



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

Terrorism including issues related to Ideology, Identity Politics, and Organized Crime

Executive Summary

The multilateral system continues to be under severe stress as the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism metastasize. While some have argued that such “malignancies” are the consequences of inherently national problems, no one doubts that the threats they pose have become transnational in origin and effect, and can only be overcome through multilateral, global efforts.

Many factors drive and sustain today’s terrorism. It is a phenomenon that stems from a constellation of fault lines and imbalances caused by exclusionary, unaccountable, and ideologically based governance; inequitable distribution of resources; and new and emerging forms of geopolitical power rivalries that are reshaping the trajectory of these imbalances and their outcomes. Deft use of web-based communication technologies, including social media, has made it possible for terrorist organizations and organized crime networks to make inroads into disgruntled and marginalized communities and rally them to their ranks on the basis of social injustices and grievances created by these imbalances. Marginalized youth have been a prime target. Armed non-state actors that hold territory, command resources, and engage in highly lucrative illicit economic activities have made these youth their primary recruits.

The United Nations (UN) – and the multilateral system more widely – remains at a deadlock when it comes to a universal definition of terrorism. The challenges posed by the lack of a universally accepted definition further manifest themselves in the way in which the current framework of international law, although prohibiting terrorists acts in multiple forums, is not capable of addressing the full scope and the evolving nature of the terrorist threat. At the geopolitical level, multilateral efforts will continue to be hampered until the double standard is addressed: namely, that the rhetoric and action of member states is inconsistent when it comes to terrorism.

Terrorism is no longer merely local and can no longer be considered a menace in the distance. It is expected that fighters will return to their home countries so radicalized, traumatized, or both that they will pose a serious danger. However, the attention to foreign fighters must not eclipse the reality that the proportions of recruitment are incomparably larger in the localities of the terrorist groups, which are also the societies that bear the brunt of the violence.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact purpose of any terrorist as there are many factors - sociological, economic and psychological - driving extremism, and thus, radicalization must be viewed as highly individualized. The use of religion is a powerful and persuasive tool. And yet, terrorism that is seemingly religiously driven may simply be perpetrated by regular criminals looking for gains, projects or

adventures that are justified by a “higher purpose,” or by individuals who are otherwise excluded from society.

Violent extremist groups are mostly based in or operating in fragile and failed states, parts of the world with the highest concentration of political injustice, corruption, and conflict. Recruits are a byproduct of that system. Today’s landscape is marked by a shift from ideologically driven violence to motivations stemming from ethnic-religious identity politics that manifests itself in exclusionary and unaccountable governance. Where there is lacking social inclusion and participatory governance, extremism thrives.

The challenge remains in trying to respond to such threats without infringing upon civil liberties and freedoms. Extensive counterterrorism measures that target the Internet often lead to more authoritarianism, infringement on privacy and the free flow of information, and restrictions on civil liberties. On the societal level, blowback manifests itself in the rise of xenophobic groups, the increased prominence of the extreme right, and the prevalence of hate-crimes, rendering fault lines of identity politics more accentuated. In other words, maintaining support for the state is essential in countering violent extremism but authoritarian and repressive measures implemented can serve to undermine citizens’ support.

Multilateral efforts primarily under the aegis of the UN Security Council have provided various capacity development support and other measures to strengthen member states’ domestic counterterrorism initiatives. However, certain ambiguities inherent in these measures and in their uneven implementation provided a convenient pretext for some to pursue double standards in the fight against terrorism. A “siloed” approach to the problem and an inability to determine a universal definition of terrorism have further hampered these efforts.

Terrorism often intersects with other transnational challenges. In understanding the nexus between terrorism and organized crime, the way in which criminal activity serves to undermine governance and the rule of law and create weaknesses in the state structure for terrorists to exploit is of central importance, as well as the financial driver these activities constitute.

While the nexus of organized crime and terrorism is important, the former constitutes its own threat to global peace and security. Thus far, the response has been ad hoc, reactive, and disjointed. There is insufficient information about the extent of the problem, no mechanism to monitor implementation of the major instrument for fighting crime (namely the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime), and cooperation among law enforcement agencies is insufficient.

In many cases the state is also complicit and encouraging the use of its territory for organized crime. States that are struggling to deliver a full range of services progressively resort to delegate groups to govern themselves. Currently, there is a set of measures to deal with organized crime, but the sanctions regime has focused more on the political rather than the financial dimension of sanctions. Financial drivers remain underestimated and understudied.

The notion that the fight against terrorism and organized crime can be won primarily by military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations is losing currency. The paradigm shift from “counterterrorism” (CT) to “countering violent extremism” (CVE) and “preventing violent extremist” (PVE), has allowed for greater awareness of the root causes that lead to terrorism and the

need to move beyond traditional methods based on the application of military force, public diplomacy, pressure to democratize, or broad-based poverty alleviation.

The current multilateral architecture dealing with terrorism and organized crime threat is not sufficient. The bulk of efforts remain bilateral or unilateral. And yet, given that the challenge is increasingly multifaceted with global/national/local dimensions, it is essential to synergize strategies among all of these levels, and to bolster the one mechanism best suited to lead the way: the United Nations. It is uniquely placed to be a convener and a mobilizer of a multi-stakeholder strategy operating at the global, regional, national, and local levels.

This paper makes the following general recommendations for an improved multilateral response. It calls for:

- A **new compact** among Member States based on cooperation, solidarity and transparency. Member States must pledge not to engage in the arming of rebels or support illicit non-state military actors. The State has the responsibility to follow civilized values as a means to preclude the future existence of terror outfits.
- A **global counter-narrative** that is effectively devised and efficiently amplified to neutralize and dilute the violent extremist narrative. Political sensitivities may prevent the UN from devising the message itself but it remains best suited to be the messenger. Such a message can be developed through the creation of a Taskforce or Ad-Hoc Committee comprising individuals from civil society, religious leaders, private sector and, above all, youth actors from around the globe.
- **Institutional reforms** – at the United Nations and elsewhere – to help realize the above aims. This includes the potential of creating the position of a single UN counterterrorism coordinator to allow the UN to better leverage its comparative advantages as a convener, a norm-builder, a global monitor—and above all, as a strategic leader. Enhanced communication between and within agencies would further improve coordination particularly where there is significant overlap. A strategy could be devised for how particular UN hubs directly dealing with the nexus of terrorism and organized crime (i.e., UNODC and the UNTOC in Vienna, and CTC and the CTITF in New York, among many others) can communicate more effectively.
- **Partnerships:** A comprehensive approach must include international, regional and local partners.
 - By engaging with regional and sub regional organizations, there is an opportunity to improve response time, share capabilities and burdens and create synergies across different areas through greater cooperation.
 - Partnerships with local groups, civil society and the private sector are indispensable and could be particularly helpful when it comes to needs assessments as well as impact assessments of UN operations on the ground.
 - The majority of youth represent great partners in working for peace and are capable of real agency. A more defined and prominent role must be played by the UN Special Envoy for Youth.
- A **global crime control strategy** that would strengthen implementation of the Palermo Convention and its Protocols, enhance coordination among the relevant parts of the UN family, and enable member states to engage a broader spectrum of partners, including regional organizations, the private sector, and civil society. Such a strategy would also look into how to better cut financial flows. Cutting the financial flows to terrorists and from criminals would increase the risks to their activities.