

**The UN Security Council: Assessing Twenty Years of Counterterrorism
Summary of Roundtable Discussion
Thursday, February 3, 2022**

On February 2, 2022, the [Securing the Future Initiative \(SFI\)](#), in cooperation with the Washington, D.C. Office of the University of Notre Dame's [Keough School of Global Affairs](#) convened U.S. Government officials and non-government experts to consider the role and impact of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in addressing terrorist threats over the past two decades and how to best position its work in this area moving forward. Participants focused on the successes and shortcomings, as well as the impacts, of UNSC counterterrorism efforts since its adoption of Resolution 1373 in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. The meeting was one of a series of roundtable discussions that will inform the project's ongoing research and analysis, which will benefit from series of SFI-commissioned thematic, regional and country-focused research briefs on the role and impact of the Security Council in addressing the threat of terrorism over the past 20 years. The exchange was part of a wider effort to ensure that the SFI's findings, which it will deliver in September 2022, benefit from a diversity of views and current research.

Below is a summary of the key discussion points

Roundtable participants reflected on the evolution of counterterrorism policies and practice over the last 20 years, noting the groundswell of support for such measures, including in the UNSC, in the initial aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. It was noted, however, that 20 years of counterterrorism support, cooperation, and action may not have yielded the desired outcomes, as evidenced by the fact that there are more terrorists, more terrorist groups, more civilians being killed by terrorists and counterterrorism actions, and more ungoverned spaces today than there were two decades ago. Evaluating and measuring the impact of counterterrorism activities, including those of the UNSC, during this period is thus essential.

Participants acknowledged the public appetite for governments to appear “hard” on terrorism – often with strong public support for military-led kinetic responses to the threat. Such enduring sentiments have made it difficult to attract the necessary public support for a more holistic approach that places greater emphasis on “soft” tools. This continues to complicate efforts to change the security-dominated counterterrorism paradigm that has been the predominant one since 9/11.

It was also emphasized that this public appetite to appear tough on terrorists makes an independent assessment of counterterrorism, particularly its negative aspects, politically complex. Participants discussed how the lack of consensus on the history or past missteps of counterterrorism efforts impedes efforts to undertake an honest evaluation, especially when





there remains high praise for a “hard” on terrorism approach in society at large, highlighting that different stakeholders may have different conceptions of what constitutes “success”.

It was emphasized that the UNSC is inherently a political body where countries, particularly the “P5”, typically seek to use it to globalize their own domestic approaches for addressing specific threats to international peace and security. For example, when it comes to counterterrorism, it was noted how the UNSC’s approach has often been a reiteration of its members’ national counterterrorism strategies, rather than trying to be additive and set the bar higher for its members and the rest of the UN membership.

Participants discussed how the Council is often the first place to collect views, galvanize international attention, and motivate a collective, and often decisive, response in the event of a terrorism incident. Its imposition of legally binding counterterrorism obligations against all member states following 9/11 and on a number of occasions since then were highlighted as examples of such a response. It was pointed out how the UNSC can then use these obligations as hooks to spur more national action.

Participants also noted the value of the UNSC supporting efforts to harmonize countries’ thinking and perspectives on counterterrorism, giving the international community a baseline from which to understand the topic. They also discussed how the Council and its subsidiary bodies and experts– e.g., the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, can enable the exchange of expertise and good practices among member states, allowing countries to help one another fill knowledge and capacity gaps. In particular, it was pointed out that some states have found the independent assessments carried out by CTED to be a valuable input into enhancing their domestic counterterrorism policy and practice. It was also pointed out that there are other parts of the UN counterterrorism architecture engaged in similar efforts, with some participants asking whether these largely technical functions are appropriate for a political body like the UNSC to oversee. However, it was also noted that the UNSC’s imprimatur can in some cases allow for better access to key stakeholders in states and promote an approach that focuses on all areas of the UNSC’s counterterrorism framework, including human rights, than other bodies might.

While acknowledging the UNSC’s counterterrorism contributions, participants also highlighted some of its shortcomings in its approach. They pointed to how some countries have used the ambiguity in UNSC counterterrorism resolutions to justify the closure of civic space or the arrest of journalists. Some expressed frustration with the speed with which the UNSC has adopted different counterterrorism resolutions, urging the body “to slow down... and consider the consequences” of any action before taking it. Participants discussed criticisms of the UNSC’s approach, such as the lack of transparency, inherent exclusivity, and wavering legitimacy that lead some to argue that that the UNSC has failed to really address terrorism writ large in a truly comprehensive way. They further elaborated on the critique that the UNSC has instead too often



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra



been subject to the whims of the P5, or used by elected members (the “E10”) for counterterrorism projects that serve narrow domestic political interests. For example, the view was expressed that the least valuable Council counterterrorism products are the performative and hortatory “Presidential Statements”, generally appealing to the lowest common denominator among UNSC members, and doing little to move the needle in meaningful or actionable ways.

Participants also discussed some of the challenges civil society groups face in trying to access the UNSC and engage consistently and meaningfully with the on counterterrorism (and other) issues. Many reflected on the lack of regularized channels, similar to those in other UN bodies, for civil society to provide input into debates over whether the Council should take counterterrorism action and the development of any Council counterterrorism products, as well as to share their views on the impact of UNSC actions on the ground. It remains unclear to many civil society actors whether - or how - their views are reflected in the Council, diminishing the incentives for CSOs to invest in outreach and engagement. Participants noted, however, that the challenges civil society faces in having sustained and meaningful (two-way) engagement with the Council on counterterrorism issues was not limited to the Council, but was also the case with other UN counterterrorism bodies.

Participants expressed concern for the unintended and lethal consequences of counterterrorism policy and action, with the vague or ambiguous language in UNSC counterterrorism resolutions at times being used to justify state repression or other human rights violations. They lamented the strengthening of authoritarianism and oppression of dissent and civil society through counterterrorism efforts, including those of the UNSC, as well as what some viewed as the overall distortion of rights-conforming behavior by counterterrorism policies. Participants highlighted the importance of “right-sizing” counterterrorism policies in order to mitigate their misuse and potential negative impact on efforts to promote democracy and push back against authoritarianism.

Participants also discussed the risks posed by a lack of a time limit (“sunset clause”) or specific geographic focus of the Council’s counterterrorism obligations, which remain in effect with little meaningful consideration of their continuing necessity or efficacy. Moreover, it was noted that once an initiative or issue is tabled at the UNSC by member states, others may choose to further support or expand it, making it difficult to wind down or constrain counterterrorism activities. This was contrasted with the ability for the UNSC to end the mandates of individual peacekeeping missions or sanctions regimes, where there are several examples of mission drawdowns and exits. Yet when it comes to counterterrorism, the UNSC has shown little interest in scaling back structures that have evolved over the last 20 years. Participants recognized past justifications to expand the UNSC counterterrorism bureaucracy, but emphasized that it is necessary to see if those remain valid and, more broadly, to have an honest, holistic assessment of the apparatus moving forward.





Further, participants acknowledged the need to question the continued exceptionalization of counterterrorism in the UNSC and the rationale for sustaining the existing counterterrorism architecture, as well as to assess if those entities are fit for purpose and/or are serving functions that might not be better served by other parts of the United Nations. Further, participants acknowledged the disconnect between ever-lengthening, unwieldy UNSC counterterrorism resolutions and the implementation challenges this places on practitioners and policymakers in the field. This reality, it was highlighted, decreases the practicality and efficacy of the Council's actions, and constitutes a risk of further expansion of the UNSC's counterterrorism framework.

Finally, participants reflected on the opportunities for reform of the UNSC's counterterrorism structure and efforts. In reference to strengthening civil society engagement with the structure, some pointed to the NPO Coalition that was formed to engage with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as a best practice that could be followed here. More effective use of Council tools like Arria Formula meetings, Informal Interactive Dialogues could also ensure opportunities for consultations before Council members initiate resolutions. Further, platforms like CTED's Global Research Network could be leveraged on a more consistent and proactive basis to engage civil society members. These could expand opportunities for civil society members to provide inputs at the earlier, rather than in later stages of negotiations and create more systematized, rather than ad hoc, opportunities for consultation.

They also noted that new initiatives spearheaded by the UN Secretary-General, such as the [Summit of the Future](#), offer opportunities to integrate counterterrorism policies into the wider UN agenda and its priorities, as well as enhance engagement between civil society and the UN and in its Security Council. Participants also discussed the need for the Council to focus more attention on implementing existing resolutions rather than adopting new ones, and consider initiating processes that allow Council members to contemplate streamlining the body's counterterrorism architecture, addressing concerns of transparency, legitimacy, and spillover effects in the process.

About the Securing the Future Initiative

The Soufan Center and The Fourth Freedom Forum are developing the first-ever independent review and assessment of the UNSC's counterterrorism activities. The project will assess the Council's efforts since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as lessons learned in addressing the evolving terrorist threat. Drawing on wide ranging research, analysis, and consultations, the project will offer policy-relevant recommendations for ensuring that the UNSC's approach to addressing terrorist threats is both effective and sustainable. These recommendations will be included in the report that the SFI team will release in September 2022. The SFI project is being co-led by TSC Senior Visiting Fellow Eric Rosand, President of the Fourth Freedom Forum Alistair Millar, and TSC Executive Director Naureen Chowdhury





Fink. The project is being funded by the European Union and the Governments of Switzerland and The Netherlands.

For more information on the SFI please contact:

Michaela Millender: Michaela.Millender@thesoufancenter.org

About The Keough School in Washington DC

The Washington Office of the Keough School of Global Affairs focuses on real-time impact, representing Notre Dame at the epicenter of global engagement. The office serves as a convener for policymakers, faculty, students, and alumni from across the policy and political spectrum, as well as a venue for programming, teaching, and outreach in the DC area.



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra