

Public round table

Understanding the potential of defense and security forces (FDS) to prevent violent extremism in West Africa

Niamey, Niger, Tuesday 6 December, 2022
Hôtel Sahel, 14 :00-16 :30

SYNTHESIS

Given the limitations of military and security responses to violent extremism, has the response of prevention, which focuses on the multiple and complex causes that generate violence, been sufficiently explored? Can the defense and security forces (DSF) have a role in preventing violence? If so, do their mandate, culture and training prepare them for this? How and with whom can the DSF build a culture of dialogue? Where are the spaces for these exchanges to take place?

These were the questions posed by participants at a roundtable organized in Niamey on 6 December 2022 by the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). On that day, they presented the results of the comparative study on the [Review and Analysis of Policy, Legislative and Operational Frameworks for the Engagement of Defense and Security Forces \(FDS\) in the Prevention of Violent Extremism \(PEV\) in West Africa \(2020-2022\)](#).

This study, carried out between 2020 and 2022 in **seven West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Senegal and Togo)**, is part of the regional dialogue initiative led by Switzerland since 2016 in favor of violence prevention in West and Central Africa, which has already organized some forty meetings and workshops in recent years, involving more than 2000 people. Among other things, this program launched, in Dakar and with the Centre for Advanced Studies in Defense and Security (CHEDS) of Senegal, a series of regional seminars specifically devoted to the role of the DSF in the PVE. The study explicitly aimed to respond to the requests of the DSF in the region, expressed during these seminars, to better understand and compare the frameworks in which they operate. **This was in order to better understand the potential of the defense and security forces (DFS) to prevent violent extremism in West Africa.**

This work benefited from the participation of a dozen experts from the region who, alongside the DCAF and the Swiss FDFA experts, carried out the documentation gathering, the field surveys (more than 300 individual interviews in the seven countries), the comparative analysis of the engagement frameworks and finally, the drafting and validation of the results in the final report. To achieve this overall objective, the study sought to:

- To better understand how extreme violence undermines the experience and mandate of the DSF.
- To clarify how the DSF themselves can engage in a PVE process.
- To collect and analyze the frameworks for engagement of the DSF in PVE, be they political, legislative and operational.
- To strengthen the will and capacities of the DSF for such a commitment.
- To continue the dialogue with senior politicians, senior officers, civil society and researchers on their vision, experience and needs in the face of this challenge.

With this wealth of knowledge in their hands (the report contains 89 pages), **some 50 people took part in the round table**, which was opened by Mr. Mahamadou Abdou Salami, Director of Places of Worship at the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralization and Customary and Religious Affairs, alongside Ms. Pia Hänni, Head of Swiss Cooperation in Niger, and Ms. Anne Bennett, Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Program of the Center for Security Sector Governance - DCAF. The representative of the Nigerien authorities praised the relevance of this study, which opens up important perspectives for giving the DSF a role as an actor at the service of the population and giving the latter a role in the co-production of security, thus helping to prevent the emergence of some of the causes of VE, which continues to be a concern for Niger as well as for its neighbors.

Brief presentation of the results

The content of the report was then presented by two experts of the FDFA and the DCAF, who emphasized that **the essential tool of the PVE was the inclusive dialogue**, among others between the DSF and the populations, women and young people, and that the presence in the room of the numerous guests was an integral part of this dialogue. Furthermore, the report shows that although the causes of the VE (porous borders, weak state presence at the borders, weak capacity of the DSF to cover the national territory, ambiguous behavior of the DSF, links with criminal circles, expansion of illegal gold mining, political and decision-making exclusion) are better understood, **the security reading of these causes (rather than the socio-political one)** remains predominant. In fact, **the role of the DSF in the PVE is still very rarely explicitly included in policy, legislative and operational frameworks, and even less so in DSF training**, which hinders the integration of the prevention role in their mandates and practices. PVE strategies have been prepared in all countries, but generally without any concrete link to the role of the DSF, and similarly, although public security and defense policies are almost everywhere under review, they still rarely integrate the prevention dimension. This **siloed approach**, as well as the lack of linkage between security policy makers and senior DSF officials, which blurs the vision of security for those with that mandate, are among the obstacles to be overcome. Nevertheless, the study reveals that pragmatic steps have already been taken in many places, even if the momentum remains tentative and unstructured. **Local mechanisms for dialogue** and therefore PVE, such as security committees, exist and, in some cases, are effectively opened to civil society, which generally seeks this dialogue with the DSF. It was also noted that **civil-military activities** geared towards the needs of the population contribute to the easing of tensions. However, the necessary measures regarding the **training** of the DSF and public access to information have not yet been fully taken into account. In its final section, the report mentions **seven challenges and courses of action** and asks the fundamental question: **what is the real place of the DSF in our societies?**

Where to find the report:

https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/PVE_Report_EN.pdf

Panel and exchanges

The debate that followed was launched by four panelists from Niger, Burkina Faso and Cameroon.

Based on the observation that violent extremism has exposed a cultural and organizational crisis in the DSF in the West and Central African region, the first speaker, Mr. Savadogo from Burkina Faso, emphasized the profound need to adapt the DSF so that they can evolve with society and with today's threat. An engagement of the DSF in violence prevention is precisely an opportunity to do so. But how can this be achieved? The first point is the recognition that if repression, as well as prevention, is part of the DSF mission, the former should not be used systematically and constantly to the detriment of the latter - it is therefore necessary to rebalance the responses. One question that arises today, for example, in Sahelian countries that have experienced military coups, is whether the coup plotters in power will be open to alternatives other than an armed response or whether they will radicalize in violence to seek a balance of terror; is this not a cycle that could occur in other countries if the various PVE strategies are not implemented early on? The prevention

mission of the DSF must be more clearly written into the doctrine of force employment, which, as the study confirms, is not the case today. It is also important to avoid involving the population itself in the security response (notably through militias), because this contributes to an education in violence rather than to the reconstruction of a social contract based on trust, where power is entrusted to the state and its DSF to respond to the needs of the population.

General (er) Mounkaïla of Niger followed up on these remarks by stressing the role of the government in the development of public policy, indicating that the DSF remains in a subordinate position, which means that the evolution of doctrine must come from both the politicians and the DSF. Another important point is that not enough thought has been given to the "army-nation" relationship, even though the states of the region are still largely organized around the army; in this case, what role can the army play in providing responses, on behalf of the state, to the multiple needs of the population? Is this not precisely where the PVE comes in? In other words, human security becomes a new paradigm to cultivate, because through it, new relationships between the DSF and the population are woven. And in order to imbibe this new culture, the speaker emphasizes, above all, the importance of the training of the DSF, as well as the spaces for discussion that civil-military activities offer.

For Dr. Hassane, also from Niger, the role of the DSF, while important, must also be placed in its broader historical context on the one hand, and socio-political context on the other. Historical, because the colonial doctrine in which the DSF were created was not to protect the population but to control or subdue it. These practices have been perpetuated over time and have not provided fertile ground for trust between the population and the DSF. Moreover, the DSF are part of the social body, just like the school, health, and economy. Therefore, we should not overestimate the role of the DSF and overdo the expectations on the DSF, which cannot meet all the needs of society! Putting the role of the DSF in this broader context is also necessary, because it puts the different actors in a relationship that, through a frank dialogue, should allow to mobilize the efforts of all to "pick up the pieces" of a society in pain.

The last speaker, Ms. Memb from Cameroon, pointed out that one of the effects of this crisis, which has also hit hard and is still affecting the Far North of her country, has been to reveal the role of women in the prevention of violence, who before the crisis were already considered vulnerable and who at the time of the crisis were considered above all as victims. However, no one, including the DSF present in the field, had imagined that mothers could help resolve this crisis, other than through repression: they are in contact with their children, they keep their trust, and they can and want to engage in the famous dialogue that can allow for return and reintegration. In a few years, a mutual understanding was established and DSF then organized an indirect approach, through these women. This collaboration has shown that the DSF and women can work towards the same goal and the experience has allowed the DSF to see the communities in a different light and vice versa. It is therefore important to closely involve women in security issues.

Finally, stimulated by these presentations, the participants did not fail to agree on the importance of rethinking the role of the DSF in the nation, and to underline the difficulty of doing so. They came back to insist on some of the elements already mentioned, such as the need for capacity building for the DSF, but also for civil society, to become impregnated with these new perspectives, or the animation of dialogue spaces where the DSF and the population can meet and exchange. They recalled that a functional justice system should also find its place in this effort, and that the DSF must also better understand this complementarity between their respective functions. Others questioned the emphasis on the role of the DSF: is there not a need to integrate the PVE into society as a whole? If it is integrated into the DSF training, it should also be integrated into the general school system! Finally, it was also said that the Sahel is part of the world, and it is also managed by those who manage the world - a call to put the discussion in an even broader context.

Thus, this roundtable has amply demonstrated the need for dialogue and the appetite of participants to seize these new perspectives in the search for lasting solutions to the violence that haunts the region. The seven avenues for action identified by the study are therefore a useful heritage for all to pursue in this effort.



Program

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| 13:30-14 :00 | Guests' arrival |
| 14 :00-14 :10 | Welcome and presentation of agenda and panellists (MC Saidou Sidibé) |
| 14 :10-14 :40 | Opening remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pia HÄNNI, Head of Swiss Cooperation in Niger • Anne BENNETT, Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Programme – DCAF • M. Mahamadou ABDOU SALAMI, Director of Places of Worship at the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralization and Customary and Religious Affairs |
| 14 :40-15 :00 | Group photo |
| 15 :00-15 :30 | Presentation of key findings of the study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carol MOTTET, Senior Advisor, Peace and Human Rights Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs – FDFA, Suisse • Ariane INKESHA, Programme Coordinator – DCAF |
| 15 :30-16 :00 | Panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General (er) Mahamadou MOUNKAILA, Consultant Defence, DCAF Niger • Dr Moulaye HASSANE, Senior Researcher, Head of the Counter Radicalization and Violent Extremism Program, CNESS, Niger • Madeleine MEMB, MediaWomen4Peace, Cameroon • Mahamadou SAVADOGO, Risk management specialist, consultant on violent extremism, Burkina Faso <p>Moderation: Saidou SIDIBE</p> <p>Discussion</p> |
| 16 :00-16 :15 | Closing remarks |
| 16 :15 | Coffee |