

Remarks by President Obama and His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan After Bilateral Meeting

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, it's wonderful to be back with one of our most stalwart allies in the world, King Abdullah of Jordan, and his delegation. We've had, as usual, excellent consultation about the enormous challenges that His Majesty and the Jordanian people face in a very difficult time, in a very difficult neighborhood.

We spent the bulk of our discussion around the situation in Syria, Iraq, and our joint efforts to combat ISIL. Jordan has been an outstanding partner in that process. As I've said publicly, we have seen progress in pushing back against ISIL in territory both in Iraq and now in some portions of Syria. But a lot of work remains to be done. And so the coordination between our nations and other coalition partners is absolutely critical. And Jordan has made enormous contribution. Jordan is a country that punches above its weight when it comes to the fight against ISIL.

With respect to Syria, I briefed him on the conversations that I've had with President Putin and the cessation of hostilities agreement that has been put in place. We are very cautious about raising expectations on this. The situation on ground is difficult, but we have seen modest progress over the course of the last week or so with respect to humanitarian access to populations that are threatened.

If, over the next several weeks, we can see some lessening of the violence that's been wracking that country, then that provides us a basis to build a longer-term ceasefire both in the north and the south, and allows us to move forward on the political transition that ultimately is going to be necessary to bring an end to the civil war in Syria.

It also would allow us, then, to focus all of our efforts -- all the parties in the entire world community, including Russia -- in going after ISIL, something that right now they are not doing and are not focused on.

We talked about refugees and the burden that Jordan, as well as other countries in the region, are bearing. The Jordanian people have been extraordinarily generous in accommodating the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have been fleeing the fighting, and the United States is the leading contributor to humanitarian efforts to house and provide basic care to these refugees. But the numbers continue to grow. And I expressed to His Majesty our commitment to make sure that as they continue to be open to helping people in need, they will have a strong partner in the United States and we will make sure that our money is where our mouth is in terms of looking after these refugee populations.

In addition, I'm proud of the both economic and military assistance that we have consistently provided to Jordan. Considering everything that Jordan is doing essentially for the region and the world, and the strains that this has placed their economy under, I think it's important for them to know that the United States is there every step of the way.

Finally, we discussed the situation in Israel and the West Bank, and the increasing tensions that exist between Israelis and Palestinians there. His Majesty has been a critical component of reducing some of the immediate sources of tension around the Temple Mount and visits there. But we continue to agree that it's important for us to provide both sides a sense of possibility and hope, and not simply despair. That's hard to do. And so we have explored ideas in terms of how we can make progress. But His Majesty has continued to be a voice of reason and moderation and tolerance for all the parties concerned in this issue. And we very much appreciate his partnership in the process.

So we're lucky to have a friend like Jordan. Hopefully, they feel that the United States has been with them during these very difficult times. The good news is, is that, whether it's fighting ISIL, reducing the violence in Syria and trying to get that country on a track for political reconciliation, trying to bring Israelis and Palestinians to recognize their shared interest in peace -- on all these issues, our countries have been in sync. And that will continue as long as I'm President and long after I'm gone, thanks to the leadership of His Majesty.

Appreciate you being here.

HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH: Mr. President, thank you very much for really your kind words. I'm delighted to be back here in Washington. And I just wanted to echo the kind words that the President has just said.

We are so grateful for the support that you've shown me and our people, our country. Truly, no country other than the United States has given us so much support -- whether it's to the economy so that we can take the challenge of refugees to our country, but also to the military and security so that we can defend our borders, but also secure our people. The help that we've gotten from you, Mr. President, from your administration, from the Congress, and the people of the United States is something that is very difficult to express in any words. And we are very, very grateful for that.

I'm also here to thank the President for his tremendous leadership in dealing with the threat of ISIS -- Daesh -- specifically when it comes to the challenges in Syria. We are all working together as part of the international team to try to find, as the President said, a political solution. Yet, at the same time, the threat of Daesh is one that has taken some of our consultations today on how do we defeat Daesh as quickly as possible -- not only in Syria, but also to reach out to our Iraqi brethren to make sure that they too are part of this struggle against extremism.

I do think that we are moving in the right direction. The coordination with the United States is exceptional. And again, I'd like to thank you, sir, and all your institutions for working very closely with us in this respect.

So I'm actually leaving Washington very optimistic about the level of support from the United States, the leadership that the President has shown on the issue of Syria. And hopefully, the discussions between yourself and the Russians will move the process in the right direction. But also looking at the larger picture when we're looking at the challenge of ISIS and their franchises around the world, I think that the future looks much better with the leadership of the United States.

We did, again, as the President said, speak about bringing hope to the Israelis and Palestinians. These are obviously challenging times, but hope is something that we have to bring both sides. And we did talk about this issue and to see what we can do in 2016 to bring the momentum in the right direction.

But I actually am here just to thank the President and the American people for all the support they've given for our country and how truly grateful I am for your leadership, sir, for your support to me and my people.

Q Mr. President, can you respond to Mitch McConnell's comments yesterday about your Supreme Court choices and the fact that they're not planning on holding a hearing whatsoever?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, the Constitution says that I nominate candidates for the Supreme Court when there's a vacancy, and that the Senate exercises its constitutional role in advise and consent. I'm going to do my job. We are going to go through a process, as we have done in two previous Supreme Court vacancies, to identify an outstanding candidate that has impeccable legal credentials and would bring the kind of ability and compassion and objectivity and legal reasoning to the Court that the Highest Court in the Land demands.

One side made the nomination, and then Leader McConnell and all the members of the Senate are going to make a decision about how do they fulfill their constitutional responsibilities. I recognize the politics are hard for them, because the easier thing to do is to give in to the most extreme voices within their party and stand pat and do nothing. But that's not our job. Our job is to fulfill our constitutional duties.

And so my hope and expectation is that once there is an actual nominee and once this is no longer an abstraction, that those on the Judiciary Committee recognize that their job is to give this person a hearing, to show the courtesy of meeting with them. They are then free to vote whatever their conscience dictates as to whether this person is qualified or not. In the meantime, the American people are going to have the ability to gauge whether the person I've nominated is well within the mainstream, is a good jurist, is somebody who's worthy to sit on the Supreme Court.

And I think it will be very difficult for Mr. McConnell to explain how, if the public concludes that this person is very well qualified, that the Senate should stand in the way simply for political reasons. We'll see what happens. And I think the situation may evolve over time. I don't expect Mitch McConnell to say that is the case today. I don't expect any member of the Republican caucus to stick their head out at the moment and say that. But let's see how the public responds to the nominee that we put forward.

The one thing I think is important to dispel is any notion that somehow this is some well-established tradition, or some constitutional principle that a President in his last year of office cannot fill the Supreme Court vacancy. It's not in the text of the Constitution.

Ironically, these are Republicans who say they believe in reading the text of the Constitution and focusing on the intent of the Constitution. But none of the Founding Fathers thought that when it comes to the President carrying out his duties, he should do it for three years and then on the last year stop doing it.

There's an argument that, well, the President shouldn't do this because he is a lame duck. Well, the truth of the matter is, is that traditionally the term "lame duck" refers to the two or three months after an election has taken place in which a new President is about to be sworn in. I've got a year to go. I don't think they would approve of me abdicating on my duties as Commander-in-Chief and to stop doing all the other work that I got to do. Well, this is part of my job.

There's been arguments that for 80 years this has been the tradition. Well, that's not the case. Justice Kennedy was approved after being nominated by Ronald Reagan in Ronald Reagan's last year of office. They say, well, that's different because he had been nominated in 1987, even if he was confirmed -- or '85 -- even if he was confirmed in '86. Well, the notion that there is some two-month period in which suddenly it all flips and everything shuts down, that's not a credible argument.

What other arguments are they making? They suggest that, well, there had been a couple of times where Democrats said it would be wise for a President not to nominate someone. First of all, we know senators say stuff all the time. Second of all, these were comments that were made where there was no actual nomination at stake. So it has no application to the actual situation that we have right now.

I'm trying to think of any other reeds that they're grasping here as to why they would not carry out their duties. And I can't really think of one.

I recognize that this is an important issue for their constituencies, and it's particularly sensitive because this was Justice Scalia's seat that is now vacant and that a whole host of decisions on the Supreme Court could turn on this ninth justice and their vote.

But that's how our democracy is supposed to work. And what I do -- the last point I'll make -- we have already seen a breakdown of the judicial appointment process that gets worse and worse each and every year, each and every Congress. It becomes harder and harder to get any candidates for the judiciary confirmed. We saw Senator Reid have to employ the so-called "nuclear option" because there was such a logjam in terms of getting judicial appointments through.

If, in fact, the Republicans in the Senate take a posture that defies the Constitution, defies logic, is not supported by tradition simply because of politics, then invariably what you're going to see is a further deterioration in the ability of any President to make any judicial appointments. And appointments to the Supreme Court as well as the federal bench suddenly become a complete extension of our polarized politics.

And at that point, not only are you going to see more and more vacancies and the court systems break down, but the credibility of the Court itself begins to diminish because it's viewed simply as an extension of our politics -- this is a Republican judge or this is a Democratic judge, as opposed to, this is a Supreme Court justice who is supposed to be standing above the day-to-day politics that take place.

So I understand the posture that they're taking right now. I get the politics of it. I'm sure they're under enormous pressure from their base and their constituencies around this issue. I've talked to many of them, and I've told them I'm sympathetic. And, by the way, there's not a lot of vigor when they defend the position that they're taking, that they wouldn't even meet, for example, with a Supreme Court nominee. They're pretty sheepish about it when they make those comments.

So we'll see how this plays itself out. But I'm going to do my job. I'm going to nominate somebody and let the American people decide as to whether that person is qualified. And if they are qualified, let the American people decide whether there's enough time for the U.S. Senate to hold hearings and have a vote. It's not as if, from what I see, the Senate calendar is so full that we don't have time to get this done.

All right? Thank you, guys.

Q Your Majesty, Nadia Bilbassy with Al Arabiya. In light of the Syria accord and the cessation of hostility, how do you envision the next step in terms of fighting ISIS and pursuing a political career? And if I may, can you describe the current cooperation and coordination with the United States, considering the rise in challenges and crises in the Middle East?

HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH: Well, as I said early on, the relationship and coordination with the United States is outstanding. And one of the reasons we're here is to make sure that we're taking the coordination between our two countries to the next level.

As to what is happening in Syria, obviously the political process is I think the priority of the moment. And we're all supportive of what John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov are doing as part of a political process, but at the same time making sure that the second part of that dimension is the fight against ISIS and Daesh. And I think that both elements are complementary to each other.

Specifically, obviously to the southern part of Syria, it is whether or not, based in connection to what the Americans and the Russians have been doing, can we get a cease-fire going into the south alongside our border as part of a building block of the political process that helps move the politics of this issue forward between the regime and opposition forces. Because at the end of the day, Daesh is the enemy for all of us. And we'll have to see how things are moving between the two foreign ministers.

But again, we've got some good initiatives moving in that, and we're just keeping our fingers crossed that the political process continues to move in the right direction. And so far, I think things are --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We'll see.

HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH: -- we'll have to keep our fingers crossed.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you, everybody.

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12:04 P.M. EST