

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Charlotte, NC, 8/26/2014

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Aboard Air Force One

En Route Charlotte, North Carolina

10:44 A.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: This afternoon, as you know, the President will be addressing the National Convention of the American Legion, where he'll discuss keeping our commitment to America's veterans isn't just a policy priority, it's also a moral obligation. That's why the President, when he took office, dedicated additional resources to mental health care for veterans, benefits for those veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, and loans for those veterans and members of their families who are trying to get an education.

And in light of reports earlier this summer that highlighted the need for new management reforms to improve service delivery at the VA for our veterans, the administration acted quickly to implement them. But there is a lot more work to be done, some of which has already been announced just today. And as Secretary McDonald continues his work, he'll make sure that accountability is restored at the VA and that America has a VA that puts our veterans first.

So you'll hear a lot more from the President on this issue today, and I'd refer you to the factsheet that we put out earlier today for additional details on some of these proposals.

So with that, we'll go to your questions.

Q Josh, can you talk to us a little bit about surveillance over Syria, what the goals are? Does that suggest that there's some imminent military action by the U.S.? And has the U.S. consulted at all with the Assad regime over this surveillance?

MR. EARNEST: Let me start with a couple of things that I said yesterday. The first is, the President has not made any decisions at this point about any military operations in Syria. I'm not in a position to discuss the details -- the operational details of our nation's intelligence activities. As I also mentioned yesterday, there are teams of professionals at

the Pentagon who are responsible on a daily basis for reviewing and updating and putting together contingency plans for the President of the United States and the Commander-in-Chief.

This is work that the Pentagon does on a regular basis, and for details about those plans I'd refer you to the Pentagon. But it certainly isn't a surprise to anybody here that those plans are based on intelligence.

What we have also made clear that is the President, as a matter of policy, will not hesitate to use military force where necessary to protect Americans. We've been just as clear about our view that resolving the situation in Iraq, related to ISIL, is not something that can be done only using America's military might. Permanently restoring -- or at least restoring on a sustainable basis security to the nation of Iraq and to that region between Iraq and Syria will require the United States to use so many other tools in our arsenal. It will require an effective, inclusive Iraqi government that can unite that country to face the threat that's posed by ISIL. It will require the involvement of other governments in the region that have a blatantly obvious interest in this outcome. It will require the involvement of countries around the world, particularly our Western allies that also have an incentive to confront that threat that's posed by ISIL.

We talked also a little bit yesterday about the risk that's posed by foreign fighters, those individuals with Western passports that have traveled to that region and taken up arms alongside ISIL. We are concerned, and our allies are concerned, about the risk that is posed by those individuals returning to the West and carrying out violent actions in the West that could be aimed at Western targets.

So we've been clear about what our strategy is here, and it is a strategy that is focused on using all the elements of American power and influence to try to resolve this situation. That, of course, includes the military, but is not limited only to the military.

Q The Assad regime has said that any act over its territory would be considered a hostile act if they did not -- if they weren't notified. Can you categorically say the U.S. will not notify or consult or coordinate with the Assad regime on any action?

MR. EARNEST: As a matter of U.S. policy, we have not recognized the Assad regime as the leader of Syria. And there are no plans to change that policy, and there are no plans to coordinate with the Assad regime as we consider this terror threat.

Q Can you comment on the Egypt-UAE bombings in Libya?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen those reports. I'm not in a position to comment on those reports either. I would suggest that you check with the Egyptians and the Emiratis on those reports that cite their military involvement in Libya.

The thing that I will reiterate is that it is the view of the United States that an outside interference in the situation in Libya only exacerbates the tensions in that country and serves to undermine the democratic transition that the political leaders in that country are

trying to implement. But in terms of the specific reports of those military airstrikes, I'd refer you to the countries that are mentioned in those reports.

Q But is it fair to say that you would not welcome the participation of other nations in that conflict at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I can't talk about specific military actions that are reported or maybe being contemplated by other countries. But just as a general matter, it's our view that outside interference is counterproductive, because it exacerbates tensions that already exist in that country and undermines the democratic institutions -- admittedly fledgling democratic institutions, but democratic institutions nonetheless in that country.

Q Josh, I know that you're not going to say exclusively, but can you give us some idea of where the President is in thinking and the decision on airstrikes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Roger, as you know, the President has already ordered airstrikes that are underway in Iraq, that are aimed at a couple of specific goals; one is the protection of Americans in Iraq, and they were also deployed to avert a humanitarian disaster and a genocide there.

Q I'm talking about Syria.

MR. EARNEST: As it relates to Syria, the President hasn't made any decisions. And I'm not in a position to give you an update in terms of where the President's current thinking is on this, other than to point out that our strategy on this, for dealing with this situation, does not rely solely on the American military. I mean, the thing that's important to remember here is, at the risk of putting too fine a point on it, the previous administration tried relying only on our military. And sending 140,000 American servicemen and women to Iraq for a prolonged period of time had an impact on the security situation in Iraq -- there is no question about that -- for the positive.

But it was not -- it certainly was not the policy of the Bush administration or of the Obama administration to leave those American troops -- and there were hundreds of thousands of them, or more than a hundred thousand of them -- there permanently. And what we saw is that the Iraq's political leaders didn't seize the opportunity to capitalize on that stabilized security situation. And because of the failure of Iraq's political leadership, we saw that that country was very vulnerable to the influence and to the attacks of violent extremists.

And let me just go back to this, because this is important. That's why it's so important for us to build up effective partners in the region -- because for all of our efforts, they're only undermined if there aren't effective partners in the region and in these countries that can take responsibility for providing security for their own people. And that is why the President is so cognizant of this idea that we can't rely only on American military might. Of course, the American military has tremendous capabilities that can influence these kinds of situations. But for a sustainable solution we're going to need effective partners

both in the form of effective governments where these actions are taking place, but also the constructive contribution of other regional governments that have a clear interest and a vested stake in the outcome.

Q When you say the strategy doesn't rely solely on the military, that's a reference to the need for partners, is that correct?

MR. EARNEST: That is a reference to the way in which we're going to confront the threat that's posed by ISIL, and the need for us to build up an effective partner in the Iraq government, but also the effective contribution -- or the constructive contribution of other governments in the region.

Peter.

Q Can I clarify on -- the current military campaign in Iraq is based, in your all's view, on the President's inherent Commander-in-Chief powers, not on any previous authorization to use military force, either in 2001 or 2002? Is that right? In other words, not the Iraq resolution and not the post-9/11 resolution?

MR. EARNEST: The current military action that has been ordered in Iraq is vested in the powers as the Commander-in-Chief. And we have filed war powers notifications demonstrating our commitment to coordinating with Congress as we deploy that power.

It has been our policy that -- and the President talked about this in a speech he gave earlier this year about his view that the current Iraq AUMF, authorization to use military force, needed to be changed because it was so broad. But as it relates to the military actions that are underway, those are actions that are underway -- or that have been authorized under the President's powers as Commander-in-Chief.

For a more detailed analysis, I don't want to go too much farther here. We're sort of -- we're reaching the limits of my knowledge on this, because it's complicated and I want to make sure we get this right.

Q Is it the White House's theory, then, that inherent power would be enough to go across the border into Syria as well? If you expand what you're doing against the same enemy, is it the same authorization -- authority that you guys are relying on? Or would you be using the 2001 one, which is what you do use in Somalia and Yemen and other places like that that use drone strikes, that kind of thing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we have said about this, Peter, is we have not speculated about what sort of authority would be required from Congress if the President were to make a decision to authorize military -- the use of military force in Syria. Since he hasn't made that decision, we haven't talked about what sort of authority he may or may not use if he were to make that decision. We just haven't sort of speculated that far.

It's a legitimate question, and if we reach the point where the President does make a decision to use military force in Syria, then that will open up an additional set of questions that you're raising right now. But we haven't attempted to answer them at this point

because the President has not made a decision to authorize military force in Syria.

Q But you all make a distinction between this potential action and last year, when you asked Congress to weigh in -- not that you said Congress had to weigh in; you thought you had the authority even without Congress last year, but you said you wanted them to weigh in, to have a sense of consensus, right? But you make a distinction between the retaliatory strikes you contemplated last year and these kind of intervention, which would be a different type. Is that right?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the goals of those two missions -- the goal of the mission from last year was aimed squarely at the Assad regime and was in response to the intel assessment that they had used chemical weapons against innocent civilians.

The situation a year later is markedly different. What we're talking about now is confronting a terrorist group that has sought a safe haven in Syria. This is a group that poses a threat to Americans in the region and could potentially, down the line, pose a broader threat to American interests and our allies around the globe. So the situations are somewhat different.

Now, what the ramifications of those differences are for our -- for some of the legalistic questions that you're asking are important. But these are questions that I don't have answers for right now just because the President, like I said, hasn't made a decision to authorize this military action in Syria.

Q One last question on this. Do you have any sense of the timetable? He's meeting with Secretary Kerry today. How important is that meeting?

MR. EARNEST: The President confers on a regular basis with the Secretary of State. They typically will meet on a weekly basis when the Secretary of State is in Washington, which is rare these days. He's putting a lot of miles on the airplane. But I would anticipate that they will discuss a range of issues in that meeting, including our ongoing efforts to face down the threat that's posed by ISIL.

But in terms of whether or not there's a presidential decision that will come directly out of this meeting, I'm not in a position to say.

Q But I just meant, like are we -- are we talking about days? Are we talking about weeks? I mean, he didn't move that quickly on Iraq, right? He came out in June and said, I'm contemplating airstrikes, but he didn't move until August when he felt the circumstances had changed.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's fair to say that the President is watching the situation very closely, as are the other elements of his national security team. Some of that is because there is already kinetic military action that's underway in Iraq at the President's direction. So this is something that has his close attention. But I wouldn't prejudge at this point when the President would act, or even at this point if he will act.

Q -- options yesterday in the meeting with Secretary Hagel?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry?

Q The President hasn't made a decision, but was he presented with options in the meeting with Secretary Hagel yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: I'm just not in a position to get into the details of those discussions.

Did you have a question?

Q Yes, I was just -- anything imminent on it?

MR. EARNEST: I just don't have an update on the timing.

Q Josh, there are reports today that Ukraine took Russian soldiers the day after the ambassador -- the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine sent out a tweet that was very solidly against Russia's incursion into Ukraine. Can you comment on that? I mean, on the fact that Ukraine has soldiers and what the President thinks should be done at this point.

MR. EARNEST: Well, our posture on this remains that we are disappointed that President Putin and the Russians have not used their influence to deescalate this situation. And in fact, what we have seen are repeated provocations by the Russian regime to further escalate tensions in the region. And whether that's moving humanitarian convoys across the border into eastern Ukraine without the consent of the Ukrainian government, that certainly represents a pretty flagrant escalation of this situation.

There are also a number of reports that the Russians are now actively moving military hardware across the border. That's something they've been doing for some time, and there are some indications that the pace of those movements have increased. We've actually asked President Putin to do the opposite. We've actually asked him to use his influence to try to deescalate the situation and to convince pro-Russian separatists to actually lay down arms and to negotiate with the legitimate government of Ukraine to resolve this situation.

So the Russian regime has faced sanctions from the international community, and their economy has borne some costs as a result of their actions in Ukraine. And by continuing to ramp up that activity, they make the imposition of additional costs even more likely.

Q Is the President pessimistic about the meeting today between Poroshenko and Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't asked him about that specific meeting, but we certainly will be interested to learn about those discussions. And I'm confident that U.S. officials will be in touch with the Ukrainians to hear their takeaways from that meeting.

Q Josh, was the White House aware that Vice President Biden was doing these photo-line fundraisers with congressional candidates tacked onto official trips or other campaign trips and not announcing them publicly?

MR. EARNEST: I will say that I know that -- well, let me say that I read your story in Politico today, so I'm now aware of them.

Q We got a reader. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: There's at least one, right? (Laughter.) What I'll say is that the Vice President's political activities are obviously very closely coordinated with the political activities of the President and other senior members of the West Wing. So the President and Vice President are spending a lot of time and energy supporting Democrats who are on the ballot this fall, and they'll continue to do that.

What I would observe is I don't think that there is a significant difference between the Vice President, for example, doing photo lines, where he doesn't do formal remarks, in support of Democratic fundraising activities, and the President convening roundtables with donors to Democratic Party causes to discuss his support for Democrats in the fall elections.

There isn't press access for either of those things, because in neither case is the President or the Vice President delivering formal remarks. But I do think that they are indicative of this administration's desire to support the campaigns of Democratic candidates who are eager to support the President's agenda and support the plight of middle-class families in the Congress.

Q And is the President doing any events like that where he's doing photo lines attached to events for Democratic donors that aren't on the public schedule?

MR. EARNEST: I know the President typically does photo lines in conjunction with fundraising events. Off the top of my head, I can't think of an example in which the President has done a photo line without doing a more formal fundraising event. I wouldn't -- that's not a definitive thing, because it's off the top of my head, but if he's done any of those he's not done very many.

Q Josh, is Senator Hagan -- I didn't see -- is the Senator on the plane? Is she meeting the President on the tarmac? What's the deal today?

MR. EARNEST: She is not on the plane. I understand that she's been in North Carolina for the August recess. And I understand that both Senator Burr and Senator Hagan will meet the President on arrival at the airport in Charlotte.

Q Will he travel in with them to the convention?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what their travel plans are. You should check with them. I believe that both senators, however, are addressing the convention at some point while the convention is in town.

Q Hagan had some pretty harsh comments on the President, in her statement last Friday -- I'm sure you saw it. Do you have a reaction on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Senator Hagan is certainly an independent voice for the people of North Carolina, and that means that she doesn't always agree with President Obama on a range of issues. But Senator Hagan has demonstrated that she is a dedicated advocate for America's veterans. President Obama is, too. And I'm confident that that means that they'll have an opportunity to work together, because they both believe it's a priority to make sure that we're living up to our covenant with America's veterans.

Q Is the President concerned about potentially being a drag on Senator Hagan as she runs for reelection in November?

MR. EARNEST: No. The President, over the course of the last two elections, has performed -- has out-performed expectations in North Carolina. He obviously narrowly won North Carolina in 2008; fell just a little short in 2012. But that demonstrates that the President has a pretty deep reservoir of political support here in North Carolina.

The people of North Carolina -- the North Carolina economy in particular is one that benefits from the kinds of policies that the President is championing in Washington, D.C. Everything from investments in R&D have a significant economic benefit in areas like the research triangle. Immigration reform is something that would certainly benefit -- strongly benefit the North Carolina economy. So there are any number of reasons why the President has strong support here in the state of North Carolina. And if there's an opportunity for the President to lend some of that support to Senator Hagan's campaign, then he won't hesitate to do it. But based, again, on my reading of Politico and other news organizations that are carefully covering the North Carolina Senate race, it sounds like Senator Hagan is doing a pretty darn good job of making a case for herself right now.

Anybody else? Okay, thanks, guys. We'll see you on the ground.

END

11:06 A.M. EDT