

Press Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on the Visit of King Abdullah of Jordan

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we will do this on background as three senior administration officials. I'll give a little bit of a topper, just to give you guys some flavor, some of which you're already gotten from Jay and from Eric, on the briefing -- or on the meeting tonight with the King of Jordan. And then I will open it up.

Q I was going to ask you tell us about anything the President may be announcing tonight in terms of deliverables.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. So I don't want to get ahead of anything that the President may or may not announce. I think suffice it to say, as everybody knows, Jordan has an extraordinary burden in hosting almost 600,000 refugees from the Syrian crisis. We are constantly engaged in conversations with them about what more we can do to help support their assistance to these refugees and their own budget and economy as they deal with that.

So I don't want to get ahead of anything the President may or may not announce, but suffice it to say it would be a topic of conversation in the meeting tonight.

So with that, let me just give you a little bit of a laydown. Obviously, as you guys know, the President is going to host a working dinner with King Abdullah this evening at Sunnylands, the Annenberg retreat. Jordan is an invaluable ally, close friend of the United States, and Sunnylands offers a private location, a less formal setting that will allow the President to have a wide-ranging discussion with the King.

The meeting is really -- hosting him at Sunnylands -- a demonstration of both our partnership with Jordan, the warm friendship that the President has with King Abdullah, and our friendship with the people of Jordan. So that's one of the reasons that we picked Sunnylands as a location, as opposed to doing it in Washington where they've met on previous occasions.

The President looks forward to discussing with King Abdullah opportunities to promote peace, prosperity and reform. I would expect that they will discuss opportunities to strengthen the U.S.-Jordan strategic partnership, how to advance our political, economic and security cooperation. And obviously they will continue consultations on Syria and the negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians on finding a durable, comprehensive Middle East peace solution.

The President, I think it's also important to note, will have an opportunity to hear from the King about how the King has advanced Jordan's economic and political stability and some of the reforms that he's been working on since he was last briefed on this by the King in April 2013, when they met, and how the U.S., importantly, can help support the King's vision for the future of Jordan.

The two leaders will also discuss the U.S. commitment to assisting Jordan meet its economic challenges -- and that goes to the question about Syrian refugees in particular. We are committed, as you know, to working with Jordan to support approximately 600,000 Syrian refugees at this point in Jordan and Jordanian host communities, the majority of which now are in host communities as opposed to in the camps. I know that gets sort of a lot of press, but a lot of them are within urban areas in Jordan now also.

Jordan and the United States both strongly support the Geneva II process and efforts to find a political solution to the crisis. And I also expect that they will discuss, as the Vice President did earlier this week with the King, the growing threat of extremists -- the extremist threat emanating from the Syrian crisis. So it's safe to say that will be a topic of discussion.

Also Jordan is a key stakeholder in the Middle East peace process, as you guys know. And we have deep appreciation for the King's support for the negotiations. So the President and the King will be able to review the status of the talks and our efforts to realize a viable, independent Palestinian state alongside a secure Jewish state of Israel -- two nations enjoying self-determination, security and peace.

And again, since we expect this would be wide-ranging, I know some people have asked will they discuss Iran, so I would say yes. I would expect they would touch on the ongoing P5-plus-1 negotiations with Iran to try and reach a comprehensive solution, and the President will have an opportunity to brief the King and sort of bring him up to speed on where we are in that process as well.

So with that, that's sort of a framework of the meeting. I will just open it up for questions and let our two senior administration officials sort of field anything that you have.

Q How much pressure is dealing with the refugee crisis putting on the King's government?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think quite a significant amount of pressure. As my colleague mentioned, there are almost 600,000 refugees -- Syrian refugees in Jordan. The Jordanian government has had to help support them in Jordan, obviously with help from the international community, but a lot of these refugees are

living in Jordanian communities, as my colleague mentioned. They're not all in refugee camps. So that's put significant strain on the Jordanian economy, which is already under significant pressure even before the Syrian conflict.

We also know that the Jordanians face the cutoff of gas from Egypt given that the pipeline has been blown up now several times, which has added to the challenges that Jordan has had meeting its energy demands. So they're on track with the IMF agreement that they reached a couple of years ago, which we think is really important. We've also tried to do as much as possible. We've provided over a billion dollars of assistance in 2012-2013. We're on track to do the same thing in 2014.

Q With a B?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. Total assistance. And we've also urged our other partners to see how they can help the Jordanians, as well -- partners in the Gulf, in Europe and elsewhere -- both as part of an effort to help neighboring states deal with the spillover from the Syrian conflict, but also to help Jordan move forward in its reform agenda, which we strongly support.

Q Can you talk to us about how significant a portion of the jihadis in Syria now you believe to be Jordanian? How big a problem is that? And is that an issue that the President and the King will discuss tonight? How do you sort of quantify that? What's going on there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not sure that we've talked about the breakdown of jihadis in Syria by nationality. I mean, it's a problem --

Q -- a significant component, though, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There are jihadists from a variety of Arab countries. There are also jihadists from outside the Arab world who are fighting in Syria, as we know from some of the videos that we've seen. So I think it's a problem that all of the regional governments know they have to address together.

We're working pretty closely with Jordan, with Turkey, with Lebanon, with Iraq to try to not only stem the flow of foreign fighters into Syria, but also to make sure that we interdict young men who intend to travel to Syria to fight in the conflict before they get to that point of trying to smuggle themselves in, basically.

The Jordanians have been very good partners, though, on counterterrorism in general. We have a very strong relationship across the board. That's been the case for many decades. So I think the conversation between the President and the King is going to be one in which they both share the same goals and will discuss how we can build on the cooperation and support that we've already offered Jordan to do more together to address this growing threat in Syria.

Q So obviously the crisis in Syria has a destabilizing effect to some degree on the region. Would you say that effect is getting worse, or it's kind of destabilizing but it's kind of at the same level?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Clearly, every day that the conflict in Syria goes on brings with it new challenges for the region as a whole. I think the humanitarian crisis, the growing extremism problem, the burdens that the crisis is imposing on neighboring countries to deal with the refugees, those problems as long as the conflict in Syria continues will continue to grow.

And we've made it a specific focus of our policy to try to help these neighboring countries to deal with these burdens. The President met with the Lebanese President last September in New York and announced a significant increase in U.S. assistance to Lebanon. He's meeting with, obviously, the Jordanian King now. We have an ongoing dialogue with the Turks and with the Iraqis. So we understand that this conflict is imposing significant burdens on neighboring countries.

We want to work to address those pressures while at the same time, obviously, trying to move forward to resolve the conflict in Syria as quickly as we can, because these issues aren't going to -- these pressures aren't going to diminish until the underlying conflict in Syria is resolved.

Q Do you think that, as the President goes into this meeting tonight with the King, that he is now beginning to think about changing the strategy in Syria in some way?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President has always said that he -- he's always looking for the best options available with regard to Syria. And ever since this conflict began, I think we have been examining the full range of options. The President has made clear that the one thing we aren't going to do is deploy American troops -- deploy boots on the ground. But short of that, everything else is potentially on the table.

And this is a constant process of evaluating where we are with the Geneva negotiations, with the humanitarian situation. You know about the resolution that we're putting forward at the U.N. with regard to the problem of extremism in Syria. So we monitor these issues on a daily basis and are in touch with the President about different ideas to address them.

Now, that doesn't mean that there's a silver bullet in any of this. Obviously this is an extremely difficult conflict and there are no easy answers, but I think the President has made clear from the beginning that he wants the best ideas that we can develop in the government. And I think that's what Secretary Kerry was referring to the other day.

Q Any of those options more on the table now than they were a month ago?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think what we would say there is the President addressed this in his press conference. He always reserves the right to keep all options on the table, obviously, in the interest of U.S. national security. But we continue

to believe that, at this time, there's not a military solution to this crisis, which is why the emphasis right now is on trying to bring the sides together and foment a political solution and a political transition.

Q Arming the Syrian rebels, for instances, is that under more active consideration now?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, you know that we have been supporting the Syrian opposition for some time. Back in I think it was April of last year we announced an increase in our support of the opposition to include military support to the opposition. So I think the general category of support to the Syrian opposition is certainly one of the areas that we've explored over the past couple of years and I think that will continue to remain on the table.

We have to obviously figure out how to do that in a way that helps advance towards a political solution because, as my colleague said, we don't see a military solution to this conflict, but helping to improve the position of the Syrian opposition, put pressure on the Syrian regime is certainly part of I think the overall calculation.

Q Congress has been funding Jordan at a level that was set six years ago, around \$660 million a year, and then putting in all of these add-ons to deal with these sort of crises -- the Iraqi border, the Syrian border. I guess a new -- the next sort of five-year phase is under discussion this year, right? Is the White House's belief that the U.S. just needs to plan on giving Jordan more money, period, going forward? Or is this not yet -- are you still sort of weighing that? And are they talking money on this trip?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, first of all, we have a five-year memorandum of understanding with Jordan in which the administration agreed to request \$660 million a year -- \$360 million in ESF, \$300 million in FMF. That MOU expires in September of this year. So without getting ahead of what the President and the King may discuss, I think certainly our bilateral relationship, our support for Jordan will be one of the issues that they'll be discussing.

And I think we have worked with Congress over the past couple of years to increase our support to Jordan because they are facing such tremendous pressure from Syria and from the rest of the region -- I mentioned the pipeline from Egypt as well. So the Syrian conflict I don't think anyone expects to conclude in the next few weeks, months. I mean, this is not something that's going to be resolved overnight. So that will certainly factor into our calculations about what we need to do to help Jordan weather this challenge.

Q It sounds like he may be asking for more money but you can't say that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think he's (Senior Administration Official) just going to let his comments stand where they were.

Q Do we know how much it's costing the Jordanian government to have all these refugees in their country?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My colleague reminds me that -- was that a U.N. or --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: -- a USAID estimate this year that it will cost them \$900 million in 2014.

Q -- \$900 million to cover the cost of dealing with the refugees? That's what it will cost Jordan?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Jordan is also facing a \$3.2 billion budget deficit in 2014, which could also be exacerbated, depending on what happens with the Egyptian gas, how much they're able to get this year. It could add billions more to their deficit.

Q The risk of extremists sort of infiltrating the refugee community in Jordan -- I'm wondering if we have any kind of specifics that we're asking for in terms of how Jordan's military and intelligence handles that threat and if we're satisfied with measures they've taken to address it.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I would say, first of all, that Jordan is a very strong counterterrorism partner so we work very closely with them on a wide range of issues and I think ensuring that support that we're both offering to the Syrian refugee community goes to the right people -- refugees that are truly in need -- is certainly one aspect of that.

But at the border, there are also screening procedures in place that the U.N. implements to ensure that those who come across really are in need and don't present a security threat. So I think the Jordanians are very cognizant of this concern and have taken steps to try to address it. And we're very confident of our cooperation with them.

Q Middle East peace and Jordan's role in that -- I understand that a big issue with our negotiations with the Palestinians and the Israelis is security along the Jordan border. What are we asking Jordan to do and what have they told us about the security plan they've presented?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, so first of all, I mean, Jordan, as you said, has a very important role to play on Middle East peace. King Abdullah, his father have long been some of the most high-profile supporters of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Obviously Jordan has a peace treaty with Israel and King Abdullah has been particularly supportive of Secretary Kerry's efforts, the President's efforts to move these negotiations forward. He's met recently with both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas to try to urge them to make the compromises that are necessary for peace. And he's also played a leading role in marshaling support for the Palestinians within the Arab League, which is also very important.

But as you mention, Jordan also has an important role on the ground, given that it shares a border with the West Bank and with Israel. And I think everyone knows that the security arrangements that would accompany a peace agreement are among the most

important issues that are being negotiated now. There has always been particular concern about the Jordan Valley, so, without getting into details of the negotiations, Secretary Kerry, General Allen, who has been leading an effort, as you know, to develop ways to address security requirements for both Israel and the Palestinians, have both been working intensively with not only Israel and the PA but also with Jordan to see if there are ways in which these three countries, with our support, can cooperate to ensure that that border is as secure as possible.

And again, without going into details, I think the Jordanians have been extremely cooperative and extremely forward-leaning in thinking about different ways that we can achieve that goal that are also compatible with, obviously, Israel's security but also Palestinian sovereignty.

Q Is President Obama satisfied with anti-corruption efforts inside the King's government in Jordan? And also, the human rights groups have expressed some concerns about barriers to entry for refugees. If the U.S. is going to help fund these efforts at the border, is the President going to press the King for greater access for refugees into the country?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right. So on the first count, as my colleague said, I think the President and the King will discuss Jordan's reform efforts. We strongly supported the King's reform agenda and want to continue to do so. The King has talked many times, including when he last met with the President in April of last year, about his long-term vision for Jordan as a constitutional monarchy as a model for the Middle East. That's something -- that's a vision that I think we very much share. And certainly one element of that is the fight against corruption. And there have been some important steps that the Jordanian government has taken -- setting up the National Integrity Commission, moving forward with trials of, in some cases, important figures for corruption. We, I think, want to help Jordan move forward to achieve those goals, and I think this general category of reform is something that the President and the King will discuss tonight.

On your question about Syrian refugees, every country takes upon itself obligations to admit refugees in need. Jordan is certainly one of those countries and it's on the front line of the Syrian conflict. So our assistance to Jordan in dealing with this problem has been predicated on the idea that the border will remain open to legitimate refugees. That will continue to be I think a fundamental part of our cooperation and I think also a fundamental lodestar for Jordan's efforts with regard to the Syrian conflict.

But, clearly, there are tremendous pressures. And we're going to need to work closely with Jordan, as will other countries, to ensure that they can meet the burden represented by these hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Q Can you talk --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Two more questions.

Q -- host communities? How does that work? Families taking in families?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So 80 percent of the refugees in Jordan are actually urban refugees, so they're not in the tented communities. In the beginning of the conflict, you saw a lot of attention on Zaatari as a camp and a lot of Syrians were there, but now they're being hosted in communities. So they're in people's homes; they've set up makeshift tents. And so the burdens that places on host communities in terms of their hospitals, schools, electricity, water, that whole public infrastructure that goes into what would be supporting Jordanian communities also has to now support dramatic increases of population.

So our assistance looks not just to help the Syrians that are in now these communities, but also the communities themselves. How do we help make sure the water infrastructure is set so that everyone is able to benefit from water? We have AID programs that have increased school shifts so that students go in the morning and then again in the afternoon. So we're trying to think of creative ways to make sure that all of the populations, not just Syrians but also Jordanians, are helped.

Q Is the U.S. poised to take any Syrian refugees? Like there's a call for this. Is the U.S. preparing to make any announcement on that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think this is an issue that we are continuing to explore. There are no announcements that I know of that we intend to make right now.

Q Of the pressures on Jordan, from the influx of refugees from Syria and whatever economic or political issues that are going on inside the country -- what is the biggest pressure on Jordan now? Or is a combination -- some sort of combination of the two?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think clearly the conflict in Syria is a tremendous source of pressure because 600,000 refugees in a country that is, 5 million, 6 million -- 10 percent of the population -- I mean, that's a huge burden to take on. But Jordan is also in the process of trying to transition its economy from a donor-based economy that is based on the expectation of donor contributions to one that's self-sufficient. That's an important part of their IMF agreement. It's an important part of their effort to diversify their sources of energy away from reliance just on partners in the Gulf and on Egypt towards other sources of energy, and also to modernize their economy so that Jordan can become a hub for technology, for service industries across the Middle East. That's part of the King's vision for putting Jordan on a firm economic as well as political footing for the next 20, 30 years.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So just again, this was on background attributable to senior administration officials. There is no embargo so you're welcome to use it as soon as you would like. We will produce a transcript.

Thanks, everybody.

END 2:55 P.M. EST

