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Barack Obama

Pentagon Address on the Progress Toward Defeating ISIL

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Good afternoon, everybody. I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday weekend -- especially our men and women in uniform. This Fourth of July we were honored to once again welcome some of our incredible troops and their families to share Fourth of July and fireworks at the White House. It was another chance for us, on behalf of the American people, to express our gratitude for their extraordinary service around the world every day.

And that includes the work that brings me here today -- our mission to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group ISIL. This is a cause, a coalition, that's united countries across the globe -- some 60 nations, including Arab partners. Our comprehensive strategy against ISIL is harnessing all elements of American power, across our government -- military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic, development and perhaps most importantly, the power of our values.

Last month, I ordered additional actions in support of our strategy. I just met with my national security team as part of our regular effort to assess our efforts -- what's working and what we can do better. Secretary Carter, Chairman Dempsey, I want to thank you and your team for welcoming us and for your leadership, including General Austin who's leading the military campaign. And I want to summarize briefly where we stand.



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I want to start by repeating what I've said since the beginning. This will not be quick. This is a long-term campaign. ISIL is opportunistic and it is nimble. In many places in Syria and Iraq, including urban areas, it's dug in among innocent civilian populations. It will take time to root them out -- and doing so must be the job of local forces on the ground, with training and air support from our coalition.

As with any military effort, there will be periods of progress, but there are also going to be some setbacks -- as we've seen with ISIL's gains in Ramadi in Iraq and central and southern Syria. But today, it's also important for us to recognize the progress that's been made.

Our coalition has now hit ISIL with more than 5,000 airstrikes. We've taken out thousands of fighting positions, tanks, vehicles, bomb factories, and training camps. We've eliminated thousands of fighters, including senior ISIL commanders. And over the past year, we've seen that when we have an effective partner on the ground, ISIL can be pushed back.

In Iraq, ISIL lost at the Mosul Dam. ISIL lost at Mount Sinjar. ISIL has lost repeatedly across Kirkuk Province. ISIL lost at Tikrit. Altogether, ISIL has lost more than a quarter of the populated areas that it had seized in Iraq. In Syria, ISIL lost at Kobani. It's recently endured losses across northern Syria, including the key city of Tal Abyad, denying ISIL a vital supply route to Raqqa, its base of operations in Syria.

So these are reminders that ISIL's strategic weaknesses are real. ISIL is surrounded by countries and communities committed to its destruction. It has no air force; our coalition owns the skies. ISIL is backed by no nation. It relies on fear, sometimes executing its own disillusioned fighters. Its unrestrained brutality often alienates those under its rule, creating new enemies. In short, ISIL's recent losses in both Syria and Iraq prove that ISIL can and will be defeated.

Indeed, we're intensifying our efforts against ISIL's base in Syria. Our airstrikes will continue to target the oil and gas facilities that fund so much of their operations. We're going after the ISIL leadership and infrastructure in Syria -- the heart of ISIL that pumps funds and propaganda to people around the world. Partnering with other countries -- sharing more information, strengthening laws and border security -- allows us to work to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria as well as Iraq, and to stem, obviously, the flow of those fighters back into our own countries. This continues to be a challenge, and, working together, all our nations are going to need to do more, but we're starting to see some progress.

We'll continue cracking down on ISIL's illicit finance around the world. By the way, if Congress really wants to help in this effort, they can confirm Mr. Adam Szubin, our nominee for Treasury Under Secretary to lead this effort. This is a vital position to our counterterrorism efforts. Nobody suggests Mr. Szubin is not qualified. He's highly qualified. Unfortunately, his nomination has been languishing up on the Hill, and we need the Senate to confirm him as soon as possible.



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Meanwhile, we continue to ramp up our training and support of local forces that are fighting ISIL on the ground. As I've said before, this aspect of our strategy was moving too slowly.

But the fall of Ramadi has galvanized the Iraqi government. So, with the additional steps I ordered last month, we're speeding up training of ISIL [Iraqi] forces, including volunteers from Sunni tribes in Anbar Province.

More Sunni volunteers are coming forward. Some are already being trained, and they can be a new force against ISIL. We continue to accelerate the delivery of critical equipment, including anti-tank weapons, to Iraqi security forces, including the Peshmerga and tribal fighters. And I made it clear to my team that we will do more to train and equip the moderate opposition in Syria.

Now, all this said, our strategy recognizes that no amount of military force will end the terror that is ISIL unless it's matched by a broader effort -- political and economic -- that addresses the underlying conditions that have allowed ISIL to gain traction. They have filled a void, and we have to make sure that as we push them out that void is filled. So, as Iraqi cities and towns are liberated from ISIL, we're working with Iraq and the United Nations to help communities rebuild the security, services and governance that they need. We continue to support the efforts of Prime Minister Abadi to forge an inclusive and effective Iraqi government that unites all the people of Iraq -- Shia, Sunnis, Kurds and all minority communities.

In Syria, the only way that the civil war will end -- and in a way so that the Syrian people can unite against ISIL -- is an inclusive political transition to a new government, without Bashar Assad -- a government that serves all Syrians. I discussed this with our Gulf Cooperation Council partners at Camp David and during my recent call with President Putin. I made it clear the United States will continue to work for such a transition.

And a glimmer of good news is I think an increasing recognition on the part of all the players in the region that given the extraordinary threat that ISIL poses it is important for us to work together, as opposed to at cross-purposes, to make sure that an inclusive Syrian government exists.

While the focus of our discussions today was on Iraq and Syria, ISIL and its ideology also obviously pose a grave threat beyond the region. In recent weeks we've seen deadly attacks in Tunisia, Kuwait and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. We see a growing ISIL presence in Libya and attempts to establish footholds across North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Southeast Asia. We've seen attacks in Ottawa, Sydney, France and Copenhagen.

So I've called on the international community to unite against this scourge of violent extremism. In this fight, the United States continues to lead. When necessary to prevent attacks against our nation, we'll take direct action against terrorists. We'll continue to also partner with nations from Afghanistan to Nigeria to build up their security forces.



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We're going to work day and night with allies and partners to disrupt terrorist networks and thwart attacks, and to smother nascent ISIL cells that may be trying to develop in other parts of the world.

This also includes remaining vigilant in protecting against attacks here in the homeland. Now, I think it's important for us to recognize the threat of violent extremism is not restricted to any one community. Here in the United States, we've seen all kinds of homegrown terrorism. And tragically, recent history reminds us how even a single individual motivated by a hateful ideology with access to dangerous weapons can inflict horrendous harm on Americans. So our efforts to counter violent extremism must not target any one community because of their faith or background, including patriotic Muslim Americans who are our partners in keeping our country safe.

That said, we also have to acknowledge that ISIL has been particularly effective at reaching out to and recruiting vulnerable people around the world, including here in the United States. And they are targeting Muslim communities around the world. Numerous individuals have been arrested across the country for plotting attacks or attempting to join ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Two men apparently inspired by ISIL opened fire in Garland, Texas. And because of our success over the years in improving our homeland security, we've made it harder for terrorists to carry out large-scale attacks like 9/11 here at home.

But the threat of lone wolves or small cells of terrorists is complex -- it's harder to detect and harder to prevent. It's one of the most difficult challenges that we face. And preventing these kinds of attacks on American soil is going to require sustained effort.

So I just want to repeat, the good news is that because of extraordinary efforts from law enforcement as well as our military intelligence, we are doing a better job at preventing any large-scale attacks on the homeland. On the other hand, the small, individual lone wolf attacks or small cells become harder to detect and they become more sophisticated, using new technologies. And that means that we're going to have to pick up our game to prevent these attacks.

It's also true why, ultimately, in order for us to defeat terrorist groups like ISIL and al Qaeda it's going to also require us to discredit their ideology -- the twisted thinking that draws vulnerable people into their ranks. As I've said before -- and I know our military leaders agree -- this broader challenge of countering violent extremism is not simply a military effort. Ideologies are not defeated with guns; they're defeated by better ideas -- a more attractive and more compelling vision.

So the United States will continue to do our part, by working with partners to counter ISIL's hateful propaganda, especially online. We'll constantly reaffirm through words and deeds that we will never be at war with Islam. We're fighting terrorists who distort Islam and whose victims are mostly Muslims. But around the world, we're also going to insist on partnering with Muslim communities as they seek security, prosperity and the dignity that they deserve.



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And we're going to expect those communities to step up in terms of pushing back as hard as they can, in conjunction with other people of goodwill, against these hateful ideologies in order to discredit them more effectively, particularly when it comes to what we're teaching young people.

And this larger battle for hearts and minds is going to be a generational struggle. It's ultimately not going to be won or lost by the United States alone. It will be decided by the countries and the communities that terrorists like ISIL target. It's going to be up to Muslim communities, including scholars and clerics, to keep rejecting warped interpretations of Islam, and to protect their sons and daughters from recruitment. It will be up to all people -- leaders and citizens -- to reject the sectarianism that so often fuels the resentments and conflicts upon which terrorists are currently thriving. It will be up to governments to address the political and economic grievances that terrorists exploit.

Nations that empower citizens to decide their own destiny, that uphold human rights for all their people, that invest in education and create opportunities for their young people -- those can be powerful antidotes to extremist ideologies. Those are the countries that will find a true partner in the United States.

In closing, let me note that this Fourth of July we celebrated 239 years of American independence. Across more than two centuries, we've faced much bigger, much more formidable challenges than this -- Civil War, a Great Depression, fascism, communism, terrible natural disasters, 9/11. And every time, every generation, our nation has risen to the moment. We don't simply endure; we emerge stronger than before. And that will be the case here.

Our mission to destroy ISIL and to keep our country safe will be difficult. It will take time.

There will be setbacks as well as progress. But as President and Commander-in-Chief, I want to say to all our men and women in uniform who are serving in this operation -- our pilots, the crews on the ground, our personnel not only on the ground but at sea, our intelligence teams and our diplomatic teams -- I want to thank you. We are proud of you, and you have my total confidence that you're going to succeed.

To the American people, I want to say we will continue to be vigilant. We will persevere. And just as we have for more than two centuries, we will ultimately prevail.

Thank you very much, everybody. And thanks to the team up on the stage here with me -- they're doing an outstanding job.

Question: Take a question?

President Obama: You know what, I will take a question. Go ahead.



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Question: Every servicemember who is listening to you today, Mr. President, is wondering, are you going to veto the defense bills that are going to pay me? What is your latest thinking on that? Because we've heard secondhand through statements of policy that your advisors would threaten a veto. What's your take, sir? Would you veto the appropriations bills?

President Obama: Our men and women are going to get paid. And if you'll note that I've now been President for six and a half years and we've had some wrangling with Congress in the past -- our servicemembers haven't missed a paycheck.

But what is also important in terms of our budget is making sure that we are not short-changing all the elements of American power that allow us to secure the nation and to project our power around the world. So what we're not going to do is to accept a budget that short-changes our long-term requirements for new technologies, for readiness. We're not going to eat our seed corn by devoting too much money on things we don't need now and robbing ourselves of the capacity to make sure that we're prepared for future threats.

I've worked very closely with the Chairman and the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop a budget that is realistic and that looks out into the future and says this is how we're going to handle any possible contingency. And we can't do that if we've got a budget that short-changes vital operations and continues to fund things that are not necessary.

We also have to remind ourselves that the reason we have the best military in the world is, first and foremost, because we've got the best troops in history. But it's also because we've got a strong economy, and we've got a well-educated population. And we've got an incredible research operation and universities that allow us to create new products that then can be translated into our military superiority around the world. We short-change those, we're going to be less secure.

So the way we have to look at this budget is to recognize that, A, we can't think short term, we've got to think long term; and B, part of our national security is making sure that we continue to have a strong economy and that we continue to make the investments that we need in things like education and research that are going to be vital for us to be successful long term.

Question: As an Army reservist, I'm curious to know if you have any plans to send any more American troops overseas right now, any additional forces.

President Obama: There are no current plans to do so. That's not something that we currently discussed. I've always said that I'm going to do what's necessary to protect the homeland.



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One of the principles that we all agree on, though, and I pressed folks pretty hard because in these conversations with my military advisors I want to make sure I'm getting blunt and unadulterated [sic] uncensored advice. But in every one of the conversations that we've had, the strong consensus is that in order for us to succeed long-term in this fight against ISIL we have to develop local security forces that can sustain progress.

It is not enough for us to simply send in American troops to temporarily set back organizations like ISIL, but to then, as soon as we leave, see that void filled once again with extremists. It is going to be vital for us to make sure that we are preparing the kinds of local ground forces and security forces with our partners that can not only succeed against ISIL, but then sustain in terms of security and in terms of governance.

Because if we try to do everything ourselves all across the Middle East, all across North Africa, we'll be playing Whack-a-Mole and there will be a whole lot of unintended consequences that ultimately make us less secure.

All right? Thank you. I didn't even plan to do this. You guys got two bonus questions.