

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/27/2014

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/27/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-8272014

August 27, 2014

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 27, 2014

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:22 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Let me begin with a quick statement here, and then we'll get started with your questions.

On Friday, September 12, the President will deliver remarks at a nationwide AmeriCorps Pledge ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House to mark the 20th anniversary of the national service program. This event will kick off a year of service for 75,000 AmeriCorps members from coast to coast, and recognize the 900,000 Americans who have served through AmeriCorps over the last two decades.

Additional details on the President's participation in the ceremony will be released as soon as they become available. So that will be something to look forward to here in a couple weeks.

Nedra, do you want to get us started?

Q I will. Thanks, Josh. Now that the President has met with Secretaries Hagel and Kerry, can you give us an update on the timeline for his thinking on Syria? Is there a decision imminent?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Nedra, I'm not in a position to read out those meetings. The President does on a regular basis meet with his Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State when they're in town. He does that weekly. But there are obviously a couple of things that they are discussing. The President and his team are closely watching the situation in Iraq and monitoring the ongoing military activities -- U.S. military activities against ISIL in Iraq to protect American citizens and interests in that country.

We're also carefully watching the efforts of Iraq's political leaders to form an inclusive government. It's important for the Iraqi people and for Iraq's political leaders to unite that country to face down the threat that's posed by ISIL. We have said all along that that

is a key component of the comprehensive strategy that the President is going to put in place, and has put in place, to deal with this situation.

There is not -- while this obviously is something that drives news coverage and captures the attention of the public, military action alone will not sufficiently confront ISIL and deal with that threat on a sustainable basis. Certainly there's a very important role for the American military to play and they can make a substantial contribution to stabilizing the security situation in that country. But for us to have a sustainable solution it's critically important for Iraq's political leaders to unite the country so that they can have a united front as they confront ISIL. That will allow them to have an integrated, sophisticated security force -- both an Iraqi security force and a Kurdish security force that can be on the ground fighting ISIL.

The United States is also deeply engaged in conversations with regional governments who obviously have a very clear, vested interest in the outcome. The United States is also in touch with our partners in Western Europe and around the globe to engage the international community in this effort.

So all of that is ongoing. And the President, in the course of the conversations that he had with the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense over the last couple of days, talked about this ongoing effort. But I'm not in a position at this point to give you with a whole lot of detail much insight into the kind of specific guidance that the President has received, or specific updates that the President has received on this situation.

Q Because he does often talk about wanting an international coalition, does he want to have a decision on Syria before he goes to NATO to discuss it with other world leaders?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would anticipate -- without previewing the meeting, I would anticipate that the threat that's posed by ISIL will be a topic of some conversation at that meeting. There obviously will be leaders of some countries that have a vested interest in that outcome. We also will have the leaders of some countries that we believe can and have already demonstrated their willingness to play a constructive role in dealing with this challenge. But I would not, at this point, set up a time frame for a presidential decision.

Q Has the President seen the video that Steven Sotloff's mother made appealing to ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the President has seen that video. It popped shortly before I came out here. I have seen the video and I've seen the news reports about the video. And obviously the thoughts and prayers of everybody here at the White House and the Obama administration are with the Sotloff family as they endure this very tragic situation.

As you know, this administration is deeply engaged and doing everything we can to seek the return of every American who is currently being held in that region. But I don't have an update in terms of the President's -- whether or not the President has seen the specific video in question.

Q Do you know if she ran that by anybody in the U.S. government, and if so, if she was discouraged or encouraged to do that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that the members of this administration have been in touch with the Sotloff family on a regular basis, but I don't have anything to share in terms of guidance that was offered to them about the wisdom of doing a video like this.

Q Do you think it was wise for her to do this, or could this put her son in more danger?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't venture an analysis on that question. She obviously, as is evident from the video, feels desperate about the safety and well-being of her son, and understandably so. And that is why our thoughts and prayers are with Mr. Sotloff's family at this very difficult and trying time.

Roberta.

Q You talked about engaging -- the United States government engaging regional governments and governments in Western Europe and around the globe on ISIL. I'm wondering if you can give us a list of countries that that U.S. has approached to be part of the coalition.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a large number of countries that the United States has engaged. We are obviously in regular conversation with many of our allies around the globe. We have been in touch with them on this particular issue over the last several weeks.

The thing that I would point out is that the Department of Defense just yesterday named seven different Western countries who are providing urgently needed arms and equipment to the Kurds. So that's one example of how our allies have been enlisted in this effort. There are a number of other countries both in the region and around the world that have made pledges of humanitarian support. There obviously is a very dire humanitarian situation in Iraq, a large number of displaced persons within that country. There are some religious and ethnic minorities in that country that are still at very grave risk from the violent extremists in ISIL. So there are a lot of ways in which countries around the world and countries in the region can contribute to solving this problem.

I think the other important role that I should point out here is there is an opportunity for some of the regional governments that do have some influence over the Sunni tribes in western Iraq that can be enlisted and engaged in the effort to beat back the threat that's posed by ISIL. And we certainly are interested in those governments in the region using their influence with Sunni tribal leaders in western Iraq to engage them in this effort.

There also is an opportunity for regional governments, as many of them have already, to step up and lend some support to moderate members of the Syrian opposition who are fighting ISIL forces in Syria.

So there are a large number of ways that countries around the world can contribute to this effort, and the United States, as the indispensable nation in the world, is playing a leading role in engaging countries around the world on this topic.

Q Has the United States commenced surveillance flights over Syria?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to talk about the operational details of the United States' surveillance and intelligence programs. What I think I mentioned yesterday is that there is an entire wing of the Pentagon that is responsible for developing contingency plans for the Commander-in-Chief if and when he should need them. Those plans are based on a number of things, including the analysis of intelligence. But aside from pointing out those facts, I'm not in a position to discuss or confirm reports of specific operational details related to America's intelligence programs.

Q Lastly, the President met with his economic advisors this morning. Can you tell us a little bit about -- more about that?

MR. EARNEST: The President did convene a meeting in the Roosevelt Room earlier today with members of his economic team. This included members of the Cabinet as well as senior economic advisors who work here at the White House. They discussed a broad range of things, including some of the broader trends that we're seeing as it relates to our economy. They discussed, among other things, the labor participation and some of things that we can do to address the labor participation rate as well as the long-term unemployment rate. These are a couple of the issues that are perceived by some who know a whole lot more about economics than I do that this is worthy of some attention. And there was a discussion of some policy options for dealing with and trying to mitigate some of the negative impacts that things like long-term unemployment are having on the economy.

But in terms of specific policy proposals or details, I'm not in a position to discuss them.

Nadia.

Q Josh, you stated that the U.S. policy is not to pay ransom for any terrorist organizations. Can you explain to us what's the difference between that and your negotiating with the Taliban to secure the release of a U.S. soldier in return for other people being accused of terrorism?

MR. EARNEST: I assume you're referring to the case of Sergeant Bergdahl?

Q Right.

MR. EARNEST: Let me say a couple of things about that. The first is that it is the policy of the United States of America that we do not pay ransom or make concessions to terrorist groups to secure the release of hostages. That is a policy that has been put in place for a couple of reasons. The first is it's well documented that many extremist

terrorist organizations use the revenue stream of ransoms to finance their broader operations. In some cases, that's actually the lifeblood of their organization -- is being able to collect these ransoms and to roll that money into broader operations.

Secondly, routinely paying ransoms only puts other innocent American citizens at risk of being kidnapped and held for ransom. And the last thing that we'd want to do is heighten the risk even more for innocent American citizens.

Now, in the case of Sergeant Bergdahl, the President of the United States is the Commander-in-Chief and he has a commitment to an unimpeachable value, which is ensuring that we do not leave men and women in uniform behind enemy lines in the hands of the enemy. And the President engaged in an effort that is typical of the end of armed conflicts for there to be prisoner exchanges. And that's what we saw in this case. In this case, Sergeant Bergdahl was returned to the U.S. in exchange for a handful of detainees from Guantanamo Bay. The Secretary of Defense certified that steps had been taken to sufficiently mitigate the threat that was posed by the release of those detainees from Guantanamo Bay, and therefore that transaction was executed and resulted in the safe return of Sergeant Bergdahl, whose safe return we celebrate and are certainly pleased by.

That said -- and I'll just finish up with this -- our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those innocent Americans who are being held hostage by extremist groups in the Middle East right now. And this administration is exerting significant influence and resources and time and effort to secure the release of those individuals. We will not pay ransom for them, but the United States is engaged diplomatically to try to secure their release.

The United States and the President on at least one occasion has ordered a military mission to try to free those hostages. The mission was well-executed. It did not, however, result in the release or the rescue of hostages. But it does demonstrate the commitment of this administration to use even very extreme and risky measures to try to save the lives of innocent American civilians who are being held hostage.

Q But you have 8,000 people signing a petition on the White House website demanding that doing something extra for the release of Steve Sotloff does not change the policy. They don't think it's going to change the administration policy.

MR. EARNEST: We feel the circumstances of Mr. Sotloff's hostage-taking are tragic, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family. And the United States is committed to doing everything that we can to try to recover him and rescue him safely and as soon as possible. We certainly would call on those who are holding him to release him.

But it is the policy of the United States, and has been for quite some time, that this government does not pay ransom for American hostages. And not only do we not -- well, and we don't ask others to pay ransom to secure the release of American hostages, for the reasons that I laid out -- that it only serves to allow those terrorist organizations to

finance their operations, and it only puts at greater risk the lives of other American civilians.

Let's move around a little bit. Roger.

Q Josh, can you talk a little bit about the recruitment campaign again, other countries? And who is leading it within the government? Is NSC leading? Is the Secretary of State? How does that work?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't -- "recruitment campaign" I think is your word, not a word that I did use or would use, even in this situation. I think what I would do is I would -- let's take a step back -- and I know that typically those are the kinds of the words that would make you cringe, but hear me out here. The sense of a lot of people who are perceiving this situation is that the most important powerful and effective tool in the President's toolbox is kinetic military action. And there is no doubt that forceful military action can play a role in stabilizing the security situation in Iraq. But what we have learned in very vivid terms over the last decade or so is that a U.S.-led military operation is not an enduring solution to this situation.

After all, more than 100,000 American troops spent nearly a decade in Iraq to try to resolve the security situation in Iraq. And it did create a very important opportunity for the Iraqi people and Iraq's political leaders to seize a stable security situation and try to put in place an inclusive government that reflected the values and interests of everybody all across that country.

Tragically and disappointingly, Iraq's political leaders did not do that, and they pursued a more narrow sectarian agenda that caused -- that put a lot of pressure on that country, and caused it to be so weakened that an extremist organization like ISIL could step right in and make significant territorial gains across the country. That is prima facie evidence that American military might alone cannot solve this problem on a sustainable basis.

What's needed is a more comprehensive solution, and that comprehensive solution certainly includes the use of American military force, but what's also required is the engagement of, first and foremost, an inclusive Iraqi government that can rally the country and unite the country in the face of this existential threat that they face. That also will have the effect of strengthening their security forces, knowing -- members of their security force can know that they're fighting on behalf of and in support of and in defense of a united country. That will also improve coordination between the Kurdish security forces and Iraqi security force.

There's also an important role for regional governments to play and then for governments around the world to play, in no small part because of the threat that's posed by foreign fighters.

So this element of outreach to countries around the globe to engage them in this effort is part and parcel of the comprehensive strategy that this President has laid out for -- had laid out initially in his West Point speech, but it was discussed on several occasions since then.

So I know that there are some headlines in the paper today that would lead some to believe that the United States has begun a new diplomatic effort in pursuit of this one goal. The fact is this element of our strategy is something that we've communicated on multiple occasions and will continue to be a critical part of whatever success we have in facing down the threat of ISIL.

Q And about my cringing here --

MR. EARNEST: Thank you for your patience. I appreciate it.

Q Okay. But back to my question. Can you talk about how is the outreach working? Who's doing what?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this kind of outreach takes place at a variety of levels. Obviously, the State Department, as the chief diplomatic arm of the United States government, has a very important role to play as they talk to their counterparts about this challenge. The United States Department of Defense has very important military-to-military relationships that they can leverage. There also are important relationships in the intelligence community. The U.S. intelligence community obviously has very deep relationships with countries not just in the region but around the world where they can use some knowledge and analysis to benefit this ongoing effort.

Q Are these people asking countries to sign up?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say one other thing. You've also seen readouts from the President of the United States where he's calling his counterparts around the world to talk to them about this situation. So this outreach and engagement is taking place at the highest levels, but is also taking place at levels where you'd expect -- the Department of Defense, the State Department and the intelligence community, to name just few.

Q Just a quick follow-up. Susan Rice's role?

MR. EARNEST: As the National Security Advisor, she obviously has an important role to play. She has counterparts with whom she speaks regularly.

Q She's on the phone, too, then?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any -- I'm not in a position to detail any specific phone calls that anybody is making at this point other than the calls that the President has made that we've already read out. But she certainly is involved in this effort in the same way that many other senior members of the President's team are involved.

Let me jump around just a little bit. Justin.

Q I wanted to ask about the story that was in the Times today about the administration pushing for an international voluntary treaty on climate change. I know that Jen Psaki put out a statement today saying that nothing is down on paper yet, but I'm wondering,

first, if you could just speak generally if the White House supports expanding the '92 U.N. treaty with voluntary commitments, including the kind of name-and-shame strategy that was described in the Times report.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll say a couple things about that. I mean, the President has articulated a number of times just this year the need to address the threat that climate change poses both to human health and to our economy. That's why he put forward a comprehensive plan to cut carbon pollution and prepare the United States for the impacts of climate change while also leading an international effort to combat global climate change.

The plan that he laid out built on some of the steps that he has already taken, including doubling fuel economy standards, significantly increasing -- more than doubling the production of wind and solar. The President put in place, his administration put in place the first-ever limits on carbon pollution from power plants and has put forward a strategy to reduce methane emissions. So there are a whole range of ways in which this administration has moved forward to try to address what the President has identified as a priority, reducing the impact, the causes of climate change.

Now, what we've also said is the President has taken these steps on his own, but we would welcome any sort of cooperation we would receive from anybody on Capitol Hill, Democrat or Republican, who would be willing to engage and work side by side with the administration to make progress on some of these goals. There's important legislation that could be passed in pursuit of these goals.

What's also true is the President hasn't been shy about trying to lead on the international stage as well. So you saw that the President play an important role in Copenhagen in 2009 in trying to broker some agreements. In his conversations with leaders in India and China and other countries, the President talks regularly about joint steps that can be taken to reduce the causes of climate change. There was an important agreement related to HFCs that the President announced after his meeting with President Xi of China last year on this issue. So this is something that the President regularly raises in international forums as well.

So as Jen pointed out in her statement, there is no written agreement at this point, but based on what you just heard me recite about the priority the President places on dealing with climate change, you won't be surprised to hear that this is something that members - - or officials at the State Department are working on very closely and intensely at this point.

Because that agreement is not written, it's not yet clear exactly what sort of role Congress would be required to play. Will this be the kind of an agreement that would require congressional approval in terms of exceeding to a treaty, or is this the kind of an agreement that would be what's been described in the past as a political agreement in which there would be a little transparency about which organization or which countries are living up to the standards that are reaching the agreement and which aren't? So

we'll work through those details in advance of the 2015 meeting in Paris, but this is something that the administration, principally through the State Department, is very hard at work on.

Q Sure, but I mean I guess all of that didn't quite answer my question of if the administration supports --

MR. EARNEST: It didn't? (Laughter.) It's a lot. Surely something in there must have.

Q -- if the administration actually supports the tenets that were kind of mentioned in the Times article, this name-and-shame idea and the voluntary expansion of the '92 treaty with partner countries.

MR. EARNEST: I see. The agreement hasn't been written yet so I don't want to get ahead of sort of what may be included in the agreement or what we're pushing to include in the agreement. We're pushing to broker the kind of an agreement that would tangibly have an impact on reducing the causes of climate change and the causes of the kinds of pollution that have such a detrimental effect on public health in this country and in communities all around the world.

So we're pushing hard on this. The President has played a leading role on this in the past and he is going to play a leading role on it this time. But in terms of what the details are going to be in that agreement, they haven't even started writing the agreement yet so it's hard for me to say. I will say that as a strategy, the name-and-shame thing that you are citing is a strategy that proved to be pretty effective as it relates to the agreement that was brokered in Copenhagen in 2009, so I certainly wouldn't rule out that strategy. But what strategy we'll eventually pursue will be dictated by the content of the agreement.

Q And then the last thing on this. Obviously there was kind of outrage on Capitol Hill from Republicans, but also Nick Rahall --

MR. EARNEST: There sort of is about everything these days, though, right?

Q -- a Democrat from West Virginia said that he'd do anything he could to stop the administration from working kind of outside the confines of a Senate treaty. He said it's fruitless to negotiate agreements with the world that can't even muster the support of the American people. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit -- this is a Democrat.

MR. EARNEST: There is a little flaw in that argument, right? But I do think that just because Congress doesn't support it doesn't mean the American people won't support it. There are a whole lot of things the American people support right now that Congress doesn't and that Congress has refused to act on. So I don't think it's -- but I didn't mean to interrupt your question, I apologize. Keep going.

Q Well, I mean, you kind of addressed it, but obviously complaints are coming from Republicans, too, on this issue of if you work on an agreement -- obviously nothing is on paper so we're talking a bit hypothetically, which I know that you're always reluctant to do, but --

MR. EARNEST: I'll give you a little latitude.

Q If you're negotiating a treaty that does not require Senate approval or an agreement that does not require Senate approval, is that a tougher sell to world leaders, and is it tougher to kind of enforce and put the weight of the United States behind it if it doesn't have that Senate approval?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll see, I think is the answer to that question. I think that -- let me try to answer your question this way. We would not want to enter a situation where we did try to broker an agreement that did require some sort of Senate ratification and then have that fall victim once again, as so many other priorities have, to dysfunction in Congress. So we're going to weigh all of these priorities about how impactful they can be with the international community, whether it reduces their influence with the international community to live up to these agreements, what's the likelihood that Congress would sort of buck their own reputation for inaction and actually take some important steps on something as important as reducing the causes of climate change. So I think all of these things will have to be evaluated in the context of the negotiations and in the context of the content that's ultimately included in the agreement.

Mara.

Q You've been pretty clear about what has to happen in addition to military action in Iraq.

MR. EARNEST: I've tried to be.

Q What's the equivalent in Syria? In other words, what's the comprehensive strategy for Syria other than any potential strikes that you guys might decide to make on ISIS's safe haven there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the elements of that strategy would not be entirely dissimilar from the elements of the strategy that we're pursuing in Iraq.

Q -- an inclusive government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that's a good question. I think it means supporting elements of the moderate opposition that have demonstrated a desire to lead that country in a way that reflects the diversity of interests in that country. That, after all, is what the moderate opposition has been fighting for, for more than three years now. So that's why you've seen the administration support elements of the moderate opposition.

We would continue to engage regional governments to continue their support for the moderate opposition. Again, this would be part and parcel of pursuing the kind of political strategy that would unite the country of Syria. After all, right now, because of the sectarian way in which the Assad regime has both governed but also attacked their own people, it has created what is essentially a de facto safe haven for extremists like ISIL to thrive. That's why, particularly in Syria, it is important that ultimately -- I recognize this

is a longer-term goal, this is not something that's going to happen next week -- but ultimately that there is leadership in Syria that can unite the country of Syria to confront this threat that's posed by ISIL.

That's why we have been supporting the moderate elements of the Syrian opposition. That's why we'll continue to. It's why we'll continue to encourage regional governments to support the moderate opposition in Syria. We've also seen significant contributions from the United States, principally, but also from other countries around the world, in support of trying to meet the humanitarian needs of displaced persons in Syria. There is obviously a very important humanitarian need there that has existed for quite some time.

So those elements of the strategy will continue as well. The broader question and the question that is in the minds of people who are asking some questions in this room and are writing some stories in the newspaper is what role does the United States military have in that strategy, and that does continue to be an open question.

Q Right, but there's no peace process. I mean, in Iraq, there's an actual effort to form this inclusive government. I mean, there are things happening. But Syria is just in a civil war. There's nothing diplomatic going on.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there have been periodically over the years conversations between the Assad regime and the elements of the moderate opposition in Syria. There's no doubt that there has not been the kind of cooperation among -- just internally within different elements of the moderate Syrian opposition that we would like to see to present a united front when they negotiate with Assad. So I'm not trying to downplay the challenge we have there. They're significant, particularly when it comes to trying to find the kind of political agreement that will be required to ultimately resolve that civil war in Syria. But this is something that the President is routinely looking at. We've said many times here that we're always reviewing our strategy for dealing with Syria, and that continues to be true today.

Bill.

Q So that moderate opposition you just referred to would be the same collection of doctors and dentists that the President once described as delusional to think that if we had armed them they would have been able to do anything in Syria? I mean, what are you talking about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I'm talking about the fact, Bill, that there is not a military solution to the situation in Syria. And this is something we've talked about for quite some time. It's going to require very difficult political accommodation and negotiation to try to broker an agreement among the disparate elements of the moderate opposition, and to try to reach an agreement that would allow Assad to step aside and allow a more moderate governing coalition to take hold and to govern the nation of Syria.

This is a longer-term prospect. I'm not trying to dissuade you from that. But certainly the doctors and dentists that you have describe ostensibly --

Q The President did.

MR. EARNEST: -- are likely to be better at forming an inclusive, sort of professional government than they are going to be dug into the trenches facing the hardened fighters that are being armed by Mr. Assad.

Q And the unity in outreach effort that you so eloquently described a moment ago --

MR. EARNEST: Thank you.

Q -- does this have to be completed before there's any possibility of armed action against -- in Syria against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: My expectation would be that this element of engaging the international community would be something that is -- you described it I think in your question as being "done" -- I don't think we'll ever be in a situation where we're done talking with our international partners about what can be done to address the situation in Iraq and Syria as they confront the threat that's posed by ISIL. That's something that will be ongoing.

I don't think we'll ever reach a point where we say, okay, we're done coordinating with the international community on this. We're going to need the sustained, committed involvement of the international community to support the efforts of an inclusive Iraqi government to use their influence with Sunni tribes that can be helpful in the situation. This is going to require a sustained effort, and this administration is willing to lead that sustained effort to get it done.

Q And the President could decide at any point on this continuum to allow bombing inside Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, sure. And the President has said that he is -- maybe the President hasn't said this, but the President's National Security Advisor has said the President will not hesitate where necessary to order the use of military force to protect Americans in that region. And that continues to be true.

Q If you'll just tell us when the decision is coming, that would be helpful. (Laughter.) One quick thing. Do you have anything on Ukraine saying that they've been invaded by the Russians at the port way south from where the action has been taking place?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we have seen from the Russians is a continued effort to destabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine --

Q This is specifically today.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, and I've seen those specific reports. I'm not in a position to offer our own analysis of that information on military movement. But if true, it would be consistent with the other kinds of destabilizing military activities that Russia has pursued in Ukraine. These are the same kinds of activities that the international community has

called on President Putin to end, and these are the same kinds of military activities that have earned or caused the international community to impose a pretty significant cost on the Russians and on the Russian economy as a result.

What we would like to see is Russia to roll back their military from across the border, to stop providing weapons and materiel and training to the separatists, and to use their influence with the separatists to try to reach a political agreement with the Ukrainian government.

Ed.

Q Josh, I know earlier you said that the Pentagon has an entire wing that does planning. So we can't always read into that -- planning takes place all the time.

MR. EARNEST: It does.

Q But last night on CNN, Marie Harf, your counterpart at the State Department, said the Pentagon has given the President "a range of planning options." That would be a little bit different than them just planning, to actually give it to the President. Is that true? Does the President have planning options for bombing Syria to deal with ISIS from the Pentagon?

MR. EARNEST: What the Pentagon has made clear -- I think this is what my colleague was referring to -- they've made clear that they are prepared to offer the President contingencies. As you point out, they're always doing the kind of planning that's required to meet the requests and needs of the Commander-in-Chief, that if he should order military action, they want to make sure that they have plans available to carry out that action.

But I'm not in a position to disclose what sort of plans or conversations the President has had with his military planners. So I can't confirm those individual reports because I'm just not going to be in a position to get into those detailed conversations. But I think what she's referring to is just this idea that the Department of Defense is routinely engaged in developing contingency plans for the President and can be readying to present them to him if and when he needs them.

Q On Syria, tomorrow the U.N. Security Council is meeting to discuss a commission report they put together about the broader humanitarian crisis. But in there -- which is obviously very serious, beyond just ISIS -- but in there, the report claims that ISIS and other armed groups have been carrying out chemical attacks. So my question is, since that was a red line for the President previously, in a different context, with President Assad using chemical weapons, if the U.N. is correct that ISIS is using chemical weapons in Syria or elsewhere, that's a war crime. Does that constitute U.S. military action? Is that a red line?

MR. EARNEST: Ed, I'm not aware that the United States has assessed that ISIL actually has used chemical weapons, so we'll have to check on that for you. The United States is very interested in working through the U.N. to address so many of the challenges that

we're faced with in Syria. As we've discussed before, both Russia and China have played a pretty negative role in the effort to mobilize the international community on this.

But there is one important thing that the U.N. Security Council can do, and they will do this next month -- the President is going to convene a U.N. Security Council meeting to discuss the threat that's posed by foreign fighters, and that will be an important opportunity for the President to discuss with the leaders of the world what can be done cooperatively to try to counter the threat that those individuals with Western passports might pose to Western governments.

Q On that point, I haven't heard you -- you haven't been asked yet about Douglas McArthur McCain, the American killed in Syria over the weekend, allegedly fighting on behalf of ISIS. What's the President's reaction to an American citizen going over there -- amid all the turmoil and all the crisis and the President saying what a grave threat this is -- that an American citizen is -- and others apparently -- fighting on behalf of ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't spoken to the President about it. And we are in a position to confirm the death of one U.S. citizen, Douglas McArthur McCain, in Syria who was fighting on behalf of ISIL, who was affiliated with them.

There are thousands of foreign fighters from more than 50 countries -- or up to 50 countries who have traveled to Syria to take up arms alongside ISIL. We are very concerned about the risk that those individuals pose to the 50 countries from which they traveled. In many cases, these are individuals that have Western passports. They have some freedom of movement in our modern transportation system. And we are working cooperatively with Interpol and other law enforcement agencies, as well as the homeland security agencies in countries throughout the West and in the region to try to monitor the movements of these individuals and to mitigate the threat that they may pose.

These are individuals who have been radicalized. These are individuals who've received some military training. In some cases, they're battle tested, and they've demonstrated, as Mr. McCain did, a willingness to die for their cause. This means that we are -- this is one of the reasons why -- this is something we're concerned about and have been working not just over the last several weeks but something we've been working on for months. I know this is something that Attorney General Holder has spoken about quite a bit in his conversations with his counterparts principally in Western Europe.

I mentioned earlier that the President's chief counterterrorism advisor, Lisa Monaco, has been very focused on this, and she's traveled both in the region but also throughout Europe to discuss efforts to coordinate our efforts to protect the West from these individuals.

Q Last one. In the speech yesterday, the President talked about James Foley, the beheading, and said that he vowed justice will be done. And I wonder if you could be more specific. It's a broad statement to say that justice will be done. And you've been saying that it's not just military action, that it would have to be a range of things. And Senator McCain today was critical and said, "There is no strategy. They flail from one

issue to another, reacting rather than acting.” What is the strategy then? For the President to say, we’re going to root out the cancer, that’s more of a slogan than a strategy, isn’t it? What does that mean, “root out the cancer”? How?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that, as I’ve mentioned in answer to Roger’s question, the President has laid out a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the threat posed by ISIL. This includes elements of American military might. It also includes using our diplomatic influence to engage regional governments in countries around the world in terms of fighting ISIL. But we’re going to need an inclusive Iraqi government that’s stable, that can unite the country to meet the existential threat that exists inside their country right now.

I do want to make one note about the Republican criticism that you cited. It stands in stark contrast to criticism that’s been leveled by other Republicans. I want to note that Congressman Peter King -- he’s a member of the Homeland Security Committee and chairman of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence -- and he criticized President Obama, saying, “I can’t understand why a Commander-in-Chief would ever tell the enemy what we’re going to do or not do.” Congressman Mac Thornberry is the vice chair of Armed Services Committee and a member of the Intelligence Committee in the House. He’s a Republican; he’s criticized the President by saying, “The first thing we should do is quit talking about what we’re not going to do. When the President takes options off the table that only simplifies the planning of ISIS.”

I read you these two quotes to illustrate that there appears to be some disagreement among members of the Republican Party who are looking to capitalize politically on this situation. Some Republicans want to say that the President is not doing enough to describe what he’s thinking, and there are some Republicans who say the President has described too much of what he’s thinking. That’s why we’re not focused on the politics. The President is focused on putting in place a strategy that can successfully defend the interests of the United States of America.

Jim.

Q To jump off of that, is the President’s strategy to defeat ISIL -- defeat ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, first and foremost, Jim, the President’s strategy is to protect Americans who are in harm’s way. There are Americans in Iraq right now whose safety is threatened by the recent advance of ISIL across western and northern Iraq. That’s why the President ordered military strikes, and it’s why the President has been so deeply engaged, and the Vice President and others deeply engaged in encouraging the Iraqi government to unite that country in the face of that threat.

But principally, the President is focused on protecting the national security of the United States of America, and in this case protecting American personnel that are in harm’s way.

Q That’s sort of a different question, though. Does he want to defeat --

MR. EARNEST: Well, you asked me what our goals were, and that is the goal. And that is the goal the President has in mind.

Q If you have cancer, typically you want to defeat cancer. You don't want to die from cancer, right?

MR. EARNEST: I'll agree to that.

Q If ISIS is a cancer, does he want to defeat it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, of course, Jim. But the goal of this action and what the President is focused on as we pursue this strategy that includes elements of American military might, that includes diplomacy with governments in the region and around the world, that includes our intensive conversations with Iraq's political leaders to unite that country -- our focal point here is safeguarding the American people and putting the foreign policy interests of the United States first and foremost. In this case, that means ensuring the safety and security of American personnel who are in Iraq right now. They have some important work to be done there, and we want to make sure that they can be safe while they do that important work.

Q And I know you had some questions earlier about a time frame for options on Syria -- ISIS in Syria. Is there an urgency for the developing -- or for the development of those options? Is it crunch time?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that this is a situation that the President and his team is watching very closely, and the President is getting regular updates both on our military activities there, but also in assessing the capabilities and movements of ISIL, principally because he's concerned about the safety and well-being of American citizens who are in that region.

The President is also getting regular diplomatic updates about the response that we're getting from countries around the world as we try to enlist them in this effort. The President is also getting regularly briefed and updated on the political situation in Iraq. A critical component of this solution is an inclusive Iraqi government that can unite the country and that can marshal a sophisticated and integrated Iraqi security force that can be on the ground and meet the existential threat that that country faces right now.

Q And there was some conversation, some discussion about the ethnic Shiite Turkmen in northern Iraq. Iraqi forces have been evacuating them from that region because of the threat posed by ISIS. Is there a similar humanitarian situation taking shape there that might lead the President to decide on a Mount Sinjar-type operation in that part of Iraq?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to get ahead of any decisions that the President may make. But I did refer earlier to our concern about religious and ethnic minorities in different communities in Iraq that are being persecuted and are at risk of terrible violence from ISIL right now.

Q That's the situation you're watching?

MR. EARNEST: That's certainly something that -- that, and other situations like it is certainly something that we're watching. The President has demonstrated our nation's interest in preventing humanitarian massacres or even genocides like that.

Q And just to jump to domestic politics -- Republicans in recent days have talked about the prospect of a continuing resolution vote in the fall being used as leverage to block the President from taking executive action on immigration. That, of course, raises the prospect of a government shutdown.

MR. EARNEST: It does.

Q Do you think a government shutdown might happen this fall?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have no idea. It certainly was a shame when --

Q You're not in a position to say whether there will be a government shutdown?

MR. EARNEST: It certainly was a shame when Republicans engaged in a strategy to shut down the government over the Affordable Care Act. And that was -- there were bad consequences for that government shutdown. It certainly did have a negative impact on our economy. And we would hope that Republicans wouldn't do the same thing again, to shut down the government over a common-sense, bipartisan effort to try to mitigate at least some of the worst problems that are caused by our broken immigration system.

Q Might that make the President think twice about taking executive action on immigration?

MR. EARNEST: No, it won't, because the President is determined to take the kind of common-sense steps that are required to address the worst problems of our broken immigration system. Nothing the President does is a replacement for the kind of robust solution that passed with bipartisan support through the United States Senate, but the President is determined to act where House Republicans won't. And there is strong support for that all across the country -- from the business community, the labor community, law enforcement, even senior members of the faith community, some of whom -- many of whom, I'm sure, didn't vote for Democrats in recent elections but are supportive of trying to put in place policies that will address some of the worst inequities of our broken immigration system.

So, again, it would be a real shame if Republicans were to engage in an effort to shut down the government over a common-sense solution like that. But they've done it before, and hopefully they won't do it again.

Jared.

Q Josh, this has been asked a couple different ways, so just forgive me for trying one more time. What, if anything, is the administration doing to prevent ISIS from having a future operational safe haven across the border in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a couple of things that we're engaged in here. Principally, this is a challenge that cannot be answered or at least -- let me say it this way.

Q You've been telling us what you can't do. I'm asking what is --

MR. EARNEST: It's important for us to keep that lesson in mind, right? We don't want to repeat some of the mistakes of the past and just assume that the robust and aggressive use of our very impressive military, that that alone can solve this problem on an enduring basis. If we actually want to sustain an enduring solution, it's going to require other elements of American power and influence to get that done. That means enlisting the international community, both regional governments that have a very clear, vested interest in the outcome, as well as countries around the globe. It's going to require elements of the moderate opposition in Syria to step up to coordinate amongst themselves to do a better job of coordinating and cooperating amongst themselves to meet the threat that's posed by ISIL. So there is a strategy --

Q Wasn't that coordination being done to counter the threat that Bashar al-Assad was posing and not necessarily the threat that ISIS was posing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it was both. Even the reports of the death of the American who was fighting in Syria on behalf of ISIL, he was reportedly killed by elements of the moderate opposition as they were fighting ISIS elements in their country. So it's no secret that the moderate opposition is fighting not just the Assad regime but also the dangerous elements of ISIL as well.

Q So do you think that there will be a time in the near future when ISIS won't have an operational safe haven in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it certainly would be very dangerous for them to have an enduring safe haven in Syria. I guess I would say that that's -- I might point out that that's another lesson that we've learned in terms of trying to protect American national security, that giving terrorists with violent aspirations a safe haven from which to operate for an extended period of time has very dangerous consequences for American national security as well.

Olivier.

Q Josh, one, and then a follow-up. Does the President consider ISIL to be a state-sponsored terrorist group?

MR. EARNEST: That is a question I have not contemplated.

Q The follow-up will probably shed a little bit of light, which is that we've heard a lot about your comprehensive strategy about Iraq, about the combination of military force and diplomatic pressure and the rest of it, but what about the components of starving ISIL of financial support from states around the region? I mean, for a long time now, American officials have complained about money flowing from individuals and possibly

even states in the region to the more extremist elements. So what I'm trying to get at is whether your comprehensive plan envisions piling on the pressure to those states to either stop state support or stop individual support.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me tentatively accept the premise of your question and say that we do believe that there are a range of ways that regional governments and governments around the globe can play a constructive role in trying to counter the threat that's posed by ISIL. One of the things that I mentioned earlier was that there is probably an opportunity for some regional governments to use their influence with the Sunni tribes in western Iraq to enlist them in the effort to defeat ISIL. That would be a way that governments could leverage their relationship with individuals to play a constructive role in this effort.

If there were an opportunity for governments to play a similar role as it relates to those individuals who are financially supporting ISIL, then we certainly would welcome that contribution as well. I will say that my understanding is that the majority of financing for ISIL's activities comes from their own organizational efforts, so to speak -- that ISIL is engaged in shakedowns in local communities that they run.

Q Money from --

MR. EARNEST: Yes. And so, that that is the principal way. And ransoming hostages is something else that they do that has also bankrolled their efforts as well. So any part of -- and David Cohen over at the Treasury Department will be the first to tell you that one important way that you can counter these kinds of threats is to shut off their access to money. And, in fact, that's one of the things that makes ISIL so dangerous, is they've already demonstrated that they have significant access to large sums of money, and that will make them difficult to confront.

Q But just one more bite at this. Since the Syrian uprising began, there has been a disagreement between the United States and some of its regional allies about how to go about funding, equipping, training or arming opposition to Bashar al-Assad. And I guess what I'm trying to get at is how much of the problem being faced today in the region from ISIL stems from that disagreement. In other words, are you seeing nominal partners and allies who over the past couple of years have provided resources to ISIL? How much of a problem has that been? Has it stopped? Are you confident that today that's not happening anymore?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's probably a difficult assessment to deliver from here. I think I would observe that it is in the clear interest of the vast majority of countries in this region for a violent destabilizing entity like ISIL to fail. And that is why we are engaged in an effort to enlist these regional governments in the effort to counter ISIL; that there is an opportunity for these regional governments to do a variety of things -- whether it's contributing humanitarian aid, using their political influence with individual communities in this region, or even contributing to the military effort -- that there are a lot of things that those regional governments can do. And it does seem, at least on the

face of it, based on my own very simple-minded analysis, that they have a pretty clear interest in doing that.

Chris, I don't think I've gotten to you yet, and I apologize for the delay in doing so.

Q Not at all. The President has spoken often about common-sense gun laws. And I just wonder in that context if he has seen the video or had a reaction to the 9-year-old who was at a firing range with an Uzi and killed her gun instructor, shot her gun instructor?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, I saw those news reports. I haven't seen the video, and so I guess it's hard to comment on the situation without knowing the details of the circumstances in which this occurred. I know they were at a gun range, and I know this was an instructor who tragically was killed in this -- what apparently was an accident.

But it certainly doesn't change anything about the President's views that there can and should be more that Congress can do to pass legislation that would keep guns out of the hands of those individuals who shouldn't have them. What impact that kind of legislation would have on this situation is difficult to assess without knowing the circumstances here. But it's certainly -- tragic incidents like this certainly don't undermine the case that the President has been making on this.

Q And if I can go back, a very different topic, back to Iraq and the Turkmen minority. And can you give us a sense of is there a bar or what the President is looking at in considering where he does these humanitarian airdrops?

MR. EARNEST: Well, generally speaking, there is significant capability that our Department of Defense has to carry out defense -- to carry out humanitarian aid drops like those we saw near the Sinjar Mountains. So these kinds of options are on the table because they do alleviate some of the suffering that is sustained by religious and ethnic minorities that are being persecuted, or at least threatened by ISIL.

In terms of this specific situation, I can't comment on the President's latest thinking in terms of what sort of American intervention, or if an American intervention is being contemplated. But this is the kind of situation that the President has ordered military action in support of in the past. And this particular situation is one that the President and his national security team continues to watch very closely.

JC, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. How concerned --

MR. EARNEST: Actually, Lalit, I'll give you the last one. Let's do JC, and then we'll go to you.

Q Want him to go first, then I can do the last one?

MR. EARNEST: No, go ahead.

Q How concerned is this administration that once again the United States will bear the major burden when it comes to financial costs and the cost of human treasure as this particular situation possibly escalates?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll say two things about that. The first is the President has demonstrated that he is prepared to expend significant resources to protect American personnel in that region; that we have important interests there, and we have a large number of American personnel in that region. They were in harm's way as ISIL was making their advance across western and northern Iraq. And the President did not hesitate to expend resources to protect them. That will not change.

However, we know that this effort will be more successful and the solution more enduring if we can succeed in engaging the international community to contribute. And that's why we are hopeful that Iraq's government will succeed in forming an inclusive government that will unite the country against ISIL.

We're going to continue our intensive diplomacy with governments in the region to enlist them in this effort, and we're going to continue to have the kinds of conversations with our allies around the globe that we have on a range of issues to talk about what they can do to address this situation.

And whether it's providing humanitarian aid, whether it's offering additional training assistance or equipment to Iraqi and Kurdish security forces -- if it's political leverage that they have with individual communities or tribal leaders, for example, inside of Iraq to enlist the efforts of those tribes or individuals in this effort, then we'll ask those governments to use them as well. So there are wide range of ways in which members of the international community and regional governments can participate in this effort. And we're going to continue to try to enlist them in it.

Q Would this possibly include meetings next week in Wales?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I think I mentioned earlier, this is certainly a topic that I'm sure will come up for some discussion, but I wouldn't preview what those discussions are at this point.

Q Thank you, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Lalit, last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. I'd like to check with you if the President got a chance to speak to Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel this week on their recent trip to India. How was it? What's the feedback he received from them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Lalit, as you know, the President after the election of Prime Minister Modi invited him to Washington. We're still working on locking down a date. The President does look forward to meeting with the Prime Minister at a mutually convenient time.

In the meantime, both Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel have traveled to India to meet with their counterparts. I believe that at least one of them met with Prime Minister Modi, as well.

Q Both of them.

MR. EARNEST: Both of them did -- to discuss the very broad relationship between the United States and India. Items on the agenda included national security and counterterrorism cooperation for sure. There were also discussions about the economic ties and trade relationship that exists between India and the United States.

As I mentioned to somebody earlier, when talking about climate change, that this is an issue that is constantly on the agenda when there are discussions between high-level members of the U.S. government and high-level members of the Indian government. So there is a rich, robust relationship between the United States and India. That was on display when the President hosted Prime Minister Modi's predecessor for a state dinner here at the White House early in the first term of this administration. And the President looks forward to building on that relationship when he meets with Prime Minister Modi at a time -- sometime soon.

Thanks a lot, everybody. Have a good one.

END

2:27 P.M. EDT