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Religious Extremism, Insurgent Violence and the Transformation of the New African Security Landscape

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In the early twenty-first century, Africa has experienced significant changes in the nature of the security threats it is facing. Since the 1960s and throughout the post-colonial period, the African landscape had been dominated by political irredentism and territorial disputes triggered by the legacy of colonial arbitrariness and perpetuated by autocratic regimes. By the 1990s, the scene had transformed, as non-state actors had become increasingly active across the continent. Later, this evolution grew to concern vectors of statehood, political violence and force projection (or a group's ability to broadcast power). These changes are rooted in the synthesis of legitimacy crises, the disintegration of prevailing social systems and the rise of disruptive military innovation, and are vividly visible in Africa (Philips 34, 2011). As a result, today, African regional conflict management capacity faces a challenge of updating its response matrix to generate a proper understanding of the ongoing transformation, whereby new actors are impacting the dominant conflict grammar in open-ended ways.

Specifically, a new generation of armed groups has emerged over the past quarter of a century. Understanding this new generation of non-state armed groups presents novel analytical and practical challenges, as these entities differ substantially from those that are traditionally active in civil conflicts (UN System Staff College and Center for International Peace Operations 2015, 7). Just as the state system itself is an evolving architecture (Engel and Porto 2010, 159), the new groups have an equally deep historical anchoring. Guerrillas, rebels and warlords have operated in fertile frontiers and marginalized zones, both real and abstract; they have represented, if sometimes

in the vaguest of terms, a range of disenfranchised groups and have pursued many of the same goals — however unpalatably — as their nineteenth-century forebears (Reid 2012, 148). The differences from earlier generations are twofold. On the one hand, the new groups have varied characteristics, which ultimately constitute groups that are predominately hybrid. These groups display religious extremism, performing terrorist actions that are at times concerned with territorial gains, and at other times focused mostly on transnational targets. Present-day armed groups in Africa are hybrid actors whose motivations and beliefs cannot be attributed to a single philosophical cause or act of violence. On the other hand, these new groups are increasingly spilling across borders, embracing transnationalism. None of the three main groups discussed in this chapter — Al Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram — are confined to the countries in which they originated — for example, AQIM has become a bigger issue in Mali than in Algeria where it originated. In this context, the global nature of militancy in Africa is characterized by the simultaneous manifestation of three aspects of violence: a resurgence and mutation, a dynamic of uncertain and unsettled form, and a trajectory of expansion.

Transformed Landscape and New Actors

Understanding the new armed groups in Africa and re-mapping the (in)security landscape of the continent accordingly, is the first critical step toward a redefinition of an effective policy response. The security environment of the twenty-first century is characterized by the influence and power of non-state armed groups, and because these groups are central to understanding regional and world politics, the analysis of the nature of these actors should be taken more seriously (Mulaj 2010, 2). Without a clinical interpretation of the full picture of political violence across African

states and how it has transformed over the past 25 years, institutions such as the African Union (AU), regional organizations and civil society actors will remain in a declamatory rather than a regulatory position. For a long time, the prevailing literature in social sciences and in policy making was that the search for durable peace in Africa was directly related to issues of governance and democratization (Adebajo 2002, 38). Until recently, the international implications of insurgency on the continent had been neglected. This was due to the fact that the patterns of international politics revealed by insurgency often ran counter to the ideologies or mythologies of African statehood and unity. A revised and updated understanding of the subject is overdue (Clapham 1996, 209).

The transformation of the landscape is only due in part to the result of the revolutionary rather than evolutionary actions of the new groups. The discontinuity of boundaries is one of the most important factors in the building of African states and the state system (Herbst 2000, 252; Salehyan 2007; Checkel 2013). Present-day armed groups have created a myriad of transnational connections, laying the groundwork for a new generation to be more lethal and also be transformed as a result of the influence of a diverse network of forces. To be certain, this transformation, which gathered momentum in the early 2000s, was foreshadowed by key developments in earlier decades. As a number of states collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, lines between various forces and their objectives, and between combatants and non-combatants, had begun to become blurred or at least highly fluid (Reid 2012, 169). It is, however, the impact of globalization in the mid-to-late 1990s, and more visibly in the 2000s, that forcefully ushered in a new generation of self-directed actors in the continent. Put simply, globalization is by far the biggest driver of this transformation, which yielded new ungoverned spaces. It accentuated asymmetries in wealth and rates of development, accelerated demographic shifts and urbanization, empowered individuals and non-state actors through access to emerging

technologies and the dissemination of new norms and ideas, and shrank time and distance (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010, 277; Raleigh and Dowd 2013). It therefore also set the stage for the manifestation of various mutations of militant religious and terrorist movements in Africa.

An important pattern at the centre of this recent transformation has been the materialization of a sequence whereby a nexus is established among the armed groups, politics and religion. During the 1960s, 1970s and most of the 1980s, groups across the continent that began as political entities (on the basis of ideological choices or separatist claims) would remain so. Trajectories away from the "political" would take the form of state collapse, co-optation or criminalization, but seldom religiosity. Starting in the late 1980s, insurgencies increasingly began to borrow from religious rhetoric and "cleansing" ideologies. Three main stages emerged in the evolution of the trajectory from political to religious. First, groups would essentially be influenced by the increased presence of religion in world affairs and introduce a layer of religious terminology in their reoriented mandate. Second, groups would seek alliances with religious groups, thereby retaining their original stance but boasting a forceful religious partnership — oftentimes with a view to gain external attention. Third and finally, by the late 1990s armed groups began to make religion their primary basis (i.e., predication and combat). Overall, with the general intensity of religious-based conflicts increasing, the new armed groups came to inevitably echo this dynamic. A study from the Peace Research Institute in Oslo has measured the presence of identity-based religious cleavages in 241 intrastate conflicts during the period from 1946 to 2004. It shows that religious conflicts have become significantly more intense than non-religious ones (Lindberg 2008). This takes place in an environment of renewed interface between religiosity and conflict, wherein religion has come to occupy a central place in new conflicts, with one-third of countries experiencing, in one form or another, a "religious conflict" today (Pew Research Center 2014).

Whereas Southern Africa and Central Africa were affected by other internecine identity markers (Lemarchand 2009; Prunier 2010), the religious and terrorist groups have dominated more intensely North Africa, West Africa, the Sahel and East Africa. Three constellations of key actors active in these four regions can be identified and are discussed in this chapter: Al Shabaab in East Africa, AQIM in the Maghreb and the Sahel, and Boko Haram in West Africa.

East Africa and Al Shabaab

As is often the case with faltering statehood, the path leading to the emergence of Al Shabaab in Somalia in 2006 started with the fall of the Mohamed Siad Barre regime in that country in 1991. Barre had led the country since October 1969 as a result of a coup conducted nine years after the country's independence. The rise of the religious dimension in Somalia is, however, relatively surprising, as cohesion, rather than fragmentation could have been initially expected. The majority of the country's population is Sunni of the Shafi'i school and the country enjoys a religious and linguistic unity that is rare in Africa. However, the absence of a lasting political authority and the extremely strategic position of the country — which garnered the colonial competition of Britain, France and Italy, as well as Ethiopia in the Ogaden region — led to the development of informal Islamist power patterns. Somalia only witnessed an Islamist revival movement late in the post-colonial period. The movements that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s — such as the Liberation Front of Western Somalia, the Democratic Front for the Safeguard of Somalia, the National Somali Movement, the Somali Patriotic Movement or the United Somali Congress — did not harbour a religious identity.

During the 1970s in Mogadishu and under Saudi Wahhabi influence, the first Somali Islamist movement, *Al Jama'a al Islamiya* (the Islamic Group), was born. This group then connected

with a local student movement known as *Wihdat al Chabab al Islamiya* (the Union of the Islamic Youth). Under the name *Al Itihad al Islami* (the Islamic Union), the new organization displayed a Salafi orientation and played a key role in the opposition to the Siad Barre regime. In the chaos following the fall of Siad Barre in January 1991, the Islamic Union set up training camps and, with Saudi financial support, started preaching (*da'wa*) around the country. This did not meet with much success, as its list of prohibited activities alienated large segments of the Somali population. Importantly, the Islamic Union attempted unsuccessfully to set up an Islamic Emirate, which was opposed by the National Somali Front. Early transnational undercurrents manifested as an offshoot of the Islamic Union — the Islamic Union of Western Somalia. It conducted, in 1990–1996, sporadic attacks in Ethiopia in the name of the liberation of the Ogaden region, triggering a military reaction by Ethiopia, which in turn brought an end to these activities.

The founding of the Islamic Union represented the matrix of contemporary political Islam in Somalia, limited by: a population that rallied to the project only temporarily and partially; powerful political groups and tribal actors actively opposed to the religious project; and an expansionist desire that ended the initial cohesion, often violently. Against this background in the 2000s, a second wave of religious-driven groups emerged in Somalia, that of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and, later, Al Shabaab. Whereas the Islamic Union movement was the result, ultimately, of an essentially local opposition to the arbitrariness of a fallen state, the second movement was primarily impacted by the post-September 11 international developments. Hence, contemporary Somali Islamism was born in a context already militarized, criminalized and atomized. *Itihad Mahakem al Islamiya* (the Union of Islamic Tribunals) arose in 1999 amid an urgent need for order. Taking the form of a networked system of courts, the UIC rapidly took over the justice function of the state, as well as education groups (150,000 children were schooled during

this period) and health services overseen by militias that were paid by the contributions of the different tribal. By 2004, a presidency was set up with the creation of a Supreme Council of the Islamic Courts of Somalia under the leadership of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. This, however, triggered opposition by the Somali warlords who launched an Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism. Armed engagements between the Alliance and the UIC took place in 2006.

The important aspect of the UIC story was its federation of diverse actors and the fact that three-fourths of the country (north, south and east) came under an Islamic jurisdiction over a period of about seven years. To be certain, the UIC benefitted from the then-popular perception that only under Islam could Somalia be united, and it did offer a potential response to tribal, clan and ethnic diversity. However, its appeal to most Somalis was primarily its ability to tackle insecurity in a conservative, although not radical, religious framework. The UIC had indeed developed a jurisprudence of *soulh* (reconciliation) and *simah* (pardon), which was temporarily transferred to local tradition (*xeer*) and the dominant role of traditional leaders.

The international community failed, however, to engage with the one entity that had been able to offer an alternative, however forceful, to the warlords since 1991. The United States, in particular, looked upon the UIC as a Taliban-like entity and painted it as a terrorist actor. Combined with rising internal dissensions between moderate and radicals, and the UIC's opposition to the AU's 2006 intervention in Somalia, the UIC drifted into radicalization, buttressed by accumulating military defeats. On December 27, 2006, the organization was dissolved. The materialization of a political centre of gravity would have singularly helped rebuild the Somali state, but the US-led process of reconciliation was opposed to the reconstitution of the UIC. Consequently, the UIC's implosion led to the emergence of several factions, in particular

a short-lived moderate group led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, with a national wing known as Hizbul Islam and a radical branch, Al Shabaab.

Initially known as *Hizb Al Shabaab* (the Party of Youth) or *Harakat Shabaab al Mujahidin* (Movement of the Fighters' Youth), Al Shabaab was constituted as a formal radical group entity in March 2007 (although their presence was noticeable as early as 2003 with the killing of four humanitarian workers in Somaliland attributed to the group). Led by Aden Hashi Farah Ayro (a militant from the UIC who had spent some time in Afghanistan in the 1990s), Al Shabaab introduced an important shift in the development of Somali Islamism by explicitly attributing their actions to both a global jihad and a radical Salafist ideology. Hence, an urban youth movement, almost exclusively localized in Mogadishu, positioned itself from its inception by employing violence, targeting foreigners and using a transnational mode. A second historic and revealing split from the early Islamic Union or the UIC was also established at that time as a major influence on Al Shabaab, a foreign group called al-Qaeda. In particular, Al Shabaab used al-Qaeda's modus operandi of suicide bombings, notably to target the African Union Mission in Somalia, and reaching Kampala, Uganda, with a lethal attack in July 2010. In February 2012, al-Qaeda's new leader Ayman al Dhawahiri — following Osama Bin Laden's death in May 2011 — recognized Al Shabaab as al-Qaeda's representative in Somalia. Over the next few years, Al Shabaab would continue to assert its presence throughout Somalia and the East African region, in particular leading a high-profile four-day attack on a mall in Nairobi, Kenya, from September 21–24, 2013, killing 67 people.

In sum, the short-lived UIC movement, of a relatively moderate Islamism earning societal legitimacy through a positive regulation effort (dispensing justice), was replaced in the mid-2000s by radical Islamism, which for the next 10 years sought primarily to establish its imprimatur

through force and terror. Since the US-supported Ethiopian intervention that lasted from December 2006 to January 2007, crisis dynamics have, in Somalia and throughout East Africa, shifted to the terrain of this mix of religion-cum-violence. Yet, the influence of religious leaders has, in point of fact, diminished in favour of armed militant groups pursuing political or criminal goals. While Al Shabaab consolidated local support on the global scene, al-Qaeda could now use the jihad in Somalia to recruit internationally. In this boomerang narrative, a Christian nation, Ethiopia, backed by the United States, invaded Somalia in 1993 and slaughtered Muslims. Jihadis had risen up and repelled the invasion, making Somalia a frontline battleground against the crusade Bin Laden had long alleged the United States was waging (Scahill 2013, 228).

North Africa, the Sahel and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Just as Al Shabaab traced an arc going from local to regional to international threat, an Algerian group would, from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, travel the same road, in time emerging as one of al-Qaeda's most lethal franchises. In September 1998, as the civil war that had been waging in Algeria since 1992 was slowing down, *Al Jama'a al Salafiya lil Da'wa wal Qital* (the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat [GSPC]) was formed. This group came into existence against the background of close to 20 years of Algerian radical Islamist militancy. Starting in the early 1980s, as disenchantment dominated the social and political purview of the Algerian generation born after the country's independence in 1962, *al Haraka al Islamiya al Musalaha* (the Armed Islamic Movement [MIA]) had been set up under the leadership of two militants, Mustapha Bouyali and Said Makhloufi. Although the MIA was short-lived, it established a lasting form of violent outlaw Islamism with connections to the criminal underworld that will long dominate Algerian

politics, and would in time be exported to the rest of the Maghreb and to the Sahel. Triggered by a military coup in January 1992 that interrupted an election that was on its way to being won by an Islamist party, *Al Jabha al Islamiya lil Inqadh* (the Islamic Salvation Front [FIS]), the 1992–1998 Algerian civil war had a death toll of some 150,000. As a more militarized group overtook the FIS, *Al Jama'a al Islamiya al Musalaha* (the Armed Islamic Group [GIA]), starting in mid-1992, the country descended into a gruesome cycle of violence by various Islamist groups and counter-violence by specialized anti-terrorist governmental units known as the Ninjas, culminating in a series of large-scale massacres in mid-1997 in the localities of Beni-Ali, Rais and Bentalha.

The violence slowed down starting in 1998, and a nationwide political process meant to move beyond the conflict,brought a halt to the activities of the GIA and several other groups. Under the leadership of Hassan Hattab, the GSPC continued its activities underground, but did not conduct a major operation for five years. In early 2003, the group initiated an important reorientation of its activism. Fleeing the urban centres of the Algerian coast and the mountainous coastal Kabylia areas where it resided for the most part— sporadically ambushing police and military patrols — the GSPC moved southward toward the vast Algerian desert and neighbouring Mali, and began traversing that area with a view to establishing a sanctuary. That base was eventually established in 2003, following a spectacular operation led by one of the GSPC's leading figures, Abdelrazzaq "El Para," who, from January 22 to April 11, kidnapped 32 European tourists, who were released in August under murky conditions (Keenan 2009). As the GSPC's leadership shifted, with Hassan Hattab replaced by Nabil al Sahraoui and then Abdelmalek Droukdel, the group moved to actively regionalize its activities, focusing on lucrative, large-scale hostage-for-ransom campaigns — between 2003 and 2015 73 individuals, mostly Westerners, were kidnapped, six of whom died in detention and

another five were killed in separate operations. At the end of this phase, the GSPC became further internationalized by seeking and becoming an al-Qaeda franchise in North Africa. On September 11, 2006, al-Qaeda's then number two, Ayman al Dhawahiri, announced that the GSPC had joined al-Qaeda to become AQIM. During the following months, the rebranded group conducted attacks throughout the Maghreb, with a view presumptively to establish its presence. The group did not, however, pursue further its pan-Maghrebi efforts and turned instead to the Sahel.

Already tactically present in the Sahel, to evade Algerian forces and to strike other North African states, AQIM positioned itself strategically in relation to the area immediately after the start of the Libyan 2011 revolution. Within less than a month after the beginning of the uprising against Muammar Gadhafi on February 16, 2011, the group had issued two statements (on February 24 and March 19) and dispatched a team to acquire the heavy weaponry (including SAM-7 anti-aircraft and RPG-7 anti-tank missiles) that was made available following Gadhafi's opening of arms' caches. Almost overnight, the Libyan security vacuum was able to significantly militarize the AQIM. It also created a vortex of insecurity providing unprecedented opportunities to target regional authorities that were faced with uprisings and uncertainty. In December 2011, an offshoot of the AQIM was created. The *Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya* (the Movement for Oneness and Jihad and West Africa [MUJAO]), followed later in the same month by another subgroup, *Ansar al Din* (the Partisans of the Sharia), composed mostly of Tuareg militants. Joining forces with a secular Tuareg group opposed to the Malian government and seeking Tuareg independence — the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) created in October 2011 and made up of battle-hardened militants previously in exile in Libya — the AQIM, the MUJAO and Ansar al Din moved, in January-February 2012, to capture the northern Malian cities of Gao, Kidal and Tombouctou, before threatening to

take the capital Bamako, which had witnessed a military coup that brought down the regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré on March 22. After holding these cities for several months, the AQIM-MUJAO-Ansar al Din-MNLA coalition fell victim to internal fighting from May 2012 onward, and was dislodged from the cities by a French military intervention, Operation Serval, which took place from January 2013 to August 2014.

In the aftermath of the French intervention — and having launched a large-scale kidnapping operation of hundreds of foreign workers at an oil production compound in the town of In Amenas, Algeria, on January 17, 2013 — the AQIM and its affiliated groups moved back to the Maghreb. It became apparent that the AQIM, a group that was forged in reactivity and ambiguity that had demonstrated poor decision-making skills, was ill-equipped to handle its most daunting challenge — namely, regenerating itself in the face of advancing Western troops. Yet, if the French intervention was indicative of a rupture in the AQIM saga, it was due primarily to exposing the limits of the Sahelian territorial expansion plan, allegedly hatched by AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel some years ago (Mohamedou 2013). The nature of the AQIM's terrorism and the group's association with transnational criminal networks prevalent throughout the region, indicates that although the group has often appeared to act in the name of lofty ideological and religious beliefs, they seem to have a more immediate interest in ransoms, which are reversed in a political economy of terrorism. Such operational ambiguity came to characterize AQIM's "Islamist terrorism," wherein hostage-hustling, drug trafficking, arms dealing, car smuggling, money counterfeiting, cigarette reselling and gas bootlegging are more present than political or religious pronouncements (Mohamedou 2011, 3). The combined effect of the French intervention, the local resistance to AQIM's nexus of terrorism and criminality, the peace process in Mali (an agreement for peace and reconciliation between the Malian government and rebel groups from the northern region, which resulted in the preliminary signing of an agreement on June 20, 2015), and larger developments in the al-Qaeda saga, following the death of Osama Bin Laden and the rise of the Islamic state, opened a period of atomization, from 2014 onward, of the group — two new offshoots emerged: *Al Murabitoun* (the Almoravides) in March 2012 and *Junud al Khilafa* (the Soldiers of the Caliphate) in September 2014.

West Africa and Boko Haram

The same hybridity that presides over the new groups in East Africa, North Africa and the Sahel is illustrated in the case of the Boko Haram group, which has come to dominate the Nigerian and West African security scene over the past 15 years. Boko Haram is a complex movement that is, all at the same time, the result of ethno-religious tensions, has separatist aspirations in the context of a federal state and increasingly radicalized with a terrorist approach to a rigorous neo-Salafist entity. Although the religious nature of the group is often cited, it is important to keep in mind that, in reality, the factors of tribal identity, corruption, the aftermath of the 1967–1970 Biafran War and the sharing of petroleum resources, contribute equally to the explanation of the group's violence (Otis 2008, 223). The movement, which coalesced in the early 2000s, also has a deeper historical anchor in three main respects. The first is the legacy of the Sokoto caliphate, which existed in northwest Nigeria from about 1804 to 1903. To be certain, Islam has been present in Nigeria since the ninth century, but it is the nineteenth-century period that mostly impacts this specific revival narrative. A second aspect is the more recent influence of a wave of militant Islamism that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the leadership of Mohammad Marwa.[1] Thirdly, Nigeria has historically experienced discriminatory management by the British colonial power that favoured Christians over Muslims.

Against, this social context that emerged in the early 2000s the movement that came to be known as Boko Haram (initially known as the *Yusufiya* — follower of Yusuf — or Nigerian Taliban) was born. Straddling a three-state arc in northeast Nigeria — the Yobe, Borno and Adamawa states — the *Jama'atu Ahl al Sunna wal Jihad* (the Group of the People of the Sunna and Jihad) emerged in the area of Maiduguri in the Borno State in early 2000, with the view of establishing a strict Islamic state in the north of Nigeria to address the corruption and poor governance that had overtaken the country and the region. Consisting mainly of young recruits and led by Mohammad Yusuf,[2] the group was initially focused on non-violent militancy concerned with the implementation of the sharia (Islamic law), social justice and, increasingly, regional separatism, they set up a community of "true" believers in Kanama in the Yobe state, near the Niger border. Gradually added to these aims was an anti-Western disposition, born out of opposition to the missionary ideal of education. "Boko Haram," a neologism commonly translated as "Western education is forbidden," became the street name of the movement during its key formative years in the mid-to-late 2000s. If the group was gradually being radicalized during its clashes with the Nigerian authorities starting in December 2003 (50 killed), and if it was already showing signs of transnationalism with militants flocking from around the West African region (notably from Chad, Cameroon and Niger), its focus remained overwhelmingly on local political and religious authorities. Attacks took place in January, September and October 2004 on police precincts and border posts, and continued throughout the next two years. The assassination, in April 2007 at the Indimi Mosque in Kano, of Yusuf's former mentor, Islamic scholar Jaafar Mahmoud Adam — who had criticized the group's interpretation of the Koran and the Prophet's teachings — was attributed to Boko Haram, and marked a turning point in the escalation of violence; there had been a series of skirmishes with the Nigerian authorities, which culminated in the killing of Yusuf in July 2009.

The disappearance of Yusuf and the violent manner in which he and several hundred militants were killed in 2009, opened the door for further radicalization both within the group and in the geographic region in which it operated. As repression against the group increased, and following a short period during which the group went underground, a new leader, Abubakr Shekau, emerged in 2010 (Shekau had already expressed his opposition to Yusuf, whom he regarded as too soft). From that point forward, the group entered a new phase marked by: greater brutality delivered on soft targets; expanded numbers reaching 5,000–6,000 core fighters by 2015; militarized urban guerrilla operations, including simultaneous suicide bombings (notably on the United Nations building in Abuja in August 2011, and on various targets, mainly police stations, in Kano in January 2012,), use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and large-scale kidnappings (young girls, foreign workers). It also increased extremist *takfiri* (excommunication) religious discourse at once delegitimizing political and religious authorities and other moderate groups. Their use of communication technologies was evermore sophisticated using the Al Qaeda video messages' matrix. Operations were conducted staccato between 2010 and 2015 with the pace of car bombings, assassinations, and urban assault hit-and-run guerilla tactics picking up, and the targets expanding to encompass government officials, young students (276 schoolgirls were taken hostage in Chibok in April 2014), religious leaders, mosques, churches, and market places. As this took place, the Nigerian authorities demonstrated a striking inability and unwillingness to tackle the issue efficiently, and, in time, decreed a state of urgency in May 2013. Amid suspicions abounding as to the "ambiguity" of the security forces, the involvement of thousands of troops from Chad and hundreds of mercenaries from South Africa, the magnitude of the attacks reached unprecedented levels with 2,000 people killed in the first six months of 2014, and 2,500

people during the single month of January 2015.

Above and beyond Shekau's ruthlessness, the transformation of Boko Haram's *modus operandi* owed much to the successive influences both Al Qaeda and then the Islamic State in Iraq and al Shaam (ISIS) had on the Nigerian group. With larger swathes of territory taken beyond the portions of the Borno State and reaching south into the Adamawa state, Boko Haram — in emulating ISIS tactics — was demonstrating an evolved organizational ability beyond local militia uprising. Similarly, in the "franchising" logic pioneered by al-Qaeda in earlier years, Boko Haram created its own franchise, Ansaru, in January 2012,. Formally known as *Jama'atu Ansaru al Muslimina fi Bilad al Sudan* (the Group of the Muslims' Companions in the Land of the Sudan, i.e., Black Africa), this new entity displayed a bigger transnational orientation, pursuing links with AQIM and Al Shabaab. Two of its senior officers, Abubakar Adam Kambar and Khalid Barnawi, reportedly trained in the Sahel with the AQIM, conducted kidnapping operations of Westerners for ransom in January and December 2012, and in February 2013. At the close of this sequence, Boko Haram — whose violence caused the death of approximately 11,000 people in Nigeria and West Africa between 2000 and 2015 — swore an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State on March 7, 2015, which was accepted by ISIS spokesman Mohammed al Adani on March 12.

Conclusion: Non-statehood, Religion and Differently-governed Spaces

Al Shabaab in East Africa, the AQIM in the Maghreb and the Sahel, and Boko Haram in West Africa are only the prime examples of the new, impressive brand of armed groups that have come to dominate the narrative of African security in the early twenty-first century. Operating on a mixed mode of religious phraseology, irredentist ideology and terrorist violence, these organizations are not extraordinary developments, but rather visible manifestations of a mode of non-state power projection that has been steadily proliferating in quality and quantity across the continent and beyond.

By the second decade of this new century, each of these three groups had also generated vortexes of insecurity on a large scale, generating regional and international crises and setting the stage for other groups to materialize. In North Africa, the NATO military intervention in 2011 and the disappearance of Muammar Gadhafi created instability in Libya, providing an opportunity for the AQIM, that it swiftly took advantage of. AQIM flags started appearing in Libyan cities as early as November 2011, reactivating operational alliances that had existed in the 1990s between *Al Jama'a al Islamiya al Muqatila* (the Libyan Fighting Group [LFG]) of Abdelhaqim Belhaj and AQIM's Algerian GSPC predecessor, GIA. The reactivated LFG, in turn, spun into a new group known as *Ansar al Sharia* (the Partisans of the Islamic Law), in 2012, led by Mohamed al Zahawi and several loosely organized Muslim operatives. This group coalesced around the eastern coastal city of Derna and, in November 2014, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. In neighbouring Tunisia, where terrorism had not been an issue during the dictatorship years (1987–2011) of President Zein Abidin Ben Ali, a related group also known as Ansar al Sharia emerged simultaneously in April 2011 under the leadership of a former Tunisian inmate, Abu Ayadh al Tounsi,[3] going on to conduct armed operations in Tunisian urban centres and battling the Tunisian army around the mountainous areas of Chaambi. By 2015, the group had developed important links with the Islamic State — which featured a large contingent of approximately 3,000 Tunisians — and was allegedly linked to the March 18 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the June 26 attack on a tourist hotel in Sousse, in which a total of 59 people were killed.

In West Africa, Boko Haram had similarly begun

transnational operations reaching beyond Nigeria onto Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Al Shabaab, for their part, opened two fronts in East Africa beyond Somalia, sporadically attacking Kenya and Uganda. As such violence kept occuring and displaying hybrid characteristics — other additional theaters developed in the Sinai area in Egypt with *Ansar Beit al Maqdis* (the Partisans of the Sacred House, i.e., Jerusalem) and in the Central African Republic (CAR) with both the Séleka and the Anti-Balaka groups — it became apparent that, in a world of increasing cross-border flows, armed insurgencies and the resulting crises they trigger or respond to, have spread from more limited internal conflicts to take on an eminently transnational character.

This also begs the question of the explanatory power of the religious component when, more often than not, it was statehood that kept arising as the problematic component, with de-statization patterns multiplying. Ultimately, the actions of the new groups are strategies not identities. When it comes to comparative analyses of political behaviour, especially violence, theological categories are therefore less adequate, as they are not associated with a discrete set of political preferences. It is hence important tobe particularly careful not to conflate theological orientations and social movements (Hegghammer 2009, 264). The combined effect of transnational dynamics and local anti-authority dynamics is bound to impact the very nature of statehood in Africa. We have to grasp the dynamics of such open-ended processes that are, fundamentally, built on shifting contingencies that are creatively capitalized on by the new groups. States recover from early losses, insurgents gain strength and build institutions over time, organizational innovations occur that transform the central axis of the conflict, and external actors throw their power into the mix (Staniland 2014, 219).

If ungoverned spaces cannot exist without governance rooted in both territoriality and a normative preference for rule by sovereign states (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010, 277), in this context of new wars, we are witnessing a redefinition of the terms of engagement, both politically and religiously. Politically, the new forms of protection and legitimacy tend to be socially exclusive rather than inclusive. For those that are included, such political complexes represent new frameworks of social representation and regulation (Duffield 14, 2014). Thus, the new groups' relationship to urban centres is, for instance, ambivalent. Eminently modern and needing the urban technological nodes, these groups need the cities. At the same time, the very degeneration of these cities before the start of war into divided, repressive environments fuelling more despair and dispossession than hope and empowerment, lead many to regard these spaces as ones in need of destruction before reconstruction. The cleansing rationale at work is as much ideologically anchored, if not more so, than the religious one. In Somalia, for instance, it was the pattern of fragmented urbanization (producing marginalized garrison communities with patron-client connections to political leaders) and rapid population growth (with the resulting lack of resilience and carrying capacity in the Mogadishu's metabolism) that produced the violence and instability that eventually destroyed the state (Kilcullen 2013, 88). Fundamental to this is the paradigm shift is that it renders cities' communal and private spaces, as well as their infrastructures and civilian populations, to be targets and open to threats (Graham 2010, xiii).

In the final analysis, for all their visibility, religious crises in these parts of Africa are fuelled less by religiosity per se than by a deteriorated environment, where de-statization enables the emergence and proliferation of groups with increasingly radicalized agendas. As power struggles, weak institutions and identity divisions remain key sources of conflict in Africa (Aall 2015), the impact of these groups and the sum total of the crises they generate affect equally the local domestic sphere, the regional one and the larger international environment. These three realms are interconnected and it is their fluid

nature that enables these groups and allows for the manifestation of transnationalism and the responding statist extraterritoriality. For instance, the United States has established a system of triangulated aerial surveillance in which groups operating in East Africa, the Sahel, Libya and the Sinai are monitored, and sporadically targeted with strikes (notably in Somalia). The US military presence in East Africa (the Arba Minch base in Ethiopia, and those of Manda Bay and Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti) is supported by French forces in Mali, Niger, Chad and the CAR. (The United States also use a military base in Victoria, Seychelles, to conduct surveillance over Somalia.) In such an expanded (Turse, 2015) and degraded context, the normalization of the religious-terrorist threats should not mask a trajectory that, fundamentally, is about identity-driven actors instrumentalizing religion. Similarly, it must be noted that such trajectories are not irreversible. Demarcation through theatrical piety rather than socio-political or ethnic identity is not necessarily a formula that can last, notably in places where tribal and local identities are historically strong and necessitate balance and power-sharing among different groups. Engagement on the religious front — dialogues led by religious leaders, social platforms for de-radicalization, education campaigns — are important and legitimate ways through which both state actors and civil society can counter the narratives of the groups and reveal the theatrical nature of how they instrumentalize religion. However, the current empowerment of the new groups by way of religion seems set to continue as, quantitatively, more such actors have materialized and, qualitatively, their actions have gained in breadth and sophistication, as illustrated by the Islamic State and its influence on several key African groups.

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Endnotes

1   A religious preacher also known as Maitatsine. He moved from the city of Marwa in Cameroon to northern Nigeria and advocated fundamentalist readings of the Koran, rejecting the Sunna (practice of the Prophet Mohammad) and the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Mohammad).

2   A Salafi cleric from the Yobe state in Nigeria.

3   His real name is Saifullah Bin Hussein.