

Mr. Merican (Malaysia):

I join earlier speakers in thanking you, Mr. President, for convening this timely debate on such a critically important topic. The concept note (S/2016/416, annex) that you shared in advance also provided useful guidance. I also wish to thank the briefers, whose respective briefings have brought keen insights and added much value to the discussion today.

At this stage, my delegation aligns itself with the statements to be delivered by the representatives of Thailand and Kuwait, who will speak on behalf of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, respectively.

For the past quarter century or so, the United Nations and the Security Council have been at the forefront of international efforts to counter the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism. Besides the necessary targeted military actions and intelligence operations on the ground, we have established norms, networks, structures, strategies and action plans to counter the spreading influence of terrorists, fighting them on a number of critical fronts, notably their movement, financing and recruitment.

Those efforts have shown varying degrees of success. However, we can do more. And we must do more. That is why today's discussion has particular resonance for us, as it seeks to address the narrative or ideological aspect of terrorism, and one of the main drivers of the phenomenon. Accordingly, we are pleased to join the consensus on the presidential statement just adopted (S/PRST/2016/6), which we fully support, and we thank the Egyptian delegation for initiating it.

Terrorism and violent extremism are global threats that transcend cultures, religions and geopolitical boundaries. They have no religion. In the past few decades, the international community has engaged in long-standing struggles against various terrorist groups worldwide, from the Irish Republican Army to the Tamil Tigers and Aum Shinrikyo. We thus reject any association of terrorism and violent extremism with any one religion, nationality or ethnic group.

However, as Muslims, we should not be in denial. We should be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that, whether we like it or not, there is a critical need for us to address the exploitation of Islam by terrorist groups, which has led to the perceived link between terrorism and Islam or Muslims. As all of us are aware, among the most heinous and nefarious perpetrators of terrorism and violent extremism today are Al-Qaida, the Taliban, the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and Da'esh. They all have one thing in common — they rely on Islam, or more accurately, their twisted interpretation of Islam, to legitimize their causes, justify their criminal actions and attract their followers. Therefore, for the purpose of today's debate, I wish to focus my statement on that disturbing phenomenon, notwithstanding our long-held position that terrorism must be dissociated from any particular religion.

It has been said that in order to understand a religion, one must study its scriptures. In our Koran, the holy scripture for Muslims, a message of peace, justice and honourable conduct is featured prominently and constitutes the very essence of Islam. Indeed, the very definition of Islam itself is peace. To illustrate that, the Koran states:

“And make not Allah's name an excuse in your oaths against doing good, or acting rightly, or making peace between persons; for Allah is One Who heareth and knoweth all things.” (The Holy Koran, II: 224)

Meanwhile, on justice, Allah says, in verse 8 of Surah Al-Maidah:

“O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is acquainted with what you do.”

In light of such clear commands in the Koran, we strongly denounce the terrorists’ claims that their barbarity is sanctioned by Islam. The concept of “the end justifies the means” has no place in Islam. So even if you have good intentions or you are fighting a just cause, you are still not allowed to achieve it via wrongful means or to commit transgressions against others.

Long before the Geneva Conventions existed, Prophet Muhammad and subsequent scholars instituted a just-war doctrine. Among other things, during the conduct of war, Muslims are forbidden from harming non-combatants, particularly women, children, the elderly and the sick, as well as envoys, diplomats and those praying in houses of worship. They are even prohibited from harming civilian objects, including water wells, trees, crops and livestock. That is the true and right teaching of Islam. True Muslims do not accept ideologies that espouse hatred, wanton violence and destruction. We must make absolutely clear that the extremists are the blasphemers. It is they who insult and pervert the teaching of the Holy Koran and the Sunnah.

It is abundantly clear to my delegation that if we are to successfully counter the terrorist narrative, we cannot limit the response to merely denouncing violence or stating why their approach is wrong; we must cut through their rhetoric and seductive approaches. An ideology does not exist in a vacuum. To those who are marginalized, disenchanting or frustrated, an ideology can be a powerful thing. It provides a sense of purpose, a sense of direction and a sense of belonging, especially when faced with deep underlying socio-political grievances.

Based on investigations of the motivations of foreign terrorist fighters in Malaysia, their main motivation has been found to be political in nature, be it prolonged and grievous injustice, gross violations of human rights, foreign occupation, or systematic discrimination against people whom they identify with due to shared religion, values or ethnicity. Beyond this motivation, they share little similarities in terms of academic background, social status or geographical origin. Thus, in countering the terrorists’ narrative, it is also crucial to remove these underlying root causes in order to expose the fallacy of their arguments. This will diminish the soft power of the terrorists in manipulating socio-political grievances to gain sympathy among impressionable youths and to recruit foreign terrorist fighters worldwide.

Part of Malaysia’s efforts in countering the extremist narrative is also to engage with religious and community leaders to spread accurate messages about Islam. We believe that there is a need to encourage more IT and media-savvy Muslim public figures and scholars to reach out to youths via social media to provide a counter-narrative, including to clarify the concept of jihad, which has been twisted to serve the terrorists’ agenda.

At times, the promise of heavenly reward and spiritual salvation has led some to become misguided and fall for the terrorists’ narrative. Thus, in our response we have incorporated a rehabilitation programme as part of our counter-terrorism measures. This is consistent with our belief in long-term rehabilitation and not just punitive action in dealing with terrorists. Under this programme, experts from various religious departments, clerics and police counsellors actively engage with detainees and provide guidance with the aim of eventually restoring them as useful members of society.

Malaysia remains steadfast in its belief that terrorism and violent extremism are twin cancers that require our collective and concerted effort to address. We therefore reaffirm our commitment to continuing our close cooperation with the United Nations and relevant international organizations towards that end.

On a final note, I wish to stress that terrorist attacks do not discriminate among women or children; they do not discriminate between old or young; black or white; Muslims, Jews or Christians; rich or poor. All of us are potential victims of terrorism. In our response to this threat, let us not allow the terrorists to divide us. Hysterical responses to terrorism, including by discriminating against a group of people for their peaceful religious beliefs or branding an entire group of people as terrorists, will merely perpetuate terror and paranoia and further serve the terrorists' narrative.

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