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Members of the European Parliament

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To Mr. Josep Borrell
HR/VP of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200 / Wetstraat 200
1040 Brussels, Belgium

Dear Mr Borrell

We the members of the Kurdish Friendship Group in the European Parliament are very concerned about the resurgence of ISIS in the Middle East.

It is now almost three years since the world celebrated the territorial defeat of ISIS. To achieve that defeat, over 11,000 members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – Kurds, Arabs and others – gave their lives. However, this was not the end of ISIS. It still exists as a movement with sleeper cells in Syria and Iraq, and the great majority of the ISIS fighters and their families captured after their surrender are still detained in camps and prisons that have repeatedly been described as ‘ticking time bombs’. As last month’s attempted prison breakout in Hasaka North-East Syria demonstrated, this situation has potentially fatal consequences, both for the region and for other states where ISIS has carried out terrorist atrocities in the past and could do so again.

On the evening of 20 January, over 300 ISIS fighters attacked the prison in Hasaka: converted college buildings that housed around 4,000 members of ISIS from 54 countries. At the same time, the prisoners inside started to riot - capturing and killing guards and taking control of the prison. The attack was the result of months of preparation in which armed fighters infiltrated the surrounding area. Resistance by the guards, swift action by the SDF, and air support from the international Coalition ensured that the majority of the prisoners were not able to escape and that the attack was eventually contained. However an unknown number of ISIS prisoners got away, and the fragile security of the region suffered a severe jolt.

In North-East Syria there are also other prisons housing ISIS fighters and camps housing ISIS women and children, including the notorious al Hol Camp where detainees impose ISIS law. Every week there are reports of killings in al Hol, especially executions of those trying to break with ISIS ideology, and a generation of children is being indoctrinated by ISIS mothers.

Apart from some clearly inadequate foreign aid, almost the entire burden for maintaining these prisons and camps falls on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which has suffered years of debilitating war, is under constant attack from Turkey, and is cut off from the world at the insistence of Russia.

Last month’s attempted escape from Hasaka was the largest ISIS action since they lost control of territory, but it was not the first attempted escape and nor will it be the last. We hope, though, that it can serve to make the world take action before there is an even more serious escape, and we believe that Europe can and should take a lead in that action.

The ISIS detainees are currently in a legal limbo. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has called for an internationally recognised court to be set up to try them and to decide on what to do with them. They have also asked that foreign countries accept the return of their own nationals, but, so



far, the response has been very limited. Moreover, while international powers delay taking action, the situation becomes ever more dangerous, including for Europe.

Setting up appropriate structures to deal with the prisoners (courts, prisons, de-radicalisation programmes) will not be easy, but is desperately necessary. This is a clear and attainable goal, where European action could make a vital difference.

We would be glad to help you to bring this important issue on the European agenda.

François Alfonsi, Andreas Schieder, Nikolaj Villumsen