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By Hilary Matfess

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Children gather around a burnt-out car following an attack by Boko Haram in Dalori village 5 kilometers (3 miles) from Maiduguri, Nigeria , Sunday Jan. 31, 2016. A survivor hidden in a tree says he watched Boko Haram extremists firebomb huts and listened to the screams of children among people burned to death in the latest attack by Nigeria's homegrown Islamic extremists. (Source: AP Photo/Jossy Ola.)

Hilary Matfess is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, center left, walks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, center right, after her arrival at the airport in Bamako, Mali, Sunday, Oct. 9, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/Baba Ahmed.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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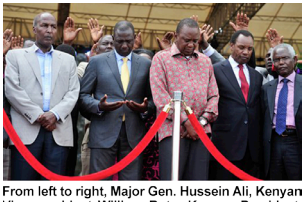

From left to right, Major Gen. Hussein Ali, Kenyan Vice president William Ruto, Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, Henry Kosgei, and Ambassador Francis Muthaura, pray, as they attend a thanksgiving rally, in Nakuru, Kenya, Saturday, April 16, 2016. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and five others who had been charged with crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court held a rally attended by thousands to celebrate the withdrawal of the charges against them. The rally has been opposed by opposition leader Raila Odinga and some members of civic organizations who say it does not respect the suffering of the victims of violence following a disputed presidential election late 2007. (Source: AP Photo/Kevin Midigo.)

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Religion

The practice of Salafi jihadism by Boko Haram members has encouraged a number of analysts to consider the insurgency to be essentially a religious movement. Many of those who assert that Boko Haram is best understood as a religious phenomenon rely on simplistic depictions of so-called radical Islam. The Hudson Institute's Dr. Paul Marshall criticizes those who fail to "recognize that Boko Haram is motivated by their religious ideology" and give too much emphasis to motivations related to employment, power, and sex. His interpretation is that "Radical Muslims want to take over the world. They divide it into two parts—those who submit to Allah and therefore are at 'peace' and those that are at war until they are made to submit to Allah." The Chibok abductions, which launched the insurgency into the global spotlight, appeared to many to be an explicitly religious attack by Muslim insurgents on Christian school girls. The simplicity and appeal of this narrative made it popular in newspaper accounts and among some advocacy groups; however, it is ultimately not empirically supported. Interviews with former fighters found fewer than one in ten were motivated to join the group because of their religious beliefs.

Certainly, the insurgency goes to great lengths to portray itself as the vanguard of "true" Islam. Alex Thurston, a professor at Georgetown University, uses historical analysis to explain aspects of Boko Haram as a nuanced religious movement resulting both from differences in Quranic interpretation and political trends. He emphasizes that Boko Haram (like a number of jihadi groups) subscribes to the concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'.* Thurston defines this concept among jihadis as an "exclusive loyalty to 'true' Muslims and disavowal . . . of anyone the group considers an infidel." This is also borne out in interviews with former fighters, in which half of male respondents and more than 35 percent of female respondents cited religion as a "strong influence" within the insurgency's operations.

This concept has influenced the sect's ideology since its foundation. Thurston observes that Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, asserted that *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* was the foundation for a "completely self-sufficient system"—an assumption that allowed Boko Haram to reject the system of politics and governance in North Eastern Nigeria.

Though the scope, scale, and intensity of the insurgency increased under Abubaker Shekau following the death of Mohammed Yusuf at the hands of the Nigerian state in 2009, the centrality of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* appears to have continued under his tenure. In the video message to the "Leaders of the Disbelievers," Shekau not only denounces France's involvement in the region, but also criticizes the presidents of Chad and Niger for their support of the military campaign against the insurgency. In this video, Idris Deby and Mahamadou Issoufou are infidels by association—and since they are not "true Muslims," they are legitimate targets.

Politics

Interviews with Boko Haram members reveal surprisingly high levels of participation in Nigerian politics, given the group's vehement anti-state position. Interviews with insurgents found that 48 percent of former Boko Haram members voted in the 2015 elections. This finding is particularly striking in light of the fact that national turnout for the presidential election that year was less than 44 percent. That level of turnout, if generalizable to the whole insurgency (admittedly, an uncertain leap), suggests that this is a rebellion emanating from those who maintain a considerable interest in the Nigerian political system. In fact, the interviews also revealed that Boko Haram members have high levels of trust in President Buhari—a particularly surprising finding, given the insurgency's condemnation of the Nigerian government.

Interestingly, a common grievance among the former insurgents was their treatment at the hands of the Nigerian security sector—even before they joined the insurgency. When asked open-ended questions about the Nigerian military, former insurgents described them as "brutal," "merciless," and "pitiless." The military's abuses fueled a motivation for revenge, which proved to be very influential in driving recruitment. A majority of the former fighters polled cited revenge as the only or the strongest influence in their decision to join the insurgency.

According to a new Africa Research Institute report by Fr. Atta Barkindo, a doctoral candidate and researcher at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, this revenge narrative also has deep historical roots, tracing back to the fall of the Kanem-Bornu Empire in the 14th century. According to Barkindo, who worked as an emergency translator in the Lake Chad Basin and has transcribed more than 50 YouTube videos from Boko Haram, "the Boko Haram narrative contends that the state built on the ruins of the Kanem-Bornu empire brought nothing but corruption, immorality, inequality, injustice and neglect." Though this "version of history is selective, idealized, and questionable," it is a compelling narrative for those who feel wronged by the current government.

Social Networks

Interviews with former insurgents also suggest that social networks and family pressure are the main conduits of radicalization and membership, rather than firebrand preachers or prison recruitment, as is often assumed. Interviews with former fighters found that neighbors were the second most important factors; more than one in five women who were members of Boko Haram were brought into the organization through their relationship with neighbors. Family and extended kin networks were also found to influence decisions to join Boko Haram. More than 11 percent of respondents joined the sect because of family pressure or support. Consider the testimony of one former fighter, who recalled, "When I was in Bama town, I did not have any intention of joining this sect. But there are a few children that have decided to join, but for me I did not, until my cousin brother invited me for a serious lecture one day, then from there I developed the interest in being a member of the group."

These social networks did not have to rely on violent coercion; in fact, only 5 percent of male former fighters and 17 percent of former female members were brought into the insurgency by force. Though it is possible that interviews with defected and former combatants are not representative of the active members of the sect, the findings of this research are consistent with other work done on the insurgency's recruitment. For example, these interviews are consistent with some of the findings of a Mercy Corps report, which documented Boko Haram's use of business support (through loans and grants to entrepreneurs) to attract membership.

Conclusions

Emerging work on Boko Haram's members challenges the existing paradigm for why people join the sect, which focuses on radical ideology espoused in mosques and prisons. Gaining a better understanding of the motivations for joining the insurgency might improve the abilities of regional stakeholders and the international community to respond to, and prevent recruitment into, the insurgency.

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From October 9 to 11, 2016, German Chancellor Angela Merkel took her first multiday trip to Africa since 2011. This came on the heels of the announcement by the German Ambassador to Niger that Germany plans to construct a military airbase in Niamey. For a country whose interest on the African continent has been limited compared with other nations, this development seems to represent a shift in Germany's foreign policy toward the region. Yet unlike China, the Asian Tigers, Arab investors, or the emerging economies looking to establish economic footholds on the continent, Germany's motivations seem partially rooted in its migrant crisis at home.

Background

Much has been made over the last decade of the engagement in Africa by the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—all of which were deemed to be rising economic actors in an increasingly globalized world. Also, countries such as South Korea, Turkey, Iran, and the UAE have shown increasing interest in African engagements. Japan and Singapore have been the latest international actors to focus attention on the continent. In August 2016, Japan pledged to invest $30 billion in Africa's infrastructure and private sector over the next three years, presenting itself as an alternative to China, which is frequently viewed as exploitive by Africans. Experts have observed that Singapore is reacting positively to Africa's improving investment climate and that investments into the continent have been growing at more than 11 percent annually since 2008. All these countries have economic interests in Africa, which they see as a provider of natural resources, as well as emerging markets for their goods. Some also have political motivations, especially those that view Africa's 54 countries as comprising a significant voting bloc in the United Nations.

A New Motivation

Germany, however, seems different. It has a mature economy and enjoys an excellent commercial reputation in markets around the world. And while it is interested in securing support from UN member states for a permanent seat on the Security Council, Germany's primary focus lately has been on an immigrant crisis that has roots in Africa as well as the Middle East.

In 2015, Merkel announced a groundbreaking new refugee policy that would admit 1 million asylum seekers from Syria in addition to others seeking protection from violence and warfare. At the time, she enjoyed a 63 percent approval rating. That has since plummeted to 45 percent as the integration of over 1 million refugees proved to be more difficult than she had envisioned, with several cases of attacks on Germans and significant backlash against Muslims. Following the notorious attacks on women in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, she appears to have shifted some of her focus from Syrian refugees to North African asylum seekers, the latter of whom were blamed for those attacks, by tightening the rules for their entry.

Merkel's visit to Mali, Niger, and Ethiopia on her African tour this week – before hosting leaders from Chad and Nigeria for talks in Berlin later this month – can be seen as part of Germany's new emphasis on immigration. Her recent public comments have underscored the importance of development in Africa as one way to improve living conditions and prevent the mass exodus of Africans from the continent. To that end, the German government has announced plans for development projects such as vocational training and infrastructure, as well as expressing interest in private partnerships between African and German businesses. She has also been toeing the European Union's line on migrant policy, suggesting that Germany might negotiate "Readmission Agreements" with African countries to speed up repatriations of their citizens who reach Europe but are denied asylum. Her comments have also had a humanitarian dimension, lamenting the loss of life that has resulted from the dangerous journey from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean.

Why a Military Airbase?

There also appears to be a counterterrorism component to Germany's engagement in Africa. In addition to the military airbase announced by the German Ambassador, Merkel announced while in Niamey this week that Germany would provide approximately €10 million worth of military vehicles and other military equipment. Germany already has over 550 soldiers in Mali as part of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This base in Niger would offer support to that mission and those troops, while also projecting an increased German presence in Africa. Germany will become the third Western country with a military base in Niger; the others are France and the United States.

Currently, the United States is augmenting its presence in Niger by constructing a new temporary military base in the central city of Agadez. The U.S. Air Force has budgeted $50 million for the construction of a new runway and associated pavements, facilities, and infrastructure adjacent to the Niger Armed Force's Base Aerienne 201 (Airbase 201) south of the city of Agadez. The U.S. will relocate its existing assets from its shared air base with France in Niger's capital city of Niamey to the new facility in Agadez.

Conclusion

Germany's recently expressed concerns for Africa's security, development, and general well-being seem to be related to the refugee crisis that has plagued the Merkel administration and Europe as a whole. The timing of the announcement that Germany intends to construct a military airbase in Niger and provide a significant amount of military equipment suggests that Germany views an improved security situation in the Sahel (which it hopes to help create) as one way to control the flow of migrants into Europe. As Merkel has stated on several occasions, "the wellbeing of Africa is in Germany's interest" implying that Germany expects to experience an improvement in its own security once improvements in Africa's are gained.

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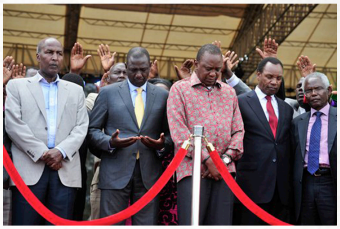

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African Leaders Accuse the Court of Bias

The ICC was established in 2002 by the ratification of the Rome Statute. According to this agreement, the ICC was given the mandate of investigating and prosecuting those responsible for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Since its founding, the court has opened investigations into 10 situations, nine of which occurred in Africa, and issued public indictments for 39 people, all of whom are African.

This prevalence of African cases has led many African leaders to accuse the ICC of bias. Most prominently, Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta, who was indicted by the ICC for his role in 2007–2008 election violence, has led a public campaign against the ICC, characterizing the court as undertaking "weak cases built with weak investigations and pursued with political zeal."

Other African politicians and commentators have also accused the ICC of political bias. South Africa's ruling African National Congress has criticized the ICC for prosecuting only African cases, stating, "the ICC is no longer useful for the purposes for which it was intended." Similarly, Ethiopia's foreign minister has regularly accused the ICC of targeting African leaders for political reasons.

Despite Criticism, Many States Still Support the ICC

This criticism fails to take into account the way that constraints on the ICC's jurisdiction have affected which cases the court has investigated. As the Court's defenders point out, the ICC only has jurisdiction over violations that have occurred since the Rome Statute entered into force in 2002. Given the prevalence of conflict in Africa in the early 2000s, and the 33 African countries that are signatories to the Rome Statute, it is not surprising that the ICC has investigated a large number of African cases.

Furthermore, the ICC does not choose many of the cases it pursues. In fact, the governments of the Central African Republic, Mali, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo each requested the ICC to open investigations in their countries, while the UN Security Council referred cases in Sudan and Libya. The ICC has only unilaterally opened cases into Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire. Recently, the court has also opened preliminary investigations into Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Palestine, and Ukraine, thus expanding its scope beyond Africa.

Critically, many African states still quietly support the ICC. This support became evident at the AU summit this July. Although a majority of AU member states voted to bring forward a motion to withdraw from the ICC, the motion failed after Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Botswana argued in favor of the court, while also noting that only individual countries had the ability to withdraw from the Rome Statute.

The ICC Is Not Biased, but Is It Competent?

Although the ICC may not be biased against African states, there are legitimate concerns about its competence. Despite an annual operating budget that has grown from $53 million in 2004 to $153 million in 2016, the ICC has only successfully convicted three people, all relatively low-ranking, while sitting heads of state and senior politicians have avoided conviction.

This is partly because the ICC frequently relies on the assistance of hostile political leaders to carry out prosecutions. This dynamic was seen in December 2014 when the ICC's Chief Prosecutor dropped charges against Kenyatta after failing to gather enough evidence to secure a conviction. As the Chief Prosecutor made clear, this failure was not because the evidence did not exist, but rather because rampant witness intimidation, allegedly directed by the Kenyan State House, deprived the Court of testimony necessary to secure a conviction.

Although the ICC was designed to ensure that even the most powerful could be held accountable for crimes against humanity and other grave offenses, in practice, the court lacks the enforcement authority necessary to complete the investigations and prosecutions of powerful figures that it is legally empowered to carry out.

Evaluating the ICC's Impact

The most important measure of the ICC's impact is the opinion of those the court is supposed to represent: victims of the most serious crimes of international concern. Despite the ICC's failings, surveys in countries where the ICC pursued cases find that citizens largely hold positive views of the Court. In Kenya, an Afrobarometer survey conducted after charges against Kenyatta were dropped found that 60 percent of Kenyans believe the ICC is still a relevant institution, and 56 percent opposed the country's plans to withdraw from the ICC. Similarly, in the Central African Republic, a survey of conflict-affected regions found that victims of violence were both more likely to have heard of the ICC and to hold positive views of the Court. These results suggest that many ordinary people still feel the ICC is a positive force for justice, despite its challenges.

Conclusion

Burundi's recent announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Rome Statute raises concerns about the ICC's ability to fairly and effectively provide accountability to victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although the court has struggled to prosecute sitting heads of state, it has won support from many victims and leaders alike for taking on difficult cases that other institutions are unable to prosecute. The ICC remains a unique tool for justice in Africa and worldwide, but still faces many challenges.

Sarah Graveline is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.
