

Jihadist Threats to African Stability – and Euro-American Global Dominance

In the absence of a compromise between the two ends of Africa's economic divide, the very fabric of African coexistence is under serious threat.

By Charles Villa-Vicencio

Africa arguably faces the biggest threat to political stability since the collapse of colonialism in the mid-twentieth century. The militancy of Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, the al-Mulathameen Brigade (the “Masked Ones”) in Algeria, Ansar al-Dine in Mali, Séléka in the Central African Republic and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, among others, strike at the heart of African cohesion and nation-building.¹

The growth of this militancy feeds off the profile of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere and more

recently the declaration of a caliphate by the ‘Islamic State’ in Syria and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL). Reacting to last year’s brutal beheading of American and French hostages in Syria and Algeria and subsequent Islamic militant attacks in Paris and elsewhere, the West sees the growth of Islamic extremism in the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East and Europe as a direct threat to the Euro-American-centred understanding of global coherence. By contrast, the hostage-taking of over 200 girls in Chibok on the night of 14-15 April 2014 and subsequent events resulted, at best, in a restrained response by the West (as well as by the Nigerian state).

Journalists, analysts and scholars provide crucial insights into the identity and praxis of Africa’s rebel groups. Credible information is, however, invariably a casualty of war. This means that unbiased insights into the African conflict necessitate a high level of critical thoughtfulness. The consequences of the support by the West for oppressive African regimes needs close scrutiny. Strident Muslim aggression needs, in turn, to be understood in relation to the influence of western-based Christian fundamentalist groups in Africa, which many devout Muslim believers see as a muted form of the Christian crusades that endured for 200 years. Eight hundred years later, the current conflict is understood by them as a continuing fight for the purity of an Islamic belief, against which defeat is for them not an option.

There is a need to unravel the underlying affinity with, and popular support for, specific rebel groups, as well as the periodic tensions that exist within rebel groups in the Maghreb, Sahel and Central Africa. This involves situations in Somalia, for example, where Al-Shabaab pursues a nationalist struggle (requiring the support of people with different needs and interests) while appropriating a global Islamic agenda. The extent of this dual agenda provides insights into the potential limitations and possibilities of a continental fight-back against the dominant Euro-American influence in African countries and the quest for individual national objectives.

There are at least five key elements that are fundamental to understanding the jihadist conflicts in Africa.

Euro-American global dominance

Current fundamentalist Islamic assertions can be traced back to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, established in the wake of the thirty year ‘religious war’ in Europe. The Treaty failed to hold, with periodic wars and eventually the eruption of the Napoleonic Wars (1803 -1815) that ravaged Europe. This was followed by the 1815 Concert of Europe, an attempt to (again) forge stability under ‘great power’ control.

European expansionism had, in the meantime, already extended into the ‘new world’ by the end of the fifteenth

century, characterised by Columbus's epic voyage in 1492. Vasco da Gama, in turn, sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497 opening a new trade route between European countries and India. In 1858 direct British rule was established in India, the Anglo-Chinese opium wars were under way, and other European nations occupied territory in the region. In 1884-85 the Berlin Conference formalised the carving up of Africa by European countries.

In an attempt to re-establish world order in the wake of the World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 placed Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine under British protection. Syria and Lebanon were placed under French control. Egypt in the meantime remained under British rule, and France controlled the Maghreb. Arab nationalists and radical Islamic groups fought back against colonialism. In 1948 the West further prioritised the protection of the newly established state of Israel and, ironically, oversaw the birth of Salafism and jihadism in the marriage between Saudi tribalism and Wahhabist theology.²

In Africa, British and French colonialists were determined to see the birth of moderate, pro-western states in the wake of the independence struggle in the 1950s and 1960s, while the Cold War impacted on the independence process. The net outcome was a plethora of African coups d'état and counter coups, with dominant western states supporting their client states in quashing rebel groups. This ideological conflict soon mutated into resource wars and economic deprivation, manipulated by religion and culture, which are still prevalent today.

This continuing ideological underpinning of opposing groups in Africa indicates the need for a deeper understanding of the conflict between rebel groups and existing African governments. It requires more than military engagement to persuade rebels to lay down their arms. African governments and their global partners need to accept that the manipulation of religion, culture and material resources, as a basis for the survival of current African governments, is both counter-productive and futile.

It also requires groups committed to exclusivist forms of Sharia to explore options for co-existence with people of other faiths and persuasions.

The absence of a peaceful resolution to this contestation provides a gap within which jihadism and other quests for potential domination thrive, highlighting the need for a new paradigm for global coexistence to end the conflict. Karl Marx warned that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living".³ The obligation of each generation is to remember and to engage with the past as a basis for creating a new future.

The African State

The ability of Africa to overcome a history of conflict, linked as it is to the history of colonialism and the internalisation of power relations by successive independent Africa states raises questions concerning the nature of the African state.

Basil Davidson argues that the assumption that state boundaries in Africa ought to coincide with cultural boundaries is "the curse of the nation state".⁴ It is also an underlying dimension of divisions and under-development in regions within African states, notably in the under-development of north-east Nigeria, in the eastern parts of the DRC, in the northern regions of Uganda and elsewhere.

African states have their roots in colonial law, which resulted in a situation of political control by a dominant group. This "crime", says Mahmood Mamdani, resulted in the politicisation of culture, religion and indigeneity, to the exclusion of subservient and minority groups. Africa's continued failure to adequately address the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and economic divisions of the state provides fertile ground within which rebel groups prosper in African states.⁵

This encourages cross-border alliances between allied groups, as evidenced in Boko Haram's support in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. It is also seen in the attacks by Al-Shabaab into the disputed Ogden territory and deeper into Kenya – attacks undertaken with the noticeable

support of alienated Kenyan nationals who choose to designate themselves as 'Somalians'. There is, at the same time, also evidence of this cross-border activity resulting in tensions between rebel groups in defence of their specific areas of operation. This has resulted in reports of Al-Qaeda amir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, admonishing AQIM regional commanders to explore flexible forms of co-operation with Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Kenya and elsewhere on the continent.⁶

Class Conflict

Capitalism has produced a dependent African economy, and African experiments with Marxist-inspired socialism have shown themselves incapable of inspiring growth and development.

The challenge is to create an African economy in pursuit of self-sufficiency, capable of rising above dependency on American, European and growing Chinese trade. The extent of organised labour in most countries remains largely ineffective, resulting in a capitalist class that is largely unchallenged by the broader community, although this is slowly changing in some African states.

A minority of grassroots Africans have been drawn into middle and upper classes which, in the words of Steven Friedman, constitute an exclusive club "never meant to be for everyone."⁷ In situations where an increasing number of impoverished young people are supportive of rebel groups, the conflict between rich and poor is invariably decided through rebellion, class warfare and terrorism. In the absence of a compromise between the two ends of Africa's economic divide, the very fabric of African coexistence is under serious threat.

The question is whether African leaders and their sponsors have the political will and economic savvy, let alone the moral integrity, to negotiate the required economic compromise. Robert Rotberg outlines the parameters of the global economy within which this compromise needs to be negotiated: "The centre-periphery structure of global politics places strain on developing economies that makes it extremely difficult for Africans to develop fully

in the market place dominated by first world economies, which have effectively been built and maintained in a colonial-economic relationship with Africa. This reaches to the heart of the under-development in Africa, from which individual African states are seeking to liberate themselves.⁸

Religion as a national and global phenomenon

African poverty acts in a symbiotic relationship with religion, with religion being a powerful mobilising force among grassroots communities.

Priests, mullahs, rabbis and other religious leaders are frequently associated with the negative forces that terrorise the world through the use of religious language and symbols that acquire apocalyptic dimensions. This interpretation of religion demands dogmatic obedience by its followers, accompanied by visions of rewards in heaven. There are, at the same time, inspirational religious leaders and grassroots believers in Islam and Christianity who affirm the supremacy of God and Allah over state and rebel leaders.

Focus on the pre-eminence of the divine in political conflict is a critical theological principle, largely suppressed in the captivity of institutional religion to the dogma of ruling and rebel groups, which lifts the political conflict into the realm of ultimate (spiritual) encounters between rebels and the state. Driven by different forms of propaganda, this promotes and legitimises the engagement of believers in the massacre of civilians, the kidnapping and abduction of people, the raping of women and girls, forced marriages and the killing of infidels and apostates – as well as the slaughter of rebels by government forces.

The extent of this violence, driven by a sense of exclusivity, moral superiority, religious intensity and blind submission to authority has resulted in the endemic demonisation and dehumanisation of 'the other' – whether Christian, Muslim or simply people who are indifferent to the prevailing conflict. This is seen in the escalation of conflicts across the continent, including the religious war between Séléka and anti-Balaka that engulfs 'politically uninvolvement'

by-standers in the Central African Republic.

Dehumanisation of the other

The extent of rebel atrocities are responded to with government violence of similar magnitude, as evidenced in the call by Amnesty International for senior military officers in Nigeria to be investigated for the way in which they responded to the activities of Boko Haram rebel groups; and some spokespersons for government forces openly advocate and defend violence as the 'only solution' to the conflict, which draws on a range of both religious and secular forces.

Contemporary rebel groups draw on religious and cultural ideas that feed off the origins of earlier cultural and religious traditions and historic movements. In so doing, they have lifted the conflict into the realm of spiritual encounter in their conflict

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with the state.⁹ Boko Haram draws on the memory of Mai Tatsine, literally the 'people who curse', in their fight for an independent Nigerian Islamic state; Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb emerged as an armed Islamic group fighting against a secular state in Algeria; al Shabaab began as a military wing of the Somali Council of Islamic Courts; and in the Central African Republic Séléka and anti-Balaka are rooted in contemporary forms of a Muslim and Christian community-driven war.

Marginalisation, exclusion, desperation and the absence of political alternatives in the face of uncompromising state military power, lead to a combination of political reactions, religious extremism and violence. These responses, fuelled by abject poverty in the face of elitist economic wealth and authoritarian power, have produced a toxic mix of anger. Needing to be fully dissected and comprehensively analysed, the origins of the capacity of these and

other rebel groups to resort to human terror need to be understood as a basis for discerning alternative options for countering the dehumanisation of Africans and indeed of humanity itself.

There are no quick answers to questions central to the threat posed by rebel groups to specific African states, often supported by regional and global powers. These and related alliances need to be placed under the microscope of a pool of multi-disciplinary analysts with a view to addressing the intertwined causes of the conflict embedded in Africa's stubborn conflict. Thabo Mbeki, writing on the 2011 popular uprisings in Africa as seen in the African Maghreb and Egypt, asks a pertinent question that is equally relevant to the proliferation of rebel groups elsewhere on the continent: "Where are the African intelligentsia, whose task it is to narrate accurately what is unfolding [on the continent]?" he asks. His call is for an analysis and narrative that "might serve truly to advance the Africa democratic revolution and therefore the African Renaissance."¹⁰ If analysts and scholars in African and other countries, together with regional and global agencies, fail to embrace this responsibility the (much heralded) economic progress in particular African countries is likely to be engulfed in an ideological war that knows no state borders. ■

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