

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Assembling global security law and the politics of scale-making: the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)

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## Abstract

This article rethinks ‘the global’ by analysing the emergence and growth of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an informal platform of multilateral counterterrorism co-operation which has been instrumental in the making of post-9/11 global security law and governance. It problematises and empirically analyses how global scale is enacted through the socio-material practices of translation and assemblage that have been deployed in the construction, maintenance and extension of the GCTF governance network. Drawing from interviews with policy experts and GCTF members, and from participant-observation in GCTF and UN events, the article contributes to the theme of the Special Issue and wider legal debates about the spatiotemporal dynamics of global law and governance by critically analysing how global scale is fabricated in practice and unpacking the politics of GCTF’s global scale-making processes. Focusing on specific techniques and norm-creation processes of the GCTF, like watch-listing toolkits and ‘good-practice’ documents on foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and countering violent extremism (CVE), the article analyses how translation, problematisation and enrolment practices have assembled the GCTF as an ‘apolitical’ global security governance body. Our approach opens novel possibilities for socio-legal research on the politics of scale-making and critiquing global security power in action through empirical attention to its assemblage practices.

**Keywords:** Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF); scale-making; assemblage; global security law and governance

## 1 Introduction

With the emergence of novel threats that traverse national boundaries – like the flow of so-called ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ (FTFs) and other ‘risky’ travellers, ‘violent extremism’ and the rapid circulation of ‘terrorist and violent extremist content’ (or, TVEC) online – the international security system is changing. New coalitions, techniques and organisational networks are being forged to pre-emptively counter transboundary threats in more dynamic ways, in line with the trope that ‘networked threats require networked solutions’ (Slaughter, 2017: 12; for a critique see Rodiles, 2018). New global security infrastructures, driven by rapid advances in AI and automated decision-making processes, are emerging which reshape counterterrorism practices in far-reaching ways (Sullivan, 2022). These shifts have given rise to a post-9/11 transnational regulatory architecture marked by ‘institutional and normative sprawl’, the global governance of an ever-expanding array of activities as potential security threats and the increasing erosion of international human rights law protections (De Londras, 2022: 1). And they are redrawing the

terrain on which international organisations (IOs), global governance bodies, private actors and states are working together to know and govern emergent global security risks and threats.

This article critically engages with this changing post-9/11 landscape by empirically examining the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). The GCTF was launched in September 2011 as ‘an informal, apolitical, multilateral counterterrorism platform’ (GCTF, 2024) to streamline international counterterrorism efforts and help implement UN obligations in this area. It creates ‘soft law’ outputs, including ‘good practices’, policy toolkits and standards, on a range of security issues, through informal norm-making processes and flexible partnerships with input from states, IOs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the small GCTF Administration Unit, counterterrorism experts, private security consultants and occasionally, academics. The GCTF is a relatively understudied global counterterrorism body (but see, Ní Aoláin, 2021; De Londras, 2022; Roele, 2022; Mignot-Mahdavi, 2024). We contend that the GCTF offers an ideal example for understanding how global law and governance is assembled, and for mapping how ‘small’ institutional bodies and networks in the counterterrorism domain can become ‘large’ and powerful.

In line with the theme of this Special Issue, our study of the GCTF helps in rethinking ‘the global’ by focusing on the scale-making, translation and assemblages practices that diverse GCTF actors have deployed and that have given them shape. In doing so, we engage with the Special Issue invitation to depart from the dominant *a priori* conceptualisations of ‘the global’ that have long shaped international legal thought by default by examining how global scale is enacted through the GCTF’s practices of legal worldmaking (Rajkovic 2025). Our analysis draws from critical accounts of international ordering as a practice of legal imagination and bricolage (Kennedy, 2016; Koskeniemi, 2021: 4–8). But we contend that this bricolage, or assemblage, is not just about ideational phenomena or concerned with the construction of appropriate idioms of argumentation, epistemological frames and representational vocabularies for international rule. It always involves diverse elements that are both discursive and non-discursive, including particular governance devices, socio-material techniques and assemblage processes for knowing and governing specific problems, as well as sociotechnical infrastructures and their material practices (Sullivan, 2020). In our approach to ‘the global’ and practices of international legality, discourse and materiality are inescapably enmeshed and co-constitutive (Foucault, 1980; Aradau et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2025). And because the power relations that global assemblages enact are entangled with their processes of operation, they need to be grasped in practice through their relational effects and emergent processes (Johns, 2021; Sullivan and Van Den Meerssche, 2024). It is a socio-legal approach to the study of global law and governance in action that resonates with the relational materialism of Foucauldian governmentality studies, actor–network theory (ANT) and legal materiality scholarship (Latour, 2007; Li, 2007; Lemke, 2021; Johns, 2023).

Existing analyses of the GCTF tend to focus on the quality of its norms (informal/formal) and the various ways informality weakens human rights (Ní Aoláin, 2021; Baumann, 2022). While this is an important part of GCTF’s power as a global security actor, we favour a different approach. One that also attends to the socio-material processes through which global law and governance is fabricated and made powerful in practice, focusing on ‘the techniques and translations through which objects, subjects and modes of governance are constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and ordered’ (Flyverbom, 2010: 440). To get at these socio-material dynamics, we reorientate our study of ‘the global’ from normative questions to empirical processes involved in the GCTF’s construction.

Our socio-legal analysis draws on interviews with policy experts, GCTF members and NGOs from across the GCTF network undertaken in 2018–2019, and participant observation in GCTF events - including on the sidelines of the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in 2018, and involvement by the second author in the GCTF Counterterrorism Watchlisting Toolkit Initiative in 2020–2021 (GCTF, 2021). As elaborated below, we use this interview material to highlight key translation processes – including problematisation and enrolment practices – through which the

GCTF has been assembled. Studying translation processes is critical in the empirical analysis of emergent global governance networks because it is through such processes that ‘the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited’ and the diverse elements of material-discursive networks are operationally linked or sutured together (Callon, 1984: 203; Foucault, 1980; Flyverbom, 2010). In other words, we use our interview data strategically throughout this article not only to elucidate expert knowledge practices about the GCTF, but to trace how these epistemic processes are interconnected with and have enabled practices of socio-material assemblage and global scale-making.

We argue that empirically analysing scale-making and assemblage practices provides important insights into how global law and governance is enacted and sustained by highlighting the junctures, strategic alliances, translation processes and material-discursive moves that enable micro actors to ‘grow’ in size and become macro actors in emergent global networks (Callon and Latour, 1981). Our argument is informed by recent counterterrorism scholarship highlighting the specific ‘patterns of institutional practice’, processes of ‘institutional interlinkage’ and techniques of ‘orchestration’ and ‘managerial governance’ that have developed around the GCTF and helped to broaden its institutional reach (Rodiles, 2018; Ní Aoláin, 2021: 934; De Londras, 2022: 45; Roele, 2022: 27; Mignot-Mahdavi, 2024). Yet we push these important insights further by showing how these norm processes work alongside other socio-material, technical and discursive practices to disassemble international legal authority and assemble the GCTF as a powerful global body.

Drawing from ANT and science and technology studies (STS) scholarship, our empirical analysis in this article shows how distinctive translation practices of problematisation and enrolment have been central to the GCTF’s emergence, configuration and growth as a powerful and ‘apolitical’ global security governance network. We argue that critical scholarship on the GCTF (and informal international law-making more broadly) should move beyond problematising the ‘soft’ quality of its norms (Mignot-Mahdavi, 2024), the expertise of norm entrepreneurs and/or the power of the states involved in the GCTF’s creation. The global scale of the GCTF also needs to be unpacked by mapping and analysing its socio-material assemblage practices. This approach nuances our understanding of material agency in global security governance and opens possibilities for conceptualising and doing novel forms of immanent critique (Leander, 2021; Johns, 2016: 16–18). It also requires a concomitant shift in critical registers from the normative to the empirical, and use of methods that can map and analyse how global power relations and scale are made and sustained in practice.

We develop these claims in two moves. In section two, we critically assess how the global is usually conceptualised in law and governance scholarship and outline our alternative approach for examining global scale-making practices in action. In section three, we put this toolkit to use in order to trace and understand the GCTF’s key assemblage and scale-making practices. By focusing on problematisation, enrolment and moments of translation where ordering takes place (Flyverbom, 2010), we empirically analyse the GCTF’s relational interplays with other bodies, its entanglement with global security infrastructure projects and its particular construction and circulation of norms. We conclude by revisiting the key findings of the article and critically reflecting on the value of doing this socio-legal work in global security law and unpacking the patchy nature of global law through attention to the politics of scale-making (Tsing *et al.*, 2024).

## 2 Engaging with the politics and practice of global scale

Our analysis of the GCTF and ‘the global’ builds on critical research into global governance assemblage dynamics and related ideas on scalar complexity in global ordering (Sassen, 2008; Zumbansen, 2011; Sullivan, 2014; Valverde, 2015). In this way, we take a rather different approach to the global than much of the existing global law scholarship. Rather than asking what the global is conceptually and then analysing it as a distinctive epoch, definable space, set of organising logics

or particular governance scale with in-built assumptions about size and scope, we shift registers and ask *how* macro or global scale is enacted and made durable in practice. And instead of deploying methods that start with a theory of the global as an ideal-type with specific qualities and then seeking to confirm these features and enabling assumptions through empirical case studies, we reverse the direction. Drawing from governmentality studies, assemblage thinking and related work in ANT and STS, we repose ‘the global’ as a key problem to be explained through our research, building our theorising and critique of global security law and governance through our empirical description of how global scale is assembled in practice, using the GCTF as our example (Ong and Collier, 2005; Lerner and Walters 2004; Bueger, 2014; Valverde, 2009).

Analysis of global law and governance often disregards the socio-material conditions and politics of scale-making because governance scales tend to be taken for granted. Scale is often used as a pre-existing concept and supposedly stable background condition to explain globalisation, rather than as a problem and effect of governance to be empirically examined in itself. In the relational approach that we use, ‘the global’ lacks an independent existence outside the specific projects of governance that materialise it. And because it is always emergent and enacted through particular sites and programmes with their own rationalities, techniques and practices, site-specific and empirical analyses of global scale-making processes are needed (Marcus, 1995; Perry *et al.*, 2003; Ong and Collier, 2005). Our analysis of scale-making as a socio-material practice engages with current debates on law and infrastructure (Kingsbury, 2019; Rodiles, 2022a; Sullivan, 2022; Cohen, 2023; Johns, 2023; Sullivan and Van Den Meerssche, 2024) and legal materiality (Cloatre and Cowan, 2019; Hohmann, 2021). Four key elements of this scalar literature are particularly important in our analysis.

First, we analyse global scale-making as a socio-material practice enacted in localised sites. Here, we draw on the critical anthropology of Anna Tsing who argues that the enthusiasm and novelty often ascribed to globalisation processes is alluring, but usually comes with analytically blinding effects:

‘Globalization draws our enthusiasm because it helps us imagine interconnection, travel, and sudden transformation. Yet it also draws us inside its rhetoric until we take its claims for true descriptions ... Flow is valorized, but not *the carving of the channel* ... We lose touch with the material and institutional components through which powerful and central sites are constructed ... We describe the landscape imagined within these claims rather than the ... politics of scale making’ (Tsing, 2000: 330. Emphasis added).

Tsing suggests an alternate route for understanding global problems and their emergent forms of power by attending to ‘the carving of the channel(s)’ through which global processes are enacted. What is needed, she argues, is an empirical approach to ‘the global’ that questions scalarity itself or ‘makes scale an object of analysis’ by examining ‘the material and institutional infrastructure[s] of movement ... that limit or promote circulation’ and the ways powerful governance sites are practically assembled (Tsing, 2000: 338). We take seriously this call to unpack ‘the global’ by analysing the material and infrastructural conditions through which it is enacted. Enabling global ‘flow’ and scale requires hard work and the alignment of diverse actors, techniques and practices, and our analysis of the GCTF seeks to foreground this kind of socio-material work.

Second, we draw from the methodological toolkit of ANT to map how the global scale of the GCTF is assembled and maintained. For Callon and Latour, there are no intrinsic differences between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ actors and scales. ‘All differences in level, size or scope’, they argue, ‘are the result of a battle’ and effects of power relations and ‘the constructions of networks that will elude analysis if we presume *a priori* that macro actors are bigger or superior to micro actors’ (Callon and Latour, 1981: 279–280). Latour argues that ‘it is only by making flatness the default position of the observer that the activity necessary to generate some difference in size can be detected’, resulting in a methodological technique called ‘flattening the landscape’ (Latour, 2007:

182). By situating everything ‘side by side and firmly on the same plane’ through empirical analysis, processes enabling relative changes in scale can be highlighted – that is, ‘all the connections, the cables, the means of transportation, [and] the vehicles linking places together’, or socio-material networks which allow some actors to become ‘large’ by making others relatively ‘small’ in comparison (Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 2007: 176; Callon and Latour, 1981). In other words, this ANT flat-ontology approach is not about denying hierarchical power relations and structural divisions in the world. It is a methodological device that allows analysis of the assemblage of scale through sociotechnical practices and an important way of unpacking and tracing ‘the practical means of achieving power’ (Latour, 1988: 27–28). In our analysis, this flat-ontology approach is deeply concerned with materialisations of power, not disinterested in them, as sometimes suggested.

Differences in scale are produced via diverse ‘translation’ processes where an actor ‘takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another’ by enlisting ever greater quantities of ‘bodies, materials, discourses, techniques ... laws [and] organizations’ to their cause (Callon and Latour, 1981: 279, 284). This creates hierarchies by allowing actors to stabilise some relations such that they no longer need be considered and can become ‘matters of indifference’, while leaving others open to ongoing negotiation (Callon and Latour, 1981: 285). We find this isomorphic and relational approach to scale and mapping of scale-making practices especially generative for global socio-legal research. Drawing on this insight, we empirically examine the GCTF’s translation processes. In doing so, we loosely structure our empirical analysis around Callon’s classic STS formulation of translation and network construction. Accordingly, translation and network construction is constituted through processes of ‘problematisation’ as well as of ‘interessement’ and ‘enrolment’. Through problematisation, ‘particular ... actors position themselves as indispensable to others by defining the nature of the problem and offering a possible solution’. Interessement and enrolment refer to the imposition and stabilisation of ‘the identity of the other actors’ involved in the problematisation processes, thus defining and attributing a set of interrelated roles to network actors who accept them (Callon, 1984: 207–208). This approach helps us show how ‘problematisation’ is not merely ideational or an expert-led element of global governance, but something enacted through socio-material processes of alliance-construction and active disregard.

Third, our empirical analysis of global scale-making highlights practices of assemblage – that is, the ‘on-going labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging connections between them’ (Li, 2007: 263). Tania Li highlights six key assemblage practices that usually go unnoticed in global governance studies: *forging alignments* (‘the work of linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage’); *rendering technical* (‘extracting from the messiness of the social world ... a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c) a beneficial result’); *authorising knowledge* (‘confirming enabling assumptions; containing critiques’); *managing failures and contradictions* (‘presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies; smoothing out contradictions so that they seem superficial rather than fundamental’); *anti-politics* (reposing political questions as matters of technique’); and *reassembling* (‘grafting on new elements and ... deploying existing discourses to new ends’) (Li, 2007: 265). These practices do important translation work forging asymmetries of power and are closely imbricated in the fabrication of macro scale. We draw on this typology to examine how GCTF norms are made expansive, allowing the GCTF to ‘grow’ as a global security actor. Our interest in assemblage resonates with ANT-inflected international relations (IR) studies analysing authority and governance in world politics as the effects of international practices (McKeen-Edwards and Porter, 2013; Bueger, 2018). This focus on practice helps reorientate our analysis away from global epochal shifts and defining logics towards the specific sites, techniques and devices through which scale and power are practically assembled.

Fourth, drawing from STS and STS-inflected ethnographic and socio-legal research, we examine the scalar devices that various GCTF actors deploy and the governance assemblage work



they perform. Scalar devices are techniques, artefacts and representational conventions that actors use for knowing and managing large-scale enterprises (Ribes, 2014; Sullivan, 2022: S42). According to Ribes, ethnographic studies of scalar devices in action tend to highlight three specific elements: (a) ‘the development and deployment of a scalar device’, (b) ‘the resulting indicator and its reception’ and (c) ‘the down-stream consequences of indicators as they are wrapped into organizational action or design’ (Ribes, 2014: 160–161). This empirical study of scalar devices is often used in STS infrastructure and critical data studies (Bowker and Star, 1999), but rarely in global law and governance research (cf. Riles, 2011; Sullivan, 2020; Davis *et al.*, 2012). We draw on this work in unpacking the construction and circulation of GCTF ‘good practices’ and other informal norms to understand how they also help in fabricating and sustaining global scale.

Analysing scale-making as a socio-material practice, using ANT techniques like ‘flattening the landscape’, attending to the effects of translation processes and following the productive work of assemblage practices and scalar devices are the key elements that comprise the conceptual and methodological toolkit used in this paper to examine how the GCTF enacts global scale. In what follows, we put this toolkit to use by empirically analysing the assemblage and scale-making practices of the GCTF, focusing on its relational interplays with other bodies, its entanglement with global security infrastructure projects, and the construction and circulation of its norms. We conceptualise and study these global scale-making practices relationally – as practices that are both performed by the GCTF and which help enact the GCTF by giving it specific substance and institutional durability. As discussed above, our analysis draws on interviews with GCTF network members, participant-observation in GCTF and UN side-events, and the involvement of the second author in the GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit Initiative, all in the period between 2018 and 2021.

### 3 Global security in motion: mapping global scale-making and assemblage through the GCTF

This section examines how a ‘small’ informal coalition tasked with enhancing implementation of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy and UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions by disseminating ‘good practices’ has been able to become a ‘large’ and powerful institutional body in a relatively short period of time, producing regulatory networks and governance devices that have profound worldwide effects and that are reshaping global counterterrorism law in significant ways.

Establishing authority as a global security body and circulating global norms requires assemblage work. Diverse actors must be enrolled into the GCTF through processes of alignment and translation. Participants must be carefully selected to reflect ‘global spread’ and strategic relevance and conflicting perspectives need to be contained to minimise friction and facilitate ‘global’ consensus. Governance artefacts must be created and circulated to help bind the diverse elements of the GCTF network together and allow agreement on contentious security issues to be translated into ‘good practice’. Asymmetrical power relations and hierarchical decision-making structures must be built, reinforced and disavowed through the use of various governance techniques and devices. Criticisms of the GCTF must be anticipated and either avoided, repurposed or quelled. Close relations with competing international bodies and multilateral processes need to be fostered and maintained, even whilst GCTF working processes are reassembling international authority and multilateral governance in significant ways. Funding streams must be cultivated and financial incentives harnessed to drive implementation, maintain asymmetries and harmonise interests. And ‘politics’ must be avoided to maintain the fiction of an expert-led apolitical global security platform. As our analysis shows, each of these translation and assemblage practices have been crucial in the GCTF’s fabrication of scale.

### 3.1 Problematisation – or, how best to govern?

Scale is often made through translation processes that start with a problematisation. This means that ‘actors position themselves as indispensable to others by defining the nature of the problem and offering a possible solution’, formulating a strategic objective to address an ‘urgent need’ (Flyverbom, 2010: 430; Foucault, 1980; 195). Problematisations prefigure particular interventions and help assemble and format relations in important ways by outlining ‘a system of alliances or associations between entities’ and particular forms of ordering, establishing the identities of the actors involved, defining their linkages and positing some actors as crucial to the solution, thus establishing important hierarchies, elevating certain practices and defining what it is that the network ‘wants’ (Callon, 1984: 206).

The problematisation processes through which the GCTF emerged assembled relations in this way. The GCTF first emerged as an idea from US norm entrepreneurs in 2006–2007 as a potential solution to perceived deficiencies of international counterterrorism institutions in effectively countering networked security threats (Millar and Rosand, 2006; Rosand, 2007). These threats were represented as transboundary, ever evolving (iterative, dynamic, fluid), complex (cutting across cultural, religious and ethnic divides) and working to reconfigure established boundaries (e.g. between internal and external security, and ‘home-grown’ and transnational terrorist risks). Problematising the post-9/11 landscape in this way generated important governance effects and reshaped relations between key actors in particular ways.

First, it elevated transnational co-operation between states and the provision of technical capacity-building from global minority world states to global majority world states as key. When international security is problematised as a weakest-link public good – whereby terrorists are deemed to exploit ‘ungoverned spaces’, and security failings by one state potentially affect all the others – then comprehensive international co-operation becomes critical in attaining a new shared objective: ‘the goal of developing a seamless [global] counterterrorism web’ (Krisch, 2014). Second, when threats are reposed as ‘networked’, they call for a more ‘agile’ response than states or IOs have traditionally provided. As former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon put it: ‘The Internet is a prime example of how terrorists can behave in a truly transnational way; in response, States need to think and function in an equally transnational manner’ (UNODC, 2012: iii). In this way, continuous institutional learning, adaptive governance and flexible organisation became elevated and valorised as the new ‘global’ security imperatives.

Third, awareness of the limitations of the US-led ‘Global War on Terror’ and ‘hard’ military responses in addressing the ‘underlying conditions’ of terrorism facilitated the development of CVE discourse and practice. CVE reorients international counterterrorism governance towards an array of practices previously deemed to be either the internal affairs of states or outside the scope of security intervention altogether – for example, in the fields of development, health, education and family life (Rodiles, 2022b). It also reconfigures boundaries between internal and external security, with global terrorist threats ‘out there’ reframed as interconnected with ‘home-grown’ threats cultivated ‘here’, leading to important realignments within states and international bodies. Fourth, this reconfiguration of threat also stretched the temporalities of international security. It effected a shift from countering concrete threats to peace and security through targeted or time-limited measures towards a ‘decades-long struggle’ aimed at governing the social, political and ideological conditions deemed conducive to ‘terrorism’ and ‘violent extremism’, using pre-emptive security technologies and infrastructures that are ongoing and temporally unbounded (Rosand, 2007: 405; Rodiles, 2022b; Sullivan, 2020).

Most importantly, this problematisation diagnoses the post-9/11 UN-led multilateral response to terrorism as a failure, unable to effectively counter ‘the threat’ and obstructing the required type of co-operation needed. Post-9/11 UN security governance was largely dominated by three institutional bodies connected to the UNSC: (a) the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and its expert body, the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), which led on general

counterterrorism matters; (b) the Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee, which administered the UN's targeted counterterrorism sanctions regime; and (c) the 1540 Committee on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, with a focus on their non-acquisition by terrorists. With the growth of this problematisation, each of these bodies became framed as unduly bureaucratic, dominated by UN political considerations and of limited utility to actual counterterrorism practitioners. As one former US official involved in the creation of the GCTF explained: 'less than 2 years after 9/11 ... I couldn't get anyone in Washington to pay attention [to the CTC, because] ... they didn't see it as relevant to their work' (Interview 1). Also, there was limited experience within the UN counterterrorism architecture for sharing expertise or supporting capacity-building: 'When the UN would do [this]', it would ... be very staged and formalised. Everyone would sort of have their backs up ... watching out for the political angles' (Interview 1).

With this GCTF problematisation, the UN counterterrorism architecture was recast as too slow, legalistic and dominated by multilateral diplomacy and 'politics' to effectively counter terrorism and sustain the momentum generated after 9/11. This sense of failure was reinforced by the 2010 US National Security Strategy which highlighted 'the shortcomings of international institutions that were developed to deal with the challenges of an earlier time' and that called on the US to 'spur and harness a new diversity of instruments, alliances and institutions' as the appropriate remedy (White House, 2010: 3, 46). According to one US interviewee involved in creating the GCTF, 'that language [in the National Security Strategy] didn't appear there out of thin air. We put that in ... to give a boost to this idea [of the GCTF which] ... wasn't ready for prime time yet [because] we hadn't consulted with our allies' (Interview 1). In other words, to counter twenty-first-century global threats, a more agile, global body was needed. One which had to be able to (a) route around the 'politics' of IOs and avoid 'get[ting] bogged down in seemingly endless political debates'; (b) bring counterterrorism practitioners and experts from key states 'out of their shell' in informal settings; and (c) share experiences and build 'good practices' on pressing security issues (Rosand, 2007: 422).

So, already one year before the GCTF was formally launched in 2011, the key ensemble of actors and obstacle problems that were to hold this new global body together had been assembled. By convening this process as a state with extensive security expertise and financial resources to support counterterrorism capacity-building worldwide and by assuming the convening power to select GCTF founding members and participants, the US State Department Counterterrorism Bureau had already made themselves indispensable nodes in the new 'global' network that they were building. But to 'grow' from an idea not yet 'ready for prime time' into a global security governance body, this network first needed to be stabilised. National security practitioners from key states needed to accept the core elements of this problematisation, so that its assumptions about the nature of the threat, the ineffectiveness of IOs and the value of informal counterterrorism norm-making could be 'black-boxed', or accepted as given and non-contentious. They also needed to be interested in what a new expert-led, collaborative global security body might offer them and attenuate their ties with existing UN counterterrorism organisations. Resistance to the US idea of the GCTF and its disdain for formal multilateralism needed to be effectively neutralised through various strategies of interest capture, alignment and enrolment. Only in this way could the GCTF 'grow' in global scale and power.

### 3.2 Enrolment – capturing and aligning interests

This section examines three enrolment and assemblage strategies that were critical in the GCTF's global expansion. By enrolment, we refer to the power effect generated 'when an actor recruits existing networks of humans and non-humans into that actor's project', aligning their interests with the strategic needs of the assemblage of which they are a part of (McKeen-Edwards and Porter, 2013: 31). In STS scholarship, enrolment is a key stage in the process of translation and



fabrication of scale. It resonates with the insight from governmentality studies and ANT that ‘those who are powerful are not those who “hold” power in principle, but those who practically define and redefine what “holds” everyone together’ (Latour, 1986: 273). The three key GCTF enrolment strategies we analyse are: (a) dissipating potential resistance from UN actors, states, and critics; (b) promoting the GCTF as an ‘apolitical’ and ‘safe’ space shaped and dominated by functional security expertise; and (c) building artefacts for generating and sustaining ‘agreement’ on contentious security issues, including via informal counterterrorism norms. These enrolment strategies are neither exhaustive nor unique to the GCTF. But we empirically hone in on them to show how the GCTF has come to act as a privileged institutional site for global counterterrorism and how global scale is enacted in practice through it.

### 3.2.1 *Anti-politics – or, the neutralisation of resistance*

Translating the GCTF from a novel blueprint for counterterrorism governance conceived inside the US State Department into a powerful global governance mechanism required opposition from key players to be dissipated and transformed into alignment. Prior to the formal GCTF launch in 2011, the US State Department circulated a non-paper to key states they wanted to invite to the Forum. Opposition came from two main sources: Russia and China within the UNSC, and UN CTED from within the UN counterterrorism system (Interview 1).

At the time of the GCTF’s inception, Russia and China were heavily interested in maintaining the UNSC’s formal counterterrorism authority (Hedenskog, 2020: 32). They were protective of state sovereignty and wary of involving non-state actors, mostly civil society, in formulating responses to counterterrorism issues, particularly in relation to the elastic concept of CVE (Interview 2). Obtaining their support was deemed critical in allowing the GCTF to develop as a global body. As one interviewee put it: ‘We needed [Russia and China] for legitimacy with the UN’, and this neutralisation and enrolment in turn required three moves (Interview 1). First, the GCTF was made institutionally subservient to the UN in its formal documentation. This hierarchy was reinforced during initial GCTF consultations between the US, Russia and China in 2010–2011. The GCTF Political Declaration, the founding document setting out the body’s aims and objectives, explicitly asserts that one of the GCTF’s primary roles is to ‘realize implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy’ and ‘to develop a close and mutually reinforcing relationship with the UN system’ (GCTF, 2011: 3). Second, this political declaration made clear that the GCTF would refrain from the making of international law, primarily to enlist Russian and Chinese support. As a former US official involved in GCTF consultations explained in an interview conducted before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine:

R: ‘If Russia was out, it would be much more difficult than if otherwise. [So], we knew we had to bring them in early ...’

I: ‘What were those [initial GCTF] discussions like, with Russia and China?’

R: ‘It was all about no norm-setting. That this [i.e. the GCTF] is subservient to the UN. We are implementing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. It is a vehicle to support implementation of the UN framework. We don’t make law. We are not formal. It was all legalistic ... I mean, the wording of the declaration is that there’s nothing about ‘shall’ or any legalese. You will never see a legally binding-sounding word in any GCTF document. There is always a footnote saying: “Nothing in this document shall be seen as imposing any obligation.” It’s all voluntary ... [That’s] a comment to Russia .... and those countries [e.g. China] that are very sensitive about state sovereignty’ (Interview 1).

Third, enrolling these opponents also meant providing them with a sense of ownership over this new security body. For example, China has been particularly interested in countering the use of the internet for ‘terrorism’ or ‘violent extremism’ purposes and has held at least two GCTF events on this issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). As one interviewee explained: ‘China has a couple of things that it cares about and it follows these issues very closely . . . Proactively engaging on certain things like cyber issues [through the GCTF] has enabled [China] to feel like it’s theirs. Like they own a piece of it’ (Interview 1 emphasis added). Cultivating this sense of ‘ownership’ or identification with the GCTF was important for capturing the interest of, and enrolling, potential opponents. But it also had to be carefully managed to ensure that differences are streamlined, so ‘agreement’ could be forged and the validity of the original GCTF problematisation affirmed. The Chinese internet project, for example, was left to run its course with minimal GCTF support and then quickly absorbed by another GCTF online counterterrorism project co-led by the UK and Switzerland (Interview 2). The official launching of the GCTF in September 2011, coinciding with the tenth anniversary of 9/11, was conducted jointly by the USA and Turkey on the margins of the 66th session of the UN General Assembly (Slaughter, 2013). While Turkey clearly has its own counterterrorism priorities, this move can be seen as another effort to align potentially reluctant nations by signalling that the GCTF is not a purely Western endeavour and that it is tied to the UN and to multilateralism more broadly.

Neutralising resistance to the GCTF from UN counterterrorism bodies like CTED involved different enrolment strategies and required what one US interviewee described as ‘a careful dance’. According to this participant, while securing UN support for the GCTF, the US government also:

‘made sure that we were doubling down on our support for the UN at the same time – both our diplomatic and our funding support for UN counterterrorism efforts. We made a conscious effort to engage at a higher level with the Counterterrorism Committee (CTC) . . . [and we] became much more involved in the work of the CTED . . . We didn’t see it as zero-sum game’ (Interview 1).

Rendering the GCTF institutionally subservient to the UN system and enhancing US diplomatic and financial support for the UN substantially modified the original GCTF problematisation, which had specifically highlighted the failings of UN-led counterterrorism as the GCTF’s *raison d’être*. Yet, these enrolment practices paradoxically allowed the GCTF to grow because they ‘enabled the Russians . . . to be there. But not be obstructionist . . . Same as with China . . . And so, they don’t stand in the way when [there’s] cooperation between the GCTF and the UN’ (Interview 1). Extension of the GCTF’s global reach was forged through translation processes that effectively enrolled political opponents, while interrupting their competing associations with UN counterterrorism institutions by constructing a novel, informal and expert-led network of ‘global’ security actors and coalitions. But as we elaborate below, overcoming political resistance to the GCTF platform was not enough. A particular kind of global security environment also needed to be assembled for this network to effectively scale.

### 3.2.2 Fabricating ‘apolitical’ space

The second key enlistment practice we observe from our interview materials involves the fabrication of the GCTF as an ‘apolitical’ or ‘safe’ space. This particular spatial device and discourse of ‘safety’ seeks to engage national counterterrorism practitioners and key donor states and encourage them to rechannel their security expertise and funding through the novel institutional body of the GCTF. As one interviewee explained:

‘There has been sort of an understanding that politics like you see at the UN are left outside the room when you go into the [GCTF]. And that the whole reason for its existence was to

create a [politics-free] space – and everyone acknowledges, everyone who is a member of the Forum, sees that value. It's a space ... that's not operational, in the sense of operations being coordinated, and it's not intelligence-sharing ... It's much more sort of *practical*, like coordination, best-practices sharing. There is no judgment; there is no effort to name and shame. It's an informal platform and everyone knows that everything is voluntary. So, you basically put everyone at ease at the outset. *This is a safe space*' (Interview 1, emphasis added).

Given the GCTF's focus on politically contentious counterterrorism problems, sustaining this ideal of technocratic, apolitical governance is no ordinary feat. It requires a number of disparate elements, governance techniques and discursive practices to be assembled. Keeping things 'apolitical' also means excluding certain issues from being meaningfully considered. Recent scholarship has shown, for example, how the GCTF has failed to adequately take the adverse human rights effects of counterterrorism measures into account when formulating 'good practice'. Ní Aoláin argues that inadequate resourcing and support for human rights expertise in the GCTF norm-production lifecycle and the recurrent practice of bringing rights' advocates in 'late in the game' has 'set human rights interventions up for failure' (Ní Aoláin, 2021: 934). Yet as one former GCTF official makes plain, human rights are engaged with superficially within the GCTF because their 'politics' disrupts the GCTFs highly-valued pragmatism and fragile avenues for 'agreement':

'There is risk aversion amongst GCTF members to have these discussions ... when a topic is being proposed for a GCTF initiative. I remember the discussions within the Netherlands being like, "We shouldn't go into that. It's too politically sensitive. No human rights" ... People fear that the consensus we now have ... on how to cooperate on CT [counterterrorism] issues within the GCTF; they fear that it is being lost when we ... talk about human rights. That is, I think, an honest fear, because I know the discussions that [they] are hinting towards and they are spoiled by the politics ... The pragmatism of the GCTF will be lost' (Interview 2).

This marginalisation of human rights is intimately tied to the process of keeping GCTF space 'apolitical' and 'safe' for those sensitive to rights-based critique, including the Gulf donor states that provide substantial financial support. Disregarding rights and designating the implementation of security norms and practices as apolitical is thus key to the GCTF's growth. This discursive cut and organisational division of labour is a crucial global scale-making practice that sustains enrolment and enables possibilities for consensus to be maintained, even while UN counterterrorism policy proclaims that counterterrorism and human rights are mutually reinforcing goals (UNGA, 2006). Avoiding naming and shaming states for inadequate implementation of security norms is another critical way of keeping things 'apolitical'. As one interviewee put it, referring to the blacklisting practices of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for inadequate implementation of counterterrorism financing measures: 'You couldn't have gotten the GCTF created and the 'good practice' exercise started if there weren't those assurances provided to those who were suspicious of this becoming another FATF-type body' (Interview 3; on FATF's non-co-operative jurisdictions, see Rodiles, 2018). In this way, the voluntariness of GCTF's normative outputs is instrumental for enlistment and scale-making, because it helps to foster an 'apolitical' safe space to govern perceived security threats from.

Apolitical space is also fabricated through the GCTF by 'reposing political questions as matters of technique', to use Li's typology of assemblage practices (Li, 2007: 265). Rendering technical does important work depoliticising contentious security governance by linking it to detailed techniques of 'agreed' norm implementation and defusing potential opposition to GCTF enlistment. One interviewee frankly explained this 'rendering technical' rationale as follows:

‘What we try to do at the GCTF is move to the most technical level possible to avoid political difficulties. *Because, when you move down to technical stuff then a lot of policy officers in China and Russia will have less appetite to go against it*, or a lack of knowledge to go against it ... So, it’s an apolitical ... informal forum for policy-makers and practitioners. We are really bureaucratic in that sense. But that’s also why we have made a lot of progress over the last years’ (Interview 2, emphasis added).

Rendering technical via GCTF working processes and norms authorises a particular kind of counterterrorism expertise by fabricating ‘apolitical’ space and requires clear rules for who can participate as practitioners (Mignot-Mahdavi, 2024). It also serves to pre-empt criticism and expand the relative size of the GCTF as a governance body, enabling its norms to circulate widely as agreed ‘good practices’ (as discussed below) and enrolling critics to its cause. So, this technocratic move does more than authorise counterterrorism expertise. It is also a material-discursive practice that helps the GCTF generate global scale and ‘flow’ by reducing political friction.

### 3.2.3 Generating global consensus through counterterrorism ‘good practices’

A third related enlistment and scale-making practice involves the generation of global consensus on contentious counterterrorism problems through the formulation and circulation of ‘good practices’. This is widely regarded as GCTF’s key added-value as a security governance body and has resulted in more than 50 GCTF framework documents (including memoranda, manuals and policy toolkits) since 2011. Yet this global agreement is a fragile achievement and its assemblage requires the alignment of a diverse set of socio-material techniques and practices.

Fabricating agreement in this context requires the provision and maintenance of an alternative meeting space outside of, but interfaced with, UN institutions where a selective group of experts can develop shared practice. This articulation plays an important agenda-setting role that helps shape how counterterrorism issues are subsequently taken up by the UN, including via UNSC Resolutions. One interviewee likened the GCTF to a policy rehearsal space before moving on to the UN main stage:

‘The GCTF really sets the stage for discussion of new trends and new threats and new developments in the UN framework. So, *first* we have a discussion within the GCTF with 30 members, and then we move to the UN stage, where there are a lot more countries on the table. And we find it then easier to convince those countries of the relevance of these new threats and new policy developments, or [of] resolution development even’ (Interview 2).

Another interviewee referred to an action-orientated ‘middle ground’ between politicised UN poles to describe this agenda-framing and forum shaping process in relation to the development of the GCTF’s 2016 ‘good practice’ document on terrorist kidnappings and ransoms:

‘[With the GCTF] it was like the ground had been laid. Instead of starting a discussion at the Security Council from scratch, you were basically building on a body of discussion, a body of practice ... You were starting at a much higher level *and you were closer to the end game when you start* ... You couldn’t have gotten there [by] starting at the Security Council because of the poles that existed [there]. ... [But] if you can break through that in another forum and show that there is a middle ground - where, in between the poles, work can be done - *then* the UN can actually do stuff. It’s just a question of how you get beyond the poles. And the GCTF created a space where you could, with the right people at the table, show that there is this ... more consensus-orientated area, where progress can be made’ (Interview 3, emphasis added).

Transforming contentious security issues into non-contentious globally agreed practices requires three strategic moves: first, taking problems out of international multilateral fora into smaller, curated sites that can be more readily controlled by powerful network actors; second, avoiding multilateral polarisation as much as possible and ‘smoothing out contradictions so they seem superficial rather than fundamental’ (Li, 2007: 265); and third, reassembling ‘agreed’ practices from the GCTF back into the international norm-production process of the UN.

Much of the GCTF’s regular convening space is forged through the consultation meetings that generate ‘good practices’. The GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit endorsed by the GCTF Ministerial Meeting in 2021, for example, was preceded by six virtual workshops between July 2020 and February 2021, attended by representatives from national states, IOs, regional bodies, civil-society organisations (CSOs) and a small number of academics.<sup>1</sup> This initiative was co-led by the US State Department, UN CTED and the UN Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT), with approximately half of the experts attending these workshops drawn from these institutions. The workshops not only provided the space to virtually assemble and align GCTF stakeholders. They also significantly narrowed the key questions to be addressed in the final draft of the output. This was facilitated through accompanying ‘concept notes’ that reiterated the main initiative’s objectives as articulated by the co-leads, and by the co-leads carefully selecting and vetting the participants and structuring the speaking lists and agenda. The normative output itself (here, a ‘policy toolkit’) also provided the rationale for meeting and forging ‘agreement’.

Another key agreement site is provided by the GCTF Administrative Unit (AU), which supports the overall management of GCTF-hosted activities and is currently hosted by The Netherlands. The AU was until recently based in the offices of the Asser Institute in The Hague, alongside the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – an influential security think-tank largely funded by the US and Dutch governments. Asser often leads on the drafting of key GCTF outputs and is classified as a preferred GCTF implementing partner. Staff from the GCTF AU, Asser Institute and the ICCT were – at the time our interviews took place – all in the same building, facilitating informal alliances and groupthink. As one ICCT interviewee explained:

‘We are basically in the same space ... I don’t know if you see it ... there is now two GCTF people and some ICCT people sitting there. We have our ICCT director, who has her own office, and then the GCTF director as well. But we are all on the same floor and the same building. We share the kitchen, the bathrooms, and most of the staff are in the same office area. But the work that we do is quite different. Because in the end, the GCTF has all these working groups. And so, the GCTF people host meetings and do a lot of organising and booking flights and inviting speakers and drafting agendas. And they sub-contract the content part of the work to organisations like the ICCT’ (Interview 4).

Fabricating a ‘consensus-orientated area where progress can be made’ also crucially requires getting ‘the right people at the table’ and excluding those deemed undesirable (Interview 1). This has involved the US being very selective about the states invited to become founding GCTF members, keeping club membership relatively small and carefully managing how CSOs, experts and academics are brought in to provide input. The fact that the 30 GCTF founding members were chosen by the US (on the recommendation of the State Department’s Counterterrorism Bureau) for a mix of strategic, financial and diplomatic reasons demonstrates the US State Department’s hierarchical power in convening the GCTF network:

‘We initially wanted something like 20 to 25 [states]. And we wanted basically the CTAG [Counterterrorism Action Group] – which was the G8 plus Spain, Switzerland and Australia – plus 11 non-CTAG members drawn from mainly Muslim-majority countries, as

<sup>1</sup>The second author attended three of these six workshops, including as presenting participant.



well as India. And we wanted a front-line state ... and the [states] we thought would be contributors, the donors. We wanted to expand the notion of who is a donor, beyond the usual grouping. So, that's why Qatar, the Saudis and UAE were involved' ([Interview 1](#)).

Additional states, like Egypt, Morocco and Pakistan, came into the GCTF network by successfully lobbying the White House. Nigeria and South Africa were tapped to provide representation for the sub-Saharan Africa region. Others, such as The Netherlands, were later brought in by the US to shore up the overall balance between European and non-European members. The 'globe' represented by the GCTF is therefore a selective patchwork with a distinctive ontology and politics. It privileges both the strategic priorities of the US government and the enabling assumptions of the original GCTF problematisation.

Certain states and institutions were precluded from club membership because they were considered by the US at the outset to be too 'political' and polarising on counterterrorism issues within the UN ([Interview 1](#)). Others were tentatively brought in but relegated to the lesser status of GCTF 'non-membership' - which allows ad hoc participation when their specific experience is deemed to be useful but grants no right to be consulted on GCTF outputs. Capacity to fund GCTF initiatives is another important means of participation in the GCTF network. As one interviewee put it when explaining how the UAE was included to financially support the GCTFs Hedayah Centre of Excellence on CVE:

'[CVE] was just a priority for us as a counterterrorism bureau. We were trying to figure out ways to get [funding], because our funding at the time ... in the State Department for CVE [was] very limited. And, so, there is always this thinking about, "How can we pick other people's pockets for things we want to see done internationally?"' ([Interview 1](#)).

Diversity of network membership is also narrowed in practice through selectivity in the practitioners, experts, NGOs and think-tanks that are chosen to lead the production of GCTF outputs. The GCTF Coordinating Committee, led by the GCTF co-chairs, and the members leading specific GCTF initiatives play a crucial role in this stabilisation process. GCTF workshops are less dialogical spaces of multilateral debate than micro-managed sites where stakeholder views are raised and selectively gathered by GCTF leads for subsequent strategic rearrangement and presentation by a small pool of subcontracted implementation partners. Framework documents can be reviewed by GCTF members before presentation and later adoption by the GCTF Coordinating Committee. But the preparation and drafting of GCTF outputs, where 'agreed' practices are structured and ordered, is extremely opaque, with minimal input or engagement with GCTF members or meeting participants. As one interviewee with experience working on 'good practices' put it: 'It's definitely an epistemic community with shared values and shared norms ... So, the US and Canada and all the usual suspects are there and very much on the same page. And that [goes for] a lot of the implementing partners as well' ([Interview 4](#)). The creation of GCTF framework documents and outputs provides justification for regular expert meetings and opportunities for informal exchange. There is a not-so-invisible revolving door between these implementing groups and GCTF states as well.

Global agreement is also an effect of the specific governance artefacts used by the GCTF. Because the format of 'good practice' documents and toolkits tends to only include areas of shared agreement, excluding issues deemed too contentious, they are devices that in themselves generate important dissensus-narrowing effects. If disagreements do arise, they are usually smoothed out by the use of various control mechanisms, including process opacity, resort to hierarchical decision-making structures and membership rules, financial incentives and discipline. Diplomatic power is also wielded to help achieve 'agreement'. As one US interviewee put it: 'if a few countries object we will arm wrestle them so they don't object any more', by

deploying ambassadors and other diplomats to capitals ‘to iron out those differences quickly on a timeframe’ (Interview 3).

The drafting of the GCTF Counterterrorism Watchlisting Toolkit, for example, took place entirely outside of the six expert workshops that purportedly informed its construction. The drafting process was initially led by researchers from the Asser Institute and ICCT, contracted by the US as implementing partners of the initiative, together with the US-based security and intelligence think-tank, Valens Global, working under the close micro-management of the US State Department and UNOCT as Toolkit Co-Leads. When behind-the-scenes disagreements arose between the ICCT/Asser researchers who prepared the original draft (drawing from the input of non-members in the workshops) and the Toolkit Co-Leads (who sought to endorse and extend the US watchlisting system as global ‘best practice’) about whether and to what extent references to human rights should be included, GCTF network hierarchies were reasserted to forge ‘agreement’ (Kassem, Mignot-Mahdavi and Sullivan, 2021). Specific references to human rights were deleted from the text and watered down. And the ‘first comments phase’ of review, which was to include GCTF members and participating non-members, was amended to specifically exclude non-members from providing any commentary (Mignot-Mahdavi, 2022). GCTF implementing partners were also rebuked by actors further up the chain for stepping outside the terms of their contractual obligations and removed from the later and more critical stages of the GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit drafting process altogether. Two months after its formal adoption by the GCTF, this toolkit was then rapidly incorporated into UN norm-making procedures and positively endorsed by the UNSC for its ‘balanced implementation’ of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy (UNSC, 2021).

Funding and financial discipline are also key techniques in fabricating and sustaining global agreement within the GCTF and enacting global scale. Practitioners and experts participating in GCTF ‘good practice’ production processes are often funded by, and answerable to, the same funding bodies. Such relations of financial dependency do important work simplifying and homogenising the ‘global’ that the GCTF enacts, significantly narrowing the scope for political disagreement on global security ‘good practice’. Consider, for example, how one security think-tank interviewee described attendance at their first GCTF meeting:

‘I was doing this project for US State [Department]. And my contact person at US State said, “There is this GCTF meeting in Nigeria and it might be a good thing for you to visit it, because then you right away know the actors in Nigeria” ... And when I arrived at the meeting in Nigeria there were about 40 people present. But of the eight or ten people who presented, I was looking at them thinking, “Wait a minute. *All* of you are funded by US State. *All* of your organisations are doing US State-funded projects.” And I know all of them – because they are our direct colleagues and competition as well. But you know most of the faces, of course. So, it was [the] Global Centre [on Cooperative Security], ICCT and [so on]. ... [And] I’m like, “Hey, that is the same guy that US State *also* said would be good ... for me to employ as a trainer in my Philippines project”. He was *also* presenting. So, especially over coffee, you talk to everyone and [you] realise that *every single one of them* was funded by US State in their projects’ (Interview 4, emphasis added).

Funding is also critical in smoothing over conflicts about global ‘good practice’ between minority world donor states and the majority world post-colonial states where GCTF projects are largely implemented. As one interviewee explained, implementation states: ‘might very strongly disagree under the surface with the underlying values or ideas’ of the GCTF framework documents, [but] they still know how to play to that tune ... [and] adopt the discourse that they know they need to speak ... to get money’ (Interview 4). Funding is also key to ensuring implementation of GCTF good practices and hardening their nominally ‘soft’ status. Unlike the UNSC, which has Chapter VII of the UN Charter to formally oblige member states to implement security measures, the

GCTF uses money and funding agreements. As one GCTF interviewee put it: ‘We have some really powerful donors ... [and] if they put their money where their mouth is, they can enforce implementation’ (Interview 2).

These three interrelated enrolment strategies – neutralising and absorbing opposition, fabricating ‘apolitical’ space, and generating global ‘agreement’ and consensus via ‘good practice’ – are the key socio-material practices through which the GCTF has stabilised its original problematisation and fabricated macro scale, coming to act as an institutional network for global counterterrorism. Yet, as discussed below, consolidating the GCTF’s global power and scale and getting its norms to circulate and generate worldwide effects requires additional translation and mobilisation work.

### **3.3 Movement and moments of translation: the construction of global normative frameworks via circulation and sustained networking**

One of the major strengths of the GCTF has been its ability to operate as an informal platform, from which several partnerships have emerged around the issue areas previously problematised by it. As an ‘outward-looking platform that [aims] to develop good practices both with input from, and in the service of, the outside world’ (Interview 3), it has grown far beyond its membership. The GCTF bundles together different actors, institutions and organisations through flexible partnerships. These include states other than its members, which are invited on an ad hoc basis to participate in its concrete projects and activities. Such flexible schemes of co-operation with ‘non-member participants’ or ‘supporting states’ are characteristic of informal coalitions in related fields like counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and nuclear security. The common thread here is that all these networks seek to expand their outreach without compromising the purported like-mindedness of their core members (Rodiles, 2018).

Partnerships are also forged through more routinised practices of assemblage and reassemblage of shorter or longer duration (Flyverbom, 2010). The GCTF engages in selective interplays with some UN organs and expert groups, as discussed above with the example of the GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit and involvement of UNOCT and CTED in the preparatory work that led to the toolkit’s adoption. Interplays of ‘institutional interlinkages’ (De Londras, 2022: 45–49) between the UN and the GCTF are crucial in the circulation of ‘good practices’ and of the kind of security knowledge that the GCTF seeks to disseminate. These practices are not just about norm circulation and referencing. They also perform important global scale-making work. CTED works closely with the GCTF, and makes ample references to its documents – for example, in its Technical Guide to the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) and other relevant resolutions (UNSC, 2019), a crucial reference document for UN member states concerning their counterterrorism obligations. The UNSC frequently refers to the ‘good practices’ of the GCTF, clarifying that these ‘assist interested States with the practical implementation of the United Nations counter-terrorism legal and policy framework [and] complement the work of the relevant United Nations counter-terrorism entities’ (UNSC, 2014c: 3; UNSC, 2014; UNSC, 2021).

Thus, one could understand the GCTF as an implementation partner of the UN – of the UNSC in particular, but also the broader General Assembly-led UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (UNGA, 2006), and related action plans of the UN Secretary-General (UNGA, 2015). But such an understanding would be to assume fixed roles between the different partners within the network. It also presupposes a more institutionalised and hierarchical relationship, or even a juridical relationship, between network actors built around the reformalisation of informal norms and capacity-building in the implementation of UN legal obligations. As discussed above, rather than following this more traditional legal approach, we prefer to adopt a more isomorphic and relational approach to these network-formations and scale-making practices. This allows us to hone in on ‘the moments of translation where ordering takes place’ (Flyverbom, 2010: 429),

instead of taking for granted that this occurs according to some pre-established procedure or criteria. In our analysis, such moments of translation are constantly shifting and not circumscribed to any given place and time. They emerge through the circulation itself as part of a global security assemblage in motion (Tsing, 2000).

A clear example of this moving assemblage where ordering takes place and global norms are created through iteration is the almost parallel adoption of normative frameworks on FTFs by the UNSC and the GCTF. At the beginning of 2010s, the FTF phenomenon became a pressing concern for the international community due to the rise of ISIS. ISIS had very successfully used the internet and social media as a recruitment tool, attracting mostly young people, including from Western countries, who travelled to Syria and Iraq in large numbers to support them. And the then newly created GCTF was considered to be the ideal forum for undertaking swift negotiations to counter this issue:

'You could more easily see progress or have a serious discussion on [the FTF problem] in the GCTF because of the informality, because of the less politicised nature of it. And so you could make progress in the GCTF. And the idea was, because you had the P5 at the table and other key UN member states from different regions, [that] that would then help pave the way for [this FTF problem] to be taken up in the UN context' (Interview 2).

A GCTF initiative was rapidly launched by Morocco and The Netherlands and produced a compilation of 'good practices' known as *The Hague–Marrakesh Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) Phenomenon* (GCTF, 2014). This 'good practice' document was endorsed on 23 September 2014, at the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the GCTF in New York. The very next day, a UNSC summit-level meeting on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts was scheduled to take place during the US's rotatory presidency of the UNSC. According to the organ's practice, the UNSC presidency carries important agenda-setting powers. So, each country holding it tries to push subjects onto the agenda which are deemed to be particularly relevant for its own foreign policy (Rodiles, 2024). At times, new subject matters within broader topics are promoted, ideally leading to the adoption of a resolution. For the US, as for other Western nations, the FTF phenomenon became such an issue, and so the adoption of a binding resolution on FTFs during President Obama's personal chairmanship of the UNSC summit (on 24 September 2014) became a key priority (Interview 2). And thanks to the preparatory work that had already been done on this issue via GCTF 'good practices', the UNSC successfully adopted Resolution 2178, which became widely known as the 'foreign fighters' resolution' (UNSC, 2014c).

This far-reaching, quasi-legislative act of the UNSC was critiqued for abusing UN processes like other post-9/11 quasi-legislative measures, such as UNSC Resolution 1373 (2001), had done (Scheinin, 2014). But Resolution 2178 is not only informed by the GCTF 'good practices' on FTFs - it actually reproduces large parts of them (Interview 1). Resolution 2178 is revealing for the intense interactions between the UNSC and the GCTF, as well as for showing how security law today is made global through formal–informal interplays (Rodiles, 2018). However, this is only one part of it: or, just one moment in an iterative process which is not fixed. *The Hague–Marrakesh Memorandum* and UNSC Resolution 2178 are better understood as complementary elements of an FTF 'good-practices' global assemblage in motion that reinscribes its meaning and scope in co-evolutionary and iterative ways. An Addendum to this Memorandum was swiftly endorsed by the GCTF following its adoption (GCTF, 2016), and further FTF 'good practices' have since been developed around it (GCTF, 2018a, 2018b).

As intricate and enmeshed as these moments of translation already are, the process doesn't stop with addenda to memoranda and the further moves through which they feedback into formal UNSC obligations. Norm-making and ordering in the global counterterrorism field actually takes place in ever shifting sites and through ongoing socio-material processes. This becomes clearer

through analysis of the further interactions that the GCTF entertains with other projects and networks, far beyond the UN. This ‘sustained networking’, as one of the main legal architects of the GCTF described it (Rosand, 2020), reveals how counterterrorism ‘good practice’ emerges and develops as a knotted ensemble of practices that become globally scaled, involving formal and informal institutions, experts, social media platforms and ordinary people who are affected or otherwise engaged by these measures.

The ‘innovative and flexible partnerships’ that the GCTF fosters extends to include the so-called ‘GCTF inspired institutions’. While these are formally stand-alone ‘independent’ institutions, they are at the same time GCTF initiatives specifically created in order to further pursue GCTF goals. These institutions include the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IJRL) in Malta, the Geneva-based Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and the CVE-focused think tank, Hedayah, based in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Although often described as means of assisting in the implementation of GCTF outputs, ‘inspired institutions’ also partake in the continuous development of ‘good practices’ on rule of law, FTFs and CVE. As mentioned by one interviewee, ‘what I know is that discussion in the GCTF [on the inspired institutions] went from [counterterrorism capacity-building] to, okay, they are producing best practices, too’ (Interview 2).

CVE is one of the three main thematic focus areas of the GCTF. But it is also an issue that cuts across the Forum’s overall work and that of the broader global counterterrorism community more generally (Saul, 2020). Instrumental in this context is the UN Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (UNGA, 2015) – an ambitious transnational programme which aims at constructing a global framework for addressing ideologies and conditions deemed ‘conducive to terrorism’, and which involves a diverse range of actors including national governments, cities and local communities (Rodiles, 2021). The work envisaged in this plan resonates with the work performed by the GCTF and its ‘inspired institutions’, especially Hedayah. One could argue that the Secretary General’s Plan has served to catalyse GCTF’s memoranda on CVE. In the end, they are both part of the same project of global counterterrorism law-making across scales (Tsing, 2000) – from the very local sites of community life, through to the international spaces of the UN system and transnational networks of governance. In both cases, ‘good practices’ for CVE are identified across jurisdictions and in national and subnational sites, and include a diverse array of actors, from bureaucrats to adolescents.

Hedayah plays a crucial role in bringing people together and engaging them in CVE practices, propelling them along the many iterative pathways through which this assemblage moves. As a self-proclaimed ‘international center of excellence for countering violent extremism’ (Hedayah, 2024), this ‘inspired institution’ combines the production of studies and research with the delivery of capacity-building on CVE-related issues. In this context, capacity-building includes more than the training of counterterrorism law-enforcement officials and other practitioners. For Hedayah ‘capacity building’ is also concerned with resilience-building on the ground and engaging with ordinary people in their everyday life. Hedayah also helps to create pathways that promise to generate new networks of connectivity, in particular through social media. For example, it organises CVE-related hackathons where programmers and other software designers come together to collectively create new CVE-orientated software and apps that are deemed helpful in countering the online propaganda of listed terrorist organisations such as ISIS (GCTF and Hedayah, 2014). Outcomes from these hackathons are then carefully documented in order to spur further CVE-related developments and interventions by way of mimesis. Apps designed via student competitions aimed at facilitating communication conducive to so-called ‘counter-narratives’ (Rodiles, 2022b) have also been referred to in GCTF ‘good practices’ documents with a view towards being more widely replicated. Such is the case of 52Jumaa – a Facebook-like online network designed for young Muslims, through which they can share messages, experiences and engage in challenges inspired by the Qur’an that help build ties between these young people around the common theme of countering violent ideologies (US Department of State, 2015).



Thus, one of Hedayah's main functions is to identify and amplify on- and offline practices of ordinary people that are considered to be potentially valuable (or, 'good') in the development and circulation of counter-narratives to Jihadist violence. These are circulated through formats such as conference reports and various 'how-to' guidance documents containing practical tips for government officials and social workers (Hedayah, 2024). Accordingly, 'good practices' and CVE 'capacity-building' cannot be easily disentangled. Both are part of the same endeavour of 'pulling together discrete practices and putting them in some sort of framework around a certain issue' (Interview 1). This 'sort of framework' is a normative one - an open-ended collection of what- and how-to-do indications, taken from and intended for a variety of actors across sites and scales. In other words, Hedayah's CVE-related 'good practices' emerge across highly variegated sites and their global status is acquired through the movement of the many actors involved in their multilayered interactions. It is through this movement and circulation of security governance artefacts that the network continuously grows, incessantly amplifying CVE-related activities. Indeed, the globalised CVE project is very much about making and remaking agencies through the assemblage and reassemblage of institutional and mundane activities in an overlapping and always-expanding counterterrorism-violent-extremism regulatory framework that is continually drawing new elements into its orbit (Sullivan, 2020; Rodiles, 2022b). Which begs the crucial question of what is actually being governed by the global counter-terrorism law that security networks like the GCTF are assembling?<sup>2</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

Our empirical analysis of the socio-material practices of assemblage that have allowed the relatively small international coalition of the GCTF to grow into a leading global security governance network has shown that the 'global' character of the Forum is 'better understood as a dynamic rather than fixed adjective', the meaning of which 'is attuned to, interacts with, and is shaped by ongoing spatial and temporal practices' (Rajkovic, 2025). Instead of assuming a priori conceptualisations of the global nature of the GCTF, in this article we have reposed globality as a problem to be empirically explained by focusing on how global scale is enacted and given shape through a series of material-discursive moves. These include relational interplays with security institutions and networks, the circulation of global norms, the use of a variety of enrolment and translation techniques and entanglement with diverse security projects and infrastructures.

Taking Tsing's call seriously to make scalarity and the socio-material politics of scale-making a key object of empirical analysis (Tsing, 2000), and drawing insights from ANT and STS scholarship, we have traced the discourses and techniques through which global counterterrorism law and governance is performed through the GCTF network. To do so, we have analysed key GCTF initiatives and materials carefully gathered over several years, both as socio-legal researchers and participant-observers in some of these initiatives. This included participation in the GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit process, side events of the UN General Assembly, networking workshops organised by UN CTED and, most importantly, conducting interviews with former GCTF officials, diplomatic officials from leading GCTF member states and counterterrorism experts deeply involved in GCTF processes.

This allowed us to trace how particular problematisation practices that catalysed the GCTF network were constructed and disseminated to align those deemed valuable for transboundary counterterrorism co-operation along a common, post-9/11 perception of risk and shared commitment to pre-emptive security governance. This alignment has had important effects on the spatiotemporalities of law and governance in the global security field, giving it the character of an ever-expanding and flexibly repurposed normative apparatus. Problematisation was analysed through specific enrolment practices of alliance-building in which hierarchies were

<sup>2</sup>We are grateful to Mariana Valverde for drawing our attention to this.

successfully embedded whilst frictions and potential resistance was smoothed out via the fabrication of ‘apolitical’ and ‘safe’ governance spaces. As our analysis showed, rendering counterterrorism problems technical has been a key assemblage practice through which the GCTF has sought to forge global consensus on a range of highly contentious security issues – from the building of invasive surveillance mechanisms for governing the cross-border movements of ‘risky’ people through devices like the GCTF Watchlisting Toolkit, to concerted global security activity on issues that were previously the internal affairs of states, like kidnapping for ransoms and education. We have argued that these material-discursive moves can also be understood as techniques of translation whereby ever greater quantities of subjects, materials and discourses are enlisted through the GCTF platform into the transnational counterterrorism architecture, generating a kind of global power to speak and act on behalf of others (Callon and Latour, 1981) and allowing the GCTF to grow by making other actors relatively small in comparison. This holds especially true, as we have seen in our examples on CVE, for the construction of risks and manifold expressions of ‘violent extremist’ ideologies, which further blur the lines between ‘homegrown’ and ‘international’ terrorists, and transboundary co-operation and localised security measures (Sullivan, 2020; Rodiles, 2022b).

Much of the existing research on global security law and governance is unduly normative in focus and immaterial. Our article contributes to this body of scholarship and global law scholarship more broadly by showing how empirical attention to the socio-material practices of scale making – and the processes through which ‘objects, subjects and modes of governance are constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and ordered’ (Flyverbom, 2010: 440) – can help nuance our understandings of global security law and power and unpack how hierarchies and asymmetries between actors are assembled and sustained in practice. Working with Latour (1988: 27– 28), we contend that ‘to take the fabrication of various scales as our main center of interest’ in global socio-legal research ‘is to place the practical means of achieving power on a firm foundation’. Analysing global security law empirically through its material techniques and practices, and the diverse ways these enact and reconfigure global scale, opens novel possibilities for critical legal research and intervention.

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