

International Expert Group Meeting on the Protection of Vulnerable Targets and Unmanned Aircraft Systems

Online event

6-7 October 2021, 8.45 a.m. – 12.15 p.m. (EDT)

Background

The targeting of vulnerable or “soft” targets by terrorist and violent extremist groups is increasing and terrorists are seeking new ways to exploit the vulnerabilities of open-air public/crowded spaces to inflict mass casualties, including by use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS or “drones”). Terrorists have already used UAS to gather intelligence, conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, and carry out attacks, and their use of UAS such purposes is likely to continue growing.

Crucially, UAS enable terrorist groups to bypass traditional physical protection measures. Whether in the form of hardened venue perimeters designed to stem vehicle-borne attacks, armed guards or visitor-screening barriers, these measures can be easily circumvented by terrorists using UAS to fly over them. Once they are near or inside the perimeter of a vulnerable site, they can potentially be used for a variety of hostile purposes, such as collecting information about fragile/unprotected areas which may not appear as such from the ground or to discharge a lethal weapon on the public. Additionally, camera equipped UAS allow terrorists to maximize the media impact of their actions. Terrorists have also shown themselves to be capable of constructing sophisticated devices from scratch and modifying commercial drones for malicious purposes. Da’esh even uses online and social media channels to disseminate guidance material on how to execute such attacks.

The rapid evolution of UAS related technology and terrorists’ easy access to it necessitates Member States and relevant stakeholders to develop and enhance international cooperation and identify and share good practices to counter the threat related to UAS. At the same time, when they are employed by authorized law enforcement and other competent authorities in a human rights-compliant manner, UAS can themselves be critical assets in protecting vulnerable sites against terrorist acts. At major sporting and concert events, for example, UAS can provide situational awareness and support crowd management efforts, such as by alerting security personnel about excessive concentrations of visitors in certain areas. Or they can facilitate evacuation procedures during the unfolding or in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist incident.

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy highlights the need for Member States to improve security and protection of vulnerable targets, including ‘soft targets’ and critical infrastructure (including its seventh review resolution [A/RES/75/291](#), PP and OPs 69, 71, 73, 74). United Nations Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) stresses the need for Member States to develop, review or amend national risk and threat assessments to consider ‘soft targets’, and to develop appropriate contingency and emergency response plans for terrorist attacks. It also calls on Member States to establish or strengthen national, regional and international partnerships with public and private actors to promote the sharing of information and experiences, in order to better prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to, and recover from

terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets. Furthermore, the Security Council, in resolution 2341 (2017), encourages all States to make concerted and coordinated efforts — including through international cooperation — to raise awareness and expand knowledge of challenges posed by terrorist attacks against critical infrastructure. In its resolution 2370 (2017) the Security Council strongly condemns the continued flow of weapons, including small arms and light weapons (SALW), military equipment, UAS and their components, and improvised explosive device (IED) components to and between ISIL (Daesh), Al-Qaida, their affiliates and associated groups, illegal armed groups and criminals, and encourages States to prevent and disrupt their procurement networks for such weapons, systems and components.

In 2018, the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee endorsed the *Addendum to the 2015 Madrid Guiding Principles* containing two specific additional good practices on the protection of vulnerable targets (Guiding Principles 50 and 51). While acknowledging that Member States bear the primary responsibility for critical infrastructure and vulnerable target protection, the Addendum notes the growing need to increase cooperation both between Member States and with private companies that own, operate and manage those infrastructures to address security needs.

In this context, UNOCT is supporting Member States in their efforts to address the terrorist threats to vulnerable targets by leading—in cooperation with the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), and in consultation with INTERPOL—the implementation of the *United Nations Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets*¹, which aims at:

- Identifying, gathering and sharing policies and good practices to understand, prevent and counter terrorist threats against vulnerable targets, including urban centres and major tourist venues, religious sites as well as the threat posed by UAS;
- Strengthening Member States' capacity to develop comprehensive and collaborative strategies, including through public-private partnerships;
- Providing, upon request, tailored capacity-building to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to and recover from terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets.

Objectives of the Expert Group Meeting

UNOCT is inviting Member States and local authorities, relevant international and regional organizations, and private sector representatives to participate online in the **International Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Targets and Unmanned Aircraft Systems on 6-7 October 2021, from 8.45 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. (EDT)** to:

¹ The framework behind the Global Programme includes, inter alia: the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288 and review resolutions, particularly A/RES/75/291); Security Council resolutions 2341 (2017), 2396 (2017); UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2018 Addendum to the 2015 Madrid Guiding Principles, S/2018/1177; CTED, UNOCT and INTERPOL, The protection of critical infrastructures against terrorist attacks: Compendium of good practices, 2018; and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), Antalya Memorandum on the Protection of Soft Targets in a Counterterrorism Context, 2017. More information: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/vulnerable-targets>

- Identify challenges encountered and lessons learned and good practices when developing approaches to: (i) protect vulnerable targets, including ‘soft targets’, and critical infrastructure, from UAS-related terrorist threats; and (ii) use UAS to protect vulnerable targets;
- Provide an overview of existing international, regional and national policy frameworks to tackle the risks posed by drones;
- Identify Member States’ priorities and needs, both in the policy domain and in the field of technical assistance, which the United Nations can address, including through its Global Programmes on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets and on Unmanned Aircraft Systems.

Areas to be discussed

- Lessons learned and good practices from recent UAS terrorist attacks/threats
- Lessons learned and good practices from the use of UAS to prevent terrorist attacks
- Legal and policy frameworks
- Prevention, preparedness and response
- Public-private partnerships
- Crisis communications and resilience
- Human rights implications of the use of UAS to protect vulnerable targets

Participants to the event

- Experts from Member States;
- International, regional and subregional organizations;
- Private sector representatives;
- Civil society representatives and other relevant stakeholders.

Conduction of the meeting

- The meeting will be held online. Connection details will be provided to participants that register at <https://forms.office.com/r/jzSiya7FUJ>