



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Reshaping the Future of Crime, Terrorism and Security, 2 April 2019

Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

First of all, I would like to thank the Permanent Representatives of Georgia, the Netherlands, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as the colleagues from UNICRI and INTERPOL for organizing this important event. It is very important to address this issue as time moves fast and new technologies appear every day and we need to address these challenges.

The international counter-terrorism efforts continue to address a broad range of threats emanating from terrorist groups of all sizes. In many aspects of our lives, the internet has leveled the playing field, giving a voice and opportunities to the millions of people who did not have it before. While largely a force of good, we have unfortunately seen that it has also benefited the forces of evil.

Today, small terrorist cells and lone wolves have access to many of the same resources that the large terrorist organizations such as ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaida have.

Those cells and individuals do not need great financial resources. They misuse the Internet to access bomb-making guidelines, they spread their hateful ideology on social media for propaganda and recruitment purposes, and they exchange information on the dark-web for their heinous purposes.

Terrorists are also likely to try to weaponize new and emerging technologies, such as drones, artificial intelligence and synthetic biology. Reportedly, Da'esh successfully used commercial drones for surveillance missions in Syria and armed them with grenades during the battle for Mosul in 2017.

To counter such threats, we need to expand our toolbox to include new instruments. Artificial Intelligence and Robotics in particular are promising technologies that could provide law enforcement with important tools to support their efforts to counter terrorism.

Robotic patrol systems could help police in remote border areas and drones already assist with surveilling territory that is difficult to access, but that is often misused by terrorists as safe haven. Big data and artificial intelligence could help detect, or even predict and prevent crimes, including terrorism.

Machine learning is already employed to find terrorism related content on social media. As computer processing power and available data increase, abhorrent videos such as footage of the recent terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, will be removed from the internet more quickly. When all these technologies are combined and feed into one command and control centre, law enforcement will be empowered to react more swiftly and in targeted fashion to potential terrorist threats.

However, there are three important aspects that we must consider in this context.

First, it is important to ensure that all Member States have access to and benefit from these new technologies. This is crucial. Member States in the global south are most affected by the scourge of terrorism, but do not always have the required means to protect their populations from terrorist attacks. I therefore call upon Member States and the private sector to share their expertise and support developing countries in their efforts to counter terrorism.

I would like to offer the support of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism as a convener and enabler in this regard. I have already advised my Office to explore initiatives in the area of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data, to identify avenues to support Member States' counter-terrorism efforts with the help of these new technologies and I invite all of you to participate in our efforts.

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism is also jointly organizing with the Government of Belarus an International High-Level Conference on Countering Terrorism through Innovative Approaches and Use of New and Emerging Technologies, which will be held in September 2019 in Minsk.

The purpose of the Conference will be to shed light on the misuse of new technologies for terrorist purposes, but also on opportunities that artificial intelligence provides especially in the context of border security.

To better coordinate the capacity-building efforts within the United Nations system, we are also in the process of reinvigorating the multi-agency working group of the Global Counter-Terrorism Compact Task Force on Emerging Technologies and Critical Infrastructure. This working group will help us collaborate, leverage existing capacities, and reap synergies in our efforts to support Member States.

Secondly, while the development of new technologies is promising, we must always respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. Some of these technologies may be highly intrusive and infringe upon individuals' rights. We also need to keep a close dialogue with civil society organizations in this regard.

As Secretary-General Guterres has said, "When we protect human rights, we are tackling the root causes of terrorism," and Member States have recognized in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy that effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Advances in automation and robotics also pose a number of ethical questions and moral dilemmas. Should we leave war-fighting to machines? Should a robot be enabled to kill a human being based on code? These are questions we need to address and answer.

Thirdly, I am particularly grateful to our colleagues from UNICRI and INTERPOL for inviting private sector representatives to this important event.

The private sector is in many cases the engine of innovation and owns both the knowledge and the infrastructure of new technologies. I would be keen to learn about your views on how we can collaborate to use your inventions to counter-terrorism and for the good of humanity.

The risks we face leave us only one way forward. We need to continue innovating and collaborating among all of us – the United Nations, Member State Governments, and the private sector. I invite all of you here today to work hand in hand.

The Russian-American science fiction writer Isaac Asimov once famously said: “The saddest aspect of life is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.” End of quote. I therefore call upon you: Let us be wise, so that we can meet the legal and moral challenges of inventions to come.

Thank you.