

The dynamics of youth radicalisation in Africa

Reviewing the current evidence

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Summary

Youth radicalisation towards violent extremism is a global phenomenon that threatens peace, security and stability. This paper reviews the evidence on the factors that may contribute to the dynamics of youth radicalisation. Available findings from East Africa and the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, and North Africa are used to understand the dynamics that may contribute to radicalisation and, potentially, to violent extremism. Many factors emerge including political, economic, social and individual factors. Religion, identity and gender also arise as topics for further analysis. Youth radicalisation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be attributed to any one explanation or set of factors. This paper recognises these complexities, offers recommendations and identifies additional issues that should be explored further.

THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 has challenged conventional ideas around radicalisation, and the individuals that have been attracted to this group have challenged traditionally held notions around violent extremism, radicalisation and recruitment. The perceived profile of recruits has changed from that of destitute young men in the developing world to include educated men and women from seemingly affluent backgrounds globally. Radicalisation and recruitment is proving to be increasingly transnational in nature, with complex networks of terrorist groups transcending continental boundaries, as well as social, racial and cultural barriers. Governments and citizens across the world are grappling with these dynamics in efforts to develop appropriate responses to increasingly complex circumstances.

Terrorism in Africa has had an incalculable impact in terms of lives lost, physical injury and trauma, the displacement of families and communities, increased insecurity and varied impediments to development. In many places the convergence of porous borders;

ineffective or corrupt law enforcement structures; and endemic organised criminal activity, involving drugs, people smuggling and weapons trafficking, further challenges stability and security.

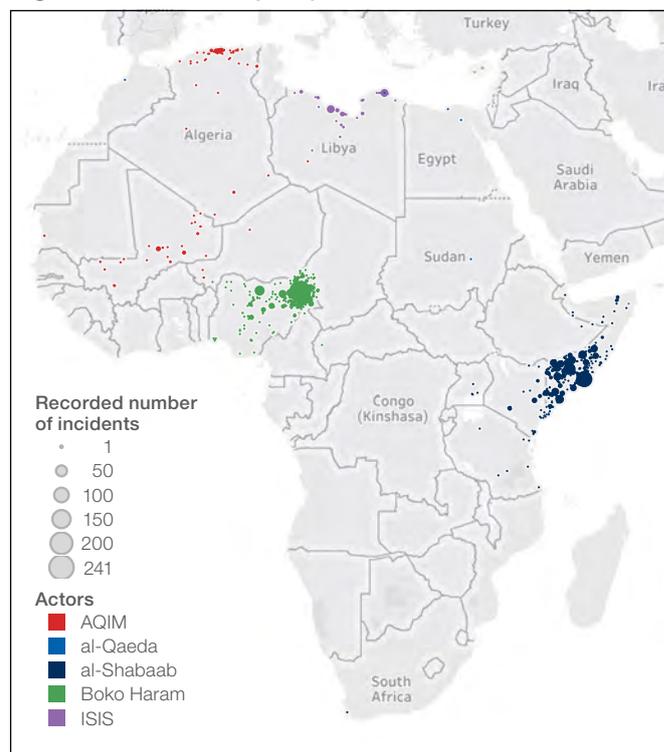
Youth, in particular, have been strongly affected by terrorism, both as victims and as perpetrators. Growing concern has been voiced around the high number of young people who have been recruited into extremist causes in recent years. Extremist groups globally rely on young people to make up the numbers that reinforce their causes¹ and thus lay a specific emphasis on young people when it comes to recruitment, making the youth more vulnerable than other groups. The youth bulge in Africa, along with the various socio-economic challenges this presents for societies, further adds to the vulnerability of youth on the continent.

Methodology, terminology and structure of this paper

This paper presents a review of the available literature on youth radicalisation, as observed in the three African sub-regions. The review concentrates on recent studies, produced primarily between 2005 and 2015. The age group of interest is the 15- to 24-year category ('youth' as defined by the United Nations [UN]), although all the evidence presented does not fit strictly into this category. It is worth noting the overlap with the age category defined as children (those between the ages of 16 and 18), and that this paper does not focus specifically on children.

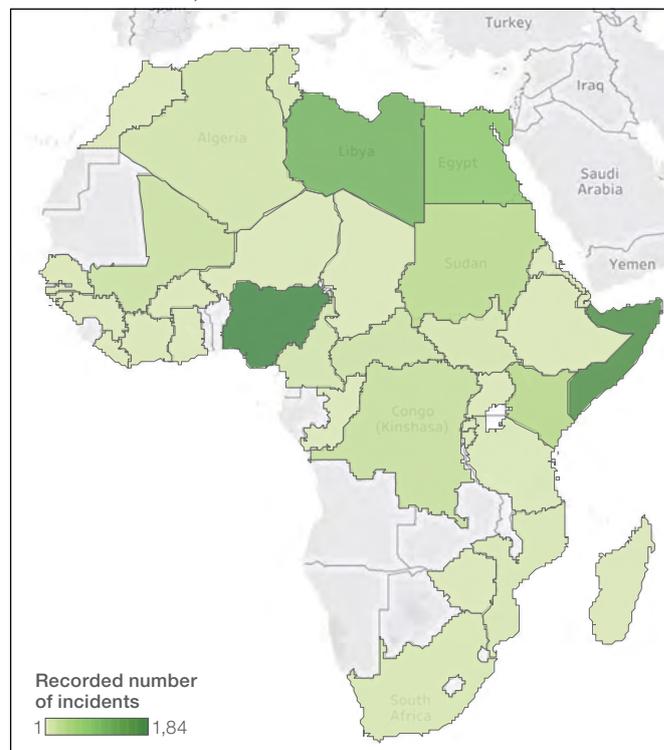
The findings are presented in terms of the groups of factors observed in the data. This paper was designed as a descriptive exercise to extract and present available evidence, not to analyse the validity of the information presented or its direct implications. This review is intended to serve researchers, policymakers, practitioners and donors in their analyses on how to conceptualise further research, and in considering the design of policy and programme interventions. Given that the body of evidence on this issue and related matters is likely to grow substantially, the findings presented here should be understood as an overview of the current situation.

Figure 1: Terrorism by major actors, Africa, 2010–2015



Source: Version 6 data, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2016. Retrieved from www.acledata.com

Figure 2: Volume of terrorism incidents by country, Africa, 2011–2015



Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2016). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

There are complex debates surrounding the subject matter under review, and the terminology, definitions and concepts used are highly contested. These debates are not presented here, and for the purposes of this discussion specific choices have been made in terms of terminology and definitions. ‘Radicalisation’ is understood here as the process through which individuals or groups develop or become susceptible to extremist ideologies.² Radicalisation may be a precursor to extremist activities and manifest in violence or direct support for extremist actions, but may also be non-violent,³ where an individual might hold or support radical views or beliefs without acting on these using violence.⁴ ‘Violent extremism’ has been defined as ‘a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature and may include acts of terrorism’.⁵ Finally, ‘recruitment’, for the purposes of this paper refers to the process through which individuals are drawn into active participation in extremist groups, performing various functions.

In terms of structure, this paper first provides data on terrorism in Africa, as well as data relating to youth, within the three regions under review. This is presented purely for the purposes of contextualising the findings that follow. The findings from the literature are then presented. This is followed by a discussion of the research evidence, which groups the specific factors noted in the evidence.

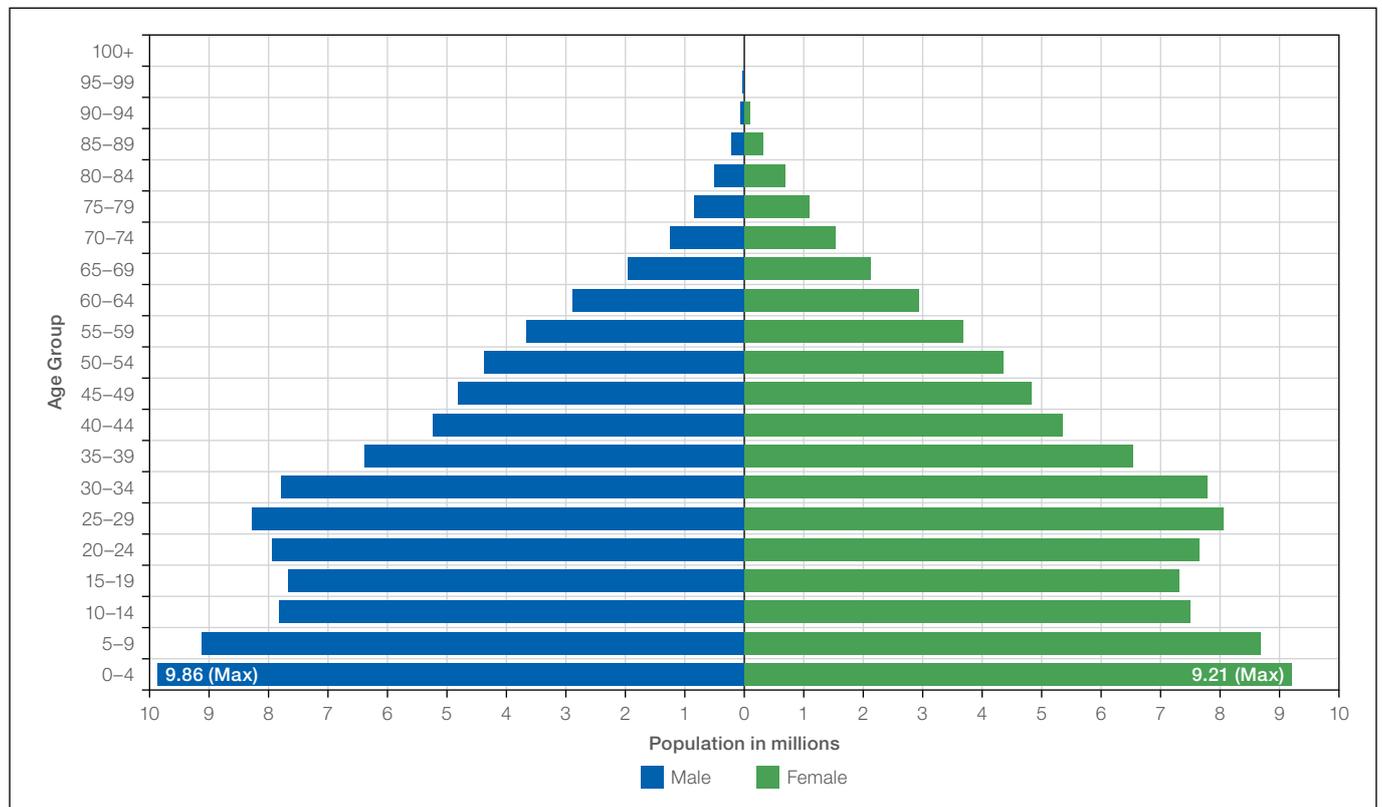
Context

Terrorism in Africa

Figure 1 provides an indication of terrorist incidents in the three sub-regions and the major groups responsible for these. It also illustrates the transnational nature of the phenomenon, demonstrating the spill over of the problem into neighbouring countries and regions.

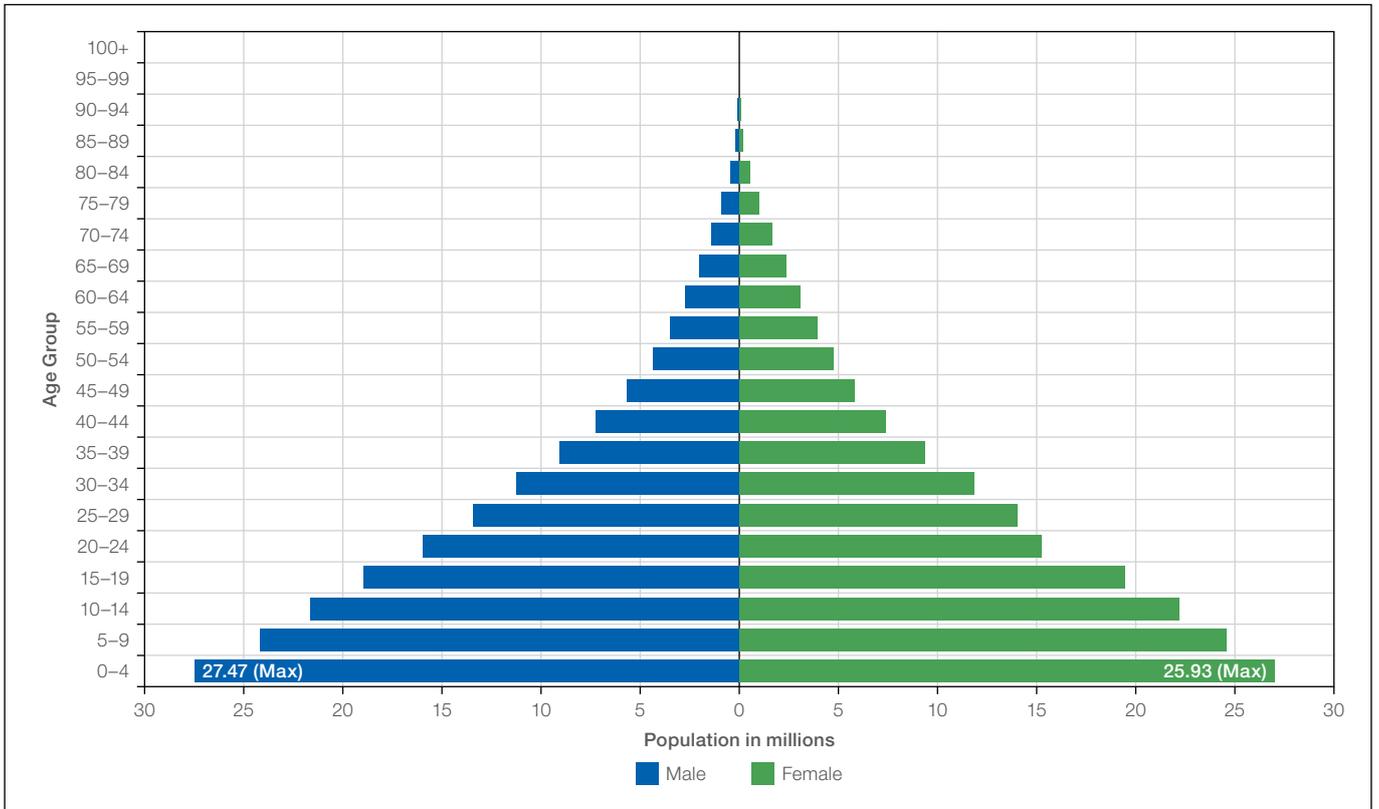
Figure 2 suggests that the majority of African countries in Africa have been affected by violent extremism in some way, with Nigeria, Somalia and Libya the most severely affected in the identified sub-regions. Only a handful of

Figure 3: Population distribution for North Africa in 2016, by age and gender



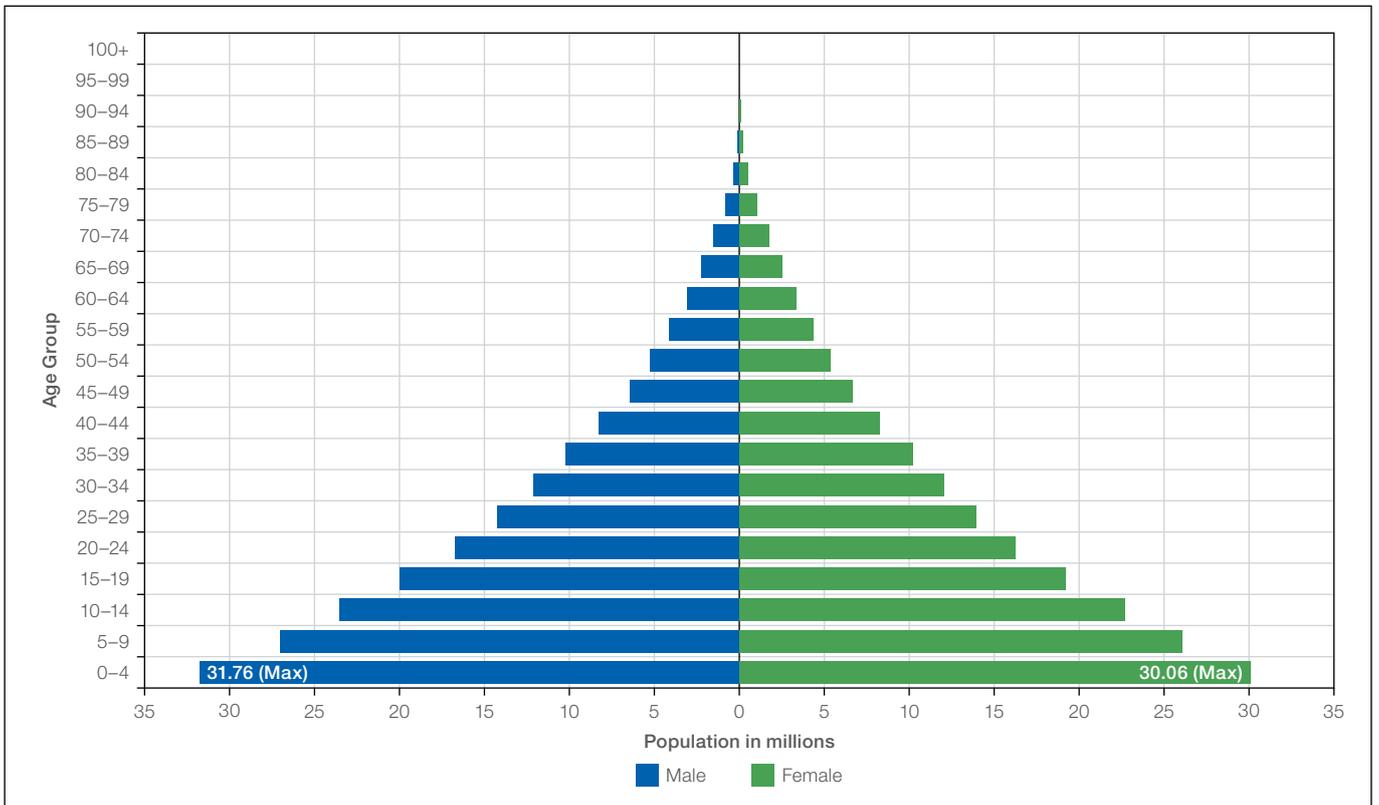
Source: International Futures version 7.18 (www.pardee.du.edu)

Figure 4: Population distribution for East Africa and the Horn in 2016, by age and gender



Source: International Futures version 7.18 (www.pardee.du.edu)

Figure 5: Population distribution for ECOWAS and the Sahel in 2016, by age and gender



Source: International Futures version 7.18 (www.pardee.du.edu)

countries remain largely directly unaffected, and these are mostly in Southern Africa.

Youth population demographics in Africa

Africa is regarded as the most youthful continent, with more children and young people in Africa than on any other continent.⁶ High youth populations on the continent represent opportunities for economic development due to a younger and more able workforce. At the same time, this may entail higher developmental demands and increased security risks, as states have yet to meaningfully translate the potential of these demographics into national advantages – politically, socially and economically.

Figures 3–5 show the youth bulge across the three sub-regions. This is expected to grow. In East and West Africa the population distribution is regular and population numbers increase as age decreases. The picture is, however, different in North Africa, with an uneven distribution especially among those under 35 years of age. Those between the ages of 25–29 comprise the largest grouping. There are more female young people in this age category than male. Also significant is that those in their teens (under the age of 20) are surpassed in number by those under 35.

Findings

General issues and approaches from the literature

The literature generally presents the radicalisation process as involving the interaction of a number of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors.⁷ These factors operate together, with different weights in different contexts, to create the dynamics of radicalisation that may relate to specific individuals or groups. These are described as negative ‘push’ elements that force individuals away from particular circumstances⁸ and ‘pull’ elements that draw individuals into radicalisation.⁹ Radicalisation may take place gradually¹⁰ and involves a process of socialisation ‘towards extreme behaviour’.¹¹ The socialisation of individuals during childhood, and their learning throughout their lives, frames the choices they make during their lifespan. This includes views on society,

politics, religion and personal relationships. Such views are not static, but are subject to change over time.

The presence of certain ‘risk factors’ may make an individual more susceptible to radicalisation. These factors can operate at the individual, family, social and macro-levels, and include, for example, emotional vulnerabilities such as feelings of anger or alienation, dissatisfaction with political or social circumstances, and the subjective rationalisation of the use of violence and the belief that it is ‘not inherently immoral’.¹² Equally, theories relating to violence note that certain resilience factors serve to strengthen individuals against adopting pro-violent views or taking violent actions. Examples of these are strong family structures, financial stability and strong social cohesion.¹³

Examining how someone becomes engaged in extremist activity is often more useful than asking why someone adopted such a path

It has been noted in the literature that examining *how* someone becomes engaged in extremist activity is often more useful than asking *why* someone adopted such a path. As Horgan explains, when asked why they engaged in extremist activity individuals will refer to their own subjective beliefs, which may be a greater indicator of the impact of indoctrination or effective propaganda by a terrorist group rather than the actual factors surrounding the process.¹⁴ Examining the point at which the radicalisation process began and how it progressed, however, will offer insight into the relevant push and pull factors involved, which extremists may not necessarily understand or acknowledge.¹⁵

Despite the presence of factors that may ‘push’ youth towards radicalisation, it is acknowledged that young people involved in such activities possess personal agency and therefore make choices for which they are responsible. However, it is equally important to understand the role of coercion, intimidation and threats to safety as a factor in certain cases.¹⁶ In some instances the risk factors may not be present or may be insufficient to push

youth into radicalisation. Coercive tactics may cause young people to feel their only option is to join an extremist organisation, particularly where they or their loved ones would suffer from their refusal to join or in areas where extremist activity is more extensive than the government's sphere of influence. It is possible, though, for radicalisation to occur after having been coerced into joining.

The means by which extremists are being radicalised and recruited are also of significance and have evolved drastically over the last decade. Radicalisation globally is taking place within the context of massive growth in access to information technology. It is increasingly becoming the norm for youth to rely on new forms of technology as their means of engaging in society. Information and communications technology (ICT) is ubiquitous in the modern world, and is likely to be establishing standards against which young people's aspirations are being set. There are documented cases of how ISIS, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have exploited social media platforms to propagate radical views and gain support for their ideologies.¹⁷

Radicalisation globally is taking place within the context of massive growth in access to information technology

Furthermore, a growing body of research points to places of detention as fertile environments for radicalisation and recruitment. It is believed that ISIS was conceptualised within an Iraqi prison and that the group's initial plans were coordinated from within prison.¹⁸ The phenomenon is not difficult to understand when considering that detention centres are obvious places of vulnerability, where the need to band together with others is strong. When states have limited resources it may be difficult to segregate extremists or potential extremists, or to detect radicalisation.¹⁹ The evolution in radicalisation and recruitment tactics have added further challenges to states as they attempt to counter the global reach of extremist organisations.

Political factors

Evidence suggests that government repression, along with the human rights abuses that this may involve,

kindles discontent and anger directed at the state.²⁰ It could also result in despair, where young people lose faith in using peaceful means to be heard by the government or to the ability to bring about meaningful political change through peaceful means.²¹ Where persecution is meted out upon state orders, victims have no avenues for protection or recourse from state institutions. State abuse foments political and social divisiveness and the 'us vs them' mentality, which leads to the youth seeking identity and cohesion elsewhere, often finding it within extremist groups.²² Research on the psychology of radicalisation reveals that violence is often perceived by extremists as the only way to achieve their goals.²³ Heavy-handed strategies by governments have in many cases not been effective in weakening extremist groups or lessening the threat they pose. Instead they have had the opposite effect of increasing potential threats and widening the pool of young people who may be willing to engage in extremist activity.²⁴

Within the North African context, autocracy and poor governance coupled with state repression is cited in literature as a strong driver of youth radicalisation. Youth grievances came to play a significant role during the Arab Spring, and while the demands that marked the uprisings centred on civil liberties and economic opportunities, much of the discontent focused on state brutality across the region as well.²⁵ Decades of autocratic rule in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia have meant weak adherence to international human rights standards and the suppression of dissent directed at the state. Arbitrary arrests, imprisonment without trial and the use of torture are commonplace in many of these states.²⁶ In 2015 Freedom House ranked the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as the region with the lowest freedom ratings in the world.²⁷ Its data reveals a troubling and consistent history of suppression in Algeria,²⁸ Egypt,²⁹ Libya,³⁰ Morocco (to a lesser extent)³¹ and Tunisia. Although Tunisia's ratings have improved since 2012,³² evidence suggests that the use of torture by state bodies is still widespread and that there is little oversight over these bodies, resulting in a lack of accountability.³³

The various uprisings in North Africa have yet to help young people realise their democratic aspirations and to some, non-violent action has lost much of its appeal.³⁴ In Egypt the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak after a 30-year tenure, followed by the country's first democratic elections, was cause for cautious optimism among Egyptians seeking reform. However, the 2013 coup that resulted in the overthrow of the democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, had a severe impact on youth aspirations around political participation and their expectations of democracy. Some reasoned that radical activity, along with violence, was the only way in which to influence power and stimulate change. Despite militant activity in the Sinai region in the preceding years, it was only in the aftermath of the 2013 coup that the Islamic State province or 'Wilayat Sinai' was established. Habib states that 'marginalization, poverty, the failed experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in governance and the blows by the security services have become sufficient justifications for violence'.³⁵ These very grievances have been cited by many young Egyptians who have joined ISIS or are sympathetic to its cause.³⁶

The various uprisings in North Africa have yet to help young people realise their democratic aspirations and to some, non-violent action has lost much of its appeal

Allegations of extrajudicial executions in Kenya,³⁷ Egypt³⁸ and Nigeria³⁹ appear to be a motivating factor for the youth who join al-Shabaab,⁴⁰ ISIS and Boko Haram⁴¹ respectively. Philip Alston, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions in Kenya, alluded to a culture of impunity among the police, where executions or harassment became commonplace not only in dealing with terror suspects but citizens generally.⁴² In Egypt retaliation against the state in the form of terrorist activity is becoming increasingly evident, with the youth feeling unduly targeted and victimised by security forces (both the military and the police) as well as by the judiciary.⁴³ Similar shortcomings in the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram may be noted. The police's excessive use of force and the government's abuse of power are credited for radicalising the sect as a whole.⁴⁴ The visible change in Boko Haram's tactics after the Nigerian police's blanket application of brutality against the group in 2009 illustrates this direct relationship between police brutality and radicalisation.⁴⁵ This is because blanket responses employing brutality deprive radical groups of the opportunity for meaningful political engagement.

In Mauritania the anti-Islamist policies of former president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya in the early 2000s, along with political discontent over perceived persistent government corruption,⁴⁶ are alleged to have provoked radicalism among young Mauritians.⁴⁷ These youth are now contributing to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali.⁴⁸ Evidence of the involvement of young, disaffected Mauritanian youth in AQIM began to surface in 2005



VIOLENCE IS OFTEN PERCEIVED BY EXTREMISTS AS THE ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

when reports pointed to young Mauritians not only receiving military training in camps in Mali and Algeria but also holding key positions in the group.⁴⁹ Sidi Ould Sidna, a young AQIM-affiliated Mauritanian who killed four French tourists, provided insight into his justification of violence when he likened his use of violence to the Mauritanian Army's use of force against the country's people.⁵⁰

Balancing human rights with justice remains a challenge, particularly when public expectations of security actors become heightened

In Kenya, perceived reactionary responses by security forces have been witnessed, especially after a terrorist attack has taken place. These responses have sometimes resulted in ethnic and racial profiling of particularly Somali youth. For instance, during Operation Usalama Watch in April 2014, 4 005 Somali-looking individuals were arrested in a campaign of mass arrests intended to root out al-Shabaab.⁵¹ A total of 3 010 of them were released after it was established that they were Kenyans with no criminal records, while those thought to be illegal immigrants were deported.⁵² Such actions appear to be strongly counterproductive. They lead to humiliation, provoke resentment and suspicion towards the government and foster feelings of exclusion, leaving the youth vulnerable to recruitment as they seek an outlet for their frustration and a sense of belonging elsewhere. Balancing human rights with justice thus remains a challenge, particularly when public expectations of security actors become heightened.

The role of corruption in stoking radicalisation, even when government repression is not prevalent, is also evident and is noted for its ability to foster political instability and poor governance. The death of Mohammed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian fruit vendor who set himself alight outside a governor's office in the town of Sidi Bouzid, is believed to have sparked the Arab Spring. His actions told a story of frustration and despair and have been directly linked to relative deprivation and corruption in Tunisia. To understand the immensity of the problem, a World Bank report released in 2015 found that companies owned by former Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his inner circle had defrauded the Tunisian state of amounts ranging between US\$1 billion and US\$2.6 billion over a seven-year period.⁵³ A second World Bank report examined 220 companies owned by the Ben Ali family during his tenure, through which the family amassed a fortune of US\$13 billion⁵⁴ – more than one-third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).⁵⁵ Discontent with corruption and cronyism bears a strong connection to weak rule of law in a state and was among the central features of the uprisings across the MENA region.⁵⁶ The results of pervasive corruption manifest in greater inequality gaps⁵⁷ and stifled socio-economic development.⁵⁸

A WORLD BANK
REPORT EXAMINED

220

COMPANIES OWNED BY THE BEN
ALI FAMILY THROUGH WHICH
THEY AMASSED A FORTUNE OF

\$13 billion

Despite Tunisia making progress in its transition to democracy, the country has been subject to terrorism at home and has seen substantial numbers of its youth contributing to extremism abroad. Some contend that this is the result of socio-economic conditions that have not improved despite progress in terms of civil and political rights, and that corruption is a large part of the problem.⁵⁹ The effects are argued to have a direct impact on the population when one takes into account that there are instances where 80% of the funds for development projects have been lost through graft.⁶⁰ Recognising this weakness on the part of states, extremist groups have capitalised on growing dissatisfaction. Chayes argues that extremist groups use corruption to their benefit by claiming to be forces fighting injustice.⁶¹

Corruption is also presented in literature as a stimulant for the radicalisation and recruitment of Nigerian youth into Boko Haram.⁶² In a study conducted in Nigeria, 70% and 67% of interviewees in Sokoto and Borno states respectively cited corruption as a factor driving radicalisation. The belief is that corruption has contributed to a lack of infrastructure and the state's weak provision of basic services. Boko Haram's anti-secular rhetoric equates Western education and civilisation with corruption. It uses this to gain support and dissuade the youth from attending schools where Western education is taught.⁶³ The challenge extends to other parts of West Africa as well.⁶⁴ For instance, despite Ghana's reputation for good governance, pervasive corruption remains a daunting challenge in many sectors, including healthcare, immigration, education, the judiciary and security.⁶⁵

Even among educated youth, socio-political dissatisfaction with corruption can provide fertile ground for radicalisation

These circumstances provide an indication of how even among educated youth, socio-political dissatisfaction with corruption or perceived injustices can provide fertile ground for radicalisation, especially because extremist organisations have been very adept at portraying Islamism as the solution to corruption and injustice.⁶⁶

In Kenya perceived corruption, especially among security actors, has led to disillusionment with public institutions.⁶⁷ A direct link has been drawn between insecurity and corruption, which has been touted as one of the greatest obstacles in the fight against terrorism.⁶⁸ As a result, many young people have sought solutions to their problems outside of the country's political processes.⁶⁹ Many of them feel frustrated with the inconsistent application of the rule of law, particularly with regard to addressing impunity among the elite. As a result they lose confidence in legal processes and seek external sources of justice.⁷⁰ Botha notes that 99% of the youth recruited into al-Shabaab were of the view that '[the] government only looks after and protects the interests of a few'.⁷¹ Botha adds that politicians and the government face a serious legitimacy crisis among the youth who have joined al-Shabaab.⁷²

Groups like al-Shabaab have not shied away from capitalising on perceived injustices resulting from corruption in their recruitment campaigns. As Lombardi, Ragab and Chin argue,

even though terrorist groups' statements of purity and anti-corruption may be more rhetoric than reality and thus need to be better appreciated and countered, the failure to appreciate the centrality of corruption to the attraction of terrorist groups and their tenacity, has allowed them to embed themselves in societies through their service provision.⁷³

Economic factors

Economic and developmental factors play a key role in driving youth radicalisation, yet are obviously not a factor in all cases. For example, a large number of ISIS recruits come from middle-class backgrounds, with some holding stable, well-paid jobs in developed countries.⁷⁴ However, the ways in which socio-economic conditions serve as facilitators are important. It is not necessarily abject poverty but rather circumstances that do not allow for the realisation of aspirations that may be at the root of the discontent associated with extremist activities. Taşpınar discusses the issue of 'relative deprivation'⁷⁵ and refers to 'frustrated achievers' – those youth who are educated and ambitious but lack real opportunities to go forward.⁷⁶ Their frustration increases when these

youth begin to compare their circumstances with those of the wealthy elites around them or compare their own prospects for progress with growth and development in the developed world. This is especially the case where corruption at government level is found to be inhibiting economic growth and good governance.⁷⁷

The inability to perceive progress over prolonged periods of time could also result in disillusionment and waning faith in the state and state institutions. The psychological and social strain of these circumstances on young individuals could lead youth to seek a sense of purpose through other avenues, as subjectively, these are seen as the only way to change course or challenge the status quo.⁷⁸ Extremist groups capitalise on this sense of hopelessness. By offering young individuals the opportunity to participate in seemingly noble or worthy causes – resistance against foreign or domestic oppression, for instance – groups such as ISIS or the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) offer a sense of purpose and an alternative course away from their current circumstances, including unemployment. This may offer some insight into why ISIS, for example, highlights job opportunities as part of its recruitment campaign.⁷⁹

The highest levels of youth unemployment globally are found in the MENA region

The issue may also be one of exclusion from the economy or certain sectors of it, rather than unemployment itself. Blattman uses Belgium as an example – the country with the largest employment gap between foreign nationals and nationals in Europe.⁸⁰ Blattman explains that economic exclusion is compounded by social or racial differences and draws the conclusion that ‘the shame and injustice of exclusion, not poverty, is what leads so many to rebel’.⁸¹ A growing body of research in Europe points to problems around social inclusion as a result of discrimination based on religion and ethnicity.⁸² Evidence indicates that such discrimination may have a detrimental effect on marginal communities in terms of access to quality education, housing and the way in which criminal justice functions.⁸³ Therefore, aside from leading to a lack of social cohesion,

exclusion may result in a poor quality of life for certain sectors of society.⁸⁴ Such trends exist within the African context as well.⁸⁵ It is from within these sectors that young people may find a sense of common identity or social cohesion either online or through direct contact with extremist groups. Rik Coolsaet, professor at Ghent University and a Belgian counter-terrorism policy advisor, attributes the rise in radicalisation to what he calls ‘a new youth subculture’ stemming very much from both individual and collective emotional distress. He describes these young people as being ill at ease within society and thus more susceptible to the ideals radical groups appear to offer.⁸⁶

The highest levels of youth⁸⁷ unemployment globally are found in the MENA region, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).⁸⁸ Figures begin at 25% and are as high as 60% in certain MENA states.⁸⁹ To illustrate the gravity of this problem, youth unemployment stands at 42% in Tunisia – the place where the Arab uprisings were sparked – with 40% of university graduates being unemployed for significant periods of time. Underemployment also plays a role here, where young people are engaging in work for which they are over qualified due to a lack of suitable opportunities, or are employed intermittently for temporary periods of time.⁹⁰ The last 11 years have shown an average economic growth rate of 2% in the MENA region – a figure far too low to satisfy the demands of the growing youth population.⁹¹ ILO projections indicate that this will continue until 2018 at least, while the World Bank estimates that 40–50 million jobs need to be created by 2022 in order to retain stability.⁹² Similar economic trends exist around violent conflict. A World Bank study on the root causes of civil war points to stagnant economies and high rates of inequality as contributors to long, drawn-out violence in a country.⁹³ Such bleak economic conditions may offer an explanation as to why groups such as ISIS have been able to find a foothold in the region (in Libya and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula specifically) and, moreover, why North African youth have been recruited in their thousands to take part in extremist activities abroad.⁹⁴

An interesting point to consider that alludes to the primacy of development in the MENA context is that

while large numbers of extremist fighters hail from countries such as Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, few or in some cases no recruitments⁹⁵ have been reported in certain Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Oman,⁹⁶ Qatar or the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁹⁷ This is not a new phenomenon. Research indicates that these countries seem to have resisted not just the influence of ISIS over the last two years but also the reach of groups such as al-Qaeda over the preceding two decades.⁹⁸ The common denominators among these countries are high levels of development, service delivery and social security, as well as opportunities for quality education and employment. This may also indicate that it is not necessarily regimes with autocratic features that give rise to violent dissent. Rather, it is likely that autocracy coupled with inefficient governance and low levels of development that give rise to turbulence and vulnerabilities within a state.

In Nigeria, where status and wealth have an influence on society, inequality and corruption are causes for relative deprivation among the youth

Similar patterns of radicalisation exist in West African and Sahelian countries, which are among the poorest in the world.⁹⁹ An estimated 41 million¹⁰⁰ young people in the Sahel region alone face a future of uncertainty and despair. Kaplan refers to young, unemployed men in various West African cities as 'loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid which was clearly on the verge of igniting'.¹⁰¹ In Niger, which has the highest fertility rate in the world, and in other countries in the Sahel with high fertility rates,¹⁰² the number of unemployed young people is expected to rise without major investments in job creation. This also widens the pool from which to choose young people who may be radicalised.

Nigeria, too, is described as having a large number of disaffected youth, especially in the northern part of the country.¹⁰³ Poverty rates in north-eastern Nigeria stood at 64.8% in 2012, compared to 31.2% in south-eastern Nigeria.¹⁰⁴ When compared to the southern and other parts of Nigeria, and also to the vast inequalities in economic wealth within the North, massive disparities are evident within the country. Some of these disparities are fuelled by decades of systemic corruption, which further retards the development prospects of young individuals from poor backgrounds.¹⁰⁵ In Nigeria, a country where status and wealth have an overwhelming influence on both society, as well as access to opportunities,¹⁰⁶ inequality and corruption are causes for relative deprivation among the youth.

Extremism has existed in various degrees in Nigeria since the 20th century.¹⁰⁷ However, the malaise of chronic poverty and youth unemployment in northern Nigeria have been cited for their role in aggravating extremism in recent times.¹⁰⁸ This is due largely to the number of either uneducated or unemployed university graduates who have joined Boko Haram.¹⁰⁹ Radicalisation has

±41 million

THE NUMBER OF YOUNG
PEOPLE IN THE SAHEL REGION
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also been enabled by disappointment at the lack of employment prospects for many young members of the sect who had migrated from rural or semi-rural areas to urban areas in search of better opportunities.¹¹⁰ These constraints are not limited to the north or dominantly Muslim region of Nigeria. High unemployment in the Niger Delta region was equally credited with facilitating the recruitment of youth into MEND.¹¹¹ The group's grievances over the lack of basic amenities and resources while being reminded of the vast wealth of crude oil elites led to the group's violent inclination.

Decades of living in high levels of extreme poverty without access to basic social services in Mali have created conditions that push young people towards any entity promising a better life.¹¹² The social services provided by AQIM in Mali have created incentives or pull factors for youth to join AQIM.¹¹³ AQIM's strategy of providing small-scale cash incentives and basic health care support to small communities living in abject poverty has endeared it to elements of the population.¹¹⁴ The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa's ability to appeal to the youth of Mali and Niger to join its ranks is also linked to the financial¹¹⁵ benefits it provides.¹¹⁶ Thus, the wider the discrepancy between youth expectations and the government's ability or inclination to meet them, the more vulnerable the disillusioned youth are to non-state actors that are willing to provide for these needs.¹¹⁷

Lack of access to basic education, poor education infrastructure and a shortage of dedicated teachers have contributed to low levels of education among youth in West Africa and the Sahel. Indicating the scale of the problem, 83% of young people are illiterate in Borno State, an area in which Boko Haram activity has been notably high.¹¹⁸ In Mauritania the educational level of young people arrested for terrorism also attests to this. Young people apprehended for terrorism in that country were found to be between the ages of 16 and 24 and had dropped out of secondary school.¹¹⁹ Shortcomings in Mauritania's educational system have helped to create a vacuum in which radicalisation thrives. This is because poor Mauritians go to *mahadras* or religious seminaries where, in some cases, radicalisation occurs. Although

radicalisation occurs in only a handful of *mahadras*, these schools can create a space for interaction between individuals prone to violent extremism and those who are not.¹²⁰ As such, in this context young *mahadra* graduates may be more receptive to ideas of violent extremism. This was the case with Sidi Ould Sidna, mentioned above, as he often listened to extremist audio recordings in the *mahadra* he attended and returned to his hometown radicalised.¹²¹ A lack of education or shortcomings in education obtained is not necessarily a motivation for the involvement of all leaders of extremist or terrorist organisations. The case of MEND for example, revealed that some of the group's leaders had acquired university education¹²² and that the driving factors were relative deprivation.¹²³

For some young people it was easier to join al-Shabaab rather than languish in poverty with no chance to 'pursue something greater'

In East Africa youth unemployment and poverty are also seen as significant drivers of radicalisation. According to the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics, the youth in Kenya experience higher unemployment rates than the rest of the population. In 2009, 15.8% of youth aged 15–19 years were unemployed, as were 13.1% of youth aged 20–24. These figures are relative to the country's overall unemployment rate of 8.9%. In her study, Botha notes that 57% of al-Shabaab respondents joined the group between the ages of 10 and 24.¹²⁴ Unemployment was cited as a significant reason why Somali youth in Eastleigh, Nairobi join al-Shabaab.¹²⁵ Joining the militant group was a form of employment and a way of providing for recruits and their families, as it brought in monthly payments of US\$50 – US\$150, depending on the type of work, such as patrolling the streets or working as a porter.¹²⁶ A lack of education was found to result in feelings of despair and disillusionment over prospects for the future. Thus, for some young people it was easier to join al-Shabaab rather than languish in poverty with no chance to 'pursue something greater'.¹²⁷ As one youth explained, 'All one had to do was carry around a gun and patrol the streets.'¹²⁸ 'It was an easy job compared

to other jobs such as construction work,' said another.¹²⁹ Tanzania presents a similar case study. High rates of unemployment exist alongside a perception that Muslims do not benefit proportionally from Tanzanian development efforts and private sector investment. The rise in domestic militarism has been attributed¹³⁰ to these factors.¹³¹

Nonetheless, not all young people exposed to poor economic conditions become radicalised. Botha's study notes that 'only 4% of respondents cited economic factors as a motivating factor for joining' al-Shabaab.¹³² Furthermore, evidence shows that many who engage in violent actions motivated by extremism are neither poor nor uneducated, but actually come from middle-class or relatively privileged backgrounds. For instance, the perpetrator of the Garissa University attacks in April 2015, which left 147 people dead, was the son of a former government official and a former student at the University of Nairobi.¹³³

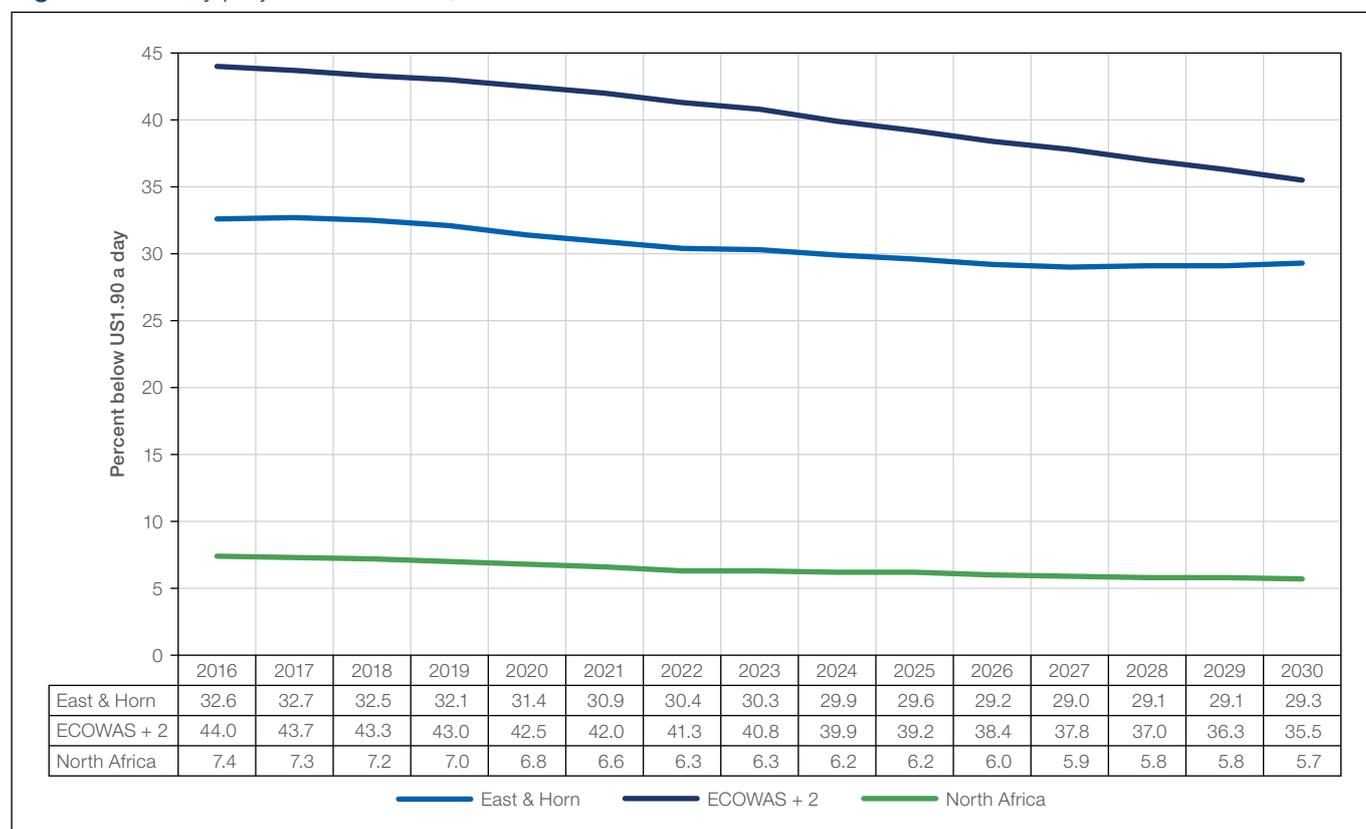
The magnitude of the socio-economic woes in North Africa, as well as parts of East and West Africa,

is illustrated by the current migration crisis, where substantial numbers of Africans contribute to the vast number of people seeking to enter Europe. The fact that such large numbers of migrants are dying in their attempts to reach Europe is strong evidence of the extent of desperation resulting from dire socio-economic conditions.¹³⁴

Figure 6 suggests a decline in poverty over the coming 15 years in the three sub-regions. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region may see the most progress in this regard, with the percentage of people living below the poverty line decreasing by over 10%. East Africa and the Horn indicate a 5% decrease by the year 2030, while North Africa indicates the least projected progress with a decrease of below 5%.

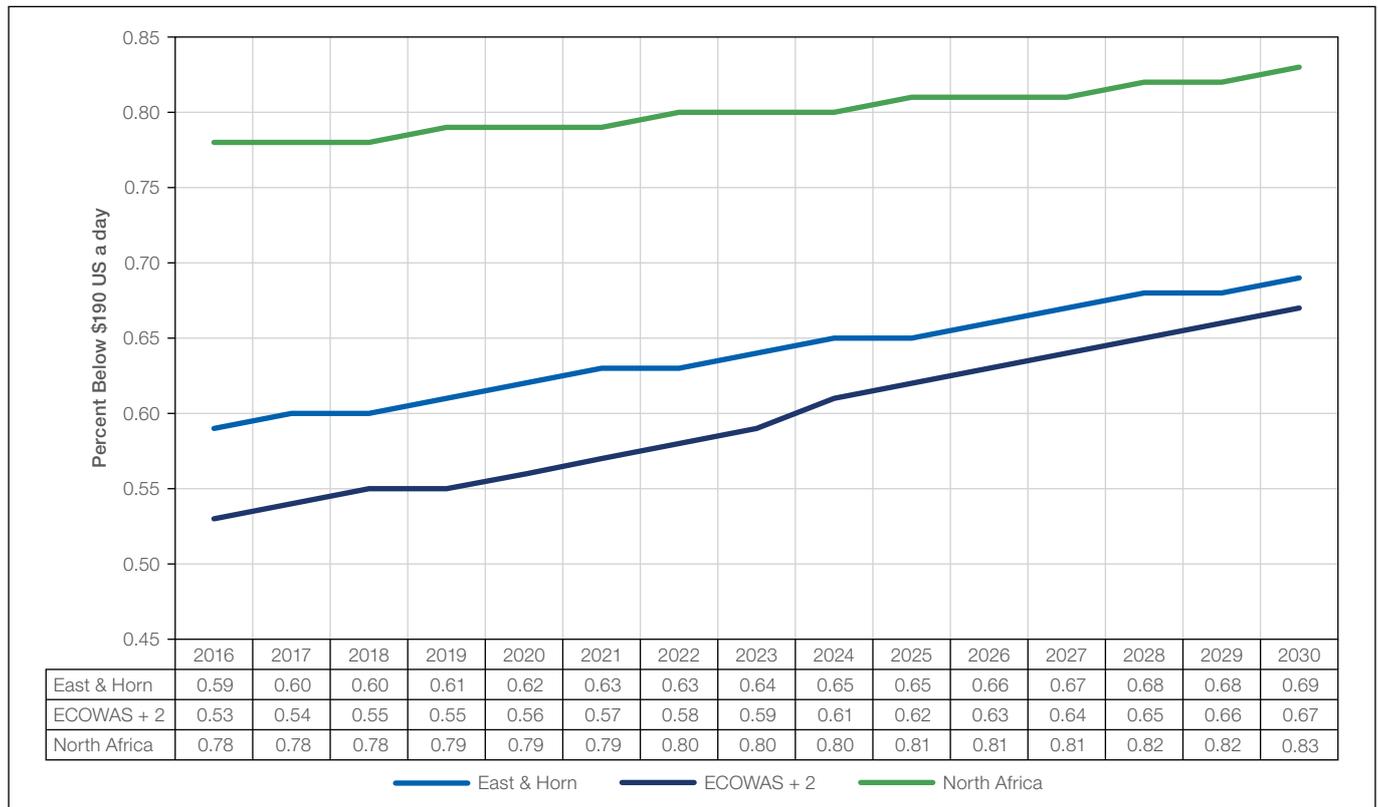
Figure 7 provides projections for human development across the three sub-regions for a 15-year period. The determinants for this projection look specifically at life expectancy, education and per capita income. Upward trends are suggested for all three sub-regions.

Figure 6: Poverty projections in North, West and East Africa until 2030



Source: International Futures version 7.22 (www.pardee.du.edu)

Figure 7: Human Development Index for East, West and North Africa, 2016–2030



Source: International Futures version 7.22 (www.pardee.du.edu). Note: “ECOWAS + 2” refers to the ECOWAS states as well as Chad and Mauritania.

Fight or flight? Youth radicalisation and migration

Push factors driving the radicalisation of young Africans and those driving migration are seen to converge on the extent to which relative deprivation or other factors compel youth to seek alternatives elsewhere. The push factors driving migration do not necessarily result in the radicalisation of youth in the countries from which migrants originate or to which they relocate.

Similarly, push factors driving radicalisation do not necessarily result in migration. Factors driving both these issues tend to be diverse, covering a range of security, political and socio-economic issues.¹³⁵ They include war, terrorism and harsh socio-economic and political conditions.¹³⁶ The effects of relative deprivation and other push factors are evident in their ability to drive disenchanted young people from African countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Mali and Nigeria¹³⁷ to increasingly endure gruelling circumstances in pursuit of more promising conditions in Europe.

Against the backdrop of pressures due to the influx of migrants into Europe, and a rise in youth radicalisation in Europe, a tendency has emerged of associating migration with extremism. The possibility of extremists’ exploiting migration opportunities to further their agendas cannot be ruled out. Given mixed migration patterns and refugee flows, the potential for radicalisation in internally displaced persons camps exists and has been documented.¹³⁸ Concrete evidence illustrating its actual occurrence is, however, lacking. In spite of a degree of convergence in the push factors driving both trends, the context-specific conditions feeding the flow of migrants need to be well documented.

One of the possible dangers of interventions that are not founded on well-researched evidence is the probability that they will not have the desired effect. Specifically, security-intensive responses to the migrant crisis can have similar radicalising effects on the youth as other factors mentioned above. This trend can, for example, be observed in the radicalisation of Somali migrants who had experienced harsh responses at the hands of Kenyan security forces. While security is undoubtedly of great importance in the European and African contexts, it is necessary to balance these needs against humanitarian concerns and international human rights standards. Moreover, measures to address emerging challenges should not be the sole responsibility of European states. An important consideration centres around what African states are doing in terms of long-term development plans to stem the exodus of young people from the continent and, moreover, how these states are dealing with issues of smuggling at a law enforcement level nationally, regionally and continentally.

Thus, stemming the various migration flows must be done only after research has been conducted to understand these flows, in order to address them individually.¹³⁹ The same is true about the factors driving radicalisation in Europe and elsewhere. Studies to assess the impact of initiatives to address the migration crisis must also be conducted. This is to ensure the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Valetta Summit Action Plan, a combined endeavour by European and African states to increase cooperation and effectiveness around migration challenges.¹⁴⁰

Social factors

Certain social dynamics can shed further light on the drivers of radicalisation. In Mauritania many young people involved in AQIM were found to be from divorced homes.¹⁴¹ While this in itself can be managed with strong family support, the lack of parental supervision and care for orphaned or abandoned children is increasingly linked to radicalisation in communities in northern Nigeria.¹⁴² A further parallel among recruits is what researchers refer to as 'absent-father syndrome'.¹⁴³ There appears to be a link between abandonment or abuse by fathers during childhood and entry into violence in later years. Moreover, the propensity to be strongly influenced by charismatic, (typically) male leaders or recruiters appears to be greater in cases where the father was absent from a child's life.

A 2013 study on youth involvement in Boko Haram similarly found that weak family configurations contributed to youth vulnerability.¹⁴⁴ The issue is highlighted with parents in northern Nigeria who send children to Quranic schools to assist them in caring for the children while providing them with education. Boko Haram is reported to recruit children and young people who are sent by their families to become *al-majiri* (or pupils of Quranic schools).¹⁴⁵ The use of these children as beggars on the streets of northern Nigeria further exposes them to the risk of radicalisation by strangers purporting to provide an escape from dire circumstances.

In Somalia, the absence of father-figures among men and boys who make up al-Shabaab is also significant. A study by Ferguson found that multi-generational family connections that serve to nurture and guide young people have been destroyed by the years of war in Somalia.¹⁴⁶ Weakened family structures have resulted in a profile of al-Shabaab recruits with cognitive impairments, rooted in disrupted maternal bonding and exacerbated in boys growing up without the guidance of their fathers.¹⁴⁷ Many recruits are also orphans. These young men and boys thus become vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation by ideologues who act as stand-in parents.¹⁴⁸

Peer pressure has also been identified as a factor in youth recruitment into al-Shabaab in Somalia. Many of those recruited into the organisation do so due to the influence of friends.¹⁴⁹ Botha's study on radicalisation in Somalia revealed that friends were the primary group whom recruits informed of their decision to join al-Shabaab, with only a small number informing either a sibling or their parents of their decision.¹⁵⁰ Parents in this instance were found to play a lesser political socialisation role than peers.¹⁵¹

In the case of al-Shabaab in Kenya, most al-Shabaab recruits had a father who was responsible for making all the rules and decisions in the family and hence had the largest influence in the political socialisation processes of these youth.¹⁵² In addition, most recruits to al-Shabaab were found to be middle children.¹⁵³ As Botha notes, middle children are particularly vulnerable to recruitment and thus radicalisation. Many of them feel as though they do not belong in the family setting, and it is this characteristic that especially places them at a disadvantage.¹⁵⁴

Weakened family structures have resulted in a profile of al-Shabaab recruits with cognitive impairments

In East Africa, Tadesse argues that perceptions of social exclusion and marginality in the midst of a youth bulge are a recipe for radicalisation.¹⁵⁵ He notes that even among educated youth, frustrated expectations and relative deprivation have put many at the risk of radicalisation.¹⁵⁶ Many young people in Kenya, for instance, struggle to access health services, housing and education, thus increasing their vulnerability.¹⁵⁷ In addition, Kenya also faces the challenge of frustrated, poor and non-elite youth who find it difficult to achieve culturally recognised adulthood and thus seek validation by joining extremist groups.¹⁵⁸ Joining these groups gives such young people a sense of adult-like status through responsibility, purpose and financial compensation.¹⁵⁹

Research exploring the nexus between mental health and radicalisation is gaining traction, with some interesting findings. A study led by Queen Mary

University of London aimed to show a correlation between ‘psychosocial adversity’ and sympathy towards violent movements or extremist tendencies. The study indicated a connection between relative social isolation and tendencies towards depression with sympathy towards extremist groups and extremist ideology. The study tied radicalisation to marginalisation along with feelings of inequity and injustice. It went further to explain that previous experiences with or exposure to violence could also provide an explanation for a vulnerability to radicalism.¹⁶⁰ This may provide insight on the significant numbers of ISIS recruits hailing from Iraq and Syria, countries that have been embroiled in widespread, continuous violence for prolonged periods of time.

Factors relating to identity and belonging

Identity appears to be another factor crucial to the radicalisation of young individuals. Taşpınar explains ISIS as a ‘pseudo-state in search of citizens’, and those who join the state as people who are searching for belonging or acceptance and thus turn to a society that promotes itself as one of unity with common societal goals.¹⁶¹ This premise was echoed in a study of ISIS defectors carried out by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.¹⁶² Issues around identity must be understood in a global context of young people who, for different reasons, are struggling to find a place of belonging and acceptance.

Maher argues that foundational elements are generally similar when it comes to radicalisation, namely ‘righteous indignation, defiance, a sense of persecution and a refusal to conform’.¹⁶³ These elements are common threads observed in all radical groups, from al-Shabaab or Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Africa to right-wing groups such as Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (Pegida) or the English Defence League in Europe. Young people are at their most vulnerable and impressionable age between puberty and adulthood. This is also the time when they are most open to outside influence, increasingly becoming aware of the social and political world around them and simultaneously

establishing their own identity.¹⁶⁴ Radical groups exploit these identity struggles in their recruitment and radicalisation agendas.

Many Somali youth who felt discriminated against said they joined al-Shabaab in response to a threat to their religious identity

In Kenya racial and ethnic profiling fosters the perception that Somali Muslims are treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, exclusion from political processes has led to feelings of isolation and has fomented a crisis in terms of identity and belonging. This has been the experience of Somali Muslim youth, particularly when applying for national identity cards, which are essential for participation in political processes such as elections. Muslims in post-independence Kenya have been kept on ‘the borders of the national agenda, which has caused many to feel like they are not fully part of Kenya’.¹⁶⁵ This has led ‘the government and non-Muslims to question the patriotism of Somali Muslims.’ Unsurprisingly, many Somali youth who felt discriminated against said they joined al-Shabaab in response to a threat to their religious identity.¹⁶⁶

Similarly, a study into radicalisation and terrorism in Kenya and Uganda revealed that social identity is paramount in influencing an individual’s drive to join al-Shabaab and the Allied Democratic Forces in both these countries.¹⁶⁷ Islam was found to be central to the identity of individuals joining these groups.¹⁶⁸ For such individuals, religious and ethnic identity drove perceptions of political exclusion and feelings of relative deprivation, and hence was their rationale for becoming radicalised.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, for youth seeking social inclusion in Mauritania, the allure of enlistment in criminal and/or extremist organisations lied in the sense of kinship they gained from being part of this group and the concomitant rise in self-esteem this provided.¹⁷⁰

Traditional concepts of unity are a significant feature of the global Muslim world. This is evident in Mauritania, where a prominent aspect of radicalisation is discontent

around the occupation of Palestine and the treatment of Palestinian Muslims.¹⁷¹ This reveals the effect of perceived injustice even in other geographic regions in fuelling radicalisation, due to the notion of a common, binding identity. Mohammed Siddique Khan, the man responsible for the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005, gave credence to this notion when he asserted that his actions were in retaliation to the ‘bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of *my* people’.¹⁷² Although born and raised in the United Kingdom, Khan identified more strongly with those sharing his faith in other parts of the world rather than his fellow citizens. The same phenomenon can be seen playing out with the large numbers of foreign fighters committing themselves to wars abroad with which they have no ostensible connection.

Action perceived to be against either domestic or foreign oppression is seen as noble or heroic; even more so to impressionable youth who may find militant activity appealing because it is seen as a way to relieve some of the powerlessness experienced due to political repression.¹⁷³ In testimonies to the US Senate in 2010 and the UN in 2015,¹⁷⁴ Atran provided critical reminders about the group under discussion – that these were individuals who were still going through transitional phases in their lives and as such were more easily lured by ‘a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends ... and eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world’.¹⁷⁵

The role of religion

History reflects the long and continuing influence of religion on peace, security and politics in society. Religion has demonstrated the ability to inspire the most powerful acts of both kindness and ruthlessness. Much emphasis has been placed on the role of religious ideology in relation to waves of radicalisation and violent extremism on the continent. Groups such as ISIS and the Lord’s Resistance Army have consistently used religion as a rallying tactic to garner greater support for their causes. In the context of this discussion, it is important to establish distinctions between how religion can be manipulated or misunderstood, on the one hand, and the role of religion as a personal motivator, on the other. It is also important to acknowledge the vulnerabilities inherent in major religions that may be subject to exploitation by those driving extremist agendas.

Traditional concepts of unity are a significant feature of the global Muslim world

Recruiters place a heavy emphasis on religious obligations and have been successful in luring young recruits by presenting their agendas as a ‘holy’ wars or causes. Aside from the influence this has on young people seeking purpose, or a sense of adventure or agency, the spiritual elements they attempt to draw on (such as perceived afterlife benefits, for instance) make

Foreign terrorist fighters¹⁷⁶

The potential for returning foreign fighters from conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, to attack their home countries has created global concern. In response the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2178, which calls on states to take legislative and operational steps in preventing and responding to the phenomenon. Resolution 2178 defines foreign terrorist fighters as ‘individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict’.

According to Malet,¹⁷⁷ the first time the concept ‘foreign fighter’ appeared was in a headline published on 21 March 1988 by The Times of London covering a story about a victory by Afghan mujahideen ‘aided by Saudi, Egyptian and Pakistani fighters’ against pro-Soviet government forces. Africa has been on the receiving end

of foreign fighters and has also been a source of foreign recruits. African foreign fighters also include nationals from neighbouring countries – for example, those from Kenya and Tanzania – travelling to Somalia to join al-Shabaab, and nationals those from Libya travelling into West Africa.

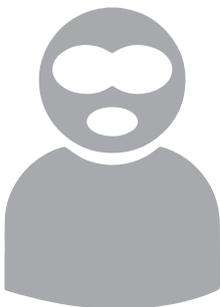
One key challenge for policymakers is the fact that people who have been radicalised share a transnational identity with the destination country or community. Due to globalisation and enhanced communication networks, individuals considered to be more resilient to radicalisation through their ‘having it all’ share a transnational identity with the destination country and are equally at risk of being reached and targeted. African countries need to take advantage of this global emphasis on the phenomenon to not only prevent the involvement of African nationals in conflicts beyond the continent but also address the influx of militants to conflict areas on the continent.

radical choices even more appealing to young people. Recruiters also play on the sense of nihilism among some young people that may emanate from desperate circumstances.

Islam, in particular, has been the focus of much debate, with many analysts pointing to the religion as the root cause of extremism globally.¹⁷⁸ Central to this claim is the notion that there may be some inherent quality in Islam that influences violence, and therefore that the faith alone creates a propensity for violence. The bases for such views are essentially the number of Muslim youth who have become radicalised and the extent of the violence committed in the name of the religion.¹⁷⁹ In the study conducted by Botha, 87% of respondents who were asked why they had joined al-Shabaab cited religion as a motivating factor.¹⁸⁰ In Kenya, 58% of respondent recruits into al-Shabaab ‘grouped al-Shabaab and being Muslim in the same category (us) and saw the group as the defender of Islam against other religions and other countries (them)’.¹⁸¹ While this dealt specifically with Kenya, where Somali Muslim youth feel discriminated against, it also refers to the need to respond to a threat to one’s religious identity as a motive for joining.¹⁸² Similar reports have emerged from a Senegalese medical student who travelled to Libya to become a ‘jihadist doctor’, supporting the development of the purported caliphate in Libya.¹⁸³ His reason for joining was that jihad was his duty as a Muslim.

Religion acts as a vehicle to voice emotional and moral outrage and provides a space for common identity that youth seek

Different factors lead different people to being recruited and radicalised, with available evidence suggesting that the factors driving radicalisation may be more complex than religious ideology by itself. The major religions, by themselves, do not advocate violence. Groups and individuals may, however, promote radical agendas by misrepresenting religious values. Sageman¹⁸⁴ argues that ‘religion has a role but it is a role of justification, it is not why people go there’.¹⁸⁵ He makes reference to ISIS and argues that the group uses religion to fulfil a political agenda rather than using politics to fulfil a religious vision. With regard to the foot soldiers who make up the numbers in such organisations, Sageman explains that it is ‘emotional or moral outrage’ that spurs many on to join extremist groups. Religion acts as a vehicle to voice this outrage and provides a space for common identity that youth seek. He emphasises that it was not a religious vision that drove the emergence of ISIS but rather the carnage brought on by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which saw mass atrocities being perpetrated against Iraqi civilians by the government as well as foreign forces. A point to consider in this regard is the way in which ISIS captives are dressed in orange jumpsuits prior to their



DIFFERENT FACTORS LEAD PEOPLE TO BEING RECRUITED AND RADICALISED

executions. Analysts explain that this is symbolic of the torture and captivity of inmates at the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib detention centres, where inmates were dressed in the same way, and alludes to the fact that the driving factors at play extend beyond religion and include political grievances and a desire for vengeance.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, the large number of secular Baathists who are members of ISIS and hold powerful positions within the organisation may also indicate that religion may have less to do with the rise of the group than conventional opinions suggest.¹⁸⁷

Ranstorp holds that young people recruited into extremist organisations are those who have experienced some sort of crisis in their lives – political, economic, psychological or spiritual. Consolation may be found in religion, which may also act as a tool for mobilisation and activism.¹⁸⁸ He adds that ‘most active terrorist groups with a religious imperative were actually propelled into existence in reaction to key events’.¹⁸⁹ Libya serves as a pertinent example of this, where the rise of ISIS is attributed to the breakdown of the state brought on by the 2011 NATO intervention into Libya.¹⁹⁰ Closer examination of groups operating in North Africa, such as ISIS in Libya or the various extremist groups operating in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, reveal politicised goals of such groups. Their efforts are geared primarily towards territorial gain, political power, political upheaval or the control of resources, rather than the fulfilment of a religious imperative.

A dominant and consistent claim made by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is that their actions are carried out in the name of Islam and aim to benefit the global Muslim population, or *ummah*. ISIS, in particular, maintains that its agenda is to restore Islam to its ‘golden age’¹⁹¹ through a revival of the caliphate. These claims have, however, been refuted and the proclaimed caliphate has not gained its desired legitimacy. Studies indicate little support among the majority of Muslims for extremist causes. In late 2015 the Pew Research Centre aimed to assess Muslims’ views on ISIS in 11 countries. The results of the study indicated that support for the group ranged between 1–11%, with the overwhelming

majority of those polled holding unfavourable views of the group.¹⁹² Of the countries included in the survey, 61% of Nigerian Muslims, 64% of Muslims from Burkina Faso and 60% of Senegalese people (Senegal is 92% Muslim) view ISIS unfavourably.¹⁹³ A more extensive poll was conducted by Gallup over six years and covered 50 000 Muslim respondents in 35 countries. The results, released in 2008, revealed that only 7% of those polled held radical views, while the remaining 93% were classed as ‘moderate’.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, a very revealing fact, contained in a 2011 report by the US National Counterterrorism Centre, is that the majority of victims of extremist attacks in the MENA region are in fact Muslim,¹⁹⁵ and that Muslim-majority countries endure the greatest number of attacks, rebutting the claim that violence is carried out in the name of the faith, and on behalf of the *ummah*.

ISIS maintains that its agenda is to restore Islam to its ‘golden age’ through a revival of the caliphate

While some religious leaders have pushed forward extremist views and have been sympathetic to the use of violence, it should be noted that across the Muslim world recognised and legitimate religious authorities, holding global influence, have repeatedly rejected extremist groups’ use of violence in the name of Islam,¹⁹⁶ reiterating that Islamic law demarcates the parameters within which violence is permissible and permits only defensive action. To indicate the fallacies in the claims of extremists and their calls to violence, many scholars have referred to Islamic laws of warfare, which are clearly defined and include, for instance, the prohibition on the killing of civilians¹⁹⁷ and provision for the fair treatment of prisoners of war.¹⁹⁸ Two issues are of significance in considering how religion contributes to shaping attitudes around radicalisation – the interpretation of religious law, and how extremist groups may actively distort sacred text/scripture to further their causes.¹⁹⁹

Geopolitics and the role of foreign military action also need to be placed within the debate on radicalisation

globally.²⁰⁰ The impact of war in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the US programme of drone strikes²⁰¹ in Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia, has resulted in a massive loss of civilian lives, human rights abuses and the crippling of economic infrastructure in these countries.²⁰² Such action has fuelled resentment that should not be underestimated in its power to provoke violent responses from those affected.²⁰³ Testimonies by extremists consistently cite these issues in their efforts to justify their own violent actions.²⁰⁴

Counter-terrorism efforts relating to religion should themselves be examined for their role in radicalisation. Certain states have limited religious freedoms as part of their counter-terrorism efforts. In Egypt, for example, 27 000 mosques were shut down in 2015 and regulations were passed imposing stringent restrictions on religious figures and their activities.²⁰⁵ In Kenya a number of high-profile, radical Muslim clerics have been targeted and extra-judicially executed during counterterrorism campaigns, fuelling anger and resentment in certain communities.²⁰⁶ In these cases, governments fail to recognise that such measures are ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst, as such actions cannot address the spectrum of factors at play. This approach also overlooks the instrumental role that religious figures and settings could play in debunking flawed or manipulative extremist narratives.

Counter-terrorism efforts relating to religion should themselves be examined for their role in radicalisation

Reports that Sufi Islam and its peaceful outlook is losing its appeal among many young people in West Africa and the Sahel may be cause for further concern.²⁰⁷ During the first Council of Youth Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) it was noted that youth from OIC countries often are disengaged from Islamic values.²⁰⁸ The danger of this disconnect is that it could diminish the ability of youth to differentiate between Islamic values and toxic extremist ideology. Onuoha's findings on why young people joined Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria indicate that it was 'ignorance of

religious teaching opposed to violence' was the foremost reason for their recruitment.²⁰⁹

The range of factors explored above indicates why the role of religion in radicalisation is often overstated. Counter-terrorism efforts that focus on religion alone may therefore be narrow or misdirected. Ignoring the many critical layers of individual factors, personal circumstances and structural conditions relating to a recruit's background will likely result in weakly designed strategies to respond to this complex problem.

The role of gender

As with all social dynamics, radicalisation has a gendered dimension. This means that radicalisation is likely to operate and manifest differently for young women and young men, depending on a range of gender-related factors, including the status and position of each group in society; behavioural norms and the expectations relating to each; and the opportunities for or difficulties experienced by each group.

Even though one cannot assume that masculinity and extremism are linked, available findings suggest that the majority of radicalised youth and violent extremists are male. Weak family structures, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment have been identified as contributing to making young men vulnerable to radicalisation.²¹⁰ This is the case with young men recruited into Boko Haram in particular, but it could also be extrapolated to other groups such as al-Shabaab that use young men as foot soldiers. Researchers have, however, argued that gender issues in general are not significant causes for violent extremism and that although most violent extremists are young men, 'ideals of masculinity and honour' do not necessarily play a driving role in violent extremism.²¹¹

Evidence suggests that young women are increasingly being implicated in violent extremism globally, where they may play a wide range of roles as sympathisers, victims, violent actors, or active agents as preventers and peace builders. In a 2015 study conducted across the MENA region it is shown that the drivers of women's participation in violent extremism are similar to men's, but with some gender-specific differences.²¹² The study notes that female recruits find motivation in adventure

and a perceived romanticism around participation in violent extremist organisations, unlike male recruits who are more motivated by the lure of violence.²¹³ Gender subordination or exclusion also pushes many young women to join these groups, especially those who are driven by a desire for social and political agency.²¹⁴

The study finds that male and female members of violent extremist organisations in the MENA region have much in common in terms of motivating factors, recruitment and ideological commitments.²¹⁵ Push factors common to both genders include dissatisfaction with the status quo; political and economic conditions; a desire to escape the social or economic pressures experienced within a community; personal experience of abuse or humiliation by state security forces or foreign forces; or the death or abuse of family members at the hands of these forces.²¹⁶ The study concludes that both genders share certain pull factors, including religious ideology, nationalist goals and aspirations, and selective incentives provided by the violent extremist groups such as stability or financial rewards.²¹⁷

Some of the propaganda tactics al-Shabaab has used in its recruitment of female radicals include social media and mosque outreach

In East Africa there have been increased reports of female radicalisation. However, most of this is anecdotal.²¹⁸ Some of the propaganda tactics al-Shabaab has used in its recruitment of female radicals include social media and mosque outreach. Once recruited and trained, women hold key roles as fundraisers, cooks, intelligence officers and suicide bombers.²¹⁹ In Somalia, female suicide bombers are preferred by al-Shabaab due to their unlikely detection at security checks and because they are perceived as being more likely to attract media attention to the movement if they are caught or carry out suicide attacks.²²⁰ Close to 80% of the Somali female population is illiterate. This, combined with the lack of real alternatives to make a livelihood, particularly in areas controlled by al-Shabaab, leaves many women vulnerable to recruitment.²²¹ Interestingly, while it is apparent that more and more young girls are being wielded as Boko Haram's weapon of choice for committing suicide attacks, there is empirical evidence to suggest that they have been forced into participating rather than having willingly cooperated.

The use of gender-based violence by extremist groups is not new but is becoming more prominent as a propaganda and intimidation tactic. Rape, paedophilia, slavery (including for sexual purposes), forced marriage and impregnation are increasingly being used by extremist groups. The abduction of over 270 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014 raised serious questions about its escalation of violent tactics. El-Affendi and Gumel argue that the use of gender violence by Boko Haram is 'a symptom of a deeper pathology

THE ABDUCTION OF OVER

270

SCHOOLGIRLS BY BOKO
HARAM IN 2014 RAISED
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ESCALATION OF VIOLENT TACTICS

within the movement's ideology (signified by its blatant advocacy of slavery and its hostility to modernity and education), which exacerbates the marginalization of Northern Nigerians and perpetuates the spiral of insecurity'.²²²

There is currently only a limited range of empirical research findings relating to women and their entry into and engagement in violent extremism. As a result scholars have had mixed reactions to the role of women and especially their impact in curbing militancy, largely due to a lack of research that clearly measures their roles and the effect that they have on curbing or countering violent extremism. Research has tended to focus on the role of women in relation to others, in particular men, and thus their ability to influence others through familial roles.²²³ These findings suggest 'women can be particularly effective at dissuading their children, siblings, husbands, etc. from being violent actors through dialogue, through the respect they garner as matrons, and through education as the "first teachers"'.²²⁴ The limited attention paid to female-specific drivers and recruitment strategies, and the view of women as primarily facilitators or supporters of violent extremist groups, ignores or downplays their role as participants.

A mix of individual, political, economic, social, religious and structural influences can be identified within the dynamics that lead to radicalisation

Scholars argue that this sort of analysis runs the risk of instrumentalising women; seeing them only as tools through which to address the problem of male radicalisation and downplaying their more direct roles in violent extremism.²²⁵ Moreover, because the role of women in curbing the spread of extremism or building community resilience is not clearly defined, 'hard and soft CVE [Countering violent extremism] remain separate'.²²⁶ Scholars who make this argument note the importance of empowering women 'to no longer be relegated to the periphery, but elevated as a serious security concern and targeted in both soft and hard approaches to countering violent extremism'.²²⁷ The idea that 'women

generally play a moderating role against extremism, and if more empowered could do this more effectively'²²⁸ has, however, been disputed by other researchers. They instead contend that 'there is little evidence that women have a moderating influence on militancy, but this does not mean they cannot, as active agents, play a significant role in countering violent extremism'.²²⁹

Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence presented in this paper indicates that no single factor, or set of factors, sufficiently explains youth radicalisation. Rather, a mix of individual, political, economic, social, religious and structural influences can be identified within the dynamics and processes that lead to radicalisation. It is clear that this mix of factors differs among individuals, and in the groups and contexts within which extremist groups operate. The most important implication of this is that policy and programmatic responses cannot be designed from a 'one size fits all' perspective, and that far more nuance is required.

It should also be noted that the factors discussed here on the whole present limited differences from the evidence on the motivators for youth violence more generally. There is a vast body of knowledge on the factors behind youth violence that has been established over more than 40 years of research and experience. While international terrorism has fuelled legitimate concern over youth radicalisation, the exceptionalism associated with acts of terrorism involving young people should not be overemphasised, based on the current evidence. It is likely that much can be learned from the field of youth violence prevention, including research methodology, programme interventions and the design of programme evaluation methodologies.

The evidence presented here suggests that youth radicalisation is context specific. While this paper presents data from three African sub-regions, with examples from specific countries, it is clear that international and national policy and practice have direct implications for very localised matters. A great deal of current wisdom on prevention programming recommends action at the local level. However, more

nuanced approaches are required, addressing the factors that influence young people's specific personal motivations as well as the structural factors that impinge upon or even determine their views, attitudes and responses.

Finally, short-term solutions to some of the endemic problems (including matters relating to politics, economics and justice) seem unlikely to be sustained. While the experience of international terrorism creates a demand for urgent solutions, the evidence indicates that many responses (particularly hard security-oriented responses) intended to achieve short-term gains can be poorly conceived and therefore unlikely to achieve an ultimately positive outcome. Measured and evidence-based approaches, based on principles embedded in human rights and the rule of law, are more likely to have sustainable outcomes.

Reflecting on the findings above, there are recommendations that may be gleaned from this study. These are directed at governments, international and regional organisations, and civil society and the media, considering that each of these stakeholders has a role to play in curbing and preventing violent extremism.

Governance and human rights

1. African states, along with the UN and relevant regional organisations, need to drive good governance by entrenching justice, accountability and the rule of law in order to build public confidence in political and justice systems and foster state legitimacy, leaving less space for extremist organisations to build their agendas.
2. The international community and civil society should assist African states to promote good governance by supporting these states' initiatives to augment, develop and transform the policies and institutions required for good governance.
3. Respect for human rights needs to take greater precedence across the continent, at all levels, with oversight on state compliance with international human rights standards. The international community and civil society can be instrumental in assisting

states in such efforts and exerting pressure on states when necessary.

4. Governments should partner with local communities to foster social cohesion and understanding between people, particularly in states where ethnic, religious, social and linguistic diversity is high. States, as well as the media, should deal responsibly with the challenges around radicalisation and should take care to avoid the 'othering' of certain communities, which has been shown to contribute to the cycle of hostility and violence.

Development

5. Governments and the broader international community should prioritise the socio-economic empowerment of young people by increasing access to education and sustainable employment in a manner that keeps pace with population growth.
6. States should exert efforts to increase youth participation in political processes. Initiatives that promote young people's subjective experience of having power and agency to influence their own circumstances, and that provide pathways to exercise this agency, should be developed and strengthened. Special focus should be placed on marginalised youth in this regard.

Policy and programme responses

7. The available evidence calls for nuanced responses that take account of the structural and institutional factors that influence radicalisation, as well as more personal and localised factors. This requires policies that promote multi-levelled programmes that take all relevant levels into account. By extension, this implies that research is necessary before programmes are designed for a defined geographical context.
8. Muslim communities need to exert greater effort to educate young people, in order to build greater resilience to radicalisation, thus enabling them to distinguish between extremist rhetoric and Islamic values. In line with this, states may have a greater chance of building resilience in communities through engagement and partnership with community

leaders or clerics who may have greater influence at the community level.

9. Nuanced, gender-sensitive responses should be entrenched in policy and programmatic intervention efforts aimed to counter radicalisation in order to tackle the distinct factors driving young men and women to join extremist groups.

Areas for further research

10. At present, the conflation of migration and terrorism has resulted in the securitisation of migration, and fear-based responses that have fallen short of international law on the rights of migrants and refugees. Research examining the nexus between migration flows and radicalisation and violent extremism is needed to improve empirical understanding of these dynamics.
11. More research is needed into the means used for radicalisation, along with the spaces used to radicalise and recruit the youth. ICT and places of detention are significant in this regard.

Notes

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