

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett McGurk , 12/13/16

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/13/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-special-envoy-global

December 13, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 13, 2016

PRESS BRIEFING

BY PRESS SECRETARY JOSH EARNEST

AND SPECIAL PRESIDENTIAL ENVOY FOR

THE GLOBAL COALITION TO COUNTER ISIL, BRETT MCGURK

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:00 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Tuesday. As advertised, I'm going to be joined today by Brett McGurk. Brett has been here a couple of times before. Brett just left a National Security Council meeting with the President. The President, as you know, convenes his National Security Council every few weeks to review the progress that we're making against ISIL. Brett participated in the meeting and is now here to provide an update to all of you on that progress.

Brett's title -- I was asking him just before we walked in -- is Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition Against ISIL. He's got a presentation that he'll offer up and then he'll take some questions. He'll leave and then I can take your questions on non-ISIL-related topics from there.

So with that, Brett, do you want to take it away?

MR. MCGURK: So thanks for having me. I thought I would give an update on the counter-ISIL campaign. The last time I was here I think was about six months ago, and I have a lot of new information, which I'll convey.

The President just convened, as Josh mentioned, his National Security Council today to discuss the current status of the global campaign against ISIL. The meeting provided an in-depth overview of where we are in this campaign, and I want to provide just an update overall.

So as you know, we analyze ISIL and focus our policy on destroying it in really three dimensions -- its core in Iraq and Syria and shrinking its physical space; its network, so that's foreign fighters, finance and propaganda media networks; and then the so-called affiliates, made of affinities, affiliates around the world, of which Libya has been of particular concern to us.

The United States, we have an Integrated Campaign Plan that incorporates our entire government -- Defense, State, Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security, and the intelligence community -- around specific lines of effort. It's called the ICP, and it's an effort we review and refresh really each quarter to help identify opportunities, reinforce areas where we're having success and address areas that may have fallen behind. The President received a detailed update on this ICP this morning.

We also, of course, lead a global coalition of 68 members -- this is one of the largest coalitions of its kind in history -- to relentlessly combat ISIL across all lines of effort. So, militarily, on the ground in Iraq and Syria, we're supporting partners with training, equipping, advising and airstrikes. That's 17,455 airstrikes against ISIL terrorists as of this morning.

Through law enforcement cooperation, where we're sharing information to find and disrupt plots around the world. Through intelligence, homeland security and other channels to help combat the flow of foreign fighters across borders. Through treasury and finance to destroy ISIL's economic infrastructure. And through both governments and the private sector to combat ISIL's poisonous ideology and their propaganda online, their ability to recruit.

Our global coalition has also provided billions of dollars to support stabilization in areas cleared of ISIL, enabling citizens to return. And this is not only a U.S. effort; ISIL is an enemy that threatens the entire world, so we have leveraged resources from around the world, including more than \$2 billion pledged for humanitarian, stabilization efforts in Iraq during coalition meetings in July.

But U.S. leadership matters on this. And that's why I want to thank the Congress for their close coordination in supporting a counter-ISIL budget amendment in the recently passed continuing resolution. These funds will be essential to help us accelerate the campaign and support efforts such as demining that allows people to return to their homes. And I'll be calling on coalition partners to make similar contributions here over the coming days.

Let me update you briefly on some of the update -- the campaigns we have ongoing now, particularly in Sirte, Libya; and Raqqa and Mosul.

In Sirte, about a year ago ISIL controlled approximately 150 kilometers of land on the Mediterranean coastline. It was using Libya as a haven from which to plan attacks in neighboring Tunisia, and ISIL leaders were encouraging people to travel to Libya, instead of Syria, to join ISIL. They saw it as their growing safe haven.

Since that time, at the President's direction, we've eliminated the mastermind of the Tunisia attacks, Nouredine Chouchane; the leader of ISIL in Libya, Abu Nabil, who came from Syria to lead ISIL in Libya. And now we've just completed operations to liberate Sirte and its surrounding areas. So in Operation Odyssey Lightning, U.S. military forces conducted almost 500 airstrikes in support of units fighting under the authority of Libya's Government of National Accord. And while we've still got work to be done, this strategic location in the Mediterranean is no longer accessible to ISIL terrorists. We'll, of course, continue to support the Government of National Accord as it pursues ISIL throughout the country.

In Raqqa -- Raqqa remains ISIL administrative capital and it is under more pressure now than ever before. Forces partnered with our coalition have now entirely severed routes between Raqqa and ISIL locations in Iraq. And the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of local Arabs and Kurds, are steadily advancing on Raqqa with the aim to isolate or really strangulate the city. Since this operation began about one month ago, the SDF has cleared 700 square kilometers north of Raqqa, and just on Saturday began a second phase of operations along the new access just to the west, and this is proceeding quite well.

The pressure in Raqqa is bearing fruit as ISIL leaders come out of hiding, which allows us to kill them. Today we confirm the deaths by precision coalition airstrikes of three terrorist leaders in Raqqa -- Salah Gourmat, Sammy Djedou, Walid Hamman.

Gourmat was a French Algerian, Djedou a Belgian. They were responsible for planning and facilitating the November 13th attacks in Paris last year. They were also actively plotting attacks when they were killed on December 4th in the streets of Raqqa. Hamman had been convicted by a Belgian court for a terrorist plot in 2015, and he was working with Gourmat and Djedou to plan new attacks.

So these three dead terrorists in Raqqa join a growing list from ISIL's what we call their external operations network that we have targeted and eliminated. Last month, coalition forces eliminated Abd al-Basit al-Iraqi. He was the ISIL emir for attacks throughout the Middle East region and a key facilitator for terrorist travel through Turkey. Coalition strikes also killed Boubaker al-Hakim, an ISIL leader planning attacks in France and throughout Europe. And a leader of all ISIL external operations, of course, Muhammad Adnani, was killed on August 30th as he traveled from Raqqa to Bab.

So the point is, even as operations continue to move towards Raqqa, our coalition is relentlessly reaching into Raqqa to eliminate ISIL leaders with a particular focus on those planning and plotting against our homeland and our partners.

For the operation to seize and hold Raqqa, which will be coming, we're in close consultation with our partners including Turkey. I was in Ankara last week for talks on this and other topics and these talks were quite fruitful. And the President's authorization over the weekend for an additional 200 Special Operations Forces in Syria will help further accelerate our campaign to eject ISIL from Raqqa. I visited these Special Operators several times and they are doing truly heroic work to protect our homeland and to eliminate this haven of ISIL in Syria.

And I'll briefly discussed the Mosul campaign. We're now in month two of what is really the most complex operation to date -- the liberation of Mosul -- and thus far we've seen a very steady and deliberate advance along all axes against ISIL terrorists, which are using the civilian population in Mosul as human shields.

I just visited the eastern axis, just in the outskirts of Mosul, last week. Secretary Carter was in Iraq, and he visited the Qayara airbase, south of Mosul, over the weekend. And General Votel, our CENTCOM commander, was in the same area just yesterday and gave a very detailed to the President this morning. And all of us witnessed this unprecedented cooperation between the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga, which has really been essential to this campaign.

Our coalition since the beginning of this campaign, about two years ago, we've trained over 65,000 Iraqi personnel who are now fighting professionally and performing heroically. So ISIL terrorists are now trapped in Mosul. They're unable to resupply or replenish their dwindling ranks. Throughout this campaign, which began just a couple months ago now, we've already conducted over 500 airstrikes, destroyed about 100 car bombs, 100 tunnels, 300 bunkers -- this is ongoing every single day.

We're often asked how long this is going to take, and the answer is, in Mosul, it will take as long as it takes. I think it's useful to remember other campaigns against ISIL. Kobani, Raqqa, Baiji oil refinery are very significant campaigns; each of them took about six months. Some have gone faster -- Fallujah went a little faster than anticipated. And the key thing is that, what ISIL does in these cities is they set up concentric rings of defenses, and once you break through the crust of that defense, you don't know what's going to come next. Eventually they reach a culmination point; they simply cannot resupply, they run out of suicide bombers, and they culminate. And in Mosul, we don't when that will come. It could come very soon; it could come a couple months from now. But our momentum will be sustained and we'll provide relentless pressure on the enemy throughout Mosul.

Every single operation in Iraq that we have supported has succeeded, and all the ground that has been retaken from ISIL in Iraq has been held, and Mosul will be no different.

Let me very briefly, in about five minutes, just go through some of the indicators that I discussed last time when I was here in June -- there's about eight of them, but I'll go them fairly quickly -- of how we track this overall campaign and how we measure how we're doing.

The first is territory. And we actually have a new map here which just came out this morning from our intelligence community, and the map demonstrates that ISIL continues to lose significant ground. And why is this important? Because what has made ISIL this global phenomenon, with all of these recruits from all around the world -- although that's rapidly diminishing -- is this notion of this homeland and caliphate. And all of their propaganda used to talk about this expanding homeland, this expanding movement, and they can no longer say that because their territory is now rapidly shrinking.

So in Iraq now, about 61 percent of territory that had been controlled by ISIL has now been reclaimed, and in Syria, about 28 percent. But what is most significant -- I think the last time I was here there was still a 98-kilometer strip of border with Turkey in which ISIL terrorists were still able to come in and out, and that is where the Paris attackers, the Brussels attackers transited through this route. So since then, over the last six months, we've worked very closely with the Syrian Democratic Forces, and also with Turkey and the moderate opposition to close off that route. It's at the number one in the map.

So ISIL now has no access to an international border, and this is significantly impacted the overall campaign because they are now a very isolated entity within Syria and Iraq, and, most importantly, it is much harder for them to come in and out, which is critical for them to project their terrorist acts outside of Iraq and Syria. So territory we're continuing to shrink as we speak, and that will continue.

Leadership. ISIL's leadership ranks are dwindling. I already mentioned some of the recent strikes against their leaders in Raqqa. But since the start of the campaign we've eliminated nearly all of Abu Bakr Baghdadi deputies and his trusted advisors. That includes his likely successor, Haji Imam; his ministers for war, finance, oil and gas, security, and external operations. And as these leaders are replaced, we target and kill their replacements. And we've seen a significant degradation in their overall capabilities and ranks.

Baghdadi himself -- he claims to be the caliph -- we have not seen his face in well over a year. He issued an audiotope about a month ago, but issuing audiotapes deep in hiding is not really a sign of a confident leader, particularly in today's media age. So eventually, we will find and eliminate him as well, but the leadership ranks continue to diminish.

Third indicator, their overall fighting capacity, their overall strength, overall fighters. The number of battle-ready fighters inside Iraq and Syria is now at its lowest point that it's ever been. We estimate about 12,000 to 15,000. And ISIL is unable to replenish its ranks.

Whereas we used to see about a thousand foreign fighters in the 2014 time frame flowing into Syria, coming from all around the world -- I've mentioned this before -- an unprecedented number of these foreign fighters, these jihadi fighters coming from all around the world, almost 40,000 -- it's now down to really what is quite a negligible amount, in our estimation.

And that's really thanks, again, to our efforts on the ground and our Special Operators that have done an incredible job to clear out that area of the border just south of Turkey, and now the intervention from Turkey to protect its border, make sure that these terrorists cannot get in and out.

We are also making sure that foreign fighters cannot transit across borders. So about 60 countries within the coalition have really strengthened their laws against the transit of foreign fighters. Plots have been disrupted in about 15 countries, and this continues. One

of the unsung efforts of our coalition which has really strengthened is the information-sharing among different capitals. This is something that has now really accelerated, and it's increased our ability to stay well ahead of this enemy.

Fourth indicator, briefly, is revenue. We're destroying ISIL's economic base. Just last week -- it's only one example, but last week, our air coalition destroyed about 168 ISIL oil tankers, the largest strike of its kind. And we've continued to target their oil and gas infrastructure, their bulk cash storage sites and their financial facilitators. They cannot pay their fighters. The fighters come thinking they're going to have this lavish lifestyle -- that is not happening. Their fighters are not getting paid, and we have multiple indications of that. And we will continue to maintain this relentless pressure.

The fifth indicator is one I mentioned -- this was really critical when we started this -- was their access to borders. Again, they were flowing in and out by almost over 1,000 a month. That is no longer happening. So quite significant development to close off their entire access to international borders.

Sixth indicator, media propaganda. ISIL used to have this very slick, sophisticated media information apparatus, and it was led by two people. One was Muhammad Adnani, their chief spokesman and also their head of external operations; and, two, a very sophisticated media expert named Dr. Waeli. He was kind of the head of all those slick videos they used to produce. Both of them are no longer around.

We also have been working very closely with the private sector and within the coalition to get their content off the Internet, to make it far harder to access. Their overall output is down by about 75 percent. If you just measure -- we measure these things in 12-month increments -- from August of 2015 to August this year, decrease of 75 percent. Twitter -- just one example -- have taken down 400,000 pro-ISIL Twitter handles. And the ratio of anti-ISIL information to pro-ISIL information has totally flipped from where it was two years ago. And we'll keep this going.

This is also a global effort. So ISIL tries to recruit with different messages around the world. So in the UK, we have the UK leading an effort to really target those who might be recruited in Europe. In the Gulf region, we're working very closely with the UAE. I met them -- really incredible young people who are working 24/7 to counter the toxic ideology and poisonous messages of ISIL. Saudi Arabia is helping quite a bit with that. And even in Southeast Asia, Malaysians and other critical partners within our coalition are helping to counter the message in that part of the world. Very different messages in different parts of the world, and we work to adapt to that.

Seventh indicator, briefly, is what we call global cohesion. ISIL had sought to be a global organization with direct links, financial fighters, leaders, between its core in Iraq and Syria to these so-called affiliates. So in response, we've strengthened a global coalition to find and sever all of those links. The result has been a weakening of their so-called affiliates across the board. I mentioned Libya, but also Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, and Afghanistan -- all of these entities are being significantly degraded.

Importantly, our coalition also includes multinational organizations, such as INTERPOL and Europol, to help develop a global database of ISIL-affiliated fighters to stop, again, their transit across borders. My deputy, Lieutenant General Wolfe, was at the INTERPOL annual meeting last month to try to strengthen these relationships and make sure that we are sharing the information we need to stay ahead of this threat.

So as ISIL's global cohesion weakens, ours is strengthening with cooperation across the globe.

I would just say in conclusion -- and I mentioned this last time -- we are having tremendous success against this enemy. It is accelerating. We are now putting pressure on its two so-called capitals of Mosul and Raqqa -- simultaneous, relentless pressure. That will continue. We are killing their leaders. We're taking off their ability to finance and resource themselves. But this remains an unprecedented threat. The fight is not over. This will remain a multiyear effort. But we have developed a campaign that is global, and I hope I've demonstrated the overall breadth of the campaign.

I also just want to say, since we've been doing this for a couple of years, and I visit our guys in the field all the time, we've lost five Americans in this campaign. Five of our military personnel have been killed in this campaign. And it's important to keep in mind, because I saw with my own eyes the casualty collection points just outside Mosul of the Iraqis who are fighting. We are advising them to fight and retake their territory, similar to our Syrian partners. And their casualties are very high. An operation in Manbij, Syria, for example, which was really important to protect us -- Manbij is where the foreign fighters were flowing through. It's where they were planning external operations. And the Syrian Democratic Forces in that operation had over a thousand casualties.

Similar in Mosul, the Iraqi security forces that we are training, advising and enabling are fighting heroically. They are taking casualties and continuing to advance. And I think we're all very proud to work with them and grateful. And it's also just a reminder of the different mode of operation we have here -- enabling, advising local partners to take back the ground that they have lost. And I think it is significant that all the ground we have taken as a coalition, working with locals, everything we've taken back from ISIL -- that's over 60 percent in Iraq, 28 percent in Syria -- none of it ISIL has been able to retake. And that is because before we do any of this we have a tremendous effort -- sometimes months long, sometimes shorter -- to prepare the ground politically, economically, to get the stabilization resources in place to help make sure people can return to their homes, and make sure that the defeat of ISIL is a lasting one.

So it is significant that to date ISIL has not retaken any of the ground it has lost in operations we have enabled. And we're going to make sure it continues that way.

That's quite a different approach, I will just say in closing, than the Russians. The Russians have really had one counter-ISIL mission -- they claim to be fighting ISIL -- they've had one counter-ISIL mission and that was Palmyra. And they made a big deal about that. They had a big concert and they invited members of the media to come see it.

And ISIL has now retaken Palmyra. In our operations, ISIL has not retaken a speck of ground that we have taken from them. And I think it is fairly significant that the one operation the Russians touted as a counter-ISIL operation ISIL has now retaken.

We're not pleased about that. We want to wipe ISIL entirely off this map. The point of the map -- as I have explained before, everything that's in color on this map used to be controlled by ISIL. So the summer of 2014, everything there was part of the caliphate. Everything in green has been retaken, and everything in dark green is just what has been retaken in the last month. The dark red splotches in the southwest are areas that actually ISIL has gained over the last two years -- very small areas and areas that we primarily do not operate.

And I'll just say finally on the situation, of course, in Aleppo -- this was discussed briefly in the meeting this morning, and there is a very active effort going on to try to resolve this. The Security Council, of course, will be convening later today. But of course, we've said a lot what we think about the tactics the Russians, the regime are using -- tactics that are totally different than anything we do against ISIL in Mosul. We are cognizant of every single innocent life in Mosul. We're fighting an enemy that is using human shields, and we're acting with tremendous precision. And if you see what the Russians are doing with the regime in Aleppo, it could not be any different.

So the contrasts I think are quite stark.

With that, I will leave it there. And I think overall, the campaign here against ISIL has momentum. We're always looking for ways to accelerate it and we're always talking about that, and we will not stop until we destroy this enemy.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, Brett.

Mark, do you want to start?

Q Sure. Can you say how you hand over an operation as complex as this to a new administration? And have you yet briefed any Trump transition personnel?

MR. MCGURK: It's a great question. We were just talking about this. So just in my own experience, I was here in -- I was senior director for Iraq and Afghanistan in the Bush administration. It was the first transition in wartime in 40 years. And we worked very hard with President Bush and the incoming President-elect, President Obama, to have a very seamless transition, given the importance of a transition in wartime.

So this is similar -- a transition in wartime. It's complex. And the direction very clearly from President Obama is to make sure we're doing all we can to ensure it can be a seamless transition. There, of course, will be a lot of continuity on the military side, and so we're doing all we possibly can to support that effort. I'll leave it there.

Q Have you conferred with Trump officials?

MR. MCGURK: I think there's constant transition meetings going on, particularly in the State Department. I think those meetings are ongoing now.

Q Have you yet?

MR. MCGURK: I won't talk about the individual meetings we're having. Those meetings are ongoing constantly.

MR. EARNEST: Justin.

Q On a few things. First was Libya, and I know you outlined a lot of progress. The estimates have been that there were between 5,000 and 8,000 ISIL fighters there. Obviously they weren't all killed, and so there's I think a kind of outstanding question about if those estimates were high, or if not, if they've escaped in a way that they could regroup and pose a problem later. And the other question was about oil revenues. You talked about that a lot the last time we saw you. And I'm wondering if the rise in oil prices globally could help ISIL in a way that sort of counteract some of the gains that you outlined here, or if you feel like they're cut off at this point from the global oil.

MR. MCGURK: Thanks. Two very good questions. So in Libya, it's hard to get a precise estimate of how many. We think most of them were probably killed in Libya -- or in Sirte in that campaign. But they really holed up -- I mentioned this is what they do -- this is their defense strategy. They have these kind of rings of defense and then they have a little citadel in the middle where they try to hole up. And in Sirte, they did that for some months in a little final area of the city.

Our Ambassador, Peter Bodde, our Ambassador to Libya, is in discussions with Prime Minister Sarraj about the next steps in this campaign and what support the Libyans might want. And of course, we'll be discussing that with him. We want to make sure, in our view, that ISIL and extremist groups cannot have safe haven and sanctuary anywhere in Libya.

On the oil trade, we have significantly reduced their ability to generate any serious revenue from oil. Of course, though, it does continue, but it's all self-generated. I mean, they cannot get any oil out of their little self-contained entity. There is definitely trade going on between different groups -- this is a very chaotic situation, particularly in Syria -- but their ability to replenish their resources is just significantly degraded. And whenever we find where they are extracting oil we make sure that we eliminate that.

Q The concern seems to be, though, that fighters were able to escape. And you're discounting that? You think sort of the -- our allies were able to sort of fully encapsulate the city?

MR. MCGURK: We don't get into numbers. We think we eliminated quite -- the vast majority there in Sirte. But if they try to regroup, I'm certain we'll find a way to deal with that.

MR. EARNEST: Mark.

Q The information-sharing with the Turks, it's been really strained on the diplomatic level -- obviously the whole question of cooperation with the coup and the allegations and the request for the return of the fellow that they think was involved in the coup. Has that been reflected at all in the cooperation you've seen in the counter-ISIL campaign?

MR. MCGURK: Obviously it's a complex relationship. I was in Ankara about four or five days ago, had very good, very detailed meetings in Ankara about the overall situation. And the Turks have done an awful lot here over the last year, very close cooperation with us in the counter-ISIL fight, and I felt very good coming out of those meetings about the way forward.

General Dunford is in regular contact. The day before I was in Ankara he was in Incirlik meeting his counterpart, General Akar. So our communications with Turkey is extremely close. They are doing an operation now -- just south of that green splotch here, near Al-Bab -- and obviously we're looking for ways to try to help them defeat ISIL in that particularly sensitive area.

It's also a sensitive area of the country because you have a number of different forces converging. So a lot of what we do every single day is try to make sure that we deescalate any tension between non-ISIL affiliated forces that we have relationships with so everybody is focused on the same enemy. This is extremely hard.

And that's why I mentioned there's another model for doing this -- we can send in the 82nd Airborne to go in and do all this kind of stuff. We do not think that that would be a lasting, sustainable way to do it. We think what is sustainable, particularly in something as complex as Syria, is advising, assisting, enabling. And I think the record of what we've been able to clear out proves that. But it makes it complex, because we're trying to encourage our partners that were working with on the ground, you guys need to go that way, when sometimes they want to go a different way. So this is what the daily communication and constant discussions are with the Turks and different actors on the ground.

But I was very encouraged by my meetings in Ankara last week that we have a shared way forward, and it's going to continue.

Q They're fighting the ISIL forces as much as they want to fight the Kurds?

MR. MCGURK: Well, right now they are engaged in a hostile fight against ISIL, and Turkey soldiers have taken casualties. And I think we have to extend our condolences to them. I did that when I was there. They are engaged in a fight against ISIL on the ground, definitely.

MR. EARNEST: Michelle.

Q About a week ago, there were reports in Syria the ISIS leadership or what's left of it was meeting to try to pick a al-Baghdadi successor. What do you know about that? Do you think al-Baghdadi is wounded or incapacitated in some way? And even if he were taken out of the picture, how much of an effect would that have on their strength?

MR. MCGURK: So it's a great question. I saw those reports, which we can't confirm. I would say any ISIL leaders have a pretty good succession plan because we're removing them at a pretty fast clip. Baghdadi is unique because he's the guy that rose in the Grand Mosque in Mosul and declared a caliphate, which I think I mentioned this the last time I was here -- but I travel now all around the world to countries in which their young men, and in many cases, young women, have been attracted to this movement. And when you say what is it that has attracted your young people to this movement, there's a number of different answers, but there's a common denominator -- this notion of a homeland and a caliphate.

And Baghdadi claims to have a unique -- this phony unique claim to being a caliph. This is all a total fraud, but he claims to have this unique lineage that makes him a caliph. So I definitely think that when we do eliminate Baghdadi it will make a significant difference.

I also think it is significant that he tried to be a kind of new type of terrorist leader -- giving public speeches, going to the Grand Mosque and giving this sermon in the summer of 2014 -- and he is now in deep, deep hiding. And we have not heard from him until he issued this audiotope a couple months ago, and it was a very defensive message. It basically said, for all of the fighters in Mosul, stay and fight to the death. But all the indications we're getting is that many did not take that message well because where is Baghdadi? He is somewhere in hiding. And we also know he hides with slaves and all sorts of terrible things. This guy is one of the most despicable we've ever seen.

So we're doing all we can to find and eliminate him. As I mentioned, all of his deputies -- nearly all of his deputies have been eliminated. And it's a matter of time before we find him. I do think it will make a significant difference on ISIL as an organization, as a movement, once he's eliminated, but it will not eliminate this kind of global jihadi terrorist threat, obviously.

MR. EARNEST: Ron.

Q Given all the progress, does ISIS still have the ability to plot and orchestrate attacks against the United States and our allies from the territory that they have remaining? And will President Obama leave office with that ability apparently still intact?

And on Aleppo, you said it was discussed briefly. There are reports that there are scores of civilians being massacred by the advancing Syrian army. There are also reports of a ceasefire. Did those issues come up, and was there any response to that from the President?

MR. MCGURK: So in terms of plotting, this is what they want to do. ISIL wants to attack us, and they want to attack our partners. And they're very sophisticated -- the Paris attacks, the Brussels attacks, those were planned in Raqqa. They ran through some of these other towns I mentioned and they would deploy their operatives to carry out attacks. We think we significantly degraded their ability to do that. But they do have

operatives in a number of places in which they are planning external attacks. This is something that is the primary focus of ours, to eliminate what I call that external operations network.

So the head of it was Mohammad Adnani. That's why targeting him was so significant. Most of this is also being done in Raqqa, but I think we have demonstrated these three I mentioned today that were eliminated just a few days ago were part of this very sophisticated terrorist plotting network.

So every single opportunity we get we are degrading this network, but it still exists. This is still a threat. They are trying to recruit -- not planned, sophisticated attacks -- they're trying to do that, but they're also trying to recruit deranged individuals from all over the world to act in their name. And that is something that is very hard to stop, which is why the information-sharing and everything we're doing kind of behind the scenes as a coalition is so critical.

I can't speak to what's happening in Aleppo right now. I will just say, as I think I mentioned at the outset, this is a horrific situation. I think it demonstrates once again the tactics that the Russians are using in support of the regime are something that is truly beyond the pale, could not be any different than the types of tactics that we utilize. And I've also seen these reports of the ceasefire and a potential agreement, but I can't confirm any of that because this is all fairly late-breaking. But I understand the Security Council will be convening later today to discuss it.

MR. EARNEST: Andrew.

Q I wanted to follow up on your trip to Ankar. What did you hear from the Turks that made you so confident, vis-à-vis what they planned in Al-Bab and with regards to what you just said?

MR. MCGURK: Well, I'd just say this. Turkey is at war against ISIL. There's no question about that. They are fighting on the ground, they are taking casualties. And ISIL is a significant threat to Turkey, and that is something that they see very clearly, and so we're working through various ways in which we can help them.

We do have disagreements, of course, in terms of some things going on in Syria, which we also have very candid discussions about. When it comes to Raqqa, we want to get ISIL out of Raqqa as soon as possible, but this will be a sequence campaign. That's the only way to do it. So we're in the isolation, kind of the strangulation phase now. And then we have to identify the force to actually move in and seize and hold the city. There are a few options for that. One of the options, of course, is working very closely with Turkey, and we are having a detailed discussion with them about this.

But the most significant thing when I was in Turkey was just their threat perception of ISIL as a significant threat to Turkey, which it is. Turkey has suffered more casualties in ISIL attacks than almost any of our other coalition partners. And so while we've had some disagreements over the years, I thought we had a pretty good shared way forward. Not to say there isn't some tension, obviously.

Q I also wanted to ask, are U.S. forces embedding with the Popular Mobilization Forces?

MR. MCGURK: Embedding with popular -- I think you're talking about a report in which there was a photograph of some training of -- so Popular Mobilization Forces are known as being primarily Shia militia forces, many of which operate outside the command and control of the Iraqi government, which is a significant problem, not only to us but also to the Iraqi government.

But under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces, there are local forces from these areas to hold the ground after operations conclude. Many of these are locals from Nineveh Province -- so Sunnis, Christians, all sorts of -- it's a very diverse province. I'll give you an example. In Anbar Province, under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces, about 15,000 local Anbari tribal fighters mobilized to fight Daesh. That is one reason why, from the four to the five, all of that is green. We cannot do that only with the Iraqi security forces. We needed the tribes to be mobilized. So those are all Sunnis from Anbar. They're being paid by the government to fight ISIL, and we're, of course, supporting them.

MR. EARNEST: Richard.

Q Could you tell us a little more about the coalition partners? Are they just as resolute as the U.S. in continuing further? And can you tell us -- the operation themselves, how -- what's the percentage of the operation being done by the U.S., and the coalition -- the percentage by the coalition partners? Besides Turkey?

MR. MCGURK: So a very good question. I've been at this from the beginning, the inception of the coalition, when we had about 15 countries, and there was always a question of what will this grow into.

In the last three weeks, we had all 68 -- ambassadors from all 68 members at the State Department, and we also held what's called kind of the small group of coalition countries, over 20 countries, in Berlin, just a couple weeks ago. And what is fairly extraordinary about this is the sense of international consensus about the need to basically destroy this enemy, and the sense of burden-sharing.

As I mentioned, the United States will not do this -- we cannot succeed in this alone. And the coalition remains extremely strong. So Secretary Carter will be seeing his counterparts in London here in a few days. And the overall cohesion of the coalition across all these multiple lines of effort -- the military gets a lot of the focus, but it is counter-finance, counter-propaganda, counter-foreign fighters, and everything kind of working together -- that we have coordinating mechanisms throughout the coalition. It is working extraordinarily well. And the international consensus behind this effort is something I think we have to continue to build upon, because it is something that's quite extraordinary.

In terms of overall effort, I mentioned there's been about

-- over 17,000 airstrikes now. I think if you add them up, about 4,500 or so have been coalition airstrikes. So, definitely U.S. military forces are doing the bulk of the airstrikes. There's a reason for that -- we have the best military in the world. But the number of coalition partners operating to support that effort is quite significant.

And, of course, we couldn't do this without flying out of Incirlik Airbase, flying out of some other areas within the region. And we're obviously very grateful for that. Without the coalition, we would not be able to defeat this enemy.

MR. EARNEST: We probably have time for two more and then we're going to let Brett go.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. I just want to sort of follow up, especially as it relates to the coalition and strikes. There's been some reporting, Brett, that the U.S. needed to use the Australians to conduct strikes against some of the Paris attackers, and I wonder if you can sort of help me unpack the complications as it relates to the chain of command that the United States might have in conducting airstrikes and having to utilize coalition partners like Australia and others?

And second, I wanted to ask you about Saudi Arabia. That story has come out today and I wondered if you could sort of help unpack this idea that the U.S. is limiting military support for the Saudis because of what's been happening vis-à-vis civilian casualties in Yemen.

MR. EARNEST: I can take the Yemen one, Brett.

MR. MCGURK: So let me -- I'll just say about the -- and I defer to my DOD colleagues who work this every single day -- this has been the most precise air campaign in history. I mean, I think it will be studied in the future and people will -- the most precise air campaign in history. And all of our airstrikes go through a common structure in terms of validating the targets. And it is really moving at an incredible clip.

I can't get into the details of sometimes who does a strike and everything. What I will say is, when I mentioned today -- and this was mentioned also by Secretary Carter earlier today -- eliminating these external plotters in the streets of Raqqa, painstaking, tireless work by coalition actors, our military forces, our folks on the ground, our intelligence apparatus -- all working as one team. And it doesn't always work that well, but it is working quite, quite well.

But I just can't get into in terms of who does what. But it is the most precise air campaign in history. We're very proud of it, and that will continue.

I'll just say about Saudi Arabia -- I was in Saudi Arabia a couple weeks ago to meet with Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. I've seen him a number of times, including also with Muhammad bin Nayef. And Saudi Arabia also is in this fight. I mean, ISIL is a fundamental threat to Saudi Arabia. If you read ISIL's propaganda, if you read

what Baghdadi writes, he's obsessed with Saudi Arabia and striking in Saudi Arabia. So we are working very closely with the Saudis in a whole range of areas in order to help degrade ISIL, particularly on a lot of the counter-ideological fights. So they're very much in this as well.

And I'll let Josh address the Yemen question.

MR. EARNEST: Gardiner, I'll give you the last one.

Q John Brennan has suggested that the campaign on the ground and the campaign against ISIL globally are going in two opposite directions. He said this summer, we still have a ways to go before we're able to say that we've made some significant progress. And he warned that the trajectories for this ISIS religious state or caliphate and global violence point in opposite directions. "As the pressure mounts on ISIL," he said, "we judge that it will intensify its global terror campaign to maintain its domination of the global terrorism agenda."

You're sort of saying the opposite thing. You're saying that these two campaigns are going in exactly the same directions instead of opposite directions, and you're pointing to the three deaths recently of these external plotters as evidence of that.

Tell me why there's such a difference between what you're saying and what some other intelligence people in the administration are saying. Why are you so convinced these two things are going together while other say it's sort of like squeezing a balloon -- if you squeeze it here, they're going to show up someplace else?

MR. MCGURK: I don't think it's so much of a disagreement. In fact, all of our intelligence assessments inform the way we obviously discuss this and prosecute the campaign. I said this will be a multiyear effort. Be very clear about that. The number of foreign fighters, the number of people indoctrinated into this ideology is something that will not be overcome for a number of years. And while the notion of the caliphate is what kind of led to this explosive growth of ISIL -- that is why shrinking the caliphate is so important -- but their desire to inspire attacks around the world as they lose their territory is something that we expect will probably increase.

How do they want to stay relevant? They're trying to spark and inspire attacks around the world. That's why they used to say -- Muhammad Adnani's last statement was very interesting. If you read of Muhammad Adnani, the spokesman, all of his propaganda, again, it used to be about, come to the homeland, or retain and expand the caliphate. Most of their propaganda were these sundrenched scenes of children and families and a very optimistic message, actually.

His last message before his death was very different. It actually said, we might lose all of our territory, but we'll still be around, and, in fact, if you can't come -- because you can't because it's hard to get in here now -- stay home, pick up a knife, and attack someone down the street. It was a very different message. It's a message that does not appeal to a

broad segment of the population. It's a message that appeals to really deranged individuals. But they are trying to remain relevant as they lose their homeland -- what they call their homeland -- by trying to inspire these attacks.

And that is something that will continue. And that is why one thing we've done in the coalition, we talk about even as we degrade their ability to have territory in Iraq and Syria, we need to adapt as a coalition to increase our ability to share information, our hubs of sharing information, to be able to stay ahead of the threat. So that's something as a coalition I think will continue for some time.

So the military-focused coalition of taking back these cities, which we will do, will evolve into a coalition focused on the information-sharing, the patterns of interaction among capitals, among intelligence communities, among law enforcement communities. It's something we have to continue to expand upon and grow.

Q But, Brett, that's a much less optimistic, even frightening message for those of us in this part of the world, because it's suggesting that your success there only increases the dangers here, no?

MR. MCGURK: No, because what they can do inside of Iraq and Syria are these big spectacular attacks. Make no mistake, these are terrorists. It's an international terrorist organization that has the same ideology as Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. The only difference between ISIL and al Qaeda is that ISIL said, let's do a caliphate now, whereas al Qaeda said, well, we'll do a caliphate down the road.

That's the key difference. But they aspire to do massive spectacular attacks around the world, and in order to do that, they need territory to plan and plot and resource. And so we're making sure that they are on their heels every single day, but I would never get up here and say this threat is something that is going to go away or something that we cannot remain absolutely vigilant on.

And which is why, as I mentioned, it's not just DOD and State; it's our entire government working as part of this integrated campaign plan to stay ahead of it because it's different tools. It's military, law enforcement, intel, and counter messaging. So we need to stay at it every single day and remain vigilant for a long time to come.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Brett. I appreciate it.

MR. MCGURK: Okay, thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Okay, we can go back to our regularly scheduled programming now. (Laughter.)

Kevin, do you want to start?

Q Sure. Josh, I did want to ask about laying the blame for Palmyra to Russia, but now that it has been retaken, or partially been retaken, what is the strategy going forward? Is the U.S. going to be involved in that operation? It would seem to be a ripe target now that

you have these forces there that we know about. Or are we going to leave that to the Russians to deal with?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as Brett mentioned, this obviously is something that we're concerned about. I do think that it exposes the failed strategy, or at least calls into question the integrity of those who are describing their strategy.

Their strategy, as they stated, is to be focused on ISIL and to be focused on extremists and terrorists. But the truth is the real consequence of their strategy, which appears to be an intense focus on bombing innocent civilians into submission so that the Assad regime can enjoy some tactical gains, actually results in fueling the kind of extremism that we know extremists rely on to thrive.

It also is exhibit A when you consider this is an example of Russia taking their eye off the ball when it comes to terrorists. That they did have this one limited successful operation against Palmyra -- one that the United States was not involved in but one that we were obviously pleased, and we said so at the time, that this was territory that had been taken away from ISIL -- but the strategy that Russia has employed has caused them to take their eye off the ball, allow ISIL to make some gains, but it also continues to fuel the kind of extremism that only makes Syria a haven for terrorist organizations that plot violence not just in the region but around the world.

Q You've left that particular battle to Russia, and I guess the question now going forward, is that strategy going to change? Will the U.S. get involved in the fight for this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any operational updates at this point, so I can't tell you sort of where this will fall in terms of any planned military operations on the part of our coalition. But it's obviously a situation that we're watching closely.

Ayesha.

Q Iran today ordered its scientists to start developing nuclear-powered marine vessels for what it said as a response to a U.S. violation of the atomic deal. So I was wondering, how much of a concern is this, this kind of maybe tit for tat, the idea that Iran is now saying that it's responding to actions taken by Congress by building these nuclear-powered vessels? Is there a concern that this is going to be an ongoing thing and that there's going to be kind of back and forth now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would agree with your assessment that the timing of this announcement to coincide with the President's signing of the Iran Sanctions Act is not likely a coincidence, but we've been clear even through much of the congressional debate in Congress about the Iran Sanctions Act that the President would not sign into law a piece of legislation that undermined the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

The extension of the Iran Sanctions Act does not undermine the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And we've -- that's been our position from the beginning. We've explained that quite clearly in public and we've explained that

in private to the Iranians.

At the same time, the announcement from the Iranians today does not run counter to the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. We continue to be able to watch closely Iran's nuclear program, starting in the uranium mills and throughout the nuclear supply chain. That is an unprecedented insight into any country's nuclear program, and allows us to verify their ongoing compliance with that program. And our expectation is that as they undertake these kinds of research-and-development efforts, that they will do so consistent with their international obligations.

And we have the ability, because of the cooperation with the Iranians under the agreement, to verify their ongoing compliance with the agreement.

Q But does this kind of -- going forward, should this be something of a warning to Congress or to the next administration that there could be repercussions for pursuing more sanctions, or anything like that?

MR. EARNEST: No, I wouldn't be particularly concerned about that. There are a range of Iranian activities that are a source of concern to the international community and to President Obama outside the scope of the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The reason that we pursued that international agreement is because Iran's ability to get access to and potentially use a nuclear weapon was the number-one concern of the United States and the international community with regard to Iran.

So we've taken that top concern off the table without firing a single shot. And this is something that even the harshest critics of the deal acknowledge has been accomplished. It didn't eliminate all of our concerns with Iran, but it did eliminate our number-one concern about Iran, and that's ultimately the point.

There are other concerns that we have about Iran's behavior that include their support for terrorist organizations and other destabilizing elements in the Middle East, like Hezbollah. We are concerned about the way that Iran continues to menace Israel, and we continue to be concerned about the Iranian regime's lack of respect for basic universal human rights. And we have a variety of ways of countering all of that activity -- some of that involves additional financial sanctions. Some of that involves close cooperation with our partners in the region.

But the number-one objective of the international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons was to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And that objective has been achieved. And because of our ability to monitor Iran's nuclear program, we can verify the ongoing success of that effort. And it certainly is something that makes the world a safer place. It enhances the national security of our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel. It enhances the national security of our NATO partners in -- NATO allies in Europe. And it enhances the national security of the American people, and it will be an important part of President Obama's foreign policy legacy.

Justin.

Q The Energy Department said today that it wasn't going to be turning over names of individual employees involved in the President's climate change efforts to the transition team, the Trump transition team, and said that the request left employees unsettled. I'm wondering if you can explain if that was the only reason that that was made, and why this doesn't sort of -- if it was information that the Trump transition team wanted -- violate the President's sort of edict for helping them as much as they can to smooth over the transition.

MR. EARNEST: Well, we do continue to work closely with the transition team to ensure a smooth and effective transition. And that is work that is going on across a variety of federal agencies, including at the Department of Energy. But there were reports about what certainly could have been an attempt to target civil servants, career, federal government employees.

The kinds of people that we're talking about at the Department of Energy are scientists and lawyers and other experts who are critical to the success of the federal government's ability to make policy. And their work transcends the term of any one President. That's by design. That's to ensure the continuity of the federal government and to ensure that effective decision-making and policy planning is undertaken regardless of which political party is in charge of the Oval Office. If we had to replace the entire Department of Energy every time a new President was elected, that is certainly going to undermine the ability of those at the most senior levels to implement a coherent and effective energy policy.

Our principle -- and this is a principle that Presidents in both parties have long abided by -- is that we should observe the protections that are in place that ensure that career civil servants are evaluated based on merit and not on politics. And I'm sure that the President-elect used the same kind of criteria when choosing his new Department of Energy Secretary as well. Don't you think? (Laughter.)

Q Well, I'll let you interpret that one.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. (Laughter.)

Q But the President mentioned in his "Daily Show" interview last night that he planned to do some speeches after leaving office, and seemed to purposefully delineate those from political speeches that he might give if Donald Trump and his administration did something politically that he disagreed with. So assuming that these are paid speeches -- I mean, this is something that maybe is on your mind, as well -- I'm wondering if the President is going to be putting any sort of self-imposed restrictions on who -- you know, this was a big campaign issue in Wall Street. Education, foreign governments, that sort of thing -- if those sort of things are being set out already.

MR. EARNEST: I would anticipate that there will be significant interest in hearing from former President Obama once he's left office. So he'll have an opportunity to be choosy about which invitations he accepts. And I don't have any criteria to lay out for you at this point about how he will choose which invitations to accept, but I'm confident that there will be a high standard that he'll observe.

Kevin.

Q Thanks. Can I circle back on Yemen?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q The United States' support for the Saudis, at least bringing it back, I'm understanding, because in part of the civilian casualties in Yemen. Can you give me sort of an update on why that decision was made and what that means moving forward?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, we have long expressed some pretty significant concerns about the high rate of civilian casualties in Yemen. And many of those casualties have been as a result of operations carried out by the Saudi-led coalition in the region. Not all of them -- there have also been civilian casualties as a result of operations carried out by their adversaries, as well.

But of course, the United States is playing a role in supporting the Saudi-led coalition. And in light of the high rate of civilian casualties, there was -- the President ordered a review of the kind of assistance that the United States provides to the Saudis as they undertake this effort. That review is ongoing, but there are a couple of steps that the United States is prepared to take to change some of the assistance that we provide.

That includes refocusing our efforts to support the Saudis when it comes to enhancing their border security and their territorial integrity. The concerns that the Saudis have expressed, which is entirely legitimate, is that you have an organization that has overthrown the government of Yemen and has menaced Saudi Arabia, on a number of occasions even breaching their borders.

So Saudi Arabia's concerns about this I think are entirely legitimate. And so we are going to focus our efforts on helping the Saudis protect their border. We also are going to undertake steps to refocus our information-sharing and the responsibilities of our personnel in Saudi Arabia to be focused on this effort.

In addition, we've also decided to -- well, I think that covers it. And I think this is reflective of the fact that we have these longstanding concerns. This review has been ordered. And these are some changes that we've made, but this review is ongoing. And as this process moves forward, I wouldn't rule out additional steps that we may take to address the concerns that have been raised.

Q Just a couple more, really quickly. A number of electors, you were told yesterday, were requesting an intelligence briefing, and you said you hadn't had a chance to sort of look over that letter. Have you had a chance to look that over? And what's your reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen some more of the published reports. Look, when it comes to the Electoral College, we're talking about some of the more esoteric aspects of the functioning of our democracy.

Q Yeah, we are.

MR. EARNEST: But it certainly is important that individuals who are entrusted with that responsibility do so with a seriousness of purpose. So at this point, I don't have a formal response to the letter to put forward.

Q But would you support that idea of having the report sent to electors prior to them casting their votes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, I know that some of the request was for classified information, and it's not clear that all of the electors -- and I'm sure most of them don't -- they don't have security clearances.

So this is an unusual request, maybe even unprecedented. I'm not a historian, but it's hard to imagine a scenario where a similar question arose. So we'll let you know if we have more of a response.

Q Last one. Is the White House aware of post-election intelligence that actually shows anything to do with the hackers' intent? We've talked a bit about that, because there have been widely differing assessments. I'm just wondering if the White House remains confident that the intelligence has not in fact been politicized.

MR. EARNEST: The President is certainly confident. And he insists that the intelligence that he is provided as the Commander-in-Chief by our intelligence agencies is not clouded by political politics or partisan politics. He insists that that material, that that intelligence that he is provided is not clouded by the pursuit of an agenda, a political agenda or otherwise.

The President can only make good decisions -- the Commander-in-Chief, any Commander-in-Chief can only make good decisions when they have information that is accurate, that is timely, and that is reliable. And that's what the President insists on. And that also means that the President wants to hear the unvarnished truth. He doesn't want anything shaded. He doesn't want any intelligence professional to fear retribution for presenting bad news to the President of the United States. In some ways, that's actually the basic job description of an intelligence professional who's briefing a principal, and that is to be able to give an unvarnished assessment, even if it's bad news, without fear of any retribution.

And the President has confidence that that's the kind of guidance and information that he's been provided by the intelligence community.

Q Any intelligence as to the intent of the hackers?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any updated assessment to share at this point, but there certainly seem to be a not insignificant number of intelligence professionals who appear to be sharing their opinion with all of you on an anonymous basis. I obviously don't have

the luxury of doing that, but when there is a formal assessment to share from the intelligence community, and if that's something that can be shared publicly, that's something that we'll try to do.

The President does believe that we should -- particularly when it relates to something as central to our democracy as the conduct of a national election, the President does believe that we should share as much information as possible with the public. And that is why the intelligence community, on October 7th -- more than a month before the election -- issued a statement that represented the unanimous assessment and conclusion of all 17 national security agencies that have an intelligence arm. And they concluded that Russia was engaged in malicious activity in cyberspace that was aimed at destabilizing our elections.

And we made -- the President made clear, we made clear that a proportional response to that was appropriate. But the President's first concern and the first steps that were undertaken by the U.S. government were to ensure that the equipment and systems that were used to register voters, allow voters to cast ballots and to ensure that those ballots were counted were protected. And the intelligence community has assessed -- and this is something that they've also said publicly -- that they did not observe an increase in malicious cyber activity from the Russians on Election Day that could have disrupted the casting and accurate counting of ballots.

But for a more detailed assessment about what Russia's motives are, or what else Russia may have been engaged in in the context of the election, are a series of questions that will be considered in this review that President Obama has ordered. Our expectation is that this is a review from the intelligence community that will be completed in advance of January 20th. And we're going to make public as much of that review as possible.

Michelle.

Q Will the President talk a little bit about the hacks, since he announced the review last night? And he said that it was nothing fancy; that we saw -- it's been happening, coming from Russia, seeming to put it into a bigger perspective. And he also talked about how he felt that the emails were the things that became the obsession, not the fact that this was coming from Russia, even though he just said that was really nothing new in the same breath.

But it seems like what we should be identifying there is the poor state of cybersecurity in this country. The fact that we're even sitting here talking about this being a possibility, and the strong possibility that the election could have been influenced by this, doesn't that really point to the fact that our defenses -- whether they're government systems or campaign systems -- the strength of them pales in comparison to the ability of a state actor like Russia to affect things here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by acknowledging at least one aspect of your premise that I think we can agree on, which is that cybersecurity should be, and is, a critical national security priority of the United States. And President Obama has spent a

significant portion of his presidency trying to strengthen the defenses of the United States. And we've made important progress in doing so.

Some of his proposals for doing so -- increasing our investments in cybersecurity -- have unfortunately fallen on deaf ears in Congress. And you'll recall that there was a substantial increase that was included in the President's budget for cybersecurity that Republicans in Congress refused to even consider. They wouldn't even hold a hearing. This was the first time in 40 years that Republicans in the Congress wouldn't even hold a hearing on the President's budget. And there wasn't the kind of robust consideration in Congress, let alone a vote, on the substantial increase in cybersecurity resources that President Obama had identified.

So when it comes to ensuring that the U.S. government is focused on cybersecurity, that is a message that apparently has not been received by Republicans in Congress, and, yes, that makes the United States of America more vulnerable to a wide range of threats. And that is something that the President continues to be deeply concerned about.

The other thing that the President has done is ordered this review by a bipartisan Blue Ribbon Panel to help the incoming administration formulate and take additional steps to implement an enhanced cybersecurity strategy. And that's a report that the President received just last week. And that's one that we'll be passing on to the next administration, and should position them for success.

But it's going to require the Republican White House being more persuasive with Republicans in Congress to actually pay attention to this issue. Because there's been a tendency on the part of Republicans in Congress to ignore or reject every proposal that we've put forward, even when it comes to something as apolitical and central to our national security as cybersecurity.

So that all being said, I don't think anybody envisions a scenario in which the federal government of the United States steps in to assume responsibility for the cybersecurity of a national political party or of an individual political operative. I don't think there's anybody that thinks that that would be appropriate or even effective.

Is this a lesson for all of us to try to be more conscientious about our cyber hygiene? Yes. But state actors have substantial capabilities. Russia has substantial capabilities. They're not as significant as the capabilities that are wielded by the United States, but they are substantial. And establishing rules for the road -- rules of the road for effective and acceptable conduct in cyberspace is an important challenge, and one that we've made some progress on.

For example, the President last fall, a little over a year ago now, worked with the Chinese to reach an agreement about at least one norm that should be observed, which is that state actors should not be engaged in cyber-enabled theft for commercial purposes or for commercial benefit. That had been a previous activity on the part of the Chinese

government that had attracted significant concerns, not just by the U.S. government but also by U.S. businesses, I think for obvious reasons. And that is one norm that we have made a lot of progress in establishing in cyberspace.

But we clearly have more work to do. But I don't think there's anybody who thinks that the answer to this situation is for the federal government of the United States to be responsible for the cybersecurity of the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Q But by the same token, it seems like we're seeing that the weakness of individuals' email systems collectively, in the sense that a foreign state could come in and try or succeed in affecting an election, is almost a threat to national security, or at least a threat to the functioning of democracy in this country. So has the weakest link kind of become an individual's email account?

MR. EARNEST: No, I don't think so, because I don't think that's what the President has identified.

This is going to be a challenge for our democracy as the American people consume information in the modern age. The fact that this information that was leaked from a variety of places, including John Podesta's Gmail account, that was the source of intense media interest, primarily because of the gossip that may or may not be contained in those emails -- not because of the fact that Russia was releasing that information as a transparent effort to, at a minimum, erode confidence in our democracy.

And I think that there are obvious questions about cybersecurity that I covered in response to your first question. I think what the President is raising is the need for careful evaluation about our public debate, about the way that these views are communicated -- or the way this news is communicated and the way that it is consumed by people all across the country. And if we lose the ability as a democracy to acknowledge generally accepted facts, basic facts, or if we lose the ability -- or at least norms are eroded, such that you have Republicans cheering for Russians to hack their political opponents.

And what's troubling about this situation is it wasn't just any old Republican who was doing that, it was the Republican nominee for President who was doing that. That's problematic. That doesn't have anything to do with cybersecurity. It has something to do very basically, though, with the kind of political debate and political discourse and democracy that we want to have.

Q And we're hearing some pushback, strong pushback today from some Democrats on the President-elect's picks for Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State -- ties to Russia, deals with Russia, views on sanctions, among other things. Do you have anything to add, even in a general sense, on those choices?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I would say generally is that throughout his campaign, the President-elect indicated his intent, if elected President, to pursue warmer relations with Russia. So what better way to do that than to choose somebody who has been awarded the Order of Friendship by Vladimir Putin to be your Secretary of State?

So this is not a particularly surprising or even unexpected development. I suspect that there will be many members of Congress in both parties that have some questions about that. I've previously stated the principle that President Obama believes that any President should have some latitude in assembling his team, but there is a process for members of the Senate to consider the nomination of people who will serve in the Cabinet.

And, look, Mr. Tillerson is a seasoned business executive and he's got some skills in answering tough questions in public, and I suspect he'll have to put them to use in the spring.

Chris, go ahead.

Q Thanks. It was only until President Obama signed an executive order in 2014 barring federal contractors from discriminating against federal workers that ExxonMobil adopted a policy to prohibit discrimination against their employees who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. And the shareholders of that company, prior to that annual meetings had rejected such a policy 17 consecutive times.

Given the practices of that company, does that raise concerns about, first of all, whether the President's adaption of LGBT human rights as part of foreign policy will be in jeopardy in the next administration, as well as the non-discrimination policy that he's put in place for federal contractors?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by making an observation, Chris, which is that we have often talked about how disappointed we've been that at various stages Congress has not made progress on a range of issues that the President has prioritized, including ensuring that we treat LGBT Americans fairly and not discriminate against them. And we haven't seen as much legislation passed by Congress as we would like to see that would ensure that those protections are in place. So the President has turned to using the executive powers at his disposal to try to advance those policies.

And we have acknowledged at every turn that those executive actions are not a substitute for legislative action. And there's been a skepticism expressed by some, most of them Democrats, who say that, well, an executive action isn't as forceful or as broad as legislation. They're right about that of course. But you have highlighted, actually, a good example where the President taking executive action hasn't just had an impact in the government, but it's also had an impact in the private sector as well.

So I think this is just one example of how the President's judicious use of executive authority has been effective in changing minds and practices not just inside the federal government, but in the private sector as well.

More broadly, I think it's hard to tell exactly what this particular personnel announcement says about the kinds of policies that President Trump will pursue once he is in office with regard to ensuring that Americans are not discriminated against because of their sexuality. And I think, to put it generously, we've gotten some mixed signals publicly about what the President-elect's intent is. So as with so many other issues that are important, we'll have to wait and see what policy he intends to pursue.

Ellen.

Q My question is, how is the President planning on integrating the fact that -- into this security report -- the fact that Julian Assange from WikiLeaks and the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan says it wasn't Russia at all, that they met with the person that leaked this, it was an inside job, et cetera?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have not seen reports citing the British ambassador to Uzbekistan, so I compliment you on the breadth of your reading. What I will just say is the view that Russia was actively involved in cyber activity that was aimed at eroding public confidence in our political system is the unanimous, high-confidence conclusion of all 17 intelligence agencies in the United States. That is not a recently known fact. That is not a recently disclosed conclusion. That is a conclusion and a finding and an assessment that was released a month before the election.

So I know that the President-elect himself has raised doubts about that assessment. Apparently, the British ambassador to Uzbekistan has made common cause with the President-elect to raise those doubts. But the American people will have to judge for themselves whether they have more confidence in the ability of the United States intelligence community to unanimously reach the same conclusion on this matter, or if they trust the conclusion of the British ambassador to Uzbekistan.

Maggie.

Q Circling back, back to the Department of Energy, is this the first time that the administration has flat-out denied a request made by the Trump transition team?

MR. EARNEST: Look, I think it's an entirely legitimate question. I don't think I can get into all of the conversations that are taking place at federal agencies all across this town and all across the country to ensure a smooth and effective transition.

I can tell you that, in general, the administration has worked hard to diligently provide as much information as possible to the incoming team. And that is not the kind of work that you can do just at a moment's notice. This is a lot of work that requires months and months of planning, and this administration has planning since the beginning of the year to compile and prepare materials for the review of the incoming administration.

And obviously we envisioned a different kind of process and a different kind of transition, but we remain no less committed to ensuring that the incoming administration can hit the ground running. And that means providing extensive information to the incoming administration, and that effort will continue through Inauguration Day.

Q Since you brought it up earlier, care to elaborate on your thoughts on President-elect's pick for Energy Secretary?

MR. EARNEST: I think I've said enough about that. (Laughter.)

Andrew.

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to ask what the President's thoughts are today regarding Aleppo and what the fall of the city means for his legacy?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, Andrew, as Brett alluded to, the situation in Aleppo remains deeply troubling, and the innocent loss of life there that has persisted for years at the hands of the Assad regime, enabled by the Russians and Iranians, is deplorable. And the United States has played a leading role in the international community to try to facilitate a diplomatic resolution to the situation there, at least to just try to reduce the violence and increase the consistent flow of humanitarian relief.

And I understand that at some point later today, and maybe even right now, the United Nations Security Council is meeting to consider such a proposal. Obviously, if this ends up being a proposal that will result in a reduction in the violence and an increase in the provision of humanitarian assistance, then it's something that the United States will not just enthusiastically support but we're going to be actively encouraging all parties to support it, and actively encouraging all sides to implement it effectively so that the people in Aleppo who have been suffering in unthinkable circumstances can finally get some measure of relief.

Q You talk about the Syrians, and the Russians, and the Iranians and what they've done, but a lot of the anger over what's happened in Aleppo is directed at this White House and this presidency. Do you think that's fair? Why do you think that is?

MR. EARNEST: Well, first of all, I think I'm going to refrain from criticizing people who are having an emotional reaction to the terrible violence that they have faced. And their feelings of anger and frustration I think are entirely understandable given what they've been through. And I think it would be inappropriate and maybe even immoral for me to stand here and criticize them.

What I will say is something that you've heard me say before, which is that President Obama has -- and Secretary Kerry -- have been at the leading edge of a tireless effort to try to bring that violence to an end, or at least reduce it enough that humanitarian assistance can get to those people that need it the most. And this administration and this President certainly makes no apologies for that tenacious pursuit of the kind of solution that would bring relief to the suffering people of Aleppo.

And it's not particularly surprising to me, given this long-running, bloody conflict, that the people of Aleppo are angry that this hasn't been solved more quickly.

Q Related to the rest of the world -- I mean, I guess the question is, why do you think that U.S. military action in Iraq can bring out millions of people onto the streets around the world, but Russian and Iranian actions in Aleppo don't have the same response?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, I think it's hard to paint with a broad brush about how the international community is responding to this situation. I think that you have seen many moral consciences aroused by the violence in this part of the world, and it shows itself in a

variety of ways. Sometimes it is the photograph of a small boy in the back of an ambulance who has barely escaped a Syrian government bomb. There was a pronounced public reaction to that photograph.

These kinds of images do tug at the conscience of people around the world. It certainly tugs at the conscience of everybody in the Obama administration, and that's why the Obama administration has pursued so tirelessly the kind of diplomatic solution that would bring that violence to an end. And that's what we're seeking, and hopefully we'll be able to make some more progress on that at the U.N. Security Council today.

Yes, ma'am, I'll give you the last one.

Q Hi, Rosslyn Jordan with Al Jazeera, following up on his point on Aleppo.

MR. EARNEST: Nice to see you, Rosslyn.

Q Hi, nice to see you. The civil war in Syria has been going on for almost six years.

MR. EARNEST: It has.

Q The estimates between the U.N. and various human rights groups is that at least 400,000 to 470,000 Syrians have been killed. At least 32,000 of those people have been killed in Aleppo. Some of those people have been on social media. They've been able to go on TV today. They fear they are living the last days or hours of their lives. And they are asking: Where is the world? In particular, where is the United States?

And the question is -- and I understand that the President did not want to launch a regional war -- but if ever there were an argument -- say, human rights advocates -- to act on the responsibility to protect, Syria is that situation. Why did not the administration intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war?

MR. EARNEST: Rosslyn, the answer is simple, and it's one that we've said on a number of occasions: There's no military solution to the civil war in Syria.

Q But how can (inaudible) the job?

MR. EARNEST: But, Rosslyn, what is the military proposal that has been tabled that would effectively prevent those deaths? Is the suggestion that somehow the United States should just occupy the nation of Syria? Do we really think that's going to reduce the violence in Syria? I don't think there's any evidence to substantiate that claim, even if that's one that is being made. I haven't heard any other sort of suggestion. The only solution is a diplomatic one, and no country in the world has expended more of an effort to pursue that diplomatic solution than the United States of America.

The United States has a special responsibility because we have the most influential, strongest country in the world. And we readily accept the responsibility, certainly under President Obama's leadership -- we've readily accepted responsibility for working through the international community and using that influence to try to bring that violence to an end.

The United States is the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance. We've provided substantial resources to try to meet the basic humanitarian needs of Syrians who are fleeing violence, and there has been a substantial U.S.-military commitment to organizing the international community to try to address some of the consequences of the chaos in Syria, and that is the extremism that has fueled so much terrorism in that region of the world.

But when it comes to addressing and solving the underlying violence and chaos, that is ultimately a political question and a political that's needed. It's the failed political leadership of Bashar al-Assad that has brought us to this point. And it's resolving that political problem that will be necessary to definitively end the violence and ensure that the people of Aleppo, who have been under siege for years, can get some relief.

Q But the question has to be raised: Given how often Secretary Kerry has personally lobbied the Russian government, has personally lobbied the Foreign Minister, Mr. Lavrov, as recently as this weekend, and yet, oh, this isn't the right time to have a ceasefire, the United States is simply protecting the rebels who are holed up in Aleppo -- at some point, shouldn't this administration be calling Moscow's bluff and actually forcing them to do what they have promised to do, which is to call back the Syrian military and prevent them from committing what some are now alleging are human rights violations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as we've indicated before, the United States strongly supports and would support an effort to ensure that the Assad regime, and those who are culpable for the Assad regime's actions, accountable for the tactics that have been used inside of Syria. Far too many innocent lives have been lost, women and children included, and we believe in some accountability. And hopefully that is something that the next administration will continue.

But when it comes to Russia, they've spent significant amounts of credibility in trying to describe to the international community their response to this situation. And as we discussed earlier, as Brett referenced, the Russians regularly like to say that they are focused on taking ISIL fighters off the battlefield in Syria, but the truth is they've taken their eye off that ball, and the one measurable gain that they've previously been able to point to against ISIL has now been rolled back.

So I think it is very difficult not just to justify, but even to explain what sort of strategy Russia is trying to pursue inside of Syria. Well, maybe I should say it this way: It's hard to reconcile their explanations about what they're doing inside of Syria with the truth.

The truth of the matter is, they're focused on propping up the Assad regime, and the Assad regime is trying to bomb civilians into submission so that he can try to get control over his country again. He's lost control over his country, he's lost legitimacy to lead. And the concern from the United States isn't just about the humanitarian situation there, it's about how that chaos has fueled extremism and given life to terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and our interests around the world.

So this is a complicated problem, but we're attacking it from every angle. And you heard from Brett the efforts that we're undertaking and that are making significant progress against ISIL. But the role for diplomacy and the leading role that the United States has played in pursuing that diplomacy to address the political situation in Syria is something that we've been pursuing for years and continues to this day.

Q Is this administration considering in its final weeks any punitive actions against Vladimir Putin's government because of its ongoing support -- militarily, financial, diplomatic -- for Bashar al-Assad's government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a range of steps that we have been considering. And the truth is, because of some of Russia's actions in Ukraine, violating the territorial integrity of that country, they're already facing significant isolation that has eroded their status diplomatically and has hurt their economy.

So Russia is already suffering the consequences of the kind of international behavior that has been repudiated by the international community, but I wouldn't rule out potentially applying additional steps because of the way that they have behaved in Syria, as well.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:33 P.M. EST