

Remarks by the President on the Military Campaign to Destroy ISIL

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The White House

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The Pentagon

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THE PRESIDENT: Good morning, everybody. Today, the United States and our Armed Forces continue to lead the global coalition in our mission to destroy the terrorist group ISIL. As I outlined in my speech to the nation last weekend, our strategy is moving forward with a great sense of urgency on four fronts -- hunting down and taking out these terrorists; training and equipping Iraqi and Syrian forces to fight ISIL on the ground; stopping ISIL's operations by disrupting their recruiting, financing and propaganda; and, finally, persistent diplomacy to end the Syrian civil war so that everyone can focus on destroying ISIL.

I just had a chance to meet with my National Security Council as part of our regular effort to review and constantly strengthen our efforts. And I want to thank Secretary Carter, Chairman Dunford, and Vice Chairman Selva for hosting us and for their leadership of our men and women in uniform. We heard from General Austin, who is leading the military campaign in the region, as well as General Votel, whose Special Operations forces are playing a vital role in this fight.

I want to provide all of you a brief update on our progress against the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq, because as we squeeze its heart, we'll make it harder for ISIL to pump its terror and propaganda to the rest of the world.

This fall, even before the revolting attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, I ordered new actions to intensify our war against ISIL. These actions, including more firepower and Special Operations forces, are well underway. This continues to be a difficult fight. As I said before, ISIL is dug in, including in urban areas, and they hide behind civilians, using defenseless men, women and children as human shields.

So even as we're relentless, we have to be smart, targeting ISIL surgically, with precision. At the same time, our partners on the ground are rooting ISIL out, town by town, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block. That is what this campaign is doing.

We are hitting ISIL harder than ever. Coalition aircraft -- our fighters, bombers and drones -- have been increasing the pace of airstrikes -- nearly 9,000 as of today. Last month, in November, we dropped more bombs on ISIL targets than any other month since this campaign started.

We're also taking out ISIL leaders, commanders and killers, one by one. Since this spring, we've removed Abu Sayyaf, one of their top leaders; Haji Mutazz, ISIL's second-in command; Junaid Hussain, a top online recruiter; Mohamed Emwazi, who brutally murdered Americans and others; and in recent weeks, finance chief Abu Saleh; senior extortionist Abu Maryam; and weapons trafficker Abu Rahman al-Tunisi. The list goes on.

We're going after ISIL from their stronghold right down -- right in downtown Raqqa, to Libya, where we took out Abu Nabil, the ISIL leader there. The point is, ISIL leaders cannot hide. And our next message to them is simple: You are next.

Every day, we destroy as well more of ISIL's forces -- their fighting positions, bunkers and staging areas; their heavy weapons, bomb-making factories, compounds and training camps. In many places, ISIL has lost its freedom of maneuver, because they know if they mass their forces, we will wipe them out. In fact, since the summer, ISIL has not had a single successful major offensive operation on the ground in either Syria or Iraq. In recent weeks, we've unleashed a new wave of strikes on their lifeline, their oil infrastructure, destroying hundreds of their tanker trucks, wells and refineries. And we're going to keep on hammering those.

ISIL also continues to lose territory in Iraq. ISIL had already lost across Kirkuk province and at Tikrit. More recently, ISIL lost at Sinjar, losing a strategic highway. ISIL lost at Baiji, with its oil refinery. We saw the daring raid supported by our Special Forces, which rescued dozens of prisoners from ISIL, and in which Master Sergeant Joshua Wheeler made the ultimate sacrifice.

So far, ISIL has lost about 40 percent of the populated areas it once controlled in Iraq. And it will lose more. Iraqi forces are now fighting their way deeper into Ramadi. They're working to encircle Fallujah and cut off ISIL supply routes into Mosul. Again, these are urban areas where ISIL is entrenched. Our partners on the ground face a very tough fight ahead, and we're going to continue to back them up with the support that they need to ultimately clear ISIL from Iraq.

ISIL also continues to lose territory in Syria. We continue to step up our air support and supplies to local forces -- Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen -- and they're having success. After routing ISIL at Kobani and Tal Abyad, they've pushed ISIL back from almost across the entire border region with Turkey, and we're working with Turkey to seal the rest. ISIL has lost thousands of square miles of territory it once controlled in Syria -- and it will lose more. The Special Forces that I ordered to Syria have begun supporting local forces as they push south, cut off supply lines and tighten the squeeze on Raqqa.

Meanwhile, more people are seeing ISIL for the thugs and the thieves and the killers that they are. We've seen instances of ISIL fighters defecting. Others who've tried to escape have been executed. And ISIL's reign of brutality and extortion continues to repel local populations and help fuel the refugee crisis. "So many people are migrating," said one Syrian refugee. ISIL, she said, will "end up all alone."

All this said, we recognize that progress needs to keep coming faster. No one knows that more than the countless Syrians and Iraqis living every day under ISIL's terror, as well as the families in San Bernardino and Paris and elsewhere who are grieving the loss of their loved ones. Just as the United States is doing more in this fight -- just as our allies France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Australia and Italy are doing more -- so must others.

And that's why I've asked Secretary Carter to go to the Middle East -- he'll depart right after this press briefing -- to work with our coalition partners on securing more military contributions to this fight. On the diplomatic front, Secretary Kerry will be in Russia tomorrow as we continue to work, as part of the Vienna process, to end the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, here at home, the Department of Homeland Security is updating its alert system to help the American people stay vigilant and safe.

And as always, our extraordinary men and women in uniform continue to put their lives on the line -- in this campaign and around the world -- to keep the rest of us safe. This holiday season, many of our troops are once again far from their families. And as your Commander-in-Chief, on behalf of the American people, we want to say thank you. We are grateful, and we are proud for everything that you do. Because of you, the America that we know and love and cherish is leading the world in this fight.

Because of you, I am confident that we are going to prevail.

Thank you very much, everybody.

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12:56 P.M. EST