Countering Violent Extremism in West Africa and the Sahel

BACKGROUND

The threat of terrorism and violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel is of increasing concern to numerous local, regional, and international actors. Longstanding development challenges in the region, alongside environmental degradation, political and social marginalization, organized crime, and weak governance have not only complicated the delivery of security and stability for the region’s citizens, but also contributed to creating an enabling environment for violent extremist and terrorist groups. Studies of the drivers of violent extremism have identified a broad range of factors that can heighten the appeal of such groups and their ideologies and tactics. These include “push” factors based on structural conditions and “pull” factors that make violent extremist ideas and groups appealing, such as charismatic leaders, attractive ideas and causes, or financial, social, and material incentives. In response, regional and international actors have increasingly recognized the importance of focusing on countering violent extremism (“CVE”) as part of an effort to identify and mitigate sources of potential conflict and instability in the region.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

As a response to this growing threat, the Global Center on Cooperative Security has undertaken a number of projects to identify practical ways to address the spread of violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel. In April 2013, the Global Center, in cooperation with the African Centre for Research and Studies on Terrorism, organized a symposium in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which was held with support from the governments of Burkina Faso and Denmark, and under the auspices of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). The symposium brought together 140 representatives from 27 governments, four international and regional organizations, and 28 civil society experts and scholar-practitioners to discuss ways to contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of CVE programming and strengthening community resilience against violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel. The outcome
Action Agenda, produced by the Global Center, reflected these inputs and offered a menu of CVE projects and programming for the region, with recommendations for action by states in West Africa, regional, and international bodies.

As an initial step in implementing the Action Agenda, the Global Center is undertaking an assessment to more deeply understand the drivers of instability and violent extremism in Burkina Faso. The study will serve as a basis for the development of projects and programming in Burkina Faso that advance the goal of preventing the emergence of violent extremism, promote social cohesion, and preserve Burkina Faso’s historical stability against this evolving threat. This pilot project is being undertaken with support from the government of Denmark and in partnership with the Ouagadougou-based research organization, Centre pour la Gouvernance Democratique (CGD). Research for the assessment commenced in November 2013, when the project team met with over 100 representatives from governments (Burkinabe and foreign), civil society, and multilateral organizations in Burkina Faso. The final report of the assessment will be released in June 2014.

A second component of this project, also drawn from the recommendations in the Action Agenda, involves the design and delivery of CVE training and sensitization for frontline officials and practitioners. To this end, a pilot training workshop was organized in Ouagadougou by the Global Center and supported by the governments of Denmark and Burkina Faso, under the auspices of the GCTF. It convened practitioners from Burkina Faso’s security sector, including the Gendarmerie and national police, as well as government officials from the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Human Rights, as well as regional and international experts. The workshop provided participants with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the drivers and impact of violent extremism and programs and policies to counter the threat in Burkina Faso as well as the broader region of West Africa and the Sahel.

The Global Center is exploring opportunities to strengthen regional CVE capacities in West Africa and the Sahel, and build on these pilot projects and other initiatives.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY

The Global Center on Cooperative Security works with governments, international organizations, and civil society to develop and implement comprehensive and sustainable responses to complex international security challenges through collaborative policy research, context-sensitive programming, and capacity development. In collaboration with a global network of expert practitioners and partner organizations, the Global Center fosters stronger multilateral partnerships and convenes key stakeholders to support integrated and inclusive security policies across national, regional, and global levels.

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