



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

NPS Scholarship

Publications

---

2017-08-09

## Master's alum: Sahel music holds security potential for countering violent extremism

Seals, Brian

Monterey, California : Naval Postgraduate School

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/55728>

---

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

# Master's alum: Sahel music holds security potential for countering violent extremism

 [chds.us/c/item/5692](https://chds.us/c/item/5692)

Brian Seals

Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security master's degree alumnus Mathew Wenthe recently presented material related to his thesis on the music of Africa's Sahel Region at a research fair hosted by the [Global Engagement Center](#) at the U.S. Diplomacy Center.

The [rhythm and percussion](#) of Africa's [Sahel Region](#) have stories to tell and, Wenthe believes, may well hold actionable information for countering violent extremism. His CHDS thesis, "[In Harmony with the Population: Ethnomusicology as a Framework for Countering Violent Extremism in the Sahel](#)," suggests the study of how music is made and shared could target criminal and terrorist networks using the West African nation of Mali as a sort of case study.

Wenthe's was one of eight presentations from six universities at the event held in the Diplomacy Center's Henry Kissinger Exhibit Space. The presentations touched on issues related to countering violent extremism. He used his CHDS research along with recent findings from his subsequent time studying at the Naval War College. Wenthe is a Colonel in the Air National Guard where he is Chief of the Plans and Execution Division.

"I try to make a case that the culture and history of [ethnomusicology](#) can inform homeland security and the academic community" Wenthe said. "The whole premise is understanding foreign cultures and understanding the media they produce. I view it as a window into understanding some of their underlying grievances."

The region has been the focus of [State Department](#) efforts aimed at violent extremism, including a Pan-Sahel Initiative of 2002 and a subsequent Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership initiated in 2005. The northern part of Mali was the site of a 2012 coup that came on the heels of a food shortage and restive militants flooding the country from Algeria and the establishment of sharia law for a time in the northern reaches of Mali. Wenthe noticed that during that time of extremism some social media personas seemed to have the paradox of religious extremism yet an affinity to modern music.

In writing his CHDS theses, Wenthe developed a framework he refers to as MLB, or music as a lens or bridge. Some 200 digital images of Mali's coup were analyzed and categorized along with music into themes such as love, money, independence or weapons. He created a matrix to gauge music messages, themes and activities against the images, giving the music of the region a map.

"I wanted to use music and social media because it provides a lens for you to better understand their culture and to identify your own cultural biases," Wenthe said

Fostering a better understanding and viewing a fuller picture of Malian life could serve as a bridge to that culture for counterterrorism purposes and building other types of diplomacy as well. The presentation at the State Department offered recommendations to incorporate into CVE messaging campaigns. Among them was incorporating disciplines such as anthropology and ethnomusicology. It also calls for strategies identifying cultural influencers in social media and enlisting them in CVE messaging campaigns.



Master's degree alumnus Mathew Wenthe studied music of the Sahel and how it could be used in Countering Violent Extremism.

The seeds of his thesis topic are rooted in 2011 during his time as a helicopter pilot teaching search and rescue in West African nations in cooperation with the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Africa Command. While there, he met an ethnomusicologist who was researching music use on cell phones. Their conversations remained in the back of his mind as he entered CHDS intending to write on a more traditional topic.

His thesis shifted as instructors encouraged participants to innovatively tackle novel and challenging issues. He was further influenced when instructor Kathleen Kiernan brought in legendary music executive [Al Teller](#) who discussed countering terrorism through music.

“What CHDS did for me, along with the National War College program I just completed, was give me the skills to analyze and frame a problem to ultimately solve it,” he said.

[Copyright/Accessibility/Section 508](#)