



**UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM**

Opening remarks of Mr. Vladimir Voronkov

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT)

“International Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Targets and Unmanned Aircraft Systems”

6 October 2021, 9 a.m. (New York time)

Your Excellency, Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al-Thani, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations,

Excellencies, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to warmly welcome you to this third International Expert Group Meeting on the Protection of Vulnerable Targets.

Protecting vulnerable targets, including “soft targets” and critical infrastructure, has become one of the top priorities of our global counter-terrorism agenda.

After the first meeting on the protection of religious sites that we held in January, and the second meeting focused on urban centres and touristic venues in June, this third Expert Group Meeting will address the threat that the terrorist use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) represents against vulnerable targets—as well as the opportunities that UAS technology offers to protect those same targets.

I am very pleased to share this opening session with Ambassador Al-Thani. The State of Qatar is the main contributor to our Global Programme on the Protection of Vulnerable Targets, and I sincerely appreciate this support. Not only this Programme is financed by Qatar. I am grateful for the general contribution of Qatar to the work of the Office.

Commonly known as “drones”, Unmanned Aircraft Systems have already been employed by terrorists to gather information, conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, and carry out attacks by discharging explosive devices.

By using drones to film their attacks in conflict zones, Da'esh has sought to maximize the media impact of its actions. It cannot be excluded that returning foreign terrorist fighters may apply the “know-how” acquired on the battlefield and seek to turn drones against civilian targets, including open-air crowded places.

As the technology and know-how to build UAS becomes more widely available and easy to purchase around the world, their use for terrorist purposes is likely to grow. Future scenarios include the potential threat of “drone swarms” whereby one single operator controls multiple drones at the same time; or the routine employment of drones equipped with autonomous navigation features that do not emit any radio signal and are thus more challenging to identify and disrupt.

On the flip side, technological advances are making counter-UAS solutions more efficient and precise in their ability to detect and disable hostile drones.

When they are employed by authorized law enforcement and other competent authorities, UAS can themselves be critical tools to protect crowded spaces, areas adjacent to major events, and tourist locations. They can enhance prevention—for example, by providing real-time information to accurately assess risks—or help to effectively manage crisis situations, such as coordinating evacuations and supporting the work of first responders.

For the next two days, this Expert Group Meeting will tackle these two different dimensions, negative and positive, of the use of UAS technology in the context of vulnerable targets. The protection of human rights, a fundamental consideration in this area, will also be a cross-cutting topic in the different sessions of today's discussions.

I would like to sincerely thank [my good friend] Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, for opening our session on case studies today. I am sure her participation will highly contribute to our discussions.

I am pleased to see the response that convening this Meeting has triggered, drawing international experts of different disciplines, from the public and private sectors, academia, civil society organizations and even sport federations. I hope this will also become a good opportunity to expand collaboration and learn from each other.

As the General Assembly made clear in the recent review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, only through national, regional and international partnerships with public

and private stakeholders will Member States be able to succeed in effectively preventing and responding to terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets. The need to team up and build public-private confidence is even more important when we consider the role of Unmanned Aircraft Systems in this context.

It will therefore come as no surprise that forging strong, innovative and multi-stakeholder partnerships is one of the main objectives of our Global Programme on the Protection of Vulnerable Targets, and of our Global Programmes on Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Sports and Security, which are also co-hosting this Meeting.

The Vulnerable Targets Programme—which was launched in response to the calls of the General Assembly and the Security Council, including its Counter-Terrorism Committee:

- (i) Provides to requesting Member States specialized technical assistance and capacity-building to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to and recover from terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets; and
- (ii) Identifies and shares relevant good practices from around the world through tailored “knowledge products”, such as modular guides.

This Programme is implemented in partnership with relevant United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact entities—namely, the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute; and in collaboration with INTERPOL, and other international and regional organizations.

I would like to thank these entities for their dedication to our common efforts. Let me wish you a very productive meeting, invite you to share your good practices and experiences, and thank you for your engagement, for your support, and for your work to prevent and counter terrorism.

I thank you for your attention.