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Press Briefing by Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton and Assistant to The President for Counterterrorism and Homeland Security John Brennan

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1:00 P.M. EDT

MR. BURTON: Good afternoon. Thank you guys for coming. Welcome back to Martha's Vineyard. Once again, the President wanted me to extend his thanks and appreciation to the folks of Martha's Vineyard for their hospitality, for the good food here, for what nice folks run the shops, and once again, appreciates that last year there was so much respect for the First Family's privacy, and especially the girls, as they had such a good time here.

So today I have with me John Brennan, who will talk a little bit about this first anniversary of the release of the mastermind behind the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie.

MR. BRENNAN: Good afternoon, everyone. As Bill said, today is the one-year anniversary of the unfortunate, inappropriate and wrong decision by the Scottish executive to release Abdel Basset Mohamed al-Megrahi, a Libyan national who was rightly convicted and sentenced to life in prison for his role in the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, on 21 December 1988. That reprehensible act of terrorism claimed the lives of 270 innocent individuals, including 189 U.S. citizens.

We have made clear repeatedly that we emphatically disagree with that decision to release Megrahi. We made that position known before the decision was made by the Scottish executive, and we've continued to make that decision, the wrongness of that decision, clear to both Scottish and Libyan authorities.

We've expressed our strong conviction that al-Megrahi should serve out the remainder, the entirety, of his sentence in a Scottish prison. We will continue to reiterate this position to the Scottish and Libyan authorities. And the President extends his deepest sympathies to those affected by that reprehensible act of terrorism, especially those families and friends of the victims of that tragic act. Thank you.

I also would draw your attention to the statement that was released this morning by Secretary of State Clinton on the release of Megrahi.

MR. BURTON: All right, with that, Erica.

Q Mr. Brennan, other than making your displeasure clear repeatedly, which you've done since the outset, are there any concrete steps that you can take or are taking?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, as I think I said, it is our view that Megrahi should serve out the remainder of his sentence in a Scottish prison, which would require his return to Scotland. Clearly, the prognosis of his near-term demise that prompted the decision by the Scottish executive to have this compassionate release -- and we certainly take umbrage at that reference to compassion, because Megrahi did not have any compassion at all for those victims -- so we are continuing to convey our sentiments to the Scottish authorities. We'll continue to call for his return to Scotland and that he serves out his prison sentence there.

Q But other than conveying your sentiments, is there anything concrete that you can do or are doing?

MR. BRENNAN: Clearly, this was a decision in the license for his release, which was an act by the Scottish authorities. We have conveyed to the Scottish authorities our position, and has Prime Minister Cameron, who was here, and this was an issue that came up during his recent visit. So we are continuing to make clear our position. I'll leave it at that.

Q And do you have any new information about any possible involvement by BP in this whole matter?

MR. BRENNAN: This act was looked at very carefully by the court that convicted Megrahi, and the culprit in this attack is very clear. And I will leave it, again, at that. Again, what we're focused on today is the regrettable decision of the Scottish authorities to release Megrahi.

MR. BURTON: All right, we're going to get right back after Alister.



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President Obama's Address on the End of the Combat Mission in Iraq



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August 31, 2010 3:19 PM EDT

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Q Mr. Brennan, I wonder if I could ask a question about Mr. Bout, Viktor Bout. Is that a subject you can talk to?

MR. BRENNAN: Viktor Bout, yes.

Q Viktor Bout. Does the administration have any concern that his extradition may yet hit an obstacle in getting him back quickly to the United States?

MR. BRENNAN: The Thai appellate court on 20 August upheld the extradition request, or concurred that he could be extradited to the United States. We appreciate very much that decision. Viktor Bout is somebody who for two decades was responsible for arms trafficking and supporting terrorist organizations on multiple continents -- South America, in Africa and in Asia. He was arrested in March of 2008. We have sought his extradition so he could be tried in New York. We are very pleased with the cooperation of Thai authorities. And we are looking forward to his expeditious return here.

This is something that a number of governments throughout the world believe is very important so that we're able to stop these illegal arms traffickers from carrying out their activities, which are undergirding the ability of terrorist organizations and other groups to carry out attacks worldwide.

Q Do you think there's any problem -- do you expect there to be any obstacle in him being speedily removed back to the United States?

MR. BRENNAN: The Thai appellate court overruled the decision of a lower court, so we are very pleased and we are very hopeful that this will be able to be carried out in a very short time.

MR. BURTON: Jake.

Q I was wondering, some of the critics -- or some of the supporters of the Islamic center, the proposed Islamic center in lower Manhattan, have said that the opposition to it could fuel anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. And I'm -- being that this has gone on now for several weeks, I'm wondering have you detected any of that? Have America's enemies been using this as a propaganda tool -- the opposition to the Islamic center?

MR. BRENNAN: We're staying focused on countering terrorist threats wherever they might develop. And there are a number of reasons that terrorist groups will point to, many of them unfounded. And indeed, we are continuing to prosecute the war against al Qaeda very effectively in many different parts of the world.

So we are continuing to stay focused on that. There are a number of opportunities that we have with our partners to continue to have success against al Qaeda. We really have had the opportunity over the past year to undercut a number of their capabilities, and we continue to do so.

So the debate over what's going on in New York City is something that I'm not really focused on at this point. I'm focused on making sure that we can keep the American people safe and prevent these terrorist groups from carrying out attacks here or anywhere.

Q But I'm not asking to wade into the debate. I'm just wondering if -- because supporters of the project have said opposition to it will affect the efforts at counterterrorism by the U.S. Have you seen any evidence of that?

MR. BRENNAN: I have not seen evidence of that to date.

Q And in terms of Megrahi, I'm wondering -- there have been diplomatic efforts with Libya in the past few years -- I'm wondering if that is at all a means to urge the government, either by stepping back from the diplomatic inroads that have been made, or using the new relationship in some way to get him back in that Scottish prison.

MR. BRENNAN: We've continued to have effective and productive diplomatic exchanges with Libya on a variety of issues, including counterproliferation -- counterterrorism as well. We will use those diplomatic channels to convey our sentiments on a broad range of issues, to include Mr. al-Megrahi.

MR. BURTON: Chip. Oh, Jake.

Q Is there anything you wanted to say about the announcement today that Secretary of State Clinton has made about the peace talks -- the Arab and the Palestinian and Israeli --

MR. BURTON: No, nothing in particular. Obviously we're pleased that this is something that the United States -- with President Obama, to Secretary Clinton, to George Mitchell -- have been working on for a very long time, and we're obviously pleased it's moving forward.

If you have anything to add?

MR. BRENNAN: No.

MR. BURTON: Chip.

Q If I could ask Mr. Brennan on that exact topic, on the Middle East. When the parties come to the table, do you see any change in the kinds of threats and the number of threats you see from around the world? Is that

something that's encouraging, from your point of view?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, I think Senator Mitchell said it quite well at his press briefing this morning, that what we can't do is to allow extremist militants and those who are opposed to peace in the Middle East prevent these negotiations from moving forward. And for too long I think the extremists have been able to hold certain activities hostage because of their acts.

We are going forward with this with a strong sense that these talks can succeed. There is a commitment now by the Israelis to participate in it. We're hoping that the Palestinians are going to agree shortly to participate as well. And so what we need to do is to make sure that all sides remain committed for these talks over the next year.

And there may be militant groups out there, terrorist organizations that will point to this as yet one more reason for them to carry out their cowardice acts. But I know the United States is not going to be deterred from its role in facilitating these talks, direct talks between the parties. And I certainly hope and I know the President and this administration hopes that all sides will remain committed, irrespective of what these extremist organizations or militant groups might say or even do.

Q Will you be briefing the President every day here? And do you do those in person? Is it multiple times a day, or just one time a day? How much time do you expect to spend with him every day?

MR. BRENNAN: I briefed the President this morning. I flew up with the President yesterday on the plane. Any time that I have anything that I need to convey to the President, I can do it very quickly. I can be in touch with him a number of times during the day. And I anticipate that that will be the same throughout the course of the time here on the island.

Q And most of that is face to face?

MR. BRENNAN: I was out at the farm this morning, but a lot of it is -- whatever means that I have in order to get information to him as quickly as possible, if there is a need for that, I have that ability to do so.

Q And the topics include? (Laughter.)

MR. BRENNAN: All the things that you would expect to be included in a national security briefing.

Q Can I follow on that, please?

MR. BURTON: And probably a lot you don't expect.

Q Like what?

Q I'm completely serious -- is the threshold by which you decide, "Well, I need to talk to the President," change at all because we're in vacation mode here?

MR. BRENNAN: There are a number of issues that the President is following very, very closely, and expects to be kept informed about developments on those issues. I am working very closely with those who are at the White House, with our team here, to make sure that I have full visibility into those national security issues. And then I will make the determination, in consultation with others. General Jones is also involved in moving forward on national security issues. And so what I need to do is make the decision about whether something needs to get to the President immediately, or whether it's something that I can wait until the next scheduled briefing for.

Q Abdulmutallab happened while he was on vacation in Hawaii. Is there any disadvantage to having the President on vacation when something like that happens?

MR. BRENNAN: Communication systems are very robust. We can move information at the speed of light. We can get to him very easily here. I have immediate access if I need that. So if there were to be some type of event that would require immediate engagement with the President, I am certain I can do it as quickly as I could do back in Washington.

MR. BURTON: And I would just add to your question, Mike, that along with the national security briefings that the President is receiving, he also has quite robust economic daily briefings that he's receiving from his team. And he's always picking up the phone and calling his advisors and folks to talk about the economy as well, especially when there's new news to be had.

Dan.

Q There is this level of optimism that these talks, direct talks, will succeed. What is the basis for that? I mean, what's going to be making -- what's making it different this time around?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, as you know, Senator Mitchell has been involved of the past year plus in engaging with the parties -- the Israelis, the Palestinians and others -- to lay the groundwork and the framework for these talks to be able to take place.

There is a feeling, I think, within this administration that the parties have a strong commitment to forging peace that

can endure in the region. There are a number of issues that are outstanding. It was made very clear that there are no preconditions to these talks.

But again, Senator Mitchell has worked day and night for quite a while, working with the parties involved in this, and the sense is that the time is right to move forward. I think Senator Mitchell said no time is ever perfect or right, but what we need to do is to make sure that we're able to move forward with a sense of commitment and dedication.

And the President has made very clear that peace in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians, is central to U.S. interests but it's also central to the security interests of the Palestinian people, the Israelis, as well as the region as a whole. So we are very hopeful.

MR. BURTON: Let me come back to you.

Major.

Q Mr. Brennan, a couple things. The New York Times reported this morning that the U.S. has reassured Israel on the immediacy or the timeline it believes a nuclearized Iran could pose to Israel. Can you comment on whether or not you endorse that point of view, how that point of view has been conveyed, what reaction there has been from Israeli officials?

MR. BRENNAN: I'm not going to address any Israeli assessments of the Iranian nuclear program, nor will I address in open forum here our assessments of that, other than to say that we are very concerned about Iran's continued refusal to engage constructively with the P5-plus-1, to demonstrate through actions that its nuclear program is peaceful.

And we are continuing to move forward, applying pressure to Iran, to make sure that they're able to see that it is in their own interest and to their benefit that they deal constructively with the international community on this very important issue.

So clearly we are very concerned about Iran's continued activity in this area. But again, I will leave the assessments sort of off the table at this point.

Q Well, the reason I ask is when we checked at State, CIA, the Pentagon, they said you've got to go to the White House on this story, that this is a White House action taken on behalf of a White House assessment of either new intelligence or a new appraisal of where Iran is technologically. Is there anything the White House has detected that can be described even generically as new and important as it understands the timeline of this potential threat?

MR. BRENNAN: We are encouraged by the international support for the sanctions regime. We also, though, realize that in addition to maintaining that sanctions regime on Iran, that we need to stay focused on preventing Iran from having a nuclear capability. That is what our engagement has been with regional players, with our allies in the region and in the international community. And we'll continue to do that.

So we are looking at this issue very carefully. We're monitoring it carefully as well. We're continuing to stay in very close dialogue with countries in the region, including Israel, on the status of Iran's nuclear program. We'll continue to do so. But again, what we need to do is to make sure that we're able to convince Iran, with the international community, that it needs to abide by its international obligations -- something that it has to date refused to do.

Q You mentioned you're constantly monitoring counterterrorism threats. I wondered if you've had time since the al-Shabaab took responsibility for the attack at the end of -- or near the end of the World Cup, what you've learned, if anything, more about that? And do you -- as some counterterrorism analysts now suspect that was kind of a breakout action on their part, to take them out of what would be a confined area of terrorist activities to one that's more broadly -- that, one, makes them much more of a -- if not a regional player, perhaps a more lethal player outside of the particular confines it had operated in earlier.

MR. BRENNAN: Well, obviously we're very concerned about the demonstrated ability of certain groups in that region -- al-Shabaab had claimed responsibility for that attack -- to carry out attacks outside of Somalia, and concern that it might indicate that there would be a broader effort on the part of some elements of al-Shabaab to carry out attacks.

We're working very closely with Ugandan officials. The investigation is continuing. We're working very diligently to prevent similar types of attacks. Al Qaeda has had a presence in Africa for many years. We're concerned about the relationship that might exist between certain elements within al-Shabaab and al Qaeda. Al Qaeda carried out two attacks against U.S. embassies in Africa over a decade ago.

So clearly, what we need to do is to continue to work with our African partners to maintain pressure on militant groups within Africa that are aligning with al Qaeda. But the attack in Kampala was exceptionally tragic and unfortunate. But what we have done as a result of that is to redouble our efforts as far as working with our African partners in this area, including with the TFG, the transitional government in Somalia.

This is something that requires continued focus and efforts, and what we're trying to do is to make sure that we're able to focus on these issues, whether they take place in Africa or taking place in South Asia, Yemen, or other areas. Working with our partners, building capacity, allowing them to take the lead in fighting these terrorist organizations and preventing these attacks is a real priority of this administration.

Q Back to the Middle East, (inaudible) flesh out the President's role going forward, not the role that he's played thus far in getting the parties to the table -- going forward. I understand there's a dinner, for example, the day before. To what extent will he be involved, hands on, in these bridging proposals or stepping in when there are disagreements, and into the direct talks themselves?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, as you said, the President will be hosting a dinner on September 1st. He also will be holding bilateral meetings with the leaders who will be coming here to participate in the talks. The talks themselves will take place on September 2nd. These will be direct talks. As we said, the United States is playing the role of facilitator in this regard. We talked about a one-year timeframe, looking at making progress in that time. And this is the relaunching of those direct talks. And so the process is now ahead of us. The engagement and involvement of the United States is going to stay strong and sustained and at a high level. And the President's engagement and involvement in the future in these talks will be determined by developments as we go forward.

Q Can I follow on the Middle East?

MR. BURTON: Sure.

Q You say that there's no preconditions, but has there been any kind of indication or promise from the Israelis about extending this settlement moratorium?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, I think as was said this morning by Secretary Clinton, as well as by Senator Mitchell, that the United States' position is that we want to make sure that the environment in the region is conducive to making progress on these very fundamental issues that lie in front of us as far as being able to forge a peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The settlement issue is one that the United States government has spoken out on in the past. We have our position on that. We've made that position known. And as I said, what we want to do is to make sure that there is going to be an environment that is as conducive to making the progress that we need to make, and that means an environment on both sides that each side then can look to the other and gain additional trust and confidence that there is this commitment to moving forward in a very constructive and productive way.

MR. BURTON: Carol.

Q To follow on Mike's question, can you talk a little bit about what the President is going to ask of Mubarak and King Abdullah? And particularly, if you could, in regards to Hamas, does he want to see new elections --

MR. BRENNAN: President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan are the heads of state of the two Arab states that have peace treaties with Israel. And therefore, their involvement in this and encouragement of the Palestinians is important.

There has been I think extensive consultation, not just with those two leaders but also with other Arab leaders, to ensure that Palestinians feel as though they can move forward with confidence knowing that they have that support from their Arab partners.

So when the Palestinians come, and President Mubarak and King Abdullah come, it is with a sense that this is something that is important not just for the Palestinian and Israeli people but also for the region as a whole.

As far as what will be asked of them, this is something, again, that is going to move forward as direct talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The United States, Egypt, Jordan, others -- the Quartet -- are all going to be helping both sides to bridge the differences that exist right now. And again, it's going to be one -- a role of encouragement, making sure that the parties are able to move forward knowing that the international community supports their efforts to reach a peace agreement.

MR. BURTON: Scott.

Q Yes. Mr. Brennan, you talked about the importance of resolving this conflict of security of the Palestinians and the Israelis. There's also been a change of focus, I believe, by the administration, that it very much is in the United States' national security interest, given its longstanding support of Israel, at a time when the President is reaching out to the Islamic world. How important is resolving this to -- directly to the American national security?

MR. BRENNAN: I think it's been the United States' position for decades that continuation of hostilities in the Middle East is inimical to U.S. interests, and that's why we have been an active player over the years -- instrumental in the peace treaty that was reached between Israel and Egypt; heavily involved in the engagement between Israel and Jordan as well.

We recognize that it is not just in the national security interests of Israel and the Palestinians. It's in the national security interests of the neighboring states of Lebanon, Syria, other Arab countries, as well as with the international community. It also is something that unfortunately has been used by some organizations to try to rationalize their acts of violence, which under no circumstances can be justified. But we recognize that the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian divide and disagreements can be a source of problems in the region that are directly -- directly affect U.S. interests.

So this is something that there has been a longstanding U.S. commitment to engage with the Israelis and Palestinians on. Previous administrations have dedicated much effort and energy to this, and the Obama administration is carrying this tradition on. Senator Mitchell has done wondrous work over the last year and a half to lay the ground work so that today's announcement and hopefully the convening of these talks can take place at the

beginning of September.

Q Can you talk a little bit more about how the President is staying on top of economic issues on vacation? Who's briefing him in person? Are these briefings longer because he's not face to face with advisors?

MR. BURTON: I would say that most of the information that he's getting is on paper. His economic team back in Washington is sending on memos and important updates on what's happening on the economy as they happen. I know that he spent some time this morning with some of those economic memos in particular.

And while he's here he'll of course pick up the phone and call members of his economic team, and if at any point during the trip it makes sense to read them out, I'll do that. But I would say that that's the way key way he's getting his information.

Q And also, the Tax Relief Coalition, this group of a thousand companies, are saying that letting tax cuts expire is going to hurt business, small businesses in particular. Do you have anything to say about that?

MR. BURTON: I can't respond to the specific comments from this group that I'm just now hearing about. But I will say the President's feelings on this are that the people who need relief right now are middle-class families, and what we need to do is get help to small businesses so that we're creating an environment where those businesses can create jobs.

The Wall Street Journal yesterday had a report that the President commented on, showing that the big problem in our economy is that the people who can create the most jobs aren't able to get the resources they need in order to bring on new folks, pay for benefits and that sort of thing.

So that's why the President has been talking about the small business bill. That's why he thinks that as soon as the Senate gets back, Republican obstruction needs to stop, they need to get it done, and we need to keep this economy moving in the right direction.

Jackie.

Q One more?

MR. BURTON: I'm sorry?

Q Back here?

MR. BURTON: Yes, Knoller.

Q Mr. Brennan --

MR. BURTON: Is this on the same topic?

Q Say again?

MR. BURTON: Is this on the same topic?

Q Sure.

MR. BURTON: Okay, because I'd already called on Jackie. So it's awkward now. (Laughter.)

Q I didn't mean to interrupt. I thought she was done.

MR. BURTON: Okay, one quick second.

Jackie.

Q What contacts, if any, have there been with Senator Kerry amid his trip to Afghanistan? Is there any reaction to the statement that Hamid Karzai has agreed to let the anti-corruption probe go forward independently?

MR. BRENNAN: Obviously the administration is staying very close in touch with Senator Kerry. We're encouraged by the Afghan government's and President Karzai's continued interest in rooting out corruption in that country, which stands in the way of Afghanistan being able to realize its full potential.

So this is something that there is regular and constant interaction with our embassy inside of Kabul, but also with Senator Kerry as he has gone out to the region in Afghanistan -- as well as the situation in Pakistan, the very tragic flooding there, and the additional U.S. aid that is going to Pakistan. This is something that Senator Kerry has been also very much involved in.

Q Have you spoken to Senator Kerry?

MR. BRENNAN: I have not personally, no.

Q What is he -- who is he in touch with, with the administration?

MR. BRENNAN: A range of individuals. I would -- on any given day he would be in touch with different types of people.

Q But mostly over there in the embassy and --

MR. BRENNAN: Well, with the people out there in the region, but also he is a regular interlocutor of General Jones and other individuals at the White House to keep him fully informed and abreast of developments here, but also to make sure that we have an understanding of the engagements and discussions that he has had in the region.

MR. BURTON: All right, Mark.

Q Mr. Brennan, I know Russia is one of the Quartet. Can you describe Russia's role in bringing about these -- relaunch of the peace talks? Is Russia playing a helpful role?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, the Quartet's statement is -- provides some additional context for the relaunching of these direct talks. Russia also has a very strong interest in seeing the Israelis and the Palestinians reach understandings and agreements on the issues that lie between them.

So Russia has been engaged in this effort. The President and other senior officials within this administration continue to engage with the Russians. Senator Mitchell pointed out that Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia played a very helpful role in getting to this point. So we see the Russians as partners in this effort as part of the Quartet.

Q Bill --

MR. BURTON: Yes.

Q Vice President Biden --

Q We're not done with him, right?

MR. BURTON: We're not. (Laughter.)

Q Okay.

Q On the last day of the general session of the DNC in St. Louis, Vice President Biden gave a speech today in which he said a couple things I want to get your reaction to, if possible. One, he projected that Democrats would retain control of the House and the Senate. He said "If it weren't illegal," he would "make book on it." He also described the previous administration as "presiding over a Ponzi scheme that masqueraded as a vision." And he also said that this is not -- "this ain't," rather, "your father's Republican party." He called it the past -- or the new Republican agenda in the midterm elections "the past on steroids." Does the White House agree with these characterizations of the opposition party, and does it fit within the overall matrix of trying to rise above the day-to-day tit-for-tat of politics?

MR. BURTON: Well, I can tell you I didn't see the Vice President's speech in total.

Q Do you wish you had?

MR. BURTON: It sounds like it was a great speech, but far be it for me to comment on what the Vice President says. He obviously speaks for the administration. As it relates to -- what was the first quote that you had there?

Q "If it weren't illegal," he would "make book on" Democrats retaining control of both the House and the Senate.

MR. BURTON: Just on that specific point, and I'm sure that you guys could probably get a side bet going on that if you wanted to, but --

Q I'm not a betting man.

MR. BURTON: I've heard differently. (Laughter.) The President's view is that --

Q About the House and Senate. (Laughter.)

MR. BURTON: These midterm elections coming up give the American people a choice about what direction they want to go in. Do they want to keep moving forward with these policies that have helped us to make progress and move the economy in the right direction, help us to make progress to make it stronger to create an environment where people are creating jobs again, or are we going to go back to the policies of the past that have got us into this crisis?

So of course the President agrees with the notion that given that choice, the American people are going to continue to want to move forward.

Q Is he comfortable with calling the Bush administration someone who presided over a Ponzi scheme that masqueraded as a vision?

MR. BURTON: Like I said, I haven't seen the speech in and of itself, but far be it for me to comment on something the Vice President said out of context.

All right, the end?

Q For Mr. Brennan.

MR. BURTON: Okay, Chip.

Q On a different topic, there have been reports from some quarters that there is a thawing relationship between al Qaeda and Iran, and there are some concerns that the peace process and this talk of Israel attacking Iran could drag them closer together. Is that a concern of you and the White House?

MR. BRENNAN: I think we're concerned about any efforts by al Qaeda to try to forge relationships with either other groups or with nation states. And we are concerned about certain activities in that region. Iran does border Afghanistan. There is a flow of individuals in that area. We are expressing our concerns to the countries in the region about the threat that al Qaeda poses. There clearly are, though, some confessional differences between al Qaeda, a Sunni organization, and Iran, which is mainly Shia. But that doesn't mean that we are not looking very carefully at any types of relationships that might exist between al Qaeda and other entities, be they groups or states.

Q Is there a growing relationship between the two?

MR. BRENNAN: I wouldn't characterize it that way. I would just underscore the importance of making sure that we're able to maintain our monitoring of al Qaeda's efforts to try to establish footholds in other areas of the world, as continued pressure is put on them in their safe havens.

MR. BURTON: Jake.

Q Franklin Graham told CNN that President Obama -- the reason so many Americans seem to believe President Obama is a Muslim is because he was born a Muslim, his father was Muslim, the seed of Muslim has passed through the father, he's renounced Islam, he's accepted Jesus, but the confusion is because his father is a Muslim. Since he's a major religious figure in this country, I was wondering if you guys had any response to that.

MR. BURTON: Far be it for me to comment on someone's characterization of what some people said in a poll. I can't say why people necessarily change their mind in this poll. I can't say why folks even answer the question when pollsters call. But the President is a committed Christian. I think that the American people know that. And Franklin Graham is certainly entitled to his opinion.

Yes.

Q Can I ask you something quick about health care, these allies of the White House that are switching their focus on how they're presenting the discussion off of reduced costs and on to --

MR. BURTON: Sure.

Q Can you comment on that? Is that something that you -- the White House is supportive of, thinks is a good idea? Will this be the President's message --

MR. BURTON: Is the White House supportive of the slideshow?

Q Well, the notion, the idea, the messaging.

MR. BURTON: Well, what we've seen at the White House is that the American people want the health care reform to be given a chance to succeed, but know that -- and we're making sure that folks do know that -- that health care reform includes things like making sure that kids can still get health insurance, even if they have a preexisting condition; that young adults can stay on their parents' health care for a longer time than they could previously; that consumers are protected.

There's been a range of polling on this issue, and you see different things in different polls. But overall -- and especially when you look at the specific elements -- people want these reforms to succeed. And if people are given the choice between letting these things move forward, letting them succeed, versus what I've heard from the Republicans, which is that they want to repeal it, people are going to -- people will choose to make sure that this moves forward and that our health care system is in much better shape; that insurance companies aren't in the driver's seat, and that people are covered and have access to care.

Q Will the President be talking about it in these terms of improving upon the legislation, or are we going to see him doing that?

MR. BURTON: I mean, I haven't seen the entire slideshow. I've seen the reports about it. The President is going to continue to talk about it the way that he has talked about it, which is that we settled a hundred-year-old question

on whether or not we were going to have health care reform in this country, and we're going to move forward with implementing it.

Q Bill, back on just the President and his faith in that poll, one of the reasons cited by many is that we don't often see the President going to church on Sunday. Where is the First Family in their decision to find a congregation? Is that still an active search, or have they sort of settled into a way of worship that they do now?

MR. BURTON: Well, as -- the President has addressed this some, that by the President choosing a church, it does put undue pressure on that congregation, and it makes it a lot harder for folks to get into the church and to worship without the glare of all you guys coming along with them to be a part of that service. He prays every day. He talks to a wide range of pastors and religious leaders periodically. He's in contact with his religious advisor every single day, Joshua DuBois. And he's going to continue to get that kind of spiritual guidance when he can. When he's up at Camp David he obviously attends a chapel there, as we've said.

And you'll see him in church again. I mean, he's been to church as President. He'll go to church once again. But he is getting spiritual guidance on a regular basis.

Q Okay. And on a lighter side, he bought the Franzen novel today. What's he reading? Did he read the corrections? What's he interested in -- in downtime here in times we're not seeing him?

MR. BURTON: I don't know exactly what he's going to read. I think that book is probably a good -- is probably a good guess. "Freedom." But I don't know for sure. I think that he's -- he brought a series of books. I'm not sure which ones he's going to read, or even all the books that he brought. But while he's here he's probably going to spend some time playing some basketball out where he's staying, going to the beach. I have a feeling he's going to get some ice cream. He's a big fan of the ice cream on this island.

So I think it's going to be just like last year where he'll wake up in the morning and kind of decide what he and the family are going to do that day.

Q He also bought "The Red Pony." Was that for him?

MR. BURTON: I appreciate the question. I'll have to get back to you. It wasn't.

Q Do the girls have any friends or cousins here with them?

MR. BURTON: Not that I know of.

Did you have a question?

Q I was just curious, is there any contrast between the vacation this year and last year, in your mind? I mean, is he more interested in sort of staying closer to home? He didn't go out last night. I know that was just the first night, but the family had been separated over a period of time. Is there any sort of different aim for this vacation in comparison to last year's?

MR. BURTON: Well, I would say the difference between last year's vacation and this year's is that since his vacation, the automotive industry is back on its feet, health care reform has passed, and the economy is now moving in a different direction than it was moving in before. But his goals for his time here are the same.

Q Mr. Brennan, do you get any down time, or is it all work and no play?

MR. BURTON: Look at this guy. Do you think he's got down time? (Laughter.)

MR. BRENNAN: I don't do down time.

Q That's your casual outfit? (Laughter.)

Q Back on the mosque, Governor Paterson has suggested a land swap so that it could be moved further away from Ground Zero. Any reaction from the White House?

MR. BURTON: Nope.

Thank you.

END

1:38 P.M. EDT

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