

CHOD Conference Press Briefing with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., and Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, Department of State at Fort Belvoir, Virginia

Press Operations

General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, Department of State, Colonel David Kelly, Joint Staff
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GENERAL JOSEPH F. DUNFORD, JR.: Good to see you – see you so soon.

First, let me – I think you all know the president's special envoy. Brett McGurk has been with us all day. And then Colonel Dave Kelly is here. Dave is a brilliant officer, but he's actually on our staff. Today was all about the coalition, so I asked Dave to join us.

Today was, in my view, actually a fairly historic day. We had representatives from over 75 countries, and also NATO and the European Union, to discuss the challenges of violent extremism. And this is the second time we've done it. Last year we had a little over 40 nations, and this year almost 75. And literally we walked the globe today with discussions that involved West Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the networks that actually connect violent extremist organizations from the Western Hemisphere to Southeast Asia.

I think some of the conclusions – one, that we are dealing with a transregional threat, and it's going to require more effective collective action by nations that are affected. You know, one of the anecdotes is that in Syria and Iraq we saw as many as 40,000 foreign fighters from 120 different countries, which gives you some sense of the range of ISIS's challenge. Although today primarily we spoke about ISIS because we view them today as the most virulent strain of violent extremism, we really are talking about a military network that we expect to be enduring to deal with all forms of violent extremism – ISIS and al-Qaida – (inaudible) – any transregional threats.

I think the – to summarize, probably the key takeaway is we realize that the most effective action against these groups is local action. But that local action has to be informed by the

nature of the threat, which is a transregional threat, so cooperation globally is important. And then, also, our global efforts have to be informed by those local – by local information as well.

The things that we talked about that connect these groups are three: one is the flow of foreign fighters, two is the flow of finances or resources, and three is the narrative. From a U.S. perspective, and frankly I think from this military group, we realize at the strategic level the idea is that we cut the connectivity between these groups, again, in West Africa. Today we spoke about the various locations where these groups operate. But cut the connective tissue through those three enabling functions, and then enable local forces to deal with the challenge. And that's what we spoke about today, is enabling these local coalitions to deal with the challenge.

I'm going to let Mr. McGurk make, you know, one or two minutes of comments as well. But I think you all have come down here late in the day, and so we'll take the time to answer your questions. And for you hardy souls that actually did come down here, we'll make sure that we answer everybody's question before you – before you leave.

So, with that, I'll turn it over to Mr. McGurk. Thanks.

BRETT MCGURK: Sure. Mr. Chairman, it was a real honor to be here in this – it really was a historic gathering of chiefs of defense. It was also an opportunity to just review a little bit where we are in the overall campaign against ISIS and talk to many coalition members here.

Our coalition against ISIS, of course, is a subset of the group that we met with today, but it's really the largest coalition of its kind in history: 69 countries now, three international organizations – the Arab League, the EU, Interpol, and NATO. NATO is our newest member, that joined during the NATO summit this summer at the invitation of President Trump. And I was just in Brussels and briefed the North Atlantic Council, and all 29 allies were very – were prepared to contribute even more to the overall campaign, answering the president's call.

I think we look at some statistics in the overall campaign. Now we are at about 90,000 square kilometers. ISIS is down really to its last 10 percent of territory. About a third of those gains, a little more than a third of those gains now, have come over the past year. It's a more accelerated campaign, thanks to many of the accelerants that were authorized by the president earlier this year.

Importantly, ISIS has not regained a single meter of that territory. That's a record that we're very proud of. Everything that has been retaken from them has held. And over 6.6 million people have been liberated from ISIS overall in this campaign.

And we talked today quite a bit about the civilian-led efforts of the campaign, which go hand in hand with the military efforts. We have a stabilization and humanitarian parallel effort that goes with every military campaign, and it has helped return people to their homes. So, in Iraq, for example, we have now 2.3 million Iraqis have returned to their homes in areas that have been liberated from ISIS. And we're starting to see a similar trendline in Syria.

Foreign-fighter flows into Syria have nearly stopped. There was 40,000 just a few years ago. This flow has nearly stopped. And also, foreign fighters are unable to get out of Syria. And we believe we've cut their revenue down to the lowest level ever, and their outside sources of funding are now entirely severed.

Most interestingly, today I thought – we did, as the chairman said, a little trip around the globe, because it's not just about Iraq and Syria, although that gets so much – so much of the attention. We had very detailed presentations about operations against ISIS in Marawi, in the Sahel. We talked about how we're tracking foreign terrorist fighters around the world, making sure that we catch them if they're trying to cross borders, trying to target our homelands. And we had a very good presentation from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the very important meeting efforts that they have taken on, both counter-ideology and really leading the counter-messaging campaign in that part of the world.

So it was a very instructive, very poignant, I think, moment in our overall campaign against ISIS, as we also look to shift to a new phase in the overall effort.

Q: General, could we start with Niger, if you don't mind? There were some reports today that the mission for the U.S. servicemembers in Niger changed. They were going after a high-value target. And another Special Operations group was supposed to join them and did not, but they were ordered to go in anyway. Can you comment on these reports or confirm them?

GEN. DUNFORD: The only thing I can tell you is what we discussed last night, and that is, you know, those are the kind of questions the investigation is designed to uncover. And once we – once the investigation is complete, we will address those and any other issues that have been raised.

Q: But you can't comment specifically on whether or not the mission changed?

GEN. DUNFORD: I can't. I can't, because, again, anything that you've seen in that regard is speculation. And once the investigation is complete, we'll have the facts and we'll share them.

One of the things, you know, I'm just sensitive to on Niger, as I mentioned last night – I just want to reiterate it now – is the very first people that we want to sit down with and share the facts are the families, once the investigation is complete. And we want to do that once, and we want to do it right. And then, immediately thereafter, we will get the team – the Pentagon team together, and we'll share it with you and the American people.

But what – you know, there's so many bits and pieces of information that are coming out – some speculation, some bits of fact. We want to make sure we have the whole story, we have the whole story in context, we can provide the facts to the family. That's my primary target audience right now. They have legitimate questions. They lost their loved ones, and they have legitimate questions about what happened, and we're going to answer those questions. And

then this full range of questions, to include this one, we will address. And we'll address it fully.

Q: Can I – Mr. McGurk, in your capacity, do you – are you tracking the movement of ISIS into Africa?

MR. MCGURK: Part of our campaign is to try to track the movement and flow of foreign fighters. And, in fact, we had a very good discussion today about how we can do that globally; how we share information better; and how, as a coalition, we've actually stopped attacks by trying to connect dots. So, yeah, certainly. And the effort in the Sahel, which was part of the conference today, is really about trying to block these migrant flows, which are – which the extremist groups are trying to take advantage of.

Q: So what kind of flows are you seeing from Iraq and Syria, for instance, into Africa?

MR. MCGURK: Iraq and Syria, the flow has almost stopped. So if –

Q: Out of.

MR. MCGURK: Yeah, you can look at – just look at ISIS's own propaganda. About a year ago they started to stop saying come to Syria. At the time they said go to Libya. Then they stopped saying go to Libya; they said go to the Philippines. Now they can't go to the Philippines. So they're running out of places to go.

GEN. DUNFORD: Let me just follow up, you know, because it's less about numbers, I think, in some cases, than small numbers of leaders, individuals, that maybe add to the insurgency. If you took a look at the Philippines, for example, we got a brief today on Marawi from the – from the vice chief of defense for the Philippines. And they estimate there was about 30 foreign fighters that made their way back to the Philippines, so a relatively small number.

The theme of today is that, you know, small numbers of ISIS leaders are attempting to leverage local insurgencies. And so we see in Africa a number of local insurgencies that rebranded themselves and pledged allegiance to ISIS over the past year. And then, you know, what they're looking for is a small number of foreign fighters' leadership that may try to make their way to what we call safe havens.

What today's discussion was all about was information, intelligence sharing about the movement of these individuals so we can prepare local forces to deal with the challenges associated with them coming back. I don't – you know, there's a – even yesterday, there was kind of a hint that you expect to see large flows of ISIS fighters coming out of Syria and Iraq. We don't see that at all. We don't see large numbers of fighters coming out of Syria and Iraq. The numbers that we're seeing in other places that have come from Syria and Iraq are fairly small numbers.

Again, what we're really dealing with are largely local insurgencies, connected by money,

connected by foreign fighters, small numbers, connected by an ideology. But it really is about – at this point in the campaign, I think it's about ISIS attempting to leverage insurgencies that exist in various parts of the world, and then our efforts to keep these groups from actually being connected and being effective at sharing tactics, techniques, procedures, money, foreign fighters, and those kind of things.

And again, I think what Mr. McGurk's efforts have done and our partners on the ground – our Iraqi partners on the ground, our Syrian partners – what they have done, I think, in large part, when you look at Raqqa and Mosul, one of the most significant things it's done, besides denying physical space of the enemy, I think it's to also undermine the credibility of the narrative, one of those three things that I described as enabling. And I say undermine the credibility of the narrative because if you recall, two years ago the narrative was the establishment of a physical caliphate – you know, a perfect Islamic world and they were trying to incentivize young people from around the world to join them. And I think today we can – we can safely say that that narrative doesn't have much credibility.

Q: Can I follow on that, sir?

Q: Just to follow up from –

GEN. DUNFORD: I'm just going to tell you what I'll do. I'll just go right to left, all right? So that way –

Q: Thank you, General. Lucas Tomlinson from Fox News.

Was that 12-man Special Forces team authorized to go after ISIS around – (inaudible) – in Niger?

GEN. DUNFORD: The rules for that particular 12-man team are they were authorized to accompany Nigerien forces when the prospects of enemy contact was unlikely. That is the rules under which they were operating.

Q: There's a report that they were going after a terrorist leader. Is that just not true?

GEN. DUNFORD: Look, again, when the investigation is complete, we'll know the full details of the patrol. What I mentioned to you yesterday and probably what I'd say today, we know what the mission was initially, we know what the assessment was initially, and we know what the framework is within which our forces are conducting operations in Niger. I'm not willing to speculate on what happened subsequent to that because, again, I think it's important that we complete the investigation, we determine the facts, we share the facts with the families, and then we share them with you. And at the time we share the facts with you, we will – we will answer all the questions that you have. And we'll make sure that those questioned are answered, again, first and foremost with the families.

Q: I have a question for Mr. McGurk. Is this ISIS strategy that we've seen take all this territory back from them in Iraq and Syria, is that essentially the Obama strategy, or did something change under this administration?

MR. MCGURK: I think we've made some pretty significant – that it's moving faster, more efficiently, and more effectively – pretty significant changes made in terms of delegations of authorities. A very important decision was made back in May about how to prosecute the Raqqa campaign that the president made, which allowed us, I think, to complete the Raqqa operation. So I think it's moving faster, more efficiently, and more effectively due to some really critical changes that were made in the strategic review led by Secretary Mattis and the whole interagency team with Secretary Tillerson and the chairman.

So, having just come back, actually – I was in Syria last week – you can really get a sense of the momentum that's really building now. Our training classes for the forces we're training are all full. We have more recruits than we can train. So it's really kind of taken on a really positive momentum, a snowball effect, so we feel pretty good about that.

GEN. DUNFORD: In addition to what Mr. McGurk said, I think, and I can agree, I'd also point to the continued capability development of our partners on the ground. So, if you look at where the Iraqis were in the fall of 2015 and you compare their combat capability to 2017, they have improved significantly over the last two years.

If you look at where we were in the fall of 2015, at one point I think we had identified about 175 partners in Syria that we had trained and were available, maybe some hundreds that were available to fight. We now have over 50,000 partners on the ground, half of those partners Arab partners. And so the growth of our partners over time compared to the decision-making process and, frankly, the momentum that that all has generated I think has fed the success that we have seen in Raqqa and Mosul.

And the only thing I'd add, too, is that one of our themes today was that this is an inflection point, it's not the end of the campaign, and a strong emphasis on the need to keep the coalition that Mr. McGurk has helped to craft, to keep that coalition together for a long time. The next phase of the campaign is equally important –the clearing phase, the stabilization phase, and the enabling of local security forces to make the security that we have gained enduring.

Q: Just one follow, Mr. Chairman. What is the next phase for the coalition post-Raqqa?

GEN. DUNFORD: Yeah, I mean, the first – the first step is the stabilization efforts that Mr. McGurk has helped pull together in the international community, the United Nations, and nongovernmental organizations, the European Union and other – and other groups. And he can – he can talk to that stabilization. I mean, it's critical that we meet the people's needs. As we have been in Mosul, we must in Raqqa and elsewhere meet their immediate needs. Obviously, the basics of water, food, electricity would be the – would be the beginnings.

The other – the other key piece will be to continue to work with our Iraqi partners to make sure that their capability development continues. And ideally, you know, in the near future they will have the capability to be self-sustaining. When I say near future, I look at the near future as three to five years. I mean, it's an effort that's going to take some time. But that is the next phase in Iraq and Syria.

The next phase for us more broadly is to expand our information and intelligence sharing, which was a strong theme of today, again, to make sure that we cut that connective tissue, the enabling capabilities that – again, I talked about foreign fighters, resources and narrative – but to get after those strategically. And then continue in areas like today, where it's G5 Sahel. We had a brief on that. You obviously have tracked events in Libya. You're tracking events with AMISOM in East Africa. We just talked about Iraq and Syria. We continue to support our Afghan partners on the ground in Afghanistan also dealing with ISIS, also a key part of our fight against al-Qaida.

And then, in Southeast Asia, we see some very promising initiatives. Today we spoke about Indonesia and the Philippines and Malaysia, and the cooperation that they have had in sharing – in sharing information. And, of course, the efforts that have taken place in Marawi have been as a result of some of the support that the Philippines has received.

And so this is all about, again, making sure that these local efforts and regional efforts all benefit from the framework that we have in place for a broader global network.

Q: Mr. Chairman, thank you for your time today, and – (inaudible) – as well. In light of the shift away from Iraq and Syria, or at least the discussion of looking at other places more closely, and also the rebranding of local insurgencies as we've seen in Niger, were there any discussions today about expanding in that region – additional (inaudible), additional U.S. enablers, additional authorities, anything along those lines?

GEN. DUNFORD: No. First of all, I just want to clarify we are not shifting our attention away from Iraq or Syria yet. And again, I think one of the points that was made several times today is the need for the coalition to stay focused on Iraq and Syria, you know, for an enduring period of time.

The only discussion that we spoke about today really about resources is the G5 Sahel has some very promising initiatives it's standing up. And we received a briefing about the resources they have available, and there's obviously some fiscal resources that are required. And so that was discussed. But, obviously, the group that was here today was not in a position to discuss that in detail. But there was no discussion about additional forces or additional capabilities. That conversation would be premature.

Q: As you look at it, do you see any needs yourself?

GEN. DUNFORD: No. I think what I would say is that, you know, we're constantly, constantly

looking at the enemy. We're looking at the enemy as he adapts. We're trying to stay ahead and anticipate where the enemy will be tomorrow, which is important, and looking for opportunities.

This isn't about just going where the enemy has gone. This is about anticipating where the enemy will go and making sure that we set the conditions for them to receive a very inhospitable reception when they get there by local forces. So we're constantly looking at that and making adjustments in our campaign, and making recommendations to the secretary and the president as to reprioritization and reallocation of resources that we think that's requiring.

Q: Thank you so much for doing this. Just to follow up on an earlier question, to be clear, do you see ISIS moving into the African continent, and like the Philippines – or Libya – (inaudible) – apparently now shifting to the African continent?

GEN. DUNFORD: Yeah, again, I would probably avoid characterizing it as a major shift of ISIS. I think that what ISIS is absolutely trying to do is leverage local insurgencies now to rebrand themselves. They are trying to maintain relevance.

You know, the message two years ago was they were going to have a physical caliphate. The message now is local fighters are to stay where they are and conduct terrorism locally. So ISIS is attempting to maintain relevance by leveraging these local insurgencies and by dealing particularly in places like the G5 Sahel brief that we received today, or Libya, or Sinai, or a smaller presence in East Africa. But I wouldn't – I don't think it's fair to say that we've seen a large flow of ISIS influence or a large flow of ISIS leadership into Africa. In fact, that's exactly what we're trying to prevent by having a common understanding on the part of preparing these countries to deal with the challenges ahead.

We want to make sure that ISIS actually has no safe haven, no coldest corner of the room, if you will, to go to after Iraq and Syria. And, of course, that's complemented by our efforts in Iraq and Syria to make sure we annihilate the enemy in Iraq and Syria and we don't allow them to leave.

Q: (Inaudible.)

MR. MCGURK: Yeah, I would just – one of, I thought, the benefits of the discussion today is it's violent extremist organizations, not just ISIS. So, in the – in the Sahel, for example, some of these extremist groups raise the banner of ISIS, but others are al-Qaida, others have their own affiliations. Part of Boko Haram went to ISIS. But they're all part of the same ideology.

And General McMaster actually came and we had a very good discussion about how do you take the network, how do you take these types of groups and just really analyze them and begin to sever their connections, so that they can't get out of their local area, financing, how do they move and everything?

So whether it's ISIS, whether it's al-Qaida, whether it's Boko Haram, it's kind of a similar approach. But in that part of the world, we want to make sure that it's really contained, they can't infiltrate the micro networks, and we contain it in the Sahel. And I thought it was a very good discussion we had today about that.

Q: And the second question, on cutting the connective tissue. What does that look like to the military? Is that treated as advise and assist? Is it counterterrorism, direct action, you know, direct combat missions, drone strikes? Will it depend – and – (inaudible)?

GEN. DUNFORD: I think what you're alluding to, it is largely, you know, the whole-of-government approach that's going to have to deal with those three. I think the military dimension, number one, is the information and intelligence sharing that we're doing with our partners. And this military network that we spoke about today is designed to do just that, complement the broader intelligence relationships that we have between our countries, the law enforcement relationships we have in our countries, and information sharing is one part of it.

I think the key contribution that the military makes to the countering the narrative is enabling our partners to be successful on the ground, which is one of the best ways to discredit the narrative.

And with regard to the resources, I think the information and intelligence sharing that we're doing at the military-to-military level is also what makes a contribution to the broader campaign.

But at the end of the day, to be successful – and the State Department, of course, leads our counter-messaging campaign. And we also spoke today with the Saudi-led effort which will help, I think, with credible Islamic voices to discredit the narrative as well.

I don't know, maybe Mr. McGurk has something else to add. But, again, the military dimension is largely information sharing plus our operations on the ground that we contribute to the counter-messaging campaign.

MR. MCGURK: (Inaudible) – coalition is organized. It's military support, it's counter-finance, it's counter foreign fighters, it's counter-messaging and it's humanitarian stabilizations. That's how we've organized ourselves globally. And I think the approach that we use in Iraq and Syria is kind of a very intense approach, obviously a significant portion of the effort. But the same tools can work – (inaudible) - and you have to attack it whole-of-government and take a network-based approach. That's what we discussed today.

Q: (Inaudible.) One would argue, and one could argue, that the narrative – (inaudible). And while – (inaudible) – the narrative still hasn't – (inaudible) – in many, many places. And I'd like – just I'd like you to address that a little bit. And specifically, why is it so important that Saudi Arabia is leading that effort to – (inaudible)?

GEN. DUNFORD: Sure. Sure. I mean, Jim, you know, I'll start, and Mr. McGurk will certainly

have something to add to this.

I think you've correctly identified as probably one of the toughest challenges is the counter-narrative. I would say this: I'm encouraged. Not complacent, but I'm encouraged by how the success on the ground is translating to undermining the credibility of the narrative. And I think the numbers of foreign fighters that are flowing into the region is an indicator.

There's been some studies on the numbers of young people that are radicalized, and those numbers seem to go down. And I'm loath to give specifics, but there certainly are indicators that fewer people, fewer young people are radicalized. And again, I think that's as a result of us being able to demonstrate ISIS for what it is. I mean, they can only behead so many people and treat people the way they treated them in Mosul and Iraq, and those stories have gotten out. And young people who actually were motivated to join them have returned back home now and exposed the truth about the Islamic State. And so I think that's all – that's all been particularly helpful.

With regard to the question about the Saudi-led effort, I think the number is 41 nations that are represented in that initiative, 41 Islamic nations. Clearly, credible Islamic voices are the ones that are going to resonate the most in countering the narrative of ISIS and countering it and discrediting it for what it is. So we're actually encouraged.

Last year, they gave us a brief and it was really at the discussion level. And this year they actually have now established a center in Saudi Arabia. And over the next year, we expect that their initiatives will start to – will start to pay dividends. So I really do think those 41 Islamic nations are the ones that have the most credibility to take the lead in countering this message that ISIS is attempting. But again, I think it is tough, but I have seen some indicators that they're having a more difficult time getting the message resonating.

MR. MCGURK: That's a great question. And, you know, and we track the propaganda week to week. It's really interesting, because three years ago most of their propaganda, when you looked at it, was actually they put out this positive message. That was the vast majority of their propaganda was this we're a historic movement, come join, you know, come to the homeland, these kind of sundrenched scenes of families and friends. That was kind of most of their propaganda. And I think that actually did attract a lot of people, and whole families came for a time.

They don't view that – that's not in their propaganda anymore. They are now really appealing to, like, the criminal elements of our society. Rather than saying come be a part of historic movements, it's all of a sudden go and grab a knife, grab a gun. Very different – very different message to a very smaller segment of any community. Still a huge problem with law enforcement and intelligence channels, but it is not – they can no longer do this mass appeal.

And there is a religiously based messaging component to their propaganda and that's why having Saudi Arabia in the lead with a lot of this is so critical. Together with Egypt, UAE we

have a 24/7 messaging hub. Malaysia, we have a 24/7 messaging hub, OK? So we attack this globally, but it is really significantly different than three years ago compared to what they put out. But, you know, we're going to – we're going to keep at it. As they change their message, we'll adapt to whichever counter – (inaudible).

Q: And just a real quick one to the Colonel. Colonel Kelly, you said if you – (inaudible). The coalition has 73 nations now. Can the coalition get too big? (Inaudible.)

COLONEL DAVE KELLY: So I'm an exchange officer. (Inaudible) – actually U.S. and work for the Joint Staff, so – (inaudible) – back to Australia. What I bring to the Joint Staff, I think, is a diversity of perspective, and such diversity of perspective that we're looking for in our planning as we take this effort forward. So can it become too big? I don't think so. I think the price of admission is one – (inaudible) – part of solving the problem.

GEN. DUNFORD: Let me – let me reinforce that. I think Colonel Kelly has it exactly right.

First of all, in this coalition, the group that we spoke about today, we're not trying to create another organization. This is one of the points I made in my opening comment. What we're trying to do is make the local, regional, multilateral efforts more successful. So we're not trying to put some structure above the G5, say – (inaudible) – or what's going on in AMISOM or what's going on in Iraq with Syria, what's going on in Afghanistan. What we're trying to do, by exchanging information and intelligence, is make those local and regional efforts more effective.

So, in that regard, I don't think it can be too big. In fact, the bigger, the better, because the more nations that come – and the – and the price for admission is merely to come and attend and exchange information.

But one thing I think I've seen in terms of comparing this year to last year is the common understanding of the nature of the threat is, in my judgment, much more sophisticated than even 12 months ago. And so just that can't help but make our operations more effective. And frankly, it can't help but have these chiefs of defense return home and have an effective conversation with their political leadership to make sure that we are integrated not only across all of these efforts, but within all of these efforts. The kind of whole-of-government approach that Mr. McGurk is leading in Syria and Iraq is one that also must take place in the G5 Sahel and East Africa, Southeast Asia.

And that actually, Jim, was probably one of the big takeaways today, was, again, making these organizations more effective by, number one, cutting that connective tissue; and, number two, a much more effective way to share information and intelligence. Because, again, these groups are connected, and the less that they're connected and the more we prop up local security forces and give them the capability to deal with those challenges, the closer we come to the end state. The end state actually is getting to the point where the security challenges in each of the respective countries or regions can be dealt with largely by local security forces with a minimal amount of international support. And I think there's going to be some degree of international

support required in many of these locations for some time to come, just given the governance issues and the economic issues that they confront. But getting that down to a minimum level makes this a sustainable effort.

And that's one thing we also spoke about, is that if this is in fact a generational struggle in the sense that the underlying conditions that feed extremism and terrorism will take a generation to address, the military dimension has to be sustainable over time. So it needs to be sustainable from a military perspective, sustainable from a political perspective, and sustainable from a fiscal perspective. And again, largely focused on making sure that local forces can deal with this in a more effective way, and that's what this – that's what this broader representation of countries is designed to do today.

MR. MCGURK: One more thing. Most of their messaging was coming out of Raqqa. That was their hub. That was where they put everything together. That's where they put their products together. And they can't do that anymore. Very different using an infrastructure of a city, which they were doing in Raqqa, to put all this stuff out, and to plan and plot attacks against us. Remember Jihadi John? He used to just sit in an apartment building with hundreds of people so he knew he couldn't be targeted, and he was a computer hacker sitting there trying to inspire people to attack around the world. They were using Raqqa as their hub, and they don't have Raqqa anymore. And it's very different for them to be in some, you know, very small village deep in the Euphrates Valley than to be in Raqqa. So their messaging platform in Raqqa, to say the least, is no longer available to them.

GEN. DUNFORD: Let's go to the second row.

Col Ryder: We have time for about two more questions.

GEN. DUNFORD: OK.

Q: Hi. First, a quick follow-up on your discussion about these rebranded local insurgencies. Can you give us a ballpark of how many groups we're talking? And what level of connection to ISIS are we talking? Are we talking just a rebranding, or ISIS in Iraq and Syria being able to pass along tactics they've learned about using commercial drones to these groups elsewhere?

GEN. DUNFORD: That is a great question. It's a complicated question, one that would take a long time to answer. But I'll make a stab at giving you, you know, kind of an overview.

And so there's many groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS. And, you know, one thing that's interesting is ISIS actually had some pretty strict criteria to be a part of ISIS. Maybe 12 to 18 months ago, some pretty strict criteria. They've stopped kind of sanctioning, if you will, organizations that want to be a part of ISIS, and so we haven't seen much of the qualifications, you know, to be a – to be a part of ISIS. I think that's an indicator.

But in terms of general areas, I mean, the ones that we spoke about today – so I'll just speak generally – certainly in West Africa ISIS is attempting to leverage the local insurgencies. We certainly see a concentration, and we've been disrupting them over the past year in Libya. We see an ISIS concentration in the Sinai that Egypt has been working on here now for some time. And certainly there's a smaller ISIS presence in East Africa. And we, obviously, have spoken a lot about the ISIS presence in Syria and Iraq. There's a smaller ISIS presence, ISIS Khorasan, that we're dealing with in Afghanistan. And then we spoke today about Marawi and really Southeast Asia, where there's been an effort for ISIS to gain traction, although the recent success by the Philippines has certainly set that effort back. So I describe it in broad geographic areas, and that really probably captures the essence of our conversation today.

I'll give you a follow-up if you want. Go ahead.

Q: Yeah, OK. So I guess specifically when, if at all, could you say ISIS is defeated?

GEN. DUNFORD: Yeah, I think – I think, from our perspective, ISIS is defeated when you no longer operate as a transregional terrorist organization and when the groups that maybe identify themselves as ISIS can be dealt with by local security forces. That'd be – that'd be my perspective on criteria for success.

And again, the thing I want to emphasize today – and part of our conversation was – that this wasn't all about ISIS, right? This was about violent extremism. And that's something I think we're going to be dealing with for some time to come. There will be other permutations of the ISIS group in the future, and our idea is now to make sure that the nations that are most at risk actually have the wherewithal to deal with those challenges in the years ahead.

Q: Conor Finnegan with ABC News.

(Inaudible) – question about Niger – (inaudible). Can you say at all whether or not the CIA was involved in the events in Niger?

GEN. DUNFORD: What I can tell you is I have no knowledge of CIA involvement. And if there's – if there's any other government organizations that are involved, that may or may not come out in the investigation. But I'm not sure what you're alluding to, and I'm – I can say that definitively.

Q: And just one quick follow-up on the connective tissue issue. I know you mentioned, you know, troop deployments and intelligence sharing. But specifically, can you say whether or not there will be new troops deployed to different countries like Niger as part of these training missions or – (inaudible)?

GEN. DUNFORD: No, we – you know, I can tell you that we have not had discussions about additional resources in any of these efforts. I think it's fair to say that we're still focused right now on finishing our work in Iraq and Syria. We're not trying to look past that. That is our main

effort, to make sure we get that right, to keep the coalition together, to complete the job. And we're certainly assessing the next phase of the fight. You know, again, I characterize this as an inflection point. It's a significant change in the campaign.

But I would tell you this. You know, we have an ongoing dialogue with all of our combatant commanders to try to anticipate what's next, and to make sure that we reprioritize and reallocate resources to stay out in front in the end. We do have an opportunity now to anticipate and be out in front. I think it's fair to say two years ago we were reactive. And I think as a result of what's happened in Iraq and Syria, we have an opportunity to get out in front of the enemy. I think it's fair to say that ISIS is on their heels right now. Our job is to make sure they don't recover.

Col Ryder: Let's go to Kasim and then we'll end there.

Q: Raqqa was liberated with the support of the coalition and the millions of dollars of (inaudible) , and also American troops on the ground, but the SDF dedicated the Raqqa victory to the PKK leader Öcalan. I know the Pentagon condemned this thing, but what would you say it was Öcalan's and PKK's ideology that enabled them to that victory for Raqqa? Do you agree with that assessment? And what is your reaction to these things happening in Raqqa?

GEN. DUNFORD: Yeah, what I would tell you is that we condemn the PKK as a terrorist organization, and we stand with our Turkish allies and we share their characterization of the PKK.

Q: And also, to Mr. McGurk, have you talked to SDF about the display of Öcalan's pictures in Raqqa and his messages being said on live video shots inside Raqqa during the victory (inaudible)?

MR. MCGURK: Yeah, I think as the chairman said, I think we spoke very clearly about this issue and that particular display – (inaudible).

GEN. DUNFORD: David, thank – let me just – let me just finish by saying thanks. I mean, this was a lengthy day, and you had to come all the way down to Fort Belvoir, and – but I appreciate it. I mean, I really do, because I find, in essence, coming out of today to have 75 nations here that are developing a common understanding of the fight and a shared commitment to respond collectively is actually a pretty significant event. And I got to tell you, I was hopeful that we would have productive day, and today has exceeded my expectations in terms of the maturity of dialogue and the shared commitment of the chiefs of defense that sat around a table to get after this issue, and again to be supplemented by Mr. McGurk's presentation, General McMaster's presentation. I think we spoke not only about the military dimension of the problem, but more broadly the whole-of-government efforts that need to be – that need to be pulled together in order for us to be successful. So thanks for coming down.

Q: Thank you.