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Differentiating between Islamists and the problem of counter-terrorism in Africa

Africa has witnessed increased terror attacks from Nigeria and Mali in West Africa to Somalia in the Horn. Part of the problem in crafting an effective counterterrorism response is policymakers misunderstanding what Islamism is and how different groups of Islamists relate to each other. Policymakers must be more knowledgeable about the finer nuances found within Islamism and not treat it as a monolithic phenomenon.

Islamism has been described by Zeynep Kuru and Ahmet Kuru¹ as “... *an ideology that emerged in the twentieth century in reaction to colonialism and modernization. Political Islamism aims to create an ‘Islamic state’ ruled according to the Shari’a. Although political Islamist movements can be characterized as part of the Islamic religious resurgence, these movements are primarily political. Political Islamists regard the foundation of the Islamic state as the sine qua non for the attainment of a complete Muslim life. The key ideological components of the political Islamists programme are: taking the Quran as the source of political, legal and social systems; and claiming to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammed*”.

Whilst agreeing on these core aspects, Islamists are divided into three major factions according to Quinton Wiktorowicz, on account of their differences on tactics to be adopted. Purists focus on nonviolent methods of *daw’ah* (propagation) and education to connect more people to the Islamist ideal. At the same time, they shun political participation, viewing it as deviant. The second group, or *politicos*, seek to participate in the political arena. *Politicos* believe in this route to bring about social justice and to legislate good behaviour and sanction bad behaviour. Purists and *politicos* view the process of Islamizing society as evolutionary. The final group consists of the *jihadists* who adopt a more revolutionary approach, believing that the current *status quo* can be toppled through violence².

In practice, these demarcations between the groups tend to be fluid. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, ostensibly a *politico* organization, had an armed wing in the 1930s and 1940s. Following a harsh government crackdown, they chose a political path³. In 2014, however, the Egyptian government reported that the Muslim Brotherhood

had re-activated its armed wing, killing five policemen in one attack⁴. The transition from political party to terrorist group was also affected in Algeria when in 1992 the authorities prevented the Islamic Salvation Front from coming to power in an election. Prevented from assuming power through the ballot box, some members of the Front went on to establish the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) which eventually morphed into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)⁵.

In the same vein, the boundaries of purists and jihadists are also porous. Consider Tableegh Jamaat which is active in 150 countries and has 80 million active followers, making it the largest Muslim proselytising organization in the world⁶. Despite its proselytising focus however, various scholars have commented on the organization's proximity to jihadist groups. Alex Alexiev⁷ writes:

"After joining Tableegh Jamaat groups at a local mosque or Islamic centre and doing a few local dawa (proselytism) missions, Tablighi officials invite star recruits to the Tablighi centre in Raiwind, Pakistan, for four months additional training. Representatives of terrorist organizations approach the students at the Raiwind centre and invite them to undertake military training. Most agree to do so".

The problem counterterrorism professionals on the African continent have is that they respond to these groups independently of seeing the wider connections they display. Consider the case of Nigeria's Boko Haram which was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri by Muhammed Yusuf. Before the organization took a militant (therefore jihadi Islamism) form, it began as a purist organization in the form of the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque which was focused on proselytism, providing unemployed young men with skills to find employment and assisting with providing food to the local community from the mosque's farm⁸. The first recruits to Boko Haram proper emanated from worshippers at this mosque.

In Somalia, meanwhile, a similar pattern emerged when the Al Islah organization was established in the mid-1990s. Al Islah established schools, health facilities and community centres. It, too, would fit into the purist group within the Islamist ideology of Wiktowicz. However, its political objective of establishing a theocratic Islamic state throughout all of Somalia and Somali-inhabited regions of neighbouring countries is the same political objective which the jihadist Al Shabaab is pursuing. Many of those who passed through Al Islah's doors went on to become part of the Islamic Courts Union and then onto Al Shabaab⁹. Al Islah, then, set the basis for the emergence of violent Islamism's latest mutation in Somalia – Al Shabaab

Whilst in principle, there is no problem with faith and politics mixing in the sphere of electoral politics as in the case of Europe's plethora of Christian Democratic parties or NGOs with a religious bent providing ministering to the faithful and providing for their material needs, it becomes a problem when these still subscribe to radical interpretations of faith. Bashirov and Lancaster¹⁰ convincingly argues that there are two aspects to moderation: behavioural and ideological – and that both these aspects have to be present if Islamists are to be tamed. Whilst behavioural moderation refers to entities adopting tactics to make it popularly appealing as well as bypassing legislation enacted to keep radical elements out of the public space; ideological moderation is far deeper. It involves the abandonment or revision of radical goals and accepting political pluralism, tolerance, and checks and balances on arbitrary state power. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or Al Islah made behavioural

adaptions, but not the deep-seated ideological changes required of them to participate in a democratic polity. Unless they fully embrace and demonstrate ideological moderation as well, they should be barred from operating in the public space. African policymakers must fully comprehend the Islamist threat holistically, and not only focus on its jihadist form. Only then will counterterrorism become more effective and prevent the loss of innocent lives across the continent.

Endnotes

¹ Zeynep Akbulut Kuru and Ahmet T. Kuru, 'Apolitical interpretation of Islam: Said Nursi's Faith-Based Activism in Comparison with Political Islamism and Sufism,' Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 19, No. 1, January 2008, p. 100.

² Quinton Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafist Movement," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Vol. 26, 2006, p. 208.

³ Robin Simcox, "Time to Reassess the Muslim Brotherhood," The Heritage Foundation. 5 June 2017. Internet: <https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/commentary/time-reassess-the-muslim-brotherhood>. Date accessed: 3 April 2019.

⁴ "Egypt says Muslim Brotherhood has formed military wing," Reuters. 9 February 2014. Internet: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-brotherhood/egypt-says-muslim-brotherhood-has-formed-military-wing-idUSBREA180QC20140209> Date accessed: 3 April 2019.

⁵ "Profile: Al Qaeda in North Africa," BBC News. 17 January 2013. Internet: <http://www.bbc.com/news-world-africa-1708138>. Date accessed: 8 April 2019.

⁶ Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Tablighi Jamaat: An Indirect Line to Terrorism," Stratfor. 23 January 2008. Internet: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/tablighi-indirect-line-terrorism>. Date accessed: 4 April 2019.

⁷ Alex Alexiev, "Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions," Middle East Quarterly. Vol. 12 No. 1, 2005, p. 5.

⁸ Andrew Walker, "Join us or die: The birth of Boko Haram," The Guardian. 4 February 2016. Internet: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/join-us-or-die-birth-of-boko-haram> . Date accessed: 7 May 2019.

⁹ International Crisis Group, Countering Terrorism in a Failed State. International Crisis Group Report No. 45. Nairobi/Brussels. 2002, p. 13.

¹⁰ G. Bashirov and C. Lancaster, 'End of moderation: The radicalization of AKP in Turkey,' Democratization, Vol. 25, No. 7, 2010. p. 1210.

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