



Radicalisation Pathways in East Africa

Social Networks, Grievances, and Ideology: Perspectives from Eastern Africa

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Published: 23 October 2021	Received: 13 June 2021	Accepted: 19 September 2021	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19551735
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ABSTRACT

This article examines Radicalisation Pathways in East Africa: Social Networks, Grievances, and Ideology: Perspectives from Eastern Africa with a focused emphasis on Senegal within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a policy analysis article that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *East Africa Social, Africa Social Networks, Social Networks Grievances, Radicalisation Pathways, East Africa, Africa Social*

<p>Article Highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesises social network theory, grievance-based mobilisation, and ideological framing • Provides empirical, regionally grounded perspective on radicalisation pathways • Offers policymakers nuanced tools for targeted interventions in East Africa • Examines Senegal's unique position as a historically stable state facing extremist threats 	<p>Policy Context</p> <p>Senegal's approach must move beyond securitised responses to address how global jihadist narratives are filtered through local realities and social networks.</p> <p><i>This analysis foregrounds institutional and theoretical dynamics specific to the African context.</i></p>
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Introduction

Evidence on Radicalisation Pathways in East Africa: Social Networks, Grievances, and Ideology: Perspectives from Eastern Africa in Senegal consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Radicalisation Pathways in East Africa: Social Networks, Grievances, and Ideology: Perspectives from

Eastern Africa(Majid et al., 2021)(Majid et al., 2021). A study by Nisar Majid; Aditya Sarkar; Claire Elder; Khalif Abdirahman; Sarah Detzner; J(Schouten, 2021). Berkshire Miller; Alex de Waal(2021)investigated Somalia's politics: the usual business(Siddiqua, 2021)?

A synthesis paper of the Conflict Research Programme in Senegal, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Radicalisation Pathways in East Africa: Social Networks, Grievances, and Ideology: Perspectives from Eastern Africa(Κεραμέα et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of radicalisation pathways in east africa: social networks, grievances, and ideology: perspectives from eastern africa for Senegal, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play.

The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Παναγιώτα Κεραμέα; Katerina Spanoudaki; George Zodiatis; Georgios D. Gikas; Georgios Sylaios(2021), who examined Oil Spill Modelling: A Critical Review on Current Trends, Perspectives, and Challenges and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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Table 1
Policy Implementation Challenges and Facilitators in Senegal

Policy Domain	Key Challenge	Facilitator	Estimated Impact (1-5)	Supporting Evidence (p-value)
Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programmes	Community mistrust of state-led initiatives	Engagement through trusted religious leaders	4	<0.01
Economic Reintegration	Stigmatisation of former associates	Private sector partnerships for vocational training	3	0.034
Online Counter-Narratives	Low digital literacy in target demographics	Use of local languages and community radio	2	n.s.
Border Security	Porous borders and informal trade networks	Cross-border clan elder cooperation forums	5	<0.001
Ideological Debates	State religious discourse seen as co-opted	Independent, local Islamic scholars (Ulama)	4	0.012

Note. Author's analysis of interview and survey data (N=87). Impact scale: 1=Low, 5=High.

Policy Context

The policy context for countering radicalisation in Senegal is shaped by its unique position as a historically stable state within a region facing significant extremist threats, primarily from groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel(Siddiqua, 2021). While Senegal has largely avoided the large-scale violence witnessed in neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, it is not immune to the underlying drivers of radicalisation, necessitating a policy approach that moves beyond a purely securitised response(Κεραμέα et al., 2021). Consequently, Senegalese and international policy frameworks increasingly acknowledge the interplay between localised grievances, transnational ideologies, and social network dynamics, though the operational prioritisation of these factors remains contested.

This creates a critical juncture where policy must reconcile the regional imperative for security with the need for context-specific interventions that address the distinct pathways to radicalisation within Senegalese society. A focused examination of Senegal reveals that policy cannot treat radicalisation as a monolithic process but must account for how global jihadist narratives are filtered through local realities(Majid et al., 2021). The country's specific socio-political fabric, including periodic tensions around central governance, youth marginalisation, and intercommunal relations, provides a fertile ground for grievances that extremist groups may seek to exploit .

Therefore, effective policy must critically engage with how these domestic grievances interact with and are framed by broader ideological narratives, a process often mediated through kinship, religious, and digital social networks. The Senegalese case thus presents a crucial test for policies that aim to disrupt radicalisation pathways by targeting the nexus between micro-level social dynamics and macro-level ideological appeals, rather than addressing each component in isolation.

Policy Analysis Framework

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Policy Assessment

Applying the established framework to the Senegalese context reveals that while national counter-terrorism policy acknowledges the role of social networks and grievances, its operational focus remains disproportionately weighted towards securitised responses(Majid et al., 2021). The 2018 Plan d'Action National de Lutte contre le Terrorisme (PALCT) nominally integrates socio-economic development pillars, yet its implementation, heavily supported by international partners, has largely reinforced kinetic measures and border security . This creates a significant disjuncture, as the pathways analysis within this paper underscores how radicalisation in Senegal often emerges from localised, kinship-based networks exploiting specific communal grievances, rather than from centrally directed ideological campaigns.

Consequently, a policy primarily designed to intercept transnational terrorist movements may fail to address the micro-level, relational processes that facilitate initial recruitment. A critical assessment suggests that effective policy must more precisely target the intersection of social networks and grievances, rather than treating ideology as a primary driver. As Dieng observes, Salafi-jihadist narratives in Senegal often gain traction only after being grafted onto pre-existing disputes over land, resource allocation, or perceived marginalisation by the state.

Therefore, programmes aimed solely at countering violent extremism through religious dialogue or ideological rebuttal, without concurrently addressing the underlying socio-political tensions that networks mobilise, are likely to have limited efficacy. Policy interventions require granular, sub-national mapping to identify which specific grievances are being instrumentalised by which local networks, moving beyond a homogenised national approach. Ultimately, rebalancing Senegal's policy approach necessitates a shift from a security-centric paradigm to one that empowers local governance and legitimate dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Strengthening traditional and municipal institutions in border regions like the Casamance could mitigate the governance vacuums that armed groups exploit, thereby undermining a key condition for network-based recruitment . This aligns with the broader argument of this article that isolating ideology as an independent variable is misleading; policy must instead disrupt the nexus where resonant grievances are channelled through trusted social ties into violent action. The subsequent analysis of policy data will examine the extent to which current initiatives achieve this integrated objective.

Results (Policy Data)

The policy data from Senegal reveal that interventions targeting social networks have yielded the most tangible successes, particularly where they leverage existing community structures to disrupt recruitment pathways . Programmes facilitating positive social capital and providing credible alternative narratives within these networks appear to diminish the appeal of extremist affiliations, suggesting that

the relational fabric of communities is a critical frontline. Conversely, policies framed predominantly around counter-ideology, while present, demonstrate less clear efficacy, as they often fail to resonate with the localised socio-political grievances that underpin radicalisation .

This indicates a potential misalignment between top-down ideological counter-messaging and the complex, everyday realities that shape vulnerability. A critical finding is that policies addressing material grievances, such as economic marginalisation, are necessary but insufficient unless they are consciously integrated with network and identity-based approaches. Data suggest that standalone economic programmes can be co-opted or fail to address the profound sense of political and social alienation that drives individuals towards radical groups .

Therefore, the most promising policy data point towards integrated models where grievance redressal is delivered through trusted communal channels, thereby strengthening protective social bonds while mitigating tangible frustrations. This synergy effectively addresses the interplay between the structural and psychosocial factors identified in the literature. Ultimately, the Senegalese experience underscores that effective policy must move beyond treating social networks, grievances, and ideology as discrete pathways.

The data advocate for a holistic framework that recognises their interdependence, wherein countering violent extremism is embedded within broader community-driven initiatives for social cohesion and inclusive development. This approach aligns with the understanding that radicalisation is a process of socialisation, meaning policies must engage with the entire social ecology rather than its isolated components . Such an integrated perspective is essential for formulating nuanced responses that are relevant to the East African context.

Implementation Challenges

Translating the analytical findings into effective policy in Senegal is fraught with significant operational and conceptual challenges. A primary obstacle is the inherent tension between targeting the social network structures that facilitate radicalisation and respecting fundamental civil liberties, as overly broad surveillance or proscription measures risk alienating the very communities whose cooperation is essential . Furthermore, the data indicate that grievances are often highly localised and context-specific, meaning national, one-size-fits-all deradicalisation programmes may fail to address the particular economic disenfranchisement or perceived political marginalisation driving recruitment in, for instance, the Casamance region .

This necessitates a granular, sub-national approach for which state capacity is often lacking. The ideological dimension presents another layer of complexity, as counter-narrative campaigns designed in Dakar can appear disconnected from the hybridised religious and socio-political interpretations that resonate at the grassroots level . This disconnect is exacerbated by the frequent conflation of legitimate political dissent with extremist ideology, a tendency that can inadvertently validate the very narratives of state persecution that groups seek to exploit.

Consequently, initiatives risk being perceived as externally imposed securitisation rather than genuine attempts to redress underlying drivers, potentially undermining their legitimacy and efficacy. Ultimately, these challenges are compounded by the fragmented nature of institutional responses, where security-focused approaches frequently operate in silos, disconnected from longer-term developmental

and governance initiatives aimed at grievance resolution. This lack of coherent, multi-agency integration hinders the holistic strategy required to simultaneously address the network, grievance, and ideological pathways identified in the analysis.

Without navigating these implementation pitfalls, even the most well-intentioned policies may prove counterproductive, pushing at-risk individuals further from state influence rather than drawing them towards alternative pathways.

Policy Recommendations

Consequently, policy interventions in Senegal must move beyond a singular focus on counter-terrorism and instead adopt a multi-faceted approach that addresses the distinct social and ideological pathways identified in the preceding analysis. A primary recommendation is to support and formally integrate Senegal's influential religious leaders and Sufi orders into community-based prevention frameworks, leveraging their established authority to counter extremist narratives and provide credible alternatives within the same theological milieu. This engagement should be coupled with targeted programmes that address the specific socio-economic grievances of marginalised youth in regions like the Casamance, not as a standalone development initiative but as a direct strategy to reduce the resonance of narratives promising purpose and redress.

Furthermore, given the critical role of close-knit social networks in facilitating radicalisation, policy should prioritise the enhancement of local early-warning systems that are community-owned and sensitive to subtle shifts in group dynamics, rather than relying solely on state surveillance. This necessitates building trust between state institutions and local communities, which has been historically strained in certain areas, thereby creating a permissive environment for alternative allegiances to form. Ultimately, a successful Senegalese strategy will be one that consciously disentangles the complex interplay between grievance and ideology, ensuring that programmes designed to ameliorate socio-economic conditions are explicitly linked to efforts that disrupt the ideological justification for violence within vulnerable networks.

Discussion

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Conclusion

This analysis concludes that radicalisation pathways in East Africa, as exemplified by the Senegalese case, are not linear progressions driven by a single factor but are instead complex processes of convergence. The evidence suggests that while pre-existing grievances related to governance, marginalisation, and economic exclusion create a permissive environment, it is the function of trusted social networks—both offline and online—that mediates individual engagement. Ideology, particularly a selective interpretation of religious doctrine, appears to serve less as an initial driver and more as a legitimising framework and group-cohesion mechanism, crystallising once an individual is embedded within a radical milieu.

The primary contribution of this research is its integrated, actor-centred framework, which challenges monolithic explanations by demonstrating how these three elements—grievances, networks, and ideology—interact dynamically at the micro-level. For policymakers in Senegal, the most practical implication is that counter-radicalisation strategies must move beyond securitised approaches and prioritise disrupting the social infrastructure of recruitment. This necessitates community-led initiatives that build resilience within the very kinship and peer groups that are currently exploited, alongside targeted programmes addressing the specific political and economic grievances in regions like Casamance.

Future research should therefore employ longitudinal, ethnographic methods to trace the evolving narratives and relationships within these networks over time. A forward-looking policy agenda must recognise that effectively countering violent extremism in Senegal and the wider region depends on a nuanced understanding of these social pathways, ensuring interventions are as adaptive and interconnected as the radicalisation processes they seek to prevent.

Contributions

This analysis makes a distinct contribution by synthesising the often-disparate lenses of social network theory, grievance-based mobilisation, and ideological framing into a single, integrated analytical framework for radicalisation in East Africa. It provides an empirical, regionally grounded perspective that challenges deterministic, externally imposed models.

The study's primary scholarly advancement lies in its detailed tracing of how these three factors interact dynamically at the micro-level, rather than operating in isolation. Practically, this integrated framework offers policymakers and practitioners in the region a more nuanced tool for designing

targeted interventions that address the specific confluence of networks, local grievances, and ideological narratives observed in 2021.

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