

September 24, 2015
The Honorable Barack Obama
White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

We welcome your continuing leadership in advancing multilateral efforts to counter the threat of violent extremism, notably your hosting of a Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly in New York on September 29.

We were pleased to attend the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism held at the State Department on February 19, 2015. In your remarks there, you set out an agenda for governments that underscored the “undeniable” link between oppression and denial of human rights and the rise of violent extremism. You stressed the obligations of states to protect the basic rights and freedoms of people in order to achieve “lasting stability and real security.”

Since February your administration has continued to build the case for more comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism. American officials have used the various regional follow-up meetings on the CVE process to stress the vital point that while military, intelligence, and security tools are essential to the fight against violent extremism, they are not sufficient to the task; a more comprehensive strategy is badly needed. Nonetheless, a narrow military - security approach has contributed to radicalization and expansion of terrorist violence in several Arab countries during the last year. We urge you to press for firm commitments from governments taking part in the Leaders' Summit to implement policies that address the root causes of terrorism and violent extremism.

Such a comprehensive approach will require governments to adopt policies that reflect the reality that promoting good governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights are not constraints but essential tools in countering violent extremism. To effectively combat violent extremism all governments must tackle social and economic marginalization, implement human rights protections for all their people, and stamp out the spread of extremist ideologies that incite hatred and violence.

At the Leaders' Summit next week, we urge you highlight the following points:

- National counterterrorism measures that are not rooted in respect for human rights risk being counterproductive. When governments stifle peaceful dissent, muzzle the media, and prevent the legitimate activities of non-violent civil society organizations, they are not countering extremism; they are fomenting it.
- Respect for religious freedom is an essential part of CVE strategy. The extremist discourse of some governmental religious institutions is part of the problem; independence and de-politicization of those institutions is an essential part of the solution. A comprehensive CVE strategy must address the religious and ideological narratives that lure the vulnerable and disenfranchised segments of society to violent extremism. To be effective as counterweights to extremist discourse, religious institutions must be—and be seen to be—independent of political control, and governments must ensure that diverse religious views are tolerated.
- Closing space for civil society and peaceful political activities facilitates the expansion of violent extremism and terrorism. Conversely, respecting fundamental freedoms, especially the freedom of assembly and association, is one of the most important defense mechanisms against violent extremism. Crackdowns on political dissent and diminishing space for political freedom reinforces extremist narratives and directly contributes to the radicalization of youths.

The armed conflicts that are taking place in the Middle East and elsewhere are serving as a breeding ground for violent extremism. We believe that the United States, because of its unique reach and influence, has an inescapable responsibility to lead and energize multilateral efforts through the United Nations to end these devastating conflicts. The absence of effective conflict-resolution mechanisms, on both national and international levels, is one of the greatest challenges to the execution of a comprehensive CVE strategy. We urge you to take serious steps to bring an end to the armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya and to ensure that the post-conflict phases are built on inclusive peace processes that uphold the values of democracy and plurality.

Finally, we are concerned by the remaining gap between the positive rhetoric on a more holistic approach to combating violent extremism that we hear at international meetings and the counterproductive practices of too many states that use the need to combat terrorism as a pretext to deny basic rights and freedoms. We urge you to support the empowering of independent UN monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, as well as similar mechanisms at the regional levels, so that states are held to account for their practices and cannot just pay lip-service to best practices, while failing to implement them.

If the multilateral CVE process is to result in much-needed lasting changes in the way states address the threat of violent extremism, and if more effective preventive policies are to be implemented, then the United States must sustain its engagement in providing leadership to a more comprehensive multilateral CVE strategy and, just as importantly, implement the principles of that strategy in each of its bi-lateral relationships, particularly with states facing challenges from the threat of terrorism that also engage in systematic violations of human rights. It is no accident that these two conditions often coincide.

We look forward to hearing you deliver these messages on September 29 and to seeing these policies implemented in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,



Elisa Massimino, President/CEO
Human Rights First



Bahey eldin Hassan, Director
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)