

Security Indicators

Through carrying out regular situational analysis, mapping our vision and the actors operating with and against us and understanding our information and its role, we should now have a broader understanding of our context.

From here, we can begin to drill down into concrete security indicators: the elements we observe in our context which may indicate the threats we face or a change in our security situation, such as the emergence of new threats to our work. In this Chapter we will explore ways of looking for these in our daily life, our devices and our surroundings which may alert us to an impending danger to ourselves or to friends, colleagues and people we work with or our organisation, as well as how and where to look for these signs.

A security indicator is anything out of the ordinary that we notice which may have an impact on our security. Security indicators can include concrete incidents such as receiving declared threats, attacks against partner organisations, or suspicious behaviour of persons we may notice; however, they also include more subtle developments such as changes in the behaviour of our devices, or our health and well-being. What these have in common is that they may indicate a change in our security situation. We can identify security indicators at various different moments in our daily life and work. Examples of these may include:

- receiving a letter from the authorities about an impending search of the office
- someone taking your picture without your permission, or noticing someone photographing your organisation's premises unauthorised
- not being able to concentrate and forgetting to lock the door to the office
- many unexpected pop-up windows opening when browsing the internet
- feeling exhausted even after a good night's sleep.

Like many of the previous steps, observing security indicators and utilising them as a basis for taking action to avoid harm is not necessarily new to us. In day-to-day life, people will often do this informally: for example, a series of muggings taking place in a particular neighbourhood at night will probably, when observed by others, lead to many avoiding that area or taking precautions when passing through it.

Due to the increased threat human rights defenders face as a result of their work, it often pays to just be more organised about this process. It's important to develop the habit of noting, recording, sharing and analysing security indicators with colleagues and allies regularly. This practice helps in several ways.

1. It enables us to corroborate our observations with others and understand whether our perceived notion of danger is shared and warrants action.
2. It creates a catalogue of such items, which we can later use to understand patterns of threats.
3. It alerts our allies to a situation which may plausibly impact their own security.

Identifying security indicators

We already have an instinct (our intuition) for noting peculiarities that may affect our well-being in daily life, such as somebody following us, an unknown vehicle parked outside our office or finding ourselves in a neighbourhood where we don't feel safe. Remember that these instincts are valuable, but are not absolutely accurate and may let us down on occasion.

In this regard, security indicators are more easily noticed once we have gone through a process of explicitly establishing a base-line: that is analysing and getting to know our socio-political environment, our daily life (including our homes, offices, vehicles and other surroundings), our devices and indeed our state of physical health and emotional well-being. Once we establish 'normality' in this regard, it is easier to notice anything which is 'abnormal'.

It's good to establish certain practices with which we can regularly identify and share potential security incidents. Below, we explore some good practices which you should engage with regularly in order to identify indicators and share and analyse them more effectively.

Monitoring our socio-political environment for changes in security

Observing broad trends and particular developments in the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental situation in which we operate, as in situational monitoring and analysis (see [Chapter 2](#) earlier in this Section), can help identify certain security indicators. There are a number of activities you can take advantage of in order to achieve this, such as:

Talking to trusted friends, colleagues, and fellow organisations

It's a good idea to regularly check in with colleagues, friends or peers who are engaged in the same or similar activities to see if they have noticed or experienced anything out of the ordinary. This may help you to identify patterns or be on the lookout for similar indicators.

Following and documenting news

Some indicators can be drawn from sources in the media, where you can learn about changes to the interests or resources available to your allies or opponents (as you identified in your actor map), or attacks against fellow human rights defenders, which may be important indicators to note. It may be useful to regularly analyse major news events with your friends or colleagues, informally or during established meetings, in order to identify trends which may indicate a change in the security situation of your work.

Meeting experts

If you are embarking on an activity or beginning to work on an issue or in an area which is new to you, it may be useful to meet with an experienced and trusted person who can give you information regarding the security considerations of such work.

Indicators in daily activities

In day-to-day life, there are many opportunities to check and scan for things which may indicate a change in your security situation. As mentioned above, some of this is instinctive. However, as intuition can sometimes be misleading and as tiredness or stress can negatively impact upon awareness, it may be useful to consider some of the tactics outlines in the exercise below.

Note: This list is provided as a set of examples and is not exhaustive. Consider taking the time to sit with your trusted colleagues and friends to carry out or discuss the activity below.

Security indicators in our daily life

Purpose & Output The purpose of this exercise is to help us get an overview of our daily routines and other activities, through visualising it and noting the points at which we can check for indications of a change in our security situation.

We can use this overview of our routines to make a check-list of moments in the day where we can establish a base-line and subsequently check for potential security incidents.

Input & Materials Use whatever drawing materials you would ordinarily use, and either a notebook, electronic document, whiteboard, etc., for creating your check-list.

Format & Steps **Visualisation: Drawing, writing**

In this exercise, we suggest that you use drawing as a way of visualising your routines. Although drawing may seem strange at first, it is a useful way to externalise your routines to get a different perspective on activities you may normally not consider from the perspective of security.

Draw a typical working day, or a day during which you are carrying out an activity you consider dangerous.

Do not worry about making it too visually accurate or artistic: just enough for you to understand it yourself. Simply begin with where you are when you wake up in the morning and consider things like:

- Where you are when you have breakfast, if you have breakfast?
- If you work outside of home, how do you get there? In what vehicle, with whom, and via which areas?
- When you go to work, what devices do you bring with you? What other things do you bring (keys, wallet...)?
- Where do you work, and who else is there? How do you work and what devices do you use for that?

**Format &
Steps**

- If you eat lunch or dinner during work, include this. How long do you give yourself and where do you eat?
- What time do you stop working? If you work away from home, how do you get home? What route do you take?
- What do you do before you sleep? What time do you normally sleep?
- Where do you regularly spend time apart from work and home?

Once you have a picture of your day, try to look for moments where you may want to stop and establish a 'baseline', i.e. what a normal day looks like in order to later check for signs that anything unusual is happening in your physical surroundings. Some suggestions might include:

- The vehicle in which you travel: are there any signs of tampering (wheels, brakes, steering, ...)?
- The route you take to work: are any of these areas dangerous? Is it worth checking whether you are being followed?
- Your office or workspace: is everything in its place when you arrive, and before you leave? Are the doors and windows locked?
- The space immediately around your home or office: is there anyone or anything (for example, strangers, police or vehicles) out of the ordinary here?

Note down the moments when you will check for signs of danger in your physical surroundings, and consider sharing them with trusted friends, neighbours and colleagues. If you consider yourself at high risk, you might include the daily routines of your family members or other close persons.

Create a check list from the results: what will you check, and when?

Remarks & Tips Going through this process is meant to help identify both instances when we carry out an action or take a precaution based on our own sense of security, as well as to notice moments when we may feel a need to pay more attention or take precautions.

If you carry out many diverse activities in your human rights work, try to repeat this exercise for the different ways in which you work.

The purpose of sharing this with a trusted friend or colleague is to make ensure we double-check and confirm our observations and/or cover potential areas we may have overlooked.

Important: Monitoring indicators during dangerous activities

During more dangerous activities, such as a protest or resistance action, or a monitoring and documentation mission, we have to be particularly aware of security indicators, especially given that the situation around us may change quickly. Consider carrying out the activity above for these particular activities and make a note of any different moments in which you should be sure to check for possible signs of danger in your physical surroundings. Make your own check list!

Digital security indicators

We may be somewhat accustomed to looking for security indicators in our socio-political environment or the physical realm or in our daily life. However, threats which arise in the digital realm are increasingly relevant to human rights defenders: censorship of websites, confiscations of computers and other devices and electronic surveillance are commonly used to gather information, intimidate and/or attack human rights defenders.

It may take a little more time and skill to notice security indicators in the digital realm. When it comes to digital security, we have not yet developed an evolutionary instinct for identifying or reacting to threats, dangers or even noticing signs that may indicate a threat to our information. Furthermore, due to varying and often limited access to technology, we may not have much knowledge about digital devices and the concept of digital insecurities itself can seem overwhelming. It is possible to develop this knowledge and comfort with digital technologies, but we often have to start from the beginning and learn what signs to look for in our devices and systems which may alert us to an irregularity. Irregularities include any interruption of normal function of our devices and may include problems such as:

- sluggish start, operation or shut down of your device
- erratic cursor movements on the screen
- unusual emails or text message from known contacts
- unknown persons contacting you with information they shouldn't have
- phishing attempts: emails claiming to be from known contacts, your email provider, social networks or others which attempt to convince you to download an attachment or click on a link in order to obtain your login details or infect your computer
- unread emails appearing as 'read'
- emails or other notifications about failed login-attempts into your accounts such as your email, social networking accounts etc.
- the battery on your phone or laptop running out unusually fast.

Identifying digital security indicators

There are some useful practices which, if carried out regularly, can help you to establish a baseline (i.e. 'normal' functioning) and later identify indicators which might otherwise go unnoticed. You can monitor the outcome of the activities below

and with documentation and review, identify any changes and see if they amount to a security indicator corresponding to a possible threat.

- Scan devices with an anti-malware program to see if you have malware or spyware.
- Check your firewall to see what information leaves and enters your device.
- Check what processes and programs are running on your computer and your mobile phone, to see if some are unauthorised.
- Use two-step authentication for your online services where possible, so you can detect whether others have attempted to impersonate you.
- Make physical marks (such as with UV marker) or use tamper-tape on your devices and take pictures of them to help you verify if they have been tampered with.¹³

For more in-depth information on searching for security indicators, see **Appendix B**.

Indicators in our health and well-being

Another space in which to explore security indicators is within ourselves, our physical experience and our feelings. Our emotional situation might hint of external threats as much as to a condition within ourselves which might prove problematic to our overall security situation. Someone who is exhausted, burnt out or depressed is unlikely to be as secure or effective as they would be if they were healthier or better rested. Being sensitive towards ourselves and handling our emotional and physical vulnerabilities with care may contribute to our security as much as it might prove a source of inspiration and power.

Some common security indicators we might identify in this regard include:

- changes in sleeping patterns
- always feeling tired
- finding it very difficult to work in a motivated and focused way
- sudden mood swings
- becoming irritated or angered by small things
- feeling sad or down much of the time
- being unable to stop thinking about bad things that you have experienced or witnessed

¹³ For more on physical protection of devices, see Security in a Box: "Protect your data from physical threats" <https://securityinabox.org/en/guide/physical>

- changes in your appetite or eating patterns
- increases in the amounts of alcohol, drugs or medicines that you consume
- thoughts about ending your life.

Many people are used to noticing these indicators in the course of their daily life and taking action to rectify the situation. However, as activists we sometimes continue to push ourselves and risk causing lasting damage. Sometimes, we can get so caught up in our work that we don't even realise or pay attention to what we are feeling in our own minds and bodies. Therefore, as with everything we have covered until now, it is a good idea to try to be methodological about taking care of our physical, emotional and psychological selves. One such way of doing this is by making a stress table.

2.5b

Exercise

The stress table

Purpose & Output This exercise can help you to identify your limits concerning different kinds of stress, how to recognise these limits and measures to counter stress. Take some time, ideally when you are not under stress and try to create your own stress table.

Input & Materials For this exercise we differentiate between three levels of stress, like a traffic light:

Green = bearable, motivating stress. This kind of stress might keep us creative, but we may become tired more easily, need more breaks and know that we don't want to feel it for a long period of time.

Yellow = unpleasant stress. With this level of stress, we may feel tired and at the same time alert. We may manifest physical signs of stress (which vary from person to person). We will usually have a strong desire to change the situation which is causing this sensation.

Red = unbearable, profound and lasting stress. This kind of stress affects different spheres of our lives including our relationships at work, with our friends and family as well as

our personal relationships. This level of stress also reduces the pleasure and relaxation we take from recreational activities, and we feel anxious and/or miserable. Our bodies show clear physical reactions, and we may feel close to collapse, and resort to unhealthy measures to stay alert, such as stimulants.

**Format &
Steps**

- Step 1:** Basing yourself in the example below, draw up an initial stress table and reflect on it with somebody you trust.
- Step 2:** Decide on a regular schedule, when you want to review your stress status, and try to carry out these reviews accordingly.
- Step 3:** If you frequently experience high stress levels over a period of time, review your stress table to determine if it is still adequate.
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**Remarks &
Tips**

Checking this stress table could be one step in your personal security guidelines and should be done regularly. Be sure to check if your definitions for the different levels are still accurate, or if you have simply become accustomed to higher stress levels!

	Indicators (How do you recognise that you are at this stress level? What makes this phase qualitatively different from the previous level?)	What can you do to reduce the level of stress, or increase your ability to cope?	Resources needed
Green
Yellow
Red

Bear in mind that emotional dangers are sometimes subtle and can creep up on us. They increase slowly over time and we may fail to notice how much has changed. Some strategies for regularly scanning for indicators of emotional danger include:

- paying attention when friends and family comment on your mood, appearance or interpersonal behaviour
- actively seeking out feedback from trusted friends and colleagues who care about you enough to be truthful with you
- keeping a private diary of your thoughts and feelings from day to day
- paying attention to ways in which your stress level might be making you less aware of security indicators (physical, informational, or emotional) in your environment;
- if necessary, seeking advice and support from a mental health professional.

Sharing and analysing security indicators

It's very important that we share and analyse security indicators with trusted friends or colleagues in order to establish whether they are worth taking action. It may well be the case that one or more people involved in your activities have noticed similar signs, having observed the same or similar indicators.

If you work for an organisation or group which has regular meetings, including security indicators as a regular agenda item for discussion is one way of ensuring that they are analysed. When sharing incidents and noting security indicators is seen as a valuable activity, it naturally happens more frequently and informally too.

Steps to follow in the analysis of security indicators¹⁴

In the case of particularly important security indicators, such as concrete incidents, it may be useful to ask the following questions as a basis for analysis.

1. **What happened?**
2. **When did it happen?**
3. **Where did it happen?**
4. **Who was affected?**
5. **Was gender-based violence (GBV) involved?** This is especially important in the case of concrete incidents involving third parties. Consider physical and psychological factors.
6. **In the case of aggressions—who was responsible?**
7. **Why do we feel this happened?** Try to avoid being accusatory here but rather establish the facts of the incident.
8. **What was its origin?** Was this related to common delinquency, environmental factors or our work and activism?

¹⁴ Based on Peace Brigades International Mexico Project (MEP, 2014) Programa de Asesorías en Seguridad y Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos, p.82

As security incidents are generally 'sensitive' information, it's good to discuss and analyse them in a digitally, emotionally and physically 'safe' space. Keep the following factors in mind:

- If you are sharing indicators remotely (e.g. during field work), consider the channel you use to communicate them. To allay fears, it may help to speak to someone over the phone, but keep in mind that this may not be secure. You may want to use a more digitally secure channel, such as encrypted text messages or emails.
- Noting and sharing indicators among your group is a service to yourself and your peers and should be treated as such. Indicators, even when they are internal, are not necessarily anyone's 'fault'. Above all, they should be considered in light of what they may mean for everyone's security. Sharing an indicator is a moment for appreciation, not a moment for shaming.
- When sharing security indicators that relate to a person's behaviour, it is helpful to include positive security indicators (when a person took an appropriate security precaution, or when the political situation changes in our favour) as well as critical indicators (when an action or inaction was noted). Sharing these in a positive, non-judgemental setting is crucial to you and your peers and colleagues' ability to benefit from the openness of the discussion, and look for collective solutions, instead of placing blame and marginalising people.

Maintaining a register of security indicators

Whether working as an individual, a group of friends or a formal organisation, it is important to create a space where you can record security indicators in as much detail as possible, in order to later share and analyse them. This may take the form of a document or spreadsheet which should be periodically analysed (weekly or monthly) so that any trends in the indicators can be noted.

In a group or organisation, it's useful to designate someone to maintain the registry of indicators and store them in a secure manner. By any standard, a registry of security indicators should be considered highly sensitive information and only shared with trusted partners. Of course, in some high-risk actions such as a protest, the only space you can use to record incidents may be your own mind. In such cases, it's best to find a friend or colleague with whom you can share details of the incident as soon as possible.

Example: Register of security indicators

When?

.....

Where?

.....

Who?

.....

What happened?

.....

Analysis (GVB? Responsible? Why? Origin?)

.....

.....

.....

Note: Some people may not feel comfortable having their personal or emotional security indicators recorded in such a document. As a rule of thumb, it's always best to ask if people are comfortable with this and respect the wishes of those who are not. In these cases, it is important that they nevertheless have a safe and comfortable social or professional space to share these feelings in as much confidentiality as is appropriate.