

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 5/19/15

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May 19, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 19, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

*Please see below for a correction and an addendum to the transcript, marked with asterisks.

1:20 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Afternoon, everybody. Apologize for the delayed start of today's briefing. One of those days.

Q What's going on back there? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: If the walls had ears.

Q Well, they do talk.

MR. EARNEST: All kinds of --

Q How bad is it? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Not that bad, fortunately. But there's a lot going on. And not everybody is on my schedule today, unfortunately. And because all of you are on my schedule, that's why we're late. So I apologize for that.

Q Can you tell us what's going on?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we will -- if we have a robust questioning period here I think we may get to it all. (Laughter.)

So, Darlene, in that spirit, do you want to get us started?

Q Thanks. And welcome back to the podium.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, I'm delighted to be here. Although I'm pleased it was well tended in my absence.

Q Do you have any comment on the possibility that the Islamic State leader that was killed on Friday had for a time been the captor of American Kayla Moore?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, obviously we saw over the weekend the bravery and courage of our men and women in uniform who carried out an operation, at the direction of the President, to go after an ISIL leader in Syria. As you know, the results of that operation were the death of that ISIL leader and a number of other ISIL fighters who were at the compound. There was one individual, the wife of this ISIL leader, who herself we believe was also involved in some ISIL activities. She is somebody who is currently being -- is detained and is somebody who is currently being interrogated.

And we're trying to learn as much as we can about her involvement with ISIL and what information she may have that would shed some light about a variety of ISIL activities. For example, we know that this individual was likely -- played a prominent role in some of the oil and gas activities, essentially some of the financing of ISIL. Information that we could learn about those activities would be useful. But if there are other things related to ISIL's use of hostage-taking to fund their operations, we'll seek to gather that information as well.

So this information is -- or this process to obtain this information has only just begun in the last couple of days. But I don't have any information to share at this point about what has been gleaned from that process.

Q There's been a lot of commentary since ISIL took over Ramadi in Iraq, and a lot of it has been skeptical of the administration's approach there. Speaker Boehner today said that, again, said hope is not a strategy. And Congressman Schiff said alarm bells should be going off. You get the drift. Is the President feeling any pressure to reevaluate or rethink his strategy there with regard to ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by directing you back to something that the President said back on October 14th of 2014. You'll recall that that was the day that the President invited military chiefs from the members of the coalition to Andrews Air Force Base for a discussion about how military efforts of the coalition that was being led by the United States against ISIL could be efficiently integrated. And in a statement that the President delivered after that meeting, he noted that this is going to be a long-term campaign; there are not quick fixes involved. "As with any military effort, there will be days of progress and there are going to be periods of setback."

And again, that's something the President said back in October. And I think that over the course of the last four or five days we've seen all of this. We have seen that there are no quick fixes involved. We have seen that there have been important -- there's been important progress that's been made, as we just discussed as it relates to this military operation against the senior ISIL official in Syria. But there have also been periods of setback. And certainly the ISIL effort to take over Ramadi is a setback.

And we've been pretty candid about that. But I think this illustrates how important it is for us to maintain some perspective on this. We've had other periods of setback, too, that have been followed shortly by important progress. There was extensive discussion on Capitol Hill and in the media about the risk posed by ISIL when they took over Kobani inside of Syria. There were even cameras trained on the village of Kobani from Turkey, sort of filming the day-by-day effort of ISIL to take over that village.

But because of the effort of the U.S.-led coalition to coordinate closely with Peshmerga fighters on the ground, ISIL fighters were driven out of that city, and even several miles from that city. Again, that is in indication that while we have certain periods of setback, that we also have days of progress.

Kobani is just one example. There are a variety of other examples, whether it's the recent example in Tikrit, or even going back a little farther to earlier in this campaign where there was public concern about the siege at Sinjar Mountain, where hundreds, if not thousands, of religious minorities were at risk because they were surrounded by ISIL fighters vowing to carry out essentially an act of genocide against them. Or even a strategic location like the Mosul Dam -- again, an area that's been hotly contested, that briefly was under the control of ISIL fighters but is now safely in the control of Iraqi security forces because of the support of coalition fighters.

So there's been a lot of back-and-forth, and that's something that we would anticipate we'll see over the course of this military campaign.

The last thing I'll say is that the President is always -- or I guess should say is regularly in discussion with his national security team to get updates in terms of the success of the strategy so far -- where are we seeing areas of progress; where are we seeing areas of setback; and are there things that we can do to tweak the strategy to better reflect those areas of concern, or to capitalize on those elements of our strategy that have worked and apply them in other areas. This is something that the President is mindful of. It's something that he's talking about with his national security team just about every day, including today.

Q On trade -- I wanted to switch to trade for a second, with the debate getting ready to move over to the House. Could you talk a little bit about the role Nancy Pelosi is playing for the White House? She has said that she wants to help members get to yes on this, so what is she doing to help you all get to yes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Darlene, you know that the White House has found Leader Pelosi to be an extraordinarily capable partner when it comes to advancing our agenda through the United States Congress, and the working relationship that the White House has established with Leader Pelosi has been effective. And that doesn't mean that the administration and Leader Pelosi agree on every issue -- we've had our differences -- but our areas of agreement and effective cooperation have far out-numbered those areas where we've disagreed.

I know that Leader Pelosi has indicated that she's going to keep an open mind when it comes to trade legislation, and I think that is all that the President has asked -- that member of Congress in both parties, frankly, keep an open mind and evaluate these legislative proposals in the context of facts, and to consider carefully those facts before making up one's mind.

And we're going to continue to work closely with Leader Pelosi. We're certainly interested in winning over her support. But short of that, we're interested in engaging with members of Congress in the Democratic Caucus to consider carefully this legislation that we're trying to advance through the Congress. And we're going to continue to work with her, even if this is one of those rare instances where she does not side with the administration.

Q And then, tomorrow, with the President's address to the Coast Guard Academy, can you say if he's going to be making any announcements there? I believe that's his last commencement address this season, if I'm right. Is that right?

MR. EARNEST: That's correct, yes.

Q He's given a course of three or four addresses in past years. Why so few this year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know that a policy process was convened to determine the number of commencement addresses that the President would give. But the President obviously enjoyed the opportunity that he had a couple of weeks ago to address the Lake Area Technical Institute commencement, and talk about the important work that that community college is doing in terms of serving their community and helping people in the community get the skills they need to get good middle-class jobs.

Obviously the graduates of the Coast Guard Academy will be assuming responsibility for serving their country -- in some situations, even at great risk to their own personal safety. And that's an indication of their service and commitment to the country, and that's worthy of the President's praise. And he's looking forward to the opportunity to give that commencement address.

But I don't have any information on why the President didn't have any more thoughts for graduating students this spring.

Roberta.

Q Just going back to trade for a second. Hillary Clinton said earlier today that she thinks that trade legislation should address the concerns about currency manipulation, and I know that's something you've talked a lot about. Is it possible to do? I thought that Secretary Lew today called it -- said it would be a poison pill for TPP if it was included. So is the President open to including some kind of currency manipulation language? Or is that really putting Secretary Clinton at odds with the administration and what it's saying?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Roberta, what the administration has said, and I believe Secretary Lew has said this as well, is that, thus far, what the administration has successfully been able to do is to advocate for fair currency policies in a variety of multilateral meetings.

Whether it's the G7 or the G20, or the IMF meetings, Secretary Lew and other senior officials in the administration, even including the President, have regularly made the case to their counterparts that unfair currency practices should not be pursued.

And we have had some success when it comes to China. Their currency has appreciated about 30 percent over the last five years or so. That's an indication that the advocacy of American officials has been effective. We've seen that Japan over the last three years have not intervened in their foreign exchange markets. That's an indication that they at least have been open to the message that's been aggressively delivered by American officials when it comes to fair currency practices.

But what we have been concerned about, principally, has been the need to ensure that the Federal Reserve here in the United States has the independence and the authority to implement monetary policy in a way that they believe is consistent with the best interest of the U.S. economy. And certainly over the last five or six years, we've seen how important and valuable a tool that has been in terms of trying to prevent a second Great Depression. And we have been concerned that some of the currency provisions that some have floated would undermine that independence. And that's why you've seen the administration come out quite strongly against that.

There have been other proposals that are much more measured that would talk about the priority that we have placed on ensuring fair currency practices while, at the same time, preserving the independence of the Federal Reserve. So the point is that there are some provisions that we strongly oppose, but there are some permutations of these proposals that could earn the administration's support because they wouldn't threaten the independence of the Federal Reserve.

Q And which permutations are you referring to?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously there's at least one provision that has been floated by Senator Portman that would undermine the independence of the Federal Reserve and interfere with the ability of the Federal Reserve to implement monetary policy in a way that would have -- in a way that's critical to the stability of the U.S. economy. And the President would certainly not support that kind of provision, and would even take the extraordinary step of vetoing the TPA bill if this amendment were added.

And there are, however, other provisions, including one that's sponsored by Senator Bennet, that the administration is still open to considering.

Q Then on Ramadi -- given the setback, does the White House still have confidence that Prime Minister Abadi can pull together the kind of ground response needed to go with the coalition airstrikes? And does the White House still have faith that the Prime Minister can be the kind of inclusive leader that had been hoped for?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the strategy that we've seen from Prime Minister Abadi is one that is predicated on a multi-sectarian security force. So what Prime Minister Abadi has done is he's consulted closely with leaders in Anbar Province, and this was put to a vote of the

Anbar Provincial Council and they unanimously recommended that Prime Minister Abadi follow through with deploying the Popular Mobilization Forces.

These Popular Mobilization Forces do reflect the multi-sectarian nature of the nation of Iraq. The Popular Mobilization Forces include some Shia militia and they include some Shia volunteers, but they also include Sunni volunteers, including tribal fighters from Anbar. That, again, reflects the diversity of the country. And that will be, again, something that we have held up for a long time as part of the criteria that we believe is integral to Iraq's ability to repel the threat from ISIL.

What's also important is it's important that these forces are under the command and control of the Iraqi central government, whether it's through the Prime Minister and through the Secretary of Defense in Iraq. That is what's critical. And this is a principle that we have established previously, that the United States will be very supportive of multi-sectarian efforts who are taking command-and-control orders from the Iraqi central government. And we're going to continue to be -- while there obviously is significant work that needs to be done to push ISIL out of Ramadi, this is a strategy that we believe is one that's worth pursuing.

Jim.

Q Josh, is it safe to assume that the President and Secretary Carter will be talking about ISIS during their meeting this afternoon?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a preview of their meeting to offer. They typically cover a range of topics in the context of their conversation, but I wouldn't be surprised if this came up.

Q Okay. And you said earlier that the President meets with his national security team from time to time to talk about tweaking the strategy with respect to ISIS. I guess the question, though, really is does the President need a new strategy when it comes to ISIS? What do you think?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, we've been asked this question in the context of other situations, too -- when we saw ISIL forces take over Kobani, there were questions raised about the success of the President's strategy, and what we did see over time was that the strategy that we have laid out of local forces taking the fight on the ground to ISIL with the backing of coalition air power succeed. And they did succeed in liberating Kobani and driving ISIL forces not just outside the city limits of Kobani, but actually several miles away from the city.

That's just one example. There are other examples, including Tikrit, several provinces where there had previously been populated territory that were dominated by ISIL that no longer are. These are provinces like Diyala, Nineveh, and the Kirkuk province. And so this is an indication that the strategy that the President has laid out has enjoyed periods of progress and success.

Q And you're saying that ISIS will be driven out of Ramadi?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm saying is that there have been areas of setback, too. That doesn't mean that the strategy needs to be discarded. But I do think we need to -- and the President -- more importantly, the President thinks that it's important for his national security team to be focused on giving him the best options, evaluating our strategy, examining where the strategy is working and applying those best practices in other areas. It also may mean reevaluating in some areas where the strategy isn't working as intended and needs to be upgraded. This is part of the continuous process that's underway at the National Security Council, throughout the President's national security team.

Q And you mentioned Kobani. Are you saying that ISIS will be driven out of Ramadi?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that certainly is what the strategy is intended to effect. I'm not going to set any timelines in terms of this, but obviously our goal here is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and, yes, that means driving them out of Ramadi.

Q And is the President frustrated with what's happened in Ramadi? Is he frustrated with the progress of this mission against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, what I can say is the President is mindful that this is not a short-term proposition. That's something that the President has indicated on a number of occasions. But the President is also mindful of the fact that we're going to have days of progress and periods of setback. That's been the approach that the President has taken for almost a year now, and he's very mindful of that.

And again, he's also mindful of the fact that that phenomenon was on display this weekend where we did have U.S. military forces carry out a daring raid in Syrian territory to take out a senior ISIL leader and a dozen or so of other ISIL fighters.

But we also saw on display that ISIL did succeed in eventually overrunning Ramadi, and that's an indication that that would be a setback. And the President is mindful of this dynamic, and this is a dynamic that is common in military conflicts and it's the way that the President continues to evaluate our success.

Q Earlier today, Secretary Clinton said that she would like to see her emails released as soon as possible. I guess the State Department has said that we may have to wait until January to see these emails, which is right around the time of the Iowa caucuses, which seems like it would be a pretty poor time for that kind of release to occur. Would the White House consider honoring Secretary Clinton's request to expedite the release of these emails? Might the President be persuaded to issue some sort of executive order so these emails could be released sooner than seven months from now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I can only imagine the headlines that we'd see if the President were to personally intervene in the standard processing of a FOIA request. And essentially, that's what Secretary Clinton's emails are being subjected to. So for questions about how that process will be carried out and how long it will take to complete it, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Q But seven or eight months, I mean, that's a long time.

MR. EARNEST: It's also a testament to the large number of emails that they're going to have to process.

Q They can't process faster than 10,000 emails a month?

MR. EARNEST: Again, you'd have to ask them about that.

Q And finally, there's a pretty disturbing report in the Wall Street Journal that said that the Justice Department is looking at going after officials in the Venezuelan government there for potentially being involved in narco-trafficking. Is the White House concerned that Venezuela is becoming something of a narco-state?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have raised concerns previously about the Venezuelan government and the frequency with which they have flouted the basic human rights of their people. And this has been the subject of some concern for a while. This is something that was discussed while the President was at the Summit of the Americas in Panama a month or two ago. But I don't have any details on that specific Wall Street Journal report. I'd refer you to the Department of Justice on that.

Nadia.

Q I'm going to have another go at Ramadi. You just said that it was a setback. Yesterday was almost like a unifying message among all government agencies that you're going to take it back. How are you going to take it back? Surely, you're not talking about the Iraqi forces, because they have proved to be unable to stand up to ISIS. And you just mentioned now the popular forces. They are -- contrary to what you said, they are perceived and they are seen as Shia militia trained by Iran, equipped by Iran, and actually sending them to Ramadi would increase the sectarian strife there, not alleviate it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me take your first question first, which is that we have seen that the Iraqi security forces, when backed by coalition air power, have demonstrated some effectiveness on the battlefield. It was the efforts of the Iraqi security forces backed by coalition air power that drove ISIL from Tikrit. That was an important measure of progress.

I'll go back to the Kobani example. There was a situation, again, in Kobani where there was a lot of concern that ISIL had successfully threatened and overrun that Syrian village. But Iraqi security forces, in this case, primarily Peshmerga, were backed by coalition air power and they did succeed in driving ISIL fighters out of that village and essentially out of that area.

The same is true at Mosul Dam. We saw a similar dynamic at Mt. Sinjar. And there are broad swaths of populated territory in some of those provinces that I named earlier in Iraq where we have seen Iraqi security forces successfully take the fight on the ground to ISIL and defeat them, or at least push them back.

And that is an indication that there is a security force there that we can work with and that can have some success against ISIL.

That said, clearly the Iraqi security forces that were mobilized to protect Ramadi did not succeed. And that's an indication that they need some additional reinforcements, and that's what Prime Minister Abadi is considering.

Now, as it relates to your second question, the Popular Mobilization Force does include Shia militia, but it also includes some Shia volunteers and it also includes Sunni volunteers, including tribal fighters. It's a multi-sectarian force. And those forces that have indicated that they will be responsive to orders from the Iraqi central government are forces that the coalition will support.

The last thing I'll say about this is that the decision to deploy the Popular Mobilization Force is one that was backed by the Anbar Provincial Council, so obviously they believe that the Prime Minister is taking the right step here and they are committed to supporting this decision. This is something that was also put to a vote essentially of Prime Minister Abadi's cabinet that we know also is diverse and reflects the diversity of the nation of Iraq. They strongly supported the deployment of the Popular Mobilization Forces into this effort.

So there's a lot of work that needs to get done, and the last couple of days have been a setback for the effort against ISIL. But I think past guide tells us that in the proper circumstances, that Iraqi security forces, when they're backed by the effective use of coalition airpower, can be effective against ISIL.

Q So the only difference here is Anbar is majority --almost 90 percent are Sunni?

MR. EARNEST: That's the significance of the Anbar Provincial Council saying to the Prime Minister, send the Popular Mobilization Forces -- they would be effective in helping us.

Q But do you believe that the central government, led by Prime Minister Abadi, has given enough weapons to the Sunni tribes to fight against ISIS? And this is a criticism now that's leveled against it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's something that's difficult for me to speak to. I know that this is a concern that has been raised by some.

Q Yes, but you supported him.

MR. EARNEST: No doubt.

Q I mean, all the decisions were going through --

MR. EARNEST: You can even say that in the present tense. We continue to support Prime Minister Abadi because of the multi-sectarian way in which he's governed that country and which he sought to prosecute this war in his country.

To be honest with you, I can't speak to the specific provision of equipment to some tribal fighters. But obviously, Prime Minister Abadi is mindful of the need to make sure that those fighters are properly equipped. Obviously, he's going to make sure that those

fighters are responsive to the command-and-control of the Iraqi central government. And if so, it would be in the interest of the Iraqi central government to make sure that those fighters have the training and equipment that they need to succeed. And obviously the coalition will have something to say about that as well.

Q One last question. The U.N. is estimating that 25,000 civilians fled from Ramadi, and apparently they are not allowed to go to either Baghdad or Babil. Have you raised this issue with the Prime Minister? Because the options for them are either stuck in the desert or being killed by ISIS.

MR. EARNEST: Well, we obviously are very concerned about the humanitarian situation that ISIL has created all across Iraq, most recently in Ramadi. As it relates to the details in terms of trying to provide for the needs of those individuals who are fleeing ISIL from Ramadi, I don't have information about that, but I'd encourage you to check with the Department of Defense.

Justin.

Q First, on ISIL and Iraq. Speaker Boehner obviously was critical today, but he also said that he wanted the President to withdraw his AUMF. He said that it was --

MR. EARNEST: Months after suggesting that he couldn't do anything until the President sent language up there, right?

Q Yes. But he said that the President's proposal is irresponsible because it called for more authority than he had today, and sort of -- I think he used both the recent developments and evidence that the proposal hasn't moved through Congress to justify asking you guys to resubmit it.

MR. EARNEST: He's the Speaker of House and he's blaming the President for something not moving through Congress. It doesn't line up very well for the Speaker on this, does it?

Look, here's the thing. The President has been very clear about what he would like to see from Congress, and that is Congress fulfilling their constitutional responsibility when it comes to matters of war and peace. And we have seen the Congress -- I think I've said this before -- Congress has been AWOL when it comes to the AUMF.

They've demanded that the President send up language; we sent up language. They've demanded that the President spend time in advance of sending up that language with Democrats and Republicans to try and craft a compromise; we hosted -- I know there were at least dozens of conversations and at least a dozen meetings here at the White House with members of Congress and their staff throughout the fall and over the winter, as we tried to put this proposal together.

At some point, it has to be the responsibility of the Speaker of the House to do his job, and for members of Congress to do their job. And we have not seen members of Congress and we certainly haven't seen the Speaker of the House do his job when it comes to this specific matter.

Q I guess the Speaker said repeatedly that you guys haven't laid out enough of the strategy. I think that's a rhetorical debate, but if that's the concern, is there any more that you can do to sort of bring clarity to your plans for Iraq?

MR. EARNEST: I think what we see from the Speaker is excuse after excuse for why he hasn't done his job. And particularly on this matter, that's a pretty significant disappointment to the President. I know it's a significant disappointment to our men and women in uniform who are looking for the United States Congress. You'll recall that this was part of our rhetoric leading up to this AUMF debate. This was an opportunity for the United States Congress to step and show their support for our men and women in uniform, to show the support of the United States Congress to the international community, that they were committed to the strategy that the President has laid out to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And we haven't seen the Congress fulfill that basic step, and that has been a source of significant disappointment to the President.

Q And then I just wanted to ask about Elizabeth Warren. She's made a big criticism over TPA that --

MR. EARNEST: You think? (Laughter.)

Q Well, specifically, the possibility that it could alter financial -- deregulation in Dodd-Frank.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. Yes.

Q She's offered an amendment that she says sort of tracks with statements that you guys have made that would essentially prohibit any free trade agreement that could impact financial regulations from fast track. Is that an amendment that you guys would support?

MR. EARNEST: I've only gotten a very cursory rundown about what her amendment would do if it were to take effect. And the way that it's been explained to me is that it would actually have the opposite of the intended effect; that it could be a situation where the language that she has put together could actually make it easier for Wall Street reform to be unwound. And because the President has placed such a priority on Wall Street reform, and has actually worked closely with Senator Warren and others to implement Wall Street reform, even under the vociferous objection of a bunch of K Street lobbyists, obviously we would have concern about a proposal that would do exactly that. But there are a wide range of amendments that --

Q Can you explain why?

MR. EARNEST: Actually, I can't. But let's see if we can get you some more information about that specific proposal.

Jon.

Q So on the authorization to use military force, I know from the very start the White House's position is we would like to have this. You sent up your draft, but you don't need it.

MR. EARNEST: As a legal matter, that is just a fact.

Q So would you consider it a setback? I mean, it certainly appears to be going nowhere, and not just because of the latest developments with Speaker Boehner, but I can't really find any Democrats up on Capitol Hill that have gotten behind what the White House sent up. Is it going to be a major setback if you don't get this as it looks?

MR. EARNEST: As I told Justin, I think it would be a significant disappointment if Congress continues to be AWOL when it comes to the AUMF. For members of Congress to stand up as often as they have and insist that the President respect the role that they have to play when it comes to national security, and for them to demand meetings with the administration that were organized by the administration, to demand language from the administration that the President sent up, to demand that administration officials participate in congressional hearings on this matter, and we sent up the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to testify on it -- I mean, at some point, somebody in Congress needs to assume responsibility for this, and not just complain about it the whole time.

Q But when you look at all that's happened since the White House sent up the draft of the use -- authorizing the use of military force, you've seen setback after setback. You've seen some successes, but you've seen huge setbacks like we've seen in Ramadi, the most significant. You've seen the reports that ISIL is not only operating in Syria and Iraq, but they are exporting operations to Libya. Doesn't it make sense to say maybe the strategy needs to be overhauled? I mean, since you sent that document up to Capitol Hill, the situation in a whole variety of ways has gotten much worse. Maybe it's time for a different strategy. That's not unreasonable, is it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's a different question. The fact is -- and I think I tried to acknowledge this to Jim -- is that the President and his team are constantly testing the strategy and evaluating what elements of the strategy are working well and where can those lessons be applied in other areas, and what elements of the strategy aren't having the intended effect and need to be reformed or changed. This is something that the President and his national security team are always focused on.

And there are a number of discussions that we've had with members of Congress about this issue. The fact is that it is the responsibility of Congress to send a clear signal to the world, to our enemies, and to our men and women in uniform that the United States Congress is committed to the effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And, again, when it comes to making their voice heard and fulfilling their constitutional responsibility to do that, Congress and their leadership in both parties has been AWOL.

Q Now, on the overall track record of military operations of the President's strategy on this, you said we've seen periods of progress and success. Would you say that overall, this strategy has been a success?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, yes. Overall, yes. It doesn't mean that there haven't been areas of setback, as we saw in Ramadi.

Q I mean, is exporting terror to Libya, taking over the capital of Iraq's largest province -- this is overall success?

MR. EARNEST: What we've also seen is we've also seen a coalition of 60 nations both in the region and around the world join the United States in this fight. We've seen a new Prime Minister take office in Iraq and unite that country and deploy a multi-sectarian security force against ISIL that has succeeded in liberating important areas of Diyala and Babil and Nineveh and the Kirkuk Provinces. We've seen important Iraqi security force gains in Tikrit *and Ramadi. We've also seen strategic areas like Sinjar Mountain and Mosul Dam where Iraqi security forces have emerged victorious.

So we have seen a lot of success. But we've also seen significant periods of setback. And that's part of what a military conflict is going to be, particularly when it's going to be a long-term proposition like this one.

Q Now, in the President's interview with Nadia on Friday, he was asked directly if he think the bloodshed in Syria will end before he's out of office, and he said, "I'll be honest, probably not." So was the President essentially acknowledging that he's going to be unable to deal with the situation or at least basically going to leave the mess we've seen in Syria now to the next President?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, the mess we've seen in Syria is one that's been going on for some time. And that's principally the responsibility of the failed leadership of the Bashar al-Assad. And that's why the United States and a number of other nations have insisted that he leave that country so that a political transition can take place.

We know that because of his failed leadership that a vacuum was created and that did create an opportunity for a group like ISIL to mobilize and to organize in a way that's been very destabilizing to that region. And it's caused a lot of violence to break out. And that's not something that's going to get solved overnight. This is a --

Q I'm not asking about overnight. Has the President given up on solving this situation before he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: The President hasn't given up on anything. The President is seeking to implement a strategy that has shown some success -- in Kobani, inside Syria. We have had some success against an ISIL leader in Syria just over the weekend who was taken off the battlefield. So there is evidence of success to point to, but there's no doubt that there's more important work that needs to get done.

I think the last thing -- and this is critically important, too, particularly in the context of the ongoing political debate -- the President feels very strongly that the very significant problems that are faced by people in Syria, for example, are not problems that the United States is going to come in and solve for them. We're not going to impose a solution on Syria. We're not going to commit billions of dollars and the lives of hundreds of thousands of our men and women in uniform to try to solve those problems.

What the United States is going to do under the leadership of this President is mobilize the international community to try to protect the national security interest of the United States. And whether that is taking discrete strikes on extremists that are using Syria as a safe haven to plot against the homeland, or whether that's carrying out specific special operations raids against ISIL fighters, or deploying U.S. military to back the fighters on the ground against ISIL inside of Syria, or continuing to try to facilitate a political reconciliation inside Syria -- that will be the role of the United States under this President. And the President believes that that's a wise manner to try to protect our interest in that region of the world.

Tommy.

Q Thanks, Josh. I have three quick questions for you. First of all, on TPP, Senator Elizabeth Warren put out a report called "Broken Promises." I wonder if you guys have any reaction either to the substance of the report or to the fact of it and the strength and persistence of its opposition to the deal.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I read some of the news coverage of the report. I actually don't think it was on TPP. I think it was on a range of other trade agreements in which she believes, according to the report, that certain provisions related to labor standards have not been robustly enforced in the manner that she believes is appropriate.

And the response that the President has routinely had when faced with this question has been to say that the TPP agreement that's being negotiated is not NAFTA and it's not any of these other trade agreements that have been enacted, it's a different one. And what it contains are higher labor standards and environmental standards, and ensures that they are enforceable, that they're written into the agreement.

And so those who are concerned with the way that previous trade agreements have been enforced when it comes to labor standards should find TPP something that they can support because it will include enforceable labor provisions that will be enforced in the same way that other elements of the agreement will be enforced.

Q And the report is called, "Broken Promises." I know it's not about TPP per se, but the strong implication is that the President is making the same promises that were made before and that he's not going to keep them.

MR. EARNEST: And this is a wholly different agreement.

Q Secondly, could you describe then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's involvement in the ongoing TPP negotiations when she was with the administration?

MR. EARNEST: Her involvement in the ongoing -- she's not involved in the ongoing negotiations. She's no longer a member of the administration.

Q When she was, how would you describe her involvement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not able to. You could check with the State Department on that. I just don't know. Or check with Secretary Clinton's team, maybe they'll tell you. I don't have any detailed knowledge of what those kinds of conversations were like. Obviously she was a part of them, and she's spoken publicly about that. But I can't detail the kinds of meetings that she possibly attended.

Q Well, how would you characterize -- you made some statements a few weeks ago about her involvement in the Iran nuclear deal, and I'm wondering if you have a similar assessment of her involvement --

MR. EARNEST: I don't. Again, she talked about that quite a bit publicly when she was the Secretary.

Q Okay. And finally, last week you said that you thought that Sherrod Brown would find a way to apologize for implying that President Obama was being sexist when he referred to Senator Warren by her first name. Has he found a way to do that?

MR. EARNEST: You should ask him.

Let's move around.

Q Thanks, Josh. What bad consequences, if any, are there if Congress leaves without renewing or in some way amending Section 215?

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question. As you know, the Patriot Act is scheduled to expire at the end of this month. And the Patriot Act includes a number of important provisions that give our national security professionals the tools they need to protect the homeland and to protect the American people. And if those authorities are not authorized, it does pose a risk to our national security. And it is something the President is concerned about.

The good news is that we saw the United States House of Representatives come to a bipartisan agreement to renew the Patriot Act, but also reform a number of the proposals that had raised concerns that been expressed by a number of people, including the President, about the degree to which civil liberties were protected.

So it was obviously the product of important, difficult bipartisan work to reach a compromise that would ensure that our national security professionals would continue to have the tools they need to keep us safe, while ensuring that we are taking -- going to greater lengths to protect the privacy and civil liberties of the American people. And hammering out that bipartisan agreement was hard work, but it was work that was successfully completed by the House of Representatives and it passed with strong bipartisan support. I believe it got 338 votes -- that's a substantial majority.

Now what we need to see is we need to see the Senate vote on this piece of legislation before the end of the month. And there is some disagreement -- or at least some concern that that might not happen. And the concern that the President has is that there are some in the Senate who have suggested that the Patriot Act should just expire. That does not reflect the view of the vast majority of members of Congress, fortunately. It certainly does not reflect the view of the President.

However, there are a larger number -- mostly Republicans -- I think it might even be exclusively Republicans -- who have said that we should just go ahead and extend the Patriot Act in its current form. The problem with that approach -- and this is obviously an approach that is pursued by those who are principally concerned with ensuring that our national security professionals have the authority that they need to keep us safe. The fact is, that poses the greatest risk to protecting that authority because there is significant doubt about whether or not a proposal like that would pass the Senate. And the Speaker of the House has indicated that a proposal like that would not pass the House of Representatives.

So given that we have a choice between allowing those authorities to expire either because we don't renew the Patriot Act at all, or we attempt to pass something that we know wouldn't pass either the Senate or the House, the only option that's really left for the United States Senate -- if they're genuinely concerned about protecting the authority of our national security professionals to keep us safe -- is to pass the USA Freedom Act, which is a piece of legislation that had bipartisan support in the House that both protected the authorities of our national security professionals while also protecting the civil liberties of the American people. And that's what we're hoping that the Senate will do.

Q But if I may, let's say that a week goes by and they don't do it. What will happen? I mean, does it immediately mean that this data can no longer be collected? Is there a period of time in which they continue until there's -- what is the mechanism?

MR. EARNEST: For the actual impact of the legislation lapsing, I'd refer you to the DNI. I think they could probably give you some better insight into what impact this would have on the authorities that they use to keep the American people safe.

But, again, this is something that would -- this is a deadline that needs to be met by June 1st. And we're hopeful that the Senate will do the right thing -- will do the thing that's necessary to protect these authorities and protect the American people, and that's pass the USA Freedom Act, which passed the House of Representatives with strong bipartisan support.

Q And finally, what role is the White House taking in helping folks get this point that they should do this before they leave? I mean, is your effort as big as the one on trade, for example?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there have been a number of conversations between senior administration officials, principally members of the President's national security team and members of Congress. The good news, again, as I mentioned, the hard work of this has been done. The hardest part is actually figuring out how to solve these thorny policy questions about how to make sure that our national security professionals have the authorities that they need, while also making sure that we're protecting civil liberties.

That's difficult work. And people of good conscience can disagree with the way that some of those lines are drawn. But again, I think that's a testament to the good work that was done in the House that they were able to reach a bipartisan agreement on this.

And what's clear is that this is the only way, this is the only path for the Senate to ensure that our national security professionals can continue to do the work that they need to do to keep us safe. And again, that's why we're hopeful that the Senate will allow that specific piece of legislation to come up for a vote. We do believe it has the bipartisan support necessary to pass the Senate. The President would, of course, sign it into law before June 1st.

Chris.

Q Josh, Congressman Ted Lieu today, in his legislation known as the Therapeutic Fraud Prevention Act, would seek to ban at the federal level widely discarded conversion therapy for LGBT people by classifying it as fraud. The White House has supported bans on this practice before, but has advocated a state-by-state approach. Will President Obama endorse the federal legislation?

MR. EARNEST: Chris, as you rightly point out, the President has indicated his support for efforts to ban the use of so-called "conversion therapy" for minors. There is overwhelming scientific evidence to indicate that this so-called "therapy" -- especially when it's practiced on young people -- is neither medically, nor ethically appropriate, and can actually cause substantial harm.

So we certainly would welcome some kind of congressional action to address the practice of so-called "conversion therapy," nationally. But we're hopeful that members of Congress and, frankly, practitioners across the country will rely on the clarity of medical evidence that's been marshalled to indicate that these kinds of practices are harmful, particularly when subjected to minors.

Q Does that -- is welcoming congressional action, is that classified as endorsement of this bill that was introduced by the Congressman?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't taken a close look at this specific legislation, so I'm not in a position to offer a specific endorsement of the bill. But I can say, as a general matter, given the President's strong opposition to so-called "conversion therapy" that he's previously articulated, we would welcome congressional action that's consistent with the views the President has expressed on this.

Carol.

Q Last month at his speech at Defense University, the Vice President said that the Islamic State's momentum in Iraq is halted and in many places has been flat out reversed. How do you justify a statement like that given what's transpired this week? And why should people have confidence in the President's strategy -- particularly, as you just said, it's not under any sort of new review -- when statements like that are undermined within weeks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Carol, I think what the Vice President has said is entirely consistent with what I and others have said about our efforts in Iraq. And it's certainly consistent with what the President said back on October 14, 2014. As with any military effort, there will be days of progress and there are going to be periods of setback.

That's what the President said in October of 2014, and that's certainly what we've seen over the course of the last four of five days, where we enjoyed this progress by taking an ISIL leader off the battlefield -- that's a testament to the bravery and skill of our men and women in uniform -- but we've also seen the setback in Ramadi. And that's an indication that Iraqi security forces need to retool their efforts.

And we've seen that Prime Minister Abadi, with the consent of the Anbar Provincial Council and with the support of his entire cabinet, is prepared to send the Popular Mobilization Forces to that area to augment the true presence in and around Ramadi. And with the backing of coalition air power, we're optimistic about their chances. But that's not something that's going to happen overnight. But when it does happen, I hope we have the same opportunity to discuss it rather robustly that we're having today.

Q So let's take one statement that you currently say, that Baghdad is safe. Why should anyone believe you on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Carol, the fact is that there is an aggressive military conflict underway in Iraq and there are any number of areas where we can point to the success of the strategy that the President has laid out -- by building a coalition of more than 60 countries, and using coalition air power to back the efforts of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces on the ground -- whether it's the Kirkuk Province, or the Mosul Dam, or Mount Sinjar, or Tikrit, or Kobani, there are any number of military successes that we can point to where this strategy has succeeded in driving back ISIL.

But this is not a short-term proposition. And we're going to continue to pursue a strategy that has yielded important successes so far. At the same time, the President and his national security team are interested in continuing to refine that strategy to make sure that we're capitalizing on those elements of the strategy that seem to work the best. And reforming those elements of the strategy that haven't resulted in the intended effect.

Ron.

Q One more question about the raid over the weekend. Did the White House reach out to the families of the four Americans who were held and lost their lives while they were being held hostage by ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know of any specific conversations that have taken place between senior administration officials and the families of the hostages this weekend.

**[We have been in touch with the families of those American hostages previously held by ISIL. Given the sensitivity of those discussions, and out of respect for these families, we don't have more details to provide on those conversations.]

Q Because there was some report that they were contacted directly and told of the raid and the success of the raid when it happened.

MR. EARNEST: That could be. I just don't know.

Q On the policing issue yesterday. It's one thing to put restrictions and prohibitions on the transfer -- future transfers of certain types of equipment. What about the billions of dollars' worth of equipment that's already on the streets of these major cities and elsewhere? Because if something happened in Baltimore, or Ferguson, or someplace tomorrow, there is still the possibility of the police responding as they have in the manner in which I guess the President is not happy with. So what leverage does the President have to deal with the situation on the ground now in real time? Because to some extent we're talking about, again, billions of dollars' of equipment that's already over there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, I think you're describing a situation that's much more adversarial than it actually is. The fact is the recommendations that were developed by this Task Force in 21st Century Policing included significant input from law enforcement officials, both state and local, and in jurisdictions all across the country. And what was also included in that task force were a set of recommendations that had best practices that have been implemented with great success in some communities that could have similar success if applied in other communities.

And what we have seen is that the vast majority of law enforcement officials have been interested in considering those best practices; that it's in the interest of these law enforcement organizations to implement these best practices in a way that will build trust with the communities that their sworn to serve and protect.

Q You've also, no doubt, heard the concern that much of this equipment -- some police say -- is defensive in nature, not offensive in nature. And they're concerned about an approval process in this restricted category that could become politicized and bureaucratic and lead to delays, and so forth. And, again, what -- and that's, again, in the procurements -- but what leverage does the White House, if any, have in terms of really trying to dictate or try to influence events on the ground now? For example, the Department of Justice is involved in having investigations into departments and other kinds of investigations. Do you foresee the DOJ being more involved in real time in monitoring how police use this military-style equipment?

MR. EARNEST: Well, those kinds of patterns and practices investigations are initiated based on conclusions that have been reached by career prosecutors. So that's not something that the President can order. But what the Department of Justice has done

with some success is sought to work closely with local law enforcement on a range of issues prior to the need for any sort of wide-ranging investigation like a patterns and practices investigation.

So whether it's the COPS Program or some of the civil rights -- officials in the civil rights division of the Department of Justice, or even the element of the Department of Justice that's responsible for reaching out to local law enforcement, those kinds of conversations have already been happening. And there is more work that can be done as the federal government communicates with local law enforcement about what best practices can be implemented, what sort of training should be required before the use of some of the military equipment that they've already received. There are a range of ways that the federal government can be supportive of those local law enforcement organizations that are interested in reforming their tactics or their practices to better serve their populations.

And the President has been clear that the federal government doesn't manage or control these local law enforcement organizations; this is local government. And what the federal government can do is we can try to be helpful in terms of offering up best practices, offering advice -- in some cases, even offering resources. But ultimately, it's going to be the responsibility of these local leaders and local law enforcement officials to decide what's going to work best in their community.

Q And you're right, some are going to resist because they don't want Washington telling them what to do, and for any number of other reasons. But --

MR. EARNEST: That may be true.

Q I think there's a sense in the country, too, amongst some law enforcement that their jobs are not understood, that this whole issue of militarization has been exaggerated -- to use the words of some. For example, the prohibited weapons in the report yesterday -- bayonets, track vehicles -- you don't see those kinds of things on the streets in the cities. So how does the President see his relationship with law enforcement now, generally? Is it clear to say that he's walking a very fine line -- it's a very difficult balancing act to appear to be even-handed in dealing with this very contentious issue of communities and police? Because again, at the beginning of the premise of this question, this is not a Washington matter, this is an issue for cities, for towns, for localities.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer that question a couple different ways. The first is that we have been, I think, pretty forthright about the fact that changing some of the policies related to the militarization of local law enforcement is not going to dramatically change the relationship that these local law enforcement agencies have with some of these communities.

I do think that what it could do -- and what we're hopeful that it will do -- is it will contribute to the effort to try to deescalate some of that conflict. And that's what we're hopeful that will do. But there is so much more that needs to be done to try to address some of these problems that we're seeing between law enforcement and the communities that they serve.

As it relates to the President, there's no question -- and the President has talked about this -- that the kinds of policy considerations at stake here are extraordinarily complicated and that trying to implement the kinds of policies that we know will meet the needs of these communities are difficult, even on their own. They're only more difficult when you consider that you have Republican majorities in Congress that are pretty resistant to trying to address some of the basic challenges that are facing many of our urban communities right now.

But it's not at all hard for the President to say -- as he has on many occasions -- how much respect he has for the vast majority of law enforcement officers in this country who are doing the right thing and who are doing a really good job. The President was just in Camden yesterday where he was touting the efforts of that police force even in a very dangerous neighborhood. And the impact that their efforts have had on the local crime rate, on violent crime, on shootings, has been rather extraordinary. And as the President said, if they can do it in Camden, you can do it anywhere.

Q Well, one thing they did in Camden was they eliminated a local police department and brought in a county police department with a unit to take over, which is very, very controversial. And it's an issue that's been raised in places like Ferguson. Is that something the President supports -- the idea of consolidating or disbanding local departments in favor of bigger jurisdictions?

MR. EARNEST: It worked in Camden. But each of these jurisdictions is going to have to make this decision for themselves about the best way for them to implement these reforms in a way that's good for the safety of law enforcement officers who are doing very difficult work, and occasionally, very dangerous work, but also making sure that they are effectively serving the communities where they're working.

And again, these are tough questions. And that's why we formed this task force to consider them. And the task force included senior law enforcement officials to offer up some of these recommendations. But it's not at all hard for the President to indicate his full-throated support for the vast majority of men and women in local law enforcement agencies across the country who are doing excellent -- and in some cases, even heroic work.

Okay. April.

Q Josh, I want to follow up on that and some other questions. The White House watched every night with Ferguson and saw the military equipment, saw the tear gas. And then months later, the next year, you had Baltimore. Was Baltimore more the impetus for the President to say now it's time for us to go on and ban some of these military -- pieces of military equipment -- when it comes to these riots that are an outgrowth of killings of -- police-involved killings of black males?

MR. EARNEST: No, this is a process that had started several months ago.

Q Well, why not then, instead of now, after Baltimore? It could -- there was a robust debate, as you like to say, about that right after Ferguson.

MR. EARNEST: Because this was an intensive process where the members of the task force took very seriously their responsibilities to meet with people all across the country to talk about these issues. There were a number of working group sessions that were convened around the country to take a look at these issues, and they took their work very seriously and they didn't want to rush something through. They actually wanted to put together in a timely fashion a very solid set of recommendations that could be helpful to law enforcement organizations across the country. And we're hopeful -- and I think we've seen early indications are that local law enforcement agencies take these recommendations seriously. And that's what we want them to do.

Q I'm going to ask you something that's not -- that has not happened yet and it's not a hypothetical, but it's real.

MR. EARNEST: But it hasn't happened yet? (Laughter.)

Q Exactly.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q But, unfortunately, we've seen in the last year or so a lot of killings by police -- police-involved killings of African American men. And, unfortunately, there's a pattern, and it could happen again. Do you believe, does this White House believe that this ban will help take down the temperature, lessen the tension when it comes to communities and police when a situation like this happens in the near future?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we're certainly hopeful that this is going to -- this will have the effect of reducing violence, regardless of who those victims are. And we've talked a lot about how these recommendations, if properly implemented, could have the effect of building trust in some of these communities. And that will have an effect, not just on the safety and well-being of those individuals who live in the communities, it will also have an impact on the safety and well-being of the police officers who are trying to fight crime in these communities. And that's ultimately the result that we'd like to see.

Q Next question on another subject, Amtrak. We understand that there are new rules coming out. Could you talk to us about the rules, particularly if these new rules -- particularly as we've seen a cut in Amtrak funding on the Hill? How do you marry that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there have been some rules that were announced over the weekend by the Federal Railroad Administration, and they included the use of automatic train control by all Amtrak trains in the Northeast Corridor. They also -- those rules also required Amtrak to assess the risk at every curve along the Northeast Corridor -- and there are many of them for anybody who has taken the train all the way to Boston. So that would be some important work that needs to get done.

And then, also, is just the practical recommendation that -- or requirement that Amtrak increase its wayside signage that alerts engineers and conductors of the maximum authorized speed throughout the Northeast Corridor. So there are some common-sense,

practical steps that Amtrak is now being required to take at the direction of the Federal Railroad Administration.

I think it also merits pointing out that Amtrak did announce last week their intent to meet the December 31st deadline for installation and use of positive train control across the Northeast Corridor -- across the system in the Northeast Corridor. That's a more advanced system that can prevent or at least could contribute to preventing crashes like the one that we saw last week.

Q Is there irony in the fact that you have this horrific crash, deadly crash, and then there was a chance to increase funding and it's cut?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, the President has been a long-time advocate for investments in our infrastructure. And I do think it is too early to say what sort of funding needs to be assessed in order to prevent a crash exactly like the one that we saw occurred last week, simply because it's not exactly clear what caused the crash that occurred last week. But what the President has said -- and I've had the opportunity to say this, too -- that setting aside the tragic incident from last week, Congress needs to accept responsibility for properly funding our infrastructure. That would be good for our economy. It certainly would be good, as a general matter, for passenger safety. And there's no good excuse for Republicans continuing to block it, particularly when you consider that these kinds of investments in the past have been considered a bipartisan priority.

Q Last question on another subject. You're talking about ISIL in Iraq, and we're hearing more about activities in Africa when it comes to ISIL and we're also hearing about other terror groups in Africa. Is there a concern about the President's trip in July as it relates to increased noise or increased news about terrorist activity in Africa?

MR. EARNEST: You mean would -- are you essentially asking if the President's trip would --

Q Is there concern about his trip to Kenya, a place that has -- he's not going to the place where the terrorist activity happened, but is there concern about the President now with more information about ISIL, Boko Haram in that area?

MR. EARNEST: I see. Are you asking a question about the President's safety?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. I am confident that the necessary steps will be taken to ensure that the President can travel safely to Africa.

Q So the trip is definitely still on?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any scheduling changes to announce at this point.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. You mentioned that the President is always engaged in conversations about tweaks that may apply to strategy, especially as it relates to ISIS. Is there robust consideration in that conversation about increased troop levels in Iraq, for example?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, the President has made very clear that he does not envision a scenario where we commit hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to a sustained ground combat operation inside of Iraq. That would clearly not be in the best interests of the United States and it's not something that the President would consider. And incidentally, it's also not something that the President's military advisors have recommended at this point.

Q Ten thousand -- we've heard that figure used before, say, that we would like to have seen what might have happened if say, 10,000 were left there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's been speculation. And --

Q -- to consider that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to get into the hypothetical thing. But what I will do is I will tell you exactly what the President's view is on this -- that committing hundreds of thousands of U.S. ground troops to Iraq on a sustained ground combat operation is not in the best interests of the United States and is not something that the President will consider. And incidentally, it's not something that his military leaders have recommended.

Q But they have mentioned, say, 10,000 might make a difference. Does the White House believe it would make no difference to, say, have 10,000 more troops on the ground in Iraq?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to speculate on future recommendations that the President may receive from his military officials. But I'll just -- for the mathematicians out there, I'll highlight the significant difference between 150,000 U.S. troops and 10,000.

Q Okay. Let me ask you about sort of the back-and-forth with Senator Warren. Would it be in the White House's interests to maybe have Jeff over from NEC play devil's advocate for some of the suggestions that are coming from the Warren camp about some of the problems with TPP? Would that be useful for the American people?

MR. EARNEST: I guess I don't understand what you're asking.

Q Have Jeff from the National Economic Council come over and maybe --

MR. EARNEST: Come over where?

Q Here. Answer some questions about some of the considerations and some of the questions that the American people have about TPP, and some of the questions that, frankly, Senator Warren has raised.

MR. EARNEST: I think the President answered this question very directly himself when he was asked about it last week at Camp David. And I've obviously entertained a number of your questions today. But if you're interested in having a conversation with Mr. Zients, we'll see what we can set up.

Bill.

Q You talked about Ramadi today several times. You seem to be saying, well, you win some, you lose some, and it goes on. And at this stage of the game, isn't that a little silly when Iraqi troops have cut and run, and there are a minimum of U.S. troops advising and there's no real prospect for improvement?

MR. EARNEST: Bill, what I think is a little silly is for us to spend a whole lot of time agonizing over the fall of Kobani, and then after Kurdish security forces, with the backing of American coalition fighters, retake that village, drive ISIL forces out, and everybody decides that that's not really a big deal either.

I guess the thing is we have to sort of decide what our approach to these issues is going to be. Are we going to light our hair on fire every time that there is a setback in the campaign against ISIL? Or are we going to take very seriously our responsibility to evaluate those areas where we succeed and evaluate where steps are necessary for us to change our strategy when we've sustained setbacks.

Q I guess my point is this is coming a little late in the game, don't you think?

MR. EARNEST: In what respect?

Q I mean, considering the amount of blood and treasure already expended.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Bill, the amount of blood and treasure that's already been expended is a microscopic fraction of the blood and treasure that was committed under the previous administration to this effort. And what we have seen is the effective use of American military airpower and the effective use of our training expertise to equip Iraqi security forces and Kurdish security forces to enjoy areas of significant progress. And whether it's retaking Kobani, or more recently, retaking Tikrit, or preventing a genocide at Mt. Sinjar, or retaking the critical infrastructure around the Mosul Dam, those are areas of progress and where we have enjoyed success because of the strategy that the President laid out.

But there have been areas where we have sustained setbacks. And what we have continued to focus on is making sure that the Prime Minister of Iraq is going to unite that country to counter that threat that they face from ISIL, both in terms of the way that he governs that country, but also in terms of the way that they deploy security forces.

And given the fact that the Shia Prime Minister of Iraq enjoys the unanimous support of the Sunni Anbar Provincial Council is an indication that the leaders of that country continue to be committed and dedicated to this multi-sectarian principle that we believe is integral to their success. It doesn't mean that they're going to enjoy success overnight,

but it does mean that they're going to continue to make progress, and they're going to have the full support of the United States and our 60 coalition partners as they undertake that effort.

Q Another subject -- hostage policy review. It's been underway since November. Is it complete or almost complete?

MR. EARNEST: Well, they've made substantial progress in conducting that review. You know that there are some interim proposals that have been floated already by the review team. You know that there are a number of conversations that have already taken place by national security officials and some of the families that have gone through the painful hostage ordeal.

I don't have any announcements to make about the completing of that review, but I can point out that they've made some progress and that they are nearing completion of that process.

Q Does that progress include an acknowledgement that the U.S. will no longer threaten families, or the question of prosecution for ransom?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll let the review process work its way through. But we have made clear that our policy about not paying ransom to hostage-takers, to terrorists, not making concessions to them is a policy that's not going to change -- it is not part of the ongoing policy review.

Q Right, but the question of prosecution or the threats of prosecution to families who have hostages currently -- you suggested, in fact, from this lectern that wouldn't necessarily be enforced. Is that something that the review has basically decided?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to get ahead of where the review is. But part of the review is the manner and degree to which the federal government and the national security apparatus communicates with the families of those who are being held hostage. And that is the subject of review by this policy team. But I'm going to reserve judgment until they have an opportunity to make their announcement.

Dave.

Q Thanks, Josh. The Center for American Progress came out with a report today recommending that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms be merged under the FBI to better enforce gun laws. Is that a good idea?

MR. EARNEST: Dave, I haven't seen the specific report. Obviously, the administration believes strongly in the mission of the ATF. They do important work, they have an important responsibility to provide for the public safety of the American people. There obviously is more that we'd like to see Congress do to support those efforts. And we believe that the ATF could be even more effective if they were getting the proper level of support and funding from the United States Congress. But I'm hesitant to pass judgment on the report given that I haven't had a chance to take a look at it.

Q If I could provide one detail, they say that, for example, you just mentioned that the ATF is, they say, deliberately kept ineffective by the gun lobby working in conjunction with Republican lawmakers to bring about the result you just mentioned. Does the President subscribe to that view? And does he feel that this proposal might bring about a better result from his end?

MR. EARNEST: I hadn't asked him that direct question, but that certainly is consistent with the kinds of cynical, political tactics that we've seen Republicans use in the past when it comes to other things. But again, I haven't taken a look at the report to pass final judgment on it. Okay?

Olivier, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. I hope you'll humor me and take two of them. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I'll give you the last two.

Q Thank you. So you've urged us not to light our hair on fire in response to individual setbacks, not get overexcited about individual successes in this strategy, which I guess raises the question of what are the metrics for long-term success? How are you guys -- when you look at this strategy, how can we tell if it's working if every individual success is just an individual success and every individual setback can't be judged -- you can't just react to the policy, how do you guys decide that things are working?

MR. EARNEST: I think it's an entirely fair question. Let me tell you -- there are a couple of different ways for us to evaluate this. The first is continuing to maintain the support of the 60 members of our coalition is one indication of our success. If we've been able to successfully persuade 60 other countries around the globe that they should continue to contribute to this effort, that would be an indication that there's strong international support for the progress that we're making.

The second thing is that our strategy is predicated on the multi-sectarian governance of Iraq's political leaders. And while we cannot make decisions for them about how they govern that country, our success is dependent upon the nation of Iraq governing that country in a way that unites the country so that they can face down the stuff that they face from ISIL.

As a more practical matter, I guess, I think the other metric that I would point you to is something that the Department of Defense has cited when it comes to the amount of territory that was -- where ISIL had previously operated but now no longer can safely operate. And I think the latest tally I've heard is between 20 percent and 25 percent of territory where ISIL previously operated they can no longer safely do so. And that is an indication -- and again, I think that's consistent with the dynamic that we've been talking about here, which is that there is measurable progress in terms of pushing back ISIL.

But that's not going to be a short-term proposition. It's been marked by periods of setback. But it is an indication that the strategy that the President has laid out and has been implemented so far has been effective in pushing back ISIL.

Q And swinging somewhat abruptly to another theater, how concerned is the President about the prospects for a springtime Russian or Russian-backed offensive in Ukraine?

MR. EARNEST: We've been concerned for some time that the Russian government continues to violate the terms of the Minsk Agreement that they signed on to. That's a message that we've been disappointed by their failure to live up to their commitments. And it's a message that's been delivered directly by the Secretary of State to President Putin. That's also a message that we've delivered publicly on a number of occasions.

And we continue to be concerned about the flow of materiel across the border between Russia and Ukraine. We continue to be concerned about reports that Russian troops are continuing to move across the border, and that they're fighting in support of the separatists in eastern Ukraine. That's a dynamic that has put innocent civilians in danger, and it's resulted in the death of many member of the Ukrainian military.

So the United States and our partners in Europe do continue to be concerned about Russia's destabilizing activity in Ukraine. And we are closely monitoring that situation to detect evidence of escalation.

But what's also true is that the United States and our European partners are resolute about the set of sanctions that have been imposed against Russia. And we have seen that those sanctions have imposed an economic cost on the government for their destabilizing activities in Ukraine. And I'm confident this will be the subject of continued conversation when the President travels to Germany in the G7 meeting at the beginning of next month.

Q I guess I was asking about that evidence of escalation and whether you have seen recent evidence of escalation -- how concerned you are about this sort of narrowish window for a possible offensive either backed by the Russians or led by the Russians?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any security analysis to share with you from here about evidence of escalation. But we continue to be aware of Russia's consistent practice that does continue of moving materiel across the border, of finding creative ways to support the Russian-backed separatists in a way that has led to more bloodshed both by civilians in Ukraine, but also by members of the Ukrainian military.

Thanks, everybody. Have a good one.

END

2:39 P.M. EDT