Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The key to ending the suffering of ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East is leadership."

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Thank you Mr President for convening today's important debate on the victims of attacks and abuses on ethnic or religious grounds in the Middle East. I thank the Secretary-General and all of the briefers for their thoughtful and sobering statements.

Mr President,

Last week, I had the sombre privilege of speaking alongside Kurdish friends at a UK event marking the Halabja chemical attack in 1988. And on the 14th of April, the UK will mark Anfal Memorial Day.

As a former soldier, I served in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and on mainland Europe, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have seen firsthand the devastating and enduring impact of attacks against ethnic and religious groups.

My message today Mr President is this: the key to ending the suffering of ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East is leadership. Bold leadership. Leadership that promotes tolerance and stands up against hatred. Leadership that brings people together regardless of their ethnicity, religion, belief, gender or sexual orientation – and enables their full participation in society.

So, I welcome the Secretary General's announcement today of the creation of a panel of experts and Foreign Minister Fabius's proposal for a conference to consider these issues.

We look to the future, but we can also learn from the past.

The past gives us hope. And the Middle East – as described by José Manuel García-Margallo called the cradle of civilisations – has long been admired for its history of tolerance and cosmopolitanism and what his Beatitude described as the mosaic of religions. Before Daesh began their brutal war against the citizens of Iraq and Syria, Assyrians and Yezidis had lived for millennia alongside the Muslim majority.

Even in the recent past, bold leaders have stepped forth in a spirit of reconciliation and tolerance. In 1977 for example, Egyptian president Sadat stunned the world when he became

the first Arab leader to visit Israel. Initially seen as an unpopular move after so many years of conflict it fundamentally changed the relationship for the better.

But in 2015, Daesh's actions underline the urgent need for today's moderate voices and bold leaders to make themselves heard.

Daesh is slaughtering Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Their cruelty knows no bounds. A recent UN report on Iraq described Daesh's widespread abuses include killings, torture, rape and sexual slavery, forced religious conversions and the conscription of children. All included horrific stories.

And for example, as my Parliamentary colleague from Iraq Mrs Vian Dakhil articulated in an extremely passionate speech, how Yezidi girls and women are openly sold, or handed over as gifts to Daesh members, with witnesses describing the screams of girls as young as six and nine as they were raped by Daesh fighters.

And Daesh are also destroying our shared cultural history. As mentioned by you Mr President, the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, bulldozed. The human-headed bull statues of Nineveh – quite literally de-faced by a pneumatic drill. Priceless artefacts, sold to fund Daesh's brutality.

But the problem is wider than Daesh. So, our response must be broad as well. Under Articles 18 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, each UN member state has a duty to protect all of its people.

But, how should we support this in the Middle East?

We must degrade and ultimately defeat Daesh, working through the Global Coalition. As the UK's Minister for the Middle East, a large proportion of my time has been devoted to the diplomatic efforts.

The other immediate priority is the appalling humanitarian crisis that is taking place across Syria and Iraq– where 11.4 million Syrians and over 2.5 million Iraqis have fled their homes. The UK has been at the forefront, from helping to protect the Yezidis on Mount Sinjar, to contributing 1.2 billion US dollars to the Syria crisis and nearly 60 million US dollars to Iraq.

With over 220,000 killed and over two million displaced people in Syria, Mr President a generation is being denied the education that they need and deserve. One day the guns will fall silent in Syria. And the international community must do its part to help educate the free Syrians and refugees. So there are for example the doctors, the farmers, the teachers, the civil servants, to help get the country back off its knees.

We need others to step up urgently to the pledging conference that will take place in Kuwait next week. That is the opportunity to do so.

But more must be done to address sexual violence in conflict and to support survivors - which is why we hosted the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict last June - and produced an international protocol on the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict.

The Iraqi government is the first in the region to have a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. But it needs our international support. To this end, the UK and Canada recently set up a scoping mission to Iraq - and are working with the Iraqi government to implement the recommendations.

But the best defence against radicalisation, the best guarantee of stability and sustainable growth the world over - is inclusive and accountable government.

This will not happen overnight. It will not happen in a year or indeed a decade. It will be the work of a generation. But it is work that is crucial, nonetheless.

In Britain, we have learnt this the hard way. The Magna Carta, whose 800th anniversary we mark this year, did not suddenly create a free and just society overnight. Rather, it was a critical step on an incremental process, peppered with setbacks, civil wars and religious persecution, towards the parliamentary democracy we know today.

But while the work in the Middle East could take a generation, we must not let it take eight centuries. In the past, ideas could only travel as fast as a person on a horse, spreading the word from town to town. Now ideas can be shared with the touch of a button. We can – and must - be quicker to foster these ideas to enable the creation of inclusive, representative governments.

But on that note we should be mindful how modern technology, the internet, is being hijacked to promote extremism and incite violence.

Mr President, we all have a role to play in tackling extremism. For example, I commend the exceptional work in Lebanon of Mufti Deryan - whom I met recently – to build bridges between faith communities to end extremism and terror.

We must give our full support to the Middle East Peace Process, and to the two state solution - to prevent more suffering and an uncertain and dangerous future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

And we must continue to seek peace in Syria. We should not fall for the regime’s specious argument that they can protect minorities. Assad’s actions have fuelled sectarian violence and his regime is ultimately responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The Syrian people deserve a more accountable, inclusive, representative form of governance than Assad could ever offer.

Mr President, we, the international community, must heed early warnings and seek to prevent atrocities before they begin – as we did last year in the Central African Republic. But where preventative action fails or comes too late, there must be no impunity for perpetrators.

Justice is neither easy nor quick. But it is essential. From Rwanda to Yugoslavia, South Africa to Northern Ireland, history has shown that peace can only be built on accountability and justice.

Finally, we must counter Daesh's twisted narrative, through education and good governance.

We need to underline the responsibility of authorities and civil society alike to support counter narratives and tackle what the High Commissioner called the 'toxins of extremism'.

And we must engage and empower women to help build the secure, stable and prosperous Middle East that we all want.

We call on the governments in the region to guarantee freedom of religion - as laid down in Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights - for all their people. Because when children are brought up to respect followers of all religions and of none, extremist ideologies will wither and die.

So, to conclude Mr President: in this anniversary year for the United Nations, let us take inspiration from its founders - and from our shared history.

Let our bold leaders – whether of countries or indeed of communities – continue the vital work for tolerance and reconciliation.

To these leaders, I will end with this: as together we tackle Daesh, as we address the humanitarian crisis in Syria, as we build a more stable, inclusive, more prosperous Middle East - know that you have the support of the United Kingdom.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-key-to-ending-the-suffering-of-ethnic-and-religious-groups-in-the-middle-east-is-leadership