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Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Congressional Leaders on the Situation in Syria

September 3, 2013

The President. I want to thank the leaders of both parties for being here today to discuss what is a very serious issue facing the United States. And the fact that I've had a chance to speak to many of you and Congress as a whole is taking this issue with the soberness and seriousness that it deserves is greatly appreciated and, I think, vindicates the decision for us to present this issue to Congress.

As I've said last week, as Secretary Kerry made clear in his presentation last week, we have high confidence that Syria used, in an indiscriminate fashion, chemical weapons that killed thousands of people, including over 400 children, and in direct violation of the international norm against using chemical weapons. That poses a serious national security threat to the United States and to the region, and as a consequence, Asad and Syria needs to be held accountable.

I've made a decision that America should take action. But I also believe that we will be much more effective, we will be stronger, if we take action together as one Nation. And so this gives us an opportunity not only to present the evidence to all of the leading Members of Congress and their various foreign policy Committees as to why we have high confidence that chemical weapons were used and that Asad used them, but it also gives us an opportunity to discuss why it's so important that he be held to account.

This norm against using chemical weapons that 98 percent of the world agrees to is there for a reason, because we recognize that there are certain weapons that, when used, can not only end up resulting in grotesque deaths, but also can end up being transmitted to nonstate actors, can pose a risk to allies and friends of ours like Israel, like Jordan, like Turkey, and unless we hold them into account, also sends a message that international norms around issues like nuclear proliferation don't mean much.

And so I'm going to be working with Congress. We have sent up a draft authorization. We are going to be asking for hearings and a prompt vote. And I'm very appreciative that everybody here has already begun to schedule hearings and intends to take a vote as soon as can—as all of Congress comes back early next week.

So the key point that I want to emphasize to the American people: The military plan that has been developed by our Joint Chiefs—and that I believe is appropriate—is proportional. It is limited. It does not involve boots on the ground. This is not Iraq, and this is not Afghanistan.

This is a limited, proportional step that will send a clear message not only to the Asad regime, but also to other countries that may be interested in testing some of these international norms, that there are consequences. It gives us the ability to degrade Asad's capabilities when it comes to chemical weapons. It also fits into a broader strategy that we have to make sure that we can bring about, over time, the kind of strengthening of the opposition and the diplomatic and economic and political pressure required so that ultimately we have a transition that can bring peace and stability not only to Syria, but to the region.

But I want to emphasize once again: What we are envisioning is something limited. It is something proportional. It will degrade Asad's capabilities. At the same time, we have a

broader strategy that will allow us to upgrade the capabilities of the opposition, allow Syria ultimately to free itself from the kinds of terrible civil wars and death and activity that we've been seeing on the ground.

So I look forward to listening to the various concerns of the Members who are here today. I am confident that those concerns can be addressed. I think it is appropriate that we act deliberately, but I also think everybody recognizes the urgency here and that we're going to have to move relatively quickly.

So with that, to all of you here today, I look forward to an excellent discussion.

Congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force

Q. Mr. President, are you prepared to rewrite the authorization, and does that undercut any of your authority, sir?

The President. I would not be going to Congress if I wasn't serious about consultations and believing that by shaping the authorization to make sure we accomplish the mission we will be more effective. And so long as we are accomplishing what needs to be accomplished, which is to send a clear message to Asad, degrading his capabilities to use chemical weapons, not just now, but also in the future, as long as the authorization allows us to do that, I'm confident that we're going to be able to come up with something that hits that mark.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:51 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Bashar al-Asad of Syria.

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