

## **Renewing the US-UN Partnership against Terrorism**

*By Eric Rosand*

Many counter-terrorism experts in this country and elsewhere often underestimate the contributions that the UN and other multilateral institutions can make in the field of counter-terrorism. In doing so, they tend to focus on what these bodies cannot do: serve as mechanisms for intelligence sharing and facilitating operational cooperation, rather than on what they can do and must do to address the multidimensional scourge of terrorism.

At the global level, the UN and its specialized agencies can and have used their norm-setting authority to set standards in the various counter-terrorism-related fields. For example, there are now some 16 international treaties that criminalize nearly every imaginable terrorist offense, and international standards or best practices have been developed in areas such as aviation, maritime and port security, and the development of travel documents. A number of these bodies have developed technical assistance programs to help states join the legal framework or implement the standards. In addition, different parts of the UN, whether in areas such as development, human rights, or education, can contribute to addressing some of the underlying conditions that may give rise to terrorism. Finally, the UN's seal of approval can offer legitimacy to a wide range of counter-terrorism programs and initiatives, thus reinforcing the efforts of the United States and other countries outside of the UN.

At the regional level, having unique knowledge and expertise of local conditions, regional bodies can provide a forum for building trust and political will and information sharing, as well as developing approaches that can take into account cultural and other contextual issues and undertaking region-specific initiatives or other actions that complement and build upon the global counter-terrorism framework. They can also facilitate the exchange of best practices and expertise among their members. When given the necessary resources and mandate, they have served as transmission belts between what is adopted at the global level by the UN and other international organizations and the states trying to implement that framework.

While there is great potential for multilateral bodies to contribute, their performance since September 2001 has been uneven at best. Although the events of 9/11 energized a number of regional bodies to become engaged or to deepen their engagement in counter-terrorism activities, the responses have varied greatly, both in terms of breadth and depth. Many are underfunded, providing few if any dedicated resources for counter-terrorism. Few have developed the necessary linkages with the various parts of the UN system involved in counter-terrorism work that are necessary to promote the implementation of the global framework. Moreover, apart from the Organization of American States and some organizations in Europe, few have developed holistic counter-terrorism strategies or programs that include not only security-related and capacity-building measures, but those related to fostering human rights and some of the broader political, social, and cultural issues that may give rise to terrorism. The least engaged regional bodies are in areas where the threat may be the greatest and where states often lack the capacity (and effective strategy) to confront the threat posed by home-grown terrorist groups or recruited radical militant terrorists.

With the exception of European-focused bodies such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, regional organizations have had great difficulty in developing programs aimed at addressing the underlying conditions that are conducive to terrorism and contributing to the "battle of ideas." Organizations in regions with large Muslim populations, such as Southeast Asia, North Africa, and South Asia, would seem ideal for developing regional programs to tackle these issues.

The rapid increase in the number of bodies active on the counter-terrorism plane since 2001, has led to a growing

need and increased calls for greater cooperation, coordination, and information sharing and increased efforts to enhance synergies and minimize duplication of effort. The shortcomings in this area have come almost to define the UN's post-September 11 response, which now includes more than 20 largely separate, turf-conscious components with often overlapping mandates. This has led to calls for the creation of a UN high commissioner for terrorism to coordinate all of these initiatives, and a G8 heads of state summit statement in July 2006 calling for a more coherent UN counter-terrorism program and response to the threat.

For the past five years, the UN, particularly through its Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) has sought to assume the role of global coordinator among the different organizations. While it had some early successes, particular in conducting a worldwide audit of global counter-terrorism capacity, by most accounts the CTC has failed to meet its expectations. Some of its failings stem from the insurmountable obstacles it faces as a Council body operating under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, trying to act as a "social worker" by coordinating capacity-building assistance, rather than the "police officer" that everyone expects the Council to be. A recent study by Security Council Report, noted that it is premature to determine whether the recently adopted GA Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy "will displace the CTC ... as the central focus of UN counter-terrorism activity. However, it will reinforce the growing calls by many states, including a number in the Council, for the focus to be less exclusively on the Council." In short, nearly six years after September 11, 2001, the CTC may now simply be the wrong part of the UN to be taking the lead on these issues.

These shortcomings have been exacerbated by the growing lack of US leadership on these issues in New York and in the CTC in particular. While the US has continued to be the driving force behind many of the counter-terrorism efforts of regional bodies where it is a member (OSCE, OAS, APEC) and in other bodies such as the G8 and FATF, it has devoted little high-level attention to these issues at the UN.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US succeeded in reaching out to the UN, in particular the Security Council, to help globalize the "war on terror." Since then, however, despite the fact that the US has much to gain from an effective, and well coordinated, UN-led effort, US attention has waned. It has shown a decided lack of leadership in New York on the issue and let much of the critical international counter-terrorism machinery, which it was instrumental in creating, atrophy.

Fortunately, there may be an opportunity now for the US to renew its counter-terrorism ties with the UN. In September 2006, the General Assembly adopted the first ever global counter-terrorism strategy, which is very much in line with the Bush Administration's updated counter-terrorism strategy. The GA Strategy calls for a holistic, inclusive approach to counter-terrorism, one which includes not just security-related preventative measures that have been the Security Council's focus since September 2001, but also gives priority attention to addressing terrorism's underlying conditions such as poverty, prolonged unresolved conflicts, dehumanization of victims of terrorism, lack of rule of law and violations of human rights, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization, and lack of good governance. In a single document, the breadth of the UN counter-terrorism framework was put more in line with the scope of both the threat and what is needed to address it effectively

The Strategy, which was supported by every UN Member State, reinforces what many terrorism experts have long felt, namely that an effective counter-terrorism strategy must combine preventative measures with efforts to address both real and perceived grievances and underlying social, economic, and political conditions. It understands that some of the keys to addressing the threat effectively including resolving festering conflicts that are exploited by extremists and addressing economic, social, and political marginalization, which provides fertile ground for the spread of extremism. By calling on all parts of the system as well as states and other international and regional bodies to contribute to its implementation, the Strategy provides an overarching framework for a "whole of government" and "whole of system" approach to combating terrorism, which brings together security, economic,

and socio-cultural elements. All of this reinforces the Bush Administration's September 2006 updated counter-terrorism strategy, which emphasizes non-military tools, international cooperation, and multilateral institutions.

One of the keys to whether the Strategy will in fact be implemented is not only whether there is improved coordination and cooperation among the different parts of the UN system, but whether coordination and cooperation among the numerous other multilateral bodies and mechanisms involved is also improved. Having an effective UN coordinating mechanism at the center of all of this activity is essential. Whether the CTC has the broad legitimacy needed to fill this role remains to be seen. If it is not up to the task then an alternative approach within the UN is needed to help ensure that the promise offered by the Strategy is fulfilled.

With a new Secretary-General and a new US Ambassador, who has been better received on the international stage than his predecessor and who understands the roots of terrorism from his time in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US should seize the opportunity to show that it is committed to working with its global partners, including the UN, in addressing global threats. Both Ambassador Khalizad and Secretary-General Ban have recently accepted new jobs facing a serious threat to the international order that the UN must do its share to protect. They also have the benefit of inheriting an agreed framework for action in the form of a universally endorsed counter-terrorism strategy. Their job is to work with the international community to implement it.

*Eric Rosand is a Senior Fellow at the Center on Global Counter-Terrorism Cooperation in New York and previously served both in the US Department of State's Office of the Counterterrorism Coordinator and at the US Mission to the UN*