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14. ABSTRACT
Using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) from 1997 to 2012, this brief outlines the geography of Islamist militancy on the African continent and provides an analysis of commonalities and differences across distinct militant Islamist groups. The analysis shows that the levels of violent Islamist activity in Africa have risen sharply in recent years, both in absolute and proportional terms. While much of this increase has been driven by the intensification of conflict in a small number of key countries, there is also evidence for the

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Tracking Islamist Militia and Rebel Groups

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RESEARCH BRIEF NO. 8

RESEARCH BRIEF – FEBRUARY 2013

TRACKING ISLAMIST MILITIA AND REBEL GROUPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) from 1997 to 2012, this brief outlines the geography of Islamist militancy on the African continent and provides an analysis of commonalities and differences across distinct militant Islamist groups. The analysis shows that the levels of violent Islamist activity in Africa have risen sharply in recent years, both in absolute and proportional terms. While much of this increase has been driven by the intensification of conflict in a small number of key countries, there is also evidence for the geographic spread of violent Islamist activity both south- and east-ward on the continent. Differences within and across violent Islamist groups reveal differential objectives, strategies, and modalities of violence across Africa. With ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali among the most violent in Africa – and evidence of the spread of violent Islamist activity across Africa – violent Islamist groups, their activities, and objectives are likely to remain extremely influential both nationally and internationally.

AUTHOR

Caitriona Dowd is the senior research and data manager for the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) and a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin.

The escalation of violent conflict in Nigeria and Somalia in recent years and the intensification of overlapping crises in Mali in 2012 have drawn attention to the role of Islamist groups in violence across Africa. This brief explores this phenomenon through data recorded and published through the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) from January 1997 to December 2012. This research analyzes the activity of various Islamist militia and rebel groups active across Africa by focusing on their historical development and using empirical data documenting their activity. Given the sensitive nature of attributing religious association with politically violent behavior, and the multiple types of groups claiming some relationship to Islam as a motivation, the following qualifications should be noted: in this brief, 'Islamism' and related activities refer to the proactive promotion or enforcement of Islamic ideologies, laws, policies, or customs.[1] Islamist activity is manifest across various disciplines and traditions within Islam, encompassing a range of political, social, and religious activity.

Islamist militias and – though less common – rebel groups are the subject of this research. They are distinguished from other Islamist groups by their utilization of violence in the pursuit of their goals. Elsewhere, such groups are referred to generally as *Jihadi Islamists*.[2] For the purposes of more detailed classification and analysis by violent group type, this study divides these violent Islamist groups into 'Islamist militias' and 'Islamist rebel groups.'

ACLED defines a 'rebel group' as a group that seeks to replace the current national regime in power. ACLED defines a 'militia' as a group that uses violence to advance the position of a political elite and often concentrates on local or regional goals. Examples of violent Islamist militia groups include Nigeria's Boko Haram and Mali's Ansar Dine and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), while rebel groups include Somalia's Al Shabaab and Algeria's Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[3]

ACLED treats groups which are identified as composed of Muslims as violent 'communal militias,' which are active in areas where local militias or mobs mobilize under such an identity, and are normally involved in violent altercations with, or violence against, civilians of a different identity group. Muslim-identified communal militias are distinguished from violent Islamist groups by the fact that they do not have an explicitly articulated agenda of promoting or enforcing Islamic ideologies, laws, policies, or customs in specific territories or across communities.[4]

In addition to having distinct objectives, the nature of violence and the targets of Muslim-identified communal militias typically differ from those of violent Islamist groups. Communal militias are most often recorded as being involved in conflict with other identity groups. This is true almost by nature of the definition of a communal group, where they define themselves in contradistinction to opponents or outsiders. This violence most often manifests in a cycle of repeated attacks by members of opposing communities. In this sense, the dynamic of violence differs in form and function from that of violent Islamist groups with a more clearly articulated agenda, as communal groups often become engaged in a self-reinforcing cycle of attacks which exacerbates mutual animosity and distrust.

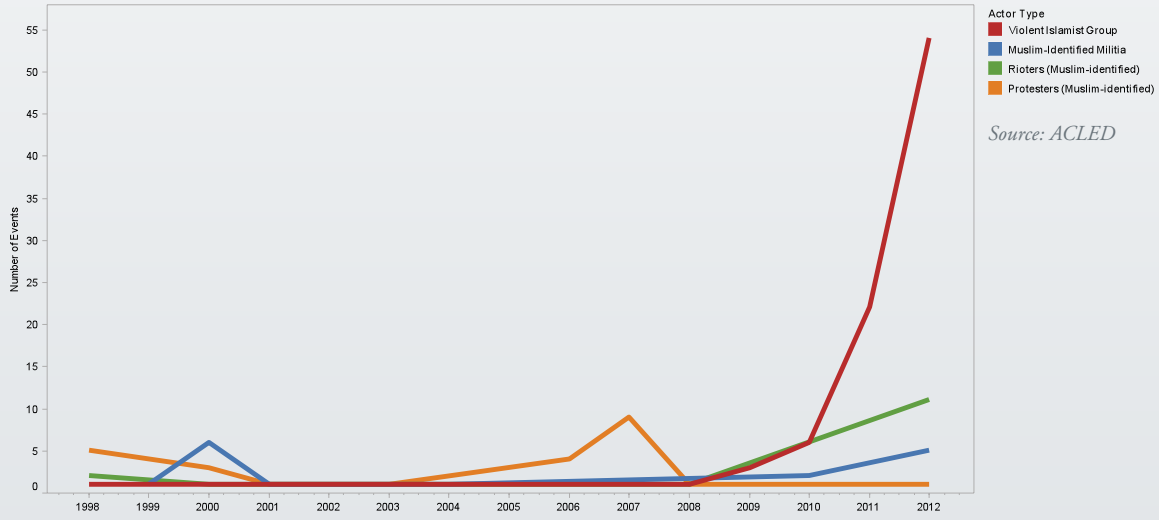
EMERGING ISLAMIST AND COMMUNAL GROUPS

Violent Muslim-identified groups are active in 18 countries. Nigeria has by far the highest number of documented events involving violent Muslim-identified militias (128 between 1997 and 2012) followed by Egypt (43), Kenya (32), and Ethiopia (24). Similar groups have also been active in Tanzania, Libya, Niger, Sudan, Guinea, Malawi, and Tunisia, among others. Tracking these groups' activity over time, there are historical spikes in 2000 and 2010, coinciding with communal riots in Nigeria at both points. In addition, 2012 witnessed a very sharp spike, owing to the escalation of communal tensions primarily in Kenya, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Ethiopia.

Muslim-identified groups also participate in organized riots and organized protests, which are distinguished from riots by their non-violent nature. This brief does not attempt to explore the drivers or focal points of individual protest or riot events. However, in some case countries, there is a pattern of increasing violent Islamist activity alongside or following an increase in protesting and rioting among Muslim communities. This pattern is evident in Kenya and Nigeria, two countries in which populations and communities are often highly divided (see Figures 1 and 2).

The pattern in Kenya and Nigeria suggests that one of two processes may be underway: either communities in which pre-existing tensions have led to mobilization of organized protests and riots become radicalized and establish violent Islamist groups by a process of escalation; or violent Islamist operatives seek out communities in which pre-existing tensions render communities open to their rhetoric. While both processes may manifest themselves similarly in the intensification of violent Islamist activity, the mechanisms by which this occurs are significant, in that they reveal something important about Islamist militia and rebel group recruitment, and the logic

Figure 1: Events Involving Muslim-Identified and Violent Islamist Groups, Kenya, 1997 – 2012



Source: ACLED

behind the adoption of an Islamist mantle in societies with competing conflict actors.

Analysis of the sub-national spaces in Nigeria in which violent Islamist groups and Muslim-identified militias, rioters, and protesters are active reveals considerable overlap in the states in which these groups are most active. However, much of this correspondence would be expected as a result of the demographic geography of the country with a concentration of the Muslim population in the northern region. The region of Nigeria with most recorded violent Islamist activity – Borno State – has no recorded protest or riot events involving Muslim communal groups, though it has witnessed activity by Muslim militias. Of the regions with the next highest levels of violence – Yobe, Kano, Kaduna, and Bauchi States – only Kano and Kaduna experienced activity by all four actor types. The remaining regions have various combinations of group activity, such as Abia and Imo States experiencing some militia, protest, and/or riot activity, but no records of violent Islamist groups.

There are also countries in which this pattern of escalation is not evident, including Ethiopia, Somalia, and Mali, suggesting more research is required on the nature of any escalatory dynamic in specific cases.

Figure 2: Events Involving Muslim-Identified and Violent Islamist Groups, Nigeria, 1997 – 2012

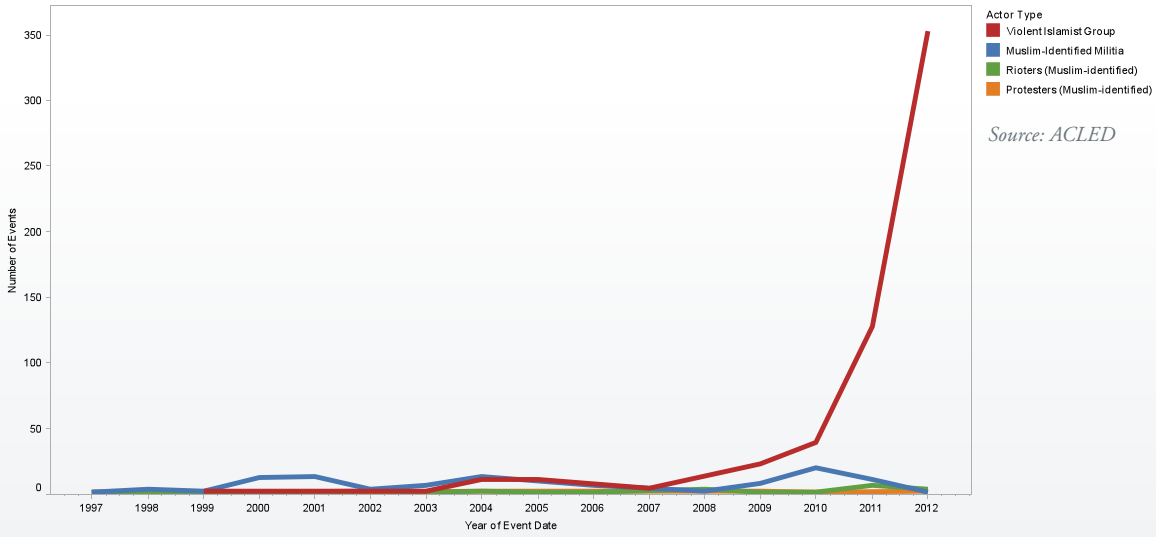


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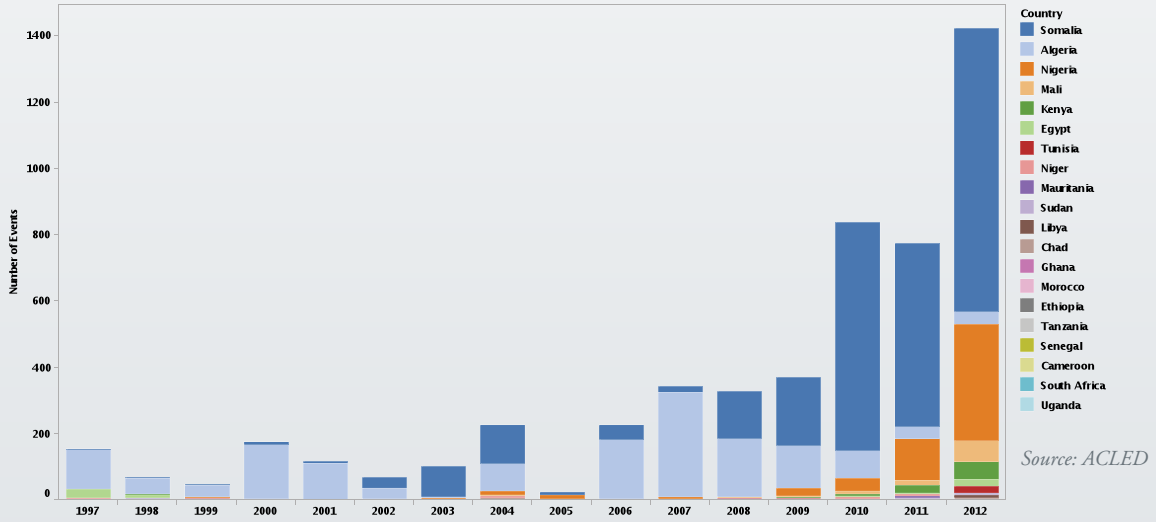
Figure 3: Violent Islamist Activity by Country, 1997 - July 2012



Source: ACLED

GEOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENT ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Overall, violent Islamist activity has increased significantly in the past fifteen years, with a particularly sharp increase from 2010 onwards (see Figure 3). Violent Islamist activity increased both in terms of absolute numbers of events and as a proportional share of overall violent conflict on the continent, growing from 4.96 percent of overall political violence in 1997 to 13.54 percent in 2012.

There is a clear drop in violent Islamist activity – in absolute and proportional terms – in 2005. This can in part be explained by dynamics within key countries. These include Algeria, where activity levels of the then-Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (now AQIM) dropped in 2005, leading some analysts to speculate that the majority of its members "may be prepared to give up the armed struggle in Algeria and accept the government's reconciliation initiative,"[5] and a relative lull in violence in Somalia under the Islamic courts.

Reported fatalities resulting from violent Islamist activity have also increased significantly in recent years, surpassing the previous peak in 1997 at the height of the Algerian Civil War (see Figure 4). 2012 witnessed the most fatalities, owing to the intensification of highly fatal conflicts in Somalia and Nigeria. 2010 witnessed the third highest fatality levels, associated with shelling campaigns in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, as the African Union Mission in Somalia and the Transitional Federal Government forces sought to push Al Shabaab from residential areas in the capital.

Spatially, much of the growth in violent Islamist activity in recent years has been concentrated in Somalia and Nigeria, while the most significant drop since 1997 has occurred in Algeria. While these countries present unique cases for analysis in their own right, their specificity also means it is interesting to exclude them in order to more clearly see where new geographies of violent Islamist activity are opening (see Figure 5). Figure 5 clearly indicates the increased level of activity in Mali and Kenya, alongside a comparable drop in violent Islamist operations in Egypt over the past 15 years. A further feature highlighted in Figure 5 is the spread of low-level violent Islamist activity to a wider range of countries than those in which Islamist militias and rebel groups were operating in 1997. Among the countries which, in 1997, had fewer than 10 recorded events involving violent Islamist groups are Chad, Ghana, Morocco, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Senegal. Combined, these countries have witnessed a particularly sharp increase in the first half of 2012, indicating they may be future hotspots of violent Islamist operations.

When viewed spatially, there is a clear trend for the spread of violent Islamist activity south- and east-ward on the continent (see Figure 6). This trend is significant for multiple reasons. In the first instance, it may reflect the strength of diffusion – the physical dispersal of operatives and weaponry – as Islamist violence spreads from historical hotspots such as Algeria and Somalia with the movement of operatives and ideological leaders across borders.

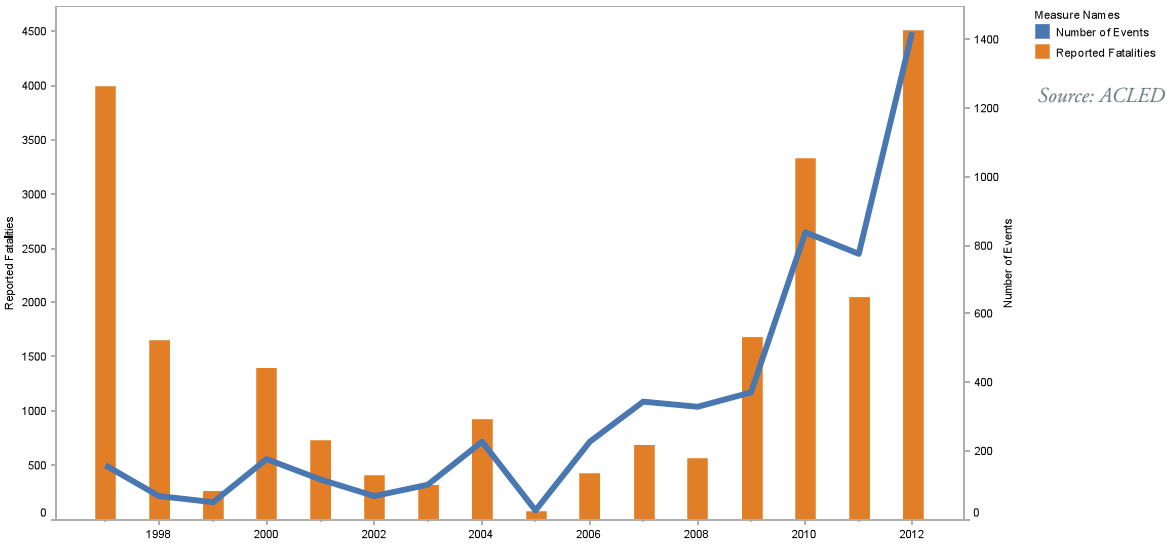
While there is some evidence to suggest that Algerian and Somali militants became increasingly active in neighboring countries over the last 15 years, this diffusion model alone cannot explain the growth in local violent Islamist activity. Other explanatory factors must be considered, including transnational organizational linkages that see localized militant groups 'brand' themselves in particular terms in order to benefit from larger international networks. An example of this can be found in Mali, which has recently witnessed the growth of a domestic, Tuareg-dominated Islamist movement in Ansar Dine. The group is affiliated with the broader Al Qaeda movement, though it gains local traction through its roots in the community. Similarly, growth in violent Islamist activity in Kenya increasingly involves recruitment of Swahili-speaking Kenyan nationals, as opposed to ethnically Somali Kenyans, as investigations into the al-Hijra center in Mombasa have indicated.[6]

The spread of militant Islamist activity to these new spaces reveals the significance and fluidity of the Islamist mantle as a mobilizing identity. This appears particularly relevant in Kenya, where the combination of a large Muslim population and the near-exhaustion of pre-existing ethno-regional affiliations may have combined to create a particularly fecund environment for recruitment and activity. Viewed in this context, the growth of violent Islamist activity can be partially explained as the strategic use of a mantle which has proven useful for conflict actors seeking to establish an identity in a crowded conflict landscape, with the ability of the group to take root being shaped by domestic contexts.

DISTINCTIONS ACROSS VIOLENT ISLAMIST GROUPS

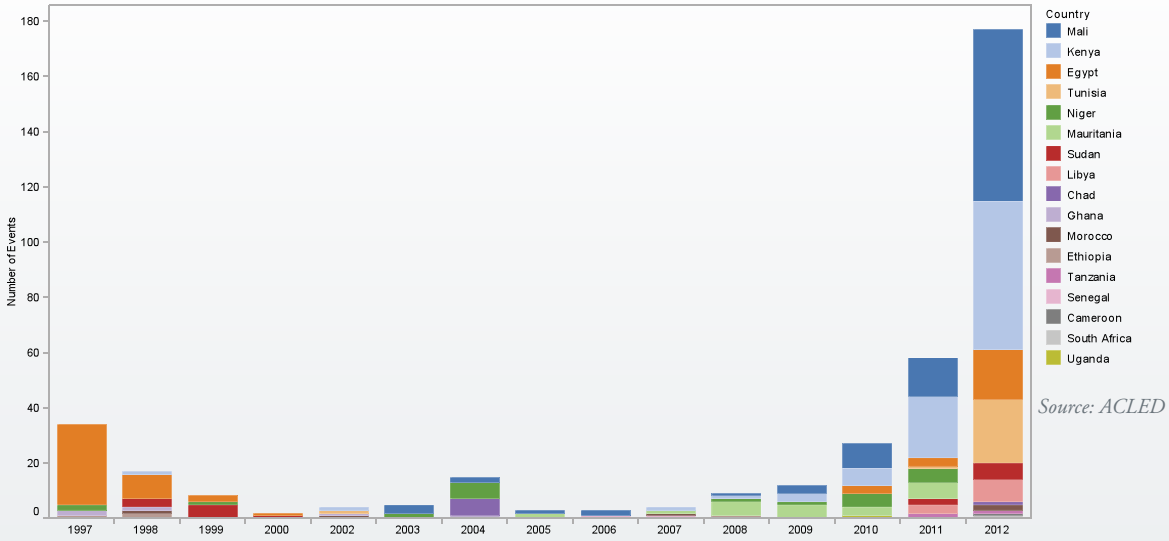
Violent Islamist groups are necessarily a diverse and variegated category of violent actor. They operate in distinct settings, have developed in diverse historical and contextual circumstances, and subscribe to various theological and ideological positions. With this in mind, this analysis can identify patterns and trends in activity within and across particular groups. There are revealing differences across the main groups in question.

Figure 4: Violent Islamist Activities and Associated Reported Fatalities, 1997 - 2012



Source: ACLED

Figure 5: Violent Islamist Activity by Country, Excluding Algeria, Nigeria, and Somalia, 1997 – 2012



Source: ACLED

The first important distinction is the nature of the groups themselves. As noted, ACLED distinguishes between rebel groups – which seek to replace the current national regime in power – and militia groups – which use violence to advance a position of a particular elite, and often concentrate on local or regional goals. The vast majority of violent Islamist groups active over the last 15 years are political militias, as opposed to rebel groups. While rebel groups constitute the largest share of overall activity, this is shaped by Somalia and Algeria's dominant roles in the conflict landscape, where rebel groups such as Al Shabaab and AQIM have a specifically articulated agenda to overthrow the national regime. By contrast, local Islamist militias such as Boko Haram tend to focus on regional or sub-national goals, often lacking the capacity to mount a large-scale threat to the national regime or the desire to establish an alternative regime in its place. This is not to diminish the destabilizing impact of violent militias, but rather to refine the understanding of the threat they pose: militia groups may be in a position to operate with a greater degree of impunity than rebel groups, owing to the fact that they do not expressly seek to establish a governing regime in the long-term. This may render them less reliant on popular support, and thereby less concerned with the implications of civilian casualties.

These structural factors may inform the differences observed in the activity of these groups. Al Shabaab, AQIM, and Boko

Figure 6: Violent Islamist Activity by Country over Time

Source: ACLED

Haram are the most active violent Islamist groups in Africa. Proportionally, Al Shabaab and AQIM have engaged in far less violence against civilians (at approximately 14 percent of their overall violent activity) than Boko Haram (at over 50 percent). Boko Haram also has a far higher average fatality per event rate (at 5.6), than Al Shabaab (3.0) and AQIM (3.1). If considering fatalities associated with violence against civilians only, these average fatality rates drop to 2.5 for Al Shabaab and AQIM, and remain elevated at 5.3 for Boko Haram.

Groups' conflict profiles are also temporally and spatially dynamic: Al Shabaab violence against civilians has intensified at times and in locations where it either faced or suffered territorial losses. 2011 and 2012 witnessed the highest rates of violence against civilians to date. Reports are dominated by instances of targeted killings of alleged civilian spies in advance of territorial losses to Federal Government forces, and indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets following territorial losses.

Boko Haram, by contrast, has certainly intensified its targeting of civilians since it first became prominent in 2009, with attacks on civilians increasing from 20 percent of attacks in 2009 to 51.2 percent in 2012, but this has been less clearly associated with external triggers. Rather, it reflects a transformation in their perceived enemy: while 2009 witnessed some limited targeting of civilians, this mainly involved the assassination of former or otherwise inactive security officers in civilian contexts, in keeping with the group's focus on engaging security services at that time. 2010 saw a gradual break from this pattern, with the increased targeting of political figures and traditional leaders, and sectarian violence against followers of certain Islamic sects. This redefinition of the terms of the group's engagement culminated in a series of high-profile bombings in civilian areas and attacks on Christian centers of worship in December 2010. This modality of violence has continued to characterize the group's activity since this time.

AQIM's profile differs yet again, having first emerged as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) in the late 1990s, in an explicit rejection of the tactics of civilian targeting employed by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).[7] This has shaped the group's lower levels of violence against civilians overall, and the prevalence of Western civilian-targeting in its actions.

FINDINGS

With ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali among the most violent on the African continent, and evidence of the medium- to long-term spread of violent Islamist activity across Africa, violent Islamist groups, their activities, and objectives are likely to remain extremely influential both nationally and internationally. This analysis has presented several findings that can inform discussions on the nature and significance of this phenomenon: the first is that the levels of violent Islamist activity in Africa have risen sharply in recent years, both in absolute and proportional terms.

The second finding is that, while much of this increase has been driven by the intensification of conflict in a small number of key countries, there is also evidence for the geographic spread of violent Islamist activity both south- and east-ward on the continent. The growth of violent Islamist activity in Kenya, in particular, is a cause for concern in a country with multiple, overlapping, pre-existing ethno-regional tensions which may render communities particularly open to the rhetoric of this form of militancy.

The third finding has highlighted how the differences in the structure of these violent Islamist groups reveal differential objectives, strategies, and modalities of violence. This brief has focused in particular on the impact of structural factors on groups' violence against civilians, which suggests avenues for future research into where and when civilians are most vulnerable, and how violence is used against civilians by groups with or without territorial control.

These findings point to several conclusions. Most significantly, there is no single explanation or analysis that can account for the recent rise in violent Islamist groups in Africa. Islamist violence has fallen in some key states such as Algeria and Egypt, as it has arisen in new spaces, including East and West Africa. The different contexts in which violent Islamist groups are active suggest several possible country-specific explanations. The spread of militancy from neighboring countries – either physically through the dispersal of operatives and weaponry, or less directly through creeping instability – may explain the emergence of violent Islamist groups in states neighboring Algeria and Somalia.

However, even in these neighboring states, it is clear additional forces are at play. Violent Islamist activity in Mali would not have been possible without the interaction of local militant groups and transnational Islamist networks, both of which benefit from the association. Ansar Dine and MUJAO have emerged from relative obscurity to dominate discussions on security in the Sahel, due in large part to their association with AQIM, while the latter has capitalized on Tuareg-dominated groups' traction in local communities to establish a foothold in new territory. Similarly, in Kenya, violent Islamist activity has grown in communities with pre-existing tensions and fissures, suggesting the role of overlapping cleavages in shaping the salience of identity-based militancy.

A third dynamic that cannot be ignored relative to increasing Islamist violence is a rising global consciousness among Islamist groups and Muslim populations in the wake of the Arab Spring. Qualitative studies are better positioned to reflect on the influence of this phenomenon on the growth of violent Islamist activity in Africa. However, some of the patterns outlined here of escalation from Muslim-identified communal tensions expressed in protest and riot behavior to violent Islamist activity attest to the importance of exploring the mechanisms by which violent Islamist groups gain footholds in such communities, and processes by which these tensions can be peacefully resolved.

The destabilizing impact of violent Islamist militias and rebel groups in Africa is likely to increasingly dominate security discussions on the continent, particularly in light of the very rapid deterioration of security in the Sahel in recent months. This study has provided an overview of the levels and dynamics of this activity over the past fifteen years, and pointed to the need for future research that takes into account the structural and behavioral differences across such groups in a bid to develop a more finely tuned understanding of capacity, threat and populations' vulnerability.

ENDNOTES

1 For similar definition, see International Crisis Group, *Understanding Islamism, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 27 (2 March 2005)*.

2 International Crisis Group, *Understanding Islamism, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 27 (2 March 2005)*, p. i.

3 This paper does not treat the Janjaweed group active in Sudan to be Islamist, insofar as the group has not articulated a clear Islamist agenda relating to ideology, law, policies, or customs.

4 The term 'Muslim-identified' is used throughout this brief. Communal groups are by their nature disorganized, often spontaneous, and lacking an articulated ideological framework for their actions. As such, communal groups do not have a formalized structure or articulated doctrine, and ACLED relies on the characterization of such groups' composition by secondary sources such as media, security sources, and observers. While these characterizations are usually reliable, in recognition of issues of potential media bias and the reification of identity narratives, ACLED distinguishes between the self-appellation of groups such Al Shabaab or other Islamist organizations, and the labelling of militias or groups composed of Muslims.

5 International Crisis Group. 31 March 2005. *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction? Africa Report No. 92*, p.5.

6 United Nations Department of Public Information. 25 July 2012. 'Security Council Committee on Somalia and Eritrea Adds Aboud Rogo Mohammed to List of Individuals and Entities.' www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/sc10728.doc.htm (accessed August 2012).

7 Stephen Harmon. 2010. 'From GSPC to AQIM: The evolution of an Algerian Islamist terrorist group into an Al-Qa`ida Affiliate and its implications for the Sahara-Sahel region,' *Concerned Africa Scholars*, No. 85: 12 – 29.

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