

Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED)

2023 Counter-Terrorism Week Side Event

Monday, 19 June 2023, 1:15–2:30 p.m., EST

Statement of

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**“Good Practices for Managing Violent Extremist Prisoners: Preventing
Radicalization to Violence while Promoting Disengagement and
Rehabilitation”**

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you at this important side event on the management of violent extremist prisoners. I thank the Council of Europe, OSCE and UNODC, as well as my office, CTED, for all your good work to put today’s event together.

The management of violent extremist prisoners, or “VEPs”, presents unique challenges to all of us working in the counter-terrorism field. For one thing, it is an area where the practice of countering violent extremism, or “CVE”, has an exceptional urgency.

It focuses on individuals who have already shown an inclination towards terrorist violence, and who in many cases may be due for release within relatively brief periods of time. There is an urgency to ensure that these individuals, somehow, are convinced to renounce their commitment to violence, so that society at large can enjoy the fundamental right to personal security.

Our topic today is also unique, of course, because it concerns a population that is deprived of liberty. The imprisonment of these individuals may be appropriate and just, but it means they are in a position of subjugation. Their treatment must be firm and deliberate, but it must also take due account of their human rights.

The fact is, prison environments are highly conducive to radicalization to terrorist violence. Prisoners may be convinced that their confinement is unjust. The restrictive prison environment is highly susceptible to manipulation by those advancing violent extremist ideologies. This is why prisons are sometimes referred to as “hotbeds” for terrorism and terrorist recruitment.

CTED has been doing its part to support Member States in this crucial area of work, including through our recent, joint project with UNODC and UNOCT. We recently published an Analytical

Brief on this issue and the several key findings we have learned through our work.

There remains much uncertainty about the scope of the issue. Member States take different approaches to counting and classifying VEPs, and reliable data are lacking. However, it seems clear that the number of VEPs in countries around the world is growing.

It is also evident that tailored risk assessments are crucial in this field. VEPs are a diverse group, which necessitates the implementation of different approaches, although this is resource intensive. The experts who are with us today can help to shed light on the types of initiatives that are showing positive results.

We also know that women VEPs require specific approaches. Women's involvement in violent extremism conducive to terrorism has reportedly tripled in the past decade, yet their separation and isolation in prison environments often mean that their needs are overlooked.

As I have said, a human rights-based approach is critical in this area. It is essential that States pay careful attention to maintaining

prison environments that are humane and respectful of human dignity, in accordance with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

The issue of management of VEPs also raises issues regarding the rights to freedom of thought and freedom of belief. It is entirely appropriate for States to work to suppress and eradicate ideologies that support and incite terrorist violence. But more difficult questions may arise with respect to certain viewpoints that may not enjoy the favour of States, but that are not connected to the perpetration of violence. Drawing the boundaries of appropriate intervention into personal belief systems by States may raise sensitive issues.

And beyond that, interventions aimed at preventing radicalization to violence in prisons cannot ignore the underlying issues that may be conducive to the spread of terrorism. That is not to say that terrorist violence can ever be justified – it cannot. But effective interventions should be based on a comprehensive understanding of the causes of radicalization.

Some of these issues – such as questions of discrimination, marginalization, poor governance and other issues – should be taken

into account by practitioners in this field, even as we collectively reject the resort to terrorist violence to address them.

CTED remains committed to engaging with Member States through our country visits on behalf of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and our ongoing dialogue, to identify key challenges and promote the implementation of best practices in this field.

And we will continue our endeavours to facilitate technical assistance projects for Member States that request them, to support them in their crucial counter-terrorism efforts.

I thank you.