



# Security Council

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## Twelfth 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

### I. Introduction

1. In adopting its resolution [2253 \(2015\)](#), the Security Council expressed its determination to address the threat posed to international peace and security by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant<sup>1</sup> (ISIL, also known as Da'esh) and associated individuals and groups and requested that I provide an initial strategic-level report on the threat, followed by updates every four months. In its resolution [2368 \(2017\)](#), the Council requested that I continue to provide, every six months, strategic-level reports that reflect the gravity of the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat.

2. This is the twelfth such report.<sup>2</sup> It was prepared by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team<sup>3</sup> and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate in close collaboration with the Office of Counter-Terrorism and other United Nations entities and international organizations.

3. During the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, the threat posed by ISIL has increased and may rise further in the coming months, in conflict zones as the longer-term fallout of the pandemic risks benefiting emboldened regional affiliates of ISIL, and in non-conflict zones in the form of inspired attacks as a result of a surge in online propaganda during the pandemic. Moreover, ISIL could regain the capacity to orchestrate international attacks over the coming year. Addressing the protracted issue of ISIL fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters, and their family members in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic remains an urgent, strategic imperative for international peace and security.

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<sup>1</sup> Listed as Al-Qaida in Iraq (QDe.115).

<sup>2</sup> See [S/2016/92](#), [S/2016/501](#), [S/2016/830](#), [S/2017/97](#), [S/2017/467](#), [S/2018/80](#), [S/2018/770](#), [S/2019/103](#), [S/2019/612](#), [S/2020/95](#) and [S/2020/774](#).

<sup>3</sup> The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolutions [1526 \(2004\)](#) and [2253 \(2015\)](#) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities.



## II. Threat assessment

### A. Overview of threat

4. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to influence terrorism trends in the second half of 2020. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIL in 2019, its sizable remnants were still of concern to Member States, with foreign terrorist fighters assessed as a major, long-term and global threat. Precarious holding arrangements in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic for individuals with a suspected or perceived association with terrorism, still including many foreign terrorist fighters and their family members, have yet to be systematically addressed by the international community. Several Member States assess that allowing the problem to go unresolved could ultimately increase the threat.

5. Some Member States observed a subtle change in the response of ISIL to the pandemic as the established narrative in the group's propaganda materials portraying the virus as "divine punishment of arrogance and unbelief" grew harder to sustain in the light of its universal impact. ISIL continued to call for attacks on its enemies while they were distracted and their counter-terrorism defences presumably impaired. However, the idea of weaponizing the virus, first discussed within ISIL in March, does not appear to have materialized as a practical plan.<sup>4</sup> Generally, Member States assess that ISIL has been unable to flesh out a purposeful strategy to take advantage of the pandemic, while its messaging remains aspirational and lacking in practical focus.

6. Outside conflict zones, restrictions on movement and meetings in order to contain the spread of the virus have continued to make it difficult for ISIL fighters and other terrorists to travel, gather or raise revenue. Access to potential targets has been reduced depending on the kinds and levels of restrictions, with public targets remaining largely unavailable where a full lockdown is in force. ISIL still lacks an external operations capability and the pandemic further reduces opportunities to mount high-impact attacks. Inspired attacks will be the main risk over the next year outside conflict zones and frequent low-casualty attacks could have a high cumulative psychological impact.

7. As people spend more time at home and online, individuals susceptible to ISIL propaganda and incitement risk greater exposure. The socioeconomic toll and political fallout of the pandemic, meanwhile, could further aggravate the longer-term threat by exacerbating drivers of terrorist radicalization. These factors could lead to a "bottle up and release" effect or a sudden rash of attacks when pandemic-related restrictions are eased in various locations.

8. In conflict zones, terrorists have maintained the same ability to move and operate despite the pandemic. ISIL was particularly active in a number of States in Africa affected by conflict in the second half of 2020. Despite setbacks in Afghanistan, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) has continued to exploit difficulties in the Afghan peace process. ISIL continues to pin its main hopes for resurgence on the ongoing insecurity in its core areas of operation in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

9. Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla (QDi.426) is not assessed to have changed the strategic direction of ISIL since becoming its leader in late 2019. Member State counter-terrorism operations have inhibited his command and control abilities, which in turn has led to the ISIL core giving further autonomy to regional affiliates and has strengthened the role of the group's so-called general directorate of

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<sup>4</sup> Information provided by a Member State.

provinces. This branch could prove key to reviving the external operations capability of ISIL, which Member States expect may occur during 2021 and will depend partly on the efficiency and interoperability of the regional affiliates. As ISIL entrenches itself in various conflict zones and destabilizes them further, exploiting local fragilities, it will have more capabilities and options available to project an external threat to non-conflict zones.

10. The leader of ISIL has maintained a policy of avoiding direct communication. While this preserves his personal safety, some Member States assess that he runs the risk of losing interest from supporters worldwide. His spokesperson, Abu Hamzah al-Qurayshi (not listed), has released four audio broadcasts in the past year but this is considered a poor substitute. On 18 October, the spokesperson betrayed frustration in his injunction that supporters spend less time online and more time mounting attacks, jailbreaks and other operations. He specified Al-Qaida, the Taliban and Member States as the key targets for high-impact attacks.

### **1. ISIL fighters and their family members in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic**

11. The potential threat from ISIL fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters, and risks to their family members in displacement camps in Iraq and the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic are assessed by Member States as growing more serious with neglect. This includes possible escapes from the holding facilities, which could be compounded by disorder and rioting in the wake of COVID-19 outbreaks. Several Member States expect this situation to have a long-term security impact globally, in particular in other conflict zones, and continue to urge repatriation for prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration, as appropriate in each case.

12. Member States assess that ISIL would struggle to replicate the “Breaking the Walls” campaign that was instrumental in the resurgence of Al-Qaida in Iraq because it cannot easily secure and absorb large numbers of fugitives. Still, the ISIL spokesperson, in a statement on 18 October, underscored the group’s policy in 2019 of prioritizing this approach. Hence, ISIL is expected to refocus in the year ahead on increasing its capability to orchestrate jailbreaks and assist escapees, encouraged by the propaganda and disruption impact of the prison break fomented in August 2020 by ISIL-K in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. ISIL is also aware of the propaganda resonance of any potential outbreak of COVID-19 and associated unrest in holding facilities.

13. According to Member States, a terrorist threat may be incubating in displacement camps and detention facilities housing ISIL fighters, their family members and other individuals with a suspected or perceived affiliation with ISIL, especially in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. Many instances of radicalization, fundraising, training and incitement of external operations have been reported in the Hawl camp, where some 65,000 people remain, far above its intended capacity. ISIL supporters have described the camp as “the final remnant of the caliphate”. Since late 2019, the de facto local authorities have found it harder to maintain security in the camps and facilities, especially in Hawl. The number of guards, meanwhile, fell from 1,500 in mid-2019 to 400 in late 2020.<sup>5</sup> There are still approximately 27,500 foreign children held in camps in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, including an estimated 8,000 non-Iraqi children, 90 per cent of whom are under 12 years of age. The Hawl camp annex for non-Iraqi foreigners houses over 7,000 children, some reportedly being groomed as future ISIL operatives.<sup>6</sup>

14. In November, one Member State reported that there were some 11,000 male ISIL fighters held in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. These comprise some

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by a Member State.

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by a Member State.

5,000 Syrians, 1,600 Iraqis, 1,700 foreign terrorist fighters of known nationality and around 2,500 of unknown nationality. The improvised and converted facilities in which they are held are often unsuitable from humanitarian and security perspectives, and it remains unclear how they will be judicially processed. The Huri camp reportedly hosts 100 male children. Member States are concerned that the several riots that took place in 2020 in Hasakah prison could easily recur in that facility or elsewhere.

15. An extension of the Roj facility for internally displaced persons was finished in July, doubling its capacity to 4,000. Some foreign women have been transferred there from the Hawl annex, reportedly with reluctance in many cases. Security at the facility is more effective than at others, with one Member State reporting that the cost of obtaining assistance in escaping to a safe destination is around \$14,000, compared with \$3,000 to escape from the Hawl camp.

## **2. ISIL finances**

16. ISIL cells operating in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic continue to fund their operations through a combination of extortion of the local population or similar criminal activity, remittances from abroad and cash reserves believed to remain under the control of the group's leadership. The location and value of such reserves are difficult to assess now that the group no longer controls territory. ISIL was previously estimated to have approximately \$100 million in reserve.

17. Member States consistently report that funds flow to ISIL family members housed in displacement camps through a range of methods. Most involve remittances to financial institutions or money service businesses in neighbouring States, which are subsequently couriered into the Syrian Arab Republic or remitted through informal financial networks.

18. The reported use of cryptocurrency in the Syrian Arab Republic has increased in recent months. There are ongoing reports of terrorist fighters or their family members seeking to raise funds via cryptocurrency wallet addresses. The pandemic has also been exploited by those seeking to profit from the sale of personal protective equipment. One State brought charges against a reported ISIL facilitator for operating a website purporting to sell N95 face masks.

## **B. Regional developments**

### **1. Middle East**

19. Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic remain the primary focus of the objectives of ISIL. The group maintains clandestine cells pursuing a protracted insurgency. The cells are given a significant degree of tactical autonomy by the central leadership. ISIL is able to sustain attacks in rural and desert areas, with a lower rate in urban areas, in particular in the Iraqi-Syrian border region and in the Governorates of Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din along the Hamrin mountain range. Likewise, ISIL fighters operate freely on the Syrian side of the border in and around Dayr al-Zawr. Member States report that ISIL engages with smugglers operating across the border between the two countries.

20. An estimated 10,000 ISIL fighters are believed to remain active in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, the majority of whom are based in Iraq. However, as the capability of the Iraqi security forces grows, it is expected that the trajectory of ISIL operational activity will be pushed downwards in the country. Foreign terrorist fighters numbering in the low thousands remain active within this ISIL core conflict zone. Member States assess that these elements have been assimilated through family

and other ties within their new environment, observing that very few are now choosing to leave the region. With regard to fighters in detention, there are continuing concerns about the possibility of their being released from holding facilities and rejoining ISIL or leaving the region.

21. While the Idlib region in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic is dominated by a rival group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham,<sup>7</sup> it remains an important facilitation and transit point for ISIL. Member States report that some ISIL leaders and their families continue to shelter in the region, which also offers the safest access point to Turkey for ISIL members seeking to leave the Syrian Arab Republic.

22. In July and August, counter-terrorism operations against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Yemen (ISIL-Yemen) (QDe.166) caused the death of several of its leaders, including its overall leader, Abu al-Walid al-Adani, and its explosives expert, Abu Sulayman al-Adani. As a result, ISIL-Yemen is now going through a period of tactical recovery.

## 2. Africa

23. In Libya, there have been positive developments in the intra-Libyan dialogue process facilitated by the United Nations, including the adoption on 23 October of a ceasefire agreement between the parties. Further stabilization would reduce the risk of future resurgence of terrorist groups in the country. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Libya (ISIL-Libya) (QDe.165) has continued to decline, in particular with the confirmation by Member States of the death of its leader, Abu Abdullah al-Libi (also known as Abu Mu'az al-Tikriti, or Abdulqadir al-Najdi), in Sabha on 15 September. However, a contingent of ISIL-Libya fighters remains present in the south of the country, and the group reportedly continues to maintain sleeper cells in some northern coastal towns.

24. Having pledged allegiance to ISIL in 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, with a contingent estimated to number between 500 and 1,200 fighters, maintains an active presence in north-east Sinai, despite the growing military pressure of Egyptian security forces. The group has committed sporadic attacks on checkpoints, military installations and critical infrastructure, mainly using improvised explosive devices. Egypt assesses it to be a local group with no financial, operational or organizational links with the ISIL core or other affiliates.

25. In Morocco, cells inspired by ISIL have been disrupted in several towns, including Tangier and Tétouan. On 27 October, a leader of one such cell held in custody murdered a prison guard in Tiflet prison. The cells were composed of “frustrated travellers” who had been unable to join ISIL in the core conflict zone and instead pledged allegiance to ISIL and planned local attacks using improvised explosive devices.

26. ISIL affiliates in West Africa operate primarily through Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (QDe.163), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (QDe.162) and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (commonly known as Boko Haram) (QDe.138). In the Sahel, ISGS experienced significant attrition of its forces following battles with Al-Qaida-affiliated Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) (QDe.159) and as a result of robust counter-terrorism operations, though its command and control structure is believed to remain intact. Numerous attacks by these groups against the military and civilians at the end of 2020 in the Liptako-Gourma region demonstrate their resilience and adaptability. In the Lake Chad Basin area, both ISWAP and Boko Haram have maintained their level of

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<sup>7</sup> Listed as Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant (QDe.137).

operations. ISWAP is assessed as benefiting from strong ties with the ISIL leadership in the core conflict zone, which is reflected in the group's media and propaganda.

27. In the latter part of 2020, Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) affiliates in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique enhanced their operations. ISCAP is emerging as a strong ISIL affiliate, with sophisticated tactics and capabilities, emboldened by recent operational successes. Member States reported increased recruitment, seizures of towns, destruction of property and multiple civilian casualties. ISCAP intensified and coordinated high-impact conventional attacks, sometimes on targets simultaneously, including two attacks in Mozambique concurrently with its first cross-border incursion into the United Republic of Tanzania on 14 October.

28. Member States assess that there has been probable coordination and skills transfer among ISCAP affiliates given that recent attacks revealed discernible similarities in the modus operandi. One Member State indicated that the ISIL core is controlling and directing ISCAP attacks as well as remitting funds. For instance, in September, financial support was channelled from the ISIL core through ISIL networks and sympathizers in Somalia and some East African countries.<sup>8</sup>

29. The ISIL affiliate in Somalia sustained recruitment and training and conducted low-scale attacks alongside other activities. Some Member States assess that ISIL in Somalia continues to serve as the logistical centre for ISCAP affiliates (see [S/2020/717](#), para. 48). During the reporting period, the group focused on training recruits and providing ideological guidance to and directing ISCAP affiliates. Member States observed that back-up trainers and tactical operatives were sent to bolster operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique.

30. In Mozambique, non-State armed groups identifying with ISCAP presented an increasingly cohesive and capable threat, conducting indiscriminate and retaliatory attacks in the northern Province of Cabo Delgado. They expanded operations to more districts and provinces under the banner of ISCAP, demonstrating a strategic intention to capture more localities and enhanced operational capabilities, including the capture and continued holding of the port of Mocimboa da Praia in spite of sustained military operations by government forces.

31. ISCAP in the Democratic Republic of Congo continued to deploy advanced capabilities during several attacks in Beni and other locations in North Kivu and Ituri Provinces. ISCAP bolstered operations by carrying out, with modest success, attacks on hard military targets during which it confiscated weaponry and armaments from the Congolese military. The group sought to occupy more locations and establish new bases. Member States observed a new trend as ISCAP used conventional weaponry and improvised explosive devices. In October, it launched an onslaught on the Kangbaya central prison in Beni to release its operatives. Over 1,000 prisoners reportedly escaped, including about 200 ISCAP operatives and enablers.

### 3. Europe

32. In Europe, an endogenous threat persists from lone attackers inspired by ISIL. A spate of attacks in several Western European countries in the latter half of 2020 is assessed to have been partly inspired by ISIL, while in some cases investigations also identified Al-Qaida as a key motivator. The attacks included a knife attack near the former offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris on 25 September; a suspected stabbing in Dresden, Germany, on 4 October; the beheading of a middle schoolteacher outside Paris on 16 October; a stabbing at a church in Nice, France, on 29 October; a

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<sup>8</sup> Information provided by a Member State.

shooting in Vienna on 2 November that killed four people; and another stabbing attack in Lugano, Switzerland, on 24 November.

33. None of the attackers in France were previously known to law enforcement authorities. The shooting in Austria was carried out by a man who had served a prison sentence for attempting to travel to the Syrian Arab Republic to join ISIL and had been enrolled in a rehabilitation programme. Taken together, the attacks highlight a number of concerning trends, including evidence of significant advance planning despite an unsophisticated modus operandi. In most cases they involved young men with no previous signs of violent behaviour, but who acted with extreme cruelty, in particular in the case of the killing of the schoolteacher in France. The attacks have revived debates in Europe about the challenges of terrorist radicalization in prison, the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, and the monitoring of terrorism offenders upon release from prison.

#### 4. Asia

34. ISIL-K continued to demonstrate resilience in Afghanistan notwithstanding its degraded military capabilities, including in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. Although the group faces challenges in its ability to seize and hold significant territory in those provinces, it has claimed responsibility for a number of recent high-profile attacks, including the devastating attack on a maternity hospital in Kabul in May, the assault on Jalalabad city prison on 2 August, an attack on Kabul University on 2 November and the killing of a female Afghan journalist in Nangarhar Province on 10 December.

35. ISIL-K is currently assessed to have between 1,000 and 2,200 fighters in Afghanistan spread across several provinces<sup>9</sup> and is expected to continue to target Kabul and provincial capitals in future attacks. Shihab al-Muhajir, announced as the group's new leader in June 2020, reportedly heads ISIL operations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and States in Central Asia. He is said to have had an earlier affiliation with and to maintain familial ties to the Haqqani Network.

36. Online recruitment and radicalization of ISIL sympathizers in South Asia continues to be a concern, in particular through propaganda publications targeting followers, including in Maldives and Sri Lanka.

37. ISIL also remains resilient in South-East Asia with a number of factions, in particular in the southern Philippines. This gives special urgency to initiatives developed by authorities in the region, including the promotion of narratives to counter violent extremism online. Although counter-terrorism forces reported successes in disrupting some cells and averting imminent attacks, the region continued to experience violence initiated or inspired by ISIL.

38. The prominence of women involved with ISIL, including in carrying out suicide bombings, continues to be a trend in South-East Asia. Two such attacks occurred in the Philippines on 24 August, both involving women believed to be widows of Abu Sayyaf Group fighters. In October, officials in the Philippines arrested a woman allegedly preparing for an attack.

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<sup>9</sup> Information provided by a Member State.

### **III. Updates on responses to the evolving threat**

#### **A. Overview**

39. Since my previous report, the pandemic has continued to pose significant strategic and practical challenges for Member States' efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and the underlying spread of violent extremism, in full compliance with international law. Member States and United Nations experts have also raised the concern that terrorists may be seeking to exploit new vulnerabilities resulting from the ongoing global health crisis, including by forging opportunistic alliances with organized criminal groups (see [S/2020/754](#)). In the longer term, the economic downturn and the diversion of government resources in the wake of the pandemic could weaken national counter-terrorism efforts and international cooperation and assistance.

40. On 23 November, the Chairs of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1373 \(2001\)](#) concerning counter-terrorism, the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions [1267 \(1999\)](#), [1989 \(2011\)](#) and [2253 \(2015\)](#) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities and the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#) emphasized in a joint briefing to the Council that counter-terrorism must remain high on the international peace and security agenda despite the challenges caused by the pandemic and numerous competing priorities.

41. Relevant United Nations entities continued to ensure business continuity in their support for Member States' counter-terrorism efforts by using remote assessment procedures, delivering online or blended virtual and in-person training, supporting States' efforts to use innovative information technology solutions and organizing virtual events. They also carried out research and analysis to identify new counter-terrorism trends and developments and set up several additional guidance tools to address pressing challenges and promote existing good practices. At a virtual open briefing in August, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate presented its updated technical guide to the implementation of Security Council resolution [1373 \(2001\)](#) and other relevant resolutions.

42. The entities of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact held 42 inter-agency working group meetings virtually from July to December and continued to deliver joint capacity-building initiatives on a range of priority and emerging counter-terrorism issues. The Coordination Committee of the Compact held its fifth meeting in August 2020 to reinforce joint action in supporting balanced implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy during the pandemic.

#### **B. Suspected ISIL fighters and their family members in conflict zones**

##### **1. Current situation**

43. The dire and unsustainable situation faced by individuals, mostly children and women, with suspected links to United Nations-designated terrorist groups, who remain stranded in holding facilities in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, remains of grave concern. They continue to face considerable challenges relating to their basic human rights, including protection, health, shelter, water, sanitation, hygiene and education. The pandemic has further restricted their access to humanitarian assistance and caused the suspension of some protection and support services, while the United Nations is facing 44 per cent and 53.4 per cent funding shortfalls, respectively, for



the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan and the COVID-19 response plan for the country.

44. Member States' efforts to repatriate their nationals from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic have continued to be limited and hampered by pandemic-related travel restrictions, public reluctance in countries of nationality, a lack of diplomatic relations or adequate consular access, and logistical challenges in arranging transportation. Uzbekistan repatriated 25 women and 73 children from the Hawl and Roj camps in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic in December, while other States carried out repatriations of a limited number of individuals.

45. In September, humanitarian actors were allowed to assess needs in several facilities that are de facto under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces and house children believed to be victims of ISIL exploitation or with family ties to the group. In October, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced that they would begin the large-scale release of many of the Syrian women and children held in camps under their control, although only several hundred are reported to have been released so far. A process to address the situation of the many camp residents whose identity documents have been lost, destroyed or confiscated is yet to be established. In Iraq, the Government had by mid-December closed all but three camps under its administration hosting people displaced since 2014.<sup>10</sup>

46. Many camp residents and returnees are survivors of conflict-related sexual violence or children born of conflict-related sexual violence. Their perceived affiliation with ISIL may expose them to new vulnerabilities after leaving the camps, including security risks at checkpoints, retaliation, stigmatization and alienation. Receiving communities may also face security risks and challenges in reintegrating returnees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees continues to monitor the situation of returnees and strongly recommends that the return of internally displaced persons and refugees should be voluntary, safe, dignified and informed by conditions in areas of origin conducive to a sustainable return.

## 2. United Nations support

47. Leveraging the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, the United Nations system continued to actively encourage and offer support to Member States for human rights-based and age- and gender-responsive protection, voluntary repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals with suspected links to United Nations-designated terrorist groups, with the consent of relevant Governments for activities undertaken in territories under their control and in line with the key principles that I set out in April 2019 (see [A/74/677](#), annex V). This support was highlighted in September 2020 during a high-level virtual event organized by the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia on the theme "Central Asian experience with individuals returned from Syria and Iraq: successes, challenges and lessons learned".

48. A new global framework was launched in August to coordinate support among 15 United Nations entities for requesting States with regard to individuals returned from or remaining in displacement camps in Iraq and the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. The framework, jointly led by the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), conforms to the requirements of relevant Security Council resolutions as well as the guiding principles issued in 2015 on foreign terrorist fighters (see [S/2015/939](#), annex II) and the addendum of 2018 thereto

<sup>10</sup> Jad'ah 5, Salamiyah and Amiriyat al-Fallujah remained open as at December 2020.

(see S/2018/1177, annex). United Nations entities have developed a number of field-driven project proposals to implement the global framework in Iraq and Central Asia.

49. The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) continued to support Iraq in its efforts to prosecute ISIL members for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. UNITAD provided training for investigative judges, supported the digitalization and archiving of documentary materials for use as evidence and resumed its support for the excavation of two mass grave sites. In December 2020, UNITAD engaged with Yazidi community members on returning Yazidi remains exhumed during mass grave excavations in 2019. It has developed guidance documents and training to assist investigators in engaging with vulnerable witnesses, including the establishment of a witness protection unit, and has also developed Shuhud, a digital platform that enables witnesses and survivors to submit information remotely, securely and confidentially.

50. UNICEF and its partners continued to deliver critical humanitarian assistance to help children and caregivers in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. In Mosul, Iraq, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) continued its support to strengthen legal proceedings and the representation of children, improve their treatment in detention and support their reintegration. UNICEF and other United Nations entities also continued to support other requesting States in repatriating and reintegrating children safely. In November, UNODC organized a three-day capacity-building workshop for Indonesia on rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups.

### **C. Criminal justice and international legal cooperation**

51. Bringing terrorists to justice and ensuring full accountability for international crimes in compliance with international law continued to present significant challenges compounded by the pandemic. In several States, the pandemic has led to delayed hearings or extended proceedings, case backlogs, prolonged pretrial detention and the suspension of early release programmes, and has hampered victims' access to proceedings.

52. United Nations entities worked to factor these challenges into their support for Member States. In September, UNODC delivered a workshop on using new technologies in criminal proceedings in Nigeria, where the pandemic has prevented in-person hearings. In November, together with the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, UNODC organized a second international expert meeting to review a draft good practices document on remote access to judicial proceedings in terrorism cases. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali supported Malian judicial authorities in providing overseas victims with access to live broadcasts of the trial of the alleged perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Bamako in 2015.

53. United Nations entities continued to support efforts by States to develop and implement comprehensive and tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. A global programme was launched to that effect in September by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre within the Office of Counter-Terrorism, in close cooperation with the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and UNODC. The three entities also developed two projects to provide related assistance to States in the Lake Chad Basin Region and, if requested, Mozambique. United Nations entities also continued to work in partnership with the African Union to support the implementation of the Lake Chad Basin Commission Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko-Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region.

54. Prosecuting terrorists for gender-based crimes, especially crimes of sexual violence, remains particularly challenging, including with respect to finding, protecting and supporting victims and witnesses willing to testify. An analytical brief issued by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate in July on the prosecution of women associated with ISIL found that States had encountered a range of gender-specific challenges in investigations, charging and sentencing practices, rehabilitation and reintegration.

55. Working with practitioners and regional organizations to address challenges relating to the collection, use and sharing of evidence to bring terrorists to justice remained another key priority. Between August and October, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre delivered virtual workshops on online terrorism-related investigations for Bangladesh, Malaysia and States in Central Asia. UNODC delivered two workshops in October for law enforcement officials in Lebanon on collecting admissible evidence in terrorism-related cases while complying with international human rights standards, especially when interviewing women and children. In November, the Counter-Terrorism Committee held a virtual open briefing on the role of judges, prosecutors and defence counsel in bringing terrorists to justice, including the effective use of evidence collected on the battlefield or by the military. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, UNODC and the International Association of Prosecutors also held an expert group meeting to revise the *Practical Guide for Requesting Electronic Evidence Across Borders*, issued in February 2019.

56. The Office of Counter-Terrorism, UNODC and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate provided support to Kazakhstan, Tunisia and Uganda within the framework of a joint programme on the management of violent extremist prisoners. In November, UNODC and the Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization jointly organized training courses in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda to strengthen cooperation between police and prison authorities on preventing and countering violent extremism. UNODC finalized a new regional programme for Arab States to support prison management and foster the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders.

57. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs are preparing a study on the interrelationship between counter-terrorism frameworks and international humanitarian law. The Executive Committee continued to implement a project on strengthening understanding of the implementation of counter-terrorism measures in compliance with international humanitarian law, which is aimed at identifying existing practices, challenges and policy options. In November, UNODC delivered a global online training course on counter-terrorism and international humanitarian law.

#### **D. Supporting victims of ISIL**

58. United Nations entities continued to advance the rights of victims of terrorism, including by encouraging States to include actions to uphold the rights of victims in their national counter-terrorism strategies. On 21 August, I attended the third commemoration of International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to the Victims of Terrorism, organized by the Office of Counter-Terrorism, which was followed in September by the second ministerial meeting of the Group of Friends of Victims of Terrorism. These events provided opportunities to honour and reaffirm solidarity with victims of terrorism while vital services for them, such as criminal justice processes and psychological support, have been interrupted or delayed during the pandemic.

59. On 8 December, the Coalition for Just Reparations<sup>11</sup> of Iraq and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq held a virtual conference on the theme “Reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Iraq: the way forward”. Reflecting on the second reading of the draft Yazidi Survivors Bill by the national parliament of Iraq on 11 November, participants agreed that all survivors should benefit from the forthcoming legislation and that reparative measures should go beyond compensation to include services such as symbolic recognition and guarantees of non-recurrence.

60. The Office of Counter-Terrorism, UNODC and the Inter-Parliamentary Union collaborated to develop model legislative provisions to support and protect the rights and needs of victims of terrorism, on the basis of a series of virtual expert consultations with Member States, members of parliament, parliamentary organizations, civil society and academic institutions. The model provisions will address specific thematic areas, including the right to compensation, access to justice, recognition and remembrance of victims of terrorism and the role of victims associations. They are to be presented at the first Global Congress of Victims of Terrorism, in June 2021.

## **E. Countering the financing of terrorism**

61. The pandemic has compounded persistent difficulties faced by Member States in countering the financing of terrorism, bringing new challenges relating to, inter alia, increased reliance on online transactions and reduced direct contact with customers. Member States remain concerned about the use of the Internet and social media by terrorists to raise and move funds. A number of States have announced law enforcement actions targeting the financing of terrorism through cryptocurrencies. Financial disruptions caused by the pandemic appear to have increased terrorist groups’ reliance on criminal activities, including electronic fraud and cybercrime. International travel restrictions could also give rise to new trafficking and cash smuggling routes.<sup>12</sup>

62. The COVID-19 crisis has fuelled a debate on the impact of legislation and measures to counter the financing of terrorism, including targeted financial sanctions, on emergency humanitarian responses (see [S/2020/493](#), annex) and civil society. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate has launched an initiative within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact to produce guidance for States on countering the financing of terrorism in full compliance with international human rights law, and invited stakeholders, in particular civil society actors, to provide inputs for analysis. In October, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, together with Morocco and the Netherlands, launched a joint initiative under the umbrella of the Global Counterterrorism Forum to identify and disseminate good practices for countering the financing of terrorism while safeguarding civic space, and held an initial expert meeting in December.

63. In response to Security Council resolutions [2462 \(2019\)](#) and [2482 \(2019\)](#), the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre continued to implement a global, integrated capacity-building programme on countering the financing of terrorism. In August, the Office of Counter-Terrorism organized a third workshop for Bahrain on protecting the

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<sup>11</sup> The Coalition for Just Reparations is a diverse alliance of Iraqi civil society organizations supporting reparation claims of survivors and victims of crimes perpetrated during the conflict with ISIL.

<sup>12</sup> See the information note of the Eurasian Group for Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism on the impact of COVID-19; available from <https://eurasiangroup.org/en/measures-taken-in-response-to-the-spread-of-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

non-profit sector from terrorist misuse, and in January 2021 it initiated a similar workshop series for Tajikistan together with the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre also coordinated inputs from United Nations entities for the update of the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group's strategic and operational regional plan on countering the financing of terrorism and, together with the Office of Information and Communications Technology, advanced the development of a software solution for States to enhance the systematic collection, analysis, use and sharing of financial transaction-related data.

64. In November, as part of its support for Iraq in countering the financing of terrorism, UNODC organized a meeting for representatives of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates to enhance understanding of regional terrorism financing risks and strengthen cooperation among competent authorities. It also held a training workshop for Iraqi practitioners on implementing sanctions pursuant to Security Council resolutions [1267 \(1999\)](#) and [1988 \(2011\)](#) to disrupt terrorist networks.

65. In September and October, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute delivered virtual pilot training courses for stakeholders in Albania and Kenya on the use of its policy toolkit entitled "The Hague good practices on the nexus between transnational organized crime and terrorism", developed by the Global Counterterrorism Forum. In November, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in collaboration with the World Customs Organization (WCO) and UNODC, enhanced the work of its informal law enforcement network on mineral-related crimes, focusing on information-exchange, capacity-building and knowledge of supply chains and related trafficking offences. In the Sahel region, WCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) jointly delivered online capacity-building training on tackling illicit trafficking in cultural property.

## **F. Border management and law enforcement**

66. The pandemic has challenged border security and law enforcement experts and practitioners to re-evaluate border security measures, including the role that public health authorities and measures should play in integrated border management strategies. This requires an understanding of the tools and technologies available to Member States to contain the spread of the virus, such as remote and touchless biometric services, including their effectiveness, the adequacy of legislative frameworks to regulate their use and their impact on human rights. In December, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate launched an initiative within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact to further explore the impact of the pandemic on border management and law enforcement in the counter-terrorism context.

67. The United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme led by the Office of Counter-Terrorism continued to support beneficiary States in enhancing their inter-agency detection capabilities by establishing human rights-compliant advance passenger information and passenger name record systems in accordance with Security Council resolutions [2178 \(2014\)](#) and [2396 \(2017\)](#). Under the programme, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate led online deep-dive assessments to support Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Maldives and Sierra Leone, resulting in the development of tailor-made implementation road maps for advance passenger information and passenger name record systems. The programme also delivered its first online training course in October for Botswana.

68. UNODC, in cooperation with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and INTERPOL, continued to support States in the Middle East and North Africa through its Airport Communication Project to identify and intercept foreign terrorist fighters at international airports. The Counter-Terrorism Committee held a closed videoconference on maritime security in October and a virtual open briefing in December on terrorist threats to civil aviation, the status of implementation of Security Council resolution 2309 (2016) and follow-up to the civil aviation-related provisions of Council resolution 2396 (2017). The closed videoconference helped to lay the ground for joint meetings of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office of Counter-Terrorism from October to December to prepare a discussion paper on evolving maritime security threats, existing international frameworks, gaps, challenges and needs.

69. Under a new global programme launched in January 2020, the Office of Counter-Terrorism and its partners continued to assist seven States in West and Southern Africa in establishing counter-terrorism fusion cells to better share and use information. Deep-dive assessments led by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate were conducted in support of Botswana in July and Uganda in September. The programme developed several knowledge products and training courses for future delivery.

70. Within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate continued to lead the development of technical guidelines on preventing terrorists from acquiring weapons in line with Security Council resolution 2370 (2017). UNODC continued to support States in South Asia in their efforts to assess their capacity to counter the threat posed by improvised explosive devices.

71. In November, the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the International Telecommunication Union delivered a virtual global exercise on responding to cyberattacks against critical infrastructure, attended by participants from 34 Member States. Also in November, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute and INTERPOL organized virtually the third annual global meeting on artificial intelligence for law enforcement, in preparation for the development of a toolkit on responsible artificial intelligence innovation for law enforcement. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute continued to develop within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact an expert analysis of the human rights aspects of the use of artificial intelligence in counter-terrorism.

## **G. Countering terrorist narratives and engaging communities to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism**

72. At a virtual open briefing held by the Counter-Terrorism Committee in December on the threat of terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean, it was stated that terrorist propaganda had become more ubiquitous globally, while existing inequalities exacerbated during the pandemic had increased the risk of terrorist recruitment and radicalization. Globally, misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech, which can interplay with terrorist narratives, have continued to flourish online. In many States, necessary physical distancing measures have reduced the ability of front-line practitioners, teachers, religious leaders and health-care and youth workers to identify and address signs of radicalization to violence. Such trends were highlighted during three round-table meetings held in August and September on the nexus between COVID-19 and violent extremism organized by the Counter-Terrorism

Committee Executive Directorate and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, joined by United Nations staff and researchers, including the Global Counter-Terrorism Research Network.

73. Several United Nations entities undertook specific efforts in response to these challenges. UNESCO, the European Commission, the World Jewish Congress and Twitter launched the “Think Before Sharing” campaign in August to counter the spread of conspiracy theories. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, working with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, piloted a COVID-19 ISIL communications toolkit to support Member States in enhancing their response and preparedness in this respect and in developing messages that promote social cohesion. In October, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, together with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, organized two virtual workshops on understanding and responding to hate speech and incitement to violence. In November, the Joint Research Institute published a research report on the risk of the malicious use of social media during the pandemic, and in December it organized virtual courses on the topic in Sierra Leone. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre worked with the United Nations Development Programme, Facebook and civil society organizations in November to strengthen the capacities of young grass-roots social media activists in Bangladesh to counter misinformation.

74. Building capacity on preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism by encouraging human rights-based, gender-sensitive, evidence-informed and innovative approaches remained a priority for United Nations entities in line with their respective mandates, with a specific emphasis on engaging young people and communities. In November, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute published a research report on the impact of terrorism on young Malians, which identifies young people as both victims of terrorism and essential drivers of positive societal change. A separate report by the Joint Research Institute published in the same month offers evidence-based recommendations resulting from experiences in the Sahel and North Africa for more effective interventions to build community resilience against violent extremism. In December, the Office of Counter-Terrorism established an international hub on behavioural insights to counter terrorism as a new programme office in Doha.

75. In September, as part of a global programme on sports and security, the Office of Counter-Terrorism, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations convened a virtual high-level meeting on the promotion of sport and its values as a tool to prevent violent extremism, followed by a technical-level event. The programme subsequently launched a global call for funding proposals in November 2020 for grass-roots sports-based interventions for preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism, and in January 2021 it held its first youth consultations with the purpose of shaping a global messaging campaign against terrorism.

76. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre developed a semi-virtual, peer-to-peer approach to youth engagement for preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism, which engaged hundreds of young people in Australia, the Sudan and Sweden between August and November 2020. UNESCO and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre continued to implement a joint interdisciplinary project on youth empowerment in Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

77. In Iraq, UNESCO continued to implement its “Reviving the spirit of Mosul” and “Voices of the children of Old Mosul” initiatives to empower the local community to rebuild the city through heritage, education and cultural life. In Anbar and Ninawa Governorates, UNESCO launched a project aimed at mainstreaming gender

considerations into preventing violent extremism through education, with a focus on addressing the social constructs of masculinities and femininities. It also provided further support for prevention through education in Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Senegal.

78. The Group of Friends of Preventing Violent Extremism and the Group of Friends of Women, Peace and Security received a joint briefing in November on the outcomes of a global digital consultation of civil society on the gender-related dimensions of violent extremism and counter-terrorism responses. The consultation, which was held from May to July, was led by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and funded by the Office of Counter-Terrorism within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact. Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring a human rights-centred approach, promoting gender equality, the leadership of women and a culture of inclusion and considering the views and experiences of women's civil society organizations in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism.

79. In November, the "Tech Against Terrorism" initiative supported by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate launched a beta version of its Terrorist Content Analytics Platform, a centralized platform of verified terrorist content designed to rapidly support technology companies in identifying the use of their services for terrorist purposes. As at December 2020, the Platform's alerts serve more than 60 technology companies, which represent the full ecosystem of companies whose services have been misused by ISIL. In December, the Executive Directorate also hosted a "Tech Against Terrorism" webinar on cooperation between the United Nations and smaller technology platforms in countering the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. Participants emphasized the critical role of the United Nations in fostering public-private partnerships as part of a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach to effectively address related challenges while safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms online.

## **IV. Observations**

80. Efforts by ISIL to regroup and to reinvigorate its activities since the loss of its last stronghold in the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2019 gained momentum throughout 2020. The threat posed to international peace and security is on the rise again amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Several Member States have warned that the group could regain the ability to carry out external operations in the course of 2021, out of either its core in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic or one of its stronger regional affiliates.

81. Although the group has not developed a consistent strategy to exploit the pandemic, its core and affiliates took advantage of the disruption caused by the virus to increase operations in the second half of 2020, within and outside conflict zones. These included high-profile attacks in Afghanistan, West Africa and Central Africa. Meanwhile, a string of inspired attacks by lone individuals in Europe in the latter half of 2020, shortly after the easing of physical distancing measures, suggests that online terrorist propaganda continues to pose a near-term threat of home-grown attacks outside conflict zones.

82. I urge Member States to remain united in their efforts to counter ISIL and the broader threat of terrorism, despite the strains and competing priorities caused by the pandemic. Ensuring full accountability for crimes committed by ISIL and upholding the rights and needs of victims cannot be postponed. The United Nations will continue to prioritize coordination and capacity-building support for Member States, including



in addressing evidentiary challenges and developing tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

83. As a matter of the utmost urgency, I reiterate my call to Member States for the voluntary repatriation, with the consent of relevant Governments and in line with international law, of adults and children, including those with suspected links to ISIL, stranded in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. I appeal to Member States that have already repatriated their nationals to share their experiences and partner with the United Nations to support others in doing so.

84. The profound global impact of the pandemic will continue to transform the human and operational environments for ISIL and other terrorist groups, as well as their potential linkages to organized crime. It is imperative for Member States to continue to monitor these developments, exchange information and collaborate to ensure the maintenance of preventive measures. The pandemic has exacerbated conditions conducive to terrorism, which widens the pool of vulnerable individuals for ISIL to target. Decisive, concerted measures are needed to effectively counter the use of the Internet and digital technologies for criminal purposes, including incitement and financing of terrorism. Human rights-compliant systems must be in place to detect and apprehend terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters, given the prospect of the resumption of large-scale international travel.

85. The United Nations system, working through the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, will continue to partner with Member States to support their implementation of the counter-terrorism resolutions of the Security Council and the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. I call upon Member States to use 2021, a year of milestones – marked by the twentieth anniversary of Council resolution [1373 \(2001\)](#), the fifteenth anniversary of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and its seventh biennial review – to renew their commitment to multilateral action against terrorism under the auspices of the United Nations.

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