



**UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM**

Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov,

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

Eleventh “Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat”

24 August 2020, 10 AM

Mr. President,

Excellencies and Distinguished Representatives,

Let me begin by expressing my profound condolences to Afghanistan, Chad, France, Nigeria, Somalia, the United Kingdom, and all Member States which have recently suffered terrorist attacks. My heartfelt thoughts and sympathy go to the survivors and families of the victims.

I thank you for the opportunity to brief the Security Council on the eleventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security, and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering this threat, as mandated by the Security Council resolution 2368 (2017).

The report was prepared by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, led by Mr. Fitton-Brown, and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, led by Ms. Coninx, in close collaboration with my Office, and with contributions from other United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact entities.

Mr. President,

This report covers a period like no other, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting virtually all Member States. This pandemic environment raises several strategic and practical challenges for counter-terrorism, which we discussed during the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week organized by my Office last month.

Our discussions during the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week showed that States need to stay attuned to how the ISIL threat evolves during and after the pandemic. They also emphasized the need to sustain the focus and resources required to address the persistent threat posed by ISIL and the continuing challenges posed by foreign terrorist fighters.

Since the start of the year, we have seen contrasting regional disparities in the threat trajectory. In conflict zones, the threat has increased, as evidenced by ISIL's regrouping and increasing activity in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, and among some of its regional affiliates.

However, in non-conflict zones, the threat appears to have decreased in the short term. Measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19, such as lockdowns and restrictions on movement, seem to have reduced the risk of terrorist attacks in many countries.

Yet, there is a continued trend of attacks by individuals inspired online and acting alone or in small groups, which could be fueled by ISIL's opportunistic propaganda efforts during the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic's impact on recruitment and fundraising activities remains unclear, as its socio-economic fallout could exacerbate conditions conducive to terrorism and increase the medium- to long-term threat, both within and outside conflict zones.

Meanwhile, there is no clear indication of a change in ISIL's strategic direction under its new leader. Command and control arrangements between the ISIL core and its remote "provinces" have continued to loosen, thereby strengthening regional affiliates.

Mr. President,

I would like to highlight some developments in different regions.

In the Middle East, the ISIL core has continued to consolidate its position in some areas previously under its control, operating increasingly confidently and openly. More than 10,000 ISIL fighters are estimated to remain active in Iraq and Syria, moving freely in small cells between the two countries. There has been a significant increase in ISIL attacks in both countries in 2020 compared to 2019.

The COVID-19 crisis has further complicated the already dire and unsustainable situation of thousands of individuals with suspected links to ISIL who are stranded in the conflict zone, especially women and children. Repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration and the protection of the vulnerable have become ever more urgent. While some states have repatriated and continue to repatriate children, we have seen only limited progress in overcoming legal, political, and practical hurdles to repatriation.

The global threat from ISIL is likely to increase if the international community fails to meet this challenge. Decisive action is required from Member States on humanitarian, human rights, and security grounds. The Secretary-General reiterates his call on Member States to meet their obligations under international law and repatriate their nationals -- women, men, and children. The United Nations system stands ready to support their efforts in this regard.

Turning to Africa, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) remains a major focus of ISIL global propaganda, and its total membership of approximately 3,500 makes it one of the largest of the

remote “provinces”. ISWAP continued to reinforce links with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which remains the most dangerous group in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and the Niger.

Although ISIL has only a few hundred fighters in Libya, it has been exploiting local tensions between ethnic groups. It represents a potent threat capable of broader regional impact. The risk of escalation of the conflict in Libya could allow ISIL to expand its activity.

Another worrying development is the attacks staged by the Islamic State Central Africa Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Mozambique, including complex attacks and brief takeovers of villages.

In Europe, the threat continues to come mainly from Internet-driven, homegrown terrorist radicalization. Three ISIL-inspired attacks occurred in France and two in the United Kingdom during the reporting period, while other attacks by lone actors against soft public targets were thankfully foiled. Acute concerns persist about radicalization and failed rehabilitation in prisons, and the imminent release of dangerous inmates with a terrorist background or connections.

Several Member States in Europe report a growing terrorist threat from “right-wing violent extremism”, which requires intelligence services to shift their operational and analytical priorities away from a focus on ISIL.

In Asia, ISIL’s affiliate in Afghanistan remains capable of high-profile attacks in various parts of the country, including Kabul, despite continued territorial losses and the arrest of its leaders. The group seeks to use Afghan territory to spread its influence across the region, similar to the approach of ISIL’s core. It also aims to attract fighters who oppose inter alia the peace agreement reached between the Taliban and the United States.

In other parts of Asia, ISIL claimed its first attack in the Maldives in April. Concern remains over the recruitment of ISIL fighters in the country and the looming challenge of managing returnees from the core

conflict zone. In South-East Asia, attacks on security forces occur regularly, but government authorities have maintained pressure on ISIL activities through counter-terrorism operations.

Mr. President,

The report of the Secretary-General also highlights how the United Nations system has continued to actively support Member States over the past six months despite the pandemic.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, United Nations entities swiftly adjusted their operations to ensure business continuity. Collaboration under the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact continued with regular virtual meetings and joint projects. At the end of March, my Office launched the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Platform to further facilitate this process and engagement with Member States. I have already reported to the Security Council on the outcomes of the successful Counterterrorism Week in July.

My Office has worked closely with CTED and other Compact partners to incorporate flexible approaches in our capacity-building support to Member States, including by using online platforms and developing remote needs-assessment methodologies.

I would like to draw your attention to a few key activities of my Office.

First, we led the development of a multi-agency framework to provide coordinated United Nations support to requesting Member States on the protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of third country nationals returning from Iraq and Syria. The framework, coordinated by my office and UNICEF, aims to ensure that this support is human rights-compliant and gender-sensitive, and takes into account the best interests of the child.

Second, we continued prioritizing our work on victims of terrorism, including encouraging Member States to identify specific actions to uphold their rights in national counter-terrorism strategies. The

commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to the Victims of Terrorism last week reminded us that we need to do more to support victims.

In particular, more needs to be done to address sexual violence committed by ISIL, both in terms of accountability and support to victims.

Third, countering the financing of terrorism remains a key priority. The pandemic increases the potential risk of cybercrime by terrorists to raise and move funds. In June, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in my Office, together with CTED, UNODC, and the Office of Information and Communications Technology, launched a new, global capacity-building programme for the prevention and suppression of the financing of terrorism, in line with the Security Council resolution 2462 (2019).

Fourth, my Office has continued to partner with a broad range of entities to support Member States in law enforcement and border security. The United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme led by my Office to support Member States in implementing Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014), 2396 (2017), and 2482 (2019) currently has 36 confirmed beneficiaries in different regions. The programme adapted to the COVID-19 crisis by developing, together with CTED, an online assessment methodology that was first used in June in Côte d'Ivoire.

Lastly, during the High-Level Open Debate convened by the Indonesian Presidency earlier this month on "Addressing the issue of linkages between terrorism and organized crime", we discussed the need to tackle the illicit supply of small arms and light weapons to terrorist groups. UNOCT, UNODC, CTED, and the Office for Disarmament Affairs launched a joint project in February focused on Central Asia to address this phenomenon.

Mr. President,

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the challenges we face in eliminating the threat of terrorism. ISIL and other terrorist groups seek to exploit the far-reaching disruption and negative socio-economic and political impacts of the pandemic.

As emphasized during the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, strengthening collective action and international counter-terrorism cooperation must remain a priority during and after the pandemic.

As Member States continue their efforts to develop comprehensive responses to the threat posed by ISIL and terrorism, they can count on the full support of my Office and the United Nations system through the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

Thank you, Mr. President.