



**UNITED NATIONS  
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM  
UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)**

**REMARKS for Dr. Jehangir Khan  
First Global Conference on Fragile Borders  
High-level Panel: Setting the Scene: Defining Fragility  
Abuja, Nigeria  
31 January 2023**

*Excellencies,  
Distinguished Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*A very good morning to all. On behalf of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, I am pleased to deliver remarks at this important global conference organized by our close partners at the World Customs Organization and hosted by the Nigeria Customs Service. I take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to the Government of Nigeria for its warm hospitality.*

*As we look to set the scene for the important discussions ahead over the next three days on the critical role of Customs administrations within national security architectures, and more concretely their role in preventing and countering terrorist threats as the 'first line of defense' against many criminal organizations and terrorist groups seeking to exploit vulnerabilities at international borders, I believe it is worth establishing the context in terms of terrorism trends and international efforts towards supporting States to address not only terrorist threats, but also the drivers of violent extremism through the adoption of "all-of-Government," "All-of-Society" approaches.*

*So, to begin, I will first look to provide some high-level context to frame the discussions for the days ahead. Despite substantial international and regional counter-terrorism efforts, terrorist activity has increased in many parts of the world, and particularly in Africa, as terrorist groups seek to exploit and take advantage of existing conflicts and fragilities. Terrorism continues to evolve, increasingly affecting societies that had until recently been largely spared from that type of violence.*

*Groups such as Da'esh, Al-Qaida and their affiliates have progressively exploited instability and conflict, as well as gaps in border management, to increase terrorist activity and intensify attacks across the continent.*

*The situation in Africa is particularly urgent where some of Da'esh's strongest affiliates are increasingly exploiting existing instability and basing their operations. Da'esh and Al Qaida have expanded across large areas of the Sahel, having increased their presence in Mali while penetrating further into Burkina Faso and Niger. They have also expanded southward into countries of the Gulf of had until recently been largely spared from that type of violence.*

*The deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso and Mali has made the north of the coastal countries the new front line for terrorist groups operating in the Sahel. Hit-and-run attacks from across the border with Burkina Faso and Niger, including in northern Benin, have been worrisome. Such attacks are typically attributed to terrorist groups active in the region, notably Al Qaida-affiliated Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), which is increasing its control and expanding towards the Atlantic coast. It has further opened a travel corridor to the south through Burkina Faso, recruiting from Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Togo are trained in Burkina Faso prior to being redeployed to their countries of origin.*

*These groups exacerbate conflict dynamics, aggravate instability and human suffering, and contribute to humanitarian catastrophes. Climate change coupled with supply chain disruptions (due to the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis in Ukraine) pose an additional layer of complexity, inducing food insecurity that is also being exploited by terrorists and other criminal groups. Women and children in particular bear the brunt of insecurity created by terrorism, often deprived of fully enjoying their rights and the promise of sustainable development.*

*Prevention remains essential to countering terrorism, but there is a need to reconsider and invest more in such approaches. Addressing its deep and multi-faceted drivers yields more impactful and long-lasting results. While military and law enforcement responses to existing threats are necessary, they are not sufficient for defeating terrorism and could actually be counter-productive if not firmly anchored in the rule of law and human rights. Multifaceted solutions implemented through a "whole-of-society approach" are needed.*

*Circling back now to the critical role that Customs Administrations play within efforts to counter terrorism. It is Customs that manages and secures the cross-border flows of goods, people and conveyances, ensuring compliance with national and international laws and the security of the global supply chain. Indeed, security is at the very core of Customs' mandate.*

*But the significance of Customs' role goes well beyond border security, and in this regard, there is a need to understand and explore the relationship between security and national economies, which are impacted by cross border travel, trade and taxation practices, and delve even further to Customs' role in management of competition between states and non-state armed groups, particularly in fragile areas post-conflict situations.*

*The discussions over the next three days will be critically important in exploring, understanding, and defining the strategic importance of an expanded role for Customs Administrations in fragile and post-conflict situations, particularly where the scourge of terrorism continues to contribute to instability and impede economic development of border communities and states as a whole.*

*This leads me to the role and actions of the international community, and in particular, organizations such as the United Nations and the World Customs Organization, in supporting national efforts and bolstering international cooperation and coordination.*

*Across the globe, UNOCT leads and coordinates an 'All-of-UN' approach to assist States in preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism. We work closely with our partners, such as the WCO, as well as with INTERPOL, IOM, and others across all four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which is a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism. The critical role of Customs is specifically highlighted within the Global strategy, whereby the General Assembly resolved to:*

*"step up national efforts and bilateral, sub-regional, regional and international cooperation, as appropriate, to improve border and customs controls in order to prevent and detect the movement of terrorists... while recognizing that States may require assistance to that effect".*

*I will take this opportunity to highlight some of the programmes implemented by UNOCT in support to Member States in their fight against terrorism, particularly in strengthening border law enforcement capacities and enabling them to better address the complex challenges they face in*

*securing national boundaries across the spectrum of travel modalities.*

*First, a growing number of Member States are receiving concrete technical support in building their capacities to prevent, detect the movement of terrorists and others who may pose a security-related threat by collecting and analyzing passenger data within the various modes of travel under the framework of UNOCT's flagship global initiative, the UN Countering Terrorist Travel Programme. In recognition that Customs administrations are the principal border agency with the key role as the first line of defense and therefore uniquely placed to take enforcement action to prevent terrorism and transnational crime, this Programme works closely with the WCO, as well as other key UN partners, to promote and ensure an interdisciplinary approach and enhance interagency cooperation in the collection and processing of data for risk assessment and border management purposes, in line with UN Security Council resolutions, international standards and recommended practices and human rights principles.*

*Second, building upon the importance of interagency cooperation and coordination, the UNOCT Global Fusion Cells Programme works with Member States to develop national interagency coordination mechanisms or fusion cells/centres which can pool and analyse information, enable informed decision-making, help prevent terrorist attacks from occurring, ensure appropriate preparedness, and promote intelligence-led response measures. Once again, Customs Administrations play a can and should key role in such mechanisms. This will be explored further tomorrow during panel 4.*

*Third, UNOCT's Border Security and Management (BSM) Programme aims to reinforce the capacities of Member States to prevent terrorists from moving across borders and to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in line with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and relevant Security Council*

*resolutions. The programme provides (1) tailored technical assistance to policy-makers on border security and management to design comprehensive border security strategies and action plans; (2) delivers capacity-building activities to law enforcement agencies on border security, information sharing, and the use of biometrics at borders.*

*I mention these programmes precisely because innovative and collective efforts are needed to address the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. National institutions, including Customs Administrations need to be supported and empowered to establish and strengthen their capacities to address and respond ever-evolving threats and challenges. This even more critical in fragile and conflict-affected situations.*

*Let me pause here so that discussions around this context can ensue. Thank you very much.*