



**UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM**

**Remarks by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov,
Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism**

**Briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the northeast of
the Syrian Arab Republic**

27 January 2022

Madam President,
Excellencies,

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to brief the Security Council.

My briefing will focus on the terrorist threat to international peace and security, especially in the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic.

I look forward to soon briefing the Council in more detail based upon the forthcoming 14th report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by Da'esh to international peace and security, which will be issued at the end of this month.

I am deeply concerned about the attack Da'esh launched last week at al-Sina'a prison in Al-Hasakah city in northeast Syria, and the ongoing fighting that has also affected the civilian population.

The attack has resulted in the escape of an unknown number of Da'esh prisoners from a facility reported to hold around 3,000 Da'esh fighters. UNICEF estimates that the prison also held nearly 700 children. I am appalled by reports that Da'esh has used these children as human shields.

Although the group's barbarism should come as no surprise, these children have been left prey to be used and abused in this way. You may remember that during my briefing to the Council in 2020 I called for the children to be taken out of harm's way. I support UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore's call that these children should never have been held in military detention in the first place, as also echoed by USG Martin Griffiths in the previous session.

This incident was predictable. Da'esh has been highlighting and calling for jail breaks. There have been previous instances in Syria and elsewhere in the world.

The ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Monitoring Team has regularly warned of the precarious holding arrangements in northeast Syria and said that an incident of this kind was to be expected.

For the time being, the ability of Da'esh to strategically exploit jail breaks in this area may be limited.

The group cannot easily absorb or exfiltrate fugitives in large numbers. It is thus not surprising that many who escaped the prison have been killed or recaptured. But it does not mean that the threat can be neglected.

I would like to quote my colleague Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Geir Pedersen, who briefed this Council yesterday. Speaking about the events in Al-Hasakah he said [I quote]: "this episode brings back terrible memories of the prison breaks that fueled the original rise of ISIL in 2014 and 2015. I see this as a clear message to us all of the importance of uniting to combat the threat of internationally-proscribed terrorist groups -- and to resolve the broader conflict in which terrorism inevitably thrives." [End of quote.]

Excellencies,

This latest incident speaks to the urgent need for concerted international efforts to address in an effective, sustainable fashion the issue of the prisons and camps in northeast Syria that hold suspected Da'esh fighters and individuals with perceived links to the group, including children. Most of these individuals have never been charged with a crime, yet remain in prolonged detention, uncertain of their fate.

It is a reminder also of why Da'esh continues to embed itself in Syria.

Challenges to stabilization in Iraq, as well as the continued conflict and elusive progress on the political track in Syria make this area a favored arena for Da'esh and other terrorist groups.

This is a tragedy not only for the Syrian people, but neighboring countries, and indeed the world.

Only hours after the attack in Al-Hasakah, Da'esh fighters attacked an army barracks located north of Baghdad, killing at least 11 soldiers.

These attacks highlight two pressing areas of concern.

First, they are not isolated incidents.

The Secretary-General's reports have warned that the threat posed by Da'esh is growing, including in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Since its territorial collapse, the group has focused on reconstituting its capabilities, continued to maintain clandestine cells, pursued a protracted terrorist insurgency, and maintained sizeable numbers, the majority of which are based in Iraq.

The group is organized in small cells hiding in desert and rural areas, while they move across the border between Iraq and Syria to avoid capture. This also highlights the trans-border nature of the Da'esh core in the region.

The attacks could also embolden Da'esh affiliates in the Sahel and Central and East Africa to mount violent attacks.

In recent months, Da'esh affiliates have expanded in many subregions of Africa - spreading from the Sahel, taking further hold in Central and Southern Africa, including Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Meanwhile, I am deeply concerned about the political and security situations unfolding in Mali and Burkina Faso stemming from the unconstitutional takeovers of power in those countries.

We may see terrorist groups exploit and actively instigate the power vacuum that state fragility creates, undermining state legitimacy further in the Sahel region.

We are also witnessing a rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan which could have far reaching implications for peace and security around the world.

I would like to echo the Secretary-General's concern that terrorism remains a constant global threat – not only to the situation of Afghanistan.

Secondly, civilians, especially women and children, pay the highest price from this deteriorating security situation.

I urge the Council's attention to the situation in al-Hawl, and al-Roj and other camps and detention facilities in the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic.

In al-Hawl camp alone, over 56,000 people are held, mostly women and children, in dire humanitarian conditions. Ongoing and increasing physical and psychosocial violence is deeply troubling.

The Secretary-General has consistently stressed the urgency of an adequate international response to the dire humanitarian, human rights and security situation, particularly for children. When I briefed this Council in 2020 on the threat posed by Da'esh, I noted then the urgency of getting the children in these camps out of harm's way. We have all seen reports that as male children in these camps reach the age of 12, they are transferred to other facilities. Some of these children may be among those Da'esh has now used as human shields. That would not have happened if they had been repatriated in 2019, 2020, or 2021.

I commend those Member States especially in Central Asia and elsewhere that have taken on the numerous challenges involved in repatriating their citizens, as well as those Member States which have worked to support the humanitarian situation on the ground in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

However, as the situation festers, which is unfortunately the case, it only exacerbates the conditions conducive to terrorism and poses a serious threat in the mid-to-long-term perspective.

The significant challenges faced by Member States in ensuring the protection of vulnerable individuals, accountability for gross violations of international law including terrorist crimes, and security, are not becoming any less urgent or any less complex with time.

These challenges and risks are growing more serious with neglect and could have a long-term impact not just in the region but globally.

In this regard, I would like to recall the Global Framework and Multi-Partner Trust Fund to support requesting Member States on the protection, voluntary repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals with suspected links to United Nations-designated terrorist groups returning from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

The Global Framework is co-led by UNICEF and my Office and provides a whole-of-UN approach that responds to the humanitarian assistance and protection needs of children and adults, and supports requesting Member States to promote security and address accountability in the repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration process.

The repatriation of third country nationals from Syria and Iraq remains a major priority for the United Nations and we stand ready as a reliable partner to Member States in responding to these challenges.

Da'esh's attempts to break its fighters free from prison underlines the need to bring them to justice as soon as possible, and ensure accountability to break the cycle of violence.

I would like to pay tribute to the work of UNITAD in this regard.

I also welcome the new provisions on so-called battlefield evidence adopted by this Council in its resolution 2617 extending the mandate of our colleagues from the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.

Madam President,

For over twenty years, the leadership of a united Security Council has been decisive for international counter-terrorism efforts. And one key lesson is that military responses are necessary but not sufficient in addressing the terrorist threat.

We need consistent, coordinated, and comprehensive efforts across countries, sectors, and disciplines, anchored in human rights and the rule of law, to address terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, while ensuring respect for international humanitarian law.

The United Nations, working through the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, will continue to support Member States in countering terrorism.

I thank you.