THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
SAUL/ZILKHA ROOM

NEW FRAMEWORKS FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A CONVERSATION WITH DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN

Washington, D.C.
Tuesday, February 16, 2016

PARTICIPANTS:

Welcoming Remarks:

STROBE TALBOTT
President, The Brookings Institution

Introduction:

GENERAL JOHN ALLEN, USMC (Ret.)
Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, The Brookings Institution

Featured Speaker:

THE HONORABLE ANTONY J. BLINKEN
Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of State

Moderator:

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. TALBOTT: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for braving the elements to come here this morning for a discussion on one of -- and maybe not just one of, but one of the most dangerous, vexing, and important challenges that the world is facing and that the United States is facing, namely, the phenomenon that is metastasizing in many regions of the world, of terrorism and violent extremism.

We're very grateful that Tony Blinken, the deputy secretary of state, is here to give us an administration perspective on this issue. For more than the last seven years Tony has been dealing with these issues and related ones from the White House and now from his post at the State Department. After Tony finishes his remarks he will have a conversation with Tamara Wittes, who is the Director of our Middle East Policy Center.

But first, another colleague is going to provide us with a bit more context on the subject at hand, and he will also be adding a little bit more by way of introduction of the good work that Tony has been doing. General John Allen is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings. He is also, along with Mike O'Hanlon, the co-director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence. John joined over a year ago after a distinguished career in the military, culminating as a four star general in the Marine Corps, and also being the commander of the international assistance force in Afghanistan. His new career as a think tanker was almost immediately interrupted by a call back to duty. He, as I think all of you know, was tapped by President Obama as the first special envoy to the global coalition to counter ISIL. He worked tirelessly, effectively, and I would also say heroically. After 13 grueling months he returned to the Brookings Institution. In thanking John for his service President Obama hailed him for his tremendous ability and courage. This event is his first public appearance here at Brookings since his return.

So, I would ask, John, you to come up and get the program under way. (Applause)

GENERAL ALLEN: Thank you, Strobe, very much. Tamara, thank you; it's good to be with you this morning. And it is a great honor to be with you all this morning, and certainly to be with our Deputy Secretary of State, the Honorable Anthony "Tony", Blinken, who joins us today to address one of the most important topics of our time, which is countering violence extremism.

Our time with him this morning is all too brief, so I'll keep my remarks short. Today the United States and the community of nations are faced with one of the greatest threats we've experienced since the end of the Cold War, the rise of extremist organizations such as Al Qaida, ISIL, that directly threaten the stability of our partners, the region of the Middle East and even our own security here at home. The truth of the matter is these groups are a symptom of a greater problem, the radicalization of thousands upon thousands of men and women with little to no hope and simply dismal prospects. We know that the journey is often a short one from radicalization to extremism, and then into the arms and into the ranks of ISIL and other similar groups.

Solutions are long-term and they must transcend the use of military force. Did you imagine that I would ever say that? It will require U.S. leadership, however, to counter violent extremism in the world community. And properly, the instrument of American power best suited to the long-term solution of this crisis is American diplomacy. Our speaker has already set the conditions and participated dramatically in the summit which occurred about a year ago here in Washington on countering violent extremism where leaders from around the world gathered to embrace this issue.

Indeed, few Americans are better suited to leading this effort than Deputy Secretary Blinken. His truly distinguished public service has spanned now decades and has included long service on the Hill as the Democratic staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and service to two American presidents on the National Security Council, ending as the deputy national security advisor to President Obama and national security advisor to Vice President Biden. Deputy Secretary Blinken joined the Department of State on the 16th of December 2014, and in doing so completed a circle of his State Department and public service employment which began in 1993. Deputy Secretary Blinken then is uniquely qualified to shepherd not only the substantive aspects of the solutions to the challenges we face, he is also at the heart in the State Department of essential reorganizational initiatives to bring about the reality of our long-term solutions. In this he has exerted true and important leadership, and I have seen it at work. He sees deeply into the future and seeks to change the strategic landscape through the help of exerting American leadership and moving the United States, our partners, and millions of people away hopefully from the effects of interminable conflict, injustice, and human misery. And we shall hear more

about that today from him.

So, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming a dear friend to the Brookings Institution, the Deputy Secretary of State, the Honorable Tony Blinken. (Applause)

MR. BLINKEN: Well, thank you all very, very much. And, John, with that build up I think that I can only disappoint. To those of you who are inspired by Taylor Swift and Kendrick Lamar at the Grammys, this may not be the follow up that you're looking for. (Laughter)

But I do have to say it is a great pleasure, as always, to be at Brookings. It's a great pleasure to be with a dear friend and a great colleague, Strobe Talbott, who never fails remind me that deputy secretaries had a lot more fun in his day. But then again, he also didn't benefit from the strong bipartisan consensus that enjoy today, so things have changed. (Laughter) But in all seriousness, Strobe has been an extraordinary friend, colleague, mentor for many, many years, and I think it's safe to say I wouldn't be here had it not been for that support and mentorship over the years.

And John Allen, I think Strobe spoke very eloquently to you. I think there are few Americans to whom our fellow citizens owe so much for the work that you've done over so many years to keep us a little bit safer and a little bit more secure. When the President asked you to build a global coalition from scratch to degrade and ultimately defeat Daesh, you hit the ground running and never looked back. In one year John Allen put together a coalition of now 66 partners that has brought every political, diplomatic, economic, and military tool down to bear against Daesh, undermining the very foundations of its self-declared caliphate and revealing its cause for the savage lunacy that it is. We would not be where we are in this campaign without its architect and the original driver, John Allen. And it is always a great pleasure but also an honor to be with you. Thank you very much, John.

A few days ago I was in Djibouti City and spent some time at a municipal library where I sat with a dozen or so young civil society leaders to talk about violent extremism and the extraordinary ways in which this community is mobilizing in response. Situated along a corridor of flight for desperate young migrants and beleaguered refugees, Djibouti is increasingly focusing on preventing and countering violent extremism in a part of the world that is all too familiar with the tragic costs of famine, war, and terror. We were sitting together and I asked this extraordinary group of young people, what is it that

drives other young people to answer the siren call of violent extremism and, maybe more important, why is it that so many more, the overwhelming vast majority, don't answer that call? And we had a rather extraordinary discussion and their own answers were passionate, thoughtful, and they revealed the degree to which they're grappling with these very questions every day. In one week alone this group hosted a dialogue between moms and mothers, organized poetry contests and skits, brought together university scholars and religious leaders, all in this effort to better understand and counter the challenge of violent extremism.

If that extremism thrives in the shadows of personal, social, political, and economic marginalization, capitalizing on the grievances of those who feel cast aside, left behind, ignored, or repressed, these young leaders were determined to counter it with the bright light of education, inclusion, tolerance, good governance, and opportunity. I walked away inspired by their commitment to understand and defeat what is a metastasizing threat. Not as soldiers on the battlefield, or even public officials in office, but as community leaders, as teachers, as entrepreneurs, as students, all with a shared stake in a peaceful future.

That's the good news. The bad news is that just a few days ago three young women arrived at a camp for those who have fled the ravages of Boko Haram in far northeastern Nigeria. There in a sea of families, two of the girls detonated bombs they were carrying, taking their own lives and the lives of nearly 60 other people. The third young woman surrendered when she learned that her parents and siblings were among the displaced persons in that camp, saving her own life and perhaps countless others. This is just one of many excruciating reminders, as if one were necessary, of the challenge we face, a challenge that does not stop at borders, or distinguish among its victims.

In response, the United States has mobilized countries around the world to disrupt and defeat those threats to our common security, starting with Daesh and Al Qaeda, including Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, AQAP, and a number of other groups. Now, the most visible part of this effort is the battlefield and our increasingly successful effort to destroy Daesh at its core in Iraq and Syria. Working by, with, and through local partners we have taken back 40 percent of the territory that Daesh controlled a year ago in Iraq and 10 percent in Syria, killing senior leaders, destroying thousands of pieces of equipment,

all the while applying simultaneous pressure against key chokepoints and isolating its bases in Mosul and Raqa. In fact, we assess Daesh's numbers are the lowest they've been since we began monitoring their manpower in 2014. We have a comprehensive strategy that includes training, equipping, and advising our local partners, stabilizing and rebuilding liberated areas, stopping the flow of foreign fighters into and out Iraq and Syria, cutting off Daesh's financing, countering its propaganda, providing life saving humanitarian assistance, and promoting political accommodations so that our military success is sustainable. In each of these areas we are making real progress. But these hard fought victories undermine more than Daesh's fighting force, they erode the narrative it has built of its own success, the perception of which remains one of Daesh's most effective recruiting tools, for the danger of violent extremism has slipped past war's front lines and into the computers and onto the phones of citizens in every corner of the world. Destined to outlive Daesh, this pernicious threat is transforming our security landscape as individuals are inspired to violent acts from Paris to San Bernadino to Jakarta.

So, even as we advance our efforts to defeat Daesh on the frontlines, we know that to be fully effective we must work to prevent the spread of violent extremism in the first place, to stop the recruitment, the radicalization, the mobilization of people, especially young people, to engage in terrorist activities. And that's what I want to talk about today.

So here's what we know, there is no single type of violent extremism, no single method of recruitment, no single source of motivation or support, there's no single story, no easy synonym for one region, religious tradition, or culture. Some violent extremists believe that they are Pius, others are not, some are misinformed and misled, others are educated and knowledgeable, some are beyond reach, others will still listen, some are more focused on what they're running to, others driven by what they're running from, some become disillusioned, others become very, very dangerous. In short, the nature and range of possible drivers of violent extremism can vary greatly, from individual psychological factors to community, sectarian, and religious divisions. And these persist across different ethnicities and cultures.

While there's no single cause we do see common denominators, common factors that breed or help accelerate violent extremism, including feelings of alienation and exclusion, exposure to violent rampant propaganda, a lack of critical thinking skills, and experiences with state sanctioned

violence, heavy handed tactics by security services, and the systematic denial of opportunity. Of course, there is no grievance so bitter, not disadvantage so deep that it ever justifies murder, rape, slavery. But if we're going to actually win in a sustained fashion the fight against violent extremism, it will not be through combat alone, it will not exclusively by sending American troops and others into every dark corner of the world, intervening in every country where a radical ideology takes root. Security operations are absolutely necessary but they are not sufficient. As Secretary Kerry has said, this is a fight that over time will be won in the classroom and houses of worship, on social media, in community center, at sites of cultural heritage, on the sports field, and within the homes of people in every corner of the planet. It's a fight that will be determined by our ability to come together as leaders and as nations to reach those at risk before terrorist recruiters do. It will be determined, in other words, but a comprehensive approach that tackles this challenge from every angle, harnessing every tool at our disposal, mobilizing every community leader as our partner.

Since President Obama first issued a call to action at the United Nations in 2014 and hosted a summit on countering violent extremism one year ago this month here in Washington, a movement has grown, a movement of country leaders and company CEOs, municipal officials and young people, clerics and parents, united by their commitment to fight the ideologies of hate, to defeat agents of terror, to destroy networks of financiers, propagandists, and recruiters, to strengthen our own ability not only to counter, but to prevent radicalization in the first place. To help deliver on this commitment, Secretary Kerry has directed the State Department to lead the efforts of the United States abroad in coordination with the whole of our government, to reach out and work with foreign governments, organizations, individuals, to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Today, I'm able to announce that in consultation with Congress we are increasing the resources and personnel devoted to this mission, to be led by a renamed Bureau of Counter Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, in order to embed this priority into the core of our foreign policy and ensure it's sustained through a more proactive and integrated approach. We believe this step is critical to effectively confronting the shifting landscape we face and that's why we've also asked Congress for additional resources in the President's budget request. But I want to emphasize these resources will be

additive to our existing counter terrorism efforts.

Our approach is governed by five core priorities that were first shaped by our discussions at the White House summit a year ago and are now being refined into the first ever joint strategy by USAID and the State Department on preventing and countering violent extremism. Let me briefly walk though the core elements of that strategy. First, we are expanding partnerships to develop the expertise to better understand violent extremism and its drivers at the international, regional, national, and local levels. The phenomenon of violent extremism is of course not new, but its manifestations in this century are; its tactics, its tools, its reach, especially of course through the internet and social media. So we're developing the research and evidence base to shape rigorous and targeted initiatives tailor made to the communities in which they'll be implemented. Since last year's summit we've helped establish an independent network of local researches around the world dedicated to exactly this task. By examining violent extremism in its unique context we're improving our ability to vigorously measure the effectiveness of our policies and our work, to ensure that we understand exactly why something works or why it fails. Thanks to the work of many partners, including Muslim majority nations, the global counter terrorism forum will release a tool kit this coming September of best practices and strategies that address the complete life cycle of radicalization to violence, from prevention to intervention, to rehabilitation and reintegration. We're still learning. It's only a year ago that this conversation really began and we've put that conversation front and center on the global agenda. It's now at the core of our engagements on a bilateral basis, a multilateral basis, with countries as diverse as France, Djibouti, Tajikistan, virtually around the world. We may not yet have full fidelity on the impact of our efforts -- it's a work in progress, but we are putting in place the structures and resources to carry forward this effort in tailored, targeted, data driven, and results oriented ways.

Second, we're working closely with our partners at the national and local level, in Europe and around the world, to actually adopt more effective policies to prevent the spread of violent extremism. One example, we have something now called the Strong Cities Network, connecting local officials around the world to share their experiences, and importantly, their best practices. For the first time there is a global platform for those on the front lines to learn from each other. We can learn from communities in

Tajikistan that have created mother's schools to help mothers recognize warning signs of radicalization to violence and act to protect their children before it's too late. We can learn from cities like Dakar, Senegal where a collaboration of 19 District Mayors supports roughly 500 youth volunteers, again to help identify and address local concerns in partnership with the police. And we can learn from cities like Vilvoorde in Belgium, a small town that had per capita the highest number of foreign terrorist fighters leave for Syria and Iraq. A little over a year ago in 2014 a delegation from Vilvoorde came to the United States to learn about community engagement and policing techniques, including law enforcement and community advisory groups, diversity training, student exchanges. After he returned home the mayor of that town instituted new programs modeled on the ones he had seen here in the United States. In the time since the rate of recruitment has fallen significantly. And although the lure of Daesh remains, the mayor reports that nobody has left for Syria or Iraq since the summer of 2014.

Third, we're strengthening local partnerships to address the underlying political, social, and economic factors that put communities at high risk and make young men and women more susceptible to the siren call of extreme ideologies. In many environments where the risk of violent extremism is high what we see is that development has failed to take root, governance is weak, access to education limited, unemployment common. Together with the State Department USAID is bringing its development expertise to bear in precisely these environments, harnessing the full range of analytic tools to design, support, and measure programs that reduce the vulnerabilities of local communities. In Gao, Mali, where the rate of recruitment was particularly high during occupation by violent extremists in 2012, AID piloted a program to reduce the isolation and marginalization of target communities. After fostering trust by responding to basic needs the program quickly pivoted to activities that built ties between communities through things like soccer tournaments, dialogues, youth conferences. Social network analysis conducted during the program found that community integration had already increased by 11 percent and led in particular to more tolerant views on the rights and role of women in society. So these programs work, they can be effective, and we've seen it on the ground, in the field.

Thanks to the leadership of Secretary Kerry we're mobilizing public and private sector support behind these efforts through the global community engagement and resilience fund. We have a

first round of grants that will be made shortly to local communities in Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Mali, followed by a second round to Burma, Kenya, and Kosovo.

Fourth, we will engage and amplify locally credible voices that can expose the true nature of violent extremism, its savagery, its denial of human dignity. Every day in the state of art propaganda videos, in glossy magazines, in a relentless flood of tweets and posts, Daesh and its supporters warped ideology, traffic, and lies, glorify violence. We're fighting back hard in this space, in the press, in social media, pointing out the reality of what these terrorists are doing to their fellow Muslims and anyone else who stands in their way. Through the recently announced Global Engagement Center and digital communications hubs in places like Abu Dhabi and Kuala Lumpur, we're helping to tackle propaganda and recruitment efforts head on by empowering independent positive voices from the region, voices that represent the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation is also working to set up its own messaging hub, to raise the voices of its scholars and clerics on the importance of multiculturalism and inclusion. And just over the last year we've seen the space and tolerance for extremist propaganda begin to shrink. Twitter alone recently suspended 125,000 accounts for threatening or promoting terrorists acts. In corners of social media that were dominated just over a year ago by Daesh, the equation has flipped. Now the space is overwhelmingly populated by anti-Daesh messages and it's beginning to have an impact, measured not only in tweets and followers, but the falling numbers of foreign terrorist fighters and the growing networks of researchers, young people, and city leaders inspired now to positive action.

Just this past December when the leader of Daesh asked Muslims everywhere to join the case we saw in social media a global backlash. Too busy being part of a civilized and functioning society, wrote one. Also, Sherlock Season 4 starts in just a few days. A few weeks ago the White House dispatched some of its most senior national security leaders, from across the government to Silicon Valley, to discuss what more we can do together to elevate positive and diminish negative voices while of course respecting some of the differences in our approaches.

Our challenge today is not so much the small number of violent extremists on line, it's their virulence. They're organized, sophisticated, technologically savvy than moderate voices. They

succeed in inspiring an extremely tiny segment of the global population to violence. We've understood that in the United States we cannot be effective messengers on our own in this space. We have to empower those who are. Local voices, including disillusioned returnees, religious leaders, women, young people. This past year in response to a call from the State Department 45 university teens from 17 countries participated in a competition to produce credible and persuasive campaigns against extremism. In their final presentation the winning team described the fear and frustration of growing up in neighborhoods where classrooms must be protected by snipers and school buses by police. As university students from Lahore, they know better than anyone the value of ensuring that messages of tolerance resonate with those who need to hear them most.

Fifth, and finally, we will strengthen the capabilities of our partners to prevent radicalization to violence in prisons and help ensure that former fighters are rehabilitated and reintegrated back into society wherever possible. We know from experience across the globe that prisons can be hotbeds for recruitment, especially when terrorist leaders are captured, foreign fighters are housed together with non extremist offenders. The urgency of this challenge has been brought into sharp relief in recent years. Two of the three perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attacks may have been radicalized in prison. The same is likely true of the terrorist who shot and killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels in 2014. And it's also likely true for the gunman responsible for the attack in Copenhagen in 2015. As a result, our partners around the world are increasingly embracing innovative ideas to mitigate prison radicalization. In one front line state we're working with a local NGO that provides pro bono legal assistance and vocational training to inmates, including juveniles, who have been detained for low level, non violent offenses. By facilitating the release and reintegration of these prisoners we help remove them from a setting where they are vulnerable to the recruitment efforts of violent extremism. But prisons can also be effective environments to target rehabilitation and reintegration programs, in part because prison is a time when individuals can be cut off from negative influences and contacts of the past if it's done right. Today we're working with experts around the world to develop tools to assess the attitudes of prisoners to extremism and to terrorism over a period of time, to help both separate terrorist recruiters and ideologs from vulnerable inmates and identify good candidates for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Ultimately at the heart of our strategy, at the center of each of these five pillars, is a commitment to the principles that have underwritten an unprecedented era of greater peace and prosperity over the last seven decades, principles of good governance and pluralism, of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, of human rights and human dignity. Governments that stoke the flames of sectarianism and religious animosity, or leaders who use counter terrorism laws as an excuse to crack down on protestors, journalists, or civil society only deepen the fissures and grievances that can help fuel extremism. Those who advance these tactics would have us believe that societal tolerance, civil society, and an active press lead to violence and disorder, and societies are more stable with a strong arm of centralized power and the safety blanket of control. But as President Obama has said, the essential ingredient to lasting real stability and progress is not less democracy, it's more democracy. It's continuing to invest in a world where the vast majority of people recoil at the action of terrorists and reject the ideology of violent extremists with every fiber in their being. We need to keep it this way while reaching the very small pool of people who don't. At a time when two young women saw no choice, no hope, no chance, but to detonate themselves in a crowded haven for vulnerable families, there can be no doubt, no confusion about the gravity of the risk we face or about the firmness of its grip. But what makes these tragedies so agonizing, it's not our despair at the alternatives, it's our great confidence in them. No child is born to hate, no child is born to kill. They all reach out their arms when they want to be carried. They all ask questions when they want to know the answers. They grow up wanting to be accepted, to learn, to contribute, to fulfill their potential. They're doing their part, we have to do ours.

So on behalf of Secretary Kerry, let me say in conclusion how grateful we are for the support and engagement so many of you in this room have lent to this work, in classrooms, in community center, in think tanks like Brookings. It's not hard to see in the end that in their very acts of terror violent extremists are precipitating exactly what they hope to destroy, a world more closely bound together in defense of dignity, justice, and peace.

Thank you very much. (Applause)

MS. WITTES: All right. Tony, thank you so much for that fantastic overview and for a sense of the connection between the organizational structural piece of this in the U.S. government and

the impact with partners around the world, government and non government.

A lot of people say that countering violent extremism, CVE, is a sort of a fuzzy term. And I think that in your remarks today you both acknowledged that from a social scientific perspective it's very complicated, but that doesn't mean we can't get our hands around it, and you give some specifics on that. That said, I think there is a question about how elastic this term becomes. And specifically, when you get into U.S. government efforts, mobilizing resources, mobilizing personnel to do this job over a long period of time, does it start to become a kind of all encompassing umbrella.

So I wonder if you can respond to some of those concerns or critics about the fuzziness of this term.

MR. BLINKEN: Sure. And look, we're just getting started. This is a conversation that really started a year ago as I said with the President convening countries, leaders, civil society, private sector from around the world, and we're trying in the first instance to marshal all of the research and analytics and work that's been done in so many different places on this, to put them together all in one place, that we have a common base of understanding. And just starting with that is an important first step in getting the contours of the problem in place. And I think that what we're seeing is that, as I said earlier, there is no one story, there is no one explanation, but there are certain common denominators that we can work on and that we can help others work on.

Second, a lot of this is about actually sharing best practices. Because what we're seeing again around the world is different countries in different ways at times have confronted different aspects of this problem. And some have done so very, very successfully. Bringing their answers to bear, sharing that information widely, is another key part of getting a grip on this and that's what we're trying to do.

Now, the third piece of it is the one in a sense that's more amorphous because we're also seeing that there are underlying drivers that go to really long-term challenges in a society where for whatever reason development has not taken root. And there of course we're looking at answers that may be more generational in nature. But if you don't start on them you're not going to finish and get to the place that you want to go.

And then, finally, the two other aspects of this that have really emerged and popped out

are the importance of finding the most credible voices. I think we began thinking that we in the United States and our voice would be effective in combating this problem. And the truth of the matter is, it's not. And what we've learned is that we really have to empower local voices, credible voices, that resonate more with their communities. And the final piece of this, as I mentioned, is the prison element, something else that's really emerged in the research that's been done. And we've so much radicalization in those environments. So what we're doing is we are defining the problem more effectively, we're looking at solutions that have worked, we're sharing that information, and we're focused on particular things that we know need our focus. I think in that way we're getting our arms around it. But again I want to emphasize, this is something that is in a sense in its early days.

But here's what we know. We will defeat Daesh. I have absolutely no doubt about that. But unless we're able to have a sustained strategy to deal with violent extremism, that is the efforts to recruit, to radicalize, to mobilize people to violent acts, then Daesh 2.0, whatever it is, will have something that it can take advantage of. That's why it's not enough to take the fight to groups that manifest themselves in violent ways, to counter them, when the problem is already real. You have to try and get at some of the underlying factors that lead to radicalization and extremism in the first place.

There is never going to be a 100 percent solution to this, but the more you can squeeze it, minimize it, contain it, the more effective you're going to be.

MS. WITTES: Okay. So you just spoke a bit about the military piece, which as you said is the most visible, and you spent the bulk of your remarks on this longer-term effort, but in between there's also the politics. And from the beginning the administration has said that military efforts are going to be insufficient on their own to defeat Daesh. Even in Iraq and Syria there's a political diplomatic component that has to happen. I wonder if you can start by giving us perhaps a bit of an update, maybe particularly on Iraq where we haven't heard as much recently, but also we've all been watching I think the very dramatic diplomacy around this Syrian conflict over the last week, watching with dismay the interaction between that diplomacy and what's going on in the battlefield. It feels as though this diplomatic effort in Syria is hanging by a thread. So can you give us the latest on that?

MR. BLINKEN: Sure. I guess I'd say two things. First, we've of course seen Iraq and

Syria as one large battle space because they're fundamentally joined. But let me, for the sake of responding to this question, divide them briefly. In Iraq as I've said we've seen very significant progress in pushing Daesh back. I mentioned that over the past year the groups that were supporting the Iraqi security forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga, some of the militia, Sunni Tribal fighters, increasingly working together with our very strong support and the support of the Coalition, have taken back 40 percent of the territory that Daesh controlled a year ago. Daesh has not been able to engage in any offensive operations since last spring. And what we're seeing is that not only are we taking back territory, but we're doing it in a strategic way, cutting off lines of communication, increasing the chokehold on Mosul, which is their base in Iraq. And I think we have great confidence that we will succeed in that theater. But it's not enough. There are two other critical elements to make this a sustainable success.

First, it's not enough to liberate a town. You have to then stabilize it and rebuild it so that people have something to go back to. That's a massive undertaking. We've seen it work effectively in Tikrit. Now about 85 percent of the population has returned to Tikrit. We're just getting started in Ramadi, which is an even greater challenge. It's going to take very, very significant resources, resources that the Iraqi government doesn't have, especially with falling oil prices. So there's a real need for the international community to continue to support those efforts. But then the stabilization and reconstruction of liberated areas is not enough either. And here's the really hard part, that is a sustainable, political accommodation. If we're not able to help the Iraqis find that, then the environment that created such a fertile ground for Daesh risks remaining. And of course we've been grappling with this, and the Bush administration was grappling with this, for years. That's going to be the most difficult part.

It's really interesting, when you talk to Iraqi leaders in all communities, virtually all of them now are preparing for the after Daesh. They believe that Daesh will be defeated in Iraq and they're all now trying to position themselves for what comes after, trying to maximize their own advantage. We have to figure out of there is an accommodation that allows Iraq to stay together and all the disparate groups in Iraq to believe that their interests can be advanced and protected by the Iraqi state. Or we have to find some other solution that leads to a sustainable political accommodation. That's a huge challenge.

Syria. There too we've actually made real progress against Daesh, and we've seen in

the north over the last six or nine months virtually of the border between Turkey and Syria that was under the control of Daesh, now under the control primarily of Kurdish-Syrian forces with the support of the Coalition and with a small piece, about 10 percent left, west of the Euphrates that's still under Daesh control. And in fact that's its only real means of entry and exit from Syria. And we're working with the Turks to try and get control of that last 10 percent. That in turn allows you to start to put pressure on Raqqa. And from the east, what we've done in Iraq is also cutting off lines of communication between Raqqa and Mosul. So you can see that moving, but the big joker in the mix is the other part of the Syria equation, and that is the civil war. And we've focused and we've made Daesh a priority. That poses the most immediate and serious security concern to us. But we also know that we won't be able to fully defeat Daesh in Syria unless we also deal with the civil war, and particularly with Assad, because as long as he's there he remains the most powerful magnate for foreign fighters and recruits to Daesh that you can have. And he also helps create and perpetuate a chaotic environment in which Daesh find refuge.

So we have to deal with that. We also have to deal with it because of course it is a horrific humanitarian catastrophe and we are moved to try to act there. And we're also seeing profound strategic effects coming out both in terms of the neighboring countries and the refugees, but also as everyone knows, Europe, and even a threat potentially to the European construction project. It is a vastly -- to state the obvious -- complicated undertaking. Secretary Kerry has repeatedly and heroically worked to forge agreements among very disparate actors. And we have now an agreement that was reached last week calling for cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access. And we had about a week's time, going to Friday, to put that agreement into effect. It is usually challenging. I don't want to prejudge where we're going to be at the end of the week. Unfortunately we've seen the Russians and the regime not stop but actually even accelerate their offensive. We'll have to see where we are on Friday to see if they're going to abide by the agreement that was reached last week.

MS. WITTES: More broadly these civil conflicts, whether it's in Syria, but also in Libya, in Yemen, seem to be drivers of radicalization in and of themselves. And there were some who would argue that the United States focus, as it's been on Daesh, has been perhaps not active enough in seeking to resolve those civil conflicts that are not giving extremists space and driving radicalization all across the

region. How would you respond to that concern?

MR. BLINKEN: I would say that we actually have sought very hard to resolve them. I think the debate is over the means that we've chosen to do that. For some, the argument has been that absent a significant U.S. military intervention in various places to try and stop the violence, defeat the bad actors, that we're not going to succeed. I think our concern has been that we've seen that in the recent past American interventions in someone else's civil war usually produce a whole host of unintended consequences that may create more problems than they solve. So we've been focused on trying to support moderate, local actors and local forces using the full weight of our diplomacy and our economic power, as well as mobilizing the international community in various places to try to get at the heart of these conflicts and to try to end them.

But one of the dilemmas of course we face is that in virtually of these places none of the conflicts are about us. And we have to have a certain degree of humility as we approach than to thinking that we somehow represent a magic solution. I think my friend and colleague, Phil Gordon, goes through the litany of different places where either we've intervened with force, we've intervened without force, or we haven't intervened, and the result has been virtually the same, whether it's Iraq, whether it's Libya, whether it's Syria. So what we've tried to do is to bring the full array of tools at our disposal to these challenges, not just an open ended and large scale military intervention, because then what. The bottom line I think that we really found is that absent finding political accommodations nothing you do is really sustainable. And that's the biggest challenge.

MS. WITTES: Thanks. A Brookings plug I have to insert is a new piece that came out in Foreign Affairs just today by my colleague Ken Pollack on the civil wars in the region and the implications for American security and what more can be done to resolve them. So I urge you all to look for that.

I'm going to ask you just one more question if I may and then I think we may have time to take one or two from the floor. I know you have to be out right at 11:00. We've spoken mostly this morning about the Islamic State for obvious reasons. But violent extremism goes well beyond the Islamic State, its affiliates, or even Al Qaeda. There is Shia extremism as well, and I wonder how you would apply some of the frameworks you were talking about today to groups like Hezbollah, for example.

MR. BLINKEN: Well, two things. One is one of the big concerns that remains and that we're very focused on even as we deal with the challenges of Daesh, of Al Qaeda, and various affiliated groups, is first extremism and terrorism that continues to be supported and sponsored by Iran, and the threat that that poses. Since the summer we have worked to deepen and accelerate our collaboration with partner and allied countries in the region to give them and also us ever greater means to push back against any of these kinds of actions. And this started with the Camp David meeting that President Obama hosted with leaders from all the Gulf Countries, but it has continued with a lot of very sustained work in building up the capacity of our partners and allies. And that's starting to have an impact.

You're also seeing increasingly countries in the region standing up and making it clear that they want to take responsibility for their own security. Now, it's one thing to say it, it's another thing to do it. And of course it's vastly complicated, but that's a very I think good sign. And how we have to see if we can help make it real.

Third, with regard to Hezbollah, we've continued to work very hard to isolate it, to diminish it, and to deal with its manifestations around the world, including through using tools like the Treasury Department and its designations to cut off financing, to designate individuals to make it more difficult for them to operate. And we've also tried to rally other countries to the cause, including in Europe. So the challenge is doing all of this at the same time, but we're determined to do it.

MS. WITTES: But you see state sponsored terrorist groups as a different kind of problem?

MR. BLINKEN: A different kind of problem to the extent that it may require a different answer, but not different in the sense that it's a problem that we're confronting very, very aggressively.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Okay, I think we may have time for -- let's see, where's our microphone. Why don't we start with the person who's right in front of you, Simaya. It's a young woman on the aisle. There we go. Thank you. And we've just got a couple of minutes so please identify yourself and give a very brief question if you would.

MS. BERNSTEIN: Leandra Bernstein, Sputnik International News. With the situation in Syria I'm wondering what the United States is prepared to do about Turkey's ongoing shelling of Kurdish

forces, and also with the threat of ground troops being sent in by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, what the U.S. stance on that is.

MS. WITTES: And if you would, just hand the microphone across the aisle to that gentleman.

SPEAKER: Hello, my name is (inaudible). Kurdish leaders are pressing for holding a referendum before the U.S. presidential election. I was wondering, you know, how would that impact the war against ISIS and whether an independent Kurdistan will be positive or negative factor in countering extremism activity and ISIS?

Thanks.

MS. WITTES: Thanks very much. Tony, why don't we let you take those two?

MR. BLINKEN: Look, what we're focused on most immediately is working to implement the agreement that was reached last week on a cessation of hostilities across the country, with the exception of continuing to go after Daesh and al-Nusra and any other UN designated group, and at the same time make sure that the humanitarian access that was agreed, to besieged communities, starting with a handful of specifically designated ones, but then expanding across the country, that that agreement is implemented. And in order to do that one of the things that would be not only helpful, but probably necessary is for all groups to start to stand down, not ratchet up what they're doing. So we're looking at all of our various partners on our side of the equation to do just that.

With regard to the Kurdish referendum, and this I believe you're referring the possibility of a referendum on independence, first the Kurds in Iraq are among our closest and most effective partners. And they have performed heroically in dealing with and helping to dismantle and ultimately defeat Daesh in Iraq. And we're grateful for that partnership and the work that they're doing. And of course we know well the aspirations of many Kurds for the future, including for independence. I think one of the challenges that they'll have to face in thinking about this now is whether an independent Kurdistan would be economically viable, and given oil prices where they are I think that's a challenge in the immediate, and what impact it would have on the efforts that are profoundly in the interests of the Kurds as well as our own, to deal with and defeat Daesh. Because I think the danger is that introducing this element now

risks creating a tremendous distraction that will get people focused on internal Iraqi debates and challenges and differences. It risks distracting the central government in Baghdad, the Sunni community, and the only beneficiary in that will actually be Daesh.

So, look, our Kurdish friends of course have the right to proceed however they wish in trying to identify the aspirations of their fellow citizens, but I think at this particular moment in time moving forward in that direction would be both very difficult as a practical matter and potentially counterproductive to the immediate challenge of defeating Daesh.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Well, this struggle is, as you said, a generational one. And within a year you'll be handing this effort off to a successor, but it's clear from everything you laid out this morning that you and everyone in the State Department are setting up that long-term effort to hand it off in good order.

So I want to thank you for sharing that with us this morning. Thank you for taking these questions, and thank you for being with us.

MR. BLINKEN: Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming. (Applause)

* * * * *