“Securing the present, protecting the future”

Understanding, preventing and addressing the risk of misuse of CBRN science and technology by terrorist groups and other non-State actors

Side-event to the
Meeting of the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention

United Nations Office at Geneva
Palais des Nations, Geneva
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Concept note

Organizers: The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) - United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)

Background:

New scientific and technological developments and emerging technologies are transforming life, industry, and the global economy in positive ways. At the same time, some of these technologies, such as 3D printing, nanotechnology, synthetic biology, artificial intelligence and drones, also present significant potential to be misused by criminal and terrorist groups, lone wolves, and other non-State actors to perpetrate their malicious actions in an innovative fashion that would further amplify the impact of an attack involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or their constitutive chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) materials. For this reason, it is imperative to raise awareness throughout the international community about the potential misuse of these technologies, to analyse to what extent they pose a potential threat, and to better understand how these threats could be countered in an efficient manner.

In resolution 2325 (2016), the Security Council called upon Member States to take into account developments on the evolving nature of risk of proliferation and rapid advances in science and technology in the implementation of resolution 1540 (2004). The Security Council further requested the 1540 Committee to take note in its work, where relevant, of the continually evolving nature of the risks of proliferation, including the use by non-State actors of rapid advances in science, technology and international commerce for proliferation in the context of the implementation of resolution 1540 (2004).
In May 2018, the UN Secretary-General adopted the new Agenda for Disarmament, underlining that advances in science and technology “can have a game-changing impact on our future security” and that “contemporary developments are quickly outpacing the ability of our normative and regulatory frameworks to keep up”.

In the Sixth Review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in June 2018, the General Assembly via resolution 72/284, called upon all Member States to “prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their means of delivery... and (encourages) cooperation among and between Member States and relevant regional and international organizations for strengthening national capacities in this regard.”

The resolution additionally encouraged “all relevant international, regional and sub-regional organizations and forums involved in the fight against terrorism to cooperate with the United Nations system and Member States in supporting the Strategy and to share best practices, and calls for information-sharing, through appropriate channels and arrangements, on individuals and entities implicated in any type of terrorist activities, their tactics and modus operandi, supply of weapons and sources of material or any other form of support, (...) including by exploiting information and communications technologies (...).”

The report of the Secretary-General (A/73/177) issued in July 2018 provided an update on developments in science and technology and their potential impact on international security and disarmament efforts and further highlighted the “concerns that these technologies could be easily acquired by, or could be used as tools of proliferation by, malicious non-State actors”.

Within the context of the Biological Weapons Convention, the Meeting of Experts in August 2018 recently reviewed developments in science and technology, including the potential for the enhanced implementation of the Convention, as well as in terms of potential benefits and risks. Even more recently, in September 2018, the Secretary-General’s Strategy on New Technologies emphasized the need to “[call] attention to the benefits and risks of new technologies”, and to provide a platform for “connecting governments to ideas, partners and solutions”.

Recognizing these sentiments and seeking to contribute to the effective implementation of the abovementioned international instruments and programmes, the sharing of experiences among Member States and obtaining the expert insights of national and international scientific and technological societies is crucial for keeping up with the speed, complexity and innovation of advancements in science and technology and for foreseeing potential risks and pathways for governance.

Objectives:

1. To introduce Member States to emerging technologies and their implications for the risk of terrorist groups and other non-State actors gaining access to and using WMD and CBRN materials.

2. To promote debate and discussion among the participants on the prevention of the misuse of emerging technologies by terrorist groups and other non-State actors.
Relevant Activities of Organizers:

**INTERPOL**

The use of Darknet to acquire, transfer or smuggle biological material or weapons is a major concern for law enforcement community. The recently launched Project “Pandora” is an operational workshop aiming to increase the capability of police investigators and intelligence analysts working in the area of cybercrime, organized crime and counter-terrorism, to investigate bioterrorism the Darknet.

The potential use of drones in a terrorist incident or attack against a critical infrastructure and soft targets is a growing concern for law enforcement as the availability of drone technology becomes more widespread globally. With the increased payload capacity of drone technology and recent incidents of terrorist groups using drones in surveillance activities, the potential scenario of delivering CBRN and explosive materials represents a growing risk. In 2018, INTERPOL envisages developing its dedicated Critical Infrastructure Protection Unit within the “CBRNE and Vulnerable Targets Sub-Directorate” by launching a flagship initiative addressing the rising threat posed by the criminal and terrorist use of drones in a CBRN context.

**UNICRI**

Through its office in Geneva, UNICRI has launched a project entitled “Security through Research, Technology and Innovation (SIRIO)”, the scope of which is to analyze and understand the global impacts, opportunities and challenges presented by rapid technological change. In particular, SIRIO offers an analysis of emerging and future security risks, the mapping of technology innovations, and the testing of forward-looking technology driven solutions for real global problems.

**UNOCT/UNCCT**

UNCCT recently launched a programme on “Preventing and Responding to WMD/CBRN Terrorism”, which includes a study on the global threat and risk of terrorist groups accessing and using WMD and CBRN materials, focusing in particular on capabilities, vulnerabilities, impact and the relevance of new technologies, as well as the organization of related international and regional meetings to foster dialogue.