

Back to Basics:

**Human Rights and Civil Society as Foundations for
Effectively Preventing Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism**

27-28 June 2018 | New York

Meeting Summary

On 28 June 2018, the Global Center on Cooperative Security and the Prevention Project, with the support of the governments of Norway and Sweden, hosted a side-event at the United Nations Headquarters on the margins of the UN General Assembly's sixth biennial review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) and the United Nations High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States. The event was informed by an expert-level workshop, held at the Permanent Mission of Norway to the United Nations on the previous day. The conversations during the workshop and side event were oriented towards developing a series of concrete, policy-relevant recommendations for promoting and protecting human rights and safeguarding and expanding civil society spaces while countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism.

Participants included the UN Special Rapporteurs for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions; human rights defenders and other civil society actors, including from Afghanistan, Kenya, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Uganda; representatives from international human rights and democracy organizations and think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, Amnesty International, Article 19, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Center for International Studies, the International Federation for Human Rights, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and the Open Society Justice Initiative; and representatives from the United Nations, including the Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Participants acknowledged that respect for human rights and the rule of law as enshrined in Pillar IV of the GCTS is a foundational element of counterterrorism approaches, yet it continues to receive insufficient attention and resourcing. Heavy-handed tactics, whether on the battlefield or by law enforcement and security agencies, are on the rise with increasing violations of human rights protections. Although occasionally effective in the short-term, participants stressed that the negative implications of overly-securitized responses on reducing terrorist recruitment and radicalization are significant. The meeting considered practical ways to elevate and sustain attention to the human rights dimensions of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism and the need for a “whole-of-society” approach to addressing the threat of violent extremism – an approach that includes human rights defenders and civil society actors as key partners. Participants hope that the recent changes in the UN counterterrorism architecture, most notably with the creation of the UNOCT, the appointment of the first-ever Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, and the finalization of the first [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact](#) among 36 UN entities and Interpol and the World Customs Organization, create opportunities to achieve progress on many of the issues raised during the meeting.

Participants discussed a range of themes, including:

- The relationship between declines in levels of democratic governance and civil society freedoms on the one hand, and levels of violent extremism and terrorism on the other, including the tendency for counterterrorism efforts and measures aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to be directed at specific, often marginalized communities, without adequate justification;
- The exceptionalization of terrorism as a crime and the creation of a new body of law that facilitates exceptional counterterrorism and P/CVE responses, including the heavy monitoring and in certain cases criminalization of legitimate activity by non-governmental actors;
- The importance of avoiding the use of a narrow security lens to anoint countries as “good” counterterrorism partners, while overlooking human rights violations and bad governance;
- The challenges that civil society organizations (CSOs) face in providing meaningful services and support to local communities while establishing safe and productive relationships with government entities, notably where there is the tendency of some governments to see civil society as an adversary rather than an ally in P/CVE efforts, especially in relation to “sensitive” domains such as the reintegration and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters and their families;
- The role that local governments (e.g. provinces and municipalities) and local P/CVE action plans can play in deepening the involvement of CSOs in P/CVE efforts, but at the same time the need for better cooperation and coordination among local organizations to enhance impact;
- The need to impose human rights obligations on non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations, so they can be held accountable for their violations within the framework of international human rights law;
- The increase in donor funding for very specific P/CVE projects and the negative implications this may have on funding for broader social inclusion, human rights, democracy, and governance programs, which may have an indirect, positive effect on increasing societal resilience against violent extremism;
- The importance of, but challenges and risks associated with, bringing local human rights defenders and other civil society actors into regional and international forums; and
- The paucity of UN resources devoted to helping ensure Member States respect the freedoms of expression, association, and religion, and other international human rights obligations, while countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, and the limited transparency surrounding the UN counterterrorism agencies, their efforts, and their impact.

During the meeting, participants proposed a series of practical recommendations, many of which were presented at the conclusion of the high-level side event on 28 June at the United Nations Headquarters. A document listing these recommendations is forthcoming.

A video recording of the side event at the United Nations Headquarters can be found [here](#).