

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN AFRICA:



Conflict Ecosystems, Political Ecology and the Spread of the Proto-State

Policy Brief

BACKGROUND

The eight deadliest wars of the 21st century included the battle with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and three others involving violent groups claiming inspiration from the ideologies of Al-Qaida and Daesh.¹ Of the five countries in the world that experienced the sharpest increases in political violence in 2020, four (Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Cameroon) were affected by such groups and the conflicts around them. These worrying trends continued into 2021, despite persistent national and international efforts to counter them, with Mozambique joining the Sahel on the list of growing conflicts.

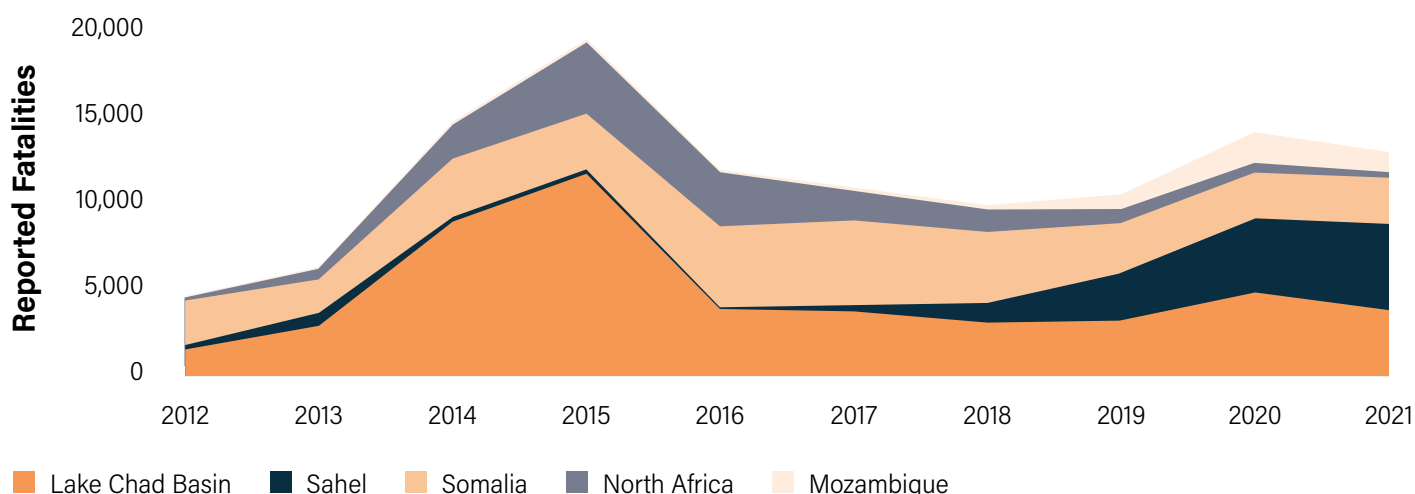
Violence linked to these groups in the Sahel nearly doubled in 2021 (going from 1,180 to 2,005 events),

which highlights the rapidly escalating security threat in this region.² This 70 percent increase year-on-year continues an uninterrupted escalation of violence that began in 2015. Although this began in Mali, it has spread extensively to Burkina Faso, which accounts for 58 percent of all such recorded events in the Sahel.

Violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups (VEGs) claiming inspiration from these ideologies declined in the Lake Chad Basin and in Mozambique in 2021, and across Africa fatalities declined by 7 percent, but still exceeded 12,000 deaths. Battles with security forces and non-state armed groups made up 52 percent of the incidents in 2021, a shift in focus that was particularly marked in Somalia.

FIGURE 1.

Trends in fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in Africa by theatre





FROM INDIVIDUAL RECRUITS TO STRUCTURED COMPETITORS TO THE STATE

The UN's 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*ⁱ laid out a broad and ambitious agenda and noted that Pillars Iⁱⁱ and IVⁱⁱⁱ of the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy⁵ have often been overlooked. UNDP's landmark report *Journey to Extremism*⁶ described the choices made by individual recruits to these groups, and the factors influencing them—many of which should be addressed by those frequently-overlooked Pillars.

This policy brief reviews the experience of UNDP Country Offices in five conflict zonesⁱⁱⁱ and the academic and practitioner literature through the complementary lens of the dynamics of local and national elites and the communities and groups that they lead.

We observe that:



VEGs operate in the complex and shifting “conflict ecosystems” of these regions;



their progress must be viewed in the context of the relationships between populations and their ecosystems as well as between competing political elites;



they seem to be evolving from small bands towards proto-state competitors for communities' allegiance; and



these groups are both global and local, ideological and economic.

i. “Tackling conditions conducive to terrorism”.

ii. “Ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism”.

iii. Sahel (Liptako-Gourma), Lake Chad Basin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Mozambique.

As they get bigger and richer these groups build local structures very like a State. Indeed they begin to compete with Governments not only through coercion but also by promising some of the most essential local services that people want, like safety and swift decisions on disputes. They may do so cruelly and oppressively, but even that may initially be attractive to communities that are weary of lawlessness and insecurity. This is more evident in longer-standing groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia than in newer groups like those in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, while those in the Sahel are developing towards the type of capacity seen in Somalia. None is yet a so-called caliphate, as Daesh has proclaimed itself to be, nor are any yet in power like the Taliban in Afghanistan, but the response to the threat they pose needs a strategy that acknowledges this new state of affairs.

These transnational and global violent (extremist) groups and local violent groups claiming inspiration from ideologies espoused by Al-Qaida

or Daesh (VEGs) reflect a competitive version of a “mediated state”.⁷ Here it is not the state alone, but also more deeply structured VEGs, that negotiate with (other) non-state sources of authority to provide functions of government. Indeed, the more deeply structured VEGs have many of the characteristics of a “proto-state”, as originally identified in pre-modern evolving structures but more recently typified by Daesh.⁸

The concepts this report uses to categorise groups do not reflect official UN terminology. The terms function as analytical framework to offer a nuanced and contextualized description of the manifold dynamics of groups and actors the report studies. They cater to the fact that groups and actors operate at different geographic and strategic levels, with varying inspirations and aspirations. Hence, this report should be read with the understanding that a contextualized response to violent extremism and terrorism requires regular conflict analyses that take into account the volatile and ever-changing threat picture.



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LOCAL GRIEVANCES

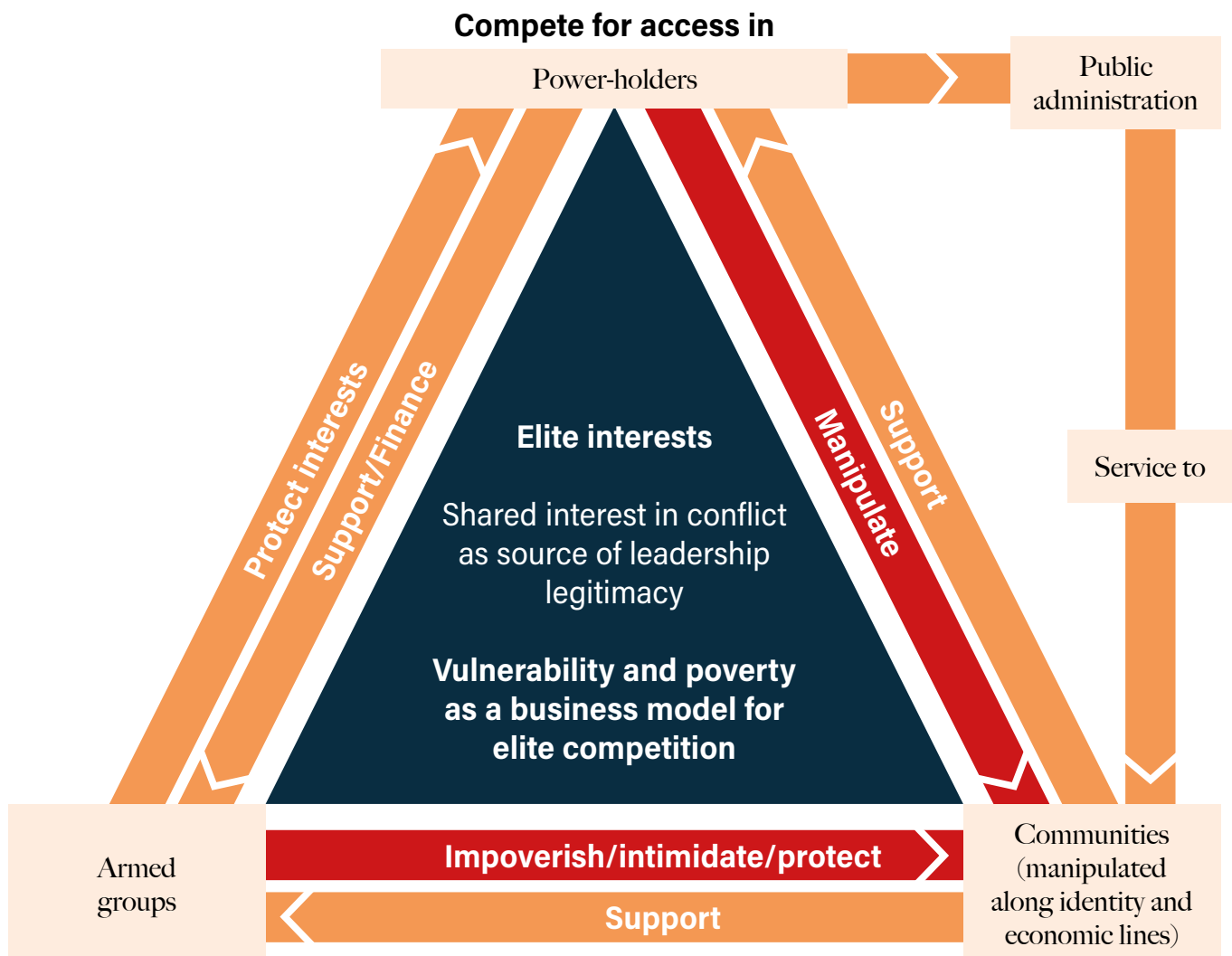
These violent groups prey on local grievances that cement their foothold within aggrieved communities. Through their local presence, they generate the (usually illicit) revenues required to operate group structures. Those activities bring them into contact with purely criminal groups, with whom they share an interest in weakening state capacity in the areas they control.

The most common grievances that violent extremist groups (VEGs) commonly prey on include:

- **remoteness** from the capital city (and a resulting sense of marginalization, exacerbated by a capital-centric allocation of state resources);
- a sense of **unfairness**, discrimination or victimization among communities (which is readily appropriated for VEG recruitment), often related to abuses by state forces or associated militias;
- perceptions of **corruption** (in the broadest sense of the word) among a wide spectrum of elites and power-holders;
- grievances over (perceptions of) unfair **land** management, which is inextricably linked to water resource access, and resulting land degradation (exacerbated by climate change); and
- slow or ineffective state provision of **justice** and dispute resolution.

FIGURE 2.

Pathways of predation



LOCAL POLITICAL ECONOMIES

Power-holders from all identity groups whose position depends on their patrimonial relationship with clients in “their” identity group benefit from (indeed, may depend on) the persistence of identity group grievances and sense of being threatened. They therefore share an interest in continued instability and poverty.

Hence their interests lie in fostering identity rifts between groups and undermining trust. In this, they readily collaborate with local VEGs who share these interests, even while they compete with one another for control and influence. Shared elite interests in continuing grievance, insecurity and poverty accompany acute intra-elite competition both within and between identity groups.

This undermines public service delivery, which is increasingly driven by private elite interests, and further erodes communities’ trust in the state. Elite access to administrative controls generates such internal competition that VEGs can readily use the ineffectiveness of public service as an entry point.

Leaders seeking to modernize, reform or innovate in governance and the economy operate within this political economy, which is characterized by the “business models” of patrimonial elites, as do VEGs and other contesting groups. These elites depend on the persistence of identity group grievances and fears to bolster their positions—grievances they may create as well as manipulate. While they may talk about reform, in practice some elites resist changes that might undermine the dependency of “their” constituencies on their patronage role. That political economy also limits the freedom of action for those who seek to drive innovation.

Understanding this nexus of predatory incentives in local detail is essential in working out what prospects reform champions really have, given that vulnerability and poverty are the central business model for these patrimonial elites.



“Rather than working to resolve conflicts, it is often powerful elites that encourage shifts and increases in violence to cement their positions or to take advantage of changing political circumstances. There are clear benefits to engage in violence, and chief amongst them is that it is an effective weapon through which to garner political power. In short, politics causes political violence.”⁹



GLOBAL VISIONS

However, a reductionist picture of VEGs as purely economic actors—or, indeed as purely grievance entrepreneurs—would lose sight of the ideological aspects of their strategy, objectives and appeal. Although each group is different, with messages and objectives that are specific to their context, they all engage in global messaging about Governments being complicit in a perceived global war on Islam and position themselves as part of global ideological movements.

Their comparative advantage over other non-state armed groups may lie partly in their frightening reputation, derived in part from that of their global patron, and partly from the appeal of their ideological “offer” to potential elite allies. All the same, they have by no means eliminated the competition, and the conflict ecosystem remains crowded and complex.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Understanding in enough detail to support effective reform

Women and men experience the violence and economic dislocation wrought by VEG activities differently. They often play, or are expected to play, different social roles and experience environmental degradation differently. Women and young people also come to understand their situations through different means or media and their agency when responding to these situations also varies.

Women have been used by Boko Haram as suicide bombers and by Al-Shabaab as intelligence sources, but on the other hand, women form the backbone of many peacebuilding and victim support efforts. We should not imagine that women’s roles and responses are any more homogeneous than men’s.

Instead, the very diversity of their responses makes it all the more important to ensure that both women and men are fully involved in every stage, from analysis to execution to evaluation.

Recommendations:

- Invest in a careful, gender-aware analysis of the processes that enable VEGs to expand at the local, subnational, national, regional and global levels and constantly update this analysis;
- Apply the understanding gained through this process to provide thought leadership and engage in policy dialogue on the key enabling factors for VEG expansion (especially the common threads listed above^{iv}), ensuring that these conversations provide safe, inclusive forums in which the voices of women and young people can be heard and heeded.

2. Analysis of the strategic options available to respond to developing VEG challenges

While in 2016 few VEGs in the region represented serious competition for the state (Al-Shabaab in Somalia being the main exception), by 2021 this picture had been changed by the expansion of VEG power, the retreat of state security and justice provision and the deepening of internal political crises. It may now be more of a case of communities facing competition for their social contract—a choice often made under a degree of coercion by both bidders—such that both ordinary citizens and their elite patrons may “buy in” to a VEG’s offer.

While each case is different, to underpin appropriate responses, the focus will need to shift from assessing the factors that prompt individuals to slide into violence to assessing strategies to contest groups as they evolve from raiding bands into proto-states.

iv. Remoteness, (perceptions of) unfairness and of corruption, land management, dispute resolution.

Repressive responses may continue despite evidence that over-securitized approaches aggravate extremism. Excessive focus on the security sector feeds into narratives of capital-centric resource allocation, runs the risk of elite capture of international support, and perpetuates exclusive power structures. VEGs can use abuses by state agencies to validate grievances, reinforcing their position with elites and communities.

Especially when VEGs are acting as proto-state competitors, programming risks creating top-down state-building and security sector efforts that are separate from political economy and ecology considerations and unable to address the lack of Government legitimacy. Programming risks sidelining promising dialogue, reconciliation and insider mediation initiatives led by community leaders and faith-based actors—initiatives that may offer hope at the local and national levels. Strategic opportunities to deploy an understanding of VEGs’ business models may be missed unless dialogue processes are appropriately framed to provide inclusive pathways towards peace.

Recommendations

- Apply realistic strategic analyses of the true requirements for maintaining Government control of areas and of the opportunities for recapturing territory from the VEG. That strategic analysis needs to go beyond the military-tactical assessment of combat options to consider the political economy of the relevant elites and the communities for which they are the key patrons.
- Review the opportunities to deploy peacebuilding, governance and development-based tools, prioritizing them through a VE lens and adapting them to the challenges of these “conflict ecosystems”.

3. Reflecting climate change and political ecology in analysis

VEGs take advantage of environmental degradation and unfair land management to position themselves as righters of wrongs, regulators of access to natural resources and providers of justice and administrative services, as well as livelihood substitutes. Though they have not yet made climate change a major message, they could readily craft a global narrative positing it as the ultimate form of structural violence imposed by developed countries upon the rest of the world.

Recommendations

- Conflict analysis should include not only the political dynamics between various identities, livelihoods, political groups and violent mobilizers but also the relationship between human populations and the ecosystems they live in.
- Enable national dialogues to create space for inclusive local “story of place” conversations to explore the economic, ecological, cultural and social significance of localities, bringing generations together and giving genders and other identities the opportunity to engage. This should allow the exploration of opportunities for land restoration that also restores the social fabric and reduces the attractiveness of VEGs as apparent short-term solutions for grievances.

4. Following the financial flows

VEGs, especially those which have developed more ideological and deeper state-like structures, need resources to sustain their operations. Frustrating their strategy requires not only understanding their income sources but also tracking their expenditures to identify ways to defeat their business model.

Recommendation

- Follow the money: track the income streams of both VEGs and other elites shown in the “pathways of predation” diagram to understand their relationships and identify ways of impeding their incomes without devastating local economies;
- Track the expenditures of VEGs, identifying where they spend their money, and therefore what they think gives them an advantage, to help Governments to deliver better services and out-compete VEGs where they have tried to appeal to elites and communities;
- Build national capacity for tracking illicit financial flows within and between countries and join up mainstream anti-corruption work with systems to counter terrorist finance.

5. Treating the trauma to minimize recurrence

There are also gender (and generational) differences in the way that individuals respond to the trauma of VEGs’ depredations. That trauma is poorly monitored at present, but perverse coping strategies for such trauma all too easily perpetuate domestic, interpersonal and community violence, generating cycles of damage and replicating the traumatic conditions and making conditions rife for further recruitment by VEGs.

Recommendation

- To prevent this, invest in locally appropriate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), using approaches that are adapted to local challenges and community resources. Local, faith-based MHPSS may also generate helpful counter-messaging for other aspects of VEG narratives.

6. Spreading alternative narratives

Communities’ responses to VEGs’ strategies are also shaped by Government policies, resource allocations and messages. However, limited capacity to monitor their impact makes it harder to adapt policies and messages appropriately.

Indeed, understanding VEGs’ “campaign narratives” at the local level and the gendered differences in their effect will be important in contesting their appeal and defeating their approach. VEGs use a wide range of media, so counter-messaging will need to be equally locally embedded and socially adapted.

Recommendation

- Create safe spaces for local voices to be heard, especially those of young people and women, which are all too often marginalized. This will contribute to effectively challenging VEG recruitment of communities and individuals.
- Explore the scope for local mediation, including through religious and faith-based networks, to contest both the global ideological and local grievance messages of VEGs to elites and communities.

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