

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/29/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see all of you. A couple of announcements at the top before we get started.

The first is, today the administration announced two new common-sense executive actions to keep the most dangerous firearms out of the wrong hands and ban almost all reimports of military surplus firearms to private entities. These executive actions build on the 23 executive actions that the President unveiled in January as part of the comprehensive gun violence reduction plan. Even as Congress fails to act on common-sense proposals, like expanding criminal background checks and making gun trafficking a federal crime, the President and Vice President remain committed to using all the tools in their power to make progress to reducing gun violence.

And that is why today we announced two additional executive actions -- first, closing a loophole that would keep some of the most dangerous guns out of the wrong hands; and second, keeping surplus military weapons off of our streets.

The second thing that I wanted to apprise you of -- the President today conducted a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This is part of the series of communications that the President has initiated around the situation in Syria. The President, as you know, has called a number of our other allies in Europe and some of our partners in the region, and that international consultation is ongoing and will continue in the days ahead. But I wanted to let you know of that specific one that occurred earlier this morning.

So, with that, Julie, we'll let you get started.

Q Thanks, Josh. Congress is getting briefed early this evening by a series of administration officials on the intelligence reports on Syria. Given that their briefing appears to be unclassified, is there an expectation that the public and all of us in this room will also get that report today?

MR. EARNEST: Julie, it's correct, there is an unclassified briefing that is scheduled among a handful of senior administration officials, including National Security Advisor Susan Rice, the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They'll be conducting a telephone conference call with members of Congress who are dialing in from their congressional districts all across the country.

That conference call is just the latest in a series of robust congressional consultations that everybody from the President on down in the administration have been engaged in over the last few days. The reason for that is quite simple. As the President contemplates what kind of response is appropriate to the situation that we've seen in Syria, the President believes it's important for us to consult with Congress.

We've done that in a robust way that has involved reading out some of the conversations that the President and others have had with our allies around the globe, that has involved the sharing of some intelligence -- although that's difficult to do in this setting because, as I mentioned, the conference call is unclassified. It also includes a conversation about some of the options that are available to the President in terms of a specific response to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons.

So this call is something that we have been working to schedule for a number of days now, but it is just part of the ongoing, robust consultation that this administration believes is important for us to have with Congress.

Q Can we get the dial-in number?

Q Are we going to see that same unclassified report? Is the public going to see the same unclassified report?

MR. EARNEST: Separate from the conversation that they're having today, we have discussed our commitment to producing, for you and for the American public to review, an unclassified version of an intelligence assessment about the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria. It's my understanding that that report has not been finalized as of this moment, but that we are still on track to produce that report before the end of the week.

Q So not today? I'm just trying to get specific on --

MR. EARNEST: Right. I'm not ruling out today.

Q Thank you. Can you also set some expectations for this intelligence? Several officials say that this is not going to be a slam dunk, that there's no sort of unimpeachable proof in the intelligence that the chemical weapons attack last week was carried out by Bashar al-Assad or his senior advisors. So what should the public be looking for? What should lawmakers be looking for if there isn't sort of a slam-dunk guarantee in this intelligence?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a few facts that we already know. We already know from a previous intelligence assessment that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. We know that the Assad regime maintains stockpiles of

chemical weapons in Syria, and we've indicated from this podium and from other places over the course of the last two years that the Assad regime would be held accountable for the security of those chemical weapons and would be held accountable if those chemical weapons were used.

We also know that it is the regime alone that has the capability to use the chemical weapons that were used in the attacks that we saw on August 21st. We also know that the Assad regime was engaged in a military campaign targeting the specific regions where this chemical attack occurred. So there are a lot of relevant, important facts that we already know. And we know those facts for a number of reasons -- previous intelligence assessments that we've made public. We're also aware of some of the reporting that's been conducted by independent journalists on the ground in Syria that have documented the horrific nature of the attack.

We are aware of reports from non-governmental organizations there on the ground in Syria trying to meet the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. They have been a witness to those attacks and to the people who have borne the brunt of those attacks. So there's a lot of publicly available information that we already know that is very convincing.

Q But everything you're referencing is largely circumstantial. And what I'm wondering is, is that circumstantial evidence enough to have the President make a decision to move forward with military action, or is there going to be something in the intelligence that we and Congress will get later today or tomorrow that goes beyond circumstantial evidence, that is definitive proof that these attacks originated from high levels of Assad's regime?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, based on the facts that I just laid out, there is a preponderance of publicly available evidence to indicate that the Assad regime carried out chemical weapons attacks in Syria. That is what the President has said. The Vice President has said that. The Secretary of State has said that. We've also seen our partners all around the globe say that, everybody from senior officials in the U.K., in France -- even the Arab League has put out a statement to this effect.

I also want to read for you one other piece of relevant information to this question that you're asking, because there is a difference between what can be provided publicly and what classified intelligence assessment is available -- that when we're producing a public intelligence document, we have to be conscious of protecting sources and methods. And there are other diplomatic sensitivities, frankly.

We've talked about the intelligence-sharing relationship that we have with a number of countries around the world, and including some countries in the region. All of that information is combined to provide an assessment. But that assessment that is provided publicly has to necessarily be different than the assessment that is provided privately.

So that might lead you to ask about the quality of that classified intelligence assessment. I'm of course not in a position to talk about it from here, but I have seen statements from two people who have seen those classified intelligence assessments. The first is the Chair

of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Senator Feinstein. She said, "I've been briefed by the Intelligence Committee on last week's chemical weapons attack in Syria, and I believe the intelligence points to an attack by the Assad government."

I would also direct you to a statement from the Vice Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence; this is a Republican Senator named Saxby Chambliss, a gentleman who has not shied away from contradicting the President in public on a wide range of issues. However, in this case, his assessment is similar, if not the same, as the assessment that was reached by the President. Senator Chambliss said, "Based on available intelligence, there can be no doubt the Assad regime is responsible for using chemical weapons on the Syrian people."

Roberta.

Q So how has the intelligence community completed the classified version of its assessment?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to talk about classified intelligence assessments from here.

Q Whether it's been completed or not?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to talk about them from here.

Q How robust can your consultation of Congress be if Congress hasn't been provided with the classified details of the assessment?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are some classified details that have obviously been provided to Congress, at least if you believe what Senator Feinstein and Senate Chambliss say.

Q Right, but the meeting --

MR. EARNEST: I would make the case to you that the robust consultation with Congress involves more than just sharing intelligence. It involves some insight into the perspective of our diplomatic partners around the globe. It involves reading out conversations that the President and others have had with our allies. It involves a review of the options that are available to the President as he considers an appropriate response.

So there's a pretty wide range of topics that should be covered in any robust consultation with Congress. And that will be the case as it relates to the conversation that they'll have today. It is constrained by the fact that that conversation will take place in an unclassified setting. But there is information that can be shared, and we are working to share that information.

I don't want to also -- I don't want to leave you with the impression that this conference call is the first or the last medium for consulting Congress. It's not. There have been a range of other conversations that senior administration officials have had with congressional leadership, with the leadership of the appropriate committees and with other members of Congress who have demonstrated an interest in this topic.

And there will be more conversations. Some of those conversations are classified. Some of them are unclassified. Some of them covered intelligence issues. Some of them covered diplomatic issues. Some of them even included conversations about different capabilities.

So there's a lot of consultation that's ongoing. But this conference call at 6:00 p.m. this evening is certainly an important part of that robust consultation.

Q What's your reaction to what's happened in the U.K., the unexpected delay there, the British Parliament's deliberations? And what are you going to be able to tell Congress or us about whether that hampers deliberations here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say a couple of things about that. I don't want to get involved in commenting on debates that are ongoing in the British Parliament. I have my hands full commenting on debates in the U.S. Congress.

That said, we certainly do appreciate the strong words that have come from senior leaders in the British government about what's taken place in Syria. You've heard both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary articulate their strong objection and condemnation of the use of chemical weapons. We've heard them talk about their desire to see the Assad regime be held accountable for its actions in carrying out this chemical weapons attack. And we've also seen an acknowledgement from the Foreign Secretary about the United States' right and ability to make our own foreign policy decisions that are in our national security interest.

Let me just read a brief segment of the Foreign Secretary's statement. He said, "The United States are able to make their own decisions, of course. We will remain closely coordinated with them and in close touch with them, as we are every day. I speak to my counterpart, Secretary Kerry, every day, and have done so this evening." This is something that he said yesterday. "So, of course, they will be able to make their own decisions. But we will continue to be determined that the world should reject the use of chemical weapons, and that the United Kingdom has a role to play in that." We certainly welcome the role the United Kingdom has to play in that.

Jim.

Q Josh, just to bounce off of Roberta's question -- is there a concern about waiting too long that delays could make the mission more complicated? If you wait until after the G20 visit, for example, you've given the Syrians plenty of time to position themselves for any kind of response that might come. What about that concern?

MR. EARNEST: You've heard the President talk about, in other settings outside of the situation in Syria, talking about the conduct of foreign policy and how that relates to our use of military authority, and how these are some of the most difficult decisions that he has to make as Commander-in-Chief. But he takes the requirement to make these decisions very seriously, and he's carefully considering the circumstances before him. And he's doing that in a reasoned, robust way, and he's doing that in consultation with members of Congress. He's doing that in close consultation with our allies around the

globe. He's doing that in close consultation with his national security team. There's a role for a number of people to play here as they assess the situation. So the President is going about that in a very reasoned, orderly fashion.

Now, I would also point out that the President acknowledged in an interview with your network that was taped one week ago today, where he acknowledged that there is a compressed timeframe in which a decision needed to be made. And part of that is driven by the idea that there is an international norm against the use of chemical weapons. And it is important for the Assad regime and other totalitarian dictators around the globe to understand that the international community will not tolerate the indiscriminate, widespread use of chemical weapons, particularly against women and children as they're sleeping in their beds.

Q Josh, to follow up on that, speaking of that interview -- I appreciate the segue -- he also said in that interview that there are questions in terms of whether international law would support a response. And when he was talking about that, he was talking about whether or not he would have some sort of international partnership in taking some kind of action against Syria. Would the United States at this point, given that there are some delays overseas on the other side of the Atlantic, go it alone?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to presuppose what kind of judgment the President reaches about the appropriate response in this circumstance. However, the President did acknowledge in that interview the role that international law would play as he assesses an appropriate response, and that is a factor that has been considered among all these other things that have gone into making this decision.

We have also seen pretty clear statements from our allies around the globe, from the Arab League and others who have said that the Assad regime needs to be held responsible. And the opinion of other world leaders in this situation matters.

Q So absent a U.N. mandate, some sort of resolution at the United Nations, absent some sort of definitive word from our key ally in Great Britain, those I guess words of encouragement, those votes, those separate statements that have been made by the Arab League and others, might that be then sufficient? Is that what you're saying?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm saying is that I'm not in a position to offer up any sort of legal justification for a response that has not been decided upon. However, it is relevant that a wide range of other international leaders and international bodies have weighed in on this situation. And they've weighed in, in a way, generally speaking, of condemning the use of chemical weapons, of condemning the Assad regime for using chemical weapons against civilians, and articulating a requirement that the Assad regime be held accountable for its actions. Those viewpoints are relevant to this discussion.

Now, there's one other part of my answer that's important for you and your viewers to understand. The President of the United States is elected with the duty to protect the national security interests of the United States of America. And the decision he makes about our foreign policy is with our national security interests front and center.

Q Just to follow up on that very quickly, last night in the PBS interview he said that there's a chance that chemical weapons might be turned against the United States. And I was just curious -- he said that was part of his national security deliberations. Does he really think that Syria is capable of launching chemical weapons at the United States? What did he mean by that?

MR. EARNEST: I think what we're very concerned about is the willingness that the Assad regime has demonstrated to use chemical weapons. It is apparent that they did so on the night of August 21st on a large scale that had horrific results. It's also been assessed by our intelligence community -- something that we've talked about a lot this summer -- that there have been a number of other occasions, admittedly on a smaller scale but important nonetheless, where the Assad regime has used chemical weapons. We know they are sitting on a large stockpile of chemical weapons. They've demonstrated a willingness to use it in violation of clear international norms.

The President believes firmly -- and he said this in the interview that he did with Chris Cuomo and he said this in the interview that he conducted last night -- that these international norms are important. And it is not appropriate for totalitarian dictators to flout them with impunity. So protecting that international norm is something that the President cares deeply about, but it's also a norm that other world leaders are very concerned about having been violated.

But there are a couple of other ways in which our national interests intersect here. We're talking about a very volatile region of the world. And we're talking about maybe the most volatile country in one of the more volatile regions of the world. So that instability is a cause of significant concern to the President. He also mentioned in the interview that this country borders a NATO ally in Turkey. It borders one of our most important partners in the region, Jordan, and it is in close proximity to the nation of Israel, a country whose security we have vowed to protect.

So there are a wide range of interests, and that doesn't even get into military bases and other interests that we have in the region. So there are a number of ways in which the national security interests of the United States are at stake in a pretty big way here.

Kristen.

Q A number of members of Congress have said that they believe they should be able to vote before any military action is taken. Does the President agree with that? Does he think that Congress should have a vote?

MR. EARNEST: What the President believes is that as he considers the appropriate response to this circumstance that it is important for his administration to consult with Congress in a very robust way. And that's what we're seeing has happened.

Since this event was first reported last week, we have seen senior administration officials consulting with senior members of Congress -- whether it is the congressional leadership, senior members of the relevant committees, or even just members of Congress that have an expertise or interest in this area. So there is ongoing consultation with Congress. And

the next step in that consultation will occur this evening at 6:00 p.m., where a number of senior officials in the administration will be gathering on the phone to consult again with some of these senior members of Congress with an interest in this issue.

Q So just to be clear, he thinks that he should have to consult with Congress, but he doesn't necessarily think that Congress needs to vote before he takes military action?

MR. EARNEST: The President believes it's very important for this consultation to occur. That's why the President has made it a priority. And that's why so many senior members of the administration have been involved in consulting with the congressional leadership, the leadership of the appropriate committees and other members of Congress that have an expertise or interest in this area.

Q And I want to go back to the British Parliament for a moment. They are saying that they don't want to vote until the U.N. comes back -- the U.N. inspectors come back with their report. Does the President share that view? Will he take any action or make any decision before the U.N. inspectors actually produce their report?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let's talk about what the mandate is of the U.N. inspectors who are in Syria. The mandate of those inspectors is to assess whether or not chemical weapons were used. The entire international community acknowledges that chemical weapons were used. The Syrian regime has even acknowledged that chemical weapons were used. It's not within the mandate of those U.N. inspectors to assess the responsibility for the use of those weapons. It's just within their mandate to assess whether or not they were used. That's no longer an open question.

Unfortunately, what we have also seen at the United Nations is a repeated willingness on the part of the Russians to block action at the United Nations. And that's unfortunate. And the United States believes strongly in the U.N. process. That's why we have spent so much time engaged in a U.N.-led process. It's why you've seen the newly confirmed Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, spend so much time consulting with her colleagues on this issue. We're invested in the U.N. process.

At the same time, we're currently seeing that process circumvented by an intransigent Russia that is refusing to allow the U.N. to hold Syria accountable. So what the President will do is he will make a decision about an appropriate response based on the national security interests of the United States of America.

Q And possibly before the U.N. inspectors finish their investigation?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to offer you guidance on the timeline during which the President would make a decision. That's not something I'm in a position to do from here.

Ed.

Q So if Russia blocks action in the U.N., go around that --

MR. EARNEST: They already have three times, right? And it looks like they're doing it again.

Q And then Congress is on recess. So we'll consult them, we'll call them. We'll have a conference call. But we won't have a vote, we won't have authorization. What happened to the Barack Obama of 2008, who said repeatedly you've got to get congressional authorization before you go with military action?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that is presupposing a decision that has not been made.

Q So he is not going to take military action?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't say anything close to that.

Q So when he talked about a "shot across the bow" last night, he is not talking about military action?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to parse the President's words in the interview that he conducted with CBS -- with PBS, pardon me. Sorry, Major, maybe next time.

Q We're working on it. (Laughter.)

Q But, I mean, look, we can go back and forth on he hasn't made a decision yet.

MR. EARNEST: But it's true that he hasn't made a decision yet.

Q I'm not denying that part. But you know as well as anyone that we're on the verge of something, unless you want to tell us we're not and that there's not going to be military action.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to characterize a decision that hasn't been made.

Q So my question then is, what happened to the Barack Obama of 2008 who said you've got to go to the U.N., you've got to get a resolution; you've got to go to Congress, you've got to get authorization? Now, if Russia blocks it, we're going around it. Congress is on recess. We're going to call them, but we're going to move forward.

MR. EARNEST: What this President has done is demonstrated a clear willingness to consult and invest in the U.N. process. That is something that we have done at the U.N. throughout the President's tenure in office. And it's something that we've done in this case. The President did it with great success in building an international coalition to deal with the situation in Libya a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, what we're seeing right now is Russia repeatedly block efforts at the U.N. to hold the Assad regime accountable. That is very disappointing, but the President of the United States is not going to allow that obstruction to prevent him from making decisions that are in the best interest of our national security. And when it comes to Congress, the President believes strongly in robust congressional consultation. That is something that we have been engaged in since day one of this circumstance, and it is something that will continue.

We are seeing an important part of that consultation this evening. But there will be additional consultations tomorrow and in the days and weeks ahead.

Q You talked a moment ago about how important it is with our allies -- Turkey, Jordan, Israel -- all right there. So is the standard being set now that if there is U.S. military action, that if it's six months, nine months, Assad uses chemical weapons against Israel, against Turkey, against Jordan, against his own people, the U.S. is ready to go back in again?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me unpack a couple of things that you said there. The President believes strongly, as does the global community here -- we've seen statements from Prime Minister Cameron, U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague, President Hollande in France -- all indicating strongly that it is important for the international community to protect international norms against the use of weapons of mass destruction, particularly like these chemical weapons that were used in Syria against innocent civilians. That is an international norm that we cannot allow to be violated.

Q So the answer is, yes, if it happens again in six months, the U.S. will go in again?

MR. EARNEST: Protecting that international norm is a priority of the international community. The President has also made the case, which he did in the interview last night, that protecting that international norm is within the core national security interests of the United States of America. So protecting that international norm is important.

Now, what we also have with Turkey is a defense treaty. So we are committed to the defense of our ally, Turkey. You have heard me and others talk about the United States' commitment to the security of our ally, Israel. The nature of our relationship with Jordan is slightly different, but it is a critically important partner in that region. It is a nation with whom we cooperate on a wide range of national security and counterterrorism efforts. And we value that relationship seriously.

So I don't want to speculate on a hypothetical scenario. But suffice it to say the protection of that international norm is a priority for the President, it's a priority for the international community because we cannot allow a totalitarian dictator to use weapons of mass destruction like that with impunity.

Q Two other quick things. When you mentioned weapons of mass destruction, when our own ally, David Cameron, says today, "Let's not pretend there is one smoking piece of intelligence that can solve the whole problem." The American people went through this before with the war in Iraq about a smoking gun, about a slam dunk. I understand it's a different situation, but there are similarities. Shouldn't the President, before taking any possible military action, have something close to a smoking piece of intelligence so the American people can know with as much certainty as possible that this is the right course?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me read one other thing that David Cameron said that I think is relevant to this, which is, he said, "We know that they" -- meaning the regime -- "have both the motive and the opportunity, whereas the opposition does not have those things.

And the opposition's chance of having used chemical weapons in our view" -- meaning the British view -- "is vanishingly small."

So the assessment that David Cameron has reached about the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons overlaps to a large degree with the assessment that's been reached by the President and the Vice President and Secretary of State, and a number of other world leaders.

Now, as it relates to the situation in Iraq, I don't agree that these are similar situations. I think that there are some very important differences. What we saw in that circumstance was an administration that was searching high and low to produce evidence to justify a military invasion -- an open-ended military invasion of another country, with the final goal being regime change. That was the articulated policy of the previous administration.

What we have seen here, tragically, is a preponderance of evidence, available in the public domain, that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against innocent civilians; that we don't have to search high and low for that evidence. That evidence exists thanks to social media, thanks to some of the videos that have been broadcast, thanks to some of the good work that independent journalists are doing on the ground, thanks to the reports of non-governmental organizations that are on the ground trying to meet the needs of the Syrian people. That's the first thing.

The second thing is, the President has been very clear that he is not contemplating an open-ended military action. He is contemplating -- what we're talking about here is something that's very discreet and limited.

Thirdly, the President was also candid yesterday in his interview about the fact that we're not talking about regime change here; that we're talking about enforcing a critically important international norm. So I thoroughly reject the suggestion that these two situations are somehow similar.

Q So last thing on that Iraq situation, though -- when the President gave his speech in 2002 as a state senator about Iraq being a dumb war -- he came out against the war in Iraq -- he said, "But I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States." He was saying, I know he's used chemical weapons, he's harmed his own people, but "I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States or its neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, the Iraqi military a fraction of its former self." And he said, "He can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history." So why in this situation can't Assad be contained and fall into the "dustbin of history," as by the President's own standard in 2002?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't thoroughly looked at the analogy that you're trying to draw here. I think what you read --

Q Saddam used chemical weapons on his own people, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Right, but I think what you read might be a pretty appropriate justification for why the President has concluded that our policy is not regime change when it comes to this scenario. What we are looking for is a response to the use of chemical weapons that will enforce a critically important international norm. The global community believes that it's important for us to enforce that norm, and the President has assessed that it's in the core national interest of the United States of America for us to enforce that norm.

But it is our view that there is not a military solution to the broader conflict that's taking place in Syria. We've seen 100,000 people in Syria lose their lives. We've seen millions of people in Syria displaced within that country or to neighboring countries. What we're seeing there is a tragic situation, even outside of the abhorrent use of chemical weapons. And we believe -- the United States believes, and we've been working with our partners and allies around the globe to try to bring about a transition of leadership in Syria so that the Syrian people can have a government that reflects their will.

That is somewhat different than the approach that was taken by the previous administration dealing with Iraq.

Major.

Q I want to read to you a couple of things from this AP story this morning and get your reaction. "Intelligence officials say they could not pinpoint the exact locations of Assad's supplies of chemical weapons." It goes on to say, "U.S. and allied spies have lost track of who controls some of the country's chemical weapons supplies." That's according to two intelligence officials and two U.S. officials. Do you agree?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to talk about classified intelligence assessments. I'm not in a position to do that from here.

Q But you just said from the podium that it is absolutely clear -- repeatedly, you and Jay have said it's absolutely clear the U.S. government is certain that the Syrian regime has been in complete control of its chemical weapons supplies. This story attributes that to four different people in this government saying they are not sure about that.

MR. EARNEST: You've got a handful of anonymous individuals who are quoted in that story.

Q Do you disagree with it?

MR. EARNEST: And I have an on-the-record statement from the Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, an on-the-record statement from the Vice Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. I have on-the-record statements from the President of the United States, the Vice President, the Secretary of State. I've got on-the-record statements from the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. We've got the President of France, we've got a multilateral resolution passed by the Arab League indicating all of these things.

So I leave it to you to decide whether or not you believe --

Q Many of those statements are about --

MR. EARNEST: -- anonymous quotes that are included in the AP story --

Q Josh, you referred to them.

MR. EARNEST: -- or an on-the-record statement from people who have looked at exactly the same information and reached a different conclusion.

Q Those statements you're talking about are not responsive to that question.

MR. EARNEST: They are willing to put their names behind their belief in the intelligence assessment that has been conducted.

Q But those statements that you just read off there are not responsive to this central question of absolute certainty that the Syrian regime retains control of all of its supplies of chemical weapons. Are you saying that it is absolutely clear --

MR. EARNEST: I mean, I can go through them, if you'd like. I think that's exactly what all of these people have said -- that the Assad regime is responsible for this use of chemical weapons. That is what people who have looked at this intelligence --

Q That's not what he's asking.

Q He's not asking you that.

Q No, no, part of -- because you have conceded -- and Jay mentioned this on Monday -- that because of the bombing in this disputed area, evidence might have been destroyed. So there may not be absolute evidence. It is a circumstantial case based on inferences that they have the regime -- the regime controls the chemical weapons, chemical weapons were used, therefore the regime used them. This story asserts, based on people who work for this government -- and let's bring our memories back to Iraq --

MR. EARNEST: Who were quoted as anonymous. Who were quoted anonymously, right?

Q Stop, hold on. Back to Iraq. There were mid-level people at the time of the debate about Iraq who raised their hands and said, we're not sure, we're not convinced. High-level people said, we're convinced. All I'm saying is we have a history where mid-level people who may not have names, but who have information, raise their hands and say, we're not sure. High-level people say, we're absolutely sure. All I'm asking is, from this podium, are you saying with absolute certainty the U.S. government knows that every piece of chemical weapons equipment and supplies possessed by the Syrian government is retained by their control?

MR. EARNEST: I am not in a position to offer you an intelligence assessment. I'm not an intelligence officer. The United States and this administration has vowed to release a public version of the intelligence assessment that is compiled by the intelligence

community.

So you'll have an opportunity to evaluate --

Q But one of the --

MR. EARNEST: Let me finish. I let you finish, so let me finish. So I will allow you the opportunity to consult that public document and to review and assess for yourself how convincing you find it.

I've already acknowledged from here that whatever that public document is, it will necessarily have to differ from whatever classified document is also produced that provides the evidence for these assertions. And what I can also convey to you is that others who have seen that classified intelligence -- that includes leading members of Congress in both parties, that includes the leaders of our allies around the globe, that includes members of the Arab League, the most important collection of Arab states -- they've all see this evidence and they've reached an assessment that dovetails with the assessment that we have conveyed to you so far publicly.

Now, the other part of this that is relevant is there is other information that you know about the use of chemical weapons, about the terrible impact that that has had on people in Syria. And you are also aware of previous intelligence assessments that indicates that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons on multiple occasions before.

So there are a lot of facts that you already know that you can compile to assess for yourself what's occurred. And you'll also have the opportunity to consider a document that's prepared in consultation with the intelligence community to marshal some other evidence.

Now, we're not going to be in a position to provide all of the evidence that we've collected, but there are important pieces of intelligence that can be provided that will substantiate the conclusions that you've heard the President and the Vice President and others articulate about what happened in Syria on August 21st.

Q In response to Jim's question, which was about the President saying it's in the national security interest of the United States because we might be attacked -- the President doesn't actually believe Syria is going to attack the United States with chemical weapons. You mentioned other regional allies and an overall volatility, which there is not a contention that this is going to be something that's going to come to America, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are significant American interests in the region that are --

Q I understand that. I've heard that.

MR. EARNEST: -- that are of significant concern to the President.

Q I'm asking about the direct national security interests of this country being threatened by Syrian chemical weapons. The President is not contending that is a real threat, is he?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to offer a full assessment of the military capabilities of the nation of Syria or the Assad regime. But I am in a position to explain to you what the President was talking about when he was referring to our critical national security interests in the region.

Q That's international norms and regional allies.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. And American facilities in the region.

Q Last question. Does the United States government agree with the British legal assessment released today about how it could proceed with a military strike even without the U.N. or parliamentary approval?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't looked carefully at their legal assessment. I've seen the reports that they have produced one. It is my understanding that if and when the President -- when the President reaches a determination about the appropriate response to this circumstance and a legal justification is required to substantiate or to back up that decision, we'll produce one on our own. We're not going to rely on somebody else's.

Q Does the Jay Carney statement of Monday to me in a question here -- when I asked whether or not Syria has control of all of its chemical weapons, whether the rebels have any chemical weapons -- and he said that they were in complete control, that they had no evidence that the rebels had any or had overrun any kind of depots -- does that statement still hold today in light of what this story is saying?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I don't see any reason to contradict what Jay has already said. And that's true, there is no evidence that anyone has produced to indicate -- or at least credible evidence to indicate that rebels have used chemical weapons or if they have access to the delivery systems that would have been required to carry out the attacks that we saw on August 21st outside Damascus.

Q I understand the delivery systems part. But it does appear as though sources in your government are saying --

MR. EARNEST: Anonymous sources.

Q Josh, you guys talk to us anonymously all the time and expect us to believe those credible statements.

MR. EARNEST: I'm just saying that anonymous sources --

Q But you talk to us anonymously all the time.

MR. EARNEST: What you also say to me on a regular basis when I and others speak anonymously to you is that you --

Q What?

MR. EARNEST: -- place more credibility in on-the-record statements. So that's all I'm directing you to right now.

Q But in light of the anonymous sources -- conceded that are in your government -- from a trusted news organization, are saying that they don't know where some of these weapons are. Does Jay Carney's statement still hold that you do know where they are, that the Syrian government has not lost any yet -- has not lost control of their weapons?

MR. EARNEST: All I will say is what we have said before, which is that we have not seen credible evidence or credible reports that the opposition has used chemical weapons or that they have the capability of using the kind of chemical weapons that we saw used in an attack outside Damascus on August 21st.

Q But he also said that there was no evidence that Syria had lost control or that it had been overrun in any way, or their chemical stockpiles had been overrun in any way. Do you still hold to that statement?

MR. EARNEST: I see no reason to differ with it.

Q And then, finally, is a chemical weapon attack in Syria -- this is another way of asking a question that's already been done.

MR. EARNEST: It's all right. Others have done that. You're allowed to, too.

Q Is the chemical weapon attack in Syria a direct threat, a direct and imminent threat, to the security of this country within our borders, the United States?

MR. EARNEST: The President has assessed that the clear violation of an international norm against the use of chemical weapons goes to the core national security interests of the United States of America. And there are any number of reasons for that. It includes the large stockpile of chemical weapons that the Assad regime maintains. It includes the volatility of not just the country, but also the region. It involves the relationships that we have with other countries in the region, including our allies like Turkey and Israel, and our close partners and friends like the nation of Jordan. It also involves the facilities that the United State maintains in the region. So there are a number of ways in which the violation of this clear international norm has an impact on our core national security interests.

And then the last thing I guess I'd point out -- and I said this once or twice, but I think it's worth repeating. It's also important for other totalitarian dictators around the globe who are watching the circumstances unfold in Syria and are watching the international community's reaction to understand that the international community will not tolerate the use of chemical weapons, that that international norm is inviolable, and that any violations of that norm has consequences.

Q I understand. But in a war-weary country -- even the President acknowledged this -- the country is war-weary. So in a war-weary country, it's important to be careful with these words. You say "an impact." Some would argue that's different than having a direct

and imminent threat against the United States rather than having "an impact" on its allies or on an international norm. Those are different things of concern, but are they as serious as a direct and imminent threat to our country?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to parse the President's words any further on this. I think the President has been very clear. And I've done my best to try to describe to you all of the national interests that the President believes are important, that he was elected to protect that are at stake here. The appropriate response to this circumstance is what the President is currently weighing.

J.C.

Q Does the cautious approach the administration is taking here really reflect concern that any response may tip the leadership balance in Syria towards someone that may not in fact be -- that, in fact, may be worse than Assad for stability in the region?

MR. EARNEST: That's getting a little bit of a way down the line in terms of presupposing an action or a decision that the President hasn't made. But I will just say that the volatility of the region is a factor as we consider our response here. It's also a reason that the President believes that this situation merits a response because it is such a volatile region. So that volatility is something that is carefully considered as this situation is analyzed.

Q I wasn't suggesting regime change, although there is a volatility, and what is known sometimes might be better than what is unknown.

MR. EARNEST: Is there a question?

Q Just a thought. (Laughter.) I could turn it into a question or an answer, if you like?

MR. EARNEST: I'll pass it along, how about that.

Roger.

Q Senator Menendez this morning said that under the War Powers Act it's all right, as far as he is concerned, for the President to go ahead with military action for the first 60 days. But if the action lasts beyond 60 days, he must come to Congress for authorization. Is that the kind of thinking the President -- does the President agree with that?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to offer you our own specific analysis of the War Powers Act from here. Suffice it to say that the President believes at this stage what is critically important is robust consultation with Congress. And that is an effort that we've been engaged in since the first day that this event occurred, and it's something that will continue in the days and weeks ahead.

Q David Axelrod said that he was sure the President would go on TV to the American people once he makes a decision. Can you confirm the thoughts of your former colleague?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I don't want to presuppose what that decision is. But suffice it to say that the President believes it's important to -- as evidenced by the fact that we have promised to make public an intelligence assessment of the circumstances here. You can deduce from there that the President believes it's important to have a dialogue with the American public about the decisions that the President is making, particularly when they are as weighty as this specific decision.

So I'm not going to make any promises of presidential addresses, but you can rest assured knowing the President believes that communicating with the American public as he approaches this situation is a top priority.

David.

Q Thanks, Josh. The Washington Post just published a report online from more documents provided by Edward Snowden that sort of reveals for the first time details about the U.S. spy agencies' budgets that have not been released before. Some of the findings is that the budget has grown enormously since 9/11; that the CIA's budget is by far the biggest of the spy agencies, far bigger than outside experts had estimated; that the U.S. has developed new cyber programs to attack other countries' cyber systems.

And I'm wondering two things. One is, does the President -- this information has never been released despite many efforts from outside folks to try to get this information. Does the President believe that this is helpful now in the current climate to have a discussion about the details about how the U.S. is spending its money in these departments to help get a better understanding to, as he said, make the public comfortable with how this money is being spent and what kind of programs are being run?

MR. EARNEST: David, I believe that story was published since I walked out here, so I haven't seen the actual story itself. So I'm not in a position to comment on a specific story.

But I will reiterate something that the President himself has said, which is that he does believe that strengthening public confidence in these programs is important to the success of these programs. There is little debate about the fact that these programs are critical to our national security, that they have played a role in protecting the homeland and disrupting plots by those who are looking to perpetuate violent acts against the United States of America and our interests. So the President is committed to strengthening those programs.

The President has put forward his own ideas about what we can do to strengthen those programs. He's also appointed this outside board, the members of which we announced just a couple of days ago. So the President is following through on those promises of reforms.

But in terms of the specific report, I'm not in a position to comment on it only because I haven't read it.

Q Well, was the White House aware this story was coming out? I mean, it's been in the works for a while. The intelligence agencies provided responses to some of the direct questions. Were you guys aware? And, again, I'm just curious if you have concerns about this kind of information being out. Or are you comfortable with what the White House was told that --

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard for me to comment on the information included in the report because I haven't seen the report. I didn't talk to the journalist who was working on this story, so I'm just not in a position to comment on that information.

We've talked about our concerns about the damaging leak of classified information, but, frankly, I'm not sure whether or not that applies here because I haven't read the story.

Christi.

Q Thank you, Josh. You've talked a couple of times about the global community being in agreement now on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Do you expect that that consensus will strengthen over the next few days? Or is it already at a point where the President feels that he has the international mandate he's talked about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we will certainly continue our consultations with our allies around the globe. We want to continue to keep our allies in the loop as the President considers a decision about a response. We are certainly pleased by the comments that we've seen from our allies like the U.K. and France, Australia, Germany, the Arab League. NATO has even put out a statement on this. So we're pleased with the strength of the international support that exists for enforcing this international norm against the use of chemical weapons.

So those consultations will continue. I don't want to predict what the reaction to those consultations will be. But we are committed to those consultations. We value the comments of the international community and believe that their support is important to this overall effort.

Q And if the President has made the determination that core national security interests of the U.S. are at stake here, does he need an international mandate of any kind now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we believe strongly in the U.N. process. I've articulated that a couple of times here today, and I think that's evident from our actions.

You have seen us closely consult with other allies who have expressed their strong view here, so we certainly are interested in engaging with the global international community on this issue. But at the same time, the President's chief accountability is to the American people that he was elected to protect. And the President believes strongly in making the kinds of decisions and taking the kinds of steps that are necessary to protect our core national security interests that we've acknowledged are at stake in this situation.

Ann.

Q Thank you, Josh. One week from today, will he still go to Russia? And will he -- what would he say directly to President Putin? Will they look for a moment where he can present this same information to President Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any changes in the President's schedule to announce at this point. So as I think the schedule -- we've already released the schedule that indicates the President will leave on Tuesday evening to travel to Sweden and then to Russia from there next week. And I don't have any changes to announce at this point.

Jared.

Q Josh, you've said several times in the briefing today that the message to totalitarian dictators is that you won't allow violation of international norms. Is the flipside to that that if you are a totalitarian dictator and you'd like to kill 10,000 people, 100,000 people, and not use chemical weapons, that the United States will abide that?

MR. EARNEST: Of course not. You have seen this country work in close consultation with our allies and partners to confront the broader conflict in Syria. I think I referred to that a little bit earlier, that we are very concerned about the violence that we've seen in Syria. And we have been working closely, even with the Russians, on trying to find a diplomatic solution to the violence that we've seen in Syria.

It's our view that a military solution does not exist. And what's required is for both sides to come to the table and reach a diplomatic solution to effectuate a transition in leadership in Syria.

Q How is the situation in Syria affecting the ongoing peace talks in Israel?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the State Department for the latest on those talks.

Mike.

Q The Justice Department just announced that it's not going to seek federal prosecution of marijuana laws in the states that legalized it either recreationally or medicinally except where eight priorities are crossed. Does this essentially mean that the administration accepts the premise that states can overturn federal drug laws within their own state boundaries?

MR. EARNEST: Mike, I think that was announced while I got out here, so I'd refer you to the Department of Justice to explain their legal analysis here.

Q And let me just ask from a different direction then. The President has said that these drug laws are probably due for a fresh national debate. How would you characterize his feelings about the legalization of marijuana? Has his views evolved on that subject?

MR. EARNEST: Ironically, I think I got this question last week, and I think I'd just refer you to the comments that I made last week on this. I don't have anything new. The President has talked about the appropriate use of prosecutorial resources and that applying them to individual users, particularly those who are sick or their caretakers, is

probably not the best use of law enforcement resources. But having laws in place so that these law enforcement resources can be targeted at drug kingpins and traffickers and others who contribute to violence on our streets is a very good use of those law enforcement resources.

John.

Q You've said a couple of times here that the President believes in robust consultation with Congress. But there are 500-plus members of Congress who won't be consulted given the numbers and the set of people you were doing those consultations with. Why don't their constituents deserve to have their elected representatives get the same kind of briefing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not ruling out future briefings that might include every member of Congress. There are a number of senators who are involved. So even if we're not allowed -- if we're not in a position to have a conversation with every single House member in a state, there certainly is a way for the elected representatives of a state to ensure that their representatives are being consulted in this circumstance.

Let me just say that our consultation here started from day one. It has been continuing. We have an important call that will take place this evening, but it's not the end of our consultation. Our consultation will continue. And if there is a desire or a need for there to be a broader briefing once members of Congress return to Washington, D.C., then we'll certainly consider that request.

Q Is it possible that a strike would be launched before they return to Washington, D.C.?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to get into the timeframe of a decision that hasn't been made yet. You walked right into that one, though, John.

Stephen, I'm going to give you the last one.

Q Since Assad has defied the world for two years and shown himself capable of great cruelty, sometimes irrational decisions, some would say, what reason is there to think that a limited and discreet shot across the bows would deter him from using chemical weapons again?

MR. EARNEST: That's a clever way of asking a question that will bring me dangerously close to presupposing that a decision has been made. So let me just say that that is among the factors that's being considered here, that we want to make sure that a response sends an unambiguous signal to the Assad regime and to dictators all around the globe that living up to these international norms is the firm expectation of the international community, and that failure to do so has serious consequences.

Q So you're saying it's a limited strike, but people are misinterpreting what "limited" means?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let people interpret what that means if and when a decision along those lines has been announced.

Mara, I'll give you the last one.

Q Today was the day that a group of senators was going to be meeting again to talk about the budget issues. When is that? And who is coming?

MR. EARNEST: Let me pull up my notes and I think I can give you some specifics about that. Let's see if we can find that in here. This afternoon -- and I think it may even be ongoing, Mara -- the Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, Rob Nabors, one of Denis's deputies, and Sylvia Burwell, who is the Director of the Office of Management and Budget is meeting with a number of Republican senators at the White House here today. There will be a number of things that they'll discuss.

The meeting is a follow-up onto the conversations that the White House has engaged in with Republican members of Congress on budget issues. This is part of the President's search for a caucus of common sense. But it's also my understanding that -- well, let me say it this way -- Denis and others were prepared to talk a little bit about the situation in Syria if that was requested by some of the participants in the meeting.

Q Who are they?

MR. EARNEST: I don't actually have a list of the senators who are attending the meeting. I don't want to read out their schedules, so you can check with them. But you certainly have -- you've seen a couple of these Republican senators talk about these meetings.

Q You're saying it's the same people that have been up here before?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. There have been different groups of Republican senators that have come to the White House to talk to senior White House officials about a range of budget issues, and that's what's continuing today. But, again, I wouldn't rule out that there may be some conversations about Syria. But the reason that the meeting was called was to follow up on some of these budget conversations they've been having.

Q Can we have a readout of that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know. We'll have to get back to you. Thanks, everybody. I appreciate your patience today. Have a good one.

END

2:12 P.M. EDT