

AMONG FAMILY AND FRIENDS:

A Social Network
Analysis of Influencers
and Communication
Channels in Sudan

Executive Summary

Connecting the Horn of Africa to North Africa and the Middle East, Sudan is a converging ground for a variety of extremist groups and an at-risk country for violent extremism (VE).¹ Under President Omar al-Bashir, Sudan was known for providing a safe haven to groups promoting extremist and violent ideology, including Al Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram.² Long-standing violent conflict, displacement, human rights abuses, and a worsening economy act as risk factors for VE in the country,³ but were also the driving force behind the peaceful revolution that removed Bashir from power in April 2019. This revolution has resulted in a 39-month transitional period that may usher in a new future of civilian rule. While this is an unprecedented time in Sudan with significant opportunities for hope and change, it is also a time of immense uncertainty as the Transitional Government grapples with a myriad of challenges including a spiraling economy, spoilers within and outside the government, and violent conflict in Sudan's peripheral states.⁴

While terrorism and VE have been consistent concerns in Sudan since the late 1990s, there has yet to be an in-depth evidence base on the topic to inform programmatic responses. The sensitivity of discussing VE in Sudan as well as the extremely restrictive operating environment have limited opportunities for research and locally-led response. Recently, Sudan has eased restrictions to allow such research,⁵ and the transition provides another window of opportunity to continue to build understanding of VE in the country.

The research and data collection which informs this report faced a myriad of challenges due to the shifting security situation during the 2019 revolution. The insecurity and changing context delayed the research and required the research team to frequently adapt their plans. However, this transition has also highlighted possible entry points that can inform civil society efforts to transform VE in Sudan as the country moves forward.

1 UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment," Regional Bureau for Africa, 2017. <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>

2 See: European Institute of Peace, "The Islamic State in East Africa," European Institute for Peace, September 2018. http://www.eip.org/sites/default/files/Report_IS%20in%20East%20Africa_October%202018.pdf; and UNDP, "Violent Extremism in Sudan, Study Report," Partnering Against Violent Extremism (PAVE), 2018. [http://www.sd.undp.org/content/dam/sudan/docs/Violent%20Extremism%20in%20Sudan%20-%20UNDP%20SNCCT%202017%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.sd.undp.org/content/dam/sudan/docs/Violent%20Extremism%20in%20Sudan%20-%20UNDP%20SNCCT%202017%20(1).pdf)

3 UNDP, 2017.

4 International Crisis Group, "Keeping Sudan's Transition on Track," International Crisis Group, October 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/keeping-sudan-transition-track>

5 See UNDP, 2017 and UNDP, 2018.

Methodology

The research team in consultation with Search for Common Ground (Search), the Sudanese National Commission on Counter-terrorism (SNCCT), and the US Embassy identified three target areas for this research: South Darfur, Kassala, and Khartoum. These locations were selected based on the diversity of risk factors they represent, as outlined below, and the assumption that their varying contexts would provide unique insights into the different factors that influence recruitment in Sudan.

- ♦ **Khartoum** - Khartoum was selected for this study due to the high rate of urbanization and the influx of migrants from the peripheral regions of the country. In addition, Sudan's relatively young population also has high rates of unemployment and the city itself is home to a large number of foreign migrants and students.
- ♦ **South Darfur** - South Darfur was targeted as it is a converging ground for migrants from Western Africa, Arab States, as well as internally displaced people from the Darfur conflict. The influx of migrants and IDPs has impacted the social and economic background in South Darfur.
- ♦ **Kassala** - In Eastern Sudan, Kassala was selected due to the influx of refugees and migrants from across the border with Eritrea and Ethiopia. The increasing importance of Kassala as a religious hub has also made it a flashpoint for religious and political tensions between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Arabian peninsula.
- ♦ **Rural vs Urban** - Lastly, to provide a contrast between rural and urban contexts, Kassala was also included in order to provide insight into more rural populations while Khartoum and South Darfur⁶ provide insight into the urban context, allowing for a comparison between rural and urban recruitment in Sudan.

⁶ The capital city of South Darfur, Nyala, grew rapidly due to the Darfur conflict making it the second largest city in Sudan. This location was targeted to provide an example of a "semi-urban" context.

To inform programmatic responses to VE, this research was guided by research questions centered on identifying at-risk individuals and potential influencers. It also identifies opportunities, entry points, and barriers for a civil society response; as well as the existing institutions and initiatives working on transforming VE.⁷ The research questions were informed by an initial literature review to identify the existing knowledge and gaps related to VE in Sudan, which drew upon both English and Arabic sources and was completed in January 2019.

Following the literature review, the research team travelled to Mombasa, Kenya in April 2019 for a learning exchange, which leveraged similar research conducted by Search in coastal Kenya and Tanzania.⁸ The Sudanese research team met with the researchers from Kenya and Tanzania to discuss the sensitivities, challenges, and best practices for conducting this research. As VE is a very sensitive topic in Kenya and Tanzania as well, this exchange provided useful insight to support conflict-sensitive data collection, and to mitigate challenges due to restrictive government oversight.

While the intention of the research team was to immediately begin data collection after the Mombasa workshop, intensifying protests in Khartoum prevented them from doing so. The protests, which had begun in December 2018, culminated with the peaceful overthrow of President Bashir on April 11, 2019, a few days after the research team returned to Khartoum. As the University of Khartoum campuses and the research team's offices were taken over by the peaceful sit-in, data collection was delayed until the research team could safely regain access to their offices. During this period, Search staff and the research team sheltered in their homes as protesters took over the streets and were met with a violent backlash from government-backed forces.

⁷ The full list of research questions can be found in the annex of the report.
⁸ Russell, Olivia, "Meet Me at the Maskani: A Mapping of Influencers, Networks, and Information Channels in Kenya and Tanzania," Search for Common Ground, June 2017. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SFCG-Meet-Me-at-the-Maskani-Final.pdf>

The security situation improved enough in late-July 2019 for the research team to train the research assistants and conduct initial focus group discussions in Khartoum. However, the situation intensified once again due to protests following the announcement that the Transitional Military Council and Forces for Freedom and Change had not come to a power-sharing agreement. This led to a shutdown of universities and roads, and prompted internet, power, and water outages. Thus, research was delayed until the safety and security of staff and participants could be ensured. When the revolution succeeded and a transitional government was agreed upon on August 17, 2019, data collection was able to slowly resume in Khartoum. However, persistent challenges due to continued university closures and disease outbreak in South Darfur and Kassala caused further delays in those locations. Despite the challenging context, data collection resumed in Khartoum

in September, and began in Kassala and South Darfur in November 2019. All data collection was completed by January 2020. After analysis, the findings were shared and validated by an in-person workshop in Khartoum in July and a virtual session in August 2020.

This research utilized a mixed methods approach, with 22 semi-structured interviews with influential religious actors, civil society representatives, government representatives, and local authorities; as well as 18 focus group discussions which included a total of 153 men and women between the ages of 18 and 35. Lastly, the research team distributed (via WhatsApp, email, and hardcopy) relational surveys to 24 civil society organizations based on a mapping of key civil society stakeholders conducted in partnership with the SNCCT.

Findings

This research responds to the need for a deeper understanding of the dynamics related to vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Sudan, as well as the need for actionable recommendations for civil society and governments seeking to address the topic. The research findings, detailed below, identify those who are at-risk, their key influencers, the places where they discuss their frustrations, as well as the key avenues through which they receive information. Further, this research analyzed the opportunities, entry points, and barriers to transform VE in Sudan.



Who Is at Risk?

In general, respondents identified *youth*, broadly, as being the most susceptible to recruitment. This was further narrowed down to *young men*. This finding did not vary by location, socio-economic background, ethnicity, education, or gender and is confirmed by other research both within Sudan and abroad.

The motivations for joining VEOs centered around *marginalization* (due to ethnic, religious, or ideological beliefs and backgrounds), *unemployment, and economic hardship*. These broad themes and drivers to recruitment did not vary across target location, but respondents did note interesting differences in these motivations based on class. Young people from elite, high-income households were noted to join VEOs for ideological reasons while young people from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds were driven by economic factors and unemployment. Class differences were further highlighted when respondents discussed which VEOs the recruits joined. Typically, wealthier individuals from urban areas were recruited to join ISIL, whereas individuals with lower incomes often joined Al Shabaab and Boko Haram.

When exploring the differences between rural and urban contexts, as well as the role of traditional leaders and religious actors, the research identified discrepancies among participants' responses regarding these

issues. For instance, respondents varied on the importance of these actors, with some noting that traditional tribal leaders frequently recruit young people to join local tribal militias, in a bid to increase the local tribe's power and control over land. Tribal militias were perceived to be the main source of violence among rural communities. While some noted that these militias frequently aligned with VE groups for power and money, others contended that tribal militias were more likely to side with the Bashir government. Differences among respondents also surfaced when discussing the impact of Bashir's government on VE recruitment moving forward. While Bashir's government sought to distance itself from extremist groups, some respondents noted that due to the government's previous support for VEOs, many Sudanese associate VE with the corruption of Bashir's government, and are thus not interested in VE recruitment narratives. The differences in these perspectives, as well as the variety of views on what constitutes VE, indicates *the challenges with the term violent extremism, as it frequently has varied and nuanced interpretations in Sudan.*



What Are the Roles of Peer Groups and Immediate Family Members?

Across all target locations, participants indicated that they predominantly talk about their frustrations with *friends*, followed closely by immediate family members (spouse, parent, or sibling). In particular, *female family members* were most frequently mentioned as those in whom individuals confided their frustrations. This finding was true across all target locations, with minor differences in the relative importance of spouse, parent, or sibling. While various types of solutions were proposed by these influencers, few offered concrete pathways for individuals to *take action* regarding their frustrations. The types of solutions proposed were grouped into the following themes: perseverance, pragmatism, religious solutions, positive outlets, discussions, and violence. While the majority of the solutions proposed were peaceful, violence was suggested as a solution, or made to seem acceptable, a quarter of the time. It is also notable that violent solutions were proposed equally by family and peers.



What is the Role of Traditional Leaders and Religious Actors?

Interviewees indicated that religious actors can play an important role in VE due to their deep cultural ties and networks, as well as their association with historical Sudanese religious traditions of moderation and tolerance. However, focus groups respondents did not indicate that religious actors were individuals that they turned to with their frustrations. In addition, respondents were in disagreement as to the importance of influential religious voices and their credibility. Thus it will be imperative that programmatic responses that integrate religious actors ensure that they are credible among target populations. Similar to what was noted above, traditional leaders, especially tribal leaders, were perceived to be linked to either VE or the Bashir government, thus undermining their credibility with many young people. However, the exact connection between tribal militias and VE is still uncertain as interview and focus group respondents were not in agreement.



Where Are Frustrations Discussed?

Rather than discuss their frustrations and grievances in public spaces, respondents across all target locations indicated that they prefer to discuss their frustrations at *home*, further confirming the finding that

frustrations are discussed with close networks. When disaggregated by location, the importance of home decreased in Khartoum and South Darfur, while the *university campus* (Khartoum) and *online platforms* (South Darfur) increased in importance. This highlights the need for programmatic responses that seek to address VE to take a multi-pronged approach that is rooted in the spaces where individuals feel most comfortable in voicing their concerns, such as homes, university campuses, and online spaces.

Interestingly, while markets were the place most frequented by respondents, further analysis highlighted that markets were not places where individuals discussed their frustrations. This could be due to a number of factors, including the highly sensitive and securitized environment in Sudan where the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) has been widely accused of arbitrary arrests and detentions. This limits the extent to which Sudanese are comfortable sharing their opinions and perspectives with strangers in public. Although frustrations and grievances were not discussed in markets, markets do play an important role in the lives of many Sudanese. As a result of transportation and fuel shortages, many Sudanese wait for transportation for hours at a time in markets, where it was noted that they are exposed to public speeches that promote religious extremism, violence, and exclusion of various political or social groups. *Markets serve as platforms for Sudanese to interact with extremist narratives*, either passively or actively.



What Are the Information Pathways?

As was observed during the peaceful protests and revolution, the proliferation of online and digital platforms has increased in Sudan. This is confirmed by respondents, regardless of gender, who overwhelmingly indicated they received and shared information from *online platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp)*, followed by *television* and *radio*. Interestingly, the fourth most popular avenue for respondents overall was *in-person conversations and debates*. When disaggregated by gender, in-person conversations and debates decreased in importance for men (ranking 6th after books and newspaper) but stayed the same for women. These responses suggest the need for any online or media targeting to be followed up with in-person discussions.



How Do CSOs Collaborate and Share Information?

While CSOs were not directly mentioned by participants as influential, civil society can play an important role in building resilience and peace in local communities. Due to the previously restrictive operating environment in Sudan, and the sensitivity of the topic, very few CSOs addressed VE. Of those that reported having addressed VE in their work, there was an absence of strong collaboration or information sharing among them. While this could have been influenced by the fact that a number of CSOs disbanded and others just started to expand their operations in the aftermath of the 2019 revolution, thus destroying any previously established pathways, it also highlighted the need for increased collaboration and information sharing among CSOs working on VE in Sudan. While the transitional period has begun to open up the civic space, organizations will need support to develop strong networks and relationships.

In addition to limited collaboration and information sharing, civil society in Sudan faces considerable barriers to addressing VE, including a lack of capacity among CSOs, fear of engaging on sensitive issues, and a widely held belief that VE is a 'foreign' problem that does not resonate with Sudanese.

Recommendations

The key insights and recommendations for future civil society efforts to address VE in Sudan identified by this research are detailed below:

- 1 Support a Sudanese-led definition of VE and local drivers** - One of the key themes mentioned frequently by interviewees and in discussions was that extremist messaging was a foreign concept which did not resonate with Sudanese people. Our research found that this points to a broader trend in Sudan, where people have varying definitions of extremism and violence that impacts local communities. As a first step, it will be important for there to be a Sudanese-led process to develop a shared definition VE, and a common understanding of how it manifests in local communities. This process should be sure to engage diverse stakeholders and marginalized groups. Programs should then seek to increase awareness and understanding of this common definition, the push and pull factors that motivate individuals to join VEOs or engage in violent acts, as well as the underlying grievances that extremist recruitment narratives leverage. Vulnerable groups and at-risk individuals should be engaged in discussion about the drivers and definition of VE in Sudan in the places and spaces that they feel most comfortable.
- 2 Increase awareness and capacity among peer and family networks** - As individuals frequently seek advice and support from the people closest to them, i.e. friends and immediate family members, these individuals should be supported in increasing their awareness and knowledge of dynamics of VE recruitment. While family and friends offer a range of solutions, many of them do not provide actionable recommendations and a quarter of the time they propose violent solutions. Thus, projects addressing VE should consider building awareness and skills among peer and family networks related to identifying indicators of recruitment and radicalization, and developing conflict transformation skills among these influencers to provide alternative solutions and pathways for at-risk individuals to address and resolve their frustrations.
- 3 Ensure the inclusion of women as key influencers to enhance resilience to VE** - While respondents indicated that they discussed frustrations with family members, 46% of these responses indicated that their confidant was a female family member (sister, wife, mother). Thus, preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives should specifically ensure the inclusion of women in building awareness and capacity to address radicalization. All programming should also provide options to ensure women feel comfortable, i.e. women-only sessions where women can encourage one another and share information and knowledge.
- 4 Integrate digital and online media to target at-risk individuals** - Internet use and social media are growing in Sudan. This was on display during the peaceful protests that overthrew President Bashir as organizers mobilized over Facebook and WhatsApp groups and shared information on security forces and intelligence operations. The importance of these modes of communication was confirmed by this research's findings that online platforms were the most common way respondents received information, followed by television and radio. Initiatives designed to address VE should integrate these emerging platforms, as well as established media outlets to engage with at-risk individuals, prompt conversations about their key concerns, and encourage a diverse discussion on solutions to address these concerns. However, any media program which seeks to address VE should be followed up with in-person discussion and debate, as this was another avenue through which individuals indicated they receive information.

- ♦ In addition, future research should be conducted to develop a broader understanding of media practices and engagement in Sudan, including where and how individuals engage with these information channels, which in turn would support P/CVE efforts in the country.

5 Strengthen and establish collaborative relationships among civil society - Barriers to effective engagement on P/CVE among civil society in Sudan included low capacity and collaboration, which was confirmed by the CSO relational survey. While collaboration and information sharing among CSOs existed, it was low —only 10% of possible collaborative relationships exist. As the country rebuilds post-Bashir, there is an opportunity to build on this existing foundation of collaboration to strengthen civil society. Collaborative relationships among CSOs will support complementarity among initiatives, continue to build an evidence base on P/CVE in Sudan and ultimately contribute to increased resilience to VE. In addition, since the sensitive nature of VE and previously restrictive operating environment for CSOs limited civil society's engagement, the newly opened environment provides a window of opportunity that should be seized on to build capacity among CSOs to address community needs and P/CVE efforts.

6 Target markets for positive narratives of inclusivity, tolerance, and diversity - Markets are frequented by at-risk individuals daily, they also represent a platform and entry point for extremist messaging of all kinds (not just violent extremism but also extremist political messaging). Therefore, markets may also provide an entry point to promote positive narratives of inclusivity, tolerance, and diversity. While respondents indicated that they do not discuss their frustrations in markets, there is an opportunity to capitalize on the amount of time that Sudanese tend to spend waiting for transportation to broadcast targeted messaging.

7 Support further research to continue to monitor the impact of the transition on existing or emerging drivers of recruitment - This research spanned the overthrow of President Bashir and the beginning of the transitional period —a time that was noted for hopefulness and optimism among Sudanese. It will be important to continue to monitor how the changing context might impact levels of recruitment in Sudan, and to identify new drivers that may result from the transition and could exacerbate or mitigate VE recruitment. As the landscape continues to shift during the transition, it will also be valuable to identify the impact that various influencers and leaders have on recruitment and radicalization in Sudan.

- ♦ In particular, this research noted that the role of traditional leaders and religious actors will be an important area for additional research, since they were noted as having possible influence in rural areas. The role of these actors and traditional tribal affiliations in supporting community resilience should be better understood as they could provide possible entry points to engage with at-risk individuals. Similarly, religious actors were identified as possible influencers who have the connections and networks to promote positive Islamic messages of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. However, due to the connection some religious actors had with the former government, it will be important to understand which leaders have credibility with at-risk individuals.
- ♦ Currently the body of evidence on VE in Sudan is limited, to further inform future programming on VE additional research regarding rural recruitment dynamics should be conducted. Overall, efforts to address VE in rural communities will need a strong understanding of the historical and present-day dynamics, as well as the relationships between tribes.