



# human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

September 17, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As you prepare to make your annual address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, we write to urge you to include the following points in your remarks in connection with the threat presented by ISIL and your strategy to degrade and ultimately to destroy it.

We welcome your readiness to lead a multilateral effort to deal with the threat of ISIL, which has been responsible for rampant and gross human rights abuses. We also welcome your determination to advance a more inclusive and responsive Iraqi government as part of your comprehensive strategy; a government that protects universal rights will strengthen the determination of Iraqis to work together to defeat ISIL and secure a more stable and democratic future. We urge you to stress throughout your engagement with the Security Council and General Assembly the foundational role that human rights and the rule of law play in making societies resistant to extremist groups such as ISIL – and, correspondingly, the fundamental role they must play in successful counter-terrorism strategies.

We believe that your efforts will be more successful and will benefit from greater international support if you use the opportunity of your address to the General Assembly to clarify the scope and objectives of America's military mission to destroy ISIL and the relationship between that mission and other U.S. efforts to combat terrorism. Specifically, we urge you to assure the international community that American military action against ISIL will be tailored to meet that threat and does not represent an unbounded broadening of the use of military force as part of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. While the current threat from ISIL may require military action, we urge you to reaffirm what you said last year at the National Defense University: "We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root; and in the absence of a strategy that reduces the wellspring of

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extremism, a perpetual war – through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments – will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways.”

Moreover, to stem the spread of terrorist groups like ISIL, we urge you to commit the United States – and call on all UN member states – to focus greater attention on prevention, including addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and ensuring that efforts to combat terrorism are carried out in accordance with international law and never become a pretext for violations of human rights. We urge you to pledge publicly that United States actions will accord with international law and outline a plan for greater transparency around the rationales and outcomes of targeting operations, so that our allies and their publics may see clearly that this is so.

Finally, because so much of the legitimacy of U.S. leadership comes from our commitment to the rule of law, we urge you to seek a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force. If the Security Council is unable to fulfill the role international law mandates for it, we urge you to offer a legal justification based on clear precedent relating to individual or collective self-defense, as is required by international law.

Mr. President, last week you invoked American global leadership, saying that “It is America that has the capacity and the will to mobilize the world against terrorists.” And last year you rightly cautioned Americans to “discipline our thinking, our definitions and our actions” in order to meet the terrorist threat while protecting our democracy. As you rally the international community to work together to defeat ISIL, we urge you to reaffirm that the United States is not engaged in a perpetual global war against terrorists everywhere and is determined to use force only where necessary and as a last resort.

Sincerely,



Elisa Massimino

Cc: The Honorable Susan Rice  
Ms. Valerie Jarrett  
The Honorable Samantha Power  
Mr. Ben Rhodes  
Mr. Dean Pittman