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Saudi Arabia to Lead UN Counter Terrorism Initiative

By [Brooke Goldstein](#) and [Zack Kousnetz](#)

If the UN were to form an anti-terrorism group dedicated to attacking the menace on a global scale, who do you think would be asked to lead it? A nation with a proven track record of anti-terror initiatives? A nation that esteems human rights and freedoms above all else? Unfortunately, in the case of the UN Centre for Counter Terrorism (UNCCT), the answer is emphatically neither.

The UNCCT was formed in September 2010 with the purpose of executing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by the General Assembly in 2006. In a move more befitting *Alice in Wonderland* than the United Nations, Saudi Arabia was named chair of the organization.

The Resolution that created the UNCCT highlighted four key "**pillars**" in the fight against terrorism. The first of these pillars, "tackling the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism," was undermined almost immediately upon the organization's establishment. Three months after the UNCCT's formation, WikiLeaks exposed a trove of diplomatic [cables](#) in which Secretary of State Hilary Clinton **wrote** "Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, LeT, and other terrorist groups, including Hamas." Clinton's US embassy cables also revealed Saudi resistance to prioritizing the issue in terms of its own domestic policy.

These revelations are perhaps not so surprising in light of the Saudi kingdom's lukewarm response to terrorism funding and [recruitment](#) within its borders. Remember when, in the months following the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Arabia denied the fact that 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, before eventually **confirming** the undeniable truth in 2002? Even worse, this past February two former US senators involved in the 9/11 inquiries suggested in separate affidavits that the Saudi government may have played a direct role in the attacks themselves.

It's an ironic twist that the UN appointed Saudi Arabia, a country historically labeled by groups like the CATO Institute as a state sponsor of terrorism, to chair the flagship effort to end such practices. The UN's actions speak to a certain cluelessness it exhibits as a governing body: the organization bows to diplomatic and political courtesies while ignoring what's happening on the ground.

The designation is also farcical in another sense. Saudi Arabia's human rights record blatantly contradicts the UNCCT's fourth pillar, "ensuring respect for human rights against the backdrop of the fight against terrorism," as evidenced by the nation's [treatment](#) of its own citizens. Amnesty International's 2012 Report **details** the state's numerous abuses: public demonstration is forbidden, females face harshly oppressive discrimination in both the law and society, citizens are subject to

torture and confinement for excessive periods of time without due process of law, etc. And the Amnesty International report is not even comprehensive. For example: it fails to mention LGBT rights or the fact that homosexuality in the Saudi kingdom is a capital offense.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored curriculum continues to foster a learning environment of intolerance and discrimination. As detailed in the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom's recently published report, the Saudi Kingdom's academic curriculum for grades 1-12 contains textbooks that disparage Christianity and Judaism and tutors on the subject of jihad and war against nonbelievers. In 2010, a special investigation by the BBC's *Panorama* **discovered** that part-time schools "teaching the official Saudi national curriculum" in the United Kingdom were imparting messages of anti-Semitism and homophobia to young Muslim students, as well as illustrating how to punish thieves by cutting off the criminal's hand or foot.

It is no secret that Saudi Arabia holds a strong anti-democracy stance, as exemplified in March 2011 when the kingdom sent troops into Bahrain to help repress protests during a government crackdown. Freedom of expression is nearly non-existent; a draft of the nation's own anti-terror law **leaked** in July 2011 would suppress free speech and could punish blasphemy with death.

The greatest irony of all is the UN's failure to come up with a legal definition for the act of terrorism while purporting to fight it with projects like the UNCCT. While the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism has been in the works since 2000, the UN General Assembly Sixth Committee (Legal) has reached an **impasse** in negotiations. The result is that the UNCCT exists without any clear international definition the word "terrorism."

The standoff is the outcome of maneuvering by the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**, a 57-member voting bloc that represents itself as the "collective voice of the Muslim world." The group refuses passage of any Sixth Committee Resolution defining terrorism unless it exempts certain kinds of conflicts, such as "armed struggle against foreign occupation." This means that, according to the OIC, attacks on civilians would not constitute terrorism as long as they were citizens of a so-called "occupying power." This is obviously unacceptable.

The UN must first facilitate a consensus between states on the definition of terrorism if it is to effectively combat the threat. Furthermore, it's incumbent upon all Western democracies and especially the Obama administration to lobby for the removal of Saudi Arabia from the UNCCT. The UN needs to stop playing political games when human lives are thrown into the mix; terrorist groups will continue to survive as long as there are nations that remain lax on enforcement and bodies like the UN that reward complacency. Only an international campaign that possesses both legitimacy and resolve has the potential to eradicate -- or at least suppress -- terrorism.

Brooke Goldstein is a New-York based human rights attorney and award winning filmmaker as well as the founder and director of The Lawfare Project, and director of the Children's Rights Institute. Zack Kousnetz is a student-fellow at the Children's Rights Institute and a rising second-year student at the New York University School of Law.