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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights (IIPJHR), a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).



The issue of foreign fighters: preventing and fighting youth radicalisation

Introduction

The International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights (IIPJHR) has been closely monitoring the issue of youth radicalisation for several months. This radicalisation leads some young people to fight in conflict zones of the Middle East. They are known as “jihadi fighters”. IIPJHR prefers to use the term of neo-mercenaries to emphasize their individual status, their sectarian ideology, new methods of radicalisation in the digital era as well as the new demographics involved (women¹ and minors).

This worrying trend primarily concerns North African and Middle Eastern as well as European States but goes further still as cases of Asian as well as North American fighters in Syria have been reported². Estimates are that between 3,000 and 11,000 fighters have fought in Syria since 2011³. A report of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) on the issue talks about 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria, 2,800 of whom are European. 70% of the fighters in Syria come from neighbouring Arab countries.

Besides contributing to the deterioration of the situation in Syria and Iraq, the return of these foreign fighters represents a real terrorist threat for these States. However, the management of returnees is complex and IIPJHR would like to draw attention to the fact that this strategy must be complemented by the need to prevent departures in the first place, which demands a fierce response against radical propaganda. To help fight against this phenomenon, a dual strategy is required that acts to prevent initial departures as well as managing returnees.

A sectarian-type of radicalisation

More than ever, States should combine their efforts to fight indoctrination. In France, the Inter-ministerial Mission for Vigilance and Combating Sectarian Aberrations (MIVILUDES) issued a warning in 2014 while the National Union of Associations for the Defence of Families and Individual Victims of Sects (UNADFI) noted growing cases of “sectarian aberration”⁴. The process of indoctrination is a sectarian process which articulates a type of eschatological discourse isolating the individual from family and from society⁵. Young, vulnerable people can easily fall prey to such propaganda.

Radicalisation through the Internet

IIPJHR specifically highlights the role of New Information and Communication Technologies and the use of social media, including popular channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) widely used by youth. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) highlights the existence of new spiritual authorities operating on the Internet, acting as inspirational figures and virtual preachers⁶. Neo-mercenaries take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Internet. They have been able to make use of them for their own ends. They use them for several functions: propaganda, recruitment of potential candidates via social networks as well as communication and information between fighters. This involves self-radicalisation taking place in front of the computer and is much more difficult for the authorities to prevent and detect.

¹ TV5 Monde. Jihad : pourquoi les femmes, aujourd'hui, s'engagent-elles ?, 8/08/2014.

² Aaron Y. Zelin. ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans. International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR). <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>

³ In his study on French djihadi fighters, Daniel Thomson reveals the plurality of candidates to « jihad » : he notes that it not limited to young men but covers a range of people, including some well-integrated in society, as well as women and in some cases, entire families. In Daniel Thomson, *Les Français djihadistes*. Les Arènes. 2014.

⁴ Le Bars, Stéphanie. « Des familles s'inquiètent des dérives sectaires liées à l'Islam ». *Le Monde*. 24/03/2014.

⁵ Dounia Bouzar, *Désamorcer l'islam radical. Ces dérives sectaires qui défigurent l'islam*. Editions de l'Atelier. 2014.

⁶ Josep Carter, Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann. #Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR). 2014. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>

While IIPJHR does not intend to demonize the Internet and the opportunities it provides, IIPJHR invites States to be creative in order to protect young people, especially minors, from the negative influence of radical propaganda. The IIPJHR notes the American government's initiative in countering this propaganda through the Twitter account "Think Again Turn Away". The challenge for States resides in protecting people from sectarian influences without hindering the rights inherent to the free movement of persons as well as freedom of expression. The issue of return and States' collective action

States are faced with an important security challenge: the management of the return of these fighters poses difficult problems for the authorities. European States already have a "classic" arsenal of anti-terrorist legislation, but they often remain helpless in the face of this new type of fighter. In this regard, IIPJHR particularly welcomes the recent progress made by the French government in July 2014 in its new bill that includes an administrative ban on foreign travel for individuals suspected of being radicalised, the creation of a new criminal offence (individual initiative to carry out terrorist activities) as well as the possibility of blocking websites promoting radicalism⁷. IIPJHR also looks favourably on Turkey's latest measures to increase vigilance at the borders⁸. IIPJHR hopes these first measures will help save some of the young people entrapped by recruiting agents.

Similarly, IIPJHR welcomes the collective efforts of European States to reinforce cooperation and intelligence coordination demonstrated for example by the meeting of⁹ European States on 8 May 2014 with representatives from the United States, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia in order to prevent further departures to Syria and to fight against radicalisation⁹. IIPJHR also welcomes the European Union's action: the adoption of a plan in Milan on 7 July regarding the coordinated use of information sharing to help prevent terrorist attacks¹⁰. Given the crucial role of the Internet, IIPJHR welcomes the EU decision to meet with Google, Twitter and Facebook in order to prevent radicalisation happening through these platforms¹¹.

IIPJHR also invites States to reflect that, as civilians, these fighters should answer for their deeds on the basis of clear evidence. Broaching the subject of fighters' accountability raises the issue of atrocities committed on foreign soil.

Conclusion

IIPJHR urges the UN Human Rights Council and the international community to continue the fight against radicalisation to enhance the protection of young people

⁷ RFI. France unveils new anti-jihad bill. 9/07/ 2014.

⁸ SETimes.com. EU approves action plan to deal with jihadists. 21/07/2014.

⁹ Le Monde. « Menace djihadiste : neuf pays européens accélèrent la coordination du renseignement », 6/06/2014.

¹⁰ "The aim is to improve the use the Schengen Information System, target border controls, transmission of information to Europol for joint analysis, share information about foreign fighters with national authorities as well as practical co-operation and exchange of information, for example in the use of passenger data," the EU said » in SETimes.com. EU approves action plan to deal with jihadists. 21/07/2014.

¹¹ SETimes.com. EU approves action plan to deal with jihadists. 21/07/2014.