

Remarks to the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee

Date: Wednesday 18 May 2022

Delivered by: Jordan Street, Senior Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Saferworld

Mr. Chair, thank you for the introduction and another thank you to my fellow briefers here today.

Allow me to start by offering deep appreciation to Members of the Committee for including this session in your programme of work.

My organisation, Saferworld, is an independent, international non-governmental organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build peace in East Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Europe and Asia.

We are speaking today as a member of the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism.

Our coalition is an informal network of civil society organisations, including major international human rights, humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations from every region of the world.

We, like the stakeholders of the CTC [Counter-Terrorism Committee], CTED [Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate] and Member States, work to prevent violent terror attacks.

Briefly, I want to build on the previous speakers' points on the impacts of counter-terrorism on civil society and civic space, and the strategic rationale for involving civil society in national and transnational counter-terrorism work and policy formation.

Firstly, it is no longer controversial to highlight how counter-terrorism activity has led to measurable negative impacts.

Last year we saw the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy note the harms caused by counter-terrorism on civic space, on human rights, and through the instrumentalisation of gender.

Saferworld has seen and documented these harms, and some of our teams and our partners around the world, like Ms. Allamin, have lived through them.

Unfortunately, some of the most severe restrictions on our partners' work derive from security and counter-terrorism laws and measures.

In many areas where our coalition partners work, these prevent us from undertaking human rights monitoring, peacebuilding programmes, or work with women's rights organisations or youth groups.

In some cases, state authorities have arrested, harassed and imprisoned partner civil society members under the auspices of counter-terrorism, simply for working with the UN.

We need to be clear that negative impacts from counter-terrorism policy and practice on civil society and civic space are happening repeatedly. These are not impacts that can be written off as unpredictable or isolated.

It is incumbent on all of us to take these negative impacts seriously with a policy response that does not dismiss them as unavoidable consequences.

Colleagues, part of that policy response should be the meaningful inclusion of civil society and I'll tell you why.

Last week, we at Saferworld released a new study that analyses 20 years of the international response to terror and proscribed groups in conflict-affected contexts around the world.

One of the key conclusions from this paper is that across multiple contexts, proscribed terror groups have shown, I quote, 'a flair for conflict analysis and have tailored their approach accordingly'.

In other words, they know how to spot weaknesses in the social fabric and exploit them to their advantage.

This new research analyses how terror groups have effectively understood and manipulated local dynamics and conflict drivers in their context – such as marginalisation, inequality and human rights violations – and have responded to these, often in a more astute way than counter-terror strategies have.

Our and our partners' experience shows that those designing and implementing counter-terrorism strategies need to invest in an understanding of local contexts, grievances and conflict drivers and respond to them in practical, meaningful ways that change people's lives.

The best way to do this is by working with civil society groups who are immersed in communities and who are able to offer clear guidance in how counter-terrorism strategies are having or can have negative unintended consequences.

To respond effectively to the threat of violent terror groups, international strategies should include civil society in the design, implementation and follow-up – in a meaningful way based on partnership and the recognition that a collective effort offers the best chance at prevention.

However, this must not instrumentalise civil society and local groups.

Too often civil society engagement strategies see the inclusion of civil society groups as a tick box exercise or as a way to extract information or transfer risk, and use such groups to implement previously conceived strategies. This approach is harmful.

Colleagues, the engagement of civil society is of course not a magic bullet, but it should be a fundamental part of all strategies to prevent violent terror attacks.

Not just in programmes at the national level – it also must extend to the global, transnational level.

Bringing civil society practitioners into the global counter-terrorism policymaking space, at the CTC and in General Assembly processes like the Global Counter-Terrorism strategy, is a strategic move for UN Member States.

It allows these strategies to be better informed. It can also shine light on the potential downstream impacts at the national level that are often overlooked, including more nuanced understandings of power dynamics, gender and conflict legacies.

In contrast, excluding civil society practitioners or misrepresenting their voices as 'enemies of the state' or 'politically motivated' does UN counter-terrorism efforts a disservice and ultimately makes the multilateral system's response significantly weaker.

We were encouraged to see that there is progress in CTED's new mandate on the inclusion of civil society but it is crucial that this mandate is implemented in a meaningful way.

But what more can be done?

Colleagues, ultimately what we believe is needed is a *level of intentionality* that reckons with foreseeable negative impacts that I, Hamsatu and other speakers have noted today. Responses should proactively seek to mitigate these harms.

A core part of this intentionality should be the inclusion of civil society perspectives in the wider work of the CTC and CTED.

It will mean undertaking to ensure that the CTC and CTED have access to the full range of stakeholders in policy discussions in New York and on country visits.

It will mean a clear coordinated effort to meaningfully engage with, listen to and integrate civil society in the wider work of the UN counter-terrorism architecture.

As per the most recent review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, states and the UN system should be further enabling civil society actors to be partners in preventing terror attacks, in line with the Secretary-General's Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space.

Finally, members of this committee and the wider UN system should be taking proactive steps to monitor and mitigate any harms to civil society and civic space emanating from counter-terrorism approaches being carried out in the UN's name – either through the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions or activities to implement the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

It is our view that states should create an independent oversight mechanism to prevent such harms from taking place.

Before I finish, I want to reiterate my thanks to the Chair of the Committee, to the previous speakers and to the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate for today's session.

I would like to note that in an ideal world, it would not have been me that you heard from here today. We wanted representatives from the global south to be here in person.

But unfortunately too many of our partners are operating in severely repressive and restrictive spaces.

Many are at risk of reprisals from state authorities for participating in UN meetings and some – as you all know – are banned from travelling or are imprisoned with counter-terrorism used as a phony excuse to justify such a crackdown.

And then of course, there is responsibility from other states that are making it incredibly difficult for our partners to travel, with convoluted visa processes.

This is all to say that I know there are those on this committee that are keen to see new voices that are not from the global north countries – and we too support this, but ask for those states that are making it difficult for this to become a reality to work to change their restrictive approaches.

I thank you for your time.