Security Council

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

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[1] (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, and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat.

2.   This is my eleventh report on the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security.[2] The report was prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,[3] in close collaboration with the Office of Counter-Terrorism, other United Nations entities and international organizations.

3.   Against the background of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the report highlights a surge in ISIL activity in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic and among some of its regional affiliates. ISIL has not been able to reconstitute its external operations capability, and the measures of Member States aimed at reducing the spread of the virus appear to have temporarily reduced the risk of terrorist attacks in many States outside conflict zones. However, the pandemic's impact on ISIL propaganda, recruitment and fundraising activities remains unclear. Socioeconomic fallout from the crisis could exacerbate conditions conducive to terrorism and increase the medium- to long-term threat, within and outside conflict zones.

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[1] Listed as Al-Qaida in Iraq (QDe.115).

[2] 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 and S/2020/95.

[3] 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. There is no clear indication of a change in the strategic direction of ISIL under its new leader, Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla (QDi.426), a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, although he is expected to adapt to external events, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Command and control arrangements between the ISIL core and its remote "provinces" were already loosening prior to al-Mawla assuming leadership, and this is expected to continue or even accelerate in the current circumstances. The ISIL core continued to consolidate in some of the areas previously under its control and to operate increasingly confidently and openly. A comparison between early 2019 and early 2020 reveals a significant increase in the number of attacks by ISIL in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

5. The dire and complex situation of individuals with suspected links to ISIL, especially women and children, stranded in camps or being held in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic continues to require urgent action on humanitarian, human rights and security grounds. The September 2019 directive of the group's former leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (QDi.299), regarding efforts to release ISIL fighters and dependants is assessed to remain in place. The impact of COVID-19 has further destabilized holding arrangements and put stress on de facto authorities. Member States report concern among detainees and camp residents about contracting the virus, adding to the existing problem of escapes and other uncontrolled departures. Only limited progress has been made in overcoming legal, political and practical hurdles to repatriation. The pandemic has diverted limited resources to address related issues and further complicated access to and transport from holding facilities. The global threat from ISIL is likely to increase in the medium to long term if the international community fails to meet this challenge.

6. The impact of the pandemic on the threat posed by ISIL has been multifaceted. States' curfews and travel restrictions have complicated terrorist planning and operations, making it harder for terrorists to move, recruit, raise funds and mount attacks. Measures taken to safeguard public health have also reduced the number of potential terrorist targets such as crowded streets, public transport and venues. ISIL lacks the external operational capability to direct sophisticated attacks against other targets, while the impact of actors inspired to act alone tends to be less severe.

7. While the threat of terrorism appears to have temporarily decreased in non-conflict zones, the pandemic could compound the threat in fragile and conflict-affected States, where Governments face challenges in asserting their authority, especially in remote areas and border regions. The pandemic has strained government resources, and travel restrictions have further hampered the provision of services to local populations.

8. ISIL propaganda and media output have been sustained at 2019 levels since the onset of the pandemic. The group has diversified its outlets following disruption by the operation coordinated by the European Union Internet Referral Unit in 2019 to take down terrorist content. In April and May, Member States observed the use of smaller platforms and file-sharing services.

9. ISIL has labelled the pandemic as "divine punishment" for its enemies and stressed the opportunity to mount attacks while their resources and defences are stretched. The group has also recommended caution regarding the risk of infection among its members, advising physical distancing and the avoidance of travel. While ISIL propaganda shows it is alert to the possibility of using the COVID-19 virus as a crude, improvised form of biological weapon, Member States report that the group does not appear to have advanced any plans to do so. In conflict zones, ISIL has continued with its "war of attrition" propaganda campaign, most recently from 14 to 20 May.

10. ISIL has benefited from a largely captive audience of people confined at home owing to COVID-19. If the group's propaganda efforts are successful, it is possible that a spate of inspired attacks could occur as public mobility and assembly resume and targets once again present themselves. Yet, ISIL communication efforts have so far not gained the same traction as the April and September 2019 broadcasts by al-Baghdadi. Al-Mawla has yet to communicate directly; Member States believe that he is cautious about the associated risk of being killed or captured. Nevertheless, with ISIL eclipsed in the news by COVID-19, there is a risk of appearing irrelevant. This could present additional motivation for ISIL to accelerate the revival of its external operations capability.

11. The issue of foreign terrorist fighters associated with ISIL remains a cross-cutting challenge for Member States in their efforts to mitigate the future threat. As States release growing numbers of returnees in the coming months and years, it will be vital to address this issue alongside terrorist radicalization in prison, rehabilitation, reintegration, probation and other related challenges. COVID-19 is complicating detention in overcrowded prisons around the world, with infection rates high; the resulting anxiety is complicating efforts to maintain order. Member States have to balance these concerns against the imperative of avoiding the premature release of dangerous inmates.

12. ISIL financial reserves are assessed by Member States to total around $100 million. The group continues to fundraise through different avenues, including kidnapping for ransom, private donations and some extortion of commercial activity. Funds are also believed to accrue through crowd-sourced online fundraising. Appeals to assist ISIL fighters and their families in camps are seen regularly across social media platforms. Some stores of cash are believed to remain buried in the core conflict zone or to be kept with trusted custodians and couriers.

B. Regional developments

1. Middle East

13. More than 10,000 ISIL fighters are estimated to remain active in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. These fighters, organized in small cells, are freely moving across the border between the two countries and some have managed to find safe haven in the Hamrin Mountains of north-eastern Iraq. Despite its loss of territory and weak presence in urban areas, ISIL launched a campaign against Iraqi forces as part of its "war of attrition". This effort was abetted by restrictions on the deployment of national security forces owing to the pandemic, as well as by political complexities. ISIL operations were notable for their increased use of improvised explosive devices on intercity roads, political assassinations and the burning of crops owned by ethnic minorities. In May, Iraqi forces, with assistance from international coalition forces, began a new military campaign to pursue ISIL remnants and regain the initiative against the group. Member States assessed that this campaign had resulted in pushing back ISIL, including the death of several of its leaders.

14. In the Syrian Arab Republic, there was an increase in ISIL activity in early 2020. The group has sleeper cells in Homs, Dayr al-Zawr and Hasakah. There were also reports of limited ISIL activity in Dar'a and in the desert east of Suwaydah.[4] They attacked energy installations and military convoys, set up checkpoints and carried out assassinations. COVID-19 is invoked in social media campaigns by ISIL sympathizers to raise money for families in the Hawl camp. A break-out attempt at

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[4] Information provided by Member States.

another holding facility in the same area in March began with a riot over fears of the virus spreading among inmates.

15.   ISIL in Yemen, under the leadership of Nashwan al-Adani, continued to suffer attrition in its struggle with the local, stronger Al-Qaida affiliate and was confined operationally to the governorates of Bayda' and Dali'. In late December 2019, ISIL in Yemen conducted two rocket-propelled grenade attacks on international humanitarian and charity offices operating in Dali'. Member States reported a prisoner exchange between ISIL in Yemen and Ansar Allah in April 2020, as well as some coordination regarding checkpoints. ISIL in Yemen maintains training facilities, ammunition and arms in Qifa Rada' under the supervision of Khalid al-Yazidi.

2.   Africa

16.   Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (QDe.163) has been involved since March 2020 in a violent confrontation with the local Al-Qaida-aligned coalition known as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) (QDe.159), ending previous efforts to deconflict their operations. ISGS attracted defectors from the Katiba Macina grouping within JNIM. It developed propaganda materials attacking the "flexible" implementation of Sharia by JNIM and its intention to negotiate with national authorities. ISGS expanded its presence in the JNIM core area of operations in and around Mali but was rapidly pushed back from the Gourma region to the Liptako region and along the border between Burkina Faso and the Niger. Despite the attrition, including from security operations by Member States in the region and their international partners, ISGS remains the most dangerous group in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger. It has important family connections with local communities and armed groups in Mali. ISGS built its reputation on attacks with wide propaganda value. It is now in direct contact with the ISIL core and is featured in its global newsletter, *Al-Naba*. Further, ISGS has developed a close collaborative relationship with Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (QDe.162), although it is unlikely that the groups will merge or that ISGS will accept operational subordination to ISWAP.

17.   ISIL in Libya is assessed to number only a few hundred fighters, but it remains a potent threat capable of wider regional impact.[5] The ongoing conflict in Libya and the risk of escalation might create new opportunities for ISIL to expand its activity. After a period of relative quiet between February and April 2020, ISIL in Libya launched a number of attacks against local military and security forces in the Sabha and Fazzan regions. The group is concentrated mostly in the south, where it exploits tensions between Arabs and other ethnic groups for recruitment and raises funds through extortion and kidnapping for ransom. It is also assessed to retain dormant cells in the coastal cities.

18.   Following leadership turmoil in 2019, ISWAP has continued to see power struggles at the top. In January 2020, Abu Abdullah Idris Ibn Umar al-Barnawi a.k.a. Ba Idrissa, who succeeded Abu Musab al-Barnawi a.k.a. Habib in 2019, was replaced by Abu Hapsa a.k.a. Malam Lawan. The ISIL core was involved in the decision to remove Ba Idrissa and it is reported that he may have subsequently been killed. This turmoil appears to have had little adverse impact on the operational effectiveness of ISWAP, however, as demonstrated by a series of attacks claimed by the group in Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria, in the southern Niger and in north-western Cameroon. ISWAP remains a major focus of ISIL global propaganda, and its total membership of approximately 3,500 makes it one of the largest and most conspicuous of the remote "provinces".

19.   Despite sustained military onslaught, rivalry with Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaahidiin (Al-Shabaab) (SOe.001) and losses incurred, the ISIL affiliate in

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[5] Information provided by Member States.

Somalia recorded an increase in low-scale bomb attacks and assassinations of prominent personalities across Somalia. These were mainly in Mogadishu, Puntland and southern Somalia, where ISIL maintains a network of operatives, sympathizers and training bases. Member States observed that ISIL in Somalia remained in communication with Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) affiliates and its loose network of individuals.

20.   In early 2020, ISCAP activities showed a consistent trend in attacks and modi operandi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. ISCAP operatives remained focused in their objective to establish a "caliphate". Sustained government military operations targeting ISCAP operational bases in the region of Beni led to a loss of equipment and the arrest of some operatives. Following ISCAP displacement from some of its bases, one Member State reported movement towards the north-eastern Province of Ituri where several attacks were reported and several operatives affiliated to ISCAP were arrested in May 2020. Undeterred by these losses, ISCAP was able to plan and execute attacks against government military forces and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and to conduct reprisals against civilian populations. As ISCAP continues to mutate, Member States observed improved capabilities, including the use of asymmetrical methods of attack, media output and improvised explosive devices.

21.   In Mozambique, the activities of ISCAP operatives in the north-eastern Province of Cabo Delgado gained momentum with the launch of complex attacks on several locations concentrated in Muidumbe, Quissanga and Mocimboa da Praia. ISCAP operatives staged brief, symbolic takeovers of villages, where they displayed banners and preached to the local populations. Emboldened by the takeovers, there was an upsurge in low-scale attacks throughout the reporting period. The capabilities and tactics used in attacks mirrored those of ISCAP in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including improvised explosive devices, kidnappings, beheadings and looting of villages for supplies.

3.   **Europe**

22.   During the reporting period, Europe suffered three ISIL-inspired attacks in France and two in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A number of other attacks by lone actors against soft public targets or symbolic law enforcement targets were foiled. Member States' terrorism threat assessments varied from moderate across Western and Northern Europe to low to moderate in the western Balkans, with the threats being mainly from Internet-driven homegrown terrorist radicalization and rarely involving networks or the use of explosives for mass casualties. Radicalization and failed rehabilitation in prisons, and the imminent release of dangerous inmates with a terrorism background or connections, remain acute concerns for Member States in the region.

23.   The threat of attacks directed from the ISIL core or elsewhere outside Europe still exists, with ISIL seeking to reconstitute its external operational capability. Thus far, only limited attempts to develop cells in Europe from the Hawl camp have been detected. Member States continued to highlight the risk of abuse of migration flows by terrorist groups and returnees, along with related screening challenges. One Member State in the region reported that 11 individuals with clear or suspected links to groups affiliated with ISIL or Al-Qaida had recently been identified among illegal immigrants through the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) Information System, International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) databases and the Terrorist Screening Centre of the United States of America Federal Bureau of Investigation.

24.   Dedicated tutorials and online chatrooms are used by terrorist recruiters to target migrants in their native languages. Self-radicalization is also fuelled by home-made

videos from returnees from conflict zones and a range of activities on social media, including tutorials on avoiding detection by security services. In Northern Europe, the burning or mistreatment of Qur'ans in June and November 2019 during rallies against Islam in one Nordic State, and enduring references to the satirical cartoons of 2005, fuelled propaganda with a higher impact on ISIL sympathizers and the wider terrorist community.

25.　Several Member States in the region have highlighted concerns over a growing terrorist threat from "right-wing violent extremism", white supremacists and neo-Nazi groups, which requires intelligence services to shift their operational and analytical priorities away from a focus on ISIL sympathizers. ISIL sympathizers and right-wing violent extremists are seen by some States as symbiotic, feeding off each other's propaganda in the aftermath of the March 2019 terrorist attack against two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

26.　The influence of preachers sympathetic to ISIL ideology is of concern to several Nordic and western Balkan States. In the Nordic region, some preachers have turned to lower-profile activity after authorities closed mosques where they had been active or brought legal action against them. One Member State arrested six preachers involved in the radicalization and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters and closed a network of schools that employed six individuals associated with ISIL. In the western Balkans, some Member States reported that local preachers kept a low profile to avoid prosecution while continuing their radicalization activity, and that the historical influence of clerics with an affinity with violent extremist ideologues from Egypt had given Al-Qaida an advantage over ISIL in the region.

27.　Terrorist networks of individuals of Central Asian and Chechen backgrounds are emerging in Europe.[6] One Member State in the region arrested a group of nationals from Tajikistan who had been instructed to form a cell to carry out attacks and recruit among migrants. In the same State, other individuals of Chechen and Tajik backgrounds raised concerns following evidence of self-radicalization and linkages to organized crime. In the Nordic region, a cluster of ethnic Uzbek individuals involved in organized crime and terrorism financing was identified.[7] It is not always possible to draw clear distinctions between ISIL and other affiliations among radicalized individuals.

4.　Asia

28.　Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) has continued to see losses in its former strongholds of Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces in Afghanistan. The leaders of ISIL-K were arrested by the Government of Afghanistan in April and May 2020, including Aslam Farooqi, the head of ISIL-K, his predecessor Zia ul-Haq and other senior members. The death in January 2020 of the head of the Uzbek components in ISIL-K, Abdukholik, prompted the departure of some Uzbek fighters from the group. One group of Central Asian fighters planned to leave Afghanistan for Turkey to join the local pro-ISIL Central Asian diaspora.

29.　Despite its significant territorial losses, ISIL-K remains capable of carrying out high-profile attacks in various parts of Afghanistan, including Kabul. ISIL-K seeks to pursue a global agenda by implementing the approach of the ISIL core, namely using Afghan territory as a base for spreading terrorist influence across the wider region. It also aims to take advantage of the changing dynamics of the Afghan peace process and to attract Taliban fighters and foreign terrorist fighters who oppose the agreement reached between the Taliban and the United States. In the event of further military pressure on ISIL-K in Kunar Province, the group is expected to retreat to Badakhshan and other northern provinces of Afghanistan.

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[6] Information provided by a Member State.
[7] Information provided by a Member State.

30.   It is estimated that the current ISIL-K strength in Afghanistan is approximately 2,200 members.[8] The group's new leader is Matiullah Kamahwal, previously the head of ISIL-K in Kunar Province. The leadership also includes Syrian nationals Abu Said Mohammad al-Khorasani and Abdul Tahir. ISIL-K has maintained its association with the leader of ISIL, Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla, through foreign terrorist fighters. However, it is assessed that the ISIL core no longer has a significant role in the decision-making of ISIL-K.

31.   Some of the terrorist groups active in Afghanistan cooperate closely with ISIL-K. Many former members of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (QDe.132) in Afghanistan have already joined ISIL-K, many of whose leaders are former TTP members. It is expected that TTP and its various splinter groups will continue to align themselves with ISIL-K regardless of how the Afghan peace process develops.[9]

32.   On 10 May 2019, ISIL claimed that it had established an affiliate in India (Hind Wilaya), reportedly consisting of 180 to 200 members, mostly located in Kerala and Karnataka States.[10] Member States remain concerned about the radicalization and recruitment of ISIL fighters in Maldives and about the looming challenge of managing returnees from the core conflict zone.[11] ISIL claimed its first attack in Maldives on 15 April 2020, setting fire to five government speedboats, ostensibly in retaliation for investigations into violent extremism and drug trafficking. The attack caused no casualties but was extensively celebrated in ISIL media, including in the local Dhivehi language.

33.   In South-East Asia, the picture remains mixed. Government authorities in Indonesia and the Philippines have maintained pressure on ISIL activities through counter-terrorism operations, many of which have succeeded in disrupting planned attacks at early stages. At the same time, attacks on security forces in the region occur regularly. ISIL affiliates continue to operate and find safe haven in the southern Philippines.[12]

34.   The challenge of whether and how to repatriate ISIL fighters and their dependants from the Syrian Arab Republic is ongoing among Member States in the region. Public opinion in some States remains firmly opposed. Officials in Indonesia are working to facilitate the return of orphaned minors.

35.   The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ISIL in South-East Asia has also been mixed. Some ISIL sympathizers have used the virus as a pretext for fundraising and to advance their propaganda. The pandemic does not appear to have contributed to additional attacks in the region, however.

III. Updates on responses to the evolving threat

A. Overview

36.   The COVID-19 pandemic is having wide-ranging and evolving implications across all areas of work of the United Nations, including international peace and security. Addressing the Security Council in April and in July 2020 on COVID-19, the Secretary-General cautioned that terrorist groups saw the uncertainty created by the pandemic as a tactical advantage and a window of opportunity to strike while the attention of most Governments was turned towards the pandemic. He urged preparedness in the event of bioterrorist attacks. In June 2020, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive

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[8] The assessments of ISIL-K strength vary among Member States.
[9] Information provided by a Member State.
[10] Information provided by a Member State.
[11] Information provided by a Member State.
[12] Information provided by a Member State.

Directorate published an initial analysis of the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism.[13]

37. While it is too early for a definitive assessment of the implications of the pandemic on the terrorism landscape and counter-terrorism efforts, States have to remain vigilant and sustain the focus and resources required to address the persistent threat posed by ISIL. In its resolution 2532 (2020), the Security Council, considering that the unprecedented extent of the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, demanded a general and immediate cessation of hostilities in all situations on its agenda and called for a durable humanitarian pause. The Council affirmed, however, that this general and immediate cessation of hostilities and humanitarian pause did not apply to military operations against ISIL and other terrorist groups it had designated.

38. The United Nations system continued to actively support efforts by Member States to address the threat posed by ISIL, its affiliates and supporters, and to return or relocate foreign terrorist fighters, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mandate delivery, coordination and programme implementation continued apace from January to March 2020. Notably, the Under-Secretary-General of the Office of Counter-Terrorism, the Executive Director of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Coordinator of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in February in Indonesia conducted their first joint high-level consultation visit. This was followed by a joint high-level visit of the Under-Secretary-General and the Executive Director to the Philippines in early March.

39. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, United Nations entities swiftly adjusted to restrictions on international travel and in-person meetings to ensure business continuity through virtual means. The heads of the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate continued uninterrupted their engagement with representatives of Member States and United Nations Resident Coordinators. The inter-agency process under the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact continued with regular, virtual meetings and joint projects. Entities also strengthened their bilateral cooperation, such as through the adoption of a joint action plan between the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and consultations between the Office of Counter-Terrorism, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions to strengthen collaboration for technical assistance. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office of Counter-Terrorism incorporated flexible approaches into their joint efforts to deliver technical assistance and capacity-building programmes, using online platforms and developing remote needs-assessment methodologies.

40. While the second counter-terrorism week at the United Nations was postponed in tandem with the seventh biennial review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy until the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly, the Office of Counter-Terrorism organized from 6 to 10 July 2020 a scaled-down virtual counter-terrorism week focused on the strategic and practical challenges of countering terrorism in a global pandemic environment. The event included a "virtual expo" to showcase the capacity-building work of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre within the Office of Counter-Terrorism.

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[13] Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism" (June 2020).

B.   Suspected ISIL fighters and their dependants in the conflict zone

1.   Current situation

41.   Amid ongoing political, humanitarian and security challenges in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, the threat from the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the unsustainable and volatile situation in overcrowded camps and places holding thousands of people with suspected links to United Nations-listed terrorist groups, most of whom are women and children.

42.   These individuals have experienced significant trauma and include victims of sexual violence committed by ISIL, as well as children born as a result of sexual violence, kidnapped and/or recruited. Without adequate monitoring and supervision, many women and children remain at high risk of indoctrination and exploitation, as ISIL supporters continue to attempt to recruit and radicalize vulnerable people in these unsustainable conditions.

43.   The ongoing health crisis caused by COVID-19 has made protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts ever more urgent, as re-emphasized by the Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. They stressed that concerned States should repatriate their nationals who wish to return, on a voluntary basis, from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic as a matter of priority, in accordance with international law, including international human rights law, humanitarian law and refugee law, where applicable, and with the consent of relevant Governments for any activities to be undertaken in territories under their control. The rights of affected individuals, including women and children, need to be upheld and essential services provided. Policies and actions leading to statelessness should be avoided. The United Nations system developed a set of key principles in this regard in March 2019.

2.   Repatriation efforts

44.   The pace of repatriation has slowed significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Member States continue to face political, legal, operational and security challenges, including in conducting comprehensive risk assessment and determining the possible criminal responsibility of each individual.

45.   The rate of return for women remains significantly lower than for men and children. It is essential that women do not become the forgotten demographic. States should address the situation of women remaining in the camps through strategies that are gender-responsive, tailored to individual needs and fully compliant with international human rights standards.

46.   The protection, voluntary repatriation and rehabilitation of children should be prioritized. The United Nations system has continued to engage with the Governments of the countries of origin of foreign children to secure their safe, voluntary repatriation and care for their needs, based on the principles of non-refoulement and non-separation from their parents, as well as the obligation that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children.

47.   The United Nations system is in the final stages of developing a global, multi-agency framework to provide coordinated support to requesting Member States on the protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of third country nationals returning from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. The implementation of the framework will be coordinated by the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The framework articulates the principles and minimum conditions, governance arrangements and programmatic direction and activities for the provision of support to returnees who

may have links or family ties to United Nations-listed terrorist groups, ensuring that such support is human rights-compliant and gender-sensitive and takes into account the best interests of the child and relevant risks.

3. Prosecution

48. The continued efforts of some Member States to bring members of ISIL and its affiliates to justice, despite jurisdictional, evidentiary and human rights challenges, are imperative and encouraging. United Nations entities have continued to work closely with some Member States, upon request, to support their efforts to prosecute and hold foreign terrorist fighters accountable for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, in addition to terrorism-related offences.

49. The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD) has identified a range of new evidentiary sources for use by domestic authorities in the prosecution of ISIL members. The expanded cooperation of UNITAD with the Government of Iraq has been central to the digitization and forensic examination of evidence relevant to ISIL crimes, including collaboration with the Iraqi judiciary to obtain call data records from Iraqi mobile phone service providers, which will add significant value to existing and future lines of investigation.

50. A joint report of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in January 2020 highlighted ongoing challenges in the prosecution of ISIL members and their affiliates in Iraq, including a lack of fair trial standards, overreliance on confessions (often tainted by allegations of torture) and an insufficient distinction between the seriousness of different offences and associated sentencing, owing to a broad definition of terrorism and related offences. UNAMI and the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq agreed to jointly develop guidelines for the conduct of trials in accordance with international human rights standards.

51. United Nations entities continued to support requesting States in developing comprehensive and integrated counter-terrorism strategies and addressing gaps in national legislation. The Council of Representatives of Iraq is considering draft legislation that would incorporate international crimes into national law, which would represent an important step in providing accountability for ISIL acts falling within this category. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan is providing mentoring support to the International Crimes Department in the Attorney-General's Office for the investigation and prosecution of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

52. In States facing challenges relating to the return of foreign terrorist fighters, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are collaborating to facilitate assistance to strengthen the criminal justice system of requesting States, including through the development of toolkits to assist judges to adjudicate complex terrorism-related cases.

53. United Nations entities continued to work with relevant States to secure access to all places of detention holding children on criminal charges. It is essential to ensure that children, regardless of their affiliation or role, are treated in accordance with international law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Any prosecution must be conducted based on internationally recognized juvenile justice standards. The minimum age of criminal responsibility must be respected, and detention should be used only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period. [14]

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[14] See, for instance, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre handbook entitled "Children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: ensuring a child rights-based approach".

4. Rehabilitation and reintegration

54.   Previously identified challenges persist regarding risks of radicalization to violence in prison and managing terrorism inmates, including infrastructure and managerial issues. Prisoners face grave health risks from the pandemic and many States have pardoned detainees or released prisoners on furlough and temporary release programmes. Such releases have not included detainees with actual or alleged association or family ties with ISIL, however, as many States continue to hold detainees charged with security offences, including women and children.

55.   United Nations entities continued to support efforts by States to develop comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, not only for returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families, but also for local supporters and affiliates. The United Nations has provided guidance and coordinated efforts to support Iraq in developing a national road map to facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals formerly associated with ISIL to return to their areas of origin in Iraq. Building a clear domestic legal framework and considering judicial and non-judicial mechanisms are also essential.

56.   Perceived affiliation with terrorist groups, particularly ISIL, often leads to stigmatization and an increased risk of rejection of concerned individuals, especially women and girls, by their communities, posing challenges for their rehabilitation and reintegration. Victims of sexual violence, with or without perceived terrorist affiliation, might face additional ostracization, scrutiny and alienation. States are encouraged to implement measures to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence, including by adopting legislative and policy reforms, ensuring accountability and providing services and reparations to victims to facilitate their reintegration in society.

57.   There is a concerning lack of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for children associated with terrorist groups and for women and children released from custody for security-related charges. It is essential that States develop such programmes based on evidence and guided by international human rights law. In several States, UNICEF is planning to support reintegration programming for returning children and providing community-based reintegration support, including mental health, psychosocial, social, educational and health services, and responses to gender-based violence as needed.

58.   The Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration continued to develop evidence-based guidance on the design and implementation of and support for integrated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes. In March 2020, the Working Group briefed the Group of Friends of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration on emerging practices and lessons learned from past and ongoing programmes. UNODC and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate have continued their active contribution to the ongoing revision of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards by the Working Group.

59.   As a complement to broader policy efforts, the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, UNODC and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre continued to develop guidance for States in developing and implementing comprehensive prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, in accordance with international law and taking into consideration sensitivities related to age and gender. Both approaches emphasize defining procedures based upon a comprehensive assessment for each individual who will be processed through judicial mechanisms while offering operational clarity for those eligible for rehabilitation and reintegration in different settings.

60.   The Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, UNODC and the Centre also continued to support the development of common regional approaches to screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration in accordance with the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region, including addressing the overall coherence of such approaches, ensuring appropriate gender dimensions and strengthening cooperation mechanisms relating to the transfer of persons. The three entities also formalized a partnership to build the capacity of Mozambique to screen, prosecute, rehabilitate and reintegrate persons associated with terrorism.

61.   In February 2020, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and Indonesia convened experts from South-East Asian Member States to share regional good practices and identify gaps and challenges in developing comprehensive and tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme introduced by the Philippines, with the support of the military and other government and civil society organizations, has facilitated the surrender of hundreds of members of the ISIL-affiliated Abu Sayyaf Group. In May, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, UNODC and the Directorate organized an online training webinar over three weeks for prison staff in Kazakhstan, half of whom were female, on managing violent extremist offenders.

C.   International and regional cooperation

62.   COVID-19 presents unique challenges to international cooperation efforts as States redirect their resources, attention and policy focus internally, leading to more fragmented or isolated national responses. The United Nations continued to underscore the imperative of practical counter-terrorism cooperation, in accordance with international law, including enhanced coordination and cooperation in the provision of mutual legal assistance.

63.   In West Africa, UNODC developed and disseminated COVID-19 guidelines for law enforcement entities providing capacity-building and mentoring services to support them in continuing their work during the pandemic. UNODC also continued to deliver technical assistance and support to the Eastern African Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization to operationalize its Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre of Excellence, including by strengthening its research, analysis and regional law enforcement training capacity.

1.   Military evidence

64.   In January 2020 in Jakarta, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate held a regional meeting on gathering admissible evidence in high-risk situations in order to bring terrorists to justice before national criminal courts. Participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand exchanged relevant practices and challenges with regard to Security Council resolutions 2322 (2016) and 2396 (2017), as well as views on the relevance of the military evidence guidelines[15] previously developed by the Directorate within the framework of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

2.   Electronic evidence and open source intelligence

65.   The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate continued to work with UNODC on a global initiative to enhance the capacity of States to collect and

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[15] "Guidelines to facilitate the use and admissibility as evidence in national criminal courts of information collected, handled, preserved and shared by the military to prosecute terrorist offences".

use electronic evidence stored by service providers in cross-border criminal investigations, including through an expert group meeting held in April 2020 to develop a training module.

66. Collecting open source information from the open and dark web and social media can be extremely valuable for law enforcement agencies engaged in the investigation and prosecution of suspected terrorists. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre continued its work to enhance the special investigative capabilities of States in South and South-East Asia in this regard, benefiting from the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate's assessment of and dialogue with Member States to better understand related gaps and good practices.

D. Supporting victims of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

67. 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 8 April 2020, the Secretary-General submitted to the General Assembly a report prepared by the Office of Counter-Terrorism on progress made by the United Nations system in supporting Member States in assisting victims of terrorism (A/74/790), which was mandated by Assembly resolution 73/305, on the enhancement of international cooperation to assist victims of terrorism.

68. During his visit to Iraq in March 2020, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide welcomed progress towards ensuring non-impunity for the crimes committed by ISIL and encouraged further efforts to strengthen accountability for atrocity crimes. Following their consultations with the Special Adviser and the extensive engagement of UNITAD with religious communities across Iraq, the leadership of religious communities in Iraq adopted an interfaith statement on the victims of ISIL which repudiates the ideology of ISIL and emphasizes the need for concerted action to ensure that ISIL members are held responsible for their crimes in accordance with the rule of law. UNITAD also provided capacity-building and technical equipment to the Ministry of Health of Iraq and provided psychosocial training to domestic mental health providers.

69. There remains a concerning lack of progress and accountability in addressing conflict-related sexual violence and bringing perpetrators to justice. Members of ISIL, whose ideology is permeated by misogyny, continue to be prosecuted for acts of terrorism, which currently exclude war crimes and other egregious crimes such as rape, sexual assault, ethnic cleansing, slavery, trafficking in persons and sexual exploitation. Pursuant to Security Council resolution 1888 (2009), the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict continued to advocate that sexual violence crimes committed by terrorist groups should be included in indictments or charging documents, cumulatively if necessary, and adjudicated at trial, to ensure criminal accountability for perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence.

70. As victims and survivors of terrorism, women not only are directly affected by violent terrorist actions, but also suffer as terrorists and violent extremist groups more broadly curtail the rights of women and propagate misogynist ideologies. The Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) found that the actions of violent extremist groups comprised significant attacks on the rights of women and girls, including on education, public life and decision-making over their bodies, as well as rape and gender-based violence. Additionally, strategic manipulation of gender norms and stereotypes is a recurrent recruitment and radicalization tactic, which undermines the resilience of communities against terrorist narratives. Growing evidence attests to misogyny as an integral part of the ideology, identity and political economy of violent extremist groups, and to hostile sexist

attitudes towards women and support for violence against women as the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism.[16]

E.   Countering the financing of terrorism

71.   Member States continued to take a variety of legal and policy measures to prevent and disrupt terrorism financing, as analysed in the joint report of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (S/2020/493) issued in June 2020 pursuant to Security Council resolution 2462 (2019), based on responses from 112 States. The report highlighted progress made, including in the adoption of legislation on countering the financing of terrorism, the preparation of national risk assessments through multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms and the introduction of asset-freezing measures. Challenges frequently cited by States included the integration of financial intelligence into counter-terrorism efforts, the lack of enhanced and specialized investigative and enforcement capabilities and the lack of legal frameworks to keep pace with the rapid evolution in financial tools and terrorism-financing methods.

72.   The pandemic has raised additional concerns about the potential use of cybercrime to raise and move funds and the misuse of virtual assets by terrorists. States are increasingly introducing new regulatory frameworks to include virtual asset providers as reporting entities in their legislation related to countering money-laundering and the financing of terrorism.

73.   In January 2020, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre organized a training session on countering the financing of terrorism for officials from Mongolia, and in May it held a virtual training workshop for over 100 officials from Bahrain. In June, the Centre, together with the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, UNODC and the Office of Information and Communications Technology, launched a global capacity-building programme, pursuant to Security Council resolution 2462 (2019), on the prevention and suppression of the financing of terrorism, focusing on four main pillars: comprehensive assessments of priority States, awareness-raising on key topics, legislative framework improvements and enhancing operational capacity.

74.   In January 2020, the Centre collaborated with the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate to support Tunisia in developing a handbook on terrorist designations and asset freezing. In February 2020, the Centre and the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group convened the third and final round of subregional consultations on the implementation of a regional operational plan on countering the financing of terrorism.

F.   Border management and law enforcement

75.   The COVID-19 pandemic has led to multiple border closures, a significant disruption of commercial travel and mobility restrictions, which may have restricted the ability of terrorists to travel.

76.   Member States should further strengthen their use of INTERPOL tools and resources, in line with Security Council resolutions. Greater attention should be paid to maritime border security, given the risk that terrorist organizations may exploit

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[16] See Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True, "Misogyny and violent extremism: implications for preventing violent extremism" (Monash University and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, October 2019), available at https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2019/10/ap-policy-brief_ve_and_vaw_v6_compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=1624.

vulnerabilities at sea, including by using cruise ships for terrorist travel or other terrorist purposes, attacking maritime infrastructure to disrupt the supply chain or attacking ships.

77. The United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme led by the Office of Counter-Terrorism continued to assist States seeking to establish inter-agency passenger information units to exchange traveller information in accordance with Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017). In February 2020, the programme, the International Organization for Migration and the United Kingdom Border Force conducted an advance passenger information and passenger name record mission to Azerbaijan to enhance capacity-building, risk management and the integration of technology into border security. In May, the Sudan signed a memorandum of understanding with the Office of Counter-Terrorism to endorse a programme implementation road map. Adapting to the COVID-19 crisis, the programme developed an online assessment methodology that was first applied in June with the relevant authorities of Côte d'Ivoire, including the National Human Rights Commission, to develop an implementation road map.

78. In July, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate held consultations with experts from Member States, United Nations entities and regional and international organizations to enhance understanding of the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related responses on the responsible use of biometric technologies for counter-terrorism purposes, in line with Security Council resolution 2396 (2017). Experts discussed security risks and challenges with regard to providing support and guidance for the review of national risk and threat assessments and standard operational procedures to include public health requirements, in compliance with international human rights law.

79. The United Nations and the United States are co-leading a global counter-terrorism forum initiative to develop a guidance manual on establishing effective watch-listing procedures, in compliance with international law, including international human rights law, to enhance the implementation of Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) and the application of the Council's 2018 addendum to the guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (S/2018/1177, annex). Three expert webinars were held in June and July 2020 to inform the development of the manual.

80. In February, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, UNODC, the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate and the Office for Disarmament Affairs launched a joint project to address the connection between terrorism, organized crime and the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons in Central Asia. The project supports the implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Security Council resolution 2370 (2017), the 2015 guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (S/2015/939, annex II) and the 2018 addendum thereto, and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, among other international legal instruments and guidelines.

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

81. Efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism are to remain a priority during and after the pandemic as part of long-term, integrated counter-terrorism efforts. United Nations entities continued to help requesting States, while the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated related concerns, including as a result of a boost to terrorist narratives, diversion of resources to fight the pandemic and limits

on preventive activities owing to physical distancing measures. Additionally, growing restrictions on civic space, the use of emergency powers and the potential abuse of measures to combat misinformation risk enhancing existing grievances.

82. In April 2020, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate co-chaired a virtual meeting of the Platform on Gender and Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism in North Africa. Participants raised concerns that the pandemic could be exploited by violent extremists to jeopardize the fragile gains made in advancing more gender-responsive and inclusive preventive approaches. Discussions emphasized the importance of prevention work to counter hate speech and violent extremist narratives in the context of COVID-19.

83. On 28 January 2020, pursuant to Security Council resolution 2354 (2017), the Counter-Terrorism Committee held an open briefing on countering terrorist narratives and preventing the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. Participants underlined the importance of promoting comprehensive and multi-stakeholder approaches beyond removing and filtering content that violates legislation or online platform guidelines. In April, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate published an analytical brief that identified strategic communication efforts to counter terrorist narratives, technology trends and existing challenges, including from a human rights and gender perspective, and provided further guidance for consideration by States.[17]

84. Local preventive initiatives driven by and aimed at youth are crucial, especially in the context of the pandemic. In Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) continued to work with youth on an inclusive, multidisciplinary approach that addresses education, culture, communications and information. In June 2020, the Centre and UNESCO organized a joint webinar for youth, members of civil society and the media and government experts in East Africa on risks and opportunities during COVID-19 to counter hate speech and violent extremist propaganda online. UNESCO also continued its work to restore cultural heritage destroyed in Iraq during occupation by ISIL, including in Mosul. UNDP continued to strengthen community resilience to violent extremism by supporting the socioeconomic inclusion of young people and their participation in decision-making, including through the establishment of youth action groups in Central Asia to implement community-oriented youth action plans.

85. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute continued to work with grass-roots organizations in nine countries of the Maghreb and the Sahel through online training, social media campaigns and research and analysis efforts to strengthen community resilience to terrorist narratives and recruitment. In Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali raised awareness about the underlying human rights-related grievances that are exploited by violent extremist groups to recruit individuals from the general population. In February the Mission, OHCHR and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre provided training for members of law enforcement on counter-terrorism and human rights.

IV. Observations

86. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ways in which our world is transforming and the challenges we face in eliminating the threat of terrorism,

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[17] "Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate analytical brief: countering terrorist narratives online and offline".

including that posed by ISIL. Conflicts have changed in nature but continue to divide Member States and people while they need to unite to confront common challenges. Inequalities within and between countries have been laid bare, with the most vulnerable hit the hardest. Human rights are infringed upon and distrust is growing, while ignorance and anxieties surge into hate and xenophobia. Life in all its facets is disrupted by new technologies, which can be used for tremendous good and criminal purposes alike. All these challenges, accelerated and magnified by the pandemic, have the potential to feed into a vicious circle of destabilization and violence that ISIL is keen to exploit and exacerbate.

87.   The international community needs to stay attuned to how the threat of ISIL continues to evolve during and after the pandemic to adjust its response. Recent months have highlighted strong regional disparities in the threat trajectory. In non-conflict zones, it appears to have declined in the short term. Progress in intelligence, law enforcement and criminal justice efforts and cooperation among Member States have sustained an encouraging reduction in international attacks while ISIL has still not been able to reconstitute its external operations capacity. Yet, there is also a continued trend of attacks by individuals inspired online and acting alone or in small groups, which could be fuelled by ISIL propaganda efforts during the pandemic. In conflict zones, the threat has increased, as evidenced by ISIL regrouping in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic and its affiliates increasing their reach and staging bold attacks. ISIL and others seek to gain advantage from the strain on national capacities caused by the pandemic and to go on the offensive.

88.   It is vital, therefore, that Member States remain vigilant about the threat posed by ISIL and continue working together and with the United Nations to strengthen international counter-terrorism cooperation and provide assistance to the most affected countries. United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact entities expanded their tools to continue supporting requesting States in comprehensively addressing the threat.

89.   In particular, urgent action is needed for the repatriation, in line with international law, of women, men and children, including those with suspected links to ISIL, stranded in the conflict zone. I call on Member States to meet their obligations under international law towards these persons.

90.   Preparing for terrorism, like for public health emergencies, requires institutional and social resilience, as I underscored shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in my report to the General Assembly on the activities of the United Nations system in implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/74/677) for the seventh biennial review of the Strategy. In doing so, people should be put first and the rights and needs of victims of these tragedies should be upheld. In anticipation of the review of the strategy, the virtual counter-terrorism week organized by the Office of Counter-Terrorism from 6 to 10 July provided inputs regarding how Member States, United Nations entities, international and regional organizations, civil society and the private sector can work together to sustain and integrate counter-terrorism efforts in recovering together better from the pandemic.

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