

Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on the Trip of Vice President Joe Biden to Morocco, Ukraine and Turkey

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MR. SPECTOR: Thanks for joining us tonight. We have a number of senior administration officials with us who are looking forward to talking to you and taking your questions. So with that, if somebody wants to begin.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Actually, let me just make sure everybody is up to speed about exactly what we actually did. I think you know the itinerary. We spent two hours last night, fresh off the plane from Ukraine and went straight into a working dinner with Prime Minister Davutoğlu. It went for two hours. It was a very good conversation.

Then we got up this morning. The Vice President gave public remarks at the Atlantic Council, which some of you may have seen, on energy security with a particular focus on Europe. After that he had a short follow-up conversation with Prime Minister Davutoğlu. And then we went off and had a meeting with a civil society network known as the Checks & Balances Network, which is funded by the National Democratic Institute. Then we went to what turned out to be a four-hour session with President Erdoğan; about half that time was spent just the two of them one-on-one; and then we had a working lunch, although it happened at 3:00 p.m. So that's maybe longer personally -- whatever time it was, and time lost much of its meaning by that point. But it was also -- so that's what we did.

But just to economize your time, why don't you ask me the questions you're most interested in. And I'll invite my colleagues to chime in if they have their way to talk about it. And we'll do this -- obviously, we'll do it on background. But if there's -- if at some point I need to pivot, we need to pivot to off-the-record, we'll do that. But start on background.

Q They came out and they only gave like general and brief comments about all these things that they're going to accomplish -- trying to get the train-and-equip mission going. There was hardly anything on that. No mention of Incirlik. No mention of Assad really. It looks to us that if they made any deals behind closed doors, they certainly didn't want to announce anything. So was there -- you say progress was made, but how do we quantify that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the way I would describe is that the conversation has evolved and is quite dynamic to begin with. You're right that they didn't sit there and sign their names on the bottom line on a whole host of agreements. But actually, I think we came to a much greater clarity about where we need to go from here. There were some additional questions that went unresolved, and both of our systems have to noodle over those in the coming days. But I actually think that we have a much better understanding about what each other's needs and constraints are on these issues.

And let me just give you a sense for where I think the conversation focused. Look, I know there's been a lot made about whether we're close or far apart from the Turks on the ISIL issue and the Syria issue in particular. I will say that I think coming out of these conversations we are convinced we have a lot more in common than there is disagreement on these issues. Just let me point to three areas in particular.

We are in complete agreement that ISIL needs to be defeated. Complete agreement. It's a threat not only to the United States and our other allies in the region, but it's a threat right on Turkey's border. They take it very seriously. They want to work with us to combat the threat. They're already working with us to combat the threat. They want to look for ways to expand their cooperation with us. And we want to work with them to combat the threat. There is agreement on that.

The second is we are both in agreement that just like in Iraq you basically need an effective ground force to work alongside our air force to defeat -- to degrade and then defeat ISIL in Iraq. You're not going to have that type of -- that in Syria unless you have a viable force on the ground.

We are in agreement that that viable force to defeat ISIL on the ground in Syria is not Assad; and instead, is the moderate Syrian opposition, the Free Syrian Army, and that we need to do more in that space to train and equip. We obviously have our own program. The Turks have signed up to host one of those training bases. But we talked about whether there might be some other ways that we can expand cooperation, grow the moderate Syrian opposition faster, make it more effective. There are no final decisions on that, but that's not a bad thing. We're moving -- I think we're moving in a very positive direction about getting a fuller understanding about how we might accelerate the training and equipping of the moderate Syrian opposition.

And the third thing that we agree on is that the conflict in the Assad regime is a magnet for extremism in the region. We need a political transition away from Assad. We agree about that, as well.

So they talked a lot about that. I should also say with the Prime Minister, who was just back from Iraq, there was a lengthy -- I would say most of the dinner last night was about Iraq. And what's interesting is -- it's no surprise that the Turks did not have the smoothest of relationships with the previous Iraqi government. The relationship with Prime Minister Maliki was quite scratchy. And I think they agree with us that Prime Minister Abadi is serious, that he is committed to forming a more inclusive government, and importantly committed to figuring out a way to really get Sunni buy-in at the local level to include standing up national guard elements, mobilizing tribes to flip against ISIL, and in other areas of Iraq, making sure that Erbil and Baghdad are working together. The Turks have been supportive of this interim oil revenue-sharing agreement that Erbil and Baghdad just struck. Both we and the Turks and most importantly Baghdad and Erbil have, I think, an interest in pivoting off this interim agreement towards a more enduring and lasting solution to the oil-revenue issue. And so we talked a lot about Iraq too.

And I think we and the Turks are -- I mean if there's a Venn diagram, it's like this on Iraq right now. So I think we feel really good about our conversations with the Turks.

So you're right. There weren't a ton of details I guess after the remarks, but I think you heard from both leaders that the relationship and our discussions on these issues are in a good place.

Q So what do you still disagree on?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know -- I think we have to -- I think we agree on the major objectives of the strategy, right, which is we have to do everything we can to defeat and degrade ISIL. We have to stand up a viable ground force in Syria to be able to do that. That's not the regime. It's got to be the moderate Syrian opposition. And we need to facilitate a political transition.

Where we still are -- it's not disagreement. But I think where we still need to get across the goal line in terms of our agreement is how our military-to-military cooperation is going to be synced up in those areas. But that's not disagreement. I just think that -- now that I think we are in a good place about what we're trying to accomplish, we need to figure out what's the best way for our militaries to work together to make that happen.

Q Talking the moderate Syrian opposition, there are lots of stories about FSA and guys going in to fight for FSA and coming out fighting for somebody else. A lot of fluid lines between the various groups in Syria.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's no question. And it's been our position from the beginning, and I think the Turks agree, which is whatever we do -- and we're going to do in the train-and-equip mission already, but to the degree that we're cooperating with the Turks and other allies in the region to stand up a moderate Syrian opposition, we're going to have to be good about vetting these groups.

And by the way, we're not always probably going to agree. But to the degree that we're partnering on standing up these forces, then it's on those forces that we agree that we trust, and it will take Syria in a better place and are committed to combating ISIL on the

ground. So there will have to be a vetting criteria that's agreed to by parties.

Q What about the other two conditions that the Turks have placed for cooperation -- the no-fly zone and the buffer zone, the safe zone?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I want you to ask the Turks about that. But here's the point that I would make about that. Those are not ends in and of themselves. The question is: What is the purpose of it? And this was part of the discussion. What is the purpose of the no-fly zone? Or what is the purpose of a buffer zone along the Syria-Turkish border? The purpose is to create a space where a moderate Syrian opposition dominates the ground, pushes out extremists and carve out territory where refugees don't have to flow into neighboring countries, where people can contemplate returning back to these safer zones.

And so if you think about a strategy -- go back to the three things that I talked about -- if you think about a strategy of how can you push ISIL out of these areas, look at where they're operating in the north. If you look at the Euphrates Valley and go north to that, ISIL is crawling all over the border areas between Syria and Turkey. So how do you push them out, how do you stand up a moderate force that can fill in that void as they get pushed out? And how can you do it in a way hopefully that leads to a political transition away from the current regime?

None of this, by the way, is going to be instantaneous. But the whole point I'm making is that I think sometimes we get too fixated on the buzzwords like no-fly zone, buffer zone, safe zone. We may or may not end up with certain labels. It's the objectives, though, that we share in common.

Q What's the military-to-military problem?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's not a problem. There's not a problem. It's that we haven't -- well, once you agree on the objectives, we have our militaries work together to figure out how it is that we can fill in the white space here.

Q There was a military delegation here for two days --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, there's a couple. We've had a number of delegations here. So we had a delegation in a number of weeks ago from CENTCOM and EUCOM, the two --

Q There was one just last week --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There are military folks here all the time. We had -- let me go off the record for a minute.

*** OFF THE RECORD ***

Q (Inaudible)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we can go back on the record. Look, the PYD -- I think you all are tracking -- but the Turks have concerns because the PYD, some of the actors fighting ISIL in Kobani have ties to the PKK, which the Turks obviously have to contend with a longstanding insurgency with the PKK. And their concern always with Kobani was, they didn't like ISIL, but they weren't (inaudible) with PYD too. So they were stuck. They had all these refugees coming over the border. But once the town was basically empty, they kind of looked at the town, they saw two enemies.

And so we had this conversation that senior official number two mentioned with the Turks about, okay, well, then let's facilitate a way -- if you're not crazy about the PYD, and we get that, let's figure out a way to allow reinforcements and resupply from Iraqi-Kurdish Pesh, transiting through Turkey, to resupply fighters against ISIL. It's a win-win. Because it continues to support the fighters fighting ISIL, and it's a win because it balances out some of the concerns you're worried about on the PYD side of the equation. That was the deal.

The only issue was there came a point where it was our assessment that the fighters in Kobani were a couple of days away from running out of ammunition. So we did an emergency airdrop. Not to preclude the arrival of the Pesh, but to buy time for the arrival of the Pesh. And that's what we explained to the Turks. And you'll notice we did the airdrop. And since then the Pesh have moved in. There are also some FSA, I believe, operating there. So senior official number two is right. This is an area where -- even in the case where we and the Turks did not have identical views of the situation on the ground, we worked it out.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, I think the issue there was that we both wanted ISIL out. They didn't want ISIL replaced with a group that they think has been responsible for terrorism in Turkey. We both agreed that the Peshmerga were a reliable force to hold, and the Peshmerga and the FSA working together were an even better combination. So we had an overlapping interest. We were able to prove concept that you could clear space and hold it with forces that we have confidence in to have our same long-term interests and objectives.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let's also keep our eye on the prize here that we and the Turks agree ISIL is a huge threat. But for us, ISIL is the most important issue here. And the biggest reason we have been engaged in Kobani, to cite General Austin, is they've been providing a lot of targets, so we've been servicing those targets. They have literally lost hundreds and hundreds of fighters in Kobani because of the airstrikes there. And they just keep coming. They just keep coming from other parts of Syria. So as long as they're going to keep coming to Kobani, which by the way our sense is that now as the momentum has tipped against them, they keep coming. As long as they keep coming, Lloyd Austin's guys are going to keep coming too.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What did Allen say? He said, they are impaling themselves on Kobani.

Q How can you stop Assad barrel-bombing civilians, for example, say in the north, without a formal no-fly zone? And that was my first question. And then also, why is there so much sort of concern about figuring out who the moderate opposition are when America, as much of the Friends of Syria group, is already supporting moderate opposition rebels who have been vetted, why isn't that vetting good enough going forward? And if you sort of supported -- if in Kobani, Turkey I think gives kind of advice on where to strike and stuff, why don't you want to do that in the rest of the country with the FSA, or do you?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me answer your second question first. And your first question, I'll probably go off the record.

We are working with groups that we believe are committed to taking Syria into a better place, that is a political transition towards of more inclusive, more accountable, more just element.

But when we're talking about vetting groups that we're going to provide lethal assistance to through the train-and-equip mission, which the Department of Defense will oversee, we're talking about pretty high-level vetting. You got to have confidence that these guys are capable, can be trained, and if you -- when you train them and provide them with weapons, they're not going to go immediately in to switch sides or hand their weapons over to somebody else.

So the vetting and screening and training procedure is different and has to be more rigorous.

Q Isn't America already giving lethal assistance through the Friends of Syria agreement, through the Asia regional command centers in Jordan and the Southeast?

*** Off the record ***

Q -- so the FSA can help?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think eventually as you train forces that you have confidence in, there's the possibility that down the line, those forces can help you or make airstrikes. We see that in Iraq.

Q Just go back to the prize again. I understand that you're very happy about the way the meetings are going, about the common goals. But is there any evidence it's working? Assad is still in power. Is there any evidence ISIS is seriously degraded other than the momentum might have been shifted?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, so let's be clear, the current campaign and strategy in Iraq and Syria is focused on ISIL, so let's measure it against that.

I think it's our judgment that a lot of the momentum that you saw over the summer -- first of all, you saw it earlier because when they did Fallujah and Ramadi, really, if Mosul was the tipping point in June, you saw Mosul, and then bang, bang, bang up and down the

Tigris and Euphrates River. And when you look at the map now, I think the kind of blob which is the ISIL territory, that really emerged like that in the second half of the summer. I think it's our view that a lot of ISIL's forward momentum has been if not stopped substantially slowed, and that they're starting to get pushed back in other areas.

Obviously there are the kind of tactical defeats in places like Mount Sinjar or Amerli or others. But I think recently you've seen Iraqi security retake the Baiji refinery. I think you're starting to see some progress in other parts of the country, as well. I think you're seeing elements of the Iraqi security forces and the Peshmerga work together to fight ISIL in certain places. And I think what we're finding in Iraq is that ISIL is not 800-foot tall; that our airstrikes have forced them to fundamentally change the way in which they were operating. Like the days of them feeling comfortable having a hundred armed vehicles on a road in a convoy and rolling down the highway like a conventional army, those days are if not over, they are rapidly declining because when that happens, they're getting hit.

So they are I think pulling back into a more dispersed, diffuse entity, which can be tough to root out. And it's also an entity that's a lot harder to gain a lot more. It's a mobile operation. It makes it a lot more difficult to take and hold territory.

The other thing I think we're starting to see on the Iraqi side in particular, also to some degree in Kobani, is that when we have local forces who are well organized and committed to fight, have the equipment to do so, and can be backed up by American airpower, they can actually do some real damage to ISIL.

So the President was clear from the very beginning, this is a multi-year enterprise. I know Americans are impatient. But from the very beginning, the administration has been clear: This is going to take some time. And let's remember, the objective is to degrade and eventually defeat. Well, we're doing a lot of degrading. And I'll leave it up to you to judge in a couple of months or six months or a year from now whether they're on the path to defeat or not. But at the moment I think we're doing a heck of a lot of degrading.

Q Let me ask about Ukraine. Erdoğan said that you discussed -- Biden and Erdoğan discussed the crisis in Ukraine. You talk about ISIS a lot, are Ukrainian crisis -- is ISIS a bigger threat than Russian aggression in Ukraine? And do you consider that? And the second question is, Ukrainian -- talking to Ukrainians yesterday, they were a little bit disappointed with the results of the visit. And there is disagreement between Congress and the White House about assistance to Ukraine. They ask for more equipment, military equipment, and so on. Is there any movement in that regard? Did you discuss any further additional --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me do a couple of top lines, and then my colleague can give you some more detail.

I'm not sure it's productive to think of is ISIL more or less of a threat. Let me put it this way, the Vice President, the President, the administration as a whole has I think been pretty clear that issues like ISIL, Ukraine, and Ebola, for example, are right at the top of

our national security. Now whether you rank them one, two, three or three, two, one, that's not -- it's just an ESPN. So it's not productive to think that way. They're really important.

But in terms of the deliverables of the trip, I'll make two points. One, we are increasing our security assistance to Ukraine. The first of our counter-mortar radars have arrived. More are on the way. We're providing excess defense articles like Humvees and other vehicles that are necessary. We've already provided \$100 million. We're looking at tens of millions of dollars of additional money for training. We're working with Congress to secure tens of millions of dollars more.

But there's a little bit, as it relates to the assistance package, writ large, I think what you've heard out of the meetings is a little bit of a chicken-and-egg problem, which is everybody recognizes that there is enormous need right now for assistance. And we are committed. The United States is committed to doing our fair share -- more than our fair share, frankly, to provide assistance. But we could not provide enough of it on our own. We need the IMF with us. We need the Europeans with us.

And I think what you heard not only from the Vice President yesterday, but from Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and President Poroshenko -- especially Poroshenko -- is that we have a new government. We will not be able to mobilize billions and billions of dollars of foreign assistance, nor get that next tranche of IMF money and move forward towards an official package or anything until there's a government and we know who the ministers and what they're -- and what reforms they're committed to. So it's a little bit of -- the government hasn't formed yet.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think you laid it down well. With regard to the security assistance, as senior official one has said, we've done a lot. The conversation that we're having with the Congress is with regard to the European Reassurance Initiative, the big package with a billion dollars that the President has asked for for the NATO space and for the Eastern Partnership area. And there I think we anticipate that the Congress will be quite generous to Ukraine. But we haven't gotten the appropriation yet. But then we'll be able to increase, we hope, particularly the train-and-assist mission with that.

And with regard to the larger macro-financial that we need, we need a government. We need the reform program to begin to be implemented. We need to have a real partnership with this new government of Ukraine -- both on the security side and on the reform and financial side.

And I think we had -- it was good to see the program come forward. Now we need to see the personnel and just to reinforce what the Vice President said is, it's a matter of the next six days, the next six weeks, the next six months for Ukraine will be crucial.

Q (Inaudible.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: President Putin is visiting here soon. Turkey has an intense interest in what happens in Ukraine, has been very supportive of our general transatlantic policy, but has a particular concern about the Crimean Tatars we talked

about a bit today; but about the dire straits that they are in and about Turkey's efforts to support them and our joint efforts to ensure that there are costs for Russia's aggression in Crimea and everywhere else.

Q I just want to ask a question about the Incirlik base. This still is being discussed between the U.S. and Turkey? Or has the U.S. basically given up on this issue? Is it still on?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, no, in what I referred to earlier, I think as we continue to have this high-level conversation about how we can act together to combat ISIL in both Iraq and Syria, to the degree our militaries are working together, we continue to have conversations about the ability of coalition aircraft and other assets to be able to use Turkish facilities. But I think the Turks have been clear that they want to get us all on the same page first before they open up -- what they would call open up their platforms a little bit more. So what I'm saying is I think we're making very good progress in that space. And hopefully when we get to the end, if we're all in agreement, then we'll have expanded access for the coalition in Turkey. But, of course, that will be up to the Turks.

MR. SPECTOR: Okay, thank you.

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