

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/26/16

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Monday. Hope you all had a pleasant weekend. I do not have any announcements at the top so we can go straight to your questions.

Kevin, do you want to start?

Q Sure, thank you, Josh. I wanted to ask about tonight's debate, and, in particular, how does the President plan to watch it? With the family? With staff? By himself? What may be his biggest concern going into the debate? And does -- there's been a lot of talk about what -- the role of a moderator and whether the moderator should be an aggressive fact-checker. Does the President have any thoughts about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I anticipate that this fall Monday evening will be similar to other fall Monday evenings in the White House residence, which is that the President will be working tonight with the television on in the background. I think the one difference will be instead of Monday Night Football, there will be a little more politics being discussed in the context of the debate.

And the President had an opportunity to answer some questions last week from ABC where he talked about how important it is, he believes, for Secretary Clinton to talk about those aspects of her career I think provide people -- provide some insight so that people understand exactly what motivates her to seek the office of the presidency. And he obviously believes that she's got a strong case to make. That's why he's spoken publicly so many times in support of her campaign.

With regard to the moderators, there's plenty of advice that's going around to both the candidates and the moderator. I haven't spoken to the President about any advice he may have for Mr. Holt tonight, but I think anybody that's spent any time around Lester knows that he is somebody who is always well prepared. And I suspect that having spent a decent portion of the last several decades in broadcast journalism that he'll perform well even under the intense spotlight of a presidential debate.

Q Wanted to ask about Aleppo as well. It seems like the news reports are indicating that it becomes more dire by the hour. And can you provide some update of what the administration is doing to try to stop the carnage? And is it warming to the prospects of expanding the sanctions regime, as some in Congress want to do?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, the situation in Syria continues to worsen. And the situation in Syria has been terrible and the bloodshed sickening. But we've seen that, over the weekend, it just got worse. And I think anybody who's following these news reports, whether you're an official with the United States government or just a human being reading the news, understanding the toll that this violence is taking on the lives of so many innocent people, you've got to be deeply concerned about it. And the President certainly is.

What we have seen from the Assad regime and the Russians is a concerted campaign to strike civilian targets to bomb civilians into submission. And it's taken a variety of forms. And over the weekend, we saw the specific targeting of the headquarters, or staging areas used by the White Helmets -- the relief organization, the first responders in Syria -- that are just trying to provide for the basic needs and safety and well-being of citizens who are caught in the crossfire.

There were also military strikes against the facilities that ensure that civilians in eastern Aleppo have access to drinking water. The idea of weaponizing access to a clean water supply for civilians is beyond the pale. And people of good conscience around the world should speak up, and are speaking up. And I know that there was a vigorous discussion about this at the U.N. Security Council just last night. And I certainly would encourage you to take a look at the remarks from Ambassador Power, where she talked about this situation and tried to make a very forceful case about the consequences of this situation for the rest of the international community, and how important it is for the international community to speak with one voice in condemning these actions and not allowing these norms to be eroded.

It's clear what the consequences will be for Russia as well. They are drawing themselves even deeper into a sectarian conflict inside of Syria. They're increasingly isolated in the international community. They're going to have to expend significant additional resources to shore up their efforts there. These are resources that are not in ample supply in Russia. We know that their economy is struggling and that their currency reserves have plummeted in just the last couple of years. And we know that poses a risk to Russia and their presence not just in Syria, it also poses a risk to Russia back home, because we know that this kind of violence and chaos that's being sown in Syria only fuels extremism in Syria and around the world.

But this is the choice that Russia has made, and it's one that they'll have to account for.

Q Any warming to the expansion of sanctions regime regarding supporters or entities that do business with al-Assad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, sanctions has always been a tool on the table available to the United States. The concern we have with the current congressional proposal that's being debated is that it would deploy those sanctions essentially unilaterally. And what we have found is that the sanctions tool is most effectively used when it is deployed in close coordination with our allies and partners around the world.

By carefully coordinating the implementation of sanctions, we can ensure that these sanctions essentially serve as a force multiplier -- that the kinds of financial penalties that can be imposed by the United States are multiplied when they are imposed in close coordination with our allies and partners. And that's what we have typically sought to do.

What we've also refrained from doing is discussing in detail -- or discussing in advance the detailed aspects of our sanctions strategy, primarily because we don't want to telegraph our intentions so as to allow the targets of those sanctions to take actions that would circumvent our actions.

So if and when we have made a policy decision to move forward with imposing additional financial penalties against the Assad regime, or other entities that work closely with the Assad regime, that's something that we'll discuss only after that decision has been made and those penalties have been imposed.

Ayesha.

Q A little more on Syria. You said that Russia will have to kind of answer for their actions, but I wonder, who is Russia going to answer to? And with this -- and I was just trying to -- does the administration have a specific plan B now that this ceasefire has failed? Is there going to be a change in course? Is there going to be a change in actions or approach from the administration? Are there new things that you guys are considering doing -- taking in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any announcements at this point. But I think with regard to Russia, what I would say is simply that Russia will have to account for their actions in the context of the consequences they are likely to provoke. Russia is further isolated in the international community. And, again, I think that was on display in rather vivid detail at the United Nations Security Council meeting last night. Russia is going to have to invest more in their efforts inside of Syria in order to prop up the presence that they have there, in order to further shore up the Assad regime.

And Russia is going to have to deal with the fall out because their actions are fueling extremism, not just in Syria and not just in the region, but around the world, including in Russia. And those are actions that I think you'd have a hard time arguing are in their national interest. They certainly don't seem part of a coordinated strategy. But, again, that's something that the Russians themselves will have to account for.

Q I wanted to ask a question in light of an FBI report that violent crime in the U.S. increased in 2015, so I wanted to get an administration response to that. And also, in general, in the past couple of days we've seen -- we saw -- well, today, we saw shootings in Houston that I think nine were injured. We saw a shooting over the weekend at a mall in

Washington -- I think that may have killed five. These shootings, they continue to happen. It seems like they get attention but not as much -- maybe there might be a little uptick in interest if it seems like it's connected to international terrorism, but other than that, they seem to happen and fade quickly. Like, is the administration concerned that the country is becoming somewhat numb to the violence and to these types of shootings?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll start first with the statistics. What the numbers indicate is that since President Obama took office in 2009, the violent crime rate in the United States has fallen 15 percent and the violent crime rate in the United States is near historic lows. And there's ample evidence to indicate that even in those communities where we saw an increase last year in 2015, so far in 2016, in some of those cities we've seen violent crime fall. So I think this is an indication that the country is safer, as measured by the violent crime rate, than it was in any year under the previous four Presidents.

Now, there, of course, is more that we can do to fight violent crime. The President has advocated additional resources for our men and women in law enforcement. The President has advocated for improved training, so not just hiring additional police officers but also improved training and resources that can be used to make our men and women in law enforcement even more effective than they already are. The President has advocated for criminal justice reform. And there's ample evidence to indicate that effective criminal justice reform would further reduce the recidivism rate in this country, which would have a positive impact in reducing violence.

So we've made important progress in this area. The country is safer under President Obama than it has been under previous Presidents, as measured by the violent crime rate. But the President believes that there is more that we can and should do. And there's no area where the President has been more outspoken than taking action on common-sense gun safety measures that would make it harder for criminals and others who shouldn't have them to buy a gun.

And we have never made the case that passing a law like one that would close the background check loophole would prevent every act of gun violence, but there's plenty of evidence to indicate that it could have a positive impact on reducing incidents of gun violence. And we could do all of that without undermining the constitutional right of law-abiding Americans.

So the President is going to continue to be outspoken on that, and he will moving forward.

With regard to the two shooting incidents that you referred to over the last 72 hours or so, I'd refer you to local law enforcement in both situations for a specific update on the investigation. I believe that the FBI in Washington State has indicated that, thus far, there is no connection to international terrorism at this point. But that investigation continues. And I know that the local law enforcement authorities have indicated that they have a suspect in custody. So that investigation continues.

But this cycle that you've cited of a mass shooting, intense public interest for short period of time, and then attention migrating to other places is not a new one, and one we've seen in this country that even pre-dates President Obama's inauguration. And it's one the

President has expressed deep frustration about. But, ultimately, as the President has indicated, enough citizens are going to have to demonstrate enough passion for this issue to persuade the Congress to pursue a different approach and actually consider common-sense measures that would protect Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans but do more to ensure that -- or to at least make it harder for individuals who shouldn't be able to get a gun from getting one.

Michelle.

Q Is the President going to try anything else in terms of gun violence?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any announcements at this point, but the President and his team are always reviewing available options. But the President made a big announcement at the beginning of this year about using his executive authority to make it harder for people to obtain a firearm at a gun show, for example, without undergoing a background check.

And really, this is a situation where the ball is in the court of the United States Congress. And, ultimately, they're going to have to hear from the American people that this is a priority. That I think is the only way we're going to be able to get the attention of a sufficient number of members of Congress to take serious action.

Q Even at this point, you're not ruling out that he might take additional executive action?

MR. EARNEST: I would not rule that out.

Q And we've heard the administration use words now relating to Russia's actions in Syria like "barbarism," "unacceptable," "outrage." But you've also said that trying to forge a ceasefire will be a test for Russia. Haven't they already failed that test miserably?

MR. EARNEST: Thus far, I think that's fair to say. When you have a country that's using its military might to prop up a murderous regime, target the water supply of civilians, to target the headquarters that are used by first responders, to target refugee camps, to target humanitarian aid convoys or, in any of those instances, to support a regime that's doing exactly that -- I think that indicates that they failed the test. I think the question now is, at what point is Russia prepared to try a different strategy?

Again, the strategy that they are currently pursuing is one that only further deepens their involvement in a sectarian conflict, and it's hard to see how that benefits Russia's national security or benefits the Russian people. Our concern is that furthering that sectarian conflict only fuels extremism that poses a threat to the region and the world.

And that's why the President has worked hard to build and lead a 67-member coalition that is applying significant pressure to ISIL and to other extremists that are operating inside of Syria. That's the way to keep the American people safe and to protect our national security interests. But it's unfortunate that the Russians are pursuing a strategy that is in such direct conflict with that.

Q So when you hear the Foreign Minister say that there's still a chance that a ceasefire could be worked out, do you at all take those words seriously?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we've gotten to the point, Michelle, where we evaluate Russia's approach to this situation not by listening to the words of their ambassador but by watching the actions of their military. And, unfortunately, in recent days, we've seen their military support or directly engage in the kinds of acts that are roundly condemned by the civilized world. That is not indicative of a country that's serious about pursuing peace, or even about pursuing an approach that seems to be in the national security interest of their country and the world.

Q So at what point do you say what they exhibited shows no seriousness at all toward establishing a ceasefire? And why even try -- like, why go through the motions if they've already done this, this, and this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Michelle, I don't think the administration is going to be in a position of apologizing for pursuing peace. The truth is, in the context of the negotiations that we've already engaged in with the Russians, the United States and our international partners have not been in a position where we have had to make any concessions. It was because of our intense skepticism and doubts about Russia's credibility that we insisted the Russians live up to their commitments before the United States would follow through on the actions we know the Russians are seeking, and that was military cooperation.

So the United States has not had to make any concessions in order to pursue peace. We were quite clear from the beginning that our efforts against extremists was going to continue unabated, and that if Russia wanted to cooperate with those efforts they would have to demonstrate a commitment to reducing the violence and allowing the flow of humanitarian assistance to reach those who were in need. They haven't lived up to that bargain, which means they have not gotten the kind of military cooperation that they would like to see. But the United States and our coalition partners have continued, unabated, in our campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and to apply pressure and take other extremists off the battlefield as well.

Q Okay. And we heard the President's advice for Hillary Clinton for the debate. Does he or the administration have any advice for Donald Trump? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Even if we did I'm confident it would go unheard.

Q All right, thanks.

Q Hi, Josh. Can we talk about JASTA? Does the White House have a latest count on congressional support for the bill? Does it look like it's going to, as Mitch McConnell says, override the President's veto, for the first time in his presidency, this week?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not here to make any predictions or to provide any vote counts. We continue to make our case to members of Congress. We've acknowledged from the beginning that this was going to be an uphill fight, but there have been some high-profile

members of Congress that had indicated some openness to our position and some unease with the consequence of moving forward with the legislation that Congress has passed.

So you saw Congressman Thornberry from Texas write a letter -- he's somebody who is not somebody we regularly look to, to support the President's agenda in Congress -- but in this case, he stood up, to his credit, and make a principled case for outlining his concerns with the bill.

We saw a similar letter from Congressman Adam Smith. He is a Democrat from Washington State. He is somebody who is a more consistent supporter of the President's policies, but he's arrived at some similar conclusions. And I think that's an indication of the principled nature of the position that the President has argued. But as we know, two members, two votes is not enough to sustain the President's veto in the United States House of Representatives, so there's some important work that we have ahead of us.

Fortunately, Congressman Thornberry and Congressman Smith are viewed as two influential members of the House Republican Conference and the House Democratic Caucus respectively. They are well regarded for their experience and knowledge of these issues. And hopefully they're making a case among their colleagues as well. We certainly would benefit from their advocacy.

Q Has the White House spoken with the Saudis to discuss the possibility of the override?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update on those kinds of conversations. Obviously, I think as I acknowledged last week, given the significant consequences for our country's relationship with Saudi Arabia, you won't be surprised to hear that the Saudi government has been in touch with the Obama administration about this piece of legislation. But I would also hasten to add we've heard from a lot of other countries, too, who have expressed similar concerns about the potential impact of this bill. And there was a letter that was provided by the European Union voicing their deep concerns about the impact that this legislation would have on the U.S. relationship with countries all around the world.

So it's not just our partners in Saudi Arabia who are concerned about this bill. Some of our closest allies in Europe are deeply concerned about it, too. And this is, again, consistent with the argument that we have made that we're not just concerned about the impact that this bill would have on the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia; we're deeply concerned about the impact that this bill would have on the U.S. relationship with countries all around the world. And that's why the President vetoed it at the end of last week. And that's the basis for the argument that we're making to members of Congress that they should sustain the President's veto.

Q On the crime bill, is the President disappointed overall in the idea that violent crime has gone up by 3.9 percent, even though it's still at historically low levels? Is he disappointed by that?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President is gratified that the United States is currently in a period where violent crime is at or near historic lows. Is there more that we could do to try to prevent more violent crime? Yes. And that means we can provide additional resources to our law enforcement. We can pass some common-sense gun safety legislation. We can certainly reform our criminal justice system in a way that would have a positive impact on recidivism rates.

So there certainly is more that we can do, and the President has put those kinds of efforts at the front of his domestic agenda. So the President believes there's more that we can do, but he certainly is gratified that our country is benefitting from historically lows or near-historic -- violent crime rates at or near historic lows.

Q Okay. And then just on the debate. When was the last time the President spoke with Hillary Clinton? And will he be calling her before to wish her good luck tonight?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any calls the President has planned for today. But I know the President had an opportunity to see Secretary Clinton a couple of times not last week but the week before. I don't know that they had a detailed debate strategy discussion, but the President has got some experience of going head to head with Secretary Clinton in the context of a debate, and she performed quite well in those settings. And I think the President expects her to do the same tonight.

Jordan.

Q Josh, the President's veto message made a pretty passionate case against the bill. So I'm wondering if he is going to --

MR. EARNEST: Are you saying that his spokesperson hasn't? (Laughter.)

Q Not a comment on you. (Laughter.) It was three pages. But given that, is he going to get personally involved in lobbying members of Congress against the bill?

MR. EARNEST: Look, I don't have a detailed accounting of the President's involvement in this lobbying effort, but the President's views are well known and the President has had an opportunity to convey those to members of Congress at different points. So there's no doubt about the position that the administration has taken, and there's no doubt about the personal views of the President when it comes to this issue. And I think he made that quite clear not just in the act of vetoing the legislation, but in explaining in that statement exactly why he had chosen to veto the bill.

So there's no ambiguity about the President's position. What the President says in private is reflected in his public statements on this. And our vote count would be a little bit higher if those who expressed some unease in private with the impact of the bill had that show up in their public votes as well.

Q So do you think some of these folks who are wavering in private, especially Democrats, don't you think it would maybe help them to make that position public if they got a personal call or conversation with the President?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, maybe. You can also imagine a situation where these members of Congress would say, I didn't take this position because the President asked me to, I took this position because it's the right one.

So each individual member of Congress has their own approach to these kinds of questions. But for anybody who is wondering exactly what the President's position is on this bill, I think we have been unambiguous about the deep concern that he has about the impact that this bill would have on our relationship with countries around the world, including the relationship the United States enjoys with some of our closest allies.

I'll just point out something that I've pointed out before. The President is not the only national security expert in America to harbor these concerns. There are other high-profile Republican legal and national security experts who have expressed their concerns with this bill. Even President George W. Bush's Attorney General, Michael Mukasey, has expressed his concern about this bill and has indicated publically what those concerns are. So we certainly welcome that show of bipartisan support from a variety of national security experts that have made clear they have concerns with this, too.

Q Lastly, on the CR. I know last week you expressed some frustration that Flint aid wasn't included in the package. Is that something that, if it's not included in the CR, that's sort of a red line for you guys where you're not going to sign it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jordan, I think what I indicated yesterday is -- not yesterday, it was Friday -- I indicated Friday the President's view that Congress has some more work to do. And he is disappointed that -- after months of suggesting that Congress did have an important role to play in providing significant assistance to Flint and other communities that have been enduring lead contamination in their drinking water, that there is a role for Congress to play in helping those communities address that problem, the President has been making that case for months and is disappointed that we haven't seen the kind of congressional response that the President believes this situation deserves.

So there are plenty of Democrats that are up there advocating for the kind of approach that the President believes is appropriate for Congress to pursue, and we just need to get some Republicans committed to this effort, too. And if we do, we'll be able to mobilize the kind of response that, frankly, the American people and the people of Flint readily deserve.

James. Nice to see you today.

Q Josh, thank you very much. Nice to be back with you. First, on the FBI report about crime statistics. As you know, that is an annual report which compiles statistics from I assume tens of thousands of jurisdictions -- lots of them, anyway. In responding to the findings of the report, you just declared that America is safer under President Obama than it has been under any of the last four Presidents, a period that will take us back to 1981. Since law enforcement is chiefly a local endeavor, are you asserting some causative role for President Obama in the historically low crime rates that we have today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly have been some steps that the Obama administration has taken to support local law enforcement. But I've routinely been asked this question the other way, which is, why hasn't the Obama administration done more to impose some of our policy solutions on local law enforcement agencies? And at each turn, I've noted the longstanding tradition in the United States of delegating responsibility for law enforcement to the local level. And the President believes --

Q If we could stick with the question that I asked, and not the one you are frequently asked. Are you asserting some causative role for President Obama in the crime levels for which you just seemed to take credit for?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think that there is any one direct causation that we can draw, but I think the President is proud of the positive contribution to this effort that his administration has made.

Q Since you asserted that the numbers show that Americans are safer from violent crime now than they have been at any time in the last 35 years, is it safe for us also to conclude that Americans are safer from mass shootings now than at any time?

MR. EARNEST: I think the data indicates -- well, I don't know what the data indicates. I guess we'd have to ask the FBI about that. So we can go take a look at the numbers and see what they say.

Q And lastly, on JASTA, when historians look back on this episode and seek to re-create everything that was going on which culminated in the President's veto and, perhaps, may yet see an override or further developments of one kind or another, will they justifiably see that there was at work something that we might -- for lack of a better term -- call the Saudi lobby?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know. I mean, I guess --

Q We hear about the Israel lobbies, right? All the time. Is there a Saudi lobby?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there's been a lot of public reporting about the Saudi government trying to mobilize their friends and allies to express their opinion about this bill. With regard to the President's decision, I think we've been quite clear that his decision is motivated by the impact that this bill would have not just on Saudi Arabia but on countries around the world. So I don't know -- I can't speak to what extent there was an aggressive lobbying effort here in the administration, but based on the public reporting I've seen, there appears to be a rather intense effort by the Saudi government to lobby Capitol Hill, and it remains to be seen how successful that will be.

Q Does the President believe in the existence of either an Israel lobby or a Saudi lobby?

MR. EARNEST: I will say that this is the first time that I've heard the words, Saudi lobby. Maybe that means I need to get out more, but it's the first time that I've heard it.

Q Does he believe in the existence of an Israel lobby?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't asked him that question. I think it is clear that the Israeli government has worked hard to build relationships here in Washington that allow them to exert some influence on Capitol Hill. But I don't know if that crosses the threshold of being described as a lobby or not, or just a country that is a close ally of the United States and has friends on both sides of the aisle. That clearly is true.

Ron.

Q In terms of timing, how much time do you think you have with this veto override?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly no expert when it comes to legislative procedure, so I'd probably refer you to one of my counterparts in Leader McConnell's office to describe how long it will be before the Senate takes action to consider the President's veto and to hold a vote to override it. From there, of course, it will go straight to the House of Representatives and I'm not sure how long that takes, and I'm also not sure how long it would then take the House to act on it.

Q We're talking, do you think, in terms of trying to even discuss this matter with legislators, you obviously have some sense of urgency, though, that you don't have unlimited amounts of time. You have days?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our approach has been to make a forceful case to members of Congress. I don't know how long we have to take. Just as somebody who observes the legislative process, sometimes things that seem like they should take a long time in Capitol Hill get done really quickly, and things that seem like they should get done really quickly take an inordinate amount of time. So I don't know how long this will take, but certainly, since the President received the bill 13 days ago, we have been -- 13 or 14 days ago -- we have been engaged in an effort to persuade members of Congress that they should sustain the President's veto and consider a different approach.

Q And similarly, with the CR, do you -- what is the status of that, as you perceive it, in terms of timing? And we know there's a deadline, but --

MR. EARNEST: We do know there's a deadline.

Q -- do you see this coming together? Do you see huge obstacles? How engaged is the White House in the --

MR. EARNEST: I'm quite reluctant to predict congressional outcomes these days. There is a deadline looming before Congress, September 30th. That's the end of the fiscal year. And it seems like at least every year of the Obama presidency, we've spent some portion of the last week in September worrying whether or not Congress was going to do its job and get its act together and ensure that the government would be funded and not shut down.

Unfortunately, Republicans who promised to get Congress moving again if they were handed the reins of the Congress have broken that promise and they have failed. And we, once again, here are four days before the deadline, and we're publicly wondering if

Congress is going to fulfill their most basic responsibility, and that is are they going to succeed in passing a budget to keep the government open.

And what we have seen time and time again is a reliance on the part of Republicans to try to do things on party-line votes. And that just doesn't work. And I think it accounts for so many of their failures over the course of the last several years. They're going to have to work with Democrats in both the House and the Senate, it appears, to pass this budget. So they better get to work.

Q And just to clarify something. Charlotte -- is the Department of Justice still just monitoring the situation there, or is there now an "investigation" of the Scott shooting?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen an announcement from the Department of Justice about an investigation, but if there's an announcement it will come from them.

Q Because there were some statements from some community activists there that they were under the impression that there was now an investigation underway.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that statement from the Department of Justice, but you can check with them about the status.

Q And just lastly, on the debate tonight, you said, you know, it will be on in the background and not ESPN, or -- is too much being made of this whole thing, do you thing? Is that the point? You said the President -- is this your sense of the coverage, which I'm sure you're aware of and all that --

MR. EARNEST: It's hard to escape.

Q Do you think too much is being made of this whole moment in the campaign?

MR. EARNEST: No, I wouldn't say that. This is an important moment in the campaign. And anybody that's worked on a campaign at any level understands how significant candidate debates are. And it's an opportunity for the candidates to square off and to speak for themselves in answering questions and describing their experience and their vision and their priorities.

And, look, there hasn't been a lot of space for that in the context of this presidential election. So this is a rather unique opportunity for that kind of discussion to take place, and I think people are quite interested to see -- to tune in and see how the individual candidates handle themselves in this setting.

Q And it comes at a time when there's a lot of reporting suggesting that the polls have tightened almost into a deadlock. And I know we can argue the merits of polls or not polls, but certainly it is important that the public perception is that the race is tightening now.

Is that what you're -- you can see that. And is there any level of concern -- the White House, the President -- about this state of the race, if you will?

MR. EARNEST: Look, if reports about tightening polls convince more people to tune into the debate and educate themselves about the positions taken by the individual candidates, and impress upon voters the need to be engaged in the political debate in this country, that's a good thing. I can't speak to the accuracy of the polls. I don't know if they're accurate or not.

Q So you don't know whether the race has tightened or not?

MR. EARNEST: I do not. You've got plenty of polling analysts that are making good money offering that kind of advice to all of you.

What I will say is that the President -- regardless of what the polls say, the stakes in the election are high. And whether the polls indicate a nail-biter or a blowout, people should be tuned in. People should be focused on the debates, and people should cast a vote regardless of which candidate you support. Because the next President of the United States is going to have a lot of influence over the future of the country. And the President has made quite clear what his views are and who he's supporting. But, look, if there are more people involved, that's only a good thing for the country.

Q Do you have any preview of the President's travel? October is just four or five days away, and you said twice a week he'd be out there.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any travel announcements yet, but stay tuned and we'll have some more details.

Mark.

Q Josh, what will President Obama be saying about the Dakota access pipeline in his speech today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, as it relates to that specific project, there obviously is a review that's being conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to evaluate the most effective way to move forward. I would not expect an extensive discussion of that specific project in the President's remarks.

There has been an effort on the part of the EPA and the Department of Interior to go back and review more broadly the procedure for soliciting input from Native populations across the United States for projects like this. And I think that does reflect a commitment on the part of the Obama administration to strengthen the relationship between the federal government and tribal governments across the country.

So I don't know if the President will talk about that at length either. It's not really the kind of topic that is going to bring an audience to their feet, but it certainly is the kind of issue that the people in attendance at the Tribal Nations Summit are interested in. And I think the announcement of that review was welcomed by tribal leaders across the country.

Q Does President Obama have a view on the pipeline, or is he waiting for the results of the review?

MR. EARNEST: With regard to the actual -- to the Dakota access pipeline, that's something that will be determined by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in consultation with *the EPA and the Department of Interior. So I've not heard the President express an opinion about that particular project.

Q Any readout on the conference call with the rabbis today?

MR. EARNEST: The President is doing a conference call with rabbis today in honor of the upcoming celebration of the Jewish New Year. I didn't hear how the call went, but we'll see if we can get you some information about it.

Margaret.

Q Josh, President Obama took action as he laid out to stop imminent slaughter in Benghazi, took action to help the Yazidis in a limited way. Has the President rule out any kind of intervention or action in Aleppo?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President is continuing to get advice from his national security team, including from the military leaders at the Department of Defense reviewing all of the available options. I think what is unique to the situation in Aleppo is that the bloody attacks that are being waged there are being carried out in a heavily populated, urban area, where there are a large number of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. The two situations that you cited, the Yazidis in Iraq were obviously is a situation where they were on Sinjar Mountain, and there were some approaching ISIL fighters that were taken off the battlefield, and that was able to protect Yazidi population.

In Benghazi, the President has talked about how important it was to make a decision in advance of the Gaddafi regime's military forces reaching the city. And so the strikes that were taken there to protect the innocent population that Gaddafi had vowed to slaughter in Benghazi were carried out in advance of the military reaching the city.

Obviously the situation in Aleppo is different. You have a bombing campaign being waged by the Assad regime and by the Russians that is taking place in densely populated urban area without regard to civilian casualties. And that certainly would make a U.S. military intervention in that specific campaign significantly more complicated than the two examples you cited.

Q So you're saying too difficult or too late, circumstantially, to intervene?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not ruling anything out. The President is going to continue to rely on advice from his national security team, including from his military commanders, including those who are closely following the situation on the ground inside of Syria. But I'm just trying to draw a distinction between the two other examples of military intervention that you cited in illustrating why they're different than the situation the President and the world now faces.

Q You've talked extensively in this room about how -- on or off the table really at this point. Diplomacy is your path forward, a political decision has to be made. The situation being so acute in Aleppo, as you've described -- bombing waterways, U.N. says using bunker buster bombs to blow up underground hospitals and bomb shelters -- in targeting the same kind of civil society that the administration is arguing should be involved in negotiations in the future, if you're targeting and eliminating populations who would be at that table, how can you still support credibly that that's your policy diplomatically to lead to negotiations without defending those people?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Margaret, you are right that it is very difficult to engage diplomatically, and it's very difficult to follow through on specific diplomatically negotiated solutions while what you're describing is taking place. That's why all along, throughout the talks that we've had with the Russians, we've insisted that there be a protracted period of calm and that the steady flow of humanitarian assistance is able to move into those communities that need it the most. That has always been essentially the precondition for any sort of negotiated cooperation between the United States and Russia.

Q Didn't they provide their answer to that proposal? I mean, with the bombings that you've seen in the past few days? The French ambassador at the U.N. and the French ambassador here in Washington is basically saying the Russians have shown us they either can't or won't deliver Assad. But you disagree? You think they can and possibly will still deliver Assad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the question right now, Margaret, is are they willing to live up the commitments that they previously made. Obviously the doubt about that grows every day, particularly as we see those attacks worsen. And, yes, there continue to be questions about whether or not Russia is capable of or willing to exercise influence over the Assad regime to reduce the violence inside of Syria. There are doubts about that, and those doubts only grow as these attacks worsen.

So, no, there's not been much that I've had to say today or even over the last several days that sound like they are defending Russia's capabilities or credibility. If anything, the doubts harbored by the administration about Russia and their intent are growing.

Q Is there any feeling of urgency given how bloody and brutal this new campaign is in Aleppo? And when will we get a decision on some of those things are being debated?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I -- "debated" is not a word that I used. I think this is an issue --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Look, this is an issue that the President and his team have been discussing and focused on and worried about and concerned about for many years now. And like I said at the top, the situation in Syria, as bad as it is, only continues to worsen in some of the most unthinkable ways. This idea that there are Assad regime military forces, or even Russia forces, that are using enhanced or more powerful weapons to try to

bomb hospitals or even daycare centers, playgrounds I think they were describing in some of these reports, that were moved underground to try to protect innocent children -- the idea that first responders, the White Helmets, as they're described, would be targeted, or a humanitarian aid convoy would be targeted -- it's sickening. It's beyond the pale.

And it's not just morally questionable, at best; I think we can say it's immoral to target a humanitarian aid convoy. But it also is in conflict with the stated goal and strategy that the Russians have laid out.

So, look, I'm not going to stand up here and defend Russia's credibility. If anything, I spent most of the last week or so raising doubts about it. But, again --

Q But you're giving them the benefit of the doubt.

MR. EARNEST: We're not giving them anything. And I think that's the important thing for people to understand --

Q Have you taken the offer off the table to restart negotiations with the potential of having military coordination in the future?

MR. EARNEST: No. The negotiations haven't started. I'm not sure that they're ongoing right now. But it's important for people to --

Q But the offer stands.

MR. EARNEST: That's not a concession. Seeking peace is not a concession. Seeking peace is our goal. We're trying to --

Q Right, coordination was the leverage. That's still an option?

MR. EARNEST: Well, coordination is what Russia says is what they want. And it will not be provided by the United States until they deliver on the commitments that they have made. And they have not delivered on those commitments. If anything, they have walked back from them.

So the United States has not been in the position where we are providing anything to the Russians. I think the question right now on the part of the United States is, what is it that we can do to build a movement toward peace. And that search has been rather fruitless in the last few days.

Q On sanctions, when you were asked earlier about the congressional proposal, you said it wouldn't be effective if it's purely unilateral. Is the administration in negotiations or in any kind of proposal conversation with any of its allies to go ahead -- because obviously it wouldn't go through the U.N. But is there any kind of coordination with France, with Britain, with other powers in the EU to try to leverage sanctions -- where you might get people to sign up?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak to the details of the kind of diplomatic engagements that are ongoing with our allies. And I know that Secretary Kerry, over the weekend, had an opportunity to meet with -- or have a conversation with some of our European allies about the situation in Syria. I'll let the State Department give a readout in terms of describing how prominently that question of sanctions featured in that discussion.

But it is certainly accurate to say that the United States continues to engage deeply with our allies. And there are a variety of potential strategies that are discussed in each of those conversations.

Q But, respectfully and not to put too fine a point on it, though, I mean, it's all based on rhetoric at this point. There's a lot of rhetoric. There's a lot of oratory. But there isn't at this point anything you can say that's being considered the have any kind of intervention to stop what's happening in Aleppo, or in Syria more broadly, or to have any kind of action against Russia for the targeting of the aid convoy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there obviously are some limitations -- there are certain elements of our strategy that we do not discuss publicly. But what I can say is certainly the United States and the President's national security team is quite focused on confronting the most direct threats to U.S. national security. And that's why you are seeing such a sustained effort on the part of the United States military and our 67-member coalition to go after ISIL. And when you consider the territory that ISIL previously controlled in Iraq and in Syria, about 40 percent of that has been retaken. That's an indication of the progress that we're making on the ground.

But there continue to be some areas of Syria that are undeniably war-torn. And there are lives and communities that have been shattered as a result of this violence. And it is heartbreaking. And it only fuels the kind of extremism that the administration is mostly concerned about. And we're going to pursue every available channel that we can, including peace, including the pursuit of peace, including negotiations, to try to bring the violence down, to try to ramp up the humanitarian aid that is able to get through, and to try to stop a lot of that bloodshed. But the last few days have not been good.

Gardiner.

Q You probably answered this, but I just want to understand, are you willing to cut yet another deal with the Russians? Is this the last deal they have to live up to in order for things to happen? Where are you in your negotiations with the Russians? Again, are you sitting at the table ready to do -- strike yet another deal that they would potentially walk away from, as they have this last one?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Gardiner, it is hard to imagine the United States reaching any other negotiated agreement with the Russians until they live up to the commitments that they've made to reduce the violence and allow for the free flow of humanitarian access and aid to the communities that need it most in Syria.

So that's the state of play. The international community is awaiting a tangible sign from the Russians that they're prepared to live up to the commitments that they've made. Thus far, their credibility is increasingly flimsy and doubts are rising about whether or not they have the influence with the Assad regime that they claim to have.

And, look, if the conclusion of the international community is that Russia doesn't have the influence that they claim to have with the Assad regime, then, yes, that probably means we're going to have to pursue a different path to reaching the kind of political transition that we know is necessary to address the chaotic situation inside of Syria.

Q Does that mean this notion of sharing targeting information with the Russians -- is that off the table forever? Or is it still out there, potentially, if the Russians live up to this past deal?

MR. EARNEST: I think the way that I would say it, Gardiner, is that it is not going to be on the table until we see the Russians live up to the commitments that they've made in terms of reducing violence and allowing humanitarian aid to be delivered with some consistency. And over the last week, week and a half, we have not seen that, despite Russia's stated commitments. And that's why it's difficult to envision any sort of military cooperation with them, because all along that military cooperation was contingent on Russia performing the duties they committed to perform. And not only have they failed in that effort, they've actually be doubling down on the kinds of strategies that we've been trying to prevent in the first place.

Q Over the weekend there was a picture of the First Lady and President George Bush in an embrace that sort of went viral. Can you just explain the relationship between them? Is it of affection? Just tell us more about that hug. (Laughter.)

Q And I have a follow-up. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, Gardiner, I think what is obvious from the photo is that Mrs. Obama has genuine affection for former President Bush. And while they were not photographed hugging -- at least that I'm aware of -- Mrs. Obama also has a lot of affection for Mrs. Bush, as well. Over the years, they have had an opportunity to appear together at events, some of them somber and some of them celebratory. And, look, there's been a lot of discussion about how people who have served in the Oval Office, even if they have different political philosophies and belong to different political parties, have a lot of appreciation for people who have assumed similar burdens. And I think that's certainly true in this case.

The hug was not an indication that political difference of opinion have been resolved. But I think it is a reminder that people who have different views but love their country can find ways to cooperate in a way that's good for the country.

And, look, the President -- President Obama -- in his comments, made reference to the fact that it was President Bush that signed into law the bill that initiated the construction of the project. And I think it's an indication that, again, for our political differences, a

shared commitment to a set of basic American values is what has long made the United States of America the greatest country on Earth.

Q Josh, one more. On TPP. It's clearly one of the last big priorities of the administration. You just sent out a note from Secretary Pritzker highlighting the TPP benefits for small businesses. There is a sense on Capitol Hill that you're going to have to give something to McConnell and Ryan to get TPP through a lame duck session of Congress. Can you give us any hint about what you guys are willing to kind of give up to get this thing going? Are there discussions yet about this going on in the White House? Is there just sort of a wait for the election? Where are you on getting TPP done?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the administration is committed to working closely with Leader McConnell and Speaker Ryan's office to find the most effective path forward in Congress for the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Both Speaker Ryan and Leader McConnell, throughout their decades-long service in the Congress, have been ardent proponents of agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. So I'm not aware of any deal that's going to be cut. I think the case the President would make is consider your previous position and your philosophy on these kinds of issues and recognize that, regardless of the outcome of the presidential election, there's not likely to be a President sitting in the Oval Office for the next four years that supports this.

So there is a now-or-never element to this. But look, ultimately people like Leader McConnell and Speaker Ryan are experts in the legislative process and they certainly are experts when it comes to congressional politics. And in this case, our interests are aligned. We're eager to work with them to get this deal across the finish line, as are a number of outside organizations who wield significant influence in American politics but don't typically use that influence to advocate for President Obama's agenda. These are organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable and National Association of Manufacturers and the Farm Bureau -- these are all organizations, Republican-leaning organizations, that are strong supporters of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

So we certainly would count on them to also advance our case and to make clear to Republican leaders in Congress that this is an important priority for the country, an important priority for our economy. And we'll see what happens. Should make for an interesting fall and winter.

Toluse.

Q Thank you, Josh. You've talked a lot about the credibility of Russia in the Syrian issue, and said the credibility is -- their influence over the Assad regime is questionable. I'm wondering if the U.S. and the international community's credibility with the opposition forces is at risk, given the fact that you've advocated for two ceasefires that have fallen apart and right now members of the opposition are crying out against the silence of the international community. Do you worry that if you come back to the

opposition with a future deal that they're going to be less likely to put down their arms or separate themselves from Nusra because they worry about what's happened in the past and don't give the U.S. and the international community that public credibility?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, Toluse, the President and the administration are not going to be in a position of apologizing for advocating for peace. And that's what we have sought to do in the context of these protracted diplomatic discussions with the Russians.

Trying to get Russia -- the country that appears to have the most influence with the Assad regime -- to use that influence to protect innocent people has been our strategy, at least for trying to address the political situation in Syria. We've obviously had another very forceful strategy for countering extremist elements, including ISIL, inside of Iraq and in Syria that's involved carrying out 15,000 airstrikes and a number of other things. But when it comes to trying to address the kind of violence that's plagued communities like Aleppo, that's been our approach. And it's not like there are a whole bunch of other people advocating a different approach. There have not been a lot of specific alternative proposals that people are encouraging President Obama to pursue.

So with regard to opposition forces on the ground inside of Syria, our message to them has been -- for some of them, has been that we're very focused on ISIL and we want them to be focused on ISIL too. To the political opposition inside of Syria, our argument has been, we agree that a political transition inside of Syria is long overdue and we are deeply concerned by the increasing frequency with which the Assad regime has been willing to target civilian populations.

So those are -- that's in a nutshell has been President Obama's assessment of the situation. And given those facts on the ground, we have tried to pursue our goals with a clear-eyed sense of what our national security imperatives are and what our moral imperatives are. And even as the situation worsens and gets more difficult, we're still going to be guided by America's national security interest as the top priority, but also making sure that we're pursuing a strategy that's consistent with the kinds of values that we hold dear in this country.

Q On the crime stats that came out -- FBI Director Comey, last year, he talked a lot about a Ferguson effect, and now we are seeing -- at least in the numbers -- the number of homicides in violent crimes increasing between 2014 and 2015. Has that caused you to re-assess your reaction to the claim that there's been a Ferguson effect?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, based on the numbers that have been released today by the Department of Justice, I think even the Department of Justice has acknowledged that it's difficult to cite one specific cause for some of the changes that we see in the numbers.

Presumably, that's also true in the numbers that we've seen in the first six months of 2016 that indicate a reduction in violent crime in some of the same cities where there was an increase last year. So I guess the point is, collecting this data is important and it certainly gives academics and experts an opportunity to carefully evaluate the trends and try to determine whether there are some policy changes that would make our country safer.

The thing that we do know by looking at the broader trends is that violent crime in this country is at or near historic lows, and that's a good thing. But the President is certainly advocating for policies that he believes would drive those numbers down even further.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. Some FBI documents released last week showed the President used a pseudonym to email with Secretary Clinton. Can you shed any light on what that exactly - is that like a screenname or --

MR. EARNEST: Well, did you assume the President's email address was b.obama@whitehouse.gov? (Laughter.)

Q I did not.

MR. EARNEST: Okay, good. (Laughter.)

Q I tried it a few times. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Good. I see. I see. Good. So you didn't take it personally when you didn't get a response then?

Q That's true.

MR. EARNEST: That's good. That's good.

Listen, I think what it means is it means that there are some common-sense security measures that have been put in place to protect the President's email. I think for obvious reasons we don't discuss a lot of those measures publicly, but the fact that it's not easy to predict exactly what the President's email address is, is, in fact, one of those measures.

Q Can you shed any light on how he uses email? Is it common for him to communicate with other Cabinet Secretaries directly by email, or is it more of a -- does he send personal emails? How does he use it?

MR. EARNEST: There is a limited universe of people that can send emails to or receive emails from the President's email address. And, again, that is also a function of the security measures that we have in place. I don't know how many Cabinet members are in that universe. But I think the President largely uses email the way that other people do, too. He does a little business, but he also will exchange pleasantries and other personal notes via email as well. And I think Secretary Clinton -- at least based on the descriptions of the emails that he traded with Secretary Clinton indicate that that often is the nature of his conversations over email.

Q -- reports indicate that the President is using a secured government email device of some sort. Do you happen to know how emails on that account would be archived? Is every email he sends going to be considered a presidential record under the Presidential Record Act? Or are there going to be some personal correspondence that's exempt? Do you know anything about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I do know is I do know that all of the emails that he sends will be archived. I don't know how archivists will then treat that information, so I guess we'll have to see in the future. But I can confirm for you that those emails are saved consistent with the spirit of the Presidential Records Act.

Gregory.

Q Thank you, Josh. Do you email the President?

MR. EARNEST: I've emailed the President before, yes.

Q What about? (Laughter.)

Q What's the address? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I guess pursuant to --

Q Well, you come out here sometimes and you say, I've spoken to the President about something. Are those conversations always in the Oval Office? Or are there times when he will send you a message to relay to us through email?

MR. EARNEST: It's almost always in a face-to-face conversation with the President when I cite that experience.

Q So are -- you said they're both business-conducted and some pleasantries. Are they mostly pleasantries with you, or does --

MR. EARNEST: It's both. It's both. (Laughter.) This feels weirdly personal all of a sudden, doesn't it? (Laughter.)

Q Well, this is obviously unique in the history of the presidency.

MR. EARNEST: Sure, I know, I understand.

Q You have this now, as Byron alluded to, an historical record that will chronicle how the President's thinking on any given --

Q Is he worried about you as a family man? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I don't think that there will be a lot of anticipation on the part of historians eager to see what emails the President was trading with me. I don't think it will end up being that interesting. But, yes, some of it is work-related, some of it's not.

Q I mean, is he sending you like 50 emails a day, 200 emails a day? What is it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no, I don't think I'm going to get into a lot of detail about this, but, no, the President doesn't send nearly as many emails as I think probably everybody in this room is required to do, primarily because --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of. (Laughter.) Never in an email with me, I'll tell you that. But, look, the President also has a system that most of us don't benefit from, which is that he's got essentially a staff secretary that can make sure that memos and things are delivered directly to him and then are appropriately -- his response is appropriately circulated to people. So he doesn't rely on it -- need to rely on it in the same way that presumably all the rest of us do in terms of handling basic day-to-day functions.

Q Is it a volume as large as, say, that amassed by Secretary Clinton? That's what I'm trying to get at. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't characterize it further than that.

Dave, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. Back along the lines of Toluse's question on the FBI statistics. Coming at a time when there's so much focus on protests and police shootings, isn't the White House at all concerned that this one-year rise in crime is playing into Donald Trump's hands about his campaign message about restoring law and order in the country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I've not found that the release of new facts has much impact on the rhetoric we've seen on the campaign trail. So no, we have not been particularly concerned about that.

Q Okay. About the President's trip to Fort Lee on Wednesday to visit with the troops, obviously, can't -- politicking on a military base isn't allowed. And the President is going there to meet with troops, hold a town hall meeting. Yet, it's six weeks before a big election in a very important swing state, so how can you say this isn't at least a partly political trip?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Dave, I can tell you it's not a political trip. The President does not intend to do any politicking on a military base. I don't think the President should avoid traveling to a military base just because it's an election year; if anything, it's in the midst of an election year, we should have all that much more appreciation for the service and sacrifice that's made by our men and women in uniform and their families. And that's what the President will do when he travels to the military base, and there will be -- he expect to spend some time talking to servicemembers and their families, and then he also expects to spend some time answering some questions for a program that will be aired on CNN later that night.

But the President is very much looking forward to it. And I think it should be a good conversation.

Q Last question -- while he's there, does the President plan -- have any plans to highlight in particular the contributions of Muslim soldiers?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific plan that's in place for the President to do that, but I think there have been a number of other occasions where the President has had an opportunity to talk about the service and sacrifice of patriotic Muslims who serve in

the United States military. So that's not the express purpose of the trip, but if it comes up the President won't hesitate to talk about it.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow. Enjoy the debate.

END

2:29 P.M. EDT