

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/11/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all today. Finally Friday. I don't have anything at the top, so let's go straight to your questions.

Darlene, do you want to start?

Q Do you have any reaction to Speaker Boehner saying it's very possible that House Republicans could go to court against the administration to block the Iran deal?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, this is the continuation of the Tortilla Coast gambit that we discussed yesterday. Like many decisions that are made probably on a Tuesday night at Tortilla Coast, they seem like a great idea after a couple of margaritas, but when faced with the scrutiny of the light of day, they don't seem quite as realistic.

I would note this is the same location where Republicans cooked up the plan to shut down the government two years ago. So maybe for the next couple of weeks, hopefully they won't have any meetings at the Tortilla Coast.

Q Maybe Tortilla Coast should be shut down --

Q I think this conversation is insensitive to Mexican food. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Let me just say in general that we obviously are pleased to see that Congress has not succeeded in spoiling the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And there are -- as the international community moves forward with implementing this agreement, there will be some very serious steps that Iran will be required to take to significantly curtail their nuclear program before any sanctions relief is offered.

And I know that there has been some grumbling among those on Capitol Hill about the outcome, but it also seems worth reminding them that the process for considering this agreement in the Congress is actually a process that Congress themselves determined. So

you might say that Congress was given an opportunity to set the rules here, and this is the outcome that has occurred as a result of that process. And I haven't seen any specific -- I don't think that they've followed through in terms of filing court documents or anything.

And we obviously feel quite confident in our ability to move forward with the rest of the international community to implement this agreement. But that means the next steps will be Iran's in terms of reducing their nuclear stockpile, disconnecting the centrifuges, rendering harmless their heavy-water reactor in Arak, and the other steps that are required and codified in the agreement.

Q He said it was one of many options or possibilities that they're considering to stop the deal. Going to court is one of several possibilities.

To go back to yesterday and the discussion about refugees, you had said earlier in the week that the administration was reviewing a bunch of different approaches to help with the migrants who are streaming into Europe right now. When you said yesterday that the administration is planning to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next budget year, is that part of the review, or is that still going on? And is there something more to come from that?

MR. EARNEST: There continues to be an ongoing review among the President's national security team, principally at the State Department, to determine what additional steps the United States can take to help the rest of the international community as they confront this significant humanitarian crisis. For years, the United States has been playing a leading role in this response, and the United States is the largest donor to ongoing humanitarian relief efforts. We obviously would like to see other countries step up and contribute to that ongoing effort. These are countries in the region and around the world, including countries that have not traditionally felt an obligation to support these kinds of efforts.

But the announcement yesterday is obviously only one component of our response, but I do think should serve as an illustration to the American people but also to the rest of the international community that the United States is stepping up our efforts, and other countries need to as well.

Q What is the timeline for completing that review? Do you have any updated --

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any updated timeframe to share with you. This is obviously a process that is being carried out with a sense of urgency, because the situation as it relates to the basic humanitarian needs of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people is quite urgent.

Q And then finally, you've hesitated in the past when asked about this, but do you have any comment on a report today that the U.S. delegation is not going to stay at the Waldorf Astoria later this month?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a lot of information to share about this. Obviously there are a range of considerations that influence where the President will stay when he is not at the White House. Those considerations include everything from available space to cost and to security. And while I don't have the details on the specific arrangement that's in place for the President's trip to New York in a couple of weeks, I can confirm that report that the President will stay and the rest of the U.S. delegation will stay at the New York Palace Hotel.

Julia.

Q Thanks. I just have a few details I wanted to pin down about yesterday's announcement.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. I can try.

Q You said yesterday that it would be about a 12- to 18-month process for these refugees to go through security screening. But if the goal is to have 10,000 Syrian refugees settled in the next year, are there any plans to speed up that process?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple things about that. The 12- to 18-month window is the -- represents sort of the most efficient completion of that process; that oftentimes the process will even take longer, at a range of 18 to 24 months. And I focused yesterday in my discussions about the security considerations of these kinds of policy decisions, and I did that because the security considerations are the top priority and they get the most focus, but those are not the only factors in what is admittedly a rather drawn-out process.

So just to give you one other example, there are public health considerations about bringing refugees into the United States, and so we want to make sure that those refugees receive proper immunizations and those kinds of things. And that takes some time.

As it relates to how this -- well, two other things. One is, I also indicated yesterday that we would not take any shortcuts when it comes to our security. So there will be an effort to try to accelerate that process or move more people through that process, but it will not come at the expense of the robust security precautions that will remain in place. The last thing is, what I acknowledged yesterday is that there is a bit of a backlog, and so it may be that somebody who applies today, for example, may not be part of the 10,000 that would be admitted in the next fiscal year. But it certainly would show a stepped-up pace, and it does create some additional slots, additional opportunities for those who are in that backlog to be admitted next year.

Q And do you know -- so basically you're saying the 10,000 that you would be taking in, in the next year, are people who have already applied? There really aren't any slots open for new applications because those people -- it could be as long as two years before they ever come here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, surely there are new slots for applications. It's not clear to me, however, that anybody would be able to make their way through this process before the end of the next fiscal year if they're just applying today, for example.

Q And then yesterday it was a little unclear whether or not the overall cap on refugees taken around the world would increase. Do you have any updated details on that, or is there a sliding around within the cap that you would have existing?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have additional information to share with you about the overall cap. There has been a policy process that's been underway that predates this most recent crisis about increasing that cap. But obviously there are some new factors that may influence exactly what that cap -- where that cap is set.

So this is part of the ongoing process that Darlene referred to earlier that is being carefully considered by the President's national security team, including officials over at the State Department who are responsible for administering the refugee program.

Michelle.

Q Thanks, Josh. It's kind of interesting -- today on September 11th, with the President about to speak to servicemembers, there are these reports that have been kind of building about the quality of intel that the President has been getting on the fight against ISIS. Isn't the President deeply concerned about that? And just yesterday you said that he does have confidence in the intel that he's getting, but isn't this exactly the kind of thing that would lead someone to question their confidence in that intel?

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, the President relies on intelligence, as does the rest of his national security team, for making very difficult policy decisions that have significant consequences for our national security. So the President relies a great deal on the intelligence that's provided by the intelligence community. He has great admiration for those in our intelligence community, and in some cases there are individuals who are taking great risks to obtain information that could be useful to the President of the United States and his team.

So there is an ongoing inspector general investigation, and so I'm reluctant to say very much about this specific case because of that investigation. But I can tell you that as a general matter, the President does have confidence in the members of the intelligence community that take very seriously the responsibility that they have to make sure that the President and his team have access to the most and best information available so that they can make the best possible decisions about the national security of the United States.

Q So I understand he does have confidence generally, but does he not have some concern about the reports that are out there or even the fact that there is an investigation that's going on? So that's not speaking about the investigation, it just -- I mean, we can talk about his confidence; can't we also talk about his concerns?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, this is a matter that continues to be under investigation. And rather than worry about what the outcome of that investigation might be, we'll allow that independent investigation to run its course.

I guess the last thing I will say is that the intelligence community is very well aware of the high standards that this President has set in his desire to understand exactly what's happening, even if that means the intelligence community may have to share with the President some bad news; that I think in a variety of areas, the President has been quite clear about his insistence that here in the United States, that we're going to confront our challenges head-on and we're not going to bury our head in the sand, and we're not going to be looking for best-case scenarios. We're not looking for hopeful outcomes here -- or we're not sort of hoping for the best.

The President would prefer a cold-eyed assessment of what's exactly happening so that we can make the best possible decisions. And one example that I can think of is the case of Dr. Weinstein. This was a situation where we talked earlier this year about an American hostage who was being held in the Afghanistan-Pakistan area who was killed in a counterterrorism operation. And the President took the extraordinary step of insisting that information about that operation be declassified so that the American public and people around the world could understand exactly what happened, and so the United States and the President himself could take responsibility for the consequences of that operation.

And I think that reflects the President's not just desire but his commitment to understanding what the facts on the ground are, and making decisions accordingly.

Q Well, it's interesting that you bring that up because the family of Weinstein is upset about possible information that the CIA could have had before this happened, and they put out a statement that was pretty lengthy yesterday. Do you have anything to say in response to that?

MR. EARNEST: There's not much that I can say about that. What I can say is that the President -- as I just said, the President was quite clear about taking personal responsibility for the consequences -- the tragic consequences, in fact -- of that counterterrorism operation.

The President has directed his national security team to expend significant time and resources to try to safely recover and rescue American citizens that are being held against their will around the globe. And there are significant resources and individuals who put themselves at great risk to try to secure the safe return of Americans who are being held hostage. And we announced earlier this summer a broader review of our hostage policy, and that included improved integration of the intelligence community into that policymaking process to ensure both that those who are responsible for recovering those American citizens are operating with the most current and up-to-date and accurate intelligence information, but also so that that up-to-date intelligence information can, when appropriate, be shared with the families of those who are being held overseas.

So we have acknowledged that there is an important role for the intelligence community to play in recovering and rescuing American hostages. And the President is serious about making sure that those tremendous capabilities are properly integrated into his government strategy for saving them.

Q Does the President believe that the coalition is winning the war against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's no denying that we've made a lot of important progress against ISIL over the last year or so. I had our team pull some relevant statistics here that illustrate the progress that's been made. I'll just go through a few of them -- and there are more that we can share if it strikes you as interesting.

The fact is, in Iraq, ISIL has lost the freedom to operate in some 30 percent of the populated territory that they held one year ago. Right now, there are Iraqi F-16s that are carrying out airstrikes against ISIL targets in Iraq. That reflects the strengthening security relationship between the United States and Iraq as they confront the threat that is posed by ISIL.

Inside of Syria, ISIL has lost more than 17,000 square kilometers of territory in northern Syria, and are now cut off from all but 68 miles of the nearly 600-mile-long border between Syria and Turkey. The U.S.-led coalition against ISIL has now hit more than 6,700 targets. That includes thousands of fighters in fighting positions. And just about a month or so ago, there was an announcement that the United States had carried out an airstrike that removed Haji Mutazz from the battlefield. The significance of that is that Haji Mutazz was the second in command of ISIL, and that is a pretty clear illustration that even the senior-most members of this organization are under some intense pressure by our ISIL campaign.

So, ultimately, we have made important progress to degrade and destroy ISIL. There's also no denying what the President has said several times now, which is that there will be periods of progress and periods of setback in this campaign. And that's a part of any military operation like this. But obviously taking a look at some of the facts on the ground, there's no denying the important progress that's been made in the last year.

Bob.

Q Hey, Josh. Theoretically and in all likelihood, a week from today the Iran nuclear agreement will be implemented as far as the United States is concerned. What happens, at least as far as the White House is concerned, as far as the President is concerned, after that? How often does he get updated, et cetera? I know this is a lot of speculation, I realize that, but often will he be updated about whether they're complying, et cetera?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll just say as a general matter, Bob, that there will be intense focus on the implementation of this agreement, and this is I think for good reason. This is obviously something that the President and his team have worked on quite extensively over the last couple of years. A lot of time has been spent on the details of this arrangement. They spent several months earlier this year, even once the broad outlines of the agreement were reached, on locking down the details. So that should give you a good sense that there's keen interest in the follow-through.

And the United States, our international partners, and the experts at the IAEA will all be closely watching Iran to verify that they've taken the steps that they're required to take before they receive any sort of sanctions relief, but also in the months after that to verify

their ongoing compliance with the agreement. That will be a very high priority around here.

Q Will he likely be conferring with the other leaders of the +5?

MR. EARNEST: I certainly wouldn't rule that out, but I don't have any meetings to announce at this point.

Jon.

Q On the issue of the Russian troops in Syria, what's the U.S. plan to deal with them? Is there going to be coordination with them now that the reality is you've got Russians on the ground? How is the administration going to approach that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, we're obviously watching these developments quite closely. Secretary Kerry has spoken to Foreign Minister Lavrov a couple of times just this week to discuss this exact issue. The United States has made clear that our priority is on a political transition in Syria, and we believe that that is the root of so many problems that have sprung from this crisis -- whether that is the growth of ISIL or this significant humanitarian crisis that's occurred. And any efforts that anybody would take, including the Russians, to offer material support to the Assad regime would be counterproductive for that reason.

So at the same time, we would welcome constructive Russian contributions to our anti-ISIL campaign. There are more than 60 countries who are participating in that effort, and we would welcome constructive Russian support for those efforts.

Q So can you see the potential for a constructive Russian contribution with Russian military personnel on the ground in Syria -- those that are there now? They could be supporting the Assad regime. They could also be -- could they be coordinating with the U.S.-led effort against ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: I think we've acknowledged for some time that the true intentions of the Russians as it relates to this military deployment are unclear. So at this point, it's hard to tell exactly what they're planning to do, but we've I think tried to make clear what we would like to see them do, but ultimately they'll have to decide.

Q And just one other. The Vice President had obviously a very emotional interview last night on the Stephen Colbert show. Did the President get a chance to see that by any chance, do you know?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to the President about that today so I don't know if he has seen it. There obviously has been a lot of coverage of that interview, and I would anticipate the President has seen at least the coverage of the interview.

Q Josh, did you see any of it?

MR. EARNEST: I did not see it. It aired past my bedtime. (Laughter.)

Q Back on Iran. The White House called the fact that this deal is moving through the Hill a victory for diplomacy. But we're months away from any kind of implementation. Nothing has actually been implemented and won't be for months and months. So isn't it too early to call it a victory?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the reason that that language was chosen is that there was significant concern that we expressed quite candidly that Congress's success in killing this deal would put diplomacy at great risk and put the United States in a position where a military confrontation in the Middle East, another one, was much more likely. And because this deal was not killed by Congress, that is a victory for diplomacy and we are now going to give diplomacy the opportunity to succeed in advancing our interests.

And it is in the interest of the United States, it's in the interest of the members of the P5+1, it's in the interest of our partners in the Gulf, it's in the interest of our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, for Iran not to obtain a nuclear weapon. And that's what we're pursuing, and the President believes this is the best way for us to pursue those interests and we're pleased that the Congress did not succeed in spoiling that agreement.

Q But Iran's own parliament still hasn't voted on this. I mean, there is still political risk here.

MR. EARNEST: There's no denying that there are many, many, many important steps ahead. Surely ensuring that Iran both politically and technically begins to move forward with implementing the agreement is, as you point out, no small consideration. In fact, it's something that we're going to be watching very closely.

Q The Supreme Leader -- I want to ask you about some of his comments, because he has said that they want sanctions fully, completely removed, which is something that the President would need Congress's help to do. Is he trying to renegotiate this deal?

MR. EARNEST: Let me be clear. The President himself has not suggested that he supports removing all of the sanctions. So that's one. The second thing is that we have heard a variety of comments from a variety of leaders in Iran. And what we have indicated is that we are quite intensely focused on their actions, and that in earlier stages of this process that included their actions at the negotiating table. But now that we are getting closer to the implementation of this agreement, we will be able to closely watch their actions when it comes to actually following through on the commitments that they made in those negotiations, and that is the way that we will -- that's what we are most focused on.

Q But there's an implied threat within that of pulling out.

MR. EARNEST: I mean, I guess you could say that much of the rhetoric that we've seen from Republicans in the last several months would also include an implied threat of pulling out of the agreement. But it does look like the United States --

Q It's the Supreme Leader, and he runs the country.

MR. EARNEST: Sure. But again, there are lots -- when we're talking about Iran, there are lots of implied threats. And what we are focused on are Iran's actions. And we will take very seriously and ensure that Iran takes very seriously the responsibility that they have to follow through on the commitments that they've made in the agreement.

Q And one last one on that. Do you have any expectation that the President would meet with President Rouhani when they are in New York?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, the President's schedule for the U.N. General Assembly is not settled, but as we get some more details about his schedule when he's in New York, we'll let you know.

James.

Q Josh, a few on Iran and then a few on ISIS, if you don't mind. First, I know as we approach implementation of the Iran deal that you don't want to be engaged in the business of pre-judging how it's going to go, and in fact, that all the codicils built into the thing are aimed at verification and not having simply to rely on trust. But I do wonder if the experience that the U.S. and the P5+1 had dealing with Iran over the course of the negotiations themselves -- which went on for some two years -- produce in this administration some modest optimism about how it's going to go. Or, to the contrary, are you expecting there to be a lot of disputes, a lot of problems with Iran?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, James, it's notable that Iran was actually willing to come to the negotiating table and negotiate in a serious way; that there had been previous diplomatic overtures that made pretty clear that Iran wasn't all that serious about entering into serious negotiations with the international community, and this time was different.

So that might be a -- produce, like, a small ray of optimism about the likelihood that they will follow through with the commitments that they made in the agreement. However, whether there's optimism or not, we'll be focused on independent verification by the IAEA, and we've talked about how rigorous those verification measures are.

Q President Bush, after 9/11, famously labeled Iran a member of an "axis of evil" in the modern world. Today, we have a President of the United States who touts as a great diplomatic victory his implementation of a policy which he himself publicly admits may well, as a matter of its own structure, produce a situation in which sanctions relief money for Iran is being used by Iran for terrorism. Can you understand why Americans who lived through 9/11 might find it mind-boggling that we would have a President who would tout as a victory an agreement which would steer money directly to terrorist activities?

MR. EARNEST: James, the reason the President has described this as a victory is that this is an agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And if there are those who have concluded that they think that Iran has evil intentions, then they should be welcoming this agreement that many experts have concluded actually is the best way for us to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And that's been the President's priority.

At the same time, this administration has been quite serious and engaged in a range of consultations with both our Gulf allies, as well as Israel, about what we can do to ramp up our cooperation as we counter the variety of nefarious activities that Iran engages in in the region and around the world. And there will continue to be significant sanctions in place on Iran and senior officials in Iran precisely because of their destabilizing activities and their support for terrorism.

So this is a -- our concerns about Iran's support for terrorism have not waned. And our determination to confront -- to work with the international community to try to confront Iran's support for terrorism has only ramped up in recent months and years.

Q On the ISIS intelligence issue, you just told us that the President has confidence in his intelligence services. Should we construe that to be synonymous with you telling us the President has confidence in all of the intelligence he's received on ISIS, say, over the last six months?

MR. EARNEST: Well, James, this is something that the inspector general is taking a look at. And, as I mentioned, the President obviously has great respect for the men and women in our intelligence services. He has made clear to them how important the materials that they produce and the intelligence that they yield is to our country and to the decision-making that his team is engaged in.

Q So to recap here, when I ask if he has had confidence in the caliber of the intelligence he's received on ISIS over the last six months and you tell me that's a matter of investigation, that you are declining an opportunity to say he did have confidence in that intelligence.

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'm declining to do is to interfere in an ongoing independent investigation. I think that the President is interested in making sure he's got the best and most accurate information about what's exactly happening on the ground. And he's made that clear to the men and women in the intelligence community, and he's got confidence in their ability deliver, but there's an ongoing investigation to check that out.

Q Last question. When my colleague earlier asked you in this briefing whether the coalition is winning the conflict against ISIS, you trotted out a series of statistics. I think we all remember from the tenure of Robert McNamara onward that statistics in the context of military conflicts can tell a false story, or not the whole story. So I'm going to give you an opportunity again to answer the question without reference to statistics. Are we winning the war against ISIS, or not?

MR. EARNEST: James, there's no denying that we've made important progress, and I think the statistics that I laid out before substantiate the progress that we've made. At the same time, we've sustained setbacks consistent with the President's admonition at the very beginning of this effort that there would be periods of progress and periods of setback. And we've surely sustained both.

What has not changed, however, is the President's determination to continue to work and lead this international coalition of some 60 countries to carry out a strategy that would degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q So we're making progress, but you don't feel comfortable saying "we're winning"?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's an assessment that the Department of Defense could share with you. And there is --

Q He's the Commander-in-Chief and you speak for him.

MR. EARNEST: There's an understandable tendency to want to do a little play-by-play of a military conflict. And I think what is clear is that important progress has been made, but there is a tremendous amount of work that remains to be done to succeed in our ultimate goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

Chris.

Q Let me ask that question in another way, if I can, Josh, which is that -- in part because of the anniversary, a lot of military and intelligence analysts have been talking about al Qaeda versus ISIS, and a couple of facts that they point to about ISIS is that they've had much more success in self-funding and much more success at recruitment in part because of social media than al Qaeda ever did. Does this administration consider ISIS, at this point in time, to be more dangerous than al Qaeda ever was? And I'll ask you the question that I think has been asked on every anniversary since 9/11: Are we safer?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the answer to your last question is, yes, we are. And that is a testament to the service, professionalism, and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform, our men and women in law enforcement, the men and women of our intelligence community, and the important steps that our country has taken under both administrations to safeguard the homeland. And there's no question about that.

At the same time, there continue to be risks and threats to the United States. And under the leadership of this President, this administration has worked effectively with the international community to confront shared threats. The ISIL situation is a good example. There is a coalition of more than 60 countries that is led by the United States that is applying significant pressure to ISIL -- both to ISIL fighters who have sustained more than 6,700 airstrikes, but also to the ISIL leadership, including to the second in command in ISIL who was taken off the battlefield just last month as a result of a U.S. airstrike.

Now, the beginning of your question also illustrated something else that often gets lost in this debate, and that is that our military efforts are significant and important, but they're not the only important aspect of our strategy. We have worked effectively with our coalition partners to try to shut off the illicit financing that does fund so much of ISIL's terrorism. We have worked hard with other members of the coalition to counter the efforts that ISIL has engaged in using social media to radicalize foreign fighters and

others around the globe who might be supportive of their cause. And I think even in those efforts you could describe that strategy as making important progress but also sustaining some setback as well.

But it is important -- and I'm glad that you raised it -- it is important for people to understand that this is not just a military strategy, that there's a counter-finance strategy, that there is an effort to prevent, or at least counter ISIL's strategy in cyberspace to recruit foreign fighters or inspire others or radicalize others to carry out acts of violence. So this is a coordinated effort and one that we remain committed to.

Q So do you disagree with the statement that ISIS is more dangerous than al Qaeda ever was?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm sure there might some people with interesting opinions on this. I think what's clear is that they both pose very different threats. I think there is reason to be skeptical that ISIL has the same intent and capacity that al Qaeda had to carry out a large-scale attack against the U.S. homeland on the scale of the one that was perpetrated against this country 14 years ago today. But that is not to diminish the significant threat that ISIL clearly does pose to the United States and to other countries around the world. And it's why I think that we have been effective in enlisting some 60 other countries, including some other countries in the region who are not traditional allies of the United States necessarily, but in many cases have been good partners with us, to join us in this effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q Let me just ask you one question about the Iran vote, because earlier this week, when Hillary Clinton gave her foreign policy speech, she was very pointed about her willingness to take military action should Iran pose a nuclear threat. But she also said that as President she would very quickly invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House. In fact, she said she would do it in her first month in office, which obviously points out what had been a growing chasm that some might argue really started to grow when he came here to speak before Congress. And I wonder, have there been any discussions with the President or his foreign policy team, State Department team about how to move forward in that relationship and what comes next.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, the President has had the opportunity to speak with Prime Minister Netanyahu on several occasions since that speech earlier this year, certainly since that speech was announced back in January.

Q But not since the vote passed?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that they've spoken since the vote. There is an ongoing effort right now to arrange a meeting between the President and Prime Minister Netanyahu, and I would anticipate that we'll have a date set shortly, but I think you can look for Prime Minister Netanyahu to visit the White House sometime in early November to meet with the President. And once we have that date locked down, we'll obviously let all of you know.

The other thing that we have often said is that there's probably no world leader with whom the President has spent more time interacting and talking and meeting with than Prime Minister Netanyahu. And I haven't checked the latest sort of stopwatch tally, but I think that statistic is probably still true. That is, in one part, a testament to the length of the conversations that they have when they have them, but also is a testament to the depth of the security relationship between our two countries, and the depth of this President's commitment to strengthening that security relationship.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has himself observed that the security relationship and security cooperation between the United States and Israel under President Obama's leadership is unprecedented. And the President has indicated on a number of occasions his desire to begin consultations with our Israeli allies about how to further deepen that cooperation. And we're looking forward to doing that.

Q That raises the question -- how much of this decision to I guess put forth this invitation and arrange this meeting is about the checklist that always exists, frankly, between leaders in that part of the world and the United States, and how much of it is rebuilding that relationship?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Chris, it's an indication that despite our well-known differences on even some key issues, the bond between the United States and Israel when it comes to our security relationship is unshakeable. And the President has spoken at length about why that is. Certainly some if it has to do with the common values between our two countries. It certainly has to do with the important people-to-people relationships that exist between the citizens of our two countries. It also goes to our shared strategic interests around the world.

And again, it probably is hard to -- at least off the top of my head here -- I can't think of another situation over the last six and a half years of this presidency where there has been an ally of the United States with whom we've had such a vigorous and public disagreement. But the fact that the leaders of these two countries can come together and have a conversation and have actually an in-person meeting I think reflects the commitment of both of the -- the leaders of both those countries to the strength of this relationship. And I think it also is an indication of how the President believes the future of the relationship between the U.S. and Israel is so critically important.

And the President believes that that future is something worth talking about and investing in. And I'm sure that will be part of the discussions that he'll have with the Prime Minister later this year. But we'll have more that we can say about the substance of that meeting when it gets a little closer.

Mark.

Q Josh, will NSA personnel be part of the Fort Meade event today, or just military?

MR. EARNEST: We'll get you some more details about the President's activities there. At Fort Meade, his public event will essentially be an online town hall, if you will, with U.S. servicemembers serving around the world. And at Fort Meade, they have something that

is called the Defense Media Activity, and essentially is a studio that is capable of housing an audience -- an in-person audience as well as using the Internet, live-video streaming and social media feeds to bring in an audience around the world.

And there will be servicemembers -- U.S. servicemembers who are stationed in places as far away as Europe, Afghanistan and Asia who will be participating in today's event. I believe that there are even some servicemembers who are in the United States Navy who will be onboard ships participating in this event.

And so it is because of the unique capabilities that are present at Fort Meade that the President will be traveling to Fort Meade to meet with and interact with our men and women in uniform. And again, there's probably no better day than a day like today for the Commander-in-Chief to spend some time with our men and women in uniform.

While the President is at Fort Meade, after this event, the President will also have an opportunity to stop by some of the NSA offices and greet the staff there, and thank them for their service to the country, as well.

Q Coverage of that?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that because of the sensitive equipment and sensitive environment at the NSA, that media coverage will not be possible. But we do have some staff traveling and we'll see if we can get you some details about the time the President spends with NSA employees today, as well.

John.

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to follow up with what you were talking about a little bit earlier about the progress that you say ISIS has not made against the U.S. over the course of the past year. The first statistic, if I'm not mistaken, that you spoke of was that they no longer control 30 percent of the territory that they controlled one year ago. Is that correct? Did I get that number right?

MR. EARNEST: You got the number right, but we've described it as they've lost the freedom to operate. And so I think what this is, is that this may be an area that maybe they didn't previously control, but at least they were able to freely operate there. And it may not be a situation that we control it now, but it certainly means that they are no longer free to operate.

Q In Iraq.

MR. EARNEST: In Iraq, yes.

Q So does that mean that they are still free to operate in 70 percent of the territory that they controlled one year ago?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. I mean, I'm no math major, but I think that's probably right.

Q Has ISIS gained new territory in the past year?

MR. EARNEST: I believe what this is, is this is sort of -- this reflects like a summation of that. We've acknowledged that there's been a back and forth. There have been some areas where we've been able to make progress, some areas where we sustained setback. But if you sort of take a look at the overall, even given the back-and-forth that is part of any military conflict, that that area that they previously had freely operated in is now 30 percent smaller.

Q And looking at just the big picture, can you say whether ISIS has had any difficulty in recruiting new fighters over the course of the past year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a hard thing to assess. I think that there are clearly efforts that we have made online and our partners have made online to try to counter their recruitment efforts. And while we are pleased with those efforts because that's an important area for us to focus on, there's obviously a lot more that can and should be done to make that effort more effective.

So I think that there's -- it's easy to see the evidence of our efforts to counter them, but there clearly is more important work that needs to be done in this area as well.

Q I want to just ask you one question on a completely different subject. You touched upon it just a little bit earlier -- that's about the Vice President. I have no doubt that he has the support of 100 percent of the people here at the White House as it relates to the grief that both he and his family are going through with the loss of his son back in May. I'm just curious, could you give a sense about the support that the Vice President has amongst the staffers here in terms of the possibility of him running for President? You say that there are folks here that would like to see that happen, that are encouraging the Vice President to make such a move? Give me your sense about what you sense is happening right here at the White House.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard for me to assess the personal political preferences of everybody that works at the White House. I wouldn't be surprised, if the Vice President were to decide to get in the race, that there would be some people who would ultimately vote for him. But because the people who work here are very much focused on serving this President and very much focused on the task of governing that they have before them, that that's where their attention is focused. But, look, I don't have any special insight into who everybody around here is going to vote for; I would anticipate that most people around here will vote in the Democratic Primary. But again, I'm sure each of the candidates has some level of support here at the White House.

Q You were intimately involved in the race back in 2008 when Vice President Biden was named to the ticket. You worked closely with not only the President -- Senator Obama at the time -- but also then-Senator Biden. Give me a sense about what strengths he brings if he were to make a run for the White House. What does he bring to the table as a candidate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let you guys handicap what kind of presidential candidate he would be. But what I will say is that in the 2008 race, I think there was no denying the effectiveness that Senator Biden demonstrated on the stump. He's a tireless campaigner, and that was even on display for those of you who covered him in Pittsburgh over the Labor Day weekend; that he is somebody who relishes the opportunity to do some grassroots politics. And that made him an enormous asset to our campaign in 2008.

In 2008, then-Senator Biden also brought extensive international experience. He is somebody who had served as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, somebody who had established relationships with world leaders all across the globe. And in his role as Vice President, he has been able to use that experience and capitalize on those relationships to advance the interests of our country in a very meaningful way. And there's no denying that that is an important part of his experience and made him a real asset to our ticket in 2008.

Q You're handicapping.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let you all decide whether or not any of that stuff would come in handy this time around. (Laughter.)

Tamara.

Q Congresswoman Mia Love tweeted out a picture of the Twin Towers and said that the Iran deal would fund terrorism. She's not the only person today to invoke 9/11 as the House considers measures related to the Iran deal. What is your reaction?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't see the actual tweet. I'll just say in general that the President has been quite clear about his -- about the priority that he has placed on deepening our security cooperation with our Gulf allies and with our allies in Israel to do even more to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the region and Iran's support for terrorism. That's something that the President takes very seriously, and in fact, that's one of the reasons that the President has chosen to pursue this diplomatic agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. We don't want to allow a state sponsor of terrorism to get access to a nuclear weapon, and that's why the President made this such a priority. But it certainly has not come at the expense of our desire to limit Iran's support or counter Iran's support for terrorist activities around the world.

Q The House has just completed voting on its -- it was the one to support the Iran deal that was designed to fail but of course has failed --

MR. EARNEST: It made a whole lot more sense Tuesday night at Tortilla Coast, Tamara. (Laughter.)

Q Are you an investor in Tortilla Coast? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: They're going to have to cut me in after all this, aren't they?

Q The Speaker said that that was really an accountability vote. And Mitch McConnell has talked about this being an issue in 2016. Do the President and Democrats own this thing and is that something that carries political risks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as it relates to this notion of accountability, I think that those members -- I think that we saw many members of Congress spend a significant amount of time evaluating the agreement, trying to understand all of the details, the consequences for American national security, the exact commitments that Iran was making to curtail their nuclear program. I think that's an indication that they took this vote very seriously. It has significant implications for our national security, and I think they all understood that regardless of which way they voted, that they would be held accountable for it.

Unfortunately, we saw a number of members of Congress actually announce their opposition to the agreement before the deal was even reached. And I think that's an indication that those members of Congress didn't take this situation as seriously as they should have.

Q Do you think this will be a campaign issue?

MR. EARNEST: Hard to say, but we'll certainly find out. If it is, I think there will be a number of Democrats making a very strong case for supporting the most effective strategy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Julie.

Q Thanks. Just back on Syria for a moment. When you've responded to the refugee crisis and others in the administration have, you all talk about the responsibility that Assad has to bear for this and the fact that the long-term challenges to bring stability there. The President said four years ago that Assad should go. So I wonder, as he has watched this crisis unfold and become more urgent in the last few weeks with the refugees, has it caused him to rethink at all any of the actions he did or did not take to try to resolve the crisis in Syria? And how do you respond to those who would say that what we're seeing now with the refugees is in some ways an indictment of his strategy for dealing with the problems there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly have seen that claim made by some of the President's political opponents. And what many of them have suggested is that greater U.S. military intervention in Syria should have been pursued.

But I think that raises two fundamental questions. The first is, the President I think has made a pretty persuasive case about why he doesn't believe that another ground war in the Middle East is in our interest. And I'd be curious to hear somebody make the case about how they believe a widespread ground war involving U.S. servicemembers in Syria would have alleviated the violence in Syria, or certainly alleviated the need for innocent people to try to escape that violence and not get caught in the crossfire.

So again, ramping up our commitment of servicemembers on the ground in Syria, in the mind of the President, is not in the best interest of our national security, and doesn't logically explain how that would prevent a refugee crisis.

Q But are there no other options that he could explore? I mean, doesn't this cause for a wholesale rethinking of what you're doing there to try to bring about the political transition that you've talked about?

MR. EARNEST: If there are other options, I haven't heard them from our critics. But you've heard me say on many occasions that the President is constantly pressing his national security team to evaluate what kind of results our strategy has yielded thus far, and to pursue ideas and options for investing more in those elements of our strategy that appear to be bearing fruit, or backing off some elements of the strategy that don't appear to be working as well as we'd hoped.

And there's always this give-and-take in a policymaking process, particularly one like this that thus far has not yielded the kind of results that we'd like to see. We do believe that President Assad has lost legitimacy to lead in Syria. And we do believe that the ability of ISIL to establish a safe haven inside of Syria is a consequence of Assad's failed leadership. We do believe that the significant humanitarian and refugee problem that we see emanating from Syria is a consequence of Assad's failed leadership, and that we could address those problems in the context of a political transition inside Syria.

And the United States has been a leading advocate of the U.N.-led process to try to facilitate that transition, but unfortunately that transition has not occurred. And those negotiations have been very difficult to make them constructive.

But just because the problem is difficult to solve doesn't mean that we have somehow shifted our attention from it. At every turn we're mindful of the fact that the situation is only going to be something close to resolved once the political crisis inside of Syria has been resolved.

Q Do you feel that -- or does the administration feel that the Russians built up now in Syria offers an opportunity to ramp up your efforts to bring about that kind of transition? Or does it instead make that more difficult?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, it's unclear exactly what Russia's intentions are. And we've made clear to them what we would like them to do, but ultimately we'll have to see what path they take. We've said that additional support for the Assad regime, for many of the reasons that I just laid out, would be destabilizing and counterproductive, but that we would certainly welcome Russia's constructive engagement in the strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q Just back on the Waldorf Astoria question for one moment. You mentioned various concerns -- or various factors that go into deciding where the President stays. Was one of the factors here a concern that the Chinese might surveil or otherwise try to spy on the American delegation while they were at the Chinese-owned Waldorf Astoria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, I'm not at liberty to detail the security considerations that may or may not have factored into this particular decision.

Lesley.

Q Thanks, Josh. Cuba said, I guess yesterday or today, it's going to release prisoners ahead of the Pope's visit. Has the White House had any talk with the Holy See on that? Are you disappointed at all that it doesn't include any political prisoners?

MR. EARNEST: I hadn't seen that announcement, Lesley, today, so let me see if I can have somebody follow up with you on for a reaction.

Juan Carlos.

Q Yes, on Venezuela. Reaction to a 13-year sentence handed down to opposition leader Leopoldo López, and the calls from Congress for additional sanctions on the Venezuelan government to that sentence?

MR. EARNEST: Juan Carlos, the United States is deeply concerned that Leopoldo López has been convicted and sentenced to 13 years and 9 months in prison on a range of politically motivated charges. Venezuela's problems cannot be solved by criminalizing dissent. We call on the government of Venezuela to release Mr. López and all political prisoners that it has unjustly detained.

We have consistently called on the Venezuelan government to improve the climate of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. These are essential to a functioning democracy, and the Venezuelan government has an obligation to protect these fundamental freedoms. The only way to solve Venezuela's problems is through real dialogues, not detaining political opponents and attempting to silence critics.

Q Anything on calls from Congress, members -- asking for additional sanctions on the Venezuelan government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, earlier this year, the Obama administration did impose sanctions on some leaders in the Venezuelan government because of their terrible human rights record. I think based on the reaction that we saw from Venezuela to that announcement, those sanctions have succeeded in applying some pressure to the leaders of that country, and we'll certainly consider a range of options as we work with other countries in the Western Hemisphere to apply pressure to the Venezuelan government and to make clear that other countries in this hemisphere prioritize not just the respect for, but even the protection of the basic human rights of law-abiding citizens.

Jared.

Q Josh, we always talk about the legacy of 9/11 on the anniversary. In the context of this Syrian refugee situation, we used to see in major humanitarian crises like these a giant spike in what the United States would accept in terms of refugees -- hundreds of

thousands in certain circumstances. That's not really what's being discussed in this situation. And I wonder if part of the legacy, part of the unfortunate legacy of this anniversary is that those kinds of options are no longer available to the United States.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jared, I think as we discussed a little bit yesterday, I don't think there's anybody who contemplates a situation in which the solution is just bringing every Syrian who's fleeing violence to the United States. I'm not sure that's what those Syrians want. My guess is the vast majority of them would not want that because they would prefer to remain in the region or even in their own country, close to family but also in a position so that they could return home as soon as possible once the situation has eased.

So that's why we've made clear that the most effective response to this urgent situation is actually trying to provide for the basic humanitarian needs of those who have had to flee their homes. And the United States has been the largest donor of that humanitarian assistance, and we're going to continue to encourage countries around the world to support that ongoing humanitarian effort.

Q Do the security measures put in place, again, in the legacy of this anniversary, limit us? Does it limit the dexterity of the United States response to humanitarian crises like this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our top priority is the safety and security of the American people and the U.S. homeland. And that certainly has been taken into account as we've made this policy decision, and it will be as we make these decisions moving forward. That said, the humanitarian response that you've seen from the United States is indicative of the values of this country in recognizing the humanity of these innocent people who have fled a terrible situation and now find themselves in a rather desperate situation. And that's why the response that you've seen from the United States is consistent with those values but also consistent with the need to protect the safety and security of the American people.

Q So again, comparing to historical examples, does the security from 9/11 change or limit substantially the kind of response that's available to the United States?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, the most effective response to this urgent crisis by the United States or anybody else is supporting the ongoing humanitarian efforts in that region of the world. And the United States has been the leading donor of that humanitarian assistance, and I would actually say that one of the legacies of 9/11 is understanding that standing up for our values as a country and walking the walk when it comes to our values and the policies of this country is important. And that fact that the United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to this effort I think is an indication that that's exactly what the President has done in pursuing this policy.

Toluse, I'll give you the last one, and then we'll do the week ahead.

Q Thanks. Just to go back to the question of whether we're winning against ISIS, Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said yesterday that we're, "tactically stalemated" in the fight right now. And I'm wondering -- I mean, you've given the 30

percent number, and some of the stats that we heard today we've heard a couple months ago. So I'm wonder if right now, over the last few months, do you agree with the statement that we're tactically stalemated, or if you do think we are making progress?

MR. EARNEST: Well, General Dempsey can give you the best tactical assessment of the situation. I'm also aware that General Dempsey has noted that the long-term prospects for ISIL are not very good for ISIL, and that is a testament to our intensive strategy using military options, but also diplomacy, counter-financing, and others to degrade and ultimately destroy them. And that's the strategy that we've pursued, and the President has been pleased that we have been able to build and hold together a coalition of more than 60 countries to join us in this effort. And that's why we continue to be confident about our long-term success.

Q And you mentioned long-term. General Dempsey also said yesterday that the broader fight in this region is something that could take a decade or more. Is that something you all are willing to accept that this fight can take?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has said many times that this would have to be a long-term proposition, and it is going to require the sustained commitment and attention of the United States and policymakers in this country. It's received that thus far. And we're going to continue to make sure that we rely on and build up the capability of our 60-nation coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q And one really quickly on Israel and I guess a potential visit by the Prime Minister in November. You had said that -- you had said earlier that if once this Iran deal is secured, that the likelihood of getting a new defense treaty would increase, that you had made overtures to the Israeli government. I'm wondering if now that this has sort of gone through, you've gotten any response from the Israelis as to whether they'd be open to that.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I can just say in general that we do think that this meeting between the President and the Prime Minister and other meetings that will occur in the weeks and months ahead will include a discussion about deepening the security cooperation between the United States and Israel.

Let's do the week ahead, and then I'll let you get started on your weekends here.

On Monday, the President will travel to Des Moines, Iowa to join Secretary Duncan's sixth annual Back-to-School Bus Tour. The President and Secretary Duncan will host a town hall with high school juniors and seniors and their parents to discuss college access and affordability. Many of you probably have some pre-deployed assets that can be used to cover the President's trip to Des Moines.

On Tuesday, the President will welcome the 2015 NCAA Women's Basketball champion, Connecticut Huskies, to the White House to honor the team on winning their championship title. This visit will continue the tradition begun by President Obama of honoring sports teams for their efforts to give back to their communities.

In the afternoon, the President will host Their Majesties King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia of Spain at the White House. Their visit reinforces the strong and enduring ties between the American and Spanish people. The First Lady will also host the Queen for tea and a tour of the White House Kitchen Garden.

On Wednesday, the President will travel to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and visit with wounded servicemembers who are being treated at the hospital.

On Thursday, the President will attend a DSCC event here in the Washington, D.C. area.

On Friday, the President will attend meetings at the White House.

And next Saturday, the President will deliver remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's 45th Annual Legislative Conference Phoenix Awards Dinner right here in Washington, D.C. So with that, I wish you all a good weekend.

END

1:24 P.M. EDT