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POLICY BRIEF

Dialogue with violent extremist groups
Community perspectives in the Lake Chad Basin

Maram Mahdi

To explore dialogue as a viable option in preventing and countering violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin region, it is important to consult local communities who are directly affected by it. Their experiences offer first-hand community-level insights on the challenges affecting the region and their communities' perceptions regarding dialogue. This policy brief aims to gain some insights on civil society perspectives on dialogue in the region.

Key findings

The following key findings summarise the perspectives of local communities on dialogue as an option for resolving the Boko Haram crisis in the Lake Chad Basin. They are based on questionnaires distributed to representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) attending a workshop in Abuja, Nigeria in August 2019.

▶ Although the type of dialogue referred to was an exchange between state/government actors and violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a few of the respondents referred to intercommunal dialogue in their questionnaires.

▶ The respondents were divided on the ability of the Multinational Joint Task Force to secure peace in their communities. The Force's capability of securing peace ahead of any peace negotiation or cease-fire during a dialogue process will largely rest on how it is trained and equipped in the future.

▶ There is a need to dispel what local communities understand a securitised approach to mean and whether an improved military response as opposed to a less securitised approach is needed.

▶ Although a number of participants stated that dialogue should be both considered and pursued as an alternative or a complementary method to end the crisis, the majority of respondents raised various criticisms and/or challenges explaining why, in their perception, it is unlikely that a successful dialogue process can take place.

Recommendations

▶ There is a need to go beyond intercommunal dialogue, this requires a broader effort on the part of government to raise awareness and sensitise communities on dialogue with violent extremist groups.

▶ The governments of the Lake Chad Basin will have to undertake further research to outline what the basis for dialogue between violent extremist groups and state representatives entails. There is a need for a nuanced understanding of the vested motivations and interests of all actors involved in any forthcoming dialogue process.

▶ Governments around Lake Chad should initiate nation-wide discussions on whether dialogue can be pursued as a viable option to ending the crisis. Affected communities and civil society ought to be consulted to test their receptiveness to the idea of dialogue. Buy-in from local communities is critical in determining the success of any attempts at dialogue.

▶ Lastly, this effort to galvanise improved possibilities for dialogue will aim to address these internal divisions by promoting a national cohesion and reconciliation process based on local realities.

Introduction

At the end of 2018, the *Global Terrorism Index* listed Boko Haram as one of the four deadliest terror groups in the world.[1] Since 2009, the group has been engaged in a violent insurgency in Nigeria's north-east which has spread to neighbouring regions in the Lake Chad Basin. Boko Haram's campaign has since expanded across the region's porous border into other local communities, mainly in communities in Cameroon, Chad and Niger,[2] resulting in a humanitarian crisis in the region. The group's insurgency has reportedly led to at least 25 000 civilian deaths, the displacement of 2.1 million people and widespread destruction of property,[3] with deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

A decade since the start of the Boko Haram insurgency, the implications of the Lake Chad Basin crisis on local communities is stark. As a response to counter violent extremist groups, regional and international governments have relied on the use of force as the default setting and most effective approach. This approach focuses on strengthening the military and other law enforcement agencies in an effort to counter the threat, not only making greater financial contributions to militaries and growing the size and scope of their functions but also increasing support to intelligence agencies.

The Lake Chad Basin countries along with external governments, including the United States and France and Germany,[4] have poured vast amounts of capital into strengthening national security forces in their efforts to counter violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). For example, at a summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in September, the Heads of State and Government pledged a billion-dollar fund to fight violent extremism in the region.[5]

However, that approach to the crisis has not achieved its intended results. A decade since the crisis began, violent extremist groups continue to operate and hold significant territory both within and outside of Nigeria. It is understandable that national armies are strengthening their efforts with vast amounts of capital invested in training and resources. But the continued operations of the violent extremist groups compel an investigation into alternative approaches to address the Lake Chad Basin

crisis. At the present moment, researchers, human rights practitioners, non-governmental organisations and other experts have called for the use of broad-based preventative approaches.

Broad-based approaches to ending the conflict, such as mediation, negotiation and dialogue, have proved successful in the past. In the field of the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), these approaches are currently being explored to determine their applicability in different settings and with different levels of actors.

In a recent study conducted by the Institute of Security Studies, dialogue with violent extremist groups such as al-Shabaab and Boko Haram was investigated as a viable option.

This policy brief aims to build on the previous research and offer insight on the perspectives of civil society organisations (CSOs) regarding the possibilities for dialogue between the governments of the Lake Chad Basin and violent extremist groups. These insights question the potential for a dialogue-based approach and seek to determine whether local community actors, including civil society, believe that governments should initiate dialogue with Boko Haram or ISWAP.

Violent extremist groups continue to operate and hold significant territory both within and outside of Nigeria

To explore dialogue as a viable option, it is important to consult local communities who are directly affected by the crisis. Their experiences offer first-hand community-level insights on the challenges affecting the Lake Chad Basin region as well as the communities' perceptions on dialogue.

Research question

This study first aimed to understand the perspectives of CSOs on current responses to the humanitarian situation in the Lake Chad Basin. Following from this, the research explored whether alternative responses to the crisis are needed or have become imperative.

The study also sought to determine whether civil society considers dialogue to be a viable response to

ending the crisis. The study also touched on some of the challenges inherent in any dialogue process and on some of the key issues involved in initiating such a process in the Lake Chad region. Furthermore, the study briefly looked into the role of localised and external players in the dialogue process.

Methodology

Participants from selected CSOs in the region participated in a four-day workshop in Abuja, Nigeria from 20 to 23 August 2019, aimed at strengthening the organisational and project management capacity of their respective organisations.

During this workshop, a questionnaire was distributed to participants from four countries, namely Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. A total of 31 participants completed the questionnaire. The participants were informed of the objectives of the study and were able to submit their questionnaires on a voluntary and anonymous basis.

Since the primary language of Cameroon, Chad, Niger is French, the questionnaires were distributed and the responses received in both English and French. This paper does not name any of the organisations; rather the study focuses on broader trends and new approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism.

Limitations of the study

Given that the research was undertaken in English and French, translations had to be managed carefully to ensure the same understanding was communicated in both languages. Although only 31 participants completed the questionnaires, the responses detailed below are indicative of the views of CSOs in the region. The participants represent the countries of the Lake Chad Basin and stem from local communities and regions including Borno (Maiduguri), Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa, N'djamena, Niamey, Diffa, Yaoundé and Maroua, to name a few.

The current approach to countering violent extremism

This section provides detailed information on the responses from the CSOs to key themes raised in the questionnaire.

Perceptions of a militarised response

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a joint initiative consisting of troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria and is aimed at securing peace in the Lake Chad Basin through increased regional cooperation.[6] Operating under the auspices of the African Union and with the support of the European Union, the MNJTF is one of the primary modes of countering violent extremist groups in the region. In the context of the fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP, the MNJTF came into effect in 2015 and has maintained a critical role in the Lake Chad Basin.[7]

The participants were asked to comment on the role of the MNJTF to determine whether they believed that the current militarised response is efficient and should be maintained as a viable strategy, given the massive financial and human costs associated with its operations.

The introductory question sought to understand CSO perceptions of a militarised response to violent extremist groups and their activities. In particular, participants reflected on their awareness of the role of the MNJTF and their perspectives on its ability to secure peace in their respective communities.

> The MNJTF is one of the primary modes of countering violent extremist groups in the Lake Chad Basin

There was an almost even divide between respondents who had doubts that the Force was able to secure peace in their respective communities, and those who believed that the MNJTF could secure peace. Those who had a favourable perspective asserted that the Force would have to be strengthened with more resources and training. One participant explained that although the MNJTF alone will not resolve the crisis, its presence constitutes a deterrent.

In aiming to understand if CSOs perceive that alternatives to a military response should be explored, the participants were asked if they think that the response of the MNJTF may be too severe in its attempt to counter violent extremism – or whether they think that national and regional forces are exercising their powers in ways that are counter-productive to resolving the crisis.

Again, just over half (16) of the participants stated that they believed the response is too severe. One of the respondents had the following to say:

'I think it [the response of the MNJTF] has significantly contributed in helping recruit more Boko Haram fighters and sympathisers as a result of their irrational response, especially at the beginning of the incidents and to a large scale extended those attitudes which did not change.'

Cases in which human rights violations were committed by armed forces against local communities and civilians have been reported.[8]

However, 12 of the participants stated that they thought that the use of force exercised was in relation to the threat faced.

A further three participants mentioned it was context-specific. They explained that the conflict with violent extremist groups is an asymmetric form of warfare and that therefore, common and standard practices of combat could not be applied. For example, a respondent stated that 'the approach cannot be deemed severe if it is directed at the non-repentant terrorists'.

Another important factor to consider is that the participants' responses were dependent on whom they perceived the targets to be. It became evident that if a military response was directed at combatants or known members of violent extremist groups then participants gauged this response to be acceptable. However, in instances when civilians are harmed as a result of military operations, the perceptions shifted and the approach was perceived as unjust and participants felt that an unnecessary amount of force was used.

This perspective was contradicted by one of the respondents who stated that: 'In my opinion, there isn't any approach that is too severe as a response to an armed militia if it will bring about deterrence to a large extent.'

This line of thinking seemed to be quite dominant among participants. This could be an indication that a heavy-handed militarised approach has become conventional in some communities in the Lake Chad Basin. That when it comes to violent extremist groups, militarised responses and a compelling use of force are mandatory.

As indicated above, there is an almost 50% split in the perceptions of the MNJTF. This applies to the usefulness of a militaristic approach in general as well as to the severity of the approach. The responses also revealed that there is a range of perceptions on what constitutes a heavy-handed or securitised military response. Within this set of perspectives some respondents seemed to be making an argument for improved and accurate targeting when combating violent extremist groups. The argument here is that militaries need to clearly distinguish between civilians and combatants or members of violent extremist groups. This second point then excludes the debate on whether the military's excessive response needs to be tempered or supplemented with a broader set of approaches and makes the call for an improved military response.

Defining dialogue

The remainder of this brief focuses on dialogue as an alternative approach. The study provides insights into the perceptions of CSOs, as trusted community actors, on this alternative. CSOs have a unique vantage point and in conflict settings are often among the few entities accessing reliable information from communities. This section, as with the questionnaire, explores dialogue as an alternative that may be an effective approach to countering violent extremism.

It is important to note that dialogue is not an event but rather a process. It is an integrated approach that takes place over a significant period of time and requires the consistent participation of many local actors.[9] 'A genuine dialogue, where both sides are willing to listen to each other, greatly enhances the stability of a community, and largely the state.'[10]

Respondents indicated a shared and popular understanding of dialogue as a conversation between various actors with the aim of reaching consensus on a certain issue. Overall, the participants defined dialogue as a concession-making agreement between parties. The following quote sums up the respondents' definition: 'Dialogue, in my view, is a two-way exchange or conversation, by way of deliberations and exchange of thoughts and positions, with a view to resolving a dispute or coming to an agreement that is mutually beneficial and binding.'

Using this common definition, the study probed perceptions on the likely discussion points that would form part of a dialogue process in their community contexts. This provided the study with insights into the pressing issues local community actors believed would chart the pathway of dialogue between government actors and the Boko Haram factions.

Two open-ended questions were posed to discern whether dialogue should be explored as an alternative to respond to the conflict they face from violent extremist groups:

1) Do you think this definition [of dialogue] should be applied to conflict environments where parties may be hostile?

2) Do you think that the situation in the Lake Chad Basin has reached a point where your respective governments should initiate dialogue with Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province?

The responses to the first question were uniform from the majority of respondents believing that dialogue could be initiated in a conflict environment. One respondent stated that it would be possible to promote an enabling dialogue environment even during hostilities. They mentioned that the success of dialogue with terrorist groups depends on the willingness of the 'belligerents' to accept the dialogue process.

A number of respondents referenced the case of the Chibok negotiations as a precedent for a dialogue approach to achieve its intended results. In April 2014, Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from a secondary school in Borno State, Nigeria.[11] The Nigerian government's decision to negotiate the release of the girls was widely heralded as the most effective solution to secure their release and dramatically increased the value of negotiation and dialogue as a plausible P/CVE option.[12] CSOs perceived that this successful case pointed to the potential of dialogue and negotiations between governments and violent extremist groups.

Perceptions about the feasibility of dialogue were under the spotlight in the second question. The responses to this question were varied and provided rich insight into the perceptions on this issue. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents believed that the crisis in the Lake Chad region has reached a point where there was appetite for alternatives, and that dialogue should be initiated. Of the remaining third, eight respondents stated that dialogue should not be initiated while four respondents declined to answer the question.

These perceptions were investigated further. All participants were asked to substantiate their answers and also expand on the likely challenges that might result from initiating dialogue with violent extremist groups. Reponses to this are detailed in the section below.

Key concerns around dialogue with violent extremist groups

While many CSO participants were in favour of dialogue, together with those who did not support this, a number of key concerns and possible challenges are detailed in this section.

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GIRLS ABDUCTED BY BOKO HARAM FROM A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA IN APRIL 2014

The respondents shared their perspective on likely challenges to the dialogue option with violent extremist groups. The concerns mentioned below range from contrasting ideological and religious beliefs; civil society's scant trust that either Boko Haram and ISWAP or government actors will be open to dialogue; hierarchies and unclear communication strategies and the proposed timing of dialogue.

The specific challenges of trust; motivation; required concessions; religious perspectives, and capitulation are discussed below.

Trust

A prerequisite for any successful dialogue is that both parties have to engage in a sincere and open reconciliation process. One of the major concerns of civil society when considering dialogue is local communities' deeply entrenched mistrust of violent extremist groups. A number of participants mentioned that it would be difficult to initiate any meaningful conversations with groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP because they question their integrity.

One of the participants was of the opinion that groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP are made up of rebels and heretics and that even if dialogue were to take place, no successful outcome would be reached. This sentiment, which questions the ideologies and objectives of terror groups, was widely shared among participants. The claim was common that violent extremist groups could not be trusted to act on any final agreement, agree to a cessation of hostilities, or agree to concessions.

Motivation

This mistrust between local communities, national governments and violent extremist groups is entrenched by a lack of understanding of the driving factors and motivations of the extremists. A respondent had the following to say: 'Dialogue is extremely important, but in this case the motivations of these groups are not identified so it is not easy to engage in dialogue with them.'

Attempting to engage in dialogue with violent extremist groups is nearly impossible without a sound knowledge of the genesis of the group as well as the reasons for its continued existence, including an understanding of inherent interests and incentives. This is clear from the perceptions of the CSO respondents who agreed that one of the major challenges inhibiting dialogue is the vague understanding of the motivations and vested interests of these groups.

Significant challenges need to be resolved before dialogue can be considered

'Addressing the challenge of Boko Haram requires greater understanding of its rise.'[13] Some of the participants also mentioned that, according to them, violent extremist groups have no clear line of communication and therefore it is difficult to initiate dialogue when these groups have no clear formal representation. This perception brings to light the diverse structure of violent extremist groups and is a critical factor in analysing the possibilities for alternative approaches.

Concessions

Another intriguing set of responses centred on the issue of concessions. Some of the respondents were wary that violent extremist groups would reject the option of dialogue. Any attempt to dialogue would be nearly impossible as violent extremist groups are unwavering in their position.

A few of the respondents viewed the issue of concessions from another angle, questioning what could realistically take place or be expected in a dialogue process. In their view, the substantive issues are the expected outcomes of dialogue and whether these outcomes could be practically explored. The following quote sums up the key concerns relating to dialogue: 'The substantive issue is dialogue with Boko Haram for which reason? Which state would be able to give in to their claims?'

This view underlines the reality that there are significant challenges to be resolved before dialogue can be considered as an alternative or complementary approach to the MNJTF. The critical underlying basis for any form of dialogue must clearly outline the concessions and the likelihood of those concessions taking place.

Religious perspectives

Arguably, the most crucial challenge is premised around ideology and religion. The majority of respondents questioned the extent to which governments would be in a position to implement any concessions and compromises made by Boko Haram and ISWAP who demand the creation of an Islamic state.

One of the respondents asked if democracy should be discarded for Sharia law. If a dialogue process were to be seriously considered, could the Lake Chad Basin countries apply Sharia law or agree to be part of the Caliphate? Another participant mentioned that although their country is predominantly Muslim (98%), they are fully committed to a secular lifestyle. This statement sheds light on the real challenges of any dialogue process where religious beliefs and practices are discussed. Beyond that, any concessions or compromises that impact on freedoms and on religion would be a violation of any citizen's human rights.

Capitulation

Lastly, some local communities view a dialogue approach with violent extremist groups as defeat. The perception among a few of the participants is that any form of dialogue or negotiation by government actors with extremist groups results in capitulation. One of the respondents stated that: 'This could be interpreted [by violent extremists] as a victory when the goal is to put an end to this extreme practice.' Several participants saw any attempt at dialogue to show weakness on the side of their national governments. Given the fact that military forces or regional security forces such as the MNJTF have been unable to put an end to the crisis, opting to engage in dialogue and being 'compelled to compromise on key issues' would be seen as a victory for the terrorist groups and a failure of the incumbent security forces. Some participants view this dialogue process as a zero-sum game whereby their communities and national governments fall on the losing side.

The involvement of local and external actors

The next section explores the parties who would be participating in dialogue. The CSOs were mostly in agreement on which local actors should be involved. Participants felt that religious leaders including Islamic

and Christian clerics; traditional leaders including community elders, and women and youth groups should be prioritised for consultations.

When asked if external actors should be involved, the responses varied. A significant number of participants believed that external actors should not take part in the process. The respondents asserted that a locally relevant, locally driven process was needed for any successful attempts at undertaking a dialogue process. These local communities were the primary actors directly affected by the crisis and as such could create a context-specific understanding of the challenges and solutions surrounding dialogue. Furthermore, one participant noted that the interests of external actors are informed by a diverse range of factors, and these interests may not align with local needs and interests.

> Compromises that impact on freedoms and on religion would be a violation of any citizen's human rights

Yet other participants felt that external actors should play auxiliary roles, such as assisting local actors with funding and resources to undertake the dialogue process. Such external actors may include various non-governmental organisations, international institutions and national governments. These ranged from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and China to regional and international institutions such as the United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS and organisations such as the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Analysing the possibilities for dialogue

The findings have outlined civil society perspectives on dialogue in the Lake Chad Basin. Notwithstanding the challenges mentioned above, the civil society actors interviewed believe that there is potential for dialogue between violent extremist groups and governments in the Lake Chad Basin. The underlying reason for believing in the possibilities for dialogue is the dire humanitarian situation faced by these local actors in communities

affected by violent extremism. Local community actors are pressed for a solution to ending the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin.

A securitised approach to the conflict has failed to eradicate Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, free ISWAP and Boko Haram-held territory and reduce the armed prowess or physical capabilities of these groups. The majority of CSOs are convinced that a deadlock has been reached between these groups and security forces such as the MNJTF. It is this deadlock, the deteriorating security conditions and the constant fear faced by these communities that has galvanised support for alternative approaches.

> A securitised approach to the conflict has failed to eradicate Boko Haram and its breakaway faction and reduce the armed prowess of these groups

Is dialogue the alternative response which local communities believe would end the Boko Haram crisis? From the responses, community actors would likely support dialogue as a viable option to ending the Boko Haram campaign.

In fact, given that the current menu of approaches has not achieved the desired results, coupled with harsher living conditions and the spread of violent extremism into more local communities around Lake Chad, the majority of civil society representatives believe that alternative approaches such as dialogue are required.

However, while the majority of respondents welcomed the idea of governments engaging in dialogue with violent extremist groups, few believed that such an approach would result in a favourable outcome. Their support for a dialogue process is largely dependent on the extent to which there are guarantees that the key challenges raised above are addressed.

This means that these challenges and proposed responses need to be clearly outlined before such a process can be initiated. The basis of such a dialogue would have to address pertinent issues concerning the disarmament of violent extremist groups; the reintegration of former combatants into local communities and the communities' acceptance thereof; questions surrounding the constitution and the implementation of a secular versus a religious state; addressing claims of Western education and many other challenges. Any attempt by national governments to initiate dialogue with the support of local communities would require sensitive and timely discussions around concessions, motives and interests and ideologies. For example, the belief amongst some local actors that dialogue with violent extremism amounts to capitulation means greater engagement is needed by governments to educate and raise awareness on the successes and failures of any dialogue process.

This set of complex findings shows that the process is one that will take substantial time and commitment to set up prior to dialogue getting underway. Furthermore, although the potential for dialogue exists, other

IS DIALOGUE THE ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE WHICH LOCAL COMMUNITIES BELIEVE WOULD END THE BOKO HARAM CRISIS?

enabling factors will have to be put in place. A set of permissive factors would have to be set up such as an agreement to a cessation of hostilities, an agreement to openly engage, appropriate timing and an understanding of the local, regional and external actors required. These enabling factors are a state obligation on the part of the countries of the Lake Chad Basin region. A sustained effort by these governments to inform local communities and populations on the challenges surrounding dialogue is required. Without such an attempt to consider and guide meaningful discussions and efforts on dialogue, military responses will likely continue as the preferred means of operation.

Key findings

The following key findings summarise the perspectives of local communities on dialogue as an option for resolving the Boko Haram crisis in the Lake Chad Basin. The findings are accompanied by a few suggestions directed towards policymakers when considering the option of dialogue.

- Although the type of dialogue referred to was an exchange between state/government actors and violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, responses varied according to the participant's understanding and definition of dialogue.

- The respondents were equally divided on the ability of the MNJTF to secure peace in their communities. The Force's capability of securing peace ahead of any peace negotiation during a dialogue process will largely rest on how the Force is trained and equipped in the future.

- Respondents were almost equally divided on their perspectives regarding the use of force utilised by the MNJTF. There is a need to dispel what local communities understand a securitised approach to mean and whether an improved military response as opposed to a less securitised approach is needed.

- Local communities in the Lake Chad Basin remain divided over the issue of dialogue. Although a number of participants stated that dialogue should be both considered and pursued as an alternative or a complementary method to end the crisis, the majority of respondents raised various criticisms and/or challenges explaining why, in their perception, it

was unlikely that a successful dialogue process could take place. This underscores the dilemma between the preferability of an alternative means of conflict resolution and the complexity involved.

Recommendations

- There is a need to go beyond intercommunal dialogue, this requires a broader effort on the part of government to raise awareness and sensitise communities on dialogue with violent extremist groups.

- The governments of the Lake Chad Basin would need to undertake further research to outline what the basis for dialogue between violent extremist groups and state representatives entails. There is a need for a nuanced understanding of the vested motivations and the interests of all actors involved in any forthcoming dialogue process.

- Governments around Lake Chad have to initiate nation-wide discussions on whether dialogue can be pursued as a viable option to ending the crisis. Affected communities and civil society ought to be consulted to test their receptiveness to the idea of dialogue. Buy-in from local communities is critical in determining the success of any attempts at dialogue.

- Lastly, this effort to galvanise improved possibilities for dialogue will aim to address these internal divisions by promoting a national cohesion and reconciliation process based on local realities.

Conclusion

Until CSOs as community spokespersons are committed to opening the door to dialogue, the idea of dialogue as a viable and successful option will continue to encounter challenges and thus remain unlikely. As local community actors are often overlooked in policy design and practice, this study aims to reflect critical input and perspectives from local actors who face the brunt of violent extremist activity from groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP. The question of dialogue and its implementation has to be informed and supported by a significant majority of local community actors in the Lake Chad Basin. Until such time when dialogue becomes a viable option informed by local perspectives and a nuanced understanding of the driving incentives behind violent extremist groups, external actors will most

certainly continue to fund national and regional militaries in an effort to counter the threat of violent extremism in the region.

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About the author

Maram Mahdi is a Research Officer in the Complex Threats in Africa Programme at the ISS. She holds a Master's degree in Security Studies from the University of Pretoria in South Africa.

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