



Session 9: Violent Extremism

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**WHY
VIOLENT
EXTREMISM
STILL
THRIVES**

THE PUZZLE

- African countries have invested heavily in designing strategies and programs to counter violent extremism.
- Yet, violent extremism has continued to spread.
- In fact, one of the puzzling questions about the persistent wave of insurgencies in Africa is that they continue to be characterized and defined by extremist ideologies.
- After violent extremists discredited Algeria's insurgency in the 1990's, the assumption was that dissident rebels may want to avoid the adoption of extremist ideology, as it alienates the majority of local populations, fragment the ranks of rebels, and scare away external supporters.
- Given such negative marginal returns, it is puzzling that transnational and local Salafi jihadism remain the insurgent repertoire in the crises that engulf some parts of Africa.



STRATEGIC INCENTIVES FOR VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Jihadi insurgents continue to thrive even when they have failed to translate the advantages they have into lasting positive outcomes for their followers.
- Though it is tempting to attribute this prominence to Islam's presumed core teachings, in several conflict-affected areas, the adoption of jihadism as a tool of war continues to be viewed as a rationalist choice to violently contest the status quo.
- In environments pervaded by bad governance and intense inter and intra-group tensions, individuals and communities tend to embrace any group that can offer assurances of survival and when possible profit as well.
- It is therefore more analytically sound to analyze violent extremist groups as revolutionary actors that happen to be religious.



THE INSTRUMENTAL VALUE OF JIHADI IDEOLOGY

- For Rebel leaders, the adoption of a radical revolutionary identity provides a critical competitive advantage in attracting the most dedicated first-movers' fighters necessary to build a well-funded, robust network that can outcompete rival rebel groups and shape the dynamic and outcomes of conflict.
- The first-movers are usually high quality rebels who create the impression that their armed struggle has a good shot at bringing about radical political change. This is critical in the early phases of conflicts as recruits tend to flock to groups that have the potential to win and a fearsome reputation for enforcing law and order.
- Regardless of how extreme the ideology might be, the future prospect of radical political transformation, buttressed by the promise of immediate access to guns, protection, money, ends up luring more moderate individuals into the orbit of jihadi groups.



REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

- In environments pervaded by state misrule and intense inter and intra-group tensions, individuals and communities tend to embrace any group that can offer assurances of survival and when possible profit as well. In other words, people join groups and alliances based on relative power calculations.
- For rebel leaders, radical ideology helps their groups recruit and stand out from the rest of the pack. For aggrieved communities, there are situational incentives to joining a winning coalition.
- In this view, it is not the presumed religious radicalism of young men that determines alignment choices. Rather, it is the strategic gains that leaders and their rank-and-file members aspire to gain that determine what armed groups individuals or communities opt to join or support.
- In this context, viewing Islamic fundamentalism in fragile states as the main drivers of modern insurgencies misdiagnoses the problem.
- This brings us to the second lesson, which is that the overemphasis on counter-narrative efforts is not enough to tackle the scourge of violent extremism.
- It is how governments treat their citizens that matters if one hopes to counter violent extremism in Africa.





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