

Press Call by Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications, and Jeff Prescott, Senior Director for the Middle East, NSC, on the Upcoming Visit of King Salman of Saudi Arabia

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MR. PRICE: Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for joining this call. Wanted to offer an opportunity to preview the visit on Friday of King Salman of Saudi Arabia. This call will be on the record but it will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. We would ask that you don't tweet or post on social media until the call is concluded.

Today, we have two senior administration officials. First, we have Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications. We also have Jeff Prescott, who is NSC Senior Director for Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Gulf.

So with that, just a reminder this call is on the record but embargoed until the conclusion. And I will turn it over to Ben to kick it off.

MR. RHODES: Thanks, everybody. I'll just make a few brief comments and then turn it over to Jeff here.

This is an important visit at an important time with the many developments in the region where we have a shared interest with Saudi Arabia and with the recent conclusion of the Iran deal, and the follow up on the Camp David summit with Saudi Arabia and our other Gulf partners.

I'd just note that the President last met King Salman when he visited Saudi Arabia earlier this year, had a good discussion there. They've since spoken by phone. Saudi Arabia was represented at the Camp David summit by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, among others. And this visit will be an opportunity for the President to follow up on the progress we're making on the Camp

David agenda, to discuss the Iran deal, and also our efforts to push back against malign Iranian activities in the region, but also, of course, to discuss a full range of regional issues. And I'll turn it over to Jeff to kind of give you a flavor of that agenda.

MR. PRESCOTT: Thanks, Ben. And as Ben mentioned, this will be the first meeting since the President traveled to Saudi Arabia in January. Obviously, the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is longstanding and deep and broad, and we expect the two leaders will have a lot to talk about in their meeting.

Even as we work together to tackle challenges in the region -- security and stability -- we also have, of course, a very longstanding, long-established collaboration across a whole range of issues, including education, commerce, health, energy and other issues. And so we see this meeting as an opportunity to ensure that we're continuing to consult closely and align our approaches on a range of issues.

And this will be an opportunity I think for the President and King Salman to discuss ways that we can strengthen our partnership and cooperation going forward. So we're expecting an open, wide-ranging, candid conversation between the two leaders. Obviously, as Ben mentioned, we expect the President will -- and the King will want to talk about the conclusion of the Iran negotiations and the Iran deal. We've obviously been consulting closely with our partners in Saudi Arabia throughout this process and have appreciated their expressions of support for the JCPOA and our effort to address Iran's nuclear program. And we expect the two leaders will discuss ways to continue to promote security in the region, including by, as Ben mentioned, coordinating more closely to address Iran's destabilizing activities in the region, as well as the broader threat from extremism and terrorism in the region, to include, importantly, the counter-ISIL campaign and threats from al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

So we'll be expecting the two leaders to discuss, obviously, our approaches to these issues and others, including regional conflict, where I think we have a shared urgency on the need to address them, including Yemen, Syria, and, of course, efforts not only in those two places but across the region -- political efforts to resolve many of the conflicts and challenges we've seen across the region.

Obviously, the meeting later this week will be a good opportunity for the President and King Salman to review the work that we've done to follow up the Camp David meeting that the President hosted in May, including a number of working-level groups from our departments and agencies across the U.S. government that have met over the last several months to work on the details of U.S. and the GCC cooperation across the Gulf countries on counterterrorism, on border security, in terms of military planning and training, procurement, and a range of other areas.

And obviously, Secretary of State John Kerry has been in the region meeting with his Gulf counterparts in recent weeks. Secretary of Defense Carter was in Saudi Arabia recently. And we expect, of course, later in the month, to have a ministerial-level meeting of the

U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation forum, a chance to check in on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly to review progress, and really to build on the efforts that the President will be able to continue with in the course of the meeting later this week.

Obviously, throughout these efforts, we've been looking to support Saudi efforts to build their own capabilities and to build their own capacity to act in terms of promoting security in the region in a responsible way to pursue resolutions to conflicts and avenues to alleviate suffering and offer over time the prospect of true prosperity through trade, education, technology to people across the region. And we expect the meetings later this week to focus on that as well.

Finally, I think it's just worth mentioning that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia's relationship is really rooted in this sort of shared strategic objective we have in our commitment to the region. This goes on for many decades. We obviously don't agree on every detail of our respective policy approaches, but when we do disagree, we discuss these issues frankly and directly, and seek ways to bridge gaps and work towards shared goals. And I expect that spirit of a very candid relationship between friends will come through in these meetings later this week as it has in the President's -- and in his phone calls with the King over the last few months.

So with that, why don't we open it up for your questions?

Q What is the White House reaction to securing enough votes to ensure the Iran nuclear deal can survive a congressional vote? And is the White House expecting the King to indicate his support for the deal while in Washington?

MR. RHODES: Well, when the President announced the completion of the Iran negotiations, he made clear that his goal was to assure that the Iran deal could be implemented. And he also made clear that he would veto any legislative effort in preventing implementation of the Iran deal.

Since then, we have exhaustively briefed members of Congress. We've answered many questions. We've provided many briefings. And we've been very heartened by the steady increase in support over the last several weeks.

Despite the very aggressive opposition to the deal, we have seen members study the facts, and those members who started from a place of being undecided have increasingly broken in favor of the deal. And I think it points out the simple fact that the more people get to know about the details of the Iran deal, the more likely they are to support it.

So we welcomed the announced support of every single member of the House and Senate who have come out for the Iran deal over the last several weeks. We certainly welcome the support from Senator Mikulski today, who has a long record of being strong on issues related to national security, nuclear weapons, support for Israel.

And, again, to us, we remain focused on the goal the President said at the outset of this debate, which is ensuring that we can implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. At the same time, we think that every vote counts. So we are going to continue to make

our case to those remaining undecided members of the House and Senate. We think every vote is equal here, so even as this is an important milestone, we're going to continue our exhaustive efforts to brief undecided members of Congress. And then we'd hope to continue to see the growing support that has characterized the month of August as we continue to move into the month of September.

With respect to the Saudis, they have expressed support for the Iran deal. The Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, has done so in statements recently. We've welcomed that support. At the same time, they've expressed concerns about other Iranian activities in the region, which are understandable, given Iran's destabilizing actions in places like Yemen, Syria and other countries. And so we're going to continue to be focused on discussing with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners how we can build more effective capabilities and cooperation to counter that Iranian activity.

So we're not -- we're looking for Saudi Arabia I think to continue to express the positions that they have over the last several weeks, which is noting comfort with the Iran deal as it relates to the nuclear issue, but having very real concerns about other Iranian behavior in the region. And I think that's what will shape the context of the discussion on Iran with the King.

Next question.

Q What, if anything, in tangible terms will the President have to say to reassure King Salman of the U.S. commitment to the Gulf and Saudi security and to counter this -- Iran's regional misconduct once some of its assets are freed up? I know Salman has given some cautious support, but he has expressed misgivings. And on top of that, I wondered if on the agenda that you all already laid out to what extent, if any, will oil markets, oil prices or the stability of oil, of energy markets be discussed?

MR. RHODES: Just quickly on the second question, I think energy is a regular issue of discussion between the United States and Saudi Arabia, so I'm sure that it will come up in that context. I wouldn't suggest that it was going to be foremost on the agenda, but I think it's a key part of our longstanding relationship with Saudi Arabia and will I think be discussed in a routine matter, as it frequently is in these meetings.

On the first question, look, we understand that Saudi Arabia has concerns about Iran's behavior in the region. We understand that they have concerns about what Iran could do as their economy may perhaps improve along with sanctions relief. We discussed this at length at Camp David. The President at Camp David went through our assessment that when you look at what we estimate is in the neighborhood of \$56 billion in assets that Iran will be able to access as they begin to get sanctions relief when completing its key nuclear steps -- we went through our assessment that Iran is in such a significant economic hole that it is our belief that they are likely to spend that money on issues related to improving their economy and the standard of living for their own people.

However, we also acknowledge the fact that we need to ensure that we're doing everything we can to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. And there's always a risk that Iran could spend funds on those nefarious activities.

At the same time, there's no risk at all -- parity when it relates to defense budgets. So, for instance, the defense budget of our Gulf partners is more than eight times that of Iran. And there's no amount of sanctions relief that could even begin to close that gap.

But what we need to do is develop capabilities to deal with the asymmetric threats that Iran poses, which are not very expensive. So we've been focused on areas like maritime security, cybersecurity, ballistic missile defense, Special Forces capability, intelligence cooperation and sharing -- these are the types of areas where if we can better coordinate with our Gulf partners, we can make a better difference in pushing back against some of Iran's destabilized activities.

So this is not just a diagnosis of the challenges in the region. I think we're focused on very concrete capabilities that can enhance our Gulf partners, including Saudi Arabia, in working together and with us to push back against those Iranian activities that concern us.

I don't know if you have something to add to that.

MR. PRESCOTT: Well, Ben, I would just add one additional note, which is to say this is a conversation that is not merely something that began -- obviously been a feature of our longstanding security cooperation. But the President really focused on these areas that you just mentioned in terms of asymmetric threats and our Gulf partners' capabilities to address those threats at the Camp David summit. And it's a conversation that we've continued under the radar in these working-group meetings -- really rolling up our sleeves with our experts in departments and agencies to build out a whole range of capabilities in the areas that you mentioned, including border security, maritime security, cybersecurity, counterterrorism and other areas.

And so the President and the King will have an opportunity to check in on the progress of those efforts, but we have a number of engagements coming up after this meeting and beyond where we're really building these capabilities with our partners, including the Saudis.

Q Hi, (inaudible) about enhancing capabilities of the Saudis, and Reuters reported today that they are near a deal for two new Lockheed warheads. Will that be one of the deliverables out of the meeting? And then separately, who else do you expect to accompany the King as part of the Saudi delegation?

MR. RHODES: On the first one, I don't anticipate that we're going to have new announcements along those lines at this meeting. There are obviously many different Saudi defense capabilities and relationships to U.S. contractors that are ongoing. So that's not to say that there are not discussions in different areas, but we are not aiming to make announcements along those lines.

One of the things I would say actually is on this capabilities point, there are a lot of I think significant systems and heavy weapons that have characterized the U.S.-Saudi defense procurement relationship when you talk about planes and ships. At the same time, what we're seeing is those large-scale conventional capabilities are important, but they are not sufficient to counter the threats that we face in the region, which come from the types of Iranian meddling that we've seen in different countries, and also that come from terrorist organizations like ISIL that also use asymmetric tactics, which is why we're seeking to broaden this conversation from those large-scale systems, which are important and will continue to characterize our relationship to these more nimble 21st-century capabilities in areas like cyber and maritime and special forces.

So again, no new announcements there, but those are certainly issues that we discuss on an ongoing basis with the Saudis.

The second question was -- the delegation. I would refer you to the Saudis. They'd be best positioned I think to put out their full delegation. We would expect the King to travel with a number of advisors. And we engage regularly across our foreign and defense ministries, but also our economic agencies as well, so we would expect the King to have a delegation that touches upon different elements of Saudi-U.S. cooperation.

Q Hi, everybody. My question is basically a -- it seems like the Saudis are going to be asking us for a lot of things, and they have been. But what are we going to ask them? What are we going to pressure them to do? What's our leverage here? Thanks.

MR. RHODES: I'll start, and then Jeff may want to add here. Look, the things that we're talking about are profoundly in our own interest. So to the extent that Saudi Arabia is enhancing its capabilities along the lines that we've discussed, that is going to help not just Saudi and Gulf interests, that's going to help American interests as those capabilities are utilized against ISIL, for instance, or are utilized in promoting stability in the region.

So when we talk about what we can do in the follow-on to Camp David, we see that as serving our interests. The President has often spoken about the fact that the United States can't solve all the problems in the Middle East by ourselves. We want partners stepping up to the plate and enhancing their own abilities to counterterrorism and (inaudible) security.

I think we'll also want to have a very significant set of discussions on conflicts like Syria and Yemen where we would support and share many of the objectives that Saudi Arabia has. At the same time, we want to make sure that we're pursuing both military and political strategies in both of those cases, and that we are both committing the humanitarian assistance necessary to deal with grave situations in again both Syria and Yemen.

Jeff, you want to add to that?

MR. PRESCOTT: I think that's right. The only thing I would add, Ben, is just that when we go back to the conversations that the President had with his Gulf counterparts at Camp David and look at the cooperation that we've got underway and that we'll be enhancing by

this visit, the goal of building these capabilities is both to address some of the asymmetric threats that we see in the region, but also to enable our Gulf partners not only to play a positive role in resolving regional disputes and regional conflicts in an effective way, and to do so from a position of strength so that our partners are in a position to help deescalate some of the conflicts in the region.

That's the goal I think we share. It's a strategic goal I think the President and the King will have an opportunity to talk about. And they'll be able to go into some detail about regional conflicts, including Yemen and Syria.

MR. RHODES: Yes, and one other specific example, for instance, is Iraq, where for many years Saudi Arabia had very frosty relations with the Maliki-led government in Baghdad. Since Prime Minister Abadi took office you have seen much greater engagement between the government of Saudi Arabia and the government of Iraq. We believe that's constructive. It sends a message, again, of support for Iraq unity and efforts to bring back stability.

Saudi Arabia has significant relationships in Iraq that can be utilized to support the ongoing effort against ISIL. We've been very focused, for instance, on Anbar Province and deepening our support with -- community, including Sunni tribal communities. Saudi Arabia I think can be a constructive voice in encouraging cooperation across different Iraqi communities.

So whether it's Yemen, Iraq, Syria, we want to make sure that we have, again, military strategies, but also political strategies that support a resolution of conflict, and again, humanitarian assistance for the many people who are in need. If you look at Yemen, for instance, there has been a deteriorating humanitarian situation for populations inside of Yemen in Saudi Arabia and others we've worked alongside in terms of trying to provide humanitarian assistance that can reach those who are in need.

Q Yes, can you hear me?

MR. RHODES: Yes, we got you.

Q Yes, thank you. I just wanted to ask, speaking of Yemen, do you expect the President to express concern or even alarm about the civilian casualties that have been inflicted in Yemen by Saudi airstrikes? Do you anticipate a frank discussion on the consequences of that military intervention?

MR. PRESCOTT: Well, thanks. I think it's a good question. I do think we will see expression of concern. We're deeply concerned about, in particular, the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Yemen. And what we have been doing is urging all the parties involved, including the Yemeni government, coalition members and others, to take steps to allow for unfettered humanitarian access to all parts of Yemen, to enable the operation of the Red Sea ports to humanitarian and commercial traffic, and to avoid damage to Yemeni infrastructure that's used in the delivery of assistance and other goods and services. And of course, that includes a call on all parties to use restraint in terms of the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

That said, I think we are -- and I believe we will see full agreement from our Saudi partners -- that there's no military solution to the crisis in Yemen. We all need to continue to work towards reaching a political solution based on the GCC Initiative, which, of course, includes the Saudis, the outcomes of the Yemeni national dialogue, and, obviously, relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions, including U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216.

And so what we've been doing is fully supporting the U.N. effort at mediation to work with the Yemeni government, all the Yemeni parties and regional stakeholders in pursuit of that negotiated solution. So I think the President and the King will have an opportunity to obviously discuss this issue in depth. And I expect the President will express the concerns that we have about the urgent need to find a resolution to this crisis.

Q Thanks. Just first of all, I wanted to follow up on Dan's question about Yemen. You've implored the Saudis a couple of times already to kind of be careful with civilian casualties and targets that may cause problems for civilians. Have you seen their behavior change at all? Have you seen their targeting change? Has there been any impact from those calls at all?

And secondly, on Syria, what do you see as a kind of bigger role for -- or what role could the Saudis play in Syria? You see the Iranians and the U.N. are coming forward with peace plans. And there are some suggestions that the Russians are actually operating in Syria now. Could the Saudis play a constructive role there, do you think?

MR. RHODES: Well, I'll start and Jeff if you want to add. On your second question, Saudi Arabia has obviously been a part of the counter-ISIL coalition that includes taking direct action in Syria against ISIL targets. At the same time, as you mention, we believe fundamentally that any longstanding stability in Syria is going to have to come through a political resolution. And we've engaged with Saudi Arabia in a couple of important ways in that regard.

One is in terms of seeking to align our support for the Syrian opposition, we want to make sure that when we are working with our Gulf partners and with Turkey and other countries who have an interest in supporting a return to stability inside of Syria that we have a common view in terms of which opposition deserves our support and that we're seeking to isolate more extremist elements of the opposition. And that's been an ongoing conversation with Saudi Arabia even as we've been engaged in the military and counterterrorism effort against ISIL.

But secondly, we also want to galvanize the political process and dialogue inside the country. We have seen increased interest from Russia in recent months, I think rooted in the fact that we continue to have a security situation. The Assad regime has lost significant territory in recent months and there's a risk, of course -- the longer the conflict goes on, the greater the human suffering. And we've seen the greater risk of extremism.

So for instance, Saudi Arabia recently joined an unusual trilateral meeting with the United States and Russia with Secretary Kerry in Doha -- been focused in part on the question of how can we get more progress on a political resolution inside of the country. So I think that we'll certainly want to discuss those efforts with the King -- the political process in pursuit of a resolution, support for the opposition, and ongoing counter-ISIL efforts.

With respect to Yemen, we have very deep concerns. We are able, because it's the nature of our relationship, to again provide certain types of support to the efforts in Yemen, but also, I think, to be frank, when we believe that more care needs to be taken to avoid civilian casualties. And that will be an ongoing position that we take.

And look, we have to hold all of ourselves to the highest possible standard when it relates to preventing civilian deaths, and that will continue to be a part of our dialogue as it relates to Yemen.

Q Hi. Hopefully you can hear me this time. Sorry, there was a problem with the phone; it cut off. Don't worry, I didn't fall asleep or anything. Thanks for doing this.

My first question is about -- Secretary Kerry mentioned it today, trying to bolster the cooperation of Gulf States on the Iran deal. You mentioned also the transfer of some equipment. Do you expect there to be many more sales? It seems like -- missiles or even fighter jets to the Gulf States over the next year or so. And do you see that as entirely a good thing?

And also, following the agreement, it was Saudi Arabia -- even some within their government -- who mentioned that if Iran was going to show any indications of moving toward a weapon, that Saudi Arabia would have no choice but to develop or obtain their own nuclear weapon. And it kind of raised a lot of eyebrows, especially considering how many concerns there have been about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and the administration wanting to dissuade people from thinking that.

So has the President had conversations with the Saudis about those kinds of comments? And is that something that's going to be talked about on this trip as well? Thanks.

MR. RHODES: Look, the Saudis have never given us any indication that they were going to move in that type of direction. And the fact of the matter is, we think the world that is most likely to bring about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East is a world in which there's no deal, because then there are no constraints on the Iranian nuclear program. And if we did see Iran move within a period of months to approaching breakout capacity for fissile material, it could be the case that countries like Saudi Arabia feel the need to develop their own indigenous capability. And we have the initiation of a nuclear arms race in the most dangerous and volatile region of the world at this point.

So one reason why we've made the case to Congress to support this deal is that if Congress were to kill this deal, we could be looking at a fairly near-term situation in the Middle East where other countries feel the need to pursue their own nuclear capability to counter an Iranian capability.

In the context of a deal, we do not think it is necessary for the countries to make that decision, because there will be the very significant and meaningful constraints on the Iranian nuclear program for at least the next 15 years, and a permanent prohibition on Iran having a nuclear weapons program that is verified by our inspections team.

So again, we have not heard from the Saudis that they are going to move in the direction that some have speculated. We don't believe it's necessary in a world in which there is an Iran deal. We will discuss the Iran deal and how it will be implemented. And one of the benefits of the deal that we will lay out to the Saudis again is the verification regime, which can give confidence that Iran is meeting its commitments.

On your first point, I would expect there to be continued sales in the years ahead. That's been a longstanding characteristic of our relationship with -- in the Gulf States. It's not a world -- it's not happening because of the Iran deal; we've had, again, longstanding support for the security of our Gulf partners, and they've had longstanding procurement relationships with U.S. defense companies.

I think what will evolve, as we've said, is that it not just be focused on aircraft and ships, but it will increasingly be focused on new capabilities, and you mentioned missile defense as one of them. Absolutely, we believe that developing ballistic missile defense is going to be an important part of the Saudi defense picture.

And frankly, one of the things we've talked about is, looking across the GCC countries and having -- in terms of missile defense. So how can we take not just the capability of Saudi Arabia and enhance them, but how can we work with our Gulf partners so that when they are purchasing and deploying these types of systems they're integrated in a way that contributes to the shared security of the Gulf region.

And again, that's an important point as it relates to any concerns about the Iranian ballistic missile program, which has been a source of concern for both us and the Gulf States.

Well, thanks, everybody, for joining the call. And we'll look forward to the visit with King Salman on Friday.

END

5:13 P.M. EDT