

Secretary of State John Kerry
Speech on Syria
National Institute for Peace
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Thank you Nancy very much and good afternoon to you all. It's great to be here and I want to thank the United States Institute of Peace for hosting me. I'm used to flying long distances to deliver a speech, so it's nice – although perhaps no less dangerous -- just to walk across 23rd Street.

This Institute is a truly spectacular place, even though it has reached the pivotal age of 30. As some of you may remember, my generation was taught not to trust anyone that old. But given that I'm now more than twice that age, my message to young people is don't believe everything you are taught.

The truth is that under the leadership of Nancy Lindborg and my old friend Bill Taylor, this 30-year-old Institute is truly hitting its stride as a force for reconciliation and conflict resolution. Precisely because of the experience it has gained, USIP is increasingly effective; it is a place where smart and energetic people come to help others and I am confident that is going to remain the case for many, many decades to come – so congratulations to you all and, as soon as I'm done, I expect each and every one of you to go right back to work.

Of course, there's another reason I'm especially pleased to be here and that is stated boldly in the very name of this Institute -- peace.

Across the street in the Harry Truman building, there are thousands of men and women who think about peace every day and especially about what it would mean to the many millions of people who live without it – including many who have never in their entire lives truly known it. And as a veteran, a diplomat, a citizen, a father and grandfather, I personally believe peace is as worthy a pursuit as anyone could imagine and that no matter how hard it

may be to achieve – the attempt, if guided by principle and realistic vision -- is always worthwhile.

I doubt there are many leaders who, at the end of their lives, look back with regret at having done all they could to prevent war; and I hope there are none who think to themselves: Thank God, I didn't bother lifting a finger to stop people from killing each other. So it shouldn't be a surprise to you that peace will be a major theme of my remarks this afternoon.

As you know, these are extremely complicated times and I appreciate the chance to share some thoughts in advance of the G-20 summit that begins Sunday in Antalya, Turkey. Our leaders will assemble there with a full agenda, which reflects the fact that our country is engaged today in more areas of the world on more important issues with more partners and with higher stakes than at any time in history.

Along the Pacific Rim, we have negotiated a landmark trade pact that will bind together 40% of the global economy based on high labor and environmental standards and 21st century rules of the road.

In Africa, we are working with local partners to train the leaders of tomorrow, increase access to electricity, improve food security, halt debilitating conflicts and ensure that our success in stopping Ebola cold and in slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS is sustained.

In Latin America, we are reaching out to the people of Cuba by normalizing relations after 54 years, while also helping Colombia to move closer to a negotiated solution to its decades-long struggle with the rebel group, FARC.

In Europe, we are standing firm with our Allies in support of a democratic and sovereign Ukraine, and in sending a strong message of reassurance that NATO's promise of collective defense will be upheld.

And in recent days, we have seen the beginning of what promises to be the most dramatic transformation of a nuclear program since the breakup of the

Soviet Union; as Iran begins to mothball centrifuges, destroy the core of its heavy water plutonium reactor, and export much of its stockpile of enriched uranium.

Finally, at the end of this month and into December, I will be in Paris, where we are determined to negotiate a truly ambitious, durable, and inclusive framework for curbing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. Earlier this week, in Norfolk, I laid out the national security implications of this challenge – from the impacts on our own military readiness to the potential multiplication of overseas crises caused by food and water shortages, higher temperatures, extreme weather events, sea level rise, and the movement of people away from areas that can no longer sustain life.

The good news is that it is not too late to reduce emissions, limit the damage, and seize the economic and environmental benefits of a transformed energy future. We are pulling out all the stops to make that happen, because the consequences of continued inaction – of more excuses, more delays, and more refusals to acknowledge what is taking place right before our eyes -- are simply unacceptable.

So it's an understatement to suggest that there's a lot going on. In fact, there are many important subjects we could be discussing this afternoon.

But today, I really want to focus on an area of the world and, in fact, one particular country that has been of central concern of the Obama Administration for the past four and a half years --and that is Syria. The civil war there, and the humanitarian disaster that has flowed from it, will be a major topic of discussion at the G-20 Summit and, before that, at meetings in which I will participate in Vienna on Saturday.

So I thought this might be a good time to bring you up to speed on the Administration's strategy in Syria, on decisions made by the President, and on the actions we are taking and will build on in weeks and months to come.

Syria, as we know, is not just another country. In fact, it is one of the first places many of us learned about when studying history in school. Damascus and Aleppo are among the oldest continually inhabited cities on the face of the Earth. They are part of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. For 4000 years, empires have risen and fallen but Syria has remained a commercial crossroads. This has contributed to a rich cultural mix of ethnicities, customs and creeds.

But the story of modern Syria has been a grim one. In 1970, a Baathist military leader, Hafez al-Assad, seized power, ushering in an era of limited modernization accompanied by unlimited repression. In 2000, Asad was succeeded by his son, Bashar, raising hopes for greater political openness -- hopes that the new leader chose not to fulfill.

It was little wonder then, that when the sparks of Arab Spring began to ignite, demands for change were heard in Syria. The protests were actually quite modest at first and were driven generally not by sectarian or religious differences, but by the lack of freedom and jobs. The violence only began when Asad responded to peaceful demonstrations by sending in thugs to beat young people up. And when their parents objected and took to the streets themselves, the regime replied first with bullets, then with bombs.

Having made peaceful change impossible, Asad made war inevitable. And this war gave rise to Daesh, the gravest extremist threat faced by our generation and the embodiment of evil in our time.

The result, as we know, has been four and a half years of nonstop horror. One Syrian in twenty has been wounded or killed. One in five is a refugee. One in two has been displaced. The average life expectancy has dropped by twenty years. Eighty percent of the electricity has been knocked out, plunging much of the country literally into darkness. And the burden of the conflict falls most heavily on the smallest shoulders.

Imagine what it would mean for America's future if the entire public school systems of our largest cities -- including New York, Chicago, and Los

Angeles -- were suddenly to close and stay closed. And then there are children like two-year-old Yazan al-Najjar, whose birth in Lebanon could not be registered because his parents were separated during the war. Officially, he is neither Syrian, like his mother, nor Lebanese. And there are thousands like him, young people growing up in camps, overcrowded apartments, under bridges, and in the streets without a country to call their own or any official identity at all. Make no mistake, the longer this terrible Civil War lasts; the harder it will be for the country to recover, and the more wounds of body and mind will open – wounds that can never truly be closed.

Since the fighting began, as a Senator and as Secretary of State, I have met with many of those personally touched by the conflict:

- Doctors who are risking their lives in a country where treating the injured can be equated with treason.
- Women who struggle to keep their families together despite constant attacks, threats of abuse, bitter cold, and shortages of water and food.
- A courageous whistle blower who emerged from Syria with photographic evidence of the torture that Asad's security forces inflicted on thousands of victims.
- And just a few weeks ago, with refugees who had survived barrel bombs dropped from helicopters.

Given all this, I want to be very clear.

From the beginning of this crisis, there has not been a single idea for addressing the Syrian conflict that has been discussed in public that hasn't also been the subject of intense scrutiny within the administration.

Whatever questions one might have about the content of our policy, there should no doubt about the effort made to consider every option for ending this crisis.

That explains why the United States originally supported the deployment of international human rights monitors to Syria; why our UN Ambassador, Samantha Power, led the fight in the Security Council to demand access for humanitarian relief agencies and for an investigation into war crimes by the

International Criminal Court; and why we have been at forefront of every attempt to forge a diplomatic solution.

It's why we have been in regular contact from the outset with mainstream Syrian opposition groups, meeting with them repeatedly, helping them in ways both public and private, and encouraging them to unify and take steps to broaden their support.

It's why we have worked hard to mitigate the incredible burden the war has placed on Syria's neighbors -- Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. In each case, we have coordinated closely with the government to prevent the violence from spreading and to help them cope with the massive influx of refugees that has now spread even beyond their own region to the heart of Europe. To date, we have contributed more than \$4.5 billion in humanitarian relief and we are constantly exhorting other countries to open their own wallets because -- even as another winter closes in -- the need for help far outweighs the supply. In addition, we have announced a six-fold increase in the number of Syrian refugees we will welcome to our shores.

In addition to all this, the United States led a successful international effort to eliminate Syria's declared inventory of chemical arms. When Asad attacked his own people with these horrific weapons, President Obama's threat of military strikes forced the Syrian regime to back down and enabled us to strike a deal with Russia and other members of the UN Security Council. As a result, for the first time in history, WMD were removed from a country while a conflict was going on. And it's good that happened, because we can only imagine the devastation the leaders of Daesh would have caused if they had been able to get their hands on Syria's arsenal of sophisticated and lethal chemical arms.

I emphasize this because the list of crimes for which Daesh is responsible is already numbing. These thugs aren't just terrorists; they're also smugglers and kidnappers. They butcher teachers, burn books, and wage war on knowledge itself. They execute journalists for doing their jobs and average citizens not for anything they have said and done but simply for who they

are -- for what they believe about religion and God. In Iraq, Daesh fighters have been abducting, raping, and auctioning off women and girls, even teaching that the abuse of under-age non-Muslim girls is not only acceptable but a form of prayer. And they have urged followers and affiliates from across the globe to murder their neighbors, to commit homicides and suicide at the same time.

This past summer, the terrorists picked up sledge hammers and smashed half a dozen statues in the ancient city of Palmyra. They destroyed the 1800 year-old Roman Arch and temples that were even more venerable. Then they seized the city's director of antiquities, made him kneel in a public square, cut off his head, and left his body tied to a pole. The man was 83 years old had been in charge of preserving Palmyra's cultural heritage for more than 50 years.

It couldn't be plainer. History doesn't matter to Daesh; human dignity doesn't matter to Daesh; and the sacredness of life is alien to Daesh. Their leaders represent everything we fought against in World Wars I and II and they oppose everything we have tried to build up that is right and good in our societies. In confronting them, we face a fight against medieval and modern fascism at the same time.

And let me be clear. This isn't just a fight we must make on behalf of others -- as important as that might be. The United States does not go in search of enemies, but there are times when enemies come in search of us. And we know for a fact that Daesh means what it says when it threatens to attack America and Americans.

So the stakes could not be higher. Under President Obama's leadership, the United States has mobilized a 65-member Coalition to take on Daesh and defeat Daesh. We've said from the beginning that this would be a multi-year effort, but -- as I will describe in a couple of minutes -- we're already on the right track and making gains, and we are clear about the road ahead.

My friends, the Syrian civil war has dragged on now for more than four and a half years. We recall with sadness that the civil war in neighboring Lebanon lasted for sixteen. Regrettably, this is not a part of the world where flames, once ignited, simply extinguish themselves.

The intractable nature of the conflict in Syria is attributable to a number of factors, beginning with the Asad governments. The four decades of dictatorial rule choked off any attempt to develop an organized political opposition. Sectarian differences that might have worked themselves out peacefully in a more open society instead festered beneath the surface. The forces unleashed by Arab spring emerged so suddenly that the collision between rising alarm on one side and skyrocketing expectations on the other was much more traumatic than might otherwise have been the case.

The situation was further complicated by the involvement of regional actors, especially Hezbollah, which intervened on behalf of Asad, and the foreign terrorist fighters who have joined Daesh and other terrorist groups.

We face an environment now that bears little resemblance to the kind of black-white scenarios that make decisions relatively easy. Put simply, there are bad guys all around and good guys who are not accustomed to working with each other. But the dominant truth about the situation in Syria is that, although Asad and Daesh are supposed to be bitter opponents, they are both parts of the same problem.

In fact, the rise of Daesh is directly attributable to the policies and actions of the Asad regime; that's why we have referred to Asad as a magnet for terrorism. This is a case, and there are many in history, in which two supposed enemies are in fact symbiotic. Loathing towards Asad drove thousands of Syrians into the arms of Daesh. Fear of Daesh caused some Syrian groups to feel they had no realistic option but to support the government. The desire to flee both explains the massive refugee crisis we face today.

The relationship between Asad and Daesh clarifies one of the apparent peculiarities of this conflict – that the two extremes have only rarely targeted

one another. In fact, they even do business with each other – buying and selling oil. Asad and Daesh are enemies far more in theory than in fact, and neither has shown any interest in bringing the killing to an end.

If neither the dictator nor the terrorists are the answer -- and they are not -- our challenge is to create the conditions under which a clear and broadly acceptable alternative can emerge.

To that end, President Obama has set for our nation three inter-related goals.

We begin with Daesh. Some fourteen months ago, the President made it clear that the United States was committed to the defeat and dismantlement of this terrorist organization. And over the last month, he has directed every member of his National Security Team to pick up the pace and move forward with ideas for degrading and defeating Daesh more rapidly, more completely, and permanently.

Second, we are intensifying our diplomatic effort to finally bring to an end the Civil War in Syria.

Third, we are determined to support our friends in the region, and to ensure that the instability created by the Syrian crisis does not spread further beyond its borders.

These measures are mutually reinforcing. The more progress we make on one, the more likely we are to succeed on the others.

Now, President Obama has made clear his view that the crisis in Syria cannot be resolved militarily – and that remains the case. But it is also clear that the chance for successful diplomacy depends, in part, on the ability to exert leverage, on control of territory, and on perceptions about who is gaining the upper hand. That's why it matters that there is increasing evidence in both Iraq and Syria that Daesh can be defeated – even routed – when faced by the combination of Coalition air strikes and effective partners on the ground.

Remember that the Coalition has only been together for 14 months. People forget that. Last summer it did not even exist.

But the Coalition has already made a huge difference in reversing Daesh's momentum and saving people's lives.

The evidence is there for all to see.

To date, the Coalition has launched more than 8000 air strikes in Iraq and Syria and the number is rising every day – there were more than 40 just last night.

The Coalition and its allies on the ground have defended Mosul dam and other vital facilities in Iraq while also preventing a terrorist assault on Baghdad.

We have driven Daesh from the critical border town of Kobani and liberated the city of Tikrit, enabling most of its population to return and start to rebuild their communities.

With its partners, the Coalition helped to rescue an endangered minority on Sinjar Mountain – and today allied forces are engaged in a major operation to liberate Sinjar itself and to cut off highway 47, Daesh's main artery from Syria into Iraq.

We have also established a robust program—including the deployment of thousands of American advisers -- to train and assist Iraqi security forces.

We have significantly degraded Daesh's top leadership, including Haji Mutazz, the organization's second in command, and we continue to eliminate commanders and other personnel from the battlefield.

Overall, Daesh is unable to operate in twenty to twenty five percent of the territory it controlled a year ago.

And we are just getting started. We now know more about the enemy than we did and more about what has worked and what has not. And so, at the President's direction, and with those lessons in mind, we are stepping up our strategy in all its aspects.

In Iraq, we are supplying our partners with the help they need, in the form of armored bulldozers and mine-clearing equipment, to break down the Daesh defenses around the key city of Ramadi. In fact, as I speak, Iraqi forces are engaged in a systematic but carefully calibrated effort to encircle and re-take that city.

Meanwhile, another Iraqi force recently re-took the Baiji oil refinery, strategically located on the road linking Baghdad and Mosul.

In Syria, we have increased the shipment of supplies and ammunition to moderate opposition forces.

The President has authorized the deployment of a small number of U.S. Special Forces in an advisory role.

We are encouraging our European allies to do more – and they are.

We are increasing our operational tempo out of the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, flying more often and to greater effect.

We joined with our Kurdish partners in a daring rescue operation that saved the lives of 79 Daesh prisoners who were about to be executed one by one.

We remain in constant communication with our Arab friends, who are fully supportive of our goals and who continue to participate in Coalition efforts – which are not just military but also include putting relentless pressure on Daesh's finances, on its ability to attract foreign recruits, and on countering its message of division and hate.

We are also providing additional assistance to enhance the security capabilities of Jordan and Lebanon.

And these efforts are paying off.

Not long ago, Daesh controlled more than half of Syria's 500 mile-long border with Turkey. Today, it has a grip on only about 15 percent and we have a plan with our partners to pry open and secure the rest.

We are striving with local forces to put the squeeze on Raqqa, the center of Daesh's operations.

We have hit some of the organization's key energy facilities, including just recently the Omar oil field, from which the terrorists derive both revenue and fuel.

In coming weeks, we will be doing more to degrade Daesh's ability to produce, transport, and sell oil and gas.

And we have made Daesh change the way it moves and operates, because its leaders now get up each morning worrying about what might come down from the sky.

All this and more is part of a strategy to continue building on what has worked and to apply pressure against Daesh from as many directions as possible, with as much intensity as possible, for as long as it takes.

At the same time, we know full well that the struggle against Daesh is not taking place in a political vacuum. That's why we are working to promote a fully sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq that is secure in its borders and able to protect all of its citizens.

But the truth is that nothing would do more to bolster the fight against the terrorists than a broadly supported diplomatic process that would begin to de-escalate the conflict; and that would give the Syrian people a real choice - not between Asad and Daesh -- but between the status quo and something

far better and long overdue: a true transition in which responsible Syrians from across the political spectrum will have a voice.

That is why another core element of our strategy in Syria is diplomatic; a renewed political initiative – broader and more action-oriented than any previously attempted – to isolate the terrorists and set Syria on the path to peace.

This possibility was the focus of meetings in Vienna at the end of last month; meetings that for the first time brought all the key interested international parties to the same table. That session produced a communiqué endorsed by every country who attended -- countries that don't always agree on much – like Saudi Arabia and Iran -- but who do agree that Daesh is evil and that the war in Syria must be brought to an acceptable end.

More specifically, the countries represented in Vienna agreed to support Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and pluralist character.

We agreed that Daesh and other terrorist groups must be defeated.

We agreed that Syria's state institutions should remain intact.

We agreed that the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, must be protected.

We agreed that access for humanitarian relief should be assured throughout the country.

We agreed to increase support for internally displaced persons and for refugees and for the countries that host them.

We agreed that the UN should convene members of the Syrian government and opposition to develop a plan along the lines of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance followed by a new constitution and free and fair elections.

And we agreed to explore the possibility of a nationwide ceasefire to be initiated in parallel with this renewed political process. Now obviously, such a ceasefire would not include Daesh, because our effort to defeat Daesh – and the effort of our partners to defeat Daesh – will continue until we prevail. In fact, it is precisely through this political process that we can, for the first time, marshal the support of the entire international community against a single common enemy – Daesh.

I want to be clear: the Syrian people will be the validators of this whole effort. UN envoy Staffan DeMistura has met with representatives of more than 230 Syrian groups, including the government. Our own special envoy, Michael Ratney, has also been in constant communication with Syrian representatives, and I have met with opposition leaders myself. So this is not about imposing anything on anyone.

But the Syrians will be the first to tell you that they need help from the international community; and what they especially need is a consensus about how to achieve a political transition that will free them from the stranglehold of extremists and allow them to shape their own destiny.

And I want to underscore: the leaders of the responsible Syrian opposition are not focused on revenge; they have no desire to prolong this war; and they understand that compromises will be required. But at the same time, it's simply not possible to go back to the situation that existed before this conflict began – not after month upon month upon month of indiscriminate violence, torture, and bloodshed; not after 40 years of dictatorship. Asking the opposition to trust Asad or to accept Asad's leadership is simply not a reasonable request; it's literally a non-starter. That's why we are pushing so hard for a real transition – because without a real transition – the fighting is going to continue and the war will never end.

On this point, I acknowledge that we are still working through with Russia and Iran the question of Asad and his role. We and our partners believe that neither peace nor the defeat of Daesh is possible with Asad in power, and that four and a half years of bitter civil war has made the position of the Syrian people on this subject very clear.

But even while divided on this critical issue, the United States, Russia and other countries involved have decided not to let that disagreement prevent us from trying to build on the common ground we have established. Our goal is to develop a timetable for action based on interim steps, the participation of a broad range of Syrian parties including both men and women, and the kind of political transition that will empower the center against the extremes.

I cannot say this afternoon that we are on the threshold of a comprehensive agreement; there remains much work to do. The walls of mistrust within Syria, within the region, and within the international community, are thick and high. But those walls will never be breached unless we make a concerted and creative effort to surmount them. Our meeting at the end of October showed that the agreed basis for action is much wider than many had supposed.

Looking ahead, it should be crystal clear that Daesh can never be allowed to gain control in Syria and equally clear that Asad lacks the ability either to unite and govern the country or to end the war. So if the war is to end, we must find an alternative. That logic is compelling and provides a basic unifying principle for our efforts going forward.

On Friday evening, I will return to Vienna. Assembled there will be representatives from the Arab League, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, the UK, and the United Nations. America's message to each is that we all have a responsibility, not to dig in our heels, but to take the next forward step – so that the bleeding can stop and the building can begin; and so that the habits of civilization can once again take hold in the region where civilization itself was born.

There are moments in managing world affairs when the elements required for progress simply do not exist; but time and turbulence can generate new possibilities. We do not know for sure whether the right possibilities have yet come together in connection with Syria. We do not know for certain whether the kind of political transition we seek in that country can be achieved. We do not know for certain how long it will take before we can

say that Daesh has been defeated. But we do know for certain that we have an obligation to ourselves, to friends throughout the region, and above all to Syria's next generation, to test those possibilities to the fullest – and even more, not to accept no for an answer.

We have a responsibility to do everything we can, for as long as we must, to fulfill the high aspiration enshrined in the very name of this institution; we have a duty to peace.

Thank you very much.

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