Current Trends
IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

Hudson Institute
Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World

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Contents

The Jihadist Fight for West Africa

By Toulu Akerele

THE JIHADIST AMBITION TO ESTABLISH A GLOBAL CALIPHATE HAS suffered serious setbacks in the last two years. Daesh (Islamic State or IS) emerged as a more brutal and, with its territorial gains in Syria and Iraq, successful jihadist competitor to al-Qa'ida. Yet by October 2019, its self-declared Caliphate had crumbled and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, committed suicide under duress of an U.S. operation, leaving the global jihadist movement without a center of gravity. Both Daesh and al-Qa'ida (AQ) have been weakened and pushed underground; despite an increasingly widespread network, there is no central battleground on which jihadists can concentrate their aspirations and efforts, as they did Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan over the last two decades. West Africa, and particularly Nigeria, could likely fill this vacuum.

Afflicted with endemic and widespread corruption, absentee governments, high unemployment rates, mass poverty, and factionalized ethnic and religious groups, West Africa is vulnerable to jihadist radicalization and recruitment. The region's porous borders, organized criminal networks engaged in smuggling and trafficking (of drugs, people, and weapons), and tactical geographic positioning create a permissive environment for jihadi operations. The Islamic State already maintains armed groups in seven African countries—Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali,

Niger, and Nigeria—as well as small sleeper cells in Mauritania, Morocco, and Sudan.[1] Al-Baghdadi's successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, has confirmed Daesh's focus on West Africa, in addition to Europe.[2] Similarly, al-Qa'ida has an established presence in the region as well, with branches in North Africa and throughout the Sahel.

Although they share similar caliphal ambitions and relatively fluid membership, the various AQ and IS-affiliated groups in West Africa are increasingly competitive, not cooperative. This is particularly true in Nigeria, whose northern border regions are becoming the main locus of African, and global, jihadist competition. The largest economy in Africa, Nigeria is also home to what was once the deadliest terror group in the world: Boko Haram.[3] Various splinters of this group—including a still deadly but reduced Boko Haram (BH) led by the ruthless hardliner Abubakar Shekau, the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), the AQ-aligned Ansaru, and respective sympathizer factions—are now engaged in an escalating, and increasingly deadly, struggle for prominence, recruits, and resources. This fight for West Africa between terrorist groups could fuel a regional Islamist revival and shape the future leadership, ideology, and strategy of the global jihadist movement. Or, if approached strategically, it could be used to weaken the jihadist movement on the African continent.

Sahelian Terror Organizations

DAESH AND AL-QA'IDA AFFILIATES SPAN FAR AND WIDE IN AFRICA, ON A QUEST for continental dominance and the demise of democracy (*dar al-Harb*), to replace it with rules based on their extremist belief system (*dar al-Islam*). In sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel, terrorist groups flourish in the ungoverned space left by runaway governments that allow them to hide and train with complicity from local bandits.[4] In stateless areas with the least resistance, like Mali and Niger, jihadis create safe havens, using quasi-ethical claims to justify their actions.[5] Daesh counts among its branches not just ISWAP, which operates in the Lake Chad basin region, but also the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Islamic State in the Central African Province (ISCAP, in Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique), and a minimal presence in Mauritania and Morocco. Meanwhile, AQ's ranks include al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as well as AQ affiliates al-Shabaab in Somalia, Ansaru in Nigeria, and *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) in

the Maghreb and West Africa. Additionally, Boko Haram, and those that align with it, like the Bakura faction, are affiliated with neither Daesh nor AQ.

Many of these larger organizations consist of an amorphous complex of factions, cells, and groups that have shared ties of some kind, at some point, with one another. Some are splinter factions that have defected from a bigger group; others form strategic alliances or recruit local bandits for operations. They also have joined, and sometimes shifted, allegiances to the two central jihadist organizations: AQ and Daesh. This broader regional history of groups evolving, splitting, and realigning, shapes the dynamics at play in West Africa. Even as the center of gravity of African jihad shifts from the Sahel to West Africa, the ideas, disputes, and actors of Sahelian jihad help drive the violent competition between AQ- and Daesh-aligned groups within West Africa. It is helpful, thus, to review the major Sahelian jihadi groups and their influence on their West African counterparts.

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb

Arguably, the most influential terrorist organization in the Sahel is AQIM. It originated as an Algerian Salafist-jihadist group, and now operates in Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Niger, with core strengths in Mali. Birthed in 1998 from the Algerian civil war, AQIM's goal is to undo regional governments in a bid to implement Shar'ia law and anti-Western regimes.

AQIM rose to prominence under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdel, becoming one of the wealthiest terror organization's in the world through its trafficking of drug, arms, and humans as well as kidnapping foreigners for ransom in North Africa.[6] Before French forces assassinated him in June 2020, Droukdel was a pioneer of Sahelian jihad, expanding AQIM activities across the region to concretize his dream of a North African Islamic Caliphate. This included ties to and support for other African terrorist groups, which helped expand the Sahelian jihadi brand.

Although AQIM originally backed Boko Haram in Nigeria, it was quick to switch support from BH to splinter group *Jama'at Ansar al Muslimin fi Bilad al Sudan* ("Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa"), also known as Ansaru, which emerged following BH's indiscriminate killings of approximately 150 innocent Muslims in Kano, Nigeria. Ansaru announced its formation through flyers distributed in Kano shortly after the massacre, in January 2012.[7] From its inception, Ansaru coordinated its Nigerian operations with Mali-based AQIM and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), another Malian jihadi organization with strong ties to AQIM. Elite AQIM-trained operatives joined

Ansaru to train local members, import sophisticated systems, and, most importantly, spread AQIM's pan-African jihadist ideology. Such was AQIM's influence, that Ansaru adopted its goals, even when they extended outside their immediate area of operations, as when it announced it would continue attacking French targets until France ended its ban on the Islamic veil at home and its counterinsurgency in Mali (December 2012).[8]

During the Arab Spring, AQIM exhibited minimal operational activity as approximately 10,000 fighters from the Sahara and Sahel regions left to fight in Libya, Syria, and Iraq.[9] However, as some of those conflicts have lessened and fighters have returned, the significant coffers of AQIM and MUJWA have allowed it to support regional and local allied groups in resuming operations and carrying out attacks on meaningful sites, like the Timbuktu libraries.[10]

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

In 2017, the Saharan branch of AQIM, under Mokhtar Belmokhtar's leadership, merged with Al-Murabitun, Ansar al-Dine (AAD), and Katiba Macina to form JNIM, a hierarchical militant alliance, headed by AQIM.[11]

JNIM is now seen as the prominent terrorist group in the Sahel and one of AQ's most successful affiliates, dedicated to driving foreign forces out of Mali and instating fundamentalist Islamic law. Despite the autonomy of JNIM groups, they reaffirm membership within the umbrella coalition, conducting complex attacks, assassinations, and IED attacks against United Nations (UN), Malian, and French forces and soft targets.[12] However, such collaboration does not infer identical strategic priorities, with varied tactical approaches resulting from local, regional, and national socioeconomic and political peculiarities.[13]

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

The origins of JNIM's biggest competition in the Sahel, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, coincide with MUJWA's fragmentation. MUJWA split from AQIM in late 2011, due to over-representation of Arabs, instead of locals, among its commanders and differences regarding jihadi methods.[14] MUJWA focused exclusively on the Sahel, before splitting again in 2015. Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui —one of the founding members of MUJWA and current ISGS leader—pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and subsequently formed ISGS while other MUJWA

fighters stayed with al-Murabitun and went on to eventually join JNIM. Daesh recognized al-Sahraoui's pledge seventeen months later, sparking a two-year transformation period during which he recruited followers, trained members, raised funds, and set up shop in the regional nexus of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. ISGS gained international notoriety following the deadly ambush in Niger in October 2017 that killed four U.S. Special Forces and five Nigerien troops.[15] The growing notoriety of ISGS led to an inevitable absorption into ISWAP ranks and shared technical backing, in a bid to further dismantle West African governments through Islamization.

Like other Sahelian jihadist organizations, ISGS uses poachers, criminals, and traffickers familiar with the terrain as additional manpower to support the operations of its trained fighters. Despite its low number of fighters (over 300),[16] the group remains lethal through sophisticated attacks against remote military bases, oftentimes disconnecting military communications' channels before launching mortars and jihadists on motorbikes, who disappear before the military can regroup and respond. Such attacks saw 89 Nigerien security forces killed in January 2020, and another 300 deaths within two months, leading President Macron to shift security priorities in Africa from fighting AQ to ISGS. At the G5 summit gathering between France, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, President Macron stated, "the priority is the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara,"[17] with Burkina President Kabore later echoing that the group "has emerged as our main enemy, against whom we should focus our struggle."

Boko Haram and West African Jihadism

DESPITE THE SAHEL PREVIOUSLY BEING THE FOCUS OF JIHADIST ACTIVITY IN AFRICA, dominated by AQ- and Daesh-aligned groups in Mali, the most active terrorist groups now operate along the borders of northern Nigeria with Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISGS, re-emerging AQ affiliates such as Ansaru, and a multitude of violent communal bandits and ethnic militias wreaking the most havoc. Most of these groups have a common root in the original Boko Haram insurgency and are the product of fragmentation and disagreement, particularly since BH leadership was taken over in 2009 by Abubakar Shekau.

In the past, these groups cooperated both horizontally (with each other as well as with other African jihadist groups) and vertically (pledging allegiance to global jihadist movements), providing them with resources and collaborative opportunities while reinforcing the agenda of attacking beyond their domestic borders. This can be seen in Ansaru and BH's joint attacks along Nigeria's borders with Niger and Cameroon from March to May 2013, in an attempt to deter local security forces from supporting the French-led intervention in Mali.[18] Similarly, the diverse membership of Boko Haram's Shura council—the highest decision-making body—once included not just senior BH commanders but also representatives of Ansaru, AQIM, and MUJWA.[19] Meanwhile Daesh, in a bid to show public support and absorb existing cells under their umbrella, accepted pledges from BH (in March 2015) and ISGS (in October 2016), while praising terror attacks in remote areas like Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo.[20]

The seemingly invincible leader of the Boko Haram (also known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* or JAS) insurgency, Abubakar Shekau, portrays himself as a mobilizer and pioneer. He quickly took on an autocratic leadership role following his escape from prison in 2009 and the death of Boko Haram's founder, Muhammad Yusuf. Of Kanuri descent, like Yusuf, Shekau evinces staunch ideological commitment to Islamic social reform, which he believes is best achieved through intense and ruthless jihad. He has openly identified with other theaters of jihad, including Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali,[21] yet has no desire to internationalize the group's activity, even accusing all Muslims living in "infidel lands" of heresy. Unlike many other jihadist groups' dreams of a transnational or global Caliphate, Shekau is focused solely on establishing an Islamic State in northern Nigeria.

Many high-ranking members of the Nigerian Army believe Shekau lacks the literary as well as Islamic and Western know-how to maintain leadership within the insurgency and is walking a tight rope of survival.[22] Rather than set Boko Haram apart from other terror organizations by developing new means for waging jihad, Shekau relies on execution videos à la Daesh or pictures of slaughtered civilians and security agency camp boys, which BH then portrays as executed military men, to induce fear amongst the populace.[23] Having allegedly attained the rank of mufti, Shekau claims to be able to issue fatwas on topics without any explicit law (*ijtihād*), however rival factions have claimed he distorts issues and misleads his followers.[24] Shekau accuses anyone that is not a member of his group of heresy and adapts interpretations of Quranic texts to suit his needs, going as far as to issue fatwas against those that defected from BH to join other jihadist groups.

His dictatorial tendencies and thirst for power, demonstrated by forcible con-

scriptions and the inability of existing members to question his decisions for fear of death, have led multiple factions to depart from BH, leaving only dedicated grassroots followers tolerant of his unimaginative leadership style. In recent times, Shekau has noticeably displayed expansionary plans within northern Nigeria, releasing a video in June that featured English, French-Cameroonian, Fulani, and Hausa-speaking fighters acknowledging fellow fighters in Zamfara and Niger states.[25] Less than a month later, BH fighters in Niger State returned the greetings to Shekau and their "brothers" in Zamfara. This signifies a key shift from Boko Haram's primary base in Sambisa forest in north-eastern Nigeria to growing activity in Zamfara, and Niger states, in Nigeria's northwest and Middle Belt, respectively.

Nonetheless, due to his firm *takfiri* belief, Shekau lacks any concrete links with jihadists outside of his enclave, with no direct support from international terror groups.[26] Although Shekau has sought to secure international endorsement, volatile leadership skills, claiming to support at various times either AQ or Daesh as discussed below, his unwillingness to execute an expansion strategy, and lack of innovation minimizes the risk of any longstanding collaboration with other jihadi groups.

Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida

FROM AS EARLY AS 2003, SAUDI-BORN NIGERIAN YUSUF AHMED, A PROMINENT BH leader, sent 21 members to train in Niger with AQIM's predecessor, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Ties between al-Qa'ida and BH can be traced back to BH's founding, with evidence of meetings between BH and GSPC in Nigeria. AQ's external operations unit in Pakistan even directed senior BH members on target locations in Nigeria.[27] After the Boko Haram uprising of July 2009, which saw a violent clash between BH and Nigerian Security Forces and the extra-judicial killing of BH founder Mohammed Yusuf, Shekau and his foot soldiers fled to Sambisa Forest, an abandoned game reserve, to hide, regroup, and mobilize additional support.

Other surviving sect members spread like wildfire to neighboring countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The decentralized operating structure of the insurgency meant detached cells were able to function under the spiritual guidance of Shekau.[28] By early August 2009, AQIM had provided 200,000 Euros and training in support of Boko Haram, referring to the group as its Nigerian *mumathil*

(representative).[29] So well-founded was the nature of the AQ-BH alliance that following Yusuf's extrajudicial killing, an interim BH leader stated:

> Boko Haram is just a version of al-Qa'ida, which we align with and respect. We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is totally Islamized, which is according to the wish of Allah.[30]

Three months later, in December 2009, a failed Christmas Day bombing of a North West Airlines flight to Detroit by a young Nigerian trained in Yemen by al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula further evidenced the informal, yet heavy-duty, support AQ provided to strengthen Boko Haram's capabilities as the group renewed itself underground. The following year, Droukdel publicly offered to train and arm the insurgency to wage attacks in Nigeria.

AQ's tactical influence on Boko Haram became apparent through the introduction of suicide bombings, with the first successful attack in August 2011 using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) against the international target of UN Headquarters in Abuja, claiming twenty-three lives and injuring over a hundred civilians.[31] A martyrdom video released shortly after, described the UN as the "Forum of all the global evil," while praising Bin Laden.[32] However, the concerning shift in BH's tactics toward the use of women and children as suicide bombers (including girls as young as seven years old) combined with Shekau's merciless killings of innocents, led Droukdel to shift AQIM's support to the breakaway faction of Ansaru.[33]

Interestingly, Ansaru is comprised of Hausa and Fulani militants, unlike Shekau's predominately Kanuri Boko Haram that uses Fulani members to commit suicide attacks. Based in Kaduna and Kano of north-western Nigeria, Ansaru presented itself as the humane alternative to BH, vowing to "restore the dignity of Muslims in Black Africa,"[34] many of whom had been accused of treason by Shekau. Following a string of successful joint kidnappings that funded both groups, they severed their ties as Shekau shunned Ansaru's negotiations with the Nigerian government and Ansaru favored AQIM's continental focus over Shekau's regional, takfiri narrative.

Al-Qa'ida continues to propagate ideology in the region, publishing booklets in April 2017 that recounted Boko Haram's history with AQIM and showed its moderation compared to Daesh. This propaganda is designed to convince BH fighters operating in Nigeria to see the error of their ways and accept the purpose of AQIM as they did in the past.[35] Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi authored

the booklet and is coincidentally a former member of Boko Haram's Shura Council, underlining AQ's resolve to re-establish activity in Nigeria. Recent attacks in Kaduna[36] point to AQ's alignment with Ansaru as a means of securing a revival in Nigeria, most notably the February 2020 attempted kidnapping of Umaru Bubaram, Emir of Potiskum in Yobe State.[37]

Despite ideological and ethnic differences between Boko Haram and Ansaru, the lack of clarity regarding a seemingly fluid membership obscures any intra-group lines, indicating a transient connection. Following the 2016 arrest of its leader Khalid al-Barnawi in Nigeria, Ansaru remains without clear leadership. The recent death of AQIM leader Droukdel further complicates the group's situation and might well catalyze further operations within north-western Nigeria to prove its viability in the fight for West African hearts and minds.

Boko Haram and Daesh

SHEKAU DECLARED A CALIPHATE IN BORNO STATE IN AUGUST 2014 AND, IN A move destined to be short-lived and problematic, shirked Boko Haram's history of ties with al-Qa'ida to pledge allegiance to Daesh. In 2015, under President Buhari's new administration, the Nigerian Armed Forces, in conjunction with the Multinational Joint Task Force's 7,500-man counter-insurgency operation,[38] made critical gains against the Boko Haram insurgency. In an attempt to save face, Shekau strategically made a second pledge of allegiance.

Subsequently, the eighth issue of the Islamic State's online magazine *Dabiq*, published in March 2015 and entitled "Shari'a alone will rule Africa," publicized the group's loyalty.[39] Acknowledgement of the symbolic allegiance from both groups soon turned into a cooperative endeavor, with former Daesh spokesman Shakyh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stating in *Dabiq*:

> We bring you the good news today of the Khilāfah's expansion to West Africa, for the Khalīfa has accepted the pledge of allegiance made by our brothers...So whoever is stopped by the disbelieving rulers, and prevented from emigrating to Iraq, Shām, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, or Khurasan, will not be prevented—by Allah's permission—from emigrating to Africa. So come, O Muslims, to

your state, for we call on you to mobilize for jihād and incite you and invite you to emigrate to your brothers in West Africa.[40]

This further extended the group's psychological warfare as two of the world's most brutal terror organizations[41] had joined forces, confirming BH as a globally recognized threat. Shekau successfully boosted members' morale and image, having regained international support and public backing. Still, Shekau's union with Daesh was destined to be fleeting as he had overlooked a key element of such an alliance: shared leadership.

Abubakar Shekau is a leader accustomed to making executive decisions and managing the group's finances, irrespective of the thirty-member Shura Council that commands the group's regional cells.[42] From as early as May 2011, Shekau refused to acknowledge shared leadership, even refuting northern Nigeria's first terrorist kidnapping of foreigners by an AQIM guided Ansaru-BH cell as a BH success story, with rumors of his faction exposing this and similar "traitorous" cells to Nigerian Intelligence at the time.[43] Unsurprisingly, Shekau clashed with al-Baghdadi almost instantly. He rejected al-Baghdadi's authority as Caliph, sentenced apostate Muslims to death, and ruthlessly punished his internal critics. In August 2016, ISWAP emerged as a new splinter group, shunning, as Ansaru did previously, Shekau's hardliner approach to diplomatic negotiations and his indiscriminate killing of Muslims, women, and children.

Baghdadi recognized Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi as head of ISWAP and the rightful leader of Boko Haram, most likely due to the symbolism of his father Muhammad Yusuf being the founding father of the insurgency. The threat to Shekau's previously undisputed leadership was both symbolic and ideological, a dangerous combination for the narcissist. Meanwhile, ISWAP declared the Shekau sect *Khawarij*.[44] In fact, so opposed is ISWAP to the takfiri ideology of Shekau that, in June 2018, the group released a 124-page book in Arabic, written by al-Barnawi and another of Yusuf's sons. The book, *Cutting out the Tumor of the Khawarij of Shekau by the Allegiance pledge of the People of Nobility*,[45] refutes the claims of "chain takfirism"[46] that Shekau uses to justify murdering civilians, Muslims, and his own commanders. The second chapter of al-Barnawi's book, "The Principles of Faith of the Khawarij," details Shekau's deviation from the path of Islam, with subsequent chapters explaining the implications of deviancy and justifications for fighting BH based on religious rulings.

The book was a clear attempt to establish al-Barnawi's grip on ISWAP and galvanize international and regional support, while criminalizing Shekau and his regional supporters, thus converting new members and defectors to ISWAP's

ranks. It worked. Defectors from Shekau's faction migrated to join ISWAP along the northern fringes of Lake Chad in the ungoverned border towns of Nigeria, Niger, and Chad.

Adopting the same economic prowess as Daesh exhibited in Iraq and Syria,[47] ISWAP strategically took control over the fish and pepper trade in the Lake Chad region, together worth $48 million annually. Internally displaced peoples (IDPs) soon began farming, fishing, and trading under the careful supervision of ISWAP, a seemingly better alternative to the inhumane conditions of the IDP camps. In turn, the group capitalized on the opportunity to recruit new members by spreading the news that Allah blessed their war with improved marine life, a "symbolic manna from heaven,"[48] a stark contrast to the logical conclusion that reduced population and human activity around the lake, due to the insurgency, resulted in more aquatic life. According to HumAngle, a local spoke of the difficulty in choosing between starvation and safety in the IDP camps, and the "abundance of food, where life can end any minute."[49]

The group also collects levies from farmers, herders, and fishermen, taxing all produce cultivated by locals, and charging a substantial fee for the provision of security. ISWAP thereby receives a constant stream of revenue independent from other affiliates; it can make millions of naira on a daily basis during peak seasons for fish and red pepper, due to the payments for fishing rights, levies, and livestock taxes. These funds allow the group to lure in new members through livelihood support, monthly stipends, and transactional relationships with other armed groups in the region, thus building a network of smaller, radical cells in north-western Nigeria.

Meanwhile, the remnants of Shekau's faction remain in southern Borno and northern Adamawa states in Nigeria and the north-western parts of Cameroon. Boko Haram continues to thrive across borders, surviving a deployment of 40,000 Nigerian troops and coordinated attacks from the Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF),[50] comprised of Nigerian, Chadian, Nigerien, and Cameroonian armed forces.[51] Shekau retains his legitimacy due to his nomination as deputy by Muhammad Yusuf and his steadfast loyalty to the grassroots disciples in Borno state,[52] but his ambition and influence is not limited to that region.

Recently, a new "Bakura faction" pledging loyalty to Shekau surfaced around the Lake Chad basin. Its attacks on fishermen and civilians suggest the BH-aligned faction is unwilling to let ISWAP control trade in the Lake Chad basin. As Bakura Doron himself originates from northern Lake Chad, it is not farfetched to assume his group will set up shop as Shekau's reinforcement in the region.[53] However, Shekau's need to maintain absolute authority at all costs may affect this new part-

nership. Just as he earlier traded al-Qa'ida's long-standing power, connections, and resources within Africa for Daesh's infamy and public support only to abandon both groups, so, too, might Shekau leave his current partners in the Bakura faction when a better opportunity presents itself.

Indeed, in March 2020, according to Major General MG Ali, Deputy Theatre Commander of Operation Lafiya Dole and Special Forces Commander, ISWAP allegedly initiated a reconciliation attempt with BH in a strategic bid to jointly ward off the military's constant bombardments of its open and exposed locations in northern Borno.[54] The gambit was swiftly declared dead on arrival, with negotiations condemned on both sides. However, the fact that Shekau never renounced his loyalty to the Islamic State means he might still view the two factions as connected, perhaps in a bid to keep strategic opportunities open.

The Fight for West Africa

WEST AFRICA IS EMERGING AS A FRONTLINE IN THE GLOBAL JIHAD MOVEMENT. Permissive local environments afford opportunities within the area for jihadism to spread and feed into the strength of the larger Islamist movement, from North to East Africa. The region's jihadist landscape is comprised, in part, of splintered local jihadist groups, whose competing ideologies and ambitions are stoking a competition with a cocktail of issues no single government can control. This jihadist fight for West Africa has led to escalating levels of communal violence and increasing attacks on military and civilian targets as regional groups seek to one-up each other. Power plays between the likes of ISWAP and Boko Haram, or ISGS and JNIM, will further the groups' resilience, bringing more violence in areas under their control, and suggest a future expansion of targets along the West African coast.

The coronavirus pandemic saw most African governments scrambling to bolster their national healthcare while inadvertently enabling the unmonitored migration of terrorist actors and bandits across West Africa. Governments have been left economically vulnerable, with the tactical resources needed to counter jihadist insurgencies stretched thin.[55] On the operational front, ISWAP has been carrying out a repertoire of medium-scale attacks against the Nigerian Army since July 2019 and will most likely gain more ground and membership. BH publicly undermines the military, by denying Shekau's alleged deaths while looting

weapons and ammunition to further jihadist causes across Nigeria's borders. ISWAP claimed the lives of twenty two Nigerian soldiers in a November 2019 attack near Damboa and successfully conducted a three-man suicide raid on the MNJTF Post in Monguno.[56] In January, ISWAP reported at least seven separate attacks on the Nigerian military and police in addition to a video from *AMAQ*, the Daesh propaganda arm, showing a child executing a Nigerian Christian in ISWAP custody,[57] a similar tactic used by Shekau to desensitize new recruits early on. More recently, the April 2020 gruesome murder of a Chadian soldier by a Chadian, Arabic-speaking ISWAP commander sent a chilling message to President Déby, following his claims that the group had been expelled from Chad.[58] Given that the group's commanders usually speak in classical Arabic or Hausa, the Chadian context proves ISWAP's continued presence in spite of numerous counterinsurgency operations.[59]

Amid this increase in violence, the Nigerian Air Force and Air Task Force's Operation Lafiya Dole conducted multiple airstrikes in Sambisa Forest, resulting in several gains neutralizing a BH logistics facility[60] and claiming lives of several BH leaders in July.[61] Yet, from April to June 2020, BH, ISWAP, and regional armed forces traded attacks back and forth: ISWAP claimed credit for an Improvised Explosive Device attack on a Nigerian Army vehicle and the mortar shelling of a Chadian Army base;[62] Boko Haram opened fire on the convoy of Nigerian Senator Ali Modu Sheriff, the former governor of Borno state, and his family, killing five.[63] Even the Ansaru faction has joined the fray, claiming a January 2020 attack on Nigerian soldiers in Kaduna that caused over twenty-five casualties.[64] This, alongside the attempted kidnapping of the Potiskum emir in Kaduna, was the faction's first major action since the 2013 French military intervention in northern Mali that led Ansaru to temporarily withdraw operational support to AQIM and AQ in order to operate more effectively with local groups in Borno State and northern Cameroon.[65] These attacks confirm the rebirth of Ansaru as a competing terror organization in West Africa.

In terms of civilian warfare, Boko Haram has been consistently terrorizing locals in North Cameroon, with a recent attack in the Kassa-Dara village (September 2020), claiming the lives of a catechist and an old woman.[66] The group also abducted and killed five aid workers in July 2020 as a caution to international aid groups.[67] Since January, ISWAP has frequently targeted humanitarian workers, even distributing warning letters to residents about aligning with military or international aid groups.[68] A total of twenty four aid workers have been killed in north-eastern Nigeria between August 2019 to 2020. The back and forth of attacks against the military and civilians from ISWAP, BH, and Ansaru shows a

competitive fight to win the hearts and minds of West African jihadists, notably through frequent targeted killings against the *kuffar,* unbelievers that include the Christian population.

Clashes in the Sahel between ISGS and JNIM are also further evidence of a power struggle for the regional jihadi mindset. ISGS and JNIM battled intensely over five days along the Mali-Burkina Faso border in mid-April 2020, with ISGS killing sixty JNIM militants and capturing forty prisoners.[69] The first May 2020 edition of the Islamic State's weekly newsletter *Al-Naba*, claimed al-Qa'ida to be treacherous, starting "a war against" and "participating in the war against the mujahideen,"[70] by working with the Malian government to control the border with Algeria and Mauritania. In turn, JNIM attempted a parley via a series of booklets to detractors by appealing to Sahelian jihadis to join forces, including several audio messages focusing on doctrinal divergences between JNIM and ISGS, which fell on deaf ears.[71] An influx of new ISGS splinter groups may soon arise in West Africa, as seen in Mali and Burkina Faso (January 2020), which will further fragment the jihadist landscape.[72] With ISGS shifting focus towards the inland Niger Delta, recruiting in villages through financial incentives and spoils of war, it is likely JNIM will upgrade its military strategies, fragment and follow ISGS along the Niger Delta into West African terrain.

In northwest Nigeria, Ansaru has been campaigning for rural support. It has steadily forged ties with smaller radical groups, particularly in Zamfara State, by selling them low-cost weapons donated by JNIM allies. It has also deployed clerics to undermine democratic rule and governmental peace efforts in Zamfara in a bid to win support through a "hearts and minds campaign."[73] However, Ansaru is not the only group active in the region, which has become another arena in the jihadists' struggle for power. ISWAP, too, is carving out stronger relationships with aggrieved communities, radically inclined armed groups, and organized criminal entities. Meanwhile, in June 2020, Boko Haram released a video in four languages wooing armed groups in northwest and north-central Nigeria to its cause.[74]

Another factor that could shape this competition between groups is their leadership, especially the uncertainty surrounding control of ISWAP. However, ISWAP leadership is seemingly more collective than competing groups, with a tactical focus on shared governance.[75]

Before his own death, Daesh's leader, al-Baghdadi ordered the killing of a high-ranking ISWAP commander, Mamman Nur, in September 2018,[76] for his seemingly weak leadership style in comparison to Shekau's tyrannical stance, particularly following the release of around one hundred Dapchi school girls.[77] This appears to have discredited the ISWAP leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, caus-

ing him to flee underground.[78] Although there are indications that he has been replaced by the formerly unknown Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar Albarnawi, these claims are yet to be confirmed by Daesh itself.[79]

This changing of the guard presents an opportunity for other West African terrorist organizations. Ansaru, in particular, might try to leverage the confusion over ISWAP's leadership to pry away its members. Shekau might seek to absorb some of the more extremist members of ISWAP into Boko Haram as part of his expansion across northern Nigeria, especially following the low turnout in recent Boko Haram Eid celebration photographs. Conversely, the emergence of Albarnawi as ISWAP's new commander could pose problems for Boko Haram. As 'al-Barnawi' in Arabic means "the man from Borno," the ISWAP leader could use his provenance to poach Boko Haram followers from Borno, followers on whom Shekau relies to maintain legitimacy and control of BH.

Alternatively, the lack of an official Daesh declaration of Albarnawi's rise to ISWAP's leadership might signal the group's growing strength. This silence, like that which met Nur's execution, marks a polarizing change from Daesh's public announcement,[80] through a number of official and affiliated media channels, when it originally instated Shaykh al-Barnawi at ISWAP's helm. It strongly suggests that Daesh, unable to direct or even influence ISWAP's decisions, is now the weaker of the two organizations, especially since ISGS joined the ISWAP ranks. An inside source spoke of ISWAP's growing operational autonomy, "IS [Daesh] doesn't have the kind of tight control on ISWAP as many are suggesting…." Another source— also anonymous for security reasons—explained, "they [Daesh] wouldn't want to upset their hosts and will have to live with ISWAP's infractions and different approach."[81] Following the loss of its self-declared Caliphate and Caliph, Daesh requires ISWAP's strength, weaponry, ammunition, and numbers. The source claimed Daesh "are now looking to the Sahel for sanctuary," confirming that "IS needs ISWAP more than ISWAP needs them because of the defeat it has suffered in Syria and Iraq."[82] Many counter-terror experts believe ISWAP has risen to become the deadliest terror organization within sub-Saharan Africa.[83] Even as ISWAP grows more independent of Daesh, increasing its operational strength and assembling a greater arsenal from its weekly military raids, its strategy is likely to align more closely with global jihadist trends. This will likely include investing in the expansion of existing networks and the creation of wider, international networks to operate across the global theaters of jihad.

Meanwhile, Boko Haram will continue following a different approach. Shekau exhibits great reticence towards regional expansion; he would rather die in power à la Baghdadi than forge new alliances and align with less takfiri-centric ideologies.[84]

This could create leadership challenges within Boko Haram as well. It has proven the most lethal regional terrorist organization thus far, with 2,537 deaths counted in Nigeria between January 2019 and January 2020,[85] rendering Nigeria the third most terrorized country in the world.[86] However, Shekau's tactical success and proven staying power, aided by a persecution narrative fueled by State violence, could be undone by his greed, lust for power, and despotic takfiri ideology. He might retain his core group of loyalists, since those who once opposed him have either already defected, or were killed by Boko Haram, leaving only the most indoctrinated and merciless behind. Or his supporters, realizing that Shekau's chances of reclaiming leadership of a united Boko Haram (including defected and splinter factions) for the successful establishment of a Caliphate are extremely slim, might defect to ISWAP and AQ-backed Ansaru.

The ideological, strategic, and personality differences of West African jihadist organizations, coupled with the turbulent dynamics of membership and defectors within BH, Ansaru, Islamic State factions and sympathizers, further extends the ongoing presence of religious extremism within the region. In Nigeria, the State has failed to develop the capacity to resolve religious differences without generating violence, meanwhile the dividing lines between various religions are increasing and widening.[87] With West Africa's rising economic marginality, religious groups and preachers have become major sources of mobilization, particularly in the absence of stable political and religious climates. This paves the way for future outbreaks along sectarian lines and clashes between different Muslim sects and, by default, jihadist factions, as seen in the high levels of intolerance irrespective of religious lines.

Conclusion

THE BATTLE FOR THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF WEST AFRICAN JIHADISTS IS STILL very much alive between Boko Haram, al-Qa'ida, and Daesh. The result of this struggle will likely shape the future of terrorism all over the African continent. One outcome, however, is unlikely: unification. Despite the shared goal of attaining a Caliphate, fundamental differences in strategy, leadership, and, most importantly, ideology render this goal unattainable. Daesh views AQ as the "Base of Apostasy," in a play on the group's name, while AQ have commonly designated Daesh as *Khawarij*.

Both BH and ISWAP continue to lead increasingly violent attacks on each other as well as on Nigerian security forces and civilian aid workers. The Sahel is likely to become a front in this fight for West Africa as ISWAP subsumes ISGS and Ansaru re-establishes ties with AQIM. As a result, the West African battleground continues to out-terrorize the jihadist Sahelian front, with a strong possibility for an extremist Islamist revival in northern Nigeria and surrounding countries, assuming it is not already currently underway.

These conflict dynamics are also likely to further internationalize the fight against terrorism in Africa. President Macron already declared ISGS a priority for France and its five Sahel allies in January.[88] Yet as ISGS merges with ISWAP and Ansaru expands into Francophone West Africa, France and other allies could be obliged to mobilize an intervention in a growing number of African countries. Such a boots-on-the-ground approach, however, would not only bring more devastation and civilian displacement, due to clashes between security forces and insurgent groups, but also misses the jihadists' key strategic weaknesses.

Fighting as much among themselves as against the existing states of West Africa, the region's jihadists are irreconcilably divided. A psychological war, waged through the fusion of security agents, quick adoption of and action on human and signals intelligence, and information and political operations, could pit the ideological differences between these insurgents against one another.

More political dialogue with sympathizers to groups like Boko Haram should be adopted to end the cyclical violence caused by military operations by both governments and armed militias. Creating a large-scale discourse with vulnerable communities could considerably lessen jihadists' opportunities for recruitment. For instance, dialoging with children and repentant fighters to encourage and educate them will facilitate deradicalization efforts, particularly in the case of BH's forcible conscription.[89] By engaging religious leaders and spreading a counter-narrative by leveraging and improving upon existing defector programs, such as the Nigerian Government's Operation Safe Corridor, those who still feel compelled to join the jihadist fight will be denied the opportunity. The reintegration of repentant Boko Haram combatants into war efforts can aid negotiation efforts with their former comrades. Ultimately, it is the primary responsibility of Sahelian governments to win the hearts and minds of their citizens in an asymmetrical warfare campaign, by creating opportunities to engage the populace, counter extremist preaching, and modifying cultural narratives to educate the masses, thereby better equipping them in the face of violent extremism.

Until then, the fight for West Africa will continue.

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The "Central African" Jihad: Islamism and Nation-Building in Mozambique and Uganda

By James Barnett

THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) HAS NOT SCORED MANY PROPAGANDA victories in the year since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed by U.S. forces in Idlib, which makes the recent seizure of a Mozambican port by IS-linked jihadists all the more significant. On August 12, 2020, militants seized Mocímboa da Praia in the gas-rich Cabo Delgado province from a demoralized Mozambican army running low on ammunition. This assault on a city of 30,000—the militants' third and most successful this year—marked a notable evolution in an insurgency that began three years ago and was initially characterized by crude and sporadic attacks on villages in the

northern province.[2] IS media channels were quick to produce triumphalist statements about the operation, which it attributed to soldiers in its newest affiliate, the Central Africa Province (Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiya or ISCAP).

Since mid-2019, ISCAP has increasingly claimed attacks in both eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and northern Mozambique, yet the affiliate remains poorly understood. ISCAP does not represent a single group but rather two independent insurgencies, one waged by a DRC-based Ugandan rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and the other by a group of insurgents in Cabo Delgado alternatively known as Ansar Sunnah, al-Shabaab (no formal relation to the Somali group), or Ahlu Sunnah Wa Jama aka ASWJ (meaning "adherents to the Sunnah and the community," a term sometimes used to refer to all Sunni Muslims). The nature of these two groups' ties with each other and the wider Islamic State network remains vague, but this need not preclude an interrogation of how Salafi-jihadist insurgencies emerged in two areas without long histories of such radicalization.

While the ADF's and ASWJ's stories differ in many ways, they notably both emerged in opposition to regimes that came to power as Pan-African, left-wing liberation movements. For ideological, historical, and ethnopolitical reasons, both the Mozambican and Ugandan regimes were at best suspicious, if not outright hostile, to organized Islam from their first days in power. Both regimes sought to control and coopt Muslim elites in order to neutralize any potential Islamic political project from emerging. In doing so, they alienated segments of their respective Muslim communities in ways that laid the groundwork for an insurgency, more immediately in the case of Uganda than in Mozambique.

This is not to suggest that the left-wing roots of the Mozambican and Ugandan regimes are the sole factor behind the rise of these insurgencies, which are complex and multi-causal phenomena. The liberation movements are not the only African regimes to have sought to coopt Muslim elites, nor, for that matter, are Uganda and Mozambique the first countries to produce Islamist backlash through a secular political program. After all, the Afghan mujahideen first took up arms against Nur Muhammad Taraki's Marxist-Leninist regime.

This is simply to say that we cannot understand the ideological dimension of jihadism in the cases of the ADF and ASWJ solely by examining the religious beliefs of the militants themselves. We must also consider these groups as tragic byproducts—violent discontents or dissidents of a sort—of bold but faltering attempts at a particular type of post-colonial nation-building.

The Mozambique Liberation Front's Fraught Relationship with Islam

FOR CENTURIES MOZAMBIQUE'S NORTHERN COAST REPRESENTED THE SOUTHERN reaches of Muslim Swahili civilization. Swahili slave traders and the migration of the ethnic Yao brought Islam into Mozambique's interior in the 19th century, but to this day the faith remains strongest in the northern coastal communities.[3] The Portuguese, having established a littoral presence in the early 16th century, formally colonized present-day Mozambique in 1891 but did not govern it as a single administration until 1942, contributing to strong regional divisions and a weak national identity that persist to this day.[4] The Portuguese looked down upon Islam and viewed the local Sufi *turuq* as part of an Arab anti-colonial conspiracy. A Portuguese official declared in 1937 that Islamism was "as disruptive and prejudicial as bolshevism," a harsh statement in the context of Antonio Salazar's right-wing *Estado Novo*.[5]

As it turned out, the Portuguese would soon come to see Islam as far more tolerable than left-wing rebellion, which began in Mozambique with the establishment of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in 1962. Playing on regional, ethnic, and ideological divisions, the Portuguese succeeded in coopting many Muslim leaders, including in Cabo Delgado, as a counterweight to FRELIMO (the Portuguese nevertheless persecuted other Muslims viewed as seditious). The colonial authorities funded *hajj* for certain Muslim elites, repaired mosques, published Portuguese translations of Islamic texts such as Bukhari's *hadith*, and helped East African graduates of Wahhabi institutes in the Gulf expand their presence in the country.[6] Some Muslims fought for FRELIMO, but the group never had enthusiastic support in Muslim populations, nor across the wider nation for that matter.

In contrast to other African liberation movements, FRELIMO never took power through revolution and mass mobilization. Rather, a 1974 military coup in Lisbon, dubbed the Carnation Revolution, brought an abrupt end to the *Estado Novo* and Portugal's empire. FRELIMO had won independence only insofar as the liberal officers behind the revolution felt it was wasteful for a small country to be fighting long wars abroad. A year after the coup, Mozambique was granted independence and FRELIMO assumed power, albeit with a weak popular mandate.

The ambivalence if not antipathy of many Muslims towards FRELIMO during

the independence struggle would help sour relations between the new Mozambican state and Cabo Delgado's Muslims, who constitute some 58 percent of the province, for years to come.[7] The shaky foundations of FRELIMO's rule, meanwhile, contributed to the outbreak of civil war in 1977 pitting the government against a rebel outfit, dubbed RENAMO, that received backing from neighboring South Africa and Rhodesia (which both sought to punish FRELIMO for supporting fellow liberation movements in their respective countries). That same year, FRELIMO adopted Marxism-Leninism as its official ideology, declared a one-party state, and initiated a campaign of secularization. Islam was particularly affected by the party's antireligious policies to the point that Muslims were forced to build pigsties in their neighborhoods in the name of development.[8]

Some of this anti-Islamic program was rooted in ethnic and regional factors, but there was a strong ideological dimension as well. President Samora Machel was committed to modernization and collectivism as both a communal and individual project. Machel's "New Man" would reject traditional culture and adopt a scientific mindset.[9] "Closely related to the battle for unity is the struggle to wipe out the spirit of individualism and to foster a collective spirit," Machel noted in one of his speeches. "The struggle against tribalism, racism, *false religious and family loyalty*... is essential if the barrel of our gun is always to be trained on the correct target."[10] [emphasis mine]

These anti-religious policies deeply alienated Muslim communities at a time when FRELIMO needed all the allies it could muster in the fight against RENAMO. By the early 1980s, FRELIMO adopted a less repressive stance towards Islam and instead sought to coopt Muslim leaders through national religious organizations, notably the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO). By 1989, FRELIMO recognized the need to improve its image in the West, which culminated in a 1992 peace agreement with RENAMO. FRELIMO publicly committed to multiparty democracy and relaxed restrictions on civil society, leading to an influx of Gulf, Libyan, and Sudanese NGOs, some of which promoted Wahhabism.[11]

FRELIMO never abandoned its suspicion of politicized Islam, however. It courted Islamic organizations and started bringing more Muslims into its ranks in the mid-1990s, but by 2000 it was expelling activist Muslims from its ranks, keeping only those who would not question a secular party agenda. While FRELIMO now operated in an ostensibly multiparty system (albeit a flawed one that saw many former RENAMO fighters take up arms again in the 2000s), the party still acted in many ways as a Leninist vanguard that brooked no internal dissent. For Muslims to advance within the party—and by extension, within national politics—they would have to subordinate the interests of their religious community to the party's

agenda. FRELIMO did not win any elections in Muslim areas until 2004, and only then with low turnout.[12]

FRELIMO not only failed to endear itself to the broader Muslim public; it intentionally exacerbated rising tensions within the Muslim community in order to prevent the emergence of an organized challenge to its rule from some one-fifth of the population. The major fault line was between the Sufi elites—themselves a divided lot—and the newer Wahhabi community that dominated CISLAMO, the FRELIMO-backed "national" organization. There were divisions within the Wahhabi community too, however. The fact that CISLAMO's leadership was largely South Asian or mixed-race and hailed from the south alienated Black Muslims in the north, many of whom had studied at Wahhabi institutes abroad on CISLAMO scholarships. Frustrated with the cooptation and corruption of CISLAMO leaders, some of these Wahhabi graduates founded a grassroots fundamentalist movement, Ahl al Sunnah, in the late 1990s. Some scholars, such as Liazzat Bonate, have suggested that today's insurgency may have its roots in this group.[13]

Along with this sociopolitical and religious context, it is important to understand the role of economic marginalization, and indeed exploitation, in the rise of ASWJ. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's poorest province, has become a flashpoint of the country's socioeconomic grievances. Thousands of residents have reportedly been displaced due to ruby and graphite mining, port development, and agribusiness projects.[14] The province has immense natural gas reserves that has spurred billions of dollars in foreign investment in offshore drilling. But local communities have seen little of this money, as many jobs have gone to foreign workers.[15] The ASWJ insurgents have exploited local grievances over this inequality. A July 2020 editorial in the Islamic State's al-Naba newsletter accused the "communist" FRELIMO and Western "crusader" states of conspiring to rob the region of its resources.[16]

The origins of ASWJ itself are still murky. There is general agreement among observers that the group started out as a non-violent movement that drew support from underemployed men who were dissatisfied with both the government and Cabo Delgado's Muslim elites. They rejected the state's legitimacy, encouraging Muslims not to attend state schools, pay taxes, or vote. By 2015 at the latest, the group was known locally as "al Shabaab," meaning "the youth" in Arabic, and could be seen carrying knives around the street and marching into mosques criticizing "degenerate Islam."[17]

Eric Morier-Genoud has recently proposed the most detailed origin story of ASWJ to date, suggesting that the group emerged as a scripturalist (particularly Quranist) cult from within Cabo Delgado's Wahhabi community sometime after 2007, that it quickly fell afoul of CISLAMO—who encouraged the authorities to

quash it—and that it began to militarize in response to a series of arrests in 2015 and 2016.[18]

Since its first attack in October 2017, ASWJ has expanded operations rapidly. The group pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in mid-2019, formally merging into ISCAP. By 2020 it was staging attacks at twice the rate it had in 2018 and had begun attacking more security forces. The group fundraises by partaking in local smuggling networks, though it does not appear to control the region's contraband trade wholesale.[19] In the first half of 2020 it appeared to expand its territorial base outside of Mocímboa da Praia district before seizing the district capital and port in August.[20]

ASWJ presents fundamentalist Islam as the antidote to decades of political exclusion and economic marginalization in Cabo Delgado. "We occupy [the towns] to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor and gives the profit to the bosses," says a militant in one of the group's videos.[21] The insurgency also seems to reflect longstanding ethno-political tensions in the region. The Muslim-majority Mwani of Cabo Delgado's coast reportedly form the backbone of the group.[22] The Mwani were quite powerful in the pre-colonial era and have historically been skeptical of FRELIMO, generally supporting RENAMO in elections since the 1990s. The Mwani resent that politics and business in Cabo Delgado are dominated by the Christian-majority Makonde who hail from the interior and constitute FRELIMO's primary constituency in the north (the current president, Filipe Nyusi, is Makonde).[23] The Makua, Mozambique's largest ethnic group, also appear to be present in ASWJ (according to Genoud, the group was founded by two Makua). While relations between the Makua and Mwani have not always been cordial, the coastal Makua are mostly Muslim (many have intermarried with Mwani) and share many of the same grievances against Cabo Delgado's Makonde and FRELIMO.[24]

The Mozambican response to the insurgency has been heavy-handed. Mozambican security forces have been accused of numerous human rights violations including torture and extrajudicial killings. The authorities have shuttered mosques suspected of ASWJ connections, fueling local narratives of a "war on Islam" by a distant central government. Many analysts have drawn comparisons between the Mozambican authorities' response to ASWJ with the Nigerian government's brutal crackdown on Boko Haram beginning in 2009.[25] The parallels are notable—and disconcerting, given Boko Haram's subsequent ascent from a small sect to one of the world's deadliest militant groups.

President Nyusi has begun seeking the help of private military contractors from South Africa and the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group to bolster his struggling security

forces.[26] The Tanzanian military announced in August 2020 that it would conduct operations along the Mozambican border and South Africa is considering ways to support counterinsurgency efforts.[27] Unfortunately, no foreign military force is sufficient to address the underlying causes of the conflict. Such an intervention could indeed catalyze an expansion of the insurgency across borders, much as Kenya's 2011 intervention in Somalia did. Tanzania, which has produced many jihadists but has so far avoided a full-blown insurgency,[28] is particularly vulnerable given its porous border with Cabo Delgado. Considering these factors, ASWJ poses the greater threat of expansion of the two ISCAP/Islamic State-branded insurgencies.

The Struggle for Africa's Great Lakes

WHEN YOWERI MUSEVENI CAME TO POWER IN 1986, HE DID SO WITH BOLD PLANS to transform Uganda and the wider region. He and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) were of a later generation of African liberation movements that had taken to the bush to fight independent, ostensibly neocolonial African regimes rather than foreign or minority-rule governments. Museveni had been influenced by the earlier liberation movements, including FRELIMO, whose frontlines he had visited as a student in the 1960s and in whose camps he later trained.[29]

Museveni's government never repressed Islam as FRELIMO did, but he and his comrades were certainly suspicious of organized religion. As the NRM's *Ten Point Programme* for a post-liberation society claimed, "sectarianism has enabled dictators and idiots to emerge, take power illegally and perpetuate their stay in power with greater ease."[30] These critiques were well-founded. Previous Ugandan dictators such as Milton Obote and Idi Amin had exploited religious fissures to their advantage. The latter had politicized his Islamic faith as a means of shoring-up his regime domestically and soliciting support from Arab and Islamist states such as Libya. Amin's regime was vulnerable since his own ethnic group, the Kakwa, was small. But Islam—which arrived in Uganda in the 1840s and was marginalized under British colonialism—offered some promise as a political base.[31] While still a minority at roughly 14 percent of the population, Muslims were numerous enough that they could staff the upper echelons of Amin's security services. Amin's

regime fell to a Tanzanian invasion in 1979, unleashing a series of attacks against Muslim communities.

When Museveni took power by force seven years later, he was concerned that the Muslim community would advance an overtly political agenda as it had under Amin. Uganda's Muslims, for their part, felt stigmatized due to their association with that regime, which facilitated the entrance of new actors onto the religious scene: The Tablighi Jammaat, a revivalist missionary movement originating in 1920s India, arrived in Uganda in the late 1970s and became a vehicle for Muslim organization.[32] Taking a page from several other East African governments—FRELIMO included—Museveni began using the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) created by Amin to bring the country's Muslim leadership under control.[33] This practice was both in line with the NRM's liberationist vision, in which a tightly controlled civil society works in support of the vanguard party's nation-building project, and was a practical way for the new regime to consolidate its authority.

In contrast to its generally "quietist" practices in Asia, the Tablighi movement in Uganda was politically outspoken and quickly became the harshest opponent of the UMSC. Tensions emerged in 1989 when a pro-government leader was elected to the body, which led to increasingly anti-government rhetoric in Tablighi sermons. In 1991, a Christian convert who had studied in Saudi Arabia, Jamil Mukulu, led hundreds of Tablighi youths in an assault on the UMSC's headquarters in Kampala, killing several policemen. Mukulu and his associates were imprisoned, during which time they established the radical Uganda Muslim Freedom Fighters (UMFF). Once out of prison, they established a training camp in western Uganda before fleeing under military pressure to Bunia in present-day Congo in 1995.[34] At this point, another group entered the picture: The National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), a militant organization comprised of ethnic Bakonjo and Baamba that was fighting for the recognition of their kingdom in the Rwenzori mountains along the Uganda-Congo border. NALU formed in the late 1980s as a hardline faction of the Rwenzururu, a Bakonjo-Baamba protest movement that sought to redress the marginalization of their communities that had begun under Britain's indirect colonial rule.[35]

Surprisingly enough, the Islamist UMFF and secular NALU merged in the mid-1990s. The two groups would have never joined forces were it not for the work Sudan's intelligence services, which were looking to support any and all opponents of Museveni's regime. The Sudanese interest in Uganda was rooted in the complexities of Sudan's then-raging second civil war. Sudan had been battling an insurgency in its south led by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) since 1983. Religious divisions had long contributed to Sudan's North-South tension,

but the conflict took on greater sectarian overtones after 1989 when Col. Omar al-Bashir came to power with the support of Hassan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front.[36] Turabi, inspired by the thinking of Islamic revivalists such as Sayyid Qutb and Abul Ala Mawdudi, sought to refashion Sudan as an Islamist state. (Turabi is best known today for his association with Osama bin Laden, who moved his base of operations to Khartoum from 1992 to 1996 at Turabi's invitation.)[37] The Sudanese had long been suspicious of Museveni—perhaps overly so[38]—as he had run in the same left-wing circles as SPLA founder John Garang during their time as students at the University of Dar es Salaam. Once Museveni came to power, Khartoum was convinced that the former guerilla leader would transform Uganda into the rear base of the SPLA insurgency.

Sudanese intelligence operated freely in eastern Congo in the 1990s as Bashir was aligned with Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko, the kleptocratic "dinosaur" of African politics whom Museveni and his fellow travelers saw as a neocolonial relic and a threat to Pan-African liberation. Multiple anti-Museveni rebels, including the UMFF, NALU, and the now-infamous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), operated from eastern Congo at this time. Bashir armed each of these groups, and even invited Jamil Mukulu and other UMFF militants to Sudan to train with bin Laden's al-Qaeda (Mukulu may have also trained in Afghanistan).[39] In a fit of pragmatism, Bashir merged UMFF and NALU along with several smaller outfits, creating the awkward rebel coalition of ADF-NALU.[40]

This geopolitical angle is critical for understanding the future trajectory of the ADF and the role it finds itself in today in eastern Congo. Neither ADF-NALU nor the LRA ever posed anything like an existential threat to Museveni's regime, and yet the Ugandans twice invaded the Congo, first in 1996 and then in 1998, to pursue these groups.[41] Museveni did so because he believed that these groups were, above all, Sudanese proxies. These invasions were part of a larger regional conflagration, the Congo Wars of 1996 to 2003, that began as an extension of the Rwandan civil war and genocide. The first war ended with Museveni and his Rwandan allies overthrowing Zaire's "dinosaur." The second war involved roughly a dozen African nations at one point or another, killed up to five million people, and continues to simmer today in many ways. "Africa's World War" would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power as well as the ADF's position in the militant landscape of Africa's Great Lakes region.

Museveni saw Sudan's support for the ADF-NALU and LRA as part of a wider effort orchestrated by Omar al-Bashir and Hassan al-Turabi to "Islamize" and "Arabize" the Great Lakes region, hence the imperative of dislodging the groups from eastern Congo.[42] The contest between Khartoum and Kampala in the mid-1990s

thus assumed highly ideological stakes as Uganda supported a left-wing, secular and "African" SPLA against an Islamist, "Arab" regime that was seeking to weaponize religion across Africa. In Museveni's mind, ADF-NALU did not simply undermine the integrity of Uganda's perennially insecure borders—it threatened the ethno-religious balance of the region. In other words, African identity itself was at stake.[43]

The ADF-NALU was severely weakened over the course of the Congo Wars, falling to a strength of a couple hundred men by 1999, although it managed to stage notable cross-border attacks nonetheless.[44] Uganda withdrew its forces in 2003 as the war wound down, granting ADF-NALU some respite as the newly rebuilt DRC armed forces (FARDC) did not prove to be of equal caliber. The group became embedded in eastern Congo, strengthening ties through intermarriage and recruitment with the Vuba and Nande minorities of the region (the latter being closely related to the Bakonjo-Baamba in NALU), and intermittently collaborated with other rebels (and the occasional FARDC officer).[45] Its perceived threat to Museveni's regime diminished in 2006 when Sudan, having recently signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the SPLA, ceased its support for Ugandan rebels.[46]

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, ADF-NALU appeared to have a more conventional political agenda (although Mukulu and his followers maintained certain Islamist practices[47]) and hardly stood out among the myriad militant groups operating in eastern Congo. The group underwent a notable ideological shift beginning in the late 2000s, however. In 2007, Museveni's government agreed to the Bakonjo-Baamba's demands to recognize Rwenzururu as an independent, semi-autonomous kingdom. As a result, the NALU leadership demobilized and returned home.[48] Shedding the secular wing of the rebellion allowed the more hardline Islamists with ADF to chart the group's course moving forward. The arrest in 2015 of ADF emir Jamil Mukulu in Tanzania, may have also contributed to a hardline shift. When Mukulu's successor, Musa Baluku, took control of the group, it had been badly fragmented by a recent FARDC-UN operation. Placing an emphasis on jihadist ideology may have been a tactic for Baluku to assert control over the divided group.[49] Baluku might have also seen such a pivot as a way to solicit funds, recruits, and other support from transnational jihadist networks.

By 2012, ADF was using the name *Madinat at Tawheed wal Mujahideen* ("the city of monotheism and mujahideen") in its internal documents, although it is not clear if this referred to the group as a whole or simply one camp.[50] In a series of videos filmed in 2016 and 2017, the group spoke of a caliphate and the imperative of killing infidels while adopting jihadist aesthetics such as the black flag of Khorasan and the use of *anasheed* (Islamic acapella songs) commonly featured in

Islamic State and al-Qaeda propaganda.[51] The videos featured militants speaking in Swahili, French, Arabic, Luganda, and Kinyarwanda, indicating a desire to reach a wider East African audience.[52] The first serious evidence of ADF connections with the Islamic State came in 2018 when FARDC soldiers found Islamic State material during a raid on an ADF camp near Beni, including a hardcover book published by IS's Maktabah al Himma.[53] In July 2018, Kenyan police arrested Waleed Ahmed Zein, a Mombasa native who served as a financial facilitator for ISIS and reportedly used *hawala* systems to transfer funds to the ADF.[54] Then in November 2018 the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa shut down for several days in response to a terror threat that was alternately reported as emanating from a Tanzanian cell within a Ugandan Islamist group (a clear reference to the ADF) or an Islamic State-linked group (presaging the announcement of ISCAP).[55]

The ADF has proven itself resilient, but its room for further growth is limited. Only some three percent of the population in North Kivu province, its base of operations, is Muslim.[56] The group must also contend with numerous other militias. It has its turf and shows no sign of weakening, but it is highly unlikely that it could unify the majority of fighters, let alone civilians, in North Kivu, to say nothing of the wider region. Over the past two-and-a-half decades, only those Congolese rebels backed by neighboring states have succeeded in seizing and holding population centers. A group that operates under the Islamic State flag is unlikely to receive such support from the regions' strongmen. Needless to say, these constraints on the ADF are no consolation to those communities that will continue to suffer the group's brutality.

Transnational Connections

THERE REMAINS MUCH SPECULATION AND DISAGREEMENT AMONG ANALYSTS regarding the nature of the ADF's and ASWJ's ties with each other and, more importantly, with the Islamic State. With regards to the former, there is certainly a degree of overlap in networks, which is unsurprising given the porousness of borders in the region and the historical interconnectedness of East Africa's Islamic networks. Additionally, Mocímboa da Praia has long been a transit point for migrants from Somalia and the Great Lakes region headed to South Africa. Both ADF and ASWJ are connected to jihadist networks in Kenya and Tanzania. When Jamil Mukulu's son was arrested in 2011, al-Hijra, a Salafi organization that

evolved into al-Shabaab's Kenyan affiliate, paid his bail.[57] Many al-Hijra members fled Mombasa around 2014 amid a police crackdown and settled in Tanzania, where they joined local jihadists in places like the coastal Tanga region and Rufiji district. By 2015, some of these Kenyan and Tanzanian militants had reportedly fled into Mozambique and joined the group in Cabo Delgado.[58]

Tanzanians appear to constitute a sizeable presence in both ADF and ASWJ. At least one Tanzanian cell based in Tanga reportedly split under police pressure in 2017 and sent some fighters to join the ADF and others to Cabo Delgado.[59] ASWJ fighters have reportedly received training from militants in Tanzania and, according to one detainee, ADF camps in DRC (the group also reportedly sent members to Kenya and Somalia for military and/or religious training).[60] For their part, several Congolese and Ugandans, including a fugitive imam from Kampala's Usafi mosque, have been arrested in Cabo Delgado, along with at least one Somali suspect.[61] The group's leadership may also include a Gambian.[62]

The nature of the two groups' ties to the Islamic State—in other words, what ISCAP really constitutes—is vague. Suffice it to say, we can confidently assess that IS communicates with members of ASWJ and ADF, as evidenced by the numerous IS claims and other media related to operations in DRC and Mozambique since mid-2019.[63] According to the UN panel of experts, based on information provided by member states, the Islamic State's branch in Somalia (ISS) acts as the "command centre" for ISCAP and its loose network of affiliates. "The ultimate goal," according to the panel, "is to consolidate a triad connection of the operations of ISIL affiliates in Eastern, Southern and Central Africa."[64]

This may well be the case, but it is worth questioning what type of "command" ISS would exercise over ISCAP. ISS consists of only a few hundred fighters, primarily based in a remote corner of northeastern Somalia. The group faces pressure from local security forces, U.S. airstrikes, and al-Shabaab and its membership is primarily Somali and presumably not well attuned to the social and political realities of eastern Congo or Cabo Delgado.[65] None of this precludes a relationship between ISS and ISCAP, but it does suggest that any "command and control" that ISS exercises over ISCAP is loose. Similarly, there are no indicators of a transfer of technology, tactics, or techniques. Both ADF and ASWJ are waging relatively low-tech insurgencies by the standards of the Middle East. In Mocímboa da Praia at least, the insurgents introduce themselves as "al-Shabaab" rather than ISCAP and insist they are locals.[66]

While we should not prematurely draw conclusions about the groups' ties to the Islamic State, there is certainly a possibility that the Islamic State will forge a closer relationship with the two at some point in the future. Eastern Congo and Cabo

Delgado particularly could increasingly become destinations for aspiring jihadists around southern and eastern Africa who lack the means to reach other *wilayat* (provinces of the caliphate) in Iraq, Syria, Libya, or even Somalia.

Conclusion

A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF LITERATURE OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES HAS examined the role of authoritarian repression, weak governance, and socioeconomic inequality in fueling radicalization. All of these factors contributed to the rise of ADF and ASWJ, but there is another element at play in these two cases: That of a guerilla movement-turned government struggling to reconcile its lofty dreams of modernization and Pan-Africanism with the aspirations of Muslim activists and the complexities of postcolonial politics.

Museveni's efforts to bring Islam under state control sparked violent backlash that produced the ADF in short order. The group would not have evolved as it subsequently did, merging with NALU and becoming embedded in eastern Congo, were it not for the regional competition between the liberationist Museveni and the "neo-colonial" (i.e. reactionary) regimes in Khartoum and Kinshasa. The eventual splintering of ADF-NALU was also indicative of an unbridgeable ideological divide between NRM and the ADF. Museveni could eventually accede to the Bakonjo's demands for a semi-autonomous kingdom (although the relationship has been fraught)[67] as he had long tolerated the role of such "traditional" authorities in the modern Ugandan state. Accommodating Islamism, on the other hand, proved harder, as evidenced by the reported failure of several attempts at negotiation with the ADF. It may well have been the case that the ADF's demands were too extreme for any reasonable regime to accept, but it is worth noting that many Ugandan Muslims feel they have not reaped the benefits of "liberation." The 1995 constitution promised the establishment of Sharia courts for civil affairs, but these have not materialized, leaving Muslims to privately adjudicate such matters.[68] Museveni's regime continues to seek to coopt and divide the Muslim community, and the government's relationship with the Tablighi Jamaat is particularly hostile.[69]

FRELIMO repressed organized Islam from the outset far more than NRM ever did. The fact that many Muslim communities were at best unenthusiastic about FRELIMO during the independence struggle reinforced the ideological tensions between Marxism-Leninism and Islam. The party never abandoned its suspicion

of Islamic civil society even as it switched from repression to cooptation. There is admittedly less of a direct link between a specific government policy and the rise of an Islamist insurgency than in Uganda. Nonetheless, we can conclude that FRELIMO's alliance with Islamic leaders in the 1990s was short-lived, resulting in a political system in which activist Muslims could not meaningfully advance; that FRELIMO consciously exacerbated intra-Muslim tensions by coopting Muslim leaders, thus helping undermine trust in religious elites; and that FRELIMO never endeared itself to the Muslim population at large.

The rise of ISCAP is reflective of a larger challenge facing many African states: that of creating a compelling notion of nationhood that could serve as the basis for effective state-building. As Gérard Prunier has written, the Congo Wars showed that African nationalism is generally *reactive*, a force that comes out during periods of foreign intrusion but does not otherwise serve as a cohering identity.[70]

The liberation movements shrewdly diagnosed many of the impediments to Africa's political and economic development. But few of them have succeeded in forging the inclusive national identities—to say nothing of a Pan-African one—that they once promised. The emergence of the Islamic State's Central African Province is, in part, a result of these failures.

NOTES

1. Tom Bowker, "Battle looms in Mozambique over extremists' control of port," *AP*, August 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/battle-looms-in-mozambique-over-extremists-control-of-port/2020/08/25/6bbc1a86-e6aa-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html.
2. The group's first recognized attack, an October 5, 2017 assault on several police stations and government offices in Mocímboa da Praia, was relatively ambitious in nature. However, the group's subsequent campaign consisted of sporadic and crude attacks on soft targets until mid-2018, when the group gradually began increasing its operational tempo and attacking some hard targets. For more see Bulama Bukarti and Sandun Munasinghe, "The Mozambique Conflict and Deteriorating Security Situation," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, June 2020, https://institute.global/policy/mozambique-conflict-and-deteriorating-security-situation.
3. Marilyn Newitt, *A Short History of Mozambique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 22.
4. Ibid., 147–148.

5. Edward A. Alpers, "Islam in the Service of Colonialism? Portuguese Strategy during the Armed Liberation Struggle in Mozambique," *Lusotopie* (1999): 165–184.

6. Ibid.; and Eric Morier-Genoud, "Why Islamist attack demands a careful response from Mozambique," *The Conversation*, October 18, 2017, https://theconversation.com/why-islamist-attack-demands-a-careful-response-from-mozambique-85504.

7. Liazzat Bonate, "Islamic Insurgency in Cabo Delgado: Extractive Industry, Youth Revolt and Global Terrorism in Northern Mozambique," August 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/project/Insurgency-in-Cabo-Delgado.

8. Eric Morier-Genoud, "A Prospect of Secularization? Muslims and Political Power in Mozambique Today," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 27 (2007): 240–275.

9. See, for example, Machel's speech, "Educar o Homem para Vencer Guerra Criar uma Sociedade Nova e Desenvolver a Pátria," November 1973, available at https://www.marxists.org/portugues/machel/ano/mes/educar.pdf.

10. Newitt, *History of Mozambique*, 156.

11. Genoud, "Prospect of Secularization."

12. Ibid.

13. Liazzat Bonate, "Muslim Religious Leadership in Post-Colonial Mozambique," *South African Historical Journal* 60 (2008): 637–654; and Liazzat Bonate, "Why the Mozambican Government's alliance with the Islamic Council of Mozambique might not end the insurgency in Cabo Delgado," *Zitamar News*, June 14, 2019, https://zitamar.com/mozambican-governments-alliance-islamic-council-mozambique-might-not-end-insurgency-cabo-delgado/.

14. Joseph Hanlon, "ISIS is not driving the Cabo Delgado war," *New Frame*, August 24, 2020, https://www.newframe.com/isis-is-not-driving-the-cabo-delgado-war/; "Population complains of land expropriations in Pemba: 7.50 meticais per square metre—report," *Club of Mozambique*, October 25, 2018, https://clubofmozambique.com/news/population-complains-of-land-expropriations-in-pemba-7-50-meticais-per-square-metre-report/; "The land grabbers of the Nacala Corridor," *Grain*, February 19, 2015, https://www.grain.org/article/entries/5137-the-land-grabbers-of-the-nacala-corridor; and Eric Morier-Genoud, "Tracing the history of Mozambique's mysterious and deadly insurgency," *The Conversation*, February 18, 2019, https://theconversation.com/tracing-the-history-of-mozambiques-mysterious-and-deadly-insurgency-111563.

15. "Minister of Labour visits Cabo Delgado, the Mozambican province about to host 2,000 foreign workers," *Club of Mozambique*, https://clubofmozambique.com/news/minister-of-labour-visits-cabo-delgado-the-mozambican-province-about-to-host-2000-foreign-workers/.

16. "Islamic State Editorial on Mozambique," translation by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi available at *Pundicity*, July 3, 2020, http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/07/islamic-state-editorial-on-mozambique#.Xv88U1Wihpc.twitter.

17. See for example, Bukarti and Munasinghe, "The Mozambique Conflict"; Joseph Hanlon, "Islamic attacks: marginalized youth with wide networks," *Club of Mozambique*, May 29, 2018, https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-islamic-attacks-marginalised-youth-with-wide-networks-hanlon/; and Joseph Hanlon, "How Mozambique's smuggling barons nurtured jihadists," *BBC*, June 1, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44320531.

18. According to Genoud, ASWJ can be traced to a man in Balama district in the interior of Cabo Delgado, Sualehe Rafayel. An ethnic Makua, Rafayel had studied in Tanzania in the 2000s and joined a local Wahhabi mosque upon his return in 2007. He soon dropped out, however, in opposition to its ostensibly impure practices, subsequently ending up in jail after CISLAMO his nascent movement. By 2014, a sect had been established, either by Sualehe or one of his associates, another Makua by the name of Abdul Carimo. The sect practiced a scripturalist form of Islam, particularly Quranist (i.e. it rejected the *hadith*), and established compounds and multiple mosques, including one in Mocímboa da Praia. Genoud is careful to note that this movement was a sect insofar as it sought to withdraw from society rather than overthrow the state. As the movement attracted more followers it came into conflict with local Muslims and Sufi and CISLAMO officials alike. 2015-16 marked a turning point for the group as it began to militarize in response to pressure from the authorities, particularly after a deadly confrontation with locals in Ancuabe district in November 2016. See Eric Morier-Genoud, "The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: origins, nature and beginning," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (2020): 396–412.

19. "Where crime compounds conflict: Understanding northern Mozambique's vulnerabilities," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, October 25, 2018, https://globalinitiative.net/northern_mozambique_violence/.

20. Bukarti and Munasinghe, "The Mozambique Conflict."

21. "Mozambique: Is Cabo Delgado the latest Islamic State outpost?" *BBC*, May 4, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52532741.

22. Eric Morier-Genoud, "Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram is tightening its deadly grip," *Quartz Africa*, June 6, 2018, https://qz.com/africa/1307554/mozambiques-boko-haram-al-sunnah-is-tightening-its-deadly-grip/.

23. Francisco Almeida dos Santos, "War in resource-rich northern Mozambique—Six scenarios," Chr. Michelsen Institute, May 2020, https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/7231-war-in-resource-rich-northern-mozambique-six-scenarios.pdf.

24. Bonate, "Islamic Insurgency."

25. See for example Hilary Matfess and Alexander Noyes, "Counterproductive Counterinsurgency: Is Mozambique Creating the Next Boko Haram?," *Lawfare*, September 1, 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/counterproductive-counterinsurgency-mozambique-creating-next-boko-haram.

26. Peter Fabricius, "'SA private military contractors' and Mozambican airforce conduct major air attacks on Islamist extremists," April 9, 2020, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-09-sa-private-military-contractors-and-mozambican-airforce-conduct-major-air-attacks-on-islamist-extremists/; and Tim Lister and Sebastian Shukla, "Russian mercenaries fight shadowy battle in gas-rich Mozambique," *CNN*, November 29, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/29/africa/russian-mercenaries-mozambique-intl/index.html.

27. "TPDF to launch a manhunt along border with Mozambique," *The Citizen*, August 11, 2020, https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/news/TPDF-to-launch-a-manhunt-along-the-border-with-Mozambique/1840340-5607474-6wv92oz/index.html; and "South Africa ready to help insurgency-hit Mozambique, if asked," *Reuters*, September 2, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mozambique-insurgency-safrica-idUSKBN25T35Z.

28. Tanzania has so far avoided a full-scale jihadist insurgency despite signs of growing radicalization over the past decade, with numerous Tanzanian fighters joining al Shabaab and more recently the ADF and ASWJ. There are multiple possible explanations for this. For one, sectarian and ethnic polarization is much lower in Tanzania than most East African countries, a product of both the nature of its initial colonization and, more importantly, the relatively successful nation-building project of Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere (himself a mentor to many African liberation movements). Similarly, Tanzania consciously avoided intervening in Somalia for fear of inciting backlash from al Shabaab and/or nascent jihadist networks within the country. The insurgency in Cabo Delgado is too close to ignore, however, and Tanzanians reportedly constitute a sizeable portion of the group's fighters. Suspected ASWJ militants have already once crossed the Rovuma river and conducted an attack on Tanzanian soil. See James Barnett, "A Salafi-jihadi insurgency could spread to Tanzania," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, November 19, 2019, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/a-salafi-jihadi-insurgency-could-spread-to-tanzania.

29. In 1968, Museveni led a delegation from the Students' African Revolutionary Front at the University of Dar es Salaam, then an intellectual hub of the African Left, to visit FRELIMO-held territory in Mozambique. Museveni credited the experience with influencing his decision to wage a struggle against the Ugandan government. He also trained in FRELIMO camps for two years in the late 1970s. See Philip Roessler and Harry Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go to War: Liberation Politics and the Outbreak of Africa's Deadliest Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38–39; Jonathan Fisher, *East Africa*

After Liberation: Conflict, Security and the State Since the 1980s (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 40; and "Museveni salutes FRELIMO for role in birth of UPDF," The Independent, May 19, 2018,
https://www.independent.co.ug/84994-2/,
https://www.independent.co.ug/84994-2/.

30. Fisher, East Africa After Liberation, 44–45. This is not to suggest that Museveni is anti-clerical or avowedly opposed to religion. He is himself Christian and has at times spoken favorably of religion's role in society and has awarded religious leaders sympathetic to the government with positions. In its insurgent days and first years in power, however, the NRM was highly critical of the ways in which Uganda's religious elites had historically bred division and inserted themselves into politics.

31. Richard J. Reid, A History of Modern Uganda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 334; and Abdin Chande, "Muslim-State Relations in East Africa Under Conditions of Military and Civilian or One-Party Dictatorships," Historia Actual Online 17 (Autumn 2008): 97–111.

32. Gérard Prunier, Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86–87; and "Inside the ADF Rebellion: A Glimpse into the Life and Operations of a Secretive Jihadi Armed Group," Congo Research Group, November 2018,
https://insidetheadf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Inside-the-ADF-Rebellion-14Nov18.pdf.

33. Stig Jarle Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihadi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 130.

34. Ibid., 130-131.

35. For more see Arthur Syahuka-Muhindo and Kristof Titeca, "The Rwenzururu Movement and the Struggle for the Rwenzururu Kingdom in Uganda," Institute of Development Policy and Management at the University of Antwerp, March 2016.

36. President Jaafar Nimeiry's decision to declare Sudan an Islamic republic and implement nationwide Shariah law in 1983 served as the immediate catalyst of Sudan's second civil war. However, the conflict was not simply the result of Muslim-Christian tensions. Rather, it was rooted in longstanding political and ethnoregional tensions that had been left unresolved following Sudan's first civil war (1955–1972). For more see Richard Cockett, Sudan: The Failure and Division of an African State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Zach Vertin, A Rope from the Sky: The Making and Unmaking of the World's Newest State (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019).

37. For more, see James Barnett, "The Evolution of East African Salafi-Jihadism," Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 26 (2020): 20–48.

38. According to Gérard Prunier, Museveni and John Garang had only briefly overlapped

at the University of Dar es Salaam and had not been close associates, suggesting a paranoid miscalculation on the part of Khartoum that in fact drove the two guerrilla leaders closer together in opposition to Khartoum. See Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 80.

39. Andrew McGregor, "Oil and Jihad in Central Africa: The Rise and Fall of Uganda's ADF," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, December 20, 2007, https://jamestown.org/program/oil-and-jihad-in-central-africa-the-rise-and-fall-of-ugandas-adf/; and "Who is Jamil Mukulu?" *The Independent*, May 17, 2015,

https://www.independent.co.ug/who-is-jamil-mukulu/.

40. Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 131.

41. Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 120–121, 196.

42. Ibid, 196; and Roessler and Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go to War*, 144–145.

43. Roessler and Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go to* War, 165-166; and Fisher, *East Africa After Liberation*, 163.

44. Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 135.

45. "Inside the ADF."

46. McGregor, "Oil and Jihad;" and Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 136.

47. In 2001, the US government designated the ADF under its "Terrorist Exclusion List." According to US officials, the group was using more Islamist rhetoric at this time to try and attract funds from the Middle East. According to one defector, the group began to implement Sharia law in its camps more seriously around 2003. However, there was no evidence that the group was particularly jihadist or linked to other Islamist groups in the region at this time. Rumors abounded in the 2000s that the group was collaborating with jihadists across Africa and the Middle East, but no compelling evidence was ever offered. Museveni in particular had incentive to play up the group's transnational jihadist nature in the aftermath of 9/11 as he sought to position Uganda as the African counterterrorism partner of choice on the continent. For more see "Inside the ADF;" McGregor, "Oil and Jihad;" and "Uganda: LRA, ADF on American terrorist list," *IRIN*, December 7, 2001, https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/uganda-lra-adf-american-terrorist-list.

48. "Inside the ADF."

49. Robert Postings, "The tentative ties between the Allied Democratic Forces and ISIS," *Defense Post*, December 4, 2018, https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/12/04/tentative-ties-allied-democratic-forces-isis-dr-congo/; and "Inside the ADF."

50. "Letter dated December 12, 2013 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo," United Nations Security Council, January 23, 2014, 119; and "Inside the ADF."

51. Caleb Weiss, "ISCAP Ambushes UN Peacekeepers in the DRC, Exploits Coronavirus,"

Long War Journal, July 1, 2020, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/07/is-cap-ambushes-un-peacekeepers-in-the-drc-exploits-coronavirus.php.

52. "Inside the ADF."

53. Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS, After Laying Groundwork, Gains Toehold in Congo," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/world/africa/isis-attack-congo.html.

54. "Treasury Sanctions East African Facilitator of Intricate ISIS Financial Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 7, 2018, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm476.

55. "U.S. to reopen Congo embassy after 'terrorist threat'," *Reuters*, December 3, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-security-congo/u-s-to-reopen-congo-embassy-after-terrorist-threat-idUSKBN1O22IH; and Carla Babb, "Threat from Islamic State-Affiliated Group Reason DRC Embassy Closed," *VOA*, December 3, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/africa/threat-islamic-state-affiliated-group-reason-drc-us-embassy-closed.

56. "Inside the ADF."

57. Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 138–139.

58. Millard Ayo, "IGP SIRRO: Wahalifu wa Kibiti baadhi yao wamekimbilia Msumbiji," YouTube video, 4:01, January 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDEFKTO9nB0&feature=youtu.be; "Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa," International Crisis Group, September 21, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/kenya/265-al-shabaab-five-years-after-westgate-still-menace-east-africa; and Hanlon, "smuggling barons."

59. "The Islamic State in East Africa," Hiraal Institute, July 2018, 40.

60. Almeida dos Santos, "Six scenarios."

61. "Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) opens cell in Mozambique, says security expert," *Club of Mozambique*, April 2, 2019, https://clubofmozambique.com/news/allied-democratic-forces-adf-opens-cell-in-mozambique-says-security-expert-report/; "Homens armados entregam-se às autoridades em Mocímboa da Praia," March 21, 2018, http://www.newsaiep.com/moz_news/homens-armados-entregam-se-as-autoridades-em-mocimboa-da-praia/; and Brian M. Perkins, "Evaluating the Expansion of Global Jihadist Movements in Mozambique," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, May 17, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/evaluating-the-expansion-of-global-jihadist-movements-in-mozambique/.

62. Gregory Pirio, Robert Pittelli and Yussuf Adam, "The Emergence of Violent Extremism in Northern Mozambique," Africa Center for Strategic Studies," March 25, 2018, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-emergence-of-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique/.

63. Whether it is merely a faction within ADF and ASWJ that fly the IS banner is another question and an important one to ask given the frequency or insurgent fragmentation, especially in the DRC, and especially in light of al Qaeda's first (and to date only) claim in Mozambique in May 2020. We cannot be certain, but there are no indicators that either ADF or ASWJ has fractured in a major way. While many observers speculated at the beginning of the Cabo Delgado insurgency that multiple groups might be behind the violence, testimonies from residents suggest that the recent attacks on Mocímboa da Praia were carried out by the same men who conducted the first assault in October 2017.

64. "Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat," United Nations Security Council, February 4, 2020, 5.

65. For more on the Islamic State in Somalia see Barnett, "Evolution of East African Salafi-Jihadism."

66. Genoud, "jihadi insurgency."

67. The relationship between NRM and the Rwenzururu kingdom was rocky from the start, and its future is uncertain. In 2016, Ugandan soldiers besieged the king's palaces and arrested him on charges of treason. See Eleanor Beevor and Kristof Titeca. "Troubling times for the Rwenzururu Kingdom in western Uganda," *Africa at LSE*, London School of Economics, August 29, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/08/29/troubling-times-for-the-rwenzururu-kingdom-in-western-uganda/.

68. Sadab Kitatta Kaaya, "Muslims renew demand for Qadhi courts," *The Observer*, December 2, 2014, https://www.observer.ug/component/content/article?id=35269:-muslims-renew-demand-for-qadhi-courts; and Muwanga Ronald, "Muslims want own law for divorce, succession," *Ugandanz*, June 29, 2019, https://www.ugandanz.com/muslims-want-own-law-for-divorce-succession/.

69. Tablighi leaders have repeatedly complained of persecution and arbitrary arrests at the hands of Museveni's government. See "Uganda's Muslims accuse Museveni of persecution," *ENCA,* December 19, 2016, https://www.enca.com/africa/ugandas-muslims-accuse-museveni-of-persecution.

70. Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 361–364.

The West in African Violent Extremists' Discourse

By Bulama Bukarti

O N NEW YEAR'S DAY 2016, AL-SHABAAB, A JIHADI GROUP ACTIVE IN East Africa, released a propaganda video featuring then-Republican Party presidential frontrunner Donald Trump calling for the "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States…."[1] Citing these comments as evidence, the narrator claims that America is gripped by a "malignant hatred" of Islam. Then, Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American member al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula who was killed in September 2011 by an American drone attack in Yemen, warned American Muslims that "there are ominous clouds gathering in your horizon." Jabbing his finger towards the camera, al-Awlaki concluded "the West will eventually turn against its Muslim citizens. You either leave or you fight."

This was not a one-off message from al-Shabaab, nor is al-Shabaab the only extremist group in Africa that exploits current or past events in the West for ideological and operational ends. This paper examines representations of the West in the propaganda material of three prominent African jihadi groups: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and *Jama'tu Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Musulmin* (JNIM).[2] For all of these groups, the West is a prominent messaging tool; they consistently depict the West as antagonistic toward Muslims and themselves as fighting the West and its

influence. While the West, which is conflated in violent extremists' literature with Christians and Jews, is painted with a broad brush, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France are especially singled out by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and JNIM, respectively. This is not a mere coincidence—it is a result of the past or present role these countries have played in the groups' respective domains.

However, these groups deploy representations of the West for different purposes: recruitment and radicalization of not only Western citizens, but also of local fighters; and justifying violent attacks on Western and, more often, local targets. How, when, and why these jihadi groups use the West in their propaganda depends on their differing local contexts and dynamics as well as their strategy and target audience. Understanding this is important to our overall understanding of jihadis' recruitment and mobilization strategy, but also vital to ensuring that Western intervention in Africa is done in a way that avoids strengthening extremists' narratives.

Setting the Scene: African Jihadi Groups

THERE ARE OVER A DOZEN JIHADI GROUPS ACTIVE ACROSS AFRICA TODAY: al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) active in East Africa; *Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Liddawati wal Jihad* (JAS), the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and *Ansaru al Musulmina fi Bidad al-Sudan* (Ansaru) active in the Lake Chad region and other parts of northern Nigeria; *Jama'tu Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Musulmin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) active in the western Sahel; the Islamic State in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Islamic State in Mozambique active in their respective countries under the banner of Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP); the Islamic State in Libya and al-Qaeda in Libya; the Islamic State in Sinai and al-Qaeda in Sinai active in Egypt; Islamic State in Tunisia and al-Qaeda in Tunisia both with just several dozen fighters; and the Islamic State in Algeria and al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) active in Algeria and, in the case of AQIM, parts of the Sahel. Al-Shabaab and ISS were originally one group, as were JAS, ISWAP, and Ansaru (referred to jointly as Boko Haram in this paper). Conversely, JNIM is a merger of four different organizations active in North Africa and the Sahel, including al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

This essay will examine the propaganda of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and JNIM, not only because they are the oldest groups (with copious amounts of primary literature), but also because their views of the West are sufficiently representative of their splinter groups which broke away after much of the materials analyzed here had been produced. Despite ideological frictions and inter-factional violence between these groups and their splinters, their portrayal of the West remains same. Similarly, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and JNIM have different trajectories and modi operandi as well as being engaged in intra-group warfare with some of their former allies. But if there is one thing they are agreed on, aside from their claim to be fighting for Islam, it is their passionate hatred for Europe and America. All three groups consistently exploit past and current events and policies to portray the West as engaged in a cosmic war against Islam and Muslims, while claiming they are fighting to destroy colonial surrogate regimes, ungodly systems and institutions that originated from the West, and rid their domain of exploitative Western influence.

Al-Shabaab

AL-SHABAAB (THE YOUTH), WHOSE FORMAL NAME IS *HAARAKAT AL-SHABAAB al-Mujahideen* (Movement of the Young Jihadis), started off as the enforcement wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). A group of Sharia courts that began emerging in the early 1990s and united themselves in 1999 amidst a power vacuum and turmoil from years of civil war, the ICU formed a rival administration to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia. Until 2006, the ICU controlled most of the territory and population of southern Somalia, including the capital and most populous city, Mogadishu. Between late 2006 and early 2007, the ICU suffered major defeats at the hands of Ethiopian troops, who intervened at the request of the TFG, and lost most of the territory it controlled. Consequently, less-militant members of the Union went into exile in Eritrea and Djibouti. There they formed the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia, a political group that reconciled and struck a power-sharing deal with the TFG.[3]

Meanwhile, hard-liners from the ICU repositioned al-Shabaab as a militant Islamist group and declared a jihad against "enemies of Islam," which meant Ethiopia, a Christian-majority nation, and the TFG, including the former ICU members who joined it. From mid-2006, al-Shabaab began to launch deadly attacks on civilian

and military targets and recruited jihadists from neighboring countries, as well as foreign fighters including from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. The group made rapid territorial gains capturing areas initially lost by the ICU, including Mogadishu and the southern port city of Kismayo. Amid escalating violence, the African Union created the Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in February 2007, with the backing of the United Nations Security Council, to support the government of Somalia and help in stabilizing the country.[4] Al-Shabaab and its leaders were designated as foreign terrorists by the United States and put on the sanctions list by the United Nations (UN) in 2008, and proscribed by the United Kingdom in 2010. In 2012, it declared allegiance to al-Qaeda, a move that formalized long-rumored ties between the two groups.[5]

Since 2011, al-Shabaab has lost control of major urban centers, due to U.S. airstrikes and a 20,000-strong AMISON force, but the group has maintained its hold on large rural areas throughout Somalia, which it uses as safe havens from which to commit deadly attacks in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti. Al-Shabaab's deadliest attack came in October 2017, when two trucks packed with explosives went off on crowded streets, killing over 500 people in one of the worst terrorist attacks on record.[6] Since 2008, the group has been involved in more than 8,400 violence events and has been linked to more than 22,000 fatalities,[7] including about 1,800 AMISOM personnel.[8] It is estimated to have between 7,000 and 9,000 fighters as well an extensive network of sympathizers, informants, and other collaborators throughout Somalia.[9]

In 2016, as the Islamic State proclaimed a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, some al-Shabaab members began urging the group's leadership to honor their religious duty by pledging allegiance (*bay'a*) to the new Caliph, namely the Islamic State's leader, Abubakar al-Baghdadi. After it became clear that these pleas had fallen on deaf ears, several al-Shabaab cells consisting of several hundred fighters splintered and gave *bay'a* to al-Baghdadi themselves. This was followed by internal rivalry and violence in which the main group targeted and killed pro-Islamic State members. Although inter-factional clashes continue into 2020, both factions have continued to kill civilians and strike government and Western targets, including American troops.[10]

Boko Haram

BOKO HARAM HAS BEEN UNLEASHING VIOLENCE IN THE LAKE CHAD REGION for over a decade now. The group formed in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri in 2003 around one Muslim cleric, Muhammad Yusuf, as a movement for reform towards puritanical Islam. Years of fierce criticism of the government, rejection of government regulations such as traffic laws, and disputes with rival clerics by Yusuf and his lieutenants culminated in a deadly clash with Nigerian security forces in July 2009. Hundreds of Boko Haram members, including Yusuf, were killed, hundreds more arrested, and the group's headquarters was razed.

After Yusuf's death, his deputy, Abubakar Shekau, took over the group, whose members fled to the Mandara mountains and then to the Sambisa forest, both in north-eastern Nigeria. Under Shekau's watch, Boko Haram grew more ruthless and sophisticated. Its permissible targets expanded from security forces and government employees to include anyone who does not subscribe to its version of Islam, including women and children. Its attacks spread from its north-eastern Nigerian base to other parts of the country and into neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.[11] The group (and its later offshoot, Ansaru) and its leaders were proscribed by the United Kingdom in July 2013, designated by the United States in November of the same year, and listed by UN in May 2014.

Boko Haram reached its peak in 2015, a year after its infamous kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls, mostly Christians, from their school dormitory in north-eastern Nigeria—an incident that garnered it international attention. That same year the group became the world's deadliest terror organization and pledged *bay'a* to ISIS.[12] In 2014, it declared an Islamist "caliphate" in the territory it controlled inside Nigeria, which was equivalent to the size of Belgium. By building its ability to impose its ruthless interpretation of Islam, it sought to consolidate its shift from insurgency to territorial governance. In pursuit of this vision, Boko Haram has killed an estimated 38,000 people and displaced over two and a half million, trig-gering a complex humanitarian crisis.[13] By 2016, however, it splintered, due to ideological and operational disagreements in the group.[14] This led to intra-group warfare for ideological reasons but also operational ones, such as control over territory, land, and water resources as well as key supply routes.

More recently, the individual and collective efforts of the national governments of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, backed by their Western partners, have disrupted Boko Haram's progress, shrunk its territory, and forced it back into

guerrilla-style warfare.[15] Yet, despite intra-group fragmentation and infighting, Boko Haram has continued to commit assaults and raids including on military formations in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. Its recent spectacular assaults include a December 2019 raid on a Nigerien military base that left over 70 local soldiers dead, an attack on Chadian soldiers that killed nearly 100 on March 23, 2020, and another that killed 47 Nigerian soldiers on the same day.[16]

JNIM

JAMA'TU NUSRAT AL-ISLAM WA AL-MUSULMIN (GROUP TO AID ISLAM AND MUSLIMS, abbreviated as JNIM) is an amalgam of four different violent groups active in the Sahel and loyal to al-Qaeda. The first member of the group is *Ansar Dine* (Helpers of the Faith) formed in 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, a former Malian diplomat, hostage negotiator, and prominent Tuareg rebel, with the aim of establishing its version of Sharia law across Mali.

Drawing members mainly from the Ifora tribe of northern Mali, it came to prominence for exploiting Mali's 2012 coup, seizing territory in the north, and imposing its interpretation of Sharia law.[17] JNIM's second member group is the Macina Liberation Front, which operated in central Mali starting in 2015 under the leadership of Amadou Kouffa. It rose to notoriety for destroying a mausoleum that had been proposed as a UN World Heritage site.[18]

The third member is al-Mourabitoun (the Sentinels), which was a product of a union in 2013 of two other jihadi groups. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, its one-eyed leader, fought Soviet forces in Afghanistan, was an al-Qaeda commander who had been involved in jihadi violence for about three decades.[19] Finally, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had its roots in the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s. The group later became an al-Qaeda affiliate with the object of establishing Islamic government and law in place of secular authority and ridding North Africa of Western, particularly French, influence. Its mission later expanded to West Africa, and a Saharan branch was formed.

These four groups' representatives appeared in a video in March 2017 announcing the formation of JNIM and declaring *bay'a* to the head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. They also eulogized previous al-Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Seven days later, al-Qaeda central issued a statement approving the new group and accepting their *bay'a*. Its first attack came three days

after its creation, when it attacked a military base in central Mali, killing 11 Malian soldiers, burning vehicles, and stealing arms.[20]

JNIM, which was listed as global terrorist organization by the United States and UN in October 2018 and the United Kingdom in 2019,[21] has become a common platform for al-Qaeda-allied fighters across the Sahel. It was responsible for around sixty-five percent of the more than 700 incidents and 2,000 fatalities recorded in the Sahel in 2019.[22] The group's estimated 1,000–2,000 fighters under several cells are active predominantly active in Mali, but also carry out operations in Niger and Burkina Faso.[23]

Exploitation of the West

ALL THREE OF THESE GROUPS ARE ROOTED IN LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES, WITH MAINLY local grievances and agendas. However, they draw on global events and causes to promote their ideological and operational goals. The West serves as a useful, handy non-local character in their recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization strategy. Citing Islamic scriptural and doctrinal concepts (often selectively and out of context) and political grievances (genuine or imagined), African militant groups paint a picture of a West locked in a cosmic, existential war with Islam and Muslims. The West is a big part of their binary worldview: you must either be part of the ummah (global Muslim nation) or against it; you must either do hijra (migrate) from *Dar al-Kufr* (the abode of disbelief—the West in this case) to *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam—their self-declared caliphates).

Piggybacking on historical events such as the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, as well as current ones like racial inequities in the West, the Iraq war, and American foreign policy in the Middle East, African jihadi groups contend that the West is out to destroy Islam and Muslims, both physically and morally. Physically, the West is destroying Islam through military interventions, illegitimate exploitation of natural resources as well other more sinister schemes such as contaminating vaccines with sterilizing agents, HIV, and cancerous agents to truncate a growing Muslim population. Morally, the West corrupts Muslim children through schools, movies, music, football, and pornography. Thus, all Muslims have a duty not only to pick a side, but also to work actively to destroy the West and its local allies before they destroy Islam.

This depiction of the West is created for several reasons. Firstly, it is used to

recruit and mobilize Muslims living in the West by creating an unbearable, irreconcilable tension in their "mutually exclusive" identities (being a Muslim and Westerner), forcing them to choose one against the other. Secondly, it is exploited to recruit and radicalize locals by making them feel under an existential threat from an external force, creating a sense of fear and victimhood. Thirdly, it is used to justify attacking Western targets, but also and most importantly, local governments and officials, most of whom are themselves Muslims, by portraying them as surrogates of a hostile West. While all Western countries, regardless of their historic or current policy, are painted with a broad brush, the United States, United Kingdom, and France are particularly singled out by al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and JNIM, respectively. Al-Shabaab uses this portrayal of the West mostly to recruit Western Muslims, Boko Haram exploits it mainly to radicalize local recruits, while JNIM deploys it to justify horrendous acts. These differences are a function of differing contexts and dynamics, though also perhaps a question of capacity. In what follows, we shall explore each of these headings in some detail.

Recruiting Western Citizens: Al-Shabaab

TRUMP WAS NOT THE ONLY AMERICAN IMAGE IN AL-SHABAAB'S 2016 DOCUMENTARY. It also used historic footage of the civil rights-era firebrand Malcolm X, footage of police shootings and violence against African Americans, protests by African Americans, and examples of African American men in prison. It eulogized three Somali-American "martyrs," who migrated from the United States to Mogadishu in 2008 and died on the battlefield, as worthy models for American youth. These images were invoked to demonstrate the United States' "racism and historic injustices" against African Americans with the intent to recruit not only American Muslims, but also African Americans, to the "jihad" in East Africa. It urged African Americans to convert to Islam and wage jihad, at home or abroad, to establish a system that "guarantees their rights" and makes them equal to white people.

That video, however, was not al-Shabaab's first propaganda material to target Western citizens or to decry American antagonism toward Muslims and other minorities. Omar Hammami (also known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki, "The American"),

an American recruit who became a military commander in al-Shabaab, emerged as one of the group's most effective propagandists in the West. With his flat American accent, Hammami appeared in several videos from 2008 to 2013 urging Muslims living in the West to join the jihad in Somalia and around the world. His first major speech was a response to President Obama's 2009 Cairo address entitled "A New Beginning," in which the president called for improved mutual understanding and relations between the West and the Muslim world as well as unity in confronting violent extremism.[24] Citing Islamic texts and concepts, Hammami attempted to refute the various points Obama made and called on Muslims to leave the United States and commit themselves to jihad:

> The animosity that America holds for Islam and Muslims, and the establishment of an Islamic state has become as clear as day. And it is a fact that cannot be denied by any intelligent person… The whole ummah feels the enmity, oppression and evil of America. And your Muslim brothers and sisters are surprised at how you are staying in America.[25]

Selectively invoking Islamic doctrines like *hijra* (migration), *ummah* (the community of Muslims), and jihad, Hammami sought to convince his Western audience to join a conflict halfway across the world by emphasizing that Muslims worldwide must unite under the leadership of one Caliph to pursue the civilizational war that is underway.

> This is a war of civilizations, it's not a war of individuals. It might very well be the case that Joe was just an 'average Joe.' He could have, maybe he never meant any harm for Islam. But at the end of the day that doesn't change the fact that he was still part of the civilization that is at war with Islam. So what it comes down is that, we have to first choose a side.[26]

Hammami is not alone in the bid to attract Western citizens to al-Shabaab. Ahmed Hussein Ahmed, who, in 2007, attacked an Ethiopian army checkpoint killing 20 soldiers, was a British Somali. Ahmed dropped out of a business studies degree at Oxford Brookes University to volunteer for al-Shabaab. He left a video extolling martyrdom and imploring other British Muslims to follow his lead. "I advise you to migrate to Somalia and wage war against your enemies," he said in front of al-Shabaab's black-and-white banner. "Death in honour is better than life in humiliation."[27]

Other al-Shabaab videos include other American recruits from Minneapolis, Minnesota, threatening the West and inciting their intended audience.[28]

Using propaganda materials shared online, including through social media, al-Shabaab condemned the Islam practiced by Muslims living in the West as "fake, phony and benign" and claimed that trying to practice Islam in the West is "nothing more than a dreamworld."[29] They positioned Somalia as a "key battleground in the struggle between Islam and the West."[30] Al-Shabaab videos and other online materials were effective in the West partly because they were filled with culturally relevant materials that resonated with some members of the Somalia diaspora community on both sides of the Atlantic. The United States is particularly targeted by al-Shabaab because of U.S. airstrikes in Somalia, but also because of the sizeable number of Somali-Americans that the group seeks to influence. The group's sophisticated and diverse communication strategy also contributed to its success.[31]

With its online propaganda materials circulating freely in the United States and Europe, at least until the group was banned, as well as with on-the-ground recruiters, al-Shabaab successfully recruited dozens of fighters as well as financiers and sympathizers from the West.[32] Jonathan Evans, then-Director General of the British Security Service, said in September 2010 that a "significant number" of U.K. residents were training in al-Shabaab camps. He warned that "it's only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab," saying the Somalia showed many of the characteristics that made Afghanistan so dangerous as a hotbed for terrorism.[33] Evans' warning was not unfounded: there were at least ten Britons who joined al-Shabaab. In the United States, an investigation by the House of Representatives' Committee on Homeland Security found that:

> More than 40 Americans from Muslim-American communities across the U.S. have joined Shabaab since 2007, including two dozen recruits from Minneapolis… Three who returned home have been charged in U.S. courts, one awaits extradition from the Netherlands, and 15 are believed dead, leaving as many as 21 American Shabaab fighters still at large or unaccounted for. At least 20 Canadians of Somali descent, many from Toronto, also have disappeared and are believed to have joined Shabaab…[34]

While Hussein Ahmed was al-Shabaab's first British suicide bomber, Shirwa Ahmed was the first American to blow himself up, killing 30 others, in the Puntland region of north-eastern Somalia. Other al-Shabaab recruits from Europe include

a Danish Muslim of Somali ethnic origin who attacked targets in Mogadishu, claiming 23 lives.[35] In fact, the 28-year-old Somali man who tried to kill cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, who drew a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad with a turban shaped as a bomb, was allegedly linked to al-Shabaab.[36] If that attack had been successful, it would have been the first attack on European soil by an individual linked to a jihadi group based in sub-Saharan African.

By 2011, over 40 individuals living in United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Denmark, and Sweden had either died fighting for al-Shabaab, were convicted of involvement with the group, were featured in its videos, or were confirmed to be members.[37] Since then, al-Shabaab's propaganda has become less effective in the West, possibly because of efforts made to stop its circulation and other security and counter-messaging efforts initiated by Western governments and organizations.

Exploiting the West to Radicalize Local Recruits: Boko Haram

UNLIKE AL-SHABAAB, OTHER AFRICAN GROUPS DO NOT APPEAR TO TARGET WESTERN audiences for recruitment. This is most likely because there is a very tiny, if any, diaspora in the West from the groups' domains. Other factors possibly affecting this distinction are a difference in strategy and prioritization of whom to target for recruitment as well as lack of capacity. For example, there is no diaspora community in the West from the Lake Chad region or the Sahel, the epicenters of several groups. These groups still exploit historic events and current Western foreign policies, however, but they use them instead to radicalize local recruits and justify their violence. One such group is Boko Haram, whose project is almost entirely predicated on anti-West narratives. This is aptly summarized by the group's moniker "Boko Haram," which literally translates as "Western-style education is forbidden," but essentially means Western lifestyle is a sin. This name was given to the group by locals who observed its heavy anti-West propaganda.

Boko Haram believes that the West has formed an unholy alliance with governments across the Lake Chad region to extinguish "the light of Islam." The group particularly targets the United Kingdom because of British colonial history that it

selectively invokes to depict a prosperous *Bilad as-Sudan* ("the lands of the blacks," used historically by Arabs to describe the geographic region to the south of the Sahara stretching from West to East Africa) ruled by Muslim empires, such as the Sokoto caliphate, Kanem Borno empire, and the Songhai empire, that was conquered and destroyed, economically and morally, by European colonialists and Christian missionaries. It preaches that European colonialists deliberately dismembered Muslims lands, such as northern Nigeria from Niger and Chad, and merged them with Christian populations to permanently kill Muslims' dreams of living under a strict Sharia state. In his "History of the Muslims," the founder of Boko Haram states,

> As such, since they have eliminated the flag of "there is no god but Allah," they introduced the flag of nationalism. They eliminated the laws of the Qur'an and the Sunna, and they brought the laws of ignorance in their place. They also brought the love of Western Europe, Western education and those different political systems.[38]

Boko Haram's hatred for the West also features in the specific institutions it targets. Its key reasons for forbidding schools and consistently attacking them, killing students and teachers, is that the schools originated from the West and are modelled after Western educational institutions. Boko Haram alleges that the use of the English language and regalia in educational institutions, and recognition of Saturday and Sunday as the weekend, are all signs of the Euro-American, Judeo-Christian influence on the schools. Furthermore, it preaches that schools are a Western scheme to corrupt Muslim morals through movies, football, and music. In its manifesto, a 169-page Arabic treatise published in 2009, the group declares that schools are the "deadliest poison" that Europeans planted in the Muslims ummah, saying,

> The enemies of Islam are waging their war from all angles, but they did not succeed against Muslims except through their destructive civilisation and distraction of Muslim children from studying their religion… they built schools to teach the destructive western civilisation…[39]

The group also refers to events in the Middle East to show its recruits how passionately the West hates Islam. When it launched its insurgency in 2009, it consistently referenced such global events as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Kashmir crisis to justify its attacks and place itself within the context of the global

jihadi movement. It evokes such events as the protests and controversies that trailed Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed to show how the West harbors enemies of Islam. It cites the Iraq and Afghan wars to show that the Muslim ummah is under an imminent danger of destruction from the West. In his exegesis of the Qur'an during Ramadan in the spring of 2008, Boko Haram's founder and first leader states,

> Look at what they are doing to Muslims in Guantanamo. Look at the Abu Ghraib prison inside Iraq. The prison was built with the money of the Iraqi people in their own land and property, yet they are the same people that are being incarcerated in the prison. They would put people as prisoners, and a dog to assault the prisoners, while they were completely naked. They would also force a dog to sleep with the female prisoners...[40]

Similarly, Boko Haram's rejection of democracy, constitutions, and secularism is partly predicated on the fact that they originated from the West and are advocated by the United States. It seeks to delegitimize governments, opposing imams, and Muslim groups by portraying them as puppets of the West. It has released numerous messages in which it warns and ridicules Western leaders such as Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, François Hollande, and Emmanuel Macron.

During the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, Boko Haram spread misinformation that the West and it local allies were using the virus to wage a war on Islam. It maintained that prescribed health measures were intended to stop Muslims from congregational prayers and travelling on pilgrimage to Meccah. It alleged that health experts' advice that patients should frequently hydrate was intended to stop Muslims from fasting in the month of Ramadan (which was observed at the peak of the outbreak).[41]

Boko Haram weaved its narratives about the West into local grievances and its exclusivist interpretation of Islam to recruit thousands of members from 2003 to 2009, before launching its insurgency in the Lake Chad region. The group's narratives about the West successfully contributed to its radicalization strategy because of a widely held, pre-existing historic sense of grievances against British colonial masters and European missionaries as well as current conspiracy theories about the West in the areas where it operates. Boko Haram's core messages remained the same after launching its insurgency in 2009, but its communication strategy evolved, with video and audio messages with markedly improved iconography and resolution, subtitles in different languages including English and

French, and use of multiple fighters speaking in different languages, such as Kanuri, Hausa, Fulfulde, French, and English. From their content, however, the group's propaganda materials are targeted at local audiences and parts of messages made or subtitled in English or French are mostly directed at local governments or Western leaders and organizations.

Using the West
to Justify Violence:
JNIM

AS EXTREMIST VIOLENCE IN MALI AND ACROSS THE SAHEL INCREASED EXPONENTIALLY, in February 2020 the president of Mali renewed his country's offer to discuss a cessation of hostilities with the main jihadi leaders in the area.[42] JNIM issued a communiqué a month later accepting the offer but insisted that a precondition it has always stipulated must be first be met: "Ending the racist, arrogant French Crusader occupation."[43] This reveals who JNIM considers to be its worst enemy. The group has always maintained that it is fighting to resist Western hegemony, French plundering of natural resources, and its refusal to let go of its former colonies. France is singled out by groups in the Sahel both because of its colonial past and its current active role with thousands of troops on ground in the region.

In its play for the hearts and minds of locals, JNIM has a policy of not targeting Muslim civilians and says it kills local troops and officials only because they conspire with French forces to perpetuate un-Islamic Western systems and institutions. It brands national governments as "colonially-installed" or "surrogate" regimes and accuses presidents and prime ministers across the Sahel of granting their Western patrons unfettered access to local resources and of serving the interests of foreign powers to the detriment of their own citizens.[44] Thus, JNIM frames its war as a "defensive jihad" against "crusaders and occupiers" and urges all Muslims to join it in stopping killings by the "crusader army" and shaking off the persecution by French forces.

Abdelmalek Droukdel was, until his death in a French operation in June 2020, the head of AQIM, one of the constituent groups of JNIM, and overseer of all al-Qaeda affiliates in North and West Africa.[45] He was also a key ideologist and propagandist. In a discourse posted to jihadi forums in December 2012, he condemned

the "devastating economic policy of Western countries not only in Maghreb or in Sahel, but also in southwestern African states like Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Cameroon."[46] He argued that the real reason for Western presence on Muslim lands was exploitation of natural resources such as gas, oil, and uranium. He painted a picture of poor African children collecting cacao-trees for multinational companies producing chocolate, accused Paris of supporting the "apostate" regimes of Africa, and threatened Spain, pledging to "purify" Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa, as a first step towards reconquering Andalusia.[47] In his last video released in March 2020, entitled "France and the Spider's Home," Droukdel urged Sahelian governments to end the French military presence, calling the French troops "armies of occupation."[48]

Droukdel is echoed by jihadi ideologues like radical Gulf theologian Abd ar-Rahman as-Sa'di. In a 2013 fatwa as-Sa'di proclaimed that, "the things done by France in Mali are just a crusade against Muslims in Mali. Damages of this war can't be hidden. The biggest destructions regard killing of children, women and old people."[49] The text opened by stating that, "the reason for their interference in Mali is—as it is no secret—that they [Malians] are Muslims. And because they declared their will to implement God's law." It goes on to condemn France, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations for bombing Muslim women, children, and the elderly, killing thousands, displacing tens of thousands, and causing famine. In an attempt to demonstrate the anti-Muslim policy of the West, he cited the then-crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR), which saw President François Bozizé toppled, to contend that the French did not intervene in CAR because it is not a Muslim country and does not have valuable natural resources to be stolen. He referenced verses of the Qur'an and Muslim scholars to condemn Muslim countries who supported the intervention and urged Muslim youths to join the jihad for the liberation of Muslims.[50]

Even more than Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, JNIM also seeks to strategically internationalize its jihad, partly because of Drounkdel and AQIM's direct ties to al-Qaeda. That was Droukdel's goal in his last message, as it was throughout his lifetime, where he framed JNIM's violence as a struggle to liberate Palestinians. "To our brothers in Palestine, we say, indeed the blood of your children is the blood of our children and your blood is our blood... We take Allah as our witness that we would not abandon you until we achieve victory or attain martyrdom." He urged fighters to focus attacks on occupation Christian armies and never target Muslims.[51]

When the Far Enemy Gets Near

NO AFRICAN GROUP HAS EVER CARRIED OUT A SUCCESSFUL ATTACK ON WESTERN soil. However, it is clear from their discourses, as discussed above, that this outcome is purely a matter of capacity, not willingness or strategy. These groups have a specific, publicly declared policy of targeting Western citizens and interests in their areas of operation. Indeed, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and JNIM have carried out numerous attacks on the "Far Enemy," just when that enemy gets closer to the groups' territories. Western citizens and interests are targeted for ideological reasons, but also for opportunistic ends, such as getting media attention, collecting ransom, and pressuring national governments to acquiesce to prisoner swaps or other demands.

In January 2020, about a dozen al-Shabaab fighters attacked Manda Bay base, which serves as a forward reconnaissance base for the U.S. Army and is used for U.S. drone warfare against the group, killing three Americans including a U.S. serviceman, destroying two U.S. helicopters, and multiple U.S. military vehicles during their assault. The group said the attack was a direct response to the Trump administration's designation of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.[52]

In August 2011, a Boko Haram attacker killed 23 people and injured 80 others in a suicide attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja. In a video filmed before the operation, the attacker pleaded with his wife and little son to understand his action of attacking the "forum of all the global evil" and sent a vague warning to "Obama and other infidels."[53] Even locals working for Western organizations are not spared by Boko Haram. In December 2019, a faction of Boko Haram abducted six local workers for the Paris-based aid agency Action Against Hunger, four of whom it later executed.[54] In 2018, it executed two of three female nurses it captured while they volunteering for the International Committee of the Red Cross in north-eastern Nigeria.[55] Several others remain in the group's brutal custody where they are exploited as sexual and domestic slaves. Their "crimes" were working for Westerners—enemies of Islam—and "spying" on mujahidin.

In the Sahel, JNIM's component groups have carried out several attacks on hotels patronized by Western citizens in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast since 2015, claiming that the locations are used for espionage and conspiracies against Muslims. AQIM targeted U.S. and Russian contractors in Algeria shortly after its formation in 2007, and in December of the same year, it bombed the UN headquarters in Algiers.[56] They are also notorious for kidnapping Western citizens for

ransom, earning millions of dollars. In January 2016, AQIM abducted Beatrice Stockly, a Swiss female missionary in Mali. Shortly after, it posted an 8-minute video online demanding the release of its fighters held in Malian prisons, as well as Ahmad al-Faki al-Mahdi (known Abu Ahmad Tourab), a jihadi leader who was at the time standing trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague for allegations of ordering the destruction of historical monuments in Timbuktu in 2012. Days prior to Stockly's abduction, two Australian couples were abducted, presumably by AQIM, and the group continues to hold a British South African and a Swedish hostage, who were kidnapped in November 2011 from a restaurant in Mali.[57]

Public Sentiment Swings Against the West

WHILE JIHADI GROUPS IN AFRICA ENJOY VERY LIMITED, IF ANY, WIDER COMMUNITY support, their narratives about the West feed a widely held sense of grievance, and fuel misconceptions and conspiracy theories about the West. Unfortunately, Western actions, particularly those designed to help African countries suffering from terrorism, have at times only reinforced the accusations made by jihadi groups. Although there is not yet sufficient evidence that Western missteps are strengthening the hand of the extremists, if countries like the United States and France continue to be seen as arrogant, lacking transparency, or indifferent to local lives, this could fuel further radicalization.

Following an attack on a Nigerien army base that killed over 70 local soldiers in December 2019, the Hausa service of the British Broadcasting Cooperation interviewed several Nigeriens. All the respondents blamed France, rather than the jihadis, for killing their soldiers and called on French soldiers to withdraw.[58] From Chad to Niger, and from Mauritania to Burkina Faso, public opposition to the French presence has been growing across francophone West and Central Africa. As a result, President Macron was forced to ask heads of Sahelian governments to address this anti-French sentiment and be clear if they need France's help.[59] Speaking after a NATO summit in London in December 2019, he sounded rather desperate, "do they want us to be there? Do they need us? I want clear answers to these questions." "I can't have French troops on the ground in the Sahel when there is ambiguity [by authorities] towards anti-French movements and sometimes comments carried by politicians," he concluded.[60]

Ahead of a summit of governments of Sahelian countries to answer these questions in January 2020, further protests were held in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Thousands of protesters demanded the withdrawal of French troops, burning the French flag.[61] Footage of these protests was later used in a JNIM recruitment video to claim that their insistence on the withdrawal of "armies of occupation" is a popular demand. During the January summit in Pau, France, the president of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré, appeared on Burkinabe national television criticizing the tone of this "summons." That all the Sahelian leaders should be summoned to French territory for this summit, as opposed to it happening somewhere neutral, he seemed to be suggesting, was a product of French arrogance, of France's tendency to treat francophone governments like colonial outposts. Nevertheless, he later joined the presidents of Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Chad in releasing a joint statement confirming that they want French troops to stay.[62]

In Somalia, deaths of civilians in U.S. airstrikes have long led to pockets of protests with demonstrators chanting anti-American slogans, but this has not escalated into a national issue.[63] A rapid increase in the number of strikes under the Trump administration has led to mounting civilian fatalities, some of which U.S. Africa Command has recently admitted to, though only after public criticisms and pressure.[64] Accusations of lack of transparent investigation and justice or reparations for victims could exacerbate anti-American sentiments, which may feed al-Shabaab's recruitment and radicalization efforts.[65]

Conclusion

THE WEST IS A PROMINENT TOOL IN AFRICAN JIHADI GROUPS' TOOLBOX. HISTORICAL grievances and current events and policies are weaponized to paint a picture of a West that is out to destroy Islam physically, intellectually, economically, and morally. The sensation of fear, tension, and victimhood that this message creates is used to recruit Muslims living in the West, radicalize local recruits, and justify horrific acts of violence. Understanding that this depiction of the West is an important part of African jihadi groups' radicalization process is important for instituting projects to counter them.

Most African jihadi narratives about the West may be false or exaggerated. However, given these militias' pure opportunism and adeptness at manipulating situations, it will be impossible to stop their attempts to exploit historic or current

events. Furthermore, it is unrealistic, and perhaps counter-productive, to expect France, the United Kingdom, or the United States to cease from their African counter-terrorism operations. Nevertheless, Western countries' long-term success requires a strategy that is more sensitive to local opinion.

Western efforts to fight violent extremism should be undertaken in a way that does not feed extremist narratives by causing damage to local populations. Thus, the United States should consider rolling back its airstrikes in Somalia and shelving its reported plan of using unmanned drones in the Sahel—where it completed a $100 million-dollar specialized drone base in 2019. Continued civilian casualties and damage to property, as unintended as they may be, risk alienating local populations and strengthening the hands of violent extremists. Allegations of civilian deaths caused by U.S. airstrikes and human rights abuses by UN peacekeeping troops should be transparently investigated and sanctioned. This will make it harder for jihadi groups to exploit isolated incidents and serve as an example for local governments. Rather than maintaining large troops on the ground, France should focus on building the capacity of local security forces to confront the jihadi challenge in the Sahel through technical and logistical support. Similarly, Western governments should consider bolstering programmatic efforts aimed at strengthening trust with local communities. Finally, counter messaging efforts should include pro-Western messages such as documentaries showing the religious and other freedoms Muslims living in the West enjoy. This will make it harder for extremists to peddle disinformation about the West.

NOTES

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Iran in Lebanon: A Fatal Occupation

By Hassan Mneimneh

IN 2020, LEBANON SHOULD BE CELEBRATING ITS CENTENARY. IT IS NOT. Instead, it is close to terminal collapse as a polity, an economy, and even as a society. Lebanon is under Iranian occupation, although ascertaining this condition may demand some attentive consideration from the uninitiated. Iran's proponents assess it as a confirmation of the "Axis of Resistance" against imperialism and Zionism; its detractors ascribe it to a deliberate plan of Iranian expansion across the region. However, the Iranian occupation of Lebanon may be rooted in Lebanon's own tumultuous history rather than in Tehran's designs. Iran in Lebanon may be more an artifact of history than a product of strategy. In fact, the outcome of Lebanon's present course may not yield Iran any tangible advantage. And it certainly seems to be on the verge of destroying Lebanon.

A Century of Occupations

IN 1920, FRANCE PROCLAIMED "GREATER LEBANON" AS A STATE ON THE PATH to independence. Prior to this action, undertaken within a mandate from the League of Nations, Lebanon had been part of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of the

European central empires during World War I. Lebanon could have been carved out as a homeland for Christians in the Near East. Instead, for considerations, both practical and principled, the Christian Maronite Patriarch Elias Hoyek—the central local figure in the negotiations with France on the prospective form and content of the new state—agreed on the proposition of a commonwealth of equals, a "state of its citizens." This promised Christians, Muslims, and others, an identity that would transcend religions and sects—a modern national one.

The fulfillment of this promise, over the course of the following century was incomplete, always hesitant, and at times insincere. Still, a distinct Lebanese culture informed by its Arab Middle Eastern hinterland, but with deliberate affinities to the West, did emerge. And while the historically anchored feudal patterns of patronage managed to entrench themselves in the structures of the new polity, as a republic based on representative governance and universal values, Lebanon survived multiple wars. It deployed its own warlords in internecine conflicts—and multiple occupations—Palestinian, Israeli, and Syrian. But since its 1943 independence, it is the current, fourth occupation by Iran from which Lebanon seems ill-equipped to disengage.

The three previous occupations presented themselves through a readily identifiable foreign presence. Lebanon had been coerced into recognizing the Palestinian occupation of parts of its territory. The secret component of the "Cairo Agreement" of 1969 surrendered Lebanese sovereignty to the Palestine Liberation Organization in districts adjacent to Israel. The PLO also had open, exclusive control of refugee camps, while expanding its dominance, both directly and through proxies, to large areas across Lebanon.

Christian militias resisted the PLO occupation. The end of the PLO occupation in 1982 was realized only through the combined efforts of rival Syrian and Israeli occupations, both of which were triggered by the PLO presence and role. Internal Lebanese inequities, discord, and miscalculations contributed to the intermittent civil war that devastated Lebanon between 1975 and 1990. Nonetheless, it is evident that the PLO shoulders a primary responsibility, as an agent and as a catalyst, in subverting Lebanon, derailing it from the path of stability and prosperity upon which it seemed to be set.

Starting in 1978, with a considerable expansion in 1982, Israel occupied parts of Lebanon—initially to counter aggressive PLO actions against Israeli territory and citizens. This goal was substantially achieved in 1982 through the ouster of the PLO from Beirut; it was completed by the Syrian occupation shortly thereafter, which chased the battered PLO leadership and organizations from the rest of Lebanon.

Exhibiting a deplorable lack of understanding of the Lebanese context, Israel failed to translate its military victory into a suitable, viable political arrangement. Instead it was trapped by security considerations. In fact, Israel fell prey to the paradoxical logic of having to maintain its occupation of Lebanon to avert the dangers that it faced, and which were due to its occupation of Lebanon. Indeed, for the incubation and development of Hizbullah as its proxy force in Lebanon, Iran capitalized on the counter-productive, and often brutal attempts of Israel at quelling the resistance to its occupation. By the time Israel gained the wisdom of withdrawing from the entrapment of its Lebanon occupation in 2000, Hizbullah had long become an irreversible reality.

Undoubtedly, the most insidious foreign presence that Lebanon has faced was the Syrian occupation. Initiated in 1976, ostensibly at the request of the Christian Lebanese leadership to avoid the fall of Lebanon to the PLO, Syria sought to instill itself as a permanent suzerain. It absorbed feudal leaders and warlords into a complex web of economic, political, and security controls. And it engaged in openly predatory and unapologetically oppressive behavior, meting out collective punishments for dissent. Syria was forced out of Lebanon in the aftermath of the February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who had transitioned from seeking to co-opt the Syrian leadership into siding with the opposition to Syria's role in Lebanon.

The plight of Lebanon over the past half century has resided in the succession, overlapping, and mutual enablement of the occupations which it has had to endure. The Palestinian occupation (1969–1982) brought forth the Syrian (1976–2005) and the Israeli (1978–2000) occupations. In the aftermath of Israel's push into Beirut in 1982, which widened the span of its occupation of Lebanon, and placed Syria at a raw strategic disadvantage, Damascus welcomed and enabled the Iranian occupation. For Syria, it was an expression of its long-term alliance with Tehran, and as a buffer against direct confrontation with Israel. While leaving behind underground networks and open influence, Syria's exit in 2005 vacated Lebanon—for the first time in decades—to one sole occupation: that of Iran. And that remains a novel one, hidden in plain sight, asserted and denied by the same statement.

Certainly, the Iranian occupation of Lebanon is not executed through the dispatch of foreign legions. In Syria, Iran had to resort to conventional forms of occupation to help quell the uprising against its partial vassal in Damascus. In Lebanon, however, while the role of Iranian IRGC experts in training and military equipment setup is both ascertained and deduced, there is no visual presence of Iranian or other non-Lebanese forces dependent on Iran anywhere in Lebanon.

Instead, Lebanon's situation as an occupied Iranian territory is confirmed

through the presence of oversized portraits of Iran's two consecutive Supreme Leaders, Khomeini and Khamenei, and some other Iranian command figures, at central, semiotically significant geographic locations across Lebanon. The occupation is also made clear through the open, complete, and unconditional allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran proclaimed by Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hizbullah, together with the rest of its rank and file. More significantly, the Iranian occupation is expressed through the meticulous, never diverging, adherence to the directives of the Iranian leadership, including the costly dispatch of the Lebanese recruits of Hizbullah to tours of duty in Iran's numerous regional conflicts.

The Odds Against Lebanon:
Satrapy and Kleptocracy

YET, INTRACTABLE AS IT IS, IRAN'S OCCUPATION IS NOT THE ONLY ROOT CAUSE of imminent end that Lebanon faces today. Three decades of Lebanon's "Second Republic" have coalesced into crescendoing plutocratic kleptocracy and deliberate mismanagement, enabling the political-economic elite to syphon away the unrealized wealth of future Lebanese generations. This amounts to a massive pyramid scheme, to which the Lebanese public was rendered complicit through relative prosperity, resulting from the artificially high rate of exchange of the national currency. Still, the responsibility of the Iranian occupation in causing what appears to be the imminent death of Lebanon is paramount.

Iran maintains a de facto "Satrapy" in Lebanon. Common in ancient empires, the satrapy model grants the satrap, as the local representative of the central imperial power, a margin of decision-making on local affairs. This arrangement also demands that the priorities of the empire are observed and maintained. Hizbullah is Iran's satrap in Lebanon.

Hizbullah's satrapy has denied Lebanon—as a state and society adhering to modern norms of representation and accountability—the ability to confront the neo-feudal order, which is the expression of patronage interests that predate the emergence of Lebanon as a modern state. This order relies on vertical, factional, communitarian segmentation, intended to further the interests of its leadership. Atop clientelism, this order is sustainable only through re-directed public funds.

Thus Iran's satrapy instituted a quasi-open pact with the neo-feudal order, which had to acquiesce to the transfer of weapons Hizbullah receives from Iran in exchange for the satrapy condoning and allowing graft and corruption.

This arrangement underscores the primary responsibility of the Iranian occupation for driving Lebanon to depletion. It was later modified to introduce a direct Hizbullah participation in the misuse of public funds. At first, this took place through the demand to disproportionately and/or unlawfully allocate funds to Hizbullah's base of support, ostensibly as a counterbalance for the plunder of public resources by the remaining political class. Then came the imposition of Hizbullah associates and partners as full-fledged participants in direct graft and kleptocracy. A tertiary responsibility can be identified in the change of corruption patterns affecting Lebanon as the mode of the proverbial "cow:" from sustainable "milking" to riskier "bleeding" before the full-fledged rush to "slaughtering." In multiple ways, Hizbullah's satrapy negates Lebanon's promise as a modern state and is detrimental to its existence.

Indeed, by complying to the Iranian orders of animosity towards Arab and Western states—whether through an aggressive media role or kinetic contributions—Hizbullah denies Lebanon the support historically accorded by such powers in times of distress. This is manifest in the open control that Hizbullah exercises over Lebanese political institutions and includes a weak presidency bound to Hizbullah by a covenant of support in exchange for docility; a parliament in which Hizbullah has secured a majority through its partners; and a cabinet formed exclusively of ministers affiliated or allied with Hizbullah. Thus the previous, and barely plausible deniability of Lebanon being under Iranian occupation via Hizbullah, is no longer tenable.

The retreat that regional capitals and worldwide powers have adopted towards Lebanon—now under the open control of a hostile party—is justifiable and reasonable, even though, by Iranian design it negatively impacts the wider Lebanese public. The Iranian occupation of Lebanon, via Hizbullah, continues to hold hostage the interests of Lebanon and the Lebanese people themselves. It demands that they coerce the world community to provide support, of which Iran extracts a considerable fraction.

For virtually all world and regional capitals, the current configuration of open alignment with Iran no longer allows such concessions. While itself in disarray, the opposition to Iranian hegemony in Lebanon has thus the opportunity to present the case that the new ostracism faced by Lebanon is the outcome of the multi-faceted Iranian role in the plight of Lebanon. Iran, through Hizbullah, is both an enabler and participant in corruption, and through its military and media

proxies in Lebanon is engaged in open offensive actions against other countries. This is based on their enmity to Tehran or rejection of its designs, irrespective of the ensuing detriment to Lebanese interests. The opposing messaging from Hizbullah and the Iran-aligned camp is that the non-provision of support is "aggression," and that the threats of death which its Secretary-General Nasrallah has lashed at the United States are "resistance."

An assessment of the real damage that the Iranian occupation has inflicted on Lebanon begins with the reckoning that these two opposing messages seem to have comparable traction. This is so in Lebanese intellectual circles and popular circles alike, despite their deeply diverging relationship with facts and conventional reason. From narrative dominance down to municipal councils redirecting local resources in support of the satrapy, Iran has accomplished a robust, self-perpetuating, and effective control of Lebanon. It has done so with a relatively limited allocation of its own resources, and with no direct presence. It is a "model occupation" that seems to validate the concept of the "exportation of the revolution," which was exalted in the aftermath of the cataclysmic 1979 Iranian Revolution. Yet, Iran has been unable to replicate even more limited versions of this extreme success story, either in settings where its interests are more acute, or where its willingness to expend resources is evident.

The Rise and Fall of Wilayat al-Faqih

AT FACE VALUE, IRAN'S ENGAGEMENT OF EXTERNAL NON-STATE PARTIES AS ITS proxies seems to be framed by theology. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has adopted a modified version of Twelver Shia Islam, *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Rulership of the Jurisprudent), which has elevated its hierarchy to a pontiff-like status. The outreach and recruitment of Shia communities, in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and Pakistan has sought to win clerics and the faithful to this new, more centralized version of Shiism.

The gravity of such a shift lies in its inherent challenge to today's universal notions of the international political order. The implicit global quasi-consensus has been that individuals can reconcile their affiliation to citizenship and religion. Citizenship entails adherence, allegiance, or loyalty to the constitutional order,

the social contract, the homeland, or to more ambiguous notions of nation. It is generally understood that freedom of religion—with variable limitations—is subsumed under citizenship. This citizenship-framing of religion is readily accepted with no doctrinal concerns by liberal, conservative, and most orthodox Muslims worldwide. A segment of orthodox Muslims do refuse a priori the paramountcy of citizenship over religion, but the practical implications of this refusal is limited by doctrinal stances, both in conventional Sunni and Shiite settings.

Strict orthodox Sunni dogma limits the acknowledgement of legitimacy to political systems that proclaim an Islamic character. In non-jihadist circles, however, even in radical Salafist ones, the measure of the Islamic content that secures legitimacy is extremely low. A mere claim, even one that is void of any adherence to precepts, meets the threshold. In such situations, the faithful are expected to be disapproving, but compliant. The conventional orthodox Shiite doctrine asserts that no earthly political system is religiously legitimate—a quality reserved to the eschatological state to be proclaimed by the Mahdi at the end of time. Meanwhile, however, the faithful are expected to accept and follow the de facto political order of their homelands.

In both Sunni and Shiite contexts, Islamism constituted a challenge to the duality sanctioned or advocated by religious establishments. The Sunni Muslim Brothers and the Shite *Da'wah* Party sought to end what they posited as a contradiction between citizenship and religion; they did so by advocating the takeover of the state by a militant religion. While subverting the global political order by negating its recognition of separate religious and secular domains, these Sunni and Shia Islamist movements claimed to operate within the norms of the modern international system. This was so whether such a claim was tactical and utilitarian, genuine and aspirational, or simply reflective of a lack of full consideration. Prior to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Sunni jihadists were alone in openly rejecting the global political order, together with all its local ramifications, in their pursuit of a transnational political configuration based on religion. While they did succeed in inflicting grave damage worldwide, the traction that Sunni jihadists have secured across many decades of militancy has remained insignificant.

If no Shia equivalent to Sunni jihadism has manifested itself in the past decades, it is largely due to the fact that radical Islamist Shiism has adopted a "Stalinist" formula, as opposed to the "Trotskyism" of its Sunni counterpart. Wilayat al-Faqih is indeed the Shia version of the rejection of the world political order by denying the validity of its citizenship foundation. Shiite believers, irrespective of citizenship or nationality, are religiously expected to declare allegiance and display obedience to the jurisprudent ruler, the Supreme Guide of the Islamic

Republic. Were such a proposition to be universally accepted, as mandated, by all Shiite believers, the implications would be disastrous. It would in effect amount to the excision of Shiite citizens from their respective homelands, positioning them as extra-territorial citizens of the Islamic Republic.

The Lebanese Hizbullah was openly launched as part of this vision. Its full name in the 1980s summarized its ideological posture: "the party of the Islamic Republic in Lebanon." A young Hassan Nasrallah, later to assume the leadership of the Hizbullah, was filmed delivering a speech proclaiming that the realization of the universal Islamic Republic, in Lebanon and elsewhere, will remain the true and ultimate purpose of the party. The model of Wilayat al-Faqih found opportune conditions for implementation in Shiite Lebanon in the 1980s.

While the main focus was on Shiites proper, early revolutionary figures within Hizbullah and Iran brandished an ambiguous irredentism towards Sunni Islamists —most famously exemplified by the open embrace of the killer of Egyptian President Anwar a-Sadat. A main street in Tehran is named in his honor. An undercurrent of a patronizing Shia stance could be herein identified, with Shiism understood as the true message of Islam, along with a recurrent push towards *istibsar* (conversion to Shiism). Against the backdrop of repeated calls for a Sunni-Shia theological dialogue and rapprochement, more pragmatic figures were content with alliances against common enemies. The Islamic political ecumenism notwithstanding, at no point since its foundation was Hizbullah open for membership outside of a clear Shia affiliation.

Over the course of the 1980s, the momentum of Islamist maximalism allowed Hizbullah to emerge as the potent heir to early Shiite Islamism in Lebanon. These antecedents, such as *Amal al-Islamiyyah* and *Harakat Futyan Ali*, lacked political vision and were more an expression of a socio-religious conservatism that shared Iran's desired political order to reconfigure its society away from Western-style modernism. As an extension of the Iranian Revolution, Hizbullah commanded the support of numerous Shia clerics. With the newly found connection to a powerful Shiite Iran, these clerics gained visibility, after having been otherwise sidelined by both neo-feudal leaderships and leftist parties, which drew the larger part of their rosters from the Shia community.

Driven by revolutionary enthusiasm, Hizbullah successfully monopolized the resistance against Israeli occupation, kidnapped numerous foreign residents of Lebanon, which provided Iran and Syria, its ally, with human bargaining chips in strategic transactions. Hizbullah also assassinated leftist thinkers, liquidated the vestigial Jewish community in Lebanon, and competed with Amal, the Shiite warlord movement, that had supplanted the feudal leadership of the Shia community.

However, a careful consideration of the evolution of the self-presentation of Hizbullah as an Iranian proxy, and of the nature and effect of the considerable investment that Iran executed in Lebanon in the 1990s, reveals a subtle but meaningful shift. Iran, through Hizbullah, scored considerable success in Lebanon. It was not, however, through the embrace of Wilayat al-Faqih.

While the Islamic Republic deployed its full arsenal of ideological tools, creating what coalesced as a model totalitarian system in Hizbullah's Lebanon, it became increasingly evident that the initial moment of enthusiasm did not translate into a cultural revolution within the Shiite community. Hizbullah's totalitarianism is of a practical transactional character. Its subjects are attended to from the cradle to the grave, and beyond. They study in Hizbullah schools, get medical care in Hizbullah hospitals and clinics, train in Hizbullah camps and serve in its regular forces or reserves, work in Hizbullah enterprises, fight in Hizbullah wars, are provided compensations by Hizbullah civil defense for material losses endured as a result of hostilities, die in Hizbullah service, and have their families supported and cared for after their death by Hizbullah institutions. Most is done and rendered promptly and efficiently, with deliberate attention to dignified provision. This takes place in clear contradistinction to the rampant corruption and dysfunction across Lebanon and the region.

Hizbullah's totalitarianism and discipline has enabled it to replace most remnants of the battered left in its areas of dominance. Its educational and religious institutions sought to saturate the Lebanese Shia community with ideologically-vetted versions of Wilayat al-Faqih. However, while the attachment and gratitude of the Hizbullah constituency to its leadership is eminently palpable, and the recognition of Iran's role in enabling the system is widespread, Shiite Lebanese "citizens" of the Hizbullah virtual state did not metamorphose into subjects of the Islamic Republic. Nor did they, by and large, alter their religious, cultural, and communitarian patterns in favor of an ideological alignment with Wilayat al-Faqih.

More pertinently, Wilayat al-Faqih did not achieve any meaningful traction vis-a-vis the substantive ideological and theological dimensions of Shia Lebanese life. The previous decades witnessed the emergence of multiple major Shia Lebanese religious intellectual figures—Muhammad Jawad Mughniyah, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, Hani Fahs, ʿAli al-Amin. None espoused Wilayat al-Faqih, and many opposed it vocally. Hizbullah itself failed to graduate ideologues for its central doctrine. In fact, its previous Secretary General, Subhi al-Tufayli, exited the party and became a harsh critic of the Iranian role of Hizbullah, and of Wilayat al-Faqih.

Wilayat al-Faqih is invoked repeatedly in the statements of Hassan Nasrallah,

in his solemn devotion to the Iranian Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei. Its alleged religious character is often declared by Iranian-aligned intellectuals to resist any critique of the open allegiance proclaimed by Nasrallah to Khamenei. But in reality, Wilayat al-Faqih has nearly expired as a religious doctrine among the Lebanese. It survives, within Hizbullah, as a stand-in for its dependence and subservience to Iranian interests and diktat. Meanwhile it flourishes in rival Sunni Islamist and communitarian circles as a convenient smear against all Shiites.

The failure of Wilayat al-Faqih to root itself in Lebanon may elicit some disappointment in Tehran. Beyond the ideologues, however, the leadership of the Islamic Republic, and notably its IRGC which oversaw the Lebanon operation, should be amply satisfied by the outcome of their investment. Through Hizbullah, through the control and loyalty it has earned and confirmed in the Shia community, as well as through the multiple arrangements that Hizbullah has coerced and secured with the rest of fragmented Lebanon, Iran maintains a unique form of occupation that endows it with advanced positions on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Through Hizbullah, Lebanon has fought battles on behalf of Iran. It has been available as an object of negotiation, both defensively and offensively, with Israel, the United States, and Gulf Arab states. It may be convenient to attribute this role to a strategic Iranian outlook. However, it is even more compelling to relegate Iran's successes in Hizbullah to the hesitant, often inefficient posture of its adversaries. This may be changing with the more resolute U.S. stance adopted by the current Administration.

Up until recently, as its proxy in Lebanon, Hizbullah has shielded Iran from possible retaliations and was believed to constitute an insurance policy against drastic actions targeting Tehran. The evident change in the rules of engagement with both the United States and Israel deny Iran its previous unwarranted advantage of limiting retaliatory actions to its proxies, and devalues the previous functions of Hizbullah. As pressures continue, and if Iran were to face unanticipated risks—including that of losing its accumulated assets in Lebanon—the temptation of using them before losing them may be too strong to resist, detrimental implications to Lebanon notwithstanding.

Grim Prospects
for Lebanon and Iran

THE PALESTINIAN OCCUPATION OF LEBANON WAS OPPORTUNISTIC AND CARELESS. It antagonized parts of its host society, depleted others and was untenable in the long run, ultimately inviting its own demise. The Syrian occupation was predatory and voracious; it sought to alter the course of Lebanon as a fulfilled society, reclaiming it through brute force into an atavistic Syrian irredentism objectively relegated to history. A change in the balance of power in the region, with the U.S. action in Iraq, rendered the Damascus regime's brute force less convincing, sealing the end of the Syrian occupation.

As to Israel projecting onto Lebanon notions from its own experience as well as obsolete recollections of interactions with previous generations of Lebanese—the occupation of Lebanon was in fact tactical, with ill-conceived strategic extensions, and with no exit strategy. Perhaps the measure of its success was meant to be the eradication of the danger at the northern border. But the PLO factions with their limited ability to inflict terror on the Israeli population were soon replaced by a carefully nurtured Iranian foreign legion, with considerable weaponry and with an effective command and control structure. Thus, it can be asserted that the Israeli occupation of Lebanon was a failure.

As novel as the current Iranian occupation of Lebanon is, it is in fact built on contradictions and ill-conceptions. Beyond the illusion of Wilayat al-Faqih, which may fuel futile attempts at reproducing Iran's Iranian success elsewhere, Iran in Lebanon suffers from defects that foreshadow negative outcomes.

The outreach of Iran to Lebanon was theological in its aspiration and ideological in its appeal. Iran capitalized on the legacies of Arab nationalism and revolutionary leftism to recycle enmity towards the United States and Israel to its advantage. By nurturing its anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist discourse, Iran was able to gain influence in Arab political culture in general, and in certain segments of Lebanese society. In the process, however, Iran entrapped itself in a narrative that may conflict with its interests, and which certainly limits its ability to maneuver.

Iran fostered the emergence of a martial totalitarian enclave in Lebanon, with no exit strategy from the build-up to confrontation. It proposed and propped up a formation that is deeply and irretrievably factional. The composition of this formation is strictly communitarian in its membership and constituency, and frequently

sectarian in its social and cultural policies. Yet, it insists on maintaining the fictional claim that it is a "national" resistance movement. The reality of Hizbullah, as an expression of communitarian privilege, and the recurrent official and informal factional shows of force, have contributed to heightened communitarian tensions, despair from the idea of a shared Lebanon, and a feeling of alienation and detachment across the general Lebanese public

Iran, through Hizbullah, insists on a perpetual enmity towards Israel. Ironically, the current logic that it proposes mirrors the paradox of Israel's occupation of Lebanon between 1982 and 2000. Hizbullah maintains its rogue weaponry to defend Lebanon against a possible Israeli military action aimed at eliminating that same rogue weaponry. While angrily rejected, the parallels with Israel are numerous. The dispatch of Hizbullah fighters to Syria, the occupation of Syrian lands, and the expulsion of Syrian families from their homes is often characterized as preventive or preemptive measures against terrorists. This is explained in a language reminiscent of Israel's own justification of actions against Hizbullah in Lebanon. More ominously, Hizbullah, as an army trained and accountable to a foreign power and composed of willing recruits, has considerable affinity with the South Lebanon Army, created and maintained by Israel in the course of its occupation.

One portion of Lebanon's population equates Hizbullah with dignity, security, and victory. Another portion recognizes the inevitable destruction for which it continues to prepare. Amid such contradictions, it is hard to see an outcome that does not perpetuate the on-going devastation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran may have been far less in control of the process of its occupation of Lebanon than recognized, and may have few options in the unfolding of events in the next phase. However its actions, whether strategically conceived, or—more likely—opportunistically adopted, have subverted the course of Lebanese history. In all cases, its legacy will bear major responsibility for the slide of Lebanon into the abyss.

Iran's Revolutionary Influence in South Asia

By Husain Haqqani

SOON AFTER IRAN'S ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN 1979, ITS LEADER, AYATOLLAH Ruhollah Khomeini declared that Iran would challenge "the world's arrogant powers" across the globe.[1] "We shall export our revolution to the whole world," he announced, adding that, "Until the cry 'There is no God but God' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle."[2] The idea of exporting Iran's ideology was also incorporated in the Islamic Republic's constitution. Article 154 of the current Iranian constitution affirms that Iran "supports the just struggles of the *mustad'afun* [oppressed] against the *mustakbirun* [tyrants] in every corner of the globe."

As is often the case with revolutionary regimes, the early fervor of the Iranian revolution seems to have subsided and the broader goal of replicating the Islamic revolution has been modified to expanding Tehran's influence and ensuring external support for the survival of its clerical regime. But Iran still pursues a robust policy of cultivating and deploying proxies in other, mainly Muslim countries.

The role of Iran's proxies and allies in the Middle East is well known, partly because it is more overt. Hezbollah's targeting of Israel and its efforts to dominate Lebanon, Iran's role in propping up the Bashar Assad regime in Syria, or its political

and militant meddling in Iraq and Yemen often make headlines. But the Ayatollahs have also expanded their influence across South, Central, and East Asia without attracting the same level of attention as their activities in the Middle East.

Seeking Leverage, Spreading Ideology

IRAN'S GOALS IN ASIA APPEAR TO BE EXPANSION OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL leverage, spread of Islamist ideology, and the recruitment of cannon fodder for its proxy wars. It also hopes to keep in check the influence of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Tehran has built deep influence among the populations of its neighbors, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The Ayatollahs' regime also maintains close relations with the Government of India, which has security concerns over Iranian influence domestically but which also sees Shiism as a Muslim bulwark against Sunni radicalism.

A large Iranian diaspora, and cooperation in nuclear technology, characterizes Iran's ties with Malaysia. Under its former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, Malaysia even joined Turkey's President, Recip Teyyip Erdogan, and the Iranians in trying to create an alternative to the Saudi-led Organization of Islamic cooperation (OIC).

The country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia, remains wary of Iranian ideological influence over its Muslims, as does Singapore. But Indonesia and Singapore maintain economic relations with Iran. Even Thailand, which has a Muslim minority comprising under five percent of the population, has been used by Iran as a source for black market weapons.

Iran's clerics have a natural affinity with Shia Muslims, many of whom look to Iran for spiritual and political support. The overwhelming majority of Asia's Muslims are Sunnis and few Sunnis these days have any sympathy for Iran, unlike in the earliest days after the Iranian revolution. Then, Sunni Islamist groups also looked toward Tehran until the Iran-Iraq War, and the portrayal of Iran as the center of Shia revival, turned most Sunni Islamists away from the Ayatollahs.

Given the huge population sizes, even minorities in larger Asian countries number in the millions. That allows the Iranian Ayatollahs to cultivate Shia populations that can be influential even when they represent a smaller percentage of the overall population. For example, only 20 percent of India's Muslim population of 195 million

is Shia but India cannot ignore 40 million people. Similarly, Pakistan's 15 percent Shias add up to 30 million and in Afghanistan they number around six million.

The Shia presence in East Asia is less pronounced but still significant. Of 230 million Muslims in Indonesia, an eighth of the world's total, less than one million (including foreigners living in Indonesia) are Shia. Malaysia and Indonesia refuse to recognize Shia teachings, actively suppress Shia movements and Malaysia has sometimes even arrested Shias for publicly practicing their faith.[3] But both countries are liberal in issuing residence permits to Iranian students and business-men, making it possible for Iranians to bypass international sanctions.[4]

Creating Pockets of Influence

IRAN'S CURRENT STRATEGY FOR CREATING POCKETS OF INFLUENCE IN ASIA IS based heavily on cultivating Shia populations while dealing pragmatically with the governments of various countries. Every now and then, Iran's leaders still speak of Pan-Islamic ideals just as Khomeini insisted that the 1979 revolution was not just Shia but an Islamic revolution.[5]

The current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, often speaks of the "wave of Islamic revival [that] has swept through the Islamic world." According to Khamenei, Iran's "revolution could not be exported, since it is not a commodity. However, our Islamic revolution, like the scent of spring flowers that is carried by the breeze, [has] reached every corner of the Islamic world and brought about an Islamic revival in Muslim nations."[6] Khamenei often includes non-Middle East-ern Asian countries while discussing the problems confronting "the world of Islam," describing Iran's South Asian neighbors as part of Iran's regional focus. "Take a look at the condition of Islamic countries in our region ranging from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria to Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen and Libya," he said in 2015.[7] But he does not hesitate to play the Shia card when necessary.

"We can see that people—in Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other parts of the world where there are devout Muslims and Shia—get concerned about the situa-tion of our country," Khamenei said in one speech. According to him, "That shows the active presence of the Islamic Republic's thoughts in the world of Islam. The Islamic Republic has two aspects. It is republican in the sense that it represents ordinary people. It is also Islamic—that is to say, it is based on divine and religious values."[8]

Several Iranian institutions help in creating and sustaining networks of mosques, clerics, and seminaries that can influence large Shia communities.[9] This includes the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), an official chain of cultural centers that teaches "the ideals of the Revolution" and works to improve relations between Muslim countries. It also sponsors programs to teach Persian language and civilizational history and culture.

The Supreme Leader directly controls ICRO, making it an instruments of Iran's foreign policy.The organization has been most successful in its soft power programs in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan,[10] alongside the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which provides "alms and state funding to assist the 'dispossessed' 'oppressed' martyrs and veterans internationally."[11]

The Al-Mustafa International University (MIU), headquartered in Qom, has affiliated religious seminaries and Islamic colleges in over 50 countries. Thousands of foreign students are also enrolled at the university, often at no cost to them, and come to study at campuses within Iran. Many Al-Mustafa graduates go on to establish religious and cultural centers in their home countries, on behalf of the Iranian regime, creating a network of supporters of the Islamic Revolution among local populations.[12]

The MIU's influence is most pronounced in Afghanistan. In a 2014 interview, Hojatoleslam Muhammad Hassan Ibrahimi, Khamenei's representative in Afghanistan, estimated that nearly 9,000 Afghans study in Iranian seminaries and about 10,000 Afghans in Iran's universities. According to Ibrahimi, about 54,000 junior and senior Afghan (Shia) clerics were living in Iran, either in or outside seminaries. MIU has a branch in Kabul since 2012, making it the main institution providing administrative services and credentials to Afghanistan's Shia clergy. [13]

Pakistan: Nuclear-armed Neighbor

AMONG SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES, IRAN HAS TARGETED PAKISTAN FOR SPECIAL attention, for multiple reasons. As a neighbor and the only nuclear-armed Muslim country, Pakistan is deemed important by leaders of the Islamic Republic. Pakistan's large, and influential, Shia population had been close to Iran's clerics even before the Islamic Revolution.

Pakistan had built special relations with Iran after Pakistan's independence in 1947. But after the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iran's leaders were initially wary of

Pakistan's close ties with the United States and the Arab Gulf monarchies and also resented the fact that Pakistan's leaders had been close to the Shah.

As Pakistan's pro-West and pro-Saudi military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, initiated efforts to Islamize Pakistan in the 1980s, Pakistan became a center of Sunni-Shia conflict. Zia-ul-Haq claimed neutrality in the Iran-Iraq conflict but that was not enough for him to escape the personal wrath of Ayatollah Khomeini. In revolutionary Iran's first military parade in February 1980, the Pakistani dictator (who insisted on attending) had to witness the spectacle of his own portrait being part of the portraits of world leaders over which Iran's revolutionary guards marched as a sign of contempt and hatred.

Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization efforts brought greater Saudi funding for Sunni fundamentalist madrasas and the fear among Pakistan's Shias about marginalization. Many of Pakistan's leading personalities, including the country's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had been Shias and Shias had faced little organized discrimination during Pakistan's first three decades. Pakistan had, in 1974, passed a constitutional amendment that excluded members of the relatively small Ahmadiyya sect as non-Muslims. The Shias are more numerous and no one in government supported the extension of discrimination and persecution of Ahmadis to Shias.

But, in the wake of the Iranian revolution, and particularly under Zia-ul-Haq, extremist Sunnis demanded that only Sunni jurisprudence be enforced through the Islamization of laws. At least one Sunni group, supported by Saudi donations, called for legally declaring Shias as being outside the pale of Islam. Meantime, Sunni militias started attacking and killing prominent Shias, who responded with militancy backed by Iran. In 1986, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a directive to the Iranian government to protect Pakistan's Shia.

The Shias of Pakistan subsequently organized themselves as Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan (Jafaria Movement of Pakistan) and demanded greater autonomy for Shia theologians within the country's legal system. They generally also endorsed the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini.[14] The murder of the group's firebrand leader, Arif al-Husaini, by Sunni militants in 1988 created a martyr for Pakistan's Shias. The small town of Parachinar, in Pakistan's northwest and along the Afghan border, started being described in Iran's media as "a second Gaza."[15]

By 1993 a Shia militant group called Sipah-e-Mohammad (SMP, the Army of Mohammad) had emerged under the leadership of Ghulam Raza Naqvi and Murid Abbas Yazdani. With Iranian financing and training, the group made a point of retaliating against Sunni extremists with assassinations and attacks on Sunni hardliners.[16]

Iranian support also helped expand the network of Shia madrasas in Pakistan.

At the time of India's partition in 1947, there were 245 seminaries in Pakistan, of which only seven were Shia. By 1998, the total number of madrasas had risen to 2861, of which 47 were Shi'a. In 2002, the number of madrasas in Pakistan had increased to 9,880, with 419 Shia seminaries. Two years later, the number of Shia madrasas had risen to 458, including 84 madrasas for women.[17] Although the stated purpose of madrasas is to produce trained theologians, madrasas in Pakistan have the additional function of providing cadres for Sunni and Shia political groups.

Tehran was also believed to be behind the formation of a Shia political party, the Majlis Wahdat-e Muslimeen (MWM—Society for Unity of Muslims) in 2009. The MWM seems to be following the model of Bahrain's Shia Al-Wefaq rather than that of Lebanon's Hezbollah, eschewing violence and emphasizing political participation. The party says it reflects "the Shia minority's aspirations for political representation," denies receiving Iranian funding, but acknowledges "ideological links" with Iran's revolutionary leadership.[18]

Although it currently has no seats in either house of Pakistan's federal parliament, it holds two seats in the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly. It has allied with the ruling Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) of Prime Minister Imran Khan for the 2020 local elections in the northern Gilgit Baltistan region. Most of MWM's leaders come from the Imamia Students Organization (ISO), which organizes Shia students on college and university campuses.

ISO claims to have a network of 800 branches and 18,000–20,000 male and 6000 female members. In 1989, shortly after he became the Supreme Leader, Khamenei met a group of ISO activists in Tehran. The supreme leader spoke about Muslim unity while remaining deeply anti-American and anti-West, as well as hostile to the status quo powers in the Greater Middle East including Saudi Arabia and other pro-U.S. Arab states. [19]

ISO serves as a bridge between Iran and Pakistani Shia students other than the ones studying theology. The Shia madrasas across Pakistan are already dominated by faculty trained in Iran and their graduates often go for further education to Qom and other Iranian seminaries. Although Sunni extremists still call for excluding Shias from the ranks of Islam, Pakistan has managed to control the Shia-Sunni violence that reached its peak in the 1980s and mid-1990s. But the country remains a battleground for Sunni and Shia extremists still backed by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively.

Despite the shock of Sunni-Shia violence inside Pakistan, Ayatollah Khomeini's directive for Iran to act as the protector of Pakistan's Shias, and disagreements during the civil war in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan have been able to build a functioning relationship. Even as they clashed, the two countries cooperated in

the field of nuclear technology. A nuclear cooperation agreement, ostensibly signed in 1986, led to several Iranian scientists receiving training in Pakistan. The A.Q. Khan network supplied centrifuge technology for uranium enrichment to Iran even though Pakistan later denied that these transfers were officially approved.[20]

Still, Iran's relations with Pakistan remain uneven. A major faction of the Baloch insurgency in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan, across the Pakistan border, has adopted jihadist ideology and is openly anti-Shia. Tehran suspects that Pakistan's intelligence service supports the group, which operates from inside Pakistani Balochistan. Iran closed its border with Pakistan in 2009 after Jundallah attacks in Iran and then-President Ahmadinejad openly accused "certain officials in Pakistan" of supporting the insurgents on behalf of the United States.[21]

Incidents such as kidnapping of Iranian soldiers by Pakistan-based Baloch insurgents and firing on Pakistani troops by Iranian border guards create tensions, in addition to the sectarian issues.

Pakistan is also unhappy over Iran's recruitment of at least 20,000 Pakistani Shias in the Zeynabiyoun Brigade of IRGC's Quds Force. The brigade was recruited primarily to fight in Syria and is named after the shrine of Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter, Sayyida Zeynab, near Damascus. Pakistani Shias volunteered for the Brigade ostensibly to defend that shrine.[22]

But the origins of the Zeynabiyoun Brigade might lie in IRGC's earlier arming and training of a Shia militia in Parachinar, on Pakistan's northwest border with Afghanistan. A Zeynabiyoun commander reportedly acknowledged ties with the Quds Force dating back to the time of the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. After war broke out in Syria, the Quds Force tapped into its pre-existing network, and announced the formation of the militia in 2014.[23] General Ismail Qaani, who succeeded Qassem Soleimani as commander of the IRGC's Quds Force oversaw the Zeynabiyoun, as well as the sister Afghan militia, Fatemiyoun.

Prior to recruitment, a significant number of Zeynabiyoun members lived in Iran and studied in religious seminaries in Qom.[24] Recruitment ads posted on Facebook in 2015 called for physically fit men, ages 18–35, and offered training, regular salaries, and death benefits for the fighters' widows and children.[25] An IRGC statement in 207 declaring "victory" against the Islamic State in Syria, said that the Zeynabiyoun Brigade vowed its readiness to fight anywhere the IRGC orders it.[26]

IRGC affiliated media say that initially 5,000 Shia jihadists volunteered from Pakistan to fight in the Fatemiyoun Brigade, but additional recruitment from Pakistan led to the creation of a separate brigade comprising Pakistanis. Although the Zeynabiyoun are currently away from the country, Pakistan's security estab-

lishment is concerned about the threat posed by returning fighters trained and controlled by Iran. That threat gives Iran leverage in its military to military and intelligence level talks with Pakistani officials.

Every now and then Iran demonstrates its covert ingress in Pakistan, which ensures that the secret services of the two countries continue to work with each other. In 2010, the Pakistan-based Jundallah leader Abdul Malik Regi was arrested by Iranian security forces as he was flying over the Persian Gulf enroute from Dubai to Kyrgzstan.[27] The facts of Regi's arrest remain mired in mystery, leading to speculation that Iranian intelligence was independently able to track Regi's movements from Pakistan.

Similarly, in 2010 Iranian agents were able to free an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in 2008 in Peshawar by Sunni extremists, without any help from Pakistan's ubiquitous security service.[28] Pakistan tends to play down Iran's brazen interventions partly to avoid losing face over its inability to fend off such involvement and partly to avoid escalating tensions with Iran.[29]

India: Relations Between Ancient Civilizations

DIFFICULT RELATIONS WITH PAKISTAN HAVE CREATED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR India to develop close ties with Iran. India is the third largest importer of Iranian oil in Asia and offers the Islamic Republic an opportunity to "escape international isolation."[30] Tehran and New Delhi cite historic ties between two old civilizations as the underpinning of their relationship. Persian was once the official language in Moghul India and Indians, even other than Muslims, see the two ancient countries tied by culture. Iranian society has appreciated Bollywood while Indian filmmakers have been inspired by Iranian ones.

But the real reasons for India and Iran maintaining close ties relate to trade, investment, and politics. India enjoys an economic advantage in helping Iran circumvent western sanctions on Iranian oil and the financial sector. U.S. sanctions and Pakistan's policies have blocked the completion of the proposed 1724-mile Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, which would enable Pakistan and India to use up to 40 billion cubic meters of Iranian natural gas. But even without that pipeline, Iran has served as an important energy supplier to India.

Iran's location to the west of Pakistan enables India to leverage relations with Iran in its strategy of containing Pakistan.[31] India and Iran share concerns about Sunni Islamist radicalism and have coordinated strategies in Afghanistan to keep Pakistan's influence there at bay. The two countries have also cooperated in developing the Iranian port at Chahbahar, to serve as an alternative trading route for landlocked Afghanistan, which is unable to trade with India because of impediments created by Pakistan. For that reason alone, even as India draws closer to the United States and Israel, it remains unwilling to jettison its ties to Iran.

According to Indian strategists, India sees Iran as its "overland gateway to the Central Asia region and Afghanistan, theatres where India seeks to deepen its economic activities and, more importantly, consolidate its presence by projecting greater power.[32] Close ties with Iran are a function of "India's appetite for energy resources," "a shared interest in countering Pakistan's regional influence," and India's desire to seek a "balance against China, which is close to Pakistan and active in Central Asia."[33]

India considers its Iranian connection sufficiently worthy in strategic terms to ignore the Islamic Republic's criticism of Indian actions in Kashmir. Iran considers India's increasing economic and soft power particularly beneficial and, in return, is willing to support India's desire to be recognized as a great power. Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, has described "expanding relations with India in all areas is among the priorities" of his administration. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, bilateral trade was flourishing, and the two countries expected it to rise farther than its 2019 high mark of $17 billion.

India and Iran have a reason other than the strategic and economic factors they both highlight in their relationship. India's Shia Muslim minority, estimated at 40 million, is the second largest Shia concentration in any country, after Iran with 66 million. India's Shias have "deep ideological links with the Shia Islamic learning centers in Iran" but Indian officials have not found Shias to be involved in "transnational acts of terror."[34]

According to Lieutenant General Ata Hasnain of the Indian army, himself a Shia, "India's Shia community had kept its Iran linkage without any effect on its patriotic orientation towards India."[35] But it is clear that by maintaining close ties to the Ayatollahs' regime, India would like to keep things that way.

Unlike their Afghan or Pakistani counterparts, India's Shias do not depend on Iranian support. Ayatollah Khamenei's representative in India once remarked that there were more than ninety Shia seminaries in India and more than a thousand Indians studied at the Qom seminary in Iran.[36] But Indian authorities have found no evidence of these seminaries receiving undisclosed Iranian assistance or

recruiting Shia militias. Often, radical Indian Shia preachers have thrived only after leaving India. For instance, Zaki Baqri, a Shia scholar from south India, reportedly preached "Khomeinism" but only after moving to Toronto, Canada.[37]

The one region where Indians are concerned about Iran's involvement with the Shia community is Jammu and Kashmir. Shias number between 12–15 percent of Kashmir's population and are concentrated in the Kargil region, the locus of the 1999 mini-war between India and Pakistan. According to General Hasnain, Kargil has a population of 140,000 of which 77 percent (100,000) are Muslim. 65 percent of Kargil's Muslims are Shias. These Shias lives in a strategic part of Ladakh, which is itself strategically important because of adjoining China.

An Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) has functioned in Kargil since 1979, helping the impoverished local population with charity and education. But it also propagates Iranian revolutionary ideology in addition to playing a role in local politics. Kargil Shias observe the anti-Israel Qods Day in Ramadan as directed by Khomeini, mark Khomeini's death anniversary annually, and became prominent for coming out in streets after the killing by the United States of IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani.

Indian observers such as General Hasnain played down the "demonstrations in support of Iran and the assassinated Qassem Soleimani, seen in Kargil and elsewhere in India," describing them as "only transactional in nature for the expression of solidarity."[38] Reports of growing Iranian influence in Ladakh have not affected the Indian relationship with Iran so far. But the growth of pro-Iran entities there would definitely be an irritant in future as India starts questioning Iran's rationale for building a radical support base within India.

Soleimani and the Qods Force may not have targeted Indian interests, but they did try, in 2012, to attack an Israeli diplomat on Indian soil. The wife of the Israeli defense attaché to India was injured after the car she was travelling in was targeted by a motorcycle-borne blast in Delhi. Two Indians, who were bystanders, were also injured. The attack came in tandem with an attack on an Israeli embassy employee in Tbilisi, Georgia, and an explosion in Bangkok, Thailand, where two Iranians were trying to assemble explosives to assassinate Israeli diplomats.[39] Indian police investigation into the attack in Delhi lead nowhere but it did result in strong private protests by Indian officials to Iran and the IRGC has not tried something similar in India since.

The botched attacks of 2012 on Israelis notwithstanding, Iran makes a clear distinction between its approach to governments it disregards in its covert operations, and governments it tends to respect or at least not provoke. South Asian countries fall in the second category. Iran's allies, including militias recruited from

amongst Shias of Afghanistan and Pakistan that work under the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), have not tried actively to overthrow governments. Instead, they serve as an instrument for bargaining, which enables Iran to negotiate more effectively with the governments in power. But the IRGC operates in tandem with the Iranian regime's ideological and cultural thrust.

"If in the Revolutionary Guard there is not strong ideological-political training, then [the] IRGC cannot be the powerful arm of the Islamic Revolution," a message from Ayatollah Khamenei stated in the preamble to the IRGC's ideological-political training module from 2016.[40] The module described the group's objective as "Exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution" and ensuring "Survival of velayat-e faqih (doctrine of the guardianship of Islamic jurists."

The IRGC inculcates a group identity amongst its members and trainees as "Guardians of Islam and Mujahideen" who reject nationalism and believe in themselves as "Allies of God and Imam Mahdi (Imam of the Age). Group members must conduct "Jihad as resistance" and be ready for martyrdom. They must also know that their enemies include "Polytheists"; "People of the Book" (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians); the "Baaghi" (internal conspirators); and the Mohareb (those who wage war on God). [41]

The IRGC's ideological-political manuscripts make it clear that the IRGC's mission is to export the revolution, which it deems divinely mandated and for which violence is justified.[42] The IRGC's Quds Force has a budget separate from the general Iranian budget and is controlled directly by the Supreme Leader. It is important to note that, in addition to Corps and Directorates for Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, the IRGC's Quds Force also has directorates for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Other Directorates cover Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, Western nations (Europe and North America), and North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, and Morocco).[43] The organization chart of the IRGC makes it clear that South and Central Asia are important targets for Iran's influence operations.

Iran's Afghan Sphere of Influence

AFGHANISTAN HAS BEEN A MAJOR ARENA FOR IRAN'S DEMONSTRATION OF ITS power, short of trying to wrest absolute control. Iran hosted around two million Afghan refugees during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, maintained close ties with Sunni Mujahedeen operating in Afghan provinces bordering Iran, and sponsored Shia groups in the war against the Soviets.[44] When the U.S.-backed Mujahedeen, based in Pakistan, announced an anti-communist government-in-exile in 1988, composed exclusively of Sunnis, Iran demanded representation of the Shia Hazaras.

This enabled Iran to claim a seat at the table in international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Iran supported the creation of Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami (Islamic Unity Party), which united all Khomeinist factions under the leadership of Ali Mazari. During the Afghan civil war in 1992–93, Iran supported the Dari-speaking, Sunni non-Pashtun groups such as Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Society) of Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Massoud, Jumbish-e Melli (National Islamic Movement) of Abdul Rashid Dostum, and smaller Ismaili Shia factions.[45]

A prominent Afghan Shia leader pointed out Iran's "strong presence in Afghanistan," based on "culture, customs, and language."[46] Dari, one of Afghanistan's two official languages, is a variant of Persian and is spoken by half of Afghanistan's population. Although most Afghans are Sunni, some ethnicities in this multi-ethnic country are Shia. Prominent among them are the Hazara, "a much-persecuted minority group of Asiatic origin inhabiting what is known as the Hazarajat, a region in Bamiyan and surrounding provinces."[47]

The Hazara are the largest Shia community in Afghanistan, far larger than groups like the Qizilbash, the Farsiwan, and the Sayyeds. They are also politically most influential and are concentrated in a strategically located region. The Taliban targeted them for being Shia and also because territory inhabited by the Hazara was important to control Afghanistan north, which resisted Taliban rule. The major Hazara Shia group, Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami, was part of the Northern Alliance that helped Americans topple the Taliban in the aftermath of 9/11.

Iran ostensibly played a critical role in persuading the Northern Alliance to support Hamid Karzai's nomination as President of Afghanistan immediately after the overthrow of the Taliban. James Dobbins, the American envoy to Afghanistan at the time has been quoted as saying that it was the Iranian representative,

Mohammad Javad Zarif, who convinced Younis Qanooni, a powerful Northern Alliance leader, to back Karzai. Dobbins also received an offer from an Iranian general to assist in training the Afghan National Army, an offer the Americans wisely turned down.

Apart from the fact that the U.S. overthrow of the Taliban benefited Iranian interests, Iran also used its cooperation immediately after 9/11 to pave the way for negotiations with the U.S. with the aim of ending U.S. sanctions against Iran.

Since the Taliban's overthrow in 2011, the Iranian-backed Hazaras have become socially and politically important in Afghanistan. Iran helps the Hazaras in maintaining that influence and, in return, Hazara politicians advance Iran's sway in Afghan matters. Hizb-e-Wahdat leader Karim Khalili, has twice served as the Afghan vice president and remains close to the center of power in Kabul.[48] Iran's ability to leverage Afghan domestic politics has protected it from the United States using its military presence in Afghanistan to threaten Iran.

As mentioned earlier, IRGC's Quds Force has also managed to raise a force of Afghan Shia volunteers—the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which some see as "Hezbollah Afghanistan." The Fatemiyoun detachment of some 20,000 fighters has fought in Syria and several hundred have been reported killed in battles there since 2013.[49] The group started out as a militia comprising Afghan refugees in Iran and Syria but now recruits inside Afghanistan as well. It is safe to assume that the Iranians will not stop at mobilizing Afghan Shia fighters for battle in Syria. Iran would also be able "to utilize these forces to further its interest in Afghanistan."[50]

Over the years, even as the U.S. had a huge military presence there, Iran has managed to secure its border with Afghanistan. It ensured the flow of water downstream in shared rivers and worked with the Afghan government on countering narcotics and dealing with its large Afghan refugee population estimated at one million. Iran has extended U.S. $500 million in aid to Afghanistan officially while being one of Afghanistan's major trading partners. At the same time, Iran has close ties to various militias and armed groups both allied with and battling the Americans.[51]

Iran considers Afghanistan as part of its natural sphere of influence. But given the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, and the fact that the Iranian clerical leadership's closest allies in Afghanistan are an ethnic minority, Tehran moves cautiously on Afghanistan's chess board. Iran maintains close relations with the government in Kabul and in addition to the 50 to 55 Shia members of parliament, also counts many Sunni politicians among its friends.

Iran's Afghanistan policy is coordinated by the Afghanistan Headquarters, set up in late 2001 and located in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But several competing

centers of power, including the Supreme Leader's Office, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), the IRGC, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, and the Ministry of Interior play a role in decisions relating to Afghanistan.[52]

In anticipation of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Iranian government has also been involved in political discussions with Taliban representatives. The Taliban and the Islamic Republic share a common enemy, the United States, and Iran has reportedly funded or supported Taliban factions to increase American losses. In doing so, Iran's leadership seems to have forgiven the Taliban's massacre of Shias and hostility towards Iran when the ruled over Afghanistan in 1994–2001.

The Iranians realize that the Taliban will be a major force in post-U.S. withdrawal Afghanistan. While retaining their traditional Shia and Dari-speaking Sunni partners, Iran wants to make sure that it can deal more effectively with the Taliban, if they come to power again. Iran would not like a total Taliban victory but has no hesitation in planning for it. Iran's Afghan policy offers an illustration of the mixture of pragmatism and ideology that characterizes Iran's strategy for influence in South Asia.

Conclusion

SOUTH ASIA IS NEXT IN IMPORTANCE TO THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE HIERARCHY of Iran's foreign policy and influence operations priorities. Iran maintains close ties with governments in the region, including military to military and intelligence to intelligence relations. But it also uses Shia populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to cultivate a support base that can be used as leverage in negotiations with governments of these countries.

Iran's desire for nuclear weapons makes Pakistan a country of particular interest for Iran's Ayatollahs. Iran portrays itself as the protector of Pakistan's Shia minority and has conducted a proxy war with Sunni extremists, some of whom have enjoyed Saudi Arabia's support. Iranian intelligence has penetrated Pakistan sufficiently to be able to conduct independent operations, (such as securing the release of its diplomat from hostage takers in 2010) and buying used Pakistani centrifuges for uranium enrichment from the A.Q. Khan Network for nuclear materials. Pakistani authorities are concerned with Iran's influence but must be mindful of the sentiments of Pakistan's large Shia population.

Now that thousands of Pakistani Shia fighters have been recruited and trained

as part of the Zeynabiyoun Brigade of the IRGC's Qods Force, Pakistan will have to watch out for an Iranian controlled militia on its soil.

India does not face a similar threat from Iran as does Pakistan. But Iran has managed to cultivate strong economic and political ties with India, partly to circumvent international isolation and sanctions. India is home to the world's second largest cluster of Shias after Iran. Although India's Shias have, so far, not been as militant as their co-religionists in Pakistan and the Middle East, India will also have to watch out for the impact of revolutionary ideas emanating from Tehran and Qom.

Afghanistan is perhaps the South Asian country most vulnerable to Iranian machinations. Although its Shia minority represents a smaller proportion of the population than that in Pakistan or India, it is fully integrated in Iran's strategy for Afghanistan. The Fatemiyoun militia, the Hizb-e-Wahdat political party, and pro-Iran Persian speaking Sunni politicians are all useful to the Islamic Republic's plan to project greater power in Afghanistan—especially if and when the United States withdraws its military from that country.

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The Battle for the Soul of Islam

By James M. Dorsey

JORDANIAN RULER ABDULLAH I BIN AL-HUSSEIN GLOATED IN 1924 WHEN Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, abolished the Caliphate. "The Turks have committed suicide. They had in the Caliphate one of the greatest political forces, and have thrown it away... I feel like sending a telegram thanking Mustapha Kemal. The Caliphate is an Arab institution. The Prophet was an Arab, the Koran is in Arabic, the Holy Places are in Arabia and the Khalif should be an Arab of the tribe of Khoreish," Abdullah told *The Manchester Guardian* at the time, referring to the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed.[1] "Now the Khaliphate has come back to Arabia," he added.

It did not. Arab leaders showed no interest in the return of the Caliphate even if many Muslim intellectuals and clerics across the Middle East and the Muslim World criticized Ataturk's abolition of it. Early Islamist political movements, for their part, largely declared the revival of the caliphate as an aspiration rather than an immediate goal. A century later it is not the caliphate that the world's Muslim powerhouses are fighting about. Instead, they are engaged in a deepening religious soft power struggle for geopolitical influence and dominance.

This battle for the soul of Islam pits rival Middle Eastern and Asian powers against one another: Turkey, seat of the Islamic world's last true caliphate; Saudi Arabia, home to the faith's holy cities; the United Arab Emirates, propagator of a militantly

statist interpretation of Islam; Qatar with its less strict version of Wahhabism and penchant for political Islam; Indonesia, promoting a humanitarian, pluralistic notion of Islam that reaches out to other faiths as well as non-Muslim centre-right forces across the globe; Morocco which uses religion as a way to position itself as the face of moderate Islam; and Shia Iran with its derailed revolution.

In the ultimate analysis, no clear winner may emerge. Yet, the course of the battle could determine the degree to which Islam will be defined by either one or more competing stripes of ultra-conservatism—statist forms of the faith that preach absolute obedience to political rulers and/or reduce religious establishments to pawns of the state. Implicit in the rivalry is a broader debate across the Muslim World that goes to the heart of the relationship between the state and religion. That debate centers on what role the state, if at all, should play in the enforcement of religious morals and the place of religion in education, judicial systems and politics. As the battle for religious soft power between rival states has intensified, the lines dividing the state and religion have become ever more blurred, particularly in more autocratic countries. This struggle has and will affect the prospects for the emergence of a truly more tolerant and pluralistic interpretation of one of the three Abrahamic religions.

An Ever More Competitive Struggle

A SURVEY OF THE MODERN HISTORY OF THE QUEST FOR MUSLIM RELIGIOUS SOFT power reveals an ever more competitive struggle with the staggered entry of multiple new players. Initially, in the 1960s, the Saudis, with Pakistani and a degree of West African input, had the playing field more or less to themselves as they created the building blocks of what would emerge as the world's most focused, state-run and well-funded Islamic public diplomacy campaign. At the time, Western powers saw the Saudi effort in fostering conservative Islam as part of the global effort to contain communism. Ultimately, it far exceeded anything that the Soviets or the Americans undertook.

The Saudi endeavor, in contrast to the United States that could rely on its private sector and cultural attributes, was by necessity a top-down and largely government-financed initiative that overtime garnered widespread public support. The bulk of Saudi money went to non-violent, ultra-conservative religious, cultural and media

institutions in countries stretching from China across Eurasia and Africa into the Americas. Some recipients of Saudi largesse were political, others were not. More often than not, funding was provided and donations were made with the tacit approval and full knowledge of governments, if not their active cooperation.

Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, the kingdom's religious outreach no longer focused on containing communism alone, and Saudi practice increasingly mirrored Iran's coupling of religious soft power with hard power through the selective use of proxies in various Middle Eastern countries. Rarely publicly available receipts of donations by Saudis to violence-prone groups and interviews with past bagmen suggest that the kingdom directly funded violent militants in select countries in response to specific circumstances. This included Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, Pakistan to support anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian militants, Bosnia Herzegovina in aid of foreign fighters confronting Serbia in the 1990s, Palestine, Syria where Islamists were fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iraq wracked by an anti-Shiite insurgency and Iran in a bid to fuel ethnic unrest.

Money was often hand carried to recipients or channelled through businessmen, money exchangers and chosen banks. Receipts of donations to Sipah-e-Sahaba, a banned virulently anti-Shia group that attacked Shias in Pakistan, and its successors and offshoots, bear the names of a Saudi donor who is hard to trace. They suggest that the dividing lines between private and officially-sanctioned funding are blurred.

To be sure, the level of Saudi funding and the thrust of the kingdom's religious soft power diplomacy has changed with the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The drive today is to project the kingdom and its Islam as forward-looking, tolerant, and outward- rather than inward-looking. Saudi religious outreach also aims to open doors for the kingdom through demonstrative acts like the visit to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland by a delegation of 25 prominent Muslim clergymen led by Mohammed al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League. The League, which was once a prime vehicle for the kingdom's global promotion of religious ultra-conservatism, has also been forging closer ties with Jewish and Christian evangelist communities.

Indeed, Prince Mohammed has turned the League into a propagator of his vaguely defined notion of a moderate Islam. Meantime, Saudi Arabia's retreat from religiously packaged foreign funding[2] has created opportunity for the kingdom's competitors. Facts on the ground in the kingdom and beyond, nonetheless, tell at times a different story. Schoolbooks are being cleansed of supremacist and racist references in a slow and grinding process initiated after the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said in its 2020 report that "despite progress in recent years, Saudi textbooks have seen some backsliding regarding language inciting hatred and violence toward non-Muslims. While the 2019–2020 textbooks showed marginal improvements in the discussion of Christians, textbooks still teach that Christians and Jews 'are the enemy of Islam and its people,' and that members of the LGBTQI community will 'be struck [killed] in the same manner as those in Sodom.'"[3]

Prince Mohammed's nominal embrace of religious tolerance and inter-faith dialogue has produced far more public interactions with Jewish and Christian leaders but not led to a lifting on the ban on public non-Muslim worship and the building of non-Muslim houses of worship in the kingdom itself. Access to holy sites like Mecca and Medina remains banned for non-Muslims, as it has been for most of Islam's history, and often entry into mosques is also barred.

While Saudi Arabia has implemented strict regulations on donations for charitable purposes abroad, the source and the channelling of funding to militants that serve the kingdom's geopolitical purpose remains unclear at best. Militant Pakistani bagmen described in interviews in 2017 and 2018 the flow of large amounts of money to ultra-conservative madrassas that dot Pakistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan. They said the monies were channelled through Saudi nationals of Baloch origin and often arrived in suitcases in an operation that they believed had tacit Saudi government approval. The monies, according to bagmen interviewed by this writer, were being transferred at a time when U.S. policymakers like former national security adviser John Bolton were proposing to destabilize the Iranian regime by supporting ethnic insurgencies.[4] Saudi Arabia was also publicly hinting that it may adopt a similar strategy.

No Longer in a Class of its Own

THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN MARKED THE MOMENT WHEN SAUDI religious soft power was no longer in a class of its own. It also launched a new phase in Saudi-Iranian rivalry that progressively has engulfed the Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Competition for religious soft power and influence is a fixture of the rivalry. So is the marked difference in Saudi and Iranian concepts of religious soft power.

Although both had sectarian traits, Saudi Arabia's primary focus was religious

and theological while revolutionary Iran's was explicitly political and paramilitary in nature and geared toward acquiring hard power. Iranian outreach in various Arab countries focused on cultivating Shiite militias, not on greater religious piety.

The Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s in which Sunni Gulf states funded Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's war machine shifted Iran's focus from export of its revolution to a greater emphasis on Iranian nationalism. Iran also moved to nurturing Shiite militias that would constitute the country's first line of defense.

Gone were the days of Tehran's emphasis on groups like the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain that gathered regularly in a large sitting room in the home of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a one-time designated successor of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the exploits of his son, Mohammed Montazeri, who was nicknamed Ayatollah Ringo and founded an armed group in Lebanon and Syria that aimed to liberate Muslim lands.

The watershed shift has shaped Iran and its religious strategy, including its support for and recruitment of Shiite and other groups and communities in the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It constituted Iran's soft and hard power response to the Saudi effort to infuse Muslim communities worldwide with an ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian interpretation of the faith. Elsewhere, like in Southeast Asia and West Africa, the thrust of Iranian religious diplomacy was, like much of the Saudi effort, focused primarily on religious and social issues.

The shift was evident early on in emotive debates in Iran's parliament in 1980 about the utility of the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran at a time that Iran was at war with Iraq. Men like Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of the parliament who later became President, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, the number two in the Iranian political hierarchy at the time, and chief jurist Ayatollah Sadegh Khalqali, who was known as the hanging judge for his penchant for the death penalty, argued unsuccessfully in favour of a quick resolution of the embassy crisis so that Iran could focus on the defense of its territory and revolution.

The debates signalled a shift from what was initially an ideological rivalry to a geopolitical fight that continues to this day and that is driven by the perception in Tehran that the United States and the Gulf states are seeking to topple the Islamic regime.

An Ever More Complex Battle

IF THE FIRST PHASE OF THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISLAM WAS DEFINED BY THE largely uncontested Saudi religious soft power campaign, and the second phase began with the emergence of revolutionary Iran, the third and most recent phase is the most complex one, not only because of the arrival on the scene of new players but also because it entails rivalries within rivalries.

The new players are first and foremost the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Qatar, and Indonesia. Their entry into the fray has further blurred the dividing lines between purely religious and cultural soft power, nationalism, and the struggle within Muslim societies over values, including various freedoms, rights, and preferred political systems.

The third phase is complicated by the fact that all of the players with the exception of Indonesia have embraced Iran's model of coupling religious soft power with hard power and the use of proxies to advance their respective agendas. This is apparent in the Saudi-UAE-led war to counter Iran in Yemen; Emirati, Egyptian and Turkish support for opposing sides in Libya's civil war; and Turkish and Gulf state involvement in Syria.

The intensifying violence lays bare the opportunism adopted by most players. Saudi Arabia, for example, has been willing to forge or maintain alliances with groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood even though it has designated the organization as a terrorist entity,[6] while the UAE, which claims the mantle of moderation but still supports the forces of Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar whose ranks include a significant number of Salafist fighters.[7]

The resurgence of political Islam as a result of the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, fuelled the worst fears of men like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed, Egyptian General-turned President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

The upheaval also created an opportunity for the UAE, a country that prides itself on being a cutting-edge, cosmopolitan home to people from some 190 countries. It launched a multi-faceted effort to project itself as an open and tolerant society that is at the forefront of Islamic moderation and tolerance, and to respect religious diversity and inter-faith dialogue.

Bin Zayed's acquiescence of the Salafis, who have sought to impose strict Islamic law on Haftar's eastern Libyan stronghold of Benghazi, is based on their association with an ultra-conservative strand of the faith that preaches absolute

obedience to the earthly ruler in power. That acquiescence contradicts Bin Zayed's otherwise dim view of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam like Wahhabism.

Speaking in 2005 to then U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey, Bin Zayed compared Saudi Arabia's religious leaders to "somebody like the one we are chasing in the mountains," a reference to Osama bin Laden who at the time was believed to be hiding in a mountainous region of Afghanistan.[8] In an email to *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman twelve years later, Yusuf al-Otaiba, a confidante of Bin Zayed and the UAE's ambassador in Washington, asserted that "Abu Dhabi fought 200 years of wars with Saudi over Wahhabism."[9]

Al Otaiba's comment came a year after the UAE, in a bid to undermine Saudi religious diplomacy, sponsored a gathering of prominent Sunni Muslim leaders in the Chechen capital of Grozny that effectively ex-communicated Wahhabism.[10] Western officials refrained from publicly commenting, but they privately commended Emirati efforts to confront a worldview that they feared provided a breeding ground for social tensions and extremism.[11]

Bin Zayed has played a key role in shaping Bin Salman's policies to shave off Wahhabism's rougher edges and to bring the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's religious soft power endeavors closer together. This alignment has resulted in what author Shadi Hamid calls non-political politicized Islam, or a "third trend in political Islam."[12] That trend, in the words of scholar Gregory Gause, "is tightly tied to state authority and subservient to it."[13]

Bin Zayed's efforts have paid off. Despite ruling at home with an iron fist, Bin Zayed has been able to promote a state-controlled Islam that styles itself as tolerant and apolitical and preaches obedience to established rulers without addressing outdated or intolerant concepts embedded in the faith such as the notion of kafirs or infidels, slavery, and Muslim supremacy that remain reference points even if large numbers of Muslims do not heed them in their daily life. His success, backed by armies of paid Western lobbyists, is evidenced by the fact that the UAE is widely perceived as a religiously tolerant, pluralistic, and enlightened society. This is in stark contrast to Bin Salman and Saudi Arabia's reputational problems as a result of the 2018 killing in Istanbul of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the arrests and alleged torture of dissidents and others deemed a potential threat.

The UAE has also successfully projected itself as a secular state despite the fact that its constitution requires legislation to be compatible with Islamic law. In doing so, Emirati leaders walk a fine line. Islamic scholars with close ties to the UAE felt a need to rush to defend Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador,[14] against accusations of blasphemy for telling Charlie Rose in a television interview that "what we would like to see is more secular, stable, prosperous, empowered, strong government."[15]

To avert criticism, the UAE government rolled out Mauritanian philosopher Adballah Seyid Ould Abah who insisted that it was "obvious that (Al Otaiba) did not mean secularism according to the concept of 'laícite' or according to the social context of the term. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other countries in the region are keen on sponsoring a religion, maintaining its role in the public field, and protecting it from ideological exploitation which is a hidden manifestation of secularization."[16]

The UAE scored one of its most significant successes with the first ever papal visit to the Emirates by Pope Francis during which he signed a Document on Human Fraternity with Al Azhar's Grand Imam, Ahmad El-Tayeb. The pope acknowledged the UAE's growing influence, when in a public address he thanked Egyptian judge and his late advisor Mohamed Abdel Salam, who was close to both the Emiratis and Egypt's Al-Sisi, for drafting the declaration. Abdel Salam ensured that the UAE and the Egyptian president rather than Al Azhar put their stamp on the document.

Creating the UAE's Religious Ecosystem

TO BOLSTER THE EMIRATI VERSION OF "COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY" ISLAM AND counter influential Qatari-backed groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other strands of political Islam, Bin Zayed launched a multi-pronged offensive involving geopolitical as well as religious building blocks.

Bin Zayed drew a line in the sand when in 2013 he helped orchestrate a military coup that toppled Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother who won Egypt's first and only free and fair election.[17] His engineering of the 2017 debilitating UAE-Saudi-Bahraini-Egyptian diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, which is accused of being a pillar of political Islam, further strengthened Bin Zayed's drawing of the religious soft power battle lines.

The battles that have ensued between the UAE and Qatar have been as much in the realm of ideology and ideas as they have been in war theatres like Libya, where the UAE has funded and armed Libyans fighting the elected, internationally recognized Islamist Government of National Accord based in Tripoli.

Bin Zayed signaled his ideational intentions with the creation of religious organizations of his own, the launch of Emirati-run training programs for non-UAE

imams, and a visit a year after the 2013 coup in Egypt to Al Azhar's sprawling 1000-year-old mosque and university complex in Cairo. The visit was designed to underline the Emirati ruler's determination to steer Al Azhar's adoption of moderate language and counter extremism and fanaticism.[18]

Meantime, the new Emirati imam-training programs put the UAE in direct competition with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Morocco, major purveyors of Muslim clerical training. The UAE scored initial successes with the training of thousands of Afghan clerics[19] and an offer to provide similar services to Indian imams.[20]

The UAE's growing world influence was evident in those who participated in the 2016 Grozny conference that effectively excommunicated Wahhabism. Participants included the imam of the Al-Azhar Grand Mosque, Ahmed El-Tayeb, Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam, former Egyptian Grand Mufti and Sufi authority Ali Gomaa, a strident supporter of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, Al Sisi's religious affairs advisor, Usama al-Azhari, the mufti of Damascus Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, a close confidante of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, influential Yemeni cleric Habib Ali Jifri, head of the Abu Dhabi-based Islamic Tabah Foundation who has close ties to Bin Zayed, Indian grand mufti Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad, and his Jordanian counterpart, Sheikh Abdul Karim Khasawneh.

The participation of El-Tayeb, a political appointee and salaried Egyptian government official, and other Egyptian religious luminaries who had supported Al-Sisi's military coup, said much about the UAE's inroads into Al Azhar, an institution that was for decades a preserve of Saudi ultra-conservatives. El-Tayeb signaled the shift when in 2013 he accepted the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Cultural Personality of the Year in recognition of his "leadership in moderation and tolerance." El-Tayeb was lauded "for encouraging a culture of tolerance, dialogue and protection of civil society" at a moment that Morsi, the embattled Egyptian president, was fighting for his political life, and Bin Zayed was cracking down on Emirati Muslim Brothers.[21]

The Grozny conference was co-organized by the Tabah Foundation, the sponsor of the Council of Elders, a UAE-based group founded in 2014 that aims to dominate Islamic discourse that many non-Salafis assert has been hijacked by Saudi largesse. The Council, like the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, another UAE-funded organization, was created to counter the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) headed by Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the world's most prominent and controversial Muslim theologians who is widely viewed as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Tabah Foundation is headed by Saudi-based Mauritanian politician and Islamic scholar Abdullah Bin Bayyah as well as El-Tayeb. Before he established

the Emirati-supported group, Bin Bayyah was vice president of Qaradawi's European Council for Fatwa and Research, created to provide guidance to European Muslims through the dissemination of religious opinions. He also heads the Emirates Fatwa Council that oversees the issuing of religious opinions and trains and licenses clerics.

Bin Bayyah, as well as other prominent traditionalists with past ties to the Brotherhood and/or political Islam, including Hamza Yusuf, an American convert to Islam, and Aref Ali Nayed, a former Libyan ambassador to the UAE, found common ideological ground in the assertion that the Brotherhood and jihadist ideology are offshoots of ultra-conservative strands of Islam. They saw the UAE's position as rooted in decades of animosity between Al Azhar and the Brotherhood that Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak exploited to counter the Brothers and Wahhabism.

Born Mark Hanson, Yusuf, a disciple of Bin Bayyah, is widely viewed as one of the most influential and charismatic Western Islamic preachers.

Nayed, an Islamic scholar, entrepreneur, and onetime supporter of the 2011 popular "Arab Spring" revolts, moved Kalam Research & Media, a Muslim think tank that he founded in 2009, to Dubai and aligned it with the UAE's strategy.

"I believe that the entire region is undergoing an identity crisis in reality. Who are we? And what is the Islam we accept as our religion?... It is an existential question and there is a major struggle. I believe that there is fascism in the region as a whole that dresses up as Islam, and it has no relation to true Islam... Let me be explicit: there are countries that support the Muslim Brothers, and there are countries that are waging war against the Muslim Brothers... This is a regional war—we do not deny it," Nayed told BBC Arabic.[22]

Embracing Machiavelli's notion of religion as a powerful tool in the hands of a prince, members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family, including Bin Zayed and his foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, began courting Bin Bayyah in early 2013. They invited the cleric to the Emirates the same month that Morsi was toppled.[23] In a letter three months later to Qaradawi's IUMS that bitterly opposed the overthrow of Morsi and condemned the Egyptian military government's subsequent brutal repression of the Brotherhood, Bin Bayyah wrote that he was resigning from the group because, "the humble role I am attempting to undertake towards reform and reconciliation [among Muslims] requires a discourse that does not sit well with my position at the International Union of Muslim Scholars."[24]

Bin Bayyah published the letter to demonstrate to Emirati leaders that he had ended his association with Qatari-supported Islamist groups. He has since acknowledged that he speaks on behalf of the UAE government.[25] The courting of Bin

Bayyah emanated from Bin Zayed's realization that he needed religious soft power to justify the UAE's wielding of hard power in countries like Yemen and Libya. The timing of Bin Zayed's positioning of Bin Bayyah as what Usaama Al-Azami, an Islamic scholar, dubs "counter-revolutionary Islam's most important scholar,"[26] was hardly coincidental. It coincided with the gradual withdrawal from public life of the far more prolific and media savvy Qaradawi, who had become a nonagenarian.

Al-Azami argues that the UAE's financial and political clout rather than intellectual argument will decide to what degree the Emirates succeed in their religious soft power campaign. "The counter-revolutionary Islamic political thought that is being developed and promoted by Bin Bayyah and the UAE suffers from certain fundamental structural problems that means its very existence is precariously predicated on the persistence of autocratic patronage. Its lack of independence means that it is not the organic product of a relatively unencumbered engagement with political modernity that might be possible in freer societies than counter-revolutionary Gulf autocracies," Al-Azami wrote.[27]

Yahya Birt, a British Muslim scholar of UAE-supported clerics, argues that their need to project their sponsors at times is at odds with reality on the ground. "The extracted price of government patronage is high for ulema in the Middle East. Generally speaking, they have to openly support or maintain silence about autocracy at home, while speaking of democracy, pluralism, and minority rights to Western audiences," Birt said. "What does this mean for the soft power dimension of the UAE with projects such as the Forum for Promoting Peace? On the face of it the Forum seems benign enough: promoting ideas of peace, minority rights and citizenship in the Arab and Muslim world, but at what price? Any criticism of the UAE's human rights violations…seems impossible," Birt went on to say.[28]

Longing For Past Imperial Glory

SLICK PUBLIC RELATIONS PACKAGING IS WHAT GIVES THE UAE AN EDGE IN ITS rivalry with both Saudi Wahhabism as well as with Qatar and Turkey. Saudi Arabia is hobbled by the image of an austere, ultra-conservative and secretive kingdom that it is trying to shed and a badly tarnished human rights record magnified by hubris and a perceived sense of entitlement. For its part, Turkey's religious soft power drive has a raw nationalist edge to it that raises the spectre of a longing for past imperial glory.

Inaugurated in 2019, Istanbul's Camlica Mosque, Turkey's largest with its six minarets, symbolizes President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ambitions. So does the controversial return a year later of the Hagia Sophia, the 1,500 old-church-turned-mosque-turned museum, to the status of a Muslim house of worship. In contrast to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the general who turned Hagia Sophia into a museum to emphasize the alignment with the West of the state he had carved out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, Erdogan embarked on a campaign of support for mosques and Muslim communities in former imperial holdings and beyond.

In doing so, Erdogan was following in the footsteps of Ottoman sultans who sought legacy in grandiose mosque construction. He was signaling his intention to restore Turkish glory by positioning his country as the leader of the Islamic world, willing and able to defend Muslims across the globe. His was a worldview outlined by Ahmet Davutoglu, Erdogan's onetime prime and foreign minister, who argued that Turkey's geography, history, and religious and cultural agency empowered it to be a regional hegemon.[29]

Erdogan underlined the importance of religious soft power in his geopolitical strategy by granting his Religious Affairs Department or Diyanet a key role in foreign and aid policy. Established by Ataturk in 1924 to propagate a statist, moderate form of Islam that endorsed secularism, Erdogan infused the directorate with his version of political Islam.

Erdogan harnessed the Diyanet to legitimize his military escapades in Syria, Libya, and Iraq[30] in much the same way that Iran and now the UAE blends hard power with religious soft power. Diyanet regularly instructs imams at home and abroad to recite a Quranic verse, Sura Al-Fath or the Verse of the Conquest, to legitimize the Turkish president's adventures. The sura conveys a message of victory and conquest as well as the favor God conferred upon the Prophet Mohammed and his followers. It promises increased numbers of faithful as well as forgiveness of worldly mistakes by those who do jihad on the path of God.

The construction of mosques and the dispatch of Diyanet personnel who serve as imams, religious counselors, and political commissars have been an important component of a multi-pronged Turkish strategy to build influence. The strategy also included development and humanitarian aid, the funding and building of infrastructure, private sector investment, and the opening of universities.

The meshing of religious soft power and aid has served Turkey well. Perhaps nowhere more so than in Somalia where U.S.$1 billion in aid channelled through Diyanet and other NGOs funded the building of the Recep Tayyip Erdogan Hospital in the capital Mogadishu[31] and the establishment of Turkey's foremost foreign military base.[32] Somalia is at the eastern end of a major Turkish diplomatic,

economic and cultural push across the African continent that is part of policy designed to position Turkey as a major Middle Eastern, Eurasian and African player.

The price tag attached to Turkish largesse often was that beneficiaries handed over schools operated by the exiled preacher Fethullah Gulen, a onetime Erdogan ally who Turkish officials accuse of building a state within a state and engineering the 2016 failed military attempt to unseat Erdogan with the backing of the UAE. Beneficiaries were often required to extradite suspected Gulen followers and look the other way when Turkish intelligence agents kidnapped alleged followers of the preacher and return them to Turkey.[33]

Turkey's quest for religious soft power kicked into high gear in the wake of the failed 2016 coup with Erdogan repeatedly defining Turkish identity as essentially Ottoman. It is an identity that obliged Turkey in Erdogan's view to come to the defense of Muslims around the world, starting with the 45 modern-day states that once were Ottoman territory. Erdogan, for instance, embraces Palestinian nationalist aspirations as well as Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, and the struggle for independence of Kosovo because they are Muslim. Erdogan is not the first Turkish leader to root Turkey's Islamic identity in its Ottoman past.

So did Turgut Ozal, who in the 1980s and early 1990s put Turkey on the path towards an export-driven free market economy. Ozal, as president, also pioneered the opening to post-Soviet Central Asia and encouraged Turkish investment in the Middle East and North Africa. But he shied away from de-emphasizing Turkey's ties to the West. Erdogan's contribution has been that, by breaking with Turkey's Kemalist past, he was able to put Islam as a religion and a foundational civilization at the core of changing Turkish educational and social life and positioning the country on the international stage.

If Ozal, a former World Banker, was the more cosmopolitan expression of Turkish Islamism, Erdogan veered towards its more exclusivist, anti-Western bent. Ozal embraced Westernization as empowering Turkey. Erdogan rejected it because it deprived the state of its religious legitimacy, ruptured historic continuity, and produced a shallow identity. It is a strategy that has paid dividends. Erdogan emerged as the most trusted regional leader in a 2017 poll that surveyed public opinion in 12 Middle Eastern countries. Forty percent of the respondents also recognized Erdogan as a religious authority even though he is not an Islamic scholar.[34]

The irony of Erdogan's fallout with Gulen as well as the souring of Turkish-Saudi relations, initially as a result of Turkish suspicions of Gulf support for the failed coup and the 2018 killing in Istanbul of Khashoggi, is that both the Turkish preacher and the Saudi journalist were nurtured in Saudi-backed organizations associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Gulen played a key role in the 1960s in the founding of the Erzurum branch of the Associations for the Struggle against Communism, an Islamist-leaning Cold War Turkish group that had ties to Saudi Arabia.[35] Erdogan, former Turkish president Abdullah Gul and former parliament speaker Ibrahim Karatas, among many others, were formed in nationalist and Islamic politics as members of the Turkish National Students Union, which represented the Muslim World League in Turkey.[36]

Turkey has a leg up on its competitors in the Balkans, Central Asia, and Europe. Centuries of Ottoman rule as well as voluntary and forced migration have spawned close ethnic and family ties. Millions of Turks pride themselves on their Balkan roots. The names of Istanbul neighbourhoods, parks, and forests reflect the Balkans' Ottoman history. Central Asians identify themselves as Turkic, speak Turkic languages, and share cultural attributes with Turks.

In Europe, Turkish operatives often enjoy the goodwill of large well-integrated Diaspora communities even if the fault lines run deep between Turks and Kurds opposed to the Turkish government's repression of Kurdish political aspirations.

Turkey's Achilles Heel may be that the Ottoman-style Islam it projects is a misreading of the empire's history. In another twist of irony, Erdogan embraced a Kemalist vision of the Ottomans as a religiously driven empire rather than one that perceived itself as both Muslim and European and that was pragmatic and not averse to aspects of secularism. It is that misreading that in the words of Turkey scholar Soner Cagaptay has produced "an ahistorical, political Islam-oriented, and often patronising foreign policy concoction" and has informed Turkey's soft power strategy.[37]

Turkey has sought to bolster its bid for religious soft power by positioning itself alongside Malaysia as the champion of the rights of embattled Muslim communities like Myanmar's Rohingya. Turkey's claim to be the defender of the Muslim underdog is however called into question by its refusal, with few caveats, to criticize the brutal crackdown on Turkic Muslims in China's northwestern "autonomous region" of Xinjiang.

Turkey's perfect opportunity to project itself arose with Gulf acquiescence to the U.S.'s official recognition of Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, as well the launch of a peace plan that buried hopes for a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To the chagrin of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Turkey convened a summit in Istanbul of the Riyadh-based, Saudi-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation that groups 54 Muslim countries to denounce the U.S.'s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Erdogan vowed two years later to prevent Israel from annexing parts of the West Bank and declared that Jerusalem was "a red line for all Muslims in the world."[38] Erdogan has also con-

demned the UAE and Bahrain's recent diplomatic recognition of Israel even though he has never reversed Turkey's own ties with the Jewish state.

The New Kid on the Block

INDONESIA, THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK IN THE COMPETITION FOR MUSLIM religious soft power and leadership, has proven to be a different kettle of fish. Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, rather than the government of President Joko Widodo, has emerged as a formidable contender, one that is capable of operating on the same level as the states with which it competes.

As a result, the Indonesian state takes a back seat in the global competition among Muslims. It benefits from its close ties to Nahdlatul Ulama as well as the movement's ability to gain access to the corridors of power in world capitals, including Washington, London, Berlin, Budapest, the Vatican, and Delhi. Nahdlatul Ulama was instrumental in organizing a visit to Indonesia in 2020 by Pope Francis that had to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.[39]

The movement also forged close working ties to Muslim grassroots communities in various parts of the world as well as prominent Jewish and Christian groups. Nahdlatul Ulama's growing international influence and access was enabled by its embrace in 2015 of a concept of "Nusantara (archipelago) Islam" or "humanitarian Islam" that recognized the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.[40] The movement has also gone beyond paying lip service to notions of tolerance and pluralism with the issuance of fatwas intended to re-contextualize the faith by eliminating categories like infidels.[41]

Nahdlatul Ulama's evolution towards a process of re-contextualization of Islam dates back to a 1992 gathering of religious scholars chaired by Abdurrahman Wahid, the group's leader at the time and later president of Indonesia. The gathering noted that "the changing context of reality necessitates the creation of new interpretations of Islamic law and orthodox Islamic teaching."[42]

Speaking to a German newspaper 25 years later, Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf laid out the fundamental dividing line between his group's notion of a moderate Islam and that of Indonesia's rivals without identifying them by name. Asked what Islamic concepts were problematic, Staquf said: "The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims' relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever

they live … Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity… In today's world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century."[43]

Widodo initially hoped that Nahdlatul Ulama's manifesto on humanitarian Islam would empower his government to position Indonesia as the beacon of a moderate interpretation of the faith. Speaking at the laying of the ground stone of the International Islamic University (UIII) in West Java, Widodo laid down a gauntlet for his competitors in the Middle East by declaring that it was "natural and fitting that Indonesia should become the (authoritative) reference for the progress of Islamic civilization."[44] Widodo saw the university as providing an alternative to the Islamic University of Medina, that has played a key role in Saudi Arabia's religious soft power campaign, and the centuries-old Al Azhar in Cairo, that is influenced by financially-backed Saudi scholars and scholarship as well as Emirati funding. The university is "a promising step to introduce Indonesia as the global epicenter for 'moderate' Islam'," said Islamic philosophy scholar Amin Abdullah.[45]

Saudi and Emirati concerns that Indonesia could emerge as a serious religious soft power competitor were initially assuaged when Widodo's aspirations were thwarted by critics within his administration. A six-page proposal to enhance Indonesian religious soft power globally put forward in 2016 by Nahdlatul Ulama at the request of Pratikno, Widodo's minister responsible for providing administrative support for his initiatives, was buried after the foreign ministry warned that its adoption would damage relations with the Gulf states.[46]

That could have been the end of the story. But neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE anticipated Nahdlatul Ulama's determination to push its concept of humanitarian Islam globally, including at the highest levels of government in western capitals as well as in countries like India. Nor did they anticipate Mr. Widodo's willingness to play both ends against the middle by supporting Nahdlatul Ulama's campaign while engaging on religious issues with both the Saudis and the Emiratis.

The degree to which Nahdlatul Ulama is perceived as a threat by the UAE and Saudi Arabia is evident in battles in high level inter-faith meetings convened by the Vatican, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and others over principles like endorsement of the UN human rights declaration.

Nahdlatul Ulama's rise to prominence was also what persuaded Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League, to visit the Indonesian group's headquarters in Jakarta in early 2020.[47] It was the first visit to one

of the world's foremost Islamic organizations in the League's almost 60-year history. The visit allowed him to portray himself as in dialogue with Nahdlatul Ulama in his inter-faith contacts as well as in conversation with Western officials and other influential interlocutors.

Al-Issa had turned down an opportunity to meet two years earlier when a leading Nahdlatul Ulama cleric and he were both in Mecca at the same time. He told a Western interlocutor who was attempting to arrange a meeting that he had "never heard" of the Indonesian scholar and could not make time "due to an extremely previous busy schedule of meetings with international Islamic personalities" that included "moderate influential figures from Palestine, Iraq, Tunisia, Russia and Kazakhstan."[48]

Saudi Arabia was forced several months later in the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian presidential election to replace its ambassador in Jakarta, Osama bin Mohammed Abdullah Al Shuaib. The ambassador had denounced in a tweet—that has since been deleted—Ansor, the Nahdlatul Ulama young adults organization, as heretical and he had supported an anti-government demonstration.[49]

Nahdlatul Ulama's ability to compete is further evidenced by its increasingly influential role in Centrist Democrat International or CDI, the world's largest alliance of political parties, that grew out of European and Latin American Christian Democratic movements. Membership in CDI of the National Awakening Party or PKB, the political party of Nahdlatul Ulama, arguably gives it a leg up in the soft power competition with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which both ban political parties. Meantime, the PKB is far more pluralistic than Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has shown increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

CDI's executive committee met in the Javan city of Yogyakarta in January 2020. Participants included prominent Latin American leaders and former heads of state, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Elmar Brok, a close associate of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Nahdlatul Ulama's sway was apparent in CDI's adoption of a resolution that called for adherence to universal ethics and humanitarian values based on Western humanism, Christian democracy, and Humanitarian Islam. The resolution urged resistance to "the emergence of authoritarian, civilizationalist states that do not accept the rules-based post-WWII order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations."[50]

Nahdlatul Ulama benefits from what journalist Muhammad Abu Fadil described as rejection of an "Arab face of Islam" that in his words was "hopelessly contorted by extremism" in Western perceptions. Abu Fadil suggested that "certain elements

in the West have become interested in 'Asian Islam,' which appears to be more moderate than Arab Islam; less inclined to export radical ideology; less dominated by extremist interpretations of religion; and possessed of a genuine and sincere tendency to act with tolerance."[51]

Conclusion

A MAJOR BATTLE FOR MUSLIM RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER THAT PITS SAUDI ARABIA, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Indonesia against one another is largely about enhancing countries' global and regional influence. This battle has little to do with implementing notions of a moderate Islam in theory or practice despite claims by the various rivals, most of which are authoritarian states with little regard for human and minority rights or fundamental freedoms.

Muslim-majority Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy, is the odd man out. A traditionalist and in many ways conservative organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, has garnered international respect and recognition with its embrace of a Humanitarian Islam that recognizes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principles enshrined in it and has taken tangible steps to address Islamic concepts that it considers outdated. In doing so, Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable challenger to powerful state actors in the battle for the soul of Islam. But it still faces the challenge of overcoming the Arab view, expressed by Abdullah I of Jordan after the end of caliphate, that Muslim leadership must somehow return to the Arabs.

NOTES

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