



**1st Standing Committee on Political and Security related Cooperation**

**“Countering the evolving threat of terrorism in the Euro-Mediterranean region”**

Rapporteur: Hon. Gennaro Migliore (Italy)

**Report**

**Executive Summary**

1. Ongoing operational presence of the terrorist group "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq raises concerns, as terrorist attacks appear to resurge in numbers and casualties.
2. In light of the thousands of ISIL survivors, including foreigners, that are still detained by authorities in the region, and without a permanent solution in the short run, the current situation in Syria and Iraq requires an urgent and comprehensive resolution, with the proactive engagement of the international community and individual countries with affected nationals.
3. Recent terrorist attacks have demonstrated the concrete threat posed by terrorist recidivism. This happens as thousands of terrorist fighters, affiliates and sympathizers, are going through the justice systems in their own countries, and many are being cleared for release. The situation requires policy makers to closely re-assess relevant legislative provisions and the effectiveness of deradicalization programs to minimize the risk of recidivism. National parliaments need to strike the delicate balance between security measures and constitutional norms and fundamental freedoms.
4. In 2020, parts of the African continent have become the core of international terrorist activity with the rise and expansion of ISIL provinces and affiliates, especially in Western Sahel region, Lake Chad Basin, East Africa and Mozambique. Currently, terrorism-related deaths in Africa account for 41% of the worldwide casualties caused by terrorism. This represents an unprecedented rise of the phenomenon on the continent. There is a strong need for the international community to support at counterterrorism in the affected parts of Africa, as well as addressing root causes leading to the rise in violent extremism.
5. Throughout 2020-2021, PAM has continued to act as the key platform for counterterrorism policy discussions among the Parliaments of the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions. PAM reflects a unique "collective" perspective of its national parliaments to the global policy fora, and benefits from a strong network of partners, contributing to strengthening synergies of global counterterrorism efforts.

## Current state of ISIL in Syria and Iraq

6. Following a phase of readaptation, ISIL is again expanding its presence in Syria and Iraq. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, the activities of ISIL increased in North-Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, exploiting the temporary withdrawal of the forces of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL and the limited patrolling activities due to the Covid-19 outbreak.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Office on Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) estimates that more than 10,000 ISIL fighters remain active in the area between Syria and Iraq.<sup>2</sup>
7. In Syria, ISIL continues to resurge in areas previously deemed liberated by both the regime-led Syrian Armed Forces and the Kurdish authorities. In North-Eastern Syria, ISIL has exploited the reduced patrolling activities of local security actors to organize focused and increasingly sophisticated attacks.<sup>3</sup> In May 2020, ISIL leadership referred to the socio-economic effect of the pandemic as the greatest opportunity ISIL had in the last decade.<sup>4</sup>
8. In particular, ISIL cells have been very active East of the Euphrates River, where attacks were conducted in the surroundings of Deir Ez-Zor, and in Raqqa, which once was the stronghold of the group. In the area west of the Euphrates, ISIL launched a series of attacks against Syrian regime forces in the Homs desert region and its fighters also attacked Palmyra, one of the symbols of the successful counter-terrorism efforts in Syria.<sup>5</sup> ISIL is also suspected to have blown up a critical Syrian gas pipeline in the heart of regime-controlled territory, knocking out power across the country.<sup>6</sup> ISIL cells also frequently target the civilian population with kidnappings for ransom and for racketeering businesses.<sup>7</sup>
9. Throughout 2020, ISIL claimed to have carried out nearly 600 attacks in Syria, mainly targeting Syrian regime forces, and other armed groups.<sup>8</sup> The deadliest of these attacks resulted in the killing of 37 soldiers of the Syrian regime forces on a bus that was taking them home on leave.<sup>9</sup> In early 2021, civilian casualties in North-Eastern Syria have continued to rise. In January 2021, ISIL launched more than 100 attacks in the Deir Ez-Zor province.<sup>10</sup>
10. In Iraq, where mass protests, an economic crisis and the COVID-19 outbreak have restrained the government's capability to fight back, ISIL has managed to adapt to circumstances and to exploit them to its advantage. The number of ISIL attacks in Iraq has maintained an increasing trend throughout 2020, with more than 250 attacks recorded in the first quarter of the year.<sup>11</sup> The figures for early 2020 were double than those recorded in the same period in 2019, and were very close to the number of attacks committed at the beginning of 2012, during the initial rise of ISIS.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/abbdcd29-fe66-4be2-b35e-efcfca536ce1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084362>

<sup>3</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/22cf69f5f7ab4a3268fd224107fad61>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-policy-and-resurgence-isis-iraq-and-syria>

<sup>5</sup> <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-syria-a-deadly-new-focus/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-24/gas-pipeline-explosion-causes-power-outage-across-syria-sana>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55887870>

<sup>8</sup> <https://cutt.ly/Wcw4D1G> ; <https://cutt.ly/tcw7ggG> ; <https://cutt.ly/qcw4Vj5> ; <https://cutt.ly/dcw8vhO>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/at-least-37-soldiers-killed-in-isis-bus-ambush-in-syria-2345814>

<sup>10</sup> <https://icct.nl/publication/prosecution-of-isis-fighters-by-autonomous-administration-of-north-east-syria/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/13/2002298979/-1/-1/1/LIG\\_OIR\\_Q2\\_MAR2020\\_GOLD\\_508\\_0513.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/13/2002298979/-1/-1/1/LIG_OIR_Q2_MAR2020_GOLD_508_0513.PDF);

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>

11. In January 2021, a suicide bombing in the center of Baghdad killed 32 people and wounded hundreds of others, representing the deadliest attack in the capital since 2017. On that occasion, the Iraqi Foreign Minister recalled that ISIL is still not defeated and called for greater support by international partners.<sup>13</sup>

### **ISIL FTFs survivors in Syria and Iraq**

12. The resurgence of ISIL activity in Syria and Iraq raises particular concerns, especially in light of the thousands of ISIL survivors that are detained by authorities in the region following the territorial defeat of the proto-state in 2018.

13. In Syria, around 10,000 ISIL male members are in custody in different structures of the Al-Hasakeh Governorate under control of the Kurdish authorities, of whom 2,000 are foreigners from 50 different nationalities, mainly from Western and Arab countries.<sup>14</sup> In these structures, guards are struggling to keep control of the prisoners and frequently report crimes and persistent radicalization. Moreover, multiple riots were recorded, which highlighted the clear risk of jailbreaks by dangerous radicalized individuals.<sup>15</sup>

14. The COVID-19 outbreak and the recent resurgence of ISIL have also worsened the living conditions in the camps where women and children affiliated with ISIL are held. More than 22,000 foreign children of at least 60 nationalities are held in North-Eastern Syria, in addition to many thousands of Syrian children. As of early March 2021, the camp of Al-Hol hosts 62,000 people, representing the biggest camp in the area, where 80% of the population are women and children.<sup>16</sup>

15. In these camps, residents live in dire conditions and episodes of violence are a daily occurrence, with at least 31 killings reported since the beginning of 2021.<sup>17</sup> The killings are largely believed to have been carried out by ISIL fighters, who are punishing perceived enemies and trying to intimidate those that might not agree with their extremist ideologies. In late March 2021, nearly 5,000 Kurdish soldiers conducted a security sweep in the camps to prevent further violence. Kurdish security officers reported the arrest of nine people, including an Iraqi ISIL member, who was actively working in recruitment.<sup>18</sup>

16. The fate of the foreigners currently detained in Syria and Iraq requires an urgent and comprehensive solution, with the proactive involvement of all the countries involved. However, repatriations of FTFs and their families have been piecemeal, and only a few people have been repatriated, often as a result of emergency plans for critical illnesses. Most countries continue to show reluctance to repatriate their nationals, citing difficulty in collecting

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/22/islamic-state-claims-deadly-baghdad-twin-suicide-bombing>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/world/middleeast/isis-prisoners-syria.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/islamic-state-prisoners-escape-from-syrian-jail-after-militants-riot> ; <https://npasyria.com/en/46551/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085982>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210303-syria-camp-for-is-relatives-records-31-murders-this-year>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/28/syria-kurds-arrest-9-at-al-hol-camp-for-isil-families>

evidence and claiming the pandemic as a further impediment, while the international community remains fragmented on this issue.

17. Inaction and temporary solutions do not constitute a viable way to address the fate of the ISIL detainees. The likely outcome is a magnified terrorist threat in the near future. In the camps, there is a clear risk of the emergence of the next generation of ISIL supporters, as many children are faced with war-related trauma, persistent radicalization, and the issue of statelessness. In prisons, if the status quo persists, terrorists will network among each other and become more dangerous, meanwhile innocent will be radicalized.

### **The threat of terrorist recidivism**

18. The risk of terrorist recidivism has emerged as a worrying trend, as more than four thousands of terrorist convicts will complete their sentences in the coming years, as reported by OSCE.<sup>19</sup> A recent trend has shown that some of them are likely to carry out attacks upon release.
19. Most of the sentences remain of brief duration, especially for those who did not travel to warzones and were convicted for non-violent terrorism-related crimes, such as spreading online propaganda and engaging in terrorist financing. According to Europol, among the EU States, the average length of sentences for terrorism-related offenses does not exceed 5 years.<sup>20</sup> According to this data, hundreds of terrorism-related prison terms assigned in the last years will soon expire, posing a serious threat of potential terrorist recidivism.
20. In the last two years, a number of terrorist attacks have been conducted by released prisoners, or people that were under monitoring by the authorities for suspected terrorist affiliation. In November 2019, a terrorist attacked and killed two people and injured three others before being shot dead by police officers near the London Bridge, in the UK. The terrorist, Usman Khan, was out on license from prison after having served a term of eight years for planning terrorist attacks and wore an electronic bracelet. Khan also took part in the government's "Desistance and Disengagement Programme", the purpose of which is the rehabilitation of those who have been involved in terrorism.<sup>21</sup>
21. In February 2020, another released prisoner, Sudesh Amman, injured two people in an attack in South London, before he too was shot dead by police officers, who had him under close surveillance. Amman had been released from prison just ten days before he carried out the attack, after serving a two-year term for possessing documents containing terrorist information and disseminating terrorist publications.<sup>22</sup>
22. In November 2020, a 20-year-old Austrian, Kujtim Fejzullai conducted a terrorist attack in the center of Vienna, killing four people and wounding some 20 others. The perpetrator had previously served a prison sentence for attempting to travel to Syria to join ISIL. Feizullaj was released early from prison in line with relevant legislation due to his young age and took

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<sup>19</sup> OSCE-wide counter-terrorism conference, 21 April 2021, Session III  
<https://www.osce.org/event/osce-wide-counter-terrorism-conference-2021>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50611788>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51351885>

part in a deradicalization program, even though he had never been assessed as fully deradicalized.<sup>23</sup>

23. These events raised some doubts about legislative provisions governing the release of terrorist convicts and the effectiveness of deradicalization programs.
24. To address the emerging issue of terrorist recidivism, countries have adopted different measures. Some countries are introducing a system of increased sentencing, aimed at extending the detention period for terrorism-related offenses. In particular, increased sentencing is often paired with limits to early release provisions, in cases where an individual has not been rehabilitated yet. For instance, the Parliament of the United Kingdom adopted an emergency law in February 2020 preventing terrorist offenders from being released before the end of their sentence without a thorough risk assessment by the Parole Board.<sup>24</sup>
25. Other countries adopt measures to closely monitor those convicted for terrorism while they are in prison, and after their release. In Italy, judges and territorial police forces are informed of the release of convicted terrorists and are given a report on the in-prison monitoring activity in order to help police units identify the appropriate measures that need to be taken as a follow-up.<sup>25</sup>
26. Other measures can also imply preventive detention, probation service, or electronic tags. However, the implementation of such measures needs to comply with international instruments for the protection of human rights and with national constitutional provisions. In addition, post-prison monitoring has limited effectiveness, as in the case of the London Bridge attack.
27. There is a need to examine the effectiveness of long-term solutions, such as deradicalization and rehabilitation programs. In this regard, the initiatives that seem to work better tend to integrate diverse actors in a holistic approach, often working on the religious education of violent extremists.<sup>26</sup> Some countries, like Morocco, have developed a dedicated program with theology courses given by religious clerics, which allows them to question and refute radical discourses.<sup>27</sup>

### **Alarming level of terrorist activity in parts of Africa**

28. Recent months have seen a drastic deterioration of the security and socio-economic conditions in Western Sahel region, Lake Chad Basin, East Africa and Mozambique. In these areas, observers reported a sharp increase in terrorist activity intertwined with a severe economic slowdown.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://icct.nl/publication/vienna-attack-the-path-of-a-prospective-foreign-terrorist-fighter/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-to-automatic-early-release-of-terrorists> ; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-51623028>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.giustizia.it/resources/cms/documents/anno\\_giudiziario\\_2020\\_dap.pdf](https://www.giustizia.it/resources/cms/documents/anno_giudiziario_2020_dap.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26631540>

<sup>27</sup> <https://eeradicalization.com/dealing-with-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters-insights-from-the-moroccan-experience/>

<sup>28</sup> [https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s\\_2020\\_1293\\_e.pdf](https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2020_1293_e.pdf)

29. In 2020, Sub-Saharan Africa has become the epicenter of increasing terrorist activity, accounting for 41 percent of total terrorist-related deaths in the world.<sup>29</sup> In Mali, the number of violent acts conducted by terrorist groups in 2020 increased by 50%, leading this year to be the deadliest one on record.<sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> In other countries of Western Sahel, namely Niger and Burkina Faso, violent acts increased, respectively, by 130% and 309%.<sup>32</sup>
30. Terrorist groups in the Sahel are recruiting and exploiting children for military and labor purposes. Factors pushing children to join armed groups are most often related to the need for protection perceived by a child and his or her family, extreme poverty, hunger, lack of access to education, and lack of hope for the future.<sup>33</sup> Save the Children reports that 50% of the population in the Sahel is under 15 years old, and more than 1 million children are currently displaced by hunger or armed conflicts, exposing them to violent extremism and military recruitment.<sup>34</sup>
31. In Lake Chad Basin, a sharp increase in violent acts was reported, particularly in Cameroon and Nigeria. In 2020, the number of attacks claimed by Islamist groups in Northern Cameroon has had a 90% rise compared to 2019, jumping to around 400 acts over the year. In the same time period, in Nigeria, terrorist attacks have risen by 52%.<sup>35</sup>
32. The African Continent has become the core of the expansion of ISIL franchises and of Al-Qaeda affiliates. In the Sahel, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the al-Qaeda umbrella-affiliate, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the recognized Islamic State affiliate, constitute major threats.
33. In Nigeria, ISIL is exerting growing control on the Boko Haram splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP has close ties with ISIL core, proven by the training of terrorist fighters in Libya who are then sent back to their countries of origin in the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>36</sup>
34. Moreover, a Mozambican group known as Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah and an affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly part of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), started operating under the banner of Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). ISCAP may be the IS affiliate causing the most concern for the international community, as the group continues to demonstrate improved military capabilities and the ability to seize and control territory.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/01/2020-trends-terrorism-isis-fragmentation-lone-actor-attacks>

<sup>30</sup> <https://acleddata.com/2020/12/17/mali-any-end-to-the-storm/>

<sup>31</sup> In 2019, in Mali, 182 violent acts conducted by identity militias were reported. In 2020, the violent acts were 273. Source of data: <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

<sup>32</sup> In 2019, in Burkina Faso, 32 violent acts conducted by identity militias were reported. In 2020, the violent acts were 101. In Niger, violent acts were 9 in 2019 and 21 in 2020.

Source of data: <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/publication/no-choice-it-takes-world-end-use-child-soldiers>

<sup>34</sup> [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18336/pdf/sahel\\_brief\\_vf.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18336/pdf/sahel_brief_vf.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/boko-haram-violence-against-civilians-spiking-northern-cameroon>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/islamic-state-franchises-africa-lessons-lake-chad>

35. In Mozambique, ISCAP managed to seize the port of Mocimboa da Praia after a sequence of coordinated attacks, showing developed military training and coordination.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the capture of the port has allowed ISCAP to resupply its fighters and make money through the trade or taxation on both licit and illicit commodities.
36. The threat posed ISCAP risks to dramatically increase in the following months, as its affiliates are currently sieging the region of Cabo Delgado, characterized by great reserves of natural gas and ruby deposits.<sup>38</sup> In the framework of this offensive, in late March 2021, ISCAP fighters stormed the city of Palma killing dozens of civilians and causing the displacement of nearly 10,000 people. After this attack, the number of people displaced by the violence in Cabo Delgado has reached 669,256, of whom the absolute majority are women and children.<sup>39</sup>
37. In March 2021, to ensure the adoption of effective measures to respond to the surge of this group, the U.S. President Biden has included the Mozambican and the Congolese branches of ISCAP in the list of foreign terrorist organizations.<sup>40</sup>
38. These recent developments represent a danger that will have global implications, as the conditions in these areas may serve as an opportunity for terrorist organizations to establish a foothold from which they may organize and export terror throughout the world.
39. International efforts to promote security in the affected parts of Africa must address the root causes of violence and instability, including a persistent lack of development, environmental degradation, ties between terrorist groups and transnational organized crime, lack of opportunities for youth, arms proliferation, exploitation of local conflicts by global terrorist actors, governance vacuums, and diminishing trust in state institutions.

### **Highlights of PAM action on Counter-terrorism**

40. Throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021, PAM has been very active on counter-terrorism, by facilitating dialogue and policy exchange among the parliaments of the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions, and by bringing the concerns of PAM parliaments to the forefront of global discussions on terrorism issues.
41. In collaboration with its partners, PAM organized three key events. On 30 June 2020, PAM together with the UN and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) co-organized a virtual conference to take stock of the terrorism threat in the context of the pandemic. During the meeting, parliamentarians engaged in a focused security debate and exchanged views on how to retain counter-terrorism efforts high on Governments' agendas during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
42. On 15 February 2021, PAM and the United Nations Office on Countering Terrorism (UNOCT), held the virtual joint Parliamentary Meeting on the "Challenges of the post-

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/isis-fighters-capture-mozambique-port-town-1.1063135>

<sup>38</sup> <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-11/>

<sup>39</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/moz\\_palma\\_response\\_protection\\_flash\\_report\\_20210405.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/moz_palma_response_protection_flash_report_20210405.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-africa-islamic-state-idUSKBN2B30QJ>

territorial ISIL context”. The meeting was a crucial opportunity to speak about the challenges of repatriation, prosecution, deradicalization, evaluating the threat of recidivism and strengthening international cooperation on counterterrorism. The event also marked the signing of a landmark cooperation agreement between PAM and UNOCT, which will further enhance the synergy between international actors and national parliaments on counterterrorism policies.

43. On 15 April 2021, PAM together with OSCE PA, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), UNOCT, and the Interparliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPA CIS) co-organized the International Parliamentary Conference on “Global Challenges and Threats in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Terrorism and Violent Extremism”. The event allowed the participating PAM delegates to examine the evolving trends of the terrorist threat, particularly against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as to evaluate ongoing international efforts to prevent all forms of violent extremism.
44. In the framework of the fruitful cooperation with its international partners, PAM actively contributed to several high-level fora, including briefing the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), the UN Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, the OSCE-wide Counter-Terrorism Conference on building partnerships against extremism and radicalization, a series of events organized by NATO South Hub on the best practices on security and counter-terrorism in Northern Africa, and to the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.
45. In 2021 and 2022, PAM, through the work of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Counterterrorism, will continue to work with all its partners, including international organizations, national security agencies, think-tanks, academia and civil society to monitor and adopt legislative response to the evolving nature of the terrorist threat through parliamentary action.