VIOLENT EXTREMISM ONLINE:
A CHALLENGE TO PEACE AND SECURITY

REPORT

1. Violent Extremism Online – A Challenge to Peace and Security

On 31 January 2017, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), in collaboration with the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), organized its thirteenth edition of the joint annual seminar series. The seminar was held in the Palais des Nations, in Geneva.

The seminar series, reflecting the longstanding and close collaboration between UNOG and DCAF, aims to raise awareness on the complexities and challenges of security sector governance among the Geneva-based diplomatic community, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations.

The thirteenth edition addressed the phenomenon of violent extremism, in particular, focusing on the role of the Internet and social media platforms. The seminar brought together more than ninety representatives from Permanent Missions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations based in Geneva to discuss how to prevent and challenge violent extremism on the Internet and social media platforms. The seminar featured presentations by Adam Deen, Managing Director of Quilliam Foundation; Ambassador Kok Jwee Foo to the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore; Adam Hadley, Senior Researcher at ICT4Peace Foundation; Wedad al Hassen, Senior Program Associate at Hedayah and Mark Stephens, Independent Chair at the Global Network Initiative.

Participants of the thirteenth seminar were welcomed by Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Michael Møller, who highlighted the importance of a comprehensive and human-rights based approach to preventing violent extremism online and offline. The Director of the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Ambassador Thomas Guerber, concluded the thirteenth UNOG-DCAF seminar stressing the need that the relevant actors should pull together, should think beyond existing approaches in order to foster synergies wherever possible and learn from each other's experiences.

2. Conference Summary

Violent Extremism, the Internet and Social Media

The kick-off to the thirteenth seminar was a presentation addressing the connection between 'extremism', 'terrorism' and 'social media'. It started by citing the following statement made by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, that is

"We are in a battle, and more of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."

It is indisputable that certain violent extremist and terrorist groups have developed a sophisticated propaganda machinery; especially in respect to communications on the Internet and social media platforms. These sophisticated communication strategies have contributed to the perception that society is swamped with violent extremist messages. However, the question was raised whether this perception actually corresponds to reality; especially, as it is a fact that the output of violent extremist material on the Internet has declined with the ongoing military operations. Nonetheless, the

presentation aimed to provide an answer to the question of why violent extremist groups use new communication tools, such as the Internet and social media platforms; and what messages and narratives actually resonate with vulnerable individuals.

In the context of jihadist propaganda material online, it was noted that although we might feel swamped by these messages, it is false to believe that the messages themselves only depict violence and brutality. On the contrary, the majority of propaganda material produced and disseminated via online communication tools actually depicts 'ordinary' civilian life. Consequently, the question was posed whether disseminating a message, such as depicting a person eating a burger, could actually lead to violent extremism, and in itself could induce to terrorism? Should such a message be restricted; i.e. blocked, filtered, or removed from an online platform? Put differently, do we have to tolerate such messages?

The presentation clearly indicated that in order to answer these questions, it is important to understand the rationale behind disseminating such messages. However, it was argued that from a legal point of view, such a message would most likely be tolerated, since any restriction of such messages would not meet the three-part test of pursuing a legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality. With that said, the speaker underlined that legal tolerance would not automatically mean civil tolerance. On the contrary, it was stressed that civil society has to be active in opposing and dismantling these narratives and messages.

"It is impossible to kill an idea, but it is possible to make it obsolete and irrelevant."

Research conducted by Quilliam Foundation has shown that in the context of jihadist propaganda, a set of re-occurring themes exists. These themes relate to utopia, military supremacy, brutality, mercy, victimhood, and belonging. However, the success of these narratives is rooted in personal, partial or perceived grievances. In order to overcome these grievances, achieving social cohesion is a vital product. These personal, partial, or perceived grievances are exploited by charismatic recruiters that play with the intellectual, ideological, social, emotional or spiritual feelings of the vulnerable individuals. Nevertheless, it was stressed that recruiting vulnerable individuals is likely to fail without personal interaction in the "real world". This serves a twofold purpose: First, empirical research shows that radicalisation is not possible without personal interaction. Second, it is in the self-interest of these groups, in order to ensure their operability.

It was further stressed that policymakers must not forget that the individuals they want to engage with and reach have adopted a binary worldview. For these vulnerable individuals, the world is divided in "Us vs the Other". In their minds, violent extremist groups represent the good, the truth, and a high moral standing; whereas "the other" represents the evil, the falsehood, hypocrisy and immorality. The only way to overcome this binary worldview is by strengthening plurality, diversity and social cohesion.

To this end, it was noted that conducting pre-propaganda research was indispensable in order to understand the underlying rationale of the different narratives. Moreover, taking these actual findings

as the basis for any further policy response is even more important, especially in creating positive, alternative messages.

Violent Extremism Online – A Challenge to Peace and Security

The panel discussion, moderated by Anne-Marie Buzatu, DCAF, aimed to provide answers to the following questions:

- A. What are best practices in preventing violent extremism (PVE) online?
- B. What is the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in that regard? What are the roles and responsibilities of the respective stakeholders?
- C. What is the potential of PPPs to ensure that international human rights law standards and the rule of law are respected and protected when preventing and challenging violent extremism online, in particular with regard to regulatory measures?

Panellists were asked to share their experiences in PVE online and their views regarding the added value of multi-stakeholder initiatives to address the phenomenon of violent extremism on the Internet and social media platforms.

A. What are best practices in preventing violent extremism (PVE) online?

For the panel, it was evident that effectively preventing violent extremism on the Internet and social media platforms requires reactive and proactive measures. These measures encompass activities ranging from filtering, blocking, or regulating online content to creating positive alternative messages and counter the messages of violent extremism.

The importance of the latter was exemplified in the presentation of Hedayah's work. Hedayah is an international, independent, a-political and non-ideological organization that serves as a platform to connect policymakers to practitioners and experts. It pursues target audiences that national governments might struggle to reach and supports national governments in a kind of "burden sharing". At the same time, in its role as a non-governmental organization, Hedayah acts as an intermediary and enjoys a good relationship with civil society. Hedayah's work focuses on six thematic areas, of which 'Communications and Counter-Narratives' and 'Community Engagement' were addressed in more depth. In regard to the former, Hedayah's recent launch of a 'Counter-Narrative Library' was followed with great attention. This online library contains a regionally-focused compendium of articles, video footage, documentaries, and interviews describing narratives of former extremists, victims and family members useful for developing alternative narratives.

In order to develop compelling alternative narratives, according to one speaker, it is important to start by assessing the relevant push and pull factors. On the one hand, this helps to avoid assumptions. On the other hand, it contributes to identifying the target audience and consequently, the appropriate messenger and message. In particular, identifying the target audience is one of the most crucial components because the successes of alternative messages strongly depend on the speaker's perceived credibility by the target audience. Consequently, not every entity or person is the most

suitable actor to convey an alternative message; but very often families, religious leaders, and former violent extremists are considered by the target audience to have a credible voice. It was further highlighted that in order to create the message itself, it is important to understand the target audience and what resonates best with them. Developing alternative narratives further requires identifying the medium through which the message should be disseminated. This should be reflected in the relevant dissemination strategy.

However, it was stressed that counter-narratives alone will not provide a solution to violent extremism, but that governments have to address the root causes, such as actual and perceived grievances. In addition, any relevant policy has to be consistent and multi-faceted. In other words, it has to be ensured that communications and counter-narratives do not contradict each other and that they are part of a more comprehensive approach that includes the regulation of online content, engagement with civil society, and the empowerment of young people; and that the message is appropriate for the local context and audience.

A further interesting initiative mentioned is the so-called 'Religious Rehabilitation Group' (RRG) in Singapore, whose objective is to rehabilitate detained Jemaah Islamiah members and their families through counselling, in order to correct the misinterpretation of Islamic concepts and dispel the extremist narratives through online and offline outreach programmes. RRG further engages with youth by means of one-to-one live chats, to offer them assistance and guidance.

B. What is the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in that regard? What are the roles and responsibilities of the respective stakeholders?

Panellists agreed that violent extremism is too complex to be taken on by any single government or private information and communication technology (ICT) company. Consequently, the only effective approach to address this phenomenon is through multistakeholder initiatives.

As such, a multi-stakeholder approach becomes particularly relevant in the context of regulating online content that constitutes as "violent extremist material." However, it was noted that the role of the relevant stakeholders may differ.

Governments

From the presentations, it became evident that governments have a complex role. On one hand, governments have the obligation to protect their citizens. On the other, especially in preventing and countering violent extremism online, governments have fewer possibilities. In the context of developing alternative narratives, a government might be a credible messenger to reinforce existing values and morals. In other words, governments play a role in promoting tolerance and diversity within society and in fostering understanding for different cultures. However, in the context of counter-narratives, governments are very often not credible in conveying a message to effectively counter the violent extremist narrative. For example, in cases where those governments are perceived as the origin of the grievance. In such a situation, any message disseminated by a government will fail to achieve its

purpose since it simply will not resonate with the target audience. Therefore, it was noted that governments might be better positioned to play a more facilitative and supportive role.

Private information and communication companies

Due to their diverse roles, ICT companies have recently taken various steps to address violent extremist content on their respective mediums and platforms, as well as still meeting the expectations of their users. These steps included adapting their terms of service to capture violent extremism, or the publication of so-called 'transparency reports' that disclose information about the number of received government requests and the number of requests complied with. As such these reports are particularly relevant in the context of content regulation because they allow individual users to better understand the nature and extent of these requests.

Private ICT companies are increasingly cooperating with governments – however, mostly on a voluntary basis. This voluntary cooperation can be direct cooperation with governments or with Internet referral units (IRU), such as the European Union's IRU under Europol, or the United Kingdom's IRU. Additionally, major social media companies have cooperated to create a common database for content that was deemed to be violent extremist material – the so-called 'hash-sharing-database'. The aim of this database is to facilitate exchange between the major social media companies and to prevent content that was restricted on one online platform from reappearing. At the same time, social media companies have become more active in the context of alternative messaging, at least by providing learning programmes and trainings to individuals to gain the technical know-how.

Non-governmental organizations and civil society

Non-governmental organizations and civil society in general play a crucial role in preventing and challenging violent extremism on the Internet and social media platforms. Civil society and non-governmental organizations are called upon to flag violent extremist content, in order for private ICT companies to assess and examine these flagged messages against their own terms of service. Based upon this assessment, they decide whether or not to take content down. However, since all content is not deemed to be violent extremist material, it ends up violating the terms of service of private ICT companies. Therefore, civil society is needed in order to engage in dialogue and debate to dismantle these heinous ideas.

Moreover, civil society has to be involved in creating positive and alternative messages. At the same time, civil society and non-governmental organizations can fulfil a 'watchdog' function, especially in the context of respecting and protecting human rights.

C. What is the potential of PPPs to ensure that international human rights law standards and the rule of law are respected and protected when preventing and challenging violent extremism online, in particular with regard to regulatory measures?

Regulating content on the Internet and social media platforms necessarily raises questions with regard to the respect for human rights, inter alia the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right

to privacy. However, neither the right to freedom of opinion and expression nor the right to privacy are absolute rights, i.e. these rights can be lawfully restricted in cases where the limitation meets the three-part test of pursuing a legitimate aim, necessity and proportionality – the protection of national security, for instance, is such a legitimate aim.

In the context of countering violent extremism online, regulatory measures bear a twofold challenge resulting in unintended consequences. Firstly, regulatory measures, such as filtering, blocking, and deleting online content can have a 'chilling-effect' on human rights, putting pressure on private companies to adopt stricter terms of service – the so-called 'intermediary liability'.. Secondly, apart from the negative impacts on human rights, such regulatory measures can defeat the purpose of long-standing law enforcement efforts to investigate or collect evidence. For example where private ICT companies have taken down online content or suspended a user from their platforms, thereby thwarting police investigations by deleting evidence. One way of addressing these challenges is by strengthening cooperation and institutionalising partnerships between governments and ICT companies, and in particular by institutionalising procedures for content removal requests. Such established procedures would further enhance transparency as it would support an informed debate on whether certain laws and regulations adequately protect individuals' rights to freedom of opinion and expression and privacy. Such transparency measures would further contribute to enjoyment of the right to effective remedy.

3. Conclusion

The thirteenth UNOG-DCAF seminar entitled *'Violent Extremism Online – A Challenge to Peace and Security'* exemplified that there is no one-size-fits-all solution but that a comprehensive approach is needed to prevent the Internet and social media platforms from turning into an 'echo chamber' for violent extremist narratives. Thus, it was considered of utmost importance that governments, private ICT companies and civil society pull together, think beyond traditional approaches, foster synergies where possible and learn from each other's experiences.