Overview

The Securing the Future Initiative (SFI) workshop on 21 March 2022 convened a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives from the EU and its member states, the United Nations (UN), and African Union (AU), as well as researchers and civil society actors. The event was organized on the margins of the monthly meeting of the EU’s externally-focused counterterrorism committee (COTER) to allow for the participation of capital-based counterterrorism experts from EU members. The purpose of the workshop was to exchange views on the impact of the UN Security Council’s (UNSC) counterterrorism (CT) activities over the past 20 years on the EU and its member states. Discussions focused on how to ensure the Council’s approach to addressing the evolving terrorist threats is fit for purpose more than two decades since the 11 September 2001 attacks that catalyzed its growth in this field, and in light of an evolving terrorist threat landscape and changed multilateral CT architecture. The Brussels workshop, which was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, was one of a series of SFI-hosted discussions aimed at capturing a diversity of perspectives on the past and future role of the UNSC on counterterrorism. These roundtables will inform the SFI’s final report, which will be presented during the opening of the 77th UN General Assembly in New York in September.

Below is a summary of key discussion points. It is not a transcript of the event and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or other SFI sponsors.

A More Diffuse, Volatile Threat and a More Elaborate, but More Politicized UNSC and Wider Multilateral CT Architecture

Workshop participants discussed the evolution of the UNSC CT agenda and architecture over the last 20 years, noting the increased preoccupation of the Council on CT in the post-9/11 era and the development of what became an exceptionalized regime. It was noted how the UNSC spent much of the first decade after 9/11 condemning and responding to specific attacks and elaborating its CT architecture, whereas in the second decade, particularly after the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS), the UNSC increased its focus on particular topics associated with
CT, including international cooperation, aviation security, countering narratives and financing, and preventing terrorist use of small arms and light weapons, for example.

It was also noted how the terrorist threat has evolved since the UNSC adopted resolution 1373 in September 2001. There is no longer a clearly identified enemy as there was when al-Qaida was the focus; participants noted that even ISIS doesn’t now present the same centralized threat that it once did. Instead the current threat is more diffuse and volatile, with new thematic areas of concern such as online propaganda and new forms of financing, which are shaping counterterrorism priorities and approaches for the near term in many states.

Participants also discussed the unusually intrusive nature of UNSC CT actions in comparison to its approaches to other thematic topics, with actions resulting in (perhaps) unintended consequences such as barriers to humanitarian access, constraints on free speech, or the curtailing of other human rights by some states in the name of counterterrorism.

The increasing politicization of CT and other issues in the UNSC in recent years was highlighted. Some pointed to the United States’ 2020 veto of a UNSC resolution on prosecuting, rehabilitating, and reintegrating returning “foreign terrorist fighters” – the first time a UNSC CT resolution was vetoed – and the heated debate among UNSC members around the adoption of a recent 1267 Committee report as examples of the growing divisions.

**The EU on CT in the UNSC: Defend EU Values and “Own the Fight”**

Participants underscored the lasting impact of the crisis in Ukraine, including in the Security Council, and its potential impacts on future cooperation on security issues. Some noted that while the Council will still have a role to play in addressing threats to international peace and security, including terrorism, it will become an even more politicized and polarized body going forward. Where the UN is present through peace operations for example, it was argued, the Council will play a critical role in mandating and shaping missions. In response, it was argued, the EU should “own the fight” pushing back against authoritarian regimes which are pointing to their own approach as more effective in providing security for their citizens than the one being pursued in democracies.

It was noted that with two or three EU members typically sitting on the Council at any one time, these countries, along other like-minded Council members, need to be more assertive in defending EU principles such as the respect for human rights and humanitarian norms, the
women, peace and security agenda and the protection of civil society space, and redouble efforts these in the context of counterterrorism. The EU needs to continue to underscore how respect for these principles is the only effective way to tackle the threat over the long-term and ensure that the UNSC is guided by a fact-based understanding of the terrorist threat, rather than politics.

It was emphasized that EU members and EU institutions should be proactive and aware of these realities and continue to highlight the imperative of preserving these values as they grapple with the evolving threats. Participants also noted how the worsening dynamics in the UNSC created opportunities for regional bodies to become more assertive in addressing peace and security issues.

Lots of UNSC and Other Multilateral CT Action, but No Strategy: Balancing the “Hard” and the “Soft”

Participants discussed the fundamental shifts in multilateral CT policy and language, particularly with the advent of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and EU’s Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) in 2011. Some pointed to a shift in focus from CT to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Others cautioned, however, that increasing attention on the amorphous and undefined concept of “violent extremism” (instead of terrorism, which, although does not have a universally accepted definition, is defined in a number of international conventions) has offered authoritarian governments opportunities to abuse the lack of a definition of this concept to frame political opponents as “extremists”.

More broadly, participants discussed how the UNSC CT framework and toolkit developed over the past two decades has not been able to address situations where states themselves are part of the problem, including by sponsoring or enabling terrorist activity or manipulating or otherwise misusing this framework to go after political opponents. Among other things, this has created an accountability gap, which risks undermining the UNSC’s credibility if left unaddressed.

Participants also highlighted how, despite more than two decades of multilateral CT efforts, a comprehensive strategy for addressing the threat that balances kinetic and “soft” measures remains elusive. They pointed to the UNSC, which has adopted a series of CT resolutions on a variety of themes, but has never elaborated its own strategy or what a comprehensive CT strategy should include. Moreover, even the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the EU
CT Strategy are, in fact, not strategies, but rather just a list of activities or actions, participants noted. Some said that more than 20 years after 9/11 the time has come to develop such strategies – that mix reactive and preventative measures – at the global and regional levels.

Impact of 20 Years of UNSC CT on Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Peacebuilding: The “Tail Wags the Dog”

Participants also considered the UNSC counterterrorism architecture, particularly how it has evolved over time, its influence on counterterrorism policy, and its impact on the policies and activities of other UN bodies. It was noted that CT in the UNSC and at the UN more broadly is part and parcel of what has become a large CT-driven political economy world-wide. Some asserted that the three pillars that comprise the UN’s core mission - peace and security; human rights; and development - are being eclipsed by a growing CT pillar that, some felt is attracting resources that could be better spent on the UN’s core mission.

Although the UNSC has increasingly welcomed more involvement of human rights, humanitarian law, and development experts and institutions in its CT work, it was pointed out that this involvement continues to be in the service of CT, “with CT driving the train”. Participants also highlighted the risk of securitizing these Geneva-based actors and institutions as the UNSC tries to involve them more in its CT work.

Some commented on how the “Do No Harm” principle, which has been the foundation for development, human rights, and humanitarian action should be a cornerstone for UNSC CT action, with any future action informed by the evidence and assessments of unintended negative consequences of such action. Others pointed to how, with no consensus across the wider UN membership on the nature and severity of the threat, not to mention how best to address it, agreement on new CT language in the UNSC has become increasingly difficult to achieve. The result has been an increased reliance on regurgitating previously agreed language to secure buy-in from Council members rather than focused resolutions designed to address specific gaps or incidents.

Although this helps preserve the consensus that has, with few exceptions, been a hallmark of the UNSC’s CT practice since 2011, some noted that it has increasingly limited the impact of the Council’s resolutions as well as failed to take into account the already strained absorption capacities of states to meaningfully interpret and implement them.
Understanding and Assessing the UNSC CT’s Impact: Ambiguity, Causality, Complexity, and Questions

Participants exchanged views on the impact of the UNSC’s CT framework and architecture on the ground. They discussed the challenges to assessing such impact, particularly given the many factors outside the control of the UNSC that can influence whether and how a member state implements its CT measures. The discussions also highlighted, however, that one of the key ingredients to maximizing impact of a law or UN resolution is clarity; yet, UNSCRs are known for “constructive ambiguity”, thus allowing them to be interpreted differently by different countries, which in turn further complicates any impact assessment.

While acknowledging the difficulties in making a causal link between a particular UNSC CT measure and specific national actions, participants discussed the UNSC’s influence on how countries view the CT enterprise, shifting it from a bilateral issue to a global one with universal actions and binding measures. Some noted that the Council, as a result of its engagement, mobilization, and clear guidance on necessary action, particularly on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their return has prevented the worst terrorist threats from coming to fruition. Other areas of UNSC CT impact highlighted included its ability to draw attention to new and emerging terrorist threats and CT challenges, such as right-wing extremism, the creation of a distinct UNSC architecture to monitor and assess member state implementation of its CT framework and to facilitate the delivery of technical assistance to address member state needs, and the mainstreaming of human rights and gender issues into its CT resolutions.

Participants also noted that EU institutions and member states, partly as a result of the UNSC’s CT resolutions and engagements, have become more adept at identifying and stopping terrorist plots and threats, highlighting intelligence sharing and prevention mechanisms as examples of success. Although recognizing the progress made, participants discussed the need to create new responses to address the evolving threat moving forward especially considering new technologies and the misuse of the internet.

The 1267 Committee/Monitoring Team: What is it monitoring? Sanctions implementation or the threat?

The evolution of the UN’s counterterrorism sanctions and the work of the UNSC’s 1267 Committee and its Monitoring Team was also discussed. Participants shared how the focus has shifted during the past 20 years. With al-Qaida the main target in the early 2000s, the emphasis
was on getting member states to implement the sanctions (i.e., travel ban, assets freeze, and arms embargo) against those individuals/groups on the Committee’s list. The Monitoring Team’s priority was thus to prepare listings for the Committee to consider. With the emergence of ISIS, however, and the threat becoming more diffuse, assessing the threat and identifying new groups against which the sanctions should be targeted became the priority for the team and the Council. Currently, in part because of the Team’s unique mandate within the UN system to engage with intelligence services around the globe, threat assessments constitute 90% of its activities. Participants noted how this had led to the Team’s and the Committee’s work becoming more politicized than ever, e.g., “with each sentence in [the] Team’s reports being challenged” by one or more Committee members and individual members trying to ensure that their perspective on a particular group is reflected in the Team’s reports. The importance of insulating the assessments from politics, which has become more difficult as a result of the increased polarization in the Council, was highlighted.

The point was also made that the work of the Monitoring Team – which is primarily focused on identifying the “enemy” – and the sanctions regime must be part of a broader approach to addressing terrorist threats in order to maximize their impact. This led some to recommend that the UNSC streamline its CT architecture by creating a single CT committee (i.e., merging the Counter-Terrorism Committee and the 1267 Committee) and a single CT expert group (i.e., joining together its Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate and Monitoring Team), a proposal that has long been advocated by experts.

The Connection or Disconnection between UNSC CT Measures and Local Needs/Priorities

Participants discussed the importance of understanding how tools, policies, and norms developed in New York and Geneva translate on the ground in both implementation and impact. Participants recognized a disconnect between the local threat perceptions and priorities and the CT measures developed by the UNSC and other global bodies, noting that the measures often reflect the priorities of the Council rather than the states or stakeholders most affected. To highlight this disconnect it was noted how diligent the African Union (AU) has been over the past 20 years in taking actions to facilitate the implementation of UNSC CT measures on the ground in Africa. The development of an AU model CT law, the creation of joint intelligence fusion centers, and the ratification of international CT conventions and other related instruments were cited as examples.
However, it was noted that the threat from terrorism in several parts of Africa has actually become worse over the same period of time. Some participants noted how the UNSC’s emphasis on enhancing executive branch authorities and security sector capacities even in countries without a strong rule of law tradition, rather than reducing the threats, has actually contributed to aggravating the underlying drivers of the violence. The point was made that the UNSC CT measures are often not what AU members want and/or need to address the threats of most concern to them. The question was therefore raised as to what the UNSC and the rest of the UN CT architecture is doing to actually reach people in communities who are suffering from politically motivated violence, and how a state-based body can effect changes in state behavior that help create an enabling environment for terrorist groups to exploit.

Moreover, participants highlighted how the AU’s focus on supporting implementation of the UNSC CT framework has taken time away from work it could be doing to better understand the CT needs and priorities of African stakeholders and then focusing on how to best address them. Thus, participants highlighted the importance of shifting from a top-down approach to UNSC (and other global) norm creation to one that is more informed by the local priorities and threat perceptions rather than the P5 or New York-based UN institutions which may be disconnected from these local realities. Participants considered different ways to do this, including by creating opportunities for “local intermediaries” such as civil society, researchers, and other experts to share contextualized information on the local perspectives and needs with UNSC member capitals and with the UNSC CT architecture during consultations. Participants also suggested that the EU specifically target resources to support such intermediaries, particularly those outside of capitals.

**The UNSC CT Regime: The Search for Transparency, Inclusivity, and Accountability**

Participants discussed challenges emanating from a lack of transparency and accountability in the UNSC’s CT (and broader) work and dearth of checks and balances across the Council’s and wider UN CT architecture that has expanded dramatically since 2001. They noted the importance, for example, of CTED sharing its assessments (with the permission of the assessed state) more broadly beyond the 15 members of the Council and a limited number of UN entities than it currently does; sharing outside the UNSC is a new development and marks modest progress, but needs to be more regularized and widened.

Absent that, it was argued, most major donors (e.g., the EU) will remain unable to benefit from these assessments, which include an identification of capacity-building needs, as they allocate
their significant CT and P/CVE capacity-building resources. It was noted that Switzerland and Finland have set a good example by agreeing to share the reports from CTED country visits to their countries; Finland has taken the additional step of posting it on the website with public access. Participants encouraged more EU states to do so following their own CTED assessment visits.

It was further noted that it is time for sober reflection on how to make the UNSC’s CT approach and architecture not only more transparent but also more accountable. Participants pointed to the UNSC’s inability and/or unwillingness to address member states’ (mis)use of CT measures to restrict civic space or human rights as they implement the UNSC CT framework. Some participants pointed to the incongruity of having senior UN human rights officials speak out publicly when states use CT measures or language to justify crackdowns against political opponents or independent journalists when the UNSC CT community remains silent.

Beyond enhancements to transparency and accountability, participants emphasized the importance of having the UNSC adopt a more inclusive approach to its CT work, for example by creating more opportunities for researchers, human rights defenders and other civil society actors to share their perspectives across a range of CT- and P/CVE-related issues with the Council.

**Chipping Away and the Lingering Security/Development Divide**

Participants discussed the importance of bridging the lingering divide between the “hard” and “soft” sides of CT. For example, the UN, EU, and other actors are doing a lot to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, including work on governance, education, peace-building, conflict resolution, and public health; however, it was noted that law enforcement and other security practitioners need to become more aware of how this work contributes to the prevention of terrorism and how their own work, if not underpinned by respect for the principle of “Do No Harm”, can help increase the threat. It was further highlighted how the security community needs to avoid trying to instrumentalize the work on the “soft” side (including by applying a “CT” label to it) as this will reduce its impact on target communities; though at the same time it was noted that actors engaged in this space need to be engaged in CT discussions to ensure a balanced and comprehensive approach.

**Right-Wing Extremist Violence: A Possible “New” Area of UNSC CT Focus?**
Participants discussed whether there were dimensions of the terrorist threat that the UNSC has yet to address but should. For example, it was suggested that the Council should turn its attention to right-wing extremist violence, which has become of increasing concern to governments in the West and Oceania. Some voiced caution, in part because they believed it was already covered by existing UNSC resolutions which focus on terrorism “in all of its forms and manifestations” and that it was a worrying precedent if UN CT bodies required a resolution to address each new issue when it already had a mandate to identify and address emerging threats and challenges. As such, there was nothing stopping the Council including, for example, CTED, from focusing attention on threats posed by right-wing terrorist groups. In fact, it was noted that CTED has already been raising this dimension of the threat with a number of states who themselves have flagged this issue to CTED as a key challenge. Some pointed out, however, that it was nevertheless important for the Council not to be perceived to be focusing solely on Jihadist groups and Islamist terrorism, which remains the perception despite the broad language in its CT resolutions.

Participants were ambivalent about whether the UNSC should adopt a new CT resolution at all (i.e., on any topic), given the Council’s already bulging and largely unbound CT framework. Moreover, the point was made that as new threats emerge, additional UNSC resolutions that reinforce the traditional security paradigm for CT that is reflected in dozens of UNSCRs adopted over the past 20 years should be avoided. Instead, it was argued, the focus should be on intensifying the efforts of non-security actors, including at the UN, to address the drivers of violent extremism as identified in different contexts. More attention should thus be given to how the UNSC can best support and further catalyze these efforts.

Recommendations

During the discussions, participants put forward a range of recommendations aimed ensuring a sustainable and effective Security Council approach to addressing terrorist and violent extremist threats in 2022 and beyond. For example: the UNSC should

- Be guided by the subsidiarity principle in its CT work going forward: the Council should not get involved when there are other parts of the vast multilateral system that are better placed to do or in fact already doing the work. This means that the UNSC should look more often to regional and subregional organizations, which are closer to the threat and better positioned than the Council to fashion a multilateral response that is tailored to the needs or priorities of stakeholders in their region. In addition, work that is being done
elsewhere within the system on development of other non-security prevention measures ought to stay where it is within the system and not be subsumed by the UN’s swelling CT architecture. This would reduce the likelihood that the peacebuilding and development work that is targeting communities that might be susceptible to radicalization and violence, and is critical to being able to prevent it, doesn’t get “securitized” and thus undermined. The consistent application of the subsidiarity principle, participants stressed, would help right-size the Council’s and the wider UN’s approach to addressing terrorism and violent extremism into the future.

- Ensure that human rights and victim-focused approaches are at the core of its CT engagement and that the UNSC CT approach is at the service of peacebuilding and not vice versa, as currently is too often the case.

- Adopt and advocate for “bottom-up” approaches to the development of CT policies and ensure that any future UNSC CT resolutions are informed by the local needs and situation on the ground and developed in a more transparent and inclusive manner than has been the practice to date in order to increase the efficacy and implementation of the measures.

- Deploy CTED staff into the field to allow for more sustained engagement between CTED experts and CT policymakers and practitioners and local actors, including from civil society: this should have a positive impact in helping to translate the often complex, technical, and intentionally ambiguous UNSC CT requirements into local action.

- Streamline its CT architecture by merging the CTC and 1267 Committees into a single CT body and the CTED and Monitoring Team into a single expert group to help the UNSC promote a more integrated CT approach that nests sanctions into a wider CT framework and the streamlines UNSC CT engagements with often under-staffed ministries in member states; and

- Increase the transparency and thus the impact of its CT work, including by making CTED country assessments more accessible so that a wider set of stakeholders outside of the Council can benefit from the analysis and recommendations in the assessment; presumably, this would enhance the impact of the Council’s CT work as, for example, it might increase both the likelihood that a capacity-gap identified by CTED is actually
addressed and the incentives for the assessed to take the necessary action to close what has now been a publicly identified shortcoming.

- Call for the development of more CT training and tools that are specifically tailored to the various local and regional contexts and complemented by the delivery of the necessary equipment.

- Advocate for the development of local practitioners’ networks in regions in Africa and Asia – informed by the EU RAN model – to facilitate the sharing of analysis, expertise, and research, which could contribute to the development of early warning and other evidence-based prevention tools derived from high quality, networked research.

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For more information on the SFI please see [www.sfi-ct.org](http://www.sfi-ct.org) or contact:

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