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Libya’s Islamists: A Fragmented Landscape

By Alison Pargeter

POST-QADHAFI LIBYA HAS BEEN DEFINED BY CHAOS, DIVISION AND disintegration. With the once-strong center in tatters, the country has fragmented into an array of militias, towns, tribes and regions, all competing to dominate the new order. Libya’s Islamist milieu is no different. Ten years after the overthrow of the former regime and it is difficult to identify a single coherent Islamist movement or current. Even the Libyan branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood is wrought with divisions and is shattered from within, as evidenced by the group’s recent decision to convert itself into an NGO. The militant scene is even more diffuse, defined more by location and personalities than by any particular ideology or organizational dynamic, while the various Salafist currents that are spread across the country are equally difficult to pin down.

This complex and shifting Islamist landscape is partly a function of the way in which Libya’s revolution unfolded, with town after town rising up against the regime and forming their own local militias. It is also a reflection of the fact that in Libya, local and regional dynamics and identities often transcend national
preoccupations. As a result, the various Islamist groups that have emerged, including those at the more extreme end of the spectrum, have found themselves unable to go beyond their own localities. This environment has given rise to a proliferation of Islamist personalities and commanders, each bent on establishing and maintaining their own personal fiefdoms. Indeed, ideology has often been lost to the more pressing aim of imposing control and reaping rewards at the local level. Despite the aspiration to the Ummah (one Muslim nation) by both the militant and the moderate currents, therefore, Libya’s Islamists have fallen prey to the localization and raw fighting over the spoils that has characterized so much of the Libyan conflict.

The picture has been muddled further by the intervention of external powers, including Turkey, which is currently serving as a type of COMINTERN for the Islamist movement, controlling and directing it in a fashion not entirely dissimilar to that in which Moscow controlled the international Communist movement during its heyday. While Turkish intervention may have served as a rallying point for many of these Islamist currents in western Libya, who welcome Ankara’s backing and support, there is still no ideological or organizational glue to hold them together. Libya’s Islamist scene therefore is as chaotic and dysfunctional as the rest of the country.

The Moderate Scene:
Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood

The story of moderate political Islam in Libya, as represented by Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood has been one of disappointment and failure. A decade on from the Arab Spring, when it looked as though the region’s future would be defined by the rule of political Islam, the Libyan Brotherhood no longer even exists in its classic form. This inglorious end is perhaps unsurprising. In stark contrast to its counterparts in neighbouring countries, the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood never had a chance to root itself in Libya, largely because of Qadhafi’s zero tolerance approach to any oppositional or organizational force outside of hisJamahiriyah (State of the Masses). The movement operated mainly in exile abroad, its cadres returning to Libya at the time of the 2011 revolution. As such, the Libyan Brotherhood never had any social base upon which to draw.

Although its political arm, the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), succeeded
in punching above its weight politically in the first part of the transition, manoeuvring its way through the bargaining that followed the 2012 elections to play a major role in the country’s first elected government, from the start, the Libyan Brotherhood found itself up against enormous challenges. This was partly because armed groups on the ground always had more sway than the country’s nascent governance structures, but also because the Brotherhood soon found itself grappling with its own internal divisions. These divisions became especially acute in July 2013, when the Brotherhood was brought down in Egypt, unleashing a wave of anti-Brotherhood sentiment inside Libya. The Libyan Brotherhood was accused of being bent on seizing power, and its offices and those of the JCP were attacked in Benghazi. Indeed, events in Egypt galvanized anti-Brotherhood sentiment in Libya, prompting the JCP to announce it was freezing its work in the government and the General National Congress (parliament).

Events in Egypt also triggered an internal review process. At this time, a current within the JCP came to feel that the association with the Brotherhood in Egypt had become toxic. This current sought to use the review process as a means of distancing itself and the Libyan Brotherhood from its Egyptian counterpart. As prominent JCP member Abdulrazak Al-Aradi explained, this linkage made the group “a soft target.” This faction within the JCP also began looking increasingly to Tunisia where An-Nahda was engaged in a process of “Tunisification,” focusing on politics and national priorities in a development that would later result in its dropping the term Islamist altogether. As such, parts of the JCP began calling for a similar process of “Libyfication” within the Libyan Brotherhood.

Although the Libyan Brotherhood did not go as far as An-Nahda, at the movement’s general conference in October 2015, there was broad agreement that the Brotherhood should rebrand itself and refocus its activities on religious and educational work. The movement’s then general guide, Ahmed Abdullah Souki, explained, “The movement’s priority at this stage should lie in focusing on internal educational work as well as dawa and serving society.” However, a current inside the movement, including some in the traditional leadership who were intent on upholding the branch’s historical link with Egypt, pushed back against going down this route. With elements inside the movement and the party pulling in different directions, this review process ended up being buried, leaving the Brotherhood and the JCP in a kind of suspended animation that was to continue for years.

Yet the movement was facing a bigger problem. When the country split into two competing factions in 2014—one in western Libya and the other in the east—the Libyan Brotherhood enmeshed itself fully in the dynamics of the west. More specifically, it bound itself to Operation Libya Dawn, a loose coalition of revolution-
ary and Islamist forces led by Misrata, and backed by Qatar and Turkey, which in the summer of 2014 took control of the capital and most of western Libya. Some elements within Operation Libya Dawn were particularly hard line, adopting a radical Islamist outlook, and supporting militant groups in the east of the country. As well as inadvertently confining itself to the west of the country, therefore, this association tarnished the Brotherhood’s image and left it open to accusations of extremism. So much so that in February 2017, the Tunisian An-Nahda leader Sheikh Rachid Al-Ghannouchi cautioned JCP leader, Mohamed Sawan and senior JCP member, Nizar Kawan, that it was time to cede some “painful concessions” and move away from groups that have been labelled as terrorist, warning that failure to do so would open the Libyan Brotherhood to the same future as that of its Egyptian counterpart.4

However, the movement’s traditional leadership was reluctant to split off from its Islamist allies in this way, preferring to remain situated within the revolutionary milieu. Yet by doing so, it ended up being swamped, lost in a sea of Islamist and revolutionary forces and currents in which it was unable to stamp its mark or authority.

In such an environment, internal cleavages only worsened. Serious problems erupted in 2015 when elements from the JCP began engaging in the UN-lead peace process that was to result in the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement in Skhirat in December 2015. The Brotherhood’s leadership, with its more hawkish outlook, baulked at partaking in any kind of rapprochement with the forces in the east. So too did some members of the JCP. Al-Aradi explained, “The JCP was divided between those who accepted the Skhirat declaration and those who rejected it.... The faction that rejects the political agreement is keen on its association with the [Muslim Brotherhood] movement. Those who support the political agreement want to develop the party and take it away from the movement.”5 Some JCP members were so outraged at the party’s willingness to back the peace deal that they resigned, accusing the party leadership of “deviation.”6

Tensions grew, and in 2018, the movement mobilized its members to try to get a greater grip on the party. When former JCP leader, Mohamed Sawan, reached the end of his two terms as leader, the movement called on its members to renew their membership of the party. The attempt to muscle in on the party in this way elicited accusations from some JCP leaders that the movement was intervening in its affairs and threatening its independence. For many in the JCP, therefore, the association with the party had become a heavy burden.

With the party and the movement in disarray, and with the country unravelling fast, the Libyan Brotherhood was unable to keep itself together. The leadership, with
its traditional mentality, proved unable to move on. As such, the Brotherhood became increasingly irrelevant. In August 2020, the Brotherhood branch in Zawiya announced its dissolution. Two months later, the Misratan branch followed suit, citing the leadership’s failure to implement the revisions and reforms agreed upon in 2015 as one of the reasons for its decision. With these two important branches dissolved, the movement had all but imploded from within. So much so that in May 2021, the Brotherhood announced it was turning itself into an NGO and changing its name to the Revival and Renewal Association. As for the JCP, it is still clinging on under the new leadership of Imad Al-Banani, who was elected in June 2021. Al-Banani is of a more traditional outlook and his appointment looks to be an attempt by what is left of the Libyan Brotherhood to reassert its control over the party. However, his appointment has already prompted a number of resignations from the JCP.

Despite its hopes in 2011 of seizing the moment to make a glorious return to Libya, therefore, the Brotherhood failed to make any real mark and got lost in the morass of forces and factions that sought to dominate post-Qadhafi Libya. Moreover, by binding itself so tightly to the forces of the west (and by extension to these forces’ foreign backers), it took sides in the conflict, thereby alienating large swathes of the population while simultaneously laying itself open to accusations of militancy. Furthermore, the resistance of its leadership to reform left it unable to adapt or make itself relevant. By its own actions, therefore, the Brotherhood cornered itself and in so doing, brought about its own ignoble demise.

The Militant Scene: A Mishmash of Islamisms

LIBYA’S JIHADIST SCENE HAS ALSO BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY DIVISION AND FAILURE. Since 2011, there has been no overarching current or group able to embody a sense of any cohesive Islamist project capable of transcending Libya’s uncompromising geography, complex social fabric and regional divisions. Even the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which had once been able to articulate a national mission and aspiration, could not come together once the lid of repression was lifted. Indeed, from the outset, the militant Islamist arena was a muddle of ill-defined groups and forces comprising LIFG and Al-Qa’ida remnants, as well as
other jihadists, many of whom were freed from the notorious Abu Slim prison in 2011. These forces were unable to unite under a single ideological banner and became locked in the local, linked more to neighbourhoods, towns, or to their own revolutionary brigades that had risen up against the regime than to any overarching Islamist project. The jihadist scene was splintered from the start, characterized by local commanders and forces that had no social base and whose primary goal was to seize control.

Indeed, once the Qadhafi regime fell, these hardline Islamist forces moved quickly, like their non-Islamist counterparts, to impose themselves on their own neighborhoods and areas, relying on revolutionary legitimacy, which in the new Libya had come to trump all else. Yet they did so as individual brigades or militias rather than in the name of any Islamist movement. This mosaic of forces created a confused picture, with Islamist brigades jostling up against each other and against other forces, as they sought to take control and to fight over the spoils. Within this ruptured environment, personality came to override the Islamist project. Islamist commanders such as Wissam Ben Hamid, Ziyad Balam, Ahmed Majberi and Ismail Salabi came to prominence in the east, while the likes of Hadia Shaban, Ahmed Ali Attir, Abdulraouf Kara and Haitham Al-Tajouri rose in the west. These figures represented a broad range of ideological stances, from militant jihadist, to moderate, to Salafist.

Many of these forces may have had a hardline Islamist outlook, but they were keen to be part of the new state. Although this eagerness was related partly to accessing state funds, it was also because these brigades viewed themselves as the custodians of the new Libya and believed it their duty to take the revolution to its end. As Islamist, Ahmed Majberi, the head of the Zintan Martyrs’ Brigade in Benghazi explained, “We are part of the state. We wanted to bring the whole regime down, not just the family of Qadhafi...I want to complete the task that my brothers died for.” Regardless of their personal ideological outlook, these commanders saw themselves as revolutionaries first and foremost, tasked with purging the country of the vestiges of the past.

Yet even when they were given semi-legal status in the form of the Libya Shield Brigades and the Supreme Security Committees (SSCs), which answered nominally to the Ministries of Defence and Interior respectively, they remained fragmented. They joined these forces as individual brigades and militias, retaining their own identities and independence, with their own command structures, and in some instances, their own shura councils. They also continued to act on whim, embroiling themselves in in-fighting and turf wars, as they sought to outmanoeuvre each other in the pursuit of control and access to financial gain. As such, these groups
defied any single label, representing a mishmash of Islamist and revolutionary elements for whom ideology often appeared to be little more than a garb.

From Ansar Al-Sharia to the BRSC

Against this backdrop, a number of more puritanical groups that had a more explicit ideological agenda came to the fore, primarily in the east of Libya, a region traditionally associated with Islamist militancy. These groups first came under the spotlight in June 2012 when, in a major show of force, they gathered in Benghazi’s Tahrir Square in support of implementing Sharia. This gathering comprised a dizzying array of brigades who had pulled together in the words of one participant to, “terrorise those who don’t want the rule of Allah’s Sharia.” This was the first real manifestation of a purist current who called for Hakimiya (God’s rule on earth) and who differed from the more revolutionary-minded Islamist forces that were willing to work with the authorities.

The most prominent of these forces was Ansar Al-Sharia (AAS), which differentiated itself by its association with a wider transnational movement and by its efforts to create a social base through engaging in charitable work. However, even AAS proved itself bound by geography and unable to expand beyond a handful of localities. The largest branch, AAS-Benghazi, was led by former LIFG veteran, Mohamed Al-Zahawi, and comprised many former Abu Slim prisoners, most of whom came from the Benghazi municipality. The group was focused in certain neighbourhoods of the city, unable to break into the tribal crescent that formed Greater Benghazi.

AAS-Derna was led by Sofiane Bin Qumu, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, and was located in the Bu Masefer forest outside of Derna. Despite Qumu’s assertion that the location was a way for the group to protect the town’s power plant, it is more likely that the group was forced to locate itself outside of the town because of the presence of the far stronger Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade, led by ex-LIFG veteran, Salim Al-Derbi. AAS also established a branch in Sirte in July 2013, vowing to ensure that Sharia was “employed in everything.” There were also seeds of branches in a handful of small towns.

However, AAS never succeeded in getting any real foothold in the capital or in expanding beyond these localities. Despite Al-Zahawi’s attempts to rebrand the
group under a single umbrella, AAS-Libya, following accusations of its involve-
ment in the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi in September 2012, there is
little to suggest that there was any serious organisational linkage or co-ordina-
tion between these branches. Furthermore, while the group certainly admired
Al-Qa’ida, there was little to indicate either that there was any formal link to the
Al-Qa’ida movement. Rather, like the other jihadist forces and brigades, these AAS
branches operated more as independent groups that orbited around their own
leaders.

However, the launch in May 2014 of Hafter’s Operation Dignity Campaign,
designed to eliminate Islamist elements of all hues from Benghazi, was to redraw
the lines of the militant scene in the east. Faced with such a ferocious foe, various
Islamist forces, including AAS, bandied together to form the Benghazi Revolu-
tionaries Shura Council (BRSC) which vowed to defeat Hafter. Yet while these
forces may have been willing to fight alongside each other, the differences between
them were too deep to be smoothed over even in the face of a common enemy.

In fact, the launch of Operation Dignity triggered further divisions inside some
Islamist forces. A split emerged inside Brigade 319, for example, between hard
line elements including Salim Al-Nabbous, who sought to fight against Hafter
and those of a more Salafist inclination, led by Admin Al-Tawerghi, who preferred
to remain neutral. When the Al-Tawerghi faction refused to hand over the
brigade’s weapons and ammunition, the Al-Nabbous faction, in conjunction with
some elements from AAS, launched a bloody attack against brigade’s Bu Atni
camp, killing 14 members of the Al-Tawerghi group, including Al-Tawerghi
himself, who was tortured and beheaded.

As for the BRSC, this coalition was always a marriage of convenience compris-
ing forces with varying stances and viewpoints. As Ahmed Hassan Meshiti, a mem-
ber of the BRSC, remarked, “Every one of us had his own position. Our ideology is
not the same.” Similarly, Al-Aradi observed of the BRSC, “These brigades all fought
the forces that were around Hafter but they were not clear about their stance towards
the state, nor were they united around one vision. Some of them were revolution-
aries, committed to the legitimacy of the state, and they were reject-ing carrying
weapons against it. Other brigades and leaders were closer to the idea of IS and
Al-Qa’ida and some of them were raising the flags of these two organizations and
adopted their slogans.”

Thus, while the BRSC certainly contained plenty of violent extremist elements,
the whole alliance cannot be tarred with the same brush. Rather, it represented an
opportunistic coming together of Islamist-leaning forces who sought to prevent
Benghazi from slipping out of their hands.
They were ultimately unsuccessful, however, and in 2017, Hafter, with the help of Salafist Madkhalist and tribal forces, defeated the BRSC, marking the end of the presence of these groups in Benghazi and in the east more widely. Similar groups that had spawned in Derna and Ajdabiya were also put down and despite a number of attempted comebacks, such as the Defend Benghazi Brigades, a loose collection of BRSC remnants which briefly succeeded in seizing the oil ports of Ras Lanuf and Es-Sider from Hafter in March 2017, the group disbanded three months later. Around the same time, Ansar Al-Sharia, which had been devastated by Hafter’s campaign, also announced its dissolution.

Hafter succeeded, therefore, in putting the nail in the jihadists’ coffin in eastern Libya at least. Yet in so doing, he also opened the door for the Salafist current, which under his patronage has been able to expand and impose itself in the areas under his control. In return for military support, with Salafist fighters making up some of the LNA’s most potent brigades, Hafter afforded the Salafists control over the religious space in the east. Salafist Madkhalists have used the eastern Awqaf, for example, to pursue their ideological agenda, with the Supreme Fatwa Committee issuing edicts against women travelling unaccompanied, mixed gender gatherings and demonstrations. Yet while these Salafists may have played a major role, including in assisting Hafter to extend his power into other towns and regions, they are far from united and are as disparate a force as everything else in Libya.

**Islamic State**

The Islamic State (IS) came to a similarly sticky end, although it was defeated by a coalition of forces led by Misrata rather than by Hafter. Despite IS’ presence attracting much media attention, the group’s experience in Libya was limited and its power and reach often exaggerated. While IS certainly had its moment, the group proved unable to survive in the fragmented and highly competitive Islamist arena. Even at the height of its prowess, it failed to get any real grip beyond Sirte and the surrounding area, and was always a poor and flawed imitation of the group in Iraq.

Its presence in Libya was always small, and the group took many months to make its first real conquest. From its first public appearance in Derna in October 2014, when a group of youth declared their allegiance to the khalifā, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, it took until February 2015 for it to take Nawfaliya, a small town
with a reputation for Islamist militancy even during the time of Qadhafi, and until May 2015 to take Sirte, its first and only sizable territorial conquest in Libya.

Sirte’s fall to the group was no coincidence. Sirte was Qadhafi’s birthplace, home to his tribe—the Qadhadhfa—and as such, resisted the 2011 revolution until the bitter end. Thus, while other towns in Libya were taken over by revolutionary forces that had sprung up from within, Sirte fell into the hands of outside forces who defeated the town. These forces, many of whom were from Misrata, which had traditionally had an antagonistic relationship to Sirte, ransacked the town, unleashing their revenge, prompting thousands of terrified residents to flee. Once the dust settled, the victors left Sirte in the hands of the newly created, Sirte Revolutionaries Brigade, which comprised mainly veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq jihads, as well as former Abu Slim prisoners. Although some members of this force came from Sirte, the brigade was strongly associated with Misrata, many of its cadres having been trained by the Al-Farouq Brigade, a Misratan force known for its militant Islamist outlook.

Although there were a handful of other forces present in Sirte, including tribal forces, it was the Sirte Revolutionaries Brigade that went on to form the Sirte SSC, which had huge support from the hawkish Misrata Military Council. It was these same forces that went on, with the support of the Al-Farouq Brigade, to establish the Sirte branch of AAS in 2013. The commander of AAS in Sirte was Ahmed Ali Attir, a Misratan who had been one of the founders of the Al-Farouq Brigade. As such, AAS was able to entrench itself in the town, taking advantage of the fact that Sirte’s social fabric had been shattered. The main tribes associated with the former regime, including the Qadhadhfa, the Werfella and the Awlad Suleiman, all of which were present in the town—had already opted out of the scene, having declared from the outset of the revolution their refusal to engage with the post-2011 order. In addition, there was no competing Islamist-revolutionary force from the town that could oppose the AAS takeover. That is not to suggest they had no competition whatsoever. In July 2013, for example, the Zawiya Martyrs’ Brigade, led by former army officer, Saleh Bu Haliqa from Benghazi, tried to check their progress and succeeded in killing Al-Attir in August 2013. However, forces in Misrata quickly rallied round, sending fighters to Sirte to kick Bu Haliqa out. The combination of strong Misratan backing and the fact that the country’s new authorities had turned their backs on the town, dismissing it as a remnant of the old regime, meant that these AAS militants had more or less free rein.

By the time IS came along, therefore, the environment was already ripe for the group to seed itself. Many AAS members in Sirte gave their allegiance to IS in 2015 in what was a change of brand more than a takeover. However, IS’ arrival in
Sirte was not supported by all of AAS, and triggered yet another fracturing within the Islamist camp. Some AAS members, including Amar Said and Khalifa Barq, refused to join IS, opting to go to Benghazi to join the fight against Hafter instead. The same had occurred in Nawfaliya, where the Emir of AAS, Gaydan Al-Nawfali, refused to join the group, choosing to station his forces in an animal feed warehouse outside the town.\textsuperscript{19}

Even among these more extreme elements, therefore, IS’ allure was not sufficient to be able to unite the extremist strand. While IS may have attracted some youth from other towns, as well as contingents of foreign extremist elements, its appeal was not universal. Indeed, despite Benghazi being home to some of the most diehard of militants, IS was only able to attract a handful of adherents in the city. While it managed to attract some support in Derna, it was easily outnumbered and chased out by other militant elements, led by the Abu Slim Martyrs’ Brigade, which was far more locally rooted in the town. In Sabratha, meanwhile, it remained little more than a small cell that never made any real impact.

Despite the chaos and lawlessness of post-Qadhafi Libya, therefore, the group’s reach remained limited and bound by several factors including the country’s geography, and the crowded and highly competitive Islamist scene that contained groups that were far more embedded in the local map. In addition, in contrast to IS in Iraq, IS in Libya could not play on sectarian dynamics, nor did it serve as a magnet for former regime personnel. Despite reports in some media outlets that tribes or notables from tribes linked to the former regime gave their allegiance to IS\textsuperscript{20}, there is no concrete evidence to suggest this is the case. Had these tribes backed IS in any serious fashion, the group would not have been dislodged so easily.

As such, once Misrata launched its campaign to take control of Sirte, the group’s days were numbered. With the assistance of US air strikes, Bunyan Al-Marsous, a coalition of brigades from Misrata, which included Islamist oriented forces, succeeded in dislodging IS and taking over the town, killing and arresting many of its leaders and personnel.

Since its defeat in Sirte, what was left of the group has struggled to make its presence felt. IS remnants are accused of having perpetrated a number of hit and run attacks in desert areas such as in May 2017, when IS fighters attacked the Lodd Agricultural Project, south of Sirte, and October 2018, when they launched an attack against the remote desert town of Al-Fuqaha in Al-Jufra. Most recently, a suicide bomb detonated at a checkpoint in Sebha in an attack claimed by IS. However, it is difficult to gauge how many of these attacks were actually the responsibility of IS, given that in the chaotic and contested environment, it has benefitted both sides in Libya’s conflict to tag their opponents with the IS label.
While it may still have elements operating in the southern deserts, these elements have failed to exploit the vast ungoverned spaces in any visible or tangible way. As such, the group’s future would appear to be doomed. Indeed, in light of the difficulties IS had in installing itself in Libya when the group was at its peak and conditions almost ideal, it seems unlikely that it will re-emerge in any meaningful form. Warnings of its being positioned to “grow even stronger in civil war conditions,” and of its being able to mount a “large scale resurgence,” are probably exaggerated. This does not mean that there aren’t still extremist elements in Libya that aspire to the kind of uncompromising ideology espoused by IS. However, Libya ultimately proved hostile to the group that was unable to nest itself in an overcrowded militant scene dominated by personalities and fiefdoms.

Enter Turkey

With IS routed in Sirte and the BRSC and its counterparts in Derna and Ajdabiya chased out of the east, western Libya has become the main centre of what is left of Libya’s Islamist scene. Yet this scene is no less chaotic. Ever since Qadhafi’s toppling, western Libya has been bursting to the seams with armed groups of differing hues, each beholden to their particular commanders or areas. Although many of these forces pulled together under the banner of Operation Libya Dawn, this coalition struggled to hold itself together, its components endlessly embroiled in turf wars in the struggle to dominate and to reap the benefits of controlling official bodies, buildings and financial flows.

These cleavages became even more pronounced in 2016 with the arrival of the internationally-backed GNA, when a number of forces in Tripoli, led mainly by Salafist-Madkhalist commanders, positioned themselves, for opportunistic reasons, as the new executive’s security providers. A split developed between those forces, which included the Special Deterrent Force and the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade, which had put themselves nominally under the command of GNA’s Interior Ministry, and those more hawkish Islamist forces who looked to Libya’s ultraorthodox Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq Al-Gharianni. This latter group rejected the GNA altogether, viewing it as an imperialist imposition that served what they considered to be the counter revolutionary forces of the east. They also considered Salafist Madkhalist forces to be serving as a vector for Saudi Arabian influence, although the extent of Saudi support for these elements remains unclear.
While this division was by no means clear cut, and while there were other forces present in the west that fell into neither camp, competition between these two main trends intensified at the end of 2016, when GNA-allied forces began arresting and imprisoning elements from the BSRC, which was backed by Al-Gharianni and his supporters. More explosively, in October 2016, elements from the Special Deterrent Force were accused of kidnapping and killing Sheikh Nadir Al-Omrani, Al-Gharianni’s deputy in the Dar Al-Ifta. Fearing a backlash from the pro-Gharianni camp, GNA-aligned forces launched what they described as a “pre-emptive strike” on their militant opponents, attacking various hardline militias and pushing them out of the capital.

Although these hardline forces lay low for a while, they returned to the scene en masse in April 2019, when Hafter launched his assault on Tripoli. At this time, the GNA hastily cobbled together the “Volcano of Anger” coalition, bringing in all forces regardless of ideological orientation to help repel the attack. Despite their differences with the GNA, these militant factions saw in this campaign the opportunity to stage a comeback while presenting themselves as steadfast revolutionaries who could ride in and save the day.

Hafter’s attack, therefore, galvanized a broad array of revolutionary and Islamist groups, including Salafists, jihadists, and those of a more moderate outlook, who put their differences to one side to defend the capital. They presented a formidable force. As Wehrey and Badi rightly observe, “Haftar’s rationale in the assault ignored the fact that a dizzying array of Tripolitanian militias has vested political and economic incentives to defend, in contrast to the security vacuum in the south and to the tribal demography of the east, where Haftar was more successful.”

Yet it was not through revolutionary ardour alone that Hafter was pushed back out of Tripoli a little over a year later. Hafter’s defeat was in no small part down to the intervention of Turkey, which provided significant military assistance to the GNA, including sending large contingents of Syrian mercenaries to assist in the fight. These mercenary forces, who were mainly Syrian Turkmen, and who had been trained by Turkey in northern Syria, were shipped over to Libya in large contingents on the promise of pay, healthcare provision and the possibility of Turkish nationality, as well as the threat of being kicked out of the Syrian National Army. Through these forces, Ankara hoped to rebalance the military equation and to offset the advantage afforded to Hafter through the support he was receiving from Egypt, the UAE and Russia, including Wagner Group mercenaries. Indeed, Libya’s conflict has been fuelled by the relentless intervention of external powers on both sides, who have aggravated and prolonged the chaos.

Although many forces in the west, including those of a non-Islamist bent,
welcomed Turkish military involvement, it was the Islamist and more ardent revolutionary forces that had pushed particularly hard for such intervention. That the Islamists should have looked to Turkey at this time was expected. Turkey, which had sided with Operation Libya Dawn in 2014, had already become a key magnet for Libyan Islamists of all hues. It not only served as a place of refuge, opening its doors to those fleeing the east, as well as those who had come to feel increasingly uncomfortable in the west following the GNA’s arrival, including Al-Gharianni himself, it became a new ideological center around which Libyan Islamists revolved.

It was natural therefore that in late 2019, when thanks to the backing of his UAE, Egyptian and Russian sponsors, Hafter looked set to pulverise forces in the west, Islamist forces and political personalities pressurized the GNA into accepting Turkey’s offer of large-scale military assistance. The head of the Higher State Council, Khalid Al-Mishri, a former leading member of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, intimated at this time that the head of the Presidency Council, Fayez Serraj could find himself and his government brought down if he did not accept Turkish military help. 28 Al-Gharianni, meanwhile, lashed out at the GNA for having dallied over accepting Turkish assistance, issuing a fatwa ruling that Turkish military bases in Libya were halal (religiously permitted) as well as legally acceptable. 29 Under such pressure and with Hafter looking poised to take over, the GNA had little choice but to comply.

While Turkey’s entry into the conflict turned the tide of the war in the GNA’s favor, its ongoing presence in the country has also had an impact. Indeed, the Turkish presence appears to have had somewhat of a stabilizing influence on the unwieldy array of forces in western Libya. There has been a notable reduction in intra-militia fighting since its arrival, and Tripoli looks to be more stable than it has done for a while.

This does not mean that there aren’t still tensions or low-level clashes that erupt from time to time. The ongoing squabble over who controls the Awqaf that is being played out between Salafist Madkhalist currents and those of a more political Islamist bent is a case in point. 30 However, Ankara seems to have brought some semblance of order, temporarily at least. Yet while Turkey may have helped these forces put some of their differences to one side, they are no closer to becoming any kind of cohesive force or movement. Despite the efforts by successive governments to turn them into professional security forces, they remain as unwieldy as ever. While there are still Islamist leaning forces in control of particular neighborhoods and towns, these forces are still more focused on what they can gain rather than imposing any particular ideological agenda. As such, the Islamists of varying
shades have been subsumed by the wider chaos, leaving an Islamist scene that is diffuse, diluted and more elusive than ever.

Conclusion

QADHAFI’S TOPPLING OPENED THE DOOR TO A WIDE ARRAY OF ISLAMIST FACTIONS AND forces who came to the fore after more than 40 years of repression. The chaos that engulfed the country at this time, as well as the absence of any proper centralized authority, the ready availability of weapons, and the complete marginalization of those linked to the former regime, looked on the surface to offer an ideal environment for militant Islamist groups to flourish. Yet while Islamist forces, including jihadist elements, certainly proliferated, they never succeeded in forging any unified or coherent ideological force that could extend beyond the local.

Yet the Islamists were not alone in their failure to create a movement with national reach or appeal. There has never been any truly organic national movement established in Libya, whose three regions were bolted together at independence in 1951. Libya’s monarchy was always a creature of the east, and while Qadhafi’s 1969 coup may have attracted support, his revolutionary Jamahiriyah was imposed by brute force. Since his demise, there has been nothing akin to any national movement able to extend across the country as a whole. Attempts at forging political parties have been pitiful, while regional, local and tribal identities remain as potent as ever. The recent adoption of a political system based on allocation, with posts in the recently appointed Government of National Unity (GNU) doled out by region and chosen to appease various towns, tribes and personalities, is evidence of such.

It is little surprise, therefore, that Libyan Islamism remains characterized by division and discord. While Islamist elements will continue to represent an important component in the national picture, they will remain as fragmented as everything else in the country.
NOTES

3. From its establishment, the Libyan Brotherhood had always operated under the wing of the mother branch in Egypt. For a history of the Libyan Brotherhood, see Alison Pargetter, Return to the Shadows: The Muslim Brotherhood and An-Nahda after the Arab Spring, (London, Saqi 2016).
6. Prominent members of the bloc resigned from the party and accused the leadership of deviation following the bringing down of a helicopter belonging to Operation Libya Dawn allegedly by LNA forces near Zawiya in October 2015.
25. These militias included the National Guard, led by ex-LIFG member, Khalid Sharif; the 6th Security Division, led by Naim al-Duwaibi; the Ihsane Brigade, led by Tariq Derman Werfelli; the Sumoud Brigade from Misrata, led by Salah Badi; and remnants of the BRSC. Libya Focus, December 2016, Menas Associates.

I

T IS NOW MORE THAN TWO DECADES SINCE AL- QAEDA LAUNCHED ITS
attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. These decades have seen
a drastic growth in organizations that have sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda,
and subsequently the Islamic State, contributing to an explosion of research
exploring these organizations. Researchers within area studies, political
science, criminology, sociology, history, and other fields have engaged themselves
in understanding these organizations, their dramatic growth, and their internal and
external dynamics.¹ A variety of approaches to understanding the jihadist pheno-
menon, including essentialists seeing jihadism as caused by a specific strand of
Islam (either due to global trends including globalization and Saudi missionary work
or through Arab resentment) and being ideologically driven.² Some analyses has
seen the phenomenon as the “Islamification of radicalism,” basically the recruiting

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for African Jihad

By Stig Jarle Hansen
of demographics already vulnerable to extremism because of grievances, alienation, and poverty into jihadist organizations (in this article defined as militant groups justifying their violence based on their perception of Islam). Such an approach can include work focusing on local, and in some cases global, grievances as causes of radicalization. Social movement theory, more traditional criminological network model-based approaches, and insurgency studies-based approaches (for example exploring rebel governance) also became common approaches to study the spread and internal dynamics of jihadist groups. Additionally, researchers have studied these relatively new organizations by focusing on their economic dynamics.

This article studies a subset of such economic approaches, focusing on a “crime-terrorist nexus” critically and providing examples of how such articles and analysis have in many cases been inaccurate, leading to misunderstandings and policy errors. The article explores how an over focus on greed as an explanatory variable and on alleged “crime-terror” nexuses, sometimes framed as if jihadists were “for sale,” have led to confusion and securitization. At times, this focus also leads us to overlook profit motivations and crime connections amongst actors fighting against jihadists, leading us to neglect an important dimension of counterterrorism interventions. As argued by Philip Herbst, “labelling a group as ordinary criminals (notwithstanding that terrorism is also illegal), belittles the underlying grievances, ideologies, and motivations, attributing their actions to solely personal, often material gain. In all cases, the designated label channels a policy reaction that is anchored in the very different fields of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency (COIN), or law enforcement, each centered around its own principles, dogmas, and common practices.” Such approaches, and an over-emphasis on the “crime-terror” nexus, create a very unsophisticated picture of complex organizations that is nevertheless tempting to apply in its simplicity. Yet often these approaches conflate “war for profit” with “profit for war,” neglecting how other insurgencies have used crimes such as bank robberies to finance warfare. Moreover, the failure to put jihadists in a local context leads to a neglect of other groups’ involvement in crime, including western allies in the “War on Terror.”

The “mafia”-focused approach leaves us with the danger of underestimating both local grievances, and the role of jihadists in providing solutions to these local grievances, as well as the genuine ideological commitments of jihadists. This approach has also at times led to inappropriate policy guidelines. As will be shown later, it might also lead to issue linkages that damage policies in completely unrelated fields, as, for example, within environmental protection and nature conservation. While linkages between jihadism and other forms of crime do exist at times, they seem very often to be based on jihadist “taxing” of criminal activities.
rather than integration into them. The term “taxing” illustrates some ambiguity in our conceptual framework, as it in itself can be seen as an illegal activity, as in demanding “protection money.” But at times, those who pay “tax” actually get something in return from the jihadists for such payments, sometimes more than the services provided by local western allies that similarly enforce taxes on the local population.

This article does not dismiss all articles focusing on the crime-terror nexus or the “follow the money” approach, but rather appeals for nuancing concepts and more scrutiny of narratives that see jihadist actors as outright “mafias” so that we may avoid false issue linkages that result from such narratives. Importantly, such linkages have been made in the past by prominent individuals. For example, James R. Clapper, then the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI), claimed that increasing transnational organized crime and the links of such organizations to international terrorism was amongst the most pressing national security concerns of the United States. The U.S. National Intelligence Council similarly predicted in 2011 that:

Terrorists and insurgents increasingly will turn to crime to generate funding and will acquire logistical support from criminals, in part because of successes by U.S. agencies and partner nations in attacking other sources of their funding. In some instances, terrorists and insurgents prefer to conduct criminal activities themselves; when they cannot do so, they turn to outside individuals and facilitators. U.S. intelligence, law enforcement and military services have reported that more than 40 foreign terrorist organizations have links to the drug trade.

Although these statements are old, the reflexive tendency to link crime and jihadism is clear and relevant today, as is the potential for policy to flow from such perceived linkages.
Into Darkness: Looking for Greed in African Civil War

“GREED” AS AN EXPLANATORY VARIABLE FOR AFRICAN CONFLICTS SAW AN EXPLOSION in the 1990s as Western researchers strove to understand the new wars that erupted after the Cold War. Collier and Hoeffler’s work studying the role of greed in African conflict was in many ways a “perfect” entry into a public debate that discussed the flare of conflicts in an African setting, presenting an alternative to Robert Kaplan’s approach from the early 1990s that focused on primordial hatred. Books and articles like Kaplan’s “The coming Anarchy” had painted a picture of irrational wars based on primitive feelings and social trends that had disappeared from the more “modern” Western world. Eizenberger, meanwhile, argued that Africa’s wars were without ideology, about “nothing at all.” Collier and Hoeffler instead focused on profit motivations driving civil wars. In this telling, conflict actors were profit maximizers inspired by “greed.” This theory to a certain extent acted as a guide for a new generation of journalists and analysts trying to make sense of multipolar conflicts. Such a view influenced many of the subsequent works on warlords, which again tended to focus on profit opportunities in a conflict landscape. The dichotomy between greed and grievance was, and remained, faulty.

To a certain extent, this approach failed to distinguish between “profit for war,” in which an organization is gathering money to wage a war, and “war for profit,” in which harnessing profit is a pragmatic attempt to cater to the greed of the involved leaders, who in many cases have no interest in peace. The two categories overlap, and, as claimed by Mary Kaldor, it is “difficult to distinguish between those who use the cover of political violence for economic reasons and those who engage in predatory economic activities to finance their political cause.” However, while these categories overlap within organizations, with different sub-commanders having different interests, they nevertheless are important as ideal types. It allows us to explore empirical signs for which of these ideal types are important in a given case, by, for example, looking at how much an organization spends on supposedly “unnecessary” expenses, such as for governance purposes, that could have been harnessed as profit by the leadership. Importantly, income gathering does not necessarily mean that greed drives an organization or entity. Few researchers would, for example, say that the United States was driven by the sale of war bonds and the
raising of extra taxes in their efforts to fight Nazi Germany during World War II. Income should thus not be taken as outright evidence of “war for profit.”\textsuperscript{13} This is not to say that the economic-focused research of the 1990s and onwards failed to produce some insights. Collier, for his part, changed his focus over time to opportunity costs, basically examining what rebels miss out on when acting against a regime, in this sense focusing much more on the obstacles to and deterrence against war rather than outright greed as a motivating factor.\textsuperscript{14}

Today, we often see a confusion between the concepts of \textit{war economy} and \textit{illicit economy}, the latter being an “illegal” economy—basically the trade of goods like weapons, drugs, and humans that in many cases are a major trait in state economies outside war zones. The war economy concept refers to a macro-economic situation amid war and will consist of a system of many actors adapting to wartime conditions, ranging from small farmers to major businesses. Some of these actors are conducting activities that would have been legal in a prewar setting. Yet, it is easy to focus on parts of the economy that are perceived as illegal (often from a Western perspective), including, in Somalia’s case, the study of the mild narcotic khat, which was actually legal throughout much of Somali history\textsuperscript{15} and remains legal in neighboring countries as Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen.\textsuperscript{16} More importantly, the war economy should not be confused with the political economy of a specific jihadist organization, or indeed any insurgent organization. Such organizations will often be embedded in the context of the war economy but will function differently and have different strategies than, for example, a subsistence family household that also constitutes a part of the war economy. The agency of actors outside the warring factions should not be underestimated. In cases such as Somalia, other economic actors, such as large-scale businessmen and even aid agencies, may wield considerable negotiating and even armed power vs even armed factions.\textsuperscript{17}

Although researchers such as Erik Alda and Joseph L. Sala contributed greatly to conceptual clarity around the way jihadists integrate into crime, there are often problems with understanding the different forms of interaction between crime and armed factions. Alda and Sala distinguish between “Coexistence, Cooperation, and Convergence of Terrorism, Organized Crime, and Crime,” a conceptual separation that can be applied to insurgencies as well.\textsuperscript{18} Coexistence becomes a situation where jihadists simply exist in an area where criminal groups are present; cooperation means that there are forms of cooperation, including taxation of crime by the jihadists, while convergence means integration between criminal organizations and jihadists. This article will argue that coexistence and cooperation, usually in the form of taxation, are the most common forms of interaction.
We should remind ourselves that explanatory approaches based on “war for profit” have led to failed policies in the past. In Somalia in the 1990s, the United States believed that it could bring in “warlords” such as Mohamed Farrah Aidid (famous for his central role in the “Black Hawk Down” incident) by offering rewards. These strategies generally failed, partly because the Americans misunderstood how group identities negated such strategies. The existing and complex field of interaction between identity, ideology, and political economy was reduced to a form of Orientalism.

September 11 changed the war economy focus, as economic studies tended to focus on clandestine financing channels for the al-Qaeda network, studying at the time “profit for terror.” However, as the al-Qaeda network morphed and came to include affiliates fighting insurgencies (of which some, such as the Islamic State, even distanced themselves from the original organization), a wider field developed and the study of “profit for war” became more prevalent. New affiliates such as the Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and later Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) emerged and, particularly in the African context, the “war for profit” theme re-emerged as well. One of the organizations in this study, the Shabaab, was, for example, highlighted as a mafia-like racketeering group, highlighting both the protection fees paid by businessmen in Somalia to the group as well as the tactical cooperation between the Shabaab and foreign forces controlling airports and ports. The Shabaab was indeed presented as a prime example of the “Crime-Terror-Insurgency” nexus by the U.S. government.

In West Africa, the story at times was similar. Media reports as well as researchers focused on al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) facilitators reputed to have been involved in kidnappings and drug smuggling.

We also have works that suggest that jihadists are a part of the political market, suggesting ideological flexibility on the part jihadist actors, when what we see is actually a relative consistency towards their own organizations and the West. We have seen opportunism and splits within jihadist organizations, yet both ideology and operational differences matter when organizations split. The political loyalties and services of jihadist leadership are not simply sold to the highest bidder in a competitive manner. Jihadist leaders have so far seldom been swayed away from the path of jihadism by outsiders, and they will have specific ideological demands when negotiating. It is important to understand that economic motives of the rank and file might be more parochial, at times being subsistence-based. However, motivations of the rank and file should not be equaled with the motives of the leadership without a proper examination.
As expressed so excellently by Wolfram Lacher with regards to arguments about al-Qaeda’s involvement in the West African context, profit-based arguments have often been used normatively to tarnish the reputation of jihadist actors while neglecting the fact that local regimes and clan or tribal networks are involved in similar practices.\textsuperscript{24} A thorough political economic analysis is of great value, but it can easily turn into forms of Orientalism, where “our” allies are innocent and “our” enemies are culprits. It might also turn into an analytical trap where everything is seen as “war for profit,” where “our side” is seen as clean while the others are seen as a “mafia,” and where local grievances, and the role of jihadists in providing answers to these local grievances, as well as genuine ideological commitments are underestimated. There are genuinely excellent political economy studies that do not fall into these traps, including the works of Briscoe, Bøås, Lacher, Raineri, Strazzari and Ahmad, and Andreas’ works on the Bosnian civil war.\textsuperscript{25} Such approaches have produced vital insights to better understand and respond to jihadists and other armed groups. But these only improve our understanding when applied in a way that accommodates a critical orientation toward “follow the money” and “war for profit” approaches. Indeed, the above-mentioned articles could have benefitted from more thinking around the differences between “profit for war” and “war for profit.”

This article strives to provide a set of critical lenses to avoid the problems and pitfalls often encountered in such studies. The author acknowledges that there might be individuals and organizational subgroups that straddle the line between jihadism and crime, but research has to nonetheless ensure that general organizational dynamics are represented. The article gives examples of how a “war for profit” emphasis has produced erroneous assumptions and even policy guidelines, as well as how the concepts of “income for warfare” and generating “warfare” for income have been mixed up. This has led to an underestimation of the importance of ideological dimensions and the organizational cohesion of jihadists as well as a neglect of politics and local grievances. The article also illustrates how a perceived crime-terror nexus has been used to advantage certain causes and has additionally harmed innocent third parties.

This article focuses on two African cases, since the aforementioned errors seem to be most prevalent in these contexts. It focuses on one of the most common examples used in analyses of the crime-terrorist nexus, the Sahel-based JNIM, and one of the more common examples of the alleged “war for profit” strategy, that of the Harakat al-Shabaab, which is accused of integrating into piracy. In doing this, the author employs cases that initially seem to contradict the main arguments of this article.
The Harakat al-Shabaab: Highly Successful in the Economic Field

THE HARKAT AL-SHABAAB, WITH ITS ORIGINS IN A SMALL NETWORK THAT COALESCED in 2003–2004 (though formally founded in 2006), of which a large proportion of commanders were veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, is today perhaps al-Qaeda’s numerically strongest affiliate. It has gone through a golden age when it controlled large parts of southern Somalia, recruiting successfully in Kenya, Tanzania, and to a lesser extent in Uganda, and through a period of defeats from 2011 to 2016. The Harakat al-Shabaab is today a highly successful economic actor in Somalia. It manages to gather large amounts of money through “taxation”/protection money to the extent that the Hiraal Institute, a Somali think tank, claims that “all the major companies in southern Somalia pay the annual Zakat to AS; only very small-scale businesses such as street hawkers, that have not reached the Zakat requirement, are untaxed by the group.” The taxing is meticulous and involves taxing government officials and even officials in the Somali National Army. Hiraal’s 2020 assessment of Shabaab’s income suggested that the total income from “taxes” is at least $15 million per month, which would total $180 million per year, and that Mogadishu was the center of the tax collection, with more than $7.5 million coming from the city on a monthly basis. However, there are large discrepancies between this figure and the figure from Hiraal’s 2018 report, which assessed the Shabaab’s annual income at $27 million. While Shabaab’s income seemingly has increased since 2018, a more than sixfold increase in income over two years seems unlikely, and the $15 million per month number is based on a single source. What we do know is that Shabaab has a sizable income in Somalia today, and Hiraal’s impression that Shabaab is adept in harnessing taxes seem to be correct, with some sources claiming that the government of Somalia taxes less than the Shabaab.

This seems to confirm the impression that Shabaab has turned into a “mafia” as there is a lot of profit to be made in Shabaab’s activities. However, one should tread with caution when making such assessments. Firstly, it should be noted that while Shabaab’s taxation is rather unpopular in Somalia, it at times is more transparent than that of the government. For example, Shabaab gives receipts that allow a
lorry driver to pass Shabaab checkpoints after having paid an initial toll (as opposed to government checkpoints, where drivers are routinely forced to make repeat payments). Secondly, it should be noted that Shabaab actually provides services in return for the taxes it collects. Two local respondents in Somalia, for example, suggest that the shari’a courts covering Mogadishu are the most efficient institution for arbitration in business conflicts and property disagreements. Respondents suggest that Shabaab is also good at reducing crime. As Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones stress, there are limits to Shabaab’s “care,” with the group, for example, sometimes discriminating against minorities at a local level. However, these efforts to provide “care” are also costly. These functions and institutions—courts, reliable checkpoints—are less important for a purely profit-driven organization. Shabaab chooses to have these institutions regardless. Some of these institutions’ functions might provide some economic support that can resemble profit maximization, as suggested by Ahmed, who highlighted the security provision of the Islamic Courts as a major driver of private sector support for Shabaab in 2006. Nevertheless, as security provision is essential to both prevent crime and protect business, it becomes too simple to suggest that this is based on pure greed or the quest for profit. It is interesting that the Hiraal Institute suggests that it is the transport sector that is today most positive about the Shabaab, while local sources also suggest that this is the sector that is most dependent on Shabaab’s security provision.

Although there is probably a financial surplus within Shabaab today, and it should be acknowledged that this might drive more opportunism on the part of Shabaab in the future, this was not always the case. The Hiraal Institute’s 2018 assessment of Shabaab’s income as $27 million (which, with estimated expenditures of around $25.6 million in the same year, meant the group roughly broke even), illustrated a time when profit was lower. We need to remember that the period from 2011 to 2016 was a time of retraction and losses for the Shabaab, including the loss of profit as taxation became harder. There was simply little profit in staying in the Shabaab at the time. The stability of the Shabaab leadership at this time has to be acknowledged. Although there was a split in the top leadership in 2012, this seems to have been ideologically driven and/or induced by differences over tactics. Furthermore, the split led to several deaths but only one senior defection, which actually did not materialize until 2017 when Shabaab was stabilizing itself economically and turning more profit. Thus, high-ranking defections were relatively uncommon during the troubled periods of 2007–2008 and 2011–2016 and they remain so today. In other words, even at moments when Shabaab was not profitable, its leaders, designing the income-gathering
mechanisms, with a few exceptions kept themselves inside the organization at the risk of their own lives. It should also be noted that the two rounds of low-key dialogue between Somali authorities and the Shabaab—one in 2009 and one in 2017—never floundered over economic issues but over issues related to ideology (the Somali government in 2009 wanted Shabaab to abandon takfirism) as well as the withdrawal of foreign forces from Somalia (both in 2019 and 2017). The increased profitability of Shabaab seems to offer an interesting scenario for the future, but it seems too easy to claim today that Shabaab is a “mafia” based on “war for profit.” Today, Shabaab provides governance and puts effort into spreading its ideology by influencing local schools. All the evidence suggests that Shabaab’s aim is to create a shari’a-based government in Somalia without foreign intervention.

Shabaab has in the past been seen as being tied to a variety of illegal and illicit income generating activities, but such claims must be nuanced. At their worst, these claims are based on weak sources and are misleading, often leading to sensationalism in the press and interest groups attempting to tie into the “war on terror” discussion. Andrea Crosta, executive director of the Elephant Action League, told Agence France-Presse in 2013, for example, that the ivory trade “could be supplying up to 40 percent of the funds needed to keep [Shabaab] in business,” though he specified that Shabaab is not involved in the actual killing of elephants or rhinos. Yet the work of the Elephant League drew on a very limited number of sources. Multi-source corroboration was not forthcoming, yet the claim was widely circulated in the press, by politicians, and among filmmakers and NGOs, eventually influencing both legislation and financial support for the involved NGOs. Indeed, as remarked by Tom Maguire and Cathy Haenlein, it is quite easy to ship illegal ivory from Kenya and Tanzania through those countries’ port systems due to corruption, while Shabaab’s area of operations is far away from the most important hunting grounds for elephants in East Africa. The volume of trade that would have supplied 40 percent of Shabaab’s income would have been sizable, yet this trade was never detected as not a single consignment of ivory shipped out of Somalia was ever detected from the Persian Gulf to East Asia.

Yet these claims had policy outcomes, some very malign. Kristof Titeca and Patrick Edmond highlighted how the claims of Shabaab’s involvement in the illegal wildlife trade impacted the global debate on poaching as the narrative was exported to other theaters, for example with regards to the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, and figured frequently in the press despite being based on little evidence. Titeca and Edmond show how these allegations contribute to militarizing conservationism, subsequently leading to an underestimation of local grievances that
cause poaching and turning the focus away from both local authorities and international enterprises’ involvement in the value chain of poaching. It cannot be fully ruled out that there were some individual Shabaab commanders involved in wildlife trafficking activities, but it can be ruled out that Shabaab was ever an important actor in poaching, and in hindsight the 40 percent estimate seems to belong in the world of fiction.⁴⁴

Allegations of Shabaab’s involvement in piracy seem to have similar effects as the allegations of Shabaab’s involvement in poaching. Bruno Schiemsky suggested in 2008, for example, that we would see a major alliance between Shabaab and pirate groups and that Shabaab was preparing a fleet of pirate ships to launch assaults against international shipping. The same author also claimed that Shabaab had 2,500 men posted along the coastline of Somalia and that pirates were training a Shabaab fleet.⁴⁵ Such an alliance never materialized and the fleet was never seen. Indeed, claims of a crime-terror nexus simplified the dynamics between piracy groups and elided the fact that Shabaab lacked a presence in many of the areas that hosted pirates. In the areas where Shabaab gained a presence, it taxed pirate groups until piracy dwindled from 2013 onwards, but it never integrated into these groups. Some pirates also had a role in smuggling arms to the Shabaab, yet this is a case of coexistence and loose cooperation rather than convergence. In fact, Shabaab may have even contributed to the dwindling of piracy in 2006 back when it was part of the Islamic Courts Union, although this is contested.⁴⁶

Shabaab has indeed been involved in the trade of some illicit commodities. In the case of the charcoal trade, Shabaab’s involvement was crucial at very important stages of the organization’s trajectory. The organization managed to tax the trade while it controlled the port of Kismayo, and later it managed to tax the sector with checkpoints outside Kismayo.⁴⁷ Shabaab was only one actor in the complex supply chain of charcoal, with some other actors being subsistence farmers and others yet being partners of the West in the war on terror, such as western-backed Somali officials and Kenyan military officers deployed as part of the African Union’s peace-enforcement mission.⁴⁸ Shabaab is involved the smuggling of sugar as well, but, again, Shabaab is just one actor out of many in this logistical chain that has also included Kenyan and Ethiopian officials.⁴⁹ The major problem for law enforcement interventions vis-à-vis both charcoal and sugar smuggling was and remains the other participants in these logistical chains: first the subsistence actors such as transporters and farmers who depend on the income and could be potential victims of any efforts to curtail these trades, and secondly the involvement of eternal forces such as Kenyan officers among the African Union forces and the Somali political elite, some of whom have close relationships with Western states.
Importantly, some Shabaab leaders have been pragmatic and seemingly profit-driven, for example Timojele “Rambo,” who organized kidnappings in Somalia’s Galmudug region in 2009. However, this concerns specific leaders rather than the organization as a whole, and indeed Timojele only was active during the golden age of the Shabaab. We do not know if he would have stayed with the group as he was killed before Shabaab’s period of setbacks. As indicated by Katharine Petrich, Shabaab’s role in the trade of illicit goods seems rather to be focused on taxing the trade rather than integrating into the value chain, and it is the taxing that is the most important source of the group’s income. Such taxing might be seen as “protection” money, but it is also essential in building up institutions, an activity that Shabaab is heavily engaged in. Shabaab is coexisting and cooperating with (by taxing) crime rather than integrating into it, as indeed it is with other Somali business sectors, and it is taxation that creates the group’s income, not a crime-terrorism nexus.

JNIM: A War for Profit?

JAMA’AT NASR AL-ISLAM WAL-MUSLIMIN (JNIM) INITIALLY SEEMS LIKE A CLEAR CASE in which a focus on “war for profit” rather than “profit for war” is justified. However, this is not the case. The organization itself is young, formed in 2017 through the merger of four older organizations, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, al-Mourabitoun, and the Saharan branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Several of its member organizations, especially AQIM but also al-Mourabitoun, the latter a splinter group from the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (the French acronym for which is MUJAO), had strong reputations for being involved in illegal trade and other illegal activities. AQIM subcommander Mokhtar Belmokhtar even held the nickname “Mr. Marlborough” for his involvement in illegal cigarette smuggling through the Sahara, and he was undoubtedly involved in kidnappings in the Sahel. As Ivan Brisco claims, “few countries have experienced an armed insurgency so strongly rooted in criminal networks, no more so than in the case of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which seized control of Gao in June 2012. It is likewise rare to find a crisis in which illicit revenues serve to weaken and delegitimize so many critical areas of state authority, including the armed forces, intelligence services and the offices of the presidency.”
AQIM was originally based in northern Algeria, though parts of the group moved south and took active advantage of smuggling routes in the Sahel while employing kidnappings to gain funds. The group was alleged to have earned $91 million between 2008 and 2013 from kidnappings, while Wolfram Lacher suggests that the ransom fees from 2008 to 2012 totaled between $40 and $65 million. Allegations of collusion between AQIM and drug smugglers figured heavily in the press in this time, including stories of how an undercover U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent presented himself to three Malian nationals as a representative of the Colombian FARC guerrillas. The Malians in turn asserted that they could arrange protection from AQIM for a cocaine shipment across the Sahara. Notably, such a supposed link between AQIM and the drug trade created prominence for NGOs involved in fighting drug use and drug transportation and served to link two evils, jihadism and drug smuggling.

Nevertheless, upon closer scrutiny, AQIM’s involvement with illegal trade and smuggling has to be adjusted. Analysts tended to superimpose a link, often without an adequate basis in evidence. There was simply no evidence that individuals involved in the DEA agreement were actually representatives for AQIM. As suggested by Wolfram Lacher, these individuals could have been interested in aggrandizing themselves. Firstly, as claimed by Peter Tinti, estimates of the stream of cocaine are highly uncertain, often based on extrapolating from confiscations that occur rarely. Moreover, the drug enforcement organizations that make such confiscations are absent from large parts of the Sahel. Secondly, drug income might have been more important for more secular factions in the north, that were consequently more involved in the trade than JNIM and even AQIM. In the words of Lacher, “Talk of an alleged drug-terrorism nexus diverts attention from the much more profound problems that allowed drug trafficking to thrive in the region: the deep involvement of state agents and local elites.”

Moreover, AQIM’s involvement in the drug trade might have been minimal. The group has taken little interest in drug-related conflicts, indicating that fighting over the control of the drug trade was low on their priority list. As Lacher claims, AQIM was not involved in the pre-2013 clashes over drug routes at all. Importantly, the initial collapse of jihadists in northern Mali after the French intervention in 2013 did not result in dwindling narcotics flows, suggesting that jihadists were not as involved in the drug trade as often perceived.

AQIM was also accused of other illicit activities. Weapons smuggling was claimed to be a major source of income for the group, with some primary sources backing up the claim. Yet AQIM’s involvement in weapons smuggling was limited to the northern Sahel. Some weapons dealers shunned the jihadists because
of the cost of dealing with them and the related insecurity. As suggested by Tanya Mehra et al., we also see that for jihadists in West Africa, arms trafficking seems to be a way of building loyalty by providing arms to allies rather than a for-profit activity. In this analysis, arms are for internal use or are employed to sway groups into becoming allies. Jihadists’ involvement in human trafficking seems to be of a similar, limited nature.

JNIM’s involvement in illegal gold mining was also discussed as yet another example of a crime-terror nexus. Journalists David Lewis and Ryan McNeill produced an article with the title “Special Report: How jihadists struck gold in Africa’s Sahel,” yet the article contained little evidence of JNIM’s involvement in the gold trade. Rather, it cited locals who suggested that “Armed men said residents could mine in the protected areas, but there would be conditions,” which does not, in fact, implicate a specific armed faction. We see that other journalists identify specific non-jihadist groups, such as the Koglweogo militias in Burkina Faso or traditional hunters such as the Dozo in Mali, taking control of mines as well. Moreover, local sources suggest that these groups tax mining, and in Burkina Faso’s Soum province, gold miners pay jihadist groups for protection. Jihadists thus do not integrate into gold mining but rather interact with it by either taxing the industry or through supplying services (protection) that a state would have provided in other settings. To a certain extent, the gold mining industry also undermines jihadists by providing jobs to youths that could have otherwise joined the jihadists. The seizure of mines by the government might, however, create recruits for jihadists. In Kabonga, Burkina Faso in 2018, for example, local gold miners went to a jihadist group and pressured it to reopen a mining operation closed by the government.

As previously mentioned, we have clear evidence of AQIM’s involvement in kidnappings. These activities were a major factor driving AQIMs turn to the south. Nevertheless, we also see the historical influence of ideology (as well as personal rivalries) on AQIM’s kidnappings as well as a turn in which the kidnappings are handled in a less pragmatic and less profit-driven manner. Sergei Boeke, for example, suggests that Mokhtar Belmokhtar initially challenged the practice of hostage-taking on theological grounds (the hostages were generally noncombatants). Belmokhtar even requested arbitration from AQIM’s legal committee on the issue. We also see that Belmokhtar refused to tax locals, abstaining from a potential source of profit.

Yet, Mokhtar Belmokhtar got a legal opinion from AQIM and started his highly profitable kidnapping activities, soon mirrored by the activities of another subgroup of AQIM led by veteran commander Abu Zaid. The kidnapping profits
strengthened the two factions. However, when Abu Zaid kidnapped French workers from an Arlit facility in 2010, Osama bin Laden and then-AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel intervened, according to Adib Bencherif, hindering Abu Zeid from negotiating a pure ransom by pressuring the latter to include political demands (though the last hostage was released for ransom after Abu Zeid had died). Similarly, it seems like AQIM complained about Belmokhtar’s passivity in jihad, which, according to Bencherif, might have induced attacks from Belmokhtar in order to justify his own jihadist credentials, including a massive hostage-taking incident at the In-Amanas gas facility in Algeria.

Often the indicators of jihadi involvement in illicit activities are extrapolated. Chelin, for example, extrapolates from the existence of illegal trade in an area with a jihadi presence to suggest jihadi involvement in said trade, seemingly without empirical evidence. This is not too unsimilar to the claim of an insurgency-ivory connection in East Africa. Similarly, Pollichini suggests that attacks against law enforcement are a way to prepare for reasoning criminal operations, overlooking the role of the police and affiliated militias in causing local suffering, as illustrated by Benjaminsen and Ba. The example of the Boeing 727 carcass that was found close to the town of Tarkint in Mali’s Gao region and had been used to transport seven to 11 tons of cocaine (known as the “Air Cocaine” incident) tend to be mentioned simultaneously with the names of jihadist actors, although no link is explicitly highlighted.

As for the more lucrative illicit activity of JNIM and (before 2017) AQIM, i.e., kidnappings, these were also implemented in collusion with government officials. Despite the involvement of AQIM, or at least its southern faction, in kidnappings, the organization also established shari’a courts and protected the local population. From April 2012 to January 2013, AQIM, together with its later partner in JNIM, Ansar Dine, set up a shari’a court in Timbuktu and organized a hisbah (morality police). The group organized a help line for the locals to call if they had been victims of crime and even strove to run the city’s electricity system and keep the hospital open. This signals a commitment by AQIM, at least in this period, to deliver governance and services to the local population, therefore incurring expenses that could have been disregarded if it was a purely profit-driven organization.

Two of AQIM’s future partners in JNIM, MUJAO (an offshoot of which later joined JNIM) and Ansar Dine, engaged themselves in similar ways in northern Mali. During the period when MUJAO ruled Gao from June 2012 to January 2013, the group attempted to curtail crime, provided economic aid, and ensured electricity and water maintenance while also keeping prices of basic food staples low. In Kidal, Ansar Dine may have managed to reduce crime as well.
It should be noted that the modus operandi of AQIM cannot necessarily be extrapolated to their partners in JNIM, some of which are today more important than AQIM in a tactical sense. The Katiba Macina is today perhaps the most important part of the umbrella organization, being behind 75% of JNIM attacks in 2019 alone. The focus on “war for profit” with regards to this organization has been less important in academic research, as the group’s dynamics are in general seen as strongly influenced by local conflicts and the lack of rural security. Importantly, the Katiba Macina have, despite never controlling areas outright, established semi-territoriality: forms of governance that are implemented because the group is allowed to control the local population due to its enemies’ lack of interest in protecting the locals. The Macina has created institutions, delivered justice with the support of qadis (Islamic judges), and attempted to curtail cattle rustling (while also taxing cattle).

The cost of extrapolating jihadist connections in specific sectors has been heavy as illicit smuggling routes are treated as being connected with the war on terror and smugglers are treated as jihadists. Paradoxically, this might, as suggested by Franklin Charles Graham in 2011, lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which low-level smugglers, gold miners, and cattle rustlers have their livelihoods removed, thus being pushed into the arms of the jihadists, who can provide income and tools to handle government repression and sanctions. In many ways, it seems that JNIM’s main source of income is the taxing of all sectors, regardless of whether they are illicit or not. Furthermore, as is the case with the Shabaab, there is no integration into illicit trade. Illicit trade can be taxed, but a loss of income would not be crucial for such an organization. This would also be hard to implement and, in fact, might be more detrimental to some of the West’s partners in the region. The “war for profit” narrative creates a Manichaean dichotomy for the War on Terror in which “our” side is virtuous and value-driven while the other side is craven and selfish. The reality is much more complex and morally ambiguous. It can create analytical errors when the West fails to understand the weaknesses of its own allies.

Conclusion

THE “WAR FOR PROFIT” NARRATIVE SERVES TO ORDER THE WORLD INTO “GOOD” and “bad” categories where the bad, the jihadists, become dependent on “bad” activities. This narrative removes the complexities of the wider war economy,
where subsistence farmers and small-scale businessmen and women might earn a livelihood that will help them survive in a difficult setting, and where the borders between what is illicit and legal are porous. It also provides a potential for issue linkage that can be exploited by activist entrepreneurs and politicians to securitize new topics. As is shown in the above discussion, this can have malign consequences. When it comes to JNIM and Shabaab, “profit for war” seems more important than “war for profit.” If profit were the main interest of these groups, they could choose to integrate more closely into illicit trade rather than just tax parts of it, and they could have long ago cut expenses—for example in their administrative efforts. Misreading these organizations has ramifications for our policies against them, as using economic incentives seems of limited use to lure leaders to defect. On the other hand, addressing grievances and political demands become viable strategies in peace negotiations, since it is doubtful that the organizations in question are waging war merely for profit, which would represent a type of war that can theoretically go on forever so long as profit is forthcoming.

Yet the results of this analysis do not mean we should avoid political economy analyses of these organizations. We need to know who their economic allies are, and it is important to understand how economic profiles might differ across organizations. However, such analyses need to avoid confusing coexistence beside criminal groups with cooperation and/or integration into such groups. Such analyses need to note that “taxing” (or protection money) is different from integration, and accusations of jihadist involvement in new and/or criminal sectors that are prominent in media coverage need to be scrutinized. The study of war economies remains important but will be improved with more critical approaches and conceptual clarity.  

NOTES


6. See, for example, Ken Menkhaus, *Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case*


15. Khat was legal in Somalia until the 1980s when it was banned by the Mohammed Siad Barre dictatorship. The ban has not been upheld by Somali governments since 2000, and it remains legal in Somaliland today.


28. Hiraal Institute, A Losing Game.

29. Ibid.


32. Ibid.


34. Ahmad, Jihad & Co.

35. Hiraal Institute, A Losing Game, 1.

36. The most in-depth analysis of the split can be found in Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda’s Most Powerful Ally (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018). Although it lacks references, for an overview on the academic positions on the split see also Hansen, “An in-depth look at Shabab’s Internal Divisions.”

37. Ibid., 20.


44. Maguire and Haenlein, “An Illusion of Complicity.”


48 Ibid.


54. Chelin, “From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel.”
56. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 14.
59. Ibid., 9.
60. Ibid., 6.
63. Ibid., 35.
67. Ibid., 8.
70. Ibid., 929.
73. Ibid.
74. Chelin “From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel.”
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 18.
81. Ibid., 24; see also Stig Jarle Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-lines of the African Jihad (London: Hurst, 2019).
82. Eizenga and Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM.”
83. Benjaminsen and Ba “Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups?”
85. The author would like to thank James Barnett and Tor A. Benjaminsen for comments, although all mistakes in this article are his own. This piece draws upon research funded by the “God, Grievance, and Greed” project.
The North-South Divide: Nigerian Discourses on Boko Haram, the Fulani, and Islamization

By Michael Nwankpa

NIGERIA, AFRICA’S MOST POPULOUS STATE, FACES INTERSECTING and multidimensional security crises in nearly every part of the country. In northeastern Nigeria, the jihadist group Boko Haram, along with its now-larger splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has maintained an active insurgency since 2009, leading to the deaths of over 30,000 people. In northwestern Nigeria, there are alarming rates of kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and other forms of terroristic violence known locally as “banditry,” much of it committed by ethnic Fulani pastoralists. In southeastern Nigeria, the military is clamping down on the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a group seeking the secession of the Igbo people from Nigeria. In Nigeria’s central Middle Belt states, herder-farmer conflict between Fulani pastoralists and non-Fulani farmers persists after many years. This herder-farmer crisis has expanded into...
southern Nigeria and assumed a dangerous religious dimension as southerners, who are mostly Christian, fear an encroaching Islamist threat that is much bigger than Boko Haram alone. Many Nigerians no longer distinguish between Fulani herders and Boko Haram, seeing both as a singular terrorist front whose sole aim is to Islamize Nigeria.

These fears of Islamization have helped fuel cycles of vitriolic rhetoric and ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, undermining the country’s stability. Southerners have reacted to perceived Islamization and “Fulanization” by forming regional vigilante outfits such as Operation Amotekun, which is supported by governors in the Yoruba-majority southwest, and IPOB’s Eastern Security Network in the southeast. Expectedly, this southern resistance to a perceived Islamic incursion, as well as ongoing discrimination against Fulani people in southern Nigeria, has provoked retaliatory actions from northern political groups such as the Miyetti Allah, a powerful herders’ union. Miyetti Allah has issued threats against northern residents of southern origin and blocked shipments of farm products to the south, for example.¹

Nigeria’s unity thus appears to hang in the balance. Many Yoruba now voice interest in forming an independent state, though secessionist violence has not reached the same levels in the southwest as in the Igbo-majority southeast, where IPOB escalated its operations in the spring of 2021. It is therefore important to look beyond the sensationalist rhetoric and unpack the Islamization discourses to capture the true essence of the Fulani herders’ crisis as well as Boko Haram’s declared Islamization objective, especially in light of the fact that Boko Haram has so far failed to expand into southern Nigeria.

This essay seeks to show that Fulani herders and Boko Haram have separate ideologies and interests and that cooperation between Fulani herders and Boko Haram has been limited, though not entirely negligible. The growing fear and stigmatization of Fulani among the Nigerian public is likely to prove counterproductive, undermining both national cohesion and the fight against Boko Haram and other forms of violent extremism. This essay also finds that the lack of Boko Haram incursions into southern Nigeria is rooted in overlapping ethnoreligious, cultural, political, and geographic factors that are unlikely to change anytime soon, significantly limiting opportunities for Boko Haram to expand beyond its northern base in the near future. This essay benefits from key informant interviews conducted between 2014 and 2021 with Nigerian security officials and politicians, detained Boko Haram suspects, and members of vigilante and sub-state armed groups including Amotekun and IPOB.
Islamization Discourses in Nigeria

Discourse over the Islamization of Nigeria is not novel to Boko Haram and Fulani herders. The notion of Islamization discussed here relates to the aggressive expansion of Islamic social and political systems or the imposition of shari’a rule on a non-Muslim society and non-practicing Muslims. It is a form of forced conversion or assimilation into an Islamic society, different from proselytization and voluntary conversion. Historically, the expansion of Islam in Nigeria has involved a degree of Islamization. The nineteenth-century jihad of the Fulani preacher Usman Dan Fodio (1804–1808) that produced the Sokoto Caliphate is the prime example. Driven by a desire to reform the Muslim communities of present-day northern Nigeria, Dan Fodio sought to enshrine Islamic values and shari’a among the ethnic Hausa emirates and purge them of “pagan” rituals and practices. Dan Fodio’s followers dislodged the Hausa rulers and established a Fulani-controlled ruling dynasty that has endured until today (although its power is now largely symbolic). Dan Fodio’s jihad even expanded to the southwest into Yorubaland, but not without meeting resistance.

Ever since Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, the country’s north has been susceptible to Islamic reformist movements that have challenged the traditional political and religious authorities of the region, who are often descendants of the elite of the erstwhile Sokoto Caliphate. As one former gubernatorial candidate in Kaduna state in northern Nigeria noted to the author, “Every once in a while, you get a leader or a group of people who rise up in the effort to purify Islam, to expand its scope and take it to those areas where it does not exist.” The issue of shari’a has been exploited by conservative Muslim politicians and the northern clerical establishment as a tool of mobilization while many northern dissident groups, for their part, have used the issue as a tool of protest. For example, between 2000 and 2003 (the first few years of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic that followed decades of military rule), 11 northern governors, beginning with Governor Sani Yerima of Zamfara state, adopted shari’a law.

The adoption of shari’a law by these northern governors could be understood as a drive by Hausa-Fulani elites to Islamize northern Nigeria, ignoring the protests of the significant Christian minorities in those states. Yet such a brazen attack on the secularism of the Nigerian constitution fails to conceal the real agenda behind the adoption of shari’a in the north. In the early 2000s, the Hausa-Fulani elites were driven by a geopolitical agenda to protect their political interests against a
southern Yoruba president and former military ruler, Olusegun Obasanjo, whose policies were considered anti-north (Obasanjo would later seek a third term in office in contravention of the Nigerian constitution). The Hausa-Fulani political class, in other words, used sharia as a tool to mobilize the Hausa-Fulani populace against perceived southern domination. Similar divisions and fear are seen today as southern Nigerians resist what they perceive as Islamic colonization driven by the Fulani herders.

Conversely, Boko Haram’s Islamization project can be seen, to some extent, as “a violent political reaction to Muslim authoritarian regimes and their allies in the west.” Boko Haram formed in protest against the perceived corruption, both material and spiritual, of the northern Muslim elites. For Boko Haram, the solution is and always has been the establishment of a puritanical Islamic system, though the two factions of the group have had different degrees of success in actually erecting a proto-state, with ISWAP going further in this direction. Boko Haram is not the first Islamic reformist or dissident movement to challenge the northern Nigerian elites in this regard, although it is undoubtedly the most destructive. In the early 1980s, the north witnessed several bouts of riots by a religious militant group known as Yan Tatsine led by the notorious Mohammed Marwa (aka Maitatsine). Boko Haram’s quest to establish an Islamic state is thus symptomatic of a recurrent intra-Muslim contest and challenge to the spiritual authority of the Sokoto Caliphate and its descendants in northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram’s Islamization agenda is laid bare in its statements. As one of Boko Haram’s spokesmen, Ali Sanda Umar Konduga (aka Usman al-Zawahiri), stated in 2011, “We would continue to fight until Islam is well established and the Muslims regain their freedom all over Nigeria. The only solution to what is happening is for the government to repent, jettison democracy, drop the constitution, and adopt the laws in the Holy Qur’an.”

In the early stages of its insurgency, Boko Haram helped stoke fears of a nationwide ethnoreligious civil war. Between 2010 and 2015, the group’s operations were dispersed throughout the north (in contrast, today the group is largely confined to the northeast). In this period, the group attacked churches and Christian neighborhoods across the north as well as government offices and security installations. Consequently, a popular conspiracy theory arose in the south alleging that Boko Haram was a creation of northern elites who intended to thwart the second-term ambitions of President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, who was up for reelection in 2015. (Conversely, as President Jonathan declared a heavily militarized state of emergency in three northeastern states in 2013 and 2014, many northern elites promoted a conspiracy theory that alleged that
Boko Haram was created by President Jonathan to decimate the Hausa-Fulani populace.)

In reality, not only is Boko Haram not a puppet of the Fulani elite, but its attacks against Christians have, in practice, not extended beyond the Christian minorities in northern Nigeria. Based on the group’s own ambitious statements such as the aforementioned one by Usman al-Zawahiri, one could argue that Boko Haram seeks to Islamize the whole of Nigeria. However, Boko Haram’s limited actions in southern Nigeria suggest that this is at best a long-term aspiration and not a strategic priority for the group. Interestingly, neither Boko Haram nor ISWAP have launched any campaign to disrupt the oil and gas sector in Nigeria’s south, which is Nigeria’s economic lifeline. In this sense, Boko Haram’s historical genesis—as a dissident preaching movement critical of northern elites—can help explain why Boko Haram has shown little appetite in expanding its terrorist activities southward: Its primary concern has always been over the fate of Nigeria’s Muslims in the north.

In terms of the ostensible Fulani Islamization agenda, it is necessary to first distinguish between the different social groups to which the Fulani belong. The Fulani fall under four sociological categories: the ruling dynasty or rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate (the elites), the settled Fulani (the working class), the semi-sedentary Fulani (mostly Fulani farmers), and the pastoral Fulani “who depend completely on their herd of zebu cattle for subsistence, and whose lives are tuned to continuous transhumance, migratory drift, and periodic migration.” The Fulani herder “lives and survives instantaneously,” as one Nigerian interviewed for this essay noted. Most Fulani herdsmen are thus motivated primarily by material, rather than ideological, interests and concerns.

The Fulani elites are seen by many Nigerians as the inheritors of Usman Dan Fodio’s jihad and are thus viewed suspiciously. Additionally, the fact that the British colonial government favored the Fulani ruling class as part of its system of indirect rule leaves a bitter historical legacy. These fears and suspicions of ethnic and religious domination described as “Fulanization” and “Islamization” have manifested at different junctures in the trajectory of the Nigerian state, including during a 1978 constitutional debate about shari’a; in 1986, during the enrolment of Nigeria into the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); and, most prominently, in the early 2000s, when 11 northern governors adopted shari’a.

Nevertheless, the claim that Fulani herdsmen are carrying out a campaign of Islamization is unsupported by the evidence. As one source, who has been in close contact with both Fulani armed groups and Boko Haram defectors, noted, “this is a purely conspiracy theory.” This theory stems from the historical distrust
between the south and the Hausa-Fulani majority in the north and is further fueled by the perceived complicity of the Fulani elites (particularly President Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani, and his northern advisors) in Nigeria’s security crises. President Buhari’s administration has conspicuously remained ambivalent in its response (publicly, at least) to much of the criminal violence rocking Nigeria, especially banditry and kidnappings perpetrated by Fulani herders. This stands in contrast to President Buhari’s rather hardline approach to the perceived threat from historically non-violent groups such as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), also known as Nigeria’s Shiites, and IPOB.

Some Fulani political and religious elites have reportedly maintained an ambivalent relationship with criminal herders, sympathizing with the herdsmen’s violence out of ethnic or religious solidarity. However, while they may enjoy a degree of sympathy (or, at least, indifference) within the government, Fulani herders have not captured the Nigerian state for the purposes of Islamization. Whether it be farmer-herder clashes or banditry, violence involving Fulani is almost always driven by local conditions and competitions—often over scarce land or material resources—rather than a grand ideological and religious project. In this sense, the failure of the Fulani religious and political class to strongly condemn the criminality of certain Fulani herders has contributed in no small part to southern fears of Islamization.

Boko Haram and Fulani Herders: Is There a Connection?

Many Nigerians see Fulani herders as synonymous with Boko Haram, claiming that both have an agenda to Islamize Nigeria. As one security official claimed, “Fulani herder is another branch of Boko Haram working under a different guise. So, if they are working under a different guise, definitely they share the same aspiration with Boko Haram. And the mission of Boko Haram is to Islamize the nation and take over.”

In reality, there is little that connects the Fulani herdsmen to Boko Haram, besides the fact that the two groups come from northern Nigeria, are Muslim, and are likely to speak the lingua franca of the north (Hausa). As a senior IPOB member stated, “Their program is far different [from Boko Haram].”
For starters, ethnicity and geography separate the Boko Haram insurgency from the activities of Fulani herders. The majority of Boko Haram’s commanders are Kanuri, an ethnic group that makes up less than three percent of Nigeria’s population, and Boko Haram’s main theater of operations is in the Kanuri heartland of northeastern Nigeria, particularly Borno and Yobe states. In recent years, Boko Haram’s attacks have been largely confined to these northeastern states and parts of neighboring countries adjacent to Lake Chad, such as northern Cameroon. While Fulani bring their cattle to graze in the northeast, and while Boko Haram counts both Hausa and Fulani among its ranks, Boko Haram’s insurgency is ultimately driven more by grievances among the Kanuri population of the northeast than by Fulani grievances.

Fulani herders have, in fact, been harmed by Boko Haram’s indiscriminate attacks. The faction of the (now late) Abubakar Shekau in particular is known for its wanton violence against both Christians and Muslims alike, meaning the Fulani are not spared. The Boko Haram insurgency directly affects the Fulani herder insofar as Boko Haram militants have engaged in cattle rustling, while the insurgency affects the herders indirectly insofar as instability in the northeast has pushed herders southward from their traditional grazing routes.17 In contrast to Shekau’s faction, ISWAP makes a much more concerted effort to govern and has attempted to mitigate violence between Fulani herders and non-Fulani (Muslim) farmers in its areas of control, protecting one group from encroachment by the other.18 This itself shows that the Fulani herders are not natural allies of Boko Haram and ISWAP but rather one group among many in the northeast with whom the jihadists must balance their relationships. Additionally, Fulani herders have clashed with jihadists in the northeast, such as in December 2019, when Boko Haram killed 19 herders.19

Boko Haram and ISWAP have a different ideology than the Fulani herders. Boko Haram does indeed seek Islamization: it is guided by a fundamentalist Islamist ideology that rejects Nigeria’s secular democracy and seeks to replace it with a shari’a-based political system.20 Although some scholars have suggested that greed has by now supplanted ideology within Boko Haram,21 there is no doubt that religion plays a central role in the group’s constitution and operation. In contrast, those Fulani herders moved to criminality appear to be primarily motivated by material concerns. As one Nigerian police official explained, “The Fulani Herders are not looking at the religious aspect per se. They are looking at how their social status will be rising in terms of that criminality act [sic] as regards to kidnapping and waiting for ransom to be paid.”22

However, there is some evidence of a strategic marriage of convenience between
Boko Haram and certain Fulani-led criminal groups in northern Nigeria. For instance, shortly after bandits kidnapped over 300 schoolboys in Katsina state in northwestern Nigeria in December 2020, Shekau’s faction claimed the attack and released exclusive video footage of the hostages, who claimed to be prisoners of Shekau. In other words, while Shekau’s soldiers did not kidnap the students themselves, they appear to have been in touch with the kidnappers to arrange to have the operation look as if it were the work of Boko Haram. Beyond this, one source described limited technical support and training that Boko Haram offers to bandits as well as weapons exchanges between the groups. In his words, the bandits obtain ransom from the government and “use the money through the Boko Haram network to smuggle weapon [sic] into the northwest region.”

The Implications of Stigmatization

THE CRIMINAL ACTIONS OF SOME FULANI, AND THE OCCASIONAL COMPLICITY OF Fulani elites in such violence, have had serious implications for ordinary Fulani and their relationships with other ethnic groups. Firstly, violence has ruptured the mutual and complementary relationship between Fulani herders and their host communities that has existed in the past. Every Fulani is now treated with stigma and suspicion. While Fulani are increasingly discriminated against in the south by Yoruba, Igbo, and other groups, their relationship with the Hausa majority in the north, historically a codependent relationship defined by assimilation, is no less hostile today. As the key informant with access to the Fulani armed groups noted, “Most of the communities in the northwest, once they see a Fulani man roving around in their community, they will arrest him and start investigating. ‘What brings you to our community? What are you doing here? Do you come to attack us?’ [sic]” In many parts of the country, it is difficult for Fulani, whether herders or not, to do legitimate business without fear of discrimination or attack. For some Fulani, this stigmatization is a factor that leads them into criminality.

The incursion of Fulani herders from other West African states such as Niger, Mali, Cameroon, and Chad has also complicated the security picture in Nigeria. The migration of Fulani is natural, but many Nigerians suspect that the influx of foreign Fulani into Nigeria in recent years was a result of the Fulani elite’s mobilization in the build-up to the 2015 general election between former President
Jonathan and then presidential candidate Buhari. Although Buhari won the election, “they [the foreign Fulani] continued coming,” according to one IPOB member. “The Federal Government was busy instead of following what they agreed and allowing them to go back [to their home countries], they are still coming in because the business of thuggery and kidnapping they started is lucrative.”

These claims should be treated with skepticism, as criminality within the ranks of Fulani herders has a history that stretches back well before 2015, especially when it comes to cattle rustling. A more plausible explanation is that while some Fulani elites in Nigeria are sympathetic to criminal herders, many others are likely powerless or simply reluctant to clamp down heavily on their kith and kin. In 2016, Governor Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai of Kaduna state admitted to paying the leaders of Fulani criminal outfits to stop them from attacking communities in his state.

Foreign Fulani often persuade or coerce Nigerian Fulani to join their criminal networks (though some Fulani bandits from Nigeria have themselves begun to cross into Niger and target local communities). These foreigners take advantage of Nigeria’s porous borders, across which small arms also flow. But Fulani criminals do not operate in isolation. Their criminal acts are aided and abetted by criminal elements and networks that draw from other ethnic groups including Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other minority groups who are “selling them weapon, [sic] selling them ammunition. Some are providing intelligence information to them.” The Fulani are also not the only ones perpetrating kidnappings. Fulani-dominated bandit outfits are the most active in the northwest, but in other parts of Nigeria local gangs also kidnap for ransom.

The perceived complicity of the Fulani elite in communal violence and the failure of federal security agencies to combat criminality have led to the establishment of sub-federal security outfits such as IPOB’s Eastern Security Network and Amotekun, the latter of which is supported by southwestern governors. Officially, these outfits were established in response to the threat to local communities posed by Fulani herders. Yet the ethnoreligious framing of Nigeria’s security crises as ones of either “Fulanization” or Fulani-led Islamization is simplistic at best and disingenuous at worst. One Nigerian paramilitary officer noted:

“The stigmatization of the Fulani is hurting security because crime is crime. Crime should not be tribalized. My agency has had cause to arrest some guys who are kidnappers and they are not Fulanis. How about that? So, we won’t say, because they are not Fulanis, we automatically turn them into Fulanis.”
The Fulani themselves suffer from bad state policies, poverty, and stigmatization by society at large. Adverse climatic conditions such as desertification, deforestation, and drought threaten the economic livelihoods of Fulani herders. The Nigerian state, for its part, has failed to maintain established grazing reserves and routes that Fulani have historically relied on. Some of these grazing reserves have been cultivated for farming or other forms of infrastructure development. Hence, as the Nigerian paramilitary official quoted above noted, “The Fulanis have no option [but to graze on open lands] as they have an understanding that they must keep grazing. You cannot overnight say the Fulanis should not graze. So, it’s as if the government is deliberately attacking the Fulanis because they are not educated.”

This is not to say that the Fulani have suffered more than other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Climate change threatens the livelihoods of Nigeria’s farmers and fishers as well, and poor government policies have stifled economic development and led to insecurity that affect all Nigerians regardless of ethnicity. This is simply to recognize that the Fulani have legitimate grievances, though this does not justify criminality.

Consequently, labelling every Fulani a criminal or radical bent on Islamization will only legitimize ethnically based violence, fueling the sorts of tit-for-tat attacks that have roiled Nigeria of late. This calls to mind Dag Tuastad’s argument regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly that Israeli’s use of the labels “terrorist” and “Arab Mind” to describe the full spectrum of Palestinian resistance organizations inflames tensions and escalates conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Throughout Nigeria’s history, labelling a group as a terrorist or security threat has led to a misrepresentation of violence (as is the case with IPOB) or the criminalization of an entire community (as is the case with the IMN aka the Shiites).

It is therefore necessary for Nigerian officials and citizens alike to disaggregate criminal elements from the broader Fulani community. A failure to do so will likely lead to more ethnically based violence and thus push more Fulani to take up arms. It is also possible that, should stigmatization of Fulani increase, more Fulani armed groups will forge connections with Boko Haram and adopt jihadist ideology as a way of interpreting and seeking to remedy their grievances.
Boko Haram: Stuck in the North?

Boko Haram does not appear to have seriously attempted to attack southern Nigeria at any point in time. The only publicly available evidence of Boko Haram attacks or plots in southern Nigeria is circumstantial and shaky. Boko Haram has itself only claimed one attack in southern Nigeria, a 2014 explosion at a gas tank storage unit in Lagos. Shekau’s claim was immediately disputed by local authorities, however, who said the explosion was accidental. For an organization whose declared objective is to Islamize Nigeria, it is worth considering why Boko Haram has failed to establish a presence in the country’s south.

The lack of Boko Haram attacks in southern Nigeria is rooted in the profound structural and social differences between Nigeria’s north and south. These regional disparities have had significant consequences for the regions’ respective development trajectories and, more importantly, for nation-building. The factors that aid Boko Haram’s expansion in the north—shared culture, religion, and other demographic similarities—are not present in the south. The south and north are significantly different from one another in terms of language, topography, levels of socioeconomic development, and religion.

To meaningfully expand into the south, Boko Haram would need to build some degree of popular support, which would be difficult in an overwhelmingly Christian region. Boko Haram could conceivably recruit among Yoruba Muslims, who constitute approximately 45 percent of the ethnic group in the southwest. However, as David Laitin and James Watkins note, “the Muslim-Christian divide in Yoruba land, far from fanning the flames of religious conflict in Nigeria, actually built the foundation for compromise.” Among Yoruba Muslims, loyalty to one’s indigenous culture is generally equal to one’s allegiance to Islam if not slightly greater. As such, there is a significant degree of religious syncretism among Yoruba Muslims and interfaith marriage among the Yoruba more broadly. Because Yoruba politicians cannot afford to alienate a large part of their electorate, religious adherence plays a limited role in Yoruba politics, unlike among the Hausa-Fulani, whose religion is deeply entrenched in their politics. It is therefore unlikely that Boko Haram will develop deep inroads amongst the Yoruba.

These linguistic and cultural differences alone would make it difficult for Boko Haram to infiltrate the south undetected, but the south is also more economically developed than the north and enjoys higher literacy levels. Boko Haram’s extremist ideology is thus less likely to resonate with southerners. Additionally,
northern Nigeria’s topography, including numerous hills and large stretches of uninhabited forest, has proven crucial to Boko Haram’s resilience. The landscape of southern Nigeria—which is flat, more riverine, and more urbanized—is less conducive to the type of guerrilla warfare that Boko Haram has waged to date.

Nonetheless, as one Nigerian official warned, “there is every possibility that they [Boko Haram] will still come down south if they are not caged.”\(^{39}\) If this were to happen, it would be through partnership with criminal networks in the south. Although the ties between Boko Haram and Fulani bandits are rather weak and transactional in nature, such transactional ties can have structural significance that help bridge divides between groups.\(^{40}\) Hence there is reason to believe that Boko Haram could forge similar ties with criminal networks in the south. These ties would likely be weak and transient, however, meaning that the prospect of Boko Haram establishing a sustainable foothold in the south is minimal. For these reasons, it is likely that Boko Haram has not spent much effort trying to operate in southern Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

**This paper argues, contrary to what many Nigerians believe, that Boko Haram and Fulani herders do not constitute a unified radical Islamic vanguard. Nonetheless, it is critical to understand that such sensationalist claims have not emerged in a vacuum. They stem from historical distrust between Nigeria’s north and south and also reflect widespread frustration with the incompetence of a Fulani president as well as the occasional complicity of other northern political elites who bear some responsibility, directly or indirectly, for fanning the flames of ethnoreligious conflict. At the same time, many southern political elites have disingenuously stoked fears of Fulani-led Islamization and “Fulanization” for political gain. In terms of Boko Haram’s goal of Islamizing Nigeria, this paper concludes that Boko Haram lacks the capacity to achieve such an ambitious feat, as it has failed to establish even a minor presence in southern Nigeria over the course of more than ten years of insurgency.**

Moving forward, President Buhari’s administration and Fulani elites should strongly condemn and punish criminal acts perpetrated by Fulani armed groups. The Nigerian government should also invest in its under-resourced and under-manned security agencies, which are struggling to cope with rising insecurity.
across the country. The proliferation of small arms across Nigeria and the lack of adequate border security will also have to be addressed. Lastly and most importantly, the Nigerian government will, in the long term, need to improve its governance and provision of justice in order to address the underlying issues that drive criminality and ethnoreligious violence.

Unfortunately, these developments are unlikely to occur anytime soon, especially as Nigeria approaches another tense election in 2023. Southern political elites are leveraging southerners’ fears of “Fulanization” and Islamization to position themselves as Nigeria’s last line of defense against a hostile internal adversary. The Ohaneze Ndigbo—the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization—and other Igbo elite will likely associate with the secessionist IPOB if they feel it will increase the chances of an Igbo gaining the presidency in 2023. Likewise, the Afenifere (the leading Yoruba socio-cultural organization) supports Operation Amotekun as a means of furthering Yoruba political interests.

In short, Nigeria’s political elites cannot be trusted to fix the country’s flawed political structure and address the ethnoreligious tension engendered by political dysfunction. Any fundamental change would have to be driven from the ground up by the people, a glimpse of which was seen in the youth-led #EndSARS protests against police brutality in 2020. Otherwise, Nigeria will drift further apart.

NOTES

4. 2014 interview with a former candidate for the governorship of Kaduna state and member of the 2013 Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North, henceforth known as respondent i.


11. 2021 interview with a member of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), henceforth known as respondent ii.

12. Interview with a representative of the government’s program for demobilization, disarmament, and deradicalization (DDR)—known as Operation Safe Corridor—with direct access to Fulani armed groups, henceforth known as respondent iii.

13. 2021 interview with an intelligence officer in northern Nigeria, henceforth known as respondent iv. According to the officer, “There are people from the north who are always happy with such attacks. They look at it, especially in the name of religion, there are people that sympathise with them. They are happy. They celebrate it. So, if they can celebrate it, definitely there is that element of if anybody is looking at it as a conspiracy.”


15. Respondent iv.


22. Interview with a senior Nigerian police official, henceforth known as respondent v.

23. Respondent iii.

24. Ibid.

25. Respondent ii.


29. Interview with a Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps officer, henceforth known as respondent vi.


31. Respondent vi.


36. The shari’a debate of 1978 is indicative of this trend. The Yoruba overwhelmingly took


38. Research suggests that a lack of education and religious illiteracy in particular are significant factors in radicalization in Sub-Saharan Africa. See *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2017).


Salafis, Sufis, and the Contest for the Future of African Islam

By Joshua Meservey

For centuries, most African Muslims observed their faith according to Sufi practices. Syncretic, mystical, and emphasizing experiencing God, Sufism was well suited to thrive on a continent where traditional religions often had a flexible cosmology that emphasized the supernatural. The fact that illiteracy or a lack of formal theological training was no barrier to fully participating in, or even leading, Sufi rites likely contributed to the practice’s popularity as well.

With its insistence on adherence to the written precepts of certain Islamic holy texts, its ultra-exclusivist worldview, and its strong association with foreign cultures and traditions, Salafism appears as ill-suited for the African context as Sufism is well-suited. Yet today, Salafism dominates the practice of Islam in parts of the continent. In some cases, it has displaced the centuries-long observance of Sufi rites in the span of a few decades.

A confluence of local dynamics that made parts of Africa amenable to Salafi appeals, and the rise of a global Salafi movement supported by wealthy Arab benefactors, explains much of the phenomenon. Those dynamics remain largely the same today, suggesting that Salafism will continue to grow, often at the expense of Sufism.
Its expansion will likely follow the same pattern it has followed so far: irregular, falling well short of dominance in many areas, and at times taking on the flavor of the surrounding culture even while the core ideology remains exclusivist and Islamist.

This is notwithstanding the tentative episodes of Salafi-Sufi toleration and even cooperation that in a few communities has interrupted the hostility that usually exists between the two groups. Those episodes becoming more than an occasional exception would require an unlikely rethinking by Salafis of foundational beliefs that reject any deviation from a narrowly defined conception of correct Islamic practice, and that view correction of those deviations as imperative.

Salafism and its Benefactors

Salafism is a fundamentalist movement that believes true Islam consists of practicing the faith only in the manner of the Prophet Mohamed and his companions (the Salaf). For Salafis, a literal reading of the Quran, Sunnah, and certain hadith (collections of sayings and stories from or concerning Mohamed, as narrated by his companions) are the only reliable guides for how to live in this way. Any rites or beliefs that stray from that standard are heretical innovations that must be expunged.¹ Salafis’ narrow definition of “true Islam” excludes virtually all other Islamic sects, such as Shi’a, Ismailis, and, most relevant for the African context, Sufis, whose syncretism and elaborate rituals generally provoke Salafi contempt.

Salafism sprang from the Islamic modernist and revivalist movements that emerged in the Arab world and South Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries largely as a response to the Muslim world’s decline and the simultaneous ascendance of the non-Muslim world, especially the West. These movements offered an explanation and remedy for the decline that was evident, in their eyes, in non-Muslims ruling Muslims, and by the perceived decadence of the Islamic community. There is no consensus date for Salafism’s emergence as a distinct movement, but by the post-colonial era it was well established with a diversity of form that reflected its predecessor movements’ growth, evolution, and splintering.

While doctrinal rigidity is generally a defining feature of Salafi belief, some African Salafis have made accommodations towards other sects that hint at the spectrum of belief and practice within the community.² In Senegal, the Jama’at Ibad al-Rahman eventually reached out to other Muslim organizations, even participating in Sufi celebrations.³ Several prominent ideologues that are widely regarded as
Wahhabi or Salafi, such as Mahmoud Dicko of Mali and Muhammad al-Hasan Ould al-Dedew of Mauritania, have been pragmatic enough at times in their relations with non-Salafis that one scholar has dubbed them “post-Salafis.”

Divergence on esoteric theological matters is common among Salafis as well. Quietists, for instance, abjure politics—until, in some cases, they don’t—while other Salafis believe the way to establish the Islamic state they seek is through vigorous political activity. The Salafi-jihadi group Boko Haram in Nigeria famously hates Western-style education, yet the group’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf, was mentored by the country’s leading Salafi cleric, Ja’afar Mahmud Adam, who embraced Western-style education. In Ethiopia, the Takfir wal Hijra faction emerged from the broader Salafi community and agitated for stricter Salafi practice, even declaring some fellow Salafis kuffar (non-believers). In the mid-1990s a group of Sudanese Salafis in the same way denounced Hassan al-Turabi—a radical Islamist and supporter of Osama bin Laden who was for years a key figure in Sudan’s fundamentalist government—as a heretic and called for his death. Temporal concerns can divide Salafis as well: Cote d’Ivoire’s national Wahhabi organization became moribund for much of the 1980s because of a dispute between factions divided by class and nationality.

African customs and beliefs have also forced Salafi adaptations. In Ghana, Salafis can allow an unusual amount of freedom for women to operate publicly, and there was such resistance to the first-generation Salafis’ intolerance and attacks on local customs that later Salafis adopted a less stringent approach. In Cameroon, converts to Wahhabism abandoned some Sufi rituals, such as dancing, but continued others, including the elaborate funerals typical of Sufis.

These adaptations are rare and limited, however. Salafism is, on the whole, much less accommodating of theological diversity than is Sufism, which has evolved in Africa in line with local conditions and preferences over hundreds of years. In that sense, and even though there were African Salafi-style reformist movements that predated the global Salafi movement, Salafism is much more of an “imported” product in the African context than is Sufism.

Despite this, Salafism has spread dramatically across Africa over the past several decades. The reasons behind its gains are many, but primary among them are the shrinking nature of the world thanks to globalization, an international educational-religious-NGO complex fueled by Arab petrodollars (particularly from the Gulf states), and local conditions in many African countries that have been favorable to those who would challenge traditional religious elites. The world’s increasing interconnectedness gave Salafis more, and more powerful, ways to deliver their message. Salafi radio and television broadcasts exposed
a wider African audience to Salafi ideas. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, more efficient and available global travel and the relative increase in prosperity on the continent made the *hajj* far more accessible to African Muslims, who were often exposed to Wahhabi teachings and sometimes converted while on pilgrimage. *Hajj* returnees were important vectors of Salafi practice in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, and Sudan.

Similarly, the worker-hungry, booming Gulf state economies drew many Africans, some of whom eventually returned home imbued with Salafism. Some helped transform Somali society, for instance, from one that generally resisted Salafism to one that today is majority Salafi.

Arguably no returnees were more instrumental in spreading Salafism in Africa than students. In Cote d'Ivoire, returning scholars, including the country's first doctor of Islamic theology (Moustapha Sy, who lived in Saudi Arabia for more than two decades), revitalized the Salafi movement in the country after internal squabbling had paralyzed its foremost national association. Salafism first entered The Gambia in the 1970s thanks to returning Gambian scholars educated in places such as Egypt, Kuwait, and Sudan. So too with Uganda, where several hundred University of Medina graduates first introduced Salafi doctrine to their home country beginning in the 1970s. Scores of young Ethiopians who traveled to Saudi Arabia in 1962 eventually returned with advanced degrees in Islamic studies and helped cement Arsi, Bale, and Robe into Salafi strongholds. The first wave of Tanzanian graduates of Saudi universities established the sprawling Ansar Sunna movement in Tanzania that remains active.

Studying overseas did not inevitably confer a Salafi worldview on African students. The Ansar movement in Tanzania is frequently at loggerheads with the state-sponsored National Muslim Council of Tanzania (better known as BAKWATA), yet both are stocked with graduates of Saudi universities, as are other Muslim organizations without any kind of reformist agenda. Some Africans who studied in Saudi Arabia rejected Wahhabism entirely, off-put by racism they experienced there as well as what they perceived as the religious hypocrisy of some Saudis. Nonetheless, the spread of Salafism within Africa would not have been nearly as strong or widespread as it is today without Gulf-funded Salafi education. African Salafi clerics and adherents with foreign links—especially to the Middle East—are ubiquitous on the continent. Even many indigenous reformist movements eventually received a boost from the global movement.

This was by design. Saudi Arabia’s third king, Faisal, established the University of Medina in 1961 with the explicit charge to train foreign students as Wahhabi missionaries. The university’s by-laws mandated that 75 percent of the student
body must come from overseas,\textsuperscript{30} which contributed to the rise in the foreign share of enrollment in Saudi universities from 18.6 percent in 1970 to 23.9 percent in 1980. Many of these students focused their studies on Islam.\textsuperscript{31} Under the tenures of Faisal and his successors, the House of Saud established a complex of NGOs, programs, and educational centers to promote its brand of Salafism and preach a (Saudi-centered) call for global Islamic solidarity, making Saudi Arabia the ideological center of the Sunni Muslim world and giving rise to a form of fundamentalist Pan-Islamism over the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

The resources poured into these efforts to propagate Salafism by countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are staggering. The latter has been the most prolific. A former U.S. official estimated in 2004 that the Kingdom had spent more than $75 billion proselytizing Wahhabism; in 2005, former CIA director James Woolsey estimated the number to be $80 to $90 billion.\textsuperscript{32} If those funding trends have continued until today, a safe estimate of how much Saudi Arabia has spent spreading its version of Salafism would be well over $100 billion.\textsuperscript{33}

Glimpses of these proselytization campaigns from around the world give a sense of what all this money has bought:

- Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd claimed that he financed the building of nearly 2,500 Islamic learning centers and 1,500 mosques in Muslim-minority countries alone. The King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, based in Medina, had by 2000 distributed 138 million copies globally.\textsuperscript{34} Additionally, some estimate that the Saudis have built thousands of mosques and Islamic centers in sub-Saharan Africa.\textsuperscript{35}

- The Kuwaiti Africa Muslims Agency (AMA)\textsuperscript{36} claims that over the course of 35 years it has built 6,000 mosques and more than 800 educational centers across the continent while distributing 20 million Qurans and providing over 700 scholarships for post-graduate studies, among many other initiatives.\textsuperscript{37} There are numerous other Salafi-affiliated aid agencies operating in Africa, some of which are larger than the AMA.

- By 2016, the Saudis had financed dozens if not hundreds of Islamic educational institutions in Kenya.\textsuperscript{38} In neighboring Ethiopia, a scholar noted new, Gulf-funded mosques in about 20 towns and villages in the Wollo Province of Amhara state in 2013.\textsuperscript{39} Another
report notes that in one year in Ethiopia, the Saudi embassy funded construction of 36 Wahhabi mosques. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of foreign-financed mosques grew from around 35 to over 100 in Djibouti.

- Just one of the numerous Salafi-oriented NGOs in Ghana built 91 mosques and 89 schools in less than a decade in the 2000s. The founder of an NGO in Cote d’Ivoire claimed that his organization built hundreds of mosques and madrasas with help from Saudi funders. In Burkina Faso, the number of Islamic education institutions, mostly built with money from Arab countries, swelled from 12 in 1984 to nearly 200 twenty years later.

- In Mali, the head of the Salafi Al-Farouk charity said his organization—fueled by $3 million a year from donors in the Middle East, Turkey, and the UK—built over 300 mosques while also managing the Sahel University, which has 400 students. Al-Farouk is just one charity, though a prominent one, suggesting that another claim that thousands of Wahhabi mosques were recently built in southern Mali could be accurate. In the city of Timbuktu in northern Mali, Wahhabis opened 16 mosques in just 3 years at a time when the city had a population of only about 35,000. In Senegal, a single Salafi organization financed by Middle Eastern donors built hundreds of mosques across the country.

The proliferation of Salafi-oriented worship and educational centers does not prove there has been a proportional uptake in Salafi belief, but the extraordinary sums spent have given the movement an obvious competitive advantage in Africa. The new mosques and madrasas, the provision of scholarships, and all manner of social services for Salafi constituents were powerful inducements in poor African countries. Sufis, whose Quranic students often had to make do with writing on wooden slabs, could not begin to compete.

In addition, African Salafis sometimes received—in exchange for continuing to preach Salafism—a salary from foreign NGOs or endowments, giving them a degree of financial security clerics from other sects generally lacked. There are reports as well of Salafi organizations offering cash or other benefits to Muslims in exchange for conversion to Salafism or adhering to certain Salafi practices, such as veiling women, though it is unclear how widespread or effective such measures have been.
Being plugged into the global movement also gave African Salafis the advantages of association with a wealthy, worldwide network. Leading Salafi figures in Nigeria facilitated introductions between Gulf and Nigerian businessmen and vouched for certain Nigerian entrepreneurs to receive visas to Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{53} Embracing Salafism gave Malians entrée to a particular merchant class.\textsuperscript{54} In Sudan, the Faisal Islamic Bank, stood up mostly with Saudi funding, helped create an Islamist middle class by providing loans at favorable rates to those associated with the community.\textsuperscript{55}

No other sect in Africa could marshal nearly as many resources as could Salafis. That already formidable advantage was further bolstered by certain realities specific to Africa that made parts of the continent truly amenable to the Salafi worldview.

Local Drivers of Salafi Growth

Long before petroleum became the engine of the global economy and allowed the Gulf Arabs to spread their brand(s) of Islam far and wide, Salafi-like reformist movements were already shaping Africa’s religious landscape. In the late 1400s, Muhammad al-Maghili and like-minded clerics incited massacres of Jews in modern-day Algeria by claiming that Muslims who tolerated Jews’ insufficient subordination to Islamic rule had strayed from Mohamed’s teachings.\textsuperscript{56} The famous jihad led by Usman dan Fodio and his Fulani ethnic group that began in 1804 conquered Muslim states across the Sahel. Scholars debate dan Fodio’s motivations, and his followers joined for diverse reasons. Yet he and his son and successor, Muhammed Bello, claimed their jihad was required because of the corruptions practiced by the nominally Muslim rulers they targeted,\textsuperscript{57} a typically reformist justification.

There have been other, less dramatic reformist movements throughout African history as well. Several have been documented in Tanzania, which produced indigenous reformers who continue to inspire Salafis today.\textsuperscript{58} A study of Malawian Islam notes a spontaneous reformist movement within the country’s third-largest ethnic group, the Yao, that manifested beginning in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{59} Salafi-style movements in Ghana\textsuperscript{60} and Burkina Faso\textsuperscript{61} predated those countries’ encounters with global Salafism as well.

Despite the relative frequency and strength of indigenous, Salafi-style reformist movements in Africa, Sufism remained the dominant practice of Islam. Today, it
may still be the plurality practice, but the balance appears to be shifting—and has already decisively shifted in some parts of the continent. There is no comprehensive data capturing the extent of Salafism’s spread in Africa over the last 100 years, but the fragmentary information that is available gives a sense of the phenomenon.

- In East Africa in the 1990s, Salafism was a “fringe off-shoot of Islam,” but it is now mainstream. In Kenya, three eastern counties that comprise the former North Eastern Province and the Eastleigh neighborhood of Nairobi, each dominated by ethnic Somali Muslims, have between them a lone Sufi madrasa with few adherents after the others shuttered. Wahhabi mosques and madrasas prevail.

- In Ethiopia, Salafism may have first taken root in the ancient Muslim city of Harar in the 1940s, then intermittently spread to other towns such as Bale and Arsi in the Oromia region. Decades later, U.S. diplomats visiting the same region fretted about the ubiquity of Salafi-style practice and dress.

- Wahhabism arrived in Ghana around the 1940s. By the mid-1970s, perhaps more than a third of Muslims in Ghana’s major cities and their environs were adherents, likely displacing a Sufi brotherhood, the Tijaniyyah, from its perch as Ghana’s majority Islamic order. Scholars estimate that a decade later, Wahhabs comprised at least half of Ghana’s urban Muslims, with similar rates in neighboring Burkina Faso. By the early 1980s, over two million Ghanaian Muslims identified as Salafi.

- In Cameroon, Wahhabs have grown to about 10 percent of the Muslim population since the 1960s. The percentage is higher in some important towns such as Foumban, where Wahhabis make up around 20 percent of the Muslim population.

- The number of Sufi adherents, who formerly dominated Nigerian Islam, has experienced a “radical decline” since the 1990s because of Salafi growth. A Salafi imam in Nigeria’s largest city, Lagos, estimated in 2014 that 60 percent of the Muslim youth in the city followed Salafi precepts, though he noted the diversity of practice within that group.
- By the time of his death in 1998, the Saudi-trained Salafi Imam Bashar Sanko Yillah’s “Basharia” movement in Sierra Leone boasted over 100 branches, established in just 13 years.\(^72\)

- A scholar estimated in 2007 that around 150 Salafi graduates of Egyptian and Saudi educational centers had settled in the Cape region of South Africa alone.\(^73\)

Salafism’s growth in Africa is part of a global trend, but some of the reasons behind it are rooted in the peculiarities of the continent itself. No region on Earth has a greater collection of underperforming states: 18 of the world’s 25 worst-ranked countries on the most recent Fragile States Index are African.\(^74\) Similarly, governments that mistreat their citizens abound in Africa. In Freedom House’s most recent *Freedom in the World* report, 23 of the 54 countries classified as “not free” were African.\(^75\) These state failures may make the continent uniquely fertile territory for Salafis who promise an explanation and solution for a country’s ills, and who often deliver tangible benefits in the form of food, education, and other types of support.

No state better illustrates these dynamics than Somalia, the country that has arguably experienced the biggest shift from Sufism to Salafism. Its failed experiments with socialism, persecution of Islamists in the 1970s, and eventual violent collapse in 1991 contributed to many Somalis embracing Salafism. The explosion in the use of the veil among Somali women, for example, may have been in part an effort to protect against the extreme sexual violence that accompanied the country’s meltdown in the 1990s.\(^76\) Later, the Islamic Courts Union, in which the Salafi-jihadi group al-Shabaab incubated, rose to prominence in part because it provided a level of predictable justice and enforcement that had been long absent from Somalia.\(^77\)

To enhance Salafism’s appeal, state failure did not have to be as spectacular as in Somalia. Governments that entrenched poverty and imposed authoritarianism and kleptocracy provided ample opportunity for Salafis to demonstrate the case that their practice of Islam was the blueprint for properly managing all elements of human existence. In Tanzania, Salafism grew as the failure of President Nyerere’s dalliance with socialist agricultural schemes deepened.\(^78\) Economic turmoil in the 1990s in Cameroon contributed to Wahhabis’ gains as they slid neatly into the role vacated by the government by building health and religious infrastructure and responding to local requests for development projects.\(^79\) Wahhabi and similar sects gained in Mali and Burkina Faso for the same reason.\(^80\)

Resentment of these abusive and neglectful governments was strong enough
to taint the Sufi establishment in countries where it was aligned with the government. Senegal’s early reformist movement took aim at the Sufi leadership not just because of its contempt for Sufi practice, but because of Sufi clerics’ cooperation with the French colonial power. In 1991, 1,000 young Islamists of the Salafi-adjacent Tablighi Jamaat movement violently seized the headquarters of the state-recognized and Sufi-led Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, decrying its coziness with the government. One of West Africa’s most prominent Salafi movements, the Nigerian-born Yan Izala, was likewise animated in part by disgust with Sufi clerics’ closeness with authorities in the north of the country.

Association with government can be so toxic that it has even compromised some Salafi movements in the eyes of other Salafis. Senegal’s government so effectively coopted the country’s original reformist organization that its chief founder, Cheikh Touré, defected in the late 1970s to start a separate organization, the Jama’at Ibad al-Rahman. In Mozambique, a group of Salafis who went on to start the Ansar al-Sunna movement split from the Islamic Council of Mozambique (known by its Portuguese acronym, CISLAMO), a Wahhabi organization. The differences between the two emerged partly because of the latter’s domination by an older generation of leaders of Indian extraction from the south (whereas the younger Salafis were primarily northern indigenes) but also because CISLAMO was officially recognized by and worked closely with the government, while Ansar’s young supporters hailed from opposition strongholds.

State insufficiencies likely enable Salafism in subtler ways as well. The prestige enjoyed by clerics who study in Saudi Arabia—home of Islam’s two holiest sites—or other venerable Islamic institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo may be more pronounced because of how few people can achieve an advanced degree, much less from a renowned overseas university, in poorly governed countries that inevitably have sub-par education systems. As has already been discussed, returnees from overseas studies also regularly maintain ties to the broader Salafi movement that they can tap for funds. Those funds go even further in the oftentimes indigent contexts in which Africa’s Salafis operate.

Finally, violence may have played a role in spreading Salafism on the continent, though there is no comprehensive data. Salafis have forcibly taken leadership of mosques in places like Tanzania and Kenya, and Salafi-Sufi clashes have erupted in numerous African countries. While both sides appear to believe mosque leadership is important given how frequently conflict over the issue breaks out, violent tactics may be counterproductive because of their potential to repel average Muslims and trigger resistance to Salafism.

State failure was a major facilitator of Salafism’s expansion in Africa, but some-
times the practice spread simply because of the unique dynamics of a given area’s society or history. East Africa is arguably the region of Africa most affected by Salafism’s spread, which is likely in part because of its proximity to and long exchange with the Middle East. In this case, an accident of geography helped shape a region’s experience with Salafism.

Iconoclastic movements like Salafism also often appeal to young people. That makes Africa, the world’s youngest continent, fertile territory, particularly among aspirational youth chafing at the dominance of what they see as an obstructive and anachronistic older generation. The fact that many Salafis value religious, and some secular, education (literacy, for instance, is important to a movement that emphasizes reading the Islamic holy texts as the surest way to inculcate “pure Islam”) made the schools they established appealing to youths seeking broader educations than the rote memorization of the Quran often offered by Sufi schools.

Ethnic or ideological tensions at times splintered Salafi movements, but they could also provide an opening for Salafi thought. Muslims from Cameroon’s south embraced Wahhabism in part as a reaction to the traditional dominance and high-handedness of the northern Fulani Muslims. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, reformers in the eastern city of Kisangani were drawn primarily from a non-Arab community considered indigenous, while the Sufi establishment was primarily descended from those associated with Swahili Arabs who had once colonized the area. In Malawi, doctrinal disputes between Sufi orders and the already-mentioned indigenous reformist movement among the Yao left an opening for Salafis linked to the global movement to establish a strong position among Yao youth. Some South African Muslims, unsettled by a post-Apartheid constitution legalizing practices such as abortion and prostitution that they found abhorrent, embraced practices associated with reformist Islam.

Conclusion:
The Future of African Islam

SALAFISM’S PAST GAINS ACROSS THE CONTINENT DO NOT GUARANTEE FUTURE success, and some areas of the continent, despite being subject to the same influences and pressures as other regions where Salafism now dominates, remain largely non-Salafi. In Ethiopia, the general Muslim population, apart from Salafi
strongholds such as Arsi, Bale, and Harar, have bristled against the paternalism and foreignness of the practice. This is despite Ethiopia’s proximity to the Middle East with which it has an ancient history of engagement, and despite its neighbors such as Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya being significantly affected by Salafism.

Other African Muslim communities have similarly rejected Salafi overtures. Nigerian Igbos trained in Saudi Arabia now lead much of Muslim life among the Igbos in Nigeria’s southeast, but shari’a law—a cherished standard for Salafis—remains unpopular in the community. Some Nigerians viewed the Izala movement so dimly that when a new generation of Salafis took up proselytizing in the northern Nigerian city of Kano in the 1990s, they avoided the Izala brand in favor of promoting themselves as Ahlus-Sunna.

Resistance to reformist or fundamentalist movements is not exclusive to the post-colonial era either. In the 1840s, a Salafi-like sect waged a purification campaign from its base in Baardheere, Somalia, against Sufi practices; the effort ended when other Somalis razed Baardheere to the ground.

Ultimately, however, the Izala and Baardheere examples demonstrate the Salafi movement’s vitality. Parts of northern Nigeria, and much of Somalia, are today strongly Salafi. In the Somali case, this is despite initial spirited resistance to fundamentalist movements not just in Baardheere but in many other parts of Somalia.

Other areas of Africa that have thus far largely rejected Salafism could likewise eventually come to embrace it, as the factors that facilitated Salafism’s initial rise are extant. There is no indication, for instance, that the state insufficiencies in Africa that give Salafis fodder for their proselytizing are going to improve in the near term.

Similarly, the globalism that facilitates exchange between Africa and Salafi strongholds is here to stay. Middle Eastern states aggressively exporting Salafism to Africa have only become more deeply involved with the continent over the years, while Turkey, which promotes its own brand of Islamism, is influential in countries such as Ethiopia, Libya, and Somalia. Iran’s traditional promotion of Shi’a Islam in Africa has faltered largely because of an effective counter-campaign by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it still proselytizes on the continent. It has inspired and supported a number of African Shi’a communities, perhaps most prominently the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, which may have several million supporters.

There are indications that some of the Middle Eastern states that promoted Salafism are re-thinking their approach. The Saudi government recently issued a royal decree banning the financing of foreign religious infrastructure that promotes intolerance or incites violence, and Riyadh has also taken steps suggesting it is trying to rein in extremist organizations and preaching. Consider the case of the Muslim World League (MWL), Saudi Arabia’s premier, quasi-official

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charity begun in 1962 which lavishly funded divisive and intolerant organizations and preachers, including a number of terrorists, in Africa and around the world. The MWL’s new leader, Sheikh Mohammed al-Issa, vows that the organization will spread tolerance, and has thus far, in his public-facing comments at least, made good on that vow.

Yet the Saudi royal family’s enthusiasm for proselytization stems in part from the fraught domestic politics of its country, which are unlikely to grow any less difficult in the foreseeable future. Spreading “pure” Islam is a crucial way for the House of Saud to placate the country’s Wahhabi religious establishment, upon which it has relied since the mid-1700s to provide the family’s rule with religious legitimacy, and to signal to its people and Muslims everywhere that it is a worthy custodian of Islam’s two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina.

It is also unclear if the Saudi government, despite being a monarchy, can long resist pressure from the large portion of its population that has sincerely held Salafi beliefs. Drying up the demand for proselytizing Salafism will require many Salafis to reconsider core doctrines like *tawhid*, i.e., the oneness of God, a central tenet of Islam that for Salafis compels an exclusivist stance towards other sects. Even if the reform efforts that Riyadh has launched—and the progress made on stripping textbooks of incendiary material is encouraging—are sincere, it will be many years before they can erode the support for the chauvinistic elements of Salafi belief.

Furthermore, the Saudi government may not resist the temptation to again use Salafism as a geopolitical tool if it believes the national interest demands it. One of the initial reasons Riyadh began proselytizing Wahhabism was to try to contain Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Pan-Arab nationalism and later Iran’s Shi’a revolution. Nasser no longer imperils Riyadh, but Iran does. If the Saudis feel further threatened by Tehran, they may calculate the Iranian danger outweighs the risks associated with Wahhabi radicalism and reach again for the proselytization tool.

Genuine religious conviction has at times motivated members of the Saudi royal family as well. King Faisal reportedly believed that proselytization was necessary to return Islam to its “true” practice and away from the heretical departures of Sufism and other sects. The Saudis also wanted to protect Islam from the spread of atheist communism during the Cold War and from the corrupting decadence of Western culture and lifestyles. It is impossible to accurately gauge the depth of the Saud family’s commitment to Wahhabism, but some of its members are likely devout and could influence government policy towards continued proselytization.
Furthermore, even if governments like Saudi Arabia’s wish to reorient the global Salafi network away from aggressive proselytization of intolerant practices, they lack the power to do so (even though they helped create the network). This network is simply too massive and has operated too purposefully for too long. Similarly, it is unlikely such governments have the capacity to ensure the funds flowing from their countries will not support extremist education and teaching overseas, given the complexity of the funding networks and the relative ease that technology gives for clandestinely moving money about. This all suggests that while extremist preachers and organizations in Africa might currently or in the future have more difficulty accessing funds, money will still flow to Salafi causes on the continent.\footnote{108}

Other factors will help determine the movement’s future in Africa. Salafism has its own constituency and momentum on the continent that is likely now self-sustaining.\footnote{109} The financial advantage that Salafis have enjoyed for decades has contributed to them capturing the commanding heights of Muslim life in a number of countries, even in some where they are, at least for now, a minority. Salafis control a significant number of national Muslim councils and many of the continent’s most lavish or important mosques,\footnote{110} giving them powerful platforms from which to spread their message.

The occasional demonstrations of limited tolerance by Salafis for other sects in some parts of the continent raise the question of whether the accommodations represent a re-thinking of core Salafi beliefs that promote exclusivism, or if they are simply a recalibration of tactics in recognition that Salafism’s astringency is sometimes counterproductive. For now, the inter-sect comity is rare, fragile, and irregular. It should be cheered, but it probably does not portend a larger shift, especially as there are recent examples of African Salafis temporarily softening their confrontational approach to try to win greater political power.\footnote{111}

What the evidence does suggest is that Salafism is likely to continue spreading on the continent. The possible consequences of such a development are mostly shrouded in mystery, just as are the full effects of the larger shifts in Africa’s religious landscape that have occurred over the last century. Whatever the consequences may be—Africa’s increasing orientation towards the Middle East, perhaps, or continued or increased social conflict of the kind that has frequently flared between Salafis and other sects—in the context of the world’s fastest growing population, they are going to reverberate for decades to come in Africa and far beyond.
NOTES

1. For this reason, Salafis are often known as “reformers,” though the term can encompass Muslims of other sects—including Sufis—who had a Salafi-style, even violent, dislike for certain religious innovations but otherwise generally adhered to the practices of their sect.

2. For instance, a prominent South African Salafi, Jameel Adam, considered one Shi’a sect heretical and so *takfir*, but not another. See Tore Refslund Hamming, *Diffusion of Islamic Discourse: Saudi and Iranian Influence in Lagos and Cape Town* (Paris, France: Sciences Po, March 2013).


4. Wahhabism is a Salafi sect born in Saudi Arabia where it is the official state religion. Wahhabism in fact predates the modern Salafi movement, having emerged in eighteenth-century Arabia, though it is similar enough to other strains of Salafism that it is generally considered to be part of the broader Salafi movement. The use of the Wahhabi label in the African context can be imprecise as opponents of Salafism sometimes use it as a pejorative to discredit Salafi Muslims who might not actually be strictly Wahhabi. This paper will use “Salafism” except to remain true to source material that deliberately used “Wahhabism,” or when it is more accurate and appropriate to signal the specifically Saudi variant of Salafism.


6. Libya’s Madkhalis, for example, are traditionally understood as quietists but have emerged as powerful militant actors on both sides of Libya’s civil war. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, “Salafism and Libya’s State Collapse: the Case of the Madkhalis,” in *Salafism in the Maghreb: Piety, Politics and Militancy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107–137.


16. Østebø, “The Question of Becoming.”
21. “Somalia’s Divided Islamists,” International Crisis Group *Africa Briefing* no. 74, May 18, 2010; Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *Al-Qaida’s (Mis)adventures in the Horn of Africa*, (Harmony Project at Center for Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007).
25. Østebø, “The Emergence of the Salafi Movement in Bale, Ethiopia.”
27. Ibid.
29. This is true in Ghana and Burkina Faso, for instance. See Kobo, “The Development of Wahhabi Reforms.”
33. Other estimates suggest the number could be even higher. The Saudi government said that between 1975 and 1987, it spent $4 billion a year on overseas development aid (ODA). If that number remained constant between 1975 and today, Saudi Arabia has spent nearly $200 billion on ODA. Also, Saudi proselytization began before 1975, so calculating how much the Kingdom spent beginning in 1975 would not capture the full extent of the spending. Some Saudi money was spent on traditional development activities, but Saudi Arabia’s proselytization imbues most if not all its charitable works. For instance, Saudi organizations frequently fund well drilling, in part because water is critical to the ritual ablutions Muslims perform before prayers. Furthermore, wealthy private donors were, and likely still are, major funders of global Salafism. Their contributions would not be captured by these numbers. For mention of Saudi Arabia spending $4 billion a year on ODA, see Alex Alexiev, “Wahhabism: State-Sponsored Extremism Worldwide,” Testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security, June 26, 2003, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Alexiev%20Testimony%2006262003.pdf. For mention of the well drilling, see Kaag, “Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad.”
36. The AMA has been suspected of ties to the Somali Salafi-jihadi group al-Shabaab.


40. Deborah L. West, Combating Terrorism in the Horn of Africa and Yemen (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, 2005).


45. Watling and Raymond, “The Struggle for Mali.”


52. Roland Marchal, “Islamic Political Dynamics in the Somali Civil War: Before and After


54. Østebø, “African Salafism.”


60. Kobo, “Shifting Trajectories of Salafi/Ahl-Sunna Reformism.”


64. Østebø, “The Question of Becoming.”


67. In 2007, however, another scholar identified Sufism, particularly the Qadiriyyah and Tijaniyyah orders, as the dominant Islamic practice in Ghana. It is possible that combined, the various Sufi brotherhoods outnumber the Salafis but that no single brotherhood dominates any longer because of the growth of Wahhabism. For the 2007 assertion, see Moshe Terdman, “Ghana: Clashes Between Sufis and Radical Muslims,” *Religioscope*, August 6, 2007, https://english.religion.info/2007/08/06/ghana-clashes-between-sufis-
69. Kobo, “Shifting Trajectories of Salafi/Ahl-Sunna Reformism.”
71. Hamming, Diffusion of Islamic Discourse.
78. Gilsaa, “Salafism(s) in Tanzania.”
82. One of the radicals arrested in the subsequent government response, Jamil Mukulu, went on to found the Allied Democratic Forces, a Salafi-jihadi group active today in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Abdulhakim A. Nsobya, “Uganda’s Mili
83. Harmon, Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region.
84. Loimeier, “L’Islam Ne Se Vend Plus.”
86. For instance, the famed Nigerian cleric, Ja’afar Mahmud Adam, paraded his degree from the Islamic University of Medina to establish his religious bona fides, and part of the effectiveness of Ghana’s first foreign-educated Salafi preacher, Hajj Umar Ibrahim,


88. The instigators and reasons for the confrontations are sometimes murky, however, in which cases it is difficult to determine which sect is resorting to violence as a tactic.


91. Leinweber, “The Muslim Minority of the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

92. Thorold, “The Yao Muslims.”


94. Hussein Ahmed, “Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Islam in Ethiopia and Somalia: A Comparative and Contrastive Overview,” Journal of Ethiopian Studies 40, no. 1/2 (2007): 261–76. The scholar Jon Abbink in 1998 wrote that an Islamic “fundamentalist” movement “is absent [in Ethiopia], and will not find fertile ground for any mass allegiance.” Abbink’s prediction so far appears correct, but the shifting of religious currents can be very difficult to detect. Furthermore, during a 2019 trip to Ethiopia, an Ethiopian scholar told the author that the traditional practice of Islam

95. It is unclear, however, whether the resistance to shari’a among Igbo Muslims is due to fear of backlash among Christian Igbo who form the majority of the ethnic group and who associate shari’a with the violence in northern Nigeria, or if this reflects a genuine dislike of the shari’a system itself on the part of Igbo Muslims. For mention of Igbo Muslim resistance to shari’a, see Egodi Uchendu, “Being Igbo and Muslim: the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria and Conversions to Islam, 1930s to Recent Times,” *The Journal of African History* 51, no. 1 (2010): 63–87.


98. Watts, Shapiro, and Brown, *Al-Qaida’s (Mis)adventures in the Horn*.


100. Whether the domestic actions Saudi Arabia’s crown prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, has taken are motivated by a genuine commitment to reform or cynical political calculations is a hotly debated question.


104. Pardo, *Review of Selected Saudi Textbooks*.
105. Kobo, “Shifting Trajectories of Salafi/Ahl-Sunna Reformism in Ghana.”
108. During the author’s 2019 trip to Ethiopia, he heard from multiple independent sources that Wahhabi proselytization, including the building of mosques, has continued, especially in rural areas. It was unclear whether the funds were from governments, private donors, or both, but several of the author’s interlocutors believed most of the money emanated from Saudi Arabia. One source, however, identified Kuwait as being behind some mosque building in rural Ethiopia as well.
109. The Basharia Movement in Sierra Leone that established over 100 branches in 13 years was, for instance, funded without outside help. See O’Brien and Rashid, “a Study of Islam in Sierra Leone.”
110. This is due in some measure to the fact that Salafi entities built many of these mosques with the extraordinary sums they had at their disposal, while they gradually took over the operation of others. Salafis also targeted national Muslim councils, sometimes, it is alleged, using their money to unfair advantage. For some of the prominent mosques built with Salafi funds, see McCormack, “An African Vortex: Islamism in Sub-Saharan Africa.” For accounts of Salafi leadership of national Muslim councils, see Watling and Raymond, “The Struggle for Mali”; Abbink, “Transformations of Islam and Communal Relations in Wallo”; Bonate, “Matriline, Islam and Gender”; Yunus Dumbe, “The Salafi Praxis of Constructing Religious Identity in Africa: A Comparative Perspective of the Growth of the Movements in Accra and Cape Town,” *Islamic Africa* 2, no. 2 (2011): 87–116.
111. See Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria*, 80; and Hamming, *Diffusion of Islamic Discourse*. 
The Counterterrorism Conundrum: Exploring the Evolution of South Africa’s Extremist Networks

By Brenda Githing’u

In March 2021, the Mozambican jihadist group Ahlus Sunnah Wal-Jama’ah (ASWJ) launched a highly coordinated attack on Palma, a coastal town in northern Mozambique that is home to thousands of expatriate workers, tourists, and internally displaced people. Considering that the town is home to multi-billion dollar liquefied natural gas sites managed by multinational companies like Total, the attack marked a significant shift in the ambitions of an insurgency that had begun three-and-a-half years earlier with a series of small attacks on villages in Cabo Delgado province. Since October 2017, ASWJ—which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and now operates under the auspices of its “Central Africa Province” (ISCAP)—has metastasized at
an alarming rate, killing just shy of 4,000 civilians and leaving 670,000 people internally displaced.\(^2\) While Mozambicans have long suffered at the hands of ASWJ, the Palma attack notably had regional ramifications, as foreign nationals were among the victims of the three-day onslaught. South African nationals were among the largest group of foreign nationals affected by the violence, with 43 South Africans requiring emergency evacuation and medical attention.\(^3\) Tragically, Adrian Nel became the first South African national to be killed by ASWJ as he attempted to escape a luxury lodge in Palma during the attack.\(^4\)

The Palma incident grabbed international headlines, demonstrating the dividends that the Islamic State’s newest affiliate can reap for the group in the post-Baghuz era.\(^5\) The attack has also prompted widespread concerns within neighboring South Africa about the threat posed by ASWJ, especially in light of the first confirmed reports of South Africans joining the insurgency. These concerns have not arisen in isolation: Over the past five years, a number of cases have emerged in South Africa involving alleged plans to instigate terror attacks on behalf of the Islamic State while Islamic State material has additionally been discovered in the possession of several criminals in the course of police investigations, highlighting an emerging nexus between crime and terrorism within the country.

Given that the Southern African Development Community (SADC), southern Africa’s premier regional bloc, has announced plans for a multinational intervention in Cabo Delgado,\(^6\) the South African government is forced to rethink its historical opposition to Western interventionist counterterrorism approaches and is faced with a contentious debate over how to reorient its policy positions to meet the growing extremist threat in the region. South Africa’s existing Islamic State-inspired extremist and criminal networks are liable to help facilitate and capitalize on any further expansion of the ASWJ insurgency, lending a sense of urgency to the matter. On the other hand, any South African military intervention in Mozambique, whether unilateral or multilateral, risks creating blowback that could exasperate South Africa’s emergent terrorism problem. Having long avoided the sorts of controversial debates over counterterrorism policy seen in many countries since September 2001, South Africa now faces a crucial policy choice.
IN CONTRAST TO THE EXPERIENCE OF MANY AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN THE POST-9/11 era, South Africa has never formally aligned itself with U.S. counterterrorism policies or objectives. The history of South Africa’s own transition from apartheid plays an important role in this regard. In 1988, as the then-proscribed African National Congress (ANC) struggled against South Africa’s apartheid regime, the U.S. government designated the party a terrorist organization, citing the support it received from communist nations such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, and left-wing African governments. The designation came after the ANC sought to escalate its resistance against the apartheid regime by establishing a military wing known as the Umkhonto we Sizwe to conduct low-level guerilla attacks. These included nighttime raids on chemical and oil refineries and bombings of government facilities and public spaces. While in prison, Nelson Mandela maintained the case for the necessity of armed resistance, noting that while the loss of innocent lives was “a tragic accident,” his fighters would continue to strike military targets and property that served the apartheid regime. Considering the ideological disposition of the ANC towards socialism amid the backdrop of the Cold War, the U.S. government viewed the ANC as a violent revolutionary organization that threatened Washington’s strategic and ideological influence in Africa.

The ANC, which took power in 1994 after the end of apartheid and has governed ever since, positioned itself at odds with President George W. Bush’s plans to pursue a “Global War on Terror” in the new millennium. At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, former president Nelson Mandela openly accused President Bush of embarking on an imperialist project to control Iraq’s oil. This position was reinforced in an ANC policy discussion document that downplayed the threat of jihadist terrorism on the African continent, stating that “U.S. efforts to indoctrinate Africa with fears of Islamic terrorism, [are] to establish a U.S. Military mission in every African country, to control media, financ[es], religions and politicians.” The ANC’s opposition to the “War on Terror,” as well as its own history as a designated terrorist organization, underscores the degree to which ideological divisions between hegemonic powers like the United States and smaller, formerly colonized powers like South Africa have precluded a universally acceptable definition of terrorism.

Ronnie Kasrils, an Umkhonto we Sizwe veteran and South Africa’s Minister of Intelligence Services from 2004 to 2008, captured the definitional contention
over the term “terrorism” by arguing that there was a distinction to be made between jihadist movements and anti-colonial movements that the U.S. government has historically failed to appreciate.\textsuperscript{12} The ANC has often likened its history of struggle against the apartheid regime to that of the Palestinian liberation movement and associated militant organizations. This has raised concerns over the extent to which authorities would overlook the activities of militant groups in South Africa, especially since several high-profile Palestinian militants have received VIP treatment when visiting the country as late as the 2010s.\textsuperscript{13}

A classified report allegedly drafted by the country's National Intelligence Agency in 1998 noted the presence of Hamas delegates and affiliated individuals in the country. The report detailed these individuals' fundraising efforts as well as attendance at conferences near Pretoria that were attended by members of other Islamist militant organizations such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front, [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{14} The report stated that foreign Islamist militants “prefer[red] to keep South Africa [as a] rear base for military training, convalescence, fund raising, media and proselytizing,”\textsuperscript{15} claims that were later confirmed by the head of the National Intelligence Coordinating Committee in 2007.\textsuperscript{16} Kasrils, for his part, raised concerns in 2008 that al-Qaeda operatives were taking refuge in South Africa with the possibility of establishing networks.\textsuperscript{17}

These assessments came after the arrest of two South Africans, Dr. Feroz Ganchi and Zubair Ismail, in a joint U.S.-Pakistani raid in Gujrat, Pakistan in 2004. Ganchi and Ismail were captured in the company of one of the perpetrators of al-Qaeda’s 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and were alleged to have been planning attacks in South Africa at the time of their arrest.\textsuperscript{18} Then in 2007, the U.S. government sought to add two South African cousins, Farhad Ahmed Dockrat and Junaid Ismail Dockrat, to a list of UN sanctions on al-Qaeda and Taliban members.\textsuperscript{19} According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the cousins worked as al-Qaeda financiers who had “facilitate[ed] travel for individuals to train in al Qaida camps” in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{20}

Under the administration of Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), the South African government sought to shield its citizens from being drawn into Washington’s War on Terror which had led to countless terrorist designations as well as extraordinary renditions without due process. A statement issued by the cabinet condemned allegations that Dr. Ganchi and Ismail were linked to al-Qaeda and were planning attacks in South Africa.\textsuperscript{21} The South African government took a similar stance on the Dockrats, stating with regards to the UN sanctions list, “...we want to be absolutely certain that we are also totally in compliance with our national law...We
have to be sure that anyone who is listed is involved in terrorist activities and the listing is therefore legitimate.”

In doing so, the South African government’s opposition to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and its efforts to shield its citizens from terror-related charges and designations is widely thought to have garnered the support of Muslim communities and civil society organizations both locally and internationally. Consequently, there has been a long-standing assumption that South Africa would be safe from domestic threats of terrorism. However, this assumption has been challenged over the years as allegations of the presence of militant training camps and South Africans’ participation in the Islamic State have continued to surface.

Enter the Islamic State: The Evolution of South Africa’s Extremist Networks

South Africa’s extremist landscape began shifting in 2013 as a number of South Africans sought to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State. The estimated number of South Africans who have joined the Islamic State ranges between 60 and 100. Some of the earliest known individuals to successfully make the journey to Syria came from all walks of life, including a cleric from Port Elizabeth, Rashid Moosagie, who left with his immediate family; Musa Abu Mujahid Oscar, who hailed from a township in Pretoria; Abu Hurayra al-Hindi/al-Afriki, who left when he was about 18 years old; and two brothers, Bilal and Ahmed Cajeel. Utopian fantasies of life under an Islamic state, a longing for adventure, and a sense of outrage over atrocities committed in Syria and Iraq have been the key factors contributing to South Africans’ decisions to join the Islamic State in Syria. Thus, the ANC’s longstanding foreign policies in opposition to U.S. hegemony failed to mitigate the appeal of self-actualization offered by the Islamic State.

While the allure of the Islamic State may have drawn radicalized individuals out of the country, the Islamic State’s rise to prominence also ignited an unprecedented shift in the nature of extremist networks within South Africa, from subliminal operations involving allegations of training camps, fundraising, and proselytizing towards active participation in international terrorism.
This was equally matched by a shift in the South African government’s response to the emerging threat of violent extremism. South Africa’s premier police force, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (commonly known as the Hawks), have undertaken a series of counter-terrorism operations since 2015, in the process foiling four terror plots that appeared to be inspired by the Islamic State. In two cases, key suspects and their accomplices fled to Mozambique to join ASWJ, underscoring the degree to which Africa’s newest jihadist insurgency might serve as a haven for Islamic State sympathizers around the region.

In 2015, the twins Brandon-Lee and Tony-Lee Thulsie and an accomplice, Ronaldo “Arashad” Smith, attempted to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State before they were stopped by the Hawks and placed under surveillance. As an alternative to their failed plans to travel to Syria, the trio allegedly began plotting attacks against government targets as well as Jewish and American institutions in South Africa on behalf of the Islamic State. In July 2016, the Hawks conducted a series of counterterrorism raids which led to the arrest of the trio as well as two siblings, Ebrahim and Fatima Patel, who were found in a separate location with bullets and stun grenades. The Patel siblings appeared to be implicated in a separate case unrelated to either the Thulsies or terrorism and were charged with illegal possession of weapons. However, Fatima Patel was later arrested again with her husband, Sayfydeen Aslam Del Vecchio, and a Malawian national, Ahmad “Bazooka” Mussa, in February 2018 for their alleged involvement in the kidnapping, armed robbery, and murder of two British botanists, Rod and Rachel Saunders. Patel and Del Vecchio were arrested at their home where police testified to finding an Islamic State flag.

Three months after the arrest of Patel and Del Vecchio, knife-wielding men attacked a Shi’a mosque in Verulam near the eastern coastal city of Durban, murdering a congregant and seriously injuring both the imam and the mosque caretaker. The following day the Hawks discovered an incendiary device that had been planted at the mosque overnight after the attack. The same type of device was left in various locations around the city including parking lots and shopping centers. One of the twelve men arrested for their involvement in the mosque attack and planting of incendiary devices, Farhad Hoomer, was allegedly using his house as a training camp. Police said they found Islamic State DVDs in the house as well as a kidnapped victim who was being held in the basement.

However, in July 2020, the twelve men accused of orchestrating the mosque attack were released and their case was struck from the roll. Yet only two weeks later, police uncovered a kidnapping syndicate in the south of Johannesburg, arresting five men in connection with the kidnapping and extortion of a business-
man. Each of these five men had been one of the twelve suspects in the Verulam attack who had just been released. Once again, Islamic State material—as well as weapons and foreign military uniforms—were found in the Johannesburg residence that was raided, leading to speculation that the kidnapping and extortion case was the work of a domestic Islamic State cell.

The aforementioned cases have raised concerns that South Africa now faces an imminent threat of jihadist terrorism. The dismissal of the Verulam mosque case in particular sparked outrage, as both the Hawks and the victims of the attack considered the incident a clear-cut case of religious extremism. Yet the four aforementioned cases have not irrefutably met the threshold of what would classically be considered terrorism given that the suspects lacked formal membership in any organization and the evidence submitted by authorities does not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the suspects were motivated by jihadist ideology and identified with the Islamic State.

### A Crime-Terror Nexus?

**Financing and Recruitment for ASWJ**

The recent evolution of violent extremism in South Africa suggests more substantial domestic engagement with international terrorism than ever before. This has manifested in two ways: Firstly, with the exception of the Thulsie twins, each of the terror cases since 2015 have included charges related to murder and terror financing through armed robbery, cryptocurrency trading, and kidnapping and extortion. This demonstrates an emerging nexus between organized crime and domestic extremist networks.

Secondly, the emergence of ASWJ has presented an opportunity for Islamic State sympathizers from South Africa to engage in active militancy with an officially recognized affiliate without travelling as far away as Syria or Iraq. Ronaldo “Arashad” Smith, the associate of the Thulsie twins, turned into an uncooperative state witness against the twins and was later found to have fled to Mozambique, where he was pictured with another South African, Mohammed Suliman, who is said to have left for Mozambique accompanied by 15 other individuals. Furthermore, an unknown number of accomplices of the five suspects arrested for the
The aforementioned kidnapping in Johannesburg are also said to have fled to Mozambique, meaning that a conservative estimate would have at least 20 individuals from South Africa joining ASWJ since the start of the Cabo Delgado conflict.

These two developments—the crime-terror nexus and the emergence of ASWJ—have prompted the South African government to recalibrate and escalate its approaches to combating Islamic State-inspired domestic extremism. This is seen in ongoing cases such as that of the Thulsies, who were denied bail after state prosecutors argued that the twins might follow their accomplice and join the insurgency in Mozambique upon release.

The question of how ASWJ has managed to generate revenue has been a major source of contention among analysts and observers. The literature on the nexus between organized crime and terrorism is similarly divided by debates around the extent to which organized crime and terrorism—each a nebulous concept—overlap. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) lists a range of illicit activities that form an essential source of revenue for terrorist organizations. ISIS, for example, generated revenue for its operations in Iraq and Syria from human trafficking and the illicit sale of cultural antiques. However, at its height, ISIS generated most of its revenue from the sale of oil and from the taxation and extortion of the population in the areas it controlled. Similarly, while ASWJ has maintained control of the Mozambican port city of Mocímboa da Praia since August 2020, there has been no evidence to support speculation that the group has significantly exploited illicit trafficking routes for revenue. Following the Palma attack, during which AWSJ managed to rob and destroy two banks, the SADC established a technical mission to assess the nature and capabilities of the group in order to inform ongoing deliberations over a regional military intervention. One of the preliminary findings of the mission was that ASWJ receives funding from sympathetic individuals and private organizations from various countries across the region. These funds are sent through mobile money transfer platforms like M-Pesa, M-Kesh, and e-Mola that have spread across Africa in recent years.

Transnational organized crime syndicates are widely known to use mobile money services to transfer proceeds from illicit activities across borders. While these platforms provide low-cost access to financial services in rural communities and help small or informal businesses and migrant laborers, the platforms also provide opportunities for terror financing. Terrorists may register multiple accounts through false or stolen identity documents or otherwise avoid detection by law enforcement through a practice called “smurfing,” in which small transactions are initiated to obscure the sum ultimately being transferred. The rapidity of transfers (most platforms allow users to send multiple transactions in immediate succession) offer
limited time for the platforms to halt and investigate transactions.\textsuperscript{51} The fact that current and emerging mobile money transfer services generally fall outside the purview of national financial regulations ensures the continuation of poor monitoring and oversight.\textsuperscript{52} M-Pesa, M-Kesh, and e-Mola are available across southern and eastern Africa, including countries mentioned in the SADC technical mission report such as Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa, where investigations are underway to establish the beneficiaries of funds accrued by current suspects.\textsuperscript{53}

As Hawks spokesperson Captain Lloyd Ramovha stated last summer, “the investigation into South Africans’ involvement with the insurgency involves Interpol and the Mozambican authorities...with detectives looking at cross-border financial flows, the origin of these funds and the involvement of organized crime in raising these finances.”\textsuperscript{54} In short, evidence is emerging showing that individuals in South Africa with existing ideological sympathies to jihadism have begun actively offering material support to the ASWJ insurgency.

### Conclusion: Assessing the Risks of Intervention in Mozambique

As a former liberation movement once designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the ANC-led government is now faced with the task of reconsidering its policy positions on Western approaches to counterterrorism as it deliberates its intervention in Mozambique. Abandoning long-standing policy positions may rouse grievances among civil society actors and religious organizations that are concerned that South Africa might duplicate the sorts of Western military interventions and occupations that have proven immensely costly (both in terms of lives and treasure) across the Middle East and Africa. The risk of blowback to any foreign intervention is also high. While South African officials have assured the citizenry that there is “no imminent threat” of jihadist terrorism (to use Minister of State Security Ayanda Dlodlo’s phrase),\textsuperscript{55} emerging evidence of material support for ASWJ from South Africans marks a significant shift in terms of the risks the country may face from a militarily intervention. Indeed, in July 2020 the Islamic State threatened South Africa in an editorial
published in its al-Naba’ newsletter, claiming that any South African intervention in Mozambique would “result in prompting the soldiers of the Islamic State to open a fighting front inside [South Africa’s] borders.” Individuals, networks, or even organizations that are already sympathetic to the insurgents in Mozambique may turn towards more active support of the insurgency—whether by recruiting, training, financing, or conducting terror attacks—in the event that South Africa becomes party to the Cabo Delgado conflict.

The risk of blowback within South Africa has historical precedent from elsewhere on the continent. Almost immediately after Kenyan forces intervened in Somalia under the auspices of Operation Linda Nchi in October 2011, a cohort of al-Shabaab-trained Kenyans returned to the country and—with the support of other al-Shabaab sympathizers based in certain Kenyan cities—began instigating small-scale attacks on security forces and public places. These attacks were frequent but made few headlines outside of Kenya. Yet by 2013, al-Shabaab had assembled a special commando team that launched a high-profile assault on an upscale mall in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, killing nearly 70 people. Then, in 2015, al-Shabaab killed nearly 150 students in an assault on a university in the eastern town of Garissa. All the while, al-Shabaab and associated recruitment networks developed well-crafted propaganda to exploit the grievances of Kenyan Muslims, pushing a narrative that East African governments, backed by the West, were waging a war against disenfranchised Muslims across the region and that religious solidarity demanded that Kenyan Muslims respond.

It appears that disagreements are already emerging within the political arena as to the nature of the ASWJ insurgency and the appropriate responses. Several influential leaders within the South African Muslim community have downplayed the religious dimension of the Cabo Delgado insurgency, characterizing it instead as a conflict arising from disenfranchised communities who have not benefitted from the province’s mineral wealth. Faisul Sulieman, chairman of the South African Muslim Network (SAMNET), stated, “This is more a conflict about resources and a disgruntled local population than it is about some establishment of any Islamic state or caliphate in southern Africa.” These statements have some merit given that inequality and economic disenfranchisement are notable factors in fueling Cabo Delgado’s insurgency; but the statements also likely reflect an anti-interventionist position rooted in concerns from within South Africa’s Muslim community that an intervention would lead to the sorts of atrocities that have been experienced by innocent Muslim civilians in other theaters of the War on Terror. With evidence emerging of extremist networks operating in South Africa, grievances which may arise out of a military intervention in Mozambique.
have the potential of being exploited by ASWJ for domestic acts of terrorism or recruitment.

Considering the nature of terror-related cases in South Africa to date, it is important to temper fears somewhat. Any attacks that may take place in the near term are likely to continue manifesting as criminal acts seemingly inspired by the Islamic State rather than the type of complex assaults employed by groups like al-Shabaab. Additionally, South Africa remains an ideal logistical hub for revenue generation, recruitment, and possibly training. As such, South Africa is unlikely to see any major attacks anytime soon. For now, extremist networks will likely continue to operate clandestinely within the broader context of a society suffering from high levels of organized and violent crime. Therefore, traditional and routine criminal investigations and operations by the South African Police Service, and particularly the Hawks, will continue to play a crucial role in mitigating the threat of domestic terrorism.

However, it is only a matter of time before existing extremist networks within the country adopt a more ambitious set of objectives. This is all the more likely now that the SADC has decided to intervene in Mozambique. An intervention removes many of the incentives ASWJ and its Islamic State backers would have to exercise restraint in terms of targeting South Africa, instead giving a new impetus to attack the country. If South Africa’s extremist networks should also swell with new members, be they local recruits or ASWJ fighters returning from Mozambique (perhaps with specific orders from above), then they would pose a much greater threat than any of the cells that have plotted attacks to date. Thus, while situation is still evolving and much remains uncertain, South Africa clearly faces one of its most serious security challenges of the post-apartheid era.

NOTES


15. “National Intelligence Agency.”


38. Peter Fabricius, “Kliprivier Kidnapping Cell.”

39. Ibid.


48. Ibid.


51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Tage Kene-Okafor, “Mobile money service, M-Pesa, is now owned by Vodacom and Sa-


55. “Chilling Links between Mozambique ISIS and South Africa.”


57. *Al-Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat* (Djibouti: Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 2016), 22.

The Iranian Revolutionary Apparatus and Hezbollah in West Africa

By Toulu Akerele

The success of Iran’s revolution in 1979 marked the success of a new global Islamist ideology with a key commitment to countering Western influence in the Muslim world. The Iranian constitution reinforces the global exportation of this ideology, citing the aim of representing “the earnest aspiration of the Islamic ummah [universal community of believers]...made explicit by the very nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, as well as the course of the Muslim people’s struggle.”¹ This commitment to combatting perceived Western dominance is characteristic of religious fundamentalist movements, which typically “form in reaction to, and in defense against the processes and consequences of secularization and modernization which have penetrated the larger religious community.”² Since the late 1970s, Iran’s modus operandi has been to preserve the Shi’a Muslim minority
worldwide and disseminate the Islamic revolution’s ideology in response to this perceived Western ideological threat.

This pan-Islamic resolve first succeeded in Lebanon. The Lebanon-based political and militant Shi’a group Hezbollah (“Party of God”) is not a proxy of Iran, but rather its strongest political partner. Birthed from the Israeli military’s seizure of southern Lebanon in 1982, the Shi’a Islamist party aspires to establish an Islamic state within Lebanon, resulting in the movement often being referred to as a “state within a state.” The organization is a hybrid political-militant movement with three legs (social, political, and military). Some 80 to 90% of its income comes from the Iranian government, which donates roughly $200 million annually. Hezbollah’s ties to Iran are visible in the party’s founding manifesto from 1985, which declared a pledge of loyalty to Iran’s “Supreme Leader.”

The export of the Iranian apparatus gained traction over the years in Western countries and is seen in the increasing number of Iranian agents apprehended in Europe. Parallels can also be drawn between the Iranian model of exporting Shi’a ideology and the Saudi Arabian infrastructure used to disseminate Wahhabism on a global scale. Key similarities to be discussed include state-sponsored financing mechanisms, da’wa (proselytization) infrastructure, investment in education, and a heavy reliance on pan-Islamism as religious and ideological justification.

A steady shift of these activities has been underway as seen in an increase in the activities of Iranian partners and proxies in West Africa. This is in addition to the critical outreach programs Iran and Hezbollah representatives conduct with the Lebanese Shi’a diaspora in the region. As the focus of the paper is West Africa, Nigeria and Sierra Leone will be analyzed as case studies. This is due to their large Lebanese diasporas and prominent Hezbollah activity, which capitalizes on weak governance as well as pre-existing international organized crime groups and smuggling routes. As this paper will convey, there is an urgent need for African countries and their partners to understand the nature and gravity of the threat posed by Iran-linked militant organizations.
Background: 
The Lebanese Diaspora and Iran in West Africa

THE LEBANESE DIASPORA IS SPREAD FAR AND WIDE, MAINLY AS A RESULT OF LEBANESE fleeing wars and oppression over the years. While all of Lebanon’s sects and communities are represented among the diaspora, since around 1910, Lebanese Shi’as in West Africa have far outnumbered Lebanese Christians. In just ten years between 1960 and 1970, the Lebanese population in West Africa rose from 17,000 to 75,000, reaching 150,000 by 1985.4

Within West Africa, the diasporic Lebanese often dominate multiple sectors of the economy, from real estate, hospitality, trade, construction, retail and manufacturing to diamond and gold mining industries. These family-owned businesses contributed to West Africa’s economic growth and turned the region’s Lebanese community into a pillar of economic success. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, the Lebanese diaspora own 80% of distribution activities, 70% of packaging and printing, 60% of the housing stock, and 50% of industry.5

Hezbollah activity in West Africa dates as far back as the early 1980s, when the group fundraised through narcoterrorism and criminal operations. Extensive fundraising operations occurred through specific Lebanese families working in Africa, sometimes conning unwitting Shi’a donors into funding the organization. These communities are able to operate in relatively unregulated economies, providing a permissible environment for Hezbollah to self-finance through activities such as money laundering, the drug trade, and arms dealing.

Hezbollah cells are surreptitiously provided cover by Iranian diplomatic offices as well as Iran’s steady development of social infrastructure which is used to conceal illicit activity through the proffering of financial, ideological, and material support. The crux of the Islamic Revolution is to propagate Shi’a Islam and counter U.S. influence. In this sense, African Shi’a populations, and in particular Shi’a members of the Lebanese diaspora, are crucial to Iran’s activities in Africa. The highest concentrations of Shi’a Muslims in Africa include: Nigeria (four million as of 2009), Tanzania (two million as of 2009), and Niger (approximately 900,000 as of 2015), with smaller numbers found in Côte d’Ivoire, Uganda, Kenya, Senegal, and elsewhere.
The importance of the African continent to Iran’s strategic plans was revealed during a two-day Iran-Africa summit in Tehran in 2010, which brought together heads of state, diplomats, business leaders, and cultural representatives from over 40 African nations to discuss a plethora of issues. Iran and Hezbollah strategically invest in enriching cultural and religious ties with local Shi’a movements and the Lebanese diaspora in Africa by providing scholarships and erecting Iranian cultural centers in Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, and South Africa, among other countries. Interestingly, Iran has begun positioning itself in alignment with traditional African anti-colonial politics by championing the cause of African Shi’a minorities as an oppressed class.

Mosques and Madrasas:
Iranian Da’wa in Africa

Following the turbulent events of 1979, which saw both the Iranian revolution and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the 1980s saw the emergence of state support for hardline interpretations of Islam in West Africa from countries like Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. While the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represented Sunni Wahhabism, monarchism, the Arab world, and alignment with the United States, Iran represented Shi’ism, anti-monarchism, Persian power, and a direct opposition to the United States. Yet between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the extremist Sunni and Shi’a da’wa and educational infrastructures are quite similar in terms of their approach to Muslim solidarity.

The da’wa infrastructures of both Iran and Saudi Arabia utilize large sums of money spread across multiple channels. Da’wa systems are generally untouchable from a counterterrorist financing perspective due to legal and practical issues. The building of Shi’a and Sunni mosques, youth foundations, and local branches of universities throughout Africa therefore create the perfect means to disseminate radical ideologies.

Between 1975 and 2003, Saudi Arabia spent $70 billion on foreign aid worldwide, over two-thirds of which was allocated to Islamic activities. This led to the erection of 1,500 mosques, over 200 Islamic Centers, over 200 Islamic colleges, and approximately 2,000 schools in non-Muslim countries alone. By comparison, Iran’s financing model sends funds directly from the state to radical and front
organizations. A prime example is seen in the patron-client relationship with Hezbollah, with providing most of the organization’s funding. More recently, Iran has lobbied for stronger relations on the African continent in an attempt to counter the overwhelming Sunni influence in the region.

By establishing local branches of Iranian universities in Africa, Iran offers scholarships to study in Iran as a way of further cementing the Iranian Shi’a ideology. Al-Mustafa University was founded in 2007 by Ayatollah Khomeini himself. He oversees the curriculum and activities and represents the university’s highest authority. Ayatollah Khomeini reinforced the missionary objective of the university when addressing students and staff in Qom in 2010:

The first lesson that the Islamic Revolution and the auspicious Islamic Republic taught us was that we should think beyond our borders and turn our attention to the vast arena of the Islamic Ummah… Part of the great work is what you are doing. You have gathered here from nearly one hundred countries in order to become familiar with the pure teachings of Islam.

Many al-Mustafa graduates are assessed for induction into Hezbollah’s operational units, particularly those with previous combat experience in Syria and Iraq. African students are also sent to study theology in Iranian universities, during which time they are recruited and trained as Hezbollah operatives or Iranian intelligence agents.

In 2002, Ugandan Police arrested Shafi Ibrahim, the leader of a Ugandan Shi’a cell under the instruction of Iran and likely Hezbollah. Ibrahim and other African students had studied at the Rizavi University in Iran six years prior on a theology scholarship, where they were also trained alongside Hezbollah in 2001 in northern Tehran. This training focused on the use of small arms, the creation of explosive devices, reconnaissance, escape routes, and tips for enduring interrogation. These students were also provided fictitious covers, cash, and lines of communication before being sent to gather intel on Americans and Westerners in Uganda and Africa at large.

Al-Mustafa trains clerics in different countries to spread “Khomeinism” in their home countries, particularly in Africa, where over 30 countries have local branches of the university. These schools have over 5,000 African students enrolled, including the 2,000 students studying in Iran. The importance of the school’s extensive presence in Africa was reiterated by its President, Alizera Aarafi, in 2015, who emphasized the “strategic depth [for] pure Islam.” The school’s vice president
strengthened this message a year later by stating how the “export of revolution has always been one of the most important goals for the Islamic Republic. Al-Mustafa plays a role in preparing the ground and attaining this goal.” Clerics who study at the university learn Khomeinism with the assumption that upon graduation, they will act on Iran's instructions and spark an Iranian-Hezbollah influence in mosques and sister schools by disseminating Twelver Shi’a ideology in Africa.

In Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, a similar Iranian footprint is left in the form of the al-Ghadir Center, located in the Marcory neighborhood dubbed “Little Beirut.” The youth center has been framed by U.S. authorities as a base for Hezbollah to recruit youth and carry out operational activity, with a high likelihood of fundraising activity. The Director of al-Ghadir described the center’s inception as a direct response to “the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, after which a strong sense of responsibility carried by an assembly of believers.”

In 2010, Ivorian security forces planned a targeted search on the sister al-Ghadir Mosque. However, a last-minute intervention from the Ivoirian President prevented any intelligence gathering for fears of sparking resentment from the Lebanese community. Côte d’Ivoire is seen as Hezbollah’s primary center for fundraising within Africa, helped greatly by the country's established Lebanese families. With a Muslim-majority population, Côte d’Ivoire has the largest Lebanese diaspora in West Africa with over 100,000 expatriates; 90% of the Lebanese community live in Abidjan. This presents a ripe setting for Hezbollah’s social and religious offensive. Schools funded by Iran and built by influential Lebanese businessmen serve as educational hubs for the Muslim population of Abidjan, including the Moroccan diaspora. In 2018, for example, Hezbollah led an outreach campaign targeting Moroccans in Côte d’Ivoire to convert them to Shi’a Islam.

The Iranian Threat Network

THE IRANIAN THREAT NETWORK (ITN), a phrase coined by Dr. Eitan Azani et al., is a critical component in understanding Iran’s methods of exporting the Islamic revolution. The ITN is comprised of proxies and partners that Iran leverages to strategically promote its interests abroad. A prime example is again seen in Hezbollah, which focuses its activities on the Middle East yet operates terrorist and criminal networks worldwide, particularly in areas with weak governments and international organized crime groups (namely West Africa and the tri-border...
Hezbollah acts as a power multiplier for the ITN due to its near-global presence.

Hezbollah sustains an open international presence through its Foreign Relations Department (FRD). The FRD’s core missions include propaganda, financing, and support, all the while liaising between local sympathizers and Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon. Some FRD personnel are Lebanese members sent abroad, and others are Hezbollah supporters already based in the target countries. FRD personnel are akin to Hezbollah “diplomats,” acting as front men appointed by the organization to build ties between Hezbollah and Iran on the one hand and the Lebanese diaspora and Shi’a communities on the other. Some Lebanese community centers serve as bases for Hezbollah activity, with special FRD representatives coordinating among Shi’a communities on the ground. Most FRD members are closely linked to senior Hezbollah officials, and many have significant military training to abet criminal and terrorist activities.

According to Canadian intelligence, the FRD establishes front companies abroad and disguises members as talent hunters to mobilize local Shi’a backing for Hezbollah and Iran. Per Canadian intelligence, Hezbollah is “one of the most technically capable terrorist groups in the world.” A prime example is seen in 2017, when the group created fake Facebook accounts of attractive women to target Israeli soldiers. IDF soldiers were contacted by these Facebook accounts and were then lured into installing third party messaging applications that secretly installed malware onto the users’ devices. This type of hostile cyber activity granted Hezbollah spyware access to IDF soldiers’ phones, allowing them to retrieve specific intelligence and military content.

Hezbollah’s FRD is also intricately linked to the group’s Business Affairs Component (BAC), which is leveraged to build terror cells in Africa. In 2015, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned three Hezbollah members and their entities over a West Africa-based support network. The report rejected the FRD’s claims that it merely runs “community relations,” affirming: “the primary goal of the FRD in Nigeria is to scout recruits for Hizballah’s military units, as well as to create and support Hizballah’s terrorist infrastructure for its operational units in Africa and globally.”

Two years prior, the United States also sanctioned four Lebanese citizens accused of facilitating Hezbollah’s expansion into West Africa, specifically in Sierra Leone, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Gambia. The large Lebanese communities in these regions are largely Shi’a, making them a ripe Hezbollah target. As the scholar Richard Downie noted, this setting made for a perfect storm. “This is a set of countries that are under-governed – ill-governed in some respects,” Downie
remarked. “Their security services are weak. Their police capability is pretty low, so there are opportunities there for transnational organized criminals to take advantage.”

Iranian influence in West Africa has grown through Hezbollah, with main priorities focused around the smuggling of weapons and recruitment of militants into its network. For instance, FRD operatives Fouzi Fawaz and Abdallah Tahini organized Hezbollah delegations to Nigeria and became members of a Hezbollah cell in the country, with the former accused of possessing “heavy weapons [and]… other terrorism-related activities.”

It has also been reported that some African Shi’a have fought in Syria, albeit in small numbers. Furthermore, Iranian arms have been uncovered throughout Africa, with some intended for Shi’a movements whilst others were sold to local militant groups. In Senegal, for example, the insurgent group Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC) was found in possession of sophisticated Iranian weapons, resulting in Senegal’s decision to cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 2011.

West Africa in particular is home to an extensive Iranian operational infrastructure that is heavily reliant on Shi’a communities, with the most successful proxy, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, to be explored further in a case study. The FRD has targeted goals in Nigeria: to scout recruits for Hezbollah’s military units; to create Hezbollah terrorist infrastructure; and to support existing Iranian infrastructure for African and global operations.

Hezbollah Fundraising in West Africa

WITH RIYADH FINANCING ANTI-SHIA CAMPAIGNS ON A GLOBAL LEVEL, IRAN’S geopolitical, ideological, and tactical interests on the African continent have increased. As Iran’s most successful proxy, Hezbollah’s attempts to generate its own financial resources through fundraising is of particular interest given the sizable Lebanese diaspora in West Africa that is sympathetic to the organization’s goals. For those Lebanese who are not Hezbollah sympathizers, taxes are imposed on legitimate Lebanese- or Shi’a-owned businesses, with properties attacked for those who refuse to comply. Lebanese merchants are a critical component in Hezbollah fundraising activity as financiers establish strategic ties to key officials,
security officers, and businessmen in African states, thereby better positioning the organization to earn millions of dollars from government contracts. More broadly, Hezbollah-linked Lebanese businesses benefit from environments in which corruption is high.

Lebanese-owned businesses in sub-Saharan Africa are approached for contributions to Hezbollah-run political and social service organizations. These donations are often extortionate in nature and usually collected in cash by Hezbollah envoys, who transfer the funds via courier to the Middle East. In 2003, a French UTA flight from Lebanon to Benin crashed on takeoff, with Hezbollah officials found on board carrying $2 million in cash raised from Lebanese living in West African countries. This amount represented regular contributions to Hezbollah from Lebanese nationals in various West African countries. Hezbollah has institutionalized a framework to receive donations from prominent Lebanese businessmen in the West African diaspora. In June 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned four Lebanese nationals in Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, and Gambia, respectively, for Hezbollah-related activities. Per the official notice, these individuals “organized fundraising efforts, recruited members, and in some cases styled themselves as members of Hezbollah’s Foreign Relations Department.”

Several Hezbollah front companies and activists relocated from South America’s tri-border area to Africa following investigations into Hezbollah’s links to the 1992 and 1994 Buenos Aires bombings (which targeted the Israeli Embassy and AMIA Jewish Community Center). In June 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives examined Hezbollah finances, drawing attention to the funding and partnerships between the group and criminal enterprises in South America and Africa. West Africa in particular is used for the storage and transshipment of narcotics, with Hezbollah entering into often ephemeral commercial relationships with transnational criminal networks and local criminal groups alike to move the product. West Africa has many well-established drug smuggling routes into Europe, with some considering Guinea-Bissau a narco-state.

To take one example, a Beirut-based firm, Halawai Exchange Co., was caught enabling the shipment of used cars worth over $200 million into Benin through the United States as part of a narco-terror money laundering scheme linked to both Hezbollah and Latin American drug cartels. Two Hezbollah associates were arrested in 2015 for allegedly laundering money for drug traffickers, terror organizations, and organized crime groups in Lebanon, Iran, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Benin, DRC, Ghana, Nigeria, Cyprus, and multiple U.S. cities. Hezbollah and Iranian operatives are also directly involved in drug trafficking in some instances. In 2010, a cargo ship from Iran containing 130 kilograms of concentrated heroin
valued at $10 million was seized in Nigeria prior to its arrival in Europe. Tehran's clerics find ways to justify collaboration in narcotrafficking, which, typically, would run contrary to the puritanical Islam of the regime. Special fattsia of dispensation have been issued from Shi’a clerics, for instance, enabling direct cooperation with Colombia's left-wing Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas.

Fundraising activity in West Africa is also directly carried out through Hezbollah agents such as Sheikh Abd al-Menhem Qubaysi, a personal representative of Hassan Nasrallah in Côte d'Ivoire. Qubaysi’s responsibilities included liaising with Hezbollah leaders, hosting senior Hezbollah officials travelling to Côte d'Ivoire for financing purposes, and establishing the official Hezbollah foundation within Côte d'Ivoire, using it to recruit new members for Hezbollah’s military ranks in Lebanon. In May 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Qubaysi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, leading to his deportation from West Africa. Nevertheless, the following year, he was allowed re-entry into Côte d'Ivoire following pressure from the Lebanese government. Hezbollah has, in fact, been active in Côte d'Ivoire since the 1980s. Hezbollah operative Mohammed Adel Taki was arrested in Abidjan in 1988 with 70 kilograms of explosives, different detonators, grenades, portable weapons, and a rocket launcher, all of which were to be sent to France. Similarly, Gambia under its former president, Yahya Jammeh, was a known conduit for Hezbollah financing. Jammeh even intervened twice to block U.S.-designated financier Hussain Tajideen from being deported. Beyond narcotrafficking, Hezbollah likely engages in various types of illegal trade across the African continent. In Mozambique, for example, Hezbollah is rumored to be involved in ivory trafficking through several dozen Lebanese operatives in the country.

Iran also gains influence in West Africa through trading in products and services such as automobile assembly, oil and gas production, and weapons. Iran also has military cooperation arrangements with several African countries and purchases African uranium. In the 2017–2018 financial year, trade between Iran and Africa reached a record-breaking high of $1.2 billion. This trade helps Iran circumvent U.S. and UN sanctions. More notably, uranium deals struck with Namibia and Zimbabwe help Iran advance its nuclear program. The former Namibian Foreign Minister went so far as to laud “Iran’s resistance in acquiring peaceful nuclear technology despite all pressures.” In this sense, Iranian diplomacy in Africa is additionally intended to help build international support for Iran’s nuclear weapons program in the face of Western pressure. However, even as it has attempted to secure continental allies, Iran has ruptured diplomatic ties with certain African countries due to its smuggling of arms through their borders.
A key regional blunder occurred in 2010, when Nigerian officials confiscated 13 shipping containers of weapons originating from Iran that were being smuggled in containers labelled as containing building materials (less than a month later, Nigerian authorities intercepted the aforementioned drug shipment at the same port). A member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and a local “Nigerian Hezbollah” member were suspected of being linked to the arms shipment. The containers were heading for Gambia, which led to the swift expulsion of Iranian diplomats from the country even as they protested that the shipment was part of a confidential agreement with the Gambian government (a claim the Gambian president denied).  

Iranian Partners and Proxies in Africa: Polisario Front, Saraya al-Zahra, and al-Qaeda

Iranian Influence in Africa goes beyond trade, infrastructure development, and da’wa, extending into support for militant partners and proxies. It is important to note the variations in the relationships between Iran and its partners and proxies: some are completely dependent on Tehran for support, acting solely on its instructions, whereas others exercise autonomy. This flexible model affords Iran a wider reach while maintaining ideologically strong and well-connected proxies. Aside from the most prominent partners and proxies, like Lebanon’s Hezbollah, certain Iraqi militias, and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran has been steadily building its networks in parts of Africa. This risks exacerbating the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Africa.

The Polisario Front is a separatist group based in Algeria fighting for the independence of Western Sahara from Morocco. The group has links to Hezbollah and has also likely cooperated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on smuggling activities. The Algerian government is said to host Polisario members, and the group is known for smuggling arms into Mauritania and neighboring countries. In 2020, a UN-mandated ceasefire that had been in place since 1991 collapsed, with Polisario announcing it would resume its armed struggle against Morocco.
Despite not being a Shi’a group, the Polisario Front is supported by Iran. In 2018, Morocco severed diplomatic ties with Iran upon discovery that an Iranian intelligence officer, Amir Mousavi, had used his title of cultural attaché to Algeria as a cover for supporting Polisario along with other nefarious activity. Mousavi managed to recruit thousands of Shi’a youth from disadvantaged areas in Algeria to advance Iran’s goal of destabilizing the region. Hezbollah has also sent weapons to Polisario to use against Moroccan security forces. These weapons have included surface-to-air missiles and shoulder-fired missiles. Hezbollah was also instrumental in training Polisario members in urban warfare at a military base in Algeria.

Iran also established a proxy in the Central African Republic (CAR) under the command of Chadian citizen Ismael Djidah, who was arrested in 2019. The group Saraya al-Zahra was trained by the Special Operations’ Unit (Unit 400) of the IRGC’s Quds Force. Investigations later revealed that the Quds Force had given Djidah between $12,000 and $20,000 on each of his visits to Lebanon, Iran, or Iraq. Djidah was well-connected to warlords and politicians across Africa (particularly in neighboring Chad and Sudan) and was an advisor to CAR president-turned-rebel Michel Djotodia.

A UN investigation unveiled that a minimum of 12 Saraya al-Zahra members travelled to Iraq and Lebanon in 2018 and 2019 with the goal of establishing a group of 200 to 300 militants to coordinate with other cells in Chad and Sudan. During this investigation, Djidah claimed that the Quds Force had agreed to support his founding of an armed group (Saraya al-Zahra), “to carry out violent actions against Western, Israeli and Saudi interests in Africa.” He personally recruited 30 to 40 militants from various CAR rebel groups, who later underwent military training at Iranian-run camps in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. It seems the raison d’être of Saraya al-Zahra was to establish a Quds Force infrastructure in Central Africa through which to carry out attacks on Western interests in the region, something that Iran has vehemently denied.

Despite their sectarian differences, Iran has cooperated with al-Qaeda at various points throughout the latter’s history. The relationship has been bumpy at times, with Iran sometimes detaining al-Qaeda officials and al-Qaeda occasionally targeting Iranian interests. Connections between al-Qaeda and Iran predate the September 11 attacks. Osama bin Laden cultivated ties with Iran during his four-year spell in Sudan between 1992 and 1996. During this consolidation phase of al-Qaeda, the group looked to Iran and Hezbollah for tactical cooperation and knowledge. In 1993, senior al-Qaeda operatives and trainers went to Iran to receive explosives training, with another delegation undergoing similar training in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold. As early as 1998, al-Qaeda
leveraged Hezbollah’s extensive networks in West Africa to launder terrorist funds through Lebanese diamond traders in Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries. By the 2000s, Iran served as al-Qaeda’s “facilitation hub,” in the words of General David Petraeus, while Osama bin Laden stated himself in a 2007 letter that, “Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication.”

The concrete yet covert ties between al-Qaeda and Iran are becoming more apparent, particularly in the aftermath of the killing of al-Qaeda’s second-in-command in Tehran by Israeli agents. This targeted killing underscored the freedom of movement and operational activity that al-Qaeda operative, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, enjoyed in Iran, albeit under tense arrangements. The second-highest ranking al-Qaeda terrorist in the world, al-Masri was one of the founding members of the group and was wanted by the FBI for his role in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa.

However, it is important to note that cooperation between Iran and al-Qaeda exists purely on a tactical level and that tensions between the Iranian government and the group likely remain. Iran initially harboured al-Qaeda members in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks but placed restrictions on their movements, effectively imprisoning them. Some analysts allege al-Masri was under the protective custody of the IRGC at the time of his death and suggest this underscores Iran’s broader strategy of state sponsorship of terrorism. Others understand al-Masri’s arrangement as part of a 2015 prisoner exchange in which several senior al-Qaeda members (including al-Masri) were granted their freedom in exchange for the release of an Iranian diplomat who had been kidnapped by al-Qaeda in Yemen (a similar prisoner exchange took place in 2011 to secure the release of an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Pakistan). Al-Masri’s mobility in Iran was thus hard-earned and the result of al-Qaeda exercising leverage over Iran. While Secretary of State Michael Pompeo went as far as declaring Iran the “new Afghanistan” in 2021, al-Qaeda’s presence in the country comes at a strategic price for the Iranian regime. The most likely incentive Iran has in harboring al-Qaeda is that doing so prevents the group from attacking Iranian soil.
The Islamic Movement of Nigeria

NIGERIA HAS PROVEN TO BE AN IDEAL COUNTRY FOR IRANIAN ACTIVITY. NIGERIA'S population is equal to that of all other countries in West Africa combined, making it a continental giant. It is the continent’s largest oil producing nation with membership in important international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It is also one of the most volatile nations within West Africa. Nigeria's appeal for Hezbollah and Iran is rooted to a large extent in the country's large Muslim population, economic weight, and its porous borders that facilitate smuggling across the region.

Prior to 1979, Nigeria’s Shi’a community was negligible. It grew to an estimated four million people over the following decades (though some sources say the number is higher), largely through the work of the Iranian-backed Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). More so than any other group, the trajectory of the IMN underscores Iran’s potential to export its Islamic revolution to countries lacking a Shi’a majority by fomenting Shi’a opposition to established Islamic and governmental authorities.

A prominent Shi’a resistance force against the government, the IMN’s website contains pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian regime’s motto of “Death to America,” while IMN members pledge allegiance to Khomeini before pledging allegiance to their own leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, at gatherings. Estimates of the size of Nigeria’s Shi’a movement vary greatly. While Nigerian authorities report that there are 60,000 registered IMN members, Zakzaky’s followers estimate their membership lies between five and 10 million people out of an estimated Nigerian Muslim population of 100 million.

Nigeria’s Shi’a community resides primarily in Kaduna, Sokoto, Katsina, and Kano states, though they are present in other parts of the country. The IMN was founded by Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, who led a frequently rowdy Islamist group on his university campus in the 1970s. After studying in Iran following the Iranian revolution, Zakzaky converted to Shi’ism and adopted a Shi’a crusade, the IMN, which Zakzaky leads to this day. Shi’a Islam saw a considerable growth through Zakzaky, who deftly exploited political crises, such as debates over the introduction of shari’a law in northern Nigeria during the advent of democratic rule in 1999, to his movement’s advantage.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 attracted the attention of many young Nigerian
Muslims, with fliers in support of the revolution disseminated across Kaduna, incidentally the stronghold of the Yan Izala (a Salafi movement), around that time. After the revolution, many young Nigerian Muslims travelled to Iran, where they received religious and reportedly military training. As a nascent movement, the IMN needed to gain disciples. It did so with Iran’s assistance by poaching followers from rival Nigerian Muslim movements.

Although the full extent of Iran’s financial and military support for the IMN is unknown, in 2017, former U.S. State Department official Matthew Page estimated the group received approximately $120,000 per year from Iran, which would constitute a very efficient investment from Iran’s perspective. While Sheikh Zakzaky has denied receiving any funding from Tehran, a Nigerian intelligence official claimed to have audio recordings of Zakzaky’s communications with Iran, which allegedly proved longstanding state funding. The IMN has established a network of Shi’a seminaries, organizations, schools, hospitals, and a “martyrs’ foundation,” all of which have been funded at least in part by Iran.

Iran and Hezbollah openly refer to Sheikh Zakzaky and the IMN in speeches, underlining how critical they are to Iran’s network and the global Shi’a movement they hope to lead. This is seen in one of Ayatollah Khamenei’s Twitter posts from 2020, which showed an illustration of Sheikh Zakzaky in the midst of prominent Shi’a figures to mark international al-Quds Day (a holiday created by the Iranian regime to oppose Israel’s Jerusalem Day), emphasizing the Supreme Leader’s overt backing of the Nigerian movement. In August 2018, Iran officially opened an office for Zakzaky in Mashhad, Iran, with Zakzaky’s family and influential Iranian clerics in attendance. The overt support that IMN has received from Iran has raised alarms within the Nigerian federal government.

During the 2014 al-Quds Day, the IMN held a massive rally in Zaria in Kaduna state. The Nigerian Army opened fire on peaceful protestors in a two-day massacre, killing 34 people, three of whom were El-Zakzaky’s biological sons, and leaving over 100 injured. This massacre gained the attention of international human rights organizations as well as Iran-linked organizations, the latter of which tied the massacre to the ostensibly global persecution of Shi’a Muslims. The following year, in December 2015, the Nigerian security forces killed over 300 IMN members (IMN supporters say it was 1,000), also in Zaria. Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife were both injured and unlawfully arrested during the multi-day massacre. The massacre prompted international outcry, with the U.K.-based NGO Islamic Human Rights Commission petitioning to have The International Criminal Court at The Hague hear the case. For its part, the Nigerian military conducted its own investigation of the massacre and claimed to have uncovered
hard evidence of communication between the IMN and Iran, though this evidence was never made public.\textsuperscript{58} The Nigerian Army’s narrative of the massacre purports that the IMN was attempting to carry out an assassination attempt on Chief of Army Staff Major General Tukur Buratai, a claim staunchly denied by the group. Rather, the massacre seems to have occurred as a result of the IMN’s efforts to block the convoy of General Buratai, more as a show of force and protest than as part of any assassination attempt. In the ensuing massacre, the Nigerian Army burnt the group’s mosque as well as Zakzaky’s house and demolished the group’s cemetery, with Kaduna state government officials admitting four months later that approximately 350 bodies had been disposed in a nearby mass grave, with no heavy weapons discovered among the victims.\textsuperscript{59}

Since the 1980s, Zakzaky has been imprisoned by successive military regimes as a political prisoner for civil disobedience, especially as IMN followers do not recognize the Nigerian government and see Sheikh Zakzaky as the only legitimate authority in Nigeria. However, the recent acquittal of the Sheikh and his wife in July 2021 (following their detention in 2015), has sparked fears from the IMN of his re-arrest. Unsurprisingly, the Kaduna state government instantly sought to appeal the acquittal and revive the eight-count charge against El-Zakzaky and his wife.\textsuperscript{60}

President Buhari’s banning of the group has helped fuel global support for the IMN from other Shi’a. Sheikh Zakzaky has proven that being a prominent Shi’a cleric without local allies and being caught in the cross hairs of the state and Muslim establishment results in suppression. Yet this has been his greatest contribution to Iran as his group becomes a central part of Iranian propaganda. In other words, Zakzaky arguably accomplished more for Iran during his imprisonment than when he has been freed. Additionally, the fact that many of Nigeria’s leading Salafis (who are closer to the Nigerian Muslim establishment than the IMN) have links to Saudi Arabia provides incentives for Iran to continue support for the IMN as both a Shi’a dissident group and counterweight to Saudi influence in West Africa. Should the government crack down on the IMN further and in an even more violent manner, it will likely prompt IMN members to develop a more revolutionary and violent modus operandi, much as the Nigerian state’s bloody crackdown on Boko Haram in 2009 transformed the group from a dissident movement into a violent insurgency. In such a situation, Iran’s Threat Network in West Africa will enter a more dangerous phase.
Iran in Sierra Leone

SIERRA LEONE PROVIDES A CRITICAL HUB FOR IRANIAN ACTIVITY IN WEST AFRICA due to its geography, ineffective law enforcement, diamond deposits, and Muslim-majority population. Interestingly, there are few signs of Islamist radicalization or associated violent extremism among Sierra Leone’s Muslim population even though Sierra Leone’s youths are restless as a result of poor socioeconomic prospects. Yet significant divisions between the four major Muslim strains in the country (Shi’a, non-Sufi Sunni, Sufi, and Ahmadiyya) have fragmented Sierra Leone’s Muslim population. There are an estimated 125 Islamic groups in existence in the country.61

Around 1969, the Supreme Islamic Council of Sierra Leone (SICSL) was founded by scholars returning from study in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya in a bid to standardize the country’s various Islamic organizations, which were formed around ethnic or generational lines rather than doctrine.62 The SICSL developed multiple branches in Sierra Leone. It built schools and mosques and recruited foreign teachers to staff the schools, and it sent Sierra Leoneans abroad to study in foreign madrasas. Meanwhile, the Hezbollah mission in Sierra Leone serves as one of the group’s extensive fundraising operations in Africa through the local and expatriate Shi’a community.

Iran and later Hezbollah began a Shi’a missionary effort in Sierra Leone following Tehran’s opening of an embassy in the country in 1981. Iran soon established a major cultural center and created the International Institute for Islamic Studies, while supporting the construction of the Freetown Central Mosque.63 The International Institute was initially a faith-based secondary school before it grew into a technical-vocational institution, granting government-certified higher national diplomas in religious education and vocational skills. To this day, it is regarded as the leading tertiary Islamic educational institute in Sierra Leone, with many of its teachers educated in Iranian universities. The school’s Sierra Leonean graduates learn about Iranian Shi’ism and the country’s political culture. Iran has also funded the construction of multiple mosques, secondary schools, and scholarships to study in Iran, among other donations to Islamic programs in Sierra Leone.64

Iran’s modus operandi in the country is to project the benefits of its 1979 revolution, disseminate its brand of Shi’ism, and undermine international support for Western sanctions through outreach to local Muslims and Christians alike. The Ahlul Bayt Islamic Mission—a U.K.-based Shi’a NGO—is another key channel
used to transmit Iranian Shi’ism through its Sierra Leonean branch, which encourages participation in global Muslim causes. This is reinforced in meetings organized by certain Islamic organizations linked to Iran, with officials from the Iranian embassy and cultural center conveying messages of Pan-Islamic solidarity. One such meeting took place in February 2009 on the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution. The theme of the one-day seminar was “Religious Development and Democracy,” which reflected on how the Islamic revolution ostensibly served the Iranian people’s best interests.

Sierra Leone’s Lebanese population, which began emigrating in the late-Ottoman era, have been central to the trade of the country’s diamonds, both through licit and illicit means. Around the time of Sierra Leone’s independence in 1961, the country’s diamond market grew, with a significant surge in the trafficking of blood diamonds in the early 1990s as a result of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars. With the advent of civil wars, Hezbollah became involved in the blood diamond trade.

The lack of any serial number tied to individual diamonds makes them virtually untraceable, forming a mobile exchange unit Hezbollah has leveraged as both investment and a product for liquidation in emerging markets. Additionally, smuggling diamonds, as opposed to money, makes for easier transportation and provides an added layer of security in case of police raids. Hezbollah operatives and other Lebanese in Sierra Leone were suspected to have provided support to al-Qaeda operatives during Sierra Leone’s civil war.

A 2002 European investigation into al-Qaeda’s financing exposed $20 million that the group spent on diamonds in West Africa, allowing the terrorists to conceal important assets through diamonds. Those purchasing the illicit diamonds had also attempted to acquire sophisticated weapons, including missiles capable of shooting down airplanes. Two key Lebanese diamond merchants soon found themselves at the center of the post-9/11 investigations: Aziz Nassour and Samih Osailly, with a third person of interest being the Senegalese soldier of fortune, Ibrahim Bah, a prominent arms and diamonds trafficker who fought for Hezbollah in Lebanon and later with Sierra Leonean rebels in the country’s civil war. The relationship between these parties began in 1998, when Osama Bin Laden sent high ranking al-Qaeda members to Liberia and Sierra Leone to forge new business relationships and build channels for investment and money laundering. Bah played a critical role in connecting the al-Qaeda operatives to local diamonds traffickers and Hezbollah financiers. Bah even hosted Bin Laden’s African representative, Fazul Mohammed, in 1999, taking him on a tour of the diamond fields under rebel control in Sierra Leone. Osailly’s involvement stems from his
Conclusion

Iranian activity in Africa is part of a strategy for the Islamic Republic to overcome its pariah status in the West. By leveraging the poor governance, weak economies, porous borders, and instability in West Africa, Iran successfully lengthens its reach through the cultivation of partners, proxies, and Hezbollah networks while also advancing its commercial interests. The continent provides other opportunities for Iran, such as the acquisition of uranium, although Iran’s support for militant groups on the continent has, on more than one occasion, impeded its diplomatic relations. Iran’s ability to establish networks and operate in a destabilizing manner outside of its borders despite sanctions and embargos from the West is a serious cause for concern.

There is an urgent need for African countries and their Western partners to understand the nature and gravity of the Iranian Threat Network. A collaborative effort is needed to dismantle the infrastructure enabling Iran and Hezbollah to use African countries to further their agendas, including under the guise of innocuous social outreach such as scholarship provision.

The severity of the ITN has become more apparent after the targeted killing of IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani by U.S. forces in January 2020. Soleimani had reportedly been involved in establishing clandestine terror cells in Africa. Following his death, Nasrallah called for the unification of all ITN elements under the Quds Force to avenge the killing and expel Americans from the region: “Whoever thinks that this dear martyrdom will be forgotten is mistaken, and we are approaching a new era... suicide attackers who forced the Americans to leave from our region in the past are still here and their numbers have increased.” Evidence has since emerged that the IRGC is activating Soleimani’s cells in Africa to target American and partner interests. For example, in February 2021 Ethiopian and European intelligence services foiled an Iranian plot on the U.A.E. embassy in Addis Ababa. A stash of weapons and explosives were seized during the counterterrorism raids in Ethiopia, while authorities in Sweden arrested the leader of the terror cell, who was reportedly acting at the behest of Iran.
African states would do well to unite and increase intelligence cooperation with Israel, the United States, and E.U. countries that similarly have reason to monitor Hezbollah. Improved intelligence sharing can facilitate countering terrorist financing with the goal of curbing FRD activity in African countries. Investment in identifying the economic and financial assets of Hezbollah and Iran in Africa will significantly weaken their respective operational capacities. This is critical as Iranian- and Hezbollah-linked operatives travel on varied passports, specifically non-Lebanese and non-Iranian ones, allowing them to fly under the radar of law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the absence of targeted intelligence collection.

Until these actions are put in place, Iran is free to use a plethora of African actors, resources, territories, and organizations to hide its tracks in any future attack on U.S. interests, whether at home or abroad. One should not underestimate this threat. As Hassan Nasrallah has said, “Death to America was, is, and will stay our slogan!”

NOTES

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22. Levitt, “Hezbollah’s ‘Diplomats’ Go Operational.”

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55. Personal interview with a high-ranking intelligence officer in the Nigerian military who also served as a leading investigator following the Zaria massacre, June 3, 2021.
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