Fighting the Enemies of God: the Rise of and the Response to Violent Extremism in Sudan

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Abstract

This article explores the rise of and the response to violent extremism, as well as the state of affairs regarding deradicalization programs in Sudan. Based on 18 interviews with policy makers, deradicalization program staff and relatives of ISIS members, it argues that the growth of violent extremism in Sudan is far from being solely an extension of the global jihad movements; rather, it is a manifestation of domestic political and historical dynamics. This article demonstrates that violent extremism is embedded in the Islamization project that was launched by the Inqāz regime—a radical, military Islamist government that seized power in 1989—and a political ideology that created the conditions for violent extremism to thrive. Furthermore, the article illustrates two Salafi-jihadist domestic groups that are committed to establishing a global Islamic state and legitimate the use of violence to achieve their political and religious goals. This article analyzes the various narratives employed by the regime to dissociate the country from violent extremism and to portray it as a recent and foreign phenomenon. One key finding of this paper is that deradicalization in Sudan is practiced in the context where the regime attempts to balance between two contradicting interests: it tries to remove Sudan from the US government list of state sponsors of terrorism, on one hand, and to maintain the regime's questioned local Islamic legitimacy, on the other hand.

Introduction

Sudan had never before experienced violent extremism as seriously as in recent years. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attracted both global and domestic attention in the summer of 2014 (Al-Shaikh, 2014; Westphal, 2018). Subsequently, alarming

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news was broadcasted about the Sudanese individuals and groups that joined ISIS between March and June 2015 ("A Group of University Students Heads to ISIS," 2015; Yaqoub, 2015). For instance, ISIS recruited a group of students of British-Sudanese origin from the private University of Medical Science and Technology (UMST), who had been enrolled to become doctors, dentists, and pharmacists (Daftari, 2017). The group that held foreign passports and included women and children set off for Syria from Khartoum via Turkey (Yaqoub, 2015). The recruits came from diverse backgrounds, such as middle-class and elite families (Awad, 2015). Interestingly, the Turkish authorities managed to intercept a few of the student recruits on their way to the Syrian border, following intensive communication with their parents and the Sudanese authorities ("Turkey Intercepted Sudanese Students," 2015). A Palestinian-British UMST student was accused of recruiting the students to join ISIS after indoctrinating them through a Salafi-jihadist[2] student association called *Jamʿiyat al-Ḥaḍāra al-ʾIslāmiya* (JHI, Islamic Civilization Society) (2015). JHI not only targeted the students with foreign passports but also offered them religious lessons in English—an easily accessible language to the Sudanese youths who had returned to Sudan from abroad. The UMST abolished political activities but allowed Salafi-jihadist activities on campus, such as inviting radical preachers to deliver speeches in which they openly supported ISIS's cause ("Islamic Civilization Association," 2015).

There is no reliable data about the number of the Sudanese youths who have joined the violent extremist groups, but the United Nation Development Program estimates that more than 3,000 people have joined ISIS and Boko Haram[3] since 2016 (Salim & Ibrahim, 2018). Experts believe that the disclosed figure represents only the tip of the iceberg, and the Sudanese government downplays the role of its citizens who have joined ISIS (Al-Hidaibi, 2016; Elnour, 2017; "Jihadist Groups Expert," 2015; "Participation of 260 Sudanese in ISIS," 2017). Despite the relatively small number of Sudanese joining ISIS, the attention drawn by

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[2] Salafi is a group within Sunni Islamism that emphasizes the importance of returning to a "pure" Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Salafi-jihadist groups believe that violent jihad is a personal religious duty (Jones, 2014).
[3] Boko Haram is an extremist movement operating primarily in Nigeria's northeast region extending into the border areas of the neighboring West African states of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger (Pieri & Zenn, 2016).

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the path taken by these students signals the growing concern among the Sudanese public (Noah, 2016). Given this context, this paper intends to provide an understanding of the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and the country's response to it since 2014.

This paper presents two central arguments. First, the growth of violent extremism in Sudan since 2014 has been far from being solely an extension of the global jihad movements; rather, it is a manifestation of domestic political and historical dynamics. In contrast to the official narrative that portrays violent extremism as a recent and foreign phenomenon in Sudan, this paper argues that violent extremism evolved and was maintained by the Inqāz regime—a radical, military Islamist government that seized power in 1989, governing through the National Islamic Front (NIF), which was subsequently renamed the National Congress Party (NCP) (El-Battahani, 2016). Second, the Sudanese government's response and approach to combating violent extremism in the country has been merely a tactic aimed at bringing the regime both political and economic gains.

When analyzing the deradicalization program in any given context, it is crucial to take into account the political, social, and relational setting that gives rise to violent extremism (Marsden, 2017, p. 3). Studying the political conditions that gave rise to violent extremism and shape the deradicalization practices are key to countering and preventing it. Given the growing number of Sudanese recruited to engage in violent extremism, this paper provides insights into the current deradicalization landscape in Sudan. Advancing the understanding of the rise of and the response to violent extremism in such a context is crucial and even doubly important when knowing that the jihad ideology remains alive and recruitment rates are increasing, despite ISIS's military defeats in Syria and Iraq (Nasira, 2008). Thus, the ideology of founding an Islamic caliphate on the basis of violent means has exhibited resilience and adaptability to changing circumstances and is likely to inspire new jihadists in different forms and settings.

This paper is an outcome of the qualitative field research undertaken in Khartoum, Sudan between July and August 2018. The author interviewed 18 informants active in fighting violent extremism in Sudan: three staff members from the governmental

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deradicalization center, two from the National Commission for Counter Terrorism, three religious scholars involved in religious dialogue with extremists, five relatives of ISIS members, as well as five members of civil society organizations involved in preventing violent extremism in Sudan. In-depth and semi-structured interviews with informants provided insights into the rise of and response to violent extremism in Sudan. Before the interviews commenced, the researcher prepared an interview guide and adapted the question order according to each interviewee. Whenever needed, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify or complete missing information. The author conducted the interviews in Arabic, and the participants chose a time and location that suited them. Before and throughout the study, the researcher provided participants with information about the purpose of the study to allow them to make an informed decision about their participation in the study. Each participant gave verbal or written consent to participate in the study. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the identities of some interviewees were anonymized. The identities of public figures and state officials that make public statements to the press about their role in the deradicalization process are not anonymized. Using the thematic content analysis approach, the author manually analyzed interviews and identified themes and patterns important to the description of the trajectories of the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and the deradicalization practices in the country.

Newspaper articles have been valuable primary sources of information for this paper. The author collected relevant printed and online newspaper articles, both local and international and in Arabic and English, that were published from 2014 to 2018. Grey literature was very useful, too; the author collected relevant materials, such as laws, reports, policy papers, and government documents, produced by government agencies, academic centers, and consultants. This study's limitations include the unavailability of reliable figures about violent extremism, the secret nature of and fragmentations within radical groups, many of which chose to detach themselves from society. Given the topic's sensitivity, the relatives of the individuals who joined or returned from ISIS were reluctant to provide information

about the journey that led their sons to ISIS, for fear of backlash by the Sudanese security forces.

As a conduit between actors and policymakers, this paper analyzes the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and describes deradicalization programs in Sudan. The first section of the paper gives an overview of what is already known in the literature about deradicalization interventions, particularly the religious rehabilitation programs. The second section analyzes the trajectories of the rise of violent extremism in Sudan. The third section presents the response to the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and describes the deradicalization practices in the country. The final section discusses this study's results.

Deradicalizing jihadists through religious rehabilitation

To many scholars, the role of the jihadi ideology is less important in the deradicalization process. It is often overlooked and may be deemed secondary. However, this aspect of deradicalization is key to a successful deradicalization of jihadists, particularly in the context where the religious factor has proven to be the main driver for radicalization. According to El-Said (2015), deradicalization "refers to a package of policies and measures designed and implemented by authorities in order to normalize and convince groups and individuals who have already become radicalized or violent extremists to repent and disengage from violence" (p. 10). This definition emphasizes the state's role in the deradicalization process and expresses optimism about the authorities' capacity to disengage violent extremists. In contrast, Horgan (2009) identifies deradicalization as "the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity" (p. 153).

Barrelle (2015) investigated the phenomenon of individual voluntary disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context. The study ascertained that disengagement is an identity transition and that sustained disengagement is actually about the proactive, holistic

and harmonious engagement the person has with wider society afterward. Similarly to this, Dalgaard-Nielsen's (2013) study on promoting exit from violent extremism argued that an external intervention should utilize internal contradictions, dilemma, and tensions within the extremist group, as well as narratives to promote attitudinal change via behavioral change as an alternative to seek to influence beliefs directly. Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek's (2010) study showed that for deradicalization programs to succeed, there must be extensive efforts that include affective, pragmatic, and ideological components and considerable aftercare. Prison-based deradicalization programs, in particular, need to exercise caution, carefully evaluating each individual before release and implementing safeguards, such as monitoring, to protect against the eventuality that former militants could once again take up arms (Rabasa et al., 2010).

El-Said (2015) investigates the "soft" approaches to countering violent extremists and finds that religious rehabilitation is one of various measures in deradicalization programs that can be either collective (occurring among entire groups or organizations) or individual (aiming at deradicalizing individuals). The government can initiate these programs, or the jihadists themselves can initiate the deradicalization process, either inside or outside prisons. However, while many jihadists with radical ideas may participate in religious rehabilitation, voluntarily or involuntarily, this may not necessarily mean their repentance and disengagement from violence. Notably, El-Said (2015) identifies the conditions conducive to deradicalization, including macro-national factors and micro components of successful programs. He finds that strong states with a development capacity and trusted civil society are among the macro-national factors favorable to fruitful deradicalization. As one of the components of successful programs, religious rehabilitation may delegitimize the actions of terrorists and refute their theoretical and ideological justifications through religious debates between scholars and jihadists. For Marsden (2017, p. 14), religious rehabilitation can also take the form of religious instruction, specifically one-on-one dialogues with scholars or ex-militants, organized classes, and group work. El-Said (2015) adds to this view by stating that the religious debate approach is rooted in Muslim culture and history, where scholars and

detainees discuss the issues that justify violence, such as jihad, the relationship with the West, and international treaties. In this process, scholars promote a version of Islam that protects life and resolves conflict. Therefore, it is suggested that religious rehabilitation requires a sufficient number of competent, knowledgeable, moderate, and highly respected scholars.

Theological counseling is used in the Sudanese deradicalization program but it has been criticized by scholars and in other programs. In his analysis of practical and theoretical aspects of deradicalization programs, Koehler (2017) emphasizes the scholars' crucial role in religious rehabilitation programs. He suggests that respected scholars and authorities could hold theological and ideological debates with jihadists, aimed to deglamorize and de-idealize the use of violence. Theological counseling, which is largely used in the Middle East and South Asia, is based on the premise that Islamist extremists have been misguided and indoctrinated with a perverted understanding of Islam and aims to teach participants its correct tenets (Koehler, 2017). Furthermore, according to Marsden, the deradicalization intervention that addresses ideological issues assumes that "prisoners had been misled and need help to return to the correct path" (2017, p. 14). By challenging the leading extremist detainees, this tool aims to remove the aspect of religious legitimization of violence as the condition for jihad. However, it was argued that direct ideological confrontation might lead to reactance and even deepen the radicalization (Braddock, 2014; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). In Al-Hadlaq's account of the Saudi-Arabian deradicalization program, even highest ranking religious scholars were seen largely as ineffective in using theological confrontation to deradicalize terrorist inmates (2015).

Besides the top-down approach, the radical group itself can initiate the deradicalization process. Ashour (2009) suggests that the radical group may undergo the process of change, reverse its ideology, and delegitimize the use of violent methods to achieve its political goals. Both Ashour (2009) and El-Said (2015) agree that the deradicalization process among radical groups may include a behavioral change by abandoning the use of violence, with or without a cognitive change in ideological delegitimization. However, Marsden (2017) challenges the assumption that changing someone's commitment to violent

extremism will lead to a change in behavior. For Marsden, the theory that ideas and beliefs inform behavior has no solid basis because sometimes, the ideological commitment develops after engaging in a radical setting (p. 14).

Several typologies of deradicalization approaches and programs have been developed. For instance, Koehler's (2017) typology classifies and compares various deradicalization and disengagement programs worldwide. In Koehler's typology, Type D is a government-run program that relies on theological and ideological debates utilizing the state-sanctioned version of Islam in an attempt to create a cognitive opening or induce individual deradicalization (2017, p. 125). He suggests that this type of deradicalization faces resistance from committed extremists because for them, the government is part of the enemy. Ashour (2009) classifies deradicalization into comprehensive, substantial, and pragmatic approaches. According to this classification, the comprehensive deradicalization has three levels: behavioral, organizational, and ideological. Barrett and Bokhari (2009, pp. 175-176) list four types of deradicalization and rehabilitation programs targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world: 1) re-education and rehabilitation based on providing a different truth, 2) the creation of a space and an opportunity to vent frustration, 3) programs that provide an alternative lifestyle, and 4) amnesty programs.

It is important to consider the context when reflecting on the practices of deradicalization programs. For instance, El-Said and Harrigan's (2013) empirical analysis of Yemen's process of religious dialogue inside prisons shows the role of internal and international contexts in the process. Their study finds that the Committee of Dialogue, established in 2002 to convince jihadist detainees to repent and abandon violence, has been a balancing act between the need to appear as a reliable partner in the "war on terror" and the need to accommodate the wishes of the tribal population with some Islamist sympathies. Barrett and Bokhari's (2009) case study of the Committee of Dialogue in Yemen outlines the issues discussed between the scholars and the detainees. For instance, the detainees expressed their frustration that Yemen was not an Islamic state, whereas the scholars tried to prove the Islamic nature of the state and showed their preparedness to amend the laws to be Sharīʿa

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(Islamic law) compliant. They also debated whether it would be Islamic to attack non-Muslims. The Yemeni government mentioned that the program participants were born outside Yemen to Yemeni parents and radicalized abroad. At the end of the program, the detainees would be required to sign a document renouncing violence. According to Barrett and Bokhari (2009), the dialogue achieved the recognition of the legitimacy of the Yemeni government and stopped targeting Westerners. The regime was less interested in actual ideological engagement and more concerned about political expediency because of the US pressure on Yemen. The absence of an independent mechanism to oversee the program exposed the program as leading to grievances and victimization of the detainees.

The ideological approach to deradicalization has its skeptics. Marsden's (2017) study on reintegration of extremists, deradicalization, and desistance is critical of the focus on debating about the ideology of the detainees without taking into account the political, social, and relational setting that informs their experience in the community. She stresses that considering this context gives space for a holistic approach that allows focusing on the individuals' opportunity for reintegration. As part of the deradicalization process, the ideological approach is challenged by Marsden (2017) for overlooking an individual's relational context, neglecting an individual's agency, and disregarding society's role in radicalization and reintegration processes. The work of Bjørgo and Horgan's (2009) on the processes by which individuals and groups disengage from terrorism shows that intellectual debate as a tool for disengagement from religious movements is criticized for being coercive. The deprogramming is used to pull out young people from the new religious movements and is more akin to a kind of brainwashing other than that employed in the recruitment and the resocialization techniques used by these new religious movements.

The question of how individuals and groups in Sudan have been radicalized lies at the forefront. What historical context has led to the rise of violent extremism in Sudan? Understanding the political conditions during the rise of violent extremism is essential to further the conversation that scholars are creating to grasp the practices of deradicalization programs.

Context of violent extremism in Sudan

Violent extremism is not a new phenomenon in Sudan. In the 1970s, the country witnessed terrorism events, such as the assassination of the US ambassador and his deputy in the 1973 attack by the Black September terrorist organization in Khartoum ("Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 1998). In 1988, members of the Iraqi Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party assassinated the Iraqi Shi'ite leader Mahdi al-Hakim while he was attending the NIF conference in Khartoum (Al-Awad, 2016). These two terrorist events occurred on Sudanese soil but targeted foreigners and were committed by foreigners. However, a new level of violent extremism has emerged during the Islamists' era in Sudan (1989–2019). Table 1 presents an overview of the series of violent extremism events in Sudan since the 1990s. It shows that religious ideology has motivated these events, and/or the local political conditions have been conducive for their occurrence.

Table 1. Overview of events linked to terrorism in Sudan

	Year	Event	Place	Executed by
1	1991–1996	Al Qaeda members and Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan.	Sudan	Al Qaeda
2	1994	Sudanese authorities arrested the most wanted terrorist Carlos the Jackal[4] and handed him over to French authorities.	Khartoum	Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service
3	1994	The attack on worshipers in al-Thawra mosque killed 28 and injured 35 people.	Omdurman	Abdalrahman Al-Khulaify[5]
4	1996	Authorities captured the Takfiri Group	Omdurman	Abu Ayob Al-Barqawi

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[4] Carlos the Jackal entered Sudan in 1991, carrying a passport with the name Ali Barakat, issued by an Arab country. The regime's policy that required no entry visa from Arab visitors smoothed his entrance without discovering his real identity (Kafil, 2017).
[5] Al-Khulaify, a Libyan leader of the Takfir wal-Hijra cell, came from Afghanistan when Sudan opened its doors to Arabs without an entry visa.

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		for possession of weapons intended for carrying out attacks.		Takfiri Group[6]
5	1996	Jihadists attacked the Kambo ʾashara area and killed eight persons.	Wad Madani	Nineteen individuals from the Takfir wal-Hijra Group[7]
6	1998	The US government launched an attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory for allegedly manufacturing chemical weapons and being accused of ties to Al Qaeda.[8]	Khartoum	the USA
7	2000	An attack on worshipers in al-Jarafa mosque killed 24 and injured 40 people.	Omdurman	Abbas Al-Baghir[9] from Takfir wal-Hijra Group
8	2003	A terrorist cell composed of 18 individuals established a military training camp and was arrested by Sudanese authorities.	Laqawa, Western Kordufan	Summaya Al-Zarqa Group (Al Qaeda)
9	2007	A jihadist group of 40 individuals was arrested for possession of explosions and	Khartoum	Alsalama cell[10]

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[6] The emir of the group was active in the Afghan jihad. He held a Sudanese citizenship, was born in Kuwait from a Palestinian mother and he has Libyan connection. The group had been active in the city of Omdurman, and most of its members subsequently migrated to Somalia (Kabashi, 2013).

[7] This group defected from Salafi Ansar al-Sunna, came to the village on foot, and started preaching Takfiri ideology. When the villagers rejected their ideas, they attacked the villagers using cold weapons. The police intervened and killed eight members, and nine were injured. This group considered daily practices, such as cash transactions, the use of modern transportation, and possession of firearms, forbidden (Kabashi, 2013).

[8] Because of its alleged connection to Al Qaeda, the Al-Shifa factory was attacked by the USA as part of the "war on terror" and in retaliation to Al Qaeda's attack on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar Alsalam two months earlier on August 20, 1998 (K. A. Mohamed, 2015).

[9] Abbas Al-Baghir was from the Takfir wal-Hijra group and had been a member of the Islamist paramilitary Popular Defense Forces that fought in South Sudan in the 1990s.

[10] The authorities found other weapon hideouts in Suba and in al-Hatana areas and arrested 63 other individuals involved with this group (Kabashi, 2013).

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		weapons in preparation for their planned attacks on state institutions and foreigners.		
10	2008	The American diplomat John Granville and his driver Abdelrahman Abbas were assassinated.	Khartoum	Ansar al-Tawhid Salafi-jihadist Group
11	2010	A jihadist group targeted foreigners and the general elections.	Sudan	Wadi Hor Group
12	2012	A jihadist group of 30 individuals was captured after establishing a training camp equipped with explosions and weapons, targeting state institutions and foreigners.	Dinder National Park	Du'at al-Sharia Group[11]

Sources: Updated and adapted (Al-Awad, 2016; Kabashi, 2013; Kafil, 2017)

Salafi-jihadist groups and Takfiri movements that accuse other Muslims as unbelievers and legitimate the use of violence for achieving their goals have played a significant role in the execution of mosque attacks and other violent acts in different parts of Sudan. However, the pertinent questions are how Salafi-jihadist and Takfiri ideas have spread in Sudan, and what conditions have given rise to these groups.

To understand the rise of violent extremism, it is useful to revisit the last years of former President Numeri's regime (1971–1985) that witnessed a dramatic shift toward the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) political ideology. The regime reconciled with the NIF, and religious manifestations surfaced, which soon culminated in the imposition of Islamic laws in September 1983. When Islamists seized power in 1989 through a military coup, they systematically weakened and displaced secular political parties and liberal movements through arbitrary crackdowns and continuous harassments. Religious forces then expanded

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[11] In this operation, the authorities confiscated weapons and arrested 25 members of the group. The group's leader was a university professor who held a PhD degree in chemistry (Kabashi, 2013).

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into the spaces that had been long occupied by secular forces, such as civil society, women, and youth movements. The regime embarked on Islamization policies that included the expansion of religious education, the establishment of Islamic higher educational institutions, and Islamic banking. The regime pushed Islam to the public sphere in an unprecedented manner by building mosques in all public institutions, increasing the amount of religious programs in the media, and glorifying religious occasions (Kabashi, 2013).

Takfiri ideas came to Sudan after they developed in Egypt's prisons during the period when the state crushed the MB. Some members of the MB believed that no Muslim ruler could possibly torture a fellow Muslim in the way that the Egyptian state did to the MB. Thus, they declared the Egyptian state and all its supporters as unbelievers (Ashour, 2009). Similar to the MB ideology, Takfiri ideas found their way from Egypt to Sudan, and many groups adopted the excommunication of the Sudanese ruler and society. Since the 1970s, Salafi-jihadist ideas have also found their way to Sudan through Sudanese expatriates who have migrated to the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, in search of economic opportunities. There is strong evidence that when those expatriates return home, either for short or long periods, they bring the Salafi views with them, together with their economic fortunes. In the Sudanese context, Takfiri ideas emerged during the ideological tensions within the Salafi movements, such as Ansar al-Sunna. Ideological differences in the interpretation of certain issues did not only lead to defection from an individual's movement but reached the level of violent extremism and attacks on mosques and worshipers, as shown in Table 1 (Kabashi, 2013).

The Inqāz regime policies paved the way for global jihad movements to find a home in Sudan and created an environment for the germination of violent extremism. Hassan al-Turabi, the Islamist regime ideologue, created the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress to unify Mujahideen and hardline Islamic militants in Khartoum in 1991. The regime opened the door for the Arab "brothers" without an entry visa, and Sudan quickly became a refuge for Islamists and global jihadi organizations, such as Al Qaeda. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Afghan jihad, Arab Afghans came to Sudan, including Osama bin Laden. The

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state tolerance toward the Islamists made Sudan a perfect place for the well-funded terrorist organizations to settle. According to Hansen (2019), Osama bin Laden's stay in Sudan between 1991 and 1996 strengthened the Al Qaeda organization ideologically and expanded its strategic regional network. Besides the economic investments, Al Qaeda's military activities in Sudan supported the Sudanese government in the civil war in South Sudan (Hansen, 2019).

Sudan became an important stopover in the career paths of global jihadi leaders. In 1992, Osama bin Laden followed by Ayman al-Zawahiry relocated to Khartoum where they felt protected, invested and reorganize Islamic Jihad (Wright, 2002). The arrival of the global jihad movement was a boost for the Sudanese extremists to spread their Takfiri ideas. The Salafi-jihadist movement's activities flourished in society; it recruited a large number of university students and developed a significant presence in the media. The Salafi-jihadist groups established training camps for internal terrorist activities and exported activities outside Sudan (Kabashi, 2013; K. A. Mohamed, 2015). The regime's facilitation of the establishment of international terrorist organizations that take refuge in Sudan raised Western critique and provoked diplomatic pressure on the country (K. A. Mohamed, 2015). For its support of international terrorist groups, Sudan was designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1993 ("U. S. Department of State, 2018) and the US imposed economic sanctions in 1997 (Verjrr, 2018). The next section illustrates two Salafi-jihadist movements and ISIS sympathizers, offering a glimpse of the current violent extremism landscape in Sudan.

Tayār al-ᵓUmma al-Wāḥida

Tayār al-ᵓUmma al-Wāḥida (TUW, Pan-Islamist Movement) is a Sudanese Islamist ideological movement that advocates uniting all the Islamic groups and calls for the renaissance of the Islamic caliphate. According to Mohamed Ali Al-Jizuli, its founder, general coordinator, and main ideologue, TUW is neither a preaching group nor a political party; it is

rather a movement that campaigns to reform the Islamic community and the world by establishing an Islamic state (Al-Madani, 2014a). To propagate its ideas, TUW utilizes regular Friday sermons, Islamic indoctrination platforms on campuses, and intensive activities on social media ("Pan-Islamist Movement, 2018; M. A. d. a. Al-Jizuli, 2018).

While leading a mosque in an affluent neighborhood in Khartoum, Al-Jizuli exploits Friday sermons to promote ISIS ideology in Sudan. Particularly, in June 2014, not only Al-Jizuli called for attacks against American interests in Islamic countries but also he rationalized this action as Muslims' religious obligation to establish the Islamic state (M. A. Al-Jizuli, 2017; Khairalla, 2014). Afterwards, joined by a group of congregants, Al-Jizuli demonstrated on the streets in support of ISIS (A. H. Mohamed, 2015; Siddiq, 2014). To explain the nature of the movement, Al-Jizuli asserts that "jihadism is part of our ideological project (…) our target is not only the American embassies but also all the American companies and institutions located in the Islamic world; our target includes civilians, too" (Al-Madani, 2014b). For Al-Jizuli, Islam does not differentiate between civilians and military as in the West. Instead, for him there are two categories: *Muḥāribīn* (fighters) versus *Musālimīn* (peace seekers). Thus, the United States falls into the *Muḥāribīn* category that must be fought (Al-Madani, 2014b). Despite Al-Jizuli's continuous denial of being an ISIS leader in Sudan, the above-mentioned statements branded him as "ISIS commander" in Sudan ("A'ayin Network, 2014; Almohamadi, 2015; "Salafist Mohamed Ali," 2014). In fact, Al-Jizuli insists that ISIS has not appointed him as emir; instead, he strongly sympathizes with the ISIS cause. In his own words, "ISIS confronts the American [imperial] plans, the Western expansion, secular systems, and the tyrants' rule (…). We are determined to establish the Islamic State in Sudan—this is our religious and ideological goal" ("Salafist Mohamed Ali," 2014).

In 2015, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) detained Al-Jizuli for eight months in a campaign that targeted the "symbols" that encouraged the UMST students to join ISIS. Despite his continuous adherence to the global jihad ideology, Al-Jizuli's release marked the end of an extensive "religious dialogue" that had been initiated and led by the Sudanese Global Muslim Brotherhood figure, Issam Ahmed El-Bashir—the then head of the

Islamic Jurisprudence Council (Almohamadi, 2015; "National Intelligence Releases," 2016). Notwithstanding the lengthy dialogue, Al-Jizuli remained devoted to the global jihad ideology because for him, "I hit a dead end in my discussion with those scholars" ("Sudanese Security Releases ", 2015).

In January 2016, Al-Jizuli made headlines when the NISS detained him again for conducting a "survey" among the students of Sudan University of Science and Technology about the "unity of the Muslim nations and the youths' obligations when facing the division of the *Umma"* ("National Intelligence Releases," 2016). In an interview that this author conducted in Khartoum with the mother of a 23-year-old Sudanese who had joined ISIS in 2014, she blamed Al-Jizuli for radicalizing her son:

> [E]ven if Al-Jizuli has no direct contact with ISIS, but his ideas have. My son has been radicalized through listening to his Friday sermons in the neighborhood's mosque. In the months before his departure to Syria, my son used to go there every Friday and listen to Al-Jizuli's *khutba.* I wonder why the government failed to control such a dangerous person. They knew his harmful ideas, and he has influenced many young people (Hana, personal interview, July 26, 2018).

Movements, such as the TUW, are local products. The leaders of these movements (e.g., Al-Jizuli) are very active in society and wield significant influence among the youth. They have up-to-date knowledge of information technology and offer their messages in a way that appeals to the youth; they are present on campuses, in neighborhood mosques, and on social media, and their followers are growing every day. Their speeches are attractive, and they focus on issues that are relevant and urgent for their target audience. In contrast, it can be observed that the so-called moderate religious scholars who claim to offer narratives that counter violent extremism are not as accessible to the youth; they deliver rigid and unattractive messages. The next section outlines another pro-ISIS movement active in Sudan.

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Jamāʿat al-ʾIʿtisām Bi al-Kitāb wa al-Sunna

Jamāʿat al-ʾIʿtisām Bi al-Kitāb wa al-Sunna (JIKS, Society of Adherence to Quran and Sunna) is an offshoot of the MB; since 2014, the movement has been an ISIS sympathizer in Sudan (A. H. Mohamed, 2015). The foundation of JIKS dates back to 1979, when (due to internal conflicts) the Sudanese Islamic Movement split into two movements: [1] the NIF, led by Hassan al-Turabi, and [2] the MB, led by al-Hibir Yousif Nouraldayim. In another development, Sheikh Suleiman Abunaru introduced Salafi-jihadist ideas to the latter movement, which led to his separation from the historical leadership of the MB and another split among its ranks. Subsequently, the International Organization of the MB (IOMB) revoked Abunaru's membership in the movement, which led him to establish JIKS in 1991 ("Alghad TV, 2017; Siddiq, 2014). Remarkably, Abunaru's group members participated as *mujahideen* (Islamist fighters) in the Soviet–Afghan war (1979–1989) and in the jihad in Somalia and imported radical jihad and Salafi-jihadist ideas back to Sudan (Nasr al-Din, 2015).

Notably, Abunaru's followers have pledged *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to him as the emir of the movement for life ("Sudanese Expiatories ", 2014). Apparently, Abunaru's embrace of Salafism and his emphasis on Salafi-jihadi ideas among the MB's wider membership were unappreciated by the MB leadership and preceded his dismissal from it. Moreover, Abunaru noticed the IOMB's considerable hostility toward his newly established movement, when they blocked all sources of funding (Siddiq, 2014). Later, JIKS adopted more radical Salafi-jihadist interpretations of Islam, such as declaring *haram* (forbidden) any participation in the 2010 presidential elections in Sudan ("Society of Adherence," 2014). Inspired by Sayyid Qutb's salafi-jihadist ideology, the JIKS movement advocates for the transformation of society according to Islamic rules, especially the enforcement of Sharīʿa, *ḥizba* (morality police), and waging armed jihad in the advancement of Islam. Guided by Takfiri interpretations of Islamic decrees, the JIKS may declare secularists or Sufis as "infidels." Having pronounced the Sudanese government as one of unbelievers, the movement

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neither recognizes the modern state territory nor acknowledges its state institutions (A. H. Mohamed, 2015; Siddiq, 2014).

JIKS propagates its ideas through lectures, lessons, and open meetings that are held in its center in Khartoum North. The youth are specifically recruited to join the movement to perform *Daʿwa* (preaching of Islam) and jihad via mosques and religious establishments (e.g., al-Bukhary Institute of Sharia Sciences) (A. H. Mohamed, 2015). Similar to the TUW movement, in July 2014, the JIKS movement issued a support statement, backing the establishment of the ISIS and describing it as "good work" that is obligatory for all Muslims (Abunaru, 2014). After Abunaru passed away in December 2014, the movement chose Sheikh Omer Abd al-Khaliq as its new emir. Following his predecessor's example, Abd al-Khaliq declared the movement's support of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo Paris terrorist attacks justifying it as Muslims' obligation to exact revenge and supported ISIS' execution of the Jordanian pilot (A. H. Mohamed, 2015).

In August 2015, the NISS carried out a campaign that targeted the salafi-jihadists' leaders and detained both Abd al-Khaliq and Al-Jizuli for indoctrinating the youth to join ISIS (Musa, 2015; "Sudan Arrests Clerics," 2015). The movements' subsequent attempts to persuade the Sudanese authorities to release their detained leaders all failed, mainly because they had been indicted under the Criminal Code and Anti-Terrorism Act ("Mediations to Release," 2015; "Salafist Jihadist Group," 2016). Later that year, the authorities concluded their investigations and ordered the detained leaders to appear before the Anti-Terrorism Court of Sudan ("Investigations with Leaders," 2015). In a campaign aimed at ensuring that no Salafi detainees were held in jails in early 2016, the Sudanese authorities released Abd al-Khaliq, among others, after the prosecutor general dropped the criminal charges against him; he then "pledged" to cease disseminating the ISIS ideas among the youth ("Salafist Jihadist Group," 2016; "Sudanese Authorities Releases," 2016; "Sudanese Authorities Released ", 2015). The next section illustrates the response to violent extremism in Sudan.

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Response to violent extremism in Sudan

The Sudanese government's narrative tends to decontextualize the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and to portray it as an imported phenomenon from abroad. Overlooking the local actors' role in jihadism and the historical context of its development in Sudan, the government officials make use of five narratives to dissociate the country from violent extremism. First, they connect the rise of violent extremism to the increasing number of immigrants in Sudan (Al-Hidaibi, 2016; "Preventing Militant Groups," 2016). Second, the Sudanese authorities depict Sudan as an at risk country of terrorism as it is "surrounded by pores of inflammation,"(Bakry, 2017) such as ISIS in Libya, Boko Haram in West Africa, and Al-Shabab in East Africa, which try to "infiltrate" the country through the Darfur Desert ("Sudanese Security Forces," 2016). Third, the government not only blames violent extremism on "external influences," but also labels the Sudanese youth who have joined the extremist groups as "brainwashed" young students who have grown up in the diaspora (Bashir, 2017); (see also Abd al-Aziz, 2015; "Turkey Intercepted Sudanese Students," 2015; Yaqoub, 2015). Fourth, the political leadership in Sudan deploys conspiracy theories, such as the following ambiguous statement by the former Minister of Higher Education (2015): "Some institutions recruit the Sudanese students in ISIS." The ruling NCP declares, "some influential entities are working to include Sudan on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism" ("National Congress Party," 2015). Furthermore, the former Vice President of Sudan, Hassabu Mohamed Abdalrahman, accuses the international community of being behind extremism in Arab and African societies, supporting terrorist organizations with weapons and logistics ("Sudan Accuses," 2015). Sudanese public figures also make use of grand conspiracy theories; for example, the Sudanese politician, Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, comments that "ISIS is an American creation that targets Sunni Islam" ("Ali Osman," 2017), and the Secretary General of the Council of Scholars, Ebrahim al-Karuri, states that "ISIS is a Western creation to defeat Islam and Muslims" ("Sudan Council of Scholars," 2016). The government's final narrative involves introducing Sudan as a "transit point" for jihadists to

join ISIS in Libya or other jihadist groups in West Africa ("Belgium Investigates," 2016). Although it is likely that these incidents could have actually happened, dealing with them as isolated cases hinders perceiving Sudan as anything other than a mere transit point. Instead, the officials avoid raising profound questions, such as why Sudan has become a safe haven for jihadists and extremists!

The official narrative deliberately overlooks the homegrown grounds for the rise of violent extremism in Sudan, a notable example of which is the growth of Salafi-jihadist groups. These groups' members sympathize with the ideas of ISIS, which raises concerns about the spread of violent extremism across the country (Al-Zafir, 2014; Ebrahim, 2014; Khalifa, 2014; Merghany, 2014). The rationale behind concealing Sudan's role in global jihad is a desperate attempt to alter the long-standing image of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism, ascribed to the country since 1993 by the USA ("U. S. Department of State, 2018). The next section outlines the government's "soft" interventions to combat violent extremism in Sudan.

Deradicalization practices in Sudan

The Sudanese approach to countering violent extremism combines the legal and security framework with "soft" measures of deradicalization. The legal and security framework constitutes the law enforcement agencies' interventions to control terrorist activities and to demonstrate the state power (Al-Awad, 2016). As purely securitized counterterrorism procedures have proven inadequate, Sudan has adopted a religious rehabilitation program in the form of "intellectual treatments through direct dialogues with those who adopt violent extremism or join some criminal organizations for various reasons" (M. Gamalaldin, Director of the Sudan National Commission for Counter Terrorism, personal interview, August 2). Since 2008, *ḥiwār fikry* (intellectual dialogue) has been the government's key approach to combating violent extremism by persuading violent extremists to abandon their radical ideas that have justified their sympathy with and/or participation in violent extremism (Bakry,

2017; Bashir, 2017). Several governmental institutions and civil society organizations have become involved in the intellectual dialogue with extremists, including the International Center for Dawa Studies, the Center for Renaissance and Cultural Communication (El-Said, 2015, pp. 202-205), and the governmental Center for Intellectual Immunization and Welfare (CIIW). Until 2018, about 300 individuals participated in religious dialogue process organized by CIIW (E. Nourain, Director Center for Intellectual Immunization and Welfare, personal interview, July 8, 2018).

Since 2015, the concept of religious dialogue has gained momentum amid concerns about the rise of violent extremism among Sudanese university students who have joined ISIS. Typically led by religious scholars inside and/or outside prisons, *ḥiwār fikry* advocates engaging in conversations with those involved in violent extremism to "correct" their religious misconceptions ("Warnings Against Using Security Measures," 2015). Before the dialogue commences, the detainees are asked to write their religious doctrines that they desire to discuss with the scholars, and they are categorized according to the level of their religious knowledge (E. Nourain, CIIW Director, personal interview, July 8, 2018). In a series of structured sessions with scholars, *Muraja'āt fikriyya* (doctrine revisions) comprise psychological analyses of the detainees' personalities and intensive debates on their religious views that should lead them to repent (*istitāba*) and disengage from radical organizations. The detainees pledge to cease participating in violent extremism as a condition for being bailed from prison (Al-Awad, 2016; Bakry, 2017; "Sudanese Security Service," 2015).

During the *munāṣaḥa* (counseling) seminars, religious clerics introduce the concept of *wasaṭiyya* (religious moderation) and central concepts in the Salafi-jihadi movements, such as Al-Wala' wal Bara (loyalty and disavowal), *al-Ḥākimiyya* (judicature), *takfir* (accusation of apostasy), moral authority, jihad, non-Muslims' minority situation in Muslim majority countries, and the relations with the international community (CIIW Director E. Nourain, personal interview, July 8, 2018). During the religious dialogue, some examples of the issues often raised by the program beneficiaries, which they claim as having motivated them to engage in violent extremism, include: firstly, the state's failure to implement the correct

Sharīʿa in Sudan; secondly, permitting South Sudan's independence and leaving it to a non-Islamic government; thirdly, the government's collaboration with the USA on counterterrorism instead of waging jihad against it; fourthly, preventing *mujāhīdin* from migrating to support the vulnerable groups against Western invasion. Other political issues mentioned by the radicalized youth as drivers for violent extremism include the entry of foreign forces in Darfur, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the Western hegemony (E. Nourain, CIIW Director, personal interview, July 8, 2018; see also Bakry, 2017; Elnour, 2017).

In an attempt to refute these arguments, the scholars demonstrate to the jihadists that the Sharīʿa is indeed practiced in Sudan, and they normally cite examples of punishment for alcohol consumption or women detained by *al-Niẓām al-ʾĀm* (moral police) for indecent clothing. In response to the youths' questions about the rationale behind concealing the Sharīʿa-related cases from the public, the scholars justify that this is a deliberate act rooted in Islam to preserve the dignity of individuals. The scholars justify South Sudan's independence as a result of a referendum, a practice rooted in the Islamic tradition of *shūrā* (consultation with those affected by that decision) (CIIW staff member, personal interview, July 12, 2018). On the issue of collaboration with the USA and the West, the scholars explain to the radicalized youths that it is not wise to fight a much more powerful enemy—"with a superpower such as America, we [the Government of Sudan] must take a middle course; we comply in certain things and defy others" (CIIW staff member, personal interview, July 12, 2018). In the same vein, the scholars justify that the United Nations has imposed counterterrorism measures on *all* nations, including Sudan; therefore, they have to practice *taqiyya*[12] and implement the policies under coercion.

According to the CIIW director, the majority of the beneficiaries have been entirely convinced to abandon their radical ideas, while several of them have been partially convinced. Both groups have committed to disengagement and moved on to the reintegration program. The youths that have totally rejected the dialogue and refused to repent of their radical ideas have been offered the opportunity to continue the dialogue in their locations, whether in

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[12] *Taqiyya* is the precautionary dissimulation of religious beliefs and practices in the face of persecution (Walker, 2009).

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higher educational institutions or in mosques. After "graduation" from religious dialogue, the reintegration program is considered the last step of the deradicalization program where CIIW facilitates the reintegration of the disengaged individuals in society. Subject to individual needs, the procedures of the reintegration program includes, providing the disengaged individuals with job placement, reinstatement in a university, or financial assistance to establish a small businesses. In this regard, CIIW collaborates with other institutions such as the Ministry of Higher Education, the Zakat Chamber, and microfinance institutions. Considered as a reintegration mechanism, the program provides the disengaged individuals who are interested in having a stable family life with financial assistance for marriage through the Marriage Support Fund (CIIW Director E. Nourain, personal interview, July 8, 2018; see also Bakry, 2017; Bashir, 2017). This program also targets returnees from violent extremism war zones, encouraging them to refute the ideas that prompted them to join the terrorist groups ("Sudanese Security Rescues," 2018).

Discussion

The religious dialogue program operated by the Sudanese government, which aims to convince jihadists to reconsider violence extremism faces various constrains. First, the government's official narrative about violent extremism in Sudan denies recognizing the phenomenon as rooted in society. Furthermore, the doctrine revisions and religious dialogue processes utilize top-down approach, with no room for self-initiated doctrine revisions. These findings underline the importance of the bottom-up doctrine revisions that took place in Egypt, where the leaders of the Islamist militant groups renounced violence and promoted peace and coexistence with the government and society (Gunaratna & Bin Ali, 2009). In an unbalanced power relationship, the scholars involved in the religious debates with the detainees exercise their authority on the interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, and the detainees are typically coerced into agreeing with the scholars' interpretation. For fear of prolonged detention, the detainees show that they are convinced and pledge to exit the radical

groups. These findings confirm Koehler's critique of the ideological debates that they utilize the state-sanctioned version of Islam in an attempt to create a cognitive opening or induce individual deradicalization (2017).

Given the growing rates of recruitment into violent extremist groups in Sudan, the concepts of religious debates, doctrine revisions, and religious counseling have been proven to exert a limited influence on counterterrorism efforts in the country. Undertaken after the jihadists have joined violent extremist groups, these programs also offer weak counterarguments in comparison to those presented by the jihadist recruiters. These findings underline Horgan's (2009) critique of deradicalization (understood as the change in a person's ideological conviction and thereby commitment to terrorist groups) as he has found a physical role change (i.e. disengagement) to be a much more feasible outcome.

The scholars at the governmental CIIW have been unsuccessful in offering convincing alternative narratives compared with those that the jihadists deliver about jihad, martyrdom, relations with the West, and issues on the establishment of the state of the Islamic caliphate. The reason for this failure is that the religious debates are based on the premise that extremists have been misguided and indoctrinated with a misleading interpretation of Islam, and the scholars aim to teach the participants the correct tenets of Islam (Koehler, 2017). The scholars also focus on debating about the ideology of the participants without taking into account the political, social, and relational setting that informs the participants' experiences in the community (Marsden, 2017).

Given the regime's history of sponsoring terrorism, counterterrorism experts are skeptical about the Sudanese regime's sincerity to "correct" the extremists' misconceptions/misinterpretations of Islam (Zalan, 2017). In other words, since the 1990s, the regime has imposed a strict interpretation of Sharīʿa on society, declared the civil war in the South as jihad against the Sudan People Liberation Movement, and created conditions conducive to the expansion of radical extremism in society—actions that undermine the regime's credibility in eradicating extremism in Sudan (Abdalla, 2017). Being an integral part of the conservative Islamic Jurisprudence Council (*Majmaʿ al-Fiqh al-Islami*), the state-

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operated deradicalization center is far from achieving the task of correcting the misconceptions of radical youths, mainly because violent extremism is ingrained in the Sudanese state's Islamist ideology (Ahmed, 2018; Baldo, 2017; Zalan, 2017).

Sudan's deradicalization efforts have largely been part of the government's attempt to remove Sudan from the US government's list of state sponsors of terrorism, ascribed to the country since 1993 ("U. S. Department of State, 2018). Sudan's support of global jihad movements and its hosting of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in the 1990s (Hansen, 2018) have been among several reasons behind the imposition of decades of trade embargos and economic sanctions on the country (Zalan, 2016). The sanctions have had severe negative effects on the Sudanese economy, and the regime has been lobbying for years to lift the restrictions (Verjrr, 2018). To achieve this goal, the government of Sudan has tried to demonstrate itself as a reliable partner in the "war on terror" through various measures, and the USA has acknowledged Sudan's deradicalization programs ("U. S. Department of State, 2018). This recognition explains the assertive statement by the deputy director of the Sudan National Commission for Counter Terrorism: "Sudan is moving in the right direction, and the international community appreciates Sudan's efforts against terrorism, which would contribute to removing Sudan's name from the list of state sponsors of terrorism" (Bakry, 2017; see also"ISIS Members Children," 2017).

It is by no means an overstatement to claim that the regime's collaboration with the USA on counterterrorism is rather a pragmatic act. The Muslim clerics at the deradicalization facility use the Islamic concept of *taqiyya* to rationalize their cooperation with America. The deradicalization center's staff members believe that the US sanctions are unjust to Sudan; therefore, they have to practice *taqiyya* and pretend to implement the counterterrorism programs imposed by the USA "to dodge its evil" (CIIW staff member, personal interview, July 12, 2018). In this atmosphere of pressure, they dissimulate their religious beliefs about jihadism and pretend to enforce America's agenda on counterterrorism to avoid the harm inflicted by the superpower.

By examining the process and the content of the "religious dialogue," an observer can easily discern how far it is from being intellectual. At the ideological and the political levels, the dialogue process often appears as if the scholars are affirming the government's actions by using Islamic tenets, such as *taqiyya* or action under coercion. The deradicalization program leaders have chosen to "take a middle course" rather than shape a narrative founded on the precepts of human rights and democratic principles as a basis for tolerant coexistence with others. The programs that are held in the form of seminars and lectures in either jails or the premises of the intelligence office are outdated and conventional. Similar findings are reported in Yemen (Barret & Bokhari, 2009), where the regime is less interested in actual ideological engagement and more concerned about political expediency because of the US pressure on the country.

Sudan's apparent "progress" in its counterterrorism cooperation with the USA led to the lifting of certain economic sanctions in October 2017 (Verjrr, 2018). However, Sudan's intolerant regime and long-established tradition of religious persecution have raised serious questions about the regime's genuine goals in its counterterrorism efforts (Baldo, 2017). Moreover, the government's cooperation on counterterrorism necessitates breaking ties with its radical past and battling extremism at home—a delicate balancing act that may undermine its Islamic-based legitimacy since 1989 (Zalan, 2017).

Often, Sudanese officials tend to exaggerate their achievements in the Sudanese deradicalization program and portray the Sudanese experiment as "an unprecedented experience" and a model that can be applied to other contexts to benefit the world (CIIW Director E. Nourain, personal interview, July 8, 2018; see also Bakry, 2017; Bashir, 2017; Mukhtar, 2018). However, these claims remain highly questioned in the absence of an independent mechanism to evaluate the deradicalization program. Besides the macro factors and the micro components, the conditions conducive to successful deradicalization programs, including religious rehabilitation, are absent in Sudan (El-Said, 2015).

In conclusion, the political leaders' narrative about the rise of violent extremism in Sudan and their response to it are remote from reality. While the government portrays the rise

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of violent extremism in Sudan as an alien phenomenon, sociopolitical observers increasingly witness the bottom-up growth of Pan-Islamist and Salafi-jihadi movements that are committed to establishing a global Islamic state and legitimate the use of violence to achieve their political and religious goals. The official narrative of the deradicalization program in Sudan is flawed. While they inflate the success of this program is inflated, it is clear to many researchers that it is a top-down process, far from being genuine, and aimed at collecting political gains for the regime.

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