

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/12/2016

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I apologize for the late start today. I do not have any announcements at the top, so we can go straight to your questions.

Kevin, do you want to start?

Q Sure, Josh, thank you. Russia says its Foreign Minister will meet with Secretary Kerry to discuss efforts to find a peace deal in Syria. I'd like to ask, what's changed? You'd broken off bilateral diplomatic contact over the Syrian war earlier this month. What's going on?

MR. EARNEST: Well, my understanding is that this is not a bilateral meeting. This is actually a meeting of several members of the International Syria Support Group.

Secretary Kerry will be participating. This is a follow-up to the meeting that they had a week or two ago among a similar group of members at a lower level. And we have gone to great lengths to describe the continuing -- or the continued bilateral, diplomatic -- let me just start that sentence over. We have gone to great lengths to make clear the continued multilateral, diplomatic efforts that we're engaged in to try to reduce the violence inside of Syria. And we have pursued those diplomatic efforts through the United Nations. We have pursued those through the International Syria Support Group, and some of those members will be meeting next week.

What I also understand is that after that meeting, Secretary Kerry will then travel to another location in Europe -- the city is escaping me -- where he will meet with some of our European allies to discuss the situation in Syria. So, again, this is just further illustration of the deep, multilateral engagement that we are pursuing through diplomacy to try to reduce the violence inside of Syria.

And look, the reason that we broke off bilateral talks with the Russians was directly related to Russia's inability to keep their commitments. And the agreement that we had been trying to implement was one that would give Russia the opportunity to make good on their promise to use their influence with the Assad regime to reduce the violence against civilians in opposition-controlled territory, including in Aleppo. And in exchange for a reduction of that violence and the steady flow of humanitarian assistance, the United States would begin military cooperation with the Russians in applying pressure to extremists there.

But Russia was never able to, on a sustained basis, fulfill their end of the bargain, and so we never got to the point where the United States was cooperating militarily with the Russians. So that is no longer an agreement that we're trying to broker, but we are certainly working through a variety of diplomatic channels to try to reduce the violence inside of Syria, and that's necessarily going to include some Russian participation. But it no longer is in the context of trying to broker this agreement that would, at the end of it, hold out the prospect of U.S. military cooperation with Russia. That's something that Russia has lost -- frankly, lost the credibility to be able to try to agree to.

So let me just close by saying none of this has any impact on our continued, sustained, unrelenting campaign against ISIL leaders and extremists in Iraq and in Syria that we're pursuing through our counter-ISIL coalition, and that includes 67 members that's being led by the United States. That effort continues unabated. That effort has taken a toll on ISIL's leadership. That effort has taken a toll on the leadership of other extremist organizations that are operating there. And that is a testament to our men and women in uniform who are working closely with our allies and partners in the context of the counter-ISIL coalition to apply pressure to those extremist organizations and to take back territory that ISIL previously controlled in Iraq and in Syria.

Q So if Russian and U.S. officials are in the same room, and these are part of -- you said with other nations -- multilateral talks, how does that advance the peace prospects beyond bilateral talks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are other countries in the region that do have influence with groups that are a part of this conflict. So what we're looking for is a way that the international community can come together around a strategy for reducing the violence there. And we hoped we would be able to do something directly with the Russians to affect that outcome, but because Russia failed to live up to their terms of that agreement, that effort did not yield the kind of progress that we would like to see.

So we're pursuing other channels, and we're going to continue to work through the U.N., through the Security Council, through the U.N. Special Envoy, through the International Syria Support Group, through our counter-ISIL coalition, through our other engagements in Europe and our partners in the region to try to reduce the violence and bring the humanitarian assistance to the communities that need it the most.

Q In the wake of the funeral home strike in Yemen last week, is the Obama administration reviewing planned arms sales to Saudi Arabia with potentially a scaling back or cancellation of such sales?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, as you saw in the statement that was issued over the weekend, the United States is in the process of reviewing the assistance that we provide to the Saudis. Now, just to reiterate, the assistance that we provide is primarily logistical support. We do share some intelligence with them, but the United States does not do targeting for them. The Saudis and their partners use some of the intelligence that we have collected, but they make their own targeting decisions.

We were deeply concerned about this incident that claimed so many innocent lives. And we have routinely encouraged people on all sides of that conflict to be mindful of the potential consequences for civilians who are in harm's way. And the United States, when we're undertaking military operations, go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. And we want our allies and partners to do the same thing. So our security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check, and we do have expectations about the conduct of our partners.

That all said, our partners in Saudi Arabia have a legitimate security concern with the violence inside of Yemen. Saudi Arabia has a rather long border with Yemen, and there have been incidents of cross-border violence, including the firing of mortars across that border into Saudi Arabia that does threaten Saudi citizens. So it's understandable that Saudi Arabia would want to confront this threat, but particularly when it comes to the defense of their territorial integrity. But there are expectations that we have as well.

Q Josh, does this strike jeopardize arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Is that something the administration is reviewing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, as the statement indicated over the weekend, the administration is conducting a review of the security assistance that we do provide to the Saudis. I'm not going to stand here and make threats about potential outcomes, but there is a review and I think that is a pretty clear illustration that the security assistance that we do provide is not a blank check.

Jeff.

Q Josh, on Tuesday, climate activists broke through fences and cut locks and chains simultaneously in the states -- several states, and turned some major pipelines off. What concerns did this raise at the White House about security of U.S. pipelines? And what steps are being taken, if any, to improve that?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, I only recently became aware of these reports. I can tell you that both the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Transportation are investigating these reports and trying to get to the bottom of what exactly happened and what potential steps could be taken to ensure the safety and security of our energy infrastructure.

So for potential steps that can or should be taken, I'd refer you to them. Obviously, the President in a variety of contexts has talked about the importance of securing our infrastructure. And we certainly take that security quite seriously.

Q And I understand if you haven't seen much more of the reports. But doesn't it sort of raise the possibility that this could have been a lot worse had it been people with perhaps more nefarious intent?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I'd refer to the experts at DHS who could give you a better security assessment about what sort of damage could have been caused by the reported breaches. But when it comes to the security of our infrastructure, particularly our energy infrastructure, that's something that the United States and this administration takes quite seriously.

Q On another topic, Turkey said today that it would keep troops in Iraq until Islamic State forces were cleared from Mosul. This is against the wishes of the Iraqi government. Obviously, this debate has been going on for some time.

MR. EARNEST: It has.

Q How is the U.S. helping to resolve this issue? And how do you react to the latest statements from Turkey?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you've heard me stand here on many occasions, unfortunately in the aftermath of terrorist incidents, expressing our solidarity with our NATO Ally Turkey about the need to defend their people and their territory. And the United States has demonstrated our commitment to their security in a variety of ways, primarily through our NATO Alliance. And so we understand the need, the imperative that the Turkish government has to protect their citizens from terrorism.

At the same time, since the very beginning of our counter-ISIL efforts, the United States has made clear that the presence of the United States military and other members of our Counter-ISIL Coalition is at the invitation of the Iraq central government. And all of our counter-ISIL efforts, including our military operations, are in support of operations that are being undertaken by Iraqi security forces who are operating under the command and control of the Iraqi central government.

The Iraqi central government has to protect their territorial integrity, as well. We deeply respect their sovereignty. And, in fact, that is one of the core elements of our strategy.

We've talked at some length in here about how important it is for Iraqi security forces to be in the lead in terms of clearing ISIL out of Iraq and stabilizing the communities that they have fled.

There is no country or group of countries that can substitute for Iraq's performance there, because it will necessarily become -- or those gains will necessarily not be nearly as stable as gains that are made by Iraqi security forces under the command and control of an Iraqi central government that's committed to pursuing an inclusive governing agenda.

We've talked about how this political element of our military strategy is so important to a long-term solution to the situation here. So that principle is critically important. And again, it undergirds so much of our efforts against ISIL in this region of the world.

So the United States has certainly been in touch with both the Iraqi central government and our Turkish Ally about this issue. And we've made clear to them the benefits that both countries stand to enjoy from focusing on our counter-ISIL efforts and pursuing a strategy that is consistent with seeing those efforts succeed.

Michelle.

Q In an interview today, the Russian foreign minister called the allegations of hacking the U.S. political websites and systems as ridiculous. But he also used the word "flattering." He said it was flattering that the U.S. thinks that Russia did that. What do you think of that?

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, I guess I don't have much to say beyond the assessment that was released by the United States intelligence community at the end of last week, that reported with high confidence that the recent disclosures of alleged hacked emails on sites like DCLeaks.com, and WikiLeaks, and by Guccifer 2.0 are consistent with the methods and motivations of Russian-directed efforts. And given the scope of those efforts, the intelligence community has concluded that they're almost certainly directed by senior Russian government officials. And the intent, per the analysis of the intelligence community, is that Russia was interested in destabilizing, or at least attempting to destabilize, the U.S. political system.

We've seen Russia try to pursue those tactics in other countries. But, frankly, those other countries don't have the kind of well-developed, durable democratic institutions that we have in this country.

So the American people can continue to be confident in the stability and durability of our election systems and of our democracy. The American people, again, can also be confident that the U.S. government will deploy significant resources to defend our electoral systems. And DHS has already been working effectively with more than 30 states to fortify their systems. There are a number of other local jurisdictions that they've engaged with as well, and we certainly want to encourage election officials that have not availed themselves of this expertise to do so to ensure that people can continue to have confidence in our election system. But certainly, we believe everybody can.

Q The Russians -- I mean, not just the behavior, but also some of the things that they've said surrounding this, warning the U.S., certain rhetoric that they have used -- it's prompted a lot of analysis calling this like another Cold War, or going beyond a Cold War. I know that this has come up countless times in the briefing, but how would you, today, describe the relationship with Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Extraordinarily complicated, I think, is one way to do it. There are areas where the United States and Russia have been able to coordinate effectively. They include the effective removal and destruction of Bashar al-Assad's declared chemical weapons

stockpile. That was something that the United States and Russia were able to work together to achieve just a year and a half or so ago. And that would not have happened had the United States and Russia not been able to effectively coordinate.

Russia was a part of the efforts to confront Iran over their nuclear weapons program, and the success that we have had in implementing a diplomatic solution that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon required constructive Russian engagement. So that, obviously, was one benefit of Russia and the United States preserving an ability to work together in pursuit of common interests.

Another less political example would be our space program. The U.S. astronauts and Russian cosmonauts obviously work very closely together on the International Space Station to pursue scientific breakthroughs and to advance the cause of human space flight. That's something that benefits both our countries. It's something that benefits the entire planet and would not be possible without effective U.S.-Russian cooperation.

So there are areas where we agree, work cooperatively, in a way that benefits both our countries. We tend to spend more time talking in here about those areas where we disagree, and that's entirely appropriate too. Those disagreements are vigorous. We're deeply concerned about the way that Russia backs the Assad regime and the way that Russia has refused to use their influence with the Assad regime to reduce violence against civilians inside of Syria. And there are also examples of the Russians themselves carrying out strikes against civilian targets in Syria. That's deeply, deeply concerning, it's immoral, and it runs directly against the kinds of values that we hold dear in this country.

So the kind of protests that we have lodged, both in public and in private, against those tactics have been vigorous. The United States has expressed deep concern about Russia's willingness to violate the territorial integrity of Ukraine. And the United States has been able to work effectively with our European partners to impose biting sanctions against the Russians as a result of those actions.

We also have expressed, on a number of occasions, our concerns with Russia's behavior in cyberspace. The intelligence assessment from the intelligence community that was released at the end of last week is just the latest example of that -- certainly not the first.

So those disagreements are vigorous. And we spend a lot of time talking about them, but it's important not to lose sight of those areas where we are able to work effectively together to advance our interests. And that's why it's going to be important that the next President have a good understanding of the situation that they are inheriting, both to ensure that the United States of America can be protected, that our values can be advanced, and that our common interests can be pursued.

Q But the Russian government actually trying to influence the U.S. election -- how can cooperation really continue after this point, even in some of those areas where it's been longstanding?

MR. EARNEST: I guess, Michelle, given the nature of the kind of cooperation we have with the Russians now, our ability to work together where our interests align is beneficial to our country. Our ability to continue to implement the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon requires continued, constructive engagement with the Russians. And we've been able to pursue that. And IAEA inspections continue, and continue to assess the degree to which Iran is following through on their commitments.

The same thing goes for our space program. The United States and Russia rely on one another's capabilities to continue to advance that program. That's something the President just wrote about on your organization's website earlier this week, talking about how important it is for us to continue making investments in our space program. And our country benefits from those kinds of investments.

So that is not to minimize the concern we have about Russia's behavior in cyberspace. And again, I think the rhetoric that you have seen from the President and from other senior administration officials, as well as the analysis from the intelligence community, supports the seriousness with which we take these Russian steps that are a source of some concern.

Q It's been a year ago, virtually to the day, that Secretary Kerry was talking about multilateral talks about to start over Syria with the same countries that we're talking about now. And since then, tens of thousands of people have died in Syria. So why do you think that this round of multilateral talks with the same organizations, the same people will be any different than it's been?

MR. EARNEST: Primarily, Michelle, because we don't believe that anybody benefits from that widespread innocent loss of life. The international community has an interest in trying to resolve that violence. That violence only fuels extremism and chaos that we have seen reverberate not just across the region but around the world in the form of terrorism and in the form of the most severe migration crisis that our planet has faced since World War II.

So there should be an opportunity for the international community to come together. The situation in Syria is extraordinarily complex. And when you have an actor as bad as Bashar al-Assad, it makes it difficult to find diplomatic solutions that can be imposed.

The other reason that we're pursuing these talks, Michelle, is that we have long acknowledged that there's no military solution to this challenge. There are plenty of things that we can do militarily that will take out extremists and enhance the national security of the United States, and the United States has been leading the way in those military efforts. But when it comes to addressing the root cause of violence inside of Syria, it's going to require a diplomatic solution that's been very difficult to find.

Mark.

Q Josh, can I come back to the allegations of Russian email hacking? This latest bunch that has been produced, the Podesta email hacks -- any administration assessment, and intelligence assessment? Is that part of the same Russian effort? And what do you guys make of the assertion by Podesta himself that there's been some coordination or at least a heads-up given to the Trump campaign by the Russians -- or by those who published the emails?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the thing that I can tell you about the intelligence community analysis is that at least some of the disclosures in recent months, including documents that were released by Guccifer 2.0, DC Leaks and WikiLeaks, are consistent with the methods and motivations of Russian-directed efforts. And those efforts suggest that Russia is at least providing the information or is -- let me clarify that -- that the Russian government is directing the effort or at least providing the information responsible for the leaks. And that's a source of some concern because the intelligence community has concluded with high confidence that they're doing so to try to destabilize our democracy. And that's something that obviously the President takes quite seriously.

So with regard to the private emails of Mr. Podesta, I can't give you a firm intelligence community analysis because the leak of those emails was first reported shortly after this analysis was made public. But, in general, the kinds of disclosures that we've seen, including at WikiLeaks, of stolen emails from people who play an important role in our political process is consistent with Russian-directed efforts.

With regard to any sort of communications between WikiLeaks or these hackers and the Trump campaign, I can't speak to that. But I certainly can direct you to the intelligence community analysis about what's been happening with these stolen emails over the last several months.

Justin.

Q I wanted to follow up on the interview that Michelle referenced. In it, Foreign Minister Lavrov didn't explicitly deny the hacking charges, but he did say the U.S. hadn't presented "a single fact" to prove that Russia was responsible. I know you're obviously limited to some extent about what you can say about the IC assessment, but do you guys have any evidence or any intention to provide evidence to kind of back up this accusation? And what would you say to, I guess, allies of Donald Trump who say the U.S. government is coming out with this at a politically motivated time themselves?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that the analysis that we're discussing here is one that was released by our professionals in the intelligence community whose foremost focus is on the safety and security of the American people, not on the outcome of the election.

These professionals have concluded with high confidence, based on a thorough investigation, that they could make some of this information public to inform the American people and to allow election administrators at the state and local level all across the country to take the necessary steps to secure their system.

So the intelligence community and the rest of the government feels a responsibility to communicate as much information as possible. However, this is also an ongoing investigation at the Department of Justice and by the intelligence community. And that's why there are -- much of the evidence is not something that we can discuss publicly, in part because the investigation is ongoing and we wouldn't want to compromise the investigation; in part because we don't want to compromise sources and methods that may have revealed this information.

The United States intelligence community has extraordinary capabilities in cyberspace that allow them to reach these kinds of conclusions. And I also think it's fair to say, Justin, and I think a reasonable person would conclude, that there's no piece of evidence the United States government could produce that would prompt Sergey Lavrov to admit Russian complicity in these efforts.

So there are obvious limits on what we can discuss publicly. Even if those limits did exist, I'm not confident they would satisfy senior Russian officials who frequently talk about this.

Q Follow?

MR. EARNEST: I'll come back to you, Bill.

Go ahead, Justin.

Q Back in July, the President issued a cyber directive about how the U.S. government would react to "significant cyber incidents." I'm wondering if this is qualified under that directive, and if so, if the government set up the coordination group and some of the other sort of consequences of that determination.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, that's a good question. Let me check with our national security team and see if we make public incidents that trigger this particular mechanism. It may be a position where we don't discuss what sort of incidents have crossed that threshold. But I'll see if I can collect some more information and share with you what we can.

Q And lastly, I just wanted to ask about undoubtedly the most exciting news of the month, which is that the U.S. and Canada failed to renew the softwood lumber trade deal.

MR. EARNEST: You nailed it.

Q Yes, the President kind of laughed this off when --

MR. EARNEST: Come on, guys, that's -- not even like a token joke, laughter at the joke? (Laughter.) Nailed the lumber? Come on, man.

Q Oh, I get it now.

MR. EARNEST: There we go. (Laughter.) There we go. That was a little late. You guys need to -- an extra cup of coffee or something this morning.

Q The President was kind of joking about it when he was asked in his press conference in the Rose Garden with Justin Trudeau, and said that we'd get this settled. But it obviously hasn't -- a year after the deal first collapsed. And so there's two elements of this. One, I think there's suspicion among Canadians that the U.S. is slow-walking this for electoral reasons. And so I'm wondering if you can address that. The other is, how long these negotiations would drag out before the U.S. is ready to take some sort of action either with the WTO or in the courts to sort of go after Canadian subsidies on lumber.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you know, because you've covered this case or this situation so closely, President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau have had an opportunity to discuss this issue face to face on at least a couple of occasions over the course of the last year.

When Prime Minister Trudeau visited the White House early this year, this was part of their bilateral discussion in the Oval Office. And when President Obama traveled to Canada this summer, there was an opportunity for the two leaders to sit down in the context of a bilateral meeting. And this was one item that featured prominently on the agenda.

In the context of both of those conversations, President Obama made clear the U.S. commitment to resolving our differences. And the fact that negotiations are continuing this week I think is an indication that the United States takes quite seriously the concerns that have been raised by the Canadians. And there is a genuine desire on the part of the administration to try to resolve those concerns in a way that protects U.S. interests, first and foremost, but also satisfies our close allies up north. So there is an ongoing effort to work through this, and my colleagues at the USTR are prepared to meet with their Canadian counterparts again, I think even later this week, to continue the work to try to resolve this situation.

April.

Q Josh, I've got a couple questions, and I want to start off with the email situation. Looking at this press release and the statement from the Department of Homeland Security, it says, "The U.S. intelligence community is confident that the Russian government directed the recent compromise of emails from U.S. persons and institutions." And it goes on other things.

With that, you talked about the fact that there was a complicated relationship. Does that work in the dynamic of action to be taken against Russia as DHS is saying they're confident that the Russian government did this? What's the reason why we haven't heard about actions being taken against Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I was asked about this a little bit yesterday. And, April, what I made clear is that in the realm of cyberspace, the rules of engagement are still being established.

Q But isn't it theft? Isn't it manipulation of government -- government materials, be it DNC, be it RNC, be it here at the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'll let the intelligence community speak to the scope of the materials that may have been compromised. What I'm trying to address in your question is sort of the broader policy implications. And this is one of the things that makes dealing with cyber threats so challenging, is the parameters of engagement are not as well established.

And the U.S. is mindful, as we consider the approach that's necessary to protect the United States, of establishing a framework and establishing a precedent that is clearly in the best interest of the United States.

So we'll work through that. And as we do, the thing that the American people can be confident in is that the extraordinary capabilities that are retained by the United States that far exceed the capabilities that can be deployed by any other country will be used to protect our democracy and our system of conducting elections. So people can be confident in our ability to protect our system, in part because it's hard to hack. Our election system is very decentralized. We essentially have 50 different states, and in some cases, individual localities within those states that operate their own system of registering voters, of distributing ballots, and of counting them.

That makes it, in some cases, hard to implement reforms across the country because the systems are so different, but it also makes it hard to use one particular strategy to hack those systems because the systems are all so different. In some cases, the systems are pretty old. And, again, in some cases, that means casting a vote can be a little inconvenient. But, again, it also means that those systems can be harder to undermine through the Internet.

So that's why we believe that people can be confident in the integrity of the election system. We're also quite interested in working closely with elections administrators to help them take additional steps to further safeguard their systems. And I know that there are at least 33 states that have already been in touch with the Department of Homeland Security to discuss and evaluate any potential vulnerabilities to their system and take steps to remedy them. I know that there are about a dozen or so localities or individual -- or local elections administrators that have also been in touch with federal officials who have the expertise that can be provided to help them safeguard their systems.

So we certainly want to encourage elections administrators in other jurisdictions that haven't been in touch with the federal government to reach out and coordinate with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that necessary steps are being taken to protect their system. But overall, we believe people should have a lot of confidence in the ability of the United States to conduct a free and fair election.

Q Is this about states, the White House, political parties, people on the Hill -- is this just about opening an email that could have a virus? Or is it more? Is it more intricate?

Because I'm hearing for good cyber hygiene many people have been told do not open certain emails.

MR. EARNEST: For the advice that DHS is providing to elections administrators, I'd refer you to them. I think in many cases it's more complicated than just opening email.

Q All right. And also, now on the campaign trail, when should we expect the First Lady and the President, both together or each one separately, to stand with Hillary Clinton?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as we've discussed here earlier, April, sometimes having them appear together is failing to capitalize on one of the most significant benefits of having the endorsement of the President and First Lady. For some surrogates who announced their endorsement of Secretary Clinton, if they're going to go give a public speech, sometimes it's hard for them to attract a crowd, let alone media attention. President Obama doesn't have that issue. President Obama went to Greensboro yesterday, and more than 7,000 people showed up to hear him speak. A large number of media organizations, especially in North Carolina, showed up to cover his speech. That is something that benefitted the Clinton campaign, without the candidate herself having to be involved.

So that's the real value of having somebody as high-profile as the President or the First Lady on the stump campaigning for you, is that you don't have to also go there in order to get attention -- you've got somebody else there who can make a forceful case in support of your candidacy. So I wouldn't rule out that there may be a future opportunity for the President to appear alongside his hoped-for successor. But right now, we're focused on -- the President is focused on doing as much as he can, on his own, to support her campaign and to help her get her message out.

Q And last question. How personal is it for this President and this First Lady, with all the issues that Donald Trump has been facing with women, all these accusations and the tapes and things -- how personal is it for both of them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you heard the President talk about it last night, and I think you could tell that he was speaking about some deeply and strongly held values, in talking about the comments and conduct of the Republican nominee. And I think you can ascribe those same strong feelings and deeply held values to the First Lady as well.

Bill.

Q So President Putin is quoted as saying today that "hysterics have been whipped up to distract the attention of the American people from the essence of what the hackers have released. For some reason, nobody talks about this. They talk about who did it. Is it really that important?"

MR. EARNEST: I think it is important for people to know that the intelligence community of the United States has concluded that Russia is stealing emails and disclosing them in an attempt to destabilize our political system. That is an important piece of information.

Q He goes on to say that it's flattering that Russia is getting all this attention.

MR. EARNEST: Well, he's -- (laughter) -- he's certainly allowed to draw his own conclusions about curating his public image. He apparently has some unique criteria for evaluating his public image.

What we're focused on is making sure that the democratic institutions and our system of government is not threatened by actions that are taken by adversaries overseas. And the United States is prepared to defend our electoral system, and people can be confident that the United States has the capability to make good on that promise to protect our system.

Q So you're saying that Russia's an adversary?

MR. EARNEST: Not for the first time, particularly when it comes to their activities in cyberspace. I think they make it pretty clear that that's -- that the actions that they take are adverse to the actions of the United States, particularly if you're trying to undermine our system of government, or at least destabilize it.

Q Do you find it odd that the President of Russia is actually sort of blowing smoke on this?

MR. EARNEST: Not the first time that he has had some curious explanations for Russia's activities.

As we discussed yesterday, Russia is in a tough spot. They've only got one military base outside of the former Soviet bloc. And it's in a nation that is crumbling. And the Russian government has been forced to deploy extensive resources -- military and financial -- to try to protect that military base and try to protect, essentially, the puppet government that they've been supporting there for some time.

And their efforts to do that have drawn the scorn of the international community and left Russia feeling isolated -- so isolated, in fact, that President Putin didn't feel comfortable showing up to dedicate a church in France. That's not the body language of somebody who is particularly comfortable with their public image. So it appears to me that he would have much more of a reason to distract from the current state of affairs than just about anybody else.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. I want to follow up for just a second. I've heard the President use the expression "proportional." I've heard Secretary Kerry use it as well. For the people that aren't awash in policy -- they don't live in Washington -- they might have trouble understanding what that might mean with respect to responding to the apparent Russian hacks. What does that mean?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, trying to further define that word I think would only engage in or prompt more public discussion of something that, frankly, we're not prepared to discuss publicly. As I mentioned yesterday, the kind of proportional response that the President would consider is not necessarily the kind of response that we would announce in advance, or maybe even announce ever.

So the President will consider a range of options in terms of determining what is appropriate or proportional. But what we surely will do is deploy all the necessary resources to protect our system, and to prevent the Russians from succeeding in their attempt to undermine our political system and undermine our political process.

The essence of U.S. and American democracy is that every eligible citizen should have an opportunity to cast a vote and to have that vote counted, and to have a say in how our country is led. And that's a principle that's enshrined in our Constitution, and it's a principle that this government will defend.

Q Let me ask you about Aleppo -- the Russians and others apparently continuing to assault the people there in the last 24 hours. What's your response to the devastation there -- in particular, dozens more killed?

MR. EARNEST: Yeah. We continue to see the Assad regime, with the support of the Russian government, engage in depraved tactics that target civilians, attempting to bomb them into submission to collect military gains on the ground. It is immoral. It is heinous. It is something that tugs at the conscience of everybody who's paying attention. It is profoundly tragic. It has had an impact on a whole generation of Syrians, and its impact has reverberated across the region and even around the world, both in the form of terrorism, but also in the form of a migration crisis, the likes of which we've not seen since World War II.

So the consequences are significant. And that's why you can continue to see the United States engage diplomatically through the U.N., through the International Syria Support Group, through our allies in Europe and through our partners in the region to try to cobble together a diplomatic response that can reduce, if not end, the violence inside of Syria, allow for the provision of humanitarian assistance, and kick-start a political process that would lead to a government in Syria that reflects the will and ambition of the Syrian people.

Q You mentioned the U.N. I want to get your reaction to something. Vladimir Putin today said the resolution in the U.N. Security Council over the weekend calling for a ceasefire, which I'm sure you're aware of, was simply aimed at exacerbating the situation and whipping up anti-Russian hysteria -- anti-Russia hysteria. What's the White House reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: The only country on the Security Council that agreed with him on that is Venezuela. The rest of the world agreed with the United States that that U.N. Security Council resolution would send a forceful message about the need to end the violence inside of Syria. So, yet again, we've highlighted a situation in which Russia is standing alone and is the target of rebuke and scorn by the rest of the international community.

So, again -- and I recognize that President Putin says he's not particularly concerned about his public image, but maybe he should be.

Q Last one. There's been some conversation that Russia and Syria, in particular, are trying to finish off Aleppo now because there's a feeling that because the President is in the waning days, essentially -- waning months of his presidency, that he's less likely to be fully engaged there, that he is less likely to take a strong action against them in Aleppo. What's your reaction to such suggestions?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President's approach to the situation has been remarkably consistent. And the President has been willing to use military force in the context of our Counter-ISIL Coalition against extremists, including ISIL in Iraq and in Syria. But from the beginning, the United States has sought to pursue a diplomatic solution based on our belief that there's no military solution to the chaos and violence that we see inside of Syria.

And so our pursuit of this diplomacy continues unabated. That's the reason for Secretary Kerry's travel to Europe later this week. And those who underestimate the will and determination of the President of the United States to pursue our national interests do so at their own peril.

Ron.

Q Just a couple of quick ones. Does "senior Russian government officials" include Vladimir Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I will allow everyone to draw their own conclusions and their own analysis of the analysis that was released by the U.S. intelligence community. I was not with them when they drafted the statement, but I'm sure that they drafted -- they played close attention to the words that were used in drafting the statement. So I'll let them say, if they want to say, whether or not the knowledge and complicity of senior government officials that they're referring to includes the president of that country.

Q What's the White House view? Obviously, you have a view of that.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, well, the White House view is that we're going to let the intelligence professionals speak to what they know, and if they're prepared to tell you more, then they can do so.

Q In the case of the 33 states and 12 other entities that have asked for help from DHS, can you describe -- was there damage that was done? Or are they trying to get ahead of a problem? Or, again, in layman's terms, I'm just trying to understand what the situation was there. Was there some harm done, or are they just trying to proactively get ahead of a situation?

MR. EARNEST: They are primarily trying to get ahead of the situation and trying to coordinate with state and local officials to protect their systems. Obviously there's --

Q So no systems have been breached or harmed? There's been nothing --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let DHS or individual election administrators speak to the integrity of their system. But the steps that DHS has taken have included things like scans of the Internet-facing systems that are maintained by election agencies. They can conduct risk and vulnerability assessments to determine what sort of risk these individual systems may be facing and then help them take steps to remedy or reduce or mitigate those risks.

There's also been sharing of best practices. Obviously, DHS has now been in touch with 33 different states about measures that they've taken to shore up their systems. Some of the best practices that they've learned in shoring up those systems can be used in other states to shore up their systems. So that is the kind of thing that experts at DHS have been involved with. But all of that work has been done at the invitation of, and in close cooperation with, state and local officials who are responsible for administering their elections.

The one thing I want to just hasten to add here is that this is not a situation where the federal government is prepared to take over the administration of these systems. That's not the aim of DHS. That certainly is not the expertise that they have. The expertise that they can provide is to offer technical assistance and specific advice to individual administrators who do have this responsibility so they can make sure that these elections are undertaken in a way that preserves people's confidence in the system.

Q Just one on that. You used the word -- or the intelligence experts do -- "destabilize" the U.S. political system -- not a word like "influence." So is what's been happening, does there seem to be a clear purpose or a clear objective? Or is it just random, just to cause chaos? The point being, is there some attempt to really influence the election in one direction or another, or is this just sort of random, hey, we're going to gum up the works and make people feel like it's not -- like they don't have confidence in the system?

MR. EARNEST: For a better explanation of that, again, I'd refer you to the intelligence community. They're the ones that are looking at the evidence firsthand. They've got the technical wherewithal to draw those kinds of conclusions.

Q So the White House hasn't drawn these conclusions. This is certainly, hugely important thing that is on everyone's mind 20-some-odd days.

MR. EARNEST: It is, and that's frankly why we're relying on our intelligence experts to share as much evidence and information as they can about what exactly is happening. And we have certainly supported them in their effort to make this information public so that the American public can be informed about what's happening, but also so election administrators and others can take the appropriate steps to safeguard their systems. That's why we're sharing this information, and that's what we have tried to describe to people.

Q And lastly, there was a plane crash in Connecticut, and the pilot -- or the one survivor says it was intentional. How concerned is the White House about this being a possible act of terrorism?

MR. EARNEST: What I know now is that the FBI has indicated that they're going to join the investigation into what exactly happened. So it's too early for me to issue any pronouncements about what may have contributed to that crash, but investigators at the FBI are certainly going to take a close look at all of the potential causes to determine what exactly happened.

Q There's a lot of reasons why a plane could crash intentionally. So there's nothing initially that indicates terrorism one way or the other?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what the FBI has learned thus far. So we'll let them conduct their investigation and see if they can share with us a little bit more about what may have been going on there.

Andrew.

Q I wanted to follow up on the Russia questions. Does the President still think that Russia is just a regional power, given the hacking of the U.S. election, the war in Syria, the kind of prevarications at the U.N.?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that the President's assessment has changed, and I don't think there's anything that we have seen from the Russians that would lead to a reappraisal of their standing in the international community. If anything, Russia has been further marginalized because of their tactics in Ukraine and in Syria and in cyberspace. The rest of the international community has rebuked Russia for their targeting of civilians inside of Syria. The rest of the international community has imposed sanctions against Russia because of their flagrant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Many democracies in the West have expressed deep concerns with Russian attempts to meddle and influence, if not undermine, the basic functioning of their democracy. So in each case, you have the international community expressing grave concerns with Russia's conduct. That, I think, is telling in describing the kinds of limitations that Russia has encountered as they pursue much broader ambitions.

Q I guess the West or the international community finds Russia's behavior irritating. It doesn't mean they're not powerful.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the United States derives a lot of our power and influence and authority around the world by being able to skillfully and effectively cooperate with other countries in pursuit of shared objectives. That's the way that the United States has advanced our interests around the world. When the United States was just -- let's just do one example. When the United States became deeply concerned about the Iranian attempt to obtain a nuclear weapon, President Obama encountered a situation where the nation of Iran was united in pursuit of that goal and the international community was fractured in trying to figure out how to confront it.

So President Obama did what countries with significant influence around the world do, which is he marshaled the world to confront Iran in a way that benefitted the United States. Now, it also happened to benefit other countries around the world. That's why the

United States was able to demonstrate that kind of leadership. And the world would not have come together to confront Iran in the way that the world did had the President and the United States not shown such leadership.

A similar analogy could be drawn around the international agreement to cut carbon pollution. That is the kind of agreement that benefits the world. But it also benefits the United States and our economy in a variety of ways that we've discussed here at some length.

Those are two examples where the United States played the kind of leading role with the international community that, frankly, Russia would be unable to do.

Now, part of Russia's reduced influence is derived from the fact that their economy is smaller than Spain's. Some of it is derived from the fact that Russia has a rather sordid record when it comes to basic universal human rights. But, Andrew, some of it also has to do with the fact that Russia has found itself marginalized in the international community because of their actions in Syria, and Ukraine, and in cyberspace. And that's just a fact.

And I recognize that's inconsistent with some of the ambitions that are articulated by leaders in the Russian government, but it's true. And I guess the other telling example, then I'll stop -- the other telling example is that Russia for more than a year has sought U.S. cooperation against extremists inside of Syria. They've been unable to get it, in large part because they aren't able to keep their promises.

When the United States sought cooperation with other countries to go after ISIL and other extremists inside of Syria, we formed a coalition of 66 nations. Russia has a coalition with Iran and the Assad regime and maybe Venezuela, based on their vote at the U.N. Security Council resolution. I don't really know what that gets you. It certainly gets you diminished influence and a much smaller coalition than is exercised by a country like the United States that is able to work effectively with countries around the world in pursuit of shared goals in a way that enhances the national security interests of the United States.

Q I have a more concrete question. It's been reported that investigators, U.S. investigators, believe Russia targeted a contractor in Florida's electoral system, potentially exposing voter data. I was wondering if you have any information about that.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that report, but we can follow up with you on it. Okay?

Stephanie.

Q Thank you. No one -- pretty much anyone, can get their emails hacked. There are so many people out there are willing to publish them. Does the White House have any policies about email, about email behavior for people in and around the administration? Basically, what is the administration's advice for email for all of us?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, obviously when it comes to government employees, our expectation is that you're going to use your government system for government work. And the resources of the United States government are then deployed to protect those email systems. Much of the material that's been released in recent days has been personal email accounts that are maintained by individuals on broader networks that are not -- that don't have the same kinds of government defenses in place.

There are common-sense things that people can do like not clicking on links that are contained in emails sent from unknown users. There are other steps that people can take in terms of two-factor authentication that make it harder for people to gain unauthorized access to your account.

Those are the kinds of common-sense steps that people -- that experts recommend everyone should consider as they send and receive email.

Q Since negotiations for the ceasefire ended with Russia -- we talked a lot about that today -- but John Kerry calling for a war crimes investigation. What is -- in simplest terms, what is the -- what is Plan B for the U.S.?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would point out that there have been other movements at the U.N. to work through the Security Council to ensure that the Assad regime and Russia are held accountable for some of their actions -- I should say, I believe it's just the Assad regime -- but basically said there have been actions through the U.N. taken to hold the Assad regime accountable for potential war crimes. Russia has vetoed that effort and used their veto on the Security Council to prevent the referral of information, for example, to the International Criminal Court.

So the United States is deeply concerned about the situation in Syria. And the willingness of the Assad regime to target hospitals, to pursue a strategy that, at its root, is nothing more than bombing civilians into submission, is immoral and something that, as Secretary Kerry said, potentially a war crime. And the United States believes in accountability, and we'll pursue that accountability through the avenues that are available to us.

Chris.

Q Josh, the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals yesterday agreed to reconsider whether the prohibition on gender discrimination in federal civil rights law applies to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. I've asked you whether President Obama believes it does before, but you didn't have an answer. In the aftermath of the 7th Circuit decision to litigate this issue over the course of the Obama administration, will President Obama affirm Title VII bars sexual orientation discrimination in the workforce?

MR. EARNEST: Chris, I have to admit, I have not been briefed on that specific ruling so let me take a look at it and we'll get back to you, okay?

Q Given President Obama's efforts to advance LGBT rights in his administration, why wouldn't his people naturally say that anti-gay discrimination is barred under current law?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I don't know how the law works with regard to this particular legal question, so let me see if we can get somebody who is more keenly aware of the legal issues here to get back to you.

Q All arguments in this case are set for November 30th. Would you anticipate having any answer before that?

MR. EARNEST: I'll look into it and see if we can.

Mark.

Q Josh, when the President does campaign rallies like the one yesterday in Greensboro, is there a White House policy governing the display of the presidential seal on the lectern at political events like that?

MR. EARNEST: What is typically, though not always, the case is the seal is not displayed. There have been certain situations where it has been displayed, but usually at those events it's not.

Q Well, of the three rallies he has done so far -- Charlotte, Philadelphia and yesterday -- it's been displayed twice. What criteria is used to decide when to use it and when not?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to our advance team about the decision that was made yesterday with regard to the seal. I think what you've illustrated is that there's not a hard and fast policy with regard to the display of the seal. But I think everybody knows who is talking when the President is giving a speech at those rallies.

Q What about at fundraisers?

MR. EARNEST: I think it's the same, which is that it's usually --

Q Sometimes, and sometimes not?

MR. EARNEST: I think I would describe it as usually not displayed at fundraisers, but we can double-check on that for you.

Q Please.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q On the three radio interviews he's doing today, are those "Get Out the Vote" interviews?

MR. EARNEST: Those are -- you may have noted that they're in specific locations. Do you have the information? There's one in Cleveland and two in Miami. I know in Florida the President was using the occasion of those interviews to encourage people to register to

vote. There was a ruling from a federal judge that -- Chris, that was one ruling that I actually was briefed on -- (laughter) -- which is a judge in Florida did extend the deadline for voter registration by five or six days to give people who may have been affected by Hurricane Matthew the opportunity to register to vote in Florida. And what the President has long said is that we believe that we should be looking for ways to make it easier for eligible citizens and eligible voters to register and cast a vote. So that obviously was a decision that the President welcomed.

So the President went on the radio to make sure that people were aware of the decision and to encourage them to take advantage of the newfound opportunity that they have to use the next five days or six days to get registered to vote.

Q And one last one. The calendar shows that tomorrow begins the last 100 days of his presidency. Is he aware of that? Does somebody keep track of -- is there a countdown calendar in the West Wing? (Laughter.) And does he have any special plans or hopes or objectives for these last 100 days?

MR. EARNEST: No, I'm not aware that he knows that tomorrow will be -- sort of kick off the clock for 100 days left. But after this exchange, I suspect he will be informed.

Look, I think the President is approaching the final 100 days the way that he approached the previous seven and a half years or so, which is seeking to make the most of every remaining opportunity to use the power of this office to advance the interests of this country, to fight for middle-class families, and to keep our country safe. And the President -- part of that is advocating for a successor who is committed to those values and those principles. Part of that is capitalizing on whatever materializes in the lame duck session of Congress to continue to move this agenda forward. Part of that is devoting the time and attention to detail that's required to ensure a smooth transition to the next President, regardless of who it is.

So those are all priorities for the next 100 days, and I know the President is looking forward to making the most of every moment that's remaining, and then, as you mentioned yesterday, getting the chance to catch up on some sleep.

Q He mentioned that twice. Is he sleep-deprived? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: We've had this conversation before. (Laughter.) I think the President is certainly looking forward to sleeping a little longer than usual after he leaves the White House.

Dave.

Q Thanks, Josh. Speaking of the Greensboro rally yesterday, there were some demonstrators who appeared to be pro-Trump supporters -- or at least anti-Bill Clinton people who got pretty close to the stage from the looks of it. Did that cause any concern here at the White House?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any concern that was expressed. I know that there was obviously ample security there, both from the Secret Service but also from local law enforcement. And I'm not aware of any particular heightened concern about the event yesterday.

Q And the President seemed a little looser at that rally in his comments, or maybe a little -- maybe I'm reading into it, but a little less concerned about the outcome of the election. He was making some farcical comments. He seemed a little more --

MR. EARNEST: Did it seem like the shackles were off? (Laughter.)

Q It did. (Laughter.) And I'm wondering, does he feel like, basically, it's all over but the voting?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think the passion, particularly in the closing portion of the President's remarks, I think indicates that the President is feeling confident about the election, but he's determined to make sure that people don't get complacent about the outcome of the election. That is his focus. And the stakes are far too high for people to be complacent, particularly people who have been such strong and loyal supporters of President Obama for the last eight years. Those individuals have so much at stake in terms of seeing what they fought for, for the last eight years, not torn down by a Republican candidate that's promising to do just that. So that's the essence of the President's case.

So the President feels good about the broader trends. But the stakes are so high, we can't take a single vote for granted. And the President certainly is not taking any votes for granted, and that's why he's going to spend a good portion of the next couple of days campaigning for his successor. The First Lady will be in New Hampshire tomorrow. And over the last three weeks that remain until Election Day, I think you can expect to see both of them continuing to work hard and make a forceful case in support of a successor that shares his values.

Q One question. I want to follow up on Syria. Back in 2014, when the President was with his advisors devising a plan for fighting ISIS in Syria, can you say, did he benefit from the advice of former Secretary Clinton?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that there were extensive consultations between President Obama and the former Secretary of State in 2014 on this issue.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you know, Dave, they've had an opportunity to meet for lunch and to have some conversations since she left her role as the Secretary of State. Most of those conversations are not focused on work, but I can't rule out that part of their lunchtime conversation may have been about the difficult choices that the President is facing in Syria.

But there's no sort of protracted or regular dialogue to tell you about in terms of the advice that he received from his former Secretary of State. He's got a robust national security team that's in place that's focused on these issues every day that he gets advice from. And quite frankly, Secretary Clinton had other things that she was focusing on, in terms of starting up her presidential campaign.

Q I know you're not addressing the Podesta emails specifically, but the reason I ask is there's an email in there where she lays out a nine-point plan specifically for the White House, the administration to defeat ISIS in Syria.

MR. EARNEST: Again, I can't speak to the authenticity of that email. Again, I wouldn't rule out that there may have been an exchange of views, but no sort of sustained dialogue on these issues between the President and Secretary Clinton after she left office.

Jane, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. On North Korea -- North Korean human rights abuse. There are over 29,000 North Korean defectors currently living in South Korea away from North Korea's Kim Jong-un. How do you think of North Korean defectors continue to come into U.S. or South Korea?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me first start by addressing the humanitarian situation in North Korea is deeply, deeply troubling. We got a government in North Korea that seeks to enrich itself, even in the face of some of the toughest sanctions regimes in the world, at the expense of the civilian population. They've got millions of people in North Korea who face daily, austere poverty, all while the government officials continue to enjoy the luxury of a wealthy lifestyle.

So that raises some pretty serious moral questions. It also indicates a failing at the responsibility that any government has to look out for the best interests of their citizens. And that would explain the flow of defectors that we have seen. I can't speak to any specific policy changes that are being contemplated by the United States with regard to defectors from North Korea. And I'd refer you to the South Korean government for a discussion of the way those individuals are treated when they arrive in South Korea.

Q Do you think North Korea's Kim Jong-un must go to ICC, International Criminal Court?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware if the United States has taken a formal position on this issue, but obviously the flagrant violation of human rights inside of North Korea is something that is of deep concern, not just in the United States but any other country and any other person around the world that prioritizes the protection of universal human rights.

Okay. Thanks, everybody.

END

2:22 P.M. EDT

