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# Risks, Challenges and Future Research in Sahel, West Africa and the Horn of Africa

## About Hedayah

Hedayah is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi through the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Hedayah was established to serve as the premier international institution for training and capacity building, dialogue and collaboration, and research and analysis to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations, in support of long-term, global efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

## Introduction

The contents of this brief are based on the discussions that occurred from 3-4 November at an expert workshop on Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism hosted by Hedayah in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this 2-day expert roundtable was to bring together 20-25 researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a closed discussion of the current trends in CVE research. The goals at the meeting were to 1) address

*This Research Brief is a quick-reference guide for researchers, practitioners and policymakers interested in learning more about the current research and future needs and gaps in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) on the region of the Sahel, West Africa and Horn of Africa. This report reflects the discussions of the participants at the expert workshop, and does not represent the opinion of Hedayah.*

the current research outcomes in countering violent extremism; 2) determine the critical gaps in research on CVE; 3) identify the new and emerging threats of violent extremism; and 4) establish a recommended research agenda for Hedayah and CVE researchers in the coming 2 years.

In preparation for the meeting, Hedayah worked with Curtin University to map the existing CVE literature and assess the CVE research landscape across four themes: 1) social media and CVE, 2) education and CVE, 3) narratives of victims, survivors and formers for CVE, and 4) Disengagement and De-radicalization.<sup>1</sup> Meeting attendees utilized this literature review as a baseline for the discussions. Participants were also invited to prepare short research proposals prior to the meeting for review and discussion by other participants.

In addition to the discussions that occurred at the expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism*, this brief also draws from findings of the literature review conducted by Hedayah and Curtin University, the research proposals that were submitted by the participants, and independent research conducted by the authors.

<sup>1</sup> For an electronic version of the mapping activity, please visit [www.hedayah.ae](http://www.hedayah.ae).

## Current Risk Factors in the Regions

Participants mentioned that one of the main risks in the Sahel and West Africa as well as the Horn of Africa was related to the lack of appropriate resources to be allocated to prevent terrorism. Main grievances related to the push and pull factors leading to radicalization and recruitment are also often associated with development needs or unemployment. For example, As-Shebaab members are often recruited out of poorly educated and unemployed families, or individuals have contextual, rather than ideological motivations, for joining the group.

Particularly within the Sahel, West Africa and the Horn of Africa, while violent extremists tend to utilize grandiose international narratives, the conflicts and grievances are highly-localized, and not always international threats. On the other hand, the narratives utilized by violent extremists in the region can potentially link to outside groups with a global agenda, as we have seen with the establishment of a stronghold in Derna, Libya that is affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS) starting as early as September 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Participants also noted that in the Sahel, West Africa and Horn of Africa, there is sometimes an intersection between terrorism, organized crime, local political agendas, corruption and political power shifts. An evaluation of local push and pull factors should take into consideration an assessment of how these concepts overlap.

It was also mentioned that there are a plethora of ongoing activities and efforts in the region that may be relevant to CVE, but are not necessarily labeled as such. Some of these efforts include counter-radicalization programs, peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs, socio-economic relief and development programs. Participants suggested that CVE research and programming should look into the ongoing activities and draw from their relevant areas of expertise for a better understanding of the push and pull factors leading to radicalization and recruitment in these regions.

## Gaps and Needs

The participants identified several gaps and needs for future research in the region for the purposes of preventing and countering violent extremism. The main gaps and needs are described in more detail below:

### 1. Assessment of impact of CVE programs.

Participants mentioned that different organization and NGOs have been running different kind of CVE or CVE-relevant programs in the region but there is a real need to assess these programs' impact on the community and target audience and construct some sort of cohesive map of the ongoing activities related to CVE.

### 2. French-speaking expertise is an ongoing need in the region.

Taking into consideration that French language is commonly used most part of the region the area needs more expertise with French language and translated version of at least basic CVE resources that have already been developed.

<sup>2</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/isis-libya/>

**3. More coordination and collaboration to avoid duplication.**

High multi-level coordination among the actors and organizations in the region is a real need in terms of sharing the burden, avoiding duplication, exchanging outcomes and results and using evidence based approach in their efforts and activities. An activity that collates or collects relevant research and programming data in the region would support donors and governments on better decision-making and coordination.

**Challenges to Countering Violent Extremism Research in Sahel, West Africa and Horn of Africa**

Participants indicated that the main challenge in terms of future research in the Sahel, West Africa and Horn of Africa is a better understanding of some CVE concepts by the local community, development workers and aid workers in the region.

Participants also discussed that one of the main challenges to the wording of CVE research and programs in these regions is the use of “countering violent extremism” to describe what many consider to be non-security work. It is key in these regions that reporting on CVE research needs to be defined in a way that is accessible to the community in order to be applied at a local level. The research outcomes should be accompanied by practical tools that register in terms of individuals’ daily life (living day to day), rather than only as part of a long-term or broad strategy.

One participant suggested that a way to overcome some of these challenges is by fostering partnerships between young, local researchers that have access to the field data at a micro level and more senior researchers that can provide peer support and mentorship to shape the research questions and projects.

**Ongoing and Future Programs and Projects**

Participants at the Expert Workshop debated a number of research programs and projects that were both ongoing and proposed. One potential follow-up project is listed below. The description below is paraphrased based on a proposal submitted to Hedayah, so please respect the intellectual property rights of those conducting the research. If you would like more information, or if you have a partnership or funding opportunity available, please contact [info@hedayah.ae](mailto:info@hedayah.ae)

**1. Reducing Recruitment and Support for Boko Haram and Ansaru (Proposed)**

**Research Question:** How to design an effective influence campaign in a difficult environment?

**Description:** Using a developed a methodology for uncovering the most powerful existing motivations governing people’s behavior, this project will design influence campaigns based on employing powerful existing motivations and utilizing credible messengers. This research aims to focus on Northern Nigeria, aiming to counter

the narratives of Boko Haram and mitigate other forms of violent extremism in North-east Nigeria and cross-border areas. The research will provide policy makers with an evidence-based analysis of likely behaviors and triggers for key groups in the population, as well as a baseline for measurement and evaluation.