

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/8/2015

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you all. I hope you all enjoyed an extra-long weekend, even if it didn't feel extra-long. I don't have anything at the top, so we can go straight to your questions.

Julie, do you want to start?

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to get the White House's reaction to the President getting 41 votes in the Senate in favor of the Iran deal. And also, are you pushing supporters of the deal to filibuster the disapproval resolution?

MR. EARNEST: Julie, the administration is gratified by the growing support that we've seen in the United States Congress for the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. What we hoped when the agreement was initially announced in mid-July is that members of Congress would carefully consider the contents of the agreement, take advantage of the opportunity that was extended by the administration to consult with those who negotiated the agreement in the first place, spend time with experts in the intel community and in our military establishment -- certainly our diplomatic corps -- to understand the consequences for the terms of the agreement.

We hoped that they would consult with nuclear experts and non-proliferation experts to understand the consequences of the steps that Iran would have to take to reduce their uranium stockpile, to shut down the plutonium path to a nuclear weapon, and agree to the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program.

Unfortunately, on the Republican side of the aisle we saw a lot of Republicans in Congress -- nearly all of them, in fact -- actually announce their support before the agreement was even reached, and that was the source of some disappointment. But that is why I can relate to you that we feel gratified today, because the vast majority of those who did take time to consider the terms of the agreement and to participate in briefings and meetings,

and in many cases, even hear firsthand from the President about what he believes are the most important aspects of the agreement, that those individuals have over the last couple of months indicated their plan to support the agreement before the United States Congress.

Q So are you now asking those supporters to filibuster the disapproval resolution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly would expect that those members of Congress who support the agreement, to take the necessary steps in Congress to prevent Congress from undermining the agreement. And look, just in anticipating some of the arguments we may hear from the other side here, you've heard me and, frankly, both of my predecessors in the Obama administration express frustration at the rules of the United States Senate that were, to his credit, effectively employed by Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to stymie many aspects of the President's agenda, including high priorities, because of the 60-vote threshold that's required to do just about anything in the United States Senate. So it would be a little ironic for now Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to express concerns about a tactic that he himself employed on countless occasions.

The other thing that I'll point out is that the 60-vote threshold is actually one that was approved by the 98 senators who voted for the Corker-Cardin legislation back in the spring. There's been no change to the procedure. This is exactly how everyone understood that the procedure for Congress to consider this agreement would work.

Q If I could switch over the migrant issue. NSC issued a statement saying that the administration is "actively considering" ways to respond to the crisis, including refugee resettlement. I'm wondering if you could be more specific about what you're actively considering. And when you talk about refugee resettlement, are you talking about helping more refugees be resettled in the United States?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julie, what this alludes to is essentially a reconsideration led by the State Department, who has the jurisdiction for these kinds of issues, to see exactly what the administration and the country can do to help our allies and partners in Europe deal with this significant and growing humanitarian situation that is an outgrowth of the instability that we've seen in the Middle East and in North Africa.

The United States, it should be pointed out, has already taken a number of significant steps to try to address this humanitarian crisis. The United States is the single-largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to try to provide for the needs of those Syrians who are fleeing violence in their communities. The United States has been an active participant in efforts that have been led by the U.N. to try to resolve peacefully the political disagreement inside of Syria that has led to so much political instability and outright violence in that country.

So we continue to be concerned about the vulnerable position of so many people who are fleeing violence in their home countries. And the United States, in the way that we play a leading role in confronting so many other thorny difficult problems, are prepared to

continue to play a leading role in trying to assist those organizations that are trying to meet the needs -- basic humanitarian needs of these individuals.

Q But just so I'm clear, you want a role in helping the allies and partners in Europe deal with the situation, and not play a role in bringing some of these refugees to the United States.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there already -- there is a process for doing this that's run by the State Department.

Q But I'm talking either increasing caps or making special allowances, like some of the European countries are doing right now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is something that is under the active consideration of the State Department, and so I don't have any new approaches to announce at this point. But certainly consistent with the statement that was issued yesterday, the administration is actively considering a range of approaches to contribute to the solution to this very difficult challenge.

Jeff.

Q Josh, just to follow up on that -- would the approaches that you're considering require congressional approval?

MR. EARNEST: There may be some. There's no specific piece of legislation that we've put forward at this point, but I certainly wouldn't rule out an important role for Congress in terms of putting in place those kinds of policies.

Q And do you have any ideas in terms of what the financial cost of these approaches might involve?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, what we're focused on is trying to determine what the best set of policies would be, and then we'll certainly evaluate those policies in the context of the cost associated with them. But that's an evaluation that is ongoing.

Q Does the White House believe the United States has a responsibility to take a greater role in accepting some of these refugees that are really overcrowding Europe to some extent right now, and Germany and other countries like that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, as I mentioned, the United States, particularly under the leadership of President Obama, is looked upon by the world to take a leading role in responding to a wide variety of challenging situations.

And there is no denying that the situation that many of our European partners are confronting right now is a significant one. It's not a new one, though. We know that there are countries like Turkey and Jordan -- just to cite two examples -- that have been bearing a significant burden with regard to Syrian refugees and others who may be fleeing Syria

because of violence there. And the United States has provided significant financial support and other kinds of support to those countries as they have tried to meet the basic humanitarian needs of those fleeing violence in Syria.

So the situation is not new, and our effort to try to assist those countries that are bearing the brunt of the situation is not new. But it does appear that the situation is worsening, and that's why the United States is going to continue to consider additional steps that we can take to help those countries that are bearing the brunt of this burden right now.

Mara.

Q I have just two quick questions just to clarify what Julie asked. Do you expect all those 41 people supporting the deal to also vote to uphold a filibuster?

MR. EARNEST: Well, each of those members of the Senate will announce how they're going to vote on these procedural questions themselves, so I don't have any announcements to make on their behalf. But I don't think it's -- it shouldn't be a surprise to anybody who followed the debate back in the spring about the Corker-Cardin legislation that it simply established the process by which Congress would weigh in on any international agreement with Iran. And what we're discussing now is exactly what that process contemplated.

Q And there are an awful lot of people holding town hall events in Iowa these days. Why is the President going on Monday to do one also?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll have some more news about the President's travel next week a little later today.

Q I mean, he's going to Des Moines, Iowa to hold a town hall. I mean, there's tons of presidential candidates doing the same thing. I'm just curious as to why he chose that venue.

MR. EARNEST: And we'll have more news on the President's travel later today.

Q He's not running for President, is he? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: He discussed extensively as recently as when we were in Africa about why he's not going to do that.

Justin.

Q There's 10 legislative days left before the budget runs out, and so I'm wondering if you could put odds on Congress reaching a deal from your perspective and whether the White House had started any negotiations now that they're back in town, if you were expecting presidential or senior staff-level outreach this week. And if so, if you could detail that.

MR. EARNEST: Justin, I think the President spoke pretty forcefully about this yesterday, about how important it is -- particularly in the midst of the global economic instability that we've seen -- that Congress not commit an unforced error and shut down the

government.

The fact is we know that would have a negative impact on our economy. It certainly would contribute to some instability. And our economy right now is confronting more than enough instability. So we're hopeful that common sense will prevail, and that a bipartisan agreement of some kind will be reached that will both prevent a government shutdown but also make sure that our country's economic and national security priorities are funded at an adequate level.

And I wouldn't -- I don't have any specific telephone calls or meetings to tell you about. I wouldn't rule out any sorts of conversations between senior administration officials and members of Congress. But the negotiations that need to take place are not negotiations necessarily between Congress and the White House but actually negotiations between Democrats and Republicans in the United States Congress.

Congress, after all, is the one that is responsible for negotiating and passing budgets. Obviously, there's a role for the executive branch. The President has to sign that budget into law, so the administration would be engaged in those conversations. But the negotiations that need to take place are between Democrats and Republicans in the United States Congress.

There has been a repeated -- a set of repeated attempts by Republicans in Congress to try to pass appropriations bills along party lines. That effort has been unsuccessful. And it underscores the need for Congress to actually work in bipartisan fashion -- and in this case, I mean Republicans to be willing to work with Democrats to build a bipartisan majority for a budget proposal. And we certainly would welcome any sort of constructive conversations along those lines that would yield a bipartisan result.

Q I wanted to kind of drill down on when you say adequate funding levels. I know the President has talked in the past about getting rid of sequester levels. But the more pressing question seems to be whether you guys would accept a short-term CR that would kind of give Congress more time on a broader budget deal, but keep funding levels kind of where they are right now. I know that you've obviously identified other priorities. But is that the sort of pathway that you're seeing right now, especially since there seem to be a number of other cliffs -- whether it's the debt ceiling, or the highway that are coming up towards the end of the year that combine all that stuff to be there?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't prejudge any outcomes at this point. You do raise an important reminder that the administration did put forward our own budget proposal back in early February -- seems like a lifetime ago now -- but that was a serious budget proposal for how, in a fiscally responsible way, the United States of America could adequately fund both our economic needs as well as our national security imperatives. And the President is hopeful that Congress will be able to come up with something along those lines.

But Congress is coming back from a long recess, beginning this evening, and hopefully Republicans will be ready to accept the invitation from Democrats to sit down at the negotiating table and get to work on this. It should be a top priority.

Q Last thing, the U.S. embassy in South Africa today is warning of an extremist threat to U.S. interests. But the warning was pretty vague, and so I'm wondering if you can put any meat on the bone -- what's going on, what kind of threat, from who that embassy is seeing.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update for you or more detailed information to share with you about that specific statement, but I encourage you to check with the State Department. And if there's more that we can share with you on it, we'll follow up with you. Okay?

Jon.

Q Josh, first let me ask that question about the budget differently. Is the President willing to shut the government down if Congress doesn't agree to limit the sequester spending levels?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, the President feels very strongly that Congress needs to both pass a budget on time, but also make sure that our economy and our national security priorities don't have to suffer from the mindless austerity that was brought about in the sequester. And so the President has made clear that he will not support legislation that locks in those sequester caps that neglect our economic and national security priorities.

Q So he would veto a spending bill that raised the spending levels? So he'd be willing to shut the government down unless Congress agrees to lift those spending levels?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple of things about that. The first is that it's not at all clear to me that there is bipartisan support for -- well, let me say it this way -- it's not at all clear to me that there is enough support in the United States Congress to pass a budget that would lock in sequester spending. And I think there's good reason for that. I know that obviously the vast majority if not all of the Democrats oppose that. And I think there are a number of Republicans in the Congress who would have serious reservations and maybe be even reluctant to support something like that.

So I'm not sure it's going to come to that. But the President's position on this has been very clear that he will not sign into law a budget bill that would lock in sequester levels of spending.

Q Does that include a temporary budget bill, even a so-called continuing resolution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't speculate at this point about what sort of path they're going to take. Obviously there's a difference between a --

Q A bill that continues the current bill --

MR. EARNEST: -- a temporary bill that would be put into place to allow Congress to get the additional time that's necessary to pass a longer-term budget. So I would draw a distinction between those two things without speculating about what path Congress will take at this point.

Q Okay. And on the Syrian refugees, as I understand it, the United States has taken in about 1,500 Syrians. Is that the number as far as you --

MR. EARNEST: I haven't looked at the specific numbers today, but I know that there are caps based on country that are maintained by the State Department.

Q So the State Department said there's about 1,500 Syrians. Given that there are 4 million Syrian refugees, isn't that a pathetically low number the United States is willing to bring in?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, I think that when you consider the scope of this crisis, it's important to understand the scope of the U.S. response --

Q I understand we're giving a lot of money to try to alleviate the problem in the region, but in terms of the number -- historically, the United States has opened its doors when we've seen a crisis like this happen and welcomed in refugees. And in this case, it's been just 1,500 out of 4 million. So I'm just wondering -- I understand the President has to deal with limits that have been -- that he didn't set, that were imposed by law. But do you agree that that is kind of a shockingly low number given the extent of the crisis?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is clear is that the State Department is going to take the lead inside the administration in reviewing the options that are available to the Obama administration for considering additional steps that we can take to try to provide more assistance in dealing with this significant and growing humanitarian crisis.

Michelle.

Q On the same subject, we've heard the British government say that the proper way to help people is within their own country, that they don't want to open the door to more people risking their lives to come. They've made a lot of excuses for not taking more, but then they decided to take in 20,000 more. So does the Obama administration feel the same way as some of those -- the reasoning that the British government gave for not taking in more? And are we going to now see something similar where, ideologically, we feel the same way, but we're now looking at taking in more? Is it going to be sort of an alignment there with what Britain did?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, this is something that continues to be under active consideration by the administration, principally at the State Department. And I think what is true is that there are some countries in Europe that deserve credit for the efforts that they've undertaken and for the hospitality that has been shown by many European citizens who have generously responded to the desperate situation of some fellow human beings. And that is something that they deserve credit for.

But this is a complicated problem and one that I feel confident in saying that Europe is going to spend quite a bit of time dealing with. And the United States is certainly looking for ways that we can further augment the already significant steps that we've taken to support that response.

Q I guess when this -- when we were talking about this just last week, I think it was Thursday, your response was to list all of the ways that the U.S. has helped in a humanitarian way, but really relying on that, on that kind of assistance. And then you said, well, Europe has the capacity to take in a lot of these people. But now, all of a sudden, yesterday we hear from the administration that we are actively considering a range of approaches. And today when you talked about that, you said that we're continuing to look at this. So I guess my question, at the basis of it is, what has changed in our approach now? And if something has changed, then why has it changed since Thursday -- even if it's just in the way that you're presenting the U.S. approach to this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Michelle, what I would hope that you and your viewers would understand is the significant steps that the administration has already taken, that this country has already taken to try to address those needs. And the best illustration of that is that the United States is the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to help Syrian refugees who are in a vulnerable position.

There are a number of other political and diplomatic steps that the United States has taken. And we certainly applaud the EU presidency's call for this extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting that is slated for this weekend. That certainly is an appropriate step. But the United States is often looked to by the world to step up and play a leading role in trying to solve very difficult and widespread problems, and the current humanitarian crisis that is underway, based on Syrians fleeing their war-torn country, would certainly fall into that category. And that is what has prompted the administration and the President to consider additional steps beyond the extraordinary ones that we've already taken to try to help those who are bearing the brunt of this burden right now.

Q And that is a change from last week?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we did announce publicly that we were considering additional steps, but I don't think that should be particularly surprising given all of the steps that we've already taken to try to address the situation, and given the important role that the United States is always called on to play when dealing with extraordinary challenges like this.

Q But why the change over a matter of days? Was it just looking at the situation and seeing that it's much different?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know that we'd describe it as "much different," but I think it is clear that this is a growing challenge for Europe. And, again, the international community is looking to the United States to continue to play a leading role in this

response, and we are going to continue to play a leading role in this response, and that means considering other approaches that may be necessary. But that should discount the already significant steps the administration is already taking.

Q Okay. On reaching that 41 vote threshold, you said that you're gratified, but ultimately what this is going to be is, I guess, the White House getting its way more than convincing a majority of members of Congress to go along with it. So is that really something that the administration can feel good about? Does that not put a damper on ultimately seeing this through?

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, the role that Congress has carved out for themselves was essentially the opportunity to weigh in on this agreement in a way that I would describe as playing the spoiler. That's the role that Congress carved out for themselves. And we are pleased and gratified that we've been able to build sufficient support in the United States Congress to prevent Iran from spoiling this international -- sorry -- to prevent the Congress from spoiling this international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Mike.

Q Back to the migrants for a second. Do you have a timeline for the review that the State Department is doing? And along the same lines, is it your sense that the President would be comfortable if, in two weeks when the Pope arrives and likely to focus on this topic some, that the United States would be still in the posture at the end of these next couple of weeks when the Pope arrives to be taking in the same amount of refugees from Syria that it's currently taking in?

MR. EARNEST: Well, just to be clear, it's the administration that conducting the review, but the State Department has the lead because they have --

Q I understand. But you guys must be giving them sort of expectation --

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely.

Q -- as to when you want -- I mean, they could say six months, a year, whatever. Like is it in the next three days, five days, two weeks? Is it before the Pope arrives?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a timeframe to share with you. Obviously, everyone is well aware of the sense of urgency. And so this is something that is being actively considered, and we're certainly mindful of the importance of timing here. This is an urgent situation, and many people are in a rather desperate situation and are in need of immediate assistance. So this is something that's being actively considered, but I don't have a timeframe at this point.

Q And then on the Pope, is it your sense that the President would be comfortable with the same amount of refugees coming into this country when the Pope arrives?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that regardless of the result of this ongoing consideration of additional options, the United States has a strong story to tell about the way that we have mobilized the significant resources and influence of this country to try to address the urgent refugee situation that stems from the instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

Q And one last question. Sort of the flip side of the coin, to what extent does the administration believe that the kind of conversation on immigration and kind of -- that's playing out in the Republican primary and among Republican candidates, and some of the criticism that the President and the administration would likely get if they did increase some of these caps, to what extent does that factor into the consideration that the administration or the State Department makes on whether or not to increase the number of immigrants?

MR. EARNEST: I would not anticipate that a serious policy decision like the one that's currently being considered by the administration is going to be strongly influenced by the political debate in the Republican presidential primary regardless of how irresponsible that rhetoric may become.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. I have two questions on executive orders. First, does the White House have a timeframe in mind for the Department of Labor to implement yesterday's sick leave order?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that this is something that they'll be considering over the next year. But for the -- and that essentially would be how long it would take to develop the rule and implement it through the rulemaking process. But I'd refer you to the Department of Labor for a more specific timeframe. They may be able to give you some more details.

Q Okay, and a broader picture -- are more employment-related executive orders in the pipeline right now, such as a model employer order?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any additional steps that the administration is prepared to take to tell you about right now. But anybody who has been paying attention -- and I know that you have over the last nine months or so -- has seen the President on a number of occasions announce efforts using his own executive authority to protect the interests of middle-class families. And whether that is raising the minimum wage for employees of federal contractors, to paid leave that you described, even some -- even prohibiting discrimination against GLBT employees is a step that the President has announced using his executive authority. And so I certainly wouldn't rule out additional steps like that in the future.

Viqueira.

Q Thank you. Back on the migrant situation, just for the record, with the stipulation that the State Department is taking the lead here, can the administration lift these caps without action by Congress?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll have to check on the answer to that for you. I don't know if that is something that the President is able to do using his own executive authority, or if that requires congressional approval.

Q And is one of the considerations, as this new policy is being formulated or the scope of options is being considered, the idea that if you allow more people in from that part of the world, then you could perhaps have elements of groups that oppose the United States, like ISIL and on down the line, al Qaeda, come in with a new batch of immigrants if they were admitted into this country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we would obviously want to be -- and I think this is true of even the refugee policy that's in place now -- is mindful of the impact on U.S. national security. And for the way that that process is administered, I'd refer you to the State Department. But certainly the core national security interests of the United States will be considered even as this range of possible approaches is evaluated.

Q And finally, to put it in a political context, is there hesitation to announce a new policy while the Iran deal is still actively being considered in Congress? Would that complicate the politics of the votes coming up in the House and the Senate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it does appear that as the days go by, there's less and less drama associated with the Iran vote. But I --

Q It's never set in stone until they actually cast the vote.

MR. EARNEST: Surely isn't. And I think that it has been clear from our approach in terms of the extensive consultations that have continued with members of Congress by the President and other senior administration officials that we don't take any votes for granted.

That said, those who are evaluating this range of approaches to enhance our response to this situation are keenly aware of the urgency of this problem. And they're not going to allow a political debate to interfere with our ability to put forward the kind of response that's consistent with the values of this country, but also consistent with the best interests of our national security.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Josh. A couple for you. The Iran nuclear deal commits the administration to try to roll back state-level sanctions against Iran. Now, 15 governors have written to the President saying they're going to freeze that -- freeze those sanctions in place. What impact, if any, does this have on your ability to implement the Iran deal?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard a lot about what sort of impact individual state decisions may have on our broader ability to implement the agreement. But obviously that's what we're most focused on, is making sure that in the context of this international agreement that has been reached to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, we want to make sure that the United States fulfills our commitments, because we certainly are going to be expecting the Iranians to fulfill their commitments. And, by the way, Iran will have to fulfill their requirements before they get any sanctions relief at all.

But what has served the interest of the United States exceedingly well in recent years has been the unity of the international community as it relates to confronting Iran over their nuclear weapons. So that's why the President has placed a priority on ensuring that the United States can live up to the commitments that we've made, because we want to make sure that the rest of the international community is prepared to hold Iran accountable for living up to the commitments that they've made.

Q And then one on Syria. France appears to be ramping up its military efforts in Syria, flying recon missions over Syria, leaving open the door to airstrikes. Is this an escalation of the coalition's military campaign in Syria, or is it being matched by a reduction in some other partners' roles?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not aware of any specific reductions. But for decisions that are made by France, particularly as it relates to their policy for conducting some operations in Syria, I'd refer you to them for the latest update.

Major.

Q Josh, for this range of options consideration being given, is this a range of new options -- meaning things that had never been really debated seriously before, and that would lend us to believe that this would be about not money, which the United States provides substantial amounts of, but lifting the cap? Is that a fair interpretation?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is fair for you to assume that there are a wide range of options that are under consideration. I wouldn't, at this point, enumerate what all those options are. But I think it is --

Q I've stated two.

MR. EARNEST: Well, but I think it's fair for you to assume that there is a pretty broad look underway right now.

Q Okay. And let's try to put together a couple things that have been raised in this briefing. You're going to need a CR one way or the other to prevent a government shutdown. Is this something that would be likely the administration, once it comes up with a policy, to negotiate with Congress in the context of a CR -- meaning if you needed additional money for the migrant refugee crisis, or if you needed to raise the caps? Is that going to be likely the place where this is going to be negotiated, and the timeline driving the policy itself?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't want to speculate at this point about what sort of congressional involvement will be required as we consider these range of responses.

Q But if you're going to increase financial resources, which is one option, obviously you need Congress to go ahead with that. It seems pretty clear to significantly raise the cap you're going to need congressional approval. I mean, I don't know absolutely by law, but that seems pretty likely. So these two most likely responses -- I mean, let's be honest. It's going to be raising the cap or sending more money.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to prejudge the outcome here. What I will say is that we will carefully consider what role Congress can and should play. I would anticipate that based on the tenor of the debate so far, that there would be at least some Republican support for steps that would allow the United States to continue to play a leading role in the response to this crisis situation. But again, I think what most Republicans would say is, well, we want to understand exactly what you're proposing, so that's why I'm going to reserve a discussion of that until that process has been completed.

Q And that's part of the process you're going through -- things submitted to the President for his approval and then trying to get an idea from Congress, what's doable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm confident that there will be some discussions with Congress as we go through this process.

Q And stepping back for a second, the main U.S. involvement has been to provide the \$4 billion in assistance, which has largely supplemented refugee camps. The refugee crisis -- it appears to be a signal that the refugee camp and that approach, although serviceable for a year or two years, for the refugees is no longer a workable solution. Does that force the administration to recalibrate all of the calculations about what it had been doing, and this is a policy that has to be looked at completely anew?

MR. EARNEST: I don't think I would say it quite that broadly. I think that there is clear evidence to indicate that the humanitarian assistance that's been provided thus far, much of which has been in the context of ensuring that refugee camps are properly staffed and supplied, that that effort has saved millions of lives, and that people who didn't benefit from that kind of assistance would have been faced with death. And again, that's why you've seen kind words from the administration in the past about the efforts of countries like Turkey and Jordan that have expended significant resources to try to provide for the basic humanitarian needs of people who fled Syria into their countries.

So I would anticipate that that kind of humanitarian work is ongoing. But what's clear is this problem is growing and that we're seeing more refugees leaving Syria, and that calls for a more significant response from the international community. And any time there's a question about what the international community's response -- any time there's a question raised about what the response of the international community is going to be, eyes turn to the United States and start asking the United States how we're going to lead in that effort. And that's the effort that's underway right now.

Q Does the response from the international community also mean that neighboring countries not named Turkey and Jordan, meaning the other Gulf State countries, should do more and should have already been doing more to alleviate this crisis?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it certainly is clear that we are going to need a more robust response from countries around the world. That includes countries in the region. We've already seen countries in Europe step up and offer up additional support.

Q Do you describe the Gulf States' support as sufficient or insufficient?

MR. EARNEST: I would merely suggest that countries around the world, including Gulf State countries, should take a look at what they've done so far and look for ways that they can expand the amount of assistance that they've provided as well.

Francesca.

Q I'm going to try to ask this a different way. I might not be very successful. But you have stated throughout the briefing that the United States has taken a leading role and that this crisis is obviously worsening. My question is, how can the United States continue to take a leading role as it worsens without accepting more of the refugees?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Francesca, the way that we've played the leading role thus far is by being the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to this crisis situation. And the question before the policymakers inside this government is what additional steps can we take to provide even more assistance to what is a growing crisis. And we have seen countries in Europe step up and announce some new measures. The EU is holding this emergency meeting this coming weekend. And there are other countries who are indicating that they are also looking at what they've done to see if there's additional support that they can provide as well -- and they should. They should be doing that.

Q So by definition, though, you're saying that in order to continue taking a leading role, that doesn't necessarily mean taking in more refugees?

MR. EARNEST: It doesn't necessarily. I don't want to prejudge the outcome of the review that's underway. But the other thing that the United States has been doing -- and we're going to redouble our efforts to try to do this -- is to try to resolve the political situation inside Syria. That, after all, is what has caused this humanitarian crisis in the first place; it is the failure of the Assad regime to effectively govern that country, and it has allowed that country to become divided and wracked by violence. And we've even seen the Assad regime use the military of that country to carry out terrible acts of violence against Syrian citizens. That is deplorable. That is why you've heard the administration indicate our observation that President Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead that country. And there is -- or there has been periodically over the last several years an effort by the United Nations to try to broker a diplomatic political agreement that would allow for a peaceful political transition inside of Syria.

That effort thus far has not been successful, but it has enjoyed the strong support of the United States. And we're going to continue to support efforts that can address the root cause of this refugee crisis, which is trying to address the many political problems that are plaguing Syria right now.

Q Sure. And then lastly on that -- sorry, I didn't want to interrupt you.

MR. EARNEST: That's okay.

Q On the terrorism angle, there have been many Republicans, not just at the presidential level though, but many Republicans who said that they are concerned that by raising the cap and letting more in, it could allow a terrorist element in. Is that something the administration is seriously concerned about? Is that part of the reason why he wouldn't raise the cap?

MR. EARNEST: Well, whenever we're considering a foreign policy question, concerns about the basic safety and security of the United States and our citizens are at the forefront. And I can certainly tell you that as the range of approaches are considered through this process, the safety and security of the American people will be the top concern on the list.

April.

Q Josh, a couple topics. One, what does the White House have to say about the fact that Kim Davis is being released from jail and she's told not to interfere with the issuing of licenses?

MR. EARNEST: This is a decision from a federal judge, and I wouldn't have a specific comment on it at this point beyond what I said last week, which is simply that every elected official in this country is subject to the rule of law. And that is a founding principle of our democracy, and it's one that has to be followed by the President of the United States. And it's one that has to be followed by county clerks all across the country, as well.

Q With all the controversy last week, does the White House see a broader issue that this speaks to?

MR. EARNEST: Not really. I mean, the fact is I think that the -- obviously the law on this is pretty clear. And I think the vast majority of Republicans and Democrats certainly understands the importance of this principle of the rule of law.

Q On another subject. With this migrant refugee issue, it kind of goes back again to one of the questions before about the immigration issue here in the United States. Donald Trump has taken his golden spoon and stirred the pot and ignited a flame under the Republican Party about immigration. Is this the time to seize upon the momentum from that golden spoon when it comes to immigration in this country and fixing the problem?

MR. EARNEST: That's some very colorful imagery, April.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you for brightening our day. (Laughter.)

I will say that the -- obviously, the President has made clear the strong feelings he has about the need for common-sense immigration reform. He's talked at length about the strong support that exists for common-sense immigration reform all across the country.

He's talked about the important economic and national security benefits associated with immigration reform. He's talked about the positive contribution that comprehensive immigration reform would make to improving our country's fiscal situation. And he's talked about important common-sense immigration reform would be to aligning the laws of our country with the values of our country.

So the President is an eager, frequent, and passionate advocate for immigration reform.

At the same time, the President is pretty realistic that the concerted effort that was made by Republicans in the House of Representatives was successful in stymying bipartisan legislation. And unfortunately, the vote count in the House of Representatives hasn't changed. If anything, it's probably worsened. So I would not anticipate -- I would say there's not a lot of optimism inside the administration that we'll be able to make progress on immigration reform in the next 18 months or so.

Q Even with this new momentum on it, you don't think that you could seize upon this moment?

MR. EARNEST: Unfortunately, I think a lot of the sentiment that's been stirred up, to borrow your analogy, reflects the views of a minority of Americans that is opposed to immigration reform. So I don't anticipate that some of the comments that you're referring to are going to be constructive in trying to advance immigration reform legislation -- unfortunately.

Q Okay. And lastly, I'm going back to the tally. What is your official tally on the Iran deal now since you've have some senators come out?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think the number of senators who have indicated their support for the Iran agreement is 41. And I have not -- I haven't gotten the latest tally in the House. But we can follow up with you on that.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to follow up on the migrant story. I'm curious, who would do the vetting if these Syrian migrants were to come here en masse -- whether it be 300 additional or, as the U.N. is hoping, by the thousands?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, there is a process that's administered by the State Department for taking in refugees to the United States, and there are specific caps on the number of refugees from individual countries that can be accepted. But there is a process for administering this program at the State Department.

Q That process -- you're comfortable. Is the FBI comfortable? Are the folks at the State Department comfortable that they can properly vet the people who might be coming here who may or may not have ties to terrorist organizations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any additional or new steps to talk to you about. But certainly the policies that have been in place, not just in this administration but in previous administrations, is one that already considers and admits refugees from other countries into this one.

Q Where would they go?

MR. EARNEST: Again, Kevin, for questions about the refugee program, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Q Okay. Let me ask you about -- this is actually dating back to 2010. And I'm wondering, does the President stand by his 2010 executive order -- this is relating to the Hillary Rodham Clinton email circumstance -- that Executive Order 13526, making clear that only the agency that collects intelligence can determine its classifications? You've heard her say and others suggest that because it was classified by one group it may not have been classified until after the fact by another group. Does the President stand by that executive order?

MR. EARNEST: Of course he does, Kevin. And I think what both the State Department and the inspectors general, even the Clinton campaign, have all acknowledged is that there's information that can be obtained from different agencies, and that's how you arrive at a situation where one agency may consider it classified because of the means through which that information was obtained, but another agency may have obtained that information through an unclassified channel. And that's why you may have different determinations from agency officials, but it is why what Secretary Clinton has said is appropriate, which is that she was careful not to send information that was marked classified at the time on her unclassified email system.

Q Last one, on the migrants again. Would you call the response thus far satisfactory by this nation in terms of dealing with and responding to what is obviously an international crisis?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, there is no denying that the United States, under the leadership of President Obama, has already taken significant action to support the international response to this humanitarian crisis. The United States is the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to this situation, and the administration is actively considering now a range of additional steps that the United States can take to supplement our response to what is apparently a growing crisis.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Josh. As the administration considers this range of new options that we heard about from the NSC yesterday, back in May -- more than three months ago -- 14 Democratic senators sent a letter to President Obama suggesting that he find a way for a

significant increase in the number of Syrian refugees who would be allowed into the United States. Given what we've seen develop over the last several days, the last couple of weeks or so, did the President wait too long for this assessment?

MR. EARNEST: No, Chris, I wouldn't say that. The fact is the administration has a strong record of taking decisive action to try to supplement the ongoing international response to this growing humanitarian crisis. And the United States is the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to this situation. We are certainly encouraged that the EU has decided to hold this extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting this week, and to address the issue.

We've been encouraged by the response that we've seen from a number of European nations who have extended generosity to fellow human beings who are in a very vulnerable position. But it is clear that more resources and a greater effort will be needed to confront this problem, and the United States is taking a close look at what additional assistance we can provide.

Q But three and a half months ago Democratic senators said to the President, we need to look at this. So was there something they saw that the administration and the staff who is charged with this was missing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, I don't think that's entirely fair because I don't think that those 13 Democratic senators --

Q Fourteen.

MR. EARNEST: -- or 14 Democratic senators were suggesting that the United States somehow should admit hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to the United States.

Q No, but they said "significantly more."

MR. EARNEST: And I guess the point is I don't think that anybody has made the suggestion -- at least a reasonable one -- that the United States would be able to take on board all those immigrants that right now -- or all those refugees right now that are fleeing violence.

The question is what can the United States do to respond to that humanitarian crisis? And what we have already done is substantially more than any other country in the world. And what the President has indicated is that because of international expectations and because of the values of this country, he has asked his administration to take a look at what more can be done to try to address this humanitarian crisis.

Q And understanding that this is going to take some time and you're not willing or ready to give a timeline yet on when those recommendations will be considered, is sort of the clock ticking? Is it important to send a signal to those other countries who you'd like to see do more, that the United States has a clear plan and is ready to make a clear commitment?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's no doubt that the international community is looking at the

United States right now to determine what additional steps we can take to try to confront -- or help Europe confront this difficult challenge. And we've already got a strong track record in terms of the contribution that we've already made to this response, but we're certainly mindful of the urgency around increasing the resources and response that's necessary to confront this significant challenge.

Q Just a couple quick ones on the Iran vote. When did the President find out? What was his reaction?

MR. EARNEST: I did not have a chance to speak to him since the support of 41 senators was announced.

Q And understanding that the administration believes that this is obviously important for global security, on a historical perspective, what do you think the significance of this is for the President and his legacy?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I know the President himself has described this vote as the most important one since the vote to go into Iraq back in 2002, I believe; I believe that's when that vote occurred. And so this is obviously a significant policy for every member of the Congress to consider. And the President does believe that this is something that will make our country safer. He believes that it is something that will make our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, safer.

The President believes that this agreement is in the best interest of our partners in the region, particularly the Gulf Coast countries. This is something that the President discussed with the King of Saudi Arabia when he was here on Friday. So the President is obviously pleased that it looks like we will be able to implement this agreement moving forward, and he's pleased that that's clearly in the best interest of the United States.

What remains to be seen is if Iran will live up to the terms of the agreement. And we'll have a way to verify whether or not they've done that, and if they don't, they won't get any sanctions relief, and there will continue to be unanimity of opinion across the international community that Iran needs to be held accountable. That sense of unanimity was critical to our ability to reach this deal in the first place.

But preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon has long been identified by national security officials in both parties in this country as an important priority, and implementing this agreement will go a long way toward achieving that goal.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Carol.

Q I was going to ask you about Russia. Does the White House see Russia's buildup in Syria as an attempt to fortify President Assad? If not, then how do you guys view what Russia's intentions are here? And the President has spoken about new optimism that Russia may be looking for a resolution in Syria that would -- where Assad is no longer in power. So given that, how does this -- these latest events impact that view?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Carol, I think that's why we've indicated that the United States is concerned by reports that Russia may have deployed additional military personnel and aircraft to Syria, precisely because it's difficult to decipher their intentions. And that said, what we've indicated both publicly and privately is that the steps that we have detected and that have been publicly reported could further escalate the conflict. These steps could lead to greater loss of life. They could increase refugee flows and risk confrontation with the counter-ISIL coalition that's operating inside of Syria. This is all in the context of a Russian military buildup inside of Syria that could be used to support the Assad regime.

And we've made clear that it would be unconscionable for any party, including Russia, to provide any support to the Assad regime. The Assad regime has failed to confront ISIL, and the Assad regime has created an environment where ISIL has been able to establish a foothold. But we've also seen Assad actively carry out acts of violence against the Syrian people. And that's the source of our significant concern, and this is a concern that was relayed by Secretary Kerry to his Russian counterpart over the weekend.

Q Do you expect that the President would speak with President Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have -- I'm not aware of any meetings that are planned right now, but if that changes, we'll obviously let you all know.

Andrew.

Q Just to follow up on Russia. Has the United States urged NATO allies to deny Russian military over-flight rights?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for any steps like that, I'd refer you to the State Department. But what I can tell you is we've certainly made very clear to Russia our views. And we certainly have strongly encouraged them not to provide any kind of support, certainly not any kind of military support to the Assad regime, and that if they were to follow through and provide them that kind of support it can be both destabilizing and counterproductive to the interests of the international community.

Q Just a separate question on Iraq. Are you concerned that Turkish ground troops have entered Iraq?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there are some reports of Turkey taking strikes against PKK elements. What the United States has indicated is that it is important for Turkey and the PKK to return to their process of reaching a peaceful solution. And the United States obviously stands with our ally in Turkey, and we have welcomed their recent support for and more active engagement in the coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q You say you stand by your ally, Turkey. But what does that say about your ally, Iraq? I mean, is Iraq a sovereign country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our Turkish ally has a right to defend themselves. And again, it is our hope that Turkey and the PKK will get back to the process for finding a peaceful solution for those differences.

Let's see -- JC and then Christi. And then we'll call it a day.

Q To follow up on the last few questions, does this administration feel that Vladimir Putin is trying to get a stronghold -- a foothold in the Middle East -- going back to the Cold War, Khrushchev in Egypt? And what do you think is Putin's long-term goal in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, JC, at this point, it's difficult to determine exactly what their intentions are. That's why the reports that the Russians are deploying additional military personnel and aircraft to Syria are so concerning. The fact is that continuing to support the Assad regime is both destabilizing and counterproductive. And those are views that we've made quite clear to the Russian leadership, even by Secretary Kerry as recently as this weekend.

Q Do you think that Russia can be at all helpful in stemming the flow of refugees coming from Syria in any way?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, it's not clear that that's what they're doing. So we would certainly welcome Russia's constructive contribution to the counter-ISIL campaign. And we've made that clear to them as well, frankly. But right now, we continue to be concerned by these military movements. We've expressed those concerns directly to the Russian government, and we're going to continue to monitor the situation.

Christi, I give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. I wanted to ask you about the Pope's upcoming visit. Obviously he and the President share a couple of agenda items that are very timely for the President right now -- climate change and criminal justice reform. Do you feel like they're going to talk about those things? And do you expect that the Pope, here at that time, is helpful to advancing the President's agenda?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer that question a couple of ways. The first is that the goal of the Pope's visit to the United States is not to advance any political agenda, but rather to acknowledge the significant Catholic population inside the United States and the shared values of these two world leaders. And the President will have more to say on this when the Pope arrives, but that's what we're focused on. And that's why I think there's palpable excitement about the Pope's upcoming visit here in the White House and across the country.

The President has had the opportunity to meet with the Pope when he traveled to the Vatican a year or two ago, and the President certainly enjoyed that first meeting. And I also understand that this is the Pope's first visit to the United States, and I know that the American people are looking forward to giving him a very warm welcome into this country.

Q They obviously worked together to some degree at lower levels in both the President's operation and the Pope's on opening of relations with Cuba.

MR. EARNEST: Correct.

Q Do you think that they are collaborating in the same way on, say, some of these other issues?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I am confident that the President and the Pope will have an opportunity to talk about some political issues while they're here. And I'm pretty confident those conversations will take place in a private setting. But I'm certainly not aware of any other sort of in-depth consultations that are similar to those that were part of the, and critical to the success of the Cuba negotiations.

But, look, the United States and the Vatican do have a range of issues that we care about. And so, also at the same time, I also wouldn't rule out that some of those other policy conversations did take place at lower levels -- particularly things like climate change. We know that the Pope has spoken out pretty forcefully, and he obviously has significant influence around the globe and I think a lot of people -- not just in the United States but around the world -- took notice of his comments in this regard. And those are significant comments when you're talking about an upcoming set of negotiations in Paris at the end of this year, whereby -- or in which the President is hopeful that the global community will be able to take action together to cut carbon pollution and begin to take significant steps to fight climate change.

Q Can I just ask if you have any updates on the Keystone decision? Do you expect that that will come in September?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any updates on the timing for that. I would, as always, refer you to the State Department.

Thanks, everybody.

END

1:51 P.M EDT