

# G8

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# The G8's Counterterrorism Action Group: leaving takes leadership

**The G8's Counterterrorism Action Group may have been disbanded, but its members' commitment to countering global terrorism is still very much alive**

*By* Alistair Millar, director, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, and non-resident senior fellow, George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute

**W**hen the G8 foreign ministers met in London on 10-11 April, they “reiterated their absolute condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations” and talked about the need for a multi-partner approach to counterterrorism, particularly when it comes to helping low-income countries to improve their own capacities to prevent and combat terrorism while at the same time promoting and protecting the rule of law and human rights. In doing so, the ministers made specific reference to efforts of the United Nations and its Security Council, as well as a new kid on the block – the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). The GCTF was established in 2010 by the United States and Turkey as an informal platform for 30 members from five continents (the G8 countries along with 21 others, plus the European Union) to focus attention on identifying and filling capacity gaps in the realm of advancing civilian counterterrorism.

The G8 foreign ministers' statement illustrates the most important function of the G8: its continued ability to bring high-level attention to pressing international issues. The statement also shows that the G8, by looking to the GCTF for help on counterterrorism issues, recognises that it is not able to provide counterterrorism capacity-building assistance without help from donors and partners who have more to offer than the G8.

In 2011, the G8 made the bold decision to suspend the activity of its Counterterrorism Action Group (CTAG), an initiative that it had created and launched with much fanfare in 2003. The G8 now recognises that a new constellation of actors can help the G8 stick to its comparative advantages and let a broader array of states get on with the day-to-

day analytical and capacity-building work that will be able to turn the statements of eight world leaders into deeds.

In the period following the attacks of 9/11, the UN Security Council had called on member states to “assist each other” in implementing their legally binding commitments to counter terrorism under its newly adopted and sweeping Resolution 1373. It was clear that a coordinated approach among donors was needed to assist through preventing duplication and overlap in programme funding on counterterrorism and to fill broad capacity gaps (such as improving the safety and security of passengers on public transportation). With these concerns in mind, the G8 established CTAG at the 2003 Evian Summit to “prioritise and speed the delivery of counterterrorism training and assistance to countries with the will, but not the skill, to combat terror”, as one US official said.

The CTAG members started by meeting three times a year “to share information on country needs, priorities for assistance,



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projects and programmes they have undertaken; to learn about work of regional counterterrorism training centres; and to learn more about technical assistance programs of international, regional and functional organisations and coordinate their work”. While it can be argued that the CTAG got off to quite a good start in the early years of its existence – particularly by coordinating with the Financial Action Task

Force to prevent overlap and provide financial support for tailored capacity-building programmes – within a few years it was clear that CTAG had failed to meet its own lofty expectations. As Peter Romaniuk has noted in *Multilateral Counter-Terrorism: The Global Politics of Cooperation and Contestation*, “just as the substantive focus of the G8's counterterrorism pronouncements became broader, the capacity-building mission of the CTAG

Diplomats and foreign ministers gathered at the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which was created to fill capacity gaps in advancing civilian counterterrorism

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began to wane". As a result, the amount of time devoted to the CTAG by member states was reduced as meetings became less frequent and the level of participation dropped to lower-level staff. The CTAG suffered from some systemic problems, including the lack of a permanent secretariat and the organisational and administrative burden placed on the CTAG chair delegation, which was also responsible for other more pressing tasks including serving as the chair of the Lyon-Roma group and the president of the G8.

When Canada took the role of chair of the G8 in 2010, it tried to breathe new life into the CTAG. Its leadership was praised in the G8 Leaders' Statement on Countering Terrorism at Muskoka for "bringing strategic

focus to the groups' efforts through the preparation of a robust action plan on counterterrorism and organised crime". By that time, however, efforts were already well underway for the creation of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which, according to the US counterterrorism ambassador at time, Daniel Benjamin, "grew out of the G8's Counterterrorism Action Group". Recognising that its work was now being done more effectively by a larger more focused group of actors within the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the G8 agreed to put the CTAG "on ice" at its last meeting Vienna in 2011.

The CTAG had attempted to be more inclusive and expanded its membership to include the European Commission,

Switzerland, Australia, Spain and others, but all represented high-income countries with similar western-oriented views. With a more diverse group of states representing countries with Muslim majorities, which have personal experience with terrorism such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, by contrast, the GCTF brings a broader range of views and orientation to the table than the CTAG ever did. The GCTF has also been more focused, combining three regional (West Africa, the Horn of Africa plus Yemen and South-East Asia) and two thematic goals (the promoting the rule of law while countering terrorism, and preventing violent extremism), raising over \$150 million in financial commitments from members in its first two years. This has led to several initiatives that are designed to sustain commitment to counterterrorism capacity-building objectives over the long term, such as the recent establishment of an International Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism, in Abu Dhabi and efforts to get an international institute of justice and the rule of law established in North Africa underway.

With the proliferation of multilateral counterterrorism-related entities that have sprung up since 9/11 – including four Security Council committees, a monitoring team and an executive directorate, a Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force and a Terrorism Prevention Branch at the UN alone and many other dedicated units established within regional bodies across the globe – the G8 has made an extremely rare and rather bold move by removing the CTAG from its diary of future meetings. G8 leaders can continue bringing high-level attention to the ongoing need to prevent and combat terrorism in all its forms. G8 members can stay involved and actually add more value by being part of a more focused platform for counterterrorism capacity building within the GCTF.

It is quite easy to create a new bureaucratic entity. It has happened with regularity in the field of counterterrorism over the last decade. But it takes real courage and leadership to suspend the activities of a group like the CTAG. Other counterterrorism entities should follow the G8's lead and take stock of their effectiveness. If they are not achieving their goals efficiently, they should be brave enough to admit that the money they spend sustaining themselves would be better spent elsewhere. ■