



SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL



México
Misión Permanente de México ante
los Organismos Internacionales
en Ginebra



Side event: The abuse of counter-terrorism law to combat drugs and other organized crime

Co-hosted by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, in collaboration with Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), Charity & Security Network and the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)

Date: 11 March 2026 | **Time:** 13.00-14.00 | **Location:** UNOG, Building A, Room III

Concept Note

Background

In recent years, several States in the Americas have expansively applied counter-terrorism laws to encompass drug-trafficking organizations, cartels, maras, gangs and other forms of organized crime, particularly by listing them as terrorist organizations. While the term “narco-terrorism” surfaced in the 1980s in relation to drug cartel violence, it has reappeared in contemporary discourse and is increasingly used to reframe highly securitized State responses to drug-related criminality. The term “narco-terrorism” has not been formally or legally agreed upon by the UN or any other multilateral or regional organization or forum. While there can be links between terrorism and organised crime, it is seldom appropriate or justified to legally designate profit-motivated criminal groups as “terrorists”. This trend is also being used to encourage mass deportations of people accused of terrorism to detention facilities in inhumane conditions and to third countries where they have no ties. This shift, adopted or contemplated in parts of the Americas, brings significant risks for compliance with international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international refugee law.

This trend came into particularly sharp focus following the United States’ use of lethal force on the high seas, beginning in September 2025, against vessels alleged to be linked to drug trafficking. UN experts have warned that these attacks have violated the right to life under international human rights law and the rules on interdiction of vessels and use of force under the international law of the sea and involved the abusive invocation of international humanitarian law targeting rules in the absence of any genuine armed conflict.¹ Subsequent developments, including reported in-country operations in Venezuela in January 2026, took the abuse of “narco-terrorism” narratives to new heights, in violation of the fundamental international prohibitions on the use of force and aggression.

¹ See [USA 30/2025](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/un-experts-condemn-us-aggression-against-venezuela), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/un-experts-condemn-us-aggression-against-venezuela>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/un-experts-condemn-united-states-blockade-and-aggression-against-venezuela>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/11/unprovoked-lethal-strikes-united-states-against-vessels-sea-may-amount>

These developments have raised fears of further escalations of cross-border violence in the Americas, endangering sovereignty, non-intervention, and adherence to Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.

The increasing designation of certain drug-trafficking and organized criminal groups as terrorist organizations is often accompanied by harmful political narratives that associate drug trafficking with irregular migration and wider national security threats. These narratives, often associated with racism and xenophobia, present and contribute to persecuting social phenomena such as migration as criminal offenses. UN experts have cautioned that the conflation of organized crime and terrorism risks blurring the legal distinctions between the legal frameworks developed to address each type of crime, including the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. This has resulted in not only lowering threshold for the use of lethal force, but also in extending exceptional counter-terrorism powers, including summary deportations and arbitrary detention in contravention of international law. There are also serious due process concerns surrounding terrorist designations.

Best practice international standards on definition of terrorism sharply differentiate between terrorism as political violence and organized crime for profit, as set out in the March 2026 report on definition by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism ([A/HRC/61/52](#)).

The renewed invocation of “narcoterrorism” has also coincided with a resurgence of militarized “war on drugs” and public emergency approaches in parts of the region. Historically, such approaches have been associated with extrajudicial killings, erosion of due process, unjustified expansion of exceptional powers, and restrictions on civic space, with little evidence of durable reductions in drug-related violence. Measures to structurally prevent drug trafficking are increasingly overlooked, including preventive public health and education initiatives in the States to which drugs are trafficked, stronger controls on illicit and licit firearms transfers from North to South America, and alternative measures to reduce the demand for drug trafficking.

Purpose of the side event

Against this backdrop, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism will convene a side event on the margins of the 61st session of the Human Rights Council to examine the human rights consequences of these evolving trends. The event will analyze contemporary abuses of the “narco-terrorism” narrative in light of best practice international standards on the definitions of terrorism and organized crime, explore the legal and operational risks associated with expanding counter-terrorism frameworks to drug-related criminality, and consider the implications of militarized responses, particularly those involving the use of lethal force at sea or in foreign territory. It will also provide an opportunity to discuss how the international community can respond in a manner that safeguards respect for human rights and international law, reinforces the distinction between and the effectiveness of the legal regimes for addressing terrorism and organized crime, and promotes accountability, oversight, and evidence-based policymaking.

Opening remarks:

- H.E. Amb. Francisca E. Méndez Escobar, Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva.

Panellists

- Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Ben Saul
- CCR, Samer Araabi, Associate Director of Political Education and Research
- CELS, Lucía Galoppo, Lawyer for the International Team
- Charity and Security Network, Katherine Tomaszewski, Senior Legal Advisor
- International Drug Policy Consortium, Adrià Cots Fernández, Senior Advocacy and Research Associate

Information and registration

*The event will be held in a **hybrid format**. Simultaneous interpretation into Spanish will be available for in-person participants. For those joining virtually, interpretation cannot be provided, and the event will be held in English. A Spanish version of the side event will be made available at a later stage.*

Participants are kindly requested to register via the following link: [The abuse of counter-terrorism law to combat drugs and other organized crime \(11 March 2026\): Overv...](#)

Please note that registration is mandatory. Kindly address any questions or concerns regarding this event to hrc-sr-ct@un.org