

Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on the Trip of Vice President Joe Biden to Morocco, Ukraine and Turkey

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The White House

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Aboard Air Force Two

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Q Where do we stand on safe zones?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that things like no-fly zones, buffer zones, safe zones -- there's a lot of terminology here -- but they're all means. In other words, I think what is -- a more productive conversation is to have less of a focus on the means and more of a focus on the objectives, right? And then you can have a discussion about how you best secure those objectives.

So I think where we and the Turks agree is on the need to do more to combat ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. And we also agree that we need to do more to stand up and facilitate the moderate Syrian opposition, which is opposed to both ISIL and the regime. So we agree on those objectives. And then the question is, what is the best mechanism to make that happen?

And part of it, obviously, is cooperation with the Turks on the train-and-equip mission. Part of it is a conversation with them about partnering with Turkey out of Turkish facilities to do more against ISIL. But I think it's been our view that we should start with our common baseline of what we're trying to achieve and then continue to have a pretty rigorous dialogue of how best to achieve it.

Q But there's not agreement about that at this point, is there? Yes, everybody agrees Assad must go. They don't agree on the sort of balance of -- and our saying Iraq comes first, Iraq is the priority, then we'll worry about that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: First of all, we agree with the Turks that there needs to be a political transition away from Assad as part of the endgame here, all right? So we don't disagree with them on that. But you're right that at the moment our highest priority in Iraq and Syria is degrading and eventually defeating ISIL. We've stated that explicitly. We have ISIL-first, Iraq-first strategy. But not an ISIL-only, Iraq-only strategy.

As the President has said a number of times and other senior officials have said, because we're focusing on ISIL first and Iraq first, the campaign plan such that it is, is further ahead in Iraq than it is in Syria. And part of that is that the train-and-equip mission in Syria is going to take a while to get up to speed.

So that's why we're having conversations with the Turks about what we can do more now while we're ramping up the train-and-equip mission.

Q But the train-and-equip mission, as General Allen has said, and General Dempsey has said, is not -- they are expected to act in a defensive manner against ISIL and other groups, but that's not their primary mission. Their primary mission is to protect their own homes and livelihoods against ISIL.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think their primary mission is to defend their communities. And my sense is if you were able to stand up a robust opposition in the north of the country, then they would be able to clear safe zones from which to operate. Do you see what I mean? That's a different model than declaring -- having the international community declare this area is a safe zone. We will police it through X, Y and Z measures. What I'm saying is if the objective is to allow opposition groups to effectively clear, hold and build in their areas up in the north and thereby create safe zones that families can return to and that create a buffer between the conflict in Syria and Turkey, then the train-and-equip mission is actually relevant to that goal as well because you need to have viable partners on the ground to hold terrain.

Q Would they be expected to clear and hold it themselves?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: As opposed to?

Q Us helping them, somebody helping them.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we are helping them by training and equipping them.

Q Right, but do you think you can train and equip them to the point where they can actually hold and defend land as a buffer zone?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think -- we don't know. I think what we're seeing in Iraq is the degree to which we are able to provide some advice on what to do, actually make a meaningful difference on rolling back ISIL. And one of the reasons why it would be useful to have more access to Turkish facilities is that it would potentially open up our ability to do more in support of opposition forces, who are combating ISIL.

You see an example of this in Kobani already where you have a force that is dedicated and committed to fighting ISIL. ISIL has poured an enormous amount of resources into that fight, and they're getting hammered in the air from it. So you can imagine a scenario in which you have a more robust opposition on the ground that was more capable of clearing and holding terrain and also provided opportunities for us to do more to assist them. Does that make --

Q So basically you're going -- having discussions with the Turks trying to find a balance that sort of suits both of your needs?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, we'll see how the Turks-- I'm just saying I don't know how that conversation will go.

Q You both have to --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm just saying that the most useful place to start is what are we trying to accomplish, and then figure out what's the best means to accomplish that; as opposed to starting with the means, and then working down from there.

Q But again to go back to where we were before, assuming the priorities of your -- your objectives may be the same, but priorities and when you achieve them may be somewhat different. So the idea is you maybe give a little to them, they maybe give a little to you?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't want to get out ahead of -- so let me -- we're having a pretty robust dialogue back and forth. And it's happening at all levels. It's happening at our professional military level. It's happening at the John Allen level. And in the next two days -- well, tonight and tomorrow, it will happen at the highest levels of our respective governments. I don't want to get out ahead of where things may or may not end up. But all of those things will be -- everything will be on the table when things are being discussed.

Q Do you expect to reach any kind of conclusions on this visit? Do you want -- would that be ideal? Do you expect this just to be part of the continuing dialogue? At what point does the dialogue reach some fruition?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think to some degree the dialogue -- no, no, no, it's going to be ongoing. I'll give you an example. We are very far along in executing our strategy in Iraq, but it doesn't mean that we're not constantly engaged with Iraqi leadership about making adjustments in all sorts of ways. And it's the same with our interactions with the Turkish government.

I think that there have been a lot of interactions at all different levels. They understand more about what we need. We understand more about what they need than was true a month ago. And so we'll have a more developed conversation at a very high level than last time simply because we're further along in the conversation. But I don't expect that there will be any finality because the conversation will continue.

Q Just give us an overview of the Ukrainian trip? And what was the result? As I understand, Poroshenko didn't ask to participate in any kind of dialogue or new discussions with Russians. He did not want United States to be part of it, part of this dialogue that he talked the day before. Did they ask about weapons?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, first of all I would say that a major focus of the discussion is what you actually saw the President -- President Poroshenko and the Vice President talk about in public, which was the urgency of moving from this national coalition agreement, which they arrived at early this morning actually to getting a government. And I think something the Vice President said, and you saw President Poroshenko nodding his head during this, is there's actually a big difference between it taking six days versus six weeks or six months; that right now actors as diverse as the U.S. Congress, the Europeans, and the IMF are all looking at the Ukrainian government to see that there is one that is committed to reform and will partner with the international community to move forward. And frankly, it's difficult to move forward on things like a large financial aid package; or additional sanctions et cetera in that (inaudible) -- so that was a major part of focus. And that was all out in the open.

Q (Inaudible.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, what Ukrainians we're talking a lot was a kind of catalogue of pretty blatant Russian violations of the Minsk agreement. So there was a lot of that. And there was a lot of conversation about what was necessary to send Russia a clear signal that what they were doing was unacceptable.

I think there was a clear sense that you don't want to start over from scratch; that you wouldn't want to scrap the Minsk agreement and start over. We already have an agreement that lays out the basic parameters that the Ukrainian side continues to believe are the right parameters and the Russians agreed to. They just haven't enforced.

So I think everybody is in agreement that at the right time there needs to be dialogue again.

Q When is the right time?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But where I don't think we have finality yet is the timing and the modality for that. That is -- which party is what mechanism. So there were no decisions on that score. There was a lot of conversation back and forth about the need to put pressure on Russia to more live up to its Minsk agreements.

Q Did the Ukrainians actually say what they really want you to do? Do you have a clear understanding what you have to do? What kind of signal else you can send them because it's not clear?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In general what the Ukrainians hope we do is what we hope to do, as well, which is find a way to mobilize the world to provide substantial economic assistance; mobilize European countries and others to put more pressure on the Russians; and to get a government in Ukraine that lives up to its reform agenda.

Q Are you planning to do any --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: None of those things -- the reforms are Ukraine -- but in terms of mobilizing the international community --

Q No, absolutely.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Or any of those other things, that's very much about the United States.

Q My question is are you -- you and other Europeans maybe thinking about some kind of major plan for reconstruction for Ukraine, or for the east? Is there any discussion about that? Because I know what Ukrainians are saying. They want Marshall Plan. They want this kind so is there any --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Terms like the Marshall Plan get thrown around a lot in a lot of different contexts. Let me put it this way, if by Marshall Plan you mean the need for an influx of a significant amount of macroeconomic assistance, there is complete agreement that that is required, right?

In other words, even though there's a gas deal to get us through the winter, that Ukraine is going to face significant challenges as it relates to their reserves, as it relates to their energy, and that they're going to need a lot of help from the international community. We've signaled to them that we're willing to mobilize the international community -- to do our best to mobilize the international community, both the Europeans, the international financial institutions, et cetera to provide that assistance, but this is what I told you yesterday, it's help us help you -- which is why this is all tied back to the government formation and reform agenda. These things are interdependent. And by the way, it's not us telling the Ukrainian leaders this. They know this. From both the President and Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, we received no pushback on that. They get it. They know.

Q Do you see any reason to believe that the Russians are getting the message at all? If anything, they seem to be going in the other direction.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I think that there is a sense that Putin may have been a little surprised for how shunned and isolated he was at the G20. Has that kind of sense of isolation resulted in a new openness to compromise? I don't think we've seen it yet. Does it mean it won't? We don't know. But certainly we haven't seen it yet. But I do think there's a little bit in the body language that they understand that they're the odd man out.

Q Don't you think that we project a little bit too much and we would act if people said things like that about us? Because they don't seem to respond. They don't seem to respond.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You can ask the Russians whether they care or not.

Q Okay, thanks.

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