

# Countering Violent Extremism in West Africa and the Sahel

## Strengthening Regional Prevention Capacities

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### BACKGROUND

In West Africa and the Sahel, armed conflicts over the past three years in Libya and Mali have exacerbated existing security and development challenges in the region, such as unemployment, political and social exclusion, organized crime, drug trafficking, and poor service delivery, due in part to a lack of capacity by governments to meet local and national needs. The conflicts have also created openings for extremist groups and illicit actors to exploit these conditions, which can further the spread of violent extremism. The operations of groups like al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJOA) have highlighted the potential for local grievances and political conflicts to be transformed into a more regionalized or even internationalized struggle. As these groups continue to exploit less governed spaces and perpetrate low-intensity attacks that sow instability and insecurity, there is a critical need to focus on preventive approaches, such as countering violent extremism (CVE), as part of a broader effort to identify and mitigate sources of potential conflict.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), for example, has a rich body of experience upon which to build, given its focus on conflict prevention, dialogue and trust building, and strengthening community resilience—all integral components of countering violent extremism. Furthermore, the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan contains principles that are closely related to CVE principles, in that it emphasizes the primacy of prevention (such as addressing conditions conducive to terrorism), promotes respect for human rights and good governance, and encourages the utilization of nonmilitary tools and interstate cooperation to counter the threat. Among the innovative initiatives undertaken by ECOWAS is the Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), a mechanism created in 1999 to monitor and report signs of potential conflict in the region. ECOWARN has since evolved into a partnership between governments and civil society actors, with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) facilitating the civil society component.

These early warning efforts have largely focused on traditional armed conflict, but there is an increasing need to integrate emerging threats posed by nontraditional actors, for example, by

including indicators into the ECOWARN mechanism to reflect the spectrum of security challenges in the region, such as the presence of violent extremist groups. Recognizing the need to improve early warning systems, WANEP developed a set of indicators for monitoring violent extremism and religious fundamentalism in West Africa and the Sahel in October 2014.

#### **ABOUT THIS PROJECT**

Over a period of 18 months, this project will seek to identify and strengthen regional prevention capacities to counter violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel, and support community engagement efforts through initiatives aimed at both government officials and civil society representatives in preventing and responding to violent extremism. The Global Center, in collaboration with WANEP, will convene a training workshop in late spring 2015 to raise further awareness about countering violent extremism and explore ways of integrating the CVE indicators developed by WANEP into the ECOWAS early warning mechanism. To inform the workshop discussions, the Global Center and WANEP will develop research and training materials to explore the challenge of violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel, and the role of ECOWAS in identifying and responding to this challenge, including the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan and the ECOWARN mechanism. Drawing on extensive interaction with WANEP and regional stakeholders, and discussions at the workshop, a policy report will be developed to support efforts to effectively integrate CVE principles into the ECOWARN mechanism. The final report will be available in early spring 2016.

#### **ABOUT THE GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY**

The Global Center 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.

#### **ABOUT THE WEST AFRICA NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING**

WANEP focuses on collaborative approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, working with diverse actors from civil society, governments, intergovernmental bodies, women's groups, and other partners to establish a platform for dialogue, experience sharing, and learning, thereby complementing efforts at ensuring sustainable peace and development in West Africa and beyond. In 2002, WANEP entered into a historic partnership with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in implementing a regional early warning and response system (ECOWARN).

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