

Check Against Delivery

**Remarks at the  
Second United Nations High-Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism  
Breakout Session C: The critical roles of civil society and local actors in building partnerships  
for prevention**

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Thank you to UN Secretary-General Guterres for convening the second High-Level Conference and for the invitation to speak as part of this distinguished panel. A vibrant and active civil society plays a critical role in enhancing community resilience, supporting accountability and transparency, advancing the rule of law, and achieving the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. Yet, their importance continues to be undervalued and their capacities underutilized; furthermore, the proliferation of counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism (PVE) measures and programs, including through the application of new technologies, has securitized their work and been directly correlated to shrinking civic space. Twenty years after the substantive investments that followed the September 11 attacks, it is troubling that we must continue to devote substantial time defending the critical roles of civil society and local actors in building partnerships for prevention.

Since the founding of the [Global Center on Cooperative Security](#) in 2004, we have worked closely together with the United Nations, governments, the private sector, and diverse civil society partners to advance inclusive, human rights-based policies, partnerships, and practices that address the root causes of violent extremism. In addition to our capacity development and training programs, we have been providing independent analysis and recommendations to improve multilateral counterterrorism and PVE efforts through our Blue Sky consultations and report series; the [fifth version](#) was released late last year.

Building on this work, I would like to emphasize three basic facts in my remarks today:

1. The meaningful engagement of a diverse civil society is crucial for successful counterterrorism and PVE efforts;
2. Counterterrorism and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) frameworks have restricted civic space and had wide-ranging negative consequences for civil society; and
3. Governments and intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations must push back on these trends and model positive, mutually beneficial engagement.

**Civil Society Engagement**

Civil society includes a diverse range of community-based organizations, academia, think tanks,

community elders, religious leaders, victims' networks, youth clubs, and women's groups. The positive contributions of civil society to peace and security have been [well documented](#), including their delivery of a more context-sensitive, human security-driven approach to preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism. Increased references to their many roles can be witnessed in successive reviews of the [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#), including in its seventh version which is anticipated to be adopted this Wednesday.

However, recognizing civil society's importance is not enough: they need to be actively and meaningfully engaged and supported in 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, follow a do no harm approach, include gender and age considerations, and account for individual risks and needs. Civil society also holds those with decision making power accountable to their human rights and international law obligations, including governments and private sector companies who are deploying transformative technologies.

Civil society often fills roles where governments do not have the necessary capacity, trust, or expertise. In so doing, they bring greater attention to the grievances experienced by communities and shine a light on how a lack of good governance and socioeconomic and political marginalization have served to drive extremist violence. At the same time, while it is critical that civil society is meaningfully engaged and included, they should not be expected to take over a government's responsibility to protect its citizens and provide essential services.

Peacebuilders, human rights defenders, and other civil society actors work under extremely difficult circumstances. [Over 95 percent of all deaths related to terrorism occur in countries with ongoing violent conflict; the ten countries most affected by terrorist attacks are all engaged in at least one armed conflict.](#) Thus, a wider array of civil society and humanitarian partners are having to navigate more complex operating environments as counterterrorism laws and policies influence and govern their actions.

### **Shrinking Civic Space**

Civic space has been shrinking steadily over the last decade, alongside a deterioration of other rights such as the freedom of expression and association; [87 percent](#) of the world's population now lives in countries where there are severe civic space restrictions. The [lack of an international definition of terrorism](#) and the proliferation of repressive security measures to counter terrorism and its financing have played an outsized role in this regard, including through the application of new technologies such as [biometrics and artificial intelligence](#). Counterterrorism laws and policies are abused to target political opponents and marginalized populations and justify warrantless surveillance, prolonged arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, and the use of extrajudicial executions. CFT measures have created barriers to the efficient operations of civil society organizations, impeded financial access for non-profits, and [hindered or even criminalized the delivery of humanitarian aid](#). Examples of these negative consequences are well documented, particularly their acute impacts on women-led and grassroots civil society organizations. Extraordinary responses to COVID-19 have [further reinforced this negative trend, undermining trust among vulnerable populations and increasing grievances against governments](#). While the seventh Strategy review is set to diplomatically

recognize the potential negative impacts of the misapplication of counterterrorism legislation and measures, it fails to explicitly call for the promotion and protection of civic space.

### **Roles for the United Nations and Member States**

While states have a primary responsibility to engage civil society and ensure that counterterrorism and CFT measures do not restrict civic space or impinge on human rights, [the United Nations has a specific role to play](#) as a normative leader in supporting the meaningful participation of diverse civil society actors in counterterrorism and PVE policies and programs, and as an accountability mechanism to ensure that these do not negatively impact nongovernmental organizations and humanitarian actors. Among other things, this requires:

1. Protecting and promoting civic space and more forcefully, frequently, and consistently speaking out against the intentional and unintentional misuse and abuse of counterterrorism and CFT frameworks to shrink civic space, reduce human rights, and hinder financial access – in line with the [Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights](#) and the [Guidance Note on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space](#).
2. Meaningfully engaging diverse civil society actors in informing policy priorities and program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation; and thus not solely limiting their role to information gatherer or project implementer. UN action in this space should serve as a model for member states, demonstrating a consultative, supportive, and inclusive approach to these types of partnerships. The increased engagement with civil society by the co-facilitators of the seventh Strategy review, opportunities for input in the Secretary-General’s biennial report on the implementation of the Strategy, and active collaboration with some UN entities are all welcome developments that must be sustained and expanded.
3. Ensuring that all counterterrorism and PVE efforts are gender-sensitive, prioritize human rights and uphold the rule of law, and center those that are affected most by violent extremism and efforts to prevent and counter it. This includes the [ethical application of transformative technologies like artificial intelligence and data capture systems](#) alongside privacy and broader human rights protections. Necessary investments must be made in human rights monitoring and evaluation capacities and the important work of, for example, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

### **Conclusion**

The United Nations and individual governments can and must do more to protect and promote civil society and facilitate their engagement in counterterrorism and PVE efforts. Civil society will continue to work tirelessly to prevent violent extremism, self-organize to have its voices heard, and hold those in power accountable in the face of ever-more intrusive counterterrorism and PVE measures. Governments and multilateral organizations must put in place the modalities and resources to establish and sustain meaningful, inclusive partnerships with a diverse range of nongovernmental stakeholders and actively protect and promote civic space.

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