INTENT TO HARM: FACTORS INFLUENCING TARGET SELECTION BY AFRICAN ISLAMIST MILITANT GROUPS

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Abstract

The rise of Islamist militant groups and their propensity towards violence has perplexed researchers and policy-makers and lead to debate about how to handle this evolving asymmetric threat. However the general focus of past research has been on groups in the Middle East and Central Asia, overlooking African Islamist extremist groups, which have attacked both local and international targets. This case study examines one possible explanation for these groups’ target selection. The analysis indicates that government responses play a large role in determining the internationalization of targets by African Islamist extremist groups. This important finding challenges the standard response of using available security forces toward Islamist militant groups without a channel of dialogue. In addition, this paper assesses to what degree an international presence in case countries influences the internationalization of violence and reexamines how certain populations perceive foreign influences.

Introduction

One Sunday in 2011, a group of Nigerian political leaders were gathered outside a provincial official’s home. Suddenly, gunshots were heard. Militants, who were suspected Boko Haram members, were targeting a prominent member among the assembled group. While the official was not injured, one person died in the attack. Later that night and across the continent, two Kenya police officers were injured when Somalia-based Al Shabaab militants

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mounted an assault on a police post.

It is not uncommon to hear of the attacks, coups, rebellions, corruption, and extremely violent tactics that pockmark the political landscape of Africa. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) currently tracks 16 conflicts throughout the continent which are either actively violent or latent but unresolved, excluding the Arab Spring (“Africa’s Conflict Zones,” CFR). However, the targets selected for the attacks on March 27, 2011 are noteworthy for two reason: the type of group who committed the attack and where those groups were based.

Differences among conflicts in Africa are many. However, the fact that the groups involved were Islamist militant groups and one of the attacks was international validates the concern that numerous state actors worldwide have in regards to regional and international security. For example, in a regular update of worldwide threats against Americans, the U.S. Department of State noted three groups in the section about Africa, all Islamist in nature (“Worldwide Caution,” U.S. Department of State). Some groups are accused of spreading their destabilizing influence to other parts of the continent and the world (Rubin 2010). While there has been past literature focusing on terrorist groups, insurgency, and counter-insurgency (COIN) in Africa, there has not been a focused attempt to examine the target selection decision-making process by these groups and what factors impact said decisions.

Thus, this study focuses on the African Islamist militant groups that have committed violent actions but have diverse methods and areas of operation. These are distinct from more general Islamist groups, which have a political goal but which are not defined by violence. African Islamist militant groups, on the other hand, actively use violence to achieve their aims. What factors motivate a group to remain violent in the country where it was founded versus expanding into international operations? This study first proposes that initial government actions and the relevance of foreign influences in a country have an impact on the target selection of violent Islamist organizations in Africa. Second, this study will claim that this effect is due to the unique history of occupation and foreign relations on the continent.

To achieve a qualitative analysis, the theory section will trace the foundational theories of colonialism, group identity, and insurgency to create a lens through which the motivations of violent African Islamist groups can be examined. The theory is expanded on in the theoretical literature section and is used to contextualize the analysis of the cases chosen. Finally, the paper examines the merits and viability of the hypothesis and concludes with a discussion of counter-arguments, avenues for further research, and policy implications.
Literature Review

In order to provide contextual analysis applicable to African Islamic militant groups, this paper will assess three distinct schools of thought. First, colonialist studies provide insight into Africa’s internal structure. Second, Social Identity Theory plays an important role in the decision-making process. Finally, Insurgency/Terrorism literature provides a modern look at violence as a tool and the psychological factors that affect the perception of violence.

In 1960, both Nigeria and Somalia gained independence from Great Britain. Within a decade, both countries experienced violent military overthrows of their initial governments (“World Factbook,” CIA). The intensity of violence so soon after independence produced a well-documented field of study: colonialism and its effects on Africa. Victor Azarya notes that the ethnic configurations that were in place upon independence for many African nations were crystallized as groups struggled to gain power. Often, the new African nations lacked the ability to provide promised resources and meet expectations resulting in leaders restricting access in what Richard Joseph called “ethnoclientism.” Nigeria is a model of this problem, as its efforts to limit ethnic dominance only highlighted the regional differences within the state (Azarya 2003, 10-21).

Colonialism also brought about abrupt changes to the concept of what was valuable. In Somalia, colonial rule enabled an elite to engage in practices that were financially fruitful but environmentally destructive (Webersik 2004, 518-520). Governmental and societal changes affected and continue to affect the very nature of how Africa and its social groups interact as well as what these groups pursue in order to survive.

Colonialism’s lasting impact is the social tensions it brought about. In a phrase, colonialism disrupted African notions of identity (Idowu 2004, 425-427). In the eyes of extremist groups, notably those that operate in areas of weak governance, these groups view the government as merely puppets of the great powers. When the group is operating in a country with a relatively stable and central government, the viewpoint and focus of the extremist group is centered there, not on foreign powers. If political Islam is a reaction to the Western world’s influence encroaching on the Muslim world, then understanding colonialism through the eyes of those oppressed is key to qualifying why some members of militant groups are willing to take radical steps to expel those who represent a style of government favored by the West and other members are not (Stith 2010, 55-59).

That history is a component part of the most important facet of group
decision-making: how the group identifies itself. Identity is hotly debated and there is a wealth of theory and academic literature on the topic. The field is too rich with material to be able to cover the role of identity in group decision-making processes in its entirety, at least in this study. Despite this limitation, one strand of identity literature can help provide a theoretical backbone for the study of African Islamic extremism. Professor Celia Cook-Huffman notes in the Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution that in communal conflict, situational factors that cause uncertainty are likely to aggravate and harden group identity cohesion. This uncertainty leads the groups to question the legitimacy of the prevailing institutions and is likely to encourage violent actions (Cook-Huffman 2008, 23-24).

Kaya expands on this point, noting that when talking about Africa, collective identities are often linked to “concrete interests,” such as foodstuffs or other resources. Additionally, he argues that this group support is a “blowback” reaction to globalization. As new vulnerabilities and economic dependence lessen people’s ability to control their financial survival, group extremism and emphasis on tradition will increase (Kaya 2004, 15). From a Realist perspective, this is supported by discussion of the security dilemma for new militant groups. If a group is newly formed, then the main basis for determining offensive or defensive capabilities and intentions will be history. Fanatical small groups are more likely to initiate conflict when facing a larger enemy the more dissimilar it is from said group. (Posen 1993, 28-33)

Like identity, the study of insurgency is a vast field. Unlike colonialism and identity theory however, which seek to addresses the internal nature of a group, insurgency theory is useful in examining an extremist group’s relations to outside units. It is particularly useful in examining how those relations can change the nature of the group. Populations tend to follow more than one logic pathway when deciding to support insurgent tactics. There is both an active weighing of cost versus benefit and also a “hearts and minds” component that implies an alternative to inexperienced or corrupt governments. The people who support these tactics, either implicitly or explicitly, hope that the groups perpetrating them will make their lives better (Long 2006, RAND Corporation, 21-31).

Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this common affliction in Africa. These include weak governments, dependence on oil exports, exploitation of natural resources, separation from centers of power, and large populations, all of which are known to increase the likelihood of insurgent activity (Fearon & Laiten 2003, 75-90). Furthermore, an abundance of natural resources, also known as the “resource curse,” has been shown to
increase the likelihood of insurgency. Evidenced by colonial exploitation, Africa is not lacking for key natural resources (Pendergast et al. 2011, 415-417).

Additionally, some scholars believe violent insurgent groups will be more active in nations that face multiple external threats (Alozieuwa 2012, 40-63). However, this activity varies according to the level of popular support received and the group’s ties to local society, even when the insurgent groups share similar religious beliefs. Furthermore, “emotionally compelling” events, can psychologically affect the decision making process of the group’s leaders, influencing increasing violent innovation in insurgent tactics (Crenshaw 2000, 405-420).

While in the popular perception insurgencies are distinct from terrorism, an insurgency paradigm is perhaps more useful in understanding the actions of these militant groups: “Under this [terrorism] paradigm... terrorists are seen as unrepresentative, partly to discourage emulation...Under this [insurgency] approach, insurgents are regarded as representative of deeper issues or grievances within society” (Kilcullen 2005, 605). Organizations commonly labeled as “terrorists,” most notably Al Qaeda and its affiliates, take local grievances and change the perception of their origins to justify a global jihad aimed at empowering the entire Muslim world.

Violent Islamist groups use terrorist actions to force change in host governments or occupying nations vis-à-vis the actions of other groups, whether formally aligned together or not (Kilcullen 2005, 597-607). This view of insurgency is reflective of the environments in which these violent groups operate. Asymmetric groups lack the denial of power tactic available to states which are strong militarily. Instead, asymmetric groups must rely on tactics aimed at infusing fear of future punishment into the mentality of the state or governmental force they are opposing (Pape 2003, 346-350).

Methodology

If the theoretical literature is to serve a purpose, it must complement the realities “on the ground.” First, colonialism has left both visible and invisible scars on Africa’s societies and people. Second, Islam has a long and storied history in Africa stretching back into antiquity. Third, there are many issues that persist throughout the continent which create poverty and inequity and limit prospects for economic growth and development. These realities illuminate two persistent factors: national governance and foreign influence.

Historically, foreign influence, including both the arrival of Islam and
the later European colonization efforts, has had a great effect on the poverty and religiosity of African populations. African Islamist extremist groups exploit these influences through advocating for worldwide religion. Thus, government actions and foreign influence are possible variables that determine whether Islamic extremists choose to remain intra-state or become inter-state entities?

This study seeks to evaluate these two factors and the extent to which they determine an insurgent organization’s decision to internationalize. This study will compare two cases of violent Islamist organizations in Africa. The analysis of each organization will explore the history and context surrounding the formation of the group, the groups’ initial actions, their initial violent actions, and their current violent operations.

This study aims to bring meaning to the violent actions committed by insurgent organizations through an emphasis on their context. Qualitative context will enhance the visibility of foreign influence on select nations and the groups operating within their borders, enriching the understanding of government actions and the reasoning behind them. In both cases, the unit of analysis is an organization, thus the study is situated at the sub-national organizational level. Contextual information regarding government and international connections will be supplemented when necessary; however, all of the information referenced directly influences the violent Islamist groups being analyzed (Gerring 2004, 342-346).

This literature has many broad applications, examined in greater depth in the following sections. These include identifying additional COIN techniques, why insurgencies form, and how these movements are shaped by outside influences. This study aims to enrich the COIN debate by exploring how the answers to those questions affect an insurgent group’s decision-making process. Arguably, the most visible of those decisions is the violent actions a group chooses to pursue and this lies at the core of the study.

**Operationalization**

In order to ensure the relevancy of possible findings to conditions found throughout Africa, this study will adopt a narrow definition of an African Islamist extremist group, or AEIG. The groups selected for analysis must possess the following characteristics:

1. Have a leadership that is based physically in Africa.
2. Have performed violent acts directed against a population other than their principal membership.
3. Have perpetrated at least one of those attacks within an African country.
4. Have self-identified as acting on behalf of fundamentalist Islamic doctrine.

These criteria will be determined through source material provided by journalists, scholars, think tanks, and government organizations that actively track these groups and analyze their makeup, statements, and actions. To identify “extremist” organizations, this study will adopt the definition used by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS): “Extremism” should be regarded as a kind of radical negation of a state’s prevailing social norms and rules by individuals or groups (Bondarets 2012). Militant extremist groups are those that fit the preceding definition and use violence to advance their views. This paper will not use the term “fundamentalist,” defined as characterized by strict interpretation of a religious text, as a main identifier because no group is singularly religious in their identity.

It is also important to note what this study does not aim to do. Principally, the study will not attempt to work through the problematic issues associated with the branding of “terrorist,” look at ways to dismantle violent Islamist groups, or attempt to address and mitigate real or supposed grievances held by said groups. Case selection is strictly limited to focus on the factors influencing the decision to internationalize violence. Finally, due to time constraints and limited relevant literature, this paper will exclude “Arab Spring” organizations from its analysis, which also operate in the culturally distinct region of North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) as opposed to sub-Saharan Africa.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis is split into two sections, one for a local Islamic group and one for an internationalized Islamic group, both of which fit the previously stated criteria. Each section will begin with evidence of that group’s case credentials and then proceed to outline how well the group fits the four case selection qualifications.

**Group 1: Boko Haram, Nigeria**

Self-labeled as Jama‘atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da‘awati wal-Jihad, which translates to “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings
and Jihad,” Boko Haram is an African Islamic extremist group that operates exclusively in Nigeria. Their colloquial name comes from locals in northern Nigeria, their region of origin, and means “Western education is banned.” In an effort to create group cohesion, the members of Boko Haram are urged to follow strict interpretations of the Quran and the group has founded a Mosque where their radical ideals could be preached to a wider audience (“Nigeria’s Crisis,” The Economist).

Boko Haram has had two known leaders, both Nigerian: Muhammad Yusuf, who was killed by Nigerian security forces, and now Abubakar Shekau, who was believed to be killed but has since re-surfaced in Internet videos. (Chothia 2012) Boko Haram has either perpetrated or is suspected of perpetrating 151 incidents of violence in Nigeria at the time of writing. Attacks have varied in method and target, from private citizens to religious figures and police (“Global Terrorism Database,” START).

While some figures from the Nigerian government claim that Boko Haram is an international terrorist organization, there is no conclusive evidence that Boko Haram is actively operating in foreign countries. There is at best tenuous evidence claiming that the group has communicated with and even recruited from peoples outside of Nigeria. Regardless, Boko Haram has only perpetrated violence in Nigeria as defined by this study. Any unproven international non-violent actions are irrelevant to this study’s analysis of factors affecting violent action (Solomon 2012, 6-7). Given the propensity towards violence, stated Islamic values, and violence that is focused solely in Nigeria, Boko Haram is considered a local AIEG.

Boko Haram operates in a deeply divided country. Home to a population of nearly 150 million, roughly half that of the United States, Nigeria is split between a mostly Muslim north and a mostly Christian south. The southern region is home to vast oil reserves and has higher rates of employment and literacy. The northern region is where Boko Haram is based and most active.

Boko Haram is not the first Islamic Extremist group to form in the northern provinces, however. In the 1980s, a decade marked by riots against extreme poverty and inequities in the region, similar groups emerged. There is speculation that Muhammad Yusuf belonged to groups that participated in those riots and possibly created an earlier form of Boko Haram in the 1990s (Adesoji 2011, 98-119). Shortly after Boko Haram’s formation in 2002, a confrontation with police left the majority of its founding members dead after being besieged inside a mosque. The surviving members returned to their homes and then gradually proceeded to set up an organization that expanded into several northern provinces, providing welfare and religious education (Walker 2012).
After these initial actions and brief violence, little information regarding Boko Haram can be independently verified between 2003-2007. From 2002 up until the violence of 2009, there are reports that suspected Boko Haram of cultivating support, gaining members, and establishing social services. But, as one journalist put it, “so little information about the organization can be verified and solid, dependable information is hard to come by in Nigeria.” (Walker 2012) Even the first instance of violence perpetrated by Boko Haram after the siege has not been completely verifiable.

A report commissioned by the U.S. Institute of Peace speculates that Boko Haram assassinated a rival imam in 2007, while the Global Terrorist Database records the first instance of violence as occurring much later in 2009. Despite the uncertainty surrounding initial violent action, the first comprehensive period of such action is not in dispute. In the second half of 2009, almost ten attacks can be attributed to Boko Haram (“Global Terrorism Database”). These attacks were aimed at Nigerian law enforcement over a motorcycle helmet law, but it is unlikely that something so seemingly insignificant would trigger such violence (Walker 2012). The U.S. Department of State’s report on human rights for Nigeria in 2009 lists massive repression of political rights, extrajudicial killings, and torture in the months leading up to when violence involving Boko Haram broke out (“Human Rights Report: Nigeria” 2009, U.S. Department of State). Given the historical disparity between the northern and southern provinces, these disturbing reports are a more likely trigger of the targeted violence against government forces.

As of writing, the most current information about Boko Haram was last compiled in 2011. Most recently, Boko Haram was identified as the perpetrator of 13 attacks in December 2011 alone. Additionally, there are media reports of violence across northern Nigerian provinces, including against foreigners who are working inside the country (Mshelizza & Brock 2012, Reuters). There are currently no reports of direct contact between foreign military forces or foreign peacekeeping and police forces and Boko Haram.

**Group 2: Al Shabaab, Somalia-based International Group**

After the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia has faced years of chaos while various groups have tried unsuccessfully to vie for control (“World Factbook” 2012, CIA). These groups, which varied from warlords to Islamic groups, occasionally foreign-funded, had different motivations for seeking power. The Islamic movements, some of which had formed early on and even before President Barre was overthrown, were unable to gain a political or physical foothold. When the tides briefly began to turn against
the warlords in the middle of the 1990s allowing an Islamic group to gain prominence, Ethiopian troops stepped in and overwhelmed it.

It was clear to outside observers that no one group was going to gain power at the time and the status quo would likely be maintained. These observers included members of external and pre-existing Islamic extremist groups, such as al-Qaida. However, the lack of a stable government encouraged external groups to operate more openly than they otherwise would have, beginning the links into the global jihad. These links proved attractive to those lacking a constitutional path to self-governance or even a legitimate government that could address their grievances (Kilcullen 609-612).

After years of bloody lawlessness and the dismantling of the one dominant Islamist organization, a union of Islamic courts banded together to impose a semblance of stability in Somalia. Al-Qaida provided funding to and training for the young militant members of the Islamic Courts who would later become Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen, meaning “Movement of the Warrior Youth”, or more commonly just Al-Shabaab, “the Youth” (Shinn 2011, 203-215). Neighboring Ethiopia again became concerned when the propaganda disseminated by the Islamic Courts began mentioning attacking Ethiopian interests. Consequently, Ethiopia invaded Somalia, causing most of the Islamic Courts’ leadership to flee. However, the fighters who would self-identify as Al-Shabaab stayed to fight the Ethiopian forces (Wise 2011). An “Emir” known as Abu Zabayr currently leads Al-Shabaab. Zabayr, which is one of his many names and aliases, is a native Somali and is advised by an Islamist religious council (Horadam 2011).

Since the formation of the group, Al-Shabaab has been characterized by violence. The group harassed the Ethiopian forces for three years before the Ethiopians withdrew and were replaced with peacekeeping soldiers under the auspices of the African Union (AU). Since 2010, Al-Shabaab has been active outside of Somalia, notably with attacks in Uganda and Kenya, and the group has also been accused of aiding groups in Mali (Wise; “Global Terrorism Database”). Despite the increased pace of operations outside of Somalia, African Union forces have put pressure on the group and Al-Shabaab has lost ground in their fight to control Somalia (Bayoumy 2012, Reuters).

Discussion

Initial government reactions to Islamist groups and foreign influence in the country of origin are two potential variables in determining the internationalization of violence that both Somalia and Nigeria can showcase.
In Nigeria, Boko Haram members have borne witness to the perceived inequality in their country and corruption of the central federal government. Its members have seen foreign oil companies invest in the southern provinces while largely neglecting the north. Somalia has seen the opposite: almost no central government authority and a large foreign presence in the country in the form of various security forces.

This stark contrast illustrates how initial government actions play a crucial role in the formation of a militant group’s target selection. Nigeria’s central government is equipped with a sizable army that can and does enforce secular laws (Stearns 2011, VOA). These governmental forces wasted very little time in targeting the group due to the perceived threat it posed. After the initial attack, the government did not interfere with the survivors when they returned to their home provinces. Seizing on that initial attack, Boko Haram hardened its belief that the central government was corrupt, in turn feeding their ideology that they must fight political leaders in their home provinces and in Abuja. Furthermore, that initial attack on Boko Haram members inside of a mosque could be considered an act that necessitated revenge, but which took time to plan and initiate (Crenshaw 2000).

In contrast, Al-Shabaab was originally part of an alliance that was attempting to bring order to the chaos that had engulfed Somalia. Given that there was no effective Somali government to respond to Al-Shabaab and the Islamic Courts, they in effect saw themselves as a government. In a theoretical sense, one of the responsibilities of a government is to protect the sovereignty of the state from foreign invaders. As discussed in the proceeding paragraphs, it is this notion that influenced Al-Shabaab’s international goals. But as noted earlier in the data analysis section, the type of government that responds also seems to affect the decision of a group to internationalize. There were no cases apparent to this author where a vastly different form of government operated against a militant Islamist group in Africa. So while there could theoretically be intervening effects on this variable, the scarcity of current data relevant to Africa precludes the possibility of triangulation and should be an area of further study.

While the Islamic Courts/Al-Shabaab was forming, foreign governments along with exiled Somalis were forming the "Transitional Federal Government” in Kenya. Simultaneously, Ethiopia as a Christian nation was concerned about the religious nature of the Islamic courts (Wise). Given the rampant instability in Somalia, it is not extraordinary to understand why regional powers would be concerned. However, for the population in Somalia, the anarchy arose from foreign governments creating a societal system that
perpetuated weak institutions during the long period of colonial rule.

When the foreign colonizers pulled out, chaos ensued. For religiously motivated members of Al-Shabaab, the idea of having Christian foreign powers interfering with their affairs again was a formidable factor in shaping the organization’s decisions. Pursuing international targets therefore does not seem shocking when viewed through the eyes of the poverty stricken young members of Al-Shabaab. This is markedly different from Boko Haram’s vision of transforming the secular federal government of Nigeria into an Islamic state (Abimbola 2010, 95-108).

Conversely, while there is substantial foreign investment in Nigeria, only two cities in the northern provinces are even mentioned in an investor’s guide to Nigeria, lessening the degree of contact between Boko Haram and foreign influences (Uzonwanne 2011). While the group has targeted foreigners inside the country, the lack of a large foreign presence in the northern provinces, especially the lack of a “Western” economic presence, should be noted. Regardless of the debate over the depth and spread of official corruption, Nigeria still has an active government, security apparatus, and political process. This is the environment in which Boko Haram has been operating. Their focus is primarily not international targets because from their inception, they have been fighting extinction at the hands of Nigerian state security.

Without first-hand experience within these countries, it is impractical to attempt to measure or qualify how much interaction these groups, especially Boko Haram, have had with foreign influences. This is likely to be the most contentious point this study, as I do not attempt to specifically define foreign influence. For the purposes of this study, I can only say foreign influence includes economic and governmental types of interactions. To justify this method, it is important to note that foreign influences, such as economic investment and governmental support, often go hand in hand in Africa. This paper puts forth the inference that in the end, the specific type of influence is not what matters but rather the prevalence of “foreignness” in the case country.

The decision to internationalize target selection by violent Africa Islamist groups appears to be principally driven by the response of the government, or as the groups might see it, the neo-colonizers or the puppet government. Foreign influence is the trickier of the two variables. From the qualitative analysis, the two variables appear scalar. That is to say, the more autonomous the African government, the more that variable outweighs the effect of foreign influence. Conversely, the weaker the government, the more significant the effect of foreign influence becomes. The more power wielded
by a government, the less foreign presence seems to influence a group’s target selection. Therefore, foreign influence is more useful to the research when considered as an intervening variable rather than a distinct independent variable, departing from the original hypothesis.

**Implications**

The case analysis in this study presents findings that have the potential to enrich the field of COIN. If the initial by the government or governing entity is a key factor in how Islamist militant groups operate, then governments must be aware of the long-term implications of their actions. Rather than boldly countering a perceived threat with military or security forces, governments could engage religious and cultural leaders in order to make the community aware of the negative impacts a militant group can have on the welfare of the country as a whole. Additionally, with advancements in digital and information technology, governments should seek to pair the necessary and legitimate use of force with complimentary framing in public media, so as to reduce the likelihood that reactions from “militant” groups will be violent.

This paper also challenges ideas posed in some existing literature. Kilcullen suggests that breaking the links between regional Islamist insurgencies would be an effective tool in countering the violence associated with these groups. Disaggregation, Kilcullen argues, is the key to breaking global jihad and therefore should be the focus of government efforts. This study; however, points towards systemic issues as being more important than links to other militant groups in determining a group’s behavior. While it is true that aggregation among militant groups can give constituent members more resources and media attention, the perpetuation of insurgency appears to instead driven by initial systemic issues. If an insurgency is denied its raison d’être, the group should be less likely to join a global movement of Islamic jihad.

While foreign influence as an intervening variable appears to be significant, this generates additional questions regarding the specific role it plays in determining internationalization by militant groups. Further research differentiating the effects of historical foreign influence versus current levels of influence in a country could help to expand the implications of this study. Previous influence, such as colonialism, has had a seemingly immense negative impact. Nevertheless, positive perceptions of contemporary development and aid programs could potentially shift the national discourse towards a more positive view of said influences. It is possible that differences in the perception
of foreign influence contribute to determining the “area of violent operations.”

Another avenue of future research is the nature of Islamist groups and militant groups in African countries that are officially or majority Muslim. Nigeria is an officially secular country while the Somalia state is nominally non-existent, as component regions continue to act independently. Assessing the impact of a religious government could strengthen understanding of how these militant groups operate.

Some might argue that this research is less important given the violent nature of other types of militant groups, particularly in Africa. The Lord’s Resistance Army, for example, is infamous for its sudden violent attacks and use of child soldiers. However, research into Islamic extremism in other parts of the world, or even Islamic governments in Africa, is all the more important given that the Muslim population in Africa is shortly predicted to surpass that of the entire Middle East (“The Future of the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center).

Of the many problems that afflict Africa, Islamist extremist groups are of particular concern because of their ability to reach out to Islamic extremists in other parts of the world. The “contagiousness” of this particular threat is why it is all the more necessary to understand the context surrounding AIEGs.

Conclusions

This paper has examined two African Islamist extremist groups (AIEGs): Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, which met the case selection criteria. By examining the past literature, history, and context of these two cases, this study concludes that initial government actions are an important factor in whether a violent group chooses to internationalize its selection of targets. Additionally, the analysis suggests that foreign influence, with economic and military influence being considered equal, is only important in relation to the government of the country or region in question. Rather than being a distinct independent variable, foreign influence appears to be an intervening variable.

As policy makers around the world debate how to handle militant extremists in Africa, these findings should be noted when discussing possible courses of action on the continent. This research specifically dealt with conditions in Africa which are the result of the continent’s unique history, a typically Constructivist approach. However, the relevance of this research should not be considered isolated to the two cases considered. Rather, militant Islamist groups are active in several African countries and the findings herein could be applicable to these cases as well, and possibly more cases worldwide.
If government responses contribute to the problem, then current security assistance and developmental aid should be reexamined. If a lack of government services is part of the issue, then perhaps mediated talks or other conflict resolution and structural steps should be considered as well. Whatever the policy implications, there is now an initial foothold into research on the differences found in African Islamist groups and their perpetuation of violence. This research, while currently isolated, may help advance discussion on achieving peace and stability throughout Africa. ✤
Bibliography


