Violent Islamic extremism is affecting a growing number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In some, jihadi Salafi organizations have established home bases and turned into permanent security challengers. However, other countries have managed to prevent the formation or curb the spread of homegrown jihadi Salafi organizations. In this book, Sebastian Elischer provides a comparative analysis of how different West and East African states have engaged with fundamentalist Muslim groups between the 1950s and today. In doing so, he establishes a causal link between state-imposed organizational gatekeepers in the Islamic sphere and the absence of homegrown jihadi Salafism. Illustrating that the contemporary manifestation of violent Islamic extremism in sub-Saharan Africa is an outcome of strategic political decisions that are deeply embedded in countries’ autocratic pasts, he challenges conventional notions of statehood on the African continent, and provides new insight into the evolving relationships between secular and religious authority.

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Salafism and Political Order in Africa

SEBASTIAN ELISCHER
University of Florida
To my African research assistants
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Preface

I thought about writing a book about the relationship between the state and Islam for the first time during the spring of 2012. Thanks to the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, I was able to spend five weeks in Algeria. The purpose my research stay in Algiers and other cities was to examine the long-term implications of the Algerian civil war on contemporary state–Islamic relations. My conversations with Algerian clerics, members of Algerian civil society, and researchers coincided with the Tuareg–jihadi uprising in northern Mali. In Algeria, the evolving security situation in Mali led to widely different interpretations about the nature of the conflict and its root causes. I soon came to realize that to understand contemporary religious conflicts (real or perceived) requires an understanding of the historical evolution of state–Islamic relations.

Political scientists working on religion in Africa generally agree that religious authority enjoys considerably more legitimacy and public trust than state authority. However, it seemed to me that political scientists working on religion in Africa knew comparatively little about how secular authority in Africa engages with religious authority to strengthen its legitimacy and to consolidate its power. My initial work in Algeria, which should be considered a strong state, prompted me to think more systematically about how allegedly weak states in sub-Saharan Africa engage with Islamic authority.

Two publications about the relationship between secular and religious authority had a lasting effect on my thinking about state–Islamic relations: Anthony Gill’s 2008 book about religious liberty, which discusses the role of the state in determining the degree of religious liberty and Daniel Philpott’s 2007 article in the American Political Science Review, “Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion.” The article illustrates the different relationships between secular and state authority across the world.
This book would have been impossible without the help and input from many research institutions, fellow academics, and friends. Matthias Basedau from the German Institute of Global and Area studies provided me with the opportunity to spend time in Algeria and thus, inadvertently, enabled me to do some preliminary work on state–Islamic relations.

Jennifer Cook and Richard Downie from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, made me part of a research project about religious authority and the state in Africa. This enabled me to spend one month in Niger and to collect initial data for what was to become a comparative project covering ten countries in West and East Africa. Generous funding from the Gerda Henkel Foundation facilitated several research stays in Mali, Mauritania, and Chad. The University of Florida’s Humanities Scholarship Enhancement Fund enabled me to conduct additional field research in Kenya and Uganda; the department of political science provided me with resources for field research in Ghana. I am particularly thankful to the chair of the department, Dan Smith, and his support for my work. A grant from APSA’s Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs enabled me to do field research in Senegal. A research grant from the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa allowed to conduct follow-up research in Kenya.

Several research institutions in the United States and Europe invited me to present interim findings. I want to thank the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University, the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame, the German Institute for Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen, the German Development Institute in Bonn, the Center for International and Strategic Studies in Washington, DC, the African Studies Centre Leiden in the Netherlands, the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida, and the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida for hosting me.

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There is not a single day where I am not thankful that I have met you and get to walk through life with you. Without you, Jacques, and Frieda, this book would not have materialized.