



## Uprooting terrorism: Countering violent extremism through prevention

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (left) with Jeffrey Feltman (centre left), Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs; Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein (centre right), UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Jehangir Khan, Director of the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Office, UN Department of Political Affairs in Washington D.C. attending the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, hosted by the United States Government. 19 February 2015, UN Photo

*This week, Politically Speaking takes an in-depth look at questions related to terrorism, including the rise of extremist groups like ISIL and Boko Haram and the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters. Below, Jehangir Khan, Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), explained the UN's work in the prevention of terrorism. Mr. Khan underlined that a decade after the 11 September attacks, the international community has been forced to rethink its approach to confronting violent extremism.*

The emergence of new transnational terrorist groups like ISIL and Boko Haram more than a decade after the 11 September attacks is forcing the international community to rethink its approach to confronting violent extremism, one of the greatest threats to international peace and security today.

Increasingly, emphasis is shifting to addressing the underlying causes that lead people to join extremist groups, within a framework of respect for human rights and dignity, balancing out military and law enforcement responses.

According to Jehangir Khan, Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), the approach that prevailed since 9/11 had been too narrow.

“The focus had been on countering terrorism, emphasis on ‘counter’. This approach was too reactive,” he said. “There is a shift to a more integrated policy of preventing violent extremism, emphasis on ‘preventing’.”

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**UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon**

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon signaled this more comprehensive approach last month when he announced that he will present a UN Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism to the UN General Assembly later this year.

“All countries – along with regional and international organizations – as well as political, religious,

academic and civil society leaders – should join hands to forge a multi-faceted response that respects international human rights and humanitarian law,” Mr. Ban said on 19 February at the Summit for Countering Violent Extremism in Washington, D.C. He was accompanied by Mr. Khan, DPA Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman, UN Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, and UN Youth Envoy Ahmad Alhendawi.

“Missiles may kill terrorists. But good governance kills terrorism,” added Mr. Ban. “Human rights, accountable institutions, the equitable delivery of services, and political participation – these are among our most powerful weapons.”

***“There is increasing recognition of the need for a global multi-lateral response (...)”***  
*Director of UN CTITF and the UNCCT, Jehangir Khan*

He noted that counter-terrorism strategies that lack basic elements of due process and respect for the rule of law are often the most effective recruiting agents for extremism.

As part of a new global counter-terrorism project, announced by the Secretary-General last year, the UNCCT will be surveying and interviewing returning foreign fighters to better understand their motivations for joining extremist groups, some of which are sanctioned by the Security Council.

“No one has answered what are the drivers,” Mr. Khan said. “We see this phenomenon is mushrooming. What is the oxygen fueling it?”

More than 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 80 Member States have joined ISIL and the Al-Nusra Front just as of mid-2014, according to estimates from the UN’s Al Qaeda-Taliban Monitoring Team. The UNCCT, which recently received a \$100 million contribution from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is ideally placed to work on such issues.

Established in 2011 within DPA/CTITF to support the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the Centre today implements and supports counter-terrorism capacity building projects at the national, regional and global levels, including on

counter-narratives, regional counter-terrorism strategies and the foreign

terrorist fighters (FTFs) phenomenon. In September 2014, the Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution highlighting the need to address foreign terrorist fighters and, for the first time, counter violent extremism.

“There is increasing recognition of the need for a global multi-lateral response, not just solely military, which is sometimes necessary” said Mr. Khan. “It behooves countries to work together to respond to security challenges and address the root causes of violent extremism.”

Tunisia, the birthplace of the “Arab Spring”, is one of the countries from which citizens are traveling to



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses the opening of the Ministerial Meeting of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, hosted by the United States Government, in Washington, D.C. 19 February 2015, UN Photo

Syria and Iraq. The Tunisian Interior Ministry said last June that an estimated 2,400 Tunisians are fighting in Syria.

“Youth who took to the streets in December 2010 to January 2011 in the social movement that was the spark of the Arab Spring have both political and socio-economic expectations that are still not being fully met,” said UN Resident Coordinator Mounir Tabet, who was among 40 participants from the UN taking part in a brainstorming session in Geneva in late 2014 on cross-regional trends in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The forum, which focused on youth, was organized by DPA’s Middle East and West Asia Division and the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (CPPF).

In an e-mail from Tunis last week, Mr. Tabet explained that one of the slogans of the Tunisian revolution focused on the word “dignity”. Youth subscribed to a social contract with the Government where in exchange for attending school and maintaining peace, they were promised basic health, education and jobs.

“Rightly, or wrongly, the youth feel that that contract no longer works for them and are now in search of an alternative,” he said. Echoing the call for a preventive approach to countering extremism, Mr. Tabet said the UN could focus on providing support for resilient and equitable development in the country, which would strengthen young men and women’s dignities as they struggle to make and shape their future.

“The fundamental problem is the feeling of alienation, of not belonging and of not benefiting from the actual social order, either economically, socially, politically or even culturally,” Mr. Tabet added.



## **UN Counter-Terrorism Architecture**

*Addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism is the first pillar of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by consensus by the General Assembly through resolution 60/288 (2006). The other three pillars of the Strategy are: measures to prevent and combat terrorism; measures to build states’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard; and measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.*

*This same resolution established the UN CTITF, which is chaired by Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman, and supported by the CTITF Office in DPA, which is directed by Mr. Jehangir Khan. The Task Force is comprised of 35 UN entities, and includes INTERPOL.*

*The Task Force aims to enhance coordination and coherence of counter-terrorism efforts of the United Nations system—mainly through its 9 inter-agency Working Groups on key priority areas of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy—and support Member States’ efforts to implement the Strategy, including through more than 220 capacity building projects at the national, regional and global levels to prevent and combat terrorism. It especially focuses its efforts in key challenged countries and regions where violent groups are active, such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, South Asia, the Maghreb, and East and West Africa.*

*One of UN CTITF-UNCCT’s most important national-level capacity-building initiatives is the Integrated Assistance for Counter-Terrorism (I-ACT). Through this initiative, UN CTITF-UNCCT aims to support interested Member States, upon their request, to implement the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in an integrated and balanced manner across its four pillars. Burkina Faso and Nigeria are currently benefiting from I-ACT, under which CTITF entities, including those directly working on the field, are implementing capacity building projects tailored to the needs and priorities of each country. I-ACT will also be launched next in Mali and possibly Kenya.*

*At the regional level UN CTITF is undertaking projects that are assisting Central Asian, SADC and Central African countries to develop and implement regional counter-terrorism strategies. At the Global level UN CTITF is implementing projects on freezing terrorists’ financial assets, building human rights capacities and countering terrorism, and supporting victims of terrorism through a dedicated UN web portal, among others.*

*In this context, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) has brought renewed vigour to UN CTITF efforts to support the implementation of the Global Strategy as a key new resource to deliver capacity building assistance. Now into its third programmatic year, the UNCCT has initiated the implementation of 31 counter-terrorism projects around the world covering all four pillars of the Strategy.*



***How is the rise of non-state actors, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, affecting the ability of the United Nations and other international organizations to respond?***

***Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou is the Deputy Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Adjunct Professor at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and Visiting Professor at Sciences Po, Paris. He is the author of Understanding 'Al Qaeda – Changing War and Global Politics' (2011) and 'Iraq and the Second Gulf War' (2002). Politically Speaking interviewed him for this week's focus on terrorism.***

## **Uprooting terrorism: Limits and possibilities of international engagement**

***Politically Speaking: What are the most important implications for international relations of the rise of ISIS and its ideological spread?***

**Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou:** Within a relatively short period of about a year in 2013-2014, the Islamic State has become the leading radical Islamist group worldwide. Its accelerated rise is as swift as it is consequential. The group is important primarily in relation to its combination of both a territorial and a transnational ambition. This merging of two qualitatively different dynamics, previously pursued alternatively by groups – Al Qaeda was eminently transnational and most irredentist rebellion groups were largely in pursuit of territorial gains – and its ability to successfully deliver on both fronts are what mark principally the organization. This raises new questions for international relations, notably as regards statehood and war-making.

***ISIS rejects international norms and concepts of sovereignty that the UN upholds. How then can the Security Council engage with the threat of ISIS?***

**Mr. Mohamedou:** Therein lies the conundrum and the limits of non-military engagement with transnational non-state armed groups. The Islamic State is not the first organization to raise this question. It built up gradually as armed groups, in different places around the world, notably after the guerrilla wars of decolonization and throughout the 1970s, proliferated. Al Qaeda brought the issue to fruition in the 1990s by declaring war on a state (the United States, twice in 1996 and 1998) and enacting that martial ambition. As its off-shoot, the Islamic State is adding an important layer of actual displacement of two states (Iraq and Syria) in large swathes of their respective territories. The Security Council engages with the matter as 'an international threat to peace

and security' – that is its function – but some of the 'grammatical' issues of the new international relations escape that delimited security function. How to handle the simultaneous statization of armed groups and the destatization of existing states is a question that calls for engagement on wider societal levels and rests ultimately on agency at the local level.

*What do you see as the role of regional actors in countering these non-state actors? Could they be more effective than traditional powers?*

**Mr. Mohamedou:** Most certainly, regional engagement is in principle crucial in matters of familiarity, legitimacy, and efficiency. Yet, for one thing, it does not necessarily have the answers to the new and troublesome questions raised by the self-capacitation of the emerging groups. For another, regional cooperation, whether in the Levant on the Islamic State, or in the Sahel as regards Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and affiliated groups, or indeed in West Africa as concerns Boko Haram, has in recent years too often been politicized, inefficient, and relying excessively on external support or indeed decision-making.

*How is ISIS's relationship with Al Qaeda, Boko Haram and other extremist groups?*

**Mr. Mohamedou:** Having established its dominion over northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria in 2013-2014, the Islamic State is in 2015 visibly expanding its wider regional expansion beyond the Levant. By my count, there have been since the declaration of the Caliphate on June 29, 2014, nineteen pledges of allegiances or statements of support from organizations in the Middle East, North Africa, West Africa, East Africa, the Gulf, and Southeast Asia. As a result, the Islamic State has de facto displaced Al Qaeda as the main extremist Islamist group around the world. To this must be added, the enmity that has built

up since early 2012 between Al Qaeda and what was then the Islamic State in Iraq, later becoming ISIS. One can expect in the next phase a gradual disappearance of Osama Bin Laden's group and the continued rise and likely expansion of its half-heir, the Islamic State.

*What is the most important thing that the United Nations can do to curb the group's appeal?*

**Mr. Mohamedou:** Again, some of this exceeds the mere ability of international organization to resolve independently. However, as noted, the UN's unique position and its global representativity position it positively correlated here in three ways in my view. The first is humanitarian support. These crises have profound destabilizing impacts on the societies where the group is active. Providing help of such nature does alleviate the impact and open spaces for escaping the group's violence, direct or indirect. Secondly, helping states rebuild closes further institutional spaces that can come to be occupied unduly. Finally, in mediating between actors and forces of all hues to reach places from which constructive engagement can materialize. This, to be sure, is done with great difficulty but it is possible with proper leadership and vision within the organization.

