

THREE CASE STUDIES

All of the points made thus far about religion and violent conflict can be seen in three cases of religious militancy that are of interest to the British Army: Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and ISIS (also referred to as Da'esh, IS or ISIL).

[BOKO HARAM]

The official name of the group is Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lid-Dawah wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) and thus it is referred by the name given to it by the people: 'Boko Haram', which roughly translates into 'Western education is forbidden'. No

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one knows the exact size of the group, nor its current formation or leadership structures. Some experts have estimated 5,000 or so members, with a wider network of enablers and supporters in the far north-east corner of Nigeria. There seem to be multiple factions within the organisation and no clear strategy being pursued in the use of violence.

The group emerged from the preaching of Mohammed Yusuf in the early 2000s. There is a lot of mystery surrounding his life but his preaching certainly attracted large crowds. Initially the organisation did not preach or use violence, but sought to establish an Islamic order and challenged corrupt politicians and the Islamic elite of the North. It has provided welfare and practical support

and still prides itself on its commitment to widows and families under its care.

While the group increasingly found itself in tension with local authorities, it was the murder of Yusuf while in police custody in 2009 that marked the turn of the organisation into a violent one. Since 2011, Boko Haram has unleashed numerous revenge attacks on police and army outposts as their main target. Brutal responses and indiscriminate use of force by the Nigerian forces have only increased the support Boko Haram gets in the region and have fuelled further violence.

Their fighters do not seem to uphold a dedicated religious piety and include a wide range of backgrounds including non-Muslims. The justifications they use are as much political as they are religious and reactive to epidemic problems in Nigeria such as corruption and the lawlessness of the authorities and security forces. They depend on extortion, selling of bounty items gathered in attacks, and at times donations. They operate in large swathes of ungoverned territory astride the borders of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Ethnic links that cut across these borders and inter-state rivalries have provided spaces for support and supply to the organisation.

While there have been military successes against them,

[AL-SHABAAB]

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, often referred to as al-Shabaab, emerged as an amalgamation of multiple groups and became a publicly known jihadist movement in 2006. It was only one of multiple Islamist and 'jihadi' factions under the umbrella of Islamic courts that were seeking to establish jurisdiction and governance in Somalia. Early on it enjoyed practical and financial support from international jihadist networks, including links with Al-Qaeda and various Somalian diasporas.

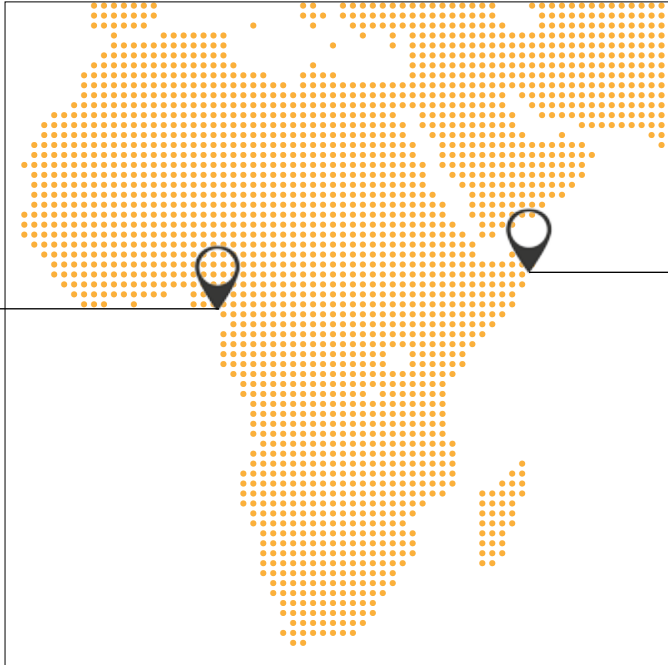
While the movement was almost destroyed during the Ethiopian intervention in late 2006, it re-emerged with a new narrative and focus in 2007. The group positioned itself as a nationalist reaction to regional and international actors undertaking military operations in the country. This remained a key factor in its recruitment during both US and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) operations. In fact, disproportionate use of external military force

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and corruption and abuse associated with regional troops continue to attract fighters and local support to the organisation. However, al-Shabaab is known to force young men to join its ranks, which was seen following the 2011 military operations by Somalia's Transitional Federal Government and AMISOM. Throughout 2011-2012 the movement lost substantial territory and was pushed into the countryside.

Al-Shabaab has acted as a proto-state in the areas that it governed. Not only has it focused on delivering education and ensuring standards of services such as medical care and facilitation of trade, it has provided security and a clear legal order for people living under its territories. It has served as an arbitrator for people's disputes over land and business deals and also as the provider of secure and orderly transit routes for traders using its territory.

In addition to the taxes it receives from activities



Maitatsine caused havoc in the country. Just like Boko Haram, the organisation did not start as a militant one, but increasingly found itself in tension with local authorities. The Nigerian government declared success by over-running Maitatsine's base, killing thousands of people in the process. Maitatsine, just like Boko Haram, had begun focusing on restoring a moral order and preached against corrupt local rulers and Islamic establishment in the country.

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Beyond such groups, Nigeria sees tremendously high levels of on-going violence between Muslim and Christian groups across the Plateau state, and never-ending militancy in the Delta state, which harbours major oil reserves.

Thus, Boko Haram remains a symptom of a larger problem that demands governance and economic reform, as well as the establishment of the rule of law and emergence of a professional army that operates within clear legal boundaries.

ultimately Boko Haram is part of a much larger problem. It is neither the first nor the last religious militancy in Nigeria. In the 1970s, a very similar group to Boko Haram, named

in its territory, it has benefited financially from piracy and kidnapping as well as donations from international networks. Thus, it has been able to pay its fighters upfront every month and to take care of its wounded and the widows of dead fighters.

Al-Shabaab's attack at the Kenyan shopping mall in 2013 and declared allegiance to ISIS were both seen as attempts by the weakened organisation to galvanise its jihadi credentials. The organisation also began to lose its appeal among Somalians and there have been significant levels of defections.

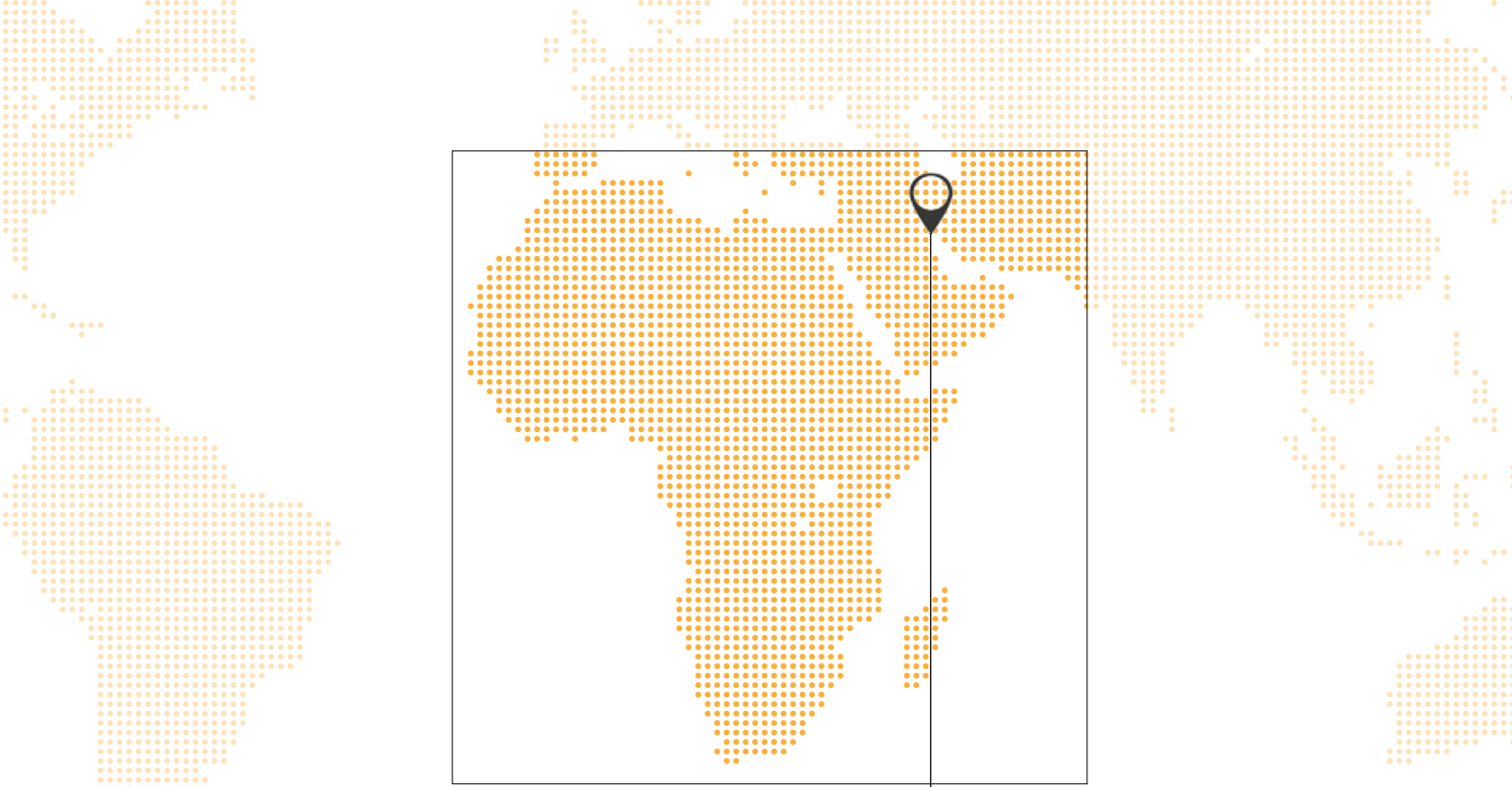
When the group's leader Ahmed Godane was killed in a missile strike in 2014, some forecasted the end of the movement or a split into factions, as his successor Ahmed Diriye could not match his charisma, religious knowledge, legitimacy, skills and networks.

However, 2015 saw new attacks by al-Shabaab

in Kenya and against AMISOM, which inflicted significant casualties. There have also been increasing questions regarding the actions of AMISOM troops in the country, and the wider developments in Somalia and the region. Developments in Yemen and al-Shabaab's closer relations with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have brought new momentum and supplies.

Al-Shabaab is also seeking more reach within north-eastern Kenya, as seen in the prevalence of violent attacks as well as a large volume of online content put out in Swahili. These point to the fact that the group is more resilient than forecasted in 2013-14. It is able to move beyond clan factions that dominate Somali politics, and even though its terror attacks cause a large portion of Somalis to condemn the group, it is still able to maintain local support and galvanise local grievances. It has learned how to govern territory and balance religious legitimacy and appeals with the use of fear and terror tactics.

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[ISLAMIC STATE]

The brutal organisation that styles itself as the Islamic State (but is often referred to by its Arabic acronym Da'esh) is rooted in the Sunni insurgency that erupted in Iraq after the US-led intervention in 2003. In fact, its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was captured in Iraq and spent time in Camp Bucca as an inmate. Many inmates and disenfranchised Saddam-era military and security officers have played a key role in the development of the Islamic State, first within Iraq and then as it expanded its operations into Syria when that country fell into civil war. It also had its roots in Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other jihadist groups that formed the Mujahideen Shura Council. The Council was disbanded in 2006 and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was declared. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over as the leader of ISI in 2010, expanded operations to Syria in 2011, declaring an Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in 2013 and the proclamation of the caliphate in June 2014.

Baghdadi's declaration of a caliphate had attracted wide criticism, not just from mainstream Islamic scholars but even from jihadist groups. In fact, ISIS and Al-Qaeda (AQ) publicly condemn each other and even clash directly in their pursuit of power and positioning. AQ in Syria aims to be a more moderate force and seeks to win populations slowly and carefully and even condemns ISIS tactics of extreme brutality. One of the criticisms of ISIS by other groups including AQ has been that it does not have any leading religious scholars or a robust theological grounding for its actions.

ISIS' use of brutal executions is an ancient strategy of causing fear among the enemy. This strategy is clearly explained in the popular text *The Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji. The book, which is widely read and cited, promotes a 'scorched earth policy', causing fear and increasing costs for anyone seeking to attack ISIS. Beheadings and theatrical executions

and 'fear propaganda' play a crucial role. As the author says: "It behoves us to make them think a thousand times before attacking us." The burning of Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kassasbeh was part of such a strategy, yet it has caused widespread condemnation, as theological justification for such actions is thin and contradicts traditional Islamic thought.

ISIS has mimicked the performances of a state in the large territory it took control of in Iraq and Syria. It has provided healthcare, education, welfare support, rule of law and even created ID cards and passports, and has brought order to places that faced anarchy and chaos. It was this performance of establishing an Islamic state ruled by a Caliph that made it an attraction for a wider global recruitment pool. While ISIS' demonstration of military success, an ability to pay salaries and provide weaponry served to recruit fighters from other jihadi groups or Syrian militias, its marketing of the establishment of a new religious-based state order became a selling point for international recruits. In fact, some of its international recruitment calls included phrases such as "where were you when the caliphate was being established?". The group's military successes and use of social media made it an exciting adventure for a wide range of people with different backgrounds to seek to join it and move to its territory.

The last 12 months have been difficult for ISIS. Coalition strikes and operations have resulted in a loss of territory and funding and, most importantly, have damaged the image of an unstoppable movement in history. Its brutal excesses have attracted condemnation from Muslims worldwide. Better international cooperation has resulted in a decline of international fighters travelling to join its ranks. However, we have also seen an expansion of ISIS activities and networks with terror attacks in North Africa and Europe. As ISIS suffers losses in its home territory, it is expected to seek to undertake more terror attacks outside of the Middle East.

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[SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE CASES]

A comparative analysis of these three groups yields some interesting insights into how they emerge and evolve and thus ultimately how they can be resisted:

- The most important factor to notice is how these groups emerge in failed or weak states that have colonial origins and chronic political instability.
- They all emerged in contexts with pre-existing high levels of violence either due to civil war, international intervention or disproportionate use of force by governments.
- They all evolved, not only in their theological outlooks and political aims, but also in their levels of accommodation of violent tactics and levels of brutality.
- They all have theologies ‘in progress’, and were not established upon clear and robust ideologies from their outset.
- Shifts in leadership and clashes with other jihadi groups demonstrate that for all their self-declared cosmic aims and leadership legitimacy, their aims are very temporal and their management structures weak.
- Their local appeal is partly about offering order and governance and partly about their military successes and financial capacity.
- Their international appeal is mostly about promises of a ‘Utopia’ actualising itself here on Earth: a chance to get away from troubles, boredom and alienation at home, and play a part in a larger story than one’s own life. It is also about actual and imagined grievances individuals have about global politics, discrimination and their day-to-day personal lives.
- Their successes often capitalise upon the failures of domestic political actors and problematic interventions by regional and international stakeholders. They show political astuteness in capitalising on developments outside their control.
- Religious framing of their causes provides a ‘contagion factor’ beyond the actual parameters of

local conflict and also enables them to hold together multiple ethnicities and nationalities.

- Their successes and failures are both dynamic; they all have demonstrated resilience and an ability to adapt to new realities on the ground, to find new ways to recruit and perform and new narratives to attract support.
- Effective challenges to their legitimacy do not come from the military successes of external powers but by other Muslims questioning their theologies, credibility, piety and chosen tactics.

Similarities observed in these three extreme examples of religious militancy in three distant geographies raise serious questions about how we approach the issue of religion and violent conflict. First and foremost, it raises serious doubts regarding theories that try to explain these groups merely by allusion to Islamic texts or extrapolate arguments about Muslims globally. In fact, as mentioned before, the presence of religion in violent conflict is not limited to a particular religion, and human history is a record of violence legitimised by grievances, competition over resources, ethnic and political ideologies. Yet, violent conflicts with religious characteristics have unique aspects. As can be seen in the cases discussed here, groups operating under a religious banner are able to recruit from a much wider audience and offer legitimisations and prolong the duration of conflicts for longer than regular ethnic or political conflicts. They also have much larger ‘butterfly’ effects in their capacity to trigger violence across the world through imagined narratives of a global Manichean battle unfolding between ‘good and evil’.

It is clearly unhelpful to ask whether or not religion leads to violent conflict, but better to examine how violent conflict emerges and how religions respond to it and are shaped by it. Only with such a re-orientation in our approach to understanding a worrying trend can we develop better responses that seek to not only contain radical groups militarily, but address the social and political issues that gave birth to them and maintained their appeal, and work with religious actors to offer constructive alternatives to extremist projects.