

Violent extremism in the Sahel

Countering vulnerability to radical narratives: towards a more pragmatic approach

Executive Summary

Violent extremism is a constant threat in the Sahel.¹ The sub-Saharan region traversing Africa from its west coast to the center-east has been experiencing an alarming rise in religiously motivated violence and jihadist attacks over the past ten years.² With the overall number of incidents and fatalities in the Sahel countries rising respectively by eight and seven times as much since 2007, the region has only recently seen a slight decline in jihadist attacks due to the various regional and international security responses in place since 2015. Yet, violent extremism remains a plague for local communities directly, with 2429 casualties and 1496 injured due to terrorist attacks in 2017, and indirectly, given that the responses of national governments push back against jihadist activities are often disproportionately severe and end up fueling the ever-growing spiral of violence.³ Military interventions alone have proven insufficient and, to some extent, counter-productive. In fact, field research shows how violent extremist ideologies are flourishing among the most disrupted communities of the conflict-affected areas; hence, a more pragmatic approach is needed. Recent Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) approaches have mostly focused on promoting anti-Islamist counternarratives but overlooked some of the root causes behind the issue. Various jihadist groups have metastasized to local communities by exploiting historical inter- and intra-ethnic rivalries as well as those various conflict-induced vulnerabilities disrupting the increasingly fragile social fabric. Poor governance, socio-economic marginalization, and rigid cultural structures and gender relations are the most relevant among the many factors that contribute to the increasing vulnerability of a growing portion of the population towards violent radical narratives. Future CVE approaches should therefore primarily

focus on addressing the above issues by directly engaging with local actors to restore the resilience of local communities, a basic condition for the eventual promotion of effective counternarratives.

About this study

Existing literature on violent extremism is divided, contested, and often politicized. For instance, there is no universally agreed definition for violent extremism since different bodies, organizations and governments adopt specific terminologies to suit specific responses, policies, and purposes.⁴ Nevertheless, the context to which the concept is applied dictates some conceptual biases. Therefore, for reasons of clarity and effectiveness, this study, albeit without adopting a specific working definition, considers violent extremism as a synonym for armed jihadism.⁵ This specific analysis does not intend to counter radical religious narratives itself, but rather aims at understanding how societal vulnerabilities lead to their violent expressions. Radicalization does not necessarily translate into terrorism and attempts to approach this otherwise have already proven counter-productive.⁶ The scope here, instead of trying to propose a counternarrative, is to understand what makes radical religious narratives appealing in the first place, and thereby countering the root causes behind this appeal. With this in mind, this study aims to understand the main causes behind rising radicalism-driven violence in the Sahel and consequently tries to address them in an effort to draft some guidelines for suitable, effective, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to the issue.

The context: a spiral of violence

With the only exception of Mauritania, which was not particularly affected by Islamist terrorism in the last five years,

all the other countries in the region have been shaken by an astonishing number of attacks. Nigeria and Mali rank fifth and tenth, respectively, among the countries with the deadliest violent Islamist activity globally. In 2017, as a result of extremist violence and related counter measures, 3399 individuals were reported dead in Nigeria and 493 in Mali.⁷ At the same time, extremist organizations harboring in Nigeria and Mali used these two countries as bases to forward attacks across the region's porous borders claiming several other lives in Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, with the spillover of terrorist activity causing respectively 148, 62, and 53 victims in the three countries.⁸ Most recently (spring 2019), the situation has not improved. Especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, jihadist militants have carried out even more deadly attacks against both security forces and civilians compared to other years, with Mali suffering, in March 2019, from the deadliest attack in the region since 2013.⁹

The most active terrorist group in the region is Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) with reportedly tens of thousands of jihadists moving from North Africa southward into the Sahel, followed by Boko Haram, based in Northern Nigeria and in the Chad Lake basin. Other groups are notably Ansar ul Islam, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), responsible for recent attacks in Niger, the movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a militant Islamist coalition especially active in Mali and Burkina Faso that was formed in March 2017 following the merger of AQIM fighters, the Fulani Macina Liberation Front, Ansar al-Dine and Al-Mubrabitoun. In response to intensifying terrorist activity, regional and international forces have also intensified their engagement in the Sahel. With the deployment of UN peacekeepers,

a United States-backed counterterrorism operation, two ongoing missions of the French special forces and the formation of the G5 Sahel Force, the region is going through a new wave of militarization in a constant escalation during the last seven years that results in an increasing number of victims, law-enforcement (sometimes in controversial extra-judicial processes) and border enforcement with patrolling and checkpoints.¹⁰

Structural causes for violent extremism

Since the immediate aftermath of 9/11, violent extremism in the Sahel has generally been linked to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and to the idea of a “global jihad”.¹¹ Yet, of the many possible ‘root causes’ behind the phenomenon, religion is one of the most controversial: unquestionably related to violent extremism, but certainly not a threat in itself.¹² In the Sahel, religious affiliation is merely the frame for violent response to those structural issues affecting the region and simply works as a marker of identity for group violence. In consequence, the root causes to be addressed when countering violent extremism in the Sahel, moving beyond the merely religious dimension, have to be identified locally as a combination of context-specific, cultural, social, and economic elements. Among the several components, the following three can be considered accountable for a large part of the issue:

1. Poor governance and the presence of conflict: Most notably, jihadist groups active in the region boost their recruitment process by drawing from marginalized elements of the population in virtually ungovernable territories. Corruption, harassment, impunity and arbitrary violence are widespread issues in the Sahel, with its peripheric regions inevitably being the most vulnerable ones. Poor governance and the incapacity of governments to meet local and national needs substantially intensifies the problems, with geographical remoteness making the border areas fertile breeding grounds for violent radical ideologies.¹³ Moreover, with the largest military deployment of both regional

and foreign forces operating in the border areas to counter smuggling and other criminal activities, more isolated communities are further exposed to violence from both jihadist groups and counter-terrorism forces, and to the abuse (real or perceived) from government authorities. Different studies show how violent extremism in the Sahel primarily occurs as a reaction to local conflicts and in response to bad governance as individuals almost completely lack trust in political leaders, police, and military.¹⁴ On the other hand, religious leaders are held in relatively high regard in their role of protectors of informal norms and institutions on the community level.¹⁵ This combination, especially in fragile, conflict-affected communities, paves the way for possible short-circuits in spontaneous local governance practices that might completely abandon formal democratic structures and ease the acceptance of violent extremist groups’ authority in providing for alternative sources of protection and basic service.¹⁶

2. Socio-economic marginalization: There is a wide consent over the idea of a causal relationship between socio-economic marginalization and violent extremism.¹⁷ In the Sahel, this seems to find further confirmation. In all the six countries considered here, even though to a different extent, social and economic inequalities, especially when overlapping with inter- or intra-ethnic cleavages, are among the central drivers for the proliferation of violent extremism. Purely material motivations, given the widespread unemployment or under-employment across the region especially among young individuals, are the rationale behind the so-called “opportunistic membership” of violent extremist groups, a particularly useful concept for understanding the issue in the Sahel. Even though there is little evidence of a direct causal link between income and violent extremism, there is reason to believe that inequalities if coupled with ethnic or social tensions might push particularly disenfranchised portions of the population towards further polarization against other groups or a perceived “majority”.¹⁸ In the Sahel, providing socio-economic incentives as well as playing on class, ethnic, and racial

grievances have proven quite successful recruitment strategies for different violent extremist groups. In Nigeria, for instance, Boko Haram established a microfinance system of loans to support small business ventures of new members, while in Mali, groups like MUJAO and AQIM have managed to align their Islamist narrative to local social issues, for example, by labelling custom duties, tolls, and tariffs as being against the will of Allah.¹⁹ In particularly rigid societal hierarchies, as in the case of many communities across the Sahel, playing on differences such as the one between land owners and herders, or between the elders and the so-called ‘cadets sociaux’ (those subordinated to age-based chieftancies, especially women and children) by promising alternative ways for a greater upward social mobility has become one of the major strategies by extremist groups to attract new members.²⁰

3. Cultural tightness and gender relations: Norms, beliefs and values, as well as gender relations, play a significant part in both the attraction and, eventually, the rejection of violent extremist ideologies.²¹ Not surprisingly, in cases of particularly rigid normative systems as in the case of the Sahel, attraction seems to be the most likely scenario. In other words, the presence of rigid gender roles and cultural tightness, namely the degree to which a society is bound by rules and norms, is thought to be positively correlated with extremist violence.²² In the case of the Sahel, given the cultural heterogeneity of the region, analyzing violent extremism through cultural lenses is, at the very least, problematic, and not recognizing this limitation would be overly simplistic. Nevertheless, common cultural patterns can be found across the Sahelian borders, including those cultural variables proven to be related with greater frequency and greater intensity of extremist violence’s manifestations.²³ A cross-country study on cultural values and behavioral tendencies shows how Nigeria and Burkina Faso, for instance, feature significantly high levels of power distance and of enhanced masculinity and machismo.²⁴ These two characteristics combined result in rigidly

distinct gender roles and low gender egalitarianism. For instance, as in the case of the Fulani communities, an ethnic group present in all the Sahel countries and characterized by a very hierarchical society, the social constructs around gender result in considerable importance given to the 'warrior virtues' of masculinity while associating femininity with family subordination or mere parental authority.²⁵ In this framework, and this is visible throughout the entire Sahel region, gender relations significantly influence men in joining violent extremist groups while at the same time encouraging women, among the main victims of extremist violence, to actively provide supplies, shelter and information to support the fighters.²⁶

Current responses: limitations and recommendations

In the Sahel, with very few exceptions, regional and international responses to armed jihadism have largely been state-centric and security-driven and have not gone deep enough in acknowledging and tackling those social, governance, and economic deficits underlying the region's problem with violent extremism.²⁷ The presence of conflicts, coupled with an endemic poor governance, further delegitimizes state authority in the eyes of the most affected communities that are in turn increasingly looking at local and religious leaders. Against this backdrop, policy makers should place local communities at the heart of their intervention by shifting their attention to local institutions and acknowledging, formalizing, and reinforcing their authority while working to make them more inclusive. Inequalities, tensions, and grievances should therefore be addressed to cut off the lifeblood of radical ideologies while at the same time repairing the eroded social fabric to restore what is perhaps the most efficient prevention mechanism against violent extremism.

Recent CVE approaches have somehow embraced these guiding principles and already adopted various measures both at national and regional levels to address some of the above issues but have been limited in both their scope and efficacy.²⁸

In 2015, USAID launched the program "Moderate Voices" to support and empower moderate religious leaders in the Sahel (both off- and online). The EU just ended its 4 year-long pilot project "Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Regions of Sahel and Maghreb". Even the regional military joint force, the G5 Sahel, now includes a Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization. There is no lack of examples for recent ambitious CVE projects in the Sahel, but they come with risks and practical limitations. Nigeria's promising "soft approach" to Boko Haram, for instance, was on the right track but eventually came to nothing because of budget restrictions. Other more structured programs, such as the ones from the EU and USAID, often placed too much emphasis on countering radical Islamic indoctrination and not enough emphasis on tackling the causes behind its appeal. Engagement with Imams and civil society as well as interfaith dialogue and awareness campaigns are crucial elements, but counternarratives must be promoted only in parallel with the creation of socio-economic opportunities for youth and other marginalized groups, and only if valuable alternatives to jihadist violence are given to the most vulnerable. Finally, in some cases, previous attempts have even resulted in unintended harm, with foreign-sponsored counternarratives being met in a general climate of suspicion or with rushed community dialogue initiatives partially evading retributive justice.

More pragmatic approaches should therefore address the aforementioned root causes while empowering individual and institutional resilience locally, especially in the vast and virtually ungovernable peripheral territories, to counter the emergence and proliferation of violent extremist ideologies. This should be done by directly engaging with the most vulnerable groups as both targets and interlocutors, such as the *cadets sociaux* and women, to achieve the necessary absence of intra-ethnic tensions and to provide concrete elements to break the vicious cycle of marginalization and radicalization. Ideally, more pragmatic CVE strategies should thus combine elements of develop-

ment aid, peacebuilding, and sociological approaches. While there is no silver bullet for this intricate problem, a more comprehensive approach and serious investment are necessary to eradicate the conditions enabling violent extremism.

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Endnotes

- 1) While the broader Sahel includes (from west to east) northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, the extreme south of Algeria, Niger, the extreme north of Nigeria, central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, Cameroon, Central African Republic and the extreme north of Ethiopia, this report focuses only on the G5 Sahel Force countries plus Nigeria, considering the importance of jihadist activity in Nigeria for the wider regional equilibrium.
- 2) Institute for Economics and Peace. "Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism". Sydney, Australia: IEP. (2018)
- 3) See, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). "Global Terrorism Database" (2018) [Data file], <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>; and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "Militancy and the Arc of Instability. Violent Extremism in the Sahel". (2016)
- 4) Neither the United Nations nor the European Union, for instance, have an official definition for the phenomenon, while definitions provided by other organizations are sometimes either too broad (e.g. USAID) or too narrow (e.g. Dutch Government).
- 5) It needs to be said that violent extremism does not equate with terrorism. The latter is a continuation of the former, and sometimes even this basic connection is contested. Nevertheless, given the context-sensitivity of the issue and since this study focuses on the (almost entirely Muslim) Sahel, considering violent extremism as armed jihadism avoids otherwise inevitable analytical shortcomings.
- 6) B., Randy. "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37-62. S., Mark. "Radicalism Isn't the Problem: It's the Move to Violence We Need to Counter." *Radicalisation Research*. March 19, 2015, <https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/sedgwick-2012-wfd/>.
- 7) Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. "Global Extremism Monitor: Violent Islamist Extremism in 2017". London, UK
- 8) Global Terrorism Database. (2018)
- 9) International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch. Tracking Conflict Worldwide" [web platform]. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisis-watch>; Al Jazeera. "Mali Sacks Top Army Chiefs, Dissolves Militia after Scores Killed." *News | Al Jazeera*. March 24, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2019/03/mali-sacks-top-army-chiefs-dissolves-militia-scores-killed-190324154604780.html>
- 10) I., Maïga and N., Adam. "What Exactly Are Foreign Troops Protecting in the Sahel?" *Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa*. April 27, 2018. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-exactly-are-foreign-troops-protecting-in-the-sahel>
- 11) International Crisis Group. "Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?". Report 92 / AFRICA. Dakar/Brussels. March 2005
- 12) A. Glazzard, and M. Zeuthen. "Violent Extremism". *Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC)*. (2016)
- 13) Common to all the Sahel countries, jihadist strongholds are always in remote border areas, such as the Sambisa forest in north-eastern Nigeria for Boko Haram, the Soum and Oudalan regions in Burkina Faso's far north, the Boulikessi region at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, or the Tillabéri Region in southern Niger.
- 14) International Alert. "If Victims Become Perpetrators: Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel". London, UK. June 2018; This idea is also confirmed within the general violent extremism literature: see Hacker, F. J. Hacker, and F. Hacker. "Crusaders, criminals, crazies:

Terror and terrorism in our time". New York: Norton. (1976); and more recently: B. Anneli, and M. Abdile. "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia." Institute for Security Studies Papers 2014, no. 266 (2014).

15) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "Journey to extremism in Africa." New York. September 2017.; for a theoretical sociology perspective see: J., Rehmann, D. Zamora, and M. Behrent. "The unfulfilled promises of the late Foucault and foucauldian 'governmentality studies.'" Foucault and neoliberalism. 134-158. (2016)

16) Mercy Corps. "Niger Strategic Resilience Assessment". Portland, Oregon. (2016)

17) P., Tinti. "The jihadi from the block." Foreign Policy, 19 March 2013. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/19/the-jihadi-from-the-block/>; M., Hassan. "Understanding drivers of violent extremism: The case of al-Shabab and Somali youth." CTC Sentinel, no. 8. 18-20. (2012); Botha, and Abdile. "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia";

18) C. C., Fair, et al. "Relative poverty, perceived violence, and support for militant politics: Evidence from Pakistan." Political Science Research and Methods 6, no. 1 57-81. (2013); H., Allan, et al. "Drivers of violent extremism: Hypotheses and literature review." Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC). (2015).

19) Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "Militancy and the Arc of Instability. Violent Extremism in the Sahel". September 2016; F. Strazzari, "Azawad and the rights of passage: the role of illicit trade in the logic of armed group formation in northern Mali". Norwegian Peacebuilding Research Center (NOREF). Oslo, January 2015.

20) B., Sangaré. "Le Centre du Mali: Épicentre du djihadisme?". Note d'Analyse du GRIP, Brussels, May 2016; A., Thiam. "Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée". Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. Geneva, March 2017; International Alert. "If Victims Become Perpetrators"

21) M., Gelfand, et al. "Culture and extremism." Journal of Social Issues 69, no. 3. 495-517. (2013)

22) A. Glazzard, and M. Zeuthen. "Violent Extremism"

23) Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) "Radicalization, violence and (in) security: What 800 Sahelians have to say". United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Geneva, May 2016; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "Journey to extremism in Africa." New York. September 2017.

24) Power distance indicates the degree to which members of a society expect and accept inequalities. See the full research: G., Hofstede, G. J., Hofstede and M. Minkov. "Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind. Revised and Expanded 3rd Edition". New York: McGraw-Hill. (2010).

25) International Alert. "If Victims Become Perpetrators"

26) Ibidem

27) Y., Mahmoud. "In Fight Against Violent Extremism, Why Is Prevention Elusive?". IPI Global Observatory. January 11, 2016. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2016/01/countering-violent-extremism-isis-libya-sahel/>

28) Under the Obama administration, the United States led the way in promoting a softer approach to counterterrorism and CVE became the new key policy-framework for both the US and many European and regional governments in the Sahel.



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