

Youth Engagement and Resilience Against Violent Extremism in the Sahel

Organized by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, the Global Center on Cooperative Security, and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

In collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark

Tuesday, 24 September | 4:00pm - 5:30pm
New York

Concept Note

The countries in the Sahel region are experiencing violent extremism at varying degrees - for some it is a relatively new phenomenon, while for others it has been an ongoing and evolving challenge. Certain characteristics and structural grievances are shared across the region, some of which acutely affect youth in particular, including poor governance, high unemployment, and a lack of opportunities. Much research has focused on the complex and interrelated factors influencing youth engagement in violent extremism, including a sense of belonging and recognition in the face of a growing sense of personal and group frustrations. Less attention, however, has been afforded to the instrumental role youth serve as leaders of civil society organizations, active members of government and advocates for social justice. Young people should not be seen merely as a liability, vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism, but as critical and active partners in bolstering community resilience and advancing prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) objectives. In these roles, youth are championing alternatives to violence, building community resilience, developing strategic communications and facilitating trauma healing and reconciliation, among other contributions. They should therefore be considered among the most potent actors in preventing radicalization and violent extremism.

Over the past several years, concerns have grown about the significant increase in violent insurgency and increased recruitment efforts by extremist groups across the Sahel region ([S/2019/570](#)). Weak governance, porous borders, rising ethnic tensions, and high unemployment - especially among youth - have created an environment conducive to the proliferation of terrorist organizations. Pre-existing local conflicts have served to draw in foreign fighters from or linked to the Region, and groups including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have begun to deconflict and converge against governments in order to exploit and expand instability in the region and beyond. Security throughout the Sahel is further undermined by collaboration between terrorist groups and criminal networks, including traffickers of drugs and arms, resulting in high financial resources and arms flows. Despite multiple strategies and significant investments, attacks by extremist groups are occurring with increasing frequency. The demographics of the countries of the Sahel skew heavily towards youth, with the population under 24 reaching 65% in Burkina Faso, 68% in Niger, and almost 70% in Mali. With youth accounting for the majority of the population, the issue of reducing vulnerability and strengthening resilience of youth against violent extremism is therefore a political priority for governments across the region.

Indeed, there has been a shift in focus from short-term, security-first approaches towards long-term, community-based development initiatives that include placing youth in decision-making positions in political, economic and public life. Such approaches can serve to empower youth to more effectively contribute to PVE and stabilization efforts. The need to put youth at the forefront of these efforts and engage them in building community resilience has been widely recognized by the international community, including through the United Nations's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel and by the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and has been reflected in key policy documents like the European Council Conclusions on Counterterrorism ([2015](#)) and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 ([SCR 2250](#)) on Youth, Peace and Security, which calls on Member States to recognize youth as positive agents of change in

peacebuilding and security efforts. The Resolution recognizes young women and young men as key actors in preventing conflict and sustaining peace. The G5 Sahel has prioritized the role of youth in preventing and countering violent extremism, including through the development of an Integrated Youth Strategy to ensure the involvement of youth in peace and security approaches in the region.

In the Sahel, a range of international organizations as well as civil society actors are implementing projects and building the capacity of local actors to support and engage youth and to prevent their radicalization or recruitment by terrorist or other armed groups. Such interventions reflect the importance of youth empowerment in resilience against violent extremism, which can be fostered on both at individual and at community level.

About the event

Against the backdrop of 74th session of the UN General Assembly, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center), and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, will bring together a Panel which includes youth leaders from the Sahel, stakeholders working in or on the region, along with experts, civil society representatives, and government officials to discuss the important role of youth in stemming violent extremism in the Sahel Region, as well as promising interventions and programs being implemented.

The event will: 1) provide the opportunity to better understand the perspective of Sahelian youths regarding the issues of radicalization and extremism leading to violence, as well as the factors that contribute to their resilience against violent extremism; 2) identify the good/promising practices employed in engaging and building resilience against violent extremism among youth in the region; and 3) provide an opportunity for international partners to explore avenues to support or join the larger network of partner organizations working in the region. An outcome document highlighting best practices will be produced and circulated following the event.

Related projects implemented by the organizers

ICCT and UNICRI are currently implementing project [MERIT](#), funded by the Government of Denmark's Peace & Stabilisation Fund, to engage and empower young women and men with the knowledge, skills and values to bridge the gap between different ethnic groups, rural and urban communities, and between youth and older generations. In doing so, the project aims to create community resilience, foster critical thinking skills, and contribute to a sense of citizenship.

ICCT and the Global Center previously collaborated on the initiative, [Engaging Civil Society Actors in the Rehabilitation & Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders and Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters](#), which focused on the work of civil society organizations to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders, victims of violence, and affected communities in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia.

UNICRI is also implementing a [Pilot Project on Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism](#) in the Sahel-Maghreb region, which aims to analyse and evaluate the actions implemented by more than 80 grass-root organisations at the community level in nine target countries and to identify practical, innovative and sustainable measures that could help in strengthening the resilience of local communities to radical narratives, terrorist recruitment and violent extremism.

The Global Center is enhancing the capacity of civil society actors in the rehabilitation and reintegration of those involved in and affected by terrorism through its [small grant making program](#). In addition, it is working in partnership with Carefronting-Nigeria and the Kenya Community Support Centre to implement a State Department-funded [project](#) aimed at empowering youth leaders to counter violent extremism and promote resilient communities in northeast Nigeria and coastal Kenya.