

Remarks by the President at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism | February 19, 2015

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. (Applause.) Thank you, John. Good morning, everyone. I want to thank John Kerry, not only for his introduction, but for the outstanding leadership of American diplomacy. John is tireless. If he has not visited your country yet, he will soon. And I want to thank you and everybody here at the State Department for organizing and hosting this ministerial today.

Mr. Secretary General, distinguished guests, we are joined by representatives from governments, because we all have a responsibility to ensure the security, the prosperity and the human rights of our citizens. And we're joined by leaders of civil society, including many faith leaders, because civil society -- reflecting the views and the voices of citizens -- is vital to the success of any country. I thank all of you and I welcome all of you.

We come together from more than 60 countries from every continent. We speak different languages, born of different races and ethnic groups, belong to different religions. We are here today because we are united against the scourge of violent extremism and terrorism.

As we speak, ISIL is terrorizing the people of Syria and Iraq and engaging in unspeakable cruelty. The wanton murder of children, the enslavement and rape of women, threatening religious minorities with genocide, beheading hostages. ISIL-linked terrorists murdered Egyptians in the Sinai Peninsula, and their slaughter of Egyptian Christians in Libya has shocked the world. Beyond the region, we've seen deadly attacks in Ottawa, Sydney, Paris, and now Copenhagen.

Elsewhere, Israelis have endured the tragedy of terrorism for decades. Pakistan's Taliban has mounted a long campaign of violence against the Pakistani people that now tragically includes the massacre of more than 100 schoolchildren and their teachers. From Somalia,

al-Shabaab terrorists have launched attacks across East Africa. In Nigeria and neighboring countries, Boko Haram kills and kidnaps men, women and children.

At the United Nations in September, I called on the international community to come together and eradicate violent extremism. And I challenged countries to come to the General Assembly this fall with concrete steps we can take together. And I'm grateful for all of you for answering this call.

Yesterday at the White House, we welcomed community groups from the United States, and some from your countries, to focus on how we can empower communities to protect their families and friends and neighbors from violent ideologies and recruitment. And over the coming months, many of your countries will host summits to build on the work here and to prepare for the General Assembly. Today, I want to suggest some areas where I believe we can focus on as governments.

First, we must remain unwavering in our fight against terrorist organizations. And in Afghanistan, our coalition is focused on training and assisting Afghan forces, and we'll continue to conduct counterterrorism missions against the remnants of al Qaeda in the tribal regions. When necessary, the United States will continue to take action against al Qaeda affiliates in places like Yemen and Somalia. We will continue to work with partners to help them build up their security forces so that they can prevent ungoverned spaces where terrorists find safe haven, and so they can push back against groups like al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

In Iraq and Syria, our coalition of some 60 nations, including Arab nations, will not relent in our mission to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And as a result of a separate ministerial here yesterday, many of our governments will be deepening our cooperation against foreign terrorist fighters by sharing more information and making it harder for fighters to travel to and from Syria and Iraq.

Related to this, and as I said at the United Nations last fall, nations need to break the cycles of conflict -- especially sectarian conflict -- that have become magnets for violent extremism. In Syria, Assad's war against his own people and deliberate stoking of sectarian tensions helped to fuel the rise of ISIL. And in Iraq, with the failure of the previous government to govern in an inclusive manner, it helped to pave the way for ISIL's gains there.

The Syrian civil war will only end when there is an inclusive political transition and a government that serves Syrians of all ethnicities and religions. And across the region, the terror campaigns between Sunnis and Shia will only end when major powers address their differences through dialogue, and not through proxy wars. So countering violent extremism begins with political, civic and religious leaders rejecting sectarian strife.

Second, we have to confront the warped ideologies espoused by terrorists like al Qaeda and ISIL, especially their attempt to use Islam to justify their violence. I discussed this at length yesterday. These terrorists are desperate for legitimacy. And all of us have a

responsibility to refute the notion that groups like ISIL somehow represent Islam, because that is a falsehood that embraces the terrorist narrative.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that groups like al Qaeda and ISIL are deliberately targeting their propaganda to Muslim communities, particularly Muslim youth. And Muslim communities, including scholars and clerics, therefore have a responsibility to push back, not just on twisted interpretations of Islam, but also on the lie that we are somehow engaged in a clash of civilizations; that America and the West are somehow at war with Islam or seek to suppress Muslims; or that we are the cause of every ill in the Middle East.

That narrative sometimes extends far beyond terrorist organizations. That narrative becomes the foundation upon which terrorists build their ideology and by which they try to justify their violence. And that hurts all of us, including Islam, and especially Muslims, who are the ones most likely to be killed.

Obviously, there is a complicated history between the Middle East, the West. And none of us I think should be immune from criticism in terms of specific policies, but the notion that the West is at war with Islam is an ugly lie. And all of us, regardless of our faith, have a responsibility to reject it.

At the same time, former extremists have the opportunity to speak out, speak the truth about terrorist groups, and oftentimes they can be powerful messengers in debunking these terrorist ideologies. One said, "This wasn't what we came for, to kill other Muslims." Those voices have to be amplified.

And governments have a role to play. At minimum, as a basic first step, countries have a responsibility to cut off funding that fuels hatred and corrupts young minds and endangers us all. We need to do more to help lift up voices of tolerance and peace, especially online.

That's why the United States is joining, for example, with the UAE to create a new digital communications hub to work with religious and civil society and community leaders to counter terrorist propaganda. Within the U.S. government, our efforts will be led by our new coordinator of counterterrorism communications -- and I'm grateful that my envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Rashad Hussain, has agreed to serve in this new role. So the United States will do more to help counter hateful ideologies, and today I urge your nations to join us in this urgent work.

Third, we must address the grievances that terrorists exploit, including economic grievances. As I said yesterday, poverty alone does not cause a person to become a terrorist, any more than poverty alone causes someone to become a criminal. There are millions, billions of people who are poor and are law-abiding and peaceful and tolerant, and are trying to advance their lives and the opportunities for their families.

But when people -- especially young people -- feel entirely trapped in impoverished communities, where there is no order and no path for advancement, where there are no educational opportunities, where there are no ways to support families, and no escape

from injustice and the humiliations of corruption -- that feeds instability and disorder, and makes those communities ripe for extremist recruitment. And we have seen that across the Middle East and we've seen it across North Africa. So if we're serious about countering violent extremism, we have to get serious about confronting these economic grievances.

Here, at this summit, the United States will make new commitments to help young people, including in Muslim communities, to forge new collaborations in entrepreneurship and science and technology. All our nations can reaffirm our commitment to broad-based development that creates growth and jobs, not just for the few at the top, but for the many. We can step up our efforts against corruption, so a person can go about their day and an entrepreneur can start a business without having to pay a bribe.

And as we go forward, let's commit to expanding education, including for girls. Expanding opportunity, including for women. Nations will not truly succeed without the contributions of their women. This requires, by the way, wealthier countries to do more. But it also requires countries that are emerging and developing to create structures of governance and transparency so that any assistance provided actually works and reaches people. It's a two-way street.

Fourth, we have to address the political grievances that terrorists exploit. Again, there is not a single perfect causal link, but the link is undeniable. When people are oppressed, and human rights are denied -- particularly along sectarian lines or ethnic lines -- when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism. It creates an environment that is ripe for terrorists to exploit. When peaceful, democratic change is impossible, it feeds into the terrorist propaganda that violence is the only answer available.

And so we must recognize that lasting stability and real security require democracy. That means free elections where people can choose their own future, and independent judiciaries that uphold the rule of law, and police and security forces that respect human rights, and free speech and freedom for civil society groups. And it means freedom of religion -- because when people are free to practice their faith as they choose, it helps hold diverse societies together.

And finally, we have to ensure that our diverse societies truly welcome and respect people of all faiths and backgrounds, and leaders set the tone on this issue.

Groups like al Qaeda and ISIL peddle the lie that some of our countries are hostile to Muslims. Meanwhile, we've also seen, most recently in Europe, a rise in inexcusable acts of anti-Semitism, or in some cases, anti-Muslim sentiment or anti-immigrant sentiment. When people spew hatred towards others -- because of their faith or because they're immigrants -- it feeds into terrorist narratives. If entire communities feel they can never become a full part of the society in which they reside, it feeds a cycle of fear and resentment and a sense of injustice upon which extremists prey. And we can't allow cycles of suspicions to tear at the fabric of our countries.

So we all recognize the need for more dialogues across countries and cultures; those efforts are indeed important. But what's most needed today, perhaps, are more dialogues within countries -- not just across faiths, but also within faiths.

Violent extremists and terrorists thrive when people of different religions or sects pull away from each other and are able to isolate each other and label them as "they" as opposed to "us;" something separate and apart. So we need to build and bolster bridges of communication and trust.

Terrorists traffic in lies and stereotypes about others -- other religions, other ethnic groups. So let's share the truth of our faiths with each other. Terrorists prey upon young impressionable minds. So let's bring our youth together to promote understanding and cooperation. That's what the United States will do with our virtual exchange program -- named after Ambassador Chris Stevens -- to connect 1 million young people from America and the Middle East and North Africa for dialogue. Young people are taught to hate. It doesn't come naturally to them. We, adults, teach them.

I'd like to close by speaking very directly to a painful truth that's part of the challenge that brings us here today. In some of our countries, including the United States, Muslim communities are still small, relative to the entire population, and as a result, many people in our countries don't always know personally of somebody who is Muslim. So the image they get of Muslims or Islam is in the news. And given the existing news cycle, that can give a very distorted impression. A lot of the bad, like terrorists who claim to speak for Islam, that's absorbed by the general population. Not enough of the good -- the more than 1 billion people around the world who do represent Islam, and are doctors and lawyers and teachers, and neighbors and friends.

So we have to remember these Muslim men and women -- the young Palestinian working to build understanding and trust with Israelis, but also trying to give voice to her people's aspirations. The Muslim clerics working for peace with Christian pastors and priests in Nigeria and the Central African Republic to put an end to the cycle of hate. Civil society leaders in Indonesia, one of the world's largest democracies. Parliamentarians in Tunisia working to build one of the world's newest democracies.

Business leaders in India, with one of the world's largest Muslim populations. Entrepreneurs unleashing new innovations in places like Malaysia. Health workers fighting to save lives from polio and from Ebola in West Africa. And volunteers who go to disaster zones after a tsunami or after an earthquake to ease suffering and help families rebuild. Muslims who have risked their lives as human shields to protect Coptic churches in Egypt and to protect Christians attending mass in Pakistan and who have tried to protect synagogues in Syria.

The world hears a lot about the terrorists who attacked Charlie Hebdo in Paris, but the world has to also remember the Paris police officer, a Muslim, who died trying to stop them. The world knows about the attack on the Jews at the kosher supermarket in Paris; we need to recall the worker at that market, a Muslim, who hid Jewish customers and

saved their lives. And when he was asked why he did it, he said, “We are brothers. It's not a question of Jews or Christians or Muslims. We're all in the same boat, and we have to help each other to get out of this crisis.”

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for being here today. We come from different countries and different cultures and different faiths, but it is useful for us to take our wisdom from that humble worker who engaged in heroic acts under the most severe of circumstances.

We are all in the same boat. We have to help each other. In this work, you will have a strong partner in me and the United States of America.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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10:54 A.M. EST