

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 2/10/15

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you all. I don't have any announcements to make at the start here, so, Julie, do you want to get us started with questions?

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to ask a couple of questions about Kayla Mueller. Is there anything that you can tell us specifically about what kind of evidence her family and the administration received over the weekend from the Islamic State, and what you know about when and how she died?

MR. EARNEST: Julie, let me begin by restating something that the President indicated in the written statement that we issued earlier today, which is simply that the thoughts and prayers of everybody who works here at the White House are with the Mueller family at this time. That includes, of course, Kayla's parents, Carl and Marsha Mueller. It includes her brother Eric and his family, and all those who worked with Kayla in her all too short life.

She is somebody who dedicated her life to serving others, and not just serving other people, but serving those who were in crisis situations, who faced dire circumstances, and were relying on the generosity and kindness of fellow human beings to try to meet their needs. And Kayla was a young woman who was willing to put herself in harm's way to try to offer that relief. She saw this as a way to honor the God that she worshiped.

And I will indicate that I was personally moved by her comments that she saw God in the eyes of people who were dealing with terrible crises. That is a particularly profound, wise statement from such a young woman, but I think it does go to the character and generosity of spirit that she embodied.

Over the weekend, Kayla's parents received a private message from her ISIL captors with additional information about her death. That information was shared with the intelligence community. They conducted a review and an analysis, and after that analysis

was completed, they concluded that Kayla has, in fact, died. And the information that they reviewed did not allow them to arrive at a conclusion about her precise cause of death, but it did allow them to conclude that she had, in fact, died.

Q Was there any information they were able to glean about when she died?

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question. I do not believe that they were able to arrive at any conclusion about the timing, the precise timing of her death.

Q Do you know if they were able to rule out whether she was killed in the Jordanian airstrike on Friday, which is what the Islamic State has claimed?

MR. EARNEST: I have seen those claims. Again, the intelligence community did not have a specific assessment about the cause of death. There are some things, however, that I can share with you about this airstrike that I know that ISIL has referenced. And this is something that military officials have indicated as well. The airstrike that was carried out by the Royal Jordanian Air Force on February 6th was against an ISIL weapons compound that group maintained near al-Raqqah, Syria.

This was a facility that had been struck on previous occasions, and it's not unusual for targets like this to be hit more than once. In previous strikes, this facility had been damaged, but like I said, it's not unusual for strikes like this to be carried out once again.

The information that we have is that -- and again, we have this information because this airstrike was coordinated with the United States military -- and the information that we have is that there is no evidence of civilians in the target area prior to the coalition strike taking place. And that certainly would call into question that claims that are made by ISIL. What is not possible to call into question is that ISIL, regardless of her cause of death, is responsible for it. This, after all, is the organization that was holding her against her will. That means they are responsible for her safety and her well-being, and they are, therefore, responsible for her death.

Q The President has held up the counterterrorism campaign in Yemen as a model for what he's trying to do with the Islamic State. And today, U.S. officials have said that they are fully closing the embassy there. Can you really, realistically hold that up now as the model for what you're trying to do in Yemen, given the problems that have been happening with the government there, with rebels taking over the capital, and now having to close the American embassy?

MR. EARNEST: Julie, at this point, I don't have an update on the status of the embassy. We have indicated for a number of weeks now that we have been closely monitoring the security situation on the ground in Sana'a and throughout Yemen with an eye toward taking the necessary steps to protect the safety and security of American personnel who are in Yemen.

In recent weeks, there have been some personnel that have been drawn down from the facility in Sana'a because of concerns about their safety and security. But for a status update about the facility itself, I'd refer you to the State Department. If there is an

announcement to make about a change in that facility's status, it will come from the State Department.

But the President has indicated that the counterterrorism strategy that we have successfully pursued in Yemen is consistent with the kind of strategy that we are pursuing against ISIL. And the reason for that is that it's consistent with our broader national security interests. What we've done in Yemen is sought to work with local officials in Yemen. We have sought to support ground forces in Yemen who can take the fight to the extremists in their own country. And we have backed up those ground forces with intelligence and with airstrike capabilities that have succeeded in applying significant pressure to extremists that are operating in that country and curtail their ability to strike American targets.

This is a threat that we remain very vigilant about. This is a dangerous organization that's operating in Yemen, and we continue to be very focused on taking the steps that are necessary to mitigate that threat.

But the point that the President has made on previous occasions, and one that you've heard me talk about a little bit, too, is that that is consistent with the kind of strategy that we're employing against ISIL; that this administration is working closely with the Iraqi government to build up the capacity of local forces in Iraq to take the fight on the ground to ISIL. They are being backed by coalition military airpower and with intelligence capabilities and with even some training capability to maximize their effectiveness. And they have succeeded in blunting the advance of ISIL and even rolling back some of the progress that they've made.

There is an analogous strategy in place in Syria. There is, of course, no central government with whom we are coordinating in Syria. So it means that we have to draw on different resources to coordinate with ground fighters in Syria. So you've seen this administration try to work with the moderate Syrian opposition and some of our partners in the region to train and equip those fighters so that they can take the fight on the ground against ISIL in their own country. And they will be backed by coalition aircraft as well.

And in the example of Kobani, a border town that had previously been seized by ISIL, that local fighters -- in this case, Peshmerga Kurdish fighters -- have succeeded with the backing of coalition airstrikes in driving ISIL out of that town. That is one isolated example, but is an indication that this strategy that the President has pursued can work.

Jeff.

Q Josh, can you give us an update on the President's plans for seeking authorization of force against ISIL with Congress?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a timing update for you, Jeff. As you'll recall, even the day after the midterm elections back in November, the President convened a news conference in which somebody in this room asked the President about an authorization to use military force. And at that point, he indicated very clearly that he would like Congress to act in bipartisan fashion to pass an authorization to use military force.

The President at that time and has been clear ever since that he wanted Congress to take that action not because he believes it's legally necessary -- the President and his lawyers have concluded that he already has the authority that he needs to order military action against ISIL -- but he does believe it would be a powerful symbol for the Congress to send to the American people, to our allies, and even to our enemies, that the United States of America is united behind this strategy that the President has laid out to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And we are hopeful that Congress will act on an authorization to use military force relatively soon.

I should say that in the intervening period since the President first discussed this back in November, and even before the President made this announcement back in November, administration officials had been engaged in conversations with Democrats and Republicans in both the House and the Senate to try to arrive at language that could be supported by Democrats and Republicans in the House and the Senate. The President does believe that this message is even more powerful if it has bipartisan support.

And so certainly in recent days we've stepped up our engagement with Democrats and Republicans on the Hill to try to finalize language that could be submitted by the administration to Congress. And we're hopeful that we can provide that information relatively soon -- that language relatively soon. And hopefully there will not be a significant delay in Congress acting on that legislative language.

Q I believe you said last week that the language would be coming this week. And certainly others said that it would be arriving by Wednesday. Is that no longer the case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, relatively soon would include any of the days that are remaining in this week. (Laughter.)

Q It could also be the following week or the week thereafter. I mean, can you just give us sort of a time window for when we should expect this to happen, and whether it's been delayed or not?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any delay. This is something that has been part of a continuous effort here on the part of the administration. There have been senior NSC -- National Security Council officials involved, certainly members of the Counsel's Office who have been involved in these discussions. There have also been other senior members of the President's national security team who participated in these discussions -- individuals that -- officials at the Department of Defense and Department of State and other places.

So this is a broad effort. There are a number of conversations that have taken place. And I think the fact that some of these details have been leaked by congressional sources I think is an indication of the large number of conversations that are ongoing between administration officials and officials in Congress. But I don't have a more detailed timing estimate to offer you other than relatively soon, and acknowledge that that could include any of the days that are remaining in this week.

Q All right. And on a separate issue, Newsweek Magazine's Twitter account has been hacked, and the hacker has issued a threat against the President and his family. How concerned are you about that hacking and how seriously are you taking that threat?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any response to the claims that are made by these hackers. I can tell you that we've seen a number of high-profile incidents in recent months where media organizations and other important institutions have been compromised in some way, or at least their computer systems have been compromised in some way.

This particular intrusion is one that is already being investigated by the FBI, so I would refer to them for specific questions on that matter. But I can tell you as a general matter, that it's a good reminder of how important it is for Congress to act on the cybersecurity legislation that the President put forward just last month; that there are some common-sense things that we can do to better protect the American people and their data, and better respond to these incidents when they occur.

Jim.

Q Getting back to the AUMF, though, it is fair to say that the President wants this to be tailored to the war against ISIS -- is that right?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I don't want to get into the contents of the legislative language that will be produced by this ongoing process. But it is fair for you and your viewers to assume that the reason the President is seeking this right-sized AUMF -- I believe is the way that he has previously described it -- is because of his desire to see Congress act in support, or at least demonstrate their support for the strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q And will ISIS be defeated while the President is in office?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, I think we've been pretty clear, and the President has been pretty clear about the fact that what we're looking at here is a longer-term challenge. And the President has been pretty forthright about that. And there are a couple of reasons for that. And I think the most important reason for that is that ultimately this is not a situation where it's the United States alone that's at war against ISIL, that this is a broader effort that involves the entire international community, and that is focused on ensuring that there are local capabilities that are built up to take the fight to ISIL on the ground.

The President does not believe it is any longer in our national security interests for us to put a large deployment of American military personnel on the ground in a combat role in Iraq and in Syria, that what we need to do is we need to build up --

Q Who is advocating that? We hear that from the administration that this large deployment of ground forces in Iraq or in Syria to go after ISIS. Who is recommending that?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen a number of people who imagine themselves sitting in that office in 2017 who have advocated at least keeping on the table sending a large number of combat troops to Iraq and Syria. And they're certainly welcome to make that case. That is not a view that the President believes is in the best interest of the United States.

Q And can I ask you about an interview that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad did with the BBC -- and perhaps you've seen this and taken note of this. But during that interview, Assad says that communications have been occurring between the United States and Syria through third parties, such as Iraq, when it comes to the telegraphing or communicating about airstrikes that might be taking place in Syria, so as to avoid any potential confrontations between the U.S. and Syria. Is that going on?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, I can tell you that -- and we have said this from the very first day that airstrikes commenced against ISIL targets in Syria -- that the United States is not coordinating our actions with the Syrian government, and we're not going to.

The simple fact of the matter is, prior to initiating strikes in Syria, we did inform the Syrian regime through the Ambassador to the United Nations, and through our Ambassador to the United Nations to the Permanent Representative of the Syrian people to the United Nations. So we made clear that we were planning to begin military action against ISIL targets in Syria, but what was made clear in that communication was that it was the responsibility of the Syrian government to, to put it bluntly, stay out of the way.

Q And that occurred prior to the airstrikes beginning?

MR. EARNEST: That is correct, earlier this fall.

Q And those kind of communications have not happened since -- is that what you're saying?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm suggesting is that to the extent that that can be counted as coordination, there has been no coordination as it relates to the specific details of our military operations in Syria.

Q Let me ask you one final thing. In that interview with Vox -- Vox -- that the President had and that was put out yesterday, there was one comment that raised some eyebrows that I just want to ask you about -- I'm sure you're aware of it and you may have a response to it -- but the President said at one point, "My first job is to protect the American people. It is entirely legitimate for the American people to be deeply concerned when you've got a bunch of violent, vicious zealots who behead people, or randomly shoot a bunch of folks in a deli in Paris." Just to be clear, though, that shooting at the deli in Paris was not random, correct? Did the President misspeak there?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, I believe the point that the President was trying to make is that these individuals were not specifically targeted. These were individuals who happened to randomly be in this deli and were shot while they were there. And that is --

Q They were randomly there, but the people who randomly shot them --

MR. EARNEST: So if you want to question the President's placement of the adverb in the sentence, the adverb in this case being "randomly," you can. But that's the point the President was trying to make.

Q Okay. I just wanted to go back and check on that.

MR. EARNEST: It's all good.

Richard.

Q Thank you, Josh. I understand you've been moved by Kayla's involvement. But what do you say to Americans and Westerners who decide to go on the ground, even for humanitarian reasons, go on the ground there? And doesn't it -- so what do you tell them? And does it complicate the U.S. and the coalition operations when they are all over the place? They might be kidnapped, or not, and then caught in situations like we saw with Kayla.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Richard, the State Department has given very specific guidance to American citizens that they should not travel to Syria. And that is guidance that they have issued and we urge people to take it very seriously. Certainly that's what we would recommend that they do. At the same time, that in no way justifies the kind of hostage-taking activities that we see ISIL engaged in. And the President has been very clear that he will use significant resources of the United States government, and commit significant resources of the United States government to securing the safe return of American citizens who are being held hostage by ISIL.

Q You are not going to try to stop them from going there, or find ways to seriously discourage them from going over?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Richard, the very clear guidance has been shared by the State Department to American citizens and we urge them to heed that advice.

Jon.

Q Back to the President's interview with Vox, he was asked directly if he believes the media overstates the level of alarm that people should have about terrorism, and he answered, absolutely. Now, this interview I guess was done a couple of weeks ago, clearly before the latest news about Kayla Mueller. Does the President still believe that the threat of terrorism is overstated?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, I think what's true is that the threat from terror that is faced by the American people in the United States is much different than it has been before; that the kind of terror act that we saw that was carried out on September 1st, 2001, was carried out by an organization that had operated for quite some time with impunity in the region between Afghanistan and Pakistan; that they had had the time and the space to plan and carry out this terribly tragic conspiracy to wreak havoc in the lives of thousands if not millions of Americans.

Because of actions that had been taken by the previous administration and by this administration, terrorist organizations no longer have that same capacity. And that means that the risk that is facing the American people is different. Now, the President and his team continue to be vigilant because there are dangerous organizations that continue to exist and to operate. We were talking just earlier about Yemen -- that the al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is an organization that operates in Yemen and is a dangerous organization. This is probably the most dangerous of the al Qaeda affiliates. And we take very seriously the threat that they pose and there are any number of steps that this administration takes on a daily basis to protect the American people.

But what people should be mindful of is that the terror risk that faces the American people is much different than it used to be.

Q But so he said -- and let me just read the second part of the question. He was asked if the media overstates the level of alarm people should have about terrorism as opposed to longer-term problems of climate change and epidemic disease. He says, absolutely. So let me just, to clarify, is the President saying -- as he seems to be implying here -- that the threat of climate change is greater than the threat of terrorism?

MR. EARNEST: I think, Jon, the point that the President is making is that there are many more people on an annual basis who have to confront the impact, the direct impact on their lives of climate change or on the spread of a disease, than on terrorism.

Q So the answer is yes, the President thinks that climate change is a greater threat than terrorism?

MR. EARNEST: I think the point that the President is making is that when you're talking about the direct daily impact of these kinds of challenges on the daily lives of Americans, particularly Americans living in this country, that that direct impact is more -- that more people are directly affected by those things than by terrorism.

Q So climate change is more of a clear and present danger to the United States than terrorism?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think even the Department of Defense has spoken to the significant threat that climate change poses to our national security interests -- principally because of the impact that it can have on countries with less well-developed infrastructure than we have.

Q I'm not asking if it's a significant threat; I'm asking if it's a greater threat.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I wouldn't have a whole lot more to say about what the President has said in that interview.

Q Well, back to the question Jim was asking about -- his description of the shooting at the Kosher deli in Paris as being a bunch of -- randomly shoot a bunch of folks in a deli in Paris -- I mean, this was not a random shooting of a bunch of folks in a deli in Paris. This

was an attack on a Kosher deli. Does the President have any doubt that those terrorists attacked that deli because there would be Jews in that deli?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, it is clear from the terrorists and some of the writings that they put out afterwards what their motivation was. The adverb that the President chose was used to indicate that the individuals who were killed in that terrible, tragic incident were killed not because of who they were but because of where they randomly happened to be.

Q They weren't killed because they were in a Jewish deli, though? They were in a Kosher deli.

MR. EARNEST: Jon, these individuals were not targeted by name. This is the point.

Q Not by name, but by religion -- were they not?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, there were people other than just Jews who were in that deli.

Q Does he have any doubt that that deli was attacked because it was a Kosher deli? This is not any random deli. This was a Kosher deli.

MR. EARNEST: No, Jon. No, Jon. I answered the question once. No.

Ed.

Q So then why didn't the President acknowledge that? If he knows that and it's obvious, why didn't he say that?

MR. EARNEST: The President has acknowledge that on many occasions when he has had the opportunity to speak about this incident.

Q But he didn't there. And in terms of the media hype, do you think a Jordanian pilot being burned alive is just the media hyping something?

MR. EARNEST: Ed, we've talked on a number of occasions and certainly I've had the opportunity, as recently as at the end of last week, to talk about how the United States of America stands shoulder to shoulder with our partners in Jordan as they confront the terrible tragedy of seeing one of their military pilots, who is serving and defending their country, be killed in such a brutal, inhumane way. I do think it exposes the bankrupt ideology of ISIL and I think it is a pretty clear illustration of how the international community has been galvanized to take on this threat -- a threat that the President has led the creation of this international coalition to confront, degrade and ultimately destroy.

Q But if it's a big threat that this international coalition is confronting, why did the President compare himself to a big city mayor fighting crime?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, I think what the President is talking about is he's talking about the necessity of assuming some leadership. And the President has stepped forward. Again, we've got 60 members of this broader coalition. Those people are -- those

countries are members of this coalition because of the leadership of this President. And the President has succeeded in leveraging the influence of the United States of America to build this coalition and even to get countries in the region to fly alongside American military air pilots as they're carrying out airstrikes against ISIL targets.

Q Right. But he wasn't talking about coalition. Back on the mayor -- he said, I'm sort of like a big-city mayor. Is that the President trying to downplay the threat?

MR. EARNEST: Ed, the President devotes significant periods of his day, on a regular basis, to confronting the threat that is posed by ISIL, by al Qaeda affiliates and by other organizations around the globe that seek to do harm to the American people.

The point that the President made, and I will restate, is that the President certainly has a responsibility to take these threats seriously, and there are significant resources that are dedicated to protecting the American people. But when it comes to the American people's level of concern and the amount of risk that they face, it is clearly different than the kind of risk that the American people faced in the days before 9/11.

Q In terms of that risk, at the prayer breakfast last week -- we didn't get a chance to ask you about this -- what did he mean when he talked about these horrible deeds by Christians back in the Crusades, hundreds of years ago? Was he trying to make a moral equivalence between misdeeds by Christians and radical Islam and what's happening today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, I would encourage you to take a careful look at the President's remarks -- and I'm not suggesting that you haven't, I'm just suggesting that those who are interested in this should take a careful look at the President's remarks. And I think what is unquestionably true is that throughout history we have seen individuals perpetrate terrible acts of violence in the name of religion. And regardless of what religion you are trying to use to justify your terrible act of violence, it's the responsibility of people with faith, of all faiths, to step forward and say that it's wrong.

Q When you put all these statements together, doesn't it sound like he's trying to say, well, this has been going on for a long time; I'm like a mayor in dealing with this kind of thing, that terrorism is just not a big deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, I don't think the President's record of fighting terrorism reflects that at all.

Q Okay. Last thing on ISIS -- overnight, there was a top recruiter for ISIS in Afghanistan killed, we're told, by an American drone strike. Back in January, "60 Minutes" asked General John Campbell about ISIS and whether it might spread -- he's the Commander in Afghanistan -- and he said, "This is not Iraq. I don't see ISIS coming into Afghanistan like they did into Iraq." How could he have been so wrong if one month later you now have somebody who's let out of Gitmo, who's now a commander for ISIS in Afghanistan? Doesn't that suggest the contrary to what General Campbell said? Within a month, ISIS has spread to Afghanistan.

MR. EARNEST: Ed, the analysis that I've seen of this particular scenario is that this one individual claiming ties to ISIS says much more about the divisiveness and the disintegration of, or at least some dissension within the ranks of the Taliban, than it really does say about the spread of ISIS.

Q So ISIS is not in Afghanistan?

MR. EARNEST: What I think it does indicate is the commitment of the United States, the Commander-in-Chief, and our military to take the steps that are necessary to protect American military personnel that are operating in Afghanistan right now.

Tamara.

Q Back to Kayla Mueller. Her family had put together a video soliciting donations from wealthy people to help pay a ransom. What does the administration make of that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Tamara, our policy on this has been really clear.

Q Can you say a little bit more than that? I think that the family felt like they were willing to face possible legal consequences from the United States to try to save their daughter.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Tamara, as difficult as it is to imagine being in the situation that was faced by the Muellers, it certainly is not surprising that they were willing to do whatever they thought they could to try to secure the safe release of their daughter. And that is why our thoughts and prayers at this moment and in the days and weeks ahead will continue to be with the Mueller family.

Q And the U.S. policy remains that that is not okay?

MR. EARNEST: That is consistent with the policy that has been pursued by previous administrations. It is the policy of this administration. And the reason for that is quite simply that ISIL relies on hostage-taking and ransom-paying as a source of funding their operations. And one of the goals and one of the elements of the strategy that we have pursued against ISIL is to shut off sources of funding.

The other impact of paying ransom to secure the release of American hostages is it only makes Americans an even greater target than they already are. And if ISIL knows that they can financially benefit from taking American hostages, then it makes those American hostages -- or Americans around the world -- it puts them in an even more vulnerable position because in the eyes of ISIL they become even more valuable.

Q A former hostage that one of my colleagues has interviewed says that there's a feeling that the U.S. policy is putting Americans in danger; that people who were with Mueller who are from European countries were freed probably because of ransoms, and that she was not -- the idea being that this policy, to use a crude term, is a death sentence for some Americans being held captive.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Tamara, I think there are a couple of things that I would say about that. The first is the President has demonstrated a willingness to commit significant American resources to securing the safe return of American hostages.

You'll recall that over the summer the President actually ordered a military raid involving a large number of U.S. personnel into Syria to try to secure the release of Americans who were being held. That is an indication that the President takes this very seriously and, again, is willing to commit significant resources to trying to secure their safe return.

I also think that the reasoning behind the policy that this administration and previous administrations have followed when it comes to ransom-paying is not difficult to explain - that it doesn't require a significant cognitive leap to conclude that by refusing to pay ransom, it sends a clear signal to potential hostage-takers that they will not be able to financially benefit from taking Americans hostage. And if we were to send the opposite signal, by paying them ransom, it would only increase the danger that is faced by -- or, I guess, it would only increase the likelihood that Americans would be targeted in this way.

Annie.

Q I had a question about the fast track authority. I'm wondering if you can give us a sense for whether that is something that we should expect to see going up to the Hill next week, and whether the President is going to be bringing up his support for that when he meets with the CBC later on this afternoon.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President is meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus here at the White House. I know that it's been a year or two since he's had the opportunity to meet specifically with just this group of members. The President is looking forward to the meeting. The President does have a wide range of issues that he wants to discuss with them. They certainly -- at the risk of speaking on their behalf, I know that they are very interested in talking to the President about some of the policies that he intends to pursue with his focus on middle-class economics that he discussed in the State of the Union address.

I know that a large -- that the vast majority of the members of that group, if not all of them, strongly supports the President's focus on middle-class economics. And there is an opportunity for the President to talk to them about how we can work together to advance some of those elements of his agenda.

The President does continue to believe that there should be some bipartisan common ground around Trade Promotion Authority; that the idea that we can make it easier for the President to negotiate an agreement that he clearly believes would be in the best interest of American workers and American middle-class families and American businesses is something that Congress should support. And so he's certainly going to be a part of making that case to Democrats and Republicans on the Hill. And it certainly is going to be the responsibility of members of the Republican leadership who share the

President's view of the benefit of some of these policies -- that they're going to have to spend some time making the case to their own members about why they should support Trade Promotion Authority as well.

Q And the timing of that, though, are you expecting something next week? We're hearing from the Hill that that's a possibility.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there are some members of Congress who are working on legislation, but you should contact their offices to get a better sense of the timing.

Andrew.

Q Regarding Ukraine, what is the White House position on the essential elements of any deal that's agreed between -- any multiparty deal? For example, would you consider changing the demarcation line as something that's acceptable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a good question. Let me just state generally that obviously the United States is closely engaged with our partners in Germany and France as they try to pursue a diplomatic solution to deescalate the conflict in Ukraine. I know that representatives from Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France are scheduled to meet in Europe later this week to discuss these ongoing diplomatic efforts. The United States, as the President indicated yesterday in his news conference with Chancellor Merkel, is strongly supportive of those efforts, and we're going to continue to be strongly supportive of those efforts.

The United States has also encouraged both sides of the Minsk Agreement to live up to the commitments that they made in the context of those talks. And we've been particularly disappointed by the fact that the Russians have failed on just about every measure to live up to the commitments that they made in those talks. They have refused to live up to the commitment that they made to withdraw all troops and weapons from eastern Ukraine. They have refused to live up to their commitment to allow effective international monitoring of the international border. They've refused to live up to their commitment to return control of Ukraine's side of that border to the government in Kyiv. They've refused to live up to their commitment to free all the hostages. And it's apparent from all of that activity that they've refused to live up to their commitment to work toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine.

So while we're supportive of continuing diplomatic conversations, what's most important is for both sides to come to the table ready to not just make commitments but live up to them.

Q How are we making sure that this isn't just a repeat of the Minsk Agreement and everybody goes away and does exactly the same as they did since the agreement was signed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think any impartial observer would acknowledge that the impact of the sanctions regime on the Russian economy means that the Russian regime has paid significant costs for their destabilizing activities in Ukraine. There is a clear financial

interest for the Russians to start living up to commitments that they've made to deescalate the situation in Ukraine. The reason for that is simply that the President has indicated that once Russia does begin to live up to those commitments, he's prepared to work with the international community to roll back some of the sanctions that have been so effective when it comes to imposing costs on the Russian regime.

So there's the story in the paper today about the central bank -- the governor* of the central bank of Russia that noted that the Russian ruble in recent months has -- the value of their currency has been cut in half. That, I guess, is just another indication of the substantial toll that the sanctions regime has taken on their economy. And so it means that there is a clear economic incentive for the Russians to start living up to their diplomatic commitments and deescalating the conflict in Ukraine.

Q Another question on the economic issue. How do you know that the sanctions have been effective? How do you decouple this from, for example, a falling oil price?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly not an economic analyst, so there may be a more authoritative source that you can consult. But based on my own observation, we do know that, for example, the value of the Russian currency has been cut in half in recent months. The decline in their currency started before we saw this precipitous decline in energy prices.

We've seen similar impact related to projections about economic growth in Russia. They started out positive. And after the imposition of sanctions, we saw that most observers downgraded those projections and they actually put them into the negative territory.

We've also seen a lot of capital flight out of Russia. And I think that reflects the broader international community's concern about the way in which Russia is isolated. So there is no question that the fall in energy prices has not been good for an economy that is overly reliant on energy exports. But there's no doubt that some of the weakness that we've seen in the Russian economy is directly attributable to the broad, international sanctions regime that this administration has worked in painstaking fashion with our allies in Europe to implement.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Josh. We know that the economic impact has been felt in Russia, but what we haven't seen is any accompanying impact in terms of the aggression. And obviously that's why critics are arguing -- part of the reason they're arguing for the arming. Given that fact, given that there is a plan out there by Russia and France, how much is the clock ticking? Should we expect a decision from the President quickly?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, I think the President had the opportunity to speak about this in the context of his news conference with Chancellor Merkel yesterday. I think the President was pretty clear that this diplomatic opening that France and Germany is pursuing alongside the Ukrainians at the negotiating table with the Russians is one that's

worth pursuing. Ultimately, this is a conflict that will be resolved diplomatically; that any sort of military support that could be provided by the United States doesn't change our calculation that diplomatic negotiations will be required to end this conflict.

So that's what the international community is focused on. That's certainly what the President is focused on at this point. He had the opportunity --

Q So you're not suggesting that the outcome of whether or not there is an agreement reached does not influence his decision? Or are you?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess what I'm saying is that certainly the decision about offering additional military assistance to the Ukrainian military will be affected by how seriously Russia participates in these negotiations and how committed they are to actually living up to their end of the bargain. So we'll evaluate that moving forward.

Q -- within a short timeline? Is that the expectation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, the President I think has been clear that this diplomatic opening is one that is worth pursuing, because no matter what happens, this is going to be resolved diplomatically. And the addition of additional military assistance to the Ukrainian military only increases the likelihood of more widespread violence, and that's exactly the thing we're trying to avoid here.

Q Yesterday also at that news conference, the President made what some people are analyzing as sort of a direct hit at Bibi Netanyahu when he said to Chancellor Merkel, much to her apparent maybe amusement but certainly nods that she would not have done this to him, referencing of course the decision to come and speak before Congress. Today, Netanyahu tweeted, and in English, which isn't typical for him and in time for morning East Coast consumption, "I'm determined to speak before Congress to stop Iran." Do you consider that a response to what the President said yesterday and is there a back-and-forth going on between the President and Bebe Netanyahu?

MR. EARNEST: If there is, I'm certainly not going to continue it from here. (Laughter.)

Q Haaretz wrote in an editorial that they see that this has created a deepening rift between Israel and the Americans. Would you respond to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I would say in response to that is that this administration has demonstrated over this President's six years in office an unwavering commitment to the national security of Israel and of the citizens of Israel; that our ongoing security cooperation is -- to use a word that was chosen by Prime Minister Netanyahu himself -- unprecedented. And there are a variety of ways in which to illustrate that. The best one is last summer when Israel citizens were facing a barrage of rockets fired by extremists located principally in Gaza; that there was a significant infusion of American resources into the Iron Dome program. The President received a request from the Israeli government to help them replenish their stockpile of Iron Dome rockets. The President

worked closely with the Congress to expedite that request and that is an indication that this President is willing and has demonstrated a willingness to act decisively to protect the national security of our allies in Israel.

Now, the President does that because he believes it's in the national security interest of the United States for us to continue to have a strong relationship with our allies in Israel. And the President is determined to make sure that party politics don't somehow trump how critically important this relationship is; that for generations American and Israeli political leaders have succeeded in putting aside their partisan affiliation to focus on the best interests and the best national security interests of the citizens of their country.

And that is why the President has said that he's not going to meet with the Prime Minister when he is in Washington in early March. His visit comes just a couple of weeks before the Prime Minister is on the ballot and the President does not want to be in a position of even appearing to interfere with the outcome of an Israeli election. And the reason for that is that the relationship between the United States and Israel and certainly between leaders in Israel and leaders in the United States shouldn't just be reduced to the relationship between political parties. It's actually a relationship between two allies.

Q Would you disagree with the characterization in that editorial that there is a deepening rift?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I would -- I didn't see their whole editorial so I don't that I would characterize it as a disagreement. I think I would just restate something that is evident from the policy decisions that this President has made, which is that this administration continues to be committed to coordinating closely with our national security counterparts in Israel to protect the security of the nation and the people of Israel. The President is determined to ensure that that coordination continues to be as, Prime Minister Netanyahu himself described it -- unprecedented.

Q And ** one thing on Kayla Mueller. Has the President made or received any calls since confirming her death, particularly from coalition leaders? And does this --

MR. EARNEST: You mean calls to other countries?

Q Yes, to leaders of other countries **. And does this at all change the strategy or calculus in this U.S.-led coalition?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President did have the opportunity earlier today to telephone President Poroshenko in Ukraine. But they principally were focused on the conflict in Ukraine.

The President's strategy for degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL is one that continues -- that we continue to work closely with the members of this coalition to take the fight to ISIL. And that takes a variety of forms. It means continuing airstrikes in Syria and in Iraq. It means that the effort to train and equip the moderate Syrian opposition is something that continues. It means that we're going to continue to work

with countries in the region and around the world to try to shut off financing for ISIL's operations. We can do that in a variety of ways, including cracking down on the black market for oil and trying to shut off the revenue that ISIL derives from hostage-taking.

We're also working with leaders in the Muslim world to try to counter some of the radical messaging that we're seeing ISIL use. They are relying on social media to try to radicalize people around the globe and we're working in a coordinated fashion with leaders around the globe, including leaders in the Muslim world, to counter that radical message. And we certainly value the participation of all of our coalition partners in those efforts.

Colleen.

Q Thanks. What's the status of the White House's review of hostage policies? And how will the circumstances of Kayla Mueller's death inform that review?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Colleen, let me just make one piece of this that I do want to make clear is that the White House has been engaged in an interagency review of the way in which the federal government interacts with families that find themselves in this terrible, virtually unthinkable position. That review does not include a reconsideration of our policy not to pay ransom, but it does cover the way in which government resources are integrated and coordinated to try to meet the needs of individual families. And what we have found is that individual families oftentimes, because there is a broad interagency effort underway to try to secure the release of their loved ones, that oftentimes that means that these families are hearing from a large number of federal officials. So one day they'll be getting phone calls from the FBI, another day they'll be getting phone calls from someone in the military, another days it's somebody from the White House. In some situations, it's somebody from the State Department. And we want to make sure that all those communications are carefully integrated so that families can have confidence that all elements of the federal government are coordinating their efforts and providing as much information as possible to the families.

The hope is that we'll be able to complete this review some time later this spring.

Q And on one other subject. The office of Brazil's President Rousseff says that she has agreed to come to Washington for a state visit in September. Is there anything that you can tell us about that?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of that but I'll check with my colleagues at the National Security Council who may be looking more closely at September's schedule than I was this morning.

Justin.

Q I wanted to ask about something from David Axelrod's book. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Did you make it through all 520 pages of that thing?

Q No, but Zeke Miller did. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Congratulations to him for that.

Q Yes. So he pulled out a passage where David Axelrod essentially says that the President believed all the way back in 2008 that gay marriage should be a right but continued to support civil unions essentially because it was politically advantageous. And so I'm wondering, I mean, is David Axelrod's recollection here correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I can tell you is that I have not had an opportunity to read all 520 pages of Mr. Axelrod's book. It does come highly recommended so hopefully I'll get a chance to do so. The firsthand account that he provides in the context of the book is not one that I would disagree with or quibble with. He obviously is sharing his views as he remembers them and sometimes his perspective is informed by his up-close, front row seat to history. And that's I guess one of the reasons that I'm interested in reading the book.

As it relates to the President's views on gay marriage, we spend a lot of time talking about the President's evolution on these issues. I think it's consistent with the kind of evolution that people all across the country have gone -- as it relates to their views on this topic -- and, frankly, I don't think I have a whole lot more to contribute to that.

Q Well, I mean, that's really the question, right? It's if the President did undergo an evolution, which has been what he's said and what you've said, or whether he sort of intentionally misrepresented his position because he didn't think that the country had quite caught up to it yet. Republicans are kind of I think seizing on the line that we've heard from the President time and time again over the last year -- don't be cynical, choose hope instead of cynicism -- to say why doesn't the President practice what he preaches here. So isn't it important for you guys to clarify this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, I think that you can just take a look at the President's comments and actions to indicate that the President has time and again chosen hope. In particular, as it just relates to this specific issue, when the President made his first public comments indicating his support for gay couples to marry that that was viewed as a pretty controversial political stance, that there were all kinds of questions many people in this room that sort of wondered whether or not the President would pay a political price for just months before a national election indicating that he was willing to support gays who wanted to marry.

I think that is an indication that the President was not the first person to articulate this position but certainly was at the beginning of a broader change that we saw all across the country. And I think that reflects the kind of record that this President has amassed while in office when it comes to fighting for justice for all Americans including GLBT Americans -- that from ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell to writing an executive order banning federal contractors from discriminating against their employees regardless of who they love or for who they love, or for speaking out so boldly in support of gay marriage, that the President has time and again been somebody who's been fighting for justice and equality. And that I think will be part of one of the most important legacies of this presidency.

Q Sure. But there's no cynicism and essentially lying about one of the biggest kind of civil rights issues that I think is confronting the nation right now?

MR. EARNEST: Justin, I think the President's record on these issues speaks to this even better than I possibly could.

Q Sorry, one last thing on the AUMF. Back when the Menendez bill was kind of working its way through Congress last fall, you guys made it pretty clear that you didn't want any restrictions on boots on the ground, even though the President has repeatedly said that that's not his intention, he didn't want any sort of handcuffing on that matter. As we're getting close and relative -- the next few days of seeing that legislation, do you guys still feel that there shouldn't be any restrictions on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, once we have had an opportunity to put forward the legislative language that, again, will reflect the painstaking effort to coordinate with Democrats and Republicans in both the House and the Senate on this, we'll have an opportunity to discuss why certain things are included or why other phrases may not be included.

That said, I'm not sure that we have waded in with a lot of detail about what we would like to see or what we would not like to see in an eventual authorization to use military force; that we have acknowledge that that would have to be the product of extensive consultation between Democrats and Republicans and members of the Senate, the House, and the administration. So we'll have an opportunity to sort of evaluate what eventually results from this process.

Mark.

Q Josh, can you now say there are no other Americans held by ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Sadly, Mark, I cannot say that. There is at least one other hostage that is held in the region. But you asked me specifically about ISIL. What I can tell you is that we are aware -- we have avoided discussing the individual cases of Americans who are being held hostage, but we are aware of other American hostages being held in the region.

Q Who is the other American held by?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again I'm not going to get into the specific discussions of the cases of individuals who are being held hostage -- principally because we don't believe it's in their best interests for me to discuss them publicly. But I know there have been public reports of at least one other hostage -- American hostage that's being held in Syria.

Q One or more? You said one and then you said plural.

MR. EARNEST: I think what I've said is at least one -- the public reports of at least one.

Q Earlier you mentioned that the war on ISIL is a long-term challenge. Can you say if the President is satisfied with the pace of the war on ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Mark, I think it is fair for you to assume that as we continue to see bloodshed in this region of the world that is carried out by ISIL that the President is impatient about it. There is no doubt. That said, he acknowledges that this is something that's going to take time and it's certainly going to demand patience from the international community and from the American people as we confront this challenge.

But it's trying. Particularly on a day like today, when we're learning of the death of this American hostage. So the President is constantly pushing his team to do more, and to do it faster. But he does that with the recognition that this is a longer-term endeavor that we're confronting here.

Laura.

Q Thank you, Josh. Some organizations here in Washington, like Reporters Without Borders, did a press conference two days ago regarding an American hostage. They gave us the name. The family was speaking. What's your reaction to that? Because you're saying that you don't want us to know, but some families now want us to know.

MR. EARNEST: Laura, I don't think that I said that I didn't want you to know. I think what I tried to articulate is that it is the conclusion of our national security professionals here that it is not beneficial to their case for me to highlight the circumstances of individual citizens.

So I know that there are families, again, who are in this unthinkable tragic situation who have different strategies for talking about this publicly. And I certainly -- because of the sympathy that I feel for them, and because of how difficult it must be to deal with this situation, I'm not going to stand up here and second-guess or judge the way that individual families are talking about this publicly, or not talking about it publicly.

But what I will say is that our national security professionals have concluded that it's not helpful for me in this context to be discussing the cases or even the names of individuals who are being held against their will in that region of the world.

Q And with emotion created all over the world with the death of Kayla, do you think it's a turning point for America in its fight against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Laura, I think the American people understand what's at stake. And I do think that the American people understand why the President has worked hard and lent the credibility of the United States of America to the effort to build this broader international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. They understand why the President has committed military air power to taking strikes against ISIL targets in Iraq and in Syria.

I think they also understand why the President has declined to commit ground troops in a combat role -- American ground troops in a combat role to Iraq and in Syria; that they recognize the President is trying to appropriately calibrate our national security interests along with the broader need of the international community to speak up, speak out, and to take action against extremists like this.

So this is a complicated situation, but I think the American people understand what we face. I think they have an understanding of the President's strategy. And this is, again, a longer-term endeavor that we are confronted with here. But the President is committed to making sure that the tactics that we employ and the strategy that we employ against ISIL reflect the national security equities that we have at stake here.

Okay. Let me do a couple more. Alexis.

Q Two quick follow-ups. Can I just clarify, did the President speak to the Mueller family, or does he intend to speak to the Mueller family? And then the second follow-up to Mark's question, and Jim asked this question, too. It's been reported that the President's preference on the AUMF language is to produce a new legislative initiative that would sunset in 2018 -- in three years. So, in response to Mark's question and Jim's question, is that three years significant because the President believes that's how long it's going to take to defeat ISIL? Or does that timing represent some other thought?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Alexis, we'll be able to get into the language that's included in the AUMF legislation once it's been submitted and made public. It will reflect a consultation that has occurred with Democrats and Republicans on the Hill, and so I don't want to get ahead of that at this point. So I'm just not in a position to talk about any speculation about what sort of time frame may be included in that language.

You asked about something else, though.

Q The Mueller family.

MR. EARNEST: The Mueller family. The President did, on two occasions over the last several days, have the opportunity to call the Mueller family, specifically Kayla's parents. And the most recent conversation that the President had with her family was to offer his condolences on behalf of the American people for the death of their daughter.

Q And when was that?

MR. EARNEST: It was sometime in recent days. I don't have a specific day.

Q So there's been a gap of some days between the time that the administration understood her to be deceased and the time that the President put out a statement today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll just say that the administration did believe that it was appropriate for us to abide by the wishes of the family and allow them to make the first statement and to deliver the news that their daughter had been killed.

Steve, you had your hand up earlier. Did you have something? I'll give you the last one if you did.

Q Did you want to say something about the ruling on Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia? And has the administration brought this up to the Malaysian leader that the President played golf with in Hawaii? And where do things go from here in terms of consequences?

MR. EARNEST: I do have a statement that many of you may have received from my colleague, Bernadette Meehan.

The United States is deeply disappointed with Mr. Anwar's conviction, following a government appeal of the original verdict finding him not guilty. The decision to prosecute Mr. Anwar and the conduct of his trial have raised a number of serious concerns about rule of law and the fairness of the judicial system in Malaysia.

These concerns are compounded by the government's intent to expand its sedition law, which Prime Minister Najib had pledged to repeal, to prosecute government critics.

When National Security Advisor Susan Rice met with Malaysian opposition leaders last April, she reiterated the President's message that countries who uphold the human rights of all their citizens, regardless of their political affiliation, ethnicity, race, religion or sexual orientation, are ultimately more prosperous and more stable.

The United States and Malaysia have built a strong comprehensive partnership and we remain committed to expanding our cooperation on shared economic and security challenges affecting our countries interests in Asia and around the world.

In that context, we urge the government of Malaysia to apply the rule of law fairly, transparently, and apolitically, in order to promote confidence in Malaysia's democracy, judiciary, and economy.

Thanks, everybody.

END

1:46 P.M. EST