



# CTED Analytical Brief: Responding to terrorist threats against soft targets



**CTED**

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL  
COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

## INTRODUCTION

The present *Analytical Brief* was prepared by CTED in accordance with Security Council resolution 2395 (2017), which directs CTED to conduct analytical work on emerging issues, trends and developments and to make its analytical products available throughout the United Nations system.

CTED *Analytical Briefs* aim to provide the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, United Nations agencies, and policymakers with a concise analysis of specific issues, trends or developments, as identified through CTED's engagement with Member States on their implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions. The *Analytical Briefs* also include relevant data gathered by CTED, including through engagement with its United Nations partners; international, regional and subregional organizations; civil society organizations; and members of the CTED Global Research Network (GRN).<sup>1</sup>

## KEY TRENDS

Although there is no internationally agreed consensus as to what constitutes a “soft” target, the term has typically been used to describe public spaces or other locations that are easily accessible and predominantly civilian in nature, often with limited security measures in place. These types of location are numerous and have long been preferred targets of terrorist attacks because they provide terrorists and terrorist groups with the opportunity to maximize casualties and generate widespread publicity.

Recent research has provided more detailed insights into the targeting methodology used by terrorist groups. One global study concluded that, in 2017, an average of 17 civilians per day were killed by terrorist attacks, often as a direct result of coordinated campaigns against civilians and public spaces.<sup>2</sup> Another study found that “soft-civilian targets”, including markets, bus stations, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and educational and religious institutions, were the predominant focus of suicide attacks conducted by Boko Haram between 2011 and 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Data from the Global Terrorism Database<sup>4</sup> appears to indicate that, whereas the number of terrorist attacks carried out against religious figures and institutions has been relatively consistent since 2012, they have also become more lethal (*see Table 1 for indicative global figures*). “Soft” targets are also often located in cities or other urban environments. Research conducted for the World

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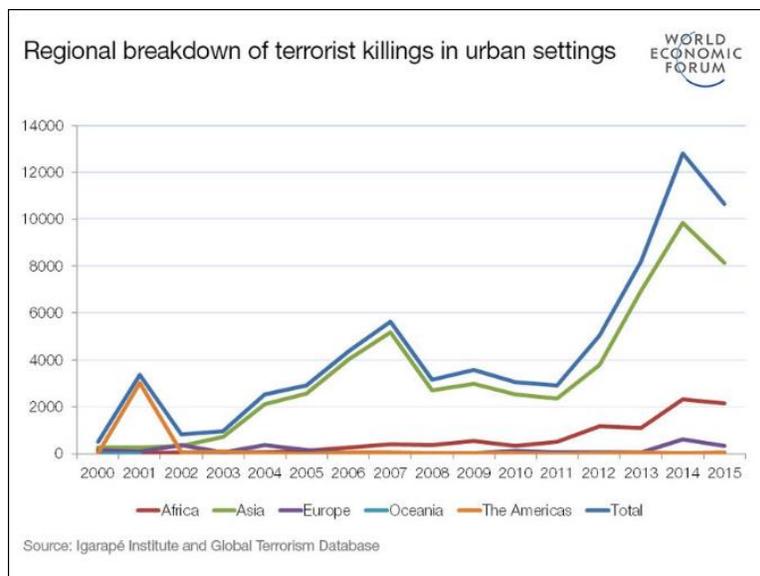
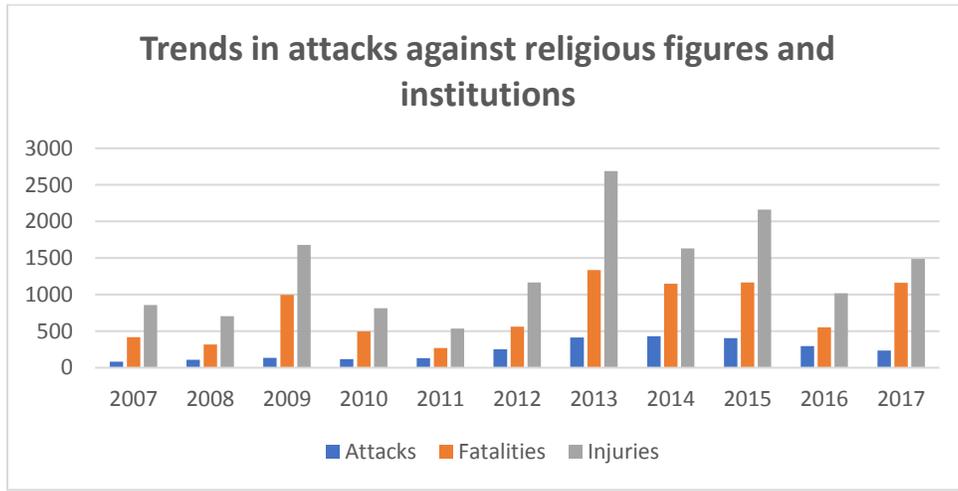
<sup>1</sup> See the [latest GRN newsletter](#) for more information

<sup>2</sup> Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *How Islamist Extremists Target Civilians* (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Warner, Jason & Matfess Hilary, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers* (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For more information, visit the [GTD website](#).

Economic Forum<sup>5</sup> indicates that there has been a sharp rise in global terrorist attacks in urban settings since 2011 (*see Table 2*).



## RESPONSES

In response to these trends, the United Nations; international, regional and subregional organizations; and Member States have taken steps to address terrorist threats to “soft” targets, often in conjunction with efforts to better protect critical infrastructure. Although these responses have varied in nature, CTED has identified several common elements, including:

<sup>5</sup> Muggah, Robert & Aguirre, Katherine, *Terrorists want to Destroy our cities. We can't let them* (2016).

- The role of risk assessment and information-sharing at all levels
- Multi-sectoral responses that involve close engagement with civil society, local leadership (including religious leaders) and the private sector
- The development of public-private partnerships, given that many “soft” targets are privately owned and operated
- A combination of physical security and preparedness measures, accompanied by steps to build societal resilience against such attacks and threats.

Preparedness measures also include efforts to strengthen interoperability between and within relevant public and private entities (including through joint training and exercises), build communication networks, and create early-warning mechanisms.

## CHALLENGES

The critical role of the private sector raises several potential challenges. The private sector has traditionally viewed counter-terrorism as the responsibility of Government and a potentially politically sensitive area in which to be engaged.<sup>6</sup> Although this attitude appears to be shifting (notably within the social media and technology spheres), certain sectors have not yet fully engaged in the public-private partnerships necessary for the protection of “soft” targets.<sup>7</sup>

A further challenge for States is ensuring that, where the private sector is engaged, their approaches to improving security are human rights compliant and seek to prevent, mitigate and address the impact of their activities on human rights. CTED’s engagement with relevant stakeholders also indicates the importance of involving civil society in “soft” target-protection initiatives and emphasizing the need to enhance information-sharing and trust-building to strengthen resilience without disclosing confidential information or disrupting the population’s way of life.

There are further challenges for States in developing and implementing “soft” target-protection strategies. These include addressing the gaps between international standards and national and domestic standards and practices and harmonizing local emergency plans with national operational plans and strategies. States have also expressed concern at the potential misuse of new technologies by terrorists against “soft” targets, including Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS). (*This issue was explored in CTED’s May 2019 Trends Alert.*<sup>8</sup>)

Member States have also noted the potential to use new technologies to protect “soft” targets. Although the use of such technologies can strengthen counter-terrorism efforts, notably in the context of law enforcement, States must ensure that they consider the potential impact that their

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<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, A. and Koser, K., [Why preventing violent extremism is the private sector’s business](#) (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Brookings, [How the private sector can be harnessed to stop violent extremism](#) (2017).

<sup>8</sup> [CTED Trends Alert - Greater Efforts Needed to Address the Potential Risks Posed by Terrorist use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#) (2019).

use could have on internationally protected human rights. It is also important to strike an appropriate balance between the strengthened physical security offered by measures such as barriers and fences and the potential impact on the community's ability to access and enjoy public spaces.

## GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

Several ongoing initiatives seek to raise awareness (including through the publication of guidance), identify Member States' needs, and leverage expertise and experience to better protect potential "soft" targets, at the international, State, local and civil society levels.

### *International level*

The Security Council has issued resolutions and guidance that are highly relevant to the protection of "soft" targets from terrorist attacks.

- Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) calls on Member States to establish and strengthen national, regional and international partnerships with public and private stakeholders in order to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to and recover from damage from terrorist attacks against "soft" targets. It also stresses the need for States to develop, review or amend national risk and threat assessments to take into account "soft" targets, in order to develop appropriate contingency and emergency response plans.<sup>9</sup>
- The Counter-Terrorism Committee's *Addendum to the guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (2018)* - notably its Guiding Principles 50 and 51 - provides guidance for Member States on measures and efforts to protect critical infrastructure and vulnerable or "soft" targets from terrorist attacks, including taking protective measures, developing and implementing crisis-management plans and risk-reduction strategies, and acting in cooperation with local authorities and the private sector.<sup>10</sup> In June 2019, the Committee held an open briefing on the protection of "soft" targets.<sup>11</sup>

The following internationally recognized guidance on the issue is also available:

- In 2017, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) developed the "*Antalya memorandum on good practices on the protection of "soft" targets in the counterterrorism context*", a set of internationally recognized non-binding good practices. These include conducting risk assessments, building public-private partnerships, and developing government plans, which can serve as the basis for international engagement, assistance, and training to enhance the security and resilience of sites that are potential "soft" targets.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [S/RES/2396 \(2017\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> [S/2018/177](#).

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see the [CTC website](#).

<sup>12</sup> [GCTF Antalya memorandum on good practices on the protection of soft targets in the counterterrorism context \(2017\)](#).

- In 2018, the United Nations Global Coordination Compact Task Force Working Group on “Protection of Critical Infrastructure including Vulnerable Targets, Internet and Tourism Security” published the *Compendium of good practices on the protection of critical infrastructure against terrorist attacks*. The Compendium highlights good practices and case studies in the protection of critical infrastructure that may be relevant to the protection of “soft” targets, including developing national strategies, sharing information and experience, ensuring coordination among domestic agencies, and enhancing international cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

Two other recent initiatives are relevant to the issue of “soft” targets:

- At the Secretary-General’s request, the United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC) is developing a Plan of Action for safeguarding religious sites. UNAOC will engage with Governments, religious leaders, faith-based organizations and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that the Plan of Action contains concrete and action-oriented recommendations.<sup>14</sup>
- The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) is launching a *Global Programme to Counter Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets* which will identify and develop policies and practices to strengthen the protection of vulnerable targets, including through enhanced international cooperation, public-private partnerships and sustainable security approaches. The Programme will link together several sub-projects, enhancing capacities to prevent and counter a) threats to major sports events, b) threats to religious sites and places of worship, c) threats to urban centres and tourist sites, and d) threats associated with UAS. The Programme will be implemented under the leadership of UNOCT, in close cooperation with CTED.

#### *Regional level*

- In October 2017, the European Commission adopted *the 2017 Action plan to support the protection of public spaces* to help Member States reduce the vulnerability of public spaces.<sup>15</sup> The Action Plan established forums for exchanging good practices and organizing training for law-enforcement practitioners. The Commission has also developed related guidance material.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Local and civil society level*

- The Strong Cities Network (SCN), launched by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in 2015, is a global network of mayors, policymakers, and practitioners, which aims to meet the

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<sup>13</sup> [The protection of critical infrastructures against terrorist attacks: Compendium of good practices](#) (2018).

<sup>14</sup> [UN Secretary-General Tasks High Representative for UNAOC with Drawing an Action Plan for Safeguarding Religious Sites](#) (March 2019).

<sup>15</sup> European Commission [Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces](#) (2017).

<sup>16</sup> European Commission [Review on Soft target/Public space protection guidance](#) (2018).

frontline needs of city governments and the communities that they serve and assist in the prevention and countering violent extremism agenda.<sup>17</sup>

- The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), established in 2014, is a public-private partnership fund established to provide grants to civil society organizations at the frontlines of the fight against terrorism. The GCERF builds local partners' capacity and connects them to national Governments, foundations, and business for preventing violent extremism.<sup>18</sup>

CTED will continue to engage with these initiatives and develop and share its expertise on the issue of the protection of “soft” targets, acting in partnership with Member States; other United Nations entities; international, regional and subregional organizations; local authorities; civil society organizations; the private sector; and the research community (through the GRN).

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<sup>17</sup> [ISD Strong Cities Network](#).

<sup>18</sup> [Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund](#).