

# Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes en route New York, NY, 9/23/2014

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The White House

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Aboard Air Force One  
En Route New York, New York

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MR. EARNEST: Good morning, everybody. Welcome aboard Air Force One as we make our way to New York City where the President will spend the next three days or so participating in the meetings at the U.N. General Assembly.

There's one piece of news that I want to get out of the way and then we'll open it up to your questions. Obviously, I'm joined here by the Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes. He can talk to you about some of the activities from overnight that all of you and your organizations have already reported on. The one piece of news is that this afternoon in New York, the President will drop by a meeting that's been convened by the Secretary of State that will include representatives of the nations who partnered with the United States in the operation in Syria last night.

So you all saw, there were five partners from Arab nations who participated in the operation. They're represented at the UN and they will be participating in this meeting the President will drop by. There will be an opportunity for you all to see the President's interaction this afternoon.

Q What time is that?

MR. EARNEST: It's late this afternoon at the Waldorf. I think the timing is around 4:00 p.m.

Q Is he going to take questions?

MR. EARNEST: I don't anticipate that he'll take questions in that context.

So with that piece of news out of the way, we'll open it up to your questions.

Q What was the imminent threat that prompted the bombings? Was it Khorasan?

MR. RHODES: So the Khorasan Group is a group of extremists that is comprised of a number of individuals who we've been tracking for a long time. It includes some former al Qaeda operatives, core al Qaeda operatives from Afghanistan and Pakistan who made their way to Syria, remain in our view affiliated with al Qaeda. And we have been monitoring over the course of many months the development of plotting against the United States or Western targets emanating from Syria.

So for some time now we've been tracking plots to conduct attacks in the United States or Europe. We believe that that attack plotting was imminent and that they had plans to conduct attacks external to Syria. And we also believe, of course, that the Syrian regime was not able to take action against that threat. So, in addition to the strikes against ISIL, we took action against the Khorasan Group to disrupt that plotting against the United States and Western targets.

Q How imminent, and where were they going to strike?

MR. RHODES: I'm not going to get into the specific details of plotting other than to say that we saw that they had very clear and concrete ambitions to launch external operations against the United States or Europe. And so this was actual plotting that was ongoing from Syria, and the strike that we took last night was aimed to disrupt that plotting.

Q And this morning was the first time that we heard the President discuss this group or this threat and it was not part of the pitch he made to the American public asking for their support in these strikes in Syria. So doesn't this mark a significant expansion of the military campaign that we're carrying out there?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think when the President gave his speech to the nation about his strategy against the threat from ISIL, he made clear that he'd be taking strikes in both Iraq and Syria --

Q ISIL, but not against --

MR. RHODES: Well, okay, so we see this very much as an extension of the threat posed by al Qaeda and their associated forces. These are individuals who have their origin, their history serving in al Qaeda. They're known to people who've been following this threat for years. They were in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So this, frankly, is a part of the ongoing effort against al Qaeda in which you've seen us take strikes in Yemen; you've seen us take strikes in Somalia. When there's an al Qaeda target we're going to take action against it.

What's unique about Syria is that the Assad regime was certainly unable to take action against this organization, the Khorasan Group, so therefore we felt the need to take action in our own defense.

MR. EARNEST: I'll just add that this is entirely consistent with the principle that the President did lay out in the address that Ben obviously worked on a lot, a core principle of this President's foreign policy that we're going to actively deny a safe haven to individuals

or organizations that seek to establish a safe haven and use that safe haven to plot attacks against the U.S. homeland. So these strikes last night are entirely consistent with that core principle of this presidency.

MR. RHODES: And, similarly, consistent with the 2001 AUMF, which is the basis under which we take action against al Qaeda and associated forces.

Q Can you talk about coordination or notification there was to the Syrian government regarding what the U.S. and the other countries did last night?

Q Because Jen has made it clear from State that there was sort of a vague, open-ended notice.

MR. RHODES: First of all, the President obviously declared publicly our intention to take military action in Syria. Subsequent to that, there was a direct contact to the Syrian regime to notify them of the fact that we would take direct action. That was undertaken at the United Nations by Samantha Power to the Syrian Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

I want to be very clear, though, that we did not coordinate with them, we did not provide them advance notice of the timing or of targets that the U.S. was going to strike. In fact, we warned them to not pose a threat to our aircraft. And again, going forward, there is no plan to have any coordination whatsoever with the Assad regime. Again, this was simply consistent with what the President had said -- a notification that we would be taking this action; frankly, a warning to not pose a risk to our aircraft. And it was in no way an effort to coordinate or provide specific information about the types of targets or timing of targets that we would hit.

Q Did the Syrians give you a green light to do it?

MR. RHODES: I'm not going to characterize the Syrian response in a private diplomatic communication. Obviously, we have significant differences with the Syrian regime. We had been able to communicate with them on issues over the course of the last several years, for instance, when we needed to send a message about our concerns about chemical weapons. But it's obviously rare that we have that contact. This was simply a matter of notifying them that we'd be taking this action.

Q When did that take place?

MR. RHODES: I'm not going to provide a specific time. Obviously, it took place in recent days.

Q I was wondering about the Arab partners that participated last night, which you all announced the President is going to stop by a meeting. Is that going to be the partnership we're going to see continuously through Syria? Could that change? Could you add partners? Will that be sort of decided on per mission, or per week or per day?

MR. RHODES: I think you will continue to see this coalition work together in Syria. And again, we were joined by five Arab partners who flew with us last night. A number of those countries took strikes with us last night. The Pentagon can give you the specifics of those roles.

I think going forward, we're looking to build this coalition. So insofar as it will change, we will grow a coalition of nations to take different actions. Some nations will take strikes in Syria; some nations will take strikes in Iraq. Some nations will participate in training and equipping of Iraqis, training and equipping of Syrians. Some nations will help us in counter financing, stopping the flow of foreign fighters.

So again, this is the beginning, but part of what the President is going to be doing at the United Nations is consulting with allies and partners about additional contributions that can be made in both Iraq and Syria.

Q What was the significance of the timing of the strikes -- last night, right before he goes to the UN?

MR. RHODES: We did not time this related to the UN meetings. This was based on the development of the strike campaign plan by the Pentagon and by the coalition that we built. So we wanted to make sure that we had good targets. We wanted to make sure that we had a coalition in place so that we were acting together with partners, particularly Arab partners. And I think it's very significant that -- it's very unique that you have five Arab countries flying with us, taking direct military action in the Middle East on behalf of our common security. That's a powerful message.

And the other thing I'd just say for timing purposes, the President was briefed on the plan that had been developed when he was at CENTCOM by General Austin and other military leadership. And the following day is when he gave the authorization to move forward with those strikes. And at that point, it shifted to the discretion of the commander, General Austin, as well as the coalition-building exercise which was still coming together.

Q Given all the stuff that's gone on in the last 12 hours or so, can you talk a little bit about his speech to the General Assembly tomorrow?

MR. RHODES: Yes, I think it's a very important moment for the President to put everything that we're doing in the context of U.S. leadership in the world. We are leading a coalition of countries against ISIL. We are leading an effort to combat the outbreak of Ebola. We are leading an effort to impose costs on Russia and to support the Ukrainian people.

So there are many different issues at play in the world today. We believe that the constant thread between them is U.S. leadership. And I think you'll see the President call upon the world to join us in confronting this threat from ISIL, but also to offer his vision of how U.S. leadership is going to deal with this set of challenges at a moment in the international community when, frankly, nations need to be stepping up to the plate and coming together to deal with threats as diverse as ISIL or the outbreak of Ebola or the type of aggression we've seen in Ukraine.

Q Are you going to still be trying to get the support of countries who may have either a philosophical objection to what the coalition did last night, or maybe just an opposition to using military force to confront these threats? Are you still going to be trying to get them on board, for example, with interdicting foreign fighters, or the financial or the oil-related issues that work into this situation?

MR. RHODES: Yes. It's a good question. And we absolutely are going to do that. I mean, already we've seen different nations have a different degree of willingness to conduct military action, but that doesn't mean that there's not a significant role for them to play. For instance, you have a number of European countries like Germany, for instance, that haven't participated in airstrikes but they are providing arms and equipment for Kurdish forces. That's critically important. For this to succeed, it's not just going to be about airstrikes, it's going to be about the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces, Kurdish forces, and Syrian opposition forces.

And then, absolutely, we are going to need the cooperation of many countries to cut off ISIL financing and to stop the flow of foreign fighters. The President will lead a UN Security Council meeting that is focused specifically on this question of foreign fighters, and that requires cooperation across many countries so that we're able to have common protocols about how we can track those people who are traveling into and out of this region. And then we have the ability to interdict foreign fighters before they can pose a threat either by reaching the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, or dangerously coming out of that theater to pose a risk in Europe and the United States.

So there will be many different roles for nations to play in this coalition. And frankly, you can't overstate the importance of some of the non-military roles, given the fact that you're not going to defeat an organization like ISIL unless you're able to cut off its financing and stop this flow of foreign fighters that they've benefited from.

Q Were you able to sense if the Khorasan strikes actually have disrupted the plot?

MR. RHODES: We're still reviewing the outcome of the strikes. I think certainly the report from the Pentagon was that they successfully hit the targets that they were aiming at. As to what impact that had on Khorasan leadership and operatives, that's something that we'll have to run down in the coming days.

Q Were any American forces on the ground helping guide these attacks?

MR. RHODES: No. There were no American forces on the ground associated with these attacks in Syria. Again, these were taken from the air, from military assets in the region, but not involving any U.S. ground forces.

Q But based on a target list that you formed over the past month since this all started?

MR. RHODES: Yeah, I think as we've been focused increasingly on the threat from ISIL, we have looked at contingency plans for targets in both Iraq and Syria. Obviously, that accelerated when the President made the decision to take action in Syria, and gave guidance to his military commanders to develop essentially a campaign plan for Syria.

And after that work was done and he was briefed on it at CENTCOM by General Austin, the following day is when he gave his authorization to move forward when the timing was ready and the coalition was ready.

And I should say, part of what is remarkable about our military is CENTCOM's ability to absorb the contributions of different partner nations very quickly so that we can essentially apportion roles for nations to play, so you can end up with five countries coming together on a fairly quick basis only in a matter of a short number of weeks from the President's speech. To have those nations flying with us in the air, conducting airstrikes is a testament both I think to the support for the President's objective of defeating ISIL, Secretary Kerry's hard work in the region, and CENTCOM's ability to put together a coalition like this.

Q Have these five Arab nations agreed to participate or support airstrikes on an ongoing basis? Or was this kind of the big action already?

MR. RHODES: No, we expect that this will be done on an ongoing basis. We don't expect to in any way have solved this challenge in one night of airstrikes. This is clearly going to have to be a sustained campaign. And we believe that we'll have a strong coalition with us going forward. And again, that's so critically important to the region to see that there are a broad number of Arab partners who are with us. This is not about the United States and ISIL; this is about the threat that ISIL poses not just to the United States, but to the people of the Arab world who are in closest proximity, to the Muslims who have been killed in far greater numbers than anybody else over the last several months.

Again, to have on the first night of these strikes in Syria Arab partners with us, that was an absolute priority of the President's. And he wanted -- if at all possible -- to get that done. And frankly, in getting five nations with us, I think we achieved that as well as we possibly could have.

Q Which Arab partners did what last night?

MR. RHODES: Again, I think the Pentagon can give you a more specific breakdown. They're doing an operations briefing now. All five countries flew with us. A number of countries conducted airstrikes with us, and the Pentagon can speak to the particulars better than I can.

Q What does he want to tell the Prime Minister of Iraq when he meets with him?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, we very much supported Prime Minister Abadi, who has put forward a far more inclusive program in Iraq than the previous government. I think he wants to underscore our support for his leadership, his efforts to bring about an inclusive government. I think he wants to discuss the nature of our ongoing commitment, not just through airstrikes, but through training and equipping of Iraqi security forces; and discuss the political program within Iraq that addresses the legitimate aspirations of all of Iraq's different communities.

So we believe Prime Minister Abadi is off to a very strong start, and we want to discuss how to cooperate going forward, and also, frankly, how to cooperate with this coalition of countries that want to contribute to Iraq's future as well.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks very much, everybody. See you on the ground.

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11:13 A.M. EDT