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Friday, 30 August 2013 13:41

Press Briefing: Latest Developments - August 29, 2013

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Press Briefing
Istanbul, Turkey
August 29, 2013

TRANSCRIPT:

MR. SALEH: We want everybody to be clear on what is happening in Syria for the past two and a half years. Bashar Al Assad decided to use lethal force- the thirteenth largest army in the world against innocent civilians who protested, who asked for the freedom; who asked for the establishment of a democratic and free society in Syria. Bashar believe that he can Syrian people into submission- force them into submission, but he has clearly failed to do so.

About a year ago, the Assad regime decided to start using chemical weapons against innocent civilians. At this point, and prior to the last attack- prior to the last attack, Assad regime have used chemical weapons in thirteen well documented locations. The regime used chemical weapons in Aleppo, in Khan Al Assal, in Saraqeb in Idlib. It used chemical weapons in Khalidiya in Homs. It used it in Adra, and then last Wednesday, the Assad regime decided to use chemical weapons at a larger scale and targeted the eastern and western Gouta causing the death of over 1.360 people- causing injuries to anywhere between on the low end estimate about 4.000 to 7.000 people. Also I want to remind everybody that first responders and medical relief doctors in the area administered 25.000 atropine shots in the area. Otherwise, we would have had a much larger humanitarian crisis at hand. We know that the regime is responsible for these attacks. We have sources within the regime itself who are sympathetic to the Revolution who have given us detailed information on the sequence of events, and how the chemical- the decision to make- to start- to use chemical weapons was made- the exact timing these chemical missiles were launched, and the specific areas that they hit.

We understand that it is vital to prove the regime's responsibility to the wider world, and to that end, we have collected evidence and samples ourselves, and we made them available to different world governments and the United Nations. We have supported from the very first days that chemical weapons were used. We supported and called for UN inspectors to move into Syria- to move freely around the country. And we have always said let the evidence show who- whether chemical weapons were used, and more importantly who used those chemical weapons. And I think everybody have seen the media reports at this point that shows the different intelligence agencies have very solid evidence that the Assad regime is responsible for using those chemical weapons. The weight of evidence that already exists, not to mention the regime's reluctance, until this point, to allow the UN inspectors to move freely around the country- until now and until this moment, the regime refuses to allow the inspectors to move freely. It monitors them very closely. It allows them to only to go to three different locations in addition to the last location where chemical weapons were used. It also- in the protocol that is signed with the United Nations- it required the UN to answer one question only; whether chemical weapons were used, but it refused to allow UN inspectors to answer the most significant questions; who used those chemical weapons. We support the international community's effort to protect Syrian citizens from a murderous regime that thinks that it can gas all of Syrians if it is not stopped. The regime's capacity to carry out such chemical attacks must be stopped. We want the regime to be stopped from using chemical weapons; killing civilians using other measures, and to be held accountable for all the crimes it had committed.

While the UN inspectors were in the Gouta- the eastern western Gouta of Damascus- the regime carried out two massacres; one in Aleppo, in Aroum, and another massacre in Idlib, in Ariha. This is at the same time the regime claims that it is committed to a political solution. At the same time we have issued a report- a press release yesterday alerting our international partners, world governments, and different organizations that are concerned with human life to the dire situation to the people arrested by the regime. We have hundreds of thousands of people who are sent to jail without trial. The regime is moving them into some military installations that can be targets for any attacks if carried by the world. When the foreign minister of Bashar Assad, Mr. Moualim, Walid Moualim gave his press conference, he specifically picked and mentioned a couple of cities and neighborhoods in Damascus that are populated by Syrian Christians. The Assyrian Network for human rights issued a press release stating that it had received valid information concerning a pre-planned attempt by the Assad regimen to use chemical weapons against those neighborhoods. This is a dangerous- this would be a dangerous step by the Assad regime, and we hope that the world understands the type of criminal who are- who we are dealing with.

Yesterday, Mr. Al Jafari, the UN ambassador of the Assad regime held a press conference that was filled with absolute lies trying to confuse public opinion in the rest of the world. He forgot to mention that the Assad regime is one of the few regimes in the world that continues to have biological and chemical weapons. He forgot to mention that the Assad regime has the ability to make those weapons, has the willingness to use those chemical weapons, as the events have proven. Mr. Al Jafari also ignored the fact that UN inspectors were not allowed to move out of their hotel for five days unit- and during that time, the Assad regime continuously bombarded the areas and shelled the areas where the UN inspectors were supposed to travel to. He also talked about the International Treaty for the Ban of Chemical Weapons and mentioned that the US have not signed on that treaty forgetting that the Assad regime is one of the few regimes in the world that was very forceful and outspoken against signing such treaty.



It is very clear to us, even if we put the issue of chemical weapons aside, we have about 2000 martyrs falling heroes as a result of using chemical weapons in Syria, and we have about 100.000 even 108.000 people who have died as a result of the regime using its ballistic missile capabilities, scud missiles, air force, tanks. It is very clear that the regime is very well intent on killing all Syrians and doing all it can to remain in control in Syria. There is an overabundance of evidence that this regime is responsible for crimes against humanity and for causing a dire humanitarian circumstance in Syria. And that, if the world does not act to stop this regime, there is no alternative, and Assad will continue killing innocent civilians. With that, I am going to start the Q and A- the Q and A session.

QUESTION: Muahamed Sheikh Yousif, Anadolu News Agency. You talked about samples the Syrian Coalition has gathered. The UN team is going to leave Syria on Saturday. Can you tell us what kind of evidence have you gathered and how are you going to be able to hand it to the UN team after it leaves Syria.

MR.SALEH: From the first few hours that the regime used chemical weapons against innocent civilians, we have communicated with Syrian Coalition members who live in the countryside of Damascus. We have a couple of members who live there. We have communicated with the office- the medical relief office of Gouta- the United Medical Relief Office of Gouta, and this is the office that looks over all the medical efforts- medical first responders in Gouta, and we have asked them to collect samples according to international standards. Those samples were sent outside of Syria to our contacts in neighboring countries. We have those samples. However, since the UN inspectors were able to go into Gouta, they spent enough hours in Gouta. Our contacts there, some of the Syrian Coalition members were actually with them as they were moving from one city to the next. We believe that the UN inspectors have enough evidence, enough samples to show a couple of things; one, whether chemical weapons were used, and secondly who used those chemical weapons, and we hope to see those questions answered in the very near future.

QUESTION: Where did you- hi- where did you send the samples, and who is processing them because Afhad said that they are not- that they have not arrived.

MR.SALEH: Who said that sorry?

QUESTION: Sorry, I forgot the... (inaudible).

MR.SALEH: We have sent them. What I can say is that we have sent them to a neighboring country. I do not want to mention the country, and we have actually talked to several organizations to ensure that these samples were collected according to international standards. So if different governments want to use them, they are available. However, like I mentioned, since the UN inspectors are there, they have collected enough samples. We do not see a need to use our samples, and nonetheless, they are available in, actually, a couple of neighboring countries.

QUESTION: Barack Obama said that the military intervention will not aim to change the regime. What do you think of that?

MR.SALEH: Mr. Obama spoke very clearly. The Assad regime committed a crime against humanity by using chemical weapons. We are talking about the use of chemical weapons in the 21st century. Chemical weapons were banned in 1925 long long time ago. No one would have imagined that chemical weapons would be used in this day and age. The Assad regime must be punished for the use- for its use of chemical weapons. We understand that. We understand that the international community must act to respond to the use of chemical weapons. We are not- we understand that the strikes, if the decision is made to carry them out because President Obama was very clear in his speech. He is yet to make that decision, and we understand that fully. It is not going to be about bringing change to the regime. It is going to be about stopping the use of chemical weapons again, and that is something that we understand. We believe it is a step in the right direction.

QUESTION: Ahmad Zakaria, from Radio Al Kul. Since you have evidence that Assad's regime has used chemical weapons, did you ask to put Assad's name in the list for those wanted for The Hague? Also what have you done to protect the detained in Assad's prisons. Thank you.

MR.SALEH: Last Monday, there was a meeting for the core 11 or what is called the London Group of the Friend of Syria. The meeting was attended by the presidential committee of the Syrian Coalition. It was also attended, at the diplomatic level, by ambassadors from the different eleven countries. What we have told the countries attending the meeting that it is very clear that the Assad regime have taken a very bold step by using chemical weapons against innocent civilians. We all know that he used those chemical weapons. He has crossed that "red line"- left it behind him a few miles back. And this very bold step by the Assad regime requires a very bold response from the international community. What we are asking for. We are asking for, first, to bring those who committed this crime against Syrians to justice, number two to protect Syrians from Assad's capabilities of using chemical weapons against Syrians again. We did- we did not get into details. Let me repeat this. We have made many many demands in the past. The international community knows our position, but at this point, we are not making any specific demands. We have said you need to protect innocent civilians; show us what you can do. And that is what we are following up with different countries to do at this point.

QUESTION: It is reported that the US attack may be a (inaudible) just by sending a warning to Assad's regime. So is it enough for you? And on the other hand, once that kind of the western attack started, do not you feel (inaudible) of the retaliation by Assad regime. Just the kind of western attack may give Assad the pretext to suppress more innocent people.

MR.SALEH: I think, one of the options that President Obama is considering a limited response to the international community- sorry a limited response to the Assad regime. He had made that very clear. Ultimately, the response, and as President Obama had made it very clear, is not about to bring regime change as we mentioned in a different question. We understand that, and what we are asking for again, at this point in time from this response, is to protect innocent civilians- protect Syrians because if the international community does not act right now, you can expect, for sure, that Assad will see that as a green light to commit even more crimes against Syrians. Remember, the very first attacks that the Assad regime carried against innocent civilians in Syria, we have had anywhere between 20 to 100 people- a hundred casualties. Now, we are talking about 1.360 casualties. If the world does not send Assad a very clear message that he cannot continue using chemical weapons, you can expect Assad to escalate his attacks. We have a grave worry. We understand that the Assad regime has no ability to respond to any move, if the international community- if the international community decides to carry out strikes against Assad, even if they are limited. Assad has limited military capability, limited intelligence capability outside, which means that the Assad's response is going to be directed against innocent Syrians. He is going to use- he is going to have more crimes against

Syrians, and that is something that we are very worried about- that is something that we have mentioned to our international partners as well.

QUESTION: On Monday meeting, what intelligence did you share with representatives of the eleven countries? Do you have satellite image or something else I mean? And my second question is; did you talk about the targets to strike in that Monday's meeting? Did you have any request- any demand- or did they share about it?

MR.SALEH: The Monday meeting that we have held was a diplomatic level meeting with the foreign- foreign ministries. We do not typically discuss military questions during these meetings because you are meeting with foreign ministers or diplomats so they do not get involved in military details. However, we did release during that meeting a very detailed outline, based on the intelligence reports that we have received- the specific timeline, the specific brigade that were responsible for loading the chemical weapons- for launching the chemical weapons. This intelligence report was released to media yesterday in both Arabic and English so it should be available, or somebody from the Media Office can make that available to you. And this is something is being closely examined by different countries because it is yet another way to prove that the Assad regime had committed those massacres. We did not discuss specific targets during those- I know there are some media reports that there were targets discussed. We did not discuss any targets during those meetings.

QUESTION: So, what did they tell you?

MR.SALEH: There was a lot of discussion that- let me kind of address that, and what the discussion was about. The meeting is only about 3 hours. It is not a full day- full day meeting, but there is a lot of focus that yes they have agreed that the Assad regime have committed crimes using chemical weapons, and it is a crime against humanity. We are talking about how do we actually prove that. So it will become generally accepted to everybody that surely the Assad regime, because we have enough intelligence- our partners have enough intelligence, but how do we actually ensure that this is a very important decision for the rest of the world to make, so how you are a hundred per cent certain, or ninety nine per cent certain- it is impossible to reach a hundred per cent certainty that the Assad regime was responsible for the use of chemical weapons. And what we have communicated to them is you need to respond, and there was an agreement that such act by Assad cannot go unpunished. There was discussion about after we go through this process-about the international response whatever it might be, what is next? Because ultimately, we want to stop the bloodshed in Syria. No one is interested in continuing to see hundreds of Syrians getting killed every day. And we continued our commitment to a political solution. This is something that we have made very clear. We are committed to a political solution, but a regime that uses chemical weapons- a regime that after the use of chemical weapons, and while the UN inspectors are there, continues to shell eastern and western Gouta- a regime that commits two massacres on the same day that the inspectors are going to Gouta, is a regime that is not serious about political solution. We hear what Assad say, but also we see what he does.

QUESTION: did- sorry- did (inaudible) but I think they told you to prepare about the conference for Geneva, right?

MR.SALEH: There was some discussion around the conference of Geneva. For us, again, we are going back to the point where we are committed to a political solution. This is something not off the table. However, before--

QUESTION: So you will still go to Geneva--

MR.SALEH: --before, Let me kind of be very clear on this. We have said we are committed to a political solution be it Geneva or not, but before we can talk about Geneva, we need to see the world's response. It is very difficult. Our first constituency is Syrians inside. It is very difficult for me to look at a mother who have just lost her children or a father who lost his family and tell him you know what I am going sit on the table with the guy who just killed your children. We want the world to respond. We understand that at the end, every conflict that you have in the world ends up with people sitting on the table. Look at World War One- World War Two; you end up sitting at the table, but you have to have the right circumstances. You have to have good will gesture from both sides, and we are willing whatever it takes to stop the bloodshed. We just need to have a serious effort from the Assad regime which we have not seen it.

QUESTION: Hello, my name is (inaudible), from Spanish Channel FM. There is a meeting this evening for the Turkish government between Mr. Erdogan and officials of security organs. Is there a representative for the Coalition who is going to attend that meeting? What are the issues that you discuss with the Turkish government, and what are your demands of the Turkish government?

MR.SALEH: This is the first time I hear of the meeting, and I am usually kept aware of these meetings. We do not typically attend those meetings. They are done at the Turkish government. But also we did not make any specific demands to the Turkish government. We have made our request, the one I mentioned, to the core 11- to the London group. The Turkish government is one of those- one of those countries. The Turkish people and the Turkish government have supported the Syrian people and the Syrian Revolution from the very first days. They have done above and beyond, and one must be grateful for all that they have done.

QUESTION: Are you seeing any signs that the Syrian government is moving potential targets into civilian areas or taking preparations for the attack that would concern you?

MR.SALEH: We have seen some reports about the government- the Assad government moving some of its military units to different locations; some to civilian areas. I have seen some of those reports. What I can say is that they are- we cannot confirm these reports at this point, but it is something to be expected. What is more interesting is the number of defections that took place in the last three to four days. This is something that we can actually confirm. We are going to be issuing a press statement about that because last night we have managed to confirm a large number of defections from some high ranking officers who have decided to remove their military cloths and put on civilian cloths and travel outside the country. There are plenty of those now in Lebanon. There are some of them who are travelling to other Arab countries, but we can confirm this, and we will be issuing a statement about that. What is important at this point- those officers serving in the Assad regime's army; they can see where this is going. I know a decision has not been made yet, but now they understand that if a decision is made, they will be putting their lives at risk, and they have to make that decision; whether they want to continue and lose their life or whether they want to abandon the Assad army and leave. We know the number of defections have slowed down because many many people defected from the Assad regime. An army that was 300.000 at some points. It has about 70.000 fighters in the latest estimate that we have- anywhere between 70 to 80. What is important is after the latest news that we hear about more defections. And from here we are going to be issuing a statement to those officers serving in the Assad army

asking them to put their weapons down, to go to their families. There is no need to risk their lives to protect a regime that will go away eventually. We understand that it is just a matter of time.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. (inaudible) why you do not demand them western countries to aim military intervention for regime change?

MR.SALEH: What we want- What is important for us is to do a couple of things; to stop the bloodshed in Syria, that is a top priority for us, but also it is very critical for us to bring to justice those who are responsible for killing the crimes. Now, we are working- we have our all efforts- we have the Free Syrian Army that is advancing. We talked in the last press conference - sorry the one before- that the Free Syrian Army advanced and had over 63 strategic victories on the ground. We believe that we are advancing on daily basis. The reports from the last three four days show that the FSA continues to advance even in light of the use of chemical weapons. We are also continuing the political process. We talked about a political solution- our commitment to that political solution. Now, the decision to deal with Bashar Al Assad is an international decision. Chemical weapons were used. A crime against humanity has been used- A crime against humanity was committed, and we want to see what the world's response will be to that crime. We are not going to get into specifics. We have asked for many many specific things over the last two and a half years. The international community understands what it needs to do. Ultimately, the way we will judge what happens is by those two parameters that I put; are Syrians going to be able to sleep at night without being afraid for their lives, and are we bringing Bashar to justice.

QUESTION: You have said 1.360 were killed in the chemical attacks. how many soldiers- Syrian freedom soldiers were killed among--

MR.SALEH: Among those that break down-

QUESTION: How many freedom soldiers are fighting inside Syria now? And (inaudible) now you have a decision (inaudible).

MR.SALEH: Very good.

QUESTION: And also, the military intervention by the West. How would it change the balance on the battlefield.

MR.SALEH: Very good. So of the 1360, we know that over half of them were women and children of the 1360. There are rough estimates that about twenty per cent of those who were killed were actual FSA Free Syrian Army soldiers. Remember that the Assad regime had a very coordinated attack. About an hour after the use of chemical weapons, the Assad regime pushed into specific areas, and for the first 45 hours, it managed to capture certain neighborhoods that were under the control of the FSA- after the use of chemical weapons. However, I was talking to one of the commanders late night early morning today, and in the last 5 days the FSA was able to push the Assad regime back to the early point that- you know- to the earlier points that were- that they were holding prior to the chemical attacks. In terms of the number of FSA, the FSA is anywhere between ninety to a hundred thousand fighters. The challenge is not in the numbers. The challenge for the FSA is the fact that they are heavily under-equipped compared to what the Assad regime has. Remember the Assad regime continues to receive arms shipments from Russia on weekly basis anywhere between 2 to 4 shipments per week. This is something- These are weapons that are being used to kill Syrians, and we have made continuous demands from the international community to put pressure on Russia to stop providing the Assad regime with more weapons to kill Syrians. I am going to take the last question. Again. Here we go.

QUESTION: It was a small- small one. You said that prisoners of conscience were being moved into areas that are about to be bombed. What evidence is there for that (inaudible)

MR.SALEH: We actually have fairly good contact with- we have very good contacts with some of these prisoners inside some of these jails. We keep on getting reports. We, just kind of to, we have had one reporter that cooperated with the Media Office was arrested in Deir EzZor, and I got a phone call from him, so I thought he was very happy. I thought he was released. And he told me now he was still at that point in time still a prisoner in Aleppo. He actually bribed the guards to get him a cellphone so he called us to say, well, you know, he still had some equipment for the Media Office that needs to be destroyed. So the situation there is not as strict. We are very aware there are some well-known prisoners that we keep track of as they move from one area to the next. We are very worried- we are very worried about those guys; especially well-known personalities. I want to remind you also there is Mr. Abdul Aziz Al Khaiyr. He is from Hiyat Al Tansiq. He has been arrested now and disappeared for the past 13-14 months. There are unconfirmed reports that he died. We are trying to our contacts to find where he is- his whereabouts- but he is the kind of person that the regime will not let anybody have access to, so it is extremely difficult to know. So the upper class- and like you know- those who are movers and shakers, those are kept very closely. But when we have 200 to 300 thousand prisoners, ultimately, you will find out information about their movements.

QUESTION: Are you able to release sort of where they were moved to. Also you just said--

MR.SALEH: Yeah just. There are-There are getting moved from one area to the next. Some we know that were moved to some of the military installations that could be target- that could be targeted- so we are worried about that.

Well, thank you for attending. As you see the situation is very fluid so we are going to try to keep you aware of the latest information. We are still have not decided on the frequency of this press conference. At this point, we are holding it on weekly basis, but we have got an overwhelming number of requests in the last couple of days. So if we see that this continues, we might be holding press conference at no regular interval. Thank you for coming.

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