

H.E. Mr. Vladimir Ivanovich Voronkov
Under-Secretary-General
United Nations
New York, NY

24 January 2018

Re: Civil Society Engagement with the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism

Your Excellency,

We write to you as representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) dedicated to measures aimed at preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism, both at the United Nations and at regional, national and local levels. As indicated in a letter¹ that many of us sent to the Secretary-General last April, we hope the creation of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT) will enhance collaboration and cooperation among the many UN entities working on preventing violent extremism (PVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) issues, and help enable the full implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) across all four pillars in countries worldwide.

We welcome you to your new position as the first Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism. We are also encouraged to see the priority Secretary-General Guterres continues to place on reforming the United Nations system to play a leading role in the prevention of conflict and promotion of sustainable, inclusive peace.

As we enter 2018 , we respectfully offer the following points and suggestions for your consideration as you identify your office's priorities for the coming period, underscoring our commitment to working closely with the OCT as it seeks to improve the UN's efforts to reduce terrorist and violent extremist threats worldwide.

We urge your office to continue to champion a "whole-of-society" approach that works with local leaders and civil society to address terrorism and the conditions conducive to it. The GCTS and the UN PVE Plan of Action underscore the critical role that civil society, including women and youth-led organizations, can play in addressing these challenges. While national governments continue to bear the primary responsibility for their nation's security, the threats from terrorism and violent extremism are more localized than ever and, in certain contexts, municipal authorities, local practitioners, and community-based groups may be better placed to address these threats. It is imperative therefore to include these stakeholders as strong allies in the design, development, and implementation of PVE efforts, including national action plans, strategies, and programs.

¹ 21 April 2017 letter to Secretary-General Guterres, available at <http://www.organizingagainstve.org/letter-secretary-general-capability-un-system-assist-member-states-implementing-united-nations-global-counter-terrorism-strategy/>

For example, because they are closer to local populations, local actors may better understand the grievances that can make communities vulnerable to terrorist recruitment, as well as the measures needed to ameliorate these conditions.

As highlighted by a growing body of research², CSOs, including local women and youth organizations, are powerful counterweights to rising violent extremist movements, because like many of them, CSOs are locally rooted, yet globally connected. CSOs are often working tirelessly and at great risk to prevent violent extremism from taking root in their communities. The existence of a vibrant independent civil society is itself a critical pillar for effective prevention of violent extremism.

CSOs' comparative advantages lie in their a) knowledge of local drivers of violent extremism and evolving local trends; b) credibility and access within communities susceptible to violent extremist recruitment that national and multilateral institutions sometimes do not have; c) deep expertise and experience in addressing relevant drivers and designing tailored and effective solutions; d) the ability and willingness to be innovative and flexible in identifying and tackling emerging issues; e) legitimacy as effective interlocutors between governments and local communities; f) their unique position to contribute to multi-stakeholder efforts help steer individuals towards positive alternatives to violent extremism; and g) being ideally placed to work with the community to prepare them, where appropriate, to support the reintegration of "foreign terrorist fighters" ("FTFs") – and other former violent extremists – as well as their families and others who served in non-combat roles, so they do not pose a security threat. Perhaps most important of all, they have a commitment to preventing violent extremism and improving the conditions in their communities, because, along with victims of violent extremist attacks, their children, families, and communities also suffer.

Yet, despite the critical role of these allies in preventing and countering violent extremism, overly broad definitions of terrorism and violent extremism are threatening the space for CSOs, including human rights defenders, to operate safely and effectively. Given the UN's recognition of the critical role of CSOs, particularly women and youth as noted in Security Council Resolutions 2242 and 2250, it is critical that the United Nations, including through your role as Under-Secretary-General and your new office, lead by example in engaging civil society as partners in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of human rights-compliant PVE and CT strategies, policies, and programs.

We offer the following recommendations for you and your office to consider to better engage civil society and other local actors.

First, as you interact with Member States and other stakeholders on these issues, we encourage you to draw their attention to two documents, which were released during the September 2017 high-level opening of the UN General Assembly and reflect the views of dozens of CSOs around the globe: one³ provides 10 practical reasons why governments should consider CSOs allies rather than adversaries

² See, e.g., "Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms: Women's Perspectives on Violent Extremism and Security Interventions", International Civil Society Action Network/Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, March 2016, available at: <http://www.icanpeacework.org/2016/03/03/3702/> (also available in Arabic).

³ "10 Reasons Why Civil Society Is an Ally and Not an Adversary in the Struggle against Violent Extremism," Global Solutions Exchange, 21 September 2017, available at <http://www.gsxpve.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/10-Reasons.pdf> (also available in Arabic and French).

when it comes to PVE and countering terrorism, and the other⁴ offers 10 practical steps governments should take to empower and support CSOs in this context.

Second, we encourage you and OCT to emphasize the centrality of protecting human rights when addressing the threats of violent extremism and terrorism. Evidence shows that support for terrorism and violent extremism is strongly correlated with violence perpetrated by states against their own populations, in certain cases as part of or in the name of CT operations. Excessive and routine police brutality and disproportionate security measures that are perceived to target particular communities are among the key sources of grievance that violent extremist propaganda exploits. This was underscored in the United Nations Development Programme's 2017 report, "Journey to Extremism in Africa"⁵. The 2017 Global Terrorism Index's examination of the drivers of terrorism "also demonstrates the risks of political crackdowns and counterterrorism actions that can exacerbate existing grievances and the drivers of extremism and terrorism"⁶ This is consistent with the GCTS, which calls countering terrorism and protecting human rights "complementary and mutually reinforcing" goals. The GCTS lists violations of human rights, lack of rule of law, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, political exclusion, and socio-economic marginalization as "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism," while emphasizing that these causes can never be an excuse to justify terrorist acts.⁷

To help ensure the sustained credibility of the UN among communities around the globe, we encourage you and your office to exert moral leadership in this area and speak out against violations of human rights committed in the name of countering terrorism. This includes reminding Member States that countering terrorism through policies that safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of their citizens is the most effective security strategy and promoting a space for collaboration between human rights organizations and Member State governments. The United Nations should continue to prioritize the provision of technical support and guidance to Member States to ensure their PVE and CT laws and strategies are fully compliant with international human rights law. UN agencies should also facilitate or deliver assistance focused on building trust and otherwise facilitating effective engagement between the security sector, including the police, and communities, particularly those where feelings of marginalization or exclusion persist.

As a demonstration of your office's commitment to both promoting a coordinated and collaborative UN response to the threats of terrorism and violent extremism and the protection of human rights, we encourage you to organize with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights a high-level event focused on the intersection between the protection of freedoms of expression, religion, and other fundamental freedoms and rights and effectively preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism. We believe it would be the first event of its kind organized jointly by the senior-most human rights and CT officials in the UN system.

⁴ "10 Steps Governments Can Take to Support the Critical Role of Civil Society in Preventing Violent Extremism," Global Solutions Exchange, 21 September 2017, available at <http://www.gsxpve.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/10-Steps.pdf> (also available in Arabic and French).

⁵ "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment", September 2017, available at <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

⁶ "2017 Global Terrorism Index," p.3, Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2017, available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Global%20Terrorism%20Index%202017%20%284%29.pdf>.

⁷ "United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy", pillar I, United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/60/288, 20 September 2006, available at <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy#plan>.

Third, we request that you prioritize meaningful engagement between your new office and civil society, including women- and youth-led organizations and human rights defenders. This ensures that the views of relevant local, grassroots CSOs are heard in New York and at the regional and national levels.

We encourage you and your office to a) meet with *independent* CSOs during your country visits, b) provide funding and other support through the UN Center on Counter-Terrorism to the growing number of civil society organizations and networks with PVE and CT expertise, c) urge Member States to include CSOs working across the spectrum of PVE and CT issues in the development, implementation, and evaluation of PVE national action plans, strategies, and programs; and d) meet regularly with the wide range of CSOs active on these issues.

The United Nations should also lead by example and make cooperation with a wide range of existing civil society platforms a standard operating procedure. The Global Solutions Exchange (GSX)⁸, a network that brings together a richly diverse cross-section of independent CSOs from all countries affected by violent extremism for exchange of analysis and effective solutions is one such platform. The GSX receives support from a number of UN Member States as well as the European Union and is already engaged with UNDP, UN Women, the World Bank, and other UN entities.

As co-leaders of the GSX Steering Group, the Prevention Project and the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) are able to initiate and coordinate any engagement with your office.

The signatories to this letter are committed to constructive collaboration with you and your office, and the wider UN system on the PVE and CT agendas. We look forward to realizing such collaboration in 2018, in anticipation of the sixth biennial review of the UNGCTS this summer, and beyond.

Signed,

- Abdoulaye Harouna, President, COPAVE, Niger
- Addu Women's Organisation (AWA), The Maldives
- Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security - Africa (AWAPSA), Kenya
- Afghan Women Skills Development Center, Afghanistan
- Allamin Foundation for Peace & Development, Nigeria
- Alliance for Peacebuilding, USA
- Amina Rasul, President, Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID), The Philippines
- Arifur Rahman, Chief Executive, Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Bangladesh
- Association of War Affected Women (AWAW), Sri Lanka
- Cabinet d'Analyses et d'Actions pour la Sécurité et la Paix (CASPA), Niger
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Egypt
- Chadi Nachabe, UTOPIA Foundation, Lebanon
- Coalition for Action on 1325 (COACT), Uganda
- Commonwealth Youth Peace Ambassador Network

⁸ See www.gsxpve.org for more information on the GSX.

- Cure Violence, USA
- CVE and Reintegration Initiative, USA
- Daisy Khan, Founder & Executive Director, Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, USA
- Daniel Koehler, Director, German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), Germany
- Dean Piedmont, The CVE and Reintegration Initiative, USA
- Dr. Emna Jebbloui, Founder of the Citizen 4Peace Project, Tunisia
- Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi, Director of the Secretariat of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, Washington Office, USA
- Farooq Sobhan, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Bangladesh
- Fatima Akilu, Executive Director of the Neem foundation, Nigeria
- Fatima Zahra Ritab Ambassador of International Peace and Civil Society Actor, Morocco
- Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN), Nigeria
- Feriha Peracha, Director and Supervising Psychologist of the Sabaoon Project, Pakistan
- Gizem Kiliç, United Network of Young Peacebuilders, Netherlands
- Global Center on Cooperative Security, USA
- Global Strategy Network, UK
- HAKI Africa, Kenya
- Hamed el Said, Professor of International Business and Political Economy, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, UK
- Herwa Community Development Initiative (Mohammed N Hassan), Nigeria
- Hope and Homes for Children, Bosnia Herzegovina
- Human Rights Watch, USA
- Human Security Collective, The Netherlands
- Inclusive Security, USA
- Institute for Security Studies, South Africa
- International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), USA
- International Institute for Human Development (IDH), Women and Youth 4Peace, Tunisia
- Julien Bahati Mukengerwa, Action des jeunes pour le Développement Communautaire et la Paix, ADECOP, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
- Khedija Arfaoui, Independent researcher, Tunisia
- Lamia Al Saket, Co-Founder Musa Al Saket Development Organization, Jordan
- Libyan Women's Forum, Libya
- Local Youth Corner, Cameroon
- Marouane Bakit, Makers of Hope for Human Rights, Libya/Morocco
- Neba Dereck Fuh, Positive Peace Group, Cameroon
- Neil Hicks, Director Human Rights Promotion, Human Rights First, USA
- North Observatory for Human Rights, Morocco
- Omar T. Mattar, Organization for Community Empowerment, Zanzibar, Tanzania

- PAIMAN Alumni Trust, Pakistan
- Peace Track Initiative, Yemen
- Prevention Project: Organizing Against Violent Extremism, USA
- Qamar-ul Huda, Director, Security & Violent Extremism Program, The Center for Global Policy, USA
- Richard Barrett, former Coordinator of the UN Security Council Al-Qaida/Taliban Sanctions Committee Monitoring Team, UK
- Richard Ponzio, Director, Just Security 2020 Program, The Stimson Center, USA
- Rodolfo Dominguez, Coordinator General, Justice, Human Rights and Gender Civil Association, Mexico
- Dr. Sarah Sewall, former U.S. Under-Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, USA
- Search for Common Ground, USA
- Spaces for Youth Development and Social Change, Nigeria
- To Be Foundation for Human Rights, Yemen
- "Women for Development" NGO, Armenia
- Zarrina Alimshoeva, researcher, International Alert, Tajikistan