Côte d'Ivoire

The online footprint of violent extremism

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This report contains references to material that readers may find distressing.

Overview

Moonshot is a social enterprise working to end online harms, applying evidence, ethics and human rights. Our team of analysts, engineers, and project managers use fresh thinking and decades of cross-sector experience to respond to some of the world's toughest problems with effective, scalable, and ethical solutions.

In collaboration with Resilience for Peace (R4P), a five-year USAID-funded program implemented by Equal Access International, Moonshot investigated the online footprint of violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire. The investigation is an extension of the project initiated in January 2022. This report provides an overview of the online discussions related to violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire held between March and October 2022.

Methodology

Between March and October 2022, Moonshot investigated and analyzed the main narratives related to violent extremism, and misinformation and disinformation (mis/disinformation) relevant to Côte d'Ivoire on specific online platforms: Facebook, Telegram, Chirpwire, Hoop Messenger, and Google Search. The research looked at publicly available pages, groups, channels, and search data; it did not assess closed or private spaces.

Moonshot deployed a mixed methods approach, including:

→ Social media analysis of public pages, groups, and encrypted messaging channels on Facebook, Telegram, Chirpwire, and Hoop Messenger, through automated and manual data collection tools and methods;

→ Search traffic analysis on Google through Moonshot's *Search Insights Tool*, a proprietary piece of software that tracks users' searches for terms indicating interest in or engagement with violent extremism and other online harms.

Social media and search traffic data collection and analysis were enabled by Moonshot's proprietary databases of Salafi-Jihadist indicators: almost 12,000 keywords that indicate curiosity for, interest in, or engagement with Salafi-Jihadist content online.[1]

Results must be interpreted in the context of low internet penetration in Côte d'Ivoire: at the start of 2022, there were 9.9 million people online (36.3% internet penetration), and 6.4 million social media users (23.4% of the total population).[2]

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1. Methodologies were deployed in compliance with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), with user privacy and freedom of expression as core principles in the approach.
2. DataReportal, Digital 2022: Côte d'Ivoire, 2022.

Key findings and recommendations

The research did not identify violent extremist communications or activity on the public social media pages, groups and encrypted messaging channels that were monitored in Côte d'Ivoire for this study.

Moonshot monitored public social media pages, groups and encrypted messaging channels in Côte d'Ivoire to identify violent extremist communications and discussions about violent extremism. During the reporting period, no instances of users openly endorsing, glorifying or advocating for violence on behalf of a Salafi-Jihadist ideology were identified on any of the monitored platforms.

Although the research did not identify violent extremist communications or activity online in Côte d'Ivoire, in light of militant incidents in Mali and Burkina Faso, and grassroots activity mixed with crime and banditry in north Côte d'Ivoire, it is important to continue monitoring online discussions to identify possible early signs of violent extremist infiltration in the country's online spaces.

Mis/disinformation was present in discussions about regional conflict dynamics and violent extremism.

Analysis of social media discussions about regional conflict dynamics and violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire identified overlaps with mis/disinformation. This includes primarily:

▸ Anti-French mis/disinformation: Anti-French narratives and mis/disinformation are present in discussions about regional conflicts and violent extremism on Facebook in Côte d'Ivoire, and mostly revolve around France's military presence in West Africa and the Sahel.
▸ Pro-Wagner Group mis/disinformation: Pro-Wagner Group narratives and mis/disinformation are also present on Facebook in Côte d'Ivoire, mainly supporting the group's interventions in Mali. These echo social media campaigns promoted by Russia in Mali in 2021.

As the regional conflict dynamics evolve, P/CVE programs in Côte d'Ivoire should continue supporting national and local influencers identifying, understanding, and building resilience against mis/disinformation.

Narratives that may threaten social cohesion and resilience in Côte d'Ivoire were identified.

Divisive discourse about the Fulani people remains identifiable on social media, although these narratives are not linked to violent extremism.[3] This creates additional risks to community cohesion, which could further marginalize certain demographic groups. This vulnerability is often exploited by violent extremist groups in their propaganda efforts to sow division and appeal to groups feeling marginalized. It is important to embed in P/CVE programming in Côte d'Ivoire social cohesion and resilience building activities.

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3.   In the previous monitoring period (January 2016 - January 2022) Moonshot identified divisive discourse about the Fulani people directly related to violent extremism in the region.

West Africa and the Sahel remain areas of expansion and investment for Salafi-Jihadist groups.

Analysis of pro-al-Qaeda and pro-Daesh channels on Telegram, Chirpwire and Hoop Messenger reveal that West Africa and the Sahel remain areas of expansion and investment for Salafi-Jihadist groups. Pro-al-Qaeda channels focused on attacks committed by the al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and on the deployment of Wagner Group in Mali; pro-Daesh channels focused on regional expansion, and expressed anti-French sentiment. While no Ivorian-specific content was observed, online communications of Salafi-Jihadist groups in the region can help inform prevention and early intervention, as certain themes exploited in their propaganda could apply in Côte d'Ivoire.

Conclusion

The research did not identify violent extremist communications or activity in the monitored public social media pages, groups and encrypted messaging channels in Côte d'Ivoire during the reporting period. However, Salafi-Jihadist groups are present and active offline and online in neighboring countries, and EAI's offline programming has identified the emergence of grassroots activity in the north of Côte d'Ivoire. It is important to continue prioritizing the north of Côte d'Ivoire in P/CVE programming, and to monitor online discussions about violent extremism in the country in order to identify possible early-warning signs of risk and vulnerability to violent extremism, as well as local resilience factors.