

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Ben Rhodes

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September 20, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 20, 2016

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

6:06 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good evening, everybody. Welcome to New York. I trust you all have been able to keep yourselves busy the last couple of days. Been a few things going on. I'm joined by a couple of special guests -- let me introduce them.

As many of you have written, the global refugee crisis has been a focus of this administration for more than a year now. And as you've heard me say, the President was determined to make this challenge a central theme during this year's United Nations General Assembly. That's why the President hosted the Leaders Summit on Refugees this afternoon, during which he highlighted the scale of the challenge as well as the contributions that are required to alleviate it.

The President also took part in a private sector roundtable to showcase what the American business community is doing to help address the refugee crisis by creatively leveraging their resources and their ingenuity. The roundtable included U.S. business leaders, representing more than 50 companies who responded to his call for action and have committed to investing, donating, or raising more than \$650 million.

So I'm joined by some corporate leaders whose companies have made substantial pledges to this effort. This is a good illustration of the significant resources that we can mobilize when the public and private sector work together to solve a significant challenge. So the three leaders that we have here are Lila Ibrahim from Coursera; Julie Sweet from Accenture, and Jacqueline Fuller from Google.org. Each of them will share a short statement about the contributions that their companies are making, and then we'll give each of you an opportunity to ask them whatever questions that you may have. We'll let them go and then we can get on to any other business that you may have.

So, with that, Lila, do you want to take it from here?

MS. IBRAHIM: Good afternoon. I'm Lila Ibrahim, Chief Operations Officer at Coursera, and I'm also a first-generation American.

Coursera is an education focus technology company. We're founded in Silicon Valley where our headquarters remain, and our mission is to transform the lives by making top university courses available to anyone, anywhere.

That means we have 21 million learners from all around the world. And they're taking courses from the top universities -- think Yale, Duke, Stanford, Johns Hopkins University.

Now, imagine you showing up on the shore of a new country, much like my parents did here in the United States. But no employer recognizes your credentials or the experience that you bring to your new country. So you look around and you realize that finding places to get reskilled or your new credential -- they're hard to access and they cost a lot. So where do you start? That's where Coursera has made a commitment to provide 100 percent financial aid for online courses from the top universities to refugees in the U.S. and around the world. And we're doing this in partnership with organizations like the United States government State Department and any nonprofit that works directly with the refugees.

To date, over 400 refugees have already enrolled in courses just in the past three weeks, and over 35 have actually completed courses in a short amount of time. Our ambition is to provide career-relevant skills and valuable credentials to 10,000 refugees by the end of next year. In order to achieve this goal we need more government and nonprofit, on-the-ground partners. We need them to be doing the critical work to support the refugees through these extremely difficult times.

As a first generation, I think about my parents own journey to the United States to pursue a better life. In fact, I'm here today as an engineer and as a business leader because my parents had the opportunity to enter a new country and to get a good education that has paid forward. For me, this announcement is extremely meaningful and why I choose to be at Coursera, because at Coursera we believe that anyone, anywhere should have the ability to transform their lives through access to quality education. We not only want to support refugees, but we're also working with similar initiatives with governments and employers to figure out how to best equip people at a time that they need it the most -- whether they're refugees, or veterans, or single mothers. With the knowledge and skills that they need to be successful, we're hoping that we can help them get new jobs, better jobs, or start their own company.

We're humbled and honored to work with the U.S. government and other partner organizations to help a generation of people start a new chapter and pursue a better life not only for themselves but for the generations to come.

Thank you.

MS. SWEET: Hello. I'm Julie Sweet, the CEO of North America for Accenture. And I'm very pleased to be here with Lila and Jacqueline to talk about our commitment to the Partnership for Refugees. I first want to talk a little bit about why we are so committed to the partnership and then what we are doing.

And so it's a company of 375,000 people with 50,000 in the U.S., and with a mission to improve the way the world works and lives. We feel it is our obligation, our responsibility to be a reader and take action on the most urgent and pressing needs that face the communities and countries we operate in. And I think we can all agree that there is probably no more urgent and pressing need today in communities around the world than to help in the refugee crisis.

As a business leader, we see a compelling case to step up and take action from three perspectives. We've all talked about the global scale of the crisis and the threat to economies, to health and security around the country. But as a business leader, we see the flip side, and that's the growth and the opportunity for tapping into the incredible potential of refugees. And as an American, we know, in a country built by immigrants, exactly how powerful that potential is.

And then finally, in the third perspective, of course, it is the very uniquely human aspect of this terrible crisis -- and we've worked a lot with refugees over the last few years and heard firsthand about the devastating loss. As business leaders, we cannot erase those memories, we can't change the devastating loss, but we can provide the education and the opportunity for employment that will create a new life and the ability to have that hope and that new life.

And that brings me to what we are doing, as we answered the President's call for action to the private sector. So this partnership -- public-private partnership is following a very important principle, and that is to tap into the unique capabilities of each company in order to achieve our common goal. It is not a one-size-fits-all. And earlier today, we were all in a room of CEOs and senior business leaders, and you really saw how it takes a village, the diversity of contributions that are necessary.

We at Accenture are focusing on three areas. First, in addition to being one of the founding members of the partnership, we became the strategic consulting partner, helping build out the platform, the website, bringing the strategy and consulting and technology advice that we give our clients to the platform -- to mobilize from 15 companies in June and a remarkable -- over 50 companies in just 90 days.

Second, we're focused on employment. We have had a Skills to Succeed program since 2010 that is committed to skilling or creating the skills to create their own business for three million people. And we have leveraged our expertise in helping the disadvantaged get the skills to have jobs to now focus on refugees. One of our Skills to Succeed partners, Upwardly Global, specializes on immigrants and refugees, connecting them with jobs, providing training, and the simple things like how do you interview, how do you talk about yourself when, in your own country, it might be viewed as bragging, but in the U.S., you need to talk about it differently.

It's sometimes the simplest things that can really make a difference, and we are committing \$3 million in cash to Upwardly Global in order for them to expand in the U.S. and to have a refugee-specific curriculum and also expand globally. In addition, we're tapping into the passion of our people, who are incredibly committed and focused, and have spent already hundreds of hours working with Upwardly Global and will continue to do so.

And finally, we're tapping into our innovation gene, and we are partnering with USA for UNHCR to have them be our key partner in our innovation challenge, which we do every year. Because we know the solutions we need to solve this crisis. We don't have them all today, and so we annually work with MBA students from around the country to solve critical problems, and then we commit to implement the solutions.

And so I hope that this summit that we've had will not only inspire the leaders of other countries but inspire more companies, because we're at 50, but we need to be many, many more of large and small companies to really do what we need to do as a country for our refugees.

MS. FULLER: So like Julie, let me start with some of the why. If you think about Google, we were founded by someone who came here in his youth from Russia. If you look at our CEO, he came from India. Our CFO not born in America. So Google couldn't be who we are as company without that investment and that global welcoming to immigrants.

So as we thought about what was happening with refugee crisis, we knew we wanted to get involved, and as we thought about, okay, how can we make the most distinct contribution -- the President today, when we were meeting earlier, made the comment, as governments, we need help with marketing around refugees; we need help with outreach. And one of the things we thought about is, we want to make sure that we are opening up the opportunity to contribute, the opportunity to do something, the opportunity to see what is happening right now as a humanitarian crisis but as an opportunity as well.

So we our did our first-ever global matching campaign, where we went out and said, we will match dollar-for-dollar whatever is raised for great groups on the front line like IRC, UNHCR, Maisons Sans Frontieres -- and to be perfectly honest, we had no idea how well that would go. First time ever going globally. And within two days, we had raised over \$11 million. And what's interesting, it was over 175,000 people participated. The average gift was something like \$25. So this is a great opportunity for people around the world to say, we want to be part of this and we want to help.

So that kicked off our giving and we went on to invest a total of over \$16 million. and I just wanted to share a couple of the things that we've learned.

One, we always are concerned, we don't want to look around the world and think that technology is the silver bullet and the answer to every problem. What I'm here to tell you, with the refugee situation, especially with the need to provide education, technology really is a silver bullet. Technology really can help us bring efforts to scale.

So today, we're announcing a partnership with the Clooney Foundation for Justice that's going to help bring education for refugee children in Lebanon. So you take a country like Lebanon that has a largest number of Syrian refugee per capita and think about, okay, half of those are Syrian refugees, half of those refugees are children themselves, and of those children, half of them are not in school. So we need solutions that are scalable. And what that means is digital technology. That means learning, that means connectivity; that means creating new solutions. And we have done this in a few other places. We've, for example, as soon as this crisis hit, we helped provide connectivity along in the camps and along migration routes. We've provided -- we sent our teams of engineers and product managers to develop critical information such as the site refugeeinfo.eu that provides information on things like asylum.

And what we've learned is that where we think companies like Google can have a lasting impact, a sustainable impact, is if we double down on education. We saw, for example, in Germany, another country that has welcomed many, many refugees, we committed to bringing 25,000 Chromebooks there to centers -- community centers, nonprofits, schools, churches, anyone who is opening their doors and working with refugees. And what we're seeing there is that in just a short amount of time, all 25,000 Chromebooks were spoken for because there are so many groups eager to help. And right now, they're reaching more than 42,000 refugees in Germany.

So as we think about this crisis, this opportunity, I think it's a moment for all of us to step up in generosity, and for the world to come together and to say, this is something that we can take on together in solidarity.

Thanks.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you. Are there questions for the business leaders who are here about the contributions that they have made?

Carol.

Q I'm just curious what you guys see as the main factor driving people to contribute -- what you're hearing anecdotally and kind of what's inspiring folks.

MS. FULLER: To contribute? I mean, I'll say for us, for the campaign that we did, I mean, part of it is just being given the opportunity to do it in a way that they have trust that the nonprofits have been vetted and that their dollar is going to be impactful. I think there's a lot of goodwill around the world, globally, and people oftentimes just need an easy way and a way to give to an organization that they know is doing really great work.

MS. IBRAHIM: At Coursera, an interesting thing happened. We have megathons, which are kind of like a hackathon, but it's not just for engineers -- it's for everyone. We do this three times a year where we give people about three days to really work on projects. So last year, our employees said, there's got to be something we can do for refugees. So they looked and found that we had over 600 people who were taking Coursera classes already

that said they were a current or a former refugee. So we went and talked to our university partners, and they made some progress on coming up with an idea around Coursera for refugees. The next megathon came around, we made even more progress.

By that point, the entire company got behind it. So to me, it was very much about creating the time and space, and getting people together because there was an immense amount of energy and we just needed to really unleash the potential that our employees saw.

MR. EARNEST: Other questions? Okay, thank you, ladies. Thanks for taking the time. I appreciate it.

Before we go to questions, the other thing that occurs to me in listening to them talk is there has been a lot in the political discourse recently about refugee policy in this country, And I think, once again, the business community -- certainly the businesses that were represented up here -- are a shining example of what the vast majority of Americans believe our values say about how we should respond to situations like this. And you also see them focused on practical solutions even to rather thorny, complex, significant challenges. But the determination that animates them is entirely consistent with the kinds of values that are essential to the founding of this country. And I think the presentations that they made are another good illustration of that.

So, let's go to your questions. Ben has joined me up here and we'll try to divide and conquer, and move through it this evening.

So, Josh, do you want to get us started?

Q Thanks, Josh. Let's start with the attack on the U.N. aid convoy at the Red Crescent facility. What has the U.S. learned about who was behind that and what equipment was used? And given what's happened over the past few days and the U.N. suspending the very humanitarian aid that you said is central to this deal, how can the U.S. credibly say that this ceasefire is still operational?

MR. EARNEST: Ben, do you want to take that?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, all of our information indicates clearly that this was an airstrike. That means there only could have been two entities responsible, either the Syrian regime or the Russian government. In any event, we hold the Russian government responsible for airstrikes in this space given that their commitment under the Cessation of Hostilities was to certainly ground air operations in places where humanitarian assistance is flowing. So that's the first point I'd make.

Second, with respect to what comes next, clearly this represents an enormous humanitarian tragedy that should be condemned. And I think you've seen condemnation from the international community here today. It presents an enormous challenge to the process that we are seeking to implement through the agreement.

Secretary Kerry was able to meet today with the International Support Group for Syria -- that's a group of countries that we generally coordinate with in terms of our approach to the situation in Syria. The uniform view around that table is that we need to continue to determine whether or not the Cessation of Hostilities can continue. The preference is to see if it can, given that it offers right now the best opportunity to provide for an opening to reduce the violence and address the humanitarian concerns.

That doesn't mean we're not significantly concerned by the complete failure to demonstrate good faith on the Russian side. It just means that we're going to continue to review the circumstances with our closest partners, speak very directly to Russia about whether or not it's serious about pursuing the terms of the agreement, test whether or not we can make any progress in the coming days. If we can, we believe that that's the preferable course of action. If we can't, then clearly we will not be able to move forward with the terms of the agreement.

In any event, the type of military cooperation that Russia has sought under the agreement, that has to await the implementation. And so that's obviously something that we would need to see results before moving forward.

MR. EARNEST: Toluse.

Q I wanted to ask about the 9/11 bill that the President has on his desk. Does he plan to veto that? And there has been some reports from the Senate -- Senate Republicans saying that the White House hasn't done very much to cooperate or try to negotiate to find an agreement on what would be acceptable to the White House.

MR. EARNEST: Toluse, the President will veto this legislation. I don't have an update for you in terms of timing, but as soon as the President has put pen to paper, we'll be sure and let all of you know.

White House officials and other senior officials on the President's national security team have engaged members of Congress and their staffs in both parties in both Houses of Congress, and we've acknowledged from the beginning that there's a steep hill to climb to address the concerns that we have raised about this legislation. As we've made this case, members of Congress in both parties have indicated that they are open to the concerns that we've expressed -- in many cases, they share them. And the real question for members of Congress will be whether or not they're prepared to cast a vote that is consistent with the views and feelings that they express in private.

That doesn't apply to every member of Congress. Some members of Congress are not open to our position, but some are. And those members of Congress and their staffs have been the focus of our efforts. And we're going to continue that engagement up to and through the President vetoing this legislation, in the hopes that we can find an alternative that preserves the effective response that we've already designed to counter state sponsors of terrorism.

Rather than leaving that designation subject to individual decisions by individual judges that could result in contradictory outcomes, we believe the process that we have in place is the most forceful way to respond to state sponsors of terrorism. That is a specific designation by the United States government that applies across the board that subjects these countries to sanctions; that subjects these countries to the kind of isolation that is faced by countries around the world that are subject to U.S. sanctions.

So this is obviously something that the President takes quite seriously. He's also concerned about the potential impact that this could have in terms of the concept of sovereign immunity. The United States benefits from sovereign immunity more than any other country in the world because the United States uses our influence in the international community more than any other country in the world. And to pass a piece of legislation that would open up our diplomats and our servicemembers and even American businesses to potential lawsuits in courts all around the world is foolish.

So we're going to continue to make this case. We already have. We'll continue to make it. And at some point, members of Congress will face a question about whether or not their vote that they cast in public reflects the views that they've articulated in private.

Ron.

Q What is the administration's explanation for the Inspector General finding that there were some 800 people who were slated for deportation who were granted citizenship? Given the national security concerns and concerns about immigration, what do you intend to do about it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, the thing that I can tell you is that this is something that DHS is continuing to look at. Some of the reporting on this was not -- well, frankly, was not quite accurate. Questions were raised about whether or not these individuals were eligible to gain citizenship and there were potential disqualifiers. So that's why DHS is going back to take a close look at the records. It's clear that there needs to be an improvement in terms of digitizing some of the fingerprint records that have been collected. There is important progress on that scale that has already been made.

Quite frankly, additional progress would have been made had sufficient resources been appropriated by Congress to complete that effort. So we certainly would like to see Congress support DHS's ongoing efforts to address some of the problems in the system.

Q So what is the scale of the problem, if you're blaming inaccurate reporting? The reporting suggested there are 800 people who fall into this category. How many are there? Are there none? Are you saying that -- you've said on many occasions how secure the system of vetting refugees and others is, and -- different category of people, but --

MR. EARNEST: Yes, it's a different system, so we shouldn't conflate the two. But, look, Ron, we obviously are -- we take these kinds of reports quite seriously, and we're going to pursue necessary reforms. In some cases -- the reform that we know is needed is to

complete the effort to digitize these fingerprint records. We need additional resources to get that done. So Congress is going to need to step up to the plate and provide additional resources.

With regard to the 800 individuals, we obviously are engaged in an effort to go back and take a look at their cases. Questions have been raised about whether or not they are eligible. It doesn't mean they are ineligible. But that's what DHS is working to determine and if they are ineligible then obviously will take the necessary action.

Q So given your analysis that's still ongoing, are you -- there seems to be a big problem in the system. Are you willing to admit that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are questions that have been raised about the system that are included in the report. There certainly are some reforms that could be implemented if Congress is prepared to step up to the plate and provide the necessary resources. But I think that's what the findings show.

I think the last thing that I would assert is the administration certainly takes seriously the consideration that is made in terms of protecting our national security when it comes to our immigration system. National security is the President's top priority. Protecting our homeland is the top priority. And that's true whether it's the refugee program; that's also true when it comes to pursuing immigration reform more broadly. And that's one factor in the significant disappointment that the President's expressed about how Republicans in Congress blocked the passage of comprehensive immigration reform that would have improved border security and would have focused our law enforcement resources on those individuals that actually do pose a threat to our national security.

So there certainly is more that can be done to fix our broken immigration system. But many of the reforms that we've pursued have been blocked by Congress.

Q If I could just ask one more. In the current -- the Rahami case, is the President concerned about these reports that the FBI or law enforcement officials in some way had contact with this family some time ago, two years ago, yet this is still -- this kind of event is still able to happen? Is there some -- what's the level of concern about that set of circumstances in this particular case?

MR. EARNEST: I think the FBI has acknowledged that they had had contact with this individual. The extent of that contact and what prompted that interaction between law enforcement and this individual is something that's still being reviewed by the FBI.

It's important to remember that this is an individual that is a United States citizen. So this person, in his interaction with law enforcement, is entitled to rights. And law enforcement has a responsibility not just to protect the country, but also to protect the rights of every American citizen.

So the President is confident that the Department of Justice and the FBI will go back and review the interactions that this individual had with law enforcement to determine if there is something different that could have been done or should have been done to prevent the

violence that we saw over the weekend.

Christi.

Q Thanks, Josh. Ben, going into tomorrow's meeting with Netanyahu, could you talk a little bit -- just take stock of where U.S.-Israeli relations are? It's been kind of a rocky road between these two leaders, but where do you think things stand right now? And can you also address the question of whether the President is planning to lay out a framework for Mideast peace before he leaves office?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, I think as we take stock, you'll note, of course, that we just recently concluded a new 10-year MOU to provide the largest foreign assistance package to another country in our history. This builds on I think what has been the very firm foundation of the relationship, which is the security partnership. And I think Prime Minister Netanyahu, even in areas and times when we've had differences on other issues, has always made clear that President Obama has done as much for Israel's security as any other President.

And so whether it's our commitment to Iron Dome and missile defense systems that have saved Israeli lives, our intelligence sharing relationships, our ability to have consistent dialogue with the Israeli security services, and this long-term MOU, I think President Obama has demonstrated a commitment to that foundation of Israel's security.

So that's kind of the -- I think certainly been a hallmark of the last eight years. At the same time, we've had differences on issues. In particular, we have been concerned about some of the trends as it relates to the prospect of peace. We've been concerned about continued settlement activity, the potential viability of a Palestinian state in the face of that settlement activity. And we've raised those directly with the Israeli government. I'm sure President Obama will do so tomorrow as well.

We do so because we believe that, ultimately, Israel will be most secure if there is a two-state solution and they can live side-by-side in peace and security with an independent and sovereign and sovereign Palestine.

So this is an issue where I think we've, once again, in addition to the efforts to promote peace in the past, we've taken our concerns to the Israeli government as we've seen this uptick in settlement activity over the course of the last years or so.

On other issues -- obviously the Iran issue has been a preeminent one at times in our relationship. I think, frankly, our assessment right now is that with the JCPOA in place, and with the ability, through the IAEA to clearly monitor and verify Iran's commitment to following through on its commitments in the JCPOA, and with the fact that Iran's nuclear program has been substantially rolled back, that issue has been less of an area of tension in our relationship. That's not to say Prime Minister Netanyahu supports the Iran deal, but I do think that certainly we've seen comments from the Israeli security establishment that have noted the benefits of the nuclear deal. So that has not been the issue of prominence that it was a year or two ago.

So I think tomorrow they'll discuss the security package, they'll discuss the MOU and our cooperation now and into the future. I think we'll discuss the Palestinian issue, of course, and our concerns about some of the trends that we're seeing. I'm sure they'll discuss regional issues like Iran and what Israel is dealing with in a very tough neighborhood, given the conflict in Syria, and issues along their borders.

In terms of our own plans going forward, we don't have plans for the President to pursue a new initiative at this point. We do want to raise our concerns directly with the Israeli government, and the President said in his speech today that he does not believe that, ultimately, it's in the interests of Israel to continue an occupation and to continue settlement activities.

So I think that this will be a good opportunity -- they haven't in a while -- for them to discuss the progress that's been made but also discuss some of these areas where we've had differences.

Q Kind of came together at the last minute. Can you say anything about why the meeting? And is this -- is it fair to say this is the last time they'll meet?

MR. RHODES: Well I think the reason why principally is the completion of the MOU. It's been an area of intense focus of our teams -- Susan Rice leading that effort out of the White House. Given very substantial commitment on our part -- \$38 billion over 10 years -- to include a commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge, and certain capabilities that we have worked through with them in determining how they deal with threats in their region, it was a good basis for the two leaders to note that progress, to discuss that security cooperation, and also have an opportunity to review other issues in the region and around the world, including our concerns on the Palestinian issue.

I never say never with respect to future meetings with the Israeli Prime Minister. It's certainly the last one that we anticipate, but given how close our relationship is, events can always precipitate a meeting.

Q The President was pretty careful yesterday in his statement not to use the word "terrorism" when addressing the New York and New Jersey attacks, although he did mention that that was something the FBI was investigating in Minnesota. Is there a reason for that? And would he use that word now that the man has been arrested?

And secondly, for Ben, would you be able to give us a little bit more of a readout on the Nigerian meeting, in addition to what the President said?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, I think based on the indications that we have seen so far, it does appear that this is an act of terrorism, and that's why the investigation is being conducted the way that it is. Obviously, the situation yesterday when the President addressed it, it was still quite fluid. But, look, we've obviously -- in the last 24 hours or so since the President addressed it, there's a lot more that we've learned about this particular situation and the individual who is responsible.

There's still, however, is a lot more investigative work that needs to be done to learn more about this individual, to learn more about who he was associating with, to learn more about who he was communicating with. We obviously want to ensure we understand exactly, as much as can, about what may have been motivating him. That's part of an investigation that will keep the country safe. It also is an opportunity for us to learn some lessons and, with regard to the questions that Ron was asking earlier, if there is something different that law enforcement could have done or should have done, that's a question that they obviously want to carefully consider in this situation given their previous interactions with him.

I think that addresses your question. Ben, you want to take the part.

MR. RHODES: Yes, quickly Jeff, I wasn't in the meeting so we can see if someone can give you a more detailed readout. I would just reinforce what the President said about the fact that we're very committed to the success of the Buhari administration. Nigeria had a peaceful, democratic transition that I think surprised some people, frankly, given the enormous challenges in the country, and President Buhari has, I think, shown real leadership in trying to set out on a path of reform.

We continue to provide assistance as it relates to their efforts to combat terrorism, particularly Islamic State's branch in Nigeria, formerly Boko Haram, and so there is a discussion around how to increase our counterterrorism cooperation. We also, again, want to see the success of some of the reform efforts that President Buhari's pursued in the country, and so they were able to discuss ways in which the United States, which has a significant trade and assistance relationship with Nigeria, can help play a role in supporting efforts to improve the lives of the people of Nigeria and strengthen its institutions.

And tomorrow morning, we have the Africa Business Summit, which is going to focus on ways in which we can continue to increase trade and investment -- two-way trade and investment between the United States and Africa generally. Nigeria is one of the countries of focus that will be discussed at that summit and so, one of the other items is, how can we make sure that our approach to development is also taking advantage of the opportunities in Africa for increased trade and investment which raises standards of living in countries like Nigeria but also creates markets for our goods in the long run.

Q A couple questions for Ben. Ben, you said that you didn't expect the President to pursue a new peace initiative at this point, but would you rule out that he could, at some point between now and when he leaves, lay down some kind of a framework or a road map or some sense for how a future president and future people in the Middle East could pursue a peace agreement, either in a speech or some other format?

And then secondly, on the meeting the President had with Premier Li, I'm wondering how hard the President pressed the Chinese leader on the need for tougher sanctions on North Korea in the wake of the nuclear test, and whether the President is satisfied with the response he's gotten from the Chinese so far on their willingness to cooperate in something like that.

MR. RHODES: So with respect to Middle East peace, I wouldn't rule out the President taking any particular step on the issue. What I would say is his test has always been can I make a positive difference by engaging on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. We've tried multiple tactics, none of them have succeeded, given the fact that the parties themselves have been unable to come together.

So I think that he'll want to, obviously, discuss these issues Prime Minister Netanyahu. We're not currently engaged in the type of diplomatic initiative that we have been at different junctures of the administration. In terms of what he says about the issue before he leaves office, again, I think he'd want to make a determination about how can he be most constructive in supporting a vision that he cares about, which is an Israel that has security and peace with the Palestinian people and a Palestine that is sovereign and independent.

So we really haven't pursued any particular initiative on this. We'll want to continue to express our preference, which is that the parties themselves negotiate an agreement.

And your second question?

Q Just about the sanctions --

MR. RHODES: Look, we've seen very strong statements of condemnation from China about North Korea's recent nuclear test. We've had extensive discussions with them at a variety of levels. For us, we want to see, first of all, the full implementation of the existing U.N. Security Council resolution and we want to discuss appropriate responses to this cycle of provocations, which could include additional sanctions. And we want China to understand that in the long run it is going to be less secure if we see this pattern of provocation out of North Korea both because of the instability of having a nation like North Korea pursuing a nuclear program and a ballistic missile program, but also, frankly, because there are things that China objects to like our deployment of the THAAD missile defense system that we have an obligation to deploy in the face of these provocations.

And so that's something that President Obama discussed at length with President Li. It wasn't the focus of what was not a lengthy meeting with the Premier but it's something that we're making clear at every level. And thus far, I don't think we can be satisfied because of the fact that we continue to have the cycle of provocation out of North Korea. I think China has grown more serious, they've taken steps that they've never taken before in terms of the previous U.N. Security Council resolution and the nature of their condemnations of North Korea's actions. But we want to continue to see follow-up from them.

Q Two questions. One, you said earlier on the ceasefire in Syria that you guys were going to test in coming days whether Russia was serious. Can you describe a little bit about what you mean by that? What specific things would show that they are serious or show that they're not serious, given what happened this week?

MR. RHODES: Well, this was completely contrary to the agreement and an outrageous attack on people who were trying to save lives. And Russia had agreed to having its own airstrikes and Syria regime airstrikes grounded certainly in areas where we're trying to provide humanitarian assistance.

In terms of how we test going forward, the principal way is whether there is a commitment to follow through on the grounding of the Syrian air force and the cessation of Russian airstrikes in areas where terrorist organizations are not operating, and certainly areas where we're seeking to provide humanitarian assistance. So that capacity to demonstrate a period of calm and to cease the bombardment of civilian areas or areas where moderate opposition elements are present -- that is the principal test of seriousness.

Look, we take very seriously this outrageous attack. We feel the responsible thing to do is to consult with all of our partners. And that's what Secretary Kerry did today with the meeting with the ISSG. All of them, including some very tough critics of the Assad regime around that table, still believe that the preferable course is to see whether this agreement can be implemented.

And so there's a desire to continue to try to test whether or not we can get a true period of calm from the different nations that have made up the support network for the Syrian people and the Syrian opposition that we work with. But I think we'll be able to tell whether or not today was an indication that there's just no good faith in terms of implementing the agreement, or whether or not there's a recognition that the only way out of the political, humanitarian and security crisis in Syria is some form of negotiated settlement that stops the violence, allows humanitarian assistance and gets the parties back to the negotiating table.

Q -- do you have a different measure now for testing this -- because there's not some larger consequence that -- because you went into this agreement and this happened. And so you're saying you would go back into an agreement. How would you guarantee that?

MR. RHODES: It's the same metric which we said at the beginning, which is whether or not there is a true commitment to the reduction of violence and a period of calm and allowing for humanitarian assistance.

Clearly this is completely contrary and in violation of that agreement. The question is whether or not we just walk away from the table completely at this point, or whether or not we do some more diplomacy and consultation to determine whether or not there is some path forward.

And so, again, we're still in the early stages of responding to this, consulting with our partners. At this point, again, I just don't want to close door to the possibility that we can get back to the type of agreement that was negotiated. If we can't, we'll walk away. And there certainly is not going to be military cooperation between the United States and Russia as it relates to targeting Al-Nusra elements and ISIL unless and until we see an implementation of the agreement.

So our end of the bargain here was to have that military cooperation established on the back end of a period of calm. And given that we hadn't seen that, we certainly have not initiated that cooperation.

Q Separate topic. The two presidential candidates had some meetings with foreign leaders here. Do you find that to be helpful, unhelpful? Do you think that, I mean, you obviously are -- it's the former Secretary of State -- the President's former Secretary of State. There's close communication between the campaign. Do you get a readout of what those discussions entail? And do you find it interesting the Donald Trump met with the leader of Egypt?

MR. RHODES: The fact of presidential candidates meeting with foreign leaders is certainly something that we have absolutely no problem with. When then-Senator Obama was running for President and I was working for him, we met with a number of foreign leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was then in the opposition -- including presidents and prime ministers on his foreign travel.

So I think it's a tradition. I think it's useful for candidates to have an understanding of what some of the issues are that are shaping the international agenda. But they are not conducting foreign policy. So these are decisions that they make on their own, and we do not see that as, in any way, an extension of the work that we're doing on behalf of the American people.

Q So on the ceasefire, given the things that Russia has done and said over the last couple of days, I guess it's hard to see how there is good faith and goodwill there. But today, the Kremlin said that they see little hope of renewing the ceasefire. Would you say that? Do you see this as unlikely?

MR. RHODES: Look, I want to be very clear here. We have not seen good faith. This was an outrageous action. We believe that Russia bears responsibility given, again, the fact that this was an air strike, and only they or the Syrian regime would be conducting such a strike, and it was in an area where we knew humanitarian aid was being delivered. And this is critical -- this was not something that is not coordinated. When a convoy goes in, there is very clear information provided to different parties about where they're going to be and when they're going to be there. And so we find it to be completely contrary to the agreement that was negotiated, and a further demonstration of the type of bombardment and disrespect for innocent civilian life that we've seen from the Syrian regime and its Russian sponsor for a long time now.

So I do believe it puts in serious -- raises serious questions about whether or not this agreement goes forward. I'm just not closing the door on the possibility that, in our consultations with other countries and with Russia, we might not try to pursue a ceasefire because, frankly, it's the only path forward that can truly achieve a political resolution to the Syrian conflict.

This isn't the first framework that we've tried to pursue for a Cessation of Hostilities and, in conflicts like this, I think we have an obligation to continue to try to find whether there are diplomatic openings to make progress. If we can't, we walk away. As I was saying to Carol, our commitment under this agreement was to engage in military cooperation with Russia after there was a demonstrated period of calm, and we have not done that yet. And so, unless and until we see a period of calm actually take hold, and those flights ground, and the humanitarian aid delivered, we're not going to move forward with our end of the bargain, which was to cooperate on efforts against ISIL and Nusra.

Q But the Kremlin is saying that there's little hope of it being renewed. Would you say that on its face that is bad faith? Or are you not putting too much store --

MR. RHODES: I'd put a lot more -- I'd pay a lot more attention to the fact that there was a bombardment of an aid convoy. That to me is the bad faith. That's something that needs to be answered for. And frankly, if Russia is serious about its expressed concerns about that action, it would ground the Syrian air force in these areas, and ground its own airstrikes in these areas, and show that it's seriously committed to allowing for a better future for the Syrian people.

So that I think is ultimately what gives us our own assessment that we do not see Russia acting in good faith at this point.

Q And just quickly -- oh, I'm sorry.

MR. EARNEST: Go ahead.

Q I was just going to ask, what can you say about any interaction with Rouhani?

MR. RHODES: We have no planned interaction with President Rouhani, and I'm not aware that there was any.

MR. EARNEST: Mark.

Q Yes, Josh, I'm still confused on the Israeli-Palestinian thing. I want to come back to that for a second. There have been a series of reports since March that the President is considering, perhaps as a parting gesture, hoping to leave something for a future administration, an outline, some kind of a framework for what a future deal might look like. Were they wrong? Is he still considering that? Has he shelved the idea? Is it still a possibility?

MR. RHODES: Look, I think most of those reports were speculation, frankly, about what are the different options available to us. We do not have any particular plan to pursue that course of action. Over the course of the last eight years, basically everything you could consider as it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian issue we have. So I don't want to suggest that we've never discussed different things that the President could do to move the ball forward. But we're not coming to this meeting tomorrow or moving forward in the coming weeks with a plan for the President to take a particular action on this issue.

I just also don't want to stand here and say we're going to rule out the President speaking to the Israeli-Palestinian issue in any more detailed way before he leaves office because ultimately, we'll make a judgment based on whether or not he believes that that would be constructive in pursuit of the outcome we want to see, which is a negotiated two-state settlement.

Q Back to North Korean sanctions. Can you talk about the news story about the Chinese company which may be exporting the material to North Korea? I think the newspapers (inaudible.) Is the U.S. coordinating with the Chinese on this issue?

MR. RHODES: I'm not familiar with this specific report. We do believe that China has an obligation to implement fully the sanctions that have been passed at the U.N. Security Council resolution, including preventing the export to North Korea of a variety of goods and technologies. When we see concerns about that we do raise them directly with China, but I'm not familiar with this specific report.

Q With regard to U.N. Security Council resolution on the nuclear test ban that you were circulating, I was just wondering what you have to say about it. Is it -- was it designed to be legally binding at first, I mean, in your intention? And what does it have to do with your --

MR. RHODES: So as the President said in his speech today, we believe that all nations should reinforce the norm against the testing of nuclear weapons. And we believe that acting through the U.N. Security Council resolution will send a strong message that the international community is committed to reinforcing the norm against the testing of nuclear weapons.

It is a part of our broader policy. When we came here in 2009, the President shared a U.N. Security Council session, and we had a resolution that essentially embraced a framework of the agenda he had laid out in Prague. We've invested a lot in that effort since. First, our own efforts to reduce our stockpiles through the New START Treaty; certainly the long commitment to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to Iran through diplomacy, which also was an effort that very much had its roots here in the U.N. General Assembly in 2009; but also strengthening international norms against proliferation. And at a time when North Korea is testing nuclear devices, it's all the more imperative that the world expresses its commitment to ban testing.

Now, in terms of the force of law for the United States, ultimately, we believe that the Senate should ratify CTBT. That's clearly not going to happen this year or -- the likelihood of that happening soon is slim. However, what we want to accomplish through this process is to have that clear expression of support for the ban on testing to reinforce the norm through the U.N. Security Council, and to, frankly, isolate those like North Korea, who are operating outside of norm -- the norm against the testing of nuclear weapons.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks a lot, everybody. Have a nice evening.

END

7:06 P.M. EDT