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Measures to eliminate international terrorism

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Letter dated 16 April 2019 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a copy of an analytical document entitled “Consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats”, prepared by the Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law-Enforcement Organizations (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 111, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) V. Nebenzia



Annex to the letter dated 16 April 2019 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law-Enforcement Organizations

7 and 8 November 2018, Moscow

Consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats

The global community of special services and law enforcement agencies is working constantly to identify current terrorist threats and predict the emergence of new ones.

International terrorism today remains the main source of terrorist threats that have a significant impact on the security situation in various regions of the world.

International terrorist organizations are engaged in public radicalization efforts and are expanding their propaganda and recruitment campaigns, including online. The international terrorist organization Islamic States and the Levant (ISIL) is implementing strategic plans to seek out new regional alliances and establish a global Sunni “caliphate”. These activities are leading to the creation of new terrorist breeding grounds and are destabilizing the situation in many regions of the world, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia. They are also strengthening the terrorist underground and the terrorist attacks that it perpetrates in Western European countries.

Description of the activities of international terrorist organizations in the Middle East

The increased activity of ISIL, Al-Qaida and other international terrorist organizations in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, is the main source of terrorist threats affecting the situation in most countries around the world.

The combat capabilities of ISIL have been undermined by its military defeats and the actions of Syrian governmental forces to liberate occupied territories.

As a result, ISIL has made some changes to the range of methods that it uses to commit terrorist acts. The main focus of its new tactics is on setting up large numbers of terrorist sleeper cells, which are equipped with trained terrorists who have experience of engaging in hostilities and committing crimes in conflict zones. Such fighters are specifically tasked with directly participating in the preparation and commission of terrorist acts upon their return to their countries of origin. To that end, they are intensively trained in mines and explosives and in the development of covert channels of communication. As these persons are aware that intelligence and investigative measures are being used to track them, they employ special concealment measures when returning to their home countries.

Against a backdrop of weakening ISIL positions, Al-Qaida and its regional branches, including Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent, are gradually strengthening their positions.

Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front) and the Levant Liberation Organization remain active. In Syria for example, under the auspices of Jabhat Fath al-Sham, the Levant Liberation Organization formed a coalition whose leader has

managed to subjugate various Salafist groups operating in the Syrian Governorates of Idlib and Aleppo and to ensure financial and other support for the coalition from abroad. He has not only maintained control over those forces but has moved them away from strikes from the United States-led counter-terrorism coalition.

Foreseeing the possible loss of their previously captured territories, international terrorist organizations have devised guerrilla warfare tactics that combine surprise attacks on government and security forces with terrorist attacks on civilians. At the same time, some ISIL fighters have begun hiding on the Syrian-Iraq border area where Al-Qaida fighters previously took shelter.

Thus, despite the declaration of a military victory over ISIL, this entity continues to exist as a terrorist organization and a symbol of terrorism.

Bearing this in mind, the military and political situation in the Syrian Arab Republic will remain challenging and may worsen and spread to other regions. The development of the situation will continue to be strongly influenced by the activities of ISIL, Jabhat Fath al-Sham, Al-Qaida and other armed groups.

Description of the activities of international terrorist organizations in Central, Southern and South-East Asian countries, African countries and other countries

International terrorist organizations continue to increase their efforts to expand the area of terrorist activity beyond the traditional Middle East and North Africa region. As a result, the level of terrorist threat is increasing in European countries, where a number of terrorist acts of varying scale are committed. This is largely due to growing illegal migration flows being used by members of international terrorist organization to infiltrate European Union countries, as well as the return of foreign terrorist fighters to their home countries.

Even greater numbers of Russian Federation and Central Asian citizens who engaged in hostilities in the Middle East on the side of international terrorist organization are returning to their countries of origin. Once there, they actively participate in extremist activities mainly aimed at radicalizing the population, especially young people.

Consequently, there is a threat of an increase in the number of persons sympathetic to radical ideas in Central Asian countries and a related expansion in the recruitment base for ISIL and other international terrorist organizations from among migrant workers living in Russia.

In the past, Al-Qaida, ISIL and regional terrorist organizations leaders attracted foreign fighters from Central Asian countries to commit attack against governmental, police and military structures in Afghanistan and other hotspots around the world in order to achieve local tactical goals. Recent terrorist attacks demonstrate that these fighters are now being used against civilians in other countries, including non-Muslim countries, in order to destabilize the situation and fuel inter-ethnic conflicts.

The previously predicted establishment of an extensive terrorist network in the Philippines and the growth of terrorist activity by ISIL cells led to a terrorist attack on the island of Mindanao, planned by ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2017.

The subsequent defeat of armed groups belonging to the Islamic State East Asia terrorist group in the Philippines demonstrated the remarkable success of the country's army and special services in the fight against terrorism. A major development during special operations was the elimination of a number of jihadist leaders, including militant leader and "emir" for South-East Asia Isnilon Hapilon and

his closest assistant Mahmud Ahmad, through whom Islamists from South-East Asia made contact with the leadership of ISIL in the Middle East.

Nonetheless, the situation in South-East Asia remains alarming. Regional terrorist groups based on the Philippine islands of Mindanao, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi are finalizing the regrouping of their forces, which could indicate that new attacks are being prepared.

The counter-terrorism situation also remains tense in many African countries. First of all, there has been an increase in the activities of international terrorist organizations in North Africa. At the same time, terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Mourabitoun (Algeria), Ansar Eddine (Mali), Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia, Libya), Boko Haram (Nigeria), Al-Shabaab (Somalia), Wilayat Sina' (Egypt) and the Army of Islam (Libya) remain active.

International terrorist organizations are thus continuing to pursue the strategic goal of consistently ensuring a long-term presence in their areas of "responsibility", building the necessary human and operational capacities in those areas and, thereby, demonstrating to their actual and potential supporters, as well as sponsors, their resilience and readiness to take action.

The implementation of this strategy, in our view, may lead to the emergence of new hotbeds of terrorist activity and destabilize the situation in many countries in both Central, Southern and South-East Asia and in Northern, Western and Eastern Africa, several European countries as well as the Russian Federation.

Based on the above, it is possible to identify several of the most pressing threats of a terrorist nature that will have a direct impact on how tense the situation will become in the short and medium term.

1. *The most pressing threat will be from foreign terrorist fighters returning to their countries of origin after engaged in hostilities in "hotspots" on the side of international terrorist organizations*

With the military support of Russia and other States, the armed forces of Syria have now liberated a significant part of Syrian territory from the fighters. These included not only Syrian and Iraqi nationals, but also a significant number of foreign terrorist fighters who are nationals of Arab and African States, South-East and Central Asian countries and a number of European countries.

The foreign terrorist fighters are travelling to North African countries where, taking advantage of inadequacies in their law enforcement, they are being temporarily deployed to form terrorist groups while considering options for subsequent relocation to other regions. In some States, ISIL and Al-Qaida members are setting up trans-shipment bases to help fighters fleeing combat areas transition to new environments.

An assessment of the intelligence received shows that members of international terrorist organizations are attempting to travel from Syria and Iraq primarily back to their countries of origin. Although the overall rate of returning fighters is low, such persons with expertise in mine warfare, urban warfare and secret communications pose a serious threat to those countries.

Accordingly, it should be expected that there will be an increased willingness by fighters and their families to return to their countries of origin through various channels of migration, followed by activities to recruit "jihadists" to their ranks and expand the sphere of influence of international terrorist organizations. This situation fuels terrorist activities in various regions of the world, especially in European countries. At the same time, certain groups will purposefully choose to commit

terrorist acts in States where an existing potential for conflict can be used by international terrorist organizations for their criminal ends, including further exacerbating sociopolitical and interethnic divisions.

2. *A significant concern is the threat of increased support to international terrorist organizations based in northern Afghanistan through the influx of fighters from Syria and Iraq*

ISIL ideologists see Afghanistan as a critical launching pad for the creation of a “global caliphate”. ISIL leaders therefore continue to focus their efforts on expanding the territory of the “Khorasan Province” established there. To achieve their goals, groups of foreign fighters are being deployed to Afghanistan from Syria and Iraq. The groups based there are being replenished by former members of the Pakistani wing of the Taliban and others.

According to various estimates, the number of ISIL forces deployed in Afghanistan ranges from as high as 3,000 to 4,000 persons. Their activities have been noted in Faryab, Jowzjan, Sari Pul, Kunduz, Samangan, Nuristan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Laghman, Ghazni and Zabul Provinces. At the same time, ISIL has numerous fighter training camps throughout Afghanistan.

Given the above, there is an increasing threat that the area of tensions will shift from Afghanistan to Central Asia. The greatest danger in this regard comes from the “Badakhshan bridgehead”, where the positions of the Taliban and Jamaat Ansarullah are being strengthened.

In view of the unstable military and political situation in Afghanistan, it is predicted that in the near future the activities of the international terrorist organizations deployed there will include attempts to infiltrate the territory of neighboring countries, primarily in Central Asia.

3. *The commission of terrorist acts in States that are engaged in countering the activities of international terrorist organizations remains an ongoing threat*

In the context of a weakening ISIL, the leaders of that international terrorist organization have directed its supporters in many countries around the world to employ independent jihadist tactics in their countries of residence. They are called upon to carry out terrorist acts by any accessible means, such as using knives, firearms, explosives and vehicles.

The perpetrators of such terrorist acts could either be members of local terrorist and extremist organizations who are followers of ISIL, self-radicalized persons under the influence of its ideological narratives disseminated on the Internet, or individuals who have returned from combat zones in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

The recent practice of terrorist acts being committed by supporters of ISIL who do not formally belong to radical organizations and who are able to act independently allows that organization to spread panic in society and create an atmosphere of distrust in the legitimate authorities.

As terrorist attacks in European countries resulting from events in Syria and Iraq have shown, real threats of a terrorist nature mainly come from sleeper cells and lone wolves, whose attacks are very difficult to detect and prevent. Their targets are civilians, law enforcement officials and social infrastructure facilities.

The most attractive targets for terrorists are places of mass public assembly, especially during the holding of major sociopolitical and sporting events.

Such terrorist tactics are predicted to remain a priority. This will allow international terrorist organizations to save military and human resources while

causing serious damage to countries engaged in countering their activities. The possibility of terrorists attempting to gain access to components and technologies related to weapons of mass destruction can also not be ruled out.

4. *There is a growing new threat from the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and robotic systems for terrorist purposes*

As the losses by international terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria have increased, Islamists have increasingly resorted to tactics that exclude the direct involvement of fighters in operations. The most characteristic example is the use of customized guided or programmable unmanned aerial vehicles for terrorist purposes.

In the hands of terrorists, customized drones clearly pose a serious threat, especially in combat conditions and particularly in Syria. For example, such unmanned aerial vehicles have attacked Russian military facilities in the districts of Humaymim and Tartus.

However, experts do not rule out the possibility of drones being used not only in combat conditions, but also to commit terrorist acts in the territory of different States. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles by terrorists thus represents a new threat, including against civilian and military infrastructure.

A serious danger is also posed by international terrorist organizations using industrial and homemade robots and robotic systems filled with explosives, both in areas of armed conflict and for the commission of major terrorist acts against civilians and individual targets located in the territory of other countries.

Various types of terrorist attacks involving the use of unmanned aerial vehicles are predicted. For example, they could be used to spray radioactive or chemical toxic agents over large cities. The threat also exists of Islamists using drones to deliver high-power explosives to densely populated areas. One plausible scenario is the use of a large number of aerial devices at the same time, making it even more difficult to counteract them.

5. *The threat remains of international terrorist organizations increasing their indoctrination of the public for the purposes of radicalization, including online*

Supporters of international terrorist organizations have now established a single global system of online resources which are focused on providing religious and ideological training to future members of the extremist and terrorist underground. The global network includes online resources for virtually all operational international terrorist organizations, whose terrorist and extremist materials are published in more than 40 world languages.

International terrorist organizations continue to disseminate practical recommendations on the organization of secure online channels of communication using publicly available software, including the encryption of transmitted data, in order to spread propaganda, select and prescreen new supporters and fund their activities.

The ability to carry out recruitment activities remotely, using modern telecommunications technologies, facilitates the task of engaging citizens in the illegal activities of terrorist entities. Social networks allow recruiters to influence, target and recruit individuals predisposed to participate in the activities of international terrorist organizations and religious extremist organizations.

A main reason that radical Muslims, especially young people, are drawn to the activities of international terrorist organizations is the bright and regularly updated content posted online by their supporters. Some proactively seek to contact the

emissaries of international terrorist organizations or travel independently to conflict zones, where they join their ranks.

Experts also note a shift towards terrorist propaganda and the targeted use of mobile messaging platforms, primarily *Telegram* and *WhatsApp*. These are used for the development of concealment measures, street terror tactics and virtual terrorist attacks against models of specific targets, as well as for the hidden control of cells of international terrorist organizations.

At the same time, the use of modern information and telecommunications facilities for terrorist purposes (so-called “terrorism by telephone”) has become widespread.

Information and communications technology plays a critical role in terms of facilitating the travel preparations of individuals joining the ranks of ISIL and related terrorist groups, training them in combat practices, disseminating information on the activities of international terrorist organizations, and in the planning of attacks. In particular, ISIL online forums are used to discuss ways to avoid detection at border crossings and which routes are unlikely to give rise to suspicion, including through States that do not have adequate controls at their borders.

The threat of public radicalization, which facilitates recruitment by terrorist organizations and the establishment of a supportive base for their activities, remains undiminished.

Terrorist ideological tools are first and foremost used to target young people, who spend a significant part of their lives on social networks. Having lost their traditional values and customary social reference points, marginalized groups are also vulnerable to terrorist narratives.

As a result of the widespread dissemination of radical Islamic ideology, sleeper cells have gradually emerged in many countries and their members acquire knowledge of concealment measures and terrorist tactics. This poses a serious threat to the security of those countries.

International terrorist organizations are therefore forecast to increase their indoctrination of the public, who will be drawn into terrorist activities through the related dissemination of radical narratives online.

An assessment of terrorist threats allows us to conclude that international terrorist and extremist organizations are currently perfecting their criminal methods and tactics, systematically selecting and recruiting new members, and assigning them to participate in combat operations in Syria and Iraq. These members are also being recruited to form sleeper cells, including in European countries, and to carry out terrorist attacks.

There are indications of a new trend towards terrorists committing frequent “low-cost” attacks with a relatively small number of fatalities, while relatively rare terrorist acts with a large number of casualties continue to be committed.

Terrorists are expanding their ties with the criminal underworld, particularly with members of organized criminal groups and communities specializing in the illicit arms trade and with representatives of the narcotics business. They are also spreading radical ideology, inciting religious hatred and committing extremist and terrorist crimes in an attempt to change the sociopolitical order of a country through violent means.

New tools of warfare disguise who the masterminds, organizers and perpetrators are. In order to effectively counter terrorism it is therefore necessary to understand

the essence of this social phenomenon, to predict the security threats associated with it and to develop timely measures to combat it.

In this regard, increased attention must be paid to the joint implementation of specific measures to eliminate terrorism-related threats, including:

(a) Measures to eliminate the main factors giving rise to the threat (such as the expanding sphere of influence of international terrorist organizations, the organization of channels to smuggle fighters and their families to Western countries, and recruitment activities carried out by the emissaries of international terrorist organizations and religious extremist entities). These include:

- Exchanging advance information on the intentions and specific activities of international terrorist organizations and religious extremist organizations
- Carrying out activities aimed at detecting, preventing and suppressing their terrorist activities

(b) Measures to suppress the key enablers of these threats (such international terrorist organization members, sleeper cells, lone wolves and suicide bombers). These include:

- Using common information resources, including the international counter-terrorism database
- Stepping up the exchange of information on the most pressing issues related to countering the international terrorist organizations operating in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan

(c) Measures geared towards ensuring the security of possible terrorist targets (such as critical infrastructures, places of mass public assembly and transport facilities). These include:

- Holding international events for relevant units of the special services, security agencies and law enforcement organizations of various countries with a view to exchanging experience in order to ensure the security of major sociopolitical and sporting events and of critical infrastructure
- Studying the law enforcement practices of cooperating parties with regard to ensuring the security of possible targets of terrorist attacks

In summary, the basis for a constructive approach to countering terrorism in the international community should be the development of a common understanding and assessment of future terrorist threats, the strengthening of counter-terrorism cooperation between the law enforcement agencies and special services of individual States, and their adoption of specific measures aimed at improving the effectiveness of existing mechanism, and the creation of new mechanisms, for regional and international cooperation to combat terrorist and extremist activities.
