So again, if you look at where ISIL strongholds are in Syria, these are not areas that are hotly contested for Assad to go back and essentially reestablish authority and legitimacy. We believe they're areas that, because they're predominantly Sunni, are more likely to benefit the opposition that we support.

However, it is all the more important, Andrea, that we provide additional training and equipping to the Syrian opposition so that we are making certain that they are benefiting as the counterweight to ISIL from our actions.

And on the Iran question, I'd just say we do not cooperate or coordinate military activity with Iran. We have made clear to them publicly and insofar as we've had bilateral contact that we've told you about on the margins of some of the P5-plus-1 discussions, that we've encouraged them to support an inclusive Iraqi government so that there are not sectarian agendas driving Iraqi politics -- because, frankly, for the threat to be dealt with, we need to have a united Iraq. But I don't know if my colleague wants to add anything.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just add, Andrea, on the question about aiding the Syrian moderate opposition in Syria to go after ISIL, the issue here is -- unlike in Iraq, where we have a government with whom we can work and a ground force that we can support and assist, we do not have a government, quite obviously, in Syria with whom we can work. We need to bolster the Syrian moderate opposition to enable it to be able to take and hold ground, pushing out both ISIL and the Assad regime. That is going to be essential to our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy the organization.

As my colleague said, the President has made quite clear that ISIL will not have a safe haven in either Iraq or Syria, and we will conduct a systematic air campaign to roll back ISIL and address their freedom of movement across the borderless -- now borderless area between Iraq and Syria. And when that happens inside Syria, and going after and degrading ISIL and their operations there, we need to have a moderate Sunni force in order to come in and hold that ground.

And what we're asking from the Congress, and what the President has already asked the Congress for, is authorization to enable us to undertake that training/equipping mission. And now what we have is the commitment from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which we received, indeed, in a trip that I took over the last weekend to the Kingdom, to be a full partner with us in that effort, including by hosting that training program.

Q Hey, guys, thanks for doing the call, appreciate it. Two quick points. You said that it would be a sustained and systematic effort. If that's the case, I mean, I wonder if you could explain why you don't think you need legal authorization from Congress. This is no longer a one -- a short-term thing. You're saying this is a long-term thing. At one point do you have to go to Congress for actual authorization, not just for funding for the training and equipping? And then if this is a longtime, sustained effort, what do you hope to leave your successor? What state do you hope this effort will be in by the time the President leaves office?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Peter. On your first question, the President has constitutional and statutory authority to direct U.S. military airstrike operations to deal with the threat posed by ISIL. He has made clear time and again, and he will again tonight, that we are strongest when the executive branch and Congress act together when we use military force. So the President would welcome congressional support for the administration's efforts against ISIL.

Now, that support could take any number of forms, including potentially a new limited authorization for the use of military force that would specifically address the threat posed by ISIL. But, to be clear, we do not believe the President needs that new authorization in order to take sustained action against ISIL. We believe that he can rely on the 2001 AUMF as statutory authority for the military airstrike operations he is directing against ISIL, for instance. And we believe that he has the authority to continue these operations beyond 60 days, consistent with the War Powers Resolution, because the operations are authorized by a statute. So we welcome congressional support.

We believe we have the authority that is necessary to carry this out, and we'll continue to consult with Congress about the different ways in which they can express that support. And one of them, of course, is the important train-and-equip authorization we've discussed, but there are other means for them to do that as well.

The other question was -- so, look, we believe that this will have to be a sustained effort. We have shown that we can reverse ISIL's momentum in Iraq, but squeezing the space that they're operating in, degrading their capabilities, pushing them out of their safe havens is going to take time -- particularly in Syria where we do not have a partner that is as capable as the partners that we have in Iraq. That's all the more reason that we need a coalition established.

The goal is to degrade and ultimately destroy this organization, but we're not going to put a fixed date for the accomplishment of that goal because, again, this is going to look like the type of counterterrorism campaign that we waged against different al Qaeda affiliates. So, for instance, in Yemen and Somalia, we have been able to contain the threat to the U.S. homeland, degrade those terrorist-affiliated organizations, in some instances decapitate their leadership, but we're still at it. And I think that there is a rhythm that people are accustomed to in Yemen and Somalia, where we are providing support to security forces on the ground and we are taking airstrikes as necessary.

And so we want to, above all, protect the United States homeland and our interests. We want to reverse the tide against this organization. We want to methodically degrade this threat and build up the capacity of our partners, such that it will ultimately allow for the disruption of this organization. And we will do as much of that work as we can with the time that is available to the President. We do believe that there is a national consensus around the need to deal with ISIL, and that's what we've heard from members of Congress in recent days as well.

Anything you want to add to that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just say, the emphasis I would put on my colleague's point is we've been able to do that -- the things that he mentioned -- through applying continued pressure by doing so through our own airstrike efforts but also through working with our partners on the ground, and that's the model that we're looking to apply here.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me just invoke something that both of my colleagues often say privately but they haven't said in the context of this answer, which is the approach the President is advocating here and has pursued in these other places stands in pretty stark contrast than to the approach that was pursued in the past.

We're not talking about American combat troops being introduced into the situation. We're certainly not talking about 100,000 or more combat troops being added to the ground here. And we're certainly not talking about the United States acting alone. We're talking about the United States acting as part of a broader international coalition that's being led by the President of the United States to support forces on the ground as they take the fight to ISIL and apply continued pressure to them.

Q Hi, guys. Thanks for doing the call. At the top, you mentioned that one of the key reasons for needing to act was the escalating danger that ISIS has obviously posed over the last several months, but I'm wondering if you can talk about some of the domestic and political considerations, too. To what extent do those affect the need to articulate an approach, the timing of this approach, and then the approach itself -- everything from kind of shifting public opinion to the midterms, some of the pressures from within by Hagel and Kerry? To what extent has that played into what you're announcing and the timing of your announcement? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll say a couple of things, and then my colleague may want to add here. So the timing of this announcement was driven entirely by the development of our strategy and certain events that we were actively supporting in the region. To be specific, we have always said that when the Iraqis formed an inclusive government, we would be prepared to escalate our support for them. And the types of expanded air campaign in Iraq and expanded support to their security forces on the ground are entirely consistent with that effort.

I would add that we put a lot of time and effort into supporting the Iraqis in forming that government. U.S. diplomats worked very actively with the Iraqis as they took courageous decisions to come together. So we were working that issue very aggressively.

At the same time, look, I think it's very clear with this President that he does not shoot first and ask questions later. He is going to take the time to get it right, precisely because it is important to our national security. So we were appropriately deliberate in developing intelligence and reviewing options, and consulting with European and Arab and other partners around the world to get a sense of the coalition that we could put together and get a sense of the types of targets that we could pursue in Iraq and in Syria as well.

So the timing for this President was driven by getting this right -- getting it right in terms of having an Iraqi government in place, getting it right in terms of consulting with international allies and partners so that we could be sure that they would join us in a coalition, and getting it right in terms of doing the homework within our government at developing targets and developing options to move out on. And, by the way, we're going to continue to review this going forward as we develop different military plans for actions that carry out the President's decisions that he's making tonight.

So this was not driven at all by any political consideration; it was driven by an analysis of the threat from ISIL, and the developments in the region that we were encouraging that came about. Because we believe it's a huge success that the Iraqis have this government in place. Already, we're seeing Sunni tribal leaders and political leaders expressing far greater support for cooperating with the Baghdad government in evicting these terrorists from their communities.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me just add that you will be surprised to hear me say that the President believes that these important national security questions far supersede any sort of domestic political calculation that the President makes. We would also expect that the nation's elected leaders would put the national security interests of the United States ahead of domestic political considerations. That's one reason, for example, why we are strongly encouraging Congress to give the President the necessary authority to train elements of the Syrian opposition.

Obviously, for anything to pass Congress right now, it requires bipartisan support. You have a Republican-led House and you have a Democratic-led Senate. We certainly are challenging members of Congress to put aside their partisan affiliations and give the President the authority that he needs, not because of any sort of domestic political consideration, but because the Commander-in-Chief believes that having the authority to train elements of the Syrian opposition is in the best interest of American national security.

And beyond that, we certainly would welcome any other show of support from Congress for the strategy that the President is pursuing. We believe that would send a powerful signal certainly to our enemies, but also to our allies around the world, that the United States is united in our commitment to pursuing the objective that the President has laid out to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q Thank you. Just to follow up a couple things -- you said you welcome any other expression of support for Congress. Are you talking about a non-binding resolution of some sort? And when did Obama actually sign off on this plan to do this? And finally, which countries will join the United States in launching airstrikes in this area?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, let me see if I can -- so first of all, on the last question, we are confident that there are many countries that are going to join a broader coalition through a range of actions, and that includes airstrikes; that includes training, equipping and arming Iraqi security forces and the Syrian opposition; that includes intelligence and logistical support; that includes humanitarian assistance. And already, we've seen a number of key NATO Allies commit to that effort. We believe when Secretary Kerry meets with Arab partners from around Saudi Arabia, that we've had strong expressions of support from not just the Arab League but nations like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and Jordan and our closest partners in that region.

In terms of their specific commitments, and in terms of who for instance will join in airstrikes, that's precisely the conversations that are taking place now. So Secretary Kerry will be discussing this with Arab partners tomorrow. As I said, he'll then be going to other

parts of the Middle East, into Europe, so that we are putting this together. Because, frankly, we've had a lot of commitments come into us from different countries. What we need to now do is essentially figure out how to build the strongest and most comprehensive approach going forward, because some nations can add more value in some areas where they have the capabilities, and some nations can add value in other areas.

So we essentially need to disaggregate who can join us in kinetic action like airstrikes, who can join us in training and equipping forces. And that's already taking place. We already have many countries who are providing arms and support to both the Iraqi security forces and military assistance, of course, to the Syrian opposition.

So, again, that's an effort that is ongoing. But I think there's a core group of Arab partners, a core group of European allies, then there are additional allies like Australia and Canada who have also already committed support in Iraq and are working with us to develop additional options going forward.

With respect to Congress -- again, support from Congress can come in any number of forms. That includes the authorization and the resourcing for the training and equipping of the Syrian opposition. That could include a new limited authorization for the use of military force that would specifically address the threat posed by ISIL. Although we do not believe that is necessary for the President because he has the authority to conduct these actions, that could be a form of support from Congress. That could come in any number of other types of provision of resources, resolutions and support for the actions that we are taking.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I guess I would just add one thing on the coalition question -- and I think this is important to really focus on, which is to say, in discussions with governments in the region, notably the Saudis and the Jordanians, what is clear is that we have a very common view of this threat. And this is really quite unusual.

ISIL has been I think a galvanizing threat around the Sunni partners in the region. They view it as an existential threat to them. Saudi Arabia has an extensive border with Syria. The Jordanians are experiencing a destabilizing impact of over a million refugees from the Syrian conflict, and are profoundly concerned that ISIL, who has stated that their ambitions are not confined to Iraq and Syria, but rather to expand to the broader region.

And what I also heard is that our partners in the Sunni moderate governments in the region agree on the need for a comprehensive strategy. They are quite concerned about the hundreds of foreign fighters flowing into Syria and Iraq from their own countries, and the potential for them to come back to their countries. They're concerned about the financing. And they're quite concerned about the, frankly, warped version of Islam; and in fact, it is not Islam that ISIL is promoting. And you saw statements from King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the Grand Mufti in Saudi Arabia condemning ISIL.

So what we have here is a galvanizing threat from ISIL that is I think leading our Sunni partners in the region to join us along the range of potential capabilities that my colleague mentioned.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And just to repeat what I said at the very beginning of the call, we will have -- following the NATO Summit, you've got Secretary Kerry in the region tomorrow, you've got him continuing his travels through the Middle East and Europe. And then at UNGA, in addition to the President attending the Security Council session, we expect there to be meetings led by Secretary Kerry and others devoted to Iraq. And I think you will see between now and UNGA the development of some of the concrete roles and new commitments that nations will make associated with this coalition, in addition to ones they've already made.

Let's keep in mind that we have a substantial number of countries that have already stepped up to the plate in Iraq, flying missions with us and humanitarian airdrops, and providing the Kurds and the Iraqis with arms, for instance.

And on the decision -- when did the President make the decision, I think we clearly had a sense that we were going to do more after the Iraqis formed a government. So over the course of the last several weeks, we've actually been having meetings on a fairly regular basis with the President and his national security team. Lisa Monaco has chaired meetings with the counterterrorism community in the U.S. government. We've had consultations with the Pentagon to consider what additional things we could do after a government is formed.

So this has been worked for several weeks, such that when the Iraqi government was formed, we knew we could move out with additional actions. Similarly, we wanted to get through the NATO Summit and get that initial sense of the openness from our Allies to join a coalition. It was pushing on an open door, as the President said, given the concern about foreign fighters. We've heard very similar things from our Arab partners.

So having had those two pieces done, the President made decisions to finalize what's in his speech here over the course of the last several days. But this has been a process that we've undertaken for several weeks.

Q I wanted to ask about the Syria element of this. When you were talking about airstrikes in Syria, it didn't necessarily sound like those were imminent. Can you give us a timeline on that? And do you think it's important to have the Syrian opposition forces armed and trained before you take strikes so that you're providing them cover, or do you see those as two different missions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we do not see the training-and-equip authorization as some prerequisite to strikes. We are going to take airstrikes in Syria at a time and place of our choosing. We are actively working different options that have been developed by the Pentagon.

So this is something that the President has decided to do. We will take action on the Syrian side of the border to degrade ISIL. But we're not going to telegraph our punches by being specific about the time and nature of the target.

So I would expect there to be action in Syria -- well, there will be action in Syria. We will do that as necessary, as we develop targets and as we continue what is a systematic air campaign that is not going to be restricted by a geographic border that, frankly, has very little meaning anymore, given ISIL's operations in both Iraq and Syria.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I would just say to that is, what we've experienced here and what we're seeing is ISIL is moving with impunity back and forth from Syria to Iraq, and vice versa, each time and from each place gaining arms, gaining manpower, gaining fuel, literally and figuratively, for their fight.

And so the President is determined and has decided, as my colleague said, to take action to degrade and to defeat the organization. And that has to happen. And an essential piece of that is limiting that freedom of movement, going after the safe havens -- which are plural, in this instance -- in Iraq and Syria.

Q I wanted to clarify, following up both on what your colleague said -- so when you talk about the request that you've asked in the context of the continuing resolution -- so this is for political signal? It's to signal that everyone is unified as opposed to anything else concrete? I just wanted to get clarity on that. And in terms of the training for these fighters for the Syrian opposition, it sounded like this training would take place in Saudi Arabia. Can you clarify where the training would take place, and would any of it involve, for example, having U.S. personnel in Syria training the rebels? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President is confident that he has the authority that he needs right now to order the kind of military actions that he has decided to order.

What he does not yet have the authority to do, and what he needs the authority to do right away, is to use -- under Title 10 authority, to train the Syrian opposition. And we've been working that -- and I'll let my colleague take that element of the question. But the President does not believe that he needs authority from Congress to carry out the military action that he has decided to order.

What he does, however, need Congress to do is act on his request to give him the authority to begin the effort to ramp up our assistance in the form of training-and-equipping elements of the Syrian opposition.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So to answer that quite specifically, the DOD does not have current authorization in its Title 10 authorities to train the Syrian moderate opposition. So we made the request back in June, and the President announced it in his West Point speech, for authority to provide DOD that authority so we could mount a train-and-equip program to bolster existing efforts to train and equip the Syrian moderate opposition. That request has yet to be acted on.

We then have seen the continued advance of ISIL, but most specifically we now have the commitment from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to be a full partner in this effort -- the train-and-equip program, to host that program. And I can't speak to a specific site because that is an ongoing discussion with the Kingdom and will be reviewed by our planners from CENTCOM, but we have the commitment from the Kingdom to host that site, to be a full partner in the train-and-equip program. And importantly, we've got a Sunni base and buy-in on this program and it would not involve -- let me underscore that -- not involve U.S. personnel in Syria. This would take place in Saudi Arabia.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And I know this has been tricky for folks over the last several months and years, given the different authorities under which the United States government does things, but to be very clear, some people have said, well, why are you just now beginning to provide military assistance to the Syrian opposition. We have made clear that we have been providing military assistance to the Syrian opposition for some time now -- for well over a year, dating back to the spring of 2013. However, in order for the Department of Defense to have the authority to train and equip the Syrian opposition, and in order to effectively scale up that program, we need these additional Title 10 authorities that will enable the Department of Defense to take that training program forward. And that will free up the authority of the U.S. military to undertake a training and equipping mission, and it will also free up the ability to provide resources that will scale that effort.

At West Point, the President said he wanted to dedicate \$500 million, for instance, from the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund to this effort. So this is important for both the authorities necessary and the ability to scale the program beyond the type of military assistance we've been providing to date.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me do one other element of Juliet's question, which is simply that, Juliet, which is my colleague just outlined the authority that we need. What we would welcome would be another sign, another signal from Congress, another way that Congress can show their support for the strategy that the President is implementing to confront ISIL, and that can take any variety of forms, as we've discussed previously on this call. But there is one element that my colleague just outlined that the President does require from Congress.

Q Yes, hi, Jim Acosta here. Thanks for doing the call, appreciate it. Sorry to have a problem with the mute button there. Are you confident at this point in who will be trained among the Syrian rebels, or is that vetting process still underway? And we know that U.S. advisers are on the ground in Iraq right now to aid with the calling-in of the airstrikes to help those Iraqi ground forces. Do you envision a similar effort taking place in Syria, where you would have U.S. personnel on the ground in Syria? Or is that going to take a little bit of a different shape? Thanks very much.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Jim, good questions. On the second question, no, we do not envision U.S. troops in Syria. We can develop targets through other means. We have a variety of capabilities on the intelligence side that can allow us to develop targeting options without having any personnel on the ground. Even in Iraq, for

instance, while, yes, our personnel at the joint operation centers are valuable and working hand-in-glove with Iraqi and Kurdish forces, we have significant intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets that help us develop targets in Iraq.

With respect to your other question -- and if my colleague wants to add here -- look, one of the reasons why the President was deliberate in taking the initial decision to provide military assistance to the opposition in Syria is precisely because he wanted to make sure that they were vetted, that we knew who we were dealing with, that there were effective pipelines for getting that assistance into the country. And, frankly, part of the reason why we didn't rush to provide arms into Syria is because we didn't want them to fall into the hands of people like ISIL. So it was the right thing to do to be deliberate to develop those relationships, to vet the opposition. But now we have a two-year track record of relationships with the Syrian opposition. We have far greater confidence in who we're dealing with than we would have at the beginning of the Syrian revolution.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just add on the vetting piece -- that obviously will be a critical part of the train and equip program that we're seeking the authority for DOD to move out on. But the important piece of this is that with the partnership of Sunni governments in the region who have the in-roads in, and the knowledge of, and the connections to the moderate opposition forces, the Sunni tribes in the area, we will be greatly aided in our ability to identify individuals to be vetted and to be trained, and we'll be greatly aided in our ability to gather intelligence to support our overall goal to degrade and destroy ISIL.

Q Hi, thanks very much. I wanted to ask about the comparison to Yemen and Somalia. It seems as though -- obviously there is a much better coalition, there is a bigger political effort, bigger diplomatic effort here, as well as the military component, and I'm wondering if you would sort of argue that obviously that the contours of this are much broader and bigger than anything the President has undertaken before.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, well, look, there are similarities and differences, Kathleen. First of all, in Yemen, it is multifaceted. I would note that in Yemen we do take airstrikes and direct action against AQAP targets and we do train Yemeni security forces and have advisers who are helping to carry out that mission.

At the same time, though, we have a significant political effort. We've supported the Yemeni government as they've undertaken a national dialogue, we've worked with the Saudis and the GCC to facilitate political transitioning in Yemen. We've provided an enormous amount of humanitarian assistance in the country. So there is a multifaceted effort there as well. Same is true in Somalia.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think my colleague is exactly right. And Lisa Monaco was in Yemen over the weekend providing and meeting with President Hadi on exactly this issue -- our continued assistance and support for President Hadi, for the people of Yemen in securing and implementing their political transition. So our counterterrorism efforts against AQAP in Yemen take all the forms that my colleague said

and it has allowed us to place continued pressure on AQAP to disrupt attacks on the homeland and to work to put President Hadi and the Yemeni people on a sustainable path to implement the political transition that he has put in place there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And coalitions in both countries -- the GCC has been instrumental in Yemen. AMISOM is made up of several countries, including African peacekeepers on the ground in Somalia. However, the difference is also there in that this is a threat that crosses a border in Iraq and Syria. The scale of ISIL's territorial advances has been quite substantial and goes beyond the territory held by AQAP. But on the one hand, AQAP has shown more sophisticated and dedicated homeland plotting against the United States, so that's a different type of threat. On the other hand, ISIL has shown its ability to be a fighting force that can win territory on the ground. So there are differences.

I think the similarities we're highlighting is the United States is using unique capabilities, including direct action from the air, and training and equipping security forces on the ground, rather than having the types of ground forces and occupation forces, candidly, that we've had in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just add one more piece on the distinction in the threat here. As my colleague points out and is known to this group, AQAP has been a consistent and determined terrorist threat in its ability to mount and try and perpetrate attacks on the homeland. We do not yet have credible information about ISIL's plot for the homeland, but the distinction here is the number of foreign fighters who have been able to flow into and become attracted to extremists in Syria and Iraq, including ISIL, is unprecedented. And that foreign fighter flow and presence and freedom of movement is what poses the threat to the homeland, and the President has taken decisive action to address the threat to our personnel in Iraq and is taking decisive action and will in taking this fight to ISIL to defeat the organization.

MS. HAYDEN: So we have time for one more question. And before people jump off the line at the end of that, I would just remind everyone that this call is on background. These are senior administration officials and it's embargoed until the President speaks this evening around 9:00 p.m. So with that, we'll take the final question.

Q Hey, guys, it's Olivier, thanks a lot. I guess I don't understand what "destroy ISIL" means. What are your criteria, specific criteria for success here? How will you know when the American campaign or American-led campaign has been a success? That's my first one. And then the second one is the President talked last year about getting the country off a war-footing, rewriting or scrapping the AUMF from 2001 entirely. How does this open-ended campaign affect those projects? Are those projects now things that have to be pushed off to his successor?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Olivier. On your first question, this is not dissimilar from the type of approach we've taken with al Qaeda where our goal is to disrupt, dismantle and defeat the organization. With al Qaeda, what we've managed to do with core al Qaeda is decimate its leadership ranks and significantly degrade that threat.

There are remnants of al Qaeda that exist in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but clearly we have methodically and relentlessly degraded that threat, and have core al Qaeda on a pathway to defeat. And what we mean here with ISIL is our ultimate objective is to destroy the organization so that ISIL does not exist as a threat anymore. That is going to take time, that this is a deeply entrenched group, this is AQI; they've been in Iraq since after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. However, what we can do is systematically roll back the organization, shrink the territory where they're operation, decimate its ranks, cut off its sources of support in terms of funding and equipment, and have the threat methodically and relentlessly reduced going forward.

In order to destroy the organization, we have to set the conditions that would involve Iraqi security forces and Syrian forces on the ground who are able to reclaim this territory that has been held by ISIL. And that's why it's a long-term proposition because we can roll back the organization and do great damage through this type of systematic campaign, but we essentially have to set the conditions on the ground for indigenous forces to reclaim this territory.

Candidly, in Iraq, you can see a pathway whereby Iraqi security forces, Sunni tribes work to evict these terrorists with the support of partner countries in the region as well as the United States and others. And Syria -- it's going to be a more difficult challenge because they're not as capable a partner. That's why we need to increase this training and equipping of the Syrian opposition.

So success for us is working to methodically dismantle this organization to prevent attacks as best we can from ISIL, particularly any plotting against U.S. interests or the homeland, and to set the conditions in place so that this group is destroyed in the long run. That's going to have to be done by partners on the ground.

On your second question, no -- look, first of all, let's step back here and remember that when President Obama took office there were nearly 180,000 Americans serving in harm's way. There were over 140,000 in Iraq, over 30,000 in Afghanistan. There are currently 30,000 Americans in Afghanistan, the number is coming down, and our combat mission will end at the end of the year. The clearest manifestation of America being on a war-footing is having tens and tens and tens of thousands of troops at war. And we have brought troops home. And at the end of the year when our combat mission is over in Afghanistan, presuming we get a BSA, we'll have roughly 10,000 troops there. Even with the advisers we put into Iraq, we're in the neighborhood of 1,000 troops there. That is a shadow of what we had when we took office when there were nearly 180,000 troops in harm's way.

Thankfully, we do not have the type of tragic losses that we used to see every month in Iraq and Afghanistan when we were losing so many American servicemembers even though we of course continue to have tragic losses in Afghanistan and there's always risk associated with military action.

So first and foremost, we have to bear in mind the difference here when we're talking about removing these large American forces from the ground and dealing with counterterrorism from the air. And, frankly, this is entirely consistent with what he said at NDU, which is that this threat is evolving, and if the threat evolves we will use comprehensive counterterrorism strategy to get at it through targeted action, through airstrikes, through support for partner forces on the ground, through support for more inclusive political outcomes in these countries, through humanitarian assistance and economic development support.

All of that was in the NDU speech, all of that was in the West Point speech, and that's a different approach than the war in Iraq or the war in Afghanistan.

In terms of the legal authorities, it does present questions -- and I think the questions raised at NDU are relevant to this -- which is how will we work with Congress in the long run to tailor authorities as necessary to deal with the variety of terrorist threats. ISIL isn't the first threat we've deal with, it's not going to be the last one. We have the authority to take action to protect the United States and our interests, given the threat that ISIL poses but we will have a continued dialogue with the Congress about this question because we do believe that we need, as terrorism shifts -- and we're not talking about the organization that attacked us on 9/11 anymore as the principal threat but we're talking about some of these affiliates that have broken off or some organizations that have evolved into something different, as in the case of ISIL or some of these more localized threats in North Africa. It's going to take different tools to deal with them. That's what the President was talking about at NDU and that is something that we're going to have to resolve certainly over the course of the next two years. Do you want to add anything?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, just that as the President said at NDU and again at West Point, we need to be nimble enough to make sure that we have the tools necessary to fight the terrorist groups that evolve and turn their attention from being locally focused and regionally focused, and turn their attention to the homeland. And that's I think what you see the President committed to doing and acting on with his announcement tonight.

MS. HAYDEN: Great, thank you, everyone, for joining us. Have a great night.

END

6:48 P.M. EDT