

Background Conference Call on Airstrikes in Syria

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MS. HAYDEN: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. You've already heard this morning from the President and from the Pentagon, but we wanted to give you a chance to ask some more questions about the actions we took last night in Syria. So we have a group of senior administration officials to speak to you on background. There's no embargo on this call.

Again, this call is on background. And with that, I'll turn it over to our first senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, everybody. I'll just give some brief opening comments and then turn it over to my colleague.

As you've heard, the President spoke earlier today about the actions that we took in Syria last night. This was consistent with the strategy that he outlined to the American people earlier this month when he made clear that we were going to have to take action on both the Iraqi and Syrian side of the border as part of our efforts to defeat the threat posed by the terrorist group ISIL.

It is very important to the President that just as we have built a broad coalition to support the Iraqi government and Iraqi security forces, that we have a broad coalition in place for these operations in Syria. And so we believe that this sends a very important message to the region and the world that we were joined by five Arab partners -- Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar. And this makes perfectly clear that this is not simply a battle between the United States and ISIL; this is between the people of the region, the governments of the region, and the threat posed by this terrorist organization, which has overwhelmingly killed Muslims, and poses a threat not just the U.S. but to our Arab partners.

In terms of the sequencing, the President authorized this military action on Thursday, following his visit to CENTCOM on Wednesday. He was briefed by General Austin while he was on the ground at CENTCOM, as well as other members of his military advisors.

And on Thursday, he authorized them to move forward with the strike plan that he had been briefed on, on Syria.

I think the other factor that drove the timing was putting the coalition together, and Secretary Kerry has done tireless work in traveling to the region to bring together a very strong show of support among our Arab allies and partners who flew with us last night in Syria and will continue to be part of this coalition going forward.

One scheduling note: Later today, as we recently put out, the President will have a chance to drop by a meeting that Secretary Kerry is convening with the representatives of these Arab partner countries here at the United Nations to discuss their efforts going forward.

The only other point I'd make is over the course of the next two days the President will focus very much on the coalition that is continuing to come together to confront the threat by ISIL. He'll be meeting tomorrow morning with Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq. Clearly, as we said repeatedly, our strategy did not rely solely on airstrikes but on support for forces on the ground, and that includes the Iraqi security forces and the Syria opposition. And so we'll have a chance to discuss with Prime Minister Abadi his efforts to build an inclusive government inside of Iraq and our effort to support him in that political process and in the work of the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish forces as they go on the offense against ISIL.

The President will certainly be able to speak on the margins with a range of our other allies and partners, including a number of European allies who are here who have committed to join us in this coalition effort.

The last point I'd make is we've been very clear that this is a broad-based coalition because it's a comprehensive strategy. So we will have some nations engaged in airstrikes and kinetic action with us. We will have some nations who are supporting the training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces and Syrian opposition forces. Other nations will cooperate with us on cutting off ISIL funding. And, importantly, nations will cooperate with us on stopping the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Iraq and Syria. And the President will chair a U.N. Security Council session tomorrow afternoon that is focused on the threat from foreign fighters.

So with that, I will hand it over to my colleague who can focus on the additional action we took last night, which was, in addition to striking ISIL targets, our actions against the Khorasan Group.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks very much. Let me take a minute to just run through some information about the additional action that the President also spoke to a short while ago, and that is the action that the President ordered to disrupt imminent attack plotting against the U.S. and Western interests conducted by what is really a network of seasoned al Qaeda veterans. And you have heard them referred to as the Khorasan Group. These are al Qaeda veterans who have established a safe haven in Syria to develop and plan external attacks in addition to construct and test improvised explosive devises and to recruit Westerners for external operations.

Now, the intelligence that we have and that was the basis for the President's order for the additional actions that were taken last night indicated that these senior Syria-based al Qaeda operatives were nearing the execution phase for an attack in Europe or the homeland. And so the President ordered decisive action to protect our interests and to remove their capability to act.

We have, as a national security and counterterrorism and intelligence community, been working with our foreign partners for some time now, watching this group over the past few years since many of its members arrived in Syria, notably from Pakistan and Afghanistan. And as my colleague noted at the top, the President ordered this action based on information that we had that their plotting was reaching an advanced stage.

Now, you may have questions about the reference to the Khorasan Group. That is a term that sometimes has been used to refer to this network of al Nusra Front and al Qaeda core extremists, all of whom share a history of training operatives, facilitating fighters and the movement of money, and planning attacks against U.S. and Western targets. These are operatives who are quite seasoned; who are, in the view of the counterterrorism and national security community, very dangerous; who fought and lived together in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other areas in the Middle East -- Iraq, Iran, Yemen and other places. And they have for many years, they've developed expertise and experience conducting and planning attacks against innocent individuals.

And what we have seen as a community is this group move to Syria and bring their experience and their skillsets, and frankly, to exploit the conflict in Syria and the safe haven that that conflict has provided.

The group also, we believe, has actively recruited Westerners to serve as external operatives to then go back and blend into their home countries. And this was one of the reasons behind the additional aviation security measures we put in place worldwide a few months ago.

To be clear, this group of al Qaeda veterans, referenced as the Khorasan Group, their focus is not and has not been the Assad regime or helping the Syrian people. These are al Qaeda operatives taking advantage, as I said, of the conflict in Syria that has provided -- left a void and provided a safe haven for them to advance attacks against Western interests. And they've been doing so with the support of al Qaeda and the al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front.

So again, the President ordered this action in order to disrupt their attack planning against the U.S. and against Western interests to include Europe.

So with that, I think we're ready for questions. Is that right?

Q Hi, thanks. The other day, DNI Clapper referred to the Khorasan Group as a potential threat. And I'm wondering if you can explain the disconnect between his statement and what you just said about the final phases of executing a plot. Also, can you shed any light on the connection between this group and AQAP or AQAP bomb-making expertise?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure, I'll go first, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague. The President's decision was based on the assessment of our intelligence community as it relates to the status of planning by the Khorasan Group. So our intelligence community has been monitoring this threat for many months. DNI Clapper, of course, has led that effort. And the basis of the President's decision to authorize direct military action to disrupt the operations of this group was a broad intelligence picture that pointed to the danger of the Khorasan Group undertaking external plotting against the United States or Europe and other Western targets.

So we were monitoring active plotting that posed an imminent threat to the United States and potentially our allies, and that served as a basis of the President's decision. And that was a united view of our intelligence community.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I agree with all of that, everything my colleague said. And I guess what I would just say -- in addition to the plotting that we have been watching and concerned about from this group, as always, we have and continue to be concerned about AQAP, which I think as you know, Ken, as somebody who watches this space, they have proven to be the most determined and persistent actor, particularly when it comes to aviation plots.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And then, Ken, where I would draw the distinction, of course, and we would draw the distinction is, ISIL we have described as an organization that clearly poses a threat to Americans in the region, but we have not yet seen homeland plotting along the lines of the type of plotting that has emanated from al Qaeda and these particular operatives. But we see the potential for that threat to evolve, particularly given the foreign fighters.

Q Hi. Thanks very much for doing the call. On the airstrikes in Syria last night, there's been a lot of conversation as to whether the leaders of ISIS in Raqqa might have gotten a heads up just by the talks that have been going on in Washington about airstrikes on Syria. What do you make of that? Do you think that too much advance notice was perhaps telegraphed to those leaders, giving them an opportunity to evade these strikes? Do you know whether or not any of those leaders were hit?

And as for Khorasan, this is an organization that's going to be new to a lot of Americans out there. You talked about AQAP. You're really monitoring a lot of different terror groups all at the same time. Do you have the resources to do that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. Let me say a couple of things, and then my colleagues may want to add to it.

On this question, Jim, we're not concerned about that at all. The fact of the matter is, the President was very clear we're going to take action against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. We've been taking action against ISIL for several weeks now in Iraq and continue to hit targets there.

The fact of the matter is, first of all, ISIL is a terrorist organization that also seeks to hold territory. And because they seek to hold territory, they have both targets as it relates to fighters, but they also have targets as it relates to their infrastructure and their ability to sustain themselves and their ability to, again, hold and govern territory. And those are not the types of targets that can be easily avoided.

So the fact of the matter is the nature of this terrorist group makes it difficult for them to go to ground in ways that are similar to terrorist organizations that do not seek to govern space, but rather seek to hide and plot out of sight.

That said, I'd also note that the United States has been at war with al Qaeda and its affiliates for a long time, in addition to ISIL. And the fact that al Qaeda or AQAP or al Shabaab knows that we're after them has not in any way prevented us from being able to take out their leadership and to find targets to hit. So we're not necessarily in this for an element of surprise. We're in this for a sustained campaign to degrade and ultimately defeat this organization. So it's for that reason we're not at all concerned with the notion that they understand that we're coming after them. Frankly, we're going to be doing it for some time now.

On the second point, the only quick point I'd make is that the Khorasan Group really grows out of al Qaeda. Again, these are operatives who had experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan, so in some cases this is essentially the same cast of characters that we've had our eye on for many years. These are known operatives to us rather than a new group appearing out of whole cloth. This is more like, again, a group of people that we are concerned about seeking to exploit the safe haven in Syria to plot against us. And that's why we took the action we did.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think I would just say, Jim, you're right in in terms of the variety of threats that we're seeing from AQAP to ISIL, the Khorasan Group and groups in North Africa. But I would also point out in all of those places, we are working with our partners to address those threats. And the President has been clear about that strategy going back to what he said at West Point and before.

So I think the strategy he's laid out in terms of building partner capacity, working with partners to take the fight to these groups when they are regionally and locally focused and before they can be -- direct their hateful ideology to the United States is the strategy that I think you're seeing play out right now and last night with respect to ISIL with five Arab partners.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The only thing I would add on the issue of surprise. Look, we're still assessing the results of our strikes last night, but every indication we have so far is that we were very effective. We and our partners were very effective at hitting the relevant targets, and hitting them with quite some effect. So whether they were surprised or not, I'd leave that to them. But we know we hit what we were aiming at.

And look, they're adaptive enemy, but we're also an adaptive foe ourselves. And so we've watched them react to the pressure we put them on in Iraq, and we will continue to watch them as we continue to put pressure on them throughout the region.

Q Hi, thank you. I wanted to ask about the whole question of authorization and where you stand now on the various bills in the House and the Senate; calls for eliminating the two existing authorizations and/or combining them into a single one. What you would like to see that say. When you would like to see it considered in Congress.

More specifically on last night, can you talk a bit about the authorization for that? I know you said that some of this is under the '01 al Qaeda authorization. I'm not quite sure I've heard a good explanation of how those two things correlate. And you just sent out a War Powers notification to Congress on the Khorasan strikes. It would seem to me that that is the one group that actually would come over the '01 authorization. So why would you send a War Powers authorization on that and not on the Syria strikes?

And finally -- and then I'll shut up -- the President has spoken many times about the new strategy, including a near-certainty that strikes would not hit civilians, and also that it required an imminent threat to the homeland. You said that there is no imminent threat to the homeland from ISIL.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I think I'll turn to -- we have our NSC legal advisor on the phone here who can give you the best answer on that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So just starting with the question of the authorizations, I think that -- we believe the President had the authority under the 2001 AUMF to conduct the military operations against both ISIL and the Khorasan Group. The Khorasan Group, because they are part of -- they're al Qaeda veterans, they're also associated with al Nusra Front in Syria, we believe that they are very clearly within the ambit of the AUMF, which applies to al Qaeda, the Taliban and associated forces. And so they would be subject to the 2001 AUMF.

ISIL is also, we believe, subject to the 2001 AUMF. And I think to understand why that's so, you have to understand a little bit about the history of ISIL. They were, beginning in 2003, known and affiliated directly with Osama bin Laden; they were known as al Qaeda in Iraq for a number of years. And we, the United States and coalition partners, used force against al Qaeda in Iraq for a number of years. They were at war with the U.S. And it was only recently that they split with al Qaeda, but they remain at war and in conflict with the United States.

And given the history of this group going back many years, given the fact that we have been in conflict with them for many years and that hasn't changed, we don't believe that Congress would have intended to remove the President's authority to use force against this group simply because the group had a disagreement with al Qaeda leadership. And so based on that history, based on their longtime connections to al Qaeda, and based on the fact that they continue to be in conflict with the United States and U.S. partners and allies, we believe that the 2001 AUMF would still apply to ISIL.

The filing of the War Powers Reports today -- we actually filed two War Powers Reports earlier today; one to notify Congress on operations against ISIL, and the second on the Khorasan Group. I think we've -- in both cases, it follows a pattern this administration has followed in keeping the Congress notified at appropriate intervals of our operations against ISIL. You've seen a number of War Powers reports filed over the past two to three months. That's also true with al Qaeda, where we periodically update Congress on operations against al Qaeda. And I think the judgment here was that these were both significant enough operations that we believed that further War Powers notification was merited.

Q You touched on earlier whether you've been successful or not in reaching your targets. Do we know if the strikes have killed senior leader al-Fadhli, who's with that al Qaeda-linked group?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We don't have confirmation on that leadership target.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll defer to my colleague, but I think the Department of Defense is still conducting and reviewing the results of the activity. But as my colleague said, we've got every reason to believe that the work of the Department of Defense and our allies was quite effective last night.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I have nothing to add. Both of you are correct - we're still assessing the results and are not in a position to confirm right now.

Q I guess I just want to follow up on this issue of the Khorasan strike. The question I guess is, would we have gone after them had it not been for ISIL? In other words, if this is a happy serendipity that we can hit two for the price of one, in effect. Or would we have done it without what the President announced two weeks ago in response to the direct threat from ISIS?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll just say, Peter, we have been watching this threat from the Khorasan Group for some time. And we had contemplated the need for direct military action, if necessary, to disrupt their plotting. So this is something that has very much been on our radar for several months. And it was an action that we were contemplating taking separate and apart from the growing threat from ISIL.

Now, clearly, the fact of the United States launching a military action in Syria provided an opportunity to take that action. But for us, it was rooted in also the development of the intelligence related to the threat posed by the Khorasan Group.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just emphasize the second point. As I think I said at the top, Peter, we've been very focused on this group and their exploitation of the safe haven in Syria, and the fact that that conflict there has drawn elements to use it as a space for plotting. And we took -- the President ordered the action after we had developed intelligence when we determined that their plotting had reached an advanced stage.

Q So we might have done this basically -- even if ISIS were not a big factor for us and we were not trying to go after them specifically, we might have been doing this anyway?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, I think it's clear -- the President has been crystal clear that we will take action against terrorists that pose a threat to the United States, and the Khorasan Group fits into that category.

Q Obviously, this is a major moment in this fight to go into Syria, but some analysts have described it as a critical moment. Would you and can you talk about how you think this coalition that participated last night impacts what the President does over the next three days?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd say a couple of things. I mean, first of all, this is a critical moment because the United States is acting on the strategy that the President announced, which was to not be constrained by borders in targeting ISIL. I think it's very important to keep in mind that we're effectively fighting this campaign against an organization that operates irrespective of borders. So we have to look at it that way. And if we have to take action in Syria, we have to take action in Iraq, we do that, and we're seeking to strengthen partners on both side of that border so that we're squeezing the space where they operate.

And so this was a milestone yesterday, but this is part of a broader campaign that has involved the U.S. taking military action in Iraq for some time now, and that will clearly go forward.

I think as it relates to the United Nations -- a few points. First of all, the President will have a number of meetings that are focused specifically on the efforts against ISIL. Later today, he'll have a chance to meet with our Arab coalition partners to discuss our efforts.

Then, tomorrow morning, he will meet with Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq. And clearly, the Iraqi side of the border is an area where we have a significant amount of activity, both in terms of our support for Iraq. And Dr. Abadi has put forward an inclusive political program that we believe provides the basis for Iraq's communities coming together. He's also, again, committed to having Iraqi security forces be the force on the ground. So when we get this question about boots on the ground, the Iraqis and the Peshmerga are going on the offensive, and so we want to discuss those efforts.

We also, importantly, have to discuss with the Iraqi Prime Minister and other leaders how to coordinate our assistance -- because there are actually a lot of countries coming forward who want to do something. Some countries want to take strikes. Some countries want to focus on training and equipping of Iraqi security forces. Some countries are providing humanitarian assistance in northern Iraq. So in addition to racking up the number of coalition partners, we need to make sure that we have a coordinated strategy as it relates to how that assistance goes into Iraq and how we're working together essentially as a team. And so that will be a subject of conversation with Dr. Abadi.

Then, the President chairs the UN Security Council session on foreign fighters. And clearly, as it relates to the threat beyond Iraq and Syria's borders, this is the critical issue. We need to have a common set of measures that we are taking as an international community to stop the flow of these fighters into Iraq and Syria and then out of Iraq and Syria. We need cooperation between intelligence and law enforcement. We need to be able to find and apprehend those individuals who have been radicalized and are seeking to join this fight or leaving this theater of war. That will be a focus at the U.N. Security Council session.

And then the President's speech tomorrow I think is an opportunity for him to address this issue. I think you'll see him step back and address the broader context for the international community. We have a number of challenges right now. This is certainly front and center and will be a significant part of his speech in terms of mobilizing the international community against the threat from ISIL.

But you also have the United States mobilizing the world against Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, mobilizing the world against this outbreak of Ebola. And so I think you'll see from the President a vision of U.S. leadership that cuts across a number of challenges but also focuses very expressly on what nations need to do to come together to take the fight to ISIL and to uphold peace and security generally.

I don't know if anybody else wanted to get in there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me jump in because I think I can give a little more context on sort of this building effort. This builds on what my colleague was saying. This has been a building process for weeks now, so ever since the President announced that he was going to do it -- we were going to do strikes in Iraq, he asked Secretary Kerry and certainly other people in the administration to continue to build this effort internationally. So before he gave the speech that he gave about two weeks ago now, he asked him to go out -- Secretary Kerry called the Saudis. He asked them to host this meeting in Jeddah, which had GCC countries and then additional countries from the region, because there was an agreement across the administration that we need to not just, of course, go at it alone, but have support from the region. They needed to be in the lead. He asked them for him to do that.

He went and helped lead that meeting. At that meeting, what was surprising to us -- obviously we did dozens of calls leading up to it -- was that the questions from the countries in the region was not whether they could be involved, but how. They were very forward-leaning, many of them, about their engagement. We built from there. Secretary Kerry had a meeting with King Abdullah later that night. So this is now a week and a half ago. And during that meeting he committed Saudi Arabia to obviously be involved in the coalition and also take military action, including airstrikes, should that be needed.

So the point is this coalition has been building, including the military component, for several days now, and it was certainly in place long before today.

Just two other pieces of kind of coalition-building color for all of you. With Jordan, Secretary Kerry had a meeting with King Abdullah right after he went to Iraq at the beginning of this diplomacy push about a week and a half ago. He then had a follow-up stop to visit with him before he left for NATO -- I'm sorry, before he left for UNGA last Friday to lock in Jordan to their participation and work on this effort. And finally, on the UAE, he's had countless meetings and late-night dinners with Abdullah Bin Zayed about their involvement.

So this has been something that has been building over the course of weeks, building on the efforts that we did in Iraq. But certainly lining up these countries is something that we've had in place, building on the President's announcement for several days now, and obviously we wanted to work in coordination to implement it as we did last night.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just say real quickly here is we've been getting a lot of questions, obviously, for the last couple weeks about which nations will join you, who will do strikes. We were aware that there were countries that were prepared to take military action with us. At the same time, we had to do a couple things. One, we wanted to get the broadest coalition possible out of the gate; and by any measure, we think having five Arab partners flying with us over Syria more than meets that objective.

Secondly, CENTCOM is extraordinarily capable at pulling in together partners and essentially constructing a means for all of them to participate in a unified plan. And so it's quite remarkable that, again, only a short number of weeks after the President's speech not only were these countries able to make those commitments, but CENTCOM was then able to turn their political interests in participating into an actual plan that was carried out last night and will be carried out going forward. This is a testament to some of the capabilities that have been developed at CENTCOM over the years as they've run complex operations.

Q Two quick questions. Number one, we heard [senior administration official] and others say the strikes have been very effective. Can you tell us anything about what actually was hit in layman terms, in concrete terms, what damage was done? Were fuel depots hit? Can you tell us about any command-and-control targets that were hit or whatnot? And secondly, what has been the response from Russia to all this? What has their -- have you mentioned all this to them? Have you heard from them?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I can take the first question. We talked about this a little in our operational briefing earlier today. We did go after command-and-control facilities and infrastructure, as well as training, berthing, are resupply capabilities of ISIL inside Syria. And frankly, the same can be said for some of the Khorasan targets as well.

We are still assessing. So again, all the indications we have at this point are that these strikes have been very effective. And we showed some video today; we also showed some before-and-after photos of some buildings that we hit. One of them was a finance center. Another was a headquarters building for ISIL near Raqqa. So, again, every indication that we have is that we've been very effective.

But we continue to assess what we call battle damage assessment. The BDA process takes some time. And we're going to take the time to do it right and make sure that we know exactly what we damaged and, frankly, what we didn't. Ninety-five percent of the munitions that we dropped were precision-guided munitions. And that includes the Tomahawk missiles, which are very precise. Which goes a lot for the reason why we haven't seen any claims of collateral damage or civilian casualties thus far, but it also I think gives us a measure of confidence that, again, these strikes were very effective.

So we're still processing it. We're still analyzing it. Every indication we have is that we were very effective. And the idea was that to go after this group -- as my colleague pointed out earlier, this is not -- these are murderers, but they are not just murderers. They do want to grab ground. They want to hold territory. They want infrastructure. They want revenue streams. And so they do need and do use hard targets and facilities. And it was those principal targets that we went after inside Syria.

And I'll defer to my colleagues on the Russia part.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, as it relates to the Russians, we've been very upfront with them about the fact that we intended to take action in Syria. The President obviously communicated that to the world. We've had the opportunity to make our intentions clear in diplomatic channels -- again, not in any way coordinating or notifying with specificity our actions, but the fact that we intended to take this action.

Again, you've seen their public comments on this. I'd make the broader point, which is that for over two years now we have said to the Russians that their support for the Assad regime was going to bring about a growth of extremism inside of Syria; that Assad has no legitimacy to lead the country; that his brutality was creating safe havens for extremists and was increasingly becoming a magnet for foreign fighters.

And this is precisely why -- again, even as we were taking action against ISIL -- we continue to believe that lasting stability in Syria has to come through a political transition in which Bashar al-Assad leaves power, and there is an inclusive governing authority that is formed in that country. Because ultimately, so long as you have a dictator who is brutalizing his people, you're going to have a much more difficult time reaching the political accommodation inside the country that is necessary for stability. So that's why we continue to train and equip the Syrian opposition as a counterweight to ISIL, but also, frankly, as a counterweight to Assad. And the Russians, this is a conversation we've been having with them for some time now.

And again, we've encouraged them to support efforts like the Geneva process that were aimed at fostering an inclusive transition and will ultimately, as the President reiterated in his speech to the nation, continue to do that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And this is an ongoing conversation, obviously. Secretary Kerry spoke with Foreign Minister Lavrov last weekend about CW use, but also about this issue, and he'll have a bilateral meeting with him tomorrow. I'm sure they'll cover a range of topics, but this will certainly be one of them.

Q Hi. Could you address the situation following the number of weeks of strikes in Iraq? You said that ISIL has been pushed back from various areas around the Mosul Dam and Erbil. But have you any figures or whatever showing how the footprint of ISIL in Iraq has been diminished by these strikes? And is there any evidence that their position in the cities has been eroded? Or is that something that's going to have to wait for the Iraqi troops to sort of get their act together?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, first of all, the context in which the President took the initial strikes in Iraq was you had ISIL on the advance threatening Erbil very rapidly, posing a potential threat to Baghdad. The first objective was to stop that momentum. And we were able to stop ISIL in its tracks and essentially create a perimeter around Erbil and, if needed, around Baghdad. And you'll recall that for some weeks the airstrikes were focused principally on those missions of the humanitarian support for certain crises, but also protecting those two cities. We did not expand the mission set beyond that in terms of the air campaign until after the President's speech to the nation.

However, we were able to do a couple things. One was, by stopping the advance of ISIL, we were able to give space for the Peshmerga to regroup, the Iraqi security forces to regroup, for our assessment teams and advisers on the ground to determine what the needs were of those forces, and to ramp up our training and equipping. So we took advantage essentially of the halt in ISIL momentum to reinforce and rearm the Iraqi security forces.

We were also able to help them in going on the offense in some tactical areas, notably retaking the Mosul Dam, the largest dam in Iraq, which is a critical piece of infrastructure.

Going forward now, we've extended the mission set to rolling back ISIL. And so our efforts in the coming weeks and months will be focused on providing that air support while the Iraqi security forces on the ground go on offense.

So in all, we've stopped their momentum. They've suffered some tactical losses. We've been able to reinforce and rearm Iraqi security forces and essentially set the conditions to steadily shrink the space where ISIL operates over time.

And as they are now worried more about their own security, given our airstrikes, they're also less able to pose a threat to some of the populations in Iraq. But of course, they still very much have territory that they hold, and that's what we're focused on.

Q Many Arab leaders have discussed or talked about their concern that Qatar and Turkey are still not really on board, although I know Qatar did take part in some military operations. Turkey is still noticeably out. And there's a fear that they could start kind of criticizing the Arab nations that are participating and try to kind of stir up unrest against the governments that are cooperating.

Can you tell us where Turkey and Qatar stand right now? And is there still a concern that they're basically playing both sides or aren't fully on board?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. First broad comment I'd make is that ISIL, more than anything we've seen in recent years, has been a unifying force in the region. If there's one thing that a very disparate group of nations can agree on, it's that they reject ISIL. And so we don't see any nations in the region who believe that ISIL is worth supporting. And, in fact, we see all the nations in the region agreeing that this is a threat that needs to be dealt with.

Specifically, Qatar is fully a part of this coalition. The fact that they were flying missions with us last night I think demonstrates that. They're committed to staying in this going forward. And we've worked with them to try to make sure that insofar as people are providing assistance and funding to opposition groups in Syria, that we are working together in channeling that assistance to the same, legitimate opposition. And we believe that Qatar is going to work with us in that effort. So we're confident that they are a part of this coalition.

Turkey is still determining what its posture is going to be. Clearly, they were concerned for some time about the hostages that were being held. Now that's resolved, and I think there will be ongoing discussions with Turkey about what they can do. At a minimum, we certainly want their full cooperation in efforts to crack down on a flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria and Iraq. Turkey has been a transit point for some of those foreign fighters, so we've had discussions with them on that issue.

I don't know if you want to add anything to the Turkey discussion.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I think you hit it.

MS. HAYDEN: Okay, thanks, everyone, for joining us. Again, this call is on background with our speakers as senior administration officials. Thanks so much.

END

12:57 P.M. EDT