

August 2018

The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review

Raised expectations, missed opportunities from the June 2018 review

About the Author

Hanny Megally is a Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation

In June 2018, the United Nations (UN) Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy—adopted by the General Assembly in 2006 and reviewed every two years—underwent its sixth biennial review in New York. It took place with lots of raised expectations—particularly around strengthening obligations to comply with human rights law while countering terrorism, and increasing the inclusion of women and civil society organizations in policymaking and programming in this area. Sadly, the results fell short. Here is what happened.

A draft [resolution](#) was debated and adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on June 26, and was followed by a two-day High-level Conference on Countering Terrorism, attended by more than 1,000 delegates from 150 member states. It featured more than [25 side events](#) and saw 126 statements delivered in four thematic sessions:

- strengthening international cooperation through the sharing of information, expertise and resources
- combating the evolving threat from foreign terrorist fighters
- strengthening global action to prevent violent extremism, including by engaging youth and preventing misuse of new technologies and the internet by terrorists
- strengthening the role and capacity of the UN to support member states

Why were expectations raised?

In the lead-up to the review and conference, expectations had been raised by a series of actions the UN was taking to increase effectiveness in tackling the challenges of terrorism and violent extremism. A year earlier, Secretary-General António Guterres had undertaken a major reform in the UN counter-terrorism architecture by establishing the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), headed by Vladimir Voronkov in a newly created Under-Secretary-General (USG) position. The USG was tasked with providing overall strategic leadership, cohesion, coordination for the UN in this area (something that many had complained was sorely lacking), and ensuring that “the important work on

preventing violent extremism is firmly rooted in the Strategy” (an area where deep divisions remain among member states).

The Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (CTC), initially established in the Department of Political Affairs, were moved into the UNOCT for greater coherence. Early in 2018, a [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact](#) was signed by 36 UN entities, INTERPOL, and the World Customs Organization aimed at, inter alia, improving coordination, enhancing transparency through regular updates from UNOCT, and establishing a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation to strengthen evidence-based data gathering for more effective programming. Finally, it seemed the UN was getting its act together.

Expectations were further raised by the promise that the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate’s expert assessments in technical assistance and capacity building would be made more widely available to benefit member states, donors, and recipients. On the civil society front, strong signals were being sent from top UN echelons that systematic and meaningful ways of engaging with civil society actors were being developed. Finally, various consultations in the lead up to the review—among government officials, UN representatives, independent experts, and civil society actors—had brought out strong support for increased funding for and the mainstreaming of the fourth pillar of the strategy. This is the pillar that emphasizes, as essential components, the promotion and protection of human rights and respect for rule of law.

“Where concrete progress had been expected, we were met with speeches but little else.”

The glass half-full

On the plus side, the adopted resolution does contain some important new language, for example, with regard to addressing the situation of returning foreign terrorist fighters. In addition to prioritizing efforts to address the threats posed by such returnees, the resolution also emphasizes the need to develop “rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, taking into account gender and age dimensions, for returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters and their families.”

This is very commendable given the alarmingly negative signals from many Western countries regarding the return of their citizens who have travelled to Syria or Iraq to join or support the Islamic State (IS) in one form or another. Indeed one senior Western Minister has been quoted in the media as wanting them “[eliminated](#)” while another saw them as a “serious danger” and advocated [killing them](#) rather than allowing them to return. In some instances, states have resorted to [revoking](#) citizenship.

There are, of course, difficult challenges to be faced in dealing with the risks associated with returnees, and no one can forget the appalling brutality that was

meted out to those who were captured by the IS or lived under its regime. On the other hand, as Agnes Callamard, the UN's special rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, and Reed Brody from Human Rights Watch have correctly highlighted there are also [opportunities](#), and not just challenges, such as returnees helping uncover evidence to ensure justice for victims and relatives.

Discussion, however, should not be only on challenges and opportunities but on upholding international law. If individuals are captured "hors de combat" or have surrendered, they should be detained, and if crimes have been committed they should be brought to justice. Patrick Hamilton from the [ICRC](#) has rightly warned against the "dehumanizing rhetoric" and reminds us that "exceptional crimes do not justify exceptions to the law." Secretary-General Guterres rightly pointed out during his [keynote speech](#) at the conference that the actions and beliefs of terrorist groups are an affront to the values of the UN, and in the fight against terrorism we need to uphold those values if we are to succeed.

To continue on the positives, the resolution also references the importance of developing effective monitoring and evaluation tools and, in particular, requests the Secretary-General to ensure that the annual progress reports that UNOCT is mandated to produce provide this information for the sake of transparency and effectiveness.

Last, and in response to calls from member states, the Secretary-General undertook to establish a Global Network of Counter-Terrorism Coordinators to enhance the sharing of experiences and good practices.

The glass half-empty

On the downside, it was clear from the debates and speeches in New York that deep divisions still remained between member states including on such seemingly innocuous issues as the utility of the prevention approach to violent extremism, the identification of the conditions and drivers to radicalization, the important role of civil society in ensuring an effective global strategy, and even on the attention being paid to gender. Where concrete progress had been expected, we were met with speeches but little else.

Much can be summed up in the biting [critique](#) issued by a group of prominent NGOs attending the review. It included concerns about failure to adequately address the human rights abuses being committed, and the increasing erosion of international humanitarian law in the name of combatting terrorism. They highlighted the increasing lip service being paid to strengthening the fourth pillar and the importance of gender analysis, but noted that very little in terms of concrete steps emerged from the review. Finally, they lamented the lack of an enabling environment for civil society, including women, to meaningfully engage

with the strategy review.

So, what next? Despite all the talk about strengthening the fourth pillar (human rights and rule of law), little has been done to ensure that this is what will happen in the near future in a consistent and meaningful manner. While we continue to see an increase in human rights and humanitarian law violations in the name of the “war on terror,” much of the review was spent discussing states’ performances in passing legislation and acting to combat terrorism, with little assessment of the adverse impact on human rights. As a small step forward, USG Voronkov should work with OHCHR to establish an integrated infrastructure that would ensure human rights expertise and advice is mainstreamed in all counter-terrorism policies and programming.

Second, the positive references that were made by Secretary-General Guterres, by USG Voronkov, and by many delegates, UN entities, and NGOs regarding the important work of civil society organizations should now be translated into establishing a new unit in UNOCT to ensure that the views of civil society are fully reflected in counter-terrorism policies and programs. This is something the Secretary-General referred to in his [closing remarks](#).

Last, well-established counter-terrorism practices are often affecting people (especially women) in gendered ways, including in counter-terrorism legislation and states of emergency. References to the strengthening of gender analysis and to inclusion of women continue to be made at every review, but no further steps are taken. At this review, Kai Sauer, Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations and co-facilitator of the review, noted the importance of data and referenced research that had shown a correlation between gender equality and a decrease in violent extremism. Going forward, it is clear to all that gender analysis can only be strengthened through the collection of national data. This can, for example, include measuring the impact of counter-terrorism legislation and states of emergency on women and girls. At the same time, gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation, including through the use of gender-related indicators and collection of sex-disaggregated data of all counter-terrorism programs, should be happening across the board. Analysis of this data, with UN support, should urgently inform national prevention approaches to violent extremism plans and strategies.

**Center on International
Cooperation**

726 Broadway, Suite 543
New York, NY 10003

The Center on International Cooperation is a non-profit research center housed at New York University. Our core mission is to enhance international responses on the countries and issues most important to conflict prevention and recovery, through direct and regular engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community. Visit us at cic.nyu.edu.
