

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

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

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Before we get started here, I wanted to introduce Brett McGurk. He is the President's Special Envoy to our Global Counter-ISIL Coalition. And he has prepared some materials to discuss with you today some of the progress that we're seeing on the ground against ISIL in Iraq and in Syria. And then he's got a little time afterwards to take a handful of questions from all of you.

So we'll do that before we go back to our regularly scheduled programming. So, Brett, I'll turn it over to you.

MR. MCGURK: Thanks, Josh. So I thought what we'd do -- I'd take about 10 minutes to put you into the picture of what we're seeing day to day in this very difficult, extraordinarily complex fight against ISIL. I can't overstate the complexity of this, and yet despite that, we now have some real traction against this very serious enemy.

We define ISIL -- it's a global organization; that's why we've built a global coalition of 66 partners to combat it. It's really defined as the core in Iraq and Syria, the phony, self-proclaimed caliphate. There are then networks -- global networks, propaganda networks, foreign-fighter networks, financing networks -- so we've kind of gotten a handle on those. And then affiliates, about eight of them around the world. Of course, Libya is one we're particularly concerned about, and we took some action there this week.

What I wanted to focus on today, just about 10 minutes as an opening, is the core in Iraq and Syria, because there's been a great deal of focus on there. And, as the President has said, we have to defeat them in the core and show that this is not an expanding

movement; it's actually a shrinking movement. And so to defeat them in the core is how you actually begin to unravel the entire global network, and we've begun to see that now in some concrete ways.

So there's a map here, which I'll just go around very briefly, kind of clockwise, to describe what's happening and just how complex this is, and what we're working to do.

The number one, that is what we call the Manbij pocket. It's about a 98-kilometer strip of border with Turkey. It is the last remaining outlet of ISIL's territory with the outside world. Turkey has done a very good job of beginning to close down that border, and the President spoke with President Erdogan earlier this week, and that was of course one of the topics of conversation.

Just to situate this map real quick -- orange is areas that ISIL controls. Green are areas that they've lost over the last 18 months, so you can see the constriction of the areas they used to control. And red are areas in which they've actually made some gains. So just to the west of this number one is where they've tried to push out, and we call that the Mar'a line. They've been trying to push out there for about a year. We think we've halted that flow.

But the Russian air campaign in this part of the country has dramatically complicated the picture. The Russians, in working with the regime, have cut off the main supply corridor coming from Turkey into Aleppo. The Russians say that's to cut off the weapons corridor; it's actually primarily a humanitarian corridor. And this has really created a real humanitarian crisis. It's also completely shaken up the situation north of there to the Turkish border. And it's one of the most complex areas of the map, which I'm happy to talk about in more detail.

Number two is Raqqa. Raqqa, of course, is their main headquarters. It's where we think most of the leaders are. It's where plots like Paris are planned and coordinated. And so, therefore, we are focused on eliminating the enemy in Raqqa every single day. We're doing airstrikes there constantly, but most importantly, not just the military part, we're fusing information from across the government and, most importantly, from across the coalition about what we know about this enemy -- about how it finances itself, how it communicates, how it funds itself. We know more now than we ever did before, and we're beginning to constrict its hold on Raqqa.

This dam just to the northwest, Tishreen Dam, that was the main roadway from Manbij to Raqqa. It's now sliced off. ISIL can no longer access that. And that was an operation by Syrian Kurds and Arabs about a month ago.

And then, if I move to number three -- number three right now is the town of al-Shaddadi. Shaddadi, an operation, started about three or four days ago, and it's a very complex operation and it includes thousands of fighters -- I won't get into the specific numbers -- but about 40 percent of them are non-Kurds, 60 percent are Kurd.

When I was in Kobani a couple weeks ago, the main focus was in getting all these disparate groups together and putting them together to kind of consolidate with some coherence and mass to move on ISIL, particularly in Shaddadi. And if you think about it, the kind of metaphor we use, there's a lot of different groups that are kinds of shards of wood that want to fight ISIL; it's our job to try to pull them together not just in bundle but in a bat. And what you have going now towards Shaddadi is a baseball bat. It's Kurds, it's Arabs, it's Christians -- a number of forces with good command and control, good coordination with our air power, and they're having some real effect.

But this is -- again, there's a military side, but what I'm primarily focused on also is there's a politics to this -- who's going to govern a town like Shaddadi afterwards. It's primarily an Arab town, and we're working very closely to make sure that locals are in control of that town once it's cleared of ISIL. So that is still ongoing. It will unfold over the coming days. So far, though, it's going fairly well.

Number four is Sinjar. Sinjar was the main connector between Raqqa and Mosul. And Shaddadi is the last piece of cutting off this connection between Raqqa and Mosul and making sure that they simply cannot travel those roads anymore. And so it's been Sinjar, Shaddadi, cutting off the connection between Raqqa and Mosul.

Sinjar was for primarily Kurdish Peshmerga fighters. Sinjar is where ISIL really broke onto the international scene with everything we know about the Yazidis and the Yazidi slaves. In fact, they used to take their -- they would take these young women off Sinjar Mountain, collect them, separate them, and then bring them to Shaddadi to kind of trade them as slaves.

So what we're doing here is not only a military operation, it's kind of a moral imperative to take these areas from ISIL. And that's one reason we're so focused on it. But Sinjar was very important because it cut off the main highway into Mosul.

And I'll get to Mosul. Mosul, of course, everybody asks about -- when are we going to move on Mosul? We don't answer that question because we won't put a timeline on it. But Mosul is already started. We're already working to constrict it. We're pooling all of our information, intelligence, to basically learn more about them. Doing airstrikes into Mosul every single night based on that -- upon that intelligence. And again, most importantly, working the local politics. So I'm in constant touch with our ambassador on the ground in Baghdad, with our diplomats in the field up in Erbil. And then, again, taking these kind of shards of wood together and turning them into a baseball bat.

So what we've done for Mosul -- you'll see Makhmur on the map -- that's where we're setting up a joint -- a headquarters, pooling all of these fighters that are going to fight ISIL. It's Sunni tribes, it's local notables from Ninawa province, it's Iraqi Peshmerga, and it's the Iraqi army.

So in Munich last week, for example, I saw both President Barzani of the Kurdistan region and Prime Minister Abadi to sit together to talk about how are we going to deal with Mosul not only militarily, but also politically. That is something we're very focused

on, and it's actually coming along fairly well.

I'll skip to seven, because seven is Tikrit. Tikrit, an iconic city in the heart of Salah ad-Din province, it's where ISIL moved into in the summer of 2014 and totally depopulated the city -- killed thousands of people in massacres they put on YouTube. It was retaken last year. And then we focused very hard, after the military operations, on what we call stabilization. And that means returning internally displaced people, getting them back to their homes, getting the lights back on. Extremely, extremely difficult to do, especially when we don't have large numbers of forces on the ground to do this.

We're working through the U.N. and through our local partners. But Tikrit has been a real success. About 90 to 99 percent of the people are now back in their homes. And one reason of that is very good cooperation from the Iraqi government and Prime Minister Abadi, and he's delegating a lot of authority to the locals in these areas, so the governor of Salah ad-Din province and to local Sunni leaders in these areas that kind of take charge.

And then through the Global Coalition, we have a stabilization fund -- about \$80 million now -- to fund these very quick-hit rapid projects. So Tikrit was a proof of concept. It actually worked pretty well.

And now we're looking to do the same thing in Ramadi, which is number eight on the map. Security operations in Ramadi finished about a few weeks ago. There are still some things ongoing. But now we're very focused on the stabilization piece, trying to get people back into their homes, and most importantly, trying to get de-mining, and IEDs out of the streets and out of the homes. The governor of Anbar province -- I was in Baghdad about 10 weeks ago -- I talked to the governor who was just in Ramadi; every second or third home is wired with IEDs and land mines.

So to get people back, we have to get the de-mining teams in. That's Iraqi de-mining teams but also international de-mining teams. The foreign minister of Norway will be here later this week. Norway has taken a global leadership role in this type of issue. We'll be talking to them about that. So it's setting up the conditions for Ramadi to get the stabilization moving. That's, again, already started. We have -- about 36 electricity generators have come in; about 115 more will be coming in in phase two. Very, very hard. Very painstaking. Very tedious. It requires the government of Baghdad to delegate authority to local leaders in Anbar province. And that's something we're working with them on every single day. So the Ramadi stabilization piece about what comes after ISIL is a real focus of ours.

Number nine, in Haditha -- I point out Haditha because there's Al Asad Air Base there. And early on in this campaign, President Obama made the decision to put our forces and our Special Forces out at Al Asad Air Base. We were joined by some of our coalition partners. And it was really -- I've been out there a few times -- it is Wild West territory. It was very difficult. Had we not gotten out there when we did, this entire area would have been controlled by ISIL. But we started working with about two or three tribes, reconnecting with relationships we had previously. Those tribes are now fully mobilized.

We have about 10,000 tribal fighters now in Anbar Province. They're not only defending against ISIL, they're now moving and operating on offensive operations, and doing a great job. And that's because of our great operators who are out there.

Number ten is Rutbah. Rutbah is the highway from Amman to Baghdad. We had a team last week in Amman. King Abdullah is, of course, here this week. We saw the King last week in Amman with his entire interagency team -- his chief of defense, his intelligence chief, his foreign minister -- to talk about western Anbar province and Jordan, and the role that Jordan can play, and the importance of opening up this economic lifeline. And that's something that we're also going to be looking to do. It's just not defeating ISIL, it's about what comes after, and opening up the economic interconnections between these places that ISIL has severed.

I'll just focus last on eleven -- that's Palmyra. It's important because it's the dark red. It's very difficult for ISIL now to take territory. The last major offensive operation it really had was in May of last year, when it retook Ramadi. Little things here and there. But Palmyra is -- as we push ISIL from the north, they try to fill space to the south and southwest, and it's also something we're focused very much with our Jordanian partners on. And that's one reason King Abdullah will be here this week, and we look forward to seeing him. He'll, of course, see the President.

So all of this, it's military, it's economic, it's diplomatic, it's political. It's extraordinarily complex. We've made a great deal of progress, particularly over the last six months after we put a lot of the pieces together. And I think you'll see over the coming weeks and months more of that kind of coming into shape. Shaddadi is something that's happening this week, but there will be more things like it over the coming week, which I won't really preview.

And, of course, to pull this all together, we're in constant communication with our national security team and the President. And the President will be coming to the State Department on Thursday -- as he's come to the Pentagon in the past; and we, of course, have meetings here in the Situation Room constantly -- but to talk about the political and diplomatic piece of this, which is critical to the long-term success.

So that is the core -- shrinking the core in Iraq and Syria, which is fundamental to our overall strategy, and at the same time drawing up the global networks, and of course focusing on the affiliates. One thing I'll say about the global networks -- my final point -- is finances, because I think you've been briefed by my colleague, Adam, and others about the finances. It took a long time to figure out how is this organization financing itself, what are its weaknesses, and how can we go after it. That was a very intensive intelligence-driven exercise on our part and with the coalition. We learned an awful lot. And then we began to systematically, working with our DOD colleagues, rooting out their economic infrastructure.

We know that ISIL is now cutting its salary to its fighters by about 50 percent, and I think you're going to see that continue to decrease. Their ability to fund themselves has taken a substantial hit, and we're going to make sure that it continues on that trajectory.

So with that, that's a very short overview of an extraordinarily complex situation. But I'm happy to take questions.

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, do you want to start?

Q Thanks. What can we say about the current numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria? And we've been hearing a lot about Saudi Arabia making these offers to possibly use ground troops or do something more. What can you say about that, as well?

MR. MCGURK: So, foreign fighters is a great question because the foreign fighter question kind of exemplifies why this is something -- we've never seen something like this before. So total foreign fighters we've seen -- about 35,000 from 120 countries around the world.

Q Traveling?

MR. MCGURK: No, total number that we've seen over time. We've gotten that down now to about -- I think the high-end estimate now is about 25,000. But if you put that in perspective -- and it depends on who you talk to, who were following this in the Afghanistan days in the '80s -- there's about twice as many of jihadist foreign fighters that went into a theater, and that was only a handful of countries. So that's why this is such a global threat like something we've never seen.

So what are we trying to do? It's not only working with our partners in Turkey to close the border and to do a good job in terms of who comes through Turkey, and the Turks have actually done a very good job at that recently. But also the source countries -- they're coming from 120 countries all around the world, and we need those countries to share information with Turkey, and we've also improved that quite a bit. But it's still an extraordinary challenge. We want to make sure that foreign fighters cannot get into Syria, and once they get into Syria, they'll never get out. So we're seeing some of them now try to go to Libya. It's much harder for them to come into Syria, and those that get into Syria are finding a pretty miserable go of it and we want to keep it that way.

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is also a key partner in the coalition, a real leader in terms of the counter-messaging, particularly religiously based messaging that we obviously cannot take the lead on. And so we very much encourage that. And when they come to us with some ideas, we're very much open to those ideas because we want them to be a part of this campaign within the umbrella of our broader coalition.

MR. EARNEST: Ron.

Q You mentioned shrinking the core. In terms of the capability that ISIS had to plot or orchestrate the attack in Paris, what evidence is there that you have degraded that capability? Is there any? And do you think you have, or do you not know whether they have the same capability that they had a few months ago when they orchestrated that attack?

MR. MCGURK: It's a great question. They have a sophisticated external plotting network. We know more about it now than we did before, and we're continuing to learn more about it. And as we've shown, as we've done with similar networks, we will learn about it and then we will completely uproot it and eradicate it.

What makes ISIL a little bit different is that it's a state-like entity. It tries to pretend that it's a state, it controls territory, it controls territory with millions of people. It plans operations in Raqqa, it then sends its operatives, we believe, from Raqqa up through that Manbij pocket, and they're able to sneak out. It's harder for them to get out now. So we really want to do two things: We want to make sure that border is sealed, and we want to take the territory away so they can't move.

As the map shows, as I mentioned, the Tishreen Dam, from Raqqa to Manbij is kind of how they used to go and then get out. That's why we had to take away that Tishreen Dam. It's basically a bridge that crosses the Euphrates. It's much harder for them to move now, so we're going to continue doing that. And as we know who is part of that network, we'll of course target them, and that's something our DOD colleagues are focused on.

Q But is that capability dependent on them physically moving out of Raqqa? Are there communications abilities that they have that you've been able trace? You mentioned money, cutting salaries or pay of some fighters. That's the kind of thing I'm looking for to see what evidence there is.

MR. MCGURK: So they try to do two things. They try to inspire lone-wolf attacks, as we've seen. And so we've worked very closely with the private sector, with Twitter, with Facebook, everything to eliminate their ability to do that, and we're doing some other things to eliminate their ability to do that. But that's kind of lone-wolf one-off attacks they're trying to inspire.

But they also are planning -- trying to plan bigger things. So Paris, for example, was we believe planned in Raqqa, planned by some of their foreign fighter external operatives. But, again, we find these people, and we do, and we're able to kill them. So, Jihadi John. Jihadi John was one of the main guys on the Internet trying to inspire lone-wolf attacks. That was his main reason for being a part of the organization of ISIL. Not only did we shut down his network, we were able to find him and kill him. So we'll continue to do that.

MR. EARNEST: Andrew.

Q I was just wondering what you -- in your diplomatic engagement, what you say to Syrian rebels who think that perhaps the United States hasn't been a reliable ally to them. In recent months, people have been pummeled in Aleppo, and the U.S. hasn't been able to step in and save them.

MR. MCGURK: Well, I think we're doing an awful lot. But one thing we're doing right now is working very hard at the cessation of hostilities. And nobody is under any illusions for how difficult this will be. And my colleague, Michael Ratney, is talking to all the

groups now. And we are working particularly in this area north of Aleppo. Because the area north of Aleppo is not Nusra, it's not ISIL, it's moderate opposition groups. So if the cessation of hostilities is to take root and hold, we should see a serious de-escalation of violence there. And so the conflict in Syria between the regime and the opposition -- and we've had a lot of discussions with our partners on this and with, of course, with the Russians and everyone else through this Vienna format.

And it's the type of conflict that can go on and on forever. And if you look at the numbers, just open-source numbers from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and other sources, about 100,000 combatants, give or take, have been killed. More fighters on the regime side have been killed than the opposition side.

This is something that can just go on and on forever. And if the Russians don't make some changes in their behavior, and the regime doesn't make some changes in their behavior, and we can't have a serious political process for a transition -- which is now locked into U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 -- this will go on forever.

So what we're trying to do is to deescalate the conflict and to lock into place a cessation of hostilities, which will begin to change the dynamic -- to get humanitarian supplies into these besieged areas. We've seen some progress in that. But that's one reason we're working so hard at that right now.

So we'll know more next week about how this is going. We have a lot of people working very hard at it.

Q If this ceasefire or cessation of hostilities doesn't hold, is the U.S. credibility among those rebel groups further damaged?

MR. MCGURK: I think Secretary Kerry spoke to that before the Congress today. We're, of course, preparing for all contingencies.

Q You saw some car bombs in Damascus this week. Is it the U.S. assessment that ISIS has been able to infiltrate what has been an Assad stronghold? And if you could also talk -- what you're seeing in Libya. How is the growth of foreign fighters there and the kind of structure they're building different than what is happening in Syria?

MR. MCGURK: So ISIL took credit for those car bombings. It's signature ISIL-type attacks, and we have no reason to doubt it was ISIL. They've done a number of attacks in Damascus before. ISIL is really a threat to everybody. And one thing all of our partners in the region -- we try to make this point all the time -- that there's different threat perceptions in every capital around the region, but ISIL is a threat to absolutely everybody. And they're a threat, frankly, to the people in Damascus. And that's why we want to unite ranks as much as possible against ISIL.

Libya is just a bit of a different situation. You don't have the sectarian dynamic; you don't have a lot of the dynamics we have in Iraq and Syria. But we do see ISIL using the same tactics that it used in Syria. So it establishes itself. It eliminates all competitors and it tries to attract, through the migrant flow in Africa, it tries to attract foreign fighters into

Libya. Its own open-source propaganda in Dabiq Magazine is now telling people, hey, don't go into the caliphate in Syria, come to Libya. So it's trying to attract as many foreign fighters to Libya as possible. And where it has roots, such as Sirte, it eliminates all of its competitors. And it's trying to project attacks outwards, as we've seen in Tunisia.

So, look, it's a serious threat and it's something that, obviously, we're focusing on every day. But the sequence of events in Libya that we want to see is to have the Libyan political process completed, and we're hoping to have a vote in the Libyan parliament to approve the new Government of National Accord, from which we can, as a whole international community -- which is locked into a U.N. Security Council resolution -- support that government and help them get on its feet. But when we see a threat emerging in Libya, we won't hesitate to act in the meantime.

Q Can you just clarify, given the proximity of Libya to Europe, is there more of a focus not only on these affiliates but on having those affiliates act externally -- more external attacks?

MR. MCGURK: Yes, a lot of focus is on Libya. So when we had -- the coalition got together in Rome a couple weeks ago with Secretary Kerry, and a main topic of conversation was Libya. We're now flying -- I think the Italians announced yesterday -- flying our ISR out of Italy. So Libya is a huge focus, and they've already launched external attacks from Libya. But one reason we launched the attack the other day on a leading terrorist who was responsible for the attacks in Tunisia and on a ISIL training camp was because, when we see an ISIL training camp and we see them doing pushups and calisthenics there every day, they're not there to lose weight. I mean, they're there to train for something, and we're not going to let them do that.

MR. EARNEST: Nadia.

Q I'm actually surprised that you didn't talk in detail about the efforts to fight ISIS in Syria, considering that you talked about the coalition, the Russians claiming that they are fighting there, the Syrian regime, et cetera. So considering that ISIS is not part of this cessation of hostility agreement that was signed yesterday, can you just put this in a picture, where are we now in terms of ISIS and its gaining territories or not in Syria?

And also, one part in this communiqué that I'm sure you saw yesterday -- that is says that the commission will identify both the areas under ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. And you know very well, probably more than most people, that Jabhat al-Nusra was under Jaysh al-Fatah. So how difficult is it for all parties, actually, including the Russians, to target this Syrian opposition, the moderate one, if there's -- Jaysh al-Fatah and they are very close to Jabhat al-Nusra?

MR. MCGURK: It's an excellent question. And ISIL -- we have not seen them launch major operations in Syria for some time. It's doing some things right now -- actually northeast of Aleppo, trying to take away some territory from the regime. That sort of stuff

goes on day to day. But delineating where ISIL is, is fairly easy; delineating where Nusra is in some parts of the country is also fairly easy. But we also have these difficult parts of the country where things are marbled together.

So if you read the statement carefully, we've agreed to try to delineate as best we can, but also the groups that sign up to the cessation of hostilities will not be attacked by the Russians and the regime. It's very clear. So if groups are signing up to the cessation of hostilities and those attacks continue, that will be a clear violation of the cessation of hostilities. So it's very clearly stated and signed on to by the Russians.

So we have to see how it is implemented, but this will all be -- the proof of the pudding is in the eating in these things. So we'll know once we get into the implementation phase. And if the Russians and the regime are continuing to attack opposition groups that are part of the cessation of hostilities, they will be in total violation of the cessation of hostilities.

So we'll know more as we get into next week. But you hit the nail on the head of a very difficult question, which we need to delineate as best we can. But we have an agreement from the Russians and, again, we have to see. But opposition groups that agree to the cessation of hostilities will not be attacked. So that's the agreement. And nobody is under any illusions of how difficult this will be, nor are we under any illusions that we can take their word as it stands. We have to see. I mean, the test will be in the implementation.

Q You touched on this a bit, but can you kind of talk specifically about what comes next in Libya? You mentioned the recent airstrikes. Is this going to be an incremental approach where you expect to carry out more airstrikes as the political process plays out? And you said that this is a big focus in Europe. Do you expect a lot of cooperation from the European partners on this?

MR. MCGURK: I would expect an awful lot of cooperation --Italy, France, a lot of those countries, particularly in Rome, are talking about taking a leading role, but mainly a leading role in supporting a new Government of National Accord. So there's been a great effort and emphasis in getting that government formation process finalized.

So, at the same time, though, we're not just letting these threats fester, as you saw earlier this week. But we want to see that government formed just as soon as possible. It's very important. My colleague, Jonathan Winer, our Envoy in Libya, is working this day and night with Martin Kobler, the U.N. Special Envoy. So we want to see that government formed. And once that government is formed, I think the international community and our partners in Europe will swing behind it.

Meanwhile, when we see threats emerging such as ISIL, and threats emerging that threaten us or our partners in a very direct way, we won't hesitate to act.

Q Brett, would you agree that the current counter-ISIL strategy is effective?

MR. MCGURK: I think if you look back to where we were only 18 months ago -- and I was in Iraq when Mosul fell; I was in Baghdad when we were having very serious conversations about the total collapse of Baghdad, about the fall of the Baghdad airport, about the fact that you had this entire fraying of an entire society; seven Iraqi army divisions simply totally collapsed -- if you go from that point to where we are now, I mean, I'll just take it from Iraq. Working as a coalition to rebuild an Iraqi security force that had been totally demoralized and almost on its back to getting them back up, to getting them trained, to bringing them back into some coherence -- that baseball bat analogy I used before -- and then to retake a city like Ramadi, one of the most difficult terrains in an urban environment to fight in -- I think we've made quite a bit of progress.

But my first point here was how difficult this was going to be. We always said it's going to take a long time. But if you go from where we were in the summer of 2014, and recognizing how difficult this is, and you just look at the map of taking away 40 percent of their territory in Iraq -- and it's going to continue to shrink -- we're having some good effect.

I mean, we're taking out about one to two of their main, key leaders every few days, and that's going to continue. And we're doing some things that obviously I won't talk about from the podium, but some momentum is beginning to build. They would flow freely from Raqqa to Mosul. They had the highway. And now they can't. That road is entirely cut off.

So we're going to continue to squeeze them, restrict them in Mosul, continue to squeeze and constrict them in Raqqa, and also continue to galvanize the entire international community against this threat, because it's a global challenge. That's also something that we began beginning in the summer of 2014.

So I think it has been effective, but nobody working with us every day is under any illusions of how difficult this is, of how sophisticated this organization is. I mean, its external plotting network is not just a bunch of leaders who are plotting; it's organic. They try to do lone-wolf attacks -- inspire lone-wolf attacks while they plan and try to do more sophisticated things.

So it's something that we try to stay ahead of every day. We, within our government, led by the President and the national security team, we try to have a pretty flat organization, working with fusing information from the Treasury Department, Defense Department, State Department, to stay ahead of what's happening. And I think that's actually -- we're doing a better job at that now than we were about a year ago. So we've got to keep at it.

But I think the momentum has turned. The foreign fighter numbers have begun to go down. And we're just going to keep at it.

Q I wanted to ask you about Turkey. Can you sort of talk a little bit about their role in all of this? They didn't seem to be too happy when you met with YPG in Kobani, and they have basically said the U.S. should either for us or against us. Can you respond to that

and sort of talk about how Turkey will play a role in the cessation of hostilities, but also making sure that they're not taking out the Kurdish fighters that we're partnered with?

MR. MCGURK: Yes. I've probably been to Turkey more than any country in the last 18 months. They're a critical partner of ours. I was last there with Vice President Biden. We're working with them extraordinarily closely. And, as I said when President Obama saw President Erdogan in Antalya for the G20, one of the main focuses of conversation was this 98-kilometer strip of border. We had some recommendations for the Turks; they had some recommendations for us. We've worked very closely together, and have made a real difference on that border. And so we're going to continue that very close partnership.

My trip to Kobani was primarily focused on, as I mentioned, getting the political cohesiveness -- not just Kurds but Arabs, Christians, other units -- getting them together, a political cohesiveness, to begin to move on Shaddadi. And that was the main purpose of the trip. And now, I think, the fact that the Shaddadi operation is underway, I think we feel pretty good about it.

But we're going to continue to work closely with Turkey day to day. They're one of the primary partners for us in this campaign. It's why the President spoke with President Erdogan for almost an hour and a half the other day. And we have to work on this closely together. So we can't succeed in this without Turkey.

MR. EARNEST: We'll do Jon and then Tara.

Q Yes, just a quick follow-up on the overall strategy and how effective. In your answer on the last 18 months, you talk about the territory that's been taken back in Syria and in Iraq. If you look at ISIL as an overall organization, and you factor in what they've been able to gain in Libya and the foreign fighters that have now started to go to Libya, and you see what they've done in terms of recruitment and inspiring followers globally, would you say that this organization is stronger or weaker now than it was 18 months ago? Not just the core here, but the overall.

MR. MCGURK: I think overall it's weaker. Look, a couple things. Some of the affiliates, such as Libya, it's ISIL taking advantage of an anarchic situation. They're not sending paratroopers into certain areas to start a franchise. Boko Haram is a preexisting problem, preexisting terrorist organization that now flies the flag of ISIL. So just because you have an ISIL affiliate pop up, it doesn't mean suddenly it's a fundamentally different situation. These are mostly locally driven events.

Libya is a little different; that's why we're concerned about it. But we look at how they recruit, and they recruit on three levels. One is these kind of sun-drenched scenes of the caliphate, and come live in this historic movement. That's actually a vast majority of their propaganda -- that it's a historic movement, it's expanding, we're going to go all the way to Rome, and come be a part of it. It's like 60 percent of the propaganda is that. It

doesn't get much attention because the second part is the gore and violence and the mayhem. That's a pretty small category of their propaganda. And then they have a religiously based message, which they also put out.

But that first primary propaganda effort on their part is no longer credible. So their chief spokesman, Adnani, when he speaks now, he is very much on the defensive, trying to explain, "Well, here's why we've lost all this territory, but we're coming back." It's a totally different message. And it's not inspiring people, I think, like it was 18 months ago. I mean, 18 months ago, when I'd be in Malaysia or Australia, there was a sense that ISIL was just totally on the march, and that was having an effect, a radicalizing effect. That's not the case anymore. It's shrinking. Their leaders are dying. And that's going to continue to be the case.

However, Jonathan, I'd just make the point, which I made in the beginning. Nobody here, working on this every day, is under any illusions for how difficult this is going to be, for how lethal this organization remains; for how hard it is to build not only a global coalition with all these different countries, but also a coalition of different actors on the ground; to be cohesive -- like I said, all these different shards of wood, to turn them into a bat to really fight. It's really hard. And given that, I think if you look at where we were 18 months ago until now, I think you can now see the progress and you'll see more I think over the coming months. But nobody is under any illusions for how hard this is going to be.

MR. EARNEST: Tara, I'll give you the last one, and we'll let Brett go.

Q Thanks for your presentation. I liked the maps. They're very helpful. And obviously you thought about this so carefully, it's really interesting to hear your perspective on it. And I liked the way you described how the global perspective of the 125 countries. You talked about the moral imperative, so I'm wondering you can tell me more about where that comes from. I mean, you talked about how they put the women into slavery, but then also, where does that lead the U.S.?

MR. MCGURK: Well, look, this is an organization that enslaves women, it destroys our common heritage, it murders anybody that disagrees with them. So it speaks for itself. But I was in northern Iraq with the Peshmerga before they did the Sinjar operation, and you could get a sense from the fighters and from President Barzani and the commanders that this wasn't simply a mission against a brutal enemy; it's against an enemy that is just different for what it's done to people. It also, though, exemplifies why the post-ISIL is so hard. And I'll tell you a story from that meeting, before that operation began.

A very senior Peshmerga commander told me he was dealing with all the local leaders, particularly the Yazidis, who are from this area, about, after the operation, who's going to govern and who's going to take charge. And we're very focused on, once areas are cleared, you don't have revenge attacks and tit for tat, because that can begin to unravel things very fast. We've seen that in the past. And this Peshmerga commander told me he was discussing this with an elderly Yazidi civilian from this area, talking about this fact -- what

comes after -- and he said the Yazidi elderly man said, you know, these people, Daesh, they took my wife, they took my three daughters, they took my sister, and all I have left in this life is my revenge against these people.

So that is what they've done to the psychology in some of these places. And so what we're working to do, as we clear out ISIL, is try to make sure there's a way -- working with the U.N. and the coalition -- to restore life to these areas so you don't get into these cycles of revenge. But, I mean, your question hit on something for why not only is it imperative upon all of us to defeat this enemy, but also imperative upon all of us to focus on what comes after. And so that's part of the campaign.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Brett.

MR. MCGURK: Thank you very much.

MR. EARNEST: So I know the map up here was a little hard to read from there. We have copies of the map that we can distribute on paper, so just contact our office and we'll make sure that we can get you a copy.

But obviously Brett's experience in the region and the amount of work that he has put into this makes him I think a pretty useful messenger in helping all of you and your readers and viewers and listeners understand exactly what our strategy is and what we are focused on to advance the interests of the United States but also to keep the American people safe. And that work is ongoing at a rather rapid pace, even on those days when it's not in the headlines. It's actually rare for Brett to spend a day in Washington, D.C. and so I thought it was important to make sure that we try to make sure that all of you were on his schedule.

Q Where is he usually based?

MR. EARNEST: Well, he is based here, but he spends so much time traveling in the region that it's unusual for him to spend an entire workday here in Washington, D.C. So we were pleased to have a little bit of his attention today.

Q He was good.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks. So with all that, Kevin, let's go to your questions on other topics.

Q I want to turn to the Supreme Court. So should Senate Republicans take the advice of Joe Biden from 1992 when he said action on Supreme Court nomination must be put off until after the election campaign is over, or Joe Biden of 2016 who insists the President's nominee should get full consideration?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I'd go with both. (Laughter.) Because Vice President Biden in 1992, in the same speech that you noted, said if the President consults and cooperates with the Senate or moderates his selections absent consultation, then his nominees may enjoy my support, as did Justices Kennedy and Souter. So we've observed in the past that

we can spend a lot of time sort of throwing quotes back and forth, and I think that's sort of indicative of some comments that the President made last week about how this process has become politicized. But when you consider the record of Senator Biden and his service on the Judiciary Committee, it's a record that's hard to beat. When you consider that he presided over the last time that the Senate voted to confirm a Supreme Court nominee in an election year, that was a nominee that was put forward by a Republican President, and Joe Biden was Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and ensured that Justice Kennedy got both a fair hearing and a timely yes-or-no vote. That's what we're asking the Senate to do.

There are a variety of examples of this. Senator Biden, more than anyone else, has ensured the fair confirmation of nine Supreme Court Justices. I don't think there's any other senator that can stake a claim to that kind of record. He wasn't just in the United States Senate so that he could confirm Supreme Court justices appointed by Democrats -- he often presided even in difficult situations, like an election year, of ensuring that even appointees of a Republican President were confirmed to the Supreme Court.

So I know there's often this old adage that sometimes politicians are reduced to the expression that people should do as I say, not as I did. In this instance, we actually want the Republicans in the Senate to do precisely as Vice President Biden did when he served in the Senate. And if so, it will allow the President's nominee when he puts that individual forward to get a fair hearing, to get a timely yes-or-no vote, and for the Supreme Court of the United States to function precisely as the Founders intended.

Q Obviously, senators are going to pick and choose quotes. Would you acknowledge that the comments -- Senator McConnell was speaking on the Senate floor quoting the Vice President. Would you acknowledge that this has made more difficult, more unlikely that the nominee will get a hearing and a vote this year?

MR. EARNEST: I would not, precisely because of Vice President Biden's record when he served on the Judiciary Committee.

Let me give you -- I mean, I said the examples of Justice Kennedy and his overall record of confirming Supreme Court justices. There are other elements of his record that are just as enlightening. Vice President Biden, when he presided over the confirmation hearing of Justice Thomas, he did not support Justice Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court, but yet he allowed Justice Thomas's nomination to move through the Judiciary Committee and move onto the floor of the United States Senate.

That is exactly the kind of commitment to the functioning of the institution of the United States Senate that we'd like to see Republicans demonstrate. And again, that isn't just a matter of doing as Senator Biden recommends -- as then-Senator Biden recommended. That's going as then-Senator Biden actually did. And that's what we're counting on Republicans in the United States Senate to do.

And again, they shouldn't do it because they are forced into some position based on awkward quotes that they themselves have given -- and goodness knows there's plenty of them. We'll see how long this goes; maybe we can discuss some of those as well. But in some ways, the most important element of this is they have a constitutional duty. They swore to uphold an oath and to fulfill the responsibility that the institution of the United States Senate has to consider the President's nominee, to give that individual a fair hearing, and to give that person a yes-or-no vote.

And I know there are at least two Senate Republicans yesterday who acknowledged that oath and acknowledged that if the President -- when the President nominates someone, that hearings should go forward. Senator Kirk himself specifically referenced the oath that he took not just as a member of the United States Senate, but also as a member of our armed forces. He certainly takes that oath seriously, and he recognizes that giving the President's nominee a fair hearing is what that oath requires. And hopefully he will be able to persuade other members in his conference of the importance of that oath.

Ayesha.

Q Turning to the report on Guantanamo Bay, why not name the 13 facilities considered, or at least make -- and also to make a recommendation for a facility to move the transferees that would be left over? Part of what the administration is saying is they kind of want to -- you want to rise above politics with this issue and to have Congress move forward. But are political concerns keeping you from naming these facilities? And is it a concern about not wanting to put certain lawmakers on the spot if you name certain facilities or put them on the table?

MR. EARNEST: Ayesha, you won't be surprised to hear that the reason that the administration can't undertake a more thorough and detailed evaluation of a specific site is because it's specifically prevented by Congress. Congress passed a statute that instructed and has prevented the administration from undertaking serious planning that would be required to do the prudent thing, which is close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, and to take those individuals who cannot be safely transferred to other countries and incarcerate them here in the United States.

That is a common-sense proposal, as the plan that we rolled out today makes clear. It would save taxpayers billions of dollars over a couple of decades, or at least \$1.7 billion over a couple of decades. And we would be eager -- in fact, we are asking Congress to work with us to allow us to do the kind of planning that needs to be done to do this safely and in a cost-effective fashion. But we're going to need congressional cooperation in order to do that.

Congressional cooperation in this instance is a reference to Congress actually removing a barrier that prevents that from happening. And if Congress is willing to act on that, then we'll be able to move in a direction of actually having serious discussions about specific plans.

And the Department of Defense, I know, has indicated that these kinds of plans could be initiated in relatively short order. So this doesn't necessarily need to be a longer-term goal, but what we need to see in the short term is a willingness on the part of the United States Congress to put the interest of our national security ahead of the interest of their politics.

Q So are you saying that this law is the law that's preventing -- or that prevented the administration from putting forward a more detailed plan? I mean, this was a nine-page plan not including the appendix. So it seemed kind of sparse. Are you saying that it was legislation, laws that have been passed that prevented you from going into more detail? And also, if it's the case, if it's you need Congress to act to pass laws to remove these restrictions, if they don't move, what is the administration's plan going forward?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me be clear about this. The administration is constrained by law from undertaking designed or detailed planning for a U.S.-based facility. And that hinders our ability to put forward the kind of details that you're suggesting. However, what we were able to do within the confines of the law is to develop a plan based on a prototype detention facility, essentially a model that could give us an estimate about what that looks like.

What that looks like is a savings to the taxpayers of up to \$85 million a year. Over about 10 years, that's a net savings, once you've factored in the transition costs, of more than \$300 million over 10 years. And those costs explode over the longer term -- we're talking a savings of about \$1.7 billion in net savings over 20 years.

So there is a clear argument. The facts bear this out -- even in our nine-page report -- you can take a look at the numbers and see that there is a significant benefit for taxpayers of doing something that is clearly within our national security interests. It is not just President Obama who thinks that closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay would advance our national security; President Bush held the same view. Senator McCain, at one point, even held the same view. This is obviously the view of our Department of Defense that issued this report. This is the view of 60 retired generals and other senior military officers who wrote a letter to the *President Congress today, announcing their support for this plan.

We hear a lot of rhetoric on the campaign trail that the President needs to do a better job of listening to his military commanders and military leaders. This is what our military leaders suggest is necessary to enhance our national security. And right now, it is Congress who isn't just listening to them -- failing to listen to them, it's Congress who is actively blocking these steps to save taxpayers money and to make our country safer.

Jon.

Q So, Josh, given what you just said, and given what Loretta Lynch said back in November when she said, "With respect to individuals being transferred to the United States, the law currently does not allow that. Certainly it is the position of the Department of Justice that we would follow the law of the land in regard to that issue." So

given that it would be against the law to bring detainees at Guantanamo Bay to the United States, is it safe to say that if Congress does not act to change the law, then the prison at Guantanamo Bay will not be closed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, I'm not ready to arrive at that conclusion. What we're focused on right now is congressional consideration of a plan that they specifically asked for so that we can have a discussion about the best path forward.

So I think it's clear, based on the fact that we've submitted this plan to Congress right on the deadline and the time frame that they asked for, that we're interested in a robust consultation about this.

Q Okay, but wait a minute. I don't understand how you can say that you're not willing to rule that out. It's against the law. The law says, as I think you just said from the podium, and certainly the Attorney General of the United States said in congressional testimony, and in fact, the Defense Secretary said just last month in congressional testimony, it is against the law to move those detainees to the United States. So unless you're just going to let them all go, how could you close down that prison?

MR. EARNEST: Well, first of all, nobody is talking about letting them all go. So we put forward this very specific plan for how these individuals can either be safely transferred to other countries, how they can go through a criminal justice process, or how they can be safely incarcerated here in the United States. That is a cost-effective plan that is consistent with our national security interest.

Q And you've seen the congressional reaction to that plan, right?

MR. EARNEST: Again, what I have seen is the plan that we have put forward actually lay out exactly why what our argument is reflects the facts. It reflects the facts that we can save money by doing it in the way that we've outlined, and it reflects the need to protect our national security. And we're interested in a serious conversation with Congress about this.

Look, there is this emerging trend in Congress that has worsened in just the last few weeks where Congress isn't simply in a position of just saying no; Congress is actually refusing to engage. They're not just actively saying no, they're refusing to do the basic function of their job. They're refusing to consider this specific Gitmo plan. They're refusing to even consider the President's nominee to the Supreme Court. They're refusing to even take any sort of action on an AUMF. And they've refused to even convene a hearing to discuss the President's budget with the President's Budget Director -- something that has happened every year for the last 40 years.

So I'm not really sure exactly what they're doing in Congress. But they're doing just about everything except for fulfilling their basic constitutional responsibility.

Q On this case, Congress actually has acted, and they've acted repeatedly, and they've acted to vote in a bipartisan fashion to say no, they don't want detainees from Guantanamo Bay brought to the United States. So I'm asking you, if they don't act on

this, if they don't approve this plan that you've just outlined, can the President still close that detention facility before he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, Congress specifically --

Q Yes or no, can he still do it?

MR. EARNEST: Congress specifically requested this plan on this time frame, and we have provided it to them. So, again, they're going to have to decide whether or not they actually want to take a look at this. What they have done thus far, as you point out, is put in place barriers that have prevented the administration from moving forward in this way. But by putting those barriers in place, they have led us down the path of a policy that wastes taxpayer dollars and makes the United States of America more vulnerable to terrorist organizations.

Q You're not answering my -- it's a really simple question. If those barriers remain in place, can you still close that facility, yes or no?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President himself has considered this question, and what he has said publicly is that our focus is going to be on working with Congress. And working with Congress requires presenting them a specific plan on the time frame that they asked for. That's exactly what we've done. And we're now asking for Congress to give it fair consideration. And I'm not going to speculate at this point if Congress refuses to do that.

Q And just one last thing. Marco Rubio today suggested that the President is also considering turning over the entire naval base to Cuba. I didn't see that in the white paper. Is that something that is under consideration?

MR. EARNEST: It's not under consideration, and we've said that many times.

Scott.

Q In deciding the cost savings over a 20-year period -- does that mean the American people should expect that some of these inmates will be held for 20 more years, in some cases without charge?

MR. EARNEST: Scott, in some cases, we're talking about individuals who were initially apprehended and transferred to the prison at Guantanamo Bay at pretty young ages, as teenagers. So it does mean that we need to start thinking long term about how this process is going to work.

Again, our preference is, where possible, to conduct the review and determine how these individuals can be transferred to other countries, with appropriate security restraints to make sure that we are mitigating any risk that they may pose to the United States. There is a long process for certifying that. It requires a specific approval of the Secretary of Defense before an individual can be transferred. But there are about 35

individuals who are currently detained at the prison at Guantanamo Bay who are eligible for that process. We just need to find a willing partner overseas who's willing to receive that individual and put in place the security restraints that we believe are necessary.

We've discussed at some length the options for bringing these individuals to justice, either through military commissions or through Article 3 courts. The President made an allusion to some reforms of that process that he believes would make military commissions, in particular, themselves more cost-effective and efficient.

Look, some of you also may have seen earlier today a tweet from the Chief of Staff who indicated that right now we have a situation at the prison at Guantanamo Bay that it's not possible for some individuals to actually just plead guilty. That's an indication that we need to fix a broken system. And right now, again, as Jon pointed out, all we've seen are Congress throwing up obstacles. And what we would like to see is Congress engage with us on this plan so that we can act in the best interest of taxpayers, that we can act in the best interest of our national security, and that we don't end up in a situation where this unwieldy problem ends up on the plate of the next President, whoever that person may be.

Margaret.

Q Josh, people on the Hill are calling this dead on arrival. Is there a plan B?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the plan was put forward just a couple of hours ago.

Q This plan that they're saying is dead on arrival.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, it sounds like it's pretty inconsistent. So I guess, look, I guess you have to ask Congress if they were pretty disingenuous in making the request that we actually send them a plan. It sounds like they didn't actually take it very seriously. And, again, I actually think that just reinforces a pretty significant problem that Congress has right now. I think by anybody who is paying attention, it's hard to figure out exactly what Congress is doing. They're certainly not doing their job. They're not considering a plan to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. They've ruled out consideration of the President's nominee to the Supreme Court. They've refused to take any sort of tangible action on an authorization to use military force against ISIL. And they won't even engage in a hearing with the President's budget director on the President's budget proposal in the same way that every Congress for the last 40 years has.

So I don't know what's happening in Congress right now. What we're focused on right now is doing the job of the American people -- making sure that we are being good stewards of taxpayer dollars and looking out for our national security. And so I think in each of those instances, what you have is you have the administration trying to move the country forward and trying to set politics aside and actually focus on the best interests of the country. On the part of Congress, you see nothing.

Q But if the President and what you're describing is that the White House is really trying to work with Congress and, in many ways, dependent on Congress to get this prison closed, but in the face of that intractable opposition, is the President willing to leave office with Guantanamo Bay still open? Is he ready to admit defeat?

MR. EARNEST: That surely is not his preference. As the President noted today --

Q Is it a possibility?

MR. EARNEST: -- I remember standing -- sitting in that chair, right over there, and I believe it was January 22nd, 2009, where the President put forward his specific plan for closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay. We've been talking about this in detailed fashion for more than seven years. This has been a top priority. And at each turn, we have been stymied by Congress, and that's frustrating. But that frustration pales in comparison to how irresponsible it is to treat taxpayer dollars and our national security in that way.

Q But are you just going to let the clock keep ticking? I mean, you've got a year left here, and time is of the essence, as the White House keeps saying.

MR. EARNEST: Right now, it appears that Congress is going to let the clock tick without doing anything. We've put together --

Q So Gitmo will stay open after President Obama leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: We've put forward a very specific plan for ensuring that that doesn't happen. And we're hopeful that somebody in Congress somewhere will actually take a serious look at this, be willing to put the national security of the United States and the importance of efficient use of taxpayer dollars ahead of their own personal political considerations. I recognize that that may be a bold consideration to make in Washington, D.C. these days, particularly in an election year, but it's what the American people expect and it's what the Constitution requires.

Q But can you address -- the President talked about what he saw as this sort of scary idea for people -- moving terrorists closer to the U.S. mainland and, in some ways, to their own backyard. Given that there are, among these 91 people here, still about 46 who can't be cleared out, there isn't enough evidence against them, but there's too much worry to release them. Moving those people to the U.S. mainland, isn't that just shifting the same problem to another zip code so that the next President faces the exact same problem of indefinite detention of detainees with no clear sign of avoiding what has become what the White House says is a rallying point for terrorists?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, there's a lot there, and you've raised what I think is an important question -- several important questions.

The first thing, as the President referenced in his statement in the Roosevelt Room earlier today, is that there are hardened, dangerous terrorists who, right now, even as we speak -- dozens of them -- who are serving time in American prisons on American soil, right now. That doesn't make the United States more vulnerable, it makes us safer. They

have gone through a criminal justice process where they have been convicted and they are serving time, and they are being held where they cannot pose a threat to the American people.

Q But in this case, many of these detainees, it is not nearly as clear cut in terms of the evidence and in terms of the trial. And that is one of the problems along these many years with closing the facility, is how do you get around all that.

MR. EARNEST: Right. So there are a group of people where that doesn't apply; where we should be able to find a justice process of one form or another that will allow the justice to be served. What's also true is there is a process that was put in place on January 22nd of 2009 that initiated a formal review of the files of these individuals who were detained to determine how and where they could be safely transferred. And we're going to continue to implement that process to determine if there are more individuals who, based on an updated intelligence assessment and based on updated diplomatic conversations with our partners, could be safely transferred somewhere else in a way that is consistent with our national security interests.

I wouldn't rule out that more people from the group of 46 or 56 that we have here, that they could be moved into the category of eligible-for-transfer. And that is a testament to the success of the process that the administration put in place on the President's second full day in office.

But look, the final thing is, the option is -- the other option that right now Congress is nudging us in the direction of is one that only serves to exacerbate our national security vulnerabilities. It only allows extremist organizations to continue to use the operation of the prison at Guantanamo Bay as a recruiting tool. We know that they do that. And why we give them that weapon to use against us is beyond me.

What's also true is that the dollars and cents here just don't add up to a logical, Republican congressional strategy. Look, there's some Democrats who are complicit in this too. So this doesn't -- members of Congress suggesting that we continue to operate the prison at Guantanamo Bay even after we've transferred all those individuals who are eligible for transfer doesn't add up. The per-inmate cost of the prison at Guantanamo Bay is only going to continue to skyrocket. And when you look at the longer-term cost implications -- well, look, even in the short term it doesn't make sense.

In the short term, we could recoup the transfer costs in three to five years, but essentially be in a situation where we are saving taxpayers up to \$85 million each year by moving these individuals to U.S. soil. Over the long term, the cost savings are even more significant.

So when you consider just the dollars and cents here, when you're a fiscal conservative and looking at making sure that government is smaller and that taxpayer dollars are effectively used and efficiently used, that we're looking to cut wasteful spending, \$85 million a year -- that seems like a pretty sizable amount.

Toluse.

Q Can I just follow up on the numbers of this? It seems like this plan was delayed for many months, basically as you guys tried to get the cost squared away. And it does sound like you're going to have 30 to 60 individuals, and even though you're going to be saving \$85 million, it's still hundreds of millions of dollars -- probably over \$200 million -- for 30 to 60 individuals. And I'm wondering if that cost is something that the President is comfortable with. It's still a per-prisoner cost of several million dollars. So is that something the President is comfortable with? Is that something you've been trying to get -- you're tried to get that number down more, and struggled with that? And is that the reason why the plan was delayed so long?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, Toluse, I think what is true is that once we have an opportunity to take a closer look more specifically at the way that a U.S. facility could be used, I wouldn't rule out that there might be some additional cost savings. But we can't do that important work until Congress agrees to start working with us to see if that's even possible.

I guess in the same way that it costs money to run prisons in the United States, it's going to cost money to detain these individuals, even if we bring them to the United States. Releasing them, at least in some cases, is not an option. So shouldn't we just try to find the most cost-effective way to do it? And isn't it ridiculous and irresponsible to suggest that we should just wantonly spend an extra \$85 million a year to keep these individuals at a prison at Guantanamo Bay that, oh, by the way, terrorists actually use as a recruiting tool? That doesn't make sense. That's a not a good way to run the country. It certainly isn't the best way to look out for our national security, and it's not a good way to be a good steward of taxpayer dollars. And that's the essence of our case here.

And look, when you're talking about people who are strong on national security, people who are serious fiscal conservatives, people who are willing to listen to the advice of our military commanders, you sound a little like a Republican trying to make a foreign policy decision -- at least how Republican candidates for President suggest they would make foreign policy decisions. So let's start living up to our rhetoric here and actually do the right thing for the American people.

Q The NDAA kind of specifically called for the administration to put out a specific name of a facility or facilities. And I know you said that the law also kind of restricts you from doing the research that you need to do, but it doesn't restrict you from naming facilities that you're looking at. DOD didn't look at facilities last year, so it doesn't restrict you from sort of maybe narrowing the pocket down to just a few facilities that you're actually considering. I'm wondering why the administration didn't do that, because that's a criticism that you're getting from the Hill.

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, the reason that these site visits were made was to inform our development of prototype facilities that would allow us to take a look at exactly how this would be done. But we are prohibited by law from developing the kind of specifics and details around a specific facility.

So look, this is exactly part of what congressional engagement should be. We should have a discussion about where this kind of facility would be located. So if there are Republicans that have strong ideas about what would be a good place, then they should bring forward those ideas. We're happy to have that discussion. We can take a close look at whether that would meet our requirements and whether that would actually bring about the kind of tax savings that we envision. We would welcome that kind of discussion on the part of Congress. But right now, Congress has passed a law that prevents that conversation from taking place. Again, that's not consistent with anybody's idea about what it means to do your job.

Q One more. There have been several district attorneys who have said that they're also looking to get a "backdoor" into phones and that if this case does go forward and Apple does cooperate with the FBI, there's not just going to be this one phone -- they have several phones that they're waiting to use as well in this same way. So I'm wondering -- you've made it sound like it's just going to be this one isolated case, but is there a threat that other district attorneys across the country will be able to use this case as a way to get into phones for other types of cases that aren't terrorism related?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll say, Toluse, I'm not aware of the details of other cases that may be out there. So I'll let prosecutors, if they have cases that they think are comparable to this, to make their own case.

What I've been asked about is this very specific request that the Department of Justice and our independent investigators at the FBI have made to a judge. They haven't sought to do this on their own; they have gone through a judicial process, through a legal process, to obtain access to a phone that was used by a terrorist, that is no longer living, that was actually the property and was owned by the local government in California.

So I've limited my comments to this specific request. I can't speak to other requests that may be out there. If there are additional requests that have to be made by local prosecutors, they'll have to go before a judge. And that's an indication of exactly the case that we have been making, which is I have not stood up here and suggested that the FBI should be able to decide whether or not they get access to this phone. I've also stood up here and said that it shouldn't be Apple who decides who gets access to this phone. There's a court of law and there is a procedure in place to determine and to weigh the merits of the arguments that are made by both sides. And in this case, a judge has come down on the side of the independent investigators at the Department of Justice. And given the way the President has made this investigation a priority -- because information that is yielded in the investigation could be relevant to continuing to protect the American people -- that's why we're hopeful that the FBI will continue to do its important work.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Is it your understanding that the NSA is still in the practice of collecting bulk metadata? And if so, if that's your understanding, why wouldn't the FBI simply go to them to get the information that they claim they need from this particular device?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, you'll recall that last year Congress passed legislation to reform this program, to ensure that the intelligence community would no longer be in the business of collecting that bulk metadata that was included in Section 215 of the Patriot Act. So that is no longer taking place.

Q So there is no collection, to your understanding, of bulk phone records at all?

MR. EARNEST: What I know, based on the law that was passed by Congress last year with bipartisan support, is it made critical reforms that actually put telephone companies in a position to collect that data and with a court order, the law enforcement officials could conduct the kind of searches that are critical to our national security. But it would not be a situation where the U.S. government was in a position of holding that data ourselves.

Q Let me follow up on something Margaret was asking you about, and this is sort of a broader question about detainees. Considering there is ongoing battle in theaters all over the globe involving terrorists, where are they being held, once they're captured?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, there is a process for this. And, again, we don't have to sort of envision in our mind how this might work. We have time and time again demonstrated that we can, when it comes to terrorists who are apprehended in the United States, we've got a process in place where we can make sure that they are subject to robust interrogation, that our intelligence officials can use that information to enhance our national security, that we can get the information we need out of them to make sure that we can keep the American people safe, and then we can turn them over to law enforcement interrogators who can put them through the Justice system. Those individuals have been convicted, and some of them, many of them are actually serving time right now on American soil, in American prison facilities, no longer posing a threat to our national security. We have a system in place that works, that keeps the American people safe and lives up to our values.

Q What about the ones captured on the battlefield? They're in Syria -- so, for example, they're not being transported back here. Where are they held? Because the argument that some are making now is since we're engaged in ongoing battle that involves terrorists that may be apprehended on the battlefield that don't represent a particular country, they have to be housed somewhere, they're going to be detained. And the argument that some are making is that a facility like Guantanamo is still going to be important moving forward, even beyond the 91 current detainees.

MR. EARNEST: That's wrong. And the fact is, over the last seven years, we've waged a very aggressive campaign -- a counterterrorism campaign all around the world. And that has been in Iraq, that's been in Syria, that's been in Afghanistan, and that's been in a variety of other countries around the world. Not one prisoner has been transferred or added to the population at the prison at Guantanamo Bay since President Obama took office.

Q So they're being held abroad.

MR. EARNEST: So in each case -- we are on a case-by-case basis, evaluating the best way to bring these individuals to justice or to at least make sure that they cannot pose a threat to U.S. national security.

Let me just give you one example. There is the woman who was the wife of the ISIL leader that was killed in a raid conducted by U.S. forces in Syria.

Q Syria, yes.

MR. EARNEST: This was last year.

Q I remember.

MR. EARNEST: And this woman was facing very serious charges related to ISIL's hostage-taking activities. That individual has faced a couple of things. Right now, that individual is in the custody of Kurdish officials and is going through the Kurdish criminal justice system. That individual has also been indicted by the Department of Justice for her complicity in hostage-taking activities.

But given her terrorist background, she's in custody and she no longer is posing a threat to U.S. national security. And I think that's just one textbook example of how, on a case-by-case basis, we can make sure we take actions that put the safety and security of the American people at the top of the list, but also make sure that we're acting consistent with our values. And that's exactly what we've done.

Q So essentially what you're saying is because these facilities exist, would it not be then possible to take some of the detainees that are currently housed at Guantanamo and move them to some of these other facilities, ultimately emptying out the prison in Cuba?

MR. EARNEST: Again, what we would have to do is we would have to evaluate the security measures in place at those other facilities, and we'd also have to get the agreement --

Q They must be pretty strong if they're housing terrorists like the one you just mentioned.

MR. EARNEST: -- but we also have to -- well, first of all, we're talking, in some cases, about terrorists who may pose a significant threat. And so we need to make sure that we've got the security measures in place to keep them safe.

But here's the other thing -- and I think this goes back to the core problem with the prison at Guantanamo Bay -- why would another country want to take them? Why would they want to take on that problem? Members of the United States Congress certainly don't want to take on that problem, and it's a problem that was created by the United States government.

So this is why it's so important for us to resolve this situation before the next President takes office, because it ends up being a sticking point in our relationships with friends and allies and partners with whom we have other important business to conduct. And this

lingering issue is one that only serves to cloud the agenda that already has a lot of high-profile and high-priority national security items on it.

Q Last one. On the high court -- is it your concern that if what's happening now, or what appears to be happening now, which is it's become political and it may not -- this particular nominee may not get an up-or-down vote, or even a hearing -- that when the tables have turned and eventually the Democrats are in control, that this will happen again, this will cloud the process in the future?

MR. EARNEST: There is no denying that what Republicans are threatening to do in the context of this Supreme Court nominee is unprecedented. Since 1875, a President's nominee has never been denied a hearing unless that President later withdrew that nomination. And this would be an historic and unprecedented acceleration of politicizing a branch of government that's supposed to be insulated from politics.

And while there -- as the President has acknowledged, there are Democrats and Republicans who are responsible for contributing to that. There is no denying that what Leader McConnell and other Republicans are proposing to do right now would turbocharge that process and may, in some ways, subject the Supreme Court to the kind of politics that they've been insulated from for more than two centuries. And that would be a shame.

And fortunately, I'm not the only person that's making that argument. We've seen statements from people like Senator Kirk, Senator Collins. Even somebody like Senator Blunt, a Republican from my home state of Missouri, has indicated that he believes that this nominee should get a hearing. So, again, in some ways, if I were sitting in your chair, the observation that I would make is there's actually not bipartisan support for blocking the President's nominee; in fact, there is actually bipartisan support for making sure this individual gets a hearing, a fair one, and gets a timely yes-or-no vote. Hopefully, that's what we'll get.

Michelle.

Q Josh, just today, in Spain, a former Gitmo detainee was arrested as a suspected terrorist recruiting for ISIS. Officials there said that he was a leader who was trained in weapons and explosives. Does that matter?

MR. EARNEST: It does matter. Because of the changes that this administration put in place, again, back on January 22nd of 2009, the recidivism rate that we've seen from individuals who have been transferred under the formula that was put in place by the Obama administration, that recidivism rate is in the single digits. It's quite small. And it underscores how important it is for us to have in place the appropriate security arrangements for when we transfer an individual to another country. We can do this safely. We know how to do this. And that's why the President believes it's both in our national security interest, but it also is much more cost-effective than what's happening right now.

Q So let's say just one or two of the thirty-five that are potentially going to be transferred went back to fight for ISIS -- and this example today, I mean, this is somebody who is in Europe while the United States is fighting ISIS. So of this new batch, let's say the recidivism rate is only in the single digits, at this period of time, when we're at war and ISIS is acting in other countries beside Iraq and Syria, isn't that a significant threat?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's certainly a threat that we're mindful of. But again, according to your own reporting, this individual has been apprehended by authorities. The other thing, Michelle, is that if we know we're at war with terrorist organizations that are seeking to radicalize populations around the globe, and we know that the prison at Guantanamo Bay is a prominent recruiting tool that they use, why wouldn't we take that away from them?

Look, even the gory videos that were released by ISIL a couple of summers ago evoked some of the themes and imagery from the prison at Guantanamo Bay. We know that they are seeking to capitalize on that as a propaganda victory, and we should take that away from them.

Q So taking those same guys and transferring them to prisons in the U.S., wouldn't that then just become the recruiting tool? As the argument has been, if there were to be some violent protests surrounding that, then it would be on U.S. soil. So I guess at the crux of it --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think that's a legitimate argument because I don't know that there are any huge protests that are taking place on Cuban soil right now.

Q Then just as a recruiting tool, your argument that Gitmo itself is the recruiting tool, wouldn't the recruiting tool then just be transferring to having these guys still held indefinitely in the U.S. be the same thing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, their argument would be a lot tougher because the detention that we would have in place would be cleanly in line with American values; that we would ensure that this is consistent with the way that American citizens are treated. That certainly is more consideration than these terrorists give to their adversaries, to say the least. But we would be on quite strong moral ground to say that these individuals are being treated humanely, that the conditions in which they are detained are safe and clean and reasonable. And we would be taking away an important propaganda tool that we know that extremist organizations, like ISIL, capitalize on.

Brett was just standing here at this podium talking about how we're mindful of the threat that ISIL poses because of their ability to radicalize people around the globe. Let's make that a little harder for them. Let's close the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Q And in addition to what we heard the Attorney General say not too long again, we just saw the Joint Chief send a letter to the Hill reiterating that, that it would be illegal based on current law to transfer people to the U.S. So given what we've heard now, several officials say, surrounding the illegality of making a transfer like that, why are you not ruling out executive action to do something more at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Because I'm not going to take any of the President's options off the table. But that certainly is not what our focus is right now. Our focus right now is quite clear, given that we have presented to Congress exactly the plan that they asked for on exactly the time frame that they asked for. And what we're asking for is legitimate consideration be given to the plan. We've got a very strong case to make about how the plan that we have put forward would save taxpayer dollars and make the American people safer. That's the essence of our plan, and it's time for members of Congress to put their own political considerations aside and actually consider what's in the interest of the national security of the United States.

Q Yes, I know you're saying -- that's your focus. But it's hard to ignore what so many have said surrounding what's legal and what's not, including the Attorney General. So how can you still say that executive action is possible? That would put a severe limit on what the President could do.

MR. EARNEST: I think what I've been clear about is that we are focused on congressional action and getting Congress to actually act on the plan that we have presented there today. If they do that, that would make any sort of discussion about the President's executive actions obsolete. And that's why we're going to go ahead and continue to put pressure on Congress to do the right thing.

Q So the President could still take executive action on Gitmo, is that what you're saying?

MR. EARNEST: I'm saying that what we're focused on right now is Congress taking action. And I'm not going to stand up here and unilaterally take any options off the table when it comes to the President's use of his executive authority.

Q Okay. And lastly, speaking of action in Congress, McConnell now is saying that a hearing is not going to happen. It's now the consensus of those on the Judiciary Committee that it's just not going to happen. So how does this change the White House's reach-out to the Hill and your strategy in general?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can tell you that since we last met here that the President did make some additional calls to members of Congress, including some Republicans, including people who served on the Judiciary Committee. I don't have specific names at this point. But that outreach continues and it will continue.

And I would just observe that while Senator McConnell may claim some unanimity of opinion among Republicans on the Judiciary Committee, he cannot claim unanimity of opinion when it comes to Republicans in the United States Senate. The fact is we've seen unambiguous statements from people like Senator Kirk and Senator Collins that they believe that the President's nominee should get a fair hearing and a timely up or down vote.

I certainly value their opinion. I think Senator McConnell does, too. But I think the opinion that we all value the most is what's required by the United States Constitution. And the institution of the United States Senate has a duty to function and ensure that the

Supreme Court of the United States has what's required to function as the Founders intended.

Q So you still think there's a chance that this -- that hearings would happen?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely. Again, based on what people like Senator Kirk, Senator Collins; I know that Senator Coats has also indicated that he believes that -- he said that "if the President nominates someone which is his choice, I think that person would deserve a hearing." Senator Blunt said, "I certainly don't mind taking a vote on this issue." Neither Senator Coats, nor Senator Blunt represents a state that President Obama won in the reelection of 2012. Neither of them would describe themselves as a moderate. Both of them are conservative Republicans, but both of them are out there saying publicly that if the President nominates somebody, they're ready to vote on them.

So again, I guess it will make for an interesting caucus meeting when Senator McConnell brings together the members of his Senate. Maybe they're having lunch right now. I guess --

Q -- every member of the Judiciary Committee signed a letter saying no hearing.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not sure -- I wasn't in the meeting, obviously. I was standing right here. I'm not sure what Senator Kirk, Senator Collins, Senator Blunt or Senator Coats has to say about it.

We'll do a couple more hands in the back. Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Back to Gitmo. We were told earlier today that there was outreach to relevant congressional parties on the White House's plan, and I was wondering if you could expand on which members were informed about the plan before it was released through the outreach and whether the President has personally called members of Congress to discuss the plan.

MR. EARNEST: Let me check on that for you and we'll see if we can get you some more details. I know that there was extensive congressional consultation that occurred before the plan was formally released. But let me see if I can get you some greater detail about how exactly that took place.

Sarah.

Q Thanks, Josh. As you mentioned, you've given Congress the plan that it asked for, as you put it. And the administration is citing kind of the broad ban on spending money to move detainees to the U.S. as why you can't give a specific site. But the same law, the NDAA, Section 1035 says that this report that you have given, that Congress asked for, says that the report is supposed to include the specific facility or facilities that are intended to be used or modified to use, et cetera, et cetera. So why -- how are you fulfilling Congress's request for that specific data?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think what this highlights that every year in the NDAA, the can't writes in language that specifically prohibits the administration from undertaking plans that would lay the groundwork for bringing individuals from the prison at Guantanamo Bay into the United States. So I think you have highlighted yet another example of congressional dysfunction that they have written a law that includes varying guidance.

But the truth is there's no reason we have to sort of go through all of this. Why don't we just have members of Congress who actually are willing to put politics aside, focus on the best interest of the United States, and have a serious conversation with the administration about the most effective way for us to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, save taxpayer dollars, and remove a recruiting tool that we know that ISIL is eager to use?

Q Well, Senator McCain, who you have noted, when he ran against the President, said that he also supported closing Guantanamo Bay. He's now the Armed Services Committee Chairman. And he said that the report today is a vague menu of options, not a credible plan for closing Guantanamo, let alone a coherent policy to deal with future terrorist detainees. Is Senator McCain just being cynical and political?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think you'd have to ask him how he arrived at his conclusions. But again, I think the facts here are pretty clear. We've made clear exactly how the American people can save money by closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay. We've made clear that this is something that can be done safely, consistent with our national security interests. In fact, we've made clear that it would actually enhance the national security of the United States to pursue this approach.

And again, it's going to be up to Congress to decide whether or not they're willing to enjoy the benefits of the outline that we have put forward. Are they going to put forward their own plan? There really hasn't been much of a discussion about that. I don't know if there's a congressional plan to try to achieve these goals. After all, we know there are a lot of Republicans who are running for President who are saying that they would make foreign policy decisions based on the advice they get from our military leadership, consistent with the need to cut government and cut wasteful government spending, and to make sure we're doing everything to make America strong, and to protect our national security. If we're making decisions based on that criteria, Congress would implement this plan today.

Q Last question. In the President's trip to Cuba, my understanding is that he's not planning to visit the base -- either the soldiers or the prison. Can you confirm that? It was a little vague in some earlier conversations. And was it considered and dismissed, or was it just never seen as a possibility?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have the details yet on the President's trip to Cuba. At this point, I don't expect that the President will go to the base at Guantanamo Bay, but let me check on that for you and we'll see if we can confirm that in advance of a more full schedule.

Julie.

Q Thanks, Josh. The President seemed pretty frustrated today. He talked for a long time about his plan that he's sending to Congress to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. He talked about the number of hours he spent working on this, and how many calls he has fielded with complaints from allies. And it was obviously a major promise of his campaign. He is now in the final year in office, and he basically acknowledged the impossible politics -- and you referenced it earlier -- no members of Congress want these prisoners in their districts or states. So I wondered if you could just give us a sense of -- get us into his head a little bit about how he feels. He's got 10 months left, and this is still an issue that he does not seem to be able to get rid of. And sort of how he's looking at this now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the way the President sees this is he sees it as an opportunity that he has to prevent a problem that was passed on to him from being passed on to the next President. And he takes that approach not knowing who the next President is going to be. His view is that the interests of the United States would not be enhanced by passing this problem on to either a Democrat or a Republican in the Oval Office. And the President has acknowledged that the politics of this are tough and that there's an opportunity, given that he doesn't have any more elections to run, Vice President Biden doesn't have any more elections to run, and that means they have some clarity of judgment that they can use here to do the right thing for the American people.

And, again, in a lot of ways, what we're looking for from Congress is, even if there is a reluctance on the part of some members of Congress or many Republicans -- many members of Congress -- from cooperating with the administration on this, the least they could do is actually just remove the obstructions. Just get out of the way so the people who are actually trying to act in the best interest of the American people can do their job.

And that's in some ways what the President is seeking. If Congress feels like they don't want to be involved in this effort, as I mentioned, there's plenty of good reason for them to want to be involved in it -- it would enhance our national security and it would save taxpayer dollars. But if they don't, they can just remove the obstructions and allow the United States -- to allow the President of the United States, his national security team, and our uniformed leaders in the military take the steps that we believe are necessary to enhance our national security. We could do all that, save taxpayer dollars. That would be the right thing to do, and the President is hopeful that he can get that done before he leaves office.

Q And just back on Biden's comments for a moment on the Supreme Court. He seemed to be making the argument in 1992 that even though he had in the past as Chairman of the Judiciary Committee moved along Republican nominees and was willing to in a future administration, that there was something about the election year and being in the thick of a campaign that made it inappropriate to fill a vacancy either by the President or the Senate moving it. So I wonder, can you explain to us what is different from June 1992 to February 2016? Why is the standard different?

MR. EARNEST: I think the biggest difference is there wasn't a vacancy. There's not a single thing that then-Senator Biden said that prevented the Senate fulfilling its constitutional obligations. And in fact, I think, again, he made clear later in his speech that if the President consults and cooperates with the Senate or moderates his selections absent consultation, then his nominees "may enjoy my support" as did Justices Kennedy and Souter. Justice Kennedy was confirmed in an election year.

So again, when it comes to evaluating the performance of members of the United States Senate, Vice President Biden has got a record that's pretty tough to beat. And this is not a -- as I mentioned, we're simply asking the United States Senate in 2016 to do what Senator Biden did himself in 1987 and 1988, when he gave fair consideration to a nominee that was put forward by a President in the other party. And Vice President Biden advanced the process so that that individual could be confirmed in an election year. We believe that the Senate this time should do the same thing.

Q But it was after that that he said he didn't think that was going to be appropriate in the election year in which he was speaking.

MR. EARNEST: Again, I think it depends on which part of the remarks you take a look at. And what's undeniable is there was not a vacancy. There was nothing that Senator Biden said that prevented the Senate from fulfilling its constitutional duty.

Q We just didn't mean for that to be followed at all.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I wasn't there in 1992; I was a senior in high school. (Laughter.) So it's hard for me to assess with a lot of clarity exactly what the dynamics were. But what is clear is that there was no vacancy at the time. There's nothing here that he said that prevented the Senate from fulfilling its constitutional duty. And in fact, in the same speech, then-Senator Biden made clear that he would be open to consultation with the White House that was controlled by the other party in fair consideration of the nominee that was put forward by the President of the other party.

That's what we're asking the Senate to do this time.

Q And lastly, could you just tell us a little more about the President's visit to the State Department tomorrow? I don't think we heard about that previously before Brett mentioned it.

MR. EARNEST: That's right. So the President periodically has convened meetings with his national security team to discuss the ongoing effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. The President will convene the meeting -- or the next meeting on Thursday at the State Department.

Over the last few months, the President has convened these meetings not just in the Situation Room but in other places. You'll recall the President went to the Pentagon, I believe it was either in November or December of last year, to have this meeting. I know there was a discussion about our counter-ISIL campaign at NCTC last year. And this week, the President will be convening the meeting at the State Department.

Obviously, the State Department has been doing important work to try to reach this agreement -- or at least an understanding around a cessation of hostilities in Syria. So given the primacy of the work that's being done at the State Department right now, the President thought it made sense to convene the meeting over at the State Department this time.

Francesca, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. Speaking of election year politics, I wanted to ask you about something the President said last week. Several times in here you have indicated that he wouldn't endorse in the Democratic primary, and the White House Chief of Staff even said last month that he'll see who the nominee is at the end of that primary process, that's not our job, and then he'll decide. But the President's remarks during his press conference seem to suggest that he could endorse a Democratic candidate in the race. He said, "Ultimately, I will probably have an opinion on it based both on being a candidate of hope and change and on a President who has got some nicks and cuts and bruises from getting stuff done over the last seven years."

So my question is: What's changed recently that the President is now suggesting that he could actually endorse in this primary?

MR. EARNEST: I think if you go back and take a look at the way that I've described the situation is that we don't currently have a plan for the President to make public his preference in the Democratic presidential nomination process. The President will fill out a ballot and vote absentee in Illinois. The Illinois primary is March 15th. So he's got to make a decision pretty soon, if he hasn't already.

And so the real question is just whether or not we're going to make that public. Right now our plan is not to make that public. But I wouldn't rule out the possibility that we may decide to make that public at some point in the future.

Q Thanks for your clarification.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, guys. We'll see you tomorrow.

Q Who's on the short list?

MR. EARNEST: What's that?

Q Who's on the short list? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: We'll see. I'll try to come with some of that material tomorrow.

END 2:25 P.M. EST