



Washington Examiner

Trump declares ISIS caliphate ‘decimated’ as deadly urban combat continues in Syria

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THE STATE OF ISIS: “The ISIS caliphate has been decimated. Nobody thought it was possible to do it this quickly,” boasted President Trump in remarks to ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, gathered at the State Department yesterday.

“Three weeks ago, I was in Iraq and I was talking to some of our great generals and I gave them the absolute go-ahead. I said, ‘Go at it. How long will it take once you get started?’ He said, ‘Sir, one week.’ I said, ‘Where did that come from, one week?’ And he meant it,” Trump said. “It’s about a week since they really got going and they’ll be informing us very soon officially that it’s 100 percent ... But I want to wait for the official word. I don’t want to say it too early.”

The president is not claiming that ISIS is defeated, but he argues that by denying the remaining fighters control over any territory, their power and influence have been vastly diminished. “They can no longer extract natural resources because they no longer control the land or the area. They can no longer tax the citizens in that area because they no longer have that area.”

UP TO THE COALITION NOW: The Pentagon estimates there could be as many as 20,000 to 30,000 ISIS fighters who have gone to ground, dispersed across Syria and neighboring Iraq, and Trump said that, with U.S. troops leaving soon, it will be up to the coalition partners to help keep ISIS from staging a comeback.

“They’ll be around, they’re sick, they’re demented,” Trump said. “You can’t do better than we’ve done militarily, but you will have people that will be around, and we’ll search them out and you’ll search them out and we’ll find them and hopefully they won’t be around very long.”

“We look forward to giving our brave warriors in Syria a warm welcome back home. Rest assured, we will do what it takes to defeat every ounce and every last person within the ISIS madness and defend our people from radical Islamic terrorism.”

VIEW FROM THE FRONT: Reporters covering the final push to rout ISIS from its last redoubt, tell of dodging mortar rounds and describe dirty, deadly urban combat by the U.S.-backed Syrian fighters, who will soon lose their American advisers.

“In the distance, the ISIS dream of a caliphate in its dying days. After all the fighting and lives lost, this is what it comes down to: A terror group that once held territory around the size of Indiana has been reduced to an area just a couple square miles,” reported CBS News’ Charlie

D'Agata. "Commander Khaled Baran said the final fight against ISIS has slowed to a grind because the terror group is holding those civilians as human shields."

"The militants are now trapped in an area about the size of Central Park," writes Rukmini Callimach in the New York Times. "As the noose has tightened, even those who joined the caliphate in its earliest days are trying to save themselves ... Out of food, the families [of ISIS members] say they have been reduced to boiling a weed that grows in highway medians."

"After a lightning advance last month, the military operation to take Baghuz has stalled as commanders negotiate an end to the siege with the Islamic State, according to three American officials and two militia commanders," the Times reports.

VIEW FROM THE HILL: Meanwhile on Capitol Hill, there is bipartisan head-scratching over the plan to withdraw U.S. troops, leaving a vacuum that will likely be filled by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Russian and Iranian benefactors.

The division between the president and the Pentagon was encapsulated in a brief exchange during yesterday's House Armed Services Committee hearing on counterterrorism. Rep. Seth Moulton D-Mass., a combat veteran, questioned Owen West, the Pentagon's top special operations civilian.

"Mr. West, your former boss, Secretary Mattis, disagreed with the president's plan to withdraw from Syria. Do you think he was wrong?" Moulton asked. "No, sir," replied West.

Earlier Moulton pressed Maj. Gen. James Hecker, joint staff operations vice director, about whether the U.S. would be able to keep the pressure on ISIS if it withdraws all its ground forces.

"I will say that there will be a decrease in the amount of pressure that we'll be able to apply, but we'll still be able to apply pressure," Hecker testified.

NOT GOING TO CUT AND RUN: In an interview on CNN, Sen. Mike Rounds R-S.D. said the timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. troops may be a lot slower than advertised. "I really think after fully discussing not only with the president but with other members, I think there's a strong clarification that has occurred saying, we're not just going to run away," Rounds told CNN's Brianna Keilar.

"We're not going to leave overnight. We're going to do it based on certain conditions being met. And one of them is, is the continued elimination of ISIS as a threat," Rounds said. "And so, I don't expect that we're going to just simply be out in the next few days or few weeks at this point."

Good Thursday morning and welcome to Jamie McIntyre's Daily on Defense, written and compiled by Washington Examiner National Security Senior Writer Jamie McIntyre(@jamiejmcintyre) and edited by David Mark (@DavidMarkDC). Email us here for tips, suggestions, calendar items and anything else. If a friend sent this to you and you'd like to sign up, click here. If signing up doesn't work, shoot us an email and we'll add you to our list. And be sure to follow us on Twitter @dailyondefense.

HAPPENING TODAY: Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, commander, U.S. Africa Command, is scheduled to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee at 10:15 a.m. At the conclusion of Waldhauser's testimony, AFRICOM will release its annual posture statement on the U.S. Africa Command website.

POMPEO'S HIGH HOPES: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sounds upbeat about the prospects for real progress in the second summit between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, set for Feb. 27 and 28 in Vietnam.

"We are very hopeful that Chairman Kim will fulfill his commitment, the one that he made back in June in Singapore, to denuclearize his country. It's in the best interest of the North Korean people," Pompeo said on Fox Business Network yesterday. Asked by host Maria Bartiromo if he believes it is still possible for North Korea to denuclearize, Pompeo said, "Of course I do. We've seen it. We've seen it in the discussions. Chairman Kim has told his own people that they need to turn the course, they need to advance their economic conditions inside of their country."

CARDIN'S LOW EXPECTATIONS: The president's Democratic critics are not nearly so sanguine. "North Korea has made virtually no progress towards denuclearizing their program. They haven't tested missiles, because they have the capacity today. The president has made very little progress in getting us towards a safer North Korea," argued Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., on CNN yesterday.

"And by the way, North Korea's non-nuclear activities, its human rights violations, its interference in other countries is still there. So, it is strange to me why the president would claim he's made progress when he hasn't, and now setting up a second summit meeting with Kim Jong Un," Cardin said.

TRUMP'S SUMMIT TO-DO & NOT-TO-DO LIST: Channelling the old Goofus and Gallant cartoons, the Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner, former CIA deputy division chief for the Koreas, has put together a handy checklist for president laying out do's and don't for a successful negotiation.

Do: "Insist on a detailed comprehensive roadmap to North Korean denuclearization, robust verification measures, predicating benefits on tangible progress in reducing Pyongyang's arsenal, and resuming advocacy for improving North Korea's human rights record."

Don't: "Repeat the mistakes of Singapore," namely, "Accepting a poorly-crafted document that mirrored North Korea's priorities, unilaterally tossing off concessions that undermine allied deterrence and defense capabilities, and beautifying a purveyor of crimes against humanity."

Especially Don't: "Sign a peace declaration, accede to an ICBM-only deal, or reduce U.S. forces in South Korea."

OUR MAN IN KABUL: Zalmay Khalilzad, special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, is back in Washington from his shuttle diplomacy trying to forge a peace deal between the Taliban and the U.S. backed Afghan government.

There's been a lot of back-and-forth about the status of an agreement in principle with the Taliban for a framework for going forward. We'll hear from Ambassador Khalilzad himself tomorrow when he discusses "recent progress and challenges to advance a peace process," at the U.S. Institute for Peace at 2 p.m. After his remarks, he'll sit down to discuss the status of the talks with USIP board chair and former National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley.

HEAD THEM OFF AT THE PASS: The Pentagon announced yesterday that 250 active duty troops will be deployed from Arizona to Eagle Pass, Texas, to help reinforce the ports of entry in the area.

The Department of Homeland Security requested the additional troops in response to a caravan of approximately 2,000 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador near the Texas border.

The Pentagon says the personnel includes military police and medical personnel from current border security support missions in Arizona and engineers who will support hardening of ports of entry.

The 250 troops are already supporting border missions and are separate from the 3,750 additional U.S. forces the Pentagon announced Sunday would be heading to the border to support Customs and Border Protection.

HOUSING WOES: Virginia Sen. Mark Warner met with Army Secretary Mark Esper yesterday in his Capitol Hill office to press for answers about hazards in military housing reported at several bases in his home state.

The questions were prompted by a series of investigative reports by Reuters that describe "a dark side of the U.S. Military Housing Privatization Initiative, the largest-ever corporate takeover of federal housing."

Two decades ago, the Defense Department began turning over most family housing on U.S. bases to private companies to manage in an effort to improve living conditions. Reuters reported, though, "In some homes, however, lead paint hazards threaten children; rampant mold sickens others; ceilings leak or collapse into bedrooms, and rodents soil cribs and carpets."

"Our nation's military families deserve better than this. They deserve safe and healthy housing, free from mold, lead, pests, and other hazards," Warner said. "In our meeting today, I told Secretary Esper that I expect the Army to make improving military housing conditions a top priority and hold accountable any companies who may have profited off the mistreatment of military families."

COTTON ON CHINA: In a speech yesterday, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., accused Chinese President Xi Jinping of establishing a "new evil empire," aided by multinational and even American corporations despite the Communist regime's disregard for human rights.

“[W]e must stop our own companies from helping China build this new evil empire,” said Cotton, at the Hudson Institute. “This is the 21st-century rope that capitalists will sell to hang themselves.”

The senator, whose assignments include the Select Committee on Intelligence and the Armed Services Committee, didn't shy away from naming names, such as "Thermo Fisher Scientific, which sells the DNA sequencers China uses to build genetic dossiers on its ethnic minorities," and "Google, which is performing cutting-edge AI research in China and contemplating even greater investment in that country."

EX-F-16 PILOT PANS F-15X: J.V. Venable, retired F-16 pilot and Heritage senior research fellow for defense policy, writes in the Washington Examiner that Congress should be very skeptical of plans to buy Boeing's fourth generation F-15X to replace the Air Force's obsolete F-15C models, and instead should think about ramping up production of the fifth generation F-35.

“The F-15X is an updated version of the F-15E, and six active-duty pilots I have interviewed who have flown both that jet and the F-35 state the former could never survive in a modern day, high-threat environment,” writes Venable. “That strongly suggests buying the F-15X in lieu of the F-35 would be a very poor choice.”

“Even with the threat in places like Syria, stealth is becoming a prerequisite for survival...While an F-15X's arsenal of 22 air-to-air missiles is formidable, it might not live long enough to target a fourth-generation Russian or Chinese fighter,” he argues. “In the unforgiving world of conflict, investments have to deliver viable combat capability, and in that regard, the F-15X falls well short of the mark.”

THE RUNDOWN

Washington Post: Congressional negotiators seek contours of border deal as shutdown looms

New York Times: Taliban Peace Talks in Moscow End With Hope That the U.S. Departs

AP: Cornered in Syria, IS lays groundwork for a new insurgency

Reuters: U.S. Might Lift Sanctions On Venezuelan Military Who Back Guaido: Bolton

Military Times: DoD Officials: Irregular Warfare Will No Longer Suffer A 'Boom-Bust' Cycle In Eras Of Great Power Competition

Breaking Defense: Attacking Artificial Intelligence: How To Trick The Enemy

Business Insider: The U.S. Navy Just Turned The Future Guns Of Its New Ford-Class Supercarriers On A Drone In A Landmark Live-Fire Test

Forbes: Army Plan To Delay Chinook Helicopter Upgrades May Have Big Jobs, Political Consequences

Sacramento Bee: California National Guard to Transgender Troops: 'Nobody's Going to Kick You Out'

CBS News: Syria: CBS News dodges ISIS bombs despite Trump claim group is almost wiped out

The New York Times: A Desperate Exodus From ISIS's Final Village

Washington Post: U.S. cuts some military assistance to Cameroon, citing allegations of human rights violations

Breaking Defense: CNO Wants More Cyber, IW in Navy's Wargames

Calendar

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 7

8 a.m. 30th Annual SO/LIC Symposium & Exhibition. Hyatt Regency Crystal City at Reagan National Airport. <http://www.ndia.org>

10 a.m. Capitol H-140. House Appropriations Committee hearing: Quality of Life in the Military. www.appropriations.house.gov

10:15 a.m. Dirksen G50. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing: United States Africa Command and United States Southern Command. www.armed-services.senate.gov

11:30 a.m. 1667 K Street, NW. "Regaining the High Ground at Sea: Transforming the U.S. Navy's Carrier Air Wing for Great Power Competition" <https://csbaonline.org>

12 p.m. 1619 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. U.S.-Japan Business Diplomacy. www.sais-jhu.edu

12 p.m. 1800 M Street, NW, Suite 800. By invitation only — Center on Military and Political Power conversation on the implications of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. <https://www.fdd.org/>

2 p.m. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: Business Meeting. www.foreign.senate.gov

4 p.m. 1616 Rhode Island Avenue N.W. "The Strategic Importance of the U.S. in Afghanistan." www.csis.org

FRIDAY | FEBRUARY 8

10 a.m. 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosts a "Discussion with the Secretaries of the U.S. Military Departments, with Army Secretary Mark Esper, Navy Secretary Richard Spencer, and Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson. www.csis.org

MONDAY | FEBRUARY 11

3 p.m. 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W. "Is Bigger Better? Concentration, Competition, and Defense Contracting Outcomes." www.csis.org

TUESDAY | FEBRUARY 12

8 a.m. 1st St. N.E. Capitol Hill Visitors Center SVC 201-00 Defense Writers Groups breakfast, featuring Sen. James Inhofe, chairman, Armed Services Committee <https://nationalsecuritymedia.gwu.edu/>

8:30 a.m. 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W. “Seventh Annual U.S.-Mexico Security Conference: New Government, Old Challenges in Mexico's Security Landscape.” www.wilsoncenter.org

8:45 a.m. 529 14th St. N.W. “Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy.” www.press.org

9 a.m. 1030 15th Street N.W. “Iran's Revolution Turns Forty.” www.atlanticcouncil.org

9:30 a.m. 1775 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. “A conversation on defense policy with Rep. Seth Moulton.” www.brookings.edu

10 a.m. Rayburn 2118. House Armed Services Committee hearing: Outside Perspectives on Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Posture. Witnesses: Ellen Tauscher, former undersecretary of state for arms control and international security; Bruce Blair, Princeton University; Frank Miller, The Scowcroft Group. <https://armedservices.house.gov/>

2 p.m. Rayburn 2118. House Armed Services Committee hearing: Military Service Academies' Action Plans to Address the Results of Sexual Assault and Violence Report at the Military Service Academies. <https://armedservices.house.gov/>

6 p.m. 1619 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. “The European Strategic Landscape after the INF Treaty.” www.sais-jhu.edu

WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 13

12 p.m. 1717 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. “From War to Peace in the Balkans, the Middle East and Ukraine.” www.sais-jhu.edu

2:30 p.m. Dirksen G50. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing: Current Condition of the Military Housing Privatization Initiative. www.armed-services.senate.gov

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 14

11 a.m. 214 Massachusetts Avenue N.E. “Building an Effective Approach to Terrorism Prevention.” www.heritage.org

WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 20

12:30 p.m. 1619 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. “The 'New Cold War' Metaphor Makes No Sense.” www.sais-jhu.edu

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 21

8:30 a.m. 2101 Wilson Blvd. “Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Defense Roundtable Breakfast.” www.ndia.org

11 a.m. 1000 Massachusetts Avenue N.W. “Gullible Superpower: U.S. Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements.” www.cato.org

TUESDAY | FEBRUARY 26

7 a.m. 2425 Wilson Blvd. Breakfast with Ryan McCarthy, Under Secretary of the U.S. Army. www.ausa.org

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 28

8 a.m. 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W. “Strategic National Security Space: FY 2020 Budget and Policy Forum.” www.csis.org

SUNDAY | MARCH 3

10:30 a.m. Breakfast discussion with rocket scientist behind Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system, Dr. Ari Sacher. 8900 Little River Turnpike, Fairfax. jnf.org/vabreakfast