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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Can Appeals for Peace Promote Tolerance and Mitigate Support for Extremism? Evidence from an Experiment with Adolescents in Burkina Faso

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## Abstract

Recent efforts to improve attitudes toward outgroups and reduce support for extremists in violent settings report mixed results. Donors and aid organizations have spent millions of dollars to amplify the voices of moderate religious figures to counter violent extremism in West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Despite this investment, we know little about whether such messaging persuades the primary recruits of violent extremist organizations: at-risk youth in fragile settings. In this paper, we consider whether pro-peace religious messaging can promote social cohesion among school-age respondents in Burkina Faso. Using a survey experiment, we find little evidence that such messages affect reported attitudes or behaviors toward religious extremists and find instead that it can have the unintended effect of increasing intolerance toward ethnic others. Our findings carry lessons about the inadvertent priming of ethnic identities that can result in a backlash effect among certain societal segments.

**Keywords:** violent extremism; religion; Burkina Faso; Islam; experiments

## Introduction

Can pro-peace messaging and appeals for tolerance improve attitudes and behaviors toward religious and ethnic outgroups and reduce support for violent extremism? We consider this question in the context of increasing Islamist influence among disaffected youth in conflict zones and fragile settings. To attract new adherents, many Islamist armed groups present their violent tactics as the solution to

 This article has earned badges for transparent research practices Open Data and Open Materials. For details see the [Data Availability Statement](#).

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