

# Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and Gen. Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room

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SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CHUCK HAGEL: Good afternoon.

As you all know, this has been an important week in our campaign against ISIL. So, let me make a few comments about that campaign and what's been going on the last week, and then General Dempsey will make some comments, and then we'll take the questions.

As I said, this week has been an important week for the U.S. and our coalition forces as we began airstrikes in Syria. Along with France, we've conducted over 200 airstrikes in Iraq against ISIL and in support of Iraqi forces. With our Arab partners, we've conducted 43 airstrikes in Syria.

Combined with our ongoing efforts in Iraq, these strikes will continue to deny ISIL freedom of movement and challenge its ability to plan, direct, and sustain its operations.

We also took action in Syria against the network of Al Qaida veterans known as the Khorasan group. We are still assessing the operational impact of these strikes. This was a critical operation. Members of this group were actively plotting attacks against the United States and our friends' allies.

In Syria there has been no coordination, nor will there be with the Assad regime. Nothing has changed about our position that has shifted our approach to Assad and his regime because this regime, President Assad, has lost all legitimacy to govern.

As we continue our operation from the air, I also want to emphasize that no one is under any illusions -- under any illusions -- that airstrikes alone will destroy ISIL. They are one element of our broader comprehensive campaign against ISIL, a campaign that has diplomatic, economic, intelligence and other military components, working with coalition partners and a new government in Iraq.

This week we move forward on each of these fronts. In New York, the president chaired a U.N. Security Council meeting focused on stopping the flow of fighters into and out of the region.

With the Treasury Department in the lead, the United States and our coalition partners are also intensifying efforts to cut off ISIL's financing and we continue to support the new Iraqi government and its program of reform and reconciliation, because that is the only long-term solution to the sectarian tensions that enabled ISIL's rise in Iraq.

On Wednesday President Obama met with Prime Minister Abadi. The president affirmed America's support for him, his new government and the Iraqi people. Yesterday Secretary Kerry met with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the president and vice president spoke with Turkish President Erdogan to strengthen our coalition's cooperation against ISIL.

Senior military officials continue to coordinate with our coalition partners. The other dimensions of our military strategy are also seeing progress. Now that we have the support of Congress, we are moving forward with our plan to train and equip the moderate Syrian opposition.

We have begun detailed military planning for this mission. And assessment teams have arrived in Saudi Arabia.

In Iraq, ISIL strongholds continued to pose a major challenge. But our support for Iraqi and Kurdish forces is enabling many Iraqi units to go on the offensive. Coalition forces will continue to maintain pressure on ISIL fighters throughout Iraq.

As the president emphasized on Wednesday in his speech at the United Nations, this broad diplomatic, economic and military campaign is being underwritten by a broad multinational coalition of more than 40 nations, including five regional partners. And this coalition continues to expand.

Over the last two days, the governments of Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands have announced their intention to participate in coalition airstrikes in Iraq. A few minutes ago, before coming down here, I spoke with Britain's defense minister, Michael Fallon. He called me as he left the chambers of the Parliament to inform me that the British Parliament had just voted 524-43 to join the air campaign in Iraq with the United States and our coalition partners.

A broad coalition has been and will continue to be a cornerstone of our strategy against ISIL and we appreciate all the contributions and commitments of our friends and allies as we continue to work closely with them and coordinate their participation and efforts.

Sustaining our broad diplomatic, economic and military campaign will require a long-term commitment from the United States and all of our partners and allies. This will not be an easy or brief effort. We are at the beginning, not the end.

We are at the beginning, not the end of our effort to degrade and destroy ISIL. I know that Americans have confidence in the skill and professionalism of our men and women in uniform and our exceptional military leadership.

When I had the opportunity to visit CENTCOM last week with President Obama in Tampa, we made a point of expressing our deep appreciation to General Austin and his CENTCOM team for their hard work, their planning. And this hard work and planning and commitment to this country is keeping America secure.

I'm proud of them. The president's proud of them. We're all proud of them. We're proud of these men and women who do so much for our country, and the men and women downrange who are carrying out this mission every day with courage and dedication and resolve.

Thank you.

Marty?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: Thanks, Mr. Secretary.

I'd like to also reiterate that the campaign against ISIL will be a persistent and sustained campaign, and it will take time. As I said last week, this is not an Iraq -- this is an Iraq first strategy. But it's not an Iraq only one.

Our coalition strikes this week demonstrate to ISIL that they have no safe haven in Syria. Our targeted actions are disrupting ISIL's command and control, their logistic capabilities, and their infrastructure in Syria. While in Iraq, we're empowering our Iraqi partners to go back on the offensive.

We'll continue to build, to guide, and to sustain a credible coalition to include, importantly, Arab states to set the stage for a broader international campaign against ISIL. Our military actions are part of a comprehensive strategy that includes disrupting their financing, interdicting recruitment and movement of foreign fighters, and exposing ISIL's false narratives, in particular, stripping away their cloak of religious legitimacy behind which they hide.

While the situation in the Middle East evolves and continues to demand our attention, we're also balancing pressing challenges in other areas. The Ebola outbreak in west Africa is the largest the world has ever seen. This is a complex emergency beyond a public health crisis that has significant humanitarian, economic, political, and security dimensions.

As part of the inter-agency and international response, we're leveraging our military capability's unique capabilities to establish command and control nodes, logistics hubs, training for health care personnel, and engineering support.

And as most of you know, I just returned on Tuesday from a trip to France, Lithuania, and Croatia where I had some candid and very productive discussions with my NATO counterparts. Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe and vulnerabilities to NATO's southern flanks stemming from ISIL and other regional threats, and our enduring commitments in Afghanistan will continue to demand the attention of our European allies.

While I was in Europe, I had the chance to visit the American military cemetery in Normandy with my French colleague. That sacred ground near the sands of Omaha Beach is a testament to the extraordinary men and women in uniform who safeguard our freedoms.

Today they're conducting hundreds of exercises, activities, and engagements across the globe, actions that deter conflict and assure our allies. They're always foremost on -- on my mind, as are their families.

And with that, we'll be happy to take your questions.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you mentioned President Erdogan of Turkey a few minutes ago. As I'm sure you know, Turkey's again raising the prospect of a buffer zone in Syria and Iraq, with its border -- also today, raised the prospect of a no-fly zone over Syria.

I know Chairman Dempsey has spoken about that to some extent in the past. I'm wondering if the United States would now consider supporting actively to -- to protect a no-fly zone or buffer zone to enforce one.

And also, can you please give me some explicit examples of how the United States is protecting against civilian casualties in Syria?

SEC. HAGEL: Thank you.

On the first question, the buffer zone issue, as I mentioned, and you know, the president and the vice president spoke to Prime Minister Erdogan this week. We continue to talk with the Turkish leadership about their different ways to contribute to the coalition.

The issue of a buffer zone is not a new issue, as you all know. We discuss all these possibilities, and we'll continue to talk about what the Turks believe they require. They know clearly that ISIL and what's happening in Syria and Iraq is a -- a clear and present threat, danger to them. They are now hosting about 1.3 million refugees, plus all of the other dimensions of the ISIL threat to their country and their people.

As to collateral damage, our military, every mission that it plans, always factors in first collateral damage questions and assessments. There is no strike, no military operation ever undertaken in our military without that clear assessment. And then a judgment has to be used as to whether we would go forward with that mission. It is first and foremost the

priority of our commanders who have responsibility for strikes to make sure -- do everything they can to make sure there is no collateral damage, specifically civilian casualties.

And I don't know, general, you may happen to have...

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, thanks, Mr. Secretary.

What I'd add is that one of the things you're seeing in this air campaign is the -- the fruition of two decades of inter-operability and -- and procurement activities, training activities, education activities with our allies in the region who are performing just as well as we are on the issue of precision and reducing the possibility of collateral damage.

Of course, you know you can't reduce it to zero. And I suspect that over time ISIL will probably publish a few propaganda videos alleging civilian casualties. But we've got a pretty good suite of ISR there now that should enable us to actually determine not only how to strike, but the results of it after the fact -- what we call patty battle damage assessment. But our -- but our allies are doing very well because of 20 years of effort.

Q: Can I ask you to just clarify on the issue of enforcing a no-fly zone or a buffer zone with Turkey?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, look, a buffer zone might, at some point, become a possibility, but that's not part of our campaign plan presently.

SEC. HAGEL: Jim?

Q: Secretary Hagel, General Dempsey, thank you very much.

I wonder if I could ask you first, Secretary Hagel, you're aware of the threat faced by Syrian Kurds in northwestern Syria along the Turkish border near Kobani. In fact, there was a firefight playing out between ISIS fighters and the Syrian Kurds on CNN just a short time ago.

They appear to be facing the same genocidal threat that we saw with the Yazidi people and others in Iraq. The U.S. came to their aid. Why hasn't the U.S. come to the aid of the

Syrian Kurds from the air? And is that a step that you're considering taking? And I wonder if I could have a quick follow-up with the general?

SEC. HAGEL: Mm-hmm. Well, first of all, as General Dempsey said, we have a rather sophisticated and complete ISR picture of all that -- that area, including the area that you talk about. So we are aware of what's going on. We are discussing how and what we can do with our coalition partners to help them deal with it. So it's not a matter of us not being aware of it, nor not actively looking at -- at the options that we have to deal with it.

Q: Does that mean -- does that mean someone like Turkey would be more likely to act than the U.S.?

SEC. HAGEL: Well...

(CROSSTALK)

SEC. HAGEL: Jim, as I said in my answer to Lara, we're talking to Turkey about this and - - and all of the different aspects of the ISIL threat.

Q: General Dempsey, I wonder if I could ask you, it's been a little more than a week since you testified before Congress and mentioned during that testimony that if you believed it was the right step, you would recommend deploying U.S. ground forces in certain roles if you believe that that was the right thing to recommend to the president.

Since then, we've heard from many administration officials attempting to walk that back. But it...

GEN. DEMPSEY: Mm-hmm.

Q: ... sounded to me and to others like you were a commander saying honestly and sincerely what -- that you would do what you felt was necessary; you would recommend what you felt was necessary if you thought that was necessary to accomplish the mission.

I wonder if you stand by that, if you believe it's necessary you will go to the president say, 'Mr. Obama, I need ground troops in certain roles to succeed here'?

GEN. DEMPSEY: If you're asking me would I would provide my -- my best military advice at all times, the answer is absolutely. If you're suggesting that I might, at some point, recommend that we need a large ground force to counter ISIL, the answer to that is also absolutely.

But it doesn't have to be Americans. In fact, ideally, for the kind of issues we're confronting there, the ideal force -- in fact, the only truly effective force that will actually be able to reject ISIL from within its own population, is a force comprised of Iraqis and Kurds and moderate Syrian opposition.

At some point, if we have to advise them more closely than currently we are, of course, I'd recommend it. But we haven't reached that point.

Q: (off mic) And I'm not talking about a large presence. I'm talking about, for instance, helping in targeting -- targeting air strikes or forward deployed advisers. Are those specific missions that you might ask the president for U.S. forces?

GEN. DEMPSEY: I will -- I -- I just stand by the statement. I will make a recommendation - - the -- I have -- the president gave me a mission, destroy ISIL. And I will recommend to him what it takes to destroy ISIL.

SEC. HAGEL: I might just add, Jim, every meeting I have been in with the president of the United States and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff over the last year and a half, the president has made it very clear -- as I have made it clear, as secretary of defense -- he expects, the president of the United States, the absolute most direct and honest military advice that General Dempsey and other military uniform leaders can give him.

And he wants it and he must rely on it. And he says he relies on it.

Tony?

Q: A couple of budget question in the -- then a second question for General Dempsey.

What are the resource implications of this long, persistent, sustained campaign?



Can you realistically conduct it within the confines of your current budgeting plans, specifically, you have got a \$58 billion request for fiscal year '15 in the so-called OCO budget. You can -- can you accommodate this sustained campaign within those levels of spending?

SEC. HAGEL: Well, as you know, we are generally spending roughly, since this effort started, \$7 million to \$10 million a day. That is being funded out of OCO, overseas contingency operations, and we are going to require additional funding from Congress as we go forward.

As you know, the continuing resolution is due in December 11. We're working now with the appropriate committees on how we go forward with authorizations and funding.

Q: Sir, could I add to this?

(CROSSTALK)

GEN. DEMPSEY: Obviously I work very closely with the service chiefs.

When we submitted the budget last year and it went to the White House for approval and it was approved and sent over to Congress, as you know, the Joint Chiefs all said we could accomplish the nation's security needs with that budget with certain assumptions.

One of them was that the number of commitments would either level off or come down. And secondly, that we would get some flexibility in the budget to change paid compensation, health care, retire weapons systems and infrastructure.

Commitments have gone up. The things that we were looking for in terms of flexibility have only very minimally been delivered.

So if you're asking me do I assess right now, as we go into the fall review for '16, that we're going to have budget problems? Yes.

Q: Well, let me push back a second here. You're going to be dropping from 26,000 troops in Afghanistan today to 9,800 next year. You're spending \$4.6 billion a year on -- a month in Afghanistan now. That's going to come down.

Can't you just move the savings from that into the ISIL campaign?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yes, this would -- this would be a great point for a tutorial on budget. You're talking about OCO. OCO is gas money. The baseline budget is what's -- builds and sustains, trains and equips and organizes a force. We have to separate those when we talk about budget.

SEC. HAGEL: And we will be.

Marcus?

Q: Has the building gone a long-term analysis on how much they expect both you and Chairman said you expect this to be a long-term operation.

Has it done an analysis on how long --

(CROSSTALK)

SEC. HAGEL: We are doing that right now. We have to. We would have to project out, as we are, at -- what the chairman's point was about baseline budgets. That's the critical part of this. And so, yes, we're -- we are doing that now.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yes, if I could add to that, because I just got asked minutes ago, how long is it going to take to recapture Mosul? And I said, hmm, great question. If you don't mind, I will answer it with a question.

How long is it going to take the government -- the new government of Iraq to convince the Sunni, Shia and Kurds that their future should rest with them, not with separations along sectarian lines?

This is a campaign that strings activities together and one of the activities that has to come together is a government of Iraq that separates because of its policies, that can draw the people back to them so that ISIL can no longer swim freely within their ranks.

SEC. HAGEL: Yes, Jim?

Jim?

Q: Chairman Dempsey, do you believe that it will take -- in fact take some ground troops inside Syria to destroy ISIS?

And if they are not Americans, do you have enough faith in training 5,000 Free Syrian Army troops, the nonaggressive militants, to achieve that goal, to destroy ISIS?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Actually, first I never -- I never heard the phrase "nonaggressive militants," but I mean, I suppose -- (Laughter.)

GEN. DEMPSEY: -- it sounds to me like an oxymoron, Jim.

But let me see if I can answer the question.

Air power alone -- first of all, there is no military solution to ISIL. I have said military only solution, okay? Secondly there is no air power alone solution to ISIL, either in Iraq or in Syria.

And so the answer is, yes, there has to be a ground component to the campaign against ISIL in Syria, and we believe that the path to develop that is the Syrian moderate opposition.

Five thousand's never been the end state. It's -- there's -- there's -- we've had estimates anywhere from 12,000 to 15,000 is what we believe they would need to recapture lost territory in eastern Syria.

And I am confident that we can establish their training if we do it right. We -- we have to do it right, not fast. They have to have military leaders that bind them together. They have to be -- have a political structure into which they can hook, and therefore be responsive to. And that's going to take some time.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you said earlier this week that the U.S. would defend militarily the Free Syrian Army. What does that mean? I mean, are talking about possibly engaging Syrian forces military?

SEC. HAGEL: I think the question was asked those that we -- we begin training...

Q: Right.

SEC. HAGEL: ... if they were attacked would we help them, and I said yes.

Q: If I could...

Q: Mr. Secretary, could I follow up...

SEC. HAGEL: Kristina

Q: Thank you. Mr. Secretary, why was the decision made to send the headquarters element of the 1st Infantry Division to Iraq? What will they be doing there? Will they be lead the joint operation centers?

And general, I want to follow up with a question for you.

SEC. HAGEL: Well, first of all, I can help you with that one, too. The -- in fact, the general's son is...

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah.

SEC. HAGEL: ... with the 1st Division. But you recall the president, when he announced to the nation what his strategy was and what he was instructing the Defense Department to do, he mentioned that there'd be an increase of 475 personnel. And so the command and control function of that will come out of the 1st Division as other personnel will be assigned as well from other components. But that's -- that's why they are going.

General.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, they're -- and they're a coherent standing war fighting organization that understands how to integrate these multiple activities and to manage the activities of the coalition.

The group that went in there initially was really focused on just beginning to make the initial contacts that the Iraqi security forces and monitoring the activities of the assessment team. This is an organization that actually has the bandwidth and the skill sets to manage a campaign.

Q: (off mic)

SEC. HAGEL: Dave, did you...

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. I just wanted to ask -- follow up with a question. Can you give us an update about the training of Iraqi forces? And what are the risks to U.S. troops that will be doing the training and advising there?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, the update is that the -- as I mentioned I think in a previous engagement, of the 26 or so brigades that we assessed to be prepared to -- to accept training and advice and reequipping we're beginning to do two things.

One is, we're working with -- CENTCOM is working with the Iraqi military leaders to ensure that what occurs on the ground is their campaign, not our campaign. We want it to be their campaign, enabled by us, not our campaign where we drag them along for legitimacy.

And I can assure you that some of the activities -- all of the activities you've seen in and around Baghdad up until now have been Iraq military leaders establishing priorities and objectives enabled by us. So we're making progress.

We've got to have a longer, larger campaign that actually recaptures lost territory. What risks? By the way, the, you know, men and women in uniform understand risk. They understand how to manage it. We've been -- we've been doing train-and-equip for the last 12 years nonstop. We can't ever drive risk to zero, but I've -- I assured the moms and dads out there of these young men and women that we mitigate it and reduce it to the -- to the greatest extent possible.

SEC. HAGEL: (Inaudible)

Q: Do you believe that so far you have avoided any civilian casualties in your air campaign? And do you have any reason to believe that the reports that senior leaders of

ISIS and Khorasan have been killed in some of these air strikes?

GEN. DEMPSEY: We have received no reports of civilian casualties or collateral damage, up to this point in the campaign. But there's always some latency in reporting on the ground in an air campaign. So we're alert for it and also have flown ISR to try to confirm or deny battle damage assessments.

As for some of the -- the -- whether some of the key leaders of either Khorasan or ISIL have been killed, too soon to tell. We -- you know, what we do is, we monitor various kinds of intelligence. We scan social media, which is normally the first place you find out, frankly. But it's too soon to tell.

(CROSSTALK)

Q: Who is the head of the free Syrian opposition, the moderate rebels that you are planning to train?

And, Chairman Dempsey, do you need spotters on the ground to be more precise in your airstrikes in Syria and is that what's stopping you from helping the Kurds along the Turkish border right now?

SEC. HAGEL: Well, first of all, we're in the process of setting up the vetting system for those that we will begin training, moderate opposition Syrian fighters.

Q: But who is the head of that opposition?

SEC. HAGEL: Well, we don't have a head of it, in that we are vetting and will continue to vet through our regional partners, State Department, intelligence departments, as they will build their coalitions with our help, We're not gonna instruct them as to who their leaders are. They'll make their own decision on who their -- who their leaders are.

GEN. DEMPSEY: And, Jennifer, the question about whether we need spotters, as you say, forward air controllers on the ground to help in Syria and whether that's a limiting factor in what's going on the -- on the -- with the Syrian Kurds, the answer is no.

As I've mentioned in testimony, the issue of the requirement for forward air controllers on the ground really manifests itself when the forces join and become intermingled. That's

when it becomes very complicated and difficult to manage from a -- from a full-motion-video feed from a Predator. These forces happen to be separated, so that's not a limiting factor.

But I -- but I would also remind us, actually, that you can't be everywhere and see everything. I know that somebody's got an iPhone out there taking a picture of it, but that does not mean that we're anywhere nearby, because the CENTCOM commander, given the tasks he's been given, prioritizes his resources and he may not happen to be looking right now at the -- at the Syrian border.

REAR ADMIRAL JOHN KIRBY: Thanks, everybody. Appreciate it.

SEC. HAGEL: Thank you.