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CONTENTS

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Rethinking Islamism in Western Africa

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Abstract

What factors have caused and sustained Islamism in West Africa? In answering this historically relevant question, this article re-examines the dominant narratives and hegemonic schools of thought that have attempted to tackle this phenomenon. Drawing from existing theoretical trends, this article repackages and synthesises their hypotheses into a basic formula. Escaping the ideological trappings of the past and overcoming the old structure-agency and material-ideational divide, this article argues that in West Africa, and the Sahel-Sahara region in particular, prerequisites for terrorism and factors that allow an effective dissemination of *Salafi-jihadism* are primarily located in geography (human and physical) and history. Islamism, this article argues, is thus a mix of context-derived geopolitical and contemporary factors and a case of ideational resuscitation of historical events and religious memories.

Introduction

History is fascinating. Located in the past, its burden usually plays out in the present. History hardly forgets. Indeed, "historical events… are not punctual, but extend in a before and after of time which only gradually reveal themselves" (Marrouchi, 2003, p. 6). The effects of space and place on human activity and aspirations are equally profound. Do harsh climates and treacherous deserts beget violent tenacity? Certainly, the likes of Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars remind us that ungoverned and de-securitised spaces allow lawless and criminal activity (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2013). Natural and human disasters too sow the seeds of political unrest, and, as the basic tenet of the Westphalian system of states reminds us, no country is an island and sovereignty often comes with a hefty price. The state is not an independent, isolated entity and no state is free from a neighbour in disarray. As Ali Mazrui tells us, Africa is replete with the follow-on effects of these historical and geographical variables and examples of

how they come to shape the present, and how the effects of place and space determine human action and aspirations (Mazrui, 1986, p. 41).

From Nouakchott, Adrar and Kidal, to Agadez, Ndjamena and Maiduguri, the Sahel-Sahara region of West Africa, as a number of authors note, is a turf of political unrest, human and natural disasters, and a vast expanse of ungoverned and dangerous spaces (Diarra, 2012; Gearon, 2013; Lindell & Mattsson, 2014; Renard, 2010; Roussellier, 2011; Sanders & Lau, 2012). In recent years, however, it is religious extremism that has placed the sub-region under the global microscope. Whilst Ansar ad-Deen in Mali seems curtailed, although not quite, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria is seemingly unstoppable in its ability to inflict violence and chaos. The organisation's rule of barbarity has also engulfed the neighbouring states of Chad, Cameroun and Niger. Boko Haram's leader Abu Bakr Shekau has extended his global significance from having links with al-Shabaab in Somalia to declaring allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's Islamist squad in Syria and Iraq (Onuoha, 2012b). In Mauritania, there is a nascent but dangerous wave of extremist thought, especially since 2007 (IRIN, 2008; Racelma, 2008), while Malian and Mauritanian Islamism have links with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

As Islamism stretches statecraft to the brink of anarchy in the region, it makes sense to theorise that Islamist activities in West Africa have prompted the possible emergence of a new 'Middle East' in that part of the world. Baz Lecocq's neologism, *Africanistan*, bears great theoretical significance here. The term is used for the Sahel-Sahara region due to the region's similarity—rugged topography, climatic treachery and apocalyptic ideology—to the Islamists' territory on the other side of the Red Sea: *Africanistan* is an African replica of Afghanistan (Lecocq, 2013, p. 67). In other words, West Africa is becoming the home of a 21st-century Islamist dystopia.

Yet Islamism in West Africa, if not misunderstood, is certainly poorly documented and relatively undertheorised. Indeed, scholars' approaches to the phenomenon in the field have been generally divided into two predominant theoretical camps. The first group has more or less reduced the rise of Islamism in the region to ideational and cultural variables, namely, either *fetishising* Islam (Walther & Christopoulos, 2012, 2014; Woode, 2013), 'essentialising' local cultural traits or, obversely, reducing the phenomenon to a long history of Arab domination, European colonialism and post-colonial ineptitude (Dugard, 1977; Johnson, 2001; Marrouchi, 2003). The latter camp, dismissing the first, has been quick to turn to concrete and material variables, selecting

arbitrary economic, political or institutional factors like poverty, ungoverned territory, poor governance, lack of accountability or representation (Ammour, 2012; Bayo, 2008; Diarra, 2012; Hailu, 2010; Piazza, 2006; Shaw, 2013; Walther & Retaillé, 2010) or simply the failures of certain institutions or the state itself as primary factors behind the rise of Islamism in the region (Bøås & Jennings, 2007; Newman, 2007; Sulemana, 2014).

This article attempts to present a holistic equation, an all-encompassing formula that synthesises and weds the best predominant narratives and contents of the two camps. The hypothesis here is that the conditions that foster terrorism and allow the dissemination of Salafi-jihadism can be distilled into two components: the geographical, in both its physical and human variants, and the historical. Drawing from these two schools, this article argues that Islamism is a product of context-derived geopolitical and contemporary material factors, as well as a case of ideational resuscitation of historical events and religious memories. In the process, this article postulates that terrorist groups and their activities that dwell on religious puritanism have only done so as a political strategy for mobilisation. That is, Islamism, to borrow from Karl Marx, is both the 'sigh' of the local and provincial anti-statist, identitarian and economically-oppressed factions and an opportunistic *real-politikal* strategy by terrorist vanguards.

Current Narratives around Islamism

The historical security and socio-political dilemma of our time, especially in Western Africa, is the rise of nihilistic terrorist and insurgency movements adopting Islamo-fascistic values and rhetoric. There have been numerous methodological and empirical explanations of the rise of such organisations. Following the works of authors such as Bernard Haykel (2003, 2009) and Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley (2010), some scholars have veritably reduced the rise of Islamism in West Africa to one fundamentally relevant but simplistic variable, religion. Here, one can mention the scholarly works of the likes of Ely Karmon (2014), Patrick Meehan and Jackie Speier (2011), Olivier Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos (2014), and Jacob Zenn (2013) amongst many more within this camp. The problem with this approach, as J.B. Woode (2013) illustrates, is that it supports a tendency to see Islamism not only fundamentally through the religious and cultural narrative but also, in a Huntingtonian sense (see Huntington, 1993), it completely dismisses the relevance of material socio-political realities.

On the other hand, others such as Ricardo Larémont (2011) and Wehrey & Boukhars (2013) come to analyse the situation through what Govand Azeez (2015) calls the "outsourcing of agency" (p. 10). This is an historicised internalised Eurocentric imperial tool and a program of action; one which, drawing from enlightenment racial schema and colonial experiences in the non-European world, presents a basic formula: the lower a subject within the enlightenment racial schema then the more passive, absentminded, docile and stagnant that historical subject. The African, placed below the Arab and just above the indigenous subject within the Hegelian racial schema, is thereby denied cognitive autonomy or the ability to act independently (Azeez, 2015, pp. 10-11). Accordingly, the rise of Islamism according to the likes of Boukhars and Amar (2011) is outsourced to its original source, the Middle East (also see Larémont, 2011). Here the source of Islamically-veneered violence is traced to the politics of Arab North Africa. But such discussions from the second camp are at times obsessively geopolitical and material rather than ideational. Others, like Jeremy Keenan (2004, 2005, 2008, 2009), Brennan Kraxberger (2005), Morten Bøås and Kathleen Jennings (2007), in their hypotheses, have reduced Islamism in the Sahel-Sahara to the other material factors. Here, the rise of Islamism, terror activity and upheaval is brought down to the now clichéd 'war on terror', and the related 'poverty hypothesis', governing failures, policy shortcomings and how the activities of the United States affect the sovereignty of states in the region.

Thus the general orientation in analysing terrorism in West Africa has not allowed for a synthesis of the role of the region's unique social and cultural history (advocated by the first group) and, to some extent, its geopolitics (advocated by the latter camp). There is little appraisal of Islamism that draws concurrently from the religious, political, geopolitical and, crucially, the historical ideational factors. This straightjacket narrative of global terrorism creates the danger of recycling misleading conceptions about Islamist violence in Africa (Dowd & Raleigh, 2013). It also obscures the global and local settings within which terrorist organisations in the region operate. Tariq Ali could not have presented in better terms the limitations of the above trend: "Tragedies [of terrorist activity] are always discussed as if they took place in a void, but actually each tragedy is conditioned by its setting, local and global" (Ali, 2002, p. 1). From this standpoint, historical and geopolitical settings immediately move from the periphery of the Islamist debate to its centre.

Islamism and human-physical geography

A factor that strengthens, disseminates and hegemonises political Islam in the Sahel-Sahara region is physical and human geography. Within this variable, there are four primary variants and connections: cultural, religious, economic and politico-climatic. The first, the cultural link, manifests in the cultural and ideational affinity of the Sahel-Sahara sub-region to the Arab world, primarily through North Africa and the western bank of the Red Sea. In fact, as Clarke demonstrates in his book *West Africa and Islam* (1982), this region is an ecological and cultural borderland where for over a millennium Arab-Berber people and sub-Saharan Africans have interacted and intermingled (p. 29). The symbiotic relationship between the two peoples, mainly through the Arab-Berber's dominant political, economic and cultural position vis-à-vis 'Black' African rural people, ensured that cultural interaction and exchange between the two groups often moved in a predictable asymmetrical manner. As Hall demonstrates, "the idea of Blackness was used to designate lower status people, including free slaves, as 'Blacks' (*gaa-bibi, har-bibi*)" (Hall, 2007, p. 89). As such, historically, the elite stratum throughout the region, for example Songhai society, until the advent of European colonialists, did not consider itself to be 'Black'. Instead, internalising inferiority, it designated itself as cultured, civilised, progressive and 'Arab'. Asymmetrical cultural flows, the inferior socio-political position of the indigenous Africans, the supposed high value of the Arab-Islamic cultures and the sheer power of their political establishments, ensured the spread of wider Arabic normative cultural values and practices. By the 19th century, the highly Arabised people of the region had entirely internalised, acquired and normalised these previously foreign cultural traits and principles. Today, the cultural link and commonality between the two has reached such a point that the region can arguably be included as part of the larger Middle East.

The second, the religious link, manifests in the affinity of the entire West African region to the Islamic world through the sheer numerical strength of Muslims. As Mazrui (1986) reminds us, "West Africa is the heartland of Black Africa's Islam" (p. 94). Stephen Harmon, in his book *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region* (2014), points out that there "are over 150 million Muslims in West Africa, some 15 per cent of the world's total Muslim population"(p. 112). Harmon (2014) goes on to demonstrate that Islam in the region is largely divided into two main categories. The first and most popular category is "moderate Islam, usually traditional and/or indigenous, including the Sufi

brotherhood and various Islamic civic organizations" (Harmon, 2014, p.112). This category dates back roughly to the 15th century; it propagates "individual spiritual development as well as the master-disciple relationship and the veneration of past Sufi masters" (Harmon, 2014, p. 112). The Sufi brotherhood, as Harmon points out, has a "reputation for resisting injustice, whether social corruption, colonial rule, or post-independence tyranny" (Harmon, 2014, p. 112). The second and more recently established and flourishing category is radical Islam, which includes groups likes AQIM and Boko Haram. Usually influenced by and enchained to external Islamist networks in the Middle East, these groups grew out of puritan revivalist movements of the 1970s, like those of Nigerian Yan Izala and the Malian Wahhabi movements. Whether one is referring to Sufi Islam or radical Islam, the religious connection between Muslim Africa and the Islamic world is a strong one. West Africa is spiritually linked to the *Umma* (the global Muslim community) and the Middle East, and even though the Muslims in the region do not constitute a monolithic bloc, nevertheless, the region is a great source of ideological and material strength for terrorist entities that wish to draw from the social, cultural, economic and political capital of the region for their own political purposes.

The third factor, and a dominant second-camp hypothesis, is the economic connection. This variable is summed up by the fact that mass poverty begets political violence. The 'relative deprivation' paradigm for political violence put forward by Ted R. Gurr in *Why Men Rebel* (1970) suggests that, irrespective of other factors, the success of terror organisations, especially in the global south, depends largely on the economic condition and socio-economic disenfranchisement of the local population (Agbiboa, 2013, p. 151; Piazza, 2006, p. 162). Whilst certainly many terrorists are not poor—Osama bin Laden and the more recent 'Jihadi John', the bourgeois Kuwaiti terrorist, exemplify this—nevertheless, poverty and socio-economic vulnerability are major factors in the way Islamism is advanced in the west of Africa. The frustrations of the masses propel political violence as an alternative form of expressing dissent as Robert D. Kaplan (1994, p. 66), in his seminal work *The Coming Anarchy,* reminds us. The idea is that the subaltern and lower classes experience a greater subjective feeling of powerlessness, and in areas where there are no legitimate political outlets terrorism and political violence become a desperate effort to reclaim control over lost agency and lives.

In their desperation to find a livelihood and a source of income and belonging, those frustrated masses fall prey to the rampaging radicalism

of militant Jihadism. It is for these reasons that West Africa presents an imminent threat of radicalisation and political violence in the region and abroad (Kaplan, 1994, p. 66). In this context, the primary factors for the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria are the acute inequality in wealth, the pervasiveness of poverty and the resultant general dissatisfaction amongst the youth, mostly in the North (Sulemana, 2014). Poverty seems to be a constant factor in regions where terror insurgencies and activities are rife.

Finally, the politico-climatic variable—a second-camp proposition— manifests in the political and security uncertainties associated with a hostile, treacherous and unpredictable landscape. Alem Hailu (2010) best describes the effects of physical geography and its relation to security issues within Western Africa:

> The conducive atmosphere created by the breeding grounds of poverty, alienation and polarization is compounded by the weak state's incapacity to provide services or monitor its poorly controlled border and vast uninhabitable spaces that render it 'attractive for recruiting and hiding places' [for aspiring terrorists] (p. 48).

Collectively, these factors define the geopolitical significance of the Sahel-Sahara, in the wider region and in international politics. They have made the possibility of large-scale extremist 'Islamist' violence a possibility in the Sahel-Sahara region. Islamism in this region is therefore in anarchy, which, despite warnings, seems to have arrived unannounced. After all, if the turf of terrorism in the Middle East is a treacherous desert, so is the arena of Islamist activity in the Sahel-Sahara. If the Middle East is predominantly Muslim and Arab, the Sahel-Sahara region is predominantly Muslim and Arabised.

A perfect recent case study of how these factors come to enhance the geopolitical significance of the region is the 2011 revolution in Libya that toppled the Muammar Gadhafi government. Works of authors like Scott Shaw (2013), Laurence Ammour (2012), and Francesco Strazzari and Simon Tholens (2014) suggest a near consensus in strategic security studies on the fact that the Libyan revolution has been a significant contributor to the rise and the sophistication of neighbouring insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, Ansar ad-Deen and similar groups in Mauritania and Chad (also see Sanders & Lau, 2012). The political-climatic variable is clearly evident in the impact of Gadhafi's ousting. The security of the Sahel-Sahara region came to be further disturbed by the sheer lack of political certainty, the weakening or obliteration of the security apparatus on these borders, as well as the proliferation of

unregulated weapons and Islamist fighters, who went on to operate within previously uninhabitable or securitised spaces.

There are also cases within the region where an insurgency in one country has emboldened another in a different country. No country in the region is free from a neighbour in disarray. Cases of this include links between insurgencies in Mali, Nigeria and Mauritania (Onuoha & Thurston, 2013; Zenn, 2013). Whilst the topography and climate of the Sahel-Sahara region have contributed to this, the cultural and religious links between the region and the Middle East and among the countries of the region have played significant roles. The cultural and religious synergies between the Middle East and the Sahel-Sahara arc of Africa, and the implications of perilous topography, have always made large-scale Islamism in West Africa a question of when, not if.

The Historical Narrative

There is another strand of connections between the Sahel-Sahara region and the Islamic world that provides a background to the phenomenon of Islamism. As significant as the first variable is the historical factor—often pushed by the first camp. History plays a fundamental role in the rise of Islamism in the region, for it is only through archaic solidified and objectified narratives that current socio-political identities and images of the self are given credence. In other words, if the geopolitical dimension of the Sahel-Sahara highlights the impact of religious, cultural, politico-climatic and economic variables on the rise of Islamism, the historical factor highlights mainly the ideological and political connections of the region to the wider Islamist movement.

In this sense, Islam in the region has been ideologically and politically instrumentalised in two fundamental ways: as an anticolonial emancipatory tool and as a master narrative igniting fundamentalist revivalist movements. Regarding the first, Islam's anti-authoritarian and anti-orthodox characteristics, its anti-ecclesiasticism as well as its emphasis on egalitarian, communal and consensus-driven values has ensured that at the hands of colonised subjects it becomes an explosive and empowering ideological tool. In fact, the history of the Middle East and Africa is full of such examples. In the Middle East and Arab world examples include the Cairo revolt of 1798, the Urabi revolt in Egypt (1879-1882), the Sheikh Barzanji rebellion in Kurdistan (1919-1924) and the Omar Mukhtar rebellion in Libya (1912-1931). Notable sub-Saharan African examples include the Mahdi uprising in Sudan (1882-1885), the Hausa-Fulani revolt of the Imperial Sokoto Caliphate under

Dan Fodio and his successors (1804-1903), Mauride resistance in Senegal under Ahmadou Bamba (1891-1927) and Azawad resistance to post-Berlin French rule in what today comprises northern Mali, north-eastern Mauritania, northern Niger, southern Algeria and Libya and the extreme northwest of Chad. This anti-imperialist dimension of Islam highlights its historical role in the Middle East and Africa's anti-colonial and independence struggles.

On the other hand, the latter utilisation of Islam by political entities has functioned as a master narrative pushing for the reinvigoration of the supposed "fallen Islam" (Mazrui, 2006, p. 171). This is a reference to the religion's glorious past and its imperial splendour in the Arabian Peninsula, North and West Africa and greater Asia. Islamic conquest and ascendency, which started in the seventh century, witnessed domination in the world of science, education and law. However, "mighty Islam" fell with the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 (Özoğlu, 2011, p. 8). The Islamist master narrative is thus a nostalgic ideological tool looking primarily to the past, the past of Islamic conquest and ascendency, with the hope of creating a collective homogenous puritan identity. To borrow from John Turner, this atavistic historical image of Islam is a "conservative, millenarian, Wahhabi, Pan-Islamic, apocalyptical, conspiratorial, neo-fundamentalist and counter-hegemonic" narrative (Turner, 2014, p. 119).

In the region, both the lament of 'fallen Islam' and hopes of reviving and restoring the glorious history of Islamic civilisation foment similar feelings as in the Middle East. Indeed, newspaper cartoon portrayals of the last prophet of Islam did not only expose the "temper of militant Islam in the gulf"; it did so in Kano, Dakar, Niamey and Nouakchott as well (Booth, 2007, p. 450): a 'lament' of humiliation but also a cry for reviving the old empire—a 'hope' for the restoration of ties between West Africa and the Sahel-Sahara to Islam and the Muslim world. These ties are often strengthened by global and local events.

It is only reasonable to conceive that 150 million West African Muslims, to borrow from Mazrui (1986, p. 94), in the "heartland of Black Africa's Islam" would respond to calls for Islamic revivalism. Whilst revivalist Islam has manifested in many forms, Samuel Huntington's disturbing 'clash of civilisations' thesis has not bode well for world security, as it has played a central role in forming and disseminating the Islamist narrative (Huntington, 1993). Invigorating old Islamist dispositions, this narrative exemplifying the conservatives in the first camp, has in turn strengthened the contemporary Islamists' belief that not only will the next fault line of world conflict be religious,

as in Huntington's thesis, but also that global religious confrontation is inevitable and nigh. For Islamists, jihad is a question of redemption from humiliation, a step towards subjectivity and liberation. In West Africa, as elsewhere, global Islamic revivalism has tended to be messianic, as Islamist insurgents believe their actions to be acts of absolution.

This mode of thinking is rooted in the region's religious history as it stems from Islam's position on the coming of the Mahdi. Messianism is a central theme in the Islamist ideological artillery, shaping the politics of Islamist movements such as those of Sheikh Dan Fodio, Sheikh Ahmadu Lobbo I of Masina and Sheikh Umar Tall of Tokolor (see Last, cited in Clarke, 1982, p. 119). Like the belief that the establishment of a caliphate in Sudan will hasten the coming of the Islamic Mahdi, the possibility has existed in West Africa for religious fanatics to believe that the establishment of terror cells to threaten and drive out institutions of western democracy and western interests will hasten the return of historical Islam (Bassil, 2013, p. 164). In Nigeria, a demonstration of this is the *Maitatsine* Movement of the 1980s, led by Cameroonian Mohammed Marwa, who claimed to be the Islamic Mahdi, and the rescuer of Islam from, according to him, the corruption of western democracy and technology (Adesoji, 2011). The ongoing Boko Haram insurgency is a post-9/11 offshoot of *Maitatsine*. Interestingly, Muhammad Isa further demonstrates the link between the region and the Middle East, through the way the *Maitatsine* movement was explained as an after-effect of the 1979 Iranian revolution (Isa, 2010). The latter, Boko Haram, has used names like the Nigerian Taliban, and is widely seen as a West African extension of al-Qaeda (Gourley, 2012; Onuoha, 2012a; Roggio, 2012; Sage, 2011). This global connection between Islamist thought and specific terror cells in West Africa also applies to groups in Mali, Chad and Mauritania (Gearon, 2013; Lecocq, 2013; Lounnas, 2014; Shaw, 2013).

Shifts in U.S. foreign policy towards the Muslim world after the events of 11 September 2001, and the twin wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) reignited this historical revivalist movement. These events pricked old historical wounds and accentuated the ideological hatred that would provide anchorage for global extremist thought in the post-9/11 world. There are also a lot of recent global events that further feed this historical urge to revive Islamism. Only thirty years ago, aggrieved elements in the Muslim world, such as *al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimoon* [the Muslim Brotherhood], had nursed the opportunity to contest the 'unjust' creation of Israel in Palestine (Saikal, 2003, pp. 23-

24). Furthermore, U.S. and Western activities in other Muslim territories have at times run parallel to the classic portrait of the U.S. and its allies as pursuing a hegemonic empire over the Muslim world. This post-9/11 and anti-imperial resentment has as equal potency in West Africa as it does in the Middle East. What makes global jihad 'global' is an ideology that pays no respect to post-19th century national or regional boundaries, or associated Westphalian notions of sovereignty. In West Africa, the effect of the global wave of militant thought is in this sense equally crucial if not more so. Indeed, groups like Ansar ad-Deen, Boko Haram and Ansar al-Sharia have continually referenced, and shown willingness to identify with, the greater global jihadi current rather than present themselves as internal national movements. In justifying their struggle, Islamist groups in West Africa employ a propaganda strategy that not only resonates with groups such as al-Qaeda and the so-called 'Islamic State', but also draws directly from the same historical master narrative.

Coming back closer to home, the local settings and conditions also embolden the historical Islamist narrative in West Africa. After all, Huntington's categorisation of world cultures and civilisations placed most of the West African sub-region not under African civilisation but rather Islamic. Ironically, Mazrui's estimates of the Muslim demography in West Africa may perhaps exonerate Huntington: "Guinea (Conakry) and Niger are each over 90 per cent Muslim, Senegal and Mali each over 80 per cent, Chad over 60 per cent, Sierra Leone over 50 per cent, Cameroon over 40 per cent, the Ivory Coast over 30 per cent, and so on" (Mazrui, 1986, pp. 93-94). Historically, West Africa has also been the home of the most sophisticated empires, and they were predominantly Muslim, if not Islamic. Notable and most astounding are the Soninke- and Mende-speaking Ghana Empire (in 830–1235 AD which incorporated present day Mali and Mauritania), the Mali Empire (in 1230–1600 AD which incorporated present day Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Niger etc.) and the Songhai Empire (in 1464–1591 AD which incorporated all the above-listed countries in addition to Nigeria, Benin and the Gambia) (Clarke, 1982; McKissack & McKissack, 1995).

This history of the 'mighty Islam' in West Africa resonates with the glory of more recent Islamic empires such as the Kanem-Bornu Empire (700-1387 AD), the Sokoto Caliphate (1803-1904) and the Tokolor Imamate of Sheikh Umar Sa'id Tall (1864-1893 AD) (Clarke, 1982, p. 136; Nachtigal, 1971). In the end, 'mighty Islam' comes as a glorious and, until recently, vivid memory for the locals. Whilst contemporary

global 'humiliations' have been a cause for lament, an historical 'glory' has promised hope. The jihadi narrative in West Africa has positioned Islamism as the transition between humiliation and glory, between lament and hope. The Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria is known for its copious and rhetorical reference to the 'jihad' waged by Osman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate (Adesoji, 2011; Cook, 2011). Similarly, Iyad Ag Ali's Ansar ad-Deen group in Mali has made references to global jihad as well as to the political and religious success of the Sahel-Sahara region under historical Islam (Shuriye & Ibrahim, 2013).

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, holistically the plethora of scholarly works that attempt to explain the rise of Islamism in West Africa can be brought down to two schools of thought. The first, illustrated by the works of Haykel, Moskalenko, McCauley, Karmon, Meechanan and Speier, Walther and Chistopoulos, simply reduces the rise of terror movements in the region to the impact of Islam. The fetishisation of Islam and reduction of the 'Muslim' to an automaton moved by a set of rigid inscriptions (scripture) creates a particular methodological approach that reduces this complex phenomenon to nothing but cultural and ideational matters. Epitomising this argument from the first camp is Bernard Lewis's seminal piece, the *Roots of Muslim Rage* (1990). Lewis famously argued that Islamist rage and violence is rooted in the cultural and civilisational fallacies of Islam. As Lewis (1990) writes:

> It should now be clear that we are facing a[n] [Islamic] mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both (p. 60).

On the other hand, there is the second camp, including the likes of Kaplan, Gurr, Hailu, Edward Newman and Bayo Ogunrotifa, who reduce the phenomena of Islamism to merely concrete material matters. Within this camp, poverty, failed states, weak governance, certain arbitrary geopolitical factors and the decline of security are given as possible factors to explain Islamist movements like Boko Haram, Ansar ad-Deen and AQIM in West African countries ranging from Mauritania through Mali to Nigeria.

The intention of this article has been to create a general

methodological equation that binds the structure-agency and the material-ideational factors. This was done through synthesising their variables into a dual causality: the human-physical geographical factors and the historical factors. Moreover, this article has argued that due to its location and relation to Arab North Africa and the Middle East, human-physical geography presents the region of West Africa as vulnerable in the face of Islamists. Here, *Arabisation* or the ancient acquired cultural resemblances, hegemonisation of Islam in the region, the endless economic shortcomings and the de-securitised and largely uninhabitable politico-climatic spaces ensure the empowerment and rise of Islamists. On the other hand, the ongoing historical diachronic Islamic collective memories of a glorified past and empire are revived persistently through global and local cultural and political conflicts of today. Conjointly, these factors continue to be the fuel that adds to the fire of Islamism.

In short, the success of historical Islam in the region and the sheer numerical strength of Muslims present an oxymoron in West Africa. Whilst geopolitical and historical connectors have the potential of presenting Islam as a useful social force against economic and political handicaps and injustices in West Africa, ironically, these same variables have also made the region 'vulnerable' and placed it in the hands of militant jihadism. The lesson from the foregoing is that any policy package designed to respond to Islamism in this region of the world must be pursued on the premise that terror activities that dwell on religious puritanism have only done so as a strategy of mobilising the sighs and cries of the oppressed, and appropriating them through appealing to Islam is merely an opportunistic *real-politikal* strategy.

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