Over the last nearly two decades, Member States mandated the United Nations system to respond to the threat posed by global terrorism. This sparked a wide range of structural and conceptional developments, driven both by the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. The global threat posed by al-Qaida and more recently by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) enabled a global coalition of Member States to be built, which on other issues hold diverging, in some cases opposing, positions. By focusing mainly on this specific terror threat the new structure could avoid the political difficulties of the negotiations concerning a general definition of the term terrorism, which have been deadlocked for several decades, with little hope of progress.

While significant parts of the response from this structure of the United Nations focus on security and preventative measures, a fairly recent addition to the work of the United Nations system focuses on the issue of deradicalization, in particular with a focus on returning or relocating foreign terrorist fighters. In this context, the United Nations uses the terminology “rehabilitation” and “reintegration”, rather than “deradicalization”. The United Nations does not set global standards for what rehabilitation, reintegration or deradicalization entails and consequently also does not offer definitions for these terms. This is a recognition that these processes are culturally specific and can only be defined within a specific social context. Therefore, it is the responsibility of Member States to define the specifics of these processes. However, the United Nations does deliver capacity support for deradicalization efforts of Member States, such as for example the sharing of best practices and experiences across regions, and advises Member States on the compatibility of respective measures with human rights and international law. This support is part of a broader structure of various counter-terrorism and prevention of extremism strategies and mandates of the United Nations and cannot be fully understood in isolation. Therefore, it is important to address both the conceptual as well as the institutional structures currently in place.
After a short summary of the historical development of the United Nations counter-terrorism and preventative structures, this chapter will first focus on the two basic normative documents guiding the counter-terrorism work of the United Nations system, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) and the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE Plan), outlining their major provisions and the effect these documents have on the operational work of the United Nations.

These documents have two central functions. They present a normative framework in which Member States should develop their counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism strategies and they guide the United Nations system by outlining priority areas for its work. These documents primarily address Member States as the principal actors. The United Nations system is only mandated to support Member States in their operational efforts but is not assigned a role as an independent actor or standard setter. This also relates to efforts to deradicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign terrorist fighters. One important role of the United Nations system in this regard is to ensure that the conceptual and normative frameworks outlined in the GCTS as well as the PVE Plan are an integral part of the efforts of Member States.

The third part of this chapter will outline the various institutional counter-terrorism structures of the United Nations, aimed at providing analysis and needs assessment, capacity building as well as coordination and coherence. These various actors within the United Nations system have the responsibility to assist the General Assembly and the Security Council in the continuing development of the conceptual and normative framework, including the framework for rehabilitation and reintegration measures. In addition, they support Member States in the implementation of the various measures outlined in the GCTS, the PVE Plan and the various Security Council resolutions.

Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion on potential ways the United Nations counter-terrorism structure could further evolve to more effectively and efficiently support the international community. This includes a more systematic engagement with regional and sub-regional organizations to ensure that all politically significant decision-making levels are addressed, a more systematic and structured engagement with civil society in order to ensure that the substate level is adequately included in counter-terrorism and prevention of radicalization efforts and finally a structured engagement with private sector stakeholders to ensure that relevant expertise and knowledge developed in this sector feed into the work of the United Nations system.

**Historical development of the United Nations counter-terrorism structure**

Since 1999 the counter-terrorism efforts of the United Nations in significant aspects have developed in response to the rise of al-Qaida and since 2014 have been modified in response to the emergence of the ISIL. Following the bombings of the embassies of the United States of America in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania on 7 August 1998 the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1267 (1999), establishing a global sanctions regime, focusing on the leaders of al-Qaida as well as the Taliban, and the 1267 Sanctions Committee of the Security Council entrusted with the management of the regime. This entails decisions concerning the sanctioning of individuals and entities, the delisting of individuals and entities that are no longer relevant as well as the management of all information that is included in the sanctions list. In 2011, the Security Council decided to remove the Taliban from the counter-terrorism sanctions list (resolution 1989 (2011)) and to create a new Taliban-centred sanctions regime.
In 2015 the Security Council, with resolution 2253 (2015), expanded the listing criteria of the Al-Qaida sanctions regime to also include individuals and entities supporting ISIL.

In addition to the global sanctions’ architecture, the Security Council developed a general global counter-terrorism structure. Following the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, the Council passed resolution 1373 (2001). The resolution, passed under Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, is legally binding for Member States, and asked Member States to adapt their national legal systems to counter the threat of global terrorism, including to counter-terrorism financing. The resolution also mandated the newly formed Counter Terrorism Committee of the Security Council to oversee the implementation of its provisions.

In the same year, the Security Council also passed resolution 1540 (2004). The resolution affirms that the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and their means of delivery constitutes a threat to international peace and security. It decides that Member States must refrain from providing support to non-State actors that attempt to develop, acquire, manufacture, possess, transport, transfer or use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their means of delivery (resolution 1540 (2004), para. 1). The Security Council also established the 1540 Committee mandated to oversee the implementation of the provisions of the resolution. To augment these Security Council structures, the Secretary General established the Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) in 2005 (A/60/825, para. 3) after wide-ranging consultations with Member States. This demonstrated that, while the Secretary General does not have an independent decision-making role, his office can act as an important driver of innovation if it is possible to build sufficient political will among Member States. CTITF was endorsed by the General Assembly in 2006 when the Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (60/288, para. 5). CTITF is tasked to ensure overall coordination and coherence in the counter-terrorism efforts of the United Nations system. Within this framework the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) was established in 2011 and endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 66/10.

In order to address the continuing spread of violent extremism and recognizing that such radical tendencies form the basis for global terrorism, the Secretary General presented the PVE Plan to the General Assembly on 15 January 2015 (A/70/674). This innovation was received with a mixed reaction by Member States, some of which saw this as a potential intrusion into their domestic affairs while others criticized the plan’s provisions as too general to be effective. Consequently, it took nearly two years to build political acceptance for the PVE Plan. Finally, in 2017 the General Assembly through resolution 71/291 established the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT), headed by Under-Secretary General for Counter-Terrorism Vladimir Ivanovich Voronkov. The role of this new office is to strengthen coordination and coherence between the different elements of the United Nations counter-terrorism entities and to provide strategic leadership on the issue for the organization as a whole. To achieve these aims CTITF and UNCCT have been incorporated into UNOCT. The establishment of this office was a reflection that the growth of the mandated counter-terrorism and prevention work for various entities of the United Nations system had led to a loss in efficiency and the risk of duplication. To further enhance coordination between the various CTITF entities, the Secretary General and the heads of the various CTITF entities signed the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact in 2018 (Annex III to A/72/840).
Basic normative documents: United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism

Since 1999 the United Nations Security Council has passed a significant number of resolutions to adapt its global sanctions regime and the global counter-terrorism structure. A useful compendium of the relevant Security Council resolutions can be found in Annex I of the 2018 report of the Secretary General on the Activities of the United Nations system in implementing the GCTS (A/72/840). As far as the wider United Nations system is concerned, the operational work in this area is guided by the GCTS and the PVE Plan of the Secretary General.

The adoption of the GCTS by the consensus of the General Assembly in 2006 was hailed as a major achievement, since this was the first time the full membership of the United Nations agreed on a common framework to fight terrorism globally since the issue was raised with the League of Nations in 1934 (The Stanley Foundation, 2007 p. 1). As one expert framed it, “the synchronization of international objectives in the global strategy has created an opening for better technical and political multilateral coordination” (Millar, 2010). Despite this positive reception, some Member States and academic specialists immediately pointed to the lack of a commonly agreed definition of terrorism as one of the enduring weaknesses of the strategy (The Stanley Foundation, 2007, p. 22). This debate continues to date. For example, during the meeting in which the General Assembly adopted the resolution containing the sixth biennial review of the GCTS, the representative of Brazil highlighted that the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of terrorism was detrimental to the shared goal of eliminating it and stressed the need to overcome the stalemate preventing the adoption of the comprehensive convention on international terrorism (United Nations Meeting Coverage GA/12035, 26 June 2018).

The GCTS falls into two major parts. In the short resolution text Member States commit to implement it (60/288, para 3 (d)), to encourage non-governmental organizations and civil society to contribute to its implementation (60/288, para. 3 (e)) and to review the GCTS every two years (60/288, para. 3 (b)).

The Annex of the resolution consists of a Plan of Action in which the details of the GCTS are outlined. Member States commit themselves to becoming party to all legal instruments against terrorism, for example international counter-terrorism conventions, and to implement those as well as all relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. The strategy outlines specific measures grouped into four pillars: measures to address the conditions conducive to terrorism; measures to prevent and combat terrorism; measures to build States’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system; and measures to ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the global and domestic fight against terrorism.

The responsibility to implement the GCTS rests primarily with the Member States (72/284, para. 5). However, in addition to Member States, the General Assembly calls on the United Nations and other appropriate international, regional and subregional organizations to implement its provisions (72/284, para. 2). While not a legally binding document, the GCTS does carry political weight since it is backed by all Member States of the United Nations. The biennial review of the GCTS by the General Assembly aims to adapt the specific measures to the changing nature of the global threat of terrorism, making it into an evolving document. Currently, the review process involves several steps. In its review resolution, the General Assembly requests the Secretary General to submit two reports, one in the year after the review and one during the year of the next review. In the first report, the
Secretary General submits recommendations on how the implementation of the measures outlined in the GCTS can be assessed and progress can be measured (72/284, para. 83). In the second report, submitted several months prior to the next review, the Secretary General is to report on the progress made in implementing the GCTS and to make suggestions on how the United Nations system can implement it in the future (72/284, para. 84). Therefore, the review process is a continuous discussion between the United Nations system and Member States rather than a singular biennial event. This ensures that the GCTS reflects the consensual political will of all Member States and that this consensus is able to evolve organically as the threat emanating from global terrorism changes. The review process also regularly triggers close engagements by academic and political experts with Member States and the United Nations system, influencing the ongoing debate. For example, the Global Center on Cooperative Security regularly publishes a series of reports in advance of the review negotiations (Cockayne, Millar, Cortright, & Romaniuk, 2012; Cockayne, Millar, & Ipe, 2010; Chowdhury Fink, Romaniuk, Millar, & Ipe, 2014; Millar, 2018; Millar & Chowdhury Fink, 2016).

As far as content is concerned, the current version of the GCTS is a wide-ranging document. Rather than explicitly outlining new measures for the individual pillars, the document covers a range of issues related to the four broad topics of the GCTS. In its latest review (72/284) the General Assembly encourages Member States and the United Nations to take a broad approach to counter-terrorism and to involve non-governmental organizations, civil society, women and youth in their efforts. The resolution also addresses a range of security-related issues such as biometric information exchange to counter the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters or the importance of countering the threat of the misuse of the internet and other media by terrorists (72/284, paras. 34–35, 41). The issue of deradicalization is addressed only in the context of returning foreign terrorist fighters. Member States are in general terms called upon to enhance efforts to implement respective programmes (72/284, para. 37) and to develop rehabilitation and reintegration strategies (72/284, para. 39). The document does not specify what such programmes should look like and avoids defining this issue further. This limits the role of the United Nations system only to supporting Member States in their efforts rather than giving the various United Nations entities an independent role.

However, in order to counter the risk that counter-terrorism measures are misused to unduly limit fundamental rights, the General Assembly uses the reviews of the GCTS to continue to emphasize the centrality of the protection and respect for the rule of law, international law, the Charter of the United Nations, international humanitarian law and refugee law, human rights and fundamental freedoms (72/284, para. 10) while countering terrorism. This provides a general framework for the activities of Member States and allows the United Nations system to advise Member States on which strategies fall within these boundaries.

In addition to the negotiations concerning the GCTS, the issue of deradicalization and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters has been part of the ongoing discussion between Member States and the United Nations system for a number of years. Already in 2015, the ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, in its special report on foreign terrorist fighters, highlighted the importance of a deliberate “returnee policy” for Member States, including deradicalization strategies (Monitoring Team, 2015, para. 58). The Security Council addressed the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters in a separate section of resolution 2396 (2017), in which the Council urges Member States to implement appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation strategies (S/RES/2396 (2017), paras. 29–41). Finally, the recent Trends Report of the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) emphasized that
Member States “have continued to investigate the appropriateness and effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for incarcerated FTFs [foreign terrorist fighters]” (CTED, 2018b, p. 14).

The GCTS also elaborates on the issue of preventing violent extremism leading to terrorism (72/284, para. 16). The GCTS connects this issue to the PVE Plan of the Secretary General (A/70/674). The current review document recommends Member States to consider the implementation of relevant recommendations of the PVE Plan as applicable to their national contexts (A/72/284, para. 18), leaving political space for Member States to adapt the provisions of the PVE Plan to their specific political, economic and cultural conditions. Recognizing that violent extremism is the underlying social basis for global terrorism, in 2015 the Secretary General presented his comprehensive PVE Plan to the General Assembly (A/70/674). The Secretary General argued for an “interdisciplinary ‘All-of-society’ and ‘All-of-government’ approach to address the drivers of violent extremism” (A/70/675).

The PVE Plan envisions itself to be an integral part of the GCTS and argues that addressing violent extremism entails reinvigorating measures covered under the GCTS pillars concerning eliminating conditions conducive to terrorism and the respect for human rights and the rule of law (A/70/674, para. 7). The PVE Plan explains that the term “violent extremism” covers a wider category of manifestations than “terrorism” (A70/674, para. 4). However, the PVE Plan does not offer a more precise description of the term and makes clear that definitions of “terrorism” and “violent extremism” are the prerogative of Member States. However, the PVE Plan emphasizes that such definitions must be consistent with the obligations of Member States under international law, in particular international human rights law (A70/674, para. 5).

The PVE Plan emphasizes that there is no authoritative statistical data on the pathways towards individual radicalization but that research demonstrates that one can distinguish between “push factors”, the conditions conducive to violent extremism and “pull factors”, individual motivations (A/70/674, para. 23). This conceptualization is similar to the one presented by Koehler in Chapter 2 of this book. Since the PVE Plan aims to provide a general framework, which can be adapted to various regional situations around the globe and adapted to guide political decision making, the analysis of the causes of radicalization remains broad.

As far as “push factors” are concerned, the PVE Plan lists lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law, prolonged and unresolved conflicts and radicalization in prisons (A/70/674, paras. 25–31). The “pull factors” include both individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances and victimization, the distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies, as well as ethnic and cultural differences and social networks (A/70/674, paras. 33–37).

In order to counter these factors, the PVE Plan recommends that Member States develop their own national action plans to prevent violent extremism (A/70/674, para. 44) and calls for greater regional and subregional cooperation (A/70/674, para. 45). It recommends that these national action plans should be developed in a multidisciplinary manner aiming to both counter and prevent violent extremism. The PVE Plan also connects these national plans to national development policies connected with the Sustainable Development Goals (General Assembly resolution 70/1) agreed to by Member States (A/70/674, para. 44 (e)).

The issues of disengagement and rehabilitation of violent extremists are addressed under the second priority area, strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law (Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force (2018) Summary Plan of Action to Prevent...
Violent Extremism, p. 4). As in the GCTS, the PVE Plan does not specify or define how disengagement should be achieved but only calls on Member States to develop respective programmes (A/70/674, para. 50(g)). This leaves the responsibility for such programmes solely with the Member States and mandates the United Nations system only in a supporting role.

The PVE Plan also outlines the support the United Nations will give Member States in countering violent extremism. The PVE Plan explains that the United Nations system is already addressing the underlying drivers and triggers of violent extremism through its work (A/70/674, para. 57). However, the Secretary General pledges that the United Nations entities will redouble their efforts to adapt existing programmes so that they target the drivers of violent extremism more precisely (A/70/674, para. 58). The Plan then outlines 12 practical measures the United Nations system will take (A/70/674, para. 57), including capacity-building support for Member States (A/70/674, para. 57). In essence, the PVE Plan suggests mainstreaming prevention of violent extremism into all areas of work of the United Nations system. As a practical step, the Secretary General regularly convenes a “high-level action group on the prevention of violent extremism, which consists of the heads of 22 United Nations departments, agencies, funds and programmes” (A/72/840, para. 54).

Some Member States and experts highlighted the importance of the PVE Plan’s role to focus on preventative approaches and strategies as part of the wider counter-terrorism work of the United Nations (Millar, 2016). Millar and Chowdhury Fink argue that “there will be no way to balance a militarized, law enforcement-centric response to terrorism without institutionalizing a preventative approach” (Millar & Chowdhury Fink, 2016, p. 4). Others highlighted that the PVE Plan presents a “reaffirmation of the centrality of human rights in any policies, strategies or actions by Member States and indeed by the UN itself” (Megally, 2017).

However, the PVE Plan was also met with mixed reactions among Member States. In a resolution, the General Assembly only took note of it (70/254, para. 1) and to consider it further as part of the biennial review of the strategy in 2016 (70/254, para. 2), a rather weak initial endorsement. Recognizing that the concept of “violent extremism” is very broad, the General Assembly has also begun using the more specific terminology “violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism” (see, for example, 70/291, para. 40). The PVE Plan also elicited criticism from academics and specialists. One common argument among critics of the PVE Plan is that the lack of a clear definition of the term “violent extremism” is a serious gap since the phenomenon is supposed to include wider manifestations than “terrorism”. Atwood argues that, consequently, “the term obscures more than it illuminates by potentially lumping tougher diverse forms of protest, insurrection and radicalism” (Atwood, 2016). Modirzadeh (2016) outlines further that the lack of definition, in combination with the very general terms in which the drivers of extremism are analysed, clashes with the fairly prescriptive recommendations contained within the PVE Plan. In her analysis this risks the misuse of the concept by subsuming legitimate interests under the banner of suppressing “violent extremism”. Furthermore, Modirzadeh is concerned that the mainstreaming of the concept into humanitarian work would result in the risk of integrating humanitarian efforts in the security field.

However, the prescriptive terms used within the PVE Plan are fairly broad and consequently leave sufficient room to avoid these potential pitfalls while translating the provisions of the PVE Plan into the work of the United Nations system. In addition, while assessing the impact of the PVE Plan, it is useful to consider its
nomative impact rather than its practical effects. The Plan […] may at least nudge the international community towards a fuller understanding of the threat of terrorism, and perhaps compel a more holistic approach by some of the more receptive member states.

(Ucko, 2018, p. 270)

Rather than giving specific instructions to Member States on how to implement the PVE Plan, the document presents a broad framework that can be tailored to the various specific circumstances and challenges Member States in different regions of the globe face. The United Nations mandate to support Member States in their efforts in turn allows the various United Nations stakeholders to support Member States in their understanding of this framework and to ensure that national counter-terrorism measures are tailored accordingly and are broader than only the development of repressive instruments, including efforts to develop disengagement and rehabilitation programmes for violent extremists.

The operationalization of the GCTS and the PVE Plan within the United Nations system is the task of the various counter-terrorism structures of the organization. Analysing the current status of these structures is crucial in order to assess the capability and capacity of the United Nations system to support the efforts of the international community.

United Nations counter-terrorism structure

As outlined above, the current counter-terrorism structure within the United Nations systems spans both the Security Council as well as the General Assembly. The current structure is broadly oriented on three overarching goals (71/858, para. 10): analysis/needs assessment, capacity building, coordination/maintenance of coherence.

Analysis and needs assessment

The analysis of the threat and the gaps in the capacities of Member States and needs assessment is mainly accomplished by the three bodies under the purview of the Security Council: the ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, CTED and the 1540 Expert Group.

ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team

A useful summary of the counter-terrorism mandate of the ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team can be found on the website of the ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee and in Annex I of Security Council resolution 2368 (2017). The team has three main tasks.

Firstly, it analyses the global threat emanating from ISIL, Al-Qaida and their affiliated individuals and entities. This global threat analysis feeds into the discussions of the ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee as well as the regular reports of the Secretary General concerning the threat posed by ISIL and foreign terrorist fighters and the United Nations efforts in support of Member States (Security Council resolution 2368 (2017), para. 101).

Secondly, it supports the Sanctions Committee and the Ombudsperson in listing, delisting and decisions concerning amendments to the sanctions list as well as the various annual and triennial reviews of the sanctions list. Finally, in cooperation with Member States, international organizations and private sector stakeholders, the team develops recommendations to the Sanctions Committee on how the operational implementation of the three sanctions measures (asset freeze, travel ban and arms embargo) can be more effectively implemented by Member States in order to ensure that these measures reflect the evolving nature of the threat emanating from ISIL, Al-Qaida.
and their affiliated individuals and entities. These recommendations are regularly accepted by the Sanctions Committee and subsequently implemented as legally binding provisions of Security Council resolutions. Therefore, the Team is also involved in creating new capacity needs by Member States.

**Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate**

The current mandate of CTED is outlined in Security Council resolution 2395 (2017). CTED’s mandate is to assess and analyse capacity and implementation gaps of Member States, in particular with regard to Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014) (resolution 2395 (2017), para. 14). Therefore, CTED plays a central role as the “monitor, facilitator and promoter of the implementation by Member States of the relevant Security Council resolutions” (A/71/858, para. 17). It assesses counter-terrorism capacities and identifies gaps, new trends and challenges. In order to compile these assessments, CTED conducts country visits, which regularly include experts from relevant international, regional and subregional organizations (CTED Factsheet, 2018).

CTED reports its findings to the Counter Terrorism Committee and makes recommendations on how gaps and implementation challenges can be mitigated. Through this work, CTED is also involved in the process supporting Member States in the implementation of the various provisions of the GCTS and is mandated to cooperate closely with UNOCT (resolution 2395 (2017), para. 14). Finally, CTED maintains a Global Research Network, which enables it to analyse emerging threats, trends and developments (resolution 2395 (2017), para. 15). The quickly expanding mandate of CTED during the past several years raised concerns with some experts that the mission would slowly be overburdened and that CTED should refocus its efforts on its core business of gap analysis (Millar, 2017). Some even called for a wider reform of the United Nations counter-terrorism structure, which would practically subsume CTED under the newly created UNOCT (Rosand, 2017; Baage & Stoffer, 2017). However, with resolution 2395 (2017), the Security Council opted against such a wide-ranging and fundamental reform but highlighted the importance of close and regular cooperation and coordination between CTED and UNOCT (resolution 2395 (2017), para. 18–20).

**1540 Expert Group**

The 1540 Expert Group has a mandate focused on supporting Member States in the implementation of Security Council resolution 1540 (2004), which asks Member States to refrain from providing support to non-State actors that attempt to develop, acquire, manufacture, possess, transport, transfer or use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their means of delivery (resolution 1540 (2004), para. 1). The 1540 Committee and the 1540 Expert Group also monitor the implementation of the resolution and play a clearinghouse role to facilitate assistance to Member States (A/71/858, para. 18).

**Capacity building**

The United Nations system is currently undertaking a significant amount of capacity-building projects in the framework of the GCTS (Annex II of A/72/840 offers an overview of these projects). Capacity building is operationalized by the various entities of the CTITF and oriented along the four pillars of the GCTS (A/72/840, para. 42). The UNCCT, the Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) of UNODC and the United Nations Interregional Crime and
Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) are considered to be the main United Nations counter-terrorism bodies for capacity-building support (A/71/858, para. 21). The counter-terrorism-related capacity-building efforts of other United Nations entities, such as for example the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), are also coordinated by CTITF.

The Under-Secretary General for Counter-Terrorism serves as the executive director of UNCCT (A/71/858, para. 62). UNCCT currently follows a five-year programme of work launched in 2016 (The Beam, 2016, p. 13). This programme ensures that the activities do not overlap with the activities of other CTITF entities but leverage experience through joint efforts (A/71/858, para. 23). UNODC-TPB promotes the ratification of the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism and supports Member States in their implementation. It provides legal assistance for the review and drafting of national counter-terrorism legislation and builds the capacity of criminal justice systems to effectively respond to terrorism.

(A/71/858, para. 25)

UNICRI assists intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental organizations in formulating and implementing improved policies of crime prevention and control, including counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism. This is achieved through research, training, field activities and information collection and dissemination (A/71/858, para. 26). For example, since 2015 UNICRI, in cooperation with the European Union, has been implementing a capacity-building project in the Sahel-Maghreb region which aims to promote deradicalization activities (UNICRI, 2015, p. 1).

The role of the United Nations system in supporting Member States’ capacity-building efforts allocates the responsibility of the conceptual definition of what deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration entail and when they are achieved, solely to Member States. Consequently, this includes the risk that standards can vary significantly between Member States. Due to its supporting mandate, the United Nations cannot officially develop its own internal definitions or benchmarks for these terms. However, the United Nations system does play a significant role in helping Member States to design respective measures in accordance with human rights and international law and therefore is able to outline principle standards for such measures. For example, UNCCT, in cooperation with the CTITF Working Group on Protecting Human Rights while Countering Terrorism, has developed five Basic Human Rights Reference Guides for Member States that include practical tools outlining how to protect human rights while countering terrorism. In addition to addressing issues such as stopping and searching of persons, security infrastructure, detention and the right to a fair trial and due process, these guides address the issue of the compatibility of counter-terrorism legislation with international human rights law (CTITF, 2014).

Coordination and coherence

Since 2017, the area of coordination and coherence has seen significant reforms. Chiefly among these was the establishment of UNOCT (General Assembly resolution 71/291). UNOCT provides leadership and overall coordination and coherence for all capacity-building support efforts of the United Nations system with regard to counter-terrorism (71/291, para. 1 and A/71/858, para. 64). The establishment of this new office by the General Assembly was aimed at reducing administrative inefficiencies, duplication of work and competition between the various United Nations entities in the area of counter-terrorism capacity building.
The establishment of UNOCT concluded a debate among Member States and experts that took nearly half a decade on how the United Nations counter-terrorism structure could be more efficiently organized. Some experts had consistently argued the case for a high-ranking coordination office since 2012 (Cockayne, Millar, Cortright, & Romaniuk, 2012; Millar & Chowdhury Fink, 2016; Stoffer, 2013). In order to ensure that UNOCT has the institutional means to fulfil its leadership and coordination mandate, CTITF and UNCCT were integrated into the office.

CTITF has the operational responsibility to coordinate the relevant activities of the currently 33 member entities and five entities that are observers of CTITF and to ensure that coherence among the various activities is maintained (A/71/858, para. 12 and Figure II). The Under-Secretary General for Counter-Terrorism is the Chief of CTITF and, therefore, ultimately responsible for system-wide coordination of counter-terrorism activities within the United Nations (A/71/858, para. 62). CTITF is organized into 12 thematic working groups (A/71/858, para. 15), covering a wide range of issues including among others the prevention of violent extremism. Currently, there is no working group solely dedicated to deradicalization issues. In order to further enhance the coordination between capacity-building efforts across the United Nations system, the Secretary General in 2018 signed the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact with the heads of the CTITF entities (Annex III to A/72/840). The signatories of the non-binding compact (Annex III, para. 10 (e) of A/72/840) commit themselves to a range of concrete coordination, collaboration and information exchange standards (Annex III para. 11 of A/72/840). Furthermore, in a separate report, requested by paragraph 18 of Security Council resolution 2395 (2017), UNOCT and CTED laid out a number of concrete recommendations on how both institutions can increase their cooperation and coordination (Annex of S/2018/435 and Annex IV of A/72/840). Both documents clearly demonstrate the “efforts made in improving coordination and cooperation between the UNOCT and CTED and with other CTITF entities” (Millar, 2018, p. 15).

The mandate of UNCCT is to promote international counter-terrorism cooperation and support Member States in the implementation of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, in particular through capacity-building support, by providing relevant legal and technical expertise, including for deradicalization efforts for Member States. UNCCT also provides fora in which Member State officials can exchange experiences and best practices and strengthen their bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Furthermore, UNCCT, as part of UNOCT, currently conducts in-depth research to enhance the understanding of the foreign terrorist fighters’ phenomenon among Member States and the United Nations system. A first study concerning foreign terrorist fighters in Syria was published in 2017 (UNOCT, 2017).

In addition to these internal reforms and initiatives, the Secretary General, following a suggestion by UNOCT, convened in June 2018 the first ever gathering of the heads of counter-terrorism agencies of Member States in a High-Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism. After discussions with Member States and lobbying efforts (ICAN, 2018), the event also included representatives of civil society organizations and regional organizations. Although the conference did not produce a negotiated outcome document, it led to the establishment of a new unit within UNOCT to ensure that the views of civil society feed into the office’s work and the establishment of a Global Network of Counter-Terrorism Coordinators to better share expertise and best practices (Secretary General Closing Remarks, 2018).
Conclusion and outlook

The United Nations system with its international reach and global legitimacy is ideally placed to counter global threats. The threat of terrorism posed by al-Qaida and ISIL to all Member States, helped to build and maintain a broad consensus among all Member States of the United Nations that this system should play a role in counter-terrorism efforts. However, at the same time, Member States have avoided giving the United Nations system an independent role. The various mandates given to the United Nations system on the issue of counter-terrorism and preventative measures as well as rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters are aimed to support Member States’ efforts. In this regard, the various United Nations stakeholders are not mandated to be independent actors, giving prescriptive advice to Member States, but to generate and deliver knowledge and expertise, provide fora for Member States to cooperate multilaterally and to convene Member State officials and experts from specialized agencies and international organizations. Consequently, the priority areas of the work of the various United Nations stakeholders are adjusted according to the evolving global terror threat, the changing challenges that Member States face, their capacity needs as well as donor priorities. This ensures that the actions of the United Nations system are based on the widest possible political consensus among Member States, something that would not be easy to achieve if the United Nations system acted independently.

Building political consensus among Member States concerning key terminology such as “terrorism”, “extremism” or “deradicalization” remains a challenge and, therefore, conceptual developments will remain evolutionary and only oriented on the operational needs as well as challenges faced by Member States. Nevertheless, during the past two decades the General Assembly and the Security Council have made major and significant contributions through the development of the various Security Council resolutions as well as the GCTS and the PVE Plan as basic normative documents that provide a flexible and evolving framework for Member States countering the challenge of global terrorism. The complex system of normative documents and institutional structures of the counter-terrorism architecture of the United Nations has evolved organically over nearly two decades, at each point responding to the changing threat of global terrorism, violent extremism and demands by Member States.

The development of the operative mandates of a significant number of stakeholders within the United Nations system risks operative duplication, inefficiency and administrative competition. Consequently, in order to ensure the effective and efficient functioning to implement the aims of the GCTS and the PVE Plan, strong coordination among all the actors of the United Nations system continues to be needed. With the creation of UNOCT in 2017 and its strong coordination mandate this challenge was addressed. However, a new opportunity was also created to continue further internal reforms. These reforms should aim to involve a wider range of stakeholders, above and below the level of Member States, in the implementation of counter-terrorism, preventative and deradicalization efforts of the United Nations. Chief among these are regional and subregional organizations, civil society and non-governmental organizations and private sector stakeholders.

Regional and subregional organizations have built their own counter-terrorism and preventative structures over the last few years and a stronger engagement by the United Nations system with these structures would ensure that capacity-building efforts are addressed also at the level between Member States and the global structure. For example, in Southeast Asia, the Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCCT) has developed into an influential regional platform for research and project work, while in
East Africa, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s (IGAD’s) Security Sector Program (SSP) does important work on counter-terrorism issues and IGAD’s Center of Excellence in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE) works on conceptual and operational issues. The United Nations system has already engaged with these and other organizations; for example, there is a long-standing cooperation with the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, EUROPOL. However, these engagements have been driven more by individual project demands rather than conducted in a systematic fashion. Creating such specific mechanisms for these engagements would enable the United Nations system to tap into a wealth of knowledge and capacities, aiding in more effective project design and delivery processes. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) global structure with its FATF-style regional bodies (FSRBs) could be a potential blueprint for such a network. The announcement of the Secretary General in June 2018 that the United Nations is establishing a network of counter-terrorism coordinators could be an appropriate forum to achieve this.

Secondly, civil society and non-governmental organizations are important stakeholders in counter-terrorism, preventative as well as deradicalization efforts due to their local knowledge and close connection to various communities. Some organizations also have a global reach, such as for example the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) or the Counter Extremism Project (CEP), which co-hosted the Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism, a side event to the General Assembly Plenary meeting in 2015. It is therefore crucial to involve these actors in a more systematic way. Despite the fact that civil society is named as an important stakeholder in several counter-terrorism-related United Nations documents, institutional engagement with such stakeholders in the field of counter-terrorism remains largely ad hoc and unsystematic. One example of a more structured engagement is the Global Research Network (GRN) of CTED. The establishment of a new unit within UNOCT to engage with civil society and non-governmental organizations is a first important step in this direction.

Finally, private sector stakeholders can bring important information, experience and innovations to the counter-terrorism and preventative work of the United Nations. Often it is the private sector that is the operational implementor of counter-terrorism measures, such as international sanctions, air travel security mechanisms or financial transfer regulations. For several years, some counter-terrorism actors within the United Nations system have engaged the private sector intensively. For example, in 2016, the ISIL, Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team published a report focusing on the challenges private sector stakeholders face in implementing Security Council sanctions measures (S/216/213). In 2017, CTED and ICT4Peace launched the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (The Beam, 2017, p. 9). Here too, non-governmental organizations can provide already existing private sector networks and open doors for the United Nations system. For example, CEP has built up a significant private sector network and developed eGLYPH, software capable of detecting and removing extremist images, videos and audio messages that have been pre-determined to violate the terms of service of internet and social media companies (CEP, 2016). Further structured engagement of the United Nations system, under the leadership of UNOCT, with private sector stakeholders in a wide range of industries, such as the travel, financial and logistics sectors, could result in the development of more effective measures as it would connect the operational implementors with the designers of counter-terrorism, preventative and deradicalization measures.
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