

Preventing Islamic radicalisation and conflict

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In recent years, most of the major violent conflicts in the world have happened in Muslim-majority countries. Of these conflicts, a substantial and increasing share has been related to terrorism by Islamist insurgents (Gleditsch and Rudolfsen, 2016). Specifically, driven by Islamist groups, the Sahel has seen a clear increase in terrorism after an outbreak of violence in Mali in 2012: it now accounts for 43 percent of the world's terrorism deaths; Mali and Burkina Faso are among the world's five countries most impacted by terrorism deaths; Burkina Faso now accounts for more terrorism deaths annually than any other country (Global Terrorism Index, 2023). And related to these facts, data from U.N.'s International Organisation for Migration shows a major increase in illegal immigration pressures over Europe coming from affected populations in the Sahel. Islamic radicalisation is a major correlate of violent conflict in the world today and deserves specific attention in terms of conflict prevention policies.

In this policy brief, we report on a series of studies we conducted in Mozambique on preventing Islamic radicalisation and conflict. Like some countries in the Sahel, Mozambique has seen the emergence of Islamist insurgents in its resource-rich northern province of Cabo Delgado, starting in 2017. Violence in this region is ongoing, has been associated with ISIS,

and has resulted to date in more than four thousand deaths, and more than 800 thousand people displaced. The immediate reaction of the Mozambican government was solely military, with little success or even backfiring because of mistargeting insurgents and losing support of local populations. This should not come as a surprise as the classical conflict literature has focused on the idea that increasing the opportunity cost of engaging in conflict is an important way to prevent it — i.e., that winning the 'hearts and minds' of local populations through development can be the most effective conflict-prevention strategy (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Miguel et al., 2004; Berman et al., 2011).

We collaborated with local religious organisations in Mozambique to test ways to decrease Islamic radicalisation, and in that way, reduce anti-social behaviours and violence in Cabo Delgado. We were encouraged to ally with civil society because an initial randomised controlled trial we launched before the conflict in Cabo Delgado province showed that community mobilisation through information provision by a consortium of organisations led to lower incidence of conflict in the first year of the conflict — as measured by independently reported geo-referenced violent events (ACLED and GDELT; Armand et al., 2020). This way, we started to believe that religious organisations (which



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were part of that first consortium) could have a specific role to play in terms of reaching communities with relevant information to prevent conflict. That could be a way to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local populations while addressing the specific religious dimension of the violent conflict situation in Mozambique.

Religious sensitisation and anti-social behaviour

We started by partnering with the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO) to run a randomised controlled trial in Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado (Vicente and Vilela, 2022). CISLAMO sponsored two conflict-prevention interventions in 2019, targeting young men from local mosques, who are potential recruits for the insurgent group. The first intervention was a religious sensitisation campaign conducted by religious leaders, who provided information about the lack of theological foundation of typical claims by Islamist insurgents. Some of these claims had a direct connection to violent behaviour. The main motivation of this campaign was to change the religious beliefs of participants, directing them toward non-extremist Islam. The second intervention was a training module on entrepreneurship and employment in the local labour market. The main idea of this module was to improve the economic prospects of subjects — i.e., to increase the opportunity cost of engaging in conflict.

In this project, we employed state-of-the-art measurement of outcomes as we focus our attention on anti-social behaviour by running a Joy-of-Destruction lab game, which allows observing participants’ behaviours against real stakes. We know that behaviour in the Joy-of-Destruction game is associated with known determinants of conflict (Caldara et

al., 2017). The Joy-of-Destruction game is played in pairs. Each participant has a unique decision to make — i.e., whether to destroy the endowment of the other player at a cost. Players play this activity simultaneously. In our implementation of the lab game, the main Muslim sample we follow plays against four types of opponents: local Muslims, local Christians, local public officials, and foreigners. We measure beliefs about the behaviour of counterparts as well. In our study, we are able to track 1,520 experimental decisions about destruction in the Joy-of-Destruction game. We complement our behavioural measurements with standard survey-based attitudes, namely on measuring extreme religious views that may lead to violence.

Our results show that the religious sensitisation (religious treatment) reduced anti-social behaviour in the Joy-of-Destruction game: the magnitude of the effect is 8-9 percentage points on the probability that subjects in our main Muslim sample destroy the payoffs of their opponents. Differently, we observe no effects of the training module related to entrepreneurship and employment (economic treatment), which aimed to raise opportunity costs of violent behaviour, on the same outcome. In fact, this intervention significantly increases the belief that others will behave in an anti-social manner in the Joy-of-Destruction game. These results are shown in [Figure 1](#). We also report on suggestive evidence that our main Muslim sample targets more anti-social behaviour towards public officials and foreigners, consistent with the violent attacks that have taken place in the region. Finally, we observe effects of the religious campaign on survey attitudes, namely on increased optimism regarding peace in the region, increased trust in the state, and lower support for mixing religion with politics.

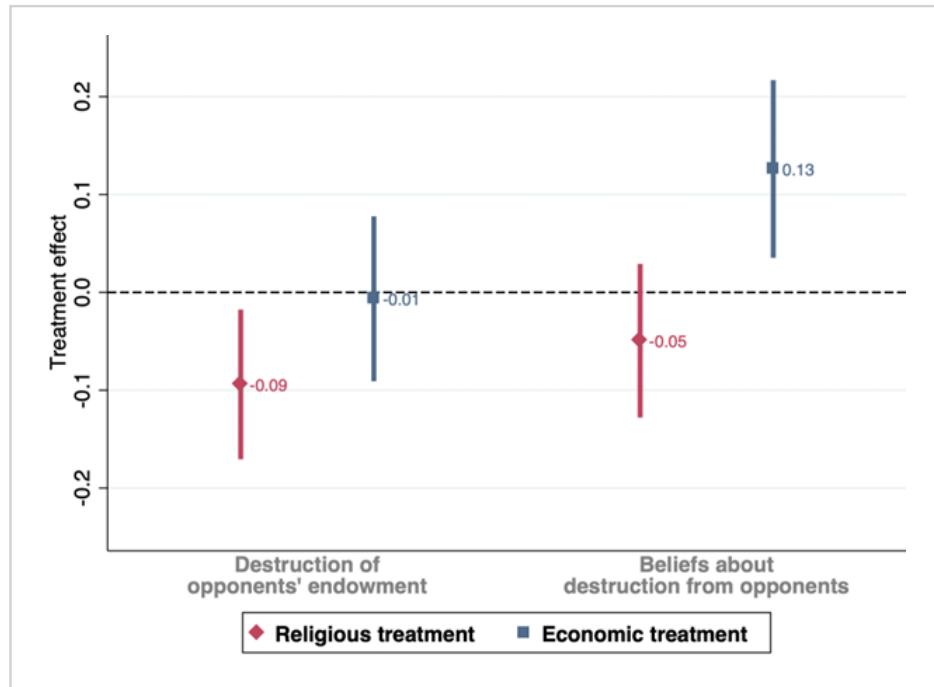


Figure 1: Treatment effect on the probability of destroying the opponent's endowment and beliefs about the opponent's behaviour

Scaling-up through the radio

Encouraged by the results from the Pemba experiment we just described, we expanded the partnership with CISLAMO to other religious organisations in Mozambique, namely the Islamic Congress of Mozambique, and the Christian Council of Mozambique. These three organisations sponsored the scaling up and adaptation of the religious sensitisation in the first project with CISLAMO to a pan-religious radio campaign favoring peace, which was broadcast throughout the province of Cabo Delgado during the year of 2021. In this campaign, religious leaders of each organisation voiced their clear support for peace and explained how their religion supports peace, based on passages of the corresponding scriptures. The campaign was broadcast through eight community radios, in daily broadcasts composed of 90-second spots, including the use of local languages.

In Armand et al. (2024), we analyse short-run impacts of the radio broadcasts on incidence of violence province-wide in Cabo Delgado measured through independent reports of geo-referenced violence involving Islamists actors (ACLED). In doing so, we compute a topography-corrected measure of radio coverage using the Longley-Rice Irregular Terrain Model (e.g., Olken, 2009) and assume that it varies in a quasi-random manner conditional on distance from the radio antennas in a cross-section or conditional on grid-cell fixed effects in a panel. The relevant measure of radio coverage is shown in [Figure 2](#). We also study a sample of close to 1,400 individuals in 146 villages in the province (based on the sample of Armand et al., 2020), which were surveyed by phone and observed in behavioural activities aimed at measuring anti-social behaviour, trust, support for peace, and tolerance. This sample was randomly exposed to individually targeted phone messages

with the same contents of the radio campaign.

We find that the radio campaign consisting of the joint pro-peace religious message decreases the probability of a violent event perpetrated by Islamist insurgents in the six months after the radio campaign ended. Anti-social behaviour towards non-Muslims decreases, like survey-reported violence, following the campaign. There is an impact on political/religious attitudes in the direction of supporting more socially progressive and non-violent views. However, the radio treatment has mixed effects on behavioural trust and seems to be increasing fear, measured as the belief that others will be anti-social and as tolerance towards different groups. The effects of the radio campaign are likely stemming from the media/public nature of the campaign, as the analogous phone message intervention has statistically insignificant impacts on political/religious views.

Potential implications for the Sahel

Our experience in Northern Mozambique indicates that community sensitisation and information work effectively to prevent conflict. Important and specifically, we have shown that religious organisations can counter Islamic radicalisation and, in that way, decrease anti-social behaviour and violence. Although the political situation is much more unstable in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, than it is in Mozambique, we believe that the Sahel context can use the evidence we collected. Civil society partnerships including the mainstream religious organisations in that region (e.g., see related initiatives by the Timbuktu Institute, based in Senegal) can be set to provide a clear pro-peace position based on religious precepts and countering the positions of radical

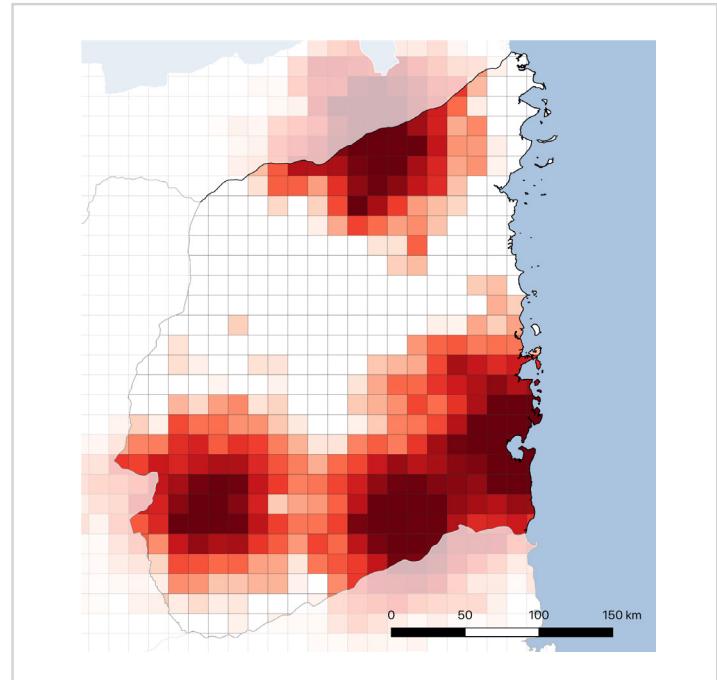


Figure 2: Community radio coverage in Cabo Delgado

Islam. This type of policy is low-cost, does not rely on fragile state actors or involve clear political interests, and can be communicated safely and effectively through the radio. Specifically in the case of Senegal, where there has been no noteworthy Islamist violence to date, but there are clear records of Islamic radicalisation in progress (US Department of State, 2021), our research points in the direction of using sensitisation campaigns by mainstream religious organisations to counter radical views of Islam on issues such as female education, which is opposed by Islamists and can be promoted further in the country (62% of adolescent girls in Senegal are out of school at the time of lower secondary schooling - latest available year, World Development Indicators, 2024).

Policy Brief

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