

Obama: U.S. at war with those who have perverted Islam

WASHINGTON (AP) — Muslims in the U.S. and around the world have a responsibility to fight a misconception that terrorist groups like the Islamic State speak for them, President Barack Obama said Wednesday in his most direct remarks yet about any link between Islam and terrorism.

For weeks, the White House has sidestepped the question of whether deadly terror attacks in Paris and other Western cities amount to “Islamic extremism,” wary of offending a major world religion or lending credibility to the “war on terror” that his predecessor waged. But as he hosted a White House summit on countering violent extremism, Obama said some in Muslim communities have bought into the notion that Islam is incompatible with tolerance and modern life.

“We are not at war with Islam,” Obama said. “We are at war with people who have perverted Islam.”

While putting the blame on IS and similar groups — Obama said the militants masquerade as religious leaders but are really terrorists — the president also appealed directly on prominent Muslims to do more to distance themselves from brutal ideologies. He said all individuals have a duty to “speak up very clearly” in opposition to violence against innocent people.

“Just as leaders like myself reject the notion that terrorists like ISIL genuinely represent Islam, Muslim leaders need to do more



Attendees of the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism listen as President Barack Obama speaks Wednesday in the South Court Auditorium of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House Complex in Washington.

than discredit the notion that our nations are determined to suppress Islam,” Obama said.

Issuing such a direct challenge to Muslims marked a clear departure from the restrained, cautious language Obama and his aides have used to describe the situation in the

past.

In the days after last month’s shootings at a satirical French newspaper that had caricatured the Prophet Muhammad, Obama avoided calling the attack an example of “Islamic extremism,” and instead opted for the more generic

“violent extremism.” Recently, the White House also struggled to explain whether the U.S. believes the Afghan Taliban to be a terrorist organization.

That refusal to directly assess any Islamic role in the terrifying scenes playing out in Europe, the

Mideast and Africa has drawn criticism — especially from national security hawks, who argued the Obama counterterrorism strategy couldn’t be successful if the president was unable or unwilling to confront what they considered the true nature of the threat.

White House aides said they were avoiding associating the attacks with Islam for the sake of “accuracy” and to avoid lending credence to the terrorists’ own justification for violence — a strict interpretation of Islam.

“These are individuals who carried out an act of terrorism, and they later tried to justify that act of terrorism by invoking the religion of Islam and their own deviant view of it,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said at the time.

Yet the argument over terminology has increasingly become a distraction, including this week as Obama gathered law enforcement officials, Muslim leaders and lawmakers for a three-day summit on violent extremism.

In his remarks Wednesday, Obama acknowledged it was a touchy subject but insisted it was critical to tackle the issue “head-on.”

“We can’t shy away from these discussions,” Obama said. “And too often, folks are understandably sensitive about addressing some of these root issues, but we have to talk about them honestly and clearly.”

Islamic State militants find a foothold in Libya

CAIRO (AP) — Libya, virtually a failed state in recent years, has succeeded in one way: It’s providing a perfect opportunity for the Islamic State group to expand from Syria and Iraq to establish a strategic foothold closer to European shores.

Extremists loyal to the group have taken control of two Libyan cities on the Mediterranean coast, have moved toward oil facilities and are slowly infiltrating the capital, Tripoli, and the second-largest city, Benghazi. They have siphoned off young recruits from rival militant groups linked to al-Qaida and in some places taken over those groups’ training camps, mosques and media networks.

Notably, there appears to be strong coordination between the Libya branch and the group’s central leadership in Syria and Iraq. One of its top clerics, Bahraini Turki al-Binali, has visited the Libyan city of Sirte to preach: in 2013 and again at the end of last year, soon before it fell into the hands of the group’s supporters, according to a rival militia official based there.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity for fear for his life.

A video released last week showing the beheading of a group of Egyptian Christians abducted from Sirte was produced by the IS media branch.

About 400 mostly Yemeni and Tunisian fighters are in Sirte, according to Libyan Interior Minister Omar al-Sinki.

Embattled Debaltseve falls to Ukraine rebels; troops retreat

ARTEMIVSK, Ukraine (AP) — Government soldiers pulled out of a ferociously contested railway hub in eastern Ukraine Wednesday, ending a siege so intense the retreating troops said they couldn’t get water or food amid relentless shelling by Russian-backed separatists. At least six soldiers were killed in the withdrawal and more than 100 wounded.

President Petro Poroshenko sought to portray the fall of Debaltseve in a positive light, saying

the pullback was carried out “in a planned and organized manner,” despite assertions by exhausted and dirt-caked soldiers, some of whom made their way out on foot, that their forces suffered heavy losses.

No matter the circumstances, the retreat appeared to be an acceptance by the Ukrainian leader of a humiliating defeat in exchange for a chance at pushing a shaky truce agreement forward and securing the pullback of heavy weapons.

The loss of Debaltseve was a serious setback for the army. The town is a strategic railroad junction that lies on the most direct route between the separatist east’s

two major cities, Donetsk and Luhansk. By taking control of it, rebels gain significant transportation connections to boost their regions’ capacity to function as a unified entity.

Court nixes Guantanamo conviction of Australian ex-detainee

MIAMI (AP) — An appeals court on Wednesday struck down the terrorism conviction of Australian David Hicks, reversing one of the few successful

prosecutions of a prisoner before a U.S. military court at the Navy base at Guantanamo Bay.

The U.S. Court of Military Commission Review vacated Hicks’ March 2007 guilty plea, the first conviction of a prisoner at the base in Cuba and still one of only a handful.

Attorney Wells Dixon said he immediately called Hicks’ lawyer in Australia, where it was the middle of the night, to pass on the news to his client.

“David is aware of the decision and he is thrilled,” Dixon said. “He is free to live his life without this conviction hanging over his

head.”

Hicks, 39, pleaded guilty to providing material support to terrorism. It was a plea bargain in which all but nine months of his seven-year sentence was suspended and he was allowed to return home by the end of that year.

Last year, an appeals court ruling in the case of another detainee found that material support was not a legally viable war crime for conduct that occurred before 2006, when Congress passed legislation authorizing the special wartime court at Guantanamo known as a military commission. Hicks had been in custody since late 2001.



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