

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki

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Briefing Room

• Press Briefings

Aboard Air Force One
En Route New York, New York

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MS. PSAKI: I know this is a short flight, so I thought I would just start. And I know we've done a number of briefings, but just giving you all just a couple of key points on the President's engagement in the operation that happened overnight last night.

The operation has been months in — was months in planning. The President was first briefed on this operation in depth over a month ago by the actual operational commanders. He was regularly updated by the national security team on the planning details of this operation, to include a briefing in the Oval Office on Monday.

Last night, the President monitored key aspects of the operation in real time in the White House Situation Room. I think you all saw the photo that we released on that.

I also want to stress that the President directed the Department of Defense to take every precaution to minimize noncombatant casualties in the operation, hence how they proceeded with their — the operation.

Unfortunately, as we know and we saw, ISIS once again revealed its barbarity in a final act of cowardice, and displaying a never-ending — ended — disregard for innocent lives. Hajji Abdullah detonated an explosive device shortly after U.S. forces arrived on site, killing himself, a woman, and three children.

Of course, there will be more assessments. I mean, the Department of Defense will do an assessment, as they always do.

But just wanted to outline that at the top.

I know we also did a briefing on the trip today to New York, but why don't we get to your questions?

Q Sure. Two subjects. First, obviously, news of the day.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Big picture: Strategically, what does this mean for U.S.? What does this mean for the Islamic State? And what does this mean for Syria?

And did you coordinate or communicate with Russia at all, given the airspace issues in Syria?

MS. PSAKI: Let me start with the first question. Hajji Abdullah's death delivers a catastrophic blow to ISIS and shows that the United States will take out terrorist threats no matter where they stand to hide in the world — try to hide in the world.

Last night's effective action took a major terrorist leader off the battlefield and makes it clear that we will hold anyone accountable who seeks to harm Americans at home or around the world.

I would also note that while this planning was taking place, of course, we were also leading a coordinated effort, as you all know — more than 200 engagements with leaders around the world — to stand up for the sovereign — the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

And so, it shows the competence of U.S. leadership, the effectiveness of U.S. leadership, and our ability to keep the American people safe while also standing up for our values at the same time.

In terms of international coordination, it's a good question. I will have to check with the State Department on the specifics of it.

Q Was there a video component to the scene unfolding in the Situation Room? And who else was in there with him?

MS. PSAKI: I'm sure I can get you a complete list. I know some individuals were shown in the photo we released. Members of his national security team were there, including Jake Sullivan and Liz Sherwood-Randall. I think you could see John Finer in the photo. Obviously, the Vice President. We will venture to get you a full list of attendees.

Q Jen, can you — on the trip today, there was some reporting by the New York Times that the White House is trying to move more to the center when it comes to crime, and there's concern about reaching out to police organizations. And obviously, there's a policing executive order that's supposed to be in the works. Can you talk a bit about: Is there a conflict between civil rights groups who want more accountability for police, want less use of force unnecessarily, and what the White House is doing right now, like on this trip?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, we would direct the — reject the notion that we were moving into any political direction. The President has a decades-long record of fighting — of being an advocate for fighting crime and supporting local COPS programs with necessary and appropriate resources and funding.

He has never been an advocate for defunding the police, as you know, but his record on these issues long precedes his time as President.

I would say that he is also committed and he believes that both need to come hand in hand — that pursuing police reform is a step that will help rebuild trust in communities and is something that is welcomed by many communities and police forces across the country, and he believes that goes in hand with public safety. Having effective, accountable community policing to help us — helps us fight crime, and it also makes us safer.

So, while we are here in New York, what you will hear him talk about today, as we've previewed a little bit, is his, you know, decades-long commitment to supporting law enforcement, to ensuring that communities have the resources they need too.

And you'll hear him talk about his sweeping and comprehensive plan to adjust gun crime [sic] — gun crime and our focus on implementing that, but also, again, ensuring that communities have the funding that they need, including his proposal to double federal support for community policing with \$300 million more for cities, plus another \$200 [million] more for community violence intervention program.

But you will also hear him — and he also remains very committed to taking steps we can to put in place police reform measures that he thinks are long overdue. Obviously, his preference was to have had that through legislative processes, but we are looking at what can be done through executive actions.

I think you may have seen Susan Rice convey we're not close on that front, but we are working on it.

Q Jen, we've had six law enforcement officers killed by criminals this year. The President has not spoken out forcefully against any of these attacks. Even some of his supporters say the lack of forceful condemnation is demoralizing to police. Why hasn't he spoken out more forcefully against these attacks?

MS. PSAKI: More forcefully against attacks against police officers?

Q Yes.

MS. PSAKI: He went and gave an entire speech to the — to the police forces just a few months ago. He — we have put out statements, and he has condemned the violence and the attacks on these police officers. He's reached out to family members. He is somebody —

Q But why not (inaudible) —

MS. PSAKI: Let me finish my answer, because I think that's an inaccurate characterization. And you haven't even given me names of who you're talking about.

Q Well, Charles Wilson is —

MS. PSAKI: But the President's —

Q — (inaudible) of the National Association —

MS. PSAKI: — the President's record —

Q — of Black Law Enforcement Officers. He's one of the people who said it's demoralizing.

MS. PSAKI: The President's record is very clear here. He has a long record of advocating for, supporting through funding, through speaking out, the role of local police, of national police and the important role they place — they play in addressing crime and keeping communities safe.

Q Why not go to one of the officer's funerals, if you're going to come to New York, and show support for the law enforcement?

MS. PSAKI: The President — we have been planning this trip in coordination with the mayor's office. We've invited a number of officials to attend the trip. He also is, as you know, going to the police headquarters to make clear his strong support for them.

Q Jen, I know you gave a little bit of the lead-up to the raid. I mean, can you give more on the President's thinking ahead of the ISIS raid?

MS. PSAKI: I can, but tell me more about what you mean.

Q I just mean like — well, you know, a little bit more from either inside the room — I know it's the Situation Room, but like — or what the President was thinking as this — as this raid was taking place.

MS. PSAKI: I think the President, again, has been — received a number of briefings, as I noted, from his national security team over the course of the last several weeks, including one from the operational commanders just a few days ago. And the President was thinking: We got to go after terrorists wherever they are and get them, and protect the American people. He also was — made clear and reiterated this at every point in the process, to do everything we can to avoid civilian casualties.

So, I think you saw the photo of him in the room. You're always watc- — in those moments, you're always watching, you're thinking about the bravery and the courage of the — of the service members who are on the ground, you know, implementing an operation. And that is, of course, front and center from him — for him always.

But, you know, he was also thinking about, you know, the role he plays as Commander-in-Chief in keeping the country safe. And, certainly, taking out the current head of ISIS is a big step forward in that.

Q Do you guys have a number on how many civilian casualties there were?

MS. PSAKI: There — again, that is an assessment being done by DOD. I would note that — as was confirmed and I just confirmed again — that, given that the intended target self-detonated and deployed a tactic used by his predecessor, that that shows, again, the brutality of ISIS — and killed his own family.

We certainly know the facts of that, but I will leave it to DOD to give any additional assessments.

Q And if I could, just on USICA.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q There are a number of House Democrats and Senate Democrats that really want to see this done by the President's State of the Union Address. Are you — do you guys just want to see the House pass the Senate version of the bill, given that this — the House version is taking a lot longer with all of these amendments?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're not going to make a calculation or direction of that from here. As you know, the process — how it works — is: Once it passes the House, it would — we would expect it would go to conference and there would be a discussion about any disagreements or any final details that are not aligned between the two pieces of legislation.

That's a normal part of legislating. And we certainly support that. Obviously, the President has said he wants to sign it as quickly as possible.

Q A few things. Were you in the room last night — the Situation Room?

MS. PSAKI: No.

Q Okay. Let's start with this one — today's event. The governor is there as well. This is an official event, but is this an endorsement of her reelection — of her election campaign?

MS. PSAKI: I think this is an event and an opportunity. The President is a big fan of the governor, but this is not a political event. This is an event for the President to stand with leaders in New York as they've seen, you know, the tragic deaths of a number of police officers recently — people who have been serving on behalf of communities across New York — and also for the President to make clear he stands with them in their efforts to address crime in their communities.

Q Two others from last night. Was he able to watch the whole thing live?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have a detail of how — of that.

Q And were any of — any members of the special forces team who conducted last night's raid involved in the Baghdadi operation?

MS. PSAKI: I would point you to the Department of Defense on that.

Q There's a meeting today — remind me — today with Presidents Putin and Xi —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — in China.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q How do we feel about that meeting and not being invited to it?

MS. PSAKI: There are diplomatic meetings that happen all the time. Our National Security Advisor, I believe, just recently spoke with his counterpart. Let me just get all the specific details on this so I can make sure it's accurate for you.

And, you know, our view and assessment is that — oh, I should say — sorry — Secretary Blinken recently spoke to China's Foreign Minister Wang, his counterpart, and underscored the global security and economic risk posed by further Russian aggression against Ukraine and conveyed that de-escalation and diplomacy are the responsible way forward.

You know, that is the message we continue to convey, including the fact that a destabilizing conflict in Europe would impact China's interests all over the world. China certainly know that.

But we have our own means of communicating through counterparts. We'll continue to do that and continue to stand up for what we feel should be global values.

Q And on the Supreme Court, any update on when he might begin interviewing potential nominees?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to provide an update on the process from here.

Q Hey. Hey, Jen, two things on Congress. It seems like, on the Russia sanctions negotiations, that Congress is intent to at least include some preemptive sanctions into that bill. Is that a red line for you? Or could you ultimately support something that has preemptive —

MS. PSAKI: We have done some sanctions in advance already. Our approach — and we are in very close touch with members of Congress about this legislation, which I don't think has been formally even proposed yet. So, we are in close contact, in conversations with them.

Our approach from the beginning has been based on our belief that, you know, the crippling economic sanctions package that we have been discussing and has been underway in our interagency process, which we briefed Congress on, is a — has a deterrent — could have a deterrent impact as we're already seeing in the Russian markets.

But we've never set a red line. I'm not setting a red line. We've done sanctions in advance, and we're in discussion with Congress about the legislation.

Q And then, on the approps talks ongoing right now, can you detail a little bit about the White House's engagement in them? And do you support larger increases to the defense budgets to get Republicans on board?

MS. PSAKI: Those talks are being — we're closely engaged with them from the White House, from our OMB team. But I'm not going to detail specifics of those behind-the-scenes talks at this point.

Q If Russia —

Q And any — sorry, one more, Steve.

Q No, go right ahead.

Q Any fear that the ongoing talks now will further delay your budget for next year, which I think Shalanda Young said is coming past the State of the Union?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any assessment of that. I know she confirmed that just a couple of days ago, so — but I don't have a new timeline beyond that. That's my understanding of where it stands at this point.

Q So, if Russia and Belarus are having some military exercises, is this any cause for concern?

MS. PSAKI: You know, we've raised — our U.N. Ambassador, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, raised some concerns about this when she spoke at the United Nations, where she talked about her concern about — our concern about 5,000 troops in Belarus, the potential for 30- — up to 30,000 more. Clearly, this is an escalatory, not a de-escalatory action.

And certainly, we look at — look at, you know, these developments as we make assessments about how to support and work with our other NATO partners in the region.

Q With regard to the civilian casualties in Syria, are — is the administration saying that they were caused entirely by the bomb detonating or by crossfire from the one lieutenant engaging with U.S. forces? Like, what — give us some clarity on that.

MS. PSAKI: Obviously, these events just happened overnight. And so, I'm going to let the Department of Defense do a final assessment, which I'm certain they will provide additional detail on once it's finalized.

Q Jen, will there be any, like, evidence or, like, release to support the idea — I mean, I know the U.S. has put out its statement that, you know, they detonated the bomb themselves. But will the U.S. provide any evidence? Because there may be people that are skeptical of the events that took place and what happened to the civilians.

MS. PSAKI: Skeptical of the U.S. military's assessment when they went and took out an ISIS terror- — the leader of ISIS?

Q Yes.

MS. PSAKI: That they are not providing accurate information —

Q Yes.

MS. PSAKI: — and ISIS is providing accurate information?

Q Well, not ISIS, but, I mean, the U.S. has not always been straightforward about what happens with civilians. And, I mean, that is a fact.

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, there's an extensive process that the Department of Defense undergoes. The President made clear from the beginning, at every point in this process, that doing everything possible to avoid civilian casualties was his priority and his preference.

I just reconfirmed, and I think our national security colleague who did a briefing this morning also reiterated, that the individual who was the target detonated himself, killing his entire family.

Given these events just happened less than 24 hours ago, we're going to give them time to make a final assessment. And they'll provide every detail they can.

Q Civil rights advocates have asked the President to visit Rikers Island. I know that's not on this trip. Can you speak to why this isn't on the trip? And is there a plan for the President to visit Rikers Island anytime soon?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any trips to preview at this point in time. Obviously, this trip today, which is a full trip, including the President's visit to thank law enforcement officials, to convey clearly to them that he has their back, that he is going to continue to support adequate funding and resources that they need to keep their community safe, and also to meet, of course, with leaders in the state who have shared concerns about rising crime.

But, you know, I expect he'll be back to New York, you know, during his time as President, but I don't have any preview of a trip to Rikers.

Q Thanks, Jen.

Q One thing, Jen. Do you have any updates on the German Chancellor visit — if you're planning a press conference or anything to share on the details? Or —

MS. PSAKI: I believe we are, but let me see if I can get the final details for all of you.

Q We're about to land, just so you know.

11:52 A.M. EST