18th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights: 
Human Rights and Prevention of Violent Extremism 
5-8 November 2018, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

KEY MESSAGES

Over the last decade, violent extremism has featured prominently in policy, political and academic debates internationally. These debates tend to revolve around two axes: security and human rights.

The 18th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights took place on 5-8 November 2018 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on the theme of “Human Rights and Prevention of Violent Extremism”. The seminar was co-organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (nominated by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The host of the 18th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Indonesia. Four simultaneous closed-door working groups addressed the following topics in detail:

- WG1 – Push and Pull Factors of Violent Extremism
- WG2 – Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level
- WG3 – Violent Extremism: Women's Involvement, Rights and Security
- WG4 – Youth, Education and Prevention of Violent Extremism

The seminar ran for three days and representatives from governmental and civil society organisations attended, bringing expertise from research, policy and frontline practice. As anticipated, the debates during the workshops were passionate and the plenaries and Q & A sessions engaging.

Several key messages emerged from the seminar the most prominent of which was one of hope and unity. The mere presence of so many stakeholders and the engagement of key decision makers and government officials demonstrated in practice that under the leadership of ASEF, Asia and Europe are determined to tackle the societal, security and human rights issues that are associated with both the idea, reality and myths surrounding violent extremism. Human rights were also portrayed not as hindrance to anti-radicalisation policies and laws, but as strong levers that can rebalance power, which is a key determinant in the prevention of extreme attitudes that lead to violence.

Similarly, in all debates that involve complex and living notions such as violent extremism and human rights, the issue of definitions was raised. The seminar acknowledged that a more nuanced delineation of key terms is needed. It also agreed that these terms are often not transferable into simple matters of writings. However, consensus was reached that violent acts of extremism warrant definition when it comes to their prosecution. The elasticity of legal terms and the lack of clarity of what constitutes terrorism and violent extremism can easily be misused, exploited or manipulated by law enforcement agencies and the powerful.
Therefore, one must ask why definitions are important before dedicating time and resources to trying to narrow down phenomena that might be best addressed and indeed prevented within a wider conceptual framework. What was also clear from the debates was that violent extremism includes many forms and these are not exclusively motivated by the misuse of faith, but also, of beliefs such as anarchy, and right and left-wing narratives as well as nationalist and separatist ideologies.

The extent to which the phenomenon of violent extremism is apparently spreading must be viewed critically. For example, in the EU 205 attacks were stopped, failed or completed. The impression is that this number is much larger. Terrorism accounts for 0.03 as a cause of death per 100,000 population in Europe, the closest of this being struck by lightning. In fact, one must ask where these attacks took place and understand the reasons behind them.

This led to a debate about the narrative that has been adopted since the September 11th attacks. Counter terrorism was framed as a “war on terror”, putting emphasis on security and national borders. In combination with public misinformation, this narrative created an environment where nationalism, extreme views and hate attitudes and speech came to the fore. This created a vicious cycle of division between “the bad” and “the good”; “us” and “them”. The delegates welcomed the conceptual shift from “war on terror” to “prevention of violent extremism”, embodied in the UN Secretary-General’s 2016 Plan of Action on Prevention of Violent Extremism. With this, the emphasis was now placed on addressing the root causes of violent extremism and on adherence to human rights and the rule of law. This shift enabled more actors, especially civil society organisations involved in peace, humanitarian assistance, human rights and development to contribute to the many processes that are needed to prevent violent extremism. In a “whole-of-society” approach to prevention from national to sub-national levels, the local European and Asian communities can now provide a strong basis for any plan of action.

The strong community voice at the seminar showed that communities are rising. Their role in the prevention of violent extremism was not only discussed extensively but also highlighted through best practice in both continents. Local groups and people do matter when it comes to addressing fears and feelings of isolation and hate. The need to work responsibly with these groups was highlighted particularly when it comes to issues of funding. Governments and regional bodies must include these community voices and acknowledge their distinct contributions in the design and delivery of strategies, at all stages from pre-radicalisation, radicalisation, engagement in violent extremism, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

The challenge in this approach is how to ensure its effectiveness, as security sector strategies run alongside civil society community-led efforts without each cancelling out each other’s gains.

The empowerment of the community and individual action is where human rights were seen to be mostly relevant. “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person”, as Eleanor Roosevelt noted during the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Seventy years since humanity came together to collectively say “no more”, the ASEM seminar reignited a debate on the value of the universality of human rights and their practical application at the local level.
Participants also agreed that effective policies to counter violent extremism must include considerations of women’s role in the prevention of, and participation in, violent extremism. Their role can be seen as both victims and as agents of violent radicalisation. It is now increasingly evident that women are playing a variety of roles in promoting violent extremism, including as propagandists, recruiters, fundraisers, educators, and suicide bombers. Recent cases of female suicide bombers, in particular, as well as evidence for a growing number of females leaving home to join violent extremist groups, did much to dispel the notion that violence is a male business, with women only entering the picture as victims in need of protection. Raising awareness about women’s involvement in violent extremism and improving understanding of the motivators behind women’s decisions to join it is certainly important and effective from a prevention perspective. Some of these motivators have been shown to be gender specific, such as strategies based on traditional gender roles used by violent extremist groups to recruit women. The involvement of women and girls in violent radicalisation narratives and actions can only be addressed by women empowering themselves to build counter-narratives to the conservative and misogynistic views often linked to violent extremism activities.

The discussion on what the literature has called “pull and push factors” was also extensive and as expected inconclusive. Consensus was, however, achieved in accepting that there is a gap between the academic literature and actual practice. Practitioners highlighted that linear divisions and categorisations by academics do not reflect the complexity of their reality and the multi-faceted reasons that lead to violent extremism. For example, while poverty, social exclusion, victimisation, oppression, misuse of beliefs, cultural and ethnic differences and political ideologies were all mentioned, these were not presented as single factors for violent radicalisation.

There was an interesting discussion on democracy, and a question mark raised on under which conditions democracy did act as a bulwark to radicalisation. Within this debate the question of power and state terrorism emerged, with the majority of participants bringing forth examples whereby the state, through its actions, provided the “push” to violent extremism. There was a consensus on the necessity to respect separation of powers, rule of law, independence of justice and constitutional rights of suspects. The necessity to ensure the protections of human rights in jail system was also considered as a key point to prevent propaganda and recruitment for violent extremism.

How state and other power is used is paramount in changing the world views that foster extreme ideologies. The issue of abuse of state power was particularly prominent in the Asian delegates’ arguments. They also discussed the need for human rights training to be part of the curriculum for security agencies. Concerns were expressed, however, as to whether there are sufficient mechanisms in place for monitoring effectiveness in sensitizing security agencies to human rights concerns. It was suggested that local civil society groups could be part of the monitoring process for such programmes.

Looking into the future, the role of education and the implications of current action for young people were discussed. There was agreement that current practice is alienating the European and Asian youth population who is often portrayed as the problem rather than the hopeful, new generation that can bring an end to current divisions. Building resilience and empowering through education were the key messages coming out from the related workshop. Evidence was presented that this resilience can be built through
formal and informal education as it can act as the vehicle for engagement even with the most vulnerable of youth.

**General recommendations to ASEM countries:**

1. Countries should be encouraged to have **stronger legislation** or statutory guidance in order to **ensure compliance with human rights norms**. This legislation should include compulsory human rights education and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (both in schools and for government officials); legislation on equality, diversity and anti-discrimination.

2. Legislation and state action alone will not address the problem. Governments must work closer with communities as well as other bodies involved in peace, humanitarian assistance, development and human rights. **The “whole-of-society” approach** requires building trust and relationship between government and civil society, NGOs, the private sector, academe, faith-based groups, women’s and youth organizations. To this end, mechanisms are required to strengthen civil society’s capacity. This includes public consultations and debates, the empowerment of women and the youth. Young women and men can conduct their own training and spread messages around prevention. There should be a youth platform for speaking more loudly about local issues but also political no-go areas such as state terrorism, genocide, the culture of impunity and the way youth are used for lucrative purposes.

3. There is confirmation of the need for **National Action Plans on Preventing Violent Extremism**. These would include legislation, as above, but also strategies and finance to provide opportunities for marginalised or disaffected groups, whether in cities or in remote areas. It would include support for inter-ethnic and inter-faith exchanges in order to build community cohesion and community solidarity. It would also include support for grassroots organisations (NGOs, teachers, families, religious leaders, women) who were tackling violent extremism or were working to combat vengeance.

4. The misuse of state and other power was noted as a major factor in shaping world views and the attitudes that then impede our ability to live together and foster extreme ideologies. Human rights are the only universally accepted lever that can rebalance this misuse, and thus more emphasis is needed to promote them at the legislative, policy and educational levels. In this regard, **good governance** is key to ensuring that human rights are promoted, protected and fulfilled even in times of high pressure.

5. In order to promote **critical thinking**, there should also be a strengthening of political education: this means a rights-based education, learning about religious and ethnic conflict in one’s own country, and stressing different narratives and perspectives on history. Critical thinking is also enhanced by enabling communities to participate in decision-making.

6. Women’s critical role in preventing violent extremism should be placed within a **gender frame** in order to understand better how gender stereotypes are manipulated by adherents of violent extremism. Since socially constructed norms and behaviours of women and men in a society are used to recruit and mobilize
women and men, it is important to understand how gender may be used in destructive or constructive ways. Context-specific study and analysis of “pull” narratives based on gender will lead to more effective prevention efforts as will commitment to ensuring women’s human rights are protected and fulfilled.

7. While laid out in Pillar IV of the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, human rights must be a cross-cutting concern in all four pillars. There is a need to continue the dialogue between Asia and Europe to strengthen capacity and understanding of the applicability of human rights as the foundational norms of any programmatic action to prevent violent extremism.