EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The seventh review of the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy* offers a critical moment to reflect on the United Nations' role acting against the changing landscape of security, including the COVID-19 pandemic, growing authoritarianism, shrinking civic space, and declining support for multilateralism. Now more than ever, it is critical that the promotion and protection of human rights and the rule of law underpinning the Strategy are reinforced and that the United Nations places a renewed focus on policy leadership and coordination to support the Strategy's implementation in a manner that responds to the peace and security needs of the next decade.

This report, the fifth in the Global Center on Cooperative Security's "Blue Sky" series, explores how the United Nations' comparative advantage can be leveraged to improve the policy development, interagency coordination, delivery, and impact of counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts in support of the Strategy. It first observes the complex security landscape and the way UN counterterrorism entities have adapted their responses to ever-changing threats. Second, it situates counterterrorism and PVE efforts within the UN Secretary-General's broader reform initiatives to advance a prevention-forward approach. Third, it assesses efforts to implement the Strategy at the global, institutional, and programmatic levels in a balanced manner that promotes transparency and accountability.

CALIBRATING THE UN COUNTERTERRORISM ARCHITECTURE

The period since the last Strategy review can be largely characterized as one that saw an ever-expanding role of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), established in 2017 and headed by an Under-Secretary-General. This expansion is reflected in the substantive increase in staffing, extrabudgetary resources, liaison offices, and partnership with UN entities and regional bodies. Member states have placed wide-ranging demands and priorities on the UNOCT that require the office to respond with strategic leadership and coordination.

The UNOCT's reliance on extrabudgetary funding profoundly impacts all aspects of its work. First, the majority of its funding, managed through a trust fund, supports the implementation of ad hoc, time-bound capacity-building programs, with two-thirds of more than 130 staff members tasked with executing these. This is, in part, the result of situating the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, a capacity-building entity, within the UNOCT, as well as creating the new Special Projects and Innovation Branch. The effect has been to focus more energy and resources on the delivery of capacity building than on effectively coordinating the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact (Global Compact) membership. Second, it makes the UNOCT highly dependent on a handful of donors who provide funds that come with explicit earmarking or implicit expectations and oversight. Some commentators have referred to the "pay to play" nature of a select number of donors influencing policy priorities, rather than allocating funds based on a clearly defined plan that strives for balanced Strategy implementation. Third, the rapid rate at which the UNOCT is spending down the trust fund raises serious questions around the sustainability of its operation.

Unearmarked, multidonor resource mobilization is a critical part of taking UN counterterrorism and PVE efforts to the next level and ensuring improved coordination and visibility. The UNOCT multiyear appeal for 2019–2020 represented a first concerted effort for joint resource mobilization but seemed to lack clear strategic direction and prioritization. It would have benefited from further coordination, especially at the UN country team level. The UNOCT's role in overseeing the multiyear appeal's development and the inclusion of proposals that it would implement underline the office's duality as referee and player within the UN counterterrorism and PVE system.

SITUATING UN COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS WITHIN A PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

In the increasingly saturated landscape of capacity development assistance, one strength that differentiates the United Nations is its field presence around the world. To leverage that advantage, coordination between headquarters and field offices and missions must be strengthened in close collaboration with Resident Coordinators, UN country teams, and civil society. The Secretary-General's prevention agenda has offered renewed opportunities for the United Nations to deliver as one. Enhancing coordination between headquarters and the field by supporting upstream violence prevention efforts, setting longer-term and locally driven priorities with local governments and civil society, and monitoring context-specific indicators will help achieve counterterrorism and PVE outcomes that are greater than the sum of their parts. This will also allow for better integration of counterterrorism and PVE efforts across the UN pillars of human rights, peace and security, and development rather than as a standalone effort.

DELIVERING ON CIVIL SOCIETY COMMITMENTS

UN agencies' mandates across the counterterrorism and PVE architecture cannot be fulfilled without the meaningful and sustained participation of civil society, which is a critical partner in mitigating violence and building resilient societies. Counterterrorism and PVE efforts can be harmful to civil society, particularly human rights defenders, and can undermine efforts to build lasting security, including by securitizing civil society work; imposing restrictions on the freedoms of expression and opinion, association, assembly, and religion; and demanding onerous reporting requirements as part of sanctions regimes and regulations on countering terrorism financing.

Civil society engagement needs to involve meaningful collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental actors that informs the strategic design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs. The UNOCT's long-anticipated civil society engagement strategy focuses on drawing expertise from civil society in three key areas—gender, youth, and human rights—across the UNOCT's and the Global Compact's work, but little attention is paid to how the UNOCT will best support civil society to realize Strategy implementation. The Strategy's success depends on consistent engagement with civil society, which was lacking in the Strategy's development. It remains to be seen how civil society will be brought on in that process and how do-no-harm principles will be upheld. Specific concerns have been raised to ensure broad participation by and protection of civil society who engage the United Nations and select national governments. Efforts should be benchmarked against the UN system–wide guidance being prepared as an output of the Secretary-General's call to action to positively engage, promote, and protect civic space.

STANDING UP FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

At the time of its adoption, the Strategy marked a political turning point by recognizing that a sustained response to terrorism requires prevention and cannot rely on hard security responses alone, while placing respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of counterterrorism efforts. In recent years, however, the Strategy's biennial review process has become increasingly politicized. The resulting resolutions are cumulative rather than reflective of current priorities, and outcomes do not effectively guide UN-wide efforts in a manner that systemically accounts for human rights, civil society engagement, and human security.

Without adequate safeguards, the UN system's counterterrorism and PVE policy, coordination, technical assistance, and advocacy risk causing more harm than good. For more than a decade, there has been a steady shrinking of civic space, which is often accompanied by a deterioration of other rights, and abuses under the guise of countering terrorism have been widespread. Member states, independent experts, and civil society have long observed that Pillar IV remains underimplemented by pointing toward the limited advocacy, programming, and investment under this pillar. Mainstreaming human rights issues across the

United Nations' work requires more than incremental, project-based, or piecemeal approaches. It calls for structural reforms, strong leadership, direct financial support, and accountability to support a fundamental shift in the culture. Global Compact entities should employ appropriate accountability and oversight mechanisms that identify, monitor, and address potential harms. Project aims and indicators should focus on measuring impact, reduction of terrorism, and improvements in human security, not merely project milestones.

Priorities and targets guiding the Global Compact working groups' efforts should accordingly be founded on the principles of the Strategy and its biennial resolution and leverage the many existing data and assessment frameworks within the UN system, notably through the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, as well as country-specific and thematic analysis. These efforts must furthermore strive to be gender sensitive and consider the varying experiences, effects, impacts, and needs of people with different gender identities. Gender mainstreaming and parity are critical to achieving gender equality commitments in line with the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the Secretary-General's gender parity strategy.

ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

Assessing progress made in Strategy implementation by member states is difficult, given the need to rely on self-reporting from governments, UN agencies, and civil society. Lacking a formal assessment mandate and framework, the Secretary-General depends on member states sharing information voluntarily, with limited infrastructure for drawing on existing country-specific and thematic analysis and outputs of the UN system. Due consideration should be given to the establishment of an independent review body or the creation of a peer review mechanism to assess member state implementation of the Strategy, which other parts of the UN system employ. The establishment of such a framework would allow for results to feed into the Secretary-General's biennial report ahead of the Strategy review to better inform the negotiation process and priority setting.

Since the last review, a number of efforts have been made to improve the caliber of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation at the UN's programmatic and institutional levels, including by the creation of the Global Compact Working Group on Resource Mobilization and Monitoring and Evaluation. Additional dedicated resources and staff, however, are needed. Without appropriate investments in monitoring and evaluation, priority-setting and funding remain opaque, the impact of individual projects continues to be unclear, duplication and overlap are difficult to avoid, and their overall contributions to the actualization of the Strategy remain uncertain.