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Barack Obama

First Update On Authorizing Targeted Air Strikes and Humanitarian Aid in Iraq



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Good morning. Over the past two days, American pilots and crews have served with courage and skill in the skies over Iraq.

First, American forces have conducted targeted airstrikes against terrorist forces outside the city of Erbil to prevent them from advancing on the city and to protect our American diplomats and military personnel. So far, these strikes have successfully destroyed arms and equipment that ISIL terrorists could have used against Erbil. Meanwhile, Kurdish forces on the ground continue to defend the city, and the United States and the Iraqi government have stepped up our military assistance to Kurdish forces as they wage their fight.

Second, our humanitarian effort continues to help the men, women and children stranded on Mount Sinjar.¹ American forces have so far conducted two successful airdrops -- delivering thousands of meals and gallons of water to these desperate men, women and children. And American aircraft are positioned to strike ISIL terrorists around the mountain to help forces in Iraq break the siege and rescue those who are trapped there.

Now, even as we deal with these immediate situations, we continue to pursue a broader strategy in Iraq. We will protect our American citizens in Iraq, whether they're diplomats, civilians or military. If these terrorists threaten our facilities or our personnel, we will take action to protect our people.

We will continue to provide military assistance and advice to the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces as they battle these terrorists, so that the terrorists cannot establish a permanent safe haven.



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We will continue to work with the international community to deal with the growing humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Even as our attention is focused on preventing an act of genocide and helping the men and women and children on the mountain, countless Iraqis have been driven or fled from their homes, including many Christians.

This morning, I spoke with Prime Minister Cameron of the United Kingdom and President Hollande of France. I'm pleased that both leaders expressed their strong support for our actions and have agreed to join us in providing humanitarian assistance to Iraqi civilians who are suffering so much. Once again, America is proud to act alongside our closest friends and allies.

More broadly, the United Nations in Iraq is working urgently to help respond to the needs of those Iraqis fleeing from areas under threat. The U.N. Security Council has called on the international community to do everything it can to provide food, water and shelter. And in my calls with allies and partners around the world, I'll continue to urge them to join us in this humanitarian effort.

Finally, we continue to call on Iraqis to come together and form the inclusive government that Iraq needs right now. Vice President Biden has been speaking to Iraqi leaders, and our team in Baghdad is in close touch with the Iraqi government. All Iraqi communities are ultimately threatened by these barbaric terrorists and all Iraqi communities need to unite to defend their country.

Just as we are focused on the situation in the north affecting Kurds and Iraqi minorities, Sunnis and Shia in different parts of Iraq have suffered mightily at the hands of ISIL. Once an inclusive government is in place, I'm confident it will be easier to mobilize all Iraqis against ISIL, and to mobilize greater support from our friends and allies. Ultimately, only Iraqis can ensure the security and stability of Iraq. The United States can't do it for them, but we can and will be partners in that effort.

One final thing -- as we go forward, we'll continue to consult with Congress and coordinate closely with our allies and partners. And as Americans, we will continue to show gratitude to our men and women in uniform who are conducting our operations there. When called, they were ready -- as they always are. When given their mission, they've performed with distinction -- as they always do. And when we see them serving with such honor and compassion, defending our fellow citizens and saving the lives of people they've never met, it makes us proud to be Americans -- as we always will be.

So with that, let me take a couple questions.

Q: Mr. President, for how long a period of time do you see these airstrikes continuing for? And is your goal there to contain ISIS or to destroy it?



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THE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to give a particular timetable, because as I've said from the start, wherever and whenever U.S. personnel and facilities are threatened, it's my obligation, my responsibility as Commander-in-Chief, to make sure that they are protected. And we're not moving our embassy anytime soon. We're not moving our consulate anytime soon. And that means that, given the challenging security environment, we're going to maintain vigilance and ensure that our people are safe.

Our initial goal is to not only make sure Americans are protected, but also to deal with this humanitarian situation in Sinjar. We feel confident that we can prevent ISIL from going up a mountain and slaughtering the people who are there. But the next step, which is going to be complicated logistically, is how do we give safe passage for people down from the mountain, and where can we ultimately relocate them so that they are safe. That's the kind of coordination that we need to do internationally.

I was very pleased to get the cooperation of both Prime Minister Cameron and President Hollande in addressing some of the immediate needs in terms of airdrops and some of the assets and logistical support that they're providing. But there's a broader set of questions that our experts now are engaged in with the United Nations and our allies and partners, and that is how do we potentially create a safe corridor or some other mechanism so that these people can move. That may take some time -- because there are varying estimates of how many people are up there, but they're in the thousands, and moving them is not simple in this kind of security environment.

Just to give people a sense, though, of a timetable -- that the most important timetable that I'm focused on right now is the Iraqi government getting formed and finalized. Because in the absence of an Iraqi government, it is very hard to get a unified effort by Iraqis against ISIL. We can conduct airstrikes, but ultimately there's not going to be an American military solution to this problem. There's going to have to be an Iraqi solution that America and other countries and allies support. And that can't happen effectively until you have a legitimate Iraqi government.

So right now we have a president, we have a speaker. What we don't yet have is a prime minister and a cabinet that is formed that can go ahead and move forward, and then start reaching out to all the various groups and factions inside of Iraq, and can give confidence to populations in the Sunni areas that ISIL is not the only game in town. It also then allows us to take those Iraqi security forces that are able and functional, and they understand who they're reporting to and what they're fighting for, and what the chain of command is. And it provides a structure in which better cooperation is taking place between the Kurdish region and Baghdad.

So we're going to be pushing very hard to encourage Iraqis to get their government together. Until we do that, it is going to be hard to get the unity of effort that allows us to not just play defense, but also engage in some offense.



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Q: Mr. President, the United States has fought long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with uncertain outcomes. How do you assure the American people that we're not getting dragged into another war in Iraq? Have you underestimated the power of ISIS? And finally, you said that you involved international partners in humanitarian efforts. Is there any thought to talking to international partners as far as military actions to prevent the spread of ISIS?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, a couple of things I would say. Number one, I've been very clear that we're not going to have U.S. combat troops in Iraq again. And we are going to maintain that, because we should have learned a lesson from our long and immensely costly incursion in Iraq. And that is that our military is so effective that we can keep a lid on problems wherever we are, if we put enough personnel and resources into it. But it can only last if the people in these countries themselves are able to arrive at the kinds of political accommodations and compromise that any civilized society requires.

And so it would be, I think, a big mistake for us to think that we can, on the cheap, simply go in, tamp everything down again, restart without some fundamental shift in attitudes among the various Iraqi factions. That's why it is so important to have an Iraqi government on the ground that is taking responsibility that we can help, that we can partner with, that has the capacity to get alliances in the region. And once that's in place, then I think we end up being one of many countries that can work together to deal with the broader crisis that ISIL poses.

What were your other questions? Did we underestimate ISIL? I think that there is no doubt that their advance, their movement over the last several months has been more rapid than the intelligence estimates and I think the expectations of policymakers both in and outside of Iraq. And part of that is I think not a full appreciation of the degree to which the Iraqi security forces, when they're far away from Baghdad, did not have the incentive or the capacity to hold ground against an aggressive adversary. And so that's one more reason why Iraqi government formation is so important -- because there has to be a rebuilding and an understanding of who it is that the Iraqi security forces are reporting to, what they are fighting for. And there has to be some investment by Sunnis in pushing back against ISIL.

I think we're already seeing -- and we will see even further -- the degree to which those territories under ISIL control alienated populations, because of the barbarity and brutality with which they operate. But in order to ensure that Sunni populations reject outright these kinds of incursions, they've got to feel like they're invested in a broader national government. And right now, they don't feel that.

So the upshot is that what we've seen over the last several months indicates the weaknesses in an Iraqi government. But what we've also seen I think is a wake-up call for a lot of Iraqis inside of Baghdad recognizing that we're going to have to rethink how we do business if we're going to hold our country together. And, hopefully, that change in attitude supplemented by improved security efforts in which we can assist and help, that can make a difference.



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Q: You just expressed confidence that the Iraqi government can eventually prevent a safe haven. But you've also just described the complications with the Iraqi government and the sophistication of ISIL. So is it possible that what you've described and your ambitions there could take years, not months?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think we're going to solve this problem in weeks, if that's what you mean. I think this is going to take some time. The Iraqi security forces, in order to mount an offensive and be able to operate effectively with the support of populations in Sunni areas, are going to have to revamp, get resupplied -- have a clearer strategy. That's all going to be dependent on a government that the Iraqi people and the Iraqi military have confidence in. We can help in all those efforts.

I think part of what we're able to do right now is to preserve a space for them to do the hard work that's necessary. If they do that, the one thing that I also think has changed is that many of the Sunni countries in the region who have been generally suspicious or wary of the Iraqi government are more likely to join in, in the fight against ISIS, and that can be extremely helpful. But this is going to be a long-term project.

Part of what we've seen is that a minority Sunni population in Iraq, as well as a majority Sunni population in Syria, has felt dissatisfied and detached and alienated from their respective governments. And that has been a ripe territory for these jihadists and extremists to operate. And rebuilding governance in those areas, and legitimacy for stable, moderate governing in those areas is going to take time.

Now, there are some immediate concerns that we have to worry about. We have to make sure that ISIL is not engaging in the actions that could cripple a country permanently. There's key infrastructure inside of Iraq that we have to be concerned about. My team has been vigilant, even before ISIL went into Mosul, about foreign fighters and jihadists gathering in Syria, and now in Iraq, who might potentially launch attacks outside the region against Western targets and U.S. targets. So there's going to be a counterterrorism element that we are already preparing for and have been working diligently on for a long time now.

There is going to be a military element in protecting our people, but the long-term campaign of changing that environment so that the millions of Sunnis who live in these areas feel connected to and well-served by a national government, that's a long-term process. And that's something that the United States cannot do, only the Iraqi people themselves can do. We can help, we can advise, but we can't do it for them. And the U.S. military cannot do it for them.

And so this goes back to the earlier question about U.S. military involvement. The nature of this problem is not one that a U.S. military can solve. We can assist and our military obviously can play an extraordinarily important role in bolstering efforts of an Iraqi partner as they make the right steps to keep their country together, but we can't do it for them.



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Last question.

Q: America has spent 800 billion dollars in Iraq. Do you anticipate having to ask Congress for additional funds to support this mission?

THE PRESIDENT: Currently, we are operating within the budget constraints that we already have. And we'll have to evaluate what happens over time. We already have a lot of assets in the region. We anticipate, when we make our preliminary budgets, that there may be things that come up requiring us to engage. And right now, at least, I think we are okay. If and when we need additional dollars to make sure that American personnel and American facilities are protected, then we will certainly make that request. But right now, that's not our primary concern.

Last question.

Q: Mr. President, do you have any second thoughts about pulling all ground troops out of Iraq? And does it give you pause as the U.S. -- is it doing the same thing in Afghanistan?

THE PRESIDENT: What I just find interesting is the degree to which this issue keeps on coming up, as if this was my decision. Under the previous administration, we had turned over the country to a sovereign, democratically elected Iraqi government. In order for us to maintain troops in Iraq, we needed the invitation of the Iraqi government and we needed assurances that our personnel would be immune from prosecution if, for example, they were protecting themselves and ended up getting in a firefight with Iraqis, that they wouldn't be hauled before an Iraqi judicial system.

And the Iraqi government, based on its political considerations, in part because Iraqis were tired of a U.S. occupation, declined to provide us those assurances. And on that basis, we left. We had offered to leave additional troops. So when you hear people say, do you regret, Mr. President, not leaving more troops, that presupposes that I would have overridden this sovereign government that we had turned the keys back over to and said, you know what, you're democratic, you're sovereign, except if I decide that it's good for you to keep 10,000 or 15,000 or 25,000 Marines in your country, you don't have a choice -- which would have kind of run contrary to the entire argument we were making about turning over the country back to Iraqis, an argument not just made by me, but made by the previous administration.

So let's just be clear: The reason that we did not have a follow-on force in Iraq was because the Iraqis were -- a majority of Iraqis did not want U.S. troops there, and politically they could not pass the kind of laws that would be required to protect our troops in Iraq.

Having said all that, if in fact the Iraqi government behaved the way it did over the last five, six years, where it failed to pass legislation that would reincorporate Sunnis and give them a sense of ownership; if it had targeted certain Sunni leaders and jailed them; if it had alienated some of the Sunni tribes that we had brought back in during the so-called Awakening that



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helped us turn the tide in 2006 -- if they had done all those things and we had had troops there, the country wouldn't be holding together either. The only difference would be we'd have a bunch of troops on the ground that would be vulnerable. And however many troops we had, we would have to now be reinforcing, I'd have to be protecting them, and we'd have a much bigger job. And probably, we would end up having to go up again in terms of the number of grounds troops to make sure that those forces were not vulnerable.

So that entire analysis is bogus and is wrong. But it gets frequently peddled around here by folks who oftentimes are trying to defend previous policies that they themselves made.

Going forward with respect to Afghanistan, we are leaving the follow-on force there. I think the lesson for Afghanistan is not the fact that we've got a follow-on force that will be capable of training and supporting Afghan security efforts. I think the real lesson in Afghanistan is that if factions in a country after a long period of civil war do not find a way to come up with a political accommodation; if they take maximalist positions and their attitude is, I want 100 percent of what I want and the other side gets nothing, then the center doesn't hold.

And the good news is, is that in part thanks to the excellent work of John Kerry and others, we now are seeing the two candidates in the recent presidential election start coming together and agreeing not only to move forward on the audit to be able to finally certify a winner in the election, but also the kinds of political accommodations that are going to be required to keep democracy moving.

So that's a real lesson I think for Afghanistan coming out of Iraq is, if you want this thing to work, then whether it's different ethnicities, different religions, different regions, they've got to accommodate each other, otherwise you start tipping back into old patterns of violence. And it doesn't matter how many U.S. troops are there -- if that happens, you end up having a mess.

Thanks a lot, guys.

¹ Reference is to Sinjar or Shengal Mountain, which is, or is part of, a mountainous ridge located near the Yezidi Kurdish city of Sinjar in Nineveh province, Northwestern Iraq.