

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett McGurk

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

**Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.

12:50 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see a little jovial Friday afternoon spirit here in the Briefing Room. As many of you know from the guidance last night, I'm joined today by Brett McGurk. Brett, as you know, is the Special Presidential Envoy to our coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. As you know, Brett has periodically come to the Briefing Room to stand here at the podium and to give you an update on our efforts to counter ISIL -- not just in Iraq and in Syria but around the world.

So he's here with an update. The update that he'll be providing all of you is similar to the update that the President will receive when he convenes his national security team on Tuesday of next week. As you know, the President periodically every two or three weeks will do a meeting with his national security team to review progress and to consider any updates to our strategy. So that meeting will be convened at the Treasury Department. The usual assortment of national security officials will be joining him for that meeting. And as usual, the President will have a statement at the conclusion of that meeting to give you a little sense about what was discussed.

So with that, I'll turn it over to Brett. He's got some opening remarks and I believe even a visual aid here. And then he'll stick around for 10 or 15 minutes to take questions.

So, Brett, do you want to take it away?

MR. MCGURK: Sure. Thanks, Josh. Thanks. It's great to be back here. I think I was here some months ago, and I just want to give an update of where we are in this most complex, most challenging, and also most important campaign.

When the President addressed the American people back in September of 2014, he talked about our global campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And since then, we've actually made a lot of progress -- if you look at from where we were back then until now, and even from where we were when I last addressed you some months ago.

So what I want to do is just kind of briefly how we analyze this most difficult challenge. It's important to keep in mind, before I talk about the progress, I want to put the caveat in -- this is one of the most challenging terrorist situations we've seen in some time. Forty-thousand foreign fighters from all around the world have poured into Syria over the last four years -- that's an unprecedented challenge in terms of the types of numbers. But to address it, that's why we had to build a global coalition to address it and shrink their overall territory in Iraq, Syria, and also Libya.

We analyze it in three dimensions. There's the core in Iraq and Syria -- this is their self-proclaimed kind of phony caliphate. I've traveled now all around the world, and the common denominator when I asked leaders in various capitals what is it that's driving your young people to this movement -- the common denominator is this notion of a historic caliphate. So we have to shrink the core, and we're doing that -- I'll talk about that in some detail. So there's the core.

Then there are the global networks. Those are the foreign fighter networks that feed the core in Iraq and Syria, the financial networks, and the propaganda networks. And we are constantly, through a global coalition, every single day, squeezing and constricting those networks.

I just came from the State Department, where I addressed 66 ambassadors and representatives from our coalition to talk about how we're doing, particularly in that global network piece.

And then they have seven affiliates around the world, self-proclaimed affiliates. It's important that we not get too distracted about these -- many of them are preexisting terrorist groups, which we're already very much focused on, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria. We're focused on that, we have been pre-Daesh, we're focused on them now, even after they're flying the black flag of ISIL.

But in a situation like Libya, where we see ISIL sending some of its best leaders to Libya to set up an affiliate, we do get concerned, we focus on it, we target the leaders quite effectively and with precision, which we've done. And we also work with the new government to begin to take back the territory that ISIL holds, and that is now very much underway.

Let me go through very briefly some of the indicators that we look at in terms of how we're doing against ISIL. And I'll just kind of -- I'll allude to about eight of them because it shows where we are and where we've been.

Number one, we look at the morale of their overall fighters and the overall force. And the morale now, compared to where it was even four or five months ago, is plummeting. We're seeing them execute their own fighters on the battlefield. We're seeing them unable

to move fighters around the battlefield. And we're seeing the recruits fall off precipitously.

Even if you don't take it from me, look at their own statements and what they say to their own potential recruits. Their spokesman is a terrorist named Mohammad al-Adnani. He has talked for years about this movement as one as a global, historic, expanding movement. Every single thing they would say in their propaganda is that we are going to retain and expand our territories -- constantly going to expand. If you look back a year ago, their propaganda was these black flags kind of taking over the Middle East and moving into southern Europe.

His last statement about three weeks ago was very different. He actually said, you know, we might lose Raqqa, we might lose Mosul -- which they will -- and we might lose Sirte, but we're still going to be around so come join us anyway. It's kind of a very different message than what we were hearing, and I think it's one that is not quite as appealing to their potential recruits. So the morale is plummeting, they're executing their own fighters.

Number two, their ability to hold territory. They have not had a successful offensive operation, particularly in Iraq, in over a year. They've lost about 50 percent of their territory in Iraq, about 20 percent of their territory in Syria, and it's continuing to shrink. But most importantly, is the strategic territory that they held is shrinking quite dramatically. The border with Turkey is no longer accessible to them, and very significant towns in Iraq, such as Tikrit, Ramadi, Ar-Rutbah, going out in western Anbar Province -- no longer accessible to them. And all the road connections between Raqqa and Mosul have been cut off.

Number three indicator: Their access to combat-ready fighters: How big is this organization? We assessed back in December of 2014 they had as many as about 31,000 fighters in their ranks. It's now down, it's at the lowest historic point we've seen. We estimate -- it's hard to get an exact number -- but between 19,000 and 25,000, and it's continuing to shrink quite rapidly. Their ability to recruit and to move foreign fighters around the world, which is very important to protect all of our homelands is also much more difficult. Since the President went to the U.N. Security Council and the U.N. General Assembly in 2014, and we passed a very historic U.N. Security Council Chapter 7 Resolution called 2178. And that really shined the global spotlight on this problem. Since then, and in working with our coalition, 45 countries have enacted laws to restrict the ability of foreign terrorist fighters to travel through their territory; 35 countries have made arrests and broken up cells. And then through sharing information between different capitals, we learn more and more, and create a virtuous cycle.

We now have information-sharing agreements with 50 countries all around the world to combat this, and we're working very closely with Interpol. Interpol is a critical partner of ours. We have about 4,000 ISIL foreign fighter profiles in the Interpol database. That's a 400 percent increase from when we started this in the fall of 2014. It is much harder for these guys to travel and move around.

The fourth indicator: Their access to revenue. Their revenue -- we think we've cut off entirely their revenue that's coming from the outside. They rely entirely on self-generation -- oil, oil trade, sale of antiquities. And we have systematically gone about with very good intelligence work throughout our whole government effort to target that. They've cut their salaries in half. As you know, we've talked about it before, we've targeted their oil production efforts. We've targeted their trucks that move the oil around. And they are no longer able to do what they used to do.

This, again, creates a virtuous cycle. They've cut the pay to their fighters; the fighters don't want to remain in the organization; they desert; their morale plummets; they can't fight -- and then we can defeat them on the battlefield.

A fifth indicator is their access to borders. When we started this, they controlled almost the entire Syrian border with Turkey. It's now down to about a 98-kilometer stretch of territory, and that is shrinking rapidly, particularly with an ongoing effort in Manbij, which I'll talk about very briefly.

Sixth, they're capable -- they have capable and confident leaders. This is an organization in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in the Ramadan in 2014, went into Mosul -- at the Grand Mosque in Mosul and said, we're establishing a caliphate. We haven't heard from Baghdadi since late last year, and this is no longer a confident organization. You can just see it in their own statements.

So their leaders are not nearly as confident. They're not nearly as capable. And we are killing one of their senior or mid-level leaders once every three days now. We've taken out about 100 just over the last few months alone. And this is because of the intelligence that we're able to gather from everything that we're doing.

The fact that we have local actors on the ground, local forces on the ground working closely with us to gather intelligence, everything of course our military is doing in the skies over Iraq and Syria, and everything that our heroic Special Forces are doing, of course, on the ground in Iraq and Syria is creating this virtuous cycle.

Their media propaganda is not what it was before. They had kind of open season back in 2014. We've worked very closely throughout the global coalition to make sure that we get this stuff off Twitter, off Facebook, off YouTube. We work very closely with Facebook and Twitter. Twitter has taken down about *125,[000] pro-ISIL handles. For every one on Twitter now there's about six counter-ISIL handles countering their messaging every day, 24/7. Our partners in the coalition, the UAE has been a leader in this, the U.K., Malaysia, because it's a very localized message-based structure, but we're going at it every single day.

Finally, their global cohesion -- they see themselves as a global organization. And their cohesion is shrinking. Their connections between the heart of their so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq to their co-called affiliates is drying up and shriveling up. And even in their

own propaganda -- because it's much harder for them to get into Syria now -- so they tell their recruits, maybe don't go to Syria, think about going to Libya. But Libya is also increasingly a not-very-hospitable environment for them.

And if you think about Libya, which isn't in the news as much as Iraq and Syria, but just a few months ago there was no government in Libya. There's now a government backed by the United Nations. That government is now on the ground in Tripoli. Of course, it is working with local forces loyal to that government, which are now starting to push into the heart of what ISIL thought was its stronghold in Sirte, and they're making some real progress.

We have a lot of work to do in Libya. There's a lot of actors on the ground. And it's a core principle of ours that those actors need to recognize that civilian-led government, and from there, if the government of Libya, of course, requests help from the international community, I think they'll find a very willing partner.

Let me very briefly just highlight just a few points on this map. I referred to this map the last time I was here, and just to situate everyone, every color that is in this map are areas that ISIL at one point or another controlled. So in the summer of 2014, all those colors -- they were moving down on Baghdad. You might remember those days. Everything in green are areas that they've lost since then. Everything in orange are areas they still control. And the very small splotches of dark red are areas that they've actually gained.

This map only goes until the end of April, which is unfortunate, because since the end of April we've launched a number of major offensive operations with our partners on the ground. So there's a lot more green on this map now than there was in the end of April, and we hope to have an updated map coming out in the next week or so.

But let me just highlight a couple points on the map; I won't go through the whole thing. But number one, that's the 98-kilometer strip of border with Turkey that I mentioned. This is very important because it is the last strip of border it controls. Turkey has done a great job in kind of sealing off the area on the Turkish side of the border, but until we take the territory away in Syria, we still remain vulnerable.

There's a city there, a town called Manbij. Manbij is where we believe the Paris attackers, the Brussels attackers, they all kind of pulse through this area -- from Raqqa up to Manbij, and then out to the capitals where they had organized their attack. So we have to work with forces on the ground to close out this area.

We've pushed -- this is the Mara Line. That's the extent of ISIL's western advance, and we've worked with opposition groups to push to the east. That's proven to be very difficult because they have met with very fierce resistance from ISIL with suicide bombs and truck bombs. So we opened a new front about a week ago, and this is going extremely well, a force called the Syrian Democratic Forces. And the force that is doing this operation, there's about 3,500 of them. And it is based upon a core principle that we set when we developed this strategy, and this was fundamental to the President, fundamental to our DOD campaign plan, and also the diplomatic strategy: We want local people who know

the local area to organize and liberate their areas. We don't want, obviously, American troops going into the streets and alleys of these towns. We want local people with local knowledge to liberate their own territory.

So when it comes to Manbij, there's an organization out called the Manbij Military Council. There are about 3,500 fighters. 3,000 of them are local Arabs from Manbij. I met some of their leaders when I was in Kobani, and I've met them elsewhere. And they launched an operation about a week ago and crossed the Euphrates River here in what some of our Special Forces who work with these guys have said is one of the most complex military maneuvers they've seen in some time. And they did it under fire. They've taken casualties. In fact, one of the main leaders of this organization, of the military council, his name was Abu Layla, someone that I also met, was killed in the operation. They've now named this operation after him, and they've continued to advance.

They continue to advance so rapidly that Manbij is now almost entirely surrounded. And once Manbij is taken away from ISIL, it will really entirely cut off their ability to move from Raqqa and to move fighters, and to threaten us and to threaten our partners and our homelands.

So it's a very important operation. It launched about a week ago. There was months of work that went into it. They still have some ways to go, but we're focused on it and it is critically important. And once we're in there, we think the amount of information we're able to get about ISIL, about the leadership networks will be very important for further unraveling it.

Raqqa, just very quickly. Raqqa, of course, remains their kind of their headquarters, and we think a lot of their leaders are still there, although fewer than there were. And as I said, we're continuing to target those leaders in Raqqa, but, most importantly, the reason that the President made the decision to send additional Special Forces to Syria -- going from 50 to 300 -- is because we think we've hit on a formula that works -- again, organizing local people to take the fight to ISIL combined with air support and combined with hard, kind of local political work that we're doing. It works.

And what we're doing to move down on Raqqa is recruiting and increasing the number of Arab fighters in their own territories. So obviously, we have people on the ground helping to do that training. And so far we think that is going quite well.

I will just move around to number five. That's, of course, Mosul. The President has authorized additional military enablers for Mosul. Those are getting in place, and I'm very confident that when the decision comes to use them, they will be used quite effectively. And that will be coming.

But also important for Mosul, we're doing a lot of diplomatic and political work within our coalition to make sure that the humanitarian, the stabilization piece, and the local politics is set up so that we do Mosul right. Mosul is very complicated. There's about a million people still in Mosul. There's Arabs. There's Kurds. There's different ethnicities. And we want to make sure that everybody is pulling together and working together.

Here I give the government of Iraq a lot of credit. They have allocated in their budget 15,000 local fighters from Ninawa Province to be part of the Mosul campaign. We're working very closely with our Kurdish partners in Erbil, and of course, with the government of Baghdad to organize and coordinate this entire effort. That is very much underway. And of course, we won't put timeframes on it. But we feel pretty good about how it's going to tick up.

Tikrit -- I mentioned Tikrit last time, but it's important because it's so critical that as we're focused on defeating ISIL, we're not just focused on defeating them and not thinking of what comes next. We're focused on the day after ISIL.

And this is where as our global coalition we've done -- we've been able to pool resources. And I think we've hit on a very effective mechanism, which has really revolutionized the kind of post-conflict stabilization effort. Returning people to their homes after a conflict like this is one of the hardest things to do historically. We've looked historically. It can take years, if ever.

In Tikrit -- Tikrit, of course, is an iconic Sunni city in the heart of a mixed province, Salah ad Din Province. The entire population now -- 95 percent of the population, according to the U.N. statistics, has returned to the city of Tikrit. And that is because we have a stabilization funding mechanism through the coalition. It's funded about \$100 million at any given time, so that it's able -- you can draw from it and flush resources to the local level. The government of Iraq is determined to decentralize authority as much as possible to provincial officials. And we're working to make sure that local people are organized to secure the streets.

So in Tikrit now, security is being provided by local police, which eventually gives people the confidence to come home. And once they start coming home, you reach a tipping point and the population returns. So in Tikrit that is going very well. The entire population is back. And in Iraq entirely now, about 700,000 people have come back to their homes.

This is important because one of the main challenges in this part of the world, of course, are the refugees and migrant flows. And we want to make sure that as we defeat ISIL, we are setting the conditions for people to return to their homes.

Final point I'll mention is seven and eight. Seven is the Euphrates Valley. This would all be green if this was an updated map because we have worked very closely, again, with the local people to liberate their own territories. And the tribes of Anbar Province, about 15,000 now, tribal fighters, organized to work with Iraqi security forces. And they have now cleared the entire Euphrates Valley from Ramadi up to Haditha. And that is significant because it would not have been done if we didn't have the support of the local people. And so that has now cleared out.

And in Ramadi, we're trying to do the same thing as in Tikrit -- bringing people back to their homes. We have about \$25 million allocated for the stabilization effort in Ramadi. We have 2,500 local police from Ramadi in the streets. We have tribal fighters

coordinating to control Ramadi, working very closely with the governor of Anbar Province.

What has made this very difficult -- and this is how barbaric ISIL is and why we have to wipe them off this map -- before they leave an area, before they left Ramadi, those who survived and retreated, they left IEDs, booby traps in almost every home. So of the 70,000 people that returned to Ramadi, about 100 of them tragically were killed to find a booby trap in their closet or in their refrigerator. So the government stopped the returnees. We then as a coalition -- we all met in Rome, with key contributors from the coalition -- we raised about \$25 million to help the demining, the -- getting all these booby traps out of these homes. And there's now experts, world-renowned experts on the ground in Ramadi helping to clear meter by meter to help people come back to their homes.

It's a sense of just how difficult this is. It's a sense of how every single detail we are really focused on. And because we have a coalition, we can draw on resources rapidly to try to help. So Ramadi right now they are clearing the booby traps and the IEDs to help people come back to their homes.

Just to the southeast of Ramadi, of course, is Fallujah. The Fallujah operation has been in the news, and this is very much ongoing. Overall in Fallujah, we're focused on three dimensions. One is military campaign, of course. And this is being led to actually enter the city of Fallujah -- this is very important -- it is being led by the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service, and local tribes.

The overall force, about 20 percent, is local Anbari tribal fighters. And entering the city, it will be primarily the Iraqi security forces and, ultimately, those tribal forces.

Just yesterday, the Iraqi Special Forces punched through the main crunch -- the crust of ISIL's defense and set up a foothold in the southern edge of the city in a very critical neighborhood. And our military personnel who know this land better than anybody -- I was talking to Lieutenant General Frank McKenzie yesterday, who knows this ground, it's very significant to get that foothold and then to continue to push forward. This will take weeks; it's not going to be fast. Again, they have to go block by block, clearing IEDs. But we are helping the Iraqi security forces, as they operate under the Iraqi chain of command.

There have been reports of some isolated atrocities committed by some of the popular mobilization forces, primarily these are Shia volunteers who are in the outskirts of Fallujah. And we've discussed this with Prime Minister Abadi. We've discussed it throughout the government. And so far, everybody is saying and doing the right thing to make sure that anyone who commits a human rights violation is held to account.

The Iraqi security forces, as the IDP has come out, we did the same thing -- you have to screen who is coming out, do biometrics, make sure that Daesh is not infiltrating the IDP population, but this has to be done in an organized, coordinated way. And we've worked

with the local leaders in Anbar, with the governor, to make sure that there is a local representative to try to make sure that this is going well. But we're concerned about it, we're focused on it, and the government of Iraq is also focused on it.

Final point before I just turn to questions. Number eight is Ar-Rutbah, and that's all orange, but on the new map it would be green. And this is way out there. And this is where, in some cases, we're ahead of where we thought we would be. There's a highway from Amman into Baghdad -- I was just in Amman a couple weeks ago. And that was about tens of millions of dollars of commerce coming through there every single month. It's obviously dried up entirely since ISIL came in. And the Iraqi security forces with, again, about a thousand local tribal fighters from the local area, cleared out ISIL from Ar-Rutbah just about two weeks ago. And we're now working to secure and open that highway, which is critical for our close partner, Jordan, and also, of course, for Iraq.

So, again, you can see the pressure kind of coming from all directions. It's not just Iraq and Syria, but it's global. And I think, overall, while this remains a tremendous, tremendous challenge, the strategy is kicking into gear and we're making some progress. And we'll talk to the President next week about where we are and how we might further accelerate.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Thank you, Brett. With the detail laid down there, so why don't we go around here? Josh, do you want to start?

Q Great. Thanks for doing this. I wanted to ask you about Mosul. You talked about the importance of having this be led by local forces, but how concerned are you about some of the Shia militias that, with Iranian support, are taking on a lot of the action? And have you assessed the risk of there being a sectarian bloodbath against Sunnis that could have a backlash that would actually help the Islamic State?

MR. MCGURK: So Tikrit was kind of a test for this. So Tikrit, we had -- this was about a year ago -- and you had a lot of popular mobilization units who are primarily Shia operating in that battle space. We worked out a formula in which those units would not go into the city of Tikrit itself. The units that we support, very importantly, all have to be operating strictly under Iraqi command and control. And there's a couple reasons for that. One, we're not going to support any unit that is not operating strictly under Iraqi command and control. And secondly, we don't want to make any mistakes. And sometimes it's hard to tell from the sky who is who.

So a lot of these units actually are operating under Iraqi command and control, they are disciplined, but there are a couple of exceptions and exceptions of units that the Iranians have tremendous influence over that are outside the Iraqi command structure. And that's a big problem for us, it's a problem for the government of Iraq. So we discussed this with the Iraqi authorities as early as -- just yesterday, I was talking to our ambassador, and it's a concern. But, again, so far, the plan for Fallujah and who is entering the city are the Iraqi security forces operating under that command and control structure.

So it's a concern. I will say that everybody -- if you know the Iraqi scene, I mean, the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, all the way down, even Muqtada al-Sadr -- everybody on the Shia side is saying the right things. Any human rights violation is -- cannot -- everybody who violates anyone's human rights has to be held accountable. It's not acceptable. We're working here to liberate the people of Fallujah, who are Iraqis. ISIL, it's important to remember, is holding the entire population hostage -- anyone who leaves they're trying to kill.

And so everybody is saying the right thing, but in a complicated environment like this, and in the smoke and dust of it, which we are in now, there will be incidents, and it's important, then, that the government holds the people accountable.

MR. EARNEST: Ted.

Q You mentioned, number four, the revenues of the Islamic State. What's the estimate of the annual oil sales now? And is that -- to what extent is it going down because the oil prices dropped or is it because of also airstrikes and the counter operation?

MR. MCGURK: Yes, so it's a great question. So we got real insider knowledge into their finances because of an operation our Special Forces did, again, over a year ago, deep into Syria, into the town Shaddadi, which is now no longer in ISIL's hands. And it was an operation against Abu Sayyaf, who was a deputy to ISIL's main leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and their main financier. And our heroic Special Forces -- these guys are incredible -- they pulled more information off that site than any raid in their history. We learned more about how they're funding themselves through that operation than anything else we had done.

They were generating about a billion dollars a year, about \$500 million from oil and gas, and \$500 million from antiquities trade, from extortion, from what they call taxes -- just extracting revenues off the population. But based on that information from that raid, we were able to then systematically develop all that intelligence information, and working across the U.S. government into the military targeting process to go after how they're getting oil out of the ground and how they're selling it.

So we've reduced their production by at least 30 percent. We've substantially reduced their ability to generate revenue. The numbers are fuzzy, so I just don't want to give you a precise number, but it continues to go down. As we see them adapt, which we're seeing them do, we then get together and we go to the Situation Room with all the experts and say, how are we going to adapt and stay ahead of them, which we're going to do.

But it's because of -- this is why this is hard. I mean, some say, well, how come you couldn't have -- why didn't you just go after all their oil immediately? You have to get the intelligence, the specific information about exactly what they're doing so that the military effects can be precise and have the effect that you want. And it was based upon that operation, deep into Syria, that we got the intelligence we needed to begin to really target their revenue streams, and we're going to continue to do that. We'll be relentless in going after that.

MR. EARNEST: Justin.

Q I wanted to ask about Libya and, obviously, I think the question of what happens next. And so I'm wondering -- there's been obvious success against ISIL there but there seems like the presence of factions continue to exist, General Haftar has not pledged allegiance to the central government. And so what's the plan for after you're hopefully able to eradicate ISIS there? And is the U.S. going to do more to help that central government? Because we've seen problems with basic services, basic finances -- sort of the core-of-government functions.

MR. MCGURK: Yes, so Libya, I think as you know, it's obviously extremely complex. And 10, 11 weeks ago, there was hardly any traction to say how are we actually going to grapple with this. So, one, they formed a government, a U.N.-backed government, recognized by the international community -- a very important ministerial meeting held in Vienna in which the whole world really rallied to support that government. There are elements on the ground exactly as you mentioned that have not yet recognized the authority of that government, and that remains a problem. Our position is very clear that any armed actor on the field in Libya should recognize the authority of that civilian government, the Government of National Accord.

Secretary Kerry was in Abu Dhabi just a couple days ago talking about some of this, and of course we're talking to the Egyptians about this. And we're prepared to obviously work with General Haftar under the umbrella of the Government of National Accord. So there's a lot of discussions going on about this, and I think we're making some traction. And my colleague at the State Department, our Special Envoy on Libya, Jonathan Winer, is, of course, working the political piece of this every single day together with the U.N. Special Representative Martin Kobler.

We have a lot of work to do in Libya, don't get me wrong. But we now have I think some traction in how to go after it. And those effects are now starting to be seen on the ground. But it will take time, and we have to work it step by step. But you're absolutely right, we want to make sure these armed actors come under a civilian umbrella. And we'll need the cooperation from our partners to make that happen.

MR. EARNEST: Andrew.

Q A couple questions on Syria and one on Libya. We saw earlier this week there were thousands of people fleeing Manbij ahead of the assault, which, as you know, the town is now surrounded. What are you doing to help the people that are fleeing and to screen the people that are fleeing in case militants have infiltrated refugee flows?

MR. MCGURK: So in Manbij, it's harder than some of what we're doing in Iraq, just because we don't have the access -- which we do from a place like Baghdad -- where we're working directly with the government.

So I mentioned the Manbij Military Council. There's also a Manbij Provincial Authority, an authority from Manbij that will be ready to go in and to work locally to make sure they can work the stabilization piece. The borders remain difficult. We just reopened the

border with northern -- the Kurdistan region of Iraq and into northern Syria to get a lot of this humanitarian relief flowing in. That border is open for humanitarian trade, primarily for this reason -- to make sure that as areas are liberated from ISIL, the resources can be there to help people.

But Manbij, you're right -- so we've kind of -- completing the encirclement, and now the very difficult phase of actually liberating the city will begin. And I don't want to put a timeline on that, but we are working with local actors who have local knowledge and pooling the resources as best we can to make sure that we get the stabilization piece right.

Syria is much harder, however, because we're not obviously working with a central government. We are not going to work with the Assad regime. Period. And so it presents different challenges than Iraq.

But if you look at what we've done in terms of clearing out all this territory, I think we've hit on a formula that works. Manbij will be a big test. It will be one of the most strategic blows to ISIL yet because it is their hub of foreign fighters. It is their main kind of access route from Raqqa. And so I suspect they will fight for it. But we feel pretty good about the plan -- not only the military plan, but importantly the post-ISIL plan.

Q And sorry, just on Libya. The Misrata Brigades and some Libyan officials are saying that Sirte has basically fallen. They're quite surprised that they've gone and the forces are basically mopping up. Is that your assessment?

MR. MCGURK: I think it's -- I think they have some ways to go. And I just don't want to get ahead of the situation because it remains pretty fluid, but we're encouraged by the progress they're making.

We understand the Government of National Accord set up an operations room to organize all these fighters who are fighting against ISIL. And in Libya a few months ago when I would do conferences, and they'd talk -- analysts would talk about Libya, they'd talk about this kind of hockey-stick growth of ISIL in Libya. In fact, it's remained static at about 5,000 total fighters. Most of them are from North Africa or Sub Saharan Africa. It has not grown, And that's because the Libyan people totally reject ISIL entirely.

So they've been able to control Sirte by force. But once you have a credible force on the ground that moves against them, there is a chance that they could crack pretty quickly. But I don't think we're there yet.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret.

Q Is there a clear read on what Baghdadi's status is? You made a point of saying you haven't heard from him in some time. Is he alive and well? And can you give us a timeline on the retaking of Raqqa?

MR. MCGURK: So we have no reason to believe that Baghdadi is not still alive, but we have not heard from him since the end of last year. It is Ramadan. He purports to be the caliph; that's what he calls himself. And so you would think he'd be coming out with a

statement to his so-called followers. But we have not heard from him. But we presume that he's still alive.

I will say, though, as I mentioned the leaders we're taking out, we are getting closer and closer and closer to the very core. And so it's really a matter of time for him. I just can't put a timeline on any of the operations for Raqqa and Mosul. Raqqa will be extremely difficult, but I think we have a pretty good plan after Manbij to organize these local actors, Arab fighters to move down and to isolate Raqqa.

MR. EARNEST: Michel.

Q If I heard you correctly, you were saying that the problem is there were more atrocities perpetrated in Fallujah than you knew. And all you have is to take the government of Baghdad at its word, that's saying everything -- we're doing the right thing.

These forces that -- there are several reports about summary executions from these popular mobilization forces. How concerned are you that they are probably -- there are more reports, and that they are using this push against ISIS to engage in score settling with Sunnis and you're probably unwittingly supporting them in these acts?

MR. MCGURK: Most atrocities being committed in Fallujah are being committed by ISIL. And ISIL is killing families as they're trying to leave Fallujah. It's happening every single day. There are Yazidi slaves inside Fallujah. That is the vast bulk of the humanitarian violations.

However, we are very concerned about some of these reports by some of these militia groups that are outside on the outskirts of Fallujah. And I would just say that even the leaders of these units have said this is totally unacceptable and they're going to hold people to account. And they have to hold people to account, because these types of incidents play right into ISIL's overall narrative.

So again, we faced this in the early days of Tikrit, and there was all sorts of projections of what might go wrong. We worked very hard with all the right actors to try to tamp things down. I think that was pretty successful. And that's what we're doing in Fallujah right now.

I will say, the post-ISIL environment in a lot of these places is very chaotic. There's a sectarian dimension potentially, but there's also a kind of tribe-on-tribe dimension. And it is really complex.

I told the story that last time I was here of a Yazidi who said, all I have left in my life is my revenge. There is a lot of that. And it's incumbent upon -- we're not on the ground in Fallujah. It's incumbent upon the actors and the government and the religious leaders to say the right things, to issue the right instructions, and to hold people accountable. So we are concerned about it, and we're talking to the right people almost 24/7 to try to make sure it's handled appropriately.

Q Do you feel that the government of Baghdad shares your concerns, that these Sunnis when they see these acts, they aren't pushed further into the arms of these extremist groups? If not ISIL, some other group that would replace ISIL in Iraq?

MR. MCGURK: It's a great question. The government of Iraq certainly shares these concerns. Prime Minister Abadi is going to Fallujah almost every other day. And importantly he is bringing with him all the Sunni leadership of the country, the local leaders of Fallujah and Anbar province, and the national leaders in Baghdad.

When I was in Baghdad about -- one of my trips recently, about six, seven weeks ago, I met with all the Anbari sheikhs, particularly in the area of eastern Anbar and Fallujah. And the driving demand to get into Fallujah and to liberate the city was coming from the Sunnis of Anbar province and from these areas. And so that is the plan. The forces to enter the city, I mentioned about 20 percent of them are local Fallujans. We're training the police to make sure the local police are controlling the streets afterwards.

But there are these reports of isolated incidents, which everybody is concerned about. And so, so far right now things seem to be relatively tamped down. And we have to make sure it stays that way.

Let me just put one plug for the coalition in terms of local police. We are training now about 900 police leaders every three months. It has been a real success. It's how we've been able to get local people controlling the streets after ISIL. And we're looking to triple that number by October. That's one reason I met with the coalition today to talk about getting to that target.

MR. EARNEST: Michelle.

Q Did you just say that those were local police?

MR. MCGURK: Yes, so we want -- the idea after ISIL is that in a place like Tikrit, we want people from Tikrit to be the police controlling the streets.

Q -- yes, I just wanted quick clarification. But my actual question is, in about two years now, of these people being hounded by a 60-plus-member Western coalition, we really haven't seen the number of fighters go down all that much. It hasn't even been cut in half. So can you describe what the foreign-fighter flow looks like right now? How much of this 25,000-strong force are foreign fighters? Are they still pouring over the border from Syria? Maybe you could give us a sense of really how many fighters you think there have been in total since the beginning.

MR. MCGURK: The numbers are -- so that's why there's a range, 19,000 to -- but their ability to get fighters into Syria is dramatically restricted. So our goal is to make sure that they can't get in, and once they're in, they're never going to get out.

Q But they're obviously still getting in, right?

MR. MCGURK: Well, it's very hard for them to get in. So even in their own propaganda - they have a magazine they release every couple of months called Dabiq Magazine. And in their own propaganda, they say, hey, join our great organization, but maybe don't come to Syria, go to Libya. And that was a sign that told us it's much harder for these guys to get into Syria.

We know from all of our sources of information it's much harder for them to get into Syria, and it's increasingly hard for them to get out. We also know from Libya, it's very difficult for them to get into Libya. The 5,000 fighters in Libya, most of them are actually North Africans or from Sub-Saharan Africa.

So the numbers have gone down substantially. Now, that said, as it's harder for them to get to Syria, what they're trying to do is to recruit local -- to inspire homegrown attacks. So someone who's inspired over the Internet, rather than being recruited to come into Syria, they're trying to recruit them to conduct attacks at home. They've always done that, but it's what they're increasingly trying to do.

But that's a very different challenge, and it's something that we all have to focus on. It will be with us for years. That's why all of us in Washington, the whole government, but across this kind of global international community have to focus on it. But it's a very different problem than what we saw in Brussels or what we saw in Paris, which are attacks organized in Raqqa by very sophisticated leaders -- organized in Raqqa, and then they send the operatives out to carry out the attack.

So, so long as they're pressured in Raqqa, they can't plan, they can't plot, and that's why we want to keep the pressure on them constantly.

Q Are these mostly foreign fighters still, though? Has the sort of demographic of who these people now are changed much?

MR. MCGURK: I mean, ISIL is made up of a bulk. There are fighting forces all -- nearly all the suicide bombers, and they, in their own numbers, they claim to have done about 119 suicide bombs in May alone. And nearly all the suicide bombers are foreign fighters. And the suicide bombers are what gives them this kind of ruthless impact, both on the battlefield and against the civilian population.

Some of their rank and file, they're Syrians, they're Iraqis. But there's a decreasing number of those.

MR. EARNEST: Okay, I think we have time for one more. Richard, do you want to do the last one?

Q Thank you, Josh. I'd like you to tell us a little bit more about the contribution of the coalition partners. You just talked about the training being given. We can go through the daily round up by the NSC -- can you just tell us, as for the raids, is it mainly an American operation? In percentage, can you say it's like 90 percent American raids and 10 percent - and also, as for ground troops, are we getting to a point where we'll have to ask more ground troops from coalition partners to complete the job on the ground?

MR. MCGURK: So the coalition is -- the way we've organized the coalition, there's -- I don't want to go through it, but there's five lines of effort. There's military, there's countering foreign fighters, there's countering finance, there's countering propaganda, and then there's the humanitarian stabilization.

On the military, it's about 12 coalition partners are conducting air -- helping on the overall military air campaign. And the fact that it's strengthening and growing -- we've added about four partners -- Belgium, France, others are now also conducting operations with the U.K. in Syria just over the last four or five months.

Since the Paris attacks -- I'll give you another statistic. Since the Paris attacks, we've increased the rate of strikes in Raqqa by about 100 percent, based upon additional resources from the coalition, additional support from the coalition. About 20 coalition partners have forces on the ground doing training, doing advising and assisting. And that's not all U.S.; that is a real, truly coalition effort. Even where our Special Forces are, we have a number of coalition partners together with our Special Forces. But we're organized across these different working groups.

Stabilization, which I mentioned, is led by Germany and the UAE. And this is -- it's that working group -- they meet about every month at different parts around the world to basically make sure we have this stabilization, this post-ISIL piece going as best as we can.

On the counter-messaging, I think I mentioned in my opening, it is U.K., Malaysia, UEA -- constant, 24/7 counter-messaging. And a huge role there, of course, with our partners in the Gulf. Because there is a religious dimension to this that obviously we can't be the leaders on.

So we're organized by the coalition through these multiple military, diplomatic and humanitarian lines of effort. And we hope to have a meeting here in Washington over the coming months to really bring a lot of this together. The last time we met was in Rome. I think the coalition, having just met with all the leaders of the entire 66-member coalition, we have a coherent strategy, a coherent global campaign plan. Every capital I'm in now I don't have to do a briefing of what we're doing. Everybody knows exactly what we're doing, and it's about how can we do this better and making sure that foreign fighters can't flow across borders, making sure we have the stabilization piece, making sure we're doing the counter-propaganda -- all of which supports the military campaign -- is something that is now kind of -- we're in a virtuous cycle of how it's going.

With that said, I close on a caveat I opened with: This is a tremendous challenge. These guys want to attack us. They want to attack us every single day. We have to remain vigilant, not just the United States of America but our coalition partners. And for the most part, we are, but of course, this is a challenge that will be with us for years.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Brett.

MR. MCGURK: Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Nicely done. Appreciate you coming. All right. You'll obviously have an opportunity to hear more from the President on this issue on Tuesday at the conclusion of the counter-ISIL meeting that he'll convene with his national security team at the Treasury Department.

So we've already taken a lot of questions today but I'll stick around and take a few more. Josh, do you want to start?

Q Sure. Josh, the President's decision to allow expanded airstrikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan, does the fact that we're once again focusing on the Taliban there as opposed to al Qaeda and other extremist groups like ISIS mean that the President will be more likely to approve allowing more than the 5,500 troops to stay at the end of his presidency?

MR. EARNEST: It does not. And I would -- for a variety of reasons that I will explain, I would encourage you to not try to interpret anything about a future potential decision on troop numbers with the new authorities that have been given to our forces who are already in Afghanistan. Let me explain to you why.

The mission that our men and women in Afghanistan have been given and been conducting since 2015 is not any different today than it was yesterday. This mission is focused on two things. One is carrying out counterterrorism operations to protect the American people and our interests around the world. The other mission is a very important one as well, and that is to offer train, advice and assistance to Afghan security forces that are working hard to provide security in their own country.

It is now the responsibility, fully, of the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces to provide for the security of the nation of Afghanistan. And the United States and our NATO partners can be and have been supporting them by offering training, advice and assistance.

In many situations, U.S. military personnel, and, in some situations, contributions from NATO forces have been accompanying Special Operations Afghan forces on some operations. Those U.S. forces would not have a combat role per se, but rather would be offering advice and assistance even as these operations are being carried out.

What these authorities will allow is it will allow U.S. forces to engage in similar efforts to accompany conventional Afghan security forces when they undertake operations. What this would allow is U.S. forces to be more proactive in supporting conventional Afghan forces as they take the fight to the Taliban. And this means, in some cases, offering close air support, or it means, in some cases, accompanying Afghan forces on the ground or in the air.

Again, to this point, U.S. forces and our NATO partners have, in some situations, been accompanying Afghan special operators. This authority would allow U.S. forces to accompany conventional Afghan forces in certain situations, but when they're accompanying them, they continue to be -- remain focused on the advise-and-assist mission that they've been carrying out now for almost two years.

Q And just quickly, Senator Perdue speaking to the Faith and Freedom group this morning suggested as a prayer for the President the verse of Psalms that says “Let his days be few.” And in case your familiarity with Psalms is as lacking as mine is, the next verse of that goes “Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.” Would the President like an apology from the senator for that comment?

MR. EARNEST: I did make note of Senator Perdue’s comments. As Senator Perdue considers whether or not an apology is appropriate, there are a variety of other Scripture he might consult.

Tim.

Q So Reuters reported that the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is coming to Washington next week. Can you confirm whether the Crown Prince is meeting with President Obama?

MR. EARNEST: I don’t have any -- I’ve seen some of these reports. I don’t have any details about his potential travel or whether or not the details of his trip have been locked down at this point. But once we have some more updated details about his trip and about what sort of interactions he’ll have with the U.S. government, then we’ll provide those. But I would not anticipate that we’ll have those today.

John.

Q Thank you, Josh. The President told Jimmy Fallon he was happy that Trump is the Republican nominee. Does he believe that Secretary Clinton can easily defeat the presumptive Republican nominee, Mr. Trump?

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, the President on a number of occasions has now made clear that it’s important for Democrats to run scared and to engage in this debate fully, and not to take the results for granted. And I think the President made quite clear in the video that he released yesterday that he intends to be a forceful advocate for Secretary Clinton and the policies that this administration have been pursuing over the last seven and a half years, because he does view this as a choice facing the American people about whether or not the next President will be someone who is committed to policies that advance the interests of the middle class, that seek to advance the country’s interests around the world by strengthening our alliances, or are we going to hand the keys to the White House to someone who is promising to tear down that progress.

So this is obviously an election that the President believes is a priority, and he’ll be engaged accordingly. And he certainly will be making the case to Democrats, Republicans and independents across the country that the American people should consider this election a top priority as well.

Q So he’s not taking the defeat of Donald Trump for granted.

MR. EARNEST: Not at all.

Q Not at all. Another question, just a postscript on yesterday's meeting with Senator Sanders. Was there any discussion of Senator Sanders addressing the Democratic Convention, as many robust Democratic candidates who were nominated have addressed the convention on prime time in the past?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a whole lot more details of their private conversation to share. If it did come up, I'm confident this was not something that they spent a lot of time discussing, primarily because the Democratic nominee is the individual who will be responsible for determining the program at the convention.

So presumably when -- if and when Senator Sanders and Secretary Clinton have an opportunity to meet, this will be on their agenda, but not something that President Obama would weigh in on.

Michelle.

Q We saw Vice President Biden's open letter to the victim in this Stanford rape case talking about being "filled with furious anger" over it. Does the President share that view? And why doesn't this furious anger translate into making some comment on what is sort of the glaring issue here -- well, one of the glaring issues here that's caused so much concern is the sentence itself.

MR. EARNEST: Well, you have heard the President I think, on a number of occasions, talk about how serious he believes the matter of sexual assault and violence against women is. And that's why the President has made clear in a variety of these settings just how wrong sexual assault is.

The President has made -- has stated unambiguously that there is no room for sexual assault or sexual harassment or violence against women in the United States military. There is no room for any of that on college campuses. And there surely is no room for that in our society. And the President has been unequivocal.

And the President has been engaged in a number of efforts to combat sexual assault. The President and the Vice President have teamed up together to advance the It's On Us campaign. This is a grassroots effort to encourage men and women all across the country to take the It's On Us pledge, and that pledge essentially is to intervene in situations in which the risk of sexual assault might be elevated -- if you observe a situation, even in a social setting, to intervene to try to prevent a sexual assault from occurring -- and that we all have a responsibility to protect our community, to protect the people around us, and to intervene in those situations in which something like this seems like to occur.

So the President has quite strong feelings about this. The Vice President does too. The Vice President also has his own personal track record as a United States senator. Of course, Vice President Biden wrote the Violence Against Women Act, an historic piece of legislation that devoted significant resources to combatting violence against women all across the country.

So this is something that both the President and the Vice President have made a priority, not just because they believe that it matters as a policy matter, but because of their own deep personal conviction about how wrong sexual assault is.

Q I think it was just surprising to see some of the words and phrases that the Vice President chose. I mean, obviously he feels so strongly about this that he writes this open letter in that way. So would you say that the President is also angry about the details surrounding this case?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is fair to say that the President feels strongly that every act of sexual assault and sexual violence and rape is wrong, and one that deserves a forceful rebuke to make clear to everyone that we have certain principles we have certain values in our country.

Now, I'm not going to talk about any specific situation, and I'm not going to talk about the specific court decision.

Q Yes, but the obvious question is, when you say things like that -- "strong feelings," Biden's "furious anger," "deserves a forceful rebuke" -- the obvious question is, and what's angered so many people around America right now, is a six-month sentence a forceful rebuke?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, this is a court proceeding, and a criminal court proceeding. So I can't weigh in on it. But I think when I talk about a "forceful rebuke," I'm making a clear reference to the fact that we need to just make clear to everybody that there's zero tolerance for sexual assault. There's no excuse for directing violence towards women, or engaging in sexual activity without consent. That's wrong. There's no excuse for it. There's no justification for it. There's no explaining your way out of it. And that's true in every setting.

Q A six-month sentence doesn't seem like zero tolerance, though.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I just can't weigh in on a specific decision that was handed down by a judge. There are legal proceedings underway here so I can't talk about any specific case.

But I can talk in generalities about how there can and should be no tolerance for sexual activity without consent, no tolerance for violence against women, no tolerance for sexual harassment, no tolerance for rape. And the President has been -- the President's comments and feelings about this have been unambiguous.

Q Okay, then just talking generally, would you say that there is not zero tolerance right there, given that somebody could get a six-month sentence for rape in America? That doesn't seem like zero tolerance. Would you agree that we're not yet at a point where there is zero tolerance?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President's point is that anywhere in our society, when we see sexual violence taking place, it means we've got work to do. Even one instance of rape, even one instance of sexual assault is one too many. And it's not something that the President is going to accept. There is no resignation on the part of the President and the Vice President that this is just something that we're going to have to deal with as a society. It's something that we must confront seriously, and eradicate from our society. There's no tolerance for it. There's no justification for it. There's no explaining it away.

And the goal of the It's On Us campaign is to make clear that we all have a responsibility for doing that. And this is something that the President feels strongly about.

Q Yes, I mean, but given -- you've expressed so many strong feelings right now, repeatedly saying that there's zero tolerance. So wouldn't this be a good time to speak out about a court case? I mean, what would be the harm in that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as we had an opportunity to talk about a little bit yesterday, there is -- it is important that people who are responsible for conducting criminal investigations, people who are presiding over criminal proceedings, need to feel confident that they can do so without any sort of political interference. They need to be guided by the facts and by the evidence, and by what the law says.

And it's important that we avoid even the perception of a figure with significant political influence weighing in, trying to dictate or influence an outcome. That would erode confidence in our system of justice.

And I guess what I would do, Michelle -- as you consider this, just as a thought experiment -- is to consider if you had a President of the United States who didn't have such strong feelings about eradicating sexual assault, and you can imagine a scenario where if that individual also failed to abide by a long tradition of respecting an independent judiciary, you can imagine a situation where that person might feel like they can influence -- or can try to influence a judge who had imposed what that person considered to be too harsh a sentence. We wouldn't have any tolerance for that, either. That certainly would erode our confidence in the justice system.

So we need a justice system that operates independently, and one that -- because that's the only way it can continue to have the confidence of the American people that everyone is subject to the rule of law, and the rule of law is applied fairly regardless of who you are, regardless of where you went to school, regardless of what political office you may hold.

Q And speaking of strong feelings, did the President sob at graduation, as he promised he would on many occasions?

MR. EARNEST: When I walked out here, the President had not returned from graduation so I wasn't able to count the number of dirty Kleenexes he had stuffed in his pocket. (Laughter.)

Jim.

Q Over the past year, the Taliban in Afghanistan has made significant gains. U.S. military commanders have testified on the Hill that the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating. So is the President's decision now to expand military authorities in Afghanistan -- airstrikes and embedding now, again, with Afghan forces -- an acknowledgement that it was a mistake to put limits on those authorities in the first place?

MR. EARNEST: It was not, Jim. And here's the -- there continues to be concern about the security situation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a dangerous country. It has been for some time now, and it still is today. I don't think anybody, from the President on down, was under the illusion that after a couple of years of being responsible for the security situation of their own country, that the Afghan government and Afghan security forces would eliminate entirely the threat from the Taliban or any other extremists in that country.

What we have seen, however, from Afghan security forces is a remarkable willingness to fight for their country. The forces are resilient, even in those situations where they do encounter operational or even strategic setbacks. There's been a willingness on the part of the Afghan forces to reorganize and take the fight back to their adversaries. And some of that is evidence of a successful effort on the part of the United States and our NATO partners to train Afghan forces, but some of that is also the built-in national pride of Afghan security forces to fight for their country and to counter the threat from extremists.

After all, when the Taliban carries out a bombing in Kabul or anywhere else in the country, most of the victims are Afghans. So it makes sense that Afghan security forces would feel, as a point of national pride, a desire to eradicate those violent extremists from the midst of their country.

And that resilience and that commitment to fighting for their country has shown on the battlefield. The question I think has simply been, what else can the United States do to support them in those efforts? The President feels strongly that the Afghans must remain in control of the security situation in their own country. The U.S. combat role in Afghanistan ended at the end of 2014, and the President is not considering restarting it.

But the question is, is it possible for us to be more proactive in supporting conventional Afghan security forces? And we anticipate that by offering them more support in the form of advice and assistance, and occasionally accompanying them on their operations, that they are likely to be more effective on the battlefield. And that's the goal here, and that's the goal that the United States has pledged for years now, which is to support the Afghan central government and support the Afghan security forces as they provide for the security situation in their country.

Q How is expanding those authorities, however, not thrusting the U.S. military back into a combat role, direct combat role, in Afghanistan?

MR. EARNEST: Because they will be offering advice and assistance to Afghan forces, conventional Afghan forces --

Q But not -- airstrikes are airstrikes. They're combat operations. They're not ground combat operations, but they are combat operations.

MR. EARNEST: Look, there have been counterterrorism operations that have been undertaken by the United States forces and by --

Q But the expansion of authorities, as I understand it, goes beyond what the rules were previously to go beyond the terrorism aspect and to attack large gatherings of Taliban who are not presenting a terrorist threat.

MR. EARNEST: What the authorities allow our forces to do is to provide the kind of advice and support that they have, up to this point, been previously providing to Afghan Special Forces. Now they will be lending that assistance to conventional Afghan forces.

And the President has been very clear about what their responsibilities are, and in some cases, this means providing some close air support, and in some cases this does mean accompanying Afghan forces on their mission. But when we're talking about the operations that are underway on the ground, U.S. forces that are operating on the ground do not have a combat mission. Those U.S. forces are there under a mission to offer advice and assistance.

Now, we've had this conversation in the context of Iraq and Syria; it applies in Afghanistan too. These forces are trained for combat. They certainly are going to be armed for combat. And the reason for that is simple: They're in a dangerous situation. They're putting themselves at great risk to try to advance our efforts in Afghanistan. And that means that they are performing a remarkable service to this country. They are aiding our national security. We owe them a debt of gratitude. But this is what they do willingly because they have been given orders by the President of the United States and by their Commander-in-Chief, and they're fulfilling them.

But it's important for everybody to understand exactly what those orders are. For our forces that are operating on the ground, they have not been given a combat mission. They have been given a mission to offer training, advice and assistance to Afghan security forces.

Q Whether intended or not, like in Iraq and Syria, however, they could be drawn into a combat situation.

MR. EARNEST: There's no denying that. And the President, when he spoke at Arlington Cemetery on Memorial Day, noted the loss of American lives, both in Iraq and in Syria and in Afghanistan. And it's a dangerous place. And we certainly don't take for granted the remarkable courage that is displayed by American servicemembers on the battlefield in Afghanistan, and we certainly do owe them a deep debt of gratitude. Because the work that they are doing there, as we learned painfully on 9/11, has a direct consequence on the national security of the United States.

Q And is there any time limit based on these new authorities? Because earlier it seemed to me you were avoiding a question about whether the President would be able to reduce the number of forces down to 5,000 by the end of this year. But that seems to indicate you expect this expanded authority to be over by the end of this year, because how could you possibly do it and still reduce the forces?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, you've been covering these issues for a long time in more detail than I have. What my understanding is, is that even -- that if the plan to draw down U.S. forces to 5,500 by the end of this year moves forward, that would still be a sufficient -- at a sufficient level to carry out these expanded authorities where necessary. So the point that I'm trying to make is, just because these expanded authorities have been authorized by the Commander-in-Chief, that does not limit in any way our ability to follow through with the plan to draw down our troops at a level of 5,500 troops by the end of this year.

Gary.

Q Josh, in terms of the troop numbers without this military authority being there on the ground and actually seeing the extent to which it is implemented, how can we say at this point whether or not that 5,500 number of troops would, in fact, be adequate to carry out those operations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, this is what -- this is based on the briefing that I received from the Department of Defense that obviously you can consult with my colleagues over there. But my understanding is that there is nothing about these expanded authorities that would prevent the drawdown of troops to the level -- to the 5,500 level by the end of this year.

Q And then along those lines, because the extent to which that is used is largely left to the commanders there on the ground --

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Q -- is there concern that if it is, in fact, heavily used, that it could end up leading to or resulting in an expanded footprint there on the ground, out of necessity?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think actually what our military commanders in Afghanistan have said about this is that their intent is to use these new authorities judiciously. And the idea here is to put U.S. forces in a way -- in a position where they can be more proactively supportive of operations led by Afghan security forces on the ground. But not in every situation, but in situations where our commanders on the ground, based on their knowledge of those forces, based on their knowledge of the terrain, based on their knowledge of the operation, can determine whether or not that kind of stepped-up assistance is necessary.

So this is something that our -- so when we talk about expanded authorities, we're talking about authority that the President of the United States has granted to our commanders on the ground in Afghanistan to have somewhat more latitude in asking our forces and

commanding our forces to carry out these advise-and-assist missions in support of Afghan-led efforts.

Q And lastly, can you elaborate again -- I know you touched on it earlier -- but elaborate on how this is not a reversal, in terms of strategy and policy there in Afghanistan, for the U.S. military.

MR. EARNEST: Well, first of all, it doesn't forestall or prevent us moving forward on the strategy that the President laid out last for drawing down our troop levels to 5,500 at the end of the year. This does not reflect a change in the basic mission that our men and women in uniform in Afghanistan are performing. This is not a restarting of combat operations. Those combat operations ended in 2014.

But what this is, is it does allow U.S. forces to provide the kind of advice and assistance to conventional Afghan security forces that, up to this point, have already been provided to Afghan Special Forces. So that is some expanded authority. We do anticipate that this could enhance the effectiveness of conventional Afghan security forces on the ground. But, ultimately, these are decisions that will be made by U.S. commanders on the ground, but it does not change the basic mission. It does not change the trajectory that the President laid out last year for troop levels. But we do believe that it could enhance the performance of Afghan security forces that are fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Q Because at the core, it seems like you're giving the U.S. forces more to do, with the idea of having less U.S. forces there on the ground to do it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the way that I would describe it is we are actually giving our commanders on the ground the ability to decide to do more where it's appropriate. And that's why it is not a change in our mission, but rather it gives them the opportunity to conduct this mission of advice and assistance in slightly more areas if our commanders have concluded that it's beneficial.

Q And they could conclude on a widespread basis that it is necessary to carry those out, though?

MR. EARNEST: They potentially could conclude that, but they have indicated that that is not their intent at this point.

Margaret.

Q Josh, you've used the word "if" when you talked about future decisions that might be made on troop levels. Are you just leaving the President negotiating room there -- maneuvering room? Or are you suggesting that this is something that will be looked at?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm suggesting is -- first of all, this is not a negotiation. It's the Commander-in-Chief who will make a decision.

Q Maneuvering is --

MR. EARNEST: I understood, I just --

Q -- self-corrected.

MR. EARNEST: -- it's okay. I'm not clarifying you, I'm just trying to -- I'm not correcting you, I'm just trying to clarify the record here, in terms of the President's approach.

So he's the Commander-in-Chief. We have said all along that he gets regular updates on this situation from members of his national security team, based here in Washington, and based at Central Command down in Tampa. He'll also get some advice from our commanders on the ground, and he will take that input and consider broader strategic decisions about the appropriate troop levels in Afghanistan.

The current plan is for 9,800 servicemembers to remain in Afghanistan for most of this year, but to draw down that number to 5,500 by the end of the year. General Nicholson, who recently took command of operations in Afghanistan, has indicated that he was going to conduct a review of our efforts there. And the President, at this point, has not received a specific recommendation to change the troop levels in Afghanistan. But the President will certainly -- the point that I want to make, though, is -- the reason I bring that up is that the President is certainly interested in the advice from his commanders on the ground about the strategy moving forward.

Q So he'd consider it if that was the recommendation of the general? Reconsider troop levels?

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Q I want to also ask you -- there was a letter published on this topic just a week or so ago by a number of prominent former military commanders, including General John Campbell, who just left command; General Petraeus -- a number of very top diplomats who had served this administration -- Ryan Crocker, Cunningham, a number of people. And they were saying basically that this President needs to leave his successor room to make his or her own decision thus freeze at 9,800. Is that something that the President is taking onboard? I mean, what do you make of that, given that this President has said he was handed a lot of very difficult circumstances coming into office, when he looks at battlefields. Wouldn't he appreciate giving his successor the decision of making the drawdown?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is surely true is that President Obama's successor, regardless of who that person is, that person will be inheriting a situation in Afghanistan that is far improved from what President Obama inherited, both in terms of the security situation on the ground, but also in terms of the number of U.S. forces that are operating in that country.

When President Obama took office, between Iraq and Afghanistan there were 180,000 U.S. troops on the ground. Now, here in the last few months of the Obama presidency, the combined number of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan is about 15,000. So less than 10 percent of the troop levels that President Obama inherited. And the truth is, the security situation in Afghanistan is improved.

It's still a dangerous place. I'm certainly not discounting the risk that our men and women in uniform take every single day to undertake this mission, but because of the strategic decisions that President Obama has made over the last seven years, we have succeeded in decimating core al Qaeda that was previously operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. And we have an Afghan central government that is committed to the task of securing their country and is an effective partner with the United States in pursuing that goal.

So the next President will inherit a much better situation in Afghanistan than the one that President Obama accepted. But, look, when the President talked about -- last talked about troop numbers in Afghanistan -- I believe this was last fall -- I think the President made quite clear his thought process about designing a strategy for Afghanistan that would enhance the ability of the next Commander-in-Chief to succeed in implementing a strategy that makes the American people safer.

And we've made tremendous progress in making the American people safer because of our efforts in Afghanistan. And the President is very interested in making sure that the next President is somebody who is committed to building on that progress.

So this is an argument that you've often heard me make in the context of the U.S. economy. I think it's very relevant and resonant in the context of the U.S. economy. But it also directly applies to the situation in Afghanistan; that we've made remarkable progress over the last seven years in making the American people safer, in improving the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, in drawing down troop levels from Afghanistan. And the President is certainly interested in making sure that the next President is somebody who is committed to building on that progress. And that means the President wants the next President to inherit a situation in which we maintain our momentum forward.

Q But this would be a political consideration or perhaps a conversation with the successor candidate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would not anticipate that the President will consult with the candidates for President as he is making this decision. The President will be making this decision in consultation with his national security team in Washington and his military commanders in Tampa and on the ground in Afghanistan.

Q Political -- is what I meant.

MR. EARNEST: I see. I think it's hard to predict at this point exactly what kinds of conversations would be taking place. The President is interested in -- particularly when we get to a situation where there is a President-elect, the President would want to make sure that the President-elect understands what our strategy is and understands the strategy that we've been pursuing based on the guidance of our military -- of his military commanders.

But over the next several months as the strategy is designed, the President will be relying on the advice of his national security team.

Karen.

Q Just quick follow-up on Michelle's question. There's a petition on Whitehouse.gov to impeach the judge in the Stanford sexual assault case. And it's surpassed the 100,000 signatures for a White House response. Will there be a White House response?

MR. EARNEST: There will be a White House response. There is not one yet, but stay tuned. We'll make sure you all get it.

Andrew.

Q In October, last year, the President urged parties in the region to get the Taliban back to the negotiating table. Does this decision reflect the reality that those talks -- the prospect of talks is dead?

MR. EARNEST: It does not. We are continuing to urge actors in the region to be supportive of a Afghan-led reconciliation effort with the Taliban.

A couple of weeks ago, the United States military took action in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to take out the leader of the Taliban who was viewed as a significant impediment to the continuation of those talks. It's too early to assess at this point what impact that will have on the direction of the talks. But we're going to continue to encourage all parties to participate in that Afghan-led process.

Justin. I'll give you the last one, Justin, here, and we'll do the week ahead.

Q Yes, just a quick one. I think you raised some eyebrows yesterday in your exchange with James when you referred to the FBI inquiry into Secretary Clinton's emails as a criminal investigation.

MR. EARNEST: They seemed to be largely eyebrows at my -- at the Republican National Committee headquarters.

Q Well, the Clinton campaign has repeatedly said that this is not a criminal investigation. It says it on her campaign website. So I'm wondering did you sort of misspeak or --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I've said is on a number of occasions that I have not been briefed by the Department of Justice about the investigation. So questions about the nature of the investigation should be directed to the Department of Justice. I've said that on many previous occasions.

The point that I was making is that the ongoing investigation at the Department of Justice is one that is being conducted independent of any sort of political interference, and any sort of -- the President has complete confidence that the individuals who are responsible for conducting that investigation -- these are career employees at the Department of Justice -- these are individuals who understand that they should not be swayed by anything that the President has to say.

The President of the United States wants them -- and is confident that they will, in fact, pursue the facts, follow the evidence, and lead to a conclusion that is supported by the facts and the evidence.

Q But you don't know whether or not this is a criminal inquiry?

MR. EARNEST: I would have no insight into that because I'm not getting any sort of briefings from the Department of Justice about that ongoing investigation.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify.

Let's do the week ahead. On Monday, the President will attend meetings here at the White House.

On Tuesday, as I mentioned, the President will convene his National Security Council over at the Treasury Department. That afternoon, on Tuesday afternoon, the President will deliver remarks at the first ever United State of Women Summit to mark the progress made by and for women and girls domestically and internationally over the course of this administration and to discuss solutions to the challenges that they continue to face. That evening the President will host a picnic for members of Congress at the White House. Senator Perdue's attendance is still TBD. (Laughter.) But his invitation remains. (Laughter.)

On Wednesday, the President will travel to Green Bay, Wisconsin for a Hillary For America campaign event. Additional details on the President's travel to Wisconsin will be made available in the coming days.

On Thursday, the President will attend meetings here at the White House.

And as we announced yesterday, on Friday, the President and the First Family will travel to Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico and Yosemite National Park in California. Additional details about their travel to New Mexico and California will be made available early next week. The President and the First Family will return to Washington on Sunday evening.

Q Is that a graduation present? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Actually, it's an opportunity for the President and the First Family to mark the centennial of our national park system. So I suspect they'll have some fun. But also it's an opportunity to symbolically acknowledge the important role that the U.S. government has in protecting some of the most beautiful vistas and territory in the country. So the President and the First Lady are very much looking forward to the trip.

Thanks, everybody. Have a great weekend.

END

2:12 P.M. EDT

