

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 6/12/2014

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: All right, I know this is confusing. I am not an Oakland A's fan, but I am wearing this because last night the 12-U Bethesda-Chevy Chase Select baseball team completed an undefeated season by winning the championship. And I want to congratulate my son's team and all the players and the coach, Arnie Brooks, who is a great, great guy. So here's to the BCC A's.

And that is the only announcement I have at the top, so I'll go right to your questions -- except to say that the President, as you know, does have an event at 2:00 p.m. We're going to keep the briefing, unless everybody decides they want to run over and cover that. But I just wanted to note that that is currently on schedule. And if anybody needs to go over, that's fine, we'll keep going.

Jim.

Q Thanks, Jay. Just to clarify something on behalf of my colleagues -- this is not your swan song today, is that correct?

MR. CARNEY: It's not -- probably not. We'll see. It depends on how it goes. (Laughter.) Can I decide that at the end? I might have one more in me.

Q Okay. Jay, the President just today, with Prime Minister Abbott, said that the U.S. is prepared to take military action when our national security is threatened. Does the Islamic State of Iraq represent a threat to U.S. national security?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as the President said, Jim, we are very concerned about the ISIL and the extremist threat in northwestern Iraq and the bordering region with Syria. And there is no question that Iraq is a strong and important partner to us. That is why we have the collaborative relationship with Iraq that we have. That is why we have provided substantial assistance to Iraq, including military assistance. And we have increased that

assistance over the past year as the challenges posed by the unrest, the civil war in Syria have spilled over, and now in the last several days caused great concern with what's happening in Iraq.

So what the President made clear was that we have been providing a significant amount of assistance to Iraq, including military hardware. I believe Josh detailed some of that the other day. And we are actively considering requests from the Iraqi government and looking very closely at other efforts we can undertake to assist Iraq in this very serious situation.

Ultimately, as the President also made clear, Iraq's future has to be decided by a unified effort among the different groups and political parties in Iraq coming together in moderation to fight the extremist threat posed by ISIL. And that is what we've had discussions with Prime Minister Maliki and others about, other Iraqi leaders about, and that continues to be the case.

Q In the considerations, have you specifically ruled out the use of any U.S. ground forces?

MR. CARNEY: We are not contemplating ground troops. I want to be clear about that. The President was answering a question specifically about air strikes. And he made clear that we are considering our options as part of the overall effort to support Iraq as part of the overall assistance that we provide and can provide Iraq in this fight. But we are not contemplating ground troops.

Q So air strikes specifically are part of the consideration?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the President -- when he said that he's not ruling anything out, he was responding to the question about request for air strikes or would he consider air strikes. And that's what he meant.

Q Any concerns that this is maybe a little bit too late?

MR. CARNEY: I think that's it's important to note that we have been ramping up our assistance to Iraq, including substantial amounts of military materiel and hardware for some time now. What we have seen in the past several days is a significant and concerning escalation in the violence and in movements by ISIL forces, jihadists into the country and the occupation of some towns and cities in the country.

So we have a near-term situation that we need to move very quickly on, and we are assessing what we can provide additionally, what we can do additionally to assist Iraq. We also have the longer-term, ongoing challenge in our partnership with Iraq, in helping them to take steps to further unify the country and also to assist them through the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund, for example, to be better prepared to handle this kind of threat now and in the future.

Q And were you surprised at this sudden showing of strength by the insurgency?

MR. CARNEY: I think that -- I know that we have been monitoring this for some time and have been very concerned about and have discussed our concern about the problems caused by the unrest in Syria and the war in Syria, and the porousness of the border with Iraq -- the challenges that creates for Iraq and has created for Iraq, and the need for Iraq to have its capacities increased and for Iraq itself to apply those capacities in a way that meets the challenge.

That is why we have taken the steps we have in the past, including delivery of 300 Hellfire missiles, millions of rounds of small-arms fire, thousands of rounds of tank ammunition, helicopter-fired rockets, machine guns, grenades, flares, sniper rifles, M16s and M4 rifles to the Iraqi security forces.

We also delivered additional Bell IA-407 helicopters late last year, and 10 ScanEagle surveillance platforms are on schedule for delivery this summer. I think you also have been told that we recently notified Congress of an additional sale of \$1 billion in arms, including up to 200 Humvees. And that sale is now in a 30-day review period.

Under the strategic framework agreement, we have also expanded our training programs both inside Iraq and in Jordan, where a second round of CT training will occur this summer. So this is part of an ongoing effort to help the Iraqi security forces deal with this threat. As the President noted, there is also the need for a unified political approach to be taken by the Iraqi government in response to this common threat that the extremists pose, extremists who -- an extremist group and the members of an extremist group who do not have Iraqi national interests at heart, but who are bent on death and destruction in Iraq. And the threat they pose is to every individual within Iraq. And, therefore, we will continue our discussions, including in the ongoing consultations that the Vice President has with Iraqi leaders, to urge more unity among the political parties and communities in Iraq as they deal with this challenge.

Q And, Jay, let me just quickly ask about immigration. The President last night said immigration reform is not dead, despite the Cantor defeat. Does this mean you're not ruling out the possibility of taking some sort of administrative action on deportation before the August recess?

MR. CARNEY: The President was referring to the effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform. We believe that the broad coalition and consensus that existed prior to this week's primary in the 7th District of Virginia is as strong as it was -- is as strong today as it was then. And the House ought to follow the Senate's lead and pass a bipartisan, comprehensive immigration reform measure that would provide extraordinary benefits to our economy, to our security and to our businesses, and would deal with this challenge in a comprehensive way. And that imperative hasn't changed at all. That's what the President was referring to.

Q There's been a lot of talk over the last two days about the surprise of seeing how fast things have been moving in Iraq. But given what's been going on in Syria for such a long time, was it exactly this scenario something that this administration foresaw for some time? And if it wasn't, then should it have been?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as I think I just said, we have been very aware and have discussed here and in other venues the challenge posed by the war in Syria and the extremist activity there and the ISIL as it formed and moved across the border into Iraq. And that has always been a great concern. That is why we have stepped up the assistance that we've been providing to the Iraqi security forces.

Q So the surprise is what? How quickly --

MR. CARNEY: As I think the President accurately said just moments ago in the Oval Office, we cannot be everywhere at all times. Whether it's Iraq or elsewhere, we need to partner with other countries and their militaries and security forces to assist them in combatting these kinds of extremist challenges. And that is what the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund is about that the President discussed in West Point, and that is very much the manner in which we've approached our close relationship with the Iraqi government and the support that we give Iraqi security forces.

Ultimately, a nation -- a sovereign nation like Iraq has to have the capacity to deal with these kinds of challenges. We can assist -- and we are -- and we will look at all options in this current near-term situation. But the medium- and long-term solution to a challenge like this has to be one that is led by Iraqi security forces.

Q Does this make for a great argument for having -- for the U.S. should have acted sooner in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: I can remember answering questions probably before you got here, Michelle, about our concern -- or should we be concerned when it came to supplying lethal assistance to the opposition in Syria, about where that assistance and in whose hands that assistance would ultimately end up, and whether or not we could trust that that assistance would not find its way to extremists who actually had designs against U.S. national security interests or Americans themselves.

And that is why we took the approach that we took, and it is also why we have established now, for quite some time, a manner by which we can provide and have provided substantial assistance to the moderate opposition, including to the opposition's armed elements. And that's the approach we took precisely because we did not want and many others did not want for assistance from the United States to end up in the hands of extremists.

Let me move up and back. Justin.

Q Two quick ones on Iraq. The first is, when the President determined about a year ago that he wanted to launch air strikes against -- targeted air strikes against Syria, he decided that it was important to ask Congress for authorization for that. If he makes the same determination here, do you guys feel like it's necessary to get any sort of authorization from Congress?

MR. CARNEY: There are obvious legal authorities that exist regarding the use of military force in conflicts not in Syria but elsewhere. We can get more for you on that.

What the President said today is he is considering all options in response to the question about potential direct action by the United States military. But we would have to get back to you on how that would proceed if that decision were made.

Q And then, does this change at all your calculus for withdrawal from Afghanistan? I mean, we've seen -- certainly Republicans on the Hill have suggested that a big reason that the sort of rebel insurgency in Iraq was able to take hold was that there wasn't a continuing U.S. presence there. And so I'm wondering if that changes anything about sort of plans for Afghanistan going forward.

MR. CARNEY: It does not change the approach that the President announced recently that we are taking in Afghanistan. We are ending that combat mission this year. And we, pending the signing of a bilateral security agreement, will keep a smaller number of troops in Afghanistan focused exclusively on the missions that the President discussed.

And I think that the broader question has to be when we talk about this is, should American men and women in uniform be fighting in Iraq today, and is that the right approach for our national security interests. Should American forces be occupying countries for decades, or should we take the approach that the President took when he ended the war in Iraq and established a relationship with the sovereign government of Iraq through which we can provide the kind of assistance we provide. That's the approach that he believes is the right approach to take, and it's certainly consistent with the strategy he's laid out in Afghanistan.

Kristen.

Q Jay, thanks. Following up on that question, what's to stop the same thing from happening in Afghanistan that we're seeing in Iraq? Do you have anything that gives you an assurance that we won't see the same thing?

MR. CARNEY: We need to have, as the President laid out in his speech at West Point, a strategy that is focused on partnering with the security forces of other countries that helps them develop the capacities necessary to deal with these kinds of threats, because we cannot have U.S. forces around the world in armed conflicts without end. It's simply not a wise approach to our national security interests.

We retain, as the President made clear today, the right to use force -- military force -- unilaterally if necessary when our national security interests demand it. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't, when we're looking at the medium- and long-term approach that we have to the challenge posed by terrorist groups like ISIL, that we shouldn't partner with other nations' security forces in an effort through the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund, for example, that allows for those forces to work more effectively against the threat that these jihadists pose.

Q Does this not undercut, though, since you bring up West Point, the President's argument for a lighter footprint? I mean, I understand what you're saying we can't have forces there indefinitely, but given the fact that it continues to devolve?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, but is the -- when you're asking that about Iraq, is the suggestion that we should send or we should still have tens of thousands of troops in Iraq. And if that is the proposition, then we can discuss that. That's certainly not the President's view.

What we can do is consider requests from our partners in the Iraqi government. We can provide the substantial assistance we already provide and have provided to the Iraqi government, including to Iraq security forces. That's military materiel, it's intelligence assistance and the like. And we can contemplate other requests and take action as needed and necessary.

But if the question you're asking is should we have 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, 100,000 troops in Iraq, the President's view is no.

Q Well, no, not necessarily that troop level. To another point, though, Senator Tim Kaine has said that the President should present a clear plan to Congress soon. Does the President have any immediate plans to consult with members of Congress?

MR. CARNEY: We are in active consultation with members of Congress on the situation in Iraq, and we will continue to do that as appropriate.

Q And just finally, Jay, how would you characterize what's happening in Iraq right now? Would you characterize it as a civil war?

MR. CARNEY: What we're seeing is an Islamic jihadist group composed substantially of non-Iraqis, as I understand it, but certainly mixed nationalities threatening the sovereign state of Iraq. And the Iraqi security forces need to confront that threat, and we are working very closely with the government in Baghdad and with Iraq's political leadership to evaluate the kinds of assistance we can provide in addition to the assistance we've already provided and the assistance that's on its way to help them meet that challenge.

Q So just to be clear, would you characterize it as a civil war? Or you're not ready to go that far?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I think the way it characterized it reflects what's happening on the ground there.

Q Can I follow?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, ma'am.

Q Jay Carney, (inaudible) from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Thanks for taking my question. You've had the Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, here today. He's been quite critical of the President in the past, some would say offensive at times about him. Has all been forgiven? And given that past relationship, how would you now describe it, especially since they disagree so much on climate change?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think what the President said reflected the very close nature of the relationship between the United States and Australia, the alliance between our nations, the friendship between our nations. And the tone of the meeting, the bilateral meeting reflected that warmth and high level of collaboration and cooperation. The leaders discussed a number of issues, as you know --

Q Climate change?

MR. CARNEY: -- and climate change was one of them, of course. And they talked about the importance of confronting climate change. President Obama emphasized the need for ambitious domestic climate policies as the basis of a strong international response.

The United States will continue working with Australia to advance climate change, clean energy and energy efficiency solutions, including in the context of the G20. So this was certainly a topic of discussion among many, as you would expect in a bilateral meeting between leaders of such close allies.

Q And he asked him to put it on the G20 agenda?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have a specific agenda for the G20 to lay out for you, but certainly within the context of the G20, this would be something that the President believes would be important to discuss.

Cheryl.

Q Can I just ask, do you have a readout at all about the TPP or the trade negotiations in this meeting with the --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any more detail than the President provided in his statement at the bottom of the bilat.

Major.

Q Does the President believe, based on briefings, that Baghdad is in jeopardy of being overrun?

MR. CARNEY: The President knows that the situation in Iraq is serious and that there needs to be action taken quickly in order to confront the challenge posed by the ISIL. So I wouldn't characterize the situation on the ground militarily. I would refer you to the Defense Department for that. But we're certainly aware here at the White House -- and the President is very aware -- of that situation, and that is why he has made clear that we are assessing what efforts we can take, building on the efforts we've already taken, to assist the Iraqi government as it deals with this challenge.

Q There are reports Iranian al Quds forces assisted in this repelling or dealing with some of the ISIL forces. Does the administration have any confirmation of that, and would it consider that a welcome development?

MR. CARNEY: We have seen reports, but we cannot confirm them, Major. And while we appreciate the seriousness of the security situation in Iraq and the brutal actions of ISIL there, we urge the government of Iraq to take prudent decisions on how it will address this crisis in the spirit of national unity -- which goes back to the point I was making earlier that the only way for this to be effectively dealt with in Iraq in the medium and long term is for there to be political unity in Iraq, in combating a common enemy.

There is no side in Iraq that ISIL is fighting for. This is a jihadist, extremist group that is bent on death and destruction within Iraq. And it is absolutely necessary for the various factions within Iraqi politics and ethnic and religious groups to come together united by the threat posed to the Iraqi sovereign state here to rebuff the challenge.

Q Do you also have a message for the Iranian government to stay out, even if invited?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that this is an issue for the sovereign government of Iraq. And our view is they ought to make prudent decisions about how they deal with the threat in the interest of national unity.

Q You used earlier in your very first formulation, you talked about a unified effort that builds on moderation. Can you in any way credibly apply either of those words -- unified or moderate -- to al-Maliki's governing of Iraq? And how much blame does this administration put on his decision-making process in alienating Sunnis and others within the country?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I can certainly say that we agree that all Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Maliki, need to address -- need to do more, rather, to address unresolved issues within Iraq to better meet the needs of the Iraqi people. However, the threat to Iraq's stability right now is ISIL. And ISIL, as I've noted, has an ideology that has little to do with Iraqi domestic politics. Rather, its aim is to take territory and terrorize the Iraqi people, regardless of sect or ethnic or religious affiliation. Its ideology would be the same no matter who was in power in Baghdad.

So that said, we will continue to work with Iraqi leaders from across the political spectrum to encourage the kind of collaborative approach and governance that would best address these unresolved issues. And we urge Iraq's leaders to secure support from all Iraqi communities by presenting a common political vision with tangible programs aimed at bringing the country together.

This has been an ongoing challenge in Iraq as it tries to build a future as a sovereign state. And in order to do that, Iraqi leaders need to have a unified vision about Iraq's future that is not sliced into separate visions according to political affiliation or religious affiliation. And that's the challenge that Iraq's leaders have been grappling with for a number of years now. It's an urgent challenge now, and I think the immediacy of the threat posed by this extremist group highlights the need for Iraq's leaders and other political actors to set aside some of their differences to join together to meet the common threat posed by ISIL.

Q The President, the Vice President, one of his advisors, Tony Blinken, have all in the past couple of years described Iraq as a success story. When did it go bad?

MR. CARNEY: The fact is, Wendell, we have described what was the case, and that is that Iraq has over the years taken steps to resolve its internal political differences through peaceful means as opposed to through violence. But this is an ongoing challenge within Iraq.

ISIL is not a domestic political entity. It is a force that is trying to claim territory and wreak havoc in Iraq, and it is a force that has no Iraqi citizens' interests at heart. And that is why, as I've mentioned before, the threat posed by ISIL is cause for increased unity among Iraq's political factions, and a more cohesive approach to be taken by the central government in Baghdad when it comes to combatting this serious threat.

Q Senators Graham and McCain both held I-told-you-so news conferences today, both saying that the price we're seeing now, the risk of losing what Americans lost their lives for, was caused by not keeping U.S. troops in Iraq. Why are they wrong?

MR. CARNEY: Wendell, there is no question that Senator McCain and President Obama have differed on the Iraq war since Senator McCain was for it and Barack Obama was against it. There's no question that going back to 2008, when Senator McCain allowed that his vision might include tens of thousands of U.S. forces in Iraq in perpetuity, that that was in stark contrast as a vision to the one held by then-Senator Obama, which was that we should responsibly end what was already a very long war in Iraq.

President Obama's view is that Iraq needs to, with the partnership of the United States, be able to handle its own security. And I would note from some of the statements you said today that within a couple of sentences of each other, Senator McCain said that this is because we didn't keep troops in Iraq, but he's not calling for troops in Iraq, which -- I'm not a logics expert, but there's a little inconsistency in those statements, it would seem.

The fact is, we can't, as the President said today, be everywhere at all times to meet the challenge posed by extremist groups like ISIL. But we can partner with Iraq, as the President noted today, through the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund and through our direct bilateral relationship and the assistance that we provide to Iraqi security forces as well as to the Iraqi people, work together to help Iraq beat back a challenge like this. Ultimately, Iraq's future has to be resolved by the Iraqi people and by the leadership of Iraq.

Q And one final question. You rattled off a list of the equipment we provided in Iraq, some of which is now in the hands of the ISIL folks. And you were reluctant to be more aggressive in Syria, and it would appear that the problems have come over the border into Iraq. How much of what we're seeing in Iraq now is a result of not taking a more aggressive response to the civil war in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as I answered earlier, the approach we took was to carefully evaluate to whom we would be providing assistance in Syria in the opposition precisely so that that assistance did not end up in the wrong hands.

We have for some time now provided substantial assistance to the opposition in Syria. But I think our past history shows, and understanding of the situation in both Syria and in portions of Iraq bears out, that we need to be very smart about how we -- and to whom we provide lethal assistance and military hardware of any kind. And that's the approach that we take. We think it's the right approach in terms of U.S. national security interests.

Jon.

Q Jay, just a short while ago, Speaker of the House John Boehner described the deteriorating situation in Iraq, and then said, "And what's the President doing? He's taking a nap." I'd just like to get your response to the Speaker of the House.

MR. CARNEY: My response is the answers to questions a little more substantive that I've given already about the situation in Iraq and the approach that we're taking.

We provide substantial assistance to Iraqi security forces. I would note that in that same briefing, as I understand it, the highest elected leader of the Republican Party did not have any suggestions for an approach to Iraq that I could tell or any policy prescriptions that he would offer beyond the statement that you just repeated.

Q And on this question of troops, going back to the end of the war, the administration with Vice President Biden taking a lead role tried but failed to get a status of forces agreement with Iraq that would allow some U.S. troops to remain for training and counterterrorist operations. Because of that failure, obviously all the troops had to come out immediately. Do you believe -- does the White House believe the situation in Iraq would have been any different if you had not failed to get the status of forces agreement and there had been some residual U.S. force left in Iraq?

MR. CARNEY: The agreement to which you refer was one that would have to have been reached between two sovereign nations. And an agreement to allow for, under conditions that we would find acceptable, a remaining force from the American military was not reached through negotiations between the United States and Iraq.

The point I would make is that a relatively small number of troops designed specifically for the kind of narrow mission that we're talking about with a post-2014 force in Afghanistan would not supplant the need, either in Afghanistan or Iraq, for national security forces to take the lead effectively in combating any extremist threat from the outside as you have with ISIL, or inside. And again, if the argument is that we should have -- as some suggested going back to 2008 -- tens of thousands of U.S. troops in Iraq in perpetuity --

Q No --

MR. CARNEY: No, but I'm --

Q That's not what I'm asking. It's a very specific question about your attempt.

MR. CARNEY: And I answered that, which is that a small force focused on CT training -- CT and troop training and assistance is not the same as what was called for by others when it came to a substantial, essentially occupation force in Iraq in perpetuity, which obviously President Obama -- Senator Obama and candidate for Senate Obama never supported.

Q So just to be very clear, so you're saying it would have made no difference -- that the situation in Iraq would not be different?

MR. CARNEY: You're asking me to hypothesize about what might have been in a different circumstance. I don't think anybody can answer that question.

What I can tell you is that a sovereign state of Iraq has security forces that need to be up to the task of dealing with these kinds of challenges. Now, they will have the assistance that comes with partnership with the United States, as well as with other nations that have the interests of Iraq and its sovereignty at heart and provide substantial assistance to Iraq, as the United States does. But ultimately, Iraq's future needs to be decided and defended by Iraqis.

Now, we are providing substantial assistance and we are considering in this current near-term challenge what other efforts we can undertake to help the Iraqis in this current situation. But the long term here, and this was true two years ago, and it will be true two years from now, has to be one that sees an Iraqi future that is defended by a unified political leadership in Iraq and by Iraqi security forces.

Q The President and senior officials in this White House have repeatedly over the years, and as recently as Tuesday, described as the President's top foreign policy accomplishments ending the war in Iraq and decimating and destroying core al Qaeda. Given what we're seeing now, can you still claim those as two of your signature achievements?

MR. CARNEY: There is no question that the President pledged to end the war in Iraq, and he did. And that was --

Q There's no war in Iraq right now?

MR. CARNEY: U.S. combat mission in Iraq.

Q U.S. combat.

MR. CARNEY: What is also the case, and what the President made clear as we wound down the war in Iraq is that we need to be a good partner to the government in Iraq and provide the assistance that we can at their request to help them meet their security challenges. And we have done that.

Ultimately, Iraq's future has to be decided through reconciliation of the political factions within Iraq and a unified approach to dealing with the challenge posed by a group like the ISIL.

Q And decimating and destroying core al Qaeda when an al Qaeda-linked group is now in charge, in control of major cities in the heart of Iraq?

MR. CARNEY: Well, in your question, you have made the appropriate distinction, which is core Iraq [al Qaeda], based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has unquestionably been severely compromised and decimated. I don't think anybody would disagree with that.

What we have been saying for a long time now is that when it comes to threats to the United States and our national security interests directly, the threat posed by affiliated groups has grown in Yemen for example and elsewhere as the core leadership and core al Qaeda in the Af-Pak region has been diminished and decimated. We've openly discussed that. The President, John Brennan when he was here and also obviously over at the CIA has talked about it. And that is a challenge that we are very upfront about.

But I don't think you can argue that when it comes to al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region that the strategy of going after core al Qaeda leadership has not been effectively prosecuted.

Q Isn't it equally dangerous or arguably more dangerous to have an al Qaeda-linked group in control of major Iraqi cities than have them in the mountains of Pakistan?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I guess I would have to remind you that the most severe military attack on the United States in our lifetimes occurred -- was organized and ordered out of Afghanistan and Pakistan by core al Qaeda.

Q Is there any concern here at the White House about a disruption of oil supplies?

MR. CARNEY: I have obviously -- I don't have any specific information about that. I can tell you that when it comes to the oil fields in -- let me make sure I get this right. There's in Baiji a refinery -- that we understand that that oil refinery remains in the control of the government of Iraq. But I have not -- I don't have any other additional information about that issue.

Q How about reports, Jay, of evacuations of Americans just north of Baghdad? The AP just -- a story that three planeloads of Americans are either going to be or have been evacuated as a precaution to get them out of the way of this moving insurgency.

MR. CARNEY: I don't have anything on that. I'd ask the State Department about that.

Yes, Carrie.

Q Why is the President not considering ground troops at this point, given that -- following on Jon's point -- that the administration had contemplated having troops there? If you could just explain why that's not on the table.

MR. CARNEY: Because we don't believe that that's the approach that we should take. In this case, we would agree with Senator McCain, who made that point I think today or at least that that was his view. What the President was referring to was the question about contemplating air strikes.

Q But why --

MR. CARNEY: Because as I've been saying, ultimately, the challenge posed by a group like ISIL has to be met by the Iraqi government and Iraqi security forces. Now, they can be assisted considerably -- as they have been and are being -- by the United States and other partners. And we will review requests for further assistance and other kinds of assistance very closely, and obviously in this current situation very quickly.

But ultimately, Iraq's future will be decided by the ability of Iraq's political leaders to come together in a spirit of unity to deal with all of the challenges that a nation like Iraq faces in building its future, and specifically in repelling the kind of assault that we're seeing now from an extremist group like ISIL, which is not focused on changing Iraqi domestic politics. It's focused on seizing territory and focused on death and destruction within Iraq. And it's regardless of political affiliation.

Q There's a report that Bowe Bergdahl is coming back to the United States overnight. Do you have anything on that?

MR. CARNEY: I don't. I would refer you to the Defense Department.

Mark.

Q Jay, some people have pointed out that with ISIL advancing on Baghdad we may not have a common interest with Iran, but we may have sort of an overlapping interest in that they're worried obviously about the Shiites in Iraq. Major asked about the Quds force. I'm just wondering more broadly whether you believe there is some degree of overlap in the interest that Iran and the U.S. have in this particular case. And if that's the case, what constructive role could Iran play in diffusing this crisis?

MR. CARNEY: Mark, I think the question has to be not just the immediate crisis, but how Iraq can move forward. And that is why we've seen reports about this -- and we can't confirm them -- but we would certainly call on the government of Iraq to approach such considerations prudently and in the interest of national unity. And Iraq's future, as the President was saying, has to be one decided by all elements of Iraqi society. And what you obviously don't want to see happen is a situation where unity is even more severely tested than it has been in the past. And that would I think suggest that the Iraqi government would need to approach that kind of question very carefully.

Q But beyond staying out, is there something else Iran can do that would be constructive?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not sure that this is specific to Iran, but everybody in the region and in the world we believe should have an interest in not seeing groups like ISIL flourish. And that's separate from religious affiliation. It has to do with the sovereignty of a nation like Iraq, and the appalling actions taken by groups like ISIL that show no mercy when it comes to civilians and what their overall ambition is.

Q Can I ask just one small internal question? Vice President Biden obviously had this as his portfolio for the first term in a fairly formal way, and that changed a bit in the second term. With this now metastasizing like this, is he deeply engaged? Is there some thought to having him pick this up again?

MR. CARNEY: Vice President Biden has continued to be one of the principal interlocutors of the administration with Iraqi leaders. He has a long history in Iraq with all of the political groups there and with the leaders there. And that hasn't changed. And certainly in recent months, the Vice President has been actively engaged in discussions with the Iraqi leadership.

April.

Q Jay, as the President is assessing this indirect help in Iraq, what are the guarantees that there won't be some boots going back over there to help out?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we're not contemplating boots on the ground, April. We're looking at options that we can take, including in the assistance that we provide, military assistance and other assistance that we can provide to the Iraqi security forces, to the Iraqi government. We're evaluating requests of other actions that we might take. The President was referring, in answer to the question in the Oval Office earlier today, to specifically the question about whether he would consider direct action, U.S. airstrikes. But we're not considering boots on the ground.

Q But as things happen -- and they're not expected and anticipated, and may escalate -- what are the guarantees that --

MR. CARNEY: Again, we're just not considering that, April.

Andrei, and then Zeke. And then we'll get out of here.

Q Jay, it may not be your last briefing, but it may be my last opportunity to ask a question of you. And I want to thank you for trying to be fair to me and to others from the podium. It is appreciated.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you.

Q Now, today is Russia's National Day, the equivalent of the 4th of July. So looking back at the new Russia, can you fairly say that the United States has done all you can to be true partners with the new Russia?

MR. CARNEY: By "new Russia," you mean post-Soviet Russia?

Q Post-Soviet Russia.

MR. CARNEY: Well, the approach that President Obama has taken, as you know, has been one that has been driven by a clear focus on our national security interests. And where our interests and Russia's interests overlap, we have been able to cooperate. And we have also been very clear about our disagreements with Russia. Those disagreements

have intensified, as you know, most especially over Russia's extremely unhelpful approach to the situation in Ukraine and its illegal claims of annexation of a portion of the sovereign territory of Ukraine.

But we, again, will continue to approach the relationship with Russia in a very deliberate manner. We call on Russia to use its influence to prevail upon separatists in Ukraine to lay down their arms, to vacate buildings they've occupied, and to abide by the approach announced by the new President of Ukraine when it comes to reconciliation and moving forward in Ukraine.

And we urge Russia to take that action to recognize the new President, and to cease its assistance to the separatists in Ukraine.

And we'll continue to make our views on that issue and other areas where we disagree very clear, both publicly and in our conversations -- frequent conversations -- with our counterparts in the Russian government.

We will also continue to work with Russia cooperatively where we can, and there are areas where we continue to work cooperatively with Russia because it is in our national security interest and in our national interest to do so.

Q If I may, one on Ukraine?

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q Why don't you call on the government in Kyiv to show at least some restraint in the military operations that they have against their own people, and the shelling and the bombing basically their own region, their own people?

MR. CARNEY: Andrei, I think that we all need to be clear-eyed about who is responsible for the violence in Ukraine. And I would urge you to, as well. As you know probably, President Poroshenko presented in his inaugural address on June 7th a peace plan that included a ceasefire contingent on Russia taking immediate steps to deescalate the situation, including by recognizing President Poroshenko as the legitimate leader of Ukraine, ceasing support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, and stopping the provision of arms and materiel across the border.

We are concerned by reports that these groups are now in possession of heavy weapons, including tanks, which would represent a significant escalation.

When Vice President Biden spoke to President Poroshenko, the two leaders -- President Poroshenko, rather, confirmed that if the separatists disarm and vacate buildings they presently occupy, the Ukrainian government is prepared to grant amnesty within Ukraine or offer safe passage back to Russia to those Russian militants now operating in eastern Ukraine. Vice President Biden expressed his strong support for the trilateral discussions between Ukraine, Russia and OSCE Special Representative Heidi Tagliavini.

So I think the government in the Kyiv has demonstrated an absolute commitment to deescalating the conflict, to reconciliation within Ukraine. It would be a very good thing, indeed, if Russia would follow suit.

Sorry, Zeke. Last one.

Q Yes, thank you. You mentioned earlier to Justin that the President has legal authorities to take unilateral action. I'm wondering if one of those legal authorities includes the 2002 Iraq Resolution, which is still on the books? Does the White House believe that the President has the authority under that resolution to do that?

MR. CARNEY: Zeke, what I said, as I continued to answer that question, was that we will evaluate requests and consider different actions that we may take. The President made that clear in the Oval Office. We don't have a decision on that specific issue now. When we do, we can certainly get back to you on that question.

Q And Senator Menendez just a couple of weeks ago introduced legislation to repeal that resolution from 12 years ago. And it has five or six co-sponsors in the Senate. Is that something the White House would be supportive of, repealing that resolution from the --

MR. CARNEY: I think broadly, separate from the current circumstances, we've addressed the President's approach on this issue. I don't have any updates on what he's said in the past.

Thanks, everybody.

END

2:26 P.M. EDT