



Islamist Militias and Rebel Groups across Africa

By Caitriona Dowd
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Introduction

The escalation of violent conflict in Nigeria and Somalia in recent years, and the early successes of Islamist factions in overtaking territory in Northern Mali following the coup in early 2012, have drawn attention to the role of Islamist groups in violence across the African continent. The capacity and perceived threat of these groups has been further highlighted by speculation of linkages and coordination between distinct groups across Africa and beyond (BBC News, 26 June 2012). This paper seeks to explore this phenomenon through data recorded and published through the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) from 1997 to July 2012. From this analysis, we present three key findings: the first is that violent Islamist activity on the African continent has increased sharply in recent years, both in absolute terms, and as a proportion of overall political conflict events. Secondly, this increase in violence has coincided with an expansion of the countries in which operatives are active. While a considerable share of the increase in violent Islamist activity can be attributed to an intensification of violence in a small number of key countries (Somalia and Nigeria, notably), there has been a concomitant increase in Islamist activity in new spaces, with a discernible spread south- and east-ward on the continent. Thirdly, commonalities and discrepancies within and across violent Islamist groups reveal differential objectives, strategies and modalities of violence on the continent.

This paper proceeds with a definition of violent Islamist groups, a review of the geography of Islamist militancy on the African continent, and an analysis of commonalities and discrepancies across distinct militant Islamist groups.



Part I: Islamist Militias, Rebel Groups and Violent Communal Groups

This working paper outlines and analyses the activity of various Islamist militia and rebel groups active across Africa by focusing on their historical development, and empirical data documenting their activity. Given the sensitive nature of attributing religious association with political violent behaviour, and the multiple types of groups claiming some relationship to Islam as a motivation, the following qualifications should be noted: in this paper, 'Islamism' and related activities refer to the proactive promotion or enforcement of Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs.¹ Islamist activity is manifest across various disciplines and traditions within Islam, encompassing a range of political, social and religious activity. Islamist militias and – though less common, rebel groups – are the subject of this paper, and are distinguished from other Islamist groups by their utilisation of violence in the pursuit of such goals. Elsewhere (International Crisis Group, 2 March 2005, p. *i*), such groups are referred to as *Jihadi* Islamists, although for the purposes of classification and analysis by violent group type, the terms 'Islamist militia' or 'Islamist rebel group' are used herein. In ACLED terminology, a rebel group seeks to replace the current national regime in power; while a militia group uses violence to advance the position of a political elite, and often concentrates on local or regional goals. Examples of violent Islamist groups include Somalia's Al Shabaab, Nigeria's Boko Haram, Mali's Ansar Dine and MUJAO, and Algeria's AQIM.²

This paper does not attempt to explore in detail the activity of Muslim, but not explicitly Islamist, militia groups or violent mobs. Groups which are identified as composed of 'Muslims' are treated in ACLED data as communal groups, which are active in areas where local militias or mobs mobilise under such an identity, and are normally involved in violent altercations or violence against civilians or militias of a different identity group (e.g. Christian). Such groups are distinguished from Islamist violent groups by the fact that they do not have an explicitly articulated agenda of promoting or enforcing Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in specific territories or across communities. Rather, they almost exclusively engage in identity-based inter-community violence in a pattern which is most similar to communal, ethnic or religious groups. In addition to distinct objectives, the nature of violence and the targets of militia and communal group activity are often different from those of violent Islamist groups. Muslim militias and communal groups are most often

¹ For similar definition, see International Crisis Group (2 March 2005).

² ACLED does not consider the Janjaweed group active in Sudan to be Islamist, insofar as the group has not articulated a clear Islamist agenda relating to ideology, law, policies or customs.



recorded involved in conflict with other identity groups (this is true almost by nature of the definition of a communal group, where they define themselves in contradistinction to opponents or outsiders), and this violence most often manifests itself in a cycle of repeated attacks by members of opposing communities. In this sense, the dynamic of violence differs in form and function from that of violent Islamist groups with a more clearly articulated agenda, as communal groups often become engaged in a self-reinforcing cycle of attacks which exacerbates mutual animosity and distrust.

Such groups are active in eleven countries. Nigeria has by far the highest number of documented cases of violent Muslim communal group activity (106 between 1997 – 2011), followed by Egypt (26), Ethiopia (16), and Kenya (12). Similar groups have also been sporadically active in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ghana, Guinea, Malawi and Tanzania. Tracking these groups' activity over time, there are clear spikes in 2000 and 2010, coinciding with communal riots in Nigeria at both points.

Elsewhere in the dataset, Muslim groups are recorded as participating in spontaneous riots and organised protests (distinguished from riots by their non-violent nature). This paper does not attempt to explore the drivers or focal points of individual protest or riot events. However, in some case countries there is a pattern of increasing violent Islamist activity alongside or following an increase in protesting and rioting among Muslim communities. This pattern is evident in Kenya and Nigeria (see Figures 1 and 2), two countries in which populations and communities are often highly divided.

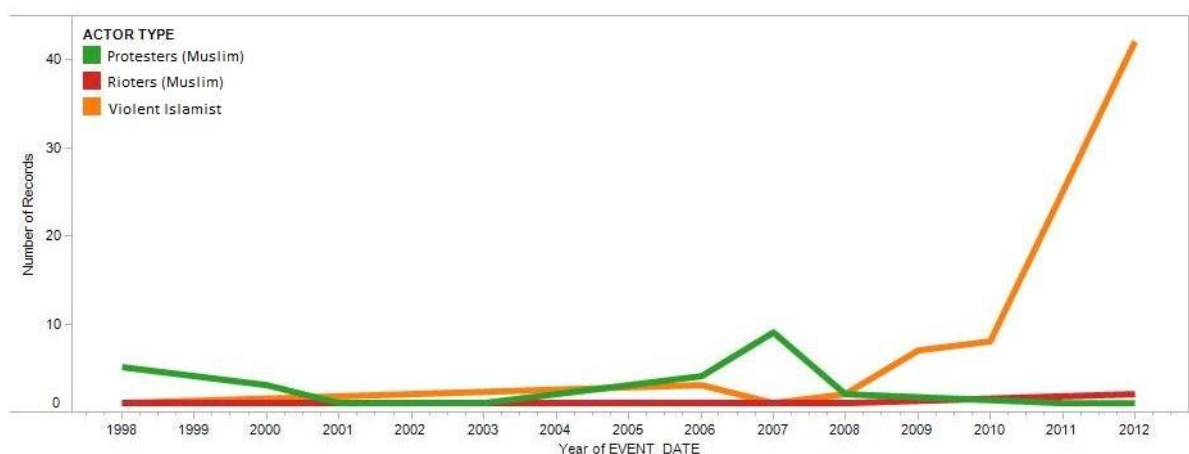


Figure 1: Protesters (Muslim), Rioters (Muslim) and Violent Islamist Groups, Kenya, 1997 – July 2012.

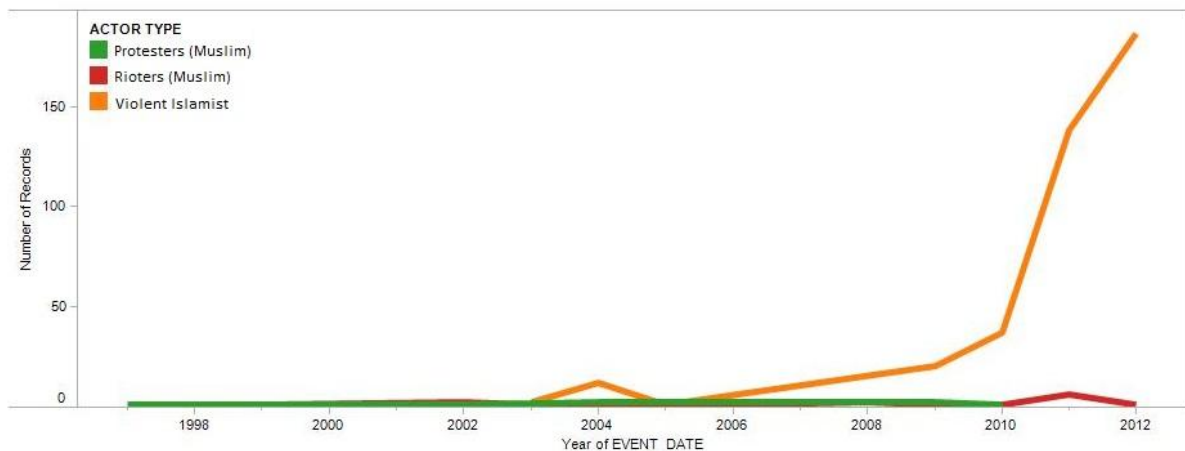


Figure 2: Protesters (Muslim), Rioters (Muslim) and Violent Islamist Groups, Nigeria, 1997 - July 2012.

The pattern in Kenya and Nigeria suggests that one of two processes may be under way: either communities in which pre-existing tensions have led to mobilization of organised protests and spontaneous riots become radicalised and establish violent Islamist groups by a process of escalation; or violent Islamist operatives seek out communities in which pre-existing tensions render communities open to their rhetoric. While both processes may manifest themselves similarly in the intensification of violent Islamist activity, the mechanisms by which this occurs are significant, in that they reveal something important about Islamist militia and rebel group recruitment, and the logic behind the adoption of an Islamist mantle in societies with competing conflict actors.

Analysis of the sub-national spaces in Nigeria in which violent Islamist groups, Muslim militias, rioters and protesters are active reveals considerable overlap in the states in which these groups are most active. However, much of this correspondence would be expected as a result of the demographic geography of the country (with a concentration of the Muslim population in the northern region). The region with the highest records for violent Islamist activity (Borno State) has no recorded protest or riot events involving Muslim groups, though it has witnessed activity by Muslim militias. The regions with the next highest levels of violence – Kano, Kaduna and Plateau States – have all experienced activity by all four actor types, while remaining regions have combinations of activity levels, including some (Abia, Imo and Taraba States) with some militia, protest and/or riot activity, but no records of violent Islamist groups. In addition, there are also country cases in which this pattern of escalation is not evident, including in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Mali, suggesting more research is required on the nature of any escalatory dynamic in specific cases.



Part II: Geographies of Violent Islamist Activity across Africa

Data analysis provides several insights into the level of activity, role and operation of Islamist militias across Africa. Overall, violent Islamist activity has increased significantly in the past 15 years, with a particular sharp increase witnessed from 2010 onwards (see Figure 3).

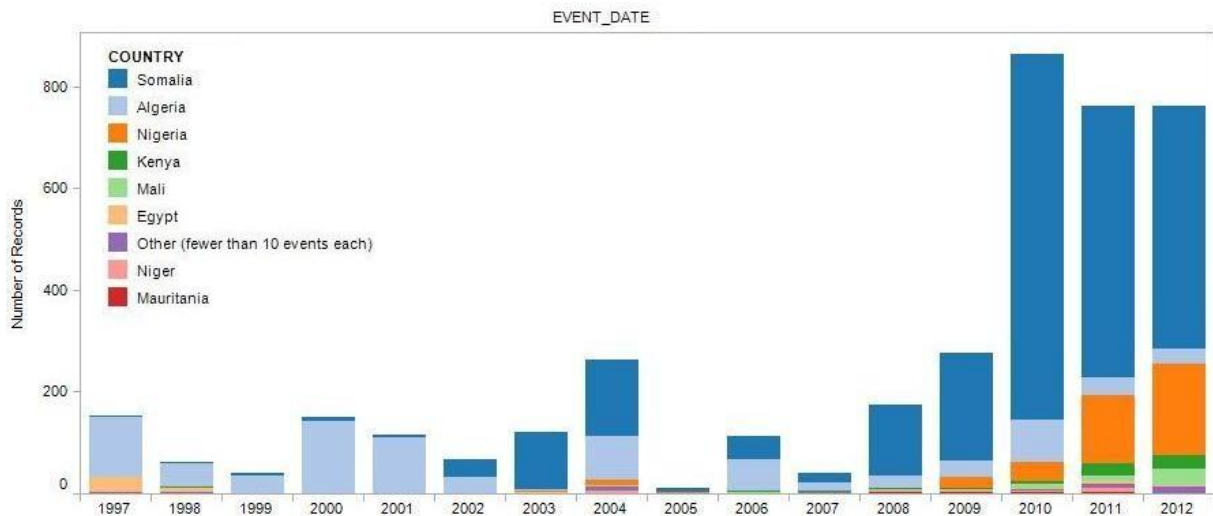


Figure 3: Violent Islamist activity by country, 1997 - July 2012.

This increase holds for both absolute numbers of events and the proportional increase in violent Islamist activity as a share of overall violent conflict on the continent (see Figure 4).

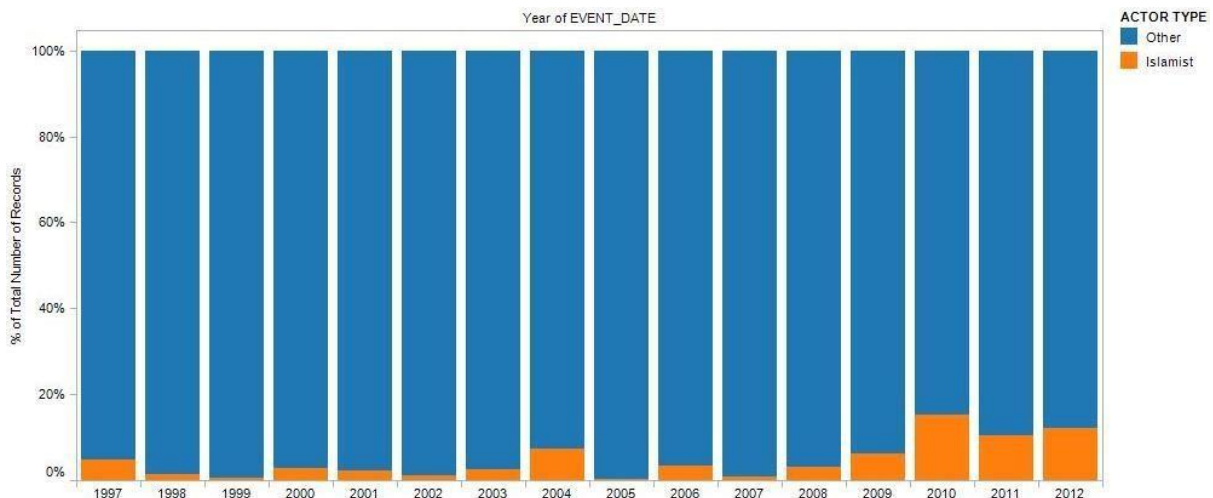


Figure 4: Violent Islamist Activity as a Proportion of All Violent Activity, 1997 - 2012.



Both figures illustrate a clear drop in activity – in absolute and proportional terms – in 2005 and 2007. This can in part be explained by dynamics within key countries. These include Algeria, where activity levels of the then-GSPC dropped in 2005, leading some analysts to speculate that the majority of its members ‘may be prepared to give up the armed struggle in Algeria and accept the government’s reconciliation initiative,’ (quoted in International Crisis Group, 31 March 2005, p. 5); and a relative lull in violence in Somalia under the Islamic Courts Union. This lull can also be partially explained by issues of definition: during these periods, there were high levels of violence in countries such as Sudan, which are home to high levels of Muslim populations, but whose militant groups are not considered ‘Islamist’ in the context of this report (see Footnote 1).

Reported fatality levels resulting from violent Islamist activity have also increased significantly in recent years, although these levels peaked in 1997 at the height of the Algerian Civil War (see Figure 5). 2010 witnessed the second highest levels of fatalities, owing to the intensification of shelling campaigns in the Somalia capital, Mogadishu, as AMISOM and TFG forces attempted to push Al Shabaab from residential areas in the capital. By July, 2012 fatality levels had already surpassed those of 2011, while event levels were comparable, indicating that the year may be one of the most violent to date.

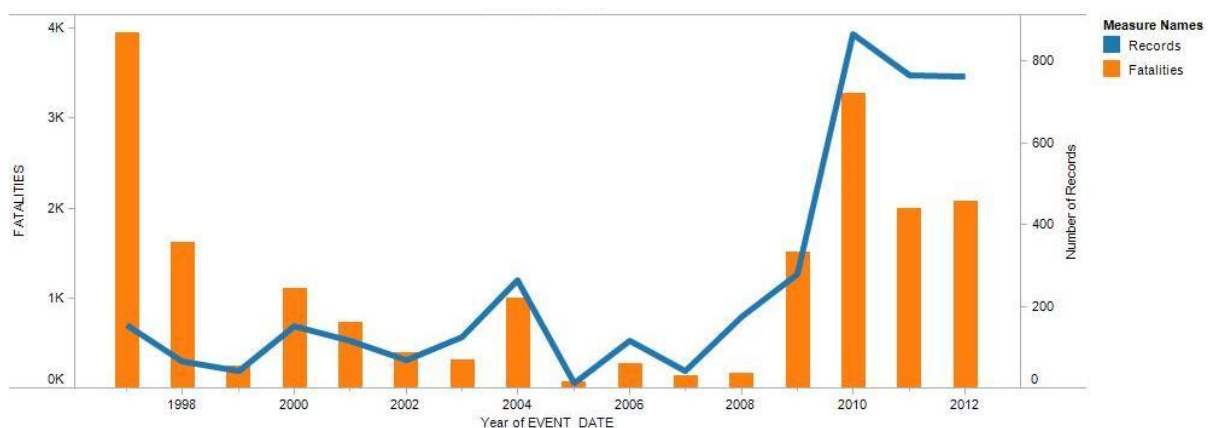


Figure 5: Records of Violent Islamist Activities and Associated Reported Fatalities, 1997 - 2012.

Much of the growth in violent activity in recent years, however, has been concentrated in Somalia and Nigeria, while the most significant drop in Islamist activity since 1997 has occurred in Algeria. While these countries present unique cases for analysis in their own right, their specificity

also means it is interesting to exclude them in order to more clearly see where new geographies of violent Islamist activity are opening up (see Figure 6).

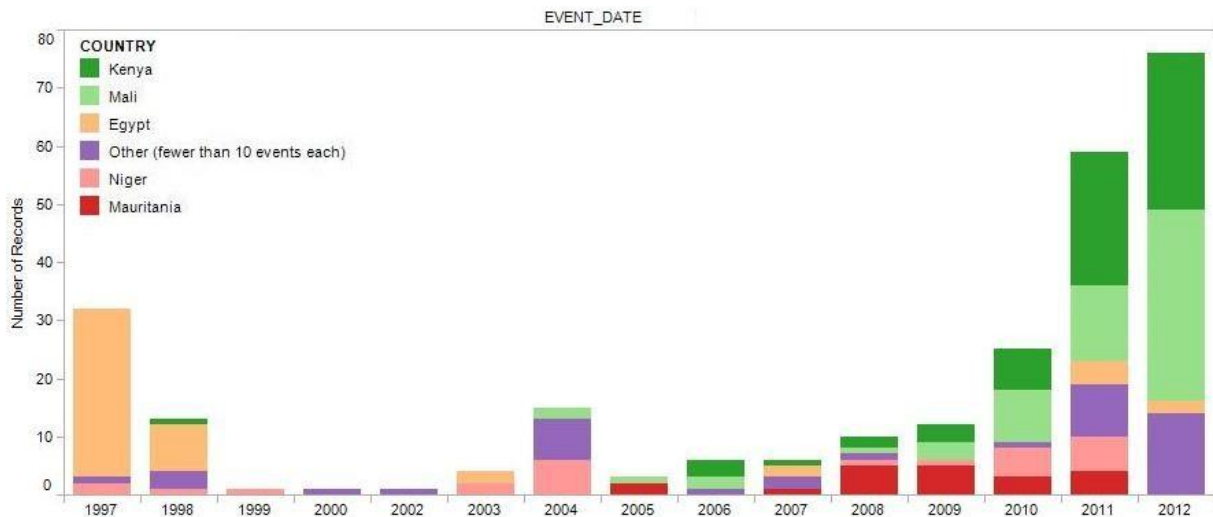


Figure 6: Violent Islamist activity by country, excluding Algeria, Nigeria and Somalia, 1997 – July 2012.

The graph above clearly indicates the increased level of activity in Kenya and Mali, alongside a comparable drop in violent Islamist operations in Egypt over the past 15 years. A further feature highlighted in Figure 6 is the spread of low-level violent Islamist activity to a wider range of countries than those in which Islamist militias and rebel groups were operating in 1997. Among the countries which had fewer than 10 recorded events involving violent Islamist groups are Chad, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tanzania and Senegal. Combined, these countries have witnessed a particularly sharp increase in the first half of 2012, indicating they may be future hotspots of violent Islamist operations.

When viewed spatially, there is a clear trend for the spread of violent Islamist activity south- and east-ward on the continent (see Figure 7). This trend is significant for multiple reasons. In the first instance, it may reflect the strength of diffusion – the physical dispersal of operatives and weaponry – as Islamist violence spreads from historical hotspots such as Algeria and Somalia with the movement of operatives and ideological leaders across borders.

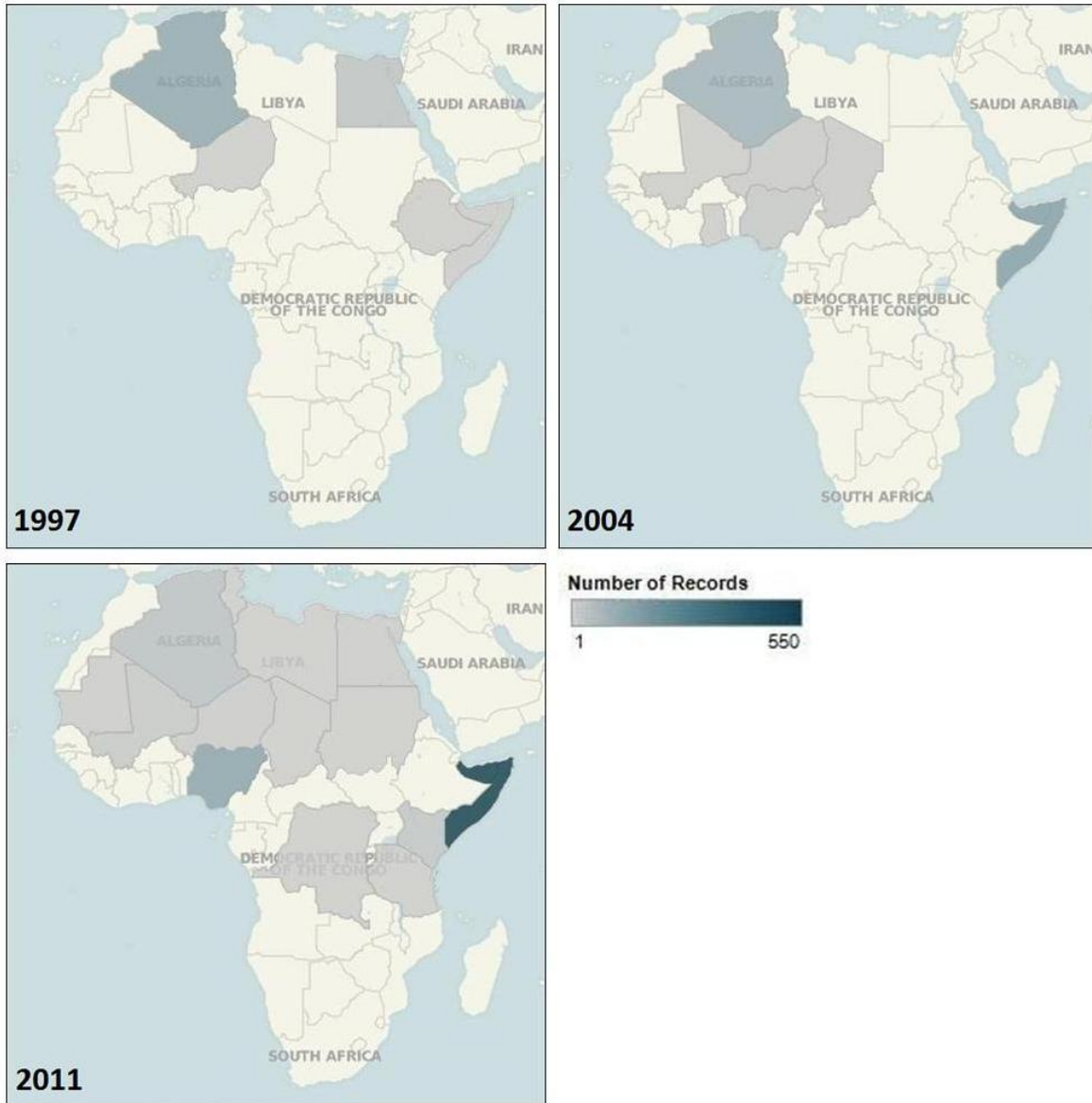


Figure 7: Violent Islamist activity by country (1997, 2004, 2011).

While there is some evidence to suggest that Algerian and Somali militants are active in neighbouring countries over the course of the dataset’s coverage, this diffusion model alone cannot explain the growth in local violent Islamist activity. Other explanatory factors must be considered, including transnational organisational linkages which see localised militant groups ‘brand’ themselves in particular terms in order to benefit from larger international networks. An example of this can be found in Mali, which has recently witnessed the growth of a domestic, Tuareg-populated



Islamist movement in Ansar Dine. The group is affiliated with the broader Al Qaeda movement, though gains local traction through its roots in the community. Similarly, growth in violent Islamist activity in Kenya is increasingly driven by recruitment of Swahili-speaking Kenyan nationals, as investigations into the al-Hijra centre in Mombasa have indicated (UN Security Council on Somalia and Eritrea, 25 July 2012).

The spread of militant Islamist activity to these new spaces reveals the significance and fluidity of the Islamist mantle as a mobilising identity. This appears particularly relevant in Kenya, where the combination of a large Muslim population and the near-exhaustion of pre-existing ethno-regional affiliations may have combined to create a particularly fecund environment for recruitment and activity. Viewed in this context, the growth of violent Islamist activity can be partially explained as the strategic use of a mantle which has proven useful for conflict actors seeking to establish an identity in a crowded conflict landscape, with the ability of the group to take root being shaped by domestic contexts.

Part III: Violent Islamist Groups

This analysis is also helpful in identifying patterns and trends in activity and geographic focus within and across particular groups. There are revealing differences across the main groups in question. The first important distinction is the nature of the groups themselves. ACLED distinguishes between rebel groups – which seek to replace the current national regime in power – from militia groups – which use violence to advance a position of a particular elite, and often concentrate on local or regional goals. The level of political militia activity in Africa in general has been increasing over the course of the dataset (see Figure 8).

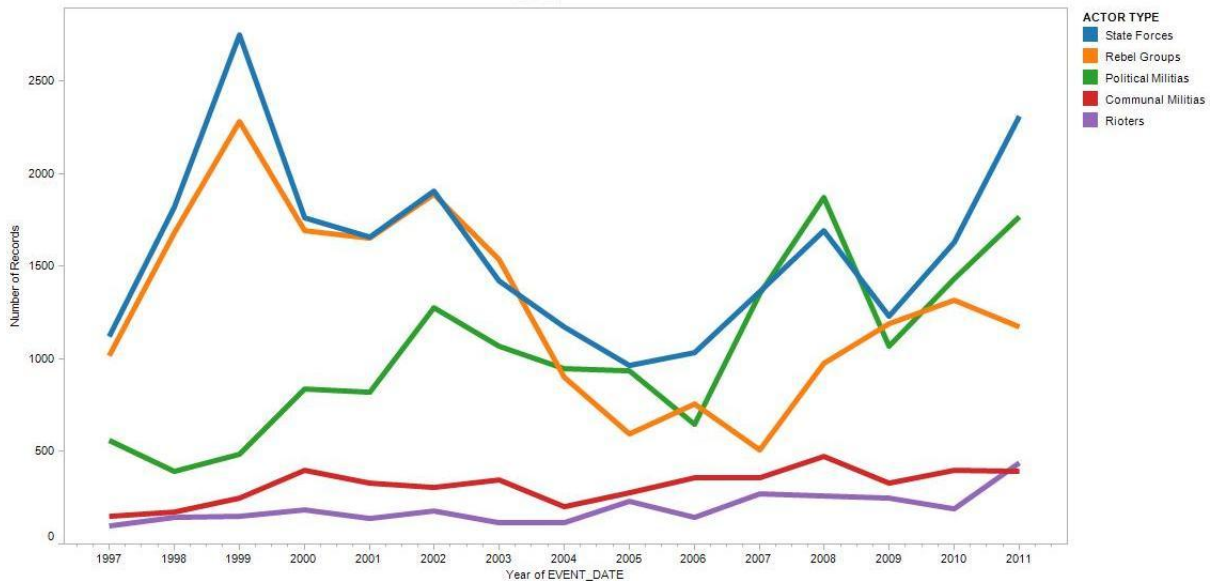


Figure 8: Violent Events by Actor Type, 1997 - 2011.

The vast majority of violent Islamist groups active over the course of the dataset are political militias, as opposed to rebel groups. While rebel groups constitute the largest share of overall activity, this is shaped by Somalia and Algeria’s dominant roles in the data, where rebel groups with a specifically articulated agenda to overthrow the national regime have operated. By contrast, most violent Islamist groups are focused on regional or localised goals, often lacking the capacity to mount a large-scale threat to the national regime, or the desire to establish an alternative regime in its place. This is not to diminish the destabilising impact of violent Islamist militias, but rather to refine our understanding of the threat they pose: militia groups may be in a position to operate with a greater degree of impunity than rebel groups, owing to the fact that they do not seek to establish a regime in the long-term. This may render them less reliant on popular support, and thereby less concerned with the implications of civilian casualties. Further, militia groups are typically associated with particular national or local elites as a source of funding and support: this may have broader implications for the politics of patronage within states.

There are also differences in the activity of different groups, first and foremost in the number of violent events with which each group is associated: this discrepancy is in part a function of the distinct operating environment in which the groups are active. Al Shabaab has been in a position to capitalise on the extreme weakness of the central Somali authorities for an extended period of time, while Boko Haram (Nigeria) and AQIM (Algeria, Mali, Niger) both operate, at least

primarily, in countries with relatively strong administrative and military units by continental standards. Ansar Dine and MUJAO (both of Mali) have been significantly less active over the course of the dataset by comparison, as a result of their relatively recent establishment. There are also marked differences in fatality patterns (see Figure 9).

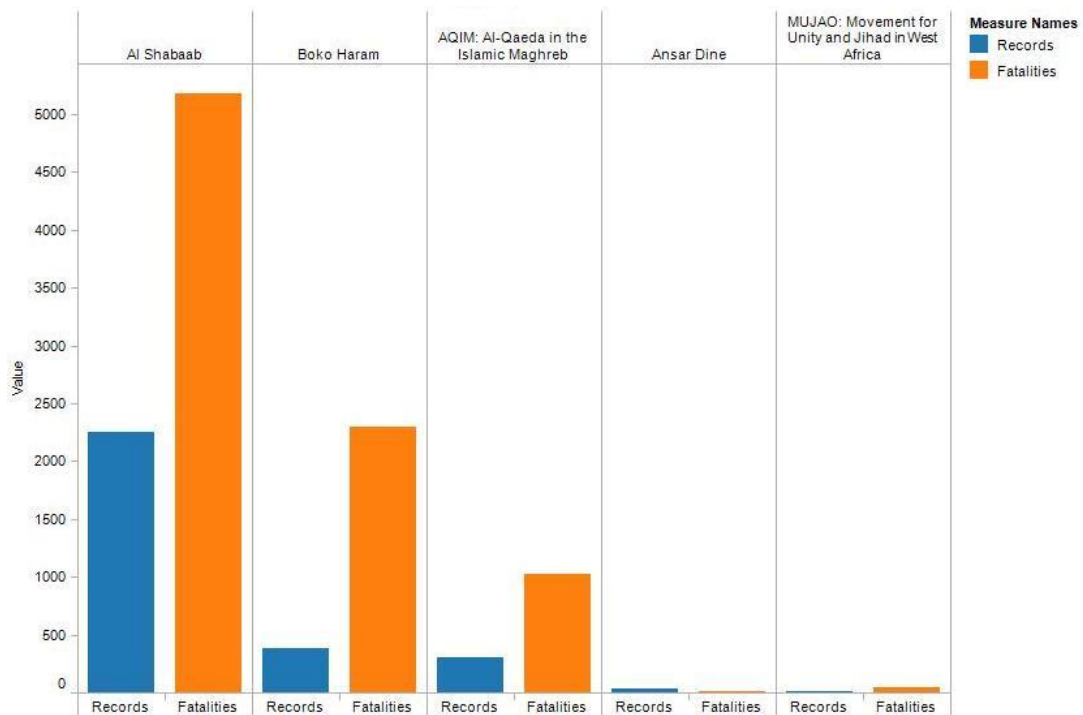


Figure 9: Records and Fatality Numbers, all years

Analysis of reported fatalities reveals that Ansar Dine has the lowest number of average fatalities per event, at 0.29; while Boko Haram has the highest, at 6.2. In between are Al Shabaab (2.72); AQIM (3.67) and MUJAO (5.25). A similar pattern emerges when we analyse the proportion of events in which each group is involved which results in reported fatalities (see Figure 10).

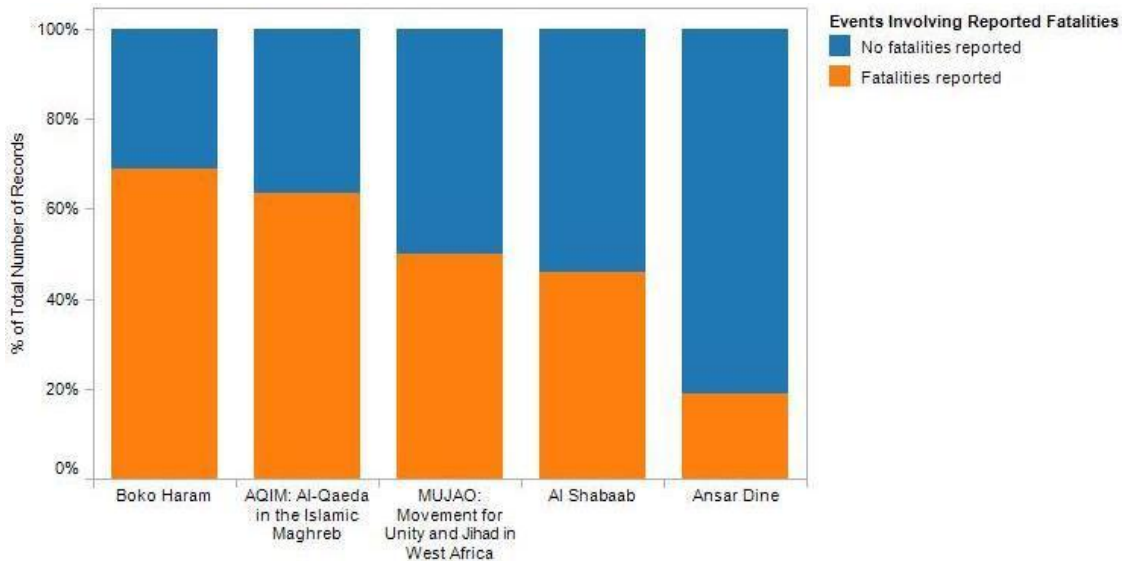


Figure 10: Proportion of Violent Events Resulting in Reported Fatalities, all years

Just under 70% of Boko Haram events result in reported fatalities, followed closely by AQIM at 63.4%, MUJAO at 50%, Al Shabaab at 45.9%, and Ansar Dine at a distant 19.1%. However, these discrepancies in fatality levels and proportions are less attributable to contextual considerations, resulting to a greater extent from the distinct modalities of violence each group employs (see Figure 11). Although associated with lower fatality levels and proportions, Ansar Dine engages in the highest (proportional) rate of violence against civilians, at 52.4% of recorded activity; followed by Boko Haram (at 49.5%); MUJAO (at 37.5%); AQIM (at 22.9%); and Al Shabaab (at 17.2%).

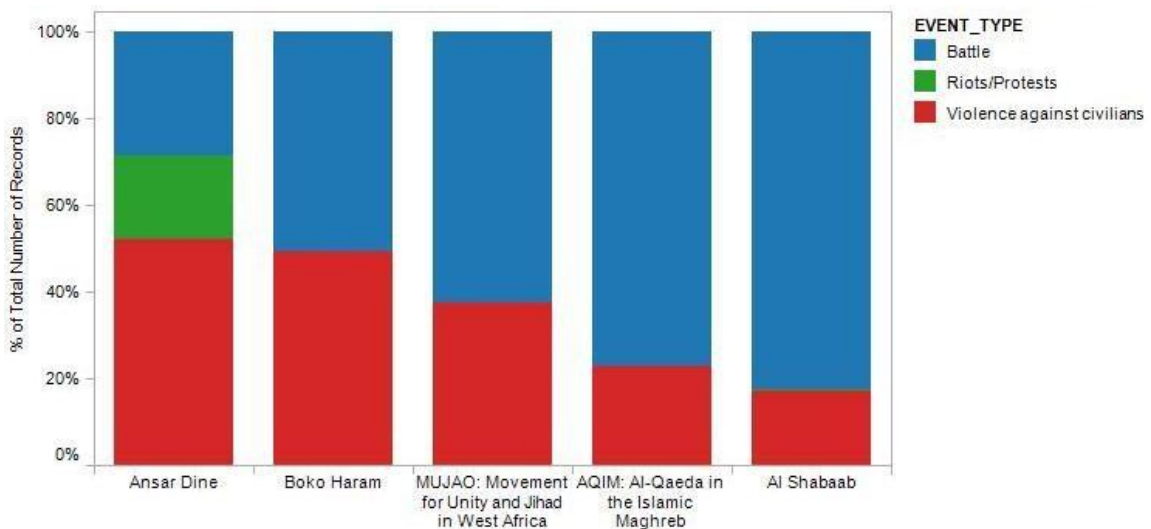


Figure 11: Violent Activity by Event Type, all years



Part IV: Conclusion

The data presented in this paper covers January 1997 – July 2012, but already indicates that 2012 is likely to be an exceptionally violent year on the African continent, both in terms of overall levels of political conflict, and specifically that involving violent Islamist groups. With ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Nigeria and Mali among the most violent on the continent, and evidence of the medium- to long-term spread of violent Islamist activity across Africa, Islamist militias and rebel groups, their activities and objectives are likely to remain extremely influential both domestically and internationally. This analysis has presented several findings which can inform discussions on the nature and significance of this phenomenon: the first is that the levels of violent Islamist activity in Africa have risen sharply in recent years, both in proportion to overall political violence on the continent, and in absolute terms. The second finding is that while much of this increase has been driven by the intensification of conflict in a small number of key countries, there is also evidence for the geographic spread of violent Islamist activity both south- and east-ward on the continent. The growth of violent Islamist activity in Kenya, in particular, is a cause for concern in a country with multiple, overlapping, pre-existing ethno-regional tensions which may render communities particularly open to the rhetoric of this form of militancy. The third finding has highlighted the discrepancies and commonalities within and across different violent Islamist groups, revealing differential objectives, strategies and modalities of violence across the continent.

These findings point to certain conclusions: most significantly, that there is no single explanation or analysis which can account for the recent rise in violent Islamist militias and rebel groups in Africa. Islamist violence has fallen in some key states such as Algeria and Egypt, as it has arisen in new spaces, including those in East and West Africa. The different contexts in which violent Islamist groups are active suggest several possible country-specific explanations. The spread of militancy from neighbouring countries – either physically through the dispersal of operatives and weaponry, or less directly through creeping instability – may explain the emergence of violent Islamist groups in states neighbouring Algeria and Somalia.

However, even in these neighbouring states, it is clear additional forces are at play: violent Islamist activity in Mali would not have been possible without the interaction of local militant groups and transnational Islamist networks, both of which benefit from the association. Ansar Dine and MUJAO have emerged from relative obscurity to dominate discussions on security in the Sahel, as a



result in large part to their association with AQIM, while the latter has capitalised on Tuareg-dominated groups' traction in local communities to establish a foothold in new territory. Similarly, in Kenya, violent Islamist activity has grown in communities with pre-existing tensions and fissures, suggesting the role of overlapping cleavages in shaping the salience of particular identity-based militancy.

A third dynamic which cannot be ignored is that of a rising global consciousness among Islamist groups and Muslim populations in the wake of the Arab Spring. Qualitative studies are better positioned to reflect on the significance of this phenomenon to the growth of militant Islamist activity in Africa, but it is worth noting that across North Africa, Islamist consciousness has to a greater extent been translated into the establishment of Islamist political parties as found, for example, in Egypt. In Sub-Saharan Africa, generally, party-political platforms are less common and politics tend to be shaped to a greater degree by issues of identity and patronage. This may mean that in such contexts, the avenues for the expression and enactment of peaceful Islamist agendas are less accessible in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, thus potentially contributing to the establishment of violent vehicles for the further of Islamist causes.



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