RECLAIMING ORTHODOXY: STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS LITERACY TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa has escalated in recent years, with militant Islamist groups exploiting governance failures, economic hardship, and ideological distortions to expand their influence. As these groups have weaponised religion to achieve their aims, so also can it be a source of resilience. Through an intellectual vaccination framework, 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.

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Violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa has intensified in recent years, particularly 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, each of which has experienced distinct patterns of insurgency shaped by local conditions. Militant Islamist groups have leveraged a combination of economic grievances, religious ideology, weak governance, and political instability to expand their operations and entrench themselves in various communities.

Across these regions, the number of fatalities linked to militant Islamist violence has surged by nearly 60% since 2021, marking an alarming trajectory of instability (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024a). The Global Terrorism Index report shows that the impact of terrorism is far higher in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and South Asia than any other regions in the world, with the three regions accounting for 94% of deaths from terrorism in 2023, and with sub-Saharan Africa alone accounting for almost 59% of all fatalities. The epicentre of terrorism has now conclusively shifted into the Central Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, as the region has witnessed a dramatic increase in terrorism in the Sahel over the past 15 years, with deaths rising 2,860% and incidents rising 1,266% over this period (IEP, 2024).

In the Sahel, extremist violence has been exacerbated by the systematic failure of state institutions to provide security and governance. Violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exploited longstanding grievances, particularly those linked to marginalisation, corruption, and resource scarcity (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). The confluence of climate change, economic decline, and political fragility have also allowed these groups to embed themselves within vulnerable communities, often positioning themselves as alternative providers of security and justice. The absence of a coordinated and effective state response has further emboldened these groups, enabling them to expand their territorial control and influence across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The growing footprint of militant Islamist groups is no longer confined to historically affected regions but is also extending into Coastal West Africa. 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. In response, governments in these countries are strengthening local, national, and regional initiatives aimed at pre-empting the spread of extremist networks. However, these efforts remain hampered by limited resources, fragile security structures, and the challenge of balancing military responses with community engagement strategies that address the root causes of radicalisation.

The humanitarian consequences of the rise in violent extremism have been devastating, with record levels of forced displacement now characterising many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. As seen in Figure 1, over 45 million people, including refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum seekers, have been uprooted due to violence and insecurity in Africa. With 3% of its total population forcibly displaced, Africa has both a larger share and absolute number of forcibly displaced people than any other major region in the world. (ACSS, 2024b). This displacement crisis has placed immense strain on already fragile economies, exacerbating food insecurity, overwhelming host communities, and deepening cycles of poverty and marginalisation. The entrenchment of extremist groups in regions where state capacity is weak means that many displaced individuals remain vulnerable to further cycles of violence, often forced to navigate precarious conditions with little hope of returning to stability (United Nations, 2024).

FIGURE 1 . TRENDS IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN AFRICA

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024b.

■ Internal Displacement   ■ External Displacement
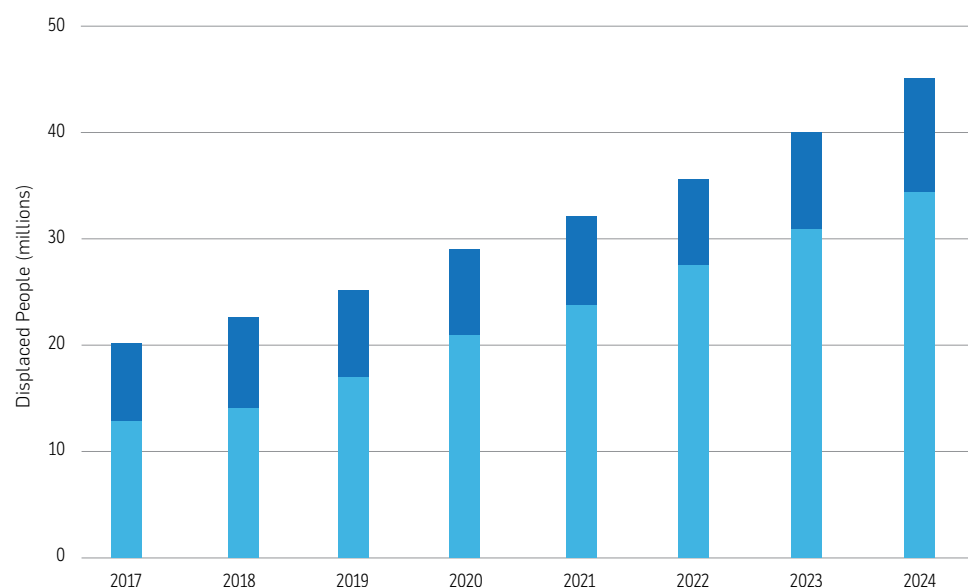
As violent extremism continues to grow, addressing this challenge requires a multidimensional approach that extends beyond conventional military responses. Strengthening governance, expanding economic opportunities, and investing in community resilience are crucial in undermining the appeal of extremist groups. While security interventions remain necessary, they must be complemented by policies that target the socioeconomic and political conditions that fuel radicalisation. Using force alone to curb extremism can exacerbate the problem, hence the need for a multi-pronged approach, including proactive prevention strategies that tackle the root causes of extremism and terrorism and build resilience across communities (Kuwali, 2022). Thus, religious leaders and institutions have a critical role in debunking and correcting misinterpreted religious ideologies, reclaiming orthodoxy, and exposing extremism as heresy, as well as in 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, they often vary in their diagnoses and causes, 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 when it comes to violent extremism (Hamladji & 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 community. Thus, a multi-tiered holistic approach to addressing violent extremism's challenges has to include the engagement of local stakeholders and community influencers, including religious and traditional leaders, women, and youth.

THE CHAMELEON: CAMOUFLAGING TACTICS OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

Just like a chameleon tried to blend with its environment, religiously motivated violent extremist groups adopt the name, language, sym-

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bolisms, ideas, and concepts of the religions they claim to represent. One of the most effective strategies used by these groups 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 "original" 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 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, violent extremist groups 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 corrupting forces contrary to authentic Islamic values. Similarly, Al-Shabaab in Somalia enforces strict and unnuanced interpretations of Sharia 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.

The effectiveness of this ideological appropriation is amplified by its strategic use of familiarity. Extremist groups do not introduce novel or alien doctrines but instead manipulate well-known religious principles, stripping them of their historical and contextual meanings to serve their objectives. This method of persuasion can be likened to a mousetrap, where materials that are otherwise benign—wood and wire—are assembled in a way that conceals their inherent danger. Similarly, these groups present theological concepts in forms that appear familiar and credible, making it difficult for some followers to discern the distortions embedded within them. This process is particularly effective in contexts where individuals or communities have experienced primary or secondary trauma, such as political oppression, economic marginalisation, or violent conflict. In such conditions, the sense of victimhood and resentment fuels a readiness to embrace narratives that frame violent action as righteous indignation, a pursuit of systemic justice, and a necessary defence against persecution. Thus, extremism thrives not only through ideological persuasion but also through the exploitation of personal and collective grievances, offering a seemingly righteous outlet for anger and disillusionment. A "liberation theology" needs to have a list of grievances from which to liberate people! Ideology without grievance does not produce a movement.

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This can make it more challenging for the masses who lack religious knowledge and understanding to separate the wheat from the chaff, as many people have joined violent extremist groups, sincerely believing them to represent the ideals of the faith. The UNDP (2017) "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement" study revealed that while 51% of respondents selected religion as a reason for joining, as many as 57% of them also admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts. This shows that there is a difference between perceptions about religion and its significance as a reason for joining violent extremist groups and actual religious literacy. The UNDP study emphasises the importance of religious literacy as a resilience-building mechanism against violent extremism.

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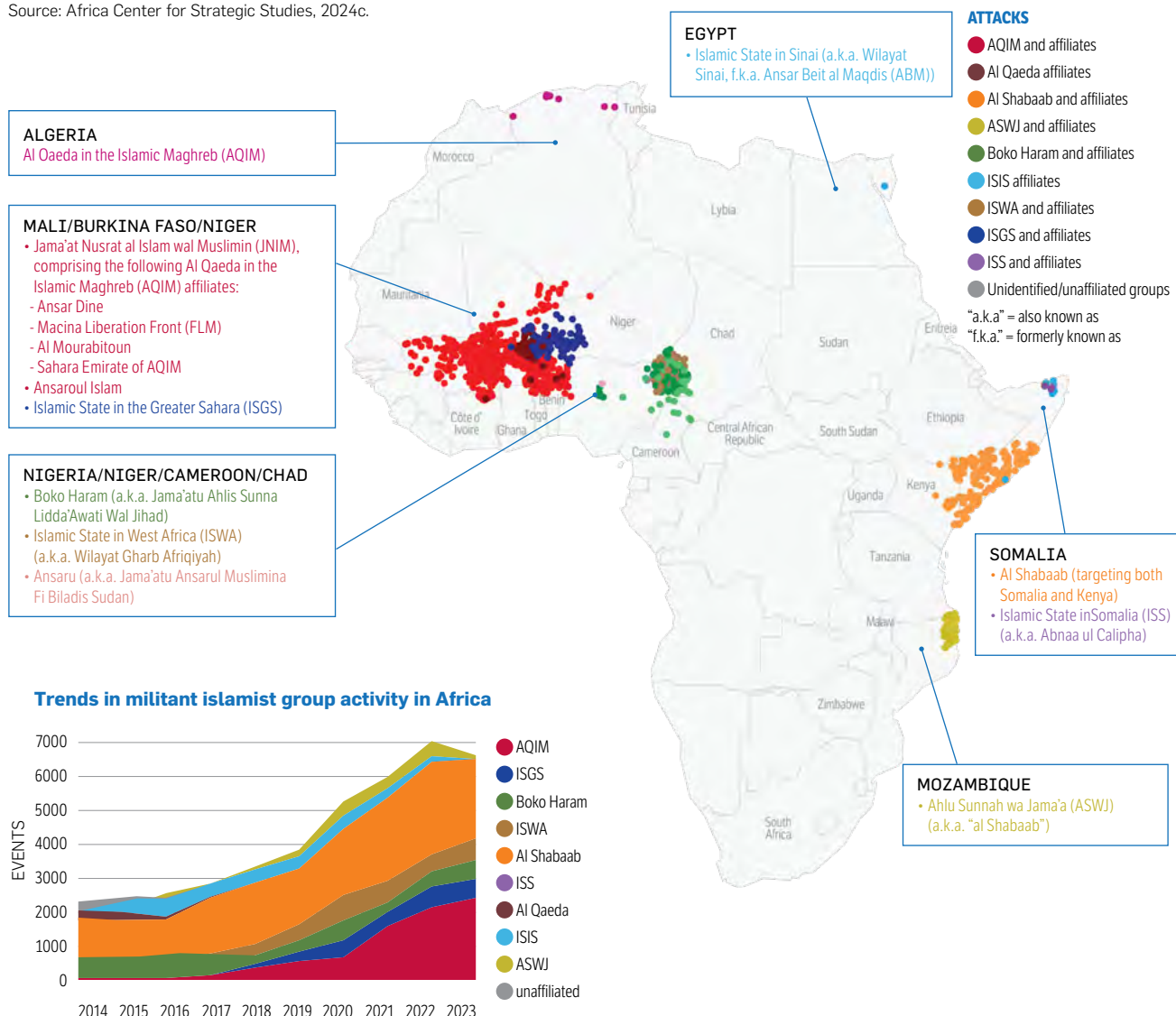services, filling
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governments.

The strategic mimicry of violent extremist groups extends beyond ideology into tangible governance structures, allowing them to cultivate deeper influence. These groups often set up parallel institutions such as Sharia courts, taxation systems, and social services, filling the gaps left by ineffective governments. 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. JNIM, for example, has successfully embedded itself in local communities in Mali and Burkina Faso by blending traditional Islamic rhetoric with anti-government sentiment, thereby legitimising their insurgency as a righteous struggle. This calculated use of religious symbolism and authority enables violent extremist groups to maintain a facade of orthodoxy, making it harder for local populations to reject their presence outright, particularly in regions where religious identity plays a central role in daily life.

Ultimately, these groups manipulate religious narratives to justify their actions and expand their recruitment base, often blurring the lines between faith and violent extremism. By portraying themselves as purifiers of a corrupted social order, they exploit religious devotion and capital to sustain their operations and attract sympathisers. The UNDP's 2017 and 2023 surveys highlight the importance of religious knowledge, emphasising that a higher-than-average years of religious schooling appear to have been a source of resilience against recruitment. This underscores the need for religious scholars and preachers to provide correct, balanced and values-oriented interpretations of religious text, not just to counter extremist narratives but to saturate the mainstream with correct religious knowledge before heresies get the chance to take root. It is noteworthy that for the 2023 UNDP research, religion came as the third reason for joining, cited by 17% — a 57% decrease from the 2017 findings (UNDP, 2023). This proves that with continuous concerted efforts at promoting religious literacy and credible, balanced religious narrative, individuals and communities can build intellectual immunity and resilience against violent extremism.

Another feature of the chameleon is that it changes colours to adapt to changing environments. Likewise, the evolving threat landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa also reflects a strategic recalibration by militant Islamist groups. For example, Hardy (2019) noted that the threat of Boko Haram was not subdued as government officials and policymakers would have us believe; rather, when jihadists in one territory have taken a beating, surviving fighters have simply relocated to other geographies and in this way, Boko Haram—the fulcrum of violent religious extremism in the Sahara-Sahel—has become, over time, an international jihadist actor. Thus, across the continent, militant groups have demonstrated an increasing ability to operate transnationally, forging strategic alliances, adapting their recruitment tactics, and leveraging illicit economies to sustain their activities (CSIS, 2024).

FIGURE 2. VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS CURRENTLY ACTIVE IN AFRICA

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024c.

EGYPT
• Islamic State in Sinai (a.k.a. Wilayat Sinai, f.k.a. Ansar Beit al Maqdis (ABM))

ALGERIA
Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

MALI/BURKINA FASO/NIGER
• Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), comprising the following Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) affiliates:
  - Ansar Dine
  - Macina Liberation Front (FLM)
  - Al Mourabitoun
  - Sahara Emirate of AQIM
• Ansaroul Islam
• Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

NIGERIA/NIGER/CAMEROON/CHAD
• Boko Haram (a.k.a. Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad)
• Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) (a.k.a. Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyah)
• Ansaru (a.k.a. Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan)

SOMALIA
• Al Shabaab (targeting both Somalia and Kenya)
• Islamic State inSomalia (ISS) (a.k.a. Abnaa ul Calipha)

MOZAMBIQUE
• Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ) (a.k.a. "al Shabaab")

ATTACKS
- AQIM and affiliates
- Al Qaeda affiliates
- Al Shabaab and affiliates
- ASWJ and affiliates
- Boko Haram and affiliates
- ISIS affiliates
- ISWA and affiliates
- ISGS and affiliates
- ISS and affiliates
- Unidentified/unaffiliated groups

"a.k.a" = also known as
"f.k.a." = formerly known as

Trends in militant islamist group activity in Africa

Legend:
- AQIM
- ISGS
- Boko Haram
- ISWA
- Al Shabaab
- ISS
- Al Qaeda
- ISIS
- ASWJ
- unaffiliated

EVENTS axis: 0, 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, 5000, 6000, 7000
Years: 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

REALISTIC ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE

One of the most striking developments in the dynamics of violent extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa is the shifting motivations for recruitment into militant groups. While ideological and religious appeals remain potent, grievances – both real and perceived – are the primary drivers of recruitment. Ideology without grievances does not produce a movement. Political exclusion, corruption, human rights abuses, ethnic discrimination, and economic deprivation create environments in which individuals and communities become vulnerable to extremist narratives. Violent extremist groups exploit these conditions by positioning themselves as protectors of the disenfranchised, providers of justice, and alternatives to the state's perceived failures. Many individuals who join these groups do so not because of religious conviction but due to a lack of viable alternatives for economic stability, personal security, and social belonging. Among nearly 2,200 interviewees, one-quarter of voluntary recruits cited job opportunities as their primary reason for joining, a 92% increase from the findings of 2017 (UNDP, 2023). This aligns with the conclusion of Adigbuo & Forae (2023), that gains from various funding sources/economic activities of terrorists contribute largely to terrorism in Africa as exemplified by Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

FIGURE 3. PRIMARY REASONS FOR VOLUNTARILY JOINING A VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP

Source: UNDP, 2023.
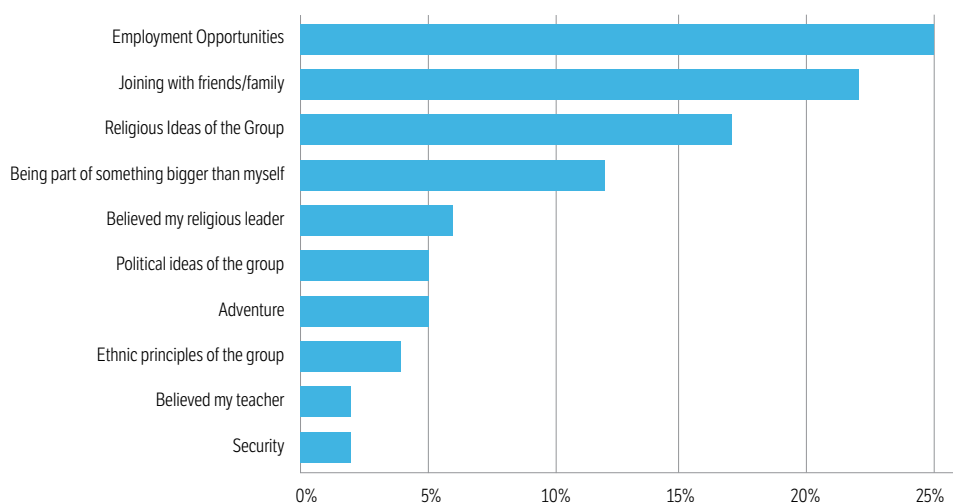
In rural areas with weak state presence, the absence of basic services such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities further exacerbate community frustrations. Young men, in particular, often feel abandoned by the state and seek belonging in groups that prom-

ise dignity, purpose, and material rewards. For many, joining a violent extremist group becomes not only a means of economic survival but also an assertion of identity and agency in a society that has otherwise ignored them. However, once recruited, the religious ideology of violent extremist groups serves as a binding force that sustains group cohesion, dictates leadership structures, and justifies acts of violence. Even among those initially drawn to these groups for non-religious reasons, extremist ideology ultimately plays a crucial role in reinforcing loyalty, silencing dissent, and legitimising violence as a necessary means to achieve their goals.

If grievances are the fuel for recruitment into violent extremist groups, then good governance and inclusive development are the antidote. The most effective long-term counter-extremism strategy is, therefore, not military suppression but the creation of viable alternatives that address the structural drivers of extremism. It is also one of the most potent prevention mechanisms for states yet to be besieged by the violent extremism problem, especially if they are neighbouring those who have. Governments must invest in basic services, particularly in historically marginalised rural areas, to ensure that individuals have legitimate pathways for social mobility, economic stability, and political expression. It is sometimes said, "*If you can get ballot boxes there during an election, then you can get basic services and infrastructure there if you have the will to.*" A holistic approach to countering violent extremism should prioritise education, child welfare, healthcare, and quality livelihoods. Investing in young men and women is particularly critical, as they form the primary demographic targeted by violent extremist groups. Additionally, strengthening local governance structures can empower communities to resist extremist infiltration by creating platforms for grievances to be addressed through legal and non-violent means. This emphasises the importance of having well-known and viable alternative pathways through which citizens can get their grievances addressed without feeling that they must resort to violence to get the government's attention. Without such alternatives, hopelessness and despair become fertile ground for violent extremist recruitment.

INTELLECTUAL VACCINATION: STIFLING RECRUITMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Within these groups' core administration, ideology determines the leadership hierarchy, with the most radical interpreters of religious texts often assuming control. This ideological framework ensures loyalty, discourages defection, and provides a moral justification for acts of violence. The religious dimension of violent extremist groups also makes their dismantling more complex, as counterterrorism efforts that focus solely on military interventions often fail to address the deeper socio-economic and psychological needs that drive individuals into these groups.

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Thus, a strategic approach to countering recruitment into violent extremist groups involves leveraging religious discourse to challenge extremist narratives at their core. By undermining the ideological foundations that these groups use to recruit and retain members, this approach effectively disrupts their succession planning, making it difficult for them 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 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.

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This methodological approach to countering extremism extends beyond individual arguments to broader theological literacy. Many extremist narratives thrive on the misapplication of religious texts, relying on selective interpretations that remove context and distort meaning. 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 – the Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), the Islamic legal maxims (*Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah*), and the 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 traditional theological education — rather than explicitly framing efforts as "counter-extremism" or "PVE" programs — also ensures local ownership of these initiatives. By engaging scholars, religious gatekeepers, and interfaith leaders, such efforts cultivate an organic resistance to extremist narratives, reinforcing traditional religious teachings that emphasise justice, ethical governance, and peaceful coexistence. In this way, rather than merely rejecting extremism, communities are equipped with the tools to proactively dismantle its ideological underpinnings and reclaim religious discourse from those who seek to distort and appropriate 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.

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