

“A Positive Agenda for the Middle East”

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Prepared Opening Remarks

Thank you, John, for the opportunity to kick off this new forum. The work of CSIS is as important as ever in a more complicated and dangerous world.

I had scheduled this speech last week to coincide with the annual Joint Military Dialogue between the UAE and the US. We had expected more than 25 senior UAE military officers to be with us.

Over the course of several days, officials from both of our armed forces engaged in discussions around shared challenges and threats. This ongoing collaboration is a testament to the strong security partnership between our two countries in fighting extremism and aggression.

The UAE takes our responsibility to stand with our allies very seriously. And we are proud to be the only Arab country to have participated in six military coalitions alongside the US over the last 25 years. For more than 12 years, we fought with your soldiers in Afghanistan. We were also with you in Kosovo, Somalia, and Libya.

We host more than 4,000 US personnel at Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi. And Jebel Ali port in Dubai is the most frequent port of call for the Navy outside of America.

Years of close cooperation with the US have helped strengthen the UAE military into a potent force in its own right. The very first air strike on ISIS in Syria was carried out by a woman Emirati fighter pilot. We are on the ground in Somalia taking the fight to Al Shabab and other militants. And we are deployed in Yemen to help restore the legitimate government and to confront Iranian interference in the Arabian Peninsula.

And let me be clear about what we are fighting for. The UAE is the promise of a new Middle East – a safe haven of stability, opportunity, and tolerance in the most difficult of neighborhoods. The character of our people and of our leadership is deeply rooted in unity at home, compassion for others, and openness in minds, markets, and faith. We are 1 million Emiratis and 8 million foreign nationals representing virtually every country on earth, living and working together peacefully in the region’s strongest economy.

Like America, we are also an unfinished story. We see the next phase of our progress anchored in a revival of the region. You see, we in the UAE entirely reject the notion that we are doomed to perpetual conflict in the Middle East. We believe there is enough room – in geography, theology, and economy – for everyone.

But first, like-minded people and countries such as the UAE and the US must meet the immediate challenge of extremism and aggression in the region. ISIS is today's most pressing danger and it must be destroyed. But there is also the continuing concern of the Islamic Republic of Iran – and whether it contributes to a new peaceful regional order or continues its aggressive regional behavior.

Let me begin by talking about the fight against ISIS and Islamic extremism. In our view, ISIS represents an existential threat to the region. It is a creeping cancer that weakens states, increases sectarian tensions, and has been directly responsible for the death, casualties, and displacement of millions of people – most of them Muslims.

We are experiencing a wave of ISIS-directed and inspired violent extremism that is rocking the Middle East and reaching deep into Europe, America, and Asia. We have seen the murderous spread of ISIS – from a concert hall in Paris to a social service center in San Bernardino, in Mali and Egypt, Beirut and Baghdad, and most recently in Jakarta and Istanbul.

In this fight, some may suggest that Arab countries are not doing their part. But the hard work and sacrifice of the UAE's men and women in uniform proves otherwise. The UAE has been in this fight for years. We are in it today. And we are prepared to do more.

On another front against the extremists, we are choking off the oxygen they need to survive.

We have taken forceful action to block the flow of funds and foreign fighters.

We're also addressing the problem at the root level – engaging with young people before they can be radicalized and protecting Islam itself from being hijacked by extremists.

To that end, the UAE has taken the lead in setting up the Hedayah Center in Abu Dhabi. Hedayah equips communities and governments with the tools to counter violent extremism and terrorist recruitment. Their experts have trained Afghan imams, worked in Pakistani schools, and assisted Nigerian officials to develop community-based counter-radicalization programs.

Another new initiative is the Sawab Center, established by the UAE and the US in July. The word Sawab in Arabic signifies “doing the right thing” or being on the “right path.”

Emirati and American experts at Sawab work side by side to counter extremist propaganda on social media, in both Arabic and English. One recent Sawab campaign highlighted the brutal stories of ISIS defectors. Another provided first-hand stories of women and girls who had escaped from the self-described Caliphate.

Let's be clear. ISIS is not Islam. And the war against ISIS is not a war against Islam. On the contrary, it is a battle to save Islam from a death cult that is hijacking an entire religion to sell an ideology of hate and murder.

And in this struggle of ideas, it must be Muslims who lead. That's why we, as proud Muslims, are committed to charting an alternative way forward. Muslim countries, led by Saudi Arabia, have formed a new coalition to coordinate across all areas of counter-extremism. ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

was clearly paying attention – calling this new initiative “falsely Islamic” and referring to the Saudi leadership as “apostate tyrants.” The overwhelming opposition to ISIS in the Muslim world leaves no doubt as to who is hijacking our religion.

Defeating their ideology will take more than force alone. This brings us to the third – and most enduring – front in the fight. To win, it is not enough to only describe what we are against. We must also define what we are for.

The UAE is taking the lead to offer a new vision for young Muslims and the region – an alternative ideology, unafraid of modernity, and looking to the future. It’s a path guided by a phrase repeated by Muslims all around the world: “In the name of God, the most merciful and most compassionate.” Respect, inclusion, peace – these are the true tenets of Islam. Ours is an Islam that empowers women, embraces others, encourages innovation, and welcomes global engagement.

When the world’s attention was focused on the aftermath of the Paris attacks, it went largely unnoticed that Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi became president of the UAE’s Federal National Council, making her the first woman in the region to lead a national assembly.

Also little noticed was the November meeting of the Muslim Council of Elders. Established and supported by Emirati leaders, the Council is an international body of Islam’s most prominent, forward-thinking scholars that is giving greater voice to moderate Islam. It is modernizing the way Islam is taught in schools, developing new training programs for imams, and updating Quranic commentaries.

Reflecting this commitment to openness and tolerance, the UAE is building a knowledge economy anchored by world-class academic institutions. Launched just five years ago, New York University Abu Dhabi is bringing together the brightest students from around the world. From 400 graduates to date, NYU Abu Dhabi has already produced six Rhodes scholars. I’m not a betting man, but I’m pretty sure that none of these 400 will be joining ISIS.

We are also building an economic engine for the entire region, a place where the free flow of goods, services, people, investment, and ideas lifts the entire Middle East and links it to Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. And in doing so, we are already planning for a future that is less dependent on oil. We will have a sustainable post-hydrocarbon economy – driven by innovation, human capital, rule of law, and open trade.

At the COP21 climate change conference in Paris, the UAE pledged to increase our country’s use of clean energy sources to 24 percent by 2021. In 2020, Dubai will host the World Expo. And in 2021, we plan to send a space probe to Mars. This is the Arab world’s version of President Kennedy’s moon shot.

These initiatives will produce the types of opportunities that people in the region dream of – sapping the energy from extremist groups and encouraging kids to pick up books instead of guns.

We hope that a similar vision for the future is shared by our Iranian neighbors.

Unlike ISIS, Iran has a choice. In the words of Henry Kissinger, Iran can be either a state or a revolution. It can be either part of the solution or part of the problem.

We applaud President Obama and Secretary Kerry for their leadership to address the threat of Iran’s nuclear weapons program. We are hopeful that Iran will seize this historic opening with a new commitment to regional stability and respect for the sovereignty of other nations.

In the UAE, this feeling is very real because no country has more to gain from more peaceful and productive ties with Iran than we do. Our coasts are less than 21 miles apart. We have significant trade ties. We see enormous opportunities for greater economic, energy, and cultural links.

We not only understand that we must find ways to coexist with Iran, we seek them. To borrow from President Obama's first inaugural address, we are ready to extend a hand if Iran is willing to unclench its fist. But unfortunately, that hand is still very much clenched. Since the signing of the nuclear deal, we have seen nothing but more Iranian aggression in the region.

In late December, Iran fired unguided rockets dangerously close to a US aircraft carrier. Last October and again in November, Iran performed ballistic missile tests in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1929.

Less visible but equally as troubling is Iran's continued interference across the region. We see this from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

Let me provide some recent and specific examples from the UAE's own experience in Yemen.

- Last August, Yemeni authorities intercepted a shipment from Iran destined for Marib that contained military-use communications equipment accompanied by pamphlets in Farsi.
- In September, coalition forces intercepted an Iranian freighter in the Arabian Sea carrying anti-tank missiles and launching units.
- In late October, surveillance photographs tracked speed boats in the Red Sea smuggling weapons to the Houthis in Yemen.

We have documented each of these examples and other incidents with photographs, which the Embassy will make available via social media.

These incidents, along with the destruction of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran, demonstrate that in Iran, old habits die hard. In 1971, just before the UAE declared its independence, Iran seized three strategic Emirati islands in the middle of the Arabian Gulf. The Iranian occupation continues to this day. Iran has consistently refused UAE offers to settle the issue through direct negotiations or at The International Court of Justice.

And while, over the past decades, the UAE and other GCC countries have built a constructive relationship with the United States, the US continues to identify Iran as the leading international state sponsor of terror. In Palestine, in Iraq, and in almost every country in the region, Iran is funding, arming, and enabling radical, violent, and subversive cells. And closer to home here in Washington, it was just a few years ago that Iran plotted to assassinate my friend Adel Al Jubeir.

And let's not forget that Iran orchestrated countless terrorist attacks that killed Americans – at the marine barracks in Beirut, at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, and in Iraq – where they supplied the IEDs that killed or maimed thousands of American soldiers.

This is not lost on the global community and certainly not among Muslims. Just last week, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation voted 55-1 to denounce Iran's interference in the internal affairs of other states.

Just as we have much to gain from increased exchanges with Iran, we also have much to lose in the face of continued Iranian aggression. ISIS may be a more immediate threat and its barbaric methods are

certainly more headline-grabbing – but if Tehran continues to ignore opportunities for reconciliation, Iran’s influence will ultimately prove to be even more destabilizing than ISIS.

It is time to see if Iran is willing to show the same kind of pragmatism and moderation in its regional policies as it did in the nuclear talks. Will Iran spend the billions of dollars made available by sanctions relief on education and health care at home or to support the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon? Will it move to resolve its territorial disputes or continue its interference in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia? Will Iran play a constructive role in helping to resolve the Syria crisis or send more IRGC troops to defend Bashar?

Now that the nuclear agreement is done, it is time to focus on the threats the deal didn't address. Two weeks ago, President Obama made clear that the US will remain steadfast in opposing Iran’s destabilizing behavior in the region, and noted specifically Tehran’s support for violent proxies in Syria and Yemen. In May 2015 at Camp David, President Obama reiterated an “ironclad” commitment to the security of the UAE and other Arabian Gulf states. He offered new support for defending against missile strikes, maritime threats, and cyber attacks – and he pledged to streamline the defense acquisitions process. We welcome these commitments.

With our allies, we continue to wait for more promising signs from Iran. But at the same time, we must remain watchful and prepared to take whatever action is necessary to defend the security of the UAE and our friends.

With the nuclear deal, diplomacy worked. It can also work in addressing Iran’s other provocative regional policies if together we apply the same level of urgency, determination, and leadership. It is important that the United States strictly enforce the terms of the nuclear deal and hold Iran accountable to its other international commitments. This is the best approach to convince Iran to accept a new peaceful order in the Arabian Gulf.

An engaged and responsible Iran would be welcomed by all in the region. This and the defeat of ISIS are the two most critical steps toward an alternative, forward-looking path for the Middle East.

I believe that a new narrative of openness, opportunity, and optimism is possible.

When I look ahead in the region, I see more Rhodes scholars and fewer terrorist recruits.

More Mars missions and fewer ballistic missiles.

More women leaders and fewer Jihadi Janes.

More online start-ups and fewer extremist websites.

An Islam of peace and inclusion, not of extremes.

In the UAE, this is our way forward. A better way that the men and women in both of our militaries are risking their lives to protect and advance.

Whether on the battlefield or at the negotiating table, the UAE is ready to lead with confidence, knowing that the US is our partner.