

TRANSCRIPT

Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Press Briefing

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PENTAGON PRESS SECRETARY MAJOR GENERAL PAT RYDER: Hey, good morning, everybody.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Hope everybody had a good Thanksgiving holiday, and I've noticed that this podium is getting smaller. Excellent. So just a few things at the top and then we'll jump right to your questions. First, the Department of Defense is closely monitoring developments in Syria. To echo the statement put out by the NSC over the weekend, let me be clear that the US is in no way involved in the operations you see playing out in and around Aleppo in northwestern Syria, which as you know, are being led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the designated terrorist organization.

In light of the significant potential for harm to civilians and minority groups in the region, the United States, along with other allies and partners, is urging de-escalation. Separately, we remain fully prepared to defend and protect our personnel and assets deployed to the region to include our forces deployed to Syria that are singularly focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS and which remain essential to ensuring that ISIS can never again resurge in Syria.

Shifting gears, Secretary Austin spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defense Rustam Umarov this morning to discuss battlefield dynamics and US security assistance to Ukraine. We'll issue a readout later this morning, which will be available on Defense.gov. And on a related note, you can expect an announcement later today on significant

additional security assistance for Ukraine, which will include key capabilities to support Ukraine's most urgent battlefield needs, including air defense capabilities, munitions for rocket systems and artillery and anti-tank weapons.

Again, we'll have more details to provide on that later today. With that, now that I got Phil standing next to me here, we are ready to begin. Over to you, Phil.

Q: Has this group that took over Aleppo cut ties with al-Qaeda as they claim?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I won't speak for HTS. As you know, they are formerly known as Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. But bottom line is still a designated terrorist organization.

Q: There were reports earlier this morning or yesterday evening that the Conoco field was hit and that the US may have done retaliatory strikes. Can you confirm any of that took place?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: So more from CENTCOM, I would refer you to them. What I'm tracking, Tara, and I don't have the details in front of me, there was some type of, I believe, rocket attack against one of our facilities in Syria. No US personnel injured; no infrastructure damaged. Separately, on the 29th, there was a self-defense strike near MSS Euphrates.

US forces essentially taking out a potential threat to that facility. Again, no US forces injured or infrastructure damaged. Completely unrelated to the ongoing situation in northwestern Syria. And again, as I highlighted in my topper, we're going to take whatever action we need to protect our forces, but two separate incidents.

Again, we're working to get details from CENTCOM, but in the meantime, feel free to reach out.

Q: On the some type of incident that happened, are you saying that that's -- that was the Conoco field, or do you not know, it's not know yet?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I don't know. I don't have that level of detail. What I'm tracking was a self-defense strike near MSS Euphrates. And again, there was an imminent potential threat against US forces and so they took self-defense strikes to defend those forces.

Tom?

Q: Thanks, Pat. What can you tell us about the current troop presence in Syria? How many are there? I know you said that you're taking every measure to protect forces. Has there been any force posture change in any way? And how close to what we've been seeing in Aleppo is the nearest US soldier?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah. So no changes to my knowledge. As you know, we've publicly talked about before, we have approximately 900 US forces deployed to Syria to support the enduring defeat of ISIS mission. That's another reason they're there. These forces are primarily in what I would describe eastern or northeastern Syria as they've been for a while.

So no proximity to what's going on in northwestern Syria near Aleppo and down near Hama. But again, we'll continue to monitor that closely.

Q: CENTCOM announced, I forget his name, but was it the [inaudible] commander who will also be taking part in monitoring the ceasefire? What exactly is the role? And are there any US assets that are going to be used to help monitor it?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah. So first of all, I'd point you to CENTCOM's release over the weekend. Major General Jasper Jeffers. And as I understand it, the general will be based out

of the US embassy in Beirut. We're talking a handful of US personnel supporting him and our efforts to work with State Department and help to coordinate with the IDF, with the LAF, with France and others in terms of making sure that the Lebanese Armed Forces have the training, the capacity, and the strategy development on how Lebanese Armed Forces will provide security in southern Lebanon.

So almost equate it to the, although not given the circumstances, but almost equate it to the traditional security cooperation role and acting as that liaison for the Department of Defense working hand in hand with Mr. Hochstein on that front. So that's where we're at the moment.

Q: So you're not actively monitoring what Hezbollah, or the Israelis are doing?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Right. We don't have US forces on the ground in Lebanon playing any type of monitoring role and don't foresee that this focus will be on enabling the LAF to have the training and the capacity to provide--

Q: What about ISR?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Right now, what I'm telling you is what we're focused on. So again, we'll have updates in the future, but that's what General Jeffers' role as I understand it is right now.

Q: So just to clarify, so is General Jeffers going to be involved in the monitoring mechanism, like the committee that is made out of the five different parties?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Well, again, I'd point you back to CENTCOM's release, which says that he will co-chair along with the Senior Advisor to the president, Amos Hochstein, for the implementation and monitoring mechanism of the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon. As I understand it, the Lebanese Armed Forces and of course the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, they will play a role, but primarily the LAF in terms of providing that security and providing that monitoring mechanism.

What we're doing is working to help ensure the LAF has the training, capacity, and the strategy development in terms of how they will do these things, if that makes sense. So again, yes in the sense that supporting the implementation and monitoring mechanism, but General Jeffers is, again, I understand it, not again actively out on the ground monitoring.

Q: So they will be receiving, based on your understanding, they will be receiving reports from the LAF, the UNIFIL, from the Israelis--

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: IDF.

Q: --and then assess the situation based on what they receive?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Broadly speaking is my understanding. And again, as things develop, we'll keep you posted. But the idea here is to have the LAF on the border filling those gaps that have been now created by virtue of Hezbollah not being there anymore, filling that vacuum, security vacuum to ensure that we are able to monitor and provide security.

Q: So today the LAF issued a statement where they say Israeli drone, UAV, targeted LAF bulldozer in Hermel, which is northeastern part of Lebanon, while it was working inside an LAF position. And in a separate statement two days ago, they said Israel committed numerous violations of the ceasefire on the 27th and the 28th. This morning, Hezbollah launched a number of rockets against an Israeli outpost in the hills, disputed Suba Hills in response and they claim this is an initial response to Israeli violations.

What is your understanding of the ceasefire and how it's holding?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah. So broadly speaking, it's our assessment that despite some of these incidents that we're seeing, the ceasefire is holding. And again, we will continue to work with partners in the region to ensure that the ceasefire has the best potential for succeeding. And part of that is, again, working with partners to help support the LAF and their ability to provide that security.

So again, don't underestimate or underappreciate the tensions in the region, but it was obviously a significant development to enable the ceasefire. And again, from the United States standpoint, we'll do everything we can to enable it to succeed. Let me move on. Jared.

Q: Sir, did the HTS offense, did that take the Pentagon by surprise? Was that anticipated in any way?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Look, Jared, I'm not going to get into what we may or may not know intelligence wise. As you know, Syria has been in a civil war for a while and there on any given day are numerous groups that are fighting against the Syrian regime. The DOD is not involved in that. It is something that we monitor. We're focused on the defeat ISIS mission because of the security vacuum that has been created by this ongoing civil war.

Q: Has any part of the department been in contact with Turkish officials about, say, how far this might go if you know they start coming towards Manbij that could start upsetting some of the positions of the US backed partner force there? We know [inaudible]. I assume the US is going to stay out of that.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: So what I would say, I'd point you back to the NSC statement, that we are in contact with partners throughout the region and I'll just leave it there. Tony.

Q: A couple of things. Will the Trump transition landing team start arriving this week given the kind of confusing agreement signed last week?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: What I would tell you, Tony, is as I understand it, so first of all, there's been no contact yet by the president elect's transition team. My understanding is that there are three MOUs that have to be signed, one of which has been signed, the White House MOU. The other two are an MOU with the Department of Justice and a GSA MOU. So we are waiting word from the federal transition coordinator and the president elect's transition team regarding the next steps to include whether the MOU with DOJ and GSA has been signed.

Q: Sure. Thank you.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: In the meantime, that's where we're at.

Q: Can you review the bidding on the PDA expenditures? Now you've got like \$6.8 billion of authority left to spend through January 20th. Depending on what was released today, what's the reality check within the building or whether you can actually get that kind of authority out in various PDAs between now and January 20th?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah. So I'll just kind of hit some points here that I know the White House has also been emphasizing. So first of all, we will continue to work to allocate the remainder of the Security Assistance Initiative funding which is approximately \$2.21 billion before the transition. And we're also working to allocate and deliver equipment from the remaining \$6.8 billion in presidential drawdown authority.

So the bottom line is at the president's direction, we will spend every dollar that Congress has appropriated for Ukraine and to replenish our stockpiles.

Q: Yeah, but realistically, can you spend that much [inaudible] PDAs by January 20th, or PDAs equaling \$6.8 billion?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah, I'm not going to get into speculate or get into hypotheticals. Again, just emphasizing we understand the urgent situation in Ukraine and the president's direction and will continue to do everything we can to ensure that Ukraine is getting the aid that it needs.

Q: OK. Fair enough. Thanks.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Sir.

Q: Ukrainian President yesterday mentioned that North Korean soldier was killed during the combat operation. Can you confirm the North Korea soldiers have engaged in the combat on the front lines?

So a couple of things on that. To this point, we have not seen North Korean soldiers actively engaging in offensive combat operations on the front lines. We do know that they have been integrated into Russian units in many cases and we are aware of reports of DPRK soldiers being killed as a result of Ukrainian strikes against Russian facilities.

Don't have a number for you to provide, but largely speaking, so far, we've not seen the DPRK engaging in offensive combat operations, although we do expect at a certain point in time that that will very likely happen.

Q: One more. The Russian defense minister visited North Korea last week. So what topic do you think were discussed and do you have a comment on this visit?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I don't have a comment on the visit. I'd refer you to the Russian Ministry of Defense or North Korea and they're incredibly responsive public relations department.

Q: Just a quick clarification. So the \$2.21 billion is USAI?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Correct.

Q: OK. Just want to make sure. Thank you.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Thanks.

Q: Thank you, General. Back to Syria. According to local media reports and our correspondents in northeastern Syria, SDF are preparing to launch an operation in seven villages controlled by al-Assad regime near Conoco oil field. Are you tracking such activities? Would the Pentagon support potential operation by SDF?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: So as I'm sure you can appreciate, we are in contact with the SDF as they are one of our key partners on the enduring defeat of ISIS mission. I won't speak for the SDF or talk about their potential future operations other than to say that again, we will continue to coordinate closely when it comes to the threat of ISIS and ensuring that they're not able to resurge throughout Syria or into Iraq. I'll just leave it there.

Q: Any updates on Russian recruiting for Yemen? Have you seen anything more significant in the last week or confirmed any of the reports you were trying to run down?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: No updates to provide. Yeah, it kind of status quo in that regard. Thanks.

Q: Thank you. Is there any UAS or drones in this package for Ukraine today?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Much more to follow later on today.

Q: And is there anything that you guys haven't seen before that you're going to be sending over in the days to come?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I'll let the release speak for itself, so I'll let you take a look at that.

Q: Back on Syria, given the instability, has there been any direction to either US forces or US contractors in Syria to maybe pull back or have a more conservative profile, etc., especially around the oil fields?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah. I'm not tracking anything like that. Again, the forces that we have that are there are focused on the defeat ISIS mission. They continue to conduct that mission. We're obviously monitoring the situation, which is on the other side of Syria, but as of right now, I'm not aware of any changes in our force posture or mission focus.

All right. Time for a couple more.

Q: Thanks. With Syria, has there been any communication with Russia along any of the secured lines as activity picks up? And then with the defeat ISIS mission, are you tracking any new developments with ISIS perhaps looking to take advantage of the overall instability and fighting across Syria?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: On your last question, I'm not aware of any significant uptick in terms of what we've already been seeing as it relates to ISIS. And again, we'll continue to stay very focused on that. My understanding is that the CJTFOIR commander has used the hotline that we have with Russia to ensure that we have open lines of communication given the fact that we do have forces operating in fairly close proximity as it relates geographically to Syria.

I won't go into details about those conversations other than we have that communication mechanism to prevent potential miscalculation. And again, we'll continue to communicate with countries throughout the region as we continue to monitor in this developing situation.

Q: Yeah, General. You say that the US forces are pushed to the northeast and what's happening now is happening in the northwest. However, the SDF have had to pull back from areas they've come under attack from HTS. They're also worried about Turkish backed groups as are main allies. Are you saying the United States isn't there to protect the SDF, or?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: So the US is in Syria to conduct the enduring defeat of ISIS. What you're referring to is the fact that SDF, there are Kurdish populations up in northwestern Syria. There is no US presence in terms of US military up there deployed as part of this mission. Again, I won't speak for the SDF, but the reason and we've been very clear on this, the reason that we have US forces deployed to Syria is to support the enduring defeat of ISIS mission and of which the SDF are Significant partners in that.

Q: But at the same time, there have been a number of airstrikes against Iranian backed militias in that region as well from CENTCOM, which is not an ISIS mission.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I'd have to go back and look, Charlie. If there have been airstrikes in that region, it's been pretty rare. We've primarily been focused down in northeast eastern part where US forces are operating when our forces have been threatened.

Q: Right at sort of Camp Omar, and things that we've been talking about. Which is where the SDF have gotten [inaudible].

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah, I don't have--again, there's been no change in mission is the bottom line for the US when it comes to our deployment to Syria. Again, if you look at Syria writ large and you look at the situation there going back to 2011, it's obviously very

complex. And you throw in the Counter-ISIS campaign and what you saw in terms of various groups in the region. There's no debating the fact that it's a complex environment. And that security vacuum created the conditions by which ISIS was able to capitalize on, and at one point, own significant swaths of Syria and part of Iraq. That is why US forces deployed to the region to counter ISIS. That's what we stay focused on, also recognizing the fact that the Syrian regime has significant challenges right now in terms of their own security and stability, which I won't comment other than, again, we urge de-escalation, and we'll continue to protect our forces if they're threatened--

Q: Sorry. Doesn't part of that mission sort of suggest that we, the United States, has a responsibility to protect allies, in this case the SDF?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Again, Charlie, look, our focus in Syria is on the enduring defeat of ISIS, working alongside partners like SDF, but that is what our mission is in Syria, and I'll just leave it there.

Q: General, I have a request and a follow up. Request in terms of the CENTCOM statements on these strikes. Can we have, I mean, more transparency who's being targeted and where being targeted? We ask about attacks on--like the other day, I asked about an attack that was claimed in local media in Syria against the US forces in Green Village.

I was told nothing happened. Later on CENTCOM issued a statement saying the attack in response to Iran aligned militia. Iran aligned militia is a very vague term and where and when? I mean these are important details and I think important for us as press and it's important for the US people to understand what their government is doing in a foreign country. So that's--I'll just leave it there.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: No, I appreciate it. Definitely take that. And as we've talked about before, again, trying to balance the operational security concerns with the fact that US troops in harm's way, try to be as transparent as we can, but I will take that back and we'll continue having those discussions--

Q: And the follow up, in terms of the violations of ceasefire that you acknowledge, have you been in touch with the Israeli side and the Lebanese government as well on these violations?

MAJ. GEN. RYDER: I'd refer you to State Department for any of the diplomatic discussions. Again, what I'm laying out for you is the Department of Defense perspective and our focus. And our focus right now is on several things. One, again working with the IDF, the LAF, France and other partners in the region to implement a monitoring mechanism and the training capacity of the LAF. The other, we're going to continue to coordinate with the IDF as it relates to getting humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

Broadly speaking, the US is also very focused on implementation of a ceasefire in Gaza and returning the hostages. So we'll stay very focused on that. And then lastly, supporting Israel's right to defend itself. And so I'll just leave it there.

All right. Thanks very much, everybody. Appreciate it.

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