



# The 10th Anniversary Of The Global Counterterrorism Forum: Time To Outgrow The Adolescence

Bibi van Ginkel

# The 10th Anniversary Of The Global Counterterrorism Forum: Time To Outgrow The Adolescence

---

Bibi van Ginkel

Policy Brief

November 2021

## About ICCT

---

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

### Licensing and Distribution

ICCT publications are published in open access format and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

### Cover Image

“160922 Koenders bij Global Counterterrorism Forum in New York“ by Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken is licensed with CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)

# Contents

---

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	1
<b>Abstract</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>The key characteristics of the GCTF and the added value in the CT landscape</b>	4
<b>Challenges and Criticism</b>	6
<b>Recommendations for the next decade of the GCTF</b>	10
<b>Bibliography</b>	14
<b>About the Author</b>	15

## Acknowledgements

This policy paper is based on excerpts from the report written by the author and commissioned by the Dutch Policy and Operations Department (IOB). The report is titled “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”. This policy brief refers to data and (anonymised) interview results used throughout the evaluation report.

## Abstract

The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) was established in September 2011. The objective was to set up a nimble, action-oriented, informal network with a limited membership to operate as an incubator for global counter-terrorism (CT) responses. The question raised in this policy brief is whether the GCTF, ten years since its inception, is still fit for purpose. In the policy brief, the author reflects on the achievements of the GCTF, and the added value of the Forum in the international CT landscape. Four key challenges are highlighted that relate to the effectiveness of the GCTF, the eroding commitment of GCTF Members, the challenges to the legitimacy of the GCTF, and the lack of inclusiveness. Subsequently recommendations are offered with several concrete proposals to address these challenges, that can assist in keeping the GCTF fit for purpose also in the next decade.

**Keywords:** GCTF, counter-terrorism, preventing and countering violent extremism, human rights, legitimacy, effectiveness

## Introduction

September 2021 marks both 20 years after 9/11, and the 10th anniversary of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). The GCTF was launched in September 2011 in New York, US as the first global platform dedicated to counter-terrorism (CT). The United Nations (UN) was perceived as not agile enough, and too political and bureaucratic to respond effectively to the imminent terrorist threats the world was facing. The US therefore took the lead to set up a nimble, action-oriented, informal network with a limited membership to operate as an incubator for global CT responses. According to its Political Declaration, the GCTF's primary objective is "to provide a dedicated, informal, multilateral counterterrorism platform for senior policymakers and practitioners from different regions and representing appropriate stakeholders."<sup>1</sup>

With a selected membership of 29 countries plus the European Union (EU),<sup>2</sup> it aimed to bridge the views between three main groups: the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to ensure political buy-in on the global level, other western states with first-hand experience with terrorism and the financial resources to sponsor activities and the expertise to deal with the problem, and a selection of Islamic countries with frontline experience with terrorism within their borders. The selection made in 2011 aimed to be a geographical reflection of the situation at the time.

Since its establishment, the GCTF has developed and endorsed 37 so-called non-binding framework documents<sup>3</sup> on a wide variety of topics related to CT and countering violent extremism (CVE).<sup>4</sup> In addition, various practitioners' toolkits have been developed. Furthermore, training workshops have been organised on various topics to raise awareness regarding the good practices and recommendations covered by the framework documents among relevant stakeholders.

Although the number of topics covered and the number of documents adopted seems impressive, the activities of the GCTF are not without criticism. Key critical arguments relate to the lack of effectiveness of the GCTF output, the eroding commitment of GCTF members, the challenges to the legitimacy of the GCTF and the lack of inclusiveness. With ten years on the clock, it is time to take stock of the achievements of the GCTF, its impact and effectiveness, and its added value to the international CT and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) landscape. The key questions of this policy brief is therefore whether the GCTF, ten years since its inception, is still fit for purpose.

In this policy brief, I argue that amendments to the way the GCTF operates are needed to remain a legitimate and relevant actor in the counter-terrorism landscape. Four key recommendations, with several practical suggestions, are made to maintain a legitimate and relevant actor. I will first elaborate on the key characteristics of the GCTF and its main achievements, before turning to the main challenges the platform faces, leading to the recommendations presented.

1 GCTF, Global Counterterrorism Forum Official Launch, Political Declaration, 22 September 2011, New York, available at: [https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Foundational%20Documents/GCTF-Political-Declaration\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Foundational%20Documents/GCTF-Political-Declaration_ENG.pdf).

2 The Members of the GCTF are Algeria, Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, EU, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE), United Kingdom (UK), and United States (US).

3 These documents have been adopted up until August 2021. See the overview on the website of the GCTF <https://www.thegctf.org/About-us/GCTF-framework-documents>.

4 The topics addressed included foreign terrorist fighters, criminal justice and rule of law, detention and reintegration, soft targets, supporting victims of terrorism, preventing and denying the benefits of kidnapping for ransom, border security and interdicting terrorist travel, the nexus between terrorism and transnational organized crime, and countering unmanned aerial system threats.

## The key characteristics of the GCTF and the added value in the CT landscape

According to the GCTF's Political Declaration and as underlined by many stakeholders,<sup>5</sup> the key characteristics of the GCTF are its apolitical and informal character, its action-oriented and technical approach, and its limited membership (hereafter referred to as the key characteristics). The question is how that works in practice, and whether it contributes to the Forum's added value in the already quite crowded CT landscape.

At the moment of establishment, a significant number of international actors was already active within the field of CT and P/CVE.<sup>6</sup> A question is therefore what the added value is of yet another actor in the field. Moreover, the topics the GCTF intended to be concerned with, also featured in international policy discussions taking place in other international fora, and particularly within the UN. And indeed, over the past ten years the topics on the GCTF's agenda included issues regarding criminal justice and rule of law responses, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), detention and rehabilitation, and travel and border control.<sup>7</sup>

The key characteristics take form in the main goal of GCTF to break with the classical way of interacting by diplomats in international fora, by bringing together policy officers with experts and practitioners from around the world to share experiences and expertise. The Political Declaration emphasised the important role civil society plays in the development and implementation of policies, and also the need to strengthen public-private partnerships. By emphasising the interaction between different stakeholders, civil society should therefore be better engaged in the dialogues and exchanges. It furthermore highlights the important role of regional organisations for the implementation and capacity-building of long-term comprehensive CT strategies in addition to the cooperation with the UN.

Many stakeholders stated that the apolitical character and informal manner of operating have indeed offered an opportunity to discuss issues and develop policies that, given their sensitive nature, would not have been discussed in the context of the UN.<sup>8</sup> Although the GCTF documents are non-binding in nature, the fact that the permanent five Members of the UNSC are on board, subsequently paves the way for other international organisations to follow and build on the agreement already reached and to include the topic on their policy agenda.

There are various examples of a direct and an indirect relationship between the work of the GCTF and other organisations. A prominent example of the direct relationship was the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 2178,<sup>9</sup> as well as the adoption of the Council of Europe's 'Additional Protocol to the Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism',<sup>10</sup> that were both adopted after the

5 This follows from the interviews conducted for "Evaluation of the '5P-ambitions' of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness", available at: <https://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/in-uitvoering/publicaties/deelstudies/2021/10/06/het-global-counterterrorism-forum>, p. 31.

6 Among those international actors are the UN, the European Union (EU), the Organisation on Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the North-Atlantic Defence Organisation (NATO) and the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS.

7 See below for several examples.

8 This follows from the interviews conducted for "Evaluation of the '5P-ambitions' of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness", p. 31.

9 UN SC Resolution 2178 (2014), UN Doc S/RES/2178 (2014), 24 September 2014.

10 Council of Europe's 'Additional Protocol to the Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism', CETS No. 219, Riga, 1 July 2017.

endorsement of the GCTF The Hague-Marrakesh Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon in September 2014.<sup>11</sup> As an effect, the adoption of the UNSC Resolution and the Additional Protocol has given the GCTF recommendations a status that goes beyond the original non-binding status. Another example was the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2482<sup>12</sup> following the GCTF The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism,<sup>13</sup> and the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2396,<sup>14</sup> which focuses on soft targets and was adopted after the development of the GCTF The Antalya Memorandum on Good Practices on the Protection of Soft Targets in a Counterterrorism Context.<sup>15</sup>

The indirect relationship can be seen in situations where the GCTF framework documents inform, for instance, the guiding documents of UN CTED, which form the basis of UN CTED's dialogue with UN Member States regarding their implementation obligations of UNSC Resolutions.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the UN, an example can be found in the 'Guidelines on the Links between Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime' developed by the Council of Europe, which follow the example of the GCTF 'Addendum to the Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crimes and Terrorism: focus on criminal justice'.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the GCTF has set a benchmark for states and international and regional organisations to follow, and thus operated 'ahead of the policy curve'.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the activities of the GCTF in general are recognised by other organisations, contributing in this way to the authoritative status of the GCTF. This is evidenced by the cross-references to the GCTF Good Practice documents often made by other organisations, which is particularly remarkable given the non-binding status of the GCTF documents.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, one of the key objectives for the establishment of the GCTF<sup>20</sup> was to support the work of the UN and the implementation of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy.<sup>21</sup> In 2018,

11 GCTF, The Hague-Marrakesh Memorandum on good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon, September 2014. The document is available at: <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2016%20and%20before/GCTF-The-Hague-Marrakech-Memorandum-ENG.pdf?ver=2016-09-01-150615-977>.

12 UN SC Resolution 2482 (2019), UN Doc S/RES/2482 (2019), 19 July 2019.

13 The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism, September 2018, available at: [https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2018/GCTF-Good-Practices-on-the-Nexus\\_ENG.pdf?ver=2018-09-21-122246-363/](https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2018/GCTF-Good-Practices-on-the-Nexus_ENG.pdf?ver=2018-09-21-122246-363/).

14 UN SC Resolution 2396 (2017), UN Doc S/RES/2396 (2017), 21 December 2017.

15 The GCTF Soft Target Protection Initiative, The Antalya Memorandum on Good Practices on the Protection of Soft Targets in a Counterterrorism Context, September 2017, available at: <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Links/Meetings/2017/Twelfth%20GCTF%20Coordinating%20Committee%20Meeting/GCTF%20-%20Antalya%20Memorandum%20on%20the%20Protection%20of%20Soft%20Targets%20in%20a%20Counterterrorism%20Context.pdf?ver=2017-09-17-010844-720>.

16 Counterterrorism Executive Directorate, Technical Guide to the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) and Other Relevant Resolutions, 2017, available at: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CTED-Technical-Guide-2017.pdf>.

17 Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, Working Group of Experts on Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime, 'Guidelines on the Links between Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime', 17 November 2020, CDCT-TTOC (2019) 01 rev 9.

18 The Dutch in their policy documents claimed the GCTF was acting 'ahead of the curve'. However, it would be more fair to state that the GCTF acted 'ahead of the policy curve' (emphasis added), as the GCTF has not been acting on new security challenges before they actually became an emerging threat.

19 An analysis has been made by the Administrative Unit regarding the synergies between particularly the UN and GCTF: GCTF Analytical Report 'From Working Relations to Structural Partnership: UN-GCTF Cooperation beyond 2018', on file.

20 The Terms of Reference of the GCTF furthermore explicitly mention the cooperation and a strengthened relationship with the UN entities as a priority. See the GCTF Terms of Reference, as adapted on 4 August 2017, available online at <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Foundational%20Documents/GCTF%20Revised%20Terms%20of%20Reference%202017.pdf?ver=2020-01-21-095304-547>.

21 UN Doc A/RES/60/288, adopted 20 September 2006.

this relationship was further strengthened with the intention to regularly organise meetings between the GCTF Co-Chairs and the UN Counterterrorism Centre (UN CTC) and other UN entities, in order to exchange work plans and mutually supportive activities and identify potential joint priorities. The rationale behind the cooperation is to support the operationalisation and impact of the UN Global CT legal framework in national legislations and policies, harnessing support for discussion regarding new terrorist threats and challenges, and complementing the mutual approaches to implementation of CT and P/CVE policies. The ambitions are clearly there. However, in practice this cooperation does not move beyond the point of a mere exchange of agendas twice a year, and a strategic view on how this partnership can be used to effectively implement policies, has not been developed. This is a missed opportunity, especially since the UN Office on Counterterrorism (UNOCT, established in 2017) brought a potential positive change to the abilities and resources available within the UN to initiate capacity-building activities. With regard to the implementation of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy,<sup>22</sup> UNOCT and GCTF would thus benefit from a division of focus areas in order to avoid overlap and competition for resources.

Although, several accomplishments of GCTF were listed in this section, there are also several challenges and criticism of the work of GCTF.

## Challenges and Criticism

While stakeholders overall praise the key characteristics, they are simultaneously highly critical regarding the effectiveness of the outcomes of the GCTF. The criticism directed at the GCTF, thus mainly focusses on four main points, namely the lack of effectiveness, the eroding commitment, the challenges to legitimacy, and the lack of inclusiveness.

### Lack of effectiveness

A key problem with the GCTF's ambition to effectively contribute to CT and P/CVE is that it does not conduct risk and needs assessments prior to embarking on a drafting process for a new framework document. Topics are typically proposed by the co-chairs of a particular GCTF Working Group and discussed among the Members. Independently conducted security risk assessments are not institutionally integrated in the work of the GCTF to inform the agenda-setting. In comparison, within the UN, the UN Sanction and Monitoring Team, regularly issues global threat assessments, thereby guiding the work of the UN CTED, for example.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, policy needs assessments, for instance in the African regions which are special focus areas of the GCTF, are also not conducted. One of the critiques is therefore that policies proposed in the framework documents lack contextualisation, which in turn is a significant impediment to implementation. Part of this problem lies in the fact that in developing these policies, the countries that are oftentimes considered to be a candidate for implementation of the GCTF good practices documents have not (sufficiently) been involved in the process, something that would otherwise contribute to ownership regarding possible solutions. Since only Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt are members of the GCTF from the African continent, only a few are directly included in the drafting process.

<sup>22</sup> UN Doc A/RES/60/288, adopted 20 September 2006.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of 21 July 2021, UN Docs S/2021/655, available online: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2021\\_655\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_655_E.pdf).

The lack of contextualisation is also not sufficiently resolved with the various GCTF practitioners' toolkits that have been developed. The GCTF is furthermore not unique in developing these 'how to' guides that should offer policy guidance, putting in question the added value of the GCTF in this respect. They much resemble the guidance documents developed by UNODC or OHCHR.<sup>24</sup>

Interesting to note in this context, is that even though the GCTF Terms of Reference also underline the importance of cooperation with regional and sub-regional organisations,<sup>25</sup> more structural relationships are so far not built with regional organisations, comparable to the attempts to deepen the relationship with the UN. Representatives of regional organisations did stress they see an added value for a more intensive and reciprocal relationship, particularly regarding the fact that they also focus on CT and P/CVE. They point to the possibilities to contribute to awareness raising and dissemination, and even implementation and capacity-building.<sup>26</sup> They consider this lack of cooperation a missed opportunity as structural cooperation could contribute to enhancing legitimacy, local ownership, and contextualisation of the policy recommendations.

## Eroding commitment

GCTF is the only international platform regarding counter-terrorism issues that organises an annual ministerial meeting. In the early years since its establishment, this high-level profile certainly attracted much attention and ministerial commitment. However, according to several stakeholders, this attention seems to be eroding.<sup>27</sup> They argued that during the more recent annual ministerial meetings it has become more difficult to attract the attendance of all GCTF Members, and thus high-level commitment. In general, these meetings are considered to be important as they can trigger a reinforcing dynamic for commitment. After all, a country is more committed to send representation on ministerial level if other states are also attending on that level. Furthermore, the attendance of a minister oftentimes goes hand in hand with an offer to financially support an activity or otherwise pledge a certain commitment. This fact generally makes it easier for policy makers back home to keep their minister interested in the GCTF and secure political support. Without attendance, there is a risk of erosion.

Furthermore, as a result of the sheer number of meetings taking place, stakeholders warned that GCTF members are no longer always able to send relevant subject-matter experts to the various expert meetings or document review meetings.<sup>28</sup> This has implications for the quality of the discussions and leads to less exchange of practices, which was initially the crux of the apolitical, action-oriented and technical approach. In practice, it is mostly a handful of Member States that actively participate in the expert meetings to share their experiences and are involved in the review of the documents.

## Challenges to the legitimacy

24 See, for instance, OHCHR, Human Rights Principles Applicable to Watchlisting, United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 2020, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Terrorism/Pages/Research-papers-and-Inputs.aspx>; OHCHR, Guidance to States on Human Rights Compliant Responses to the Threat posed by Foreign Fighters, 2018, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/newyork/Documents/Human-Rights-Responses-to-Foreign-Fighters-web%20final.pdf>; See also the website of UNODC regarding their Technical Assistance Tools and Publication, available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/technical-assistance-tools.html>.

25 See the GCTF Terms of Reference, 2017.

26 This follows from the interviews conducted for "Evaluation of the '5P-ambitions' of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness", p. 56.

27 Ibid., p. 33.

28 Ibid., p. 33.

The informal character of the GCTF leading to the development of non-binding documents, is perceived by some as a way of working outside of the more legally formalised processes of bodies such as the UN, to push for new policies without ensuring full accountability for a rule of law compliant approach.<sup>29</sup> This, the critics argue, undermines the legitimacy<sup>30</sup> of the GCTF.

Not formally embedded in the international legal framework of human rights, this lack of binding guidance on a rule of law compliant implementation of GCTF policies, opens the doors for policy laundering by others. Not all states have a similarly benign view of the norm-creating in these informal networks, and the fast tracking of the norm development. Others take example from the way things work within GCTF to apply that for their own system, which opens the door for abuse.<sup>31</sup> Risks are particularly expressed by human rights advocates in relation to, for instance, the sharing of (biometric) data without clear safeguards to prevent the arbitrary interference in the privacy of individuals, the collection of information to be used as evidence in court by military in conflict zones without fully respecting due process and the rights regarding a fair trial, or the use of administrative measures in situations that are easily labelled as posing a risk to national security in order to curb any activities of political opponents.<sup>32</sup> As several critics within international organisations and independent experts claim,<sup>33</sup> the authority within the international CT landscape attained by the GCTF, should therefore come with the responsibility to ensure states are held accountable for any human rights abuses.

Reflecting on this opinion, it is important to underline that clearly the non-binding character of the framework documents endorsed by the GCTF does not in itself provide an instrument to hold states accountable. Equally however, by consistently referring to the binding character of existing human rights framework it can be made clear that states can be held accountable for violations through the relevant human rights framework. And even though the GCTF claims to be an apolitical platform, it does not operate in a vacuum of international norms, and it also cannot be denied that it is concerned with topics with a highly political impact. GCTF thus is – or at least has the potential to grow into – an authoritative platform that, while it does not have the power to change policies with binding decisions, it has the authoritative influence to stir change.

The negotiations on draft texts of new GCTF framework documents are used more and more for political negotiations or strongarming others to accept a certain position. At times, GCTF Members even use the silence procedure at the end of the negotiations (when the clock is ticking) to increase the political pressure to force acceptance of a particular position regarding the formulation of the recommendation, avoiding transparent debates with other GCTF Members to come to a compromise on the text. Unfortunately, as a result references in the recommendations to strong human rights language have oftentimes fallen victim to this development, as GCTF Members

---

29 This follows from the interviews conducted for “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, p. 34. This view is also expressed in the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, 22 August 2019, UN Doc A/74/335.

30 The term legitimacy can mean different things. Some use it interchangeably with the term legality. Here it is rather used to describe a broader quality of the policy or the operations of the GCTF as such. Legitimacy, as it is used in the context of this policy brief, thus rather describes a way of operating in adherence with generally accepted principles of international rulemaking, rule of law, and principles of good governance.

31 This follows from the interviews conducted for “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, p. 34. This view is also expressed in the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, 22 August 2019, UN Doc A/74/335.

32 Ibid.

33 This follows from the interviews conducted for “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, p. 34.

used the last minute pressure to take those specific reference out of the text.

## Lack of inclusiveness

Another criticism regularly heard relates to the lack of meaningful inclusiveness by the GCTF.<sup>34</sup> Although the informal character does allow for participation in meetings by non-Members, the lack of transparency in who is allowed to participate and why, and the fact that hardly any sustainable relationships are built with relevant stakeholders, renders the informal character void.

The narrative is that the GCTF operates in a very inclusive manner, and many GCTF Members praise the ambition of inclusiveness of the GCTF and the interaction with multiple stakeholders during the meetings.<sup>35</sup> However, this view is not shared by other stakeholders, mainly representing civil society. They referred to the lack of transparent procedures to be admitted during a meeting, lack of openness on the agendas and running projects, and lack of open vetting procedures to get accreditation, such as for instance offered by the UN, to have permanent access to GCTF meetings.<sup>36</sup>

The Terms of Reference set the guidelines for the invitation for non-members to the various activities.<sup>37</sup> UN Member States, representatives of the various UN organs and other relevant international, regional, and sub-regional bodies, and other appropriate stakeholders (including appropriate civil society experts) are eligible to participate in meetings, if they demonstrate support for the GCTF's founding principles and objectives. However, the Terms of Reference explain only in general terms that non-members need to demonstrate support for the GCTF's founding principles and objectives as enumerated in the Political Declaration and need to have relevant expertise to share in counter-terrorism.<sup>38</sup> No other objective criteria are included. The (co-) hosts of GCTF activities should, before issuing invitations to non-members, submit a list of non-member invitees to the co-chairs of the working group that organises the particular activity for which non-members need to be invited and the co-chairs of GCTF for their consent and to all other GCTF members for their information. Consent is assumed after a two-week silence procedure after circulating the list by the Administrative Unit. In practice, however, this is a cumbersome procedure and, due to lack of transparency, at times also leading to arbitrary decisions. As a result there is also a risk that particularly the 'usual suspects' secure a seat at the table, which undermines the ambition of championing dialogues between a wide variety of stakeholders. Therefore, it is fair to state that participation as such in certain activities is not the same as inclusiveness in the processes.

The limited membership of the GCTF, finally, is a much-debated issue. This limited membership is certainly appreciated by some GCTF Member States, because it is seen as facilitating reaching consensus on the draft texts of the framework documents, and as helping to prevent the Forum from becoming a more political platform.<sup>39</sup> Others, however, have criticised the lack of a balanced geographical representation, arguing that the selection of states seems very arbitrary,

34 This follows from the interviews conducted for "Evaluation of the '5P-ambitions' of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness", p. 35.

35 Ibid., p. 57.

36 Ibid., pp. 56-57.

37 The GCTF Terms of Reference, 2017.

38 Ibid., para. 9 and 12.

39 This follows from the interviews conducted for "Evaluation of the '5P-ambitions' of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness", p. 34.

or at best only representative of the situation in 2010-2011.<sup>40</sup> For instance, given the focus of the GCTF activities on various African regions, the fact that only five African states are members renders the membership unbalanced and lacking meaningful participation with a better position to ensure contextualisation of policies. Those in favour of enlargement are, however, not in agreement on the number of states with which the GCTF should be enlarged, or on the exact states that should be welcomed as new members.

## Recommendations for the next decade of the GCTF

The leading question for this policy brief was whether the GCTF is still fit for purpose. The evaluation of the GCTF, its past activities and way of operating, shows that the key self-claimed characteristics of being apolitical and informal, and its action-oriented and technical approach and main aims are jeopardised if several challenges are not properly addressed. In this policy brief four challenges were highlighted:

1. The lack of effective implementation and contextualisation of the GCTF policies;
2. The eroding commitment due to the number of meetings which undermines the quality of the exchange and the political commitment;
3. The challenges to the legitimacy of the GCTF in relation to the lack of firm support for human rights obligations, and the undermining of the apolitical character as a result of the lack of transparency in the negotiations and the powerplay used by certain Member States in the final stage of the negotiations; and
4. The lack of inclusiveness regarding the participation and engagement with non-members, including civil society actors, and the lack of geographical representation of the membership.

In advance of the ambitions of the new co-chairs, Canada and Morocco, to prepare the GCTF for the next decade, the following categories of recommendations can be taken into consideration to ensure the GCTF remains a relevant and fit-for-purpose actor in the international CT arena.

### ***Recommendation 1: Facilitate effectiveness of policies and better implementation***

Effectiveness of policies starts with focusing on the relevant issues and addressing any identified gaps in the assessed policies. This could be realised by, for instance, setting up an independent research unit, or harnessing such a unit within the Administrative Unit of the GCTF. Such a unit could assess emerging security threats and underlying conditions conducive to radicalisation to violent extremism, by conducting regular needs assessments among GCTF members and non-members, with the purpose to target activities on issues that are necessary, and by improving contextualisation as a condition for better implementation. Setting up such a unit does not need to undermine the nimble organisation the GCTF still aims to be, but in the situation that states are not comfortable with institutionalising such a unit, one could always commission an external independent organisation to conduct such assessments on a regular basis.

---

<sup>40</sup> This follows from the interviews conducted for “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, p. 34.

Contextualisation and better implementation can also be strengthened by ensuring that the Regional Working Groups play a more prominent role in developing new initiatives, raising awareness in the region and organising implementation activities. In order to increase ownership and contextualisation, regional working groups could offer flexible GCTF working group membership for non-member countries from the region to these working groups. This way, the GCTF as such remains an international mechanism with limited membership.

Co-chairs of the working groups are furthermore recommended to present their strategic working plans as a package deal, including specific follow-up activities focused on the implementation of the framework documents. This way it can be avoided that good plans on paper collect dust without a proper attempt to translate ambitions into reality. The plans of the co-chairs would also benefit from backing from a group of supporting states, that will also pledge resources for the follow-up steps. These package deals should moreover include an objective to translate relevant documents and practitioners' toolkits to languages of interest for the regions that are specifically targeted with the GCTF framework documents and implementation activities.

Contextualisation and implementation would also benefit from a more meaningful and institutionalised relationship with regional organisations. Such a relationship should be based on the principle of reciprocity, meaning GCTF (representation) should also show interest in the activities of the regional organisations and attend relevant meetings of regional organisations. It should be possible to arrange a meeting with representatives of regional organisations once a year, or to dedicate an annual coordinating meeting to regional implementation coordination. Another option is to appoint a particular GCTF Member to be the 'Envoy' regarding a certain region, who could attend the meetings of (sub-) regional organisations and share agreed GCTF talking points.

Finally, strengthening effectiveness cannot be done without organising the monitoring of implementation of policies and the evaluation of its effectiveness. Given the fact that the GCTF is in essence an informal platform that only endorses non-binding documents, an ambition to set up a monitoring and evaluation mechanism seems to be at odds with its principles. Yet, the GCTF members could agree to a 'monitoring light' mechanism which entails that voluntary reporting on how states have implemented the GCTF framework documents in their national policies, becomes a standard item on the agenda of the Coordinating Committee's meetings. In addition, independent consultants could be commissioned on a regular basis to conduct evaluation studies.

## ***Recommendation 2: Strengthening commitment***

To ensure states stay committed to the GCTF and to its technical and action-oriented approach, it will be necessary, on the one hand, to diversify the focus of the Ministerial Meetings and Coordinating Meetings, and on the other hand to be more creative in the set-up of events. One could, for instance, lower the frequency of the Ministerial meetings to a meeting every two years or alternate between Ministers of Foreign Affairs and line Ministers on, for instance social affairs, education, or youth affairs, or by bringing together national CT coordinators. Instead of using the Ministerial Meetings to officially endorse the framework documents that are presented, the Ministerial Meetings could also focus more on the development of long-term visions with multi-annual working plans.

The set-up of Working Group meetings or expert meetings could furthermore be more creative by championing meaningful engagement and input, for instance, through the use of scenario-based discussions or table-top exercises. Lessons learnt from the Covid-19 period and the

proliferation of online working forms, could allow for diversity in the set-up of meetings, offering the opportunity to bring in a wider variety of experts and civil society representatives to the discussion in online or hybrid settings. This set up will not only increase cost and effect, but it could also ensure that relevant stakeholders remain part of the consultations and good practices exchange, as thresholds to attend meetings are lowered. This way one can avoid that the GCTF turns into just another diplomatic forum.

### ***Recommendation 3: Enhance the legitimacy of the GCTF***

The legitimacy discussion is related to the authoritative position held by the GCTF in the CT landscape, whilst lacking legitimate representation of countries or a model of accountability regarding international law and human rights obligations.

The positions of the various GCTF members regarding expanding the membership of GCTF beyond its thirty Members are very diverse and opposing. The intermediate solution would be, as mentioned above, to at least expand the membership of the regional working groups. To enhance the legitimacy of the GCTF with respect to the adherence to international law and human rights obligations, it is worth considering the possibility to appoint a special rapporteur. Such a position could improve the coherence in policy and language regarding human rights obligations throughout the various GCTF activities. The model of special rapporteurs could also be used in relation to other cross-cutting themes, such as gender issues, youth affairs, and privacy and data protection, thereby also enhancing the coherence of policies.

### ***Recommendation 4: Strengthening relations and meaningful engagement***

To address the lack of inclusiveness, a transparent and general vetting mechanism could be set up to facilitate accreditation for NGOs, in addition to the ad hoc clearance procedure. Such a vetting mechanism already exists with other international organisation. By setting up such a system, it can be possible to build a community of experts and civil society representatives with whom a meaningful engagement takes place.

It might also be worth considering establishing a civil society focal point or mailbox function for unsolicited input on initiatives, provided there is transparency in the agendas, and events and initiatives are publicly and timely announced on the website.

Ensuring that civil society representatives from non-Member State regions or grass root organisations are present during discussion can make a valuable contribution to the exchanges of experiences. Further, it is recommended that a dedicated fund is set up to sponsor participation of experts and NGOs from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, civil society organisations can organise themselves in a civil society organisation (CSO) coalition for the GCTF, which could focus on cross-cutting themes, such as youth, gender, human rights, peace building, the nexus between P/CVE and development aid, and the nexus between CT and P/CVE and humanitarian aid or management of refugees. It would also be recommended that such an initiative would be welcomed by the GCTF members, as it does not only contribute to meaningful engagement, but would simultaneously enhance the legitimacy of the Forum.

---

<sup>41</sup> The DAC List of official development assistance (ODA) recipients shows all countries and territories eligible to receive ODA. These consist of all low and middle income countries based on gross national income (GNI) per capita as published by the World Bank, with the exception of G8 members, EU members, and countries with a firm date for entry into the EU. The list also includes all of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as defined by the UN.

To conclude it is fair to say that the GCTF has passed its experimental phase of getting used to a certain way of operating and organising events and it is thus no longer a new kid on the block in the CT landscape that can pretend that the rules in the international arena do not apply to it. During this last decade, the informal GCTF has developed into an authoritative body that guides states and other international organisations in their policy development.<sup>42</sup> In that sense, an interviewee argued, “the GCTF is a norm setting platform, in anything but name!”<sup>43</sup> In other words, it is time to outgrow the adolescence phase, and step up to its potential to remain relevant and fit for purpose.

---

42 In addition to the example the GCTF sets for other organisations in developing policies, and the cross-references made to GCTF documents in the documents and decisions adopted or developed by other international organisations, other countries that are not members of the GCTF also take inspiration from the policies developed by the GCTF. Although the interviewees representing GCTF members were not able to point to specific national policies that have been amended or implemented following the endorsement of GCTF policies, the GCTF documents nevertheless play a guiding role in focusing the governments attention to specific developments.

43 This follows from the interviews conducted for “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, p. 34.

## Bibliography

- Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, Working Group of Experts on Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime, “Guidelines on the Links between Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime”, 17 November 2020, CDCT-TTOC (2019) 01 rev 9.
- Counterterrorism Executive Directorate, “Technical Guide to the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) and Other Relevant Resolutions”, 2017, available at: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CTED-Technical-Guide-2017.pdf>.
- OHCHR, “Guidance to States on Human Rights Compliant Responses to the Threat posed by Foreign Fighters”, 2018, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/newyork/Documents/Human-Rights-Responses-to-Foreign-Fighters-web%20final.pdf>.
- OHCHR, “Human Rights Principles Applicable to Watchlisting”, United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 2020, See website: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Terrorism/Pages/Research-papers-and-Inputs.aspx>.
- UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, “Report of 21 July 2021”, UN Docs S/2021/655, available at: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2021\\_655\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_655_E.pdf).
- UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while countering terrorism”, 22 August 2019, UN Doc A/74/335.
- Van Ginkel, Bibi, “Evaluation of the ‘5P-ambitions’ of the co-chairmanship of the Netherlands of the Global Counterterrorism Forum: questions regarding coherence, relevance, and effectiveness”, The Global Connection – Platform for Shared Security, available at: <https://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/in-uitvoering/publicaties/deelstudies/2021/10/06/het-global-counterterrorism-forum>.

## About the Author

---

### **Bibi van Ginkel**

Dr. Bibi van Ginkel, LLM, is the owner and founder of The Glocal Connection – Platform for Shared Security, a consultancy firm dedicated to facilitating multistakeholder engagement on highly sensitive security issues with a special focus on rule of law and prevention solutions. She is also an Associate Fellow of ICCT, for which she worked as a Senior Research Fellow prior to starting her own organisation. Van Ginkel's expertise spans the wide variety of focus areas of counterterrorism (CT) and countering and preventing violent extremism (CPVE), from rule of law issues to trends and threat developments, CT and CVE response policies, and prevention strategies in combination with development-aid initiatives. She has published extensively on these topics. In addition, she has a solid experience in providing policy advice and training. She has established close working relationships with the UN, the EU and other international organisations, as well as with government agencies and civil society actors. She has also worked as a senior consultant to United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED) on a project developing global guidelines to facilitate the collection of information and evidence by military and other relevant criminal law actors within a rule-of-law framework. Recent highlights are the evaluation project on EU Counter Terrorism Policies, the development (as implementing partner) of the GCTF Abuja Recommendations, the Glion Memorandum, and the Addendum to The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism: focus on criminal justice.

---

**International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)**

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: [info@icct.nl](mailto:info@icct.nl)

[www.icct.nl](http://www.icct.nl)