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RELIGIOUS LEADERS & VIOLENT EXTREMISM POLICY BRIEF NO. 1

Harnessing religious leadership to counter violent extremism and build religious tolerance in Nigeria and Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism (VE) in Nigeria and Kenya continues to harm local communities and disrupt development. This policy paper presents findings from an independent, academic study conducted under the Knowledge Agenda of the Joint Initiative of Strategic Religious Action (JISRA). Our report examines how religious leaders through their narratives address and explain extremist attitudes and behaviors in Kenya and Nigeria. This helps policymakers, practitioners, CSOs and other researchers at multiple levels to develop a CVE framework.

AIM AND SCOPE

The core aim of this policy paper is to document how religious leaders through narratives address and explain VE and how their counter-narratives are promoting constructive social change. The paper also identifies strategies used by religious leaders to cope with VE, counter or prevent radicalization, and foster tolerance and peace. It seeks practical, best-practice insights to help religious leaders, civil society organizations (CSOs), faith-based networks, and government authorities design more effective VE prevention and countering policies. The Kenya-Nigeria lens provides comparative lessons that can inform policy and practice in similar settings and contexts. This paper argues for solid academic and policy-relevant analyses of VE in two African countries which have been severely affected by VE.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

VE is here defined as beliefs and actions of individuals and groups who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. Religion and religious ideology is a factor in both enhancing and countering VE, but its role is often treated through a reductionist lens. This study recognizes the religious factor and its ambivalence, meaning that it can function as a double-edged phenomenon: it can inspire profound good, but also be invoked to justify harm. Religion carries within it the potential for both, depending on context, interpretation, and use. Religious leaders are highly visible and trusted authorities within communities, making them crucial to preventive and responsive VE efforts. Their involvement can advance just governance policies, conflict prevention and interfaith dialogue, but they can also justify violence. Narratives are a suitable way to portray the perspective of religious leaders, because it focuses on the experiences of people; the inside perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a combination of historical and empirical research. This leads to a complementary approach, because a historical description takes a third person perspective, while a narrative approach takes the first person perspective as starting point. The historical research traces the development of VE in Somalia and Kenya with a focus on Al-Shabaab, and in Nigeria with a focus on Boko Haram.

The empirical research draws on 151 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders (79 in Kenya and 72 in Nigeria), three focus groups, and interviews with JISRA stakeholders. Participants were selected to reflect diverse religions, denominations, regions, genders, ages, and levels of religious authority. Interviews were conducted in Hausa, Swahili, or English, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with qualitative software. The findings were subsequently validated through feedback sessions involving stakeholders including (female) religious leaders, government officials, academic experts, and civil society representatives in both countries. This methodological diversity enriched the research and provided a strong foundation for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

STRUCTURE OF THIS POLICY PAPER

The policy paper first describes the emergence of VE, in particular of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, and the frames they use to mobilize support for VE. It then presents empirical findings from Kenya and Nigeria on how religious leaders understand, explain and address VE in their local contexts. A third section presents the most important observations and conclusions, and finally the policy brief offers recommendations for the governments of Nigeria and Kenya, CSOs, and religious leaders and organizations.



OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXTUAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMERGENCE OF BOKO HARAM & AL-SHABAAB AND THE FRAMES THEY USE TO LEGITIMIZE AND MOBILIZE FOR VIOLENT EXTREMISM

This section examines how political theology, relationship between state and religion, ethnic and religious dynamics, and the Global War on Terror have shaped the emergences of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya. Through framing and narrative analysis, it shows how governance failures and regional contexts produce distinct, context-specific mobilization pathways, with important implications for policy and programming that respect local dynamics rather than rely on one-size-fits-all explanations.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS FOR BOKO HARAM AND AL-SHABAAB'S EMERGENCE

Political theology

Boko Haram's political theology centers on an exclusivist, purist interpretation of Islam that seeks to reorder the state along sharia lines and purge practices it deems un-Islamic. Boko Haram has an exclusivist religious and political worldview. It delegitimizes alternative interpretations of Islam and justifies the group's violence against those it labels as non-believers or deviants.

Al-Shabaab in Kenya – and Somalia where its origins are – holds a similar political theology, but its emphasis is more moderated. It promotes an Islamic identity that blends religious legitimacy with regional loyalties, so religious discourse travels alongside, rather than replacing, ethnic and regional solidarities. The result in both cases is a mobilizing logic in which religious ideas frame and energize political action, with Boko Haram leaning more toward doctrinal rigidity while Al-Shabaab relies on a mix of religious-political legitimacy and regional belonging.

Religion and state structures

Nigeria has a formally secular constitution, yet sharia has been embedded in the legal systems of several northern states for years, which gives religious authorities real political influence. Boko Haram argues that secular governance fails Muslims and advocates for a religiously grounded political order.

By contrast, Somalia's constitution defines Islam as the state religion. However, a central state authority is often weak or absent, and at a certain moment it collapses. This creates a vacuum in which the organizational forerunners of Al-Shabaab are seen as an alternative to shape society with Islam as the guiding and unifying ideology.

Ethnic and religious dynamics

Nigeria's diverse landscape – characterized by regional and religious divides and marked by governance failures – provides fertile ground for Boko Haram to opportunistically use or appeal to religion to solve problems. Boko Haram anchors its appeal in a Nigerian religious-political framework, whereas Al-Shabaab ties grievances to Somali ethnic and cross-border dynamics.



Al-Shabaab operates within a frame of Somali ethnic nationalism and cross-border sensitivities, with Somali identity and regional insecurity shaping grievances into the defense of a Muslim community under siege. The Somali identity – amplified by instability, refugee movements, and border politics – creates a mobilization space in which grievances are recast as collective defense.

The Global War on Terror

In Nigeria, the Global War on Terror led to the designation of Boko Haram as a terrorist organization. The Global War on Terror was the American-led international military campaign launched following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Counterterrorism efforts by the Nigerian government have at times been heavy-handed and raised human rights concerns, which have deepened local grievances, feeding Boko Haram's rhetoric of injustice and state persecution.

In Somalia, external interventions, also from the Kenyan government, often intersect with regional instability, refugee flows, and cross-border security arrangements, strengthening Al-Shabaab's appeal to transnational Muslim solidarity and broader narratives about a regional or global threat to Islam. External interventions further strengthened Al-Shabaab's portrayal of itself as part of a global jihadist struggle against Western interferences.

FRAMES USED TO LEGITIMIZE AND MOBILIZE FOR VE

The aforementioned four contextual factors explain the conditions that allowed Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab to emerge, but they do not by themselves account for their appeal or impact in the here and now. A fuller account links these structural factors to the propaganda frames the movements repeatedly deploy to recruit and mobilize supporters. Frames are the lenses through which people view and interpret the world to make sense of it. Frames are often simplified or selective interpretations of certain events or situation in the present or past. Frames can be used by individuals and organizations to depict the world in a certain way and to mobilize people to see the world in a similar fashion.

Three recurring frames in the Boko Haram messaging:

- 1. True Islam
Boko Haram advocates a return to what it sees as the original Islamic way of life during the time of the Prophet. It criticizes Sufi interpretations of the Quran and their mystical beliefs. The goal is to spread true Islam and preserve the moral order of the Muslim community.
- 2. Injustice
Boko Haram protests against Nigeria's corruption and failure to deliver socio-economic development and equitable resource distribution. It argues that Islam reveals the immorality of the current order and that leaders have a religious duty to act; they claim that a government based on true Islamic rule would create a fair society.

- 3. War against infidels
Boko Haram argues that 'true Islam' must be defended against a secular, colonial-influenced order, portraying modern education, government service, and secular law seen as illegitimate and as markers of unbelief.

Three recurring frames in the Al-Shabaab messaging:

- 1. Injustice
Al-Shabaab portrays Kenya as systematically perpetuating injustice against the ethnic Somali population, who are marginalized politically, economically, socially, and educationally.
- 2. Islam under threat
Al-Shabaab frames Western powers, Zionists, and apostates – as well as local proxies such as the Kenyan government – as crusading against Islam.
- 3. War against infidels
Related to the previous frame, Al-Shabaab argues that these infidels must be resisted through jihad, with Kenyan Muslims defending their religious identity against discriminatory state policies.

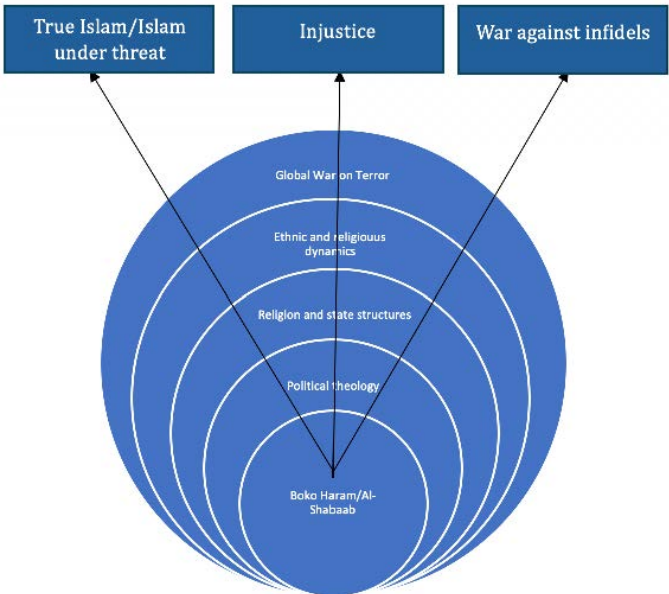


Figure 1. Four contextual factor and three frames (Polinder, 2024)



RELIGIOUSLEADERSEXPLAINING,COUNTERINGORSHAPINGVIOLENT
EXTREMIST ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS IN KENYA AND NIGERIA

Religious leaders play a central role in shaping responses to VE. The strong presence of religion in the narratives around Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab highlights why faith actors matter for countering VE and peacebuilding.

In Nigeria and Kenya, where religion is deeply embedded in public life, faith leaders can act as catalysts for development and social cohesion, but they are not a silver bullet. Their involvement can support just governance, conflict prevention, and constructive interfaith dialogue about Islam's political theology and the difference between jihadists and mainstream Muslims, while also being exploitable by actors seeking to justify violence or discrimination.

In the past, religious leaders have successfully influenced VE dynamics. For example, in 2006, the Danish Cartoon Crisis occurred after a Danish newspaper published 12 cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. This led to violent protests worldwide and triggered outbreaks of violence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Religious leaders, politicians, news media and even business elites were involved in changing the narrative by denouncing the cartoons as a conflict between the secular Danish state and the Nigerian people, rather than interpreting it as an inter-religious matter, which helped prevent further interreligious escalation. Christians and Muslims mobilized together to take non-violent action against the 'godless' Danes. Religious leaders also challenged the dominant military approach during the Chibok kidnapping – the abduction of over 270 schoolgirls by Boko Haram from the secondary school in Chibok in 2014 – as part of a broader critique of the Global War on Terror.

RELIGIOUSLEADERS'NARRATIVESINEXPLAININGVE

Religious leaders view VE as the product of a complex, multi-layered combination of factors. They emphasize that the violence attributed to religion is not a reflection of true Islam or genuine faith, but misunderstanding of Islam. They point to religious ideology, social injustices, government negligence, and policies in CVE as other contributing causes. In their view, VE incidents in Nigeria and Kenya are messy and multifaceted, requiring a multi-dimensional response. As explanatory factors for the emergence and persistence of VE, religious leaders have often referred to VE as:

- > Ignorance, misunderstanding or incorrect interpretation of Islam, often stemming from limited education.
Religious leaders link VE to misunderstandings of religion, especially the misinterpretation of jihad. According to this narrative, youth and new converts, lacking education, are easily deceived by false teachings and promises. Extremist groups exploit this ignorance, recruiting under false pretenses while communities struggle with disrupted education. According to an Islamic religious leader from Kwale in Kenya:
- > Religious ideology: religious ideas with clear societal and political goals
Religious ideology is often cited as both a motivation and justification for VE. Leaders warn that sacred texts are deliberately misused to recruit, indoctrinate, and mobilize followers for political or violent ends. Internal religious competition and ideological rigidity further fuel conflict and violence. A sheikh from Nakuru in Kenya describes:

Al-Shabaab started taking youth from the mosques using their faith; they were pushing a different message from what was being said in the mosque. When they reach where they are being taken, they find a different scenario.

It is actually people who are misusing the holy book for their own purpose or ideology (...) and they want to achieve something to take over the government or caused damage to their country, they will use the Quran or misuse the Quran, what they will do first is implant or psychologically make the followers believe that they are doing the right thing or doing something correct according to their religion.

- > Strongly experienced external threat to Islam (as noted in Nigeria)
Religious leaders mention VE as a defensive reaction to perceived threats against Islam, both from within (sectarian divides) and from external powers. Some leaders argue that foreign actors manipulate terrorism narratives to delegitimize Islam and justify interventions. Such perspectives often verge on conspiracy, linking VE to global power struggles and resource exploitation. The following statement of an imam from Kaduna in Nigeria illustrates this very well.

they always try to destroy Islam (...) when this issue of terrorism comes, did Arab countries all agree to bear the name? But who are today propagandizing the word 'terrorism'?

- > Revenge for the interference by Kenya in Somalia (as noted in Kenya)
Religious leaders link violent attacks in Kenya to retaliatory motives for Kenya's military intervention in Somalia. They stress that Al-Shabaab frames these acts as revenge, also connecting them to other conflicts such as Israel-Palestine. Such narratives highlight how foreign policy actions are perceived as triggers for local extremism. A Christian youth leader from Nairobi states:

most of them have been retaliatory attacks, when Kenya ten years ago went into Somalia, actually it was about fifteen years ago, to try and quell the terrorist and attacks that were happening along the borders. So, when the Kenyan army of course through the funding support of the US government and our government they went into Somalia, they are retaliatory attacks.

- > Government's negligence in creating a just society, along with discrimination and unfair CVE policies
Religious leaders emphasize that VE is fueled by government negligence, discrimination, and unjust counterterrorism measures. Muslims in Kenya, for example, are often marginalized, delayed in obtaining identity cards or passports, and stigmatized as 'Al-Shabaab'. Extrajudicial killings, corruption, and lack of justice deepen resentment and radicalization. The absence of fair governance fosters cycles of violence and positions extremist groups as defenders of the oppressed. The same Christian youth leader quoted above explains:

I would not blame them, if maybe my brother got killed by the government, (...) I would want to join any force that goes against the government. (...) So, such a person is one step away from being radicalized, whether Muslim or Christian.

- > Application – or threat thereof – of sharia law (as noted in Nigeria)
This narrative links VE to tensions around the application of sharia law, which heightens mistrust between Muslims and Christians. While many Muslims view sharia as a path to justice, Christians often associate it with jihad or forced islamization. Boko Haram exploits these fears by portraying itself as defending sharia and justice, deepening communal divides. Misinterpretations, lack of legal enforcement, and disrespect of religious sensibilities fuel radicalization and violence. This is how an imam from the southern part of Kaduna in Nigeria phrased it:

blatant disregard to such insults by the Nigerian Court of Law is contributing immensely in making things go out of hand. (...) youths take the law into their hands and, in the case of Deborah [she was stoned to death by a mob of fellow students who accused her of blasphemy], committed the filthy murder.

- > Existence of porous borders (as noted in Kenya)
Porous borders between Somalia and Kenya facilitate Al-Shabaab's cross-border attacks. Weak governance in Somalia exacerbates insecurity in the border region. Shared ethnic and tribal ties across the border create frequent interactions, including trade. These exchanges can fuel tensions, particularly when Christian business actors are perceived as rivals.

- > Poverty, drugs, and unemployment among youth
Religious leaders highlight poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities as key drivers of VE, especially among youth. Drug abuse further increases vulnerability, making recruitment easier and violence more likely. While poverty is not the sole explanation, it is frequently exploited by extremists and politicians to incite unrest. Even religious leaders may be drawn into corrupt practices due to socio-economic hardship. A sheikh from Nakuru in Kenya describes how explosive the situation is.

Kenya and youth is just a time bomb... the issue of unemployment, the issue of poverty, because there are so many things here.

- > Commercial, political, and private interests
VE is often intertwined with commercial, political, and private interests rather than ideology alone. Business elites, security actors, and politicians may exploit violence for profit, votes, or power. Conflicts are sometimes disguised as religious or extremist acts to settle personal disputes or discredit rivals. This blurring of motives complicates distinguishing between criminal violence and VE. A pastor from the north of Kaduna observes:

There is no religion at all. All what they have been doing has nothing to do with religion. They are just using religion for political aims.

- > Wider social tensions
This narrative highlights wider social tensions – religious, ethnic, and international – as one of the drivers of VE. Longstanding mistrust between Christians and Muslims, often inflamed by hate speech, intermarriage disputes, or past crises, lowers the threshold for violence. Extremists exploit these divisions, selectively targeting Christians to deepen rifts. International issues, such as the Palestinian conflict and Western involvement, reinforce feelings of marginalization and anger. In the words of a Christian youth leader from Mombasa in Kenya:

They were also trying to instill, to sow seeds of discord between Christians and Muslims... that is extremism and that is radicalization.



COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COUNTER STRATEGIES OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Religious leaders who participated in our study typically contribute to resilience by educating people, especially youth, about true or peaceful interpretations of religion and by refuting extremist readings. They create spaces for dialogue and advance religious literacy and tolerance. They participate in and organize peace programs on multiple levels – within their own faith communities (intra-religious), between different faiths (inter-religious), and beyond religious spheres (extra-religious) – to prevent radicalization and conflict. Understanding their actions, we differentiate between counter-narratives and counter strategies.

Counter-narratives employed by religious leaders:

- > Islam and Christianity are religions of peace
A key counter-narrative from religious leaders is that Islam and Christianity are inherently religions of peace. They stress that violence stems from misinterpretations, extremism, or political manipulation, not true faith. Leaders highlight shared values of justice, consultation, and neighborly love as antidotes to radical ideologies. One female Islamic religious leader from Mombasa summed it up:

As a religious person, as a Muslim person, it's all about peace for us. (...) You love thy neighbor. We help each other. Humanity comes before religion. People should understand that first it's humanity, then religion. There is no point you being religious and you have no humanity in you.

- > True religion does not lead to VE
Religious leaders argue that extremists misuse sacred texts, ignore Quranic principles on the sanctity of life, and exploit ignorance or conflict. Violence by groups like Boko Haram is portrayed as a distortion of faith, not authentic Islam or Christianity. Here is how an imam from Kaduna in Nigeria describes it:

Nowhere had it been told in Islam that you attack a person because he is not a Muslim. Even war was not recommended in Islam; Muslims were told to respond to war only when they were threatened as well as respond to attacks by defending themselves not by attacking others. In fact, what is recommended in Islam is that, when there's misunderstanding between Muslims and Christianity, the first step is to call each other for peace talks and agreement.

- > Islam promoted science, and scientific inquiry will demonstrate the truth of Islam (as noted in Nigeria)
Religious leaders counter the idea that Islam rejects modernity – as the name Boko Haram (meaning Western education is forbidden) suggests – by stressing its deep historical ties to science and education. They argue that western knowledge, technology, and Islamic teachings are compatible and mutually reinforcing. Islam is portrayed as a faith that values knowledge, with Muslim scholars historically pioneering fields like medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. As one imam from Kaduna in Nigeria puts it:

knowledge is Islam, Islam is knowledge. (...) you will see that when European colonial masters conquered Iraq, they stole all the Islamic books and treatises.

Counter strategies religious leaders undertake:

- > Regulate or institutionalize public religious speaking
Religious leaders propose either government oversight or, preferably, self-regulation through recognized religious bodies. Examples include a system of rotating mosque sermons and interfaith councils monitoring content to prevent radical messages. Such regulation, while respecting religious freedom, can reduce polarization and misuse of religion for extremism.
- > Educate youth and advance religious literacy
Teaching the true meaning of concepts like jihad and training youth in proper scriptural interpretation build resilience against extremist manipulation. Religious leaders, parents, schools, and communities all play a role in mentoring and guiding youth away from violence. Promoting interreligious and intrareligious literacy fosters tolerance, critical thinking, and peaceful coexistence.
- > Preach Islam, reclaim it, and refute extremist teachings that contradict it
Religious leaders stress that consistent teaching of 'pure' Islam helps neutralize radical ideologies, especially among youth. Preaching peace must be shown both in words and deeds, with leaders acting as role models for tolerance and coexistence. Refuting extremist misuse of concepts like jihad is central to building resilience within communities. According to an imam from Migori in Kenya:

The roles that I have here are as follows; to make sure that I have done what I have been ordered by God in ordering the good and to refute evil. The second thing, I must work hard because of God in mobilizing people for peace and good collaboration.

- > Participate in and organize peace programs or dialogue sessions
By fostering trust, breaking down stereotypes, and addressing grievances, dialogue helps prevent radicalization and conflict. For example, programs for Christian-Muslim relations bring together imams, pastors, youth, and women leaders to promote peaceful coexistence and resolve tensions. They provide rapid responses to emerging conflicts, ensuring dialogue before disputes escalate.

- > Promote religious tolerance (FoRB)
Religious leaders stress that true Islam and Christianity uphold peace, coexistence, and respect for different faiths. Misuse of religious freedom can fuel tensions, but its proper practice builds harmony and resilience in society. Examples are CSOs who reach young people through trainings on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), teaching respect across faiths and reducing vulnerability to extremist ideologies. Other examples are that Muslims and Christians attend each other's religious ceremonies, offer mutual help and work on joint projects such as building schools. In the words of a sheikh from Nakuru in Kenya:

Our prophet Mohammed is our role model. (...) So, we are supposed to live in harmony with our neighbors.

- > Involve women
Despite cultural and religious barriers, women contribute as teachers, mentors, and peace advocates in their families and communities. Their strong social ties and influence over youth position them as key actors in preventing radicalization and promoting resilience. In Nigeria, women trained as peace advocates intervened during escalating violence and successfully prevented the conflict from spreading to their community. Mothers also play a vital role in recognizing early signs of radicalization among their sons and guiding them away from extremist groups.



CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Religious leaders play a crucial role in fostering resilience, but they work within broader political, social, and media ecosystems. In contexts like Nigeria and Kenya, government policies, media dynamics, and organizational leadership within religious communities shape both opportunities and obstacles for faith leaders who seek to counter VE and promote peace. Among the challenges, they have mentioned:

Government: Gaps in education, justice, and CVE programs often undermine resilience rather than strengthen it. Weak educational systems foster religious misunderstanding, while unemployed youth become vulnerable to recruitment. Governments frequently fail to deliver justice, both broadly and in countering VE. In Kenya, Muslims experience marginalization in education and socio-economic life, reinforcing perceptions of injustice, low expectations of government, and feelings of powerlessness. As one religious leader from Kaduna North in Nigeria put it: ‘The Prophet says ‘leadership lasts for a very long time if there is justice, even if the leader is a non-Muslim; it would not also last with injustice, even if the leader is a Muslim’.

Media: Media coverage shapes public perceptions of VE and can either amplify risks or contribute to resilience. Sensational reporting may attract attention but often distorts root causes, reinforces stereotypes, and overshadows positive community responses such as interfaith initiatives and county action plans. International outlets frequently frame VE exclusively in Islamic terms, while social media accelerates rumors and misinformation that mislead youth.

Religious leaders and organizations: Religious leaders are essential actors in building resilience, yet divisions within faith communities can also undermine it. Religious authority is fragmented. Misuse and manipulation of religion, especially during crises, show the need for stronger institutionalization of who speaks for which community.

Some individuals or factions instrumentalize scripture to justify recruitment and violence, underscoring the need for stronger ethical guidelines and oversight. This recruitment also involves a certain (mis)interpretation of the scriptures and does not only include poor children as rich young people are also targets.

Disputes over sacred texts, blasphemy, and inflammatory rhetoric can exacerbate tensions if not carefully managed. In Nigeria, unclear positions on blasphemy have contributed to ‘jungle justice’ – extrajudicial punishments by mobs or vigilantes against people accused of crimes. The following statement of another religious leader from Kaduna North in Nigeria illustrates that: ‘Because Allah (Himself) recommended of Muslims to stand against any person insulting our Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) even if that will cost our lives and our blood’.

Such statements risk legitimizing violence in the name of religion and feed into broader sharia-related tensions between Muslims and Christians, which extremist groups readily exploit.

Although representative bodies exist, religious leaders themselves recognize the need for more robust regulation and institutionalization of authority, particularly in times of crisis. Strengthening intra-faith governance, ensuring diverse representation within leadership, and consistently promoting non-violent interpretations of doctrine are essential to prevent manipulation and foster resilience.

Religious leaders are struggling with the question of religion and violence. Quite a few argue that religion has nothing to do with violence, but that is difficult to sustain. Others emphasize that punishments need to follow the correct procedure or that violence needs to be regulated. In any case, it is a topic of debate which comes back many times in the interviews.

Women: Religious leaders acknowledge the importance of including women in (P)CVE, but institutional and doctrinal barriers limit their formal leadership roles. This remains a sensitive challenge within and between faith traditions.



SOME CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

There is broad consensus among religious leaders on the factors that contribute to VE, but there is no unified narrative about the origins of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. Quite a few religious leaders rely on associative reasoning, anecdotes, or prominent media events, resulting in a spectrum of narratives that can conflict with one another. This makes it difficult to correct or counter inaccurate narratives.

The injustice frame is the most prominent in religious leaders’ discourse to account for the emergence of VE. The Islam-under-threat frame is not widely recognized in their account, while the war-against-infidels frame is acknowledged but is often contested and reframed as a misinterpretation of jihad rather than a legitimate expression of faith. In Nigeria, some leaders acknowledge the relevance of a true-Islam frame within VE but attribute its prominence to misunderstanding or Western manipulation.

Religious leaders actively counter a set of narratives they view as harmful: misinterpretations of Islam, claims that Islam opposes science or reason, and the exploitation of broader social tensions.

Some factors remain unaddressed in the responses of religious leaders. These include VE as a reaction to perceived threats to Islam, government negligence and discrimination in CVE, debates over the application of sharia law, poverty, drugs and youth unemployment, porous borders, the role of commercial, political and private interests, and the media’s amplification of VE. Some of these fall outside the direct sphere of influence of religious leaders. There is a notable gap in engaging with injustices and discrimination – themes that leaders themselves have identified as central and that align with broader calls to address root causes of radicalization, as emphasized by international analyses.

In Nigeria as well in Somalia and Kenya, the same factors – such as governance failures, marginalization, ethnic and religious dynamics, and international interventions – converge to create distinct mobilization logics. In Nigeria, mobilization centers on doctrinal purification within a contested secular order, while in Kenya it is anchored in transnational, regionally connected frames tied to regional insecurity and cross-border identities. These differences suggest that (P) CVE policies and program design should be context-specific, grounded in the local political ecology and religious landscape, rather than relying on universal explanations for jihadist mobilization.

Religion matters, but it is not the sole driver. Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab sit at the intersection of doctrinal reform and broader socio-political dynamics. Religious beliefs interact with economics, governance, and security, and should be understood alongside preconditions and triggers rather than treated as the only cause. Religion is a moderator in processes of radicalization.

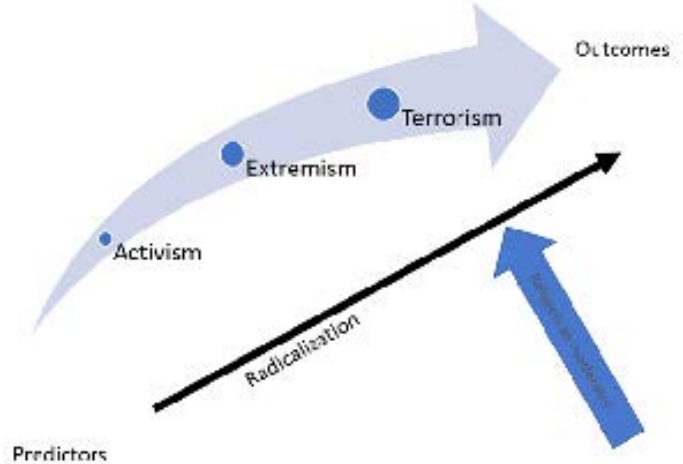


Figure 2. Religion as a moderator (De Graaf en Van den Bos, 2024)

RECOMMENDATIONS

For governments

- > Invest in equitable education: Strengthen both secular and religious education systems to reduce ignorance and vulnerability to extremist recruitment. Prioritize curricula that build critical thinking, civic values, and resilience against manipulation.
- > Address injustice and marginalization: Ensure fair access to identification papers, jobs, and social services to reduce perceptions of discrimination and second-class citizenship. Inclusive governance fosters trust and decreases the appeal of extremist movements.
- > Use a holistic strategy in (P)CVE: VE stems from a complex mix of social, economic, political, and religious dynamics, which cannot be addressed by military responses alone. Locally tailored, inclusive strategies strengthen legitimacy and sustainability in the long run.
- > Tackle corruption and impunity: Strengthen transparent justice mechanisms and reduce extrajudicial killings, which often drive individuals toward radicalization. Visible accountability can rebuild trust in institutions.
- > Promote inclusive governance: Actively engage both Muslim and Christian communities in policymaking. This reduces perceptions of domination and builds resilience across society.
- > Leverage the role of religious leaders in (P)CVE and FoRB. Religious leaders shape community values and are trusted authorities. Governments and CSOs should empower them with training in peacebuilding, human rights, and resilience against extremist narratives.

For civil society and CSOs

- > Support interfaith dialogue: Facilitate platforms where Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders collaborate to address tensions and prevent radicalization. Demonstrating unity across faiths undermines extremist narratives.
- > Promote media literacy: Train youth and local leaders to critically engage with sensationalist or misleading reporting. Empowering communities to recognize misinformation reduces the spread of extremist propaganda.
- > Empower youth: Provide vocational training, mentorship, and economic opportunities for unemployed young people who are highly vulnerable to recruitment. Engaging youth positively reduces the lure of violence.
- > Involve women: Create safe spaces and leadership opportunities for women in (P)CVE and peacebuilding initiatives in a culturally sensitive way. Women are critical observers of radicalization processes and can play unique roles in prevention.
- > Build constructive narratives: Assist communities in developing counter-narratives rooted in justice, peace, and dignity. Highlighting examples of peaceful coexistence strengthens resilience and undermines extremist rhetoric.

For religious leaders and religious organizations

- > Clarify positions on violence and blasphemy: Publicly reject jungle justice and promote lawful, non-violent responses. Clear guidance reduces space for extremist manipulation of grievances.
- > Institutionalize authority: Strengthen representative bodies to regulate who speaks on behalf of religious communities, especially during crises. Clear structures enhance legitimacy and accountability.
- > Preach tolerance and FoRB: Actively promote religious tolerance and emphasize that both Islam and Christianity are religions of peace. Explicit support for FoRB builds social trust.
- > Educate and mentor youth: Provide religious literacy programs to prevent misinterpretation of scripture and equip young people to resist extremist ideologies. Direct mentorship creates credible alternative pathways.
- > Engage in peacebuilding: Expand interfaith initiatives, joint statements, and collaborative projects to demonstrate unity against VE. Public acts of solidarity reduce the impact of divisive propaganda.
- > Use media constructively: Share positive stories of peaceful coexistence, interfaith cooperation and peacebuilding in local and social media. Visibility of such initiatives counters extremist narratives and inspires replication.

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The policy briefs aim to generate reliable, relevant, timely, and actionable analysis and recommendations based on rigorous academic research.

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