

**Virtual open briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on
“Protection of ‘soft’ targets against terrorist attacks”**

Wednesday, 27 January 2021, 10.00 a.m.–12.00 p.m., EST

Concept note

I. Introduction

1. “Soft” targets, also called vulnerable targets, (e.g., urban public spaces or other sites that are crowded with local or tourist populations) are attractive to terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), because they are relatively open and easy to access; are subject to lower levels of security protection; and offer an opportunity not only to cause massive destruction, high civilian casualties, and widespread publicity with limited logistic and financial resources, but also to instil fear into the public. Such attacks have increased in numbers in every region of the world over recent years. The effective protection of “soft” targets requires not only the implementation of physical protection measures, but also the development of strong and resilient communities and close engagement with civil society and all other sections of society, including religious and community leaders, women, educators, youth, and social workers.

2. The protection of “soft” targets, including public spaces, presents a number of significant and complex challenges. Such targets vary considerably in size and nature, and most are privately owned. Terrorist attacks against such sites generally involve some combination of suicide bombers, teams of gunmen, and hostage situations. The strong support expressed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da’esh) and other terrorist groups for such attacks by their affiliates and inspired attacks by “sleeper cells” raises not only the risk level, but also the level of unpredictability.

3. Although Governments (including at the local level) bear the primary responsibility for protecting citizens against terrorist attacks (including attacks committed against “soft” targets), the private owners and/or operators of such sites must also take steps to address the related security needs and reduce their vulnerabilities. It is essential that central and local Governments, community leaders, private-sector actors and civil society cooperate to identify ways to mitigate the related risks and threats and, ultimately, to prevent such attacks from occurring.

4. In its resolution 2396 (2017), the Security Council 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 for terrorist attacks. In their further efforts to protect critical infrastructure and soft targets from terrorist attacks, Member States should also consider putting in place national frameworks and mechanisms to support risk-based decision-making. Resolution 2396 (2017) also calls on States to establish or strengthen national, regional and international partnerships with public and private stakeholders and to share information and experiences in order to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to, and recover from damage from terrorist attacks against “soft” targets.

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)

5. In its *Addendum to the guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (2018)* (S/2018/1177), the Counter-Terrorism Committee encourages Member States, in cooperation with local authorities, to consider promoting public-private partnerships by developing cooperation mechanisms; supporting business owners and operators and infrastructure managers; and sharing plans, policies and procedures.

6. On 27 June 2019, the Committee held an open briefing on “Protection of ‘soft’ targets through local engagement and public-private partnerships” with a view to raising central and local governments’, cities’ and businesses’ awareness of the need to develop measures to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to and recover from terrorist attacks against “soft” targets.

7. CTED plays a central role in supporting and implementing the policy decisions of the Council and the Committee, assisting them to define the international counter-terrorism agenda and assessing States’ efforts to prevent and counter terrorism, including in relation to the protection of “soft” targets. The assessments prepared by CTED on the Committee’s behalf include recommendations for addressing the challenges and gaps identified with respect to the protection of “soft” targets, based on the *Framework document for Counter-Terrorism Committee visits to Member States* (S/2020/731) and the Committee’s *Technical guide to the implementation of Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) and other resolutions* (S/2017/716). The assessments also ensure that all measures taken by States comply with international law, including human rights law.

8. In the context of its assessments of, and dialogue with, Member States on behalf of the Committee, CTED has identified the need for States to develop or expand existing national strategies and action plans to consider the risk and threat to “soft” targets. This includes identifying, prioritizing, and protecting “soft” targets (acting in coordination with industry and drawing upon its knowledge and expertise). Preparedness efforts should also include mechanisms to promote risk-based decision making, information-sharing, and the development of public-private partnerships to counter terrorist attacks, and specifically terrorist attacks against public spaces. The protection of “soft” targets entails a continuous process of building relationships and capacity, especially between the public and private sectors.

9. There is a need to strengthen coordination and information-sharing by Member States, international and regional organizations, and the commercial sector. The Security Council has also encouraged States to share information, establish partnerships, and develop national strategies and capabilities to counter improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which are often the weapon of choice for terrorists in their attacks against “soft” targets.

10. “Soft” targets also face a number of new and emerging security risks and threats. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reduced people’s mobility but has also established new measures to track and control their movements. The use of information technology (IT) for malicious purposes represents a growing global threat. Cyberattacks committed by terrorist and other criminal groups against industrial control systems (ICS) and other vital critical infrastructure have become a significant threat. “Soft” targets are potentially vulnerable to tactics of increasing interest and use by terrorists, such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)

11. In June 2018, acting within the framework of the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Working Group on Emerging Threats and the Protection of Critical Infrastructure, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) issued the *Compendium of good practices on the protection of critical infrastructure against terrorist attacks*, which is intended to guide Member States in their development of strategies for reducing risks to critical infrastructure in accordance with Council resolution 2341 (2017). Mindful of the differences in conceptual and normative frameworks applicable to critical infrastructures and “soft” targets, the *Compendium* also highlights possible synergies between the two types of target and includes references to the provisions of Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) on the protection of “soft” targets.

12. CTED also promotes the initiatives developed by its partners such as the global programme of UNOCT on the protection of vulnerable targets from terrorism-related threats; the “Stadia” project established by INTERPOL in 2012; the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) *Antalya memorandum on good practices on the protection of soft targets in the counterterrorism context*; the initiative of the Strong Cities Network (SCN) of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), (launched in 2015 at the United Nation General Assembly); and the Global Cities and Terrorism Initiative of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST).

II. Objective of briefing

13. In view of the continued terrorist and other security threats to “soft” targets, there remains a need to strengthen risk-based decision making and the engagement of all relevant stakeholders to enhance implementation of protection measures. The level of implementation of related strategies, action plans and other measures varies considerably across regions.

14. The objective of the proposed open briefing is to enable representatives of Member States, United Nations entities, international and regional organizations, the private sector, civil society and academia to discuss current trends, threats, and the normative framework relating to the protection of “soft” targets and to share best practices and possible approaches for prevention, response, recovery and investigation. The open briefing will also provide an opportunity to address potential linkages to other Security Council resolutions pertaining to the protection of critical infrastructure, such as resolution 2341 (2017).

15. The briefing will seek to address challenges, gaps and vulnerabilities relevant to the protection of “soft” targets against terrorist attacks, as well as policies, instruments and tools developed to effectively manage risks to “soft” targets and enhance effective implementation of resolutions 2396 (2017) and other relevant resolutions (e.g., resolution 2341 (2017)).

16. Member States will be encouraged to share information about their experiences and practices in implementing measures to protect “soft” targets and in implementing Council resolution 2396 (2017).

III. Format and topics of discussions

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)

17. The proposed briefing will consist of an opening session, to be followed by a main session featuring presentations by a panel of experts on various aspects of protecting “soft” targets and the implementation of Council resolution 2396 (2017) and other relevant resolutions.

18. In order to encourage interactive discussions, the main session will be followed by an interactive question-and-answer session. A brief closing session will then be held.

19. The Committee Chair will act as Chair and moderator.

20. The briefing will be held via Cisco WebEx, with special privileges for Committee members and CTED Officers.

21. United Nations accredited non-governmental organizations will be able to submit questions to the panellists, via e-mail to seesmaa@un.org (by 26 January 2021).

22. An annotated agenda and meeting documentation will be posted on the Committee’s website.

IV. Venue and date

23. The proposed open briefing will be streamed live on UNTV on Wednesday, 27 January 2021, from 10.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m., EST.

V. Expected outcome

24. The participants will identify challenges, gaps and vulnerabilities; good practices in protecting “soft” targets against terrorist attacks; and policies, instruments and tools developed to effectively manage risks to “soft” targets and enhance effective implementation of resolution 2396 (2017) and other relevant resolutions.

25. Subject to prior consultations with the Committee, CTED will submit to the Committee a summary report on the outcomes of the meeting.

VI. Communications

26. CTED will promote the briefing through the appropriate channels. A press release will be issued following the briefing.