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Barack Obama

Address to the United Nations General Assembly



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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen: We come together at a crossroads between war and peace; between disorder and integration; between fear and hope.

Around the globe, there are signposts of progress. The shadow of World War that existed at the founding of this institution has been lifted, and the prospect of war between major powers reduced. The ranks of member states has more than tripled, and more people live under governments they elected. Hundreds of millions of human beings have been freed from the prison of poverty, with the proportion of those living in extreme poverty cut in half. And the world economy continues to strengthen after the worst financial crisis of our lives.

Today, whether you live in downtown Manhattan or in my grandmother's village more than 200 miles from Nairobi, you can hold in your hand more information than the world's greatest libraries. Together, we've learned how to cure disease and harness the power of the wind and the sun. The very existence of this institution is a unique achievement -- the people of the world committing to resolve their differences peacefully, and to solve their problems together. I often tell young people in the United States that despite the headlines, this is the best time in human history to be born, for you are more likely than ever before to be literate, to be healthy, to be free to pursue your dreams.

And yet there is a pervasive unease in our world -- a sense that the very forces that have brought us together have created new dangers and made it difficult for any single nation to insulate itself from global forces.



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As we gather here, an outbreak of Ebola overwhelms public health systems in West Africa and threatens to move rapidly across borders. Russian aggression in Europe recalls the days when large nations trampled small ones in pursuit of territorial ambition. The brutality of terrorists in Syria and Iraq forces us to look into the heart of darkness.

Each of these problems demands urgent attention. But they are also symptoms of a broader problem -- the failure of our international system to keep pace with an interconnected world. We, collectively, have not invested adequately in the public health capacity of developing countries. Too often, we have failed to enforce international norms when it's inconvenient to do so. And we have not confronted forcefully enough the intolerance, sectarianism, and hopelessness that feeds violent extremism in too many parts of the globe.

Fellow delegates, we come together as united nations with a choice to make. We can renew the international system that has enabled so much progress, or we can allow ourselves to be pulled back by an undertow of instability. We can reaffirm our collective responsibility to confront global problems, or be swamped by more and more outbreaks of instability. And for America, the choice is clear: We choose hope over fear. We see the future not as something out of our control, but as something we can shape for the better through concerted and collective effort. We reject fatalism or cynicism when it comes to human affairs. We choose to work for the world as it should be, as our children deserve it to be.

There is much that must be done to meet the test of this moment. But today I'd like to focus on two defining questions at the root of so many of our challenges -- whether the nations here today will be able to renew the purpose of the UN's founding; and whether we will come together to reject the cancer of violent extremism.

First, all of us -- big nations and small -- must meet our responsibility to observe and enforce international norms. We are here because others realized that we gain more from cooperation than conquest. One hundred years ago, a World War claimed the lives of many millions, proving that with the terrible power of modern weaponry, the cause of empire ultimately leads to the graveyard. It would take another World War to roll back the forces of fascism, the notions of racial supremacy, and form this United Nations to ensure that no nation can subjugate its neighbors and claim their territory.

Recently, Russia's actions in Ukraine challenge this post-war order. Here are the facts. After the people of Ukraine mobilized popular protests and calls for reform, their corrupt president fled. Against the will of the government in Kyiv, Crimea was annexed. Russia poured arms into eastern Ukraine, fueling violent separatists and a conflict that has killed thousands. When a civilian airliner was shot down from areas that these proxies controlled, they refused to allow access to the crash for days. When Ukraine started to reassert control over its territory, Russia gave up the pretense of merely supporting the separatists, and moved troops across the border.



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This is a vision of the world in which might makes right -- a world in which one nation's borders can be redrawn by another, and civilized people are not allowed to recover the remains of their loved ones because of the truth that might be revealed. America stands for something different. We believe that right makes might -- that bigger nations should not be able to bully smaller ones, and that people should be able to choose their own future.

And these are simple truths, but they must be defended. America and our allies will support the people of Ukraine as they develop their democracy and economy. We will reinforce our NATO Allies and uphold our commitment to collective self-defense. We will impose a cost on Russia for aggression, and we will counter falsehoods with the truth. And we call upon others to join us on the right side of history -- for while small gains can be won at the barrel of a gun, they will ultimately be turned back if enough voices support the freedom of nations and peoples to make their own decisions.

Moreover, a different path is available -- the path of diplomacy and peace, and the ideals this institution is designed to uphold. The recent cease-fire agreement in Ukraine offers an opening to achieve those objectives. If Russia takes that path -- a path that for stretches of the post-Cold War period resulted in prosperity for the Russian people -- then we will lift our sanctions and welcome Russia's role in addressing common challenges. After all, that's what the United States and Russia have been able to do in past years -- from reducing our nuclear stockpiles to meeting our obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, to cooperating to remove and destroy Syria's declared chemical weapons. And that's the kind of cooperation we are prepared to pursue again -- if Russia changes course.

This speaks to a central question of our global age -- whether we will solve our problems together, in a spirit of mutual interest and mutual respect, or whether we descend into the destructive rivalries of the past. When nations find common ground, not simply based on power, but on principle, then we can make enormous progress. And I stand before you today committed to investing American strength to working with all nations to address the problems we face in the 21st century.

As we speak, America is deploying our doctors and scientists -- supported by our military -- to help contain the outbreak of Ebola and pursue new treatments. But we need a broader effort to stop a disease that could kill hundreds of thousands, inflict horrific suffering, destabilize economies, and move rapidly across borders. It's easy to see this as a distant problem -- until it is not. And that is why we will continue to mobilize other countries to join us in making concrete commitments, significant commitments to fight this outbreak, and enhance our system of global health security for the long term.

America is pursuing a diplomatic resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue, as part of our commitment to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and pursue the peace and security of a world without them.



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And this can only take place if Iran seizes this historic opportunity. My message to Iran's leaders and people has been simple and consistent: Do not let this opportunity pass. We can reach a solution that meets your energy needs while assuring the world that your program is peaceful.

America is and will continue to be a Pacific power, promoting peace, stability, and the free flow of commerce among nations. But we will insist that all nations abide by the rules of the road, and resolve their territorial disputes peacefully, consistent with international law. That's how the Asia-Pacific has grown. And that's the only way to protect this progress going forward.

America is committed to a development agenda that eradicates extreme poverty by 2030. We will do our part to help people feed themselves, power their economies, and care for their sick. If the world acts together, we can make sure that all of our children enjoy lives of opportunity and dignity.

America is pursuing ambitious reductions in our carbon emissions, and we've increased our investments in clean energy. We will do our part, and help developing nations do theirs. But the science tells us we can only succeed in combating climate change if we are joined in this effort by every other nation, by every major power. That's how we can protect this planet for our children and our grandchildren.

In other words, on issue after issue, we cannot rely on a rule book written for a different century. If we lift our eyes beyond our borders -- if we think globally and if we act cooperatively -- we can shape the course of this century, as our predecessors shaped the post-World War II age. But as we look to the future, one issue risks a cycle of conflict that could derail so much progress, and that is the cancer of violent extremism that has ravaged so many parts of the Muslim world.

Of course, terrorism is not new. Speaking before this Assembly, President Kennedy put it well: "Terror is not a new weapon," he said. "Throughout history it has been used by those who could not prevail, either by persuasion or example." In the 20th century, terror was used by all manner of groups who failed to come to power through public support. But in this century, we have faced a more lethal and ideological brand of terrorists who have perverted one of the world's great religions. With access to technology that allows small groups to do great harm, they have embraced a nightmarish vision that would divide the world into adherents and infidels -- killing as many innocent civilians as possible, employing the most brutal methods to intimidate people within their communities.

I have made it clear that America will not base our entire foreign policy on reacting to terrorism. Instead, we've waged a focused campaign against al Qaeda and its associated forces -- taking out their leaders, denying them the safe havens they rely on.



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At the same time, we have reaffirmed again and again that the United States is not and never will be at war with Islam. Islam teaches peace. Muslims the world over aspire to live with dignity and a sense of justice. And when it comes to America and Islam, there is no us and them, there is only us -- because millions of Muslim Americans are part of the fabric of our country.

So we reject any suggestion of a clash of civilizations. Belief in permanent religious war is the misguided refuge of extremists who cannot build or create anything, and therefore peddle only fanaticism and hate. And it is no exaggeration to say that humanity's future depends on us uniting against those who would divide us along the fault lines of tribe or sect, race or religion.

But this is not simply a matter of words. Collectively, we must take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated fanatics, and the trends that fuel their recruitment. Moreover, this campaign against extremism goes beyond a narrow security challenge. For while we've degraded methodically core al Qaeda and supported a transition to a sovereign Afghan government, extremist ideology has shifted to other places -- particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, where a quarter of young people have no job, where food and water could grow scarce, where corruption is rampant and sectarian conflicts have become increasingly hard to contain.

As an international community, we must meet this challenge with a focus on four areas. First, the terrorist group known as ISIL must be degraded and ultimately destroyed.

This group has terrorized all who they come across in Iraq and Syria. Mothers, sisters, daughters have been subjected to rape as a weapon of war. Innocent children have been gunned down. Bodies have been dumped in mass graves. Religious minorities have been starved to death. In the most horrific crimes imaginable, innocent human beings have been beheaded, with videos of the atrocity distributed to shock the conscience of the world.

No God condones this terror. No grievance justifies these actions. There can be no reasoning -- no negotiation -- with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force. So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death.

In this effort, we do not act alone -- nor do we intend to send U.S. troops to occupy foreign lands. Instead, we will support Iraqis and Syrians fighting to reclaim their communities. We will use our military might in a campaign of airstrikes to roll back ISIL. We will train and equip forces fighting against these terrorists on the ground. We will work to cut off their financing, and to stop the flow of fighters into and out of the region. And already, over 40 nations have offered to join this coalition.

Today, I ask the world to join in this effort.



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Those who have joined ISIL should leave the battlefield while they can. Those who continue to fight for a hateful cause will find they are increasingly alone. For we will not succumb to threats, and we will demonstrate that the future belongs to those who build -- not those who destroy. So that's an immediate challenge, the first challenge that we must meet.

The second: It is time for the world -- especially Muslim communities -- to explicitly, forcefully, and consistently reject the ideology of organizations like al Qaeda and ISIL.

It is one of the tasks of all great religions to accommodate devout faith with a modern, multicultural world. No children are born hating, and no children -- anywhere -- should be educated to hate other people. There should be no more tolerance of so-called clerics who call upon people to harm innocents because they're Jewish, or because they're Christian, or because they're Muslim. It is time for a new compact among the civilized peoples of this world to eradicate war at its most fundamental source, and that is the corruption of young minds by violent ideology.

That means cutting off the funding that fuels this hate. It's time to end the hypocrisy of those who accumulate wealth through the global economy and then siphon funds to those who teach children to tear it down.

That means contesting the space that terrorists occupy, including the Internet and social media. Their propaganda has coerced young people to travel abroad to fight their wars, and turned students -- young people full of potential -- into suicide bombers. We must offer an alternative vision.

That means bringing people of different faiths together. All religions have been attacked by extremists from within at some point, and all people of faith have a responsibility to lift up the value at the heart of all great religions: Do unto thy neighbor as you would do -- you would have done unto yourself.

The ideology of ISIL or al Qaeda or Boko Haram will wilt and die if it is consistently exposed and confronted and refuted in the light of day. Look at the new Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies -- Sheikh bin Bayyah described its purpose: "We must declare war on war, so the outcome will be peace upon peace." Look at the young British Muslims who responded to terrorist propaganda by starting the "NotInMyName" campaign, declaring, "ISIS is hiding behind a false Islam." Look at the Christian and Muslim leaders who came together in the Central African Republic to reject violence; listen to the Imam who said, "Politics try to divide the religious in our country, but religion shouldn't be a cause of hate, war, or strife."

Later today, the Security Council will adopt a resolution that underscores the responsibility of states to counter violent extremism. But resolutions must be followed by tangible commitments, so we're accountable when we fall short.



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Next year, we should all be prepared to announce the concrete steps that we have taken to counter extremist ideologies in our own countries -- by getting intolerance out of schools, stopping radicalization before it spreads, and promoting institutions and programs that build new bridges of understanding.

Third, we must address the cycle of conflict -- especially sectarian conflict -- that creates the conditions that terrorists prey upon.

There is nothing new about wars within religions. Christianity endured centuries of vicious sectarian conflict. Today, it is violence within Muslim communities that has become the source of so much human misery. It is time to acknowledge the destruction wrought by proxy wars and terror campaigns between Sunni and Shia across the Middle East. And it is time that political, civic and religious leaders reject sectarian strife. So let's be clear: This is a fight that no one is winning. A brutal civil war in Syria has already killed nearly 200,000 people, displaced millions. Iraq has come perilously close to plunging back into the abyss. The conflict has created a fertile recruiting ground for terrorists who inevitably export this violence.

The good news is we also see signs that this tide could be reversed. We have a new, inclusive government in Baghdad; a new Iraqi Prime Minister welcomed by his neighbors; Lebanese factions rejecting those who try to provoke war. And these steps must be followed by a broader truce. Nowhere is this more necessary than Syria.

Together with our partners, America is training and equipping the Syrian opposition to be a counterweight to the terrorists of ISIL and the brutality of the Assad regime. But the only lasting solution to Syria's civil war is political -- an inclusive political transition that responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of creed.

Cynics may argue that such an outcome can never come to pass. But there is no other way for this madness to end -- whether one year from now or ten. And it points to the fact that it's time for a broader negotiation in the region in which major powers address their differences directly, honestly, and peacefully across the table from one another, rather than through gun-wielding proxies. I can promise you America will remain engaged in the region, and we are prepared to engage in that effort.

My fourth and final point is a simple one: The countries of the Arab and Muslim world must focus on the extraordinary potential of their people -- especially the youth.

And here I'd like to speak directly to young people across the Muslim world. You come from a great tradition that stands for education, not ignorance; innovation, not destruction; the dignity of life, not murder. Those who call you away from this path are betraying this tradition, not defending it.



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You have demonstrated that when young people have the tools to succeed -- good schools, education in math and science, an economy that nurtures creativity and entrepreneurship -- then societies will flourish. So America will partner with those that promote that vision.

Where women are full participants in a country's politics or economy, societies are more likely to succeed. And that's why we support the participation of women in parliaments and peace processes, schools and the economy.

If young people live in places where the only option is between the dictates of a state, or the lure of an extremist underground, then no counterterrorism strategy can succeed. But where a genuine civil society is allowed to flourish -- where people can express their views, and organize peacefully for a better life -- then you dramatically expand the alternatives to terror.

And such positive change need not come at the expense of tradition and faith. We see this in Iraq, where a young man started a library for his peers. "We link Iraq's heritage to their hearts," he said, and "give them a reason to stay." We see it in Tunisia, where secular and Islamist parties worked together through a political process to produce a new constitution. We see it in Senegal, where civil society thrives alongside a strong democratic government. We see it in Malaysia, where vibrant entrepreneurship is propelling a former colony into the ranks of advanced economies. And we see it in Indonesia, where what began as a violent transition has evolved into a genuine democracy.

Now, ultimately, the task of rejecting sectarianism and rejecting extremism is a generational task -- and a task for the people of the Middle East themselves. No external power can bring about a transformation of hearts and minds. But America will be a respectful and constructive partner. We will neither tolerate terrorist safe havens, nor act as an occupying power. We will take action against threats to our security and our allies, while building an architecture of counterterrorism cooperation. We will increase efforts to lift up those who counter extremist ideologies and who seek to resolve sectarian conflict. And we will expand our programs to support entrepreneurship and civil society, education and youth -- because, ultimately, these investments are the best antidote to violence.

We recognize as well that leadership will be necessary to address the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. As bleak as the landscape appears, America will not give up on the pursuit of peace. Understand, the situation in Iraq and Syria and Libya should cure anybody of the illusion that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the main source of problems in the region. For far too long, that's been used as an excuse to distract people from problems at home. The violence engulfing the region today has made too many Israelis ready to abandon the hard work of peace. And that's something worthy of reflection within Israel.

Because let's be clear: The status quo in the West Bank and Gaza is not sustainable.



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We cannot afford to turn away from this effort -- not when rockets are fired at innocent Israelis, or the lives of so many Palestinian children are taken from us in Gaza. So long as I am President, we will stand up for the principle that Israelis, Palestinians, the region and the world will be more just and more safe with two states living side by side, in peace and security.

So this is what America is prepared to do: Taking action against immediate threats, while pursuing a world in which the need for such action is diminished. The United States will never shy away from defending our interests, but we will also not shy away from the promise of this institution and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- the notion that peace is not merely the absence of war, but the presence of a better life.

I realize that America's critics will be quick to point out that at times we too have failed to live up to our ideals; that America has plenty of problems within its own borders. This is true. In a summer marked by instability in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, I know the world also took notice of the small American city of Ferguson, Missouri -- where a young man was killed, and a community was divided. So, yes, we have our own racial and ethnic tensions. And like every country, we continually wrestle with how to reconcile the vast changes wrought by globalization and greater diversity with the traditions that we hold dear.

But we welcome the scrutiny of the world -- because what you see in America is a country that has steadily worked to address our problems, to make our union more perfect, to bridge the divides that existed at the founding of this nation. America is not the same as it was 100 years ago, or 50 years ago, or even a decade ago. Because we fight for our ideals, and we are willing to criticize ourselves when we fall short. Because we hold our leaders accountable, and insist on a free press and independent judiciary. Because we address our differences in the open space of democracy -- with respect for the rule of law; with a place for people of every race and every religion; and with an unyielding belief in the ability of individual men and women to change their communities and their circumstances and their countries for the better.

After nearly six years as President, I believe that this promise can help light the world. Because I have seen a longing for positive change -- for peace and for freedom and for opportunity and for the end to bigotry -- in the eyes of young people who I've met around the globe.

They remind me that no matter who you are, or where you come from, or what you look like, or what God you pray to, or who you love, there is something fundamental that we all share. Eleanor Roosevelt, a champion of the UN and America's role in it, once asked, "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places," she said, "close to home -- so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works."



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Around the world, young people are moving forward hungry for a better world. Around the world, in small places, they're overcoming hatred and bigotry and sectarianism. And they're learning to respect each other, despite differences.

The people of the world now look to us, here, to be as decent, and as dignified, and as courageous as they are trying to be in their daily lives. And at this crossroads, I can promise you that the United States of America will not be distracted or deterred from what must be done. We are heirs to a proud legacy of freedom, and we're prepared to do what is necessary to secure that legacy for generations to come. I ask that you join us in this common mission, for today's children and tomorrow's.

Thank you very much.