Enhancing international cooperation: Bulgaria’s role in the United Nations counter-terrorism initiatives

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Abstract: The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) spearheads a unified approach across the UN to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism globally. Despite the emergence of new challenges, including the misuse of new technologies by terrorist groups, the UNOCT has amplified its efforts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus remains on promoting multilateral cooperation, with the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) playing a pivotal role in fostering international cooperation against terrorism. This paper delves into Bulgaria’s contributions and role in these initiatives, emphasizing its alignment with the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

Keywords: UNOCT, UNCCT, Multilateral Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism, Violent Extremism, Bulgaria, Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

1. Introduction

The global arena of counter-terrorism has witnessed a paradigm shift, necessitating a robust, collective approach to mitigate the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism and violent extremism. The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) has emerged as a linchpin, orchestrating a harmonized strategy across the United Nations, aiming to thwart the pervasive threats of terrorism and violent extremism that permeate borders. The UNOCT has not only been pivotal in consolidating efforts amidst the traditional challenges of terrorism but has also been agile in responding to emerging threats, notably the exploitation of new technologies by terrorist entities and the exacerbation of challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bulgaria, situated in a geopolitically significant region, has been an active participant and contributor to global counter-terrorism initiatives, aligning its national security strategies and policies with international efforts. The nation has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to international counter-terrorism efforts by ratifying conventions against terrorism and being a party to all twelve UN conventions against terrorism. [1] Furthermore, Bulgaria has actively engaged in counter-terrorism initiatives at various international forums, including the UN, EU, and NATO, thereby contributing to a unified approach towards global counter-terrorism. [2]

This paper seeks to delve into the intricacies of Bulgaria’s contributions and role in UN counter-terrorism initiatives, with a particular emphasis on its alignment with the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Through a meticulous exploration of Bulgaria’s involvement, collaborations, and challenges in the global counter-terrorism landscape, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the nation’s stance and strategies in the international counter-terrorism domain.

2. The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT)

2.1 Overview and Objectives of UNOCT

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) stands as a pivotal entity in the global fight against terrorism and violent extremism, leading and coordinating a comprehensive approach across the United Nations. The UNOCT is committed to assisting Member States in achieving a world free from terrorism by adapting and innovating, especially in the face of new and complex challenges, such as the misuse of emerging technologies by terrorist groups and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UNOCT was established on 15 June 2017 through the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 71/291, with Mr. Vladimir Voronkov appointed as its first Under-Secretary-General. The creation of the office is a pivotal institutional reform undertaken by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, aimed at enhancing the capability of the United Nations to assist Member States in implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. [3]

The UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), established in 2011, serves as the main capacity-building arm of UNOCT, providing capacity-building assistance to Member States through counter-terrorism projects and programmes globally in line with the four pillars of the Global Strategy. [4]

2.2 UNOCT’s Five Main Functions

The UNOCT is mandated to:

1. Provide leadership on the General Assembly counter-terrorism mandates entrusted to the Secretary-General across the United Nations system.
2. Enhance coordination and coherence across the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact entities to ensure the balanced implementation of the four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.
5. Ensure that due priority is given to counter-terrorism across the United Nations system and that the important work on preventing violent extremism is firmly rooted in the Strategy. [5]

2.3 The Role of UNOCT in Global Counter-Terrorism

- **Border Security:** The UNOCT recognizes that terrorists often target the weakest links of border infrastructure. Thus, implementing international standards and good practices of sound, modern integrated, and cooperative border management is crucial to halt terrorist and illegal trafficking flows.
- **Foreign Terrorist Fighters:** Addressing the cross-border challenges posed by returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters and their dependents requires international cooperation and the exchange of good practices for principled prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration.
- **Victims of Terrorism:** The UNOCT stands in solidarity with victims of terrorism worldwide, advocating for the protection of their rights and recognizing the crucial role they can play in preventing terrorism and building stronger societies.
- **Countering Terrorist Travel:** The UNOCT identifies the detection and disruption of the travel of terrorists and...
other high-risk criminals as a priority for the international community.

- **Gender Equality**: The UNOCT emphasizes the importance of mainstreaming gender considerations into counter-terrorism work to make preventive and responsive efforts more effective and to better understand the drivers of radicalization.

- **Sports and Security**: Recognizing the transformative power of sports and its positive values, the UNOCT underscores the importance of addressing conditions conducive to terrorism by building community cohesion and resilience while ensuring the security of major sporting events.

- **Cybersecurity**: The UNOCT acknowledges the challenges presented by the misuse of new technologies by terrorists, emphasizing that working together to prevent, protect, and mitigate cyber damage must be a priority.

- **Human Rights**: The UNOCT asserts that protecting human rights tackles the root causes of terrorism, as terrorism thrives on divisions and represents the denial and destruction of human rights.

- **Terror Financing**: Addressing the evolving threat of terrorism financing comprehensively, while upholding human rights and building multidimensional partnerships, is a priority of the UNOCT’s global programme.

- **Youth Engagement**: The UNOCT recognizes that terrorist groups target young people, exploiting real or perceived grievances and using manipulative messages, including through new technologies, to increase their reach across borders and cultures. [6]

### 2.4 Challenges and Developments in UNOCT Initiatives

The UNOCT has navigated through significant counter-terrorism milestones and achievements in 2022, despite the emergence of new and complex challenges, such as those arising from the use of new and emerging technologies by terrorist groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the global counter-terrorism landscape, prompting the UNOCT to scale up its efforts and adapt its strategies to help Member States navigate through these challenges while maintaining a focus on promoting multilateral cooperation. [7]

### 3. Bulgaria’s Role in UN Counter-Terrorism Initiatives

Bulgaria has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to global counter-terrorism initiatives, particularly under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN). The nation’s role in these initiatives is multifaceted, involving compliance with international resolutions, active participation in assessment visits, and the implementation of strategies that align with global counter-terrorism objectives.

#### 3.1 Engagement with UN Counter-Terrorism Bodies

In April 2022, Bulgaria welcomed a delegation from the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and various international organizations, including the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), to assess the nation’s adherence to Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) and other pertinent resolutions.

The visit facilitated an in-depth dialogue between Bulgarian entities and international experts, addressing aspects such as human rights in counter-terrorism measures and the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism. [8]

Bulgaria’s engagement with UN bodies and its willingness to undergo assessments underscore its alignment with the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and its commitment to international cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts.

### 3.2 National Strategies and International Compliance

Bulgaria has enacted comprehensive counter-terrorism legislation and developed strategies to counter radicalization, reflecting a robust national framework to combat terrorism and violent extremism.

The nation’s strategies and legislative frameworks not only address domestic counter-terrorism needs but also ensure compliance with international standards and resolutions, thereby contributing to global counter-terrorism efforts.

For instance, Bulgaria has adopted amendments to the Measures against the Financing of Terrorism Act, introducing a direct application of United Nations sanctions under the UN Security Council ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaeda sanctions regime. [9]

### 3.3 Bilateral and Multilateral Counter-Terrorism Collaborations

Beyond its collaboration with UN bodies, Bulgaria has engaged in bilateral and multilateral counter-terrorism collaborations, including with the United States and European entities.

Bulgaria and the United States have strengthened counter-terrorism cooperation through the Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Working Group established in 2015, which facilitated the signing of a memorandum for continuous training of Bulgarian counter-terrorism special forces. Bulgaria has previously presented the US with a comprehensive list of priorities and projects to enhance bilateral cooperation in the fight against violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighters. Additionally, Bulgaria proposed to create a regional research and analysis network on foreign terrorist fighters and radicalization to violence, envisioning a network of NGOs, academics, and security services from throughout the Balkans. What’s more, Bulgaria is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and has provided weapons and munitions to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region’s Peshmerga. [10]

In addition to its bilateral collaborations, Bulgaria has also been an active participant in regional counter-terrorism initiatives, notably the Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism initiative (WBCTI). The Western Balkans, identified as a region susceptible to the rise of violent extremism, has been a focal point for counter-terrorism efforts, not only for the stability of the region but also considering the implications for the EU’s internal security.

The WBCTI, supported by Bulgaria among other EU Member States, aims to enhance efficiency in countering terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Balkans by integrating existing initiatives led by EU stakeholders and international strategic partners in the region. This initiative seeks to ensure a complementary approach, considering available funding and planned activities, and involves collaboration among EU Member States, the European Commission (EC), European External Action Service (EEAS), Europol, and the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator.

Bulgaria, as one of the 17 Member States involved in the informal Working Group on WBCTI, has actively participated in developing and supporting the initiative. The country has been involved in discussions and development of the Integrative Plan of Action (iPA), contributing to identifying needs and priorities in countering terrorism and violent extremism in the Western Balkans. [11]

All in all, Bulgaria has been recognized for its robust counter-terrorism efforts, such as thwarting terrorist transit through its borders and maintaining a low threat level within its territories.

While these efforts address mostly Bulgaria’s national security concerns, they also contribute to wider regional and global security, thereby indirectly supporting UN counter-terrorism initiatives by mitigating broader threats.
3.4 Addressing Global Counter-Terrorism Challenges

Bulgaria’s counter-terrorism efforts, both on a national and international scale, address various challenges, including the transit of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, terrorist financing, and radicalization.

By addressing these challenges through its national strategies and international collaborations, Bulgaria contributes to alleviating global counter-terrorism challenges, aligning its efforts with the objectives of UN counter-terrorism initiatives.

4. The UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) and Bulgaria’s Strategic Alignment with Global Counter-Terrorism Objectives

4.1 Overview of UNCCT’s Mission and Objectives

The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) operates under the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and serves as a pivotal entity in the global fight against terrorism. The UNCCT was established to provide capacity-building support for Member States and to enhance the implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The Centre is committed to fostering international cooperation, providing support to Member States in achieving counter-terrorism objectives, and facilitating the delivery of counter-terrorism-related mandates. The UNCCT’s vision encompasses a balanced implementation of the four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which are: addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; preventing and combating terrorism; building states’ capacity and bolstering the role of the UN; and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law. [12]

4.2 Bulgaria’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Its Alignment with UNCCT Objectives

Bulgaria, as a member of the United Nations, aligns its national counter-terrorism strategies and policies with the broader objectives and initiatives of the UNCCT, even though specific collaborations or contributions might not be explicitly detailed. The UNCCT emphasizes a comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism, which is mirrored in Bulgaria’s own multi-faceted strategy. For instance, the UNCCT’s commitment to addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism aligns with Bulgaria’s efforts to mitigate factors that might foster terrorism within its borders and in the surrounding region. This includes efforts to counteract radicalization, disrupt terrorist networks, and prevent the financing of terrorism, which are crucial aspects of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy.

Moreover, the UNCCT’s focus on building states’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism resonates with Bulgaria’s national security strategy, which underscores the importance of enhancing institutional capabilities, fostering international cooperation, and ensuring the effective exchange of information with international partners. Bulgaria’s strategy also emphasizes the importance of respecting human rights and the rule of law in counter-terrorism efforts, which is a fundamental principle of the UNCCT and the broader UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

4.3 The Symbiotic Relationship between National and Global Counter-Terrorism Efforts

While specific instances of Bulgaria’s direct involvement with the UNCCT might be limited in available documentation, the alignment of Bulgaria’s national counter-terrorism strategy with the objectives of the UNCCT underscores a symbiotic relationship. Bulgaria’s efforts to fortify its national security, enhance its counter-terrorism capabilities, and foster international cooperation not only serve its national interests but also contribute to the global counter-terrorism architecture, of which the UNCCT is a crucial component.

In essence, by bolstering its national counter-terrorism framework and aligning its strategies with the four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Bulgaria indirectly supports and contributes to the UNCCT’s global initiatives. This alignment and indirect contribution are vital in ensuring a unified and robust global response to the evolving threats of terrorism and violent extremism.

5. Conclusion

Bulgaria’s engagement in global counter-terrorism, particularly through its alignment with the United Nations’ initiatives, underscores a pivotal commitment to fortifying international security frameworks against the pervasive threats of terrorism and violent extremism. While direct involvements in specific projects like those under the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) might be underdocumented, Bulgaria’s adherence to and implementation of strategies resonant with the UN’s overarching counter-terrorism objectives are evident.

The nation navigates through its unique geopolitical and security challenges, contributing to the collective global effort, and embodying the essence of multilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism. Future endeavors may seek to enhance transparency and documentation of specific collaborative initiatives, thereby enriching the discourse and evaluation of global counter-terrorism efforts.

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