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Weekly Press Conference: Latest Political and Military Developments - September 03, 2013

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Khalid Saleh
Head of Media Office
Weekly Press Conference
Istanbul, Turkey
September 3, 2013

TRANSCRIPT:

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) In today's press conference, we are going to discuss the latest political and military developments in Syria. Doctor Abdul Tawab Shahrour, head of the Forensic Medicine Authority in Aleppo was supposed to be here today. He, through his post, witnessed the crimes of Assad's regime; in particular what had happened in the town of Khan Al Assal which was one of the locations the UN investigation team was going to visit according to a protocol signed with the Assad's government.

We seize the opportunity now to call on the UN investigation team as well as Mr. Sellstrom to complete their investigation by interviewing Dr. Abdul Tawab Shahrour. Unfortunately, Dr. Abdul Tawab will not be here with us now due to security reasons. However, he will hold a press conference in the next few days, and he will present the evidence he has which shows the crimes of Assad's regime in the province of Aleppo, as I said.

We have received information about the use of chemical weapons. A number of intelligence reports that came out in the past few days indicate that the Assad regime has the largest stockpile of chemical weapons in the region. The Assad regime is the only party in Syria that has the technology and capability to launch rockets. It has the motive to use those rockets against defenseless civilians.

I want to remind you that during the past year chemical weapons were only used against areas under rebel control, and the victims of those attacks were either FSA fighters or innocent civilians who support the Syrian Revolution. Furthermore, head of the regime, on the 27th of Ramadan appeared on Syria's State T.V in a banquet threatening the social hosting environment supporting the Syrian Revolution; he explicitly said all kinds of weapons will be used against them.

What is important now is that we have received confirmed intelligence reports, from members inside Assad's Army, saying three convoys carrying rockets with chemical warheads are on the move. Two of those convoys have reached their destinations. The first one has reached the military airport of Dumair. The second one has reached Izraa in Dera'a to regiment 175. We express concern over the possible use of those rockets with chemical warheads by Assad's regime against innocent civilians. We have received information from people inside the regime that the Assad regime intends to use those weapons.

We call upon the international community to assume its responsibilities to put a stop to Assad's killing machine. Assad's remains adamant and clings more and more to power. Neutralizing Assad's capabilities and supporting the FSA so that they take control of vital institutions is the only guarantee for a peaceful transfer of power that would put an end to the suffering of the Syrian people.

We are working hard, and the Coalition's Presidency, is working very hard in cooperation with our offices in New York and Washington and the Syrian community there, as well as Syrian American Organizations, to put diplomatic pressure on the US Congress to support President Obama's decision to carry out a military operation to degrade Assad's nuclear capabilities.

We also thank the French parliament for leaving the decision of action in the hands of the French President. We appreciate this move.

We once again call on the US Congress to authorize Obama's decision, and we want to remind them that Iran and North Korea are following closely and waiting for the Congress's decision. Assad is also waiting. If the Congress fails to authorize Obama's decision, that will be a green line for Assad to use chemical weapons on a larger scale and kill more and more innocent civilians. I will open it up now for Q and A.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Hi Khalid can you do your answer in English?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) I can do it in English.

QUESTION: (Original in English) so Holly from CBS News. Two things. First of all, can you just explain in English the information of intelligence you were talking about then regarding possible future chemical attacks? And can you also tell us specifically what are the security concerns that stopped this high profile defector from speaking here today? Thank you.

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) We have received information in the last couple of days- the Syrian Coalition received information in the last couple of days that there were three convoys that are loaded- that are carrying chemical weapons, rockets carrying chemical heads left their locations. Now, we can confirm that two of them had arrived at their final destination.



One destination is in Al Dumair Airport, which is a military airport, and the other is in Brigade 175 in Izraa in Dera'a. We have serious concerns based on the information that we received from sources inside the Assad Army, who are sympathetic to the Revolution that the Assad might be considering using those chemical weapons against innocent civilians. So we have major concerns with that. We have communicated with our partner countries about- we have communicated the information with our partner countries, and they are aware of the Assad's latest movements. In terms of the information presented by Doctor Abdul Tawab Shahrour- he is the head of the Forensic Investigation Authority in the province of Aleppo. He has been overseeing and very aware actually; let me, let me use that he is very aware of many of the crimes that the Assad regime had committed in the province of Aleppo; specifically in the city of Khan Al Assal. This is a city that the Assad regime has been talking about tremendously. The UN inspectors were supposed to go to Khan Al Assal. That was the initial agreement. However, they never made it there. We've- we are asking the UN inspectors to meet with Dr. Abdul Tawab Shahrour. All I can say that due to security concerns, he is not able to be with us today. However, we hope to hold a press conference with him in the very near future.

QUESTION: (Original in English) What are those security concerns?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) I cannot- I cannot comment on the nature of the security concerns.

QUESTION: (Original in English) When did he defected? Can you give us more details?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) What I can say he defected in the last two weeks.

QUESTION: (Original in English) And will you be releasing- will you be releasing now any of the information that he brought with him?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) No, we are going to be leaving it up to him to show you guys the information- the official documents that he brought with him, but we will leave it in the next press conference when he is there because he is the most equipped to explain the different documents that he has with him.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Ahmad Zakaria, Radio Al Kul. What are your plans in case the Obama administration failed to have the authorization of Congress?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) What we are doing now. The Presidency of the Coalition, President Ahmad Jarba, Vice Presidents, and the Secretary General in cooperation with the Coalition's office in Washington and New York, as well as many American Syrian Organizations and the Syrian Community in the US are trying to put pressure of the US Congress. That is our main focus now. There are a number of plans that the Coalition is considering. However, the information we are receiving are somehow reassuring but there is no place for complacency. We will continue to work hard in the next coming days to make sure the US Congress authorizes Obama's decision. Any other questions?

QUESTION: (Original in English) Yeah, just to repeat my question. In terms of what you were actually saying. You do not actually at present have any further information about chemical weapons attacks in the past. You say that maybe forthcoming. You will be- the main thing you are saying today is that you have reason to believe that further deployments may be used in--

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) That sorry?

QUESTION: (Original in English) --Further, further deployments of chemical weapons may be used in coming days. That is basically what you are saying.

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) What we are saying- a couple of things what we have said. We have said that the Assad forces have moved some of the chemical heads into two new locations. We are very concerned about that because you have chemical heads- chemical missiles. They are carried to two new locations that where not there so that is a major concern that we have. The other thing we are talking about Dr. Abdul Tawab Shahrour who is unfortunately due to security concerns is not here with us, but he will be presenting the information that he has collected about the different crimes in Aleppo in the upcoming press conference.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Nidal Siam, Al Jazeera Channel. You talked about three convoys, but you mentioned only two destinations; one in Idlib and the other is in Dumair--

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) One in Rural Damascus and the other is in Rural Dera'a.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Yes sorry; one in Rural Damascus and the other is in Rural Dera'a. Three convoys but two destinations.

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) Yeah, we still do not have any information about the third convoy and its destination. We will provide you with an update on that as we get it.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) So do you expect there will be attacks in those areas?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) We are concerned that the regime might use rockets filled with chemical warhead in some provinces because the Assad regime has been recently saying that rebels are the ones who are using chemical weapons. We are concerned that moving those weapons is for using them against civilians. And as I have said, we have communicated with our international partners on that, and we are following closely the Assad regime's movements in those areas.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) You have said that Dr. Abdul Tawab Shahrour has documents. How are you going to communicate with the UN investigation team to handover those documents? And what do you expect (inaudible).

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) I cannot comment on the nature of those documents, but we have called on the UN investigation team to interview Dr. Abdul Fatah [Mr. Saleh meant Abdul Tawab]. He was one of the most important figures the UN team would have met in case they went to Aleppo. We will try to arrange a meeting with the UN investigation team so that Dr. Abdul Tawab will be able to hand over any documents he has. The last question. Go Ahead.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Can you name the two locations where the chemical weapons have been moved. And you said three (inaudible)

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) Three convoys. However, we were only able to confirm two final destinations; one is the Dumair Airport. It is a military airport, and the other one is in Izraa, which is in Dera'a- in the province of Dera'a. The third convoy we are yet to confirm its final destination. We have to cross the different information that we receive just to make sure that whatever information we provide to you is accurate information.

QUESTION: (Original in English) And how many warheads?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) We do not have- we do not have that information.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Excuse me, can you repeat the names of the places that are.

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) One is the Dumair Airport.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Dmair.

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) Dumair- Dumair Airport, and the other is in Izraa Fauj 175. Sahir might translate Fauj 175.

Interpreter: Regiment 175.

QUESTION: (Original in English) So you basically said that you shared the intelligence- the information that you have about these new whatever with the foreign countries, so which countries are these and how did they respond?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) We have just shared the information. This is a very recent information. I cannot on which countries, but you can imagine that this will be shared with our- with the countries that are most concerned with the Syrian Revolution- supporting the Syrian Revolution. We have information exchanged with them which is very normal trying to deal with the fact that you have somebody in Damascus who is willing to use chemical weapons at any cost. Unfortunately, the message that he has been receiving from the international community until now is a green light. I know we have talked about several options that the international community is studying. However, the Assad regime still sees no actual response to the fact the he used chemical weapons that we have over 1466 confirmed deaths in the countryside of Damascus at this point.

QUESTION: (Original in English) How recent is the intelligence. When did these convoys reach their destinations?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) We are- we can talk about- in the last 24 hours the two convoys that I have mentioned.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Excuse me, can you show on the map where those two convoys are heading to?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) yeah we can do that. Unfortunately, the space over here. So one is in Dumair- in one let us see- Dumair is over here, which is south of Qutayfah. Qutayfah is division 155 that was responsible for firing the chemical warheads last time, and the other one is in Izraa, which is- Izraa is over here in Dera'a. So they are both in south of Turkey- sorry south of Syria.

QUESTION: (Original in English) And they were moved from Damascus?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) They were moved from Qutayfah. There- in- usually that is where they had the chemical warheads. Let me, kind of cover--

QUESTION: (Original in English) They were moved from where?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) From Qutayfah.

QUESTION: (Original in English) How do you spell that?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) Qutayfah- Q, u, t, a, y, f, a, h.

QUESTION: (Original in English) That is the place where attacks (inaudible)

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) The first attack took place.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) We know that Qutayfah is the place where Brigade --

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) Brigade 155 is located.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) -- Brigade 155 is located. Those rockets now have been moved into a military airport.

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) That is right; to a military airport. One of them is a military airport and the other is Regiment 175.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) It seems the target this time is not near Qutayfah.

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) I cannot comment on the targets, but we are concerned that civilians might be targeted in different provinces because those rockets can reach a large number of places.

Let me add two more things, and I will take more questions. It is about the advances of Free Syrian Army FSA in the past couple of days. FSA fighters in Deir EzZor are steadily advancing towards Al Jabal area. In Qalamoun, Islam Brigade managed to take control of Brigade 81 Armored Vehicles. FSA fighters were also able to repel Assad's attempt to gain back control in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Rural Latakia. They were able to hold on to their positions.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Muhanad Mansour from Basmat Suria. You said you expect Assad will hit civilians again. What are the procedures that you have taken to protect the civilians? Were you able to provide atropine or gas masks? because the regime might hit at any moment. There is another question; we have noticed that the public opinion in western democratic countries is against any military operations in Syria, and we have seen what happened in the UK parliament recently. Why are not you doing anything to try to change the public opinion in those countries?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) Let me answer your first question about the procedures the Coalition has taken to deal with the possibility that Assad's regime might use chemical weapons. In the recent chemical weapons attack in Gouta, medical staff there have used all atropine shots they have. There were about 25000 atropine shots, and they were all used to treat victims of chemical weapons attacks. Immediately after those attacks and until now, we have managed to deliver hundreds of thousands of atropine shots to areas in Rural Damascus. Unfortunately, we are talking about an area inhabited by around 1.5 million people. Frankly speaking, the Coalition has limited financial capabilities, and we are trying to communicate with our friends to get more medical assistance, but even when we manage to get atropine shots there is a problem. It is extremely difficult to deliver any assistance whether humanitarian or medical to besieged areas. For example, we have managed to get \$150,000 to one of the areas in Rural Damascus but we could not. People living in those areas told us it is impossible to deliver money to such areas. So we are really facing a real problem. As for gas masks, the Syrian Coalition and the Syrian National Council bought a number of gas masks, and we are trying to deliver them. But in the end we are talking about a very large number of people. That is why Friends of Syria have a responsibility to help us at least tackle the consequences of Assad's crimes if they do not want to put an end to the real cause of those crimes. What was your second question please?

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) reports indicate that the public opinion in western countries is against any military operations in Syria, and we have seen what happened in the UK parliament recently. Why are not you doing anything to try to change the public opinion in those countries?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) Actually there are a number of media campaigns in the US and in the UK, but there is a challenge that we face. A successful media campaigns in the US costs millions of dollars. In light of the limited financial capacity of the Syrian Coalition, we focus on specific areas. For example, we are focusing now on Washington where members of Congress reside. If we had enough financial capacity, this campaign would have covered the entire US. In the UK as well, immediately after Assad has used chemical weapons, our efforts were directed to convey our message to the western media, and that is what the Media Office is working on continuously. Each day, there are almost 20 activities the Media Office does in cooperation with different activists, and I would like to thank those behind different Revolutionary web pages. They help us because our team is still relatively small.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Saladin from Suria Al Shaab. Regime web pages mentioned that Dr. Abdul Tawab is (inaudible) in Al Akramiyah neighborhood, Aleppo. You said he has defected, and he will not be here for security concerns. Can you tell more details about how he defected? And how important it is for the Syrian Revolution?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) what I can say is Dr. Abdul Tawab was not kidnapped. He left Syria under the protection of FSA. As for the details, I will leave it to him. Let us leave that to the next press conference. Dr. Abdul Tawab is well-known. He is head of the Forensic Medicine Authority in Aleppo. They oversee all criminal investigation in Aleppo. He has a large amount of information. He headed the regime's investigation committee in Khan Al Assal. That is why he has valuable information to share.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Will he meet with the UN investigation team?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) We call on the UN investigation team, through this press conference, to interview Dr. Abdul Tawab. He has information, and we will deliver this information to any party that is interested in supporting the Syrian Revolution. The last question. Go ahead.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) Back to the subject of military action. Is there any cooperation between countries that might carry out military action in Syria and the Syrian Coalition? And will the authorization of Congress mean that the strike against Assad's regime will not be cosmetic?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) Let me answer the second part. President Obama said clearly that he was talking about a limited military strike. Intelligence reports, or actually to be specific, media reports indicate that the strike is due in the next 24 to 48 hours.

There is political cooperation between the Syrian Coalition and different countries. In the end, the international community is going to take military action just to punish Assad for crossing the red line; for using chemical weapons. Chemical weapons are internationally prohibited since 1925. So for a regime to use them in the 21st century against innocent civilians, crossing Obama's red line, the international community must respond, and that is what we are waiting for, and we have made that clear to the international community. The last question. Go ahead.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Turkish news channels are just- breaking news reporting an explosion in an ammunition depot by the Syrian border in Hatay's province. Do you know any depots out there? Or do you have any idea --

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) I have --

QUESTION: (Original in English) -- what may be the source?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) -- I have no information about this. My apologies.

QUESTION: (Original in English) Can you give us an idea of how big those convoys are?

MR. SALEH: (Original in English) I cannot comment also about their size. At the end, the officers who are giving us this information- they are still working with the Assad regime. They are sympathetic to the Revolution, so we are really careful about giving a lot of information to reveal their identity.

QUESTION: (Original in Arabic) You talked about a limited military strike against the regime due in the next 48 hours. What about the support for the FSA? Is there an update on that?

MR. SALEH: (Original in Arabic) What I can say is yes. The support is increasing, and we have heard one of the plans President Obama was considering is increasing military support to the FSA. FSA fighters are now taking control of more and more land across Syria, but unfortunately, this support is incomparable, and let me be frank, it is incomparable with the support Russia provides to the Assad regime. However, we have seen reports by some Russian sources saying that Russia will not provide Assad with certain missile systems because the Assad regime cannot make the payment for them. Thank you all.

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- Mission Statement and Goals
- Coalition Principles
- Political Framework
- Political Outlook
- Contact Us

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- President
- Secretary General
- Vice Presidents
- Political Committee
- General Body

Media Center

- Press Releases
- Coalition News
- Media Round-up
- Press Conferences
- Photo Gallery
- Video Gallery

Home ▶ [press releases](#) ▶ **Weekly Press Conference: Latest Political and Military Developments - September 03, 2013**

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