

Remarks by President Obama after a bilateral meeting with President Hollande of France

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: I just had an excellent conversation with President Hollande and at the end of G8. It's very important and appropriate that the United States meet with our oldest ally, France. And obviously, we coordinate on a whole range of international issues. And the bilateral relationship is as strong as ever.

The topics that we covered were wide ranging. Today, we spent some time discussing the transition in Afghanistan where there have been some important developments. Afghan forces are now in the lead in Afghanistan, fulfilling the milestone that we agreed to at the NATO summit in Chicago.

We also discussed Qatar's announcement that an office is opening in Doha for the purposes of negotiations between Afghans, so that we have a parallel political track that matches up with the transition that's taking place militarily in Afghanistan and the elections that will be coming up next year. Both President Hollande and I agree that an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process is the best way to end the violence and to ensure lasting stability in Afghanistan and the region. And so this is an important first step towards reconciliation. Although it's a very early step -- we anticipate there will be a lot of bumps in the road -- but the fact that the parties have an opportunity to talk and discuss Afghanistan's future I think is very important.

The one thing that we do believe is that any insurgent group, including the Taliban, is going to need to accept an Afghan constitution that renounces ties with al Qaeda, ends violence and is committed to the protection of women and minorities in the country.

And over the last several months, I've discussed this issue frequently with President Karzai and also the Emir of Qatar. So I want to publicly commend President Karzai for taking this courageous step, and his determination to end the conflict and build a future

of security and peace and prosperity for the Afghan people. And I know that President Hollande shares my view on this.

We're going to continue to support these efforts in partnership with the Afghan government. I want to repeat we don't anticipate this process will be easy or quick, but we must pursue in parallel with our military approach. And we, in the meantime, remain fully committed to our military efforts to defeat al Qaeda and to support the Afghan National Security Forces.

In addition to talking about Afghanistan, we spoke about the economic and commercial ties that have been subject to the entire G8. President Hollande I think is appropriately committed to a growth strategy that ensures we all are able to lower our unemployment rates, particularly when it comes to youth unemployment, and to build a fiscally prudent strategy for long-term economic growth. And the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is a strong component of a broader, comprehensive strategy that we all have to pursue with respect to growth.

In the Middle East and Syria, we very much share the view that it is important for us to build on the G8 communiqué -- to move towards a political transition inside of Syria, to build a strong opposition that can function in a post-Assad world -- and that we will continue to work to try to find a political solution to this process and, most importantly, alleviate suffering and ensure that chemical weapons are not used by anyone inside of Syria. Both of our governments have strong evidence that in fact chemical weapons have been used in the past by the Assad regime. But we are very comfortable with the approach taken by the G8 that allows the U.N. the full powers it needs to investigate and establish these facts on the ground.

I congratulated President Hollande and his entire team for the effective work that they've done in Mali. This is a situation in which France was able to stop the splintering of a nation-state by a terrorist organization, and now is in a position to reaffirm democracy and legitimacy and an effective government inside of Mali. That involved considerable sacrifice on the part of the French people, but it's part of a broader commitment on both our parts to pursue a smart counterterrorism policy that works with partners in the region.

And, finally, I wanted to say that I welcome France's decision to support the EU designation of Hezbollah -- Lebanese Hezbollah -- as a terrorist organization. I think that sends a powerful signal that Europe stands firmly against Hezbollah's terrorist activities and is consistent with the view that the only way that we can bring about a peaceful and prosperous Middle East is to isolate extremism and to promote those persons and institutions that are committed to a pluralistic, open and tolerant society that's based on rule of law.

And so, we are very much committed to continuing to strengthen our cooperation with the French government. When countries like the United States and France act in concert, we can get an awful lot done. And I very much appreciate not only the partnership, but also

the friendship of President Hollande. He extended an invitation for me to visit France, and I told him that we are always happy to visit France.

And so, we hope that we have the opportunity to schedule that perhaps some time next year.

END

4:21 P.M. BST