Islam's Inroads

Reuven Paz & Moshe Terdman

In recent years, Islam has been growing rapidly in Africa. The precise number of Muslims in Africa today is unknown; statistics regarding religious demography on the African continent are notoriously incomplete. Still, what is clear is that Islam is now the second largest religion in Africa, accounting for about 45 percent of the population. The remainder is made up by Christians (46 percent), atheists or adherents of African religions (less than 10 percent).

Geographically, African Muslims are concentrated mainly in the West African Sahel zone, the tropical zone along the Gulf of Guinea, the Sudanese Nile region, Ethiopia, the East African coastal strip, Somalia, and the Cape region. While the spread of Islam has taken a different path in each, the majority of these places appear to share two common features. The first is that Islam has not developed into an exclusive state religion. The second is that its interpretation, at the local level, has been more or less moderate. Up until now, at least.

All of that, however, is subject to change. Slowly but surely, Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are becoming radicalized. Signs of this drift are everywhere;

Dr. Reuven Paz is founder and Director of the Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) at The Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel. A noted expert on radical Islam, Islamist terrorism, global *jihadi* movements, and Arab culture, his book on the *Mindset of Jihadis* is forthcoming in 2008.

Dr. Moshe Terdman is a senior research fellow at PRISM, and Director of its Project on Radical Islam in Africa. He is an expert on African Islam, as well as on the history of the Mamluks in Medieval Islam.

in the introduction of *sharia* law in twelve northern Nigerian states since 1999, the rigid adherence to *sharia* by Somalia's ill-fated Islamic Courts Union, and the extremist tendencies of Muslims in South Africa. These events underscore the fact that the process of religious radicalization among Africa's Muslims is dynamic—and gaining ground.

Slowly but surely, Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are becoming radicalized. Signs of this drift are everywhere; in the introduction of *sharia* law in twelve northern Nigerian states since 1999, the rigid adherence to *sharia* by Somalia's ill-fated Islamic Courts Union, and the extremist tendencies of Muslims in South Africa.

Fertile soil

The drift under way throughout Africa is defined, above all, by one element: minority empowerment. In most countries on the continent, Muslims make up a minority of the population, one that has been disproportionately affected by the social and political changes of the past ten years. That is especially true in the coastal states of West and East Africa. In the former, democratization has removed Muslim leaders and their followers from power. In the latter, the social advancement of the Muslim minority has trailed that of the region's already low average.

Poverty, corruption and political alienation have all contributed to the spread of radical Islam in sub-Saharan Africa as well. Some analysts blame nineteenth-century European colonialism for re-mapping ethnic territories, marginalizing Muslims and, in some cases, leaving a legacy of inter-communal strife. They point out that Muslims in countries historically dominated by Christians, such as Ethiopia, do not wield political power relative to their large numbers. There, social inequality, alienation and isolation provide fertile ground for foreign extremists and their ideologies to gain local support.

And gain support they have. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the countries of the Persian Gulf have all made efforts to export Islamist ideas and values to the continent. These connections stretch back centuries; during the Middle Ages, many Black African Muslims carried out religious studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo, and made the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. More recently, some Black African Muslims abroad have been influenced by Wahhabi scholars and/or the Muslim Brotherhood, and have imported their ideas back to their places of origin.

Their outreach, in turn, has been amplified by Islamic charities engaged in proselytization, known as *Da'wah* (Islamic call), throughout Africa. These organizations, many of which are based in the Persian Gulf, have experienced considerable success in converting their beneficiaries to Islam—and from there to radical Islam. Thus, the African Muslim Agency, a Kuwait-sponsored aid organization based in Luanda, Angola, has established itself in most African countries and has been involved in the spread of Islam in the predominantly Christian countries of southern Africa, in particular Malawi and South Africa. The charities sponsored by Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, meanwhile,

have been engaged in financing radical Islamic activities in East Africa and the Horn of Africa—especially in Zanzibar, where the radical Islamist organization Uamsho is active, and from where at least two al-Qaeda operatives have sprung. Similarly, in West Africa, an intensive Wahhabi-oriented proselytization effort sponsored by Saudi Arabia has caused a number of bloody confrontations between its adherents and traditional Muslim groups.

Internal influences are also at work. Largely unrecognized is the strong linkage between Sufis and *jihad* prevalent throughout the continent. The first African Sufi known to have waged *jihad* against his fellow Muslims was the Muslim scholar Othman dan Fodio, who succeeded in establishing the Sultanate of Sokoto in Nigeria, which was governed by *sharia* law at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Fodio's ideological influence extended far beyond Nigeria; until the beginning of the twentieth century, Sufis stood at the forefront of the *jihad* against the Europeans throughout the continent.

Governance, or the lack thereof, has facilitated these processes. There are more failing and failed states in Africa than in any other region in the world. But even in more or less functioning nations, such as Kenya and Tanzania, the government is incapable of preventing violence or even controlling the entirety of its territory. Border areas and the slums of big cities are de facto zones outside of the state's control. The training and equipment of local security forces are completely insufficient, and police corruption and official crime are widespread. The shadow economy of these crumbling states makes possible capital transactions and trafficking in weapons, raw materials, and consumer goods—activities without which terrorist networks would be unable to function.

Governance, or the lack thereof, has facilitated radicalization. There are more failing and failed states in Africa than in any other region in the world. But even in more or less functioning nations, such as Kenya and Tanzania, the government is incapable of preventing violence or even controlling the entirety of its territory.

Against this backdrop, news of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Western involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has had a crucial role in creating a sense of strong antipathy to the United States and the West. For their part, radical Islamists, as well as other local terrorists, have taken advantage of these feelings to achieve their aims. At times, they do so using methods practiced in the Middle East. Such is the case of insurgents in Mogadishu, who have turned Somalia into a second Iraq by using suicide bombings, the downing of planes, artillery shelling, and so on.

Future trends

In the short term, it is highly unlikely that radical Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa will become an important or integral part of al-Qaeda. In contrast to North Africa, where the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat has become the terror network's latest recruit, membership further south is likely to be limited to

a few dozen individuals. An early indication of this was given in 2002, when al-Qaeda's call to African Muslims to join their cause following the Mombasa attacks met with decidedly more indignation than approval. Al-Qaeda's call on the *mujahideen* to come to the assistance of their Somali and Sudanese brothers likewise has not had great appeal so far.

The balance of power between radical and moderate Muslims in Africa is still tilted decisively in favor of the moderates. Yet, the possibility of the development of a genuine African variant of terrorism cannot be ruled out entirely. The necessary ingredients—the lack of economic opportunity, social privation, a loss of cultural identity, political repression, and dysfunctional government—are virtually omnipresent.

These developments highlight the fact that the balance of power between radical and moderate Muslims in Africa is still tilted decisively in favor of the moderates. Therefore, in the immediate future, the importance of Africa is likely to center on two factors. The first is the weakness of regional states, which provide excellent safe havens and opportunities for black market activities to local and/or foreign radicals. The second is the sorry state of local security forces, which create an attractive environment for planning and carrying out attacks.

Yet, the possibility of the development of a genuine African variant of terrorism cannot be ruled out entirely. The necessary ingredients—the lack of economic opportunity, social privation, a loss of cultural identity, political repression, and dysfunctional government—are virtually omnipresent in sub-Saharan Africa. But the potential for violence arising from the interplay of these factors is, for the most part, directed inward in the form of violent crime, civil wars, and plundering warlords. All that is needed is a mobilizing, unifying idea, such as the one offered by radical Islam.

In this sense, the threat of Islamist terrorism to the Republic of South Africa is very real. A number of indigenous Islamist networks now have the potential to either engage in serious acts of terrorism on their own or in conjunction with international terrorists. These networks include groups like Qibla and People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD), both of which have a growing radical influence in South Africa. The former was created in the early 1980s to promote the aims and ideals of the Iranian revolution in South Africa, and in due course transform South Africa into an Islamic state, under the slogan "One Solution, Islamic Revolution." The latter, a Qibla offshoot, although ostensibly a vigilante anti-crime group, has also been linked to the Islamic Republic.

The key question, of course, revolves around the likelihood of an al-Qaeda attack against Western interests in South Africa. So far, the South African government has hoped that its neutrality in the global war on terror, as well as its pro-Palestinian stance, will spare it the hostility of Islamists. The real threat, however, is directed against American and other Western interests in the country. In this respect, there is major cause for concern: high-value targets, including large embassies and

the headquarters of multinational corporations, abound. As a nascent democracy, South Africa is obsessed with protecting basic rights—a preoccupation which could be exploited by international terrorists working in tandem with local militants. This "rights-based" environment is compounded by widespread official corruption that makes it easy for skilled and experienced terrorists to operate without fear of detection. Moreover, the country has porous borders and large immigrant communities that can easily shelter terrorists, if so inclined.

Furthermore, since 1996, Islam has been spreading rapidly in South Africa's fastest growing ethnic demographic: its Black community. This trend is the result of proselytization by Muslim refugees, who arrived in the mid-1990s, following the collapse of the apartheid regime, from places such as Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Angola, and Malawi. This has not heralded religious harmony, however; to the contrary, the same period has seen growing hostility between the country's Black Muslim community and the established White Muslims there. The grievances of Black Muslims run the gamut, from racism and exploitation to the unfair distribution of *zakat* (alms). In response, institutions such as the Afro-Middle East Center have conducted reconciliation sessions, but divisive internal politics has hindered mobilization campaigns for international causes such as Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on.

This problem of racial tensions between Black and Arab Muslims is not localized to South Africa. After all, memories of an Arab-dominated continental slave trade are still comparatively fresh. But despite these feelings, Black Muslims have had no choice but to look to the Middle East for guidance. Along the way, at least some have been influenced by radical Islamic ideas originating in the Arab world, and may try to put them into practice in their countries of origin.

In the long run, the radical Islamic ideology that permeates the Arab world poses a threat not only to the West, but to moderate African Muslims as well.

In the long run, then, the radical Islamic ideology that permeates the Arab world poses a threat not only to the West, but to moderate African Muslims as well. Globalization and closer links with the Arab world—especially due to local financial difficulties and humanitarian disasters, which have spurred greater reliance on the role of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as financiers—could bring with them changes in ideology. This process of adaptation has already begun, as witnessed by a growing unification among disparate radicals into a unified front. This process, which is in its initial phases, highlights the potential direction of Islam and Muslims in Africa.

Whither Africa?

Islam in Africa is at a crossroads. A degree of radicalization undoubtedly already has taken place, buoyed by Islamist infiltration and the conversion of Black Africans. Local Sufis have done their best to combat this phenomenon, but so far without success. Throughout the continent, one now can find radical Islamic enclaves in almost every country where there are Muslims. Yet, due to the differences between the brand of Islam prevalent in the Middle East and the

one prevalent in Africa (which also incorporates animistic beliefs), and due to the racism prevalent among Arabs toward Black African Muslims, the battle for the soul of Islam in Africa is still under way.

Islam in Africa is at a crossroads. A degree of radicalization undoubtedly already has taken place, buoyed by Islamist infiltration and the conversion of Black Africans. Yet, due to the differences between the brand of Islam prevalent in the Middle East and the one prevalent in Africa (which also incorporates animistic beliefs), and due to the racism prevalent among Arabs toward Black African Muslims, the battle for the soul of Islam in Africa is still under way.

In the future, we very well could witness the emergence of a unique brand of radical African Islam—one which will encompass African animism, the heritage of the *jihadi* Sufi movements, and methods and tactics imported from the Middle East. We also should expect al-Qaeda and its ideological affiliates to try and exploit tribal and social tensions as a way of expanding their influence throughout Africa, mainly in Somalia and the Horn of Africa, and above all in North Africa, where they already have a growing influence.

Africa serves as a bellwether of sorts in the West's struggle against radical Islam. The sociopolitical reasons for radical Islam's growing appeal in other regions—the Arab world, Europe, Southeast Asia—can also be found in Africa, and with much greater potency. Western nations need to understand this reality, and to do more to include Africa in their struggle against Islamist terrorism.