

Ministerial Session on Countering Extremist Ideology and Radicalization in Africa

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Tomorrow (15 November) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is set to convene its 1048th session at ministerial level on countering extremist ideology and radicalization in Africa.

Following the opening remarks of the PSC Chairperson of the month and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt Sameh Hassan Shoukry, the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to make a statement. Representative of Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism, Representative of the Egyptian Money-Laundering and Terrorist Financing Combating Unit (EMLCU) and the Director of the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) are also expected to deliver statements.

The report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on 'Continental efforts in preventing and combating terrorism and violent extremism in Africa' which was considered by the PSC at its 1040th session convened at the ministerial level indicates the growing rate of extremism in the continent manifested through terrorist attacks, kidnappings for ransom (KFR) and other transnational organised crimes. As captured in the report, in central Africa, over 595 attacks leading to 1758 deaths were recorded, whereas in western Africa, 253 attacks were recorded which have resulted in 1538 deaths, only during the first half of 2021. So far into 2021, there have also been 82 recorded cases of KFR throughout the continent. The attacks carried out during the same period also demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of the targets of

terrorist acts are civilians. This concerning trend has prompted Council's much needed attention to tomorrow's session which aims to explore means of countering radicalism and extremist ideologies which are at the bottom of the spread of terrorist acts.

The AU Commission Chairperson's report further highlights that international terrorist groups such as Al Qaida and Daesh (the Islamic State) continue to seek alliances with domestic terrorist sects in Africa, battling for dominance over one another. As these groups fortify efforts to spread and establish strongholds, radical and extremist ideologies serve as their main weapons for mobilising and recruiting local communities. As various examples of counter-terrorist missions demonstrate, efforts aimed at preventing and fighting against radicalism and extremism fail to go beyond security responses and military approaches which are ineffective in addressing underlying root causes of the problem. In that regard, Council's note at its 749th session that member States need to adopt holistic approaches, which address root causes of terrorism, and violent extremism has been significant in emphasising that military responses alone cannot achieve the needed success in counterterrorism efforts.

As studies into trends of terrorism and violent extremism in various parts of Africa indicate, local grievances due to inequality, marginalisation, poverty, injustice, corruption and poor governance, lack of socioeconomic opportunities and high rate of unemployment, oppression and subjugation of minority groups, and violations of human rights and freedoms are widely manipulated by terrorist groups to convert and recruit local communities, particularly the youth. To some extent, the very formation of extremist and radical ideologies is also the result of such socioeconomic challenges which are left unaddressed, prompting affected and aggrieved members of society to explore less than peaceful means of seeking their societal quests. The misuse and distortion of political

opinions and religious and cultural identities and the lack of proper and timely management of resulting disputes in society also lay a fertile ground not only for the radicalisation of affected individuals and their manipulation into joining existing terrorist groups, but also for the creation of extremist ideologies. However, most of the conversation regarding terrorism and violent extremism is centred around radical religious and cultural ideologies and security-centred measures to counter them, while the background and underlying causes for the creation of such ideologies is mostly ignored. This curtails the prevention and effective response to radicalism and violent extremism.

Understanding the unique contexts under which extremist ideologies develop is also important as opposed to adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. The factors and circumstances that make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation may vary considerably from one geographic location to another. To prevent, mitigate and ultimately eradicate violent extremism therefore, identification of the specific local causes and dynamics and engaging with community members in an all-inclusive manner to find solutions to these causes is essential. The importance of early education of children and sensitisation of youth and adults on the culture of peace, peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for diversity should also not be overlooked or underplayed and should be supported with concrete government policies.

The growing linkage between terrorism and transnational organised crimes including human and drug trafficking could also be considered as factors significantly contributing to the spread of radicalism and extremist ideologies. Particularly, with poverty and lack of employment serving as push factors, individuals, especially the youth, are driven to identify with extremist ideologies and to join groups that advance them, in hopes of making a living and supporting themselves and their families. Therefore, in addition to

strengthening national efforts aimed at creating economic opportunities and ensuring inclusive development, member States should also reinforce local, regional and continental initiatives designed to address transnational organised crimes in order to stem the finances it provides to advance radicalism and extremist ideologies. It is also to be recalled that at its 1040th session, Council underscored the need to expedite the establishment of an African list of persons, groups and entities associated with terrorist acts, including those sponsoring terrorism. This, followed with appropriate action from concerned member States and the international community such as freezing accounts of persons sponsoring terrorism, will also contribute towards reducing the spread of radicalism and extremist ideologies.

Another concerning factor which could further exacerbate radicalism and extremist ideologies in Africa is the existence of substantial number of foreign terrorist fighters in the continent, particularly in Libya and the Sahel region. At its 1035th session, Council addressed the growing security concern the projected withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya imposes upon the Sahel region and the rest of the continent and stressed the importance of developing and implementing a plan for their withdrawal. In addition to the direct security consequences, a mismanaged withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya also entails the possible spread of extremist ideologies to the rest of the continent. Therefore, in addition to disarming these forces, it is also important to develop withdrawal and relocation plans with an element of deradicalisation.

The manipulation of modern technologies and misuse of the cyber space to spread extremist ideologies, motivate and radicalise targeted groups, as well as to recruit and incite violence has also been a concerning trend. Hence, while ensuring and respecting freedom of expression, the right to privacy and other relevant rights, it also important for

member States to regulate the use of social media and cyber space in general to restrict the flow and dissemination of inflammatory content.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communiqué. Council may express grave concern over the growing rate of violent extremism and terrorist attacks in the continent and emphasise the need to strengthen existing response mechanisms while adopting measures to address underlying root causes of radicalism and extremist ideologies. It may call on member States and Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs) to enhance collaborations in securing and managing borders in order to effectively control the illicit flow of weapons and to combat transnational organised crimes, which serve to finance the spread of radicalism and extremism. The PSC may reiterate the decision of the 14th extraordinary session of the Assembly on Silencing the Guns and its previous decision on the development of a comprehensive strategy for countering terrorism in Africa; the urgent need to operationalize AU Special Fund on the prevention and combating of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa; the establishment of a special unit on counter-terrorism within the African Standby Force (ASF); and the reactivation of the Council's sub-committee on counter-terrorism. Council may also highlight the need to update relevant AU instruments on counterterrorism, including the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and its 2004 Protocol, to ensure that the issue of extremist ideologies is also well reflected.