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Remarks by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, United States Permanent Representative, to the Conference of the Foreign Ministers of Muslim and Western Countries, Astana, Kazakhstan, October 17, 2008

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen --

I begin by thanking President Nazarbayev, the Kazakh government, and all others involved in convening this meeting.

Although the world is presently focused on the financial crisis, we must remember another challenge before us: the continuing critical challenge of overcoming extremism and terror without undermining relations between the Western and Islamic worlds, and preventing xenophobia. We need to respect and understand each other and the key is through dialogue.

Therefore, we welcome this conference.

This is a moment of great anticipation. Soon the U.S. will choose a new President, who will develop his own approach to dealing with both these overriding issues -- the global financial crisis and the continuing challenge of extremism and terror.

Although al-Qaida and its extremist allies have lost ground in Iraq and have decreasing popular support, they remain a potent threat with global reach.

They attack local governments and civil institutions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and several other Islamic countries. They continue to recruit impressionable youth who are alienated from their environment, lack opportunity, and despair about the circumstances in their region.

Terrorist groups such as al-Qaida seek to provoke a clash of civilizations. In truth, those in the Islamic world have been and will remain the primary victims of terrorist acts. I have seen first hand in Afghanistan and Iraq the terrible suffering and devastation inflicted on Muslims by extremists and their allies.

Al-Qaida and its supporters are the common enemies of humanity. Failure to recognize them as such will undermine our effectiveness in dealing with this challenge, which requires a global partnership involving Islamic countries and the West. Together we have made progress since the terrible attack of 9/11.

We can do more to undermine the terrorists and discredit their ideology by cutting their access to resources, disrupting their networks, and supporting mainstream forces.

We believe it is vitally important to develop longer-term partnerships to transform and stabilize the

broader Middle East. Periods of greatness distinguish much of the history of the Islamic world. Yet today many parts of it face troubled times. Although it is the ultimate responsibility of the leaders of this region to bring about needed transformations, the interests and values of my country lie in supporting the progress of the Islamic world, just as we supported progress in Europe and Asia in the 20th century. Part of our efforts focus on resolving regional disputes. It is important for everyone to know that we recognize Palestinian needs and the imperatives of Israeli security and understand that regional stability requires Arab-Israeli peace.

We are committed to a two-state solution to the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of a comprehensive regional peace.

Building a more stable region also requires us to focus on the success of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Together we need to take advantage of the election of a new government in Pakistan and cooperate against extremists. And we must oppose both nuclear proliferation and terrorism as instruments to advance national objectives.

We understand that progress will be different in every state of the region. It will require step-by-step political and economic reforms -- including the reform of education systems -- and an understanding that change cannot come all at once or at a risk to stability. But at the same time, progress must be credible and be seen as such. In the longer term, we believe that this path will lead to economic prosperity and democratization -- with systems of representative government grounded in the cultures and traditions of the region.

I want to say a few words about attitudes towards Muslims in the U.S. My country is one of the most -- if not the most -- open and pluralist societies in the world. We value freedom of religion as a fundamental right. Americans respect Islam and all other religions. People with different backgrounds, including Muslims, have come together to build a thriving multi-ethnic society. We have faced our difficulties along the way, and we recognize we still have a ways to go. But we continue to progress.

Some have said that American society is anti-Muslim. Let me tell you, as a Muslim, that is not true. Regrettably, there are elements of anti-Islamic prejudice, which are to be deplored and do not represent the America I know. But importantly there is equality before the law and a commitment to equal opportunity for all. My own experience offers an example of the incredible opportunity America provides its citizens. Probably the greatest lesson America offers is that a complex, multi-ethnic, and multi-sectarian society can be founded and unified around a set of values and ideas.

America is said to have a civic religion -- strongly held beliefs about the rights of individuals, the limited role of the state, tolerance for the beliefs of others, and the separation of religion and the state. Within the framework of these philosophical points, an enormous sphere for private thought and action is created --

a sphere equally enjoyed by Christians, Muslims, and adherents of other faiths. And wave after wave of immigrants from Muslim countries -- including my own, Afghanistan -- in the 1980s and 1990s were able to become Americans without giving up their religious or cultural identities.

The United States cares deeply about the success of the Islamic world. In recent years, Americans have sacrificed their lives and treasure to protect Muslims abroad, including in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, and Afghanistan, and we have advocated for Muslim rights in other countries -- including China and Burma.

My country is actively pursuing increased interaction and dialogue with the Islamic world, as

demonstrated by the appointment of a U.S. special envoy to the OIC and the expansion of exchange programs throughout the region.

All of us have an interest and responsibility to overcome the challenge of extremism and terror.

As we work together to combat extremism, we must be equally committed to fighting discrimination in our own societies. Despite differences between the Western and Islamic worlds, we share unshakable values -- the dignity of each individual, respect for all cultures and civilizations, and the aspiration for intellectual, social and material progress from generation to generation.

Thank you.