

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/15/2014

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9152014

September 15, 2014

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 15, 2014

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:03 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Happy Monday, everybody. Hopefully, the rest of the briefing will be characterized by more effective communication between the White House and the Press Corps than the two-minute warning was.

Julie, why don't you go ahead and get us started today?

Q Sounds good. Thanks. I had a couple questions on the administration's response to Islamic State, starting with the conversations you're having on the Hill on the Title 10 authority. First of all, if you could read out any conversations the President might be having with lawmakers over the weekend. Last week, there were a lot of briefings for the Hill. Are there more of those? And do you feel like you're making progress in getting the Hill to include Title 10 in the CR?

MR. EARNEST: I think the best way to evaluate this actually may be to review the public statements from members of Congress as it relates to this Title 10 authority. We've seen public statements from Democrats and Republicans in senior positions, both in the House and the Senate, indicate that they support giving the administration the necessary authority to ramp up our assistance to the Syrian opposition by training and equipping them. So we're gratified by that show of bipartisan public support for this urgent priority.

There have been a number of conversations between senior administration officials, Cabinet officials, senior White House officials and members of Congress on this issue. The President has made a number of phone calls on this over the course of the last week, and I would anticipate that he'll be in touch with additional members of Congress in advance of the votes this week.

What I will -- I don't know of any additional briefings that have been scheduled, but there were all-member briefings that were scheduled last week. So every member, even if they're not on the docket for a briefing this week, has received one in the last week. And

I'm confident that if there are members of Congress that do have questions about the kind of authority or what this program would entail, that there would be a senior administration official that would be happy to discuss with them.

As I mentioned, we believe that this is a priority -- or I should restate that we believe this is a priority because what we have seen from our partners in the region is a willingness to join with us in this effort. And the President believes it's important to strike while the iron is hot here and begin to ramp up this program as soon as possible, particularly now that we have willing commitments from regional governments whose cooperation is essential to this program's success.

Q Can you give us a sense of what the Title 10 authority would include, and some more specifics? What type of weaponry you're looking to give to the Syrian rebels? How many U.S. personnel would be involved in this training mission in Saudi Arabia?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a lot of those details in front of me. The Department of Defense may be able to provide you some additional information. The goal here is to ensure that we have -- or that there is a fighting force on the ground in Syria that can take the fight to ISIL in Syria. The President has ruled out the use of American combat troops for that purpose.

So the alternative is to enhance the capacity and capability of Syrian opposition fighters so that they can take the fight to ISIL in their own country. And we do have willing partners. Saudi Arabia, as you know, has already announced a willingness to host some of these training operations, at least. And this administration wants to work closely with regional governments and other allies who have made commitments to assist in this effort. And so we're eager to get this program up and running, and that's why we are hoping and pleased to see bipartisan support for giving the administration this authority before the end of the week.

Q And if I can move on to the efforts to form a coalition. There have been certainly statements of support from countries in Europe and in the Middle East for a broad effort, but very few details about what these countries are willing to commit. U.S. officials talk vaguely about this, but we don't really have any specifics. Do you have specific commitments from countries for action, not just a broad statement, of support for what the U.S. is going to do?

MR. EARNEST: Julie, there have been intensive diplomatic conversations between senior administration officials and our counterparts in the region but also across the globe. The President was gratified, as he reported at the end of the NATO Summit, by the response that he got from the leaders of Allied nations signaling their willingness and support for the effort to combat ISIL.

Since then, Secretary Kerry has been traveling in the region, and was just in Paris over the weekend meeting with his counterparts from some of these regional partners and allies to discuss commitments that they're prepared to make to this effort.

The thing that's important to understand is that we want to try and do this in an integrated way that is as efficient as possible; that we don't just sort of want people to announce one-off commitments without making sure that they are announcing those commitments in a coordinated way -- that we want to make sure that we have all the boxes checked in terms of what our needs are. And part of what the United States is doing in terms of leading this coalition is assessing what contributions are necessary. And then this will be a role for General Allen to play, is to match up those needs with the capacity and willingness of partners to fill those needs.

So this isn't just a matter of getting people to issue a news release or make some other kind of public commitment to do something. We want to make sure that their commitment matches what's actually needed and that we're not duplicating efforts, and that the country that is in the best position to fulfill a specific need is the one that actually follows through and fills that need.

So a lot of this is de-conflicting, making sure that we're not doubling up on specific requests and letting some requests go unfilled. So we're trying to do this in a systematic, integrated way. This will be the responsibility of General Allen, who's meeting with the President tomorrow to update him on this process.

So there are no specific public commitments for me to make from here right now, but I do anticipate that based on the favorable response that Secretary Kerry and others are receiving from our allies in these discussions, that we will at some point be able to announce important commitments from our allies and from regional governments who, as we've said before, in some ways have an even greater stake in the outcome of this conflict than we do.

Q I asked you this last week, and I'm wondering if now that Secretary Kerry and others have had conversations over the last couple days, if you can say more definitively -- will the U.S. be launching airstrikes alone, or are there other countries who will be launching airstrikes alongside the U.S.?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when we are in a position to be more specific about the commitments that we've received from our allies and other interested regional governments, then we will do that.

Q But you can't even say broadly that, yes, there are other countries who will launch airstrikes alongside the U.S.?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the natural follow-up to that question would be, well, tell me who. And so we want to make --

Q -- the first one --

MR. EARNEST: And so my point is that we're not going to be in a position of making these kinds of commitments for people. It will be much more -- it will carry much more weight if you have a senior official from another country saying what their country is prepared to do in support of this allied effort, as opposed to me speaking for other

countries. I'm just not going to put myself in that position. And frankly, it will have greater credibility when it is announced by that country for you to get a sense of what kinds of contributions we're getting from other interested parties here.

So we are pleased with the progress that's been made so far in terms of the reaction we've gotten in the context of these conversations. General Allen is somebody who will draw upon his military expertise, but in this case is fulfilling a strictly diplomatic function in terms of coordinating with governments in the region and around the world to assess how they can contribute militarily to this broader effort. And he is hard at work on this already; he will brief the President on the status of these efforts tomorrow. And I know others have talked about the importance of the upcoming United Nations General Assembly meeting as an appropriate venue for us to have additional discussions on these topics. So stay tuned.

Jeff.

Q Josh, ahead of the President's trip tomorrow, can you tell us a little bit more about the administration's plan to fight Ebola, and to what extent the President is concerned about that becoming a crisis in this country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, the President's visit to the CDC tomorrow underscores just how extraordinarily serious the administration believes this issue is. The President has identified it as a top national security priority, and he looks forward to receiving an update from the experts at the CDC about the success of their efforts so far to try to confront this problem.

As you know, this is one of the worst, if not the worst, outbreak of Ebola that we've ever seen. The CDC has responded commensurate with the seriousness of the situation. They have already deployed a number of personnel to the region. I think it's -- I'm looking through my notes here -- about 100 of its workers to the region. This is if not the largest, among the largest deployments of CDC personnel ever.

The administration has already committed more than \$100 million to address the Ebola outbreak, and this has taken a variety of forms, but includes commitments from USAID, from the CDC and others to try to meet some of these needs. We've also seen the Department of Defense step forward and make some commitments as it relates to the expertise they have when it comes to logistics. And this is all part of the whole-of-government approach that the President has directed in response to this situation.

I'd point out that while this story has -- rightly so -- entered the headlines over the course of the last four or six weeks, the fact is this outbreak first started back in March, and the CDC and other government agencies were closely working with our international partners to confront that threat even back then. So this is something that we've been focused on for quite some time. The President is looking forward to the briefing that he'll receive tomorrow, and I would anticipate the announcement of additional efforts that will be

underway or that the United States can deploy to address this situation in the context of the President's visit tomorrow. But I don't have anything new in terms of specific announcements to offer up from here today.

Q To what extent does he view Ebola as being a threat to the United States?

MR. EARNEST: The President talked about this in the "Meet the Press" interview that he did 10 days or so ago. He identified it as a top national security priority.

And his concern is that making an investment here early is critical to trying to snuff out this problem before it becomes a much more widespread problem. And that is the strategy that we're implementing here, is to try to invest early to prevent this from becoming much more serious.

There are some -- there's always sort of the geopolitical concern that an outbreak of a disease could create some instability in some of these regions where the central governments of some of these countries isn't as strong as the central government that we have here in this country. So that's one source of some concern.

The other concern that the President articulated in the context of his interview was that the more that this virus has spread from person to person, the greater likelihood, the greater -- the more likely it is that the virus could mutate in a way that makes it even more dangerous. So that is why -- those are just a couple of reasons why the President is directing the U.S. government to make the kind of early investment that could prevent much more serious problems down the line.

Q And on one other topic, there's a vote coming up in a couple days in Scotland. The President has talked about this before. With the vote nearing and the polls very close, how concerned is the White House, how concerned is the President about a potential breakup of one of its closest allies?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, you have a good memory. The President was asked about this when he attended I believe the G7 meeting --

Q In Brussels.

MR. EARNEST: -- in Brussels, exactly. He was standing alongside David Cameron at a podium not unlike this one where he was asked.

You'll recall that what the President said was he said that from the outside, the United States has a deep interest in ensuring that one of the closest allies that we'll ever have remains strong, robust, united, and an effective partner with the United States. So this is a decision for the people of Scotland to make. We certainly respect the right of individual Scots to make a decision about the -- along these lines. But as the President himself said, we have an interest in seeing the United Kingdom remain strong, robust, united and an effective partner.

Q And "united" means together, as in not leaving the U.K.?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is a question before the people of Scotland on Thursday, and they'll cast a ballot in a way that they believe is in the best interests of communities in Scotland. And I will certainly respect their right to cast their own ballot without interference from people on the outside.

Christi.

Q Thanks, Josh. Can you talk about the Tampa part of the President's trip? That looks like it's about building public support for his strategy for fighting ISIL. Is that the plan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at a very specific level, the President's visit to Tampa will be an opportunity for him to visit the Central Command, which is located in Tampa. While he's there, he will spend some time getting a briefing from senior military leaders in CENTCOM about responsibility for leading the military effort against ISIL.

And I'm confident that the President, while he's there, will also have the opportunity to talk with some of the servicemen and women who will be responsible for carrying out some of the functions that the President orders. But we'll have more details on the trip probably tomorrow.

Let's move around a little bit. Jackie.

Q Just to go back to Ebola -- an administration official was quoted as saying that there will be a more upscale response. Can you give some details of what that will be?

MR. EARNEST: The President is looking forward to his trip. He is going to get a briefing from some of the experts at the CDC. In terms of announcements that the President may make in the context of the trip, I'll let him make those announcements on Tuesday. I don't have anything new from here. But you're right -- there will be some additional announcements that will be announced by the administration that represents the kind of whole-of-government approach the President believes is necessary to confront the threat that's posed by -- the threat of Ebola.

Justin.

Q You almost said ISIL.

MR. EARNEST: I did, I did. (Laughter.)

Q Well, I wanted to follow a little on Ebola. We've kind of heard from public health experts, especially people in Africa, a lot of complaints actually about the administration's response so far. There's a professor from Brown University in The Times this weekend who said the 25-bed hospital that the U.S. is setting up is like a drop in the bucket of what they need. So I'm wondering if you could just respond in some way to the criticism that's being levied by them, by Doctors Without Borders about the lack of kind of a unified response coming from the U.S. and United Nations and WHO and other places.

MR. EARNEST: Justin, the President referenced in the remarks that he delivered to the nation on Wednesday night that the United States has unique capabilities in a wide range of areas. And that means that the United States has a unique responsibility to step up in the midst of an international crisis. And the President has directed the United States government to step up in the midst of this international crisis as it relates to Ebola; that our doctors and scientists are some of the best in the world, and we're going to deploy their knowledge and resources to try to help some of the governments in Africa meet the needs of their people and confront this very difficult challenge.

The United States also has tremendous resources when it comes to our logistical capacity and when it comes to the kinds of supplies that health care workers may need to respond to this situation. So there are a number of unique capabilities that the United States can bring to this. And I think it is a testament to our country, where our -- where we have an interest but our interest is not as direct in this situation, but yet the President, with the strong backing of the American people, is going to respond in a robust fashion.

As I mentioned to Jeff, the United States responded pretty aggressively to this back in March when this outbreak was first reported. And since that time, our assistance has been steadily ramping up. And when the President travels to Atlanta tomorrow in the context of his trip, I do anticipate that we'll have some additional announcements to make about additional commitments that we're making in terms of resources that can be used to address this problem.

Q Just on the CR quickly -- I know this may be a long shot, but can you kind of give an update of where you guys think or how you think this vote is going to go? Do you expect that the Title 10 authorization will be at this point separated out in the House from a vote on the CR and then brought back together? Is that where you're at?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that will be a decision that's made by the Speaker of the House. Our interest here is seeing this Title 10 authority be given to the administration before the end of this week. Adding it to the CR is the most logical way. As a layman -- I'm not an expert in House procedure by any stretch of the imagination -- but as a layman, it does seem obvious that that's the easiest way to get this done. That will be a decision that's made by the Speaker of the House.

And this administration will be doing everything that we can, including being in close touch with members of Congress in both parties, to convince them that this is an important national security priority. And if they have open questions about what this authority would grant or what these kinds of training operations would entail, we'll do our best to answer those questions. But this is something that we're going to work really hard, and the President believes this is a top priority.

Q And in terms of language, are you happy with what you've heard from House leadership about what will come up at some point? Is your request going to be something that you think is going to get a vote?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there has been a constructive conversation between staff in the Speaker's office on this topic and senior officials here in the administration. So those conversations are ongoing and I anticipate they will be ongoing probably right up until the vote.

Stephen.

Q Back to the Scotland thing. So are you saying that if Scotland goes it alone on Thursday, what is left will no longer be a strong and robust ally? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: That's a clever question. (Laughter.) Attempting to answer it might be interpreted by some as unnecessarily or maybe even improperly interfering with a decision that should rightly be made by the voters of Scotland. So I don't think I'll elaborate any further on what the President himself said in terms of articulating what America's interest was in the outcome of this election that, again, will be decided by no one other than the Scottish people.

Q But is there any concern or is has there been any sort of thinking about what would happen if the U.K. was weaker in NATO, if your close ally lost some weight in the Security Council? There must be implications for U.S. policy in that.

MR. EARNEST: I suspect that there is somebody in the administration who has been thinking about that at some level. I don't know to what level it has risen -- it certainly hasn't risen to my level. (Laughter.) Or maybe it hasn't sunk to my level -- I'll let you interpret that for yourself. I haven't been a part of those conversations. We are confident that ultimately the people of Scotland will make a decision that they believe is in their best interest. And the President himself articulated what he believed was important about our partners over there at the United Kingdom.

Kristen.

Q Josh, thank you. In the wake of learning about the brutal execution of British aid worker, David Haines, over the weekend, Prime Minister David Cameron came out and he had very strong language that seemed to indicate that he was at least considering stronger military action. Can you update us on that? Is there any indication the U.K. is going to join the U.S. when it comes to launching airstrikes in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update on those conversations. We are in close touch with our allies in the U.K. on a range of issues, including this one. But any announcements that they have to make about commitments they're prepared to make to take the fight to ISIL will be made by them.

Q Well, can you characterize how this -- how you see this moment? I mean, there's obviously increased pressure on Prime Minister Cameron in the wake of this. So are there discussions ongoing about more coordination, since this is our closest ally?

MR. EARNEST: The United States is in close touch with the United Kingdom. As you know, we have a special relationship with them. They also have very unique military capabilities that can be --

Q But don't you expect them to join the United States in launching airstrikes, given that?

MR. EARNEST: We need to -- have had the kinds of constructive conversations that you would expect from a close ally like the United Kingdom, and we do anticipate that they will play an important role in this coalition. In terms of what role they're going to play, we'll give them the opportunity to make an announcement about anything they might be contemplating contributing to this effort.

Let me point out one thing. They have contributed already to some of the humanitarian military efforts that the President ordered last month in Iraq. I believe they dropped some humanitarian supplies near Mount Sinjar that brought some relief to those individuals who were being persecuted there. So they've already played an important role here. But they obviously have the capacity to do significantly more, and we're having close conversations with them about that.

Q And I want to just follow up on Julie's line of questioning. Over the weekend, several senior administration officials said that the U.S. had gotten some assurances from several Arab countries that they would join in an air campaign. Is that still the case?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen those reports. I saw that many of those individuals were talking privately because they didn't want to make any sort of announcements that should be properly made by those governments who are contemplating making a contribution to the coalition. So I don't want to speak publicly about those conversations either.

Q Well, I understand you can't name them specifically, but is it still the case that several Arab countries have said that they are going to join in an air campaign?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, in line with Julie's question, as soon as I say yes, you're going to ask me which countries -- and understandably so. That is a totally legitimate line of questioning. But I just don't want to go down that path, because I'm not prepared to be in a position to make announcements for these countries that may be contemplating commitments.

If the shoe were on the other foot -- and somewhere there probably is the press secretary for an Arab government being asked what the United States is actually prepared to do. And I would be --

Q Which one? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: And I would take umbrage if that individual were to make commitments on behalf of the United States, so I'm certainly not going to make commitments on behalf of these other countries.

We're pleased with the progress of the conversations we've been having with them, and those conversations continue. The Secretary of State has been principally responsible for them. I would anticipate that General Allen will continue to have those kinds of conversations as well. But I'm not -- at this point, I'm not in a position to announce specific commitments.

Q And just, finally, does McDonough seem to indicate that you had also gotten some assurances from some countries that they would send ground troops into the region? And I guess my question is, how can the U.S. expect other countries to send in combat forces when the U.S. is not prepared to do that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't want this to be interpreted as me implicitly confirming a commitment from some other country. I'm not doing that. But suffice it to say, there are countries in the region that arguably -- at least arguably -- have as much of a stake in the outcome of this fight with ISIL as anybody else; that this violence and havoc that ISIL is wreaking in this neighborhood is having a negative impact on the broader region. In some cases, these acts of violence are being perpetrated not far from the border of other countries. To make matters even worse, these acts are being committed in the name of the Sunni-Muslim religion.

It is incredibly important for moderate voices to step forward. And the President himself made the case that many of these Muslim -- I'm sorry, these Sunni-led governments in the region have for a long time, based on sectarian divisions, considered Shia-led governments, or Shia-led interests to be the greatest threat to their country. The President posited, I think with some -- in a way that's entirely reasonable, that these extremist elements of the Sunni sect actually pose a greater threat to these Sunni countries than the Shia sect does because of these terrible acts of violence that are all being committed in the name of this religion, setting aside the fact that many of the victims of this terrible violence are themselves Muslim.

So this is a very difficult situation, but the interest that many of these governments in the region [have] is even more substantial than the interest of the U.S. government. But that is why it is so critically important for this international coalition to be built, and it's why it's important for people all around the world to understand that this is not a case of ISIL being dug in in a fight against the United States. The international community is mobilizing to take the fight to ISIL because of the terrible nature of their acts and because of their nihilistic vision.

Ed.

Q What then is holding these Sunni nations back? Given the stakes you just laid out, why haven't they come forward?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, again, I don't think that there's anything holding them back. I think that what we're seeing is --

Q They remain anonymous. You won't give us their names. That's holding back.

MR. EARNEST: I think what we're seeing is we're seeing very constructive engagement from regional governments that do have a significant stake in this outcome.

We're pleased with the level of conversations that we're having with these governments, and their willingness to contribute in a tangible, important way to this broader effort. We'll have some announcements to make in terms of what sort of cooperation and involvement and commitment that we have from the international community. And based on the tenor and tone of the kinds of private conversations that are underway right now, we expect those commitments to be substantial.

Q But didn't the President sort of lay out a call to action last Wednesday night? I didn't think he was saying to the world, let's have some conversations. I mean, five days have passed. I understand that might not seem like a lot of time, but ISIS -- the threat is there. The President himself laid out the stakes last Wednesday night. So is this not a failure for Secretary Kerry to not get this coalition together?

MR. EARNEST: Ed, based on the very strong statements that we're seeing from public officials representing these other governments, there is a clear indication that this coalition is coming together very nicely.

Q But you won't even give us the names of the countries in this room as to which Arab nations are going to help with airstrikes.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, because they will make those sorts of announcements when they have them. We have seen very clear statements. And we talked about this a little bit last week, that we saw -- we've seen this statement, the Jeddah communiqué, from ministers representing states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the United States. And all of them promised -- "agreed to do their share in the comprehensive fight against ISIL," including a wide range of things and "as appropriate, joining in the many aspects of a coordinated military campaign against ISIL."

So we have seen clear public commitments from a broad range of nations to joining the broader military and international effort to combat ISIL.

Now, the other thing we should point out is there are a variety of ways to participate in a military effort, aside from just carrying out airstrikes -- that there are training and equipping that can be done; that there's logistical support that can be offered, and even things like refueling aircraft. So there are a variety of ways that these nations can contribute to the overall effort, and I would anticipate that as we get closer to the U.N. General Assembly, we'll have some more details about the commitments that are being made.

Q So that's more of the timetable? Later this month, then, because that's obviously a week or so away.

MR. EARNEST: Well, yes, I would anticipate that next week that there will be discussions about this question that you're asking.

Q And one other quick thing. Secretary Kerry was talking yesterday on CBS about when it comes to U.S. airstrikes in Syria, the U.S. can “de-conflict” such attacks with the Syrian government.” He said, “We will certainly want to de-conflict to make certain that they’re not about to do something that they might regret.” Can you explain to the American people what he is saying there? Because it’s obviously a very -- a much different situation from Iraq, where we have been invited in to attack ISIS. In the case of Syria, President Assad may respond.

MR. EARNEST: Well, just to be real clear, Ed, the United States is not coordinating with the Assad regime regarding any contingency plans that the United States military is developing. As we’ve made very clear, the United States will take lawful action when our people are threatened, regardless of any geographic boundaries. We have seen that ISIL has disregarded the vanishing boundary between Iraq and Syria, and we’re not going to be -- the United States is not going to place ourselves at a strategic disadvantage by honoring a boundary that our enemies don’t.

So beyond that, I’m not in a position to telegraph in advance what our plans may be.

Q But when Secretary Kerry says -- I want to make certain -- “they’re not about” -- he is talking about Assad -- “they’re not about to do something they might regret,” is the President prepared, if Syrian defense forces respond to U.S. war planes going and launching airstrikes in Syria, is the President prepared to take out Assad’s defense forces?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say it this way, Ed. There are a couple of ways I think to deal with this. The first is there are rules of engagement any time that our men and women in uniform are put into harm’s way. And so there will be rules of engagement that are related to any military orders that the President directs -- military actions that the President directs. So I’d refer you to the Department of Defense for a detailed assessment of that. But it won’t surprise you to know that there are contingencies related to self-defense when it comes to these sorts of rules of engagement.

The other point that I’d make as it relates to Syria is, as you all know and as has been publicly reported earlier this summer, the President did authorize a military mission that put American boots on the ground into Syria to try to rescue American hostages that were being held by ISIL. That mission was a high-risk mission; there were a substantial number of American servicemen and women that were involved. That mission was executed flawlessly, but it unfortunately did not result in the safe rescue and return of American hostages.

But I can say that while I think it is evident to anybody who is paying attention here that that is -- indicates the President’s willingness to order the kind of military action that’s required to protect the lives of military -- of American citizens, even if it means sending our military into Syria.

Q Thank you, Josh. Iran -- they said they rejected an offer or an invitation from the United States to join the fight against ISIL. What did you exactly want Iran to do? And weren’t you concerned that Iran joining this coalition would further discourage Sunni

nations of joining the fight?

MR. EARNEST: The thing that we have been really clear about is that the United States does not coordinate military action or share intelligence with Iran, and we don't have any plans to do so. There have been a couple of conversations that have occurred, most notably along the sidelines of the P5-plus-1 talks between U.S. officials and their Iranian counterparts.

This was an effort to communicate with them about our interests and our plans, but it did not reflect any change in our position that we're not going to coordinate military action or share intelligence with the Iranians. I'll repeat a point that I've made here a couple of times, which is that it is not in the interest of the nation of Iran for ISIL to make continued inroads as it relates to taking over ground in Iraq; that this kind of instability is not in the interest of any government in that region and it's certainly not in the interest of Iran.

So it's understandable that Iran may be talking about and maybe even taking actions to counter ISIL, but those will not be military actions that are coordinated with the United States because the United States does not coordinate our military action or share intelligence with the nation of Iran.

Carol.

Q Sort of following on that, a year ago the President was pursuing an informal meeting or handshake on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly with President Rouhani. Is that something that he is looking to pursue next week when the two of them are in New York again for the U.N. General Assembly?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know of any planned communication between President Obama and President Rouhani that's scheduled for the U.N. If that changes, we'll let you know.

But the nature of our conversations with Iran right now is principally focused on resolving the nuclear issue. And there are senior level administration officials that have been directed by this President to engage with their Iranian counterparts to try to reach -- resolve the international community's concerns about Iran's nuclear program. But that's the focal point of those conversations, and I don't know what the nature of conversations will be in New York, if any occur.

Q Last year when you guys were asked this same question, you were very clear that it was possible that there would be some sort of meeting, indicating that you were open to it. That doesn't seem to be what you're saying here now. Or is it fair to say that you're not interested in having a similar informal kind of meeting? Or are you saying that it is possible that this could happen next week?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'm trying to convey -- the reason that it was trickier then is that it was a pretty -- the conversation that occurred between President Obama and President Rouhani last year was historic because it was the first conversation between the

Iranian President and the American President in 30 or 40 years. So now that -- the historical significance of a conversation this year would be somewhat different.

Q Well, it would still be historical.

MR. EARNEST: It would be interesting.

Q Well, it would still be historical -- I mean, it would definitely be historical if they met in person or shook hands.

MR. EARNEST: It would be interesting. It would be interesting.

Q I don't think you would dispute that.

MR. EARNEST: It would be interesting. I think what I'm trying to convey is I don't know of a specific plan for that to occur at this time. But if it does, if something like that is added to the President's schedule, then we'll, of course, let you know.

Q Is that a possibility?

MR. EARNEST: Right now, there are no plans to do that. But if it changes, we'll let you know.

J.C.

Q To follow up a bit on Ed's question, take it another step, U.S.-Russian relations has seen better times, needless to say. However, would the President enlist --

MR. EARNEST: I mean, I think you could say that Russia's relationship with the Western world has seen better times. They're probably at their low point since the end of the Cold War. Russia's actions that are destabilizing in Ukraine have isolated them from much of Europe and the world because they've refused to sort of contribute to the situation in a positive way. But, yes, that includes the United States.

Q Then my question may be even more poignant.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q Thank you. (Laughter.)

Q Pointed, poignant?

Q Poignant, pungent, whatever. (Laughter.) I'll ask -- however, I will ask it. Would the President consider reaching out to President Putin on behalf of his and the Western allies and regional allies to denigrate ISIL, especially considering, as Ed was saying, Syria, that issue? Is there a strong relationship with Syria and President Assad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll say a couple things about that. The first is the President is looking forward to the meeting that he's having with President Poroshenko here at the White House later this week, and that will be an opportunity for him to discuss the latest

as it relates to their efforts to lock down the cease-fire, get both sides to agree to it. And that will be a very important meeting, and one the President looks forward to.

As it relates to President Putin, I don't have any meetings with President Putin to announce at this point. It could be added to the schedule, but I don't have anything like that to announce at this point.

Clearly, Russia, like much of the developed world, the civilized world is rightly concerned about ISIL. They are concerned because of the destabilizing impact that this terrible group is having on the region. They're rightly concerned about this issue of foreign fighters, something that we've talked about from here. These are individuals with foreign passports that have traveled to the region to take up the fight alongside ISIL. And there is the concern that these individuals, after getting some training and equipment and becoming further radicalized, could return back to the country from which they originated and carry out acts of violence. So I think President Putin -- at least I've heard him publicly articulate a concern about this.

And in the same way that we have sought to try to work constructively with the Russians where possible, where our interests align, notwithstanding our differences, I would anticipate that there may be an opportunity for us to find a constructive way to work with the Russians on this too.

It was just a year ago that the United States embarked on an effort, working closely with the Russians, to destroy Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile. That was an effort that was successfully completed earlier this year. That effort would not have been successful without the cooperation and coordination with the Russians. That's evidence of our ability to coordinate on high-priority issues in this region of the world. And if there's an opportunity for us to do that as it relates to ISIL, I'm sure that we'll take advantage of that opportunity.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Mike.

Q But that could go on for ages, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Mike, go ahead.

Q Just to get back to Ebola real quick. You mentioned the part of the President's interview where he talked about the fear of it mutating. Is that a sort of a hypothetical musing on his part or is it accurate to describe the government of the United States worried about the likelihood of that mutation? And is he reflecting a kind of sense of the medical community that this is a real danger and a real possibility?

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President was trying to articulate is the risk associated with failing to aggressively respond to the situation. I think it is -- I'm certainly not a scientist, and I don't have any special knowledge of Ebola. But my understanding based

on public reports is that if the disease is contained relatively soon, that the risk of a mutation like this is pretty low.

I think what the President was illustrating is that if we didn't respond aggressively, and as the only nation in the world -- the world's indispensable nation -- we have unique capabilities to respond to this. That's why it's in our interest to do so; that if we fail to respond to this and we allow the virus to spiral out of control, there is the potential that it could mutate in a way that could end up being dangerous for people back here in the U.S.

Right now, the risk of an Ebola outbreak in the United States is very low. But that risk would only increase if there were not a robust response on the part of the United States. And that's why the President -- among other things -- that's one of the things that's motivating the President to direct an aggressive response.

Q But to the specific question of the mutation, of the possibility of the mutation, he's -- by raising that, he's not suggesting that there is some concern on the part of the medical community in the United States that that possibility is that there's some likelihood of that mutation happening, and that there is some increased level of concern that you know of?

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President was trying to describe is that that likelihood remains very low right now, but it only increases the further that this virus is allowed to spread, and that is what's -- that is an important part of what's motivating the President to direct such a robust response to the situation that right now does not pose a significant threat to the United States.

Jim.

Q Has the President authorized the Pentagon to target individual leaders of ISIS in Syria or Iraq? And I know in the past the White House has said that senior leaders of al Qaeda have been decimated. Do you want to see the same thing happen with ISIS? Do you want to take those leaders out?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I will say that the President is still reviewing the plans and proposals that the Department of Defense has been hard at work developing. When this situation first cropped up -- I'm specifically referring to the significant advance that ISIL made across western and northern Iraq back in June -- the President immediately directed the United States military to increase significantly the amount of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions that were conducted in that region of the world. And that has been part and parcel of an effort to improve our knowledge about the situation on the ground.

Pentagon planners, in turn, have used that knowledge to develop some plans and target lists and other things for the President to consider as he puts together a military strategy for confronting ISIL.

This is a strategy that involves, as we've talked about here a little bit already, training and equipping soldiers on the ground. In Iraq, that means Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. In Syria, that means ramping up our assistance to the Syrian opposition fighters to take

the fight to ISIL on the ground. And they can be backed up with American military airpower. But those plans are still being reviewed by the President, and --

Q So in terms of authorizing airstrikes, you're not there yet? You're not ready to announce that yet?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are --

Q I mean strikes on individual leaders.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are airstrikes that the President has already ordered in Iraq, and some 150 or so have already been carried out. But as it relates to the specific plans that the President is reviewing, I don't have additional insight to share with you about them right now.

Q When you said degrade or destroy ISIS, that should mean take out their leadership -- isn't that right?

MR. EARNEST: Well, depriving these organizations of leaders, either on the battlefield or in command and control centers, certainly would have the effect of degrading and possibly ultimately destroying them. But I don't want to get ahead of any decision-making at the presidential level that still needs to be done.

Q And getting back to the coalition that the President is building and that the Secretary of State is building, I know you don't want to talk about which states are doing what, or who is going to be involved and so forth, but it is the goal of this White House to have a coalition that extends beyond the United States that will engage in these military actions, these kinetic military actions in Iraq and Syria. It wouldn't be a success, would it, if you had a coalition that did not have other countries participating in airstrikes, would it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, what we are seeking is the robust contribution of nations in the region and around the world to this allied effort. And we would anticipate that we will have countries that have significant military capabilities contributing to this broader effort.

Now, as I mentioned -- or I guess as I sort of alluded to with Ed, there are a variety of ways in which member countries can contribute militarily to this effort. It doesn't just mean carrying out airstrikes themselves. It could include providing some logistical support. It could include refueling. There are other surveillance efforts that other nations could undertake that would contribute to broader military success. There are a lot of different ways to contribute militarily to this coalition. So I don't want to get ahead, again, of any specific commitments that have been made by members of this coalition.

Q And just to go back to what Denis McDonough said yesterday, he was asked on a number of occasions about boots on the ground, and he reiterated that you're really looking at Iraqi and Syrian boots on the ground, and potentially some other partners that may come into the mix. But you've heard some critics up on Capitol Hill say that that's

just too limiting. Any second thoughts about just taking that completely off the table? Are you saying that that will never occur, U.S. combat boots on the ground? What if this escalates and becomes a longer, more protracted battle than you anticipated?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, I can say definitively that the President has ruled out sending American boots on the ground to be engaged in a combat role in Iraq and in Syria. The strategy that the President has put forward to deal with the threat posed by ISIL in Iraq and Syria is substantially different from the strategy that was put in place in advance of the last conflict in Iraq.

What we're considering here is more akin to the kinds of counterterrorism operations that have been successfully implemented in some other regions of the world. And those other countries, using some of our military capability, using our support for local fighters on the ground who could take the fight in their own country to the extremist organizations that are operating there, and building up the local government structures of some of these other nations -- that that has been a successful strategy for mitigating the threat, and even degrading the threat that is posed by --

Q Where has that strategy been successful?

MR. EARNEST: Well, they're places like --

Q Not Somalia or Yemen.

MR. EARNEST: Well, those are actually two of the countries that I was just going to cite. There is no doubt that in these two places the United States has deployed --

Q Somalia --

MR. EARNEST: Let me finish. That when the United States has deployed a strategy, that strategy has been specifically to work with local governments to build up the capacity of those central governments, to work with local fighters to make sure that we're increasing their capacity so that they can take the fight on the ground to these extremist organizations, and, where necessary, American military might can be deployed in support of those fighters on the ground to degrade the capacity of those individual organizations.

And just a couple of weeks ago, we saw an effort in Somalia, led by Somali fighters, to take out the leader of al-Shabaab in that country. That will have the effect of degrading and ultimately defeating al-Shabaab. Is that mission completed? Of course not. They continue to serve as a threat. But there is no doubt that this strategy has been successful.

Q You're holding up those countries as success stories, though.

MR. EARNEST: What I'm holding them up as -- as a place --

Q You've had some successes here and there, but you wouldn't hold them up as success stories.

MR. EARNEST: They are a place where the American counterterrorism strategy that has been put in place by President Obama has succeeded in degrading the threat that those organizations pay to the United States. And we intend to implement an analogous strategy against ISIL.

Go ahead, Sam.

Q In light of what you just said, there were reports this weekend that ISIL has struck a non-aggression pact with some of the moderate Syrian rebels. In light of what you just said about arming people on the ground to take the fight for the U.S., are you troubled by these reports? What should we make of them?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not. I'm just looking this up because there is a -- I know that there was a statement from this moderate opposition group to indicate that those reports of a cease-fire were not true. This is the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, and that's the group that's mentioned in the story that you're referencing. They've issued a statement indicating that they never ceased hostilities with ISIL and will continue to fight ISIL and the regime.

In fact, I understand that right now, as we speak, that the SRF and ISIL are currently fighting in a suburb in Syria and in the suburb that's referenced in the article -- they actually continue to fight one another -- and that the SRF and other elements of the moderate opposition have joined forces over the last couple of months to try to push ISIL out of the region.

Now, I know that there are some claims that suggest that one local brigade of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front reached a 24-hour agreement with ISIL that quickly broke down, but it was intended to allow both sides to retrieve the bodies of their fighters who had been killed in the ongoing conflict there. But I --

Q You're confident that U.S. diplomacy to these moderate Syrians will outweigh ISIS's diplomacy plan? That they -- sorry -- (laughter) -- that they -- my train of thought is still lost -- that they won't end up being much more persuasive than we are? I mean, they're fighting right there alongside them. Also --

MR. EARNEST: Well, they're not fighting alongside them. They're actually fighting them. And they have been for three years.

Q But related to that, the German ambassador was quoted in the New York Times saying that the reason Germany won't provide weapons to the moderate Syrian rebels is that they have no confidence where those weapons will end up. Why are we so much more confident about the final destination of the weapons than the Germans are?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say that we do have more confidence in the kinds of relationships that the international community has with the opposition fighters because the opposition fighters are not fighting the international community -- they're fighting ISIL. So I'm skeptical that ISIL is going to have a whole lot of success approaching them and achieving a diplomatic breakthrough.

Secondly, as it relates to our efforts to build relationships with these opposition fighters, over the course of the last three years, the administration has been seeking to build relationships and get greater understanding into who these individuals are and what cause they represent. And that does give us greater confidence in our ability to provide support and training and equipment to those individuals who will use that support, training and equipment in a way that's consistent with U.S. interests.

Major.

Q So what's more likely: A meeting with President Rouhani or meeting with President Putin at UNGA? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I welcome your interest in the President's schedule at the United Nations General Assembly. It will be --

Q Which would be more beneficial?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know that either of those individuals will appear on the President's dance card next week. So when we have the President's schedule laid out, we can discuss it.

Q When you said that Russia is rightly concerned about ISIL, it sounded to me as if you were indicating that there might be something that we're discussing with them that is indicating to this administration Russia might be willing to play a role. Are you trying to do that?

MR. EARNEST: I did not mean to leave you with that impression. There may be conversations that are going on. I don't happen to know of them if there are. I was merely trying to highlight something that I think even President Putin himself has acknowledged, which is that he has a similar concern to the one that has been expressed by leaders of countries throughout Europe, which is that there are individuals who have traveled to the region and taken up arms alongside ISIL who pose a threat to their home countries.

Q Would we welcome their help? And are we soliciting it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't know of any conversations between U.S. officials and Russian officials on this specific topic. I will just merely observe that there have been areas where the United States has been able to work in a coordinated fashion and a mutually beneficial fashion to advance our interests and advance the interests of Russians as well.

So I certainly wouldn't rule out those kinds of conversations, and I certainly wouldn't rule out that kind of coordination. I just don't know if those conversations have taken place at this point.

Q It also seems to me that today you're kind of suggesting a sequencing we should familiarize ourselves with. At UNGA next week, that's really where the President is going to try to lay down these commitments or advise the Arab nations to make public what they've privately committed, and that in the context of a Security Council and General Assembly resolution, this will all sort of carry with it a greater degree of international legitimacy, and that's when the expansion of this military campaign will follow. Is that a sequence that you're trying to suggest we get used to?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't say it quite that specifically. Let's take one step back from this, which is that the President has appointed -- or the Secretary of State has appointed General John Allen to take the lead in coordinating the contributions of countries who are going to be part of this broader coalition. General Allen is already hard at work on that task, and he'll be meeting with the President tomorrow to give him an update in terms of the status of those commitments.

What the United States is seeking to do, however -- prior to announcing public commitments from countries or members of the coalition -- is to put together a list of essentially the needs of the coalition. We want to walk through a checklist of all the needed commitments, and then we'll go back to individual countries and ask them to fulfill these individual -- these specific needs. So there is some coordination and integration that needs to go on here.

Frankly, it is not -- it would not be most effective for countries around the world to be issuing news releases about what sort of commitments they're willing to make in a haphazard fashion. Rather, what we're seeking to do is to integrate and coordinate those commitments in a way so as to make sure that we have an organized coalition to support those who are on the ground who are taking the fight to ISIL.

Q Logically, that work would culminate at the General Assembly meeting so you would have maximized, A, visibility, and B, a sort of echo effect in that assembly of the world's greatest leaders.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would anticipate that conversations with members of the coalition will occur throughout this week. And I would anticipate that some face-to-face conversations will also occur at the U.N. General Assembly next week. So I'm not here to set up a specific deadline, but I can give you some insight into the plan that we're pursuing right now.

Q Quickly, on Ebola -- you said, as what we all know, that the United States has unique logistical capacity. Is the United States doing everything it can with its logistical capacity to address Ebola?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President will have more to say about this tomorrow, and I would anticipate that you'll see an announcement related to ramping up the kind of assistance the United States can provide to try to meet this need.

Q But there are, besides beds and mobile hospitals, there are two enormous Navy ships that many have argued would be perfect for doing the kind of medicine that's required to isolate and treat victims of this disease in Africa, and they're not, so far as I understand, even being considered. And that's why I ask -- is the United States, with its unique logistical capacity and unique capabilities, doing everything it can to address this epidemic?

MR. EARNEST: I will reserve further comment on this until the President's announcements tomorrow.

Jon.

Q Josh, I just want to follow up on -- Jim asked you about whether or not the Pentagon has been given the authority to go after specific leaders of ISIL. You said the President is still reviewing options that have been presented to him. So are you saying that the military right now does not have the authority to conduct airstrikes specifically targeting leaders of ISIL? That they can't specifically target Baghdadi, the leader of the group, or they couldn't specifically target the executioner we've seen in those videos, if we had intelligence on where they were? Will the military now have the authority to do that kind of an airstrike?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let's separate a couple of things here. The first is, the President has given orders to the Department of Defense as it relates to airstrikes that they're already carrying out in Iraq against ISIL. As I think I've been asked before, the President is not required to sign off on each of those strikes, that they have a -- they have broad guidance that the President has given them. And they have carried out --

Q But the guidance hasn't --

MR. EARNEST: -- a large number of missions under that guidance.

Q But the guidance still has not included individual leaders, which is I think why Jim asked you that question. Are they now -- do they now have a green light to go after individual leaders?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there has been very specific guidance that's been provided to the Department of Defense about what their -- what sort of orders they've been given by the Commander-in-Chief. I'm not in a position to get into the details of what those communications are.

But, however, when it comes to the individual that you referenced, the person that we know is culpable for the killing of Mr. Foley and Mr. Sotloff, that individual is someone who, as the President himself has said, will face justice for what he has done. And we will -- and the President has already articulated that we will expend significant resources to bring that individual to justice.

Q Have you identified who that person is yet?

MR. EARNEST: As we've said for a couple of weeks now, the United States is working closely with our special partners -- or our allies at the -- in the United Kingdom and other nations that have intelligence and knowledge of this specific region of the world to try to determine the identity of that individual. I don't have an update on that process at this point.

Q And if I can ask for a clarification on what you said about Iran.

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q You made it clear that the United States will not coordinate militarily or in terms of intelligence with the Iranians. So I'm just wondering, what -- the Supreme Leader of Iran said that the Iranian government has turned down a request from the United States for support in the battle against ISIL. So was there any request that was made through back-channels to the Iranians? You've ruled out military or intelligence. Was there any other kind of a request that was made by the Iranians for cooperation in this fight that he's now announcing that they're turning down?

MR. EARNEST: Certainly none that I'm aware of. Like I said, the United States does not coordinate military action or share intelligence with the Iranians. And there have been a couple of back-channel conversations that have occurred, principally through -- in the context of the P5-plus-1 talks. I know --

Q Back-channel conversations about Iraq and about ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Well, those conversations, yes, were about this topic because there is a shared interest between our two countries. There's so much that the U.S. and Iran disagrees on, but there is a shared interest that we have here. It is not in the interest of Iran for this extremist group to be wreaking havoc across their -- the open territory of their neighbor.

So we will -- I would anticipate that there will continue to be back-channel -- the occasional back-channel conversation on this topic between the United States and other members of the international community and the Iranians. But our posture, as it relates to not coordinating military actions or sharing intelligence with the Iranians, hasn't changed and we don't have a plan to change that posture right now.

Q Okay, but I'm asking -- just to clarify, I'm asking a little more broadly, because the Supreme Leader has come out and he said that the Iranian government is rejecting a request from the United States for cooperation. And what you're saying is there has been no -- there's been meetings, there have been discussions, but there has been no request from the United States for cooperation of any kind with the Iranians in this battle against ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, our posture here is that we are not going to coordinate our military actions or our intelligence-sharing activities with the Iranians. And I did not see the direct quote from the Supreme Leader so I'm not exactly sure which aspect of -- what

his eventual point was, or what he was alluding to. But outside of a couple of back-channel conversations in which we talked about our shared interests in confronting this problem, our plans to not coordinate our military actions with Iran haven't changed.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Alexis.

Q Josh, I have two quick questions. Just to follow up -- when you were talking about Iran earlier, you said those back-channel conversations talked about shared interests and plans. So can you describe what you mean when you say there's been no coordination? What's the definition of coordination if we've discussed plans?

MR. EARNEST: A lot of questions about definitions the last couple of briefings.

Q Well, there's good reason.

MR. EARNEST: For good reason, that's right. I think what I'm trying to convey to you is that there is a reason for us to have conversations with Iran on this topic because we do have a shared interest in degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

It is not in the interest of Iran for this extremist group to be wreaking havoc within the boundaries of its neighboring country. So we do have a shared interest, and that shared interest has been discussed.

The President has already ordered military action in pursuit of protecting American citizens in Iraq. And the President has indicated that he's ready to order additional military action to accomplish our goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. I think the reasonable question that people have is, given Iran's significant military capability and given their significant interest in the outcome here, is the United States going to coordinate with Iran as we move forward on this military strategy. The answer to that is, no, we are not.

Q So a separate question -- because the President dealt with Congress last year slightly differently than the way he's dealing with them now -- this is the texture of my question. And because of the language for the training and arming, the expansiveness of the language presented to Congress, I wanted to clarify, does the President believe it's responsible to ask Congress to vote on this without knowing about the broader coalition? The sequencing is, approve it now and we'll tell you about the coalition later. Is that responsible?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, it is. The reason is simply that the President believes it is a priority for the administration to be given the authority it needs to begin training and equipping, ramping up our assistance to Syrian opposition fighters. We're doing that principally because the President believes we need boots on the ground to take the fight to ISIL in Syria. The President is determined that those boots will not be American boots that are on the ground.

So we need to make sure that we are improving the ability and expanding the capacity of Syrian fighters to take the fight to ISIL in their own country. We have already secured commitments from regional governments. Some of those commitments have been discussed publicly; the Saudis, for instance, have acknowledged their willingness to host some of those training activities.

But as I mentioned earlier, if there are specific members of Congress that have questions about what this Title 10 authority would entail or what this program would include, we're happy to have conversations with them about that because the President believes this is really a top priority.

Yes, I'll give you the last one, ma'am.

Q Thank you very much, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: You're welcome.

Q I have two questions, quick questions. One, first, did the United States ask South Korea for any financial support to use against IS? The second question is, National Security Advisor Susan Rice have a meeting with South Korean National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin. Do you have any readout of the meeting?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any readout of that meeting. I know that it's occurring today. I'd encourage you to consult with my National Security Council colleagues who may be able to provide you some more information about that meeting.

As it relates to South Korea and their contribution to the effort against ISIL, I'm not aware of any conversations that are occurring, but you should ask my National Security Council colleagues about whether or not that came up in the context of the meeting that the National Security Advisor is having today with her South Korean counterpart.

Thanks very much, everybody. Have a good one.

END

1:08 P.M. EDT