

# Decolonizing Counter-terrorism: Opportunities Within Transnational Governance

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## Decolonizing Counter-terrorism: Opportunities Within Transnational Governance

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TARIQ AZEEZ, APR 25 2022

Where were you on 9/11? This question, a common refrain amongst people the world over captures the jarring impact the events of Sept 11, 2001 had on the global consciousness. However tragic the events were, the ensuing decades, encapsulated in the slogan, the 'War on Terror', have left an indelible mark on our social and political consciousness, and innumerable casualties; targets of the 'war', in both the Global South and the West (Graff, 2021). Neo-colonial in nature, the 'war on terror' led to deadly conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, military interventions in numerous other states, weakened institutions and securitized individuals from 'suspicious' backgrounds (Graff, 2021). Two decades later it is imperative to take stock of efforts to counter terrorism and to understand how global governance has evolved in the intervening years.

In this regard, the increased role of transnational governance in an ever-globalizing world appears to be a key factor in coordinating counter-terrorism efforts. Under the helm of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy this paper seeks to understand how specific aspects of transnational governance, namely transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks have contributed to efforts to decolonize counter-terrorism while tackling the underlying drivers of violent extremism. In particular, these aspects of transnational governance will be explored through the lens of prevention of violent extremism (PVE) frameworks, as an alternative paradigm to state-centric interpretations of counter-terrorism. It will be demonstrated how through the use of transnational public-private partnerships, the state is gradually disaggregating, making space for non-state actors to assert their interpretations of reality, specifically those actors based in communities targeted by PVE programs. Knowledge networks contribute by disaggregating knowledge production and including a multiplicity of social, economic, political and cultural perspectives previously unaccounted for. These aspects of transnational governance will be explored through the cases of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and the Resolve Network, as examples of a transnational public-private partnerships and a knowledge network respectively. Thus, the research question of this essay will be conceived as the following: Can transnational governance in regard to counter-terrorism efforts be decolonized?

### The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy

As it stands, transnational governance is uniquely positioned to respond to the challenges of counter-terrorism. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006, broadened support for the UN counter-terrorism from under the sole purview of the UN Security Council which had dominated it since 2001, to the whole Assembly (Rosand, Millar & Ipe, 2008). Moreover, the Assembly for the first time agreed to address conditions which were conducive to the spread of terrorism, as a central part of a strategy to prevent terrorism. This key provision took the UN Strategy beyond the Security Council's emphasis on punitive security measures, incorporating multidimensional factors such as socioeconomic, political and cultural dimensions into an understanding of violence prevention strategies (Rosand, Millar & Ipe, 2008). The UN Strategy also made respect for human rights and promotion of the rule of law a core part of its implementation, including it as one of its core pillars. Furthermore, and central to its relevance to transnational governance, the UN Strategy acknowledged the wide variety of stakeholders, beyond the state, that are required to attain a measure of effectiveness, with particular attention to the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) (Rosand, Millar & Ipe, 2008). The four pillars of the UN

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Strategy are (Karlsrud, 2017):

1. Tackling conditions conducive to terrorism
2. Preventing and combating terrorism
3. Building countries' capacity to combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard
4. Ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism.

## Transnational security governance

Regarding the relevance of the Strategy in transnational governance, it is relevant to cite literature on transnational security governance. Such literature is crucial as it provides a framework for analyzing security cooperation external to the state (Hollis, 2010). Webber et al. provide a concise definition of security governance in this regard stating it is, "the [...] management of issues by multiple and separate authorities, the interventions of both public and private actors, formal and informal arrangements, in turn structured by discourse and norms, and purposefully directed toward particular policy outcomes" (Webber et al., 2004, p. 4). Of note is that this definition encapsulates non-state actors as well, an area of governance historically off-limits when it comes to issues of security and defense policy (Hollis, 2010). Kirchner and Sperling contribute by theorizing that state authority is being diluted due to the diffusion of authority away from the state, the obsolescence of traditional alliances, a broader concept of security and the rise of alternative forms of security governance such as transnational public-private partnerships (Hollis, 2010). Network literature contributed by Anne-Marie Slaughter suggests the state adapts to these changes by supporting connections between governmental subunits, thereby disaggregating while still maintaining authority (Slaughter, 1997). Thus sovereignty can be thought of as a catalyst for network innovation in light of growing interdependence (Hollis, 2010).

Transnational security governance is uniquely positioned as a development to respond to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century security threats. The formation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy invited the involvement of non-state actors to contribute to preventing violent extremism from taking place. Research on how communities act to prevent, contain, and bounce back from violent extremism demonstrate the broad range of actors that play a part, from social workers to schools, the local police, families (Abu-Nimer, 2018), businesses and religious associations (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016). When such actors succeed in coming together in trust-based networks, they are able to utilize a range of practical resources ranging from supporting someone with a job to offering religious counselling. However, for states to take advantage of this opportunity requires a paradigm shift from a traditional state-centric *realpolitik* perspective of security to a paradigm which embraces the involvement of public and private actors in collaborating to tackle the underlying drivers of violent extremism and terrorism.

## Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE)

Over the past fifteen years the shift towards this new paradigm cannot be described without an understanding of PVE. While not without its critics, the PVE framework brings together international organizations, states and NGOs to develop a set of initiatives which provide a holistic approach to proactively deter individuals from adopting extremist outlooks (Schwartz, 2018). Interventions vary from countering extremist narratives, to strengthening social resilience, to providing individual support to reduce risks of radicalization. Actors prioritize the need for a more comprehensive approach than was utilized in the past, with a particular focus on connecting with communities and providing alternative religious discourses (Abu-Nimer, 2018). Moreover, they develop projects which contribute in a broad way to alleviating poverty, developing infrastructure, socioeconomic opportunities and democratic institutions. While funded projects may not be overtly PVE related, they may be directed towards development, state-building, displacement, with the expectation that the establishment of higher socioeconomic and political standards will contribute to a lower threat of violent extremism (Abu-Nimer, 2018). The following sections will elaborate on the manner in which PVE has been adopted to two aspects of transnational governance, namely transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks.

## Transnational Public-Private Partnerships in Action: The Case of GCERF

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Transnational public-private partnerships in this research is defined as the pooling of authority, competences and resources from both the public and private spheres, with an emphasis on stakeholder participation and voluntary cooperation towards a common set of policy problems (Sun, 2017). Transnational public-private partnerships constitutes a form of networked governance, based on transnational networks which cooperate in devolved and flexible ways. The hybridity of such arrangements are thought to be more conducive than intergovernmental regimes to norm diffusion across varied countries (Sun, 2017). Moreover Sun (2017) found knowledge production to be a key benefit of transnational public-private partnerships, with collaboration amongst stakeholders, assisting policymakers in developing their practical knowledge and thereby their understanding of appropriate policy responses.

This explains the involvement of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), as a PVE multistakeholder public-private partnership headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. At a fundamental level GCERF provides grants to community led PVE initiatives that are led by local partners. (Atamuradova & Zeiger, 2021). This funding recognizes the recognized challenges local communities have in accessing resources in three ways (Koser, & Cunningham, 2016). Firstly, local actors lack the appropriate networks to tap into funds. They frequently lack the awareness or ability to reach funding which is frequently disbursed through states, donor agencies or NGOs. Secondly, even when able to access funds, community initiatives often are not able or eligible to receive funds, due to varied restrictions and organizational requirements such as monitoring and evaluation programs. Thirdly, there exists a lack of trust between local communities and potential grantors, whether they be the state, NGOs or foreign donors. GCERF attempts to bridge these divides by providing blended funds, that is funds contributed by states and private actors, under the GCERF flag, an attempt to achieve neutrality and overcome the trust deficit (Koser, & Cunningham, 2016). Moreover, GCERF engages with a variety of stakeholders from national governments to civil society, the private sector and local donors. A recent example of this engagement was announced on Dec 6, 2021, when GCERF introduced the Global Action Platform (GCERF Outreach, 2021). This Platform aims to connect the 200+ grantees GCERF supports by enhancing capacity building, peer to peer learning, sharing of lessons learned and good practices.

GCERF as presented above is illustrative of the application of transnational public-private partnerships as a response to the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. By developing a hybrid, networked approach to PVE, GCERF has managed to transfer the aims of the Strategy into a public-private partnership which disaggregates the interests of states, engages a variety of actors and provides space for more community-oriented efforts, such as the involvement of civil society. Furthermore, the Global Action Platform if realized will constitute another vital component of transnational public-private partnerships; that is, to be a forum for the production of knowledge.

## **Knowledge networks in Action: The Case of the RESOLVE Network**

Knowledge networks are growing phenomenon in a world which increasingly relies on the internet and digital communications to respond to global policy dilemmas (Stone, 2015). Researchers and their organizations have reacted by becoming progressively transnational, responding to the needs of international organizations, governments and global initiatives which rely on data-gathering, evidence and analysis to interpret 'wicked' policy problems (Stone, 2015). The role of research-oriented institutions such as think tanks, NGOs and university institutes are validated in the policy network if and when they are incorporated into a transnational policy community and recognized by states or international organizations.

The Resolve Network responds to these needs by positioning itself as "a global consortium of researchers, research organizations, policymakers, and practitioners committed to empirically driven, locally defined research on the drivers of violent extremism and sources of community resilience" (Resolve, n.d.). The Network features the collaboration of a wide group of stakeholders, from academia to international organizations, think tanks and NGOs making it a hub analysis of the drivers of violent extremism. The aim of the network is to enhance and inform PVE policy, research and practice (Resolve Network, n.d). Research is disseminated through reports, factsheets, briefs, compendiums and policy notes. A focus on local initiatives is evident in their research publications on local peacebuilding approaches, recommendations for local actors and effort to connect local research organizations and researchers with PVE stakeholders (USIP, n.d.). In this regard their annual event, the RESOLVE Network Global Forum at the US Institute of Peace provides a pathway for multidisciplinary knowledge and innovation to be built into PVE paradigms.

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The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy recognizes the involvement of knowledge networks as being imperative to countering the complex and multifaceted policy challenges posed by an increase in violent extremism – through the linking of political, social, economic and security issues (Carayannis & Weiss, 2021). It is reinforced by numerous reports from the UN which identify knowledge management and a greater capacity to think as being crucial to the development of the UN as a whole, and peacebuilding operations in particular (Carayannis & Weiss, 2021). The Resolve Network is an example of a network bridging the knowledge gap, transferring knowledge and influence to policymakers irrespective of location. Moreover, the Network fulfills the mandate of the UN Strategy by framing debates on PVE, providing justifications for alternative approaches, and catalyzing local or global coalitions to support preferred policies and advocate change (Carayannis & Weiss, 2021). Additionally, the Resolve Network as an epistemic community for PVE research, is particularly well-equipped to influence policy developments related to the UN Strategy due to the fact that in times of uncertainty (i.e., when acts of terrorism are committed) the demand for the expertise it provides increases (Adler & Haas, 1992).

## Transnational Governance and the Decolonization of Counter-terrorism

The question now becomes, have these developments in transnational governance contributed to the decolonization of counter-terrorism? There are numerous perspectives on colonialism, and it would be outside the purview of this article to advance each and every one. Therefore, for the purposes of this research the perspective of Alatas (2000) will be employed. Alatas (2000) advanced the idea that there are six areas which define imperialism. This paper finds the following five to be relevant to this research: (1) Exploitation and control by the subjugating power over the people dominated. (2) There is a form of guidance, for whom the people dominated are considered a disciple within a tutelage system. Thus, they are organized towards certain goals laid out by the subjugating power. (3) The dominating power expects the dominated to conform to its organization and its rules. (4) The dominated people play a secondary role in setting up the rules and organization. (5) The existence of intellectual rationalization to civilize the people under subjugation. Next this research will compare the PVE initiatives established by transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks organizations through the lens of Alatas's colonial framework.

### *Successes*

I argue that there are several successes which have been achieved through the spillover of counter-terrorism efforts into transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks. Firstly, the greatest success may lie in the disaggregation of responsibilities from the state, particularly on areas of security, therefore lowering exploitation and control exerted on the Global South. The UN Strategy invited the collective support of the global community to be brought into a forum for solving the issue of violent extremism. Their support paved the way forward for states to no longer be the sole signifier of what constitutes terrorism. The intervening years have given rise to numerous non-state actors such as GCERF and the Resolve Network which have brought a multidisciplinary perspective to the issue of violent extremism. Their continued growth suggests they are successfully challenging state-centric notions of security, and while the state by no means has given up all authority on the subject, it now has to vie for attention with an array of networks and actors.

Secondly, I argue that the multiplicity of actors and perspectives decrease the dominance exerted by states. The recognition that no one driver for radicalization exists, but rather several possibilities; including a lack of socio-economic opportunities, subpar governance, marginalization, discrimination, violations of human rights and the rule of law and prolonged conflict, disrupts the securitized lens which has traditionally marginalized minority communities (Schwartz, 2018). The relevance of economic and social factors as being relevant to peace and security has been enabled due to epistemic communities which highlight relevant research (USIP, n.d.), and public-private partnerships which have recognized the central role of the community in combating violent extremism (GCERF Outreach, 2021). Moreover, engagement with civil society has lowered the hegemony of Western states in the area of counter-terrorism, offering pathways for their voices to be heard in global forums. Thus, transnational governance has to a certain extent reduced the imperialism inherent in counter-terrorism policies, disaggregated knowledge production to involve local actors and engaged with communities in a more inclusive way.

### *Challenges*

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However, this is not to say challenges do not exist. Asymmetric power is evident in all aspects of transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks. While there has been greater engagement with local communities, intellectual and monetary control rests firmly within transnational organizations, most of which are headquartered in Western states and composed of Western governments, donors and NGOs (Abu-Nimer, 2018). Moreover, there remains a distinct form of guidance which sees grantees follow criteria set out by the donor organization, in the case of GCERF, including conforming to organizational rules and expectations (GCERF, 2021a). While efforts are made to temper this through forums such as the Global Action Platform, in an effort to learn from grantees, there is no avoiding the asymmetric power at the core of the relationship.

In addition, Abu-Nimer (2018) suggests two further challenges to PVE programming which are applicable from a neo-colonial perspective. Firstly, the question of securitization of PVE. While GCERF and the Resolve Network have laid out inclusive visions for their programming, PVE efforts have been influenced by the contemporaneous counter-terrorism programming. Therefore, there exists a tension between PVE practitioners and communities regarding whether PVE programs are there to genuinely assist them, or surreptitiously surveil them. Secondly, PVE programs are externally imposed, and face a challenge in representing the communities' interests while simultaneously producing positive outcomes on their own indicators of success. GCERF and the Resolve Network attempt to counter this through a community inclusive approach however it is not known to what degree power differentials nullify community priorities.

## Conclusions

The question asked of this research was whether transnational governance in regard to counter-terrorism efforts can be decolonized? This research has demonstrated efforts being made in innovative areas of transnational governance, namely transnational public-private partnerships and knowledge networks to shift the paradigm of counter-terrorism towards a more inclusive, community-oriented model, through the use of PVE. The cases of GCERF and the Resolve Network successfully demonstrate the ongoing transformation of counter-terrorism programming through models which embrace a human security framework. That is to say, they promote people-centered, contextual and prevention-focused measures that reduce the likelihood of conflicts, overcome barriers to development and promote human rights for all (Abu-Nimer, 2018).

While such a framework is less colonial than a security-based framework, it would be hard to ignore the centrality of capital to these structures, which still flows predominantly from the West (GCERF, 2021b). As such, I argue that while not fulfilling all aspects of decoloniality, these organizations represent a new way of approaching counter-terrorism. A method which transforms counter-terrorism from the short-term to the long-term, incorporates deep-rooted drivers of extremism into frameworks and most importantly utilizes knowledge of the local community. Going forward it will be up to these transnational entities to continue to challenge the hegemonic, state-centric paradigm of counter-terrorism, advocating for an alternative, inclusive PVE agenda which pushes the boundaries of what it means to decolonize counter-terrorism.

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