

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/16/2015

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/17/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9162015

September 16, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 16, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:26 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: All right. Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. Before we get to your questions, let me do a quick announcement.

President Obama, on November 9, 2015, will host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House. The President looks forward to discussing with the Prime Minister regional security issues, including implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to peacefully and verifiably prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and countering Tehran's destabilizing activities in the region. The President also looks forward to discussing Israel's relations with the Palestinians, the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the need for the genuine advancement of a two-state solution.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the United States is a deep demonstration of the deep and enduring bonds between the United States and Israel, as well as our unprecedented cooperation to further enhance Israel's security.

So that's November 9th.

Q Can we follow on that?

MR. EARNEST: Sure, Connie.

Q Does that coincide with Pollard's release from prison?

MR. EARNEST: You have to check with the Department of Justice for an update on his status.

Mark, want to get us started?

Q Please. Let's start with Syria and General Austin's pretty surprising admission that there are only four to five U.S.-trained Syrians in the fight against ISIL. Why is Senator Sessions not right in calling this program, the training program, "a total failure"?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, we've acknowledged for some time the significant challenges that we've encountered in training and equipping and sending to the battlefield moderate elements of the Syrian opposition. And the administration knew on the front end that this would be a quite difficult task, and it's proven to be even more difficult than we thought.

General Austin acknowledged the challenges that they were facing and acknowledged that the program would require some changes. Clearly those changes are warranted. For what sort of changes they believe will be most effective, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense that's implementing this specific plan.

But more broadly, the anti-ISIL coalition has been able to effectively coordinate with other local fighters on the ground. This includes Syrian Kurds, Syrian Arabs, Turkmen and other fighters inside of Syria that have succeeded in driving ISIL out of some important strategically held territory in Syria.

Clearly, we've got a whole lot more work to do. But much of that progress would not have been possible without the strong support of the anti-ISIL coalition, particularly in the form of airstrikes that have enhanced the performance of these local fighters on the battlefield.

Q But, Josh, you guys placed a fair amount of emphasis on this part of the strategy at the outset. Was that mistaken to put so much trust in the U.S. training Syrians? And is it -- I know you talk about changes that have to be made. Isn't it time to just to scrap that part of the strategy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, for how the program should be addressed to correct some of these problems, I'd direct you to the Department of Defense. They can sort of talk to you about the operational details of the specific programs.

I would point out that many of the most ardent critics of this administration, particularly when it comes to our Syria policy, have suggested that a much more significant and deeper investment in this training effort is what the administration should have pursued years ago. So it is true that we have found this to be a difficult challenge. But it is also true that many of our critics had proposed this specific option as essentially the cure-all for all of the policy challenges that we're facing in Syria right now. That is not something that this administration ever believed, but it is something that our critics will have to answer for.

Q Let me stick with Syria, and Secretary of State Kerry's discussion of having spoken to the Russians and the suggestion that there should -- the Russian proposal for military-to-military talks. Is the administration going to go ahead with that? Do you think that's a worthwhile avenue to pursue?

MR. EARNEST: At this point right now I don't have a specific announcement to make about any additional consultations with the Russians. What we have said for some time is that we would welcome constructive Russian support for the efforts of the anti-ISIL coalition in Iraq and in Syria. But at this point, I don't have anything new to announce.

Q Okay. Russia's U.N. ambassador said that they're ready to start airstrikes, and he doesn't see why America would object to that. Would we object to Russian airstrikes against ISIL targets?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the short answer is it depends. The fact is we want to make sure that -- a couple of things. The first is any efforts by Russia that are motivated -- that are geared toward doubling down on their support for the Assad regime would be counterproductive and destabilizing. And the reason for that is simply that the support for the Assad regime only has the effect of propping up a leader that has utterly lost the legitimacy to lead that country, and it only further divides the population and, in some ways, makes it more likely that we're driving some citizens in Syria directly into the arms of ISIL or other extremist groups that oppose the government.

So what we would welcome is an integrated, coordinated, constructive effort on the part of the Russians to support the 60-member coalition of nations that is working to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q One more briefly, if I may, about the Business Roundtable remarks the President had and his rather pointed remarks about all the doom and gloom talk he's hearing from Republican candidates and how they should maybe talking America down and America is winning now. First of all, are you really sure he's not going to watch the debate tonight? (Laughter.) And second, are you sure that maybe a certain one of those candidates isn't getting under his skin a little bit?

MR. EARNEST: I'm confident that the President won't watch the debate tonight. He will be interested to hear what happens, but I don't think that he'll be watching it in real-time.

And the comments that you heard from the President apply to a significant number of candidates in the Republican field. And this is part of politics, this is part of a political debate, and you've heard me say before that there is a lot of value in having a robust political debate in this country as we make decisions as a collection of citizens about which direction we believe that our country should move. The President, however, believes that that debate should be rooted in facts and an accurate assessment of the kind of tremendous advantages that our country has.

And I think the President would be the first to point out that those advantages are hard-won and those are advantages that can be frittered away if the next leader of the country doesn't appreciate the way that they contribute to the success of this country.

Q So America is winning now -- that's not a shot at Donald Trump?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is an effort to make -- offer the American people a clear, accurate assessment of precisely the advantages that our country enjoys, and to make sure that we're mindful of those advantages so that we don't end up in a situation where through a series of bad decisions we fritter away that advantage that's so critical the success of our country and our citizens.

Julia.

Q Thanks, Josh. Also at that Business Roundtable, the President was asked about Chinese cyber-hacking, and he said that the U.S. is preparing a number of measures that we'll indicate to China, this is something that will put significant strains on the U.S.-China relationship, and that the U.S. is prepared to take countervailing actions. Can you shed some light on this? What actions did he mean? Particularly, is he speaking about sanctions, or more? And do you also have a sense of timing of when we might see measures addressing this issue be rolled out, especially as it relates to the visit from President Xi?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julia, I think in this instance the President was intentionally nonspecific in making reference to countervailing actions. However, it is consistent with what we discussed in this room yesterday about how the United States has a series of tools that can now be used to counter the activities of those that are using cyberspace to try to gain an economic advantage or carry out acts of vandalism. And these are tools that are available to U.S. policymakers because of a policy decision that was made by the President of the United States.

And we have found that even having those kinds of economic sanctions available to the President and to the Secretary of the Treasury do have a deterrent effect on those who may be contemplating nefarious actions. We saw that that was true in confronting Iran, that one of the levers of influence the international community was able to exert on Iran was the prospect of additional and tougher economic sanctions.

So I think the point here is, is that there are a range of responses that are available. I think as the President said in the Roundtable discussion, hopefully it will not be necessary to use them.

Q Okay. And also, following up on something you said yesterday about the House bill to lift the ban on crude oil exports -- you said the White House does not support that bill because you think it is a decision that the Commerce Department should make. But does that mean that the President would veto that bill should it make it to his desk?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a veto threat to issue at this point, but clearly it's not a piece of legislation we support because this is essentially the domain of the Commerce Department.

Jim.

Q To follow on Mark's question, does the President believe he's made America great again?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess to put it another way, Jim, you might say that the President is quite proud of this country and he's certainly proud of the tremendous progress that the citizens of this country -- in part because of the policies put in place by this administration -- have had in coming back from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. We've got so much to show for all of our progress. But the President is mindful of the fact that the next President will enter into office at a point where those tremendous gains are reversible and that if there is not someone with a clear economic vision for the country that is rooted in fighting for the best interests of the middle class and advancing policies that will expand economic opportunity for middle-class families, that those gains could be reversed.

And given all of the hard time and hard work that the President has personally invested in those gains, given all of the hard work that the American people -- American workers and entrepreneurs -- have invested in those gains, the stakes in this election are high.

And again, the President believes that it's a worthy part of the political debate for us to discuss what kind of progress we've made so far, what advantages does the country and our citizens enjoy, and how can we capitalize on those advantages to ensure the long-term success of our country. And again, these are weighty decisions and they're certainly worthy of extensive debate and they will be worthy of consideration by the American people as they vote in the next election.

Q And last night, the Vice President, when speaking about Donald Trump's positions on immigration -- or his comments on immigration -- he called it "a sick message." And I know, when he was in Iowa, described some of this rhetoric as being "un-American." It does sound as though -- you know, you've sort of shied away from talking about Donald Trump here in the Briefing Room -- that the President and the Vice President are starting to comment on this GOP field more. And would it be unreasonable to suspect that the Vice President might do some of this following the debate as sort of a rebuttal to what we're going to hear tonight?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a preview of any future vice presidential remarks to share with you. You can check with his office about that. I think the President, when he was speaking in Iowa, went out of his way to make clear that he wasn't talking about just one candidate in the field. We've seen what I've described as an alarming number of Republican candidates demagoguing on this issue, in particular seeking to single out and target immigrants to this country. As the President said, it's not at all consistent with the kinds of values that have made our country great -- to borrow a phrase.

Q And getting back to Russia and Syria, I recall that during the time when the coalition airstrikes were beginning this administration warned Assad that he should resist any temptation to interfere in any way whatsoever with aircraft. Is the same warning being issued to Russia in the same regard -- to stay out of the way?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that you have heard me raise concerns about the possibility that if uncoordinated, that there could be some potential for interference in the activities of some Russian military personnel and the efforts of our anti-ISIL coalition. And we

obviously want to make sure that doesn't happen.

Q And on China -- this is my last thing -- you just said to Julia that the President was intentionally non-specific. What does that mean? Why not be specific? Is it that you want to let President Xi's visit pass and then reassess things after? Why non-specific?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think because what is clear, based on the readout that you received from our office over the weekend that U.S. and Chinese officials are engaged in candid, blunt discussions about our concerns in this policy area. And I would expect that those kinds of candid discussions will continue even when President Xi visits the White House at the end of next week.

So there are some ongoing discussions that are taking place at a high level --

Q Did the President intend that to be a warning today?

MR. EARNEST: No. I think that he merely was stating a fact, which is that the United States does have a range of tools to respond, and we are hopeful that it will not be necessary to use them. The reason that I don't believe a warning is necessary is, at this point, it is quite clear to the leaders of the Chinese government how serious the Obama administration takes this issue.

And again, there are a variety of ways to assess our seriousness here. The first is that in each of their previous meetings, President Obama has raised this directly with President Xi. The Department of Justice has taken aggressive action to try to bring to justice by indicting five Chinese military officials for their actions in cyberspace. And in our public comments on this issue over the last several months, you have heard the United States government make clear that we have significant concerns with Chinese behavior, and it is clear that the Chinese government is being responsive to those concerns by at least engaging in a candid discussion of those issues -- a discussion that will continue at the end of next week when President Obama hosts his counterpart here at the White House.

JC.

Q It was two weeks ago today, Josh, that the President called Chancellor Merkel to thank her and to show his support in her coping and dealing with the refugee crisis in Europe, especially in Germany. In that two weeks, there is consideration and actually some real disillusionment within the EU itself since open borders are basically a basic premise of what the EU is all about. Has the President had another conversation with her or other leaders to show support, to show personal concern that what is going on in Europe, the largest immigration movement or refugee movement since World War II, is something that's on his mind?

MR. EARNEST: JC, I don't have any new calls to tell you about, but the President does continue to be concerned about this significant humanitarian crisis. There are millions of human beings who have fled their homes, have fled their communities, many times with

their children in tow, seeking refuge. And it's tragic. That's why the United States has stepped up to be the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to try to meet the needs of these individuals who are in a desperate situation.

And you have heard me previously compliment the response of Germany, in particular -- both the government and its citizens -- for being so generous in trying to meet the needs of these individuals who are in such a desperate situation. What's clear is that there's no one country that's going to solve this problem on their own. And we'll need to see the kind of cooperation that is the hallmark of the European Union to take this -- to confront this challenge head on.

Q Will the President be meeting with individuals from the EU next week when he's in New York City to discuss this topic?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any meetings at this point to share with you in terms of the President's schedule for New York, but we should have more details on that next week, I would assume.

Mark.

Q Josh, how did President Obama come to post a tweet about a high school student in Texas who made a clock with some wires that got him in trouble? And why did he choose to tweet about it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President, like many of us, was struck by the news reports of this particular incident. Mark, the fact is that America's best teachers in our schools -- in our best schools at least -- nurture the intellectual curiosity of all of our students. In this instance, it's clear that at least some of Ahmed's teachers failed him. That's too bad. But it's not too late for all of us to use this as a teachable moment and to search our own conscience for biases in whatever form they take.

This episode is a good illustration of how pernicious stereotypes can prevent even good-hearted people who dedicate their lives to educating young people for doing the good work that they set out to do.

So the President was pleased to extend an invitation -- or the White House was pleased to extend an invitation to Ahmed to participate in Astronomy Night that will be hosted here at the White House next month. Astronomy Night is an event that we've previously held here that will bring together government, scientists, and NASA astronauts and others to spend some time with young people examining the wonders of the heavens. And it will be an opportunity for them to talk about science and our solar system and the universe. And it should be a good event. And I think that -- or at least we are hopeful that Ahmed will feel right at home here.

Q Does President Obama believe bias was a factor because the young man is Muslim?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think from this distance, it's far too early to draw that direct assessment from here. We have seen that local law enforcement officials have closed the case. And I think there are some difficult and penetrating questions that do need to be asked in pursuit of the information that you just presented.

Q Thanks.

MR. EARNEST: Laura.

Q Thank you so much. Just to follow up on the migrants crisis which is happening in Europe -- the Hungarian border at this moment, the situation is extremely tense, with thousands of families trying to cross the border. A wall was built in the past three days. Does the President approve the wall to prevent migrants to come to Europe?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Laura, we've obviously been following this crisis closely here at the White House. The principle that we have championed is one that is rooted in a common human decency. These are human beings who are in a desperate, even tragic, situation. They've been forced to flee their homes and their communities because of terrible violence that is taking place there. And we have seen a response from many European citizens and European governments indicating the generosity of spirit that's required to try to meet some of these basic humanitarian needs of individuals that are in a terribly desperate situation.

But what is true is that it's not just one country that's going to be able to solve all of these challenges. And the United States is committed to doing our part to continue to play a leading role in the international response. And that means continuing to be the largest donor of bilateral -- the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance. And the announcement that we made here last week about our intent to step up our process for taking in Syrian refugees -- a minimum of 10,000 in the next fiscal year -- so that's an indication that the United States is stepping up. And we'd like to see other countries both in Europe and around the world step up to do their part to respond to this particular crisis.

Q Again, on a human level, there's a wall to prevent families trying to come to Europe. So what is the White House reaction to this wall? It's all over the news in Europe at this moment.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, what we're going to need to see is the recognition by governments and citizens and countries across Europe that Germany is not going to be in the position to solve this problem alone and other countries that have shown a generosity of spirit and accepted a significant number of migrants will not be able to do this alone, that we're going to need to see a coordinated effort on the part of countries around the world, including a large number of countries in Europe, to do more to respond to this particular crisis -- and to respond to the basic humanitarian needs of these fellow human beings who are in a desperate situation.

And the United States has led by example in this regard. We've seen a tremendous commitment from Germany, to cite just one example. And it's important for other countries to step up as well.

Q Just another question on the same subject. The former Uruguayan President, two weeks ago, asked Presidents from all over the world to take some migrants to their home. Will the President consider to take some migrants in Camp David, for instance?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that that's a policy that's being considered at this point. But there is a well-established process here in the United States for resettling refugees. This is something that we talked about a little bit last week, but it bears repeating that for the specific category of refugees as defined by the United Nations, the United States takes in well over half of those refugees that are identified by the United Nations to resettle them. To put it another way, the United States takes in and resettles more refugees as described by the United Nations than every other country in the world combined.

So it is clear that the United States is willing to do our part. And we have ramped up those efforts in response to this latest crisis. But the United States can't do this alone. Germany can't do this alone. We're going to need to see other countries in Europe step up to the plate to respond to this particular crisis. We're also going to need to see countries in the region and other countries around the world that have not traditionally participated in these efforts step up and offer their support even if it's financial support.

Let's move around a little bit. Lesley.

Q Thanks, Josh. Raul Castro is scheduled to go address the U.N. next week. I wanted to see if -- I know you said the schedule is in flux still -- if the President is planning on meeting with him.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a President's schedule for the United Nations and I don't anticipate that we'll have that this week. But as we have more details of the President's schedule next week, we'll let you know if that's something that's on the agenda.

Q And I asked you last week about Cuba releasing prisoners in advance of the Pope's visit. Do you know if the White House has expressed any concern to Cuba that none of the prisoners that they released were in the category of political prisoners?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of the details of any communications between the United States and Cuba on this particular issue, but let me see if I can have somebody follow up with you and give you a better sense of where that stands.

Q And on a third issue, can I ask you about -- the President said at the BRT today that he's going to call Governor Brown. Can you talk a little bit about what they're going to speak about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously the state of California has, in just the last couple of weeks, sustained significant damage and even some loss of property as a result of widespread wildfires in the state of California. I know that officials in California,

including Governor Brown, have been in touch with FEMA. This is the federal agency that's responsible for supporting the response and recovery efforts that are already underway and being led by state and local officials.

The President will be calling Governor Brown later on this afternoon to get an update on the situation, to determine if there is additional support that the federal government can offer to California as they endure this difficult situation. And I'm confident the President will also convey his support to those Californians that, in some cases, have had to flee their homes or have had over the course of the summer to sustain the significant loss of property. He'll let them know that the prayers of the First Family and the nation are with them in these difficult times.

Q The Hungarian police are using pepper spray and water cannons on these refugees. Are you prepared to condemn those actions?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I'm prepared to do is to continue to urge countries, government and citizens all across Europe to set up their response to reflect the increased need in this situation. We've seen hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people flee their homes. And in a desperate attempt to find refuge somewhere, some of them are even fleeing to Europe. And clearly this is a difficult situation. We're talking about a large number of people, and in some cases we're talking about countries that are relatively small and don't have the kind of infrastructure and resources to at least smoothly take it all in.

But what we're hopeful of is that the government leaders and citizens in all of these countries will keep in mind the basic humanity of these individuals. Again, we're talking about people who have in some cases fled their homes with none of their possessions except for the clothes on their back. In some cases, they have their children in tow. And they're just looking for some safety and some relief. And this is when I think the conscience of the world is stirred, and hopefully we'll see governments and citizens respond accordingly.

Q But the refugees in Hungary say that they don't want to stay in Hungary, they just want to get through Hungary. So should the officials take down the wall and allow safe passage into Germany, into other European countries?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point I don't have a specific policy prescription to add, but rather I have merely a value that we here in the United States have prioritized. And we are hopeful that by focusing on the humanity of those who are in a desperate situation, that we'll see governments and leaders and citizens make the right decisions here.

Q Do you think Hungary is showing them basic humanity?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we certainly believe is that around the world we believe that there is more that can be done to offer up support to these refugees that are in a desperate situation.

Francesca.

Q I also wanted to ask about the Vice President's comments yesterday. Does the President also believe that Donald Trump has a "sick" message about illegal immigrants?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President spoke at some length about the kind of rhetoric that we've seen from the Republican candidates for President on the issue of immigration. And I think the President was quite stark in suggesting that it was un-American to single out and target those individuals just because of either their race or ethnicity or immigration status.

Q And along the same lines, the Vice President also said last night, "Folks, the American people are with us. I know it doesn't feel that way, but I'm telling you the American people agree with us." And he was talking about immigration in that context, too. Do you believe that? Does the President believe that? Because it seems right now that the American people, or at least Republicans, are with Donald Trump on that issue.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think that that's true. I think that most of the public polling that we've seen on this issues indicates strong bipartisan support for the kind of bipartisan legislation that had strong bipartisan support in the Senate and would have passed the House if it were not blocked by House Republican leaders who had apparently a different goal in mind.

So we continue to take a lot of solace in knowing that the business community, the law enforcement community, even the faith community all have indicated their strong support for common-sense immigration reform that includes not just increased investments in border security, which are critically important and strongly supported by the President and were blocked because of the opposition of Republicans in Congress, but also things like a path to citizenship for those who are here in the country and are basically American in every way except for their papers.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to give you another run at the Syria training story. You said it's proven to be more difficult than we thought. Can you expand on that? It just seems like an awful lot of money and a lot of investment for very, very little production.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess, Kevin, for a lot of details as it relates to the program, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. They're responsible for implementing and carrying out this mission.

Q And have they reported back to you and the President saying this is what happened? I just want to get your understanding of what they're telling you.

MR. EARNEST: Sure. The President has been, as you'd expect, been regularly updated on the challenges that they have encountered in trying to train and equip a moderate Syrian opposition. The challenges that are associated with this effort, though, are not difficult to imagine. The security situation in Syria is obviously extremely chaotic. It means it's very difficult to recruit individuals. Even if you do recruit them, that chaotic

security situation means that you need to intensely vet them. We, after all, don't want to be in a position of training and equipping individuals that may not share our goals. So that is a time-consuming effort as well.

And then you're essentially asking these individuals to take up the fight against a brutal terrorist organization that is renowned, or at least has received worldwide condemnation for their inhumane tactics and violence. And that's a tough assignment. And I think that's not an excuse, but it is a fact. And that is why the Department of Defense, and I think to General Austin's credit, I'm sure it wasn't easy to sit in that chair and to recite these facts, but he did that. And I think it reflects certainly the President's desire and the desire of every member on his national security team to understand the facts and to make decisions rooted in an accurate assessment of what's exactly happening.

And it's important that certainly the Department of Defense, but everybody else who's involved in this policymaking process, face up to this significant difficulty that this training-and-equip program has encountered to make the necessary changes and to make sure that the difficulty of this work is factored into our overall strategy.

So I'll remind you that this certainly was and is one component of our strategy, but so are the military airstrikes that have been used, to important effect, to support the efforts of other fighters on the ground inside of Syria that have succeeded in driving ISIL off some important territory inside of Syria. We have seen other strikes and other military missions carried out by the United States that have resulted in the capture and killing of senior ISIL officials, including the second in command in ISIL who was taken out by a U.S. airstrike a month or so ago, to say nothing of our efforts to try to counter radicalism through social media, to try to stop the flow of foreign fighters, to shut down the efforts of ISIL to fund their terrorist activities.

So this is a comprehensive strategy, and we've talked and acknowledged -- we've talked about and acknowledged the difficulty that one component of that strategy has encountered.

Q I want to ask you about the budget and funding of Planned Parenthood. What would the President think of funding other medical facilities that might provide similar service, but not Planned Parenthood as an alternative? Would that be something that the President would be willing to sign?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, we've been I think quite forthright about the President's opposition to any effort to wholesale defund Planned Parenthood. And I think what has injected this issue into the political dialogue of late are the graphic videos that emerged on the Internet in the last couple of months. And Planned Parenthood has apologized for the content of those videos, and they should -- they were shocking. But it would -- it is certainly not appropriate for Republicans in Congress -- in fact, it's even cynical for some Republicans in Congress to try to use those videos as an excuse to take away basic health care for millions of families across the country that rely on it every day.

Q I want to ask you about the poverty rate; it's still around 14.8 percent, 46-plus million people still at or below the poverty rate. Why hasn't the President been able to move the needle on this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we've certainly seen a lot of obstruction from members of Congress, Republicans in Congress, to efforts to try to address this particular issue. That said, I think there was some good news that was included in the report that, when it comes to child poverty, we actually have seen the largest two-year reduction in child poverty in nearly two decades. So that's an indication that there is some progress that's been made.

But the President believes that there's a whole lot more that we can do to try to address the poverty rate. And the first thing that comes to mind is raising the minimum wage.

One of the things that we have talked about in here is the fact that given the current level of the minimum wage, if you are the head of a household and you're trying to raise -- you're trying to provide for a spouse and two children based on working full-time at the minimum wage, then you're raising that family below the poverty line. So if we're actually interested in trying to do something about poverty, let's raise wages for those hardworking Americans that are just trying to do the right thing by working an honest job and providing for their families. That certainly would be one place to start, and it would have a material impact on the numbers that you just cited.

Chris.

Q Thanks. Let me ask you really quickly, to follow up on Ahmed Mohamed. So many interesting stories in the news that we often ask you about, and the President doesn't comment on them or if you haven't spoken to him. Why did he decide to get involved with this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think that he, like many of us who saw this online or saw it in the newspaper today, I think were struck by this story. And look, there are millions of teachers all across our country that dedicate themselves on a daily basis. Many of them are underpaid too. But they dedicate themselves on a daily basis to trying to nurture the intellectual curiosity of their students. And that's heroic work, and it's work that is going to be critical to the long-term success of our country.

But at least in this instance, at least some of Ahmed's teachers failed him. And that's a shame. And I think it tugs at your heart strings a little bit, and that we at the White House, and the President himself recognized that there could be an opportunity to try to reach out to this young man and give him a unique opportunity to nurture that intellectual curiosity. And I think he's going to fit in quite well with the other young people who will be at the White House on Astronomy Night, learning from some of the most informed, cutting-edge scientists in the world about the wonder of the stars and the planets. And that will be a tremendous opportunity for him, and we hope he'll be able to attend.

Q Is it fair to say -- and I've been watching on the Twitter feed and I saw everybody from a NASA engineer to a member of Congress just since you've been talking who have tweeted about this. Was it specifically that he wanted to spark a larger conversation about this? He saw it as an opportunity to do that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think you heard me say that I do think that for all of us that this has the potential to be a teachable moment to search our own conscience for biases that might be there. And the reason that we should do that is because I think this is an instance where you have people who have otherwise dedicated their lives to trying to teach our children, who failed in that effort because -- potentially because of some things in their conscience and because of the power of stereotypes.

And there's certainly more that needs to be learned about in this particular situation. But even the potential of that I think is a good reminder to all of us. But I think at the end of the day, the President's tweet and the invitation from the White House are rooted in a desire to try to reach out to a 14-year-old boy, who, at least based on what we know from law enforcement, was wrongly handcuffed in his own school yesterday simply for bringing in a clock.

Q And if I can follow up on Kevin's questions and others about the U.S.-trained anti-ISIS forces. Understanding what you've said about some of the successes that have been had against ISIS and the blunt responses yesterday by the general, I'm just wondering given the cost involved -- there's two parts to this, obviously. One part of it is the security issue; the other part is a cost-benefit analysis that you have to do in government all the time.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q And given that the Pentagon initially spent about \$36 million on this and the initial class was about \$600,000 per trainee, and that's based on a much larger class than the number of fighters that's actually there, is the President angry? Is he disappointed? Does he see this as a failure?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think that this administration has long understood that training and equipping members of the Syrian opposition would be a difficult undertaking. And it clearly has turned out to be more difficult than we anticipated. And I think those who might observe --

Q But when you talk about initial plans of 5,400 per year and you're looking at just four or five, that's more than just something to be anticipated or turned out to be more difficult than we anticipated, don't you think?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it certainly raises legitimate questions about what kinds of changes that need to be made to this program. And that's exactly what General Austin suggested today that he would do. That certainly seems appropriate.

But again, over the last year, many of you have understandably asked me questions about the claims of our critics who suggest that the administration should invest more deeply in training and equipping members of the Syrian opposition, that that was the recipe for success.

And General Austin went before Congress today and acknowledged that this was a more difficult endeavor than we assumed, and that we need to make some changes to that program. But I think it's also time for our critics to fess up in this regard as well. They were wrong.

Q But it didn't happen -- you didn't go into this or make this investment because the critics pushed you into it?

MR. EARNEST: No, I'm not saying that. I'm not -- I think General Austin, to his credit -- and I think this is indicative of the kind of character that he has shown throughout his military career -- he sat before that committee, he testified under oath, and he faced the music about a program that has not performed nearly as well as we would have liked. We haven't seen that kind of character on display from our critics who have suggested for years that this was the recipe for success in Syria.

Go ahead, Peter.

Q You're suggesting, therefore, that means the idea was wrong; maybe the idea was done too late or was done ineffectively. Why would that be an indictment of the idea? Perhaps it's an indictment of the execution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, perhaps that's the case. I don't think -- at least I only saw a little bit of the hearing. I didn't hear a lot of constructive advice to General Austin about how that program could have been more effectively implemented. We just heard a lot of complaints from people who are disappointed in the performance despite the fact that they basically said it was the recipe for our success there.

Q Just playing devil's advocate, but what if it had been done four years ago? Would that have made a difference?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard anybody offer up a good explanation about why that would make a difference. We would still --

Q Because people said that the opposition hadn't been as radicalized four years ago, and that by waiting so long you all allowed the opposition to metastasize in a way that meant a lot of people wouldn't pass your vetting standards now that might have passed four years ago.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know -- I think it would call into question the vetting standards if somebody could do something in the space of four years that might prevent them from being included in that group.

I don't think that there is a particularly strong case to be made that an earlier and more significant investment in a program that has shown not very good results -- to put it mildly -- is a recipe for success. I haven't heard anybody make that argument. Maybe there is somebody that does believe that if we have done this differently, we would have gotten a different outcome. But that is not what we've heard from our critics. But I would welcome them making that case if they believe it.

John.

Q On Monday, in Des Moines, the President when he was talking about the sequester, he used the term "artificial cap" to describe that. What did he mean by "artificial" exactly?

MR. EARNEST: The President was referring to sequester, this policy jargon that refers to across-the-board budget cuts without regard to the effectiveness or the importance of a particular program. And that's -- essentially the President described them as artificial because there are programs that we know are working well and enjoy strong bipartisan support, but yet they're being cut. And that is why the President has continued to urge Republicans to address this problem in the same way that they did two years.

The way that this problem was addressed two years ago was after a two-and-a-half-week government shutdown that was engineered by Republicans. Democrats and Republicans got together and hammered out a bipartisan budget agreement that found a bipartisan path to raising those artificial caps where bipartisan agreement could be found. That is an effective way for the budget of the greatest country in the world to be managed -- preferably before the government is shut down and not after.

And so that's why you have seen Democrats for months now urge Republicans to come and negotiate some bipartisan common ground with Republicans. But we have not seen Republicans accept that offer. Instead, what we have seen Republicans do is to go and try and pass budgets on a series of party line votes. But those votes have failed to produce legislation that reached the President's desk. So that is not a path to funding the government. The only path to funding the government is Republicans being willing to work with Democrats, and we haven't seen that yet.

Q And then today at the Business Roundtable he touted deficit reduction as a mark of economic progress. Isn't the sequester at least partly responsible for a great deal of this deficit reduction? And looking ahead off the next five, six, seven years, don't you see projections that will help with the deficit reduction due to the sequester?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't bring my green eyeshade with me, but we can find somebody with a green eyeshade to talk to you about how much the sequester actually accounts for deficit reduction.

I think the point is that the President believes that we can make critically important investments in our economy -- things like job training and infrastructure and research and development -- things that we know will be good for our economy. And we can do that in a fiscally responsible way.

The President talked about this one example of closing the carried interest loophole. This is a proposal that the President advocated even as a candidate for President and drew the scorn of Republicans in Washington and around the country. Now we actually find ourselves in a situation where two of the leading Republican candidates for President actually back that proposal. So for years Republicans have resisted implementing that plan, closing that loophole that only benefits the most wealthy. Let's close that loophole and make some of the investments that we know will be good for our economy. That's an example of how we can continue on the path of deficit reduction, while also investing in the kinds of economic priorities that will be good for our economy, good for the middle class, and, oh, by the way, will be even better for our deficit. So that's the kind of common-sense approach the President has taken to budgeting. All too often, it has run into this stiff, ideological partisan resistance of Republicans in Congress, but Republicans have not been well served by sort of manning the partisan barricades when it comes to these budget disputes. But that's what they've been doing for the last several months here; hopefully, they'll change their strategy as we get close to the deadline here.

Q And then just finally on the Iran nuke deal. Tomorrow, the deadline, the end of the 60-day clock runs out. Is the President looking to mark that in any way? Is he going to make any sort of a statement or anything on that?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of at this point. Obviously, there is a -- that would be the end of the 60-day clock for congressional consideration of the agreement. It, however, is still in the middle of the 90-day window for the U.N., after having voted -- the U.N. Security Council, after having voted on and ratified the agreement before the implementation phase would begin.

And that implementation phase would begin not with sanctions relief, I would remind you, but with Iran beginning to take the significant, serious steps that they've agreed to take to curtail their nuclear program -- so everything from disconnecting the centrifuges to gutting the core of their reactor at Arak, and of course reducing their uranium stockpile by 98 percent.

Q Josh, broadly speaking, is the President still confident in his decision to have authorized the train-and-equip program for Syrian rebels?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when you're encountering a situation like this, it's easy to play some Monday morning quarterbacking. The President was clearly -- believed that it could be an opportunity for the United States to expand the number of local fighters on the ground in Syria with whom we could coordinate. I mentioned earlier that there already are fighters on the ground inside Syria -- some Syrian Arabs, Syrian Kurds and others -- who have proved to be effective partners with the United States and our coalition partners in taking the fight to ISIL.

The President believed it was worth trying to augment that number through this train-and-equip program. Thus far, that's not been the result. But General Austin and others at CENTCOM are working to implement changes to this program, and we'll see if they can

implement sufficient changes to get a better result and, as Chris alluded to, get a better bang for the buck for American taxpayers.

Q Were there certain changes that the President specifically asked for? I mean, is he that in the weeds on this? Or is that all deferred to DOD?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we're talking about some very basic operational details. And I think typically the way that this works is those in the military who are lower in the chain of command make recommendations to the Commander-in-Chief, not the other way around.

Q Specifically on this issue, did it come up when the Saudi King was here? Did the President say he does want to move forward with that part of the train-and-equip program? Because I believe the Pentagon says that hasn't even started yet.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know they talked about a range of issues related to our anti-ISIL campaign when King Salman was here at the White House. But I don't have a more detailed readout of the leaders' meeting to share with you at this point.

Q Can I ask you, on Israel, I believe you said previously that phone calls had been made, offers had been made broadly by the United States to Israel about stepping up security partnerships and relationships. Now that we have the date on the calendar, Bibi is coming to the White House, does that mean you're going to drill down to some of those specifics? Can we expect that that conversation is going to be about increased U.S. military support?

MR. EARNEST: I would anticipate that that will certainly be part of their discussion. Prime Minister Netanyahu has previously described the level of security cooperation that's been offered by the Obama administration as "unprecedented." That, I think, is an indication of the President's personal commitment to the security of Israel and to the unshakeable bond between our two countries.

The President has for some time indicated not just a willingness but a desire to engage in conversations about how we can further deepen that security cooperation. There was some reticence on the part of the Israelis initially to engage in those discussions. But we would expect in the context of this meeting in November and others that may be on the agenda for lower-level officials to begin having those discussions. And we certainly would welcome the opportunity to do that.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. Given the failure of the train-and-equip program in Syria, the migrant crisis in Europe, Russia stepping up in Syria in a more muscular way, the fact that Assad is still in power, how --

MR. EARNEST: Byron sounds like he's delivering a stump speech in a Republican primary state. (Laughter.)

Q Just asking the tough questions. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I appreciate that about you.

Q How is the President's approach to Syria not a failure?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Byron, there are a couple of things that we can do to illustrate the progress that we've made. The fact is there is important progress that's been made on the ground to counter ISIL both in Iraq and in Syria; you asked about Syria, but ISIL has lost more than 17,000 square kilometers of territory in northern Syria, is now cut off from all but 68 miles of the nearly 600-mile-long border between Syria and Turkey.

We've talked about the senior ISIL official inside of Syria that was killed. And there was material in his possession that was exploited for its intelligence value based on a U.S. military operation that the President had ordered. We have seen other countries both in the region and around the world demonstrate their willingness to step up and offer greater support to our efforts in Syria.

So we've seen recent announcements from Turkey and from the UK and France to their engagement in Syria. That is to say nothing of the kind of engagement and support for our ongoing efforts inside of Syria that we've seen from countries like Jordan and the UAE, who were involved -- and some others -- who were involved on the very first day of this operation. And there was a lot of skepticism in this room, understandable skepticism in this room, about whether or not the President would be able to succeed in enlisting those Muslim countries in the Middle East in this effort. But we did succeed in doing that. And that was a diplomatic accomplishment, but it's also an accomplishment that has consequences for the long-term success of this effort.

So we've made important progress. But I would not try to talk you out of the notion that there remains a lot of really important work to be done here. And the President -- someone made reference to it earlier -- the President is always pushing his team to get a better assessment of what's happening on the ground and to determine whether or not those facts call for a further refinement or reform to our strategy there.

Q Speaking of 2016 stump speeches, we've asked a lot about --

MR. EARNEST: Good segue.

Q -- the President and his thoughts on Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, but not so much Bernie Sanders.

MR. EARNEST: I think only once or twice.

Q Only once or twice. Senator Sanders on the trail has talked about tackling big infrastructure projects, he's talked about expanding the social safety net, and he's talked about making tuition free at public colleges. Those all sound like some things the President himself has talked about. What does the President think about Senator Sanders' agenda and policy proposals?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Senator Sanders obviously has a record not just as a candidate but also as a public servant of somebody who is committed to fighting for the middle class and putting in place policies that he knows will benefit the middle class.

The President spent a lot of time at his town hall meeting in Iowa talking about the importance of expanding access to a college education for more students in the United States. It's clear that Senator Sanders supports that value, supports that priority. They may have some different ideas for how exactly to get there, but those priorities they hold in common.

And obviously Senator Sanders has made a spirited case for his candidacy, and has drawn some large and raucous crowds of enthusiastic Democratic supporters. And you've heard me say that that kind of energy and enthusiasm on the Democratic side will ultimately be important to the success of the Democratic nominee, regardless of who that person is.

Q Does the President think there needs to be more debates? I know Senator Sanders and Governor O'Malley have called on -- talked about 2016 politics today, so I figured I'd ask you.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard the President express an opinion about the appropriate number of debates among the Democrat candidates. Clearly, there should be debates, and clearly there should be an opportunity for Democratic voters across the country to have an opportunity to evaluate the performance of those candidates in the debates. But I haven't heard the President weigh in with a specific number.

Charlie.

Q I'm curious, has the President seen a picture of this clock that was made in Texas that caused so much problems?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the President has seen a picture. I saw one shortly before I came out here. I know that it was starting to be tweeted shortly before I walked out here. I don't know if the President's seen it.

Q Is it possible he'd concede that the Secret Service would make a similar mistake if they saw this device, this homemade clock, near the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess the point, Charlie, is that this was a device that was brought to a school and shown to a science teacher, so I wouldn't at this point speculate about what anybody's hypothetical reaction to it would be. What is clear is that the local police department took a look at it and promptly closed the case.

Q Do you think that the blame should be placed -- you mentioned the teachers. Should blame be placed on the teachers or the police officers?

MR. EARNEST: There will be ample opportunity for people to assign blame here.

Q And do you think this calls into question sort of the zero-tolerance policies in public schools for any device that appears threatening?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of the specific policies that may not have guided the response here, so it's difficult to comment on that without knowing what those policies are.

Toluse.

Q Thanks, Josh. On Syria, Secretary Kerry said today that Russia has asked for military-to-military talks with the U.S. And given the fact that they're now on the ground with their military there, and President Obama says that he does not want U.S. troops on the ground, and our training effort has seemed to fall very short of the goal, why not open up those military-to-military talks with Russia, and specifically with Putin?

MR. EARNEST: At this point I don't have any announcements to make. I will say that obviously the destabilizing strategy that Russia pursued inside of Ukraine had an impact on the military-to-military relationship between our two countries.

At the same time, we have been quite clear about welcoming Russia's constructive support for the anti-ISIL coalition that's operating in Iraq and Syria. And we've made that clear both publicly and privately. But I don't have any announcements to make about the current status of our military-to-military relationship.

Q If I could ask really quickly about the budget. The President said earlier today that Republicans have -- or a faction of Republicans have gone off the rails. It's kind of a follow-up to what he said earlier last month about Republican crazies who are blocking him on everything and having conspiracy theories. I'm wondering if he thinks that kind of argument is going to help as we get so close to a deadline where, as he mentioned, billions of dollars were lost in the last government shutdown. We don't look like we're anywhere close to solving this one. So does he think that rhetoric is actually going to move us closer to solving that goal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, appeals to their rationality have not moved them in the right direction, at least when it comes to the interests of the country. What I will say is that there is an opportunity for Democrats and Republicans to sit down together and build a bipartisan coalition in support of a budget agreement that is in the best interest of the country and adequately funds our national security and economic priorities. That's what we're seeking.

And I guess the good news is if Republicans are willing to work faithfully with Democrats, they'll be able to build a sufficiently large bipartisan coalition that even if there are a couple of Republicans that continue to spurn rationality, the legislation will still pass. And that's what the President is hopeful that Republican leaders will do; that they will follow the model that was established two years ago, which is Democrats and Republicans in Congress sit down together, hammer out a bipartisan agreement -- one that clearly reflects the bipartisan consensus about the best interests of our national security and our economy. It will yield a piece of legislation that no one believes is perfect but that a strong

majority of Congress can support and the President can sign. That's the approach that we believe Congress should take and we believe they should do that before the deadline on September 30th.

Jared, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. The President on more than a few occasions has compared himself to Ronald Reagan, citing some policies that he and President Reagan would have agreed on. He had one over the summer with the Iran nuclear deal very recently. When Republicans meet in California tonight -- and I'm sure some of them will be asked to compare to President Ronald Reagan, given the setting -- what kind of things would the President hope that Ronald Reagan and the President could agree that these candidates could talk about? Is there some common ground?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly is -- I read -- there was an interesting Washington Post story I guess about this a couple of days ago where they talked about how many of the policies that are aggressively opposed by Republicans now are the kinds of policies where President Reagan and President Obama both supported. And so whether that's expanding Medicaid or the notion of trying to resolve diplomatically disagreements that you may have with other countries that wish ill upon the citizens of this country, we saw President Reagan who, despite the rhetoric emanating from the Soviet Union at the time, did have the courage to begin the kinds of negotiations to reduce the nuclear threat to this country that continue to serve as important foundations of our national security.

So those are just two examples. Maybe the moderators tonight will come up with a couple more. But I think it does serve to illustrate that there should be an opportunity for us to find common ground, even on some of the priorities that the President has identified.

The fact that they are supported by a Democratic President doesn't make them automatically partisan. It does mean that we would welcome support from Republicans when the President is advocating policies that many Republicans have traditionally supported. That's not been the spirit or the attitude of many Republicans in Congress. It certainly hasn't been the spirit by those Republicans in Congress that are now running for President. But I guess that dichotomy may make for an interesting debate.

Thanks a lot, everybody. Have a good day.

END

2:32 P.M. EDT