

Press Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on Syria

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August 18, 2011

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 18, 2011

Via Conference Call

10:50 A.M. EDT

MR. VIETOR: Hi, everybody. Thanks for getting on today. We are convening this call to talk about some recent actions with respect to Syria. You should all have the President's statement this morning calling on Assad to go. I hope you also saw the Secretary's on-camera statement, as well as the executive order.

Additionally, you should have seen statements from the Prime Minister of Canada, a joint statement from the French, UK, and Germans, as well as one from the EU -- from Cathy Ashton. So there's a chorus of individuals out today talking about this issue and calling on Assad to go.

We're going to offer some more context today on our decision-making and the executive order and the diplomacy around it. This call is on background from senior administration officials. And with that, I'll hand it over to our first official, who you can quote as a senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great. Thanks, everybody, for joining the call. I'll just say a few things by way of introduction and then hand this off to my colleagues.

You see in the President's statement today that he has said that President Assad -- we have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.

I would just point you to the statements that Tommy referenced. The Prime Minister of Canada said he joins with President Obama and other members of the national community in calling on President Assad to vacate his position, relinquish power and to step down immediately.

The statement from Cathy Ashton on behalf of the EU: The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside.

And then you see in the trilateral statement from Prime Minister Cameron, President Sarkozy, and Chancellor Merkel: We call on President Assad to face reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside in the best interest of Syria and unity of its people.

So what you see today is a completely united front of the U.S. and its allies in calling for President Assad to step aside in response to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

Now, we have steadily ratcheted up our pressure on the Syrian regime over the course of the last several months. You will recall that as soon as protests began and violence was perpetrated against those protestors we started to impose sanctions on the Assad regime, which my colleague can talk about at length here. But in May, around the President's speech, he said that President Assad had to lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. Accompanying that statement we sanctioned several members of the Assad regime, including President Assad himself.

What took place in the weeks following that speech is that President Assad demonstrated that he was not going to be able to lead a democratic transition. He escalated his violence against his own people. And as we stated repeatedly over the course of the last several weeks, he lost all legitimacy in the eyes of his own people. During that time period, we continued to take several steps to ratchet up our pressure, expanding our designations and sanctions against the Syrian regime. Many of our allies took similar steps as well. We also helped lead an effort at the U.N. Secretary Council to get a presidential statement condemning the Syrian regime's actions that was issued on August 3rd.

And increasingly, however, we felt the need to coordinate a stronger response, given the continued escalation of violence against the Syrian people.

President Obama spoke with President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel about this on August 5th, and the leaders discussed the fact that we might need to move towards explicitly calling for Assad to go, but doing so in a way that was coordinated to send the most powerful message that we could, and that was also accompanied by actions. The President had further conversations with several European leaders, including Prime Minister Cameron, on August 13th, as well, forging agreement that it was time for Assad to step aside and that we would need to take more aggressive actions in support of that objective.

So over the course of the last several weeks we've been in close consultation with our allies, including each of those allies who issued statements today. We've also been in very close coordination with our regional allies and partners. So, for instance, we've consulted very closely with Turkey, which has increasingly ratcheted up its own pressure on the Assad regime. And you saw the readout of President Obama's call with President Erdogan

on August 11th, where they discussed a need for the Syrian government to end its use of violence and to respond to the legitimate demands for a transition to democracy by the Syrian people.

We've also talked to our allies in the Arab world as well and we welcome the steps that were taken, for instance, by Saudi Arabia and the GCC in terms of their strong objections to the crackdown against the Syrian people, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan.

And so today I think the two points that I'd underscore is we are taking this additional step in concert with our allies of calling for President Assad to step aside. We are doing this, however, supported by strong action: the executive order, which is by far the toughest steps that we've taken to sanction the Syrian regime, today; as well as strong international coordination. This is the United States along with a chorus of our allies who have joined us in calling for President Assad to step aside and respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

So our focus today was on issuing a statement calling for President Assad to step aside, but doing so in concert with our allies and enjoined by strong action, including, again, the toughest sanctions that we've imposed on Syria, and in some respects, as tough sanctions as we've imposed on any other country.

With that, I'll turn it over to my colleague to talk a little bit more about the diplomacy.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you very much. I'll just make two or three quick points. First, our aim, as my colleague suggested, has been to build a strong international effort in support of the universal rights of the Syrian people, and to condemn and isolate the Assad regime. We've recognized from the start that American leadership is crucial to this effort and that to have maximum impact in Syria we want to lead the chorus of voices and pressures, not just make this a solo act.

Today's announcement is the latest and most decisive step in that effort. It does come against a backdrop of months of steadily mounting statements and actions. And we do expect it will be amplified in statements and actions of international partners in days and weeks ahead.

We've worked systematically to increase our own pressures, including tough targeted sanctions against the Assad regime. At the same time, in literally hundreds of meetings and conversations at levels from the President, Secretary Clinton, to senior officials, to our ambassadors, we steadily and systematically worked to build concerted international pressure. Turkey, given its long border and previously close relationship to the Syrian regime, is an especially important partner, and you've all seen the unprecedented language that Prime Minister Erdogan has used in the last 24 hours rebuking Assad.

Our Arab partners have played also an unusually strong role in statements by Saudi Arabia, by Jordan, by Egypt, by the GCC and the Arab League. The EU and our key European partners have begun significant and expanding sanctions as well as strong

statements that my colleague mentioned earlier. The Security Council, on the 3rd of August -- a strong, unanimous condemnation of Syrian behavior was issued and the Human Rights Council also issued a very strong condemnation.

This will be amplified over the course of today and the days ahead. You've already seen the statements made by some of our European partners, by the Canadians. The U.N. Security Council meets this afternoon to consider urgently the behavior of the Assad regime. And the Human Rights Council also agreed earlier today, with the full support of all the Arab members of the council, to hold another special session to consider and condemn the human rights behavior of the Syrian regime.

Second point is that the Syrian people, as both the President and Secretary Clinton stressed today, can and must lead their country's transition. We've provided and will continue to provide strong moral support to protestors, most notably when Ambassador Ford traveled to Hama in July to witness firsthand the atrocities committed against the brave people in that city. Ambassador Ford has played a particularly valuable role in showing solidarity with the Syrian people in engaging the opposition.

Secretary Clinton met with representatives of the Syrian opposition and human rights activists in July. The opposition, on its own and without international involvement, has made significant strides in the past few months to organize and to unify. The ranks of the opposition now include Alawis, Druzes and Christian Syrians, as well as businesspeople and people across the whole range of Syrian society. Opposition leaders do understand the urgency of uniting behind a clear, common road map for a transition.

I think it's important to understand how remarkable this is and how hard it is. Syria is a country that's only now emerging from what in effect has been 40 years of an induced political coma. People are gaining confidence and interacting with one another politically. They're not afraid anymore. And that's when regimes start to crumble and transitions begin.

The U.S. will continue to strongly support and stand by the Syrian people but will respect their independent desire to chart a new course for themselves without foreign intervention or interference to redeem the dignity that they've been so long denied.

My final point: We can't predict how long this transition will take. Nothing about it is likely to be easy. But we're certain that Assad is on the way out. We're certain that international pressures will continue to build. We're certain that his isolation will continue to increase. Because the reality is that the international community, as my colleague said earlier, is uniting around a conviction that the longer Assad remains the greater the dangers for the Syrian people, the greater the dangers for Syria's future, and the greater the dangers for regional peace and security.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Now, my colleague can walk you through some of the specifics of the EO.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good morning. I'll say a few words about the executive order that the President signed today. The executive order requires the immediate freeze of all assets of the government to Syria that is subject to U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits U.S. persons from engaging in any transaction involving the government of Syria, which will isolate the Assad regime from the U.S. financial system entirely.

These new sanctions also strike at a crucial stream of funding and hard currency for the regime by banning the U.S. import of Syrian-origin petroleum or petroleum products, and prohibiting U.S. persons, wherever they may be located, from engaging in any transactions or having any dealings related to Syria's petroleum or petroleum products.

In an effort to assist in sanctions implementation in the U.S. and elsewhere, we have identified today five state-owned companies that are most importantly involved in Syria's petroleum sector. But the new executive order affects all Syrian government operations and all Syrian government parastatals, both those that we have identified and others. And in the coming weeks we will, I imagine, identify additional Syrian parastatals to aid in the implementation of the executive order.

Today's escalation of financial pressure follows weeks of targeted sanctions since the unrest began in mid-March, beginning on April 29th, with an executive order signed by the President, which targets Syrian officials and others responsible for human rights abuses against the Syrian people. That was followed by a second executive order issued on May 18th, which targeted senior government officials of the Syrian government.

Under these new and existing authorities, we have imposed sanctions since the unrest began against 32 Syrian and Iranian individuals and entities, including several corrupt cronies of the regime.

Taken together with our continuing targeted sanctions, we expect this new executive order will disrupt the Syrian regime's ability to finance its campaign of violence against the Syrian people, and we expect that today's call for Assad to step down, coupled with the real action that we're taking to apply maximum pressure on the regime, will be followed by similar action by our partners and allies around the world to isolate the government of Syria from the international financial system and deprive it access to significant revenue stream that's generated by its petroleum sector.

I would note that approximately 90 percent of Syria's oil exports goes to the EU. So action taken by the EU or by EU member states to cut off the import of Syria oil will significantly enhance the pressure on the Syrian regime.

One final point. We will work to minimize the collateral effect of these sanctions on the average Syrian citizen. But it is our firm belief that the international community must join the U.S. and act now to choke off the financial lifelines to the Syrian regime and its supporters. We look forward to the time when the resources of the Syrian government are used for the benefit of the Syrian people, not to brutalize them and to try to crush their legitimate aspirations.

MR. VIETOR: Thank you guys for dialing in. I think we have some time for some questions. Again, this is a call on background with senior administration officials. And with that, we can start the Q&A.

Q Thank you very much for doing the call, and thank you for your service. I'm wondering what you're considering as steps in case these steps today do not actually result in the Assad regime standing down from power. After the announcement of a policy of regime change in Libya, that was followed shortly by the administration pursuing military action to protect civilians there. Have you taken the option of pursuing military action to protect civilians in Syria off the table? And if so, what else are you thinking about doing just in case these steps don't actually produce the regime change that you're hoping for?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Josh, for that question. Good to hear from you. I'd just say a number of things. First of all, I'd echo my colleague in saying that as the President said in his statement, we expect there to continue to be struggle and sacrifice for the Syrian people. But in that context, Bashar Assad is on his way out. That is our assessment. We believe that the balance has shifted within Syria, that the Syrian people will not accept his rule anymore. And having that balance shift means that Bashar Assad's time in power is limited and his days are numbered.

So our focus is on what can we do to bring more pressure to bear on the Assad regime, to hasten that outcome, and to support the aspirations of the Syrian people.

To your question, the steps that we are taking today, as my colleague said, will choke off further the resources that are necessary for the regime to carry out its crackdown. The international chorus of condemnation in calling for Assad to go deepens his isolation and very much the sense that time is not on his side and that his days in power are numbered. And going forward, we are going to implement these sanctions and ensure that we're doing everything that we can to choke off our [sic] resources.

We are also going to continue to build on the steps that we've taken today. So we are going to be working with our allies and partners so that they can take additional actions and additional sanctions that will further hit the Syrian regime in its ability to finance its campaign against its own people. So we expect there to be additional pressures brought to bear by our allies. And what we've found in the past is that the more these actions are done in concert and are unified, the greater the pressure that is brought to bear on the Syrian regime.

Similarly, we're going to continue to work to deepen the regime's international isolation through multilateral institutions and through our diplomacy so that others are joining with us in calling for Assad to go and bringing their own pressures to bear on the Syrian regime.

So we believe that there's a lot of pressure that is being escalated through the steps that have been taken today. We believe the implementation of those steps will increase that pressure. We believe that others will follow in terms of taking their own steps in terms of sanctions.

And with regard to your question on military action, I don't think anybody believes that that is the desired course in Syria -- not the United States and our allies, nor the Syrian people themselves. And so the simplest way to bring this to a conclusion is for the Syrian people to get the democratic transition that they deserve and that they're demanding, and for President Assad to step aside.

Q Thanks. You said that the U.S. had led in the Security Council. I'm in front of it right now, and at least to the eye, it was mostly the European floor members that sort of took the lead. Is that going to change? And also, what do you make of criticism that sanctioning the Syrian cell phone company might actually make it harder for protestors to communicate and spread information about abuses there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll take the first one, and then turn to my colleague. In terms of the Security Council, we led along with our European allies. I think those of you who have followed that know that the United States and our European allies supported a strong resolution against the Syrian regime. We were able to bring the council to a unified presidential statement of condemnation against Syria -- which, by the way, sent a very strong message that Syria couldn't necessarily look to some of its -- some of those who had protected it in the council in the past, but rather those members of the council joined us in condemnation.

So I think that was an instance of the United States working with our European allies through the council to get a strong outcome. And we'll continue to pursue avenues through the U.N. and other places to amplify the condemnation of the Syrian regime.

I think it also speaks, frankly -- that message of condemnation from the Security Council - - to the shrinking support for Syria in the international community. Frankly, they've principally been able to look only to Iran as a patron and supporter of their crackdown efforts within in their own country. And the choices of support that they seek in the international community are closing off.

But I'll turn to my colleague to talk about the sanction question.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: With respect to the sanctions applied to Syriatel, that is a company that is controlled by Rami Makhluf, who is probably the most significant corrupt crony and supporter of the regime, who has used his preferred position with the Syrian government and the Syrian economy to siphon off enormous wealth from the Syrian people. The sanctions on Syriatel, because they're controlled by Makhluf, we do not think will result in the loss of communication ability among the people of Syria.

We will also be taking steps in the next few days to issue a general license pertaining to communication services in Syria that will also serve to facilitate communication among the Syrian people.

Q Thanks so much. I'm from the Turkish press. You touched on your administration consulted with your ally, Turkey. And you said that within the last 24 hours Erdogan's language was important. My question is within the last 24 hours since you are closing to

this decision to tell us of the goal how was the reaction from Turkey? Turkey was the lifeline to the U.S. in the past times. How do you expect this time Turkey to move forward from this point on? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just offer a couple of comments. First, as we've stressed before, our partnership with Turkey on this issue, as on many other issues, has been extremely important, particularly in the case of Syria because of Turkey's longstanding relationship with that country and with that government. And so I think it's particularly telling that the Turkish leadership has been so strong in its condemnation of the Syrian regime's abuses of its own people; so strong in its determination to bring further pressure to bear against the Assad regime.

So we've stayed in close touch not just in the last 24 hours but in recent weeks and months, and we look forward to continuing to do that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add that the President did speak, as I said, to Prime Minister Erdogan on August 11th. It was a long conversation that focused very much on Syria. And in that conversation they were able to consult about the steps that their governments were taking, including the steps that Turkey is taking and including the steps that the United States was taking today and was considering to take going forward. At that time, they reiterated their deep concern about the Syrian government's use of violence against civilians and their belief that the Syrian people's legitimate demands for a transition to democracy should be met.

They also agreed to have our teams be in very close coordination and to consult on a near daily basis to monitor the development of events in Syria, and to remain coordinated as we move forward. So I think that the coordination and consultation has been constant and strong with Turkey that does play a very important role here. And we expect that that will continue to be the basis going forward given the direction of President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan to their respective governments.

Q I wanted to ask about the administration's hopes that Assad would play a positive and useful role in the Middle East peace process. Are those dashed at this point? And would you say that sort of a desire to see those come to fruition played a role in what some see as a sluggishness to call for his ouster? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add to my colleague's succinct answer that we have a desire to see Arab-Israeli peace broadly speaking. We have no investment in individuals' particular involvement in that. So we'll continue to pursue Arab-Israel broadly, but President Assad's ability to be at all a figure in that are long gone. He has no legitimacy in his own country. He should not be in power. And therefore, we'll continue to pursue our broader interests, including Arab-Israel peace, but we also will pursue the day in which the Syrian people, again, are able to have the government they deserve.

Q Hi, folks. Thanks very much for doing the call. I have two questions. First, I wonder if you could characterize or give us some detail on the state of our interactions and our contacts at any level with the Syrian regime. And I'll pose the follow-up after.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Through Ambassador Ford in Damascus we've had contacts with the Syrian regime. Ambassador Ford has delivered very emphatically messages about our deep concerns about the abuse of Syrian citizens. And so that's been the main channel for contact.

Q How recently?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd have to check for you, but I think earlier this week Ambassador Ford had contacts at senior levels in the foreign ministry.

Q And then my follow-up question: Accounting for the fact that there is no cookie-cutter approach to different countries in a given region, nonetheless I am struck by the contrast in the way this administration handled the Egyptian upheaval and the way it has handled the Syrian situation in the following sense. In the case of the Egyptian revolution, it took approximately one week for President Obama himself to step before news cameras and call on our longtime ally, Hosni Mubarak, to step down. That call was issued on February 2nd. That crisis erupted January 25. In the totality of the Egyptian crisis, only 300 people were killed -- I say "only." In this situation, we have in Bashar al-Assad a designated state sponsor of terrorism, the host for various terrorist organizations, someone who is not a U.S. ally. And it has taken this administration five months and over 1,800 casualties for the President to issue this call for him to step down, and it was done in a paper statement. Explain that contrast.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: First of all, I'd just correct one thing. It was February 1st that President Obama issued that statement on Egypt.

Q More to my point.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay. (Laughter.) So I'd say a number of things. First of all, we have said from the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring that there are a set of universal principles that are going to guide our response that are consistent in every single country. We oppose the use of violence against peaceful protestors. We support a set of universal rights for the people of the region, and we support a process of political and economic change and reform in these countries that is responsive to the aspirations of the people.

Those principles apply to every country. They've guided our response in every single country in which we've been engaged since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Each country is going to change in its own way. The U.S. relationship to that change is going to be different in each instance. And in some of these countries we have longstanding relationships that we are able to leverage in order to support those principles.

In the instance of Egypt, we were able, through the course of the peak of the protests, to not only issue that statement but to have very close contacts with our Egyptian counterparts to urge restraint in terms of how they responded to those protests, and to urge a transition to democracy that is responsive to the Egyptian people. And I think the outcome was very much in line with the approach that we took and very much in line with the aspirations of the Egyptian people.

In Libya, we had a situation where a leader had engaged in a military campaign against his own people. There was a massive army approaching, for instance, the city of Benghazi, which he had threatened with a massacre, and we were able to rally an international coalition with Arab League support, with U.N. sanctions, and with real commitments from people to contribute resources to an effort to stop a massacre in its tracks, to reverse the momentum against Qaddafi, to create space for the Libyan people to organize, and to bring about where we are today which is a situation where Qaddafi's days are very much numbered and all of the metrics in Libya are moving against him.

In Syria, from the beginning of the protests we took a similar approach in terms of our principles were clear and we supported them. We opposed the use of violence; we, again, supported the universal rights of the people, and we call for a process of political and economic change.

We imposed sanctions. Given that this is a country in which we have more limited contacts, we needed to move more to punitive measures. I'd point out that we imposed sanctions on Syria. We did not impose sanctions on Egypt, for instance, in February. So we moved to punitive measures in Syria right away and were able to build on those punitive measures over the last several weeks and months.

At the same time, I think we sent a very clear message to President Assad in President Obama's speech that he needed to lead or get out of the way. When he failed to do so we ratcheted up both our sanctions and our rhetoric to make it clear that he had lost legitimacy and that we were going to begin -- to continue to cut off access to funds that are necessary for him and his cronies to fund their crackdown. And today we're taking the additional step of explicitly calling for him to step aside in concert with our most important allies in the world, and in concert with the toughest financial sanctions that have ever been levied on the Syrian government by the United States.

So I think that that series of punitive actions accompanied by the language that we used sends a pretty clear message about how we feel about President Assad and his legitimacy and the fact that the Syrian people deserve a better government.

So each of these countries are different, as you pointed out. Syria, unlike Egypt, we pursued punitive measures from the beginning and have ratcheted up those punitive measures. And we're going to continue to do so going forward. And across the region, I think people know that the United States is going to stand up for our principles and we're going to stand up for a process of political and economic reform that's responsive to the people of the region. And we're going to have to do it in different ways in different

countries, because we, again, have different relationships with different governments and they're going to be able to bring different tools to bear to advance our interests and the interests of the people of the region.

Q Thank you for taking the call. I wanted to ask about the timing of this. I know some over here at the State Department, some officials have said that the violence was one of the triggers. Could you comment on why this now? Why do you think everything came together at this moment that you were willing to come out and say this?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure, I'd say a couple of things. First of all, we've been moving in the direction for a period of time. Again, we have said he had to lead or leave. We said he lost legitimacy. We accompanied that with steps. But I think you're right; I think at the beginning of Ramadan, for instance, we saw an uptick in violence and horrific brutality against the Syrian people that made it perfectly clear to everybody within Syria and around the world that President Assad had no credibility; that anything he said about pursuing reform or pulling back his forces was a lie and an empty promise; and that we have lost patience with him.

As this violence had escalated, we also wanted to make sure that as we took this step that we weren't just issuing statements but were rather doing so in an internationally coordinated way and had actions to go along with those statements. So what we've done over the last period of days is ensure that we have a strong international chorus of condemnation of Assad calling for him to go, which would, therefore, have a greater impact, and that we were preparing a very robust set of sanctions that were also issued today.

So the timing was driven by the horrific brutality of the Syrian regime as well as our own efforts to develop these sanctions and develop an international coalition that would join us in calling for President Assad to go today.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And the only thing I would add to that is that I think we've seen a deepening frustration on the part of especially regional players, as well as our partners in other parts of the world. I mean, the truth is, as my colleague said, I mean, Assad has a perfect record of empty promises. And as the violence has increased, as the emptiness of all of his commitments have become more apparent, it increased and helped us mobilize the sort of international pressure that I think is going to have a maximum impact in Syria.

MR. VIETOR: We have time for one more question.

Q I have a sanctions question. Major oil companies have joint ventures with -- besides companies that were identified today. How will the sanctions affect those outside companies, given their relationship with the targeted ones?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It will affect those companies to the extent that they have U.S. persons working in the joint ventures in Syria. The sanctions, as I mentioned, apply to U.S. persons wherever they may be, doing whatever they may be

doing, in connection with the Syrian petroleum sector. So to the extent that there are U.S. persons involved, it will affect them.

The companies themselves are not U.S. companies and so unless and until there is action taken by their home jurisdictions, it won't affect the companies directly.

MR. VIETOR: Thanks, everyone, for joining. If you have any follow-up questions, feel free to email us.

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11:27 A.M. EDT