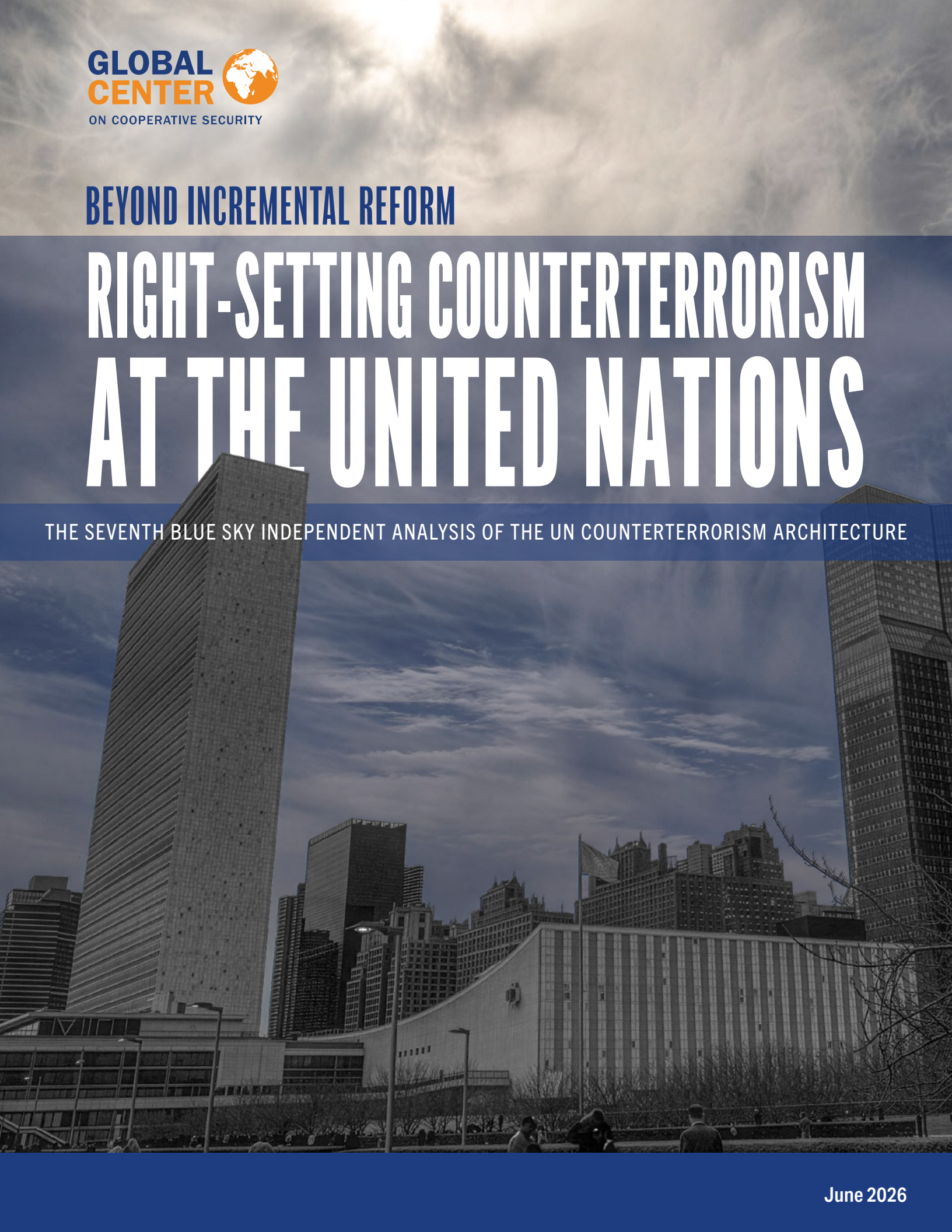


BEYOND INCREMENTAL REFORM

RIGHT-SETTING COUNTERTERRORISM AT THE UNITED NATIONS

THE SEVENTH BLUE SKY INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS OF THE UN COUNTERTERRORISM ARCHITECTURE



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June 2026

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Global Center or its advisory council, board, or sponsors or the governments of the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Global Center's long-standing Blue Sky report series offers an independent review and analysis of developments in the UN counterterrorism architecture and recommendations to member states to fulfill their commitments under the UN Charter and in line with the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. The Global Center has written this report at a time when the United Nations is confronted with significant challenges to its financial stability and overall legitimacy. This report offers a realistic assessment of the UN counterterrorism architecture and its shortcomings and challenges, as well as opportunities to reign in and realign the world body's counterterrorism efforts with its human rights and civic space protection commitments under the Charter.

In addition to the authors' cumulative decades of experience working on multilateral peace, security, and human rights policy, the analysis and recommendations presented in this report are based on interviews and focus group and roundtable discussions with more than 100 civil society organizations, member states, and UN representatives over the course of 2025. The authors also conducted an extensive review of UN documents and related external reports and news media.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acronyms	iv
Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Evolutions in the Counterterrorism Landscape	5
The Counterterrorism Landscape	5
The Terrorism Landscape	7
Evolutions in the UN Response	9
Since the Eighth Review	13
UN Office of Counter-Terrorism	13
Counter-Terrorism Committee and Its Executive Directorate	18
The 1267 Sanctions Regime	21
UN Office on Drugs and Crime	24
UN Normative Entities and UN Human Rights Mechanisms	25
The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact	29
Cross-Cutting Challenges and Structural Dynamics	35
Protection of Human Rights and Civic Space	35
Gendered Impacts and Exclusion	36
Accountability, Oversight, and Risk Management	36
Marginalization of Civil Society	37
Coordination and Fragmentation	37
The Protection Agenda and System-Wide Responsibility	37
Structural Implications	38
Pushing the Limits of the Possible	41

BOXES

1. Influential Moments Since the Eighth Review of the Strategy, June 2023–September 2025	14
2. Purpose and Shortfalls of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy	17
3. The Development of Internal CTED Guidance on Civil Society Engagement	19

FIGURES

1. Funding for UN Counterterrorism Work, 2006 and 2025	9
2. Overview of the Counterterrorism Architecture Within the UN System	11
3. Organization of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, May 2026	31

TABLE

1. Growth of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review Resolutions, 2008–2023	10
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ACRONYMS

AI	artificial intelligence
AIMC	Arab Interior Ministers Council
CTC	Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN Security Council)
CTED	Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UN Security Council)
HRDDP	Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non–United Nations Security Forces
HRGS	Human Rights and Gender Section (UNOCT)
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
OIOS	UN Office of Internal Oversight Services
TPB	Terrorism Prevention Branch (UNODC)
UN	United Nations
UNCCT	UN Counter-Terrorism Centre
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNOCT	UN Office of Counter-Terrorism
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Twenty years after the adoption of the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, the United Nations finds itself at a defining crossroads. Since 2006, the counterterrorism architecture has grown expansively, rapidly, and often reactively, creating a sprawling system of mandates, resolutions, and programs across 46 UN entities and external partners. During this period, UN entities have expanded their counterterrorism activities significantly, developing extensive normative guidance, operational assistance programs, and coordination mechanisms. Yet, counterterrorism measures have been repeatedly misused by member states to justify serious violations of human rights, restrictions on civic space, and discrimination against particular communities. The United Nations now faces a crisis of legitimacy in which the organization risks being viewed not as a shield against abuse, but as a vehicle that inadvertently reinforces it.

This seventh report in the Blue Sky series offers a sober assessment of how these dynamics persist within a UN system that is formally committed to human rights, gender equality, and the rule of law at a moment of institutional strain and geopolitical volatility. Drawing on extensive consultations with more than 100 representatives from civil society, member states, and the United Nations, this report finds that the challenge is not due to a lack of standards, awareness, or coordination, but a structural imbalance between normative authority and operational power. Human rights and gender equality obligations are well articulated across the system, yet the institutional capacity to translate these commitments into binding thresholds for engagement, assistance, and accountability remains limited.

This report argues that the ninth review of the Strategy, the UN80 initiative, and upcoming leadership transitions offer a rare if

rapidly closing window to address key pressure points and enable structural change. Without decisive action from like-minded member states and sustained external pressure from civil society, the United Nations will remain trapped in a model that prioritizes donor-driven programming and securitized capacity building over its Charter-mandated responsibilities to protect people and safeguard civic space.

A SYSTEM AT ODDS WITH ITSELF

The central tension at the heart of the UN counterterrorism agenda is unmistakable: The United Nations is committed to promoting peace, development, human rights, and the rule of law. Yet, member states routinely use counterterrorism measures to justify repression, discrimination, atrocity crimes, and the closure of political and civic space. Rather than tempering these practices, the global proliferation of UN-supported counterterrorism measures has enabled them at times. The absence of a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism and the lack of robust oversight mechanisms have allowed states to wield counterterrorism frameworks against political opponents, journalists, human rights defenders, minority groups, and civil society organizations.

Despite repeated commitments by the UN General Assembly and Security Council to ensure respect for human rights in counterterrorism efforts, human rights protection remains marginal across the growing UN counterterrorism architecture. Dozens of UN entities now carry counterterrorism mandates, up from just three in 2006, and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) alone has received more than \$400 million in contributions since its creation in 2017. This imbalance has placed political and financial power in the hands of entities structurally incentivized to expand

DESPITE REPEATED COMMITMENTS BY THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND SECURITY COUNCIL TO ENSURE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS,

HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION REMAINS MARGINAL

ACROSS THE GROWING UN COUNTERTERRORISM ARCHITECTURE.



Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

capacity-building assistance while deprioritizing human rights risks associated with its implementation.

A SHIFTING, DESTABILIZED THREAT LANDSCAPE

The threat landscape that shaped the adoption of the Strategy in 2006 has transformed profoundly, but one constant has defined the past two decades: the persistent and widespread misuse of counterterrorism frameworks to justify grave human rights abuses. Around the world, governments have invoked the language of national security to suppress political opposition, criminalize peaceful dissent, target minority communities, and erode civic space. This pattern is not episodic or isolated; it has become a structural feature of global counterterrorism practice. UN special procedures have documented thousands of such violations, affecting millions of people, underscoring a long-term trajectory in which counterterrorism activities have become a convenient and often unchallenged pretext for repression.

At the same time, the operational profile of terrorist groups has shifted. The center of gravity for groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaida and their affiliates has moved from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa, where long-standing governance failures, climate shocks, humanitarian crises, and state fragility have created fertile ground for political violence. Although Islamist militant groups remain potent, far-right violent extremism has gained momentum globally, propelled by economic precarity, xenophobia, and growing authoritarian tendencies. Yet in many contexts, the state practices enacted in the name of countering terrorism, including mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, broad “anti-extremism” laws, and the dismantling of civil society, pose far greater and more immediate harm to communities than the threats they purport to address.

Emerging technologies amplify these risks. Violent actors exploit tools such as encrypted platforms, cryptocurrencies, and disinformation driven by artificial intelligence (AI); but governments routinely use the same technologies to expand intrusive monitoring, silence critics, restrict digital rights, and commit

atrocities under the banner of security. These abuses illustrate the core problem: the global counterterrorism paradigm has evolved in ways that often reinforce authoritarian practices rather than mitigate violence, revealing a deep and widening gap between the Strategy's stated principles and on-the-ground implementation.

PUSHING THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE

In 2023, the eighth review of the Strategy yielded minimal substantive change. Member states prioritized consensus and political stability over strengthening human rights, gender, civic space, and civil society engagement language, resulting in a quasi-technical rollover of the resolution.

Since then, member states and UN entities have issued a flurry of reports and resolutions, hosted briefings and conferences, and expanded counterterrorism programming. Progress, however, toward rights-centered approaches to countering terrorism remains extremely limited and peripheral. The development of a Unified Results Framework—a potentially powerful accountability tool for reforming the architecture—is proceeding without civil society consultation, may lack a theory of change, and could devolve into a bureaucratic exercise if not grounded in protection priorities.

Leadership transitions, the UN80 initiative budget-cutting process, and restructuring proposals affecting different parts of the architecture create uncertainty but also opportunities to rethink the system's configuration and mandate coherence. Yet without strong advocacy from member states, these processes may reinforce existing imbalances rather than correct them.

SYSTEMATIC MARGINALIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Despite rhetorical commitments, the UN counterterrorism architecture continues to marginalize civil society. Sustained engagement remains inconsistent, selective, and often risk averse, particularly in contexts where governments use counterterrorism frameworks to target civil society itself. UNOCT's civil society engagement strategy has not been meaningfully updated, and the work of human rights expertise across the system remains drastically underfunded.

Meanwhile, special procedures and treaty bodies increasingly are documenting abuses, issuing warnings, and advocating for stronger safeguards. Their findings underscore the systemic nature of counterterrorism-related rights violations, but these insights remain insufficiently integrated across the UN counterterrorism architecture.

AN ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT GUARDRAILS

This report identifies major deficits in transparency, accountability, and oversight across the UN counterterrorism architecture. Key problems include limited consequences for UN entities that engage in counterterrorism programming despite clear risks to safety and rights; weak and inconsistent human rights risk assessments often

treated as procedural hurdles rather than substantive safeguards; fragmented governance structures across UNOCT, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact working groups; and a pervasive state-centric security culture that sidelines protection concerns in favor of rapid delivery, donor visibility, and expansion. These deficits undermine UN legitimacy because a more active member state presence within the Compact can heighten risks to civil society groups, especially those most affected by counterterrorism-related abuses, and deter them from engaging with the Compact altogether.

RIGHT-SETTING THE UN COUNTERTERRORISM ARCHITECTURE

This report argues that the United Nations must fundamentally reform and reorient its counterterrorism architecture from a security-first model to one firmly grounded in its Charter obligations. This shift requires anchoring counterterrorism efforts within the UN peace and security and human rights pillars, rather than treating it as an autonomous system powered by extrabudgetary funding and donor preferences.

Some key elements of this reorientation:

- **Prioritize human rights and civic space protections** across all four pillars of the Strategy, with meaningful safeguards and response protocols against misuse of counterterrorism measures.
- **Embed gender-responsive approaches**, including explicit protections for women's rights and marginalized groups.
- **Place civil society at the center** of counterterrorism design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- **Strengthen oversight**, including through more robust human rights risk assessments, transparency and oversight mechanisms, and consequences when risks cannot be mitigated.
- **Refocus capacity building** on comprehensive, rights-based assistance aligned with national needs and UN cooperation frameworks, not donor-driven interests.

This reorientation aligns with *A United Nations Agenda for Protection*, which affirms that protecting people from rights abuses is a responsibility shared across all UN entities.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

The coming months offer several openings if member states and civil society act strategically. The ninth Strategy review, the UN80 initiative, the 2026 budget review process, and leadership changes, including the appointment of a new Secretary-General, present opportunities to influence priorities. Yet, political polarization, geopolitical competition, and

shrinking financial resources may make it difficult to strengthen human rights and civic space protections. If member states do not intervene decisively, the UN counterterrorism architecture may solidify into a model increasingly divorced from human rights, reliant on opaque extrabudgetary financing, and vulnerable to instrumentalization by states seeking legitimacy for repression.

THE PATH FORWARD

This report prescribes a set of detailed, actionable recommendations for member states and UN entities.

- **Reign in and reorient** the counterterrorism architecture by shifting resources and programming toward the human rights and rule of law objectives of Pillar IV of the Strategy.
- **Anchor human rights protection as an operational obligation**, not an aspirational principle.

- **Institutionalize meaningful civil society engagement** across all counterterrorism processes.
- **Enhance oversight, transparency, and accountability**, including through a theory-of-change-based Unified Results Framework.
- **Ensure adequate funding for normative entities and human rights functions in the architecture**, including special procedures and treaty bodies.
- **Align all counterterrorism programming with system-wide risk assessments and protection priorities** under the Agenda for Protection.

Taken together, these changes would help the United Nations reclaim its comparative advantages as a norm-setter, convener, and guardian of international law and position it to address the drivers of political violence while safeguarding the rights and dignity of those most affected by violent extremism and abusive counterterrorism measures.

**IF MEMBER STATES DO NOT INTERVENE DECISIVELY,
THE UN COUNTERTERRORISM ARCHITECTURE MAY
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BY STATES SEEKING LEGITIMACY FOR REPRESSION.**



INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy* by the General Assembly in 2006 was an attempt to reassert the primacy of international law in member states' efforts to combat al-Qaida, the Taliban, and other transnational militant groups. The Strategy was built around four thematic pillars.

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

It was envisioned as a comprehensive framework for preventing and countering terrorism. The Strategy was formulated as a departure from the military-led responses to the 9/11 attacks in its emphasis on addressing conditions conducive to political violence and the protection of human rights as “complementary and mutually reinforcing.”¹ The Strategy failed, however, to articulate a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism, leaving member states to define it as they see fit. That ambiguity was key to the United Nations' ability to achieve consensus on the Strategy but has also been a primary pathway for widespread abuse by governments.

Since the Strategy's adoption, the presence of counterterrorism policies and programming within the UN system has grown exponentially. While member states bear the primary responsibility for implementing the Strategy,² the United Nations is recognized as having a critical role in “facilitating and providing support to their efforts, on the basis of a balanced implementation of all four pillars of the Strategy.”³

As the counterterrorism agenda has risen to prominence in the UN system over the past two decades, counterterrorism measures have served as one of the weapons of choice of member states seeking to justify discrimination, repression, and mass atrocities. Member state misuse of measures to counter terrorism has contributed to widespread and systematic abuses of human rights and the erosion and closure of civic space around the world, although protecting and promoting human rights and the rule of law in counterterrorism efforts is repeatedly reaffirmed by the General Assembly and Security Council.

Ben Saul, in his first report to the Human Rights Council since assuming the mandate in 2023 of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, acknowledged that “regrettably, the UN has been part of the problem, by encouraging authoritarian regimes to strengthen counter-terrorism laws in the absence of a rule of law culture or human rights safeguards.”⁴ The United Nations' embrace of counterterrorism laws in the face of such abuse begs the question of whether this embrace is at odds with its founding purpose to promote peace, development, and human rights.

A reckoning with the consequences of the global counterterrorism agenda is long overdue.⁵ Coming 20 years after the adoption of the Strategy, the ninth review of the Strategy is occurring amid an unprecedented crisis in the multilateral system. The United Nations is facing a major financial deficit, exacerbated by nonpayment of assessed dues by major contributors. The sweeping UN80 initiative is expected to dramatically realign mandates, resources, and governance structures. Failure to address a raft of global crises, from interstate conflict to humanitarian catastrophes and climate change, has called not only the effectiveness of international institutions into question, but also the very power and efficacy of international norms and law. Meanwhile, the gaps, challenges, and tensions within the

¹ UN General Assembly, *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, A/RES/60/288, 20 September 2006, annex, para. IV.

² The development of national, subregional, and regional plans to support those efforts are further encouraged. UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/72/284, 2 July 2018, para. 5 (hereinafter sixth review resolution); UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/70/291, 19 July 2016, para. 9 (hereinafter fifth review resolution); UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/68/276, 24 June 2014, para. 9 (hereinafter fourth review resolution); UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/66/282, 12 July 2012, para. 7.

³ UN General Assembly, *Options on Ways to Assess the Impact and Progress Made in the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by the United Nations System: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/73/866, 8 May 2019, para. 2.

⁴ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Rampant Abuse of Counter-Terrorism Laws Threaten Human Rights Globally, Warns UN Expert,” 12 March 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/rampant-abuse-counter-terrorism-laws-threaten-human-rights-globally-warns-un>.

⁵ Alongside the Blue Sky report series by the Global Center on Cooperative Security, a growing body of valuable literature has been produced by civil society calling on the United Nations and its member states to address human rights and rule of law problems at the heart of the UN counterterrorism agenda over the years. See International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), “The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Complex: Bureaucracy, Political Influence and Civil Liberties,” no. 700a, September 2017, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/9.25_fidh_final_compressed.pdf; Ali Altiok and Jordan Street, “A Fourth Pillar for the United Nations? The Rise of Counter-Terrorism,” Saferworld, June 2020, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/downloads/ct-textpp-final-file.pdf>; Larry Attree, “Function Before Form: Optimizing the UN's Counter-Terrorism Architecture,” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, September 2022, <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/download/pdf/461184>.

UN counterterrorism architecture identified in past review cycles remain largely undiminished. If the Strategy review process is intended to enable reflections on counterterrorism efforts to date and orient strategic priorities for the future, then a radical reorientation of the UN counterterrorism agenda to prioritize and center human rights and accountability is long overdue.

Too often, policymakers narrowly focus on the analysis of terrorism-related threats when designing counterterrorism measures, failing to account for the impacts of abuses perpetrated by governments using those measures to foment political violence. Following this introduction, the first chapter sets the stage for the report's analysis, examining the scope and magnitude of the counterterrorism agenda's impact on human rights, the spread of violence by militant groups and individual violent extremists, and an overview of the evolution of the UN response to these challenges.

After reflecting broadly on that response to these dynamics, the second chapter analyses developments in the UN counterterrorism architecture since the eighth review of the Strategy, offering insight into the work of key UN entities responsible for different aspects of UN counterterrorism

support to member states. The chapter highlights important advances, lingering challenges, and new obstacles facing the UN counterterrorism agenda as it confronts an unprecedented liquidity crisis and a breakdown in multilateralism against the backdrop of widespread abuse of counterterrorism measures.

The third chapter reflects on some of the key cross-cutting challenges that member states and other stakeholders will be confronting as they embark on the ninth review of the Strategy. It argues that these challenges are driven not by a lack of standards or coordination but by a structural imbalance between normative authority and operational power. It shows how coordination mechanisms manage fragmentation without correcting it, how existing accountability and oversight activities document risk without consistently triggering change, and how civil society functions as a critical yet underprotected source of insight and informal accountability. The final chapter concludes the report with a series of targeted recommendations aimed at reimagining the UN counterterrorism architecture that centers human rights protections and abuse prevention as operational obligations in line with UN responsibilities under the Charter.

**TOO OFTEN, POLICYMAKERS NARROWLY FOCUS ON
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PERPETRATED BY GOVERNMENTS USING THOSE
MEASURES TO FOMENT POLITICAL VIOLENCE.**



A moment of silence is observed at the UN campus in Bangkok with the UN flag being lowered to half-mast to mourn and honor colleagues killed in Gaza. Credit: UN Photo/United Nations in Thailand @UNThailand.

EVOLUTIONS IN THE COUNTERTERRORISM LANDSCAPE

This chapter provides the contextual foundation for the analysis that follows by examining how the global counterterrorism landscape and the United Nations' response to it has evolved since the adoption of the Strategy in 2006. It examines the rapid growth and increasingly securitized UN counterterrorism agenda that has taken shape in parallel with an epidemic of persistent, widespread misuse of counterterrorism measures by member states within a shifting landscape of political violence.

THE COUNTERTERRORISM LANDSCAPE

Though nominally bound by international human rights and humanitarian law, exception remains the central operative factor in member state counterterrorism efforts. Amorphous, visceral, and lacking universal legal definition, counterterrorism measures are leveraged by states to circumvent normal legal protections and repress and eliminate individuals and groups according to their political interests. A pattern of grave, widespread, and systemic abuse of counterterrorism measures by governments around the world has emerged over the past two decades. The seventh review resolution stressed that member states should “ensure that any person who alleges that his or her human rights or fundamental freedoms have been violated by measures taken or means employed to counter terrorism or violent extremism conducive to terrorism has access to justice, and an effective remedy.”⁶ The “potential negative impacts when counter-terrorism legislation and other measures are applied contrary to international law” were also acknowledged in the preambular language of the seventh Strategy review resolution, but concrete efforts to address these harms has not placed high on the UN counterterrorism agenda.⁷

The expansion of the global counterterrorism regime coincides with a near two-decades-long trend of rising authoritarianism and declining protections of basic rights and freedoms.⁸ These trends are driven by numerous overlapping conditions, from climate

change and public health crises to rising xenophobia, populist nationalism, and capitalist accumulation. Yet amid this complexity, counterterrorism and related measures have been widely deployed by member states around the world to target individuals, groups, and movements they deem a threat to established systems of social, political, and economic power.

Several comprehensive studies on the impacts of counterterrorism activities on human rights have been conducted to date. By 2009 the International Commission of Jurists was raising the alarm regarding dangers posed by the growing proliferation of counterterrorism measures. It warned that counterterrorism practices that violate human rights “have begun to seep into the normal functioning of the State, and its criminal justice system ... [posing] long-term consequences for the rule of law and respect for human rights.”⁹ By 2012, more than 140 governments had adopted post-9/11 counterterrorism laws. These laws, as Human Rights Watch explained in its 2012 report, “represent a broad and dangerous expansion of government powers to investigate, arrest, detain, and prosecute individuals at the expense of due process, judicial oversight, and public transparency” and are being applied to a “wide range of conduct far beyond what is generally understood as terrorist.”¹⁰

The longer-term consequences of these measures are laid bare in a 2023 report by Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, then the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, which describes how the widespread and systematic repression employed by governments under the guise of countering terrorism against activists and civil society groups worldwide constitute a “playbook of counter-terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism misuse” by member states.¹¹ The evidence presented in the report, titled “Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society and Civic Space,” demonstrates “that security is not the goal of abusive State

⁶ UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Seventh Review*, A/RES/75/291, 2 July 2021, p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights,” February 2025, p. 2, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW_World2025digitalN.pdf.

⁹ “Assessing Damage, Urging Action: Eminent Jurists Panel on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights,” International Commission of Jurists, 2009, p. 11, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Report-on-Terrorism-Counter-terrorism-and-Human-Rights-Eminent-Jurists-Panel-on-Terrorism-series-2009.pdf>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, “In the Name of Security: Counterterrorism Laws Worldwide Since September 11,” June 2012, p. 4, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/global0612ForUpload_1.pdf.

¹¹ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Megan L. Manion, and Alyssa T. Yamamoto, “Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society and Civic Space,” UN Human Rights Special Procedures, n.d., p. 11, https://defendcivicspace.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SRCT_GlobalStudy-1.pdf.

AS GOVERNMENTS INCREASINGLY REACH ACROSS BORDERS TO SILENCE DISSIDENT VOICES IN EXILE AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES ABROAD, THEY OFTEN RELY ON TERRORISM CHARGES TO MANIPULATE ASYLUM AND EXTRADITION PROCESSES OF HOST COUNTRIES.

practice but rather its opposite, namely the continuance of instability, insecurity, and cultures of impunity and violence.”¹²

It is difficult to account for the number of victims of counterterrorism-related abuse by member states in the two decades since the adoption of the Strategy. Over the years, counterterrorism measures have been abused to target increasingly diverse and disparate communities across national contexts, covering a wide spectrum of racial, ethnic, sociopolitical, gender, national, and class identities; political persuasions; and professional affiliations. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, more than 60 percent of journalists imprisoned in 2024 were subject to broad anti-state charges, including related to terrorism and “extremism.”¹³ Terrorism-related charges were among the top five charges used by governments to attack and silence human rights defenders around the world over the last year, with terrorism and other national and state security-related charges comprising more than 30 percent of cases documented by Front Line Defenders.¹⁴ As governments increasingly reach across borders to silence dissident voices in exile and diaspora communities abroad, they often rely on terrorism charges to manipulate asylum and extradition processes of host countries. In its 2023 study on transnational repression, Freedom House found that terrorism-related charges were leveraged in 53 percent of cases analyzed.¹⁵

Counterterrorism efforts have long been used as a pretense to justify war crimes and mass atrocities as well. The reverberating human toll of the wars on terrorism continue to mount. According

to one estimate, at least 4.5–4.7 million direct and indirect deaths can be attributed to the post-9/11 wars initiated by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, with more than 38 million displaced.¹⁶ The International Court of Justice issued two rulings to prevent genocide in response to ongoing atrocities by two member states justified in large part on the basis of countering terrorism.¹⁷ From the last Strategy review resolution in June 2023 through June 2025, 232 communiques regarding human rights concerns associated with counterterrorism and related measures, laws, and practices were issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and other UN special procedures mandate holders. These communiques cover more than 17 million alleged victims of counterterrorism-related abuses by member states, regional organizations, and private corporations.¹⁸

Despite overwhelming evidence of harm associated with counterterrorism measures, these issues remain relegated to the periphery of UN counterterrorism and related security discussions, projects, and resource allocation. Abuse at such an enormous scale is a stark indictment of the legitimacy and efficacy of the Strategy and the UN counterterrorism architecture at large and should call into question whether the United Nations can maintain a counterterrorism mandate so clearly at odds with its founding purpose: the advancement of peace, economic development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

¹² Ibid., p. 99.

¹³ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Journalist Jailings Near Record High in 2024 as Crackdown on Press Freedom Grows,” 16 January 2025, <https://cpj.org/2025/01/journalist-jailings-near-record-high-in-2024-as-crackdown-on-press-freedom-grows/>.

¹⁴ Frontline Defenders, “Global Analysis 2024/2025,” n.d., p. 17, https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1609_fld_ga24-5_output.pdf.

¹⁵ Freedom House, “Policy Recommendations: Transnational Repression,” n.d., <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/transnational-repression> (accessed 17 January 2026).

¹⁶ Stephanie Savell, “How Death Outlives War: The Reverberating Impact of the Post-9/11 Wars on Human Health,” Brown University Costs of War Project, 15 May 2023, pp. 4, 35, <https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/sites/default/files/papers/How-Death-Outlives-War.pdf>.

¹⁷ See *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Gam. v. Myan.)*, Provisional Measures (23 January 2020), <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/178/178-20200123-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>; *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (S. Afr. v. Isr.)*, Provisional Measures (26 January 2024), <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf>.

¹⁸ OHCHR, “Communication Report and Search,” <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org> (accessed 16 February 2026).

THE TERRORISM LANDSCAPE

Against the backdrop of this vast apparatus of abuse and state violence perpetrated in the name of countering terrorism, transnational nonstate militant groups and localized violent extremists continue to pose an evolving threat to member states and communities alike. The Islamist groups at the forefront of member state concern when the Strategy was adopted in 2006 expanded exponentially in the wake of the global wars on terrorism and remain a potent, albeit more diffuse threat. In its 2025 report to the Security Council, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to Resolutions 1526 and 2253 concerning ISIL (Da'esh), al-Qaida, and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities assessed that, despite the massive expansion of global counterterrorism measures, ISIL, al-Qaida, and their offshoots and affiliates have proven “resilient and adaptable to external counter-terrorism pressure” and the threat they pose remains “undiminished.”¹⁹ The 2025 Global Terrorism Index noted that ISIL and its affiliates have shown themselves remarkably adept in coordinating, inspiring, and executing attacks across 22 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe.²⁰

The center of gravity of these groups has shifted from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade. In the west-central Sahel region, generations of Western exploitation and underdevelopment, the exacerbating impacts of climate change and associated humanitarian crises, and weak institutions and elite state capture have sown the seeds of intercommunal conflict and illicit cross-border trafficking.²¹ Foreign security assistance has been cited as a key factor fueling escalating violence and human insecurity in the region by prioritizing investments in hard security and counterterrorism efforts rather than addressing the underlying conditions that give rise to political violence.²² Frustrations over the political corruption of national elites and ineffectual support from traditional international security partners were key factors behind

military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.²³ ISIL and al-Qaida affiliates have exploited these conditions, gaining an entrenched foothold in the region. According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel was the region most impacted by terrorist activity in 2024, accounting for more than half of the terrorism-related deaths globally.²⁴ ISIL-linked groups have also emerged or split off from existing militant groups to further exploit conflict dynamics in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique and in Nigeria, where government forces continue the long-running struggle against Boko Haram. In the Horn of Africa, Somalia remains a fixed theater of the long wars on terrorism, with numerous attacks over the past year in Somalia and Kenya attributed to ISIL affiliates and the al-Qaida-aligned al-Shabaab.

Meanwhile, nonstate violent extremist groups continue to be source of insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa region and in Central Asia. A regular cycle of leadership attrition in ISIL has given way to a younger generation of media-savvy commanders adept at marketing their brand to those who will listen.²⁵ Nevertheless, the 2025 Global Terrorism Index recorded substantial overall reductions in extremist violence in Iraq and the wider region since 2007.²⁶ In Syria, the short-lived optimism that came from the establishment of a transitional government in Damascus has given way to renewed intercommunal conflict and atrocities, punctuated by Israeli interventionism. Meanwhile, the dire humanitarian plight of the nearly 35,000 detainees with alleged familial links to ISIL in the “rehabilitation camps” in northern Syria remains largely unchanged since 2023.²⁷ In Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and wider Central Asia, ISIL Khorasan remains a threat of substantial concern.²⁸ Intense repression and targeted killings by Afghanistan’s Taliban government, while driving many into the ranks of the group, has degraded ISIL Khorasan’s capabilities in recent years. Nevertheless, with its decentralized, agile leadership structure and international ties, it remains a potent adversary.²⁹

¹⁹ UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 6 February 2025 From the President of the Security Council Acting in the Absence of a Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2025/71/Rev.1, 6 February 2025 (containing *Thirty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2734 (2024) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities*, para. 1).

²⁰ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), “Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” *IEP Report*, no. 101 (March 2025), p. 3, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

²¹ See Gilles O. Yabi, “The Sahel’s Intertwined Challenges,” F&D, September 2024, pp. 55–57, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/fandd/article/2024/09/yabi.pdf>; Yahia H. Zoubir, “Crisis in the Sahel: Causes, Consequences, and the Path Forward,” *Middle East Council on Global Affairs Issue Brief*, June 2022, https://mecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/MECGA_Issue-Brief_Zoubir_Final.pdf.

²² Lucia Montanaro, “Insecurity in the Sahel: Rethinking Europe’s Response,” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, March 2022, <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/download/pdf/460725>; Nick Turse, “Pentagon: U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts Have Failed Africans,” *Intercept*, 5 August 2025, <https://theintercept.com/2025/08/05/pentagon-africa-counterterrorism-failure/>.

²³ Santino Calcagno, “Military Coups in the Sahel: A Step Forward for Decolonization and a Step Backwards for Human Rights,” Human Rights Research Center, 18 July 2025, <https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/military-coups-in-the-sahel-a-step-forward-for-decolonization-and-a-step-backwards-for-human-rights>.

²⁴ IEP, “Global Terrorism Index 2025,” p. 2.

²⁵ UN Security Council, *Twenty-First Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat*, S/2025/496, 1 August 2025, p. 2.

²⁶ IEP, “Global Terrorism Index 2025,” p. 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Global Center on Cooperative Security, “Blue Sky VI: An Independent Analysis of UN Counterterrorism Efforts,” June 2023, p. 3, https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Center_Blue-Sky-VI-Report_June-2023.pdf.

²⁸ IEP, “Global Terrorism Index 2025,” pp. 4, 70.

²⁹ See International Crisis Group, “The Islamic State in Afghanistan: A Jihadist Threat in Retreat?” *Crisis Group Asia Briefing*, no. 183 (16 July 2025), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/b183-islamic-state-in-afghanistan.pdf>.



Ben Saul, special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, speaks at press conference at UN Headquarters in New York City. Credit: John Lamparski/NurPhoto/Shutterstock.

Outside these theaters of conflict, security services continue to foil and respond to sporadic affiliate and individually inspired lone wolf acts of extremist violence associated with the Islamist militant milieu. At the same time, a constellation of violent far-right extremists, groups, and movements have been gaining momentum, posing a dangerous threat to identity-diverse communities across the globe. Decades of neoliberal austerity, historic levels of economic disparity, and long-standing failure to meaningfully address legacies and contemporary manifestations of patriarchy, colonialism, and empire have given way to resurgent xenophobia and nationalism in many countries. Though far from homogeneous, these trends have been a boon for many violent far-right groups and movements seeking more legitimate platforms to openly disseminate their narratives, impunity for acts of violence, and control over levers of real political power. Long intimate connections between nonstate, far-right, violent extremist groups and national authorities in many countries are becoming more overt and mainstream.³⁰ Despite the nationalist agendas of

many far-right tendencies, they are not necessarily confined within national borders, and some are increasingly connected to wider transnational networks.³¹

The abuse of emerging technologies by transnational violent groups has been a long-standing concern of the international community over the past two decades. From the abundant use of internet communications and social media for recruitment and propaganda to the as-yet-unrealized threat posed by unmanned aerial vehicles in mounting attacks, violent extremist groups exist in a world of proliferating and accessible technologies that can be exploited for crime and violence. Violent extremist use of AI has unsurprisingly emerged as an area of concern among policymakers and analysts in recent years. Although the implications of this threat are potentially vast,³² evidence suggests extremist groups have primarily been leveraging AI for disinformation, propaganda, and recruitment.³³ On the financial front, blockchain technologies such as cryptocurrency have been

³⁰ See BTselem, "State Business: Israel's Misappropriation of Land in the West Bank Through Settler Violence," November 2021, https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202111_state_business_eng.pdf (Israel); Allison McManus and Dan Herman, "All the President's Extremists: How the Trump Administration's National Security Nominees Threaten Americans' Safety," Center for American Progress, 19 May 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/all-the-presidents-extremists-how-the-trump-administrations-national-security-nominees-threaten-americans-safety/> (United States); "Indian Government Shields Hindutva Terror Groups in Breach of FATF Standards," n.d., <https://fatfplatform.org/assets/India-shields-Hindutva-terror-groups.pdf> (India).

³¹ See Somdeep Sen, "Hindu Nationalists Now Pose a Global Problem," Al Jazeera, 26 September 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/26/violent-hindu-extremism-is-now-a-global-problem>.

³² UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) and UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, "Algorithms and Terrorism: The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence for Terrorist Purposes," 2021, https://unicri.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Malicious%20Use%20of%20AI%20-%20UNCCT-UNICRI%20Report_Web.pdf.

³³ Clarisa Nelu, "Exploitation of Generative AI by Terrorist Groups," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, 10 June 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/exploitation-generative-ai-terrorist-groups>; Bàrbara Molas and Heron Lopes, "Say It's Only Fictional: How the Far-Right Is Jailbreaking AI and What Can Be Done About It," *ICCT Report*, October 2024, <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2024-10/Molas%20and%20Lopes.pdf>.

increasingly leveraged by violent extremist groups in a wide range of fundraising schemes.³⁴ Yet, as the international community debates the threats the latest technology developments can pose in the hands of violent extremists, the potential threats of emerging technologies are already being born out in their unfettered use by member states in counterterrorism and related national security abuse and mass atrocity crimes.³⁵

EVOLUTIONS IN THE UN RESPONSE

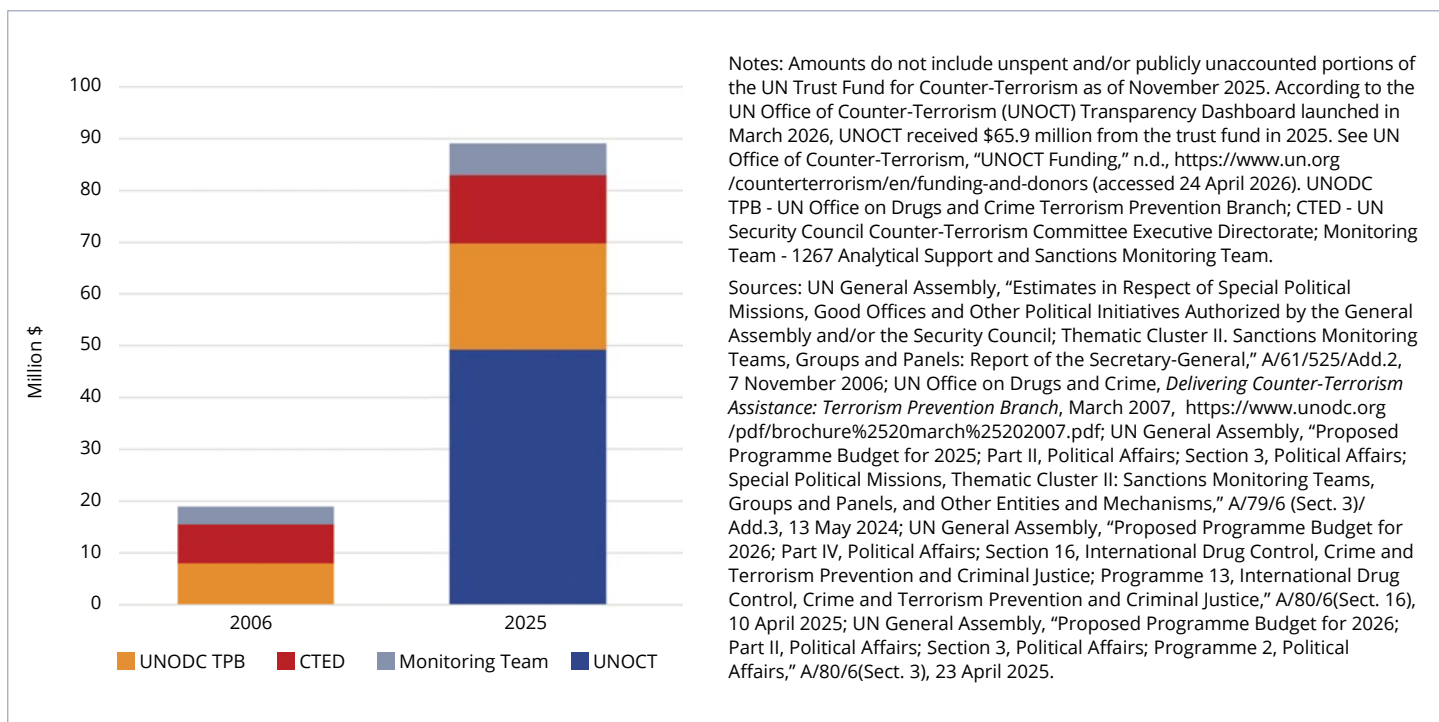
In adopting the Strategy, the General Assembly membership recognized the importance of human rights and the rule of law as the foundation of the fight against terrorism. This might seem groundbreaking, but an increasingly globalized counterterrorism agenda was already raising alarm bells among civil society groups and international organizations. Nevertheless, even as counterterrorism-related abuses mounted, the UN counterterrorism architecture continued to expand and evolve.

Since the adoption of the Strategy, 46 UN entities and international organizations are now involved in the UN counterterrorism agenda, surpassing the number of UN entities involved in the Sustainable Development Group. Combined funding for UN counterterrorism work increased by more than 350 percent since 2006 (fig. 1).

Until shifting to a three-year review cycle in 2023, the General Assembly's biennial reviews of the Strategy served to ensure its ongoing relevance in addressing the evolving needs and interests of member states.³⁶ The process has been a largely additive one. Since 2008, when the first review resolution was approved, the length of Strategy review resolutions has steadily grown from 14 operative paragraphs to 123 in 2023 (table 1).

The Security Council has adopted more than 40 counterterrorism-related resolutions since 2001,³⁷ imposing an expansive range of obligations on member states to take measures to combat terrorism. Meanwhile, the United Nations has developed a

Figure 1. Funding for UN Counterterrorism Work, 2006 and 2025 (million \$)



³⁴ Paula Matlach, Dominik Hammer, and Christian Schwieter, "On Odyssey: The Role of Blockchain Technology for Monetisation in the Far-Right Online Milieu," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/On-Odyssey-The-Role-of-Blockchain-Technology-for-Monetisation-in-the-Far-Right-Online-Milieu.pdf>; TRM, "Terrorist Financing: Six Crypto-Related Trends to Watch in 2023," 15 February 2023, <https://www.trmlabs.com/resources/blog/terrorist-financing-six-crypto-related-trends-to-watch-in-2023>.

³⁵ See Annabelle Bonnefont, "Human Rights Implications of the Use of New and Emerging Technologies in the National Security Space," *Global Center on Cooperative Security Policy Brief*, March 2024, https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/GCCS_PB_Emerging-Tech_C.pdf; Yuval Abraham, "Lavender: The AI Machine Directing Israel's Bombing Spree in Gaza," +972 Magazine, 3 April 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>.

³⁶ Beginning with the fourth review of the Strategy, the General Assembly stressed the importance of updating the Strategy to reflect emerging threats and trends, ensuring its relevance and giving a living purpose to the document. Sixth review resolution, para. 3; fifth review resolution, para. 3; fourth review resolution, para. 3. See also UN General Assembly, *Options on Ways to Assess the Impact and Progress Made in the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by the United Nations System*, para. 3.

³⁷ Security Council Report, "UN Documents for Counter-Terrorism: Security Council Resolutions," n.d., https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?ctype=Counter-Terrorism&cotype=counter-terrorism (accessed 25 September 2025).

Table 1. Growth of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review Resolutions, 2008–2023

Year	Review	Operative paragraphs (nos.)
2008	First	14
2010	Second	17
2012	Third	29
2014	Fourth	43
2016	Fifth	72
2018	Sixth	85
2021	Seventh	119
2023	Eighth	123

Sources: UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Eighth Review*, A/RES/77/298, 3 July 2023; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Seventh Review*, A/RES/75/291, 2 July 2021; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/72/284, 2 July 2018; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/70/291, 19 July 2016; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/68/276, 24 June 2014; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/66/282, 12 July 2012; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/64/297, 13 October 2010; UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review*, A/RES/62/272, 15 September 2008.

sprawling internal institutional architecture to support the proliferation of counterterrorism efforts (fig. 2). The number of counterterrorism-related mandates in the United Nations since the Strategy’s adoption has risen from six sources cited by three UN entities in 2006 to at least 87 sources informing the work of 23 UN entities in 2025.³⁸

Investments made to date in the counterterrorism architecture and the implementation of the Strategy have not been equal. The consistent underprioritization of human rights and rule of law commitments at the heart of Pillar IV of the Strategy is emblematic of a system-wide imbalance by which human rights issues receive less than 4 percent of the total UN budget.³⁹ Although there have been efforts to mainstream human rights and gender equality issues across the work of the United Nations, these developments have fallen short of meaningfully advancing the promotion and protection of human rights in counterterrorism efforts globally. Such developments aside, UN counterterrorism work remains siloed, frequently implemented outside of the parameters of cooperation frameworks developed by the United Nations and host member states. The establishment of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact in 2018 reduced some duplication across UN entities and increased visibility on cross-cutting issues, but addressing the human rights consequences of counterterrorism efforts remains a peripheral, underprioritized area of work.

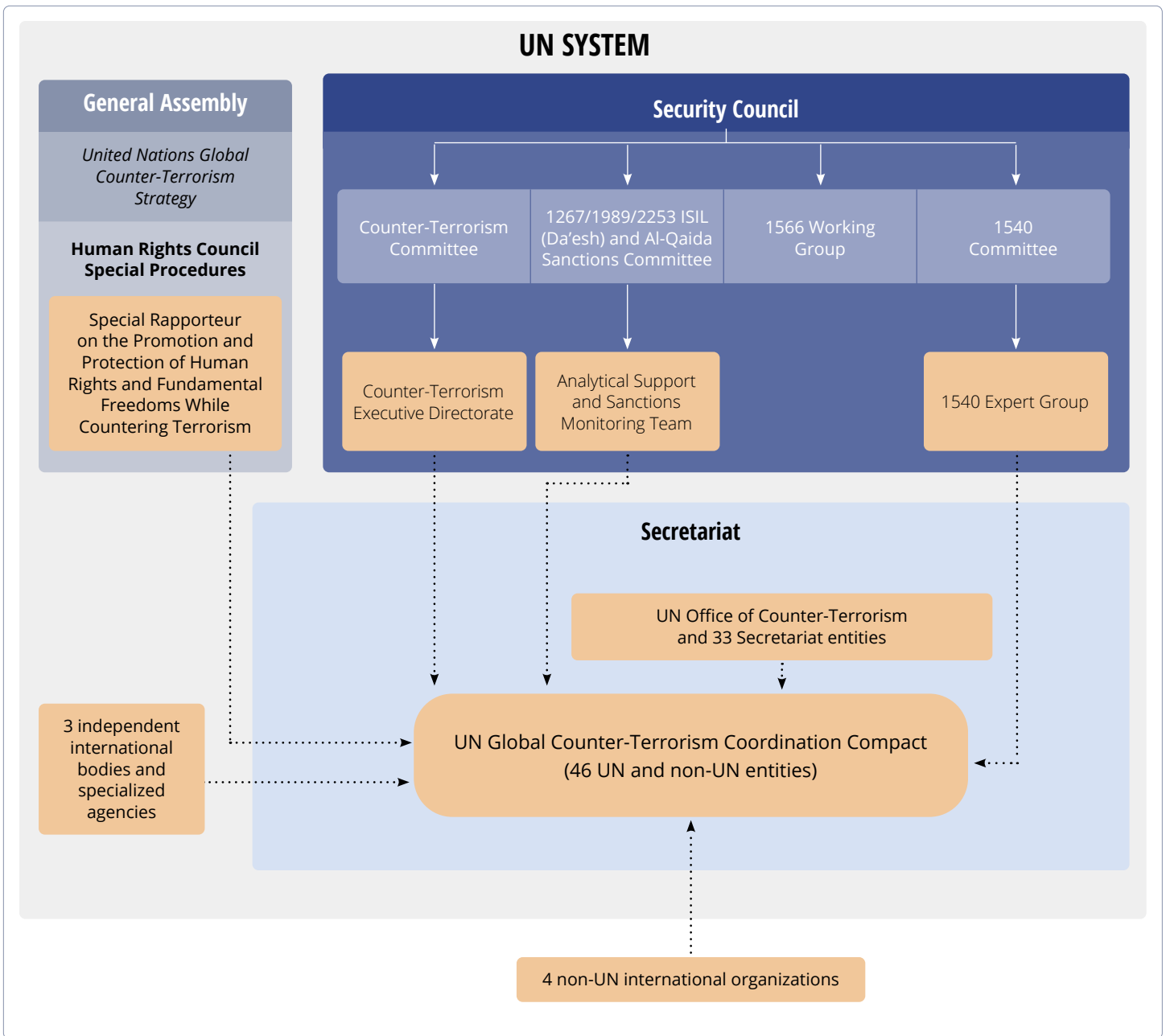
UN failure to respond decisively and evolve to confront the global epidemic of counterterrorism abuse has only fed an enabling environment for abuse and placed the United Nations at risk of complicity in human rights violations under the guise of counterterrorism efforts globally. To right-set the UN counterterrorism architecture, concrete human rights protection and abuse prevention priorities must be championed throughout work associated with all four pillars of the Strategy. This will require a radical shift in the form and function of the UN counterterrorism architecture and substantial commitments of resources and political will among member states. Unfortunately, such an undertaking may be beyond the limits of possibility.

The United Nations is at a crossroads, facing uncertainty and sustainability concerns amid challenging political dynamics and a growing liquidity crisis. Much will depend on whether like-minded member states, civil society groups, and UN entities can forge strategic partnerships to navigate pitfalls and leverage incentives and opportunities presented by the UN80 initiative, expected mandate renewals, the ninth Strategy review negotiation, associated budget proposals, and the anticipated appointment of a new Secretary-General in 2026.

³⁸ “UN Mandate Source Registry,” <https://mandates.un.org/?subject=COUNTER-TERRORISM> (accessed 25 August 2025).

³⁹ Andrew Hyde, “Funding the Third Pillar: Financing Human Rights at the UN,” Stimson Center, 8 December 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/funding-the-third-pillar-financing-human-rights-at-the-un/>.

Figure 2. Overview of the Counterterrorism Architecture Within the UN System



Source: Global Center staff.



SINCE THE EIGHTH REVIEW

This chapter offers a review and analysis of developments in the UN counterterrorism architecture since the eighth Strategy review, in 2023.⁴⁰ The eighth review came at a time of heightened political tensions, and negotiations on the review resolution resulted in a quasi-technical rollover of the prior resolution's text updated with relevant dates and events that took place since the seventh review, in 2021, as well as progress updates in response to requests made to the Secretary-General in 2021 during the seventh review of the Strategy. A few noteworthy additions included the acknowledgment of the Secretary-General's report on terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance or in the name of religion or belief; requests to the Secretary-General to assess future reporting on progress made in the implementation of the Strategy, including its impact based on a results framework; and the extension of the Strategy review cycle from biennial to every three years.⁴¹

This chapter offers an assessment of the UN counterterrorism architecture since the eighth Strategy review. To provide context for this discussion, it begins with a timeline of select developments since the adoption of eighth review resolution (box 1).

UN OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Established in 2017 under an Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) provides leadership on the General Assembly's counterterrorism mandates entrusted to the Secretary-General from across the UN system. It is charged with enhancing coordination and coherence across the Compact to ensure the balanced implementation of the four pillars of the Strategy; strengthening delivery of UN counterterrorism capacity-building assistance to member states; improving visibility, advocacy, and resource mobilization for UN counterterrorism efforts; and ensuring that due priority is given to counterterrorism efforts across the UN system and that the work on preventing violent extremism is firmly rooted in the Strategy.

Since its establishment, UNOCT has grown rapidly. As of May 2025, the office had received \$402 million in contributions since its inception, including funds held by the UN Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism.⁴² By September 2025, nearly half of its approximately

200 staff were deployed in offices across more than nine countries with the other half posted to UN Headquarters in New York.⁴³

This growth has significantly expanded the UNOCT operational footprint and political visibility within the UN system.

Yet, the scale and direction of this expansion have exacerbated long-standing structural imbalances within the UN counterterrorism architecture. Rather than serving primarily as a strategic coordinator to ensure balanced implementation of the Strategy, UNOCT has become a central implementing entity focused overwhelmingly on capacity-building assistance under Pillars II and III. This evolution has weakened its ability to exercise the leadership, coordination, and normative stewardship envisaged in its mandate.

Leadership and Coordination

As noted in past Blue Sky reports, UNOCT's leadership and coordination for balanced Strategy implementation has continued to fall short of member state and UN system-wide expectations. Stakeholders interviewed for this report repeatedly emphasized that UNOCT prioritizes donor-funded, short-term capacity-building projects over system-wide coordination, strategic planning, and integration with UN entities best positioned to address human rights, rule of law, and prevention concerns. This dynamic has been reinforced by the office's financing structure, which relies overwhelmingly on earmarked extrabudgetary contributions.

The UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), established in 2011 under the funding and leadership of Saudi Arabia, was initially operationalized as a member state capacity-building hub in the UN counterterrorism architecture. When UNCCT was absorbed by UNOCT in 2017, its structure, objectives, and budget, alongside political relationships and financial influences, were transferred with it. Initially, UNCCT was envisioned to be the primary implementer of capacity-building support within UNOCT. A 2025 evaluation by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), however, found that all five UNOCT substantive offices (the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre [UNCCT], the Special Projects and Innovation Branch, the Office of the Under-Secretary-General, the Knowledge Management and Coordination Branch, and the Human Rights and Gender Section) are implementing capacity-building projects.⁴⁴ This duplication has fostered internal competition,

⁴⁰ UN General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Eighth Review*, A/RES/77/298, 3 July 2023 (hereinafter eighth review resolution).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, paras. 34, 96, 122, and 123.

⁴² UN General Assembly, "Proposed Programme Budget for 2025; Part II, Political Affairs; Section 3, Political Affairs; Programme 2, Political Affairs," A/79/6(Sect.3), 26 April 2024.

⁴³ UNOCT staff are deployed in Austria, Hungary, Iraq, Kenya, Morocco, Qatar, Senegal, Spain, and Turkmenistan, as well as several country offices.

⁴⁴ Inspection and Evaluation Division, UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), *Evaluation of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT): Programme Managers Report*, IED-25-008, 21 May 2025, p. 25, <https://oios.un.org/file/10696/download?token=zN1HD1nP> (hereinafter OIOS 2025 UNOCT evaluation).

Box 1. Influential Moments Since the Eighth Review of the Strategy, June 2023–September 2025

Following is a partial listing of important reform processes, events, meetings, and briefings that shaped the dialogue on counterterrorism issues across the United Nations since the eighth review of the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, in 2023.

June 2023 – The Security Council held an Arria-formula meeting on enhancing the capacities of member states to ensure a gender-responsive approach to counterterrorism, organized by Malta and co-sponsored by Costa Rica, Jordan, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States.^a

April 2024 – Following a high-level African counterterrorism meeting hosted by Nigeria in Abuja, participating heads of state published a declaration reaffirming commitments to strengthened regional cooperation in combating terrorism and improving institutional capacity and coordination across governments and international partners.^c

June 2024 – The CTC organized an open meeting to discuss the domestic codification of the criminal offense of terrorism following the release of a CTED analytical brief on elements of terrorism offenses that are required by international law.^e

December 2023 – The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) held a launch event for a report titled Trends Tracker on Human Rights, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The report highlights how human rights issues are reflected in Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) recommendations to member states following CTED assessment visits.^b

April 2024 – The CTC organized an open meeting on strategies for building community resilience against radicalization to terrorism, highlighting the important role of grassroots actors, whole-of-society approaches, and good practices to strengthen community resilience against radicalization to terrorism.^d

^a UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), “CTED Briefs Security Council’s Arria-Formula Meeting on ‘Enhancing the Capacities of Member States to Ensure a Gender-Responsive Approach to Counter-Terrorism,’” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/cted-briefs-security-council%E2%80%99s-arria-formula-meeting-%E2%80%9Cenhancing-capacities-member-states-ensure> (accessed 10 February 2026).

^b CTC, “CTED Holds Launch Event for Its New Trends Tracker on Human Rights,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/cted-holds-launch-event-its-new-trends-tracker-human-rights> (accessed 10 February 2026); UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), *Trends Tracker on Human Rights: Recommendations by the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Following Assessment Visits to Member States (2017–2023)*, December 2023, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/trends_tracker_on_human_rights_-_december_2023.pdf.

^c UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), “High-Level African Counter-Terrorism Meeting in Abuja, Nigeria,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/events/high-level-african-counter-terrorism-meeting-abuja-nigeria> (accessed 10 February 2026); PRNigeria, “Full Declarations at African Counter Terrorism Meeting in Abuja,” 23 April 2024, <https://prnigeria.com/2024/04/23/african-counter-terrorism/>.

^d CTC, “Counter-Terrorism Committee Meeting Focuses on Strengthening Community Resilience,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/counter-terrorism-committee-meeting-focuses-strengthening-community-resilience> (accessed 11 February 2026).

^e CTC, “Counter-Terrorism Committee Meeting Focuses on How to Criminalize Terrorism,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/counter-terrorism-committee-meeting-focuses-how-criminalize-terrorism> (accessed 11 February 2026); CTED, “CTED Analytical Brief: A Commentary on the Codification of the Terrorism Offence,” June 2024, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/un_cted_-_analytical_brief_-_criminalization_of_terrorist_offences_1.pdf.

diluted strategic coherence, and undermined UNOCT capacity to function as a system-wide coordinator.⁴⁵

Although member states have repeatedly emphasized the importance of balanced implementation of the Strategy, UNOCT’s work is overwhelmingly devoted to enhancing state security capacities under Pillars II and III.⁴⁶ This dynamic contributes to

a cycle of demand and supply and undermines more strategic leadership and coordination.

Structural Coherence and Transparency

An independent assessment of publicly available data on UNOCT extrabudgetary funding published in September 2025 found major gaps, discrepancies, and inconsistencies in the quality and availability of its overall annual financial reporting

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ A finding shared by OIOS. See *ibid.*, p. 9.

September 2024 – The Summit of the Future took place at UN Headquarters in New York, culminating in the adoption of *The Pact for the Future*, a framework intended to guide international cooperation on sustainable development, peace and security, digital cooperation, youth and future generations, and global governance.^f

March 2025 – The Secretary-General announced the UN80 initiative as a system-wide attempt to reinvigorate the United Nations to respond to complex global challenges while facing tightening resources.^h

December 2025 – The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism released a position paper titled “Protecting Human Rights While Using Artificial Intelligence to Counter Terrorism.”^j

October 2024 – The United Nations International Conference on Victims of Terrorism, co-organized by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and Spain, took place in Vitoria-Gasteiz, bringing together representatives from member states, the United Nations, and civil society “to review progress made on the international victims of terrorism agenda.”^g

September 2025 – Iraq, with technical support from UNOCT, organized a high-level conference at UN Headquarters on the repatriation of persons from Al Hol, surrounding camps, and places of detention, bringing together member states and UN and civil society representatives to discuss the humanitarian, human rights, and security situation and cooperation on prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration.ⁱ

^f UN General Assembly, *The Pact for the Future*, A/RES/79/1, 22 September 2024.

^g UNOCT, “UN International Conference on Victims of Terrorism - 2024,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/un-international-conference-victims-terrorism-2024> (accessed 11 February 2026).

^h United Nations, “What Is the UN80 Initiative?” 15 July 2025, <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/news/what-un80-initiative>.

ⁱ UNOCT, “High-Level International Conference on the Repatriation of Persons From Al Hol, Surrounding Camps and Places of Detention,” 3 November 2025, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/events/high-level-international-conference-repatriation-persons-al-hol-surrounding-camps-and-places>.

^j UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, *Protecting Human Rights While Using Artificial Intelligence to Counter Terrorism*, December 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/un-sr-ct-ai-position-paper-dec-2025.pdf>.

and in the financial components of its publicly available program evaluations.⁴⁷ These shortcomings limit external scrutiny, complicate oversight by member states, and undermine confidence in the office’s ability to align resources with Strategy-wide priorities. In March 2026, UNOCT established a public Transparency Dashboard providing access to funding information previously unavailable to the public.⁴⁸ The creation of the dashboard follows long-standing calls from member states and civil society to provide more transparency and clarity on existing funding to the office.

UNOCT has come a long way in establishing itself in the wider UN ecosystem, including its membership in the Sustainable

Development Group, increased staff presence in UN regional offices, and instances of engagement in the Resident Coordinator system. At the same time, many stakeholders still perceive that UNOCT remains siloed from the peace and security architecture and insufficiently integrated into existing UN frameworks and UN country offices. Despite a system-wide reform process under the banner of a “one UN” approach to strengthen coordination and coherence, counterterrorism efforts have been consolidated in New York. This choice was a missed opportunity to firmly integrate counterterrorism activities under existing frameworks across the UN system and its peace and security architecture, such as the Resident Coordinator system or the Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law.⁴⁹ This institutional separation has reinforced silos, weakened

⁴⁷ Ben Donaldson, “Behind Closed Ledgers: The Transparency Gap Affecting the UN’s Counter-Terrorism Programming,” CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, September 2025, https://cso-coalition-media.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/Behind_Closed_Ledgers_CSO_Coalition_Report_4fc2281807.pdf?updated_at=2025-09-08T11:39:32.676Z.

⁴⁸ UNOCT, “UNOCT Funding,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/funding-and-donors> (accessed 24 April 2026).

⁴⁹ UN Resident Coordinators are appointed by the Secretary-General to coordinate the work of all organizations of the UN system engaging in a given country in accordance with priorities mutually agreed by the host country and the United Nations. The Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law is a UN coordination mechanism bringing together many relevant UN agencies to enhance predictability, coherence, accountability, and effectiveness in the delivery of UN rule of law assistance at the national and international levels. See UN Development Operations Coordination Office, “The UN Resident Coordinator System – An Overview,” *QCPR Info Brief 2*, November 2016, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/QCPR-Info-Brief-2-UN-RC-System-UN-DOCO-Nov-2016.pdf>; United Nations, “The Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/globalfocalpoint/> (accessed 13 February 2026).

[A]DVANCES REMAIN CONSTRAINED BY STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS AND A FAILURE OF EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TO CHAMPION HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION AND GENDER SENSITIVITY AS ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITIES.

linkages with country-level planning frameworks, and limited the integration of counterterrorism efforts into broader peacebuilding and human rights strategies. Despite UNOCT's expansion into several country offices, the political center and senior leadership for counterterrorism matters are located in New York City. Multiple stakeholders consulted for this report raised questions about the viability and necessity of the office's regional expansion and the seeming lack of a clear strategy to guide these decisions.

Human Rights and Gender

The establishment of the dedicated Human Rights and Gender Section (HRGS) in 2022 marked an important acknowledgement of the need to better integrate human rights and gender issues across UNOCT. The decision followed years of critique from civil society, human rights experts, and UN oversight bodies, arguing that human rights concerns had been an afterthought in UNOCT counterterrorism programming.

The HRGS serves as policy lead on human rights, gender equality, and intersectionality objectives in UNOCT work. Over the last four years, the HRGS has been split into two units. Prior to recent cuts, the Human Rights Unit was composed of three human rights officers covered under the regular budget and tasked with mainstreaming human rights analysis and practice across all UNOCT functions and providing technical assistance to UNOCT staff to understand the norms applicable to their areas of work. Following cuts under the UN80 initiative, the unit has lost one P-4 position. UNOCT's Gender Unit was composed of four staff members, now cut to three, one of which is on temporary contract and only one of which is covered under the regular budget. The section also lost two general service professionals to funding cuts.⁵⁰

Since the establishment of the HRGS, UNOCT has made gains in mainstreaming human rights and gender concerns across UNOCT activities, contributing to improvements in internal processes,

inclusion, staff awareness, and compliance with evaluation standards.⁵¹ Stakeholders interviewed for this report state that the Gender Unit has made great strides in gaining internal credibility, with other staff increasingly approaching the unit for project and policy input. The Human Rights Unit is making substantial progress in implementing the *Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces* (HRDDP) (box 2). UNOCT finally adopted its own standard operating procedure to support the practical implementation of the HRDDP in September 2025.

Nevertheless, these advances remain constrained by structural limitations and a failure of executive leadership to champion human rights protection and gender sensitivity as organizational priorities. The HRGS is the smallest substantive section within UNOCT, lacks budgetary autonomy, and does not have the operational authority to influence program priorities or override donor-driven pressures. As a result, human rights and gender considerations continue to be treated primarily as procedural safeguards rather than as determinants of whether, where, and how counterterrorism assistance should be delivered.

Although efforts are made by the Gender Unit to support addressing more substantive gender dimensions across the programmatic portfolio of UNOCT, the gender dimension remains largely focused on participation and parity metrics rather than on addressing the gendered impacts of counterterrorism measures, such as the targeting of women human rights defenders. Despite the adoption of HRDDP-related procedures, there is little evidence that UNOCT systematically conditions partnerships or assistance on demonstrable human rights compliance or suspends engagement where risks cannot be mitigated. This gap is particularly concerning given the political nature of many counterterrorism-related abuses, which often stem not from technical capacity deficits but from deliberate state practices aimed at repression.

⁵⁰ UNOCT representatives, consultation with authors, New York, April 2026.

⁵¹ OIOS 2025 UNOCT evaluation, p. 23.

Box 2. Purpose and Shortfalls of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy

All UN counterterrorism assistance providers are subject to the world body's system-wide *Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces* (HRDDP).^a The policy is based on the principle that

United Nations support cannot be provided where there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of the receiving entities committing grave violations of international humanitarian, human rights or refugee law and where the relevant authorities fail to take the necessary corrective or mitigating measures.^b

The HRDDP applies to all support provided by the United Nations to security sector actors. It commits UN assistance providers to assess the risk of “grave violations of international humanitarian, human rights or refugee law” and either design and communicate appropriate mitigation measures to those risks before assisting national security services or suspend program development if the risks identified cannot be mitigated. Importantly, the UN risk analysis should account for the past occurrence and risk of human rights violations not just in relation to the particular assistance envisioned, but in the wider context.^c In framing mitigation measures, UN assistance providers are empowered to propose the development of human rights and associated accountability capacities as a condition of security assistance.^d Instituted under Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in 2011, the HRDDP set important standards and expectations for UN entities engaging across peace and security efforts.^e

Yet, the HRDDP has some major shortcomings. For example, the policy only applies to UN engagement with certain security sector actors. The HRDDP also is nonbinding and not subject to regular oversight, and each entity is responsible for developing its own implementation framework. Furthermore, it does not provide a threshold or rubric against which a UN entity must suspend engagement. In the case of counterterrorism and other national security-related abuse, the driving factor behind many grave violations of human rights is not just a matter of technical ability or capacity to prevent and respond to human rights violations, but of powerful political interests intentionally leveraging counterterrorism and other national security measures to target individuals, groups, and movements for repression.

^a United Nations, *Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces: Guidance Note and Text of the Policy*, 2015, pp. 43–47, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/Inter-Agency-HRDDP-Guidance-Note-2015.pdf>.

^b *Ibid.*, p. 43.

^c *Ibid.*, p. 15.

^d *Ibid.*, pp. 27–29.

^e See UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, “Identical Letters Dated 25 February 2013 From the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and to the President of the Security Council,” A/67/775–S/2013/110, 5 March 2013 (containing *Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces*).

These weaknesses are compounded by UNOCT engagement with security actors and regional bodies that have been repeatedly criticized for misusing counterterrorism frameworks. For example, UNOCT partnered with the Arab Interior Ministers Council (AIMC) to support the adoption and implementation of the Arab Counter-Terrorism Strategy, a strategy still not publicly available. The AIMC continues to be subject to widespread criticism by civil society and UN human rights actors for misusing international legal measures and the International Criminal Police Organization's red notice system for transnational repression under the guise of countering terrorism.⁵² UNOCT has also continued to organize high-level conferences in partnership with member states facing credible allegations of widespread human

rights violations.⁵³ Such partnerships risk legitimizing state practices that contravene international human rights standards and undermining the credibility of the office's mandate.

Ultimately, UNOCT continues to operate without the safeguards necessary to ensure not only that its counterterrorism assistance does no harm but also that it actively contributes to the prevention of abuse. Without clear leadership and an overarching organizational human rights strategy, stronger member state investments in the HRGS, and stronger human rights commitments anchored in the Strategy, the HRGS risks remaining a half-measure rather than a transformative force.

⁵² See MENA Rights Group, “Understanding the Arab Interior Ministers' Council and Its Role in Transnational Repression,” 17 August 2023, <https://menarights.org/en/articles/aimc>; Letter to the Arab Interior Ministers' Council from the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, 23 June 2023, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?glid=28070>.

⁵³ In April 2025, UNOCT co-organized a conference titled “International Conference on Legislative Regulation of Measures to Counter the Use of Artificial Intelligence and Other New Technologies for Terrorist Activity” in Russia, a country repeatedly criticized for its restrictions on civic space and infringement of freedom of speech and due process. UNOCT also co-hosted “The Global Conference of Women Parliamentarians” in Doha, Qatar, in June 2024, in a country with a well-documented history of violations of women's rights and intolerance of dissent.

Civil Society Engagement

UNOCT's approach to civil society engagement remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. The office's Civil Society Engagement Strategy was developed in 2019 and remains only partially published.⁵⁴ That strategy did not adequately address the risks of reprisals, surveillance, and intimidation that civil society organizations may face when engaging with UNOCT.

Despite the many shortcomings of its civil society engagement strategy, UNOCT has made some important overtures to improve its collaboration with civil society since the last review, including civil society input being sought at the outset to feed into the UNOCT 2026–2028 strategic plan. UNOCT has not solicited structured input from civil society to inform the development of a unified results framework, however, despite its potential implications for accountability and priority-setting across the UN counterterrorism system.⁵⁵

UN system-wide guidance is clear that engagement with civil society is essential to the legitimacy and effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. Victims and communities at risk of terrorism and counterterrorism efforts should be consistently, meaningfully, and safely engaged to deliver on all UNOCT coordination, coherence, and capacity-building functions. Without credible safeguards, transparency, and accountability mechanisms, UNOCT's engagement risks being perceived as tokenistic, reinforcing distrust rather than strengthening cooperation.

Looking Ahead

UNOCT's leadership transition coincides with the UN80 initiative and anticipated budget reductions. Prior to his departure in September 2025, Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov submitted a proposal to the Secretary-General to cut 12 regular budget positions and redeploy another six positions for 2026 across duty stations in Budapest and Madrid impacting UNOCT staff across political, human rights, and administrative functions. His proposal was confirmed with the revised UNOCT budget, amounting to \$10,169,000 in 2026, reflecting a reduction of 15.5 percent.⁵⁶ The Secretary-General's 2025 report on the UN80 initiative further outlines a plan for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) to report

to the Under-Secretary-General with the aim of strengthening cooperation on counterterrorism efforts across the system.⁵⁷

Rumored further changes to the HRGS, including the separation of the two units to establish a Human Rights and Rule of Law Section with the Gender Advisor post now directly reporting to the Director for Policy and Coordination, require close attention to understand the impacts on gains made in human rights and gender mainstreaming programming across the office. Although further updates and reductions are expected throughout 2026, the ongoing reform processes are unlikely to address the structural contradictions at the heart of UNOCT's mandate absent decisive action by member states. Without a clearer division among coordination and implementation, stronger human rights conditionality, meaningful civil society engagement, and greater transparency in financing and partnerships, UNOCT risks entrenching a model of counterterrorism support increasingly detached from the obligations of the UN Charter.

COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE AND ITS EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) was established in 2004 to assist the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and to monitor member state implementation of council Resolution 1373 and subsequent resolutions on measures to combat terrorism. As the technical arm of the Security Council on counterterrorism issues, CTED occupies a unique position within the UN system, combining compliance monitoring with analytical work and playing a facilitating role in connecting member states with technical assistance providers.

Over time, CTED has adopted a more nuanced approach to country assessments, built a robust research and analysis function, and engaged with a range of stakeholders, including civil society and regional organizations.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, persistent structural constraints rooted in its Security Council mandate, consent-based modalities, and confidentiality requirements continue to limit its contribution to accountability, transparency, and the protection of human rights.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ UNOCT, *Civil Society Engagement Strategy*, 17 January 2020, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/civil_society_engagement_strategy_website_mai_2020.pdf.

⁵⁵ The General Assembly's eighth review resolution called on the Secretary-General to assess "the impact, based on a results framework, of all activities carried out by the entities subordinate to the Assembly, in line with their mandates with respect to the implementation of each of the four pillars of the Strategy." The Secretary-General tasked UNOCT to lead the development of a unified results framework through the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact in advance of the ninth review. Eighth review resolution, para. 96; UNOCT, *2026–2028 Strategic Plan and Results Framework*, 2025, pp. 18, 38, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2025-12/2026-2028_Strategic_Plan_Results_Framework.pdf.

⁵⁶ UN General Assembly, "Revised Estimates Relating to the Proposed Programme Budget for 2026 and the Support Account for Peacekeeping Operations for the 2025/26 Period: Report of the Secretary-General," A/80/400, 4 September 2025, table 94.

⁵⁷ United Nations, *Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver; Workstream 3: Changing Structures and Realigning Programmes*, n.d., p. 15, https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2025-09/UN80_WS3-1_250918_1901.pdf (pre-edited version).

⁵⁸ CTED's mandate was renewed by the Security Council in December 2025, and its mandate review cycle was shifted from four years to three. UN Security Council, S/RES/2810, 29 December 2025, para. 3.

⁵⁹ See Annabelle Bonnefont, Agathe Sarfati, and Jason Ipe, "Continuity Amid Change: The 2021 Mandate Renewal of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate," Global Center and International Peace Institute, November 2021, <https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/21Nov22-Final-CTED-Policy-Brief-1.pdf>.

Country Assessments

CTED country assessments remain the directorate's most important core function. Conducted on the basis of host state consent and guided by a risk-based selection process determined by the CTC, these visits are designed to assess the implementation of Security Council counterterrorism obligations and to identify capacity-building needs. Over time, CTED has refined its assessment methodology under the new CTC framework⁶⁰ and expanded the scope of issues covered, referencing human rights, gender equality, and civil society participation.

Despite these methodological improvements, the country assessment process remains constrained and limited in its impact. Assessments are largely confidential, with outcome reports shielded from public scrutiny unless a member state elects to release them. This confidentiality, intended to facilitate cooperation, significantly curtails transparency and weakens the assessments' potential role as tools for accountability, particularly in contexts where counterterrorism measures are systematically misused.

Civil society engagement within country assessments illustrates these tensions. CTED has developed procedures to mitigate the risk of reprisals, including limiting the disclosure of interlocutor identities to national authorities. Although necessary, these safeguards result in selective participation and often exclude the very actors most affected by abusive counterterrorism practices. Consequently, assessments may capture formal legal compliance while only partially reflecting the lived impact of counterterrorism measures on civic space and vulnerable communities.

In recent years, however, CTED has begun to take incremental steps toward institutionalizing its civil society engagement (box 3).⁶¹ It has sought to strengthen the integration of human rights concerns through technical guidance, including its Technical Guide and Human Rights Trends Tracker.⁶² Yet, human rights analysis remains uneven in practice and heavily dependent on individual expertise. Indicators related to gender and civil society are often treated as stand-alone prompts rather than shaping assessment findings across thematic areas. This limits the extent to which human rights concerns influence conclusions, follow-ups, or priority-setting for technical assistance.

After more than two decades of country assessments and increasingly systematic and widespread member state misuse of counterterrorism measures, whether and how CTED country assessments address human rights violations are important

Box 3. The Development of Internal CTED Guidance on Civil Society Engagement

Recognizing that civil society perspectives are essential to meaningful assessments of counterterrorism measures, the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) is in the process of developing internal guidance specifically dedicated to civil society engagement. This work remains at the drafting stage and is being elaborated in CTED consultations that took place in October 2025 with the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counterterrorism and in December 2025 with civil society actors such as the Global Center on Cooperative Security. The draft guidance includes several innovative elements, which remain conceptual for now, on the following topics:

- **Protocols for safe and meaningful engagement** – establishing procedures that ensure civil society voices are not only heard but systematically integrated into assessments and recommendations, with safeguards against reprisals
- **“Do no harm” risk assessments** – embedding risk analysis into every consultation process to evaluate potential threats to participants and adapt engagement modalities accordingly
- **Independence and diversity criteria** – setting standards for the selection of interlocutors that prioritize independence from state influence and reflect diversity across gender, geography, and organizational type
- **Quantitative tracking of engagement** – introducing metrics to document the frequency, scope, and representativeness of civil society consultations, providing the first systematic data on CTED outreach efforts

Because the guidance is still under development, these elements have not been operationalized yet.

questions. Stakeholders consulted for this report reiterated that CTED reports routinely reflect the relevant findings and recommendations of treaty bodies, special procedures, and other UN human rights actors. Many interlocutors also recognized that such recommendations often have little to no impact on altering

⁶⁰ UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 21 July 2020 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-Terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2020/731, 21 July 2020, annex (containing “Framework Document for Counter-Terrorism Committee Visits to Member States Aimed at Monitoring, Promoting and Facilitating the Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005), 2178 (2014), 2396 (2017), 2462 (2019) and 2482 (2019) and Other Relevant Council Resolutions”).

⁶¹ See Bonnefont, Sarfati, and Ipe, “Continuity Amid Change.”

⁶² See CTED, *Technical Guide to the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) and Other Relevant Resolutions*, 2017, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org/securitycouncil.ctc/files/cted-technical-guide-2017.pdf>; CTED, *Trends Tracker on Human Rights: Recommendations by the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Following Assessment Visits to Member States (2017–2023)*, December 2023, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org/securitycouncil.ctc/files/trends_tracker_on_human_rights_-_december_2023.pdf.

the behavior of member states. They have value, however, as a potential basis for shaping the priorities of the Compact and the programming of Compact members.

Open Briefings

CTC-led open briefings, supported by CTED, are among the few entry points for wider UN and public engagement with the Security Council's counterterrorism agenda. Currently, the two streams—closed compliance monitoring and public briefings—operate largely in parallel, with limited cross-integration. The briefings showcase CTED thematic analysis beyond closed Security Council consultations and highlight what the council sees as emerging issues in international efforts to combat terrorism.

Although open briefings enhance visibility and allow for more inclusive dialogue than closed consultations, their policy impact remains limited. Insights from public discussions are not clearly translated into CTED internal assessments, CTC compliance work, or subsequent technical assistance priorities. Moreover, the selection of themes and participants for open briefings remains opaque and largely state driven, constraining genuine inclusivity and critical scrutiny. As a result, open briefings often operate in parallel to CTED core functions rather than reinforcing them.

Recent regional open briefings demonstrate the potential value of this format for surfacing context-specific challenges and regional dynamics. In 2022 the CTC held an open briefing on Central Asia, focusing on evolving threats, regional cooperation mechanisms, and the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions.⁶³ That same year, an open briefing on South and Southeast Asia examined regional counterterrorism developments, highlighting CTED engagement with member states under Security Council Resolution 2395 and identifying capacity-building and cooperation priorities in the subregion.⁶⁴ In 2024 the first open briefing on Southeast Europe brought regional perspectives from the subregion before the Security Council.⁶⁵ These open briefings help “democratize” access to CTED analysis, but their impact is often blunted by the absence of outcome documents or systematic follow-up to feed insights into CTED country assessments or technical assistance priorities.

Discussions under the UN80 initiative about more regionally oriented peace and security cooperation may offer an opportunity to reexamine how open briefings interface with core CTED

assessment work as a complementary space for structured regional dialogue. For open briefings to become genuinely meaningful in this context, their outputs would need to be systematically linked to the broader compliance-assistance cycle, ensuring that insights feed into CTED's monitoring process and can help identify gaps or priorities for follow-up by UN entities mandated to provide technical assistance, particularly in the promotion and protection of human rights and civic space.

Research and Analysis

Alongside its assessment role, CTED has developed a research and analysis function intended to inform its monitoring and technical assistance facilitation work. This work is led by the Research and Analysis Unit, which collates data on emerging terrorist threats, evolving tactics, and counterterrorism implementation trends across member states. Drawing primarily on data from country assessments, CTED produces thematic reports and briefings on issues such as terrorist travel, financing, online radicalization, and the use of emerging technologies.

To strengthen its analytical base, CTED established the Global Research Network in 2015, an invite-only platform enabling engagement with academic institutions, think tanks, and practitioners to supplement its internal analyses. Although this has strengthened CTED's analytical base, the closed nature of the network limits transparency and constrains broader scrutiny and participation by independent experts and civil society actors.

CTED work is valued across the UN system and contributes to UN-wide analytical exercises, such as the Open-Ended Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies.⁶⁶ CTED provides substantive input to several UN coordination mechanisms, including the Security Council's Informal Experts Group on Women, Peace and Security and the UN Inter-Agency Working Group on the Call to Action for Human Rights.⁶⁷ Its annual reports and trend alerts also help raise awareness and inform priorities within the Security Council and among member states.

The link between thematic analysis and operational programming, however, remains weak. Briefings and reports often generate awareness but are not systematically translated into follow-up assistance or embedded into compliance cycles. Notably, while CTED analytical work has increasingly addressed technological and operational aspects of terrorism, the systematic analysis

⁶³ CTC, “Counter-Terrorism Committee Holds Regional Open Briefing on Central Asia,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/counter-terrorism-committee-holds-regional-open-briefing-central-asia-0> (accessed 1 January 2026).

⁶⁴ CTC, “CTC Holds Open Briefing on the Work of CTED With Member States of South and South-East Asia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2395 (2017),” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/ctc-holds-open-briefing-work-cted-member-states-south-and-south-east-asia-pursuant-security> (accessed 17 April 2026).

⁶⁵ CTC, “Security Council Holds First Open Briefing on Counter-Terrorism Efforts in South-East Europe,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/security-council-holds-first-open-briefing-counter-terrorism-efforts-south-east-europe> (accessed 1 January 2026).

⁶⁶ The working group is a General Assembly-mandated process under the First Committee. It was established by Resolution 73/27 in 2018 to develop rules, norms, and principles on responsible state behavior in cyberspace; study threats; and discuss measures to reduce risks of conflict stemming from the use of information and communication technologies. See CTED, “CTED Input to the OEWG ICT Mapping Exercise,” n.d., https://docs-library.unoda.org/Open-Ended_Working_Group_on_Information_and_Communication_Technologies_-_%282021%29/OEWG_ICT_Mapping_Exercise_CTED_input.pdf.

⁶⁷ CTED representatives, consultation with authors, New York, November 2025.



CTED open briefing on the criminalization of terrorist offenses and strengthening of international cooperation in bringing terrorists to justice. Credit: UN Photo/Loey Felipe.

of the human rights and gendered impacts of counterterrorism measures or the impacts of terrorism and counterterrorism on civic space and marginalized communities remains limited. Its focus on amplifying the threat landscape without a commensurate focus on the grave and widespread abuses of counterterrorism actions ultimately facilitates the maintenance of the status quo and undermines its wider credibility. Initiatives such as the CSO Perspectives series demonstrate the potential for incorporating more diverse viewpoints, but these efforts remain peripheral rather than embedded across CTED's analytical agenda.⁶⁸

Looking Ahead

The evolution of CTED reflects both its strengths and constraints. As a technical arm of the Security Council, it has limited leverage to compel changes in member state behavior and operates within modalities designed to preserve cooperation rather than enforce accountability. Yet, the scale and persistence of counterterrorism-related human rights abuses raise questions about whether CTED tools are being fully leveraged to inform system-wide priorities and responses.

Greater coherence among CTED country assessments, public briefings, and analytical outputs, particularly through stronger linkages with UN human rights mechanisms, could enhance the relevance and impact of CTED work without exceeding its mandate. Absent such integration, CTED risks continuing to generate valuable technical analysis that remains insufficiently

connected to accountability, protection, and prevention efforts across the UN counterterrorism architecture.

THE 1267 SANCTIONS REGIME

One of the original fixtures of the UN counterterrorism architecture, the sanctions regime established by the Security Council in 1999 under Resolution 1267 recently marked its 25th anniversary. Originally targeting the Taliban and al-Qaida, the resolution was the first to impose financial and travel restrictions on a nonstate actor under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Subsequently modified by resolutions in 2011 and 2015 and now addressing the global threat of terrorism posed by ISIL, al-Qaida, and associated individuals and entities, the regime remains the most far-reaching counterterrorism sanctions framework within the United Nations. Unlike other Security Council sanctions regimes, it operates on a standing basis and applies globally.

Comprising the Security Council committee created pursuant to Resolutions 1267, 1989, and 2253 concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities; its Monitoring Team; and a ostensibly independent Ombudsperson, the sanction regime has undergone significant procedural reform in response to sustained criticism concerning due process, evidentiary standards, and the absence of effective remedies. These reforms, most notably the creation and strengthening of the Office of the Ombudsperson, have improved

⁶⁸ See CTED, "Civil Society Perspectives on National and Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategies," September 2025, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org/securitycouncil.ctc/files/nars_cso_report_2025.pdf.

fairness and transparency in delisting procedures. Nevertheless, structural limitations inherent to the regime continue to constrain its compliance with international human rights standards and to raise questions about its long-term legitimacy.

Listing and Delisting Procedures

Listings—the designation of individuals and entities for the application of sanctions measures, including asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargos—under the sanctions regime are initiated by member states and decided by the committee through consensus, based on confidential information that is rarely subject to independent verification. Narrative summaries of reasons for listing are now routinely published, but they often rely on generalized assertions and provide limited insight into the underlying evidence. This restricts the ability of listed individuals and entities to meaningfully challenge their designation.

There has been a marked decline in listings over the years. More than 120 individuals and entities associated with al-Qaida and ISIL that were mentioned at least once in the Monitoring Team's reports since 2022 have not been added to the sanctions regime, including senior ISIL leadership who, nevertheless, remain undesignated on the committee's sanctions list.⁶⁹ At the same time, delisting procedures have improved substantially with the introduction of the ombudsperson mechanism. Individuals and entities may petition for removal, triggering an independent review process that includes dialogue with petitioners, engagement with relevant states, and a reasoned recommendation to the committee. When the Ombudsperson recommends delisting, the recommendation is binding unless overridden by the committee.

Despite these advances, remedies under the regime remain primarily procedural. Petitioners are not afforded access to the full evidentiary basis for their listing, and judicial review remains largely unavailable at the UN level. As a result, delisting decisions, although more robust than in the past, continue to fall short of full compliance with fair trial guarantees, particularly in cases involving long-term or indefinite sanctions.

Analytical Support

The sanction regime's Monitoring Team's rigorous semiannual reporting tracks the evolution of ISIL, al-Qaida, and associated groups based on member state sources and outside expertise, such as independent researchers, humanitarian actors, banks, and social media companies. These reports are widely used across the UN system and beyond. The inclusion of a provision for the

Monitoring Team to engage with civil society and the private sector in its 2021 mandate renewal did not substantially alter its working methods. At the same time, the team's ability to incorporate inputs from these sources more substantially is not always welcomed by member states. The team's ability to address the implementation and human rights impacts of sanctions measures within its analytical mandate also continues to be hindered by a normative culture opposed to "naming and shaming" member states.

The Monitoring Team's narrow technical mandate and staffing arrangement in some ways insulates it from mission creep, budgetary jockeying, and political influence emblematic of its counterparts within the UN counterterrorism architecture. Unlike the broader mandates of other counterterrorism entities, the Monitoring Team's work, substantively led by a team of 10 experts and a coordinator, focuses on the threat posed by, and application of delineated sanctions measures against, a specifically designated list of individuals and actors associated with al-Qaida, ISIL, and their affiliates.⁷⁰

The Monitoring Team is not completely impervious to the politics impacting other entities in the counterterrorism architecture. Recent years have seen member states increasingly attempting to assert their own national narratives in the Monitoring Team's analytical work and the sanctions committee's listing process, for example, pressing for the inclusion of individuals and entities lacking verifiable affiliation with ISIL or al-Qaida.

Role and Limits of the Ombudsperson

The 2009 establishment of an independent Ombudsperson for the sanctions regime was intended to enhance the legitimacy and due process of the delisting process, providing an avenue of recourse for individuals and entities seeking removal from the sanctions list. At the same time, the Office of the Ombudsperson and broader delisting process have long been and continue to be subject to a range of structural, human rights, and due process critiques.⁷¹

The Ombudsperson's mandate remains narrowly circumscribed. The office has no authority over listings at the initial designation stage, cannot compel the disclosure of classified information, and operates within a framework that ultimately preserves member state control. These constraints limit the Ombudsperson's ability to address systemic concerns related to evidentiary standards, proportionality, and the cumulative human rights impact of prolonged sanctions.

⁶⁹ UN Security Council, "Letter Dated 21 July 2025 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/2025/482, 24 July 2025 (containing *Thirty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2734 (2024) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities*, annex II, para. 13).

⁷⁰ UN Security Council, S/RES/1526, 30 January 2004, para. 7.

⁷¹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, "The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Targeted Sanctions on Human Rights," 2021, pp. 6–8, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/position-paper-unsrct-on-unsct-use-of-ct-targeted-sanctions.pdf>.

Independence, transparency, and rule of law concerns also have been raised repeatedly by officeholders themselves over the years. In his 2023 remarks to the Security Council, Ombudsperson Richard Malanjum shared a range of concerns regarding the insufficient independence of the office: the administrative status of his office and contract as an “expert/consultant” under the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, lack of managerial control over personnel and budget, and ineligibility to receive a UN laissez-passer that provides privileges and entitlements essential for safely conducting sensitive country visits.⁷² Malanjum’s predecessor, Daniel Kipfer Fasciati, alluded to these concerns in his 2021 letter of resignation to the Secretary-General.⁷³

Subsequent remarks and reports issued by the Ombudsperson since the previous Strategy review also raised concern over, inter alia, the continued lack of awareness of the existence and mandate of the Office of the Ombudsperson among member states, legal professionals, and listed individuals;⁷⁴ the failure of member states to maintain sufficient and updated listings or respond to his office’s requests for information;⁷⁵ and attempts by member states to influence the outcome of cases under review, jeopardizing the office’s impartiality.⁷⁶ In his March 2025 report to the Security Council, Malanjum notified the committee of his resignation submitted to the Secretary-General on 4 March 2025, citing overriding concerns over the office’s independence and effectiveness.⁷⁷

Although the Ombudsperson function has enhanced procedural fairness, it does not fundamentally alter the political character of the regime or transform sanctions into rights-compliant measures in a comprehensive sense. The failure of the Security Council to implement measures to ensure the meaningful independence of the Office of the Ombudsperson should raise serious concerns about member states’ and UN commitment to due process while countering terrorism. Furthermore, this failure calls into question any future prospect of establishing a more robust independent oversight mechanism within the UN counterterrorism architecture.

Human Rights and Proportionality Concerns

The sanctions regime continues to raise substantive human rights concerns, particularly with respect to due process, the presumption of innocence, freedom of movement, and the right to an effective remedy. Asset freezes and travel bans may have severe, enduring consequences for listed individuals and their families, often extending beyond what is necessary to achieve legitimate security objectives.

Although humanitarian exemptions exist, these safeguards are unevenly applied and do not account consistently for the proportionality of measures over time. The absence of clear sunset provisions and automatic review mechanisms further contributes to the risk of indefinite sanctions, even when the underlying threat has diminished.

Since the last Strategy review, the humanitarian exemption to the assets freeze provisions of the sanctions regime established under Resolution 2664 was extended indefinitely through Resolution 2761, further strengthening its credibility under international law.⁷⁸ In December 2024, through Resolution 2761, the Security Council confirmed that the carve-out would apply indefinitely to the 1267 sanctions regime.

National and regional courts have repeatedly scrutinized the implementation of UN sanctions, underscoring the tension between Security Council authority and human rights obligations.⁷⁹ Although judicial engagement has prompted incremental reforms, it has not resolved the underlying disconnect between global counterterrorism measures and individualized rights protection.

Looking Ahead

The evolution of the sanctions regime demonstrates the Security Council’s capacity to respond to legitimacy concerns through a modicum of procedural reform. Yet, the persistence of structural deficiencies suggests that incremental adjustments alone may be insufficient to address the cumulative human rights impacts of the regime. Greater attention will be required to ensure that sanctions frameworks are not only procedurally fair but substantively

⁷² UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 28 March 2024 From the Ombudsperson Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2024/274, 28 March 2024 (containing *Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson Submitted Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2610 (2021)*, paras. 50–55); “Remarks of Ombudsperson, Mr. Richard Malanjum, Following Secretariat Briefing to Update, Pursuant to Paragraph 68 of Resolution 2610 (2021) (S/RES/2610 (2021))”, the Committee Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities,” 30 November 2023, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/default/files/2023.11.30_-_ombudsperson_remarks.pdf.

⁷³ Daniel Kipfer Fasciati, Letter to António Guterres, 3 June 2021, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/default/files/20210603_letter_to_secretary-general_0.pdf.

⁷⁴ Richard Malanjum, briefing, 5 September 2024, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/default/files/2024/Ombudsperson_statement_Open_Briefing_20240905.pdf (hereinafter Malanjum briefing); UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 28 March 2025 From the Ombudsperson Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2025/195, 28 March 2025 (containing *Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson Submitted Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2734 (2024)*, paras. 49–50) (hereinafter March 2025 Ombudsperson report).

⁷⁵ Malanjum briefing.

⁷⁶ UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 27 September 2024 From the Ombudsperson Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2024/696, 27 September 2024 (containing *Report of the Office of the Ombudsperson Submitted Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2734 (2024)*, paras. 61–63).

⁷⁷ March 2025 Ombudsperson report, paras. 47–48.

⁷⁸ UN Security Council, S/RES/2761, 6 December 2024.

⁷⁹ See Carmen-Cristina Cîrlig, “Counter-Terrorist Sanctions Regimes: Legal Framework and Challenges at UN and EU Levels,” European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2016, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/589864/EPRS_BRI\(2016\)589864_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/589864/EPRS_BRI(2016)589864_EN.pdf).

proportionate, time-bound, and subject to meaningful and independent oversight.

Though somewhat insulated from the impacts of the UN80 initiative, the sanctions regime is not immune. Cuts to the Monitoring Team travel budgets have directly reduced the team's access to crucial analytical inputs, while reduced translation capacity has shortened reports, with key details displaced to English-only report annexes. The Ombudsperson and Monitoring Team experts are supported by a complement of staff within the UN Secretariat whose positions could be jeopardized under UN80 initiative personnel reductions.

The Monitoring Team maintains strong relationships with CTED and UNODC. The team's threat and implementation assessments inform CTED country assessment frameworks and trend analyses, which in turn provide the basis for UNODC technical assistance to strengthen sanctions implementation. Cost-cutting measures that impact CTED and UNODC personnel, funding, and mandates could hamper the efficacy of the overall sanctions regime.

UN OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

UNODC is mandated to assist member states in addressing illicit drugs, transnational organized crime, corruption, and terrorism within the framework of the UN Charter and international law. As the primary UN entity responsible for supporting member states in implementing international legal instruments related to terrorism, UNODC occupies a critical position at the intersection of security, rule of law, and human rights.

TPB programming has focused on legislative drafting, prosecutorial capacity, and investigative tools, often without sufficient attention to the political and institutional contexts in which such assistance is deployed. Although these interventions may enhance formal compliance with international standards, they do not necessarily address the risk that counterterrorism laws and practices will be misused to suppress dissent or target marginalized groups.

Mandate, Programming, and Funding Dynamics

The TPB mandate contrasts with UNOCT's broader political and coordination role within the Compact. The original rationale was to let TPB focus on the "how" of counterterrorism implementation (legislative drafting, institutional strengthening, and capacity-building) while UNOCT was to focus ostensibly on the "why" and "who," political strategy management, Security Council engagement, and system-wide coordination. This division was also

meant to preserve TPB autonomy from political influence, keeping its work grounded in legal and operational expertise.

In practice, however, the expansion of UNOCT capacity-building has come to overlap and at times compete with long-standing UNODC work with criminal justice and law enforcement institutions. One of the most prominent examples of mandate overlap is the UN Countering Terrorist Travel Programme, implemented by UNODC, CTED, UNOCT, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the UN Office of Information and Communications Technology.⁸⁰ Under the program, TPB handles legislative drafting, legal review, and training modules while UNOCT leads political high-level engagement. Although upheld as a preeminent example of a one-UN approach in the 2023 midterm evaluation of UNOCT and UNODC, numerous stakeholders consulted for this report expressed concerns that such collaboration sometimes obscures accountability and weakens mandate clarity, making it difficult to know which entity is responsible for results and failures.⁸¹

This overlap, driven partly by donor preferences for visible counterterrorism programming, has blurred institutional boundaries, raising questions about efficiency, duplication, and the balance between coordination and implementation within the UN counterterrorism architecture.⁸² Indeed, like UNOCT, TPB relies heavily on extrabudgetary funding, which tends to encourage rapid delivery of technical assistance over longer-term institutional reform and strategy.

Human Rights Integration and Legal Assistance

UNODC has made sustained efforts to integrate human rights considerations into its counterterrorism work and is still viewed by many stakeholders consulted for this report as maintaining a stronger, more established normative rule of law mandate than other UN counterterrorism program implementers. TPB regularly includes human rights modules in its trainings and consults the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during legislative reviews and produces thematic guidance on due process, victim protection, and proportionality of counterterrorism measures.

These efforts, however, remain uneven in practice. Human rights safeguards are often treated as technical add-ons rather than as determinants of whether assistance should be provided or conditioned. Moreover, there are no dedicated human rights focal points within TPB; and although it maintains its own adaptation of the HRDDP, human rights assessments are not systematically conducted. One 2024 assessment of TPB found "no evidence that the TPB's capacity-building programming institutionally disregards human rights – but at the same time there is a similar

⁸⁰ UNOCT, "Countering Terrorist Travel Programme," n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/cttravel/about> (accessed 13 February 2026).

⁸¹ UNOCT and UNODC, *Mid-Term Independent Joint Evaluation: United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme*, UNCCT-2018-02-82, March 2023, p. xii, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2023_cttp_mte_final_report.pdf.

⁸² Jordan Street and Ali Altiok, "Does the Terrorism Prevention Branch Prevent Terrorism? Assessing the Role and Impact of the UNODC's Terrorism Prevention Branch," *Saferworld*, June 2024, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/downloads/does-the-terrorism-prevention-branch-prevent-terrorism.pdf>.

THE CHALLENGE FACING THE UN SYSTEM IS THEREFORE NOT A LACK OF NORMATIVE CLARITY, BUT THE LIMITED CAPACITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS AND EXPERTISE TO MEANINGFULLY INFLUENCE THE UN COUNTERTERRORISM AGENDA AND THE COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY AND PRACTICE OF MEMBER STATES.

lack of evidence that it institutionally advocates for human rights.”⁸³ In contexts where counterterrorism laws are overbroad and systematically abused, UNODC technical assistance will caution against such practices but likely not lead to a suspension of support even when abuse persists.

Engagement and Partnerships

Beyond its headquarters in Vienna, UNODC maintains an extensive UN country presence, with more than 90 offices worldwide embedded in regional and national contexts. This presence has given the organization credibility and operational depth, particularly in regions where its counterterrorism work is closely linked to broader portfolios such as organized crime, corruption, and criminal justice reform.

Its integrated approach has been emphasized repeatedly by stakeholders as distinctive. Unlike other UN counterterrorism actors concentrated in New York, UNODC is seen by stakeholders interviewed for this report as closer to impacted communities, able to deliver tailored assistance based on local needs, and is trusted by justice sector actors who tend to view it less as a political arm of the United Nations and more as a technical partner. Independent evaluations reinforce this view, noting that its more localized delivery model is a critical asset and comparative advantage in relation to other entities in the UN counterterrorism architecture.⁸⁴

A combination of the influence of host-state policies, a lack of staff expertise and culture of prioritizing trust with state authorities, and the absence of a clear engagement strategy has hindered the development of TPB civil society engagement practices. Like

its counterparts in the counterterrorism space, TPB civil society engagement also remains limited and ad hoc.

Looking Toward the Strategy Review and Beyond

In September 2025, it was announced that TPB will have dual reporting lines to UNODC and UNOCT.⁸⁵ Subordinating TPB to UNOCT risks the loss of TPB operational credibility, dilution of its rule of law and criminal justice focus, and potential disruption to long-standing relationships with national justice actors who rely on UNODC’s trusted technical role.

Conversely, certain functions, such as high-level political advocacy, Security Council reporting, and system-wide coordination, are notionally more suited to the UNOCT mandate. It is yet to be determined how dual reporting lines will impact core TPB functions, but stakeholders continue to stress that UNODC’s integrated field presence and technical expertise must be safeguarded and its key advantages must be protected from UNOCT political dilemmas.

UN NORMATIVE ENTITIES AND UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

UN normative entities and human rights mechanisms play a central role in articulating and enforcing the legal and policy framework governing counterterrorism efforts. Through standard-setting, monitoring, reporting, and advocacy, these actors provide authoritative guidance on the application of international human rights law, gender equality commitments, and accountability standards in counterterrorism contexts. Collectively, their work has established a robust normative consensus on the risks posed by abusive counterterrorism practices. The challenge facing the

⁸³ Ibid., p. 33.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 13; OIOS 2025 UNOCT evaluation, p. 29 (calling for UNOCT to develop a field presence strategy informed by longer-term priorities and the comparative advantages of UN partners, particularly in areas where UNODC has built sustained credibility through its field-based technical delivery).

⁸⁵ United Nations, *Shifting Paradigms*, p. 15.

UN system is therefore not a lack of normative clarity, but the limited capacity of human rights mechanisms and expertise to meaningfully influence the UN counterterrorism agenda and the counterterrorism policy and practice of member states.

The Normative Role of OHCHR and Institutional Constraints

OHCHR is the principal UN entity mandated to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Within the UN counterterrorism architecture, OHCHR plays a critical normative role in safeguarding rights against the misuse of counterterrorism policies, provides authoritative guidance on the application of international human rights law to counterterrorism measures, documents patterns of abuse, and supports the work of the Human Rights Council, treaty bodies, and special procedures. As the UN counterterrorism architecture grew, OHCHR has consistently articulated the human rights implications of counterterrorism policies, including the risks posed by overbroad laws, prolonged states of emergency, expanded surveillance powers, and the criminalization of legitimate expression and association. These concerns are now well established across UN human rights mechanisms and have been repeatedly acknowledged in resolutions, reports, and jurisprudence.

OHCHR has developed extensive guidance on the human rights-compliant design and implementation of counterterrorism measures through thematic reports, technical assistance, and advisory services. Since 2023, OHCHR has produced a series of substantive outputs that reflect and inform its mandate within the Strategy framework. For example, OHCHR developed a guidance note that provides legal benchmarks to ensure domestic definitions of terrorism comply with international law and a “tool kit” to support member state integration of human rights protections in national counterterrorism policy.⁸⁶ The High Commissioner also produces thematic reports on terrorism and human rights, the most recent of which focused on the alignment of international law with administrative measures to counter terrorism.⁸⁷ The office also has played a key role in advancing the application of the HRDDP to counterterrorism-related support.

Within the Compact, OHCHR serves as Chair of the Working Group on Promoting and Protecting Human Rights and the Rule of Law While Countering Terrorism. In this respect, it provides strategic direction on human rights integration across UN counterterrorism initiatives; coordinates interagency dialogue on due process, human rights standards, and civic space; and

develops guidance tools and policy recommendations for UN entities and member states.

OHCHR influence within the counterterrorism architecture, however, remains structurally constrained. Unlike operational entities, OHCHR does not control funding streams for counterterrorism work, implement large-scale programming, or exercise decision-making authority over counterterrorism assistance. OHCHR’s counterterrorism portfolio is managed by a single New York-based officer and a single Geneva-based counterpart, occasionally supported by consultants engaged on an ad hoc basis. UN counterterrorism entity engagement with OHCHR expertise is frequently consultative rather than determinative, and human rights considerations are often incorporated late in program design or treated as procedural safeguards rather than as thresholds for engagement.

These limitations are particularly evident when counterterrorism measures are politically instrumentalized. In such contexts, OHCHR contributions may be acknowledged but not acted on, contributing to a persistent gap between human rights obligations and concrete changes in policy and practice.

The Human Rights Council and Universal Periodic Review

The Human Rights Council has repeatedly addressed counterterrorism-related human rights concerns through resolutions, panel discussions, and interactive dialogues with counterterrorism mandate holders. These processes have reinforced the principle that counterterrorism measures must comply with international human rights law and have provided important space for civil society participation.

The council has adopted several important resolutions since the last Strategy review, among them a March 2025 resolution on protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age, which specifically recognizes the pattern of administrative and security measures such as travel bans, surveillance, and asset freezes that are widely abused by member states to silence or restrict defenders.⁸⁸ The council also adopted a July 2025 resolution on civil society space that reaffirms the right of individuals and organizations to participate in public affairs free from intimidation or reprisals and underscores the chilling effect of overbroad security laws.⁸⁹

The Human Rights Council is also charged with reviewing the human rights records of UN member states through the Universal

⁸⁶ OHCHR, “Defining ‘Terrorism’ in National Criminal Legislation,” *OHCHR Guidance Note*, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/ohchr-guidance-note-defining-terrorism-in-national-legislation.pdf>; OHCHR, *Strengthening Human Rights in Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Policy: A Toolkit*, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/ohchr-toolkit-strengthening-hr-in-ct-strategy-policy.pdf>.

⁸⁷ UN General Assembly, *Terrorism and Human Rights: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/HRC/57/29, 7 August 2024.

⁸⁸ UN General Assembly, *Human Rights Defenders and New and Emerging Technologies: Protecting Human Rights Defenders, Including Women Human Rights Defenders, in the Digital Age*, A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1, 28 March 2025.

⁸⁹ UN General Assembly, *Civil Society Space*, A/HRC/RES/59/10, 10 July 2025.



The Secretary-General addresses the 55th session of the Human Rights Council. Credit: UN Photo/Elma Onkic.

Periodic Review process. The review, informed by member state, UN, and civil society input, results in an outcome document containing the final council assessment and recommendations to improve member state human rights protections. Member state abuses of counterterrorism and related security measures, such as due process violations, arbitrary detention, misuse of terrorism charges, and restrictions on civil society, are frequently raised in the review process. Although associated findings and recommendations are taken into account and raised in CTED country assessments, they are selectively accepted and weakly implemented and have limited follow-up or linkages to UN counterterrorism programming.

Council resolutions and Universal Periodic Review reports are not adopted within the Compact framework, but their substance aligns closely with the human rights safeguards the Compact has committed to upholding under Pillar IV. In this respect, OHCHR has sought to leverage its role as working group chair to bring the resolutions and recommendations of UN human rights mechanisms into interagency programming discussions. This has included targeted briefings for Compact members, encouraging the adoption of associated findings and recommendations into UN legislative assistance, training modules, and field project design. Yet, follow-up remains inconsistent in large part due to

limited OHCHR capacity to sustain advocacy across all thematic areas and regions.

Despite the relevance of its contributions from a normative standpoint and as a potential avenue of oversight and accountability, council engagement with counterterrorism efforts remains fragmented and politically sensitive. Discussions often occur parallel to, rather than in coordination with, Security Council- and Secretariat-led counterterrorism processes, limiting council influence on operational policy and assistance decisions. As a result, council outcomes frequently reaffirm established principles but are not carried forward into system-wide corrective action and agenda-setting.

The Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism

Human Rights Council special procedures comprise independent experts, Special Rapporteurs, and working groups that monitor thematic or country-specific rights issues. Among these, the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism is of particular significance in the UN counterterrorism architecture and global counterterrorism efforts more broadly. Alongside OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur is the

only other member of the Compact that holds a broad remit on the human rights impact of counterterrorism measures. Created in 2005 by the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur provides independent oversight of counterterrorism law and practice, monitors the landscape of human rights violations related to member state counterterrorism measures, promotes the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the counterterrorism context, and support states, UN entities, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders in these efforts.⁹⁰

The current Special Rapporteur, Ben Saul, took up the post in November 2023. He has since played an active role within the Compact and in international human rights advocacy, regularly issuing recommendations to advance human rights priorities in the UN counterterrorism architecture, submitting oral and written interventions in cases before national courts, delivering briefings and presentations to UN entities and myriad national and international forums,⁹¹ issuing statements independently and in collaboration with other special procedures mandate holders on cross-cutting rights abuses associated with member state counterterrorism efforts, and conducting formal country visits to assess the consistency of its counterterrorism laws and practices with international human rights law.⁹¹

The Special Rapporteur's ability to engage publicly has positioned the mandate as a key reference point for member states and civil society. In contrast to OHCHR counterterrorism work, including its engagement within the Compact and its provision of technical assistance to states, the Special Rapporteur's work often takes place behind the scenes and is not recognized consistently in strategic discussions, despite certain efforts to improve outreach and clarify institutional roles through ad hoc engagements and informal coordination channels.

The Special Rapporteur's work also is subject to institutional considerations within OHCHR and structural constraints from the wider UN counterterrorism system. Country visits depend

on state consent, and resulting recommendations are frequently reiterated across reporting cycles without evidence of sustained implementation. Although the Special Rapporteur operates as an independent expert, the mandate holder relies on OHCHR for logistical and institutional support, including staffing, coordination with UN entities, and facilitation of communications, country visits, and reporting processes. Mandate holders are not allocated dedicated staff to support their work. Currently, two Geneva-based OHCHR staff members are assigned to support the Special Rapporteur at the discretion of OHCHR, depending on funding. The mandate currently has no staff to cover UN counterterrorism issues in New York, and in 20 years it has had a part-time consultant based in New York only once and for less than a six-month period, in 2025, following ad hoc fundraising. Although mandate holders provide essential scrutiny and public visibility, they tend to lack the political leverage and resources required to effect systemic change in entrenched counterterrorism practices.

UN Women

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda under Security Council Resolution 1325, experts within UN Women and from across civil society continue to raise alarms regarding the politicization and co-opting of WPS discourse and policy and program platforms for the purposes of the counterterrorism agenda.⁹³ Concerns over the reductive treatment of gender and women's rights issues were voiced by several UN stakeholders interviewed for this report, including concerns that substantive gender-related issues are too often reduced to a box-ticking exercise.

At a time of rising global authoritarianism and opposition to gender equality, the UN norm-setting role on gender and human rights issues is more important than ever. As emphasized in a 2015 UN Women report, "[W]omen's rights should not be securitized and should not be seen as an instrumental tool for countering terrorism. Rather, women's rights are an end in and of themselves."⁹⁴

⁹⁰ See OHCHR, "About the Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Terrorism," n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-terrorism/about-mandate-special-rapporteur-terrorism> (accessed 17 January 2026).

⁹¹ See UN Human Rights Council, "Outline of Selected Remarks of the Special Rapporteur in September–December 2025," n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/statements/2025-sept-dec-sr-ct-remarks.pdf>.

⁹² The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism is the only special procedures mandate holder participating in the Compact, but several other special procedures mandate holders regularly address the human rights impacts of counterterrorism and other national security measures within their respective domains. The work of the Special Rapporteurs on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; on the situation of human rights defenders; and on summary executions, as well as the work of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, among others, frequently intersects with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism in tracking the impact of repression and other forms of abuse committed by member states under the auspices of national security.

⁹³ See Anna Möller-Loswick, "The Countering Violent Extremism Agenda Risks Undermining Women Who Need Greater Support," Saferworld, 26 April 2017, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/news-and-analysis/post/221-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support>.

⁹⁴ "Countering Violent Extremism While Respecting the Rights and Autonomy of Women and Their Communities," in *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, UN Women, 2015, ch. 9, https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf. These findings are echoed in the 2023 report by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, which featured detailed exploration of the discriminatory aspects of counterterrorism measures, including on women, girls, and LGBTBI+ and gender-diverse persons. See Ní Aoláin, Manion, and Yamamoto, "Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society and Civic Space," p. 12.

UN Women brings essential normative expertise on gender equity, mainstreaming, and power dynamics issues to the Compact. Through policy guidance, research, and advocacy, UN Women has highlighted the gendered impacts of counterterrorism measures, including their disproportionate effects on women's rights, livelihoods, and participation in public life.

Only two full-time staff members support UN Women engagement on counterterrorism matters, including its role as chair of the Global Compact Working Group on Adopting a Gender Sensitive Approach to Preventing and Countering Terrorism. Although it receives no additional funding, UN Women supports gender-mainstreaming and gender-sensitive programming across the UN counterterrorism architecture through the working group, for example, by supporting briefings on gender issues within and among Compact working groups and in developing human rights and gender benchmarks for the Compact.

UN Women is developing a review of gender-mainstreaming efforts across the UN counterterrorism architecture to gather perspectives on the gendered impacts of counterterrorism initiatives and the experience of external actors engaging with the UN counterterrorism architecture and UN agencies on gender issues in relation to counterterrorism issues. The process and resulting recommendations are intended to orient UN Women's support and involvement in promoting gender-responsive approaches to counterterrorism and prevention of violent extremism matters.

UN Women also plays an important programmatic role, emphasizing women's meaningful participation in the design, implementation, and oversight of counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism initiatives. It supports programs to empower women and women's organizations as leaders in preventing violence and building peace in their communities and promotes the meaningful participation of women and women's groups in security-sector decision-making and oversight.⁹⁵

Stakeholders consulted for this report widely lauded UN Women's civil society engagement practices as particularly robust. For example, during the seventh review of the Strategy, UN Women organized a civil society consultation process to inform the review negotiations. The Global Digital Consultation process resulted not only in an outcome document capturing civil society views and recommendations to inform the Strategy review but also in a public statement.⁹⁶ Regional analytical papers provided further

insights and actionable recommendations to the United Nations and its member states.⁹⁷ UN Women also continues to engage with its global, regional, and national civil society advisory groups, which help UN Women in the process of designing ideas for its policies and programs.⁹⁸

Despite the many contributions of UN Women, its influence within the counterterrorism architecture, while multifaceted, remains largely advisory. In practice, gender expertise is frequently invoked to enhance program legitimacy rather than to shape priorities, constrain harmful practices, or address structural drivers of exclusion and discrimination.

Looking Ahead

Taken together, UN normative entities and human rights mechanisms actively engage in internal norm-setting, advocacy, and external programming to promote compliance, strengthen institutional practices, and support the implementation of these standards across the UN counterterrorism system. Their work leaves little doubt as to the nature of the risks and consequences of abusive practices or the institutions, policies, and practices to address them.

Yet, the persistent gap between normative clarity and operational impact underscores a structural imbalance within the UN counterterrorism architecture. Normative entities are expected to supply legitimacy, guidance, and oversight but are not endowed with the authority or resources necessary to influence core decisions on assistance delivery, partnerships, or political engagement.

Absent a fundamental shift in priorities, robust leadership for change, radical reallocation of resources, and stronger institutional linkages between normative entities and counterterrorism decision-making, human rights and gender expertise and standards will continue to be acknowledged in principle but marginalized in practice within the UN counterterrorism architecture and by member states, a dynamic with significant implications for the Strategy's credibility and effectiveness.

THE UN GLOBAL COUNTER-TERRORISM COORDINATION COMPACT

The Compact serves as the principal coordination framework for the UN counterterrorism architecture. Established to enhance coherence, reduce duplication, and promote a whole-of-UN approach, the Compact brings together a wide range of UN

⁹⁵ Katherine E. Brown and Iman Sayed Taha, *UN Women's Engagement in Support of Counter-[Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism]*, UN Women, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/UN-Womens-engagement-in-support-of-counter-terrorism-and-prevention-of-violent-extremism-en.pdf>.

⁹⁶ *Global Digital Consultation: Civil Society Voices on the Gendered Dimensions of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism Responses*, UN Women, January 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gendered-dimensions-of-violent-extremism-Outcome-report-en.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ UN Women, "Civil Society Advisory Groups," n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/partnerships/civil-society/civil-society-advisory-groups> (accessed 19 September 2025).

entities and associated partners engaged in counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism–related activities.

Under the leadership of the Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, the Compact brings together 46 members and observers (fig. 3) and is the largest UN coordination body. Its sprawling membership, including 42 UN entities and affiliated international treaty organizations, is emblematic of the counterterrorism agenda's outsized place of concern across the world body's work.

Unlike the entities examined earlier, the Compact does not exercise operational authority, normative oversight, or political leverage. Its primary function is organizational, providing a platform for information-sharing, visibility of activities, and structured engagement across a fragmented institutional landscape. In this sense, the Compact is best understood not as a counterterrorism actor in its own right, but as the mechanism through which the system aims to manage its internal complexity. Within this complexity, tensions across political, practical, and normative objectives of the Compact undermine its effectiveness as a coordination body and its ability to address the urgent human rights challenges at the heart of international counterterrorism efforts.

Coordination Without Authority

As a coordination body, the Compact provides a platform for information-sharing, joint learning, and coordination through thematic working groups, joint planning processes, and shared reporting frameworks. It is intended to facilitate a greater degree of internal communication and visibility regarding who is doing what, where it is being done, and under which pillar of the Strategy it is being done.

The Compact's interagency engagement is organized into eight thematic working groups under the Strategy's four pillars. These working groups operate under the strategic guidance of the Compact Committee, comprising chairs of each working group and led by the Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism. In June 2025, the contract of the UNOCT full-time staff lead for the Compact Secretariat was not extended, and responsibilities were merged with UNOCT's Regional Conference team.

Despite its high level of visibility, the Compact does not possess the authority to set priorities, enforce standards, or resolve substantive disagreements among participating entities.

Participation is voluntary, commitments are nonbinding, and alignment relies largely on goodwill rather than incentives or accountability mechanisms. As a result, coordination under the Compact is procedural rather than directive. This design reflects political realities within the UN system but limits the Compact's capacity to address the identified structural tensions, particularly those related to human rights integration, civil society engagement, oversight and accountability, and the balance between security imperatives and legal obligations.

Ticking the Coordination Box

The Compact is framed as a launch pad for a range of strategic initiatives intended to foster deeper engagement and coordination among Compact entities, between the Compact and the wider UN system, and between Compact entities and member states, regional organizations, and civil society. This function has proven difficult to achieve operationally given the absence of dedicated funding. Although a range of initiatives have been attributed to the Compact over the years, the extent to which these initiatives are the product of an effort or consensus among one, several, or all Compact entities is not always clear.

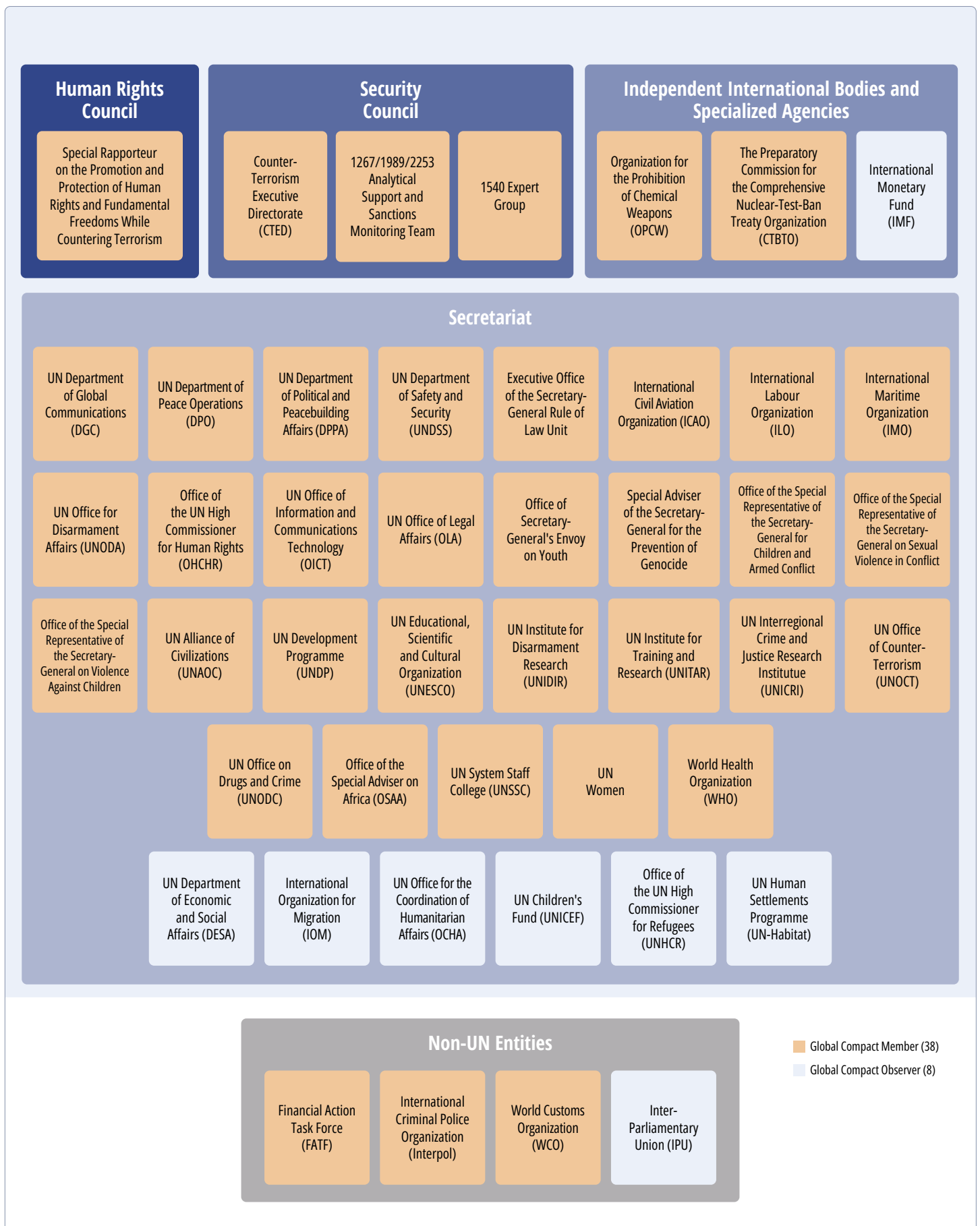
The influence of a Compact entity's work within a particular working group or the Compact as a whole depends on the alignment of this work with the priorities of the Compact Committee and the joint program of work, the capacity of each entity to devote sufficient resources to staff focal points responsible for engaging in the Compact, and, importantly, the amount of member state resources an initiative brings or has the potential to bring to other Compact entities. In this way, funding dynamics within the Compact tend to reinforce competition.

UNOCT benefits from being able to dominate the agenda of the Compact and pass off some of its own initiatives as those of the Compact. For example, the annual reports of the Compact describe it as a vehicle for a range of conferences, briefings, and events on a wide range of issue areas.⁹⁹ It is often unclear whether or to what extent Compact members other than UNOCT engaged in organizing and implementing, for example, high-level thematic conferences, events regarding UN "international days" for preventing violent extremism and for victims of terrorism, and biennial "Counter-Terrorism Week" activities at UN Headquarters.¹⁰⁰ Interviews with UN officials suggest that other Compact members played minimal to no roles in these activities beyond attendance, suggesting that the Compact can be used as a vehicle to tick the coordination box.

⁹⁹ UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact (Compact), *2024 Annual Report to the Secretary General: Executive Report*, n.d., https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2025-12/2024_ct_compact_annual_executive_report.pdf; Compact, *2023 Annual Report to the Secretary General: Executive Report*, n.d., https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2023_ct_compact_ar_executive_report.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ See UNOCT, "High-Level Conference on 'Strengthening International Counter-Terrorism Cooperation and Building Agile Border Security Mechanisms,'" n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/2024-Kuwait-Dushanbe-conference> (accessed 15 January 2026); UNOCT, "International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism As and When Conducive to Terrorism," n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/2024-PVE-Day> (accessed 15 January 2026); UNOCT, "International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to Victims of Terrorism: 21 August 2024," n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/international-day-remembrance-and-tribute-victims-terrorism-21-august-2024> (accessed 15 January 2026); UNOCT, "2023 Counter-Terrorism Week," n.d., www.un.org/counterterrorism/2023-counter-terrorism-week (accessed 15 January 2026).

Figure 3. Organization of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, May 2026



Source: Global Center staff.

Stakeholders interviewed emphasized that when collaboration takes place, it largely mirrors preexisting relationships among entities. Entities with long-standing partnerships (e.g., UNODC and CTED) coordinate more regularly, while those with little prior overlap rarely engage substantively under the banner of the Compact. This further calls into question the Compact's impact and value-add as a system-wide coordination mechanism.

Human Rights and Normative Integration

The Compact formally recognizes the importance of human rights, gender equality, and the rule of law and includes normative entities among its participants. Yet, its coordination role does not extend to ensuring that these principles meaningfully shape operational decisions or assistance delivery.

The peripheral location of human rights issues in the UN counterterrorism architecture is reflected in the thematic distribution of the Compact's working groups. Focused discussion of human rights issues falls under a single working group (Promoting and Protecting Human Rights and the Rule of Law While Countering Terrorism and Supporting the Victims of Terrorism) chaired by OHCHR and vice-chaired by UNOCT. Such an expansive mandate to drive the Compact's work on human rights and rule of law issues and supporting victims of terrorism, combined with the limited resources and staff that entities such as OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur, and UN Women can afford to allocate to participation in the Compact, hinders the working group's ability to engage.

Normative guidance and human rights expertise circulate within the Compact, but their uptake depends on individual entities' mandates, leadership, and funding incentives. The Compact itself does not provide mechanisms to condition participation, escalate concerns, or recalibrate engagement where serious human rights risks are identified. For example, in 2023, under an initiative led by OHCHR, the working group compiled a matrix of counterterrorism-related recommendations from UN human rights bodies to promote their adoption in the Compact's work. Yet, the bulk of the working group's advocacy and visibility efforts described in the Compact's 2023 and

2024 annual reports focused on the largely UNOCT-led victims of terrorism work, despite the range of initiatives being undertaken by normative entities in the Compact.¹⁰¹

Civil society has looked toward the Compact as a potential avenue for meaningful engagement with the UN counterterrorism architecture, but obstacles stemming from the political and structural constraints discussed above extend to the Compact. Advancing partnerships with civil society "through field engagements, capacity-building, coordination, and supporting victims of terrorism" is one of five overarching priorities laid out in the Compact Committee's joint program of work for 2024–2026.¹⁰² Yet, civil society engagement with the Compact remains as limited and ad hoc as with many of its individual members and more a product of individual entity and working group preferences. Ultimately, the presence of normative actors within the Compact enhances the legitimacy and visibility of UN counterterrorism efforts but in itself does not correct the structural imbalance between normative clarity and operational authority and impact identified above.

Looking Ahead

The Compact illustrates a central paradox of the UN counterterrorism system: coordination has become more regularized even as coherence remains elusive. By design, the Compact prioritizes entity inclusivity and continuity over decision-making, priority-setting, and correction. This does not render the Compact ineffective per se, but rather clarifies its function. The Compact sustains the system as it exists, facilitating cooperation across institutional boundaries without altering the distribution of power, resources, priorities, or responsibilities that shape the UN counterterrorism agenda.

Understanding the Compact in these terms is essential to any assessment of the UN counterterrorism architecture. It explains how well-documented concerns regarding human rights, accountability, and effectiveness can coexist with extensive coordination mechanisms and why addressing these concerns requires changes that extend far beyond coordination alone.

¹⁰¹ See Compact, *2023 Annual Report to the Secretary-General: Annexes to Executive Report*, n.d., annex I, pp. 26–30, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2023_ct_compact_ar_annexes.pdf; Compact, *2024 Annual Report to the Secretary-General: Annexes to Executive Report*, pp. 31–34, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/2025-12/2024_ct_compact_annual_annexes.pdf.

¹⁰² Compact, "Tenth United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Committee Meeting," n.d., p. 17, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/10cc_meeting_summary_annex_i.pdf (24 January 2024 discussion on strategic coordination of counterterrorism initiatives in Africa).

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES



The Palais des Nations at the United Nations Office at Geneva.
Credit: Jonathan Ansel Moy de Vitry.

CROSS-CUTTING CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS

As the 20th anniversary of the Strategy's adoption is nearing, the need to right-set and right-size the UN global counterterrorism agenda with the principles of the UN Charter is long overdue. The developments across the UN counterterrorism architecture, as described in this report, highlight a set of cross-cutting challenges that span mandates, institutional cultures, and operational contexts. These challenges are not episodic or isolated. Rather, they reflect structural features of the system that shape how counterterrorism policies are designed and implemented, often with significant consequences for human rights and the rule of law, civic space, and global peace and security.

This chapter synthesizes these dynamics, drawing together patterns identified across UN entities to explain how well-documented risks persist despite extensive normative guidance, coordination mechanisms, and oversight processes. In doing so, it focuses not on individual institutional shortcomings but on the incentives, constraints, and trade-offs that collectively shape the UN counterterrorism architecture.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE

Across the UN counterterrorism system, there is broad recognition that counterterrorism measures must comply with international human rights law and protect civic space. Yet in practice, counterterrorism efforts continue to be used by member states to justify repression, including arbitrary detention; restrictions on freedom of expression and association; the targeting of civil society actors, journalists, political opponents, and minority groups; and mass atrocity crimes. Financial regulations and counterterrorism financing measures also have been misused to constrain civil society, particularly organizations and individuals working on human rights, humanitarian assistance, and peace-building.

These dynamics disproportionately affect groups already facing discrimination and marginalization. Counterterrorism measures frequently are applied in ways that reinforce gender inequality, ethno-racial and religious discrimination, and the stigmatization

of communities perceived by those in power as politically inconvenient rather than genuinely linked to violent activity.

As documented throughout this report, such abuses are often facilitated by overbroad legal frameworks, weak oversight, and the expansion of security powers under the guise of countering terrorism or preventing violent extremism. There have been numerous opportunities to seriously grapple with and advance a protection agenda within the UN counterterrorism architecture since the last Strategy review. From the release of the Special Rapporteur's 2023 "Global Study" on the heels of the eighth Strategy review to the ongoing implementation of the UN80 initiative, efforts to center rights protection within the architecture have gained little traction.

A 2024 UN initiative to set the course of the international community, titled *The Pact for the Future*, could have been a promising springboard to right-set the UN counterterrorism agenda.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, although the pact envisioned a "future free from terrorism" and reaffirmed the importance of human rights while countering terrorism, it failed to elaborate concrete measures to protect human rights or address member state impunity for their abuse.¹⁰⁴ Preventing such outcomes requires more than reaffirming normative standards. In his response to the agreement, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism called for a minimum series of concrete actions to move from normative standards to operational imperatives, including "strengthening human rights risk assessments of proposed counter-terrorism laws and measures, making human rights protections more enforceable, and adequately funding human rights and accountability mechanisms."¹⁰⁵ Although presented at the 11th Compact Coordination Committee meeting in February 2025, the Special Rapporteur's recommendations were not reflected in the Compact's response to the resolution.¹⁰⁶

Ultimately, the adoption of a rights- and civic space-centered, protection-focused agenda will depend on institutional capacity and political will by member states and senior UN leadership to foster a

¹⁰³ UN General Assembly, *The Pact for the Future*, A/RES/79/1, 22 September 2024.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 44.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Saul, remarks before the Eleventh Meeting of the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Committee, New York, 5 February 2025, p. 1, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/11th_compact_coordination_mtg-ben_saul-special_rapporteur_remarks_050225.pdf. The Special Rapporteur also expressed disappointment in the resolution's failure to adequately address the grave human rights risks and growing number of harms perpetrated by member states through their misuse of new and emerging technologies as part of their counterterrorism efforts.

¹⁰⁶ Coordination Committee of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, *The Pact for the Future and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact: Strengthening Policy Interventions and Building Member State Capacities to Prevent and Counter Terrorism*, 2025 (Copy on file with authors).

Social media slide released alongside a joint condemnation by multiple UN special procedures mandate holders of Israel's deliberate killing of journalists in Gaza. Credit: Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council @UN_SPExperts.

**JOURNALISM
IS NOT
TERRORISM.**



culture of protection within the counterterrorism architecture, one that prioritizes assessing risk, conditioning engagement, and taking corrective action when violations occur. Where these capacities are weak or overridden by security imperatives, human rights protection priorities in the UN counterterrorism agenda will remain performative and procedural rather than substantive.

GENDERED IMPACTS AND EXCLUSION

Counterterrorism policies and practices are not gender neutral. As reflected in the work of UN Women, OHCHR, and the Special Rapporteur, counterterrorism measures can exacerbate gender-based discrimination, restrict women's and LGBTQI+ participation in public life, and expose gender-diverse human rights defenders to heightened risks of harassment and reprisal.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, gender considerations are often incorporated superficially into counterterrorism programming, serving to legitimize security-driven interventions rather than addressing structural inequalities or protect rights. Women's participation is frequently framed instrumentally, without meaningful influence over program design, implementation, or oversight. These patterns reflect broader challenges to integrating gender expertise into counterterrorism

decision-making and priority-setting in ways that constrain harmful practices rather than simply enhancing UN credibility.

ACCOUNTABILITY, OVERSIGHT, AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The lack of centralized, standardized data collection on project implementation and spending on counterterrorism activities, let alone a results framework to gauge the extent to which these activities are achieving the goals of the Strategy, undermines the legitimacy of the architecture and hinders evaluation and learning efforts necessary to make and justify informed strategic decisions. The UN counterterrorism architecture has developed some policies, procedures, and oversight mechanisms that should notionally mitigate human rights risks and respond to abuses, including due diligence requirements, country assessments, monitoring frameworks, implementation surveys, and universal reporting processes. These mechanisms, however, often function unevenly across entities and contexts. What oversight mechanisms do exist, for example, through CTED country assessments, the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, the Special Rapporteur, or even OIOS evaluations, are underfunded, unenforceable, or both.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Schwartz et al., "Independent Civil Society-UN Counterterrorism Engagement: A Scoping Report," Global Center and Rights & Security International, May 2024, https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/GCCS_Scoping-Report_2024.pdf.

[O]VERSIGHT MECHANISMS DOCUMENT RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES AND ISSUE RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDANCE WITHOUT ALTERING—INDEED, WITHOUT THE EXPECTATION OF ALTERING—UNDERLYING INCENTIVES, ALLOWING PROBLEMATIC PRACTICES TO PERSIST WHILE MAINTAINING AN APPEARANCE OF COMPLIANCE AND ADHERENCE TO INTERNATIONAL LAW.

In many cases, accountability is framed as a matter of procedural compliance rather than concrete action for substantive impact. Risk assessments may identify grave, ongoing violations of human rights, including abuses perpetrated under the guise of counterterrorism measures, without triggering changes in engagement, while recommendations rarely prompt concrete changes in behavior or priorities among member states or within the architecture. This dynamic is particularly evident in the priorities of UN counterterrorism assistance being so intimately tied to donor security interests to the detriment of normative commitments. As a result, oversight mechanisms document risks and consequences and issue recommendations and guidance without altering—indeed, without the expectation of altering—underlying incentives, allowing problematic practices to persist while maintaining an appearance of compliance and adherence to international law.

MARGINALIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Across these dynamics, civil society engagement emerges as a critical but structurally vulnerable component of the UN counterterrorism architecture. Civil society actors provide early warning, contextual analysis, and informal oversight that formal mechanisms often lack. Yet, as described in a 2024 scoping study on civil society–UN counterterrorism engagement, their participation is frequently consultative, one-directional, and inadequately protected.

A range of political and structural constraints in the system incentivizes a UN counterterrorism architecture that undervalues,

tokenizes, and marginalizes civil society. This dynamic reflects the broader imbalance between normative commitments and actual practice.

COORDINATION AND FRAGMENTATION

The persistence of these challenges cannot be explained solely by a lack of coordination. Rather than resolving fragmentation, the Compact manages and even more so reinforces it. By accommodating diverse mandates, risk tolerances, normative priorities, and political constraints among entities with highly asymmetric power and influence within a shared coordination and information-sharing framework, the system enables continued engagement without requiring convergence on fundamental but apparently contentious issues such as conditionality or accountability concerning human rights protection and civil society engagement. This dynamic helps explain how normative clarity—consensus, even—can coexist with operational inconsistency and why systemic corrections to reorient the architecture in line with normative commitments remain elusive despite repeated recognition of the same underlying problems.

THE PROTECTION AGENDA AND SYSTEM-WIDE RESPONSIBILITY

A United Nations Agenda for Protection underscores the responsibility of all UN entities, including those working on counterterrorism issues, to prioritize protection, accountability to affected populations, and prevention of harm.¹⁰⁸ It emphasizes proactive leadership, shared analysis of protection risks, support

¹⁰⁸ *A United Nations Agenda for Protection*, February 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/protection/Agenda-Protection-Pledge-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

for people demanding protection, and safeguards against reprisals. It also recognizes that the protection of civic space and the role of civil society are vital in addressing protection concerns and contributing to the long-term peace, development, and rights work of the United Nations, closely aligning with and reinforcing the UN system-wide guidance on the protection and promotion of civic space.¹⁰⁹

Although this plan provides an important framework, its implementation within the counterterrorism domain faces the same structural constraints identified throughout this report. Without stronger linkages among normative protection commitments, strategic priority-setting, and operational decision-making, protection will be treated as an aspirational objective and empty credibility-enhancer, rather than a governing principle and culture of practice.

STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, these dynamics point to a central conclusion: the challenges facing the UN counterterrorism system are not primarily the result of insufficient standards, awareness, or coordination. They are the product of structural imbalances between normative authority and operational power, accountability mechanisms and political incentives, and coordination and consensus.

The UN80 initiative appears unlikely to present opportunities to shift the agenda at least in the short term. Voices from civil society and within the Compact such as the Special Rapporteur have repeatedly called on the Secretary-General to ensure that these

reforms enhance traditionally marginalized human rights, gender, and civil society engagement capacities and activities in the counterterrorism architecture and wider UN system.¹¹⁰

A strategic, needs-based approach to the UN80 initiative should have prompted a shifting of resources toward long underfunded human rights capacities in the counterterrorism architecture, but across-the-board cuts within the core UN counterterrorism entities most likely will be reducing these capacities even further. This outcome mirrors anticipated system-wide impacts, with the Secretary-General's revised 2026 budget estimates showing that, of the three UN pillars of work (peace and security, development, and human rights), the already underresourced human rights pillar is poised to experience the most drastic cuts.¹¹¹

Unfortunately, the current political realities of the United Nations and wider multilateral landscape and the security-centric culture of core UN counterterrorism entities present substantial challenges in placing protection at the center of the UN counterterrorism agenda. UN personnel consulted for this report acknowledged that such a shift risks jeopardizing much of the extrabudgetary support enjoyed by UN counterterrorism entities.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for gauging the limits of incremental reform and identifying pathways for more meaningful change. Without addressing the structural conditions that shape behavior across the architecture, efforts to strengthen human rights protection, engagement, accountability, and ultimately effectiveness in counterterrorism actions will continue to confront the same recurring obstacles that reproduce an untenable status quo.

¹⁰⁹ "Protection and Promotion of Civic Space," *United Nations Guidance Note*, September 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, "UN80 Reforms to United Nations Counter-Terrorism Activities: Strengthening Human Rights, Gender Equality, the Rule of Law and Prevention; Briefing Note," August 2025, p. 2, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/terrorism/sr/activities/sr-ct-un80-reforms-august-2025.pdf>.

¹¹¹ International Service for Human Rights, "UN80 Initiative: Proposed Budget Cuts Disproportionately Hit the Human Rights Pillar," 18 September 2025, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un80-initiative-proposed-budget-cuts-disproportionately-hit-the-human-rights-pillar/>.



International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands. Credit: Hassan Anayi.

PUSHING THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE

The imperative to counter terrorism has always been invoked by those with power to justify extraordinary measures that overwhelmingly result in abuse. Herein lies the conflict at the heart of the UN embrace of counterterrorism efforts. Although the United Nations has a role to play in addressing threats posed by transnational violent extremist groups, the Strategy and subsequent development of the UN counterterrorism architecture has placed the United Nations in an impossible position between its peace, human rights, and development mandate under the Charter and its political and financial reliance on member states whose interests are increasingly at odds with international norms.

The time has come for the United Nations and its member states to right-set and right-size the counterterrorism architecture and

shift resources toward an agenda of abuse prevention and human rights protection. To do so, the architecture must shift its vision and strategy to prioritize concrete policies and programming to protect human rights and civic space, using approaches that are meaningfully responsive to gender and intersecting identities.

The recommendations below will strengthen the UN counterterrorism architecture in line with the analysis presented above. They aim to place accountability, human rights protection, and gender justice priorities at the center of the architecture and UN counterterrorism practice and improve coherence across the UN system, not through additional layers of coordination but through clearer thresholds, responsibilities, and consequences.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES

- » **Right-size and right-set the UN counterterrorism architecture.** Counterterrorism entities must align themselves under the peace and security architecture and center human rights, gender equality, and rule of law priorities in all UN counterterrorism efforts. On a programmatic level, counterterrorism assistance must be fully integrated into country-level UN frameworks to enable a one-UN approach grounded in local priorities and protection risks, particularly in communities most impacted by terrorism and counterterrorism activity. Member states should earmark their funding support to important cross-cutting priorities such as human rights, civic space, and gender protections. Resources, including from the Trust Fund; programming; and staff posts in specialized counterterrorism entities such as UNOCT must be shifted away from counterterrorism capacity-building and technical assistance functions into internal human rights and gender units and expertise and more robust oversight and engagement through dedicated staff posts in UN normative entities, including the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.
- » **Adopt human rights protections as a core obligation in counterterrorism efforts and embed it in the Strategy.** The United Nations and its member states should endeavor to fully implement the recommendations of UN human rights bodies and the Special Rapporteur, including those presented in the Special Rapporteur's "Global Study" report in 2023. The upcoming Strategy review process is set to be an uphill battle

for member states committed to human rights and rule of law-based counterterrorism efforts. Absent a pathway to advance these priorities meaningfully in the resolution, member states must instead protect existing commitments to human rights, gender-related, and civic space protections. As a long-term goal, however, the resolution for the ninth UN Strategy review should explicitly reflect the UN and member state responsibility to prevent and respond to grave, systematic misuse of counterterrorism measures and allocate resources proportionate to the scale and severity of the global epidemic of abuse being perpetrated under counterterrorism and related measures.

- » **Ensure the Unified Results Framework explicitly reflects UN and member state responsibilities to prevent and respond to grave, systematic, and widespread abuse of counterterrorism measures.** The framework must include concrete indicators to measure UN and member state contributions to a gender-responsive protection agenda, including addressing conditions conducive to political violence, preventing the abuse of counterterrorism measures, protecting those targeted, demanding perpetrators be held accountable, advancing civil society engagement, and protecting civic space. The "Global Study" and an accounting of alleged victims referenced in special procedures communiques can serve as baselines for measuring change in the misuse of counterterrorism measures over time.
- » **Promote protection through the Security Council.** Member states rotating into a Security Council seat should use their platform to support resolutions condemning the misuse of counterterrorism measures, respond to violations of human



Town hall with civil society at UN Headquarters on the occasion of the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

rights in the context of countering terrorism, and ensure regular briefings from OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur, treaty bodies, and independent experts on human rights violations perpetrated under the guise of counterterrorism and related national security measures.

» **Strengthen investments in the rights protection capacities of the UN counterterrorism architecture.**

The political and financial reinforcement and system-wide support of normative entities and independent mandate holders is a central part of right-setting the UN role in the global counterterrorism agenda. Their leadership and oversight are essential to reasserting the centrality of international human rights and humanitarian law as the basis of UN counterterrorism efforts. Member states should strengthen their funding commitments not only to normative UN entities, including OHCHR, UN Women, and independent mandates such as the Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism

and on the situation of human rights defenders, but also to the human rights and gender units within counterterrorism entities such as CTED and UNOCT. From the standpoint of programmatic funding, donors must include conditions in their voluntary funding agreements requiring all UN counterterrorism assistance to be contingent on robust human rights risk assessments and mitigation plans.

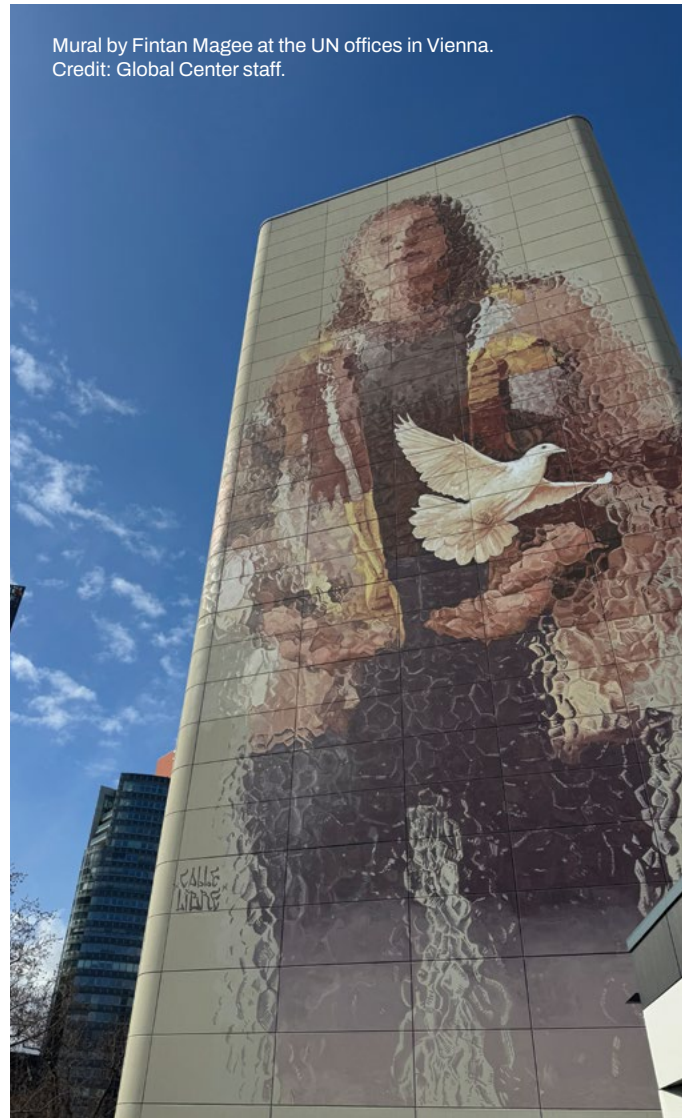
» **Champion the appointment of a Secretary-General committed to making the protection of human rights and civic space the priority of UN counterterrorism efforts.**

Leadership is crucial for building momentum and facilitating cultural and organizational change around a long-term vision. The appointment of the next Secretary-General is an opportunity to reassess the role the United Nations plays in multilateral counterterrorism efforts, and member states must champion candidates committed to reasserting UN human rights obligations into UN counterterrorism efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UN ENTITIES

- » **Programs and activities housed in the UN counterterrorism architecture should prioritize concrete abuse prevention and human rights protection outcomes.** In light of the global epidemic of member state misuse of counterterrorism and related measures, there is an urgent and long overdue need to shift the UN counterterrorism agenda and activities and the associated internal culture of counterterrorism entities toward prevention of abuse, protection from abuse, and accountability for victims of counterterrorism actions. The Compact should commit fully to implementing *A United Nations Agenda for Protection*. Such an effort must prioritize the meaningful implementation of the human rights recommendations issued by treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; invest in deeper integration and concrete oversight roles for UN normative entities and internal gender and human rights units; foster more meaningful and impactful collaboration with civil society; and enable consistent integration with the UN peace and security architecture and Resident Coordinator system.
- » **Require all UN counterterrorism programming to undergo rigorous human rights risk assessments before implementing all counterterrorism activities.** UNOCT and all Compact entities must work with OHCHR and regional UN entities to conduct formal human rights risk assessments before delivering counterterrorism assistance. UNOCT's and UNCCT's burgeoning counterterrorism capacity-building efforts must be reined in, reduced, and subjected to human rights review and oversight. Where member states are found to lack the prerequisite institutional capacities and political will to prevent and respond to rights abuses, the United Nations should not provide counterterrorism-specific assistance. This threshold also should serve as a basis for determining the locations, for example, of UNOCT country offices and host countries of UN counterterrorism meetings and conferences. Where appropriate, member states that do not meet the threshold for counterterrorism support can be referred to other UN implementing partners such as OHCHR, UNODC, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations for human rights, justice and security system reform, and rule of law assistance. In addition, member states must adopt provisions to allow earmarked counterterrorism funds to instead be utilized for prerequisite human rights and rule of law support.
- » **The UN counterterrorism architecture must adopt consistent protection and engagement standards.** Such an effort will benefit from existing guidance across the UN system on human rights, civic space, and gender protection frameworks and civil society engagement practices. The development of these standards should be guided by OHCHR and the Special

Mural by Fintan Magee at the UN offices in Vienna.
Credit: Global Center staff.



Rapporteur and be developed in partnership with civil society. All UN counterterrorism practices and policies should be assessed against these standards, and relevant indicators must be included in the Unified Results Framework.

- » **UN Women is encouraged to make their forthcoming strategy and recommendations on gender mainstreaming across the UN counterterrorism architecture publicly available.** With the support of expert staff on gender and human rights issues in Compact entities, UN Women is best placed to lead on the coordination and oversight of gender mainstreaming efforts across the UN counterterrorism architecture. Member states must adequately support UN Women politically and financially to assume this leadership role.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES

- » **Strengthen commitments to meaningful, sustained civil society engagement.** Member states must engage regularly with civil society to inform UN counterterrorism efforts, include civil society through bilateral channels, and make their financial and political support to the UN counterterrorism architecture contingent on entities meaningfully engaging with and protecting civil society in their counterterrorism-related activities.
- » **Commit to meaningful, sustained, and safe civil society engagement in all Strategy reviews and other counterterrorism policy processes.** Member states must support inclusive, protective, and accountable civil society participation in the Strategy review process. They must create new avenues for diverse civil society representatives to be involved in counterterrorism policy processes. Key considerations include the potential for virtual discussions, solicitation of written submissions, and listening sessions in national and regional capitals.
- » **Exert pressure on UN entities to engage civil society systematically and inclusively and protect them from reprisals.** Member states must hold UN entities accountable to institutionalize robust engagement and reprisal-prevention and -response protocols consistent with the UN duty to ensure safe access and participation of civil society. In line with their obligations under international human rights law and established UN principles on cooperation with the organization, member states must refrain from any acts of intimidation, harassment, or retaliation against individuals or groups engaging UN counterterrorism processes and should guarantee effective remedies when violations have occurred.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UN ENTITIES

- » **Every Compact entity must develop and publish a civil society engagement strategy.** Many entities already have or are in the process of developing a civil society engagement strategy. Some, however, including UNOCT are still falling short in their commitments here. All strategies must be the product of transparent consultation processes with civil society, prioritize communities most affected by counterterrorism measures, and be in accordance with robust risk assessment procedures. Existing UN system-wide and entity-specific guidance, as well as the 2024 scoping study, will be helpful resources for Compact members in developing civil society engagement strategies. Practices from peace-building practitioners, human rights mechanisms, humanitarian actors, and climate justice processes, such as standing advisory groups and protected submissions, should be adapted in UN counterterrorism practices. UN counterterrorism efforts will require significant protection considerations, but existing models can provide good practices for inspiration.
- » **Institutionalize reprisal-prevention protocols for civil society engaging with the UN counterterrorism architecture.** All counterterrorism entities should conduct advanced risk assessments, provide secure modalities for participation, and coordinate follow-up with civil society engaging in UN counterterrorism practices. OHCHR should be resourced to lead on any coordination across entities and the Compact to ensure efforts are in line with existing guidance.
- » **Localize interactions through UN country offices supported by entity-specific civil society engagement officers and units.** Counterterrorism efforts must be firmly integrated into UN country assessments and aligned with local needs and prerequisite capacities. All counterterrorism capacity-building and technical assistance activities should be implemented in accordance with UN country strategies and under the Resident Coordinator system. UN counterterrorism entities should work with Resident Coordinator offices, field presences, and country teams from UN Women, UNODC, UNDP, and OHCHR to regularly and jointly assess risks and establish structured, context-specific opportunities for civil society engagement. Compact members should be resourced for the maintenance of civil society engagement units and expertise to help drive these efforts.

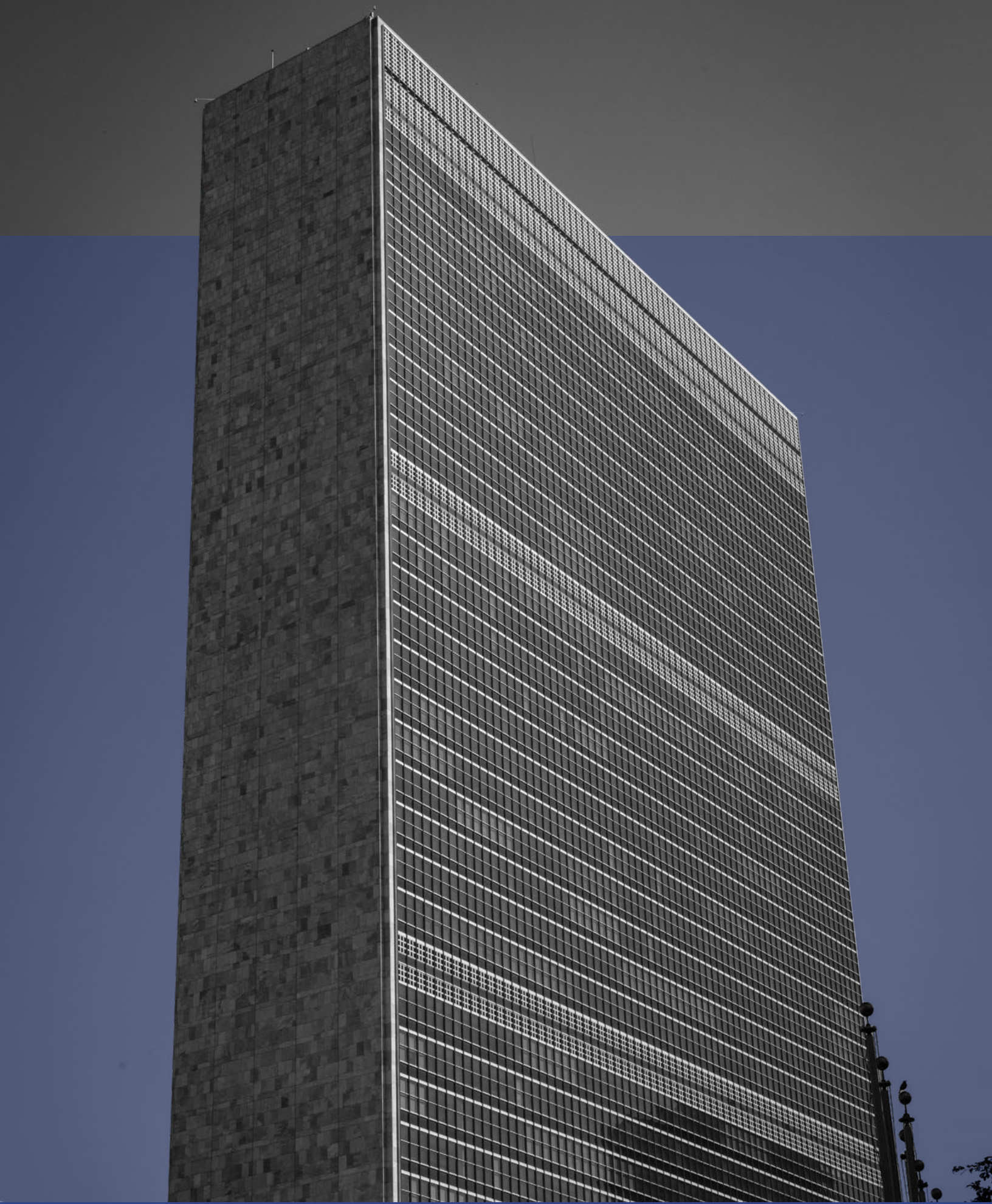
OVERSIGHT, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND TRANSPARENCY

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES

- » **Member states must mandate UNOCT and hold the office accountable for producing a Unified Results Framework that provides a means to measure the success of the Strategy.** Member states must insist that the framework be based on a clear, rights-centered vision of success and nuanced theory of change so that it serves as a means to measure whether and how the UN system is actually contributing to efforts to address political violence while fully protecting human rights and the rule of law.
- » **Consent to independent, unimpeded civil society participation in CTED country assessments and the public release of assessment reports.** Member states must follow the leadership of countries such as Finland that already have made its country assessment public and demonstrated support for a culture of transparency and accountability. Opening the country assessment procedure under Resolution 1373 will enable stronger oversight and accountability over member state counterterrorism measures and can encourage compliance with international legal obligations.
- » **Support a regular independent review process of UN counterterrorism efforts.** The creation of an adequately funded and empowered oversight mechanism for UN counterterrorism activities has been the most prevalent proposal to date for establishing such a process. This proposal is not likely to gain traction in the short term. In the meantime, member states should focus their political and financial support on cohering existing human rights capacities within the architecture (e.g., human rights and gender units, the Special Rapporteur, OHCHR), as well UN system-wide human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review, to provide the kernel of more robust internal oversight. Member states should support UN system-wide efforts to foster greater synergy between Geneva-based UN human rights actors and the largely UN Headquarters-based counterterrorism architecture.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UN ENTITIES

- » **Strengthen and cohere normative actors across the UN system for enhanced internal human rights oversight on UN counterterrorism efforts.** Existing human rights oversight mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review, special procedures, treaty bodies, and normative entities, working in collaboration with well-resourced human rights and gender expertise within the counterterrorism architecture, can form a solid basis for more robust transparency and accountability if adequately resourced, cohered, and empowered under a clear framework.
- » **Conduct a transparent review of human rights risk assessment procedures and follow-through across all Compact entities.** One of the first goals pursued under a new internal oversight framework would be to lead a system-wide review of the HRDDP and other human rights risks assessment and mitigation practices across all Compact entities, with civil society input at every stage. The review should result in recommendations for each Compact entity for strengthening their human rights risk assessment and mitigation protocols.
- » **Implement robust civil society consultations to inform, revise, and validate the Unified Results Framework prior to its finalization, ensuring it provides a means to measure the success of the Strategy.** Measuring the results of disparate UN counterterrorism-related work is not a sufficient means to make decisions about whether UN efforts are achieving the goals of the Strategy, specifically, the extent to which UN efforts are influencing member state counterterrorism efforts in ways that strengthen respect for human rights and the rule of law. UNOCT must ensure that any evaluation of this goal must be based, inter alia, on regular monitoring of changes in member state behavior around the misuse of counterterrorism measures and necessitate input from civil society groups.
- » **Support UNOCT in strengthening its reporting standards, including the consistency and transparency of its financial and programmatic reporting.** The United Nations and its member states must support UNOCT to fully implement the recommendations outlined by OIOS and the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, including the comprehensive publication of financial information; conditions for earmarking on existing funding, including the Fund for Counter-Terrorism; and regular updates on pillar-by-pillar financial reporting and integration of funding into field presences to ensure alignment with local needs. Member states can support these efforts by insisting that further funding to UN counterterrorism work is contingent on transparent, publicly released financial and results reporting.



UN Headquarters in New York. Credit: by Bernd Dittrich (@hdbernd)



The Global Center is an international nongovernmental organization that advances human rights-centered responses to political violence and violent extremism and the injustices that drive them. We believe cooperation among community groups, governments, and international organizations such as the United Nations is critical to achieving a just and secure world.

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