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U.S. Department of State Diplomacy in Action

Background Briefing by a Senior State Department Official

Special Briefing

Senior State Department Official

Amman, Jordan

May 22, 2013

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Official], did the opposition firmly commit to attending the Geneva conference next month? And did they outline in what format and what representation level, et cetera?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It wasn't the purpose of this meeting to go into the details of how the Geneva meetings would be set. Rather, it was to confirm how it fits within a broader strategy of this group of countries and the Syrian opposition to work on the political track even as we also work on providing additional support to the opposition. So we didn't go into those kinds of details. We're not there yet.

With respect to what the opposition said, first I think it's really important that I emphasize that the 11 foreign ministers there all strongly supported the holding of the Geneva meeting. And they were very vocal in that support with the opposition. George Sabra acknowledged that there are advantages and said that they will need to explain it to the people inside the country. And he said we also look to continued support from our friends at the table, meaning the countries there, and he got strong affirmations that that support would continue. And you'll see that highlighted twice in the communique.

MODERATOR: Arshad.

QUESTION: Yeah. There's one line in the communique which I wanted to ask you about, which says the ministers also emphasized that until such time as the Geneva meeting produces a transitional government, they will further increase their support for the opposition and take all other steps as necessary. What does that mean? Does that mean greater military support or greater flows of arms?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, different countries are doing different things.

QUESTION: Right.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So not all the countries at the table are doing the same things in terms of support. And I think that's going to continue. I don't think that's going to change. There'll be some countries that offer lethal support and there'll be some countries that do not.

The important thing is that all of the countries agree that this support to the opposition is a tactic that works towards achieving a strategy of securing a negotiated political settlement through a process that would start at the Geneva meeting. So that particular sentence was also specifically there to make it clear that we don't know if the Geneva process is going to be successful or not. And additional support to the opposition is not tied to a specific outcome of that Geneva meeting. Of course, if the Geneva meeting achieves a breakthrough and we get a transition government, then the opposition will actually be part of the transitional government and we don't need to support the opposition per se.

QUESTION: Is it fair to say that the support to the opposition, which you described as a tactic that was helpful toward the broader strategy – to put it in simple terms, is it fair to say that by increasing, whoever does it, the flows of lethal assistance and other assistance to the opposition, before or after Geneva, is designed to try to help them regain some of the ground that they had lost in these past days?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It's long been our sense that Bashar al-Assad and his regime are not willing to make concessions now. And they said that, if you saw the Argentinian newspaper interview that he gave a few days ago. And so we have long said that it's important to change his calculations, and that in order to change his calculations, the balance of power on the ground must change. And so, as the communique states, we will increase our support to the opposition. And the goal of that is to change that balance on the ground, but not as an end in and of itself but rather to facilitate arriving at a negotiated political solution.

QUESTION: Last one from me on this if I may. Do you expect that increase in support for the opposition to include more of the lethal weapons or more sophisticated weaponry, or is it just going to be more of the same of what has been done before by whichever countries have done that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think different countries are reexamining their options. It's not a secret that we're studying options in the American Administration. We haven't made final decisions. There is a discussion in Europe about lifting the European arms embargo. They had a discussion – there was talk about that tonight. And so different countries are considering what kinds of steps they need to take. But I think all of them fit within the parameter of helping the opposition writ large.

In specific terms, for the lethal that you're talking about, the Supreme Military Council – General Idris was there tonight and gave a very thorough briefing on what's going on on the ground, accenting in particular the latest on the Iranian and Hezbollah and Iraqi presence in the country – working through the Supreme Military Command on the lethal side, but all of it with the goal of strengthening the opposition in order to help convince the Syrian regime that it will have to negotiate the establishment of a transition government. And of course our position is well known. We cannot see how Bashar al-Assad could be a part of that administration.

QUESTION: Just, [Senior State Department Official] --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, please.

QUESTION: -- one quick thing.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah.

QUESTION: Did you mean to say Iraqi?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm sorry, what did I say? Oh, yeah, I did mean to say Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi. Idris talked --

QUESTION: You mean Iraqi Shia?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Iraqi Shia, yeah.

QUESTION: Did he give any numbers, any more specifics on the Iranian presence?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, he did. According to Idris, he said that there are Iranian personnel providing direct advisory support to fighting units. He said that there are Iraqi Shia in several battles. And then he highlighted in particular, but did not limit it to, the fighting in Qusayr. But he also mentioned, for example, areas around Damascus.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) numbers?

QUESTION: But one thing that came up a the presser today --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: You were saying --

QUESTION: Numbers.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Numbers, he said thousands.

QUESTION: And that was thousands of Iranians plus --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Total.

QUESTION: Total?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Total.

QUESTION: Including Iranians, Hezbollah --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Iranians, Iraqi Shia, and Hezbollah. He said thousands.

QUESTION: One thing that came up --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: By the way, I would encourage you to talk to General Idris yourself, and I think one of his people.

QUESTION: One thing that came up at the -- Secretary Kerry's press conference today was a concern that this might spread to Lebanon, either through the actions of Hezbollah or the reactions of the Syrian opposition in this form and in the kind of -- informally or formally, have you spoken with the opposition and encouraged them not to take --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: -- the fight into --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We have.

QUESTION: What's -- how have you tried to address this?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We have, for example, spoken to commanders in the Homs area and -- who have talked about the problem of supply trains coming up out of the Lebanese Bekaa. And we have said that we need to keep Lebanon out of this, and we need to find ways to stop the flow coming out of Lebanon. And of course we are discussing the broad Lebanese policy of disassociation from the Syrian conflict with the Lebanese Government.

QUESTION: Did you say that if they do intervene in Lebanon, it might affect American thinking on how much the United States can support them?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Michael, I'm not going to go beyond where I just went in terms of our diplomatic contacts. You can -- but I can say this: We strongly support the territorial sovereignty of Lebanon. We do not want Lebanon dragged into the Syrian civil war.

QUESTION: I noticed in Secretary Kerry's opener, he seemed to make a point of saying that the rebels had agreed to various things themselves, including not to use chemical weapons and so on. Is it fair to say, between the conversation you're just alluding to and the kinds of things that the Secretary referenced at the beginning, that there was a message to the rebel groups that they need to kind of keep their noses clean here?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Oh, absolutely.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, that wasn't -- I mean, that came up a bit tonight. But also, just in terms of the importance of the armed opposition to organize themselves and to bring themselves together under this Supreme Military Council that General Idris heads. And of course, they themselves say that they want to do that, but the Supreme Military command would ultimately become, if you will, the backbone of the future leadership of the Syrian military. Interestingly, Idris said that there probably are some members of the military that they could bring into the future Syrian military -- people who don't have blood on their hands, people that are vetted and are respectable.

So we think it's very important that Idris and the Supreme Military command and all of the armed opposition groups, A, not try to acquire chemical weapons and, B, that they leave the facilities -- they don't try to enter them. And we have communicated that with them.

MODERATOR: Anyone else, a last question?

QUESTION: In Istanbul, the agreement was that all military aid would go to Idris, and all 11 countries agreed to do that.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Has there actually been military equipment, do you know, delivered to Idris since then?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: Have you seen a reduction in the amount going to al-Nusra and other groups?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: First indications are good, but it's too early to be sure. This is one of these ones where we'd like to have more facts, but the first indications are good.

QUESTION: And can you say anything about the quantity getting to Idris now?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, I don't want to go into that.

MODERATOR: Indira.

QUESTION: You talked about the – sorry, I'm so tired. (Laughter.) You talked about the --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Tell me about it. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'm trying to remember, what did he talk about? Oh, using this threat of increasing aid to the opposition as a means to the end of getting everyone to the table. So today, at the conference, did Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and others talk in any specifics of how much they're willing to up their military aid as a means – I mean, we've got a pretty short window here, a couple of weeks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: This wouldn't – I mean, at a level of foreign ministers, you normally wouldn't get into how many truckloads or planeloads (inaudible.).

QUESTION: Or in principle that they are bringing --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: But what we're talking about here is grand strategy, and the grand strategy is clear in the communique, which is the importance of a political solution along the lines of full implementation of the Geneva communique. All the foreign ministers signed on readily to that. That – at the same time, we have to increase support to the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian Military Council for the military assistance. But again, with the goal of promoting, ultimately, a negotiated political deal.

QUESTION: And just to clarify, they did or did not say whether they would be – that they have a slate of people and they're willing to go to Geneva?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: They said that they wanted to do further internal consultations, which is not a surprise. Remember that they are in the middle of leadership meetings right now. They're supposed to begin choosing a new leadership tomorrow – Thursday. So Sabra said he understood the utility of it and he understood the importance of the political solutions and said we absolutely support the political solution. But he said, "I have to go back, and let us work on our political leadership meeting."

QUESTION: And what sort of information do you have about the Syrian regime having its slate ready? You cited to us the other day that you had read press reports, but do you have any first --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Yeah, I understand one of my diplomatic colleagues is saying there's another list out there. To be honest, until the Syrian Government names its own list itself, I don't think we really know who's going to come. We have been told that the Prime Minister of Syria will head the delegation. However, the rest of the members of the delegation, we don't know. And I don't think we will until we get – first we have to fix a date, and then work out a lot of the details, some of the things that Brad was asking about. Then maybe we're going to have a better sense of the Syrian delegation. But I think, frankly, it really doesn't matter what other countries say about the Syrian regime's willingness to talk. Let's hear it from Damascus itself.

QUESTION: And the Prime Minister would be acceptable to the opposition?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think so, yeah.

QUESTION: Who told you that the Prime Minister would lead the delegation? Was that the Russians or someone else?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It is – we've heard it from a variety of contacts, including but not limited to the Russians, but it's also been in Arab media repeatedly.

QUESTION: Were there any important commitments pertaining to military support, pertaining to, I don't know, opposition new willingness to engage in the political effort that's not captured in this communique, that you think deserves highlighting?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sabra talked – and we talked about the expansion of the meetings that are going on now. Do you all know what's going on in Istanbul? Should I give two sentences on that?

QUESTION: Yes.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Key things to know: They are having meetings right now to expand their general assembly, which, for want of a better expression, would be like their proto-parliament. They're talking about expanding it by as many as 30 to 40 seats, to take it from 61 now up to 91 to 100. They're discussing that right now. There are names; they're supposed to elect people, and there's a slate of people that would go forward to be elected – by the existing 61 members. So that's supposed to start tomorrow. Then they're supposed to go from that to electing a new president. Remember that Mouaz al-Khatib resigned, so George Sabra is the interim, but he's only the interim, so they're going to elect a new president. That is supposed to happen, George said, sometime in the next couple of days.

Then they will – remember there was the question of the Prime Minister and setting up a temporary government. They're then supposed to elect that, or to confirm that, a slate of ministers including a defense minister that would work directly with Salim Idris. That is then supposed to happen towards the end of this seven meetings, which we think will take somewhere around three to four days, but those of us who worked in Iraq understand these things can take longer.

So that's all supposed to happen. Once they've done all of these things, then they will have a new leadership of the coalition, and potentially a vastly expanded kind of base of people, from 61 going up to 90 or maybe 100. So out of that, then, they will then sit, and I think make a decision on Geneva.

QUESTION: Can I ask just --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: But can I just add one other thing? We, the Americans, in the meantime are spending a great deal of time – I have a team in Istanbul right now that are talking to the Syrians, both to the elements of the Free Syrian Army as well as to the political leadership, and explaining how they can use Geneva to their advantage.

MODERATOR: Michael.

QUESTION: Just a last quick one. Have you resolved the issue of the other potential participants in Geneva, namely the Iranians?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No.

QUESTION: At least among the 11?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No. And I think --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And I think that is one we're going to have to talk also to the United Nations.

MODERATOR: All right, last one, Jo.

QUESTION: Sorry. [Senior State Department Official], are you now going to go to Istanbul?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm going in --

MODERATOR: Few hours.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: -- five hours.

QUESTION: To Istanbul?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Okay.

QUESTION: And will you be attending the meetings? Or will you just --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Oh, no, I'm not invited to attend them.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And I, frankly, shouldn't be in the meetings. These are meetings about Syria by Syrians. So -- but I wanted to make sure that everyone there knows where we stand on issues they must -- they need, really -- you can put this in your story -- they do need to resolve their leadership issues. They cannot continue with an interim president. They have to have someone chosen, and they need to resolve the issue of the temporary government. They're either going to do it or they're not. It's taking a lot of time and attention.

So they need to resolve the question of expanding their base and bringing additional people in. So these are big issues and they need to move forward on them. So then they can move on to other things like Geneva.

QUESTION: I don't mean to be obtuse, but why has it been so enormously difficult for the opposition to coalesce around a single --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Because they've never had elections and so nobody knows anybody's relative weight, because nobody knows if you represent 10 percent or 50 percent. And because nobody knows, everybody is equal, and yet that's very difficult.

MODERATOR: All right, last one.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: This is a dynamic, by the way, that you see frequently when the iron boot comes off a political system, and before you have any kind of election. So I – I mean, this is not the first time I've seen this.

QUESTION: So everything in the communique seem to be points that the Secretary and other nations have already made, they've already all but stated. So what is new out of tonight's meeting that we didn't know --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: What is new out of tonight's meeting is that there is a solid international backing for the holding of a new meeting in Geneva by the friends, by the core friends of Syria.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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