

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Ben Rhodes, 4/21/2016

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you all. Ben has a couple of readouts that we'll do at the top, and then we'll open it up to your questions. Obviously we can try to do a little readout of some of the meetings the President did yesterday and at least the beginning of the GCC Summit that the President is participating in as well. But Ben will do this at the top, and then we'll open it up to your questions on any topic.

Ben.

MR. RHODES: Thanks. Let me just briefly give you a readout of some of the meetings the President had this morning. First of all, he was able to meet with Sheikh Al-Sabah of Kuwait -- their first meeting since last May at the Camp David summit. The President and Sheikh Al-Sabah continued a conversation that they began earlier this year through an exchange of letters that focused on how to strengthen our bilateral cooperation. To bolster that relationship, the leaders agreed to have foreign ministers inaugurate a strategic dialogue that will convene in Washington in the next few months. Currently, Kuwait, of course, continues to be one of our closest partners in this region -- it hosts the fourth largest number of U.S. forces abroad.

On Iraq, Sheikh Al-Sabah agreed on the need for Gulf support to stabilize areas of Iraq that have been liberated from ISIL. The President and Sheikh Al-Sabah also exchanged thoughts on how to approach Iran's troubling behavior in the region, but also agreed on the importance of engaging Iran with the aim of moving it toward a different, improved relationship with the Gulf.

Separately, the President conveyed his deep appreciation of Sheikh Al-Sabah for being a leading voice in the GCC for humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees. He welcomed Sheikh Al-Sabah's participation in the summit on refugees that the President will host in New York in September.

Second, the President was able to meet with His Highness, Sheikh Tamim of Qatar. The two leaders focused on what steps Qatar can take, along with the rest of the GCC, to help address the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. On Syria, the President and Emir discussed the importance of reinforcing the cessation of hostilities. The Emir committed to use Qatar's influence with various opposition groups to support the path toward a political transition away from Assad.

With regard to Libya, the President conveyed his appreciation for Qatar's support to build Libyan support for the Government of National Accord. He and the Emir agreed on the importance of further consolidating international support behind the new Government of National Accord while also mitigating the actions of potential spoilers.

Finally, the President also welcomed the Emir's update on expanded Qatari counterterrorism efforts, especially in the area of countering terrorist financing.

And then this morning, in the first session at the GCC Summit, the leaders discussed regional conflicts. That gave them an opportunity to review the situations in Syria, in Yemen, in Iraq, and across the region broadly. They'll have a lunch this afternoon that is focused on countering ISIL and al Qaeda, and our counterterrorism cooperation. And then they'll have a session concluding the summit this afternoon that focuses on Iran and our shared efforts to confront its destabilizing activities in the region while promoting broader peace and stability.

MR. EARNEST: Good. Let's start with questions.

Nadia, do you want to start?

Q First on Kuwait -- the negotiation about Yemen. After this first session, are we closer to see an end to the war in Yemen? Is it some commitment that you have from GCC countries that it's going to be over? And also, what would you describe the main sticking points that the President was unable to convince his GCC counterparts in his meeting?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, on Yemen, I think this meeting takes place at a moment of particular promise and opportunity to resolve the conflict there. The cessation of hostilities has broadly held over the last several days. With that cessation of hostilities, there's an opportunity to pursue broader peace talks. Kuwait, of course, has offered to be a host for those discussions and we very much encourage the Houthis and other forces inside Yemen to participate constructively in that dialogue.

So we do believe that there's a pathway to resolving the conflict in Yemen that can restore stability after all of the efforts that have been exerted by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other forces inside of Yemen. And that, of course, will allow us also to focus on threats like AQAP in Yemen and extremist groups across the region.

On your second question, I think that there's broad agreement about where we're trying to go in the region. I think everybody would like to see ISIL defeated and pushed out of the territory that it controls. People would like to see stability restored to Yemen and a

political transition in Syria away from Assad. And people would like to see Iraq, for instance, maintain its unity and increase its stability.

So I think on the core issues there's agreement about where we want to go. There have been I think occasional tactical differences about what we are emphasizing at a given point in time. But I think what this summit allows us to do is make sure that we're working to align our approaches and strategies. And if you look at where we were a year ago at Camp David and where we are now, we have seen progress in the implementation of the Iran deal, in the cessation of hostilities in both Syria and Yemen -- as fragile as they are, particularly in Syria, it at least provides an opening for a political process -- and of course, with ISIL losing a significant amount of its territory.

So even with some of the debates that have taken place, we've been able to broadly align our approaches and make progress, and we want to continue that here in Saudi Arabia.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret.

Q Ben, Saudi and Gulf leaders feel like the Iranian regime really poses an existential threat to them. So do you think their fear is irrational? What do you say in these meetings? And do you understand their frustration that they're being asked to reach out to a country that is recognized as a state sponsor of terrorism and make nice with them?

MR. RHODES: So we made very clear to the leaders last night and today on the subject of Iran that our partners, our friends in this region are in the room with us here, and Iran, on the other hand, has in many ways been confrontational not just to the countries here in the GCC, but to the United States as well, and that we share their concerns about Iran's ballistic missile program, its destabilizing activities in the region, its ongoing support for terrorism.

And, in fact, many of the capabilities that we're developing on the defense side through this process are focused on countering Iranian actions. So when you talk about the ability to have enhanced missile defense systems, maritime interdictions, training of Special Forces -- all of these deal with the type of asymmetric threats that we see emanating from Iran in different parts of the region. And we've been able to have from the United States and several of our partners a number of interdictions, for instance, of Iranian weapon shipments at sea just in recent weeks.

At the same time, I think the point the President makes is that there has to be an opening to have a political resolution to these conflicts, that the perpetual nature of the violence that we see in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq is not in the interest of anybody, and that in order to resolve these conflicts there has to be a diplomatic effort with the Iranians. So in Syria, to the extent to which we can bring the Iranians to the table in supporting a political process, that is going to make it more likely that a political process can succeed.

In Iraq, obviously Iran has a series of relationships in Iraq. They have a degree of influence in Iraq, but that should not cause us to disengage. On the contrary, that I think raises the interest of the United States and the Gulf partners to support the Iraqi government and to remain engaged inside of Iraq.

So in all these different places, we have a similar assessment of the fact that Iran is engaged in destabilizing activities. We also just think that even as we are vigilant, even as we develop capabilities to counter Iranian actions, we have to have an openness to pursuing diplomatic solutions or else the region is just going to see a perpetuation of the conflicts that have already caused so much suffering and instability.

Q Do you think it's irrational for the Saudis to worry that they're no longer the U.S.'s key ally?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think on the core of the relationship, that remains very solid, and that includes our commitment to Saudi Arabian security and sovereignty. They are a country with whom we share significant interests in this region.

So we certainly understand this is their neighborhood. They're worried about Iran and what its agenda is, and the actions that they've taken. Our point is simply that that concern with Iran should not foreclose the potential for diplomatic engagement if there's an ability to resolve problems. And a recent example of course is the nuclear deal where, despite all of our concerns about Iran's behavior, we were able to see a significant rollback in the Iranian nuclear program because we pursued a diplomatic process.

Q Now that things are improving somewhat in Yemen, how soon do you expect to see some of these Gulf countries step up their contributions in the fight against ISIS? What do you expect that to look like, if you can give some kind of timeframe?

And then on the Saudi bilat yesterday, did the issue of the 9/11 legislation come up at all? And how was that discussed?

MR. RHODES: So on the first question, obviously Saudi Arabia, the UAE have exerted a lot of effort, a lot of resources in Yemen. If there is a political resolution to the conflict, if the cessation of hostilities holds, that will, in the first instance, allow for humanitarian assistance to get into Yemen. And that was discussed in the meeting yesterday. It would allow for stability on the Saudi border, which is important, obviously, for their security.

It would also allow for a focus on AQAP in Yemen. The civil conflict there in some ways, made it harder to make sure that we were preventing AQAP from trying to establish a safe haven, because groups like that thrive in the conflict environments. So one thing we would like to see is a renewed focus, of course, on AQAP.

More broadly, there are many different ways in which we want to support the operation and effort against ISIL. Some of that involves military action, and a number of these countries, of course, are flying with us in the coalition, and we're reviewing what can be done, for instance, in terms of providing support to the opposition and rolling back and holding territory that is taken from ISIL.

But there are other political steps that can be taken. And so, for instance, we believe that in order for the strategy to succeed in Iraq, the Iraqi government is going to need some support. We've taken back 40 percent of the territory from ISIL inside of Iraq, but we

need to hold that territory. We need to develop those areas that have been devastated by ISIL's presence. And the countries here in the GCC can be helpful in that process, particularly given the fact that those areas in Iraq are Sunni-majority areas.

And similarly, in Syria, we'd like to see them invested in both the support for the opposition, the efforts against ISIL, but also the political process that's going to be important to resolving the conflict there. All of the leaders around the table, all the countries around the table have relationships with the opposition in Syria that are important, and the more we're aligned, the more we're going to be effective in that process.

Q And the 9/11 --

MR. RHODES: Oh, yes. The legislation did not come up in the bilateral meeting.

Q Wasn't that a big source of contention that we talked about, though? And did it matter that it didn't come up?

MR. RHODES: My sense is that the Saudis are aware of the position that we've taken on the legislation, so it's not as if they needed to spend a lot of time addressing it with us. So it wasn't a subject at the bilat even as, obviously, there have been many statements about it over the last several days.

MR. EARNEST: Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Ben, I want to ask you about investment in not just armament and airplanes, but also investment in Special Forces and that sort of attack strategy for our Gulf partners. How does the conversation happen so that the President can get them away from, say, F-15s and more towards real steel on the ground, if you will?

And a second question is, does the President take his own advice, which is to say, listen, if he wants the Saudis and others to engage with the Iranians directly, will he take a trip to Tehran or maybe engage with them directly?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, your question is exactly the topic that we're focused on in terms of military capabilities. And we really initiated this process in Camp David, and since then, we've had a working group that meets regularly to review and develop these defense capabilities. Ash Carter had a meeting here yesterday with the defense ministers to focus on this. And we've seen some progress in terms of the types of capabilities that GCC countries are investing in. We've aimed to expedite the transfer of certain capabilities to them.

And here's where the focus is: The large-scale weapons systems that we've sold over many years that are important to Gulf security are not necessarily the capabilities that are best designed to deal with the threats that we face. So, for instance, if you look at conflicts as diverse as Syria or Yemen, the ability to have a significant Special Forces capability

makes a big difference. And so we're working to enhance and train and support the development of Gulf Special Forces, and that will be critical in dealing with the types of conflicts that we've seen here in the region.

The threat that they see from Iranian weapons shipments going to different groups in the region is best confronted by maritime interdiction capabilities. And this is often kind of small boats, not large naval movements. So we've been working to develop their maritime capacity.

Iran has a ballistic missile program and has an active cyber program. And our ability to work with the GCC to have an interoperable missile defense system will guard against that ballistic missile threat, give them greater assurance in their own security, just as they will want to have cyber defenses in the event of any Iranian cyber intrusion.

So we've made progress in each of those areas. We've worked to enhance Gulf capabilities in each of those areas. We have also worked to support interoperability between the GCC countries. And all of that is going to make them better prepared to deal with these threats. So these meetings are an opportunity to review that progress and determine what additional steps can be taken to expedite that process.

Your second question was --

Q Does the President take his own advice.

MR. RHODES: Oh, Iran. Yes. Well, I think the trip to Cuba was probably enough in terms of breaking a longstanding taboo. With respect to Iran, I think our approach has been that we will engage with the Iranians where we see an opportunity to make progress. The main vehicle for that engagement has been Secretary Kerry with Foreign Minister Zarif, not just on the Iranian nuclear issue but on Syria and other regional issues.

The President has always indicated that he is willing to engage the Iranian leadership if he believes that that can make progress on different issues. He's spoken to President Rouhani on the phone. The fact of the matter is we haven't seen from the Iranians I think a desire for that level of engagement. They've really focused on the channel between our foreign ministers. And so that's where I think it's most likely to continue.

But that speaks to what we're trying to foster, which is a dynamic where we can have a diplomatic dialogue with the Iranians on issues related to these regional conflicts.

Precisely because Iran has had a role in these areas, we would like to try to move them in a more constructive direction. And that requires some amount of dialogue. It also requires vigilance in the type of military capabilities.

MR. EARNEST: With that, we're told we have the pool on the phone now and can see if there are any questions they want to ask.

Q So, Ben, just to follow up on the question about the weapons system, you had talked about ways that the United States and the Gulf countries have a different tactic, even if you have the same goals. Would you put the weapons systems in that category? Do the

Gulf countries, are they pressuring you to give them more traditional weapons like the F15, and you guys are trying to push them in the other direction with resources that would help you achieve the United States goal maybe more than the goals that they want to achieve?

MR. RHODES: No, I think on the capabilities, we have a good amount of alignment. Certainly on the new capabilities that I discussed, I think the GCC countries recognize that it's in their interest to develop these capabilities.

If you look at the two threats that are most profound for them, it's Iran and ISIL. And both of them engage in asymmetric tactics, and so the ability to develop the types of capabilities I discussed I think is very relevant to their security. I think they do have an interest in these larger systems, and the fact of the matter is, when you talk about significant air assets, the U.S. government just has a process that it goes through to review those requests. We've made major weapon sales to Gulf states during President Obama's time in office. We'll continue to review requests for systems like F15s through our own government and in consultation with Congress.

So we're not resisting cooperation in those areas. What we are doing is focusing and prioritizing these capabilities to deal with asymmetric challenges.

And where I'd discuss some tactical differences over the previous years, often that had to deal with how are we addressing the issues we've been discussing around prioritizing political processes in different conflicts and prioritizing obviously the fight against ISIL. Again, I think the Gulf states share the same objectives we have in those areas, and now that there is a cessation of hostilities in Yemen and in Syria, we believe that is the opening that should be pursued so that we're coupling both our security cooperation with our diplomatic cooperation.

MR. EARNEST: Other questions from the pool on the phone?

Q I wanted to ask on the human rights area in the bilat yesterday, did the President raise any specific cases? There's been pressure from senators to actually discuss some of the cases including the blogger Raif Badawi and others? And then also, maybe this was asked but we couldn't hear the questions. In the war in Yemen, did any of the GCC countries ask for specific weapons or more U.S. assistance in Yemen?

MR. RHODES: With respect to your second question, there was not really a discussion of U.S. military assistance in Yemen. We have provided some support to the GCC operation there, but I think because they're now in this window where there's a cessation of hostilities, the focus of the discussion was really on humanitarian access, humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen, and the prospects for a political process, and our threat assessment as it relates to AQAP.

On your first question, the President did raise the issue of human rights. There was a very candid discussion around those issues yesterday. While he did not raise individual cases, he certainly did include in that discussion the concerns that have been raised around

sentences that have been given out to bloggers and people expressing themselves online. So he was certainly alluding to cases like the one that you cite. That was one of the areas of focus in the human rights discussion.

MR. EARNEST: Why don't we give the pool one more chance, and then we're going to questions in the room.

Q I'm wondering if you can give us a sense of atmospheric inside the room when the President has been speaking with these leaders. Secondly, what discussions did the President have with the Saudi King about the economy, specifically low oil prices, and the recent Saudi decision not to reduce or freeze production? And just following up on another question, were there specific conversations about helping in Yemen, specifically on AQAP? Is there specific U.S. aid coming directed to help these countries deal with AQAP?

MR. RHODES: So on the atmospherics, I think yesterday the President had very long meetings with both King Salman and Mohammed bin Zayef of the UAE. I think that was probably his longest meeting, with King Salman. It went over two hours. I think it was a very open and honest discussion where they were able to discuss a whole range of issues, some of which we've been on strong agreement and some of which have been sources of tension.

I think they both agreed that it was to essentially have this opportunity to clear the air and to reaffirm that even as there have been some tensions over the years, that on a set of core issues we are in alignment, whether that's counterterrorism, whether that's the security of our Gulf partners, whether that's the outcome that we would like to see in a conflict like Syria. So I think it definitely moved the ball forward in aligning our approaches, and they were able to be very open and honest and free-flowing with one another in their discussion.

And that's, frankly, the purpose of these meetings, so that meeting regularly allows us, given the complexity of the region, to have a check-in on these issues and make sure we understand where everybody is coming from. And the meeting this morning is an open discussion. All the leaders were addressing those issues. And I think the President knows these leaders well, having been in office for over seven years now. So he has a good sense of where they're coming from, and I think they have a good sense of where he's coming from.

There was a brief discussion of the economy with King Salman yesterday. The President welcomed some of the efforts that have been discussed in Saudi Arabia to continue to reform their economy. There are some ambitious plans here, and the President indicated that he wants to be supportive in any way we can as the Saudis work to develop, diversify, enhance their economy going forward.

On oil, the President indicated our desire to simply continue to have a dialogue through our Energy Department and our normal channels. So it wasn't a particularly unusual discussion, but rather that's a part of our relationship and we want to continue to have an

open dialogue so that we understand our shared strategies going forward.

With respect to AQAP, we've obviously remained active in targeting AQAP and we've taken many AQAP leaders off the battlefield, including the leader of AQAP. But, again, our concern is in part in the conflict environment, whether or not AQAP is able -- or was able to establish a foothold or presence in different areas. So I think what we'll be doing is sharing that threat assessment, and then discussing how we can take advantage of the cessation of hostilities to cooperate against AQAP going forward.

So that discussion at the GCC summit is actually one of the points at the lunch, so that's ongoing now, but yesterday this was alluded to obviously in his bilateral meetings.

MR. EARNEST: Let's go back to questions in the room here.

Ron.

Q Just in terms of 9/11, to button this up, even though it did not come up in the bilateral, I'm curious as to -- and we know that the administration does not support the Senate bill. I believe that you are in favor of declassifying these 28 pages that have been in the news and so forth. So is it the administration's position that it stands by the previous findings of the commissions that have looked at this? Has the administration engaged the Saudis in any way now on 9/11 questions that are still out there, being raised by the families?

And a second issue -- there are some reports that there are now more aggressive rules on engagement in the air campaign against ISIS. Is that, in fact, true? And there are concerns about increased number of civilian casualties. The main point of that, is there now going to be a faster tempo or more aggressive pace to the air campaign and other military operations on the ground as you approach Mosul and other places?

MR. RHODES: So on your second question, no. And I think there have been some inaccurate reports out there. There have not been changes to the rules of engagement with respect to the air campaign. We believe that part of defeating ISIL is showing that we hold ourselves to a high standard on issues like civilian casualties. That's a significant part of what separates us from groups like ISIL or dictators like Bashar al-Assad. So we're going to be very aggressive, but we're also going to be very focused in our efforts to roll back ISIL.

We have taken a number of steps to try to enhance that campaign, and Secretary Carter addressed some of those in Iraq, in terms of our ability to provide more support to the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces, and our ability to have personnel who can support the ongoing efforts around Mosul. But part of those efforts with Special Forces -- part of those efforts are focused on making sure we have good targets

So in our view, the way to ensure that we're rolling back ISIL is not to shift to a more -- looser approach to rules of engagement, but rather to make sure we're gathering intelligence, partnering with forces on the ground, and finding and taking out ISIL

targets. And again, that's what our Special Forces, including the augmentations that we've done recently, allow us to do.

On 9/11, on the legislation, I mean, I think it's just important to reiterate that our opposition to that legislation is not rooted in the Saudi bilateral relationship, it's rooted in our concern that if you set a precedent for removing sovereign immunity, you open up the United States to lawsuits and litigation and processes on a whole range of issues around the world. And so we simply believe it's not the way to address those concerns.

With respect to the 28 pages, the President has asked for this declassification review. We have been deferential to the DNI in leading that review, and so when that's done we'd expect that there will be some degree of declassification that provides more information.

I will say that the joint inquiry report and those 28 pages and all the other materials that were developed in those initial months after 9/11 -- all of that fed into the 9/11 Commission's work. And we believe that that provided a definitive statement about the nature of support that came from Saudi Arabia or other countries with respect to al Qaeda financing. Obviously, it did not determine that the Saudi government had an intent to support al Qaeda.

So we believe that -- our understanding of 9/11 is well established. The U.S. government has been very clear about what we believe took place. And again, the question at issue in the 28 pages has to do with material that was drawn upon in all those subsequent investigations, notably the 9/11 Commission, which was very transparent in its findings.

Q Have you read them? Have you or the President read the 28 pages?

MR. RHODES: Again, the President is familiar with their contents. I, in a previous life, obviously, worked with the 9/11 Commission, so I'm very familiar with their contents.

And again, what they provided was I think important information, preliminary information as a part of the joint inquiries report that then was followed up on by the 9/11 Commission, which did subsequent interviews, investigations, and published its finding in the 9/11 report.

So I'm actually more familiar with this process from my previous life. And you know, I'm quite confident that the 9/11 Commission spent a good amount of time wrestling with what was in those 28 pages and making sure that they were following threads and leads that may have been present in those pages, and that ultimately -- was able to lay that out in the report and I think address some of those questions in the public testimony that the 9/11 commissioners did after the publication of the report.

Q -- said today that Russia had a considerable military presence in Syria. Do you see that as an obstacle for resolution on the ground? And second question, how would you describe the cessation of hostilities on the ground? Is it holding, in your view?

MR. RHODES: So we've been concerned about reports of Russia moving materiel into Syria. We believe that President Putin is certainly on the record and went public with his statement that Russia would be removing its military personnel and presence in Syria.

And we believe -- and President Obama said directly to President Putin when they spoke on the phone several days ago -- that Russia should focus its efforts on the diplomatic process, on maintaining the cessation of hostilities and working with the Syrian government to get them to take seriously the process of negotiation and, ultimately, transition.

So again, we think it would be negative for Russia to move additional military equipment or personnel into Syria. We believe that our efforts are best focused on supporting the diplomatic process.

I think the cessation of hostilities has, over the last several weeks, provided an opening for the restoration of some degree of calm in areas in Syria and has allowed for the delivery of some amount of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. We have seen persistent violations of the cessation of hostilities. We've seen those from the regime that is engaged in military activity, particularly in northwestern Syria. We've seen it from al Nusra, an extremist group, as well. And we've been concerned by an uptick in violations of the cessation of hostilities, including the regime not allowing for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in certain areas.

So it's important now that the U.S., our Gulf partners are reinforcing the importance of this opportunity, and we're strongly urging Russia to use its influence and, frankly, Iran as well, to try to sustain what has been an opening for the Syrian people to enjoy a greater degree of calm than we've of course had the last several years.

Q So do you think Russia is also violating?

MR. RHODES: No, we think the Syrian regime has been violating, and al Nusra. Russia, of course has a great degree of influence, however, with the Syrian regime, so we would encourage Russia to press the Syrian government to abide by the cessation of hostilities. And certainly the movement of any additional Russian military support into Syria would be inconsistent with our shared objective of getting a political process moving.

Q On the issue of this 9/11 bill, there's, of course, the separate ruling by the Supreme Court with regard to the Iran case in allowing victims to have access to money from the Iran Central Bank, \$2 billion. What is the White House's reaction to that ruling? And how do you see that comparing to it being different from this bill being debated in Congress?

And then separately -- I may be pronouncing this wrong -- but there's a lot of talk of course about Saudi Arabia's support for a brand of Islam, Wahhabism. Understandably, that would be difficult to -- they're not going to change their support of this brand of Islam, but there's thinking that groups like al Qaeda or ISIS are inspired by this extreme and conservative view. Is there any way to discuss that, or is there any discussion of that either on the leader-presidential level or lower?

MR. RHODES: So on the second question, I think the President -- look, obviously we inhabit very different cultures and have very different practices in the United States than Saudi Arabia. And the President respects, of course, Saudi Arabia's commitment to Islam

and obviously plays a unique role of the host of the two most holy mosques within Islam.

At the same time, what we've focused on is making sure that, number one, there's a sustained effort to combat any financing of extremism from any individuals in Saudi Arabia or anywhere else. We work with many countries around the world to ensure that we're drawing up any pools of funding that might go to terrorism. And so that has been a subject of conversation.

And also, the President I think has been clear not just privately but publicly if you think about the speech he gave at the United Nations the year before last about the need for countries to not just fight against ISIL, but to publicly reject and show that these more virulent strains that we see from ISIL and al Qaeda are demonstrated to be incompatible with Islam.

So it's incumbent upon everybody to reject more extremist ideologies, to reject any extremist interpretation of Islam that could lead to violence. And so we would like to see all countries in this region do that.

I think we are seeing, since ISIL established itself, a greater willingness by countries to engage in that type of effort. The UAE hosts a center that is dedicated to combatting the ideology that underpins ISIL. Saudi Arabia has discussed a similar effort, and we would welcome them doing so.

So, again, we obviously don't get into discussion of Islamic doctrine. What we do discuss is the need to combat any extremist ideologies, and to do so by making sure that they cannot be financed and making sure that people all around the world are speaking out against anything that leads to violence.

Your first question was?

Q Supreme Court.

MR. RHODES: Supreme Court, yes. So the specific Supreme Court decision dealt with a question of separation of powers. And it determined that a bill that was passed through Congress and signed by the President could serve as a means for victims of terrorism to seek assets from the Iranian government. We, of course, very much support the efforts of those families.

I think the distinction is, in this specific case, you're dealing with a state sponsor or terrorism, Iran. That has a very specific designation. And that, frankly, also carries with it a whole host of tools that we use, including sanctions and other types of steps that we would not take against Saudi Arabia or other countries.

So given Iran's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, and given the various financial tools that we have to hold them accountable to designated individuals, we believe that part of that is allowing for this type of process to go forward. The problem with the

JASTA legislation is it applies to all countries. It would suggest that the principle of sovereign immunity does not hold for countries. And again, that opens the door to potential blowback on the United States.

So while we understand and are sympathetic to the concerns of 9/11 families and have worked to support them in many different ways over the years, on this specific legislation, again, it's not an objection related to Saudi Arabia, it's an objection related to the principle that it might establish internationally.

MR. EARNEST: I think it warrants mentioning also that the Department of Justice did make an argument in the case, and the Supreme Court essentially ruled in favor of the argument that we were making. So we've been pretty consistent in making this argument, dating back several years now.

Other questions?

Colleen.

Q This will be the President's last trip here during his administration, and I wondered if you could just give a broader assessment of how he's leaving the relationship versus where it stood seven years ago. And also I wondered if any discussion came up about his potential successor, and concerns about that.

MR. RHODES: Well, on the first question, one thing I do think it's worth doing is stepping back and for all the discussion about tensions, it's hardly the first time in which there have been disagreements or tensions in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The Saudis weren't particularly enthusiastic about the war in Iraq and certainly were not supportive of the Maliki government.

So when we took office, for instance, they didn't have a diplomatic presence in Iraq. They were very concerned about the direction of events there. And that had been a source of disagreement.

In terms of where things stand today versus when we took office, I think on the core issue of how are we supporting Saudi Arabia and its security, and how are we cooperating on counterterrorism, that cooperation remains strong. Our defense relationship remains strong and in some ways has been enhanced over the last seven years. And our counterterrorism cooperation is very broad. I think really the changes have been more in just what are the first order of priorities in the region. When we took office, it was the presence of 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and a significant concern about al Qaeda. We've significantly reduced the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've significantly rolled back al Qaeda.

I think today, of course, the concern is more on the threat posed by ISIL and regional conflicts particularly in Syria and Iraq and Yemen. Again, I think what the President hopes to leave at the conclusion of his time in office is a situation where we have significantly rolled back ISIL and its safe havens just as we have been able to do with al

Qaeda; that we have a political framework around these regional conflicts so that there's a basis for the next administration to work to enhance stability here in the region. And Saudi Arabia is going to be an important part of that.

So there's always a degree of challenges here in the Middle East, in the Gulf. I think the President is focused on how can we have the right capabilities and how can we align approaches so that we're more capable promoting stability. And on that score, I think meetings like today's are very important because if you look at where we were at Camp David and where we are today, we've made a substantial amount of progress. And part of that is because we have to continue to talk to each other -- it's not just these summits, these summits have led to much greater engagement at the diplomatic and military and intelligence level as well.

Q And on a successor?

MR. RHODES: That did not come up in -- well, actually, it did not come up other than the notion that we made clear that we believe that the basis of the work that we're doing is likely to continue because a lot of this is how is the U.S. government, Defense Department, and the intelligence community engaging counterparts and so there's a lot of lines of effort that are not going to stop on Election Day or Inauguration Day. Obviously the new administration will have its own approach to things but, frankly, what we're doing is creating habits of cooperation within our government, and we did make clear that we thought that that would continue under the next administration.

MR. EARNEST: We've probably got time for one or two more.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you. Have lessons from Libya formed discussions around Syria? So is the administration still determined that Assad must go? And was Libya a topic of discussion at all? Also, it sounds like the discussion have centered specifically around AQAP. Is al Qaeda in Maghreb a completely discussion or strategy? And then on a slightly different note, the administration has engaged Cuba and Iran. Are there any plans to engage North Korea? And if not, why not North Korea? I read reports recently that the North Korean regime has made noise about reaching out.

MR. RHODES: So on Libya, it has been a topic of discussion. And I think the focus here has been on how can we work to support the Government of National Accord. A lot of nations here have a lot of influence in Libya, and what we would like to see is the opportunity of a new government that enjoys international support being able to take hold, establish its presence, establish its authority in Libya, and that is going to be much easier to do if all the different countries that have been providing support into Libya are working towards the same outcome. So a lot of the focus here was on, again, how can we align our support to forces in Libya to strengthen this new government.

With Syria, I do think we take lessons from -- well, not just Libya but Iraq that you can't just simply have military solutions to these challenges. We believe Assad has to go precisely because we don't think any political process could work with him in power, given

the fact that he slaughtered his own people, given the fact that he is rejected by a majority of his own population.

So we have not said that we would impose a military regime change on Syria. What we've said is that there should be a political transition in which he leaves power for the sake of the country and the Syrian people.

AQIM obviously is a significant concern for the United States. I think there is a greater degree of focus in these discussions here on ISIL and AQAP simply because of the geography -- that they're very active in this area -- AQAP of course in Yemen, and ISIL in countries across the Middle East. But the United States remains deeply engaged in the effort against AQAP -- AQIM. And, in fact, the Moroccan king was here yesterday. Morocco, Algeria, others are CT partners in that effort.

Frankly, the effort to stabilize Libya would be very relevant to our ability to make sure that there's not safe havens for either ISIL or al Qaeda inside of that country.

North Korea, frankly, just has not indicated any degree of seriousness about denuclearization. We've said we'd be open to engagement with North Korea if they are serious about meeting their past commitments and moving towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. We've seen the opposite from the North Koreans in their behavior.

I think the Iran deal demonstrates that diplomacy can resolve these issues, but ultimately the North Koreans have not taken that path.

MR. EARNEST: We've probably got time for one more if there are any more.

Yes?

Q Molly Hunter from ABC. You shared the Saudis' assessment with Iran and sharing those fears, but you also mentioned a new and improved relationship with the Gulf. How far are the Gulf partners willing to go? Obviously something that this afternoon session will be focused on, but what indications have you gotten from the Gulf partners that they are willing to bring Iran into the fold?

MR. RHODES: Yes, I mean, look, I think we share the assessment of Iranian behavior.

We do think that it's imperative that we're focused on the fight against ISIL and that we can have an openness to diplomacy and engagement with Iran in the service of resolving regional conflicts. I think we've gotten thus far from the Gulf countries and the Saudis yesterday certainly a lot of concerns about Iran, but an openness to that engagement.

They have not expressed an opposition to the notion that they would have some diplomatic contact or dialogue with the Iranians.

I do think that they're very skeptical, and I think that's not a surprise to anybody. Our point is simply that we can put ourselves in a position of strength, we can do that in part from the development of the capabilities that I talked about. At the same time, the best

way to try to resolve these issues and encourage Iran to move in a more constructive direction is a mix of standing up to Iran when it's necessary but also being open to diplomacy where we can make progress.

And the fact of the matter is, Iran itself is not monolithic. There are elements of the Iranian system that are more invested in conflict and that there are elements of the Iranian system that are more open to diplomacy. And part of what we've indicated is it's important for us to work with those inside of Iran who are more open to a constructive relationship, rather than to allow the hardliners there to dominate the regional engagement.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, everybody. You'll have an opportunity to hear from the President at the conclusion of the summit, and we'll see you in London.

END

2:14 P.M. DST