

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 2/6/2012

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for coming to the White House for your daily briefing. Before I take questions let me read a brief announcement.

On Wednesday, February 29th, President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will host a dinner at the White House to honor our armed forces who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn, and to honor their families. This dinner, an expression of the nation's gratitude for the achievements and enormous sacrifices of the brave Americans who served in the Iraq war, and of the families who supported them, will include men and women in uniform from all ranks, services, states and backgrounds, representative of the many thousands of Americans who served in Iraq.

The White House has been working with military and civilian leaders from the Department of Defense on this tribute, and we will release more details regarding the dinner when they become available.

Q Are you describing this as a state dinner --

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry?

Q Is that a fair description, the sort of shorthand of saying a state dinner style?

MR. CARNEY: No, I think it's unique to the kind of dinner it is. A state dinner has to do with heads of government, heads of state, but --

Q I understand the definition, but is it fair to -- similar formality?

Q Will it be fancy like that?

Q Is it buffet? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: When we have --

Q I mean, using that shorthand would be incorrect or correct?

MR. CARNEY: I think state dinner probably is not quite accurate. And we'll have more details to describe it for you. It's really focused on the men and women who served in Iraq and in all stations within the armed services. So I think one distinction might be that state dinners are about the elevated and important guests that we have visiting from other countries, and these would be for all those who served.

Q In Iraq?

MR. CARNEY: In Iraq, yes, this is Iraq.

Q A couple of hundred people?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have the number on it.

Q What's the date again?

MR. CARNEY: February 29th.

Q Black tie?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have that either. I think the folks in uniform tend to wear their uniforms. But I don't have any dress or menu or entertainment.

With that, I'll take questions. Ben. Or I'll take more questions, rather.

Q Thanks, Jay. Questions on Iran and Syria -- first on Iran. Is what the President did today on broader sanctions and also the prospect of more sanctions this spring an indication that the White House is at all worried that Israel will act on its own on a military front before these really -- these sanctions have a chance to kick in?

MR. CARNEY: No, I think that it is reflective of the policy that we've taken for quite a long time now in reaction to Iranian behavior, which is essentially a dual-track, where we continue to have an offer to the Iranians that if they get serious about their international obligations, if they respond to the letter from Lady Ashton about starting negotiations with the P5-plus-1, if they agree to give up their nuclear weapons ambitions, then there is an option for them to rejoin the international community.

Meanwhile, because they haven't done that and they've so far refused to do that, and they continue to pursue a course that is dangerous, we will ramp up the effort to isolate and pressure the regime, working with our international allies.

I think the President addressed the question regarding Israel during his interview with Matt Lauer over the weekend.

Q Right. But I mean, given that the development has happened today, or we learned about it today, about the additional sanctions --

MR. CARNEY: I can assure that the -- remember, Ben, that we have been -- there has been a steady increase in our sanctions activity, and this is part of that escalation and it's not related to -- specifically to that issue or the questions about it.

Q That issue about the Israel -- the Israeli --

MR. CARNEY: Correct.

Q On Syria -- since we last saw you, the U.N. Security Council rejected the peace plan supported by the United States, pushed hard for by the United States. Violence has continued. Obviously we had the closing of the embassy. And the President said in the NBC interview that he thinks that the noose is tightening on the Assad regime. I'm just wondering, what is that based upon? It seems to a lot of outsiders that Assad is operating freely.

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no question that he is operating with gross disregard for the health and safety and welfare of his own people. He is killing his own people. And as we witness this, it only reinforces the need for the international community to act, and reinforces the disappointment we have with members of the United Nations Security Council who did not vote with the rest of the international community in favor of the anti-Syria resolution -- the anti-Syrian regime resolution.

The fact of the matter is that the pressure on Assad continues to intensify. He's been -- he has dwindling financial resources. He has dwindling access to what he needs to continue to govern. His regime has lost control of parts of the country. There are a number of indications of the desire to depart from the regime by senior Syrian government and military officials. These are telltale signs that Assad's future is very limited at best.

And we continue to work with the international community to do everything we can to enhance the pressure on him, to make it clear to everyone that they should not want to place a bet on the Assad regime because that is a losing bet -- and it is a losing bet in pure realpolitik terms, but it's also a losing bet, obviously, in terms of being on the right side of the people of Syria.

Q One last one on this. Given that killing that you've described, is the President personally frustrated with those who block the international effort, particularly China and Russia?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that what I just said reflects our view, which is that those who voted against the resolution need to realize that betting everything on Assad is a recipe for failure -- not just for the interests of those countries, but for the stability of the region and for Syria's future.

What we've seen, the video that we've seen just most recently coming out of Syria demonstrates the appalling actions of the government forces. And you have a great number of countries -- obviously the United States, Europe and Arab countries -- who see this for what it is. And we will continue to work with our international partners to make that case.

Q China was part of the double veto that was passed in the Security Council against the Syria resolution. And of course this is one -- a little over one week before Chinese Vice President Xi visits Washington. What, if anything, will President Obama have to say to

the Vice President about this subject when they meet?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have an agenda in terms of the discussions for those meetings. I think that we've made clear our disappointment that those votes were cast. There's obviously a range of issues to be discussed in our bilateral relationship with China that will be discussed during that visit.

Q Would this have an impact on relations -- with either China or Russia.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think, again, we've -- this is about what the international community's response to Syrian actions should be. It has been -- there has been a great deal of collective action taken against the Syrian regime thus far; there will be greater action taken. And we're going to work with all the friends of Syria and the Syrian people to continue to pressure the Assad regime, to continue to make clear that Assad's days are numbered. I think that we will also, obviously, continue to work with the Chinese and the Russians on a host of other issues, even as we press this point, obviously.

Q Secretary Clinton did call on, as you mentioned, the friends of Syrian democracy to band together to help the Syrian opposition, political opposition. Is there any thought being given to giving assistance, military assistance, to the rebels that are fighting Assad?

MR. CARNEY: We believe that the right solution in Syria is a political solution. And there remains an opportunity for that to be achieved, for that transition to democracy to take place. That's why we felt, and we continue to feel, it's so important for the international community to act in the way that a Security Council resolution would have embodied. And we'll continue to work with our international partners in this regard -- because the best solution here is a political solution. Broadly speaking, we take no options off the table. But our focus is on using our diplomatic, economic and other means to help bring about and usher in a democratic transition.

Q Can we talk about Egypt?

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q Do we know how many Americans are actually in Egypt of those named in the judge's order?

MR. CARNEY: Bill, I don't want to get into specifics about the order. We're deeply disturbed by the crackdown against NGOs in Egypt, including the filing of charges against Americans. Groups like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and many others, both American and Egyptian, have done nothing wrong. Their only assignment is to support Egypt in its transition to democracy.

These groups and individuals associated with them do not fund political parties or individual candidates. Many of these groups have worked in Egypt for several years, and so their activities are not new. Moreover, they also served as observers for the recent parliamentary elections at the request of the government of Egypt.

Now, we continue to communicate at all levels with the Egyptian government on our grave concerns regarding the crackdown against NGOs in Egypt. We have underscored how serious a problem these actions are. We have said clearly that these actions could have consequences for our relationship including regarding our assistance programs. So we'll continue to work with the Egyptians.

Q What would it take to trigger a cutoff of the \$1.5 billion of U.S. aid?

MR. CARNEY: I don't want to speculate about what that would be. We've made clear that we take this very seriously, that it could have consequences -- these actions could have consequences for our relationship, including our assistance programs. But I don't want to speculate about what actions might precipitate a response on our part along those lines, except to say that we take this very seriously.

It is important to remember that these institutions have been over there for a number of years, they're all over the country promoting democracy, and that the individuals here have done nothing wrong.

Q Some of the people who were named are actually in the United States, some of the U.S. citizens, but some, obviously, are over there and we know that some are in the embassy. Do you have any idea how many?

MR. CARNEY: Bill, I don't want to get into specific numbers or names. There are some Americans who have opted to stay in the embassy compound in Cairo while waiting for permission to depart Egypt. I just don't feel that it's wise to get into more details on that.

Q So at what level are discussions about these people continuing?

MR. CARNEY: I think at every level and very high levels. You know that the President spoke with General Tantawi a number of days ago, and discussions from that level on down continue because we take this issue very seriously.

Q But he hasn't spoken to any of the top leadership --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any new communications involving the President to read out to you now. But you can be sure that we are engaging with the Egyptian government on this issue at every level.

Q Get to Iran?

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q Can we stay on the same -- stay in the region? So yesterday in the interview with Matt, the President said --

MR. CARNEY: He's Matt to you. (Laughter.) He means Matt Lauer. (Laughter.)

Q So weird, just having a nice conversation here. Mr. Carney. (Laughter.) The interview with Mr. Lauer, the President seemed to -- I guess correct me if I'm wrong -- it sounded like the President was contradicting the intelligence report that the folks gave to Capitol Hill earlier in the week about this idea that Iran is looking for a way to attack the United States, which came out in an intelligence briefing to Congress. The President seemed to say that wasn't the case. So what's -- it just sounded like a contradiction as far as the intelligence community is concerned.

MR. CARNEY: You know I'm not going to get into, with any detail, discussions of intelligence regarding Iran or anywhere else from here. The President made clear that -- and I will just refer you to his comments about what he assesses and we assess their current intentions and capabilities to be. That doesn't mean that we don't hear from a variety of channels, including very public ones, the negative intentions of certain Iranian leaders towards the United States and statements that can be bellicose or hostile. However, I would just point you to what the President said about what his and our assessment of that capacity right now.

But it is -- Iran is a very dangerous place, it's a dangerous regime, and we take specifically the refusal to abandon their nuclear ambitions very seriously.

Q When the President said Israel hasn't made a decision yet about attacking Iran, it should be implied that the United States has made a decision that it's not going to happen in the next three months?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I wouldn't imply anything at all except to the explicit comment the President made, which -- well, two things -- one, we have greater military and intelligence cooperation with Israel than we have ever had, and that what he told NBC was that he believes that Israel has not made a decision about what action to take or whether or not to take the action that's been discussed.

Q Has the United States made a decision?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to get into that kind of assessment. What I will say is that we believe that the course that we're pursuing with regards to Iran is the right one; that the sanctions have had significant impact on the Iranian economy. They have helped exacerbate tensions within the Iranian leadership that are now quite apparent, whereas when President Obama took office, Iran was unified and the world was not with regards to Iranian nuclear ambitions; the opposite is now true. And that has had, I think, the effect of making clear to the world that the problem here is Iranian behavior.

Now, we will continue to pursue that course and press for change in behavior by the Iranian regime, even as, as the President has made clear on a number of occasions, we do not remove any options from the table.

Q Are you taking credit for that? Are you taking credit for the tensions within the Iranian leadership?

MR. CARNEY: I'm just saying that they contribute to --

Q No, no, I know. But are you saying that your policies have helped exacerbate the tensions?

MR. CARNEY: Contribute to -- there is no question that the impact of the isolation on Iran and the economic sanctions on Iran have caused added turmoil within Iran. And that has had an impact at a variety of levels, most demonstrably on the economy and on the currency.

But, again, the unity that Iran enjoyed, if you will, with regards to this issue three years ago has gone, and the -- by contrast, the international community has united behind the position that the President has taken with our allies and partners to pressure Iran, to try to force Iran to change its behavior.

Q Can we go back to --

MR. CARNEY: Hold on one second. Let me go to Wendell.

Q Jay, on Israel, can I --

MR. CARNEY: Can I just go -- I'm going to work my way back to you, Connie. Thanks.

Q So Syria and Egypt -- Secretary Clinton has called for -- suggested the formation of a contact group of like-minded nations to step up the pressure on Assad's regime. Have you begun preparing for that? How would it work?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would refer you to the State Department for more details. I think that we have been working very closely with a number of partners and allies both in the region and around the world as we have worked to put pressure on Assad, and we'll continue to do that. We're carefully considering a full range of options, and we'll work closely with our allies and others to help the people of Syria put an end to this criminal regime.

Q You don't want to suggest how that might be more effective than what we're doing now?

MR. CARNEY: I think that we're pursuing a variety of means to put pressure on the Assad regime, to isolate it further. I mean, the fact is Assad is running out of money, and we will make sure -- we will work, rather, to make sure that he is unable to finance his continued crackdown. And that involves coordination with our allies and partners -- those who believe, as we do, that it's time for Assad to go, because the Syrian people deserve a transition to democracy.

Q And what about weapons and the ability to sell weapons to the Syrians?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we believe that a political solution is the right course here and that that opportunity remains. And that's why we need to act. That's why we felt that the United Nations Security Council should act. But we are continuing to work with our international allies and partners who believe, as we do, that the behavior of the Assad regime is unacceptable and reprehensible.

Q And on the charges against NGOs in Egypt, can we assume that prosecution would cross a line?

MR. CARNEY: Wendell, I don't want to, again, speculate about what actions would prompt what reactions. We are deeply concerned about the crackdown against NGOs. We're concerned about the ability of Americans to -- who have done nothing wrong -- to leave the country. And we are working at every level of the Egyptian government to resolve this issue.

Q Does the Egyptian government know what would affect U.S. aid? Has it been made clear to them?

MR. CARNEY: I think we have made clear, both in our public statements and in our private communications, how seriously we take this and that these actions could have consequences for our relationship and for our assistance programs.

Q On Syria, two days ago, the U.S. failed to get action at the highest global diplomatic forum there is, the Security Council. Have you given up on the Security Council? Do you think there's a chance that you could go back to the Security Council? And what does it do to have you evacuate the American embassy in Damascus today? What point does that make?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'll start with the second part. As you know, we've been drawing down our personnel at the embassy for some time because of security concerns, and that is why we have closed that embassy today. Ambassador Ford and all American personnel have now departed the country. That's a reflection of the situation in Syria with regards to the safety of those individuals.

We will continue to work at every level to coordinate with those who believe, as we do, that action needs to be taken; that we cannot -- that it is not the right course to help prop up the Assad regime, that we need to continue to put pressure on him and his cronies, if you will, and to further isolate him, limit his access to financial resources, and therefore make it harder and harder for him to maintain this crackdown. As you know, he's lost control of part of the country already. And we will work with all friends of Syria -- of the Syrian people, rather -- to mount the pressure on Assad going forward.

Q With that kind of political resolution of it, President Obama is willing to wait it if takes weeks, months, a year?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I don't want to speculate on how this will play out. I will simply say that we need to act to allow a peaceful political transition to go forward before the regime's escalating violence puts a political solution out of reach.

Jon-Christopher.

Q Jay, can you be specific at all about any conversations that the President might have had with his allies, including Prime Minister Cameron or President Sarkozy or Chancellor Merkel?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any new conversations to read out. We are obviously coordinating with all of our international allies and partners both at the United Nations and within the region. But I don't have any specific conversations to read out to you.

Jackie.

Q When Prime Minister Netanyahu comes to this country to speak to APEC, will he also be meeting with the President? And if not, why not?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I just don't have a scheduling update for you on that, but I'm sure we'll have something for you in due time.

Connie.

Q Thank you. The President said something very important the other day. He said the U.S. was walking in lockstep with Israel -- I believe that was his quote. Does that mean that the U.S. is coordinating with Israel on any strike against Iran?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to -- I don't recall the quote being quite as you described it. What I would say is, the President made clear that our level of cooperation with Israel, militarily and in intelligence matters, has never been higher. We've made that point repeatedly, because I think it demonstrates this country's commitment to Israel's security.

But it does not -- obviously, Israel is a sovereign country and it has very legitimate concerns about Iran's development of a nuclear weapons capacity. And we share those concerns -- there is no question.

Yes.

Q Can I ask you a question about a domestic issue, the contraception coverage debate? It seems like the backlash not just among Catholic clergy but also liberal Catholics is growing. And I'm wondering if the White House miscalculated when it seems to have not taken into account the reaction you would get, even from erstwhile allies of yours on this issue; and if there was any effort made to find a kind of middle ground, like asking employees of Catholic institutions to go out and buy a rider for contraceptive coverage if they want that?

MR. CARNEY: Mara, what I think is the case is that early on, after this decision was made, there was some misreporting about what it is and what it isn't. I think lost in the initial reports is the fact that this policy provides for an exemption for churches and houses of worship -- and exemption that doesn't exist in eight states in this country, including places like Georgia and Wisconsin. It did not make clear that there are 28 states that require these kinds of preventive services to be included in insurance policies for women, as this policy does.

We sought a lot of opinion as this policy process took place and -- behind the idea of trying to find the right and appropriate balance between religious concerns, on the one hand, and the need to provide health care coverage to women across the country. And

here, I think is an important point to note, is that, again, churches, houses of worship are exempted from this policy. Those institutions --

Q What about Catholic --

MR. CARNEY: -- where women of all faiths, many faiths, work need to have the same kind of coverage that all other American women have.

So we will continue for the coming year -- as I think also was a little bit lost in the coverage of this -- to work with those religious institutions to try to implement this policy in a way that ensures that women have access to preventive care, but tries to allay the concerns of these institutions -- because we take very seriously people's religious beliefs and their objections. And that is the balance that we have sought in this policy, and it is the balance that we'll seek in these conversations going forward.

Q But in these conversations going forward, are you going to consider something like, I think the state of Hawaii has a opportunity for women to go and purchase a rider just for contraception if they want to --

MR. CARNEY: I don't -- that's sort of beyond my policy expertise in terms of what kinds - - what could be contained within the conversation. But I want to make clear that the President's -- or the Secretary's decision, and the President concurs with it, is that this coverage needs to be available to all American women.

Q Are you looking at other ways of providing it that might have --

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, we will work with institutions to try to implement this in a way that assures that the coverage is provided and that attempts to allay the concerns that are there.

Q Now that we're on domestic topics -- on the unemployment numbers that came out on Friday, unaligned economists cheered them as very good news -- not to diminish that. Still, there are 19 million underemployed or unemployed Americans. How concerned is the White House that these numbers will inevitably have to take a dip before we see real recovery as these people reenter the workforce?

MR. CARNEY: I think there are -- some of those who I suppose don't wish us well politically have tried to make a point about this. And the facts are that in these most recent numbers this is not an issue of people leaving the workforce, that the numbers are positive across the board. Now, what we have said --

Q But that's a reality. That's not a political point to score. I mean, that's a reality that people stopped looking for work and then they have to reenter. So that not's point-scoring.

MR. CARNEY: Well, let's look at some of the facts, which include that a number -- a large percentage of that is due to younger people getting more education, which in the end is an economic positive. There are also -- there is a fact that this increase in the number of

people leaving the workforce has been a trend and a fact since 2000 because of an aging population -- which is not to say that this is wholly -- it's not something that I would wholly disregard as an issue. But the underlying fact here is that job creation remains the paramount objective in our economic policy, and should be the paramount objective of Congress as well.

I think I have -- if those folks in the back are with me -- I have a slide I can point to you --

Q We've seen that.

MR. CARNEY: If I might -- maybe not, we'll see.

Q Doesn't it seem familiar from tweets and --

MR. CARNEY: I mean, the issue here is that everything we can do --

Q Oooh --

Q Who does the clicking on that? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: It's a magic clicker. Look, I think what's important to note here is the size of the hole we were in and the steady progress that has taken place since the President's policies have taken effect. And we need to continue to work with Congress, for example, to extend the payroll tax cut through the end of the calendar year. As the President said and has said, we need to do that without drama and without delay, and Congress needs to make sure that it doesn't do anything to muck up the progress that we have made so far.

Q When the President was speaking to Mr. Lauer, he used the term -- (laughter) --

Q Someday it will be Sir Lauer.

MR. CARNEY: Matthew to his mother. (Laughter.)

Q -- he used the term "deserve." I think he said, "I deserve a second term." Does anyone deserve to be President? What did he --

MR. CARNEY: The point the President was making, I think, is one that this chart elucidates, which is that he has worked every day since he was sworn into office on his number-one priority, which he articulated even before he ran for President -- it was why he got into politics to begin with -- which is to ensure that those struggling to stay in the middle class, to better their lot, and those struggling to get into it, have been under pressure for quite a long time. And he's determined, as President, to do everything he can to change that dynamic.

And when he came into office, we were in economic free-fall, as you know.

Q -- but the use of that word?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, the context was based on his performance and his administration's performance on economic policy. The question was, do you deserve reelection, and the issue is, since he came into office, a terrible trend has been reversed. The problem is that the hole was so deep caused by the Great Recession that we still have a great deal of distance to travel.

And that's why we cannot reverse course. We cannot allow Congress to muck up the progress we've made. We must extend the payroll tax cut. We must extend unemployment insurance. And we must do the other things that the President put forward in the State of the Union that ensure that we have an America built to last -- that American manufacturing continues to rebound; 50,000 of those jobs, private sector jobs created last month were in American manufacturing, a sector that had been in chronic decline for many, many years.

We need to continue to develop the skills for American workers that will allow them to compete in the 21st century. And we need to make sure that we do all of it as we return to the kind of American values that ensure that everybody gets a fair shot and that everybody plays by the same set of rules.

Q And this can be a quickie. The Department of Justice has been working with states' attorneys general to get a housing settlement with some of the big banks, so they get off the hook on some things in exchange for creating a fund to help out hurting homeowners. Is the administration making calls to some of the AGs who have refused to sign on to urge them to sign on?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have an update for you on the so-called housing settlement. I think it's important to note that, as I understand it, the settlement that we're talking about here has to do with robo-signing and those issues, and not the broader set of issues involved in mortgage-backed securities and that sort of thing. But I don't have a progress update for you on that or any kind of details in terms of our engagement on the issue.

Yes, Roger.

Q Back to yesterday and the Super Bowl -- (laughter.)

Q Sorry, Jay --

Q Well, that gets to my question --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I was born here, so I'm a Redskins fan. I know it's complicated, because I'm a Red Sox fan, but that's because I didn't have a baseball team growing up.

Q You mean the team that beat the Giants twice?

Q On the Chrysler ad featuring Clint Eastwood --

MR. CARNEY: That's right, the Redskins did beat the Giants twice. Go figure.

Q Did the White House or the campaign have any role in the creation of that ad, or advising on that ad, or consulting on the ad?

MR. CARNEY: No.

Q Were you pleased with the ad?

MR. CARNEY: It was news to me when I saw it. Look, I think --

Q Do you consider it an in-kind contribution from Clint Eastwood?

MR. CARNEY: I mean, the answer to your question, Roger, is no. The ad points out, I think, what is significant -- a company that has rebounded obviously wants to sell more cars, and that's what advertising is about. But it does point out a simple fact, which is that the automobile industry in this country was on its back, and potentially poised to liquidate three years ago, and this President made decisions that were not very popular at the time that were guided by two important principles: One, that he should do what he could to ensure that 1 million jobs would not be lost; and two, that the American automobile industry should be able to thrive globally if the right conditions were created, and that included the kinds of reforms and restructuring that Chrysler and GM undertook in exchange for the assistance from the American taxpayer.

He was not willing to allow -- did not believe it was necessary to allow the American automobile industry to collapse and disappear. And so he made the decisions he made, and believes they were the right decisions.

Andrei.

Q Thank you, Jay. Back to Syria, please. Of course, the Russians and probably the Chinese, too, say that they are not supporting the Syrian regime. What they are supporting is the international legal regime -- the international legal norms that exist in relations between states. They do not want anyone, including the United States, to pick a regime they don't like, inside rebelling against that regime or trying -- you understand what I am talking about. Basically what you just presented to us was a rhetorical political, even economic aggression against a regime. My question is very simple: What are the specific legal grounds on which you do this, you base this -- in the absence of a resolution?

MR. CARNEY: Andrei, I would refer you to the United Nations, to our mission there, and to the State Department. What you saw, and what you see today, is a broad international consensus against the behavior of the Assad regime, the brutal killing of the Syrian people. We think that's wrong. And we agree with many of our partners and allies around the world and in the region when we say that. I think, again, the images that we've seen just this weekend demonstrate that the kind of behavior being carried out by the Syrian forces under the control of the Assad regime is vile and unacceptable.

So that is why we supported the United Nations Security Council resolution, and it's why we'll continue to work with our allies and partners to further isolate and pressure the Assad regime, to allow the Syrian people the opportunity to choose their own future.

That's the approach we take.

Q Jay, if I may, one additional question. I actually wanted to ask you about -- to remind you that lynching -- lynching is illegal in the United States. You need to have a court of law. But I will not ask about that. I will ask you about -- can you tell me --

MR. CARNEY: Andrei, I feel like it might be 1982 and it's --

Q Maybe, I don't know. Lynching is illegal. Many like-minded people form a posse, hunt somebody down --

MR. CARNEY: Andrei, do you have a question?

Q I have a question. The question is, can you assure me that you are not working inside Syria through your special forces -- whatever it is -- the working military?

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry, what's the question? Are we --

Q Is the United -- can you tell me that United States is not taking any military steps to undermine the government --

MR. CARNEY: I think we've made very clear that we are pursuing a political and diplomatic course with regards to Syria. And we will continue to do so.

Alexis.

Q Jay, you were talking about Congress. What, if anything, is new on the status of marching towards the expiration date for the payroll and UI and Medicare? We're a couple weeks away from that. What's been going on here to try to work towards a solution that doesn't end up with an 11th-hour crisis with the negotiations?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that we've made clear, the President has made clear, that Congress needs to act without drama and without delay to ensure that the payroll tax cut is extended through the end of the year, that the unemployment insurance benefits are extended, and that the so-called doc fix is extended.

I mean, the kind of economic growth that I was just pointing out to you and the kind of job creation that we saw in January needs to be continued. And in order to help that process forward, we in Washington shouldn't take steps that undermine economic growth and job creation. And certainly a failure to extend the payroll tax cut for 160 million Americans would be just the sort of step that could do that.

So we're in conversations with folks on the Hill. This is a process being led by the Hill. It should be fairly simple. We'll see if that is in fact the case. But we believe that everyone in Congress -- Republicans and Democrats alike -- should see it as the right thing to do to make sure that 160 million Americans don't have their taxes go up on March 1st, and to make sure at a macro level that steps are taken that ensure that we continue positive economic growth, and we continue positive job creation.

Jerry, and then Leslie.

Q Jay, yesterday Governor O'Malley mentioned that some of the reaction to the President's HHS policy was rooted in politics as opposed to in conscience. Does the President accept that premise?

MR. CARNEY: I didn't see those comments, and --

Q It was on CNN. He was talking about the bishops' letters, and said that many of the bishops are Republicans.

MR. CARNEY: I didn't see that. I think that we have worked to find the appropriate balance between religious beliefs and the need to provide preventive services to American women, and to ensure that American women have access to those services regardless of where they work. And we have carved out an exemption for churches and other houses of worship, and we will work, going forward, with institutions where the employer is affiliated with a church, for example, but where many, many of the employees are of all faiths, to find a way to ensure that the policy is implemented and that all women have access to these services that also deals with the concerns that have been expressed.

Q Right. But when you were answering the question to Mara you said that part of the reason that people are upset about this is because it's been misreported. What he was saying is that it's also people with a political ax to grind --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I didn't see that. I didn't watch all the Sunday shows, and I just don't -- I don't have a -- I think what we see here is the need to find the appropriate balance between concerns on the one hand and the obligation to provide services to all American women.

Eleanor.

Q You seem to be suggesting that you're looking for some sort of a balance, that this isn't a done deal. And as part of that, how do you answer criticism that government is forcing religious institutions to pay for services they find morally objectionable?

MR. CARNEY: I really don't have any more of an answer, Eleanor. I think that we decided, the administration decided, the President agrees with this decision, that we need to provide these services that have enormous health benefits for American women, and that the exemption that we carved out is appropriate. And we will continue to have discussions about ways that the implementation can be done that might address some of these concerns. But the policy itself is clear.

Q The argument is over the fact that people don't consider it appropriate.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I understand that there have been objections and that some people disagree with us, and we are going to work with institutions that have concerns here. But I think it's important to note that we believe that these services are important and that

American women deserve to have access to that kind of insurance coverage regardless of where they work.

Leslie.

Q Jay, I wanted to go back to Syria. Secretary Clinton's remarks yesterday, she mentioned that the U.S. is going to seek regional cooperation on more sanctions, including to dry up the source of funding in arms shipments -- will work to expose those who are still funding the regime and sending them weapons. Can you elaborate on who the U.S. has identified in terms of sending the weapons --

MR. CARNEY: I won't -- I can't elaborate on identifying countries or individuals. But I think that what I've been saying here should echo what Secretary Clinton said about our approach going forward in trying to further isolate and pressure the Assad regime.

Last one.

Q A question on China's Vice President Xi's visit. Ben Rhodes said the other day the economy will definitely be on agenda. And also, Jake Sullivan, from State Department, say North Korea and Iran would be on agenda. So what else will be on the agenda? And also, what will the President say to Mr. Xi on Iran?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't want to preview the President's conversations or whatever comments he might make, or the Vice President's. The fact is that we have an important and multilevel bilateral relationship with China and a number of issues are always on the agenda when we sit down with Chinese leadership, and that will be the case with this visit as well.

Thank you, all.

END

1:24 P.M. EST