STUDY GUIDE

UNODC

Group of 20

Universidad de Navarra | FACULTAD DE DERECHO

University of Navarra
UNMUN
Model United Nations

WELCOME TO UNMUN 2026!

Esteemed delegates, it is with great honour that we welcome you to the UNODC committee of UNMUN 2026. This is a Junior committee for those in their final years of high school. This is a crucial period of your life–you taking the initiative to represent yourself, your high school, and your assigned nation at the University of Navarra is a grand step in a promising direction. No matter if this is your first MUN or already one of many, coming here may be a daunting leap. Nevertheless, we encourage you to make the most of your experience as much as you can. Connect with fellow high school students; familiarize yourself with your university role models. Cherish this opportunity of challenge and growth. Remember, an experience is what you make it out to be. As your chairs, we hope to help guide you along this journey.

Your presiding Chair will be Katrina Mae Galeos. Tri-national yet Filipina at her core, Katrina is the embodiment of International Relations in real life. Ironically, she studies the same thing, being a third-year student of International Relations + Geopolitics and Diplomacy at the University of Navarra. Katrina loves public speaking and being a delegate, having participated in several MUNs from Madrid to London. If you ever need tips on confidence, negotiating, or even broader themes like proactivity and having inter-cultural awareness, she is more than willing to help.

Your Co-chair will be Ákos Angyal. Also a third-year International Relations + Geopolitics and Diplomacy student here in Navarra, Ákos comes from Hungary! Do not let his nationality fool you though, because Ákos is trilingual and fluent in English, Spanish, and of course his mother tongue. From attending MUNs throughout high school, his love for MUN only ever grew when he started doing University-level editions. Ákos would like for all of the students to make the most of the conference, setting aside feelings of nervousness or stress; MUN can be tough, but the principal goal is to enjoy!

Your Secretary will be Grecia Aguila Calderón. A second-year International Relations + Geopolitics and Diplomacy student here, hailing from Peru, Grecia has demonstrated strong all-around skills when it comes to global affairs. Dedicated to her craft, she has been an active disciple of MUN since high school, continuing on to represent the University of Navarra in conferences internationally since her first year. Grecia expects a robust debate and for this to be a great learning experience for all delegates. She looks favourably upon the committee being a safe and fun space to engage in debate with an open mind, respect and commitment.

This committee plays a vital role in the affairs of the dark side of the world–organized crime, drugs, and terrorism. The Dais invites you to learn more about the great initiatives this committee has started. We expect the delegates to remain respectful and maintain a professional conduct in this debate, as the topics this committee deals with are highly sensitive and real. Of course, a debate is nothing without a resolve. Hence, we look forward to you all putting all that you have researched and discussed into good use. After getting a good grasp on all the

perspectives of the topic at hand, we implore you to collaborate efficiently and effectively with your peers, drafting resolutions that will both bandage recent scars and heal deep seated wounds. We may be young now, but we form the foundation of the next generation of internationalists.

We extend our hands to you all in case you have any questions, concerns, or comments at all. Feel free to reach out on any matter at hand–we would love to get in contact with you already! Here are our email addresses if you need anything.

Sincerely,

Your Dais
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About the Committee:

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the lead body in the United Nations Secretariat in charge of assisting member states in combating illicit drugs, transnational organised crime and terrorism. It was founded in 1997 as a result of merger of the United Nations Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention ("United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2019 Performance Assessment," n.d.).

Working in over 150 countries, UNODC builds international cooperation networks and provides reliable data and analysis to inform and aid global and national policymaking ("About UNODC," n.d.). Its mission is to tackle the world drug problem, prevent and counter corruption, promote fair and effective criminal justice systems, fight organized crime and prevent and counter terrorism ("About UNODC," n.d.).

To achieve this, they operate through three interconnected pillars. Firstly, they offer normative support to states when adopting new policies on drugs, crime or terrorism. Secondly, they offer technical cooperation so states can strengthen their capacities to these challenges. Finally, the agency implements research and analysis to adopt knowledgeable policy and operational decisions. These pillars reinforce each other and require a long term strategic vision to find long lasting solutions that support member states in strengthening the rule of law, promote sustainable development and adapt to emerging global challenges and threats. ("United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2019 Performance Assessment," n.d.).

UNODC operates within three divisions: Treaty Affairs, Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, and Operations. However, as its mandate has proliferated, especially in the field of crime prevention, organizational challenges like fragmentation, complexity of themes and resource management issues have become a threat to its efficiency (United Nations Joint Inspection Unit 2010, 5–6). The office functions under the authority of the UN Secretary-General and reports to them. It is also institutionally tied to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through its functional commissions: Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ). UNODC serves as their Secretariat, providing research, technical and policy advice, and implementation support ("Commissions," n.d.).

UNODC's experience and expertise make it a trusted global actor in combating illicit drugs, organized crime and terrorism. It plays a meaningful role in international coordination and guidance in security measures, particularly in vulnerable regions. Nevertheless, the agency faces funding constraints, as it relies heavily on voluntary donor contributions, affecting its priorities (Office of Internal Oversight Services 2020). Looking forward to the future, UNODC seeks to strengthen their long term strategy, deliver balanced and holistic solutions that take into account the uniqueness of each region and adapt rapidly to the emerging methods of extremist and criminal activity worldwide.

Topic A:

Coordination of security policies to tackle the increase of drug trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean. Case study: Cartel de los Soles.

I. INTRODUCTION

Latin America and The Caribbean have become one of the world's most lethal corridors in the global cocaine trade,[1] a region where the fight against drug trafficking constantly blurs the line between crime, corruption, and state power. The rise and geographic extension of organized drug trafficking networks across Latin America and The Caribbean has become one of the region's most important security challenges. It includes cross border smuggling, maritime transit routes, and corruption networks that undermine state institutions and development. Due to its extent and complexity, effective response relies on the sharing of information and collaboration of multiple players at different levels. Coordinated security policies, combine national law enforcement action, regional information sharing, maritime and border control cooperation, judicial and anticorruption measures, and international financial control tools. Regional organizations and multilateral bodies, such as de UNODC and the OAS/CICAD , make a keen emphasis on the need for multilateral efforts for more effective results.

El Cartel de los Soles, a vivid example of the ambiguity in the foundation of security due to the blurriness in status of protector and breacher. The Venezuelan cartel who began operations in the latter part of the XXth century shows the need for a coordinated and joint effort into tackling these issues. This case study demonstrates how the challenge of drug trafficking in Latin America and The Caribbean is no longer just a war on crime, rather it has become a test of whether states can preserve integrity within their own institutions, and to an extent how neighboring countries can become allies for transparency.

II. KEYWORDS/KEY CONCEPTS

Transnational Organized Crime
Criminal networks that operate across borders and shape the drug trade by coordinating routes, corruption, and illicit economies.

Narco-Corruption
The infiltration of state institutions by criminal actors through bribery, coercion, or direct collaboration.

[1] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Strategic Vision for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022–2025*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022. Accessed October 19, 2025. https://www.unodc.org/res/strategy/STRATEGIC_VISION_LATIN_AMERICA_AND_THE_CARIBBEAN_2022_2025_ENE17_EDsigned.pdf

Transit States
Countries that become logistical corridors for drug shipments even if they are not major producers or consumers.

Intelligence-Sharing Mechanisms
Tools and platforms used by states or regional bodies to exchange information on routes, networks, and financial flows.

Maritime Interdiction
Operations at sea aimed at identifying and intercepting vessels carrying illicit narcotics across Caribbean and Atlantic corridors.

Terrorist Designation of Criminal Groups
A U.S. legal classification that expands military, financial, and judicial action against cartels such as the Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The modern day narrative of drug trafficking activities in Latin America and the Caribbean is rooted in the transformation of the global cocaine "economy" and its gradual decline after the 20th century. The decade of 1980 saw the rise of the major cartels in Colombia, mainly in Medellín, and Cali, which were behind the establishment and operation of production and distribution chains for cocaine worldwide, their main target markets being the USA and Europe, with the Caribbean as the main transit corridor. After those cartels came to an end in the 1990s, cocaine's trade and distribution turned into a decentralized network of numerous smaller groups scattered across the Andes and Caribbean regions. The split up of organized crime saw further intensified military measures against drug trafficking, measures such as the militarization of anti-narcotics campaign, and a change in their trafficking routes which now went from Colombia through to the countries next door like Venezuela and Brazil as well as several islands in the Caribbean which had less strict control, as well as strategic access to maritime route making it favourable for smuggling by sea.

Venezuela's geography, its proximity to Colombia's "coca-growing" areas and its long Caribbean coastline, made it a vital point in this new transshipment route. The Colombian government, in the early 2000s, through its Plan Colombia, started with the strictest counter-narcotic strategies, which drove the traffickers to move their activities into the more accessible Venezuelan side of the border. Eventually, claims of involvement by the Venezuelan military within the drug cartels started to leak out.[2]

[2] Infobae. "Cártel de los Soles: cómo la red criminal de Maduro convirtió a Venezuela en puente del narcotráfico." *Infobae*, September 6, 2025. https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/09/06/cartel-de-los-soles-como-la-red-criminal-de-maduro-convirtio-a-venezuela-en-puente-del-narcotrafico/?outputType=amp-type

The first record of the expression "Cartel de los Soles"[3] was in the 1990s when it was used to make allegations that parts of the Venezuelan army were involved in drug smuggling.The name was coined due to the insignia of suns on the uniform of Venezuelan generals. Individual or isolated incidents of corruption among military officers started being recorded; Subsequently it became an issue that encompassed an extensive range of military, civilian and criminal networks said to be participating in the international cocaine trade. During the 2000s and the decade of the 2010s, multiple reports by journalists, investigators, and some international inquiries revealed widespread corruption at border checkpoints, misuse of military transportation and ships, and the existence of networks that facilitated the movement of drugs from Colombia through Venezuela to maritime departure points.[4] These criminal activities were both a reflection and a reinforcement of the situations in the rest of the region. As the areas of coca production and trafficking gradually moved, crime groups diversified their routes and gradually relied on state-actors and transit nodes that span several jurisdictions.

Gradually, the region has come to the conclusion that drug flows are not only an issue of criminal justice but rather a challenge of governance and transparency, this shift in mindset has caused a shift in policies, both internal and external. Therefore, various multilateral instruments and working groups, such as the OAS/CICAD initiatives for maritime counter-narcotics, and UNODC strategic plans for Latin America and the Caribbean, pointed out the necessity of building up the capacities of the ports and the coasts, the carrying out of joint maritime operations, the establishment of intelligence-sharing platforms, and the conducting of harmonized financial investigations to trace and freeze illicit proceeds among the mentioned activities. These regional frameworks were created aimed at closing the gaps: the existence of interoperable databases, joint training, and the provision of legal tools for extradition and asset forfeiture across borders as a shared resource.

Political tensions have been raised due to recent events. Legal actions, notably U.S. prosecutions and sanctions against high-ranking Venezuelan persons and their networks, have brought international scrutiny upon the Venezuelan case and have resulted in responses that range from top-level meetings aimed at preventing the control of trafficking through leadership to stratified multilateral actions. In addition, the Caribbean governments along with those of the bordering countries in mainland South America are fostering collaboration in the areas of maritime interception and port security over traffickers' preference for less visible, ocean-centered routes.

[3] BBC Mundo. "Título del artículo." *BBC Mundo*, Fecha de publicación. Accessed October 19, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c98lz3lp3plo.
[4] Ibid.

IV. CURRENT SITUATION

The severe lack of coordination in the fight against drug trafficking characterizes the security environment in Latin America and the Caribbean. The United States' aggressive, unilateral military strategy overshadows and undermines the multilateral framework, based on collaboration and intelligence sharing. This stance, which is mainly aimed at organizations associated with the Venezuelan government, like the Cartel de Los Soles or the Tren de Aragua, has caused a significant geopolitical rift among allies in the hemisphere.

Unilateralism from the United States finds its legal foundation in the determination of the US government to consider cartels and drug trafficking groups terrorist groups. Initially published by President George W. Bush in September of 2001, Executive order 13224 from the Department of State, gave precedence to the War on Terror that the US has conducted all around the world. The order defines terrorism as:

> "An activity that (1) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (2) appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking."[5]

Through that framework the US government has been able to conduct blockades to groups and individuals, both domestic and foreign who are allegedly linked to terrorist activities, their financing or commitment.[6] Moreover, this same executive order creates a designation process in which organizations and individuals can be designated as terrorist-related. Today, organizations like the Cártel de Sinaloa, Al-Shabab, Al-Qaeda, Clan del Golfo, Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua are designated as such.

Yet regardless of the individual legal consequences that the designation of individuals or organizations may have as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, for purpose of this study guide, the designation of Cartel de los Soles and other local latinamerican cartels has expanded the reach of the United States' War on Terror efforts.

The War on Drugs

The War on Drugs framework must be understood together in order to give context to the military deployments in the Caribbean. In the 1970s the US government launched the War on Drugs that aimed to reduce drug abuse domestically, and later was given federal enforcement. During the Reagan presidency the War on Drugs focused on criminal punishment of drug abusers and distributers.[7] This later resulted in an expansion of the War on Drugs that mainly focused on the cartels that trafficked drugs from Latin America into the United States.

[5] "Executive Order 13224 - United States Department of State." 2025. United States Department of State. September 24, 2025. https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224.
[6] "Executive Order 13224 - United States Department of State." 2025.
[7] Britannica Editors, "War on Drugs | History & Mass Incarceration," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 27, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-on-drugs.

Governments from Latin America joined this initiative and focused on the prohibition, interdiction and criminalization of drug-related crimes to reduce drug trafficking.

The renowned 'Plan Colombia' was launched in the year 2000 and lasted until 2015, it was an anti-drug campaign led by the Colombian government yet strongly supported by the United States. The 'Plan Colombia' was aimed at the reduction of drug trafficking from the FARC-EP guerrilla group to reduce drug abuse in the US. Yet the distinction between reducing drug trafficking, fighting terrorism and increasing counter-insurgency was extremely blurred. This resulted in military campaign against the FARC-EP regardless of the nature of the battling front.[8] The line between efforts on the War on Drugs and the War on Terror became strongly blurry, revealing the complex nature of drug trafficking in Latin America, specially the reach that groups like the FARC-EP may have by being fueled to drug trafficking.

Analysts claim that the Plan Colombia prevented the failure of the Colombian state with a thriving economy and strong institutions, yet highly question the human rights abuses and aggravation of the Colombian civil war.[9] The end of the 'Plan Colombia' was characterized by a change of policy by the Colombian government that resulted in peace talks and the signing of the peace agreement in 2016. Replications of the Plan Colombia have been tried and claimed over Latin America, like the Plan Merida in Mexico or former president of Ecuador Guillermo Lasso supporting the establishment of a 'Plan Ecuador', all of them with few success and aiming to counter the influence of cartels and terrorist groups fueled by the illicit trade of narcotics.

Military Deployment in the Caribbean

During the most recent years of the framework the Trump administration has reinforced its focus in the armed and forceful struggle against cartels and trafficking networks. "United States is in an 'armed conflict' with drug cartels and will treat their members as 'unlawful combatants (...)".[10] This approach traces back to the 2001 Bush administration War on Terror approved by Congress to use international force against Al-Qaeda.[11] Thus, the government has claimed the latest military deployment in the Caribbean as a way to reduce drug trafficking from Latin America into the United States.[12]

In these sense the US has deployed "Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group and the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, amounting to more than 4,500 Marines and sailors, three guided-missile destroyers, an attack submarine, a special operations ship, a guided missile cruiser and P-8

[8] "El Plan Colombia," Informe Final - Comisión De La Verdad, n.d., https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/el-plan-colombia.
[9] Sergio Muñoz Bata, "¿Es El Plan Colombia Replicable En América Latina?," Letras Libres, September 29, 2016, https://letraslibres.com/politica/es-el-plan-colombia-replicable-en-america-latina/.
[10] CFR Editors, "Trump Declares 'Armed Conflict' Against Cartels," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 3, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/article/trump-declares-armed-conflict-against-cartels.
[11] CFR Editors, "Trump Declares 'Armed Conflict' Against Cartels."
[12] Wilson, Gerardo Lissardy and Caitlin. 2025. "What Does Trump Want in the Caribbean as US Deploys Warships?" September 4, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c78nl9lz8zeo.

Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft."[13] The US SOUTHCOM has then carried on attacks on Colombian and Venezuelan speed boats on international waters allegedly transporting illegal narcotics. President Trump has been "weighing strikes inside Venezuela itself as part of a broader strategy aimed at weakening leader Nicolas Maduro."[14]

Tren de Aragua, Cartel de los Soles and the Venezuelan Regime

The strategy of the Trump administration to weaken the Venezuelan regime has been focused on countering armed cartels with links to the highest ranks of the government, specifically the Tren de Aragua and Cartel de los Soles. According to InSight Crime,[15] the Tren de Aragua is the most powerful criminal organization in Venezuela, financed by foreign cells established in Colombia, Peru and Chile. Since 2018 the Tren Aragua has been involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking in the Colombia-Venezuela border, sexual exploitation and robbery using the migration flows in Latin America. Today, the Tren de Aragua is considered one of the most powerful and dangerous gangs worldwide for its transnational expansion, its economic fueling through drug trafficking and protection from the Venezuelan government.

On the other hand, the Cartel de los Soles was founded in mid-2000 after a scandal from Venezuelan National Guards collaborating with Colombian drug traffickers, enabling the passing of cocaine shipments to and from Venezuela.[16] With the signature of the Plan Colombia and the strengthening of military operations against guerilla groups in Colombia, drug traffickers fled and found a vacuum in Venezuela with a considerable decrease in their operations. Yet in 2024 the Cartel de los Soles gained importance again thanks to scandals from high National Guard officials having nexus with transnational drug trafficking. Thus it was possible to understand that Cartel de los Soles is not a simple drug trafficking group, but it is embedded into the government structure of the Venezuelan regime.[17] However today, both Colombian and Venezuelan leaders like Nicolas Maduro, Diosdado Cabello and Gustavo Petro who deny the existence of it.[18]

The relationship between the Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua must be understood through the Venezuelan regime. "If the Tren de Aragua is the armed wing, the Cartel de los Soles is the financial arm."[19] They both are instruments of the regime who has de facto involved

[13] Natasha Bertrand and Avery Schmitz, "Here's What the US Military Has Positioned as Trump Pressures Venezuela," CNN, October 19, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/19/world/us-military-build-up-caribbean-trump-pressures-venezuela.
[14] Bertrand and Schmitz, "Here's What the US Military Has Positioned as Trump Pressures Venezuela."
[15] InSight Crime, "Tren De Aragua," InSight Crime, April 25, 2025, https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-venezuela/tren-de-aragua/.
[16] InSight Crime, "Cartel De Los Soles," InSight Crime, October 1, 2025, https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-venezuela/cartel-de-los-soles-perfil/.
[17] Antonio Ledezma, "El Tren De Aragua Y El Cártel De Los Soles: Los Instrumentos Criminales De Nicolás Maduro," *El Debate*, March 25, 2025, https://www.eldebate.com/internacional/20250325/tren-aragua-cartel-soles-instrumentos-criminales-nicolas-maduro_281019.html.
[18] Norberto Paredes, "Qué Se Sabe Del Cartel De Los Soles, La Organización Designada Como Terrorista Por EE.UU. Y Acusada De Tener Su Base En Las Fuerzas Armadas De Venezuela," BBC News Mundo, September 10, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c98lz3lp3plo.
[19] Ledezma, "El Tren De Aragua Y El Cártel De Los Soles: Los Instrumentos Criminales De Nicolás Maduro."

itself in transnational crime as a way of retaining power amidst domestic and international threats of democratization.

The United States has taken measures in its efforts to reduce drug trafficking in Latin America. The denomination of Cartel de los Soles, Tren de Aragua and other illegal organizations as terrorist opens the door for a much harder stance and forceful courses of action. Sanctions and military deployment have been the preferred mechanisms from the Trump administration. This has equally changed the focus of drug trafficking in Latin America from a criminal and judicial matter to a political matter inside the White House and in Latin American capitals.[20]

Governments from Latin America have similarly categorized the Tren de Aragua and Tren de los Soles as terrorist organizations, with the exception of Colombia and Venezuela. And while sharing a hard stance against drug trafficking and cartels, the international community has strongly condemned the deployment in the Caribbean. The UN Human Rights chief has categorized the deployment as unacceptable, extrajudicial killings, and a violation of human rights law.[21]

V. MAIN ACTORS/STAKEHOLDERS

The Government of Venezuela

Its territory, security institutions, and political environment place it at the center of the regional trafficking system. Accusations point to sectors of the armed forces and political elites enabling or participating in the smuggling chain. This generates mistrust, sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and a growing disconnect between Venezuela and regional multilateral frameworks.[22]

The United States

A dominant actor with the capacity to deploy military assets, impose sanctions, and designate cartels as terrorist groups. Its strategy is mostly unilateral, heavily militarized, and shaped by the legacy of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. This produces tension with states that prefer multilateral, coordinated approaches.

Colombia

Historically central to coca production and the first stage of trafficking chains. After Plan Colombia, routes shifted toward Venezuela, reshaping regional dynamics. Colombia remains a key security actor, cooperating with U.S. initiatives while managing internal political pressures and the legacy of armed conflict.

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[20] El Departamento Del Tesoro Sanciona a El Tren De Aragua Como Organización Criminal Transnacional - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, July 12, 2024, https://2021-2025.state.gov/translations/spanish/el-departamento-del-tesoro-sanciona-a-el-tren-de-aragua-como-organizacion-criminal-transnacional/.

[21] Rachel Hagan, "US Strikes on Alleged Drug Boats Violate Law, UN Human Rights Chief Says," October 31, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2nx95pgz7o.

[22] BBC Mundo, "Cartel de los Soles: poder militar y criminal," 22 de septiembre de 2022,

Regional Organizations

UNODC and OAS/CICAD promote coordinated policies, shared databases, maritime cooperation, financial investigations, and judicial harmonization. Their role is essential but limited by the willingness of states and the influence of large powers.

Secondary Stakeholders

Caribbean islands affected by maritime routes, including cases like Trinidad y Tobago; Brazil, Peru and Ecuador facing the spillover of trafficking networks; and criminal groups such as the Tren de Aragua, Clan del Golfo, and Sinaloa Cartel, which compete or collaborate with Venezuelan networks.

VI. IMPORTANT SUPPORT MATERIALS

- "Más allá del Cartel de los Soles". Insight Crime. https://insightcrime.org/es/investigaciones/mas-alla-del-cartel-de-los-soles/
- El cartel de los Soles, la red criminal que enfrenta a Estados Unidos y Venezuela". El País. https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-09-07/el-cartel-de-los-soles-la-red-criminal-que-enfrenta-a-estados-unidos-y-venezuela.html
- EU and Latin America & the Caribbean working together for citizens' security. European External Action, October 29, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-latin-america-caribbean-working-together-citizens-security_en4
- UNODC Strategic Vision for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022-2025. https://www.unodc.org/res/strategy/STRATEGIC_VISION_LATIN_AMERICA_AND_THE_CARIBBEAN_2022_2025_ENE17_EDsigned.pdf

Topic B:

Tracking online fundraising, propaganda, and recruitment by extremist groups. Case study: ISIS recruitment of women

I. INTRODUCTION

Technology is one of the most important factors driving the increasing use of the Internet by terrorist organizations and their supporters for a wide range of purposes, including fundraising, recruitment, propaganda, training, incitement to commit acts of terrorism, and the gathering and dissemination of information for terrorist purposes. While the many benefits of the Internet are self-evident, it may also be used to facilitate communication within terrorist organizations and to transmit information on, as well as material support for, planned acts of terrorism, all of which require specific technical knowledge for the effective investigation of these offences. With the increase in internet users, social media users have also risen.[23]

Social media platforms allow users to share their views, opinions, emotions, judgments, and beliefs. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are popular choices and flooded with messages, posts, and tweets. As per the recent survey, every minute, 4,74,000 tweets are uploaded on Twitter, and 2,93,000 statuses are uploaded on Facebook.[24] With billions of registered users, social media platforms offer wide outreach. Hence, it is a convenient medium for the extremist group to propagate its harmful ideology. These extremist groups share violent content, hateful messages to make their agenda widespread in radicalization, recruitment, and propaganda.[25] The extremist organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda, now use social media platforms for propaganda, radicalization, and recruitment of susceptible youth.[26]

Despite increasing international recognition of the threat posed by terrorists' use of the Internet in recent years, there is currently no universal instrument specifically addressing this pervasive facet of terrorist activity. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) plays a key role in providing assistance to Member States, in furtherance of its mandate to strengthen the capacity of national criminal justice systems to implement the provisions of the international legal instruments against terrorism, and does so in compliance with the principles of rule of law and international human rights standards.

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[23] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2012. "The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes." https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf.
[24] J. Schultz. (2019). How Much Data is Created on Internet Each Day? Micro Focus Blog.
[25] A. Bermingham, M. Conway, L. McInerney, N. O'Hare, and A. F. Smeaton, "Combining social network analysis and sentiment analysis to explore the potential for online radicalisation," in Proc. Int. Conf. Adv. Social Netw. Anal. Mining (ASONAM), Jul. 2009, pp. 231–236, doi: 10.1109/ASONAM.2009.31.
[26] "Online Extremism Detection: A Systematic Literature Review With Emphasis on Datasets, Classification Techniques, Validation Methods, and Tools." n.d. IEEE Journals & Magazine. https://doi.org/10.1109/access.2021.3068313.

UNODC, as a key United Nations agency, actively participates in the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force[1], thus ensuring that the counter-terrorism work of UNODC is carried out in the broader context of, and coordinated with, United Nations system-wide efforts.

To sum it up, the growing technological integration of terrorist organizations creates significant security concerns for the international community. As digital platforms continue to expand and evolve, the capacity of extremists to exploit them for recruitment, propaganda, and operational coordination will likely increase. Law enforcement agencies, which must balance effective surveillance and counter-terrorism measures with the protection of privacy and freedom of expression, will find themselves in difficulties. Furthermore, the absence of a universal legal framework regulating the online activities of such groups complicates coordinated international responses. Without stronger cooperation and adaptive legal mechanisms, technology misuse by terrorist networks will continue to pose a growing threat to global security.

II. KEY WORDS/CONCEPTS

i. **Extremism:** It implies violent action or inciting violent action, or lesser forms of conduct that do not normally trigger criminal law sanctions (Kkienerm, n.d.). Violent extremism encompasses a wider category of manifestations than terrorism since it includes forms of ideologically motivated violence that falls short of constituting terrorist acts (United Nations 2015, 2)

ii. **Radicalization:** The process by which individuals adopt violent extremist ideologies that may lead them to commit terrorist acts, or which are likely to render them more vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations (Kkienerm, n.d.).

iii. **Online Propaganda:** information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions (“Propaganda” 2025). It is often conveyed through mass media (Smith and Lannes 2025).

iv. **Cybercrime:** the use of a computer as an instrument to further illegal ends. represents an extension of existing criminal behaviour alongside some novel illegal activities. (Dennis and Aaron 2025)

v. **Rule of Law:** The rule of law is a durable system of laws, institutions, norms, and community commitment that delivers four universal principles: accountability, just law, open government, and accessible and impartial justice (“What Is the Rule of Law?,” n.d.).

vi. **Digital Literacy:** Includes the ability to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies. Four main principles guide digital literacy are comprehension, interdependence, social factors, and curation (UOTP Marketing 2025).

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Terrorism has plagued society for decades, manifesting in various forms and driven by different political, social, and ideological motivations. These extremist coalitions form from varying instabilities (political, societal, or economic), injustices, conflicts, perceived oppression or beliefs (LaFree & Dugan, 2004). The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in particular has been one of the largest, longest running, and dangerous terrorist groups out there. Since its formal rise in 2014, ISIS has developed into a global network in over 20 countries, continuing to pose a threat to peace and order worldwide (UN Security Council, 2023)

Terrorism groups and extremist threats are not a new phenomenon of the century, but their forms and methods continue to evolve as they look for modern ways to consolidate power. In their quest to prove their political ideologies through violent means, these extremist organizations now garner funds to sustain themselves, disseminate propaganda, and recruit unsuspecting people through online methods. Such online methods include, but are not limited to: social media platforms (e.g., X/Twitter, Telegram, TikTok), encrypted messaging apps (e.g., Signal, WhatsApp), online gaming forums, crowdfunding sites, and cryptocurrency exchanges (GNET, 2025; FinCEN, 2025). These digital methods allow two things: avoidance of surveillance and rapid communication with audiences.

One might speculate on how effective these online activities are. This begs the question–to whom are these online affairs directed to? When analyzing the impact of these effects, we must look into the demographic of the audience who end up getting brainwashed and sent to the hands of terror actors. Analyses show that online extremist propaganda intentionally appeals to individuals who seek belonging, identity, or meaning, often exploiting personal vulnerabilities such as isolation or discrimination. Women in particular are especially at threat and targeted when it comes to these underlying attacks. ISIS frames women as “mothers of the caliphate,” promising empowerment if they work as nurturers, recruiters, or fundraisers for their “religious duties” (Heidarysafa et al., 2019)

One of the first recorded uses of online methods happened in the early 2000s when Al-Qaeda began circulating online videos and magazines such as Inspire to reach Western audiences (Torres-Soriano, 2013). Eventually, between 2013 and 2015, ISIS started picking up these more modern methods to indoctrinate people, as it ended up being quite effective. They utilized high-quality videos, *nasheeds*, and Twitter (now called X) campaigns such as #AllEyesOnISIS and #CaliphateCalling. A particular example of their use is their online magazine Dabiq and Rumiyah, where they paint these narratives of adventure, belonging, and moral purpose (Winter, 2015). By 2017, an estimated 30,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries had joined ISIS, many of which were radicalized through online networks, showing how effective this has become for them (UNODC, 2023).

Online propaganda is one of the ways that non-state actors, such as ISIS and the extremist groups in question, can grow their power. By this use of soft power and untracked spreads of

dangerous propaganda, terrorist ideologies can be implanted into the minds of vulnerable populations. Deeply acknowledging and comprehending the roots and context behind this issue will help build your foundation of understanding the current situation, to be detailed in the subsequent section.

IV. CURRENT STATUS

In a globalizing world, extremist groups are turning global too, working as a multi-state system now too. Formal banking channels, remittances, and crowdfunding are the international sorts of ways that terrorist groups like ISIS fund themselves. Furthermore, cryptocurrency makes their cash flows indetectable (GNET, 2025). It becomes more difficult to trace fintech apps, peer-to-peer transfers, and encrypted channels of illicit money (FinCEN, 2025).

The propaganda that these groups like ISIS are currently spreading consist of putting one's family's protection on the line or how dying for one's religion is the way to turn a state towards your beliefs (Heidarysafa et al., 2019). Social media broadcasts these messages to millions of people everyday. Also, encrypted messaging is another difficult way to make sure no one leaks sensitive information about the terrorist groups. It has been harder and harder to track them (Phadke & Mitra, 2021).

Nowadays the epicenter of this sort of terrorism has shifted to camps in Central Asia, West Africa, as well as the stunning ISKP regions (GNET, 2025). There is generally a lesser focus now on Iraq or Syria. Currently, bodies of importance and consultation aim to perform counter missions, such as the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) advisory, and the Counter ISIS Finance Group (CIFG) meetings. However, the decentralized and transnational nature of these networks complicates enforcement (FinCEN, 2025).

Online communities and fundraising campaigns intertwine with recruitment. Targeted propaganda often guides potential supporters toward financial contributions while also simultaneously radicalizing new members or vulnerable peoples. Particularly women end up being targeted as a marginalized group that extremists can influence, often leading to women being the ones to coordinate fundraising and recruitment within digital communities and detention camps (GNET, 2025)

Having a comprehensive understanding for what kind of methods terrorists are employing, what keeps these online affairs going, and what kind of people end up being the target victims, is crucial to form not just correct arguments, but better solutions. This is a very modern and difficult problem, with many communities and families being affected for the rest of their lives.

V. MAIN ACTORS/STAKEHOLDERS

International organizations:

The *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)* aims to prevent and counter the threat that terrorism and violent extremism poses to the international community (*Terrorism Prevention Branch*, s. f.-b). The Office recognized that the internet offers new forms for illicit activity, making the prevention of cyberterrorism an urgent priority. Between 2019 to 2021, UNODC has implemented programs across the globe to do so. For instance, it implemented programs in North Africa and the Sahel to strengthen responses against the use of the internet for terrorist purposes by promoting awareness of legislative frameworks, supporting research, coordination and cooperation among national entities (*The Use Of The Internet*, s. f.).

Because most terrorist activity requires cross border networks, international cooperation is vital to prevent and counter terrorism. Working alongside the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, UNODC promotes technical assistance to member states, supports legal enforcement cooperations, updates model legislative provisions, and develops data preservation and disclosure tools. This cooperation is supported by contributors from Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA (*International Cooperation*, s. f.)

The United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy , adopted in 2006, sets the overall UN framework on this matter. The strategy rests on four key pillars: addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, preventing and combating terrorism, building States' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard, and ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the foundation for all counterterrorism efforts (*United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy | Office Of Counter-Terrorism*, s. f.). The UNODC implements it along with other offices such as the *UNOCT*.

Regional and Multilateral Organizations

The *African Union (AU)* acknowledges the serious danger that terrorism and violent extremism pose to the continent. The OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, which entered into force in 2002, provides a legal framework that criminalizes all forms of terrorist activity and encourages cooperation in extraterritorial investigations and mutual legal assistance (Organization of African Unity 1999). However, the Convention predates the rise of online radicalization and does not address the evolving digital threats.

Africa remains especially vulnerable to terrorism and extremist recruitment. By 2021, more than 4000 attacks were reported across the continent, resulting in around 18 000 fatalities. The factors that drive up radicalization numbers include limited education, the role of religious ideologies, economic inequality and a fragile relationship between the state and citizens (*Journey To Extremism In Africa*, 2023). The AU now seeks to strengthen state legitimacy, social cohesion and state capacity to tackle the need to radicalize in many cases. Moreover,

further international collaboration to improve intelligence sharing, legal frameworks and technological capabilities is needed.

In the Americas**,** the *Organization of American States (OAS*) has also taken action to prevent radicalization. The Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE) is the regional entity dedicated to fostering cooperation to prevent, combat and eliminate terrorist acts and activity. CICTE provides legal instruments to ensure OAS members have a common framework that aligns with the UNODC counterterrorism standards (*Comité CICTE*, s. f.). The Declarations of the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (2022), reflect the regional consensus and reinforce association with UNODC, INTERPOL and other international agencies. It also promotes cyber resilience and cooperation to combat online terrorist propaganda though the OAS also has the Cybersecurity Technical Program, which strengthens national cybersecurity capabilities, protects critical infrastructure, and promotes secure exchange of information among Member States (*Cybersecurity Technical Program*, s. f.).

Despite such efforts, terrorist and violent extremism acts persist in the Americas. UNODC has supported awareness-raising initiatives and guidance in the region in partnership with INTERPOL and regional research institutions. Recent trends in terrorism in the region are increasingly linked to xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and religious or belief extremism (XRIRB) (*2023_UNODC Supports Latin America To Address Cases Involving The Investigation And Prosecution Of Terrorist Acts And Violent Extremism Based On XRIRB*, s. f.). The presence of these groups, both online and offline, promote hatred to minorities and anti-institutional violence, showcasing the need for stronger preventive measures.

The *League of Arab States* states, through the Arab Conventions for the Suppression of Terrorism (1998), has committed to mutual legal assistance, information exchange and judicial coordination among Member States, while urging states to monitor any type of spread of extremist propaganda (League of Arab States 1998). Many of its 22 member states face recruitment and radicalization challenges linked to ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

An emerging concern is female radicalization and recruitment into religious extremism. Research shows that girls and women face distinct “push” and “pull” factors that increase their vulnerability to extremist recruitment , often related to gender based inequalities and marginalization (Al-Badayneh, Khelifa, and Elwakad 2024). In response, the League and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have developed a guidebook on gender-aware approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (*OSCE And League Of Arab States Promote Guidebook On Gender-aware Approaches To Preventing And Countering Violent Extremism And Radicalization That Lead To Terrorism*, s. f.).

Non state actors:

Although the territorial presence of *ISIS* has largely diminished in Syria and Iraq, the organization has shifted to a decentralized network model, integrating branches and online supporters across the globe. It seems that radicalization into violent extremism is now digital, with ISIS exploiting anonymous platforms to recruit, guide and finance supporters while evading legal frameworks and counter terrorism measures.

Another one of the group's evolving strategies is the use of cryptocurrencies to raise funds for propaganda and logistics, enabling global activity (Extremism, s. f.). This highlights the urgency of states and international organizations to take action.

VI. CASE STUDY

SAUDI ARABIA:

As a Sunni-Salafi jihadist organization, ISIS traces its ideological origins to Al-Qaeda in Iraq as it emerged from its remnants in 2010. As quickly as ISIS expanded its territories in Iraq and Syria, with a peak 2015, it lost them again. By late 2017, its areas had declined by more than 90%. Since the self-proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014 by its then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,[27] ISIS actively sought to enlist women to bolster its territorial and ideological influence. Indeed, unlike other jihadist groups, ISIS' success in establishing a Caliphate meant that it needed women to continue its state-building project beyond this generation.

Shortly after this, ISIS quickly learnt that the best way of recruiting is through social media channels such as Twitter, Telegram. The group fled the local media with gendered narratives such as marriage, motherhood, piety, and adventure. Europol's review of ISIS shows women as both target audience and content creators with roles ranging from moral policing, education, health, and online messaging – functions that a "caliphate' needs to be like a state.[28] They also helped raise funds and with logistics across private channels. The Saudi authorities recognized the issue publicly, and in a statement, the Interior Ministry announced that 46 Saudi women had joined the extremist group since 2011, some departing with their children.

From 2014 onwards, the Kingdom has decided to combat online recruitment by means of deterrence and rehabilitation. A series of counterterrorism instruments[29] and cyber provisions, updated in 2017, allowed arrests and trials (including female defendants) for joining, recruiting,

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[27] "ISIS Jihadist Movement: US Policy: Overview | EBSCO." 2015. EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | Www.ebsco.com. 2015. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/ethnic-and-cultural-studies/isis-jihadist-movement-us-policy-overview.

[28]https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/women_in_islamic_state_propaganda_3.pdf

[29] "Saudi Arabia: New Counterterrorism Law Enables Abuse." 2017. Human Rights Watch. November 23, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-law-enables-abuse?.

financing, or glorifying ISIS online. The Mohammed bin Nayef Counselling and Care Center,[30] located in Riyadh, offered post-custody counselling and reintegration to women disengaging from jihadist groups. On top of that, Saudi Arabia's new framework, adopted in 2017 - Law on Combating Terrorism Crimes and Its Financing and Anti-Cyber Crime Law (Art. 6)[31]– criminalizes online promotion, coordination, or financing of terrorism and enables prosecutions where posts, chats, and transfers of information form the evidentiary spine.

UNODC launched a publication in 2012[32] to provide practical guidance to Member States for more effective investigation and prosecution of terrorist cases involving the use of the internet. It highly aligns with the Saudi needs to gather, preserve, and present e-evidence. To conclude, in the Kingdom, women's recruitment to ISIS is a digital phenomenon. The state's answer conjoined legal deterrence and rehabilitation under a strong cyber umbrella. UNODC guidance provides the legal-procedural backbone for e-evidence, and benchmarks for gender-responsive handling of women suspects, witnesses or returnees.

[30] "Security Web Portal | News." 2017. Rcc.int. 2017. https://www.rcc.int/swp/news/198/why-saudi-arabias-deradicalization-program-is-successful?.
[31] https://Www.Aml.Gov.Sa/En-Us/RulesAndRegulations/Combating%20Terrorism%20and%20Financing%20of%20Terrorism%20Law.Pdf?." n.d.
[32] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2012. "The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes." https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf.

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