

Terrorism in Africa: Explaining the Rise of Extremist Violence Against Civilians

Written by Joseph Mroszczyk and Max Abrahms

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JOSEPH MROSZCZYK AND MAX ABRAHMS, APR 9 2021

Terrorism on the continent of Africa has been rising sharply over the decade. Non-state (terrorist groups, militias, rebel groups, etc.) have increasingly targeted civilians in their campaigns of violence. From Somalia to Mali and Nigeria to Mozambique, the continent has repeatedly witnessed grisly acts of violence targeting its civilian populations. According to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), in 2015 there were 381 attacks targeting civilians in Africa resulting in 1,394 fatalities. This number rose sharply throughout the years and by 2020 there were 7,108 attacks targeting civilians resulting in 12,519 fatalities (see Figure 1) (Raleigh, et al 2010). The threat of terrorism has grown so much on the continent that by 2020 seven of the top 10 countries in the world in terms of terrorism risk were in Africa, according to global risk consultancy Verisk Maplecroft (Brown 2010).

Existing research from the literature on terrorist targeting may offer a few explanatory pathways to account for this trend. Scholars have long sought to explain how terrorist and insurgent groups develop their targeting strategies, including the potential benefits they derive from various approaches. Some of these targeting strategies may be attributed to external factors, such as inter-organizational competition, or internal factors, such as ideological justifications or principal-agent problems. At least two such theories are worthy of consideration in the African context and may help explain the trend. First, the marketplace of violence on the continent is saturated with a variety of armed groups—many of which are affiliated with major international terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State or ISIS—that are jockeying for influence, power, and access to resources. This competition, as demonstrated in the literature, can lead to increased civilian targeting. Second, the religious justifications for violence used by armed groups in Africa are also associated with the indiscriminate targeting of civilians. While many other factors contribute to terrorism in Africa, these two factors are particularly important for understanding the dramatic rise in civilian targeting.

The Empirical Weakness of the Strategic Model

Within political science, a substantial body of literature has sought to explain terrorist attacks, particularly against civilian targets. The dominant theoretical paradigm is known as the Strategic Model of Terrorism. As its name suggests, the Strategic Model posits that aggrieved groups turn to terrorism because it helps to achieve their political platform (Abrahms 2008). This perspective has led scholars to conclude that violent groups target civilians because terrorism maximizes the odds of political success given their operational constraints (Abrahms 2011; Pape 2003; Dugan, LaFree, & Piquero 2005). The logic is compelling. Terrorists are presumed to be rational actors (Crenshaw 1981). And by definition, terrorists have political motives (Schmid 2012). Thus, people are thought to engage in terrorism for the political return by coercing target countries into granting major concessions (Kydd and Walter 2006; Pape 2003).

Yet the Strategic Model is stronger theoretically than empirically. Despite the logical appeal of this theoretical framework, it rests on a weak empirical basis. Compared to more selective violence against government targets, indiscriminate violence against civilian targets is politically ineffective, even counterproductive for the perpetrators (Abrahms 2006; 2011). Targeting civilians tends to backfire on terrorist groups by lowering the chances that the

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government will grant concessions (Abrahms 2012; Abrahms & Gottfried 2016; Fortna 2015; Gaibullov & Sandler 2009; Getmansky & Sinmazdemir 2018), strengthening the resolve of target governments to pursue the terrorist group (Abrahms 2006; Berrebi & Klor 2008; Chowanietz 2010; Getmansky & Zeitzoff 2014), reducing support for the group among the population (English 2016; Muro 2018; Stanton 2016), and even curtailing the longevity of the group (Abrahms 2018; Cronin 2009; Lahoud 2012).

Due to the potential political costs, terrorist leaders often eschew organizational responsibility when operatives strike civilians (Abrahms & Conrad 2017), blame the terrorist attacks on rogue subordinates (Abrahms 2020), apologize for them (Abrahms 2018), and instead brag over social media about their attacks on government forces rather than civilians (Abrahms, Beauchamp, & Mroszczyk 2017). Although the Strategic Model is empirically contested, other explanations appear to offer considerable explanatory power particularly in accounting for the rise of civilian violence in Africa.

Organizational Competition

There is a rich literature on civilian targeting as a product of organizational competition among rebel or extremist groups. Wood and Kathman (2015) find that violence against civilians increases when rebel factions are engaged in the competition. Intergroup competition promotes civilian targeting because this organizational rivalry can threaten access to resources, increase the odds of defection among civilians, and thereby incentivize predation against the population to sustain the groups. Raleigh (2012) also attributes civilian attacks to organizational competition. Terrorism can help militant groups by creating chaos for governments and signaling strength compared to rivals. Dowd (2019) applies this organizational explanation to Sub-Saharan Africa, noting that the rise in civilian violence illustrates how violent Islamist groups “strategically adapt according to the number and relative activity levels of other armed actors” (Dowd 2019, p. 435).

The application of inter-organizational theories of terrorism to Africa is sensible given the rapid rise of competition among jihadist groups on the continent. With the rapid demise of the Caliphate in Syria (Abrahms 2018), jihadists fighters have shifted many of their operations from the Middle East to Africa, which in turn fuels additional violence as rivals jockey for resources, supporters, and credibility. This geographic trend does not appear to be short-lived. In a recent BBC article, it was cited that according to Olivier Guitta with Global Strat Risk Consultancy, “Africa is going to be the battleground of jihad for the next 20 years and it’s going to replace the Middle East” (Gardner 2020). Similarly, Colin Clarke and Jacob Zenn predict that the conflict between Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates “will drive competition for prestige, recruits, and resources, metastasizing the threat” as groups vie for organizational dominance (Clarke and Zenn 2021).

More specifically, the Sahel region has emerged as a key battleground in the conflict between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) has described the resulting terrorist violence as “unprecedented” and noted that the “humanitarian consequences are alarming” with a five-fold increase in casualties from terrorism between 2016 to 2020 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (‘Unprecedented terrorist violence’ 2020). Most of the violence has emanated from the conflict between the affiliated known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Al Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). The two groups have not only competed for resources, control over areas of operation, and recruits but have also been engaged in open hostilities against one another throughout the Sahel (Zenn and Clarke 2020). Civilians have paid the price for this inter-organizational conflict (Parkinson, Phillips, & Strobel 2020). Rida Lyammouri from the Policy Center for the New South, a Morocco-based think tank, warns that “we will continue to see repercussions against individuals and communities who are perceived to support one group over the other” and “the consequences for the civilians and the communities is not something that we should underestimate” (Tinti 2020). In the Sahel, we thus see that regional specialists attribute the rise of terrorism to inter-group competition in accordance with the theoretical literature on international conflict.

This competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State – affiliates has also exacerbated conflict in the Horn of Africa where Al Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) have fought to become the dominant jihadist group in the country since 2015, ultimately declaring war on one another in late 2018. This conflict

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has wide-reaching implications for civilian security in the country, especially if the violence spreads from the sparsely-populated Puntland countryside to more urban centers (Weiss 2019). This observation in Africa—that violence against civilians has increased as rival factions engaged in direct hostilities with one another—directly aligns with findings from Wood and Kathman (2015), demonstrating why the Al Qaeda-Islamic State rivalry has—and likely will continue—to contribute to a rising civilian death toll throughout the continent.

Rise of Religious Extremism

Religious extremism may also account for the increased civilian targeting plaguing Africa. A substantial body of research links the targeting choices of militant groups to their ideological orientation. Drake (1998) was among the first scholars to examine how the ideological orientation of a group impacts its choice of targets. The terrorism literature links religious motives in particular to more indiscriminate violence against civilians. This realization gained prominence in the 1990s when researchers identified a “new” type of terrorism. Compared to the “old terrorism,” the “new terrorism” is characterized by increased civilian targeting in the name of religion, as well as other features such as nebulous political demands and a greater of unclaimed attacks (Lesser et al. 1999). As Ranstorp (1996, p. 43) noted, this emergent wave of religiously motivated terrorism was “unprecedented, not only in its scope and the selection of targets but also in its lethality and indiscriminate character.” Since the 1990s, numerous empirical studies have found evidence for a link between Islamist terrorist groups in particular and a propensity to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians (e.g., Abrahms, Maynard & Thaler 2018; Asal et al. 2009; Enders & Sandler 2000; Henne 2012; Juergensmeyer 2005; Moghadam 2008a; Wiktorowicz & Kaltner 2003). The relationship between religion and civilian attacks is reportedly not just correlated, but causal. With religiously motivated terrorism, killing becomes “an end in itself,” according to Benjamin and Simon (2002, p. 420) rather than a politically risky tool in the bargaining process. Regardless of its practical impacts in terms of inducing concessions, the violence offers utility as an expression of the religious mission (Juergensmeyer 1997, p. 19), making religiously motivated terrorists less constrained in their targeting strategy.

While Islam itself is not new in Africa, the interpretation of the religion has changed in recent decades, at least among a critical mass of the African Muslim population. The traditional, more tolerant Sufi form of Islam has been displaced by more radical and divisive Salafist interpretations, which provide the theological backbone for Sunni jihadist groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. According to Hussein Solomon of the University of the Free State in South Africa, Saudi Arabia has contributed to this spread by building hundreds of mosques across Africa in which this interpretation has been preached (Solomon 2017). Anthropologist Abdoulaye Sounaye, discussing Saudi Arabia’s funding of mosques in conflict-ridden countries such as Niger, Nigeria, and Mali, notes that “In this way (Saudi Arabia) create(s) spaces for specific theological takes on Islam, in particular here the Salafi trend.” Sounaye underscores the connection between the spread of the Saudi-backed Salafist teachings in Africa, radicalization and conflict (Fröhlich 2019). In addition to Saudi involvement, other factors have driven the adoption of Salafist teachings on the continent, including unemployment among the youth and the well-educated, which has been linked to the adoption of Salafist ideology in other parts of the world (Quinn 2021), as well as failed governance, which has created a gap for Salafist organizations to step in and provide social services, thereby winning support from disaffected groups (Pelz 2017). Jihadist groups have used Salafist interpretations of Islam to describe its enemies, its missions and objectives and its justification for the use of violence all in religious terminologies (Moghadam 2008b), ultimately contributing to a strategy that promotes anti-civilian violence as legitimate.

This explanation accords with data in Africa linking extreme violence and religious interpretations. In Somalia, for example, al-Shabaab has killed at least 4,000 civilians from 2010-2019, based on one conservative estimate (Maruf 2020). In Nigeria, Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands of civilians since 2009 (Campbell & Harwood 2018). In Mozambique, an Islamist insurgency in the northern part of the country has killed 2,600 people in the last three years (Mwakideu 2021). The various affiliates and franchises of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that make up an elaborate network of jihadist terror organizations on the continent have been responsible for thousands of other civilian deaths over the years. These Islamist groups enjoyed a decade-long ascendancy on the continent with increased freedom of operational activity and, as a result, a steady expansion in violence targeting civilians. From June 2019 to June 2020, attacks on civilians by the Islamist groups increased 47 per cent, accounting for 31 per cent of Islamist group activity in Africa compared to 17 per cent in 2017 (African Militant Islamist Groups 2020). This proliferation of jihadist

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terrorist groups across the continent is undoubtedly at least partially to blame for the increase in civilian targeting in recent years.

Relatedly, disputes over religious identities have exacerbated ethnic and resource conflicts in Africa. In the Central African Republic, the conflict between Muslim Seleka and Christian anti-Balaka armed groups, fueled by hate speech and rhetoric, has driven violence against civilians since 2013 (Schlein 2017). In Nigeria's Middle Belt, ongoing clashes between herdsmen and farmers, while historically primarily a resource-based conflict, have taken on religious and ethnic dimensions. This conflict rose to become the top security challenge in Nigeria in 2018 after the death count surpassed that from Boko Haram (O'Grady 2018). In many cases, such disputes are not due to a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996) per se, but cultivated by militant leaders to further their personal and political agendas (McCauley 2017). When conflicts take on religious identities and justifications, civilians are often the victims.

Conclusion

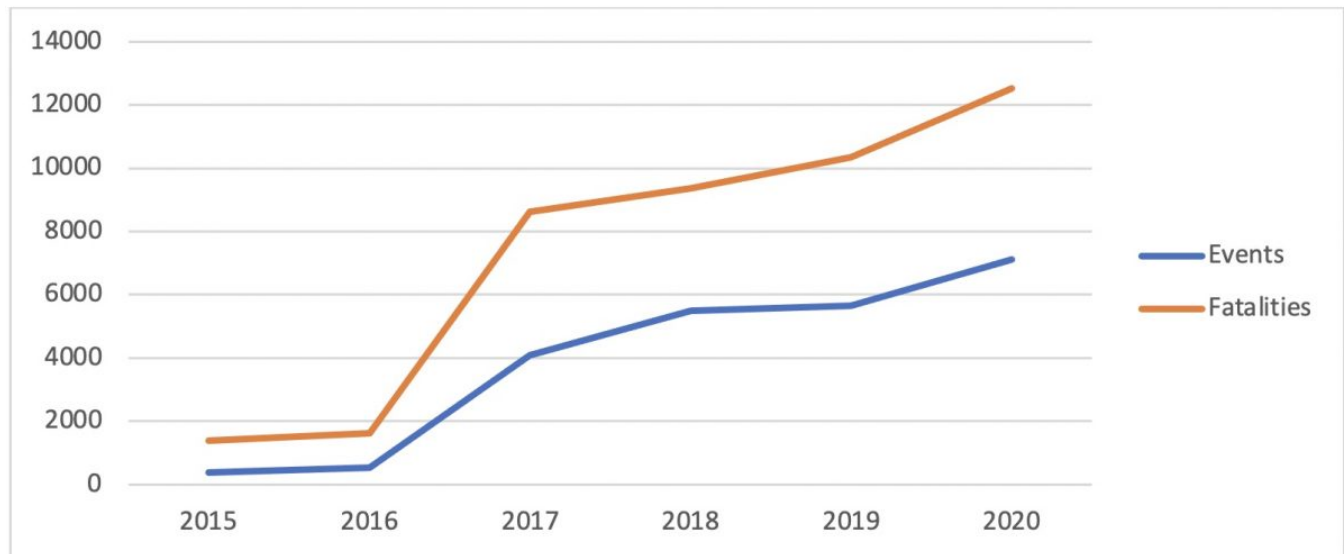
Extremist violence will continue to pose a security challenge to African countries. In this article, we identified the two main causes of terrorist group competition and renewed religious hostilities particularly since the dissolution of the Islamic State's Caliphate project in Syria (Abrahms 2018). This list is hardly exhaustive. Other factors are also contributing to the rise of civilian attacks, including the role of governments, which both perpetrate much of the violence and provoke terrorist retaliation. In tandem with terrorist attacks by non-state actors, civilian victimization by governments is on the rise in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Nsaibia 2020). Human rights groups have shown that government forces, in an effort to halt the spread of terrorist violence, have targeted civilians perceived as supportive of the extremists (Mednick 2020). Though these civilian deaths do not come at the hand of terrorist groups directly, they often strengthen them by radicalizing the population (Lake 2002). These issues could be exacerbated by a shift in focus by world powers away from counterterrorism. The political violence literature has shown that terrorists thrive when conditions are propitious. And power vacuums afford terrorists with opportunities to recruit, assemble, and mount operations (Abrahms and Glaser 2017).

As the US and other Western powers pivot from counterterrorism missions to the threats posed by China and Russia in an era of "Great Power Competition" (Mattis 2018), terrorist organizations will have even more freedom to maneuver. In December 2020, the Trump administration announced that it was pulling out its approximately 700 troops from Somalia, mostly special operations forces engaged in training and advising Somalia counterterrorism forces and also conducting missions targeting al-Shabaab (Cooper 2020). This decision has raised fears that the US withdrawal will lead to a resurgence of the group (Kenya cautions US 2020). Even before this decision, there were growing concerns that counterterrorism efforts across the continent had been failing. Speaking of the growing terrorism risk in West Africa and the Sahel, General Stephen Townsend, commander of US Africa Command, said in March 2020 that "Western and international and African efforts there are not getting the job done" (Seldin 2020). Clearly, the civilian attacks in Africa are an equifinal phenomenon in the sense that there are multiple causal pathways to explain them. Competition between terrorist groups and religious extremism continue to harm civilians, posing difficult questions for governments both inside and outside Africa about the optimal response.

Figure 1. Violence against civilians in Africa, 2015–2020. Source: ACLED.

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