

The President's News Conference

July 15, 2015

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. Yesterday was a historic day. The comprehensive, long-term deal that we achieved with our allies and partners to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon represents a powerful display of American leadership and diplomacy. It shows what we can accomplish when we lead from a position of strength and a position of principle, when we unite the international community around a shared vision and we resolve to solve problems peacefully.

As I said yesterday, it's important for the American people and Congress to get a full opportunity to review this deal. And that process is now underway. I've already reached out to leaders in Congress on both sides of the aisle. My national security team has begun offering extensive briefings. I expect the debate to be robust, and that's how it should be. This is an important issue. Our national security policies are stronger and more effective when they are subject to the scrutiny and transparency that democracy demands.

And as I said yesterday, the details of this deal matter very much. That's why our team worked so hard for so long to get the details right. At the same time, as this debate unfolds, I hope we don't lose sight of the larger picture, the opportunity that this agreement represents. As we go forward, it's important for everybody to remember the alternative and the fundamental choice that this moment represents.

With this deal, we cut off every single one of Iran's pathways to a nuclear program—a nuclear weapons program, and Iran's nuclear program will be under severe limits for many years. Without a deal, those pathways remain open; there would be no limits to Iran's nuclear program, and Iran could move closer to a nuclear bomb.

With this deal, we gain unprecedented, around-the-clock monitoring of Iran's key nuclear facilities and the most comprehensive and intrusive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated. Without a deal, those inspections go away, and we lose the ability to closely monitor Iran's program and detect any covert nuclear weapons program.

With this deal, if Iran violates its commitments, there will be real consequences. Nuclear-related sanctions that have helped to cripple the Iranian economy will snap back into place. Without a deal, the international sanctions regime will unravel, with little ability to reimpose them.

With this deal, we have the possibility of peacefully resolving a major threat to regional and international security. Without a deal, we risk even more war in the Middle East, and other countries in the region would feel compelled to pursue their own nuclear programs, threatening a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world.

As I said yesterday, even with this deal, we will continue to have profound differences with Iran: its support of terrorism, its use of proxies to destabilize parts of the Middle East. Therefore, the multilateral arms embargo on Iran will remain in place for an additional 5 years, and restrictions on ballistic missile technology will remain for 8 years. In addition, the United States will maintain our own sanctions related to Iran's support for terrorism, its ballistic missile program, its human rights violations. And we'll continue our unprecedented security cooperation with Israel and continue to deepen our partnerships with the Gulf States.

But the bottom line is this: This nuclear deal meets the national security interests of the United States and our allies. It prevents the most serious threat, Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, which would only make the other problems that Iran may cause even worse. That's why this deal makes our country and the world safer and more secure. It's why the alternative—no limits on Iran's nuclear program, no inspections, an Iran that's closer to a nuclear weapon, the risk of regional nuclear arms race, and a greater risk of war—all that would endanger our security. That's the choice that we face. If we don't choose wisely, I believe future generations will judge us harshly for letting this moment slip away.

And no one suggests that this deal resolves all the threats that Iran poses to its neighbors or the world. Moreover, realizing the promise of this deal will require many years of implementation and hard work. It will require vigilance and execution. But this deal is our best means of assuring that Iran does not get a nuclear weapon. And from the start, that has been my number-one priority, our number-one priority. We've got a historic chance to pursue a safer and more secure world, an opportunity that may not come again in our lifetimes. And as President and as Commander in Chief, I am determined to seize that opportunity.

So with that, I'm going to take some questions. And let me see who I'm starting off with. Here you go. I've got it. [*Laughter*]

Andrew Beatty, AFP.

Multilateral Agreement To Prevent Iran From Developing a Nuclear Weapon/Iran-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Yesterday you said the deal offered a chance at a new direction in relations with Iran. And what steps will you take to enable a more moderate Iran? And does this deal allow you to more forcefully counter Iran's destabilizing actions in the region, quite aside from the nuclear question? Thank you.

The President. Andrew, if you don't mind, just because I suspect that there's going to be a common set of questions that are touched on, I promise I will get to your question, but I want to start off just by stepping back and reminding folks of what is at stake here. And I already did in my opening statement, but I just want to reiterate it because I've heard already some of the objections to the deal.

The starting premise of our strategy with respect to Iran has been that it would be a grave threat to the United States and to our allies if they obtained a nuclear weapon. And so everything that we've done over the last 6½ years has been designed to make sure that we address that number-one priority. That's what the sanctions regime was all about. That's how we were able to mobilize the international community, including some folks that we are not particularly close to, to abide by these sanctions. That's how these crippling sanctions came about, was because we were able to gain global consensus that Iran having a nuclear weapon would be a problem for everybody.

That's the reason that Iran's accounts got frozen and they were not able to get money for the oil sales that they've made. That's the reason that they had problems operating with respect to international commerce, because we built that international consensus around this very specific, narrow, but profound issue: the possibility of Iran getting a nuclear weapon.

And by the way, that was not simply my priority. If you look back at all the debates that have taken place over the last 5, 6 years, this has been a Democratic priority, this has been a

Republican priority, this has been Prime Minister Netanyahu's priority, it has been our Gulf allies' priority—is making sure Iran does not get a nuclear weapon.

The deal negotiated by John Kerry, Wendy Sherman, Ernie Moniz, our allies, our partners, the P-5-plus-1 achieves that goal. It achieves our top priority: making sure that Iran does not get a nuclear weapon. But we have always recognized that even if Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon, Iran still poses challenges to our interests and our values, both in the region and around the world.

So when this deal gets implemented, we know that we will have dismantled the immediate concerns around Iran's nuclear program. We will have brought their stockpiles down to 98 percent. We will have significantly reduced the number of centrifuges that they operate. We will have installed an unprecedented inspections regime, and that will remain in place not just for 10 years, but for example, on the stockpiles, will continue to 15 years.

Iran will have pledged to the international community that it will not develop a nuclear weapon and now will be subject to an additional protocol, a more vigorous inspection and monitoring regime that lasts in perpetuity. We will have disabled a facility like Arak, the Arak facility, from allowing Iran to develop plutonium that could be used for a bomb. We will have greatly reduced the stockpile of uranium that's enriched. And we will have put in place inspections along the entire supply chain so that if uranium was diverted into a covert program, we would catch it.

So I can say with confidence, but more importantly, nuclear experts can say with confidence, that Iran will not be in a position to develop a nuclear bomb. We will have met our number-one priority.

Now, we'll still have problems with Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, its funding of proxies like Hizballah that threaten Israel and threaten the region, the destabilizing activities that they're engaging in, including in places like Yemen. And my hope is that building on this deal we can continue to have conversations with Iran that incentivize them to behave differently in the region, to be less aggressive, less hostile, more cooperative, to operate the way we expect nations in the international community to behave. But we're not counting on it. So this deal is not contingent on Iran changing its behavior. It's not contingent on Iran suddenly operating like a liberal democracy.

It solves one particular problem, which is making sure they don't have a bomb. And the point I've repeatedly made—and is, I believe, hard to dispute—is that it will be a lot easier for us to check Iran's nefarious activities, to push back against the other areas where they operate contrary to our interests or our allies' interests, if they don't have a bomb.

And so will they change their behavior? Will we seek to gain more cooperation from them in resolving issues like Syria or what's happening in Iraq, to stop encouraging Houthis in Yemen? We'll continue to engage with them. Although, keep in mind that, unlike the Cuba situation, we're not normalizing diplomatic relations here. So the contacts will continue to be limited. But will we try to encourage them to take a more constructive path? Of course. But we're not betting on it.

And in fact, having resolved the nuclear issue, we will be in a stronger position to work with Israel, work with the Gulf countries, work with our other partners, work with the Europeans to bring additional pressure to bear on Iran around those issues that remain of concern.

But the argument that I've been already hearing—and this was foreshadowed even before the deal was announced—that because this deal does not solve all those other problems, that that's an argument for rejecting this deal, defies logic. It makes no sense. And it loses sight of what was our original number-one priority, which is making sure that they don't have a bomb. Okay?

Jon Karl [ABC News].

Multilateral Agreement To Prevent Iran From Developing a Nuclear Weapon/President Bashar al-Asad of Syria/Israel

Q. Mr. President, does it give you any pause to see this deal praised by Syrian dictator Asad as a "great victory for Iran" or praised by those in Tehran who still shout "death to America," and yet our closest ally in the Middle East calls it "a mistake of historic proportions"? And here in Congress, it looks like a large majority will vote to reject this deal. I know you can veto that rejection, but do you have any concerns about seeing a majority of the people's representatives in Congress saying that this is a bad deal?

And if I can just ask you quick political question, a very quick one.

The President. Jon, I think——

Q. Donald——

The President. Let me answer the question that you asked.

Q. Yes.

The President. It does not give me pause that Mr. Asad or others in Tehran may be trying to spin the deal in a way that they think is favorable to what their constituencies want to hear. That's what politicians do. And that's been the case throughout. I mean, you'll recall that during the course of these negotiations over the last couple of months, every time the Supreme Leader or somebody tweeted something out, for some reason, we all bought into the notion, well, the Obama administration must be giving this or capitulating to that. Well, now we have a document, so you can see what the deal is.

We don't have to speculate, we don't have to engage in spin, you can just read what it says and what is required. And nobody has disputed that as a consequence of this agreement, Iran has to drastically reduce its stockpiles of uranium, is cut off from plutonium; the Fordow facility that is underground is converted; that we have an unprecedented inspections regime; that we have snap-back provisions if they cheat. The facts are the facts. And I'm not concerned about what others say about it.

Now, with respect to Congress, my hope—I won't prejudge this—my hope is, is that everyone in Congress also evaluates this agreement based on the facts; not on politics, not on posturing, not on the fact that this is a deal I bring to Congress as opposed to a Republican President, not based on lobbying, but based on what's in the national interests of the United States of America.

And I think that if Congress does that, then in fact, based on the facts, the majority of Congress should approve of this deal. But we live in Washington, and politics do intrude. And as I said in an interview yesterday, I am not betting on the Republican Party rallying behind this agreement. I do expect the debate to be based on facts and not speculation or misinformation. And that I welcome, in part because, look, there are legitimate, real concerns here. We've already talked about it. We have huge differences with Iran. Israel has legitimate

concerns about its security relative to Iran. I mean, you have a large country with a significant military that has proclaimed that Israel shouldn't exist, that has denied the Holocaust, that has financed Hizballah, and as a consequence, there are missiles that are pointed towards Tel Aviv.

And so I think there are very good reasons why Israelis are nervous about Iran's position in the world generally. And I've said this to Prime Minister Netanyahu; I've said it directly to the Israeli people. But what I've also said is that all those threats are compounded if Iran gets a nuclear weapon. And for all the objections of Prime Minister Netanyahu or, for that matter, some of the Republican leadership that's already spoken, none of them have presented to me or the American people a better alternative.

I'm hearing a lot of talking points being repeated about "this is a bad deal," "this is a historically bad deal," "this will threaten Israel and threaten the world and threaten the United States." I mean, there's been a lot of that.

What I haven't heard is, what is your preferred alternative? If 99 percent of the world community and the majority of nuclear experts look at this thing and they say, this will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb, and you are arguing either that it does not, or that even if it does, it's temporary, or that because they're going to get a windfall of their accounts being unfrozen that they'll cause more problems, then you should have some alternative to present. And I haven't heard that. And the reason is because there really are only two alternatives here: Either the issue of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon is resolved diplomatically through a negotiation, or it's resolved through force, through war. Those are the options.

Now, you'll hear some critics say, well, we could have negotiated a better deal. Okay. What does that mean? I think the suggestion among a lot of the critics has been that a better deal, an acceptable deal would be one in which Iran has no nuclear capacity at all, peaceful or otherwise. The problem with that position is that there is nobody who thinks that Iran would or could ever accept that and the international community does not take the view that Iran can't have a peaceful nuclear program. They agree with us that Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon.

And so we don't have diplomatic leverage to eliminate every vestige of a peaceful nuclear program in Iran. What we do have the leverage to do is to make sure they don't have a weapon. That's exactly what we've done.

So to go back to Congress, I'd challenge those who are objecting to this agreement, number one, to read the agreement before they comment on it; number two, to explain specifically where it is that they think this agreement does not prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and why they're right and people like Ernie Moniz, who is an MIT nuclear physicist and an expert in these issues, is wrong, why the rest of the world is wrong, and then present an alternative.

And if the alternative is that we should bring Iran to heel through military force, then those critics should say so. And that will be an honest debate.

All right.

Q. Mr. President, if I can——

The President. No, no——

Q. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that you have a situation where Iran can delay 24 days before giving access to military facilities——

The President. I'm happy to—that's a good example. So let's take the issue of 24 days. This has been, I think, swirling today, the notion that this is insufficient in terms of inspections.

Now, keep in mind, first of all, that we'll have 24/7 inspections of declared nuclear facilities—Fordow, Natanz, Arak, their uranium mines; facilities that are known to produce centrifuges, parts. That entire infrastructure that we know about, we will have sophisticated, 24/7 monitoring of those facilities. Okay?

So then, the issue is, what if they try to develop a covert program? Now, one of the advantages of having inspections across the entire production chain is that it makes it very difficult to set up a covert program. There are only so many uranium mines in Iran. And if in fact we're counting the amount of uranium that's being mined and suddenly some is missing on the back end, they've got some explaining to do.

So we're able to track what's happening along the existing facilities to make sure that there is not diversion into a covert program. But let's say that Iran is so determined that it now wants to operate covertly. The IAEA—the international organization charged with implementing the nonproliferation treaty and monitoring nuclear activities in countries around the world—the IAEA will have the ability to say, that undeclared site we're concerned about, we see something suspicious. And they will be able to say to Iran, we want to go inspect that.

Now, if Iran objects, we can override it. In the agreement, we've set it up so we can override Iran's objection. And we don't need Russia or China in order for us to get that override. And if they continue to object, we're in a position to snap back sanctions and declare that Iran is in violation and is cheating.

As for the fact that it may take 24 days to finally get access to the site, the nature of nuclear programs and facilities is such, this is not something you hide in a closet. This is not something you put on a dolly and kind of wheel off somewhere. And by the way, if we identify an undeclared site that we're suspicious about, we're going to be keeping eyes on it. So we're going to be monitoring what the activity is, and that's going to be something that will be evidence, if we think that some funny business was going on there, that we can then present to the international community.

So we'll be monitoring that that entire time. And by the way, if there is nuclear material on that site, your high school physics will remind us that that leaves a trace. And so we'll know that, in fact, there was a violation of the agreement.

So the point is, Jonathan, that this is the most vigorous inspection and verification regime by far that has ever been negotiated. Is it possible that Iran decides to try to cheat despite having this entire inspection verification mechanism? It's possible. But if it does, first of all, we've built in a 1-year breakout time, which gives us a year to respond forcefully. And we've built in a snap-back provision so we don't have to go through lengthy negotiations at the U.N. to put the sanctions right back in place.

And so really the only argument you can make against the verification and inspection mechanism that we've put forward is that Iran is so intent on obtaining a nuclear weapon that no inspection regime and no verification mechanism would be sufficient because they'd find some way to get around it because they're untrustworthy.

And if that's your view, then we go back to the choice that you have to make earlier. That means, presumably, that you can't negotiate. And what you're really saying is, is that you've got to apply military force to guarantee that they don't have a nuclear program. And if somebody

wants to make that debate, whether it's the Republican leadership or Prime Minister Netanyahu or the Israeli Ambassador or others, they're free to make it. But it's not persuasive.

Carol Lee [Wall Street Journal].

Iranian Arms Embargo and Ballistic Missile Prohibition/The President's Middle East Policies

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I want to ask you about the arms and ballistic missile embargo. Why did you decide—agree to lift those even with the 5- and 8-year durations?

The President. Right.

Q. It's obviously emerging as a sticking point on the Hill. And are you concerned that arms to Iran will go to Hizballah or Hamas? And is there anything that you or a future President can do to stop that?

And if you don't mind, I mean, I wanted to see if you could step back a little bit, and when you look at this Iran deal and all the other issues and unrest that's happening in the Middle East, what kind of Middle East do you want to leave when you leave the White House in a year and a half?

The President. Good. So the issue of the arms embargo and ballistic missiles is of real concern to us, has been of real concern to us. And it is in the national security interest of the United States to prevent Iran from sending weapons to Hizballah, for example, or sending weapons to the Houthis in Yemen that accelerate a civil war there.

We have a number of mechanisms under international law that gives us authority to interdict arms shipments by Iran. One of those mechanisms is the U.N. security resolution related to Iran's nuclear program. Essentially, Iran was sanctioned because of what had happened at Fordow, its unwillingness to comply with previous U.N. security resolutions about their nuclear program. And as part of the package of sanctions that was slapped on them, the issue of arms and ballistic missiles were included.

Now, under the terms of the original U.N. resolution, the fact is that once an agreement was arrived at that gave the international community assurance Iran didn't have a nuclear weapon, you could argue, just looking at the text, that those arms and ballistic missile prohibitions should immediately go away.

But what I said to our negotiators was, given that Iran has breached trust and the uncertainty of our allies in the region about Iran's activities, let's press for a longer extension of the arms embargo and the ballistic missile prohibitions. And we got that. We got 5 years in which, under this new agreement, arms coming in and out of Iran are prohibited. And we got 8 years with respect to ballistic missiles.

But part of the reason why we were willing to extend it only for 5, let's say, as opposed to a longer period of time, is because we have other U.N. resolutions that prohibit arms sales by Iran to organizations like Hizballah. We have other U.N. resolutions and multilateral agreements that give us authority to interdict arms shipments from Iran throughout the region. And so we've had belts and suspenders and buttons, a whole bunch of different legal authorities. These legal authorities under the nuclear program may lapse after 5 or 8 years, but we'll still be in possession of other legal authorities that allow us to interdict those arms.

And truthfully, these prohibitions are not self-enforcing. It's not like the U.N. has the capacity to police what Iran is doing. What it does is, it gives us authority under international

law to prevent arms shipments from happening in concert with our allies and our partners. And the real problem, if you look at how, for example, Hizballah got a lot of missiles that are a grave threat to Israel and many of our friends in the region, it's not because they were legal. It's not because somehow that was authorized under international law. It was because there was insufficient intelligence or capacity to stop those shipments.

So the bottom line is, Carol, I share the concerns of Israel, Saudis, Gulf partners about Iran shipping arms and causing conflict and chaos in the region. And that's why I've said to them, let's double down and partner much more effectively to improve our intelligence capacity and our interdiction capacity so that fewer of those arms shipments are getting through the net.

But the legal authorities we'll still possess. And obviously, we've got our own unilateral prohibitions and sanctions in place around nonnuclear issues, like support for Hizballah. And those remain in place.

Now, in terms of the larger issues of the Middle East, obviously, that's a longer discussion. I think my key goal when I turn over the keys to the President—the next President is that we are on track to defeat ISIL, that they are much more contained, and we're moving in the right direction there; that we have jump-started a process to resolve the civil war in Syria, which is like an open sore in the region and is giving refuge to terrorist organizations who are taking advantage of that chaos; to make sure that in Iraq, not only have we pushed back ISIL, but we've also created an environment in which Sunni, Shia, and Kurd are starting to operate and function more effectively together; and to be in a conversation with all our partners in the region about how we have strengthened our security partnerships so that they feel they can address any potential threats that may come, including threats from Iran. And that includes providing additional security assurances and cooperation to Israel, building on the unprecedented cooperation that we have already put in place and support that we've already put in place. It includes the work that we've done with the GCC up at Camp David, making sure that we execute that.

If we've done those things, then the problems in the Middle East will not be solved. And ultimately, it's not the job of the President of the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East. The people of the Middle East are going to have to solve some of these problems themselves. But I think we can provide that next President at least a foundation for continued progress in these various areas.

The last thing I would say—and this is a longer term issue—is we have to address the youth in the region with jobs and opportunity and a better vision for the future so that they are not tempted by the nihilistic, violent dead end that organizations like ISIL offer. Again, we can't do that entirely by ourselves, but we can partner with well-intentioned organizations, states, NGOs, religious leaders in the region. We have to do a better job of that than we've been doing so far. Okay?

All right. Michael Crowley [Politico].

Syria/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization/Iran-U.S. Relations/Iraq

Q. Thank you. You alluded earlier to Iran's role in Syria, just to focus on that for a moment.

The President. Yes.

Q. Many analysts and some former members of your administration believe that the kind of negotiated political settlement that you say is necessary in Syria will require working directly with Iran and giving Iran an important role. Do you agree? And is that a dialogue you'll be actively seeking?

And what about the fight against ISIS? What would it take for there to be explicit cooperation between the U.S. and Iran?

The President. I do agree that we're not going to solve the problems in Syria unless there's buy-in from the Russians, the Iranians, the Turks, our Gulf partners. It's too chaotic. There are too many factions. There's too much money and too many arms flooding into the zone. It's gotten caught up in both sectarian conflict and geopolitical jockeying. And in order for us to resolve it, there's going to have to be agreement among the major powers that are interested in Syria that this is not going to be won on the battlefield. So Iran is one of those players, and I think that it's important for them to be part of that conversation.

I want to repeat what I said earlier. We have not—and I don't anticipate any time in the near future—restored normal diplomatic relations with Iran. And so I do not foresee a formal set of agreements with Iran in terms of how we're conducting our counter-ISIL campaign.

But clearly, Iran has influence in Iraq. Iraq has a majority Shia population. They have relationships to Iran. Some are natural. We expect somebody like Prime Minister Abadi to meet with and negotiate and work with Iran as its neighbor. Some are less legitimate, where you see Iran financing Shia militias that, in the past, have killed American soldiers and, in the future, may carry out atrocities when they move into Sunni areas.

And so we're working with our diplomats on the ground, as well as our military teams on the ground to assess where can we appropriately at least deconflict and where can we work with Prime Minister Abadi around an overall strategy for Iraq to regain its sovereignty and where do we tell Abadi, you know what, what Iran is doing there is a problem, and we can't cooperate in that area, for example, unless you get those folks out of there because we're not going to have our troops, even in an advisory or training role, looking over their shoulders because they're not sure what might happen to them. And those conversations have been ongoing. I think they will continue.

The one thing you can count on is that any work that the U.S. Government does or the U.S. military does in Iraq with other partners on the ground is premised on the idea that they are reporting to—under the chain of command of the Iraqi Government and Iraqi security forces. If we don't have confidence that ultimately Abadi is directing those soldiers, then it's tough for us to have any kind of direct relationship. Okay?

Major Garrett [CBS News].

U.S. Citizens Detained in Iran/Multilateral Agreement To Prevent Iran From Developing a Nuclear Weapon/Iranian Arms Embargo and Ballistic Missile Prohibition

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. As you well know, there are four Americans in Iran: three held on trumped-up charges, according to your administration; one, whereabouts unknown. Can you tell the country, sir, why you are content, with all the fanfare around this deal, to leave the conscience of this Nation and the strength of this Nation unaccounted for in relation to these four Americans?

And last week, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, under no circumstances should there be any relief for Iran in terms of ballistic missiles or conventional weapons. It is

perceived that that was a last-minute capitulation in these negotiations. Many in the Pentagon feel you've left the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff hung out to dry. Could you comment?

The President. I've got to give you credit, Major, for how you craft those questions. [Laughter] First, the notion that I am content, as I celebrate, with American citizens languishing in Iranian jails, Major, that's nonsense, and you should know better. I've met with the families of some of those folks. Nobody is content. And our diplomats and our teams are working diligently to try to get them out.

Now, if the question is why we did not tie the negotiations to their release, think about the logic that that creates. Suddenly, Iran realizes, you know what, maybe we can get additional concessions out of the Americans by holding these individuals. It makes it much more difficult for us to walk away if Iran somehow thinks that a nuclear deal is dependent in some fashion on the nuclear deal. And by the way, if we had walked away from the nuclear deal, we'd still be pushing them just as hard to get these folks out. That's why those issues are not connected. But we are working every single day to try to get them out and won't stop until they're out and rejoined with their families.

With respect to the Chairman's testimony, to some degree I already answered this with Carol. We are not taking the pressure off Iran with respect to arms and with respect to ballistic missiles. As I just explained, not only do we keep in place for 5 years the arms embargo under this particular new U.N. resolution, not only do we maintain the 8 years on the ballistic missiles under this particular U.N. resolution, but we have a host of other multilateral and unilateral authorities that allow us to take action where we see Iran engaged in those activities whether it's 6 years from now or 10 years from now.

So we have not lost those legal authorities. And in fact, part of my pitch to the GCC countries, as well as to Prime Minister Netanyahu, is we should do a better job making sure that Iran is not engaged in sending arms to organizations like Hizballah. And as I just indicated, that means improving our intelligence capacity and our interdiction capacity with our partners. Okay?

April Ryan [American Urban Radio Networks].

Criminal Justice Reform/The President's Upcoming Visit to Kenya/Presidential Medal of Freedom Revocation/Rape

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I want to change the subject a bit. Earlier this year, on the flight to Selma, you said, on matters of race, as President, your job is to close the remaining gaps that are left in State and Federal government. Now, how does criminal justice reform fit into that equation? And what gaps remain for you—in the—towards the end of your Presidency? And also, what does it mean to travel to Kenya, your father's homeland, in the next couple of weeks as President to the United States? And lastly, would you revoke the Medal of Freedom from Bill Cosby?

The President. You stuffed a lot in there, April. [Laughter] You know what?

Q. I learned from my colleagues.

The President. Say, who did you learn from? Jonathan Karl? Is that what you said? [Laughter]

The—on criminal justice reform, obviously, I gave a lengthy speech yesterday, but I—this is something that I've been thinking about a lot; been working first with Eric Holder, now with

Loretta Lynch about—we've been working on along with other prosecutors of the U.S. Attorney's Office. It's an outgrowth of the Task Force that we put together, post-Ferguson and the Garner case in New York.

And I don't think that the criminal justice system is obviously the sole source of racial tension in this country or the key institution to resolving the opportunity gap. But I think it is a part of the broader set of challenges that we face in creating a more perfect Union.

And the good news is, is that this is one of those rare issues where we've got some Republican and Democratic interest, as well as Federal, State, and local interest in solving the problem. I think people recognize that there are violent criminals out there and they've got to be locked up. We've got to have tough prosecutors; we have to support our law enforcement officials. Police are in a tough job, and they are helping to keep us safe, and we are grateful and thankful to them.

But what we also know is this huge spike in incarcerations is also driven by nonviolent drug offenses where the sentencing is completely out of proportion with the crime. And that costs taxpayers enormous amounts of money. It is debilitating communities who are seeing huge proportions of the young men in their communities finding themselves with a criminal record, rendering them oftentimes unemployable. So it compounds problems that these communities already have.

And so I am very appreciative of folks like Dick Durbin and Cory Booker, alongside Mike Lee and Rand Paul and other folks in the House, who are working together to see if we can both reduce some of these mandatory minimums around nonviolent drug offenses. Because again, I tend not to have a lot of sympathy when it comes to violent crime. But when it comes to nonviolent drug offenses, is there work that we can do to reduce mandatory minimums, create more diversion programs like drug courts? Then, can we do a better job on the rehabilitation side inside of prisons so that we are preparing these folks who are eventually going to be released to reenter the workforce? On the back end, are we doing more to link them up with reentry programs that are effective?

And this may be an area where we could have some really significant bipartisan legislation that doesn't eliminate all the other challenges we've got. Because the most important goal is keeping folks from getting in the criminal justice system in the first place, which means early childhood education and good jobs and making sure that we're not segregating folks in impoverished communities that have no contact with opportunity.

But this can make a difference. I met these four ex-offenders, as I said, yesterday, and what was remarkable was how they had turned their lives around. And these were some folks who had been some pretty tough criminals. One of them had served 10 years; another was a repeat offender that had served a lot of time. And in each instance, somebody intervened at some point in their lives—once they had already been in the criminal justice system, once they had already gotten in trouble—and said, you know what, I think you can live a different way, and I'm willing to help you.

And that one person, an art teacher or a GED teacher or somebody who was willing to offer a guy a job—I want to give a shout-out to Five Guys, because one of the guys there was an ex-felon, and Five Guys gave him a job. And he ended up becoming a manager at the store and was able to completely turn his life around. But the point was, somebody reached out to that person and gave him a chance.

And so part of our question should be, how about somebody reaching out to these guys when they're 10 or 11 or 12 or 8, as opposed to waiting until they've already gone through a criminal justice program. That's part of why we're doing "My Brother's Keeper." But this is an area where I feel modestly optimistic.

I think in the meantime, we've got to stay on top of keeping the crime rate down, because part of the reason I think there's a conversation taking place is, violent crime has significantly dropped. Last year, we saw both incarcerations and the crime rate drop, and this can always turn if we start seeing renewed problems in terms of violent crime. And there's parts of the country where violent crime is still a real problem, including my hometown of Chicago and in Baltimore.

And part of what I've asked Attorney General Lynch to do is to figure out, how can we refocus attention? If we're going to do a package of criminal justice reforms, part of it would be actually having a greater police presence and more law enforcement in the communities that are really getting hit hard and haven't seen some of the drops in violent crime that we've seen in places like Manhattan, for example.

With respect to the visit to Kenya, it's obviously something I'm looking forward to. I'll be honest with you, visiting Kenya as a private citizen is probably more meaningful to me than visiting as President because I can actually get outside of a hotel room or a conference center. [Laughter] And just the logistics of visiting a place are always tough as President, but it's obviously symbolically important. And my hope is, is that we can deliver a message that the U.S. is a strong partner not just for Kenya, but for sub-Saharan Africa generally; build on the progress that's been made around issues of health and education; focus on counterterrorism issues that are important in East Africa because of al-Shabaab and some of the tragedies that have happened inside of Kenya; and continue to encourage democracy and the reduction of corruption inside that country that sometimes has held back this incredibly gifted and blessed country.

And with respect to the Medal of Freedom, there's no precedent for revoking a medal. We don't have that mechanism. And as you know, I tend to make it a policy not to comment on the specifics of cases where there might still be, if not criminal, then civil issues involved.

I'll say this: If you give a woman—or a man, for that matter—without his or her knowledge, a drug, and then have sex with that person without consent, that's rape. And I think this country—any civilized country—should have no tolerance for rape.

All right. Have we exhausted Iran questions here? [Laughter] I think there's a helicopter that's coming. But I really am enjoying this Iran debate. The—topics that may not have been touched upon, criticisms that you've heard that I did not answer? I—go ahead. I know Josh is getting a little stressed here—[laughter]—but I just want to make sure that we're not leaving any stones unturned here. Go ahead.

Impact of Lifting Economic Sanctions Against Iran

Q. Yes. Thanks, Mr. President. I'll be brief. The argument has been made that Iran now has a cash windfall, billions to spend.

The President. Yes.

Q. Your people seem confident they're going to spend it at home. Why are you confident they're not going to spend it on arming Hizballah, arming Bashar al-Asad, et cetera?

The President. I think that's a great question, and I'm glad you brought it up. I think it is a mistake to characterize our belief that they will just spend it on daycare centers and roads and paying down debt. We think that they have to do some of that, because Rouhani was elected specifically on the premise of improving the economic situation inside of Iran. That economy has tanked since we imposed sanctions.

So the notion that they're just immediately going to turn over a hundred billion dollars to the IRGC or the Quds Force I think runs contrary to all the intelligence that we've seen and the commitments that the Iranian Government has made.

Do we think that with the sanctions coming down, that Iran will have some additional resources for its military and for some of the activities in the region that are a threat to us and a threat to our allies? I think that is a likelihood that they've got some additional resources. Do I think it's a game changer for them? No.

They are currently supporting Hizballah, and there is a ceiling, a pace at which they could support Hizballah even more, particularly in the chaos that's taking place in Syria. So can they potentially try to get more assistance there? Yes. Should we put more resources into blocking them from getting that assistance to Hizballah? Yes. Is the incremental additional money that they've got to try to destabilize the region or send to their proxies, is that more important than preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon? No. All right? So I think, again, this is a matter of us making a determination of what is our priority.

The other problem with the argument that folks have been making about, oh, this is a windfall, and suddenly, Iran is flushed with cash, and they're going to take over the world. And I say that not tongue-in-cheek, because if you look at some of the statements by some of our critics, you would think that Iran is, in fact, going to take over the world as a consequence of this deal, which I think would be news to the Iranians.

What—that argument is also premised on the notion that if there is no deal, if Congress votes down this deal, that we're able to keep sanctions in place with the same vigor and effectiveness as we have right now. And that, I can promise you, is not true. That is absolutely not true. I want to repeat: We're not writing Iran a check. This is Iran's money that we were able to block from them having access to. That required the cooperation of countries all around the world, many of whom really want to purchase oil from Iran. The imposition of sanctions—their cooperation with us—has cost them billions of dollars, made it harder for them. They've been willing to do that because they've believed we were sincere about trying to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully and they considered that a priority—a high-enough priority that they were willing to cooperate with us on sanctions.

If they saw us walking away, or more specifically, if they saw the U.S. Congress effectively vetoing the judgment of 99 percent of the world community that this is a deal that resolves the Iranian weapons program—nuclear weapons program in an equitable way, the sanctions system unravels. And so we could still maintain some of our unilateral sanctions, but it would be far less effective, as it was before we were able to put together these multilateral sanctions.

So maybe they don't get a hundred million—billion dollars; maybe they get \$60 billion or \$70 billion instead. The price for that that we've paid is that now Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon. We have no inspectors on the ground. We don't know what's going on. They're still getting some cash windfall. We've lost credibility in the eyes of the world. We will have effectively united Iran and divided ourselves from our allies. A terrible position to be in. Okay?

I'm just going to look for—I made some notes about many of the arguments, the other arguments that I've heard here.

Multilateral Agreement To Prevent Iran From Developing a Nuclear Weapon

Q. What about—[inaudible]—at the end of the deal?

The President. Okay, that's a good one. The notion——

Q. At the end of the deal, they could go back and have a nuclear program?

The President. Right. Well, so let's address this issue of—because that's the other big argument that's been made. All right, let's assume that the deal holds for 10 years, Iran doesn't cheat. Now, at the end of 10 years, some of the restrictions have been lifted, although, remember, others have—stay in place for 15 years. So, for example, they've still got to keep their stockpiles at a minimal level for 15 years. The inspections don't go away; those are still in place 15, 20 years from now. Their commitment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty does not go away; that's still in place. The additional protocol that they have to sign up for under this deal, which requires a more extensive inspection and verification mechanism, that stays in place.

So there's no scenario in which a U.S. President is not in a stronger position 12, 13, 15 years from now if in fact Iran decided at that point they still wanted to get a nuclear weapon. Keep in mind, we will have maintained a 1-year breakout time, we will have rolled back their program, frozen their facilities, kept them under severe restrictions, had observers. They will have made international commitments supported by countries around the world. And——

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. Hold on a second. And if at that point they finally decided, you know what, we're going to cheat—or not even cheat, at that point, they decide openly, we're now pursuing a nuclear weapon, they're still in violation of this deal and the commitments they've made internationally.

And so we are still in a position to mobilize the world community to say, no, you can't have a nuclear weapon. And they're not in a stronger position to get a nuclear weapon at that point; they're in a weaker position than they are today. And by the way, we haven't given away any of our military capabilities. We're not in a weaker position to respond.

So even if everything the critics were saying was true—that at the end of 10 years or 12 years or 15 years, Iran now is in a position to decide it wants a nuclear weapon, that they're at a breakout point—they won't be at a breakout point that is more dangerous than the breakout point they're in right now. They won't be at a breakout point that is shorter than the one that exists today. And so why wouldn't we at least make sure that for the next 10, 15 years, they are not getting a nuclear weapon and we can verify it; and afterwards, if they decide if they've changed their mind, we are then much more knowledgeable about what their capabilities are, much more knowledgeable about what their program is, and still in a position to take whatever actions we would take today?

Q. So none of this is holding out hope that they'll change their behavior?

The President. No.

Q. Nothing different——

The President. No. Look, I'm always hopeful that behavior may change for the sake of the Iranian people as well as people in the region. There are young people there who are not getting the opportunities they deserve because of conflict, because of sectarianism, because of poor governance, because of repression, because of terrorism. And I remain eternally hopeful that we can do something about that, and it should be part of U.S. foreign policy to do something about that. But I'm not banking on that to say that this deal is the right thing to do.

Again, it is incumbent on the critics of this deal to explain how an American President is in a worse position 12, 13, 14, 15 years from now if in fact at that point, Iran says we're going to pull out of the NPT, kick out inspectors, and go for a nuclear bomb. If that happens, that President will be in a better position than what happened if Iran, as a consequence of Congress rejecting this deal, decides that's it, we're done negotiating, we're going after a bomb right now.

The choices would be tougher today than they would be for that President 15 years from now. And I have not yet heard logic that refutes that.

All right. I really have to go now. I think we've hit the big themes. But I promise you, I will address this again. All right? I suspect this is not the last that we've heard of this debate.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei; Israel's Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer; Saeed Abedini, Amir M. Hekmati, Jason Rezaian, and Robert A. Levinson, U.S. citizens imprisoned or missing in Iran; former Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr.; rehabilitated ex-offenders Jeffrey Copeland, El Sawyer, and Robert Warner of Philadelphia, PA; White House Press Secretary Joshua R. Earnest; and President Hassan Rouhani of Iran. He also referred to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran. A reporter referred to actor and comedian Bill Cosby.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : News conferences :: July 15.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Abadi, Haider al-; Abedini, Saeed; Asad, Bashar al-; Booker, Cory A.; Copeland, Jeffrey; Dempsey, Martin E.; Dermer, Ron; Durbin, Richard J.; Earnest, Joshua R.; Hekmati, Amir M.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Kerry, John F.; Khamanei, Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-; Lee, Michael S.; Levinson, Robert A.; Lynch, Loretta E.; Lynch, Loretta, E.; Moniz, Ernest J.; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Paul, Randal H.; Rezaian, Jason; Rouhani, Hassan; Sawyer, El; Sherman, Wendy R.; Warner, Robert.

Subjects: Africa : Trade with U.S.; Atomic Energy Agency, International (IAEA); Civil rights : Racial equality; Communications : News media, Presidential interviews; Congress : Bipartisanship; Cuba : Relations with U.S.; Decorations, medals, and awards : Medal of Honor; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Education : Early childhood education programs; Energy, Department of : Secretary; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Iran : Diplomatic relations with U.S.; Iran : Economic growth and development; Iran : International and U.S. sanctions; Iran : International diplomatic efforts; Iran : Multilateral arms embargo; Iran : Nuclear energy, civilian usage; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; Iran : Supreme Leader; Iran : Terrorism, sponsorship; Iran : U.S. citizens, detention; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Iraq : Prime Minister; Iraq : Reconciliation efforts; Iraq : Security cooperation with U.S.; Israel : Ambassador to U.S.; Israel : Prime Minister; Israel : Security cooperation with U.S.; Justice,

Department of : Attorney General; Kenya : Corruption issues; Kenya : Democracy efforts; Kenya : Terrorism ; Law enforcement and crime : 2014 crime rate, decline; Law enforcement and crime : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Law enforcement officers, service and dedication; Law enforcement and crime : Sentencing requirements, reform; Law enforcement and crime : Sexual assault; Lebanon : Hizballah political-paramilitary organization; Middle East : Economic growth and development; Middle East : Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Missouri : Ferguson :: Death of Michael Brown; New York : New York City :: Death of Eric Garner; State, Department of : Political Affairs, Under Secretary for; State, Department of : Secretary; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Syria : President; Terrorism : al-Shabaab terrorist organization; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; White House Office : "My Brother's Keeper" initiative; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Press Secretary; Yemen : Political unrest and violence.

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