

Report

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PERCEPTIONS, VULNERABILITIES, AND PREVENTION

**Violent Extremism Threat Assessment in
Selected Regions of the Southern Libyan
Borderlands and North-Western Nigeria**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The full report is available in Arabic, English, and French at:
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Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Authors: Nicolas Florquin, Hafez S. AbuAdwan, Gergely Hideg, and Alaa Tartir

Production coordinator: Olivia Denonville

Editor: Emilia Dungal

Fact-checker: François Fabry

Copy-editor: Alessandra Allen

Proofreader: Stephanie Huitson

Cartographer: Jillian Luff

Design and layout: Rick Jones

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Cover photo

A Tuareg man sits on a rock in the Tadrart Akakus, east of Ghat, Libya. 8 December 2005.

Source: Bertrand Rieger/Hemis

Overview

The 2017 *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that individuals raised in marginalized borderlands can be especially vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups. The Sahel is home to a number of such borderlands, with the movement and activities of various armed groups, the absence of strong state institutions, and the prevalence of disparaged communities characterizing its territory. Potentially, the combination of these factors makes the subregion more exposed to risk and worthy of further consideration.

Among the Sahelian border regions, Libya's frontiers seem to offer particularly favourable conditions for the expansion of violent extremist groups. Following the defeat of the non-state armed group Islamic State (IS) in the Libyan city of Sirte in 2016, violent extremist combatants headed towards the south of the country, raising concerns over the stability of border regions within Libya; in neighbouring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Sudan; and as far as Nigeria, where weapons of suspected Libyan origin have been used in episodes of violence. The Libyan borderlands, much like the broader Sahel region, are characterized by limited access to public services, weak political institutions, porous borders, multiple direct military interventions, the presence of armed groups, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and meddling by regional and global powers—all of which contribute to an increased risk of violent extremism.

This Report therefore seeks to better understand the dynamics of these risk factors in the southern Libya border region. It relies on quantitative surveys of people's perceptions of factors (or drivers), actors, and values associated with violent extremism. A total of 6,852 interviews were undertaken in selected border regions of northern Chad, southern Libya, north-eastern Niger, north-western Nigeria, and western Sudan between December 2020 and July 2021.

The Report tackles violent extremism through the lens of affected—or potentially affected—local societies, and aims to inform policymaking and programming from a prevention perspective. It does this by analysing the exposure of communities in the surveyed border regions to seven drivers of violent extremism examined in this study: (1) hardship and deprivation; (2) lack of adequate security and justice; (3) limited access to basic services; (4) the growing importance of ethnic or religious identities; (5) chronic instability and insecurity; (6) blocked political participation and the influence of non-state armed groups; and (7) the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons. While these drivers—taken in isolation—may not necessarily trigger violent extremism, violent extremist groups can instrumentalize perceptions of marginalization and discrimination and weave them together into a simplifying narrative that can act as a catalyst for violence.

Furthermore, the Report examines the interviewees' knowledge of recruitment strategies employed by a variety of armed groups in their communities, as well as their attitude towards specific violent extremist groups and associated values. By shedding light on

populations' perceptions, the Report highlights some common trends across the borderlands, and provides some granular understanding on specific challenges. Although violent extremist groups did not necessarily control territory in the areas surveyed, the analysis suggests that the situation has the potential to deteriorate quickly if action is not taken to prevent people from reaching a potential 'tipping point'.

Key findings

- Hardship and deprivation represent major challenges in the surveyed border regions of the Sahel. In Niger and Sudan, 71 and 56 per cent of respondents, respectively, rated their lives negatively. More than half of the respondents in all five countries declared having had 'often' or 'sometimes' no cash income in the year preceding the study.
- Discrimination and marginalization along ethnic, tribal, or religious lines were most strongly felt in Nigeria and Sudan. The situation in Sudan is particularly noteworthy as respondents also reported comparatively limited access to basic services. The combination of these two drivers is of particular concern from a prevention of violent extremism (PVE) perspective as it can fuel and exacerbate grievances.
- Residents of the border communities expressed complex and nuanced perceptions of the state's ability to provide security and justice. While respondents in Libya, Nigeria, and Sudan were particularly disgruntled with the government, but relatively less so with the security forces, the opposite appeared to hold true in Chad and Niger. All the case studies indicated that trust in security forces was slightly higher when security provision involved both local (state or non-state) and national or federal forces.
- Perceptions of stability and security varied greatly across the case studies. In Nigeria, 61 per cent of respondents felt insecure or very insecure in their neighbourhoods, compared with only 12 per cent in Niger, 17 per cent in Libya, 21 per cent in Chad, and 38 per cent in Sudan.
- Perceptions of small arms also varied significantly across the case studies, with respondents in Nigeria and Sudan reporting the highest levels of proliferation. The sources of weapons cited by respondents included the illegal market, the legal market, craft production, inheritance, state authorities, and employers. The survey results suggest that outbound trafficking of small arms from Libya to neighbouring countries surpassed weapons inflows.
- A significant 19 per cent of respondents in Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan reported being aware of recruitment by local or foreign armed groups in their communities. Furthermore, 11 per cent claimed to be aware of recruitment by violent extremist groups in their areas.

- The recruits of local and foreign armed groups were fairly evenly divided between men and women, with only slightly more men and boys than women and girls. The roles that respondents assigned to women and girls within these groups were less consistent, however. In Chad, the most frequently cited role for women was that of combatant (16 per cent), while only a negligible proportion of Nigerian respondents assigned this role to women.
- Around three per cent of respondents in Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan had not only extremely favourable views of mainstream violent extremist groups, but also particularly severe grudges against a range of institutions, communities, and organizations—including state, non-state, and international entities. Notably, this subset also displayed a strong level of support for violence against civilians and showed high levels of willingness to die for a leader.
- Respondents in Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan expressed varying levels of support for or resentment towards well-known violent extremist groups, such as IS, al-Qaeda, or al-Shabaab. Sudanese respondents were the most likely to assert that individuals or groups are sometimes justified in killing civilians (52 per cent), followed by those in Nigeria (32 per cent), Chad (22 per cent), and Niger (17 per cent).

Policy and programmatic observations

The following policy observations draw on the research findings and are based on in-depth consultations with UNDP regional and country teams, and target policymakers and practitioners working to prevent and address armed violence and violent extremism in the subregion covered in this study. While member states, the UN, and international development partners may already be implementing similar recommendations in specific contexts, the following list is meant to serve as a call for more systematic action in the region.

Hardship and deprivation

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should consider the broader humanitarian–development–peace nexus when designing PVE interventions in the border communities. Programming should be context specific in order to deliver activities in an integrated manner and to support sustainable resilience in targeted communities.
- Member states should ensure that national strategic plans and public expenditures create economic opportunities, expand resources, and commit to a long-term development vision for women and men in marginalized border regions.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should focus on enhancing community resilience, supporting capacity development to create

economic activities, and diversifying livelihood activities for vulnerable and marginalized groups, including youth and women.

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should promote livelihood recovery and sustainability programmes using tools such as UNDP's 3×6 Approach and Prevention Offer, as well as the 'leave no one behind' promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UNDP's 3×6 Approach is an innovative UNDP programme promoting sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable and crisis-affected groups, such as those affected by disasters or conflict. The Prevention Offer is a corporate effort to articulate UNDP's prevention and peacebuilding ambition and to promote the adoption of a strong development lens that calls for early and large-scale action in crisis prevention and peacebuilding.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should consider programming that aims to shift norms, including within the dowry system, whereby social and political capital is attributed to married men (and, to a limited extent, married women).
- Member states should consider investing in economic activities and income-generating projects related to the cross-border trade, and specific support should be provided to informal cross-border traders by encouraging the formalization of their trades or business as well as facilitating their access to markets and ability to engage in productive economic activities.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should provide short-term and conflict-sensitive 'gap filler' support—such as community development projects, affordable credit to allow youth to start their own businesses, and cash income assistance—while continuing to invest in longer-term development visions and plans. Social protection systems in the borderlands should not only provide immediate or short-term support to young persons but also aim to stimulate socio-economic recovery in niche trade areas to disincentivize the recruitment of young persons to violent extremist groups.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should support follow-up assessments on alternative sources of livelihoods in border areas where cash income is limited or periodically interrupted in order to identify possible entry points for reducing local populations' vulnerability to hardship and deprivation.

Lack of adequate security and justice

- Member states, with the support of international development partners and in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs), should ensure that security sector and wider criminal justice system reform initiatives tackle the trust and legitimacy deficits of specific security and justice institutions. This includes prioritizing community-based policing and security provision mechanisms, such as civilian–

military engagement, and developing communication and trust-building interventions in communities facing higher perceptions of discrimination. Such initiatives should be explicitly linked to gender-related legal provisions and national policies (such as UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 national action plans), and work towards greater representation of women in the defence and security forces, including through the provision of training to these forces on protecting women's rights and preventing gender-based violence (GBV).

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should establish and implement early warning mechanisms that capture and monitor the threats, risks, and perceptions of insecurity in communities, as well as levels of trust in key security providers and justice institutions. They should also develop early response systems that promote interaction between military and civilian actors at the community level to achieve more complementary, effective, and sustainable responses to violent extremist narratives and ideologies.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners, with the support of CSOs, should sponsor community-led engagement and dialogue to address the social cohesion challenges created by the complex mobility in border regions, with the aim of strengthening social cohesion and building resilient communities against violent extremism.
- Member states, the UN, international development partners, and CSOs should design and implement projects in partnership with diverse groups of women, men, girls, and boys to end impunity for GBV; to ensure that the security and justice needs of all women, men, girls, and boys are met; and to improve access to justice and public services for survivors of GBV.

Limited access to basic services

- Member states should ensure the transparent and equal distribution of resources and access to basic services across the country, paying particular attention to remote areas and cross-border communities who feel marginalized and become vulnerable to the exploitation, narratives, and propaganda of violent extremist groups. In parallel, communities should be included in the management of natural resources at the local level and informed of resource distribution and policies. The UN and international development partners should ensure that support to government institutions is context specific and conflict sensitive so that it does not exacerbate perceptions of marginalization and discrimination among border communities.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should consider integrating PVE interventions into broader regional and development stabilization efforts from an early stage to prevent extremist groups from taking advantage of a vacuum or lack of state services.

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should consider mapping the geospatial distribution of public expenditures as a way to create political momentum to increase coverage of marginalized border areas and population groups, including female-headed households, single women, youth, persons who suffer discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and ethnic and religious minorities. They should also consider appropriate practices with respect to supporting sustainable development in areas of limited statehood and to fulfilling or renewing the social contract through partnerships in service delivery with other stakeholders, including non-state actors such as community leaders.
- Member states should ensure the provision of compulsory education for all girls and boys in at-risk areas—as per Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)—together with social protection interventions to ensure attendance at school, particularly in remote areas outside of the centre or capital.

The growing importance of ethnic and religious identities

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should expand and support initiatives that aim to improve transparency in and oversight of schools, including the curricula.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should invest in the development of gender-inclusive, community-led governance systems that provide transparent and accountable leadership of religious affairs, as well as capitalize on the important role that religious teaching can play as a source of resilience and support increased religious literacy among at-risk groups.
- Member states, in coordination with the UN, international development partners, CSOs, and religious and community leaders, should initiate and implement gender-inclusive interventions that encourage interfaith and intercommunal dialogue, provide a space for equal participation of women, and lead to concrete outcomes for communities, such as their involvement in local community development plans that can be supported by the governments.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should engage with Quranic schools and religious leaders, besides other stakeholders, as entry points for developing national and regional PVE strategies in partnership with mothers and fathers, including programmes to encourage religious and ethnic tolerance as well as to identify key areas of reform in Quranic schools to improve the delivery of quality education.

Blocked political participation

- Member states should take necessary actions, including changing policies and practices, to tackle sensitive citizenship and voting issues among women and men in border communities.

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners, in partnership with media outlets and experts, should support free and responsible press or media initiatives or interventions that aim to prevent and mitigate hate speech and the perpetuation of rigid notions of masculinity as well as to raise awareness of violent extremism threats and risks. These efforts should include explicit messaging to support women’s equality and prevent women’s marginalization.
- Member states should facilitate and encourage participation in political debates through participatory processes that are inclusive of youth and lead to the adoption of local community development plans.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should consider sponsoring and nourishing a civil society-led and gender-inclusive culture of debate to make processes more inclusive and build strong partnerships with CSOs to design and implement development plans or programmes more effectively.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should actively address the marginalization of women from political processes, including by reserving places for women on councils, actively promoting women’s meaningful participation as candidates and election officials, and incorporating specific provisions to enable women’s voices to be heard at political media events such as candidate debates and election campaign activities.

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should promote and design context-specific and conflict-sensitive responses to arms proliferation, while ensuring that interventions are harmonized and coordinated across communities and borders in ways that not only limit violent extremist groups’ access to arms, but also prevent potential unintended harmful effects (such as by ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently create incentives for cross-border arms trafficking).
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should undertake rapid assessments of the risks associated with small arms, as perceived by the most exposed communities, as well as of arms smuggling or trafficking—besides other illegal activities—as a means of financing the activities of violent extremist groups.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should design and support initiatives that mitigate the risks to communities (such as by developing awareness-raising programmes on firearms security and safety and providing alternatives to arms possession as a means of protection and livelihood) while acknowledging that weapons collection may not be realistic in the short term in areas with high levels of insecurity.
- Member states, the UN, and the international community should support efforts to hamper violent extremist armed groups’ access to small arms, in line with UNSCR 1970 of 2011 establishing the arms embargo on Libya.

Recruitment by armed groups

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should prioritize PVE interventions in areas that are highly dependent on the cross-border trade.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should design and implement strategies that tackle the specific vulnerabilities and perceptions of men and women as possible recruits of armed groups (including both violent extremist and other groups), drawing from collaborative research aimed at understanding why women and men join extremist groups. Strategies may include creating economic opportunities in partnership with small businesses and engaging youth, community leaders, and other relevant influential leaders.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners, in partnership with media outlets and religious leaders, should develop alternative narratives and messages to counter the online discourse and recruitment strategies of violent extremist groups.
- Member states should encourage and promote borderland trade initiatives to increase and ensure the safety of legitimate cross-border trade, while preventing it from being exploited by violent extremist groups.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should support the outcomes of the Berlin Conference and the Libya Political Dialogue agreement related to the withdrawal process of foreign armed groups in the region (for example, the 5+5 Joint Military Commission Action Plan), particularly the reintegration process of fighters into their country or communities of origin to prevent them from joining violent extremist groups.

Affinity towards violent extremism

- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should prioritize PVE efforts in areas with relatively stronger affinity towards violent extremism, and without any stigmatization of population groups, particularly focusing on media campaigns and raising awareness among communities, in partnership with CSOs, media outlets, religious leaders, education institutions, and research institutes or universities.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should support community-led mentoring and trauma-counselling services, as well as mental health and psychosocial support initiatives in the affected communities.
- Member states, the UN, and international development partners should design and implement alternative and counter-messaging programmes that are highly tailored to a particular context and culture, emphasizing peer-group influences, mothers and fathers, religious leaders, and Quranic schools as entry points. The programmes

can leverage the perspectives and voices of former recruits—including respondents from UNDP's 2017 *Journey to Extremism* study who deradicalized or disengaged—as conduits for counter-messaging. Such initiatives should take into consideration good practices established through deradicalization programmes implemented in countries in the region and beyond, including the need to empower locally owned, community-based reconciliation and reintegration efforts.

- In order to triangulate findings and increase knowledge on risks factors, member states, the UN, and international development partners should support follow-up studies targeting individuals from border areas who have joined violent extremist groups.

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The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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