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Barack Obama

On Iraq and Ukraine



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Good afternoon, everybody. I want to say a few words on a number of topics and take a few questions before the long Labor Day weekend.

First, beginning with the number one thing most Americans care about -- the economy. This morning, we found out that our economy actually grew at a stronger clip in the 2nd quarter than we originally thought. Companies are investing. Consumers are spending. Over the past four and a half years, our businesses have now created nearly 10 million new jobs. So there are reasons to feel good about the direction we're headed.

But as everybody knows, there's a lot more that we should be doing to make sure that all Americans benefit from the progress that we've made. And I'm going to be pushing Congress hard on this when they return next week.

Second, in Iraq, our dedicated pilots and crews continue to carry out the targeted strikes that I authorized to protect Americans there and to address the humanitarian situation on the ground.

As Commander-in-Chief, I will always do what is necessary to protect the American people and defend against evolving threats to our homeland. Because of our strikes, the terrorists of ISIL are losing arms and equipment. In some areas, Iraqi government and Kurdish forces have begun to push them back.

And we continue to be proud and grateful to our extraordinary personnel serving in this mission.



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Now, ISIL poses an immediate threat to the people of Iraq and to people throughout the region. And that's why our military action in Iraq has to be part of a broader, comprehensive strategy to protect our people and to support our partners who are taking the fight to ISIL. And that starts with Iraq's leaders building on the progress that they've made so far and forming an inclusive government that will unite their country and strengthen their security forces to confront ISIL.

Any successful strategy, though, also needs strong regional partners. I'm encouraged so far that countries in the region -- countries that don't always agree on many things -- increasingly recognize the primacy of the threat that ISIL poses to all of them. And I've asked Secretary Kerry to travel to the region to continue to build the coalition that's needed to meet this threat. As I've said, rooting out a cancer like ISIL will not be quick or easy, but I'm confident that we can -- and we will -- working closely with our allies and our partners.

For our part, I've directed Secretary Hagel and our Joint Chiefs of Staff to prepare a range of options. I'll be meeting with my National Security Council again this evening as we continue to develop that strategy. And I've been consulting with members of Congress and I'll continue to do so in the days ahead.

Finally, I just spoke with Chancellor Merkel of Germany on the situation in Ukraine. We agree -- if there was ever any doubt -- that Russia is responsible for the violence in eastern Ukraine. The violence is encouraged by Russia. The separatists are trained by Russia. They are armed by Russia. They are funded by Russia. Russia has deliberately and repeatedly violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. And the new images of Russian forces inside Ukraine make that plain for the world to see. This comes as Ukrainian forces are making progress against the separatists.

As a result of the actions Russia has already taken, and the major sanctions we've imposed with our European and international partners, Russia is already more isolated than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Capital is fleeing. Investors are increasingly staying out. Its economy is in decline. And this ongoing Russian incursion into Ukraine will only bring more costs and consequences for Russia.

Next week, I'll be in Europe to coordinate with our closest allies and partners. In Estonia, I will reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the defense of our NATO allies.

At the NATO Summit in the United Kingdom, we'll focus on the additional steps we can take to ensure the Alliance remains prepared for any challenge. Our meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission will be another opportunity for our alliance to continue our partnership with Ukraine. And I look forward to reaffirming the unwavering commitment of the United States to Ukraine and its people when I welcome President Poroshenko to the White House next month.



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So with that, I'm going to take a few questions. And I'm going to start with somebody who I guess is now a big cheese -- he's moved on. But I understand this is going to be his last chance to ask me a question in the press room. So I want to congratulate Chuck Todd and give him first dibs.

Q: I'm glad you said "in the press room." Let me start with Syria. The decision that you have to make between -- first of all, is it a "if" or "when" situation about going after ISIL in Syria? Can you defeat ISIL or ISIS without going after them in Syria? And then how do you prioritize? You have said that Assad has lost legitimacy to lead. Defeating ISIS could help Assad keep power. Talk about how you prioritize those two pieces of your foreign policy.

President Obama: Well, first of all, I want to make sure everybody is clear on what we're doing now, because it is limited. Our focus right now is to protect American personnel on the ground in Iraq; to protect our embassy, to protect our consulates, to make sure that critical infrastructure that could adversely affect our personnel is protected.

Where we see an opportunity that allows us with very modest risk to help the humanitarian situation there as we did in Sinjar Mountain, we will take those opportunities after having consulted with Congress. But our core priority right now is just to make sure that our folks are safe and to do an effective assessment of Iraqi and Kurdish capabilities.

As I said I think in the last press conference, in order for us to be successful, we've got to have an Iraqi government that is unified and inclusive. So we are continuing to push them to get that job done. As soon as we have an Iraqi government in place, the likelihood of the Iraqi security forces being more effective in taking the fight to ISIL significantly increases. And the options that I'm asking for from the Joint Chiefs focuses primarily on making sure that ISIL is not overrunning Iraq.

What is true, though, is that the violence that's been taking place in Syria has obviously given ISIL a safe haven there in ungoverned spaces. And in order for us to degrade ISIL over the long term, we're going to have to build a regional strategy. Now, we're not going to do that alone. We're going to have to do that with other partners, and particularly Sunni partners, because part of the goal here is to make sure that Sunnis both in Syria and in Iraq feel as if they've got an investment in a government that actually functions, a government that can protect them, a government that makes sure that their families are safe from the barbaric acts that we've seen in ISIL. And right now, those structures are not in place.

And that's why the issue with respect to Syria is not simply a military issue, it's also a political issue. It's also an issue that involves all the Sunni states in the region and Sunni leadership recognizing that this cancer that has developed is one that they have to be just as invested in defeating as we are.



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And so to cut to the chase in terms of what may be your specific concerns, Chuck, my priority at this point is to make sure that the gains that ISIL made in Iraq are rolled back, and that Iraq has the opportunity to govern itself effectively and secure itself.

But when we look at a broader strategy that is consistent with what I said at West Point, that's consistent with what I said at the National Defense College, clearly ISIL has come to represent the very worst elements in the region that we have to deal with collectively. And that's going to be a long-term project. It's going to require us to stabilize Syria in some fashion, and stabilizing Syria in some fashion means that we've got to get moderate Sunnis who are able to govern and offer a real alternative and competition to what ISIL has been doing in some of these spaces.

Now, the last point with respect to Assad, it's not just my opinion -- I think it would be international opinion -- that Assad has lost legitimacy in terms of dropping barrel bombs on innocent families and killing tens of thousands of people. And right now, what we're seeing is the areas that ISIL is occupying are not controlled by Assad anyway. And, frankly, Assad doesn't seem to have the capability or reach to get into those areas. So I don't think this is a situation where we have to choose between Assad or the kinds of people who carry on the incredible violence that we've been seeing there. We will continue to support a moderate opposition inside of Syria, in part because we have to give people inside of Syria a choice other than ISIL or Assad.

And I don't see any scenario in which Assad somehow is able to bring peace and stability to a region that is majority Sunni and has not so far shown any willingness to share power with them or in any kind of significant way deal with the longstanding grievances that they have there.

Q: Do you need Congress's approval to go into Syria?

President Obama: I have consulted with Congress throughout this process. I am confident that as Commander-in-Chief I have the authorities to engage in the acts that we are conducting currently. As our strategy develops, we will continue to consult with Congress. And I do think that it will be important for Congress to weigh in, or that our consultations with Congress continue to develop so that the American people are part of the debate.

But I don't want to put the cart before the horse. We don't have a strategy yet. I think what I've seen in some of the news reports suggests that folks are getting a little further ahead of where we're at than we currently are. And I think that's not just my assessment, but the assessment of our military as well. We need to make sure that we've got clear plans, that we're developing them. At that point, I will consult with Congress and make sure that their voices are heard. But there's no point in me asking for action on the part of Congress before I know exactly what it is that is going to be required for us to get the job done.

Colleen McCain Nelson.



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Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Do you consider today's escalation in Ukraine an invasion? And when you talk about additional costs to Russia, are you ready at this point to impose broader economic sanctions? Or are you considering other responses that go beyond sanctions?

President Obama: I consider the actions that we've seen in the last week a continuation of what's been taking place for months now. As I said in my opening statement, there is no doubt that this is not a homegrown, indigenous uprising in eastern Ukraine. The separatists are backed, trained, armed, financed by Russia. Throughout this process, we've seen deep Russian involvement in everything that they've done.

I think in part because of the progress that you had seen by the Ukrainians around Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia determined that it had to be a little more overt in what it had already been doing. But it's not really a shift.

What we have seen, though, is that President Putin and Russia have repeatedly passed by potential off-ramps to resolve this diplomatically. And so in our consultations with our European allies and partners, my expectation is, is that we will take additional steps primarily because we have not seen any meaningful action on the part of Russia to actually try to resolve this in diplomatic fashion.

And I think that the sanctions that we've already applied have been effective. Our intelligence shows that the Russians know they've been effective, even though it may not appear on Russian television. And I think there are ways for us to deepen or expand the scope of some of that work.

But ultimately, I think what's important to recognize is the degree to which Russian decision-making is isolating Russia. They're doing this to themselves. And what I've been encouraged by is the degree to which our European partners recognize even though they are bearing a cost in implementing these sanctions, they understand that a broader principle is at stake. And so I look forward to the consultations that we'll have when I see them next week.

Zeke Miller.

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Last year, you said that you believe our democracy is stronger when the President acts with the support of Congress. In response to Chuck's question you said you don't have a strategy yet, but you'll reconsider that going forward. But why didn't you go to Congress before this current round of strikes in Iraq? Do you not believe that that's the case anymore, what you said last year? And throughout your career you've also said that -- you raised concerns with the expansion of powers of the executive. Are you concerned that your recent actions, unilaterally, had maybe -- have cut against that?

President Obama: No. And here's why: It is not just part of my responsibility, but it is a sacred duty for me as Commander-in-Chief to protect the American people.



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President Obama: And that requires me to act fast, based on information I receive, if an embassy of ours or a consulate of ours is being threatened. The decisions I made were based on very concrete assessments about the possibility that Erbil might be overrun in the Kurdish region and that our consulate could be in danger. And I can't afford to wait in order to make sure that those folks are protected.

But throughout this process, we've consulted closely with Congress, and the feedback I've gotten from Congress is, is that we're doing the right thing. Now, as we go forward -- as I've described to Chuck -- and look at a broader regional strategy with an international coalition and partners to systematically degrade ISIL's capacity to engage in the terrible violence and disruptions that they've been engaging in not just in Syria, not just in Iraq, but potentially elsewhere if we don't nip this at the bud, then those consultations with Congress for something that is longer term I think become more relevant.

And it is my intention that Congress has to have some buy-in as representatives of the American people. And, by the way, the American people need to hear what that strategy is. But as I said to Chuck, I don't want to put the cart before the horse. And in some of the media reports the suggestion seems to have been that we're about to go full scale on an elaborate strategy for defeating ISIL, and the suggestion, I guess, has been that we'll start moving forward imminently and somehow Congress -- still out of town -- is going to be left in the dark. That's not what's going to happen.

We are going to continue to focus on protecting the American people. We're going to continue, where we can, to engage in the sort of humanitarian acts that saved so many folks who were trapped on a mountain. We are going to work politically and diplomatically with folks in the region. And we're going to cobble together the kind of coalition that we need for a long-term strategy as soon as we are able to fit together the military, political and economic components of that strategy. There will be a military aspect to that, and it's going to be important for Congress to know what that is, in part because it may cost some money.

I'll just take a couple more. Yes.

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Do you regret not moving on ISIS earlier? There are some reports indicating that most of the weapons, the U.S. weapons that they have, they got it or they acquired it after the fall of Mosul. And also, the Iraqi President said today that the Iraqi forces are in no position to stand up to ISIS. What makes you think that forming a new government will change the situation?

President Obama: Well, once ISIL got into Mosul that posed a big problem, because there's no doubt that they were able to capture some weapons and resources that they then used to finance additional operations.



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And at that stage, we immediately contacted the Iraqi government. Keep in mind we had been in communications with the Iraqi government for more than a year indicating that we saw significant problems in the Sunni areas. Prime Minister Maliki was not as responsive perhaps as we would have liked to some of the underlying political grievances that existed at the time.

There is no doubt that in order for Iraq security forces to be successful, they're going to need help. They're going to need help from us. They're going to need help from our international partners. They're going to need additional training. They're going to need additional equipment. And we are going to be prepared to offer that support.

There may be a role for an international coalition providing additional air support for their operations. But the reason it's so important that an Iraqi government be in place is this is not simply a military problem. The problem we have had consistently is a Sunni population that feels alienated from Baghdad and does not feel invested in what's happening, and does not feel as if anybody is looking out for them.

If we can get a government in place that provides Sunnis some hope that a national government serves their interest, if they can regain some confidence and trust that it will follow through on commitments that were made way back in 2006 and 2007 and 2008 and earlier about how you arrive at, for example, de-Baathification laws and give people opportunities so they're not locked out of government positions -- if those things are followed through on, and we are able to combine it with a sound military strategy, then I think we can be successful. If we can't, then the idea that the United States or any outside power would perpetually defeat ISIS I think is unrealistic.

As I've said before -- I think I said in the previous press conference -- our military is the best in the world. We can route ISIS on the ground and keep a lid on things temporarily. But then as soon as we leave, the same problems come back again. So we've got to make sure that Iraqis understand in the end they're going to be responsible for their own security. And part of that is going to be the capacity for them to make compromises.

It also means that states in the region stop being ambivalent about these extremist groups. The truth is that we've had state actors who at times have thought that the way to advance their interests is, well, financing some of these groups as proxies is not such a bad strategy. And part of our message to the entire region is this should be a wake-up call to Sunni, to Shia -- to everybody -- that a group like ISIS is beyond the pale; that they have no vision or ideology beyond violence and chaos and the slaughter of innocent people. And as a consequence, we've got to all join together -- even if we have differences on a range of political issues -- to make sure that they're rooted out.

Last question.



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Q: Mr. President, despite all of the actions the West has taken to get Russia to pull back from Ukraine, Russia seems intent on taking one step after another -- convoys, transports of arms. At what point do sanctions no longer work? Would you envisage the possibility of a necessity of military action to get Russia to pull back from Ukraine?

President Obama: We are not taking military action to solve the Ukrainian problem. What we're doing is to mobilize the international community to apply pressure on Russia. But I think it is very important to recognize that a military solution to this problem is not going to be forthcoming. Now, the fact that Russia has taken these actions in violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ukrainians has resulted, I believe, in a weakening of Russia, not a strengthening of Russia. That may not be apparent immediately, but I think it will become increasingly apparent.

What it's also done is isolated Russia from its trading partners, its commercial partners, international business in ways that I think are going to be very difficult to recover from. And we will continue to stand firm with our allies and partners that what is happening is wrong, that there is a solution that allows Ukraine and Russia to live peacefully. But it is not in the cards for us to see a military confrontation between Russia and the United States in this region.

Keep in mind, however, that I'm about to go to a NATO conference. Ukraine is not a member of NATO, but a number of those states that are close by are. And we take our Article 5 commitments to defend each other very seriously, and that includes the smallest NATO member, as well as the largest NATO member. And so part of the reason I think this NATO meeting is going to be so important is to refocus attention on the critical function that NATO plays to make sure that every country is contributing in order to deliver on the promise of our Article 5 assurances.

Part of the reason I'll be going to Estonia is to let the Estonians know that we mean what we say with respect to our treaty obligations. We don't have those treaty obligations with Ukraine. We do, however, stand shoulder to shoulder with them, and we're doing not just a lot of work diplomatically but also financially in order to make sure that they have the best chance at dealing with what is admittedly a very difficult situation.

Thank you very much, everybody.

Q: On immigration?

President Obama: Thank you, guys. Thank you.

Q: Immigration?

Q: Mr. President, how are external events and your executive decision-making going to impact your decision on immigration reform? Some people say you're going to delay this.



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The President: Let me just say this: I've been very clear about the fact that our immigration system is broken and needs to be fixed. And my preference continues to be that Congress act. I don't think anybody thinks that Congress is going to act in the short term, but hope springs eternal that after the midterm elections they may act.

In the meantime, what I've asked Jeh Johnson to do is to look at what kinds of executive authorities we have in order to make the system work better. And we've had a lot of stakeholder discussions; that set of proposals is being worked up.

And the one thing that I think has happened was the issue with unaccompanied children that got so much attention a couple of months back. And part of the reason that was important was not because that represented a huge unprecedented surge in overall immigration at the border, but I do think that it changed the perception of the American people about what's happening at the borders.

And so one of the things we've had -- have had to do is to work through systematically to make sure that that specific problem in a fairly defined area of the border, that we're starting to deal with that in a serious way. And the good news is we've started to make some progress. I mean, what we've seen so far is that throughout the summer the number of apprehensions have been decreasing -- maybe that's counterintuitive, but that's a good thing because that means that fewer folks are coming across. The number of apprehensions in August are down from July, and they're actually lower than they were August of last year. Apprehensions in July were half of what they were in June. So we're seeing a significant downward trend in terms of these unaccompanied children.

And what that I think allows us to do is to make sure that those kids are being taken care of properly, with due process. At the same time, it's allowed us to then engage in a broader conversation about what we need to do to get more resources down at the border. It would have been helped along if Congress had voted for the supplemental that I asked for; they did not. That means we've got to make some administrative choices and executive choices about, for example, getting more immigration judges down there.

So that has kept us busy, but it has not stopped the process of looking more broadly about how do we get a smarter immigration system in place while we're waiting for Congress to act. And it continues to be my belief that if I can't see congressional action, that I need to do at least what I can in order to make the system work better.

But some of these things do affect timelines, and we're just going to be working through as systematically as possible in order to get this done. But have no doubt, in the absence of congressional action, I'm going to do what I can to make sure the system works better.

Thank you, guys.