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# The UN Counter-Terrorism Agenda and its Linkages to Broader Prevention, Peacebuilding, and Peace Enforcement Efforts

This policy brief provides considerations for member states regarding a reconceptualization of United Nations (UN) approaches to counter-terrorism, in addition to preventing and countering violent extremism within the organization's broader peace and security landscape—given the challenges posed by the siloed expansion of counter-terrorism frameworks in recent years. As member states look ahead to the Summit of the Future, the authors provide insights regarding ways that the Pact for the Future might better reflect the intersections between counter-terrorism and the broader peace and security approaches, with the goal of laying a foundation for a more holistic approach that includes counter-terrorism as one tool in a larger peace and security toolbox, while prioritizing human rights and protecting civic space.

## Introduction

Since the 9/11 attacks, the UN's involvement in counter-terrorism has expanded exponentially, through the adoption of more than 40 UN Security Council resolutions and eight biennial reviews of the General Assembly's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), first adopted by consensus in 2006. Counter-terrorism has become deeply embedded in the UN system, with 42 UN entities involved in counter-terrorism work in some respect, principal among them the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Since its founding in 2017, UNOCT has undergone rapid expansion, receiving more than USD 370 million in voluntary contributions through the UN Trust Fund for Counter-Terrorism,<sup>1</sup> expanding to approximately 200 staff members including 55 regular budget posts, opening a growing number of offices around the world, and

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, Funding, <https://www.un.org/counter-terrorism/funding-and-donors>, last accessed 9 April 2024.

coordinating 47 entities as part of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

Concerns regarding the negative impacts of counter-terrorism laws, policies, and measures in general, and the lack of human rights and rule of law promotion and protection, gender-sensitivity, and meaningful civil society engagement in particular, have long been documented and apply to the growing UN architecture and activities.<sup>2</sup> Among the consequences are a severe shrinking of civic space and reprisals directed at human rights defenders, women's organizations, and journalists. Given their politicization and supposed urgency, counter-terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) activities also tend to overtake more structural peace, security, and development investments, and to be counterproductively applied as the primary reason for engagement.

Since much of the UN's work on counter-terrorism has been developed and funded alongside, rather than within, longstanding prevention and peacebuilding efforts, **counter-terrorism has been described as a quasi-fourth pillar of the United Nations.**<sup>3</sup> This disjointed approach has led to fragmented strategies differently addressing various conflict situations and forms of violence, and undermining potential synergies between counter-terrorism, P/CVE, and broader peace and security efforts.

**The Summit of the Future, to be held in September 2024, could provide an opportunity for member states to address this siloed approach** by exploring opportunities for greater consideration and integration of violent extremism and counter-terrorism issues in the world body's broader peace and security efforts. Member states could seek to clarify and reconcile overlapping and conflicting mandates and activities to foster a more coherent and coordinated approach to today's complex conflict situations, while safeguarding against the negative impacts of counter-terrorism efforts and their potential to crowd out other more impactful priorities. **The second chapter of the Pact for the Future provides an opportunity to identify priorities for coordinated, complementary efforts to address threats to international peace and security at both the national and international level,** emphasizing the importance of an approach to counter-terrorism efforts that is inclusive, rights-compliant, and gender-responsive.

This background paper is intended to provide UN member states with insights on integrating key concepts and language relating to counter-terrorism and P/CVE into the Pact for the Future.

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<sup>2</sup> Global Center on Cooperative Security, "Blue Sky VI: An Independent Analysis of UN Counter-terrorism Efforts," June 2023, [https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Center\\_Blue-Sky-VI-Report\\_June-2023.pdf](https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Center_Blue-Sky-VI-Report_June-2023.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> SaferWorld, "A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism," June 2020, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/downloads/ct-textpp-final-file.pdf>.

## Reflecting violent extremism prevention and counter-terrorism efforts across the Pact for the Future

For many years, terrorism and conflict were viewed as different contexts and treated as separate domains for intervention. However, there is increasing recognition that **terrorism activities are often associated with or take place in conflict settings**. In fact, 95 percent of deaths from terrorism occur in countries that already have at least one ongoing conflict.<sup>4</sup> There is overlap between drivers of terrorism and other forms of violence,<sup>5</sup> and examining the presence of terrorist groups and activities through a conflict analysis lens can help to better understand and effectively address them through a whole-of-society approach. This has specific implications across many areas of the UN peace and security agenda, as outlined below, and member states may wish to incorporate language in relevant areas of the Pact for the Future.

### *Prevention and peacebuilding*

Violent extremism is often the product of local conditions of injustice and inequality including gender and economic inequality, weak state governance, and varying forms of exclusion that fuel cycles of violence and insecurity. Therefore, there is often considerable overlap in prevention strategies, whether for conflict prevention, crime prevention, or prevention of violent extremism. Furthermore, a recent UNDP program evaluation of support to conflict-affected countries concluded that, “PVE, as outlined in United Nations policy documents, has the potential to encompass the entirety of development and conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In recent years, United Nations agencies and donors have labelled work on government reform, livelihood, education, and peacebuilding as PVE. This is somewhat understandable, given the amount of donor funding that has gone into this area, but there has been limited evidence of the linkages between many of the proposed interventions and PVE results.”<sup>6</sup> Given the stigma associated with violent extremism, and the negative impacts on beneficiaries of being associated with programs targeting violent extremism, **member states should consider ways to incorporate language in the Pact for the Future calling for the prioritization of broader prevention and peacebuilding approaches that also address the drivers of violent extremism**, rather than demand more counter-terrorism efforts.

**At the UN, challenges stem from the separation of the broader violence prevention and P/CVE agendas.** This siloed perspective limits the effectiveness of efforts, overlooking critical connections between various forms of conflict and violence and often resulting in a narrow understanding of complex issues. It has also allowed P/CVE and counter-terrorism efforts and actors to operate at a further remove from UN human rights and development frameworks, including the UN Resident Coordinator system. Some national and regional actors are increasingly considering how to better integrate these efforts, particularly by discussing different approaches to national violence prevention

strategies, which member states may wish to reference in the Pact for the Future. Attention should be paid to the benefits of addressing the drivers of violent extremism as part of the broader peace and security agenda, and member states could consider incorporating language on the prevention of violent extremism as part of violence prevention more broadly, including in the context of nationally led prevention strategies, when negotiating the Pact for the Future. This approach would provide access to a diverse array of tools and strategies that would enable tailored responses to specific contexts, addressing root causes, and preventing violent extremism.

In recent years, UN engagement in counter-terrorism environments has increasingly fallen under the label of stabilization. There are significant overlaps between stabilization and peacebuilding, and many projects, when conducted in different contexts, could be categorized as peacebuilding, resulting in ambiguity around both fundamental concepts and project implementation. However, one structural goal of stabilization is supporting a state that is threatened by non-state or terrorist actors. As a result, projects conducted with a stabilization focus may prop up states that lack legitimacy, or are weak, unaccountable, and corrupt, fueling further insecurity and violence by insulating governments from the need to address popular grievances. **Member states may wish to incorporate language reiterating the need for accountable, responsive, legitimate government leadership in peacebuilding and stabilization efforts; they may also wish to include language acknowledging the need for comprehensive approaches that avoid over-securitized responses**, in line with language that has already been proposed as part of the peace enforcement section of the Pact.

#### ***Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration***

UN entities have a long history of work with ex-combatants on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), but individuals identified as suspected terrorists and foreign terrorist fighters are subject to special procedures involving a different legal framework, called prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR). However, the legal and technical standards applied to individuals formerly involved in terrorist activities differ considerably from those applied to former combatants undergoing the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process. The discrepancy in standards persists even though individuals detained under the PRR process may not have been involved in

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<sup>4</sup> Flávia Carbonari et al., “A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention,” *Pathfinders*, NYU Center on International Cooperation, March 2020, 6, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/a-review-of-the-evidence-and-a-global-strategy-for-violence-prevention/>.

<sup>5</sup> Celine Monnier, “Bridging the Silos: Integrating Strategies Across Armed Conflict, Violent Crime and Violent Extremism to Advance the UN’s Prevention Agenda,” *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, July 12, 2021, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/bridging-the-silos-integrating-strategies-across-armed-conflict-violent-crime-and-violent-extremism-to-advance-the-uns-prevention-agenda/>.

<sup>6</sup> Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu, “Evaluation of UNDP Support to Conflict-Affected Countries” (New York: Independent Evaluation Office UNDP, December 2020), 61, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/18359>.

violent acts, in contrast to some ex-combatants undergoing DDR who are reintegrated without undergoing prosecution or detention.

Moreover, the UN's work on PRR processes risks neglecting the root causes of violence. For instance, in Cameroon, attempts to address the Boko Haram and Anglophone crises under a single DDR framework face challenges due to the absence of peace agreements and national strategies. Due to the lack of these traditional preconditions for DDR activities, international support is limited, and national rehabilitation and reintegration efforts are not supported.<sup>7</sup> **Member states may wish to reiterate the need for support to national reintegration efforts and to call for reintegration efforts to attempt to address root causes.**

In addition, deradicalization efforts that are often part of rehabilitation processes in counter-terrorism contexts have been shown to further stigmatize and alienate ex-combatants.<sup>8</sup> Some P/CVE practitioners have questioned the idea that individuals need to be deradicalized, arguing that efforts should focus on preventing supposedly radicalized individuals from engaging in violence. To address these complexities effectively, a tailored approach in local contexts should be prioritized, placing communities and civil society engagement at the core of the process.

### *Peace operations and peace enforcement*

The UN has consistently maintained that peace operations should not undertake military counter-terrorism operations, as the three principles of peacekeeping are incompatible with the securitized, non-impartial and non-consent-based approach typical of counter-terrorism efforts. However, many peace operations are nevertheless deployed in contexts where terrorist groups are active. Member state demand for peace operations to undertake counter-terrorism and other more kinetic activities has been a major driver of the shift away from UN peacekeeping towards African Union (AU) and sub-regional peace support operations. The secretary-general himself has called regularly for a new generation of peace enforcement and counter-terrorism operations led by regional organizations<sup>9</sup>. Even so, UN support to AU peace support operations has been planned and delivered almost exclusively through the structures within the UN established for peace operations rather than those established for counter-terrorism operations.

African peace support operations, however, are not a substitute for UN peace operations. In contrast to UN peace operations, African peace support operations

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<sup>7</sup> Annabelle Bonnefont and Junko Nozawa, "Realizing a Whole-of-Society Approach to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in the Far North Region of Cameroon," *Global Center on Cooperative Security*, November 2022, 4, <https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/GCCS-PB-Realizing-Whole-Society-Approach-DDR-Far-North-Region-Cameroon-2022.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> In <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-02-13/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-consultation-our-common-agendasummit-of-the-future>, among others.

are focused on short-term security objectives rather than on longer-term political strategies or peacebuilding activities required to address the root causes of conflict. The deployment of such operations, at least in their current form—particularly when they are in receipt of UN financial or operational support—can also have implications for the ability of UN entities deployed in parallel, including country teams, to implement their respective programs and mandates. **Member states should ensure that the Pact for the Future highlights that lasting peace cannot be achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements alone, but through comprehensive solutions as part of a broader political strategy and through a collaborative approach between the UN and regional organizations.**<sup>10</sup> The adoption of Security Council resolution 2719 is an important step in recognizing opportunities to strengthen collaboration and coordination efforts between the UN and the AU on peace and security.

## Opportunities offered by the Pact for the Future for a more inclusive approach toward sustainable peace

As the threat of terrorism and our understanding of its drivers evolves, so must our approaches to preventing and countering it. Today, countries face complex conflict and development settings, with significant variations in the threat landscape from state and non-state, including violent extremist actors. Initial efforts against terrorism focused on security aspects, but increasingly actors in this space recognize the need to limit or avoid overly securitized approaches, given the lack of success of these approaches in addressing root causes, and the risk that these approaches will in fact exacerbate underlying drivers.

### *Localizing efforts*

The interlinkages between terrorism and other challenges, including climate change, corruption, transnational organized crime, and local conflict, are also increasingly more salient and complex. In this regard, localizing counter-terrorism approaches is essential to their success. **Member states may wish to call for anchoring peace and security interventions in a nuanced understanding of local contexts as a way to address the root causes of conflict and prevent the spread of violent extremism, fostering sustainable peace.** Adopting a local and microlocal approach allows counter-terrorism actors to identify the unique combination of risk and protective factors for each specific area, facilitating targeted resource allocation for effective interventions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eugene Chen, “Next Steps on the Financing of African Peace Support Operations: Unpacking Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023),” *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, February 15, 2024, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/next-steps-on-the-financing-of-african-peace-support-operations/>.

<sup>11</sup> Among others, see Celine Monnier, “Seven Questions to Consider in Designing, Implementing, and Supporting Effective Nationally Led Violence Prevention Strategies,” *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, September 14, 2023, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/seven-questions-to-consider-in-designing-implementing-and-supporting-effective-nationally-led-violence-prevention-strategies>.

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The UN peace and security architecture is not set up to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas or integration of efforts. Many reasons are behind this, including budget processes that reify divisions, funders that reinforce their own priorities, the domination of the hierarchical structure of different departments, and the challenges of a human resources system in which movement across departments and organizations is rarely rewarded.

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### *Ensuring the protection of human rights*

Today, more than 80 countries have proposed or enacted more than 200 restrictions on civil society in the last ten years.<sup>12</sup> The lack of an international definition of terrorism and the proliferation of repressive security measures further contribute to counter-terrorism playing an outsized role in the shrinking of the civic environment. The non-profit sector is increasingly being hindered, delayed, stopped, or even criminalized. Measures to combat the financing of terrorism have also been used against civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and humanitarian actors, who have faced increasing restrictions on the receipt and transfer of funds and the freezing or closure of accounts. Humanitarian organizations face financial and criminal liability for responding to the humanitarian imperative, leading to a chilling effect where decisions on where to operate and whom to serve are not dictated by needs, but rather by the risk of breaching counter-terrorism legislation. More worryingly, **many accounts point to counter-terrorism efforts themselves serving as a conflict driver**, with counter-terrorism operations—for example through the indiscriminate application of militarized approaches, arbitrary arrests and detention, and the stigmatization of certain individuals or groups—exacerbating underlying grievances and driving terrorist recruitment and activity.<sup>13</sup> **Language in the Pact for the Future should further reinforce the necessity of adopting a rights-based approach to counter-terrorism and P/CVE, guided by the principles of human rights promotion and protection, civil society engagement, and gender-sensitivity to address the broad diversity of conflicts and work toward sustainable peace.**

### *Promoting and protecting the rule of law*

Debate continues about whether terrorist activities should be examined in judicial systems under international humanitarian law, as applicable in conflict, or under criminal or terrorism laws, employing a more intrusive approach prioritizing security measures over human rights and individual liberties. As the counter-terrorism agenda has expanded, we have observed the significant growth of counter-terrorism legal frameworks, often embedded in emergency laws and disconnected from existing legal frameworks such as international law, international human rights law, international humanitarian law, international refugee law, and international criminal law. **Member states should ensure that counter-terrorism frameworks defer to existing legal regimes to ensure a more comprehensive approach to promoting sustainable peace.**

National legal frameworks for terrorism vary greatly from country to country. Some governments may treat terrorist activities as crimes but take different approaches in determining which specific criminal offense applies, as well as which legal process to undertake, and whether it involves civil or military court systems. **Member states should consider how to encourage the UN to**

**reinforce its commitment to adherence to the rule of law, as well as core human rights principles.** Adherence to the rule of law means that crimes of terrorism must not be vague or overly broad, leaving too much discretion to those who enforce those laws. Laws must give clear notice about what conduct is prohibited, must respect human rights, and may not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender orientation, socio-economic status, or political ideology. They must apply equally to all.

### *Closing silos across UN efforts*

To a large extent, counter-terrorism and P/CVE programs and activities, as implemented by UNOCT and members of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, overlap with the work of the United Nations in other areas of peace and security, including in the areas of prevention, peacebuilding, and peace operations.

Yet the UN peace and security architecture is not set up to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas or integration of efforts. Many reasons are behind this, including budget processes that reify divisions, funders that reinforce their own priorities, the domination of the hierarchical structure of different departments, and the challenges of a human resources system in which movement across departments and organizations is rarely rewarded. The siloes are reinforced by the different agenda items in which each area is covered in the UN General Assembly, usually by different delegates in the same Permanent Missions to the United Nations. These and other structural issues make it difficult to effectively coordinate, set priorities, and produce coordinated and meaningful impact.

**The Pact for the Future represents an important opportunity to acknowledge the overlap and interplay between addressing the drivers of violent extremism and other activities of the UN system** as a first step towards right-sizing UN counter-terrorism efforts. The UN must ensure that its counter-terrorism efforts are being deployed in line with the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and that their primary objective is fostering sustainable peace. **Member states could emphasize the need to prioritize political solutions rather than securitized interventions as part of comprehensive approaches that respond to root causes and drivers of conflict, building on language included in Security Council resolution 2719 (2023) on AU-led peace support operations.**

To enhance programmatic coherence, member states may wish to encourage UNOCT to coordinate through UN country teams and contribute to common country analyses. In addition, **member states may wish to encourage the**

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<sup>12</sup> 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/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Journey to Extremism: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement, 2023," <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/v2/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2023-english.pdf>.



**incorporation of P/CVE efforts into overarching national prevention strategies and align and integrate them into UN strategic frameworks, in particular, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation**

**Frameworks.** Member states may wish to call for UNOCT to become part of the Global Focal Point for Rule of Law (GFP), given that there is considerable overlap in the Security Sector Reform/DDR/PVE work of UNOCT and the various entities that coordinate through the GFP. The Pact for the Future could call for better horizontal integration of all these areas of the UN, moving beyond the standard coordination meetings to integration of capacities in different structures that would allow for deeper exchange across different efforts.

This would also require better alignment among the various parts of the UN working on counter-terrorism. Member states may wish to call for better alignment between the General Assembly's GCTS and the work of the Security Council. Establishment of dedicated intergovernmental processes encompassing the entire domain of counter-terrorism could help encourage alignment.

## Conclusion

When the Pact for the Future considers the complexities of countering terrorism and P/CVE, it must do so by first looking at the broader assessment of drivers of violence. It is also important to ensure that counter-terrorism initiatives are not conducted in silo and are considered as part of broader peace and security responses, facilitating access to a more comprehensive set of tools, and allowing a more flexible, targeted approach to countering terrorism. Moreover, as the GCTS has affirmed, counter-terrorism and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals but complementary and mutually reinforcing. The coordination and, where appropriate, inclusion of CT/P/CVE in broader peace and security efforts should be guided by the principles of human rights promotion and protection, civil society engagement, and gender sensitivity to address the broad diversity of conflicts and work toward sustainable peace. The Pact for the Future should call on the UN to live up to its role as a normative leader and to act as an accountability mechanism for member states in relation to the protection of human rights within their counter-terrorism practices. Recognition by member states can better align approaches and activities across these intersections in the Pact for the Future to help enhance the effectiveness of both UN counter-terrorism, peace, and security efforts and shift the narrative from securitized approaches to more holistic efforts with a greater focus on prevention.

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