

A Missing Piece of the Puzzle?

(Religious) Extremism and Its Impact on
Migration from Northern Africa to Europe

BY

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1. Introduction

A publication by Juliette Heij, published by Sallux (2023) , provided an overview of migration from Africa to Europe. Heij's main focus was to connect the often separately discussed aspects of mass migration, namely the 'who', 'why' and 'how' of migration and provide a holistic overview. This research paper intends to take a close-up look at the second aspect of migration, the 'why'. The focus will be on the potential effects of extremism on the migration waves coming into Europe from Northern Africa. This will be studied by scrutinizing the ways in which extremism can exploit and gain grounds in already unstable areas, whether those areas are ridden by economic distress, security issues, lack of opportunities, all of these, or something else. Furthermore, the potential direct and/or indirect connection between extremism and migration from Northern Africa to Europe is explored. For the purposes of this research, we will focus on regions in Northern and Western Africa that have significant issues with extremism and determine the involvement and impact of extremism as a contributing factor of these migration waves. To clarify, the purpose

of this research is not to argue and definitively prove that extremism is a cause (or a push factor) of migration, but rather to explore the topic as it seems to be scarcely studied, if not completely unstudied.

As was already made clear in Heij's research, the main reasons the migrants give for their departure are sometimes other reasons than extremism. For example, economic issues and corruption are commonly mentioned. Besides exploring whether extremism has direct impact on migration to Europe, the other angle of this research is to look 'a notch deeper' into the common motives given by migrants for their departure and to explore (1) whether extremism either causes or fuels these common motives (e.g., economic issues etc.), and (2) how and why extremists exploit these regions ravaged by economic distress and instability.

In the next chapter, the locations chosen for this research and the reasons for choosing them are discussed further.

1.1. Regions at Hand – Narrowing Down the Area of Focus

Northern (and Western) Africa is a vast region to consider. However, there are some 'hubs' of crises that produce both internal migration within Africa but also external migration, the latter mainly to Europe. The main countries from which migration currently originates are Guinea and Morocco. These countries do not seem to currently have direct problems with extremism. However, in Northern Africa and the Sahel area, there are other countries that are havens for many extremist actors. The countries that have been chosen for this research are primarily Sudan, Nigeria and Mali, both for their unstable situations and their known issues with extremism. Each country has its own set of problems, resulting in chaos and the dislocation of its people. Sudan is in the middle of a civil war between the armed forces and paramilitary organization Rapid Support Forces, Nigeria has problems with terrorism, both Islamist and separatist, and Mali is a major hub of Islamist organizations.

1.2. Extremism?

It is important for any research project to lay a firm foundation before engaging in analyses, beginning with defining and explaining the key terms and concepts that will be discussed. The main concept addressed in this research is extremism. At first glance it seems a rather obvious concept, but when looked at more close-

ly, it quickly becomes clear that defining extremism is not straightforward. Extremism, to begin with, refers to a system of beliefs that

[...] Characterizes an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good. Extremism exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside society.

This definition is an excerpt from Reinhart Koselleck, a German historian, and Giovanni Sartori, an Italian political scientist. It is a broad definition that could encompass many movements, organizations and ideologies. Nevertheless, it is an important starting point.

Secondly, extremism can be divided roughly into two types that can also intertwine: secular extremism and religious extremism. One is distinguished by commonly understood religious attributes, such as following a dogma, visibly identifying with a (world) religion and using religious language. The other is absent of these attributes. However, the dichotomic separation of 'secular' and 'religious' is nuanced and a complex matter among academics. Thus, it is worth mentioning that in this research, the two types of extremism are defined and separated, based on my own definitions to provide clarity for those who are not aware of these debates. Moreover, making the definitions too com-



plicated would go against the purposes of this research.

Secular extremism could be described as a form of extreme and radical political movements that aim to overpower the 'other' voices in society and gain supremacy without a compromise. For example, these groups can vary from right-wing extremist organizations to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Religious extremism on the other hand, refers to movements, ideologies, or groups that either (1) operate inside existing a religious movement as a radical or fundamentalist interpretation of the religion's dogma and rules, and/or (2) utilizes and emphasizes religious elements, ideas and dogma in their pursuit of power. The latter, in particular, is commonly intertwined with political pursuits, which, in this context, also means the 'secular'. A common example of religious extremism are terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, as well as other extremist Islamist organizations or the Hindu nationalists in India.

Regarding the types of extremism that concern this research are namely the various Islamist groups and separatist movements that operate in the Northern and Western African regions. The (para)military organizations at hand, however, are trickier to classify as 'extremist' as their goals per se do not seem to be driven by extreme ideology or some other similar motive. Rather it seems to be more general power struggles and disagreements with the current governing body and do not necessarily have absolute supremacy and control in mind. Thus, they are not classified as extremist in this research.

1.3. Relevance and Structure of the Research

The relevance of this type of research is evident as there seems to be no viable study conducted on extremism and its potential effects on migration in and from Northern and Western Africa, especially to the European Union (EU). In another recent publication by Sallux, 'A European Africa Agenda 2025-2100' (2024), the importance of religion in African societies is pointed out in chapter 3 and how that should be addressed by the EU as it relates to the EU's relationship with Africa. How extremism and religion are connected and how that is relevant to this research will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

The mass migration from the African side of the Mediterranean Sea is a contemporary and crucial issue that the EU needs to address. The dilemma is the limited available resources and the access to a 'good life' in Europe that cannot be granted and guaranteed to every single person that endeavors to come over. On the other hand, respecting human rights and human dignity, are embedded in European morale and, to some extent, in the law. Thus, the EU has a strong motivation to do something about this dilemma in a humane way. Moreover, the EU has problems with its approach to extremism. For example, the EU chooses poor targets for funding. Such example can be found in Sudan with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which in retrospect, has made the conflict even worse rather than the other way around. The EU funds sent to the

Sudanese government, which in turn were directed to the RSF, have not stopped the flow of migrants but has, in fact, made migration worse by strengthening the RSF, which is now waging war against the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This aspect alongside other problems with the EU's attempts to fix the situation will be addressed and discussed in more detail in later chapters.

This research is structured in the following manner: In the first chapter the topic is introduced with an explanation of the key terms used as well as narrowing down the geographic area that is discussed. Then in [chapter 2], the research looks at the roles and profiles of different extremist actors operating in these. Subsequently, each region is discussed in different chapters, beginning with Sudan and continuing through Mali and Nigeria. After each region has been addressed, the question, 'does poverty cause extremism or vice versa?' is discussed in detail. The sixth chapter will focus more on the connection between extremism and migration to the EU in light of what has been discussed up to that point. Finally, the seventh chapter is dedicated to discussing 'the way forward'. Additionally, some propositions are presented to answer the question, 'how to fight religious extremism?' and what the EU could change in its approach to tackling it more effectively.

This chapter has discussed the relevance and structure of the research. The next chapter looks at the different groups that operate in these areas and whether they would be positioned as religious or secular or both.



2. The Different Militias and Terrorist Movements

Northern and western Africa holds numerous notable militias and terrorist organizations. Arguably, the most notorious of the militias is the Rapid Support Forces, formerly known as Janjaweed. Janjaweed, and later the RSF, was originally a paramilitary organization that operated under the command of the Sudanese government and was later under the direct command of the dictator Omar al-Bashir. During the Darfur War in the early 2000's, Janjaweed was responsible for ethnic cleansings and war crimes committed against civilians and targeted groups of people. When Janjaweed was re-named the Rapid Support Forces, it was initially under the former dictator al-Bashir's direct command and, after the coup d'état in 2019, it became an independent militia. The RSF is a complicated case in terms of extremism. Whereas they have committed ethnic cleansing and other war crimes, they have not done so independently. At the moment, as an independent group waging war against the military junta in power and the Sudanese Armed Forces, they are not declaring any extreme ideology that they are following or pursuing. Thus, the RSF cannot be clearly labeled as extremist, even if their

actions are in the fashion of past violent extremism.

A separatist movement called the 'Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)' operates in Nigeria and conducts violent attacks against the government. The goal of the IPOB is to gain independence for the Biafra region in southeast Nigeria.

Beyond these forms of terrorism, there are numerous Islamist terrorist groups in northern Africa, but especially in Sahel. Boko Haram has been chosen as a key example due to its impact on the areas in which it operates.

2.1. (Religious) Extremism: Terrorism

Religious extremism refers to extreme interpretations of religious dogma, rules and practices. It can also take violent forms, in which the religion is interpreted in absolute terms. The 'supremacy' of the religion and the specific interpretation of it is then forced, or at least attempted to force, upon larger masses by any means possible, including violence and terror. Today



the term 'terrorism' has become synonymous with Islamist terrorism. However, terrorism is more than mere Islamism, but the close connotation between the two became more prominent after the 9/11 attacks in New York City and the USA's War on Terror that followed.

From the religious extremist groups that are discussed in this research, Boko Haram is arguably one of the most prominent ones in the context of western Africa. Operating especially in Nigeria, but also in the neighboring countries, Boko Haram is a 'classic' example of Islamist terrorism: kidnappings, absolute interpretation of the Islamic law and scripture, and execution of lethal attacks against 'the others', whether they are the government, other religions or moderate Muslims.

2.2. Non-Religious Extremism

Secular extremist groups are sometimes difficult to label as extremist. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), for example, is a separatist movement that conducts vi-

olent attacks against the Nigerian government, making it, by definition, an extremist group. The RSF in Sudan on the other hand, are neither separatist in nature, nor are they driven by any clear ideology. In the past, the RSF (then Janjaweed) was a 'special unit' that was loyal to the government and later to whomever furthered their own goals. Thus, the issues in Sudan seem to be motivated more by power and influence than religious or nationalistic ideology.

2.3. Conclusion of Chapter

The extremist groups operating in the areas at hand have been distinguished between religious and secular extremisms and why they represent their respective categories. In sum, the biggest difference between religious and secular extremism is the importance of religion in overall pursuits, visual representation and driving ideology to which the rest is subordinate.



3. Situation in Sudan

The Prequel to the War in Sudan in 2023

Sudan has a bloody and complicated history. It has endured two civil wars, 35 military coups (including the failed ones), and division of the country into modern day Sudan and South Sudan. The situation has not improved despite the numerous peace agreements over the course of decades. The most recent war in Sudan began in April 2023 and is still ongoing. The groups that have been at war in Sudan's history have varied over the decades, but, relevant to this study, the current war consists of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Abdel al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF is an independent paramilitary organization led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as 'Hemedti'. Moreover, both al-Burhan and Hemedti played crucial roles in the key steps leading up to the current war.

The immediate history of the war can be traced back to 2018, when widespread demonstrations against the then long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir erupted due to increases in the cost of living. The government's violent response to these

demonstrations and worsening economic instability climaxed in 2019 when the military overthrew the al-Bashir government in a coup d'état, imprisoned him and established a military junta. The Rapid Support Forces supported the Sudanese Armed Forces in the coup. After the coup, the Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC) was established with the purpose of gradually transferring power from the military to a democratically chosen civilian government. The council consisted of members of the military forces (SAF and RSF) and civilians. Abdel al-Burhan and Hemedti were both part of the TSC; al-Burhan was the chairman and Hemedti was the deputy chair. The civilian members were from the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a political coalition.

In 2020, the Juba Agreement for Peace was signed by the key members of the different military and civilian groups in the country. Sudan was slated to have free elections in 2023, but on October 25, 2021, al-Burhan seized power again, ousting the civilian members of the TSC and

dismissing sections of the constitutional contract. This act, again, was supported by Hemedti and the RSF. However, not long after, Hemedti expressed his regrets over supporting the most recent coup. He began to publicly criticize al-Burhan, and finally on April 15, 2023, the RSF launched surprise attacks on various locations in Khartoum, the capital, and in the Darfur region. Shortly after the attacks on April 15, Hemedti posted a thread on Twitter (now 'X') further explaining the reasoning behind his decision to take action against al-Burhan. The explanation was odd and vague, ranging from accusing al-Burhan of supporting Islamists to not supporting the democratization process. The actual reasoning and motives behind Hemedti's decision to wage war remains a mystery. However, it seems to be about a power play between al-Burhan and Hemedti and disagreements over Hemedti's position in the new security hierarchy after the 2021 coup. Currently the war has moved in a direction where the RSF is gaining more grounds. However, the situation is very unpredictable, and it seems that the end of the war is not yet in sight.

3.1. The Consequences in Terms of Refugees and Dislocation of People

Sudan has been a hub for refugees from different parts of Africa. More specifically, Khartoum, the capital, has been a crucial transit point for the migrants wanting to travel to Europe through either Egypt or Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea.

As a consequence of the current war in Sudan, over 3 million people have been displaced thus far, 600 000 of those to locations outside the country, and the numbers continue to rise. The people are moving out of the country, most commonly either west to Chad or north to Egypt and Libya, often enroute to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

A big part of this movement apparatus is human smugglers. Human smuggling is a thriving business in Sudan and a part of a wider illicit industry. The estimated annual net worth of this business is around 6 billion US dollars. There are concerns that some terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, are collaborating with the smugglers to pass people to Europe and create dormant terrorist cells. There is no definitive evidence of this, but it is a major concern that is likely to happen.

3.2. Conclusion of Chapter

Sudan is being ravaged again by a bloody war with no end in sight. Extremist movements, namely Islamists, are not in a significant role in the current war, nor have they been in the country's recent history. Rather, in the previous civil wars the reasons have concerned ethnic, religious and economic differences, in comparison to the current war in Sudan, which seems to lack those motives altogether. This war seems to be more focused on a power play between two military leaders. Thus, in terms of Sudan, it could be concluded

that extremism does not seem to be a major driving force in the current conflict and dislocation of people. Moreover, extremism does not seem to be a contributing factor to the migration waves either. The only potential connection to extremism in the case of Sudan, seems to be tied to Islamist organizations, such as ISIS, that may

join forces with human traffickers to infiltrate Europe with dormant terrorist cells. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be conclusive evidence of this. It is, however, a potential threat and a connection point between extremism and migration in Sudan.



4. Situation in Western Africa/Sahel

In the Sahel region, Islamist movements seem to be thriving. Numerous groups operate in the territory of Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso. There are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), to name a few of the prominent groups.

4.1. Mali

Mali has been thoroughly ravaged by extremist movements. Most of the Islamist movements mentioned in the previous section have a stronghold in Mali, making the risk of a humanitarian crisis and mass migration worse. The Liptako-Gourma region (consisting in states in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso), in particular, is an epicenter

of violence in the Sahel region. Because Mali is in a geographically crucial position in the Sahel region and is societally unstable, many of the Islamist movements have been able to carry out terrorist attacks both there and in the neighboring countries as well.

4.2. Nigeria

Many of the Islamist groups that operate in the Sahel area are also active in Nigeria. However, arguably, the most notorious group that has terrorized Nigeria is Boko Haram. Boko Haram is responsible for attacks on civilian targets, government buildings, and most famously, kidnappings of Christian schoolgirls, such as the notorious Chibok kidnappings.

Violence and instability in the country have not eased in the recent years. According to Dataphyte, 328,005 Nigerians have fled to Chad, Cameroon, and Niger as of January 2022. Nigeria has seen a wave of people leaving the country in the past couple of years. Interestingly, polls show that the main reason (albeit not the only reason) is security issues, of which kidnappings and over-all safety concerns top the list. Distrust in the government and politics has also been named as a significant reason for departure, indicating that corruption is a factor. However, Nigeria's security issues are more multifaceted than merely Islamist terrorism. Whereas the Islamist groups, Boko Haram most notoriously, have their main sphere of influence and impact in the country's northern and northeast regions, in other areas there are significant issues with gang violence, separatist movements as well as kidnappings. The aforementioned issues together make Nigeria a rather fragile state which also reflects directly on the waves of civilians fleeing the country. As stated above, there is Boko-Haram and religious terrorism in the north, but in the southeast, there is the secessionist movement 'Indigenous People of Biafra' (IPOB), which aims to re-establish an independent state of Biafra, which existed for a short period of time between 1967 and 1970. The IPOB, among other minor separatist groups in the southeast region, have been conducting low-level guerrilla warfare against the Nigerian government since 2021.

4.3. Conclusion of Chapter

Western Africa and the Sahel region, in particular, have more prominent issues with extremism, primarily Islamist terrorism and secondarily secessionism. The various groups operating in the area conduct kidnappings, killings, and overall terror are in part responsible for people fleeing the region. Moreover, the aforementioned issues add to the overall trends in increasing poverty, insecurity and instability in the region. Albeit terrorism is not the only reason for people leaving the country, it seems to be a significant factor that contributes to migration from the region. In conclusion, Sahel and western Africa have significant and urgent problems with violent extremism, which is also reflected both, directly and indirectly, in migration numbers.



5.

A Self-Perpetuating Cycle?

The Dilemma of Poverty and Extremism

This chapter discusses the persistent idea that extremism is a byproduct of economic distress. Whether one is the cause of the other or not, is a crucial point to understand in order to address the dilemma of mass migration.

Poverty, simply put, is understood as lack of resources. This is true to an extent; however, this definition overlooks a nuanced understanding of the situation. Countries, such as Sudan, are understood in a colloquial sense as poor. This is due to the fact that significant portions of the population live in poor conditions and lack access to resources. However, as a country, Sudan is not as poor as its population's standard of living would indicate. There are significant natural resources of oil and gold in the country, making it a wealthy country. Therefore, poverty cannot be defined as the mere lack of resources, but also the distribution of those resources among the population. In the cases of countries in northern and western Africa, the distribution of wealth is one of the main causes of poverty among individuals. It is at this

point in which extremist influence comes in. Does poverty (as in 'economic distress') cause extremism? The answer is no, but it might fuel it.

5.1. The Other Side of the Coin – The Dilemma of Extremism and Poverty

Extremism and poverty are commonly linked to each other. Many religious extremist organizations operate and recruit people in impoverished areas, which may make it seem as if poverty creates extremism. It is true that some of the poorest regions in the world have a connection to extremist organizations' activity. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, all part of the Sahel region, are among the top ten poorest regions in the world. However, extremist ideologies, and especially Islamist movements, do not originate from these poverty ridden areas, rather they arrive from elsewhere. Instead, it seems that extrem-

ist ideologies seem to be drawn to already unstable areas, which further fuels chaos, creates terror, insecurity and results in the dislocation of masses of people. Thus, a question arises: if poverty does not necessarily create extremism, but significant hubs of extremism are flourishing in poor areas, which fundamentally is the origin? To dissect this paradoxical question, let us begin by examining whether poverty creates extremism.

Firstly, if poverty is the root cause of extremist ideologies, there would be a direct relationship between the level of poverty in a region the level of extremist activity there. However, this is not the case. Albeit there is correlation, there is no definitive causation. For example, the aforementioned list of top 10 poorest countries in the world does not include Nigeria, which, as already demonstrated in a previous chapter (4.2.), has severe problems with not only religious extremism but also secular, separatist extremism. Moreover, to argue further against this notion, we must briefly look outside the regions that are discussed in this research. Some of the countries that have had severe instances of religious extremism, especially Islamism, are located in the Middle East. Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, to name a few, have been battling with internal and external terrorism. In recent history, they have become more or less unstable countries, but none of them are considered poor in the same sense as many of the Sahel countries, for example. Syria and Iraq before the wars were in fact rather stable and wealthy countries. Moreover, to showcase further that poverty does not create extremism is the fact that many notorious

leaders of these organizations, such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda, are usually from wealthy and educated backgrounds.

The Islamic State (ISIS) did not originate in impoverished areas; rather it filled a power vacuum caused by the 2011 Arab Spring and the instability that followed. Similar parallels can be observed in Mali, for example. The Libyan revolution overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi extended to Mali and Sahel by and large through weapons and fighters. Thus, it seems that poverty does not create extremism, but it may fuel it. This is a careful distinction but a crucial one.

Finally, the other side of the question, does extremism create poverty? This one is arguably an even more nuanced question than the previous one. Extremism commonly operates in areas that are already poor and unstable. They also tend to make the situation worse by inciting terror through killings, bombings, kidnappings and so forth. This creates a humanitarian crisis, and results in the dislocation of people. However, in this case, as well as in the previous, extremist organizations are not the root cause of poverty; rather they have arrived in places of economic instability. It could be concluded that poverty and extremism are connected; however, to be able to point out which causes which is hard to say. Perhaps the answer is outside of this dichotomy. Neither seems to be the root of the other. However, they both seem to feed off each other. In a way, it seems to be a self-perpetuating cycle: poverty attracts extremism, extremism fuels poverty, which feeds extremism, et cetera.

5.2. Conclusion of Chapter

As has been shown, poverty does not necessarily cause extremism and extremism does not necessarily cause poverty. However, extremist groups flourish in poor regions, which seem to be fertile grounds for them to exist. The actors behind extremist organizations, and the driving ideological forces, are not products of poverty. This seems to lead us to a problematic dilemma when we are trying to find the roots of the 'extremist tree' in order to cut it down

for good. If fighting extremism is done by trying to combat poverty, it does not eradicate extremism. If this were the case, there would be no members of terrorist organizations that are third generation migrants from Europe, some with higher education and economic stability, for example, and there would not be significant funding to extremist organizations from rich Islamic countries and other wealthy theocracies. However, if there were no poverty-ridden countries and regions, the extremist organizations would not have fertile ground to take root.



6. Is There a Connection to Migration Waves to Europe?

At this point, the main question of this research will be addressed: is there a discernible connection between extremism in northern and western Africa and migration waves to the EU? Let us begin by recapitulating our findings in light of this question.

The first region that was discussed was Sudan. Sudan has been a hub for migrants traveling from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, has been the gateway to Egypt and Libya from

where migrants can then continue across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Moreover, Sudan has a conflict-ridden history that has resulted in migration within the country as well as outside the country. The flow of migration, however, is mainly to neighboring countries rather than Europe. Furthermore, the causes behind migration from Sudan has not discernibly been extremism. Especially in the current war, extremism does not seem to play a significant role. However, human smuggling is a prosperous business in Sudan. There have

been concerns regarding Islamist terrorist organizations joining forces with these smugglers to infiltrate terrorist cells to Europe. These claims have not been definitively proven, but it is a likely threat.

The question of whether extremism creates poverty which, in turn, leads to waves of migration (or does poverty create extremism which leads to migration due to instability) has also been discussed in Chapter 5. The conclusion is that neither is the cause of the other, but they feed off each other. For example, the extremist activity in Nigeria, which is not a poor

country, does seem to have an effect on migration, including movement towards Europe.

Extremism does have, thus, a connection to migration to the EU. The next chapter discusses what to do with this information.



7. The Way Forward: What To Do with This Information?

The EU has made numerous attempts to control the continuous flow of migrants into its territory. The unintended consequences of these attempts has not stopped currents of migrant flow and has made it even stronger. By funding military regimes and/or militias, the circumstances for the civilians in these regions has become increasingly worse. This, in turn, has caused migration to continue, counteracting the original intention of stopping it. For example, as was mentioned briefly in the introductory chapter, the EU funded

the Sudanese government which directed the funds to the RSF. The militia has since gained enough strength to ignite the current war in Sudan. The question, then, is what can be done?

7.1. Religious Extremism and the Concept of 'Cosmic War'

Why is religious extremism so difficult to

tackle? Firstly, the adherents are always passionate about their ideology. They are absolute in their belief that what they are doing is the right thing to do against 'the evil'. They are willing to sacrifice to achieve their goals, including sometimes their own lives. However, these are not the only aspects that make religious extremism so difficult to counter. The concept of 'cosmic war' is a theory by Mark Jurgensmeyer, an American sociologist, that illustrates how the 'divine conflict' transcends the earthly circumstances. What happens on Earth is a mere reflection of the broader, timeless battle against fundamental forces in the Universe. To go back to the initial question, of what makes this so difficult to tackle, the answer is in the way the extremists conceive of the nature of the conflict/war. If force is used against them, even in overwhelming numbers, it merely confirms their beliefs in their own minds. After all, if they would not be doing the right thing, that is, fighting against a cosmic evil, why would that evil not try to destroy them with any means possible? Moreover, cosmic war is beyond time and space, meaning religious extremists cannot be worn down over time. The extremists are not concerned with how quickly the eventual victory occurs. A recent example of this is the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021 when the American-led forces withdrew from the country. Taliban had been squeezed, almost literally, into foxholes for over 20 years. Once American and allied forces withdrew, the Taliban took over again, rendering the progress they made toward shifting Afghanistan into a democratic and stable country all in vain.

7.2. How to Fight (Religious) Extremism?

When it comes to religious extremism, one way to combat it in the long term would be to promote and fund a 'positive' interpretation of the religion. Scott Appleby, an American historian, argues in 'The Ambivalence of the Sacred' that religion itself has no agency. It is either destructive or constructive depending on the people interpreting and practicing it. This means that while some actors utilize religion to spread hatred, discrimination, violence, and authoritarianism, the same religion has the keys to promote inclusivity, peace, love and diversity. These values, in one way or another, can be found in all of the main world religions. A contemporary example of this can be found in Nigeria when in 2018 a group of Muslim herdsmen had launched coordinated attacks on Christian farmers in 10 villages in the Barkin Ladi area of the Plateau State. The Christians fled from the massacre and an imam, Abubakar Abdullahi, provided shelter to these Christians in his Mosque to protect them. He received an International Religious Freedom Award in 2019 for his actions, in which he:

... gave refuge to his Christian neighbors, sheltering 262 Christians in his mosque and his home... then stood outside the doors confronting the Muslim attackers, pleading with them to spare the lives of the Christians inside, even offering to exchange his own life for theirs.

This is a perfect example of what Appleby described as the ambivalence of the sa-

cred. When Muslim attackers intended to massacre Christians, at the same time, another Muslim sheltered them at the risk of losing his own life. Both sides, fundamentally, identify with the same religious tradition and use the same religious texts, but it is the interpretation that makes the difference. Imam Abdullahi is not the only example, but unfortunately a minority one. There is a lack of well-funded and well-organized peacemakers within religious traditions, especially in Islam, compared to the various terrorist and fundamentalist movements. As Scott Appleby says:

The success stories mostly celebrate heroic personalities who have relied on their own inner strength, charisma, and courage in opposing dominative violence and state-sponsored or other forms of oppression. What possibilities for peacebuilding might result from more organized, adequately funded programs of education and training of the 'militants for peace' found in every religious tradition?

The EU (along with the local people) could benefit from directing funding and implementing initiatives to collaborate with and empower positive actors and organizations within religious traditions with the goal of combatting extremists' views. After all, the less popularity such extremist voices have within the larger public, the less able they are to recruit people who do not know their own religious beliefs and traditions. Moreover, there is evidence that Islamist extremists are against education as illiteracy and poverty helps the extremist agenda. In my opinion, this means education, whether it is the basic education

in schools or education about the religion that one practices, is a key to fighting extremism. As a scholar of religious studies, I would highly encourage further investigation into possibly creating funds towards constructive religious teachers and organizations and the impact they could have in creating stability and positive development in conflict-ridden areas. A good example of this is the Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria that aims to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians. The Interfaith Mediation Center was established by pastor James Wuye and imam Muhammad Ashafa, former enemies in the deadly conflicts between the Muslims and the Christians in the 1990's.

7.3. The Right to Self-Defense?

On the other side of the coin of 'how to fight (religious) extremism', especially in the case of Nigeria, is the victims' right to defend themselves if the state and the national (and also international, i.e. the UN) security apparatuses fail to do so. The United Nations' charter clearly establishes the right to defend oneself, both individually and collectively, in Article 51. Why, then, are minority communities in Nigeria, especially the Christians, not able to do so effectively? The current wave of mass violence against Christians can be dated back to 2009 when Boko Haram instigated coordinated attacks against the Christian communities in the country. From January 2023 to January 2024, over 8000 Christians

were slain, making it the deadliest period in Nigeria's recent history. The actors responsible for these killings were various jihadist herdsman, terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF) and, to an extent, even the government. The current government of Nigeria took office in 2023 under the leadership of Bola Tinubu, yet Christians persecution continue to be dismissed. The security forces have allegedly carried out killings themselves and have also looked the other way when the other, aforementioned groups have committed atrocities. While the majority of Christians have fled their homes in the face of persecution, there are some Christians, especially young men, who have taken matters into their own hands. They have tried to fight back, often unsuccessfully, only adding to the bloodshed and chaos.

The persecution Christians are facing in Nigeria is so severe that it can be considered a genocide. The government's ambivalence about the situation and the security forces participation in the killings, leaves the Christians on their own. However, there are some possible solutions to this issue.

By way of an illustration, consider Syria. In 2013, amid the chaos in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the ongoing civil war, the Syriac-Assyrian people of North-East Syria (who are almost exclusively Christian) formed the Syriac Military Council together with their Kurdish and Arab neighbors to protect themselves in the crossfire of the civil war and the rising extremist movements. As Christians, they are specifically targets of violence and harassment by extreme Islamism. The Syri-

ac Military Council is a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a collective military and rebel group that operate in Syria. The SDF is multi-ethnic and consists of Kurdish, Christian and Arab fighters. The purpose of the Syriac Military Council in the SDF is to represent the Christian Syriac people and to secure their rights, safety and interests in the region. Interestingly, the International Coalition against ISIS has for years cooperated with the SDF in their fight against ISIS and therefore also cooperated with the Syriac Military Council. Thus, this example proves the point that a community has not only a theoretical right of self-defense, but that it is also possible to realize this right within the already existing structures with the help of international support.

By introducing official councils or other groups to serve as the national security apparatus for the Christians in Nigeria, the rights and safety of their community could be secured. Additionally, a lethal cycle of retaliation, potentially against innocent civilians, could be prevented. Moreover, as there is a strong tradition of pacifism in many of the Nigerian Christian communities, an official council securing their rights could settle the internal disputes within the Christians regarding whether to take up arms (individually) or not. This approach could also prevent the development of rogue militias that are already developing due to the lack of any other form of security. It should be clear that Christians cannot be excluded from the right of self-defense. Rather the reverse; their right to self-defense can be part of a strategy that denies extremism the possibility of spreading.



8. Conclusion – A Summary of What Has Been Discussed

This research paper has discussed the regions of Northern and Western Africa in light of extremism in its numerous manifestations in relation to migration waves to Europe. The countries that have been discussed are Sudan, Mali and Nigeria. It has already been established in previous bodies of research that the main motives for migrants to relocate focus on economic distress and lack of opportunities in their home countries, as well as security issues and corruption. This research has focused on the potential impact of extremism, directly and indirectly, in northern and western Africa on migration to the EU. The findings conclude that extremism influences migration, but the level of its impact is not definitively high compared to other motives for migration to the EU. However, extremism seems have an indirect connection to the common reasons for migrating, including economic distress, instability and so forth. This is due to the fact that extremists are attracted to unstable areas where there is either a power vacuum that needs to be filled or a chaotic enough sit-

uation that grants extremists the circumstances to operate. In peacetime, extremists can take advantage of the respective governments that are either incapable or ambivalent about addressing extremism. Moreover, the question of whether poverty causes extremism or extremism causes poverty, has been addressed. The conclusion is that neither necessarily causes the other, rather they seem to fuel each other. At the same time, they are not dependent on each other but somewhat paradoxically, to an extent, they do need one another.

Especially in the case of Nigeria, Christian persecution by radical Islamists, both by the terrorist movements and also by the government and the national security forces, has been addressed and suggestions have been made on how to respond to the problem. Establishing some sort of council or other organization that can secure the rights and safety of the Christian community in the country would be an effective solution, as has been shown in the example of the Syriac Military Council operating in Syria that is responsible for

the safety and rights of the Christian Syrian people in the country. By establishing a similar council in Nigeria, violent responses could additionally be prevented by the Christian side. Moreover, the need for an official body in the security apparatus that would take care of the safety of the Christian community is urgent.

Overall, extremism impacts migration. However its impact is multifaceted: it can be direct, as in the case of some of western African countries, such as Nigeria, where extremists conduct terrorist attacks and kidnappings against civilians causing people to migrate, or it can be indirect, for example, when terrorist groups fight against the government, which, in turn, consumes the government's resources, taking those resources away from the development, safety and quality of living for the people. What could be done, then, to combat extremism? The EU could look into directing funds towards 'militants of peace' type of religious movements, organizations and others that operate counter to the violent extremists. Moreover, the right to self-defense for the persecuted communities should be addressed—and granted—for the people in question.

Migration to Europe from northern Africa is a complicated issue that is due to a myriad of reasons. However, by addressing extremism, at least one piece can be added to solving the puzzle of controlling the mass migration. That piece, in fact, seems to be peace.

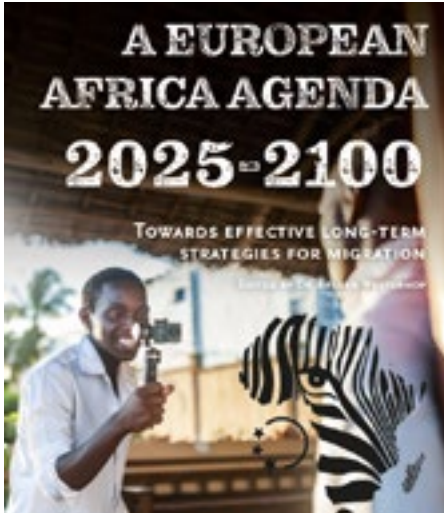
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