

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/13/2015

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October 13, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 13, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

****Please see below for clarifications, marked with asterisks.**

12:56 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Before we begin, let me observe that there are heavy hearts around the White House complex today as we mourn the loss of our former colleague and friend, Brandon Lepow. Brandon passed away last night, surrounded by friends and family, after a long and spirited fight against cancer.

Brandon worked on the President's campaign in 2008, and continued here at the White House, first in the advance shop before moving over to our communications operation. So many of you also got to know him well.

We're saddened by Brandon's death, but I know I'm not the only one who continues to be inspired by his life and the way that he lived it. I've been thinking about Brandon's family, and particularly his parents as they mourn the loss of their son. But as a relatively new father myself, I've also been thinking about the kind of man that I want my son to grow up to be. And Brandon's courage in confronting tough challenges, his selflessness and humility in interacting both with those he loved and those he barely knew, and his passion for what he believed in makes him a genuine role model.

So to his wife, Theresa, who bravely and loyally walked every step of a difficult path with Brandon over the last few years, please know that there are a lot of people in our nation's capital and around the country who are sending a lot of love to you today.

And, Brandon, buddy, we're really going to miss you, but we're sure going to do our best to live up to the high standard that you've set.

So, with that, let's get down to business. And I promised last week, in the briefing, a brief presentation about the TPP.

So in our conversations --

Q My lucky day.

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry?

Q My lucky day.

MR. EARNEST: Your lucky day. (Laughter.) Fortunately, I have some visuals that might make this more entertaining than my usual beginning. So be patient with me.

There are -- we know that when the rules of trade are fair, that Americans can out-compete anyone in the world. And that's the idea that's at the heart of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. And a new report that was recently released by the USTR details how the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement would slash 18,000 taxes that various countries put on American goods.

So, for example, let me start with Ohio. Ohio is a good example. Tires that are made in America, in Ohio, face foreign tariffs -- I'm sorry, they face tariffs or foreign taxes as high as 40 percent. And you'll recall that, in the past, concerns have been raised about the impact that foreign countries like China have had on our factories and our workers when they dump tires into markets here in the United States.

In keeping with the President's commitment to strong trade enforcement, the United States has worked aggressively, through the WTO, to hold China accountable for violating trade rules. There are a number of occasions in which that's taken place. The Trans-Pacific Partnership actually goes one step further, by making sure that manufacturers aren't at a disadvantage when they sell their tires abroad to any of our 11 TPP countries.

So, Ohio is a good example. Foreign taxes on tires made in America and shipped from Ohio are as high as 40 percent. And under the TPP, those would be eliminated.

Let me give you the examples of some other states that may resonate. Let's take Texas, for example. Leather boots that are shipped from Texas to TPP countries face foreign taxes as high as 30 percent, and obviously those would be taxes that would be eliminated through the TPP.

Just to choose another example, how about Kentucky. Kentucky is a state known for its bourbon. Some TPP countries place foreign taxes on bourbon as high as 45 percent. Those tariffs would be eliminated through the TPP.

Let's consider Michigan. Michigan obviously is well known for exporting cars around the world. These are American cars made by American workers. In some TPP countries, these automobiles face a foreign tax of up to 70 percent, a tax that would be eliminated through the TPP.

Just to choose another state, how about Iowa. Iowa is a state that produces a significant quantity of pork that is shipped around the world and enjoyed by millions of people around the globe. Some foreign countries put an exorbitantly high tax on American pork -

- up to 388 percent before it can be imported into another country. Obviously those tariffs would be *[reduced and in some cases] eliminated under the TPP.

Also consider Alabama, a state that is known for producing iron and steel.

Q And good football.

MR. EARNEST: And good football. I don't know if the tax on football would be affected by the TPP, but the tax on iron and steel -- it's as high as 20 percent in some TPP countries -- would be eliminated.

Just two more examples. Everybody knows about cheese in Wisconsin. Other countries in the TPP currently have a foreign tax on Wisconsin cheese of up to 40 percent -- a tax that would be *[reduced and in some cases] eliminated under the TPP.

And last, and certainly not least, a state that's close to my heart, the great state of Missouri -- the "Show Me State" -- produces barbecue sauce that is world renowned. This is barbecue sauce that currently faces in some countries a foreign tax as high as 30 percent. And in Missouri we believe that everybody should have the benefits of enjoying delicious barbecue sauce. And so we want to make sure that we, by moving forward with the TPP, we can eliminate that foreign tax on barbecue sauce, as well. What could be more American than that?

So, with that preview, and the possibility that we may refer to these slides again over the course of the briefing, we can go to your questions.

Q What's next -- sock puppets? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Whatever it takes, Mark.

Q I wanted to ask you about Syria. How fearful is the White House that the conflict there is turning into some sort of a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia, given that both sides are providing different rebel groups with weapons, and a lot of these groups are on different sides of the conflict?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, I think the President was fairly definitive in the news conference that he did 10 or 12 days ago in which he made clear that the conflict in Syria would not turn into a proxy war between the United States and Russia. That is a firm commitment that the President has made, and that's something that we will abide by.

The reason for that -- there are a couple of reasons for that. The first is that we would welcome Russia's constructive contribution to the broader international coalition that's been formed to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. Russia has declined to make that constructive contribution thus far. But that continues to be something that we're open to.

Secondly, the efforts of our international coalition that was built and led by the United States is one that is focused on ISIL. This is a multi-pronged strategy focused on degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. Russia claims to share that goal. Thus far, we

believe that they've pursued a strategy that actually undermines the effective pursuit of that goal. But we would welcome a change in their strategy to more effectively accomplish that goal that they have claimed to set out for themselves.

The final thing is that the President's top priority when it comes to confronting a very difficult situation in Syria is the safety and security of the American people. And that is why there are any number of military strikes that the President has ordered against extremists operating inside of Syria. In some cases, these are ISIL extremists. In some cases, these are extremists not affiliated with ISIL but yet leading extremist organizations, trying to capitalize on the chaos in Syria to plan and execute terror attacks against the United States and our interests around the world.

And that is the focus of our efforts there, and there certainly is ample rhetoric that we see from Republican critics essentially goading the President to try to engage in a proxy war with Russia. They say that ostensibly because they think maybe that it makes them look tough, but I think they would have a very difficult time articulating why that would be in the clear national security interest of the United States of America.

Q Being committed to something is one thing. How do you -- and I understand that you say that he's committed to keeping it from becoming a proxy war, but how do you actually prevent it from turning into that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think by ensuring that our efforts are focused on ISIL. And there is a multifaceted strategy that we have put forward to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and it is countering ISIL that is the focal point of our efforts inside of Syria right now. We're hopeful that that will also lead to the kind of political transition that would reduce the level of chaos inside of Syria. Countering Russia's involvement in Syria doesn't rate nearly as high on the scale.

Q Yesterday at the State Department, Spokesman John Kirby said that the U.S. was still monitoring reports of the conviction of the Washington Post reporter, Jason Rezaian, and that the U.S. hadn't received any official confirmation that he had been convicted. Do you have any sort of an update on that today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there is not much clarity about the current trial of Jason Rezaian, the United States citizen currently being held in Iran. There have been sporadic reports, and apparently a confirmation or two from a spokesman affiliated with the justice system there, indicating that Mr. Rezaian has been convicted. But we have not heard that through official channels, and there obviously has been no formal announcement of such a conviction.

It's not particularly surprising that the situation is unclear because the entire proceedings against him have been opaque. And that has been a principal concern that we've articulated with his unjust detention. Throughout this process, there has been an unwillingness on the part of the Iranians to be candid about what their intentions are. And, in fact, what is clear is that their intention is to continue to detain him unjustly, and that is something that we are quite concerned about in the same way that we're quite

concerned about the unjust detention of Amir Hekmati and Saeed Abedini inside of Iran. We also have concerns about the whereabouts of the U.S. citizen, Robert Levinson, who was last known to be inside of Iran. But we have not gotten cooperation from the Iranians in trying to -- that we would like to get to determine Mr. Levinson's whereabouts.

So we've got a number of concerns, and the lack of clarity around this particular situation is not surprising. In fact, it's consistent with the kind of sham process that they've been running over there for several years now.

Q Finally, what is your sense on whether the President will watch some or all of tonight's debate, or will he wait for the highlights in the morning?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't be surprised if the President catches part of the debate tonight. I don't think that he will watch it wire to wire. There is some pretty good playoff baseball on tonight. So I would anticipate that he may be doing a little channel surfing. But the President is certainly interested in the debate, and what he doesn't catch live and in person I'm confident that he will see in the coverage of the debate.

And as mentioned in the context of the two Republican debates that have been held so far, this kind of robust discussion in public, in front of the American people, where the candidates lay out their vision and priorities for the country is good for our democracy and it's a good opportunity for the American people and voters to carefully consider the platform on which each candidate is running. And the President welcomes a robust, healthy, vigorous debate about the many opportunities and challenges that are facing the country right now.

Julia.

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to get your response to Iranian ballistic missile testing over the weekend, which appears to be in violation of the U.N. ban against their using ballistic missiles. The Defense Minister said that Iran would not ask permission to strengthen its defense and missile capabilities. What's the U.S. response? And how does that bode for Iran's capability to hold up its end of the agreement and the Iran nuclear agreement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, first of all, the missile tests that we did see over the weekend are -- we've got strong indications that those missile tests did violate a U.N. Security Council resolution that pertain to Iran's ballistic missile activities. Unfortunately, that's not new. We have seen Iran on -- almost serially violate the international community's concerns about their ballistic missile program. And the U.N. Security Council resolution actually gives the international community some tools to interdict some equipment and material that could be used to advance their ballistic missile program, and gives us the ability to work in concert with our partners around the world to engage a strategy to try to disrupt continued progress of their ballistic missile program.

But this is altogether separate from the nuclear agreement that Iran reached with the rest of the world. In contrast to the repeated violations of the U.N. Security Council resolution that pertains to their ballistic missile activities, we've seen that Iran over the last couple of years has demonstrated a track record of abiding by the commitments that they've made

in the context of the nuclear talks. And there was a lot of skepticism. Remember, even two or three years ago in the early stages of the nuclear talks, many critics of the administration said that engaging in these kinds of talks would be counterproductive because there was no way that Iran would abide by the commitments that they made. And, in fact, Iran had previously used the cover of talks to make progress on their nuclear program.

But over the last two or three years, we have seen Iran live up to some very tough standards when it comes to limiting their nuclear program. And that said, we have been saying all along that the nuclear agreement that Iran reached with the rest of the world will not be predicated on trust, but it will be predicated on the most robust, intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program.

So we will be able to verify Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement. And if they don't, there is a very specified set of responses that can be implemented to respond to those violations. So that's the approach that we have taken thus far. It does hold the potential of us succeeding in expanding the breakout period for Iran, preventing them from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And in fact, if Iran does verifiably uphold the terms of this agreement, it would do more to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon than even a military strike would. And that is why the President has pursued this course, and it's one that we will seek to implement, consistent with the agreement that was reached a couple of months ago.

Q Iraq has started bombing Islamic State targets with help from the intelligence center that's run by Russia, Iran and Syria partners. Does the White House welcome the attacks because they're against the Islamic State, or is there some skepticism about the way Iraq is coordinating these attacks with Iraq, Iran and Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by observing the obvious, which is that Iraq is a sovereign nation in a complex region of the world. And with the possible exception of Syria, no nation has faced a greater threat from ISIL than Iraq; that the security situation in Iraq in the summer of 2014 was virtually turned upside down by the rapid ISIL advance across western and even significant parts of northern Iraq. And it has required Iraq to undertake a political transition and have a government that is much more effective in unifying the nation of Iraq across sectarian lines. That's had a corresponding positive impact on the ability of Iraq's security forces to take the fight to ISIL.

And we know that ISIL is a determined enemy, and that it will ultimately be a long effort to degrade and ultimately destroy them. In fact, that is why we built a multi-nation coalition of some 65 different nations to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And that coalition has worked effectively with the Iraqis to make progress against ISIL inside of Iraq. And we believe that those coordinated efforts, through our counter-ISIL coalition, will be more effective than the unilateral efforts of nations like Russia and Syria.

Toluse.

Q Thanks, Josh. The Taliban has said that they're pulling out of -- or they have pulled out of Kunduz in Afghanistan. I wanted to get your reaction to that, and also see if that might have an impact on the broader discussion of when to withdrawal troops from Afghanistan.

MR. EARNEST: Toluse, we have seen those reports. And obviously, that is a welcome sign. I think it is an indication that the Afghan national security forces do have a significant capability that's been built up over the last few years, thanks in no small part to the dedication of the NATO force that's operating in Afghanistan to train, equip and advise the Afghan national security forces. So the fact that they were overrun in Kunduz in the first place was a setback, but their ability to regroup and retake the city is an indication of the resilience and capability of the Afghan security forces.

As I mentioned before, the President does have a policy decision to make as it relates to our future military presence inside of Afghanistan. And certainly, conditions on the ground will influence that process, but they will not dictate the outcome; that there are a range of considerations that the President will factor in, in making that decision.

I don't have an update for you at this point on what that decision will be or when it will be announced.

Q I wanted to ask about the South China Sea. There are reports that the U.S. is planning to send a warship to some of the contested waters, potentially within 12 nautical miles of some of the islands that have been built there, and I'm wondering, specifically because China has said that they would not condone their territorial waters being breached, what your message would be to the Chinese on this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President delivered a pretty clear and resounding message in the Rose Garden when he was standing next to President Xi at the end of last month, in which he declared -- not for the first time -- that the United States will continue to sail, fly and operate anywhere in the world that international law allows.

So the fact is that the Department of Defense regularly conducts freedom-of-navigation operations around the world. My colleagues at the NSC pulled some statistics for me that I thought were interesting. In 2014, the Department of Defense challenged the excessive maritime claims of 18 different nations. These are nations as diverse as Iran, around the Strait of Hormuz, and other nations with whom we have much warmer relations -- nations like Nicaragua, India and Brazil.

So there are a variety of reasons that the Department of Defense would carry out operations like this, so it's certainly not a situation where the Chinese would be singled out. But at this point, I don't have any sort of policy announcements to share with you, other than what the President said in the Rose Garden when he was standing next to President Xi.

Q And I wanted to ask about the Iran deal. It was I guess approved by the Iranian parliament. First, do you have any reaction to it being approved over there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that was actually the one thing I was -- that I failed to mention in response to Julia's question. I'm certainly no expert in Iranian politics, but I suspect that it is no coincidence that shortly after the Majlis signed off on the Iran deal that there was a decision made by some inside of Iran to conduct a ballistic missile test that garnered the strong opposition and objection of the international community. So that's -- I wanted to make that observation first.

I don't have a specific reaction to the approval, however, other than to point to it as an indication that we continue to be on a path toward the successful implementation of this international agreement.

Q And just a follow up on that. There was a report in Fox News a couple days ago about the foreign subsidiary loophole that's part of this deal -- that when sanctions would be relaxed, that U.S. companies that have foreign subsidiaries would also have their sanctions relaxed. And there was a question as to whether or not that violates a previous law that was signed in 2012 that says that you couldn't -- that the U.S. cannot relax those sanctions unless certain conditions are met. So I'm wondering if the legality of this deal continues to sort of be in question, and whether that specific clause is something that the White House has looked at.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of the specific report that you're citing, Toluse. I will say there is no question at all about the legality of the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And just to be clear, Iran will not get sanctions relief under this deal until they have taken significant and verifiable steps to significantly curtail their nuclear program. And this is everything from -- just as a reminder, as I've said this many times -- disconnecting thousands of centrifuges, to reducing their stockpile by 98 percent, or essentially gutting the core of the heavy-water reactor at Arak. So these are significant steps that Iran still must take before any sanctions relief will be offered. And there is no denying the legal justification of moving forward with this agreement.

Q Are you all planning for any legal challenges? I know previous things the President has endorsed have been held up in court, so I'm wondering if this is something that you're preparing for.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any legal challenges that have been filed against the effort to implement this deal. But we'll obviously be -- if any challenges are filed, we certainly would feel confident about our ability to prevail in a court of law.
Olivier.

Q Josh, you said that there are strong indications that this missile test violated the U.N. Security Council resolutions. Why can't you be more affirmative and say that it did or did not?

MR. EARNEST: I asked this question myself this morning, and I don't know if this is an overly lawyered construction. I think the sense is that there's more information about the specifics of the missile launch that need to be collected before a definitive statement can

be made about whether or not it is in violation of this existing U.N. Security Council resolution. But based on what has been reported publicly, there are strong indications that it is a violation of those Security Council resolutions that are on the books.

Q Okay. And then you referred to a scale of U.S. interests in Syria, starting with preventing attacks on U.S. targets, and then including countering ISIL, countering Russia. Could you put more U.S. interests in this constellation and explain to me what's the -- obviously you said what the core one is. What are the other ones? Where does, for example, regional stability fit into this? Where does abating the humanitarian crisis fit into this? What's the order here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously it's probably hard for me to give you a real specific description because it's something I just made up as we were talking about at the beginning here. But I can certainly articulate to you what our priorities are, and the top priority is clearly the safety and security of the American people. And we've talked at length about the strikes that have been taken inside of Syria to take extremists off the battlefield. Some of those are ISIL-affiliated operatives; in some cases they are extremists not affiliated with ISIL, but dangerous nonetheless. So that is clearly the top priority.

Degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL is a significant priority both because of the national security threat that they pose to the United States, but also because of the degree to which they have caused instability throughout an already volatile region of the world. There also is a focus on -- or a priority placed upon completing a long-overdue political transition inside of Syria. We have pointed to the political problems inside of Syria and the failed political leadership of President Assad as the root cause of so many of these problems. And even the Russians have acknowledged that a political transition will be necessary to get to the root cause of so many of these problems.

Obviously, the scale of the humanitarian crisis that has been caused by the violence inside of Syria is significant and even historic. To see millions of people fleeing Syria, and millions of other people displaced inside of Syria fleeing violence is a significant challenge. This is a political conflict that has turned violent, that has upended the lives of millions of innocent Syrians. And the United States continues to be the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to this crisis. And as recently as just a couple of weeks ago we announced that the subtotal of our assistance now was up to about \$4.5 billion. That is a significant commitment of U.S. resources to try to meet the basic humanitarian needs of Syrian citizens who are just in a terrible, desperate situation.

So I would characterize those as our top priorities. And, Olivier, the reason that we're not particularly concerned about trying to mobilize a strategy to counter Russia inside of Syria is that Russia is operating from a position of weakness. Syria is home to the only Russian military outpost outside of the former Soviet Union. And four or five years ago, that was an outpost that was generously protected by a tyrant in the form of Bashar al-Assad. But because of Assad's failed leadership, because of the chaos that has been sown into that country, the security situation around that military base and about the government that led the country where that military based was located, a lot of concerns were raised about Russia's investment in that country.

And so Russia, for years, has been trying to address this problem in a variety of ways -- offering political support to Assad, offering financial support to Assad, offering some other material forms of support to the Assad regime. And now, Russia, seeing that each of those contributions was insufficient, has now had to mobilize a significant commitment of military assets to try to shore up Assad and protect their military investment inside of Syria. So that's why countering Russia's activities in that country doesn't rate nearly as high on the scale as those other priorities that I outlined.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. As you know, highway funding expires October 29th. One of the things that Paul Ryan was supposed to be thinking about was ways to pay for a highway bill -- a long-term highway bill. Now, with the Speaker's race open, are you concerned that there's going to have to be another short-term extension of highway funding?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President acknowledged in his news conference, and I think maybe even response to your question, that there certainly was the potential that the upheaval around the Speaker's race could have an impact on the ability of Congress to fulfill all of their basic obligations, including ensuring that the transportation trust fund doesn't run out. And that was even before Kevin McCarthy dropped out of the race. So the turmoil there has only multiplied since the President acknowledged that that was the case.

So, at this point, we're going to continue to make a strong case. It's one, I think, that is quite well received on Capitol Hill, which is there is strong bipartisan support for investments in infrastructure projects that we know are good for the local economies of communities all across the country. And traditionally, investments in transportation infrastructure have garnered strong bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, and we're hopeful that they will again.

These repeated short-term extensions are certainly not an effective way for state governments across the country to plan what in some cases are particularly complicated transportation infrastructure projects. If you're trying to plan and execute an infrastructure project that would take place over two or three years, getting funded in two- or three-month increments is going to be problematic.

And so that's why the President has put forward his own plan for a long-term extension of the transportation funding stream. And what the President envisions is not just an extension of that funding stream at current levels, but actually a significant increase in the investment that's made in transportation infrastructure. The President also put forward a very specific way for paying for it, because he believes that we can do that in a fiscally responsible way. But we're going to need to see Congress act.

And again, I've made this observation before -- we're not waiting on Congress to take some sort of ambitious step forward in pursuit of a visionary proposal for the country. We just want Congress to do the bare minimum. We're just asking for members of Congress to fulfill their basic responsibility -- to pass a budget, to protect the full faith and credit of

the United States, and make sure that we can have a 21st-century infrastructure in the United States. These are not -- again, as much as I would like to tout the President's proposal -- and I have -- I don't think it trends toward the visionary.

These are basic fundamental responsibilities of the United States Congress. And far too often, over the last four years, under Republican leadership, we have seen Congress stub their toe time and time again in trying to fulfill these basic functions. And there are a lot of reasons for that, but we're hopeful that maybe -- that Republicans in Congress will figure out that these basic responsibilities that are so clearly in the best interest of the American people will start to take precedent over the strongly held ideological views of some vocal members of their conference.

Q So do you believe then that Speaker Boehner, in his last couple weeks left, needs to put the highway bill and the debt ceiling increase on the floor, work with Democrats, and get that passed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Speaker Boehner himself has made a reference to his willingness to clean out the barn before he leaves. And as I've mentioned previously, that whether it's a willingness on the part of those of us here at the White House to grab a mop or a hose, or whatever is required --

Q Shovel?

MR. EARNEST: -- a shovel -- we stand ready to help. And so we're hopeful that many of these kinds of things will be on the table for discussion prior to Speaker Boehner's departure.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. In the interview that the President gave to 60 Minutes, he was asked about Secretary Clinton's email server. And he said -- and I quote -- "I can tell you this is not a situation in which America's national security was in danger." How does he know that? Because there's two inspector generals that disagree, and the FBI is investigating.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President was making an observation about what we know so far, which is that Secretary Clinton herself has turned over a bunch of email to the State Department. And the review that email has garnered some differing assessments about what's included in there, but she made clear that nothing that was stamped "Classified" was sent to her from that email account. And we know that to be true based on what has been collected so far.

So I think what the President was observing is that Secretary Clinton has acknowledged that this was a mistake. But she is cooperating with the inspectors general who are taking a look at this, and even with a partisan investigation on Capitol Hill -- the eighth one -- to take a look at this. That's obviously the right thing for her to do.

Q But we've heard you many times, for a variety of different topics, say, I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation. There is an ongoing counterintelligence investigation on this. Why did the President decide to comment, given that the FBI is looking at this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, he made that observation based on what is publicly known now, and what we publicly know now is that no information that was stamped "Classified" was sent to or sent from that particular email server.

Q Should his comments be read as an attempt to steer the direction of that FBI investigation?

MR. EARNEST: Of course not. The President certainly respects the independence and integrity of independent investigations, including those that are conducted by the FBI.

Q Will the President watch the debate tonight?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I mentioned to Darlene, I would anticipate that the President will probably see some of the debate on television tonight, but there's also some playoff baseball on television tonight. So I imagine the President might be doing some channel surfing. But he certainly will be aware of the highlights and aware of the coverage, and interested in the kind of robust debate that he believes is good for the country and good for our democracy.

Q Sorry if you went over this --

MR. EARNEST: That's okay.

Q -- in the -- I'm not sure quite how to ask this, but in his discussions with Vice President Biden, has this issue of him not participating in the debate ever come up?

MR. EARNEST: I have made it a point to not read out the private conversations between the President and the Vice President on a variety of topics, including the Vice President's possible presidential aspiration. So I don't know whether it's come up, but even if I did, I don't think I'd be willing to talk about it from here.

Q I respect that. And respectfully, is there a sense here that at some point in the very near future the Vice President will make a decision, or needs to make a decision? Because this has become a headline, for better or worse, and --

MR. EARNEST: I think the Vice President himself has, in a couple of different public settings, acknowledged that he'll have to make a decision relatively soon. And it has been our position here since over the summer that Vice President Biden will be given all of the time and space that he needs to reach this decision. And he's obviously doing what he needs to do in order to consider that possibility, but he'll make a decision and announce it on a timeframe of his choosing.

Q So these notions that the clock is ticking are perhaps -- your reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that is a matter of simple physics when it comes to time and space here. (Laughter.) So I would stipulate that that's true. But in terms of what sort of pressures he's facing in terms of his timeframe for getting in the race, those are pressures that he'll evaluate independently, and obviously will factor into his decision, I'm sure.

Q In terms of the President's television watching -- and forgive me if you've been asked - Donald Trump is going to host Saturday Night Live. Will he watch that? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I actually had not heard that, but it sounds interesting.

Q I have it from very high sources that --

MR. EARNEST: I'll bet you do. (Laughter.) I'll bet you do. I don't know if the President will watch that or not.

Q He's never done the show himself. He's participated, but he's never hosted.

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe that President Obama has hosted the show, but he's been on -- had a walk-on appearance three or four times, I believe.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Was Vladimir Putin wrong when he said to TASS yesterday, we could have used the money that we set aside for the Syrian fighter program and done a much better job of fighting international terrorism than the U.S. did?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't see those specific comments, but I would say that right now the money that Russia is using to try to shore up their investment inside of Syria is, frankly, good money that they're throwing after bad. The longstanding efforts that Russia has been engaged in over the last four or five years to try to prop up the Assad regime have not succeeded. And, in fact, this doubling-down we've seen from the Russians on the Assad regime is a losing bet and is only likely to draw Russia further into a sectarian conflict, even a quagmire, and it certainly does raise significant questions about their purported strategy to go after extremists.

The fact is, the strategy that they're engaged in right now only makes it harder to build up the capacity of a moderate opposition that would be part of a political transition, and only puts Russia at greater risk of facing the anger and ire of otherwise moderate Syrian opposition figures who are hoping for a political transition inside that country. And continued strikes at moderate opposition targets inside of Syria only emboldens ISIL. So we've seen some reports out of Syria, including around Aleppo, where Russia has taken strikes against moderate opposition fighters that have actually paved the way for ISIL to capitalize on the weakness of the moderate opposition in that region of Syria.

And so by striking non-extremist targets and not focusing on ISIL, Russia is allowing ISIL to fester and expand, and make itself more of a target by violent extremists in Syria and potentially back at home.

Q Speaking of, I want to sort of understand your mindset when you say the U.S. will not engage in a proxy war in Syria. The President made that very clearly understood, but I'm trying to understand or square what's your definition of a proxy war if we're funding opposition fighters and they're fighting against Russian-supported forces. Isn't that sort of the definition of a proxy war?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess, Kevin, the goal of U.S. involvement inside of Syria is focused on our counter-ISIL strategy -- and that is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And some of the support that we're providing to elements of the Syrian moderate opposition -- support that's been ramped up in just the last few days -- is geared toward trying to drive ISIL out of different regions of Syria, principally in northeastern Syria. And we did talk at the end of last week about the renewed support that the United States will be offering to Syrian Arabs, and the Department of Defense did confirm over the weekend that an Air Force C-17 aircraft dropped small-arms ammunition to Syrian Arab groups fighting ISIL in northeastern Syria. And that successful airdrop provided ammunition to those Syrian Arab groups whose leaders were vetted by the United States and have been fighting to move ISIL out of northeastern Syria.

That's what our strategy is, and that is a strategy that's focused on ISIL, is a strategy that has the strong support of the international community -- some 65 nations who are part of our coalition. And that stands in stark contrast to the unilateral efforts of the Russians to indiscriminately strike opposition groups with the goal of propping up the Assad regime. And it is clear that our intentions are quite different than theirs, despite what the Russian government says publicly. Russia regularly claims to be focused on countering ISIL, but that certainly is not what we see when it comes to evaluating their efforts on the ground.

Q Did you hear about the report that U.S. aircraft and Russian aircraft were close enough, within miles, to make visual identification?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have heard those reports. For the details of that, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. I mean, the other thing that I do know also occurred over the weekend is that there was a follow-up conversation between U.S. military officials and Russian military officials to pursue our de-confliction efforts inside of Syria.

There was a preliminary conversation a couple of weeks ago and there was another conversation over the weekend to follow up on those efforts. And we continue to want to be focused on the practical, operational-level discussions that will make the environment for our military pilots operating in the skies over Syria at least a little safer and make sure they don't run -- or make sure that the Russian efforts don't run headlong into our ongoing operations. And thus far, there's been no need for the United States or our coalition partners to in any way curtail our efforts as a result of what Russia is doing in Syria right now.

Q And last one on Biden. Given that there seems to be growing space between some of the President's policies and the presumptive frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, but there doesn't appear to be any space between what the President believes and what Vice President Biden believes, especially if you're talking about continuing the process that was

started and continues over the past seven-plus years, wouldn't it make sense then that he would be the best mouthpiece to keep it going? The best representative to keep the President's policies moving forward, not Hillary Clinton?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, as I acknowledged last week, that in any presidential election there will be an obligation placed on each of the candidates to clearly articulate their views and priorities and policies. And that means they're going to need to distinguish themselves among each other but also between themselves and the incumbent. That's part of any presidential race. And the fact is -- I said this last week as well -- no matter how good the first two terms have been, nobody is going to run a successful campaign predicated on essentially a third term. Each of these candidates is going to have to go out and make their own independent case. And if Vice President Biden decides to get in the race, he'll have to do the same thing. But ultimately that will be a decision for him to make.

The reason that he right now has articulated the same kind of positions that the President sought to advance is because he is a loyal Vice President -- that's what you're supposed to do when you're Vice President. If and when he decides to become a presidential candidate, he'll have to more clearly articulate his own personal views on some things. I think the vast majority of those views will be in line with what the President has pursued. But I think, as you would expect from anybody that has as much experience that he does, that there might be some policy areas where he differs not just with President Obama, but also with Secretary Clinton and others with whom he served inside this administration.

Q Wouldn't it make the debate a lot more fun, though, if he were to show up tonight?
(Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let you guys decide how the ratings would be affected by Vice President Biden's entry into the race. So I suspect this is something that my friends at CNN have considered.

Q He'll never match our numbers.

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) We'll see.

Michelle.

Q On the same subject, really, I wonder if it's more than coincidence that your fabulous graphics today came on the day of this first debate when in that area is where you're probably going to see the greatest distance between these front-running candidates and the President. And what effect do you think that opposition to the TPP is going to have on support for it and its ultimate passage?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it is a coincidence -- because as you'll recall, I had originally intended to show these on Friday, but other events intervened. So I did coincidentally have the opportunity to share them with you today. I do think it does serve as a pretty powerful illustration of the economic benefits of implementing the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement that was negotiated by this administration with 11 other countries

in the Asia Pacific region. We actually have -- I showed slides for six or eight different states; there are actually slides for all 50 and we can share those with you if you're interested.

But ultimately we would expect for there to be a robust discussion and debate in the context of a presidential campaign about the wisdom of pursuing agreements like this one. The President obviously has his own very strong views about how this agreement will benefit middle-class families. But I'll just point out that the debate about trade over the summer did not have an impact on our ability to build a bipartisan coalition in Congress to support trade promotion authority legislation. And while we certainly would welcome support from anybody who has to offer it, we're not particularly concerned about the impact it will have on the congressional debate just based solely on our experience over the summer.

Q Several times now you mentioned how much the administration welcomes robust debate, that it's good for democracy. So given that there's been so much debate now over the number of Democratic debates, would the President then welcome more Democratic debates? Or does he think that there should be more of them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't heard the President articulate a view on this. This is obviously something that the Democratic National Committee has to work out and organize not just among the candidates, but among the media organizations that are eager to sponsor those kind of engagements.

Q How about you then, Josh? Do you think that --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess my sense is that over the course of two and a half hours tonight there will be ample discussion of public policy. Look, it will be up to the candidates to -- I guess the other thing that I would say is that, certainly with all due respect to the news organizations that devote significant time and resources to organizing these kinds of engagements, it's not the only way to have a debate about public policy. That there are opportunities for candidates to make public speeches, to host town hall meetings; that that's part of taking the public debate to the electorate. And that's a good thing for our democracy. And many people lament the length of presidential campaigns in this country, and there are certainly a number of downsides to the length of these kinds of campaigns. But the one upside is that it certainly does ensure that we have -- and when I saw "we," I mean as an American citizen and as an American voter, we have ample opportunity to consider the policies and priorities and agenda of everybody who's running for President, and that's a good thing.

Q And going back to that 60 Minutes interview, I know you just said that the President made those comments on whether or not Hillary Clinton's email issue was a national security issue based on what is publicly known. But given that the investigation is still going on, was he trying to preclude the results of that investigation? Or --

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely not. The President has a healthy respect for the kinds of independent investigations that are conducted by inspectors general and, where necessary, by the FBI.

Q Yeah, but that's the question then. So if he has a healthy respect for an investigation that's ongoing, to the point that you guys almost never want to say anything about that subject, then why would he say so confidently that it is not -- or was not a national security issue? Why would he say that as a statement of fact?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think because that was the question -- I don't have the transcript right in front of me. I think that was directly the question that he was asked, and so he was trying to answer the question based on what we all know right now publicly about this particular case. But that certainly was not an attempt in any way to undermine the importance or independence of the ongoing FBI investigation.

Q So does he, in fact, not know until the results of the investigation whether or not this could have had an impact on national security?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I think that's --

Q Is that what you're saying?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'm saying is that what the President -- based on what the President knows now, and that's what all of us know now, the President wasn't speaking based on any information that has not yet been made public. But based on what has been made public and based on the public pronouncements of Secretary Clinton herself, that's how the President arrived at the conclusion that this has not and does not pose a threat to national security. But obviously the FBI will take their own independent look at this. And for questions about the status of that investigation, I'd refer you to them.

Mara.

Q I don't think you were asked about this before, the rumors about Iran wanting 19 prisoners, perhaps to swap Jason Rezaian. And do you know anything about that?

MR. EARNEST: I know that that's something that the Iranians have discussed previously. I don't have an update for you at this point on our ongoing efforts to secure the release of either Mr. Rezaian or Mr. Abedini, Mr. Hekmati, or to learn more about the whereabouts of Mr. Levinson, other than to tell you that the cases of those individuals continues to be a top priority for this government.

And you heard Secretary Kerry himself, after the talks were concluded, say that he raised the status of those American citizens who are unjustly detained in Iran right now in every single engagement he had with his Iranian counterpart. And I think that's an indication to you of the priority that this administration places on the safe return of those American citizens.

Q And just one question about your slideshow. It struck me that this is the way that administrations have sold trade deals for like 20 years, talking about these products in the states they're in. I guess I was surprised, because the trade debate has really moved on to a different stage, especially in the Democratic Party, where Democratic voters say, sure, the guys who own the leather boot company or the bourbon company or the guys --

MR. EARNEST: The barbecue sauce company.

Q Yeah, the barbecue sauce company -- they're going to make out fine, but it's not going to produce jobs. And trade deals have actually hurt us rather than helped us. I mean, that is a big, widespread view, whether you agree with it or not.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, sure.

Q And why doesn't your sale's pitch deal with that anxiety directly?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer that question a couple of ways. The very first time we started talking about the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, I spent a lot of time emphasizing how this agreement includes the toughest labor and environmental standards that have ever been included in a trade deal. And the argument that is made by many is that the labor standards in other countries give them an unfair advantage over American workers, which is how they get an unfair benefit from trade deals. That's precisely what the President has rectified by trying to level the playing field for American workers and American businesses. And the benefits are significant.

When we talk about -- and I guess I also want to turn you to the Ohio example because it's an illustrative one. We spend a lot of time talking about how important it is for the United States to counter China's repeated efforts to dump tires into the American market; that this has the effect of putting American businesses and American workers at a competitive disadvantage. When the administration has taken decisive action to question those practices at the WTO -- and every time we've gotten a verdict from the WTO, it's been a ruling in our favor, which means we have succeeded in advocating for American products -- that is a victory that has been roundly cheered by not just the owners of the tire companies, but also by the union representatives of the employees of that tire company.

So the fact is, if we can protect unfair trade practices by China in the United States and have that be good for American workers, then being able to advocate for American goods overseas should also be good for American workers. That's the consistency that you find in our argument, and it's a consistency that unfortunately is not present in the argument of many of our critics.

Q It's always been a tough sell for Democrats to get the votes for trade deals. Why do you think it's become so much harder?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know that it's harder --

Q But every single Democratic candidate came out against TPP -- a Democratic President's big policy.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, but I guess my point is I don't know that that's something -- you're more of a student of previous debates about trade agreements.

Q You're saying it's just as hard as it's always been?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I guess that's the case that I'm making. And we've not sought to downplay that. I think we certainly have -- there are a number of things -- elements in our case to make about why Democrats should support this trade agreement, even if they haven't historically supported trade agreements. And that's because it includes the toughest labor standards that have ever been included in a trade deal. It includes the highest environmental standards that have ever been included in a trade deal. And there are some significant documented economic benefits associated with this trade deal, primarily because we're talking about a trade agreement that has an impact on 40 percent of the global economy.

So when we're talking about opening up opportunity for American businesses overseas, this is a lot of opportunity that's out there. And we're talking about some of the countries that have some of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

So I guess the point is that we feel strongly about making sure that this trade agreement is consistent with the kinds of values that the President has championed throughout his career in public service, long before he even thought about running for President, but also making sure that we maximize the benefits that are associated with these kinds of agreements.

Q You haven't put a jobs number on this trade deal, have you?

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe that we have, but you can check with USTR to see if they have any kind of projection to offer.
Arlette.

Q Congressman Paul Ryan is considering running for Speaker, and he's shown a few examples where he's willing to compromise the Ryan-Murray budget of 2013 as an example. Would the White House like to see a Speaker Paul Ryan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think as I mentioned at the end of last week, it's unlikely that an endorsement of anybody -- by me, from here -- would be helpful to any Republican's candidacy.

So rather than try to navigate that twisted knot of political complexity, I'm just going to let Republicans decide for themselves who they believe should lead the Republican conference. What I will observe, though, is that whomever that person is, they will face the same kind of challenge that Speaker Boehner has faced for the last several years,

which is that there is a small but loud contingent in the Republican conference that, time and again, has put their own rigid extremist ideology ahead of effective government that's clearly in the best interest of middle-class families all across the country.

And while it's easy to hold those extremists liable for the dysfunction that we see in Congress, the fact is the majority of the Republican conference could do something about it. They could stand up to those extremists in their own conference, or they could do the thing that is actually clearly in the best interest of the country, which is rather than insisting that every important thing that happens in Congress get done along party lines, actually try to cooperate with Democrats on something.

That doesn't mean that they have to fold or concede their conservative principles.

Actually, what they just need to do is negotiate with the Democratic minority so that they can get something done for the American people. And they can do that consistent with their conservative principles. It may require them to compromise a little bit. It may mean that they don't get 100 percent of everything that they want. But that's the essence of democracy, particularly in an era where there's one party in charge of Congress and another party that's in charge of the White House.

Q On Vice President Joe Biden, he's spent over two months now mulling very publicly this decision about 2016. And there are some who are starting --

MR. EARNEST: My guess is he's been thinking about it even a little bit longer than that. (Laughter.)

Q But there are some who are starting to say that he owes the Democratic Party an answer now, sooner rather than later. Do you think that the Vice President owes that to the Democrats?

MR. EARNEST: No. I think, quite frankly, that Vice President Biden, given his service to the party and, more importantly, his service to the country, is certainly entitled to the amount of time that he believes is necessary to make what is an intensely personal decision for him.

Q And also on the debate -- in 2008, President Obama debated against Hillary Clinton many times. What advice do you think he would give to her challengers tonight? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: He did engage in dozens of debates -- and I don't think that's an exaggeration -- with Secretary Clinton over the course of 2007 and 2008. I haven't spoken to him about any advice that he would offer. I don't think that he -- I think the advice that he would offer is advice that he would offer any candidate, whether they're debating against Secretary Clinton or not, and that is that they should spend time preparing for those debates and be focused on communicating as clearly as possible for the American public what their priorities are, and that that will -- that the person who can most cleanly articulate their values and priorities is typically the candidate that comes away looking the best in these debates.

But again, every candidate will have the opportunity to do that tonight, including Secretary Clinton herself.

April.

Q Josh, I have a couple subjects I want to ask you about. Back when Joe Biden -- listening to all the questions about Joe Biden, but indirectly about him. Has the White House set up some type of contingency plan if he does decide to run for President in 2016?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Okay. So if he were to decide to run, this White House would just change and shift at that time? Or it would just function as normal with -- on the campaign trail?

MR. EARNEST: You've heard me -- certainly in the context of these briefings, we spend a lot of time talking about the important tasks that Vice President Biden has taken on in that role. And I think that's one reason that the President in the interview with 60 Minutes described Vice President Biden as among the most consequential Vice Presidents in the history of the United States. And that's because Vice President has taken on significant tasks -- everything from working on gun safety initiatives to implementing the Recovery Act, to working closely with foreign leaders in a variety of hotspots, including Iraq and Ukraine, to advance the interests of the United States.

Vice President Biden brings an astonishing set of skills and experiences to this job. It's why he's been such an important part of this team. And if he were to decide to dedicate some of those skills and experiences to running for President again, there would be -- that would have an impact on some of the things that we're doing here, but we would -- I guess the other thing is it's hard to imagine a scenario where Vice President Biden resigns his seat, or resigns the office. He certainly would continue to be in a position to make calls and participate in meetings. It just means that he would also have to dedicate some of this time to campaigning for the office.

So the point is, yes, I would acknowledge that it would require some changes around here, but we would still benefit from Vice President Biden's service as Vice President even if he chose to run for President.

Q So let's say -- and this is not a hypothetical -- TPP. Let's say Vice President Biden, as he's thinking about it, he decides next week, okay, I'm going to run. Do you have -- do you still think that you have that person to talk to congressional leaders to help push TPP forward? Or will the President be the one meeting with congressional leaders and talking --

MR. EARNEST: The President already has been involved in those kinds of conversations. But I certainly -- and on that scenario, wouldn't rule out Vice President Biden's involvement as well.

Q Okay. And the next subject, pretty simple -- criminal justice. There's a markup on some bills within the next couple of weeks. What does the President primarily want to see come out of that? Because we're hearing that the disparity in sentencing -- retroactive sentencing is one of the biggest components of both. But if something fails, what is the biggest piece that you want?

MR. EARNEST: April, I think the most important thing right now, at the beginning of this process, is for Democrats and Republicans to try to move forward in bipartisan fashion. I think the only way that we're going to be able to move criminal justice reform across the finish line in Congress is if Democrats and Republicans work together to get it done.

And that's going to require, as I mentioned earlier, a willingness to compromise. And it means that Democrats aren't going to get everything that they want out of this reform effort, and Republicans aren't going to get everything they want out of the reform effort either. But there does appear to be significant common ground in confronting some of these issues.

And while we're hopeful that a good piece of legislation will come out of this process in the Senate, at least where it started, I don't think there's anybody that thinks that will be a perfect piece of legislation. So that willingness to compromise, that willingness to accept less than 100 percent of what ideally you'd like to see, will be an important priority for those who are engaged in these conversations.

Substantively though, I think that there's been extensive discussion about sentencing reforms. There's been a lot of discussion about reforms for juvenile justice programs. I would identify those as sort of two priorities in the context of this legislation.

Q Okay. Thank you. And I want to go back to something you said about TPP. You said the President is reaching out. Could you tell us how he is reaching out to congressional leaders? Is he having meetings? What? Is he on the phone? Can you tell us?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a lot of details to share at this point. But I mean, I think the important thing to recognize is that the vote on this agreement is quite a ways off; that the text will have to be completed and translated into a variety of different languages, be made public for 60 days before the President himself even signs it. There will be additional time for that text to be considered publicly before Congress would consider it and then it would go through the congressional process.

So a final vote on legislation is quite a ways off. But I guess what I was referring to is over the summer, when we were trying to advance trade promotion authority, the President was deeply engaged in the effort to move that across the finish line and it required him to speak to the Democratic caucus at one point and even go to the congressional baseball game. So the President was obviously very personally involved in trying to advance that legislation that was eventually successful.

Q So there's no leg or groundwork right now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly is an effort to communicate with Capitol Hill to make sure that they understand exactly what's been completed here to help them understand what's included in the agreement, but ultimately we'll have the text of that agreement out so that everybody can consider it for themselves.

Bill.

Q I just wanted to point out that you have an opportunity today to help the Vice President make an announcement, should he desire to do so, simply by opening up the photo-op with the President, the Attorney General, and the Vice President, which is scheduled in about 10 minutes.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that the Vice President has any announcements that are planned for today.

Q Well, why don't we ask him? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I'm sure his office would be happy to take your call.

Q You're not going to open it up?

MR. EARNEST: No, I don't think so.

Andrew.

Q I wanted to go back to the issue of Iran's missile test. If indeed they've broken a U.N. Security Council resolution, would the U.S. countenance additional sanctions on Iran, even if that puts in jeopardy the implementation of the nuclear deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Andrew, let me just say that this is something that we're continuing to look at. And the details of this particular launch are important to determining whether or not they are in violation of the existing United Nations Security Council resolutions that govern Iran's ballistic missile program.

The United States certainly takes seriously those violations, and you'll recall that when the President convened a summit meeting of our Gulf Coast partners at Camp David, that there was ample discussion about countering Iran's malign activities in the region. And we certainly do believe that there is more work that could be done to interdict material and equipment that could be used to advance their missile program. That is work that requires international cooperation. And the President has indicated not just a willingness but even a desire to work more closely with our allies and with our partners in the Gulf Coast -- or in the Gulf to counter Iran's ballistic missile program.

Q And on a separate issue, on Syria, just following up on the question about de-confliction before -- reportedly the UK, the Royal Air Force in the UK is being -- pilots have been given orders to shoot down Russian aircraft if they are engaged by Russian aircraft in the Middle East. Has the President okayed any similar orders for U.S. pilots?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for any operational updates like that. The Commander-in-Chief certainly has the expectation that our military pilots, whether operating in Syria or anywhere else in the world, will take the steps they believe are necessary to protect themselves.

Q Okay. And a final question -- if you'll indulge me on Israel and the Palestinian territories. Is the White House concerned that we're seeing the beginnings of a third intifada? And if so, even if not, is there -- do you believe that the absence of a possible two-state solution following what was said by the Israeli Prime Minister during the election campaign has contributed to the situation on the ground that makes it more likely that that kind of intifada could take place?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Andrew, let me start by saying that the United States condemns in the strongest possible terms the terrorist attacks -- the recent terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians, which resulted in the murder of three Israelis and left numerous others wounded. We mourn any loss of life, whether it's Israeli or it's Palestinian. The United States continues to stress the importance of condemning violence and combatting the incitement, and we're in regular contact with both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority.

We continue to be deeply concerned about escalating tensions, and urge all sides to take affirmative steps to restore calm and prevent actions that would further escalate tensions. Andrew, you know the policy of the United States has been that a two-state solution that is negotiated directly between the two parties is the most effective way for us to resolve the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And in the meantime, we've urged both sides to try to exercise restraint and to prevent the further escalation of tensions in a region that's been roiled by them for generations.

John, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. Two very brief questions on Russia. Has the administration -- either through statement or in the President's talks with President Putin -- have either weighed in on the case of Lieutenant Nadiya Savchenko who was the Ukrainian Air Force pilot kidnapped from Ukraine, brought to Russia, put on trial in Moscow and, as of yesterday, undergoing psychiatric evaluation after her hunger strike?

MR. EARNEST: John, I'd refer you to the State Department for the latest of our efforts in that regard.

Q And the other question is this: December will mark the third anniversary of the President's signing of the Magnitsky Act, which are sanctions against individual Russians involved in the death of Sergei Magnitsky in 2009. He was a lawyer and accountant who got into a little row with the Kremlin.

Last week, Vladimir Kara-Murza -- who was a Russian dissident who went through a poisoning in May that I think you commented on -- he said that the administration has targeted a lot of smaller-level people with sanctions, but no major figures around President Putin. Are there any plans for that kind of sanctioning to take place soon?

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, that's a difficult question to answer because when it comes to sanctions, it would not be in our strategic interest to discuss what future plans we may have with regard to sanctions. If we were to discuss those plans in some detail in advance, it would only make it easier for those who may be the target of sanctions to take steps to evade them before they're imposed.

So I'd refer you to the Treasury Department who is responsible for implementing those sanctions. They may be able to give you a sense of what they're considering. But I would not anticipate them being able to provide a lot of information with a lot of specificity in advance because it would only undermine our overall effort.

Thanks a lot, everybody.

Q Do you have anything on MH-17?

MR. EARNEST: We can get you a statement on that.

END

2:13 P.M. EDT