



## THE DOSSIER

# Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism: Supporting CSOs to Mitigate the Spread of Terrorism in the Sahel

By Tammy Lynn Palacios

## Executive Summary

Al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates have been steadily increasing attacks in the Sahel sub-region of West Africa since 2019. Al Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) is extending its control into coastal West Africa, with attacks already breaching the northern borders of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. JNIM's nonlethal and low-lethal activity against civilians, especially extending from hot zones, represents an intentional operations strategy that explicitly requires nonlethal prevention measures.

The operational environment for al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in Africa differs from that of the Middle East, largely because of different issues of identity and cultural and traditional conflicts. The local realities of the Sahel and of the terrorism problem in the region require a Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism solution.

## Key Takeaways

- JNIM's strategy in the Sahel intentionally limits fatalities among civilians and key community figures in order to prevent the local backlash often caused by large numbers of civilian deaths.
- France, Russian paramilitary group Wagner, and West African political leaders have prioritized kinetic, or predominantly military, counterterrorism responses. This type of action can create resentment, especially when its execution is heavy-handed or focused on particular ethnicities.
- Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism would involve enacting an academic, practitioner, and



UPS Avenue for Development Executive Director Joana Pankah speaks to women at the yam market in Kpandai in northern Ghana about their importance to peace and stability in their communities in December 2022. (UPS Avenue for Development)



policymaker agreement, taking into account local and situational nuance, that supports engaging in more sustainable and less reactive counterterrorism efforts. This strategy largely does not involve force and intentionally mitigates the backlash often inspired by primarily kinetic security approaches.

- Civil society organizations (CSOs) can and want to help. These institutions can be valuable partners in Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism but need more support at the state, national, regional, and international levels.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Communities peripheral to terrorism hot zones can be made more resilient with stronger and broader partnering with local CSOs, especially in the areas of youth, women, capacity building, and peacebuilding.

- Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism efforts in coastal West Africa will have to pursue both

top-down and bottom-up strategies. The Sahel Alliance (which the U.S. is partner to) and the newer Coalition for the Sahel should broaden local engagements and expand partnerships to support a larger number of smaller, less-supported CSOs, especially those located in more rural and border areas. The U.S. State Department's Office of the Special Envoy for the Sahel Region of Africa has the access and mission set that could be leveraged, if adequately supported, toward this end.

- The U.S., United Nations, and partners should each take internal stock of all development and security efforts in West Africa. This is cost-effective as it can greatly amplify the resources and access needed to address issues and cover geography in a timelier manner. The U.N. Integrated Strategy for the Sahel is an example of a strategy whose impact could be multiplied if better integrated with more departments across the U.N. that are working on development and security in the region.



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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Youth engage in the “Youth Policy Influencing Training Workshop” designed to help them use technology to address social policies that affect them. The workshop was hosted by FOSDA with support from Oxfam in Accra, Ghana in November 2022. (FOSDA)

## The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

**Our purpose** is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





## The Spread of Terrorism in the Sahel

Affiliates of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continue to strengthen in the Sahel. Attacks and control of territory by al Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have increased since late 2019, with ACLED (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project) charting 2022 as the [deadliest year yet](#). Analysis of [ACLED \(2020-2023\) data](#) and author-collected data on JNIM and ISGS activity in the Sahel, especially peripheral to hot zones, reveal that JNIM has adopted a territorial expansion strategy that intentionally mitigates civilian backlash.

Al Qaeda's localization strategy has been acknowledged by experts and [Congress](#), but JNIM is localizing differently in its pursuit of territorial expansion into northern Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. One example of this operational strategy is holding key community stakeholders such as chiefs and local government employees hostage before releasing them alive hours, days, or weeks later. By intentionally limiting civilian fatalities and by directly targeting volunteer fighters, JNIM is mitigating potential backlash against large numbers of civilian deaths while intimidating others away from joining volunteer defense forces.

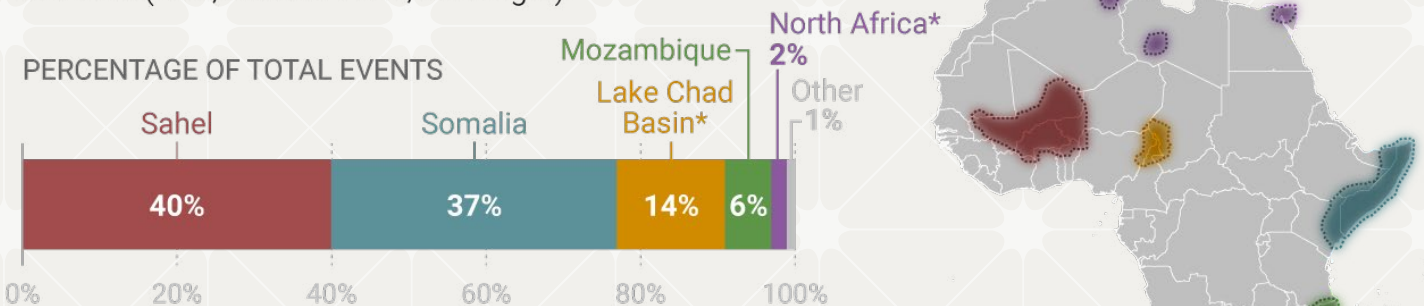
The further spread of terrorism can only be mitigated with a largely non-kinetic, or nonviolent, strategy. This strategy must hinge on prevention that addresses root factors, manages JNIM's expansion, and mitigates further backlash from hard military counterterrorism responses. The U.S. should prioritize strategic collaboration with regional partners such as the African Union, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), the United Nations, and other relevant international and local actors to craft a clear and comprehensive Sahel strategy.

### Sahel Policy

Gaps in counterterrorism policies in the Sahel have been largely exacerbated by the French [withdrawal from Mali](#) and its pledge to withdraw from [Burkina Faso](#). France, Russian paramilitary group Wagner, and West African heads of state have prioritized kinetic, or predominantly military, counterterrorism responses to the threats posed by al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in the region. ACLED's 2020 outline of [state atrocities](#) along with Wagner's presence are examples of this kinetic milieu. A military-forward approach, especially an indiscriminately heavy-handed one, only exacerbates the terrorism security issue. That heavy hand was exhibited by the Malian government and Wagner, for example, when they [executed 300 civilians in Moura](#) and [30 in Niono](#) in March 2022.

## Militant Islamist Violence by Area, 2022

Most of Africa's Islamist violence occurs in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger).



\* North Africa: Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt  
\*\* Lake Chad Basin: Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, Chad

Sources: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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A security officer interacts with a driver at the Ghana–Burkina Faso border crossing in Paga, northern Ghana, on Dec. 6, 2022. (Nipah Dennis / AFP via Getty Images)

There are upwards of 17 working groups, joint groups, and strategies on the Sahel. The U.S. State Department, USAID, the U.N., the G5 coalition, and several international allies have all supported Sahel development programs for years. Existing U.S., European, local, and regional development programs and prevention plans are well-intentioned but require a more streamlined and integrated approach. Policymakers need to reconceptualize counterterrorism as preventive, rather than reactive, to mitigate the spread of terrorism.

Any al Qaeda affiliate that achieves perceived success in territorial expansion, recruitment, or capabilities has the potential to produce ripple effects. The U.S. must pass terrorism prevention policy that brings together security and development, including by recalibrating budget charted for “security and defense” toward development. Existing projects that address reasons of engagement should be brought to the forefront and share the space with the security and intelligence sectors.

Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism is the enactment of an academic, practitioner, and policymaker general agreement that supports engaging in more sustainable and less reactive counterterrorism approaches. This strategy aims to mitigate potential backlash by being largely non-kinetic and respecting local and situational nuance.

### Supporting CSOs

Encroaching terrorist threats from hot zones in the Sahel are even more likely to erupt after elections – [slated for 2024](#) in Ghana, Cape Verde, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali – when al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates can be expected to step in to exploit community divisions. Both engagement with JNIM and ISGS and election-related violence in West Africa can be mitigated with stronger communication and collaboration between the national and local levels and by better supporting civil society organizations (CSOs). These organizations are ready to help mitigate further engagement with JNIM and ISGS.



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**“ We take mandate of the people, of their communities ... pull them along to be at the table to speak for themselves. That’s our approach to advocacy. We don’t speak for communities, but we rather help them achieve their capacities, to speak for themselves. ”**

*Donkris Mevuta, Executive director of Friends of the Nation*

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CSOs have the access, will, and capability to build community resilience against voluntary engagement with al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in at least four areas (youth, women, capacity building, peacebuilding), but they need stronger and more consistent engagement at the state and national level and sustained monetary and material support from international and regional partners. National ministries, committees, and [state security forces](#) should prioritize working closer with CSOs across West Africa to mitigate the spread of terrorism.

New Lines met with 10 local CSOs in Accra and Takoradi, Ghana, in September 2022 to hear from executive directors and program managers about best programming practices and partnerships and to better understand the local context of the security situation in areas peripheral to Sahel terrorist hot zones. Local stakeholders like CSOs are especially helpful with extending and increasing access to rural and border areas. They often have access to local information, can convene informal and formal stakeholders, and are geographically located in areas with the sparsest services, governance, and security.

Not all development projects reap the best possible outcomes for the time and funding dedicated to them. Meetings with CSO leaders and practitioners in September 2022 revealed three key considerations for acceptance and implementation of projects at the local level.

First, the local community must be engaged from inception. This gives community members agency, makes locals feel heard, and ensures projects address local needs. To go into a community and offer them water, when what they really need is sanitation, makes for unsanitary water.

Donkris Mevuta, executive director of [Friends of the Nation](#), spoke of the importance of self-representation. “We take mandate of the people, of their communities ... pull them along to be at the table to speak for themselves. That’s our approach to advocacy. We don’t speak for communities, but we rather help them achieve their capacities, to speak for themselves.”

Projects by [Community Development and Advocacy Centre](#) (CODAC) in northern Ghana are “accepted by the community because they are community driven,” said CODAC executive director Bukari Issaku. Community involvement and acceptance, including from informal institutions, are necessary for program success.

UPS Avenue for Development Executive Director Joana Pankah spoke about the opportunities in engaging informal institutions and how their small team does what they can with what they have, “bit-by-bit, bit-by-bit.” UPS Avenue for Development is just one of hundreds of CSOs – especially smaller or newer ones – that don’t have significant partnerships with regional or international organizations but have access, buy-in, and program plans that focus on supporting women and youth in the rural parts of West Africa.

Second, a program must be supported to produce the best results possible. Development is a slow build, and pervasive funding restraints and the impatience of supporting partners or state elements get in the way of the changes that the projects are supposed to make. CSOs in Ghana said that some projects could have had greater impact if they had received support for longer. An example of a project in need of support is the West Africa Early Warning and Early Response Network (WARN). WARN, which is implemented by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), fuels



analysis and reports on social and security situations across West Africa, where funding restraints draw the extent of implementation at the community-level. At a full board interview at WANEP’s regional headquarters in September 2022 it was made clear that “without funding, the system will fail to be sustained.”

Third, policymakers should consider that projects must continue to be locally created and led as much as possible. When CSOs conform to national, regional, or international calls from partners, local nuance may be sacrificed and local situations may be exacerbated. Sustainable counterterrorism lies in grassroots community development and should engage with, respect, and protect the most intricate details of a local community whenever possible.

### Accessibility to Rural and Border Areas

Government services and state security often do not reach rural and border areas across West Africa. These areas are largely isolated and have poor roadways and few or no telecommunication services, making them desirable to JNIM and ISGS in their expansion efforts. Service provision and state participation are part of the security issue.

Representatives from CODAC pointed out that border communities often are unconcerned about political boundaries, moving freely across state borders. Supporting CSOs would better secure these areas, while lack of state-provided security as well as overreactive security forces could exacerbate the security situation. CSOs need to be integrated into security strategy as a nonviolent, community-driven means to address root causes of instability. If states do not work with local communities to sustainably secure their borders, al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates will benefit from perceived local injustices of a military-forward approach.

### Capacity Matching

There are ample opportunities for capacity matching in West Africa – complementing international partners’ support with CSOs that have the time, effort, and local connections to increase the effectiveness of peace and sustainable development efforts in the region. Better matching capacity restraints and allowances



A child leans on a tree near tents and homes in Issakateng-Bausi, in Bawku, northern Ghana, in December 2022. Ghana, along with Benin, Togo and Ivory Coast, are becoming the new frontline in the Sahel’s jihadist war ravaging their northern neighbor, Burkina Faso. (Nipah Dennis / AFP via Getty Images)

across levels and entities is cost-effective and increases efficiency of peace and development in West Africa. Capacity matching, followed by information sharing and systemic changes that allow for better collaboration, could prime many entities for short-term success. Increasing the number and breadth of CSOs and projects supported would greatly increase the communities reached, a core interest of national, regional, and international partners.

There is no shortage of well-intentioned people working to support [peace](#) and sustainable [development](#) in West Africa, but those issues continue to be top [concerns](#) because of inefficient [systems](#) and pathways of communication and collaboration. Peace and development efforts are not reaching their fullest potential due to capacity restraints and limited policy priority.

### CSO Partner Terms

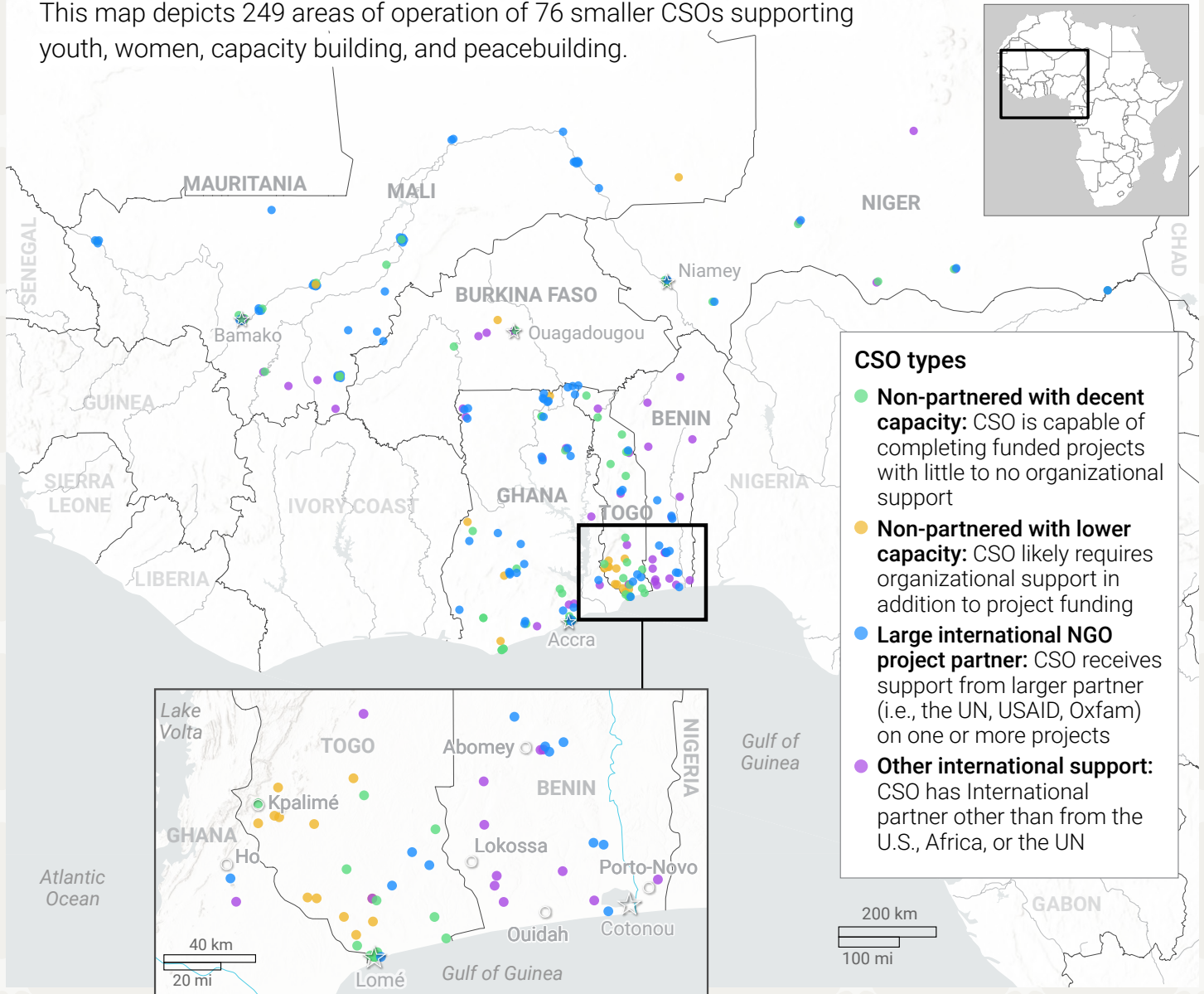
Partner guidelines have left hundreds of reputable, relevant, and willing smaller CSOs un-partnered or with incomplete support. These smaller CSOs are often located in the rural and border areas that most need to be reached to mitigate the spread of al Qaeda





# Smaller CSOs Operating in Rural Sahel

This map depicts 249 areas of operation of 76 smaller CSOs supporting youth, women, capacity building, and peacebuilding.



**CSO types**

- **Non-partnered with decent capacity:** CSO is capable of completing funded projects with little to no organizational support
- **Non-partnered with lower capacity:** CSO likely requires organizational support in addition to project funding
- **Large international NGO project partner:** CSO receives support from larger partner (i.e., the UN, USAID, Oxfam) on one or more projects
- **Other international support:** CSO has International partner other than from the U.S., Africa, or the UN

Source: Author compiled database

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and ISIS-affiliated groups in the Sahel. Expanding or reconsidering partner requirements by entities such as the U.N. and USAID would greatly increase the range of assistance to areas most susceptible to engaging with terrorist groups.

Existing coalitions like the [Sahel Alliance](#) and [Coalition for the Sahel](#) should elicit the support of already-partnered CSOs in the region to help [improve](#)

[capacity](#) and mentor partnerships with smaller and less-supported CSOs.

## Parallel Project Areas

Better support of areas parallel to [factors of radicalization](#) and [drivers to engagement](#) in terrorist activities – namely youth, women, capacity building, and peacebuilding – will strengthen communities



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**“ Prosperous social and economic communities require engaging women as pillars of society, and hundreds of CSOs are working to support women and girls across West Africa. ”**

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against susceptibility to radicalization. For optimal strengthening, all four parallel project areas should be supported; this would avoid, for example, youth with education and skills but no opportunities to use them.

### **Women: Building Knowledge, Skills, Empowerment, and Engagement**

Equipped and engaged women have proven to be [force multipliers in conflict prevention](#). These women can help improve structures and systems in their societies, better equip their communities' children and youth, and contribute to their communities' socioeconomic growth and capacity. In some West African societies, women are seen as strong and capable, but more often in parts of West Africa women are perceived as unaware or incapable and are not seen as part of the solution. Projects that focus on engaging women fall into two categories: education and skill building, and empowerment and engagement.

In discussing market societies, helpful skill-building programs may involve business skills and require start-up capital, but in reality, women's access to [credit and finance](#) are key to promoting women's socioeconomic engagements across West Africa. More established medium to large CSOs and international NGOs, like [Tanager](#) in Burkina Faso, can be leveraged to bring together their local partners, such as [L'Association Burkinabè d'Action Communautaire](#), to foster discussion and encourage change in furthering women's structural capacity. Skill building must follow education, and empowerment and engagement of women in society and local governance must follow education and skills. Knowledge and skill building should be nuanced. For example, beadmaking and tailoring may help a woman become more financially stable in parts of West African society, where helping

bring fish or other harvests to market may be more profitable in other parts of West Africa.

Prosperous social and economic communities require engaging women as pillars of society, and hundreds of [CSOs](#) are working to [support](#) women and girls across West Africa. One example is a number of programs supporting “[market queens](#)” in rural and more traditional communities. Some projects to support market queens as a socioeconomic capacity building measure are already underway, and members of several CSOs said they are interested in engaging communities with similar projects.

[Stories](#) of women have already proven they are more than passive bystanders to conflict; for example, women were instrumental to furthering peace in Liberia when hundreds marched and took part in other peacebuilding actions in the [Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign](#). [Research and examples](#) call for not only inclusivity but also engaging women as [key to the prevention process](#). Women have been engaged in a number of projects across the region, but it is time to move [toward meaningful participation](#) and leadership.

### **Youth: Supporting the Next Generation**

Youth represent the largest, most susceptible audience targeted for recruitment by transnational jihadist groups. According to Relief Web, [more than 64% of West and Central Africa's populations are under the age of 24](#). The disparately large youth population makes supporting youth in the Sahel and West Africa key to preventing and mitigating the spread of terrorism. Supporting projects that educate and empower teens and young adults, especially, will help dry up this recruitment pool. Knowledge and skill building creates more capable youth, while empowerment, leadership, and local engagement



The secretary of the Regional Queen Mothers Association delivers a communiqué to the Upper East Regional House of Chiefs – a predominately male group of area leaders – about the involvement of women in the Bolgatanga’s Upper East Region’s capital in Ghana on Sept. 1, 2022. (CODAC)

leads capable youth to pathways and opportunities to build their communities.

Education efforts should be supported by engagement. In engaging teens and young adults at the community level, in discussion spaces such as town councils, standards can be set in [intergenerational dialogue](#), young adults can bring the concerns of the next generation to the table, and, most importantly, youth can work with elders and other stakeholders to come up with solutions to their community’s problems. If youth are left uneducated, without the skills to contribute economically or strategies to engage peacefully, instability will ensue and nefarious actors will fill the gap.

CSOs like [Youth Advocates Ghana](#) (YAG) convene youth and create platforms for dialogue to promote peace and prevent conflict while advocating for stronger state and local engagement, especially intergenerationally. YAG Director Emmanuel Amatepey outlined the importance of “crafting safe spaces where youth can talk with and be heard by state authorities” in furthering peace and mitigating election-related violence. Dialogue with youth must be prioritized both at the town and district levels and state, regional, and national levels.

Bottom-up programming is more likely to address the nuanced needs of a community and can build a generation of youth passionate and equipped with the skills to build better communities. New Lines spoke



with [Foundation for Security and Development in Africa](#) (FOSDA) Programmes Manager Theodora Williams Anti and others in Ghana in September. They said youth identify ways to help their communities, receive some training, and are held accountable to present on their efforts at year end. The youth identify projects that address their local problems, and FOSDA amplifies and supports the youth in these projects. This approach guides youth, encourages them, and keeps them accountable to and hopeful for what is to come.

## Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding projects are especially necessary in areas with pervasive tension that leads to conflict. According to a concept note by UPS Avenue for Development, “there are about 352 unresolved ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts in the [northern] zone. These conflicts are centered on identity (ethnicity), power (chieftaincy), and land (economic resource).” Conflict areas in the West African countries that JNIM and ISGS are encroaching upon are often rural and border areas – regions that can be better reached by local CSOs. Peacebuilding projects that engage a diverse range of local stakeholders and focus on mediation and conflict resolution, for example, can help breed peaceful co-existence. The [West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism’s \(WACCE\)](#) Dancing for Peace is an example of a peace program that intertwines well with more traditional communities. It is important in especially more traditional communities that peace programs follow a similarly conscientious approach.

Members of the [Center for Democratic Development Ghana \(CDD-Ghana\)](#) highlighted complacency among the public at the community, state, and international levels as a core concern on the topic of violent extremism. Education in the form of training and workshops builds the capacity of CSOs to inform communities, especially youth, on the threat of violent extremism, to address the problem of complacency. WACCE and FOSDA are among the CSOs working to educate youth on violent extremism, conducting trainings to build the capacity of young people and inform other CSOs and communities.

In addition to peacebuilding projects that hinge on mediation and conflict resolution, several socioeconomic and local governance projects are

working to build peace. These projects often fall under youth programming and empowerment and engagement of women. Their aim is to strengthen social dynamics and outline a peaceful path forward by gathering and leveraging all voices to be heard.

Good governance programs such as CDD-Ghana’s West Africa Election Observers Network encourage stabilization and mitigate election-related violence. While election-related violence is often dependent on local dynamics and intra-state political maneuvering, tensions and instabilities can be exacerbated and extended by groups such as JNIM and ISGS into longer-lasting and more violent conflicts.

## Capacity Building

Grassroots, locally led capacity building projects are key to building socioeconomic opportunity across rural, suburban, and urban West Africa. Supporting CSOs with community-level capacity building projects addresses the capacity needs of local communities. Support from the state structure can also address community grievances on low, no, or inconsistent state provisions or engagement. In supporting CSO capacity building projects that improve social cohesion and support socioeconomic opportunity, states can mitigate the desires for financial stability and future opportunity that terrorist groups use to incentivize youth.

The most successful capacity building projects speak to the local needs and dynamics of a community and should be led by CSOs that prioritize engagement with local stakeholders and community members. Jeunes en Actions Sans Frontières (Youth in Action Without Borders) is one such example of a CSO implementing locally nuanced [capacity building projects](#) in West Africa. In Togo, Association des Volontaires pour l’Environnement Sain ([Association of Volunteers for a Healthy Environment](#)) works on sustainable agriculture, literacy, informal education, food security, and rural sanitation, water and waste and disaster management.

More than 300 small- to medium-sized CSOs are working on these project areas in communities near hot zones in the Sahel. These CSOs require funding and resources, and many do not have the communication with or support from their local or



## Some Prominent CSOs By Project Area

CSO	Country	Project
<b>YOUTH AND CAPACITY BUILDING</b>		
<a href="#">Synergie d'Actions pour un Développement Appropriate (SADA)</a>	Togo	Inclusive education; maternal and child health
<a href="#">Association pour une Jeunesse Sans Frontiere</a>	Togo	Educate and support youth employment; create youth center; promote culture and art
<a href="#">Foundation for Security Development in Africa (FOSDA)</a>	Ghana	Youth advocacy; promoting socioeconomic growth
<b>WOMEN AND CAPACITY BUILDING</b>		
<a href="#">UPS Avenue for Development</a>	Ghana	Financial literacy and small loans for vulnerable women and small farm holder families; maternal and child health
<a href="#">DEKI</a>	Togo	Women's empowerment; water infrastructure; clean energy
<a href="#">Cercle de Développement Participatif pour l-Enfance (CERDEPE)</a>	Mali	Women's economic resilience and empowerment; local development
<a href="#">Organisation pour la Réflexion, la Formation et l'Éducation à la Démocratie et au Développement (ORFED)</a>	Mali	Economic and Social Empowerment of Women; Integrated project to support Economic Development and Social Cohesion
<a href="#">Community Development and Advocacy Centre (CODAC)</a>	Ghana	Support the institutionalizing of the vital women-led market queen trade markets
<b>CAPACITY BUILDING</b>		
<a href="#">Association de Femmes pour la Sante</a>	Togo	Water and sanitation; improving girls' education and women's opportunities
<a href="#">Institution d'Aide au Développement Economique et Social, au Togo</a>	Togo	Fighting rural energy poverty; water infrastructure and education
<a href="#">AVOSAH</a>	Benin	Community-based rehabilitation; combatting child trafficking; supporting people with disabilities; women's access rights to land
<b>PEACEBUILDING</b>		
<a href="#">ORFED</a>	Mali	Promotion of peace in the Sahel; economic and social empowerment of women; supporting economic development and social cohesion
<a href="#">West Africa Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE)</a>	Ghana	Youth peace network preventing violent extremism
<a href="#">L'Association Malienne pour l'Epanouissement et le bien être des Communautés (AMEC)</a>	Mali	Child protection; sensitizing young people to the dangers of violent extremism
<a href="#">CODAC</a>	Ghana	Addressing the needs of border communities

state government that they need to be successful. For example, in Ghana, local CSOs belong to a committee borne from the [National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana](#). Despite this framework outlining the need to support and partner with CSOs, several CSOs that New Lines spoke with expressed concerns about communication and follow-through on the part of the Ghanaian

ministries, such as long wait times for paperwork and phone calls at the national level.

In West Africa, some states fare better with government-local relations than others. Ghana is paving the way with the National Framework and ministries dedicated to youth and women, but more can be done for West African government to



build the trust of their people. Open and consistent communication followed by implementation will mitigate the trust grievances that groups like JNIM and ISGS exacerbate.

## Regional Nuance

The operational environment for al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates is different in Africa than in the Middle East for three converging reasons.

### Identity drivers

There are unique primary identity drivers for the region and for local communities to engage with al Qaeda and ISIS.

In the Sahel, groups and communities are plagued by local violence driven by cultural and traditional conflict over territory, resources and power. Conflict ensues in the name of protecting or attacking the “other” along identity cleavages that are different than those that drive affiliates in the Middle East and Southeast Asia or lone wolf terrorists.

The greatest identity cleavages that have led to conflict in the Sahel are between the nomadic or migrating “settlers” and the “host” or more stationary communities over territory, resources, and power. Due to these identity drivers, solutions and engagement will have to be nuanced and participatory, meaning development efforts must be solicited from local voices in order to best address local issues and engage local buy-in and ownership.

These conflicts will only rise in occurrence and change in locale as terrorism hot zones change and unsustainable land-use and [climate change](#) continue. These and other ethnic identity cleavages have been steadily exacerbated by the strong and uncalculated hand of security and defense forces.

### Backlash to Kinetic Counterterrorism

The impact of and backlash against counterterrorism approaches in West Africa are different than in other parts of the world. U.S.-led counterterrorism actions in Afghanistan and Iraq fed anti-Western and anti-U.S. grievances rooted, linked, and created by the geopolitics of those regions. The largely kinetic

counterterrorism actions made by West African states against al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates have also fed grievances and further divided identities – but those identities and roots are different, which means the impact and backlash also differs.

The widespread emergence of volunteer fighting forces in West Africa is one example of a backlash against military or security counterterrorism operations and a complex resource and land situation. These volunteer fighting forces, formed largely in response to heavy-handed or indiscriminate killings that resulted in high civilian casualties, are defending their communities from state military and security forces, rival identity groups, incoming settlers, and/or terrorist groups. In the Middle East, this counterterrorism failure resulted in grievances that drastically drove ISIS recruitment in Iraq and Syria, including and largely foreign fighters; in the Sahel, the rise of these volunteer forces is tied to inadequate and untrustworthy governance and security, resulting in a more complex ecosystem of armed defense groups.

### Disparate Resources

Disparate resources to rural and border areas in West Africa have furthered the creation, recruitment, and dependence on community-level defense and militant groups.

Rural and border communities rely on these forces because of disparate, nonexistent, or heavily militarized state engagement in these areas. The group dynamics between these forces, state forces, al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates, and other groups will become more complex as the makeup of both the affiliates and their adversaries change. To lower the reliance of rural and border areas on these groups, which are sowing intra-state conflict, state authorities must heal relationships with their constituents, especially those in rural and border areas, and pursue a united security approach toward al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates. This means holding true to agreements, increasing access by improving road infrastructure, and prioritizing consistent dialogue.

For these reasons, a comprehensive Sahel strategy must be crafted with a lens distinct from counterterrorism in the Middle East.



## Policy recommendations

### Prioritize Prevention Policy

JNIM will expand into and control territory in northern Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire if prevention is not prioritized. State and regional authorities must refrain from reverting from a prevention model in the face of upcoming elections or increased attacks.

### Support CSOs

Supporting CSOs, especially programs that educate, train, engage, and empower women and youth; build local socioeconomic capacity; and support peace, will strengthen community resiliency against al Qaeda and ISIS.

Thousands of CSOs across West Africa are able and willing to support communities. The U.S. and allied partners can and should provide longer-lasting resources and program funding to CSOs and encourage West African states to prioritize stronger communication and security support with local actors.

The U.S., U.N., and other entities that work with CSOs should adjust partner terms to better support smaller and newer CSOs. Supporting CSOs in rural and border areas means reaching and supporting communities most likely to become targeted by groups like JNIM and ISGS.

Capacity matching CSOs and partners supports the prevention and development goals of the U.S., U.N., regional and international partners, and local CSOs. Frontloading the effort of broadening partnerships to include a larger number of CSOs, especially in rural and border areas, will directly support U.S., regional, and international development and security efforts.

### Leverage Existing Coalitions

Already existing partnerships such as the [Accra Initiative](#), Coalition for the Sahel, the Sahel Alliance, and the [Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel](#) can be bolstered by prioritizing more regular meetings and engaging more local stakeholders/organizations.



**Tammy Lynn Palacios** is a Senior Analyst leading the Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism initiative at the New Lines Institute. Palacios has studied terrorism and counterterrorism with a focus on al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates. She is a proponent for sustainable counterterrorism and P/CVE as supported by a truly cross-sectoral and multi-faceted understanding of the individuals, group, and region in question.

Prior to joining the New Lines Institute, Palacios served as Project Lead for the MENA Research Team at TTCSP, where she managed two international teams collecting data on think tanks and civil society organizations in the MENA region. Palacios also spent time on Syria and ISIS portfolios at the Institute for the Study of War where she focused on Salafi-Jihadist militant groups operating in Syria.

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