

Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly

United Nations
New York, New York

10:10 A.M. EDT

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen: Each year we come together to reaffirm the founding vision of this institution. For most of recorded history, individual aspirations were subject to the whims of tyrants and empires. Divisions of race and religion and tribe were settled through the sword and the clash of armies. The idea that nations and peoples could come together in peace to solve their disputes and advance a common prosperity seemed unimaginable.

It took the awful carnage of two world wars to shift our thinking. The leaders who built the United Nations were not naïve; they did not think this body could eradicate all wars. But in the wake of millions dead and continents in rubble, and with the development of nuclear weapons that could annihilate a planet, they understood that humanity could not survive the course it was on. And so they gave us this institution, believing that it could allow us to resolve conflicts, enforce rules of behavior, and build habits of cooperation that would grow stronger over time.

For decades, the United Nations has in fact made a difference -- from helping to eradicate disease, to educating children, to brokering peace. But like every generation of leaders, we face new and profound challenges, and this body continues to be tested. The question is whether we possess the wisdom and the courage, as nation-states and members of an international community, to squarely meet those challenges; whether the United Nations can meet the tests of our time.

For much of my tenure as President, some of our most urgent challenges have revolved around an increasingly integrated global economy, and our efforts to recover from the worst economic crisis of our lifetime. Now, five years after the global economy collapsed, and thanks to coordinated efforts by the countries here today, jobs are being created, global financial systems have stabilized, and people are once again being lifted out of poverty. But this progress is fragile and unequal, and we still have work to do together to assure that our citizens can access the opportunities that they need to thrive in the 21st century.

Together, we've also worked to end a decade of war. Five years ago, nearly 180,000 Americans were serving in harm's way, and the war in Iraq was the dominant issue in our relationship with the rest of the world. Today, all of our troops have left Iraq. Next year,

an international coalition will end its war in Afghanistan, having achieved its mission of dismantling the core of al Qaeda that attacked us on 9/11.

For the United States, these new circumstances have also meant shifting away from a perpetual war footing. Beyond bringing our troops home, we have limited the use of drones so they target only those who pose a continuing, imminent threat to the United States where capture is not feasible, and there is a near certainty of no civilian casualties. We're transferring detainees to other countries and trying terrorists in courts of law, while working diligently to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. And just as we reviewed how we deploy our extraordinary military capabilities in a way that lives up to our ideals, we've begun to review the way that we gather intelligence, so that we properly balance the legitimate security concerns of our citizens and allies with the privacy concerns that all people share.

As a result of this work, and cooperation with allies and partners, the world is more stable than it was five years ago. But even a glance at today's headlines indicates that dangers remain. In Kenya, we've seen terrorists target innocent civilians in a crowded shopping mall, and our hearts go out to the families of those who have been affected. In Pakistan, nearly 100 people were recently killed by suicide bombers outside a church. In Iraq, killings and car bombs continue to be a terrible part of life. And meanwhile, al Qaeda has splintered into regional networks and militias, which doesn't give them the capacity at this point to carry out attacks like 9/11, but does pose serious threats to governments and diplomats, businesses and civilians all across the globe.

Just as significantly, the convulsions in the Middle East and North Africa have laid bare deep divisions within societies, as an old order is upended and people grapple with what comes next. Peaceful movements have too often been answered by violence -- from those resisting change and from extremists trying to hijack change. Sectarian conflict has reemerged. And the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction continues to cast a shadow over the pursuit of peace.

Nowhere have we seen these trends converge more powerfully than in Syria. There, peaceful protests against an authoritarian regime were met with repression and slaughter. In the face of such carnage, many retreated to their sectarian identity -- Alawite and Sunni; Christian and Kurd -- and the situation spiraled into civil war.

The international community recognized the stakes early on, but our response has not matched the scale of the challenge. Aid cannot keep pace with the suffering of the wounded and displaced. A peace process is stillborn. America and others have worked to bolster the moderate opposition, but extremist groups have still taken root to exploit the crisis. Assad's traditional allies have propped him up, citing principles of sovereignty to shield his regime. And on August 21st, the regime used chemical weapons in an attack that killed more than 1,000 people, including hundreds of children.

Now, the crisis in Syria, and the destabilization of the region, goes to the heart of broader challenges that the international community must now confront. How should we respond

to conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa -- conflicts between countries, but also conflicts within them? How do we address the choice of standing callously by while children are subjected to nerve gas, or embroiling ourselves in someone else's civil war? What is the role of force in resolving disputes that threaten the stability of the region and undermine all basic standards of civilized conduct? What is the role of the United Nations and international law in meeting cries for justice?

Today, I want to outline where the United States of America stands on these issues. With respect to Syria, we believe that as a starting point, the international community must enforce the ban on chemical weapons. When I stated my willingness to order a limited strike against the Assad regime in response to the brazen use of chemical weapons, I did not do so lightly. I did so because I believe it is in the security interest of the United States and in the interest of the world to meaningfully enforce a prohibition whose origins are older than the United Nations itself. The ban against the use of chemical weapons, even in war, has been agreed to by 98 percent of humanity. It is strengthened by the searing memories of soldiers suffocating in the trenches; Jews slaughtered in gas chambers; Iranians poisoned in the many tens of thousands.

The evidence is overwhelming that the Assad regime used such weapons on August 21st. U.N. inspectors gave a clear accounting that advanced rockets fired large quantities of sarin gas at civilians. These rockets were fired from a regime-controlled neighborhood, and landed in opposition neighborhoods. It's an insult to human reason -- and to the legitimacy of this institution -- to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack.

Now, I know that in the immediate aftermath of the attack there were those who questioned the legitimacy of even a limited strike in the absence of a clear mandate from the Security Council. But without a credible military threat, the Security Council had demonstrated no inclination to act at all. However, as I've discussed with President Putin for over a year, most recently in St. Petersburg, my preference has always been a diplomatic resolution to this issue. And in the past several weeks, the United States, Russia and our allies have reached an agreement to place Syria's chemical weapons under international control, and then to destroy them.

The Syrian government took a first step by giving an accounting of its stockpiles. Now there must be a strong Security Council resolution to verify that the Assad regime is keeping its commitments, and there must be consequences if they fail to do so. If we cannot agree even on this, then it will show that the United Nations is incapable of enforcing the most basic of international laws. On the other hand, if we succeed, it will send a powerful message that the use of chemical weapons has no place in the 21st century, and that this body means what it says.

Agreement on chemical weapons should energize a larger diplomatic effort to reach a political settlement within Syria. I do not believe that military action -- by those within Syria, or by external powers -- can achieve a lasting peace. Nor do I believe that America or any nation should determine who will lead Syria; that is for the Syrian people

to decide. Nevertheless, a leader who slaughtered his citizens and gassed children to death cannot regain the legitimacy to lead a badly fractured country. The notion that Syria can somehow return to a pre-war status quo is a fantasy.

It's time for Russia and Iran to realize that insisting on Assad's rule will lead directly to the outcome that they fear: an increasingly violent space for extremists to operate. In turn, those of us who continue to support the moderate opposition must persuade them that the Syrian people cannot afford a collapse of state institutions, and that a political settlement cannot be reached without addressing the legitimate fears and concerns of Alawites and other minorities.

We are committed to working this political track. And as we pursue a settlement, let's remember this is not a zero-sum endeavor. We're no longer in a Cold War. There's no Great Game to be won, nor does America have any interest in Syria beyond the wellbeing of its people, the stability of its neighbors, the elimination of chemical weapons, and ensuring that it does not become a safe haven for terrorists.

I welcome the influence of all nations that can help bring about a peaceful resolution of Syria's civil war. And as we move the Geneva process forward, I urge all nations here to step up to meet humanitarian needs in Syria and surrounding countries. America has committed over a billion dollars to this effort, and today I can announce that we will be providing an additional \$340 million. No aid can take the place of a political resolution that gives the Syrian people the chance to rebuild their country, but it can help desperate people to survive.

What broader conclusions can be drawn from America's policy toward Syria? I know there are those who have been frustrated by our unwillingness to use our military might to depose Assad, and believe that a failure to do so indicates a weakening of American resolve in the region. Others have suggested that my willingness to direct even limited military strikes to deter the further use of chemical weapons shows we've learned nothing from Iraq, and that America continues to seek control over the Middle East for our own purposes. In this way, the situation in Syria mirrors a contradiction that has persisted in the region for decades: the United States is chastised for meddling in the region, accused of having a hand in all manner of conspiracy; at the same time, the United States is blamed for failing to do enough to solve the region's problems and for showing indifference toward suffering Muslim populations.

I realize some of this is inevitable, given America's role in the world. But these contradictory attitudes have a practical impact on the American people's support for our involvement in the region, and allow leaders in the region -- as well as the international community sometimes -- to avoid addressing difficult problems themselves.

So let me take this opportunity to outline what has been U.S. policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, and what will be my policy during the remainder of my presidency.

The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region.

We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War.

We will ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world. Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends on the region's energy supply, and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy.

We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. Wherever possible, we will build the capacity of our partners, respect the sovereignty of nations, and work to address the root causes of terror. But when it's necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attack, we will take direct action.

And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction. Just as we consider the use of chemical weapons in Syria to be a threat to our own national security, we reject the development of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, and undermine the global nonproliferation regime.

Now, to say that these are America's core interests is not to say that they are our only interests. We deeply believe it is in our interests to see a Middle East and North Africa that is peaceful and prosperous, and will continue to promote democracy and human rights and open markets, because we believe these practices achieve peace and prosperity. But I also believe that we can rarely achieve these objectives through unilateral American action, particularly through military action. Iraq shows us that democracy cannot simply be imposed by force. Rather, these objectives are best achieved when we partner with the international community and with the countries and peoples of the region.

So what does this mean going forward? In the near term, America's diplomatic efforts will focus on two particular issues: Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. While these issues are not the cause of all the region's problems, they have been a major source of instability for far too long, and resolving them can help serve as a foundation for a broader peace.

The United States and Iran have been isolated from one another since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This mistrust has deep roots. Iranians have long complained of a history of U.S. interference in their affairs and of America's role in overthrowing an Iranian government during the Cold War. On the other hand, Americans see an Iranian government that has declared the United States an enemy and directly -- or through proxies -- taken American hostages, killed U.S. troops and civilians, and threatened our ally Israel with destruction.

I don't believe this difficult history can be overcome overnight -- the suspicions run too deep. But I do believe that if we can resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear program, that can serve as a major step down a long road towards a different relationship, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

Since I took office, I've made it clear in letters to the Supreme Leader in Iran and more recently to President Rouhani that America prefers to resolve our concerns over Iran's nuclear program peacefully, although we are determined to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. We are not seeking regime change and we respect the right of the Iranian people to access peaceful nuclear energy. Instead, we insist that the Iranian government meet its responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader has issued a fatwa against the development of nuclear weapons, and President Rouhani has just recently reiterated that the Islamic Republic will never develop a nuclear weapon.

So these statements made by our respective governments should offer the basis for a meaningful agreement. We should be able to achieve a resolution that respects the rights of the Iranian people, while giving the world confidence that the Iranian program is peaceful. But to succeed, conciliatory words will have to be matched by actions that are transparent and verifiable. After all, it's the Iranian government's choices that have led to the comprehensive sanctions that are currently in place. And this is not simply an issue between the United States and Iran. The world has seen Iran evade its responsibilities in the past and has an abiding interest in making sure that Iran meets its obligations in the future.

But I want to be clear we are encouraged that President Rouhani received from the Iranian people a mandate to pursue a more moderate course. And given President Rouhani's stated commitment to reach an agreement, I am directing John Kerry to pursue this effort with the Iranian government in close cooperation with the European Union -- the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China.

The roadblocks may prove to be too great, but I firmly believe the diplomatic path must be tested. For while the status quo will only deepen Iran's isolation, Iran's genuine commitment to go down a different path will be good for the region and the world, and will help the Iranian people meet their extraordinary potential -- in commerce and culture; in science and education.

We are also determined to resolve a conflict that goes back even further than our differences with Iran, and that is the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. I've made it clear that the United States will never compromise our commitment to Israel's security, nor our support for its existence as a Jewish state. Earlier this year, in Jerusalem, I was inspired by young Israelis who stood up for the belief that peace was necessary, just, and possible. And I believe there's a growing recognition within Israel that the occupation of the West Bank is tearing at the democratic fabric of the Jewish state. But the children of

Israel have the right to live in a world where the nations assembled in this body fully recognize their country, and where we unequivocally reject those who fire rockets at their homes or incite others to hate them.

Likewise, the United States remains committed to the belief that the Palestinian people have a right to live with security and dignity in their own sovereign state. On the same trip, I had the opportunity to meet with young Palestinians in Ramallah whose ambition and incredible potential are matched by the pain they feel in having no firm place in the community of nations. They are understandably cynical that real progress will ever be made, and they're frustrated by their families enduring the daily indignity of occupation. But they too recognize that two states is the only real path to peace -- because just as the Palestinian people must not be displaced, the state of Israel is here to stay.

So the time is now ripe for the entire international community to get behind the pursuit of peace. Already, Israeli and Palestinian leaders have demonstrated a willingness to take significant political risks. President Abbas has put aside efforts to short-cut the pursuit of peace and come to the negotiating table. Prime Minister Netanyahu has released Palestinian prisoners and reaffirmed his commitment to a Palestinian state. Current talks are focused on final status issues of borders and security, refugees and Jerusalem.

So now the rest of us must be willing to take risks as well. Friends of Israel, including the United States, must recognize that Israel's security as a Jewish and democratic state depends upon the realization of a Palestinian state, and we should say so clearly. Arab states, and those who supported the Palestinians, must recognize that stability will only be served through a two-state solution and a secure Israel.

All of us must recognize that peace will be a powerful tool to defeat extremists throughout the region, and embolden those who are prepared to build a better future. And moreover, ties of trade and commerce between Israelis and Arabs could be an engine of growth and opportunity at a time when too many young people in the region are languishing without work. So let's emerge from the familiar corners of blame and prejudice. Let's support Israeli and Palestinian leaders who are prepared to walk the difficult road to peace.

Real breakthroughs on these two issues -- Iran's nuclear program, and Israeli-Palestinian peace -- would have a profound and positive impact on the entire Middle East and North Africa. But the current convulsions arising out of the Arab Spring remind us that a just and lasting peace cannot be measured only by agreements between nations. It must also be measured by our ability to resolve conflict and promote justice within nations. And by that measure, it's clear that all of us have a lot more work to do.

When peaceful transitions began in Tunisia and Egypt, the entire world was filled with hope. And although the United States -- like others -- was struck by the speed of transition, and although we did not -- and in fact could not -- dictate events, we chose to support those who called for change. And we did so based on the belief that while these transitions will be hard and take time, societies based upon democracy and openness and

the dignity of the individual will ultimately be more stable, more prosperous, and more peaceful.

Over the last few years, particularly in Egypt, we've seen just how hard this transition will be. Mohamed Morsi was democratically elected, but proved unwilling or unable to govern in a way that was fully inclusive. The interim government that replaced him responded to the desires of millions of Egyptians who believed the revolution had taken a wrong turn, but it, too, has made decisions inconsistent with inclusive democracy -- through an emergency law, and restrictions on the press and civil society and opposition parties.

Of course, America has been attacked by all sides of this internal conflict, simultaneously accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and engineering their removal of power. In fact, the United States has purposely avoided choosing sides. Our overriding interest throughout these past few years has been to encourage a government that legitimately reflects the will of the Egyptian people, and recognizes true democracy as requiring a respect for minority rights and the rule of law, freedom of speech and assembly, and a strong civil society.

That remains our interest today. And so, going forward, the United States will maintain a constructive relationship with the interim government that promotes core interests like the Camp David Accords and counterterrorism. We'll continue support in areas like education that directly benefit the Egyptian people. But we have not proceeded with the delivery of certain military systems, and our support will depend upon Egypt's progress in pursuing a more democratic path.

And our approach to Egypt reflects a larger point: The United States will at times work with governments that do not meet, at least in our view, the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests. Nevertheless, we will not stop asserting principles that are consistent with our ideals, whether that means opposing the use of violence as a means of suppressing dissent, or supporting the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We will reject the notion that these principles are simply Western exports, incompatible with Islam or the Arab World. We believe they are the birthright of every person. And while we recognize that our influence will at times be limited, although we will be wary of efforts to impose democracy through military force, and although we will at times be accused of hypocrisy and inconsistency, we will be engaged in the region for the long haul. For the hard work of forging freedom and democracy is the task of a generation.

And this includes efforts to resolve sectarian tensions that continue to surface in places like Iraq, Bahrain and Syria. We understand such longstanding issues cannot be solved by outsiders; they must be addressed by Muslim communities themselves. But we've seen grinding conflicts come to an end before -- most recently in Northern Ireland, where Catholics and Protestants finally recognized that an endless cycle of conflict was causing

both communities to fall behind a fast-moving world. And so we believe those same sectarian conflicts can be overcome in the Middle East and North Africa.

To summarize, the United States has a hard-earned humility when it comes to our ability to determine events inside other countries. The notion of American empire may be useful propaganda, but it isn't borne out by America's current policy or by public opinion. Indeed, as recent debates within the United States over Syria clearly show, the danger for the world is not an America that is too eager to immerse itself in the affairs of other countries or to take on every problem in the region as its own. The danger for the world is that the United States, after a decade of war -- rightly concerned about issues back home, aware of the hostility that our engagement in the region has engendered throughout the Muslim world -- may disengage, creating a vacuum of leadership that no other nation is ready to fill.

I believe such disengagement would be a mistake. I believe America must remain engaged for our own security. But I also believe the world is better for it. Some may disagree, but I believe America is exceptional -- in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all.

I must be honest, though. We're far more likely to invest our energy in those countries that want to work with us, that invest in their people instead of a corrupt few; that embrace a vision of society where everyone can contribute -- men and women, Shia or Sunni, Muslim, Christian or Jew. Because from Europe to Asia, from Africa to the Americas, nations that have persevered on a democratic path have emerged more prosperous, more peaceful, and more invested in upholding our common security and our common humanity. And I believe that the same will hold true for the Arab world.

This leads me to a final point. There will be times when the breakdown of societies is so great, the violence against civilians so substantial that the international community will be called upon to act. This will require new thinking and some very tough choices. While the United Nations was designed to prevent wars between states, increasingly we face the challenge of preventing slaughter within states. And these challenges will grow more pronounced as we are confronted with states that are fragile or failing -- places where horrendous violence can put innocent men, women and children at risk, with no hope of protection from their national institutions.

I have made it clear that even when America's core interests are not directly threatened, we stand ready to do our part to prevent mass atrocities and protect basic human rights. But we cannot and should not bear that burden alone. In Mali, we supported both the French intervention that successfully pushed back al Qaeda, and the African forces who are keeping the peace. In Eastern Africa, we are working with partners to bring the Lord's Resistance Army to an end. And in Libya, when the Security Council provided a mandate to protect civilians, America joined a coalition that took action. Because of what we did there, countless lives were saved, and a tyrant could not kill his way back to power.

I know that some now criticize the action in Libya as an object lesson. They point to the problems that the country now confronts -- a democratically elected government struggling to provide security; armed groups, in some places extremists, ruling parts of a fractured land. And so these critics argue that any intervention to protect civilians is doomed to fail -- look at Libya. No one is more mindful of these problems than I am, for they resulted in the death of four outstanding U.S. citizens who were committed to the Libyan people, including Ambassador Chris Stevens -- a man whose courageous efforts helped save the city of Benghazi. But does anyone truly believe that the situation in Libya would be better if Qaddafi had been allowed to kill, imprison, or brutalize his people into submission? It's far more likely that without international action, Libya would now be engulfed in civil war and bloodshed.

We live in a world of imperfect choices. Different nations will not agree on the need for action in every instance, and the principle of sovereignty is at the center of our international order. But sovereignty cannot be a shield for tyrants to commit wanton murder, or an excuse for the international community to turn a blind eye. While we need to be modest in our belief that we can remedy every evil, while we need to be mindful that the world is full of unintended consequences, should we really accept the notion that the world is powerless in the face of a Rwanda or Srebrenica? If that's the world that people want to live in, they should say so and reckon with the cold logic of mass graves.

But I believe we can embrace a different future. And if we don't want to choose between inaction and war, we must get better -- all of us -- at the policies that prevent the breakdown of basic order. Through respect for the responsibilities of nations and the rights of individuals. Through meaningful sanctions for those who break the rules. Through dogged diplomacy that resolves the root causes of conflict, not merely its aftermath. Through development assistance that brings hope to the marginalized. And yes, sometimes -- although this will not be enough -- there are going to be moments where the international community will need to acknowledge that the multilateral use of military force may be required to prevent the very worst from occurring.

Ultimately, this is the international community that America seeks -- one where nations do not covet the land or resources of other nations, but one in which we carry out the founding purpose of this institution and where we all take responsibility. A world in which the rules established out of the horrors of war can help us resolve conflicts peacefully, and prevent the kinds of wars that our forefathers fought. A world where human beings can live with dignity and meet their basic needs, whether they live in New York or Nairobi; in Peshawar or Damascus.

These are extraordinary times, with extraordinary opportunities. Thanks to human progress, a child born anywhere on Earth today can do things today that 60 years ago would have been out of reach for the mass of humanity. I saw this in Africa, where nations moving beyond conflict are now poised to take off. And America is with them, partnering to feed the hungry and care for the sick, and to bring power to places off the grid.

I see it across the Pacific region, where hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty in a single generation. I see it in the faces of young people everywhere who can access the entire world with the click of a button, and who are eager to join the cause of eradicating extreme poverty, and combating climate change, starting businesses, expanding freedom, and leaving behind the old ideological battles of the past. That's what's happening in Asia and Africa. It's happening in Europe and across the Americas. That's the future that the people of the Middle East and North Africa deserve as well -- one where they can focus on opportunity, instead of whether they'll be killed or repressed because of who they are or what they believe.

Time and again, nations and people have shown our capacity to change -- to live up to humanity's highest ideals, to choose our better history. Last month, I stood where 50 years ago Martin Luther King Jr. told America about his dream, at a time when many people of my race could not even vote for President. Earlier this year, I stood in the small cell where Nelson Mandela endured decades cut off from his own people and the world. Who are we to believe that today's challenges cannot be overcome, when we have seen what changes the human spirit can bring? Who in this hall can argue that the future belongs to those who seek to repress that spirit, rather than those who seek to liberate it?

I know what side of history I want to the United States of America to be on. We're ready to meet tomorrow's challenges with you -- firm in the belief that all men and women are in fact created equal, each individual possessed with a dignity and inalienable rights that cannot be denied. That is why we look to the future not with fear, but with hope. And that's why we remain convinced that this community of nations can deliver a more peaceful, prosperous and just world to the next generation.

Thank you very much.