



Second United Nations HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON COUNTER-TERRORISM

28-30 JUNE 2021

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Concept Note

Countering and Preventing Terrorism in the Age of Transformative Technologies: Addressing the Challenges of the New Decade

Introduction

1. This note provides information on the context and specific thematic sessions of the Second United Nations High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States. The United Nations Secretary-General, H.E. Mr. António Guterres, will convene the Conference at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 28 - 30 June 2021. The overarching theme for the High-Level Conference is “Countering and Preventing Terrorism in the Age of Transformative Technologies: Addressing the Challenges of the New Decade”. The Conference will provide a significant and timely opportunity to consider the practical implementation of relevant aspects of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288) and its review resolutions, including those on human rights, gender equality and engagement with youth and civil society, in line with Member States’ priorities. Moreover, it will provide a platform for Member States, United Nations entities, international and regional organizations, civil society and the private sector to exchange information, experiences and good practices while exploring further cooperation.

2. The First United Nations High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States, convened by the Secretary-General on 28-29 June 2018, provided fresh impetus which the United Nations and Member States leveraged to strengthen international counter-terrorism cooperation. Pursuant to the announcement made by the Secretary-General upon closing the Conference, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) partnered with Member States around the world to hold seven High-Level Regional Conferences in Austria, Belarus, Hungary, Kenya, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and the United Arab Emirates. The outcomes of these seven Conferences fed into the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week organized by UNOCT in July 2020. The Second High-Level Conference builds on the outcomes of the High-Level Regional Conferences and the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week.

3. The five thematic sessions of the Conference will focus on key counter-terrorism priorities under the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Due to COVID-19-related constraints, the Conference will be conducted in a hybrid format, in compliance with related guidance for conferences in place at the United

Nations. For all designated hybrid sessions, in-person access to the Conference will be restricted to one delegate per Member State or Observer State. All other participants, including speakers who are not Member or Observer State representatives, will participate online. Following panel presentations, each session will provide time for interventions from the floor. Member State Heads of Delegation are invited to make a maximum of three-minute remarks during the thematic sessions. Please see the Logistical Note of the Conference for more details.

Context and Conference Theme

4. While there is no standard definition of transformative technologies, several of the technologies that have emerged over the past two decades have transformed our daily lives, including how we communicate, learn and think. Technology has brought us multiple new forms of electronic communication, including for example, email, social networking, and videoconferencing. The Internet has provided us with immediate access to a vast amount of information, in text, image and video format, enabling high-speed and self-paced learning. The transformative technologies that have developed over the past two decades provide both opportunities and risks. They can improve human lives and move forward the sustainable development agenda. But they can also be used maliciously or have unintended negative consequences. The Secretary-General's Strategy on New Technologies, issued in September 2018, notes that new technologies can “offer us powerful new ways to achieve our shared commitments to each and every one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”, but they can also “be used to malicious ends or have unintended negative consequences”.¹ A list with examples of transformative technologies, applications and systems relevant to countering terrorism is attached to this note.

5. Technological advances have made it attractive for terrorist and violent extremist groups to exploit the Internet and social media to facilitate a wide range of activities, including incitement, radicalization, recruitment, training, collection of information, communication, and planning, preparation, financing and perpetration of terrorist acts. Terrorists also use encrypted communication and the dark web to share expertise and coordinate and facilitate attacks. Meanwhile, terrorists could misuse other technological developments in artificial intelligence, robotics technology, 3D printing, big data, algorithmic filters, and biotechnology for multiple purposes, including carrying out reconnaissance activities, planning attacks, distorting reality, undermining trust in governments, evading detection, concealing evidence, reducing their human and financial costs, and expanding their attacks' range and lethality.

6. In the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted national, regional and global vulnerabilities to new and emerging forms of terrorism. In his opening remarks at the 2020 Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, Secretary-General Guterres stated that “The pandemic has also highlighted vulnerabilities to new and emerging forms of terrorism, such as misuse of digital technology, cyberattacks and bioterrorism [...] we need to closely monitor evolving terrorist threats and evolving trends and be innovative in our responses. That means ensuring we have the right technology, tools and concepts to stay ahead of terrorists.”

7. The Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation issued in June 2020 warns about terrorists and violent extremists' exploitation of the Internet and social media, attacks against critical infrastructure, as well as increasing cybercrime and the growing capabilities of State and non-State actors to conduct cyber-

1 UN Secretary-General Strategy on New Technologies, September 2018, at: [SGs-Strategy-on-New-Technologies.pdf \(un.org\)](#), page 8

operations, including disinformation targeting elections and political systems. Nevertheless, Member States, United Nations entities, and international and regional organizations have made innovative use of modern technologies to gather, use and share information, detect and prevent acts of terrorism, bring perpetrators to justice, and support victims of terrorism.

8. During the First High-Level Conference and subsequent Regional Conferences, participants underlined the importance of preventing the exploitation of information and communication technologies by terrorist groups while expressing concern at the widespread use of the Internet by terrorists to spread their ideologies and coordinate attacks. Member States echoed this during the 2020 Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week. They assessed that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic would likely lead to more diverse terrorist threats, including cyber disruption of critical infrastructure. States deemed the misuse of digital technology and social media to spread terrorist narratives to be the most pressing issue requiring urgent joint action from governments, tech companies and civil society, while emphasizing the need to protect freedom of expression and beliefs.

9. In the sixth review resolution of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/72/284), Member States express “concern at the increasing use, in a globalized society, by terrorists and their supporters, of information and communications technologies, in particular the Internet and other media, and the use of such technologies, to commit, incite, recruit for, fund or plan terrorist acts.” Security Council resolution 2341 (2017) calls upon Member States “to establish or strengthen national, regional and international partnerships with stakeholders, both public and private, as appropriate, to share information and experiences to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to and recover from damage from terrorist attacks on critical infrastructure facilities, including through joint training, and use or establishment of relevant communication or emergency warning networks.” Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017) call for Member States to act cooperatively when taking national measures to prevent terrorists from exploiting technology and communications for terrorist acts. Resolution 2396 (2017) also encourages Member States to enhance cooperation with the private sector, especially with communication technology companies, in gathering digital data and evidence in cases related to terrorism and foreign terrorist fighters.

Opening Session: Countering and Preventing Terrorism in the Age of Transformative Technologies: Addressing the Challenges of the New Decade

10. The opening session is dedicated to framing the Conference’s discussions on preventing and countering terrorism in the age of transformative technologies and exploring good practices for addressing the challenges of the new decade. The United Nations Secretary-General, H.E. Mr. António Guterres, and the President of the United Nations General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Volkan Bozkır, will participate in the opening session with eminent speakers representing Member States and regional organizations. This session will open with introductory remarks by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. The session will include a presentation by the co-facilitators of the Seventh Review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, H.E. Mr. Mohamed Al-Hassan, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations and H.E. Mr. Agustín Santos Maraver, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Spain to the United Nations, on the review’s outcome. It will also provide civil society perspectives on the challenges and opportunities presented by transformative technologies in the context of preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.

Session I: The Global Scourge of Terrorism: Assessment of Current Threats and Emerging Trends for the New Decade

11. This session, which is open to Member States only, will feature presentations by heads of counter-terrorism agencies of Member States, representatives of United Nations entities with counter-terrorism mandates, and international, regional and sub-regional organizations. Although the overall rate of terrorist attacks dropped globally from 2015-2020, last year saw an increase in the threat posed by a number of terrorist groups, including ISIL, Al-Qaida and their regional affiliates, in some conflict zones and volatile regions, especially in Africa. Some terrorist and violent extremist groups have taken advantage of the pandemic's upheaval to recruit vulnerable individuals, forge opportunistic alliances with criminal organizations, and exploit intercommunal tensions while maintaining sleeper cells in poorly governed territories. There are concerns about a potential increase in the terrorist threat in non-conflict areas in the coming months in the form of inspired attacks, as a result of the surge in online propaganda during the pandemic, coupled with the anticipated resumption of large-scale international travel and new opportunities to attack crowded 'soft' or 'vulnerable' targets, including touristic venues, places of worship, religious sites, and major sports events, once COVID-19 restrictions on public and social gatherings ease worldwide. Terrorist groups may also regain the capacity to orchestrate international attacks in the coming year.²

12. This thematic session will address the following key questions:

- Which new technologies are being exploited by terrorists and how can Member States acting individually or multilaterally prevent such abuses?
- How will terrorism evolve over the new decade? What factors and dynamics will shape this evolution?
- Which States or regions will be most impacted by terrorism in the new decade?
- How will terrorists' modus operandi evolve over the new decade?
- What are some effective approaches for leveraging new technologies to prevent and counter terrorism, in line with international human rights law?

Session II: Parallel break-out discussions - Prevention in the Age of Transformative Technologies

13. The second thematic session will consist of three parallel break-out discussions, focusing on prevention in the age of transformative technologies.

² Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution [2368 \(2017\)](#) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities (S/2021/68); Twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat (S/2021/98); The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Annual Report 2020 at: [ACLED Annual-Report-2020 Web March2021 Pub.pdf \(acleddata.com\)](#)

14. **Break-out Session A on 'Prevention through innovative programmes, including behavioural insights and sports, to unite communities and build resilient societies'** will focus on good practices for using innovative programmes, including behavioural insights and sports, to unite communities and build resilient societies. Participants will discuss challenges and good practices for preventing and countering threats against major sporting events, using sports and their values as a tool to build resilience, especially among youths and prevent violent extremism. They will also discuss challenges and good practices for using insights from behavioural science to identify risk and resilience factors and develop empirically validated interventions to prevent and counter violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism effectively.

15. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- How can behavioural insights improve understanding of the drivers of violent extremism, identify risk and resilience factors, and develop effective counter-terrorism responses?
- What risks does a behavioural insights approach to preventing and countering terrorism present? How can those be overcome?
- What good practices exist to prevent and counter threats against major sporting events?
- What are the main challenges for preventing and countering threats against major sporting events?
- What good practices exist to promote sports and their values to unite communities, build resilience, especially among youth, and prevent violent extremism? What challenges and capacity-building needs does this present?

16. **Break-out Session B on 'Preventing misuse of cyberspace and new technologies'** is dedicated to identifying and assessing existing options and generating new ideas for practitioners to prevent the misuse of cyberspace and new technologies. This session will provide a platform to explore further opportunities for practical and operational cooperation and strengthening multi-stakeholder approaches involving governments, the private sector, civil society and international and regional organizations.

17. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- What are the primary current and possible future concerns regarding terrorists' exploitation of the Internet and new and emerging technologies? What technical and non-technical options currently exist to address those issues? What could be the respective roles of Member States, international and regional organizations, the private sector and civil society organizations in addressing these concerns?
- What further human rights-compliant steps can be taken to counter terrorist propaganda and incitement to violence, particularly through the Internet and social media?
- How can the use of new technologies for preventing and countering terrorism be further improved? What are the challenges involved in using these technologies in such a manner, including any unintended risks or consequences for international human rights and gender equality and how can these be overcome?
- How can new technologies be used in a positive manner to promote and protect human rights and promote gender equality while preventing and countering terrorism?

18. **Break-out Session C on ‘the critical roles of civil society and local actors in building partnerships for prevention’.** This session will review existing strategies and tools to ensure systematic, coherent and structured engagement between Member States, United Nations entities, other international and regional organizations, and civil society. Participants will explore new ways to strengthen civil society engagement for preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism, taking into consideration the evolution of the terrorist threat and the challenges and opportunities of the new decade. The importance of this theme is reflected in several General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. In its resolution 72/284, the General Assembly recognizes the role that civil society organizations can play in confronting the challenges of recruitment and radicalization to terrorism, notes the importance of cooperation with civil society in addressing the misuse of technologies by terrorists and their supporters, and encourages Member States to enhance engagement with civil society to support its role in the implementation of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

19. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- What are some of the main challenges that civil society organizations and local actors face in their efforts to contribute to preventing terrorism and violent extremism and addressing the impacts of terrorism and violent extremism, including by countering terrorist narratives, building societal resilience to terrorism, supporting the victims of terrorism, and promoting gender equality and youth engagement?
- How can the United Nations, international and regional organizations, and Member States strengthen their support to civil society organizations and local actors to contribute to preventing terrorism and violent extremism and addressing the impacts of terrorism and violent extremism?
- How can the private sector support civil society organizations and local actors in their efforts to contribute to preventing and countering terrorism and addressing the impacts of terrorism and violent extremism?
- How can new technologies be leveraged to enhance civil society organizations and local actors’ contributions to prevention efforts? What challenges, limitations and capacity-building needs does this present?

Session III: Upholding Human Rights and Promoting Gender Responsiveness while Countering Terrorism in the Age of Transformative Technologies

20. This session will consider challenges and good practices for ensuring full respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism, supporting and protecting the victims and survivors of terrorism, ensuring that all counter-terrorism measures are in accordance with Member States’ obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law, and promoting gender responsiveness while countering terrorism in the new decade.

21. Several General Assembly and Security Council resolutions underscore Member States’ human rights obligations under international law in the counter-terrorism context. Pillar IV of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy reaffirms that the promotion and protection of human rights for all and the rule of law is essential to all components of the Strategy. It recognizes that effective counter-terrorism measures and

the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals but complementary and mutually reinforcing and stresses the need to promote and protect the rights of victims of terrorism.

22. The landmark Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) stresses the importance of the role and full involvement of women and the inclusion of gender perspectives in peace and security efforts. Through the fifth and sixth reviews of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the General Assembly underscores the important role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, and encourages Member States, United Nations entities and international, regional and sub-regional organizations to ensure the participation and leadership of women in efforts to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism, as well as to consult with women's organizations to inform their counter-terrorism work.

23. Acts of terrorism impact children in multiple ways, with severe consequences.³ According to international law, children, defined as all persons under the age of 18, are considered vulnerable and in need of special protections based only on their age.⁴ Consequently, States must treat children, including children related to or associated with designated terrorist groups, primarily as victims when devising responses, including counter-terrorism responses. All policies and actions related to children should be firmly based on the principle of the best interests of the child, and children should be treated, first and foremost, as victims.⁵ In its resolution 2396 (2017), the Security Council acknowledged that children impacted by terrorism may be especially vulnerable and in need of particular psychosocial support, and stressed that children need to be treated in a manner that respects their rights and protects their dignity in accordance with applicable international law.⁶

24. This thematic session will address the following key questions:

- What are some of the effective approaches for ensuring a complementary and mutually reinforcing approach to preventing and countering terrorism, promoting and protecting human rights including the rights of the child, gender equality and women's empowerment, empowering youth, and supporting and protecting the victims and survivors of terrorism? ?
- How can Member States, international and regional organizations, civil society, local actors and the private sector contribute to promoting and protecting human rights, , including the rights of the child, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, , empowering youths, and supporting and protecting the victims and survivors of terrorism while preventing and countering terrorism?
- How can research, guidance, capacity-building and promoting access to new technologies support efforts to promote and protect human rights, promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and support and protect the victims and survivors of terrorism in the context of preventing and countering terrorism?

3 UNCCT, Handbook: Children Affected by the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon, page 11, at: [ftf_handbook_web_reduced.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

4 Convention on the Rights of the Child: [OHCHR | Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

5 Ibid

6 S/Res/2396 (2017), preamble and paras. 36-37

Session IV: Parallel break-out discussions: Responding to New and Evolving Counter-Terrorism Challenges in the New Decade

25. The fourth thematic session will consist of three parallel breakout discussions, focusing on responding to new and evolving counter-terrorism challenges in the new decade.

26. **Break-out Session A on ‘Reviewing the opportunities for addressing the challenges of the new decade’**. Participants will explore good practices, innovative approaches and new ideas to address persistent, emerging and evolving counter-terrorist challenges. They will also discuss Member States’ priorities and needs considering the evolution of the terrorist threat.

27. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- What are the respective roles of various national agencies, international and regional organizations, civil society, local actors and the private sector in addressing the challenges of the new decade?
- What are the primary policy tools needed to address the challenges of the new decade at the international, regional and national levels?
- What are the primary practical and operational tools needed to address persistent, new and evolving counter-terrorism challenges?

28. **Break-out Session B on ‘Demands of a new decade and strengthening a criminal justice response to counter terrorism’** will focus on the criminal justice system's role in addressing counter-terrorism related legal, practical and policy issues in the new decade. Through the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Member States “resolve to make every effort to develop and maintain effective and rule of law-based national criminal justice system that can ensure, in accordance with obligations under international law, that any person who participates in the financing, planning, preparation or perpetration of terrorist acts or in support of terrorist acts is brought to justice, on the basis of the principle to extradite or prosecute, with due respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that such terrorist acts are established as serious criminal offences in national laws and regulations.” Bringing terrorists to justice, as required under several Security Council resolutions, including its resolutions 1373 (2001), 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017), and ensuring full accountability for international crimes in compliance with international law presents significant challenges for Member States, including with regard to collecting, using and sharing various forms of evidence, including digital evidence. “Prosecuting terrorists for gender-based crimes, especially crimes of sexual violence, remains particularly challenging, including with respect to finding, protecting and supporting victims and witnesses willing to testify.”⁷

⁷ Twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat (S/2021/98), para. 54

29. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- What are some existing practices, challenges, and policy options for strengthening a criminal justice response to counter terrorism in compliance with international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law?
- What are the respective roles of different national agencies, international and regional organizations, and the private sector, in collecting, using and sharing, as appropriate, various forms of information or evidence at the national, regional and international levels?
- What are the main challenges and good practices for collecting, using and sharing, as appropriate, admissible evidence in cases related to terrorism and other serious international crimes, while complying with international human rights standards, especially when interviewing women and children?
- What role can different national agencies, international and regional organizations, the private sector and civil society organizations play in supporting victims and survivors of terrorism through the criminal justice system?
- How can new technologies be used to mitigate or overcome challenges related to delayed hearings, extended proceedings, case backlogs, and improve victims' and survivors' access to proceedings?

30. **Break-out Session C on 'Protecting, repatriating, rehabilitating and reintegrating women and children with links to United Nations listed terrorist groups'**: The Secretary-General has repeatedly stressed that the dire and unsustainable situation faced by individuals, primarily children and women, with suspected links to United Nations-designated terrorist groups, who remain stranded in holding facilities in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, remains a grave concern. Addressing the protracted issue of ISIL fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters and their family members in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, remains an urgent, strategic imperative for international peace and security. There are still approximately 27,500 foreign children held in camps in the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, including an estimated 8,000 non-Iraqi children, 90 per cent of whom are under 12 years of age.⁸ The Al-Hol camp currently houses 40,000 foreign and non-foreign children.⁹ Its annex for non-Iraqi foreigners' houses over 7,000 children.¹⁰

31. This break-out session will address the following key questions:

- What are the primary legal, political and security-related challenges that States face in their efforts to repatriate their nationals from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic? What are the main practical and logistical difficulties involved?
- What legal, political, security, practical and logistical challenges do Member States face in identifying, verifying, screening and assessing individuals and families for their potential repatriation from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic?

⁸ Twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat (S/2021/98), para. 14-15

⁹ [Two children killed in Al-Hol Camp in Syria \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/syria/stories/two-children-killed-in-al-hol-camp-in-syria)

- What challenges do States face in investigating, prosecuting, and rehabilitating and reintegrating, as appropriate, their repatriated nationals?
- What specific issues should States consider when repatriating, prosecuting, rehabilitating and reintegrating, as appropriate, women and children from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic?
- What good practices exist to overcome the above challenges?
- How can UN entities and other concerned stakeholders further improve their support to requesting Member States to identify, screen, repatriate, prosecute, rehabilitate and reintegrate, as appropriate, individuals and families from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic?

Session V: The Imperative of Strengthening International and Regional Cooperation to Counter Terrorism in the New Decade

32. The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, the 19 international conventions and protocols to prevent terrorist acts, and regional and bilateral instruments provide a robust international framework to counter terrorism. Since the adoption of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, there have been many examples of cooperation among Member States including through the conclusion of new multilateral, regional and bilateral cooperation agreements. However, much more can and needs to be done to strengthen regional and international counterterrorism cooperation, specifically in response to the misuse of new technologies. In the sixth review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Member States encourage “all relevant international, regional and sub-regional organizations and forums involved in the fight against terrorism to cooperate with the United Nations system and Member States in supporting the Strategy and to share best practices (...)”. This session will consider new and existing practical tools and strategies for strengthening international cooperation to counter terrorism.

33. This thematic session will address the following key questions:

- What are the main challenges for strengthening bilateral, regional and international counter-terrorism cooperation? How can those challenges be overcome?
- How can international and regional organizations and other concerned stakeholders further support requesting Member States to address any persistent legal, policy, practical and operational gaps to address the challenges of the new decade?
- What are some of the lessons learned and best practices of Member States in developing national and regional plans of action to prevent and counter terrorism?
- How can existing international legal cooperation instruments and tools be further refined and improved, including by making better use of technologies and capacity-building?

Plenary Wrap-Ups and Closing Session

34. The fifth thematic session will be followed by two plenary wrap-ups of sessions II and IV, with an overview of the key messages from the break-out discussions on day one and day two of the Conference. At the end of the High-Level Conference, Under-Secretary-General Voronkov will provide a summary of the Conference's key conclusions. The United Nations Secretary-General, H.E. Mr. António Guterres, will deliver a closing message. Following the Conference's conclusion, UNOCT will produce a detailed report on the Conference's key outcomes.