Forum :   1st Committee to the General Assambly
Issue: Improving international efforts to prevent terrorist attacks by terrorist cells and single perpetrators

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Introduction

The ongoing and seemingly unstoppable series of terrorist attacks affecting the western world as well as the Middle East is one of the most worrying issues that the global community has to deal with in the present times. The United Nations have been working on solving the problem for decades. In 2006 the General Assembly adopted the **Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy**, a document that not only declares the despise for terrorism felt by all signing states, but also proposes practical and concrete measures to fight it. The GA reviews the document every two years, making it always up to date with the unfolding of the events. The strategy is built upon four core pillars:

1) Addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism
2) Preventing and combating terrorism
3) Building states' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard;
4) Ensuring the respect for human rights for all and the rule of law.[1]

The UN organ that mainly focuses on actualizing the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy is the very recent **United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism**[2], established by the GA on the 15th of June 2017. Its five functions, as declared on the official website, are

1) Providing leadership on the General Assembly counter-terrorism mandates entrusted to the Secretary-General from across the United Nations system;
2) Enhancing coordination and coherence across the 38 Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force entities.
3) Strengthening the delivery of United Nations counter-terrorism capacity-building assistance to Member States;
4) Improving visibility, advocacy and resource mobilization for United Nations counter-terrorism efforts; and
5) Ensuring that due priority is given to counterterrorism across the United Nations system and that the important work on preventing violent extremism is firmly rooted in the Strategy.

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[1] FULL TEXT: https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy
[2] OFFICIAL WEBSITE: http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/

In this report, we will focus specifically on the aspect of *prevention*, as mentioned in the second and third pillar of the Strategy.

The aspect of recruitment

Terrorist groups such as ISIL, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and even white supremacist groups heavily rely upon the Internet (especially social medias) to recruit new individuals to their cause. The international community must cooperate in stopping this trend by censoring all attempts of propaganda from recognized terrorist organizations, but without crossing the border with violating the right of free speech.

The tools used for recruitment

By far the favorite platform of terrorist recruiters is Twitter, with several accounts linked to extremist groups (most famously ISIL) constantly updating their followers on the deeds of their soldiers, portraying their lives as those of glorious heroes, celebrating each success and ignoring all the failures on the field.

The giant of social media has been working hard against extremist groups since mid-2015, by closing up to 235'000 accounts of such nature[3]. Still, today many terrorist organizations such as Hamas and ISIS manage to retain official channels on the platform[4].

Another vastly used tool for terrorist recruiters is the messaging app Telegram. The reasons for its popularity for these purposes are the possibility to encrypt the messages, the ability to set them to auto-destruct and the possibility to create groups of up to 5000 people, allowing terrorists to broadcast messages to very large audiences without being traceable[5].

What has been done and what can be done

The largest internet companies (Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, and YouTube) already came together to build a common database containing the digital identities and traceability infos of terrorist recruiters in order to be able to entirely block them from uploading content on their platforms.[6]

On 14th April 2016 an ad hoc Security Council meeting on the matter of "Online Recruitment Activity" has taken place. We highly recommend reading the full meeting coverage that is available on the official UN site:
https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12320.doc.htm

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[3] https://blog.twitter.com/2016/an-update-on-our-efforts-to-combat-violent-extremism

[4] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/most-infamous-terrorists-twitter/333662/

[5] http://www.thelocal.fr/20160913/telegram-app-proves-a-headache-for-french-terror-investigators

[6] http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/facebook-microsoft-twitter-youtube-fight-terrorist-propaganda-a7458031.html

The European Council has had also an active role on the prevention of terrorism by tackling online recruitment activity. Here is in fact a manifest of the strategy the EU is willing to adopt to fight terrorism:

http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2014469%202005%20REV%204

It is a very clear and simple document and we recommend reading all of it, with special focus on the part regarding prevention, since it is what most relates to our topic.

Many articles on different media outlets condemn the idea of censoring terrorist websites, seeing it as a threat to freedom of speech and as a first step towards a loss of privacy[7]. Some news sites go on to say that internet censorship could be an additional argument these terrorist groups could have against governments, and as such should be avoided.[8]

The aspect of fundings

The main issue in tracing the money that go in funding terrorist attacks is that they actually consist in small sums, usually sent by two or few more people. The attacks of November 2015 in Paris, for example, were carried out with a total sum of $778, sent by Western Union through eight separate wires.[9]

The only way to trace such small transactions is through a strong cooperation between law enforcement organs and banks, at an international level. A strong intergovernmental body that works for this goal is the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). It was born in 1989 with the purpose of fighting threats to the integrity of the international financial system such as money laundering and terrorism funding. The FATF monitors the progress of its members in implementing the measures proposed in its Recommendations, a list of suggested actions to be taken in order to fight the above-mentioned issues.[10]

Stopping the flow of foreign fighters

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) are defined as "individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict"

According to the Security Council, terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh) and associated groups have attracted over 30,000 FTFs from over 100 Member States.[11]

We emphasize the importance of Security Council's Resolution 2178 (2014) which highlighted in September 2014 the problem of Foreign Fighters, which was previously not having the attention required by the international community. The Resolution establishes

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[7] https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/free-speech-online-is-at-risk-after-paris-attacks/417411/

[8] https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/11/censoring-web-isnt-solution-terrorism-or-counterfeiting-its-problem

[9] http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2016/thomson_reuters_15_april_2016.pdf

[10] http://www.fatf-gafi.org/about/

[11] https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/foreign-terrorist-fighters/

the basic measures each member state should adopt in order to fight the phenomenon of FTFs, emphasizing that international cooperation is fundamental in dealing with the issue. The whole resolution can be read here: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2178%20(2014)

The issue of FTFs is very much linked with the funding of terrorist groups: an individual willing to leave his home to train and then fight for the cause of the terrorist group, will also be prone to donate large sums of money to such organizations. By stopping these people from reaching the territories controlled by the terrorist organizations, we will also deal a strike to their funding.

Useful links and Bibliography

Very suggested read on the role of the UN in fighting terrorism and on terrorism in general: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/roleofun.pdf

UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee's official website: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/

FATF official website: http://www.fatf-gafi.org/home/

A read on the finances involved in terrorist attacks http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/homeland-security/260597-how-do-isis-terrorists-finance-their-attacks