



**Remarks at the United Nations High-Level Conference of
Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States**

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The Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) has been following the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review processes closely since its adoption, providing independent analysis and recommendations to improve UN efforts in the field of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE) through its Blue Sky process. We advocated for architectural change that would create a single focal point to coordinate a “one-UN” approach to address terrorism and violent extremism.

Most recently, we urged relevant UN agencies, in particular the newly established Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) to, among other things: a) continue to operationalize the reform of UN counterterrorism and PVE efforts, including through enhancing transparency, providing regular progress updates, and more consistently monitoring and evaluating program impact; b) systematically and meaningfully engage with diverse civil society actors; and c) put human rights and good governance at the core of all UN counterterrorism and PVE efforts.¹ These recommendations emerged through broad consultations with government officials, independent experts, and a wide range of UN representatives, with the aim to increase both the legitimacy and the efficacy of UN counterterrorism and PVE efforts.

Regrettably, both the results of this year’s Review Resolution and the approach taken in the High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States are deeply concerning.

The Review Resolution represents a step forward on some fronts, including for the first time important new language on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters that accounts for age and gender and recognizes the role of civil society actors; on the vulnerability of children and the need to treat them in accordance with international law; and on the inclusion of better monitoring and evaluation tools, including through annual UNOCT progress reports, allowing for a more consistent and deliberate evaluation of UN counterterrorism and PVE efforts.

However, explicit support for the mainstreaming of, and appropriate funding for, the fourth pillar of the Strategy is sorely lacking: the failure to put human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law at the core of counterterrorism and PVE approaches diminishes both the legitimacy and efficacy of the United Nations. More generally, the Resolution fails to sincerely reinforce the importance of a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, by formalizing engagement outside of the security and public sectors, to effectively, credibly, and sustainably prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism.

¹ Alistair Millar, “Blue Sky IV: Clouds Dispersing?” Global Center on Cooperative Security, May 2018, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GC_2018-May_Blue-Sky.pdf.

Check Against Delivery

While UNOCT representatives indicated the desire to establish a civil society liaison mechanism, which, in principle, the Global Center welcomes, its effectiveness will depend on how this will be realized, what mechanisms for engagement will be adopted, and whether the appropriate resources can be allocated.

Furthermore, by restricting civil society participation and access to this High-Level Conference, the United Nations seems to be echoing a reality many civil society actors and human rights defenders have far too much experience with in their domestic contexts.

Engaging civil society need not be an uphill battle. Civil society organizations and human rights defenders have long been informally consulted by the United Nations and its Member States, contributing practical guidance, field experience, and nuance to a wide range of complex issues. In the halls of an institution founded on advancing collective peace and security, the limited access of civil society actors to this conference is a blunt rejection of our work.

This is both truly regrettable and self-defeating.

The Global Center organized two side-events this week in order to create a space for civil society organizations and human rights defenders to share their experiences directly with the United Nations and its Member States. The events showcased how civil society provides firsthand local experience essential to effectively preventing violent extremism, is rooted in and credible among the communities in which they work, and provides an important check to violent rhetoric and actions by both terrorist groups and governments.

In our work at the Global Center, whether it is on advancing access to justice, rehabilitation and reintegration, financial inclusion, youth leadership, or gender integration and women's participation, our local civil society partners are working tirelessly and often under great risk to increase social inclusion and sustain peace in their communities.

Indeed, across the globe, governments are cracking down on civil society. According to one estimate, more than sixty countries have passed restrictive laws in recent years, shrinking civil society space and increasing the criminalization of, and discrimination against, civil society organizations worldwide, including through counterterrorism legislation.² More generally, during the last year, 71 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 registering gains, continuing a more than decade-long negative trend.³

We want to be very clear about the hugely negative consequences of limiting civil society participation and engagement and diminishing the centrality of human rights and rule of law in our counterterrorism and PVE approaches; nationally, regionally, and internationally. Civil society is critical, diverse, and yes, by our very nature, sometimes adversarial: but we are also essential partners in understanding the threat of violent extremism, enhancing societal resilience, and preventing and countering terrorism. In the words of Secretary-General Guterres: "A key starting point is to pursue inclusive, whole-of-society approaches, with civil society, youth, and women as essential partners." We call upon the United Nations and its Member States to rise to this challenge and lead by example by protecting, advocating for, and engaging with civil society and human rights in a regular, systematic, and meaningful manner.

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² Heinrich Böll Foundation, "For Democracy: The Heinrich Böll Foundation's Engagement in the World," April 2016, p. 36, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/hbs_-_demokratie_publication_-_en_-_online.pdf.

³ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018," 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf.