



**UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM**

**Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General,
United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
[pre-recorded]**

Side Event - Life After ISIS: Returning Individuals with Links to Terrorist Groups from Syria and Iraq and the UN Support Available to Member States through the Global Framework

24 June 2021, 12.30 p.m. – 2 p.m. EST

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join in welcoming you all to this important discussion on the situation of individuals with links to terrorist groups returning from Syria and Iraq.

I would like to thank the United States, the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for jointly convening this event in partnership with my Office.

I hope you all had the opportunity to watch “The Return: Life After ISIS”, of which we will see a clip shortly. It helps demonstrate the compelling need to repatriate people to their countries of nationality and to have in place the kinds of measures and programmes needed to rehabilitate and reintegrate people in a way that reduces risk for everyone involved. That is why I appreciate the opportunity this event provides to raise awareness about the coordinated support that the United Nations offers to Member States to address the multifaceted challenges associated with returnees.

This complex issue seems intractable to many, yet it remains an urgent priority. It is important that the wider international community, including partner regional organizations and civil society, remain engaged. Because we need a way forward: the current situation is not sustainable and will not resolve on its own.

Ever since ISIL lost its territorial hold in Syria and Iraq, its captured fighters and stranded families have posed significant new challenges.

In Syria alone there remain an estimated 10,000 suspected ISIL fighters in detention facilities, and 42,500 foreign nationals in displacement camps, the vast majority of whom are women and children.

Children who were either brought to or born in Syria and Iraq face particularly harsh realities. It is unthinkable that they should go through their formative years in such dire conditions, traumatized and deprived of protection and their basic rights denied.

There are concerns that these children are being harmed physically and emotionally and vulnerable to the predations of ISIL enforcers. Leaving them exposed to constant abuse will likely just bring about the very thing that people hope to avoid by keeping them where they are.

Children are incredibly resilient: they will heal and become a force for good, if only we create the right conditions.

My proposition is simple: ensuring the safety, rights and well-being of these children requires their return, protection, and reintegration into their home communities.

In addition to the serious humanitarian and human rights concerns that should guide our decisions to return foreign nationals from Syria and Iraq, the international community is facing serious security implications and accountability gaps.

Violent extremist activities have been on the rise in Al-Hol camp, which has prompted security operations leading to the arrest of dozens of ISIL suspects.

It has become obvious that inaction leads to resurgence of terrorist activity and a risk of uncontrolled returns.

Protection, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families is essential to break the cycle of violence.

Excellencies,

Today, I stress the obvious: “where there is a will, there is a way”.

Together with UNICEF, my Office has brought together 13 other United Nations entities to provide an “All-of- UN” Global Framework to support requesting Member States faced with the return of their nationals from Syria and Iraq.

The Global Framework coordinates human-rights based, age- and gender-sensitive assistance to address humanitarian and protection needs, while promoting security and accountability.

The United Nations stands ready to support Member States in taking effective action to address this serious humanitarian and security challenge.

Thank you.