



**Remarks at the United Nations Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week  
Webinar V: Civil Society and Media Perspectives on Preventing and Countering Terrorism  
in a Pandemic**

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Thank you to the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) for the invitation to speak on this distinguished panel and share the perspectives of the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) on civil society engagement in counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts.

The Global Center has been following the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Strategy) Review closely for years, providing independent analysis and recommendations to improve its counterterrorism and PVE efforts through our Blue Sky consultations and report series, the most recent version of which will be released this summer.

In parallel to our policy engagement, we also deliver counterterrorism and PVE training and capacity development programs in close cooperation with a broad range of civil society organizations and independent experts across the world. As part of this work, 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 prevent violence and sustain peace in their communities.

This is all the more true in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with civil society actors sharing critical information and providing key support while terrorist organizations seek to exploit the global health crisis, and emergency measures imposed by governments risk disrupting humanitarian aid flows, limiting peace operations and dialogues, and constraining civic space.

In my remarks today, I hope to convey the critical importance of meaningfully partnering with civil society in counterterrorism and PVE efforts, the obstacles to their engagement, and ways to overcome these challenges at the local, national, and international levels. In addition to conveying the perspectives from our partners around the world, my observations today are informed by two civil society-led workshops that the Global Center helped co-organize in advance of the UN Regional High-Level Counter-Terrorism Conferences in Abu Dhabi and Vienna. More than 75 civil society actors from 30 different countries participated in these workshops to share their experiences and perspectives with UN entities and member states on youth empowerment, tolerance promotion, and rehabilitation and

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reintegration efforts for foreign fighters. Participants particularly welcomed the opportunity to converse directly with the Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism.

**It is critical to recognize that civil society is diverse, and so are their perspectives, roles, and expertise in the field of counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism.** Civil society is not a homogenous entity with a singular experience or one specific skillset. It includes community-based organizations, academia, think tanks, community elders, religious leaders, victims' networks, and youth and women's groups. Civil society actors often work directly with communities and are thus well-placed to inform the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of counterterrorism and PVE policies, interventions, and capacity development programs. They can help ensure these are evidence-based, context-sensitive, dynamic in nature, follow a do no harm approach, include gender and age considerations, and account for individual risks and needs.

In relation to the Strategy, engagement between the United Nations, member states, and civil society can help translate this document to the local level, address conditions conducive to terrorism, and ensure that human rights and the rule of law are the foundations of all counterterrorism and PVE efforts.

**Unfortunately, civil society has often found itself negatively impacted by counterterrorism, countering the financing of terrorism (CFT), and PVE efforts, and their engagement in these spaces comes with considerable risks.** For more than a decade, the world has seen a global decline of human rights and civic space and increased repression of non-violent activism. Counterterrorism provisions have been used to restrict freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion, while CFT measures have challenged humanitarian operations and constricted financial access. This often does not result in a reduction of terrorist recruits or attacks, but rather further exacerbates conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

Civil society organizations have witnessed this firsthand, in particular those working to address conflict and violent extremism. They have seen their activities securitized, especially when expected or perceived to fulfil information gathering and monitoring roles for governments. This securitization threatens the core function of civil society, who now risk losing their hard-earned trust and legitimacy within the community.

**To help overcome these obstacles and realize more productive and sustained relationships between civil society actors, governments, and intergovernmental institutions, we offer four key considerations. They are informed by the aforementioned civil society consultations and the Global Center's work on these issues, and focus on ensuring that civil society has the operating environment, the resources, and the opportunities to engage in counterterrorism and PVE efforts.**

*1. A conducive environment and legal basis for operations is essential in realizing the contributions of civil society.* Civil society actors should be able to rely on the necessary political and legal conditions to properly conduct their work, including a sound regulatory framework. Specific legal and policy frameworks may need to be established to enable the involvement of civil society in certain areas, such as direct intervention work or rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. More broadly, civil society space needs to be actively

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promoted and protected, and the negative effects of counterterrorism, CFT, and PVE measures identified and mitigated.

*2. Civil society requires adequate and predictable funding as well as support in strengthening organizational capacities and building thematic and practical expertise.* Governments and other donors should provide direct financial support to organizations working on counterterrorism and PVE efforts, contribute to pooled funding arrangements that support community-based organizations, and incentivize private sector actors and individuals to support civil society in this area. Some civil society organizations may also benefit from support for technical and organizational capacities to implement effective counterterrorism and PVE programs. This includes access to relevant publications and research, translation services, training programs, and networks and platforms, as well as organizational capacity development in areas like project management, financial administration, and monitoring and evaluation.

*3. Civil society should be proactively involved in policy formulation and program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluations processes at all levels.* When civil society, notably community-based groups, are engaged at the local level, they can build the kinds of cooperative partnerships between communities, civil society groups, local government, and law enforcement necessary to sustainably counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism in line with local needs and priorities. They can also play a critical role in ensuring that counterterrorism and PVE efforts are based in human rights and the rule of law and are gender-sensitive, considering the varying experiences, effects, impacts, and needs of people with different gender identities. At the national level, the most successful national PVE action planning processes have been those where civil society was proactively consulted at the outset. This means consistently involving civil society in identifying policy priorities and ensuring their participation in program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation as a full partner, not merely as instruments of service delivery.

*4. The United Nations has a specific role to play in supporting the meaningful participation of diverse civil society actors in counterterrorism and PVE policies, programs, and practices.* UN leaders and entities should ensure that civil society organizations have a seat at the table and are actively and consistently engaged in informing policy priorities and program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. UN action in this space serves as a model for member states, demonstrating a consultative and inclusive approach to these kinds of partnerships. Civil society should also be involved in all stages of the Strategy review process, including through meaningful consultations informing the Secretary-General's biennial report and by ensuring access to related briefings. As demonstrated through our partnership with UNOCT in co-organizing the civil society led-workshops ahead of the Regional High-Level Conferences, civil society input is crucial in policy discussions and sharing of good practices. We note that only about 15% of the speakers for this Counter-Terrorism Week are from civil society and the majority of those represent international organizations like ours rather than local voices and frontline practitioners. We are hopeful that civil society actors will continue to be more fully integrated into UN discussions, policy processes, and counterterrorism and PVE program implementation moving forward.

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**To conclude, for our counterterrorism and PVE efforts to be effective and sustainable, civil society needs to be a core partner. And they can only be a full partner if they have the operating environment, the resources, and the opportunity to engage on these issues. Recognizing the importance of civil society engagement in counterterrorism and PVE efforts is not enough; governments and intergovernmental bodies need to actively involve, support, and partner with civil society to realize their full potential.**

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