BACKGROUND GUIDE: Multinational Terrorist Groups

READ TO DISCOVER:

1. What is terrorism and why is it so hard to define?
2. What difficulties face member countries in battling terrorist organizations?
3. What has the international community achieved regarding counterterrorism?

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The General Assembly (GA) is the main decision-making body of the United Nations. It includes all 192 member states; each member state has one vote. It is empowered through Article 11 of the UN Charter to “consider the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security.”

The GA addresses issues involving all aspects of the UN’s work, including humanitarian, peace and security, and human rights matters. It refers threats to peace to the Security Council for discussion. Resolutions, or peaceful decisions, produced by the GA are not binding—the GA cannot force countries to take action on any issue—but because they are supported by a majority of countries in the world, they are important international documents.

GA is divided into six committees, with each committee responsible for certain issues. It also meets as a whole. The sessions in which all members of the UN meet are called Plenary sessions.
INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in the United States. After that event, UN member states focused on ending terrorism worldwide. In early October 2001, more UN members met to address the problem of terrorism than for any other item on the organization’s agenda ever.1

But, countries still argue over what groups or individuals should be labeled “terrorists.” In many parts of the world, groups wage war within their countries, either to separate from the government or to change it entirely. Sometimes these people are treated unfairly by their government, and their struggles are justified. Other times, these groups use violence against both military and civilian targets, terrorizing innocent people to get what they want. These groups are terrorists. Often, though, it is difficult to tell the difference.

Today, several major countries – notably the United States and United Kingdom – are involved in the “war on terrorism,” a campaign to end global terrorist organizations. Other countries, such as Pakistan, Somalia and the Philippines, are struggling to put down terrorist groups within their borders. Terrorism is increasingly an international problem: large terrorist groups can stage attacks in several countries, or several groups can act as allies in a world-wide terrorist network. To fight global terrorism, the international community must address many complicated problems, such as state-sponsored terrorism and cooperation between states.

The UN is working to stop terrorism, and to ensure that member states act fairly when doing so. But many countries are afraid that these efforts will pose problems for national sovereignty—the right of a nation to control what happens within its borders. Also, the UN must find out how it can raise new funds for the war on terrorism and encourage countries to share their information on terrorists worldwide.

TERMS & CONCEPTS

“War on terrorism”: the name for the controversial campaign led by the United States and the United Kingdom in response to September 11, 2001

Sovereignty: the right of a country to govern itself and its territory without external control or interference from other countries

CRITICAL THINKING

Many countries lack the military resources to target terrorism within their borders. However, some foreign lead counter-terrorism missions have stirred violence and created tension between nations. When is it justifiable for a country to violate another country’s sovereignty?
BACKGROUND

Throughout history, governments have opposed groups that commit violence in support of extreme ideas. Sometimes these ideas are political and other times they are religious. Today, terrorist groups can attack targets around the world, or support one another in underground networks that span the globe. Every country in the world risks being affected by terrorism, even global terrorism, in one way or another.

Terrorism has been around for thousands of years, committed by both governments and non-state actors such as independent armed groups. Terrorism is an act of violence, usually in the public sphere, that is used to create fear among people in order to try to change public opinion or a government’s position on an issue. For example, government troops enter a town and burn a church down with the town’s occupants still inside to demonstrate what happens to those who disagree with the government’s policies. Or, a group of rebels may blow up an embassy in a country’s capital to protest another government’s influence in that country.

Often, people who resort to terrorist actions do not have the influence or power to cause change in a peaceful way (since they are often seen as too extreme), and feel that committing terrorist acts is the only way to reach their goal. Terrorist organizations take advantage of developmental problems. In places where people suffer from poverty, these groups attract followers by promising education, employment and the opportunity to serve a powerful political or religious cause. Essentially, these organizations claim to offer people a better life.

The existence of laws that regulate the access to primary education is another important factor. Many countries do not have laws that require students to attend school. Laws about education can also be weak. Even if there are laws requiring all children to attend school or education to be free, they are not always enforced.

People remain members of terrorist groups due to indoctrination, the persuasive teaching of extreme beliefs and ideologies. These teachings are so powerful that followers believe committing violence against innocent people is, under certain circumstances, morally acceptable. These teachings even convince followers to risk their lives for the group’s cause.

The strategies used by terrorist groups are often very simple. Unlike modern war, which is conducted with expensive equipment, armies and high-tech weapons, terrorism relies on very few resources. Terrorists are known to produce homemade bombs, steal guns and even perform “suicide missions” – setting off explosions to kill themselves and the people around them. Terrorist acts are not only difficult to prevent, but also very difficult to predict.

CRITICAL THINKING

How might economic development and improvement of living conditions help to fight terrorism?

TERMS & CONCEPTS

Indoctrination: teaching someone to accept extreme ideologies without questioning them.

Ideology: a set of ideas or beliefs.
Some terrorist groups have even tried to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) such as biological, chemical and nuclear devices. Biological weapons include diseases, which can be grown in makeshift laboratories and then released to infect civilians. Other weapons, such as nuclear warheads, cannot easily be produced, but may be stolen from governments around the world.

**Regional Terrorism**

In the past, terrorist groups have mainly been focused in specific regions. In the United Kingdom, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) carried out bombings and attacks throughout the second half of the 20th century. This violence was meant to help Northern Ireland gain independence from Britain. It was also due to a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the region. Similarly, an extremist group from the Russian region of Chechnya has pursued independence from Russia by committing violent acts against civilians. In 2004, this group took over a thousand students and teachers hostage, resulting in over two hundred deaths.3

In Latin America, groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) commit kidnappings and murder to draw attention to their radical ideas.4 And the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), once an independent radio station preaching the principles of Islamic conservatism to the poor of Indonesia, began to carry out violent attacks on civilians and western organizations in the mid-1990s. On October 12, 2002 the group committed a series of bombings in Bali which killed 202 civilians and tourists. Now the group extends throughout Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Brunei in addition to Indonesia demanding a united Islamic state across the territories and is extensively linked to Al-Qaeda.5

"The reach of multinational terrorist groups is very large. Al Qaeda was once believed to run active “cells,” or small groups, in over 60 countries (the current number is unknown).

In several regions, members in “sleeper cells” wait quietly, living normal lives for years at a time before they receive a call from the organization to commit a terrorist act.”

Terrorism affects all regions and nations. In 2009 the US Department of State recognized over 40 major terrorist groups throughout the world, and smaller terrorist organizations continue to appear.  

**Al-Qaeda and Global Terrorism**

Probably the most well-known terrorist group today is Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was formed to fight Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan in the 1980s. During the Gulf War, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, the group began to resist the presence of US troops in the Middle East.

In 1998, Osama bin Laden issued a formal declaration asking all Muslims to begin killing Americans. Even though these efforts go against the peaceful teachings of Islam, the group claims it fights for all Muslims in the region.

Today, travel and communication have become much easier, which helps terrorist groups work internationally. In areas such as Eastern Europe, countries often do not have enough resources to maintain strict border control. As a result, extremists and criminals can move between nations easily without being detected by governments.

Terrorists can inflict a lot of damage with very few resources by using cheap technology and simple tactics. On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered losses of between $100 billion and $300 billion. However, the total cost of the attack to Al Qaeda appears to have been somewhere around $500,000—a mere two to five percent of the financial damage to the US.

**The Self Defense Argument**

Terrorist attacks injure and kill many people. For example, more than two thousand people died as a result of the September 11 attacks. It is a government’s responsibility to protect its citizens. If a government believes that a terrorist group threatens its people, it may take police or military action to stop the terrorists from acting. Some believe that this force should only be used within a nation’s own borders.
Others now look to root out terrorist organizations in foreign countries as well, arguing that terrorists must be stopped regardless of their location. But it can become difficult to distinguish between battling terrorists and battling the nations that terrorists seek refuge in. In these cases, nations that harbor terrorists may have a secret alliance with the terrorist group, or they may not know how to locate and arrest terrorists within their borders. The right of one country to use military force against terrorists in another country continues to be a controversial issue.

**Complications in the War on Terror**

Critics argue that some governments use the war on terror as an excuse to suppress political opposition. For example, people who are being oppressed by their country might begin to battle the government for increased rights or independence. Without a conventional army or a lot of funding, these groups could be forced to use cheap technology and simple tactics. These groups would be called “freedom fighters” by their supporters, but “terrorists” by the government.

Human rights organizations warn that countries such as Russia, Uzbekistan and Egypt have been labeling opponents as “terrorists” or “terrorist supporters” in order to discredit them, without any basis in reality. The accusation of terrorism can even be used to attack or imprison people unfairly. Using the war on terrorism as an excuse to persecute innocent people may also make real terrorist groups more appealing to people victimized by their governments.

Other critics disagree with the concept of a “war on terrorism” as a whole. Terrorism arises in states that are underdeveloped and politically unstable, where people are vulnerable to extreme ideas. But because extreme ideas emerge all over the world, and because they are unique to every situation, there is no way to properly **eradicate** them.
In order to effectively combat terrorism, experts say, governments must be fair and cautious in their counter-terrorism efforts. Member states must look carefully at accusations of “terrorism,” and must address the violent acts in a just and rational way.

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

There are a number of international declarations that focus on terrorism. In 1963, the Convention on Offences and Certain Other Acts Committed on Board Aircraft addressed possible terrorist acts onboard airplanes. In 1979, the International Convention against the Taking of Hostages was written in New York, at a time when almost 70 Americans were being held hostage at the US Embassy in Iran.

The 1980s saw documents on even more airline precautions, protection for ships at sea and, for the first time, the protection of nuclear materials against terrorists. However, none of these measures dealt with specific multinational terrorist groups and how to stop them.

UN Action before September 11, 2001

In 1994, countries created the Declaration of Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism. First, the document encouraged countries to share information about global terrorist groups, giving every nation an opportunity to defend itself and to take action against terrorists within its borders. Second, it condemned countries that support terrorists. Finally, it established a basic definition of terrorism by outlawing “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes.”

Resolution 1373

In late September 2001, the Security Council created a more specific response to multinational terrorism in the form of Resolution 1373. This resolution called upon member states to stop funding terrorist organizations, as well as asking states to monitor bank accounts to determine which accounts were held by terrorist groups. Those accounts were to be “frozen” so that terrorists would not have access to their money.
All over the world, terrorist groups acquire money through criminal businesses (such as the sale of drugs or weapons) and donations from supporters. By freezing their funds, nations will limit the ability of multinational terrorist groups to act. However, many developing nations do not have the capacity to monitor all of their banks. Similarly, in many countries, it is illegal to interfere with bank accounts.

Resolution 1373 also established guidelines for dealing with the threat of terrorism, which required countries to stop supporting terrorist groups and encouraged them to strengthen laws about terrorism. The resolution also pushed member states make sure terrorists do not enter their borders.¹⁴

These goals, however, are difficult to achieve. Many countries already have problems associated with loosely controlled borders. Many nations also have little experience with creating laws that deal with the terrorist threat. Countries are often reluctant to share information, even information about dangerous multinational terrorist groups. Sharing knowledge of this kind might reveal secrets about national security or information-gathering practices.

Finally, Resolution 1373 called for the establishment of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, which would focus on issues that affect the growth of terrorist groups.¹⁵ Specifically, the committee helps governments find terrorists, improve border control and share information.¹⁶

On September 8, 2006, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which stressed the importance of the existing international counter-terrorism instruments. Member states pledged to consider becoming parties to them and implementing their provisions. Currently, the member states are negotiating a 14th international treaty, The Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, which would complement the existing framework of anti-terrorism instruments, and also build on the main principles present in recent anti-terrorism conventions.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

Delegates should address the following when creating draft resolutions:

- Define what “terrorism” is,
- Consider the roles of NGOs and IGOs (inter-governmental organizations) in creating and implementing anti-terrorism measures,
- Recommend ways that countries can fight terrorism within their borders,
- Suggest ways for countries to work together to ensure that terrorists do not cross borders,
- Setting up a secure and private system so that countries can share important information about terrorists, and
- Ensuring that countries do not use the “war on terrorism” as an excuse to stifle genuine political opposition.

Delegates should not only seek to address barriers that both their country and the international community face in counterterrorism, but also introduce new ideas to resolve these problems. Think critically about the conditions that aid terrorism such as poverty, poor governance, and inter-cultural tensions. The UN Security Council and its instruments have attempted to address these issues before, and now need to tackle counter-terrorism with innovative and unique ideas, while keeping countries’ sovereignty in mind.

When considering ideas, delegates should take into account the situation of the nations who are the most afflicted. Also consider the role of the Security Council. As delegates, you have flexibility in suggesting solutions to the Council and you are encouraged to look at problems and issues not discussed in this background guide.
**Questions to Consider:**

When researching your country’s policy, keep the following questions in mind to better understand your country’s position and possible solutions on the topic:

1. Has your country ever been attacked by terrorists?
2. Has your country been accused of supporting terrorism? If so, what measures has your government taken in response?
3. What anti-terror conventions and treaties has your country signed and ratified?
4. How does your country answer the self-defense argument? Should nations be allowed to act on their own to eliminate terrorist groups? Should nations be allowed to attack terrorist groups in other countries?
5. What could the UN do to help individual nations, particularly developing nations, write laws and create programs to combat terrorism within their borders?

**RESEARCH AID**

This is the official site for the Terrorism Research Center.

- **Terrorism Research Center**, [www.terrorism.com](http://www.terrorism.com)

The International Policy Group for Counter-Terrorism is a great site to find up-to-date news and research on counter-terrorism efforts worldwide.

- **International Policy Group for Counter-Terrorism**, [www.ict.org.il](http://www.ict.org.il)

Here you can find what the UN has done and is doing about Global Terrorism.


This the site for the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council, which will shed light on what the Security Council is doing to help.


At the US Department of State’s website you can find country by country reports on counter-terrorism progress.

The World Factbook by the United States Central Intelligence Agency will provide you with basic information about your country and hundreds of other countries around the world.


Similar to the CIA World Factbook, the British Broadcasting Company Country Profiles will also give you a historical, political, and economic background on your country and other UN member states:


**REFERENCES**