

**CIVIL SOCIETY WORKSHOP IN ADVANCE OF THE JOINT  
REGIONAL HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE CONVENED BY THE OSCE,  
UNOCT, AND SWITZERLAND, IN COOPERATION WITH THE  
ALBANIAN OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP**

“Foreign Terrorist Fighters – Addressing Current Challenges”

10 February 2020  
Vienna, Austria

**Civil Society Workshop Findings and Recommendations**

The United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism (OCT), with support from the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), hosted a dedicated forum for civil society participants in advance of the Joint Regional High-Level Conference convened by the OSCE, OCT, and Switzerland, in cooperation with the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship on “Foreign Terrorist Fighters – Addressing Current Challenges” at the Hofburg Congress Centre in Vienna. Participants included 53 individuals representing over 40 different civil society organizations (CSOs) with diverse experiences working on prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and reintegration, and related issues across the OSCE region.

The one-day workshop for civil society representatives preceded the larger regional conference and provided a dedicated opportunity for participating representatives from civil society to reflect on their experiences in addressing current challenges posed by foreign terrorist fighters. The meeting also allowed for perspectives from civil society to be incorporated into the regional conference and to help inform a set of findings and recommendations on civil society engagement that will be presented during the High-Level Counter-Terrorism week on 1-2 July 2020 at the United Nations in New York.

As highlighted by Under-Secretary-General Voronkov in his closing remarks, civil society, in all its diversity, is an indispensable partner in addressing the root causes of violent extremism conducive to terrorism. The discussion during the workshop highlighted the myriad contributions that civil society can and has made to preventing and countering violent extremism, including in the areas of prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation and reintegration.

In the area of prevention, the participants highlighted the efforts of civil society to build resilience to the spread of violent extremism, including efforts of CSOs to raise awareness of the threat of violent extremism, promote religious education and interfaith and intra-faith dialogues, support vulnerable youth, develop and disseminate counter-narrative campaigns, and build community trust with government institutions.

In the intervention space, participants observed that civil society actors – including psychologists, risk assessment experts, intervention providers, religious representatives, victims, and former terrorism offenders – are playing critical roles in risk assessments and intervention approaches around the world.

Participants stressed that the most pressing challenges for governments and civil society with regard to foreign terrorist fighters is currently in the areas of repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. They highlighted, in particular, challenges around how to handle the large number of foreign terrorist fighters and ISIS-associated family members in camps and detention centers in Syria and Iraq, managing individuals who have and will return from conflict, dealing with violent extremists in custody, and ultimately managing the release of violent extremist offenders in ways that facilitate their successful reintegration and minimize risks to communities.

They stressed that governments cannot confront those challenges alone and should work with civil society and other local actors who possess credibility in their communities and bring to bear specific expertise and skills across a wide range of psychosocial, vocational, financial, educational, legal, religious, familial, and communication needs. Civil society actors often have the trust of and access to the affected individuals and communities in ways that government officials do not. On the difficult issue of repatriation, participants highlighted the role that civil society actors can play, along with the media, in supporting responsible public engagement on the rationale for often unpopular repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration policies and approaches, and communicating the dangers if these challenges are left unaddressed. In this regard, participants highlighted the experience of women-led civil society actors in Central Asia working with communities and media to help facilitate community acceptance of female returnees.

Across all of these areas, participants highlighted the importance of accounting for gendered aspects of violent extremism and the need to support women civil society actors.

The participants welcomed the dedicated opportunity for civil society to reflect on these issues and hoped that the opening would lead to more sustained engagement. Some key recommendations that emerged for improving civil society engagement included:

**Build trust and create sustained and meaningful partnerships with civil society.**

Meaningful engagement means giving civil society a role in shaping the design, implementation, and evaluation of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, including through engagement in national policy and planning and in intergovernmental discussions on these issues. Participants noted that a trust deficit exists between many governments, civil society, and communities, especially among populations who feel they have experienced injustice at the hands of the state. This is a significant barrier that requires “do no harm” responses at the community and institutional governance levels that address the lack of trust between communities and governments.

**Engage civil society in national action planning processes for preventing violent extremism, including in the area of rehabilitation and reintegration.** Participants stressed the need to engage civil society as part of national action planning processes from the outset and to ensure their views are meaningfully reflected in the resulting policies and programs. All stakeholders involved should work together to determine their own roles and the communications mechanisms for ensuring accountability. Participants shared a number of good practice examples where civil society was proactively engaged in the national action planning process at the outset, including examples from Central Asia where civil society has been integrated into the development, design, and implementation of multi-agency approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration. These examples were contrasted with less participatory and ultimately less successful national action planning processes.

**Support the role of women civil society actors in prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation and reintegration.** It was noted that women are still underrepresented in peace and reconciliation processes and that gendered aspects of violent extremism are under-accounted for in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. Participants shared that experiences to date have shown that having gender expertise in the development of national action plans for preventing violent extremism, including in the area of rehabilitation and reintegration, improves the ability to reintegrate returnees more effectively. Participants stressed the need to engage and support women civil society actors in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism.

**Create an enabling environment for civil society.** The capacity of civil society actors to usefully engage in preventing violent extremism is dependent on their freedom to operate generally and their legal ability to engage specifically on violent extremism-related issues. Participants called on states to create an enabling environment for civil society to avoid undue restrictions on the work of CSOs and to create, where necessary, specific legal frameworks to enable their engagement on violent extremism-related issues, such as rehabilitation and reintegration. Participants also called on intergovernmental bodies to speak out forcefully against restrictions, often under the guise of countering terrorism, being placed on the financing, operations, and freedom of assembly of civil society actors.

**Build the capacity of civil society to work on preventing and countering violent extremism.** Civil society and community-based groups need resources, both financial and capacity related, to engage effectively in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, in particular in areas related to rehabilitation and reintegration. This includes both funding but also training and core organizational support in program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. It is important that civil society actors receive consistent funding to continue their work. Investing in operational capacity for civil society organizations can aide in ensuring that they are self-sufficient in continuing to seek funding moving forward to sustain and expand their programs.