



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

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Terrorism**

**Annual High-Level Conference of the Counter Terrorism Preparedness Network (CTPN):
Misinformation, Disinformation and Extremism**

19 April 2023, Washington D.C.

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

I would like to sincerely thank the Counter Terrorism Preparedness Network for inviting me to address you today.

I know what many of you are thinking: the United Nations has an office of counter-terrorism!?!

Yep. And the idea for it was born right here in Washington, D.C. before being taken up in New York! But more about that later.

Let me first address something that preoccupies the Member States of the United Nations, as well as to the Secretary-General and the senior leadership and staff of the Organization, both in headquarters and around the world. It's the interconnections between misinformation, disinformation and violent extremism.

Not that misinformation or disinformation are a new concern. States have long enacted measures to address the propagation of falsehoods, defamation, fraud, and perjury, for example.

What is unprecedented today is how innovative technologies have enabled the dissemination of vast amounts of information to widespread audiences at unparalleled speed.

Winston Churchill famously quipped that “a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.” And he said that long before the Internet, or the recent exponential growth in artificial intelligence.

The latter prompted leading technologists to issue an open letter in March calling for a pause on generative AI experiments, asking, among other things, whether we should “let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?”

The proliferation of information that is verifiably false not only creates -- but also exacerbates -- serious challenges in international peace and security. Such information is used to incite ethnic tensions and violence, spread hateful content about minority groups and cast doubt over the integrity of governance and democratic processes around the world.

The very reputation of the United Nations has also been tainted by misinformation and disinformation, which is all the more concerning in conflict and fragile contexts where they may have an impact on the safety and security of peacekeepers, humanitarian aid workers and other UN personnel.

While misinformation and disinformation can be spread through all forms of media, we are particularly concerned about its ability to spread widely, quickly and without formal fact-checking and verification in online and digital contexts.

Member States are also increasingly concerned over the misuse, by terrorist and violent extremist groups, of the Internet, social media, gaming platforms and related online spaces to spread misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, as well as to fundraise, communicate, plan for, and even conduct cyber-attacks.

Algorithms used by social media platforms seem to amplify violent extremist content and favour it over verified accurate information. The result is that opportunities are inadvertently created for groups and individuals espousing violent extremist views who exploit this phenomenon to publish unverified, inaccurate information, spreading propaganda and reaching new audiences for recruitment purposes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The spread of misinformation and disinformation, as related to violent extremism conducive to terrorism, requires comprehensive, coordinated, and multi-stakeholder approaches, such as the one CTPN represents.

Such approaches, as recognized by the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, must be fully compliant with international law, including international human rights law. They must promote, protect, and respect the rights of individuals to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information.

Responses to misinformation and disinformation must not infringe on fundamental rights and freedoms. The human rights that people have offline must also be protected online.

Important global initiatives to counter misinformation and disinformation that may fuel violent extremism conducive to terrorism have been undertaken to that effect.

One such example, that many of you may have heard of, is the Christchurch Call to Action to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online in a way that promotes human rights and a free, open, and secure Internet.

Another initiative is the Global Internet Forum to Counter-Terrorism, which brings together the technology industry, government, civil society, and academia to foster collaboration and information-sharing to counter terrorist and violent extremist activity online.

The United Nations has also taken important steps against misinformation and disinformation. Tech against Terrorism, which was launched and is supported by the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, plays a role in supporting the global tech industry to tackle terrorist exploitation of digital technologies.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Secretary-General launched "Verified," a global initiative to provide accessible, accurate and timely information about COVID-19 based on trusted, credible messengers that clearly communicate scientific advice related to the pandemic, proactively pre-bunking possible mis- or disinformation.

Verified also runs the #PledgeToPause campaign, encouraging people to pause and consider the validity of the information they share. The propensity to share mis- or disinformation is reduced when people are prompted to take a moment to reflect before disseminating information.

Other initiatives and good practices also exist across the United Nations system.

For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is conducting a media and information literacy training to empower people to think critically about information and the use of digital tools.

In August last year, the United Nations Secretary-General released a report on countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The report contains concrete proposals for states and private sector companies to consider as they address the challenge of misinformation and disinformation.

Looking forward, the Secretary-General proposed in his report on Our Common Agenda the holding of a Summit of the Future to forge a new global consensus on what our future should look like. One of the tracks leading to the Summit, which is planned for September 2024, is about information integrity, including how mis- and disinformation are impacting progress on global issues.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to focus on some of the work undertaken by UNOCT to counter misinformation and disinformation related specifically to the spread of violent extremism conducive to terrorism. The Office was created by the Secretary-General in 2017 as one of his first reforms of the United Nations.

UNOCT has been entrusted with five main functions.

First, to provide leadership across the United Nations system on General Assembly counter-terrorism mandates.

Second, to enhance coordination and coherence across the United Nations system to ensure the balanced implementation of the four pillars of the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which the General Assembly adopted by consensus on the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

Third, to strengthen the delivery of United Nations counter-terrorism capacity-building assistance to Member States.

Fourth, to improve visibility, advocacy and resource mobilization for the UN counter-terrorism efforts.

And fifth, to 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.

As part of its activities, UNOCT has developed targeted responses to address misinformation and disinformation as they relate to violent extremism conducive to terrorism.

For instance, our Global Programme to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism supports Member States to design comprehensive, whole-of-society strategic communication plans to counter misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and terrorist narratives.

As part of such activities, UNOCT has delivered capacity-building support to more than 1,800 officials in 38 Member States.

The Programme has also trained government officials, journalists, media representatives and young activists in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Uganda, Iraq, and Sudan, including through a unique peer-to-peer approach that supports young people to amplify their voices as agents of change in prevention and peace efforts.

The Programme has also equipped young religious leaders and young media makers with communication skills to promote interreligious understanding, debunk hateful discourse, and counter-terrorist narratives. Over 2021-2022, 24 young people were engaged to develop their

own social media campaigns to prevent hateful narratives and promote social cohesion, reaching over 1.1 million individuals.

In 2020, UNOCT established a Programme Office in Doha, in partnership with the State of Qatar. The Office hosts our International Behavioral Insights Hub, a global platform for knowledge and good practices on behavioral insights to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism, which includes a professional network of experts, academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

Similar to the #PledgeToPause campaign that used choice architecture to increase the quality of information that people share, our Behavioral Insights Hub can support the development of a new repertoire of responses that applies behavioral insights to counter misinformation and disinformation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I mentioned earlier, countering misinformation and disinformation in the context of violent extremism conducive to terrorism requires comprehensive, coordinated, and multi-stakeholder approaches. This can only be achieved through strong political commitment and multilateral cooperation.

From our part, UNOCT will continue to work with Member States and other stakeholders, including in forging new and strengthening existing partnerships to that effect, including the CTPN.

Thank you.