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The Evolution of the UN's Role in the Fight Against Terrorism: A Computational Text Analysis of General Debate Speeches (1970–2020)

Abstract

This article examines the evolving role of the United Nations (UN) in global counter-terrorism efforts over the past fifty years through a textual analysis of speeches from the UN General Assembly's General Debate between 1970 and 2020. For much of its history, terrorism was treated primarily as a domestic or regional issue. Still, the September 11, 2001, attacks marked a pivotal shift, establishing terrorism as a global security threat and legitimizing the UN's expanded institutional mandate. By analyzing the frequency and context of terrorism-related terms, this study reveals how the public discourse of member states has evolved, reflecting a growing international consensus on the need for coordinated multilateral responses. The findings highlight initial tensions around sovereignty and diverse threat perceptions, alongside the emergence of a complex counter-terrorism architecture encompassing sanctions, normative strategies, and technical cooperation. This work offers a novel perspective on how the UN collectively framed and legitimized its central role in global counter-terrorism governance.

Keywords: United Nations, Counter-Terrorism, General Debate, General Assembly

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1. Introduction

Today, the United Nations (UN) plays a central and multifaceted role in global efforts to counter terrorism. Its institutional architecture now encompasses Security Council sanctions regimes targeting terrorist actors, a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the General Assembly, and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), which coordinates technical assistance and capacity-building efforts across the UN system. This architecture reflects a broad international consensus that terrorism is not merely a national threat, but a transnational one requiring collective action under the auspices of the UN.

However, this centrality was not always the case. For much of the UN's history, terrorism was treated primarily as a matter of national or regional law enforcement, with little interest among Member States in adopting a comprehensive international response (Millar & Rosand, 2006, pp. 16–17). Repeated calls from Secretaries-General to strengthen the UN's counter-terrorism capacity were, for the most part, ignored or sidelined. Even after high-profile terrorist incidents, the prevailing international norm emphasized state sovereignty and non-interference rather than collective security.

This article examines how and why this situation changed over the past five decades. It traces the evolution of Member States' attitudes toward terrorism and their growing willingness to confer institutional authority and resources on the UN to address the challenge as a threat to global security. Before the September 11, 2001, attacks, most governments regarded terrorism largely as a domestic issue falling outside the UN's core peace and security mandate. The 9/11 attacks by Al Qaeda fundamentally altered that consensus (Altiok & Street, 2020; David & Bailey, 2017; Fink, 2012; Rostow, 2002). In its immediate response, the Security Council, invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter, defined terrorism as a threat to international peace and security and imposed binding obligations on all Member States to cooperate in its suppression (UN, 2001b). By 2006, concerns over an overly security-centric approach led many States to push for a more inclusive institutional response. This shift enabled the General Assembly to take on a more active and normative role, contributing to the complex and diverse legal counter-terrorism framework that exists today (UN, 2006).

The existing literature has shed light on how certain States have shaped or responded to the UN's evolving role in counter-terrorism. Bernhard Blumenau (2014), for example, shows how West Germany advocated an expanded UN mandate in the 1970s, well before terrorism was widely conceived as a global challenge. More recently, Vikash Chandra has examined the evolution of China's (2019) and India's (2020) discourse on terrorism and multilateralism, using their diplomats' official UN speeches to explore their policy preferences. Other studies have addressed the legal, institutional, and normative tensions generated by post-9/11 counter-terrorism practices (Altiok & Street, 2020; David

& Bailey, 2017; Fink, 2012; Tiwari & Kashyap, 2020). While these works offer valuable insights, they often focus on individual countries or specific institutional mechanisms.

This article takes a broader perspective, asking: how have Member States collectively legitimized the UN's expanded role in counter-terrorism over the past 50 years? Rather than isolating individual policies or moments, it maps evolving discursive patterns in the UN General Assembly's annual General Debate—a forum where States articulate their foreign policy priorities in their own words. This approach makes it possible to track shifts in international consensus, revealing how terrorism moved from the margins to become a defining component of the global security agenda.

2. Methodology

The United Nations General Assembly's General Debate is one of the organization's most significant annual events. For nearly two weeks each September, world leaders gather at UN Headquarters in New York to deliver official statements reflecting their governments' perspectives on the most pressing global challenges. These carefully crafted speeches articulate national interests and foreign policy priorities (Baturu et al., 2017). Since the early 1970s, roughly 95% of Member States have participated regularly, with a growing trend since the 2000s for these statements to be delivered by heads of state or government rather than by foreign ministers, as had previously been the norm.

Because states control the content of their statements, the General Debate offers a valuable window into the evolution of global political priorities over time (Brun-Mercer, 2021, pp. 444–445). This article examines speeches delivered during the General Debate from 1970 to 2020, using the **R** programming environment¹ together with the **quanteda** package to manage and analyze large volumes of textual data (Benoit et al., 2018). All speeches analyzed are in English, and therefore searches and analyses were conducted exclusively on vocabulary in that language. The General Debate corpus is publicly available via the Harvard Dataverse (Jankin et al., 2021). Through various methods, this analysis explores how leaders' views on terrorism have evolved since 1970.

Standard preprocessing steps were applied,² including removing punctuation, numbers, and common stopwords; converting text to lowercase; and creating compound tokens such as “united_nations” and “counter_terrorism” to capture relevant collocations. To ensure the analysis focused exclusively on terrorism linked to political violence, I performed keyword-in-context (KWIC) searches to exclude irrelevant uses, such as the phrase “balance of terror,” which was employed in the

1 This is a programming language and an open-source environment for statistical computing and graphics.

2 For a summary of these steps, see Welbers et al. (2017).

context of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War.³ This process made it possible to identify which speeches referred to terrorism as a tactic of political violence.

The main analytical method was dictionary-based text analysis,⁴ which counts the frequency of terrorism-related terms over time and across different states, to reveal longitudinal trends in their salience and perceived importance. While this approach does not capture all semantic subtleties or nuances of sentiment, its interpretation was validated through contextual analysis. Using **quanteda**'s "textstat_keyness" function,⁵ I identified the 25 words most strongly associated in each decade of the UN General Debate corpus with the keywords "terrorism," "terrorist," and "terrorists." These words, shown in Figure 2, help shed light on leaders' attitudes toward terrorism.

This methodology provides a systematic means of tracing the public evolution of States' positions on terrorism within the UN, while also highlighting changes in multilateral cooperation on this issue. It also identifies key moments of transformation and emerging patterns of consensus. The following section presents the results of the analysis.

3. Main Findings

Although the late 1960s saw a rise in the frequency of terrorist attacks, it was in 1972, following the attack against Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games, that the United Nations began to treat this phenomenon as an international security issue. Just days before the opening of that year's General Debate, UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim urged participating leaders to reflect on how to address this threat (Reston, 1972). The Security Council, however, took no action.

While the General Assembly failed to adopt a resolution condemning this or other attacks, from 1972 onward, it passed a series of resolutions that gave rise to international treaties and protocols criminalizing various activities associated with terrorism (Kramer & Yetiv, 2007, p. 412). By the 1990s, the Security Council had begun exercising its authority to impose sanctions regimes on States directly supporting terrorist groups, as well as on individuals and organizations linked to the al-Qaeda network, particularly after the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in East Africa (von Einsiedel, 2016, pp. 1–2).

3 For a detailed explanation of this function, see Watanabe and Müller (2025b).

4 For an analysis of this method and its application, refer to the work of Boumans and Trilling (2016) and Guo et al. (2016).

5 For a detailed explanation of this function, consult the documentation written by Watanabe and Müller (2025a).

The evolution of the UN’s role in counter-terrorism was nonetheless gradual. Many States were reluctant to grant the organization the capacity to intervene in their internal struggles against armed groups. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, however, and in the face of the clear threat posed by al-Qaeda and its network of jihadist groups, governments worldwide promoted the creation of a new international counter-terrorism architecture. This initially centered on the Security Council and was later expanded to include the General Assembly as well as various UN agencies, programs, and funds (Sherman & Sarfati, 2021). Counter-terrorism thus became one of the organization’s central priorities (Altiok & Street, 2020).

The textual analysis of the General Debate corpus reflects this historical narrative. The frequency of the term “terrorism” shows a marked increase in attention to the issue over time, especially after the September 11 attacks. As shown in Figure 1, during the 1970s and 1980s, references to terrorism were scarce and remained marginal among the topics discussed, in a context where the dominant security discourse focused on Cold War tensions, decolonization, and regional conflicts. In contrast, from the 2000s onward, “terrorism” became one of the most frequently mentioned terms, reflecting growing global concern and its consolidation as a priority on the international agenda.

Figure 1. Rank of the Number of Terrorism Mentions in the UN General Debate Corpus by Decades

Decades	Frequency	Rank	Document Frequency
1970–1979	910	533	299
1980-1989	1301	420	511
1990-1999	1444	329	599
2000-2009	5844	22	1391
2010-2019	3280	65	1107

Source: author’s own calculation

Examining the terms associated with “terrorism” reveals how the discourse has evolved over the decades (see Figure 2). In the 1970s, the focus was on hostage-taking, hijackings, and aircraft diversions, in line with UN negotiations and the adoption of related conventions, such as the 1970 Hague Convention on Hijacking of Aircraft. Regional conflicts also appeared, including references to groups involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reflecting an early international recognition of the geopolitical dimensions of terrorism.

In the 1980s, the discourse shifted toward state-sponsored terrorism and its links to drug trafficking, with mentions of Armenian groups connected to attacks against Turkish officials (Gunter, 2007). This decade also saw increased references to terrorism as a tactic embedded in broader ideological conflicts, including those in Latin America. In the 1990s, concerns intensified regarding the relationship between terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking, alongside initial mentions of al-Qaeda's attacks on U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998. There were strong condemnations of all “acts” and “manifestations” of terrorism, as well as calls to adopt international conventions on terrorist attacks and terrorism financing.

Figure 2. Main Words Associated with “Terrorism” and “Terrorist*” in the UN General Debate Corpus by Decade

Decades	The top 25 associated words
1970-1979	<i>Acts, Innocent, Violence, Kidnapping, Deir Yassin, Irgun, Subversive, Hijacking, Organizations, Victims, Hostages, Combat, Indiscriminate, International Terrorism, Subversion, Gangs, Haganah, Leumi, Subversives, Crimes, Reprisals, Stern, Criminal, Murder, Gang</i>
1980-1989	<i>Acts, Innocent, State-sponsored, Violence, International Terrorism, Narco, Attacks, Condemn, Hijacking, Armenian, Criminal, Subversion, Groups, Combat, Extradition, Combating, Whoever, Condemned, Scourge, Phenomenon, Forms, State, Drugs, Differentiate, Crime</i>
1990-1999	<i>Acts, Drug-trafficking, Bombings, Organized crime, Fight, Combat, Manifestations, Forms, Crime, Suppression, Combating, Drugs, Attacks, Extremism, Narco, Dar Salaam, Condemn, International Terrorism, Condemns, Drug traffickers, Money launderers, Money-laundering, Embassies, Violence, Phenomenon</i>
2000-2009	<i>Acts, Attacks, Fight, Suppression, Manifestations, Forms, Combat, Combating, September, Conventions, Threat, Innocent, Condemnation, Coalition, Extremism, Attack, Condemns, Organized crime, International terrorism, Counter terrorism, Scourge, Condemn, Struggle, Beslan</i>
2010-2019	<i>Extremism, Violent extremism, Groups, Attacks, Fight, Acts, Manifestations, Fighters, Organized crime, Forms, Extremist, Attack, Threat, Combating, Countering, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, Boko Haram, Daesh, Transnational, Drug Trafficking</i>

The 2000s marked a turning point: “terrorism” became one of the most frequently mentioned terms, with speeches strongly condemning Al Qaeda attacks, particularly 9/11, as well as violence by Chechen militants. Terms like “combat,” “combating,” and “coalition” reflected support for coordinated global counterterrorism efforts. The increasing use of “counter terrorism” signaled acceptance of the UN’s expanded role beyond its traditional peacekeeping and humanitarian functions.

In the 2010s, rhetoric increasingly included terms such as “extremism” and “violent extremism,” in line with Security Council resolutions⁶ and the General Assembly’s *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (UN, 2015), both developed in response to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Mentions of “fighters” referred to foreign terrorist combatants traveling to conflict

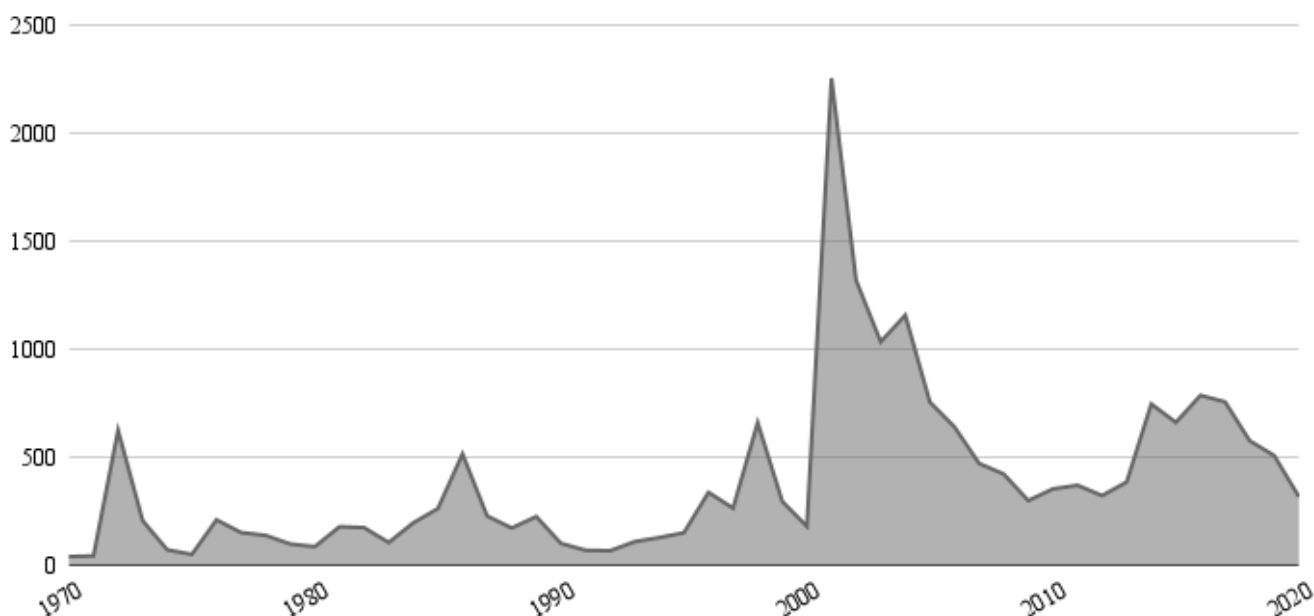
⁶ For example, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2178 (2014) and Resolution 2354 (2017) with the aim of preventing extremism and curbing the flow of foreign fighters.

zones, while specific groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (also known as Daesh), and Boko Haram appeared frequently, highlighting the diversity of emerging threats.

Temporal spikes in terrorism mentions occurred immediately after 9/11, but also in 1972 (following the Munich Olympic massacre), 1986, and 1998. The 1986 increase reflected a fragmented discourse: Latin American and Caribbean states focused on links between terrorist groups and drug cartels, while others criticized U.S. actions in Libya and Nicaragua, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and apartheid in South Africa. The 1998 peak coincided with al-Qaeda attacks in East Africa and calls for new counterterrorism measures. The post-2013 rise reflected heightened attention to ISIS.

Figure 3. Count of References to Terrorism in the UN General Debate, 1970–2020

Source: author's own calculation



Beyond mentions of terrorism, references to “counter terrorism” efforts, including anti-terrorism initiatives and UN institutional mechanisms, increased significantly after 9/11, confirming a major shift in global discourse supporting the UN’s expanded counterterrorism mandate. Figure 4 shows a table with the frequency of terms related to “counter terrorism” by decade. Figure 5 shows the number of mentions per year, while Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of countries that referenced counter terrorism in their speeches each year.

Figure 4. Frequency of Mentions of Terms Associated with Counterterrorism in the UN General Debate by Decade

Decade	Anti Terrorism	Counter Terrorism	Counter Terrorism Committee	Global Counter Terrorism Strategy	UN Office of Counter Terrorism
1970-1979	1	1	0	0	0
1980-1989	0	6	0	0	0
1990-1999	8	6	0	0	0
2000-2009	111	230	145	169	0
2010-2019	18	157	8	86	4

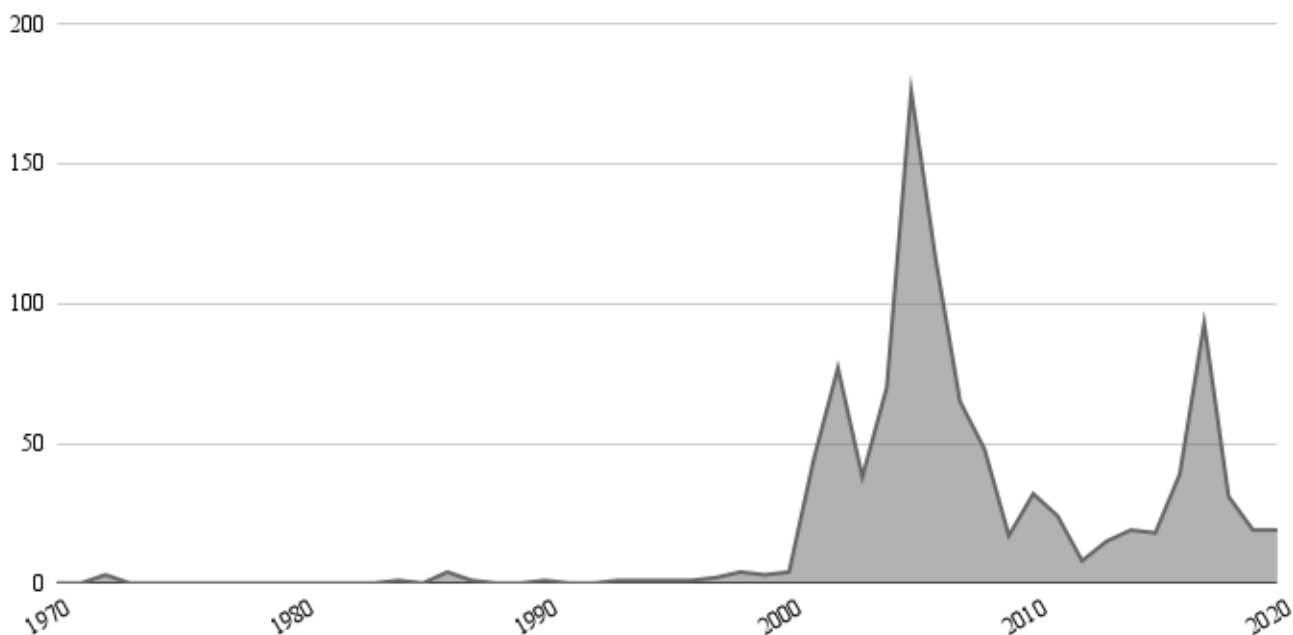
Source: author's own calculation

This increase in the number of mentions related to “counter terrorism” was influenced by key events of the 2000s. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, approved by the Security Council as a direct response to the 9/11 attacks (UN, 2001a), consolidated international consensus around the need for collective action against al Qaeda and transnational terrorism (Malone, 2006, pp. 121–125). In contrast, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, carried out without UN approval and opposed by U.S. allies such as France and Germany, revealed the limits of that consensus (Weiss et al., 2014, pp. 128–135). These tensions were also reflected in General Debate speeches, where states articulated divergent positions on the legitimacy of the war and on the scope of the UN's role in combating terrorism.

However, the regional instability generated by the invasion of Iraq, combined with military campaigns against al Qaeda and its affiliated networks, contributed to the emergence of the self-proclaimed ISIS. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, ISIS's rise and its proclamation of a territorial caliphate in 2014 reactivated international consensus, spurring new “counter terrorism” strategies backed by both the Security Council and the General Assembly. This consensus translated into specific resolutions on foreign terrorist fighters and into the adoption of the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, initiatives that, as noted earlier, reflect an effort to broaden the UN's normative framework in response to contemporary terrorism (Altiok & Street, 2020, pp. 8–9).

Figure 5: Number of References to Terms Associated with Counterterrorism in the UN General Debate, 1970–2020

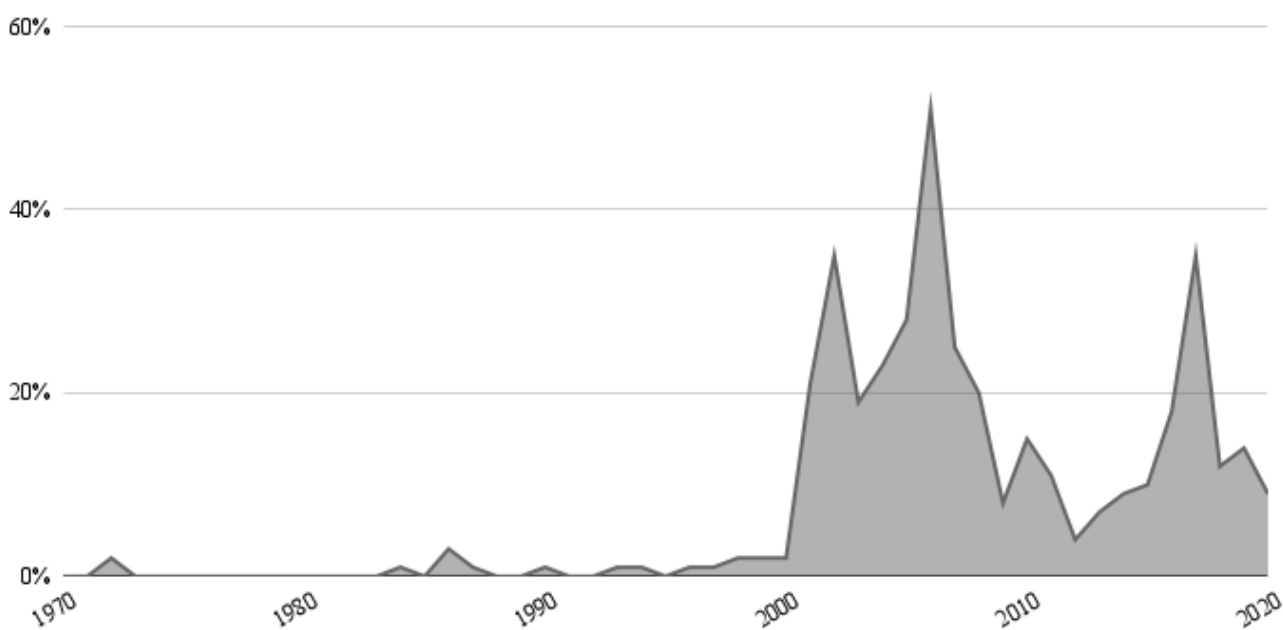
Source: author's own calculation



A key reason behind state support for the expanded role of the UN lies in the evolving understanding of the diverse threats posed by terrorist groups. Before 9/11, states generally avoided explicitly naming these groups in their General Debate speeches, opting instead for more general discussions of terrorism as a tactic. Countries facing terrorism tended to request limited international involvement, fearing impacts on their sovereignty, while others used the platform to denounce alleged state sponsors or condemn specific attacks, reflecting divergent political priorities.

Figure 6: Annual Percentage of States Mentioning a Term Associated with Counterterrorism in the UN General Debate, 1970–2020

Source: author's own calculation



Al Qaeda's attacks, starting with the 1998 bombings and culminating in 9/11, marked a turning point. These events led many states to explicitly address Al Qaeda and its affiliates as transnational threats and to advocate for strengthening the UN's coordinating role. The attacks demonstrated the insufficiency of purely national responses and generated consensus on the need for multilateral cooperation under UN leadership.

Using the Global Terrorism Database (START 2022), this study identified the most active terrorist organizations between 1970 and 2019 and analyzed their mentions in UN speeches. These organizations are listed in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Terrorist Groups Referenced in the UN General Debate, 1970-2020⁷

Terrorist Group	Incidents	Mentions in the General Debate	Number of Countries that Mentioned the Group
Taliban	12,195	404	48
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	7,161	544	60
Shinning Path	4,564	11	2
Al Shabaab	4,212	95	25
Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)	3,353	34	14
Boko Haram	3,052	112	39
Irish Republican Army (IRA)	2,882	20	4
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)	2,795	31	3
Maoísts	2,669	7	3
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	2,594	9	2
Al Qaida	2,407	230	63
Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA)	2,124	2	1
National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN)	1,683	16	7
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	1,606	79	3
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	1,580	1	1
Hamas	606	177	16
Hezbollah	407	29	15

Groups active before 9/11, such as ETA, IRA, and FMLN, were mentioned infrequently and primarily by the countries affected. For example, Ireland frequently mentioned the IRA, while the United Kingdom did not, reflecting differing political sensitivities. References to the FARC and ELN mainly came from Colombia, with similar patterns for the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, the PKK

7 The number of incidents was collected by the Global Terrorism Database (START, 2022).

in Turkey, and Shining Path in Peru. In contrast, Boko Haram, the Taliban, ISIL, and Al Qaeda were widely mentioned by various countries, reflecting their transnational threat profile and the perception that national-level responses were insufficient. This widespread recognition helped build consensus in favor of a coordinated global response under the UN's auspices, reinforcing the legitimacy of the organization's expanded mandate in counterterrorism.

In sum, dictionary-based textual analysis reveals several reasons explaining the expansion of the UN's role in counterterrorism after 9/11: the rising global relevance of terrorism; its shift in perception as a transnational threat; the increase in mentions of specific terrorist organizations; and the rise of discourse around coordinated counterterrorism efforts under the UN's leadership. However, complementary methods, such as supervised and unsupervised machine learning, could provide additional nuance. Likewise, a more detailed analysis of emblematic attacks from earlier decades—such as the Munich massacre or terrorist acts from the 1980s, could shed further light on the gradual transformation of the UN's role in counterterrorism.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of five decades of speeches at the United Nations General Assembly reveals a clear trajectory: terrorism shifted from a peripheral topic to a central concern that legitimized the expansion of the UN's institutional role in the global fight against terrorism. This change reflects both a transformation in member states' threat perceptions and a growing consensus that terrorism is a collective problem requiring multilateral solutions.

This transformation accelerated dramatically after the September 11 attacks, which dismantled the previous framing of terrorism as primarily a domestic or regional challenge. After 9/11, the Security Council invoked its authority to impose binding obligations, and the General Assembly took on a broader role both normatively and operationally. This culminated in an institutional architecture currently encompassing sanctions regimes, normative strategies, and capacity-building mechanisms designed to foster international cooperation.

However, this evolution was neither automatic nor free of controversy. Initial resistance to expanding the UN's role reflected concerns about sovereignty, political sensitivities, and divergent threat perceptions. For decades, the discourse remained fragmented, shaped by regional conflicts, ideological rivalries, and competing priorities. The gradual legitimization of the UN's counterterrorism efforts depended on shifts in these political dynamics and the development of a shared understanding of terrorism as a threat to international peace and security.

Looking ahead, the challenge is to balance effective counterterrorism action with respect for human rights, the rule of law, and political pluralism. The UN's evolving role must continue to adapt to the changing nature of terrorism and the geopolitical environment, maintaining its legitimacy through inclusion and transparency. The corpus-based approach adopted in this article offers a novel perspective on how member states have collectively framed and legitimized the UN's role over time.

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