

Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron of the United Kingdom in a Joint Press Conference

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The White House

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Rose Garden

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good afternoon, everyone. Please have a seat. Again, it is a great honor to welcome my friend and partner, Prime Minister David Cameron, back to the White House for this official visit.

I know there's been a lot of focus on last night's game. Some have asked how it came about. So I want to set the record straight. During my visit to London last year, David arranged for us to play some local students -- table tennis. As they would say in Britain, we got thrashed. So when it came to sports on this visit, I thought it would be better if we just watched. That said, I'm still trying to get David to fill out his bracket.

We've just finished up a very good discussion, and it was a reminder of why I value David's leadership and partnership so much. He appreciates how the alliance between our countries is a foundation -- not only for the security and prosperity of our two nations, but for international peace and security as well. David shares my belief that, in a time of rapid change, the leadership of the United States and the United Kingdom is more important than ever. And we share the view that the future we seek is only possible if the rights and responsibilities of nations and people are upheld. And that's a cause that we advanced today.

At a time when too many of our people are still out of work, we agree that we've got to stay focused on creating the growth and jobs that put our people back to work, even as both our countries make difficult choices to put our fiscal houses in order. Between us, we

have the largest investment relationship in the world, and we've instructed our teams to continue to explore ways to increase transatlantic trade and investment. And I very much appreciate David's perspective on the fiscal situation in the eurozone, where both our countries -- our economies, our businesses, our banks -- are deeply connected.

We moved on to discuss Afghanistan, where we are the two largest contributors of forces to the international mission and where our forces continue to make extraordinary sacrifices. The tragic events of recent days are a reminder that this continues to be a very difficult mission. And obviously we both have lost a number of extraordinary young men and women in theater. What's also undeniable, though -- and what we can never forget -- is that our forces are making very real progress: dismantling al Qaeda; breaking the Taliban's momentum; and training Afghan forces so that they can take the lead and our troops can come home.

That transition is already underway, and about half of all Afghans currently live in areas where Afghan security forces are taking responsibility. Today, the Prime Minister and I reaffirmed the transition plan that we agreed to with our coalition partners in Lisbon. Specifically, at the upcoming NATO summit in my hometown of Chicago, we'll determine the next phase of transition. This includes shifting to a support role next year, in 2013, in advance of Afghans taking full responsibility for security in 2014. We're going to complete this mission, and we're going to do it responsibly. And NATO will maintain an enduring commitment so that Afghanistan never again becomes a haven for al Qaeda to attack our countries.

We also discussed the continuing threat posed by Iran's failure to meet its international obligations. On this we are fully united. We are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. We believe there is still time and space to pursue a diplomatic solution, and we're going to keep coordinating closely with our P5-plus-1 partners. At the same time, we're going to keep up the pressure, with the strongest U.S. sanctions to date and the European Union preparing to impose an embargo on Iranian oil. Tehran must understand that it cannot escape or evade the choice before it -- meet your international obligations or face the consequences.

We reaffirmed our commitment to support the democratic transitions underway in the Middle East and North Africa. British forces played a critical role in the mission to protect the Libyan people, and I want to commend David personally for the leadership role he plays in mobilizing international support for the transition in Libya.

We also discussed the horrific violence that the Assad regime continues to inflict on the people of Syria. Right now, we're focused on getting humanitarian aid to those in need. We agreed to keep increasing the pressure on the regime -- mobilizing the international community; tightening sanctions; cutting the regime's revenues; isolating it politically, diplomatically, and economically.

Just as the regime and security forces continue to suffer defections, the opposition is growing stronger. I'll say it again: Assad will leave power. It's not a question of if, but when. And to prepare for that day, we'll continue to support plans for a transition to support the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. More broadly, we recommitted ourselves and our leadership to the goal of global development.

Along with our international partners, we've saved countless lives from the famine in the Horn of Africa. David, you've done an outstanding job in bringing the international community to support progress in Somalia, including lifesaving aid. At the same time, we're renewing our commitment to improve maternal health and preventable deaths of children, and supporting the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria so that we can realize our goal, and that's the beginning of the end of AIDS. And let me say that it's a tribute to David's leadership that the UK will be playing a leading role in the global partnership to strengthen the open government upon which human rights and development depend.

Finally, I'm very pleased that we're bringing our two militaries, the backbone of our alliance, even closer. As I told David, I can announce that next month, we intend to start implementing our long-awaited defense trade treaty with the UK. This will put advanced technologies in the hands of our troops, and it will mean more jobs for workers in both our countries. And we're moving ahead with our joint initiative to care for our men and women in uniform.

For decades, our troops have stood together on the battlefield. Now we're working together for them when they come home -- with new partnerships to help our wounded warriors recover, assist our veterans transition back to civilian life, and to support our remarkable military families.

So, David, thank you, as always, for being such an outstanding ally, partner and friend. As I said this morning, because of our efforts, our alliance is as strong as it has ever been. And Michelle and I are very much looking forward to hosting you and Samantha at tonight's state dinner. I look forward, as well, to welcoming you to Camp David and my hometown of Chicago in May, to carry on the work upon which both our nations and the world depend.

So, David, welcome, and thank you.

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: Well, thank you very much for that, Barack. And thank you for last night's sporting event. I thought there was a link between that and the table tennis. I remember it well. And because I know America doesn't like being on the losing side, I'm trying to make up to you with the gift of a table tennis table, which I hope will be there in the White House --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We should practice this afternoon.

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: I think -- well, I certainly need the practice. One of these days I'll get my own back by getting you to a cricket match and explaining the rules to you and some of the terminology that you'll have to try and get straight, as I tried last night. But thank you.

We've had excellent discussions today, and it was great that our teams had time to join those talks as well. And, Barack, thank you, because there are some countries whose alliance is a matter of convenience, but ours is a matter of conviction. Two states, as I said this morning, united for freedom and enterprise; working together, day in, day out, to defend those values and advance our shared interests.

That has been the fundamental business of this visit and we've just made important progress on four vital areas: Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and economic growth. And I want to take each in turn.

First, Afghanistan. Recent days have reminded us just how difficult our mission is and how high the cost of this war has been for Britain, for America, and for Afghans themselves. Britain has fought alongside America every day since the start. We have 9,500 men and women still serving there. More than 400 have given their lives. And today, again, we commemorate each and every one of them.

But we will not give up on this mission because Afghanistan must never again be a safe haven for al Qaeda to launch attacks against us. We won't build a perfect Afghanistan, although let's be clear, we are making some tangible progress with more markets open, more health centers working, more children going to school, more people able to achieve a basic standard of living and security. But we can help ensure that Afghanistan is capable of delivering its own security without the need for large numbers of foreign troops.

We are now in the final phases of our military mission. That means completing the training of the Afghan forces so that they can take over the tasks of maintaining security themselves. That transition to Afghan control, as agreed at Lisbon, is now well underway. And next year, as the President said, in 2013, this includes shifting to a support role as Afghans take the lead. This is an advance of Afghan forces taking full responsibility for security in 2014. And as we've always said, we won't be in a combat role after 2014. At the same time, we will also back President Karzai in working towards an Afghan-led political settlement.

Second, a year on from the United Nations Security Council resolution on Libya, we agreed we must maintain our support for the people of the Arab world as they seek a better future. And let me just say, in response to what you said, Mr. President -- Barack -- about Libya, that I'm very proud of the action that Britain and France and others took, but let us be absolutely clear. None of that would have been possible without the overwhelming support and overwhelming force that the United States provided in the early stages of that campaign -- exactly what you promised you would do -- that actually made that intervention possible and has given that chance -- that country a chance at prosperity and stability and some measure of democracy.

Most urgently now in Syria, we are working to get humanitarian aid to those who need it. And Britain is today pledging an additional £2 million in food and medical care. At the same time, we must properly document the evidence so that those guilty of crimes can be held to account, no matter how long it takes.

Above all, we must do everything we can to achieve a political transition that will stop the killing. So we must maintain the strongest pressure on all those who are resisting change at all costs. We'll give our support to Kofi Annan, as he makes the case for the transition. And we are ready to work with Russia and China for the same goal, including through a new United Nations Security Council resolution.

But we should be clear. What we want is the quickest way to stop the killing. That is through transition rather than revolution or civil war. But if Assad continues, then civil war or revolution is the inevitable consequence. So we will work with anyone who is ready to build a stable, inclusive, and democratic Syria for all Syrians.

Third, we've discussed Iran's nuclear program. The President's tough, reasonable approach has united the world behind unprecedented sanctions pressure on Iran. And Britain has played a leading role in helping to deliver an EU-wide oil embargo. Alongside the financial sanctions being led by America, this embargo is dramatically increasing the pressure on the regime.

Now, we are serious about the talks that are set to resume, but the regime has to meet its international obligations. If it refuses to do so, then Britain and America, along with our international partners, will continue to increase the political and economic pressure to achieve a peaceful outcome to this crisis. The President and I have said nothing is off the table. That is essential for the safety of the region and the wider world.

Fourth, growth. Both Britain and America are dealing with massive debts and deficits. Of course, the measures we take in our domestic economies reflect different national circumstances, but we share the same goals -- delivering significant deficit reduction over the medium term and stimulating growth.

One of the keys to growth is trade. The EU and the U.S. together account for more than half of all global trade. Foreign direct investment between Britain and America is the largest in the world. It creates and sustains around a million jobs each side of the Atlantic, and it provides a strong foundation for bilateral trade worth nearly \$200 billion a year. So deepening trade and investment between us is crucial and can really help to stimulate growth. Barack and I have agreed to prioritize work ahead of the G8 on liberalizing transatlantic trade and investment flows.

So we've had some very important discussions this morning, and I'm looking forward to continuing our talks at the G8 and the NATO summit, and to visiting you, Barack, at Camp David and in your hometown of Chicago. Who knows what sport we will be able to go and see there?

As Barack has said, the relationship between Britain and America is the strongest that it has ever been. And I believe that's because we're working together as closely as at any point in our history. And together, I'm confident that we can help secure the future of our nations and the world for generations to come.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you, David.

So we've got questions from each respective press corps. We're going to start with Ari Shapiro of NPR.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Given the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in Afghanistan from the last few weeks, I wonder what makes you confident that two years from now when the last troops leave it will be better than it is today. And I wonder if you could also talk about the pace of withdrawal, whether you see something more gradual or speedier.

And, Mr. Prime Minister, you and the President take very different approaches to economic growth -- whereas you emphasize more austerity measures, the President focuses more on stimulative measures. And I wonder whether you could explain why you believe that your approach is likely to create more jobs than President Obama's approach.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, first of all, on Afghanistan, I think both David and I understand how difficult this mission is because we've met with families whose sons or daughters or husbands or wives made the ultimate sacrifice. We visit our wounded warriors and we understand the sacrifices that they've made there.

But as I indicated, we have made progress. We're seeing an Afghan national security force that is getting stronger and more robust and more capable of operating on its own. And our goal, set in Lisbon, is to make sure that over the next two years, that Afghan security force continues to improve, enhance its capabilities, and so we'll be prepared to provide for that country's security when we leave.

We also think it's important that there is a political aspect to this -- that all the various factions and ethnic groups inside of Afghanistan recognize that it's time to end 30 years of war. And President Karzai has committed to a political reconciliation process. We are

doing what we can to help facilitate that. Ultimately, it's going to be up to the Afghans to work together to try to arrive at a path to peace. And we can't be naïve about the difficulties that are going to be involved in getting there.

But if we maintain a steady, responsible transition process, which is what we've designed, then I am confident that we can put Afghans in a position where they can deal with their own security. And we're also underscoring, through what we anticipate to be a strategic partnership that's been signed before we get to Chicago, that the United States, along with many other countries, will sustain a relationship with Afghanistan. We will not have combat troops there, but we will be working with them both to ensure their security but also to ensure that their economy continues to improve.

There are going to be multiple challenges along the way. In terms of pace, I don't anticipate, at this stage, that we're going to be making any sudden additional changes to the plan that we currently have. We have already taken out 10,000 of our troops. We're slated to draw down an additional 23,000 by this summer. There will be a robust coalition presence inside of Afghanistan during this fighting season to make sure that the Taliban understand that they're not going to be able to regain momentum.

After the fighting season, in conjunction with all our allies, we will continue to look at how do we effectuate this transition in a way that doesn't result in a steep cliff at the end of 2014, but rather is a gradual pace that accommodates the developing capacities of the Afghan national security forces.

Although you asked it to David, I want to make sure that I just comment quickly on the economic issues because this is a question that David and I have been getting for the last two years. We always give the same answer, but I figure it's worth repeating. The United States and Great Britain are two different economies in two different positions. Their banking sector was much larger than ours. Their capacity to sustain debt was different than ours. And so, as a consequence, each of us are going to be taking different strategies and employing different timing.

But our objectives are common, which is we want to make sure that we have a -- we have governments that are lean, that are effective, that are efficient, that are providing opportunity to our people, that are properly paid for so that we're not leaving it to the next generation. And we want to make sure that ultimately our citizens in both our countries

are able to pursue their dreams and opportunities by getting a good education and being able to start a small business, being able to find a job that supports their families and allows them to retire with dignity and respect.

And so this notion that somehow two different countries are going to have identical economic programs doesn't take into account profound differences in position. But the objectives, the goals, the values I think are the same. And I'm confident that because of the resilience of our people and our businesses and our workers, our systems of higher education, that we are both countries that are incredibly well positioned to succeed in this knowledge-based economy of the 21st century.

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: I very much agree with that. I mean, there are differences because we're not a reserve currency, so we have to take a different path. But I think it would be wrong to think that Britain is just taking measures to reduce its deficit. We're also taking a series of measures to help promote growth.

Just before coming here, we took a series of steps to try and unblock and get moving our housing market, where we've cut corporation tax in our country to show that it's a great destination for investment. We're investing in apprenticeships. So a series of steps have been taken.

But there are differences, as Barack has said, between the states of the two economy and the circumstances we face. But we're both trying to head in the same direction of growth and low deficits. And actually, if you look at the U.S. plans for reducing the deficit over coming years, in many ways they are actually steeper than what we're going to be doing in the UK.

So different starting points, different measures on occasions, but the same destination, and a very good shared understanding as we try to get there.

I've got Joey Jones, from Sky News.

Q And to Mr. President, can I ask you both whether you have any information about an apparent car bombing at Camp Bastion this afternoon? And on the general Afghan question, why do you think it is that people feel that you talk a good game but they don't

buy it? Why do you think it is that the British and American people look at a situation that they think is, frankly, a mess -- they see terrible sacrifice, they see two men who are unable to impose their wills -- and they just are not persuaded by your arguments?

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: Well, first of all, on what has happened at Camp Bastion, it is very early, details still coming through. Obviously, we'll want to examine and investigate exactly what has happened before making clear anything about it.

But the security of our people, of our troops, security of both our nation's forces is absolutely the priority. And if there are things that need to be done in the coming hours and days to keep them safer, be in no doubt we will do them.

On the broader issue of Afghanistan, I would make this point -- if you compare where we are today with where we've been two, three years ago, the situation is considerably improved. I think the U.S. surge and the additional UK troops we put in, particularly into Helmand Province, had a transformative effect. The level of insurgent attacks are right down. The level of security is right up. The capital of Helmand Province, Lashkar Gah, is now fully transitioned over to Afghan lead control. The markets are open. You're able to do -- take part in economic activity in that town, which simply wasn't possible when I first visited it several years ago.

So, look, it's still a very difficult situation. There are many challenges we have to overcome. But what's happening in Afghanistan today is quite different to the situation we had three, four, five years ago.

Do I think we can get to a situation by the end of 2014 where we have a large Afghan national army, a large Afghan police force, both of which are pretty much on track -- and that with the Afghan government, they're capable of taking care of their own security in a way that doesn't require large numbers of foreign troops, and that country isn't a threat in the way that it was in the past in terms of a base for terrorism? Yes, I think we can achieve that.

Now, it's been very hard work. The sacrifices have been very great. But we have to keep reminding ourselves and everybody why we are there, what we are doing. You have to go back and remember that the vast majority of terrorist plots that were affecting people in the UK, people in the U.S., came out of that country and that region. That's why we went in there; that's why we're there today.

It's not some selfish, long-term strategic interest. It's simply that we want Afghanistan to be able to look after its own security with its own security forces so we are safe at home. That's the key. That's the message we need to keep explaining to people. But I think what we're trying to do by the end of 2014 is achievable and doable.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I concur with everything David said. The only thing I would add -- you asked why is it that poll numbers indicate people are interested in ending the war in Afghanistan. It's because we've been there for 10 years, and people get weary, and they know friends and neighbors who have lost loved ones as a consequence of war. No one wants war. Anybody who answers a poll question about war saying enthusiastically, we want war, probably hasn't been involved in a war.

But as David said, I think the vast majority of the American people and British understand why we went there. There is a reason why al Qaeda is on its heels and has been decimated. There's a reason why Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants are not in a position to be able to execute plots against the United States or Great Britain. There is a reason why it is increasingly difficult for those who are interested in carrying out transnational operations directed against our interests, our friends, our allies, to be able to do that -- is because the space has shrunk and their capacity to operate is greatly diminished.

Now, as David indicated, this is a hard slog, this is hard work. When I came into office there has been drift in the Afghanistan strategy, in part because we had spent a lot of time focusing on Iraq instead. Over the last three years we have refocused attention on getting Afghanistan right. Would my preference had been that we started some of that earlier? Absolutely. But that's not the cards that were dealt. We're now in a position where, given our starting point, we're making progress. And I believe that we're going to be able to make our -- achieve our objectives in 2014.

Alister Bull.

Q Thank you, Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister. Mr. President, switching to Iran --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Can I just point out that somehow Alister gets to ask a question on behalf of the U.S. press corps -- (laughter) -- but he sounds like --

Q It's the special relationship. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Were you upset about that, Chuck? (Laughter.) Yes, what's going on with that, Jay? Come on, man. (Laughter.) It's a special relationship.

Q It is a special relationship. On Iran, do you believe that the six-power talks represent a last chance for the country to diffuse concerns over its nuclear program and avert military action?

And, Prime Minister, on Syria, how are you approaching the Russians to get them on board for a fresh Security Council resolution? And do you believe President Bashar al-Assad ought to be tried as a war crime -- a war criminal?

Thank you.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: As David said, we have applied the toughest sanctions ever on Iran, and we've mobilized the international community with greater unity than we've ever seen. Those sanctions are going to begin to bite even harder this summer. And we're seeing significant effects on the Iranian economy.

So they understand the seriousness with which we take this issue. They understand that there are consequences to them continuing to flout the international community. And I have sent a message very directly to them publicly that they need to seize this opportunity of negotiations with the P5-plus-1 to avert even worse consequences for Iran in the future.

Do I have a guarantee that Iran will walk through this door that we're offering them? No. In the past there has been a tendency for Iran in these negotiations with the P5-plus-1 to delay, to stall, to do a lot of talking but not actually move the ball forward.

I think they should understand that because the international community has applied so many sanctions, because we have employed so many of the options that are available to us to persuade Iran to take a different course, that the window for solving this issue

diplomatically is shrinking.

And as I said in a speech just a couple of weeks ago, I am determined not simply to contain Iran that is in possession of a nuclear weapon; I am determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon -- in part for the reasons that David mentioned. It would trigger a nuclear arms race in the most dangerous part of the world. It would raise nonproliferation issues that would carry significant risks to our national security interests. It would embolden terrorists in the region who might believe that they could act with more impunity if they were operating under the protection of Iran.

And so this is not an issue that is simply in one country's interests or two countries' interests. This is an issue that is important to the entire international community. We will do everything we can to resolve this diplomatically, but ultimately, we've got to have somebody on the other side of the table who's taking this seriously. And I hope that the Iranian regime understands that; that this is their best bet for resolving this in a way that allows Iran to rejoin the community of nations and to prosper and feel secure themselves.

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: Thank you. On Syria, when you see what is happening in Homs and elsewhere, I think we need to appeal to people's humanity to stop this slaughter, to get aid and assistance to those who've been affected, and to ratchet up the pressure on this dreadful regime.

But in the case of Russia, I think we should also appeal to their own interest. It's not in their interest to have this bloodied, broken, brutal regime butchering people nightly on the television screens. The irony is that people in Syria often felt that the Russians were their friends, and many in the West they were more suspicious of. Now they can see people in the West wanting to help them, raising their issues, calling for the world to act on their problems. And we need to make sure that Russia joins with that.

So it's going to take a lot of hard work. It's going to take a lot of patient diplomacy. But I think it's actually in Russia's interest that we deal with this problem, that we achieve transition, and that we get peace and stability in Syria. And that's the appeal that we should make.

On the issue of holding people responsible -- I do. They're not a signatory to the ICC, but what is being done in Homs -- and I've spoken personally to one of the photographers who was stuck in Homs, when he got out to the UK -- what he witnessed, what he saw is

simply appalling and shouldn't be allowed to stand in our world.

And that's why Britain and others have sent monitors to the Turkish border and elsewhere to make sure we document these crimes, we write down what has been done so that no matter how long it takes -- people should always remember that international law has got a long reach and a long memory, and the people who are leading Syria at the moment and committing these crimes need to know that.

Tom Bradby from ITN.

Q MR. President, it's great you've agreed to learn about cricket. I noticed the Prime Minister neglected to tell you that a test match usually takes five days. (Laughter.) So it's going to be a long trip. (Laughter.)

On the serious subject of Syria, you say you want Assad to go. You wanted Qaddafi to go, and he didn't for a long, long time. So could you just answer specifically, have you discussed today the possibility of a no-fly zone? Have you discussed how you might implement it? Have you discussed how you would degrade the Syrian defenses? Have you discussed time scales on any of those issues?

PRIME MINISTER CAMERON: What I'd say, Tom, is that our teams work incredibly closely together on this issue, and the focus right now is, as I said, on trying to achieve transition, not trying to foment revolution. We think that the fastest way to end the killing, which is what we all want to see, is for Assad to go. So the way we should try to help bring that about is through diplomatic pressure, sanctions pressure, political pressure, the pressure that Kofi Annan can bring to bear. That is where our focus is.

Of course, our teams, all the time, as I put it, kick the tires, push the system, ask the difficult questions -- what are the other options, what are the other things that we could do? And it's right that we do that. But they're not without their difficulties and complications, as everybody knows. So the focus is transition and all the things that we can do to bring that pressure to bear. And that has been the focus of our discussions.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I'd echo everything that David said. Our military plans for everything. That's part of what they do. But I was very clear during the Libya situation that this was unique. We had a clear international mandate; there was unity around the world on that. We were able to execute a plan in a relatively short timeframe that resulted in a good outcome.

But each country is different. As David just mentioned with respect to Syria, it is a extremely complicated situation. The best thing that we can do right now is to make sure that the international community continues to unify around the fact that what the Syrian regime is doing is unacceptable. It is contrary to every international norm that we believe in.

And for us to provide strong support to Kofi Annan, to continue to talk to the Russians, the Chinese and others about why it is that they need to stand up on behalf of people who are being shelled mercilessly, and to describe to them why it is in their interest to join us in a unified international coalition -- that's the most important work that we can do right now.

There may be some immediate steps that we've discussed just to make sure that humanitarian aid is being provided in a robust way, and to make sure that a opposition unifies along principles that ultimately would provide a clear platform for the Syrian people to be able to transition to a better form of government.

But when we see what's happening on television, our natural instinct is to act. One of the things that I think both of us have learned in every one of these crises -- including in Libya -- is that it's very important for us to make sure that we have thought through all of our actions before we take those steps. And that's not just important for us; it's also important for the Syrian people -- because, ultimately, the way the international community mobilizes itself, the signals we send, the degree to which we can facilitate a more peaceful transition or a soft landing, rather than a hard landing that results in civil war and, potentially, even more deaths -- the people who are going to ultimately be most affected by those decisions are the people in Syria itself. All right?

Thank you very much, everybody. Enjoy the day. See some of you tonight.

END

1:03 P.M. EDT