
Islamism in West Africa: Internal Dynamics and U.S. Responses

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Seven years after September 11 and five years after the invasion of Iraq, even desert dunes in remote African climes look different to policy-makers in Washington. Take the Sahara: before September 2001, when strategists and analysts thought of the Sahara Desert—when they thought about it at all—they saw a mostly empty, inconsequential wasteland unworthy of any substantial commitment of American resources. Sure, there had been occasional rifts between Morocco and Mauritania, inflamed by guerilla actions by the Polisario Front, who viewed Spanish decolonization from the Western Sahara as an opportunity for sovereignty rather than annexation by some preexisting state. Yes, there were the pesky Tuaregs, who rebelled every so often against anti-nomadic overlords governing from distant capitals in Mali and Niger. And, yes, a still-meddlesome Muammar Qaddafi periodically tried to extend Libyan influence beyond the Maghreb, sometimes by claiming disputed Saharan territory (e.g., the Aouzou Strip), sometimes by meddling in some Chadian dust-up between government forces and Saharan-based rebels. But for the most part, these conflicts were

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of relatively low interest and priority to the United States—as was most of West Africa.

Today, however, this previously neglected region is at the epicenter of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), a one-half-billion-dollar interagency effort linking such unlikely partners as the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development, not to mention the U.S. Departments of Justice, Treasury, and Homeland Security. The really significant partners, however, are supposed to be those West African nations that reside within or border on the Sahara—Chad,

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Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal—together with the key North African players Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. No longer perceived as a mostly worthless wilderness, the Sahara is now viewed as a potentially dangerous safe haven for terrorists. As first described by the U.S. Air Force general responsible for Africa as deputy commander of the U.S. European

Command (EUCOM)—who was impervious to barbs for mixing topographies and metaphors—the arid, relatively tranquil Sahara looms as a “swamp of terror.” It is in this context that in February 2006 a new U.S. military command was created specifically for all of Africa: the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Currently a sub-unified command under EUCOM, AFRICOM will become a stand-alone unified command in October 2008.

However vast the Sahara, it is embedded within the much larger geopolitical context of greater West Africa, which exhibits immensely different demographics and internal religious dynamics. The diversity of the region means that elaboration of a single, coherent counterterrorist policy presents a major challenge. Executing a strategy that does not scatter seeds of future blowback is essential.

In addition to the Francophone sub-Saharan countries named above, in its most restricted definition (one that excludes Chad and Cameroon), West Africa includes the Anglophone nations of Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and The Gambia; the other Francophone states of Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin; and the solo Lusophone outlier, Guinea-Bissau. Some of them are tiny in territory (Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia), some of them huge (Mauritania and Mali). Some (each of the former pair) have fewer than two million people; Nigeria, at 130 million,

has a population larger than all of the others combined. Nigeria is a major exporter of petroleum; until recently, Sierra Leone and Liberia, on account of civil war, mostly produced misery. While GNP per capita varies considerably on paper (from \$780 for Guinea-Bissau to \$2,963 for Ghana), poverty is pervasive throughout the region. Through post-9/11 counter-terrorist lenses, however, what most matters is the religious polarity.

The Sahelian countries—those that border on and whose territory includes the Sahara—are mostly Muslim: Mauritania and Niger are the most religiously homogeneous. But Christians outnumber Muslims in some coastal countries (Liberia, Benin, and Togo). Due to the arbitrary colonial lines that partitioned West Africa regardless of broad, indigenous cultural and religious zones, many of the inheritor independent states have significant proportionate mixes of followers of both monotheistic faiths: Burkina Faso and Nigeria, for instance, are split about evenly. Colonial geography has meant that in most mixed countries, Muslims hail from the north and Christians from the south; animism survives mostly in the southern belt. A syncretistic African cultural tradition and locally Islamic emphasis on harmony have combined to make Christian-Muslim coexistence (and animistic overlap) the general rule in the region. Even Nigeria, which periodically suffers from outbursts of Muslim-Christian violence, manages to maintain an overall state of functional religious pluralism; as in nearby Ivory Coast, the identity of protagonists in north-south conflicts lend them a superficially religious quality. In fact, the root causes of these cleavages transcend religion, even when they subsume it. In short, religion in West Africa takes many different expressions, from the Christian Yoruba of southern Nigeria to the Moorish Mauritanian of the western Sahel. So does Islamism.

In *Political Islam in West Africa*, I have defined Islamism as “organized activity. . . that forcefully (but not necessarily violently) strives to bring politics into line with Islamic precepts.” Islamists generally position their efforts “within a wider, transnational movement of similarly-inspired political change.” In West Africa, that “transnational movement” is generally of Wahhabist (Saudi Arabian) provenance. But even when taking the same organizational name (Izala), Islamism manifests itself throughout West Africa in sundry manners.

Thus, in Mauritania, both the Arabophone government and the opposition (both political and ethnic) claim Islam for their own, with the former conflating its vision of the faith with its legitimacy. In Senegal, a particular Muslim brotherhood (not *the* Muslim Brotherhood), the Sufi Tijani Mourides, has long enjoyed being courted by vote-seeking politicians. Yet Mourides have also been opposed by different groups of anti-Sufi “reformers”

aiming to change the tenor of Senegalese politics and society. Which group is more “Islamist” than the other? In Mali and Niger, since the 1990 wave of democratization, Islamic associations have burgeoned in both numbers and political activity (albeit more overtly in the former than the latter). Mali has also been the host of the more fundamentalist Tablighi movement (better known through its transnational appellation, Dawa). Tablighi preaching among the Tuaregs has led some security analysts to see links between home-grown ethnic grievances and international anti-Western terrorism. Other specialists (such as anthropologist Jeremy Keenan) dismiss these scenarios as bogus. Islamism in Nigeria has resulted in the adoption of *shari’a* (Qu’ranic jurisprudence) as the law of the land in twelve northern states. Capital punishment sentences for convicted female adulterers have, under this new legal regime, been issued by constitutionally legitimate state courts, although no executions have been carried out. Although human rights are definitely at issue (and one could argue that executing or prosecuting unmarried women for sexual activity is a form of gendered state terrorism), how much of this West African Islamism is a genuine security risk to the United States?

Ironically, newly-born U.S. official interest in West Africa may stoke the very agitation it is meant to preclude. Anti-Western terrorism has never been an issue in West Africa—not the way it has been, at any rate, in East Africa. Military and security analysts might reasonably worry about terrorism “migrating” from East to West Africa. But the real fear of “contagion” is from North Africa—which brings us back to the Sahara. And for all

..... the numerical weight and cultural diversity of West African Islam, including Islamist movements, there is really only one violent group—led by a single, well-identified man—that can arguably be classified as an international terrorist entity. Using the Sahara more as hide-out than staging point, this band is far from spreading terrorism, or Islamism, or anything else from its desert refuge.

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The group in question changes names almost as much as oases. Long known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), it now goes by the more media-magnetic appellation Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Led by a former Algerian air force sergeant Amari (Abdelrazak

Saifi, known in intelligence circles as “Le Para,” GSPC/AQIM has mounted hit-and-run attacks on remote government military outposts in Chad, Mali, and Mauritania. Although on the run from U.S.–trained local forces (with the help of U.S. intelligence), the group did manage to kill at least 15 Mauritanian soldiers in June 2005. Individuals with links to AQIM are widely suspected of perpetrating the roadside murder of four French tourists in Mauritania on Christmas Eve of 2007. Such random violence, however serious, hardly threatens to “infect” West Africa writ large. Nor should its essentially Algerian roots (and interests) be forgotten.

Algeria is the headquarters of the African Union’s Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism, which TSCTI supports. It is a country that, with its bloody experience of Islamist guerillas in the 1990s, is justifiably fixated on countering terrorism. It is hardly emblematic of Islamism in West Africa, however. Viewing West Africa through an Algerian prism would be a grave distortion. Africanist historians have long debated the extent to which the Sahara has served as a barrier dividing, or rather a sand-swept “sea,” linking sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. It would be unfortunate if this legendary space were transformed into a counterterrorism highway.

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It would be remiss to overlook the pacific image that U.S. security and counterterrorism agencies are taking pains to project in Africa. Military training and coordination is only one aspect of TSCTI and AFRICOM activity with African partners: promotion of economic development, democratic governance, and health improvement are also part of their mandates. “Unlike traditional U.S. military commands,” states AFRICOM on its website, this one “will focus on war prevention rather than war fighting.” From a public opinion perspective, it remains to be seen whether organizations with such words as “counterterrorism” and “command” embedded in their names are capable of persuading two hundred million West Africans of their benign intentions.

The more fundamental question comes down to this: is there need for a U.S. counterterrorism policy in West Africa in the first place? Hopefully, the main drivers leading to a positive answer will not be U.S. actions themselves. Paying closer attention to the internal dynamics of political Islam in West Africa—a varied and constantly evolving phenomenon—should be as critical an exercise as breaking in U.S. boots on Saharan soil. ■

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