II Explore
Context and Threat Analysis

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Introduction

In this Section, we will analyse the context in which we carry out our work in the defence of human rights. Creating and maintaining a systematic analysis of our political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental context allows us to better understand the threats we face, prepare ourselves to deal with these threats and maintain our well-being as we pursue our goals.

Threats, in this case, refer to **any potential event or occurrence which would cause harm to ourselves or our work**.

This process is sometimes also referred to as threat modelling or risk analysis. The more time we can make for this context analysis, the better we will understand our surroundings and the better prepared we will be to perceive and respond to threats to our security and well-being.

   The tools for context analysis explored in this Section, therefore, can and should be woven into our existing processes for strategising and planning our work in defence of human rights. You may already be familiar with a number of these tools and use them without being explicit or especially organised about it. However,

being more systematic about it will help you make a more complete 'diagnosis' of your security situation, and perhaps challenge some assumptions you may have about it.

In Explore, we will:

- propose a series of steps for carrying out **context analysis**
- carry out a simple exercise for understanding the **socio-political trends** around us
- map out our **vision** and the **actors** around us in this context
- create an **inventory of our information** as a resource for our work, and understand the threats to it
- **recognise and analyse indicators** which tell us more about our security situation
- identify and analyse the **most relevant threats** to our security.

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Overall Framework for Context Analysis

Effective security practice is based on good knowledge of the kind of threats we face as a result of our work and the possible harm those threats represent. But how easy is it to accurately identify all the threats that might negatively impact our well-being and ability to achieve our goals? To answer this question, we must consider two key factors.

Evolving threats

It is important to recognise that threats are constantly changing, sometimes very rapidly. As we go about our lives and work, so do our allies and our opponents. With advances and setbacks, as well as changes in the political, economic social, technological, legal and environmental contexts in which we work, the range of threats that we face shifts and changes. The threats that we prepare for today may be irrelevant in a month, and the key to success is remaining agile and reviewing and refining our security practices on an ongoing basis.

In reality, this isn't necessarily a very alien concept to us. We regularly carry out context analysis to make decisions about our security in our day-to-day life. The only difference here is that we are being more deliberate and organised about this process. This helps us avoid taking security precautions just our of habit or based on hear-say, as we may find that changing circumstances render them ineffective.

Context analysis helps us to understand more clearly the threats we might face as a result of our work. It comprises a series of familiar steps and perhaps some new ones. The steps we will follow are outlined below – you may find that you are already carrying out some of them.

1 **Situation monitoring and analysis** Observing the overall trends (political, economic, social, technological, legal or environmental) which are relevant to our work and taking note of any developments relative to our security. A simple example of this is reading the newspaper on a daily basis although there are a number of other sources of security specific information.

2 **Establishing our vision and activities** Based on the above, we reflect on what change we envision in our society and what strategies will help us implement this change. Many human rights defenders will be familiar with the exercise of identifying a problem we want to fix in our society, and a strategy for carrying that out.

3 **Actors and relational mapping** Creating and maintaining an inventory of all the people, groups and institutions who will be or may be affected by our action, including ourselves, our allies and opponents.

4 **Information mapping**
Taking account of our personal and professional information, and making sure it doesn't fall into the hands of the opponents we have identified. A simple example would be distinguishing your financial documents from other documents at home, and deciding to store them in a safer place.

5 **Security indicators**
Taking note of occurrences which are out of the ordinary which may indicate a change in your security situation, and analysing any trends to be noted which may impact your strategy. A simple example would be noticing an increase in thefts in the area where you live, and an acknowledgement that it may affect your security too.

6 **Threat identification and analysis**
Attempting to drive off the danger by pretending to have greater power than one actually does. As human rights defenders, we often threaten to expose and publicise threats of violence so as to publicly embarrass our adversaries.

7 **Security planning and tactics**
Based on this analysis, you identify and take concrete measures to improve your security, such as buying new locks for your doors or CCTV cameras. We will look at this in more depth in **Section III | Strategise** and **Section IV | Act**.
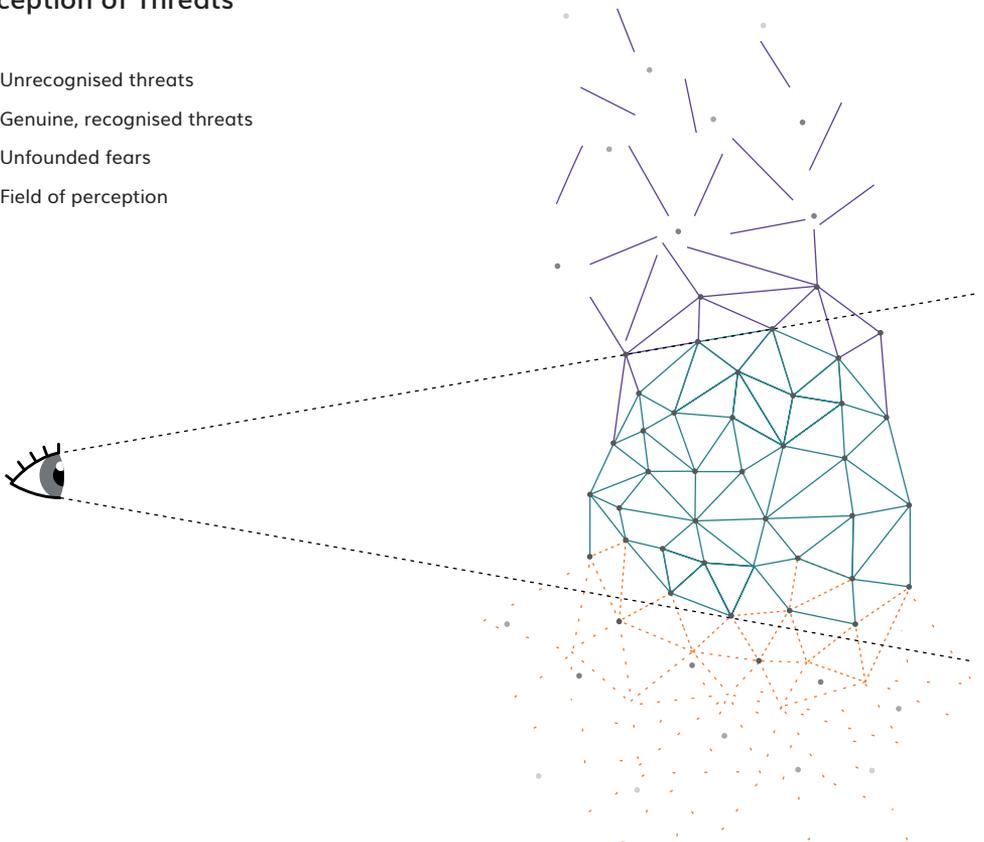
These steps do not represent one-off activities, however, and must be regularly repeated and woven into our ongoing strategic planning in order to be effective.

Analysis and perception

It may be tempting to consider this kind of analysis as scientific or objective. However, at this point it is useful to remember what we learned in **Section I | Prepare**. By definition, our **perception** of threats is sometimes challenged, limited or flawed. While there may be many threats of which we are aware, there may also be some of which we are not aware. Such **unrecognised threats** are particularly likely when we are working in new environments with limited understanding of our surroundings, or where our opponents are actively concealing threats, such as electronic surveillance. Anxious emotional reactions such as denial, fatalism or minimising effect might also result in us failing to recognise potential threats.

Perception of Threats

△   Unrecognised threats

△   Genuine, recognised threats

△   Unfounded fears

----   Field of perception

It is also possible for us to err in the other direction, and focus on threats which are not in fact likely to harm us or our work. Such **unfounded fears** may result from misinformation from our opponents or from anxious emotional reactions, possibly related to past traumatic experiences. Still, it is possible and useful to make adequate security decisions based on the limited and one-sided information available. Experience brings us insight and our intuition mostly guides us in the right direction. While our opponents develop new tactics and work to confound our security practices, the challenge that we and our allies face is to **reduce the number of unrecognised threats and unfounded fears**, thereby building a more accurate picture on which to base our security practices.

Starting from the acknowledgement that our perception of threats may be flawed, it's a good idea to think in advance about where our blind spots may be and devise strategies for checking our perceptions with people we trust. We will return to this in **Exercise 2.6b**, where we pose some questions which may help with this.

Our perception can become more accurate if we carry out research and analysis. In the rest of this Section, we chart a path of self-exploration, starting with our own vision for socio-political change, continuing to a survey of the universe in which we operate alongside our opponents, allies and other parties; an inventory of our existing resources, assets and behaviours, and an accounting of what we perceive as security indicators in our context (i.e. the precursors to threats).

The knowledge gained from the above exploration is helpful in creating and maintaining a prioritised list of potential (and actual) threats, their likelihood and severity, the potential (or actual) perpetrators and their abilities and motivations, any existing mitigations we (or our allies and others) might have in place, as well as potential next steps in further minimising these threats to our well-being and success.

As we start this exploration to identify and mitigate the threats we face, it is important to be mindful about not creating or further encouraging unfounded fears. This can be avoided if we keep in mind the role our perception and behaviour play, and work to create a healthy space to deal with these challenges. Namely we need to encourage a self-aware individual mind-set and healthy communication in teams and organisations, as explored in **Section I | Pepare**.

It is equally important to remember our own limitations in terms of time, stress and resources. This helps us determine a realistic, tangible and manageable task in identifying, prioritising and analysing threats.

In the next Chapter, we will begin by looking at the political, economic, social and technological landscape in which we operate as human rights defenders, and how that may impact our security.