



Côte d'Ivoire

The online footprint of violent extremism

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MOONSHOTTEAM.COM



This report contains references to material that readers may find distressing.



Overview

Resilience for Peace (R4P) is a five-year USAID-funded programme implemented by Equal Access International aimed at strengthening community resilience and countering violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire's northern border areas.

In February 2022, as part of Year 1 of R4P, Moonshot investigated the online footprint of violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire. This report provides an overview of the online narratives and discussions relevant to Salafi Jihadist violent extremism, and the emerging threats and opportunities to enhance local resilience to violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire and West Africa.



Methodology

Over six weeks (10 January to 14 February 2022), Moonshot deployed a mixed methods approach to map user engagement with violent extremist content online between 2016, year of the first violent extremist attack in the country, and 2022. The methods deployed consisted of:



Social media analysis through automated data collection utilizing Moonshot's proprietary and third party tools, and manual Open Source Intelligence on Facebook, Hoop, and Telegram;



Google Search traffic analysis through Moonshot's *Search Insights Tool*, a proprietary piece of software that allows to track Google Search users' appetite for violent extremism and other online harms.

Social media and Google Search traffic data collection was enabled by Moonshot's proprietary databases of Salafi Jihadism indicators: more than 8,000 French, Arabic, and English keywords that indicate interest or engagement with Salafi Jihadist content online.¹

It is important to bear in mind that these findings are based on a small sample of social media and Google Search data, collected over a relatively short period. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's low internet penetration is a key part of the context: 46.8% of the population, with active social media users at 22.1% at the time of analysis.

1. Methodologies were deployed in compliance with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), with user privacy and freedom of expression as core principles in the approach.



Key findings and recommendations



Violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire is still primarily an import from neighboring countries

The research did not identify an active and established home-grown violent extremist scene online in Côte d'Ivoire. This finding is based on analysis of online narratives in Arabic, French, and English. This conclusion reflects the offline activity in the country: violence has been focused mostly in the northern border areas, which have seen grassroots operations mixed with low level criminal activity, incited or organized by Salafi Jihadist groups present in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

These incidents indicate that there is an expansion strategy of violent extremist groups to the coastal states of West Africa. The nexus between banditry and violent extremism is commonly observed during the early days of infiltration into a new area, prior to launching messaging and recruitment, and is consistent with tactics used by regional and international violent extremist groups, particularly in Africa.

P/CVE activities, including online resilience building, should continue to prioritize the northern parts of the country with a view to scaling up as required.



West Africa is increasingly important for international violent extremist groups

Analysis of regional violent extremist narratives propagated online by al-Qaeda, Daesh, and other affiliated groups such as JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin'), revealed an increasing focus on West Africa as a region for expansion.

While no Ivorian-specific content was observed, relevant regional grievances and narratives were identified in encrypted messaging apps. Analyzed Al-Qaeda channels focused on anti-French sentiment and discussions of the deployment of Russian mercenaries (the Wagner Group) in the region, while Daesh channels focused on the war between Daesh and Al-Qaeda, and the "Caliphate's rebirth" in West Africa.



The online Salafi movement could play a role in prevention and early intervention programming

A large institutional Salafi movement with a substantial social media presence exists in Côte d'Ivoire. The research identified a number of social media posts condemning violent extremism, indicating that Salafi communities could offer a potential preventative factor. However, care should be taken to avoid inadvertently legitimizing narratives of intolerance, which were shared by Salafi communities against other communities.

This approach would require additional scoping to determine whether the Salafi movement has a role in prevention and early intervention programming, and can be bolstered in a way that ensures the principle of Do No Harm.



Violent extremism, disinformation and hate speech are intertwined

Analysis of social media discussions among the general public regarding violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire and the region identified overlaps with disinformation and hate speech narratives, such as:

- Anti-French sentiment: Some social media users accused France of creating or fomenting violent extremist activity in West Africa as a means of justifying maintaining its military presence.
- Stigmatization of Fulani communities: Reports about the disproportionate representation of the Fulani people in violent extremist activity in the Sahel region have led to stigmatization of the group, including on social media. Comments defending the Fulani were also identified in the analysis.

P/CVE activities in the country, namely online resilience building, should also aim to build the capacity of communities to identify and counter disinformation and hate speech online.

