

Recommendations for Improving UN Support of Human Rights-based and Inclusive Counterterrorism and P/CVE Efforts

The following recommendations are aimed at strengthening the role of the United Nations in promoting and protecting human rights and safeguarding and expanding civil society spaces while countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism.

They were formulated by the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) and the Prevention Project: Organizing Against Violent Extremism (Prevention Project) and were informed by [events](#) hosted by the two organizations on the margins of the sixth biennial review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) and High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States (HLC), with the support of the governments of Norway and Sweden. They also build on recommendations made in the Global Center's May 2018 report "[Blue Sky IV: Clouds Dispersing?](#)" and in letters sent by a coalition of civil society organizations (CSOs) to [UN Secretary-General Guterres](#) and [UN Under-Secretary General for Counter-Terrorism Voronkov](#) related to the recent reforms of the UN counterterrorism architecture.

They are presented for consideration by UN officials and member states representatives with the hope that those recent changes, most notably the creation of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (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](#) (Global Compact), create opportunities to achieve progress in terms of supporting human rights-based and inclusive counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism efforts (P/CVE).

- 1) **ENGAGE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY** – UNOCT, and all the UN entities which are signatories to the Global Compact, should intensify engagement with local CSOs and CSO networks, including human rights defenders, to ensure on-the-ground perspectives and realities are more fully reflected in UN counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts. The United Nations should actively address the issue of shrinking spaces for civil society more broadly and in the context of counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts specifically.
 - a. **Senior UN counterterrorism officials**, including the Secretary-General and Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, should ensure that future high level UN counterterrorism and P/CVE forums welcome and promote the participation of civil society and private sector representatives throughout all sessions consistent with the importance they ascribe such organizations in their public statements.
 - b. **Global Compact signatories** should strengthen existing and, where necessary, create new mechanisms for engaging CSOs in counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, both at UN

headquarters and in the field, while carefully considering practical implications such as diversity of contributors and the safety of participating representatives. They should also provide travel support, where necessary, and opportunities for remote participation.

- c. **UNOCT** should:
 - i. Ensure the planned UNOCT civil society unit is appropriately mandated, resourced, and staffed to facilitate effective and practical engagement with independent CSOs from around the globe;
 - ii. Expand the involvement of CSOs in the GCTS review, drawing inspiration from similar processes such as the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review process, which provides for contributions from CSOs; and
 - iii. Establish a UN-CSOs advisory board consisting of representatives from a geographically and thematically diverse group of civil society actors. This could be modeled on the approach taken by UN Women and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The board could liaise with UNOCT on an ongoing basis to ensure that different CSO perspectives and concerns are heard and reflected in UN counterterrorism and P/CVE strategies, programs, and dialogues, complementing the planned civil society unit.

- d. **UNOCT and CTED** should use country visits to meet with independent CSOs, in a manner that ensures a diversity of contributions and safeguards against reprisals, to better understand the nature and drivers of violent extremist threats and the most effective responses, and to gain a better understanding of the structural involvement of civil society in the development, implementation, and evaluation of relevant counterterrorism and P/CVE policies and programs, including P/CVE national action plans.

- e. **The UN Security Council** should use the “Arria formula” on a semi-annual basis to enable human rights defenders and other civil society actors to share on-the-ground perspectives on both the impact of counterterrorism and P/CVE measures on civil society and the contributions CSOs are making to reduce the threats of violent extremism and terrorism at the local level.

2) **COMMIT TO HUMAN RIGHTS** – Respect for human rights and the rule of law, as enshrined in Pillar IV of the GCTS, should be foundational to counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts and needs to be at the core of UN efforts.

- a. **Senior UN counterterrorism officials**, including the Secretary-General and Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism, should:
 - i. Speak out more regularly when human rights are violated in the name of counterterrorism, P/CVE, and national security;
 - ii. Underscore that heavy-handed counterterrorism tactics can create serious grievances against the state and its security forces, undermining future efforts and diminishing societal resilience against violent extremism; and

- iii. Organize a conference on the intersection of human rights and counterterrorism and P/CVE, hosted by the Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Such an event, which could be organized during the next HLC, would send a powerful message about the United Nations' commitment to upholding the centrality of human rights (including the protection of freedoms of expression and religion) and good governance in counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts.
 - iv. Enable further mainstreaming of human rights in UN counterterrorism and P/CVE engagements and programs, including by creating senior human rights posts within UNOCT and other Global Compact signatory entities that can provide proactive, sustained, and practical support;
- b. **UN human rights entities** should devote more resources, including to the relevant Special Rapporteurs, to:
 - i. Ensure counterterrorism laws, policies, and practices and P/CVE strategies and programs are fully compliant with international human rights, humanitarian law, and refugee law; this includes providing greater clarity on rights-compliant approaches to implementing Security Council resolutions, such as OHCHR's Guidance to States on human rights-compliant responses to the threat posed by foreign fighters; and
 - ii. Provide member state agencies (from the security services to local police) with practical training on how to design and implement human rights-compliant P/CVE policies and programs.
- c. **UNOCT and CTED** should place greater emphasis on the findings of the relevant UN treaty bodies and Universal Periodic Review reports and assessments when engaging with and developing recommendations for member states on the implementation of UN counterterrorism and P/CVE frameworks; and
- d. **UNOCT and UNDP** should include a stronger human rights dimension in UN efforts to support member states to develop, implement, and evaluate P/CVE national action plans, ensuring that they are evidence-based, non-discriminatory, and adhere to the principle of "do no harm."
- e. **The UN Security Council** should:
 - i. Avoid "exceptionalization" of terrorism and the efforts needed to counter it by placing counterterrorism frameworks firmly within international law, including human rights, humanitarian, and refugee law and existing approaches and frameworks, such as demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration, where appropriate. This includes pursuing acts of terrorism as violations of international human rights law.
 - ii. Overcome definitional challenges by articulating what terrorism is not. In doing so, clear parameters would exist for overreach and abuses committed in the name of national security and counterterrorism.

3) **ENSURE TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION** – Increase transparency and communication about, and evaluation of, the internal organization, functions, priorities, resources, activities, and outputs of UN agencies working on counterterrorism and P/CVE. Greater transparency could contribute to improving the accountability and effectiveness of the UN’s counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts.

f. **UNOCT** should:

- i. Establish a consistent, deliberate, and transparent mechanism to evaluate UN counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, incorporating the views of CSOs and other local actors. This needs to happen both at the programmatic-level and at the more strategic and policy level, for instance as part of the biennial GCTS review; and
- ii. Utilize assessments of the GCTS’ impact and implementation progress and annual UNOCT progress report to gather useful and actionable information that can help member states their efforts to collaborate and contribute to impactful counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts. The newly appointed expert consultant that will support project monitoring and evaluation within the UNCCT should be able to work with member states, UNOCT, and other Global Compact members to ensure greater collaboration and transparency.

g. **Member states** should:

- iii. Ensure transparency in their funding to UN counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, for example by requiring UNOCT to maintain a public record of its funds, including the publication of a strategic plan for its current funding.
- iv. Pursuant to UNSC Resolution 2395, member states should endeavor to make CTED assessments publicly available, whenever possible, to facilitate the sharing of those assessments with other UN and non-UN stakeholders and better inform their collective counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts.