



AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Africa's Fragile States: Empowering Extremists, Exporting Terrorism

By Zachary Devlin-Foltz

- ◆ Africa's fragile states create political and security environments that enhance the leverage of Islamist extremists in their ongoing struggle with moderates for influence. Countering extremism in Africa, therefore, cannot be separated from building stronger, more legitimate states.
- ◆ Robust state security operations can neutralize extremists in the short term. However, they are an insufficient long-term counterextremism strategy unless coupled with opportunities for moderates to engage in the political process.
- ◆ In fragile states, maintaining moderate Islamist support for the state should be a central stabilization objective.

HIGHLIGHTS

Twelve of the twenty states deemed by the Failed States Index (FSI) to be at greatest risk of collapse in 2010 are in Africa.¹ These fragile and failed states account for much of the continent's ongoing conflict, instability, and humanitarian catastrophes. State failure raises the risk of personal insecurity, lawlessness, and armed conflict. Such persistent and randomized insecurity undermines all aspects of ordinary life, forcing people to stay in their homes and close their businesses for fear of violence. Under such circumstances, residents become willing to support or accept virtually any groups that are able to restore order—be they warlords, local gangs, or organized criminal syndicates.

Among the violent actors that fill the power vacuums of Africa's fragile and failed states are Is-

lamist extremists. By providing security and basic services, they hope to gain greater public acceptance of their ideological agendas. A state's failure to assert a monopoly on legitimate force accordingly opens the door for extremists to build their bases of political power. Of the twelve "high-risk" states in Africa, eight have populations that are one-third or more Muslim,² a feature that more than doubles a state's risk of instability³ and provides fertile ground for Islamist extremists.

Many of these countries have seen the increasing influence of Islamists in recent years. Islamists share the belief that politics, as well as personal life, should be based on Islam. They envision an ideal Islamic state in which *shariah*, Islamic law,

forms the basis for political authority. Most Muslims in Africa are not Islamists. And most Islamists are not violent. But their rising influence coincides with recent threats posed by violent African extremists. In July 2010, Somalia's Islamist militia *al Shabaab* detonated three simultaneous explosions that targeted two venues in Kampala, Uganda, showing the final World Cup match, killing nearly 80 Ugandans and foreigners. Islamic militancy has also been growing across the Sahel, fueling concerns that this will spawn more terrorism in Africa. African Islamists, furthermore, have been implicated in terror plots on the continent and abroad. Perhaps the most high-profile case concerned Omar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, a Nigerian who attended Islamist schools in Yemen and allegedly attempted to set off a bomb on a U.S.-bound airliner on December 25, 2009.

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The platform certain Islamist movements provide extremist ideologies can also create an incubator for international terrorists, much as the rise of the National Islamic Front in Sudan and the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s led to the sheltering of al Qaeda. If not properly engaged, then, Africa's active Islamist movements pose a serious danger to security at the individual, national, and international level. However, common misperceptions of Islamist movements have led to misguided policies to curb their influence. A better understanding of Islamists and how their relationship with broader society changes in the context of state fragility can inform more effective counterextremism and counterterrorism policies in Africa.

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FRAGILE STATES AND ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

Though their adherents often share broad long-term goals, moderate and extremist Islamists do not work together in most stable states. Both may seek a *shariah* government, but extremists' use of violence strikes most moderates as counterproductive, costly, and wrong. Conversely, extremists judge moderates to be in dereliction of their religious duties for their refusal to adopt *jihad*, or holy war.

This changes when a state is weak or fails. If a government does not credibly provide security and a peaceful means for moderates to pursue their political ends, moderates may come to see violence as their best or only option. If moderates remain nonviolent under such conditions, they risk loss of credibility, not to mention attacks and intimidation from groups that do use force. But if moderate Islamists' use of violence helps to reestablish local stability, they can gain support even from those who do not share their ideology. Once moderates take this step, however, whether out of political strategy or necessity, the main barrier to their cooperating with extremists disappears. The effect is to empower extremists, who gain greater credibility and acceptance from larger swaths of the population.

In short, there is a general inverse relationship between extremist Islamists' influence and state strength. In stable contexts, extremists tend to occupy a marginal fringe of the political space. As the level of fragility increases, however, they tend to move to center stage. The state, moderates, extremists, and other actors accordingly adapt their goals and strategies to changing circumstances. This fragility-extremism nexus has unfolded in a variety of ways in Africa.

Egypt and Algeria: Capable Security Sectors and Isolated (but Enduring) Extremists. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is Egypt's most well known moderate Islamist organization. Its extremist counterpart, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), has waged violent jihad for over 30 years and is a key component of al Qaeda. Both groups believe that Muslim societies should be governed by Islamic *shariah* states. However, the Muslim Brotherhood has remained

essentially peaceful for the last few decades, pursuing its agenda through social programs and electoral competition. By contrast, Egyptian Islamic Jihad has employed violence consistently throughout its existence. The MB and EIJ criticize each other bitterly. The Brothers call the jihadis' terrorism dangerous and counterproductive while the extremists denounce the MB for luring young Muslims away from holy war.

EIJ's founding leaders began their Islamist careers in the Brotherhood. They broke away in the late 1970s following over a decade of brutal state oppression in which hundreds of Brothers were arrested and many executed. The crackdowns convinced many of these young Islamists that the Egyptian regime was waging a war on Islam and that Muslims had a duty to resist violently, however high the costs. By contrast, the MB's moderate leaders concluded that violence would only invite more oppression while alienating an Egyptian public that preferred peace.

Egypt's capable security sector exploited this wedge between moderates and extremists to further weaken the EIJ. It launched another round of violent oppression, this time specifically targeting extremists for imprisonment and torture. Such repression raised the costs of Islamist violence such that only those who saw holy war as a duty, or at least a glorious pursuit, remained committed to it. Though it officially remains banned, the Brotherhood became Egypt's primary opposition party, and many experts believe it would win a truly free and fair election today. Meanwhile, as the extremists were isolated and were languishing in jails or in hiding, their political clout waned. Intermittent domestic terrorist campaigns during the 1990s kept EIJ and other extremists in the headlines but never translated into political power. By the late 1990s, most extremists had renounced violence, whereas the remaining EIJ hardcore ultimately moved abroad and joined al Qaeda's international jihad.

Algeria provides a similar example in which the state used a combination of oppression and amnesty to push moderate Islamists away from violence. However, just as in Egypt, that policy unintentionally drove Algeria's most extreme Islamists to join al Qaeda, forming al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

(AQIM) in 2006. During a bloody civil war that raged for most of the 1990s, brutal violence won Islamist rebels little more than heavy-handed repression from the state and political alienation from the public. Many Algerians originally sympathized and supported the Islamists after the military nullified the 1991 elections they were likely to lose. However, as the civil war raged on and the violence grew more shocking and seemingly gratuitous, the public and most Islamists grew tired of the destruction. Violence, for them, was a means to an end, and they abandoned it once it proved ineffective. By the mid-2000s, only the extreme Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, known by its French acronym GSPC, remained armed and active.

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Just as had happened in Egypt, Algerian extremists who refused to renounce violence alienated the general populace and a mainstream Islamist movement that preferred peace. Whereas the GSPC's extremist predecessor recruited up to 500 new fighters a week during the 1990s, recent estimates of the GSPC's and AQIM's manpower rarely exceed 1,000.⁴ Stripped of its moderate members and politically marginalized, the group joined al Qaeda hoping to find abroad the relevance it lost at home.

Algeria's and Egypt's robust security measures were able to target extreme Islamists and dissuade moderates from pursuing strategies of violence. However, while extremist violence proved a costly and unproductive strategy in Egypt and Algeria, moderates have been provided few opportunities for nonviolent political participation. This perpetuates the ongoing tension among Islamists over the respective benefits of peaceful engagement versus violence. Moreover, while the extremist threat is subdued, it persists.

Nigeria: Limited State Capacity and Restrained Extremism. Moderate Islamists have considerable

influence within the political system in predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria. In 1999 and 2000, with the somewhat reluctant consent of the national government, several northern states made *shariah* official criminal law. Secular laws continued to apply to non-Muslims, but state governments could now enforce their interpretation of Islam among those they deemed Muslims. Using legal official means, northern leaders had taken a significant step toward establishing Islamic governance.

Muslim leaders differed in their zeal for Islamic law. Some were genuine Islamist ideologues, while others were political opportunists seeking to bolster their own credibility. In every case, however, proponents of official *shariah* claimed that the national government's shortcomings in maintaining law and order justified the introduction of religious law. If the secular state could not secure the streets, they argued that Muslims should be allowed to do so via Islamic law.

Subsequently, many northern states saw the growth of *shariah* enforcement militias called *Hisbah*. In addition to destroying alcohol and harassing filmmakers, the militias arrested common criminals, helped direct traffic, and responded to public emergencies and accidents. These gangs were not sanctioned by the national government. Nevertheless, by replacing or outperforming the government in many ways, the *Hisbah* gained popular support and made it easier for Islamist politicians to justify backing them and harder for non-Islamists to avoid, at minimum, condoning their work.⁵ In the words of one national Islamic group, "The Nigerian police force as constituted today cannot by any stretch of imagination be a substitute for *Hisbah*."⁶

The *Hisbah* themselves are diverse and difficult to categorize. Many of their rank-and-file members are unemployed youth who need no more motivation than the minimal salaries and social prestige afforded to militiamen. Some *Hisbah* activity, however, suggests extremist intentions. In several cases militias have summarily punished Muslims for insufficient piety rather than turn them over for trial in official religious courts. In other instances the *Hisbah* are accused of violence against minority groups and Islamic sects even though the victims did not necessarily contravene *shariah*.⁷

Indeed, the *Hisbah* are often more extreme than the state politicians and ordinary citizens who support them. Accordingly, that support has limits. The police have clashed with the *Hisbah* in some states, attempting to curb their zealotry and prevent them from threatening state authority. In Borno State, for example, the state government and national police launched an aggressive crackdown on the extremists of *Boko Haram*. The group demands Islamic rule throughout Nigeria and had launched a wave of violence against the state's Christians as well as the government. During clashes with police in July 2009 hundreds of extremists were killed, some allegedly while in detention. Northern Islamist leaders condemned the extremists and expressed their solidarity with the Borno government.⁸

Mainstream Islamists have a stake in the current system: they run northern state governments. As beneficiaries of the status quo, these leaders are unlikely to support attempts at radical change. However, many moderate Islamist leaders cooperate with militant extremists such as the *Hisbah* because they fill the many security gaps left by the national government. Appeasing and exploiting the extremists without threatening officialdom, moderate Islamists have adapted to Nigeria's limited but enduring state. Whether moderates will be able to permanently keep the lid on these competing pressures remains to be seen.

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Somalia: A Security Vacuum and Powerful Extremists. If the Nigerian state's failings provided limited opportunities for extremists, the Somali state's complete collapse provided a much broader political opening. Since its 1991 civil war, Somalia essentially has been without a government. Left stateless for so long, Somalis have created various local institutions designed to fill in for official government in essential areas. Starting in the mid-1990s, neighborhood leaders established *shariah* courts to provide law and order.

Originally, most courts focused on securing the streets, limiting their activities both geographically and politically to reflect the priorities of ordinary residents and clan and business leaders.

By 2005, however, more ambitious Islamists had managed to organize many courts into a loose coalition called the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The UIC's leadership included both moderates, concerned mostly with security and maintaining public support, and extremists bent on coercing their way to an Islamic state. They joined together to fight Somalia's many predatory warlords. For moderates, defeating the warlords consolidated the UIC's power and pleased their constituents. For extremists, the warlords, some of whom received U.S. support to pursue al Qaeda suspects, were agents of the West and the chief obstacle to jihad in Somalia. Protracted state collapse and its attendant chaos unified these enemies and temporarily superseded their many differences.

The UIC never achieved full unity of command, and its more moderate leaders struggled to control their extremist allies. Nevertheless, the coalition might have held for some time had Ethiopia not invaded Somalia in December 2006 to remove what it saw as a threat on its border. The incursion split the Islamists. The extremists, most notably the group *al Shabaab*, launched an underground insurgent campaign, while many moderate UIC leaders decided to negotiate with the Ethiopians. In effect, the presence of Ethiopian troops made violence less productive for the moderates, who could no longer build support by taking and securing territory.

For the extremists, however, the Ethiopian invasion brought a foreign, non-Muslim army into the equation—and against which they could rally nationalist and Islamist sentiments. *Al Shabaab* went on to declare itself an al Qaeda affiliate. Though al Qaeda operatives had long used Somalia as a place to hide and stage attacks elsewhere, *al Shabaab* provided the organization its first significant foothold in local Somali politics.

The Islamist split in Somalia continues. Even after Ethiopian troops withdrew in 2009 and the moderate Islamist Sheikh Sherif Sheikh Ahmed became president of a government of national unity, *al Sha-*

baab remained in the armed opposition, preferring to fight the moderates rather than join them in peace. For their part, most non-Islamist power brokers, be they clan elders or businesspeople, continue to prioritize security and their own local authority. Some strike deals with *al Shabaab*, some with other armed groups, and still others with the government. Though each no doubt has ideological preferences, the overriding necessity of securing self, family, and business drives them to side with whoever can most credibly protect or threaten them.

Mali and Senegal: Legitimate States and Sustained Security. In West Africa, Mali and Senegal, low-income states with considerable legitimacy, represent an alternative model for confronting extremist threats. Both use a combination of political openness and relatively robust security institutions to defuse radicalism. As a result, they have avoided the turbulence posed by violent Islamists seen in Somalia, Egypt, and Algeria.

In Mali, the 1990s brought political liberalization after years of autocracy. This created space for segments of civil society, including Islamists, to expand their role in social and political life. Some Islamists subsequently began challenging the government's handling of intergroup inequality and economic underdevelopment.⁹ Despite their criticism of the state, however, most Islamists have chosen to influence it rather than overthrow it. The legitimacy of the state, moreover, provided it great credibility in dealing with these competing interests, allowing it to define the parameters of this engagement within the context of the broader interests of society.

Mali has simultaneously engaged in active counterterrorism operations and security cooperation, with both international and regional players ensuring a strong state response to extremists who choose to use force despite the peaceful opportunities available to Islamists.¹⁰

Senegal has also cultivated a long tradition of religious moderation and military professionalism. This has been reinforced by a decades-long strengthening of democratic processes and state institutions in which the interaction between religious groups and politics can be freely debated and even publicly

challenged in a constructive effort to define the boundaries and linkages between the secular and the religious.¹¹ Accordingly, relationships between Senegalese politicians and Islamic leaders, though complicated and evolving over time, have generally been harmonious. When Senegalese Islamic leaders break or bend historical norms by opining on politics, the official response has been to tolerate and engage them rather than confront them.¹² For example, marches against government policies by Islamic youth groups in the 1990s prompted government officials to publicly consult with opposition leaders and undertake reforms that addressed some of their grievances while marginalizing those pursuing solely violent strategies.¹³

At the same time, the state has shown itself willing and able to counter hard-line extremist threats. Leaders of more radical Islamist groups who persistently incited and organized violence have been arrested and prosecuted. Restrictions have also been applied on radical groups until they have proven able to organize and operate peacefully.¹⁴ Under these circumstances, the professionalism and capacity of the Senegalese security forces engenders considerable trust and cooperation from the general public, facilitating valuable information sharing.

This approach of consultation and openness coupled with firm but lawful responses to obstinately violent actors has managed to foster a mature and flexible political environment in which opposition views, including those of moderate Islamists, are aired peacefully. While not without problems, the balanced approach taken by Mali and Senegal, combining political legitimacy and inclusivity with robust security institutions, has proven effective in maintaining stability while mitigating extremism.

THE FRAGILITY-EXTREMISM NEXUS

Islamism is a complicated ideology, and its interaction with national politics and the state only adds to the complexity. Nevertheless, as experiences in Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, and Senegal demonstrate, certain patterns emerge. States with capable security sectors, such as Egypt and Algeria, make violence a costly strategy, driving a wedge between moderates and extremists by

prompting the former to renounce violence. By contrast, in states that are unable to provide adequate security, moderates may adopt violent strategies to capitalize on the public's desire for stability and to defend themselves from those who take up arms. Indeed, where no overarching authority can punish those using violence for political means, all politics

“where no overarching authority can punish those using violence for political means, all politics is likely to become violent”

is likely to become violent. This enables extremists to find common cause with moderates without any change in either group's underlying ideologies.

Such political gains make extremists much more influential in failed states than in stable ones. That influence allows them to frustrate subsequent stabilization efforts. Somalia's *al Shabaab* is a prime example of this phenomenon. Having exploited the state's weakness to form coalitions with moderate Islamists and gain backing, or at least acquiescence, from non-Islamist leaders, the group continues to forcefully resist efforts to rebuild the Somali state, in part because *al Shabaab* recognizes that its influence would decline dramatically in a stable society. In contrast, while Nigeria is in many ways a deficient state, it has sufficiently capable institutions to make violence a costly strategy for extremists. Armed resistance would provoke a powerful government response and cost moderates the influence they enjoy within the current system.

But state strength alone provides only a temporary fix to the threat of extremists. The Egyptian and Algerian states maintain their control with heavy-handed methods and have accumulated poor human rights records. Their brutal approach, however, further radicalizes extremists, pushing them toward al Qaeda. With their moderate members sheared off, prospects for domestic political gains slim, and their own passions hardened by conflict, imprisonment, and torture, extremists have more reason than ever to join the global jihad.

By contrast, Mali and Senegal provide plenty of room for Islamists to pursue their agendas within a

transparent, democratic political framework. As a result, moderate Islamic leaders in both countries are invested in the status quo and see little reason to undermine the government. While both countries have faced some largely externally driven security challenges, their reasonably capable security forces have wisely refrained from indiscriminate responses against Islamists. This reinforces the credibility of the state while ensuring that neither extremists nor state responses to them damage the accommodation between moderates and government.

STABILIZING AND SUPPORTING FRAGILE STATES TO COUNTER EXTREMISM

A key lesson from this analysis is that proactively strengthening fragile states is a strategic investment with payoffs for both stability and narrowing the space available for extremists. This means that counterextremism and counterterrorism strategies in Africa cannot be separated from building stronger, more legitimate states. Moreover, stabilizing fragile states is not just a matter of building security institutions but a multisectoral effort. As the cases of Mali and Senegal demonstrate, legitimacy counts enormously. Creating inclusive environments empowers moderate Islamists relative to extremists. This is the case even in low-income states.

When confronting extremist threats, Africa's leaders should adopt a nuanced approach that combines aggressive but consistent law enforcement against true extremists while maintaining nonviolent political options for moderates. A vibrant religious civil society with the right of political participation will draw most Islamists away from violence. Meanwhile, a reliable security apparatus will prevent extremists from sabotaging these peaceful accommodations and imposing violent politics on non-Islamists and Islamists alike.

Where extremists in failed states pose an international threat, external military intervention or individual strikes provide only short-lived results. Counterterrorism operations alone do not address the opening that state weakness offers violent extremists to expand their influence. Indeed, such strikes or operations without concurrent and sustained efforts to stabilize failed states can backfire.

This was the case in Somalia where, despite the Ethiopian army's vastly superior military power, blunt and indiscriminate tactics were extremely unpopular among the Somali public. It had the long-term effect of generating more popular support for *al Shabaab* than it could have earned on its own while simultaneously pushing extremists toward al Qaeda.

Stabilization efforts must also be careful to protect civilian lives and respect local institutions. Where residents have established their own security arrangements, stabilization actors should work with them even—and perhaps especially—if they are operated by moderate Islamists. By cooperating with such forces, governments gain influential local partners while simultaneously empowering moderates and pulling them away from extremists.

These policies will expose the ideological gap between extremists and the rest of society. Left alone at society's margins, intractable extremists will be dangerous in their reliance on violence but politically weak. Carefully targeted law enforcement, which respects civilians and moderates, can contain these individuals without abusing the innocent, radicalizing the moderate, or exporting the extremist.

NOTES

¹ The FSI is a joint effort of the Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* that produces an annual ranking of world states based on 12 measures of weakness and the risk of collapse: available at <www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=452&Itemid=900>.

² Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan. Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Sierra Leone are other "at-risk" African countries with large Muslim populations.

³ Monty Marshall, "Conflict Trends in Africa, 1946–2004: A Macro-Comparative Perspective," Center for Systemic Peace, 2005.

⁴ Lauren Vriens, "Backgrounder: Armed Islamic Group," Council on Foreign Relations, retrieved June 13, 2010 from <www.cfr.org/publication/9154/armed_islamic_group_algeria_islamists.html>.

⁵ "Council Donates Materials to *Hisbah*," *Daily Trust*, September 19, 2008.

⁶ “Sharia Council Cautions Government over Local Enforcement,” *Vanguard*, July 2, 2001.

⁷ Conerly Carole Casey, “‘Marginal Muslims’: Politics and the Perceptual Bounds of Islamic Authenticity in Northern Nigeria,” *Africa Today* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2008), 86–87.

⁸ “Northern Govs Meet, Condemn Boko Haram Crisis,” *Vanguard*, August 4, 2009.

⁹ David Gutelius, “Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 2007), 64–65, 71–72.

¹⁰ “Mali Army ‘takes al-Qaeda base,’” *BBC*, June 17, 2009.

¹¹ M. Sani Umar, “Islam and the Public Sphere in Africa: Overcoming the Dichotomies,” in *Islam and the Public Sphere in Africa*, Selected Proceedings of a Conference Organized by The Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) Program of African Studies, Souleymane Bachir Diagne and M. Sani Umar, eds. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, May 17–19, 2007), 1–8.

¹² Leonardo A. Villalón, “Senegal: Shades of Islamism in a Sufi Landscape,” in W.F.S. Miles, ed., *Political Islam in West Africa: State-Society Relations Transformed* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 171–176.

¹³ Alexander Thurston, “Why Is Militant Islam a Weak Phenomenon in Senegal?” in Diagne and Umar, 1–8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–13.

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