

American Foreign Policy Council



SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

COUNTRIES

Mauritania
Mali
Sudan
Ethiopia
Somalia
South Africa

Regional Summary

Several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa face new and growing threats from Islamist movements. In West Africa, Mali and Mauritania have been directly affected by the rise of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has carved out a home in the Sahel, while another al Qaeda-affiliated group, al-Shabaab, is in the midst of a fierce insurgency against the weak Somali government. The Islamist threat there, while not new, has grown in potency over the past decade, with an Islamist umbrella group briefly seizing power in 2006, and a potent al Qaeda affiliate currently waging an insurgency against a weak transitional government. In Sudan, the government's own pro-Islamist tendencies have been tempered in recent years.

The impoverished and predominantly Muslim West African nation of Mali seems an inhospitable place for Islamist parties and ideas. It enjoyed a successful transition to democracy in the 1990s and has a history of religious tolerance and pluralism, while religiously-based political parties are explicitly banned by the constitution. Attempts by Iranian and Saudi agents to spread more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam have met with little success. Nevertheless, the ungoverned deserts of Mali now play host to one of al-Qaeda's newest and most dangerous affiliates, AQIM. The presence of AQIM has drawn attention and counterterrorism assistance from the United States, and forced Mali into regional security arrangements with its neighbors.

Like Mali, neighboring Mauritania is poor, predominantly Muslim, and

grappling with the emergence of AQIM. However, unlike in Mali, Islamist parties are sanctioned by the government, which has oscillated between military dictators and democratic elections in recent years. Tawassoul constitutes the main Islamist opposition party, although it has hewed a moderate line and opposes acts of violence. AQIM, meanwhile, has proven capable of carrying out terrorist attacks inside Mauritania, including the country's first suicide bombing and the murder of an American aid worker in 2009. Yet there are few indications that the group's radical ideology has taken root among Mauritania's traditionally moderate population. The government has responded to AQIM's rise with an intense crackdown on Islamist suspects and sympathizers and, together with French forces, attacked AQIM encampments in the desert Sahel region in July 2010.

By contrast, few countries in the world are more unstable or more saturated with Islamist militancy than war-torn Somalia, which forms the figurative horn of Africa. Civil war, crushing poverty, and chronic instability have in recent years created space for the emergence of a myriad of Islamist groups, including a potent al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab, and an umbrella group of several violent Islamist movements known as Hizbul Islam. With little central authority to oppose them, in 2006 the radical Islamic Courts Union (ICU) seized power in Mogadishu. Ethiopian forces intervened shortly afterward in support of the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Islamists were overthrown. However, the TFG—fractured and now ruled by the former head of the Islamic Courts Union—exerts limited authority throughout the country as it battles a fierce insurgency led by al-Shabaab, which now holds sway over vast parts of Somalia.

Ethiopia, though only one-third Muslim (and two-thirds Christian), is also home to a panoply of Islamist groups, including elements of al-Qaeda, Tablighi Jamaat, and the Wahhabi-inspired Takfir wal-Hijrah. However, Ethiopia's primary Islamist threats derive from its proximity to neighboring Somalia. Ethiopia was forced to intervene in Somalia in 1996 after cross-border terrorist attacks from the Somali-based AIAI. Again in 2006, Ethiopian forces entered Somalia to unseat from power the AIAI's successor, the Islamic Courts Union. Meanwhile, neighboring Eritrea, with which Ethiopia fought a war in 1998 over a still-unresolved border dispute, is known to support anti-Ethiopian Islamist movements across the region. Domestically, despite a sometimes tense relationship with the Christian-majority government, Ethiopia's Muslims have resisted radical Islamist ideologies and the country remains America's most important counterterrorism ally in the region.

Although Muslims constitute less than two percent of South Africa's population, the country experienced a bout of Islamist-inspired violence in the

1990s and is known to have been used by al-Qaeda's leadership as a safe haven and hub for financial activities. The country's most famous indigenous Islamist outfit, PAGAD, began in the 1980s as a social order movement but by the late 1990s was attacking public and Western targets with pipe bombs. Its leadership, however, was decimated in a crackdown in 2000 and the group has been dormant since. In general, South Africa's 1,000 mosques and educational centers have been unreceptive to radical forms of Islamism and South Africa's politics are dominated by the secular African National Congress, although an Islamist political group, Al-Jama-ah, emerged in 2007 to advocate for the imposition of sharia law.

Sudan, officially recognized by the U.S. as a state sponsor of international terrorism, has served as a hub for Islamist activity on the continent for decades. Islamist movements have been active in the country as early as 1881, when a jihad was launched against colonial British rule. Since the 1980s, a powerful offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Hassan al-Turabi has influenced Sudanese politics, with Turabi serving as speaker of the National Assembly during the 1990s. Under Turabi, Sudan opened its doors to a myriad of Islamist groups, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Egypt's Gamaa Islamiya. The country even welcomed Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, where the al-Qaeda leader set up training camps and built a financial empire. Turabi has since fallen out of favor with the country's longtime military dictator, Omar al-Bashir, who has curbed some of the Sudanese government's pro-Islamist policies in the years after 9/11.