

International Terrorism and ISIS

Hussain Al-Shahristani

17th Castiglioncello Conference, Italy, 22-24 Sept 2017

Good afternoon

It is a great pleasure to be here with you in this beautiful part of Italy to talk about terrorism and lessons we learnt in Iraq in combating it. But first, I would like to thank USPID for inviting me to participate in 17th Castiglioncello International Conference to talk to you on such an important topic that has become one of the most pressing issues of concern to the safety and security of our societies in the twenty-first century.

Terrorism in its current manifestations is no less a threat to the world security than nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction that Pugwash and USPID have endeavoured to eliminate. Only since the turn of this century, terrorism has claimed the lives of about a quarter-million innocent people and injured about 400 thousand more.

I will discuss our struggle in Iraq against terrorists who overrun large parts of the country and committed outrageous atrocities against its people. I also find it necessary to cover the ideological background that has led so many young people in the Muslim World and the Islamic

communities elsewhere to be attracted to such terrorist groups, and our collective responsibility to combat terrorism and free the world from it.

I will use the word Daesh to refer to the entity that calls itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant which is more commonly known as ISIS or ISIL, because calling it `Islamic` makes us unintentionally fall in the trap that the organization endeavors to divide the world into: Muslims and Non-Muslims entrenched against each other.

Three years ago, Daesh overrun significant territories in North-Eastern Syria and North-Western Iraq totaling about 100 thousand square kilometers. They managed to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters from as many as 120 countries around the world. Daesh spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani declared that their caliphate would, “remain and expand throughout the Middle East and into Europe”.

Over time, Daesh and its allied terrorist groups expanded to areas in Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, the Sahara region and East Asia. The organization also has sleeping cells in more than 50 countries in the world. It is a potent danger to many societies and in the last three years alone, Daesh, Al Qaeda and affiliated groups carried out 45

thousand attacks in 25 countries killing about 117 thousand innocent people, 30% of whom were Iraqis and 16% were Afghans.

When Iraq started its campaign to free the country from Daesh a year and a half ago, the terrorist group commanded about 15 thousand foreign fighters in Iraq from many countries, and almost 20 thousand of locals. Over their radios, terrorists were speaking French, English, Dutch, Russian, Pashtu and Arabic with non-Iraqi dialects.

In our combat against Daesh, we already liberated more than 90% of the area they occupied including major cities of Mosul, Ramadi, Tikrit, Falluja and Talafar with a total population of more than 4 million. Since liberation of these areas, nearly 2.2 million people who fled Daesh have returned to their homes. What remains are only two areas of Hawija and north-west of Anbar province. The battle to free these areas is under way as we meet and is expected to be swift and speedy as there are not many civilians remaining there.

In this campaign, Iraqi armed forces including the Popular Mobilization, Peshmerga and tribal volunteers managed so far to eliminate about 30 thousand terrorists, almost half of them were killed in the city of Mosul. These forces have fought one of the most difficult and intense urban battles since the World War II. Protection of the civilian population was top priority for the Iraqi forces, often at great risks to themselves; and

this was the reason why the battle for Mosul took almost seven months.

Where combating forces failed to strictly observe the engagement rules, the Iraqi Government announced that it would investigate all allegations. Nevertheless, there have been incidents where local residents whose family members have been executed by Daesh took revenge action against the terrorists' families. This is in contrast to what was propagated to the local population that they will face sectarian killings. In any case, the lesson to be learnt is that local police force should be trained and ready to move in to any area immediately after its liberation even before humanitarian aid arrives.

There remains about 3,000 terrorists in the areas mentioned earlier, and Iraq is determined to totally free all its territory before the end of this year.

To Iraqis, the human cost so far has been about 34 thousand civilians and about 11 thousand combatants. Most of them were killed in mass executions of captured soldiers in the initial wave of attack, and civilians who have resisted occupation of their towns or have tried to escape from Daesh controlled areas.

Despite these great losses, Iraqis would not stop fighting Daesh till every square meter of their homeland is freed. To highlight this

commitment, the elite counterterrorism force recently began a recruiting drive for 3,000 positions. They received almost 300,000 applicants.

Daesh cannot be totally eliminated in Iraq without a parallel effort in Syria since the area it occupies extends into that country. However, the situation in Syria is significantly different. There we witness a full-scale civil war that has created an opportunity for Daesh and Al Qaeda to control large areas of the country.

The campaign against Daesh and the Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front by the Syrian armed forces and its affiliated militants with Russian air support on the one hand and by Kurdish and Arab units of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with the support of Global Coalition on the other hand succeeded to dislodge them from about 70% of the area they occupied and intense fighting is in progress as we meet.

The de-escalating of confrontation between the regime forces and the opposition militants through ceasefires or other arrangements is necessary to focus all efforts on defeating these terrorist groups in Syria. Fortunately, this goal is now prioritized by all actors in Syria and their international backers.

However, the Syrian crisis would not be resolved without a political settlement between the regime and its political opponents. The longer

it takes for the parties to the conflict to sit together to reach peaceful solution to their political differences, the more blood would be shed to reach the same results.

It is also encouraging that all parties to the conflict agree on maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, and the right of the Syrian people to determine the future of their country by Syrian-led political settlement. Outside actors should encourage all parties to meet, discuss and agree on a road-map for peaceful settlement rather than arming them to prolong the civil war.

The defeat of Daesh and associated groups is in sight, but the military defeat by itself is not enough to eliminate the danger these terrorists pose to humanity at large. The decisive battle against them is ideological and the responsibility primarily lies on the Muslim World and the Muslim communities in the rest of the world. Allow me to elaborate this point.

The ideology adhered to by Daesh, Al Qaeda, Taliban and all Salafi militants is extreme interpretation of Islam that was advocated by Ibn Abdul Wahhab in Arabian Desert in the mid-18th century that denounced traditional Islamic practices and considered the majority of Muslims as infidels and rejected the traditional diversity and pluralism of Islam.

The spread of Wahabism in the last four decades in some Muslim countries and among Muslim immigrant communities in the West was funded by petrodollars to gain political influence. Much of the discrete support for these terrorist groups has surfaced now that some of those countries got engaged in political confrontation and exposed each other's role. On the bright side, this is an opportunity for all to reconsider their plans to use terrorist groups to achieve political gains, and to realize that these groups pose as much danger to their own security and stability as to the others.

To understand the causes of Jihadi terrorism and why so many young people in the Muslim countries and from the Muslim communities elsewhere are attracted to it, we should look into the root causes, and what can be done collectively to face this challenge to our humanity.

There is a combination of various factors that give rise to radicalism, violence or terrorism among the youth in particular. These include political, economic and social grievances and teaching extremism in the name of religion.

Political exclusion, perceived injustice, unfair distribution of national wealth and lack of social cohesion collectively build high levels of resentment in marginalized populations, especially among the deprived youth and the unemployed poor. Absence of effective platforms for

these resentments to be expressed and grievances to be addressed leads to a build-up of feeling of injustice, and such communities become fertile ground for recruitment of terrorists.

One should also not overlook the historical, ethnic and sectarian divisions among Muslim nations in many countries. These differences have recently been stirred up for political expediency, and sectarian divisions have been cultivated by some actors in the Middle East to redirect attention from their own political and social problems.

Having discussed the threat terrorism presents to humanity, let us ponder what our joint responsibility to face this challenge is.

The world should realize that Daesh and its comrades of all shades of Salafi Jihadists are a real threat to all, and not just brutal terrorist groups in some parts of the world. No country should wait until one of its cities is attacked and its citizens are murdered to comprehend the seriousness of this threat.

It is not sufficient to draw local or even national plans to deal with them. These terrorist groups should be fought at the global, regional, national and local levels not only in Iraq and Syria or in Libya or Afghanistan but in all the one hundred and twenty countries where new jihadis are recruited.

Muslims themselves should be at the forefront in combating jihadis that terrorize the world in the name of their religion. The responsibility to drain the recruitment grounds lies primarily with the Muslims themselves. Muslim scholars are called upon to rethink, reform, and reinterpret certain medieval texts about jihad. For that purpose, the scholars and Muslims in general must irrevocably condemn any act of terrorism under any banner and for any cause. Patriotic struggle for just causes does not require terrorist acts.

Schools, mosques and religious centers in the Muslim countries and within Muslim communities in the rest of the world that preach extremist ideologies are fertile grounds of recruitment of would be jihadis. These should be carefully monitored and held accountable for breeding terrorists that threaten security of their societies and the world at large. Freedom of belief should not be allowed to be used as pretext for advocating extremism that leads to terrorism.

More attention should be paid to address the causes that attract young people to such terrorist groups. Engagement of marginalized and frustrated communities by developing national policies to absorb them in the larger community and addressing the issues that agitate them is absolutely essential to deprive the terrorist from recruiting new volunteers.

In Iraq, a hard lesson has been learnt that without the full participation of all the ethnic and religious communities in the political system and addressing the grievances of these communities, whether these grievances are factual or perceived, is cornerstone to a national reconciliation program that allows all citizens to feel free, protected and equal.

Turning blind eye to massacres of minorities such as the Rohingya would leave them with no option but to take up arms and allow terrorists to hijack their just cause and grievances to promote their own agendas.

Civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen are great attraction grounds for terrorists. Speedy resolutions of these conflicts through peaceful settlement among the warring parties that allow the people of these countries to determine their future and choose the political system that serve them best is necessary not only to protect the civilian population, but also to deprive terrorist safe havens for recruitment and training.

A more urgent need that the international community should pay attention to, is the paramount importance of rebuilding the liberated areas when terrorists are cleared, and helping the traumatized populations in those areas. Such reconstruction programs, in addition to providing the basic human needs to encourage people to return to

their homes and rebuild their lives, would create jobs for the unemployed youth who otherwise could be attracted to such terrorist groups out of desperation.

The cost of reconstruction and rehabilitation of victim communities are enormous. Only in Iraq, the material destruction inflicted by Daesh is estimated at \$35 billion, excluding the damage to the archeological sites that is priceless. However, the immediate and urgent need is to restore the basic water, power, medical and educational infrastructures. The UN outlined an appeal of \$1.3 billion for post-ISIS humanitarian and stabilization requirements. This is a small cost compared to the human costs and the resources that have been dedicated to combat terrorism.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that terrorism has become a major threat to security and order in the 21st century, and it demands a more collective response. No state on its own can deal with transnational terrorism, and without international coordination, it is not possible for any country to protect its citizens from terrorism.

The most effective tool to defeat terrorism is to resolve military conflicts peacefully, particularly in Syria, Libya and Yemen, tackle poverty in the world, and work together to lift up communities that

suffer from social exclusion or economic deprivation, and make the world more just and endurable for all its inhabitants.

Thank you.