

Home • Briefing Room • Press Briefings

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 02, 2015

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 3/2/15

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:46 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Monday. I hope you had a restful weekend. March certainly strolled in like a lion; hopefully the lamb is going to appear here sometime soon, I hope.

Jim, do you want to get us started with questions today?

Q Sure. Thanks, Josh. I wondered if the President had a chance to watch Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to AIPAC and if you all have a reaction.

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe that he did. But what I can say is that the reaction here is I think as was appropriately characterized in the remarks that were delivered by Ambassador Power prior to the Prime Minister's remarks and will be followed up by the remarks from the National Security Advisor this evening, which is that the relationship between the United States and Israel is one that has been strong for generations for a variety of reasons. It has been strengthened under the leadership of this President, and it is a relationship that is enduring not just because of our shared national security interests, but also because of the deep cultural ties that we have between our people.

We share values. We share a system of government. And that is indicative of all that we have in common. And certainly the President has pursued policies that have been interested in strengthening that relationship even further. And I think whether you talk about the United States' strong military support for Israel or the way the United States has routinely and consistently stood up for Israel in a variety of diplomatic fora even when no one else would, the relationship between the United States and Israel is an important one and one that has been strengthened under this President's leadership.

Q Josh, over the past several weeks, the Prime Minister's address to Congress has been described by the administration as political, as destructive to the Israeli-U.S. relationship, as a breach in protocol. Yesterday, Secretary Kerry said that Prime Minister Netanyahu was welcome to speak in the United States. Why the change in tone? Why not adopt that tone from the beginning and perhaps avoid a whole tense episode in U.S.-Israeli relations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I think the point of what Secretary Kerry was discussing is something that you've heard me say from here many times, which is that as the Prime Minister of Israel, he gets to set his own schedule and he gets to take the actions that he believes are consistent with his own objectives, whatever they may be. And that has been true from the beginning and this has been true even in other situations when we've had differences of opinion with the Israeli leadership even on entirely different topics.

For example, this past summer, we repeatedly reaffirmed the right of the Israelis to take steps related to their security that they believed were in their best interests in terms of confronting extremists in Gaza. There were times where the United States expressed concerns about that strategy and, in some cases, in the way that it was implemented. But at each turn, we reaffirmed the right of the Israeli political leadership to make decisions about what they believe is necessary to defend their country. This is consistent with our view that it's the Prime Minister of Israel who's able to determine his own schedule and take the steps that he believes are necessary to communicate or to represent his country.

We, however, have indicated that it's important that any steps that anybody takes should not be construed as subjecting the relationship between the United States and Israel to partisan politics, that if we reduce the relationship between our two countries to just a relationship between two political parties, that's going to have a



LATEST BLOG POSTS

March 17, 2015 10:30 AM EDT

What They're Saying: People From Across the Country Call on America to Lead On Trade

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) gives America the greatest opportunity to level the playing field for American workers. That's why people from every region are backing the President's trade policy.

March 17, 2015 10:17 AM EDT

The First Lady's Travel Journal: A Journey That Began Decades Ago

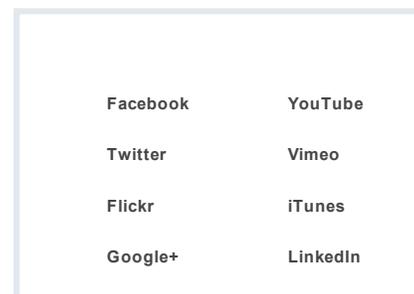
The First Lady travels to Japan and Cambodia and wants young people like you across America to join me!

March 16, 2015 3:57 PM EDT

First Lady Michelle Obama: Let's Ensure That Every Girl Can Learn

First Lady Michelle Obama writes in the Wall Street Journal on the Let Girls Learn initiative and our efforts to expand access to education for girls around the world.

VIEW ALL RELATED BLOG POSTS



negative impact on the relationship between our two countries. And ultimately that has been something that we have -- as you point out -- expressed some concerns about in the past.

Q Does the President agree with the Prime Minister's assessment that the U.S. worries about its security whereas Israel worries about its own survival, and therefore, the view of Iran might be different in both places?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly would allow that the differences -- that there are differences of perspective when it comes to a variety of national security issues. And there's no doubt about that. What the President has put foremost in his mind when confronting a wide range of threats across the globe is the U.S. national security interests. That's at the top of the list.

Now, because of our strong ties to Israel, because they are our closest ally in a very volatile region, because of the deep values that we share, it's not at all uncommon for those interests to overlap. In many cases, and I would say even in the vast majority of cases, our priorities are consistent with the priorities that are articulated by Israel's political leadership.

The best example I can give you is actually when it comes to Iran and their nuclear program. The President has made clear that it's the policy of the United States that Iran will never acquire a nuclear weapon. This is a value and a goal that is shared by the Israeli Prime Minister.

Q On another subject, Secretary Kerry met with Foreign Minister Lavrov today. What was the purpose of that? It didn't seem to go very well, so I'm curious, in the aftermath of reports of breaches in the Minsk accord and the murder in Moscow last week, what was the purpose of that meeting?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have not gotten a specific readout of that meeting, so I'd refer you to the State Department for that. But I can tell you that we have -- that this administration has a number of diplomatic engagements over the course of this week to continue to explore the situation in Ukraine and to express our concerns about the continued efforts of Russia and the separatists that they back to flout the agreement that they signed just a couple of weeks ago in Minsk.

We continue to see that, while there are some preliminary reports of some heavy weapons being withdrawn, that there continue to be efforts by the separatists and the Russians to prevent the OSCE monitors from evaluating exactly where those weapons are being withdrawn to.

And it's important to remind everybody, including those who signed the agreement, apparently, that Russia and the separatists are supposed to allow the OSCE monitors full and unfettered access to areas of conflict. And that is not something that the Russian-backed separatists have followed through on, and that's a source of concern not just here in the United States but by the other parties that have signed on to that agreement.

A couple of other points. Obviously, over the weekend you saw that the Vice President had a telephone conversation with the Ukrainian President. You mentioned already that Secretary Kerry met with his Russian counterpart in Geneva today. And I believe this was announced at the end of last week, but a week from today, the President will be hosting here at the White House European Council President Donald Tusk, and that will also be an opportunity for us to discuss some of these issues with him as well.

Julia.

Q Was the President disappointed on Friday night to have to sign a bill funding for the Department of Homeland Security for just another week? And what is he doing in this week to ensure that Congress will pass a long-term funding bill? Is he reaching out at all?

MR. EARNEST: The President certainly was disappointed to have to sign that one-week extension. That's bad policy, and it reflected a bad choice by the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives. The fact is, the House should have acted -- as the Senate did -- in bipartisan fashion to pass a full year funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security that did not include any politically motivated riders.

So the fact that the President had to sign a seven-day extension doesn't just reflect a bad decision made by the Republican leadership in the House, it reflects the failed leadership of the Republican leadership in the House. And we are hopeful that Republican leaders will do what they should have done last week, which is allow the House of Representatives to vote on a clean, full year funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security. And the reason for them to do so is that it is clearly in the best interest of the American people for the Department of Homeland Security to get funding and certainty around their funding levels.

It also is a good thing to do because we know it will pass with bipartisan support. All of the hard work on this has been done at the end of last year; that Democrats and Republicans sat down together and negotiated the appropriate spending levels in that bill to make sure that all of the important programs at the Department of Homeland Security were funded at the appropriate level. So whether it's cybersecurity, or border security, or port security, funding for the TSA, funding for the Secret Service, all of those funding levels represent policy choices that required bipartisan compromise and cooperation. And that hard work was done. That agreement was hammered out and it passed through the Senate with bipartisan support. We're hopeful it will do the same in the House this week.

Q Sure, but on outreach, I mean, I know on Friday we saw that the President reached out to Democratic leadership. Is he changing his strategy at all this week? Is he speaking to Speaker Boehner? Is there anything he is doing to reach out to the other side of the aisle on this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any specific phone calls to read out to you, but I can tell you that so much of this dispute has been a dispute between the Republican leadership in the Senate and a Republican leader in the House. And the irony is, is that the leaders -- those two Republican leaders signed an op-ed the day after the election, touting the new Republican majority in the Congress, it was headlined, "Now we can get Congress going." And, unfortunately, over the last couple of months, we've seen exactly the opposite. And hopefully, though, that cooler heads will prevail and a smarter decision for the country will be made and the House of Representatives will be allowed to vote on and pass a full year funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security.

Q On the police task force, recommendations were announced today. Advocates are applauding this, but say that they want to see how it plays out. How can the federal government tell local law enforcement how they should implement these changes, especially if they don't put money behind it in the form of grants? Does the President have any plans to back up these recommendations with funding?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a good question, Julia. I can tell you that over the course of the last couple of months this policing task force that represents a variety of perspectives on law enforcement has held public hearings across the country. They've taken testimony from more than 100 witnesses just in the space of two months. I think that reflects a seriousness of purpose with which these dedicated professionals have taken on this task.

We're certainly appreciative of their work. They're going to remain on the job for another 30 days as the President and other members of his administration evaluate their report, and that will give them ample time to conduct any follow-up if needed.

There are several things that the President, however, is doing right away. The first is he is directing all federal law enforcement agencies to carefully review the task force report so that if there are any recommendations that are applicable to federal law enforcement officers, that they can be implemented right away. The second thing that he is going to do is ask the Department of Justice to examine what sort of public-private partnerships could be formed to advance the goals that are outlined in the report.

And then, finally, as it goes to your specific question, the President has asked the Community Oriented Policing Services office at the Department of Justice to take responsibility for advancing the work of the task force, including prioritizing grant funding to law enforcement agencies that meet appropriate benchmarks that are related to these recommendations.

So to the extent that there is already funding in the pipeline to implement some of these proposals, the President wants to get that funding expedited, and at a minimum prioritized. And ultimately what we have here are a collection of best practices and recommendations from experts, and they will be passed on to law enforcement organizations across the country. What we know about these law enforcement organizations is that, by and large, they are just as committed as the administration is to trying to strike the right balance to -- well, in terms of trying to build trust with the communities that they serve and protect. The reason for that is it will allow them to be more effective as they do their job, but also allow their officers to do that job more safely.

And so this will continue to be a priority of the administration. The Department of Justice will principally have the role of taking it from here and making sure that it gets implemented not just among federal law enforcement officers, but also in communities across the country.

Okay. Michelle.

Q On the DHS issue, last week you said that if the President felt like he needed to call Speaker Boehner or sit down with somebody on the Republican side, that he would do that. So as this got down to the wire, did he feel that it was not necessary? And if not, why?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think principally because it was clear to everyone who was looking, Democrats and Republicans, that allowing the Department of Homeland Security to lapse their funding would be bad for the national security of the United States. It certainly would not be a good outcome for the American people. And the other thing that was also clear is that there was strong bipartisan support in the Senate for passing a full-year budget for the Department of Homeland Security.

I notice that the House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy was on a program over the weekend talking about this proposal, and he talked about how 57 percent of the United States Senate was supportive of the Collins amendment. These are the provisions that would undermine the President's ability to implement his executive actions to reform our broken immigration system. Well, by that measure, there are actually 68 percent of the United States Senate that supports a clean, full-year funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security -- that essentially supports taking politics out of the equation for once and funding the Department of Homeland Security for the remainder of the year.

Coincidentally, there were also 68 Democrats and Republicans in the last Senate who supported common-sense, compromise immigration reform legislation -- something that was also blocked by House Republicans.

So if we're going to evaluate things on that metric, we certainly would welcome the opportunity to do that. And that would result in the House even considering and allowing a vote on legislation to fund the Department of Homeland Security and to reform our broken immigration system.

Q So when it looked clear that the House was not going to do that, what the Senate did, did the President feel like his input -- if it was going to be directly to Speaker Boehner -- wouldn't really make any difference?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President felt like it was clear what the choice was for the Republican leadership. And ultimately that is because there have been previous discussions between the President and Republican -- and congressional leaders about the importance of funding the Department of Homeland Security. The Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, had spent an enormous amount of time over the last several weeks working with Democrats and Republicans to make sure they understood that funding the Department of Homeland Security for this year needed to be a priority.

And so, again, ultimately what the House should do is exactly what the Senate did, which is to allow a vote on a clean, full year funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security. There's strong bipartisan support for this legislation, and we hope it will pass. They should have done it last week. And the fact that the President had to sign a seven-day extension does reflect an abject failure of the leadership in the House. But they have an opportunity to address that shortcoming by allowing this full year funding bill to go to the floor this week.

Q So given what it looked like going in to the House starting to vote on what was then a three-week measure, was this outcome worse or better than what the President expected to happen?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President's expectation and I think the American people's expectation is that members of Congress need to do their job. And the most important job that they have, arguably, or at least the most important power that they have is the power of the purse and to ensure that government priorities are funded. And certainly the President takes very seriously his responsibility to protect the American people. I would expect and the President would expect that congressional Republicans would take seriously their responsibility to ensure that those efforts are properly funded, or at least funded at all.

So, again, it is the basic responsibility that House Republican leaders have this week. We saw the bipartisan support and the bipartisan vote for this legislation in the Senate. We'll see that bipartisan vote in the House as long as House Republican leaders will allow it to come up for a vote. Hopefully they'll do that before Friday.

Q And lastly, on Netanyahu. Today he laid out his purpose for coming to speak before Congress, which was to prevent Iran from ever getting a nuclear weapon. We heard Samantha Power at virtually the same time say that that will never happen. So is his speech then unnecessary?

MR. EARNEST: The Prime Minister's, you mean?

Q Yes. Is his coming here unnecessary if that's what he lays out his goal to be?

MR. EARNEST: Well, ultimately -- as I mentioned in response to Jim's question, ultimately it's the responsibility of the Israeli Prime Minister to determine his own schedule. And he can make his decisions about how it advances his agenda to speak wherever he wants. But the fact is the United States of America, under the leadership of the U.S. President, Barack Obama, has implemented a policy to ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon, because it is clearly in the national security interests of the United States for Iran not to obtain a nuclear weapon. And that is why we are pursuing an agreement that would verify that outcome.

Q Well, so then doesn't the administration see his coming here and giving this speech as unnecessary then?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, it is the responsibility of the Prime Minister to make his own decisions about where he wants to go. But what should not be lost on anybody is the strategy that this President has put in place to deal with Iran's nuclear program is consistent with achieving our goal of ensuring that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon.

If you'll indulge me for just a minute, let me explain why we believe that's the case in the context of these diplomatic negotiations.

Ultimately, these diplomatic negotiations or this diplomacy, these negotiations, will be resolved once we have succeeded in essentially shutting down four pathways to Iran acquiring the fissile material that's necessary to build a nuclear weapon. The first is to deal with the enrichment capacity at the Natanz facility. The second is to deal with the enrichment capacity at the Fordow facility. The third is to deal with the plutonium enrichment capacity at the heavy-water reactor that's currently under construction at Arak. And fourth, to ensure that Iran does not have the capacity to pursue a covert option at a facility that is not yet known to the international community.

And at each stage, we're going to ensure that we are going to set back Iran's progress on a nuclear weapon. And

that means essentially extending -- if we're successful in this effort -- and a diplomatic agreement will not be signed unless we are -- but if we're successful, we will essentially have extended the breakout period to one year. And we have already heard from experts who have said that the current breakout period is only two or three months. So we would substantially, with the successful completion of this agreement, roll back Iran's nuclear program in a way that would prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and then putting in place international monitors for an extended period of time to ensure that they're complying with this agreement.

And the point that the President has repeatedly made is that if they indicate that they are not willing to comply with an agreement -- once one is signed -- then we continue to have all of these options on the table. We can add additional sanctions to the mix if we feel like that would be successful. We'll even have a military option that continues to be available to the President.

So the pursuit if this agreement is one that does not foreclose additional steps in the future if necessary if Iran fails to live up to the agreement. And, unfortunately, what we have seen from critics of this agreement is a refusal to offer up any sort of alternative other than the military option. And that, I think, is an important part of the President's consideration as he formulates this strategy and this policy.

Nadia.

Q Let me try one more question on Iran. Does the administration believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to Congress tomorrow will complicate the negotiation at this stage or affect in any way or shape the chances of getting an agreement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it shouldn't. And it's because the international community is united as we continue to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the international community's concerns with Iran's nuclear program. As we've talked about quite a bit before, the reason that we have been able to compel Iran to the negotiating table is because the United States put in place a very stringent sanctions regime against Iran. And that has required the compliance and cooperation with the broader international community. There are a lot of other countries that rely much more heavily on importing Iranian oil than the United States does, and what that means is it means that there are other countries that are making substantial economic sacrifices to not purchase oil from Iran.

But it's because of that economic pressure and isolation that Iran has come to the negotiating table. And what we are hopeful that we can achieve in the context of these negotiations is to shutdown these four clear paths to the fissile material that's necessary to build a nuclear weapon. And if so -- and then put in place a monitoring regimen that would allow us to verify their compliance with the agreement, we would succeed in essentially ensuring that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon.

Q I don't want to keep beating a dead horse, but, I mean, the Prime Minister described the trip as historical and he said that he's coming to protect Israel's security. So obviously he does not see an eye-to-eye to what you say -

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you heard me say at the beginning of this briefing and as you heard Ambassador Power say in her remarks to AIPAC, the United States has made clear that our foreign policy goal is to ensure that Iran does obtain or acquire a nuclear weapon. That is our goal. It is my understanding that that's a goal that is shared by the Israeli political leadership as well.

So, again, I would allow the Israeli Prime Minister the prerogative of describing his trip however he would like. But what is clear is that the President is making decisions about our foreign policy with the foreign policy interests of the United States at the forefront. The good news for Prime Minister Netanyahu is that in almost every situation, what's good for the United States also happens to be good for Israel.

Q I want to get your reaction to this ad against Susan Rice, that she's been accused of having a blind spot for genocide by a Jewish rabbi. Just your reaction to that.

MR. EARNEST: It's a despicable attack and it's one that I was gratified to see be repudiated by the Israeli Prime Minister's office.

Jon.

Q Actually, the Israeli Prime Minister has articulated a different goal than what you did at this briefing. You said the United States is committed to a position where Iran will never acquire a nuclear weapon. What Bibi Netanyahu said today, and what he's been saying all along, is the goal is to make sure Iran doesn't get the capability to build a nuclear weapon. Which he says -- and is -- a different view. So what do you say about his view that the whole point of this effort is to ensure not just that Iran doesn't get a weapon, but that Iran doesn't get the ability to build a weapon?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I assume that the Prime Minister will have an opportunity to elaborate on what he means when he says the ability to acquire a nuclear weapon.

Q I can tell you what he means.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q He's referring to an enrichment capability. He's also talked about the fact that they have a ballistic missile program that would enable a delivery system for a nuclear weapon. That's what he's talking about. When Iran has the ability to produce highly enriched uranium -- that is the fuel to make a nuclear bomb -- he believes that's a threat to his real survival because it puts them on a path to building a bomb.

MR. EARNEST: And has he laid out a strategy for how to prevent them from -- how to accomplish the goal that he has laid out? I guess the point is -- you don't have to speak for him any longer. The point is he has not laid out that strategy. The President has laid out a clear strategy that we're working to achieve that would prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

And that is a clearly stated foreign policy goal, and it is a priority that this President has made because it's in the clear national security interest of the United States. It also happens to be in the national security interest of our closest ally in the region, Israel.

Q So is he correct, though, to say that your goal then is not to prevent Iran from getting the capability to build a bomb, it's to prevent them from getting a bomb? You acknowledge there's a difference there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, if he says that there's a difference there he's allowed to do that. The point that I'm making --

Q So you don't think there's a difference between those two positions?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess you could make the case that there is one. I'm happy for someone else to do that if they would like to. The point is that we believe the President has made a strategic decision about what he believes is clearly in the best interest of the United States, and it happens to be in the best interest of Israel.

No one else has laid out a strategy for how to accomplish what apparently the Prime Minister has laid out as his goal. He hasn't even laid out a strategy for how to accomplish his goal. And, by the way, I'm not even sure that the military option that some people considered to be an alternative to the President's strategy, would even accomplish his goal, because it would require not just a detailed destruction of Iran's infrastructure, but it also would require the removal of knowledge that Iran has already obtained.

So the fact is the goal that the President has set out that would ensure that -- or that is consistent with our national security imperatives here in this country is to ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon. And the best way for us to do this is at the negotiating table. Those negotiations are underway, even as we speak.

But the other thing that I have not mentioned so far in this briefing that's important for everybody to realize is it continues to be the case that our likelihood of success when it comes to reaching a deal in the context of these negotiations is only, at best, 50/50. There are difficult decisions that need to be made by the Iranian government in terms of their willingness to sign on to this agreement, and this President has made clear that he's not going to sign a bad deal.

Q So you've been saying the 50/50 thing. The President has used that for a long time now. We're getting down to the wire. The deadline is the end of this month. What's your sense? Has it gotten any more likely, any less likely?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think it's stayed about the same. And the reason for that is, while there has been progress that's been made in the context of the negotiations, there continued to be some significant gaps. But ultimately, all of this comes down to the likelihood of Iran's political leadership signing off on the deal. And that is something that is very difficult to ascertain from afar. And that is the biggest X factor that remains here, and it's one that makes us feel like, at best, our options of reaching an agreement are 50/50.

Q And finally, you know there's a move in Congress to say that if a deal is reached, that it should go before the United States Senate for approval, or not. And I understand the President would veto such a bill. Can you explain why Congress should not have a say in this? I mean, this is a major international agreement. Why are you opposed to allowing Congress to have a say in this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, we have made as much progress as we have so far in these negotiations because we've been able to work closely and successfully with Congress to pass and implement one of the toughest sanctions regime that's ever been put in place against any country. That has compelled Iran to the negotiating table.

But, ultimately, we can't put in place an additional hurdle for that agreement to overcome here at the 11th hour, that if the United States is going to sit at the table with our negotiating partners not just in Iran but with the rest of the international community, our P5-plus-1 partners, then we need to make sure that we can live up to our agreement.

So there is an important role for Congress to play. There has been on the front end in terms of getting us to this situation. That's why the administration has continued to carefully brief on a regular basis in detailed fashion, even in classified settings, the details and progress that are being made in these negotiations, because the

administration considers, frankly, Democrats and Republicans in Congress to be partners in this effort. And, ultimately, when it comes to offering up statutory sanctions relief, essentially providing significant relief from the congressionally passed sanctions -- that will require congressional action.

But the fact of the matter is, Jon, what we're envisioning as we work on this agreement is not offering significant sanctions relief at the beginning, that ultimately we're talking about a phased agreement where Iran will start to take some steps and the international community will start to offer some relief. And that is consistent with verifying that Iran is serious about living up to their end of the deal.

Justin. You look much closer than you usually are, so congratulations on your new seat.

Q Thank you. I wanted to ask about Orrin Hatch. He, in an interview with The New York Times over the weekend, said that the President's corporate tax reform proposal was, "pretty well dead" to him. And he said that neither Republicans, nor corporations would go for it because they'd essentially be paying taxes that they've already paid internationally. This has been something that obviously the President has outlined repeatedly as kind of a top priority for him, working with congressional Republicans -- to hear the top Senate Finance Committee Chairman come out pretty strongly against this plan, I'm wondering what your reaction is to it and where that leaves the President's efforts on this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, nobody in this building is surprised to hear that there is a senior Republican in the Congress indicating that he stands squarely with well-connected, wealthy corporations when it comes to the tax code. That's consistent with the kind of the strategy that we've seen Republicans try to advance for decades now. Republicans are squarely on the side of corporations and the President is squarely on the side of middle-class families.

And there is a different of opinion when it comes to this. But the President has put forward his own ideas about how he thinks that we can get this done. It's a pretty common-sense proposal where we can actually close some loopholes that only benefit those wealthy and well-connected corporations that apparently are close friends with Senator Hatch.

And we can use that revenue to invest in the kinds of projects that benefit everybody -- certainly will continue to benefit those corporations when they are landing at a new airport, or moving their goods on a modern rail infrastructure, or moving those goods on a modern superhighway. That's clearly and consistent with the interests of the business community, but more importantly, it's consistent with the interests of middle-class families in this country. It's going to create jobs in the short term. It's going to make sure that we have more economic growth over the longer term. And that's what the President is focused on.

And so it's not surprising to me that somebody who is focused on looking out for big business in Washington might have a difference of opinion when it comes to the President's tax policies.

Q Well, implicit in sort of that antagonism toward Senator Hatch, is this a concession? There's a plan that you guys have --

MR. EARNEST: He called our plan dead on arrival. I thought I was pretty nice to him in contrast.

Q Well, I mean, this is a plan that you've had for many years. And so I'm wondering if it doesn't seem to be getting a warm reception on the Hill, do you guys also see this as more of a signpost than anything that has a legitimate chance of passing in a Republican-controlled Congress?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there has been an effort to put some more details and to add some tweaks to this to try to be more specific and to try to be clearer about what our policy goals are. But, ultimately, those policy goals are about expanding economic growth and creating jobs for middle-class families. And this tax approach is consistent with that.

The truth is there are other Republicans who have had somewhat better things to say about this approach in general, where there are some Republicans who have indicated that this could be an area of compromise, even if they haven't whole-heartedly embraced our specific proposal.

And this is something that we're going to continue to talk about. It's going to require some compromise on both sides, as we've talked about quite a bit over the last couple of months. Ultimately, if we reach a tax reform agreement, it's going to include some things that the President doesn't like. It also will include some things that presumably congressional Republicans, particularly those like Senator Hatch that are close to wealthy corporations, they probably won't like either. But the question is whether or not we can actually try to find some common ground in the middle that would allow us to advance the interests of the American people.

One example of this, again, is a well-thought-out but robust investment in infrastructure in this country. That's something that would benefit everybody and surely that's something that both Democrats and Republicans could come together around. So we'll continue to see where this goes.

Q Bernie Sanders, maybe on the other side of the aisle up on Capitol Hill, has suggested that the White House

could raise as much as \$100 billion through using executive action to close corporate loopholes. If your plan is kind of running into resistance with Republicans on Capitol Hill, is that an idea that you guys would embrace towards sort of all those holes that you just outlined?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for any sort of possible executive actions along those lines, I'd refer you to the Treasury Department. But the President certainly has not indicated any reticence about using his executive authority to try to advance an agenda that benefits middle-class Americans. Now, I don't want to leave you with the impression that there is some imminent announcement -- there's not, at least that I know of.

Q Is it something under consideration? Have you guys been looking at the tax codes --

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has asked his team to examine the array of executive authorities that are available to him to try to make progress on his goal. So I'm not in a position to talk about any of those in any detail at this point, but the President is very interested in this avenue generally.

Tommy.

Q Thanks, Josh. I have three quick questions. First of all, I wanted to ask you about some comments that Senator John McCain made this morning on "Morning Joe." He said -- he was talking about ISIS, and he said he'd spoken to a leader of a Middle Eastern country last week who told him, I'm going back and telling the other Arab countries we have to develop our own plans, we cannot depend on the United States. Is that a strategic goal of the United States, is to get Middle Eastern countries to depend on us to fight ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Tommy, the President has made clear that a core component of our strategy to defeat and to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL is to build a broad international coalition of more than 60 countries. Many of them are countries from the region, and we value their support, we value their contribution to this broader effort. And by working together, we're confident that we can ultimately accomplish that goal.

Q Is that kind of what you want them to do, is to strike out on their own a little bit more in this fight?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President does believe that part of our strategy, at least when it comes to Iraq, is building up the capacity of Iraq's security forces and Kurdish security forces to take this fight on their own and to take responsibility for the security situation in their own country. Now, the President has been clear that the United States and our coalition partners will be there to assist with the training and equipping of those security forces, to even offer them advice where necessary. The President also is prepared and has on many occasions to great effect used coalition military airpower to back up their efforts on the ground. They have succeeded at some key points of rolling back ISIL's advances.

I can just give you a couple of examples that I had asked for here, that local forces in Iraq have undertaken significant offensive operations in Iraq against ISIL. They've done so with the support of the coalition. That's included efforts around the Mosul Dam and Rabia, and Mount Sinjar, which we talked about quite a bit; even places like Hasakah and Kisik Junction, that have gotten somewhat less attention in the media but have important strategic objectives associated with them. Kisik Junction, in particular, is a key supply route for ISIL to Mosul. So cutting off that junction was a successful effort by Iraqi security forces, and it was something that they undertook with the support of coalition military airpower. And that is an indication that this strategy of asking these local ground forces to take responsibility for the security situation in their own country has ultimately made important progress.

Q And on Prime Minister Netanyahu, I know lots has been made about the politization in the speech he's giving, but to what extent, if any, do you think it's helpful for the Prime Minister to take such a hard line, like skeptical line against the negotiations in terms of leverage at the bargaining table? In other words, Iran is saying, well, this guy is going to demand a better deal. Does that help the negotiation in any way?

MR. EARNEST: Again, as I mentioned I think in response to Nadia's question, I don't think that these comments will have much of an impact on this ultimate outcome. The President has made very clear what this negotiated agreement must result in, and that is shutting down these four pathways to a nuclear weapon for Iran. And that's the only way that we'll be able to reach an agreement. And that is the baseline, and that is something that Iran will have to make a decision about whether or not they're willing to agree to.

And again, the way that we will successfully complete these negotiations is not just by satisfying those concerns, but also putting in place a strict regime to verify Iran's compliance with the agreement.

Q And finally, do you know if the President is following the news of the shooting in LA of the homeless man, and if there's any reaction so far?

MR. EARNEST: No reaction that I'm aware of at this point. I know that this is something that obviously local authorities are devoting significant time to investigating.

Q Is he following the story, do you know ?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't talked to him about it.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Ed.

Q Josh, it sounds like one of the things Senator McCain was suggesting in his comments was that the heads of Arab states are warning him and others privately -- he may be wrong; we weren't in on those conversations -- but are warning him that they may develop their own nuclear weapons if they don't like this nuclear deal that's emerging with Iran. In your answers to Tommy were you suggesting the White House is okay with a potential nuclear arms race in the Mideast?

MR. EARNEST: No, Ed. In fact, I've indicated that one of our objectives here is to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. This is one of the concerns that we have about Iran's nuclear program, that if they were to acquire a nuclear weapon, it would likely set off a nuclear arms race in one of the most volatile regions of the world. So that wouldn't be good for the world. It certainly wouldn't be good for our closest ally in the region. But most importantly, it wouldn't be good for the United States of America.

Q And so given that and what you said earlier about how you think a nuclear deal with Iran would bring in inspectors and would be very tough on Iran, why did the head of the IAEA today come out and say that Iran is being very slow in their cooperation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, the fact is there were a lot of skeptics at the beginning of this effort when we put in place the Joint Plan of Action. So you'll recall this is essentially the interim agreement that went into effect a little over a year ago. And in the context of this interim agreement, the international community was able to roll back Iran's nuclear program, that we have in a verifiable way confirmed that they eliminated their stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

Q On that one point, you're saying, we verified that, right? The head of the IAEA today said, "The agency is not in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is for peaceful activities." That flies in the fact of what you just said?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, what we have confirmed is that Iran has lived up to their agreement as a part of the Joint Plan of Action. And that is confirmed based on the --

Q How do you confirm that? You confirmed that on your own? Because this is Iran's -- this is the U.N. nuclear watchdog saying they haven't been able to verify that. So can you explain how has the U.S. verified that without the U.N.?

MR. EARNEST: In the context of the Joint Plan of Action, our international inspectors have gotten very important access to Iran. It's essentially unprecedented access. And we have been able to confirm that they have complied with the Joint Plan of Action. And that is -- this is critically important because you'll recall that before the Joint Plan of Action was signed, even Prime Minister Netanyahu himself came out and said that it would be an historic mistake. But the fact is we've succeeded in rolling back Iran's nuclear program in the context of this agreement. We've succeeded in maintaining international pressure on Iran sufficient to compel them to come to the negotiating table and actually engage in serious negotiations with the international community to resolve once and for all the international community's concerns with their nuclear program. That is clearly in the best interests of the United States. It's clearly in the best interests of Israel. And it's why we would encourage people to not criticize these agreements before they're even signed.

Q And so to be clear, those were U.S. inspectors you're saying who got in? Because the U.N. says they haven't gotten in.

MR. EARNEST: What I'm suggesting is that the international community has verified that Iran lived up to --

Q But who, though? What agency?

MR. EARNEST: Through the -- the international community has verified that Iran has lived up to the commitments that they made in the context of the Joint Plan of Action.

Q But I'm sorry. I don't understand. How do you define international community when the head of the U.N. watchdog said today we haven't gotten in?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen those specific comments. But we can get back to you.

Q Okay, he's on camera saying that. Okay, last thing. I know there were reports over the weekend, the White House has dismissed it as rumors, that the President privately threatened the Israelis that if Israeli warplanes go in to try to attack Iran and try to eliminate their nuclear program, that the U.S. would somehow shoot down those

warplanes. I know you say that's not true. But the President has not taken the military option off the table with Iran. He traditionally does not with any country.

MR. EARNEST: Correct.

Q That you have to leave this option on the table.

MR. EARNEST: Correct.

Q Does Israel have the military option on the table? Does the U.S. believe is it right and proper for Israel to have the military option on the table to take out Iran's nuclear program?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ed, as I mentioned a couple of times in the context of this briefing, the Prime Minister of Israel is responsible for the national security of Israel. And it certainly would be a judgment for him to make about whether or not Iran -- whether or not Israel should use their military capability --

Q The United States would not interfere with that? You're saying it would be a decision by the Israeli Prime Minister and the U.S. would not interfere if Israel decided that they wanted to use military --

MR. EARNEST: Well, ultimately decisions about Israel's national security should be made by the Israeli Prime Minister. However, as the United States does when we're pursuing our national security interests, we consult closely with our allies, and we would expect our allies to do the same.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Josh. On the plane ride here for Benjamin Netanyahu, some reporters have said that aides said he has certain details of the talks with Iran, and that in fact he will use that information to share his concerns with Congress. And today, in Geneva, Secretary Kerry said the U.S. is concerned by those reports that selected details of the negotiations over those talks could be somehow revealed. Was that a warning to Benjamin Netanyahu? And how concerned is the administration about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, on a couple of occasions I've said from here that we've been concerned by the way that some officials in the Israeli government -- obviously they're unnamed officials in the Israeli government, at least that's how they appear in these media reports -- the way that they have used information that's been shared by the United States or other sources to try to cherry-pick some facts about those negotiations in a way that radically distorts the negotiating position of the United States and our international partners. That is counterproductive and certainly something that we are not appreciative of, to put it mildly.

I will say, that those reports come just a week or two -- I'm talking about the recent comments of the Israeli official on the plane -- come just a week or two after Israeli officials were also complaining in the media that they weren't being kept in the loop about the status of the negotiations. So that may raise some questions about the credibility of these sources.

The fact is, as I said at the time, that the United States has been providing our Israeli allies regular, detailed, classified briefings to give them the proper context about the progress that we're making in the context of these conversations. The release of that information would betray the trust between our allies and it certainly is inconsistent with the behavior of trusted allies. And that would be true even if these sources were to claim that they had obtained the information from somewhere else.

Q So given your comments and Secretary Kerry's comments earlier today, that concern extends to the speech tomorrow by Benjamin Netanyahu?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is true in any context is that the release of this information that was provided to Israel, our allies, in the context of regular, detailed, classified briefings, that releasing that information would betray the trust that exists between two allies. And that would be -- again, that would be true even if the Israelis were to claim that they had obtained that information from somewhere else.

Q Will the President watch the speech tomorrow?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't looked at the President's schedule for tomorrow. I doubt that he will spend his whole time watching the speech.

Q I'd like to ask you a couple quick things about the killing of Boris Nemtsov. The French Foreign Minister today called for an investigation. Does the President think -- does the administration believe that there's any hope for a thorough investigation in this case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, let me just say that the United States condemns the brutal murder of Boris Nemtsov. And we call upon the Russian government to conduct a prompt, impartial, and transparent investigation into the circumstances of his murder and ensure that those who were responsible for this vicious killing are brought to

justice.

Mr. Nemtsov was a tireless advocate for his country, an opponent of corruption, and an advocate for human rights and greater transparency. We offer our sincere condolences to Mr. Nemtsov's family, and to the Russian people who have lost one of the most dedicated and eloquent defenders of their rights.

Q You say "prompt, impartial." I'm not sure if I remember the third word --

MR. EARNEST: Transparent.

Q Transparent investigation. Do you believe there is any hope for that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll see. We'll see.

Q Some possibility of that based on? I'm just trying to figure out why you think that might be possible?

MR. EARNEST: Well, given the stature that Mr. Nemtsov had attained, primarily because of his advocacy for the rights of the Russian people, that if ever there were a situation in which a prompt, impartial, and transparent investigation were warranted, this is certainly it.

Q Gary Kasparov said yesterday -- obviously a former world chess champion, but also now a human rights advocate who lives in the United States, was asked if he would be going to the funeral of his friend and he said "I don't buy one-way tickets." And he talked about the chilling effect and the gloomy outlook for Russia's political opposition. Can you respond to those comments and what you think it means for anyone who in any way defies Vladimir Putin?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that the public demonstration that we saw on the streets of Moscow yesterday I think was a pretty powerful statement about the commitment of the Russian people to speak out and stand up for their rights. And, again, that's something for them to do, but that was a pretty powerful statement that they made that is probably more powerful than anything I can say from here on this issue.

Major.

Q If it's not prompt and partial and transparent -- the investigation -- then what?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I mentioned to Chris, we'll see. But obviously --

Q What I'm driving at is would this, and a determination made about that, be folded into consideration here and possibly in Europe about more sanctions? Would you tie this together with Ukraine?

MR. EARNEST: I think the simple answer to that question is that we have raised in a number of situations our concerns about the condition of human rights in Russia, and this is, sadly, only the latest chapter in a pretty long story.

Q But it's being viewed, as the demonstrations yesterday indicated, a singular event, and possibly a watershed moment in what is happening and what may in the future happen in Russia when it comes to everything that falls under the umbrella of human rights. I'm just curious if this case by itself warrants inclusion and a conversation about extra sanctions against Russia if it is not resolved to the United States government's satisfaction

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not prepared to say that from here, at least right now. But what we certainly are going to be focused on is making very clear our view that this brutal murder merits a prompt, impartial and transparent investigation.

Q You mentioned a few moments ago that what happened Friday on DHS is an example of failed House leadership. Are you suggesting there needs to be a new Speaker?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. That's the responsibility of members of the House of Representatives to decide who should be the leader of the House of Representatives. That's not a decision that I anticipate that the President or anybody else is going to weigh in on.

Q Then why use that particular language to describe what happened?

MR. EARNEST: Because there was a choice for those who are leading the House of Representatives about whether or not to put on the floor a short-term extension of the Department of Homeland Security. Funding the department in that way is something that the Secretary of Homeland Security has been very critical of. It inhibits the ability of the department to plan and make the kinds of investments that they believe are critical to our homeland security. That was one option that was on the table. The other option was full year funding bill that reflected bipartisan compromise about the appropriate levels of funding for that agency. And the Republican leadership made the wrong choice about which bill to put on the floor.

Q Right. But if you, on the one hand, hold up Republicans to the constitutional obligation and privilege of funding the government, but on the other hand, criticize them when it does that -- I mean, it is their prerogative to fund the government in whatever way they choose, though it may fall in disfavor with this White House. I mean, what's -- I guess what I'm getting at is, their sort of going through this very public process of trying to sort this out -- calling it failed leadership doesn't give them much space to do that.

MR. EARNEST: But this is not a tough one, Major. All the hard work has been done on this. As I mentioned earlier, at the end of last year Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill sat down, they worked with the administration to determine what are the appropriate levels of funding for the Department of Homeland Security and all of the responsibilities they have to execute. Whether it's funding the Secret Service, or cybersecurity, or protecting our ports, there are programs to go along with all of that. And it was the responsibility of members of Congress to work in bipartisan fashion to determine the appropriate level of funding for all those programs, and they did. They successfully completed that effort. And there is strong bipartisan support for it on Capitol Hill.

And when an initiative like that that has strong bipartisan support that's so critical to the homeland security of the United States of America, it does reflect failed leadership when it isn't put to a vote of the members of the House of Representatives, particularly when you know it's going to pass with bipartisan support.

So, again, passing a seven-day extension is certainly better than allowing the Department of Homeland Security to shut down. But when they had an opportunity to pass a full year funding bill without any extraneous, politically motivated riders, that's an opportunity they should have taken. And they should have taken it last week.

I guess the one silver lining in all of this is that on the Senate side they have already passed this bipartisan full year funding bill. And if it's put to a vote in the House this week, it will pass. Hopefully that's what will happen.

Q Two quick ones on Iran. To follow up on what Ed said, I want to make sure that -- and I get whatever your assessment is of who these international community inspectors were that were not members of the IAEA, first of all. And I'm just curious if it's possible in the administration's comprehension of the Joint Plan of Action that Iran could comply and the IAEA could say it hasn't seen everything it would like to see.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the comments of the IAEA chief, so it's hard for me to respond to what was just said.

Q Okay. And Jonathan raised the question of Congress having ultimate approval over whatever deal, if one is achieved. Isn't that baked into the cake, though? Because you can't remove the sanctions without Congress approving that. So at some point, Congress is going to have a role in rendering its verdict on this deal -- maybe not in total, but on the economic sanctions portion of it, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, that is correct. Now, here's what this is -- I tried to explain this in the context of answering Jon's question, so let me try one more time to make it a little bit more clear. What we envision in a scenario where a deal is reached with Iran is not taking the step of relaxing a large number of sanctions that would free up substantial sums of money to go to Iran. These are the sanctions that are affected by -- that were passed by Congress.

What we envision is an agreement that puts in place a series of steps where Iran takes some steps to demonstrate their compliance with the agreement, and a little bit of sanctions relief is offered, and that that is the process that continues until we can have a lot of confidence in Iran's willingness to live up to their end of the bargain. And once they do, then we will ultimately get to a place where we want to start to make changes to the statutory sanctions regime that was passed by Congress.

And, yes, removing those sanctions, as passed by Congress, would require an act of Congress and I do think could plausibly be interpreted as Congress signing off on the deal. Regardless of how you interpret it, the fact of the matter is Congress has been an important player in this effort from the beginning. They put in place the sanctions regime that compelled Iran to the negotiating table. The administration has, throughout these negotiations, kept members of Congress in both parties informed of exactly the status of the negotiations. And it's why as we move forward in this process -- ultimately it's closer to the end than the beginning -- that we're going to need Congress to weigh in on this. And again, the reason for that is that the administration does not envision a scenario where substantial sanctions relief is offered right away.

Q Substantial U.S. sanctions relief?

MR. EARNEST: Correct.

Q It could be sanctions relief from the other participants in the negotiations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, all of this is part of a coordinated effort with the broader international community. And so I wouldn't speculate about how this will be staged other than to say that the United States is going to expect Iran to demonstrate over a period of time compliance with this agreement before offering substantial sanctions relief, particularly on the scale of the significant sanctions that Congress passed and put in place.

JC.

Q A bit of a perceptive and historical question. Iran has been suffering under sanctions from the West since Jimmy Carter's administration, when the hostages were taken. What makes you feel -- or does the administration know that these sanctions really -- all of these sanctions, including right now -- are having any real effect on Iran and their disposition towards a nuclear exploration, say?

MR. EARNEST: Well, a couple of things about that, JC. The first I would say is that many economic analysts have observed that the Iranian economy has taken a substantial hit since the sanctions regime was put in place. That's everything from the value of their currency to the economic growth projections for the future. All those things took a negative hit once this sanctions regime was put in place, and those who understand these details a lot better than I do have characterized this sanctions regime as one of the most stringent sanctions regime that's been put in place against any country in history.

So what we also know is that Iran has decided to engage in a set of serious negotiations, that previously Iran had just used diplomatic negotiations as cover to try to make progress on their nuclear program. But in the context of these talks, we've actually succeeded in not just halting Iran's progress as it relates to their nuclear program but actually rolling it back in several key areas, including reducing and eliminating their stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

So I think the evidence indicates that this sanctions regime has been effective.

Fred.

Q Thanks, Josh. Last week I asked if there might be some type of informal meeting on the side with the two administration representatives. You said you weren't sure that they'd be there on the same day as the Prime Minister. They are today. Do you know if there will be -- and if not, why not? I mean, what would be the harm in some sort of meeting?

MR. EARNEST: Well, a couple of things on this, Fred. Obviously, the Prime Minister spoke shortly after Ambassador Power completed her remarks. But I know that they did not have a meeting on the sidelines there. Some of that I think is related to the fact that the Prime Minister was scheduled to speak shortly after she completed her remarks. There wasn't time for a meeting.

But I'll also point out that the administration has, as we've discussed quite a bit over the last several weeks, gone to great lengths to make sure that the administration was not perceived as interfering in an upcoming Israeli election. So, as you know, Prime Minister Netanyahu is on the ballot in just a couple of weeks, and the President and other senior members of the administration are not meeting with him on this trip to the U.S. because we want to avoid even the appearance of interfering in a democratic election in another country, in this case, Israel.

Q And on a separate issue, last week there were reports about the ATF is looking at banning a certain type of ammo for automatic weapons. The administration had advocated some type of ban or restriction on automatic weapons in 2013 that didn't go through Congress. Is this sort of an executive -- a way of doing executively what Congress wouldn't do previously?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Fred, I don't know that Congress has considered this specific provision. The President has long believed that there are some common-sense steps that we can take to -- and when I say "we," I mean the federal government, including Congress -- that we can take to ensure that we're protecting the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans while also taking some common-sense steps to prevent people who shouldn't have guns from getting them.

And in this case, we're talking about an ATF proposal that's being considered through its standard process and it's open now for public comment. For specific questions about that, I'd refer you to the ATF.

But it would be fair to say, as I mentioned, that we are looking at additional ways to protect our brave men and women in law enforcement and believe that this process is valuable for that reason alone. This seems to be an area where everyone should agree that if there are armor-piercing bullets available that can fit into easily concealed weapons, that it puts our law enforcement at considerably more risk.

So I'd put this in the category of common-sense steps that the government can take to protect the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans while also making sure that our law enforcement officers who are walking the beat every day can do their jobs just a little bit more safely.

Cheryl, I'll give you the last one.

Q Okay, thanks. A number of groups today sent a letter to the White House, a new letter but it's an old issue, asking the President to issue an executive order that would require government or federal contractors to disclose political contributions. Would the President be open to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is an issue that we have talked about at some length, as you know. I don't have any

3/17/2015

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 3/2/15 | The White House

news to make on this particular issue, but I know that there are a number of advocates out there who do believe that this is one way that we could try to introduce some greater transparency into our political system, particularly when it comes to political campaign contributions.

But at this point, I don't have any news on that.

Thanks, everybody. Have a good Monday.

END

1:55 P.M. EST