

Remarks at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS

Rex W. Tillerson, U.S. Secretary of State

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Good morning, and thank you all for traveling to Washington, D.C. to participate in this counter-ISIS/Daesh ministerial conference. It is indeed encouraging to see the attendance. When the forces of ISIS and Daesh tune into their TVs and their computer monitors, they will see the strength of a combined 68 nations and organizations. Together, we share a resolve to deal ISIS or Daesh a lasting defeat. Our coalition is united in stopping an ISIS resurgence, halting its global ambitions and discrediting its ideological narrative. And we're ready to grow stronger and stay aggressive in this battle.

President Trump, in his recent address to the joint session of Congress, made clear that it is the policy of the United States to demolish and destroy this barbaric terrorist organization. That is what we are going to do.

Many of us here today represent countries who know ISIS's carnage firsthand. In fact, today marks one year since 32 innocent people were killed and 300 wounded in attacks in Brussels. The Belgian foreign minister is home commemorating this solemn day for his country, but we are grateful to have the ambassador from our ally, Belgium, joining us today.

In the same month as the attack in Brussels, a child was killed and 600 Iraqis were injured in an ISIS chemical weapons attack in Taza, just south of Kirkuk. ISIS has carried out horrific attacks in the streets of Paris and Istanbul, each planned from its headquarters in Raqqa. The United States has also experienced attacks inspired by ISIS on social media, a phenomena we are working to combat together and which will be a major point of discussion among us today.

As we commemorate and mourn for the victims of ISIS's hatred, let us also honor them with unwavering dedication to victory. The great commonality among we who have gathered today is a commitment to bringing down a global force of evil, and I emphasize the word "commitment." The success of our mission depends on a continual devotion to our stated objective of defeating this terrorist organization.

In the run-up to this meeting, we identified over \$2 billion in humanitarian, stabilization, and de-mining needs for liberated areas in Iraq and Syria for 2017. I'm pleased to announce that we have surpassed that total in dollar pledges. Let's fulfil our pledges so we can quickly disburse the funds we need to carry out operations for the rest of the year.

Reflecting on the past year or so, we should be encouraged by the significant progress we as a coalition are making. In addition to the latest meaningful financial contributions, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into Syria and Iraq is down 90 percent over the past year. It is harder

for terrorists to get in, and more importantly, harder for them to get out to threaten our homelands.

Turkey has pushed ISIS off the Turkey-Syria border through Operation Euphrates Shield. This entire border is now inaccessible to ISIS, and we will ensure that it stays that way. Nearly all of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's deputies are now dead, including the mastermind behind the attacks in Brussels, Paris, and elsewhere. It is only a matter of time before Baghdadi himself meets the same fate.

The Libyan Government of National Accord-aligned fighters from Misrata routed ISIS in Sirte, depriving ISIS of its only territory outside of Iraq and Syria. We are pleased to have representatives of the Libyan Government with us here today.

In Iraq and Syria, our partners on the ground have liberated 50,000 square kilometers of territory from ISIS, freeing nearly two-and-a-half million people in cities, villages, and towns. Most importantly, the liberation of all of this territory has held. ISIS has recovered none of it.

Seventeen coalition members are producing content in five languages to counteract ISIS's propaganda and attack on its online presence. These efforts have yielded a 75 percent reduction of ISIS content on the internet in one year, and the takedown of 475,000 ISIS-linked Twitter accounts.

In Iraq, more than one-and-a-half million Iraqis have now returned to their homes in areas that had been under control of ISIS. The displacement flow outward has been reversed, and this is a trend we must ensure continues. And neighboring countries closest to the conflict, like Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, have undertaken a widespread humanitarian response to the regional refugee crisis, including the acceptance of millions of refugees, many of whom they are working to reintegrate into normal life in their own nations.

We especially should recognize the Republic of Iraq. Prime Minister Abadi, who is with me on stage, has shown commitment and courage, often visiting the front lines to encourage his troops and ensure that people are being cared for after the battles. His desire for stability and inclusive governance drives his vision for the future of Iraq.

The ongoing Iraqi-led retaking of Mosul is pushing ISIS out of a key stronghold and liberating more than a million civilians. Iraqi forces, many trained by our coalition, are performing heroically and placing protection of civilians at the forefront of their military plan.

This Mosul campaign could not have succeeded without the cooperation between the Iraqi Security Forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga. I am pleased to see a representative from Kurdistan Regional Government, Mr. Fuad Hussein, here today with Prime Minister Abadi. It is this close cooperation between the Iraqi people and their leaders that hastens ISIS's ultimate defeat and ensures it can never return to Iraq.

Hard-fought victories in Iraq and Syria have swung the momentum in our coalition's favor, but we must increase the intensity of our efforts and solidify our gains in the next phase of the counter-ISIS fight. Degradation of ISIS is not the end goal. We must defeat ISIS. I recognize

there are many pressing challenges in the Middle East, but defeating ISIS is the United States number one goal in the region. As we've said before, when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. We must continue to keep our focus on the most urgent matter at hand.

At this moment, we are still in a phase characterized by major military operations. The expansion of ISIS has necessitated a large-scale military response, and our offensive measures are reclaiming areas in Iraq and Syria in which ISIS has had a large and destructive footprint. Our end goal in this phase is the regional elimination of ISIS through military force. The military power of the coalition will remain where this fraudulent caliphate has existed in order to set the conditions for a full recovery from the tyranny of ISIS. Under President Trump's leadership and with the strength of this historic coalition, our common enemy will remain under intense pressure.

Soon, our efforts in Iraq and Syria will enter a new phase defined by transition from major military operations to stabilization. In this transition to the stabilization phase, our coalition will continue to clear land mines and return water and electricity – the basic elements that permit people to return to their homes. We will pursue regional diplomatic solutions for the underlying political and sectarian disputes that helped ISIS to flourish. The coalition and future partners will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to affected communities as necessary.

We appreciate the work of the UN-managed Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization, which has helped Iraq return home over half a million displaced persons in Anbar province alone. Continuing coalition support for police training will be essential, as will be coalition support for demining and clearing hazardous materials.

We will continue to facilitate the return of people to their homes and work with local political leadership. They will provide stable and fair governance, rebuild infrastructure, and provide the essential services. We will use our diplomatic presence on the ground to facilitate channels of dialogue between local leadership and coalition partners. These initiatives are working well in Iraq, and we are working to tailor a similar approach specific to the challenges in Syria. While a more defined course of action in Syria is still coming together, I can say the United States will increase our pressure on ISIS and al-Qaida and will work to establish interim zones of stability through ceasefires to allow refugees to go home.

As a coalition, we are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction. We must ensure that our respective nations' precious and limited resources are devoted to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and equipping the war-torn communities to take the lead in rebuilding their institutions and returning to stability.

A successful stabilization period will improve daily life for millions of people. Today in east Mosul, stabilization projects are clearing rubble, clearing land mines, restoring water services and electricity, and nearly 30,000 boys and girls are now back in school. These efforts are being led by Iraqis locally in cooperation with the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Abadi.

A successful stabilization phase will set the stage for a successful normalization phase. In the normalization phase, local leaders and local governments will take on the process of restoring their communities in the wake of ISIS with our support. The development of a rejuvenated civil society in these places will lead to a disenfranchisement of ISIS and the emergence of stability and peace where there was once chaos and suffering.

But none of this will happen automatically. We all need to support this effort. To date, in Iraq and Syria, the United States provides 75 percent of the military resources supporting our local partners in their fight against ISIS. For humanitarian and stabilization support, the ratio is reversed, with the United States providing 25 percent and the rest of the coalition providing 75 percent.

The United States will do its part, but the circumstances on the ground require more from all of you. I ask each country to examine how it can best support these vital stabilization efforts, especially in regard to contribution of military and financial resources.

As we stabilize areas encompassing ISIS's physical caliphates in Iraq and Syria, we also must prevent their seeds of hatred from taking root elsewhere. The loss of territory in Iraq and Syria has forced ISIS to extend its current branches and build new bases of operations in countries around the world. Already we are seeing ISIS-linked cells from the Pacific Rim to Central Asia to South America. Just this month, dozens of people were killed and wounded when members of ISIS disguised as doctors attacked a hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan.

We know military strength will stop ISIS on a battlefield, but it is the combined strength of our coalition that will be the final blow to ISIS. In order to stay ahead of a global outbreak, we must all adopt the following countermeasures: First, continue to persist with in-country counterterrorism and law enforcement operations. All of us must maintain pressure on ISIS's networks within our own countries and take decisive law enforcement action to stop its growth. ISIS is connected across every continent, and we must work to break every link in its chain. INTERPOL is the newest member of our coalition and is critical to closing all routes through which ISIS terrorists seek to travel and threaten our homelands.

Second, we need greater intelligence and information sharing within our own domestic intelligence agencies and among our nations. Our information sharing as a coalition has prevented a number of attacks, and this must expand and accelerate regardless of departmental or international rivalries. One example of this is West African nations who have put aside national differences to combat Boko Haram. Let us build on this good example.

We also must look this enemy's ideology in the eyes for what it is: a warped interpretation of Islam that threatens all of our people. As His Majesty, King Abdullah II of Jordan, has recently said, and I quote, "Everything they are, everything they do, is a blatant violation... of my faith." ISIS fighters are not all from poor or impoverished communities. Many come from middle class or even upper class backgrounds, drawn to a radical and false utopian vision that purports to be based upon the Quran. Muslim partners and leaders of their faith must combat this perverse ideological message. And we are grateful that so many have and are ready to take up this responsibility.

Lastly, in tandem with our aggressive push-back on the ground in multiple countries, we must break ISIS's ability to spread its message and recruit new followers online.

A "digital caliphate" must not flourish in the place of a physical one.

As we have seen from attacks in Nice, Berlin, Orlando, and San Bernardino, the internet is ISIS's best weapon for turning a recruit into a self-radicalized attacker. As traveling to Iraq and Syria as a fighter has become more difficult, ISIS's new call has become, and I quote, "Stay where you are...wage war in Daesh's name wherever you live."

ISIS's handlers around the world spend their days at keyboards communicating with a would-be terrorist, methodically feeding a recruit's deranged desire to develop local networks or carry out attacks in their own countries.

We are making progress, but we need to do more to attack this threat. Our Coalition's 24/7 counter-messaging hubs in the UAE, the UK, and Malaysia are having an impact, and these types of efforts should be replicated and expanded elsewhere.

Counter-messaging efforts should continue both in the online arena and on the ground in countries where religious leaders have opportunities to speak out against radicalization. Our Muslim partners, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have important roles to play in combatting the message of ISIS and other radical Islamic terrorist groups.

We all should deepen cooperation with the tech industry to prevent encrypted technologies from serving as tools that enable extremist collaboration.

We need the global tech industry to develop new advancements in the fight, and we thank those companies which are already responding to this challenge. We must capitalize on the extraordinary advancements in data analytics and algorithmic technologies to build tools that discover ISIS's propaganda and identify imminent attacks.

Researchers in the United States are already developing tools for sweeping the dark corners of the internet for ISIS material, but they need help to get to their destination even faster. Later on, we will hear at lunch from Ali Jaber, who will speak in great detail on how to achieve victory in this arena.

But let me be clear: we must fight ISIS online as aggressively as we would on the ground.

In closing, ISIS presents an ongoing challenge to our collective security, but as we have seen, it is not more powerful than we are when we stand together. We must thwart ISIS as it tries to maintain a presence on the ground and in cyberspace. We must enhance cooperation and border security, aviation security, law enforcement, financial sanctions, counter-messaging, and intelligence sharing. And we must keep making the investment in liberated areas in Iraq and Syria to help innocent people rebuild and stabilize their communities.

Right now, this means continuing to clear explosives, restore water and power, deliver humanitarian and resettlement assistance, and forge partnerships with the local leaders who reject extremism. Our time today is an opportunity for the open and honest exchange of

information and encouragement. As allies dedicated to defeating a common enemy, we should strive to understand and respect one another's perspectives and adopt the ideas that will achieve our mission.

Most of all, now is the time to strengthen our shared commitment to security and invest in a fight in which we all have a stake.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

As I mentioned in my remarks, our next speaker is a leader who has been a courageous ally in this fight. His army has shown bravery and persistence against a fierce enemy. And we admire his people who, though they have suffered, are resolute in their commitment to throw off tyranny.

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