
Violent Extremism in the Western Sahel: An Old Story with Contemporary Implications

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Abstract

Widespread and protracted Islamist violence in the Western Sahel raises questions regarding the history of the phenomenon. This study compares and contrasts Islamic militancy under the leadership of Dan Fodio (Sokoto) and El Hajj Umar Tall (Tukolor) during the nineteenth century with Mohammed Yusuf's Boko Haram since 2002. The research zone is confined to the states of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, and Senegal. Demonstrating connections between two eras when the phenomenon has been most intense reveals key ideological and methodological patterns. Paying attention to motivation, method, and the ways in which earlier movements disbanded offers a template for effective counter-terrorism measures.

Keywords

Radical Islam in Africa, Violent Extremism in the Sahel, Boko Haram, the Future of Jihad in the Western Sahel

Introduction

Since 2009 when *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* attacked government buildings in Maiduguri, Boko Haram (BH), its affiliates, and loosely associated regional groups have wreaked havoc across the Western Sahel. Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Mali and Burkina Faso are the epicenter where Islamists are responsible for—as of this writing—more than

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20,000 fatalities, thousands of abductions, and 2.5 million displaced persons.⁽¹⁾ Recognizing that *jihad* shifts over time, proclaims unique religious and secular targets and victims, and is even conceived of differently by different individuals from the same time and place,⁽²⁾ this paper situates radical Islam in the Western Sahel within an historical framework. This study argues that important linkages exist between colonial and contemporary movements that reveal a much older, robust, and regionally characteristic phenomenon which should not be overlooked. Comparing the motivations and methods of the Sokoto Caliphate and the Tukulor Empire with Boko Haram reveals key similarities that establish a pattern of characteristics which transcend time. This paper thus challenges two common assertions: firstly, that jihadism is a homogenous global phenomenon devoid of local features and secondly, that Boko Haram has its origins in the Islamic fundamentalism that occurred in the decades after Nigeria's independence.⁽³⁾ While there is some truth to these claims, these arguments are nonetheless myopic in terms of cultural specificity as well as historical phenomenology. Indeed, militant Islam in the Western Sahel maintains homegrown traits that defy homogenization and are much older and more robust than the movements that erupted during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and, as a result, deserves more attention from strategists and policymakers. Juxtaposing the socio-economic, ideological and methodological features of Western Sahelian jihadism during two periods when the phenomenon has been most pronounced provides depth to an issue with regional and international consequence. Violent extremism in the Western Sahel is complex. But analysts who remain preoccupied with Islamic militancy—globally—as well as Nigeria's post-independence religious violence risk the loss of a deeper perspective that a close examination of the long arc of history provides—a necessary component for any effective counter-terrorism template for the region.

BOKO HARAM

In 2002/2003 the Nigerian Salafist cleric, Mohammed Yusuf (Fulani, Hausa, and Kanuri), launched Boko Haram. *Boko* in Hausa translates to

“book” and *haram* in Arabic means “forbidden”; taken together the term loosely translates to: “Western education is evil.” The organization has denounced this inference, however, preferring the broader implication: “Western culture is forbidden.”⁽⁴⁾ Intended as a reformist movement, clashes with the government led the group to radicalize which ultimately ended Yusuf’s life (Yusuf was executed in 2009 while in Nigerian police captivity). Boko Haram is not the region’s, nor even Nigeria’s, only radical Islamist organization, but it has been the most violent. A consistent characteristic among Boko Haram militants is the desire for implementation of the *Shari‘a*—the core of Islamic ethics based on the *Qur‘an* and writings of early Muslim religious scholars (*Hadith*). Executions, raids, bombings, and abductions remain Boko Haram’s chief forms of terror, garnering global attention when militants kidnapped as many as 276 schoolgirls in Chibok (Borno State, Nigeria) in April 2014.⁽⁵⁾ In August that same year, Boko Haram pledged loyalty to the Islamic State (IS), reinforcing the group’s association with other jihadist organizations such as Somalia’s al-Shabab (HSM), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) including its west/central sub-groups of al-Qaeda in Mauritania and al-Qaeda in Mali.⁽⁶⁾ By late summer 2016, Boko Haram fractured between the followers of Abubakar Shekau, and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, with the Islamic State’s (ISIS) support for the latter. Since then, adherents of al-Barnawi have carried out extortion, kidnapping and murders, albeit less indiscriminately than Shekau and his followers.⁽⁷⁾ For his part, despite recurrent rumors of his death, the gregarious Shekau continues to surface, in June 2017 conspicuously leading an attack on a military compound in Maiduguri during a spree of Boko Haram violence which plagued the Borno state capital for weeks. It is also possible that Shekau masterminded the late July 2017 attack on an oil exploration team in the Magumeri area of Borno which killed 50 individuals.⁽⁸⁾ Extra-territorially, Niger to the north, Cameroon to the southeast and Chad to the northeast suffered from Boko Haram terror that year (2017); an unprecedented surge of activity erupted in Chad during the holy month of Ramadan.⁽⁹⁾ From 2017,

Boko Haram activity has declined, yet BH-linked and BH-inspired groups continue to terrorize a growing region of the Sahel.⁽¹⁰⁾

But if BH violence has slowed down, why is this so? Human Rights Watch (HRW), Stratfor, and other global intelligence organizations show that since 2016 stepped-up intervention by the multi-national Joint Task Force of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (JTF), along with assistance from extra-African partners—France, in particular—has resulted in measurable progress. Planned assaults have been averted on at least two Western embassies in Abuja; there has been a reduction of rebel-held territory in northeastern Nigeria; and thousands of hostages have been returned.⁽¹¹⁾ Notwithstanding, security remains precarious, prompting the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) in June 2017 to warn that “continuing violence has deepened a serious humanitarian crisis and development deficit in the Lake Chad basin.”⁽¹²⁾ The preponderant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and widespread famine remain a of great concern. As of spring 2017, an estimated 12 million individuals required emergency food aid, with 4.7 million under the age of five at greatest risk. In the Lake Chad basin alone, 2.4 million persons remain displaced.⁽¹³⁾

In addition to the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram, a loose conglomerate of terrorist organizations now extends across the Western Sahel including the merger of the aforementioned AQIM with al-Mourabitoun, Mujahideen of Ansar Eddine, and Front de libération du Macina formed into the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims. A comparatively independent Islamist organization called Ansarul Islam has also emerged and is likely to blame for the August 13, 2017 attack on a western-style café in Ouagadougou. But there is the matter of rogue Islamist violence with no acknowledgment of responsibility that should not be underestimated. To wit, the August 14, 2017 attack on the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission in Timbuktu which killed seven individuals likely falls into this category. The U.N. Security Council has claimed that Islamists are responsible for violence against civilians, private and government property, as well as military and police personnel across the Western Sahel; the January 2017 massive assault on Malian soldiers and

members of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) which killed 77 serves as a stark reminder of the latter.⁽¹⁴⁾ To be sure, Islamic militancy in the Western Sahel has become a transnational phenomenon, underscoring Shekau's March 22, 2017 video calling for the realization of a West African caliphate that extends throughout the whole of West Africa.⁽¹⁵⁾

JIHAD IN THE WESTERN SAHEL – A VERY OLD STORY

If Islamic militancy has acquired a striking breadth and reach in the Western Sahel, widespread religious extremism is not new in the region. Jihadists have been terrorizing the area since at least the seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century, however, it was the Fulbe (Fulani) Usman Dan Fodio who launched what would become the region's most successful jihadist campaign to date. Begun in northern Nigeria in 1804, at its peak in the last years of the nineteenth century, the Sokoto Caliphate extended across the Western Sahel from the Lake Chad basin in the north to equatorial forests in the south. Sufi Qadiriyya Dan Fodio first attacked the sultans of Hausaland and then turned his sights on Nupe and Yoruba territory. His associates and successors carried the torch far beyond Nigeria to include parts of what is now Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The Sokoto Caliphate was the largest African state at the time of European partitioning of the continent.⁽¹⁶⁾

Warriors of the deeply religious Sunni Maliki Dan Fodio conquered the nominally Muslim Hausa sultans, replacing them with a government solely informed by the *Shari'a*. Following the death of Dan Fodio in 1817, the growth of the caliphate included material and territorial opportunism characterized by intimidation, extortion, enslavement, massive displacement of persons, and carnage. A call for spiritual change was thus closely entwined with militant imperialist despotism that left ruin and waste in its wake.⁽¹⁷⁾ Importantly, this was the blueprint upon which much of Western Sahelian jihadist activity was based in the era.

The campaign of El Hajj Umar Tall shared crucial linkages to Dan Fodio's

crusade. Not only did the Fulbe (Fulani) from the Futa Toro (Senegal River Valley) live and study in Sokoto for several years upon returning from the *Hajj*, but he married the daughter of Mohammed Bello, son of Dan Fodio and heir to the Sokoto caliphate. Between 1852 and 1864, Tall waged *jihād* across Guinea, Senegal, and Mal—becoming the Tukolor Empire. With similarity to Sokoto, Tall’s Islamic reform was closely associated with territorial and material annexation by way of raids, carnage, enslavement, and environmental devastation.⁽¹⁸⁾ But the chaos of the Sokoto and Umarian movements were not the only destructive forces combining warfare and religion in the era. Samori Touré, the leader of the Mandinka Empire in Guinea from the 1870s, and the Soninke, Mahmadou Lamine in upper Senegal from the mid-1880s, in their own way, wreaked havoc in the Western Sahel in the name of Islam.⁽¹⁹⁾ No doubt, Muslim military campaigns were a powerful political force during in the past, but what factors led to the emergence of *jihād* in the first place? And further, what, if any, linkages can be made between nineteenth century *jihād* and the Boko Haram movement today—the most destructive Islamic militancy in the Western Sahel since the early colonial period?

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY: WHY IT MATTERS FOR JIHAD IN THE WESTERN SAHEL

It appears that socio-economic instability and its oft-companion, political pandemonium, are important predictors for jihadist activity in the Western Sahel. Usman Dan Fodio, El Hajj Umar Tall, Samori Touré and Mahmadou Lamine were reacting to an environment that had been turned upside down from European trade at the Atlantic shore and increased Western presence in the hinterland. Critically, a similar phenomenon exists today. The proliferation of Western capitalist culture—even to the interior of the Saharan belt—has once again destabilized economies, challenged political structures, and upended traditional lifeways. Islamic militancy during the early colonial period in the Western Sahel as much as now is therefore about restoring order to societies that have been toppled by an exogenous and seemingly uncontrollable force. While differences exist, the parallels between jihadism as a result of economic

and political chaos during the two eras are striking, and as a result, deserve closer examination.

Already by the seventeenth century the northern quadrant of the Western Sahel was experiencing internal conflict due to the seismic shift from trans-Saharan trade to Atlantic commerce. By the 1750s when the Atlantic Slave Trade was at its height, transporting millions of Africans each year from Western Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean to work as forced laborers on plantations, life had dramatically altered for Sahelian peoples. Raids for slaves in the interior placed village and family relationships at peril and the loss of human labor devastated agricultural yields. What's more, the new Atlantic economy had created a tangible divide between the "haves" and the "have nots."⁽²⁰⁾ Internecine African competition for Atlantic commerce was one thing, but it was also the case that Africans who had not benefited from the new trade network with Europeans increasingly sought to challenge regimes that were perceived to have inordinately gained. It was in this milieu that Islamic fervor swept through the Western Sahel.

The primary goal of jihadists was to reestablish order to communities that had witnessed the devastation of slave raids, the incursion of Western mores, and the rise of new economic and political elites. Again, Usman Dan Fodio and El Hajj Umar Tall are most illustrative of this process. Dan Fodio not only objected to the enrichment of the Hausa sultanates and their cronies whose trade networks with the West had destroyed traditional commerce, but the Shehu was also concerned about the degradation of Muslim culture due to the increasing pressures associated with Western presence at the Atlantic. *Jihad* was a way to reinforce conservative Islam while leveling the playing field economically and politically. It is not coincidental that Dan Fodio was from the highly religious but unprivileged nomadic Fulani herdsmen class which had not taken part in the spoils of Atlantic commerce. The scholar jihadist thus employed a holy war to confront political, economic, and religious excesses.⁽²¹⁾ Farther west, the crusade led by El Hajj Umar Tall followed much the same trajectory.

Once a thriving trans-Saharan trade region, by the eighteenth century the caravan economy of upper Senegal/Mali had been decimated by Atlantic commerce. Moors, including the Trarza, Brakna, and Douaïch, who inhabited the northwest banks of the Senegal River, benefited from business with Europeans and their intermediaries (especially from sales of gum Arabic) but this was not the case for Umar Tall's tribesmen in the Futa Toro. Tall waged war in the areas of Senegal, Guinea, and Mali not only to institute strict Islamic rule over West Africans, but also to repel or at least control European trade in the West African backcountry. His Tukolor Empire was not nearly as successful as Dan Fodio's Sokoto, but at its height during the late 1850s and early 1860s, it covered the modern territories of upper Senegal and most of Mali. (22) Nikki Keddie has rightly argued that "it is not the most devastated and depopulated areas that have revolutions, but usually those where socioeconomic and ideological changes have been rapid."⁽²³⁾ Indeed, Islamic militancy during the early colonial period was less about a dearth of resources and the enviro-social blight caused by slave-raids, but more a consequence of the infusion of Western capital and Western mores that destabilized the region. The fact that Atlantic Trade was at its height in the mid-eighteenth century meant that by the nineteenth century hinterland Sahelian societies were reeling from economic and political chaos. Competition for European business resulting in micro wars in the interior were thus commonplace during the nineteenth century.⁽²⁴⁾ Often launched by Islamic militants, the aim of this aggression was to reestablish order in the form of controlling the profit that could be had from European powers while squelching the influence of Western culture. A similar and fascinating phenomenon is now under way in the Western Sahel, especially evident in the example of Boko Haram.

It is tempting to believe that the primary reason for Boko Haram is endemic poverty. But it is not that simple. If the provinces of northeastern Nigeria are comparatively poorer than the southern half of the country, featuring high unemployment and low education rates,⁽²⁵⁾ it is not the lack of economic resources that has driven the emergence of Islamic militancy, but instead the infusion of Western capital and influence. Recognizing that 2015/2016 growth

stalled in Nigeria, the trend over the past several years has been one of spectacular economic progress. Since the early 2000s, the country's GDP has risen from \$46.386 billion (USD) in 2000 to \$568.499 billion (USD) in 2014.⁽²⁶⁾ Nigeria has mechanized and modernized, rapidly positioned in the top 25 industrialized nations of the world with exports of 34.7 billion (USD) in 2016.⁽²⁷⁾ Petrodollars have disproportionately benefited the southern half of the country—the region where most Nigerian Christians reside. Niger Delta oil exports means that Muslims in the northern interior have not experienced the improved standard of living that has occurred farther south nearer the Atlantic. Increased cash flow to the country has intensified economic disparity between north and south, fomenting resentment from Muslims for Christians. Furthermore, Muslims begrudge elite co-religionists whom have politically and financially benefited from or have significant commercial connections to Christians.⁽²⁸⁾ The fact that comparatively wealthier Christians are a minority in Nigeria⁽²⁹⁾ has not helped matters.

The issue of economic gain disproportionately benefitting Christians is not the only factor that drives Boko Haram militancy however. The infusion of Western culture to the interior of West Africa via the media has further exacerbated tensions. The Technological Revolution which reached the Western Sahel in the last decades of the twentieth century meant that traditional Muslim lifeways were increasingly under assault. While, as was shown, the arrival of Western capital and Western presence from Atlantic Trade created instability during the early colonial period making the environment ripe for *jihad*, the modern equivalent is the proliferation of Western capitalism, websites, vehicles, laptops, music, and television programs. Militant Islamists hate the United States (“the West” and its ally, Israel) not only for its progressive liberalism and secularism but also for the attraction and authority the West has wielded over Muslims in the Middle East.⁽³⁰⁾ For Islamic extremists in the region, the only answer to economic inequality and the loss of traditional Islamic mores in Africa has been the forcible implementation of conservative Islam.

WESTERN SAHELIAN *JIHAD* AND ITS AGE-OLD INTENT TO PURIFY ISLAM

Trade with the West and the infusion of Western values have once again unleashed mayhem across the Western Sahel, and the answer for jihadists has been to institute an Islamic theocracy. The combination of religion and politics inherent in an Islamic state has been the *de facto* solution for Muslim militants across the ages in the region. From Sokoto's Dan Fodio to Boko Haram's Mohammed Yusuf, the heathen and pernicious "West" associated with the onslaught of economic inequality and social corruption can only be solved with the *Shari'a*.

During the early colonial period, Dan Fodio and Umar Tall operated under the premise that *jihad* was appropriate against impious Muslims as well as Christian infidels.⁽³¹⁾ There is a long-held justification for Muslims to wage war or kill lax co-religionists as well as unbelievers who do not accept Islam. Importantly, therefore, this was not conflict between West African ethnicities, but a crusade against non-Muslims and apostate Muslims—whose Islamic religious observance (usually syncretist)—was not in line with the *Shari'a*. This was a war between *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*.⁽³²⁾ But why is this ideological characteristic of the region's historic *jihad* important for understanding what is taking place in the Western Sahel today, and most specifically the methodological trajectory of the Boko Haram movement? To start, Mohammed Yusuf like Dan Fodio and Umar Tall rejected syncretism. The difference is that while the Sokoto Caliphate and the Tukolor Empire maintained some aspects of mystic Sufism—Dan Fodio was a Qadiriyya and Umar Tall was Tijaniyya—Yusuf and his successors have out rightly disavowed all features of Sufism, believing the culture of the brotherhoods to be a corruption of Islam.

Mohammed Yusuf was trained as a Wahhabi Salafist, a conservative strain of Islam that maintains an austere interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*. Salafi Wahhabism views West African Sufism as not simply superstitious, but as apostasy. According to Saudi Arabian influenced Wahhabism, the local Sufi

reverence for talismans, praying to idols, traditional dances, even the playing of the *tam-tam*, all longtime characteristics of West African Islamic culture, are thus deemed *haram*.⁽³³⁾ While, however, Sufism has been completely rejected by Boko Haram, a grave parallel pertains to perceived targets for *jihād*. In Boko Haram as well as with Sokoto and Tukolor, non-Muslims as well as those Muslims who are viewed as impious are subject to a holy war. To be sure, such an understanding was popular among Islamic militants during the early colonial period, but it has become *de rigueur* in recent years.⁽³⁴⁾ Finally and worth more examination is the fact that Western Sahelian jihadists posit that the leader (either the *mujaddid* or the *mahdi*) is preparing the community for the Millennium.

Western Sahelian jihadists expect the appearance of a *mahdi* or at least a *mujaddid* to prepare the *Jama'a* for the end of time. Several hinterland Islamic reform movements during the early colonial period including Dan Fodio's Sokoto from 1804, Umar Tall's Tukolor during the 1850s/1860s, the mahdist rebellion in the Nilotic Sudan farther east in the 1880s, and the Sokoto uprising during 1905-06 maintained the underlying premise of a community spiritual renewal for triumph during the "last days."⁽³⁵⁾ This millenarian characteristic of *jihād* featured a Manichaeic opposition between "good and evil," which included an element of Western expulsion. As early as the nineteenth century the arch-enemies were the Christian European powers and their surrogates,⁽³⁶⁾ and critically, this apocalyptic component of jihadism is prominently re-emerging once again. While the Maitatsine riots during the 1980s exhibited this trait, Zamfari Ahmad Sani's movement to introduce the *Shari'a* in 1999/2000 as well as Mohammad Yusuf's Boko Haram increasingly proclaim the arrival of the "end of days" and an associative timely requirement to defeat and reject Westernism in all its forms. The fact that Islamic extremism in the region has once again stressed an apocalyptic feature combined with a pronounced anti-Western sentiment is key for counter-terrorism strategists since a millenarian impulse alongside a rejection of "the West" means that any form of terror can be spiritually legitimized by those who believe that the end-

of-times are imminent and that the fight is, at core, between good and evil.⁽³⁷⁾

A mahdist characteristic among jihadists in the Western Sahel has been a consistent characteristic through the years, yet it is also true that the region's Islamic militants reform Sunni Islam to accommodate a particular strain of fundamentalism in order to justify terror and exert control. Notably, militants during the early colonial period as well as today have rarely identified as Sunni or Shi'a, Sufi or Salafi. Instead they see themselves as reformers who are returning to pure Islam. For instance, one of the nineteenth century Umarians' first justifications for prosecuting *jihad* against the French took place when the Europeans refused to sell the group guns. Tall could then claim that the French were not supporting pure Islam, but instead were choosing to align themselves with lax Muslims and pagans who were in opposition to the *Ummah*.⁽³⁸⁾ Even Western political culture at the time which featured secular constitutional monarchies was rejected by Islamists whose ideal was pious religious authority. With this in mind, John Ralph Willis has argued that jihadists Dan Fodio and Umar Tall were completely opposed to Western-style politics, protecting their own brand of power by preferring to be exclusively religious leaders.⁽³⁹⁾ No doubt, a protectionist feature characteristic of nineteenth century *jihad* is increasingly apparent in the region today.

WESTERN SAHELIAN JIHADISTS' AIM TO EXPEL, CONTROL, OR ELIMINATE THE WEST AND WHY

As we have seen, Western Sahelian Islamic movements across time share the trait of an insular religious ideology of protectionism and revivalism. Yet as has been noted, there is also this matter of fighting a rear-guard action that permeates the phenomenon. Militants have been agitating against a relentless "West"; a force that is viewed as "corrupting" to pure Islam. Secular rulership and legalism, uncanonical taxation, and relative morality seem to be at the center of jihadists' concerns regarding Western culture in the region. Legal procedures based on the *Shari'a* have thus been introduced as a means to wage war on Western capitalists, their surrogates, and Western values that are perceived to threaten traditional Islamic mores.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Islam and the *Shari'a* are

perfect footings for Islamists, since, as Alex Thurston has argued for Boko Haram, they provide a schema for governing all aspects of life.⁽⁴¹⁾ Sufi or Salafi notwithstanding, Islamists have been fundamentalists, rejecting Western culture and demanding complete submission—by force, if necessary.

Dan Fodio's Sokoto was not at war with Westerners at the beginning of his *jihād*, but he was nevertheless decrying a materialistic and degenerate society that was the product of socio-economic changes directly tied to the growth of African trade with the West. One way for Dan Fodio to re-establish control under onslaught by Western capitalist culture was through enforcement of no enslavement of Muslims. In his 1804 treatise, *Wathiquat ahl al-Sudan*, the Shehu writes that it is illegal in Islam to enslave free Muslims,⁽⁴²⁾ hermeneutics that directly confronted widespread slave raiding intended for Western markets. "The West" was also challenged by our other early jihadist, El Hajj Umar Tall. In the 1850s, Tall issued an invitation to all Muslims in the French colonial settlement of Saint Louis to join his *jihād* against the European "infidels." As it turned out, Tall's army would directly fight the French several times. Umarian forces first met French soldiers at Medine (Mali) in the early spring of 1857. The contest endured sporadically and was only suspended when Tall was killed in 1864 during inter-African *jihād*.⁽⁴³⁾ A pattern of Islamic militancy against "the West" increased in the Western Sahel during the early colonial period, persisting through at least the early twentieth century with revolts against both the French and British.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Following independence, "the West" no longer possessed military and political authority over Western Sahelian populations, but today Americans and Europeans now wield comparatively more economic and cultural influence in the region. The United States is Nigeria's largest foreign investor with more than 40% of the country's petroleum exports per annum,⁽⁴⁵⁾ and according to Robert Snyder, Western values which permeate Islamic regions have produced an environment of "uni-hegemony" promoting anti-Islamic tenets such as: equality instead of patriarchy, market rationality instead of clientelism, and secularism in lieu of religious law and rulership.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Snyder's research further

underscores how Islamists resent the close relationship between the United States and Israel.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Ironically, as a result of Western introduced radio, television, and internet, Western Sahelian Muslims have an increasing sense of cultural disparity with the West, an environment that is ripe for a struggle against “unbelievers.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

While at core Boko Haram is a fight against the instability brought on by the introduction of Western capital, values and culture, as this paper has argued throughout, this is a dynamic that was first visible during the early years of European colonialism and later re-emerged during the post-colonial era when Western Sahelian populations confronted the powerful and pervasive capabilities of modern Western technology and economies. Ideological and methodological elements of Boko Haram thus possess a robust legacy in the region that deserve far more attention than has been allotted from scholars, strategists, and policymakers. The long arc of history demonstrates that Islamic militancy in the Western Sahel has been driven by local socio-economic chaos that has been brought on by the presence of Western capital, military, and/or culture, and responded to by a movement for protectionism and religious reform. It is not surprising that the founder of Boko Haram articulated a direct connection between the organization’s beliefs and the effects of early European colonialism. In a 2009 interview with Mohammad Yusuf, the Islamist linked Nigeria’s social and economic problems with Western colonial rule and its modern iteration further reinforcing this paper’s premise: “Our land was an Islamic state before the colonial masters turned it to a kafir land. The current system is contrary to true Islamic beliefs.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

CONCLUSION AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT BOKO HARAM

More than one hundred years after Europeans quelled Islamist violence in the Western Sahel, the phenomenon persists. Boko Haram is the region’s deadliest organization, yet it is just one of a growing number of terrorist groups that threaten non-Muslims and Muslims across the area. Most attempts at prognoses for this contemporary wave of terror have homogenized the challenge by focusing on global Islamism, if not less frequently framing the

violence through the lens of post-colonial movements. This paper has shown that both attempts at analyzing contemporary religious extremism in the Western Sahel are short sighted. A deconstruction of the phenomenon reveals a much earlier history of Western Sahelian Islamism that should not be ignored. If the presence and activities of Europeans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries destabilized traditional Muslim communities, it is also true that the modern extension of Western capitalist culture to the West African interior as a result of globalization, has, in turn, led to a violent reaction from a sector of the population which finds itself at a comparative disadvantage. Across West Africa—but especially in the Sahelian interior—there is palpable resentment toward Westerners and their surrogates who are perceived as corrupting pure Islam and West African lifeways.

An examination of Islamic militancy during two periods when it has been most intense revealed that *jihad* is more likely to erupt in zones of political and/or economic instability. As we saw during the early colonial era, West Africa was in disarray due to the growth of the Atlantic system which had rerouted traditional Saharan trade from the east to the western shore, intensifying competition among the indigenous for the growing coastal business, often leading to local chaos. Early jihadists were therefore just as focused on establishing authority over African competitors and European trade networks as they were on converting (often compelling) African Animists and moderate Muslims to adopt “pure” Islam. Initial destabilization therefore plays an important role for territories in which Islamic militancy operates. For its part, Boko Haram is most active in areas of comparative economic disadvantage and where unemployment is high. Hence while Islamist control in the Western Sahel is characterized by terror against moderate Muslims and Westerners, it is also the case that jihadist leaders attempt political and economic reform within their zones of acquired influence.

Close scrutiny of Western Sahelian Islamic militancy not only reveals key ideological and methodological parallels that transcend time, but the exercise equally offers possibilities for best practices regarding neutralization of the

phenomenon. If during the early colonial period violent religious extremism was quelled through conquest followed by accommodation, both strategies may be possible in the early twenty-first century. As this paper demonstrated, since 2016, the activities of the Joint Task Force of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (JTF) has resulted in measurable progress toward reducing Boko Haram territory and violence. Certainly the “conquest” model so successful during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has shown contemporary promise. However, accommodation, the twin to military subjugation may also be conceivable in terms of mitigating the modern terrorist impulse. As was shown, the fact that Muslims make up the majority of Nigeria’s population suggests that more can be done to “accommodate” popular orthodox Islamic interests. For instance, instead of the current political model which generally bows to the Christian minority by offering the presidency to a Christian in near alternating fashion, mandating the legitimization of the democratically-elected candidate during each election cycle—who may consistently be a Muslim—could go a long way toward appeasing conservative Muslims’ political interests. Further, the fact that since 1999/2000 a credible movement has been underway to install the *Shari’a* in several northern states,⁽⁵⁰⁾ indicates growing support for the political institutionalization of Islamic principles. Many Nigerian Muslims wish to legally prohibit activities that come into direct conflict with orthodox Muslim values, such as the social mixing of the sexes, immodest clothing, and the consumption of alcohol. Support for the *Shari’a* among Muslims also indicates a desire to install religious officials in lieu of secular bureaucrats; the call for a *qadi* instead of a secular judge serves as just one example.

Lest Western sensibilities be rattled by the suggestion that Nigeria sanction a federalist *Shari’a* north, this author offers the examples of Iran and Saudi-Arabia, countries that are largely governed by and for conservative Muslims and which to a certain extent have incorporated conservative political and cultural Islam, including on some levels, the *Shari’a*, despite the presence of other religious minorities. If we are to see these political entities as models for an emerging Nigeria, it is important to note that both countries perform as

relatively stable states in the global community. Moreover and pedantically, Nigeria is already a majority Muslim state by virtue of its history and population. To be sure, and in conclusion, the relentless onslaught of Western capitalism and culture, which has no end in sight, might become less divisive in a Nigeria where the presence of orthodox Islam is politically accepted and legitimized.

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