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Remarks on United States Strategy To Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization at the Department of the Treasury

June 14, 2016

I just met with my National Security Council as part of our regular effort to review and intensify our campaign to destroy the terrorist group ISIL. Our meeting was planned before the terrible attack in Orlando. But obviously, that tragedy—the awful loss of life—shaped much of our work today. In all of our efforts, foremost in our minds is the loss and the grief of the people of Orlando—those who died, those who are still recovering, the families who have seen their loved ones harmed, the friends of ours who are lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender who were targeted. I want to remind them that they are not alone. The American people and our allies and friends all over the world, stand with you and are thinking about you and are praying for you.

As Director Comey has said, we currently do not have any information to indicate that a foreign terrorist group directed the attack in Orlando. It is increasingly clear, however, that the killer took in extremist information and propaganda over the Internet. He appears to have been an angry, disturbed, unstable young man who became radicalized. As we know all too well, terrorist groups like ISIL have called on people around the world and here in the United States to attack innocent civilians. Their propaganda, their videos, their postings are pervasive and more easily accessible than we want. This individual appears to have absorbed some of that. And during his killing spree, the shooter in Orlando pledged allegiance to ISIL.

As I've said before, these lone actors or small cells of terrorists are very hard to detect and very hard to prevent. But across our government, at every level—Federal, State, and local, military and civilian—we are doing everything in our power to stop these kinds of attacks. We work to succeed a hundred percent of the time. An attacker, as we saw in Orlando, only has to succeed once. Our extraordinary personnel—our intelligence, our military, our homeland security, our law enforcement—have prevented many attacks and saved many lives. And we can never thank them enough. But we are all sobered by the fact that, despite the extraordinary, hard work, something like Orlando can occur.

In our meeting today, Director Comey updated us on the investigation in Orlando. Secretary Johnson reviewed the measures we continue to take on behalf of our homeland security. Secretary Carter and Chairman Dunford reviewed the military campaign against ISIL. And I want to thank Secretary Lew and his team here at Treasury for hosting us and for their tireless efforts to cut off the money that ISIL relies on to fund its terror network.

At the outset, I want to reiterate our objective in this fight. Our mission is to destroy ISIL. Since I last updated the American people on our campaign 2 months ago, we've seen that this continues to be a difficult fight, but we are making significant progress. Over the past 2 months, I've authorized a series of steps to ratchet up our fight against ISIL: additional U.S. personnel, including special forces, in Syria to assist local forces battling ISIL there; additional advisers to work more closely with Iraqi security forces and additional assets, including attack helicopters; and additional support for local forces in northern Iraq. Our aircraft continue to launch from the USS *Harry Truman*, now in the Mediterranean. Our B–52 bombers are hitting ISIL with precision strikes. Targets are being identified and hit even more quickly, so far, 13,000 airstrikes. So this campaign at this stage is firing on all cylinders.

And as a result, ISIL is under more pressure than ever before. ISIL continues to lose key leaders. This includes Salman Abu Shahib, the senior military leader in Mosul; Abu Sa'ad al-Sudani, who plotted external attacks; Shakir Waheib, ISIL's military leader in Iraq's Anbar Province; and Maher al-Bilawi, the top ISIL commander in Fallujah. So far, we've taken out more than 120 top ISIL leaders and commanders. And our message is clear: If you target America and our allies, you will not be safe. You will never be safe.

ISIL continues to lose ground in Iraq. In the past 2 months, local forces in Iraq, with coalition support, have liberated the western town of Rutbah and have also pushed up the Euphrates River Valley, liberating the strategic town of Hit and breaking the ISIL siege of Haditha. Iraqi forces have surrounded Fallujah and begun to move into the city. Meanwhile, in the north, Iraqi forces continue to push up the Tigris River Valley, making gains around Makhmour and now preparing to tighten the noose around ISIL in Mosul. All told, ISIL has now lost nearly half of the populated territory that it once controlled in Iraq, and it will lose more.

ISIL continues to lose ground in Syria as well. Assisted by our special operations forces, a coalition of local forces is now pressuring the key town of Manbij, which means the noose is tightening around ISIL in Raqqa as well. In short, our coalition continues to be on offense. ISIL is on defense. And it's now been a full year since ISIL has been able to mount a major successful offensive operation in either Syria or Iraq.

As ISIL continues to lose territory, it also continues to lose the money that it is—that is its lifeblood. As a result of our strikes against its oil infrastructure and supply lines, we believe that we've cut ISIL's revenue from oil by millions of dollars per month. In destroying the storage sites where they keep their cash, we've deprived ISIL of many millions more.

Thanks to the great work of Secretary Lew and many others here today—and working with nations and financial institutions around the world—ISIL is now effectively cut off from the international financial system. Cutting off ISIL's money may not be as dramatic as military strikes, but it is critically important. And we're seeing the results. ISIL's cash reserves are down. It has had to cut salaries for its fighters. It's resorting to more extortion of those trapped in its grip. And by ISIL's own admission, some of its own leaders have been caught stealing cash and gold. Once again, ISIL's true nature has been revealed: These are not religious warriors, they are thugs, and they are thieves.

In continuing to push on this front, I wanted to mention that it is critical for our friends in the Senate to confirm Adam Szubin, my nominee for Under Secretary of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. Adam has served in Democratic and Republican administrations. Everyone agrees he's eminently qualified. He has been working on these kinds of issues for years. It's now been more than a year since I nominated him—more than 420 days—and he still has not been given a full vote. There is no good reason for it. It is inexcusable. So it's time for the Senate to do its job, put our national security first, and have a vote on Adam Szubin that can lead our financial fight against ISIL and help keep our country safe.

ISIL's ranks are shrinking as well. Their morale is sinking. As one defender—as one defector said, ISIL "is not bringing Islam to the world, and people need to know that." Thanks to international efforts, the flow of foreign fighters—including from America to Syria and Iraq—has plummeted. In fact, our intelligence community now assesses that the ranks of ISIL fighters has been reduced to the lowest levels in more than 2½ years.

Even as we continue to destroy ISIL militarily, we're addressing the larger forces that have allowed these terrorists to gain traction in parts of the world. With regard to Iraq, this means helping Iraqis stabilize liberated communities and promote inclusive governance so ISIL cannot return.

With regard to Syria, it means our continued support for the fragile cessation of hostilities there. The cessation of hostilities has not stopped all or even most of the hardship on the Syrian people, the hardship on civilians. And the Asad regime has been the principal culprit in violating the cessation of hostilities. ISIL and al-Nusra, which is Al Qaida's affiliate in Syria, also continue to terrorize Syrians. But as fragile and incomplete as the cessation is, it has saved lives and it has allowed the delivery of some lifesaving aid to Syrians who are in desperate need. And as difficult as it is, we will continue to push for a political process that can end the civil war and result in a transition away from Asad.

Beyond Syria and Libya—beyond Syria and Iraq, ISIL is also losing ground in Libya. Forces of the Libyan unity Government are going after ISIL in their stronghold in Sirte. And we'll continue to assist the new Libyan Government as it works to secure its country.

Lastly, here at home, if we really want to help law enforcement protect Americans from homegrown extremists, the kind of tragedies that occurred at San Bernardino and that now have occurred in Orlando, there is a meaningful way to do that. We have to make it harder for people who want to kill Americans to get their hands on weapons of war that let them kill dozens of innocents. It is absolutely true, we cannot prevent every tragedy. But we know that, consistent with the Second Amendment, there are common-sense steps that could reduce gun violence and could reduce the lethality of somebody who intends to do other people harm. We should give ATF the resources they need to enforce the gun laws that we already have. People with possible ties to terrorism who aren't allowed on a plane shouldn't be allowed to buy a gun.

Enough talking about being tough on terrorism. Actually be tough on terrorism, and stop making it easy as possible for terrorists to buy assault weapons. Reinstate the assault weapons ban. Make it harder for terrorists to use these weapons to kill us. Otherwise, despite extraordinary efforts across our Government—by local law enforcement, by our intelligence agencies, by our military—despite all the sacrifices that folks make, these kinds of events are going to keep on happening. And the weapons are only going to get more powerful.

And let me make a final point. For a while now, the main contribution of some of my friends on the other side of the aisle have made in the fight against ISIL is to criticize this administration and me for not using the phrase "radical Islam." That's the key, they tell us. We can't beat ISIL unless we call them "radical Islamists." What exactly would using this label accomplish? What exactly would it change? Would it make ISIL less committed to trying to kill Americans? Would it bring in more allies? Is there a military strategy that is served by this? The answer is none of the above. Calling a threat by a different name does not make it go away. This is a political distraction. Since before I was President, I've been clear about how extremist groups have perverted Islam to justify terrorism. As President, I have repeatedly called on our Muslim friends and allies at home and around the world to work with us to reject this twisted interpretation of one of the world's great religions.

There has not been a moment in my 7½ years as President where we have not been able to pursue a strategy because we didn't use the label "radical Islam." Not once has an adviser of mine said, man, if we really use that phrase, we're going to turn this whole thing around. Not once. So if someone seriously thinks that we don't know who we're fighting, if there's anyone

out there who thinks we're confused about who our enemies are, that would come as a surprise to the thousands of terrorists who we've taken off the battlefield.

If the implication is that those of us up here and the thousands of people around the country and around the world who are working to defeat ISIL aren't taking the fight seriously, that would come as a surprise to those who have spent these last 7½ years dismantling Al Qaida in the FATA, for example, including the men and women in uniform who put their lives at risk and the special forces that I ordered to get bin Laden and are now on the ground in Iraq and in Syria. They know full well who the enemy is. So do the intelligence and law enforcement officers who spend countless hours disrupting plots and protecting all Americans, including politicians who tweet and appear on cable news shows. They know who the nature of the enemy is.

So there's no magic to the phrase "radical Islam." It's a political talking point; it's not a strategy. And the reason I am careful about how I describe this threat has nothing to do with political correctness and everything to do with actually defeating extremism. Groups like ISIL and Al Qaida want to make this war a war between Islam and America or between Islam and the West. They want to claim that they are the true leaders of over a billion Muslims around the world who reject their crazy notions. They want us to validate them by implying that they speak for those billion-plus people; that they speak for Islam. That's their propaganda. That's how they recruit. And if we fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush and imply that we are at war with an entire religion, then we're doing the terrorists' work for them.

Now, up until this point, this argument about labels has mostly just been partisan rhetoric. And sadly, we've all become accustomed to that kind of partisanship, even when it involves the fight against these extremist groups. And that kind of yapping has not prevented folks across government from doing their jobs, from sacrificing and working really hard to protect the American people.

But we are now seeing how dangerous this kind of mindset and this kind of thinking can be. We're starting to see where this kind of rhetoric and loose talk and sloppiness about who exactly we're fighting, where this can lead us. We now have proposals from the presumptive Republican nominee for President of the United States to bar all Muslims from emigrating to America. We hear language that singles out immigrants and suggests entire religious communities are complicit in violence. Where does this stop? The Orlando killer, one of the San Bernardino killers, the Fort Hood killer—they were all U.S. citizens.

Are we going to start treating all Muslim Americans differently? Are we going to start subjecting them to special surveillance? Are we going to start discriminating against them because of their faith? We've heard these suggestions during the course of this campaign. Do Republican officials actually agree with this? Because that's not the America we want. It doesn't reflect our democratic ideals. It won't make us more safe, it will make us less safe, fueling ISIL's notion that the West hates Muslims, making young Muslims in this country and around the world feel like no matter what they do, they're going to be under suspicion and under attack. It makes Muslim Americans feel like their Government is betraying them. It betrays the very values America stands for.

We've gone through moments in our history before when we acted out of fear, and we came to regret it. We've seen our government mistreat our fellow citizens. And it has been a shameful part of our history.

This is a country founded on basic freedoms, including freedom of religion. We don't have religious tests here. Our Founders, our Constitution, our Bill of Rights are clear about that. And if we ever abandon those values, we would not only make it a lot easier to radicalize people here and around the world, but we would have betrayed the very things we are trying to protect—the pluralism and the openness, our rule of law, our civil liberties—the very things that make this country great, the very things that make us exceptional. And then, the terrorists would have won. And we cannot let that happen. I will not let that happen.

Two weeks ago, I was at the commencement ceremony at the Air Force Academy. And it could not have been more inspiring to see these young people stepping up, dedicated to serve and protect this country. And part of what was inspiring was the incredible diversity of these cadets. We saw cadets who are straight applauding classmates who were openly gay. We saw cadets born here in America applauding classmates who are immigrants and love this country so much they decided they wanted to be part of our Armed Forces. We saw cadets and families of all religions applaud cadets who are proud, patriotic Muslim Americans serving their country in uniform, ready to lay their lives on the line to protect you and to protect me. We saw male cadets applauding for female classmates who can now serve in combat positions. That's the American military. That's America: one team, one Nation. Those are the values that ISIL is trying to destroy, and we shouldn't help them do it.

Our diversity and our respect for one another, our drawing on the talents of everybody in this country, our making sure that we are treating everybody fairly—that we're not judging people on the basis of what faith they are or what race they are or what ethnicity they are or what their sexual orientation is—that's what makes this country great. That's the spirit we see in Orlando. That's the unity and resolve that will allow us to defeat ISIL. That's what will preserve our values and our ideals that define us as Americans. That's how we're going to defend this Nation, and that's how we're going to defend our way of life.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:18 p.m. in the Cash Room. In his remarks, he referred to Omar Mateen, suspected gunman in the terrorist attack at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL, on June 12; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC; Shakir Waheib, an ISIL operative also known as Abu Wahib who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Anbar Province, Iraq, on May 6; a U.S. citizen and ISIL defector known publicly as "Mo"; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; Donald J. Trump, chairman and president, Trump Organization, in his capacity as a Republican Presidential candidate; and Nidal M. Hasan, a former Army psychiatrist who was convicted in the shootings at Fort Hood, TX, on November 5, 2009. He also referred to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization, U.S. efforts to combat, meeting at the Department of the Treasury.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Asad, Bashar al-; Carter, Ashton B.; Comey, James B.; Comey, James B., Jr.; Dunford, Joseph F., Jr.; Hasan, Nidal M.; Johnson, Jeh C.; Lew, Jacob J.; Mateen, Omar; Szubin, Adam J.; Trump, Donald J.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Army, Department of the : 2009 shootings at Fort Hood, TX; California : 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino; Civil rights : Freedom of religion; Civil rights : Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons,

equality; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Florida : Orlando :: Terrorist attack; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Iraq : Political unrest and violence; Iraq : Security cooperation with U.S.; Justice, Department of : Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Bureau of; Justice, Department of : Bureau of Investigation, Federal; Law enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; Libya : Reconciliation efforts; Pakistan : Federally Administered Tribal Areas, suspected terrorist safe havens; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : Jabhat al-Nusra insurgent organization; Syria : President; Syria : U.S. and coalition airstrikes; Syria : U.S. military detachment; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist organization; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Texas : 2009 shootings at Ford Hood; Treasury, Department of the : Secretary; Treasury, Department of the : Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, Under Secretary-designate; White House Office : Security Council, National.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600400.