



**Remarks for the
Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) Side Event**

**Threats, Challenges and Resources Related to
FTF and Family Repatriations**

**By Mr. Ali Soufan
Founder
The Soufan Center**

*24 September, 2019
New York, New York*



About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization



I am honored to be here today representing my organization, The Soufan Center, a New York-based think-tank that focuses on the nexus between security, human rights and humanitarian crises. I thank the GCTF for this kind invitation and I welcome you all to New York today.

My team and I have been monitoring the foreign fighter phenomenon since we first began to notice the trend around 2012. We have been providing figures on the numbers of foreign recruits who travelled to join jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria since 2014.

By our last count, our research found that over 40,000 foreign individuals had travelled from more than 110 countries to join the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Now, following the military defeat of this terrorist organization, the international community is faced with the imminent challenge of what to do with the men, women and children who were affiliated with this group.



Today, we are gathered to discuss the particular challenge of FTF detainees, spouses and children. I would like to share some points from our research to better help countries understand and address the serious challenge we face today.

7 Points Regarding the Repatriation of ISIS Fighters and their Families

On September 11 of this year, I joined over a dozen leading national security experts in an open letter to Western governments. Copies of this letter are available from members of my team.

The letter warns that the conditions that gave rise to the September 11 attacks are resurfacing in places like Iraq, Syria and beyond, allowing groups like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State to grow in strength.



Today I would like to share with you all the main points of this letter:

1. Support the United Nations investigative mandate of

UNITAD. The UN has been doing an excellent job investigating the horrible crimes of ISIS in Iraq. We need to expand this into Syria and fund it accordingly. Justice will be an important component of moving forward, especially for local populations brutalized by IS. In fact, we should not lose sight of local ISIS fighters and families. Ongoing political, social, and security conditions contribute to the cyclical nature of terrorism today. In parts of Iraq and Syria, years of violence have completely destroyed the social fabric; and, moving forward, communities will have to slowly rebuild trust and learn to live alongside each other again.

2. Provide proper support to the Syrian Democratic

Forces who control camps like al-Hol. There are between 60,000 to 70,000 people in al-Hol camp; about 70% of them are children. The international community should give



the SDF the resources and expertise they need to ensure that extremists cannot use their time in detention as an opportunity to plot more violence. We should recall that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's latest statement urged IS supporters to free fellow IS members detained following the fall of the caliphate. We must also understand the diverse roles played by women under IS – which continues in these detention centers. While some are victims of physical and emotional abuse; others are deeply radicalized and preach toxic ISIS propaganda to increasingly vulnerable and desperate detainees of al-Hol, mostly children.

3. Western governments need to start investigating their citizens who are being held. The international community must take advantage of the opportunity that presents itself today. Many IS fighters and families now find themselves in detention in a limited number of locations. They are in one place and some are cooperating with the authorities. Where applicable, we should be working to build cases and prosecute individuals according to the legal thresholds in the different countries.



4. Prosecute militants and their enablers to reveal these people for the violent criminals that they are – not the martyrs they claim to be. This action will show that the international community is capable of delivering justice. In particular, governments need to enact legislation to prosecute people for material support. Many nations do not have material support laws in place that would ensure prosecution of IS members.

5. Deradicalization is urgently needed, especially for the children. Children are routinely dying of malnutrition and hypothermia; there is virtually no formal education; nor is there medical and trauma counseling in camps like al-Hol. These conditions are ideal for extremist indoctrination, which we know is already taking place. A word of warning: similar conditions brought the modern Salafi-jihadist movement into being in the first place. The core membership of the Taliban, a word that literally means “pupils,” were students at extremist madrassas in Pakistani refugee camps every bit as squalid as al-Hol.



6. Reintegration into society of those who we feel are not

dangerous based on government assessments. We must work to separate individuals based on a carefully created threat matrix. For example, people who have turned their backs on extremist ideology can serve as credible voices about their experiences in Syria & Iraq, warning potential would-be recruits about the violence and misery of life under ISIS and similar groups. Countering the narrative will remain crucial. We cannot forget that the group continues to lay claim to a ‘spiritual caliphate’ – an ideology and narrative which lives on despite the physical collapse of the ‘caliphate.’

7. Be warned against revoking the citizenships of this

population. Revocation of citizenship is the same approach governments had for mujahedeen that fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. This circumstance is a factor that contributed to the founding and rise of al-Qaeda. Some, including perhaps the most infamous Salafi-jihadist of all time, Osama bin Laden, eventually had their citizenships revoked. These actions created a group of outcasts whose acts of



terrorism—including the September 11, 2001 attacks—changed the world as we knew it.

In conclusion

As I noted earlier this month with friends and colleagues in our open letter, the choice for the international community is clear: pay a relatively small price now, or pay a huge price later.

The world has repeatedly borne witness to what happens when we insufficiently react to the warning signs of terrorism before our eyes: we saw it on September 11, 2001, on the Madrid commuter rail system, at the Bataclan theater in Paris, at the Manchester Arena, at the Brussels Airport, and in other cities across the world.

We must take action against the situation unfolding itself today in camps like al-Hol. Breaking the cycle of violence will not be easy, but we cannot sleepwalk back into the mistakes of the past. We must act now.

Thank you for your time.