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Remarks on Congressional Passage of Legislation To Train and Equip Syrian Opposition Forces

September 18, 2014

Good evening. Today the United States continues to build a broad international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL. As part of the air campaign, France will join in strikes against ISIL targets in Iraq. And as one of our oldest and closest allies, France is a strong partner in our efforts against terrorism, and we're pleased that French and American servicemembers will once again work together on behalf of our shared security and our shared values.

More broadly, more than 40 countries—including Arab nations—have now offered assistance as part of this coalition. This includes support for Iraqi forces, strengthening the Iraqi Government, providing humanitarian aid to Iraqi civilians, and doing their part in the fight against ISIL.

Here at home, I'm pleased that Congress—a majority of Democrats and a majority of Republicans, in both the House and the Senate—have now voted to support a key element of our strategy: our plan to train and equip the opposition in Syria so they can help push back these terrorists. As I said last week, I believe that we're strongest as a nation when the President and Congress work together. And I want to thank leaders in Congress for the speed and seriousness with which they approached this urgent issue, in keeping with the bipartisanship that is the hallmark of American foreign policy at its best.

These Syrian opposition forces are fighting both the brutality of ISIL terrorists and the tyranny of the Asad regime. We had already ramped up our assistance, including military assistance, to the Syrian opposition. With this new effort, we'll provide training and equipment to help them grow stronger and take on ISIL terrorists inside Syria. This program will be hosted outside of Syria, in partnership with Arab countries, and it will be matched by our increasing support for Iraqi Government and Kurdish forces in Iraq.

This is in keeping with a key principle of our strategy: The American forces that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission; their mission is to advise and assist our partners on the ground. As I told our troops yesterday, we can join with allies and partners to destroy ISIL without American troops fighting another ground war in the Middle East.

The strong bipartisan support in Congress for this new training effort shows the world that Americans are united in confronting the threat from ISIL, which has slaughtered so many innocent civilians. With their barbaric murder of two Americans, these terrorists thought they could frighten us, or intimidate us, or cause us to shrink from the world, but today they're learning the same hard lesson of petty tyrants and terrorists who have gone before.

As Americans, we do not give in to fear. And when you harm our citizens, when you threaten the United States, when you threaten our allies, it doesn't divide us, it unites us. We pull together, we stand together, to defend this country that we love and to make sure justice is done, as well as to join with those who seek a better future of dignity and opportunity for all people.

And today, our strikes against these terrorists continue. We're taking out their terrorists. We're destroying their vehicles and equipment and stockpiles. And we salute our dedicated pilots and crews who are carrying out these missions with great courage and skill.

As Commander in Chief, I could not be more proud of their service. As I told some of our troops yesterday, the American people are united in our support for them and for their families. And as we go forward, as one Nation, I'd ask all Americans to keep our forces and their families in their thoughts and prayers. Thanks very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to H.J. Res. 124; and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

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