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A fourth pillar for the United Nations? **The rise of counter-terrorism**

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The rise of counter-terrorism

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Cover photo – The 'Peace Monument' sculpture by the Croatian sculptor Antun Augustinčić is a 5.5 metre high bronze sculpture at the UN headquarters of a woman who is riding a horse with an olive branch in one hand and a globe in the other.

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Acronyms/glossary

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
COVID-19	2019 novel coronavirus
C/PVE	countering or preventing violent extremism
CTC	Counter-Terrorism Committee
CTED	Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
CTITF	Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
CSO	civil society organisation
CVE	countering violent extremism
DPO	United Nations Department of Peace Operations
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
G5 Sahel	Group of Five Sahel
GCTS	Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OROLSI	Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions
PBF	United Nations Peacebuilding Fund
PVE	preventing violent extremism
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNCCT	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

Contents

Foreword	i		
Executive summary	iv		
1 Introduction	1		
1.1 An ‘all of UN approach’	2		
1.2 A huge gamble?	4		
2 The spread of counter-terrorism in Turtle Bay	7		
2.1 Counter-terrorism at the UN Security Council	7		
2.2 Action at the UN General Assembly	9		
2.3 Preventing violent extremism	10		
2.4 Becoming ‘fit for purpose’ – the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism	11		
3 Cooperation, resistance and co-optation in the UN system	15		
3.1 Reorienting peace, development and specialised entities	15		
3.1.1 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs	16		
3.1.2 UN Department of Peace Operations	16		
3.1.3 UN Office on Drugs and Crime	16		
3.1.4 UN Development Programme	16		
3.1.5 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	17		
3.2 Reluctance and resistance	18		
3.2.1 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	18		
3.2.2 UN Children’s Fund	18		
3.2.3 UN Population Fund	18		
3.2.4 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights	18		
3.3 Overcoming reluctance	19		
3.3.1 UN Women	19		
4 Why the UN’s embrace of counter-terrorism and PVE is problematic	23		
4.1 ‘PVE-isation’ of peace, human rights, development and humanitarianism	24		
4.2 Blue-washing member states’ abusive approaches	25		
4.3 Embracing a contested concept: radicalisation	26		
4.4 Fuelling threat inflation	27		
4.5 Co-opting critical voices	27		
4.6 Incoherence and the failure to manage risk	28		
4.7 Stymieing improvement: the failure to learn	29		
5 Threats to the UN system	33		
5.1 Impairing peacebuilding and conflict mediation	33		
5.2 Jeopardising peacekeeping principles	34		
5.3 Cracking down on civic space and instrumentalising civil society	36		
5.4 Putting development and humanitarian functions in the firing line	37		
6 Conclusion	43		
6.1 Recommendations	45		

Foreword

Since 9/11, states have invested extraordinary political, financial and military resources to wage a 'war on terror'. This war has had catastrophic effects. In Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, half a million people have been directly killed by it – at least 250,000 of them civilians. Add to these figures the impact of counter-terror approaches in destabilising and fuelling devastating and protracted wars in Yemen, Somalia, Syria and Libya, violence in Nigeria and the Philippines, efforts to 'stabilise' Mali and neighbouring countries in the Sahel, and the true costs of the unending war on terror are extraordinary.

Countering or preventing violent extremism has been touted as a way to change violent, repressive and ultimately ineffective war on terror approaches into something more principled, comprehensive and effective. But for many experts and practitioners, this agenda is also deeply flawed – it is blinkered, misdirected, alienating and disempowering – and is arguably just a fig leaf that has helped conceal and maintain the same counter-productive macro-strategy.¹

This paper takes on an important topic that has become uncomfortable for many. It asks how the United Nations (UN) has learnt to co-exist with this global war on terror, and whether the compromises it has struck in doing so have come to threaten its ability to uphold its Charter. Human rights activists, academics and civil society organisations worry that the DNA of the UN is mutating in ways that are highly consequential, with no proper scrutiny. How will this shift affect the UN and the people it serves? What should be done in response?

For three-quarters of a century, peace, rights and development have been the three core pillars that define the UN's unique purpose. However, in the post-9/11 era, governments' collective determination to define terrorism as the pre-eminent global security challenge has made a deep impression on the UN. Counter-terrorism has come to the fore through a flood of UN Security Council resolutions, General Assembly strategies, new funding streams, offices, committees, working groups and staff – all dedicated to counter-terrorism.

Likewise, since 2014 the 'preventing violent extremism' agenda has become a vehicle for counter-terrorism to alter the priorities of many UN funds, agencies and programmes.

In this context, the authors ask whether counter-terrorism has grown into a fourth UN pillar, undermining the integrity and effectiveness of the other three. They identify how focusing on counter-terrorism is already damaging the UN in several ways, as further risks loom on the horizon.

In the course of researching this paper, the authors heard from many UN staff who share misgivings about this direction of travel, and who are trying – often in vain – to change it. What remains unclear is where the impetus for reflection on and recalibration of the post-9/11 global security paradigm could come from. Rather than deepening and prolonging the excesses of the past two decades, the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath should – if it achieves nothing else – provide this impetus for change.

The COVID-19 crisis radically illustrates the profound vulnerability that stems from such disproportionate investment in militarised and authoritarian models for managing security threats. Today, as at many decisive moments in human history, the primary threats to people’s well-being require more systemic, non-military and collective responses from the community of nations. Member states’ obsession with counter-terrorism as the primary threat to public and national security, and the neglect of more systemic peace- and rights-based responses even to terrorism itself, has cost hundreds of thousands of lives. This is an opportunity to reconsider the investments, institutions, approaches and norms through which the UN and its members can champion human rights, security and development, before the institution is fatally undermined.

The UN has a vital role in resurrecting multilateralism and in defending the place of human rights, civic space, mediation, humanitarianism and developmental action in tackling the roots of violence and crafting a more peaceful, less militarised world. In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres: ‘when we recover, we must be better than we were before’.² Achieving this requires defending the UN’s contribution to peace, rights and development and rethinking the risks of allowing a fourth UN pillar to rise unchallenged.



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Saferworld’s work on peacebuilding responses to crises and threats

Since 2015, Saferworld’s programme ‘Peace- and rights-based responses to terror and forced displacement’ has sought to promote lessons on international efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism, support stabilisation and control migration. This work – which has included 14 research publications to date – has detailed how international responses to crises and threats are repeatedly failing in similar ways, as part of a self-reinforcing system. We have used this evidence base to promote policy dialogue with governments, international organisations and civil society to try and influence alternative approaches.

We are increasingly working with the communities and civil society organisations that bear the brunt of this violence, including by working with them to construct a Security Policy Alternatives Network (SPAN). SPAN is a shared initiative to document the impacts of hard security interventions and make the case more effectively for peace- and rights-based responses, in order to achieve better outcomes for people in the countries most affected.

Saferworld’s peacebuilding responses programme has been made possible through the generous support of Open Society Foundations and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

Notes

- 1 For example, see: Gelot L, Hansen SJ (2019), ‘They are from within us: CVE brokerage in South-central Somalia’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 19 (6), pp 563–582; Ní Aoláin F (2020), ‘Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism’, February (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/045/67/PDF/G2004567.pdf?OpenElement>)
- 2 United Nations (2020), ‘COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together’, April (https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf)

Uruguayan troops of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) patrol the streets of Goma in armored vehicles to protect residents of the city, which is under threat from the rebel group known as M23.
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Executive summary

Seventy-five years ago, the Charter of the United Nations (UN) established a new institution with three founding pillars: peace and security, human rights, and development. Over the past 20 years, a fourth pillar – counter-terrorism – has begun to emerge. This discussion paper charts the impact of this shift and warns about its potential negative implications for the UN’s ability to fulfil its Charter.

This paper maps the emergence of the counter-terrorism agenda at the UN – from the ‘cornerstone’ provided by UN Security Council Resolution 1373 in 2001,³ via the adoption of a UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2006, the embrace of countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) under former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and the establishment of the Office of Counter-Terrorism in 2017.

In 2019 – almost two decades since the counter-terror agenda began to feature in the UN’s work – the system had USD\$522.3 million of secured funding for counter-terror and C/PVE programming. This has reoriented the UN’s peace and development work in important ways, including that of specialised entities such as the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations, the UN Development Programme, and the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Some UN agencies have resisted pressure to be more involved. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN Children’s Fund and the UN Population Fund have distanced themselves from the UN’s embrace of counter-terrorism. In other cases, scepticism has been overcome: UN Women is now heavily involved following new UN Security Council resolutions, and there have been continual attempts to turn the Youth, Peace and Security agenda into a vehicle for counter-terrorism.

It is the duty of all states to protect their citizens, and states do have a legitimate right to defend themselves from both external and internal threats. Globally, however, counter-terrorism has become many states’ primary pretext for violating human rights in the name of security, portraying particular groups as a security threat. Education and empowerment for peace programmes have mutated into tools for preventing young people’s radicalisation leading to violence. Directly and

indirectly, peace operations now play a growing role in combatting terrorism. Mediation, peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts by the UN and UN partners are being criminalised, discouraged and crowded out. Given that the UN's work on peace, development and human rights requires building trust and legitimacy with people and communities in an increasingly authoritarian and conflicted world, such approaches put the UN's effectiveness on the line.

Given these trends, this paper articulates seven problems with the UN's embrace of counter-terrorism:

1. **'PVE-isation' of peace, human rights, development and humanitarianism** – through the infusion of questionable PVE methods and approaches into many traditional areas of UN activity.
2. **Blue-washing⁴ member states' abusive approaches** – by enabling the UN 'brand' to be used by member states to legitimise abusive, corrupt, exclusionary or discriminatory counter-terror approaches.
3. **Embracing the contested concept of radicalisation** – through lending credibility to unproven approaches and contested terms that result in ineffective and often harmful programming.
4. **Fuelling threat inflation** – by creating incentives for those inside and outside the UN to exaggerate and prioritise terrorism over other important issues.
5. **Co-opting critical voices** – by fostering a culture in which mild criticism is welcomed and used to expand the counter-terror industry, while more fundamental questions and concerns are stifled and evaded.
6. **Creating incoherence and failing to manage risk** – by generating pressures for different parts of the UN system to work at cross purposes, and transferring rather than managing risk.
7. **Stymieing improvement: the failure to learn** – by neglecting to establish credible learning and review systems that could better manage the performance of ineffective and harmful counter-terror and C/PVE approaches.

Looking into the future, these problems will threaten the UN as we know it in four ways:

1. **Impairing peacebuilding and conflict mediation.** This further narrows the potential for UN entities, civil society organisations and others to understand, influence or facilitate the engagement of proscribed armed groups in conflict resolution or peace processes, fostering blindness to the complexity of contemporary conflicts. This is contributing to the diminishing of trust in the UN to act as peacebuilder and peacemaker.
2. **Jeopardising peacekeeping principles.** Backing counter-terrorism makes the UN a conflict party, complicit in conduct that fuels violence, and reinforces state abuses while lessening reform incentives. Association with alienating counter-terror or C/PVE strategies taints the UN.
3. **Cracking down on civic space and instrumentalising civil society.** Amid a global crisis in civic space and fundamental freedoms, the UN's failure to challenge a counter-terror agenda that repressive governments are using to attack human rights and civil liberties will continue to prove highly damaging. The UN should not be complicit in shaping a world in which civil society is welcomed only as a partner in advancing states' political and security agendas, rather than for its vital role in fostering more inclusive, responsive, fair and accountable governance for the world's people.
4. **Putting development and humanitarian functions in the firing line.** Abandoning impartiality increases the risks faced by the entire UN system. This threatens the UN's ability to assist the world's most marginalised people and to adhere to humanitarian principles. Counter-terror laws established under UN auspices have also criminalised assistance in many contexts – intensifying deprivation and conflict and putting lives at risk.

Continuing on this trajectory appears likely to lessen the UN's ability to help solve the most pressing global challenges in just and lasting ways, and could gravely diminish the UN in the eyes of future generations.

Dismantling the counter-terror architecture may not be a realistic policy option for now, but could the UN engage in counter-terrorism without endangering its impact and legacy in this way? The lessons from two decades of intense counter-terrorism have much to offer UN leaders and member states who wish to ensure the UN becomes part of the solution rather than the problem. Finding ways to protect UN institutions and strategies from political currents and funding streams that are pushing the UN to embrace ineffective and harmful approaches will certainly be challenging. But it will also be necessary to refocus the UN on its founding Charter, and protect the parts of the UN that concentrate on rights, equality, fundamental freedoms, peace, humanitarian access and development from co-optation by the new counter-terrorism pillar. This paper advances three overarching recommendations for moving forward:

I. Refocus UN strategy on peace, rights and development through stronger processes for analysis, strategy and programme development.

1. Recommit to an overarching aim of achieving impartiality in practice by seeking to separate all operational UN entities from specific states' war aims and hard security strategies.
2. Recognise the conceptual and practical drawbacks of adopting C/PVE approaches and redouble investment in development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance programmes.

II. Protect UN credibility and impact by strengthening guidance, oversight and safeguards and standardising use of terror-related terminology.

3. Undertake a full system-wide review of all terminology related to counter-terrorism and C/PVE and provide clear definitions to guide operational and policy approaches.
4. Develop central and sector-specific internal guidelines for all UN funds, agencies and programmes for counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming.
5. Strengthen oversight over all UN-supported, in-country counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming.
6. Create a standing review body to monitor day-to-day UN counter-terrorism activities to ensure no harm is being done in the UN's name.
7. Invest in safeguarding UN peace, development and human rights work from the risks of counter-terrorism.

8. Ensure the UN system crafts a holistic, intersectional approach to address the relationship between gender, peace, security and counter-terrorism.

III. Turn evidence and experience into improvement.

9. Mandate a regular internal learning exercise to troubleshoot harmful counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming and assess its impact on peace, rights and development.
10. Develop stronger review processes for more thorough, inclusive and strategic reflections on the role of the UN in counter-terrorism including, but not limited to, the biannual UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy review.
11. Ensure the 2020 independent assessment and all subsequent assessments of the Office of Counter-Terrorism are conducted in an open, transparent and accountable manner.

Notes

³ UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1373 ushered in a new era of counter-terror cooperation, leading to the establishment of the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and numerous subsequent resolutions establishing directorates, committees, working groups and monitoring teams in an attempt to build a robust multilateral response to terrorism.

⁴ 'Blue-washing', similar to 'green-washing', is a term that refers to an entity pursuing a partnership with the UN to paint a positive image of their conduct. Historically it has been used to refer to companies that use partnership with the UN to cover for negative labour practices.



As part of civil-military activities, peacekeepers from Bangladesh serving with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) provide free medical assistance to isolated communities. In Battal, a small village near Gao, living conditions are harsh with few essential services. A woman and a young girl wait to be seen by a peacekeeper.

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1

Introduction

Over the last two decades, counter-terrorism has been one of the sole unifying forces among United Nations (UN) member states.⁵ Despite no concrete shared definition of ‘terrorism’, a plethora of counter-terrorism resolutions have been adopted by consensus by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and many UN agencies, entities and funds now engage in counter-terrorism, or its ‘more affable cousin’ – countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE). This discussion paper maps the current negative impacts of this shift, and explores future threats to the UN system. It considers whether the priority attached to countering terrorism within the UN system has been proportionate and strategic, bearing in mind the overall resources available to the UN and its member states.

The UN embarked on this course after the September 11 attacks (‘9/11’) in New York, with the immediate adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1373, which ushered in a new era of counter-terror cooperation.⁶ The Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) set up by this resolution led to a cascade of subsequent resolutions establishing directorates, committees, working groups and monitoring teams in an attempt to build a robust multilateral response to terrorism.⁷ Until 2001, UNSC played only a small role on issues related to terrorism,⁸ but that all changed in a matter of days.

Although UNSC reacted quickest to 9/11, UNGA soon caught up.⁹ In 2006, UNGA adopted the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), ushering the Secretariat, funds and agencies into a new era. The strategy mandated UN entities to work together to counter terrorism and prevent ‘conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism’.¹⁰

Given the association with the global ‘war on terror’ and the heavy reliance on counter-productive militarised approaches, many UN entities were initially reticent to embrace counter-terrorism.¹¹ But this resistance did not last. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 and the emerging phenomenon of worldwide recruitment into their ranks, combined with the continued resilience of violent groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and other al-Qaeda-linked groups in Mali and Yemen, all posed challenges to the multilateral system that seemingly demanded a shared response.¹² This response took the form of further UNSC engagement and the embrace of a variant of ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) in Turtle Bay.¹³



1.1 An ‘all of UN approach’

The socialisation, normalisation and institutionalisation of CVE was supposed to mark a break with hard counter-terror in favour of a preventive approach that addressed root causes. Despite hesitancy from many inside and outside the UN system, in 2015 the then Secretary-General Ban

Ki-moon introduced CVE to the UN, with minor modifications, as the ‘preventing violent extremism’ (PVE) agenda. With the UN eschewing the hard security tactics of the war on terror¹⁴ and adopting a ‘softer’ approach, those focusing on human rights, development and peace were asked to support and help shape the response.¹⁵ This strategy for addressing ‘pathways’ towards terrorism heralded a welcome shift towards prevention, but came up short given its narrow framing.¹⁶

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”

As a larger part of the UN system has embraced narratives around violent extremism, C/PVE has become the ‘new normal’ within more traditional UN work streams on peace and development. Under the C/PVE framework, the mandates of many UN funds, agencies and programmes have been reframed to incorporate counter-terrorism objectives. The establishment of the Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) in 2017 marked a major milestone for the UN’s embrace of counter-terrorism and its burgeoning architecture. In less than three years, UNOCT has seen ‘spectacular growth’,¹⁷ evolving into one of the largest entities at UN headquarters¹⁸ – with the mandate to organise the UN’s approach to counter-terrorism and C/PVE.¹⁹

Although C/PVE was welcomed as an apparent alternative to counter-terrorism, there is little guidance from the UN system on how they inter-relate, overlap or even conflict.²⁰ CVE and PVE are configured around concepts such as radicalisation, extremism and violent extremism – each highly subjective and contested by governments, practitioners and academics.²¹ The failure to define these terms – which have changed the approach of the UN to peace, rights and governance issues – has made them ‘synonyms with terrorism itself’,²² and



Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed (centre left) and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (centre right), Executive Director of UN Women, visit a camp for internally displaced people in Kabul, Afghanistan. Left of Amina Mohammed is Tadamichi Yamamoto, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).
© UN Photo/Fardin Waezi

has enormous implications for the UN. The pitfalls of contested definitions for the UN system is a recurrent theme in this discussion paper.

The rise of transnational violent groups using terror tactics *has* fundamentally changed the global security situation since 2001. However, the UN Charter and the mandate of the organisation has not changed and remains indispensable for addressing these and other challenges. The three pillars of the UN Charter – peace and security, sustainable development and human rights – ostensibly continue. The integrity and effectiveness of the UN need to be safeguarded, in order for it to remain capable of: delivering life-saving support to more than 90 million people in over 80 countries; saving 3 million children a year by providing vaccines for 45 per cent of the world’s children; protecting more than 70 million people fleeing war, famine and persecution; keeping peace; mediating conflicts; building tolerance and cooperation; and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²³ Counter-terror and the C/PVE agenda have altered the role of the UN and have begun to undermine its approaches to conflict, human rights and development.

The risks posed by terror attacks to civilians, and by violent groups to the rights of populations they intimidate and control, are very real and have to be dealt with. They require a cogent, collaborative and proportionate multilateral response, alongside other inter-connected risks, such as climate breakdown, pandemics, the risks posed by new technologies and deepening inequality, to name a few.

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Counter-terror and the C/PVE agenda have altered the role of the UN and have begun to undermine its approaches to conflict, human rights and development.

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BOX 1 Methodology

The paper was informed by a detailed desk-based review of available literature and analysis of internal and public UN documents, as well as a series of interviews with UN staff members representing 15 Secretariat offices, funds, agencies and programmes across the UN system.²⁴ It builds upon Saferworld's organisational expertise on the lessons of counter-terrorism, C/PVE and stabilisation approaches around the world. Through 14 research studies, this work has documented the negative experiences in contexts such as Afghanistan,²⁵ Kenya,²⁶ Kyrgyzstan,²⁷ Somalia²⁸ and Yemen.²⁹ This research is also influenced by the peace and rights activists and experts that Saferworld works with around the world, including those living in the countries most affected by detrimental counter-terror approaches.³⁰

1.2 A huge gamble?

If the UN has focused disproportionately on counter-terrorism in a bid to demonstrate its relevance to member states, then this could be seen as a huge gamble. Before doubling down, it would be wise for UN leaders and member states to reflect on whether the current approach is paying off. Is the threat of terror attacks against civilians reducing? Have states' counter-terrorism approaches benefitted these same civilians, protecting the rights, freedom and well-being of individuals as required under the UN Charter?³¹

Counter-terrorism at the UN has created new tensions for a system already struggling to balance member state interests with its responsibilities for human rights, peace and development. Counter-terrorism has become many states' primary pretext for violating human rights in the name of security, portraying particular groups as a security threat. Education and empowerment for peace programmes have mutated into tools for preventing young people's radicalisation leading to violence. Directly and indirectly, peace operations now play a growing role in combatting terrorism. Given that the UN's work on peace, development and human rights requires building trust and legitimacy with people and communities in an increasingly authoritarian and conflicted world, such approaches put the UN's effectiveness on the line.

Regardless of their domestic legitimacy or adherence to UN values, member states exercise significant control over what the UN does and how it evolves. Pressure to secure funding and demonstrate relevance to member states drives the behaviour of UN leadership and UN entities. But the UN also has a Charter to uphold, and should always make decisions that protect the integrity of multilateralism.³² If the current leadership takes ownership of the risks regarding counter-terrorism, this would require finding ways to protect UN institutions and strategies from political currents and funding streams that are pushing the UN into becoming nothing more than a provider of ineffective and potentially harmful services. Today's world requires the UN to remain much more than this.

Notes

- 5 The International Federation for Human Rights (2017), 'The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Complex. Bureaucracy, Political Influence and Civil Liberties', September (https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/g_25_fidh_final_compressed-2.pdf)
- 6 Rosand E, von Einsiedel S (2009), '9/11, the War on Terror, and the Evolution of Multilateral Institutions', in B Jones, S Forman, R Gowan (eds.), *Cooperating for Peace and Security. Evolving Institutions and Arrangements in a Context of Changing US Security Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp 143–62.
- 7 For an extensive analysis of the UN's engagement in counter-terrorism, please see: The International Federation for Human Rights (2017), 'The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Complex. Bureaucracy, Political Influence and Civil Liberties', September (https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/g_25_fidh_final_compressed-2.pdf)
- 8 Romaniuk P (2016), 'Responding to Terrorism', in S von Einsiedel, DM Malone, BS Ugarte (eds.), *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Colorado: International Peace Institute), pp 277–299.
- 9 United Nations General Assembly (2006), 'The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/RES/60/288', 8 September (https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/288&referer=/english&Lang=E)
- 10 Until recently the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) was the main coordination group overseeing the implementation of the strategy. The CTITF has recently merged with the UN Counter-Terrorism Center (UNCTC) to establish the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Compact.
- 11 Millar A (2018), 'Blue Sky IV: Clouds Dispersing?', Global Center on Cooperative Security, May (https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GC_2018-May_Blue-Sky.pdf)
- 12 Ucko DH (2018), 'Preventing violent extremism through the United Nations: the rise and fall of a good idea', *International Affairs* 94 (2), pp 251–270.
- 13 Turtle Bay is the neighbourhood in New York City in which the UN headquarters is located.
- 14 Abu-Nimer M (2018), 'Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace, and Interreligious Peacebuilding', in B Austin and HJ Giessmann (eds.), *Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism. Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13* (Berlin: Berghof Foundation), pp 1–20 (https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Dialogue_Chapters/dialogue13_Abu-Nimer_lead.pdf)
- 15 Attree L (2017), 'Shouldn't YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?', Saferworld, March (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/shouldnt-you-be-countering-violent-extremism>)
- 16 Atwood R (2016), 'The dangers lurking in the U.N.'s new plan to prevent violent extremism', *Reuters*, 8 February (<http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/02/07/why-is-the-wolf-so-big-and-bad/>)
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A wide view of the Security Council unanimously voting to adopt resolutions calling on all states to reinforce the battle against terrorism and to strengthen the Council's role in preventing conflict, particularly in Africa.

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2

The spread of counter-terrorism in Turtle Bay

“The world has been shrunk by terrorism but has not become a genuine community in response to it”.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, former Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, 2015.³³

2.1 Counter-terrorism at the UN Security Council

Prior to 2001, terrorism only rarely featured on the UN’s agenda, or the Security Council’s – the primary body charged with maintaining international peace and security.³⁴ Shaped by Cold War era dynamics and preoccupations, the Council was not seen as the body to deal with terrorist acts.³⁵ During the 1990s, a number of resolutions created terror-related sanctions regimes, hinting at a more active UNSC in the field of counter-terrorism.

Nonetheless, the ‘rapidity, unanimity and decisiveness’ of the UNSC response to the 9/11 attacks were ‘without precedent’.³⁶ Seventeen days after the attacks, UNSCR 1373³⁷ was adopted, becoming ‘the cornerstone’³⁸ of the UN’s involvement in counter-terrorism and dramatically changing the UN as we now know it.

UNSCR 1373 was ‘the first legally binding Chapter VII resolution that applied to all UN membership as opposed to previous counter-terrorism efforts’,³⁹ which had neither time limits or any conditions attached.⁴⁰ The adoption of UNSCR 1373 marked the beginning of an effort to extend legislative and executive counter-terror capacities in every member state. For the first time, a Chapter VII⁴¹ mandate handed member states the legal right to defend themselves against non-state actors.⁴² Also for the first time, UNSC labelled terrorism as a phenomenon to be combatted rather than just an act.⁴³ This has

significantly changed the relationship between state and non-state actors, with major consequences for humanitarian aid and mediation (see section 5.1).

UNSCR 1373 set the stage for dramatic growth in UN and individual states' sanctions regimes. Some forms of designation and proscription had previously existed, but they tended to be put in place by individual states.⁴⁴ Immediately after 9/11, both the Taliban and al-Qaeda were added to UN sanctions regimes. The resolution also called for new measures to eradicate terror financing, improve border security, facilitate international information-sharing and assist criminal justice systems to handle terrorism cases via enhanced legislation and administration.

From UNSCR 1373 emerged the CTC, an instrument of the Security Council to monitor the resolution's implementation. The CTC's broad mandate – 'facilitating the provision of assistance to those States, which are having difficulties in implementing the resolution [1373]'⁴⁵ – set the stage for counter-terrorism to spread across the UN. While the CTC was first set up as the Security Council's monitoring mechanism, its function evolved over time towards surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms to control state behaviours in dealing with international peace and security threats.⁴⁶

UNSCR 1373's hasty adoption led to some major gaps. In the absence of sufficiently precise and legally grounded definitions of what constituted terrorism, the 'super'⁴⁷ or 'legislative'⁴⁸ resolution gave states discretion to criminalise certain activities such as mediation, peacebuilding, humanitarian relief and protection efforts, even where those activities are protected under international humanitarian law.⁴⁹ UNSCR 1373 also 'made no comprehensive or even specific reference to the need for states to comply with human rights standards in the suppression of terrorism'. Nor did it note the need to monitor and take into account the impacts of counter-terrorism on peace and human security.⁵⁰ With the CTC's then Chair defining human rights monitoring as outside of its scope, human rights had become little more than an afterthought in the UN's approach to counter-terrorism,⁵¹ if not an outright obstacle.⁵²

In the coming years, UNSC adopted multiple

resolutions to address UNSCR 1373's shortcomings, notably the CTC's incapacity to monitor human rights compliance.⁵³ UNSCR 1456 (2003) first mentioned this, but UNSCR 1535 (2004) led the CTC to develop expertise and staff capacity to monitor human rights while countering terrorism proactively. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) was set up in 2004 'to assist the work of the CTC and coordinate the process of monitoring the implementation of resolution 1373 (2001)'.⁵⁴

UNSCR 1624 (2005) pushed states to 'comply with all of their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, refugee law, and humanitarian law'.⁵⁵ Most recently, UNSCR 2178 (2014) acknowledged the importance of human rights protection for more effective counter-terrorism approaches. The acknowledgment that 'respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are complementary and mutually reinforcing with effective counter-terrorism measures, and are an essential part of a successful counter-terrorism effort' is a significant evolution beyond the initial omission of human rights in UNSCR 1373. But human rights guarantees included in UNSC resolutions are known to be fairly broad and carry little weight. The majority of human rights language within counter-terrorism-related UNSC resolutions is underwhelming and, some would argue, ultimately simply performative.⁵⁶

While later UNSC counter-terrorism resolutions have included human rights language, the impacts of counter-terrorism action on peace and conflict dynamics have never been duly recognised and addressed. UNSCR 2178 (2014) does 'emphasize in this regard the importance of Member States' efforts to develop non-violent alternative avenues for conflict prevention and resolution by affected individuals and local communities to decrease the risk of radicalization to terrorism,' but this approach largely subordinates traditional conflict prevention and resolution methods to counter-terror imperatives, rather than asserting the importance of conflict prevention and the need to ensure counter-terrorism avoids exacerbating conflict. Similarly, UNSCRs 2178 and 2195 include language that can be viewed as subordinating approaches that support women and youth under the banner of C/PVE projects.

UNSC resolutions on counter-terrorism have lacked references to the need to pursue political, preventive solutions to conflict as a best response to the threat of terror attacks and have done little to preserve the autonomy of and resources for UN peacekeeping, peacebuilding, relief and development efforts.

2.2 Action at the UN General Assembly

UNSC's role in mainstreaming counter-terrorism over the past two decades may be important, but UNGA has also played a significant part. For the majority of the UN's 75 years, UNGA was considered the main forum for addressing terrorism issues.⁵⁷ These efforts were largely symbolic – such as condemnation of acts of terrorism. Historically, due to differences over how terrorism should be defined, member states could not agree on coordinated action by UN entities. After the Security Council took a more active role in shaping UN counter-terror engagement after 9/11, UNGA fell into line and began crafting policies and institutional tools for responding.

From 2006, the GCTS became the vehicle for defining the UN's counter-terrorism role. It consists of four pillars:

- I. addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism**
- II. preventing and combatting terrorism**
- III. building states' capacity and strengthening the role of the UN**
- IV. ensuring human rights and the rule of law⁵⁸**

Broadly, pillars II and III of the GCTS repeated and complemented UNSC resolutions,⁵⁹ but pillars I and IV integrated elements that shifted the UN system to becoming operationally involved in counter-terrorism activities. These two pillars were the areas in which UNGA began trying to take a lead.

Pillar I of the strategy put forward a relatively new understanding of what constitutes effective counter-terrorism. Measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism amount to a prevention approach based upon fostering social cohesion, political inclusion, livelihoods, and cultural and religious diversity. Original language included in pillar I made reference to implementing the Millennium Development Goals, strengthening UN capacities to build and keep peace, and a commitment to include initiatives such as youth employment programmes to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.⁶⁰ This wide scope of pillar I demanded a whole-of-system approach, pulling multiple UN entities into counter-terrorism engagement.

Pillar IV acts as both a standalone and a cross-cutting pillar (given the acknowledgment of human rights compliance as an element of all pillars).⁶¹ In this regard, the GCTS initiated a trend of pushing for the enhancement of coordination between counter-terrorism and human rights bodies within UN structures.⁶² Pillars I and IV of the GCTS and the subsequent implementation of the strategy have at times subordinated human rights and rule of law and efforts to promote peace, tolerance, social cohesion and livelihoods into counter-terror frameworks, rather than seeing these as worthy goals in their own right. This approach views these efforts as important only for helping to reduce the conditions that are conducive to terrorism. The risks of doing so are explored in sections 4 and 5 of this report.

BOX 2 The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy

*'The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288) is a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism. Through its adoption by consensus in 2006, all UN Member States agreed the first time to a common strategic and operational approach to fighting terrorism.'*⁶³

Comprised of four pillars, the GCTS is designed to drive 'a wide array of measures ranging from strengthening state capacity to counter-terrorist threats to better coordinating the UN System's counter-terrorism activities'.⁶⁴

The four pillars of the strategy are as follows:

- I. addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism
- II. measures to prevent and combat terrorism
- III. measures to build states' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the UN system in that regard
- IV. measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism

Currently, 36 UN entities, plus Interpol and the World Customs Organization, are part of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Compact (established in 2018 to replace CTITF).⁶⁵ The strategy is reviewed by UNGA every two years.⁶⁶

The main body coordinating the GCTS' implementation was the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF). In 2005, CTITF was set up to ensure that UN funds, programmes and agencies contributing to counter-terrorism would 'maximize [their] comparative advantage'⁶⁷ across the four pillars of the GCTS. For the first years of existence, these efforts stalled, as UN counter-terrorism activities under pillars I and IV remained underfunded,⁶⁸ resulting in uneven implementation of the strategy. However, to reinvigorate implementation of the strategy, the UN Counter-Terrorism Center (UNCCT) was founded in 2012, aided by a voluntary contribution of USD\$100 million by Saudi Arabia. This funding influx breathed new life into UN counter-terrorism coordination as UNCCT and CTITF – two sides of the same coin – began exerting influence across the UN system.⁶⁹

Revised through inter-governmental negotiations every two years, the GCTS is now in its sixth iteration. It now includes language calling for the need to fully respect the rights of freedom of expression and association and the need to fully comply with obligations under humanitarian law to protect civilians and medical personnel. It has evolved rhetorically – but not always substantively. However, a further shift has since dramatically changed the course of UN counter-terror activity – the birth of the C/PVE agenda.

2.3 Preventing violent extremism

In 2015, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon launched the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism ahead of the tenth anniversary of the

GCTS.⁷⁰ The affable cousin to counter-terrorism, C/PVE was championed by proponents such as the US government as part of an effort to move beyond more militarised approaches that had been prioritised in the years following 9/11. Premised on the need to 'break the cycles of conflict...that have become magnets for violent extremism', CVE was closely linked to the Obama administration's attempt to move away from a permanent war footing and towards an approach focused on root causes.⁷¹ The US defined CVE as

'proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence'.⁷²

The UN's embrace of C/PVE was partly a reaction to member state priorities during the days in and around the rise of ISIL in 2014, and the continued resilience of Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda.⁷³ Fears of losing financial resources and relevance were also important motivations for UN leadership. At this time, other multilateral counter-terrorism bodies were gaining significance, including the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum established by 30 member states as an alternative venue for developing both a collective counter-terrorism response and international CVE programmes.⁷⁴

Backing for C/PVE under Ban Ki-moon also reflected the fear that if the UN failed to engage with it, other – less principled – institutions would fill the void. This push for 'collective preventive action against terrorism...in the spirit of our United Nations Charter' was framed around making the UN 'more relevant, more credible, more legitimate and more capable in responding to terrorism'.⁷⁵ In theory, UN engagement could both promote responses that addressed root causes and renew momentum on pillars I and IV of the GCTS after a decade of slow, patchy progress and negative feedback. The UN's response was framed around 'prevention' – introducing PVE and quietly eschewing the undertone of partisanship and belligerence implicit in the term 'countering' under the Obama administration's CVE framing. Whether this semantic difference has been consequential in practice is discussed further in sections 4 and 5.

The UN's welcoming of PVE was not without its critics. Some said Ban Ki-moon had 'stoked the fire'.⁷⁶ Others argued that PVE would 'divorce policy from politics'⁷⁷ and create strategic blinkers for the UN's response to violent conflict.⁷⁸ The Plan of Action also failed to define violent extremism, therefore failing to create any clear distinction between the concept and traditional counter-terrorism. This threw 'more mud into already murky waters'⁷⁹ and 'subsume[d] other legitimate interests under the banner of suppressing "violent extremism"'.⁸⁰ The Plan included over 70 recommendations for action across new parts of the UN system, raising fears that it could result in 'politicizing governments' service delivery, endangering aid workers or distorting diplomacy'.⁸¹ Some have remarked that the implications of embracing PVE were not very thoroughly debated or scrutinised at the time.⁸²

“
The affable cousin to counter-terrorism, C/PVE was championed by proponents such as the US government as part of an effort to move beyond more militarised approaches that had been prioritised in the years following 9/11.

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2.4

Becoming ‘fit for purpose’ – the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism

Efforts to centralise UN counter-terrorism activity began soon after the PVE Plan of Action was launched.⁸³ It is unclear where the impetus originated, whether from the counter-terrorism architecture that already existed or Ban Ki-moon’s office.⁸⁴ Either way, in what many saw as a rushed process,⁸⁵ UNOCT was authorised as a new entity in 2016 and came into existence in June 2017. Just one candidate was put forward to lead it – Vladimir Voronkov, a Russian official.⁸⁶

The creation of this new office in the UN Secretariat to ‘ensure that due priority’ would be given to counter-terrorism and PVE across the UN system⁸⁷ decisively signified the entrenchment of these twin agendas. Tasked with leading UNGA’s counter-terrorism mandates, enhancing coordination, mobilising resources and strengthening the delivery of counter-terrorism capacity-building assistance to member states, UNOCT subsumed the roles of CTITF and UNCCT.

As with CTITF and UNCCT, voluntary contributions from Saudi Arabia remain the main funding source – through the UN Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism – for UN counter-terrorism efforts in the UNOCT era. The only donor to rival Saudi Arabia’s contributions is Qatar, which pledged \$75 million in December 2018.⁸⁸ Both states have spent two years insisting that their funds are never used on joint projects. Saudi Arabia has also resisted efforts to diversify the sources of funds⁸⁹ that bankroll UNCCT, reportedly to safeguard its status as lead donor and thus its leverage over UN leadership. Other attempts to create more rigorous guidelines for how the funds are spent, similar to the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) or other UN mechanisms, have been resisted by the long-time chair of the UN Trust Fund, Saudi Ambassador Abdallah Yahya Al-Mouallimi.

In June 2018, UNOCT held the first UN High-level Counter-Terrorism conference to bring together heads of domestic counter-terror agencies. An outcome from this conference saw UNOCT commit to establishing a new unit to ensure civil society views are reflected in counter-terrorism policies and

programmes (in response to previous shortcomings). Almost two years later, there has been very little progress on this commitment.⁹⁰

UNOCT grew dramatically in its first three years. With just eight of its 132 posts funded by the regular UN budget, 124 posts in UNOCT come from extra-budgetary resources.⁹¹ Unfortunately, these ratios create an office that is not resilient to outside pressure or lobbying from member state donors, undermining UNOCT’s potential to play a more respected and impartial role within the UN Secretariat.

UNOCT may still be in its infancy, but critics have already questioned its direction of travel. UNOCT could be doing more to address gaps in counter-terrorism coordination and coherence across the UN system, as well as managing risks much more proactively. However, its leaders appear more focused on trying to prove UNOCT’s added value by growing as quickly as possible – competing with other established entities like CTED and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) on policy advice and country-level analysis. Given the human rights records of the main donors – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – that are backing and funding UNOCT, serious concerns remain over how it will steward and lead implementation of the GCTS, including its neglected pillar IV as well as other related human rights compliance mechanisms.

In less than 20 years, ‘super legislative’ UNSCRs, UNGA strategies, action plans and decisions by UN leadership have taken counter-terrorism from having the smallest of footprints at the UN to being in command of a dedicated, heavily staffed office within the UN Secretariat.⁹² In this new normal – in the name of fighting the ‘global scourge’ of terrorism – ‘things that might be ordinarily untenable [have] become not only thinkable but acceptable’.⁹³

BOX 3

Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism⁹⁴

The UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism describes PVE as systematic preventive measures that directly address the drivers of violent extremism. Setting out the UN's intention to take a practical and comprehensive approach to address these drivers, it put forward more than 70 recommendations for concerted action at global, regional and national levels, based on five inter-related points:

- prevention comes first
- principled leadership and effective institutions are crucial
- preventing extremism and promoting human rights go hand-in-hand
- an all-of-government response is required
- a complementary UN system-wide approach is needed

The Plan of Action included specific recommendations to integrate PVE into relevant activities of UN peace operations and special political missions 'in accordance with their mandates', and to mainstream gender perspectives, build the capacity of young people and women, and find ways to strengthen trust between government institutions and communities to prevent real or perceived marginalisation and exclusion. As of 2020, there are over 400 projects aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism, addressing all seven priority areas recommended in the Plan of Action, which have been implemented by 18 UN entities across more than 90 member states in all regions of the world.⁹⁵

Notes

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Peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) welcome Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations (not pictured), as he arrives in Gao.

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3

Cooperation, resistance and co-optation in the UN system

‘Compromising on human rights has proven corrosive to the rule of law and conducive to a climate of impunity and may undermine the effectiveness of any counter-terrorism measure.’

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁹⁶

The integration of counter-terrorism into the UN's architecture goes well beyond the creation of UNOCT. Prior to 9/11 however, very few parts of the UN system engaged in activities related to counter-terrorism. The Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) predates 9/11, offering ‘technical assistance in prevention of international terrorism in all its forms and manifestations’.⁹⁷ But beyond this, the UN had no operational role in counter-terrorism.

Almost two decades later, projects across the UN system to implement the GCTS amounted to \$522.3 million in 2019,⁹⁸ with the Secretariat, funds, agencies and programmes all playing a role.

3.1 Reorienting peace, development and specialised entities

The Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and DPPA have both been encouraged, incentivised and, in some cases, mandated to engage in counter-terrorism. The UN's peacemaking and conflict prevention functions were already seen as vital in efforts to address ‘the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism’ in the original GCTS in 2006. At first glance, therefore, it is natural to think that DPO and DPPA could and should be part of system-wide efforts to counter terrorism.

3.1.1 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

From 2005, the Department of Political Affairs (now DPPA) was tasked with hosting CTITF (until it merged with UNOCT in 2017). In recent years, it also engaged in implementing and financing PVE programmes, through the Peace and Development Advisors programme – which is jointly run by DPPA and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and which currently implements 14 PVE projects⁹⁹ – and through the PBF. The PBF has funded multiple UN entities’ PVE efforts in Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, but this remains just a small element of a much larger portfolio.¹⁰⁰ The funding of PVE projects by the PBF and DPPA is defended as the only entry point to work on building peace or addressing conflict drivers in some contexts, but in countries where this funding has been seen to be ineffective, the PBF has shown willingness to change approach.¹⁰¹

3.1.2 UN Department of Peace Operations

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More ‘robust’ UNSC mandates for peacekeepers have either included direct support to non-UN counter-terrorism operations or have integrated C/PVE activities into their tasks – pushing blue helmets into the role of assisting in member states’ counter-terror wars, even if DPO leadership and staff are not entirely in favour.”

While sections within DPPA have embraced C/PVE voluntarily at times as a way of engaging with the counter-terrorism agenda, DPO has had limited control over its approach to counter-terrorism. More ‘robust’ UNSC mandates for peacekeepers have either included direct support to non-UN counter-terrorism operations or have integrated C/PVE activities into their tasks – pushing blue helmets¹⁰² into the role of assisting in member states’ counter-terror wars, even if DPO leadership and staff are not entirely in favour.

In Afghanistan for instance, UNSC has pushed the UN peace operation there to support both the government’s counter-terrorism and CVE strategies, as well as the Afghan National

Defence and Security Forces.¹⁰³ In Somalia, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) has long provided support to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is tasked with combatting al-Shabaab, and is now being asked to support the implementation of the Somali National Strategy and Action Plan for C/PVE, ‘in order to strengthen Somalia’s capacity to prevent and counter terrorism’.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps the most concerning development in UN Peace Operations has occurred in Mali. Not only is the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) mandated to help the Malian state to control territory and to defend and deter attackers, it is also providing ‘targeting packs’¹⁰⁵ for counter-terrorism missions such as the Group of Five Sahel (G5 Sahel) joint regional counter-terror operation in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and the French-led Operation Barkhane.¹⁰⁶ It is also being mandated to extend support to government forces that are responsible for a range of grave human rights violations¹⁰⁷ – including 101 extrajudicial killings in the first three months of 2020.¹⁰⁸ This draws the UN more directly into combatting terrorism than ever before, and – despite some public sugar-coating – internally DPO and UN leadership is fully aware of the risks.¹⁰⁹

Much of DPO’s other engagement in counter-terrorism occurs through its Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI), which signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNOCT formalising its role in counter-terrorism.¹¹⁰ OROLSI leadership has not hesitated to adapt its traditional disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration approach to fit contexts affected by terrorism and violent extremism.¹¹¹ Some DPO officials have tried to distance their different branches from the OROLSI approach, arguing that UN peacekeeping should remain independent of counter-terror objectives or activities, but support for this from UN leadership and member states has been lacklustre.

3.1.3 UN Office on Drugs and Crime

UNODC’s Terrorism Prevention Branch was strengthened under UNGA resolution 57/292 in 2002. Since then, UNODC has provided technical support and legislative expertise to member states to counter and prevent terrorism through criminal justice approaches. These efforts largely relate to pillar III of the GCTS, with a specific focus on facilitating member states’ cooperation on criminal matters concerning terrorism. UNODC continues to receive a large proportion of its funds from the UN counter-terrorism trust fund (\$144 million for projects in 2019).¹¹²

3.1.4 UN Development Programme

UNDP was for some time reluctant to engage with counter-terrorism due to fears that development work would be reoriented towards security goals. However, the birth of PVE at the UN presented a seemingly palatable entry point for the UN’s development arm to join the counter-terror fray. Welcomed in 2014 by then-administrator Helen

Clark,¹¹³ UNDP began to take a role in UN counter-terrorism efforts, embracing PVE and undertaking high-profile research such as the *Journey to Extremism* report.¹¹⁴ UNDP has justified its entry to the PVE world by arguing that ‘if risk aversion leads to inaction, this too comes with its own set of risks – to the context, programmes and the institution – and, of course to communities affected by PVE’.¹¹⁵

In 2017, a leaked internal document revealed UNDP’s ambitions to establish a Global Programme on Development Solutions for the Prevention of Violent Extremism – a four-year, \$108 million programme.¹¹⁶ By January 2020, UNDP was managing over 40 PVE projects in more than 30 countries – quite a reversal given its erstwhile reluctance to contribute to counter-terror efforts.¹¹⁷

3.1.5 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

PVE has also acted as a gateway for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to expand engagement in the counter-terrorism field.¹¹⁸ UNESCO was encouraged by the Bush administration in 2003 to become more engaged in counter-terrorism¹¹⁹ and again in 2006 with the adoption of the GCTS¹²⁰ – but UNESCO remained reluctant.¹²¹ However, in 2015, the Executive Council of UNESCO passed a decision affirming the desire ‘to enhance UNESCO’s leading role in promoting and implementing education as an essential tool to help prevent violent extremism’.¹²² This has led UNESCO to embrace C/PVE through a range of education programmes, skills development, employment and youth empowerment activities. This brought UNESCO closer together with the UN Alliance of Civilization in 2006, which is tasked with using intercultural dialogue as a tool to prevent and combat terrorism.

UNESCO’s PVE programming has significantly changed the UN’s approach to education and empowerment of young people. Despite a lack of evidence to support ‘education and employment as stand-alone solutions to the problem of youth participation in violence or recruitment into violent extremism’,¹²³ UNESCO has remoulded its education and employment programming, based on the assumption that more education and accompanying employment opportunities can address underlying causes of terrorism and violent extremism.

BOX 4 C/PVE in Tunisia

Tunisia has experienced one of the highest rates of citizens leaving the country to join armed groups in Syria.¹²⁴ Preventing this phenomenon poses a considerable challenge to authorities and the UN system. In 2017, Saferworld researchers examined elements of the response and noted how a narrow focus on C/PVE in Tunisia was raising multiple red flags. We found that in some instances, civil society groups felt they were being co-opted to support a Western-imposed approach to security, while noting discontent with ineffective anti-radicalisation projects that were distracting from a much-needed focus on providing young people with social, educational and economic opportunities.¹²⁵ However, in this instance, the UN system was able to play a nuanced role that took into account these criticisms. Attempts were made to ensure agencies were working on root causes, not just symptoms, and there were efforts to establish a dialogue with the Tunisian government to warn against the securitisation of the transition. Where possible, the UN system attempted to resist PVE labelling for its programmes, so as not to stigmatise beneficiaries, using SDG16¹²⁶ and the sustaining peace agenda as framing instead.¹²⁷

3.2 Reluctance and resistance

Several parts of the UN family – particularly the humanitarian entities – have continued to express concerns about the prioritisation of counter-terrorism within the UN and have managed to resist it to some extent.

3.2.1 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has kept its distance from counter-terrorism and PVE policy frameworks, in large part due to the incongruence with core humanitarian principles.¹²⁸ The expansion of counter-terrorism and PVE frameworks has made it harder for humanitarians to remain impartial, neutral and independent, and has presented major dilemmas to UN humanitarian delivery when assessing the viability of delivering aid in areas controlled by proscribed organisations. As counter-terror laws have evolved internationally and domestically, additional impediments have made negotiating access in hard-to-reach areas more difficult.¹²⁹ As a result, counter-terror restrictions have been criticised for leaving significant numbers of people deprived of humanitarian aid,¹³⁰ as well as fuelling conflict in the process.¹³¹

3.2.2 UN Children’s Fund

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has demonstrated its preference to not be associated with PVE and counter-terrorism-related activities.¹³² In 2004, the then UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy strongly criticised the growing focus on terrorism, noting that: ‘the bloody choreography of terrorism and counter-terrorism has taken centre stage,

diverting resources and political will from the vital work of development – and fueling a climate of insecurity that has darkened the future for millions of children and their families, many of them already desperately vulnerable’.¹³³

In recent years, UNICEF has tried to maintain a careful position on counter-terrorism, to protect its mandate and maintain services to children. Currently, UNICEF provides services in 14 countries to children on their path out of armed

forces and armed groups. It is also leading efforts to protect and reintegrate children of families who travelled to Iraq and Syria.¹³⁴ It advocates for these children to be identified as victims – rather than as ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’ – so that their families receive support to rehabilitate them.¹³⁵

3.2.3 UN Population Fund

At the headquarters level, both OCHA and UNICEF have limited their engagement to observing the coordination of counter-terrorism activities at the UN, but the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has gone a step further as one of the few UN entities that plays no part in the coordination mechanism at all. Despite positioning itself clearly at headquarters, there is, however, ambiguity at country and regional levels as UNFPA does engage in counter-terrorism or PVE activities as an implementing partner at these levels.¹³⁶ This discrepancy between policy and practice illustrates the struggle that institutions have had in establishing boundaries on the spread of counter-terrorism across the UN.

3.2.4 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

The loudest criticism of counter-terrorism’s rise within the UN has come from the human rights pillar. The former High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein and current High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet have played a significant role in raising the alarm about human rights abuses related to counter-terrorism and C/PVE. Outside of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Human Rights Council has also had an important role through the creation of a mandate for a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. Charged with the responsibility to ‘gather, request, receive and exchange information on alleged violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism’, the Special Rapporteur has played a vital, if lonely, role challenging the UN’s haste to pursue counter-terrorism and C/PVE now and consider the human rights impact later.

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However, this strong positioning does not mean OHCHR plays no role in UN counter-terrorism. For example, as the lead entity on pillar IV of the GCTS – working ‘to ensure the protection of human rights and the rule of law while combating terrorism’ – OHCHR is helping the G5 Sahel joint force operating in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to establish a compliance framework to guide military operations. As the mandate of the Special Rapporteur is not to challenge UN counter-terror activities as such, but to ensure human rights and freedoms are not violated in the course of them, there are limits to how far OHCHR and the Special Rapporteur can challenge the UN’s overall counter-terror objectives and directions.

3.3 Overcoming reluctance

Not all entities have been able to keep the rise of counter-terror architecture at arm’s length or push back.

3.3.1 UN Women

UN Women – still relatively young in the UN system – was able, for much of its first decade of existence, to push the UN to reflect on the gendered effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism and the negative consequences for women and girls around the world. *The Global Study on the Implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325* featured a strong pushback against the instrumentalisation of women and women’s rights organisations for counter-terrorism purposes, noting that when ‘women’s advocacy becomes too closely associated with a government’s counter-terrorism agenda, the risk of backlash against women’s rights defenders and women’s rights issues, in often already volatile environments, increases’.¹³⁷

The Global Study also expressed caution about moves to involve UN Women in counter-terrorism, for example by ‘empowering’ women as a response to extremism: ‘While empowering women as a bulwark against extremism is an important idea, such empowerment should never be part of Chapter VII of the Charter on the use of force. It should not come within the ambit of counter-terrorism, but as part of the civilian assistance to the development and human rights programmes in the country. To enmesh

such programmes in counter-terrorism strategies, sanctioned by the Security Council, is to deeply compromise the role of women’s organizations and women leaders.’ However, UNSCR 2242 (2015) pushed UN Women to mainstream gender perspectives into UN counter-terror activities. This, and the increasing institutional focus on PVE, has driven UN Women into further engagement with counter-terror institutions.¹³⁸

UN Women faces a dilemma in relation to counter-terrorism and PVE. In principle, actions in this area should be designed with the meaningful participation and consultation of women and girls or they will fail to take their perspective into account.¹³⁹ However, the impetus to involve UN Women and other women’s groups in UN counter-terror and PVE agendas arguably has little to do with a strong commitment to advance gender equality, conduct gender-transformative programming or transform violent masculine identities, and much more to do with involving women in the push to make counter-terrorism more effective. In turn, this is seen as beneficial in light of some broad assumptions regarding gender roles and functions: the belief that women are more peaceful, that women take care of family members, or that women can dissuade young men in their house from joining violent groups. To some extent these assumptions reflect the kind of problematic gender norms that UN Women is mandated to try and change.¹⁴⁰

As if to exemplify the way in which gender is viewed, when gender language was finally added to the GCTS during the fifth review in 2016, the operational paragraph reductively called for gender analysis only in instances of women’s radicalisation.¹⁴¹ Despite 15 years of work on the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the UN, the integration of gender dimensions within the GCTS remains woeful.

“

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BOX 5

Youth and *The missing peace*

In 2018, a progress study on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) – called *The missing peace* – mandated under UNSCR 2250, criticised governments and the multilateral system for their ‘sweeping characterisations of youth as fundamentally at risk of “violent extremism”, resulting in ‘unnuanced, counter-productive policy responses’.¹⁴² These counter-productive responses, or ‘policy panic on youth’, have led to the mobilisation of ‘disproportionate investment in hard-fisted security measures, which address the consequences, not the causes of violent conflict. The impact or the cost-effectiveness of these measures are seldom, if ever, properly evaluated.’¹⁴³

Evidence outlined in the study showed how counter-terrorism and C/PVE policies have often undermined legitimate participation by young people in political processes and social movements, and have been used to suppress peaceful protest and expressions of dissent. These counter-productive approaches further reinforce the exclusion and marginalisation of youth and do not make the world safer. Although the YPS agenda calls on the UN to invest in the resourcefulness of young people to address the root causes of terrorism, violent extremism and violence, most member states’ interest in the YPS agenda remains embedded in their diverse interests in counter-terrorism and C/PVE frameworks.¹⁴⁴

Some proponents of the youth agenda have employed a tactical approach to sustaining Security Council attention on the issues of youth marginalisation, by invoking the risk of violent extremism. Even tactical engagement with the issue of violent extremism reflects the dominance of the discourse in skewing all the elements of a youth approach that was originally embedded in an inclusion and participation discourse, rather than one of counter-terrorism or PVE. *The missing peace* report was an attempt to recover youth demands, needs and aspirations around education and jobs from a functionalist argument that ignored these issues and instead addressed them only from the flawed assumption that they offered some sort of silver bullet in preventing ‘extremism’.

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A United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) motorcade travels through a village.

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4

Why the UN's embrace of counter-terrorism and PVE is problematic

'Absent any scrutiny or accountability mechanism, [C/PVE] can lead to the United Nations legitimizing, condoning and enabling action aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism that is in clear violation of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms and disregarding its fundamental role in safeguarding international human rights law.'

Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, 2020.¹⁴⁵

The spread of counter-terrorism at the UN has been enabled by the emergence of assumptions and reasoning that are rarely made explicit and have become difficult to question – shielding the agenda from critical debate, accountability and reform. This has occurred despite almost 20 years of evidence of the negative impact of the war on terror on peace, rights and development around the world.¹⁴⁶ Even though the negative effects of counter-terrorism and C/PVE for the UN system have been charted in landmark reports such as the *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325*¹⁴⁷ and *The missing peace: independent progress study on youth and peace and security*,¹⁴⁸ the UN has doubled down on investing in counter-terrorism, with little serious pause for thought. UN counter-terrorism architecture has expanded apace, largely ignoring criticism with no significant shift in its approach.

The following section notes seven negative impacts counter-terrorism has on the UN system.

4.1 'PVE-isation' of peace, human rights, development and humanitarianism

Most UN entities working on the GCTS present their work under the apparently more benign branding of PVE, rather than counter-terrorism. Although many have doubts about this agenda, there are few practical means for such doubts to restrain the UN system. It is commonplace to hear the justification that if the UN was not engaged in PVE, other less

principled and less human-rights-compliant entities would fill the void.¹⁴⁹ The result is the 'PVE-isation' of many traditional areas of UN activity, as they have become infused with PVE objectives and goals.

In practice this means that efforts to improve governance or education or to create livelihoods are being replaced with efforts to counter

radical narratives, train youth susceptible to 'extremism' or provide jobs to stop individuals becoming terrorists. This is not a problem unique to the UN: many other institutions and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have followed suit, but it is diverting the UN from its Charter.

The distinction between 'benign' PVE framing and harder counter-terrorism approaches is not always tenable, despite what some believe. As UNDP's risk management report points out, 'fuzzy lines between extremism and terrorism lead to accusations that UNDP is supporting counter-terrorism efforts'.¹⁵⁰ This chimes with perceptions documented by Saferworld in Somalia, where we were told "people think CVE is the silver bullet to solve these issues... [but] the perception is that there is no difference between counter-terrorism and CVE".¹⁵¹ Leading humanitarian organisations have also acknowledged the quandary posed by these blurred lines, noting that 'the landscape is becoming increasingly complex' as the amorphous nature of PVE has opened up 'the risk of humanitarian efforts being linked to political, security or development agendas'.¹⁵²

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The distinction between 'benign' PVE framing and harder counter-terrorism approaches is not always tenable, despite what some believe.

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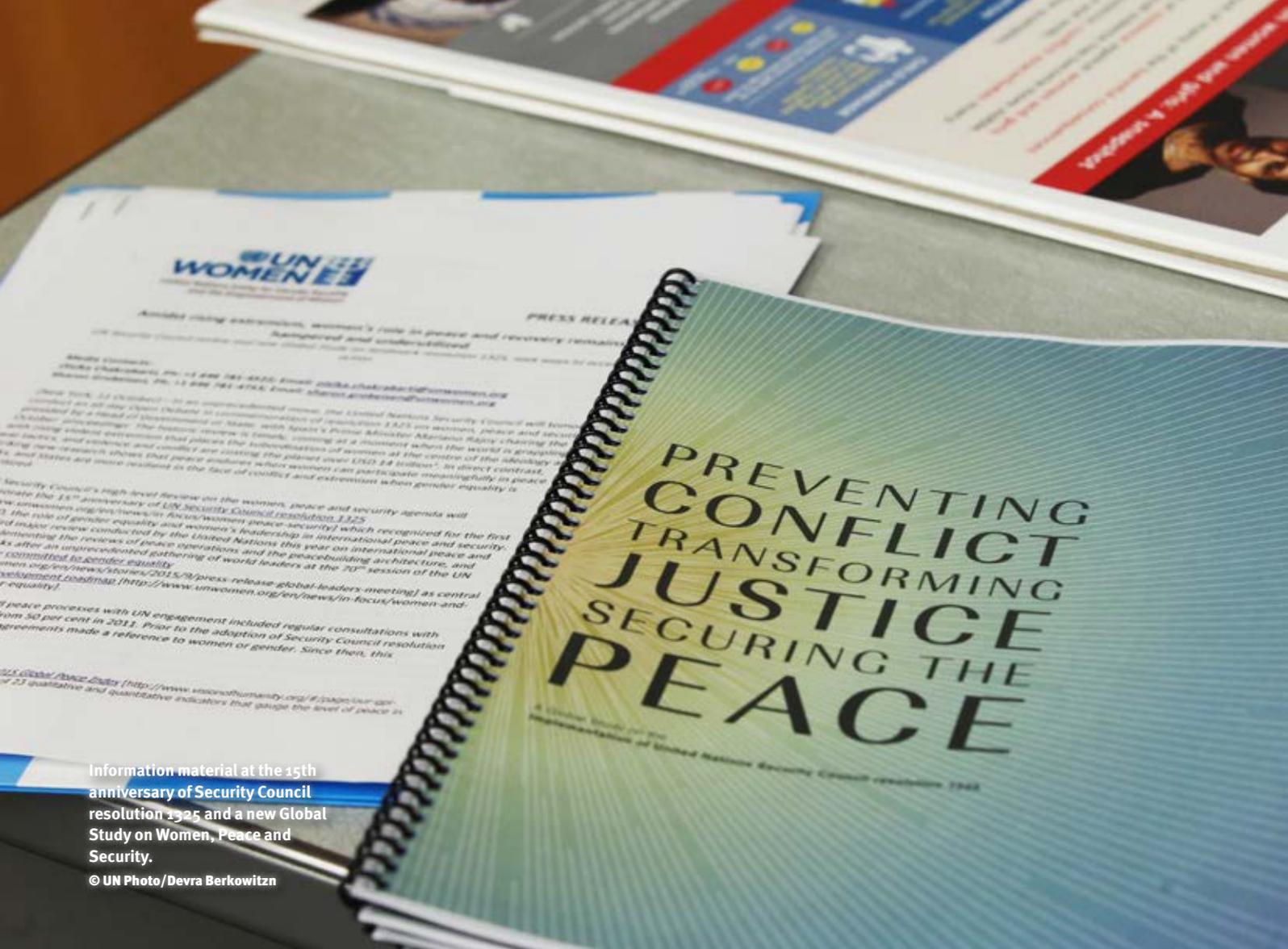
BOX 6

Impact of counter-terrorism on peace and conflict-resolution NGOs

Listing armed groups as terrorist organisations has made it harder for the UN, governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) to analyse such groups, influence them, and facilitate their participation in conflict resolution and peace processes. Some CSOs have decided to stop working on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in certain contexts where legislation such as the prohibition on material support¹⁵⁵ has made it impossible to continue. Proscription regimes appear to be making it more difficult for peace processes to succeed.¹⁵⁶

Not only do they make governments more reluctant to consider political paths out of conflict, but they also make it illegal for non-state actors to work for apolitical humanitarian or development outcomes with groups designated as terrorist under any of the many different proscription regimes. Prohibitions on local, national and international organisations accessing and being in contact with listed organisations make it extremely challenging for information about such groups to emerge – hindering any potential peaceful path out of violent conflict.¹⁵⁷

The UN's widening engagement in C/PVE programmes generates iatrogenic effects¹⁵³ to its crucial peace, development and governance work in conflict-affected or fragile countries. With PVE now an integral part of the UN's broader counter-terrorism strategy – with \$100 million worth of PVE projects included in the 2019–2020 multi-year appeal from UNOCT – it is hard to identify any clear boundary between PVE and counter-terrorism, or to keep these separate from other UN functions whose success depends on trust and impartiality.¹⁵⁴ 'PVE-isation' could therefore be deeply damaging in a UN system that has peace operations in 13 countries, special political missions in 24, 17 ambitious SDGs to implement, and responsibilities for delivering worldwide emergency relief, including to most of the world's warzones.



Information material at the 15th anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 and a new Global Study on Women, Peace and Security.
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4.2 Blue-washing member states' abusive approaches

In 2002, the then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, advised the Security Council to ensure its counter-terrorism measures 'do not unduly curtail human rights, or give others a pretext to do so'.¹⁵⁸ Yet UNSC's binding legislative resolutions have been consistently flawed, lacking a comprehensive definition of terrorism and violent extremism, and failing to take due account of the human rights impact of required counter-terrorism measures.¹⁵⁹

The failure to define terrorism and violent extremism and to distinguish counter-terrorism from PVE, and the tendency for UN officials to use counter-terrorism as an entry point for work on a range of peace- and rights-related initiatives, has left too much room

for interpretation.¹⁶⁰ This gives member states significant scope to frame conflicts, label enemies, define response strategies, and claim resources and assistance according to their interests. As a consequence, counter-terrorism, C/PVE and other UN peace strategies now 'work in the sense of what Member States want',¹⁶¹ eroding UN commitments on both human rights and impartiality in peacekeeping and humanitarian action. Member states may control the UN's agenda, but this should not go so far as to politicise the UN's approach or force it to become a party to conflict.

UN leaders may fear that inaction would lead member states to prioritise engagement with other – less principled – forums outside the UN,¹⁶² in order to pursue their counter-terrorism and C/PVE goals. Working with governments' less-than-perfect definitions may be the affordable price of doing business.¹⁶³ But there are risks of damaging the UN's longstanding

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reputation and future credibility, and exposing it to backlash for aligning behind the agenda of governments in the divided and repressive societies where terror attacks overwhelmingly occur. Such governments often use counter-terror and C/PVE as a pretext for pursuing narrow, short-term elite interests, infringing on the rights of particular groups and sowing the seeds of conflict in the process. The counter-terror pretext has proven highly effective in guaranteeing states not only impunity but even international assistance.¹⁶⁴ The risk to the UN's reputation of aiding and abetting such behaviour is substantial. It risks enabling member states to 'blue-wash'¹⁶⁵ abuse, corruption, exclusion and discrimination under the UN counter-terrorism or C/PVE brand, diminishing the UN's legitimacy in the eyes of people and communities around the world.

4.3 Embracing a contested concept: radicalisation

Within UN counter-terror architecture, there has not been sufficient reflection on the implications of using certain approaches. The most glaring is preventing the 'radicalisation' of individuals at risk of committing terrorist or violent extremist acts. UN C/PVE programmes make widespread references to preventing and stopping 'radicalisation', but there is little to suggest that such approaches work (see box 7). Special Rapporteur Ní Aoláin notes that the UN should recognise 'the lack of certainty' in the theories underpinning radicalisation and PVE, and therefore deliberate much more carefully on the widespread use of C/PVE programming.¹⁶⁶

At a practical level, this is having adverse impacts and has placed new demands on the UN. In Kyrgyzstan¹⁶⁷ for instance, the government is working to tackle 'extremism' – whether or not it is violent. An official told us¹⁶⁸ that the criteria for assessing 'radicalisation' may include people's appearance, the use of curtains between women and men, professing support for banned groups (even if these are non-violent), or disliking art or music – arbitrary indicators at best.¹⁶⁹ In practice, this has meant that C/PVE interventions and deterrence measures have come to target dissenting movements and certain minority groups,¹⁷⁰ and in turn this has 'contributed to new cycles of societal exclusion that have long since threatened peace in Kyrgyzstan'.¹⁷¹

BOX 7

Four problems with 'radicalisation' within counter-terrorism and C/PVE fields

Many C/PVE programmes use a theory of change that makes assumptions about 'radicalisation'. However, in recent years, there have been four important critiques of approaches that rely on these assumptions, including:

1. The finding that 'the overwhelming majority of people who hold "radical" beliefs do not engage in violence', whereas 'people who engage in terrorism don't necessarily hold "radical" beliefs'.¹⁷⁴
2. The tendency of radicalisation discourse to stigmatise certain social groups as potential terrorists; the term tends to result in Muslims being labelled as potential perpetrators of violence while dismissing their victimhood – skewing the subsequent focus of responses.¹⁷⁵
3. The tendency to pathologise those who recognise structural problems and demand systemic social change. The term 'radicalisation' in this respect demonises young people's critical ideas and demands for structural change.¹⁷⁶
4. The problem of focusing on the recruitment process and blaming the individual and their personal psychology, while downplaying experienced grievances and the impact of structural issues on the individual – such as socioeconomic issues, political exclusion and an array of other underlying factors.¹⁷⁷

While studies supporting radicalisation theories have received significant attention from donor governments and implementers, the growing body of literature demonstrating the counter-productive impact of policies and programmes based on these theories has received much less fanfare.¹⁷² But, as Ní Aoláin documents, 'large-scale violations of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities are being enabled by "deradicalisation" policies and practice'.¹⁷³

If deradicalisation programmes are being misused in such a way, the UN should avoid aligning with them – doing so contradicts its commitments to equality, minority rights and freedom of expression.

4.4 Fuelling threat inflation

The risk of terror attacks is at once a real and growing challenge and also an issue that has been sensationalised to give it a disproportionate and detrimental salience compared to other threats to human well-being.¹⁷⁸ Likewise, the premium set on counter-terrorism by member states has created incentives for the UN to prioritise, magnify and overestimate terror-related risks over other prominent risks of equal or greater importance to international and domestic security.¹⁷⁹

In a deep-dive study focusing on C/PVE in Kyrgyzstan, Saferworld described this process as 'threat inflation' (see box 8).¹⁸⁰ Similar dynamics have been played out in many other contexts, shifting the emphasis onto counter-terrorism and C/PVE at the expense of other pressing issues.¹⁸¹

As UNOCT and other parts of the UN system prioritise C/PVE, money and capacity are diverted away from other peace and conflict issues. The agencies involved produce and promote analysis justifying their focus and impact on terror threats – on which budgets, jobs and influence come to depend – while few resources exist for those posing tougher questions about these trends. At the same time, the narrow framing of much C/PVE and radicalisation analysis risks undermining the quality of UN conflict analyses and response strategies, undermining its ability to address conflict dynamics in a meaningful way.¹⁸²

4.5 Co-opting critical voices

As member states and UN leaders have allowed security objectives to pervade the UN system, voices questioning the legitimacy of counter-terror as a UN priority have been either actively excluded from the room, drowned out or co-opted. Stifling accountability weakens the prospects of the UN effectively promoting human rights, peace, protection and relief and upholding its Charter.

When they have not been outright refusing to accept evidence or excluding critical civil society voices

BOX 8 The process of threat inflation

Excerpt from Saferworld's 2019 report: *A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan*.¹⁸³

The prominence of the C/PVE agenda in Kyrgyzstan can be seen as the result of a process we call 'threat inflation'. In the context of global efforts to combat terrorism, decision-makers identified the threat of people supporting or leaving to fight for violent groups, which generated pressure to respond. Despite unresolved confusion over the true extent of the threat and its causes, perceived urgency to act led authorities, external actors and implementing organisations to push for rapid action and results through counter-terror and C/PVE initiatives.

As these different groups engage with each other, each interprets the initial threat of 'violent extremism' in its own way, adjusting the agenda to match its own interests...the rush to respond to what remains an amorphous threat has underpinned responses that aren't always based on solid analysis and data. Although some may help address conflict drivers, others appear superficial at best – and harmful at worst.

All the while, research initiatives seeking to understand the threat can be used by those stakeholders with an interest in justifying their existing work by reaffirming or further inflating the initial threat. This leads to some research findings being disregarded, and others – more convenient – becoming accepted, internalised and repeated by those who wish to maintain a strong consensus regarding the severity of the threat and the necessity of response. This contributes to further streams of funding, to access which applicants seek to show the relevance and effectiveness of their responses – while again reaffirming the threat.

from counter-terrorism debates,¹⁸⁴ UN counter-terrorism bodies have become quite adept at responding to criticism without changing anything structurally. When counter-terrorism activities or priorities have negatively affected women's rights or

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The counter-terror field has therefore become adept at ducking critical voices by bringing moderate versions of them in as allies, without addressing the fundamental nature of the issues raised.

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gender justice, the counter-terrorism architecture has adapted itself to 'solve' the problem by mainstreaming gendered analysis and 'empowering' women to participate in counter-terrorism activities.¹⁸⁵ When counter-terrorism approaches have stigmatised young people, approaches are adjusted to put young people at the frontlines of counter-terrorism activities.¹⁸⁶ When counter-terrorism activities have led to the abuse of human rights, compliance frameworks are formulated to enable business to go on as usual. The counter-terror field has therefore become adept at ducking critical voices by bringing moderate versions of them in as allies, without addressing the fundamental nature of the issues raised.

In this way, the proponents of counter-terrorism have subsumed, co-opted and re-presented shortcomings as issues to be tackled through innovation as part of each successive, better-funded and more inclusive generation of counter-terror and C/PVE initiatives.¹⁸⁷

gender justice, the counter-terrorism architecture has adapted itself to 'solve' the problem by mainstreaming gendered analysis and 'empowering' women to participate in counter-terrorism activities.¹⁸⁵ When counter-terrorism approaches have stigmatised young people, approaches are adjusted to put young people at the frontlines of counter-terrorism activities.¹⁸⁶ When counter-terrorism activities have led to the abuse of human rights, compliance frameworks are formulated to enable business to go

4.6

Incoherence and the failure to manage risk

Despite the creation of UNOCT and the money that goes into counter-terrorism, there has been no system-wide effort to coordinate decisions on counter-terrorism or C/PVE. This means that there is no way, for example, to ensure decisions by one agency do not negatively affect the operations of others. The huge footprint of the UN system is so diverse and incoherent that some agencies and offices have the freedom to do what others believe is bad or dangerous – exposing the whole UN family to adverse effects.

To cope with the challenges that result from expanding counter-terrorism engagement, some UN entities have developed a number of risk management reduction mechanisms and guidance notes, which are largely technical in nature.¹⁹² These include handbooks to guide staff at the country level, glossaries of counter-terrorism terminology and programme risk analysis procedures. These efforts do potentially help the UN adhere to its Charter and so have an obvious use. Yet such technical products do little to reverse the lack of meaningful focus on rights and rights protections that originate in UNSC resolutions, which is inherent in the uptake of counter-terrorism and C/PVE by a wide range of UN entities.¹⁹³

BOX 9

Commodifying women's rights organisations?

The move to draw women's peacebuilding and rights organisations into the counter-terror and C/PVE sphere has been well documented. The prioritisation of C/PVE over gender equality in many donor funding streams is contributing to the silencing of women and girls' agency and voices. Some programming has been able to focus on supporting the agency of these organisations by assisting their peacebuilding efforts which attempt to prevent individuals joining violent groups. However, too often gender language is used for 'political expediency'.¹⁸⁸ Many approaches to 'gender' in the counter-terror space are simply reinforcing securitised objectives and exacerbating gender inequalities, while not taking seriously the protection of women and girls' rights, their meaningful participation and efforts to challenge harmful gender norms.¹⁸⁹

For all the efforts towards pushing new policies and programmes to address the gender dimension of violent extremism, the UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin reports that there 'has been no systematic monitoring and evaluation assessing the merits, impacts or human rights compliance of such programming'.¹⁹⁰ Ní Aoláin notes: 'Regrettably, prioritizing women as both subjects and conduits of the prevention and countering of violent extremism has rarely been premised on their rights to non-discrimination and equality, but rather relies on the strategic rationale that it leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of violent extremism and more localized and credible strategies for countering terrorism, a form of commodification which deeply concerns the Special Rapporteur.'¹⁹¹

In isolation, strategies to manage risk for each UN fund, agency and programme can end up transferring rather than mitigating risk. Despite pushback from some parts of the system, UN counter-terror or C/PVE initiatives have still gone ahead in the Sahel, Iraq, Nigeria and Central Asia. Even when institutions like UNICEF push back on counter-terrorism's spread at the headquarters level, they can be exposed to violent attacks in the field. In Somalia for instance, UNICEF has been targeted by al-Shabaab even though it is other parts of the UN that are funding and giving logistical and political support to the military offensive against the group.

The UN has so far failed to ensure a joined-up conversation regarding risks and redlines for its engagement in counter-terrorism, whether at headquarters, regional or country level. At the time of writing, there exists no central UN document – whether from the Executive Office of the Secretary-General or the senior leadership team – to mitigate risks associated with counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming, and no document outlining when engagement is appropriate and when it is not.

4.7 Stymieing improvement: the failure to learn

Given the lessons of the global war on terror, the UN has every reason to adopt a risk-conscious, evidence-based approach to counter-terrorism. Yet many UN agencies only assess the risks of counter-terror engagement after getting involved, and this leads to bad practices being discovered after the fact. Eliminating bad practices would require more dedication to learning, coupled with conflict sensitivity at both strategy and programme levels. However, within UN counter-terror functions, there is very little space or incentive to recognise and learn from failure.

There is a variety of reasons for this. Inter-agency dynamics within the UN system put pressure on staff in each agency to protect the mandate and reputation of their institution by not reporting negative impacts. There has also been little investment in processes and systems needed to tailor programming and approaches to avoid doing harm and promote peace and rights effectively. Lack of coordination with the wider UN system, especially due to UNOCT's opaque and unaccountable

operating approach, also plays a role. Member states and some UN agencies have also made it hard for civil society concerns over counter-terror practices to be brought to the attention of counter-terror bodies, assessments and events.

As a result, funds, agencies and programmes tend to lack incentives and meaningful opportunities to identify and flag risks and negative impacts of UN counter-terror engagement. There is a reluctance within the UN and the wider C/PVE sector to share evaluations of programming.¹⁹⁴ This stops the UN learning from errors, mitigating harm, and maintaining relevance and normative power. It also raises questions about whether UN and member state resources are being wasted by a counter-terror architecture that is attracting resources at a time of overall funding scarcity for the UN.¹⁹⁵

As noted, several UN entities have internal guidance documents on counter-terrorism and C/PVE. These are technical and bureaucratic, offering operational guidance – but doing little to ensure learning around potential negative impacts across the UN system or to question the premise of C/PVE programming in the first place. One staff member explained that “many of us know that engagement in PVE introduces new challenges to the UN system. But we [as UN staff] are not doing enough to build internal advocacy points to demonstrate the negative impact of PVE.”¹⁹⁶

Despite UNOCT's mandate to coordinate counter-terror activity at the UN, there is no system-wide effort to monitor, evaluate and learn about UN counter-terrorism and C/PVE engagement. In the absence of this, there is no prospect of a substantive, evaluatory review of the GCTS. A strategy review process between the Secretary General, UNOCT and member states that remains largely closed to external evidence, analysis and debate (except for ‘consultation’ meetings in ‘open’ societies such as Hungary, the United Arab Emirates and Belarus) mimics the ‘behind closed doors’ approach to counter-terror and other security matters taken by most member states.¹⁹⁷ The UN Secretary-General approved a December 2019 budget request to undertake an independent assessment of UNOCT, which could have been a step in the right direction.¹⁹⁸ However, this process has been politicised by major donors to the UN counter-terrorism trust fund. It is therefore expected to be neither independent nor an assessment in any meaningful sense. Shielding UN counter-terror approaches from scrutiny in this way ill befits a UN system that originated the concept of human

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Shielding UN counter-terror approaches from scrutiny in this way ill befits a UN system that originated the concept of human security and which has an obligation to model open, accountable decision-making.
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security and which has an obligation to model open, accountable decision-making.¹⁹⁹

The next sections of this discussion paper highlight some issues that truly independent assessors should be carefully probing.

BOX 10 Learning from UN peacebuilding reviews

UN reviews of its peacebuilding architecture have taken a much more comprehensive approach than the GCTS review process. The 2015 UN peacebuilding architecture review mandated an advisory group of seven experts to prepare an independent report based on wide consultation and the examination of the UN's role in building peace in five countries: Burundi, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Timor-Leste.²⁰⁰ The 2020 review featured regional consultations in Europe, Africa and Central Asia that were co-organised by CSOs and the UN, and accompanied by separate tracks to allow for input from separate sections of the UN system.²⁰¹ These processes have by no means been perfect but are a marked improvement on the narrow approach taken to review the GCTS. If the UN is able to be inclusive in one process, it should be able to apply these same approaches to others.

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Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Secretary-General for Peace Operations (centre) – on a visit to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – and Mahamat Saleh Annadif (centre left), Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of MINUSMA, attend a commemoration ceremony in tribute to the peacekeepers who lost their lives recently in Mali.

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5

Threats to the UN system

“I regret to say that international human rights experts, including those of the UN system, are unanimous in finding that many measures which States are currently adopting to counter terrorism infringe on human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

Kofi Annan, 2005.²⁰²

Seventy-five years ago, the UN Charter established the three founding pillars of the UN system: peace and security, human rights, and development. Over the past 20 years, the fourth pillar of counter-terrorism has begun to emerge – which in an ever-changing world is fundamentally risking the UN’s ability to deliver on its core missions. There are four main ways in which this can be considered a ‘dangerous path for the integrity of the UN’.²⁰³

5.1 Impairing peacebuilding and conflict mediation

As mentioned previously, UNSC proscribing armed groups as terrorist organisations narrows the potential for UN entities, CSOs and other stakeholders to understand such groups, influence them and facilitate their engagement in conflict resolution or peace processes.²⁰⁴ Proscription has contributed to ‘a climate of fear’, whereby INGOs and CSOs choose not to engage in mediation or peacebuilding work with listed groups for fear of prosecution.²⁰⁵ Peace processes do not start with a high-level handshake. They are usually the product of a range of smaller, informal communication efforts that create a context in which formal dialogue and agreement become possible. Proscription regimes are preventing this from happening and foreclosing the exploration of conflict-resolution opportunities. This is important, because although political solutions to conflict in war-on-terror battlegrounds may not always be possible or desirable, decades of protracted, metastatising conflict of the kind

witnessed in Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia and the Sahel are even less palatable. The UN has repeatedly acknowledged what research has also clearly shown: most violent movements cannot be ended by military means. Law enforcement and political settlements have historically been more successful approaches.²⁰⁷

This is not a new observation and has been raised for almost a decade by conflict experts within and beyond the UN. Alvaro De Soto, the former UN Special Envoy in the Middle East, famously warned about the risks for the UN's role as a mediator if it limited who it talked to: 'the UN has become rather adept dealing with groups that most governments can't or won't touch. If this ability is removed we would seriously weaken our hand as a peacemaking tool.'²⁰⁸ This fear is proving well founded: proscription is clearly now impacting the UN's peacemaking role and its current leadership's aspirations to invest in 'preventive diplomacy'²⁰⁹ and to promote 'the primacy of politics' in UN peace operations.

Ultimately, the embrace of counter-terrorism frameworks and the C/PVE agenda contradicts principles of impartiality, blaming conflicts too wholly on 'terrorists' or 'violent extremists' and fostering blindness as to the failings of others. This ignores the complexity of contemporary conflicts and lessens clarity on the priorities for more comprehensive peacebuilding strategies. For example, when programmes begin by asking merely why recruitment into violent groups occurs, there is a tendency not to explore:

- what political and economic factors gave birth to and sustain violent movements; what grievances should be taken seriously; and whether dialogue and negotiation is possible
- the role of governments and regional institutions; who else is responsible for violence, injustice and other conflict drivers; and how strategies can help change state behaviour rather than just helping suppress the 'extremists'
- whether a change in international security or economic or diplomatic approaches could help solve the problem²¹⁰

The narrow analytical framing of much PVE work – conveniently uncontroversial in divided and repressive contexts where terror attacks overwhelmingly occur – leads to weak engagement strategies that neglect important peace priorities. It is an approach that takes impartiality, resolution and a holistic response to conflict drivers off the menu for much of the UN. In this way, counter-terrorism and C/PVE are detracting from strategies and programmes that are focused more directly on

peace, human rights and governance, lessening the prospects of the UN playing a principled and transformative role in conflict sessions.

It has been well documented that counter-terror and C/PVE are diminishing trust in state authorities in many countries and regions²¹¹ – which has further implications for the UN's role as a peacebuilder and peacemaker. Counter-terrorism and C/PVE activities that support repressive governments amount to the UN siding with the state against aggrieved populations. This creates a grave risk of alienating disaffected populations from international peace efforts and the UN. Where governments are viewed as illegitimate by sections of the local population in the wake of historic marginalisation, indiscriminate violence and other abuses, UN backing for C/PVE efforts will naturally be seen as complicit. This contributes to weakening trust and social cohesion and limits the space for elite and community-level reconciliation. Ultimately, this will perpetuate and escalate conflict, making it impossible for the UN to pursue dialogue and mediation, consult with communities, support the delivery of relief and development, and work to improve public perceptions of peace efforts.

5.2 Jeopardising peacekeeping principles

UN peace operations are increasingly being drawn into complex conflict environments, and in some cases are asked to support counter-terror operations or C/PVE objectives. This shift downplays the conclusions of recent internal policy reviews by DPO, and has led to a blurring of UN impartiality.²¹²

In a 2018 discussion paper, Saferworld argued that the UN would open itself up to six core risks if counter-terrorism objectives were embraced in peace operations:

- Supporting non-UN counter-terrorism and military missions with logistics and intelligence risks making the UN a conflict party and complicit in conduct that fuels conflict.
- UN support to militarised counter-terrorism and stabilisation efforts reduces the UN's credibility, impartiality and space for promoting peace, development and human rights.

- More proactive use of force by UN troops to combat ‘terrorist’ groups could perpetuate and exacerbate conflict.
- UN support to the expansion of state authority in counter-terrorism and stabilisation missions risks reinforcing state abuses, lessening reform incentives and aggravating public grievances.
- UN involvement in training, equipping and funding national and regional security forces to carry out counter-terror tasks could prove counter-productive.
- Buying into C/PVE can alienate communities, taint the UN by association, and expose its programmes to greater risk of attack.²¹³

Yet UN peace operations have handled a growing range of direct and indirect counter-terror objectives and tasks in settings such as Mali, Somalia, Afghanistan and Libya.²¹⁴ In Mali, France has strongly pushed the UN to engage in counter-terrorism and stabilisation in the region, to unburden its Barkhane counter-terror operation and to bolster the G5 Sahel. It has called for MINUSMA to be a ‘dam against the spread of terrorism in Mali and the whole region’,²¹⁵ with a ‘robust’ mandate that places the UN in a more direct counter-terror role than ever before.

In response, in 2016 UNSC authorised MINUSMA to adopt a ‘more proactive and robust posture’ to ‘anticipate, deter and counter threats’. Illustrating

the pressure from some powerful member states to coax peace operations into more coercive and belligerent stabilisation functions, France has proposed extending MINUSMA’s mandate further still: in September 2017, French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian challenged UNSC that ‘if granting MINUSMA a counter-terrorism mandate is not the solution, we must come up with something else’.²¹⁶

Despite deeply concerning internal assessments of the UN’s engagement in Mali, which have been toned down following French diplomatic manoeuvring, the latest UN Secretary-General’s report on the implementation of the GCTS suggests that the growing role of UN peace operations in counter-terrorism is seen as neither undesirable nor problematic.²¹⁷ There are those within DPO that have been trying to stem the spread of counter-terror into UN peace operations and uphold the important principle of UN impartiality. However, UNSC permanent members have proven unable to separate their own troubled investments in war-on-terror battlegrounds from their role as mandate creators for UN peace operations around the world. Unless there is a stronger reassertion of peacekeeping principles and political strategy from UN leadership, UN peace operations will struggle under this pressure to maintain their impartiality in future years, exposing them more directly to significant dangers of the kind encountered in Mali.

A peacekeeper on foot patrol at a market in the town of Konna, located in the centre of Mali on the Niger river.

© UN Photo/Gema Cortes



BOX 11**The UN's role in Mali**

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is currently the most dangerous UN peacekeeping mission in the world.²¹⁸ It is mandated by UNSC to help restore the authority of a state that is discredited in the eyes of large segments of the population. The proximity of UN peacekeepers to war-fighting, counter-terror missions such as the French Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel challenge the central tenets of UN peacekeeping. Given the predominance of counter-terror frameworks, there are limits as to which conflict parties the mission can engage with. Internally there are severe concerns about the mission's political role and worries about the risks to its perceived impartiality. It also exists with the constant threat of susceptibility to reprisals because it is the weakest of international forces.

Internal UN analysis has questioned the alignment of MINUSMA with counter-terror efforts in the country, noting that the terminology of stabilisation, counter-terrorism and C/PVE might not be useful for achieving the mission's objectives, and concluding that stronger investment in political conflict resolution and human rights monitoring functions could make the mission more effective in promoting peace. Encouragingly, the mission has recently moved to strengthen its human rights compliance functions. This has led to the documentation of a series of grave human rights abuses perpetrated by government forces in the first few months of 2020. The contradiction here – that the mission is mandated to extend the authority of these forces – remains.

5.3 Cracking down on civic space and instrumentalising civil society

Authorities are shutting down civic space all over the world. CIVICUS reports that civic space is closed, repressed or obstructed in 111 countries across the world, and only 4 per cent of the global population live in areas where civic space is open.²¹⁹ The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law recorded 88 countries that have proposed or enacted more than 217 restrictions on civil society since 2013.²²⁰ Governments' huge investments in counter-terrorism and C/PVE have been an important impetus and pretext for much of this crackdown, according to the Special Rapporteur:

*'It is no coincidence that the proliferation of security measures to counterterrorism and to prevent and counter violent extremism, on the one hand, and the adoption of measures that restrict civic space, on the other, are happening simultaneously... In many parts of the world, any form of expression that articulates a view contrary to the official position of the State, addresses human rights violations and comments on ways to do things better, in accordance with international human rights obligations, constitutes a form of terrorist activity or violent extremism or a broad "threat to national security", which often encompasses both terrorism and extremism... In some regions, the instrumentalization of counterterrorism, the prevention and countering of violent extremism, and protection of national security measures is brutal, with members of civil society arrested and detained on spurious grounds... Rooted in the primacy of security imperatives, sustained measures to silence and even choke civil society have been taken. It is essential to grasp the serious impact of the cumulative sustained effect that such measures... have had across civil society, locally and globally, individually and collectively.'*²²¹

UN buy-in to an agenda that is causing so much damage to respect for human rights and civil society space all over the world – especially given the failure to prioritise human rights within the UN's own strategy – legitimates and enables member states to proceed with abusive counter-terror measures, such as the arrest, detention, torture and extra-judicial killing of civil society activists and others. Many governments readily brand civil society as

‘terrorists’, ‘violent extremists’, ‘threats to national security’, ‘enemies of the state’ and ‘foreign agents’.²²²

Some UN member states oppose the closure of civic space, but have not acted on the realisation that excessive focus on counter-terrorism has been the primary enabler and pretext for it. This has included closing down alternative spaces claimed by those engaged in peaceful protest and dissent, such as cyberspace and social media. *The missing peace* report found that these spaces are important alternative forums for political participation, dissent and articulation, and their closure on the premise of counter-terrorism measures is yet another critical constraint on civic space.²²³

When civic space is defended, this is often due to the assertion of political aims rather than principle (for example, when the US criticises Russia on this issue), or is based on the argument that civil society should be defended because it is a vital counter-terror tool (rather than an essential feature of peaceful, open and prosperous societies). This argument is unhelpful, in that it defends human rights merely by normalising and encouraging civil society’s co-optation into the deeply damaging and discredited counter-terror agenda, and in that it implicitly negates the value of critical voices within society – which are often already under extreme pressure in the societies where terror attacks are most common. The long-term implications of this are dire.

The UN system has also played an important role in the instrumentalisation of civil society discussed earlier, by passing on responsibility to CSOs to implement counter-terror programmes deemed too risky for the UN to implement itself. For instance, UNDP’s risk assessment for engaging in PVE programming advocates transferring the responsibility for implementation of PVE activities to local CSOs in certain circumstances. UNDP argues that this makes for more effective CVE programming, but with the added advantage of insulating UN agencies themselves from risk. There are obvious ethical concerns with this suggestion, given that it appears to advocate transferring operational and reputational risk to national and subnational organisations and their staff.

This is particularly problematic when C/PVE initiatives focus on groups considered ‘at risk’ (this is usually based on discriminatory criteria such as age, race, ethnicity and religion). This can make civil society partners a target for the communities they are ‘assisting’, particularly where funding is linked to the monitoring of potentially violent individuals who could be perceived as supporting states’ intelligence and/or security programmes. Instrumentalising

CSOs as surveillance service providers can radically undermine their credibility as well as broader trust between the public, the UN and civil society.²²⁴ With the UN supporting governments in dozens of countries to develop and implement national action plans on PVE that are being used to spy on,²²⁵ control and/or ostracise minorities,²²⁶ there are likely to be serious and negative long-term implications for the UN’s standing among the world’s most marginalised and brutalised communities.

It is hard to justify the UN being so closely aligned with a counter-terror agenda that has done so much damage to human rights and civic space around the world. The responsibility to push back on this is one that both UN leadership and states must share. Member states that do not want to see the credibility of the UN irreversibly damaged must be more proactive in opposing and preventing other member states that are using counter-terrorism as a guise to push more nefarious objectives. They cannot simply settle for opposing these practices in their UNGA speeches and then fail to defend these concepts when negotiations become complicated.

Meanwhile, there have been attempts by the 38th floor²²⁷ to publicly distance the UN from problematic counter-terror approaches,²²⁸ but in many circles this is not seen as sufficient. Some argue that the legacy of Secretary-General António Guterres and his leadership team could be viewed in terms of the ongoing subordination of human rights imperatives to the security prerogatives of powerful member states.²²⁹ This, however, does not have to be what defines him. While efforts from his office to protect civic space are welcomed, they will ultimately be inconsequential unless there is a wider institutional overhaul of the UN’s embrace of the counter-terror agenda.

5.4 Putting development and humanitarian functions in the firing line

While the UN Plan of Action on PVE outlined marginalisation, exclusion and poverty as underlying causes of terrorism, counter-terrorism legislation is increasingly preventing development and humanitarian work from addressing these issues.²³⁰

Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan (left) delivering his address to the General Assembly when he presented his report entitled 'Uniting Against Terrorism: Recommendation for a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy', at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, 2 May 2006.

© UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



“
The “counter-terrorism agenda is deviating the UN from its core missions”, a UN staff member recently told us. “There is a need to get back to addressing root causes of conflict, promoting justice, reducing economic inequalities”.

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decision to embrace counter-terrorism has legitimised the convenient claim that ‘terrorists’ and their ideology are the primary root cause of the world’s security challenges.

Development-based C/PVE efforts will not work if they merely sit alongside problematic, militarised counter-terrorism and rule of law approaches. C/PVE would stand a greater chance of addressing the causes of violence in the absence of the brutal counter-terror tactics used by many military and criminal justice actors – but the existence of C/PVE has not resulted in the reduction of militarised

The “counter-terrorism agenda is deviating the UN from its core missions”, a UN staff member recently told us. “There is a need to get back to addressing root causes of conflict, promoting justice, reducing economic inequalities”.²³¹

As UN development becomes more involved in C/PVE programming, unintended risk shifts towards UNDP and other parts of the system delivering development programming. Instead of carving out a role within the system to show that at the heart of the majority of violent conflicts lies deep political and economic grievances, UNDP’s

counter-terrorism.²³² While UNDP’s global strategy and the UN’s Plan of Action on PVE are careful not to associate radicalisation, violent extremism or terrorism with any religion, the programmatic footprint of UNDP follows a certain pattern that warrants critical reflection. The concentration of most of UNDP’s C/PVE programmes in Muslim-majority countries likewise implicates the development branch of the UN in backing an agenda seen by many Muslims as both Islamophobic and tied to the failed global war on terror.

Recent trends show that acts of far-right terrorism – mostly in the US, Western Europe, North America and Oceania – ‘have increased by 320 per cent over the past five years’,²³³ but none of the 40 projects undertaken by UNDP address violence committed by ‘far-right’, neo-Nazi or white supremacist groups. There is obviously a restriction based on the footprint of UNDP globally, but UNDP’s lack of action towards certain manifestations of the problem arguably reinforces unhelpful prejudices and biases about the origins of and responsibility for ‘violent extremism’. UNDP staff are aware that their inaction on certain types of extremism is a risk to its impartiality, but have felt stymied in their efforts to raise this issue.²³⁴

UNDP’s C/PVE work with those at risk from ‘radicalisation’ likewise positions the institution as



being suspicious of critical voices – a problematic stance for an organisation that purportedly supports a progressive, rights-based vision for human development (for example, as articulated under the 2030 Agenda).²³⁵

While UNDP’s ‘comprehensive’ internal risk management guidelines offer steps to limit the reputational risks inherent in C/PVE programming, UNDP’s overall involvement in C/PVE is not presently open for debate.²³⁶ Ultimately, UNDP’s embrace of a C/PVE agenda closely aligned with militarised counter-terrorism is in conflict with its dedication to advancing the interests of the world’s most marginalised people. In Libya, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen, Saferworld’s civil society partners and research participants have described communities reacting to C/PVE efforts with alienation, suspicion and even hostility, questioning the wisdom and safety of pushing them into adopting an approach that is discredited in the eyes of people who live in these communities. This loss of trust can serve to reduce access to those most in need of development support. Libyan and Yemeni women’s rights organisations told us directly that C/PVE funds are the only resources available to them, which puts them under suspicion of being spies in the eyes of parties to conflict in their countries, and consequently at risk of reprisals.²³⁷

Similar risks exist for the UN’s humanitarian entities. OCHA has taken steps to manage risks associated with counter-terror activity by distancing itself from all parties and frameworks involved. But, as argued by leading humanitarians, counter-terror measures are putting the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity under pressure.²³⁸ There are increasing concerns over the ‘criminalisation’ of humanitarian action through counter-terrorism laws and frameworks.²³⁹ Research by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Nigeria and Somalia has revealed that ‘counterterrorism measures limit the ability of organisations to implement programmes according to needs alone’, while in Iraq, ‘the concept of preventing and countering violent extremism potentially impacts independence, where it could be used to support a negative political narrative about certain groups’.²⁴⁰

While some humanitarian organisations reject counter-terrorism and C/PVE funding and programming entirely, there is increasing acceptance that ‘even organisations that make a conscious decision to avoid C/PVE funding may face perception problems if others accept it’.²⁴¹ In a ‘competitive funding environment’ where C/PVE

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‘remains “fluffy” and poorly defined’, some leading humanitarian organisations have expressed fears that other agencies could ‘disregard the implications of the political motives that often lie behind the C/PVE agenda’.²⁴²

A further important factor in the politicisation and securitisation of aid is the growing legal and practical restrictions placed by governments on engagement with certain communities and territories in order to cut off resource flows to proscribed groups.²⁴³ As Saferworld and others’ research has documented in Syria, such restrictions can embolden abusive states, deprive conflict-affected populations, exacerbate and perpetuate conflict, and even perversely enable the rise of violent rebel groups.²⁴⁴

The uncritical embrace of a framework that is criminalising the work of humanitarians and preventing the UN delivering life-saving services should be a red flag for both leadership and member states alike that believe in the UN Charter and want to protect multilateralism.

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A wide view of the Security Council meeting on cooperation between the UN and regional and subregional organisations in maintaining international peace and security. The focus of the meeting is the contribution of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in countering terrorist threats.

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Conclusion

In 1961, the then UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld told an audience at Oxford University: “It is my firm conviction that any result bought at the price of a compromise with the principles and ideals of the Organization, either by yielding to force, by disregard of justice, by neglect of common interests or by contempt for human rights, is bought at too high a price. That is so because a compromise with its principles and purposes weakens the Organization in a way representing a definite loss for the future that cannot be balanced by any immediate advantage achieved.”²⁴⁵

Four decades later, the 9/11 attacks set the UN on a course that has led to it paying a price that Hammarskjöld would have considered too high: allowing the creation of a fourth pillar on counter-terrorism.

Some would argue that this shift was inevitable due to the primacy given to counter-terrorism by member states both small and large. But for years, the UN did manage to keep counter-terror at a distance. Only more recently have counter-terror offices and programmes begun to mushroom at a faster pace.

As we heard many times in our interviews with UN staff, the debates and dilemmas informing this evolution have been challenging. Some argued that the UN must play a role in counter-terrorism, because inaction could damage the UN’s reputation with populations in fragile contexts or consign the UN to irrelevance where it should be wielding influence. Some suggested that the UN could become underfunded in conflict environments, ceding the initiative to those who have less respect for human rights. Others insisted that the tools in the UN toolkit, and the potential for a whole-of-system response, could genuinely change how counter-terrorism could be done.²⁴⁶

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If the UN continues on its current trajectory – putting blue helmets and humanitarian and development functions in the firing line, jeopardising peace strategies and peacekeeping principles, and abetting a global crackdown on civil society – this price could bankrupt the UN in the eyes of future generations.

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senior UN leaders and official documents illustrate a fundamental awareness at high levels within the UN system of the risks and challenges discussed in this paper. Ultimately, however, this has not prevented harmful impacts from occurring.

When diagnosing why this has happened, UN staff and analysts always return to the most significant factor impelling the UN: that the UN's move towards counter-terrorism has been driven by member states, whom the UN cannot feasibly resist. This assertion is valid up to a point – the UN cannot fly in the face of its members' wishes. At the same time, it is clearly not sufficient for the UN to abdicate its responsibilities to its Charter in a way that jeopardises its future role and identity. If some member states push the UN in a direction that contradicts its Charter, then other member states, the UN and its staff should be willing and able to hold their ground.

Instead, certain wealthy and powerful member states have succeeded in transferring many of the risks and failings of their counter-terror strategies onto the UN and its reputation. UN staff and leaders have lost their sense of agency under the weight of resolutions and mandates handed down by the UN's most powerful organ – UNSC. Capitulation to the counter-terror agenda fatally damages the UN, and the potential to overhaul the system's new fourth pillar diminishes with each passing year.

Could the UN engage in counter-terrorism without putting itself at such grave risk? The 19-year record of increasingly intensive global counter-terrorism activities should guide the UN leadership to a better response to this question. The number of individuals fighting for proscribed groups has quadrupled since 9/11.²⁴⁷ Terror attacks are geographically more

widespread than ever; in 2018, terror incidents took place in 103 countries.²⁴⁸ Far-right terror activities in North America, Western Europe and Oceania tripled in the last five years.²⁴⁹ The war on terror has led to a huge rise in global military spending in the last two decades,²⁵⁰ with the US alone spending \$2.8 trillion on counter-terrorism between 2002 and 2017.²⁵¹

For some, these numbers point to evolving and growing threats. Strengthening, improving and expanding counter-terror approaches might therefore be presented as an urgent necessity for the UN. However, the role of counter-terrorism in fuelling protracted, unwinnable wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen, as well as facilitating repression in every region of the world, should at the very least give the UN pause.

In truth, the factors that sustain peace around the world have not been successfully addressed through counter-terrorism and C/PVE frameworks. The growth of these frameworks in the UN system is therefore not helping the UN uphold its mandate – but rather undermining it. The factors that do sustain peace can be addressed effectively by the parts of the UN system that focus on rights, equality, fundamental freedoms, peace, humanitarian access and development, if these functions are assiduously defended from co-optation. UN leadership will need to reckon with this in the months and years to come.

6.1 Recommendations

To protect the UN from the counter-terror agenda, its current leadership and member states that are committed to human rights and sustaining peace should take a different path. The way forward involves developing a more sophisticated and robust approach to conceptualising, analysing and shaping UN strategy in complex contexts, and better navigating the distinction between counter-terror and non-counter-terror responses. This will in turn help the UN distinguish between member states' political aims pursued through military means and its own role as an impartial peacekeeper, maker and builder. Combined with a strengthening of internal learning and review processes, this will put the UN on much more solid ground to maintain its credibility, uphold its Charter, and contribute to making the world a safer and more secure place.

I. Refocus UN strategy on peace, rights and development through stronger processes for analysis, strategy and programme development.

1. Recommit to an overarching aim of achieving impartiality in practice by seeking to separate all operational UN entities from specific states' war aims and hard security strategies.

Impartiality is a foundational principle for the UN. This needs to be reasserted strongly in the face of contemporary pressure to redefine conflicts as struggles against 'terrorism'. Given buying into counter-terrorism typically means compromising impartiality, the UN needs to invest in analysing and responding to the conflict dynamics from which terror threats emerge, including the agendas of member states that are involved.

This needs to inform the crafting of UN response strategies that are centred on peace, rights and development, where the UN institutions specialised in those issues are empowered to play a lead role in defining and executing strategy, independent of counter-terror and C/PVE objectives and of member states' particular interest in these contexts.

Asserting UN impartiality will also require:

- rejecting mandates for UN peace operations that include counter-terrorism or C/PVE objectives
- discontinuing PVE funding through any fund or funding mechanism that should be used for peacebuilding, governance, humanitarian or development outcomes
- refusing any CTC and CTED country visits where human rights issues are off the agenda, or which don't involve bringing a human rights expert on the mission or meeting with local civil society actors
- reversing the neglect of human rights pillar IV of the GCTS by implementing it with an appropriate level of funds, expertise and programming

2. Recognise the conceptual and practical drawbacks of adopting C/PVE approaches and redouble investment in development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance programmes.

The UN system needs to get better at understanding when the use of a counter-terror or C/PVE framework risks undermining its Charter. In settings affected by violence, it is vital for the UN to respond to the needs, priorities and perspectives of communities with a strategic focus on humanitarian action, development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance. Doing so defines the UN's role as one that addresses the drivers of conflict in a constructive and sustainable manner.

UN leaders and entities should avoid subordinating their peace, rights, relief and development efforts to counter-terror or C/PVE objectives, because these objectives and approaches so often fail to address peace priorities, exacerbate divisions and risk doing harm in a variety of other ways. The UN's efforts to address the causes and effects of violence can be more effective when defined as a contribution to the 2030 Agenda or to the Women, Peace and Security or Youth, Peace and Security agendas, rather than counter-terrorism or C/PVE.

II. Protect UN credibility and impact by strengthening guidance, oversight and safeguards and standardising use of terror-related terminology.

3. Undertake a full system-wide review of all terminology related to counter-terrorism and C/PVE and provide clear definitions to guide operational and policy approaches.

The UN system needs to be able to define C/PVE to enable UN functions to differentiate between C/PVE and counter-terrorism. These definitions must be based upon and adhere to human rights and international humanitarian law.

In particular, the UN should reconsider its use of the terms ‘radicalisation’ and ‘deradicalisation’ – given the lack of evidence that these terms are helpful. The UN should also assess the strategic implications of proscribing groups and labelling their actions as ‘terrorism’ or ‘violent extremism’. As proscription tends to rule out options such as mediation and work to address root causes, proscription needs to be avoided wherever possible.

It is possible for the UN to work effectively on the factors that underpin support for violent movements and groups – and to tackle the wider drivers of conflict – without adopting counter-terrorism or C/PVE labelling that weakens peace strategies, alienates communities and puts UN impartiality at risk.

UN leadership should ensure guidelines on use of terms and the implications they can have are understood and adhered to across the UN system. They should ensure these take precedence over current operating procedures used by some UN offices that in many instances accept too readily the terms and labels preferred by particular member states. To do this, addendums are needed within key UN documents relevant to counter-terror, PVE and peacebuilding – including the Plan of Action on PVE – to clarify terminology.

4. Develop central and sector-specific internal guidelines for all UN funds, agencies and programmes for counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming.

Each implementing entity within the UN system should develop internal guidelines that clearly define redlines for when C/PVE and counter-terror programming is and is not appropriate, considering relevant risks of exacerbating conflict and the actual needs and perspectives of the local population. Efforts should be made to coordinate these guidelines to underpin a system-wide approach that adheres to international human rights and

humanitarian law, is conflict and gender sensitive, and protects the UN from any adverse effects.

No fund, programme, agency or UN entity should be allowed to implement any project related to counter-terrorism or C/PVE without these robust guidelines. In some instances these will need to be kept confidential, but efforts should be made to publish such guidelines, recognising the potential positive normative impact these could have on donors and other implementing agencies.

5. Strengthen oversight over all UN-supported, in-country counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming.

Better UN programming should be reinforced through much more stringent oversight of anything related to ‘violent extremism’ or ‘terrorism’. Given the risks of the UN reinforcing conflict and rights abuses, counter-terror and C/PVE programming should not be treated in the same way as benign development projects. The decision to pursue such activity should be based on a rigorous risk analysis and include an assessment of the likely implications of a proposed project for conflict, gender and respect for human rights.

UN Resident Coordinators should have greater powers to review, oversee and rule out UN in-country counter-terror or C/PVE programming by any UN entity. Where appropriate, the UN should consider developing country-specific advisory groups that allow civil society, academics and community groups to voice any potential concerns with proposed counter-terror and C/PVE interventions.

6. Create a standing review body to monitor day-to-day UN counter-terrorism activities to ensure no harm is being done in the UN’s name.

Oversight of UN involvement in counter-terror and C/PVE should involve day-to-day monitoring that identifies risks for the UN and the communities it serves, and is able to rectify problems immediately – acting as a firewall that protects the UN in instances of reputational risk.

To this end, UN leadership should create a standing review body – separate from the Special Rapporteur – to monitor day-to-day UN counter-terrorism functions and report any bad practice that risks impacting negatively on peace, rights or development. This review body should be located outside UNOCT, and report directly to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, as well as informing UNGA, UNSC, and UN funds, agencies and programmes. The body should ensure a system-wide human rights compliance framework for all activity under the GCTS.

7. Invest in safeguarding UN peace, development and human rights work from the risks of counter-terrorism.

In environments where states or others are implementing counter-terror frameworks, the UN cannot simply withdraw, but should instead define a clearer role based on its peacemaking and building, rights protection, monitoring and development, and relief role.

Refocusing UN strategy on core pillars can be advanced in practice by:

- appointing human rights and peace and development advisers with the mandate to safeguard UN peace, development and human rights work from the risks of counter-terrorism. Advisers should be funded from assessed contributions and work in collaboration with – or in some instances be seconded to – UNOCT, to ensure that all UN support for counter-terrorism is conflict sensitive and upholds human rights. Given the deficits in implementing aspects of the UN GCTS that focus on addressing human rights and conditions conducive to terrorism, and the inherent problems with remodelling peace and development work to serve counter-terror aims, this would be vastly preferable to the recently proposed appointment of ‘PVE advisers’ in funds and agencies outside of UNOCT.
- generating greater civilian capacity for all peace operations, centred on monitoring the human rights situation, facilitating and supporting inclusive dialogue and local conflict resolution, and encouraging all conflict parties to address the drivers of conflict through coherent conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies.
- protecting the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, while countering terrorism and reinforcing the independence of OHCHR to tackle the human rights problems inherent in counter-terrorism.

8. Ensure the UN system crafts a holistic, intersectional approach to address the relationship between gender, peace, security and counter-terrorism.

Within and beyond the UN, moves to instrumentalise women as the agents of counter-terrorism and C/PVE risk undermining the efforts of women’s rights organisations and others to address the wider structural drivers underpinning gender inequality, exclusion and violence. The UN needs to take this risk more seriously, and ensure it is possible for women to have an equal role in constructing peace and security – from local to international and strategic levels – without paying the price of buy-in to a harmful agenda.

Mainstreaming gender principles within C/PVE and counter-terror frameworks will not be enough. What is required is a much more serious reckoning with the concerns women’s rights organisations have with the counter-terror and C/PVE agenda around the world, and stronger efforts to defend the progressive work of such organisations, independent of counter-terrorism, in follow-up.

The UN should respond by developing a holistic and intersectional approach to addressing the relationship between gender equality, women’s rights, peace, security and counter-terrorism that is fundamentally based on respect for women’s human rights. This approach should address structural inequality, the gendered drivers of armed conflict, and the role of patriarchal power structures and violent masculinities in fuelling the production of both violent movements and heavy-handed, counter-productive responses to them. This should be fully integrated into the next iteration of the UN GCTS.

III. Turn evidence, experience and more inclusive dialogue into improvement.

9. Mandate a regular internal learning exercise to troubleshoot harmful counter-terrorism and C/PVE programming and assess its impact on peace, rights and development.

Universal Periodic Reviews, Special Rapporteur reports and the Human Rights Council have provided extensive empirical evidence of harms systematically perpetrated in the name of counter-terrorism. Simply documenting bad practice cannot and should not be enough for an organisation like the UN – it should drive improvements that prevent the replication of harmful and counter-productive counter-terror approaches.

This requires commitment to learning and improving. The UN should institute a regular, whole-of-system learning exercise to identify bad practice and prevent its recurrence. The exercise should examine, among other things, proscription practices, the impact of sanctions on UN peace and humanitarian work, and the effect of including counter-terror and C/PVE within UN peace operations’ mandates. Information should be made widely available for use by third parties.

10. Develop stronger review processes for more thorough, inclusive and strategic reflections on the role of the UN in counter-terrorism including, but not limited to, the biannual UN GCTS review.

There is no reason why the UN system can undertake inclusive reviews and processes for some functions but not others. With this in mind, UN leadership, member states and the office of the UN President of the General Assembly must in the short term ensure that the review process for the GCTS is as ambitious as other review processes, such as the UN peacebuilding architecture review.

The UN GCTS review process should be brought up to standard immediately, by enabling full input and meaningful consultation by and with civil society, non-government entities and research institutions. Only states with strong records on human rights and counter-terrorism that reflect the full spirit of the UN GCTS should be selected to co-chair such review processes and to host consultations or regional workshops.

Beyond the GCTS, member states, UN entities and civil society should engage in longer-term reflections on the lessons from counter-terrorism and appropriate trajectories for the UN and other stakeholders to resolve conflict and violence looking forward. They should also strive to open up all UN review and decision-making processes relevant to counter-terrorism to these lessons and to the evidence and analysis available from CSOs and other experts.

11. Ensure the 2020 independent assessment and all subsequent assessments of UNOCT are conducted in an open, transparent and accountable manner.

As a further practical step forward, the budgeted independent assessment of UNOCT should be broadened to allow for an independent, evaluative review of the impact of UN counter-terrorism on the organisation and its functions. This review should be inclusive of all stakeholders, including UN member states, academics, civil society and UN staff members.

Notes

- ²⁴⁵ Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (2019), 'The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact: Lecture delivered by Dag Hammarskjöld, Oxford, 30 May 1961', October (https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ics_100_no_4_oxfordspeech.pdf)
- ²⁴⁶ Many other arguments in this vein have been made. Some feel that if the UN is going to play a role in complex war zones, violent groups are going to attack it and oppose its mandate, and therefore it can't be 'neutral' and needs to wake up to this fact. This is a compelling argument for some but does not hold up to scrutiny. Experience shows that the UN can effectively position itself as impartial with 'extremist' movements like the Taliban.
- ²⁴⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018), 'The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups', November (https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf)
- ²⁴⁸ Institute of Economics and Peace (2019), 'Global Terrorism Index 2019', November (<http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>)
- ²⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁰ Crawford NC (2018), 'United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated', Brown University Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, 14 November (https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf)
- ²⁵¹ It is unclear, and becoming increasingly so, what portion of military budgets is spent on counter-terrorism, but a few helpful resources provide some information: Stimson Center (2018), 'Counterterrorism Spending: Protecting America While Promoting Efficiencies and Accountability', 16 May (<https://www.stimson.org/2018/counterterrorism-spending-protecting-america-while-promoting-efficiencies-and-accountability/>); Crawford NC (2018), 'United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated', Brown University Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, 14 November (https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf)

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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