Cultural and religious demography and violent Islamist groups in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between cultural demography and Islamist violence in Africa in a cross-national time series study. It argues that while religious demography can explain some aspects of Islamist violence, these explanations have to date been privileged over analyses which take into account the way institutional and political relations of the state incentivize and de-incentivize the salience of particular identities in collective action. This paper uses disaggregated conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) to test the relationships between religious group size, diversity, ethnicity and Islamist violence. The results highlight that approaches to explaining Islamist violence emphasising the cultural specificity of Islam as particularly prone to violence, and those focusing on competition between diverse identity groups as explanations for the rise of Islamist violence are misguided. Rather, ethnic political power relations emerge as important interacting factors in religious identity conflict, with Islamist violence as an example. The article makes an original contribution both empirically, by testing existing theories of Islamist violence on previously unanalysed data; and theoretically, by highlighting the importance of political marginalisation and strategic identity construction as explanations for violent Islamist activity.

Introduction

The threat of Islamist violence and its roots in large Muslim populations is an enduring theme in discussions of conflict, international security and state stability (see Huntington, 1993, 1996). Several explanations posit a link between the absolute and relative size of Muslim populations and the threat of violence, either through socio-cultural explanations of Islam's purported violent tendencies, or through demographic mechanisms associated with population size, competition and diversity.

Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly relevant to these discussions for multiple reasons: first, the overall and proportional levels of Islamist violence on the continent have increased over the past fifteen years (Dowd, 2013). Key strategic and regionally significant conflicts have featured or been dominated by violent Islamist activity, including conflict in Somalia, Nigeria, Mali and Kenya, with consequences for national, regional and continental stability. Meanwhile, implicit assumptions about the risk, fear and threat of African instability in particular as a 'breeding ground' for terrorism continue to inform engagement with the continent (Abrahamsen, 2004). In 2004, then UK Foreign Office Minister Chris Mullin reflected on the 'little known fact that there have been more Al Qaida attacks in Africa than anywhere else in the world,' before noting that it 'is also not widely realised that there are more Muslims south of the Sahara than in the Middle East.' (quoted in Abrahamsen, 2004, p. 679) More recently, Cohen (2013, p. 63) characterised 'Al Qaeda in Africa' as 'the creeping menace to Sub-Sahara's 500 million Muslims.'

Alongside widely articulated media and policy narratives, there are several theoretical approaches to explaining identity and religious violence which are relevant to a discussion of Islamist militancy. This article derives explicit hypotheses based on competing theories of identity conflict to explain why Islamist violence has emerged in particular areas in Africa. These theories include the relative size of Muslim populations, with an emphasis on socio-cultural explanations for religiously associated violence; the diversity of populations with implications for competition between groups; and the instrumental use of identity in complex, multi-identity contexts. These hypotheses are tested with data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh, Linke, Hegre, & Karlsen, 2010).

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The paper makes three original contributions to the understanding of violent Islamist groups and identity conflicts more generally in the African context. First, it introduces a novel theory on the interaction between ethnicity, religious identity, and political power relations as it pertains to Islamist violence. Specifically, it argues that the institutional characteristics of the state and the political power relations that emerge from the political marginalisation or dominance of particular ethnic groups incentivise and de-incentivise the salience of discrete identity categories. Where alternative identity categories such as ethnicity are too marginalised to provide a meaningful basis for collective action, the utilisation of religious identity as a mobilising category is a strategic and rational response by conflict actors to the local operating environment. In the case presented here, religious, and specifically Islamist, identity becomes a strategically viable basis for the collective action of ethnically marginalised groups. The reverse is also true: the presence of politically dominant ethnic groups is negatively related to the predicted number of violent Islamist events. In contexts where an alternative basis of collective action — such as ethnicity — is strategically beneficial for groups, collective mobilisation around categories such as religion is unnecessary. These findings highlight the importance of political power relations as drivers of Islamist violence, and the category's strategic and dynamic nature.

Second, the paper finds that there is no relationship between Muslim population levels and overall levels of political violence, further refuting persistent claims of the specificity of Islam as a particularly violent socio-cultural phenomenon. While there is no clear relationship between Muslim population size and overall levels of political violence, at the same time there are an increasing number of violent groups that claim to have an Islamist agenda and several countries have witnessed a drastic increase in violence attributed to these groups. As such, the questions of Islamist violence in particular, and the discrete contexts in which it emerges, are pressing concerns.

Third, the research shows that contrary to literature emphasising the role of diversity and competition in the mobilisation of identity-based conflict, Islamist violence is more likely in contexts where a high proportion of the population is Muslim, than in those which are religiously diverse. This finding has implications for the way Islamist violence is conceptualised: rather than a minority identity group rebelling against a majority group, or diverse groups competing with other communities, Islamist violence is lower in religiously diverse contexts. As such, theories which explicitly or implicitly position Islamist violence in the context of a clash of civilizations, wherein Islamist violence is primarily directed at non-Muslim communities, often neglect or obscure the high level Islamist violence which takes place in predominantly Muslim contexts. In other words, while some prominent instances of Islamist violence involve attacks in non-Muslim or religiously diverse areas, the degree to which Islamist violence is concentrated in Muslim-dominant communities is attested to in this paper's results, and may be under-represented in culturalist theories.

There is a large and growing literature dealing with the question of Islamist violence, the consideration of which requires a clear definition of terms. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Islamist' refers to political or social activity by groups which proactively promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state and/or society (Esposito, 2003, p. 151; ICG, 2005). Islamist groups are distinguished from adherents of Islam more broadly by their instrumentalization of Islam in the pursuit of social and political objectives (Denoeux, 2002, p. 61), rather than Islam serving exclusively as a personal identity (Denoeux, 2002, p. 57). Islamist activists and groups are also not synonymous with Islamic counterparts: the latter might be used to describe groups whose work or activity draws on referents from Islam, but need not necessarily imply social or political activism. For example, an Islamic expert may be engaged in the study of Islam, but might not endorse its operationalization as an agenda for political action, while Islamist groups are primarily concerned with the latter.

Islamist activity is manifest across various disciplines and traditions within Islam, encompassing a range of political, social and religious activity (ICG, 2005). This research focuses on violent Islamist groups, distinguished by the utilization of force in pursuit of an Islamist-framed agenda. Violent Islamist groups are necessarily a variegated category of actors, emerging in different contexts shaped by various historical and cultural factors in their areas of operation, and influenced by differential ideological, theological and political doctrines. The scope of this paper necessarily obscures some inter- and intra-group variation through the construction of a single 'Islamist' category, but this simplification is necessary at this stage in order to engage with the emergence and activity of these groups as a category. A full list of groups in this category is attached as an Appendix.[1]

In general, there are limited quantitative analyses of violent Islamist activity (Bravo & Dias, 2006; Testas, 2004). Furthermore, much existing research on violent Islamist activity is limited to terrorism research. This field illuminates important, but limited, aspects of violent conflict. The challenges of establishing consensus on a definition of terrorism notwithstanding (see Cooper, 2001; Dedeoglu, 2003), common to many operational definitions is the intended psychological effect of extreme fear, and the targeting of individuals or groups as 'message generators' to a wider population (Schmid & Jongman, 2005, p. 28), while contested dimensions include whether state action or the targeting of combatants constitute terrorism (Coady, 2004). These criteria variously exclude non-spectacular violent acts undertaken without the intention of influencing observers, and attacks on armed combatants, both of which are included in a broader definition of political violence (see Raleigh, Linke, & Dowd, 2014). The same shortcoming is apparent in studies of conflict which focus on civil war only: the activity of the Nigerian Islamist group commonly known as Boko Haram, does not easily fit into the category of civil war violence, as its tactics evolve to increasingly target civilians over engagement with security forces (Dowd, 2013).

Analysing the circumstances within which a group as a whole operates — rather than investigating only a subset of its actions — offers a better understanding of the conditions in which actors emerge, and how these shape their activity. This is particularly important in light of dominant narratives of Islamist violence which often fail to problematise the association between Muslim populations and violent Islamist groups. Reorienting investigation to the political context in which these groups operate is crucial to moving beyond reductive assumptions.

Finally, among the regionally-specific research on African conflict, while there is considerable literature on the role of ethnic diversity on violent conflict, religious diversity has been relatively neglected, and the interaction between these two identity categories almost entirely so. This has contributed to a failure in some literature to engage with identity as a fluid and dynamic construct: populations' religious identity is one of multiple identities available to them, and the interaction between religious and ethnic identity has been unduly neglected.

This paper proceeds as follows: the first section reviews existing literature on Islamist violence, the conflict-demography nexus and the operationalization of identity, deriving hypotheses for testing this relationship in the context of Islamist violence. The second section outlines the research design and selection of variables. The third section outlines quantitative tests at the sub-national level,