

# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/29/2014

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MR. EARNEST: I hope you all had a nice weekend. I don't have anything at the beginning of the briefing, Josh, so we'll go straight to the questions.

Q Thanks, Josh. The President in his "60 Minutes" interview last night, acknowledged that the United States underestimated what was happening with the Islamic State and also the Iraqi military's ability to deal with it. And I know that the President is reliant on the intelligence community and his advisors for those kinds of assessments, but I'm wondering if he sees himself as having any responsibility for that failure to connect the dots there or if he has a role in what happened there.

MR. EARNEST: Josh, the President of the United States is the Commander-in-Chief, and he often talks about how he is the one that is ultimately responsible for protecting the national security interests of the United States of America all around the globe. There is no question that he relies on important advice from the leaders in our military, from leaders in our diplomatic corps, and from leaders in our intelligence community. He values the relationship and advice that he gets from leaders among all of those important segments of our government, and in fact, it's only because of the strong, sound advice that he has received from members of the intelligence community that we have had some success early on in our efforts to combat the threat from ISIL.

One of the things that we talked about earlier this summer is the efforts underway at the Pentagon to develop military options for the President, either in Iraq or in Syria. And at that time, I talked about how it was important -- or at that time, I talked about how military planners were relying on intelligence that was being collected and cultivated by our intelligence community to develop a set of targets on which the President could order military action.

The early reviews, the early assessments of those military operations indicate that the strikes were impactful and effective. That's a testament, first and foremost, to the skill and courage of our men and women in uniform, but it would not have been possible

without the tremendous ability of members of our intelligence community.

Q And the President also discussed last night how the Islamic State group has become the more immediate threat even as the United States continues to wish to see Assad go. I'm wondering if there is anything that the U.S. is actively doing at the moment to work to get Assad to go.

MR. EARNEST: Well, certainly our efforts to build up the moderate elements of the Syrian opposition will have a very negative effect on the Assad regime's ability to hold on to power; that as the opposition in Syria is built up, it will succeed in providing a legitimate counterweight to the Assad government, with the ultimate goal of a diplomatic resolution of that situation. That's also something the President discussed in the "60 Minutes" interview over the weekend.

There is not a military solution to the very grave problems that are plaguing Syria right now; that ultimately at the core is a political resolution as it relates to governing that country. And building up, fortifying and strengthening the capacity of moderate elements of the Syrian opposition will move us further in pursuit of that goal.

Q But in the past, there was the Geneva talks, and there was an actual diplomatic effort underway very actively with other nations. Is there anything like that still going on? Or is it basically just about focusing on the moderate opposition in the hopes that one day after the Islamic State is not as big of a threat, they'll also be able to confront the Assad government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I would say, Josh, is there are no -- at least as far as I know, there aren't ongoing talks in Geneva on this topic right now. But the important diplomacy that had been underway and has been underway for some time among the United States, elements of the Syrian opposition, other countries in the region, other countries around the world continues to persist. Those kinds of conversations are part and parcel of what it means to be a diplomat and what it means to represent America's interests around the globe.

What the President has indicated is that the focal point of our strategic efforts right now is on this threat that's posed by ISIL, the destabilizing impact it's having on the region and the potential that they could recruit foreign fighters that could pose a threat to the West or to even the U.S. homeland.

Q And on another topic, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about the pro-democracy protests that we're seeing take hold in much of Hong Kong.

MR. EARNEST: I have read the news reports about this. I can tell you that the U.S. government is closely watching the situation in Hong Kong. Around the world -- so this is true in Hong Kong and other places -- the United States supports internationally recognized fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of peaceful assembly and the freedom of expression. The United States urges the Hong Kong authorities to exercise restraint and for protestors to express their views peacefully.

The United States supports universal suffrage in Hong Kong in accordance with the Basic Law and we support the aspirations of the Hong Kong people. We believe that an open society with the highest possible degree of autonomy and governed by the rule of law is essential for Hong Kong's stability and prosperity. Indeed, this is what has made Hong Kong such a successful and truly global city to this point.

We've consistently made our position known to Beijing and we'll continue to do so. We believe that the basic legitimacy of the Chief Executive in Hong Kong will be greatly enhanced if the Basic Law's ultimate aim of selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage is fulfilled. We also believe that the legitimacy of the Chief Executive will be enhanced if the election provides the people of Hong Kong a genuine choice of candidates that are representative of the people's and the voters' will.

Q Would you like to see those aspirations and expressions of free speech extend also to the mainland, where people have arguably even less freedoms than they do in Hong Kong?

MR. EARNEST: The short answer to that is yes. The longer answer is that we make a point out of every interaction with Chinese -- senior Chinese government officials that respect for basic universal human rights is critically important. There's no question it's the foundation of our democracy. We believe it should be the foundation of any government, and that that respect for and protection of basic universal human rights is an important principle, and it's a principle that is raised every time that a senior member of this administration is dealing with a senior member of the Chinese government.

Steve.

Q Josh, just to follow up, China is saying it hopes the U.S. will be cautious on this issue and not send the wrong signal. Are you concerned that you might send the wrong signal on this case?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think we've been very clear about what our principles and what our priorities are. They certainly apply to this situation in particular. And we have been very consistent in voicing our support to the People's Republic of China for universal suffrage and for the aspirations of the Hong Kong people, and we're going to continue to do so.

Q And is this something the President will bring up with the Chinese leader when he goes to Beijing in November?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to preview the exact conversation that the President will have with the Chinese President. I do feel confident, however, in saying that the President will certainly raise that the protection of basic universal human rights is critically important. That's something that the President has done in every interaction that he's had with the Chinese leadership, and I'm confident that that will be part of the conversation that he is looking forward to having in November.

Q And lastly, on the CBS interview, did the President intend to blame the intelligence community for not warning him about ISIL? Because that's the interpretation some are taking.

MR. EARNEST: He did not. That is not what the President's intent what. What the President was trying to make clear -- and this is something I'd point out that the President has said on previous occasions in response to questions from probably somebody who's sitting in this room right now about how difficult it is to predict the will of security forces that are based in another country to fight. And that's difficult business, and ultimately, at the end, becomes a prediction. And as I mentioned in response to Josh's question, ultimately, the President is the Commander-in-Chief, and he's the one who takes responsibility for ensuring that we have the kinds of policies in place that are required to protect our interests around the globe. And the President relies heavily on the professionals in the intelligence community to offer him the advice that's necessary to fulfill that function, and the President continues to have the highest degree of confidence in our intelligence community to continue to provide that advice.

Nadia.

Q According to NBC-Wall Street Journal, 72 percent of the Americans disagree with the President. They actually believe that, ultimately, you're going to send ground troops. So where are you going wrong here? Is this the messaging? How come that despite all the assurances that no ground troops will be sent to Syria or Iraq, the majority of Americans believe that they will be sent?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Nadia, this country has learned some very painful lessons over the last decade and the skepticism of the American public about these kinds of -- about military involvement in some of these areas is understandable. But the fact is the President has laid out a strategy for dealing with this situation that stands in stark contrast to the strategy that was pursued by the previous administration in Iraq.

We believe, the President believes, and his national security team believes that we can be successful in strengthening the capacity of local ground forces to take the fight on the ground to ISIL in their own country, and that adding U.S. ground troops in a combat role in this situation would not be in the best strategic interest of the United States of America simply because sending ground troops into a combat role sends a mixed signal to the Iraqi government in particular about what our expectations are.

We've been very clear that this is a problem. The security situation in Iraq is something that can only be solved by the Iraqi government and the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people. This is not something that the United States or the international community can do for them; this is something they must do for themselves.

What the President has committed to do and what the United States is prepared to do is -- I guess I should say what the United States is already doing -- is strongly supporting the Iraqi central government and the Iraqi security forces as they engage in this effort. And we're going to continue to do that.

Q This situation is very fluid. I mean, obviously you admit that things change on the ground almost on a daily basis. So if General Dempsey and John Boehner both say leave that possibility for sending troops, why not even acknowledge that actually there is that possibility, instead of just completely ruling out this option?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there is one piece of your question that I want to clarify, which is it should be no surprise that Speaker Boehner has a different position than the President. He criticizes the President on a variety of topics and so it's not particularly surprising to me, and it wasn't surprising to me when I watched it on television last night, that Speaker Boehner does think that the President should consider sending ground troops into a combat role in Iraq. That's something that senior members of the Republican Party advocated in the previous administration. It's something that senior members of the Republican Party advocate in this administration. It's something that they advocated prior to ISIL's significant advance across the desert in Iraq, so it's not surprising to me that they continue to advocate that position.

But that is a different position than the position that was advocated by the President -- by this President and different than the position that was advocated by Chairman Dempsey. Chairman Dempsey, in his testimony, did not advocate and did not contemplate sending American ground troops into a combat role in Iraq.

Q A different role. He acknowledged there is a possibility.

MR. EARNEST: No, no, no. No, no, no. It's important, this is really important. I'd encourage you to go back and look at his testimony. What he was very clear about is he did contemplate a possible situation in the future where American ground troops could be deployed into a forward position with the Iraqi security forces, but they would not be deployed into that position in a combat role. They would not be engaging personally or directly with the enemy in combat. They certainly are in harm's way and would be in harm's way. But that is very different than the kind of ground combat operation that people like Speaker Boehner have advocated in the past.

So what Chairman Dempsey has indicated a willingness to leave the door open on is something that the President has said he would be willing to consider on a case-by-case basis, which is you could imagine a scenario where it might be necessary in the future for some American ground forces -- or personnel, I should say -- could be forward deployed to provide some tactical advice to Iraqi security forces, to maybe even call on airstrikes, but not to engage in combat directly with the enemy. And that's very different than the strategy that was pursued by the previous administration.

Go ahead, Jim.

Q Just to follow, are you saying that the Republicans have a little bit of war fever?

MR. EARNEST: That sounds like your colorful description of their position, not mine.

Q I mean, you were just saying that that's something that members of the Republican Party advocated in a previous administration and they seem to be advocating it now.

MR. EARNEST: They do all the time.

Q So they have ground-boot fever? I mean, what is it that you're trying to say here? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I think Jim thinks it's my first day here. (Laughter.) Look, I think Speaker Boehner characterized his own views.

Q Eager-beaver --

MR. EARNEST: I think Speaker Boehner characterized his own views on this topic. They are different than the view and the strategy that's been laid out by the Commander-in-Chief. I should say that the President was certainly appreciative of the support that Speaker Boehner and other Republicans articulated for the President's strategy as it relates to ramping up our assistance to Syrian opposition fighters.

In the view of this President -- and maybe there is one aspect of this that the Speaker and the President agree on, which is that degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL will require some ground troops in a combat role. The question that is open and I think where the divergence occurs is whether those ground troops are going to be American. The President has ruled that out. There will not be American ground combat troops in Iraq or in Syria.

Speaker Boehner wants to leave open that possibility. What the President has said is let's actually use the ability of the American military and our coalition partners around the globe to ramp up our assistance and training of local forces so that they themselves can be the boots on the ground to take the fight to ISIL. And that is wholly a different strategy than the one that was pursued by the Bush administration, and sounds different than the strategy that Speaker Boehner is advocating at this point.

Q Can I go back to the Jim Clapper question?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q Does the President have confidence in the intelligence he is receiving now from the intelligence community with respect to ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely.

Q But he is just saying that previously what he got in terms of intelligence on the rise of ISIS was flawed.

MR. EARNEST: Again, I don't think that's -- I don't think those were the words that the President used. I think the President was pretty clear, both then and as he was back in August, that nobody predicted the speed and pace with which ISIL would advance across the Syrian border with Iraq and make dramatic gains across the countryside in a way that allowed them to hold large chunks of territory.

Q But there were members of the intelligence community who were sounding the alarm. Back in February, the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency testified at a hearing that this was possible, that you could see ISIS rise and take territory and continue to take more territory. So there were people sounding the alarm within the intelligence community publicly as far back as February.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, there have been people for quite some time who have been talking about how difficult it is to assess the will of foreign organizations to actually fight for their country. And there is no doubt that there was a question about how determined Iraqi security forces would be to defend their own country, largely due to the sectarian way in which that country was being governed, and that would, understandably, raise some doubt about the fighting will of the Iraqi security forces. And I think that proved to be true in the end that ISIL was able to make significant gains because the Iraqi security forces weren't able to withstand their advance.

Now, what we have seen is we've seen several things change. The most important thing that we've seen change is the central government in Baghdad. We do now see an inclusive government in Baghdad that is governing that country in a way that can unify the country to meet the ISIL threat. That will have a corresponding effect on the capability and will of the Iraqi security forces to fight for and defend their own country.

You've seen a commitment from the United States and our coalition partners to ramp up our training and assistance even to the Iraqi security forces. And you've seen a willingness by the United States and our coalition partners to back up the efforts of Iraqi security forces on the ground with military strikes from the air. All of those things combined will significantly enhance both the will and the capability of Iraq's security forces. And we are optimistic that they will build on the progress that they've already made to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q And can I ask you very quickly about The Washington Post story that came out over the weekend about the shooting incident here at the White House back in 2011? It was reported in that story that the President and the First Lady were irate with the Secret Service over their handling of that incident. Does that accurately reflect how the President and the First Lady felt after they learned that there were shots fired at the White House and that they were fired by somebody who was intending to fire shots at the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, as I think as you would expect, the President and First Lady, like all parents, are concerned about the safety of their children. But the President and First Lady also have confidence in the men and women of the Secret Service to do a very important job, which is to protect the First Family, to protect the White House, but also protect the ability of tourists and members of the public to conduct their business or even tour the White House.

So this requires balancing a wide range of equities, which makes for a very difficult task. But it is a task that the Secret Service is dedicated to. What they are also dedicated to is where shortcomings occur, implementing the changes that are necessary to improve. And

Director Pierson and other senior leaders at the United States Secret Service are currently engaged in a review in light of the incident from 10 days or so ago to further upgrade and enhance the security posture of the White House. And what will be -- what's required in an environment like this is a security organization that is adept, that is nimble, and that can be constantly both reviewing and upgrading their posture as necessary. That's difficult work. But the President and First Lady have confidence in the ability of the Secret Service to do it.

April.

Q I want to follow up on Jim's questions. Has the White House been kept abreast of this most recent issue, the incident, as to how things are changing? And also, on the issue in 2011 -- because The Washington Post article was scathing of the Secret Service, and the Secret Service is refuting a lot of what has been said in there -- in the article -- has the Secret Service been in communication with the changes and upgrading of security to the White House since all of these things have been happening, particularly this latest article?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, as I mentioned at the end of last week, the President did have the opportunity to sit down in the Oval Office with Director Pierson to discuss the ongoing review in light of the incident from 10 days or so ago. The President is interested in the review that they are conducting, and I would anticipate that he'll review whatever it is they -- whatever reforms and recommendations they settle upon. But ultimately, the President does retain confidence in the leadership of the Secret Service and in the men and women of the Secret Service who, on a daily basis, wake up in the morning prepared to put their life on the line to protect the First Family.

Q All right. And I want to go to another question about something else. The President, at the Congressional Black Caucus dinner, talked about My Brother's Keeper, an announcement at the beginning of -- when it involves mayors and tribal leaders. Could you give us a little bit of information on that? And why now reach out to mayors and tribal leaders and not before?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, there has been an effort to reach out pretty broadly as it relates to My Brother's Keeper to engage people in what the President views as a top priority, to work in communities of color in particular, with young men in particular, to provide them some mentorship and support that is so sorely needed.

And there are many others who have demonstrated a commitment to this issue in a way that gives the President a lot of confidence that some progress can be made. And that means working with the business community, working with the academic community, working with political and community leaders to try to make progress and advance some of these goals that they've laid out. If you need some more details in terms of what the current state of our outreach, I can pull those for you.

Q Last question, as it relates to My Brother's Keeper and linking it somewhat to Ferguson. I understand the White House has been watching the events of late of Ferguson. I want to ask you about what you just said about the demonstrations in Hong

Kong, peaceful demonstrations, and then when the demonstrations are happening here in the United States, particularly in Ferguson, that are having many issues. It seems like they cannot come together on how to marry the police force and the demonstrators together in that town. And you're promoting democracy there and we're still having a conflict here. Can you talk about that?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. I think the President confronted this issue pretty directly in the speech that he gave at the U.N. General Assembly on Wednesday. He said it more eloquently than I did, but I think what he was highlighting -- or more eloquently than I will -- what he was highlighting is that every country has challenges. No country is perfect. Our country is not perfect. But what we are seeking to do is to form a more perfect union. And when we strive to address those differences, we do so in the open light of day, in the open light of our democracy.

And what you have seen is a response from the government that, while not perfect, has promoted greater understanding between local law enforcement and local citizens who are aggrieved. And the effort to try to resolve those differences in a way that acknowledges the shortcomings is what makes our country different than so many others and certainly what makes our country different than a place like China, where the response from the federal government has been to try to shut down reporting of the incident. I read reports today that Instagram is being blocked and that there are efforts to try to censor some websites who are trying to report on this situation. And that underscores I think the difference in approach that we have to try to confront this challenge that other countries have.

Q They tried to shut down some reporters at the beginning of the Ferguson of the protests here now. So, I mean, some of the policing units were trying to shut down some of the reporters during that protest, as you well know.

MR. EARNEST: But, April, what we're talking about here is we're talking about the response of the central government, the response of the democracy. And I think that, again, while there -- the question here is what is going to be the reaction of the government to dealing with these kinds of situations, and every country has them. The question is what are you going to do to try to resolve those differences in a way that reflects the values and the universal rights of the citizens.

Jon.

Q Josh, back to this question of ISIS or ISIL. Did the intelligence community underestimate ISIL or did the President underestimate ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: I think the way that I would describe it is that everybody did; that everybody was surprised to see the rapid advance that ISIL was able to make from Syria across the Iraqi border and to be able to take over such large swaths of territory in Iraq did come as a surprise. And that's something that the President has said many times and

it's something that even senior members of the intelligence community have acknowledged as well. A lot of that was predicated on the underestimation of the will of the Iraqi security forces to fight for their country.

Q But, Josh, I mean, on that question, just to go back -- I mean, you don't even have to go back to February, you can go back to November of last year. Brett McGurk, who is Assistant Secretary of State and one of the key point people for the administration on Iraq, he described almost exactly what the threat was, both on the side of the Iraqis not being able to confront it, the fact that they were able to have benefitting from a sanctuary across porous border in Syria. I mean, his description back in November was, "We have seen upwards of 40 suicide bombers per month targeting playgrounds, mosques, markets...in addition to government sites from Basra, to Baghdad, to Erbil." ISIS "has benefited from a permissive operating environment due to the inherent weakness of the Iraqi security forces." This is one of your key people on Iraq who was raising this alarm in November of last year. Did this message get to the President? Did he believe it? Did he not hear it? What happened?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, this is something that the President has discussed on a number of occasions -- that principally what we're talking about here is the rapid advance that ISIL was able to make across the Iraqi desert and the success that they have had after that advance to holding large swaths of territory. And that is not to say that there wasn't an acknowledgement of the risk that this organization posed.

Q But if I could just stop you for a second -- because two months after Brett McGurk says this, the President calls ISIL the JV team in an interview with The New Yorker.

MR. EARNEST: We've been through this and that's not who the President was referring to.

Q He was clearly talking about ISIL because the question was about --

MR. EARNEST: That's not true.

Q The question was specifically about what happened after ISIL took over Fallujah.

MR. EARNEST: That's not what the question was about.

Q The question was directly about --

MR. EARNEST: We can look at the transcript after the briefing. That's not what the -- the President also discussed this on "60 Minutes" yesterday, too. So we've sort of -- we've been through this argument.

Q But what I'm saying is here you have a top person and he's not alone. I mean, if you go -- you mentioned coming across and taking over vast areas of Iraq. Well, in February of this year, the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Michael Flynn, General Flynn, warned of exactly this. He said ISIL "probably will attempt to take territory in Iraq and Syria to exhibit its strength in 2014, as it demonstrated recently in Ramadi and Fallujah."

And the group's "ability to concurrently maintain multiple safe havens in Syria." He is warning of exactly what happened. This is back in February. How can the President say this was an intelligence failure?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, I'll read you some comments from Director Clapper himself, who said, what we didn't do --

Q There are 16 intelligence agencies -- this is the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Are you saying that the President didn't hear this? This was testimony to Congress.

MR. EARNEST: What I'm talking about is the person who is responsible for being in charge of the broader intelligence community, and what he said was he said, "What we didn't do was predict the will to fight. That's always a problem." And what that goes to is the challenge of figuring out how exactly willing foreign fighters are to defend their own country -- wow capable are they, how well equipped are they, and how willing are they to put their life on the line to defend their own country.

And we did know that there was some weakness among the Iraqi security forces because we had been publicly expressing concern for quite some time that Prime Minister Maliki was governing that country in a sectarian way that was starting to pull that country apart. And that would make it vulnerable to outside forces, and it certainly would reduce the ability of the Iraqi security forces to respond to a specific threat. What was not predicted was how quickly and how successfully ISIL would be able to make this significant advance across Iraq in a way that has allowed them to hold so much territory.

What's important is that the United States, as we always do, has led the international community in responding to this situation. And that response requires the continued skill and professionalism and service of our intelligence community. That's why -- that's an important part of why our initial response here has been successful, and they will be critical to our success moving forward.

Q Let me just button it up with this. So these warnings that came -- and I've mentioned two -- the U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, to Iraq, made similar warnings in an interview on ABC News. We had heard similar warnings from Department of Homeland Security officials. Did the President hear this? Did he know what -- he mentioned Clapper. So we know he heard what Clapper said, the head of the DNI. Did he know what these other top officials in his own administration were saying about the threat from ISIL? Did he hear what I just read to you?

MR. EARNEST: I assume that what you just read to me is congressional testimony. So there are a lot of public statements about this. I'm not going to get into what sort of private conversations the President had with the intelligence community about --

Q I'm just trying to get at -- these warnings got to the level of the President. Maybe they didn't; maybe there is a problem at DNI that needs to be looked at.

MR. EARNEST: And what I'm saying is that the President has complete confidence in the intelligence community to deal with these very dynamic but significant threats to our broader national interest. And he has complete confidence in their ability to gather the information that will be required to help us meet and mitigate that threat.

As it relates to the private conversations that the President has had with his intelligence advisors, I won't get into that. But both the Director of National Intelligence and the President have been pretty candid about their insight into this specific situation, which is to say everybody knew that there was a threat that was posed by ISIL, but what nobody could predict, as the director said, is the willingness of the Iraqi security forces to stand up and fight for their own country.

Q Well, that's exactly what McGurk said.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Justin.

Q I wanted to kind of ask about the political aspect of this. Republicans have obviously seized on the President's comments, but more generally we've seen a lot of campaign ads coming out today in North Carolina kind of accusing the President and Democrats of being slow to respond to ISIS. I know that administration officials before said that the President, as he starts campaigning -- he's going to Chicago this week -- won't be using foreign policy as part of his campaign message. But is that tenable? Or are we going to start hearing the President defend or explain or promote his strategy on ISIS as part of his campaign activities?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we have been pretty clear about the fact that the President does believe there is a very clear choice in this midterm election between the policies that Democrats have advocated that benefit middle-class families and the policy that Republicans advocate that benefit those at the top. There is a different strategy and there is a different agenda that's being promoted by the two sides. The President will make that case. The voters will have the opportunity to make their choice.

When it comes to these specific national security issues, the President believes that our national security trumps local politics. That's been true since the President entered the race for the presidency back in 2007, and it continues to be true to do this day. In fact, I over the last couple of weeks have even gone out of my way to praise Republicans in Congress, both in the House and the Senate, who voted to give the administration the authority necessary to ramp up our assistance to Syrian opposition fighters. This was a proposal that the President asked for, and Democrats and Republicans in both the House and the Senate put aside their own partisan affiliation and voted in a way that would allow that legislation to pass, and gave the President the authority that he needs to fulfill that mission.

So I think, if anything, based on the limited sample size here, we've been pretty willing to give credit where it's due to Republicans who are supportive of the President's strategy.

Q And then on the Secret Service -- Director Pierson is supposed to go in front of Congress to the Oversight Committee tomorrow. And I know that she is leading the review here, but some congressional leaders have suggested that this will be kind of a make-or-break testimony for her in their eyes, in terms of what kind of confidence they have in her ability to lead the department, both because of the recent incidents and I think a string of incidents leading up to them. And so what I'm wondering is, are you guys undertaking any review of her leadership and her ability to lead the department -- or the agency?

MR. EARNEST: As I mentioned I think last week, Justin, the President does have full confidence in Director Pierson and other members of the Secret Service to do their very important work. So we are interested in the review that is underway by the Secret Service. That is a review that the White House will take a look at, and we'll certainly consider the reforms that they recommend. But the President continues to have confidence in the men and women of the Secret Service.

Q What would have to happen to shake that confidence in Director Pierson? I mean, we've had drunken agents in hotel rooms, we've had somebody make his way into the White House. Short of an incredibly tragic circumstance, what would get the President to do a review of how she is doing as leader of the agency?

MR. EARNEST: That's a difficult hypothetical question to answer. What I'll tell you is that this is an issue that the President is obviously concerned about. That's something that he will review once they've had a chance to conduct their investigation of what exactly happened 10 days ago. That will be part of a broader review of the security posture here at the White House, and we're looking forward to the results.

Peter.

Q Josh, has the President been briefed on the air traffic control shutdown in the Chicago area?

MR. EARNEST: He has been, yes.

Q And what's the thinking here about the fact that one single individual could wreak so much havoc in such a huge chunk of the country when it comes to air travel?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the FAA is obviously hard at work on this. They've made tremendous progress in getting the system back up and running here. What the FAA has decided to do is to completely replace the central communications network, which will restore the system as quickly as possible. The FAA is assembling the new components at a remote site and they should begin arriving to the center soon.

There is an investigation underway by the FBI and the ATF into what exactly occurred, so I wouldn't want to get ahead of that specific investigation. But obviously a large chunk of our economy and the American traveling public relies on this piece of critical infrastructure, and it's something that is important to safeguard and I'm confident that this will be part of what the FAA and the ATF and the FBI all take a look at.

Q What's the President's level of concern, again, about the fact that one guy bent on doing something like this could cause such heavy damage to the air travel?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's important to remember that, apparently -- and, again, I don't want to get ahead of the investigation -- but apparently the one guy that you're referring to is somebody who actually worked at the center. So we're not talking about somebody who was just walking down the street and caused this significant problem. But I don't want to get ahead of the investigation that's currently underway by the ATF and the FBI. Ed.

Q Josh, when you said -- I just want to go to something basic on the "60 Minutes" interview. When you said it was not the President's intent to blame James Clapper, the question from Steve Kroft was, was that a complete surprise to you, Mr. President. And he said, James Clapper says they underestimated it. How is that not blaming the intelligence community?

MR. EARNEST: Because, Ed, on questions like this that the President has answered in the past, he has been very clear that as the Commander-in-Chief, he is the one who is personally responsible.

Q He never said that in the "60 Minutes" interview. He was asked, was it a surprise to you, and he didn't say yes, no, maybe -- he said Jim Clapper.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll tell you this -- that the President is the Commander-in-Chief and he is somebody who takes personal responsibility for the national security of the United States of America.

Q So if he takes that responsibility, why did he use the word "they" -- they underestimated? Why didn't he say "we"? Isn't Jim Clapper a part of the President's team?

MR. EARNEST: Of course he is. The President has confidence in Director Clapper and the President has confidence in the intelligence professionals who are responsible for providing him advice and intelligence about what's happening on the ground there. And that advice and intelligence has been critical to the success that we've had so far in combating the ISIL threat.

Q So Jim Clapper is not going to be fired? Because you would probably acknowledge this is a pretty big intelligence failure then if this is the way the President is going to characterize it, that they underestimated --

MR. EARNEST: I would not acknowledge that this -- I would not describe it that way.

Q Would not?

MR. EARNEST: I would not.

Q So the President didn't know for months that this was getting worse? And that's not a failure somewhere?

MR. EARNEST: No. What the President has been clear about is that what everybody has been surprised by was the rapid advance earlier this summer that ISIL was able to make across the Syria-Iraq border in the face of Iraqi security forces and in a way that allowed them to occupy significant swaths of territory in Iraq.

Q Right, but you're saying everybody was surprised. So if everybody in the U.S. government was surprised at that, nobody failed? Nobody is going to be held accountable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, predicting the will of foreign security forces to fight for their country is difficult. This is something that Director Clapper himself has acknowledged. What we're focused on is making sure that the President has the intelligence that he needs to build and lead an international coalition to take the fight to ISIL and employ the counterterrorism strategy that the President has laid out.

The President has full confidence in the ability of the intelligence community to provide that intelligence that's necessary to do that job. And their performance so far has been critical to our early success here.

Q A couple other topics. Prime Minister Netanyahu coming here Wednesday, I believe, to meet with the President; he gave a speech at the U.N. a few moments ago. The President at the U.N. last week said that when it comes to the Mideast peace process the status quo is unacceptable. So my question being, what does he think is holding things up right now? There's a cease-fire that's taken hold, so that was a positive development. What's holding it up now? And will he press the Prime Minister to get this process back on track?

MR. EARNEST: What we have said about this situation, Ed, is that it is clearly in the interest of both Israeli leaders and Palestinian leaders to advance beyond the current status quo. It is not in the interest of either side for the status quo to persist. And what's difficult about this situation is it will require these individual political leaders on either side to make very difficult political decisions. These are decisions that the international community -- that neither the international community nor the United States can make for them. These are decisions that they will be forced to make.

The good news is that it is in the interest of both sides to make these difficult decisions. And that is what continues to motivate the President, certainly Secretary Kerry, but other leaders in the international community, to press both sides to make the kinds of decisions that, while difficult, are ultimately in the best interest of both sides.

Q One other question on Yemen. On Friday, you said that this was sort of a model of the President's counterterror policy working -- Somalia as well, but Yemen in particular. Over the weekend, a series of headlines: A bombing in Yemen kills seven near hospital; a car bombing kills at least 15. And a splinter group of al Qaeda -- about 24 hours after you

told us on Friday that this was a good model -- a splinter group of al Qaeda fires a rocket in the direction of the U.S. Embassy in Yemen. Do you stand behind what you said Friday?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely.

Q And is this really a model for the world to see?

MR. EARNEST: What's a model, Ed, is the counterterrorism strategy that this administration has put in place to mitigate and deter -- to degrade, if you will -- the threat that is posed by extremists to the U.S. homeland. There is no doubt that there are local forces on the ground in Yemen that are not American, that are taking the fight to extremists in that country. Does there continue to be a threat emanating from Yemen? Absolutely, there does. But right now, that threat has been mitigated through the use of this counterterrorism strategy that the President has laid out, which is building up the capacity of local forces to take the fight to these extremist groups, to build up the capacity of the central government with broad, international support to try to strengthen and stabilize the country. And where necessary --

Q -- you put in place a counterterror strategy to deny them a safe haven, as well as what you just said -- mitigate the threat. It sounds like they have a safe haven.

MR. EARNEST: Ed, these are individuals who -- these are extremists groups who are hiding in Yemen, who are under continual pressure from local forces on the ground who are taking the fight to them. These are individuals who live in fear 24 hours a day of being the next victim in an airstrike, either by the Yemeni government or by international forces to take them out. And what that has done is it has applied continual pressure to them to make it much more difficult for them to strengthen the United States. They continue to be a threat, make no mistake.

This is something that we need to be vigilant about. This is something that is the focal point of the efforts of our intelligence community and our military, and this is something that we work very hard to mitigate. And that is -- but it does provide a useful model for demonstrating how an extremist organization will not just be able to freely operate even in a country that doesn't have a -- or at least didn't have a strong central government.

And because we have seen in very real tragic terms what can happen if an extremist organization is granted a safe haven if continual pressure is not applied to them, that is what allowed the al Qaeda network under Osama bin Laden to successfully execute a large-scale, catastrophic terrorist attack here in the U.S. And because of the implementation of this strategy, we've made that much, much harder for these extremist organizations. But you can't take a day off. This is something that people are focused on 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks. Moving to India. India has been opposed to the Trade Facilitation Agreement at the WTO, and I'm wondering if the President plans on talking specifically about that agreement with Prime Minister Modi tonight, or tomorrow.

MR. EARNEST: To be honest with you, Cheryl, I don't know if that's on the agenda but we can take a look at that, and after the meetings tomorrow we can give you a sense of whether or not that came up.

Michelle.

Q Josh, also on Modi. What is the single-most important narrative discussion that we should be focused on as a sign that this administration wants to take ties further than previous administrations?

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, I think the thing that I would highlight for you is the robust nature of the relationship between the United States and India, such that it can't be reduced to one specific issue. There are so many ways in which the U.S. government interacts with the India government in pursuit of our mutual interests that it's hard to identify just one. Whether it's security cooperation or economic cooperation, even agreements related to reducing the causes of climate change, that we're confident that we can advance the ball down the field by working closely with our counterparts in India.

Q Is there no specific top goal, though? What is your top ask out of this visit?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, again, what I would underscore here is that we have the kind of strategic partnership that is focused on a wide variety of areas. And whether it's security and counterterrorism, or strengthening the economy, or a host of other regional issues, that there is a broad framework where India and the U.S. work closely together to advance our shared interests. And that underscores the significance of the relationship between the United States and India, which is the world's largest democracy.

Yes, Tamara.

Q Coming out of those two meetings, are you expecting any announcements of any kind, or is this more of just like a get-to-know-you kind of meeting? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know if President Obama and the newly elected Prime Minister of India have met before. I suspect they have not, but don't fact-check me on that. If they have, it has not been recently, and they certainly haven't met since the Prime Minister took office. So this will be an important opportunity for them to spend some time talking about the relationship between our two countries. We certainly value the strong relationship that we have with India, and this was a relationship that was strengthened under the leadership of the previous Prime Minister. And the President wants to make sure that we continue that strong relationship between our two countries.

Q And regarding the Secret Service stuff, I have sort of an aesthetic question, which is that it's kind of unpleasant looking out there right now on Pennsylvania Avenue. There are at the moment two layers of gates that look like bike racks in front of the big fences.

And I'm assuming one of those layers might be for Prime Minister Modi, but is this a permanent situation? Should people get used to little fences and big fences? How long can we anticipate the aesthetics to be such as they are?

MR. EARNEST: Tamara, I'd refer you to the Secret Service for the details about the deployment of specific security precautions. What you're highlighting, though, is the very difficult challenge of balancing the need to protect the President, the First Family, and the White House with the need to ensure that all of those of us who work here at the White House have access to this building. There's also a need to ensure that tourists have access to one of the more popular tourist destinations in our nation's capital. There are thousands of people that visit the White House just about every day to tour the White House. They are essentially touring the seat of government of the United States. They're touring the house of the President of the United States. But they're also touring a museum that contains artifacts and paintings and art that are a testament to the strength of our democracy.

So there's a very unique position that the White House holds, and it presents a significant challenge for the Secret Service as they try to balance all of those equities. But it's something that they are continually refining and they are continually looking for ways to improve on it. And the President continues to have confidence in their ability to perform their very difficult function.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Josh. I want to go back to the "60" interview and your comment that predicting the will of fighters is difficult. But isn't analysis at the heart of what intelligence does? It sounds as if you're interpreting this as a misinterpretation of data rather than a massive intelligence failure.

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's certainly not how I would describe the situation. I think Director Clapper himself was pretty candid about how difficult this work is. And ultimately what you are trying to assess is the ability or the willingness of individual fighters in another country to fight for their own country.

Q But isn't part of that the other side of it, the fact that Islamic radicals had been expanding in Syria and Iraq for two years; the journalists frequently pointed out that foreign fighters were streaming into Syria? We know the Agency had people there for years; they were embeds. So is it part of the other side of the analysis that people who are on this side? So the growth of the foreign fighters, the growth of the Islamic radicals who are expanding, wouldn't that have been an indication of how difficult it was for the other side?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would defer to the intelligence community to provide greater insight to you about what kinds of things fed into this broader assessment. But clearly, there are multiple factors in this one equation. One of the factors is the capacity -- and in

this case, even the growing capacity -- of the radical extremists in Syria. Another factor was the will of Iraq security forces and their willingness to try to fight for their own country.

The other factor that went into this is what sort of impact did the divisive way in which Prime Minister Maliki was leading the country affected the willingness of Iraqi security forces to fight. The other factor here is trying to determine what exactly were the ambitions of the extremists in Syria. The other factor is what sort of environment would those extremist fighters find themselves in once they crossed the border. Would they be warmly accepted by the local population? Would the local population resist? Would there be something in the middle?

There are a lot of factors that went into sort of drawing -- making this assessment. And that's why it's so difficult to do. But what we are focused on now is trying to put together an assessment, as the intelligence community has so far successfully done, to make sure the President has the information that he needs to build and lead this broader international coalition to counter, degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. That's the focal point of the efforts over at the wide array of intelligence agencies that exist in the federal government. And that is advice the President will continue to rely on. To their credit, because of their professionalism and performance so far, they have contributed in a very important way to the early success that we've had.

Q And if I can ask you quickly about the Secret Service. The most recent incident had a lot of people asking how is it possible for somebody just to get into the White House -- a very common-sense question. And now you have this additional report over the weekend about 2011 and the shooting, and how long it took them to assess what really happened. Should the American people have confidence that the President and his family are safe?

MR. EARNEST: The President does. The President does.

Jeff.

Q Given the risk before, what gives you confidence now that the Iraqi forces will be an effective -- effectively be able to counter ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question and an important one because it is an important part of this counterterrorism strategy. There are three things that I would point to, Jeff, just to answer your question very directly. The first is, there has been a commitment by the United States and our coalition partners to ramp up our training and equipping and assistance to the security forces. So we would anticipate that these forces will be better trained, they'll be better equipped, and that they will have more of what they need to successfully defend their country.

The second thing -- and in some ways this might be the most important thing -- is the formation of a new central government in Baghdad that reflects the diversity of that country. By having a government that unites the diverse nation of Iraq to confront the ISIL threat, you can count on, or you would expect that that would lead to a more

integrated, diverse Iraqi security force that's more willing to put their lives on the line to protect their country. And we would anticipate that there would be a benefit to the Iraqi security forces from a more inclusive, more effective central government on Baghdad.

The third thing -- and this is also important -- is we're now seeing that those Iraqi security forces are being backed up American military airpower and by the military airpower of our coalition partners. That will certainly enhance the performance of Iraqi security forces on the battlefield.

But the reason the question that you're asking is so important goes to something that somebody mentioned earlier, which is ground forces of some kind will be required to take the fight to ISIL on the ground. And the open question has been, in the minds of some, is who will make up those ground forces. The President is determined that American ground forces will not be participating in a combat role in Iraq; that it will be the responsibility of Iraqi security forces to take the fight to ISIL.

That's why it's so important for us to ramp up our assistance and training for those Iraqi security forces. It's why it's so important that the central government in Baghdad govern that country in an inclusive way to unite the country and unite the security forces to meet that threat. And it's why it's so important that the United States is working closely with our coalition partners provide some military airpower to back up the efforts of Iraqi security forces on the ground.

Q Do you see any evidence on the first two points here, aside from -- I mean, we know that U.S. forces and allied forces are helping the bombing campaign. But on the first two points you made, do you see evidence that that's actually happened?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President discussed in his "60 Minutes" interview that we have started to hear the right things from Prime Minister Abadi and other leaders of the Iraqi government that they're committed to governing that country in an inclusive way. One data point I could point you to is, last week, when the President traveled to the United Nation General Assembly, he convened a meeting of the Sunni-led nations who are part of our military operations in Syria at beginning of last week. Prime Minister Abadi, the Shia leader of Iraq, joined that meeting.

The previous Prime Minister, his predecessor Prime Minister Maliki, had a very tenuous relationship with the Sunni-led governments in the region. But here you had, with the leadership of the American President, the Shia Prime Minister of Iraq being willing to sit down with the Sunni leaders of those other countries in the region. And that is an indication that he is committed to the kind of inclusive governing agenda that we think is so important to our success here.

As it relates to improve training and equipping, those are the kinds of things that you would see over time. There had been some isolated data points to indicate that the performance of Iraqi security forces has improved. For example, Iraqi security forces were successful in retaking the Mosul Dam. This is a critical piece of infrastructure in

Iraq. They did so with the backing of military power, but previously -- military airpower I should say. Previously, their forces had been overrun by ISIL forces. And so that is evidence that their performance on the battlefield is improving.

There was also a pretty contentious fight around Haditha Dam -- another piece of critical infrastructure in western Iraq -- and what we did see was that Iraqi security forces were able to repel ISIL forces that did have designs on trying to take over that piece of infrastructure. So there are a couple of pieces of evidence to indicate that their performance is improving.

Anita.

Q Just following on the Prime Minister visit today -- you mentioned a couple things on the agenda. Several human rights groups today have come out and urged the President to take up the human rights issues with the Prime Minister today. I wondered if you knew if that was on the agenda. It's a variety of things they're talking about, including the violence against women. Do you have any idea if that's going to come up?

MR. EARNEST: The issue of basic universal human rights is something that is frequently discussed in the President's meetings with world leaders around the globe. So I don't have anything specific to say about this particular meeting, but I wouldn't be surprised if this issue that we considered to be a priority in our relations with countries all around the world is raised in the context of the meetings over the next couple of days.

Q And yesterday, he was in -- the Prime Minister was in

-- or I guess he's been in New York for a few days. Did you notice the reception he received at Madison Square Garden -- 20,000 people sort of screaming, chanting his name? I think some painted his face on their body. I just wondered -- it just was like kind of a rock star reception, and I was wondering if you were surprised by that, just how popular he is.

MR. EARNEST: I read news reports. I was not aware of the body paint that may have been involved in the event.

I think the thing that I would say is that the strong turnout at that event and the enthusiastic reaction I do think highlights the deep cultural ties that exist between the United States and India; that there are so many immigrants from India to the United States that are now interwoven into communities all across the country. And I think that just highlights one other way in which in the relationship between our two countries is so important.

So, yes, interesting.

Q And then, finally, I saw that it's a working dinner tonight and it's closed. Do you expect a readout after? Just so we know.

MR. EARNEST: We probably won't have a readout today, but there will be more formal aspects of the visit tomorrow with the formal arrival ceremony, a bilateral meeting, and then an opportunity for you to hear from both leaders after the meeting as well.

Q A quick follow-up?

MR. EARNEST: Go ahead, Goyal.

Q My question is, Josh, that India has been demanding the most-wanted terrorist based now in Pakistan, including Brahamdagh. And also, Zawahiri has threatened that next his mission will be to attack India. And also, these comments were repeated by Prime Minister Modi at the United Nations, and that's what he said -- the relations between India and Pakistan and the U.S., based on the mutual interests. What I'm asking you -- all these issues you think will be discussed? Because Prime Minister Modi is asking the United States, and may ask President Obama to help India in this, because India wants peace in the region and around the world. Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: The United States wants peace in the region as well. And we value the strong security cooperation that we already have with the Indian government. We value that strategic partnership, and the President believes that strengthening that partnership even further will be a critical part of this specific meeting.

Thanks very much, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

1:31 P.M. EDT