

CONFERENCE REPORT

Closing Ranks: International Cooperation against Terrorism



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CONFERENCE REPORT

Closing Ranks: International Cooperation against Terrorism

This is a report on a public session titled “**Closing Ranks: International Cooperation against Terrorism**”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018 and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.



- 1** *What kind of international mechanisms does the world need for the global fight against terrorism?*
- 2** *What is the relationship between the containment of failed states and the fight against terrorism?*
- 3** *What are the prospects of reaching a workable, non-elusive definition of terrorism accepted by the international community?*
- 4** *Is there anything new about terrorism in the post-Daesh era?*
- 5** *Is it possible to create international mechanisms to curb state-sponsored terrorism?*
- 6** *What is the role of technology in countering terrorism?*

Summary

The session “Closing Ranks: International Cooperation against Terrorism”, brought together experts and leading practitioners in order to discuss current challenges facing counter-terrorism cooperation around the world. The speakers addressed a variety of issues related to terrorism, including root causes and possible solutions moving forward. As part of the session, the panellists advanced various ways in which terrorism can be addressed, ranging from military force to de-radicalisation programs. State sponsorship of terrorism was discussed, particularly the issue of supporting one terrorist organisation against another in advancing what a particular state may see as its national interest, often at the expense of broader international security. The panellists expressed a variety of viewpoints on the subject matter but ultimately agreed that greater international cooperation was necessary if there is to be any hope of making positive strides against what is, in the end, a global issue. Furthermore, the panel agreed that a clear definition of terrorism should be advanced at the international level in order to avoid ambiguities that threaten global counter-terrorism cooperation.

The complex motivations that drive individuals towards terrorism were discussed, as well as the significant ideological differences that exist between various terrorist organisations, both of which were identified as factors that complicate the process of reaching a common definition. As pointed out by Ali Asghar Soltanieh, there exists an agreement on the need to condemn terrorism, however, there is a clear lack of consensus and understanding of what terrorism really is.

The panellists expressed a common understanding of the idea that although terrorist organisations can be degraded and diminished, a long-term approach is needed in order to address the various root causes of the issue. The unstable environments of weak and failed states were identified as potential breeding grounds for extremism and non-state actors. Furthermore, the changing nature of warfare was emphasised as a point that needs consideration as terrorist networks will adjust and adapt to shifts in technology and strategy over time.



Maria Ramos, presenter at TRT World, asks the panelists why terrorism prevails throughout the globe and the reasons why we still grapple with addressing its causes.

Introduction

In the last decade, despite the continuation of the so-called war on terror, international terrorism has gained considerable momentum. Taking advantage of civil wars and political instability, multiple terrorist organisations have expanded their operations and have even claimed and governed territory. Counter-measures have shifted the tactics of some terror groups, resulting in high profile attacks in major cities around the world. In such an environment, international cooperation is critical to the development of a framework for collective security in order to provide protection against terror groups and the threat they pose to daily life. The increasingly sophisticated techniques used by terrorist groups require efficient international mechanisms to confront them.

One of the fundamental issues complicating international counter-terrorism cooperation was identified as state-sponsorship of terrorist groups, particularly as a means of fighting proxy wars against other states and as a means of containing other terrorist organisations. In light of this, the panel discussed the best way to advance counter-terrorism cooperation globally. As part of the discussion, the panellists identified the pertinence of finding a common definition of terrorism that would be conducive to increasing cooperation and more easily holding states to account for their relationships with organisations deemed to fall under the rubric of terrorism. The panel also addressed how technological advancements have both helped and hindered counter-terrorism efforts around the world. While the panel offered a variety of viewpoints on these core topics, the need for increased international cooperation in the fight against terrorism was agreed upon.

Defining Terrorism

Agreeing upon general definition of terrorism was identified as being elusive largely because of the characteristic of victim-target differentiation. This issue was particularly pertinent because how terrorism is defined ultimately shapes the response often with significant impact on both politics and society. It was argued that reducing terrorism to a single definition may fail to capture its “evolving nature” and mask its complexities, something that has impeded previous attempts to come to an international consensus on the subject. Efforts to define terrorism at the UN level during the 20th century were impeded by concerns over categorising national liberation movements as “terrorists” and the differences between state and non-state terrorism that would be all but impossible to capture under a single definition.

Some governments may prefer ambiguity when it comes to defining terrorism because of the latitude it gives in identifying particular acts as ‘terrorism’ or particular groups as being ‘terrorist organisations’. By restricting such ambiguity, a consensus definition of terrorism would enhance accountability and force governments to act regardless of political expediency and any groups or objectives they may be supporting. State-sponsors of terrorism and terrorist organisations themselves are naturally inclined to reject a consensus definition of terrorism for the very fact that they regard their actions as being something other than terrorism and seek to communicate this point to the public at large.

Robert Fox, Defense Editor at the Evening Standard, noted that perhaps the most difficult questions to answer relate to what drives an individual towards terrorism in the first place. States and societies need to get a better grasp of the so-called sociology of terrorism. In other words, how is it possible that an individual could have gone to school in a given society, graduated from university and then, in the end, resort to terrorism against his or her own people? The key to combatting terrorism lies in early intervention and addressing its social roots. One countermeasure is community engagement. For example, anthropologist Scott Atran of the University of Oxford’s Centre for Resolution of Intractable Conflicts noted that high-school football and the scouts’ movement have been effective responses to antisocial behaviour among the disenfranchised children of US immigrants.



Peter van Praagh, President of the Halifax International Security Forum, points out the role of nation-states in facilitating terrorist groups and non-state actors which serve their interests.

Ufuk Ulutas, Middle East Program Coordinator at the SETA Foundation, identified the most dangerous type of terrorist as being what is called the “true believer”, that is, an individual who has been truly convinced by the ideological orientation of the objectives of one terrorist organisation or another. In comparison to those who join for personal objectives, this ideological core has been identified as the most critical component of terrorist groups such as Daesh.

Ali Ashgar Soltanieh, regarded the rise of Daesh to have been a consequence of al-Qaeda in Iraq gaining momentum after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Soltanieh also problematized the concept of terrorism by pointing to the socio-economic roots of the rise of terrorist organisations as being related to the imposition of devastating sanctions and other measures, what he termed as ‘economic terrorism’. Regarding Soltanieh’s comments, Peter van Praagh, the President of the Halifax International Security Forum, underlined that in most cases, terrorism is sponsored by nation states. When defining terrorism and its root causes, non-state actors should be taken into primary consideration.

The Role of Technology

Increasingly rapid developments in science and technology have fundamentally altered the way people communicate and international terrorist networks are no exception to this. Terrorist organisations around the world have exploited advances in technology to their benefit, particularly in the realm of communications, including recruitment propaganda and psychological and cyber warfare. Social media, in particular, presents challenges to counter-terrorism vis-à-vis radicalization and recruitment. Fostering a social media landscape that promotes community cohesion rather than division continues to be a key issue with regards to examining the role of technology in counter-terrorism.

While social media platforms and rapid developments in technology have presented terrorist organisations with opportunities, they have also been harnessed to combat terrorism, providing security and intelligence agencies with ample opportunity for collecting valuable intelligence. Developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in particular have been harnessed to increase predictability with regards to the timing and types of potential terrorist attacks. Addressing this point, Robert Fox argued that a discrete culture and lexicon exist among terrorist organizations. Each terrorist movements has its 'code' through which members communicate with one another. Fox noted that advancements in machine learning have allowed for the identification and analysis of these codes, and then when combined with human expertise, allow counter-terrorism practitioners a window into the tone and context of a particular movement's agenda and worldview.

What Fox identified as 'non-obvious warfare', is a little understood yet critical lens through which to view the changing nature of terrorism and warfare. This refers to the effects of AI on various aspects of warfare ranging from cyber-attacks to autonomous weapons systems. More traditional threats such as chemical and biological warfare were also discussed as representing ongoing threats particularly in light of technological advances in these fields. Fox identified 'genetic warfare' as a newly emerging threat in the biological warfare rubric that requires more attention from policymakers and analysts alike.



Burhanettin Duran, Professor at Ibn Haldun University and General Coordinator of SETA Foundation, emphasizes the need for greater international cooperation in combating terrorism, and explains Turkey's own struggle with the PKK.

International Counter-Terrorism Cooperation



Defining terrorism is not just a theoretical issue but an operative matter of the first order. Terrorism is no longer a local problem but an issue that requires international cooperation and a global response. Cultivating an effective international strategy to combat terrorism necessitates a degree of consensus, not only on approach but also on the definition and identification of terrorism. In fact, without a consensus on a general definition, a coordinated international counter-terrorism strategy will remain in the realm of theory.

Without an internationally accepted definition of terrorism, the ratification and implementation of international conventions against terrorism – conventions covering material and financial support to terrorist organisations, state support, extradition of terrorism suspects, etc. – will remain a challenge.

In relation to the language ‘codes’ mentioned by Robert Fox, Peter van Praagh argued that a number of reasons exist which are, nonetheless difficult but, important to try to understand. The moderator of the panel, Maria Ramos, mentioned recent examples of terrorist attacks such as the Ariana Grande concert bombing in Manchester, the school bus attack in Yemen, and the twin bombings at Reina nightclub in Istanbul, to which Praagh referred to as the exact images terrorists use to gain fear into the population as the ultimate goal.

Burhanettin Duran, Professor at Ibn Haldun University and General Coordinator at the SETA Foundation, emphasised the importance of both regional and international cooperation in countering terrorism. With over 40 years of experience fighting terrorist organisations, most notably the PKK, Professor Duran discussed Turkey’s approach to counter-terrorism activities. He noted particularly that Turkey divides the issue of terrorism into three interrelated parts. First and foremost, terrorism is a security issue. Secondly, he pointed out that questions



Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's Former Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, points out the visible double standards employed in identifying and defining terrorism, and the biased characterizations of non-state actors deemed useful to certain nation-states.

of identity need to be taken into account. Thirdly, he noted that there can be an ethnic/national separatist element to terrorism. The post-9/11 era created a counter-terrorism consciousness among many of Turkey's allies, but this view has, more often than not, been myopic. Professor Duran pointed to the example of US support to the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, the YPG, and the enormous security challenge this has created for Turkey. He used this example to illustrate the challenge in fostering an environment of cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts and the fact that a lack of consensus offers at least a partial explanation of the continuation and even growth of terrorism worldwide.

Robert Fox echoed Professor Duran's call for increased international cooperation to combat terrorism, however, he noted that the complex nature of terrorist organisations, their varied identities and their divergent agendas means that narrow national objectives often supersede long-term collective interests. He also noted issue with counter-terrorism approaches, such as the 'Prevent' program in the UK, which he deemed as being too restrictive, particularly on children.



Robert Fox, Defense Editor at the Evening Standard, discusses the need to understand the sociology of terrorism in order to address it, while Ufuk Ulutaş highlights the multi-pronged attempts undertaken by the Turkish government to reduce the PKK's reach and foil its recruitment strategy.

Conclusion

The continued threat of terrorism in recent years has greatly increased the urgency of fostering international cooperation. There has been an increased proliferation of terrorist groups around the world, many bearing an increased capacity to inflict serious damage and destruction and to propagate their respective narratives, which aim to pull disaffected young people in particular into their ranks and push them to commit acts of violence. The panel also emphasised the need to address the *raisons d'être* of terrorist organisations and to apply effective strategies for deradicalisation and reintegration.

It is an inescapable fact that today, terrorism truly transcends national borders. Therefore, any potential solution requires a coordinated international response that must also transcend national interests and narrow political objectives.

