

Briefing with Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS John Godfrey on U.S. Participation in the Upcoming D-ISIS Ministerial

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MR PRICE: Good afternoon, everyone. I apologize we're running a couple minutes late here but thank you for joining us as we discuss tomorrow's virtual meeting of the foreign ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group. The meeting, as you know, will be co-hosted by Secretary Blinken and his Belgian counterpart, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmes.

To help explain the current state of the D-ISIS campaign and our continuing efforts to sustain pressure on ISIS remnants in Iraq and Syria and to counter ISIS networks elsewhere, including in Africa, we have joining us today Acting U.S. Special Envoy for the Global Coalition John Godfrey. As a reminder, this is an on-the-record press preview call, but the contents of this call are embargoed until the conclusion of the call.

And with that, I will turn it over to Special Envoy Godfrey.

MR GODFREY: Thanks very much, Ned, and good afternoon to everyone. Thanks very much for joining the call today. Happy to have a chance to chat. It's good to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with all of you and provide a preview of tomorrow's ministerial meeting. I just have a few opening remarks at the top and then we'll dive straight into Q&A.

As Ned indicated, tomorrow's ministerial will be attended by the foreign ministers of the D-ISIS Coalition Small Group. I'm very pleased to say that we anticipate high-level participation by coalition members reflecting the coalition's continued momentum as we seek to address the continuing ISIS threat. And as Ned noted, we're very pleased to announce that Secretary Blinken will co-host tomorrow's meeting together with his Belgian counterpart, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmes.

The agenda will largely focus on the coalition's continuing efforts in the so-called core of Iraq and Syria, which of course include our military line of effort but also encompass lines of effort related to stabilization, foreign terrorist fighters, counter-ISIS financing, and counter-messaging efforts. And in that regard, we will be discussing tomorrow's stabilization funding goals for 2021 for Iraq and Syria. In addition, we'll be spending some time discussing the growing threat of ISIS outside of Iraq and Syria, particularly in Africa, and the ways in which the coalition can contribute to collective efforts to ensure ISIS's enduring defeat globally.

I think as you all know, since the defeat of ISIS's fraudulent territorial caliphate in 2019, ISIS has intensified its focus on the activities of its branches and networks. That's perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the events that occurred just this past weekend in

the town of Palma in the Cabo Delgado Province of northern Mozambique. The situation there is still unfolding, but the U.S. Government is closely monitoring events on the ground, and the attacks there are horrific, frankly, and show a complete disregard for the life, welfare, and security of the local population.

Attacks such as these are clear indicators that ISIS continues to actively seek to spread its malign activity to new fronts. Ensuring the enduring global defeat of ISIS will entail effectively countering ISIS branches and networks outside of Iraq and Syria, and we as a coalition recognize that.

Turning briefly back to the core, let me start by saying that the D-ISIS campaign across Iraq and Syria has been a major success to date. Although ISIS remains a threat, the group's capabilities have been significantly degraded. The evidence supporting that claim is clear. Millions of Iraqi and Syrian civilians have been able to return to their homes. Public infrastructure and basic services have been restored. And we continue to further strengthen partnerships with the increasingly capable local security partners with whom we work to prevent a resurgence of ISIS.

To be clear, ISIS remains capable of carrying out smaller-scale deadly operations in both rural and urban areas and remains intent on doing so to demonstrate that it constitutes a continuing threat. In Iraq, the recent series of attacks are just the latest reminder that ISIS does indeed remain a threat, one that can still metastasize if left unchecked. That being said, Iraqi Security Forces have become increasingly capable in their efforts to counter ISIS operations. The coalition continues to work with ISF in an advisory capacity and the United States maintains a small number of U.S. troops to carry out a limited mission focused on advising and assisting.

In addition, we appreciate and support the expanded role for the NATO mission in Iraq now under the leadership of our Danish colleagues, whom I would also note recently opened their new embassy in Baghdad. We look forward to continued collaboration to support NMI's anticipated expansion in coordination with CJTF-OIR.

In Syria, our partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces remains strong. We continue to support them in the coalition's fight against ISIS and the SDF continues to do great work in maintaining pressure against ISIS in the northeast part of the country. We continue to closely monitor ISIS activity throughout the country and assess that ISIS has continued its efforts to regroup and carry out attacks in non-SDF-controlled areas – particularly, as one example, in the Badia desert.

And while on the topic of Syria, I'd just briefly note the detention centers and humanitarian camps are a growing issue. Two years after ISIS's territorial defeat, the SDF continue to secure about 10,000 ISIS fighters, including some 2,000 foreign terrorist fighters – that is non-Syrian, non-Iraqi – in makeshift facilities. As these detainees await repatriation and prosecution in their home countries, our local partners need to support – need support to help ensure humane and secure detention conditions.

At the al-Hol IDP camp, the United States is aware of the recent killings and other security threats within the camp. They reflect a persistent threat from ISIS and its criminal affiliates to innocent civilians in al-Hol, which places an increased burden on our local partners to maintain security within the camp.

This is an international problem that requires an international solution. There are more than 60,000 individuals in al-Hol, from dozens of nationalities, the vast majority of whom are children. We urge the international community to consider how they might support both humanitarian agencies who are providing to those populations now, as well as consider the repatriation of their own citizens in order to help relieve the burden on our local partners.

In the interest of time, I'll end my remarks so that we can get into the Q&A, but let me close by saying that tomorrow's virtual meeting is emblematic of the coalition's unwavering commitment to ensure ISIS's lasting defeat. We by no means minimize the challenges we continue to face in defeating ISIS's global network, and the D-ISIS Coalition remains critically important to our efforts and united in its determination to see this enemy destroyed.

And the last point I would note here is that the United States remains fully committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS, which is critical to U.S. national security and that of its partners and allies.

And with that, happy to tackle the questions you might have.

MR PRICE: Great. Operator, would you like to give the instructions for indicating you have a question?

OPERATOR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press 1 then 0. If you're using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, to ask a question, it's 1 then 0. Once your name has been called, please wait until I have said your line is open before speaking. You may go ahead.

MR PRICE: Great. We'll start with the line of Ellen Knickmeyer from the Associated Press.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, Ned, thank you. And thank you for doing this. I wanted to ask about ISIS in Syria. Do we consider or do you consider ISIS in Syria still a major security threat to the U.S., or is it no longer a major security threat? And if it's not, is it of the – a problem of a size that the U.S. can trust other countries with their presence there, other forces to take care of, to manage?

MR GODFREY: Thanks, Ellen. So we do assess that ISIS does continue to constitute a significant security threat, both to local partners in Syria as well as more broadly to the region, particularly across the border into Iraq, and even beyond that, ranging further afield to Europe and potentially to North America. One of the reasons for that is that

there continues to be a cadre of capable ISIS actors in Syria who have experience with plotting attacks further afield, and who we assess retain aspirations to continue doing that. And they've demonstrated some connectivity to actors further afield that we're very closely focused on, but argues I think for a sustained pressure – counterterrorism pressure, that is – against those elements, working in partnership with the local partners on the ground.

MR PRICE: We'll go to the line of Jennifer Hansler of CNN.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. I was wondering if you could give us an assessment of whether the U.S. feels the SDF is still able to secure the ISIS prisoners that it has in its camp. And then do you have an update on how many SDF the U.S. has repatriated and how many Americans might still be held in camps abroad? Thank you.

MR GODFREY: Thanks, Jennifer. In terms of the assessment of SDF capabilities, we do assess that the SDF remains capable of maintaining positive control of the foreign terrorist fighters who are held in the network of detention facilities in northeast Iraq. And in addition to that, the SDF I think has also demonstrated an ability to really carry a disproportionate share of the burden with respect to the internally displaced persons camps that also fall in that geographic space. That is not to say that they don't continue to need significant assistance from the international community in the form of principally resources to help enable them to do that, but I think in terms of actual management of those facilities on the ground, they've shown themselves to be quite capable.

In terms of the update on foreign terrorist fighters, the United States to date has repatriated 28 citizens from northeast Syria. That is a figure that encompasses – just one second and I'll get it for you – 12 adults and 16 children. And of the 12 adults, 10 have been or are being prosecuted.

MR PRICE: Let's go to the line of Daphne Psaledakis of Reuters.

QUESTION: Hi.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks so much for doing this. I wanted to ask about Mozambique and the attack in Palma. Could you give your take on the event and how many insurgents took part, where they came from? And additionally, how does this attack compare to others in Mozambique, and what is your view on the Islamic State's claim?

MR GODFREY: Thanks, Daphne. I think that – to your first – the first part of your question about our take on events, I would stress that this really unfolded late last week and quite quickly. There's been quite a lot of conflicting reporting about exactly what the situation is on the ground, including initially who might have actually been the perpetrators of the attacks, and then more broadly about the extent of the attacks and the range.

I think that in general it comports with what we've seen from ISIS-Mozambique in a couple of important and disturbing ways. One, just the sheer brutality of the events on the ground there. The horrific killings of civilians is something that we've seen elsewhere in attacks. And the second is the sort of increased brazenness of ISIS-Mozambique, and that's principally reflected in the fact that they've gone from conducting sort of hit-and-run raids, which is really what characterized their initial activities in 2017 and '18 when they were emerging onto the scene, and now are seeking to take and hold at least for some initial period of time some of the towns that they've conducted these attacks against. And I'm thinking here also of late last year when we had Mocimboa da Praia, which was also occupied briefly by ISIS elements.

So I think in that regard it's consistent with what we've seen in terms of the trend line in Mozambique.

MR PRICE: Let's go to the line of Pearl Matibe.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you, Coordinator Godfrey, for taking and for being available today. Just an additional question regarding Mozambique. I notice on your State Department website Mozambique is still not added to the PREACT, the Partnership for Regional East African Counterterrorism. I was of the – I had thought, that maybe the U.S. had already added Mozambique.

And so as you go into this meeting tomorrow, can you share a little bit about where you see that playing out? I know that President (inaudible) from Mozambique is traveling to Zimbabwe day after tomorrow, as well to – in Zambia to meet with Edgar Lungu from the Troika. Will the Troika – how does that play in, in terms of the security? Are you seeing some alliances, or have you got any part in that?

And were any Americans part of the injured or victims at all in what happened in northern Mozambique? Thanks.

MR GODFREY: Thanks, Pearl. Let me maybe take those questions in reverse order. To the issue of any American citizens who were either injured or involved, we were aware of one American citizen who was on the ground in Palma, and that individual, as we understand it, has successfully been evacuated. Obviously, the security and safety of American citizens abroad is one of the absolute highest priorities for the Department of State in any sort of situation like this.

To your question about regional discussions, we are aware of discussions between the Government of Mozambique and its neighbors. We have also been in communication with some of those same neighbors ourselves. There's obviously quite a lot of concern about the potential for the situation in Cabo Delgado to spread further. And in particular, I think since last October when we saw cross-border attacks from Cabo Delgado into Tanzania. That threat became not just an academic but a very real one, and so that's something that is the subject of quite a lot of discussion out in the region.

I will confess on the issue of PREACT I am not certain. And if I could take that question, we will endeavor to get a good answer back to you on that.

MR PRICE: We'll go to Nadia Bilbassy.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you so much for doing this. I want to follow up on al-Hol camp. I know that you alluded to it in your opening remarks. One of our reporters actually was recently in that camp, and she was faced with a very concerned reaction, a reaction from the children who have been indoctrinated of ISIS ideology. And as you mentioned, they are in the thousands. So some say that these kids actually are a time bomb unless something is done urgently. Now, you're saying that some have been repatriated, but I'm just wondering in terms of priority, where is – you put in this with your – tomorrow in the Secretary's talk with the Europeans, in particular especially the – many of them actually came from European countries. Thank you.

MR GODFREY: Thanks very much, Nadia, for the question. I would say unfortunately that the experience of your colleague is consistent with that of humanitarian workers and others who are regularly in al-Hol and Roj and the other IDP camps in northeast Syria. And indeed, I think the fact that you have such a large number of children – it's in the tens of thousands – who have been exposed to fairly horrific conditions for a period in some cases of several or more years is something that we and other international partners are quite concerned about.

You put your finger squarely on I think one of the most troubling and potentially dangerous aspects of this, which is that a number of those children either have claims to or already have European citizenship. And so there is the concern that down the road they could end up being able to go to other places and potentially do bad things. That's precisely why, to address the last part of your question, we have been engaged for several years now in urging countries of origin, including European partners, to repatriate and rehabilitate and, where it's appropriate and feasible, to prosecute both foreign terrorist fighters but also, critically, their associated family members.

And just to give you a sense of scale in terms of the non-Syrian and non-Iraqi number of individuals in northeast Syria, the number of foreign terrorist fighters who are non-Syrian and non-Iraqi is about 2,000, and the number of associated family members is about – that is family members associated with that cohort of 2,000 – is about 10,000 individuals. So we're talking about a fairly large scale here, and then on top of that you've got about 30,000 Iraqis that we are working with the Government of Iraq and others to try to get moved back to Iraq as expeditiously and responsibly as we can.

MR PRICE: We have time for a final question or two. Let's go to the line of Muath Alamri.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. My question is about – I was going to ask about al-Hol camp, but it has been asked, so I'm going to ask about the area under Assad and Russia's control. There is a lack of security. There is a lack – there is a chance for ISIS to revive again. Do you have any plan to discuss this tomorrow?

MR GODFREY: Thank you very much. I think we would share the assessment that the areas that are under the control of the Syrian regime and the – Russia have shown that the extent of that control is not as great as those parties represent it to be, and frankly are somewhat problematic. And we're concerned about the potential for resurgence there, so we would share that concern.

MR PRICE: Let's take a final question from Laurie Mylroie.

OPERATOR: Your line is open. Please, go ahead. Maybe you're on mute? Your line is open, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi, sorry, I was on mute. Could you describe the security situation in Iraq in the disputed territories between Erbil and Baghdad? Is there a problem with ISIS there?

MR GODFREY: Thanks, Laurie. There is concern that ISIS, which has historically demonstrated an ability to identify areas where it's difficult for governments to project security and governance, have focused on that so-called seam between the two geographic areas in Iraq that you mentioned. There's been a concerted effort by OIR, and frankly more particularly by the Iraqi Security Forces, to address that threat in that geographic space, and there's been some good result lately that I think has really significantly attrited ISIS's capabilities in that sector. I don't want to overspeak here for DOD counterparts, but it is something that we – and that is, coalition partners and Iraqi Security Forces – are very intently focused on.

MR PRICE: Well, thank you very much, Special Envoy Godfrey. Thank you very much to all of you for joining. As I mentioned, this call was on the record and the embargo is now lifted. And we'll plan to talk to you all very soon. Thanks, everyone.