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Resilient nations.*

# **Social media in Africa**

**A double-edged sword for  
security and development**

Research report

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# Preface

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This is the final report of a study commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which examines social media use and online radicalisation in Africa. With a focus on al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the analysis also describes governmental efforts to address this problem in relation to these three groups and outlines recommendations for policy, programming and research.

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The research team is also grateful to the academic experts, policy experts, civil society representatives, local experts and industry representatives who took part in research interviews. Their affiliations and, in some cases, their names are listed in Annex G of the Technical Annex: some interviewees' identities have been anonymised at their request.

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# Abbreviations

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AHADI	Agile Harmonised Assistance for Devolved Institutions
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AQC	al-Qaeda Central
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EU	European Union
HSMPress	Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen Press Office
ICA	Islamic Cultural Association
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
K-YES	Kenya Youth Employment and Skills Program
NACTEST	Nigerian National Counter-Terrorism Strategy
NIWETU	NiWajibu Wetu
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NSCVE	National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism
PAVE	Partnering Against Violent Extremism
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RQ	Research Question
SCORE	Strengthening Community Resilience against Extremism

SMS	Short Message Service
SNCCT	Sudan National Commission for Counter-Terrorism
STRIVE	Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UMST	University of Medical Sciences and Technology
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

# 1. Introduction

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UNDP commissioned RAND Europe to undertake a study exploring social media use and online radicalisation in Africa. This is the first publically available study to analyse how social media is used by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL to contribute to radicalisation in seven African countries – Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda – by applying lexical and network analysis techniques to primary Twitter data.

## 1.1. Study context

The role of information and communication technology (ICT) in Africa is a double-edged sword: while it can promote social, political and economic development,<sup>1</sup> it may also increase opportunities for radicalisation.<sup>2</sup> Social media<sup>3</sup> can equip terrorists with a low-cost tool to enlist, train, coordinate and communicate with followers and potential recruits remotely. Today, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, ISIL and other violent extremist groups in Africa use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media channels to broadcast their messages, inspire followers, and recruit new fighters to unprecedented levels.<sup>4</sup>

There is an on-going debate over the role of online activities in the radicalisation process and in associated counter-radicalisation efforts.<sup>5</sup> However, much of the recent discussion has focused on Western countries in relation to ISIS' online influence of homegrown terrorism and of foreign fighter<sup>6</sup> travel to Iraq and Syria. Less is known about patterns of online radicalisation in Africa and about the extent to which African national governmental strategies address the use of social media by terrorist groups both inside and outside the region to support their strategic and tactical aims.

To address this current gap in knowledge, UNDP commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a study exploring social media use and online radicalisation in Africa. This is intended to support the UNDP

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly (2013).

<sup>2</sup> There is no agreed definition of 'radicalisation'. Existing definitions include 'a process leading towards the increased use of political violence', 'increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict', and 'an escalation process leading to violence' (Della Porta and LaFree, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In this report, 'social media' refers to websites, applications and other online communications channels that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. See Oxford Dictionary (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the following RAND reports: Bodine-Baron et al. (2016) on 'Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter' and von Behr et al. (2013) on 'Radicalisation in the Digital Era'.

<sup>6</sup> Foreign fighters refer to individuals that have, for a variety of reasons and with different ideological backgrounds, joined an armed conflict abroad (Boutin et al., 2016).

Regional Centre for Africa's Regional Project on Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa. This is an initiative that aims to better understand and respond to the effects of radicalisation and violent extremism on the continent through evidence-based research and analysis.

## 1.2. Purpose and scope

This report aims at raising awareness of how social media is used by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL as part of their inventory of tools to radicalise individuals in Africa, and at outlining governmental efforts to address this issue in order to enhance future policy and programming in this area. While the main emphasis of the study is on social media, the analysis also includes a focus on other communications technologies or apps where data is available (e.g. WhatsApp) and on the use of radio, given its prevalence in the countries of focus.

In support of these objectives, the following chapters address three research questions (RQ):

- **RQ1:** What trends can be observed in the use of social media in Africa to contribute to online radicalisation?
- **RQ2:** Have existing counter-radicalisation interventions by African national governments and non-African government agencies:
  - i. Focused on preventing and responding to online radicalisation?
  - ii. Built innovative technological approaches into their design?
- **RQ3:** What implications can be drawn for the improvement of existing programmes and design of future programmes aimed at countering online radicalisation?

These questions are analysed through the lens of three case studies focused on Islamist militant groups: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL.<sup>7</sup> These groups were selected for inclusion in the study on the basis that (i) they are based in Africa; (ii) they currently constitute three of the most lethal terrorist groups worldwide;<sup>8</sup> and (iii) they are known to make use of social media to further their strategic aims.<sup>9</sup>

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, these groups have a presence in the seven African countries on which this report focuses. These countries include two that UNDP classifies as being at the epicentre of a security crisis (Nigeria and Somalia), four affected by spillover violence (Cameroon, Chad, Kenya and Uganda), and one described as being at risk of violent extremism taking hold (Sudan).<sup>10</sup> Annex D of the accompanying Technical Annex provides an overview of the main security threats in relation to terrorism and political violence affecting each of these countries.

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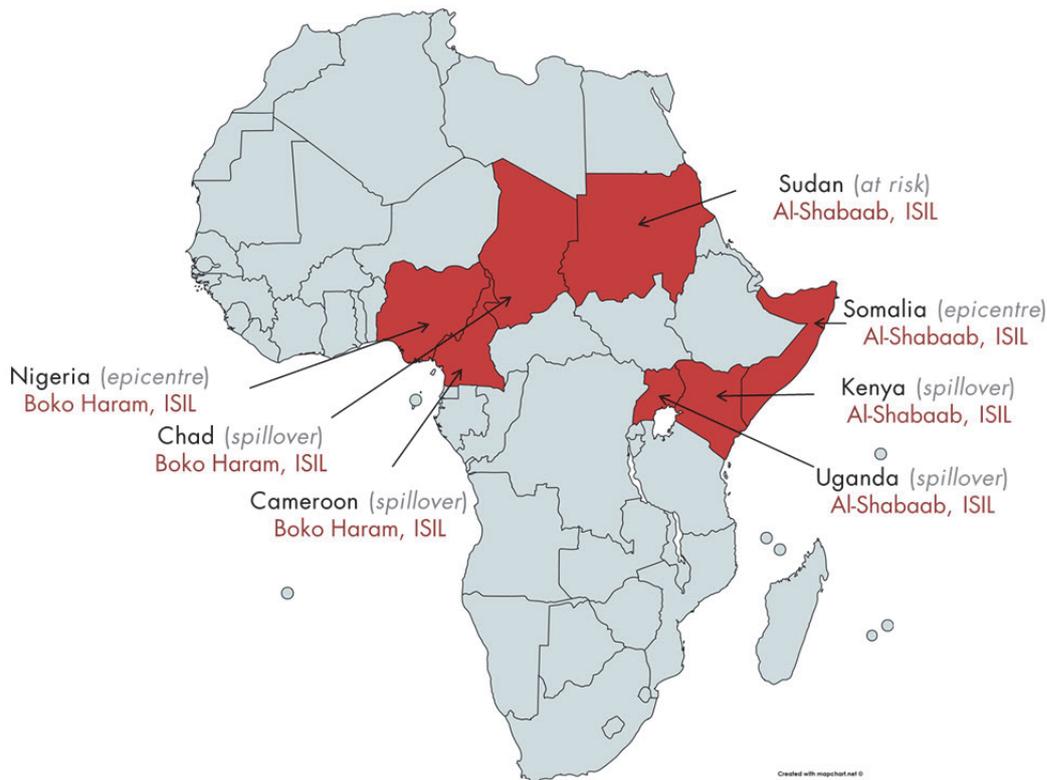
<sup>7</sup> While ISIL operates in many countries worldwide, the focus of this report is on its activities in relation to Nigeria, Somalia, Chad, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan only.

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) (2016); IEP (2015).

<sup>9</sup> The aims, activities, tactics and targeting of each of these groups is described in more detail in Annex B of the Technical Annex, while Chapters 3–5 describe their online strategies in more detail.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP (2015).

**Figure 1.1: Focus countries and terrorist groups<sup>11</sup>**



Regarding counter-radicalisation, the study focuses on existing strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) developed by the national governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda, as well as outlining relevant interventions coordinated by overseas governmental actors, with a particular focus on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) given its active role in the region. In this part of the analysis, the research team examines the extent to which these strategies and programmes focus on countering *online* radicalisation, as well as how far they build social media tools into their design and delivery. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to explore interventions undertaken by technology companies or local civil society actors, and the intention was not to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions examined.

### 1.3. Research approach

This study is based on the application of three research methods: a structured literature review, key informant interviews, and Twitter data analysis. A summary of our research approach is presented below, with further details of the Twitter data analysis approach provided in Annex F of the Technical Annex.

#### Literature review

Drawing on peer-reviewed academic and ‘grey’ literature,<sup>12</sup> the research team conducted a targeted review of literature focusing on the following thematic areas:

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<sup>11</sup> These classifications are applied by the UNDP through its regional classification system (UNDP, 2015).

- (1) The impacts of increased Internet access in Africa on development and security (informing the analysis presented in Chapter 2).
- (2) The use of social media by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL operatives and potential recruits in the seven focus countries (informing Chapters 3–5).
- (3) Government-led strategies in the area of countering online radicalisation in the seven focus countries (informing Chapter 7).

This review was conducted through targeted Google and Google Scholar searches and ‘snowball’ searching.<sup>13</sup> Complementing our search of academic and grey literature in this domain, we conducted an analysis of media reporting from 2012 to 2018.<sup>14</sup> While we recognise that media articles may be politicised or fragmentary, media sources offer the most contemporaneous reporting and are important to building a clearer picture of the three groups. Literature was included in the review on the basis of relevance to the research questions and the scope of the study, and findings were written up in a narrative synthesis structured in relation to the three thematic areas outlined above.<sup>15</sup>

### Key informant interviews

A total of 14 semi-structured<sup>16</sup> telephone interviews were conducted with five groups of stakeholders identified through RAND Europe’s contact networks. These included eight academic experts, two policy experts, two civil society representatives, one local expert and one industry representative with knowledge relating to the three terrorist groups and their activities in Cameron, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The purpose of these key informant interviews was to validate the literature review findings and to address any identifiable gaps in the available data. Interviews focused specifically on the links between social media use and online radicalisation, as well as on associated governmental responses in the seven focus countries.

An interview protocol was used to conduct these interviews,<sup>17</sup> which lasted approximately one hour each. Interview findings were captured in transcripts structured around the questions outlined in Annex H of the Technical Annex.

### Twitter analysis

While the secondary data collection focused on a wide range of technologies and platforms – including Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Kik and Ask.fm<sup>18</sup> – the primary data collection

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Grey literature’ is produced by organisations outside of academic or commercial publishing channels. Examples of grey literature include government documents, technical reports, working papers, doctoral theses and conference proceedings.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Snowball searching’ involves using a given document’s reference list to identify other relevant documents.

<sup>14</sup> Date restrictions were not applied for the search of academic and grey literature to ensure that seminal works were included in the review. The publication dates of the literature reviewed ranged from 1970 to 2017.

<sup>15</sup> The research team reviewed English-language sources only when conducting the literature review.

<sup>16</sup> Semi-structured interviews combine the use of an interview protocol containing specific questions with flexibility to ask unplanned follow-up questions. By contrast, structured interviews follow an interview protocol with all interviewees being asked exactly the same questions in the same order; while unstructured interviews consist of a free-flowing conversation on a given topic.

<sup>17</sup> The interview protocol is presented in Annex H of the Technical Annex.

focused on Twitter data only in order to explore how this particular social media platform is used to discuss the activities of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL.<sup>19</sup> The aims of this approach were to identify the types of online narratives associated with and cultivated by the three terrorist groups at the time of selected major attacks or other high profile events (see Annex C of the Technical Annex).

The Twitter data collection and analysis approach involved three steps:

1. Designing and running targeted search queries aimed at scraping (i.e. gathering) relevant Twitter data and building a project Twitter dataset.
2. Machine-based analysis of the project Twitter dataset through tools employing social network and lexical analysis approaches.
3. Research team analysis and interpretation of results and findings generated through machine-based tools.

These three steps are explained in more detail in Annex F of the Technical Annex, along with an expanded description of the Twitter search parameters.

## Synthesis

To address the first two research questions, findings from the literature review, interviews and Twitter analysis were collated and consolidated during an internal workshop. Following this discussion, the research team wrote up findings as a narrative synthesis focusing on: (i) the use of social media by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL; and (ii) counter-radicalisation interventions in the seven focus countries and their overseas partners. In order to answer the final research question, these findings were then used as a basis for developing policy and programming recommendations for the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The final research question was also addressed by highlighting the role that UNDP could adopt in supporting the uptake of these recommendations, as well as by outlining areas for future research.

## 1.4. Report structure

As Figure 1.2 shows, this report consists of eight substantive chapters covering:

- **Chapter 1:** An introduction to the study objectives and research methods.
- **Chapter 2:** A contextual outline of technology development in Africa.
- **Chapters 3–5:** An overview of the social media strategies of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL.
- **Chapter 6:** An analysis of narratives created by Twitter users to discuss the three groups online.
- **Chapter 7:** An overview of African governmental strategies and selected overseas governmental programmes in relation to countering online radicalisation.

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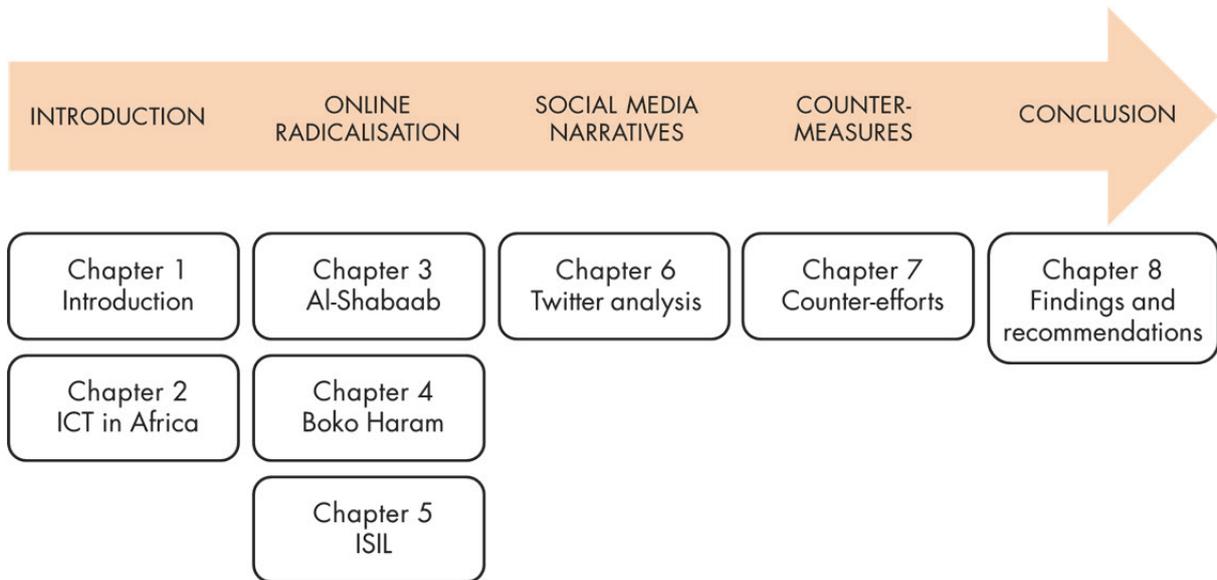
<sup>18</sup> These technology-based platforms and apps all allow users to create and share content and to communicate with other users. An overview of these platforms and apps is provided in Annex E of the accompanying Technical Annex.

<sup>19</sup> Twitter was selected given that all three groups are known to have a presence on this platform and given RAND's data access and analytical capabilities in this area (see, for example, Bodine-Baron et al. 2016). See also Annex F of the Technical Annex for more details regarding the RAND Twitter Portal and RAND-Lex – a RAND-created analytical tool that can be applied to Twitter data analysis.

- **Chapter 8:** A summary of key study findings and recommendations for policy, programming and research.

This report is accompanied by a Technical Annex that acts as a repository of supporting information. It contains an introductory overview (Annex A) and background information in relation to the case study terrorist groups and the countries examined (Annexes B–E), as well as methodological content on the Twitter data analysis and interviews conducted (Annexes F–H).

**Figure 1.2: Structure of this report**



## 2. ICT development in Africa

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This chapter provides a contextual overview of the spread of ICT and, more specifically, social media platforms and services in Africa. It first outlines trends in relation to ICT access in Africa (Section 2.1), before outlining a number of developmental benefits of ICT across the continent (Section 2.2). The chapter then explores why online radicalisation through the use of social media is an area of growing concern. The following chapters examine how three groups with a presence in Africa – al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL – use social media to further their objectives (see Chapters 3-5).

### 2.1. Overview of ICT trends

An increasingly globalised economy has created opportunities for firms in developed countries to operate worldwide, including in emerging economies.<sup>20</sup> Untapped markets in Africa are leading this trend as they are becoming increasingly attractive to developers of new technologies. ICT is an area that has benefited from such investment and market progression, while also supporting the expansion of some of Africa's fastest growing economies in countries such as Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> Internet bandwidth availability for Africa's one billion citizens has grown twenty-fold between 2008 and 2012,<sup>22</sup> and 46 per cent of the overall population in Africa had subscribed to mobile services by the end of 2015.<sup>23</sup>

According to the World Bank and African Development Bank, innovations in ICT are transforming local businesses, driving entrepreneurship and promoting economic growth in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Technology hubs across the continent – including iHub and Nailab in Kenya, Hive Colab and AppLab in Uganda, ActivSpaces in Cameroon, BantaLabs in Senegal, and Kinu in Tanzania – are creating new spaces for collaboration, innovation, training, software and content development.<sup>25</sup> Used by businesses and governments in African countries, these new technology hubs are also helping drive progress in the agricultural and financial sectors, as well as bringing improvements in relation to climate change, education and healthcare policy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Oke et al. (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Oke et al. (2014).

<sup>22</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>23</sup> George et al. (2016). For more detailed Internet user statistics in relation to Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda, see Table D.0.1 in Annex D of the accompanying Technical Annex.

<sup>24</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>25</sup> World Bank (2012).

<sup>26</sup> World Bank (2012).

Experts agree that the technological breakthrough with the greatest impact on the continent relates to the sharp rise in mobile phone use.<sup>27</sup> Africa is the world's fastest growing mobile phone market, with the number of subscribers rising from 10 million to 647 million between 2000 and 2011.<sup>28</sup> Demand for mobile phones continues to grow in Africa, particularly given the affordability of mobile services.<sup>29</sup> The mobile phone market reportedly has a higher growth impact on per capita income in Africa relative to the other communication technologies, such as fixed telephone main lines.<sup>30</sup>

In Africa, mobile phones are said to be used for maintaining networks of family and friends,<sup>31</sup> for mobile banking, for comparing market prices, for collecting health data, for advertising and for finding jobs.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the spread of mobile phones has enabled the rapid growth of social media use on the continent.<sup>33</sup> However, the growth of social media in Africa has proven to be a double-edged sword. While it has supported economic development and encouraged political engagement,<sup>34</sup> social media has also led to a number of less desirable impacts; for example, by equipping terrorist groups with a readily accessible tool with which to propagate their message and recruit followers.

## 2.2. Social media as a force for good

The growing use of Facebook, Twitter, African news apps and other forms of social media in Africa has increased citizens' awareness of political events, changing perceptions both nationally and internationally and giving 'less celebrated actors' a voice in global and local discourse.<sup>35</sup> For example, increasing Twitter use in Kenya is said to be linked to citizens' interest in challenging misrepresentation by the international media in terms of how violence and election campaigns are reported.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Nigeria, social media activity has reportedly been encouraged as a result of the Nigerian mainstream press's reluctance to report sensitive issues, or critique the conduct of Nigerian government officials or powerful corporations.<sup>37</sup>

In particular, Twitter is a form of social media that has revolutionised political discourse<sup>38</sup> and enabled African populations to communicate in new ways. Unlike other platforms, Twitter is easily accessible through a mobile phone and can give ordinary citizens a voice in international online discourse.<sup>39</sup> Modes of Twitter use include critiquing controversial development projects such as the #1millionshirts campaign,<sup>40</sup> and creating 'hashtag' movements such as #RhodesMustFall,<sup>41</sup> and #FeesMustFall.<sup>42</sup> A high

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<sup>27</sup> See: Baro & Endouware (2013); Chavula (2013).

<sup>28</sup> Carmody (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Baro & Endouware (2013); RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 17 November 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Chavula (2013).

<sup>31</sup> Baro & Endouware (2013).

<sup>32</sup> Chavula (2013).

<sup>33</sup> As of 2013, for example, there are several thousand Kenyans on Twitter (Nyabola, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Green (2014).

<sup>35</sup> Kassam et al. (2013); Jacobs (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Nyabola (2017).

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs (2017).

<sup>38</sup> Ruge (2013).

<sup>39</sup> Nyabola (2017).

<sup>40</sup> #1millionshirts refers to a charity campaign dedicated to sending 1,000,000 shirts to African countries (Twitter, 2017a).

proportion of tweeting in Kenya has been done through the use of images in order to dismiss unfounded claims from the international media and to adjust global perceptions of Kenya and its citizens.<sup>43</sup> Kenyans have also resorted to Twitter when propagating messages in relation to the presidential election campaigns in 2013.<sup>44</sup>

Social media also has an important role to play in the continent's economic development. For example, the South African campaigner Thuli Madonsela has raised R660,000 towards a #FeesMustFall fund as part of a social initiative that seeks to provide financial support to disadvantaged students at university.<sup>45</sup> Another study highlights the role of communications technology in supporting the social needs of Africans through interaction via social media, as well as in promoting economic development across the continent through online banking and increased trading opportunities.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.3. The dark side of social media

Despite its role in encouraging political participation and promoting development, social media has also led to a number of less desirable impacts including online payment fraud, online child sexual exploitation, cyber-dependent crime and online radicalisation.<sup>47</sup> Social media may increase opportunities for radicalisation by providing terrorists with a tool to recruit, train and communicate with their followers, sympathisers and other audiences. Social media can provide a level of interaction between terrorists and their potential recruits that cannot be achieved through traditional media,<sup>48</sup> and becomes an easy-access platform for propaganda that can be used by militant groups to market extremist ideas and spread terror to different audiences around the world.<sup>49</sup> It can also reportedly be used to help mobilise funds for extremist activities, as terrorists are able to reach out to sympathetic companies, communities and individuals in order to secure financial support.<sup>50</sup>

The advantages of social media for terrorist groups are significant: information travels across geographic spaces in a matter of seconds, and can often be accessed and shared by anyone.<sup>51</sup> Social media – and the Internet more broadly – can be used by terrorists to reinforce ideological narratives, allow potential recruits to connect with like-minded individuals, conceal users' identities, and normalise radical behaviours by offering an 'echo chamber' in which extreme ideas and suggestions are supported and encouraged.<sup>52</sup> Social media platforms can facilitate radicalisation by promoting content with emotional

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<sup>41</sup> #RhodesMustFall refers to a protest movement originally directed against a statue at the University of Cape Town that commemorates Cecil Rhodes. Twitter (2017c).

<sup>42</sup> #FeesMustFall refers to an effort to help students struggling to pay for their tertiary fees. Twitter (2017b).

<sup>43</sup> Nyabola (2017).

<sup>44</sup> Green (2014).

<sup>45</sup> Mdaka (2016).

<sup>46</sup> Oke et al. (2014).

<sup>47</sup> Europol (2017a).

<sup>48</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 20 September 2017.

<sup>49</sup> RAND Europe interview with Innocent Chiluwa, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>50</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 20 September 2017.

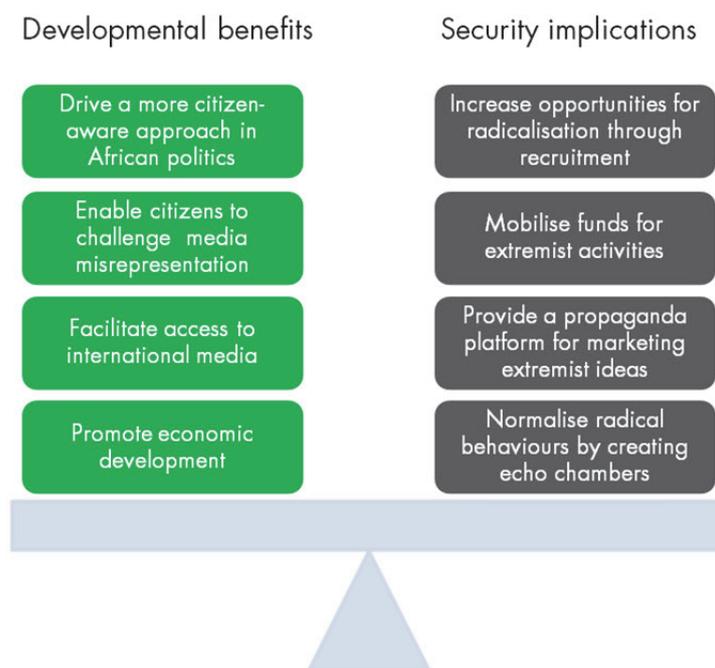
<sup>51</sup> RAND Europe interview with Innocent Chiluwa, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>52</sup> International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (2009).

appeal that taps into the grievances of users and reinforces their frustrations.<sup>53</sup> Given that social media captures users’ ‘preferences’ in its algorithms, less extreme material may be phased out, which may reinforce the extremist ideas of vulnerable users. Furthermore, these platforms offer terrorist groups a ‘quick and easy’ mechanism for sharing propaganda and claiming or publicising attacks to spread terror as political theatre for a global audience.<sup>54</sup>

Social media can also allow terrorists to monitor and play on anti-state grievances felt within different online or real-world communities in order to rally support and incite violence against government structures.<sup>55</sup> Issues concerning poor governance, state corruption, unemployment and instability can all increase the appeal of extremist groups, and are often the subject of extensive discussion on social media.<sup>56</sup> In a number of cases, terrorist groups are said to present tailored narratives on social media to position themselves as an alternative to corrupt and oppressive governments.<sup>57</sup> Figure 2.1 illustrates the positive impacts of social media, while contrasting this with factors that can contribute to online radicalisation.

**Figure 2.1: Impacts of social media on security and development**



Source: RAND analysis, 2018

The following three chapters outline the online strategies of the three Islamist militant groups analysed in this report, namely al-Shabaab (Chapter 3), Boko Haram (Chapter 4) and ISIL (Chapter 5), before exploring the social media narratives created on Twitter in relation to the three terrorist groups (Chapter 6). A more in-depth description of the three groups is presented in Annex B of the accompanying Technical Annex.

<sup>53</sup> RAND Europe interview with Innocent Chiluwa, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>54</sup> RAND Europe interview with academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>55</sup> RAND Europe interview with local expert, 11 January 2018.

<sup>56</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 20 September 2017.

<sup>57</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 20 September 2017.

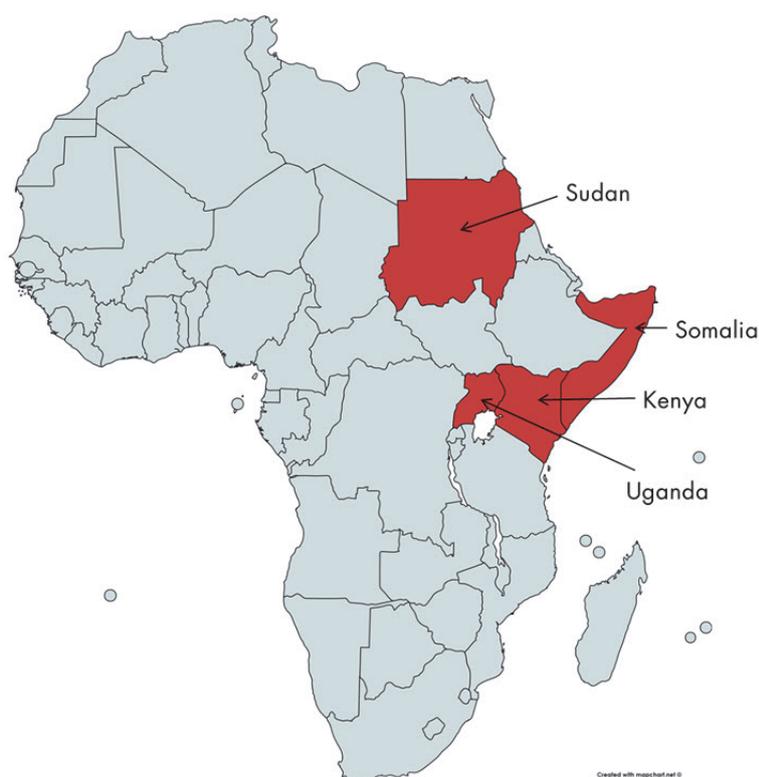
### 3. Online radicalisation: a focus on al-Shabaab

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This chapter provides an overview of al-Shabaab’s online strategy, before describing how social media is used by the group for the purposes of propaganda, recruitment, coordination<sup>58</sup> and fundraising (Section 3.1). It then describes how social media users in the African countries of focus engage with the Somali militant group online (Section 3.2).

Figure 3.1 provides an overview of al-Shabaab’s main areas of operation in Africa. While Figure 3.1 shows where al-Shabaab is physically present (in four of the seven focus countries), the group is primarily based in Somalia. Further background on the group can be found in Annex B of the Technical Annex.

**Figure 3.1: Al-Shabaab’s main areas of operation in Africa**



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<sup>58</sup> The term ‘coordination’ is used in this report to refer to: (1) groups’ attempts to coordinate, centralise and control their social media narratives (see Section 3.1.4); (2) the alignment of a group’s social media strategy with those of other actors (see Sections 4.1.4 and 5.1.4); and (3) the coordination of activities and attacks over social media (see Section 5.1.4).

## 3.1. Al-Shabaab's online strategy

### 3.1.1. Overview

#### Box 3.1: Key points

- Al-Shabaab has used social media to disseminate propaganda, recruit followers, coordinate activities and secure access to funding.
- The Somali group is said to have been particularly active on Twitter, YouTube and its own online al-Kata'ib news channel.<sup>59</sup>
- While al-Shabaab has used several official Twitter accounts since 2011, these have been repeatedly suspended.
- Al-Shabaab's video communications have focused mainly on recruiting foreign fighters and promoting battlefield tactics to demonstrate military strength.
- In areas with limited Internet access, al-Shabaab makes frequent use of radio programming to engage with local communities, including via its own radio station, Radio Andalus.

In 2007, al-Shabaab established itself as one of the more technologically advanced jihadist groups worldwide through early adoption of the Internet as a strategic tool for furthering its political and operational objectives.<sup>60</sup> Since then, the production quality of its online activities has improved and the group's online communications have aimed at appealing to local Somalis, the Somali diaspora, and the international media. Al-Shabaab is now said to use the Internet in order to share propaganda, recruit followers, coordinate activities, and access funding. While the group maintains a presence on a number of social media platforms, it has reportedly been particularly active on Twitter, YouTube and its own al-Kata'ib news channel, which is part of its dedicated media branch.<sup>61</sup>

The online activities of al-Shabaab have changed over time.<sup>62</sup> While al-Shabaab's early use of the Internet in 2006 and 2007 focused on written media communiqués and reports, the frequency of written statements was later reduced in favour of video communications. From 2007 to 2009, al-Shabaab produced videos focusing on recruiting youth, the Somali diaspora and Western foreign fighters. One such recruitment video focused on Omar Hammami, a US citizen who subsequently became the international face of the group until his fall from leader Ahmed Abdi Godane's favour in 2013.

In 2009, the group released its first high-definition (HD) video – 'We are at your service, O' Osama' – which featured Godane pledging allegiance to the al-Qaeda Central (AQC) leader, Osama bin Laden. In subsequent years, al-Shabaab continued to produce slick videos centred on the themes of recruitment and

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<sup>59</sup> Anzalone (2010).

<sup>60</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>61</sup> Anzalone (2010).

<sup>62</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

battlefield tactics.<sup>63</sup> This continued production of videos and the rebranding of the group's media wing from a 'media department' to the 'al-Kataib media foundation' in July 2010, indicates the increased importance placed by the group on garnering international publicity and attracting a wider network of recruits.<sup>64</sup>

From 2011, al-Shabaab turned its attention to Twitter, using this service to report its 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in real time.<sup>65</sup> This demonstrates a concerted effort to become the core narrator of the event, divert attention from official reporting by the Kenyan government, and attract international media attention – as emphasised by the fact that 541 of the 556 tweets from al-Shabaab's Twitter account (97.3 per cent) were in English.<sup>66</sup> This sort of Twitter activity was twice repeated in 2015, both in the al-Shabaab attack on Lido Beach, Mogadishu, in January, and the Maka al-Mukarama hotel attack in March.

To enable these online efforts, al-Shabaab has maintained a series of official Twitter accounts since 2011. In 2011, the group established @HSMPress ('Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen Press Office'), using the al-Qaeda black flag as its Twitter avatar. By December 2011, the group had tweeted 56 times and attracted 2,489 followers, with separate English and Arabic accounts. In January 2013, the English language account was shut down by Twitter. Al-Shabaab then established another account, @HSMPress1, which was active for eight months before being closed down by Twitter in September 2013. The group again established a new account later that month, @HSM\_Press, which it used to live tweet about the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, before this was suspended in September 2013.<sup>67</sup> On each occasion that the group has subsequently attempted to re-open a Twitter account, these accounts have been suspended by Twitter. These reportedly include an account established in December 2013 named 'HSM\_INFO'<sup>68</sup> and the two short-lived accounts used in the coverage of the 2015 Lido Beach and Maka al-Mukarama attacks.

Al-Shabaab's use of social media has adapted to its wider environment, with a greater focus on social media activities as the number of Internet users in Somalia has grown. For example, the move to Twitter and Facebook in recent years reflects an effort to communicate with the approximately 193,000 Internet users in Somalia who use these social media platforms routinely.<sup>69</sup> However, given that only a small fraction of the population has Internet access (1.7 per cent), al-Shabaab also runs its own radio station, Radio Andalus, and makes frequent use of radio stations in order to engage with and influence local communities, alongside the more internationally-focused efforts of social media campaigns on Twitter and other platforms.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens et al (2012).

<sup>64</sup> Anzalone (2010).

<sup>65</sup> Mair (2016).

<sup>66</sup> Mair (2017).

<sup>67</sup> Alexander (2013).

<sup>68</sup> Mohamed (2013); Mair (2016).

<sup>69</sup> A 2016 figure from BBC News (2017).

<sup>70</sup> BBC News (2017).

### 3.1.2. Propaganda

#### Box 3.2: Key points

- Al-Shabaab's propaganda activities have focused on publicising its activities, promoting its operational successes, and criticising the government of Somalia, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the West.
- Twitter has equipped al-Shabaab with a tool to deliver 'sound bite'<sup>71</sup> messages that can be rapidly picked up and shared by the mainstream media.
- The group's decision to rebrand its media wing as the 'al-Kataib media foundation' in 2010 allowed the branch to position itself as a news agency, targeting both supporters and countries involved militarily in Somalia (e.g. Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the US).
- Beyond propaganda videos, al-Shabaab issues online propaganda magazines (e.g. 'Gaidi Mtaani – Terrorist on the Street').

As outlined in Section 3.1.1, al-Shabaab has used social media platforms in order to publicise its activities worldwide,<sup>72</sup> as well as to criticise the government of Somalia, AMISOM and the West more generally.<sup>73</sup> For example, its YouTube videos have often featured footage of jihadi training exercises and successful ambushes or attacks.<sup>74</sup> These media productions have become increasingly sophisticated over time: while early videos featured grainy, hand-held footage, al-Shabaab's video has become more professionalised in terms of style, definition and picture quality. Al-Kataib productions are now quasi-news documentaries designed to attract the attention of the Somali population, domestic journalists and foreign reporters and to promote the group and its activities.

Twitter has equipped al-Shabaab with a useful propaganda tool given its ability to deliver sound bite messages that can be quickly picked up and disseminated by the mainstream media.<sup>75</sup> According to a previous content analysis of al-Shabaab's tweets,<sup>76</sup> al-Shabaab's primary aim on Twitter is to project its own overarching narrative of events, demonstrating the group's use of Twitter as an outlet for its propaganda messaging. The ability of al-Shabaab's use of Twitter to attract substantial media attention can be seen in the global media response to its real-time tweeting during the 2013 Westgate mall attack in Nairobi. Facebook is similarly used to promote violent extremist messaging and propaganda.<sup>77</sup>

The decision to rebrand al-Shabaab's media wing as the 'al-Kataib media foundation' in 2010 was taken so that the branch could attempt to position itself as a legitimate news agency, targeting not only fighters

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<sup>71</sup> 'Sound bite' messages refer to short extracts taken from interviews or speeches often made in newspapers, on television or radio. Cambridge Dictionary (2018).

<sup>72</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>73</sup> RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>75</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>76</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. (2012).

<sup>77</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 17 November 2017.

and sympathisers but also citizens of countries involved militarily in Somalia such as Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, the US and Uganda with its tailored messaging. Under the rebranded media wing, for instance, al-Shabaab released video productions from 2010 specifically targeting Burundian and Ugandan audiences and urging their governments to withdraw forces from AMISOM.

One such production is the propaganda video entitled ‘The African Crusaders’, which documents al-Shabaab’s 2011 attack on Burundian soldiers in Mogadishu. Another example with a more international focus is the propaganda video, ‘An Eye for an Eye’, which was released after the Woolwich murder of Lee Rigby in London in 2013. This video attracted widespread media attention through its messaging, which condemned Britain’s actions against Muslims globally and called for more lone wolf attacks in the West.<sup>78</sup> Beyond propaganda videos, al-Shabaab has also issued online written propaganda magazines to spread its message; for example, the Swahili publication, ‘Gaidi Mtaani’ (‘Terrorist on the Street’), which is released in PDF form<sup>79</sup> and is said to target a younger audience.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.1.3. Recruitment

#### **Box 3.3: Key points**

- Al-Shabaab has traditionally targeted two groups for recruitment: domestic audiences inside Somalia and the Somali diaspora community.
- While the group has used YouTube to upload several recruitment videos, YouTube’s content removal activities have hampered these efforts.
- Al-Shabaab has engaged more privately with potential recruits through more closed channels, e.g. chatrooms involving military commanders and diaspora fighters.
- While al-Shabaab has used social media to engage with potential recruits online, the role of friends and relatives is also influential in attracting recruits through more traditional means.

Al-Shabaab has used the Internet to appeal to Somali diaspora youth and play on their sense of alienation, identity crisis and lack of purpose.<sup>81</sup> In a vacuum without ‘employment possibilities and in an environment of pervasive cynicism’,<sup>82</sup> youth are reportedly drawn into and can be recruited by terrorist organisations such as al-Shabaab. This is a trend that has been observed more widely in nearby countries such as Sudan where the percentage of the population living under the poverty line is high at almost 47 per cent.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Anzalone (2016a).

<sup>79</sup> Anderson & McKnight (2015).

<sup>80</sup> Anderson & McKnight (2015).

<sup>81</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>82</sup> Avis (2016).

<sup>83</sup> Avis (2016). This trend is by no means unique to Sudan (see Gurr, 1970; Stewart, 2002; and Lichbach, 1989).

The results of a 2015 Afrobarometer national attitude survey found that in Sudan ‘poverty’ was one of the most frequently cited reasons that people believed to be motivating their compatriots to join extremist organisations (23 per cent), with ‘unemployment’ also mentioned as an important factor (18 per cent).<sup>84</sup> While UNDP PAVE (Partnering Against Violent Extremism) research observes a ‘positive correlation between poverty and first contact with, and joining, a violent extremist group’,<sup>85</sup> this research also finds that ‘poverty and unemployment...are not primary drivers [of violent extremism] across Sudan’.<sup>86</sup>

Other reasons for joining extremist organisations cited by Afrobarometer respondents included religious beliefs (16 per cent), lack of education (7 per cent) and the government being perceived as being ineffective or not providing for its citizens (8 per cent).<sup>87</sup> The UNDP *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report found that over half of respondents (51 per cent) identified religion as a reason for joining a violent extremist group.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, up to 71 per cent of the voluntary group of respondents identified ‘government action’, including ‘traumatic incidents involving state security forces’, as the immediate reason for joining.<sup>89</sup> Less frequently cited reasons for joining a violent extremist group included the ‘ethnic principles of the group’, the ‘political ideas of the group’, ‘service provision by the organisation’ and ‘social isolation’.<sup>90</sup>

Between 2007 and 2009, al-Shabaab featured new diaspora recruits in video testimonies calling on Muslims to return to the Somali homeland and participate in jihad against the ‘new crusaders’. These were shared via the al-Kataib news channel and a range of sympathetic online news media networks and websites, including Somali MeMo and Calamada.<sup>91</sup> In 2009, for example, al-Shabaab released a recruitment video featuring the US foreign fighter Omar Hammami in order to attract other foreign fighters.<sup>92</sup> Al-Shabaab further ran its own official website featuring news, video clips, religious guidance, edicts and issuance of threats, until this was closed down in 2009.<sup>93</sup> While al-Shabaab has used YouTube to upload several recruitment videos, these efforts have been hampered by YouTube’s content removal efforts.<sup>94</sup>

The group has also used online chatrooms to communicate with followers and potential recruits.<sup>95</sup> The use of these chatrooms offers al-Shabaab the opportunity to engage more privately with potential recruits and individuals it plans to radicalise when compared to more open platforms such as Twitter or

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<sup>84</sup> Bentley et al. (2016, 9).

<sup>85</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>86</sup> UNDP (2017c, 43).

<sup>87</sup> Bentley et al. (2016, 10, 15).

<sup>88</sup> UNDP (2017a, 5).

<sup>89</sup> UNDP (2017a, 87).

<sup>90</sup> UNDP (2017a, 46).

<sup>91</sup> Anzalone (2016a).

<sup>92</sup> Anzalone (2016a).

<sup>93</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>94</sup> A search of YouTube using ‘al-Kataib’ yielded some results but as Menkhaus (2014, 315) highlights, most of its videos were removed from the site for violating YouTube policies.

<sup>95</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

Facebook.<sup>96</sup> Investigations of diaspora recruitment found that al-Shabaab often included its military commanders in chatrooms, where they fielded questions about on-going operations, as well as involving diaspora fighters to attract recruits.<sup>97</sup> These early recruitment measures appear to have been successful in light of the hundreds of members of the Somali European and US diasporas joining the group between 2009 and 2013.<sup>98</sup> Online recruitment efforts in the last five years appear to have been largely successful as the group continues to focus on East Africa and Swahili speakers, with media operations playing to the anti-state grievances of Kenyan Muslims regarding government persecution.<sup>99</sup>

Al-Shabaab has traditionally targeted two groups for recruitment: domestic audiences inside Somalia and the Somali diaspora community.<sup>100</sup> Recruits from the Horn of Africa are particularly important for the group: al-Shabaab's media operatives have increasingly released videos, audio messages, written statements and publications aimed at a Swahili-speaking audience, and the number of Swahili-speaking Kenyans featuring in recruitment videos has increased since 2013.<sup>101</sup> Interviews with 88 former al-Shabaab fighters in Mogadishu in September 2014 revealed that young boys were persuaded to join the group after being given mobile phones and the promise of up to \$50 per month, illustrating how the group has also used technology to incentivise recruitment.<sup>102</sup>

While al-Shabaab has evidently used YouTube videos and targeted chatroom communications to engage with potential recruits, it is important not to overlook the 'real-world' focus of many of al-Shabaab's recruitment efforts. According to one interviewee, social media offers a tool that can be used to spark the interest and curiosity of a potential recruit, after which interactions are moved from open platforms – such as Facebook – to more private channels like WhatsApp and/or in-person interaction.<sup>103</sup> Peer group influence also appears to be an important factor in attracting recruits: one study found that 38 per cent of respondents were introduced to al-Shabaab through a friend, and 13 per cent were recruited by a relative.<sup>104</sup> It is noted in this study, however, that multiple overlaying factors can influence individual radicalisation, and that the process of radicalisation differs from person to person.<sup>105</sup> In the East African context, physical interaction with al-Shabaab members similarly remains an important way in which individuals join the group. Al Shabaab has often exploited clan divisions in particular to attract recruits, especially from among the region's youth (see Section 3.2).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>98</sup> Pantucci & Sayyid (2013).

<sup>99</sup> Anzalone (2016b).

<sup>100</sup> Sen (2016).

<sup>101</sup> Anzalone (2016b).

<sup>102</sup> Federal Republic of Somalia (2016).

<sup>103</sup> RAND Europe interview with civil society representative, 17 November 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Botha (2014).

<sup>105</sup> Botha (2014).

<sup>106</sup> Botha (2014).

### 3.1.4. Coordination and funding

#### Box 3.4: Key points

- In comparison to its online propaganda and recruitment efforts, al-Shabaab has been less successful in using social media as a way of coordinating its activities.
- Independent jihadists' activities on Facebook and Twitter have undermined al-Shabaab's control over centralised messaging and led to open criticism of the group.
- The Internet has reportedly enabled al-Shabaab to raise funds by linking operatives to sympathetic Salafi networks interested in offering financial support.

Al-Shabaab has arguably had less success in using social media as a coordination instrument than in its propaganda and recruitment efforts. This is because the rapid growth of Internet usage by al-Shabaab fighters has led to a 'loss of control' and decentralisation of the group's messaging.<sup>107</sup> For example, the uncoordinated use of Facebook and Twitter has allowed different independent jihadists to release their own tweets and Facebook posts which, in turn, have undermined al-Shabaab's control over centralised messaging.<sup>108</sup> While the distribution of propaganda was previously controlled through password-protected jihadist Internet forums, these restrictions now largely do not exist and propaganda-sharing can be done freely online. These changes have led to a wider range and greater incoherence of messaging, as well as more open criticism of the group by internal and external voices, as demonstrated by US jihadist Omar Hammami's vocal criticism of Godane.<sup>109</sup>

The Internet has, however, reportedly assisted al-Shabaab in raising funds by allowing the group to establish links with wealthy Salafi networks interested in supporting its global jihadist campaign.<sup>110</sup> For example, in August 2009 the group launched an online forum as part of a two-week fundraising event in support of its fighters in the regions of Hiraan, Bay/Bakool and Gedo. This resulted in donations of over \$40,000 from the Somali diaspora, with al-Shabaab leaders requesting cash contributions be sent through a hawala<sup>111</sup> to a point of contact based in Mogadishu.<sup>112</sup> This example illustrates how al-Shabaab has used the Internet to raise funds in support of its fighters.

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<sup>107</sup> Menkaus (2014).

<sup>108</sup> Menkhaus (2014).

<sup>109</sup> Anzalone (2016a).

<sup>110</sup> Agbibo (2014).

<sup>111</sup> 'Hawala' is a system of money transfer based on promises and honour, practised in the Middle East and parts of Asia and Africa (Collins Dictionary, 2018).

<sup>112</sup> Monitoring Group on Somalia (2010).

## 3.2. Engagement of social media users with al-Shabaab

### Box 3.5: Key points

- Available literature relating to social media users' online engagement with al-Shabaab typically focuses on the US and (to a lesser extent) the UK.
- The cases of Zachary Chesser and Michael Adebawale demonstrate how Western-based individuals have engaged with al-Shabaab by exchanging emails with influential leaders and communicating with other extremists on social media platforms.
- At the time of al-Shabaab's Westgate attack, there was little Twitter engagement between al-Shabaab's Twitter accounts and individual Twitter users, which may be linked to the group's desire to control the narrative.
- In-person engagement remains an important way for individuals based in the Horn of Africa to engage with al-Shabaab members.

While there is documented evidence of social media users engaging with al-Shabaab online, these tend to focus on individuals based in the US and (to a lesser extent) the UK.<sup>113</sup> These are countries on which al-Shabaab has focused in order to attract foreign fighters to its ranks. One such individual is Zachary Chesser, from northern Virginia, who was reportedly radicalised over the Internet, which he also used to post his views in support of Islamist terrorist groups subsequent to being radicalised. He came to support al-Shabaab by watching the sermons of radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and exchanging emails with the cleric about joining al-Shabaab.<sup>114</sup> In July 2010, Chesser was arrested en route to Somalia, charged with providing material support to a designated terrorist organisation, and later sentenced to 25 years in federal prison.

In another case, UK citizen Michael Adebawale used Facebook to interact with other extremists when plotting to murder Fusilier Lee Rigby in Woolwich, London – an attack which al-Shabaab subsequently claimed it had directed. While communicating with another extremist online, whose affiliation is unknown, Adebawale had expressed his intent to 'murder a soldier in the most graphic and emotive manner' using different methods including the use of a knife.<sup>115</sup> These examples demonstrate how Western-based individuals have engaged with al-Shabaab through a variety of methods, including the exchange of emails with influential leaders and use of social media platforms to communicate with other extremists with similar worldviews on matters of ideology and terrorist tactics.

To focus on one of al-Shabaab's most publicised attacks – the Westgate attack of 21 September 2013 – there was notably little engagement between al-Shabaab's Twitter accounts and individual Twitter users. Only two per cent of the 556 tweets issued from al-Shabaab's eight Twitter accounts during the attack

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<sup>113</sup> See, for example, the case of Michael Adebawale and the Woolwich attack: BBC News (2014).

<sup>114</sup> US Department of Justice (2014).

<sup>115</sup> Dominiczak et al. (2014).

involved communicating directly with individual Twitter users, and none of those tweets led to a discussion.<sup>116</sup> Five of the group's Twitter accounts responded to specific journalists and other individuals.<sup>117</sup> One explanation for this lack of engagement with individual Twitter users is a reluctance to give others control of the narrative, thus diverting attention from al-Shabaab's Twitter communications at a time of high publicity.<sup>118</sup>

In the East African context, it should be noted that physical interaction remains an important way for individuals to engage with al-Shabaab members. Somalia is a country organised around clan membership and a segmentary lineage model involving strong patrilineal linkages, clan allegiances and *diya*. The latter represents enforceable 'blood contracts', involving financial compensation being paid to the victim or to the children of victims in cases of murder, bodily harm or property damage.<sup>119</sup> Al-Shabaab has often exploited these clan divisions to attract (often young) recruits, and the in-person influence of friends and relatives is assessed as being a factor in leading individuals to engage with the group (see also Section 3.1.3).<sup>120</sup>

Chapter 6 examines some of the main online narratives in relation to al-Shabaab, with a particular focus on how social media users have discussed the group on Twitter.

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<sup>116</sup> Mair (2017). Eight accounts analysed were: @HSM\_Press, HSM\_PRESS2, HSM\_PressOffice, @HSM\_SUPER-STARS, @HSM\_official1, @HSM\_PR, @HSM\_PRESOFFICE2 and @HSMPROffice.

<sup>117</sup> Account handles with direct user engagement were: @HSM\_official1, @HSM\_PRESS2, @HSM\_PR, @HSMPresOFFICE2 and @HSMPROffice

<sup>118</sup> Mair (2017).

<sup>119</sup> Mair (2017).

<sup>120</sup> Mair (2017).

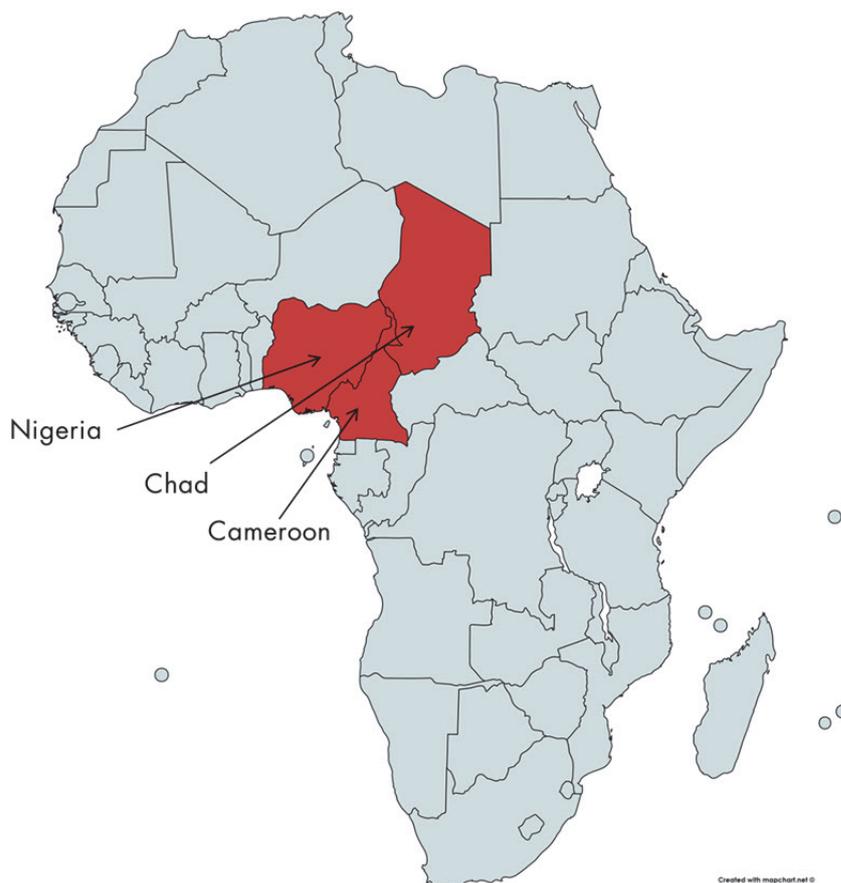
## 4. Online radicalisation: a focus on Boko Haram

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This chapter first outlines the key features of Boko Haram’s online strategy. The following sections then provide an overview of how social media is used by the Nigerian militant group to spread propaganda, secure recruits and coordinate with its followers (Section 4.1). Finally, it summarises how social media users interact with the Nigerian militant group online (Section 4.2).

Boko Haram’s main areas of operation in Africa are presented in Figure 4.1 below. While the scope of this study focuses solely on Nigeria (Boko Haram’s primary centre of operations), Cameroon and Chad, it should be noted that Boko Haram is also active in a number of other West African countries, including Benin and Niger.<sup>121</sup>

**Figure 4.1: Boko Haram’s main areas of operation in Africa**



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<sup>121</sup> Further background on the group can be found in Annex B of the Technical Annex.

## 4.1. Boko Haram's online strategy

### 4.1.1. Overview

#### Box 4.1: Key points

- Boko Haram has used social media primarily to share propaganda and – to a lesser extent – attract recruits and coordinate its activities.
- While the Nigerian militant group previously favoured more traditional forms of media (e.g. audio cassettes, leaflets, open air lectures), since 2015 it has made greater use of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to disseminate its message.
- While Boko Haram's use of social media is not as sophisticated as that of al-Shabaab and ISIL, it has become more advanced since pledging allegiance to ISIL in March 2015.
- The group's video content typically focuses on on-going attacks, operational victories and beheadings of hostages.
- Boko Haram's use of social media has been influenced by a number of contextual factors, including rapidly growing Internet access in Nigeria in recent years.

Boko Haram's online strategy has shifted in recent years. It initially made use of more traditional types of media, including public statements, leaflets and open air lectures. Before moving to online media, Boko Haram attempted to establish a newspaper<sup>122</sup> and distributed audio cassettes with recorded messages from Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau.<sup>123</sup> Since 2015, the group has favoured social media platforms including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.<sup>124</sup> At the time of writing (February 2018), analysis shows that Boko Haram's use of social media is not as sophisticated as that of al-Shabaab. Nonetheless, it appears to have become more advanced in its techniques following Boko Haram leader Shekau's declaration of allegiance (bay'ah) to ISIL on 7 March 2015 and its adoption of the name 'Islamic State West Africa Province' (ISWAP) the following month. According to one interviewee, Boko Haram's popularity grew after its pledge of allegiance to ISIL and associated expansion of its social media strategy, which 'positively shaped youth perceptions of the group'.<sup>125</sup>

In 2009, Boko Haram lacked an online strategy; instead, it contacted journalists via individual members of the Nigerian militant group and distributed audio cassettes on Nigerian street corners containing the lectures of its former leader, Mohammed Yusuf.<sup>126</sup> Boko Haram's subsequent pledge of allegiance to ISIL and rebranding, however, has exposed the group to a well-established and significant social media base

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<sup>122</sup> This attempt was unsuccessful due to disagreements over the newspaper content (RAND Europe interview with Professor Isaac Olawale Robert, academic expert, 8 September 2017).

<sup>123</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Isaac Olawale Robert, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>124</sup> Olawale (2013).

<sup>125</sup> RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Abubakar (2017).

and the expertise of its ISIL ally (see Chapter 5).<sup>127</sup> Since becoming ISWAP in 2015, the group has set up its own media department, termed the Media Office of West Africa Province<sup>128</sup>, has made greater use of YouTube and Twitter (e.g. establishing its own Arabic Twitter account, @Al Urwah al-Wuthqa, in 2015),<sup>129</sup> and has improved the quality of its videos distributed via these platforms.<sup>130</sup> Despite these changes, the core content of Boko Haram's videos has remained consistent, still focusing on on-going attacks, operational victories, and beheadings of hostages.<sup>131</sup>

The increasing use of social media by Boko Haram operatives, followers and potential recruits has been influenced by several contextual factors in Nigeria. According to one interviewee, Boko Haram's growth has been enabled by potential recruits' grievances against the state,<sup>132</sup> for example in relation to Yusuf's extrajudicial killing in police custody. Furthermore, social media is now much more widely available given that Internet access in Nigeria tripled between 2012 and 2015.<sup>133</sup> The increasing interest of disaffected Nigerian youth in using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms has led Boko Haram to increasingly focus its efforts online, as further aided by the group's connection to ISIL.<sup>134</sup> As outlined in the following sections, Boko Haram now appears to use social media primarily for propaganda purposes, with some (albeit more limited) evidence of its use for recruitment and coordination.

#### 4.1.2. Propaganda

##### **Box 4.2: Key points**

- Boko Haram's propaganda activities have mainly focused on criticising the Nigerian government and displaying the group's tactics and weapons.
- One of the group's most widely known propaganda feats was the kidnapping of 276<sup>135</sup> schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014, sparking an international media campaign referred to as #BringBackOurGirls.
- Since pledging allegiance to ISIL, Boko Haram's online propaganda has become more like that of ISIL (e.g. adding the jihadist black flag rayat al-uqab to its logo, and including ISIL's anthem in its videos).

Boko Haram has focused its online activities on promoting its cause and publicising its activities. Boko Haram's social media propaganda reportedly often focuses on anti-state grievances,<sup>136</sup> as well as on

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<sup>127</sup> BBC News (2015).

<sup>128</sup> Mahmood (2017).

<sup>129</sup> Abubakar (2017).

<sup>130</sup> RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>131</sup> Mahmood (2017).

<sup>132</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Isaac Olawale Robert, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>133</sup> Mahmood (2017).

<sup>134</sup> Olawale (2013).

<sup>135</sup> ECOWAS (2016); BBC News (2017).

displaying the group's weapons and tactics.<sup>137</sup> The group's early propaganda strategy centred on Yusuf's recorded and open air lectures.<sup>138</sup> Following its early emergence in 2002, the group also regularly briefed local media, with former Boko Haram spokesperson, Abu Qaqa, briefing the press on at least 53 separate occasions between 2010 and 2012.<sup>139</sup> However, following Qaqa's death in September 2012, Shekau took over the group's messaging efforts, which led to a surge in video publications and a shift away from briefing local media sources. Neither the production style nor video quality, however, improved markedly until 2015.

Since its bay'ah, the quality, content and style of Boko Haram's online propaganda has become more like that of ISIL. For example, Boko Haram has added the jihadist black flag (rayat al-uqab) to its previous crossed-guns-and-Quran logo, and ISIL's anthem, 'My Umma, Dawn has Arrived', to the musical repertoire of its videos. In one video, released in November 2015, Shekau declared that he was establishing his own 'Islamic Caliphate' and sending his greetings to the 'brothers' in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, as well as to 'the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria'.<sup>140</sup>

ISIL's behind-the-scenes influence on Boko Haram's propaganda operations led to the creation of a Twitter account, @Al Urwah al-Wuthqa, in 2015.<sup>141</sup> Boko Haram's videos increasingly bear the hallmark of ISIL as they now feature high-quality video footage, include English and Arabic subtitles, and showcase brutal tactics.<sup>142</sup> In one March 2015 video, for example, Boko Haram beheads two Nigerian 'spies', echoing ISIL's violent tactics and its frequent posting of beheading videos. The Nigerian group has also started posting pictures online of its fighters on the frontline in Gambaru, Nigeria, and of its 'cubs' or child soldiers, a development that further illustrates the influence of ISIL, who regularly post images and videos of child soldiers on Twitter and in its online propaganda magazines, Dabiq and Rumiyah.<sup>143</sup>

One of Boko Haram's most widely known propaganda feats has been the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, Northern Nigeria.<sup>144</sup> Following the kidnapping, carried out on 14–15 April 2014, Boko Haram released several grainy videos that included footage of Shekau declaring that the girls were 'slaves', which led to an international media campaign referred to as '#BringBackOurGirls'. The poor quality of Boko Haram's most high-profile video footage is reflective of the group's lack of media sophistication before declaring allegiance to ISIL the following year.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017; RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>137</sup> RAND Europe interview with Innocent Chiluwa, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Olawale (2013).

<sup>139</sup> Mahmood (2017).

<sup>140</sup> Olawale (2013).

<sup>141</sup> The account was shut down by Twitter in February 2015 for violating its terms of use, see Laing (2015).

<sup>142</sup> BBC News (2015).

<sup>143</sup> Jihadology (2015).

<sup>144</sup> ECOWAS (2016); BBC News (2017).

<sup>145</sup> Abubakar (2017).

### 4.1.3. Recruitment

#### **Box 4.3: Key points**

- Boko Haram's early recruitment efforts involved circulating audio cassettes and CDs with recordings of speeches made by former leader Yusuf and his then-deputies, Shekau and Nur.
- Before its suspension, the group's Al Urwah al Wuthqa Twitter account was used to attract new recruits through, for example, tweeting links to recruitment videos.
- However, Boko Haram's use of the Internet for online recruitment is not as overt as that of al-Shabaab or ISIL.
- Similarly to al-Shabaab, physical and online influences both appear to affect recruitment, with offline recruitment involving abductions, the use of 'loans' from Boko Haram members, and the influence of friends, families and business colleagues.

Complementing its propaganda activities, Boko Haram has used various technologies for recruitment purposes over the years. In the early 2000s, Boko Haram's recruitment activities involved circulating audio cassettes containing the speeches of Yusuf and his then-deputies, Shekau and Muhammad Nur. These cassettes were distributed on street corners to the group's followers and the general public, some of whom were reportedly attracted to the speeches' condemnation of corruption and injustice in Nigeria.<sup>146</sup> CDs were also circulated to the general public before the sermons were later adapted for YouTube.

Despite being suspended just one month later, in February 2015 Boko Haram's Twitter account al Urwah al Wuthqa tweeted images of child soldiers at training camps, as well as a link to a video of group members explaining their motivations for fighting for Boko Haram.<sup>147</sup> This demonstrated an effort by the group to use Twitter in order to attract new recruits by using existing members to appeal to individuals. However, Boko Haram's use of the Internet for online recruitment is not as overt as that of other terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab or ISIL. Al-Shabaab has produced specific recruitment videos and has reportedly made use of chatrooms to contact potential recruits directly (see Chapter 3), while ISIL has used a variety of platforms, including Telegram, Kik and WhatsApp, to facilitate direct contact with sympathisers (see Chapter 5). By contrast, such proactive techniques are less well utilised in the case of Boko Haram.

Physical and online factors both appear to influence recruitment to the group. On the one hand, a 2016 report found that physical recruitment is still important to the Nigerian group. It cites both abductions and the use of monetary 'loans' from Boko Haram members as a way to attract recruits, given the high rate of poverty in north-eastern Nigeria, and noting that almost all former members interviewed said their decision to join the group had been influenced by friends, family members or a business colleague.<sup>148</sup> On

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<sup>146</sup> Abubakar (2017).

<sup>147</sup> Laing (2015).

<sup>148</sup> Mercy Corps (2016).

the other hand, a 2014 study found that 21 per cent of youth in Borno state in north-eastern Nigeria identified audio and video messaging as a significant influence on radicalisation, only second to the influence of independent preachers.<sup>149</sup> In cases where young people are based in remote Nigerian villages without access to social media, Boko Haram operatives are said to use ‘middle men’ to share messages published on social media with people on the ground.<sup>150</sup> While Boko Haram’s online strategy has focused on recruiting followers, it is therefore also clear that ‘offline’ personal relationships also play a central role in recruitment.<sup>151</sup>

#### 4.1.4. Coordination

##### **Box 4.4: Key points**

- It is only recently that Boko Haram has used social media to coordinate its activities.
- Boko Haram’s pledge of allegiance to ISIL has led to closer social media coordination with the central leadership in Iraq and Syria.

It is not until recently that Boko Haram has used social media for coordination purposes on occasion. Boko Haram’s pledge of allegiance to ISIL has led to closer coordination of its social media strategy with the central leadership in Iraq and Syria.<sup>152</sup> On 27 January 2015, a video with Boko Haram’s spokesman Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi was released by an ISIL media source. This featured an interview with al-Barnawi and demonstrated a marked improvement in production quality.<sup>153</sup> This release was also publicised by Boko Haram’s Twitter account, al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, and subsequently uploaded, tweeted and spread through ISIL channels.<sup>154</sup> The connection between ISIL and Boko Haram is demonstrated by online coordination of social media and Internet activities, reflected in a social media strategy that adheres to the official ISIL line.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> CLEEN Foundation (2014).

<sup>150</sup> RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

<sup>151</sup> The importance of ‘offline’ influences in the radicalisation process is also highlighted by studies including UNDP (2017a) and von Behr et al. (2013).

<sup>152</sup> BBC News (2015).

<sup>153</sup> Jihadology (2015).

<sup>154</sup> Jihadology (2015).

<sup>155</sup> BBC News (2015).

## 4.2. Engagement of social media users with Boko Haram

### **Box 4.5: Key points**

- There is little available evidence of engagement by social media users with Boko Haram.
- Boko Haram reportedly engages with its audience in some cases through ‘middle men’ who relay social media messages to local communities without Internet access.
- Similarly to the East African context, West Africa-based followers of Boko Haram have often engaged with the Nigerian militants through personal connections.

The literature reviewed as part of this study indicates that Boko Haram possesses a less sophisticated social media strategy than ISIL or al-Shabaab, and that there is little concrete evidence of online engagement between social media users and the group. Boko Haram is said to reach its wider audience through a small group of individuals who act as ‘middle men’ and who have access to social media platforms used for communicating directly with Boko Haram members.<sup>156</sup>

Similarly to the East African context (see Section 3.2), it should be noted that West Africa-based followers of Boko Haram have often engaged with the Nigerian militants through personal contacts. As described in more detail in Section 4.1.3, individuals’ decisions to join Boko Haram have often been influenced by their friends, family members or business colleagues. Nonetheless, key Nigerian political figures have also pointed to the problem of individuals using social media to engage with the group. For example, the Emir of Kano, a Northern Nigerian state, identified social media as a driver of youth radicalisation and membership of Boko Haram while speaking at the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Ramadan Lecture organised by VON, NTA/FRCN<sup>157</sup> in Kaduna.<sup>158</sup>

Chapter 6 examines some of the main online narratives in relation to Boko Haram, with a focus on how social media users have discussed the Nigerian militant group on Twitter.

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<sup>156</sup> RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

<sup>157</sup> VON refers to the Voice of Nigeria, a Radio station, and NTA/FRCN refers to the Nigerian Television Authority and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria.

<sup>158</sup> Ahmadu-Suka (2015).



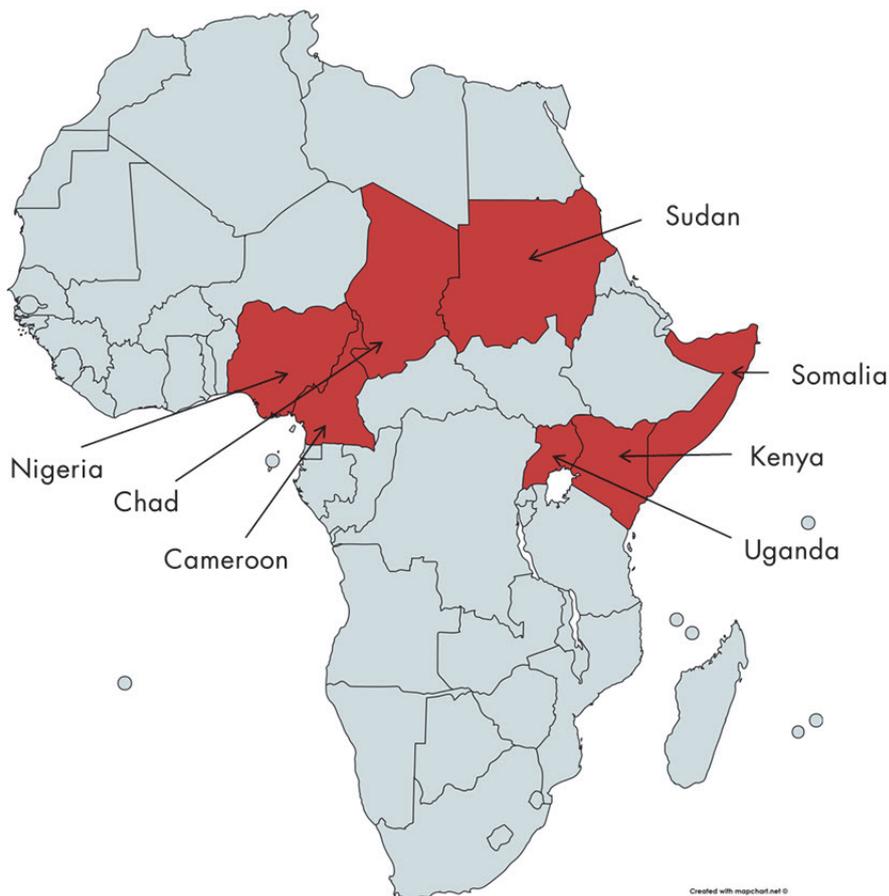
## 5. Online radicalisation: a focus on ISIL

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This chapter describes the key features of ISIL's online strategy, before describing how social media is used by the group for the purposes of propaganda, recruitment and coordination with its followers (Section 5.1), and outlining how social media users in turn engage with ISIL online (Section 5.2).

Figure 5.1 below shows that ISIL has a presence in or links to all seven countries within the parameters of the study.<sup>159</sup> Further background on the group can be found in Annex B of the Technical Annex.

**Figure 5.1: ISIL's main areas of operation in Africa**



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<sup>159</sup> It should be noted that ISIL controls territory in Syria and Libya, and has made incursions into Lebanon, Iran and Jordan. ISIL-linked groups also operate in Algeria, Pakistan and the Philippines, among other countries. However, as outlined in Section 1.2, the focus of this study is on ISIL's activities within the seven focus countries in Africa only.

## 5.1. ISIL's online strategy

### 5.1.1. Overview

#### Box 5.1: Key points

- ISIL has the most sophisticated social media strategy of the three groups.
- The group uses a wider range of platforms than al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, JustPaste.it, Kik and Ask.fm.
- Of these platforms, ISIL has a preference for Twitter but has recently shifted online operations to Telegram in response to Twitter crackdowns and anonymity concerns.
- ISIL's emphasis on social media activities is likely to be linked to its far-reaching support base, which is more international than that of the other two groups.

ISIL has a highly sophisticated social media strategy that exploits a wide range of platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, JustPaste.it, Kik and Ask.fm.<sup>160</sup> Of these platforms, ISIL has a preference for Twitter and relies on Twitter users – including thousands of ‘bots’ or automated computer tweeters – to spread its message.<sup>161</sup> According to one study interviewee, the overwhelming majority of Islamist extremist content on Twitter is related to ISIL,<sup>162</sup> while another interviewee observed that ISIL also makes significant use of Facebook in Africa.<sup>163</sup> Compared to its Boko Haram and al-Shabaab counterparts, ISIL have the most advanced social media strategy of the three groups.<sup>164</sup> Among other factors, ISIL's emphasis on social media activities is likely to be linked to its far-reaching support base, which covers different parts of the globe and is more international than the support base for the other two groups.<sup>165</sup>

Even more so than other jihadist groups, ISIL posts graphic content that includes videos of beheadings, killed hostages, and its ‘martyred’ fighters on a wide variety of platforms. Social media is used by the group for a range of ends, including propaganda, recruitment and coordination. ISIL's media operations are largely directed by the Al Hayat Media Center – the group's media arm, which was established in May 2014. In Africa, ISIL has used both its experience of using social media and its mass following to

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<sup>160</sup> Some of the platforms used by ISIL are less well known in the public domain. For example, Kik and Ask.fm are messaging apps that ISIL uses to communicate. JustPaste.it is a site that allows users to paste text and share links, garnering international attention as it has been used by ISIL to disseminate information. See JustPaste.it (2018).

<sup>161</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Maura Conway, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>162</sup> RAND Europe interview with industry representative, 16 January 2018.

<sup>163</sup> RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>164</sup> RAND Europe interview with academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>165</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Maura Conway, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

influence the social media strategy of its affiliate, Boko Haram, after accepting its leader's bay'ah in 2015 (see Chapter 4).<sup>166</sup>

ISIL has long recognised the power of digital media, uploading grainy beheading videos to the Internet, including, for example, that of the US businessman Nicholas Berg in 2004.<sup>167</sup> As the group has evolved so has its use of technology, which now encompasses a range of platforms to reach a wide audience and ensure publicity and notoriety. ISIL has advanced its use of technology in recent years, using drones and smartphones to film propaganda videos, as well as Twitter bots<sup>168</sup> in an attempt to prevent the suspension of its Twitter account.<sup>169</sup> Twitter was ISIL's main platform until 2015, with the group hijacking hashtags, including the World Cup in 2014, in order to draw attention to its cause.<sup>170</sup> While ISIL operatives in previous years linked their Twitter accounts to images associated with the group, this has become less prevalent for the group more recently given the increasingly short lifespan of these accounts. Given the high rate of ISIL Twitter account shutdowns, operatives now spend less time building their brand through posting images.<sup>171</sup>

In 2015, the group reportedly moved the majority of its online operations to Telegram in response to a Twitter crackdown and anonymity concerns after a series of targeted US UAV<sup>172</sup> strikes against leading ISIL social media operatives.<sup>173</sup> ISIL has made increasing use of Telegram to communicate sensitive information securely, given that the app is based on encrypted technology.<sup>174</sup> The app allows users to share messages and photos with other users using 'secret chats' that use end-to-end encryption, support self-destructing messages and do not allow forwarding.<sup>175</sup>

### 5.1.2. Propaganda

#### Box 5.2: Key points

- ISIL's propaganda content is often extremely violent, with beheadings posted to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.
- In recent years, the group has also used its online propaganda to promote life in the Caliphate in order to attract foreign fighters, skilled workers and their families to the group.

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<sup>166</sup> It was also reported that in Sudan 'seven Salafi figures signed a statement by a group called 'jihadists around the world' to give *bay'ah* or allegiance to al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS' (Elshabik, 2015).

<sup>167</sup> Koerner (2016).

<sup>168</sup> A Twitter bot is a type of bot software – i.e. a software application that runs automated tasks (scripts) over the Internet. Twitterbots may autonomously perform actions such as tweeting, retweeting, following, unfollowing, or direct messaging to or from other accounts.

<sup>169</sup> Berger & Morgan (2015).

<sup>170</sup> Stern & Berger (2015).

<sup>171</sup> RAND Europe interview with industry representative, 16 January 2017.

<sup>172</sup> UAV: unmanned aerial vehicle.

<sup>173</sup> Goldman & Schmitt (2016).

<sup>174</sup> Reisinger (2015).

<sup>175</sup> Bloom et al. (2017).

- ISIL's media messaging has shifted to reflect its wider strategy: for example, recent territorial losses in Iraq and Syria have led to an increasing focus on encouraging lone wolf attacks on the West.

ISIL runs an active online propaganda campaign: a 2015 report found that the group releases a total of 38 new items per day, ranging from videos and documentaries to audio clips and online pamphlets.<sup>176</sup> The group's online propaganda content is often extremely violent, with beheadings and killings posted openly to mainstream media sites including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.<sup>177</sup> However, in recent years the group has also distributed online propaganda glamorising life in the Caliphate in order to attract foreign fighters and skilled workers to the group (see Section 5.1.3).<sup>178</sup> ISIL also uses narrowcasting, creating varied content that caters to niche audiences, which portrays public works projects and acts of benevolence in order to draw popular support from Muslims worldwide.<sup>179</sup>

While ISIL's approach to its media operations has remained largely constant, using the same sorts of social media platforms and tactics, there has been some subtle change over time in the nature of content being distributed, reflecting a shift in wider strategy. Early ISIL messaging encouraged the recruitment of foreign fighters, before expanding to focus on the role of women and families in helping build the Caliphate.<sup>180</sup> Recent territorial losses have led to less of an emphasis on state building activities and the recruitment of foreign fighters. Instead, ISIL has focused upon encouraging lone wolf attacks and the perpetration of terrorist attacks in the West.<sup>181</sup> Since a speech by the now deceased spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, encouraging the killing of civilians in the West in 2014, the propaganda focus on killing and terrorism has intensified.<sup>182</sup> ISIL's most recent online magazine, *Rumiyah*, established in September 2016, has consistently run a feature named 'Just Terror Tactics' that encourages ISIL followers and sympathisers to carry out low-cost, high-feasibility terrorist attacks using knives, Molotov cocktails, firearms and vehicles.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Winter (2015).

<sup>177</sup> Koerner (2016).

<sup>178</sup> See, for example, al-Britani (2015).

<sup>179</sup> Koerner (2016).

<sup>180</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Maura Conway, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>181</sup> Byman (2017).

<sup>182</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2017a).

<sup>183</sup> Europol (2017b).

### 5.1.3. Recruitment

#### Box 5.3: Key points

- While research papers find that ISIL favours online recruitment over in-person recruitment activities,<sup>184</sup> examples such as the radicalisation of students at Khartoum's University of Medical Sciences and Technology (UMST) show that both online and offline influences contribute to ISIL radicalisation.
- Recruiters have reportedly used a range of platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Kik, WhatsApp, Telegram and Ask.fm to target individuals.
- ISIL's online recruitment process involves creating a micro-community, with supporters focusing on potential recruits, encouraging them to interact with other sympathisers and cut ties with mainstream influences, and urging them to take action (e.g. planning attacks).

ISIL is said to favour online recruitment methods over offline (physical) recruitment activities.<sup>185</sup> Twitter has been the main platform for ISIL's recruitment efforts. One study notes that recruiters have also used other platforms, including Kik, WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram and Ask.fm.<sup>186</sup> According to one interviewee, ISIL has used Twitter to radicalise students in certain cases, by first sharing information with them relating to job opportunities, before shifting the conversation in order to influence the youth to join ISIL.<sup>187</sup> Another interviewee suggested different social media platforms are used in different countries to recruit individuals, citing the example of Sudan where Twitter and Facebook are reportedly the primary tools for recruiting followers online.<sup>188</sup>

Beyond Twitter, the Dawn of Glad Tidings app<sup>189</sup> is reportedly instrumental in recruiting individuals to ISIL.<sup>190</sup> Once a user subscribes, the app can access personal data and make posts to their synced Twitter accounts. This is often perceived as the first step in the radicalisation and subsequent recruitment of ISIL sympathisers to the group's cause.<sup>191</sup> The Al Hayat Media Center is largely responsible for the group's recruitment activities and its stated goal is to 'convey the message of the Islamic State in different languages with the aim of unifying Muslims under one flag'.<sup>192</sup> A number of tailored recruitment videos

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<sup>184</sup> See, for example, Berger (2015).

<sup>185</sup> Berger (2015).

<sup>186</sup> Koerner (2016).

<sup>187</sup> RAND Europe interview with Uyo Salifu, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>188</sup> RAND Europe interview with local expert, 11 January 2018.

<sup>189</sup> 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings' is a computer app designed by ISIL specifically to circumvent Twitter spam filters and ensure the continuous, targeted release of identical Tweets (Coghlan, 2014). See also Annex E of the Technical Annex for further description of the social media and communications platforms described in this report.

<sup>190</sup> Merchant (2015).

<sup>191</sup> Weyers (2015).

<sup>192</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2017b).

have been released by ISIL, including ‘There’s No Life Without Jihad’, which features three British jihadists encouraging individuals to migrate and fight for ISIL.<sup>193</sup>

With reference to Sudan specifically, a 2017 UNDP study found that in the educated and urban parts of Khartoum, a high number of students and youth considered to be susceptible to ISIL recruitment use social media on a regular basis.<sup>194</sup> While study respondents<sup>195</sup> – and particularly university students – reported that online propaganda was not the main mode of recruitment used by ISIL,<sup>196</sup> most respondents confirmed that messages on the Internet helped in consolidating their radicalisation.<sup>197</sup> Another UNDP report found that radicalised individuals in Sudan use the Internet frequently, reporting that 87 per cent of respondents recruited to extremist groups in Sudan access the Internet every day or every week.<sup>198</sup>

ISIL is said to use a specific online process to attract recruits.<sup>199</sup> This involves creating a micro-community, which involves ISIL supporters targeting and interacting with potential recruits online. These supporters encourage potential recruits to interact with other supporters and instigate social isolation by encouraging them to cut ties with mainstream influences, including family, friends and the community. Supporters will then shift their conversations with potential recruits to private communications, often on encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram. Through these exchanges, recruiters reportedly encourage the ‘target’ to take action whether by travelling to areas where ISIL is actively pursuing a campaign of violence or by plotting terrorist attacks at home.<sup>200</sup>

ISIL’s use of social media to recruit individuals is evident in its efforts in Sudan to recruit university students from Khartoum’s University of Medical Sciences and Technology (UMST). According to a UNDP study, most of the students who were radicalised were recruited through apps and social media platforms.<sup>201</sup> While interview evidence suggests that the recruitment of these Sudanese medical students also involved ‘in-person’ engagement on campus with an imam of Palestinian origin,<sup>202</sup> the UNDP study found that ‘low-cost phones were distributed among radically-oriented individuals to gravitate them into the groups’ and various applications were developed specifically to facilitate this process.<sup>203</sup> For example, one such app enables recruiters to interact with potential recruits before the application’s automatic

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<sup>193</sup> Awan (2017).

<sup>194</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47). It should be noted that this is not the case in the more remote states of Sudan, such as Kassala, White Nile, Gedaref and Darfur, where a lack of telecommunications infrastructure means that there is very little evidence of recruitment through social media in these areas. See UNDP (2017c, 48).

<sup>195</sup> Study respondents were drawn from a range of backgrounds, including current returnees from Guantanamo Bay, the family and friends of violent extremists, religious leaders, university staff, and university students. UNDP (2017c).

<sup>196</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>197</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>198</sup> UNDP (2017a, 76).

<sup>199</sup> Berger (2015).

<sup>200</sup> Berger (2015).

<sup>201</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>202</sup> RAND Europe interview with local expert, 11 January 2018.

<sup>203</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

deletion two weeks after installation.<sup>204</sup> Other security measures on these apps include technology that does not allow for the capturing of screenshots, which can lessen the traceability of extremist activities.<sup>205</sup>

Several foreign fighters are known to have been recruited by ISIL and then travelled from Sudan to Libya, Syria and Iraq, and, in a smaller number of cases, to Somalia and Nigeria, in support of violent extremist activity.<sup>206</sup> The UMST in Khartoum has attracted worldwide attention due to the high number of its students that have travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq allegedly to join ISIL. Some of the earliest reports date to 2015, when a group of 12 students from wealthy families, with dual citizenship of Sudan and either the UK, Canada or the US, abandoned their studies to travel to Syria. While there are different estimates about the numbers of Sudanese students from UMST that have travelled to conflict zones in Syria, in July 2017 Sudan's interior minister announced that the number of Sudanese who had gone off to join ISIS 'did not exceed 140'<sup>207</sup> persons. The students that travelled to conflict zones in Syria and returned to Sudan have reportedly been detained and subjected to Sudan's new deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme.<sup>208</sup>

According to Mohammad Khalifa, an expert on Islamist groups who works with Sudan's Ministry of Education, '[r]ecruiters have used campuses, as well as social media and chat apps, to reach these potential recruits, and the recruitment pitch is often tailored for them'.<sup>209</sup> However, in 2015 *The National Interest* reported that according to some of the students and faculty members at UMST 'it is not abstract ISIS propaganda online and in social media that is the draw; rather it is personal relationships among the students that cause one friend to follow another into the militant organisation'.<sup>210</sup> *The National Interest* also reported that according to a female student at the university, 'the Islamic Cultural Association, (ICA)<sup>211</sup>, on the university campus invites many sheikhs from the Middle East to the university and they influence students within the ICA' and that '[m]ost students, she said, who join ISIS are from the ICA'.<sup>212</sup> For example, in 2015 UMST hosted sermons by clerics such as Sheikh Mohammed al-Jizouli, 'who has given sermons supporting Islamic State and called on people to "leave the bleachers and go to seats of martyrdom"'.<sup>213</sup> While ISIL is said to favour online recruitment methods over offline recruitment activities,<sup>214</sup> it appears that online influences and physical interaction are both features of ISIL's recruitment efforts in Africa.

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<sup>204</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>205</sup> UNDP (2017c, 47).

<sup>206</sup> UNDP (2017a, 15).

<sup>207</sup> Zalan (2017).

<sup>208</sup> Zalan (2017).

<sup>209</sup> Zalan (2017).

<sup>210</sup> Abdo & Abdu (2015).

<sup>211</sup> Referred to as the 'Islamic Civilisation student organisation' in other publications, such as Reuters. Please see Abdelaziz (2015).

<sup>212</sup> Abdo & Abdu (2015).

<sup>213</sup> Abdelaziz (2015).

<sup>214</sup> Berger (2015).

#### 5.1.4. Coordination

##### Box 5.4: Key points

- ISIL coordinates a number of activities online, especially in relation to its overseas attacks.
- To do this, ISIL makes use of secure chatrooms on Telegram in which members can share videos and exchange ideas.
- The group also appears to have worked with its outposts and affiliates, including Boko Haram, in developing a coordinated social media strategy.

ISIL coordinates many of its activities online, particularly those that involve attacks abroad. Telegram has reportedly often been used in the planning and coordination of terrorist attacks by the group. For example, the French-born ISIL propagandist Richard Kassim is said to have recruited other youth to carry out attacks in France, including the 2016 Normandy church attack involving the murder of a priest, via his Telegram channel ‘Sabre de la Lumiere’.<sup>215</sup> ISIL also makes use of chatrooms on Telegram, where members can share videos and photos, comment on content, and exchange ideas.<sup>216</sup> The online environment provides an ecosystem for the group, conducive for coordinating physical attacks and directing followers and potential recruits.<sup>217</sup> Examples include the chatroom ‘War and Diligence’ or ‘harb wa thibat’, a Telegram chatroom which has strict guidelines including ‘men only’, as well as official chatrooms, ‘Nashir’, ‘Amaq’ and ‘Dabiq’, controlled by the official ISIL media apparatus.<sup>218</sup>

With the increase in terrorist attacks on the West perpetuated by ISIL in 2017,<sup>219</sup> experts argue that the group is actively using the Internet to coordinate attacks outside of Syria and Iraq.<sup>220</sup> There is evidence of a pro-ISIL Telegram channel dedicated to lone wolves that provides a practical handbook to assist followers and sympathisers in carrying out terrorist attacks.<sup>221</sup> This illustrates how ISIL uses online activities to coordinate attacks outside of its central geographical base, with material readily available and accessible to individuals online.

ISIL also appears to have engaged with its outposts and affiliates, including Boko Haram in its self-styled ISWAP, to develop a coordinated social media strategy (see Chapter 4). Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, Commander of US Special Operations in Africa, stated that the two groups share ‘tactics, techniques and procedures’.<sup>222</sup> The release of Boko Haram’s video ‘Arrival of the Soldiers of the Caliphate

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<sup>215</sup> Bloom et al. (2017).

<sup>216</sup> Bloom et al. (2017).

<sup>217</sup> Matejic (2016).

<sup>218</sup> Bloom et al. (2017).

<sup>219</sup> These include attacks on Westminster Bridge (London) in March 2017, Manchester Arena in May 2017, London Bridge in June 2017, and Las Ramblas (Barcelona) in August 2017.

<sup>220</sup> Byman (2017).

<sup>221</sup> Easterly & Geltzer (2017).

<sup>222</sup> Dearden (2016).

in West Africa' on 2 June 2015 is one example of coordinated use of social media.<sup>223</sup> The common style of Boko Haram and ISIL videos – as marked by shared use of the ISIL flag, opening Arabic music ('nasheed') and the same fonts – indicates that ISIL media operatives may have assisted Boko Haram in developing its social media strategy, or influenced the Nigerian group more indirectly.<sup>224</sup>

## 5.2. Engagement of social media users with ISIL

### Box 5.5: Key points

- ISIL has a large number of dedicated followers who use social media to communicate their extremist views.
- ISIL supporters have made increasing use of more closed platforms and apps, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, in response to repeated Twitter account suspensions.
- Supporters of the group make use of a technique known as 'swarmcasting' in which core content is distributed to as many platforms as possible to build resilience against social media account suspensions.

ISIL not only possesses a sophisticated social media strategy, but also a number of dedicated followers and sympathisers who use social media to communicate their views. A 2016 report identified four meta-communities on Twitter: Shi'a, the Syrian mujahideen, ISIL supporters, and the Sunni community.<sup>225</sup> According to the report, the Syrian mujahideen has mixed views towards ISIL, sometimes offering support and making respectful references to ISIL (e.g. 'soldiers of the Islamic State') and at other times levelling insults at the group including calling them 'Kharijites' and 'dogs'.<sup>226 227</sup> In a dataset of 23 million tweets and 770,000 users, the report found that nine ISIL supporters tweeted more than 60 times per day, compared with identified ISIL opponents who tweeted 40 times per day.<sup>228</sup> This illustrates ISIL's strong presence on Twitter and its ability to attract supporters dedicated to reinforcing the online branding efforts of the group.

Berger and Morgan's 2014 sample dataset of 20,000 Twitter accounts led them to estimate that ISIL supporters used at least 46,000 accounts between September and December 2014. Furthermore, ISIL accounts reportedly have at least 1,000 followers each, with one in five selecting English as their primary

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<sup>223</sup> Campbell (2015).

<sup>224</sup> Campbell (2015).

<sup>225</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016).

<sup>226</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016).

<sup>227</sup> Kharijite is a term meaning 'those who defected from the group' after the Kharijite rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate in the seventh century and persisted against the Abbasid Caliphate. Subsequently, it is an insult used by Salafists, who do not share ISIL'S political views. There are several similarities between ISIL and the Kharijites, including condemnation of other Muslims and the killing of women and children. See Mamouri (2015).

<sup>228</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016).

language.<sup>229</sup> Three types of ‘ambiguous users’<sup>230</sup> were identified in one study: covert ISIL supporters who took steps to conceal their support, pro-ISIL intelligence operatives who followed anti-ISIL accounts with accounts created that appeared to oppose ISIL, and anti-ISIL intelligence operatives with accounts created that appeared to support ISIL in order to monitor the group’s activities.<sup>231</sup>

Individuals’ engagement with ISIL has evolved due to the increased risk of suspension on Twitter. Hundreds of users signed up to the Dawn of Good Tidings app via the web or Android phones until 2014, when the app was permanently shut down. ISIL then requested access to a high level of personal information and account settings to allow the app to post tweets to users’ accounts, with the content determined by a central ISIL social media operative.<sup>232</sup> With the Twitter crackdown on multiple ISIL accounts, ISIL operatives and sympathisers have circumvented this issue by maintaining a presence on a variety of platforms. One recent example includes the creation of a number of Baaz accounts and groups in support of ISIL.<sup>233 234</sup>

One of the most popular apps at present is Telegram, which allows users to connect and engage with fellow sympathisers and ISIL members.<sup>235</sup> Created in 2013, the app allows individuals to communicate securely through end-to-end encryption.<sup>236</sup> While it can be difficult to locate ISIL channels and users, once one account is followed it is reportedly straightforward for a user to update and expand their network of ISIL accounts by subscribing to post lists, following the users who post, and making contact with original post owners from forwarded posts on channels.<sup>237</sup> WhatsApp has reportedly become popular among Sudanese youth due to the platform’s relative privacy and anonymity to share information via the app’s group chat function.<sup>238</sup>

Chatrooms are multifunctional and multidirectional, allowing for communication between ISIL leaders, members and sympathisers, and serving a variety of purposes including recruitment, propaganda and coordination. Committed sympathisers and propagandists create and administer chatrooms, whilst official members disseminate the material as widely as possible. Furthermore, sympathisers often create ‘leaderless’ rooms to support the Caliphate, which are not hierarchically controlled, giving individual users far more autonomy in communicating and posting in the chatroom.

ISIL supporters have made further use of a technique known as ‘swarmcasting’ in which the group, with the help of supporters and sympathisers, ensures the distribution of core content to as many platforms as

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<sup>229</sup> Berger & Morgan (2015).

<sup>230</sup> These accounts were labelled ‘ambiguous’ in the author’s dataset because these accounts did not show overt support for ISIL but still possessed some form of affiliation to the group. These were unlike the other 30,000 accounts coded as ‘supporters’ which were classed to have illustrated overt and clear support for ISIL over Twitter, or those classed as ‘non-supporters’ which actively posted anti-ISIL content.

<sup>231</sup> Berger & Morgan (2015).

<sup>232</sup> Berger & Morgan (2015).

<sup>233</sup> Bindner & Gluck (2017).

<sup>234</sup> Baaz is a content-driven social media platform that uses powerful analytics, trend analysis and advanced natural language processing technology to provide news and information to users. See Baaz (2018).

<sup>235</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Maura Conway, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>236</sup> Frampton et al. (2017).

<sup>237</sup> Yayla & Speckhard (2017).

<sup>238</sup> Freedom House (2016).

possible. By adopting this technique, users support ISIL by rapidly disseminating video content and messages from Telegram across multiple platforms, thereby creating multiple copies on different platforms in order to ensure that, despite the high risk of removal and account suspension, this content is difficult to remove completely from the web.<sup>239</sup>

The dynamic and anonymous nature of social media and encrypted instant messaging apps makes it difficult to ascertain if individuals are recruited offline or stumble upon information online that may lead to self-radicalisation.<sup>240</sup> Access to content shared online may come from individual searching of the web but can also result from the effective distribution of content from core ISIL members to influential individuals elsewhere. The latter download and use the content to engage with other individuals and attract them to the group.<sup>241</sup>

The next chapter examines some of the main online narratives in relation to ISIL – as well as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab – with a focus on how social media users in Africa have discussed these three terrorist groups on Twitter.

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<sup>239</sup> Frampton et al. (2017).

<sup>240</sup> Bindner & Gluck (2017).

<sup>241</sup> Frampton et al. (2017).



## 6. Social media narratives: the role of Twitter

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The evidence presented in the previous chapters indicates that social media has been used by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL to spread propaganda, attract recruits and coordinate their operations – activities that are conducted on a continuous basis and at varying levels of sophistication across the three groups. In this chapter, we present a deeper analysis in relation to one specific social media platform – Twitter – in order to explore how users based in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda discuss content relating to the three groups.

In particular, we use sampled Twitter data to better understand how narratives have been influenced by key attacks (i.e. high-profile attacks of strategic importance from a military insurgency and/or media and propaganda perspective) linked to the three groups, with a view to exploring whether it is possible to identify clear communities of supporters, opponents and neutral observers immediately before, during and after these events.<sup>242</sup> The following sections present our analysis of all Twitter data collected (Section 6.1) and of group-specific Twitter communities (Section 6.2), before outlining the main themes emerging from the analysis (Section 6.3). For a more detailed description of the Twitter analysis methodology, please refer to Annex F of the Technical Annex.

### 6.1. Overview of Twitter communities

The first step for the analysis of Twitter data entailed the crawling of relevant tweets from the broader corpus of Twitter data generated since the social media platform was established in 2006. The research team first designed a suitable search strategy for querying Twitter data. For each group, the strategy was designed to capture tweets that:<sup>243</sup>

1. Present group-specific keywords.
2. Have been posted from one of the selected target countries.
3. Have been posted on the day of, prior to, or following a key date relating to the terrorist group(s) between 2012 and 2017.<sup>244</sup>

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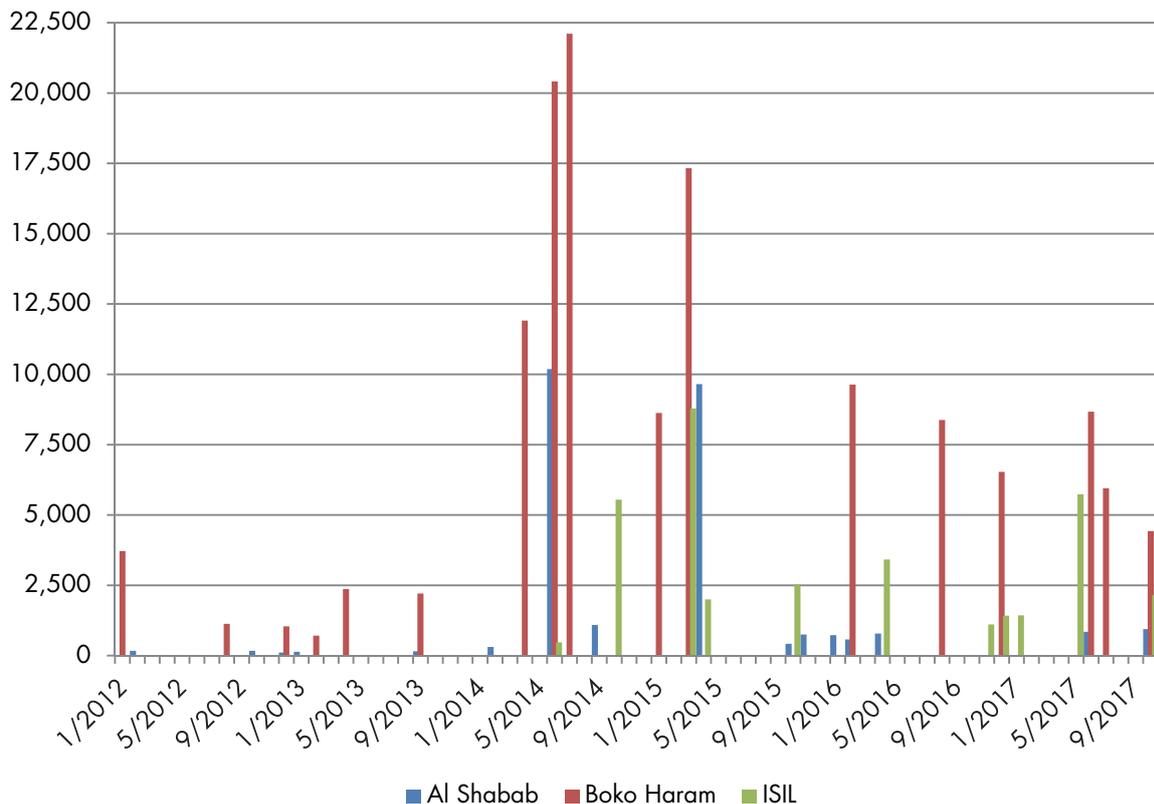
<sup>242</sup> Please refer to Annex C of the Technical Annex for a list of the key events and attacks that were the focus of the Twitter analysis, and to Annex F of the Technical Annex for a more detailed overview of the Twitter methodology.

<sup>243</sup> Please refer to Annex F of the Technical Annex for a more detailed overview of the Twitter methodology.

<sup>244</sup> The intent of focusing this on this subset of dates was to capture the polarising effect of such events, with a view to identifying communities of supporters, opponents and neutral observers. The list of ‘key dates’ are presented in Annex C of the Technical Annex.

The queries run through the portal resulted in 223,152 tweets across the selected dates and terrorist groups, with 27,741 tweets relating to al-Shabaab, 159,095 relating to Boko Haram, and 36,316 pertaining to ISIL. Figure 6.1 provides an overview of the distribution of the tweets scraped across groups and time.

**Figure 6.1: Number of tweets downloaded by date for each terrorist organisation of interest**



SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis

Building on previous research conducted by RAND,<sup>245</sup> the research team used Twitter data gathered for all three groups of interest (al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL) to generate a ‘mentions’ network (i.e. a directed, weighted network in which nodes represent users and edges the number of mentions between users) across the seven African countries in question. We determined that within the mentions network there were 3,223 ‘communities’ comprising 59,489 nodes (i.e. users). These communities represent groups of Twitter users that are more tightly connected to each other (i.e. they mention each other more often)<sup>246</sup> and can vary greatly in their size, composition, and structure. Figure 6.2 below provides a visual overview of the five main (i.e. largest) communities identified within our weighted network. The monochromatic clusters in the figure represent different communities. Each circle within a community

<sup>245</sup> Bodine-Baron et al (2016).

<sup>246</sup> When posting on Twitter, users can refer to other users by including in the content of their tweet *@userID\_to\_be\_mentioned*. When a user re-tweets a message previously posted by another user, a mention to the original user is normally included as a way to attribute a post or content to their original author. The project’s mentions network does not distinguish between mentions and re-tweets and both underpin its structure.

represents a node (i.e. a user): the larger the node, the greater the number of mentions and references to it other users in the network have made. Lines in the graph represent connections between users, both from within the same community and from different ones.

**Figure 6.2: Overview of top five communities identified within data for all groups of interest**



COMMUNITIES KEY

1 = Purple ; 2 = Green ; 3 = Light blue ; 4 = Black ; 5 = Orange

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis, 2018

To characterise these communities, we used lexical analysis techniques (see Annex F of the Technical Annex for further explanation) to identify the distinctive language used in a given community's tweets as compared to those used in other communities.

The first community, represented in purple in Figure 6.2, comprises 12,537 users who were primarily engaged in discussions about Somalian and Kenyan affairs in general and al-Shabaab in particular. This is evidenced by the prevalence of use of relevant geographic markers (e.g. Kenya, Somalia) and terms pertaining to this organisation (e.g. al-Shabaab, #al-shabaab), as well as of mentions of al-Shabaab's

Twitter accounts (e.g. @hsmmpress, @hsm\_press, @hsm\_pressoffice) and of hashtags referring to the group's attacks (e.g. #garissaattack, #westgateattack, #mpeketoniattack).

The community network has a standard core-periphery structure, with several highly connected users in the centre and user chains pointing towards the periphery. This is a common feature in Twitter-mentions networks and one that applies to the majority of networks identified in our analysis.<sup>247</sup> The main nodes of this network are represented by accounts connected to news agencies and TV channels, suggesting that this community revolved primarily around discussions pertaining to on-going events and crises linked to al-Shabaab's attacks. This is further substantiated by the prevalence of terms typical of news media (e.g. verify, blamed, claimed, confirms) in the community's tweets. It should also be noted that this community shows a limited degree of connectivity and interaction with the other four communities identified from the data.

The remaining four communities displayed in Figure 6.2 all focus their discussions on Boko Haram and are strongly interlinked. The second community, represented in green in Figure 6.2, comprises 6,818 users who were primarily engaged in discussions about Boko Haram. Based on an analysis of the main keywords and recurring expressions employed by this community, users appear to have a highly negative stance towards Boko Haram (e.g. genocidal monsters, Boko Haram massacred, Boko Haram terrorists, Boko Haram killed). Furthermore, well above 50% of the most commonly used keywords by this community are linked to a handful of Twitter accounts connected to social media influencers, commentators, and journalists. These users appear to play a leading role in shaping the content and tone of the community's discussions.

The third community, represented in light blue in Figure 6.2, comprises 3,939 users who were also primarily engaged in discussions about Boko Haram. As opposed to the second community, however, recurring keywords and collocated words suggest that users discuss Boko Haram's activities in more neutral terms typical of English media language (e.g. Boko Haram militants, Boko Haram captives, flash @news\_outlet\_account). Further, the community appears to be less dominated and steered by a handful of accounts, although the network features at its centre a handful of pivotal nodes comprising news outlet accounts.

Similarly, the fourth community, represented in black in Figure 6.2, comprises 2,803 users and is akin in structure and content to the third community, displaying the presence of pivotal central nodes connected to news outlets and the use of media language to discuss Boko Haram's activities and incidents. This network is also characterised by an over-representation of expressions connected to the case of the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping (e.g. 'Chibok girls', abducted, school), as opposed to the other Boko Haram-focused communities analysed so far suggesting a stronger interest in this incident among users active in this community.

Finally, the fifth largest community identified and represented in orange in Figure 6.2 comprises 2,791 users. Unlike previous communities, this network is not characterised by the presence of a small number of dominant nodes, but rather by the presence of many nodes of comparable weight with a high degree of

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<sup>247</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016).

interconnection. This suggests that the network functions as a community of interest, with multiple active peer participants and with no key influencers steering the debate.

It is worth noting that it was not possible to identify any ISIL-focused communities from among the largest user communities identified in our dataset. This suggests that the social media presence of ISIL on Twitter in the countries of focus during the time frame selected was more limited and fragmented than for the other groups studied. Furthermore, it also indicates that ISIL was not as widespread a subject of discussion as Boko Haram or al-Shabaab. This finding is further elaborated on in Section 6.2.3 below.

## 6.2. Analysis of group-specific data subsets

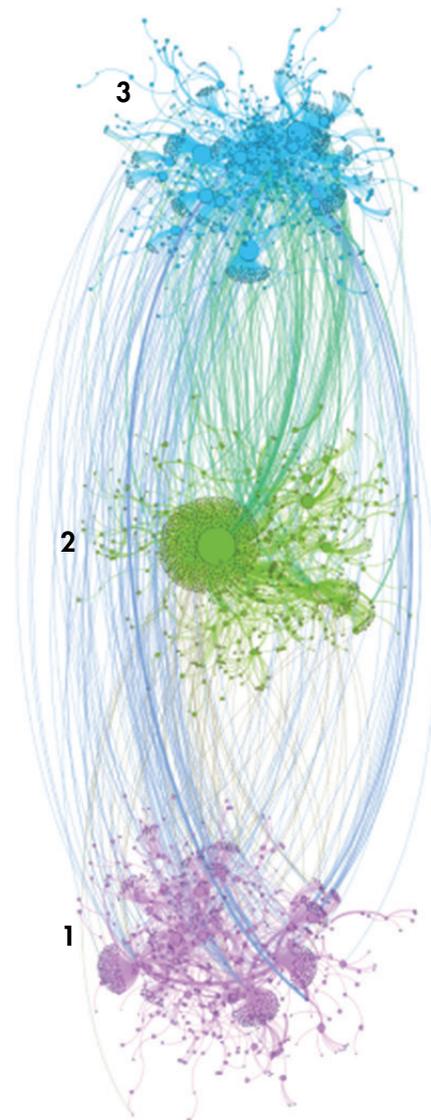
Further to the analysis conducted on the study's Twitter dataset as a whole, we also conducted separate analysis for data subsets relating to the three terrorist organisations of interest: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIL. We focused our analysis on the identification of key communities and on the content of the discussions conducted within individual data subsets as a whole, rather than focusing on micro-communities within them. This was done due to what we anticipated being a very limited size and relevance of micro-communities within the data subsets generated. Furthermore, by focusing our analysis on a group-specific data subset as a whole, we are able to determine the overall stance that Twitter users in the region had with regard to specific groups during our time frame of focus.

The methodology employed for conducting the analysis discussed below mirrored that employed for the Twitter dataset as a whole (see Annex B). The following sections provide an overview of the main networks discussing the three groups of interest, and of the overall themes emerging from the group-specific data subsets.

### 6.2.1. *Al-Shabaab*

An analysis of the top (i.e. largest) communities located within the al-Shabaab-focused data subset indicates the presence of three interconnected sub-communities, which represent a limited number of news outlet accounts and social media influencers. Figure 6.3 provides a visual overview of the top (i.e. largest) three communities identified within the al-Shabaab-focused data subset.

**Figure 6.3: Overview of top three networks within al-Shabaab community networks**



COMMUNITIES KEY

1 = Purple; 2 = Green; 3 = Light blue

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis, 2018

The first community, represented in purple in Figure 6.3, comprises 1,018 users. The community presents a standard core-periphery structure, with closely connected users in the centre and user chains pointing towards the periphery. The community revolves around a limited number of nodes, representing accounts of Kenya-based journalists, and national and regional news outlets.

The second community, represented in green in Figure 6.3, consists of 1,000 users. The community is characterised by the presence of a large central node with which all other users in the community interact via retweets and direct mentions. The central account around which the community revolves is that of a Kenyan political scientist and social media influencer commenting on political events in the country.

The third community, represented in light blue in Figure 6.3, comprises 959 users. The community is characterised by a structure similar to that of the first community (i.e. a core-periphery structure revolving around a handful of central nodes). The key nodes within this community comprise primarily Kenyan news outlets and social media influencers and are not specifically focused on discussing the topics of al-Shabaab, terrorism and violent insurgencies, but are likely to have done so at the time of unfolding attacks.

The lexical analysis conducted on the content of tweets published within the al-Shabaab-focused data subset indicates a marked presence of terms relating to:

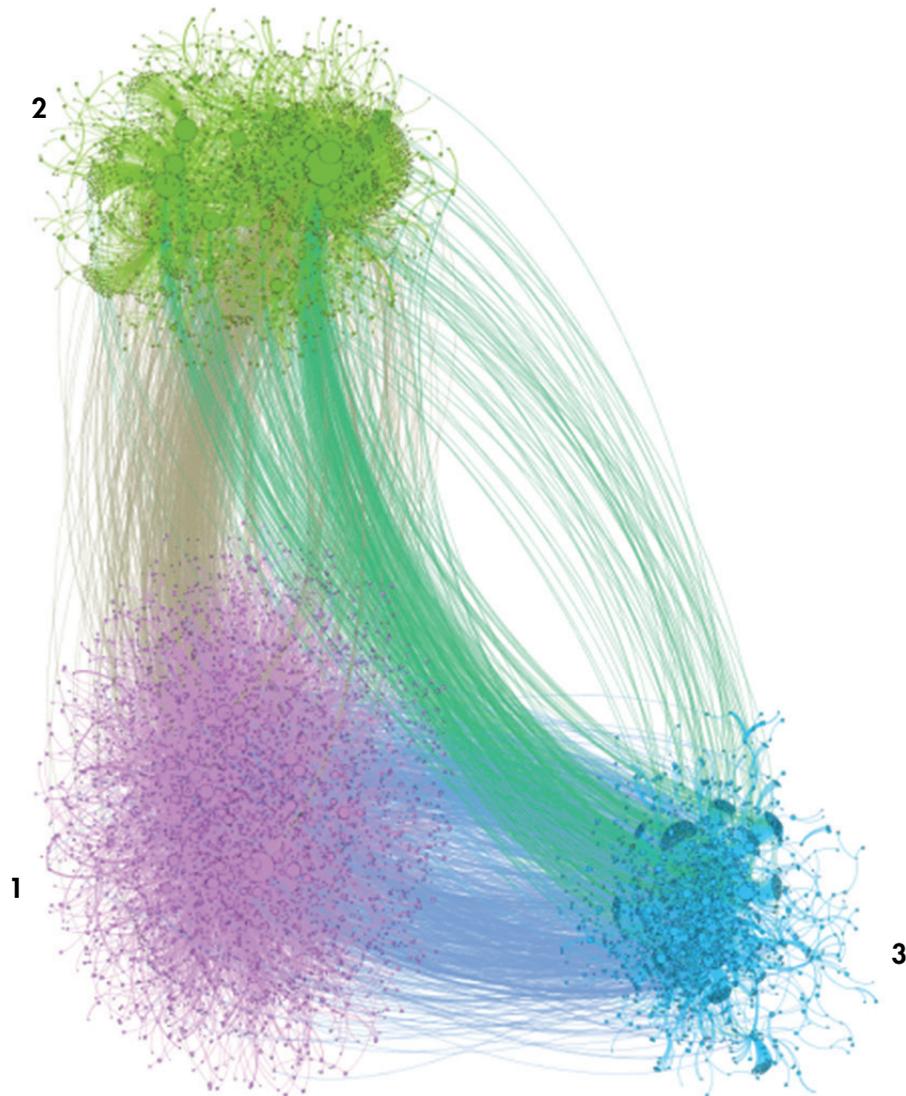
- The group (e.g. al-Shabaab, Shabaab, Godane).
- Geographic references to the group's main areas of activity (e.g. Kenya, Somalia, Nairobi, Mogadishu).
- References to attacks carried out by the group (e.g. #westgatemall, #westgateattack, #mpeketoniattack).
- Twitter mentions and meta-discussions about news (e.g. Twitter handles of news outlets and social media influencers that represent key nodes within the different Twitter communities).
- English media language typical of news (e.g. responsibility, claim, blame, verify).

Most of the above categories in this data subset suggest that, similarly to the main al-Shabaab community identified in the broader Twitter dataset, discussions around al-Shabaab focus primarily on news of on-going or recent attacks. Further, the prevalence of terms and expressions typical of English media suggests that the main users engaged in these discussions were not supporters advocating in favour of the group and its activities, but rather general Twitter users affected by or interested in unfolding events. This is further substantiated by the lack of recurring keywords and expressions in the data sample pertaining to religious rhetoric and more general propaganda that a group supporter might be expected to use. This finding may reflect the tendency of the 'noise' of media discussion following high profile attacks to overpower or obfuscate the more continuous social media activity of al-Shabaab supporters.

### *6.2.2. Boko Haram*

The Boko Haram-focused data subset presents a similar picture as compared to the al-Shabaab-focused data subset. Our network analysis identified within this data subset the presence of three highly interconnected top (i.e. largest) communities, with each focusing on a handful of Twitter accounts representing news outlet and social media influencers. Figure 6.4 provides a visual overview of the top three communities identified within the Boko Haram-focused data subset.

**Figure 6.4 Overview of top three networks within Boko Haram community networks**



**COMMUNITIES KEY**

1 = Purple; 2 = Green; 3 = Light blue

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis, 2018

The first community, represented in purple in Figure 6.4, comprises 3,718 users. The community presents a standard core-periphery structure. The community revolves around a limited number of nodes, representing accounts of Nigerian journalists and social media influencers, as well as national news outlets. Users around which this community revolves do not appear to maintain a continuous focus on discussing the topics of terrorism and Boko Haram, but rather to focus on current Nigerian news more broadly.

The second community, represented in green in Figure 6.4, comprises 2,326 users. The community is characterised by the presence of a few dominating central nodes around which all other users in the community revolve. The central accounts of this community comprise primarily regional news outlets,

social media influencers, academics, and Nigerian institutions with a particular interest in Boko Haram, terrorism, and regional developments related to security.

The third community, represented in light blue in Figure 6.4, comprises 2,208 users. The community is characterised by a structure similar to that of the first community (i.e. a core-periphery structure revolving around a handful of central nodes). The key nodes within this community consist of a heterogeneous mix of Nigerian governmental and institutional spokespersons' accounts on the one hand, and of Nigerian social media influencers discussing Nigerian news on the other.

The lexical analysis conducted on the content of tweets published within the overall Boko Haram-focused data subset yielded similar results to that of the al-Shabaab-focused one. In particular, there is a marked presence of terms and expressions pertaining to:

- The group (e.g. Boko Haram).
- Geographic references to the group's main areas of activity (e.g. Nigeria, Niger, Abuja).
- References to attacks and kidnappings carried out by the group (e.g. girls, abducts, Chibok).
- Twitter mentions and meta-discussions about news (e.g. Twitter handles of news outlet and social media influencers that represent key nodes within different Twitter communities).
- English media language typical of news (e.g. suspected, arrest, news).

Most of the above categories in this data subset suggest that discussions relating to Boko Haram also primarily focus on unfolding news and events as discussed in the media. Further, as for the al-Shabaab data subset, recurring keywords and expressions of terms and expressions pertaining to religious and propaganda rhetoric were not identified in the data sample. In the data sample examined – which focused on key attacks and other high profile events linked to the three groups – it appears that Boko Haram supporters' voices were not as 'loud' as those of media outlet accounts opposing the group, and were not as influential in driving the Twitter narrative in the immediate aftermath of these events.

### **6.2.3. ISIL**

The ISIL-focused data subset presents a very different picture as compared to the data subsets discussed in Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2. The network analysis conducted on this subset highlights the presence of a large number of small communities of comparable size with a limited degree of interconnection amongst them. These communities are characterised by a structure comprising a limited number of nodes tied to a very limited number of central influencers originating from outside the region of interest of this study. Central influencers comprise primarily users and media outlets with a critical view of ISIL and based in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East; no 'official' ISIL accounts were noted from among key nodes within communities reviewed. Furthermore, the limited degree of interconnection among these groups suggests that users discussing ISIL activities in our region of focus rarely interact amongst themselves, further suggesting that ISIL may be a topic of limited relevance within their online activities. On the basis of this, it can be inferred that networks presented in Figure 6.5 may be the product of interactions spurred by tweets focusing on particular events or attacks, rather than real communities of interest with a stable and sustained level of activity and interaction online throughout longer periods of time.

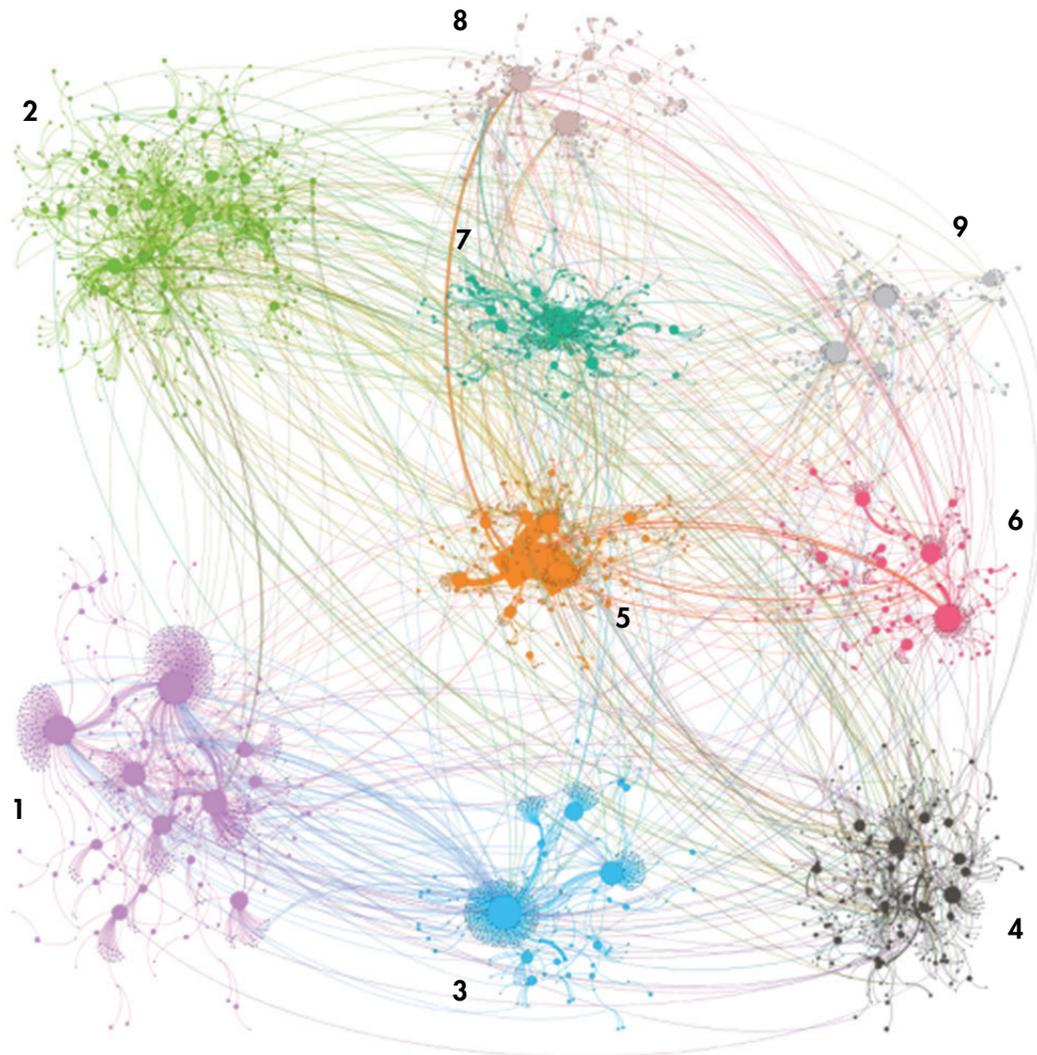
Table 6.1 provides an overview of the dimension and key accounts characterising each of the nine communities identified.

**Table 6.1: Overview of composition of top nine networks within ISIL community networks**

Community ID	Number of users	Central node users description
1 – Purple	806	Social media influencers based outside region of interest with no significant focus on topics ISIL, terrorism, or extremism
2 – Green	582	Social media influencers based outside region of interest with general counterterrorism-, military- and security-related focus
3 – Light blue	486	Social media influencers based outside region of interest with no significant focus on topics ISIL, terrorism, or extremism
4 – Black	376	Heterogeneous mix of social media influencers from within and outside region of interest with no significant focus on topics ISIL, terrorism, or extremism
5 – Orange	374	Official accounts of international, English-language, generalist media outlets
6 – Red	359	Official accounts of international, English-language, generalist media outlets
7 – Dark green	340	Journalists, practitioners and institutional accounts of non-governmental organisations from outside the region of interest with general human rights focus
8 – Ochre	328	Official accounts of US generalist media outlets
9 - Grey	295	Official accounts of international, English-language, generalist media outlets

Figure 6.5 provides a visual overview of the top (i.e. largest) nine communities identified within the ISIL-focused data subset.

**Figure 6.5 Overview of top nine networks within ISIL community networks**



**COMMUNITIES KEY**

1 = Purple; 2 = Green; 3 = Light blue; 4 = Black; 5 = Orange; 6 = Red; 7 = Dark green; 8 = Ochre; 9 = Grey

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis

Overall, when compared to the networks presented in Figures 6.3 and 6.4 for al-Shabaab and Boko Haram respectively, Figure 6.5 clearly highlights the atomised nature of the communities located within the ISIL-focused data subset. Further, as evidenced by Table 6.1, the limited size of networks and communities identified indicates that events pertaining to ISIL have interested only a small subset of the Twitter users active in these countries.

The lexical analysis conducted on the content of tweets published within the overall ISIL-focused data subset indicates a marked presence of terms and expressions relating to the same categories found in the al-Shabaab and Boko Haram data subsets. However, terms employed in the ISIL data subset are characterised by a more internationally-focused outlook. This appears to be a reflection of ISIL's

worldwide branding efforts and activities, as discussed in Section 2.2.3. In particular, key terms and expressions identified in the data subset include:

- The group (e.g. ISIS, ISIL).
- Geographic references to areas where the group has been active (e.g. Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Philippines, Libya).
- References to attacks carried out and battles fought by the group (e.g. Manchester, Mosul, Kobani, Nimrud, Tikrit, beheading).
- Twitter mentions and meta-discussions about news (e.g. Twitter handles of news outlets and social media influencers that represent key nodes within different Twitter communities).
- English media language typical of news (e.g. video, image).

The limited use of keywords and expressions typical of ISIL propaganda from among those encountered in our lexical analysis indicates that discussion about this group in the region is primarily brought forward through content critical of the group. Furthermore, an analysis of the network's key nodes indicates that users discussing ISIL in the region primarily promote content and tweets generated outside the region of interest by influencers and media outlets critical of ISIL and based in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>248</sup> However, it should be noted that there is a stronger presence of religious words and themes here as compared to the al-Shabaab and Boko Haram data subsets (e.g. caliphate, crucified, Islamic, jihadists). This suggests that ISIL has been more successful than these other groups in framing discussions relating to its activities in religious terms.

### 6.3. Key themes

This chapter has discussed results from a social network and lexical analysis of Twitter data for online communities engaged in discussions relating to al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL. The analysis has highlighted the presence of large, region-based communities engaged in the discussion of activities and events connected to al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, with a smaller community identified in relation to ISIL. In the latter case, content appears to have been generated primarily from international accounts and news outlets retweeted by local users.

The majority of news-related terms and expressions identified across different communities and subsets of the data suggest that on and around key dates of terrorist attacks, social media in the region has been inundated with messages posted by users talking about unfolding events. This group of users likely comprises accounts that are normally not engaged in conversations around the terrorist groups of interest. In light of this, on a platform like Twitter, wider media-driven discussions generated by occurring events are likely to overshadow slower-paced, continuous messaging strategies aimed at, for example, radicalisation and recruitment.

In the context of terrorist attacks and associated responses, social media therefore appears to be an important source of information for users. However, a strong degree of uncertainty about the news circulating on social media appears to transpire from keywords and expressions *used* by users (e.g. cannot

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<sup>248</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016).

verify, fake, claim), suggesting that the establishment of trusted institutional accounts could facilitate the spreading of reliable news and carefully crafted messages in times of crisis, limiting the potential for social media to be used as a vector for fake news<sup>249</sup> and terrorist dis- or misinformation.

The structure of online communities identified around different groups and dates suggests that there is an opportunity to use social media as a vehicle to present counter-narratives and alternative messaging to undermine terrorist groups' propaganda. Strategies and programmes aimed at designing and implementing online counter-narratives have been launched in recent years by a variety of actors, including governments, international organisations, and grassroots organisations. However, the networks identified in our analysis and their structure suggest that any such strategy, regardless of the organisation designing and implementing it, would be better off relying on multiple accounts and users in order to propagate its messages successfully. By employing multiple accounts, it would be possible to more easily generate and sustain networks and communities of interest with a stronger reach and with a higher degree of interconnection to other existing communities and networks interested in a given terrorist group or matter. By contrast, centralising counter-narrative efforts on a single social media account or website, designed to function as a 'one-stop-shop' for counter-narrative materials and content, would limit the potential for key messages to be propagated among relevant parties.

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<sup>249</sup> With the expression 'fake news' we refer to deliberate misinformation and hoaxes, often sensational in nature, that are disseminated under the guise of news reporting and through online social media for a variety of purposes, including political propaganda and financial profit.



## 7. Strategies for countering online radicalisation

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The previous chapters have explored how al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL use social media to share propaganda, recruit followers, coordinate their activities and secure access to funding (Chapters 3–5), before conducting a deeper analysis of how Twitter is used to discuss these three groups online (Chapter 6). This chapter offers a higher-level overview of existing strategies adopted by the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda (where applicable) to counter online radicalisation in relation to these three groups (Section 7.1). It then provides a brief overview of UNDP programming in this area (Section 7.2), before exploring selected initiatives undertaken by non-African government agencies such as USAID in partnership with local actors (Section 7.3).

### 7.1. Domestic government strategies

The issue of countering online radicalisation presents governments in Africa and beyond with a range of challenges. For example, tensions remain in striking a balance between the regulation of online space and protecting individuals' freedom of expression.<sup>250</sup> Further issues are linked to the high levels of encryption protecting users' communication on certain social media and messaging services, which can make it difficult to design and deliver interventions to counter online radicalisation.<sup>251</sup> Another challenge relates to resource availability: while social media companies can be quick to take down extremist content online, resource limitations can often constrain their ability to build counter-narratives or continuously monitor online content.<sup>252</sup> As the following sections show, while African governments have implemented a number of counter-radicalisation policies,<sup>253</sup> it appears that the specific operational area of countering *online* radicalisation is relatively new for African government actors and their overseas partners at the time of writing.<sup>254</sup>

Three of the seven countries within the scope of this study – namely, Somalia, Kenya and Nigeria – currently have national strategies that focus on countering radicalisation in relation to al-Shabaab, Boko

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<sup>250</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>251</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>252</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

<sup>253</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>254</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

Haram and ISIL.<sup>255</sup> Developed with the support of the European Union (EU) and UNDP respectively,<sup>256</sup> the governments of Somalia and Kenya have introduced national strategies for P/CVE that aim to counter the threat posed by al-Shabaab, ISIL and other militant groups such as al-Qaeda.<sup>257</sup> According to one study interviewee, the government of Kenya has focused its P/CVE policy on addressing radicalisation in the region more broadly.<sup>258</sup>

The main concern of the Nigerian National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) lies with the domestic threat posed by Boko Haram (see Chapter 4), although it also makes reference to the threat from al-Shabaab and ISIL.<sup>259</sup> The Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has also reportedly appointed three personal assistants, with one specialising in social media, thus highlighting the recognition by the government of the importance of social media.<sup>260</sup> The Nigerian government has used social media to drive counter-messaging and highlight the damaging effects of violent extremism, as well as setting in motion plans to launch a dedicated National Centre for Countering Youth Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (not yet active at the time of writing).<sup>261</sup> The government of Nigeria has reportedly used social media and radio to support the reintegration of former militants and to raise awareness of relevant training programmes.<sup>262</sup> However, the response to Boko Haram has been primarily military, with substantially fewer resources dedicated to communications or to the development of online counter-narratives.<sup>263</sup>

At the time of writing, the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Sudan and Uganda do not have national P/CVE strategies in place. However, UNDP is working with the governments of Sudan, Uganda and Chad to develop such strategies at the national level,<sup>264</sup> and these governments also contribute to counterterrorism efforts in a number of other ways.<sup>265</sup> In Sudan, UNDP is working with the Sudan National Commission for Counter-Terrorism (SNCCT) to develop a National Strategy and Policy for P/CVE that will focus on capacity development, research, strategic communications, gender and youth.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> The content relating to countries' counter-radicalisation strategies presented in Section 7.1 is up to date at the time of writing (February 2018). It should be noted that while Section 7.1 offers a snapshot of the current state of affairs, the policy landscape in this area is likely to change over time.

<sup>256</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018. See UNDP (2017a).

<sup>257</sup> While Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) are often linked, it is important to distinguish between the two: the former focuses on systematic preventative steps whilst CVE focuses on security-based counterterrorism measures. See Nickels & Shorey (2015).

<sup>258</sup> RAND Europe interview with anonymous academic expert on 22 September 2017.

<sup>259</sup> Federal Republic of Nigeria, Office of the National Security Adviser (2016) on 'The National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST)'.

<sup>260</sup> RAND Europe interview with Innocent Chilwa, academic expert, 18 September 2017.

<sup>261</sup> RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

<sup>262</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018. See UNDP (2017a).

<sup>263</sup> RAND Europe interview with Professor Isaac Olawale Robert, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

<sup>264</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018. See also UNDP (2017a); UNDP (2017b).

<sup>265</sup> For example, Chad reportedly provides more than a third of the soldiers assigned to the African Union approved Multi-National Joint Task Force and has raised its regional security profile in recent years through leadership in multilateral bodies including the AU Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council. See Nickels & Shorey (2015).

<sup>266</sup> UNDP (2017b).

While on-going government efforts in these countries are designed to address radicalisation, in most cases *online* radicalisation is an area that has not received significant attention and resources to date. The national strategies of Somalia and Nigeria include a communications component and a focus on sharing counter-narratives through the use of radio, television, the Internet and mobile phones. However, as Table 7.1 shows, little information is provided in existing strategies regarding the role of social media in these efforts, and in relation to which platforms (if any) are used in governmental efforts to target al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL in these countries.

**Table 7.1: Domestic government strategies for countering al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL<sup>267</sup>**

	<b>Cameroon</b>	<b>Chad</b>	<b>Kenya</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>Somalia</b>	<b>Sudan</b>	<b>Uganda</b>	
<b>Name of strategy</b>	No government P/CVE strategy at present and strategy development not yet underway. However, there is an anti-terrorism law criminalising the use of social media to spread terror. Source: RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018; UNDP communication, June 2018.	While Chad does not currently have a national CVE strategy, strategy development is underway. Source: RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.	National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE). Source: Strategy not available online; European Commission (2017).	National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST). Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2016).	National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. Source: Federal Republic of Somalia (2016).	While Sudan does not currently have a national CVE strategy, UNDP and SNCCT are working to develop one. Source: (UNDP, 2017b)	While Uganda does not currently have a national CVE strategy, UNDP has stated its intention to help Uganda devise such a strategy. Source: (UNDP, 2016)	
<b>Year introduced</b>	N/A – no strategy at present. Anti-terrorism law enacted in 2014.	N/A – no strategy at present.	2016.	2014 (revised in 2016).	2016.	N/A – no strategy at present.	N/A – no strategy at present.	
<b>Focus on al-Shabaab, Boko Haram</b>	N/A – no strategy at present.	N/A – no strategy at present.	The Kenya-EU implementation plan for the Kenyan CVE strategy involves providing information, advice and	Boko Haram is the main focus of NACTEST, given its on-going threat to the Nigerian government. Al-Shabaab is a secondary focus of the	The strategy makes clear its aim to defeat al-Shabaab and focuses on both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ CVE approaches. While focusing on building community	N/A – no strategy at present.	N/A – no strategy at present.	

<sup>267</sup> The content presented in this table is up to date at the time of writing (February 2018) and is intended to provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs in this area.

	Cameroon	Chad	Kenya	Nigeria	Somalia	Sudan	Uganda
<b>and/or ISIL</b>			early warning to communities exposed to al-Shabaab and ISIL (e.g. through a national radicalisation support hotline and peer-to-peer forums).	strategy, which refers to the group's links to Boko Haram (including reported provision of training). The strategy also refers to al-Shabaab's role in attracting Nigerian foreign fighters to its operational bases in East Africa, but does not refer to the threat posed by ISIL (while referring to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP], al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM] and other militant groups).	resilience against al-Shabaab's influence, the strategy also highlights the Somali government's military cooperation with AMISOM in displacing al-Shabaab from south and central Somalia. It also notes concerns that ISIL might gain a foothold in the region following its 2015 campaign to entice al-Shabaab to switch allegiance from al-Qaeda.		
<b>Focus on social media</b>	N/A – no strategy at present.	N/A – no strategy at present.	Implementing the strategy will reportedly involve efforts to build local awareness of the threat from al-Shabaab and its recruitment strategies through targeted communications. However, no specific information is provided in the implementation plan regarding the role of social media in countering the threat from al-Shabaab and other terrorist groups.	'Counter-narratives' falls under the 'Implement' strand of NACTEST, which describes which ministries, departments and agencies are responsible for executing the strategy. Under this section, the strategy refers to the Counter-Terrorism Centre in the Office of the National Security Advisor's (CTC-ONSA) programme to counter extremist ideologies through electronic media, online and advocacy platforms. However, no further detail is provided in the strategy itself regarding how (and which forms of) social media would	Strategic communications is a component of the strategy, which acknowledges the need to use radio, television, the Internet and mobile phones to counter terrorist communications and influence. The strategy highlights the value of using these tools to share the testimonies of victims and former militants through credible strategic partners external to government. Beyond acknowledging that social media will be 'very important' since 'this is an area...that [al-Shabaab] already makes extensive use of (Twitter, Facebook and other platforms)',	N/A – no strategy at present.	N/A – no strategy at present.

Cameroon	Chad	Kenya	Nigeria	Somalia	Sudan	Uganda
			be used to support this programme.	little information is provided regarding how this is done – or will be done – in practice.		

Sources: Federal Republic of Somalia (2016), European Commission (2017), UNDP (2017b), Federal Republic of Nigeria (2016), RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

## 7.2. UNDP programming

UNDP programming in the area of P/CVE is driven by research (among other inputs), having been informed by studies such as its ‘Journey to Extremism in Africa’ research publication.<sup>268</sup> In addition to working with governments to assist in P/CVE strategy development (see Section 7.1),<sup>269</sup> the UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa has also launched a four-year, \$45.7 million initiative, ‘Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa: A Development Approach’.<sup>270</sup> A core focus of the programme is on countering violent narratives and extremist propaganda.<sup>271</sup>

This strand of the programme aims to achieve three ‘activity results’, with the first focusing on ensuring that communities and civil societies are given a voice through media engagement and partnerships in target countries. This involves the delivery of training for communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and religious associations in how to engage with media outlets following attacks, aimed at better understanding how they can develop both effective counter-narratives and new partnerships with religious leaders on how to engage with youth on social media to counter extremist narratives.

Noting that ‘current...counter-narratives on violent extremism are weak or ineffectual’,<sup>272</sup> the second ‘activity result’ involves creating short documentaries and radio programmes with a view to supporting the development of effective counter-narratives. In order to de-legitimise terrorist propaganda, these programmes will be screened at universities, schools and religious institutions and will focus on survivors’ testimonials, accounts of how terrorism has affected communities, and accounts from former militants. The third activity result involves drawing together national institutions, local government, religious entities and community representatives to launch a public awareness campaign directed at members of extremist groups and those considering joining them.<sup>273</sup>

UNDP undertakes a number of counter-radicalisation activities in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda – a small subset of which involve social media-driven activities. According to one interviewee, for the most part UNDP has not yet worked with governments in these countries on designing strategies or developing programmes with a specific focus on countering online radicalisation.<sup>274</sup> Nonetheless, Kenya has seen a number of social media-driven interventions on P/CVE involving counter-narratives.<sup>275</sup> Similarly, in Somalia UNDP initiatives such as the ‘Support to Stabilization’ project have complemented the government of Somalia’s focus on STRATCOM and the use of radio to counter radicalisation (see Section 7.1).<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

<sup>269</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

<sup>270</sup> UNDP (2015).

<sup>271</sup> UNDP (2015).

<sup>272</sup> UNDP (2015).

<sup>273</sup> UNDP (2015).

<sup>274</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

<sup>275</sup> RAND Europe interview with Fauziya Abdi, UNDP, 16 January 2018.

<sup>276</sup> UNDP Somalia (2018).

### 7.3. Overseas government programmes

Countries outside Africa have also overseen or contributed to a number of initiatives focused on countering radicalisation in relation to al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL, often working in partnership with local actors in the affected African countries. In some cases, these have involved the use of social media. For example, the USAID recently introduced a programme involving a social media element – the ‘Voices for Peace’ programme – in Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Cameroon.<sup>277</sup> Focusing on the use of counter-narratives in CVE, this project makes use of social media platforms, interactive voice response (IVR) and short message service (SMS) to engage audience members and CVE actors across the four countries.<sup>278</sup> Beyond this programme, the research team found limited evidence of social media use in efforts by overseas government actors to counter radicalisation in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan or Uganda.

Looking beyond the use of social media in programming, overseas actors share the focus of domestic governments<sup>279</sup> on using radio broadcasts in efforts to counter radicalisation in Africa. Given the popularity of radio programming in Kenya, for example, an EU-funded project on ‘Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism’ (STRIVE) involved a radio pilot examining the use of radio programmes in preventing vulnerable youth from becoming radicalised, with the aim of facilitating discussion of sensitive social issues.<sup>280</sup> Radio programming has similarly been a feature of the USAID-coordinated Nigeria Regional Transition Initiative radio programme, ‘Dandal Kura’. Broadcast in the Kanuri language spoken by Boko Haram affiliates and the population in the Lake Chad Basin, the aim of this programme has been to counter extremist narratives by Boko Haram.<sup>281</sup>

While there is evidence to show that overseas government agencies are working to counter radicalisation in Africa (see Box 1), similarly to the domestic government strategies presented in Section 7.1 there appears little evidence that these overseas actors focus on the issue of *online* radicalisation. USAID in particular has contributed to a number of P/CVE initiatives aimed at countering radicalisation in Africa, but seemingly without a significant focus on how social media is used to radicalise individuals. Given the work done by USAID to contribute to counter-radicalisation in Africa, Box 7.1 below presents an overview of four of the US agency’s initiatives in Kenya in this area.

#### **Box 7.1: USAID counter-radicalisation initiatives in Kenya**

In partnership with local NGOs and civil society actors, USAID has played a particularly prominent role in working to counter radicalisation in Africa. The US agency has overseen and contributed to numerous counter-radicalisation activities, including Strengthening Community Resilience against Extremism (SCORE), NiWajibu Wetu (NIWETU), Agile Harmonised Assistance for Devolved

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<sup>277</sup> USAID (2016a).

<sup>278</sup> USAID (2016a).

<sup>279</sup> See Federal Republic of Somalia (2016).

<sup>280</sup> European Commission and RUSI (2017).

<sup>281</sup> USAID (2016c).

Institutions (AHADI), and the Kenya Youth Employment and Skills Program (K-YES).

Implemented in partnership with 15 local civil society organisations (CSOs), SCORE is a capacity-building activity for CSOs working on countering violent extremism in the Horn of Africa.<sup>282</sup> SCORE has provided training to six CSOs, allocated \$50,000 to each organisation, and aimed to support community resilience through approaches such as interfaith dialogue and counter messaging.<sup>283</sup> This initiative has reportedly helped improve relations between government agencies and local communities, as well as stimulate conversations about the dangers of radicalisation.

Other USAID-coordinated counter-radicalisation programmes in Kenya include NIWETU, AHADI and K-YES. NIWETU is a four-year programme in Nairobi, Garissa, Isiolo and Wajir counties that aims to reduce violent extremism in these areas by empowering communities and governments in countering violent extremism.<sup>284</sup> With a similar focus on community engagement and responsive governance, AHADI is designed to help 22 county governments in Kenya expand access to public services for youth and other vulnerable groups.<sup>285</sup> By introducing a national identity card registering 16,200 youth, K-YES seeks to prevent conflict and radicalisation by preventing youth from being accidentally identified as migrants and rounded up by police after a terrorist attack. The programme focuses on other recognised drivers of radicalisation by addressing the lack of economic opportunities for young people.

In summary, while efforts are being undertaken to understand and counter the drivers of radicalisation in Africa, initiatives have not typically focused on *online* radicalisation or built innovative, technological approaches into their design and implementation. There is little evidence of counter-radicalisation programmes specifically focused on social media: while the programmes described above seek to address the underlying causes of radicalisation such as poverty and unemployment, they rarely address the ways in which individuals are becoming radicalised online. This indicates that recognising and responding to the growing influence of the online influence of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL in Africa is a relatively new area for domestic governments and foreign nations.

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<sup>282</sup> USAID (2016b).

<sup>283</sup> USAID (2016b).

<sup>284</sup> USAID (2017).

<sup>285</sup> USAID (2017).



## 8. Conclusion

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This chapter first presents an overview of findings from across the three case studies – al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL – in order to address the first two research questions set out in Chapter 1 and presented in Box 9.1. Building on these findings and addressing the final research question (see Box 9.1), it then outlines a set of recommendations for policy and programming, with applicability for the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan or Uganda as well as for UNDP. Finally, the chapter describes areas for future research emerging from the evidence gaps identified by this study.

### Box 8.1: Research questions

- **RQ1:** What trends can be observed in the use of social media in Africa to contribute to online radicalisation?
- **RQ2:** Have existing counter-radicalisation interventions by African national governments and non-African government agencies:
  - i. Focused on preventing and responding to online radicalisation?
  - ii. Built innovative technological approaches into their design?
- **RQ3:** What implications can be drawn for the improvement of existing programmes and design of future programmes aimed at countering online radicalisation?

### 8.1. Summary of key findings

#### *8.1.1. Several common trends can be observed in the use of social media in Africa to contribute to radicalisation*

Social media is used by all three groups, albeit to varying degrees and levels of sophistication. Social media is used by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL in Africa. The importance of cross-media communications to the strategies of all three groups is underlined by the existence of dedicated branches for media planning, namely al-Shabaab's al-Kata'ib, Boko Haram's Media Office of West Africa Province and ISIL's Al Hayat Media Center. In part driven by growing Internet access in Africa and on-going technological advancement, it is clear that the use of social media by all three groups has increased in

recent years – although this inevitably varies by geographical area depending on the level of ICT penetration.

There appears to be a spectrum of sophistication across the three groups in relation to their social media strategies: ISIL's strategy is more advanced than those of its two counterparts, which may be linked to its more far-reaching and international support base. While still less sophisticated overall than those of ISIL and al-Shabaab, Boko Haram's social media strategy has become more professionalised since its declaration of allegiance to ISIL in 2015, whether due to the direct or indirect influence of ISIL's concerted online activities.

ISIL appears to use a wider range of social media platforms than al-Shabaab or Boko Haram

According to the literature reviewed and study interviews conducted, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL are all said to make primary use of three platforms: Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. It appears that ISIL employs a wider use of social media tools than the other two groups, as can be seen in their use of less mainstream platforms and instant messaging services such as Telegram, JustPaste.it, Kik and Ask.fm. In some cases, these more open, mainstream platforms offer terrorist groups a tool that can be used to spark the interest and curiosity of a potential recruit, after which interactions are moved from open platforms to more private channels such as WhatsApp or Telegram. In others, these groups bypass the more open platforms and concentrate their activities on Telegram and more closed networks.<sup>286</sup>

All three groups have used social media for propaganda, recruitment and coordination

The three groups appear to have used social media as a propaganda tool. For each of these groups, social media propaganda has been used to claim or publicise major attacks, showcase operational victories, demonstrate tactics (e.g. beheadings and the use of child soldiers), and denounce opponents. For ISIL, social media has also been used to attract foreign fighters, women and children by offering a glamorised depiction of life in 'the Caliphate' – although it has more recently focused its social media messaging on urging individuals overseas to launch lone wolf attacks on the West. However, our Twitter analysis indicates that in the immediate aftermath of major attacks, wider media-driven discussions generated by these events are likely to overshadow slower-paced, continuous messaging strategies aimed at, for example, radicalisation and recruitment.

It should be caveated that evidence relating to how terrorists use social media for propaganda purposes is more likely to be publicly available than that regarding terrorist groups' more covert activities in relation to recruitment, coordination and funding. This means that the relative importance assigned to these different uses of social media is difficult to quantify. There is, however, some publicly available evidence to suggest that al-Shabaab, ISIL and, to a lesser extent, Boko Haram use social media in order to attract recruits. For example, al-Shabaab has posted recruitment videos on YouTube featuring testimonies from diaspora recruits, and has involved diaspora fighters in chatrooms to field questions in relation to on-going operations. ISIL also draws on a variety of platforms, including Telegram, Kik and WhatsApp, to engage with potential recruits. While Boko Haram has focused its efforts on online radicalisation – for example, by tweeting a link to a video of Boko Haram members explaining their motivations for joining

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<sup>286</sup> RAND Europe interview with industry representative, 16 January 2017.

Boko Haram – the Nigerian group’s use of social media for recruitment appears to be less overt than that of the other two groups.

While ISIL has used social media platforms such as Telegram to coordinate its military planning and to liaise with its outposts and affiliates, social media instead appears to have created challenges for al-Shabaab’s coordination efforts. It appears that the rapid growth of the Internet has led to a ‘loss of control’ of the narrative by leaders, with messaging becoming increasingly decentralised and independent jihadists reportedly undermining centralised messaging. There appears to be limited publicly available evidence regarding if and how the three groups use social media in order to secure funding, with the exception of reports that al-Shabaab uses the Internet to contact sympathetic Salafi networks in order to raise finances for its operations.

### Terrorist groups’ use of social media is adaptive to external threats and opportunities

Particularly for ISIL, the use of social media has become more opportunistic and adaptive to the wider environment. For example, ISIL has diversified its social media strategy in response to Twitter disruption, with many supporters relocating to Telegram. As an additional adaptive measure, ISIL has increasingly made use of automated Twitter bots in an attempt to strengthen its resilience against these shutdowns. The focus of ISIL’s social media propaganda has also changed over time to reflect wider developments in strategy and operational setbacks. While initially focusing on recruiting foreign fighters, ISIL’s propaganda strategy later shifted to encourage sympathisers to carry out lone wolf attacks on the West – a development that was likely triggered in response to operational losses for the group in Iraq and Syria.

### The role of social media in radicalisation is often complemented by ‘offline’ peer influences

While online influences are clearly important in radicalising individuals, a key finding is that these have often been complemented by ‘offline’ physical influences in the form of in-person interactions with family, friends and other peer networks. For example, with reference to Boko Haram, accounts from former members indicate that their decision to join the group had been influenced by friends, family members and business colleagues. Moreover, in remote areas without access to social media, Boko Haram operatives are said to rely on ‘middle men’ to share social media messaging with people on the ground through in-person engagement. With regard to ISIL, it appears that a number of Sudanese medical students were recruited through a combination of online and offline influences, with evidence to show that on-campus engagement with an imam was influential in students’ radicalisation. While the social media strategies of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL have focused on recruitment, it is clear that ‘offline’ personal relationships also play a vitally important role in recruitment for many terrorist group followers.

### *8.1.2. While government-led counter-radicalisation efforts in Africa do not appear to focus largely on online radicalisation, some important lessons can be identified*

While P/CVE strategies have been introduced in Somalia, Nigeria and Kenya and are under development in Chad, Uganda and Sudan at the time of writing, it appears that the area of countering *online* radicalisation is relatively new for African governments and their overseas partners. Within the three existing strategies, there is some recognition of the importance of awareness-raising and communications in countering radicalisation, but little content specifically on social media use. The national P/CVE

strategies of Somalia, Kenya and Nigeria highlight the importance of sharing counter-narratives via radio, television, the Internet and mobile phones, but limited information is provided regarding the specific role of social media in these efforts, and in relation to which platforms – if any – are used in governmental efforts to target al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL in these countries.

Our research identified very few examples where overseas government actors have developed programmes with a social media element. One example is USAID’s Voices for Peace programme in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This focuses on the use of counter-narratives in CVE, drawing on social media platforms, IVR and SMS to engage with CVE actors across these countries. Beyond this programme, however, we found limited publicly available evidence of social media-related efforts by overseas government actors to counter radicalisation in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan or Uganda. Looking beyond the use of social media in their programming, it is apparent that overseas government actors share the interest of domestic governments in using radio broadcasts in their counter-radicalisation efforts, as evident in the EU-funded STRIVE radio pilot and the USAID-coordinated ‘Dandal Kura’ radio programme.

Our analysis of domestic government strategies and overseas government programmes shows that – while efforts are being undertaken to understand and counter the drivers of radicalisation in the Africa – initiatives have not typically focused on online radicalisation or built innovative, technological approaches into their design and implementation. This indicates that recognising and responding to the growing influence of the online influence of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL in Africa is a relatively new area for domestic governments and foreign nations.

## 8.2. Recommendations for policy, programming and research

Building on the findings presented above, the following sections present a set of policy and programming recommendations for the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda, as well as highlighting the role that UNDP could adopt in supporting the uptake of these recommendations. These are described in Section 8.2.1, before Section 8.2.2 outlines areas for further research.

### 8.2.1. Recommendations for policy and programming

As outlined above, it is clear that a number of African countries have introduced – or are in the process of developing – P/CVE strategies. While several of these strategies highlight the importance of awareness-raising and cross-media communications in counter-radicalisation, it appears that countering *online* radicalisation is only a recent consideration for the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. As such, we propose three recommendations for these governments, which should be undertaken sequentially:

### **Recommendation 1: Develop a bespoke national strategy for countering online radicalisation**

Each government should develop a tailored strategy that focuses on addressing online radicalisation. This could be developed either as part of the country's existing P/CVE strategy – e.g. as part of NSCVE or NACTEST – or as a subordinate strategy with a more in-depth focus on the issue of online radicalisation.

In order to draft the strategy, national governments should consult a broad set of stakeholders including (but not limited to):

- **UNDP**, to ensure that the strategy is coherent with and complements its regional P/CVE strategy.
- **(Social) media providers** (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Google and local radio stations), to identify opportunities for information-sharing and for learning from the successes and challenges of their counter-online-radicalisation strategies.
- **Local religious institutions, NGOs and CSOs**, to ensure that counter-narratives are crafted in a way that is sensitive to local context and that are likely to resonate with the target audience.
- **Local law enforcement**, to ensure that the strategy is developed in a way that is compatible with operational requirements and informed by an on-the-ground understanding of the threat landscape.

This consultation could take place through a newly established Working Group for Countering Online Radicalisation, which could then also be consulted following the launch and implementation of the strategy. Alternatively, depending on the preference of the relevant government, consultation could take place through a set of workshops or meetings dedicated to strategy development.

National strategies for countering online radicalisation should include content in the following areas:

- **Context** in relation to the importance of the issue, the threat landscape and the rationale for introducing the strategy.
- **Clearly defined objectives** in relation to the target population, planned programme activities, desired outputs and outcomes, and an associated plan for monitoring and evaluation, including appropriate timelines and key performance indicators focused on outcomes rather than inputs.
- **Resource requirements** in relation to financial costs, human resources, organisational needs and infrastructural requirements.
- **Stakeholder engagement** regarding the involvement of foreign partners, CSOs, the private sector and other organisations.

UNDP could develop a common blueprint for these government-led strategies to support their development and to ensure that they are drafted in a consistent way. This would involve compiling a template for use by national governments in structuring their counter-online-radicalisation strategy, outlining a set of best practices (e.g. in relation to how to engage with CSOs effectively), and providing indicative resource requirements with regard to time frame, cost considerations and technology

requirements. While national governments should refer to this blueprint, their strategies should be adapted to local context (see Section 8.2.2 below).<sup>287</sup>

### **Recommendation 2: After preparing a national strategy, develop counter-online-radicalisation programmes tailored to local context and needs**

It is important to ensure that a common frame of reference – i.e. the national strategies for countering online radicalisation described above – is put in place before counter-online-radicalisation programmes can be designed and implemented by national governments. If counter-online-radicalisation programmes were to be launched without such a framework, this may lead to reduced effectiveness, incoherence of approaches, duplication of effort, or potential conflicts with programmes implemented by other local, regional or overseas actors. Counter-online-radicalisation initiatives should focus not only on offering reactive social media responses following major terrorist attacks, but also on developing more proactive, continuous and preventative counter-narratives online. Our Twitter analysis highlights that there is a strong degree of uncertainty about the news circulating on social media (see Chapter 6); therefore, there is the need for trusted institutional accounts to share reliable news and carefully crafted messages in times of crisis in order to counter fake news and damaging extremist content.

Initiatives developed to counter online radicalisation in Africa should take into account a number of considerations. For example, offering a wide-reaching strategy based on multiple social media platforms, using multiple languages (where relevant), and targeting campaign messaging across multiple sectors (e.g. practitioners, media, community groups, religious groups) could help maximise the visibility of these programmes. Ensuring that programming is tailored to local context is also of critical importance: if basing a counter-radicalisation programme on religious counter-narratives, for example, government actors should engage with relevant community actors to ensure that messaging is sensitive to local context and relatable to its audience.

### **Recommendation 3: Share lessons on ‘what works’ in countering online radicalisation at the national, regional and international levels**

Given that social media is borderless and given that al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL all operate in multiple countries, lessons in relation to operational successes and challenges should be shared at national *and* regional levels. Governments should increase information exchange and cooperation in relation to countering online radicalisation. For example, official government accounts should follow, tag and retweet one another when appropriate to ensure information sharing, awareness raising, and the

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<sup>287</sup> This approach has previously been applied to good effect by the UNODC when developing ‘model laws’ as tools of technical assistance to support governments in translating their obligations under international treaties into national legislative provisions. For further information, please refer to UNODC (2018).

creation of online communities that engage constructively with official narratives and content. The sharing of lessons learned is particularly important given that the field of countering online radicalisation is relatively new.

To support these efforts, UNDP could act as an ‘honest broker’<sup>288</sup> between national governments, local communities, industry representatives and overseas governments to facilitate information exchange and help ensure that efforts are coherent and mutually reinforcing. In taking on this role, UNDP could coordinate annual regional roundtables or conferences with targeted discussion on: lessons learned regarding ‘what works’ in countering online radicalisation; individual success stories; key challenges and risks; and future opportunities for learning and collaboration. The main findings from these engagements could be captured in an annual report or compendium of conference papers, and then shared with UNDP’s contact networks alongside practical toolkits and other guidance information for practitioners.

### 8.2.2. Areas for future research

This project was broad in scope and has prioritised breadth over depth of analysis, allowing us to develop an overarching understanding of social media use in Africa by three terrorist groups and of associated responses. However, it was beyond the scope of the study to conduct a deeper examination of online platforms used by terrorist groups, or of the complex security dynamics affecting each of the African countries examined. Given the limited data available on how terrorist groups in Africa use online platforms to radicalise individuals, further work should focus on:

- **Primary research to better understand how social media contributes to individuals’ radicalisation.** While the findings of this study indicate that social media plays a role in terrorist propaganda, recruitment, coordination and fundraising activities, the issue of exactly *how* these platforms contribute to individual radicalisation processes in Africa remains poorly conceptualised in the existing literature. Given the limitations of secondary data, primary research is required to improve understanding in this area. As a starting point, this primary research could involve, for example, 10–15 individual case studies in a selected country affected by terrorist violence and with widespread social media use (e.g. Kenya or Sudan), with each case study focusing on the radicalisation ‘journey’ of former militants and drawing on data from interviews with these ex-militants.
- **Mapping initiatives undertaken by local actors to counter online radicalisation in Africa.** This study focused on the efforts of national governments, overseas government actors and UNDP to address online radicalisation in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. However, a number of study interviewees also emphasised the importance of *local-level initiatives* in this domain, which were beyond the scope of this particular study. Future work could map efforts undertaken by NGOs, CSOs, schools, religious institutions and other community-level

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<sup>288</sup> An ‘honest broker’ is an organisation that actively seeks and encourages partnership-oriented relationships with external actors. See Freeman et al. (2015).

organisations to counter the threat from online radicalisation in Africa, also exploring the extent to which social media tools have been used in the delivery of these initiatives. This type of mapping study – which could also map relevant private sector initiatives – would help raise awareness among UNDP and African governments of on-going initiatives, highlighting opportunities for cross-sector collaboration and transferrable lessons for programming.

- **‘Deeper dive’ research into online radicalisation in individual African countries.** While this report focuses broadly on seven countries, we recognise the importance of tailoring policy and programming to local contexts (see Section 8.2.1). To support understanding of local context, it is recommended that research is undertaken on the political, security and socio-economic dynamics of individual countries. This research could enhance awareness of how these dynamics can affect citizens’ engagement with online or traditional media, their susceptibility to radicalisation, and their responsiveness to particular types of government intervention. Within individual countries, analysis could also focus on how these patterns may vary between urban and rural areas. To do this, further Twitter analysis could adopt a more ‘bottom-up’ approach by focusing on the language used by different communities (e.g. supporters and opponents of specific terrorist groups) in the country of interest.<sup>289</sup> Developing individual country profiles through further research would help governments tailor interventions to a country’s specific context, as well as developing a more nuanced understanding of which approaches are more likely to be more (or less) effective in countering online radicalisation. Through this research, wider academic debates on the effectiveness of different government strategies (e.g. content filtering, takedowns, search engine filtering, promotion of counter-narratives) could be applied to specific national contexts.

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<sup>289</sup> The Twitter analysis applied in this study was instead based on a ‘top-down’ approach: within the parameters of our sampling, we identified communities at the macro level and then analysed their main topics of discussion (see Chapter 6 for a summary of the main themes from this analysis, and Annex F of the Technical Annex for an outline of the methodology).

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