

Press Briefing by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/14/press-briefing-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications

March 14, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 14, 2013

Via Conference Call

4:08 P.M. EDT

MR. RHODES: Thanks, everybody, for joining this call to preview the President's trip to Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. I'm joined on the call today by our U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, who is known to you all, as well. I'll make some opening comments and go through the President's schedule. Then Dan may add a few comments and then we'll take your questions.

First of all, let me just say that this is a very important trip for the President. It's his first trip to Israel since becoming President, and the first foreign trip of his second term in office. We felt like this was an important opportunity for the President to go to the region. In Israel, we felt that with a new Israeli government coming into place and a new U.S. term here, this is an important opportunity for the President to consult with the Israeli government on the broad range of issues where we cooperate.

We obviously cooperate very closely with Israel on security, intelligence and economic issues. And there will be a broad agenda for our governments to address while the President is in Israel, including our efforts to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, the ongoing situation in Syria, the developments in the wider region that pose both opportunities and security challenges, and efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace among the agenda.

More important than that, in some respects, this is an opportunity for the President to speak directly to the Israeli people. The President has a very strong record of support for Israel and its security, but we also understand that there is no substitute for the President of the United States going to Israel and delivering that message directly to the Israeli people. And so, he is particularly looking forward to the opportunity to spend some time with the people of Israel and to tell them directly about what guides his approach to this relationship.

Beyond that, it's a very important time for him to also reinforce U.S. support for the Palestinian Authority -- and I'll get to that in the schedule, but of course, the United States has made a significant investment in the Palestinian Authority as the legitimate leadership of the Palestinian people. And we're very supportive of efforts, for instance, on the West Bank to develop Palestinian institutions and broaden opportunity for the Palestinian people, even as we continue to work for advancements in the peace process.

And then, of course, King Abdullah is a very close ally and partner of the United States and Jordan. We cooperate with Jordan on a broad range of security issues. That includes, of course, the peace process. It also includes addressing the very grave humanitarian crisis in Syria, including the significant refugee population within Jordan. And the U.S. is providing substantial assistance to Jordan and other international partners to help allay that refugee crisis.

We're also very supportive of the political reform efforts within Jordan. Recently, of course, there were parliamentary elections. We'd like to see continued momentum on the political reform agenda that the King has supported, so we will have an opportunity to address those issues.

Let me just go through the schedule now.

The President will arrive in Israel on Wednesday of next week. He will begin his program with an arrival ceremony at the airport with both President Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Following that arrival ceremony, where each of the leaders will speak, the President will view an Iron Dome battery. The U.S. investments in support for the Iron Dome System has been one of the clearest manifestations of our support for Israel and its security. We're very proud that the Iron Dome System has saved numerous Israeli lives in helping to deal with the threat from rocket fire. The President's visit to the Iron Dome battery, again, is a signal of that continued support for Israel and its security, and the close relationship and partnership that we have on the security issues.

Following that, the President will have meetings throughout the afternoon with both President Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu. First, he will meet with President Peres at his residence. The two Presidents will have a chance to spend some time together and make statements as well. Following that, the President will go to Prime Minister Netanyahu's residence, where he'll have a chance to have a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, followed by a press conference, and then followed by a working dinner.

The President and Prime Minister Netanyahu, as you've heard us say, have spent more time together one-on-one than, frankly, any other leader that the President has spent some time with since he came into office. They'll have an opportunity to have a very wide-ranging discussion on the various issues -- security, political, and economic -- that I referenced earlier. And that will conclude the President's first day there.

The next day, Thursday, the President will begin by going to the Israel Museum. At the Israel Museum, he will view the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are a testament, of course, to the ancient Jewish connection to Israel and, frankly, a marvel that the Israelis have restored within the Israel Museum in a very substantial, impressive way. So the President very much looks forward to the opportunity to see the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Following that, he'll be visiting a technology exposition, also at the museum, in which he'll be able to see some of the remarkable signs and technological progress that's been made within Israel, some of the remarkable innovation that is helping to fuel the Israeli economy and, frankly, the global economy. And it's also the foundation of significant U.S. and Israeli economic cooperation. And I think, again, seeing the ancient connection through the Dead Sea Scrolls and then the future that is being forged in Israel through the technology exposition I think will be a very powerful experience.

Following that, the President will travel to Ramallah. In Ramallah, he will have a bilateral meeting with President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. And then the two leaders will have a press conference and then they'll have a working lunch together. Again, the United States has supported the significant institution-building that the Palestinian Authority has undertaken in the West Bank. It's a chance to discuss our continued support for the PA, as well as to discuss ways to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace going forward.

Following the working lunch, the President will join Prime Minister Fayyad at the Al-Bireh Youth Center, also in Ramallah. Again, this is an opportunity for the President to see firsthand some of the work that's being done to develop institutions on the West Bank, and also to meet with a range of Palestinian young people and hear directly from them as well. So that will complete that portion of his time in Ramallah.

Then he will go to the Jerusalem International Convention Center later that afternoon, where he will deliver a speech to the Israeli people. The speech -- frankly, the President very much wanted to have the opportunity to speak not just to Israelis, but to Israeli young people, so we've worked to help build a crowd that will bring in a significant number of Israeli university students from the many universities that our embassy partners with within Israel.

The President's speech I think will focus on the nature of the ties between the United States and Israel, the broad agenda that we work on together on security, on peace, on economic prosperity. And I think he'll have a chance to speak to the future of that relationship, so discussing not just the nature of the challenges that we face today, but where the United States and Israel are working to move together as we head into the future of the 21st century.

Following that speech, later that night, the President will be hosted at a dinner by President Peres. And President Obama was honored to present President Peres with the Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. civilian honor, last year at the White House. Now he is very much looking forward to having a dinner with President Peres and a broad range of prominent Israeli leaders at the state dinner at the President's residence. And then, that will conclude the program on Thursday.

On Friday, the President will begin his day by going to Mt. Herzl, where he will lay a wreath at both the graves of Herzl and Rabin, speaking, of course, to the significant contributions that both of those huge figures in Israeli history and Jewish history -- to their contribution.

Following those wreath-layings, he will visit Yad Vashem and tour Yad Vashem, and have a chance to lay a wreath and make remarks there, of course, marking the very somber and powerful history of the Holocaust. The President was able to travel there previously in 2008 as a senator and was very deeply moved by that experience, and it's an important opportunity to once again mark that particular tragic element of our shared history.

Following the visit to Yad Vashem, the President will travel to Bethlehem where he will tour the Church of the Nativity. Both Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity are obviously very important sights in the West Bank -- important to the Palestinian people, also important to Christians in the region and around the world. And so it will be a very powerful experience for the President to be able to have the experience of touring the Church of the Nativity and observing firsthand that history and experience.

That will conclude the President's time in Israel and the West Bank.

He will then travel to Jordan. And that afternoon, after he arrives in Jordan, there will be an arrival ceremony. Then he will have a bilateral meeting with King Abdullah. The two leaders will have a joint press conference. Then that night, the President will be hosted at a dinner by King Abdullah. And he will be spending the night there in Amman.

Then the next morning, the President will travel to Petra, which is obviously a sight that the Jordanian people are very justly proud of. And so he'll have an opportunity to see something that is of great value to people all across the region and particularly in Jordan.

And I anticipate an agenda that will cover regional security issues, the situation in Syria, the very significant refugee challenge within Jordan, the Israeli-Palestinian issue and our ongoing support for political and economic reform in Jordan.

With that, Dan, I don't know if you want to add any thoughts on the trip to Israel.

AMBASSADOR SHAPIRO: Thanks, Ben. Just briefly, just a little bit of a view from Tel Aviv here. I have to say we in our embassy in Tel Aviv have really been struck by the excitement that the Israelis are feeling about this visit. Part of it is the historic nature. Any visit of a President to Israel is historic. Only four other Presidents have ever visited here, and President Obama is the fifth. And so there's a sense that a visit of the President of the United States is a big deal.

And you can see that excitement in the kind of conversations people are having and the kind of way that the issue is discussed in the media and on the street. And you can see the evidence on the embassy Facebook page, where hundreds, if not thousands, of Israelis are competing for some tickets to hear his speech at the Convention Center.

I think part of the excitement stems from seeing very much in the same terms that we do; it's a manifestation of the close, enduring and warm ties between our two democracies, countries that share common interests and common values. And it's a reaffirmation of our commitments to each other, including the United States' strong, really unbreakable commitment to Israel's security. So I think Israelis feel good about that. But they also realize that at a time of a lot of uncertainty and change in the region, there's great importance to our leaders getting together and engaging in some very intensive consultations on the critical issues that are really in their neck of the woods, in their backyard -- Iran, and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon; obviously the dangerous situation in Syria; the constant importance of trying to make progress toward two states with two people -- with the Palestinian people through direct negotiations.

So I think they also are hopeful that the consultations between our leaders will, early in their new terms, chart the course for making progress on all of those issues in the months and in the years ahead.

So I think I'll just leave it there.

MR. RHODES: Great. We'll take some questions.

Q Thank you, Ben. Two quick questions. The President has already said going into this that the Arab Spring shows that Israel cannot depend on autocrats holding everything together in the region, so what message does his trip -- what message do you hope his trip will convey to the successors of those rulers in Egypt and the other countries? And secondly, traditionally, Presidents don't go on tour like this without hoping for some deliverables, if you will. What is his hope in that area?

MR. RHODES: Sure, thanks for the question, Peter. I'll say a couple of things. First, on the President's point, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, and in his speech in May of 2011, he has made this point that as governments in the region are more responsive to popular opinion and the aspirations of their people, it's going to change the broader political dynamic in the region.

It's obviously a good thing that the people of the region are seeking to express themselves politically, and insofar as they can make democratic progress in a range of ways across the region, the United States supports that process of political and economic reform.

A consequence of that, as the President has said, is that Israel, as it makes peace, is going to have to recognize the broader role of public opinion in peacemaking. In the past, the peace processes with a variety of countries and partners in the region were between Israel and individual leaders. And as you move towards more democratic, more representative and responsive governments, Israel needs to take into account the changing dynamic and the need to reach out to public opinion across the region as it seeks to make progress on issues like Israeli-Palestinian peace and broader Arab-Israeli peace.

With respect to Egypt, I think we've been very clear with the Egyptian government, the democratically elected government in Egypt, that they need to uphold their responsibilities, including their international agreements, which obviously include the

peace treaty with Israel. And thus far they have done that. I think there's an opportunity, frankly, for there to be a deeper source of support for peace broadly across the region if there can be progress.

So in other words, part of the reason to move forward in the pursuit of peace is to signal to the people of the region a seriousness and a common sense of purpose so that the issue does not just continue to be a divisive one in the region, but rather people can have a sense of hope in Israel and in the Arab world that peace is possible. So that's the type of dynamic we want to support, one in which people have a sense of possibility rather than a sense that this is going to be a continued source of division.

With respect to your second question, we've been very clear that this visit is not about trying to lay down a new initiative or complete our work on a particular issue; that, frankly, there's value in traveling precisely at a time when there is a new government in Israel and a new government in the United States and just having a broad strategic conversation.

With a new government, you don't expect, again, to close the deal on any one major initiative. But you, on the other hand, want to begin a broad conversation about all these issues where we're cooperating on a day-to-day basis. And there are obviously going to be significant decisions in the months and years ahead about Iran, about Syria, about Israeli-Palestinian peace. And so by having this opportunity to speak with Israeli leaders, it can frame those decisions that ultimately will come down the line. And that's the way in which the President is approaching the trip.

He also, frankly, just thought it was important to be able to speak to the Israeli people as well, given that he has not traveled there yet as President, and having that kind of conversation with the public will ultimately be helpful in deepening the relationship and supporting the many challenges that we face down the line.

It's also, again, an opportune time to support and reinforce our support for the Palestinian Authority, as well as for King Abdullah, who's working through a set of security challenges because of Syria and a set of domestic reforms that we're supportive of.

With that, we'll take the next question.

Q Thanks very much for doing this, gentlemen. A question on Iran -- Prime Minister Netanyahu has said repeatedly he wants a credible military threat against Iran. He has made clear that all options on the table, which was repeated today to Israeli television, isn't enough for him. So to what extent, if any, will the President go further in establishing a kind of red line that Prime Minister Netanyahu is looking for?

MR. RHODES: Thanks, Matt. I think the President feels that he has been very clear on this subject. Our red line is that we will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. The President has made clear -- publicly and privately -- that we reject the policy of containment, because of the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran for Israel, for the region, for the nonproliferation regime, and for the world. He has made clear that we will

do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and that means we're looking at all options, including military options. So the President has been clear on both his red line and on his approach as it relates to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

What's also the case is we believe it's preferable to solve the issue peacefully, both because diplomacy can yield a more lasting solution if you can get an assurance that a program -- a nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. Also because there certainly costs that would be involved with any military action.

And we believe that there's a window to resolve this diplomatically. We have the world united in putting in place the toughest sanctions Iran has ever faced. We have a P5-plus-1 process where we're currently in discussions with the Iranians about their nuclear program. And so we want to use the time and space that we have available and the pressure that we've applied on the Iranian government to reach a peaceful, diplomatic solution.

But, again, the Iranian government should know from the President's public comments already that he's serious about preventing them from getting a nuclear weapon, that he does not make those assurances -- and very public assurances -- without a commitment to follow through on them. He's done what he says he will do in the past on national security issues, and he certainly would in this instance.

So, again, we have a preference for a peaceful, diplomatic solution, but we have made it very clear that we will do what we must as a country to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

With that, we'll take the next question.

Q Thank you very much for taking the time to do the call, and thank you for your service. I understand that the President was invited to speak before the Israeli Knesset, but instead you guys chose to have the speech at the Convention Center. Can you explain the logic of that decision? I know that Clinton spoke in the Knesset in '94; George W. Bush in 2008. Was this a conscious decision to avoid the Knesset, or was there another explanation?

MR. RHODES: Sure, Josh, thanks for the question. We had discussions with the Israeli government about where the President would speak and they discussed a range of options with us. So, first of all, they were open to a range of options and did not express a strong preference in that regard.

What we told the Israeli government is that the President was very interested in speaking to the Israeli people, and that, in particular, he wanted to speak to young people. We obviously have a deep respect for the Knesset as the seat of Israeli democracy, and in the past, the President, again, has made clear the very significant attachment that we place on the fact that both Israel and the United States are democracy. But you also know that the President, around the world, has often spoken to young people. He spoke to young people, for instance, when he traveled to Cairo. And in this instance, we felt like bringing

together an audience of university students from a broad range of partners that our embassy has in Israel would allow him to speak, again, not just to political leadership, who he'll be meeting with on the trip, but to the Israeli public and Israeli young people.

So as we put together the schedule, what you see is a significant amount of time that the President will be spending with Israel's political leadership, a significant amount of time that he'll be investing in some very iconic cultural sites with the Israeli people. But the speech is a moment where he'll be in a room with the Israeli public, and that really was our priority as we thought through what would make the best venue for the speech.

So we're very excited about the crowd that is being put together. We know that it will represent a very broad range of views within Israel. We welcome the fact that Israel has a very broad spectrum of views that's a testament to the democracy and diversity of opinion that exists within Israel. And it will be a very important event on the President's trip.

Q Thank you, and thank you, Ben, for doing this. President Abbas was meeting in the Kremlin with President Putin today, so I guess my question is do you coordinate those efforts with the Russians? And also, do you see any prospect for meeting with Quartet process anytime soon?

MR. RHODES: We obviously consult regularly with the Russians on issues related to Middle East peace through the Quartet process. We're certainly aware of the Russians hosting President Abbas, so I'm sure that we'll be in touch with them to have a sense of where they see the current state of the peace process, where they see the potential opportunities to make progress. So insofar as President Putin and President Abbas's discussions explore some of those issues, that could be an important opportunity, again, for us to continue to explore ways forward here.

So I anticipate that we'll be in touch with both our Palestinian and our Russian partners after that meeting to have a sense of how those discussions went. And we continue to believe that the Quartet has a role to play in terms of signaling the international community's support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a two-state solution.

Q Thank you. In the past, the President linked finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian question to U.S. international security interests. Five years later, you guys are lowering the expectation; you're saying that the President has no proposal. Can you explain this gap? Is it realism, or is it lack of intent to spend political capital on behalf of the President?

MR. RHODES: Thanks for the question. First of all, it very much continues to be in the U.S. national security interest for there to be an Israeli-Palestinian peace. We believe it's in our interest, it's in Israel's interest, it's in the Palestinian interest and the world's interest, frankly, for there to be two states -- Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

So the U.S. will always continue to be engaged in this process in terms of trying to move it forward. And we have been in the past. We've taken a range of steps. We sought to bring the parties together in direct negotiations. We've put forward some U.S. principles on

security in territory, and we've sought to help the parties as they built confidence and create an environment for talks. And we'll continue with our efforts going forward.

Frankly, with respect to timing, the fact that the Israelis are just now finalizing their government I think speaks to the fact that they will have a new government in place, and we'll need to consult with that government before launching on any particular initiative.

So again, it's not that there's any diminishment in the U.S. commitment to address this issue and to play a role in supporting Israeli-Palestinian peace. Frankly, just the fact that the President is going to the region to meet with Israeli leaders, to meet with Palestinian leaders, I think signals that we'll continue to be very much engaged. And, frankly, this trip is an opportunity for him to hear from the leaders about what they see as the next steps. So having those discussions will allow us to take stock and consider how we might move this process forward.

Q Thanks for taking my call. I was wondering if you could tell us if the First Lady will be on the trip, and also what the Secretary of State's role will be? And we've heard from the State Department that Secretary Kerry will be at least on part of the trip -- if you could tell us a little bit more about what he'll be doing.

MR. RHODES: Sure. The First Lady won't be on the trip.

With respect to the Secretary of State, he will be on the trip. He'll be accompanying us in each of the three stops in Israel and the West Bank and Jordan; expect that he will be with the President in most, if not all, of his meetings, certainly in line with the type of role that Secretary Clinton played on similar trips where she accompanied the President.

Also, frankly, Secretary Kerry just returned from a very long trip to the region. He obviously did not go to these three stops because he anticipated that he'd be going with the President. But he was able to consult with a number of the other leaders in Europe, in Turkey, in the Arab world, and had a sense of the broader context for some of the discussions the President will have. So this trip will continue Secretary Kerry's focus on the Middle East and his deep engagement with the leaders in the region.

Q Hi, guys. Thanks for doing the call. Could you tell me a couple of quick ones -- does the President have any plans to meet with Syrian refugees on this trip? Is the U.S. going to announce any new aid in any of the places? And do you have any expectation that the new Israeli government would be more patient in terms of time and space, a diplomatic approach on Iran? What kind of time frame do you think we might now be looking at?

MR. RHODES: I'll answer the first question, and then kick it to Dan to discuss the government.

With respect to the first question, we don't have plans to visit a refugee camp. There are obviously very significant logistical and security challenges associated with the President traveling. However, we will be focused on Syria as one of the agenda items in Jordan and I think we will be discussing with the government ways in which we can provide support for them and for other international partners to address their refugee crisis.

I don't want to get into specific assistance other than to say that it will certainly be a topic of conversation. We provided already several hundred million dollars in assistance to deal with the Syrian refugee situation. I'm certain, tragically, that we'll be providing more going forward. So we'll have an opportunity to discuss with King Abdullah what the needs are, what the best way to provide assistance is, how they see the broader situation in Syria.

And, Dan, you may want to speak to the second question.

AMBASSADOR SHAPIRO: Well, the new Israeli government has not yet been announced, so I think it would be premature to comment on its policies, and, obviously, when that time comes it will be for that government to speak for itself.

But in general, I see a lot of continuity in our discussions. Obviously, the same President and Prime Minister will continue to lead those discussions, and many of the members of the teams that they have had working with them and have done such important coordination on the issue of Iran and on many other issues are remaining in place. So I think there will be a lot of continuity on those discussions. But of course, the conversations between the President and the Prime Minister are the most important element of that coordination.

Q Ben, you talked about how this was the first trip of the second term. But we've been hearing an awful lot about foreign policy in the President's inaugural address or his State of the Union address. So could you talk about, more broadly than just the Middle East, what are his priorities for the second term? Does the President feel any more freedom, now that he doesn't have to face voters again, in foreign policy? And it seems like a lot of kind of unclosed loops from the first time -- Iran, Syria, the relationship with Russia, the reset. The rebalancing for Asia seems to be likely to come to a head in the next few years. Can you talk about how he'll close that?

MR. RHODES: I think the President is going to be very focused on an agenda that I think he provided the outlines of in the inaugural address and the State of the Union. I just highlighted a few points that I think are at the front of our list for this year. One is responsibly winding down the war in Afghanistan. We have to continue to draw down a significant number of troops in transition to the Afghans and make a determination about what type of enduring commitment we'll have with Afghanistan after 2014.

Second is non-proliferation. And that involves, again, moving forward with a broad non-proliferation agenda. You mentioned Russia. That could involve discussion with the Russians about additional reductions, as the President signaled in his State of the Union speech. But non-proliferation very much involves dealing with the challenges of North Korea. And the President spoke to President Xi of China today about how to hold North Korea to its denuclearization commitments. But of course, Iran -- and clearly, Iran is going to be a critical foreign policy issue for the President in his second term. We have a commitment to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon not just because it's in Israel's security interest, but because it's profoundly in ours.

The President has invested a lot of effort in non-proliferation. And, frankly, the strongest message we could send to advancing that agenda is being an administration that does not see a new nuclear weapons state, as has been the case in the previous administrations with North Korea, for instance, and India and Pakistan. So we need to draw a strong line here on Iran precisely because it's important to reversing the tide of proliferation.

Beyond that, in the Middle East, there are issues that the President will be talking about on this trip that are going to be critical to his second term: How do we ensure for Israel's security in a very dangerous neighborhood? How do we affect the trajectory of the movements that are sweeping across the region, recognizing that the people of the region will determine their outcomes?

But we have a strong stake in seeing that democratic transitions are consolidated successfully in places like Egypt and Libya and Tunisia. We have a strong stake in seeing that there is a broader movement of political reform, as has been the case in Jordan and Morocco. And we have a strong stake in seeing, again, that the situation in Syria is resolved so that President Assad is removed from power and that the violence is ended and that the Syrian people can get about the business of building a country that is worthy of them.

And then, of course, the Asia Pacific region that you mentioned, we have a significant trade agenda that includes concluding the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement and the U.S.-E.U. agreement that the President launched in the State of the Union address even as we also are reevaluating our security footprint in the Asia Pacific, seeking to support the democratic transition in Burma, and just deepening U.S. engagement across the spectrum in the Asia Pacific.

So those are the issues that he outlined in the State of the Union. This trip I think is an opportunity to focus in on a region that will clearly be a focal point of some of those efforts, particularly as it relates to Israel, Israel-Palestinian peace, again, the democratic transitions in the region, and the issue of Syria and Iran.

Q Thanks, Ben and Dan. Ben, can you describe how central the Jordan stop is to this trip, and if the administration in any way thinks the Jordanian government is in any degree of jeopardy, and how well the administration believes it has withstood the various forces set in motion by the Arab Spring? Is it carrying on political reform? Yes, it had a parliamentary election, but the Islamic Action Front didn't participate. That's not exactly new in Jordan, I realize, but I just wanted to get your assessment of what the President is there to do -- just to reassure the Jordanian government, or make some broader statement about what Jordan is doing and how it's dealing with the Arab Spring.

And secondarily, I know this is off the rails a bit, but as a big issue -- and you talked about the President's conversation with the Chinese President -- can you tell us at all how much the issue of cybersecurity came up in that first presidential call with President Xi today?

MR. RHODES: On Jordan, I think it's an important stop. And it was important -- we could have just gone to Israel and the West Bank, but the President felt like it was important to go to Jordan for a number of reasons. One, they are a key security partner, and we cooperate with the Jordanians on Israeli-Arab peace, as well as on counterterrorism and a range of other security issues.

Two, the situation in Syria is obviously deeply concerning to us. Jordan has been a key partner of the United States in dealing with the refugee crisis. They have also been a key partner in working with other Arab allies, our European allies and the Friends of Syria group to support, again, a transition that sees Assad leave and that strengthens the Syrian opposition so that they're in a better position to bring about the end of the Assad regime and also plan for the day after.

But third, and very importantly, as you underscored, Jordan has a domestic reform process that is underway. We believe that King Abdullah understands the need for political and economic reform within his country. He has been sincere and consistent in calling for those types of reforms, and that is going to involve an opening up of the political process. And the parliamentary elections were a step in that, but there's obviously going to have to be follow-through. And the King himself I think has acknowledged that there is going to have to be follow-through with the new government that gets into place in Jordan so that the Jordanian people can see their voices represented in their government -- can see issues that they care deeply about, like anti-corruption, represented in the agenda of that government, and can see a broader sense of economic opportunity.

And the U.S. obviously provides substantial assistance to Jordan, both on the security side but also to help them meet some of those challenges.

So as we look at the transitions in the Arab world, there are many different models taking place in many different countries. Some are going to be very dramatic, as we saw in Egypt; some are going to be more steady over time, as we're seeing in Jordan. But we believe that the Jordanians are very sincere and committed to a reformed agenda, and the President wants to reinforce the need to make continued progress in that regard -- because ultimately reform is the path to lasting stability in terms of a government that is a partner of the United States and responsive to the Jordanian people.

On your second question, it was an issue on the agenda. President Xi obviously has just taken office, and I think what President Obama signaled is that this is going to be a key part of the U.S.-China bilateral discussion in the years to come. Just as we've had very constant communication with them on security issues and on a range of other economic issues around trade, cyber is now very much going to be a part of that dialogue -- given our significant concerns in this space and the need to assure protections for our citizens, our security, and our businesses.

So I think the two leaders committed to engage in an ongoing discussion that addresses the cyber issue.

Next question.

Q Hi, I wanted to ask -- four years after he gave the Cairo speech addressing the Arab populations of the world, he's going back, and this is his first trip and he's giving an address to the Israeli people. Why not give a similar address to the Arab people sort of following up on that first speech? And second of all, it coincides with the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Will the President address that at all?

MR. RHODES: Thanks, Jane. Well, I think it's -- at the beginning of his administration, the President felt like it was very important for him to speak to Muslim communities around the world, given the extraordinary tensions that existed between the United States and the Muslim world. And that was the purpose of the Cairo speech. And, frankly, the Cairo speech lays out a framework that holds in terms of how the President views those issues, and literally the list of issues that we're working together to address. And we've made some progress on some of those issues, and less progress on others.

You mentioned Iraq. When the President gave the Cairo speech we had 150,000 troops in Iraq; today we have zero. So I think that shows real, credible follow-through on a commitment that the President made in Cairo.

Of course, we have not resolved the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which has been a challenge for decades, and we're going to have to continue working at that. But I think the template for how the President views the issues between the United States and the Muslim world were laid in Cairo. And the template for how the President is viewing the transitions taking place in the Arab world was really laid out in his speech at the State Department of May of 2011 and his speech at the National Defense University on Libya.

This is a different opportunity for him to speak to the Israeli people, and he obviously has not had that opportunity before. And given this is his first trip to Israel as President, we thought that it was very important for him to speak directly to Israelis about the nature of the friendship between the United States and Israel, and the challenges that we're faced with and, frankly, to lift up these issues, and look on the horizon a bit, too, because at any given time there are issues that we're working very hard with the Israelis -- regional security and counterterrorism, Iran, Syria -- and the President will address all those issues in his speech. But I think he'll also talk about where we're trying to go together, what does true security mean for Israel, what is the goal of the United States and Israel in terms of bringing about prosperity and a lasting peace and security for our two countries.

And again, there's no substitute for being able to do that in Israel as the American President. As Dan said, it's unique for an American President to go to Israel. They can hear all kinds of messages from American leaders and American politicians from within the United States, but it's just different when you're able to do it face to face. So that's really the President's intent in doing so.

Dan, I don't know if you have anything you want to add to that last point about the need to speak to the Israeli people.

AMBASSADOR SHAPIRO: Just that I'd reiterate that there is sort of a hunger to hear. And as I said, we've seen a tremendous outpouring and enthusiasm, people who would like to attend his speech. And as Ben indicated, we will ensure that every sector of Israeli society is represented in the hall because that's an important part of our commitment, to talk to the whole of the Israeli public -- both from our embassy, but in this case, especially the President. And I think that is something that flows from the sense of the shared destiny, shared history, shared values but also significant challenges that we face together.

Q Thanks for taking the call, gentlemen. Just one of the things -- with the election of the new Pope and the President's trip, it seems that we're going to have both the President and the Vice President abroad next week. You'll have to excuse me for not having the kind of institutional knowledge that Mark Knoller does, but is there a precedence for this? Were there arrangements that had to be made in order to accommodate the fact that both of them will be moving abroad? And do we have adequate safeguards in place that, God forbid, something would happen that we don't have another Al Haig moment?

MR. RHODES: You know, it's an interesting question. I actually don't know for certain if they'll be abroad at the same time. I believe that the Pope's first event is Tuesday that the Vice President is attending, and the President will be leaving late Tuesday night. So it is an interesting question you ask. I'm actually just not sure whether it will be the case that the Vice President is still overseas in Italy at the same time that President Obama will be leaving U.S. airspace for the region.

So we can look into that. We do take those considerations into account and do prudent planning to ensure that we're prepared for any contingency, and we often seek to coordinate their travel for that purpose.

Just to close, I will take the opportunity of a question that had a relationship to the Pope to make the point that, again, that one of the reasons why we thought it was important for the President to go the Church of the Nativity is this has been a very difficult -- there's been a very difficult series of challenges for Christian communities in the region -- not just in the West Bank, but in places like Syria and Egypt and Iraq. And recognizing the very deep and ancient Christian communities in that part of the world I think is an important thing to do, because in these transitions, we've underscored the need to protect the rights of minorities and we've underscored the need for pluralism. And I think the visit to the Church of the Nativity is intended to send that signal.

So I'll close on that. I'll point you to also the President's interview with Israeli Channel Two that has his voice on this.

And, Dan, I'll turn it to you for the last word, including if you need to give any plugs to the embassy and its competition.

AMBASSADOR SHAPIRO: Well, one more time, the embassy Facebook page has really been, in some ways, the locus of the most feverish excitement about this. We have a competition for people to write us a comment and tell us why they would like to have one

of the 20 tickets we're giving away on that Facebook site to see President Obama's speech. We're distributing lots of other tickets to lots of mostly young people, but some other Israelis, as well.

And again, it's a continuation of what we do every day, which is really part of what President Obama always preaches, which is not just government-to-government work, which is important and goes on all the time, but also really deepening people-to-people connections, and getting to know the whole country. So that's what we're doing, and President Obama is going to join us for the next week to do it as well.

MR. RHODES: Yes. In other words, also, Dan Shapiro is a social media star in Israel. (Laughter.) I encourage everybody to take a look not just at the Facebook page but some of his YouTube videos that I am particularly a fan of, as he's been very robust in his outreach to the Israeli people and speaks much better Hebrew than I do.

With that, we'll wrap up the call. We'll stay in touch with you guys over the next few days. I know there's a lot of interest in the trip and we look forward to seeing you all there.

END

4:58 P.M. EDT