



RECLAIMING ORTHODOXY: STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS LITERACY TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa has escalated in recent years. As these groups have weaponised religion to achieve their aims, so also can it be a source of resilience. Credible religious scholars and institutions can dismantle extremist ideologies and build individual and communal resilience against radicalisation, thus stifling recruitment and the leadership succession of extremist groups.

Violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa has intensified, primarily driven by Islamist militant groups operating across multiple regions. The surge in violence has been most pronounced in the Sahel, Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, North Africa, and Mozambique, where distinct patterns of insurgency reflect local conditions and contexts. These groups exploit economic grievances, religious ideology, weak governance, and political instability to expand their influence. Across these regions, fatalities linked to militant Islamist violence have surged by nearly 60% since 2021, marking an alarming trend of instability (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024a). The Global Terrorism Index report highlights that terrorism's impact is most severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and South Asia, with Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounting for nearly 59% of all fatalities of terrorism-related deaths in 2023. The epicentre of terrorism has evidently shifted to the Central Sahel, where deaths have risen by 2,860% and incidents by 1,266% over the past 15 years (IEP, 2024).

In the Sahel, extremist violence is fuelled by state failures in security and governance. Violent extremist groups (VEGs) like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) exploit grievances linked to marginalisation, corruption, and resource scarcity (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Climate change, economic decline, and political fragility have further enabled them to embed within vulnerable communities, often positioning themselves as alternative providers of security and justice. The growing footprint of militant Islamist groups is no longer confined to historically affected regions but is

also extending into Coastal West Africa. VEGs have already expanded their territorial control and influence across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and countries such as Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire are increasingly at risk of spillover violence as groups operating in the Sahel push southward. Governments in these nations are strengthening counter-extremism initiatives, but efforts remain hindered by limited resources and fragile security structures. Balancing military responses with community engagement strategies addressing radicalisation's root causes is essential.

The humanitarian toll is severe, with over 45,000,000 people displaced due to violence and insecurity. With 3% of its total population forcibly displaced, Africa has the highest proportion of forcibly displaced people, straining fragile economies, exacerbating food insecurity, and overwhelming host communities (ACSS, 2024b). Many displaced individuals remain vulnerable, often trapped in precarious conditions with little hope for stability (United Nations, 2024).

Addressing violent extremism requires a multidimensional approach beyond military action. Strengthening governance, expanding economic opportunities, and investing in community resilience are critical. Security interventions must be complemented by policies targeting the socioeconomic and political drivers of radicalisation. Overreliance on force can worsen the problem, underscoring the need for proactive prevention strategies. According to UNDP (2017), "State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse." Religious leaders and institutions play a vital role in countering extremist ideologies and promoting peace, tolerance, and unity in diversity

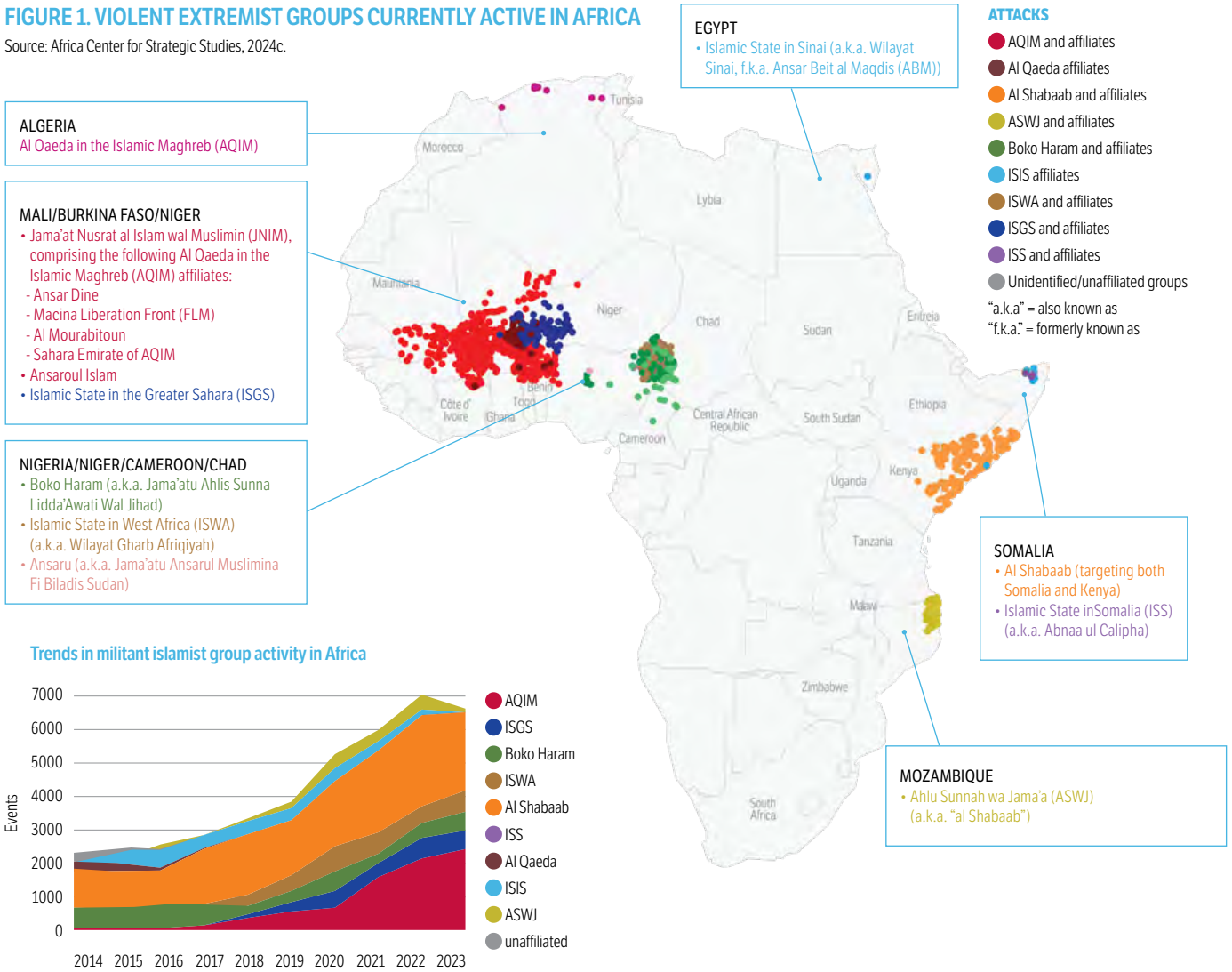
(Kuwali, 2022). Thus, religious leaders and institutions have a critical role in debunking and correcting misinterpreted religious ideologies, reclaiming orthodoxy, exposing extremism as heresy, and promoting a culture of peace, tolerance, and acceptance of unity in diversity.

Like potholes, like violent extremists

Potholes exist on roads throughout all regions of the world and present similar threats to road users. However, their diagnoses and causes often vary, and how to solve them can differ significantly. While some factors, such as heavy traffic and water intrusion, may be common to every locale, others are unique. In cold climates, the "freeze-thaw cycle," where water seeps into cracks in the pavement, expands when it freezes, and then creates cavities that collapse under vehicle weight when the ice melts, is the main culprit in forming potholes. Conversely, in warm climates, heat-induced asphalt softening is the primary culprit. The same is the case with violent extremism. While the idea of using violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality, or system of belief (United Nations, 2015), the push and pull factors that drive recruitment into violent extremist groups vary widely, and it would be a mistake to paint them all with the same brush. While there are clear common denominators, every country – and district – has its own story regarding violent extremism (Ham-ladji & Rizk, 2023). Hence, while it is important to have global strategies, there is a crucial need to *think locally and act locally* to counter violent extremism. Stakeholders intervening in various contexts must consider the local factors supporting or mitigating extremism in a commu-

FIGURE 1. VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS CURRENTLY ACTIVE IN AFRICA

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024c.



nity. Thus, a multi-tiered holistic approach to addressing VE challenges has to include the engagement of local stakeholders and community influencers, including religious and traditional leaders, women, and youth. *"Nothing about us without us!"*

The chameleon and mousetrap: camouflaging tactics of vegs

Just like a chameleon tries to blend with its environment, religiously motivated VEGs adopt the name, language, symbolisms, ideas, and concepts of the religions they claim to represent. One of the most effective strategies used by VEGs is their ability to mimic religious orthodoxy to gain credibility and legitimacy and drive recruitment by carefully appropriating symbols, language, and theological concepts that resonate with local communities. Rather than presenting themselves as radical or foreign elements, these groups frame their ideologies as a return to the "origi-

nal" or "pure" form of religion, positioning themselves as corrective forces against perceived corruption or moral decay. This strategy is deeply embedded in religious history, where heretical movements frequently claim to embody the true *fundamental* essence of faith while accusing mainstream religious institutions of hypocrisy, stagnation, or complicity with oppressive political structures. By reinterpreting foundational texts and selectively using religious terminology, VEGs construct a narrative in which they are defenders of the faith under attack from external forces. They depict traditional religious leaders as compromised by their alignment with the state or elite interests, thus attempting to delegitimise religious orthodoxy while simultaneously claiming to uphold its most authentic form. Boko Haram, for instance, historically rejected Western education and democratic governance, branding them as corrupt-

ing forces contrary to authentic Islamic values. Similarly, Al-Shabaab in Somalia enforces strict and unnuanced interpretations of Sharia laws in areas under its control, providing rudimentary justice systems that, in the eyes of some locals, appear more consistent and fairer than the state's judicial mechanisms. VEGs amplify their effectiveness by manipulating familiar religious principles, stripping them of historical and contextual meanings to serve ideological goals. Like a mousetrap, where materials that are otherwise benign – wood and wire – are assembled in a way that conceals their inherent danger, VEGs assemble and contort benign religious elements into dangerous constructs. They present theological concepts in familiar and credible forms, making it difficult for some followers to discern the distortions embedded within them. This method is particularly effective in communities suf-

fering from oppression, marginalisation, or conflict, where resentment fosters a readiness to embrace narratives that frame violent action as righteous resistance – a pursuit of systemic justice and a necessary defence against persecution. A “liberation theology” needs to have a list of grievances from which to liberate people! Ideology without grievance does not produce a movement. Extremism thrives not just on ideology but also on personal and collective grievances, offering a seemingly just outlet for anger. As the UNDP (2017) study found, while 51% of recruits cited religion as a motivation, 57% had limited or no understanding of religious texts, underscoring the gap between perceived faith-based motivations and actual religious literacy. The UNDP study emphasises the importance of religious literacy as a resilience-building mechanism against VE.

VEGs extend their strategic mimicry beyond ideology to governance, filling gaps left by weak states. They establish parallel institutions – Sharia courts, taxation systems, and social services – and by implementing religious education programs, creating “official jobs” and offering financial incentives to their recruits, they appeal to disenfranchised individuals seeking economic stability and spiritual purpose. This calculated use of religious symbolism enables VEGs to maintain an illusion of orthodoxy, making rejection more difficult in deeply religious societies. Ultimately, VEGs exploit religious devotion to sustain operations and recruitment, often blurring the lines between faith and violent extremism. The UNDP (2017, 2023) surveys emphasise the role of religious literacy in resilience against extremism, highlighting the need for scholars to proactively counter extremist narratives before they take root. Notably, religion fell from the first to the third reason for joining extremism, declining by 57% between 2017 and 2023, demonstrating the effectiveness of sustained religious education. Like a chameleon adapting to new environments, militant groups in Sub-Saharan Africa continuously recalibrate. Hardy (2019) observed that Boko Haram has not been subdued but has relocated, and in this way, Boko Haram – the fulcrum of violent religious extremism in the Sahara-Sahel – has evolved into an international jihadist actor. Across Africa, militant groups operate transnationally, forging

alliances, adapting recruitment tactics, and leveraging illicit economies to sustain their activities (CSIS, 2024).

Realistic alternatives to violence

One of the most striking developments in violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa is the shifting motivations for recruitment. While ideological and religious appeals remain potent for framing narratives, grievances – real and perceived – are the primary drivers. Political exclusion, corruption, human rights abuses, ethnic discrimination, and economic deprivation create conditions that make individuals and communities vulnerable to extremist narratives. VEGs exploit these frustrations, presenting themselves as protectors of the disenfranchised and alternatives to failing state structures. Many recruits join not out of religious conviction but due to a lack of economic stability, personal security, and social belonging. Among nearly 2,200 interviewees, one-quarter cited job opportunities as their primary reason for joining – a 92% increase from 2017 (UNDP, 2023). This aligns with Adigbuo & Forae (2023), who highlight that terrorist groups sustain themselves through economic activities, as seen with Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

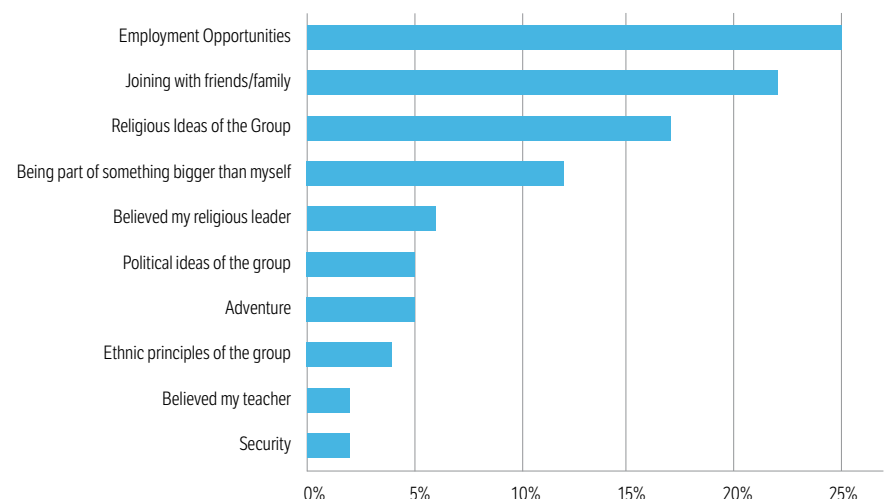
In rural areas with weak state presence, the absence of basic services like education, healthcare, and employment exacerbates frustrations. Many young men, feeling abandoned, seek dignity, purpose, and material rewards in VEGs. For some, joining offers economic survival and social agency. However, once

recruited, extremist ideology binds members, provides a “virtuous” identity, sustains group cohesion, and dictates leadership structures. Even those initially drawn to these groups for non-religious reasons ultimately become indoctrinated, as religious ideology plays a crucial role in reinforcing loyalty and legitimising violence as a necessary means to achieve their goals.

If grievances fuel recruitment, good governance and inclusive development are the antidote. The most effective counter-extremism strategy is, therefore, not military suppression but addressing the structural drivers of extremism. Prevention is particularly crucial for states neighbouring conflict zones. Governments must invest in basic services, particularly in marginalised rural areas, to provide legitimate pathways for social mobility, economic stability, and political participation. It is often said, “If you can get ballot boxes there for elections, you can get infrastructure there too if you have the will to.” A holistic approach should prioritise education, child welfare, healthcare, and quality livelihoods. Investing in young men and women is critical, as they are primary targets for VEGs. Strengthening local governance can empower communities to resist extremist infiltration by creating legal and non-violent avenues for addressing grievances. This emphasises the importance of having well-known and viable alternative pathways through which citizens can address their grievances without feeling that they must resort to violence to get the government’s atten-

FIGURE 2. PRIMARY REASONS FOR VOLUNTARILY JOINING A VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP

Source: UNDP, 2023.



tion. Without such alternatives, hopelessness and despair become fertile ground for recruitment.

Intellectual vaccination: stifling recruitment and leadership

Within VEGs, ideology shapes leadership hierarchies, with the most radical interpreters of religious texts assuming control. This framework ensures loyalty, discourages defection and justifies violence. The religious dimension also complicates counterterrorism efforts, as military interventions alone fail to address the socio-economic and psychological drivers of extremism.

Thus, a strategic response to VEG recruitment requires leveraging religious discourse to dismantle extremist narratives and framings at their core. By undermining their ideological foundations, this approach disrupts succession planning and reduces their ability to attract charismatic individuals with genuine religious knowledge. Much like immunisation against disease, countering extremist ideologies requires multiple layers or “boosters” of intellectual and theological “vaccination” to build resistance against radicalisation. While a single counterargument may be insufficient, a sustained engagement with religious teachings, historical precedents, and theological discourse can create an intellectual and moral barrier against extremist recruitment. For instance, when extremist groups invoke the concept of *Hijra* (migration) to justify relocation to their controlled territories, a simple but effective counter is to reference historical examples such as the Prophet Muhammad’s companions living peacefully with people of other faiths in Abyssinia for several years after the Islamic city-state of Madina had been established, or the fact that Muslim scholars and leaders, resided in non-Muslim lands throughout Muslim history without compromising their faith. In fact, the only way that Islam has spread to the whole world today was that the majority of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad left Madinah after his demise and dispersed throughout the world, living and mingling peacefully with various people and influencing them thereby. Though seemingly straightforward, these “silver bullet” arguments serve as intellectual inoculations that dismantle extremist propaganda by providing well-grounded religious counterpoints that are easy for

ordinary Muslims to understand and use when confronted by recruiters or their sympathisers.

Beyond individual arguments, broader theological literacy is crucial. Extremists thrive on misinterpreting religious texts, distorting meanings through selective interpretations that neglect contexts. Just as mathematical methodologies such as BODMAS eliminate ambiguity in complex calculations, religious scholarship provides structured interpretative frameworks that clarify theological positions and prevent common misinterpretations. Three major fields of classical Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory – Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), Islamic Legal Maxims (*Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah*), and Objectives of Islamic Law (*Maqasid al-Shari'ah*) – establish critical guidelines for deriving religious rulings, ensuring that interpretations remain consistent with established scholarship as well as the spirit of Islamic law, rather than being manipulated for extremist agendas. Together, they form a conceptual toolkit for faith-based critical thinking for identifying and responding to extremist interpretations and applications of Islamic texts (DIN, 2019). Strengthening communities through structured theological education – rather than overtly framing efforts as “counter-extremism” or “PVE” programs – ensures local ownership. By engaging scholars, religious gatekeepers, and interfaith leaders, these efforts cultivate organic resistance to extremism, reinforcing teachings that emphasise justice, ethical governance, and peaceful coexistence. Rather than merely rejecting extremism, communities become equipped to dismantle its ideological foundations and reclaim religious discourse from those who distort it.

Conclusion

The persistence and expansion of violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa demand a comprehensive approach that goes beyond military interventions to address the root causes of radicalisation. Extremist groups exploit governance failures, economic marginalisation, and ideological distortions to recruit and sustain their influence, adapting like a chameleon to local contexts. Countering this threat requires strengthening governance, promoting economic opportunities, and fostering religious literacy to dismantle extremist narratives

at their core. Just as potholes require context-specific solutions, addressing violent extremism necessitates localised strategies that engage religious leaders, women, and youth in building community resilience. Intellectual vaccination through credible theological education which emphasises critical engagement with religious texts and concepts is essential to counter extremist ideologies and prevent recruitment. By prioritising inclusive governance, economic stability, and ideological resilience, states and communities can erode the appeal of violent extremism and cultivate lasting peace. The fight against violent extremism, therefore, must be holistic – balancing military responses with strategic investments in human development and ideological resilience. ●

Note

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