

A Human Rights Assessment of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)

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The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) - a multi-stakeholder effort founded by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube - launched in 2017 with a mission to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms.

In late 2020, GIFCT commissioned BSR to undertake a human rights assessment of its strategy, governance, and actions. Today we are publishing the final report.

Our assessment used a methodology based on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Given the role of governments in GIFCT, we considered the first pillar of the UNGPs (the state duty to protect human rights), as well as the second and third pillars (the corporate responsibility to respect and access to remedy). The scope of our assessment was GIFCT itself, not the actions of individual GIFCT member companies, and our assessment was primarily forward looking in focus, rather than a review of prior activities.

GIFCT is a young and newly independent organization that appointed its first executive director in mid-2020. In that context, we appreciate GIFCT's foresight for undertaking a human rights assessment at such an early stage in its evolution, and trust that our assessment provides a framework for the integration of human rights into the strategy, governance, and actions of GIFCT over the coming years.

The full assessment is organized around nine themes, makes 47 recommendations for GIFCT, and is intended to provide useful insights for the counter terrorism field overall. Here we emphasize five key points:

- **GIFCT mission and goals:** The purpose of GIFCT is to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms, and in doing so GIFCT enhances the protection, fulfillment, and realization of human rights—in other words, human rights for GIFCT should be about more than “avoiding harm” while pursuing its mission. GIFCT would benefit from a clearer description of the interdependent relationship between human rights and its mission that conveys human rights as a deeply embedded, complementary, and reinforcing objective in counterterrorism and violent extremism efforts.
- **Terrorist and violent extremist content:** The lack of consensus around definitions of terrorist and violent extremist content, and the prevalence of bias in the counterterrorism field—manifested in a disproportionate focus on Islamist extremist content—influence GIFCT's human rights impacts. The multi-stakeholder status of GIFCT provides an opportunity to create a common understanding of terrorist and violent extremist content based on “behavior” rather than “group”; we recommended that GIFCT explore the potential benefits of this common understanding, such as pushing back against overbroad definitions deployed by governments, improving the capability of smaller companies to establish their own definitions, and creating a bulwark against “slippery slope” definitions that may extend too far into other forms of speech.
- **GIFCT Membership:** We encountered considerable debate around whether GIFCT should increase its company membership, especially with companies headquartered outside the U.S. Given the

UNGPs emphasis on prioritizing the most severe human rights impacts, and we recommended that a human rights-based approach should focus on the locations where impacts are most severe, rather than where they have the highest profile. By making a pro-active effort to engage more with companies and organizations outside the U.S. and Europe, GIFCT will be better positioned to achieve its mission through more engagement with companies and organizations outside the U.S. and Europe. However, expanding GIFCT membership also presents human rights risks, and we make several recommendations for GIFCT membership criteria, such as a public commitment to the International Bill of Human Rights and UNGPs.

- **Stakeholder engagement:** GIFCT contains some features of a multi-stakeholder initiative (i.e., non-companies actively participate in the work of GIFCT) but lacks others (i.e., decision-making power rests solely with companies). However, stakeholder engagement plays a central role in a human rights-based approach, so we recommended that GIFCT's work would benefit from a more deliberate integration of affected stakeholders into its work, including by broadening the range of groups engaged and clarifying the role of governments in GIFCT. GIFCT would also be strengthened by increasing its interaction with the UN Special Procedures system, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and UN Office of Counter-Terrorism.
- **Governance, Accountability, and Transparency:** We conclude that GIFCT's Operating Board, which currently consists of four founding member companies, is not a sustainable model over the medium-to-long term and recommend that GIFCT consider the merits of transitioning to a multi-stakeholder decision-making model in two years from now. We also made several recommendations to clarify, strengthen, and formalize the role of GIFCT's Independent Advisory Committee (IAC). Given GIFCT's connection to human rights impacts exists primarily through the actions of member companies, we placed special emphasis on the transparency requirements of GIFCT member companies, in addition to GIFCT itself.

BSR's assessment makes recommendations in several other important areas, such as restrictions, controls, and oversight mechanisms to address the risk of overbroad removal of content by companies making use of GIFCT resources, and developing a GIFCT point of view on what policies, actions, and strategies governments should deploy that address the exploitation of digital platforms by terrorists and violent extremists in a rights-respecting manner.

The UNGPs emphasize the importance of ongoing human rights due diligence, rather than a single "moment in time" assessment. In this spirit, we hope that our assessment increases the "connective tissue" across different segments of GIFCT's work—such as the Operating Board, IAC, and working groups—and provides a foundation upon which GIFCT can grow.