

CHARTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL | 2018



FAST FACTS

- Geopolitical contestations between states and non-state armed actors are further complicated by inter- and intra-communal tensions and violence at the subnational level, exacerbating conflict based on religious and ethnic identity.
- With the continued violent extremist threat comes the need to build conflict resolution mechanisms capable of addressing local concerns and the experiences of armed actors across the conflict spectrum.
- Rather than focus singularly on the role of informal “extremist” education in driving recruitment, there is a need for research that investigates the possible impact of divergent education systems on communal cohesion, active civic engagement, and violent extremism.
- Research exploring other markers of vulnerability and questioning prevailing assumptions regarding religious factors as key drivers of violent extremism in West and North Africa is still largely missing.
- There is a need for a comparative study in multiethnic, multiracial states with religious ethnic minorities and diverse perceptions of laïcité and secularism to analyze how state policies and their implementation can impact the perception of unfair treatment of some minority groups and instances of violence.

Charting Violent Extremism Research Priorities in North Africa and the Sahel

Context

As the socio-political dynamics of conflict and insecurity continue to evolve across North Africa and the Sahel, efforts to prioritize the exploration of ongoing and emerging violent extremist trends remain important. For decades, violent conflict, poor resource management, environmental change, and weak governments (through lack of institutional capacity or by predatory elite design) have contributed to cycles of instability and state fragility.¹ The Sahel is a dynamic zone of transition and hybridity² frequently afflicted by conflict. Social, economic, political, and security dynamics merge and mutate at the intersection of the Lake Chad Basin to the south and Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia to the north. Geopolitical contestations between states and non-state armed actors—violent extremists, organized crime, and separatist movements—are further complicated by inter- and intra-communal tensions and violence at the subnational level, exacerbating conflict based on religious and ethnic identity.

Violent extremist organizations such as Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State and its affiliates have benefited from this instability. These groups capitalize on enduring local grievances and the failures of state structures to recruit new followers and generate community support by presenting themselves as legitimate governance alternatives to the state.³ As the groups, tactics, and contexts continue to change, greater attention to ongoing and emerging threats to peace and stability in the region is needed.

In 2018, the RESOLVE Network convened over 30 global, regional, and local researchers, practitioners and policymakers with varied expertise in local governance, development, and the preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) research landscape in the Lake Chad Basin and regional proximity. The Working Group aimed to discuss locally informed understanding of violent extremism challenges within and across borders, offer insights about the future evolution of the threat, and identify areas for potential collaboration on research- and evidence-based programming moving forward.⁴ The topics identified here reflect participants' collective assessment of current dynamics, expertise, in-depth understanding, and commitment to continued analysis of violent extremism (VE) trends and dynamics in the region.

1 "Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach," Final Report of the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, *U.S. Institute of Peace*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/02/preventing-extremism-fragile-states-new-approach>.

2 Hybrid orders imply a coexistence between fixed formal written law and evolving informal customary law, pluralistic authorities and governance structures, challenges to linear legitimacy, and inherent vulnerabilities. See: Bethany McGann, "Hybridity and Fragmentation: Implications for Regional Security Policy in the Sahel and Beyond," in: *Extremisms in Africa Vol 3*, eds. Alain Tschudin, Susan Russell, Stephen Buchanan-Clarke, Craig Moffat, Lloyd Coutts (Good Governance Africa, 2020), <https://www.amazon.com/Extremisms-Africa-Vol-Alain-Tschudin-ebook/dp/B08DG7CD5R>.

3 Brandon Kendhammer and Carmen McCain, *Boko Haram*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2018)

4 The working group was co-hosted by the West African Research Center (WARC), a RESOLVE Network Member Organization. RESOLVE is grateful for the partnership and support of WARC for this convening and following collaborative efforts. For more, see: <http://warccroa.org/about-us/>.

Structures for Conflict Resolution in Violent Extremism-Affected Contexts

How do we build effective conflict resolution structures to disengage and reintegrate violent extremists and other armed actors in violent extremism-affected contexts?

With the continued violent extremist threat comes the need to build conflict resolution mechanisms capable of addressing local concerns and the experiences of armed actors across the conflict spectrum. The body of knowledge on violent extremist disengagement, reintegration, and reconciliation has grown since the time of this working group,⁵ but research on inclusive conflict resolution mechanisms in VE-affected contexts remains limited. During the working group, participants in small groups discussed the need to understand the different structures and processes necessary for the development of an integrated approach to conflict resolution in areas where violent extremism or violent extremist groups are present—particularly in the Lake Chad Basin states of Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria, where efforts or plans to reintegrate ex-combatants were already in discussion. However, some victims of Boko Haram terrorist violence object to government reintegration policies, which may show to a lack of inclusion of the affected communities in policy planning and implementation. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- What role do and should informal and formal religious actors, institutions, and ideas play in conflict resolution processes, particularly in areas with violent extremism based on religious ideologies?
- Should states seek to negotiate with armed actors in active conflict zones or during times of violence?
- What community-level factors should be taken into consideration when developing conflict resolution mechanisms in areas affected by violent extremism?
- What issues associated with or interests of violent extremist organizations and actors themselves should be taken into account when seeking to resolve violent extremist conflicts?
- What impact do historical and cultural dynamics and factors have in conflict resolution processes in states afflicted by violent extremism? Should they be integrated into future processes and, if so, how?
- What indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms already exist in the communities in question and how can they best be applied or adapted to address violent extremism?

⁵ Chris Bosley, “Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict,” *U.S. Institute of Peace*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/08/injecting-humanity-community-focused-responses-people-exiting-violent>.

Literature on conflict resolution in regional violent extremist-affected contexts remains somewhat limited. However, literature from other fields of study and geographic areas may provide some insight into best practices and essential components. Participants suggested drawing on literature on similar conflict resolution processes—in Rwanda, for example—as well as literature on customary and historical communal conflict resolution mechanisms to gain further insight.

The Role of Formal and Informal Education

What impact do the segmented formal and informal education systems have on community cohesion and violent extremism?

In many countries across the region, the education system is segmented into formal and informal sectors, directed by state and non-state authorities, respectively.⁶ Much research places attention on non-formal educational systems and their potential linkages to violent extremism, indoctrination, and recruitment—particularly as related to informal education through *madrassas*.⁷ However, the role of state regulation in education is often overlooked. Rather than focus singularly on the role of informal “extremist” education in driving recruitment, participants discussed the need for research that investigates the possible impact of divergent education systems on communal cohesion, active civic engagement, and violent extremism in Chad, Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- Do informal educational systems, divested from the state, impact the development of patriotic and civic values and susceptibility to violent extremism?
- Can and should informal educational structures be integrated into the formal state educational system?
- How closely regulated are the formal and informal education systems? By whom?
- How do different religious bodies regulate religious school systems, certifications, and curriculum?
- What types of educational reforms have been put in place? What were their goals and how successful have they been in addressing issues within the education system?
- What are the contents of the curricula taught in the informal and formal educational systems and how do they differ?
- Does formal state curriculum in these countries address civic values? If not, are there specific programs or curricula that can be utilized to uphold and teach students about

6 Alexander Thurston, *Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2018.1>.

7 Ibid.

the importance of citizenship and civic engagement? What is their impact on violent extremism?

- To what extent do teachers and other school leaders exercise power or influence over the curricula taught in the formal education system?
- Is there support for integrating informal and *Qur'anic* schools into the state education system? What are the potential pitfalls of doing so? What would a hybrid model of regulation look like, shared between religious and government regulatory bodies?

Challenging Assumptions about Religion and Violent Extremism

To what extent are religious dimensions key drivers of violent extremism in West and North Africa?

For years, researchers have examined whether the different dimensions of religion are primary drivers of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist groups and markers of vulnerability. Research on violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin and West Africa is no exception. But what is missing if we overemphasize the role of religion and its intersection with other factors? Participants noted that research exploring other markers of vulnerability and questioning prevailing assumptions regarding religious factors as key drivers of violent extremism in West and North Africa is still largely missing. In northern Cameroon and Nigeria, for instance, the destructive exploitation and misrepresentation of faith and religious temperament by Boko Haram comprised a key driver of public support for violence, not religious tenets themselves. Nevertheless, substantial donor-driven funding for addressing violent extremism is still directed to countering religious extremist narratives and facilitating religious dialogue, with little empirical backing or proven results. Participants called for greater research revisiting and rethinking the question of why people join violent extremist groups, particularly in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Tunisia. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- What roles do religious dimensions—ideas, communities, institutions, spirituality, symbols and practices⁸—play in allowing, justifying, or dissuading violent extremism in different North and West African contexts? What are the causal effects of different religious dimensions and do they differ?
- Why do community members in violent extremism-affected contexts think people join violent extremist groups? Is their perception accurate?
- What do community members in violent extremism-affected contexts think about violent extremist groups operating in or around their communities?

8 For more on religious dimensions, see: Owen Frazer and Mark Owen, “Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding: Analysis Guide,” U.S. Institute of Peace, 2018, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/USIP_Religion-in-Conflict-Peacebuilding_Analysis-Guide.pdf

State Policies for Religious Minorities

How do state strategies address the needs and challenges of religious minorities? How do state policies impact the engagement, or lack thereof, of religious minorities in violence or violent extremism?

In many countries on the Africa continent, secularism and legacies of *laïcité*⁹ have served as a means to govern multicultural societies through constitutional and statutory law.¹⁰ The understanding and development of policies around *laïcité* and secularism however, has not been uniform across contexts, leaving notable gaps in the real and perceived access and treatment of minority religious populations. In practice, secular policies and *laïcité* in a multicultural and multi-religious environment can come with challenges. How the state interacts with different ethnic and religious groups—particularly if the state favors some and discriminates against others, either advertently or inadvertently—can foster conditions in which minority groups are further marginalized from official structures and vulnerable to adverse impacts. Perceived inequality, lack of access to centralized government structures, and the very notion of *laïcité* and secularism—particularly given its association with the West—even in otherwise secular governing structures may, and in some cases has, engendered grievances and incited violence, both directed toward and emanating from minority groups.

Participants noted the importance of minority groups' perception of themselves vis-a-vis the state and other religious groups coupled with the state's perception of (and thus policy approach towards) each group. Participants questioned how state and minority group perceptions, interpretations, and interactions influence religious minority actions and daily practices. Participants ultimately suggested a comparative study in multiethnic, multiracial states with religious ethnic minorities and diverse perceptions of *laïcité* and secularism—e.g. Chad, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, and Senegal—to analyze how state policies and their implementation can impact the perception of unfair treatment of some minority groups and instances of violence. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- How does the state manage religion—through what bodies and regulations, through what constitution and statutory laws and in practice? Which religions are recognized and which are not, both in statutes and in their implementation (or lack thereof)?
- Are legal codes—both constitutional and statutory—implemented equally or in the same manner regardless of minority or majority group status?
- Are there any state policies that discriminate against religious beliefs, practices, and institutions? Are there any state policies that restrict the political, economic, and social rights of minority religions?

9 A strong version of secularism based on French legal tradition. See: Remadji Hoinathy and Daniel Eizenga, *The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education: Testing Perceived Ties to Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2019.2>.

10 For more on the distinctions between secularism and *laïcité*, see: Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Politics of Secularism," in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, eds. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827978.003.0004>.

- How do state policies address minority religious groups and the diversity within and among those groups? How do state bodies and regulations perceive minority religious groups differently, and how does that perception manifest in legislation and practice? How does legislation contrast with policy implementation?
- What are common state approaches to governing minority religious groups in contrast to majority religious groups and other minority groups, if different—both in terms of regulating religious dimensions and political, economic, and social rights in legal codes as well as the implementation of those codes?
- How do minority religious groups perceive and interact with the state? How is that different from religious majority group and minority group interactions with the state?
- How do respective minority groups perceive themselves, their situation vis-a-vis the state and other religious groups, and their relations to their community's story and history? For example, does a particular religious minority have a history of being persecuted?
- When and why do the States look at and treat some minority religious groups differently despite the common *laïcité* or secularist policies?
- When do minority groups feel marginalized or unfairly treated and why? What grievances have different groups expressed about state management of religion or more broadly about state discrimination based on religious identity? How are these grievances aired? How are freedoms of religion and belief protected or prioritized by the state?

Research Methods

What are methodological and ethical considerations in researching violent extremism and communities affected by violent extremism?

Researchers in academics and practitioner communities have adopted many methodological approaches to undertake research on violent extremism and ways to address it. However, there is no clear methodological framework or ethical guidelines for researching violent extremism and communities affected by violent extremism. Consequently, research findings are often drawn from faulty and ethically dubious methodologies that policymakers are unable to rely on for policy decisions. Flawed methodological approaches and inadequate ethical standards, given the changing dynamics within the relatively nascent field of P/CVE research, may result in faulty research findings by donors, governments, civil society organisations, academics, and international actors. This can negatively affect policy and programming decisions and therefore research subjects.

To address these existential gaps, participants proposed a study to collect best practices on methodology and ethics to govern research on violent extremism and yield reliable data for policy decisions. The study would draw on cross-comparative case studies of best practices in field research methodologies and ethics from various parts of the world affected by violent

extremism, giving priority to the Sahel and North African region.¹¹ The following steps can guide methodological and ethical considerations for researching violent extremism and communities affected by violent extremism:

1. Identifying specific research methodologies relevant for researching violent extremism.
2. Mapping the relationships and interactions between all those involved in the process—academics, practitioners, donors, and affected communities.
3. Identifying the risks for researchers and research participants in researching violent extremist societies.
4. Outlining the impact of the researcher identity on the research process, methodology, and findings.
5. Understanding power relations between the researcher and the research subject, outsider and insider identities, the power relations in ethnic, cultural, and religious dynamics they may reflect, and how that affects study outcomes.

The following questions emerged as key areas for further considerations for research to inform policy and practice:

1. What does the current regional multi-actor research environment look like? Who are the main stakeholders doing research on the field?
2. What are ethical considerations for civil society organizations (CSOs), development practitioners, and academics when researching VE and P/CVE?
3. What are common methodologies for researching VE and how can they be improved? Can preferred methods be disaggregated by the type of research stakeholders (CSOs, NGOs, practitioners, academics, etc.)?
4. What are the identifiable gaps in the research approaches of various stakeholders?
5. Based on a meta-analysis of available data and case studies, what are best practices for context-specific, rigorous, ethical, and safe field research?

11 Supported by participants, the RESOLVE Network is developing an Edited Volume, *Researching Violent Extremism Series*, that seeks to build the capacity of local researchers, develop higher research standards, and promote ethical processes for conducting research on violent extremism, informed by the experience of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners around the world. For more information and to read the published chapters, see <https://www.resolvevet.org/>.

About the RESOLVE Charting Research Priorities Working Group Series

RESOLVE Charting Research Priorities Working Groups explore ongoing and future trends to develop new, collaborative research agendas for the study of violent extremism in specific geographies or topic areas. Charting Research Priorities Working Groups engage local and international policy experts, researchers, and practitioners exchange current understandings of the violent extremism challenge, offer insights about the future evolution of the threat, and identify areas for potential collaboration on research and evidence-based programming moving forward. Research agendas created by working group participants reflect the insights, expertise, and views of the participants themselves, not necessarily those of the RESOLVE Network, the United States Institute of Peace, or any United States government entity.

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