

Review - Militancy and Violence in West Africa

Written by Carl LeVan

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CARL LEVAN, MAY 2 2014

Militancy and Violence in West Africa: Religion, Politics and Radicalisation
Edited by James Gow, Funmi Olonisakin, and Ernst Dijkhorn
New York: Routledge, 2013

The attacks on two US embassies in East Africa in 1998 shifted American concern about terrorism from the Middle East to violent extremism in Africa, but when 9/11 and the misguided invasion of Iraq soon followed, Western policy seemed to pivot back towards the Arab world and south Asia. The Pentagon's Africa Command (Africom), new bases for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (drones), and the deployment of Special Forces to the continent have since made clear that the US will engage and seek to undermine radicalism in Nigeria, Mali, Somalia and the Sahel region. Many scholars rushed to analyze – and often influence – the nature of this engagement. Perhaps the most important overall contribution of *Militancy and Violence in West Africa* is its serious effort to problematize Africa's new strains of radical Islam, without becoming clouded by the western gaze, including concerns that America or Europe will be targets of African Islamic ire. Thus, before we can appreciate violent extremism as an urgent foreign policy challenge, the authors convincingly show how we need to first understand it as a political and social phenomenon whose religious and regional variations are easily misunderstood without a healthy dose of analytical detachment.

Drawing upon original field research in Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and several Francophone countries, the authors interrogate some debates and policy drivers with fresh evidence. For example, several chapters explore the extent of international linkages, concluding:

there was general agreement that domestic factors, rather than external influences, were more important in causing radicalization and violence. External influences were only “excuses” (p.7).

Western responses, including Africom, are an important aspect of this internationalization (p.36).

The authors also explore other familiar themes in the security literature. For example, Africa's demographic ‘youth bulge’ has created a generation of unemployed young men who are easy prey for radical recruitment. Poverty also appears to contribute to (but not necessarily *lead to*) recruitment – an observation echoed by President Barack Obama in numerous comments carefully worded to not suggest that nations of young people are nations of violence.

The book should also be appreciated for exploring important, but less noticed, sources of radicalisation in West Africa. Doctrinal differences constitute one such source. An insightful and original chapter by Kwesi Aning and Mustapha Abdallah examines three radical groups in Ghana, linking their preaching techniques, external support, and other factors to rivalries over theological interpretations. Conversely, secular trends, which contributed to religious backlash in Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan over the last three decades, did not appear to do so in important African cases such as Niger, where the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ) has attacked mines (p. 223).

Even more interestingly, and daringly, the book does not exclude ideological streams of Christianity from scrutiny. Radical Muslims see ‘miraculous healing and ostentatious ways of living among Christian leaders’ as unacceptable, and proliferating praise worship churches as frauds perpetrated on the people (p. 51). Many of these churches are set up more like commercial businesses rather than non-profit faith-based institutions, notes Charles Abiodun Alao's

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chapter. Similarly, 'Islamic radicals in universities have seen Christian "crusades" as a phenomenon against which they should produce a response' (p. 65). Such concerns are making their way into the mainstream. Elite organizations such as Jamatu Nasril Islam in early 2014 outlined a sense of fear among Nigeria's Muslims when it drew attention to the state's widespread extrajudicial killings 'on a mere whim of unsubstantiated suspicion'. Should the public ever have reliable information about Boko Haram's numbers, scholars might be able to empirically establish how such state violence facilitated recruitment. There is some suggestion that provision of social services might also facilitate recruitment (p. 240), though the evidence, in this book as elsewhere, still seems quite limited. Boko Haram is not Hamas.

Though the exploration about the causes of radicalization is important, the book will also be appreciated for unpacking some of the prevailing discourse in security studies in order to challenge the loose use of concepts. The word 'terrorism' is hardly used in the book, and a recurring theme is how the juxtaposition of 'violent' and 'extremism' (for example, by the influential and uncited US Agency for International Development study in 2009, *Countering Violent Extremism*) has either generated a bias or buried important priors: what is extremism? And more importantly, when do extremists choose violence, since after all, most of them do not? This is an important point in the conceptual chapter by Abdullah bin Khaled al-Saud and James Gow that frames the book. Like Olawale Ismail's insightful chapter on regionalism (p. 244), they argue that radicalization should be studied 'as a separate process that may not necessarily lead to violence' (p. 37). In fact, in his chapter on Mali and Niger, Ismail directly questions whether *Ansar Dine*, which formed an alliance of convenience with Muslim elements in northern Mali, is an 'ethno-political resistance movement' rather than a violent extremist group (p. 245).

The research design is arguably a weak spot, especially in light of the resources that were apparently available for field research and the editors' talent for otherwise finding coherence among a diverse and talented group of contributors. Much of the research entailed focus groups, and the authors provide little information about selection, timing, size or other essentials. In the case of Nigeria, much of the research appears to have taken place prior to 2009, which was an important turning point for both the militants and the government in terms of the scale of violence and choice of targets. Moreover, the shift in tactics by Nigeria's Boko Haram, which now includes suicide bombing and coordinating attacks on 'hard' targets in the capitol, is repeatedly offered up as evidence (though circumstantial) that the group is now part of a broader global Islamist conspiracy of some sort, involving Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The book's consumers in the Western foreign policy establishment will get few insights about such questions. But perhaps that's the point: to begin in Africa, and to part ways with passionate predispositions that can lead the policy discourse astray.

About the author:

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