

Open briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on

“The nexus between international terrorism and transnational organized crime”

*United Nations Headquarters, New York, Monday, 8 October 2018,
10 a.m.-1 p.m., Conference Room 3*

Chair’s summary

Introduction

The threat posed by the potential links between terrorism and transnational organized crime has long been high on the agenda of both the Security Council and the General Assembly.

The adoption of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols represents a significant milestone in the efforts of the international community to provide Member States with the means to disrupt the activities of criminal and terrorist groups.

In its resolution 1373 (2001), the Council notes with concern the close connection between international terrorism and transnational organized crime. The Council has also referred to the “terror/crime nexus” in several recent resolutions on terrorism, including resolutions 2322 (2016) and 2368 (2017).

The Council has also noted the potential for convergence of criminal and terrorist activities, including in the context of trafficking in drugs, natural resources, cultural property, persons, and firearms. That nexus can take various forms, depending on the region in which it occurs and depending on the particular circumstances, including direct engagement by terrorist groups in criminal activity (e.g., extortion, as highlighted in Council resolution 2195 (2014)), alliances of opportunity, and the imposition of taxes on criminal groups operating in terrorist-controlled areas.

Within the framework of the country assessment visits conducted on behalf of the Committee, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) engages with Member States concerning their perception of the nexus and any identified and investigated links between terrorist and criminal groups, as well as on lessons learned.

Good practices, such as the creation of joint investigative units and prosecution authorities to handle both organized crime and terrorism, have been identified. Certain key vulnerabilities, including the failure to assess the risk posed to certain economic sectors and the lack of financial investigations aimed at tracking the proceeds of illicit activities by terrorist groups, have also been identified.

The open briefing was held at United Nations Headquarters on 8 October 2018, in close cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations

Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute. Its aims were to help strengthen understanding of the nexus as it pertains to criminal activities linked to trafficking in persons, drugs and arms and to initiate discussion of possible responses.

Introductory session

The introductory session focused on the main forms of interaction between terrorist and criminal groups, as well as on the “push-and-pull” factors involved in the establishment of the nexus.

It was noted that terrorist and criminal actors shared a common interest in exploiting unregulated spaces and weak State institutions and that linkages between terrorist and criminal groups thrived in situations of conflict and instability. Even though the two groups might pursue different goals, they might share certain methods, including strategic use of violence and recruitment from the among the same pool of people. Their sources of funding were often opportunistic and might include the illicit exploitation of natural resources such as oil, charcoal and ivory, as well as taxation and extortion.

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime provided an overview of the exploitation of economic and natural resources by terrorists and other armed groups, including the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da’esh) and Al-Shabaab. It was noted that the nexus between terrorist and criminal groups is by nature complex and dynamic and therefore requires comprehensive, tailored responses.

The joint UNICRI/Global Counterterrorism Forum Initiative on the nexus had identified a number of good practices. UNICRI was also developing a toolkit that would help translate those good practices into action in support of Member States’ efforts to address the nexus. It was expected that the toolkit would be completed by the beginning of 2019.

Session I

Session I focused on the use of human trafficking to support terrorism (whether for recruitment, as a terrorist tactic, or as a source of funding).

It was noted that some terrorists groups (notably ISIL, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab) had used acts of sexual and gender-based violence associated with human trafficking as a way to achieve strategic objectives and to raise funds to support their activities. Slaves had either been exploited as a recruitment tool to attract new fighters or directly deployed in military operations; exploited as merchandise to be sold and re-sold; exploited as a way to secure ransom payment; and as instruments to perform servitude roles.

The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict noted that victims of sexual violence and forced recruitment perpetrated by terrorists were frequently labelled as “affiliates”, rather than receiving assistance and being recognized as victims of terrorism.

CTED highlighted the preliminary findings of its study aimed at identifying and exploring the nexus between human trafficking, terrorism and its financing, which is expected to be finalized by the end of November 2018.

The participants made a number of follow-up recommendations, including:

- Ensure that victims of sexual violence associated with human trafficking perpetrated by armed or terrorist groups are recognized as legitimate victims of conflict and/or terrorism and considered to be an integral part of counter-terrorism strategies
- Enhance efforts to bring perpetrators to justice, especially as human-trafficking activities associated with terrorism or taking place in conflict or post-conflict settings continue to be met with mass impunity
- Consider listing individuals involved in human trafficking who may meet the designation criteria of the 1267/1989/2253 Committee
- Enhance cooperation/information-sharing among domestic agencies responsible for the investigation of human trafficking, terrorism, money-laundering and terrorism financing.

Session II

Session II focused on the direct or indirect involvement of terrorist groups in drug trafficking.

It was noted that drug trafficking constituted an importance source of revenue for terrorist and insurgent groups, including the Taliban and ISIL and Al-Qaida affiliates. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report of 2017 noted that, in 2016, the Taliban had earned around \$150 million dollars from taxing the illicit opiate trade, alone.

In West Africa, Boko Haram appeared to be involved in facilitating drug trafficking across the region. In Europe, drug trafficking was a common source of funding for small terrorist cells and individuals. According to UNICRI, a number of terrorists involved in recent terrorist attacks in Europe had a criminal past that was often related to drug trafficking and dealing. That was also the case for many foreign terrorist fighters who had travelled to the conflict zones of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

The World Customs Organization (WCO) provided an overview of customs programmes developed to detect commodities, including drugs, medicines, and precursors. The joint WCO/UNODC Container Control Programme represented an important tool to minimize the risk that containers would be used for illicit drug trafficking and other criminal activities. Other responses included the delivery of capacity-building assistance in detecting illicit trafficking related to organized crime and terrorism.to customs officials and law enforcement agencies.

Session III

During Session III, the participants considered terrorist involvement in arms trafficking and the connections between organized criminal groups and terrorists for the purposes of acquiring weapons. Panellists noted related initiatives of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), UNODC, and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).

Small Arms Survey presented an analysis of the types of weapons used by terrorists and underlined the current lack of specific knowledge and data concerning sources and factors that contributed to the illicit acquisition and use of weapons by terrorists.

Speakers also underscored that criminal and terrorist groups could easily exploit legal loopholes and weak national control systems in order to divert arms from the legal to the illegal market.

It was noted that the related challenges could be addressed by, inter alia, enhancing national legislative and institutional frameworks; increasing controls on the possession, use and transfer of weapons; and providing an effective criminal-justice response. International cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies, customs and prosecutors should also be strengthened.

Member States should make full use of existing tools and databases on arms tracking, such as the INTERPOL Illicit Arms Records and Tracing Management System (iARMS).

Follow-up: Joint special meeting

The discussions held during the open briefing will provide the basis for a joint special meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, and the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) on the nexus between international terrorism and transnational organized crime, as requested by the Security Council in its presidential statement of 8 May 2018.

It is expected that the joint special meeting (to be held during the first quarter of 2019), will focus on regional specificities, as well as on strategies, responses, and lessons learned in addressing the nexus.