[U.N. Seeks More Than $100 Million to Tackle Violent Extremism](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/08/u-n-seeks-more-than-100-million-to-tackle-violent-extremism/)

March 8, 2017

By [Colum Lynch](http://foreignpolicy.com/author/colum-lynch)

Foreign Policy

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/08/u-n-seeks-more-than-100-million-to-tackle-violent-extremism/>

Ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, U.N. relief agencies have sought to distance themselves from the U.S.-led war on terror, fearing a hit to their reputations and more risks of retaliation for peacekeepers and aid workers in the field.

But the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) is now seeking to carve out a big role for itself in preventing terrorism from taking root, requesting $108 million over the next four years to fund what would be the U.N.’s largest global push to limit the spread of violent extremism, according to a confidential UNDP draft strategy paper obtained by Foreign Policy.

The move comes as U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres is seeking to establish a counterterrorism czar to bring order to the U.N.’s sprawling efforts, across more than 38 departments, to contain the spread of radical movements, though it’s unclear if he is prepared to embrace the UNDP’s proposals.

The world body’s evolving role reflects a grudging recognition that the U.N. needs to carve out a niche for itself in the war on extremism if it wants to remain relevant, particularly at a time when the major powers — including Britain, France, the United States, China, and Russia — want the U.N. to do more to support their own struggles against terrorism.

“How can we defeat terrorism without eradicating the terrible poverty and malnutrition?” France’s U.N. ambassador, François Delattre, said during a visit this week by the U.N. Security Council to the Lake Chad Basin, a stronghold of the West African terrorist organization Boko Haram.

The U.N. push into the counterterrorism field may face strong head wind from Washington, where President Donald Trump’s administration is questioning the value of preventative strategies aimed at the root causes of terrorism, like those favored by former President Barack Obama’s administration.

“Saying we need jobs for jihadis — [that] it’s about root causes and upstream factors — is wholly fallacious,” Sebastian Gorka, an advisor to Trump, [told](http://www.npr.org/2017/03/01/517899216/trump-adviser-defends-presidents-approach-to-radical-islamic-terrorism) NPR this month. If “poverty and lack of education” were the causes of terrorism, “then half of India would be terrorists. And they’re not.”

The initiative, titled the “Global Programme on Development Solutions for the Prevention of Violent Extremism,” is outlined in a confidential 67-page draft document and marks something of a reversal by the U.N. development agency, which for years resisted any association with counterterrorism efforts.

“In the face of heartless violent extremism, there are legitimate calls for more security inspired counterterrorism actions,” the report states. Yet “they are not sufficient and will not, on their own, provide a sustainable solution to the crisis of violent extremism the world is facing today.”

With funds tight, and as the United States and other wealthy governments are scaling back foreign development assistance, such a rebranding could make it easier for the U.N. to get donors interested in underwriting development programs.

A decade ago, the UNDP was reluctant to deal with counterterrorism, fearing that it would “actively undermine its work,” said Sebastian von Einsiedel, a director at U.N. University in Tokyo who has written about the U.N.’s evolving counterterrorism role.

He suggested the push toward countering violent extremism could be the U.N.’s “effort to ingratiate itself with the Trump administration and to avert feared cuts in funding, given the U.S. is UNDP’s largest donor.”

But the initiative is facing pushback from both inside and outside the United Nations. Some observers say the UNDP is simply slapping a counterterrorism label on traditional development work — like promoting jobs for women and youth — in the hope of stemming its own steady decline in funding over the past decade.

And some critics fear that if the U.N. embraces the initiative, it would play into the hands of governments that portray legitimate dissidents and political opponents as violent extremists in order to justify repressive policies. One reason the U.N. has been leery of jumping into counterterrorism is the difficulty of determining just who a terrorist is.

Richard Atwood, a U.N. expert at the International Crisis Group, says the strategy encourages an “us-and-them mentality, with the U.N. positioned even more forcefully on the government’s side when it already in many places has a problem in being perceived as too close to the government.”

The U.N.’s own high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein, has also cautioned the organization to wade carefully into the struggle against terrorism.

In a confidential memo from March 2016 obtained by FP, Zeid’s office flagged concerns that governments might misuse laws and policies purportedly crafted to fight terrorism “as a pretext to crack down on political opposition and repress dissenting voices.”

“As we have seen in the context of counterterrorism, all too often measures that lack basic elements of due process and sweeping definitions of terrorism are used to marginalize or even criminalize otherwise legitimate activities disproportionately targeting minorities, opposition groups, human rights defenders, journalists or civil society organizations,” the memo stated.

Other U.N. agencies have sought to keep their distance, as well. In September 2016, Maria Calivis, the deputy executive director of the U.N. Children’s Fund, or UNICEF, was scheduled to participate in a pledging conference at U.N. headquarters for a fund to underwrite programs aimed at preventing extremism.

But Calivis pulled out of the event, which was sponsored by the United States and Switzerland, after UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake balked, according to two diplomatic sources.

“Lake has made it clear he doesn’t want to have anything to do with this,” said one diplomat. UNICEF did not respond to a request for comment.

The UNDP started exploring a role in countering extremism in May 2014, when it hosted its first major brainstorming session on the topic in Istanbul. The Obama administration urged the U.N. more broadly to pay attention to it, as well. In early 2015, President Obama developed a strategy to counter violent extremism to run alongside the military campaigns against the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other groups.

At the White House’s urging, then-U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon embraced the strategy as his own, presenting his “U.N. Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” to the General Assembly last year. He characterized it as a counterweight to the military strategy being prosecuted by the United States and other key powers, warning that a “single-minded focus only on security measures and an utter disregard for human rights have often made things worse.”

The UNDP has carried out some work on countering violent extremism in 41 countries, including pilot programs from Bangladesh to Sudan.

The UNDP report acknowledges that great uncertainty still surrounds the question of what drives young people to join terrorist organizations, carry out suicide attacks, or murder innocent civilians. It calls for a partnership with the Oslo Governance Centre in Norway to undertake research on the roots of violent extremism.

Eric Rosand, the director of the Prevention Project, said it’s “great to see” the UNDP exploring opportunities to contribute to the fight against extremism. But he said the agency must develop an accurate understanding of what fuels extremism and resist the “temptation to relabel some of its traditional development programs” as counter-extremism initiatives.

In Sudan, the U.N. agency has been trying to get at the root causes, interviewing hundreds of Sudanese — including 100 people in a government-sponsored deradicalization program — to figure out why some turn to terrorism.

They concluded, among other things, that Khartoum’s universities were a key hot spot for radical ideology. That claim was bolstered by [reports](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/29/sudan-medical-students-may-have-joined-isis-says-university) that 12 medical students, including nationals from Britain, Canada, and the United States, were recruited to join the Islamic State while studying at the University of Medical Science and Technology in the Sudanese capital.

Some observers worry that findings like this could be used to justify government crackdowns on Khartoum’s universities. But others still see a role for the U.N. in promoting development programs as an antidote to extremism, particularly since traditional funding sources are drying up.

“Look, we live in reality, and this is where the money comes from now — from donors,” said Manal Taha, a Sudanese-born American scholar who studies violent extremism in Sudan, Libya, and Chad at the U.S. Institute for Peace.

“A big bunch of money is coming through countering violent extremism.”