

Why the United States Must Maintain Its International Counterterrorism Leadership Role

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Brief Analysis

With revised U.S. and UN strategy documents in the works, the Trump administration needs to reaffirm America's role in shaping the counterterrorism agenda—and multilateral organizations are indispensable to this effort.

Last week, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from sixty-six international organizations, including three with vital counterterrorism missions. Soon after, Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned (<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/01/withdrawal-from-wasteful-ineffective-or-harmful-international-organizations>) that the administration would continue reviewing such organizations and severing ties with those it deems “wasteful, ineffective, or harmful,” in line with Trump’s February 2025 executive order (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-14199-withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-certain-united>) to that effect.

The new withdrawals and the implication that more will follow raise questions about whether the administration intends to continue America’s post-9/11 counterterrorism leadership role. The U.S. government and the United Nations will be issuing new CT strategy documents and revisions in the near future, and both represent important opportunities for the administration to clarify that it remains committed to setting the international counterterrorism agenda, including via multilateral organizations. Besides facilitating historic U.S. victories and

progress over the past twenty-five years, this multilateral approach will be essential going forward if President Trump hopes to achieve his goals against the Islamic State (IS), Iran-linked terrorism, and other threats—not just in the Middle East, but also in South America and beyond.

Targeting the Wrong Organizations

The administration did not provide further details on why it is cutting ties with the CT organizations named in the announcement: the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IJ), and the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). The United States helped create and lead each of these entities, and withdrawing from them will have a negative counterterrorism impact.

The most high-profile of the three organizations is the GCTF, which was established in 2011 and brings together civilian policymakers and practitioners from thirty-one countries and the European Union—including Russia and China, various nations on the frontlines of global terrorism (e.g., Kenya and Pakistan), and donor states in Western Europe and the Gulf that fund or provide technical assistance and training. In its early years, the GCTF facilitated in-depth discussions with Arab governments struggling to handle terrorist groups that rode the wave of the Arab Spring movements. The forum enabled Western donors and experts to advise these states on how to counter such groups without violating human rights. More recently, it served a similar function in Africa, where IS and al-Qaeda threats have grown exponentially.

The GCTF has also developed a useful body of best practices on broad criminal justice/rule of law approaches and narrower technical issues such as drone threats and prison radicalization. Among other benefits, this body of expertise furthers U.S. interests by helping allies address their own CT problems.

The IJ was founded as a counterterrorism training center for criminal justice practitioners, bringing GCTF best practices into action and proving extremely effective at advancing U.S. priorities. For example, at Washington's request, the IJ held the first **"battlefield evidence" forum (<https://theij.org/event/ij-battlefield-evidence-workstream-senior-leaders-seminar/>)** in 2019, training countries how to use information collected on the battlefield to aid civilian prosecutions of foreign terrorist fighters. Previously, many governments were reluctant to do so and lacked the requisite **know-how and legal authorities (<https://theij.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/USG-Non-Binding-Guiding-Principles-on-Use-of-Battlefield-Evidence-EN-1.pdf>)**. A year later, two multinational agencies—the EU's umbrella prosecution organization **Eurojust (<https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/publication/eurojust-memorandum-battlefield-evidence>)** and the UN Security Council's **Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/cted-launches-guidelines-battlefield-evidence>)**—followed the U.S./IJ example, issuing battlefield evidence guidelines of their own. By November 2025, Eurojust **assessed (<https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/publication/battlefield-evidence-key-insights-judicial-practitioners>)** that such evidence was being "increasingly used" in European terrorism and criminal cases. For its part, the IJ has conducted additional trainings on this issue over the years, including for the Iraqi judiciary.

The third organization, GCERF, was originally created to connect NGOs operating in high-risk terrorism environments with donors willing to underwrite CT programs. Today, it plays a pivotal role in addressing the thousands of IS family members detained at camps in northeast Syria. GCERF has facilitated the return, rehabilitation, and reintegration of women and children from the Roj and al-Hol camps to Iraq and elsewhere. Although the United States was the leading donor, providing a total of around \$36 million, GCERF raised nearly \$150 million from other governments and the private sector, demonstrating how U.S. seed funding can encourage partners to do their share.

As the creator and primary funder of these organizations, Washington has played an outsize role in setting their

priorities and holding them accountable for results. Withdrawing from them will degrade Washington's ability to ensure that international counterterrorism efforts align with U.S. priorities.

The Dangers of a U.S. Leadership Vacuum

A broader concern is that sweeping moves like last week's withdrawal announcement will signal partners that the Trump administration does not value multilateral engagement on some of the Middle East's most serious threats, including IS and Iran. Continuing this path would be a costly mistake that runs counter to the administration's stated objectives about meeting these threats.

Previously, the United States established and led two multilateral forums—the Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG) and the Countering Transnational Terrorism Forum (CTTF)—to mobilize international partners against Iran-linked terrorism, led by the State and Justice Departments and involving a range of other U.S. agencies. These are the sole bodies exclusively dedicated to addressing this threat, and more than thirty countries have joined—reflecting the global scale of the terrorist, financial, procurement, and logistical networks run by Iran and its top foreign proxy, Hezbollah. The LECG and CTTF have enabled CT practitioners across the world to compare tradecraft notes and develop effective strategies for meeting these complex threats, resulting in numerous designations, asset freezes, and law enforcement successes.

The State Department also coupled these forums with diplomatic campaigns to raise awareness about Iranian and Hezbollah threats and press for action. This approach yielded important results: nineteen governments have banned, designated, or otherwise restricted Hezbollah since 2019, while a growing number are taking similar steps against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. With these new tools, governments have ramped up law enforcement investigations against IRGC and Hezbollah networks operating in their territory.

Today, the LECG and CTTF are well positioned to help the Trump administration achieve its goal of countering Iranian and Hezbollah activities in the Western Hemisphere. Many South and Central American governments have been active members of these organizations for years, enabling Washington to bolster their capabilities against these threats. But without strong U.S. leadership and support, neither forum is likely to survive, and their demise would set back key administration priorities.

The same is true for the Global Coalition to Defeat IS, a ninety-member U.S.-led body that has played an invaluable role in combating global terrorist elements in Iraq and Syria for more than a decade. Although the administration has not mentioned disbanding or withdrawing from the coalition, its departure from other multilateral CT organizations with proven track records is sure to spook fellow member states. Even just downgrading America's level of involvement would be a serious blow to the coalition's effectiveness. Besides enabling countries to synchronize their efforts against a still-dangerous terrorist organization, the coalition has been a crucial forum for pressing countries to fund CT training programs, provide necessary equipment, repatriate IS detainees, and meet wider stabilization and humanitarian needs. More recently, the United States has used the coalition to refocus international attention on emerging IS threats in Africa.

Striking the Right Tone in CT Strategy Documents

To further reassure partners that America remains committed to both its international CT leadership role and the multilateral organizations that contribute so much to this mission, Washington should take advantage of two upcoming opportunities. First, the administration is due to release the next U.S. national counterterrorism strategy document in the near future. President Trump's [2018 strategy \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf) stated that the "United States will continue to lead and provide support to partners in the fight against terrorism," though it cautioned that America "need not sustain the primary responsibility for counterterrorism activities around the world." Although this is undoubtedly true, the

administration will have difficulty pressing other governments to ramp up their contributions if Washington dramatically decreases its own. Hence, the [new CT strategy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-trump-counterterrorism-strategy-should-say\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-trump-counterterrorism-strategy-should-say) should emphasize that multilateral organizations and engagement will remain an important part of the U.S. approach.

Second, the UN will conduct its ninth formal review of the [2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy \(https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy\)](https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy) this summer—the first such review during the current Trump administration. This provides another good forum to demonstrate that Washington will maintain its role in setting and shaping CT international norms.

Conclusion

At a time when upheaval in the Middle East is opening enormous opportunities and challenges on the counterterrorism front, the best way to “put America first” is by asserting U.S. leadership on these issues and using all pathways to push events in the desired direction—not withdrawing from organizations with proven track records of furthering American interests. The Trump administration has made clear that it sees little value in multilateral platforms as a means to accomplish its goals, but it has not yet outlined how it will replace such platforms or mitigate the clear negative consequences of disengaging from them.

Leveraging multilateral organizations to drive preferred agendas can be challenging, but this practice has repeatedly helped America build consensus and momentum on its priority issues over the years, particularly the threats posed by IS, Hezbollah, and Iran. In contrast, turning away from multilateral counterterrorism cooperation would cede this space to adversaries such as Russia and China, who hold membership in some of these organizations and would certainly take advantage of American uninterest to reshape international CT norms in line with their own priorities. That scenario alone should give the administration pause.

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Note: *One of the authors was deeply involved in establishing and helping oversee some of the organizations discussed in this PolicyWatch, while the other author participated in an expert capacity at meetings held by these organizations.* ❖

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