

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – April 11, 2017

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TRANSCRIPT:

Today's briefing was held off-camera, so no video is available.

2:03 p.m. EDT

MR TONER: Thank you. Thanks, everyone, for joining us today. Happy to be back among you and to do the briefing. Just in an effort to accommodate our folks from the broadcast media, I am trying to do this through a headset today, so I hope the sound quality is a little bit better so it can – the audio can be useable for some – for all of you, rather. I know that was some constructive criticism offered in some of the earlier phone briefings we did.

I don't have much at the top. I did want to briefly update you on the Secretary's travels. As you've probably seen, Secretary Tillerson concluded meetings in Lucca, Italy at the G7 earlier today. I'd refer you to the joint communique that was issued by the participants earlier. On the margins of the G7, he was able to meet with counterparts from Japan, from the UK, from France, Italy, and others. And earlier today, there was a meeting on Syria of like-minded countries.

The Secretary is now in Moscow, where he'll hold meetings with his counterpart Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and other officials starting tomorrow. With that, I'll hand it over to our first question.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, just a quick reminder, if you do have a question, please press *1 at any time. And first, we'll have Matthew Lee with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi Mark. Thanks. I hope you're feeling better. Doesn't sound like you are 100 percent yet, but get well soon. Come back.

My question – I have two. They're very disparate questions, though. The first is on Syria and the Secretary's comment at the press avail this morning, when he said, "I think it is clear to us all that the reign of the Assad family is coming to an end." When I read that, I was reminded of the previous administration saying that President Assad's days are numbered back in August of 2011 and continuing to say that his days are numbered for the next 1,983 days, if my math is correct. And I'm wondering if, when the Secretary says that now, does he – is he saying – he's clearly referring to some kind of new strategy, or it appears to me that he should be referring to a new kind of strategy that the U.S. is going to use in terms of Assad. And I'm wondering is that simply the airstrikes that were conducted that the previous administration opted against doing, or is there something else, and what is it? What would that something else be?

And then my second one has to do with Hungary. And I'm just wondering if you can add anything to what Deputy Assistant Yee – Secretary Yee said in Hungary today about the signing of the bill on the Central European University.

MR TONER: Sure. Thanks, Matt. And thanks for the best wishes of my health.

First of all, with reference to Secretary Tillerson's remarks earlier today, look, we obviously have no interest in seeing Assad remain in Syria over the long run. I think the world is with us on that. And last week's barbaric chemical weapons attack in Idlib province only underscored the fact that in the eyes of, frankly, most people around the world, this is a leader who has lost legitimacy and has killed and continues to kill hundreds of thousands of his own people.

I think in terms of the strategy question, Secretary Tillerson was also clear – and others have been clear – that we've got a dual focus: One, without doubt, is focused on destroying ISIS. That was made crystal clear in the D-ISIS ministerial that took place a few weeks ago, and that remains this administration's priority. But I do think you've seen or are seeing a recognition that we need to focus on moving forward with the political process in Geneva and also trying to strengthen, or de-escalate I guess, the violence in Syria. I don't have anything to offer in terms of new strategies yet. I think those are still being discussed and new methods to approach that. I would just say that we're committed

to the Geneva process, to a political process that leads to a political solution to Syria. That has not changed. One of the things –

QUESTION: But why does – why does –

MR TONER: Go ahead. Go ahead. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Why does he say it's clear to all of us that the reign of the Assad family is coming to an end? Why is it clear?

MR TONER: Well, again, I think that he's simply stating the fact that Assad is a leader in his own mind but not for the Syrian people and that his most recent actions only solidify the fact that he needs to leave and cannot govern Syria. But ultimately, Matt, that has not changed our belief that this is a process that needs to be run and decided on by the Syrian people.

Now what was clear – and you know this from last week – is we have redlines. And one of those redlines is the use of chemical weapons. And this administration carried out a very measured strike on the facility and the aircraft that carried out that strike on Idlib last week. And that sends a clear message that we do have redlines and will enact those redlines.

I do want to move to Hungary quickly. Sorry. I did issue a statement – I'm aware of Deputy Assistant Secretary Yee's remarks as well. I did issue a statement on those, I think a few weeks ago, as well. We are very concerned about this legislation that was passed by Hungary's parliament last week that was signed into law by the president this week, I think. And we believe it threatens the continued operations of Central European University, which is a leading academic institution. It's an important conduit for intellectual and cultural exchanges between Hungary and the United States. And frankly, it's at the center of freethinking and research. The legislation, we believe, can also similarly threaten the operations of other American universities with degree programs in Hungary, so it goes beyond just Central European University.

I know that tens of thousands of Hungarians have been peacefully protesting in support of the CEU, and researchers and academics and others from around the world have also spoken out in its defense. And I know that – or I can say that Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Tom Shannon met last week with the president and rector of the CEU, the Central European University, Michael Ignatieff, to discuss the effect of this law on this university. So we're urging the Government of Hungary to suspend implementation of the law. We want to see a review and discussion in order to address any concerns through dialogue with the university itself and other affected institutions going forward.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, just a quick reminder, if you do

have a question please press * 1 at any time. And next we'll go to Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. Hi, Mark. I'm also with Matt. Feel better soon. You sound awful.

MR TONER: Thank you.

QUESTION: Yeah. So Mark, I've got a couple of questions. One is do you – will the Secretary actually raise Assad's future during the meetings in Moscow tomorrow? I mean, will he actually want to kind of outline a plan or get from Russia some kind of commitment on what's going to happen? Or is this kind of an open-ended something that you'll leave till later discussions?

The other question I have is if the administration ultimately believes that the Geneva process is the way to negotiate a political transition, how quickly – I mean, do you think that these attacks mean that you'd like to have those discussions brought forward more quickly and to start something quite soon?

And then I have a Ukraine question, if I might have a follow up.

MR TONER: Great. I'm sorry. Just one more time, Lesley, your first question. I apologize.

QUESTION: Okay. Is the Secretary going to raise Assad's future during the meetings tomorrow in Moscow? (Long pause.) Hello? Mark?

MR TONER: I am so sorry, Lesley. I was –

QUESTION: You don't like the question?

MR TONER: No. I apologize. I had the mute button on. I apologize.

QUESTION: No worries.

MR TONER: No, I – that's too bad, because I was really articulate there. Anyway –

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR TONER: No, look, without getting ahead of the meetings tomorrow, I have no doubt that they'll discuss Assad and his future, and certainly in light of the actions that he undertook last week, or his regime did. But I think also Secretary Tillerson has been very clear that he'll raise the question of where Russia stands and whether it's going to remain supportive of a regime that is carrying out such brutal humanitarian – or brutal attacks on innocent civilians. And I think he posed the question very succinctly earlier today: Which side of history does Russia want to be on? And I think that's a decision it needs to make.

With respect to – I think you asked a question about whether this adds momentum to the Geneva process. Staffan de Mistura is here in town today. He's having meetings at the White House. State Department officials are there at those meetings. We'll see if we can get a readout or the White House can give a readout of those meetings later. But I think it underscores the sense of urgency that we all feel in light of last week's brutal attacks to really reinvigorate the Geneva process. It's a – and we all know this who have watched this issue over the years now. It's partly – you need a de-escalations of the violence so you can get the political negotiations back up and running in Geneva, and that's our focus and remains our focus with respect to the political process and the civil war in Syria.

You had a question on Ukraine?

QUESTION: Yeah, on Ukraine. Yeah. So the Secretary today – according to the French foreign minister, the Secretary in Italy asked his European counterparts why American voters should care about the conflict in Ukraine. What was behind that question? I mean, does – and I know that Poroshenko of Ukraine today, I think he spoke to the Secretary, it might have been today, to ensure that the U.S. remains committed to supporting Ukraine. Why did he actually ask that question of the – of his European counterparts, given that the U.S. has given at least 3 billion in loan guarantees and other kinds of support for Ukraine?

MR TONER: To be honest, Lesley, that's a question I think Foreign Minister Ayrault is going to have to answer. I – look, I mean, Secretary Tillerson has been abundantly clear with respect to our position, the U.S. Government's position, on Ukraine and his support for the Minsk process and his support for sanctions until Russia and the separatists that it backs meet their commitments through Minsk. He made that very clear. He spoke with President Poroshenko earlier today and made it very clear to him that the U.S. position on Ukraine remains the same and is very strongly in support of the Ukrainian Government, and, as I said, the full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

With respect to, as I said, what was reported out about this question, I'm not going to discuss the internal deliberations, but I have no idea of what Foreign Minister Ayrault was referring to.

Next question, please.

QUESTION: We'll go to Anne Gearan with *The Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, Mark. Glad to hear your voice, even scratchy. So one question on the discussions in Lucca and one on Moscow. On the G7, can you frame for us the U.S. response to the fact that there wasn't the kind of unified statement about Russia and Syria that the Secretary had hoped for coming out of those meetings? Does that diminish his leverage going into Moscow? And during his meetings in Moscow, what is the current state of play of whether or not he will meet with President

Putin, given that Putin himself had said he expected that meeting as recently as when Putin was at the Arctic meeting? Thank you.

MR TONER: Sure, thanks, Anne. (Coughing.) Excuse me, I apologize.

QUESTION: Oh gee, you sound awful.

MR TONER: (Laughter.) Sorry. With – I’ll answer your – well, hopefully the antibiotic will kick in.

With respect to his Moscow – I’ll start with the second question first. So as I said, he is going to – plans to meet with Secretary – or with Foreign Minister Lavrov and other officials tomorrow. If there is an invitation for him to meet with Putin, of course, he’ll do so. I think that’s a decision for the Kremlin to make and to announce, and up till now we’ve not seen such an offer extended. Now, it could come tomorrow. So as I said, he’s – he’s certainly willing to meet with President Putin to discuss all of these issues.

Your first question was, I think, about the G7 –

QUESTION: Yes.

MR TONER: – and your concern that it wasn’t quite enough or strong enough on Russia and Syria? Is that –

QUESTION: Right. I mean, what is – what is your view of how strong it was and whether the fact that it doesn’t fully back the U.S. view at this point hinders the Secretary’s leverage when he meets with the Russian officials?

MR TONER: Well, I don’t necessarily think it was – it hinders his efforts by any means, and I think it was actually quite strong on – with respect to the attack, as I said, in – it took place in Idlib province last week, the chemical weapons attack, and it also condemned Syria’s use of chemical weapons. And I think it very clearly shined a light on the fact that – that Russia and Iran and others are – I’m talking about the joint communique – are on the wrong side on this.

And it also expressed full support for the OPCW investigation into the incident and into whether this attack constituted a war crime.

I think you’re probably asking about the issue of sanctions. And look, that’s something that was up for discussion. I don’t have any great insights about – as to why it – as to why it came out the way it did. But I think that Secretary Tillerson is going to Moscow, I think, bolstered by the support of his G7 partners and allies. The fact that – with respect to Syria, Russia is on the wrong side on this. I mean, it has been supporting a regime that is now guilty of crimes against humanity in terms of carrying out chemical weapons attacks, and that’s inexcusable and intolerable. And so I think he’s going to come back – come to – he’s going to – or he’s in Moscow, rather, to deliver a very tough message, but one that needs to be heard by Russia.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, again, if you have a question, please press *1 at any time. And we'll go to Conor Finnegan, ABC News.

QUESTION: Hey Mark, welcome back. Hope you're feeling better as well. I just had a quick question. President Trump, Vice President Pence, and some other administration officials have all said that this administration wants to work with Russia more broadly against terrorism – something Sean Spicer actually repeated just now in today's briefing at the White House. So does the administration still think that they can work with Russia on that front given – given not just the chemical weapons attack last week but also what the White House said was a campaign by Russia to mislead and obfuscate about the attack, and while Russia has been aligning itself with another terrorist group, Hizballah?

MR TONER: Right. Excuse me. That's a big, complex question, but I'll try to break it down and answer it. (Coughing.) Excuse me, I apologize. And I think it's going to be somewhat of a nuanced answer, because look, we obviously would welcome if Russia were to seriously commit itself to going after ISIS in Syria. We would welcome such a move. But we're nowhere near that, and so you're absolutely right that Russia has, up until now, aligned itself with Assad, with the Iranians, and with Hizballah.

And as Secretary Tillerson asked the question earlier today is what does that in the long-term alliance – how does that serve Russia's interest? The question is whether Russia – and this is a strategic decision that Russia needs to make, is whether it would instead prefer to align with the United States and other countries in working to constructively resolve the crisis in Syria. And it's a question, as I said, I'm sure he'll be raising in his meetings.

I don't think we rule out any possibility for cooperation with Russia with respect to counterterrorism, but up until now we've seen even fledgling efforts kind of end in frustration because – for many reasons, but one is that Russia seems more intent on propping up the Assad regime than it does in really carrying out any counter-ISIS strategy.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And we'll go to Ilhan Tanir with Washington Hatti. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you for doing this. Quick question. Just a couple days ago, OSCE issued a report on Turkey about upcoming referendum which will be held on this Sunday, and this report lists severe limitations for opposition campaign and poses the question whether it's a possibility for Turkey to hold fair and free elections at this moment. What's your view? Have you seen the reports, or how do you see the conditions, circumstances in Turkey at the moment for a fair and free election?

MR TONER: Sure. We've – we have seen the OSCE and ODIHR's interim report. Obviously, we refer you to them – to ODIHR – for details of its contents. Of course, we value the OSCE's contributions to the promotion of democracy and human rights, and that includes its election observation efforts. And we stand firmly behind those efforts throughout the OSCE region. We look forward to the final report after the conclusion of the referendum.

I think I'll stop myself there and just say, look, we're going to wait and see what the final assessment is. And as I said, we support the OSCE's election-monitoring mission, not only in Turkey but throughout the OSCE. Any follow-ups?

QUESTION: Yes. Currently, the second-biggest opposition party co-chairs have been jailed since November – over a dozen MPs – again, from Turkey, the same opposition party – in jail; hundreds of other officials, local officials, have been jailed; and there's a clear limitations, again, for the campaigning. So aside from the OSCE report, how do you see Turkey's current conditions? What's administration's view aside from the OSCE report?

MR TONER: Sure. Well, as we've said on many occasions about our relationship with Turkey, it's a strong ally, it's a strong partner, and we have candid conversations about the quality of Turkey's democracy. We firmly believe that freedom of expression, including freedoms of speech and media, needs to be protected. We believe that political processes need to be transparent, and we believe that political parties need to be able to express their views and get their views out there to the public. We consistently urge Turkey at every level to respect and ensure political freedom, freedom of expression, judicial independence, and other fundamental freedoms.

And again, it's because we value and respect Turkey's democracy, democratic tradition, and, frankly, the – it matters to us deeply. And Turkey, as I said, is a strong ally, and we want to see the strongest democratic Turkey as we possibly can.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, another reminder: If you have a question, please press *1. And we'll go to Laurie Mylroie with Kurdistan 24.

QUESTION: Hi, Mark. I have two brief questions for you, and I wish you to get well like the others do. First question: Hizballah media carried a statement Sunday in the name of the previously unheard-of shared operations room, and it said, "We will support Syria with all the means that we have. America knows well our ability to respond. We will respond without taking into consideration any reaction and consequences." Is that a threat of terrorism in your view, and what is your response to it?

MR TONER: Well, first of all, thank you for the good wishes. And with respect to Hizballah's threats, of course we take any threats from a foreign terrorist organization very seriously. Hizballah's forces have helped enable the regime – the Syrian regime – to perpetuate its brutality against its own people and also to incite instability in Lebanon. We call Hizballah – on Hizballah to immediately withdraw from Syria. And by continuing to operate, carry on military operations in Syria in support of the regime, Hizballah is violating its commitment to the Baabda Declaration and the Lebanese disassociation policy from the Syrian conflict. So we, obviously, view Hizballah's role in Syria as unconstructive, and as I said, we certainly take any threats from this known terrorist organization very seriously.

Any –

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR TONER: Yeah, go ahead.

QUESTION: My – thank you very much. My second question.

MR TONER: Yep.

QUESTION: What's his response to Vladimir Putin's claim today that the chemical weapons attack in Idlib province was a false flag operation and more may follow? And related to that, can you provide more detail on Secretary Tillerson's statement there were similar chemical attacks on March 25 and 30 in Hama?

MR TONER: Sure. With respect to President Putin's remarks, look, we've been very clear about our assessment with respect to the chemical weapons attack last week in Idlib province. We stand by our assessment. I know that the White House earlier today held a backgrounder talking about some of the intelligence that led to our assessment, and I said it's – it was crystal clear to us that this was carried out and it was carried out by the Syrian regime. There's no false flag with respect to calling this for what it was, which was a gross attack in violation of international norms and standards, and one that justified the response that we took. Because as I said earlier in this briefing, chemical weapons, their use in Syria is a redline. And if used again, then we reserve the right to act in the same capacity.

With respect to this – these additional attacks that you mentioned on March 25th and 30th, as I said, we have a high degree of confidence that the Syrian regime used a chemical nerve agent consistent with sarin in the attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib on April 4th, but that's not an isolated incident. In the same 10-day period, there have been allegations of the Assad regime, rather, has carried out chemical weapons attacks in Hama governate, I think on March 25th and March 30th, and these events are part of a larger trend of allegations of regime use of chemical weapons going back to 2014, including I think three that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the United

Nations' joint investigative mechanism, attributed to the Assad regime.

So what does this mean? It means it's clear that Syria's failed to comply with its most fundamental legal obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 2118 not to use chemical weapons and to destroy its chemical weapons arsenal in its entirety. So we're going to continue to work with partners in the region to investigate reports of chemical weapons use in Syria, and we're going to support the OPCW fact finding mission's effort to do the same. Again, the idea here is to build a solid body of evidence as to whether these were chemical weapons attacks, confirming that, who were the perpetrators, and eventually, to hold these people accountable.

Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And again, ladies and gentlemen, if you have a question, press *1. And we'll go to Michel Ghandour with MBN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, thank you. Hi, Mike – hi, Mark. Hope you will feel better. I have two questions. First, talking about the redlines, is the use of barrel bombs included in the redlines – in the new redline?

MR TONER: Michel, yes. With – sorry – in response to your question, chemical weapons crosses a redline. That doesn't mean we excuse the other abhorrent weaponry that the Syrian regime has used against its own people, brutally at times, certainly in and around Aleppo during the fall of Aleppo but throughout this conflict. But given the seriousness of using chemical weapons and the universal condemnation of their use, we believe that chemical weapons – the use of chemical weapons – constitutes a redline.

Next question.

QUESTION: And what about the barrel bombs? Because we've heard –

MR TONER: I said I'm not excusing in any way, shape, or form, nor am I giving a free pass to some of the other brutal weapons that this regime has shown itself capable of using. I think it speaks to – that their use speaks to the fact that we need to pursue a de-escalation of the violence and we need to get a political resolution, one that ultimately leads to a political transition away from Assad.

Next question.

OPERATOR: And our final question will be from the line of Joel Gehrke with *The Washington Examiner*. Please, go ahead.

MR TONER: Sure.

QUESTION: Hi, Mark. Thanks for doing this when you're under the weather. Wondered what you think of the – of Italy's president traveling to Moscow today at the same time that Italy is hosting – or was hosting – the G7 summit. Obviously, the State Department has welcomed bilateral

relations between countries in the past, but are you worried that, especially following on meetings between their foreign ministries, that Minister Alfano went to Moscow recently as well, that Italian policy could be moving away from U.S. policy, either with respect to economic sanctions or the resolution of the crisis in Libya?

MR TONER: Well, first of all, we appreciate Italy hosting the G7. Look, that's a question for the Italian Government and the presidency to – as to why he chose this moment to travel to Moscow. But that's – certainly we believe that he delivered a consistent message to the Russian leadership with respect to their behavior not only in Ukraine and other parts of Europe but certainly in the Middle East and in Syria.

No, we're not concerned. We have a very strong bilateral relationship with Italy. We have a very strong relationship with – security relationship with Italy with – in the context of NATO. Italy's a very strong friend and partner to the United States. And we believe, as I said, that regardless of who is meeting with Russian leadership, they're hearing the same message.

Thanks, everybody, for joining me. I hope to be on camera tomorrow and not be sneezing or coughing quite as much. But thanks, everybody. I appreciate it. Take care.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:37 p.m.)

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