
The Logic of Violence in Africa's Extremist Insurgencies

by Anouar Boukhars

Abstract

What factors explain the great variation in the target selection of VE groups in Africa? Some tend to focus their attacks mostly on official targets while others show a relative preference for civilians. Most, however, tend to typically change their target selection over time. This article demonstrates that the logic of violence in Africa's fragile, conflict-prone states is driven by four factors: (1) The degree to which VE groups rely on local support to maintain the insurgency; (2) the dynamics of in-group/out-group differentiation and corresponding hostility; (3) inter-group rivalry and looming power shifts; and (4) the strategies of counterinsurgency employed by governments.

Keywords: Africa, Sahel, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, civilian targets, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, domestic support, targets, terrorism, violent extremism

Introduction

Violent extremism continues to be one of the most significant challenges to peace and security in Africa. Al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamic State affiliates, and other violent extremist groups continue to attract recruits and financing, shrewdly exploiting opportunities created by state fragility, exclusionary governance, corruption and local conflicts. From the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin to East and Southeast Africa, violent extremist (VE) groups have infiltrated existing local conflicts and aligned themselves with local causes. As these groups establish new footholds and seek to expand their reach, it is critical to assess the factors that shape their behavior and strategies.

Existing studies help explain how extremist insurgencies erupt and evolve, and why some countries are more affected than others.[1] But there are still notable gaps in understanding the choices, tactics and strategies of VE groups. This article focuses in particular on examining VE groups' logic of violence in Africa's fragile and conflict-affected areas. In these contexts, the character of violence is a dynamic process that evolves with changes in the conflict environment. As contexts evolve, the levels, types and choice of targets of violence evolve as well. In other words, the violent strategies of VE groups are not fixed, random or irrational. Rather, they constitute a conscious strategy that aligns with the political, social, and strategic imperatives of the conflict environments that VE actors operate in.

Recent literature on insurgent violence generally agrees that there is a strategic function to the violence that insurgent groups employ,[2] but scholars still disagree about the specific factors that drive insurgent tactics or the conditions under which changes occur in the choice and category of targets. In general, studies tend to emphasize a group's capabilities,[3] material resources,[4] territorial control,[5] domestic support,[6] and organizational characteristics[7] as key factors in prescribing the types of insurgent violence. Organizational ideology also features prominently in understanding insurgent groups' patterns of violent attacks, but unlike earlier studies which conceptualized ideological extremism as an autonomous factor that trumps other perspectives, ideology is increasingly seen as bound to local conditions.[8] In other words, insurgent groups that share similar ideologies may still adopt different violent strategies depending on the contexts they operate in.

Each of these perspectives advances our understanding of insurgent groups' strategies of violence in different environments. But none by itself can explain within and across groups' variations in the use of violence over time. Studies derived from the war economies literature, for example, stress the importance of economic factors and their source in determining insurgent groups' types of violence.[9] Groups with access to natural

resources[10] or external funding[11] are shown to be more prone to targeting civilians than those that depend on local populations for revenue. Such finding is closely related to a second assumption in the theories that attempt to explain anti-civilian violence, namely groups' capabilities.[12] The lack or loss of resources can affect groups' fighting capacities as well as their ability to dole out benefits to the populations they target for support. In these circumstances, groups may resort to the use of violence against civilians "as an inexpensive alternative to supplying positive incentives to (temporarily) expand their resource base." [13]

These explanations help elucidate the patterns of violence in different contexts. But as Aisha Ahmad demonstrated in the cases of Nigeria, Somalia and Pakistan, they cannot account for variations in insurgent violence "over time when economic factors are held constant." [14] Some insurgent groups have changed their strategies of violence even when their material conditions were not altered.[15] Others stayed on the same course as they experienced gains or losses in their access to economic resources.

Other influential accounts face the same challenge of explaining variations in violence tactics across and within insurgent groups and countries. Stathis Kalyvas' argument that territorial control is associated with the type of violence that occurs in intrastate conflicts has explanatory value in a number of contexts.[16] Groups that exercise a higher degree of control over a territory tend to be more likely to be discriminate and selective in the use of violence than those that do not. In Somalia, for example, al Shabaab's pattern of violence changed considerably as the group's territorial control shrank and threats to its organizational survival mounted.[17] But as other cases demonstrate, the loss of territorial control may not always lead to a change in the repertoire of violence of VE groups.[18] For example, VE groups that face high political costs for indiscriminately attacking civilians tend to exercise restraint even as their territorial control weakens. To be sure, political costs, "are not uniform and vary significantly across militant organizations." [19] Groups that are heavily reliant on local support and operate in conflict environments characterized by low out-group hostilities have a stronger incentive to limit their attacks on civilians than those that have high out-group antagonism.

As will be shown in the analysis below, insurgent groups that have ties to their constituent population but high-out group hostility are more prone to target members of the out-group when faced with threats to their organizational survival from the state and rival factions, community armed groups and militias. Indeed, insights in the literature that have made important contributions to existing debates on anti-civilian violence relate to the impact that groups' fragmentation and proliferation of rival armed groups have on the strategies of violence employed by insurgent groups.[20] Recent studies show a close association between multi-actor conflict systems marked by rivalries and attacks on civilians.[21] But while this literature offers compelling arguments into the way competition among rival groups can engender violence, it does little to elucidate the "variations in violence patterns over time." [22] The reason for this is that violence tends to vary over time in reaction to the rise or decrease in the intensity of rivalries between groups. The more intense the competition, the higher the likelihood of violent confrontations between groups, which has serious implications on the levels and types of violence employed by the belligerents.[23]

There are also a number of compelling explanations derived from studies that consider terrorism as a principal-agent problem. According to this view, the lack of leadership control over the fighters' behavior is strongly associated with high levels of violence against civilians.[24] Anecdotal evidence from northern Mali and Iraq shows how renegade local operatives had pursued their own targeting preferences, spurning in the process the advice and rebuke of their organizational hierarchy. Yet, this explanation implies that insurgent groups that do not suffer from the principal-agent problem avoid targeting civilians, which is not always the case.[25] Whether they do or not depends on the characteristics of the competitive environment in which they operate.

The same limitation applies to studies that attribute civilian targeting to "agency problems between terrorist groups when the parent (viz. principal) spawns affiliates (viz. agents)." [26] The core argument of this perspective is that affiliates are more prone to disproportionately target civilians than their parent organization because they tend to emphasize process goals (capture media attention which tends to drive more recruits into their

ranks) over outcome objectives (the stated political ends, such as the establishment of religious law, removal of foreign forces, etc.).[27] This contention, however, does not apply in all conflict environments. For example, the so-called Islamic State (IS) affiliates in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin have shown much more restraint than the parent organization in avoiding large-scale attacks on civilians.[28] The targeting strategies employed by both groups have generally focused on official targets and actors that collaborate with the state, particularly local chiefs. Some notable exceptions apply nonetheless.

In the Sahel where conflict is fueled by inter- and intra-communal rivalries over resources and rights, IS affiliate, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has targeted its enemies' ethnic constituencies as retribution for a series of militia killings on its local allies, especially the Fulani (also known as Peul), an ethnic group that has contributed several fighters to ISGS. In Niger, for example, ISGS has targeted civilians perceived to be close to Malian Tuareg and Daosahak armed groups. This does not mean that ISGS pursues an ethnic agenda, as the group aspires to be multiethnic and its "influence continues to spread among not only Peul, but also Tuareg, Djerma and Daosahak communities." [29] Who counts as an out-group antagonist depends on the conflict environment, which in the Sahel is highly fluid.

Two implications can be drawn from the relative target preferences of IS affiliates in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. First, if insurgent groups are dependent on support from local populations, they may exercise restraint in their violence against civilians. Second, in multi-actor conflict environments, locations marked by intense in-group-out-group divides—a dynamic that comes about because of pre-conflict tensions and tensions endogenous to the conflict—tend to be places of violent attacks against civilians, as out-group members are suspected of being sympathizers of VE groups or collaborators with the government and allied ethnic militias.

Building on these assumptions and the important scholarly explanations of civilian victimization in dynamic conflict contexts, this article offers insights into the evolution of violence and targeting preferences of some of the main violent extremist (VE) groups operating in Africa's hotspot environments, namely the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin and the Horn of Africa. In so doing, it identifies four key factors that shape VE groups' violent strategies: (1) The degree to which VE groups rely on local support to maintain the insurgency; (2) the dynamics of in-group/out-group differentiation and corresponding hostility; (3) intergroup rivalry and looming power shifts; and (4) the strategies of counterterrorism employed by governments.

Domestic Constituencies Matter

Groups dependent on local support are generally constrained in targeting civilians lest their actions trigger a popular backlash.[30] Indeed, much of the scholarship on intra-state conflict and insurgency posits that the support of local populations for a belligerent party is fundamental for fighting groups.[31] Unlike groups sustained by significant foreign fighters and external sources of funding, actors who lack access to external manpower and patronage have to tread carefully in wooing, persuading, cajoling, and coercing their target constituency into supporting their organizations and, most crucially, refraining from any engagement with the enemy.[32] In other words, the types of endowments fighting groups possess tend to affect the levels and types of violence targeted at civilians.[33]

This calculus incentivizes VE groups that depend on the local population for support and resources to use violence and restraint strategically. In this case, the attacks that carry the most strategic dividends are those directed at targets associated with the government or at a community/force that locals perceive as their greatest threat. In particular conflict contexts marked by strong in-group, out-group divides, the targeting of enemy constituents can be tolerated and even rewarded by VE groups' constituencies.[34]

In environments characterized by low out-group hostility, VE groups are more prone to attack official targets than indiscriminately target civilians. The targeting activities of African VE groups tend to support this point.

From ambush-style killings of police in Burkina Faso[35] to the recurrent deadly attacks on army camps in Mali[36], Niger[37], Nigeria and Somalia, VE groups intend to damage the morale of the security forces by demonstrating their vulnerability. Attacks against other government officials and supporters are also designed to demoralize the backers of the government.

The assassination of mayors, judges, imams, traditional chiefs, politicians and other symbols of the state undermine state authority and send a strong message that continued support for, and association with, the government comes with huge costs. In Burkina Faso, such attacks constitute about 80% of VE group targets.[38] The same pattern is seen in Central Mali where the Katiba Macina of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) has focused the bulk of its attacks on state representatives, especially water and forestry, defense and security forces, and magistrates that locals resent for their abuse and racketeering practices. The Katiba Macina has also targeted municipal councilors, village chiefs, imams and "collaborators".[39] For VE groups, attacks on government institutions, personnel and also infrastructure, as the attack that hit the gold mining site in northern Burkina Faso in October 2019,[40] are a win-win strategy. They demoralize the government and intimidate its supporters while crucially minimizing the risks of popular backlash associated with targeting innocent civilians.

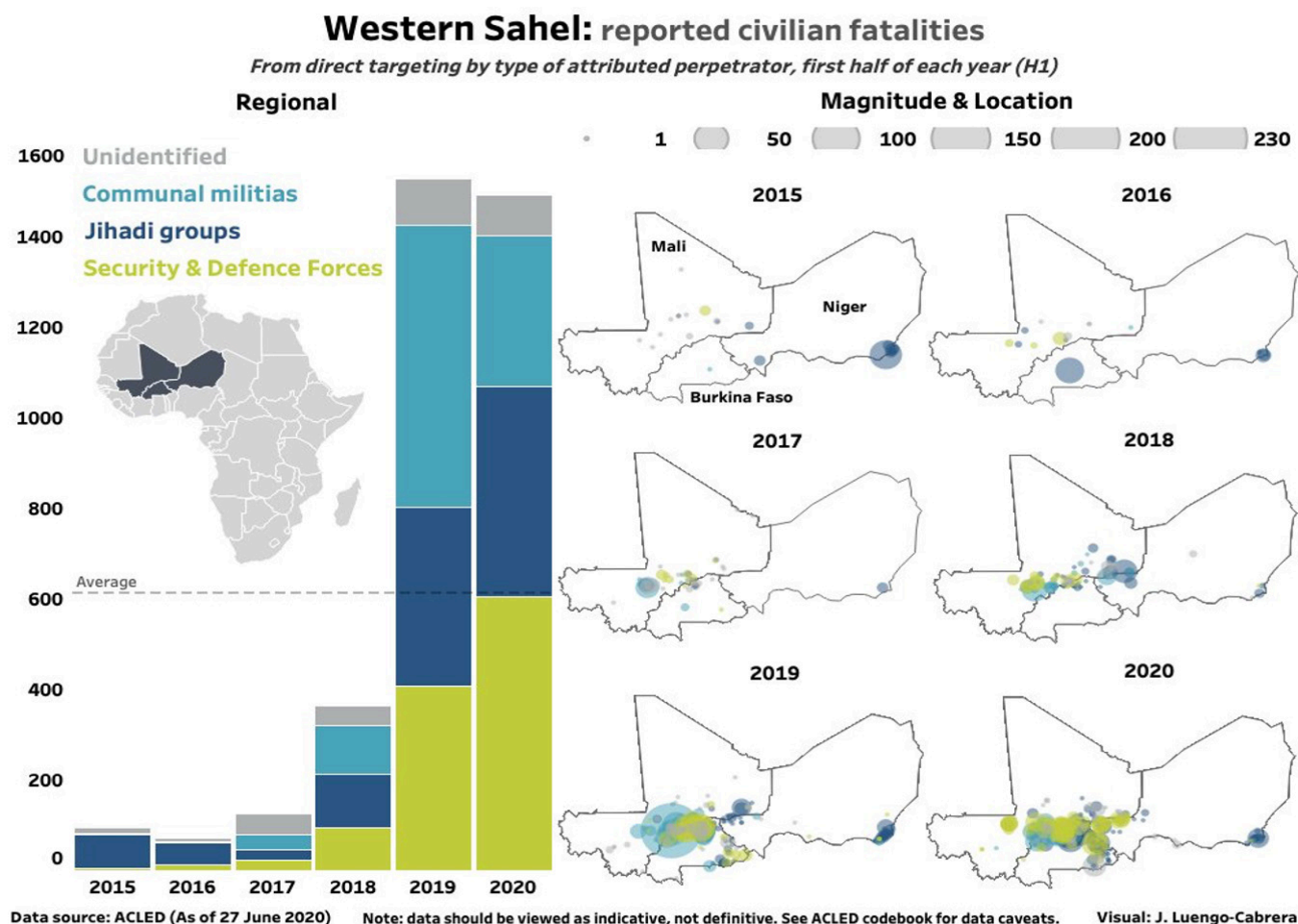
This target choice strategy, however, is subject to great variation. As stated earlier, the existence of a high degree of distrust of out-groups impacts the strategies and target choices of VE groups. The structure of the competitive environment in which violent extremists operate in some parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and other affected fragile African states, greatly shapes their groups' strategies. It is, therefore, not surprising to see Katiba Macina leader and founding member of JNIM, Amadou Kouffa move from urging his supporters in 2016 "not to attack doctors, teachers or even Christians", to publicly threatening in 2018 to take the war to communities who back the myriad self-defense groups opposed to Katiba Macina.[41] Indeed, since mid-2017, the escalation in intercommunal violence in the Sahel has contributed to a dramatic spike in violence. Violent events attributed to JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) "collectively grew nearly sevenfold" from June 2019 to June 2020.[42] This escalation in violence has also affected the targeting strategy of VE groups with strong ties to their constituencies. Since June 2019, attacks on civilians in the Sahel have increased by 36 percent.[43] As shown in the graph below,[44] posted by Crisis Group Sahel researcher, José Luengo-Cabrera, violence against civilians attributed to state security forces has also spiked, surpassing in the western Sahel that perpetrated by VE groups.

In-group Defense, Out-group Hostility

Not all the groups that are heavily dependent on local support refrain from attacking soft civilian targets. In conflict environments divided by class, race, ethnicity and religion, the level of hostility and antagonism toward out-groups tends to be acute.[45] As stated earlier, however, who counts as the "out-group" can change a lot over the course of a conflict, and the question is indeed debated internally among VE groups. In the Sahel, for example, ISGS and JNIM, are multiethnic in their composition. ISGS counts not only Fulani as members but also Tuareg, Djerma and Daosahak. JNIM has also expanded its influence with different ethnic communities, and recently, there have been several reports of JNIM mid-level leaders trying to broker understandings between the Fulani and the Dogon who in the last few years have seen conflicts between them degenerate into deadly violence.

Obviously what counts as out-group varies from one local context to another, as such distinction is fluid and largely depends on the circumstances of the conflict environment. But once such a distinction is made, VE groups gain more leeway in their targeting of civilians they deem as "complicit"[46] in the wrongs perpetrated by the government and allied militias against those the insurgents represent. The latter's constituents might be more amenable to countenance violence against groups they perceive as their greatest threat.[47] In the north of Burkina Faso, for example, VE groups have gradually expanded their attacks to target Christian churches,

calculating that such assaults might not hurt their support in a society that has nonetheless long prided itself on the peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths.[48]



For VE groups, taking on the Christian minority in the north, which they brand as transplants from other regions who have usurped jobs, rights and benefits, is also a direct reaction “to the scorched-earth tactics of the state, and the militias they work alongside.”[49] Attacks targeting churches, writes Héni Nsaibia, a senior researcher at the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), “are not a novelty: central Mali saw an analogous trend in 2017, and these took place in a similar context”, whereby militias “operate in tandem with government forces, and occasionally with international forces”, worsening in the process ethnic fault lines and spurring cycles of violence, victimization, and retaliation.[50]

The same deterioration in intercommunal relations and resultant spike in violence gripped Niger. Since the country allied with French Barkhane, a cross-border counterterrorism force, and Malian ethnic militias, from mid-2017 to mid-2018, its Tillabery region, which borders Mali and Burkina Faso, has seen a significant increase in targeting of civilians and local community leaders suspected by ISGS to be collaborating with the Nigerien state. Since April 2019, militants killed key state partners such as Arrisal Amdagh, the Tuareg leader of Inatès, and his successor, Almoubacher ag Alamjadi, whom ISGS blamed for being a “client of the apostate Nigerien regime and Christian forces in the region” as well as “ignoring warnings to desist from recruiting members of his clan to go to army training camps in Niamey.”[51]

This dynamic of targeting what VE groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger describe as duplicitous allies of governments[52] is also seen in other countries where insurgents battle government forces. In the majority Muslim north east of Kenya, for instance, al-Shabaab has targeted Christian teachers, health workers, public administrators, and construction workers to force these professionals who come from outside the region to leave in large numbers.[53] Even hotels, states a Saferworld report, “may have been targeted because they are

owned by Kikuyus (members of Kenya's dominant ethnic group, who are considered 'outsiders' in Garissa)."[54] All these examples illustrate how VE groups that operate in fluid conflict environments that have high out-group hostility tend to be more prone to attacking civilians than groups with low levels of out-group antagonism. As Louis Audet Gosselin stated in the context of the eastern regions of Burkina Faso, in areas where Christians are "far more numerous and better integrated into the social fabric" VE groups have avoided making them a target.[55] This calculus, however, changes when VE groups face significant threats to their viability, typically due to fierce competition from rival VE factions or attacks from counterinsurgent forces, namely community-based armed groups. For instance, the loss, fragmentation or contestation of territorial control could lead to high levels of violence against civilians.[56] When an insurgent group such as al-Shabab in Somalia loses ground, it tends to become more coercive toward civilians to minimize defection.

Zero-Sum Contestations and Looming Power Shifts

When groups contest one another, the competition over territory, recruits and resources can sometimes turn deadly.[57] Conflict scholars have shown how multi-actor conflict environments influence levels and types of violence.[58] Some studies have illustrated how the presence of competing insurgent groups with similar ideologies, especially religious and nationalist,[59] produce greater violence and attacks on civilians. Others have shown how the emergence of community-based armed groups and local militias as counterinsurgents influence conflict processes and greatly affect the targeting of civilians.[60]

The 1990s civil war in Algeria is a textbook case study of how rivalry between and among religious insurgent organizations shape VE groups' violent strategies. During the decade-long conflict, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) brutally targeted civilians it accused of collaborating with the Algerian military regime and since 1995 with rival Islamist insurgents.[61] The intent was to signal the GIA's ability and resolve to punish offenders and deter further transgressions. The Algerian case also demonstrates how the prospect of power shifts within and between armed groups can contribute to the escalation of violence against civilians. Dominant insurgent groups have incentives to preserve that status quo by attacking adversaries they perceive as impinging on their territory and resources.

In a competitive landscape that is marked by asymmetry in forces, the calculus to brutally stifle threats in their nascent stage makes sense for actors challenged from within and without. In Algeria, the GIA mercilessly liquidated internal dissident factions and attacked towns and villages it accused of supporting competing rebel organizations. The group directed its fury at civilians associated with its rising rival group, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the armed wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the party that was poised to win elections in 1992 before the military canceled the vote, dragging Algeria into a brutal civil war. The FIS-AIS axis was particularly threatening because it presented a less radical alternative to the GIA's uncompromising, all-out war against the Algerian military regime.[62] The threat of defections chipping away at the GIA's recruitment base made the prevention of defection a top priority for the group. The FIS-AIS posed another major challenge for the GIA. For the former, violence was a means to pressure the government to make political concessions. For the GIA, the prospect of negotiations with the regime threatened its power. When such prospect became a reality in 1996 and 1997, the GIA-led violence against civilians dramatically escalated.[63]

Most recently, deadly clashes have broken out between the Al-Qaeda coalition in the Sahel JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, founded in May of 2015 by Abu Walid al Sahrawi, former member of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter group of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Since then, the two transnational VE groups had largely tolerated each other, with ISGS refraining from infringing on JNIM territory and peacefully coexisting in theatres where their forces operated in close proximity, namely the Malian Gourma and the Soum province of Burkina Faso. The peaceful relationship came to an end "when the balance of power tilted in favor of the ISGS." [64] Throughout 2019 and 2020, the Katiba Macina—a member of the JNIM coalition—has been losing support and recruits to an increasingly

emboldened ISGS. The fear of further defections and the gradual encroachments of ISGS into Katiba Macina's territory in the Inland Niger Delta prompted JNIM "to start a fight" to put a stop to ISGS's efforts to create "a stable stronghold in [JNIM's] most vital territories." [65]

The deadly confrontations in the Sahel and other affected African regions also lend credence to the arguments that associate the proliferation of militias in fragmented civil conflicts with higher levels of violence. In the Sahel, the areas where VE groups and community-based organizations are at odds have seen the most dramatic rise in violence. In the case of central Mali, the violence perpetrated against the Fulani has had a serious impact on the strategies of Katiba Macina. Although Kouffa shied away from identifying himself with any kind of Fulani sectionalism, "there was a marked change in his rhetoric in 2018." [66] Since then, the massacre of civilians, pillaging of communities and burning of villages and mosques have reached unprecedented levels. [67] VE groups, reportedly supported by Fulani self-defense groups, have killed dozens of Bambara and Dogon, imams, village chiefs, farmers and businessmen. Ethnic Dogon and Bambara self-defense groups have targeted largely ethnic pastoral Fulani for their alleged support of VE groups, indiscriminately killing civilians, embargoing villagers, undermining livelihoods and driving thousands from their homes. [68] This cycle of tit-for-tat massacre of civilians has also ensnared Burkina Faso, where thousands of men have joined VE groups or militias such as *Koglweogo* (guardians of the bush).

For VE groups, the incentive to exercise restraint in targeting civilians diminishes when their military capability and territorial control are threatened. The impact of the explosive growth of self-defense militias and vigilante groups on the insurgents' target choice becomes more pronounced when civilians are treated as hostile out-groups. Punitive tactics of terror against civilians in the out-group can elicit local support for insurgent groups. The same calculus applies when the state counterinsurgency threatens VE groups' viability and survival.

Strategies of Counterinsurgency

Governments' counterinsurgency strategies shape insurgent violence. [69] Indiscriminate government repression tends to create a cycle of retaliation and revenge. This is particularly the case when the repression targets groups along ethnic, religious, or regional lines. [70] This distinction matters because repression deepens identity group divides and makes it very difficult for the insurgent constituency to reconcile with the government. Repressive responses also tend to raise anger among the population, radicalize those uncommitted to the cause of the insurgents, and weaken moderates. [71] The result is that even individuals who might have objected to attacking civilians in the out-group might end up sanctioning such tactics as legitimate. In cases of low out-group hostility though, insurgents have an incentive to be selective in their targeting choices, focusing mostly on government targets. Such restraint, however, tends to fade when insurgents' losses are high or when their grip on territory is seriously challenged. [72]

Armed groups "are driven by a survival instinct when under pressure," writes Joanne Crouch in the context of Somalia. The greater loss of territorial holdings and the fear of military liquidation, the greater the incentive for insurgents to lash out viciously against civilians they suspect of supporting their opponents. When threatened and cornered, al-Shabaab, for example, tightened the net on people's movement, coerced young boys into fighting, harshly punished dissent, and exacted revenge on its enemies. This violent behavior, writes Crouch, "is underpinned by political objectives." Anytime the group is threatened with elimination, she adds, "it will fight all the harder to ensure survival." [73]

Data analysis of al-Shabaab's violent actions and target selection seems to confirm Crouch's argument. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) showed that around 2010, there was a quantitative as well as qualitative change in the nature of attacks carried out by al-Shabaab. The year 2010 saw the beginning of a significant assault on the group's positions by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which resulted in the expulsion of al-Shabaab from Mogadishu in late 2011. The military pressure on the group

and its subsequent territorial reversals contributed to an escalation in violence against civilians it deemed disloyal or spies. The higher level of attacks against civilians occurred in the areas contested by al-Shabaab and the government. By contrast, the territories controlled by al-Shabaab saw lower levels of attacks.[74] This lends credence to the influential study by Kalyvas, which showed how the degree of a group's control over a territory shapes its violent strategies. The more territorial control there is in civil wars, the lesser levels of civilian victimization there might be.

Outside Somalia, and particularly in Kenya, al-Shabaab has attacked non-Muslim Kenyans "ever since Nairobi sent troops to Somalia in 2011." [75] Since then, al-Shabaab attacked shopping malls, luxury hotels, schools, construction sites, police stations, and communications masts. In the marginalized north east, the group has generally spared the ethnic Somali population, as occurred in the 2015 massacre of 148 students on a college campus in Garissa.[76] The escalation of attacks on civilians, particularly teachers who hail from outside the region, drove the government in January 2020 to order all non-native teachers to leave the area.[77] That month, al-Shabaab executed its first attack on a military base in Kenya. The attack captured international headlines, as it targeted the joint US-Kenyan military base in Lamu near the Somali border, killing a US soldier and two US military contractors, as well as destroying a US surveillance plane. Al-Shabaab has vowed to pursue its campaign of violence as long as Kenyan troops remain deployed in Somalia.

The case of Boko Haram is another example of how VE groups' target choices evolve under the repression and pressure of the government and its allies. There is a wide consensus that the killing of Mohammed Yusuf and about 1,000 Boko Haram members by Nigerian security agents in 2009 was the critical turning point in the extreme radicalization of the movement. Under Yousuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram lashed out at the Nigerian state and its symbols, including Christian communities and Muslim civilians it deemed complicitous with the brutal government crackdown on the movement.[78] Boko Haram's targeting of civilians escalated in late 2013 when government forces, backed with newly formed vigilante groups, known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), drove the group out of its urban strongholds in Maiduguri. "Until the formation of vigilante units", wrote Omar S. Mahmood and Ndubuisi Christian Ani, several "towns and villages had been spared large-scale attacks." [79]

It was also in 2013 that Boko Haram began its vicious campaign of kidnappings of both Muslim and Christian girls in northern Nigeria. This was a direct response to the government's decision to detain the families of a number of Boko Haram commanders, including the wife of its leader, Shekau, Suleiman Muhammed, the commander for Kano, and Kabiru Sokoto, the commander for Sokoto, whose wife was pregnant at the time of detention. "Boko Haram's first foray into gendered kidnapping," writes Aisha Ahmad, "therefore had a clear strategic rationale; by holding these hostages ransom, the jihadists hoped to increase their bargaining position and secure the release of their wives." [80] When the government refused to release their wives, Boko Haram's abductions escalated.

These examples demonstrate that VE groups tend to respond to mounting state pressure by adopting more brutal retaliatory violence against the state and its perceived complicitous constituency. To be sure, not all groups faced with government repression lash out at citizens they label as "collaborators". In contexts marked by low out-group hostility, VE groups have a strong incentive to exercise restraint, especially if brutal counterinsurgency practices spawn a backlash, deepening the insurgency and leaving the government worse off.

Conclusion

The spread of violent extremism and the evolution of VE groups in Africa continue to challenge scholars, policy makers, security officials and practitioners to better understand the nature and dynamics of violent extremist movements. The good news is that there have been great advances in producing more contextualized research and evidence-based knowledge that help illuminate the relevant drivers and conflict dynamics that enable VE groups to flourish in the affected African states.[81] But there is still more that we need to know beyond the

macro-level factors that drive people toward violent extremism. More research is needed to provide insight into the dynamics of VE groups themselves, particularly how they are governed, provide services, cultivate popular support and use violence. This article has sought to contribute to this line of research by providing an explanation for particular patterns of the behavior of VE groups in the African context, namely the logic behind the use of indiscriminate violence.

In so doing, it illustrated how the structure of the competitive environment in which insurgents operate helps explain the variation in VE groups' use of violence. Some VE groups focus their attacks mostly on official targets while others prioritize civilians. Most, however, tend to typically change their target selection over time, depending on the characteristics of the environment they evolve in. For example, VE groups that lack external sources of support and operate in areas characterized by low levels of out-group hostility are more likely to focus most of their attacks on state targets than civilians. The reason is that such groups need the support or at the very least the acquiescence of a fair proportion of their constituency to be viable. Those that do target civilians typically do so in multi-actor conflict environments marked by intense competition and high out-group antagonism. High levels of state repression and threat to the organizational survival of VE groups are other predictors of greater levels of violence against civilian populations, especially members of the out-group.

About the Author: **Anouar Boukhars** is a professor of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Counter-Terrorism (CT) at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), National Defense University, Washington, DC and a nonresident fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Dr. Boukhars is the author of *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2010) and co-author of *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He is also the coeditor of *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013) and *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). His articles have appeared in: *Journal of Conflict Studies*, *International Political Science Review*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, *African Security Review*, *European Security*, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, *Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel*, *World Politics Review* and *Terrorism Monitor*.

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Notes

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