Introduction

Africa’s Changing Security Landscape

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the enduring threat posed by Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other violent extremist organizations have produced a plethora of studies analyzing the driving forces behind jihadi Salafi activity across the globe. For more than a decade now, scholars, policymakers, and analysts have raised concerns about the spread of jihadi Salafism in sub-Saharan Africa. This debate calls for a new outlook on previous claims that state–Islamic relations in Africa are largely harmonious, and that the state and Islam are mutually constitutive (Gifford 2016; Haynes 2005, 2006; Sanneh 2016; Villalon 1994).

The most prominent jihadi Salafi organizations are Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the francophone Sahel, and Al-Shabaab in East Africa. In response to these new threats, many African governments have built up their military capabilities, engaged in regional security collaboration agreements, and allowed foreign powers to establish military bases on their soil (Larémont 2011; Nordic Africa Institute 2018; Tar and Bala 2019). Despite these initiatives, however, the number of attacks by jihadi Salafi groups across the continent has increased significantly since 2009.

Figure I.1 and Map I.1 illustrate these changing dynamics within sub-Saharan Africa’s security landscape. Figure I.1 contains data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). It compares the total number of jihadi Salafi terrorist attacks across sub-Saharan Africa between 2009 and 2019. In 2019, the number of such attacks peaked; since 2017, they have plateaued at a comparatively high level (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project 2019; The Economist 2020).

Jihadi Salafism clearly has emerged as a serious security challenger to many African states. In the francophone Sahel, for example, jihadi Salafism now constitutes the main security threat to the nation’s armed forces.
forces (Elischer 2019b). Map I.1 highlights the individual countries that have been affected by jihadi Salafi violence since 2000, with the number thereof having grown steadily. Most if not all studies about jihadi Salafism in Africa examine countries or geographic areas in which related organizations have established a home base and in which such violence is escalating (Ahmad 2017; Botha 2017; Chivis 2016; Comolli 2015; S. J. Hansen 2013, 2019; I. Y. Ibrahim 2017; Kendhammer and McCain 2018; Pirio 2007; Rotberg 2005; Salem 2013; Thurston 2018a, 2020; Walther and Miles 2018; Zenn 2020). Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia are probably the most studied country cases in this regard.\footnote{This is especially true for book-length studies. Nigeria’s geostrategic importance together with the regional threat that Boko Haram poses to the Lake Chad region account for that organization’s prominence in the scholarly literature on jihadi Salafism in sub-Saharan Africa.} The literature has yielded many useful insights. It has shown that the emergence and subsequent evolution of jihadi Salafi organizations constitute a dynamic process. Yet, the focus on countries or regions in which jihadi Salafi groups have turned into lasting security challengers has distracted scholarly focus from those

Figure I.1 Absolute number of jihadi Salafi terrorist attacks in sub-Saharan Africa between 2009 and 2019.
Source: ACLED: https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard
Notes: The graph compiles the following activities by groups, which the academic literature classifies as jihadi Salafi and which are operating in sub-Saharan Africa: explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, abduction/forced disappearance, remote explosive/landmine/improvised explosive device (IED), shelling/artillery/missile attack, suicide bomb, attack, grenade. All groups are listed in the Appendix.
countries that have prevented or curtailed such activity in their national territories. Very few authors have dedicated attention to the latter. Unfortunately, these observers have furthermore conducted their analysis within the confines of individual case studies (Kobo 2012; Ostebo 2011).\(^2\) As a result, systematic and comparative theorizing about why jihadi Salafi organizations establish a home base in some but not other countries has remained absent from the expanding literature on violent Islamic extremism in Africa. The discussion about the enabling factors of jihadi Salafism has thus come to represent an echo chamber. Scholars generally agree that explanations for the emergence of violent Islamic extremism must not be confined to a single variable or event. But there has been little comparative research about

\(^2\) A recent and noteworthy exception is Saalfeld (2019).
which variables matter more than others during the different stages of a given conflict between a violent extremist organization and the state.

In light of this, the book examines why some African countries have become home bases for jihadi Salafi activity while others have managed to prevent or curb homegrown forms thereof in their national territories. It directs attention to the role of the state and the effect of different official strategies in undermining the ability of jihadi Salafi organizations to establish a home base. It further examines the effect of such strategies on the subsequent stages of the conflict between homegrown jihadi Salafi organizations and the state in countries in which these organizations have established a home base. The book thus applies a state-centric approach to a geographic area of the world in which “weak statehood” – defined as the absence of viable administrative structures (H. Soifer and Vom Hau 2008) – is seen as a major impediment to the imposition of state authority and public order (International Crisis Group 2015b; Mentan 2014; Steinberg and Weber 2015). The empirical findings demonstrate that the absence of such viable administrative structures does not provide an accurate impression of the capacity of African states to structure and regulate social life regardless.

Through a comparative, inductive, and historically grounded analysis of the evolution of state–Islamic relations in ten countries of the continent, the book argues that some African states are more capable of imposing state authority on Islamic practice than others. Put differently: African states may be weak in administrative terms, but this does not impede their ability to influence social behavior (Migdal 1988) – and, hence, their ability to undermine radicalization processes. The book holds that a full account of the current dynamics of violent Islamic extremism requires an understanding of long-established patterns of state–Islamic interactions. Depending on the nature and evolution of these patterns, African states can be either radicalizers or deradicalizers of their domestic Salafi communities.

The book rests on three premises. First, religious leaders can be a resource for or a threat to the consolidation of state authority. This is particularly true in societies in which religious leaders enjoy a high degree of legitimacy and in which state leaders suffer from a low degree of public trust (Gill 1998; Koessel 2014). Second, to understand the causes behind the formation and subsequent expansion of jihadi Salafi groups, scholars need to take religious doctrine seriously. It is difficult – if not impossible – to understand the actions of any extremist organization without looking at its
ideological or religious tenets (Neumann 2016; Thurston 2016b). The book regards the appeal of jihadi Salafi groups to religious texts as an important tool for them gaining legitimacy for their actions.³ Third, to understand why jihadi Salafism has emerged as a lasting security challenger in some but not other African countries requires an understanding of the wider political and organizational playing fields in which Islamic and Salafi activity is now unfolding (Elischer 2019c; Hafez 2003; Robbins and Rubin 2013; Wiktorowicz 2001).

Reexamining Africa’s Security Landscape: The Territorial Origins of Jihadi Salafism and Their Implications for the Study of State–Islamic Relations

Salafism has become an integral part of Africa’s Islamic landscape. As elsewhere in the world, jihadis constitute a minority within the Salafi community there (Boukhars 2016b; Meijer 2009; Neumann 2016; Ostebo 2015). The Salafi creed antedates its jihadi variant by more than a millennium. Organizations and groups are rarely born extreme; their members become radicalized over time. Radicalization constitutes a process in which individuals increasingly endorse hostile and violent actions against an identified out-group (J. Berger 2018, 46–48). This process has an ideological and behavioral component to it. The former concerns ideas that are opposed to the core values of a given society, while the latter refers to the methods by which actors try to bring about changes to the status quo. Adherents to or supporters of jihadi Salafism might support resorting to violence against the state or apostates in principle but refrain from actually indulging in the practice itself (Maher 2016; Neumann 2013; Wagemakers 2012).

Although there is general agreement that radicalization processes are complex, there is no current consensus about the salience of what the individual drivers behind such radicalization are. To identify the role of the state in the radicalization processes of groups requires a distinction between homegrown (domestic) and external (foreign) jihadi Salafi organizations. In terrorism research, scholars regard groups as homegrown if perpetrator, victim, and location all match in terms of

³ The author wishes to thank Fonteh Akum and Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni from the Institute for Security Studies in Dakar, Senegal, for sharing their thoughts about the role and purpose of religious ideology.
This study focuses on organizations, not on individuals. It examines the following features of a given jihadi Salafi organization: its territorial origins; the nationalities of its leaders; the nationalities of its victims; the extent to which the group recruits jihadi fighters within a particular national territory; and the group’s ability to access a country’s Islamic sphere. The conceptual boundaries between a homegrown and an external jihadi Salafi organization are fluid. Over time, an external group may establish a foothold in more than one territory and become a domestic one outside of the country in which it originally formed.

A short discussion of Boko Haram’s geographic roots and the territorial range of its activities in Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon illustrates how a distinction between homegrown and external jihadi Salafi groups can be made. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is a textbook case of a homegrown jihadi Salafi organization. The group first formed in the northeast area of the country. Nigerian nationals are in charge of it. Nigerian Salafi scholars and clerics have played a key role in its evolution. Boko Haram’s geographic origins, the nationalities of its leadership, recruits, and victims, as well as the location of its operations all match. The number of Boko Haram attacks on civilians and state representatives has escalated in recent years (Comolli 2015; Kendhammer and McCain 2018; Thurston 2016a, 2018a).

In Chad, Boko Haram has gradually emerged as a significant security threat (Elischer 2018; International Crisis Group 2017b). The leadership of the organization does not contain any Chadian nationals. Its attacks on Chadian territory all occur in the Lac region, an area located along the country’s border with Nigeria. It is unclear to what extent Boko Haram has been able to recruit from among the Chadian population. There is no indication that the organization’s ideology has established a presence in Chad’s Islamic sphere. Taking all of these factors into consideration, Boko Haram can be classified as an external jihadi Salafi group in the context of Chad.

In Cameroon, Boko Haram has conducted attacks in the Far North Region. Studies indicate that several Cameroonian clerics propagate...
support for Boko Haram, and there are several such nationals within Boko Haram’s leadership. The organization itself is known to recruit among the Cameroonian population in the Far North region (Tull 2015; Vincent et al. 2017). In Cameroon, therefore, Boko Haram has become a homegrown jihadi group.

The distinction between homegrown and external jihadi Salafism allows for a historically accurate and process-driven analysis of the origins and subsequent evolution of jihadi Salafi organizations. It enables a distinction to be made between the territorial origins of a group and the areas to which it expanded or retreated at a later stage. In Nigeria, jihadi radicalization emerged from within the country itself. In Chad and Cameroon, jihadi Salafism entered from abroad. In Cameroon, meanwhile, jihadi Salafism appears to have established a local constituency.

Moreover, the conceptual distinction between homegrown and external jihadi Salafi organizations facilitates analysis of the role of the state in religious radicalization processes. The Nigerian state clearly failed to prevent or curb Boko Haram’s activities. Since the emergence of the group in 2009, Nigeria has seen the escalation of jihadi Salafi violence within its borders. This raises two interrelated questions: First, how could Boko Haram emerge and establish a home base for its operations in Nigeria? Second, why has the Nigerian state been unable to engage with the group in a manner that is conducive to ensuring the security and safety of its citizens? Both of these questions touch on the relationship between secular and Islamic authority. The same is true of Cameroon, where Boko Haram has, as noted, established a visible local base. In Chad, the emergence of jihadi Salafism cannot be ascribed to state–Islamic relations, however; Boko Haram activities there are the joint outcome of geographic proximity between Chad and Nigeria and porous borders between the two countries. The Appendix applies the conceptual distinction between homegrown and external jihadi Salafi groups to all countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have been victim to jihadi Salafi attacks over the course of the past twenty years.

The Core Argument: The African State as Mobilizer and Demobilizer of Homegrown Jihadi Salafism

Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations would emerge as major promoters of the Salafi creed in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1970s. The book’s core argument is that African states that established
organizational gatekeepers in the Islamic sphere prior to these developments have since managed to prevent or curb homegrown jihadi Salafi activities. To establish steering capacity in the Islamic sphere, autocratic incumbents created what this book refers to as “state-led national Islamic associations.” On paper, the activities of such associations are confined to the following: determining the date and time of the commencement of Ramadan; assisting the faithful with their annual pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia; organizing and conducting Islamic jurisprudence; and serving as an interlocutor between the state and the Muslim community.

In addition, the autocratic state elites of the 1970s provided these associations with the informal mandate to regulate access to the Islamic sphere. The purpose of such state-led national Islamic associations is to undermine challengers to state authority emanating from within the Islamic sphere by acting as informal guardians of state authority and as gatekeepers. At the same time, they provide resources and recognition to Muslim groups that the state regards as acquiescent to state authority.

To control the actions of state-led national Islamic associations, state elites maintain control over their leadership structures. In countries where state elites did establish such entities, all previously existing Islamic groups and associations were cajoled into joining the new supreme one. State-led national Islamic associations target one aspect of Islamic practice in particular: access to the Friday prayer mosques that fulfill a particularly important role within Muslim life. They bring together large gatherings of the faithful in compulsory weekly prayer. The weekly sermons provide social guidance, but they can also foster support for or resentment against secular authorities. Following Friday prayer, those remaining behind often listen to clerics in smaller circles and discuss political life. Friday prayer mosques also provide opportunities for religious education. Islamic schools are frequently affiliated with a Friday prayer mosque and its leadership. Several scholars have highlighted not only the importance of Friday prayer mosques as organizational resources for political engagement, but also their role in radicalizing the faithful (Cesari 2014; Egerton 2011; Rabasa and Benard 2015; Wiktorowicz 2001).

The creation of state-led national Islamic associations has benefited Sufi Islam, sub-Saharan Africa’s Islamic establishment, and also effectively has undermined the formation of viable Salafi communities. From
the late 1980s onward, and for reasons that differed from country to country, certain incumbents permitted the establishment of such communities. However, domestic Salafi activity still remained tied to certain informal conditions. In recent decades, these regulatory frameworks have helped negate violent Islamic extremist organizations. In line with their original intention, state-led national Islamic associations continue to undermine politically aspiring Salafi groups.

In other states, the autocratic rulers of the 1970s did not create organizational gatekeepers to the Islamic sphere. These countries saw the formation of what this book refers to as “Islamic federations,” national organizational entities that formed on the initiative of Islamic clerics. State elites recognize them as the official mouthpiece of the Muslim community, but do not interfere in their internal affairs. As a result, these associations are not subject to state involvement and have no informal mandate to regulate access to the Islamic sphere. Some countries, though, have refrained from the creation of a national Islamic association. In those with Islamic federations and those without a national Islamic organization, Salafi leaders changed the composition of the Islamic sphere to their advantage early on. Subsequently, the lack of state capacity in the Islamic sphere made these countries more susceptible to the spread of political and jihadi Salafism. Figures I.2 and I.3 display the modus operandi and the effect of state-led Islamic associations and Islamic federations, respectively, on the national Islamic landscape.
By retracing the process (or lack thereof) that led to the formation of organizational gatekeepers in the Islamic sphere and by analyzing the latter’s effect on state-Islamic relations over several decades, the book makes two key contributions to the literature. First, it helps further the long-standing political debate on state-society relations in areas of weak statehood. Migdal (1988) was the first to argue that governments in weak states can influence societal behavior via alliances between bureaucrats and representatives of civil society. Scholars analyzing the modus operandi of governance in areas of weak statehood frequently highlight the role of nonstate actors in the provision of public services (Reno 1997; Risse 2011), the promotion of state-backed societal norms (Nuñez-Mietz and Iommi 2017), or the emergence of alternative policies (Farrell and Quiggin 2017). A fourth strand examines how the tacit collaboration between the state and civil society weakens opposition movements and parties (Lust-Okar 2007; Riedl 2014). The present analysis extends this last strand of research to the relationship between the state and the Islamic sphere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, the book contributes to the debate about the mobilization and demobilization of jihadi Salafism. Countries with state-led national Islamic associations undermine political and security

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Figure I.3 Modus operandi of Islamic federations.
Source: Author’s own compilation.

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5 It is important to note that cooperation between the state and nonstate actors may lead to the erosion of the former’s authority. For more on this argument, see Mendelsohn (2016).