

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.