

Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, heads of state and government. Last year, here at the United Nations, I called on the world to unite against the evil that is ISIL, or Daesh, and to eradicate the scourge of violent extremism. And I challenged countries to return to the General Assembly this year with concrete steps that we can take together.

I want to thank everyone who is here today, including my fellow leaders, for answering this call. We are joined by representatives from more than 100 nations, more than 20 multilateral institutions, some 120 civil society groups from around the world, and partners from the private sector. I believe what we have here today is the emergence of a global movement that is united by the mission of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

Together, we're pursuing a comprehensive strategy that is informed by our success over many years in crippling the al Qaeda core in the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. And we are harnessing all of our tools -- military, intelligence, economic, development and the strength of our communities.

Now, I have repeatedly said that our approach will take time. This is not an easy task. We have ISIL taking root in areas that already are suffering from failed governance, in some cases; in some cases, civil war or sectarian strife. And as a consequence of the vacuum that exists in many of these areas, ISIL has been able to dig in. They have shown themselves to be resilient, and they are very effective through social media and have been able to attract adherents not just from the areas in which they operate, but in many of our own countries.

There are going to be successes and there are going to be setbacks. This is not a conventional battle. This is a long-term campaign -- not only against this particular network, but against its ideology. And so with the few minutes I have, I want to provide a brief overview of where we stand currently.

Our coalition has grown to some 60 nations, including our Arab partners. Together, we welcome three new countries to our coalition -- Nigeria, Tunisia and Malaysia. Nearly two dozen nations are in some way contributing to the military campaign, and we salute and are grateful for all the servicemembers from our respective nations who are performing with skill and determination.

In Iraq, ISIL continues to hold Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi. But Iraqi forces, backed by coalition air power, have liberated towns across Kirkuk province and Tikrit. ISIL has now lost nearly a third of the populated areas in Iraq that it had controlled. Eighteen countries are now helping to train and support Iraqi forces, including Sunni volunteers who want to push ISIL out of their communities. And, Prime Minister Abadi, I want to note the enormous sacrifices being made by Iraqi forces and the Iraqi people in this fight every day.

In Syria, which has obviously been a topic of significant discussion during the course of this General Assembly, we have seen support from Turkey that has allowed us to intensify our air campaign there. ISIL has been pushed back from large sections of northeastern Syria, including the key city of Tal Abyad, putting new pressure on its stronghold of Raqqa. And ISIL has been cut off from almost the entire region bordering Turkey, which is a critical step toward stemming the flow of foreign terrorist fighters.

Following the special Security Council meeting I chaired last year, more than 20 additional countries have passed or strengthened laws to disrupt the flow of foreign terrorist fighters. We share more information and we are strengthening border controls. We've prevented would-be fighters from reaching the battlefield and returning to threaten our countries. But this remains a very difficult challenge, and today we're going to focus on how we can do more together. In conjunction with this summit, the United States and our partners are also taking new steps to crack down on the illicit finance that ISIL uses to pay its fighters, fund its operations and launch attacks.

Our military and intelligence efforts are not going to succeed alone; they have to be matched by political and economic progress to address the conditions that ISIL has exploited in order to take root. Prime Minister Abadi is taking important steps to build a more inclusive and accountable government, while working to stabilize areas taken back from ISIL. And our nations need to help Prime Minister Abadi in these efforts.

In Syria, as I said yesterday, defeating ISIL requires -- I believe -- a new leader and an inclusive government that unites the Syrian people in the fight against terrorist groups. This is going to be a complex process. And as I've said before, we are prepared to work with all countries, including Russia and Iran, to find a political mechanism in which it is possible to begin a transition process.

As ISIL's tentacles reach into other regions, the United States is increasing our counterterrorism cooperation with partners, like Tunisia. We're boosting our support to Nigeria and its neighbors as they push back against Boko Haram, which has pledged allegiance to ISIL. And we're creating a new clearinghouse to better coordinate the world's support for countries' counterterrorism programs so that our efforts are as effective as possible.

Ultimately, however, it is not going to be enough to defeat ISIL in the battlefield. We have to prevent it from radicalizing, recruiting and inspiring others to violence in the first place. And this means defeating their ideology. Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they're defeated by better ideas -- a more attractive and compelling vision. Building on our White House summit earlier this year, and summits around the world since then, we're moving ahead, together, in several areas.

We're stepping up our efforts to discredit ISIL's propaganda, especially online. The UAE's new messaging hub -- the Sawab Center -- is exposing ISIL for what it is, which is a band of terrorists that kills innocent Muslim men, women and children. We're working to lift up the voices of Muslim scholars, clerics and others -- including ISIL defectors -- who courageously stand up to ISIL and its warped interpretations of Islam.

We recognize that we have to confront the economic grievances that exist in some of the areas that ISIL seeks to exploit. Poverty does not cause terrorism. But as we've seen across the Middle East and North Africa, when people, especially young people, are impoverished and hopeless and feel humiliated by injustice and corruption, that can fuel resentments that terrorists exploit. Which is why sustainable development -- creating opportunity and dignity, particularly for youth -- is part of countering violent extremism.

We recognize we also have to address the political grievances that ISIL exploits. I've said this before -- when human rights are denied and citizens have no opportunity to redress their grievances peacefully, it feeds terrorist propaganda that justifies violence. Likewise, when political opponents are treated like terrorists and thrown in jail, it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. So the real path to lasting stability and progress is not less democracy; I believe it is more democracy in terms of free speech, and freedom of religion, rule of law, strong civil societies. All that has to play a part in countering violent extremism.

And finally, we recognize that our best partners in protecting vulnerable people from succumbing to violent extremist ideologies are the communities themselves -- families, friends, neighbors, clerics, faith leaders who love and care for these young people.

Remember that violent extremism is not unique to any one faith, so no one should be profiled or targeted simply because of their faith. Yet we have to recognize that ISIL is targeting Muslim communities around the world, especially individuals who may be disillusioned or confused or wrestling with their identities.

And in all our countries, we have to continue to build true partnerships with Muslim communities, based on trust and cooperation, so that they can help protect their loved ones from becoming radicalized. This cannot just be the work of government. It is up to all of us. We have to commit ourselves to build diverse, tolerant, inclusive societies that reject anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry that creates the divisions, the fear and the resentments upon which extremists can prey.

I'm pleased that here at this summit, businesses -- including high-tech companies -- are investing funds, training and technological expertise to support innovative programs that push back on violent extremism. Cities around the world are joining together to build more resilient communities. Researchers are partnering to share best practices, knowing what works and what we can do better.

And as we saw yesterday, young people from around the world are participating in their own summit. These young people, many of them Muslim, are coming together and using their talents and technology to push back on ISIL's propaganda, especially online, and to protect their brothers and sisters from recruitment. These young people are an inspiration and give us hope, and I'd ask everyone to join me in thanking all the young people who are here today. (Applause.)

So, to conclude, we face a grave challenge. We have to be clear-eyed about the fact that this is very hard work. We have individuals here, like Prime Minister Abadi and President Buhari, who are on the front lines. And this is not going to be turned around overnight, because it is not just a military campaign that we are involved in. There are profound changes taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. There are problems that have built over decades that are expressing themselves and manifesting themselves in organizations like ISIL. Even if we were to wipe out the entire cadre of ISIL leadership, we would still have some of these forces at work.

But, ultimately, I am optimistic. In Iraq and in Syria, ISIL is surrounded by communities, countries and a broad international coalition committed to its destruction. We've seen that ISIL can be defeated on the battlefield, where there is sound organization and a government and military that is coordinating with this coalition and with our diplomatic efforts. And here at this summit, we're seeing a new global movement to counter the violent extremism that ISIL needs to survive.

Like terrorists and tyrants throughout history, ISIL will eventually lose because it has nothing to offer but suffering and death. And when you look at the reports of those who are laboring under their control, it is a stark and brutal life that does not appeal to people over the long term. So we will ultimately prevail because we are guided by a stronger, better vision: a commitment to the security, opportunity and dignity of every human being. But it will require diligence, focus and sustained effort by all of us. And I am grateful that all of you who are already participating are committed to this work.

With that, I want to give the floor to our Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon. (Applause.)

END

11:07 A.M. EDT