

Human Rights Council panel discussion on the human rights dimensions of preventing and countering violent extremism (17th March 2016)

On 17th March 2016, during its 31st session, the UN Human Rights Council held a panel discussion on the human rights dimensions of preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE), pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 30/15.

The panel, moderated by **H.E. Ms. Beatriz Londoño Soto**, Permanent Representative of Colombia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, saw opening statements from **H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon**, Secretary-General of the United Nations (*video message*) and **Ms. Kate Gilmore**, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Panellists included **URG Board member, Dr. Nazila Ghanea** (Associate Professor at the University of Oxford), as well as: Mr. Gastón Garatea, Professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru and former Chair of the National Bureau for the Fight against Poverty; **Ms. Mehreen Farooq**, Senior Fellow at the World Organization for Resource Development and Education; and **Mr. Ahmed Abbadi**, Secretary-General of La Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas and Professor at Cadi Ayyad University of Marrakesh.

There was broad consensus on the need for initiatives and policies aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism to be **based firmly in international human rights law**. UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, opened the discussion by labelling abuses by violent extremists as a “[direct] assault [on] the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” He stressed the importance, outlined in his “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,” of human rights and the rule of law remaining central to all efforts to countering and preventing violent extremism. Many states reiterated the importance of a rights-based approach, with Kuwait (on behalf of the Arab Group) describing countering violent extremism, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law as “interdependent objectives.”

UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore, reiterated this point, noting that “responses to violent extremism that respect and protect human rights are more effective and sustainable: [...] repressive policies and practices which violate human rights,” she noted, are the “breeding ground for violent extremism.” On the other hand, Gilmore noted that “respect for freedoms of religion, belief, opinion and expression is fundamental to the struggle against violent extremism.” Nazila Ghanea referenced the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ recognition that “any repressive approach” on the part of States in reaction to the rise of violent extremism “would have the reverse effect of reinforcing the narrative of extremist ideologies.”¹ The US representative quoted President Obama (statement made during the February 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism): “When people are oppressed and human rights are denied – particularly along sectarian or ethnic lines – when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism.”

¹ UN News Centre, Interview, 18 January 2016. Quoted in Ben Emmerson’s report A/HRC/31/65 of 22 February 2016, para 8.

URG Board member, Nazila Ghanea, underscored the **importance of drawing on existing standards of international human rights law and frameworks** mentioned in resolution 30/15, including resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, when developing CPVE strategies. Ethiopia noted that “national instruments and international obligations should remain the guiding principles” for all PCVE strategies.

Nazila Ghanea noted the importance of paragraph 6 of resolution 16/18, which “reminds us of the **crucial need for non-discrimination**; meaningful participation, and the need to make a strong effort to counter religious profiling.” Without this, she noted, “the very actions aimed at CPVE risk stimulating and fuelling further violent extremism.” Article 19 (on behalf of 23 NGOs) noted that “even well intentioned PVE initiatives can discriminate against and alienate the communities they seek to help, not only raising human rights concerns but also being potentially counterproductive to security.” They explained that even “supposedly soft intervention to prevent violent extremism are premised on assumptions of the vulnerabilities of particular groups to follow a pathway of radicalisation [...] that is not evidence based.”

Many participants stressed the importance of taking an **inclusive, “whole-of-society” approach** to PCVE, including a wide range of civil society and non-state actors. Kate Gilmore noted “the importance of safeguarding the space for civil society to voice the concerns of diverse groups and communities, and to contribute to people’s involvement in decision-making.” Albania (on behalf of the core group of resolution 30/15 on PCVE) underlined the fact that “governments cannot prevent and counter violent extremism on their own,” but rather that it “requires a whole-of-society approach maximizing everyone’s added value.” Norway (on behalf of the Nordic countries) noted that “the engagement of civil society is crucial to shift social norms towards a culture of non-violence,” while the US added that civil society “can provide insights and access that can be critical to making interventions more effective and sustainable.”

Many emphasised that there is **no “one size fits all”** approach to PCVE, and that different realities require different practical initiatives. In this regard, many, including moderator, Ambassador Beatriz Londoño Soto, noted the importance of taking a “**bottom up approach**,” and “[tailoring] actions according to the cultural and other contexts of a given community.” In this respect, Panellist Mehreen Farooq emphasised the important role to be played by local civil society: “NGOs, civic associations, faith-based organisations, religious scholars, educators and social service providers,” she noted “are deeply connected to communities,” and are therefore “best suited to understand the challenges of communities, and can rapidly mobilise resources to respond to their needs.” Gastón Garatea shared his experience (in Peru) of collective, collaborative “all of society” approaches leading to a better identification of key issues and factors in fight against terrorism and prolonged violence.

Pakistan (on behalf of the OIC) stressed “**the importance of integrating youth and women in the efforts and decision-making processes** regarding violent extremism, underscoring that children and youth represent future of society and that systematic failure to protect their rights may contribute to an environment conducive to crime and violent extremism.” Norway also emphasized the importance of “a carefully designed gender-focused approach,” noting gender-based violence and discrimination, as well as the fact that “it is not only men that take on roles as participants and facilitators of violent extremism.”

Kate Gilmore noted the importance of “**quality education based on human rights**,” as it “plays a key role in helping to create understanding and mutual respect between different identities and communities.” Similarly, the Moroccan representative noted that “human rights education and training are a key tool in preventing and combatting violent extremism,” and suggested that OHCHR could strengthen its cooperation with UNESCO in this area. Drawing on her experience in this area, Mehreen Farooq explained that “if you have an informed public that understand the threat of violent extremism, and the risk factors of radicalisation, then they are well-equipped to identify vulnerable individuals.” She noted that WORDE have developed “workshops on a range of public safety threats, including the risk factors of radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism,” and that they have “trained hundreds of local law enforcement officers, educators, and faith community members.”

Many participants focused on the importance of **engaging youth** as part of educational PCVE strategies, as (in the words of Ghana) the primary “targets for violent extremism conscription.” Nazila Ghanea underscored the importance of adapting the message and approach of PCVE strategies where children were concerned, noting that security frameworks are inappropriate in this context.

A number of participants expressed concern over the **misuse of PCVE laws, policies and practices to target human rights defenders, journalists and other individuals challenging the *status quo***. Kate Gilmore noted that “history reminds us that societies without tolerance for open debate are more vulnerable to extremism.” The EU Ambassador commented that “national security measures should never undermine a safe and enabling environment for an independent, diverse and pluralistic society, in which citizens have the right at all times to speak out, both on- and offline, against government policies and actions.” Article 19 (on behalf of 23 organisations) expressed “serious concerns” that PVE initiatives “increasingly [target] the free flow of information online: to block access to the internet [...] as well as to target anonymity and encryption,” which is “often without procedural safeguards.”

Nazila Ghanea reminded participants of the three part test for restrictions on expression, offered by the Rabat Plan of Action – legality, proportionality and necessity – that should be considered to be “imperative to preventing and countering violent extremism” (this was reiterated by Croatia and others).

A number of participants expressed concern over **the lack of a working definition or common understanding of the term “violent extremism,”** and how that was differentiated from “terrorism.” Nazila Ghanea noted concerns raised by Ben Emmerson, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, in his report to the HRC this month, concerning “the elasticity of the term ‘violent extremism,’ and the lack of clarity on what leads individuals to embrace violent extremism,” which in practice “means that the wide [array of measures pursued] can have a serious negative impact on manifold human rights.”² Article 19 (on behalf of 23 organisation) also noted that “the lack of an agreed definition of what constitutes violent extremism, or even a shared understanding of its causes, can open the door to human rights abuses when it comes to prevention.” Croatia (and others)

² A/HRC/31/65, para 54.

commented that “the measures to fight violent extremism require further delineation from the phenomenon of terrorism,” calling for a “clear diversification of measures and conditions to tackle each one of them.”

In a statement not delivered due to lack of time, Ghana noted that “the **concept of violent extremism needs to be further clarified** and the scope broadened to enable states engage in creditable measures to prevent it.” A number of participants proposed tentative working definitions of the term “violent extremism.” For example, the Ambassador of Sierra Leone defined it as “the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals,” including “includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence.”

Nazila Ghanea noted that the international has made progress on issues before in the absence of an exact agreed definition of the key terms, for example in the case of the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities. While suggesting that the lack of such a definition should not necessarily preclude action (as suggested by the Nigerian delegate), she stressed that “a working definition does have to emerge.” The bedrock of that should be human rights.

A number of participants stressed the **importance of the respect for economic, social and cultural rights** in the prevention of violent extremism. Kate Gilmore said “it is clear that paths lead from socio-economic marginalization to violence,” and that “policies and laws that combat social exclusion or marginalization are essential elements to the effective prevention and countering of violent extremism.” One key element of this, she noted, is “enhancing access to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by and for everyone, on an equal basis.” She identified this measure as a “life line by which individuals, communities and societies can be immunized from the rhetoric of violent extremism.” Panellist Gastón Garatea noted that in his experience, in Peru, realized that the main problem was poverty, while China identified “the promotion socio-economic well being, and [the eradication of] social injustice” as key to “[eradicating] the breeding ground” for violent extremism. Indonesia emphasised that “extremism is not a reflection of the teachings of a particular religion, but rather due to other socio-political and economic causes.”

Kate Gilmore and others stressed the importance of accountability measures, not just as a “matter of legal obligation,” but also as the basis on which “trust in public institutions, in public duty bearers and trust in public leaders” might be fostered.

Nazila Ghanea noted the “**crucial role**” to be played by **political and religious leaders**, “speaking out firmly and promptly,” as recognised in the Rabat Plan of Action, as well as the Fez Plan of Action. Ahmed Abbadi noted the need to build capacity of religious scholars and leaders to understand and address these “problematic and burning issues.”

Pakistan (on behalf of the OIC) meanwhile noted “**the importance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue**, as an effective mechanism to combat extremism and incitement to hatred based on religion.”

Morocco and others reiterated the importance of engagement of religious leaders and inter-faith dialogue, and noted a number of examples of best practice in this area.

Next Steps

The OHCHR will prepare a summary report on yesterday's panel discussion, as well as a "compilation report on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism," to be presented to the Council at its 33rd session.³

Related resources

- [Human Rights Council resolution 30/15](#) "Human rights and preventing and countering violent extremism"
- Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism ([A/70/674](#))
- Report of Special Rapporteur

Please note: this is a non-exhaustive summary of the panel discussion. To watch the full discussion, see <http://webtv.un.org/watch/panel-discussion-on-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-47th-meeting-31st-regular-session-human-rights-council/4805586892001>.

³ HRC res. 30/15, "Human rights and preventing and countering violent extremism," adopted by vote (37-3, with 7 abstentions), 2nd October 2015; paras 17, 18.