Secretary-General's Remarks at Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism

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Office of the Secretary General

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While it is inevitable that our discussions today may draw on examples such as Daesh or Boko Haram, let us be absolutely clear from the outset: the phenomenon of violent extremism conducive to terrorism is not rooted or confined to any religion, region, nationality or ethnic group.
Let us also recognize that today, the vast majority of victims worldwide are Muslims.
The objective of violent extremists is not necessarily to turn on us – it is for us to turn on each other. Their biggest mission is not the action, it is the reaction. The aim is to divide communities. The goal is to let fear rule.
Let this conference – and our unity today – be the ultimate rebuke to that bankrupt strategy.
Violent extremists pose a direct threat to the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They undermine our collective efforts to maintain peace and security, foster sustainable development, promote the respect for human rights and deliver much needed humanitarian aid.
Today, terrorist groups control territory, resources and populations. They are fuelling protracted conflicts. They have blurred borders between sovereign States.
The spread of violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, has further aggravated an already unprecedented humanitarian crisis which transcends any one region.
Local populations are paying the highest price. Millions are fleeing their homes in horror and fear, in a desperate search for safety for their families.
This challenge is all the more imperative because of the growing threat that chemical, biological, radiological or even nuclear materials could be acquired and used by violent extremists. This is a clear and present danger and the UN is working to prevent such a complex emergency.
Violent extremism is clearly a transnational threat that requires urgent international cooperation.
The Plan of Action puts forward a comprehensive and balanced approach for concerted action at the global, regional and national levels. It is based on five inter-related points:
Number one, we must put prevention first.
Evidence shows that security and military responses alone cannot defeat this scourge. Sometimes such responses have proven to be counter-productive. For example, when efforts ignore the rule of law and violate fundamental rights, they not only betray the values they seek to uphold, but can also end up further fuelling violent extremism.
Policies that turn people against each another and alienate already marginalized groups play into the hands of the very violent extremists that we seek to counteract.
We need to engage earlier and address the drivers of violent extremism.
There is no single pathway, and no complex algorithm that can unlock the secrets of who turns to violent extremism. But we know that violent extremism flourishes when aspirations for inclusion are frustrated, marginalized groups linger on the sidelines of societies, political space shrinks, human rights are abused and when too many people – especially young people – lack prospects and meaning in their lives.
The Plan emphasizes conflict prevention, conflict resolution and political solutions that are based on listening and responding to the legitimate demands of people. Resolving long-standing conflicts – and giving hope to those enduring oppression -- will help eradicate the breeding ground of violent extremism, leading to terrorism.
The Plan urges full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, because fulfilment of these goals will address many of the socio-economic drivers of violent extremism.
The Plan highlights women’s empowerment and youth engagement, because we know that societies with higher equality and inclusion are less vulnerable to violent extremism.
Number two, national ownership.
The Plan offers a menu of recommendations for Member States to forge their own National Plans of Action based on national ownership.
These National Plans of Action should use an “all-of-government” approach and engage “all-of-society” to be effective. Preventing violent extremism also requires support from religious and community leaders, women’s leaders, heads of youth groups and leaders in the arts, music and sports, as well as the media and private sector.
We must break down the silos between the peace and security, sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian actors at the national, regional and global levels.
Number three, preventing violent extremism requires increased international cooperation.
No country or region alone can address the threat of violent extremism. We need a dynamic, coherent and multi-dimensional response from the entire international community.
I pledge to leverage the universal membership and the convening power of the UN to further strengthen international cooperation at the national, regional and global levels.
Number four, United Nations support.
Under the framework of Pillars I and IV of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the UN stands ready to share expertise among Member States and support them in addressing the drivers of violent extremism through an “all-of-UN” system-wide approach.
There is much that the UN is already doing to implement these Pillars at the global, regional and national levels.
While we look forward to hearing more from you here and during the review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy this June, we are also looking at ways we could effectively mainstream the concept of preventing violent extremism into the work of the UN with the support of Member States.
I plan to create a UN system-wide High-Level PVE Action Group to spearhead the implementation of the Plan at both the Headquarters and field levels, which will review these recommendations in June.
Number five, the Plan of Action is an urgent call to unity and action.
I also hope our discussions will galvanize unity for a strong consensus outcome in the General Assembly in June.
Preventing violent extremism has many dimensions, but there is nothing more urgent than the need to protect and empower our young women and men. They are victims twice over – they are lured into the ranks of violent extremists and deliberately attacked by them in parks, schools and universities.
We will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of 1.8 billion young people around the world.
They are looking to us to demonstrate vision, courage and leadership. I am appealing to you to show exactly that.
Let these virtues be our building blocks for a global partnership to prevent violent extremism.
I have no doubt that we will succeed if we are united in action.