



From Adoption to Action: The UN's Role in Implementing its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Eric Rosand

Introduction

For much of the period following the attacks of September 2001, the United Nations' response to terrorism was dominated by the UN Security Council, which adopted a number of resolutions imposing a range of counterterrorism-related obligations on all member states. Perhaps the most significant of these is Resolution 1373 (2001),¹ which enumerated a detailed list of obligations, such as criminalizing the financing of terrorism, freezing terrorists' assets, denying terrorists safe haven, and bringing terrorists to justice, that all member states must undertake as part of a global counterterrorism campaign, regardless of other, more pressing priorities or the perceived level of the threat. These requirements in turn generated a host of counterterrorism responses at the regional, subregional, and national levels around the globe.

The UN General Assembly's adoption of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy² in September 2006 represented a shift in the global response. It broadened political support for UN counterterrorism efforts by reflecting the buy-in and consensus of the entire UN membership rather than just the Security Council. It expanded the global framework to include not only tougher law enforcement and other security measures, but also measures to address real and perceived grievances and underlying social, economic, and political conditions. It also marked the first time that all member states had agreed on a common approach to dealing with the threat.³ It recognizes that, to be effective, counterterrorism measures need to respect human rights and promote the rule of law.

For these reasons, the Strategy has helped move the counterterrorism discourse at the United Nations more in line with the perspective of the majority of member states, particularly those from the global South, and provides an opportunity to recalibrate counterterrorism efforts that have too often overemphasized "hard" security approaches.

Although the General Assembly has stressed that the primary responsibility for implementing the Strategy rests with the member states, it has recognized the important role "the United Nations plays, in coordination with other international, regional and subregional organizations, as appropriate, in facilitating coherence in the implementation of the Strategy at the national, regional and global levels and in providing assistance, especially in the area of capacity-building"⁴ and the need to enhance this role.

With the capacity shortcomings and vulnerabilities in many countries, nearly every part of the UN system has an important role to play in promoting and supporting efforts to implement the Strategy.⁵ The UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force was established in 2005 by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to improve coordination and cooperation among the increasing number of UN actors engaged in counterterrorism.⁶ It played a key role in the formulation of the Secretary-General's April 2006 report, which served as the basis for the Strategy. Since the Strategy's adoption in September 2006, the Task Force, with its thinly staffed secretariat, has become the focal point for UN efforts to support implementation of the global framework.

Coordinated, strategic, and sustained engagement by different parts of the UN system with states and other stakeholders, something which the United Nations has struggled to realize, particularly because its counterterrorism activities mushroomed in the aftermath of 9/11, is needed to help countries strengthen their counterterrorism capacities and thus be able to implement the Strategy. After highlighting some of the United Nations' achievements, in particular the Task Force, in supporting Strategy implementation efforts, this policy brief will enumerate some of the challenges facing the organization as it seeks to enhance these efforts and will offer suggestions on how to overcome them.

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Achievements

The Strategy is largely a compilation of preexisting UN counterterrorism-related resolutions, norms, and measures and generally reinforces existing mandates rather than elaborates new ones.⁷ As a result, most of the ongoing efforts by actors within the UN system that are furthering Strategy implementation, many of which are outlined in the Secretary-General's first-ever report on the subject (July 2008), are not necessarily labeled as such.⁸ In the important area of capacity building, which is addressed under Pillar III of the Strategy, these activities include the work of the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), which continues to assess each country's capacity to implement Resolution 1373 through field visits and the use of other tools, with a view to identifying priority needs and making referrals to potential donors. As of March 2009, the CTED, with its 30 New York-based experts, has passed along 84 cases of technical assistance needs.⁹

In addition, since the launch of the Global Project on Strengthening the Legal Regime against Terrorism in January 2003, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), through its Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB), has delivered various forms of counterterrorism-related assistance aimed at helping countries join and implement the universal instruments against terrorism, which now number 16. This assistance has included legislative drafting aid and the training of criminal justice professionals. Drawing on its Vienna-based staff and network of local consultants and UNODC regional representatives, TPB has provided country-specific assistance to 120 countries and trained 7,700 national criminal justice officials.¹⁰

Whereas the work of individual UN actors is largely unchanged as a result of the Strategy's adoption, the Task Force, though its eight working groups consisting mainly of Task Force members, is the practical expression of the Strategy in the UN system. The Task Force has launched some important initiatives, including the UN Counter-Terrorism Handbook; and its working groups have organized workshops and produced reports with concrete recommendations aimed at relevant UN actors, member states, and other stakeholders in a variety of thematic fields.¹¹

Perhaps the most significant concrete UN contribution to date to Strategy implementation is in the area of victims of terrorism. Building on the Strategy's call for ending the dehumanization of

terrorism victims, the Secretary-General convened the first-ever global Symposium on Supporting Victims of Terrorism in New York in September 2008. The report from that meeting, at which 18 victims from around the world were brought together, includes a series of practical recommendations aimed at ensuring that the voices and needs of the victims are heard and addressed and at raising awareness of the powerful voice of the victims in the global fight against terrorism.¹² This successful symposium highlights a largely untapped comparative advantage of the United Nations in countering terrorism: its ability to offer a platform for experts from different regions to share information and experiences on a variety of thematic issues related to addressing today's terrorist threat. The UN system's potential in this area, however, has not been fully realized, partly due to the lack of a broad-based and effective counterterrorism body for discussing the diversity of counterterrorism issues included in the Strategy. For example, the United Nations has never brought together national counterterrorism officials from around the world to share experiences and lessons learned in trying to understand and counter the growing violent radicalization and extremism that helps fuel much of today's terrorism.

With improved coordination of UN counterterrorism activities as the chief mission of the Task Force, the Integrated Assistance for Countering Terrorism Working Group is of particular importance.¹³ It includes representatives from a number of UN entities involved in Strategy-related capacity building and is a step in the right direction as the United Nations seeks to offer "one-stop shopping" for countries interested in receiving UN assistance in implementing the Strategy. It is intended to complement the work of individual Task Force entities and to take into account the needs assessments already undertaken by them.¹⁴ The working group has developed an automated information-exchange system that will compile all information submitted by Task Force members regarding their previous and ongoing work with the country at issue. It will also engage with bilateral and multilateral donors outside of the Task Force as it seeks to help the country concerned plug the identified capacity gaps.

The objectives of this working group are the correct ones, although, in order for it to realize them, it will need to overcome a few challenges in

addition to the resource one from which the wider Task Force suffers. The first is ensuring that it is adding value to, rather than duplicating, what the CTED is already doing. For example, a number of Task Force members already participate in CTED country visits and contribute to its assessments of national efforts to implement Resolutions 1373 and 1624, which address, *inter alia*, issues related to incitement to terrorism and violent radicalization. In addition, the CTED is already working with the bilateral and multilateral donor community to match technical assistance providers with recipient needs.

Thus, efforts will be needed to address the risk that countries will view the working group as an additional rather than exclusive entry point for engaging with the United Nations on counterterrorism capacity issues. A second, related challenge is getting the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to contribute the necessary information regarding their country-specific, Strategy-related initiatives to ensure a truly integrated UN response to the country concerned across all four pillars of the Strategy. These UN entities have been reluctant to share information and engage in a sustained manner with the CTED, in part because of concerns about being linked too closely with the Security Council's sometimes unpopular security-focused counterterrorism program. UNDP's and UNESCO's reluctance to interact with the Task Force, however, does not offer a positive sign that the working group will have any more luck than the CTED has had so far.

Shortcomings

The Task Force has improved coordination among different UN entities working on counterterrorism, albeit in small ways. To date, however, it has had to rely exclusively on voluntary funding contributions from member states and a small secretariat staffed by junior officials and has operated without a full-time coordinator. The Task Force has so far not been provided with the necessary resources to allow it to carry out its coordination role effectively, provide the necessary support to the various working groups, and reach out beyond UN headquarters in Geneva, New York, and Vienna to find ways to have an impact on on-the-ground efforts to implement the Strategy.

Even with the March 2009 appointment of the first full-time head of the Task Force and the Secretary-General's decision to seek UN regular

budget support for its small secretariat staff, which should enhance the Task Force's effectiveness, the UN resources devoted to supporting Strategy implementation pale in comparison with those being used to support implementation of preexisting UN counterterrorism activities. For example, although each of the three Security Council counterterrorism-related expert groups¹⁵ is a member of the Task Force and the Security Council has increasingly called for more cooperation between the Security Council counterterrorism-related mechanisms and the Task Force and recognized the linkages between the relevant council resolutions and the Strategy, the human and financial resources committed to the Security Council-led activities (some \$15 million and 40 experts) continue to dwarf those devoted to the Task Force and Strategy implementation.¹⁶

In addition, although the Task Force includes representatives from those parts of the system focused on "softer" counterterrorism issues (e.g., UNDP and UNESCO), often without the "counterterrorism" label, these nontraditional counterterrorism actors have been reluctant to participate actively in its work. This has left the perception in many circles that the council continues to be the main counterterrorism actor within UN system and that Strategy implementation efforts are therefore primarily focused on its law enforcement and other security-related aspects.

One of the virtues of the Strategy is that it offers the opportunity to stimulate a more comprehensive national response to countering terrorism and to deepen interagency cooperation and coordination. This possibility should not be limited to traditional counterterrorism actors but should include human rights, development, health, and social services ones as well. As long as the UN development and education actors are reluctant to engage with the Task Force or through the lens of the Strategy and as long as the Task Force's working groups continue to pay limited attention to those issues related to addressing conditions conducive to terrorism, which are paramount for most countries in the global South, the more difficult it will be for the United Nations to convince and work with countries to promote a whole-of-government Strategy implementation plan.

Moreover, more attention should be paid to strengthening on-the-ground cooperation among Strategy-related actors in the field and elsewhere. The traditional UN counterterrorism actors are based in New York and Vienna, making short, infrequent country visits that often do not include the sustained follow-up needed to ensure concrete results. UN counterterrorism actors and

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activities have generally not been integrated into the UN country teams or wider programs, and the vast majority of UN resident coordinators have shied away from involvement with what had been viewed in many quarters as a Security Council-imposed and thus unpopular agenda. A more integrated UN approach to its Strategy-related work at the country and subregional levels, which includes regular interactions with counterterrorism practitioners, is needed.

More broadly, the United Nations must think more strategically about how best to engage with each region on Strategy-related issues. For example, which of the many tools in the Strategy tool kit should be used in a particular region or country to promote Strategy implementation? Which aspects of the Strategy deserve priority attention in the region? Which UN actors should take the lead on the ground? What role should the United Nations play in promoting counterterrorism cooperation in a particular region? The Task Force could usefully consider all these issues rather than largely limiting itself to the important but insufficient task of improving coordination and cooperation with the UN system on different thematic aspects of the Strategy.

Possible Ways Forward

With a broad-based, consensus counterterrorism framework in place, the existing, relevant UN mechanisms may need to be adapted to maximize the contributions that the United Nations can make to supporting Strategy implementation efforts at the regional, subregional, and national levels over the long term.

For example, to be able to fulfill its coordination role effectively over the long term and to stimulate Strategy-related capacity-building efforts, the Task Force must be supported by a staff of substantive experts in a range of Strategy-related fields that can service the relevant working groups and work from New York and in the field with countries to further Strategy-related capacity-building and other implementation efforts. This support is particularly important as the Task Force seeks to shift to a new operational phase.¹⁷ These experts could also assume the burden of trying to coordinate Strategy-related capacity-building activities. Given the reluctance of some member states to increase the UN regular budget or reallocate existing funds to counterterrorism activities, the overlap between the General Assembly’s Strategy and the Security Council’s counterterrorism program, the desire of most states to see greater synergies between the counterterrorism efforts of these two principal UN organs, and the obstacles the CTED has sometimes faced in trying to build cooperative relationships with states and other stakeholders, a single counterterrorism office or department should be

established within the UN Secretariat once the CTED’s mandate expires at the end of 2010.¹⁸ This new unit, which would absorb the resources currently being given to the CTED, would then become the staff body within the United Nations responsible for supporting implementation of the Strategy and Security Council Resolutions 1373 and 1624 and for coordinating and facilitating the delivery of Strategy-related assistance.¹⁹ This secretariat body, which would also service the council’s Counter-Terrorism Committee as the CTED currently does, could seek to place some of its staff in UN country and regional offices, which would facilitate the integration of Strategy implementation efforts within wider UN country and regional team activities.

This shift would allow the United Nations to take a “substantial step towards fulfilling the call by Member States to operate as ‘One UN.’”²⁰ Mainstreaming counterterrorism into the wider UN programmatic activities in the field would reinforce the Strategy’s message about the importance of a whole-of-government response to the terrorist threat. It would also help encourage national partners to treat the Strategy and other counterterrorism capacity-building programs “as part of development assistance to ‘peace and security’ and ‘good governance’ and therefore as part of the national development plan of the country in question.”²¹ Doing so might help increase the likelihood that counterterrorism “is perceived as a national priority and that it is reflected in national policies and strategies.”²²

In addition to a more unified UN counterterrorism program, the Secretary-General should appoint a single senior UN counterterrorism official—perhaps a UN high commissioner for counterterrorism or a special representative of the Secretary-General on counterterrorism—not only to head the new office or department, but also to spearhead the UN system’s Strategy implementation efforts, with a view to enhancing their coherence and providing them with more strategic direction. The United Nations has high commissioners or special representatives of the Secretary-General in more than a dozen thematic areas, many of which were created to improve both the coordination within the United Nations of a number of relevant programs and the coherence of the message the United Nations is projecting to the world as it works in the particular field. Yet, on an issue that is at the top of the world body’s agenda and that requires a whole-of-system response at the national, regional, and global levels, the United Nations is essentially faceless.

In the end, despite its current shortcomings, the United Nations has made some important contributions to Strategy implementation. These will only be enhanced if steps are taken to streamline UN counterterrorism activities, including by

making them more relevant and closely linked to regional and national efforts, with a view to ensuring that the connections among development, peace, security, and human rights reflected in the Strategy are operationalized on the ground.

NOTES

¹ UN Security Council, S/RES/1373, 28 September 2001.

² UN General Assembly, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/RES/60/288, 8 September 2006.

³ The Strategy's four-pillar plan of action includes measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, measures to prevent and combat terrorism, capacity building, and assurance of a human rights- and rule of law-based approach to countering the threat.

⁴ UN General Assembly, A/RES/62/272, 5 September 2008, para. 5.

⁵ These different parts include traditional counterterrorism bodies, such as those affiliated with the Security Council, in particular the Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate (CTED) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB), as well as entities not traditionally associated with counterterrorism, such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Development Programme, and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

⁶ The Task Force is comprised of 23 entities across the UN system and various specialized agencies, funds, and programs, as well as Interpol. It is charged with improving cooperation and coordination among the different UN entities in the field of counterterrorism. The Task Force has organized itself into eight thematic working groups "where cooperation among United Nations system actors can add value for the implementation of the Strategy." See "Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF)," n.d., <http://www.un.org/terrorism/cttaskforce.shtml>.

⁷ Among the exceptions is the call for the development of a single, comprehensive UN Bio-Incident Database.

⁸ UN General Assembly, United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Activities of the United Nations System in Implementing the Strategy: Report of the Secretary-General, A/62/898, 7 July 2008.

⁹ "Implementing the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," March 2009, http://www.un.org/terrorism/pdfs/CT_factsheet_March2009.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These include countering violent extremism, tackling the financing of terrorism, promoting public-private partnerships in the context of counterterrorism, and addressing the impact of terrorism and counterterrorism measures on the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights. See <http://www.un.org/terrorism/cttaskforce>.

¹² See http://www.globalct.org/images/content/pdf/other/UN_Report_on_Supporting_Victims_of_Terrorism.pdf.

¹³ For information on this working group, see <http://www.un.org/terrorism/workgroup10.shtml>. This working group was formerly known as the Working Group on Facilitating the Integrated Implementation of the UN Strategy.

¹⁴ The group has received requests from two countries (Madagascar and Nigeria) and will undertake a mapping of ongoing and planned capacity-building activities in each one.

¹⁵ The three expert bodies are the CTED, the Al-Qaida/Taliban Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, and the 1540 Committee Group of Experts.

¹⁶ The same situation exists for the implementation of the mandate of the UNODC's TPB, under which some 35 experts, armed with an annual budget of \$9–10 million (the vast majority of which comes from voluntary contributions from member states as opposed to the regular UN budget), are helping countries ratify and implement the universal instruments against terrorism.

¹⁷ "UN Counter-terrorism Task Force Shifts Into New Operational Phase," UN News Service, 4 March 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/printnews.asp?nid=30091>.

¹⁸ Security Council Resolution 1805 (2008) established the CTED's current mandate.

¹⁹ Consideration should be given to merging UNODC's TPB and one or both of the remaining Security Council counterterrorism expert groups (the Al-Qaida/Taliban Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team and the 1540 Committee Group of Experts) into this new office or department.

²⁰ Martin Palous, statement on behalf of the European Union at the informal briefing by the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force to the General Assembly, New York, 3 March 2009, http://www.mzv.cz/un.newyork/en/czech_eu_presidency_2009/statements_by_the_czech_presidency_on/statement_on_behalf_of_the_european_16.html.

²¹ Julian Brett and Finn Skadkaer Pedersen, "Study to Identify Good Practices of Development Assistance in Support of Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building in Developing Countries," July 2008, p. 2 (copy on file with author).

²² Ibid.

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