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'We are succeeding' in fight against Islamic State: White House

By Ben Wolfgang
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As President Obama huddled with military leaders from across the globe, the White House declared Tuesday that the air campaign to defeat the Islamic State is succeeding - even as the terror group rampaged across Syria and Iraq, capturing key territory and leaving bloodshed in its wake.

Mr. Obama met with defense chiefs from nearly two dozen nations at Joint Base Andrews Tuesday afternoon, a high-level gathering meant to show that the White House has built the kind of international coalition necessary to defeat an enemy more capable than virtually anyone predicted.

While the meeting took place, chaos continued to unfold in Iraq and Syria. Islamic State fighters over the past two days have captured a key military training ground in western Iraq and appear poised to take control of Anbar Province.

In Syria, the group is on the verge of capturing the town of Kobani near the Turkish border.

The U.S. responded with 21 airstrikes on Tuesday, according to military officials, though analysts say those operations aren't having the impact the administration had hoped.

But violence in Iraq and Syria is only part of the challenge now facing the U.S. and its allies. The White House also has had to walk a tightrope with one of its key allies in the region, Turkey, which on Tuesday reportedly launched airstrikes against Kurdish rebels based within its borders despite American pleas not to do so.

Turkish planes bombed positions in southeastern Turkey held by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as the PKK, which is classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. but also is a fierce foe of the Islamic State. The move seems to indicate Turkey is more focused on its

decades-old struggle with the PKK than it is on the threat posed to the Middle East by the Islamic State.

The strikes come a day after the U.S. and Turkey - which has granted refuge to more than 200,000 people who fled Syria to escape violence - publicly disputed whether they had reached an agreement to allow American forces to use Turkish bases for the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS.

Turkish military leaders were among the attendees at Tuesday's meeting, during which Mr. Obama tried to draw attention to the victories of the international community while also warning that it will take time to "destroy" the group.

"We've seen some important successes," the president said, including stopping the Islamic State's advance on the Iraqi town of Irbil and recapturing of the Mosul Dam after it fell into Islamist hands.

"One of the things that has emerged from the discussions, both before I came and during my visit here, is that this is going to be a long-term campaign," Mr. Obama continued. "There are not quick fixes involved. We're still at the early stages. As with any military effort, there will be days of progress and there are going to be periods of setback, but our coalition is united behind this long-term effort."

Military chiefs from Canada, the U.K., France, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Australia and more than a dozen other nations attended Tuesday's meeting.

While the administration clearly has put together a broad coalition designed to defeat the Islamic State, critics and foreign policy analysts say it's simply false to suggest that the current strategy is working.

Sen. John McCain, Arizona Republican, declared over the weekend that the Islamic State is "winning and we're not."

"There has to be a fundamental re-evaluation of what we're doing because we are not. We are not degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS," he told CNN.

The core reason the U.S. and its allies aren't winning, specialists say, is the lack of competent ground forces in Syria and Iraq. The administration has conceded that the Islamic State cannot be defeated with air power alone and a successful ground campaign must materialize if the president's goal of destroying the terrorist group is to be realized.

"Airstrikes can only do so much and have an impact and they already have, but they are made more effective when there is a ground force that can take the fight to ISIL," White House press secretary Josh Earnest told reporters, moments after saying the U.S. strategy is "succeeding."

But thus far Iraqi security forces haven't proved they can hold or regain ground outside the capital of Baghdad.

In Syria, moderate rebel forces - now with military training and equipment from the U.S. - also have yet to demonstrate they can stand toe to toe with the Islamic State.

"It's fairly obviously wrong to say our strategy is succeeding. The only evidence of success is we're bombing things and killing people. The results, other than that, are hard to point to," said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "In Iraq, the problem is obviously that the Iraqi army is not effective. The further they get from Baghdad, the less effective they are. ISIS is still consolidating its control over Anbar Province."

Even the Army's chief of staff, Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, said Monday he's only "somewhat" confident in the Iraqi military's ability to hold off Islamic State fighters as they advance toward Baghdad.

"We'll have to see what plays out over the coming days," he said.

Mr. Friedman said it may take time to both build up a strong Iraqi military - one capable of defending areas beyond Baghdad - and to build the kind of force needed to counter Islamic State in Syria.

In the meantime, short of American boots on the ground, the terrorist group could retain control of large parts of both countries.

"The most likely scenario is a stalemate," Mr. Friedman said.

Maggie Ybarra contributed to this article, which is based in part on wire service reports.