

7<sup>th</sup> Biannual Review of the  
UN Counter Terrorism Strategy  
United Nations, New York

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July 9 2020

Good Morning Excellencies,

My thanks to the UN Office of Counter Terrorism for inviting me to address you. I start by echoing the concerns and recommendations of the previous speaker, Prof. Ni Fionnuala Ní Aoláin.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Coronavirus pandemic hit, in regions affected by violent extremism and conflict, women peacebuilders were the first to respond. From Iraq to Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia and elsewhere, they started with the hygiene awareness campaigns & sewing masks. Where there was no water or soap – as in Yemen and Cameroon – they started to produce soap and fix water pumps.

Then came the lock downs & news of the urgent demand for food. These women mobilized to produce food packages. A Syrian refugee in Turkey has become a pivotal figure not only for other refugees but for sharing the packages with Turkish families too. In Afghanistan, a network of men formed to end violence, led by an extraordinary woman, are organizing the delivery of food, hygiene and continue their PVE. In Pakistan the network of women formed to prevent violent extremism, now share advice on dealing with Covid across their rooftops. In Nigeria, while Boko Haram continues its attacks, a local organization is racing to care for the returning and escapee women and girls.

They are all my partners, members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) who live in and work on peacebuilding and P/CVE across 38 countries worldwide.

For the past 16 weeks, every week, we speak together and hear the news first hand. It is a repeated pattern everywhere:

- States are often absent and they are not responding to urgent needs, particularly in marginalized communities.
- Local civil society, like my WASL partners are filling the void where they can to provide health, hygiene, food and other provisions, as well to address violence in homes.
- They are also witnessing the resurgence of extremist movements in the vacuums left by governments.
- Our partners note that these movements are delivering relief and food and building reach & loyalty. They tap into people's concerns, twisting religious texts to foster fear – claiming Covid 19 is a curse against disbelievers; They foment xenophobia and fuel racism. Wherever we have minority communities they are at risk. So we see Christian White Supremacists blaming Jews in the US, Muslims in Iran blaming Bahaiis, Hindus and Buddhists in India and Sri Lanka blaming Muslims, local communities blaming migrants or displaced populations, for the pandemic.
- We also see governments using Covid to further repress populations from the Syrian regime to the Turkish and the Israelis, this is a time of heightened repression.
- The extremist movements we see don't operate alone. They are sponsored and supported by states. Often their leaders are political figures on the global stage – with membership in the Security Council.
- So instead of preventing violent extremism, we are seeing governments enable them.
- Meanwhile states are cracking down against civil society organizations who are defending rights and caring for their communities.
- The harassment and threats are often done through the law. In South Asia new legislation is forcing CSOs to register in every province they wish to work, instead of just one national registration. The paper work is overwhelming says my colleague. And the chance for corruption increases, as there is no accountability or oversight of local officials. From West Africa to South Asia – the counter terrorism laws puts peacebuilding CSOs in the cross hairs of the state. The US's material support laws can have a long reach, penalizing anyone who dares to mediate the disengagement and rehabilitation of individuals associated with named terror groups or their affiliates.

Two years ago when I spoke at the 6<sup>th</sup> UN Counter Terrorism Review Conference on the topic of civil society, women and bringing an end to violent extremism I offered the following recommendations to the UN and its member states:

1. Stop the rhetoric on promising rights, development and gender equality, and deliver on that promise. If your promises stay empty, you lose the trust of the people. Meanwhile extremist movements from Boko Haram to White Supremacists will fill that void and co-opt men and women in our societies.
2. Globally, Nationally and locally: value, support, strengthen and protect independent **local** civil society organizations such as women's organizations involved in preventing and countering violent extremism. They are trusted in their communities and are able to recognize early signs of violent extremism and take preventive action. Here I commend **the Govt of Indonesia** for its outreach and partnership with Indonesian civil society organizations & I thank our Norwegian, Canada, and British and Swedish colleagues for their trust in us and the WASL network of local women-led peacebuilding organizations.

3. Build, coordinate and partner between governments, international organizations, the UN and NGOs. We have to recognize each other's comparative advantages and acknowledge that the dissent and criticism we offer goes hand in hand with the solutions and constructive engagement we also provide. The UN OCT strategy for civil society engagement is necessary and welcome but still not sufficient. People who put their own lives at risk to build peace, and improving the lives of their compatriots and communities, are a country's best citizens. Is it too much to ask that they should be free from state harassment and repression?

Today I offer two simple additions to my recommendations:

1. UN member states should not be bombing their neighbors, sanctioning each other's already devastated populations, selling and flooding an already drowning region with more weapons, or arming and paying proxy groups made up of young men - most of whom, want a chance at a decent life – to fight unwinnable wars. They should be putting every effort into inclusive peace talks to end violence and the roots of extremism – with women peacebuilders as the protectors of their communities – at the heart of every dialogue.
2. I'd advise Saudi Arabia not to build 100 more religious schools for children in Afghanistan or elsewhere. If they want to help, they should be building schools where girls and boys can learn about poetry and engineering, computing, art and biology. Let's train healthworkers and social workers, and give livelihoods to people. Let's teach our children about all faiths and the universality of values that promote peace, equality and respect for diversity.

Two years ago at the 6<sup>th</sup> review, I asked what do you – collectively as the Nations of the world stand for? We agree that we do not want terrorism and violent extremism to define and determine the course of our lives. But 18 years of countering this phenomenon militarily, has just led to more violence.

We urgently need to refocus on what we seek to promote, not just what we counter. I believe making the promise and commitments in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights real, would be transformative for humanity. This is the best means of countering terrorism and extremism .

It is possible because locally women peacebuilders have the proof. Yet what I, and my colleagues, see today is alarming. On our watch, in our generation, we are seeing ethnic cleansing being normalized. The rhetoric of hate is spreading and there is an absence of global moral leadership.

There is a division between power and responsibility – with the most powerful abrogating their responsibilities for the wellbeing of others.

We cannot speak of countering terrorism without speaking of the state sponsors and fomenters of these ideologies.

Today we each as individuals and institutions - have a choice. We can keep meeting and repeating the same messages. Or you can take this moment to change the course of your actions. It's fairly simple: human beings everywhere need dignity and justice. They want peace and a chance to live a decent life.

Those who care to fight for these rights, and work to build peace, like the women peacebuilders in WASL, are already doing what they can. Are you?

I urge you to act now and join in. If we want change for the future, we have to change the present.

Thank you

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini