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International Counterterrorism Policy in the Obama Administration: Developing a Strategy for the Future

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Good afternoon. It's really a pleasure to be here at the International Peace Institute and an honor to be part of IPI's distinguished speaker's series. As someone who has participated in IPI events before entering the Obama administration, I know that its reputation for stimulating open, constructive dialogue is well-deserved. This is critical to producing the innovative thinking required to tackle some of the 21st century's greatest transnational challenges.

And as the events of December remind us, terrorism remains one of the most complicated of these to address. Although al-Qa'ida's core is under perhaps the greatest pressure it has ever faced, the challenge we face remains acute because of the strength of some of the group's affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and the Maghreb and Sahel and the distribution of its narrative. This highlights a more complex, more global picture than ever before. The threat posed by the al-Qa'ida message is more networked and widely spread than anything we have experienced.

What's more, al-Qa'ida isn't the only terrorist group with global ambitions. For example, Lashkar e-Taiba has made it clear that it is willing to undertake bold, mass-casualty operations with a target set that would please al-Qa'ida planners. This underscores the importance of not looking too narrowly when we look at the problem set.

The global nature of the common challenge we face is clear. Citizens from dozens of countries around the world, the vast majority of them not from the United States, are being victimized by terrorism and violent extremism. President Obama recognizes that the United States cannot address this threat alone. Rather, we have and will continue to reach out, and, on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect, forge international coalitions. We are building (and sometimes rebuilding) partnerships-- bilateral, with multilateral organizations such as the UN, and with the private sector, and civil society.

This is a critical part of our comprehensive approach to addressing the threat. It is based on the premise that military power, intelligence operations, and law enforcement alone will not eliminate the underlying political, economic, and social conditions that help put so many individuals in situations where they might choose the path to violence.

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Let me to highlight some of the pillars of this new U.S. approach where our partnership with the UN is critical.

First, we are focused on building political will through consistent diplomatic engagement with counterparts and senior leaders for common counterterrorism objectives, again both bilaterally and multilaterally.

Second, we are committed to addressing the state insufficiency that allows terrorists to operate freely by promoting effective civilian law enforcement, good governance and the rule of law. A major focus of this work involves effectively building capacity and making counterterrorism training for police, prosecutors, border officials, and members of the judiciary more systematic, more innovative and far reaching. CTED, UNODC, and the wider Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force can each make important contributions to this effort.

Third, we are working with partners, including with UN agencies such as UNDP, UNICEF, and UNESCO, to help countries confront what Deputy National Security Adviser John Brennan has called the upstream factors – the political, social, and economic conditions that terrorists try to exploit to win over new recruits. Accordingly, we are supporting the broader provision of essential social services to deny radicals that aspect of state insufficiency for the purposes of radicalization.

Fourth, we are ratcheting up our efforts to resolve longstanding political and other conflicts that fuel the grievances that violent extremists can latch on to. At the top of the list is the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, as you know, President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Special Envoy George Mitchell are working very hard to restart direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Fifth, and at the heart of the Obama Administration's approach, is to identify the drivers of radicalization and identify how to address them most effectively. We are asking ourselves time and time again, how do we take one terrorist off the street without creating ten more? What can we do to attack the drivers of violent extremism so al-Qa'ida and its affiliates finally have to cope with a shrinking pool of recruits? What steps can be taken to counter the narrative being offered by al-Qa'ida and its extremist allies?

Finally, our approach recognizes that our counterterrorism efforts can best succeed when they make central respect for human rights and the rule of law. Because as President Obama has said from the outset, there should be no tradeoff between our security and our values. Indeed, in light of what we know about radicalization, it is clear that navigating by our values is an essential part of a successful counterterrorism effort. We have moved to rectify past excesses of the past few years by working to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, by forbidding enhanced interrogation techniques, and by eliminating secret detention sites.

Enhanced multilateral engagement at the UN

As part of our effort to strengthen our partnerships around the globe, we have been reengaging at the UN and in multilateral fora. The Administration's renewed commitment to working more closely with the UN extends far beyond counter-terrorism in recognition of the essential role the UN plays in many critical areas. But we also recognize the UN's important role in harnessing member states efforts to further international counterterrorism objectives, and it is on that that I want to elaborate now.

Constructive U.S. leadership and engagement at the UN demonstrates first of all our commitment to multilateral, rule-of-law-based approaches. We expect to work more effectively with a range of partners and with greater legitimacy to support

counterterrorism efforts in the process. Such an approach can also be more cost-effective for all nations, because of the UN's ability to leverage international expertise and programs.

In other instances, the United Nations, because of its impartiality and expertise, is especially well-suited to playing an important role in building counterterrorism cooperation among practitioners in regions rife with distrust or conflict. This is proving to be the case in South Asia, where CTED organized a trust-building workshop in Bangladesh that brought together senior police and prosecutors from across the sub-region last November and has plans for a follow-on event in Sri Lanka later this year.

Over the course of 2010 and beyond, the United States looks forward to working with others to find ways to strengthen our counterterrorism partnerships with the UN and to maximize the ability of the organization to contribute to our collective efforts to combat and prevent terrorism.

I would like to spend a few minutes highlighting what will be some of the themes of this engagement.

I. First and foremost, for all nations to benefit, we will seek to engage member states from across the world, not just on the Security Council. Ambassador Rice has underscored the importance of reaching out not just to the Permanent Five and to our Western partners, but to nations of all sizes in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands. Clearly, we need an inclusive approach for building and sustaining a global consensus on the fight against terrorism.

With this in mind, we are working with our partners on the Security Council to see the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee become more transparent and to find ways to involve those countries that are not members of the committee in its work—and let me add that we are encouraged by the strong leadership that Turkey is providing the CTC. A more transparent CTC, which is more accessible to the wider membership and regional organizations and civil society, is critical to sustaining global support for the implementation of what remains the UN's pivotal response to the events of 9/11 – Resolution 1373.

More broadly, we are interested in exploring ways to build practical cross-regional counterterrorism cooperation at the UN. We need to move beyond the often polarized discourse on counterterrorism, in particular surrounding definitional issues, that too often – and unnecessarily – blocks multilateral cooperation, even among countries who cooperate closely on counter-terrorism bilaterally.

This kind of engagement is a small part of a wider Administration effort to seek a new beginning with Muslim communities around the world, and to expand upon the partnerships President Obama outlined in his Cairo speech last June. The President's February appointment of Rashad Hussain to serve as his Special Envoy to the OIC is just one sign of this commitment.

The UN should be a place where we focus on what brings us together, not what drives us apart. In terms of counterterrorism, we can all agree on the urgent need to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida and its affiliates – a network that has killed thousands of people of many faiths and nationalities. We can agree that the UN plays a critical role in helping countries build criminal justice and other institutional capacities required to address this threat over the long-term. We should work together to reinforce this.

II. Second, the U.S. will work to ensure a more comprehensive approach to combating and preventing terrorism. This approach is consistent with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, with its emphasis not only on short term security and law enforcement measures, but on longer-term preventive ones as well. For example, we are eager to engage multilaterally on Countering Violent Extremism issues – one of my highest priorities – and to explore the possibility of having the UN assume a larger role here.

This engagement will consistently underscore the need for the UN to play its part to ensure that national counterterrorism measures are grounded in respect for human rights and the rule of law. I was pleased to represent the United States and reinforce its commitment in this area during the Arria-formula meeting on human rights and counterterrorism organized by Mexico last November.

When we talk about the human rights dimension, Security Council Resolution 1904, adopted last December, is an important milestone. It not only reaffirms the global consensus against al-Qa'ida and the Taliban, but strengthens implementation of the UN sanctions, and improves the fairness and transparency of the regime.

We hope the resolution will help restore confidence in both the Consolidated List and the wider sanctions regime. With improved confidence in this instrument, the implementation of travel bans, financial restrictions and arms sanctions should be used more effectively and globally against terrorists and their supporters. In particular, we hope it can have an increasing impact against those hindering peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the Arabian Peninsula.

III. Third, we recognize the important role of the UN as a forum to develop the capacity of national criminal justice officials and to enhance technical and other practical counterterrorism cooperation more broadly. During the past year, the UN has adopted a more targeted approach to much of its counterterrorism work. This approach has proven itself increasingly adept in developing training and other capacity-building programs to address the specific regional and subregional counterterrorism needs. This is part of a much-needed effort to connect these activities to the day-to-day work of national counterterrorism practitioners. Partly as a result of such efforts, like those of CTED in South Asia and UNODC's in West Africa, the organization's counterterrorism activities are also becoming more closely linked to its broader efforts to address international peace and security issues. These are all positive developments. And I want to add that we are encouraged by the strong leadership the various UN bodies have today.

We will explore how the various UN counterterrorism capacity-building tools can be best leveraged in the context of the wider international community's efforts to address peace and security challenges in priority countries and regions such as Pakistan, Yemen, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa.

Building the institutional capacities of fragile, failing, and failed states to allow them to confront a range of transnational security challenges, to promote the rule of law and governance, and to provide education and other basic services to their people is the bread and butter of the UN's day-to-day work. The UN work on counterterrorism is improved as member states are able to govern effectively, control their own borders and fight crime at home.

Certainly individual counterterrorism actors have played important –and successful—roles. We believe, however, that the current approach to countering terrorism at the UN can be too stove-piped and insufficiently linked with the organization's other institution-building efforts. This is not an uncommon problem in many national governments, including, at times, my own. More holistic, coordinated thinking on these issues is needed to make the organization's work in this field even more relevant and effective. We look forward to continuing to work with partners, including within the UN Secretariat and its newly established Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Support Office, to stimulate this thinking.

Finally, we will encourage the UN to focus more attention on highlighting the important role that a robust civil society can play in countering terrorism.

So far, the UN's rich tradition of working with and empowering civil society around the world has yet to reach its counterterrorism work. Going forward, we would like to see the UN, in particular the CTC/CTED and the broader CTITF, to engage more with nongovernment experts and civil society groups more broadly. By doing so, the UN can create a constrained environment so terrorists find it harder to operate. In addition, these UN actors need to encourage states to

provide civil society with political space to allow it to be a responsible counterterrorism partner. The UN can lend its voice to remind states not to use counterterrorism legislation to justify the targeting of dissident and other civil society groups, as well as to resist efforts to clamp down on freedom of association, speech, and assembly. These UN efforts should be balanced with the its ongoing work in highlighting the importance of having safeguards in place to ensure that charities and other NGOs are not being used as conduits for terrorist financing.

Given this expert audience and our venue, I have focused my remarks on the United Nations, however, I want to underscore that the Obama Administration has been reengaging in a broad range of multilateral counterterrorism fora that, in all honesty, were underutilized for too long. This includes various regional bodies and the G8 CTAG, where just last week we agreed with our partners on a series of important reform measures.

The net effect of increased U.S. engagement has been manifold: We are increasing the pool of donors for capacity building. We are working to strengthen international resolve against terrorism. We are also strengthening global norms so that countries jointly do a better job to build security together. This broader multilateral effort we see as essential, as it multiplies the impact of U.S. and all bilateral efforts; reinforces the larger point that counterterrorism is truly a global issue; and supports our common security by investing in our common humanity.

We take it as an essential principle of our engagement that building and strengthening counterterrorism partnerships is not just about confronting our enemies but the enemies of others as well.

The events of December 25 certainly underscored the continuing peril we all face, the determination and adaptability of our foes, and the evolving complexity of the overall threat against many nations and peoples.

Contemporary terrorism has been decades in the making. It will take many more years to unmake it. There is much we still need to learn, especially about how to prevent individuals from choosing the path of violence. But I believe the United States now has the right framework for our policies, which increasingly takes into account the indispensable role that the UN plays. Ultimately, I am confident that this will lead to the decisions and actions that will strengthen peace and security for the United States and the world.

Thank you for coming to listen today. I look forward to your questions.