

**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

The Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) and the Prevention Project: Organizing Against Violent Extremism (Prevention Project), with the support of the governments of Norway and Sweden, hosted an event at UN Headquarters on the margins of the General Assembly's sixth biennial review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) and the UN High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States (HLC). The side event was informed by an expert-level workshop the previous day. The goal of both was to develop concrete, policy-relevant recommendations for promoting and protecting human rights and safeguarding civil society spaces while countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. The events highlighted in particular the role of the UN system in that regard.

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; representatives from international human rights and democracy organizations and think tanks; and representatives from relevant UN human rights and counterterrorism bodies.

Participants acknowledged that respect for human rights and the rule of law, as enshrined in Pillar IV of the GCTS, should be foundational to all counterterrorism efforts, but that in practice counterterrorism efforts often serve to undermine these principles. 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 expedient in the short term, participants stressed that such tactics can serve to drive radicalization and terrorist recruitment. Participants considered practical ways to elevate and sustain attention to the human rights dimensions of countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. They stressed the need for a “whole-of-society” approach to addressing the threat of violent extremism that includes human rights defenders and civil society actors as key partners.

Participants expressed hope that recent changes in the UN counterterrorism architecture, most notably with the creation of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, the appointment of the first-ever Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, and the finalization of the first [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact](#) (Global Compact), create opportunities to achieve progress on many of the issues raised during the meeting.

Participants discussed a range of issues, 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.

- The tendency for counterterrorism efforts and measures aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to stigmatize already marginalized communities.
- The “exceptionalization” of terrorism as a crime and the creation of a new body of law that facilitates exceptional counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, including the 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 services and support to local communities while establishing safe and productive relationships with government entities.
- 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 and the need for better cooperation and coordination among local organizations to enhance impact.
- The need to hold non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations, 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 counterterrorism and PVE forums.
- The paucity of UN resources devoted to helping ensure member states respect international human rights obligations while countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism
- The limited transparency surrounding the work of various UN counterterrorism bodies, 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 UN Headquarters¹ and helped to inform a [series of recommendations](#) formulated by the Global Center and the Prevention Project to help improve the UN’s role in supporting human-rights based and inclusive counterterrorism and PVE efforts.

¹ A video recording of the complete event is available at: <http://webtv.un.org/search/human-rights-and-civil-society-as-foundations-for-effectively-preventing-violent-extremism-and-countering-terrorism/5803143460001/?term=&lan=english&cat=Meetings%2FEvents&page=12>