North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Remarks

at the joint press point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
2019-10-18

Good evening Secretary Pompeo, Dear Mike, welcome back to NATO Headquarters and thank you so much for coming here just hours after your trip to Turkey. And thank you for briefing the North Atlantic Council.

We discussed the situation in northeast Syria and the joint statement.

And I welcome that two NATO Allies, the United States and Turkey have agreed on a way forward.

We all know and understand that the situation in northeast Syria is fragile, difficult, but I believe that this statement can help to de-escalate the situation and therefore help to improve the situation on the ground.

NATO is an important forum for all NATO Allies to sit together and address common security concerns and the situation in northeast Syria is a concern for all NATO Allies, and it matters for all NATO Allies.

I visited Turkey on Friday and I stated that Turkey is on the frontline, forefront of a volatile region. No other Ally suffered more terrorist attacks, they host millions of refugees and Turkey has legitimate security concerns. At the same time, I stated my deep concern for the danger of escalating the situation, for more human suffering, and also for increased migrant and refugee flows.

We all understand that we have a common enemy, Da’esh. We have made enormous progress in the Global Coalition, all NATO Allies and NATO are part of the Coalition to defeat Da’esh. And we must not jeopardize the gains we have made in the fight against our common enemy, Da’esh.

We will address this issue when the NATO Defence Ministers meet later on next week. And this just shows how timely and important the briefing, the discussion we had this evening.

Therefore once again, thank you, Mike, for coming and meeting the North Atlantic Council.

Mike Pompeo [US Secretary of State]: Jens, thank you. And thanks for joining me on a Friday night. I know this is exactly what everyone expected to do on a Friday night in Brussels. It was important, however, that I come by here.

Our NATO Allies and partners are an important part of America's national security. And I wanted to come talk to them about the conversation that's taken place and the statement that was jointly agreed to by the United States and our NATO Ally, Turkey, yesterday. I wanted to talk to them about what we accomplished, the things that still remain. You talked about the continued challenge to counter ISIS in the region. All the things that still need to be done. We still have a political resolution in Syria under UN Security Council resolution 2254, that we jointly need to work towards a resolution.

It was also important me to be here, you are a great leader of this organisation, and it was important for me to stop, as I headed out of the region, to make sure that our NATO friends and NATO leadership understood what the United States had accomplished, the things that we had achieved, and the path forward to limit the risk associated with the incursion into Syria and to make sure that we can still deliver on all the missions.

We also had NATO partners that were on the ground with us there in Syria, who were working alongside us. It was important for me to get a chance to talk to them, to thank them for what they had accomplished along the way as well. So that was, that was the mission, the reason I'm here, and I thank you for hosting me here this evening.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: We have time for just two questions. Jennifer Hansler, from CNN.

Jennifer Hansler [CNN]: Hi, thank you. Secretary Pompeo, President Trump earlier today in remarks about Syria said that the US has taken control of all the oil, quote, 'that everybody was worried about.' Can you explain where this oil is, how the US is controlling it, especially if troops withdraw? And then, is this . . . does this raise concerns about Syria's territorial integrity? And then to both of you: what is the understanding of when the ceasefire actually went into effect? And do you believe that it has been violated?

Mike Pompeo: So let me take, let me take those two questions, then Sec Gen Stoltenberg can . . . can answer to the extent he, he wants to. Look, the ceasefire time period, the pause commenced when we issued the statement yesterday evening. So we're now some, I don't know, 24 hours into this. We're very hopeful that we will continue to be able to implement and execute that. We . . . there was some activity today, but we also saw some very positive activity, the beginnings of the coordination that will be required. The reason this couldn't happen instantaneously, is there was a great deal of coordination that had to take place, so that there can, in fact, be a safe withdrawal of the YPG fighters that are inside of the Turkish-controlled area that is covered by the agreement. And we're hopeful, in the hours ahead, that both, both the Turks who were part of the agreement alongside of us, as well as the . . . the YPG fighters in the region, will take seriously the commitments that they made and that we will actually achieve, within the next now 96 hours, the commitments that were laid out in Paragraphs 1 through 13 of the agreement.

I didn't see the President's statements today that you suggested. I know this: we are driven by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 to make sure that we get the outcomes that the United States and frankly, most of the member nations at the UN have agreed. It's the right outcome to get the proper political resolution in broader Syria, not just in the northeast, but more broadly.

You have to remember, prior to this administration taking office, over half a million people were killed in Syria, millions and millions of people displaced. All of this before President Trump took office. We see the burden that that's placed on our NATO Ally, Turkey, with now some two or three or four million displaced persons inside of Turkey. That's an enormous burden. Europe needs to provide us to seriously consider how to respond to this, this threat . . . this challenge that's presented by migration. We are hopeful that what Vice President Pence achieved yesterday will be the beginning of leading to the resolution of all these greater challenges that are presented throughout Syria and, more broadly, the instability this creates throughout the Middle East.

Jens Stoltenberg: I'll just state that the situation in the northeast Syria remains fragile. But it is important that two NATO Allies, the United States and Turkey, who have been on the ground for a long time, have agreed a statement, made an agreement, on the way forward. That is important because it can provide a basis for progress and for deescalating the situation. And that's exactly why I also welcome the fact that those two Allies have agreed and also the fact that Secretary Pompeo spent some time here with all the NATO Allies, discussing the way forward in northeast Syria.

And NATO plays an important role, both as part of the global coalition to defeat Daesh, but also being a forum, also, to discuss difficult issues, also when there are different views within the Alliance, and that's exactly what we do when it comes to the situation in northern Syria.

Oana Lungescu: Dan Michaels, Wall Street Journal.

Dan Michaels [Wall Street Journal]: Secretary, President Trump today spoke about countries taking back foreign fighters. Can you say specifically which countries are taking back, and is the US doing anything to facilitate that? And also, since October 6 and the Administration's discussions with Syria . . . with Turkey, how do you feel? Was enough done to prevent the violence in the first place? Thank you.

Mike Pompeo: The United States has been working for months on a safe zone mechanism inside of northern Syria. We've committed real resources so had some of our NATO Allies, they were working alongside us on this. I know that in the moment, the moment when President Erdoğan called President Trump, President Trump made very clear that this was unacceptable, that we were opposed to their incursion, their cross-border activity. So I think, I think we made very clear the United States' position: that we oppose this Turkish incursion into northern Syria. We didn't think this was the right approach that would yield the very results. We were, we are cognisant – indeed, we said in yesterday's statement – that Turkey

has valid security concerns along that border, but we didn't think this was the right way to approach it and we took seriously America's capacity to try and stop that incursion.

Your first question was about foreign terrorist fighters. We've seen comments today from a number of countries who've said they may well be prepared to take back these fighters. I have to say, I'm happy about that. I am disappointed that it didn't occur previously. I personally have had this as one of my missions for an extended period of time. We have known this risk. Ten thousand foreign terrorist fighters, many times that detained persons, women and children in camps, both in Iraq and in north eastern Syria that have been detained. These are mostly ISIS fighters and their families and those around them. Their release presents a real risk to the world. And we have asked every country that has their citizens to take them back to their host country. We have had some success, but very little from European countries who were prepared to do that. I hope that they will be now. The risk remains that these camps won't continue forever. And I hope that they will take seriously what we view as their obligation to take these people back to their countries. And to the extent these are people who have violated the law, that they be prosecuted to the full extent of the law in their host country.

[inaudible; Dan Michael, off-mic]

Mike Pompeo: Yeah. I don't want to get into details, we're hopeful that every country that has persons detained in these camps will accept those back into their country, not just European countries. There are many, many countries around the world who have had people leave their country and go to fight alongside ISIS in their campaign in Syria.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. This concludes this press point.

Mike Pompeo: Great, thank you all.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you for joining us at this late hour.

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