Tip-Sheets for Reporting on Security Issues

1. Violent Extremism

Key definitions: What is violent extremism and what is the role of the security sector in responding to it?

Violent extremism (or terrorism) seeks to achieve political change through violence. It is characterized by an exclusive world view that does not tolerate differences of opinion. Often the aim is to change the nature of the political system and the state itself by attacking the public at large. Violent extremism undermines national security by attacking public safety.

Defending against violent challenges to the state and protecting the public from violent attacks is a prime responsibility for the security sector. Security sector efforts to contain violent extremism are known under several names: counterterrorism, countering violent extremism, or preventing violent extremism. The differences between these terms and approaches are blurred, but counterterrorism strategies, for example, are associated with heavily militarized tactics and a maximal use of force against suspects. There are differing opinions about when and how these strategies are effective in countering violent extremism. Moreover, they are often criticized because they have resulted in violations of judicial process and abuse of human rights by security sector actors in many countries: including for example, the intrusive use of surveillance, suspect profiling, illegal detentions, harmful interrogation tactics (including torture), and targeted killings of suspects, especially in foreign jurisdictions. In contrast, prevention strategies tend to emphasize rights-based approaches that try to address grievances driving radicalization within vulnerable communities before they lead to violence. Prevention strategies rely on inclusive approaches to the defense of human rights and rule of law as a bulwark against radicalization.

An accountable and effective security sector that respects human rights and the rule of law is a necessary element in fighting violent extremism because abuse by security forces is known to be a driver of radicalization against non-violent, state-based politics. Yet security sector abuses are sometimes more likely in societies that have faced sustained extremist violence. Sometimes security sector abuses linked to countering violent extremism are the result of policy failures: for example, strategies may be poorly formulated, based on incorrect assumptions or intelligence, or their implementation may not align with the intention behind the policy. In other cases, security sector responses to violent extremism fail to respect the law or human rights: For example, when efforts to stem extremist violence lead to increases in the powers of the security sector without adequate oversight or control. Anti-terror measures have also been used as a pretense to politicize the security sector. For example, anti-terror measures might concentrate political power in the hands of the executive, or attempt to create a legal basis for the violation of certain civil or political rights under states of emergency or anti-terror laws. In this way the fight against violent extremism has been manipulated to provide political cover for disingenuous political leaders and decision-makers within the security sector to solidify their authority or hold on government. For these reasons, repressive or abusive counter-terror measures have resulted in a spiral of increasing political tension and extremist violence in a number of contexts.

Why security sector reporting on violent extremism is important

Reporting on the security sector's role in countering violent extremism is especially opaque and dangerous. There is always a risk that telling the story of any side (whether the state or extremists) will result in instrumentalization, which also makes it difficult, if not impossible, for journalists to provide a fair and balanced account of grievances on each side. Moreover, accessing sources and information can be a difficult and risky process that may endanger both the source and the journalist.

Yet security sector reporting focusing on the nature of the state's policies to prevent and counter violent extremism is one of the most important ways for the public to learn about the effectiveness of these security policies. Governments and security sector actors may provide information to the public on changes to legal rights or new security initiatives intended to prevent or counter violent extremism. For example, changes in handling personal information, grounds for search or detention, and conditions for surveillance, among others. Coverage of such changes can verify and publicize government claims, while also presenting critical alternative analysis that promotes inclusive public discussion of threats and responses. Moreover, it is through journalistic investigation and reporting that the public tends to learn whether such policies are being applied responsibly, and to useful effect. Reporting on security sector violations of political and civil rights, as well as violent abuses of human rights, and impunity before the law may provide the clearest indications available of whether security institutions are overstepping their legal bounds in the name of countering extremism. Similarly, reporting on the inappropriate use of force can provide a chance for government and security forces to correct course before their failed policies trigger a cycle of reaction and overreaction that is likely to increase hostility and deepen radicalization.

Covering responses to violent extremism in transition contexts may be especially difficult and especially useful in transition contexts. On the one hand, a media context that is less dominated by commercial concerns and perhaps less structured may allow for more permissive reporting. Journalists can therefore facilitate open and public deliberations about the issue of political violence. On the other hand, such open dialogue may be seen by some to contribute to a normalization of violence or the legitimization of grievances that justify violent extremism. Balancing these concerns will depend on knowledge of and sensitivity to the context where the journalist is working, and also demands a careful application of a journalistic code of ethics and professional standards in the newsroom.

Key issues for reporting on violent extremism

Protecting human rights: The climate of fear that violent extremism creates, together with the threat violent extremists pose to the state, have served as justification for the expansion of powers of the security sector, including, for example, new powers of surveillance, investigation, and detention, as well as the development of more deadly capacities and tactics that could be dangerous for the population.

While responding to the legitimate threat posed by violent extremist may require adaptations in legal and operational frameworks for the security sector, these changes must still respect and protect the human rights of both the public and those individuals suspected or found guilty of extremist charges. Security policies that do not meet these criteria are dangerous to the public, to human rights, to the rule of law, and democratic governance. Moreover, they are also counter-productive in operational terms because they can feed extremist narratives of grievance about state abuse and mistreatment becoming a tool for extremist mobilization and recruitment. Reporting on the details of security policies intended to respond to violent extremism is an essential way for the public to become informed of the extent of such changes and to assess whether they have gone too far.

→ Journalists can ask:

✓ What changes have been made to security policies, strategies, and operations in the name of countering or preventing violent extremism?

✓ What new approaches, tactics, equipment, technologies are being used to respond to violent extremism?

✓ What international or regional alliances are relevant in the state's response to violent extremism?

✓ What mechanisms for cooperation are in place within security sector institutions, among them, and with their international or regional counterparts?

✓ How are fundamental rights affected by these changes?

✓ What mechanisms for complaint or sanction are in place in the event of abuse?

✓ What alternative interpretations of security policies and their effects on legal rights are available among expert legal opinions and civil society?

✓ What evidence is there of abuse?

✓ How have perpetrators been held accountable for their crimes?

Defending rights to freedom of opinion: From the point of view of democracy and international law, the security sector has a fundamental obligation to defend protections of freedom of expression. This also applies to other civil and political rights that might put a person's opinions at odds with state policies or society at large. Yet the threat of violent extremism has sometimes led security institutions to work against this obligation. For example, security institutions have targeted particular members of the public suspected of extremist activities or susceptibility to radicalization based on identity traits instead of credible evidence. This so-called "profiling" is based on characteristics such as age, gender, religion and ethnicity, among others. To ensure that efforts to control violent extremism do not lead to the development of invasive, arbitrary, and discriminatory systems of state surveillance and policing, legal provisions need to establish who the security sector may reasonably target and under what conditions. A system of judicial authority to oversee permissions and the correct application of the law is necessary, as well as parliamentary and independent oversight of potentially invasive policies.

→ Journalists can ask:

✓ How is privacy legally protected in cases of suspected radicalization or extremism?

✓ How are suspects identified and what framework is in place to monitor judicial permissions to investigate? For example, permission for surveillance, searches, or seizures of property etc.?

✓ What processes for recourse exist and how well are they working?

✓ What are the views and experiences of people who may have been targeted as extremists, including inclusive reporting on the grievances against the state?

✓ What opposing views on the application of new powers are available among civil society and independent oversight bodies, such as national human rights commissions?

✓ What does the history, motivation, social and political background of extremist groups reveal about them?

✓ What is the impact of state responses to violent extremism on the communities most directly affected as well as society more generally?

Avoiding politicization of the security sector: In some contexts, politicians or leaders at sub-national levels may have exaggerated or manipulated the threat posed by violent extremists to win support for unrelated political causes. The politicization of the threat of violent extremism can also politicize the security sector by creating a legal pretense on which governments can order security sector actors to adopt policies, conduct operations, target certain groups or curtail particular legitimate rights (such as freedom of expression or the right to peaceful demonstration). A sound system of security policy-making should ensure that the potential expansion of powers within the security sector is coherent with the fundamental principles of rule of law and human rights, that changes are approved by parliaments and judicial authorities, and, that new powers are subject to their oversight authority. Changes should also provide adequate transparency and accountability through complaints mechanisms.

→ Journalists can ask:

- ✓ How do the process of expanding the powers of the security sector works?

- ✓ Are decisions about the expansion of powers made inclusively, so that the views of all those who might be potentially affected are adequately considered?

- ✓ How is the exercise of new powers overseen by parliament, the courts and independent oversight bodies?

- ✓ Are all the relevant security sector actors transparent enough in their use of new powers so that abuse could be identified?

- ✓ Do media, civil society and the public at large have sufficient information about what the security sector is doing?

- ✓ Could investigations reveal cases of potential abuse or mismanagement that might indicate potential political abuse of power?

- ✓ What does inclusive public discussion of threats and responses reveal about changes or the use of new powers?

- ✓ Is there evidence to verify, or sound reason to doubt, government claims about responses to violent extremism (e.g. those provided through strategic communication and press releases)?

Box 10 Practical example: "Saudi Arabia using terrorism tribunal to silence critics: Amnesty"

In 2020, Aljazeera reported on the findings of an Amnesty International report, which argues that judicial processes established to counter violent extremism have become politicized and are being misused for political reasons. The story stated: "Saudi Arabia has used a terrorism tribunal as a political tool to silence critics and rights defenders, despite reforms introduced by the kingdom in recent years, a new report has found. The human rights watchdog Amnesty International concluded in its report published on Thursday that the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh was being routinely used to silence dissent and criticism in the kingdom."

This example shows how journalists can draw attention to issues of politicization and the expansion of new powers for the security sector (including the court system) by highlighting analysis from credible independent sources.

Source: "Saudi Arabia using terrorism tribunal to silence critics: Amnesty", February 2020, https://www. aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/6/saudi-arabia-using-terrorism-tribunal-to-silence-critics-amnesty

Further resources on security sector approaches to violent extremism:

➤ Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence, by Kate Ferguson. Available at: https://gsdrc.org/document-library/countering-violent-extremism-through-media-and-communication-strategies-a-review-of-the-evidence/

➤ Preventing Violent Extremism While Promoting Human Rights: Toward a Clarified UN Approach, by IPI. Available at: https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/1907_PVE-While-Promoting-Human-Rights.pdf

➤ Gender, Preventing Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, by DCAF. Available at: https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSPolicyBrief_3%20EN%20FINAL_0.pdf

➤ The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism, By the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/2/400241_1.pdf

Image: Photographers and members of the media covering the terrorist attack at the Taj hotel in Mumbai on 28 November © Reuters/Desmond Boylan.