

ISLAM IN AFRICA: FROM SUFI MODERATION TO ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION

Hussein Solomon¹

O mankind, indeed We have created you
From a male and a female
And we have made you into nations
And tribes so that you may come
To know one another (not that you
May despise one another)

(Qu'ran, Surah 49 Al Hujurat, verse 13)

Abstract

This article examines how a moderate Sufi Islam in Africa has increasingly become sidelined by more radical interpretations of the Qur'an. The latter has been termed Islamism and is closely aligned to the concept of Political Islam. The rise of Islamism is the result of a number of external and internal factors. External factors include the rise of Arabism and the role of Gulf charities operating in Africa, whilst internal factors include the illegitimate nature of the African state and the fact that Sufi leaders have developed too close ties with often corrupt politicians. Arguments put forth in the article include that the Islamist tide can be turned if pressure is brought to bear on the Gulf states to desist from supporting radical Islamists on the continent, that more needs to be done to pressurize African governments to be more responsive to their citizens' needs and, finally, it argues for a Sufi Islam which is more critical of Africa's political leadership.

Keywords: Al Shabaab; Africa; Arabism; Iran; Islam; Saudi Arabia; Sudan; Sufi.

Sleutelwoorde: Al Shabaab; Afrika; Arabisme; Iran; Islam; Saoedi-Arabië; Soedan; Soefi.

1. INTRODUCTION

For those who have researched and travelled to Africa, one is struck by the distinctive, moderate and tolerant Islam practiced on the continent. Indeed Eva Rosander (1997:1) has referred to this phenomenon as “African Islam”. By this she meant an Islam which takes into consideration local context and is accommodating and flexible – not one which is dogmatically rigid. This African Islam is intimately

1 Senior Professor, Department of Political Studies and Governance, University of the Free State.
E-mail: solomonh@ufs.ac.za

tied to the mystical and spiritual aspects of Islam known as Sufism, or in Arabic *tasawwuf* (Rosander 1997:3). Unlike the formal ritualistic aspects of those subscribing to a more scripturalist Islam, which stress the chasm between man and God (Rosander 1997), Sufi brotherhoods or paths (*tariqa* in Arabic) stress the need to bridge that gap through love and knowledge of the true inner self. Many African Muslims are Sufi in orientation. This form of the Islamic faith is more personal and more emotional, stressing the love of God as opposed to the fear of God. Moreover, Sufi Islam co-existed (McCormack 2005:1) with the richness of pre-Islamic folk customs (Viorst 1995:48).

The accommodating and tolerant aspects of Sufi Islam are seen in its dominant traits being, “ecstatic dancing (*hadra*), spirit possession and expulsion and visits to ‘saints’ and tombs” (Viorst 1995:48). These traits, in turn, are in keeping with many African traditional religious practices, and this accounts for Sufi Islam’s popularity across the length and breadth of Africa. Under the circumstances, Sufi Islam continues to attract the largest number of adherents to Islam in Africa (Westerlund 1997:330). In recent years, Sufi Islam has come under increasing threat from Islamism. What is Islamism and how is it that it has increasingly displaced traditional Sufi practices across the length and breadth of Africa?

2 UNDERSTANDING THE ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

Islamism – whether the Iranian Shi’ite version or the radical Sunni² version popularized by the likes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – is a twentieth century totalitarian ideology that seeks to mould Islamic religious tradition to serve narrow political ends of domination (Solomon 2013:14). Indeed, Islamism is sometimes interchangeably used with Political Islam. According to Zeynep and Ahmet Kuru (2008:100), “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 Qur’an as the source of political, legal and social systems; and claiming to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammed.” Unlike Sufi Islam – which is more inward-looking, attempting to purify the soul of the individual believer – Islamists seek to capture

2 Shia and Sunni Islam refer to the two main divisions of Islam which have their origins at the time of the death of the Prophet Muhammed in 632 CE when the thorny question of succession emerged. The Sh’ia or Partisans of Ali believed that succession should stay in the House of the Prophet, whilst the Sunnis believed that Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, should succeed the Prophet. Since this time, each has developed their own respective theology with sharp differences (Rogerson 2006).

political power in order to dogmatically enforce the central tenets of their faith on those living under their rule.

Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005:18) also refers to this as a “puritanical” tradition within Islam, noted for its, “fanatical reductionism and narrow minded literalism”. Whilst having been moulded and coming together as a somewhat coherent ideology in the twentieth century, its ideological roots go all the way back to the thirteenth century to the time of the Iraqi Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (CE 1263-1328) and the Arabian³ Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (CE 1703-1792). As with other totalitarian ideologies, Islamists do not tolerate difference or accept the proverbial “other”. Al Wahhab infamously declared all those who did not confirm to his purist vision of Islam to be apostates and worthy of death (Armstrong 2000:135). Indeed, violence is part of its creed. Maulana Abul Ala-Madudi (CE 1903-1979), the founder of the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami, argued that, “force may be used, in fact should be used to prevent people from doing wrong. Non-Muslim countries and cultures cannot be allowed to practice immoral deeds” (Ahmad 1989:21). One notes this dogmatic intolerance in Nigeria when the Islamist Abubaker Gumbi (d. 1992) attacked Sufism, arguing that there were no Sufi orders during the time of the prophet and that it was therefore a recent innovation and therefore unacceptable. Given the austere nature of Wahhabism, Gumbi also attacked the employment of Sufi amulets to ward off evil spirits and the use of drums in mosques (Westerlund 1997:309). It should come as no surprise therefore that radical Islamist groupings in Africa, like Al Shabaab in Somalia, Ansar Dine in Mali and Boko Haram in Nigeria, targeted Sufi shrines and practices. The desecration of Sufi places of worship in historical Timbuktu was no less than a cultural genocide.

Another Islamist ideologue, the Egyptian Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), founder and Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood remarked that, “It is the nature of Islam to dominate and not to be dominated, to impose its laws on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet” (Post 2007:175). Violence and intimidation then, are tools of the propagation of their creed. Neither is this confined to Sunni Islam. Shi’a Islam has its own violent ideologues of the Islamist creed, despite their theological difference. Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed, “Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword! The sword is the key to paradise, which can only be opened for holy warriors” (Wright 2007:47).

Islamists aim to create an ideal society, drawing inspiration from seventh century Arabia during the time of the Prophet Muhammed and the first four caliphs to succeed the prophet. Following from this is their aversion to any form of secularism – the separation between faith and state. According to Westerlund (1997:309), “The Islamist goal is to establish Islamic law, sharia, as the

3 At the time there was no Saudi Arabia, just the Arabian Peninsula. So it is fitting to refer to al-Wahhab as Arabian.

basis of Muslim societies and Islamic states. Since God is the legislator and ruler on earth as in heaven, human beings are not supposed to legislate. The secular idea of human legislation is regarded as *shirk* (polytheism), putting humans on a par with God, which is seen as the most serious sin.” In Shi’a Iran, whilst this Sunni argument of God’s sovereignty is accepted, it is also proposed that God can have an agent on earth acting for Him (Her in Islamist thought is inconceivable!). Ayatollah Khomeini developed the concept of *velayat-e-faqhi* – the rule of the supreme jurisprudent (Armstrong 2000:122). Flowing from this, according to Articles 56 and 57 of the Iranian Constitution, the guardian or supreme religious leader holds God’s absolute sovereignty over the world and man. In the process, elections and the democratic will of the people that it represents becomes so *passé*.

Indeed, the Islamists’ ideal state strongly resembles Stalin’s gulag. Here it is important to understand what Maududi’s government of God consists of. According to Maududi, “In our domain we will neither allow any Muslim to change his religion nor allow any other religion to propagate its faith. Whenever the death penalty for apostasy is enforced in a new Islamic state, then Muslims are kept within Islam’s fold. But there is a danger that a large number of hypocrites will live alongside them. They will pose a danger of treason. My solution to the problem is this. That whenever an Islamic revolution takes place, non-practicing Muslims should, within one year, declare their turning away from Islam and get out of Muslim society. After one year, all born Muslims will be considered Muslim. All Islamic law should be enforced upon them. They will be forced to practice all the tenets of their religion and, if anyone wishes to leave Islam, he will be executed” (Ahmad 1989:55).

With the growing strength of Islamism on the continent, it should come as no surprise that Africa has witnessed an intensification of inter-religious strife. Islamists declare Sufi practices as pagan (Rosander 1997:4) and have attacked Sufi shrines in Somalia, as well as in northern Mali. At the same time, Coptic Christian monasteries in Egypt have been set alight, whilst Christian churches have been attacked in northern Nigeria. This, in turn, raises an intriguing question. Why is it that Islamism is on the rise on the African continent? After all, at face value, why would people move from a tolerant, accommodating Sufi Islam to the nihilistic creed which is Islamism? Two sources – one external, the other internal – account for the rise of Islamism in Africa. External factors include the enduring legacy of Arabism and Islamism and the issue of Islamist charities operating on the continent.

3. THE ENDURING LEGACY OF ARABISM AND ISLAMIZATION

When referring to the Arabization and Islamization of Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab scholars generally adopt a romantic and positive tone. Helmy Sharawi (2004:46) strongly argues that the Arabic language, together with Islamic teachers and Islamic sciences, played a major role in the development of the African continent. In similar

vein, Yusuf Fadl Hasan (1985:35), argues, “The process of conversion was both slow and generally peaceful and in time Islam became an important agent of social cohesion which brought together Sudanese peoples of different racial, cultural and linguistic origins.”

The historical record, however, points to a far more nuanced picture. Whilst Swahili, Tanzania’s national language, has certainly borrowed much from the Arabic language (Hasan 1985:32), in other cases the local languages of the Borgo, Berti and Maal of Sudan were transplanted by Arabic and the sense of identity of these local communities were forever lost (Bankie 2004:80). Indeed, Kokole (1984:690) convincingly argues that the twin forces of Arabism and Islamism worked to disintegrate other social and tribal groups operating in the same space. Tamura (2008:7) is more blunt in his assessment. [T]he contacts between Arabs and Black Africans have been largely asymmetrical, in which Arabs have penetrated Africa, enslaved Africans and imposed their religion (Islam) and language (Arabic). They have viewed themselves as superior, as the conveyors of a higher civilization and tended to be patronizing towards those considered as inferior.” The issue of Arabization cannot be separated from Islamism. Wahhabi Islamists in Saudi Arabia, for instance, view their version of Islam as the only correct one and that African Islam is un-Islamic. Similarly, they argue that, since the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic, this language is superior to all other languages. In the process, the Arabic language and culture forms parts and parcel of Islamist ideological hegemony. In multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural African polities, this culturally chauvinistic attitude is bound to increase conflict dynamics.

The issue of Arabization is not merely a cultural issue, but one intimately connected to issues of power. The use of Arabization as an element of Arab power projection was clearly understood by the Arab League. In its September 1978 report it noted with satisfaction the Arabization activities taking place in Djibouti, Kenya and Mali and urged that budgets be increased for further Arabization activities on the continent (Yoh 2001:16). Arabization was also about access to power in countries like Sudan, where the country’s political mandarins all claimed Arabic descent (Al Medani 2010:111). Lusk (2008:168) points out that Sudan is run by a clique of “Arab” people from the Ja’a’in, Shaigi and Danagla tribes, to the exclusion of the majority of “black”⁴ Sudanese. Indeed, this was one of the drivers behind the conflict in Darfur. Small wonder then, that issues of Arabization reinforce the fault lines between the political elite and those who feel disempowered in countries like Sudan, Mauritania and Algeria. Small wonder too, that when the new government of South Sudan came into being (following their secession from Sudan), they have

4 “Arab” and “Black” are placed in inverted commas on account of the fact that there was a tremendous amount of intermarriage between Arabs and indigenous peoples over the years and that these categories in Sudan are rather more cultural in orientation than ethnic.

introduced English into the school curriculum and have generally adopted processes of de-Arabization as they seek to assert their independence.

In similar fashion, the historical record also demonstrates that the spread of Islam may not be as peaceful as Sharawi and Hasan would indicate. Whilst there have certainly been cases of the peaceful conversion to Islam as a result of Muslim merchants and the ulema (clerics), there have also been conversions as a result of intimidation and outright violence (Al Medani 2010:115). Under the influence of purist Wahhabist interpretations of the Qu'ran taking place on the Arabian Peninsula, similar movements emerged in West Africa and vast swathes of territory were conquered in the name of Islam during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These include Ibrahim Mousa, who led militant Islam in Vota Kalon, the western-most tip of Africa; Suleiman Bal, who carried the Islamic flag into battle in Senegal; and perhaps the most famous of them all, Sheikh Othman Dan Foudy (Kokole 1984:689), who greatly expanded the realm of the Sokoto caliphate throughout much of northern Nigeria beginning in 1804 (Hasan 1985:39-40). Modern day Islamists, like Boko Haram, draw inspiration from Dan Fody's jihad and consciously attempt to imitate his example, especially in their rhetoric. The problem with many counter-terrorism measures is its historical amnesia. History matters. Not recognizing this truism would result in superficial responses to extremism which would merely exacerbate, as opposed to ameliorate, the problem. Religious terrorism on the African continent, in other words, has a long pedigree.

Not only then was the spread of Islam on the continent also violent, but increasingly it was a kind of Islam which was intolerant to other faiths. One example of this occurred on 17 May 1985 when Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, gave a speech at the opening of a Muslim centre in Kigali, Rwanda. "First, you must stick to your Islamic religion and insist that your children are taught the Islamic religion, and you teach the Arabic language because without the Arabic language we could not understand Islam. Furthermore, you must encourage the children of Christians to embrace Islam and the doors of the Islamic centre, the Islamic school and Hospital should be opened to the children of Christians. You must teach the children of Christians that Christianity is not the religion of Africans, that is the religion of colonialism, that Islam is the religion of God. Christianity is the religion of the French, Belgians, Germans and American enemies. It is also a religion of Jews [...] Muslims must become a force to defend their religion. You must raise your head high in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Zaire. You must raise your voice higher and declare that Allah is great because Africa must be Muslim. Africa is not Christian. Christians are intruders in Africa. Christians in Africa are agents of colonialism. We must wage a holy war so that Islam may spread in Africa [...]" (Yoh 2001:20-21).

Given the necessary financial incentives, various African dictators – including Uganda’s Idi Amin (Huliaris 2001:6) and Central African Republic’s Emperor Bokassa I – were quite willing to play to Qadhafi’s agenda and to turn Muslims against Christians (Tamura 2008:8). Given Africa’s ethnic and religious diversity, this was a sure way to promote further conflict. Given the inherent fragility of African polities, insecurity only increased across the length and breadth of the continent. Indeed, tensions between Muslims and Christians surfaced not only in Sudan, but in Ethiopia and Eritrea as well (Tamura 2008:8). The attacks by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria against Christians and more moderate Muslims are a continuation of these historical trajectories, as is the sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians in the Central African Republic.

There is, however, another dimension to this religious conflict and this relates to the thousands of students who have left Africa to further their Islamic studies at such Islamic institutions of higher learning as Al-Azhar in Egypt, Al-Uzai in Lebanon, the University of Damascus in Syria and scores of similar institutions in Saudi Arabia. It has been noted that most of these students, upon their return to their respective countries, are more radical than those who remained behind (Yoh 2001:14). Indeed, according to John Yoh (2001:14-15), “Most of the students from Africa who studied in the Middle East are accused of being behind the religious conflicts that have been going on in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. In fact, some reports in most West and East African media suggest that those students who studied in the Middle East are often recruited before their departure to their various countries into some radical religious group operating in guise, a humanitarian agency, causing inter-religious conflicts in Africa. It is this group of students that are considered to be the source of the so-called Islamic radicalism in Africa. Some of these groups are said to be connected with Islamic organizations operating in Africa under the guise of religious agencies, some of which were accused a couple of years ago to be behind domestic conflicts and public insecurities in Zanzibar, Tanzania; Kampala, Uganda; Cape Town, South Africa; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.” These students then, become the conduits of Islamism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Students, however, are not the only conduit for radical thought entering Africa. The annual pilgrimage which sees tens of thousands of Africans going to Mecca serves as another conduit for the spread of radical Islam. In West Africa, the introduction of Wahhabi classics, such as Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab’s *Kitab al Tawhid* (The book about the oneness of God), had such a profound impact on Islamists in Mali that they took inspiration from the title of this book to name themselves “Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa” (MUJAO) (Westerlund 1997:311). Radical ideologies are also spread online. Indeed, there are over 6 000 websites around the world spreading extremism

(Schanzer and Miller 2012:57). With the spread of these technologies in Africa, Islamism too has spread. In a recent study of Saudi cleric's online activities (including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube), Jonathan Schanzer and Steven Miller (2012:v, 61) found that up to 75% of over 40 000 entries collected and coded were hostile to the West, to non-Muslim and secular cultures, as well as open hostility to non-Wahhabi Muslims. In addition, the Saudi funded Channel Islam International, which is beamed into 60 African and Middle Eastern countries, also serves to propagate the Wahhabi ideology (McCormack 2005:7). Under the circumstances, should one be surprised by the likes of Boko Haram ranting against secular states, or the Islamists of Ansar Dine and Al Shabab violently tearing down Sufi shrines in Mali and Somalia respectively?

One manifestation of resurgent Islamism is the phenomenal growth of huge mosques with Gulf funding across Africa (Westerlund 1997:313). Examples of Saudi-funded West African mosques alone include the King Faisal Mosque and Centre in Guinea (US \$21,3 million), the King Faisal Mosque in Chad (US \$16 million), Bamako Mosque in Mali (US \$6,7 million) and the Yaondi Mosque in Cameroon (US \$5,1 million) (McCormack 2005:7). The magnificent opulence of these mosques can be particularly alluring to Muslims viewing it from the perspective of their rudimentary housing in which they often have to live in on account of the years of neglect they have suffered as a result of an uncaring state. More important than the establishment of the physical structures, the funding of these mosques is, as David McCormack (2005:7) has argued, often contingent upon the appointment of a Saudi-approved imam which means *de facto* the propagation of Wahhabi Islamism.

These mosques, however, serve as more than places of prayer. Rather, they often offer educational facilities and even basic health care facilities. More importantly perhaps, it offers a social space for discussions for the community, especially that of a political nature. In situations where the political space is either restricted or shut down entirely by authoritarian states, the mosque provides an avenue for alternative political expression (Westerlund 1997:314). Under the circumstances, political opposition to the state often has an Islamist flavour.

The capture by radical Islamists of an African state with the help of Gulf charities did not only have negative repercussions for the local citizens, but was also felt much further afield (Schanzer and Miller 2012:11). A case in point is Sudan following the 1989 *coup* which brought to power Omar el Bashir and the National Islamic Front (renamed the National Congress Party after 1999). Peter Kagwanja (2006:75) notes that Sudan quickly became the epicentre of the militant Islamist world, "providing shelter to Islamist fighters, including Abu Nidal, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Gama' al Islamiyya, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In 1991-1996, Osama bin Laden used his base in Sudan to consolidate his

networks and to support terrorist groups in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and other sub-Saharan countries. Khartoum not only provided aid and shelter to extremist groups such as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia in Ethiopia, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, and the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), but also covertly aided Gama' al Islamiyya's abortive attempt on President Hosni Mubarak's life in Addis Ababa in July 1995." Moreover, Islamist Sudan's chief ideologue, Hassan al-Turabi, became an inspiration to many Islamist movements across the region, including Mali, Nigeria and Somalia. During the 1980s in Mogadishu, for instance, small Islamic study groups were established, hoping to apply the principles of the Sudanese Islamist revolution to Somalia (Menkhaus 2002:111).

Closely connected to the issue of radical Islamism and its attendant terrorism, is the issue of funding.

4. CHARITIES, TERRORIST FUNDING AND INDOCTRINATION

It is incumbent on every Muslim to give a portion of his earnings for some charitable purpose (*zakat*). It is also a religious duty to support charitable works through voluntary deeds or contributions (*sadaqah*). Whilst *zakat* is collected by the government, local mosques and religious centres in the Middle East, *sadaqah* is paid directly to the Islamic charity (Looney 2006:1). This is, however, where the problem begins. According to Robert Looney (2006:1), because *zakat* and *sadaqah* are viewed as religious duties, there has been little oversight of these activities. Moreover, the fact that donations are being made anonymously, coupled with the opaque financial and operating structures of Islamic charities, has created a perfect environment which terrorists can exploit. One indication of this comes from Somalia where one survey points out that 70% of Arab donors allowed the recipient complete autonomy to manage and disperse funds with little or no accountability (*Arab Donor Policies* 2004).

Recently leaked United States (US) department cables to the whistle-blowing website, Wikileaks, illustrate American diplomats' frustrations with getting Arab countries to monitor these charitable donations. Indeed, Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who leads his kingdom's anti-terrorism activities, was quoted as saying, "if the money wants to go to terrorist causes, it will go" (Lichtblau and Schmitt 2010). A similarly fatalistic attitude was adopted by the Qatari and Kuwaiti leadership. This compelled the United States (US) officials to bemoan Islamic militants', "ability to generate money almost at will from wealthy individuals and sympathetic groups throughout the Middle East while often staying ahead of counter-terrorism officials" (Lichtblau and Schmitt 2010).

The size of these charitable donations has been immense. Josh Martin (2005:1) estimates that, since the early 1970s, Middle East charities distributed US \$110 billion, of which US \$40 billion found its way to Sub-Saharan Africa,

making Arab states the largest donor bloc to this region. There is, however, a strong belief that this figure of US \$110 billion is too conservative. After all, the Saudi-based and funded Muslim World League alone has disbursed US \$75 billion between 1962, when it was founded, to 2002 (Looney 2006:3). Meanwhile, Jonathan Manthorpe (2013) believes that, between 1983 and 2013 the Kingdom spent US \$100 billion dollars to promote their violent, intolerant and puritanical Islamist creed around the world. To put matters into perspective, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its Communist International spent a measly US \$7 billion between 1921 and 1991 propagating its ideology around the world (Winsor 2007). Under the circumstances it is understandable why former US Under-Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, Stuart Levey, told ABC News in September 2007, “If I could somehow snap my fingers and cut off the funding from one country, it would be Saudi Arabia” (Ehrenfeld 2011).

However, more important than the amounts disbursed, are the actual activities of these charities. Whilst many of these charities are involved in useful social welfare activities, providing schools and clinics to the poor, they can also contribute to political tensions by proselytising a radical Islamism which can undermine security in a given African state by exacerbating tensions between Muslims, Christians and Animists, and between Wahhabi and Sufi-inclined Muslims. Salih (quoted in Haynes 2005:1322), for instance, powerfully argues that, “some Muslim NGOs have been used as a vehicle for spreading political Islam at an accelerated rate combining faith and material rewards among the disenfranchised Muslim poor [...] becoming cronies to militant Muslim groups, including an emergent tide of indigenous African Islamic fundamentalist movements”.

In Somalia, for instance, the Saudi-funded al-Islah organization supports and runs numerous schools, health facilities and community centres. Whilst the organization is not violent itself, its long-term political goal is to establish a theocratic Islamic state, not only within Somalia’s borders, but also in Somali-inhabited regions of neighbouring countries (International Crisis Group 2003:13). At an ideological level, such a position hardly differs from the Al Qaeda-linked Al Shabaab terrorist grouping in Somalia today. It should be noted that the diverse Sufi orders did resist al-Islah and its radical ideology, “viewing it as a form of religious and cultural imperialism” (International Crisis Group 2003:13). However, these Sufi orders lacked access to the external funds of al-Islah which allowed it to propagate its Wahhabist creed and win over converts. Al-Islah received its funding from two Saudi entities – the Muslim World League and al-Haramain. The latter was subsequently designated by the US as a terrorist entity on account of its financial ties to Al Qaeda (International Crisis Group 2003:13).

Approximately 20% of the world’s Muslims reside in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Gulf countries have targeted these for proselytization of the Islamist variety

(McCormack 2005:1). Flush with petro-dollars, Saudi Arabia has played a key role in propagating its version of Islam onto the African continent. The Saudi Muslim World League (MWL) has 16 of its foreign offices located in Sub-Saharan Africa (comprising nearly half of its foreign operations), as well as 36 offices of its International Islamic Relief Organization and several offices of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) on the continent – the latter two are subsidiary organizations of the League. WAMY played a key role in war-torn Somalia where it targeted youth for the propagation of Wahhabi Islam (McCormack 2005:6).

More than just providing such organizations with money, Saudi and Kuwaiti backers are also alleged to provide them with protection through corruption. Peter Kagwanja (2006:77) asserts that funds from the Africa Muslim Agency (a Kuwaiti charity), the CIFA Development Group (a joint Tanzanian-Saudi investment venture) and the Saudi-based petroleum company, Oilcom, were used to bribe corrupt members of Tanzania's ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi Party to turn a blind eye to the spread of Wahhabist Islam. Indeed, throughout East Africa, security officials have witnessed the close relationships between some Gulf-funded Muslim charities and local extremist groupings which have been undermining the respective countries' security. Following the August 1998 Nairobi bombing, the Kenyan government banned five Islamic NGOs on account of their alleged sympathies and funding of local Islamic fundamentalists. Those banned included Mercy Relief International, the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, Help African People, the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), and the Ibrahim Bin Abdul Aziz Al Ibrahim Foundation (Haynes 2005:1324). In similar vein, the European Intelligence Agency contends that Uganda's Islamist extremists are receiving support from the IIRO, the Islamic African Relief Agency, the World Islamic Call Society, the International Islamic Charitable Foundation, the African Charitable Society for Mother and Child Care and the Sudanese National Islamic Front (Haynes 2005:1325).

Despite the progressive tone of Qatar's state-owned propaganda arm, Al Jazeera, this Gulf state has been involved in arming, funding and even providing direct military support for Islamists (Makhmudov and Walker 2012; Barillas 2013) in northern Mali (Cartalucci 2013). Indeed, the tiny (and super-rich) Gulf emirate had established networks of madrassas, schools and charities in northern Mali, pushing the Islamist message (Allemandou 2013). Moreover, Islamist extremists like Ansar Dine and MUJAO have both received funds from Doha (Cartalucci 2013).

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has laid special emphasis on Africa's largest economy, Nigeria, for proselytization, given the country's growing influence, the fact that it is the most populous African country (of which half are Muslim (Mandaville 2007:5)) and its oil resources. Indeed, Nigeria is the world's sixth

largest oil producer and can play a crucial role as a swing producer in the event of oil shortages. This is especially important in a world which consumes one billion barrels of oil every twelve days and where demand is growing rapidly (Ghorbani, Assoulin and Zahrani 2014). Saudi Arabia's support for Islamists in northern Nigeria began in the 1960s with support to Ahmadu Bello and then Alhaji Abubakar Gumi (McCormack 2005:9). In 1978 Gumi went on to establish the Saudi-funded Jamaat Izalat al-Bida was Iqamat al-Sunna (commonly referred to as the Yan Izala) or the Society for the Eradication of Evil Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunnah (McCormack 2005:10). In many ways, Yan Izala was the ideological progenitor of today's Boko Haram. It should come as no surprise then that Boko Haram too receives financial support from Saudi Arabia (Ghorbani, Assoulin and Zahrani 2014).

The underlying point being made is that, without Arab radical Islamist indoctrination and financial support emanating from the Arab states, Islamic militancy in Africa would not have been as severe a problem, both in scale and magnitude, as it is currently.

5. INTERNAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISE OF ISLAMISM

Here a caveat is urgently needed. Just because the Islamist ideology in Africa is propagated by various Persian Gulf entities does not guarantee that a society would be prone to Islamist violence. Reflecting on this, Eva Rosander (1997:5) poses an intriguing question that, whilst Senegal, whose population is 90% Muslim, has experienced little religious conflict, why is it that Nigeria, whose population is 50% Muslim, has seen internal strife amongst Muslims, as well as violence between Muslims and Christians? The answer to the question lay in the fact that the external variables are mediated by domestic conditions. Key here is the need to problematize the African state – something which traditional counter-terrorism strategies have often failed to do.

In recent years, far from being viewed as the “hopeless continent”, Africa is being characterized as “hopeful” by publications such as *The Economist* (2011). There seems to be some empirical evidence to support such an optimistic view. After all, half a dozen African economies have been growing at more than 6% annually for the past six years and two out of every three African countries hold elections (*The Economist* 2011). However, such optimism is seriously misplaced. Whilst economic growth is taking place, such growth is occurring from a low base – reflected in the fact that Africa accounts for a dismal 2.5% of world output at purchasing power-parity, despite accounting for a sixth of the world's population (*The Economist* 2011). Moreover, such economic growth is hardly sustainable given the income disparities on the continent – a sure recipe for further socio-political

unrest. Consider here the following statistics from the African Development Bank (2013:30-36):

- 60% of Africans are engaged in low-paid, unpredictable and informal jobs;
- half of Africa's population of one billion subsists on less than US \$1,25 – the international poverty threshold;
- only half of Africa's youth is economically active.

On the political front, whilst more elections have been taking place on the continent, these have not necessarily led to liberal democracy. This is reflected in the fact that only 11 African countries have been classified as “free” by Freedom House (2013), whilst 23 have been classified as “partly free” and 22 “not free”. In attempting to explain the discrepancy between holding elections, whilst perpetuating authoritarian rule, Fareed Zakaria coined the phrase “illiberal democracy”. He defined this as, “the troubling phenomenon of elected governments systematically abusing individual rights and depriving people of liberty” (Zakariya 2013:23).

This volatile mix of economic disparities and the democratic deficit has provided the ideal recipe for sustained conflict within African polities, laying the seeds of state failure or state collapse. Indeed, in the latest Failed State Index (2013), the top five positions are all occupied by African states: Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Sudan and Chad. Moreover, no fewer than 32 African states are represented in the top fifty of the Failed State Index. Worryingly, these include Africa's biggest and most influential states, such as Nigeria at number 16, Kenya at number 17, Ethiopia at 19 and Egypt at 34.

Indeed, the African State has lurched from crisis to crisis since achieving independence. Post-colonial Africa has experienced 85 *coups d'état* and this figure passes 100 if one takes into consideration the various bloody failed attempts at regime change by the men in the military (Araoye 2012:10). Since 1945 there have been 95 conflicts on the continent, with over 45 being civil wars. To compound matters further, Africa has hosted some of the longest running conflicts in recent times. Consider here the fratricidal conflicts in Chad and Sudan lasting four decades and more, or the almost three-decade long civil war in Angola. Of course, certain regions seem to be more conflict-prone than others. The 16 West African states, for instance, have experienced 82 forms of political conflict, including 44 military *coups* (Araoye 2012:10). In the process, the African state enjoys scant legitimacy in the eyes of long-suffering citizens.

Islamists have often exploited the deteriorating economic and political conditions in African countries in order to expand their reach amongst the disaffected (McCormack 2005:1). Because of their superior organization (relative to the ineptitude and corruption of African government bureaucracies), their use

of volunteers and (of course) their access to funds from the Gulf, Islamists have been able to step in and assist desperate communities across Africa. In Mali, for instance, Islamists and their grassroots economic development have been able to establish mosques, modern schools, clinics, pharmacies and cultural centres since the 1980s (Westerlund 1997:321). Similarly, Islamists in the 1990s established a small Islamist community in Luuq. In southern Somalia they engaged in innovative cultivation techniques and fed villagers. In the process, the loyalty of citizens in these areas transferred to these Islamist groupings.

A similar dynamic, where local economic conditions are exploited, is clearly evident in the manner the Lebanese terrorist movement and Iranian funded Hezbollah (Party of God) emerged on the African continent. As Major James Love notes, Hezbollah's tried and tested *modus operandi* is also used on the African continent to great effect. Fledgling Hezbollah cells use subtle infiltration techniques to gain access to an area, without drawing attention. They gain the trust of the local populace by conducting charity fund raising activities and other social welfare programmes. This resonates very well amongst Africa's poor whose own politicians seem unresponsive to the needs of their citizens, whilst they themselves accumulate wealth. Having gained the trust of the locals, the Hezbollah cell commences to recruit from the local population, allowing the cell to begin operations. Cells would not be able to operate without building a popular support base (Love 2010).

Having created a popular support base through the exploitation of economic conditions and government neglect towards its own citizens, Hezbollah began supporting local organisations in the form of radical Shi'ite cleric Shaykh Ibrahim Zakzaky's Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), also serving to destabilize existing regimes. This was graphically illustrated when IMN members audaciously attacked the motorcade of the Emir of Zazzau, Alhaji Shehu Idri, who was on his way to a security meeting in Kaduna where the IMN was under discussion. It subsequently emerged that IMN members were instructed on religious and military matters in Iran.

One of the major problems undermining Sufi Islam relates to their proximity to the governments in existence. Sufi brotherhoods grew exponentially during the colonial period, partly as a result of their cooperation with the colonial powers. Donal Cruise O'Brien (quoted in Westerlund 1997:310) concludes that, "most Sufi orders came to collaborate willingly, even enthusiastically, with European rulers". The British, for instance, incorporated the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhoods as part of the colonial administration in northern Nigeria. In Senegal, meanwhile, the Mouridiyya Sufi brotherhoods worked with the French colonial authority in the introduction of commercial agricultural production (Westerlund 1997:310-311).

In the post-colonial period, this cooperation between Sufi orders and the respective authorities were to continue, with many Sufi leaders receiving financial

benefits from government (Westerlund 1997:311). The proximity of Sufi leaders to corrupt and authoritarian governments caused them to lose credibility and popularity in the eyes of ordinary citizens and formed the basis of vehement attacks on them by Islamists. Consequently, moderate Sufi Islam could not serve as a bulwark to radical Islamism, since the Sufi leadership was perceived to be an extension of a corrupt state.

In similar fashion, other Muslim organizations aiming to foster peace and tolerance between faiths were tarnished on account of their proximity to an often predatory and authoritarian state. In Nigeria in the 1980s, an Advisory Committee of Religious Affairs, representing both Muslims and Christians, was established and aimed to mitigate religious tensions. Similar structures came into being across the continent: the Supreme Council of Muslims in Tanzania, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, the Association des musulmans au Rwanda and the Muslim Association of Malawi (Westerlund 1997:318). Few of these have been able to mitigate sectarian strife. Because of their perceived proximity to regimes which are viewed as illegitimate, those Muslims who participate in these structures are viewed as co-opted. The fact that these Muslims often defend the incumbent governments merely serve to reinforce this perception (Westerlund 1997:319). With moderate Muslims discredited, it left the door open for Islamists to spread their message of hate.

There is another element too which accounts for the might of the Islamist juggernaut – existing cleavages within society along clan, ethnic, religious and regional lines, thereby exacerbating polarisation between groups. Africa's 3 315 ethnic groups have proven an uncomfortable fit within the continent's 54 "nation-states". Africa's post-colonial elites have exacerbated cleavages by politicizing ethnicity as a means to mass mobilization in order to protect and promote vested economic interests (Lynch 2013:102). In addition, members of the president's social group often dominate senior government positions, thereby eroding the possibility of creating an inclusive polity based on a common citizenship.

The politics of identity has seen the rupture of Sudan into North and South, the split of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the disintegration of Somalia into at least 20 mini-states, the call for an independent homeland for the Tuaregs in northern Mali, and a secessionist movement in northern Nigeria (Solomon 2012:12). Where such ethnic divisions exist and are reinforced by a common religious identity, coupled with a sense of economic marginalization, conflict beckons. With Boko Haran, Ansar Dine and Al Shabaab, there is a strong correlation between marginalized ethnic/clan identities (Hausa-Fulani in Nigeria, Tuareg in Mali and Rahanweyn in Somalia) and their use of political Islam as a form of mass mobilization, as well as to define their separateness. Traditional counter-terrorism strategies give scant regard to the relationship between religious and ethnic/clan identities.

6. CONCLUSION

With the departure of President George W Bush from the White House, the new Obama Administration also jettisoned the catchphrase, “Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)”, and instead embraced the phrase, “Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)” (Hoensball 2010). Whilst this is certainly an improvement on GWOT (critics often used to scoff at the Bush Administration declaring war on a noun!) in that CVE acknowledges the underlying ideological underpinnings driving contemporary terrorism, it is also clear that there are still several problems translating a catchphrase into a viable counter-terrorism policy. For instance, more pressure needs to be placed on Gulf countries to stop their funding of Islamism and Islamists on the continent. It is disconcerting that a country promoting Islamist extremism – Saudi Arabia – happens to be one of Washington’s closest allies. Do American policy-makers actually believe that 16 of the 19 9/11-hijackers being Saudi was merely co-incidental and unrelated to the official ideology of Saudi Arabia?

In addition, more needs to be done on the part of African states, working in conjunction with the international community, to strengthen moderate, tolerant Sufi Islam so that it can serve as a bulwark to the Islamist juggernaut. However, a Sufi Islam uncritical of the West and serving as praise singers for incumbent governments will only serve to undermine Sufism further and to reinforce Islamism. What is needed is a Sufi Islam which articulates the concerns of ordinary Muslims, even when those concerns mean criticism of incumbent governments. Where moderate Muslims serve as praise singers of corrupt governments, it will only serve to further de-legitimize moderate forces.

Islamism also spreads on the continent in the context of rapacious state elites more concerned about their own personal wealth accumulation than about the lot of ordinary citizens. In this context, Islamists provide a number of short-term solutions to increase the security of citizens – clinics, schools, food and money – and in the process they gain support for their cause. As the international community aims to assist African governments with the training of their security forces and providing them with military equipment to fight the likes of Al Shabaab, so too must it translate that assistance to pressurize African governments to be more responsive to ordinary citizens’ needs, thereby denying Islamists the grievances to exploit for their own nefarious ends.

The need to strengthen moderate voices amongst African Muslims is all the more pressing given the advances ISIS has been making on the continent. In Algeria *Jund al-Khilafah* (Soldiers of the Caliphate) has been established under Gouri Abdelmalik’s leadership, which has pledged their loyalty to ISIS (Reuters 2014). Meanwhile, the Uqba ibn Nafi Brigade has been established in Libya, which also pledged their allegiance to ISIS, as has the al-Battar Brigade (Abukar 2014). Perhaps even more worrisome is that existing groups, such as Nigeria’s Boko

Haram, has also pledged allegiance to ISIS (Abukar 2014). Now, more than ever, voices of moderation and tolerance need to be heard if the world is to avoid a clash of civilizations.

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