The Emergence of Violent Islamist Groups:
Branding, Scale and the Conflict Marketplace
in sub-Saharan Africa

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of Sussex

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

This thesis incorporates published works and works submitted for publication. I confirm that I am the sole author of all incorporated material.

Signature:...

Caitriona Dowd

Date:.. .....

29 April 2016

Acknowledgments

Thesis Summary

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This research project addresses the question of how violent groups emerge and act under specific identity mantles in complex local, national and transnational conflict environments. It takes as a case study the example of violent Islamist groups in sub-Saharan Africa, and seeks to understand what influences the emergence and dynamics of violence under this specific 'brand.' It explains Islamist violence as a strategic tool in contexts of political and socio-economic marginalisation, deliberately mobilised under an Islamist brand in order to leverage a powerful and cross-ethnic identity among otherwise disempowered communities. The project explains variation in the intensification of conflict, use of anti-civilian strategies, and groups' relationships with transnational actors, as strategic choices, shaped by features of the wider conflict marketplace, including the presence, relative strength and transnational linkages of conflict actors.

Using quantitative conflict event data, supplemented by qualitative fieldwork, the findings of this research project are four-fold: first, it demonstrates that Islamist violence should not be conceived of as unique from other non-state violence. Rather, Islamist violence can be studied in comparative context, and through some of the same explanatory frameworks that have effectively traced the origins, drivers and dynamics of other forms of non-state armed violence. Second, it finds that Islamist violence is a strategic response to local political environments, shaping the emergence and dynamics of violence under different brands. Third, it presents evidence that in spite of a dominant narrative of a single, homogeneous, global threat of Islamist violence, local conditions shape this phenomenon, and undermine the assumption of a highly transnational, mobile and rootless network of homogenous militant groups. Finally, it shows that the contours of those local environments – reflected in the number, strength and relative activity of other non-state armed groups – shape the intensity and targeting of Islamist violence in important ways.

Table of Contents

1   Introduction

This research project addresses the question of how violent groups emerge and act under specific identity mantles in complex local, national and transnational conflict environments. It takes as a case study the example of violent Islamist groups in sub-Saharan Africa, and seeks to understand what influences the emergence and dynamics of violence under this specific 'brand.' The research project explains Islamist violence as a strategic tool in contexts of political and socio-economic marginalisation, deliberately mobilised under an Islamist brand in order to leverage a powerful and cross-ethnic identity among otherwise disempowered communities. The project explains variation in the intensification of conflict, use of anti-civilian strategies, and groups' relationships with transnational actors, as strategic choices, shaped by features of the wider conflict marketplace, including the presence, relative strength and transnational linkages of conflict actors.

By considering the demographic, socio-economic and political contexts in which conflict occurs, it explains Islamist violence as a response to political and socio-economic marginalisation, mobilised under an Islamist brand as a function of the strategic leveraging of identity mantles among otherwise disempowered communities. In exploring the varying dynamics of Islamist violence, including its intensification, the use of anti-civilian strategies, and groups' relationships with transnational actors, the project explains variation on these dimensions as a strategic response to groups' conflict environments, shaped by the presence, relative strength and transnational linkages of conflict actors.

The main argument of this research project is that the local conditions in which violent Islamist groups operate determine the emergence and subsequent dynamics of their violence. The conditions of local group marginalisation, inclusion and exclusion from political power, and corresponding socio-economic and political grievances, shape the mobilisation of collective action under the mantle of Islamist violence. Relatedly, the conditions of other

armed non-state actors, including other groups at the local level, and organisational ties to transnational groups, shape the strategic use of violence, including its intensification, the targeting of civilians, and its local and transnational geography.

This chapter provides an introduction to the research project as a whole, setting out its motivation and structure, outlining the context of the subsequent substantive chapters, and summarising their key arguments and findings.

1.1   Motivation and Structure of the Research Project

The motivation for this research project is two-fold: first, observed patterns in the levels, intensity and geography of Islamist violence on the African continent present an urgent need for a better understanding of the conditions in which this violence occurs, intensifies, and abates. Second, existing debates and research on Islamist violence have largely failed to explain its relationship to local and national socio-economic, political and conflict conditions, and further, to explain precisely why this *form* of violence, over and above alternative options for collectively mobilising, have emerged at this time and in these spaces.

1.1.1 Context

This research project is motivated by several empirical trends: the first is the prevalence of violent Islamist conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, with serious implications for the safety and security of populations; the economic and political development of states; and the political stability, resilience and fragility of conflict-affected states. Together, these present an urgent case for understanding the structural conditions in which this form of violence emerges; the drivers which shape its timing, frequency and geography; and the practices of governance and development which condition its dynamics. In spite of recent research attesting to the decline of certain forms of conflict across the continent and the world (Straus, 2012; Pinker,

2012), other analyses indicate that the forms and manifestations of violence are changing and adapting to political conditions and security responses (Raleigh, 2016), and continue to present serious challenges for political development, civilian vulnerability to violence, and human security more generally.

More specifically, this research project is motivated by the need to understand and explain the recent (re-)emergence and intensification of Islamist violence in particular, as one form of conflict on the African continent. In spite of a long history of relatively low-level Islamist violence across the continent (including the bombing of the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam embassies in 1997; long-running violence mobilised around an Islamist mantle in Somalia in the 1990s; and reaching back to an earlier history of Islamist violence in Nigeria in the 1980s with the Maitatsine riots), recent years have witnessed significant shifts in the dynamics of Islamist violence. These shifts include the emergence of Islamist violence with renewed intensity and increased frequency across the continent; its emergence and occurrence in new spaces which had previously seen limited or no violence organised along this faultline; and the simultaneous emergence of this form of violence in multiple, discrete spaces in a relatively short period of time, giving the impression of a growing, and widespread phenomenon.

Conflict involving violent Islamist groups is a feature of some of the most intractable and persistent conflicts on the continent. Key strategic and internationally significant conflicts have featured or been dominated by violent Islamist actors, including conflicts in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, as well as Somalia, and increasingly in North African states including Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, with consequences for regional and global stability, human development, security and vulnerability in affected areas.

Islamist violence is also a component of the rapid and expansive seizure of territory by aligned rebel groups (as in the case of North-Eastern Nigeria and Northern Mali), as well as

a feature in some of the most striking and tragic incidents of anti-civilian violence on the continent in recent years (as in the case of the violence carried out in North-Eastern Nigeria, attributed to the violent Islamist group "Boko Haram", and targeted attacks on civilians in Kenya). Across Africa, the absolute and proportional levels of violent Islamist activity on the continent have been increasing over the past fifteen years (*see* Figure 1).
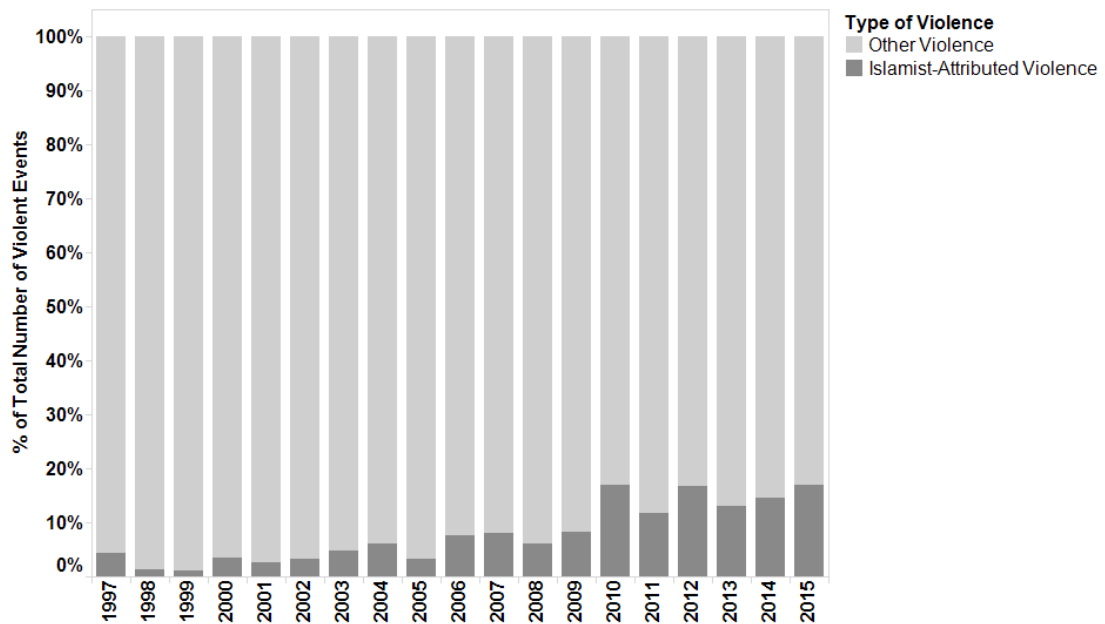
Figure 1: Violent Islamist Activity and Other Political Violence, Africa, 1997-2015.

Data source: ACLED, Version 6.

In addition to its renewed intensity, analysis of violent Islamist activity in sub-Saharan Africa indicates that this form of violence is emerging in new geographic spaces. As levels of Islamist violence fall in some historical flashpoints, such as Algeria, they are increasing in areas further east and south on the continent, particularly in Nigeria and Kenya, while the rapid onset and escalation of Islamist violence in Mali attest to the dynamism of this form of conflict (*see* Figure 2). By contrast, some contexts in which religious identities are highly politicised and salient to violent conflict – for example, in the Central African Republic – have experienced little or no evidence of Islamist mobilisation. With such a varied geographical footprint, this research seeks to understand: what are the 'place influences'

(O'Loughlin, 2010) which condition the emergence of this specific form of violence? What characteristics of space, and the relational position of communities within that space to a central regime, or to local and national elites, render it a conducive environment for violent Islamist mobilisation?

Third, violent Islamist groups are emerging, operating and adapting their strategies and tactics of violence in highly complex, variegated and multi-actor environments. Countries such as Kenya, Mali and Nigeria all witness a proliferation of forms of violence, with a considerable degree of spatial overlap, and a multiplication of not only discrete violent groups, but also types of violent actor, within shared sub-national spaces. What are the relationships between violent Islamist groups and these other non-state actors? Specifically, how does the 'conflict profile' of a space condition and shape the violence employed by armed Islamist groups? In addition, what effect does the forging of extra-territorial alliances between violent Islamist groups have on domestic groups' patterns, dynamics and geographies of violence?

Together, these empirical trends demand an explanation for Islamist violence that can at once account for its relationship to past violence, its recent dynamism and spatial expansion, and its interaction with state and governance responses.
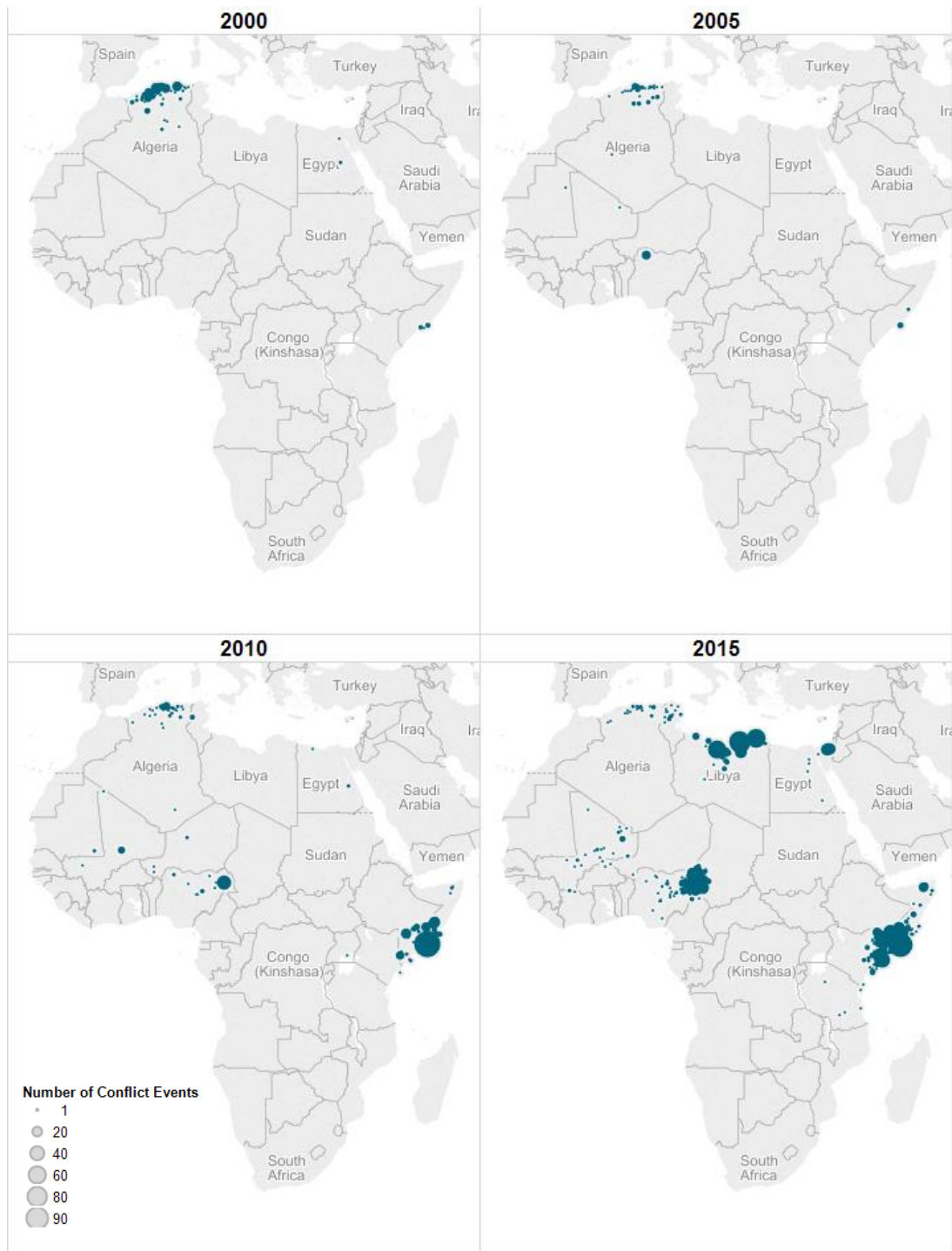
Figure 2: Violent Islamist Activity, 1997-2015 (Four Time Periods). Data source: ACLED, Version 6.

1.1.2 Debates

To date, prominent explanations for both violent conflict in Africa generally, and Islamist violence specifically, have often centred on the irrationality of violence and violent agents; and the supposed explanatory power of ideology and religious doctrine in Islamist mobilisation. Multiple analyses of conflicts involving violent Islamist groups seek to portray these conflicts as binary divisions between the 'West' and global Islam (*see* Cohen, 2013; and discussion in Abrahamsen, 2004). However, an investigation into the patterns and dynamics of violent Islamist activity in sub-Saharan Africa reveals a marked variation in the emergence and traction of these diverse groups, thus presenting a challenge to these broad-sweeping explanations. This research project is further motivated by the explanatory inadequacy of individual-level explanations for violence such as the characteristics of militants, including individual socio-economic status (Krueger and Malečová, 2003); psychopathology of terrorist actors (Crenshaw, 1981); and levels of welfare and education (Winthrop and Graff, 2010). Explanations of Islamist violence rooted in doctrinal, ideological or cultural explanations of such groups over-emphasise the specificity of violent Islamist actors as a category of violent actors. Toft's (2007) proposition that the concept of 'jihad' provides an explanation for Islam's disproportionate role in religious civil wars' (Toft, 2007, p. 110), is one demonstration of this; but as other authors (de Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Abrahamsen, 2004) illustrate, these perceptions are well-rooted if sometimes implicit assumptions in academic, media and policy spheres.

Increasingly, explanations of other forms of violent conflict, in both Africa and beyond, have drawn insights from literature on grievances, horizontal inequalities (Stewart, 2002) and political marginalisation (Wucherpfennig *et al*., 2011; Raleigh, 2014; Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009). However, there are several reasons why a study dedicated to expanding this research is warranted in the case of Islamist violence specifically: first, there

have been very few attempts to empirically test whether the relationships hypothesised between grievances and violence hold in the case of Islamist violence specifically in systematic, sub-national, dynamic and comparative models. Second, and theoretically, there has been almost no discussion as to how and why these conditions translate into specific *forms* of violence (*cf.* Stewart, 2009), and even less on why Islamist violence in particular would emerge over and above alternative forms in politically marginalised or aggrieved communities. In spite of a wealth of literature and research linking grievances to violent conflict, there has been remarkably little progress in this field in successfully linking these underlying conditions, to new, changing and dynamic forms of mobilisation and identity construction. Moreover, the research project seeks to advance this discussion by specifying the mechanisms linking violence to grievances, and accounting for the timing of conflict outbreak and emergence. As Hafez (2003) and Wiktorowicz (2002) note in their review of social movement theory and its contribution to the study of conflict and violence, it is insufficient to link structural conditions which are both common and relatively static, to the variegated and dynamic emergence and intensification of violence without a theory which equally accounts for that dynamism.

Building on debates on the role of grievances and marginalisation in violent conflict, is the role of the state as an active political agent, and a characteristic feature of the political marketplace. Marginalisation and grievances do not emerge in a political vacuum: rather, they occur when regimes and political elites work to balance their political and economic interests by appealing to politically relevant and powerful constituents, while minimising, neglecting or actively disenfranchising others. Extensive research on Africa has attested to this process, often suggesting the recent amplification or intensification of narrower, more corrupt, and more exclusive state practices (*see* de Waal, 2015; Reno, 1999; Bates, 1981). However, it has only rarely directly linked these processes to the fomentation of popular grievances, and the coalescence of interests in the mobilisation of collective conflict. Studies have pointed to the role of elite manoeuvring in the series of post-conflict political

settlements in Mali, established following successive cycles of violent conflict in the north of the country. Where decentralisation and devolution of power to local authorities in the region was nominally intended to empower local populations, associated processes, institutions and resources often fell prey to elite capture, and resulted in the creation of elite fiefdoms of power, which further entrenched popular disaffection with the state (Wing, 2013; Harmon, 2014).

These political power dynamics have particular relevance to the question of Islamist violence within the political and conflict environments: as the incidence of civil wars on the continent declines, militias serve as increasingly common conduits of politics by violent means (Raleigh, 2016), employing violence to negotiate entry to elite bargains and political settlements (de Waal, 2015). These phenomena, however, are premised on the widespread acceptance of the sitting regime, with contestation centring not on how to overthrow or replace it, but how to negotiate and improve positions within it. In such a context, how can we understand the emergence of violent groups that seek to not only active replace or supplant the regime, but propose to establish a fundamentally different political entity in its place, based on Islamist principles, laws and customs? While there is some research on the relationship between governance practices and violence more generally, the literature has largely been silent on the relationship between state governance practices, and specific dynamics of violence: who is mobilised, where it emerges, and what form it takes. This research project seeks to interrogate these dynamics within the broader conception of conflict, in order to understand Islamist militancy's specific emergence and appeal at the present time.

Taken together, the emergence of Islamist violence as a form of collective conflict in Africa presents a puzzle for understanding African political violence. Typical approaches to explaining politics and conflict in Africa tend to focus on the significance of ethnic, communal, regional and sometimes national (manifest as separatist), identities as significant

faultlines along which collective action is mobilised, and collective violence coalesces (*see* Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Sambanis, 2002; Sambanis, 2001). Ethnic and communal identities are highly politicised in numerous African contexts, and are evidently salient to the ways in which millions of people understand their position within society and politics, and their primary collective identity. At the same time, the *salience* of seemingly fixed identity markers has been shown to fluctuate both over space, in accordance with the political calculus of demography (Posner, 2004a), and over time, in response to changing political conditions such as the proximity of elections (Eifert, Miguel and Posner, 2010). This variability presents a challenge to claims of the fixedness of ethnic or communal identities, either in terms of their composition, boundaries or connections between them, or the presumed immutability of these categories' salience over time. The emergence of alternative bases for collective action, in the complex, multi-identity contexts found in numerous African states, presents a puzzle for explaining the salience of this *specific* form of collective, and violent, action at this point in time.

In spite of the complex and multifarious nature of identity in these environments, there has also been limited research on the interactions of violent Islamist groups with other violent, non-state actors. Although the plurality of conflict actors represents a growing field in the wider conflict literature (*see* Wood and Kathman, 2015; Pearlman and Cunningham, 2012; Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012), there has been limited research exploring the interrelationships and interactions between other conflict actors and violent Islamist groups, and the effect of these interactions on conflict dynamics. These interactions include both competition between discrete violent groups, and organisational linkages across and within violent Islamist organisations (Bacon, 2014; Piazza, 2009; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Cragin *et al*., 2007), both of which are explored in this research project.

A third key debate around Islamist violence, concerns the spatial and geographic dynamics of this phenomenon. Recent research in conflict studies has emphasised the importance of

the sub-national level as the unit of analysis, as it provides a more spatially differentiated explanation for the concentration of conflict in particular regions and districts within often large, diverse and differentially governed states (Raleigh *et al*. 2010; Buhaug *et al*. 2011). This is particularly the case in states with multiple, often contemporaneous but spatially discrete forms of violence (Raleigh, 2014; Buhaug and Lujala, 2005). While research on other forms of violence and conflict has expanded to explore local-level determinants and factors shaping violence, this approach has achieved only limited attention in the study of Islamist violence. The geography of Islamist violence is of particular relevance to our understanding of this phenomenon, in light of the fact that this form of violence is almost exclusively conceptualised in terms of its trans-national, and seemingly, global characteristics. The simultaneous emergence of Islamist violence in geographically disparate parts of the world, its occurrence in locations far from the original sites of conflict (for example, in the targeting of attacks against civilians in New York, Bali, London, and Paris), and reported organisational and coordination linkages within and across discrete violent Islamist groups, lend credence to the perception that this is a global phenomenon, with an expansive, and unpredictable, reach: in other words, a form of 'terrorism without borders.' (Agbiboa, 2014) However, leveraging sub-nationally disaggregated data on violent conflict occurrence presents a challenge and qualification to this perception, suggesting that local political, social and economic conditions play a central role in conditioning the likelihood of violent Islamist group emergence, subsequent conflict dynamics, and the geographic spread and diffusion of this violence, all of which are treated in the following chapters.

1.1.3   Structure

Reflecting on these empirical trends, and gaps in existing research, this research project's objectives are three-fold: first, it seeks to contribute to the literature systematically analysing and testing the empirical relationship between grievances, governance practices, and the conflict environment more broadly, and the emergence, intensification and manifestations of

Islamist violence. It is motivated by the importance of the following questions: does religious demography determine Islamist violence emergence? Do grievances, perceptions of marginalisation, and specific governance practices shape its emergence and subsequent dynamics? Do the characteristics and contours of the wider conflict environment shape the emergence and strategies of violent Islamist actors?

Second, this research project seeks to produce an original theory that explains these observed empirical relationships. It sets out to address and answer questions including: why does Islamist violence emerge in some Muslim-majority contexts and not others? Why does Islamist violence emerge and intensify in response to particular governance practices and strategies? How and why do the presence and nature of other non-state armed actors affect Islamist violence?

Third, this research project sets out to combine insights from both these empirical and theoretical questions to present a series of conclusions, centred on the primary significance of the local context in shaping the emergence of Islamist violence, in terms of the experiences of populations and communities in those spaces, the governance practices exercised there, and the interaction between other non-state armed actors and violent Islamist groups.

The research project is organised in eight parts. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the project as a whole, its motivation, constituent research questions, and analytical approach; and synthesises its main findings. Chapter 2 presents a review of existing literature, and situates the subsequent chapters within the context of existing research, dominant and critical approaches to the study of Islamist violence, and testable hypotheses and relationships that will inform the following sections. Chapter 3 details the methodology employed in the study, exploring the choice of quantitative and qualitative research methods, their advantages and limitations, and factors that influenced case and data source selection.

Chapters 4-7 contain a collection of discrete articles on several corresponding aspects of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa, of which, two have been published in international peer-reviewed journals, and two are currently under review. Each chapter introduces an original research question and presents a theory to explain observed patterns and dynamics of Islamist violence at various scales. All chapters include a short literature review of relevant research on the specific focus of those articles, while Chapter 2 summarises the broader literature on Islamist violence in Africa, and related phenomena, presenting the general context into which the following chapters fit. From these reviews, each chapter derives a set of testable hypotheses explored through empirical data. Finally, the individual chapters conclude with a discussion of findings, implications for current and future research, and, where relevant, policy implications of the specific results of that study. Chapter 8 further develops these findings, by drawing together the combined body of results to discuss their overarching implications for current and future research and policy approaches.

The substantive chapters were originally written as discrete articles, yet they collectively address the central research question of this research project, and share several common features. They all derive from an overarching research question concerned with explaining the emergence of Islamist violence in complex, multi-identity and multi-agent conflict environments in Africa. Each chapter poses related research questions, exploring the conditions that shape the emergence, intensification and dynamics of Islamist violence in these contexts. The chapters all share a common methodological approach that employs disaggregated conflict event data in the study of this violence, paired with insights from qualitative work and original fieldwork. Importantly, the chapters present a single fundamental thesis, collectively demonstrating the significance of local, domestic and national political and conflict environments as determinants in the emergence and subsequent manifestation of Islamist violence. Chapters 4-6 focus on these dynamics and characteristics explicitly. In Chapter 7, even in exploring the relationship between and effect

of transnational organisations on violent Islamist groups, the significance of the domestic conditions in which these groups operate emerges as a primary determinant of group activity, intensity and geography, an effect which is not negated through transnational affiliation.

Chapter 8 concludes with a discussion of these findings, how they present challenges and qualifications to current research, and suggests avenues for future research. A bibliography and appendices are contained in Chapters 9 and 10, respectively.

1.2 Scope of this Research

The overarching approach of this research project is one that assumes violence is employed as a rational and strategic tool in certain conditions. In contrast to pervasive interpretations of political violence generally, and Islamist violence specifically, rooted in cultural, ideological, doctrinal, or irrational explanations, I contend that the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence can be understood as responses to specific political, social and economic conditions and the contours of discrete conflict environments. These factors shape the emergence of collective action under particular brands. In elaborating on this approach in subsequent chapters, I apply definitions and exclusions of scope that are detailed below.

1.2.1 Defining Violence

The focus of this research project is specifically *political violence*, that is, the use of physical force to cause injury or death in pursuit of a political goal or agenda. The project deals with several manifestations of political violence, including that carried out by groups defined as 'Islamist' (defined in the following section). Here, I discuss the scope and limitations of my definition of political violence more broadly.

This research project is concerned primarily with the manifestations of physical violence, defined as the use of force causing injury or harm to another person. A full discussion of wider forms of violence, repression or coercion, including the phenomena of structural or cultural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1971, 1990) or systemic violence (Žižek, 2009), is beyond the scope of this project. However, in considering the role that governance strategies and processes such as socio-economic and political marginalisation, exclusion and inequality, play in shaping Islamist violence, I indirectly address the role of structural violence and its constituent practices.

In considering political violence specifically, the research project speaks to a large and growing literature on the drivers of political instability, dynamics of civil and transnational wars, and conditions of fragility and conflict on the African continent and beyond (for example, Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Buhaug and Rød, 2006; Raleigh *et al.*, 2010). This literature already encompasses a wide and diverse range of themes, topics and debates, but is necessarily limited in its ability to speak to all manifestations of violence in which individuals and groups may engage. Specifically, interpersonal violence, violence which is primarily criminal in nature (or carried out in pursuit of economic, rather than political, goals), and the differential dynamics of social violence (including sexual- and gender-based violence), are not treated in full in this project.

Incidents of interpersonal or criminal violence are too extensive to document fully and comprehensively with the available methodologies for the large number of cross-national cases under consideration here, leading to the focus on political violence alone. Importantly, the distinction between political and criminal violence is at times negligible, as research has attested to the interplay of criminal, particularly organised criminal, networks and political violence (International Alert, 2014; Lacher, 2012; Reno, 2009). While some groups engage in both types of violence, the most significant determinant of whether a group is considered to be engaged in *political* violence is the content of that group's own statements and framing

– do such groups make political statements, and justify their violence in terms of political goals (Østby, 2010)? If so, their actions meet the criteria for inclusion in a definition of political violence. In addition, detailed analyses of the targeting of victims in violence is hindered by limitations on available data, including gaps in the systematic reporting of the ethnicity, gender, and age of victims of violence. To develop a fuller understanding of these dynamics and features of Islamist violence would require a significantly different methodological approach than the one employed here, and is therefore beyond the scope of this study alone.

A second dimension of the analytical approach of this study is to refute any inherent connection between Islamist violence and 'terrorism,' and challenge the utility of a lens that focuses on 'terrorism' as a discrete phenomenon, or the exclusive preserve of a stand-alone category of violent actors. In light of the semantic and conceptual issues associated such frameworks (discussed further in Chapter 2), this research project does not rely on a distinction between 'terrorism' and other forms of violence. Instead, it proceeds by considering and comparatively analysing all recorded violent activity carried out by groups self-identifying as Islamist, and using violence in pursuit of that agenda. Therefore, I do not distinguish between groups that are designated – officially or in academic literature – as 'terrorist' organisations, and do not disaggregate violent events according to whether specific actions constitute 'terrorism.'

1.2.2 Defining Islamist Violence

In this research project, a distinction is made between 'Islamist' and other violent actors as a means of categorising and comparing violent groups. This system of categorisation follows precedents set primarily in security studies that classify groups according to ideological or identity affiliations (*see* Robison, Crenshaw and Jenkins, 2006; Piazza, 2009). Because of

the sensitivity of associating political action or violence with religious worldviews, it is necessary to clarify the bases and meanings of these terms.

For the purposes of this research, the term 'Islamist' refers to groups that proactively promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state and/or society (Esposito, 2003, p. 151; Denoeux, 2002, p. 61). Islamist activity is manifest across various disciplines and traditions within Islam, encompassing a range of political, social and religious activity (ICG, 2005). This research focuses on violent Islamist groups, distinguished from other Islamist groups by the utilization of force in pursuit of these goals. To classify groups in this way, qualitative research into their stated goals, objectives and ideologies is conducted, and included only if such groups explicitly espouse an agenda that meets these criteria. Analysis focused on the content and framing of publicly available statements to the media and political figures, messages to supporters, and – where available – internal documents from leadership within organisations themselves. Where groups frame the justification or goal of their actions in reference to Islamic tropes, laws, policies or customs, and articulate an agenda or objective of promoting or enforcing such practices, such groups meet the criteria for inclusion. Categorisations are then compared with the characterisations of the same groups in existing research for triangulation purposes, and to identify and address disagreements over the ideological content and statements of specific groups that would disqualify them from inclusion. In all cases, the categorisation of the groups in this research broadly as 'Islamist' was largely uncontested in the literature (the specifics of terminology and labelling are discussed further in Chapter 2).

1.3   Research Questions

The central research question addressed by this project is why particular identity mantles form the basis of collective violent action in some places and at some times, but not in others. Violent Islamist groups provide an opportunity to explore this question, in the highly

dynamic context of Islamist militancy in sub-Saharan Africa. Why does Islamist violence emerge in specific places? Why is the logic of their organisation appealing in some contexts and not in others? What different conditions of social, demographic, political and transnational environments render them amenable to this form of violent mobilisation?

Throughout this research project, the activity of violent Islamist groups is analysed as a single profile of group violence: its emergence, intensity, frequency, location and component dynamics (including the targeting of civilians) are all considered as interrelated features. Comparative analysis situates these groups in the universe of wider non-state armed actors employing violence in the same or other conflict spaces. In so doing, this research responds to calls for the greater integration of these forms of violence into singular conceptual, theoretical and empirical frameworks (Findley and Young, 2012), facilitating integration of historically discrete theories and concepts of political violence (Boyle, 2012). The research also seeks to address gaps in the spatialisation of studies of different forms of violence (Flint, 2003; Ó Dochartaigh, 2015), and the limited recognition of the geopolitical and political-geographical contexts in which violence, particularly that associated with 'terrorist' groups, occurs. This includes a consideration of the role of the state, the networked nature of non-state armed groups, and the interaction between terrorist networks and transnational geographies.

Within this central research question, several sub-questions arise. Each of these sub-questions interrogates a different aspect of the relationship between the environment in which violent Islamist groups emerge and operate and subsequent dynamics of violence, to produce a single, integrated theory of the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence in Africa.

1.3.1 Governance and Political Exclusion – Cultural and Religious Demography

This research project draws on existing research and ongoing debates in conflict studies, to interrogate the role of social, political and economic grievances and marginalisation in violent conflict. Specifically, I seek to understand the role of these factors in the emergence of Islamist violence specifically, and its relationship to observed conflict patterns, in order to develop a theory which explains both the mode of mobilisation, and the dynamic features (timing, intensity, targeting and geography) of violent conflict. To do so, this research project asks, what role does the cultural demography of the sub-national and national operating environments of violent Islamist groups play in shaping their emergence and activities in sub-Saharan Africa? How and why do characteristics of the population – including the religious and ethnic make-up – shape the branding, emergence and activity of violent Islamist groups?

1.3.2 Governance and Political Exclusion – State Practices

Building on the study of governance practices, elite bargains and political settlements in Africa, this research project sets out to understand how particular practices shape the form, emergence, and dynamics of violence. Research questions include, what role do state practices of governance at the sub-national and national level play in shaping the emergence and activities of violent Islamists sub-Saharan Africa? How do structures, practices and processes of governance and economic conditions shape the emergence of violent groups, and specific the branding of violence under an Islamist mantle?

1.3.3 Conflict Environment – Other Non-State Actors

Moving from the political environment, to the contours of violent conflict itself, this research seeks to apply and expand on recent research and debates concerning the fragmentation and proliferation of violent groups; and conditions of conflict, competition, and/or coordination between them, to explore how these factors shape Islamist violence.

What role do the characteristics of the conflict environment of the sub-national and national operating environments of violent Islamist groups play in conditioning their emergence and activities in sub-Saharan Africa? Do the number, nature and relatively strength of other violent groups in a conflict environment relate to the dynamics, profile, nature and branding of Islamist violence in shared spaces?

1.3.4 Conflict Environment – Transnationalism

Finally, the research project sets out to interrogate dominant existing theories of the transnationalisation and global reach of Islamist violence, by exploring both the physical transnational geography of violent Islamist groups in Africa, and their extra-territorial organisational linkages. The research project asks, what role does the transnational nature of organisations play in sub-Saharan African Islamist violence and its geography? How do the presence and nature of linkages between local and transnational actors shape the dynamics and profiles of Islamist violence, reflected in its frequency, intensity and geography?

1.4   Parts and Chapters of the Research Project

The structure of this research project facilitates two inter-related approaches. First, is a geographically scalar approach: the substantive chapters begin with a large-n, cross-national comparative analysis of the sub-national spaces of Islamist violence (Chapter 4); then proceed through a country-focused case study analysis of sub-national conditions, exclusively in the context high-Islamist activity countries (Chapters 5 and 6); before concluding with a discussion of the transnational geography of Islamist violence in Chapter 7. In so doing, the project seeks to address calls for a scalar approach to understanding political processes which produces,

> '[A] sustained study of political phenomena at different levels simultaneously – that is, local, regional, national and indeed trans-national […] A multi-level approach is fundamental to any attempt at understanding African politics.' (Nugent, 2010, p. 37)

In addition, the research project employs a sequential, group-level approach: it begins with an analysis of Islamist violence generally across the continent (Chapter 4), before considering its emergence and dynamics in specific countries among particular violent Islamist groups (Chapter 5). Chapters 6 and 7 then employ a specific group-focused lens to explore the violence of Islamist groups in specific conflict environments, and in relation to particular alliance formations and strategies.

Chapter 2 provides a review of existing literature and situates the subsequent chapters within the context of existing research, dominant and critical approaches to the study of Islamist and African violence, and several gaps, challenges and unresolved issues arising from these studies. Chapter 3 provides an overview of methodology.

The substantive chapters 4-7 take up these issues and challenges and set out to provide both a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence, and an empirical test for those theories. This section summarises the main focus and approach of each of those chapters, alongside a discussion of the ways in which the chapters relate to one another, and take up themes and questions arising throughout the research project.

1.4.1 Chapter 4 – Cultural and Religious Demography and Violent Islamist Groups in Africa

Chapter 4 has been published in *Political Geography* (Dowd, 2015a) and explores the relationship between cultural demography and Islamist violence in Africa in a cross-national time series study. It argues that while religious demography can explain some aspects of

Islamist violence, these explanations have to date been privileged over analyses which take into account the way institutional and political relations of the state incentivize and de-incentivize the salience of particular identities in collective action.

The chapter uses disaggregated conflict event data to test the relationships between religious group size, diversity, ethnicity and Islamist violence. The results highlight that approaches to explaining Islamist violence emphasising the cultural specificity of Islam as particularly prone to violence, and those focusing on competition between diverse identity groups, as explanations for the rise of Islamist violence, are misguided. Rather, ethnic political power relations emerge as important interacting factors in Islamist violence. The article makes an original contribution both empirically, by testing existing theories of Islamist violence on previously unanalysed data; and theoretically, by highlighting the importance of political marginalisation and strategic identity construction as explanations for violent Islamist activity.

1.4.2 Chapter 5 – Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in sub-Saharan Africa

Chapter 5 has been published in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Dowd, 2015b) and sets out to build on the cross-national and primarily quantitative findings of Chapter 4, to further explore and explain the emergence of Islamist violence as a substantial security threat in such diverse contexts as Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. This article addresses this question through an in-depth exploration of the strategies of governance employed by states, and how these shape the emergence and mode of collective violence.

While existing research often emphasises the specificity of Islamist violence, these conflicts can instead be understood as a form of political exclusion and grievance-based violence, comparable to other forms of political violence. Further, violent Islamist groups emerge

from *local* conditions: the areas in which groups are established share similar *local* experiences of governance and political marginalisation; a history of violent conflict on which Islamist militants capitalise; and key triggering events expanding or reinforcing state exclusion. These findings challenge a narrative emphasising the *global*, interconnected nature of Islamist violence. This article pairs data from ACLED with Afrobarometer survey data and case study evidence to identify drivers of Islamist violence across three African countries.

1.4.3 Chapter 6 – Fragmentation, Conflict and Competition: Islamist Anti-Civilian Violence in sub-Saharan Africa

Chapter 6 is currently under review in an academic journal, and explores in greater detail the specific dynamics of Islamist violence, including the phenomenon of civilian targeting, in relation to the wider conflict environment in which these groups operate. In spite of the shared high profile of recent Islamist attacks on civilians in sub-Saharan Africa, patterns of anti-civilian violence differ across and within violent Islamist groups, and the countries in which they are active. This research seeks to understand this variation by situating Islamist violence within the sub-national spaces in which such groups operate, and the wider conflict environment in which they choose to use, or limit the use of, anti-civilian violence.

Drawing on data from ACLED, the research finds that violent Islamist groups are more likely to target civilians where they are the most active conflict agent, even when other conflict agents are active in the same spaces; but less likely to do so when they are relatively weak and in competition with other non-state armed groups. Anti-civilian violence is thus found to be deployed strategically by violent Islamist groups, while its function as a signal of strength, or policing and punishing populations, depends on the relative strength of groups in relation to other armed actors in the wider conflict arena.

1.4.4 Chapter 7 – The Transnational Nature of Islamist Violence in Africa

Chapter 7 is currently under review in an academic journal, and departs from the previous chapters in re-orienting attention to the transnational environment within which violent Islamist groups are situated. This chapter explores the features and consequences of transnational Islamist violence and linkages in Africa. It does so by distinguishing between multiple forms of activity and international alliances that characterise a transnational geography of Islamist violence. Most violent Islamist groups active in Africa exhibit some form of transnationalism, but its effects on observed violence, and the processes of physical and geographical transnationalisation remain under-explored. This paper seeks to address this question using violent event data from ACLED, combined with process-tracing of individual groups, their characteristics and conflict profiles over time, to better understand the transnational nature of violent Islamism, and its consequences for conflict among this sub-set of actors. The paper finds that alliances across militant groups *do* affect the dynamics and geography of subsequent violence, but less directly than often assumed. In place of a bolstered and strengthened, international threat, violent Islamist groups exhibit reduced intensity of violence, and declining subnational geographic scope following alliance formation. Continued transnational activity and increasing international presence should therefore not be read as signs of increasing strength, but as functions of the strategic branding and performance of transnationalism by such groups, while domestic space and scope for action is typically contracting.

The findings have implications not only for the study of these specified groups, whose ongoing activity in Africa has immediate security and policy implications, but also for the implications of potential future partnerships (with emerging networks in North Africa of particular concern), and for the advancement of a geographical understanding of violent group activity more generally.

1.5   **Main Findings**

The findings of this research project are four-fold: first, I demonstrate that violent Islamist groups should not be conceived of as unique, specific or in some way separate from other violent non-state armed groups. Rather, violent Islamist actors can be studied in a comparative context, and through some of the same explanatory frameworks that have effectively traced the origins, drivers and dynamics of other forms of non-state armed violence in Africa. Second, I find that Islamist violence is a strategic response to political and conflict environments, shaping the emergence and dynamics of violence under different brands and manifest in different forms. Third, I present evidence that in spite of a dominant narrative of a single, homogeneous, global threat of Islamist violence, that the local conditions of political and conflict shape this superficially global phenomenon, and undermine the assumption of a highly transnational, mobile and rootless network of homogenous and undifferentiated militant cells. Finally, I show that the contours of those local environments – reflected in the number, strength and relative activity of other non-state armed groups – shape the intensity and targeting of Islamist violence in important ways.

1.5.1 Comparability of Violent Islamist Groups

I demonstrate that Islamist violence, far from being an exceptional phenomenon explained with reference to ideological, doctrinal or strategic uniqueness, is in fact comparable to a wide variety of other non-state armed violence. Theories of political marginalisation, exclusion, grievances and, increasingly, the conflict environment and its contours, have been effectively employed to explain a wide range of other conflict actors and dynamics, and yet violent Islamist groups are typically treated as exceptional or unique, due to their ideological content. I refute this by demonstrating the applicability of theories of political marginalisation, governance processes, and strategic leveraging of identity categories to mobilise collective violence to the case of Islamist groups.

Rather than understand violent Islamist actors as a unique phenomenon, as much of the existing literature does, I seek to illustrate the comparability of violent Islamists and other violent actors. This is done in several ways: first, I illustrate the linkages between violent Islamist groups and histories of violence, not only violence by the state, but also other forms of non-state political violence. In so doing, I seek to draw out the inter-connectedness between violent Islamist groups and predecessor groups which may have mobilised along other ethno-religious, religious or political lines, but not leveraged a narrative or rhetoric of Islamism to frame their agendas.

This is particularly clear in the case of Mali, where the transformation and reconfiguration of violent ethno-communal struggles was reframed in 2012 as an Islamist insurgency. However, there are also clear examples of this phenomenon in the cases of Kenya's former Coastal and North-Eastern provinces, and in North-Eastern Nigeria where previous episodes of state and anti-state violence have been re-aggregated under a violent Islamist mantle. In later chapters, I demonstrate the significance of this inter-connectedness by illustrating how the very presence, and relative strength and capacity, of other non-Islamist, non-state armed groups affects and shapes the ways in which violent Islamist groups engage and utilise violence, and seek to draw support from, or punish, civilian populations. Rather than understanding this violence as unique, or beyond rational explanation, explanations of the strategic calculations of violent actors can help us to understand this phenomenon.

This connectivity is not incidental to the dynamics of Islamist violence: first, it speaks to the long-standing histories of grievances, socio-economic and political relations, as well as governance practices that drive violence in these areas. Furthermore, it has implications for the management and cessation of violence, and its aftermath. I argue that where Islamism is a means of mobilising violence, not a driver or cause of conflict itself: therefore, even where violent Islamist groups are effectively defeated in a conflict, other violence will likely

emerge in its aftermath, if underlying conditions remain unaddressed. Evidence for this is found in both the pre-histories of violence and the legacies of conflict in all areas in which Islamist violence emerges, and in the perpetuation of violence under alternative mantles (including ethno-communal and internecine militia violence) in cases where Islamist violence has been more effectively routed. Examples of the latter include northern Mali and regions of Somalia seized from Islamist control, where violence by both violent Islamists and non-Islamist armed groups has persisted long after the state has nominally regained control of that territory.

Second, this interconnectedness is significant because it clearly exemplifies the rational and strategic use of this mantle by violent conflict actors, and in some cases, by the states themselves seeking to oust these groups. The reconfiguration of historical conflicts under an Islamist mantle in Kenya, Mali, Nigeria (as demonstrated in this research project) and Somalia (Hansen, 2013) all served as a means of mobilising support in otherwise highly ethnically fragmented contexts. In such cases, violent Islamist ideologies and rhetoric provide a unifying principle for mobilisation for otherwise marginalised ethnic groups, whose collective action capabilities are maximised through coalescence around a single, broad identity marker.

This is not to suggest that violent Islamist groups are homogeneous or internally uniform: in fact, under this broad umbrella, internal divisions, factionalism, and fragmentation along political, ideological, ethnic, tribal or clan lines are prevalent (de Sardan, 2013, on Mali; Hansen, 2013, on clan-based divisions in Somalia; Baca, 2015, on ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria). However, in a case of such internal divisions, the relatively unifying ideology of a pan-ethnic Islamist movement serves the function of masking factionalism and divisions and enhances strategic operating and mobilising capacity.

In this case as well, violent Islamist groups exhibit parallels to other non-state armed actors: research has extensively demonstrated that other faultlines of collective action mobilisation which are, by some scholars, assumed to be fixed, non-negotiable and unchanging, are in fact constructed, re-constituted and re-defined when politically, socially and historically expedient. Ethnicity serves and one example of this re-invention, with cases of ethnic or cultural 'entrepreneurs' in Mali and Kenya (de Sardan, 2013, p. 32; Willis and Gona, 2013, p. 451) demonstrating the inventive and diverse ways in which groups re-define the boundaries and connections between smaller, marginalised ethnic groups to enhance political and strategic bargaining power and position.

I propose that the salience of religious identity, and in the case of this study, specifically the association of religious identity with an agenda for not only religious but also social and political action, can be equally understood as constructed, constituted and shifting in response to political conditions, strategic calculations of maximising political relevance, and changing political conditions in relation to dynamic practices of governance or other critical temporal moments.

1.5.2 Political Conditions

A second key finding of this research project is that the emergence of violent Islamist groups (Chapter 4), and the dynamics of their violence (measured as intensity and frequency, in Chapter 5), are shaped by underlying political, social and economic grievances, experience of marginalisation, and processes of differential governance. The literature linking grievances, political exclusion and marginalisation to violent conflict is both extensive and growing, but its application to the study of Islamist violence has been largely relegated to a small number of country-specific case studies (for example, Agbiboa, 2013).

This research project addresses a gap in this literature by expanding on these studies to test these theories systematically both cross-nationally, and at the sub-national level, and providing an explanation that is temporally dynamic and can account for change over time. Chapter 4 identifies an explanation for Islamist violence in the shifting and changeable government-community relations of changing positions in 'political hierarchies' (Raleigh, 2014). Chapter 5 further specifies the precise practices of governance that comprise this marginalisation, and their dynamic and changeable expression over time, in order to account for both the structural relationships, and the emergence and dynamics of violence.

1.5.3 Local Conditions

A further contribution of this research is its presentation of evidence that local, sub-national conditions shape the occurrence and dynamics of conflict. In contrast to theories of a globally interconnected, undifferentiated, and rootless movement of Islamist militancy, Chapter 4 illustrates that although Islamist violence is increasing in its frequency and intensity, and is shaped by the religious demography of a state, not all Muslim-majority countries experience violence, and fewer still experience Islamist violence, specifically. Furthermore, within those states affected by Islamist violence, this is also typically concentrated in a single geographical region (Northern and Coastal Kenya; North-Eastern and North-Central Nigeria; Northern Mali), rather than distributed uniformly across the state. For this reason, the local conditions of those spaces emerge as key explanatory factors in explaining not only the occurrence and emergence of Islamist violence, but also its geographic profile and footprint.

This research project also seeks to advance the study of political and conflict dynamics at the sub-national level. It finds that the sub-national conditions of exclusion and marginalisation (Chapters 4 and 5), as well as the contours of the local conflict environment (Chapter 6), are key variables in explaining not only the emergence of Islamist violence, but also its

dynamics, targeting and intensity. In addition, even in those sections of the research project which emphasise the transnational nature of this violence (Chapter 7), a key insight arising from this research is that in spite of this apparent transnational connectivity, local conditions still influence the geographic profile of violence in important ways. Chief among these influences is the national and domestic political response to violent Islamist groups, which is not negated by alliances forged across transnational space and between groups.

1.5.4 Multi-Actor Environments

A fourth finding arising from this study is the significance of other non-state armed actors in shaping the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence. Chapter 6 outlines the ways in which the presence, number and relative capacity and activity levels of other violent non-state armed groups shapes the ways in which violent Islamist groups target their violence – in areas with higher numbers of relatively strong and high-activity non-Islamist groups, Islamist violence is less likely to target civilians. This provides insights into the strategic use, expansion, and limitation of violence by violent Islamist groups, rather than seeing the targeting of civilians, for example, as a function of ideology, doctrine or cultural norms associated with Islamism. In other words, the precise ways in which Islamist violence is manifest – the frequency, intensity and targeting of that violence – can be explained in part by the local conflict environment and profiles of other actors in that space. Violent Islamist groups, as such, cannot be understood in isolation from their political and conflict environments. Just as previous chapters attest to the significance of histories of violence, and the interrelationship between predecessor groups and subsequent configurations of the same actors under an Islamist mantle, the findings of Chapter 6 re-orient attention on the close interrelationship between Islamist violence and other agents of political violence.

The final substantive chapter (Chapter 7) turns attention to the transnational features of Islamist violence, acknowledging that this form of violence exhibits characteristics of

transnational connectivity, and particularly extra-territorial alliances across groups active in different, non-contiguous geographic spaces. Even here, however, the influence of local and national, domestic political conditions serves as an intervening variable, the effect of which is not entirely controlled for by the presence of transnational alliances. In spite of a dominant narrative which sees such groups as part of a globally interconnected, homogenous and undifferentiated whole, an over-emphasis on transnational, global dimension of such groups both obscures local conditions; and under-specifies precise nature of the transnationalism underway. Alliances across militant groups do affect the dynamics and geography of subsequent violence, but less directly than often assumed. In place of a bolstered and strengthened, international threat, we see a reduced intensity of violence, and declining subnational geographic scope. Continued transnational activity and increasing international presence should therefore not be read as a sign of increasing strength, but a function of the strategic branding and performance of transnationalism by such groups.

2   Literature Review

Recent decades have witnessed a growing research interest in the drivers, dynamics and outcomes of violent conflict in Africa and beyond. There has been increased interest in the role of politics in shaping conflict likelihood and characteristics, as well as an expansion of research on identity formation and its role in collective action, politics and violent mobilisation. Last but not least, there has been a marked growth in interest in the role, features and dynamics of Islamist violence globally, both in response to a dominant political agenda that typically situates this phenomenon in a discourse concerning the threat it poses to countries in the global north, and in a critique of the assumptions and positions put forward by proponents of that agenda. This project draws on multiple bodies of research in order to propose an original theory of the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence in Africa, incorporating insights from literature on the comparative study of political violence; governance, marginalisation and exclusion; identity, religion and ethnicity formation and mobilisation; fragmentation and competition in the conflict environment; and the transnationalisation of violence.

Each substantive chapter of the research project includes a brief literature review, situating the specific research question, hypothesised relationships and findings of that research in a relatively narrow body of study on those specific features and mechanisms. This chapter seeks to outline the body of literature and state of academic debate to which the research project as a whole seeks to speak, highlight key testable hypotheses drawn from those themes, and illustrate the contribution this research has made in addressing gaps, challenging existing research, and proposing directions for future analysis.

Several themes are common threads throughout the course of this research project, including the role of local conditions and the importance of subnational geography; the interplay between practices of governance and the salience of collective action under specific

identities; and the relationship between the broader conflict environment and the actors which constitute it, be they state-based or non-state agents. For the purposes of clarity, these common themes are summarised below as discrete fields of study, although there is significant overlap in several cases. The first section of this chapter will provide an overview of key themes and research on political violence and the move towards disaggregated and fine-grained theories and empirical tests within the field. The second section will discuss approaches to the study of religious- and, more broadly, identity-based violence, situating the novel theories developed in this research project within this broader field. The third section will outline developments in research on conflict, governance and exclusion, highlighting gaps and limitations addressed by this project. The fourth will synthesise the state of research on violence and the conflict environment as a determinant of conflict dynamics. Finally, the fifth section will conclude with a discussion of the local and transnational geographies of violence.

2.1   Political Violence

Keeping the scoping considerations outlined in Chapter 1 in mind, political violence has been understood and explained in existing literature in several ways. The key division between conceptions of violence is one that sees violence as opportunistic, exploiting the absence of the state and restrictions on the use of violence, and a second school that views violence as strategic and functional.

The first school, broadly speaking, conceives of violence as a result of chaos and disorder: violence is a feature of disorder and the breakdown, variously, of the rule of law, institutions or social contracts which otherwise prohibit the use of force (*for example,* Kaplan, 1994). In this view, the state is typically, if sometimes implicitly, conceived of as the only legitimate agent of violence in a political environment, in a conventional understanding which sees the

ideal-type state as holding a monopoly over the use of force, and all manifestations to the contrary, a sign of the breakdown of that order.

In recent years, this view has also been put forward in literature that sees violent conflict as a function of the limited capacity, 'weakness,' 'fragility,' or 'failure,' of the state (*see* Simons and Tucker, 2007; Call, 2008; Mazarr, 2014). By this logic, where the state lacks the capacity to govern effectively, violence emerges in the resulting power vacuum. At least some theories suggest that there is a temporal dynamic to this understanding of violence, and that recent violence, or 'new wars,' are particularly characterised by opportunistic violence in pursuit of personal agendas, in contrast to more ideologically-driven or substantive agendas purportedly characteristic of older conflicts (Kaldor, 1999). A corollary of this suite of theories is often framed in terms of the security threat posed by 'ungoverned spaces' presumed to be beyond the rule of law or reach of the state, and therefore potentially host to a multiplicity of violent agents operating beyond the scope of the state (*see* discussion in Raleigh and Dowd, 2013). Violence, therefore, is understood as opportunistic, in that it occurs where the state's absence permits it; and as a function of the collapse of the state in all or part of its territories (or its administrative, legal functions). The implicit assumption, therefore, is that where the state is strong, capable and effective, conditions will be peaceful.

More recent literature refutes a direct link between state weakness and conflict. Studies have found that violence occurs not only where the state is absent, weak or incapable of extending its mandate and governance, but also in the spaces where it is present, operational, effective, and repressive. Violence is a contest for power, and therefore is employed as a tool in the spaces and conditions in which power exists to be contested. Where the state is entirely absent, power may be contested among non-state actors; where the state is present, it becomes the target of violence in a contest for control (Raleigh, 2011). For example, violence in urban spaces is increasing, in conditions in which the state cannot be conceived of, at least in conventional terms, as 'absent' or weak (Raleigh, 2015; Østby, 2015).

Moreover, the state itself is an overtly violent actor: its use of violence as a means of repressing populations, limiting dissent, and extending control is well-documented, but often ignored in analyses that see violence as a function of state absence or weakness only. In findings that contrast directly with proponents of a weak or fragile state interpretation of conflict, research suggests that increased availability of unconditional financial resources to states in fact increases the likelihood that states will engage in violence, providing an alternative perspective on state accountability, governance and control (Kishi and Raleigh, 2015).

Conversely, not all spaces in which the state is absent or weak are violent. State weakness or absence, in some spaces or in some functions, is a feature of several countries in Africa, many of which do not experience large-scale conflict (Simons and Tucker, 2007). Even in conflict-affected states, when viewed from the macro-level of state institutions, those spaces beyond the state's reach may appear violent, chaotic or anarchic. However, extensive empirical research has documented the multiple complex ways in which local political orders emerge to control, limit, condone or extend the use of violence, irrespective of the state's role. Non-state actors have been shown to develop complex systems of governance – controlling, if not limiting – the use of violence in some of the most long-running and intractable conditions of state collapse (Menkhaus, 2007).

Essentially, there are no ungoverned spaces, just differentially, variably, and complexly governed ones. Some of these sub-national systems are violent, but many are not: localised conflict management systems have emerged from complex systems of interaction, bargaining and negotiation at the sub-national level, often in the absence or in spite of state involvement, which attest to the capacity of non-state agents to build peace and limit violence (*see* MacGinty and Richmond, 2013). Even explicitly violent actors do not engage in violence unceasingly and indiscriminately, even if opportunities to do so are available. Violent agents can negotiate complex systems of cooperation, coordination and co-existence

in spite of shared rivalries or animosities, explaining some of the variation and variability conflicts exhibit (Keen, 2000).

An alternative view of violence sees it as serving strategic functions. In this view, state absence or weakness may be a condition that renders violence more feasible in pursuit of strategic goals, but it is by no means a necessary condition for its emergence. Within this broad camp, scholars place varying emphasis on different features of the functionality of violence.

One approach is to emphasise the ideological content and agendas of actors, and to understand violence as a tool by which to achieve this. In the context of Islamist violence, specifically, this is often framed in terms of culturalist assumptions concerning the doctrinal or religious significance of violence as a purifying act in Islam, and the religious significance of jihad (Enders and Sandler, 2000; Toft, 2007). A more nuanced approach considers the framing of Islamist ideologies in terms of a post-colonial narrative of purification of corruption, or in post-colonial terms, similar to reformist movements throughout history, which have sought to articulate particular agendas in religious terms (*see* Dekmejian, 1995; also discussion in Hafez, 2003). This framework is helpful for understanding the ways in which violence is justified, and the role it plays in framing specific political agendas, but it has limitations. Specifically, it can explain very little about the variability in violence levels, patterns and dynamics collectively. It suffers from both excessive disaggregation, in that it is often concerned with the ways in which individual participants in violence understand themselves and their position or identity individually; and excessive aggregation, in that, poorly applied, the framework risks essentialising complex and diverse categories of actors into single cultural groups to which attributes such as a preference for violence as a purifying mechanism are applied. A focus on agendas and ideologies can help us understand *how* violence is framed and justified, but not how or why it has emerged in the first place, as a tool in the repertoire of political actors.

A second approach within this broad framework focuses on the functions violence serves within strategies and political processes, over and above its ideological framing alone. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive: ideological agendas may shape the strategies pursued by individual or collective violent agents, and condition the goals they set for themselves, and how they define success or failure in a conflict. However, the distinction is in the *emphasis* on violence as a process that is specific to particular ideologies, or is ideologically determined; and violence as a process of systems and patterns of governance and negotiation.

This framework, which underpins the theories in this research project, sees violence as a strategic and rational action in specific conflict environments. Violence can be used as a tool in political bargaining, as a means of communicating strength, power, resources, and interests (de Waal, 2015). Alternatively, its occurrence can be leveraged (typically by states) to justify particular agendas, for example, where the presence of non-state violence is used to justify state violence, repressive tactics or restrictions on civil liberties which are strategically useful to the regime (*see* Tynes, 2006; Human Rights Watch, *undated*). In this view, violence does not emerge exclusively in the absence of state power, or as a uniform product of particular ideological agendas. Rather, it is employed variably according to the contours of the political environment: violence might be used where other strategies for generating political or social change are limited or non-existent (*see* Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014); or where strategic, economic, social, political and demographic conditions make it feasible (Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2009). Critically, the use, nature and dynamics of violence will vary according to these conditions: while other frameworks predict the contexts in which violence might emerge, they offer little explanation for its dynamism and variability over relatively similar contexts. Institutionally identical states experience violence both differentially across states, but also in varied forms and spaces

within the state, with relatively little spatial overlap between discrete forms of violence (Raleigh, 2014).

Seeing violence as a strategic tool facilitates an understanding of its dynamics, tactics, agents and drivers. One development in the study of conflict that has facilitated analysis of these components is the move towards greater disaggregation of data on conflict. Through the development of disaggregated, quantitative data in the study of conflict, scholars seek to address the inadequacies of cross-national, large-*n* studies of civil war which have produced few robust conclusions and several contradictory assertions which appeared to run contrary to qualitative, in-depth studies in given territories (Kalyvas, 2006; Dixon, 2009). Early datasets of conflict occurrence or onset largely reflected dominant theories and focuses of the day, seeking to illuminate determinants, for example, of civil war, at a time when this was the most prominent form of violence globally. As conflict dynamics have evolved and shifted in response to changing political, institutional and global structures and conditions, the need for more finely grained sources of data has grown, in order to allow multiple aggregations and disaggregations of data in line with shifting strategies, geographies and practices of violence.

While relatively recent developments in the field of conflict studies, disaggregated approaches have a long history in the analysis of collective action, with early enquiries tending to focus on violent social unrest in the forms of rioting (Wanderer, 1969), lynching (Inverarity, 1976), protests (Olzak, 1989), and violent resistance to repression (Tilly, 1977). More recently, disaggregated data analysis has been facilitated by technological advances in locational and geographic software, the increased availability and accessibility of data on the sub-national and temporally specific scale, and the on-going development of theories of social change, political processes and conflict dynamics that demand finer and more sophisticated scales of analysis. In the fields of civil war and terrorism studies in particular, recent improvements in the level and detail of disaggregated data have transformed the field

from one which conceived of entire countries as being 'at war' or 'at peace,' to one which facilitates finely grained studies of the micro-dynamics of violence (Sambanis, 2001; Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009).

One area in which disaggregated conflict data analysis has expanded and deepened understandings of conflict is in the disaggregation of data by conflict actor or group. This level of disaggregation has facilitated analysis of patterns of behaviour of discrete actors within and across conflict settings, as well as dyadic relations between conflict actors engaging one another in the same conflict environment. Analyses in this vein proceed from the realisation that diverse actors do not behave alike even within the same conflict context. Actions, strategies and ultimate impact are all shaped by – and may in turn shape – the organisational structure and deployment duration of units (Manekin, 2013); processes of recruiting, motivating and disciplining group members (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006); and ideological affiliations (Piazza, 2009). Disaggregated actor data facilitates the analysis proposed in this research project of analysing group formation and emergence at the group level, and according to shared characteristics (such as self-identifying as Islamist groups) between these organisations.

Disaggregated studies of conflict have also facilitated targeted analysis of particular modalities and strategies of collective violence. From a praxis-oriented perspective, specific strategies and tactics of war – such as civilian targeting or the use of terror tactics – shape the nature and experience of conflict for affected populations. Developing an understanding of how different characteristics and drivers influence, for example, the level of civilian vulnerability is central to the design and implementation of policies and programming which seek to reduce this. Theoretically, disaggregation by the nature of violence is also important: if modalities of violence have been over-aggregated in studies of conflict, then attempts to identify drivers of instability and violence may be affected and undermined by this fact.

2.1.1   Conflict, 'Terrorism,' and Islamist Violence

In many contexts, the phenomenon of Islamist violence is treated as equivalent to 'terrorism,' with little or no distinction drawn between violent Islamist groups who employ terror tactics, and wider violent Islamist organisations, nor between the multiplicity of tactics – including, but rarely limited exclusively to, terror attacks – that characterise many armed actors conflict profiles. Furthermore, much existing research treats terrorism and wider forms of political violence as conceptually distinct, in spite of compelling semantic and conceptual reasons for considering these phenomena together. In light of these two tendencies in existing literature and policy debates, this section seeks to define and differentiate the concepts of Islamist violence, terrorism and wider political violence, which form the basis of subsequent analysis in this research project. Debates surrounding the definition of terrorism are extensive and well-documented (*see* Dedeoglu, 2003; Cooper, 2001) so this section will limit its discussion exclusively to the issues of immediate relevance to the research project, and not to the broader conceptual and theoretical debates on this topic which are of only tangential significance.

Semantically, the politicised and normative nature of the term 'terrorism' creates challenges for the non-normative study of the emergence and dynamics of violence (Bhatia, 2005; Russell, 2005; Schroeder, 2005; Hegghammer, 2009). First, groups typically do not self-identify under this label, rendering this term particularly problematic as a frame or entry point for understanding the motivations, drivers and dynamics of this violence. Moreover, this label is used in highly politicised ways, typically as a means of delegitimising or dismissing the goals, objectives and agendas of identified groups (Hegghammer, 2009), and often in support of policies and responses which can minimise the role of governments or policies in creating conditions in which this violence occurs. As such, the tragic consequences and costs of political violence notwithstanding, using a label that assumes, *prima facie*, that the use of particular forms of violence is illegitimate and exceptional,

presents conceptual challenges to the pursuit of an *understanding* of such violence and its multiple manifestations.

Conceptually, there are also issues with distinguishing terrorist activities from other forms of violence, and empirically delineating perpetrators in a systematic way. The ways in which terrorism is defined and operationalised produce widely divergent patterns of observed violence, according to discrete definitions. Previous research has found discrepancies in the recorded levels of terrorist activity across datasets that seek to capture this form of violence exclusively, owing to differences in the way datasets conceptualise 'transnational' activity, and different underlying definitions of terrorism (Sheehan, 2012).

There are several key components to a definition of terrorism that shape analysis: the definition or identification of victims, the audience (Sandler, 2014), and the capacity of violent groups, each of which will be considered in turn. With regards to victims, researchers, policies and legal definitions differ in whether or not only attacks on non-combatants constitute terrorism (Enders, Sandler and Gaibulloev, 2011, p. 321), or whether this is 'generally' a feature of terrorism, but not definitively required (RAND, 2014). Others include context-dependent attacks on military, for example, armed forces who are not actively engaged in combat, or during peacetime (as overviewed in Sandler, 2014); while a larger share of the literature accepts that terrorism can involve attacks on all targets, regardless of combatant status (Schmid and Jongman, 2005).

A common framework for distinguishing terrorism from other forms of political violence identifies the targeting of non-combatants, or (more narrowly), unarmed civilians as a definitional characteristic of terrorism. This is sometimes framed in reference to the conduct of violence 'proscribed by the laws of war.' (Asal *et al*., 2015, p. 3) From this lens, only a sub-set of violent actions carried out by any single group constitutes terrorism, as all the violent Islamist groups under consideration in this study engage with both armed non-state

actors and the state, as well as, to varying degrees, the targeting of civilians. Approaches that designate entire groups as 'terrorist' mask the extent to which such groups may also engage in conventional, dyadic warfare. This raises questions of the validity and usefulness of terrorism as a definitional category when a large (and in many cases, the largest) share of violence carried out by such groups targets state forces in violence that much more closely resembles conventional dyadic conflict (Dowd, 2014).

Moreover, this framework of conceiving of terrorism as anti-civilian violence is typically applied only to a sub-set of actors. This approach tends to obscure the degree to which other armed actors, including the state, actively engage in civilian targeting. This distinction rests on the assumption that,

> '[T]he instrumental use of civilians in order to send a message to wider audiences lends a *different ethical and moral dimension to terrorism.* Thus, it can be argued that organizations that engage in terrorist tactics […] have crossed a major ethical and moral "bright line", and warrant separate analysis.' (Asal *et al*., 2015, pp. 4-5, emphasis added).

This proposition, however, conceals the extent to which anti-civilian violence is a widespread, but varied, strategy in conflict (*see* Eck and Hultman, 2007; Hultman, 2007; Raleigh, 2012; Boyle, 2009), and not unique or specific to violent Islamist or other 'terrorist' organisations. For example, even in contexts in which officially designated terrorist organisations are active, evidence suggests that they do not uniformly target civilians more than non-terrorist organisations, undermining the claim of the moral exceptionalism of terrorism as a category of action (Dowd, 2014).

With regards to audience, an alternative framework for distinguishing terrorist violence from other forms of political violence relies on the hypothesised significance of the psychological, message-generating effects of terror tactics, which are considered 'primarily symbolic' (Asal *et al*., 2015, p. 3; Schmid, 2004). This framework maintains that terrorism involves a

psychological dimension, emphasising either its role as 'anxiety-inspiring' and fear-inducing (Schmid and Jongman, 2005, p. 25; Hoffman, 2006, p. 40) or its targeting of direct victims as message carriers to a wider, indirect audience (Sandler, 2014). This assumes that the spectacular nature of some terrorist attacks places them in a unique category of action.

However, several issues undermine this distinction: first, not all violence attributed to 'terrorist organisations,' or even described as constituting acts of terrorism, are spectacular, performative or message-generating in nature. Empirical analysis reveals that a considerable share of violence carried out by AQIM, throughout Algeria and the Sahel, the Somali-based Al Shabaab, and finally Boko Haram in Nigeria, include more conventional targeting of security forces in small-scale acts of violence that are largely indistinguishable from the violence carried out by other non-state armed actors in the same space. Routinised, low-level and non-spectacular attacks on military personnel or units do not fit easily into a definition which emphasises the psychological and message-generating spectacle of terrorist violence, except one in which 'spectacle' is defined so broadly as to encompass almost all acts of violence.

Second, a definition based on perpetrators' intention to produce a spectacle of violence demands a detailed and in-depth understanding of group goals, agendas and strategies, which is often difficult if not impossible to obtain in the case of closed, clandestine groups. Open-access resources on the inner-logic of terrorist actions are extremely limited, presenting methodological challenges to conducting research on these types of organisations (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), and preventing a comparative, cross-national and large-scale analysis of intentionality.

Third, there are also other forms of violence and violent actors that rely on the message-generating, spectacular nature of violence which do not easily fit into a category of terrorist group or terrorist action. For example, the use of civil war and militia-based violence as a

strategic tool in the process of political bargaining within a 'conflict marketplace' attests to the role multiple forms of violence serve in generating messages, conveying information about group strength, interests and demands, and using violence a symbolic and informational tool (de Waal, 2015; Raleigh and Dowd, 2015). If, as Jenkins (1975, p. 16) contends, 'terrorism is theatre,' carefully choreographed to attract attention, so too are many other forms and modalities of political violence.

A third framework for distinguishing between terrorism and wider forms of political violence relies on assumptions regarding the capacity and strength of violent actors. This body of literature suggests that terrorism is typically the preserve of weaker groups, incapable of mounting a sustained insurgency and posing a serious challenge to the state, which therefore resort to asymmetric warfare in order to impose the greatest damage at minimal cost (Hultman, 2007). Studies suggest that a crucial distinction between terrorism and insurgencies (or civil wars) is that insurgents control territory within a state, whereas terrorist groups typically have weaker capabilities, and lack a territorial base (Sànchez-Cuenca, 2007). However, this distinction does not hold in the case of Boko Haram, AQIM and allied Islamist groups that have all seized and controlled territory, and yet are regularly conceived of as engaged in terrorist attacks, and as terrorist organisations themselves. Similarly, such a distinction obscures the variation in tactics that a single group can adopt over different spaces: in the case of Al Shabaab, the group has a history of controlling territory within parts of one state (South-Central Somalia), while carrying out hit-and-run-style attacks in other areas (for example, the Somali capital of Mogadishu, and throughout Kenya). Both of these strategies reflect differential capacity within and across groups at a given point in time. A distinction relying on either capacity or its spatialized proxy, the control of territory, cannot accommodate these groups that, far from being outliers, represent the largest share of violence attributed to terrorism on the continent.

An analysis of the specific dynamics of violence also reveals the paucity of the conventional distinction between terrorism and other forms of violence. At the macro-level, recent research which *does* employ a distinction between terrorism and civil war violence, also indicates that the two are closely temporally inter-related: 'terrorism' typically follows civil wars (Findley and Young, 2012), attesting to the interrelationship between these forms of violence. At the micro-level of specific groups, there is further evidence of the dynamic evolution of violent tactics. Some groups exhibit a shift in strategies from traditionally-defined 'terror tactics' to more conventional dyadic conflict, and cycle in and out of different tactics. This is evident in the violence profile of Nigeria's Boko Haram, which engaged in pitched battles against the state during the period of its seizure of territory, extensively targeting state actors in tactics common to territorial insurgencies. At the same time, the group also indiscriminately targeted non-state actors both within the territory it controlled, and in the spaces (primarily in Nigeria's North-Central region) outside of its control, in a string of suicide bombings and indiscriminate attacks on marketplaces, mosques and public places.

A similar profile is apparent in the case of Al Shabaab, which initially engaged in conventional dyadic warfare, which devolved into more sporadic, conventionally 'terrorist' violence in areas outside Al Shabaab control, but has continued to involve battles over territory and violence against populations in areas it governs. The evolution of tactics over time and their temporal co-occurrence in different spaces undermine a clear distinction between forms of violence (Findley and Young, 2012). The cases of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa do not represent a single, linear pattern of evolving 'out' of terror tactics, or devolving 'into' them, but suggest that factors such as relative group capabilities, and the strategic advantages of different forms of violence, at different times and in different contexts, determine the choice of tactics.

Importantly, violent Islamist groups are distinct from groups which mobilise around a collective Muslim identity (including communal militias, but also rioters), but who do not report to pursue an explicitly Islamist agenda for action (Dowd, 2013). Examples of these include communal inter-religious violence in Nigeria's North-Central (Middle Belt) region, where violence often coalesces around religious cleavages, but where the establishment or imposition of an Islamic system of laws and customs politically and socially across the community is not an expressly articulated goal.

Because of the debate surrounding the labelling of such groups, the choice and application of the term 'Islamist' warrants a full discussion. I eschew terms such as 'Salafi,' 'Salafi-Jihadi,' or 'Wahhabi,' which refer to explicit ideological and doctrinal schools within the wider tradition of Islamism (Hegghammer, 2009). These refer to specific sub-sets of Islamist doctrine or ideology that are not common to all violent Islamist actors in this research project, the variegation of which is discussed further below.

Additionally, normatively loaded and politicised terms such as 'fundamentalist,' 'radical' or 'extremist' are considered similarly considered inappropriate. 'Fundamentalist' has been criticised for its apparent attribution of specific, and often violent, actions and ideologies to so-called 'fundamental' principles in Islam (Kramer, 2003; Hegghammer, 2009; Esposito, 1992, pp. 7-8). It has also been dismissed as an appropriate label due to its association with historical or apparently anti-modern components of Islam (inferred by *a return to fundamentals*), which critics argue obscures the explicitly modern (for example, in technologies, communications and strategies) of contemporary Islamist groups (Fuller, 1991, p. 2).

Furthermore, terms such as 'fundamentalist,' 'radical,' and 'extremist,' are all relative, positional categories, suggesting a category of actors whose actions or framing place them in a 'fundamental' or 'radical' position, in contrast to, *inter alia*, 'progressive' or 'moderate'

counterparts. In spite of conferring a relational position on these groups, it problematically suggests a decontextualized understanding of these groups' actions. A position of 'radicalism' or 'extremism' leads to the question – radical, compared to what? The answer may include other Islamist actors (such as those who refrain from the use of violence), the state, society at large, or any number of other positions within the wider polity or international system. This indirectly suggests a 'norm' of behaviour or political action, which often (incorrectly) implies that the use of violence is exceptional or unique to Islamist actors, thereby minimising or concealing the extent to which violence is a historical reality and widespread contemporary strategy for political bargaining and mobilisation of collective action in each of these countries. Practically, too, the designation of some groups as 'radical' and others as 'moderate' (or related terms) presents challenges for delineating, for example, between those groups that do not actively engage in violence, but may support or condone it; or those that encourage or celebrate acts of violence overseas, or against particular targets, but condemn violence domestically or against different targets (Cofman Wittes, 2008).

For these reasons, the term 'Islamist' is preferred to these alternatives, as a broadly encompassing category for a range of groups. The term has been popularised as an alternative to more normatively and doctrinally specific terms since the 1980s, which came to be seen as potentially 'prejudicial and polemical,' and used instead 'to denote the political manifestation of the religion of Islam.' (Cantori, quoted in Kramer, 2003). It is useful here in that it offers a category specific enough to facilitate inclusion and exclusion of groups based on a definitional criteria – as above, political or social activity by groups which proactively promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state and/or society (Esposito, 2003, p. 151; ICG, 2005) – while open to modification with respect to the use of violence as a strategy. As Pelletreau (1994, p. 2) noted,

> '"Islamists" are Muslims with political goals. We view these terms as analytical, not normative. They do not refer to phenomena that are necessarily sinister:

there are many legitimate, socially responsible Muslim groups with political goals. However, there are also Islamists who operate outside the law.'

Some critics have rejected the term 'Islamist,' as a reference to politically mobilised action in pursuit of Islamic goals or objectives, because of the suggestion that Islamism can be differentiated from Islam more generally, with several calls from noted, externally labelled, 'Islamist' movement leaders for the use of the term 'Muslim' in its place (*see* Kramer, 2003). This criticism is in turn, however, a normative one: it implies that to be 'Muslim' inherently necessitates political action inspired by, or seeking to implement or impose, Islamic laws or ideologies in society. As discussed, this research project explicitly seeks to draw this distinction, based on the fundamental difference between groups or individuals who identify as Muslim, and those who actively promote the implementation or imposition of Islamic laws and customs.

The term 'violent' is used as a qualifier to 'Islamist,' to narrowly refer only to those groups which employ physical force against other people in pursuit of that agenda. The actions in which these groups engage make it possible to further distinguish between those that use force and those that do not, according to the definitions and criteria detailed above.

Regardless of the specific labelling, it is important to note that the groups classified as Islamist in this study self-identify as Islamist actors: they use Islamic tropes to characterise themselves, and have targeted violence against Muslims considered to live in contradistinction to their agenda, alongside the targeting of non-Muslims. This self-identification is manifest in the public statements of these groups, reflected in the ways in which they proclaim and frame their agenda for social and political action. For example, groups explicitly frame their agenda in terms of the pursuit of the establishment of a caliphate or other territorial entity governed by Islamic laws and customs (*BBC News*, 2014a; *New York Times*, 2012), seek to establish or impose those Islamic laws and customs (*BBC News*, 2012a; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Smith, 2012), or frame and identify enemies or

targets of their violence as transgressors of those laws and customs they seek to enact (*BBC News*, 2009). In all cases, a decision regarding the classification of groups as Islamist has prioritised their self-identification in these terms, over and above the external designation of a specific group as 'Islamist' (or other related terms) by external actors such as governments, journalists and analysts. A full list of groups contained in this category is attached as an appendix (Chapter 10.1, Appendix 1).

The only exception to this self-identification criterion is the inclusion in Chapter 4 of actions that were attributed by external sources (such as news, civil society or government reports) as 'Islamist' without specifying the name of the group involved. This therefore meant it was impossible to verify through a process of content analysis whether the groups responsible for the reported violence self-identified in terms consistent with the criteria above. These groups are categorised in the relevant chapter as 'Islamist-identified,' referring to groups or actors which have been identified as pursuing an Islamist agenda by the reporting source, but are not named, and as such, independent qualitative research into their agenda, statements or profiles of the group and its actions cannot be conducted. For the purposes of analysis in Chapter 4, 93% of the actors categorised as 'Islamist' were identified in the source material by group name, facilitating qualitative research into the stated aims and goals of these groups and their subsequent classification. The remaining 7% were identified in the source material as Islamist actors without being identified by group name. Correspondingly, 96.8% of report conflict-related fatalities were attributed to an identified Islamist group, with only 3.2% attributed in the original source to generic or undifferentiated 'Islamist' actors. The vast majority of these incidents were recorded in Algeria (58.6%), followed by Egypt (14.4%) and Tunisia (11.8%).[1] Wherever Islamist-identified actors were included in analysis, robustness tests were subsequently run to test the sensitivity of models to the inclusion of this category of actors, excluding all events attributed to unnamed violent Islamist actors. The results held under these alternative specifications. In all subsequent chapters, only

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[1] Source: ACLED, Version 6.

violent Islamist groups that were named in reports as responsible for action were included in event and fatality count models.

Doctrinal or ideological differences within and between groups, though important, are not disaggregated in this study. Instead, all categories of violent groups which frame their agendas in the terms above are broadly categorised as 'Islamist,' without attention to variation in, for example, the branch of Islam to which followers or members belong, or points of contention in religious doctrine or practice. An extensive literature already exists linking doctrinal, ideological and religious facets of Islam to violent conflict (*see* Toft 2007), with a sub-literature emphasising the ways in which religious, doctrinal or ideological differences between groups correspond to differing practices and strategies of violence (*see* Woodward *et al.*, 2013). Much of this research has relied on sometimes essentialising concepts regarding the supposed 'liberal' tendencies of some religious traditions within Islam, considering others more innately violence-prone, without sufficient evidence to support this claim. For example, Haynes (2006, p. 499) predicted that violent Islamism was unlikely to gain traction in Kenya, because 'for centuries, a relatively liberal and mystical brand of Islam developed on the East African coast; that is, a perception of Islam quite different from the rigid interpretation of the Koran promoted by al Qaeda and other such militant organizations.'

Rather than contribute further to this already extensive literature and debate, this research seeks to address the substantial gaps in our understanding of Islamist violence *beyond* its ideological facets, and therefore focuses on the aggregate category of Islamist violence in order to facilitate comparison with other actors and findings in conflict research. As such, the category of 'violent Islamist' necessarily obscures some important differences in interpretation, understanding, and self-identification and framing within this category of actors, but this simplification is deemed necessary for the purpose of exploring the broader dynamics of this category of actor. This approach mirrors the ways in which phenomena

such as nationalist, separatist or ideological (for example, Communist) violence has been explored in other studies (for example, Buhaug and Gates, 2002), in an attempt to comparatively analyse this body of violent actors, rather than make a substantive claim as to the unity or homogeneity of each. It is also somewhat mitigated in the case-study oriented section (Chapter 5), and the concluding substantive chapter, Chapter 7, where important differences in the context and strategies of specific groups are explored in more detail.

Finally, the labelling of groups as 'Islamist' does not presume that this is an exhaustive and exclusive category. Violent Islamist groups may hold a range of other ideologies or agendas, either simultaneously, or over time, including nationalism and related ideologies. For example, in Algeria, in the early 1990s, the Islamist-led coalition of the FIS advocated a strongly nationalist-inspired version of political Islam, strongly influenced by the nationalist FLN. By contrast, later groups, such as GSPC (which subsequently re-branded itself as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) took a more explicitly transnational perspective, although they continued to negotiate a complex balancing act between transnational and national agendas (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007). Similarly, organisations often contain multiple factions or divisions concurrently, as is evident in the internal divisions of Al Shabaab in Somalia, where divisions concerning the scope and salience of the nationalist question, pan-Somali nationalism, and international focus, were violently manifest in a series of internal purges in 2012 (Bryden, 2014). Categorising groups as 'Islamist' does not require that they hold no other ideological or political agendas, only that Islamism is one of their agendas for action. In concrete terms, there are no groups in the scope of this study which simultaneously pursue both Islamist and secular agendas for action, nor have any of the groups under consideration actively changed from an Islamist ideology towards an exclusively secular agenda, so the classification is internally consistent, although not exhaustive as a classification of ideological content.

2.2   Identity and Violence

Identity as a concept is complex and multi-faceted. A discussion of the growing field of studies on identity mobilisation, and its relationship to conflict, in the available space will necessarily synthesise a series of key points and relevant advancements, without doing justice to the wide breadth of research in this field. Rather than present an exhaustive discussion of this vast research area, the purpose of this sub-section is to survey important frameworks for understanding identity as it relates to violent conflict, and situate the theories and findings of this research project within this broader context. It seeks to highlight frameworks that are prominent in current literature, and how the findings of the subsequent chapters challenge, confirm, nuance or advance those understandings. Debates surrounding the mobilisation of violence under religious identity mantles have conventionally emphasised the seemingly fixed nature of religious identity categories, and focused on doctrinal and ideological components of religious categories, over and above the interactive and dynamic privileging of religious and other identities in specific contexts, and the fluid strategic leveraging of these categories by political agents. In acknowledging these strategic uses of identity categories, this research project will instead draw on constructivist and instrumentalist understandings of identity, contending that identity is malleable, variable and negotiable; and leveraged by key actors for strategic and instrumental goals.

In common with different frameworks for understanding violence as a whole, there are multiple ways to understand the interplay between identity and conflict, and the connections between them. These approaches can be broadly summarised as those which see identity's role in conflict generation as culturalist, constructivist, and instrumental (Hasenclever and Rittberger, 2000, p. 644).[2]

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[2] Most of the literature on diversity as a driver of conflict has focused on ethnic diversity. However, there is a strong case that the mobilization mechanisms for both forms of identity-driven conflicts are similar, and that theories of ethnic diversity and conflict may equally apply to religious diversity (Stewart, 2009).

Culturalist interpretations see the role of identity as an independent variable in conflict models. In this understanding, identity is a causal determinant of subsequent violence, through mechanisms linking the cultural, social and ideological content of identity categories (such as religion) to conflict outcomes. Religious doctrines or belief systems are cast as irreconcilable and identification as 'fixed and non-negotiable.' (Reynal-Querol, 2002, p. 29) Subsequent violence, therefore, is assumed to coalesce around these culturally-defined identity categories, producing an inevitable 'clash of civilisations' by which these irreconcilable and exclusive worldviews come into conflict (Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 2003, p. 36). One implication of this research is that the political, social and economic conditions in which those identities emerge, are practiced, or are given meaning, are of minimal importance. The salience of identity categories is implicitly assumed to be relatively unchanging over time and space, with greater emphasis placed on the content of the category and its composite practices, traditions, and beliefs.

An alternative framework for understanding the role of identity in violence proposes that identity categories are constructed, and sees them as an intervening variable in subsequent conflict. Identity categories are created, defined, re-created and delineated according to social, historical and political context, and their salience, rather than being fixed and static over time, is variable and malleable. Identity categories in this way are seen as porous and negotiable: their limits and boundaries change over time and evolve to include or exclude various sub-categories of identity, practices, traditions, histories and groups. In this view, identity categories are constructed in a complex and ongoing, changeable, negotiated relationship between the members of that group, elites or opinion-shapers within those communities, and external forces and factors, such as the state, the political, social and economic environment, diaspora communities, and other significant stakeholders. As de Sardan (2013, p. 32) summarises:

'No ethnic movements anywhere are "spontaneous" or "natural." All are social constructions. The fact of putting forward collective ethnic references (among the diverse identities of each), giving preference to an ethnic interpretation of politics (among the other possible decipherings), and crystallising discontent, frustration, dependencies or discrimination in the form of ethnic demands (among other possible structurations) necessarily requires the involvement of some preferential or eminent actors, more or less charismatic leaders, in other words, ethnic entrepreneurs, who reorganise the past and the present in the form of an ethnic "great narrative" giving a direction to the future (restoration or revolution).'

A third framework for understanding identity and conflict stresses the instrumental uses of identity in violence. Instrumentalist perspectives emphasises that identity categories provide a convenient basis for mobilising conflict, and can be leveraged to great effect in political and conflict processes. The substantive content of identity categories, such as the corresponding belief systems, traditions, histories and practices of a religion, are given relatively less emphasis than the ways in which the category and its salience to populations, communities and groups, are leveraged for instrumental purposes. For example, successive waves of historical religious revivalism have been associated with periods of social, economic or political crisis, wherein its mass appeal has 'roots in secular circumstances but has been given religious expression.' (Faksh, 1994, p. 185) Typically, this process is elite-driven, as prominent political, social and economic actors leverage the salience of identity to pursue agendas such as social status, political advancement, economic enrichment, or related goals. As Gurr notes, in relation to ethnic conflict:

'The origins and dynamics of ethnopolitical conflict are highly complex. Theories that emphasise the supposedly crucial role of a single factor such as historical animosities or religious differences should be avoided. Such factors usually become significant because they are invoked by contemporary ethnopolitical leaders seeking to mobilise support among threatened and disadvantaged peoples, not because religious or historical differences generate a primordial urge to conflict.' (Gurr, quoted in Hasenclever and Rittberger, 2000, pp. 645-646).

While culturalist theories may be a prominent feature of the media and policy framing of Islamist violence, this framework nevertheless continues to influence the language and discourse surrounding Islamist violence in important, if generally less explicit, ways (de

Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Abrahamsen, 2004). Assertions that 'terrorism is only a problem in failed states with large Muslim populations' (Traub, 2011, p. 51), or attempts to understand the risk of Islamist violence through an analysis of the proportion of Muslim populations in a country (Lyman and Morrison, 2004) reflect the persistence of these assumptions in dominant forums. Similarly, the proposition by a prominent scholar that one explanation for 'Islam's disproportionate role in religious civil wars' lies in the cultural significance of *jihad* (Toft, 2007, p. 110) reflects the persistent appeal of explanations rooted in the ideological or doctrinal content of Islam, and not its political manifestations, manipulations or contexts.

This research project begins by empirically and theoretically interrogating the supporting evidence for a culturalist interpretation of identity and violence, before proposing an understanding of violence which draws from both constructivist and instrumentalist approaches. Insofar as the research project is motivated by the puzzle of why Islamist violence emerges in some (both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority) areas, and not in others, it sets out from a perspective which presents a challenge to culturalist frameworks and assertions. If culturalist understandings of religious identity were correct, we should see very little variation in the spatial and temporal patterns of Islamist violence across the world. If the substantive doctrinal or theological content of religious worldviews mechanistically predicts the onset of violence, then its patterns would not ebb and flow, and vary, across time and space. If the presence of a large proportion of Muslims in the population were a sufficient condition for the emergence of, and public support for, Islamist violence, then we would see much more uniform distribution of this form of violence across Muslim-majority areas around the world, and on the African continent. Alternatively, if the close proximity of large numbers of Muslims and large numbers of non-co-religionists were in itself sufficient to predict violence, then highly diverse regions would universally and relatively uniformly experience inter-communal violence.

In reality, we see sharp variations in the geography and temporal footprint of violent Islamist activity; and even violence more broadly mobilised under collective Muslim identity. Some religiously homogenous contexts in Muslim-majority regions experience high levels of violence, while others do not. Some extremely religiously diverse, or highly religiously polarised, communities experience tragically high levels of inter-communal violence and others do not. Recent empirical work has roundly refuted the proposition that violence, or Islamist violence more specifically, can be predicted from religious demography alone. The 'clash of civilizations' thesis has been tested in the context of international wars, and found no empirical support for the claim that countries with populations from different belief systems are more likely to go to war with one another (Russett, Oneal and Cox, 2000; Henderson and Tucker, 2001; Chiozza, 2002; Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2006). Similarly, scholars have tested the theory that governments in Muslim-majority contexts are more prone towards using violent repression than non-Muslim counterparts and found no support for this claim (de Soysa and Nordås, 2007). Moreover, attempts to nuance these culturalist assertions with reference to the substantive *content* of Islamist ideologies – specifying that particular traditions or schools within Islam are more violence-prone – have been empirically falsified (Woodward *et al*., 2013). As one recent study has contended, in the context of Islamist violence in Yemen,

> 'The theological discourses and position statements on which jihad scholars lavish so much attention are important, and jihad devotees like to know that these supporting arguments exist, but ultimately they are unlikely to serve as the major catalyst for winning hearts and hence ultimately minds. Nor are they likely to win the kind of tolerance or even just indifference, which are both key to AQAP's [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] survival among a well-armed population.' (Kendall, *forthcoming*, p. 3)

Finally, critical approaches to the study of religious violence have contended that by emphasising the religious aspect of actors' behaviour, scholars and policy-makers,

> '[M]ay downplay the wider context within which movements and actors operate, thereby essentialising religion and the role of beliefs more generally.

> By distinguishing it from politics, it functions to otherise political actors who draw their inspiration from religion, thereby demonising them and pathologising their involvement in politics.' (Gunning and Jackson, 2011, p. 381)

This view is also found in Islam-specific critiques of the study of religious violence, wherein a tendency to over-emphasise the specificity of Islam as a socio-cultural phenomenon leads to a failure to recognise comparably violent or abusive action in non-Islamist actors (Mayer, 1993).

One contribution of this research project has been to advance this discussion in several ways, first by testing existing theories, and second, by proposing original alternative theory to explain observed conflict dynamics. Chapter 4 first expands the empirical test of these theories to the sub-national level, as opposed to at the state or international systems levels. If violence patterns are localised, and population dynamics matter to the patterns of that violence, it is plausible that determinants of interreligious violence – and Islamist violence specifically – are sub-national, rather than manifest at the state level. Second, the chapter incorporates data on all forms of political violence recorded in the ACLED dataset: rather than limit analysis to incidents classified as 'terrorism' alone, or to instances of inter-state war in international dyadic analysis, the test is expanded to all forms of political violence at the sub-national level, including a designated category of Islamist violence. To my knowledge, this presents the first test of this persistent theory in this way.

The research found no support for the claim that Muslim-majority contexts were more likely to experience violence than non-Muslim majority contexts on the African continent. Levels of total political violence were not significantly correlated to the underlying religious demographic in these models. Levels of Islamist violence were correlated to levels of Muslim populations, indicating that Islamist violence does not typically occur in contexts of a clash of civilisations, or where a minority Muslim population faces a perceived threat from a non-Muslim majority. Therefore, approaches which assume that conflict in diverse or

polarised societies arises from a politically dominant ethnic majority and a rebellious ethnic minority (*see* Dyrstad *et al.*, 2011) are not appropriate to this study. Instead, Islamist violence is more likely in contexts where large portions of the population are Muslim, and present a viable possibility for collective action.

Moreover, there are several puzzles of Islamist violence that a culturalist framework leaves unaddressed. As Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, pre-existing conflict in areas in which Islamist violence occurs is often neglected or side-lined in analyses of its emergence and dynamics. This marginalisation of historical violence can serve particular functions within culturalist frameworks and the agendas of their proponents. As Eckert (2012, p. 336) has noted in the context of discourses that locate Muslim violence as an attack by outsiders on the Indian nation:

> 'This externalization of the [terrorist] threat not only reflected the construction of the Muslim as the outsider and the illegitimate participant in India's commonwealth; it also reflected the idea of a body politic shaped by harmonious "internal" relations.' (Eckert, 2012, p. 336)

This research project argues, instead, that Islamist violence is a strategically useful framework for mobilising collective violence in contexts where other forms of identity (such as ethnic or communal identities) are marginalised, and religious identity provides a pan- or multi-ethnic identity under which several groups can coalesce. In so doing, the chapter draws on insights and understandings from both the constructivist and instrumentalist understandings of identity.

I argue that identity is *constructed* in that it is malleable, variable and negotiable. The boundaries of membership, inclusion and exclusion are variable and change in response to political and social circumstances. Studies of the 'construction' of multi-identity, unified 'tribes' or 'ethnic' groups in Kenya clearly illustrate this dynamic. The consolidation of numerous smaller communal groups under the mantle of a single, multi-ethnic union in

Kenya's Coast (Willis and Gona, 2013) are testament to the negotiated and changeable ways in which the very existence of an identity category can be negotiated, created, and reconstructed under (in these cases, though not necessarily in all, broader) categories. Case studies of religious mobilisation in Kenya found evidence of a similar dynamic at play:

> 'They [Salafis] ignore everything but the Muslim identity, and here in Kenya where we have many tribal differences, many young men are trying to move away from this and Salafism can appeal.' (Muslim leader, quoted in Amble and Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014)

The constructed nature of identity is also reflected in its variable salience: identity is not fixed, but changeable, and the degree to which one identifies as a particular category of individual, group or community, varies in accordance with political conditions (Posner, 2004a) and key events, including elections (Eifert, Miguel and Posner, 2010)

I argue that identity is *instrumental* in that it is leveraged by key actors for strategic and instrumental goals. Identity serves as a salient and powerful basis of collectivising action: common, shared experiences of grievances, and experiences of the state, can be aggregated under different configurations depending on the strategic significance and collective action capabilities of those identities. Existing research has illustrated how the collective action capabilities of identity groups vary according to the size of particular groups relative to the constellation of other groups in the political environment (Posner, 2004a). Effectively, 'exclusive ideologies coupled with violent struggles are empowering to individuals.' (Østebø, 2015b)

Two important caveats should accompany this outline of the theoretical approach of this research project. First, this approach does not suggest that the content or substantive material of those identity categories – Islamist or otherwise – is entirely insignicant. Instrumentally, Islamist ideologies can play on the historical, cultural and social significance of particular tropes and rhetoric to render them particularly salient and effective in mobilising action. In

other words, the fact that violence is mobilised under specifically *Islamist* mantles is not incidental to the conflicts themselves: the groups in question themselves use Islamic tropes to characterise their agendas and frame their actions. In effect, religious doctrine serves as a sort of 'ideological grammar' through which grievances are articulated, and political action, including violence, is channelled and organised.[3] These groups have chosen to use an Islamist language drawing on historically and socially resonant signifiers such as the caliphate, Sharia, and others; and justify what they do in terms of (their understanding of) Islamic structures and rules. In Africa especially, Islam provides a convenient language, well understood in the west, with which these various essentially local experiences can be used to assemble a variety of grievances and aggregated under a single, powerful narrative. Effectively, 'Religion is not the cause of religious conflict; rather for many […] it frequently supplies the fault line along which intergroup identity and resource competition occurs.' (Seul, 1999, p. 564)

That these signifiers are historically, socially and culturally resonant, and reflect a well-understood and powerful rhetoric, renders them all the more effective in mobilising action. In this way, while there is little empirical evidence for the essentialising claims of culturalist frameworks which focus disproportionately on the substantive content of these ideologies, the fact that these ideologies and their content are themselves powerful and meaningful to individuals, communities and groups lends them greater purchase. The distinction is important, in that it does not negate the fact that this identity – its boundaries and composition – is both negotiated and changeable over time, nor the fact that key players instrumentalise it for particular objectives. However, it suggests that not all narratives of identity construction and instrumentalisation would be equally effective. The most powerful are those that resonate with historical legacies, social experiences, and group conditions.

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[3] I am indebted to Prof. Robin Luckham, personal communication, for this suggested framing.

Second, and relatedly, the fact that identities are malleable and changeable does not render them meaningless. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 1), charge:

> 'If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallize? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that is often striven for – and sometimes realized – by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups?'

These challenges are taken up as a fundamental motivation of this research project: given that identities are malleable, changeable, and negotiable, how can we understand the ascendance of a particular form of identification in complex, multi-identity environments? The answer lies not in seeing the multiplicity and malleability of identity categories, and their ossification around – sometimes violent – singularity, as mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed concepts. The 'hardening' Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 1) describe can be understood in a framework which recognises the complex construction and instrumentalisation of identity precisely by stating that this hardening and singularity is one manifestation of these malleable identities. At different times, in different places, among different people, the same identity will exhibit different characteristics and variable salience: one expression of this is in hard, singular and exclusive understandings of the same identity that elsewhere, or among different people, at different times, is fluid and more porous.

The challenge set out by Brubaker and Cooper's question is not to reconcile these apparently opposed conceptualisations, but to explain the processes, mechanisms and conditions through which this hardening or singularity occurs. Identity as a category remains fundamentally negotiable, changeable and malleable, reflected precisely in its manifestation in some contexts as exclusive and singular, and elsewhere as fluid and open. Characterising identity in any one moment and one community or group as 'fixed and non-negotiable,' (Reynal-Querol, 2002, p. 29) illustrates only a snapshot of the many ways in which that identity can be understood: it is the outcome of a process of hardening, which may have

begun with more multiple understandings, and may well revert back to those under other conditions. Explaining the process by which that outcome was produced, is the fundamental task of explaining the emergence of Islamist violence in Africa.

The answer to this question lies not in a single process or mechanism, but in multiple conditions and criteria. Scholars have examined the ways in which the definitions of and boundaries around identities – typically ethnic groups – become defined and hardened through processes such as state enumeration and differential resource allocation policies, economic shocks which accentuate unequal access to and accumulation of wealth; as well as the influence of external stakeholders such as missionaries and anthropologists (Best and Rakodi, 2011, p. 23; Chabal and Daloz, 2006; Chazan *et al.*, 1988; Egwu, 1998; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005; Young, 2007). Fearon (2004, p. 2) provides the following synthesis, in the context of ethnicity:

> 'Ethnicity is socially relevant when people notice and condition their actions on ethnic distinctions in everyday life. Ethnicity is politicized when political coalitions are organized along ethnic lines, or when access to political or economic benefits depends on ethnicity. Ethnicity can be socially relevant in a country without it being much politicized, and the degree to which ethnicity is politicized can vary across countries and over time.'

Additionally, several studies note the importance of Islamism as a unifying ideology in otherwise highly divided societies (Esposito, 2002, p. 39), such as in Afghanistan, where political Islam was a central unifying factor among the mujahedin (Naby, 1988), while part of the Taliban's emergence has been explained by their ability to transcend tribal divisions (Van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2012, p. 121), and a fundamental organising principle of what would later become Al-Qaeda was to overcome national and ethnic divisions (Burke, 2007, p. 3). In Kenya, Chande (2000, p. 350) outlines the ways in which ethnic dominance was a factor in the historical mobilisation of a relatively Muslim claim for autonomy in the Coast region, and later how ethnicity interacted with religion in the exclusion of certain groups from power-sharing under successive regimes (Chande, 2000, pp. 352 - 353). Hansen (2013)

details the importance of Al Shabaab's diverse clan composition as central to their emergence in Somalia: in this case, not only did Islamism initially facilitate overcoming clan divisions (Hansen, 2013, pp. 22-23; 33-34), but also explicitly served as a strategically appealing basis for mobilisation among groups seeking to offset the political dominance of rival clans (Hansen, 2013, pp. 76; 117). Similarly, Marchal (2009, p. 382) argues:

> 'At times, the benefits of supporting an ideology are more important than its content. To oppose national or international political trends, it is simpler to coalesce with those who are perceived as being their staunchest opponents. Islamism and Salafism in Somalia, as in other countries, were a repudiation of local social structures (such as clan appeal) that obscured the situation and allowed oppressors to divide the oppressed. Islamism and Salafism served to express commonalities and build alliances against shared enemies who happened to be world powers such as the USA or the USSR.'

This study maintains that Islamist identities become the salient identity under which to mobilise for violence in particular sub-national locations because they provide a critical mass for mobilisation where there is a concentration of Muslim populations at the sub-national level and other identities – such as ethnicity – have been marginalised. In such a context, religious identity can layer itself over multiple ethnic groups and serves as a basis for collectivising marginalisation. In exploring the mechanisms by which this occurs, original contributions of this research project emphasise experiences of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion; the targeting of particular community groups by government on the basis of religious identity, in turn predicting and producing a salient form of identity through which collective resistance and opposition can be mobilised; the positioning of violent groups *vis a vis* one another in complex conflict environments; and the structure and nature of organisational alliances reinforcing the logic and appeal of transnational violence.

Scholars are right to caution against the perils of 'groupism,' by which diverse and varied categories are conceptualised, treated and measured as 'discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded,' serving as 'basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.' (Brubaker,

2002, p. 164). Every effort should be made to understand the variation, internal incoherence, and dynamism over time, exhibited in necessarily simplified categories. However, the case for abandoning the unit of analysis altogether has not been sufficiently made: the categories of ethnicity and, for the purposes of this research project, religion, matter and remain relevant to social science inquiry because they continue to matter and remain relevant to social life. Ethnicity and religion are experienced as real social conditions that mediate if and how some individuals, groups and populations gain access to and control resources such as land, employment, wealth, security, protection, citizenship, and political power, among others. In countries including Nigeria and Kenya, there is documented evidence of the challenges individuals from particular communities (Muslim, Coastal or Somali, in Kenya; or so-called 'settler' populations in Nigeria) encounter in attempting to acquire land, citizenship documentation, and social and public services (Human Rights Watch, 1990; KNCHR, 2007; Sayne, 2012). Original fieldwork carried out in the course of this research project also identified several ways in which the identity of 'Muslim' is reified as a social, political and legal reality in several contexts (*see* Chapter 5). The institutionalisation of religion as a category of practice that is legally, politically and socially, experienced means we should and must discuss it.

2.3 Violent Conflict, Governance and Exclusion

Picking up the challenge of understanding how and why particular identities becomes salient in the mobilisation of violent collective action, this research project argues that conditions and practices of governance, marginalisation and exclusion can in part explain the emergence of this form of conflict. The claim that widespread grievances drive conflict is not new. Gurr (1970) argued that discrimination by the state and the subsequent production of economic and political marginalisation provides a basis on which grievances can be fomented and populations can be motivated to support and engage in violent opposition.

In application to the context of Islamist violence, several scholars have argued that the relative success of violent Islamist groups in mobilising collective action rests on their ability to deftly exploit and leverage grievances among Muslim populations, articulating these in a narrative centred on reformism, purification, and Islamic principles. As Østebø (2012, p. 1) notes: 'The appeal of these militants stems from their ability to tap into and persuade marginalised communities, particularly youth, that their grievances can be rectified by the establishment of a more pure Islamist culture.'

Early studies of the relationship between grievances and conflict focused on cross-national analyses of 'objective' grievances (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, p. 565), testing the relationship between variables like recorded poverty and the onset or occurrence of civil war (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). These studies found limited evidence for a relationship between the two conditions. However, in recent years, scholarship has made several advances on this study, including in the conceptualisation and measurement of grievances, and in the scale at which they are considered.

The first advancement is in expanding the way in which 'grievances' are understood and defined, as scholarship begins to incorporate a wider range of conditions which may drive violence. Early cross-national studies utilised measures of individual poverty. However, household poverty may be an imperfect measure of inequality and marginalisation: communities may experience marginalisation in other economic terms, such as investment, job creation or ownership of resources; or in political terms, such as representation in government or access to power. Alternatively, communities may perceive subjective differences in equality and wealth that are not captured in the empirical data (Brown and Langer, 2010), either because the data are not sensitive enough to capture micro-differences, or because the perception of difference is socially conditioned and mediated (Cramer, 2003). What is certain is that poverty, marginalisation and deprivation are central to narratives explaining key case studies of Islamist violence (*see* Agbiboa, 2013; Adenrele, 2012),

presenting a challenge to researchers to bridge this gap between the qualitative data, theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence. The findings presented here point to the modest conclusion that at the large-*n* level, higher levels of poverty at the sub-national level do not have any link to levels of Islamist violence, thus presenting researchers with the challenge of identifying the other ways in which the experience of marginalisation in a country might contribute to Islamist violence, or how variation between sub-national areas witnessing similar levels and phenomena of Islamist violence can be explained.

A second advancement in this theory is a move away from a focus on individual-level poverty, deprivation or inequality, to focus on group-level inequality, or 'horizontal inequalities' defined by cultural cleavages (Stewart, 2002). Grievances concentrated among particular social groups (such as religious populations) can provide both a motive for collective violence and an opportunity to engage in it (*see* Collier and Hoeffler, 2004 on this distinction). Motivation is established when discrimination reinforces perceptions that marginalisation is based on personal identity characteristics, while opportunity arises for a collective response to perceived injustices among cohorts with strong social capital (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). The relationship between group discrimination and violent conflict has been explored in studies in which variation in group welfare (Østby, Nordås and Rød, 2009), inequalities in political power across groups (Stewart, 2011; Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011), and the failure of governments to provide public services to populations (Berman, Shapiro and Felter, 2011) have been linked to violence. A related development is the re-orientation of research on inequality to the sub-national scale, mirroring but spatialising the focus on group inequality. For instance, research has found that regionally concentrated inequality has increased the likelihood of conflict (Buhaug *et al*., 2011).

Group-level grievances are central to understanding the emergence of Islamist violence because the process of feeling aggrieved through a collective, group structure is a function of

how the state has politicised identity groups and exercised exclusive practices of governance. The conditions in which one identity category (such as religion) becomes a basis for mobilisation over another (such as ethnicity) depend on two features: first, whether inequalities occur most strongly along ethnic or religious lines; and second, the number and relative size of the demographic groups affected, which shapes opportunities for mobilization (Stewart, 2009).

In spite of these advances in scholarly literature, structuralist approaches, nevertheless, have often failed to accommodate the dynamic nature of the political environment in which groups operate, and the fluid ways in which groups respond to, leverage, and mobilise around, established grievances. Social movement theorists have argued that approaches mechanistically linking grievances to violent political action can fail to specify the conditions in which one is translated into the other (Hafez, 2003). This is of particular importance in contexts such as developing countries in which large portions of the population may live in absolute poverty, and yet do not engage in armed violence. Moreover, violence is a dynamic phenomenon, whose occurrence cannot be linearly or statically associated with structural conditions, without an accompanying explanation as to its timing, emergence, evolution and change (Hafez, 2003; Wiktorowicz, 2002). The relatively static nature of poverty thus renders it an unconvincing explanation for the dynamic phenomenon of conflict (Raleigh 2014): with the exception of short-term shocks, persistent, poverty cannot explain the relatively sudden onset of violent conflict. As Hafez (2004, p. 39) notes:

> 'The political process approach to mass insurgency developed largely in response to socioeconomic and psychosocial theories of social movements that mechanistically link grievances generated by economic deprivation or alienation to collective action.'

Exclusively contextual-structural models, which do not account for the interactions of the state with the communities from which violent groups emerge, risk obscuring key variables which shape and catalyse the escalation, de-escalation and dynamics of violence over time,

and also space. As Araj (2008, p. 285) illustrates, in the case of strategies of violence in Palestine:

> 'The claim that suicide bombing is "a national liberation strategy" cannot fully explain why it is more popular among Palestinians in some periods than in others or why public support continues to be strong despite growing evidence that such tactics often work against strategic Palestinian goals.'

Underpinning this approach to conceptualising and operationalising grievances, is an understanding of the state as a political, and non-neutral, actor in conflict-affected contexts and politics more broadly. Studies of the nature and logic of African politics have long attested to the balancing of interests regimes undertake in order to maximise and retain power (de Waal, 2015; Reno, 1999; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Bates, 1981). This balancing manifests itself in a 'political hierarchy' (Raleigh, 2014) in which elites, ethnic and regional communities, and locations, are privileged or disadvantaged by the regime according to a calculus of political relevance (Posner, 2004b; Kasara, 2007; Wucherpfennig *et al.*, 2011). These insights have particular relevance to the logic which dictates why particular forms of identity-mobilised violence emerge in specific contexts: while much of the literature operationalises ethno-regional identities as largely static and unchanging, a vast qualitative literature attests to the fluid and dynamic nature of group identities, as discussed in greater detail in the preceding section. In connecting this with discussions on the nature of the state and its hierarchical system of privileging different communities, I argue that it is precisely this logic of negotiation and competition within and across discrete non-state groups, which shapes the strategic decision of marginalised groups to mobilise in a pan-ethnic, but religiously homogenous, form under a mantle of Islamist violence.

This research project seeks to address the shortcomings of some research on grievances and conflict in multiple ways. First, it draws on recent scholarly work and insights into horizontal inequalities, to focus on group-level perspectives of marginalisation and exclusion in Chapters 4 and 5. Equally, it seeks to address criticism of the static nature of poverty and

related conditions, mis-matched to the dynamic nature of violence, by accounting for these changes through a focus on the history of marginalisation and exclusionary governance practices, alongside dynamic expansions in these practices, in Chapter 5. Finally, throughout the research project, I set out to incorporate insights from research on the negotiated state, neo-patrimonialism and clientelist networks in an attempt to understand the competitive logic of political violence, and the positioning and privileging of groups within these systems.

2.4   Violence and the Conflict Environment

Governance environments are related to, but separate from, the conflict environment. While the former reflect the conditions of political processes – including the practice of political inclusion, exclusion, marginalisation, and bargaining – the latter refers explicitly to the dimension and contours of violence itself. Specifically, violent conflict has a varied spatial profile (*see* Buhaug and Lujala, 2005; Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009). Most existing research focuses on sub-national variation in civil war violence, noting that the geographic concentration of violence may explain some of the contradictory findings of earlier conflict studies focused at the state level: 'if civil wars are local phenomena, specific to particular areas and actors or groups, then there is no reason why the relevant local characteristics should be captured in national-level measures.' (Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009, p. 488).

Even where violence does occur, conflict profiles differ along multiple dimensions, including conflict levels, volatility, and intensity; the vulnerability of civilians to violence; and the number, relative strength and nature of discrete conflict actors. Recent research has emphasised the variegated spatial profile of different types of violence within a state, with discrete conflict agents proliferating within a state, but showing limited spatial overlap (Raleigh *et al*., 2010; Raleigh, 2014). Elsewhere, recent studies have focused on the fragmentation of the conflict environment (Pearlman and Cunningham, 2012; Cunningham,

Bakke and Seymour, 2012), the interactions and interplay of agents within it (Boyle, 2009), and the degree to which different conflict agents are present, active, and responsible for a smaller or larger share of violence across discrete contexts (Dowd, 2015c).

These violent environments are sites of unique dynamics of governance, agent activity and interaction, and civilian risk, and warrant further exploration, because they can reveal important features of conflict, including what leads to emergence, fracturing, civilian risk, diffusion, and violence cessation. One way in which this research project seeks to address the challenges set down by scholarship decrying overly static, structuralist approaches to understanding conflict, is to re-orient focus onto the conflict environment itself, as a dynamic context characterised by multiple actors and interactions between agents. In so doing, this project also seeks to incorporate a wider range of actors into analysis: an overly state-focused lens obscures the multiplicity of violent agents typically active in a single conflict environment, and underplays the potential significance of their engagements and interactions with one another.

A growing literature explores the dimensions of the conflict environment from a conflict agent perspective (*see* Dowd, 2015c). These analyses include studying the consequences of non-state actor proliferation, including implications for conflict onset (Cunningham, 2013), duration (Cunningham, 2006), intensity (Kydd and Walter, 2006), outcomes (Johnston, 2007; Nilsson, 2008; Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2009; Findley and Rudloff, 2012), and particular modalities of violence, such as suicide bombing (Bloom, 2004). Relatedly, research highlights the significance of agents' relative strength – at least one measure of which may be their activity levels – to conflict more broadly, including anti-civilian violence by groups of differing strength (Raleigh, 2012); use of violence as part of elite bargaining strategies in the 'conflict marketplace' (de Waal, 2009); efficacy of peace agreements which incorporate 'veto players' or spoilers (Cunningham, 2006); and the effect of intra-movement power distribution on gaining concessions (Krause, 2014). A smaller literature explores the

conflict environment, and its degree of fragmentation or cohesion, as a consequence of political and conflict dynamics, including repression (McLauchlin and Pearlman, 2012); battlefield outcomes (Woldemariam, 2014); and political bargaining (Raleigh and Dowd, 2015).

The study of the conflict environment as a phenomenon in itself, and one that shapes and determines the actions of agents within it, remains a relatively marginal field of study within wider conflict research. The nature and strength of state and non-state armed actors, their activity and interactions, and the impact of ongoing or historical violence, interact to structure the objectives, strategies and choices of violent groups within it. Although this is a growing field, it has received particularly sparse attention in the context of Islamist violence specifically. This research project seeks to address this gap by theorising ways in which the presence, number and relative strength of other conflict agents shape the ways in which violent Islamist groups a) relate to, and seek to gain the support of, civilian populations; and b) engage in retributive, punitive or disciplining violence, explored in Chapter 6.

2.5 Local and Transnational Geographies of Violence

Political geography has brought the question of the sub-national scale to the forefront of disaggregated study of conflict. An understanding of spatiality is central to the fundamental dynamics of violence: conflicts rarely occur throughout an entire state, or with equal intensity everywhere. Conflicts tend to be concentrated in particular regions and locations, and it is in the significance of those areas and their characteristics that the drivers of conflict can be identified. As Cederman and Gleditsch (2009, p. 488) note in the context of civil war research,

> '[I]f civil wars are local phenomena, specific to particular areas and actors or
> groups, then there is no reason why the relevant local characteristics should be
> captured in national-level measures.'

In wider conflict data research, scholars have found strong evidence of relationships at the sub-national level which have typically been obscured in national-level aggregate measures, including the geographic clustering of inequalities (Østby, Nordås and Rød, 2009), sub-national concentrations of wealth (Hegre, Østby and Raleigh, 2009) or of particular resources or livelihoods (Buhaug and Lujala, 2005), local population size (Raleigh and Hegre, 2009), and distance from the capital city (Buhaug and Rød, 2006).

In spite of the explanatory power of sub-national characteristics and dynamics in conflict, to date, much quantitative research has continued to focus on country-level data. This emphasis is at odds with the local scale on which violent groups emerge, and the local-level conditions that shape their identities and activity (Kaufmann, 2011; Dowd and Raleigh, 2013). For this reason, this research project utilises sub-national administrative units as the unit of analysis wherever possible.

The question of scale and place undoubtedly has general relevance to the study of politics and conflict, but a nuanced understanding of these factors as they pertain to Islamist violence specifically, is particularly critical. Dominant characterisations of Islamist violence associate growth in this phenomenon with a globalising, interconnected and internationally active network of militants, which produces an 'infectious regional threat,' (Karmon, 2014, p. 74); and a form of 'terrorism without borders,' (Agbiboa, 2014). Transnational conceptions of the Muslim 'ummah' and episodes of Islamist violence carried out in places seemingly far-removed from conflicts in the Middle East, feed into this perspective.

Both policy-makers *and* violent Islamist groups themselves place considerable emphasis on this interconnectedness, and much less on the conditions of local place and space which may

shape or determine the emergence or dynamics of Islamist violence. This research project seeks to respond to this lacuna: in Chapters 4-6, the local 'place influences' of sub-national spaces are prioritised in analysis in order to better understand their relationship to violence, and the variable geographies of Islamist violence across and within states. Chapter 7 explicitly addresses the question of space, by putting forward a nuanced understanding of the precise *ways* in which violent Islamist groups in Africa exercise transnationalism, both through extra-territorial organisational alliances, and through growing international (but contracting sub-national) presence. In demonstrating the relevance and significance of the local scale to shaping the emergence and dynamics of Islamist violence, and by presenting evidence on the complex and dualistic geographic transnationalism of internationally networked violent Islamist organisations, the findings of this research project present a challenge to dominant conceptualisations of militant Islamism, its supposedly highly networked and globally interconnected nature, and the proposed primacy of international factors in shaping these conflicts.

3   Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach adopted in this research project, outlining key assumptions; source, content, structure and operationalisation of data; selection of case studies; and limitations which apply across the entire project. Subsequent substantive chapters (4-7) provide more detail on the specific modelling choices adopted for particular questions and to explore discrete mechanisms.

This research project adopts a mixed methods approach to the study of Islamist violence. The project combines an analysis of conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), supplemented by original fieldwork in Kenya and Nigeria and findings from qualitative studies, to explore the drivers and dynamics of Islamist violence. The research adopts a nested approach to comparative analysis (Lieberman, 2005), combining large-*n* quantitative data with secondary, case study-focused hypotheses-testing and refinement.

Nested analysis involves the systematic and sequenced combination of small-*n* and large-*n* analysis (Lieberman, 2005; *see also*, Mahoney, 2010; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). In this framework, quantitative analysis serves as the starting point of model development, followed by small-*n* analysis to refine, further test, and sequentially develop hypotheses. The two approaches are complementary and serve to strengthen and render findings robust: the combined approach facilitates the development of generalisable theories of probability, based on large-*n* comparison, through the leveraging of thousands of units of data and multiple and diverse contexts. This large-*n* analysis minimises the chance that observed correlations are spurious or too sensitive to warrant consideration, and maximises external validity. Supplementing these generalisable outcomes with theories developed, refined and ground-truthed in the process of qualitative research through fieldwork, and small-*n* process-tracing, provides an additional test of robustness and transferability of theories, and

enhances internal validity. It does so by minimising the chances that a small number of outliers may be driving the outcomes of quantitative analysis, and supplementing the simplifying assumptions of statistical models through the introduction of nuances and insights from context-specific qualitative research. Supplementing quantitative analysis with qualitative fieldwork also brings distinct advantages, such as facilitating specific interrogation of variables, conditions or relationships that may be unobserved, unspecified, or unmeasurable in large-*n* research (*see* Rohlfing, 2008). Proponents of this approach contend that it is particularly important in a research project, such as this one, which seeks to understand both the structural drivers of political violence, and the mechanisms, processes and agency through which those drivers are translated into action (Thaler, 2015), rather than mechanistically linked to social outcomes with little attention to causal pathways (*see* Hafez, 2003; Wiktorowicz, 2002).

In so doing, the study responds to calls for greater integration of case study analysis to understand the specific mechanism and causal pathways that contribute to conflict by integrating qualitative process-tracing methodologies (Laitin, 2002; Sambanis, 2004; Checkel, 2008; Varshney, 2008). It also follows a growing body of scholarly research seeking to integrate mixed methods, and synthesise findings at the micro-, meso-, and macro-scales in social science research generally (*see* Thaler, 2015, for an overview) and in conflict studies specifically (*see* Outwater, Mgaya and Campbell, 2013). In this way, the research project is motivated to respond to critiques of large-scale quantitative research (*see* Hagmann, 2014) by seeking to connect the outputs of these comparative analyses with the everyday experiences, narratives, meanings and perspectives of peace, conflict, security and identity in their multiple manifestations within conflict-affected countries, spaces and communities.

The research project leverages several sources of quantitative data for large-*n* analysis. These include data recording the level, intensity, geography and nature of political violence,

in addition to datasets that reflect social dynamics such as perceived political inclusion, exclusion, and marginalisation. The sources of these data are outlined below; followed by a discussion of the operationalisation of data in both large-*n* and small-*n* analysis.

3.1 Violence Data

Violence data serves as a dependent variable, or outcome to be explained, in all of the subsequent substantive analyses. The research project utilises data from the geo-referenced, disaggregated ACLED project (Raleigh *et al*. 2010), substituted by alternative sources of data, where available, in robustness testing and sensitivity analyses in respective chapters. Because of the ongoing dynamic evolution of Islamist violence in Africa, the years of data utilised for this research project vary over the subsequent chapters: the earliest section (Chapter 4) is truncated at 2012, followed by 2013 in Chapter 5; Chapter 6 includes data from 2014, and the most recent chapter (Chapter 5) disaggregates data to the monthly level in order to facilitate fine-grained analysis of strategic shifts in violence, facilitating the use of data from part of 2015.

ACLED data has been used directly in several analyses of conflict relationships including poverty (Hegre, Østby and Raleigh, 2009), climate variability (O'Loughlin *et al*., 2012), territorial control (Bhavnani and Choi, 2012), conflict mediation (Greig, 2015), political power relations (Raleigh, 2014, 2016), the relationship between violence and public perceptions (Linke, Schutte and Buhaug, 2015), and determinants of inter-communal violence between religious groups (Bunte and Vinson, 2015).

The dataset contains information on the date, location, actors and types of violent event across Africa from 1997 to the present, with on-going weekly data additions continually published. The atomic unit of the dataset is the individual event, disaggregated by date (day),

event type, actor(s) involved, and location, with additional details on the temporal precision of each event, and on associated reported fatalities. This unit of analysis – the individual, disaggregated conflict *event* – is constant across all years of the dataset, and facilitates meaningful comparative analysis and process-tracing both over time and across contexts.

ACLED is the most comprehensive and up-to-date dataset on political violence in Africa, and its disaggregation by geographic location, conflict actor and event type make it the most suitable dataset available for the analysis of dynamics of sub-national political violence by actor type. The event-level atomic structure of the dataset facilitates aggregation at various spatial and temporal scales, as well as monadic analysis by actor and actor type, which provides greater insights into the component dynamics which comprise a single episode of violence over several days or across multiple locations, or combine to constitute a period of instability or war. These characteristics render the data particularly amenable to this research project, as it seeks to understand factors shaping the locations of violence, its agents (or types of agents), and the dynamics of that violence: the most appropriate level of data aggregation depends on the research question at hand (Gleditsch, Metternich and Ruggeri, 2014; Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009), and varies across the following discrete, but interrelated, questions.

3.1.1 Alternative Violence Data

Alternative sources of violence data are available in a growing field of quantitative analysis of conflict dynamics. These include the UCDP PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch *et al*., 2002; Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015), UCDP GED Global Instances of Political Violence Dataset (Sundberg and Melander, 2013; Croicu and Sundberg, 2015); the Correlates of War Project (Sarkees and Wayman, 2010); the Social Conflict Analysis Database (Salehyan *et al*., 2012); and the Global Terrorism Database (START, 2013). For

reasons outlined below, these alternatives are less appropriate than ACLED for the study of Islamist violence in this research project.

First, ACLED provides up-to-date and continually published records of political violence. This facilitates analysis of the most recent developments in key conflicts central to the hypotheses of this research project. At the time of writing several of the subsequent chapters, several alternative data sources were variously truncated at 2007 (COW, Sarkees, 2010), 2010 (UCDP GED, Sundberg and Melander, 2013; Croicu and Sundberg, 2015), 2012 (UCDP PRIO, Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015), 2013 (SCAD, Salehyan *et al.*, 2012), and 2014 (START, 2013). These truncated time periods prevented systematic and continued analysis, for example, of the onset of the Islamist insurgency in Northern Mali in 2012; the expansion and intensification from 2013 onwards of Boko Haram violence across Nigeria and into neighbouring countries, including the specific development of high-intensity civilian targeting campaigns which are the focus of Chapter 6; and the more extensive geographic and strategic expansion of Al Shabaab violence into North-Eastern and Coastal Kenya, from late-2011 to the present.

A second feature of several alternative data sources which rendered them less suitable for the analysis conducted herein was the insufficient inclusion of data on violence outside of civil war contexts (UCDP, Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015), or outside that involving terror tactics / terrorist organisations alone (START, 2013). Many available alternative datasets' focus on particular forms of violence is at odds with the theoretical focus of this research project, which seeks to identify interlinkages between historical and multiple manifestations of violence and current dynamics; understand the contours of the conflict environment (in terms of its constituent numbers and relatively activity levels of actors); and trace the evolution of violence by particular groups over time, to assess the effect of transnational alliances on its dynamics and geography. This focus corresponds to a general shift in the focus of academic studies *away* from an exclusive emphasis on civil war,

and towards a more holistic view of political violence (Gleditsch, Nordkvelle and Strand, 2014). Substantively, these exclusions variously affect the level of data available on inter-communal violence in Northern Mali, Northern Nigeria and North-Eastern Kenya, which serve as a central component situating contemporary violence within its historical context in Chapters 4 and 5. It also excludes manifestations of small-scale, vigilante, and pro-government militia violence in Northern Nigeria and Coastal Kenya, which would limit analysis of the varied constellation of violent actors active in the same spaces as these groups, central to the discussion in Chapter 6. Finally, it excludes several instances of low-level violent attacks carried out by relevant groups, such as those involving no or few fatalities such as preliminary incursions by Al Shabaab into Kenya in the 2009-2011 period, or targeted attacks by Boko Haram in the years 2010-2012, which are key to understanding the dynamic evolution of these groups over time in Chapter 7.

A related condition that renders alternative data sources less appropriate is the application of fatality thresholds as an inclusion criterion (UCDP PRIO, Gleditsch *et al*., 2002; Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015). Fatality thresholds apply an arbitrary floor on the inclusion of a conflict event, based on its intensity as measured by the number of reported casualties. This exclusion largely reflects an academic concern with explaining and studying high-intensity civil wars, but not the multiple alternative manifestations of violence that characterise a conflict space. As above, this exclusion would variously affect the levels of violence recorded in sub-national spaces; the constellation of recorded actors (with conflict agents involved in lower-intensity conflict events not included); and the dynamics of escalation (and de-escalation) of a single group's violence, with lower-intensity conflict activity excluded. For the same reasons as detailed above, these features are central to the theories and hypotheses developed and tested in the course of this research project.

In spite of these limitations, where available and relevant, alternative sources of data are used to substitute ACLED data in quantitative analyses, and the models re-run with these

alternative specifications. The results hold in almost all models, providing support for the robustness of these findings.

3.1.2   Potential Limitations and Measures Employed to Address These

In spite of extensive existing research relying on publicly available conflict event data (detailed above), reliance on data gathered through public sources (including media, civil society, international organisation and security reports) can present several challenges.

First, most existing datasets rely on coding of event data from open-access sources, due to their availability, and because there are fewer restrictions imposed on circulation and resulting analyses. Records of political violence relying on institutional sources face several serious limitations. Public health records (such as birth and death registers) suffer from serious under-reporting; while intergovernmental efforts at collecting data on household welfare and characteristics (including deaths), such as through the Demographic and Health Survey project, are typically not disaggregated by cause of death, are restricted to a limited time span, and are not administered annually in all cases (Bocquier and Maupeu, 2005). Alternative institutional sources, such as police, military, or mortuary records are also problematic: in addition to the immediate risk of politicisation of such sensitive data when used to understand political violence, they are also typically available only in aggregate, and not spatially, temporally or otherwise distinguished in a way that facilitates finer-grained analysis (Bocquier and Maupeu, 2005).

While reliance on open-access sources overcomes some of these challenges, this data too is characterised by several limitations. Public sources particularly, though not exclusively, can be subject to selection bias and/or 'description bias,' in the type of events they report (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith, 1996).

Selection bias may be introduced if violence which occurs in lower-profile or less strategically relevant contexts is under-reported as it is not deemed 'news-worthy,' reflecting a 'significance bias,' (Otto, 2013, p. 558). This is also a concern for particular modalities of violence (violence against civilians) and violence perpetrated by particular types of conflict actor, for example, involving ethnic or communal militants (Barranco and Wisler, 1999; Otto 2013). Particular forms of violence may be over- or under-reported for political reasons: in a study of Kenyan newspapers recording of violent deaths, homicides and violent accidents (particularly surrounding road safety) were found to be a high priority for journalists, because they facilitate particular narratives around the state's incapacity to provide safety, and a drift towards criminal activity and ineffectiveness. By contrast, journalists were found to 'play down' violence involving communal militias and vigilantes targeting criminals, because they typically share the wider social acceptance of this violence as legitimate (Bocquier and Maupeu, 2005, p. 336). In the context of this research, politicised bias could potentially skew results of statistical analysis by under-counting wider political violence, or Islamist violence at a time when it was less relevant in the international 'issue-attention cycle' (Downs, 1972) pre-2001, and over-counting Islamist violence in the post-2001 period.

In a similar vein, conflict that occurs in contexts with limited freedom of the press and civil society may not be reported due to restrictions on coverage and publicising violence (Sandler, 1995; Drakos and Gofas, 2006). A prominent example of this includes Algerian state restrictions on the reporting of violence during and following the civil war (Campagna, 1999; *see* discussion in Wigmore-Shepherd, 2015; Chataing, 2015). Other systematic sources of selection bias may be introduced as a result of structural conditions limiting reporting in rural areas (Otto, 2013), poor communication technology coverage and infrastructure (Weidmann, 2016a, 2016b); and/or an uneven distribution of media coverage (Dugan and LaFree, 2012).

Description bias may be introduced if the nature of the event that is reported is distorted, with particular attention to the actors involved, the type of violence perpetrated (against unarmed civilians or other combatants, for example) and the initiator of the violence. One area that is particularly vulnerable to manipulation and distortion is the calculation and reporting of casualty and fatality information associated with an event (Chojnacki *et al*., 2012; Otto, 2013). Precisely because fatality information is difficult to both trace directly to an event (as there may be a long time lapse between a violent incident and a consequent death), and because it is difficult to verify independently, reported fatality information tends to be extremely unreliable (Day, Pinckney and Chenoweth, 2014). Finally, description bias may be introduced where media sources refer to non-violent, but extra-legal, activity in violent terms – for example by referring to non-violent but disruptive demonstrations as 'riots' (Day, Pinckney and Chenoweth, 2014).

The implications of these potential biases and limitations are considerable: poor-quality, incomplete or systematically biased underlying data can lead to cascade errors affecting the reliability and robustness of results and conclusions throughout the analytical process. This is particularly detrimental if these biases are introduced in ways that are non-random and correlated to key features of the conflict and political environment (Drakos and Gofas, 2006). However, there are reasons to be cautious in estimating the scale of these issues. Although in its early stages due to the relative novelty of fine-grained, disaggregated conflict event data, research on the veracity and reliability of such datasets has been promising. In a study which took advantage of opportunities to compare media reports with confidential military records of violence in Afghanistan, findings pointed to a high-degree of correlation between the two systems of records, although noted that at the scale of the sub-national district (Admin Level 2), there was a relatively higher level of discrepancy (Weidmann, 2013, 2016a, 2016b).

In addressing each of these features in turn, several characteristics of the ACLED dataset help to overcome potential limitations. First, those characteristics most subject to description

bias are features such as the favourable or unfavourable framing of an event and its purpose (Earl *et al*., 2003), neither of which are captured in the coding of ACLED data. Fatality data are included in the ACLED dataset, but estimates and ranges are coded at the lowest available estimate to avoid over-inflation. A tendency in news reporting to sensationalise or misrepresent disruptive but non-violent events in violent terms is mitigated in the ACLED dataset through the application of strict coding procedures, which require data collectors to assess whether the report explicitly states that actual, physical violence occurred before proposing it for inclusion. This process reduces the effect of biased or deliberately negative framing.

The triangulation of event information from a variety of sources can help overcome challenges associated with incomplete reporting in any individual source, or sources of bias arising from personal, institutional or commercial interests and perspectives (Bocquier and Maupeu, 2005). Specifically, utilising a range of types of sources, and drawing on information from reports by civil society, humanitarian and development organisations, can contribute to ameliorating systematic and descriptive biases towards particular securitised or politicised narratives and characterisations in media or governmental reports (Day, Pinckney and Chenoweth, 2014). In the collection and coding of ACLED data, information and details on events are gathered from multiple sources and triangulated. An analysis of the dataset reveals that, on average, more than 37 discrete media sources are coded for each country, including 95 in Somalia, 89 in Nigeria, and 80 in Kenya (all in the top ten ranked countries for discrete number of reporting sources). In addition, at least 5% of individual recorded events cite more than one discrete source (data source: ACLED, Version 6). The triangulation of event information from multiple discrete source types, including media, civil society and inter-governmental sources, with each type itself potentially including several individual sources, has been shown to reduce the source type bias that may affect the nature, and type, of event reporting in ACLED (Wigmore-Shepherd, 2015).

In the course of the dataset's use as part of this research project, several further actions were taken to address and minimise these potential limitations, and integrated into statistical and theoretical analysis. The first set of actions is statistical in nature, and involved the introduction of variables in an attempt to control for the potential impact of structural conditions such as regime type, levels of press and political freedoms, and GDP on efficacy or biases in reporting. Conditions that correlate to higher levels of reporting bias include controls and limitations on freedom of speech, civil liberties and political participation (Campagna, 1999; Wigmore-Shepherd, 2015). Because statistical models include controls for regime type, including measures that reflect the degree of freedom of civil liberties and related measures, these measures help attenuate these structural effects.

Geographic controls were also introduced to test and if necessary limit the impact of high volume or high-profile country cases in cross-country analyses, and regional under-development as a potential dampener on reporting coverage in sub-national analyses. Similarly, statistical mechanisms such as clustering by country and using fixed effects contributed to controlling for country-specific conditions potentially driving violence. Finally, in order to limit the effect of geographic ambiguity of conflict event locations (Weidmann, 2013, 2016a, 2016b), the data analysed in subsequent analyses is aggregated to a higher level (Admin Level 1, Chapters 4, 5 and 6; and country level, Chapter 7), avoiding much of the uncertainty surrounding this highly localised sub-national scale.

In addition, while fatality data are utilised in the subsequent analyses, they serve as a substitute for event count levels in sensitivity analyses, and not as a dependent variable in primary models, precisely in order to avoid over-estimates.

Finally, the research design following a nested analysis framework further served as a check on systematic biases in the data, facilitating a process of ground-truthing and critical

assessment of processes of attribution of Islamist violence, records of Islamist violence, and observed patterns and dynamics in the data through qualitative fieldwork.

In spite of these efforts, readers should analyse the following results mindful of the potential limitations, gaps and sources of bias that are inherent in open-source event data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, the proliferation of conflict event datasets, and ACLED's expansion and ongoing integration of an increasing number of sources, provide a valuable opportunity and rich source for analysis that contributes to a significant advancement in the theorisation, conceptualisation and analysis of political violence in Africa and beyond. This research project follows multiple researchers in utilising open source data, confident that the advantages and potential offered outweigh the potential limitations when care is taken to acknowledge and mitigate them.

3.2   Other Data

In addition to violence data, the project utilises other socio-economic and political data as independent variables in much of the subsequent statistical analysis.

Chapter 4 utilises data ethnic data to analyse both the degree of ethnic diversity within countries at the sub-national level, and the relative political power, or relevance, of ethnic communities. Data are drawn from the GeoEPR dataset, a geocoded version of the Ethnic Power Relations dataset charting politically relevant ethnic groups across space and time (Wucherpfennig *et al*., 2011). The dataset is preferable to national-level measures of ethnic diversity, often captured by the Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalisation (ELF) index (Taylor and Hudson, 1972) for a number of reasons: first, it facilitates analysis at the sub-national level at the same scale which this article seeks to explore; second, it takes account of the geographic dispersal of groups through geo-referencing; and third, it includes qualitative, expert-derived information on the political status – whether discriminated against, powerless,

a partner in government, or dominant – of ethnic groups, which supports analysis of the political dimension of group marginalisation, which has heretofore been hindered by a lack of data in this field. The dataset is drawn upon for three distinct variables: ethnic diversity, a sub-national variable interval variable which counts the number of ethnic groups present in the administrative unit; ethnic dominance, a sub-national interval variable which counts the number of politically dominant ethnic groups are present; and ethnic exclusion, a static, sub-national binary variable which tests for the presence of politically marginalised groups (an aggregate category of groups in the EPR dataset which are deemed 'powerless' or 'discriminated').

Chapter 5 uses an alternative measure of political marginalisation and grievances, drawn from Afrobarometer surveys of public opinion in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria in 2008 (Afrobarometer, R4). The survey round is chosen because it pre-dates the period of rapid escalation in Islamist violence in all three countries. Exploring survey data from before this period provides an opportunity to unpack conditions prior to this escalation, and isolate the specific conditions that *lead* to Islamist violence. In other words, drawing on perception data that precedes the onset of any significant Islamist violence ensures that Islamist violence is not in itself a *cause* of these perceptions, but rather a consequence of those conditions. This design follows other research which has analysed survey data for patterns in religiosity and political participation (Beatty Riedl, 2012), and analyses which have paired conflict data with survey information (Dyrstad *et al*., 2011; Collier and Vicente, 2013), including the specific pairing of Afrobarometer data with disaggregated data on conflict locations and levels (Linke, 2013; Wig and Tollefsen, 2016).

Survey data are particularly well-suited to addressing the question of the relationship between grievances and conflict, because objective grievance, even at group level, may not necessarily translate into collective awareness of disadvantage (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). Collective awareness is what distinguishes measures of objective

marginalisation (such as poverty) and the general failure to observe a relationship between these conditions and violent conflict (Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014). It is the subjective perception of marginalisation on which violent groups can draw to mobilise, recruit members, and help evade detection. The survey data explicitly concerns the *perceptions* of respondents of their status in society relative to others: this captures more directly the grounds on which collective grievance is translated into collective action.

The survey data are drawn upon for several distinct variables: 1) how respondents perceive their economic conditions compared to other groups in the country; 2) how respondents perceive their political influence compared to other groups in the country; 3) how often respondents feel the government treats their group unfairly; and 4) how often respondents feel people are treated unequally under the law.

3.3 Large-n Quantitative Analysis

The first stage in the nested research design is large-*n* analysis. In this stage, the research project relies primarily on event data analysis as a means to identify patterns, dynamics and determinants of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa. There is a precedent of research conducted on levels, intensity and occurrence of political violence using publicly available reports and data on conflict in research on terrorism (*see*, Testas, 2004; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Piazza, 2009), civil war (*see*, Cederman, Buhaug and Rød, 2009; Weidmann, 2009; Salverda, 2013), social unrest (*see*, Salehyan *et* al., 2012; Earl, Soule and McCarthy, 2003), and lower-intensity communal or ethnic conflict (*see*, Bocquier and Maupeu, 2005; Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009).

Examples of research on political processes and conflict drawing on nested research design methodologies are also becoming more common, including Posner's (2004a) mixed-methods natural experiment study of political demography in Southern Africa; Boyle's

(2009) study of violence against civilians in Iraq, which incorporates both quantitative and qualitative, process-tracing approaches; and Koos and Basedau's (2013) study of resource extraction and conflict risk. The study of Islamist violence through quantitative empirical analysis is more limited. Although the application of this approach to Islamist violence specifically is expanding (*see* Walther and Leuprecht, 2015; Piazza, 2009; Boyle, 2009; de Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Enders and Sandler, 2000), there are limited mixed-methods studies employing both a combination of quantitative research and supplemental qualitative methodologies. Together, this constitutes an emerging research agenda and an opportunity for this research project to address this gap.

3.3.1   Operationalisation of the Data – Count and Levels

The analytical models in this research project primarily employ summed event counts of violence, aggregated to varying scales (sub-national, national or regional), and to discrete periods (monthly or annually). Where violence attributed to a specific actor or group of actors – for example, state forces, violent Islamist groups, or non-Islamist violent groups – were required, a monadic file was constructed and the relevant events extracted and aggregated to create a count of violent events attributed to specific actors or groups of actors.

The resulting figures include a sum of all violence attributed to violent Islamist groups (as defined in earlier sections). All events attributed to violent Islamist groups are counted in the sum of violent Islamist events, regardless of whether or not an individual event was demonstrably carried out with the immediate result of producing, establishing or imposing a system an Islamic system of politics, law or governance. In other words, all violence attributed to groups such as Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, and AQIM, is counted in a sum of all violent Islamist events, because of the stated agenda of the perpetrating group, rather than assessed on an individual event basis to determine whether there is an explicit link between an individual act of violence and the immediate establishment of an Islamic system. In order

to accurately capture dynamics of political violence, several exclusions are applied: first, all non-violent events such as peaceful protests, troop movement and the establishment of bases, are excluded, as these do not directly speak to the dynamics of inter-group violence under consideration here. Second, counts of total violence attributed to Islamist groups, including unnamed Islamist actors, is isolated from that of named Islamist actors, and analysed separately for robustness purposes.

Conflict event data itself is the most reliable measure of violent activity, compared to measures of fatalities or casualties (Chojnacki *et al*., 2012; Otto, 2013), but event levels can serve to render uniform events of markedly different intensity. By way of illustration, a single violent event resulting in a small number of injuries, but no deaths, is numerically commensurate to an event in which several dozen or even hundreds of people were reported killed. To control for the potentially homogenising effect of this, in several subsequent chapters, sensitivity analyses replace event count models with fatality count models. Fatality figures are among the more problematic aspects of conflict data, owing to the increased potential for reporting bias, difficulty verifying the numbers reported, and the political motivations that might influence mis-reporting. Research has shown that details such as fatality counts are more contentious than the 'hard news' of events (Earl, Soule and McCarthy, 2003, p. 72). For this reason, the actual levels of violence are considered a more reliable reflection on the intensity of conflict. However, it must be acknowledged that a single conflict event can vary widely from a low- to an extremely high-intensity incident. As such, tests were re-run with fatalities as dependent variables in several models.

All statistical models also include control variables, chosen in accordance with sensitivity analyses and established conventions in quantitative conflict studies (*see* Hegre and Sambanis, 2006; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). Control variables typically include characteristics of demography and economy, the national political system, and temporal lags of violence to control for the potential temporal endogeneity of violent conflict.

3.3.2 Operationalisation of the Data – Geography and Scale

The unit of analysis in three of the four substantive chapters is the sub-national Administrative Level 1 unit by year. To date, much existing research has focused on country-level data, an emphasis which is at odds with the sub-national scale on which violent groups emerge, and the local-level conditions that shape their identities and activity (Kaufmann, 2011; Dowd and Raleigh, 2013). The sub-national level of analysis is particularly appropriate in contexts where a specific form or agent of violence is geographically concentrated (Buhaug *et al*., 2011), as in the case of Islamist violence in Northern Nigeria, Northern Mali, North-Eastern Kenya, and Eastern Mauritania. Sub-national level analysis is also particularly appropriate in countries where there are 'spatially uneven' processes of governance, economics and transformation (Snyder, 2001, p. 94). These differential processes, in turn, correspond to variable relationships and interactions between individuals, groups, and populations with institutions and practices of governance, serving as the political and social 'micro-foundations' from which conflict originates (Verwimp, Justino and Brück, 2009, p. 307). In the subsequent chapters of this research project, this is relevant not only to the dependent variables of differential governance practices, and highly variegated environments of conflict actors over space, but also to the outcomes of conflict themselves. Finally, the sub-national comparative method is most applicable in cases where there are multiple, relatively spatially distinct but simultaneous conflicts, whose drivers, dynamics and manifestations may be distinct as in Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Mali and Algeria (Buhaug and Lujala, 2005; Raleigh, 2014).

Only Chapter 7, on the transnational dimensions of Islamist violence, aggregates measures of violence to the national level. This is because the focus of this chapter is on the dynamics of group-specific violence, and it is assumed that, although groups contain multiple, often geographically discrete, sub-units and militant cells within them, the effect of a high-level

organisational alliance with an extra-territorial partner should be reflected in a strategic shift in violence across the group as a whole. It is less likely that violence clustered at the sub-national level or in a particular cell of an aligned group will exhibit markedly different patterns to units in the rest of the country. The analysis in that chapter, therefore, focuses at the higher level of aggregation at which sub-groups or cells within an organisation identify under a common group name, with the assumption that this reflects a degree of shared goals and command, internal cleavages which characterise many (not only armed) political groups notwithstanding.

All violence counts are spatially aggregated either sub-nationally or nationally to the territory in which the violent event occurred. This means that even if an act was carried out by a relatively mobile group that travelled into the area from a separate stronghold or location of origin, it will be aggregated to the territory in which the actual event of violence was carried out. There are no well-established, systematic means to associate violence that occurs in one location, with a group's separate or discrete location of origin or operational base. This has the effect of occasionally associating violence that is carried out in high-target areas (such as high-profile locations, or sites of political power) with the characteristics and structural conditions of that area, even if the drivers of that violence are manifest in the locations of origin of perpetrating groups. This has the greatest potential impact on studies of grievances, socio-economic and political conditions in a location, by masking the strategic decision to target a location because of its 'target value' (Hegre, Østby and Raleigh, 2009) rather than the underlying conditions of that location. This may be particularly significant, also, in cases where porous borders or high-levels of mobility facilitate the diffusion of violence across boundaries.

However, several measures are introduced in an attempt to control for these potential effects. First, all models at the sub-national level include a binary variable to control for violence which takes place in the capital city and associated administrative district: this is based on

the assumption that the capital city has the highest 'target value' (Hegre, Østby and Raleigh, 2009) for groups, as it typically houses several sites of political power, is the public seat of the regime, and is often an economic power centre as well. Groups may seek to target the capital in an attempt to inflict maximum damage on the regime, target elites associated with the regime or the populations in closest proximity to them, or strike centres of power, including national and international institutions and governing bodies. Examples of this dynamic include Boko Haram's bombing of the UN Headquarters in Abuja in 2011; Al Shabaab's attack on the Westgate shopping complex in Nairobi in September 2013; the violent siege on the Radisson hotel attributed to violent Islamist groups in Bamako in November 2015; and ongoing attacks carried out by Al Shabaab in Mogadishu following the government's nominal regaining of control there.

A second measure introduced to control for the potential spillover or diffusion effects of political violence involves the construction of a spatial lag variable which provides a measure of violence levels (and, where relevant, violence levels attributed to specific groups) in neighbouring sub-national units. The effect is a control on levels of instability in geographically contiguous units, such as neighbouring states, counties or regions, which introduces a means of controlling for 'bad neighbourhood' (Weiner, 1996) effects at the sub-national level, and the spillover and diffusion of violence.

3.4 Small-*n* Qualitative Analysis

This project's quantitative analysis is supported by extensive qualitative research. In the first instance, the categorisation of violent Islamist groups is dependent on in-depth qualitative knowledge of the programmes of action, statements of intent and goals of the violent groups under analysis. This required in-depth desk-based research on a variety of groups. In addition, a review of qualitative literature, particularly as it pertained to histories of violence

and processes of governance, inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation, was also essential to situate the results of quantitative analysis in the relevant historical and political context.

In addition, original qualitative research was carried out through key informant interviews during fieldwork in Kenya and Nigeria. Fieldwork was conducted in Abuja, Nigeria; and in Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya. All three locations have been sites of considerable levels of Islamist violence within each country, and also host a large number of political, civil society and policy actors engaged in violence management, mitigation and reduction work. In an additional round of fieldwork, diaspora civil society activists engaged in conflict and peacebuilding advocacy from Northern Nigeria and North-Eastern Kenya were also identified through a snowball method, and interviewed in the United Kingdom. A final round of interviews was conducted remotely, via telephone, Skype or email correspondence, with a number of stakeholders located in North-Eastern Nigeria (Gombe and Borno States); and Northern Kenya (Garissa), where fieldwork could not be carried out due to security restrictions. In total, 40 interviews were conducted with political, military, civil society and policy actors either in person (36), or remotely (4).

Key informants interviews were designed to gather qualitative information from key informants who could provide locally-grounded knowledge about the evolution and emergence of violent Islamist groups, narratives and explanations of Islamist violence in their areas, and the relationship of violent Islamist actors to the wider conflict and political environment. Specifically, interviews sought seek to ground-truth and supplement the analysis of the quantitative data by gaining an in-depth understanding of institutional characteristics, governing structures, policy environments in which such groups operate, and potentially related triggers in the context of these groups.

Key informants interviewed included Muslim religious leaders; religious leaders involved in inter-religious initiatives and peacebuilding; Muslim youth leaders; government officials at

sub-national, national and inter-governmental levels; security agents; civil society activists; humanitarian and development workers; and researchers working on related themes in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. Although in secondary and tertiary rounds of interviews, key informants were primarily identified through a process of referral (snowballing) from initial points of contact, participants in the initial round of interviews were identified and approached with the intention of interviewing stakeholders with diverse religious, ethnic and gender identities, as well as holding a variety of civil society and professional positions, with the intention of capturing a diverse range of perspectives on the issue of Islamist violence in Kenya and Nigeria.

Interviews were conducted in an open-ended, semi-structured way. Typically, interviews asked informants about the conditions they believed contributed to the emergence, intensification, dynamics and geography of Islamist violence. Interviewees were free to direct the overall course of the interviews as they saw fit, and dependent on their own experiences, perspectives and areas of expertise. Interviews were mostly conducted in English, and on a one-to-one basis, although in cases of group interviews, occasionally, participants chose to discuss among themselves their responses to a particular question in their native language, before one or more interviewees opted to translate. The decision to conduct interviews primarily in English was determined by the English-language skills of the interviewees, and their reported comfort participating in English-language interviews. Because most interviews were conducted with elites – including development professionals, security agents, government representatives and civil society members – it is unlikely that the language itself, rather than the selection of participants shaped or negatively affected the transparency and reliability of the responses.

3.5   Case Selection

Case selection of countries varies in the following chapters. Chapter 4 applies a cross-national comparative method to 49 sub-Saharan African countries, while subsequent chapters (5-7) focus on specific cases with high levels of Islamist violence. I pay particular attention throughout the research project to the country cases of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. The selection of these cases for in-depth case study research was based on the principle of a most different case design selection, in which the observed phenomenon of interest (Islamist violence) is consistently present across cases, but other key features of the cases differ in a way which maximises the validity of hypothesised relationships which hold regardless of this variation (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

In the case of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, each country has experienced relatively high levels of non-state conflict attributed to violent Islamist groups, compared to the average across the continent. Because the initial phases of the research project included countries in which there both were and were not recorded incidents of Islamist violence; Islamist violence was distributed unevenly across and within states resulting in sub-national analysis including null values; and because the primary interest in Chapters 6-7 was in understanding variation *within* Islamist groups, rather than those spaces in which they were not active, this focus on high-Islamist violence countries does not constitute selection on the dependent variable.

Second, they all experienced high levels of violence both generally, and historically, providing an opportunity to explore in greater detail the relationship between previous forms, manifestations and mantles of political violence, and contemporary violent Islamist mobilisation. Third, in spite of a shared history of some recorded Islamist violence in previous years, all countries experienced a relatively sharp increase in associated unrest from 2009 onwards, providing an opportunity to specify the temporal conditions and changing dynamics that may have occurred prior to that date as an explanation for subsequent violence levels. Fourth, all countries experience multiple, discrete and sometimes overlapping forms of violence: violence by the state, surrounding electoral cycles, and

conflict mobilised along communal, ethno-religious and separatist identities were all features of the conflict profiles of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria.

Finally, however, these three countries vary on significant dimensions typically leveraged to explain variation in violence, and Islamist violence specifically. Each represents a regionally diverse case from East, West and Sahelian Africa, and the sample includes Anglophone and Francophone cases, reflecting differential histories and contemporary experiences of political development, such as colonialism and political cultures. Moreover, the countries are religiously diverse in their demographics and ethnic composition and fragmentation, with Mali representing a clear Muslim-majority case; Nigeria representing a case of a highly polarised religious population; and Kenya representing a Christian-majority case. It stands to reason that processes of religious mobilisation would differ across these diverse religious contexts, but where common mechanisms can be identified, this speaks to the transferability and external validity of these theories. Choosing such different cases for in-depth study facilitates a most different systems design, where characteristics such as demographics, economics, historical legacies, and political systems all vary to some degree, but the outcome of Islamist violence occurrence is similar. This allows for the similarities between the cases (including historical legacies of violence, practices of state governance and marginalisation, and dynamics of inter-group conflict) to provide an explanation for those similarities.

Although it meets the criteria outlined above, for reasons of limitations on data availability, Somalia is not included in any analyses carried out at the sub-national level. Sub-national level analysis requires information on control variables that is both geographically disaggregated and available over time. These data include dynamic levels of sub-national GDP, population, welfare indicators, and information on demographics and other features of the sub-national environment. Due to high levels of insecurity and limited state capacity throughout much of Somalia for the past two decades, these data are not routinely collected

or available.[4] Data are available, with gaps, at the national level, which has facilitated the inclusion of Somalia in Chapter 7's analysis.

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[4] This challenge is common to all sub-national comparative research attempting to incorporate Somalia into its analysis. When trying to locate information on income inequality for several countries, Strand and Gates (2002, pp. 5-6) sent a request to the Scientific Study of International Processes (SSIP) research community, and were advised: 'Missing data is usually missing for a reason and this is a splendid example. Seems to me almost all of these cases fall into one of three cases: 1. None of your business, infidel; 2. None of your business, capitalist running dog CIA lackey; 3. We'd be delighted to give you the information, but we haven't had a decent meal in thirty years; 4. All of the above (Somalia).'

4   Cultural and Religious Demography and Violent Islamist Groups in Africa

4.1   Abstract

This research explores the relationship between cultural demography and Islamist violence in Africa in a cross-national time series study. It argues that while religious demography can explain some aspects of Islamist violence, these explanations have to date been privileged over analyses which take into account the way institutional and political relations of the state incentivize and de-incentivize the salience of particular identities in collective action. This paper uses disaggregated conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) to test the relationships between religious group size, diversity, ethnicity and Islamist violence. The results highlight that approaches to explaining Islamist violence emphasising the cultural specificity of Islam as particularly prone to violence, and those focusing on competition between diverse identity groups as explanations for the rise of Islamist violence are misguided. Rather, ethnic political power relations emerge as important interacting factors in religious identity conflict, with Islamist violence as an example. The article makes an original contribution both empirically, by testing existing theories of Islamist violence on previously unanalysed data; and theoretically, by highlighting the importance of political marginalisation and strategic identity construction as explanations for violent Islamist activity.

4.2   Introduction

The threat of Islamist violence and its roots in large Muslim populations is an enduring theme in discussions of conflict, international security and state stability (*see* Huntington, 1993, 1996). Several explanations posit a link between the absolute and relative size of Muslim populations and the threat of violence, either through socio-cultural explanations of

Islam's purported violent tendencies, or through demographic mechanisms associated with population size, competition and diversity.

Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly relevant to these discussions for multiple reasons: first, the overall and proportional levels of Islamist violence on the continent have increased over the past fifteen years (Dowd, 2013). Key strategic and regionally significant conflicts have featured or been dominated by violent Islamist activity, including conflict in Somalia, Nigeria, Mali and Kenya, with consequences for national, regional and continental stability. Meanwhile, implicit assumptions about the risk, fear and threat of African instability in particular as a 'breeding ground' for terrorism continue to inform engagement with the continent (Abrahamsen, 2004). In 2004, then UK Foreign Office Minister Chris Mullin reflected on the 'little known fact that there have been more *Al Qaida* attacks in Africa than anywhere else in the world,' before noting that it 'is also not widely realised that there are more Muslims south of the Sahara than in the Middle East.' (quoted in Abrahamsen, 2004, p. 679) More recently, Cohen (2013, p. 63) characterised 'Al Qaeda in Africa' as 'the creeping menace to Sub-Sahara's 500 million Muslims.'

Alongside widely articulated media and policy narratives, there are several theoretical approaches to explaining identity and religious violence that are relevant to a discussion of Islamist militancy. This article derives explicit hypotheses based on competing theories of identity conflict to explain why Islamist violence has emerged in particular areas in Africa. These theories include the relative size of Muslim populations, with an emphasis on socio-cultural explanations for religiously associated violence; the diversity of populations with implications for competition between groups; and the instrumental use of identity in complex, multi-identity contexts. These hypotheses are tested with data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010).

The paper makes three original contributions to the understanding of violent Islamist groups and identity conflicts more generally in the African context. First, it introduces a novel theory on the interaction between ethnicity, religious identity, and political power relations as it pertains to Islamist violence. Specifically, it argues that the institutional characteristics of the state and the political power relations that emerge from the political marginalisation or dominance of particular ethnic groups incentivise and de-incentivise the salience of discrete identity categories. Where alternative identity categories such as ethnicity are too marginalised to provide a meaningful basis for collective action, the utilisation of religious identity as a mobilising category is a strategic and rational response by conflict actors to the local operating environment. In the case presented here, religious, and specifically Islamist, identity becomes a strategically viable basis for the collective action of ethnically marginalised groups. The reverse is also true: the presence of politically dominant ethnic groups is negatively related to the predicted number of violent Islamist events. In contexts where an alternative basis of collective action – such as ethnicity – is strategically beneficial for groups, collective mobilisation around categories such as religion is unnecessary. These findings highlight the importance of political power relations as drivers of Islamist violence, and the category's strategic and dynamic nature.

Second, the paper finds that there is no relationship between Muslim population levels and overall levels of political violence, further refuting persistent claims of the specificity of Islam as a particularly violent socio-cultural phenomenon. While there is no clear relationship between Muslim population size and overall levels of political violence, at the same time, an increasing number of violent groups claim to have an Islamist agenda and several countries have witnessed a drastic increase in violence attributed to these groups. As such, the questions of Islamist violence in particular, and the discrete contexts in which it emerges, are pressing concerns.

Third, the research shows that contrary to literature emphasising the role of diversity and competition in the mobilisation of identity-based conflict, Islamist violence is more likely in contexts where a high proportion of the population is Muslim, than in those that are religiously diverse. This finding has implications for the way Islamist violence is conceptualised: rather than a minority identity group rebelling against a majority group, or diverse groups competing with other communities, Islamist violence is lower in religiously diverse contexts. As such, theories which explicitly or implicitly position Islamist violence in the context of a clash of civilizations, wherein Islamist violence is primarily directed at non-Muslim communities, often neglect or obscure the high level Islamist violence which takes place in predominantly Muslim contexts. In other words, while some prominent instances of Islamist violence involve attacks in non-Muslim or religiously diverse areas, the degree to which Islamist violence is concentrated in Muslim-dominant communities is attested to in this paper's results, and may be under-represented in culturalist theories.

There is a large and growing literature dealing with the question of Islamist violence, the consideration of which requires a clear definition of terms. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Islamist' refers to political or social activity by groups that proactively promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state and/or society (Esposito, 2003, p. 151; ICG, 2005). Islamist groups are distinguished from adherents of Islam more broadly by their instrumentalisation of Islam in the pursuit of social and political objectives (Denoeux, 2002, p. 61), rather than Islam serving exclusively as a personal identity (Ibid, p. 57). Islamist activists and groups are also not synonymous with Islamic counterparts: the latter might be used to describe groups whose work or activity draws on referents from Islam, but need not necessarily imply social or political activism. For example, an Islamic expert may be engaged in the study of Islam, but might not endorse its operationalization as an agenda for political action, while Islamist groups are primarily concerned with the latter.

Islamist activity is manifest across various disciplines and traditions within Islam, encompassing a range of political, social and religious activity (ICG, 2005). This research focuses on violent Islamist groups, distinguished by the utilization of force in pursuit of an Islamist-framed agenda. Violent Islamist groups are necessarily a variegated category of actors, emerging in different contexts shaped by various historical and cultural factors in their areas of operation, and influenced by differential ideological, theological and political doctrines. The scope of this paper necessarily obscures some inter- and intra-group variation through the construction of a single 'Islamist' category, but this simplification is necessary at this stage in order to engage with the emergence and activity of these groups as a category. A full list of groups in this category is attached as an appendix.[5]

In general, there are limited quantitative analyses of violent Islamist activity. Furthermore, much existing research on violent Islamist activity is limited to terrorism research. This field illuminates important, but limited, aspects of violent conflict. The challenges of establishing consensus on a definition of terrorism notwithstanding (*see* Cooper, 2001; Dedeoglu, 2003), common to many operational definitions is the intended psychological effect of extreme fear, and the targeting of individuals or groups as 'message generators' to a wider population (Schmid and Jongman, 2005, p. 28), while contested dimensions include whether state action or the targeting of combatants constitute terrorism (Coady, 2004). These criteria variously exclude non-spectacular violent acts undertaken without the intention of influencing observers, and attacks on armed combatants, both of which are included in a broader definition of political violence (*see* Raleigh, Linke and Dowd, 2014). The same shortcoming is apparent in studies of conflict that focus on civil war only: the activity of the Nigerian Islamist group commonly known as Boko Haram, does not easily fit into the

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[5] 85% of actors categorised as 'Islamist' are identified in source materials by group name, facilitating qualitative research into their stated agendas and subsequent classification. The remaining 15% are identified in source materials as Islamist actors without specifying group name. The majority of these are found in Algeria, followed by Tunisia and Egypt. In order to control for the possible effect of attributing actions to Islamist groups – which may result from particular political or strategic considerations in countries of operation – all models were also run including only named Islamist groups. The overall results hold, indicating either that actions attributed to unnamed Islamist actors do not vary markedly from those attributed to named groups; or that the effect is otherwise controlled for through the inclusion of a North Africa dummy variable.

category of civil war violence, as its tactics evolve to increasingly target civilians over engagement with security forces (Dowd, 2013).

Analysing the circumstances within which a group as a whole operates – rather than investigating only a subset of its actions – offers a better understanding of the conditions in which actors emerge, and how these shape their activity. This is particularly important in light of dominant narratives of Islamist violence that often fail to problematise the association between Muslim populations and violent Islamist groups. Reorienting investigation to the political context in which these groups operate is crucial to moving beyond reductive assumptions.

Finally, among the regionally-specific research on African conflict, while there is considerable literature on the role of ethnic diversity on violent conflict, religious diversity has been relatively neglected, and the interaction between these two identity categories almost entirely so. This has contributed to a failure in some literature to engage with identity as a fluid and dynamic construct: populations' religious identity is one of multiple identities available to them, and the interaction between religious and ethnic identity has been unduly neglected.

This paper proceeds as follows: the first section reviews existing literature on Islamist violence, the conflict-demography nexus and the operationalization of identity, deriving hypotheses for testing this relationship in the context of Islamist violence. The second section outlines the research design and selection of variables. The third section outlines quantitative tests at the sub-national level, after which follows a report of findings. The paper concludes with an interpretation of key results and implications for future research.

4.3 Conflict and Demography

The literature on potential demographic drivers of conflict is extensive. In its simplest formulation, theorists argue that countries with large populations may be more vulnerable to conflict because of the opportunity provided for conflict agents to evade state forces, magnify policing challenges, and increase the pool for potential militant recruitment (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Robison, Crenshaw and Jenkins, 2006). Through a less direct mechanism, scholars suggest that population growth contributes to conflict through the creation of competitive pressures on increasingly scarce resources (Homer-Dixon, 1991, 1994). Research on the demography-conflict nexus over the past two decades, however, has generally found weak evidence for theories of a demographic crisis being linked to increases in conflict. Rather, the particularities of demographic change – including pronounced growth among particular groups, taking place in specific political and economic conditions – combine to contribute to instability and political violence (Gleditsch and Urdal, 2002; Goldstone, 2002; Urdal, 2005, 2008). In this vein, this research explores the relationship between Muslim population size and the activity of violent Islamist groups and politically violent groups more generally across Africa.

4.3.1 Muslim population size and violence

Studies of demography and religious violence draw on several theories. One approach maintains that identity-based conflict generally, and religious identities in particular, are uniquely intractable and prone to violence. Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000, p. 653) contend that 'conflicts about values,' are more violence-prone than those over 'interests.' Similarly, others argue that religious association of actors renders conflicts less amenable to a negotiated settlement, due to actors' demands being shaped by an intractable and indivisible worldview (Svensson, 2007; Svensson and Harding, 2011), because religious identity – more so than other forms of identity – is 'fixed and non-negotiable.' (Reynal-Querol, 2002, p. 29)

Among approaches to religious violence specifically, cultural approaches have often focused on the purported tendency towards violence within Islamic culture, above other world religions. Huntington (1993, p. 35) declared that 'Islam has bloody borders,' and later, that its 'innards' are bloody to match (1996, p. 258). These theories received renewed attention at the outset of the global war on terror, with Lewis (2003, p. 36) maintaining that a 'confrontation with a force that defines itself as Islam has given new relevance - indeed, urgency - to the theme of the "clash of civilizations."' While the explicit articulation of culturalist theories of the relationship between Islam and violence may be waning, as de Soysa and Nordås (2007) note, prominent political leaders continue to give voice to these views, and cultural representations of this relationship persist. These theories also continue to inform discourse on political violence in pervasive ways: in some instances, analysts accept the link between Muslim populations and Islamist violence *a priori*. For example, in their discussion of the 'terrorist threat in Africa,' Lyman and Morrison (2004, p. 80) produce a table detailing the absolute and proportion size of Muslim populations across 22 African countries, but not how religious group size is related to the aforementioned 'terrorist threat.' The table includes some states that have no recent recorded episodes of Islamist violence.[6] Similarly, in a discussion of failed states and the implications of state failure for international security, Traub (2011, p. 51) declares, 'Terrorism is only a problem in failed states with significant Muslim populations - admittedly, 13 of the top 20 in this year's Failed States Index.'

Several scholars have empirically tested the clash of civilizations hypothesis in the context of inter-state violence in the late 20th twentieth century (Russett, Oneal and Cox, 2000; Henderson and Tucker, 2001; Chiozza, 2002; Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2006). Studies have repeatedly found no support for the claim that conflict between states 'across the civilizational divide' (Chiozza, 2002, p. 714) are more likely than within-civilizational

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[6] The table includes: Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo (Democratic Republic of the), Congo (Republic of the), Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda.

conflicts, even in the post-Cold War period. These findings offer a robust challenge to claims that inter-civilizational differences will drive conflict between states. However, by limiting analysis to inter-state conflict in the late 20th century, the findings cannot cast light on the dynamics of internal violent conflict (which constitutes the overwhelming majority of violent events recorded in sub-Saharan Africa[7]), features which might explain its geographic distribution at the sub-national level, or whether culturalist theories offer insights into the most recent escalation in Islamist violence since the turn of the century, the period with which this article is primarily concerned.

Turning to intra-state violence, Fearon and Laitin (2003), test whether the percentage of the Muslim population in each country in a cross-country study is related to civil war onset, but do not find statistically significant results. In their study of violence and Muslim population size, de Soysa and Nordås (2007) explore linkages between Muslim population levels and state-sponsored political repression. The authors find that countries with high Muslim populations actually experience lower levels of political repression than states with a high proportion of Catholics.

Beyond culturalist theories positing a link between Muslim population sizes with higher levels of overall violence, religious demography may be a significant factor in levels of Islamist violence specifically, for logistical reasons. High proportions of Muslims in a population may be relevant to the level of Islamist violence in particular by providing a basis for recruitment to violent Islamist groups, and creating opportunities for militants to conceal themselves within a wider population and avoid detection by security forces (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Robison, Crenshaw and Jenkins, 2006). This dynamic is implicitly explored in research on ethnic diversity (discussed in greater detail below) which contends that higher rates of diversity create mobilisation challenges problems for groups (Collier and Hoeffler, 2002; de Soysa, 2002).

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[7] Source: ACLED, Version 4.

This paper investigates the impact of demographic factors on the activity of violent Islamist groups, through five hypotheses. Drawing on literature proposing a link between Muslim population size and violence, the first hypothesis is:

> *H1: Sub-national units with large Muslim populations experience more Islamist violence.*

4.3.2 Demographic diversity and violence

Existing research also posits several mechanisms by which diversity influences conflict. Diversity may limit social capital and certain types of cooperation across groups (Habyarimana *et al.*, 2007), or diversity may create security dilemmas whereby 'first-strike advantages' trigger violence among opposing groups (Melander, 2009, p. 96). Diversity may lead to conflict through competition: this can take the form of contestation over scarce resources where within-group privileging influences loyalties (Seul, 1999); competition by the creation of relative disadvantage for groups in the context of 'zero-sum local politics' (Cunningham and Weidmann, 2010, p. 1040); or competition between groups which are relatively unequal in society, where group-level 'horizontal inequalities' (Stewart, 2000; Østby, 2008; Østby *et al.*, 2011) combine with demographic factors to drive conflict. Other scholars, however, argue that fractionalised societies are less conflict-prone, owing to the greater strategic difficulties of coordinating cohesive rebellions across diverse populations (Collier and Hoeffler, 2002).

Quantitative research on the impact of diversity on the incidence of civil wars has produced mixed results: Henderson (2000) finds no significant relationship between ethnic diversity and civil war, maintaining that diversity is only significant when fused with political and economic factors. Hegre and Sambanis (2006) find that ethnic diversity in a population is

only significant in influencing the onset of lower level conflict, but not civil wars. Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000) find no support for a positive relationship between religious diversity and the incidence of civil wars. Collier and Hoeffler (2002) report that ethnoreligious diversity reduces the likelihood of civil conflict, while de Soysa (2002, p. 411) finds greater religious pluralism reduces the risk of violence, potentially as this 'emasculates opportunities for mobilization.'

Little research has looked at the emergence of particular types of violent, religiously-identified groups as a result of demographic diversity. A notable exception is Robison, Crenshaw and Jenkins (2006, p. 2019), who compare Islamist and 'Leftist' terrorist attacks, and argue that religious diversity is positively associated with Islamist terrorist attacks, as 'Muslim populations generate increasing Islamist terrorism as they move from low to intermediate societal dominance, after which the relationship attenuates.' The authors' focus on terrorist incidents exclusively, however, leaves room for a more holistic analysis of conflict activity.

In response to this body of research, Hypothesis 2 suggests:

> *H2: Sub-national units with religiously diverse populations experience more*
> *Islamist violence.*

4.3.3 Identity and violence

In contrast to the above literature, many researchers present alternative narratives that focus on the strategic use of identity in collective action as a response to institutional and political characteristics. Posner (2004a) emphasises the dynamic nature of politicised identities to highlight how adversarial politics – and potentially conflict – are shaped by political conditions. The author maintains that the size of group populations is central to whether or

not they have conflictual or non-conflictual relationships. 'All that matters is cultural demography: the sizes of the groups that the cleavage defines relative to the political and social arenas in which they are operating,' thus explaining 'why one cultural cleavage came to emerge as the axis of political competition and conflict rather than another' (Ibid., p. 530). In a similar vein, Scarritt and Mozaffar (1999, p. 85) maintain in the context of democratization that, 'ethnicity, relative to these other bases of social cleavages [religious, urban-rural, class cleavages], is a cost-effective strategic resource for organising collective political action.'

At the intersection of studies of identity and geography, Toft (2003) has shown that the location and degree of dispersion of groups is an important factor in determining the likelihood of ethnic conflict. Building on this, Weidmann (2009, p. 526) explores competing mechanisms for why geographically concentrated groups face a higher likelihood of conflict and presents evidence in favour of the opportunity mechanism, whereby 'the effect of group concentration on conflict seems to be driven by the strategic advantages for group coordination that the spatial proximity of group members provides.' From this, administrative units with higher rates of diversity should experience less violence, as the coordination and logistical advantages afforded to geographically concentrated groups will be less feasible in highly fractionalised contexts.

Drawing on these literatures, Hypothesis 3 proposes:

> *H3: Sub-national units with lower levels of ethnic diversity experience more Islamist*
> *violence.*

The above studies do not explicitly consider the role of political power relations between ethnic groups at the sub-national level and the centre. Addressing this, Cunningham and Weidmann (2010, p. 1035) consider local ethnic configuration sub-nationally, contending

that 'ethnicity's effects on conflict are context-conditional: whether ethnic diversity is conflict-provoking depends on the configuration of ethnicity within local level political boundaries where politicians and ethnic groups interact.' Administrative units with politically powerful ethnic groups should experience less violence: their status as a dominant group should present other means to access, manipulate and exercise power beyond the use of violence. By contrast, units with politically marginalised (powerless or discriminated against groups) should experience higher rates of Islamist violence: politically powerless groups have fewer avenues to access, manipulate and exercise power, and grievances arise as a result of deliberate discrimination against them in the political arena.

The above studies explore in detail the role of ethnicity, and ethnic diversity, in the onset and occurrence of conflict, but have largely neglected religious violence. This article tests these theories in the context of religious conflict, contending that religious identity can be conceptualised in a similar way to ethnicity. The strategic use of dynamic identity categories implies that populations have multiple identities available to them: individuals actively choose which identity to privilege at a given time, which is a pre-requisite for collective action. Religion serves as an alternative identity around which people collectively organise or support political agendas, just as regional, ethnic, programmatic, and class identities can serve as the salient, mobilising category in other contexts. Deiwiks, Cederman and Gleditsch (2012, p. 293) note that 'Exclusion from central power on ethnic grounds […] highlights the identity boundaries of excluded groups and leads to ethnic politicization.' However, political marginalisation on ethnic grounds can also serve as a basis for the politicisation of alternative, overlapping identity categories such as religion, in pursuit of a wide variety of political goals. As with ethnicity, the basis of collective mobilisation on the grounds of religion can serve demands including, *inter alia*, territorial secession, regional or local autonomy, greater policy control, and increased access to control over economic resources, political power and social status. Understood in this way, religion, as with ethnicity, serves as a basis for collective political mobilisation.

Limited attempts have been made to assess the interaction between religious and ethnic identities in relation to violent conflict. In Hoffman's (2006, pp. 85 - 87) study of religious terrorism, the author contends that in the wake of the Cold War religious terrorist organisations grew while ethno-nationalist groups declined in number, positioning the two categories as discrete, rather than ones in which both ethno-nationalist identity and religious agendas might interact. By contrast, Asal and Rethemeyer (2008) find that religious and ethnonationalism together constitute the most lethal type of group in terrorism data; followed by religious, and thereafter by ethno-nationalist individually. The study suggests that the interaction between these two identity categories may itself have an important impact on conflict.

Additionally, several case studies note the importance of Islamism as a unifying ideology in otherwise highly divided societies (Esposito, 2002, p. 39). Examples include Afghanistan, where part of the Taliban's emergence has been explained by their ability to transcend tribal divisions (Van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2012, p. 121). In Kenya, Chande (2000, p. 350) outlines the ways in which ethnic dominance was a factor in the historical mobilisation of a predominantly Muslim claim for autonomy in the Coast region, and later how ethnicity interacted with religion in the exclusion of certain groups from power-sharing under successive regimes (Ibid., pp. 352-353). Similarly, Hansen (2013) details the importance of Al Shabaab's diverse clan composition as central to their emergence in Somalia: in this case, not only did Islamism initially facilitate overcoming clan divisions (Ibid., pp. 22-23; 33-34), but also explicitly served as a strategically appealing basis for mobilisation among groups seeking to offset the political dominance of rival clans (Ibid., pp. 76; 117).

This study maintains that Islamist identities become the salient identity under which to mobilise violence in particular sub-national locations because it provides a critical mass for mobilisation where there is a concentration of Muslim populations at the sub-national level

and other identity categories – such as ethnicity – are politically marginal. Religious identity creates a salient mobilising basis for violence where other identity categories are rendered insufficient in size or political significance by political institutions to provide a meaningful basis for political competition or collective active. In such a context, religious identity can layer itself over multiple marginal ethnic groups and serve as a strategically rational basis for group mobilisation.

To test whether greater political power corresponds to lower levels of violence, Hypotheses 4 proceeds as follows:

H4: Sub-national units hosting politically dominant ethnic groups will experience less Islamist violence.

Lower violence levels in areas with politically powerful groups do not necessarily imply the reverse: powerful groups may have access to means other than violence to influence and exercise political authority, thus reducing levels of violent conflict, even if other factors (such as logistical or coordination challenges) may mean there is no observed relationship between political marginalisation and violent conflict. For this reason, Hypotheses 5 explicitly seeks to test this latter dynamic:

H5: Sub-national units hosting politically marginalised ethnic groups will experience more Islamist violence.

4.4   Research Design

The hypotheses are tested using a panel dataset where conflict event counts are aggregated by date and location. The unit of analysis is the sub-national Administrative Level 1 unit by year. The dataset includes observations from 686 sub-national administrative units from 49

countries in Africa over the period 1997 to 2012, producing 11328 observations.[8] The sample excludes Somalia due to the lack of reliable independent variables for much of the time period in question. The sub-national level of analysis is particularly appropriate in contexts where a specific form or agent of violence is geographically concentrated, rather than uniformly distributed across the country, as national-level theories assume (Rustad *et al.*, 2011). This geographic concentration can be found in the occurrence of Islamist violence in Northern Nigeria, Northern Mali, North-Eastern Kenya, Northern Egypt, and Eastern Mauritania. The sub-national level is also the most appropriate level for analysis in countries where there are multiple, overlapping conflicts (Buhaug and Lujala, 2005), as is the case in Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Mali and Algeria.

Administrative units and systems of government at the local level differ in their structure and size. Following Cunningham and Weidmann (2010), however, the goal of comparing these diverse units is not to obscure underlying differences, but to highlight at the macro level the general relevance of the sub-national administrative unit as a basis for political contestation and violent conflict across the continent, in spite of these variations. The inclusion of a logged population measure serves as a partial control on the diverse size of administrative units across Africa.

Models analyse variables using negative binomial regression, and cluster events on the country level to control for the fact that events are not independent of one another.

4.4.1 Dependent variable

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[8] South Sudan is included in the sample as a separate country for the years 2011 and 2012.

The dependent variable is a count of Islamist violent events that occurred in the administrative unit by year.[9] Violent events are categorised by the nature of the group responsible, regardless of whether or not a specific violent act was carried out with the direct intention of furthering that agenda. For example, all violent events involving Al Shabaab in Kenya are categorised as Islamist events, in light of the group's stated objectives, rather than the immediate outcomes associated with an individual attack. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table I.

The data on violent events is drawn from the ACLED dataset of political violence in Africa (Raleigh *et al*., 2010). The dataset contains temporally and geographically specific information on political violence since 1997. ACLED data has not previously been utilised in studies of demographic influence on violent conflict and violent Islamist groups specifically, although this dataset is uniquely positioned to provide a finely grained understanding of levels, intensity and patterns of violence at the sub-national level. Wherever possible, models use independent variables varying over time at the sub-national level, including those capturing sub-national religious demography, poverty, and population sizes, as detailed below.

4.4.2 Independent variables

Data on relative size of the Muslim population at the sub-national level is drawn from religious demography data from the World Religions Database (WRD, Johnson and Grimm, 2013). The WRD is a database of religious demographic data at the sub-national level, using on source material such as censuses and surveys. The religious demography figures are estimates for the religious population size in 2010. The data are uniquely suited to the present study's enquiry because of the provision of estimates at the sub-national level: the

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[9] Non-violent activity (such as troop movement, participation in peace talks, and recruitment) has been excluded from the analysis; as have non-violent actors such as non-violent protesters and civilians.

level at which religious population estimates are derived in the dataset is determined by the availability and structure of sources.[10] *Muslim_per* is a scalar measure of the proportion of the population that is Muslim. The variable is sub-national, but owing to the construction of the religious data from a range of sources over time, it is static over the course of the dataset. A second, static, sub-national binary variable, *Dummy Diversity*, captures whether the Muslim and Christian populations are each over 25% of the total population.

Variables capturing the degree of ethnic diversity of ethnic groups are drawn from the GeoEPR dataset, a geocoded version of the Ethnic Power Relations dataset charting politically relevant ethnic groups across space and time (Wucherpfennig *et al*., 2011). The dataset is preferable to national-level measures of ethnic diversity, often captured by the Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalisation (ELF) index (Taylor and Hudson, 1972) for a number of reasons: first, it facilitates analysis at the sub-national level at the same scale which this article seeks to explore; second, it takes account of the geographic dispersal of groups through geo-referencing; and third, it includes qualitative, expert-derived information on the political status – whether discriminated against, powerless, a partner in government, or dominant – of ethnic groups, which supports analysis of the political dimension of group marginalisation, which has heretofore been hindered by a lack of data in this field. The dataset is drawn upon for three distinct variables: ethnic diversity is captured in *Distinct Count of Ethno Group*, a static, sub-national level variable interval variable that counts the number of ethnic groups present in the administrative unit. *EPR Dom* is a static, sub-national level interval variable, which counts the number of politically dominant ethnic groups that are present. *EPR Outpower*, is a static, sub-national binary variable which tests for the presence of politically marginalised groups (an aggregate category of groups in the EPR dataset which are deemed 'powerless' or 'discriminated').

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[10] In the majority of country cases, the sub-national level at which religious demography data are available corresponds to Admin Level 1 units, but in a small number of country cases there is a discrepancy arising from the lack of available data at this level, or from changes in the administrative units in a country over time. In these cases, the author assigned regional or provincial estimates from the WRD to the administrative level 1 units within those regions in the final dataset. The countries affected are: Libya, Morocco, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda.

Controls include a logged population measure (*LogPop*), to control for high population distorting high event counts. This variable is sub-national, and dynamic. A national-level and dynamic logged GDP measure (*LoggedGDP*) controls for the potential influence of higher or lower wealth levels. A national-level, dynamic variable controls for the potential influence of regime type (*Democracy 5*), and is a binary measure of whether or not a country has achieved a score of 5 or higher on the Polity IV index (Polity IV Project, 2012). A binary control for relative poverty, Higher Poverty_ADM measures whether or not the sub-national administrative unit has higher-than-national-average levels of poverty, proxied by infant mortality rates (CIESIN, 2000). An additional national-level, static, binary (North Africa) controls both for the much higher share of the population which is Muslim in North Africa, and for the possibility that for historical and geo-political reasons, the region differs in its conflict dynamics from the sub-Saharan region. This variable includes Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco.

All variables are associated with the locations in which the conflict events take place, rather than, for example, the locations of origin of the violent group, which may differ. Some militant groups may be operating outside their locations of origin, across administrative or country boundaries, influenced by the 'target value' of a particular location (Hegre, Østby and Raleigh, 2009, p. 600). Models include a control for this potential influence through the inclusion of a dummy variable for the administrative units in which capital cities are based, *Capital*.

All models include controls which account for lagged events from the previous year in the country (of either Islamist, Other or Total violence types) to control for a dependence in violence over time; and the sum of all events of that year in the country as a whole (Islamist, Other and Total violence counts) because, despite the focus on sub-national conflict, there is often a country-level profile of violence.

4.5   Results

Tables III, IV and V outline model specifics. Model 1 strongly supports Hypothesis 1: there is a statistically significant, positive relationship between relative Muslim population size and levels of violent Islamist activity. However, in robustness tests, there is no evidence of a relationship between Muslim population size and Other or Total levels of political violence. This suggests that cultural theories of political violence being associated with Islam, or Muslim population sizes in general can be confidently rejected: neither overall levels of violence, nor non-Islamist political violence is higher in areas with high levels of Muslim populations.

Model 2 tests the impact of religious diversity on violence levels, and refutes Hypothesis 2. Contrary to a theorised relationship between religious diversity and Islamist violence, there is no significant relationship. This indicates that theories that posit a link between competition or group animosity in diverse societies do not appear to explain levels of Islamist violence in religiously diverse contexts. This suggests that Islamist violence is not driven primarily by competition across religious groups or the geographic concentration of diverse religious groups at the local level. This finding further underscores that culturalist theories of Islamist militancy as a clash between divergent worldviews cannot sufficiently explain the locations of its emergence in Africa.

In testing the impact of ethnic diversity on violence levels, Models 2, 3 and 4 find no support for Hypothesis 3. The count of distinct ethnic groups present at the sub-national level is not significantly related to Islamist violence, contrary to the theorised relationship underpinning Hypothesis 3.

Models 3 and 4 directly test the impact of ethnic power relations on levels of different political violence types, and strongly support Hypotheses 4 and 5. The number of politically dominant ethnic groups at the sub-national level is significantly and negatively associated with Islamist violence. In situations where more politically powerful ethnic groups are represented among the population, the threat of Islamist violence is lower. By contrast, the presence of a politically marginalised ethnic group at the sub-national level is positively and significantly associated with Islamist violence levels. In other words, where politically excluded ethnic groups exist at the sub-national level, the level of Islamist violence is higher.[11]

Predictive margins show the predicted level of Islamist conflict events when the size of the Muslim population and ethnic power variables vary, holding control variables at their mean. In Model 3, the predicted number of events falls from 0.007, where there is no politically dominant ethnic group, to 0.002 where there are two politically dominant ethnic groups. When the level of the Muslim population is varied alongside the number of politically dominant ethnic groups, the interaction of these two terms is apparent: when the Muslim population makes up 80% of the population and there are no dominant ethnic groups, the predicted number of violent Islamist events is .053. This drops to just .015 when the Muslim population makes up 80% of the population and there are two dominant ethnic groups (Figure 3). Limiting the sample to only relatively high risk administrative units, defined for these purposes as those areas which have experienced at least five Islamist conflict events over the course of the dataset, the overall results hold, but the effect of politically dominance is even clearer: in a sub-national unit wherein 80% of the population is Muslim, and there are no politically dominant ethnic groups, the predicted number of Islamist conflict events per year is .379, three times the level (.126) predicted in areas where there are two politically dominant ethnic groups.

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[11] An alternative specification of this model replaced separate measures of Muslim population size and political power with interactive terms, capturing the political status of ethnic groups in Muslim-dominant and Muslim-majority contexts. The results were consistent with the original specification of the model.
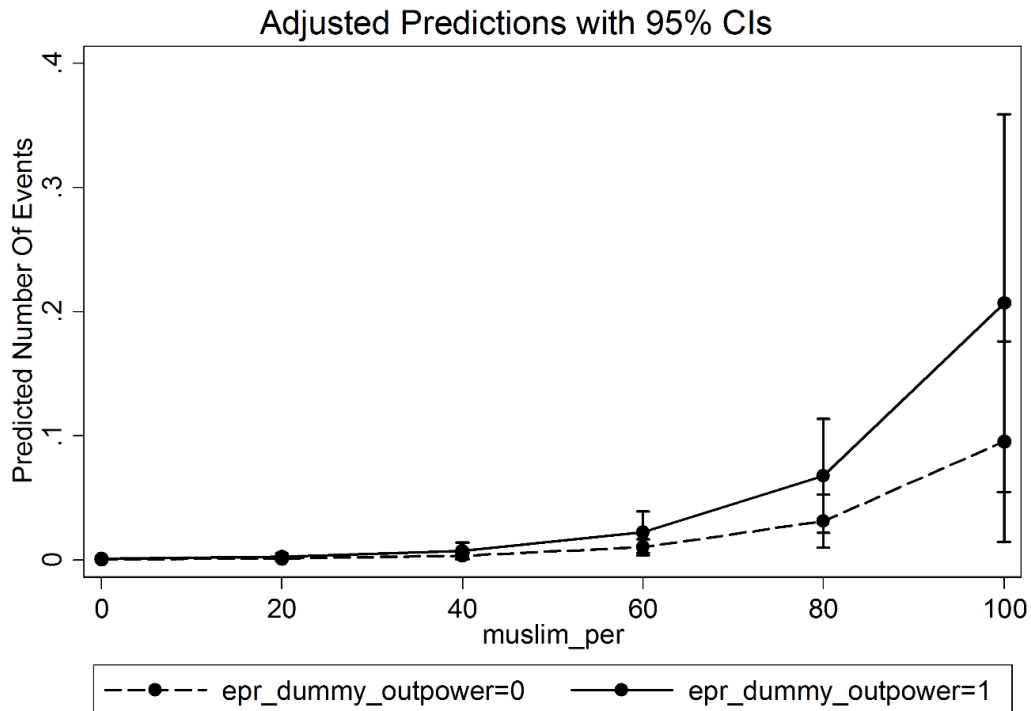
Figure 3: Predicted Number of Violent Islamist Events by Muslim Population Size (muslim_per) and Number of Politically Dominant Ethnic Groups (epr_dom).

Model 4 offers further support to Hypothesis 5 in the case of Islamist violence. The presence of a group that is out of power, captured in the variable *Dummy EPR Outpower*, is significant and positively associated with levels of Islamist violence. In other words, the number of politically powerful ethnic groups in a location dampens the levels of Islamist violence, while the presence of marginalised groups increases the likelihood of Islamist violence. Predictive margins illustrate this point clearly: the predicted number of violent Islamist events more than doubles from .031 to .068 when a powerless or discriminated group is present in a location where Muslims make up 80% of the population (Figure 4). As in Model 3, limiting the sample to only relatively high-risk areas, the predicted number of Islamist conflict events in areas with a population of 80% more than doubles from .219 to .469 with the presence of a politically marginalised ethnic group.
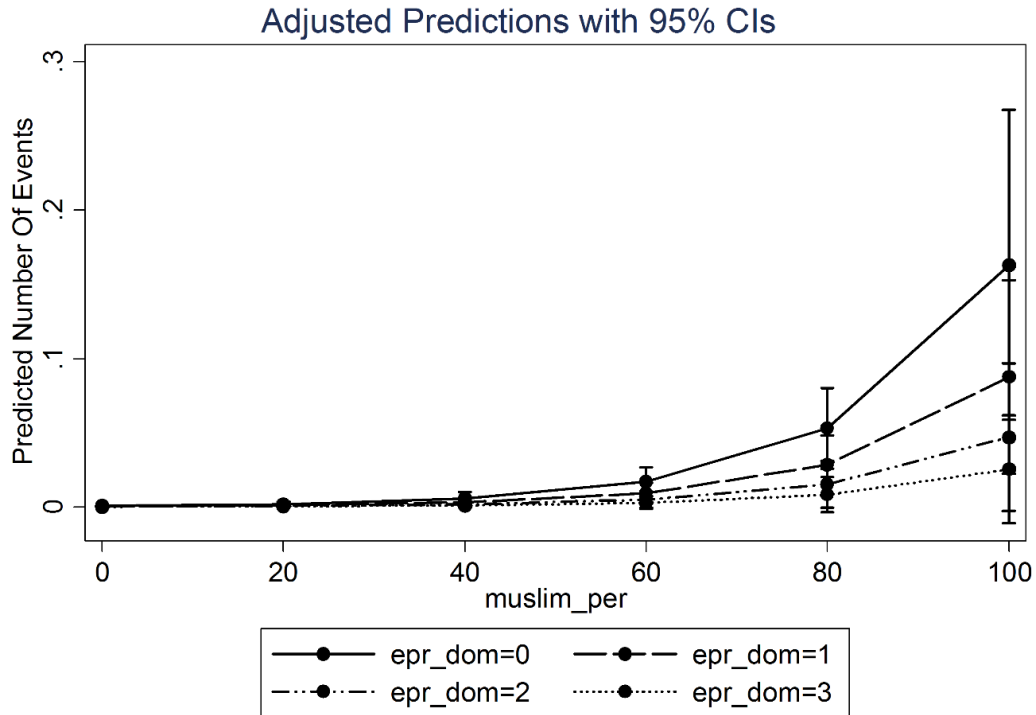
Figure 4: Predicted Number of Violent Islamist Events by Muslim Population Size

(muslim_per) and Presence of Politically Marginalised Ethnic Groups

(epr_dummy_outpower).

Among the control variables, *North Africa*, *Capital*, *Democracy5* and the constructed sum of the various event types are all consistently significant. The North African region is significantly and negatively related to Islamist violence, potentially because of the large share of the population that is Muslim, and the (relatively) rare instances of Islamist violence in the region. The logged population measure is not significant in any of the models. While population is generally found to be a strong predictor of conflict levels, this insignificance may be explained by the relative homogeneity of population sizes within country cases where sub-national administrative units may be created with relatively uniform population distribution in mind. Higher poverty rates are not significant in any model, but the logged measure of GDP is significantly and positively related to Islamist violence: together, these may indicate that the target value of a location influences the activity of violent Islamist

groups; or that higher rates of income and wealth are associated with higher rates of Islamist militancy. The lagged events variable shows no significant relationship to violent Islamist activity. This suggests that repeat actions are less common in Islamist violence, indicating a potentially spontaneous or opportunistic dynamic to the activity.

4.5.1 Robustness Checks

A series of sensitivity analyses assess the robustness of these findings. First, counts of non-Islamist political violence events (Other) and all political violence events (Total) replace Islamist violence events as the dependent variables, to test whether the results for Islamist violence were spuriously related to wider political violence. The results largely underscore the point that Islamist violence and wider political violence occur at different rates in distinct demographic, religious and ethnic contexts. As detailed above, in Model 1, there is no evidence of a relationship between Muslim population size and Other or Total levels of political violence. In Model 2, religious diversity is significantly, negatively associated with Other and Total violence levels, but is not significantly related to Islamist violence levels. In contrast to Islamist event models, Hypothesis 3 finds strong support in the context of Other and Total violence levels. The discrete number of ethnic groups is significantly and positively associated with Total and Other violence, indicating that at higher rates of ethnic diversity, these forms of political violence increase. Models 3 and 4 also diverge from Islamist event models: the number of politically dominant ethnic groups in a sub-national unit is not significantly related to overall or non-Islamist political violence, nor is it significantly related to the presence of politically marginalised ethnic groups. These divergent results suggest that distinct drivers underpin Islamist and wider political violence, although further research may unpack these categories of violence to determine whether Islamist violence shows divergent patterns from other identity-based conflicts.

Of the control variables, as in the case of Islamist violence, North Africa is consistently, negatively related to Other and Total violence levels, while the capital control is significant and positive in all models. Relative poverty, logged measures of GDP and population, and measures of democracy are not significant in any model. The lag and sum of all violent activity is positive and significantly related to both types of violence, suggesting once more a divergent dynamic in the potentially spontaneous and opportunistic nature of Islamist violence.

A second robustness check replaces ACLED's count of Islamist, Other and Total violent events with event counts coded from the UCDP GED database (Sundberg, Lindgren and Padskocimaite, 2010; Melander and Sundberg, 2010). Counts of Islamist, Other and Total events are calculated according to the same criteria employed in categorising the ACLED data. In spite of coding process differences between the two datasets which create discrepancies in the counts and distribution of violent Islamist events,[12] the overall results hold: the number of politically dominant ethnic groups in a sub-national unit is significantly and negatively correlated with violent Islamist event counts; while the presence of a politically marginalised group is significantly and positively correlated with violent Islamist events. The only differences in the two sets of results are found in the control variables: higher poverty at the ADM level is negative and significant in the UCDP results; while the control for democracy loses its significance. Finally, the lag of violent Islamist events is positively and significantly correlated to events in the UCDP models, whereas it is not significant in the ACLED model. This may be accounted for by the fatality threshold applied in UCDP data: higher-intensity results may be more temporally dependent and predictable over time than the more diverse range of violent events coded in the ACLED dataset.

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[12] The UCDP-GED dataset has a total of 2,408 violent conflict events which qualify as Islamist between 1997 and 2010; compared to 2,504 in the ACLED dataset between 1997 and 2012. The latter has a far higher record of Islamist violence in Nigeria, Mali and Kenya; and lower recorded levels in Algeria than the UCDP-GED data.

Geographic robustness checks test whether the exclusion of the North Africa dummy impacts results due to the high proportion of the population that is Muslim, and whether the introduction of a Nigeria control affects results due to the high rate of Islamist violence in the latter. In both cases, the overall results hold, although the effect of Muslim population size is weakened with the exclusion of a North Africa dummy; while the impact of population size on violence is reduced with the introduction of a Nigeria control.

A final sensitivity analysis replaces event counts with fatality counts. Fatality figures are among the more problematic aspects of conflict data, owing to the increased potential for reporting bias, difficulty verifying numbers reported, and political motivations that might influence mis-reporting. Research has shown that details such as fatality counts are more susceptible to these distortions than the 'hard news,' of events (Earl, Soule and McCarthy, 2003, p. 72). For this reason, actual levels of violence are considered a more reliable reflection on the intensity of conflict. However, it must be acknowledged that a single conflict event can vary widely from a low- to an extremely high-intensity incident. As such, tests were re-run with fatalities (grouped by Islamist, Total and Other categories) as the dependent variable. The results held across almost all model types.

4.6   Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these results, each reflecting the importance of *local* social and political conditions as drivers of Islamist violence. First, the results show that while religious demography can explain some aspects of Islamist violence, the strategic mobilisation of collective violence through dynamic identity categories in multi-identity contexts, and the political power relations of identity groups are also important factors. Political dominance and marginalisation are significantly related to violent Islamist activity, but show no significant relationship to Total or Other levels of political violence, indicating the centrality of political and group relations to the emergence of this type of violence. This

is a particularly important point in the context of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa, where academic and policy approaches tend to emphasise the highly mobile, transnational nature of violent Islamist groups, and treat them as a category of actor that is largely divorced from the political and social contexts in which they operate. The results point to the need to re-conceptualise Islamist violence as a response to political and social conditions, rather than simply a function of the diffusion of rootless, violent agents from neighbouring states. The political status of communal groups has a clear relationship to the level of Islamist violence experienced on the continent, and discussions, analyses and responses to violent Islamist action should be re-oriented to consider the political dimensions of power in affected countries.

Case studies of conflict-affected have previously pointed to the significance of this dynamic in select countries. In Kenya, for example, areas with sizeable Muslim populations that host politically marginalised groups include both the former Coast and North-Eastern provinces, where violent Islamist activity by Al Shabaab and aligned militants has been concentrated. In the former, historical research has documented the strategies by which minority ethnic communities sought to construct larger ethnic coalitions through the construction of a 'super-tribe' (Willis and Gona, 2013., p. 472) to increase political power and influence. The political and economic isolation of the country's Somali-dominant North-Eastern region has also been extensively documented (Whittaker, 2008; Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010). The recent phenomenon of the adoption of the Somali-based Al Shabaab's symbols and rhetoric among non-Somali Kenyans outside the north-eastern border area reflects the coalescence of politically marginalised groups under a wider religious identity. This may point to strategic continuities with regard to 'cultural entrepreneurship,' (Willis and Gona, 2013, p. 451) even where the mode of collectivisation appears to suggest a break from previous forms of mobilisation. This article offer a comparative test of whether similar factors are found across the diverse areas in which Islamist violence emerges, the findings of which highlight the

importance of further exploring the inter-relationship between ethnic diversity, political power relations among ethnic groups, and political violence.

Second, the results clearly show that cultural theories of violence proposing that Muslim population size, or Islam as a socio-religious phenomenon, are linked to higher levels of overall political violence can be confidently rejected. The size of the Muslim population shows no clear relationship with overall or non-Islamist violence. Cultural explanations of conflict – both explicit and implicit in academic, policy and media discourse – that disproportionately emphasise the supposed propensity towards violence among Muslim populations should continue to be critically interrogated and challenged in light of these findings. Similarly, theories that emphasise religious diversity as a driver of conflict are not relevant frameworks for conceptualising Islamist violence. Religious diversity has a dampening effect on Islamist violence, indicating that this type of conflict is not typical in conditions of competition between identity groups. This finding has implications for studies of Islamist violence that focus disproportionately on the theme of a clash of civilisations, positing an irreconcilable tension between different religious worldviews. By contrast, areas with large Muslim populations experience more Islamist violence than religiously diverse areas, highlighting the high levels of intra-Muslim violence that occur.

Finally, the results highlight the importance of local social, economic and political conditions as drivers of political violence, and Islamist violence specifically. Methodologically, the research underscores the explanatory power of sub-national analysis. Often, Islamist violence is pathologised precisely in terms of its supposed trans-boundary, internationalised nature. The notion of highly mobile, rootless Islamist militants operating across vast swathes of territory with limited connection to these locations is prevalent in a number of narratives about Islamist militancy, and the 'ungoverned spaces' in which they purportedly operate (Raleigh and Dowd, 2013). Violent Islamist groups are highly contextualised, and emerge primarily in response to local drivers and conditions, often with

local or national-level agendas. Any approach which neglects this aspect in favour of a totalising conceptualisation of global Islamist violence risks furthering misleading narratives about the nature of political violence. For this reason, the paper emphasised the utilisation of sub-national data wherever possible to identify characteristics at this level that influence group activity. However, this research has explored the phenomenon of Islamist violence in a cross-national study in recognition of the fact that the emergence and activity of violent Islamist groups across a range of diverse contexts in Africa in recent years is a significant trend, the determinants of which must be explored. This paper has sought to inform discussion and framing of this trend by emphasising the importance of differential understandings of political violence, and the primacy of sub-national conditions in shaping these agendas.

5   Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in sub-Saharan Africa

5.1   Abstract

What explains the emergence of Islamist violence as a substantial security threat in such diverse contexts as Kenya, Mali and Nigeria? This article addresses this question through an exploration of the strategies of governance employed by states, and how these shape the emergence and mode of collective violence. Conflict research often emphasises the specificity of Islamist violence; but these conflicts can be understood as a form of political exclusion and grievance-based violence, comparable to other forms of political violence. Further, violent Islamist groups emerge from *local* conditions: the areas in which groups are established share similar *local* experiences of governance and political marginalisation; a history of violent conflict on which Islamist militants capitalise; and key triggering events expanding or reinforcing state exclusion. These findings challenge a narrative emphasising the *global*, interconnected nature of Islamist violence. This article pairs data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) with Afrobarometer survey data and case study evidence to identify drivers of Islamist violence across three African countries.

5.2   Introduction

The recent escalation of violent Islamist activity in Kenya and Nigeria, in addition to on-going unrest in the Sahel, has focused international attention on Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa. In spite of this type of violence being frequently characterised as a global threat, Islamist violence emerges in particular countries and sub-national locations: not all

African countries with large Muslim populations experience violence, and fewer still experience Islamist violence specifically. What conditions facilitate its emergence? What factors contribute to the adoption of violent Islamist ideologies in some countries, but not others? This research argues that explanations for political violence that focus on political marginalisation and grievances can be used to explain violent Islamist activity in a range of contexts. This finding is in contrast to approaches that emphasise the uniqueness of Islamist violence, ideology, and goals.

Violent conflict is common across many African states (Raleigh *et al*., 2010), and research has demonstrated a clear relationship between the practices of governance such as repression (Regan and Norton, 2005) or exclusion from central power (Deiwiks, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2012) and the level, location and variations in violence across sub-national territories in Africa (Raleigh, 2014). In addition to experiencing high rates of violence, many African states experience multiple forms of violence (*Ibid.*): understanding the relationship between these discrete forms of violence and the politics and practices of governance within which they occur is of critical importance. In this context, sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed an increase in the levels of violent Islamist activity in recent years, as well as its emergence in spaces from which it was previously absent (Dowd, 2013).

Contrary to theories and explanations of Islamist violence that attribute its emergence and intensity to religious ideology or the diffusion of violence from neighbouring states, this article contends that Islamist violence can be attributed to similar factors explaining other forms of conflict, namely the local political and economic conditions in which it emerges. I propose that Islamist violence emerges in sub-national contexts shaped by governance practices of political and economic marginalisation, and with a history of non-Islamist violence. Timing and escalation are explained by the expansion of the state's politically exclusionary practices, wherein nascent or local Islamist militants capitalise on, and reconfigure, grievances. Islamist violence is not different in context or mechanism to other

forms of violent conflict, but differs in its mode of organisation. This argument has been tested in large-*n* cross-national comparison (Dowd, 2015) and in specific studies of individual country cases (Agbiboa, 2013). I go further in this paper by isolating the specific conditions in which Islamist violence emerges, the unique histories of violence that facilitate it and the variation in policy responses across sub-national spaces in three conflict-affected countries. This argument is advanced by pairing survey data from Afrobarometer with qualitative findings and political violence data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (Raleigh *et al*., 2010) in case studies of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria.

In contrast to frameworks that assert the importance of cultural or ideational aspects of Islamist violence, the findings highlight the applicability of wider theories of political violence centring on political and economic marginalisation as drivers of Islamist violence in diverse contexts. Further, this article expands and applies grievance-based explanations to Islamist violence through an analysis of the perceptions of populations of group power and influence as motivating factors in collective mobilisation, and the distribution of grievances across group cleavages as opportunity-generating conditions for collective action. In addition, by situating violent Islamist activity within the context of political practices of governance and domestic legacies of violence, rather than as a sudden aberration in the histories and politics of each country, I draw attention to focused on the endogenous practices of local conflict and instability. Finally, applying these theories at the sub-national level facilitates comparisons between different sub-national areas within the same countries differentially affected by Islamist violence, and similarities across diverse countries in which this phenomenon is present.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of prominent theories of Islamist violence; Section 2 details an alternative theory of Islamist violence based on grievances; Section 3 reviews the transformation of existing violence in sub-national

territories; key triggering events are covered in Section 4; and Section 5 concludes with a discussion of findings and implications for future research.

5.3   Islamist Violence in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Islamist' refers to groups that proactively promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state and/or society (Esposito, 2003, p. 151; Denoeux, 2002, p. 61). Islamism encompasses a wide range of political, social and religious activity across diverse disciplines and traditions within Islam (ICG, p. 2005). Violent Islamist groups are distinguished from other Islamist groups by the use of violence in pursuit of their goals (Dowd, 2015). In spite of encompassing a diverse range of actors, the theoretical conceptualisation of violent Islamist groups often assumes a relatively homogenous, global phenomenon of violent Islamism is emerging in a wide variety of contexts – from the Middle East to Africa and beyond – and proceeds to collectivise these various manifestations, rather than approaching the conditions in which it emerges as a starting point for interrogation (Dowd and Raleigh, 2013).

Several features of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria make them useful cases for analysis of this phenomenon, while highlighting a more widely transferable theory: first, they are drawn from both East and West Africa, two regions in which clusters of countries are affected by Islamist violence, including Niger, Sudan and Somalia. Second, they represent diverse religious demographies: according to Afrobarometer survey data, Muslims make up about 14% of the population in Kenya, while Nigeria's population is more evenly split between Muslims (approximately 40% of the population) and Christians; and over 90% of Mali's population identifies as Muslim (Afrobarometer, R4).

Third, all three countries have experienced Islamist violence in a relatively limited part of their territories. Each country has seen sporadic violence in capital cities, and Islamist

violence has been concentrated in the counties of Kenya's former North-Eastern and Coast provinces; in Mali's northern regions of Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao; and in Nigeria's northern states of Borno, Kano and Yobe. These sub-national areas have witnessed over 70% of the Islamist violence events that occurred in each country. [13] Finally, the level of Islamist violence in recent years has intensified in all three countries, compared to historical levels of activity. These demographic, geographic and temporal patterns provide an opportunity to test theories of Islamist violence, taking into account the variation across and within each country in an attempt to understand the contexts in which Islamist violence emerges.

5.4   Existing Explanations and their Evidence

The phenomenon of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa has conventionally been explained by two distinct theories: those that focus on the underlying, but relatively static, religious demography of countries; and those that focus on the more dynamic processes of physical diffusion of violence from neighbouring areas. An alternative perspective applied in this paper suggests that violence emanates from practices of governance, exclusion and marginalisation by the state. Demographic and diffusion explanations for Islamist violence that locate it in static contexts share an approach which overlooks the domestic political arena in which Islamist violence occurs. In doing so, these explanations neglect the local political practices in areas experiencing Islamist violence, and how these can provide a basis for mobilisation.

5.4.1 Religious Violence

More so than other forms of religiously mobilised violence, Islamist violence has been subject to claims that it is irrational and incomprehensible (Celso, 2014, p. 230). Claims that violence is an inherent cultural facet of Islam (Huntington, 1993), or that Islamist violence is a function of a global 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 2003, p. 36), and

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[13] Source: ACLED, Version 5.

that religiously framed violence is unique, remain pervasive, if nowadays more implicit, features of the discussion of Islamist violence (Cavanaugh, 2004; de Soysa and Nordås, 2007; Gunning and Jackson, 2011). In general terms, the perceived role of ideational factors such as 'jihad' in Islam has been cited as a contributing factor in 'Islam's disproportionate role in religious civil wars' (Toft, 2007, p. 110). Other scholars place greater emphasis on the concept of martyrdom, attributing the motivation to engage in political violence to the expectation of other-worldly rewards (Jeurgensmeyer, 2003). According to these approaches, religion provides not only a basis of mobilisation, or a justification for the use of force, but also the very motivation to engage in violence itself.

Empirical tests of these theories have revealed their limitations. Studies have found no evidence of increased conflict between 'civilizations' in the context of inter-state conflict (Chiozza, 2002). There is also no evidence of a relationship between Muslim population size and political violence levels in Africa (Dowd, 2015). Meanwhile, the effect of Islamist group ideology on violence intensity disappears when other organisational characteristics, such as alliances, is controlled for (Piazza, 2009).

In the context of Kenya, Nigeria and Mali specifically, religiously-focused theories shed little light on why violent Islamist activity is higher in some Muslim-populated areas than in others. If cultural facets inherent to Islam drive violence, it should be found across a range of countries with large Muslim majorities or substantial minorities. But it is absent in many such spaces, including much of Mali, where the population is approximately 90% Muslim and dispersed throughout the state, yet Islamist violence is concentrated in the far north of the country. Areas of similar demographic characteristics in Nigeria (e.g. Zamfara, Kebbi and Jigawa) witness no recorded Islamist violence or only isolated events far below the national average. Moreover, if Islamist violence is a function of the 'confrontation' between Islam and Christianity (Lewis, 2003, p. 36), it should be found more in highly religiously diverse areas, such as Osun and Oyo states in Nigeria, where 33% and 49% of the

population identify as Muslim respectively (Afrobarometer, R4). Clearly, large Muslim populations are not a sufficient condition for the rise of Islamist violence, even in otherwise conflict-affected countries.

As a consequence of the privileging of religious ideology and demography in explanations of Islamist violence, these approaches largely fail to interrogate the conditions in which proponents of violence gain traction among communities by assuming violent discourse, adherence, mobilisation and politicisation develop in political, economic and social vacuums. This paper does not seek to dismiss the potential power of specific cultural or religious symbols and rhetoric as tools for framing collective action in terms of particular narratives and histories. It argues instead, that while particular narratives may be effective in framing violence, and specific demographies may contribute to favourable conditions for mobilisation, this mobilisation is made possible through the necessary mechanism of political and economic experiences of marginality and exclusion. By analysing the political and social conditions in which violence emerges, claims that Islamist activity is driven predominantly by irrational doctrinal or demographic factors can be countered with evidence of similarities in the 'place influences,' (O'Loughlin, 2010) in which such groups emerge.

5.4.2 Physical Diffusion

Diffusion is a second common explanation for the emergence of Islamist violence in countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya's border with Somalia, Mali's border with Algeria, and Nigeria's border with Cameroon and Niger are suggested cross-border 'conduits' of violence, material and militants across the continent.

Islamist violence across Africa is presented as the result of porous and ineffective security services, rather than domestic, 'concerted indigenous support for transnational Islamic extremism' (Haynes, 2005, p. 1337). The Kenyan parliamentary report on the Westgate

attack in September 2013 reinforced this view when it concluded that 'nationwide systemic failure' on the part of Immigration Services Department and Department of Refugee Affairs was a contributing factor in the attack (Kenya National Assembly, 2013). Meanwhile, the subsequently launched counter-terrorism 'Operation Usalama Watch' – involving dragnet arrests in predominantly Somali areas of Nairobi – has concentrated on the relocation and deportation of Somali populations in Kenya as a security measure (Amnesty International, 2014a).

In Mali, also, the role of the transnational movement of militants has received considerable attention. The return of Tuareg militants from Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the movement of Algerian militants into the north of the country have both been proposed as explanations for the outbreak of Islamist violence in the country in the past three years. The physical movement of militants from nearby conflict zones is less often cited as an explanation for Islamist violence in Nigeria, because there is far less dispute over the national agenda and origins of the militant group *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (commonly, and hereafter, 'Boko Haram'), although some researchers have identified Nigeria's 'porous borders' as a driver of Islamist violence in the country (Onuoha, 2012).

However, the physical diffusion of militants can at best serve as a proximate trigger, but not explanatory cause, of Islamist violence. Ultimately, an explanation relying on the physical diffusion of militants into countries, bringing with them the threat of violence, overlooks the conditions that make diffusion attractive in the first place; or which give radical groups traction among local communities once they are among them. Undoubtedly, militants from Somalia have crossed the border into north-eastern Kenya, and that Islamist groups in Nigeria have used the border with Cameroon to evade capture, just as it is the case that militants from neighbouring Algeria and the wider Sahelian region were active in northern Mali for years prior to the most recent outbreak of violence. These movements notwithstanding, diffusion-focused explanations neglect two critical dimensions.

The first is that it does not interrogate why militants diffuse into particular spaces, not all, and that the common features of these spaces are the political, social and economic factors that might characterise those spaces to which militants relocate. Somalia shares a border with three neighbouring states, only one of which (Kenya) has seen notable levels of Islamist violence. Al Shabaab has had only limited success in militarising communities in diverse regions within the same country, with negligible activity in north-eastern Puntland or north-western Somaliland (Amble and Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014). Similarly, a concentration of Algerian militants in northern Mali should be considered in light of the conditions that make activity in that space more feasible than in nearby Mauritania or Niger. In other words, the translocation of international militants is itself a part of the puzzle of Islamist violence; alone, it does not offer an answer.

Second, an explanation relying on the diffusion of militants cannot explain the appeal violent Islamist groups have among local communities. In Kenya, a focus on the diffusion of Somali militants into the country obscures the growing record of militancy among Swahili-speaking, Kenyan nationals in the country's coastal region with limited direct connection to Somali groups. Recent research has documented membership of Al Shabaab among a wide range of ethnic groups beyond Somali nationals, or ethnically Somali Kenyans, including members from Kikuyu, Luo and Mijikenda groups (Botha, 2014). In Nigeria, in spite of reports of a growing number of foreign fighters among Boko Haram's ranks (Chimton, 2015), the leadership and the vast majority of the membership are undisputedly Nigerian, drawn from among the Kanuri ethnic group in the North-East of the country (Baca, 2015), and benefiting from considerable local support in the early days of their activity. In Mali, Ansar Dine were primarily constituted of Malian militants (Flood, 2012), with clear connections to Malian leadership of previous insurgencies (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015). The same is true of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (ICT Database, 2012).

The significant role of national militants in these domestic groups presents a challenge to the claim that the activity of trans-national militants alone can explain the rise of Islamist violence.

5.4.3 Muslim Marginalisation

An alternative explanation for violent conflict focuses on the way in which discrimination by the state and the subsequent production of economic and political marginalisation provides a basis on which grievances can be fomented and populations can be motivated to support and engage in violent opposition (Gurr, 1970). The extensive theoretical and case study literature on this relationship proposes, in general terms, a process whereby persistent inequality leads to grievances among the population and fuels demands for political change. By this logic, 'Denied such reforms, and possibly even encountering state-led repression, the aggrieved will see little choice but to rebel' (Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch 2014, p. 420).

Early studies of inequality and conflict primarily focused on levels of absolute poverty, or 'objective grievances' (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, p. 565). These largely failed to find an empirical relationship between deprivation and violent conflict (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). However, these studies relied on cross-national comparisons of individual measures of poverty, with limited analysis of the sub-national distribution of inequalities across space and populations. Other scholars have argued that approaches mechanistically linking grievances to violent political action can fail to specify the conditions in which one is translated into the other (Hafez, 2003). This is of particular importance in contexts such as developing countries in which large portions of the population may live in absolute poverty, and yet do not engage in armed violence.

Two recent theoretical developments have sought to address these shortcomings. The first is a shift in focus from individual to group-level grievances and 'horizontal inequalities' defined by cultural cleavages (Stewart, 2002). The claim that grievances are 'ubiquitous' (Wiktorowicz, 2002), or that they are 'too common to distinguish between the cases where civil war breaks out,' (Fearon and Laitin, 2003, p. 76) can obscure important differences in the nature and distribution of grievances. Deprivation may be widespread, but the extent and depth of grievances may also differ significantly across geographic locations (Buhaug *et al.*, 2011) and demographic groups (Stewart, 2002); and, consequently, so might their explanatory power as drivers of violent conflict.

Grievances concentrated among particular social groups (such as religious populations) can provide both a motive for collective violence and an opportunity to engage in it (*see* Collier and Hoeffler, 2004 on this distinction). Motivation is established when discrimination reinforces perceptions that marginalisation is based on personal identity characteristics, while opportunity arises for a collective response to perceived injustices among cohorts with strong social capital (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). The relationship between group discrimination and violent conflict includes studies in which variations in group welfare have been linked to the onset of civil war (Østby, Nordås and Rød, 2009); inequalities in political power across groups have been linked to conflict (Stewart, 2011; Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011); regionally concentrated inequality has increased the likelihood of conflict (Buhaug *et al.*, 2011); and the failure of governments to provide public services to populations has been linked to violence (Berman, Shapiro and Felter, 2011).

Other research has found that grievances over religious discrimination are related to the onset of both interreligious and theological conflicts, but not wider armed conflict (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016), highlighting the importance of grievances as both a motivating and opportunity-generating basis for collective action. However, in limiting the unit of analysis to national-level measures, and in measuring grievances as a binary variable

indicating whether discrimination occurs, the research cannot directly explain why violence emerges in some sub-national locations and not others, nor take account of the intensity of grievances at the sub-national level. Akbaba and Taydas (2011) also find that religious discrimination is a strong predictor of violent dissent, although their study focuses exclusively on religious discrimination among ethnoreligious minorities: this would variously exclude Nigerian Muslims (who do not constitute a minority by the authors' threshold) and Kenyan Muslims (who do not experience state restrictions on religious practices).

Group-level grievances are central to understanding the emergence of Islamist violence because the process of feeling aggrieved through a collective, group structure is a function of how the state has politicised identity groups and exercised exclusive practices of governance. The conditions in which one identity category (such as religion) becomes a basis for mobilisation over another (such as ethnicity) depend on two features: first, whether inequalities occur most strongly along ethnic or religious lines; and second, the number and relative size of the demographic groups affected, which shapes opportunities for mobilization (Stewart, 2009). Drawing on this literature, Islamist violence should be higher in areas with both a significant Muslim population, in order to overcome collective action problems associated with mobilisation, and where grievances are high among the Muslim population in particular.

The second development in the study of grievances has been a shift away from focusing exclusively on poverty and deprivation, to acknowledging the multi-faceted ways in which marginalisation may be experienced. Stewart (2011) points out that economic and social inequalities can often be addressed through inclusive political institutions, and thereby attenuate drivers of violent conflict. Instead, research is increasingly including analyses of political inequalities, putting the strategically exclusive and inclusive nature of state governance at the centre of analyses of inequality (Stewart, 2011; Raleigh, 2014).

Collective grievances contribute to a wider social context in which militants can evade capture among a supportive population, and in which populations refuse to cooperate or share information on militant activity with security forces (Condra and Shapiro, 2011), even if the vast majority of the population never actively participate in militant activity. Similarly, widespread economic deprivation creates a larger pool for recruitment of individual militants who are motivated by economic incentives such as payment, and the promise of status usually denied lower economic groups. Group-level inequalities in both economic and political aspects are contributing, though not sufficient, conditions for Islamist militancy in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. If grievances are a necessary condition for political violence, the areas in which Islamist violence occurs should have higher-than-average levels of political and economic grievances among Muslim populations.

5.5   Testing These Theories

The theory is tested through information from surveys of public opinion in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria in 2008 (Afrobarometer, R4). [14] The survey round is chosen because it pre-dates the period of rapid escalation in Islamist violence in all three countries. In all three country cases, the year 2009 witnessed a sharp escalation in Islamist violence: for example, Kenya had witnessed an average of .2 recorded violent Islamist events per year in the period 1997-2008, increasing to 7 in the year 2009. 2009 saw a four-fold increase in recorded Islamist violence in 2009 compared to the 1997-2008 average; and Nigeria witnessed a 17-fold increase. Exploring survey data from before this period provides an opportunity to unpack conditions prior to this escalation, and isolate the specific conditions that *lead* to Islamist violence. In other words, drawing on perception data that precedes the onset of any significant Islamist

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[14] Afrobarometer Kenya R4 surveyed 1104 respondents in October-November 2008; Nigeria R4 surveyed 2,324 respondents in May 2008; and Mali R4 surveyed 1,232 respondents in December 2008. The unit of analysis is the sub-national Administrative Level 1 (Admin1), corresponding to the current counties in Kenya, states in Nigeria, and regions in Mali. Survey and conflict data are aggregated to this level. Not all Admin1 units were surveyed in R4 in Kenya. In total, 42 counties were surveyed (those excluded in which Islamist violence has subsequently occurred include Lamu and Mandera).

violence ensures that Islamist violence is not in itself a *cause* of these perceptions, but rather a consequence of those conditions. This design follows other research which has analysed survey data for patterns in religiosity and political participation (Beatty Riedl, 2012), and analyses which have paired conflict data with survey information (Dyrstad *et al*., 2011; Collier and Vicente, 2013), including the specific pairing of Afrobarometer data with disaggregated data on conflict locations and levels (Linke, 2013).

Survey data are particularly well-suited to addressing the question of the relationship between grievances and conflict, because objective grievance, even at group level, may not necessarily translate into collective awareness of disadvantage (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016). Collective awareness is what distinguishes measures of objective marginalisation (such as poverty) and the general failure to observe a relationship between these conditions and violent conflict (Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014). It is the subjective perception of marginalisation on which violent groups can draw to mobilise, recruit members, and help evade detection. The survey data explicitly concerns the *perceptions* of respondents of their status in society relative to others: this captures more directly the grounds on which collective grievance is translated into collective action.

Respondents were asked how their economic conditions and political influence compare to other groups in the country; how often respondents feel the government treats their group unfairly; and how often people are treated unequally under the law.[15] The perception of inequality and powerlessness can be a strong motivator for disaffection with the state: if violence is related to political grievances, rates of violence should be higher in areas with higher-than-average rates of respondents reporting that their economic conditions are 'Much worse,' and political influence is 'Much less,' than other groups in the country; and higher-

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[15] Q80, 81, 82 and 45C respectively.

than-average responses that the government 'Always' treats them unfairly, or that people are 'Always' treated unequally under the law. [16]

From a review of the data, Islamist violence is indeed concentrated in areas in which Muslim populations report higher-than-average grievances. In Kenya and Nigeria, at least three of the five areas in which Islamist violence was highest had higher-than-average rates of Muslim economic grievances. In Kenya, four of the five counties surveyed with the highest levels of Islamist violence have higher-than-average grievances relating to political influence and frequent unequal treatment (the exception being Nairobi). While in Nigeria, three of the five states with the highest rates of Islamist violence had higher-than-average political grievances; and four of these report higher-than-average rates of being 'Always' being treated unfairly by the government.

In Mali, the results were less consistent: Tombouctou and Gao both registered higher-than-average grievances in relation to political and/or institutional marginalisation, although Kidal remains an outlier. Kidal is an outlier in several of the survey responses, with low numbers or no respondents reporting their economic conditions or political influence are 'Much worse' or 'Much less' than other groups, or that they are 'Always' treated unfairly by the government or unequally under the law. However, these responses should be viewed in light of the strong role secessionism plays in the region: specifically, a much higher share of the population in Kidal (over 80%, compared to an average of 8% elsewhere in the country) strongly disagree with statements such as 'The courts have the right to make decisions that people always have to abide by,' (Q44A) and 'The police always have the right to make people obey the law,' (Q44B). This suggests that while the level of grievances expressed is

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[16] In order to take into account the interaction between identity groups and demographic size, I create an interaction term in which the proportion of the Muslim population which expresses strong grievances is multiplied by the proportion of the respondents in that area which identifies as Muslim. This controls for areas where respondents report high grievances, in which these are concentrated among the Christian population (such as Nigeria's south-eastern Delta regions), and outliers in the data (such as Kakamega and Kisumu counties in Kenya) in which only a very small share of the population is Muslim, but a high portion of that population reports grievances. This calculation is based on the assumption that aggrieved populations that do not identify as Muslim are unlikely to support or join a violent Islamist group.

low, respondents in Kidal show a stronger tendency to reject the authority of the central state altogether. Responses are summarised in Table I (*see* Appendix).

In religiously diverse contexts, the perception of unequal treatment under the law is also more pronounced among Muslims than Christians in areas in which Islamist violence subsequently occurs. In Kenya's Kwale, Mombasa and Nairobi, the proportion of Muslims who responded that people are 'Always' treated unequally under the law was one-and-a-half to four times higher in absolute terms than Christians (no Christians responded with this answer in Garissa and Wajir, while 18% and 21% of Muslims did respectively). In Kilifi, by contrast, which has witnessed very little recorded Islamist violence, but which is home to a sizeable Muslim population, Christian and Muslim respondents reported equal rates of grievances in response to questions concerning unfair treatment. Likewise in Nigeria, where Muslims and Christians both responded to the same question (in Borno and Kaduna), absolute proportions of Muslim responses were higher than Christian counterparts. When an interaction term takes into account the actual size of the Muslim and Christian populations respectively, the results hold: where both Muslim and Christian respondents answered the same questions, Muslim responses that people are 'always' treated unequally under the law were on average 2.3 times larger than the rate of Christian respondents. By contrast, in the religiously diverse Nasarawa State, which has witnessed high levels of communal violence, but limited Islamist violence, reported Christian perceptions of unfair treatment were higher than Muslim counterparts.[17]

These perceptions of marginalisation are also confirmed in each of the three case studies through qualitative accounts of the mobilising power of perceived marginalisation among Muslim communities. In Kenya, Al Shabaab has drawn on the perception of oppression and marginalisation among Kenyan Muslims. In May 2014, following an attack by Al Shabaab

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[17] Mali, a predominantly Muslim country, does not provide a sufficient test for this theory at the sub-national level.

militants on Kenyan security forces close to the Somali border, a senior Al Shabaab member, Sheikh Faud Mohamed Khalaf declared: 'We are training Muslim boys from Kenya who had been oppressed there, and we return them back there.' (quoted in Mubarak, 2014)

The extent, to which histories of marginalisation are experienced on religious, rather than regional or ethnic bases, helps account for the mobilisation of collective action on religious grounds. While there is extensive documentation of ethnic profiling in security service campaigns and the denial of citizenship rights such as national identity cards on an ethno-regional basis (KHRC, 2009) in Kenya, interviews conducted with Muslim religious leaders and Muslim youth activists in Kenya revealed a widespread belief that discrimination is based on religious, rather than other, identity bases.

One interviewee maintained he was subject to additional vetting in his application for an identity card because he was a Muslim, emphasising that this discrimination 'cuts across ethnicities,' since he was from Western Kenya, and therefore ethnic or ethno-regional profiling of Kenyan Somalis could not account for this perceived discrimination (Interview A, 2015). Another interviewee reported similar experiences by Muslim applicants for identity cards, adding: 'Governments must be very sensitive of how they engage their citizens. People should not feel "This is happening to me because I'm a Muslim." Let it be cutting across, documented and in the law.' (Interview B, 2015). This perception of religiously-based discrimination may also reflect an innovative response to collective action problems, where discrimination on the basis of smaller, less mobilisation-compatible bases, such as marginalised ethnicities, corresponds to the collectivisation of those grievances under a larger, more collective, cross-cutting identity (Dowd, 2015a).

In Mali, militant Islamist leaders wrote in internal documents concerning military strategy about the importance of presenting the movement's 'general logo' as one of 'defending Muslims from those who want to victimize them,' while supporting the local Azawad

militant movement in pursuit of 'its just cause and achieving its legitimate goals,' (Droukdel, *undated*). In Nigeria, there is also evidence that Boko Haram drew on local dissatisfaction with the Nigerian government to elicit support among the population: 'People are supporting them [Boko Haram] because the government is cheating them,' a Kano imam reported in 2012 (Nossiter, 2012).

In terms of the explicit role of economic incentives, in a survey of Kenyans affiliated with Al Shabaab, economic reasons were the second most-cited reason for joining the group (after 'Religion') (Botha 2014, p. 22). Economic incentives also appear to have played a role in recruitment in Mali, where support for economic activity is one way by which violent Islamist groups supplanted the role of a largely absent state. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) forged business partnerships with local elites (Cline, 2013) and engaged in service provision, functioning in some ways 'as an Islamic charity' (Bøas and Torheim, 2013, p. 1287). Reinforcing these actions, analysts have noted how relationships founded in trade and security arrangements were cemented through the marriages of Islamist militants to local women (Goïta, 2011; Cline, 2013), 'not into powerful families, but into poor local lineages, deliberately taking the side of the poor' (Bøas and Torheim, 2013, p. 1287). Interviews in north-eastern Nigeria in 2013 also found that unemployment and poverty were the second most important reason youth join Boko Haram (following 'ignorance of religious teaching opposed to violence') rendering youth 'highly vulnerable to manipulation by extremist ideologues' (Onuoha, 2014, pp. 5-6).

Combined, these results point to two conclusions: first, grievances regarding economic and political exclusion are typically higher than average in areas subsequently affected by Islamist violence, providing both a motivation and an opportunity for collective opposition. Second, in the relatively few cases where religious diversity allows us to compare perceptions among different religious groups, it is on religious grounds that this marginalisation is perceived to take place, providing a partial explanation for the mode of

violence observed in these areas. In other words, where discrimination is experienced as religiously determined, that identity in turn provides the basis for collective mobilisation. In effect, the state's politicisation of particular identity categories through the marginalisation of religious groups in turn predicts the identity that will serve as the basis for mobilisation of opposition.

5.6   Histories of Violence and Triggering Exclusion

The findings above highlight the deeply entrenched perceptions of marginalisation among communities in areas in which Islamist violence occurs, and the ways in which militants draw on these grievances to mobilise support and recruits. However, economic and political marginalisation is widespread not only in the case studies under review, but globally, and while these conditions are contributing factors to violent mobilisation, they are not sufficient conditions for its emergence: two additional conditions explain the contexts of violence and the escalation of that conflict subsequently.

5.6.1 Histories of Violence

The history of violent opposition and conflict is central to the transformation of grievances into collective violence in the areas under consideration. Notably, all areas that subsequently experienced high levels of Islamist violence are also areas in which high rates of non-Islamist political violence previously occurred, although earlier forms were mobilised under different mantles. This legacy provides an opportunity for Islamist militants to capitalise on pre-existing forms of violence and reconfigure it under a different strategy. Of the areas subsequently affected by high rates of Islamist violence, four in Kenya (Garissa, Mombasa, Nairobi and Wajir), and three in Nigeria (Borno, Kaduna and Kano) had higher-than-average levels of violent events and/or violence-related fatalities per capita than other sub-national units in the preceding 1997-2008 period. In Mali, only Kidal registers higher-than-average

rates across the country, but this is affected by the extremely high rates of violence per capita recorded there (over 10 violent events and 36 reported fatalities per 100,000 in the preceding period, compared to an average of under 1 and 5 respectively elsewhere in the country). If Kidal is excluded from the analysis, both Gao and Tombouctou record higher-than-average rates of violent events and/or fatalities.

These legacies of violence have been capitalised upon by Islamist militants in different ways. In Kenya, two distinct areas are affected by Islamist violence: the counties of Garissa and Wajir, near the border with Somalia, and the areas around Mombasa and Kwale in the former Coastal province. Both regions share historical claims, dating to the colonial period and its immediate aftermath, of autonomy and the right to secession (Willis and Gona, 2013), and a broadly defined sense of 'being Muslims and "low-country" citizens in a state that is dominated by non-Muslim "up-country" Kenyans,' (Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010, p. 22). In the north-east, the so-called "Shifta wars" of the 1960s resulted in the imposition of administration through draconian emergency legislation, which effectively cut off the Northern Frontier District (present-day Garissa, Wajir and Mandera) from the rest of the country. Legislation restricted access to the region, and was accompanied by sporadic but devastating bouts of violence by state forces against civilian populations with the aim of sedentarising groups, and screening ethnic Somalis (Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010). In Coastal Kenya, by contrast, the basis of much of the political contest in the Coastal region has not been the absence of the state, but attempts by central elites to capitalise on the resources and wealth of coastal areas. This is reflected in the centrality of land disputes and contestation over the settlement of non-indigenous populations on large swathes of coastal land (Boone, 2012), while concomitantly sustaining the under-development of the region through the neglect of basic services, infrastructure and economic opportunities (Kivuva, 2012).

Al Shabaab operatives have harnessed these experiences of violence at the hands of the state to mobilise opposition. The group has actively drawn on pre-existing cleavages of conflict and contestation in Kenya. Al Shabaab violently intervened in the issue of land ownership in Kenya's Coast when it carried out an attack on Mpeketoni, home to Christian land owners considered non-indigenous to the region, and a symbol of politicised ethnicity in Kenya. Likewise, the group sought to provoke further violence through a wave of attacks targeting clan elders seeking to broker peace between warring factions in Mandera and Wajir (Bosire, 2014). In these ways, it is clear that not only has Islamist violence occurred in sites of previous violence, but also that the very language and targeting of Islamist violence cannot be divorced from domestic politics and historical violence in the state.

A similar pattern is evident in Mali, where the northern has a long history of recurring cycles of violence in its northern region. These cycles of violence have sought greater autonomy for the population of the northern region – particularly among the Tuareg ethnic group, who dominated leadership of previous uprisings. Successive efforts were undertaken to decentralise power followed recurring conflicts, although the implementation of these reforms fell far short of their expected effect of increasing vertical accountability, and may have instead increased opportunities for corruption and capture at the local level (Wing, 2013). Having established themselves as key providers of security and public goods in the region, violent Islamist groups forged strategic relationships with key local elites with a history of mobilising and leading violence against the state. Among these leaders was Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of the domestic Malian Islamist group, Ansar Dine, whose role in subsequent conflict reflects the interconnectedness of these discrete forms of conflict (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015; Lind and Dowd, 2015).

Critically, an overarching Islamist identity did not entirely supplant previous forms of violence: Ansar Dine was primarily constituted of ethnically Tuareg militants, which were themselves subject to considerable factionalism and 'vertical fragmentation' along lineage

and caste lines; while the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) drew on racial and ethnic tensions to recruit among Fulani and other groups (de Sardan 2013, pp. 28; 35). Effectively, while an overarching Islamist mantle may have given the impression of relative homogeneity in these complex social contexts, the histories of violence and conflicting rivalries among communities in the area were critical to the ability of diverse groups to mobilise support and recruitment.

The states in Nigeria which have subsequently experienced Islamist violence also have a long history of violent conflict, including the Maitatsine riots which took place in states across the north in the 1980s (Adesoji, 2011). In Yobe and Borno states, political elites have also relied on militia forces to intimidate opponents, among them 'ECOMOG' militias, named after the Nigerian forces in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Reno, 2002, p. 847). Interviews with diaspora civil society activists from Borno state revealed a perception that political elites in power at state level at the time of Boko Haram's emergence played an important role in the establishment and arming of non-state groups, through their concerted support for ECOMOG militias, pre-empting clashes in 2009 (Interview C, 2014). The states have also experienced sporadic outbursts of inter-communal conflict and communal militia violence against civilians marks the timeline of each of the five states from 1997-2008. Inter-communal violence has primarily occurred along religious lines, either between Christian and Muslim populations, or along sectarian lines among Muslim populations. A significant minority of these events are recorded as concerning ethnic tensions, pointing to underlying cleavages. As in Mali, there is evidence to suggest that ethnic dynamics and competition shaped recruitment and establishment of rival Islamist militias: Boko Haram has been described as dominated by members of the Kanuri ethnic group (Zenn, 2013; Agbiboa, 2013). Interviews with captured members of the group indicating the organisation's leader, Abubakar Shekau, favoured ethnically Kanuri members. By contrast, Ansaru membership is reported to be drawn more directly from the Fulani ethnic group (Zenn, 2013; Baca, 2015). The interaction between ethnic cleavages along which lines conflict had already occurred,

and mobilisation under a collective mantle suggests the salience and efficacy of Islamist militant organisations in harnessing and reformulating legacies of violence.

This history of pre-existing violence is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it highlights the importance of conceptualising Islamist violence not as a sudden disruption to politics and stability in otherwise peaceful states, but as an extension of the practices of politics endogenous to these states themselves. Effectively, each of these regions has experienced high levels of political violence: this means that violent confrontation is part of the toolkit of political opposition in these states, and is an established means by which groups seek to address issues of governance, distribution and power. Furthermore, the organisation, recruitment and targeting of violence along familiar ethnic, regional and political cleavages in all three countries, points to the centrality of previous conflict in the mobilising strategies of violent Islamists in all three contexts.

5.6.2 Key Triggering Events

There is also evidence that triggering events are linked to the onset and escalation of violence in each case study. Triggering events are not conditions for violence in themselves, but interact with grievances and a history of conflict to explain the timing and escalation of conflict in each case. State actions can help explain why violence moved from being a nascent, but relatively marginal, aspect of Islamist movements in these case studies in the pre-2009 period, to a widespread phenomenon thereafter. In each case, a critical triggering event demarcated a movement from the existing exercise of political marginalisation, to even greater levels of exclusion by the state. In such contexts, the combination of grievances, pre-existing forms of violent confrontation, and limited opportunities to affect change through non-violent channels can mean, in the eyes of militants, that 'rebellion [becomes] a legitimate strategy for countering repressive state policies' (Hafez, 2003, p. 103).

Kenya has experienced sporadic outbreaks of Islamist violence in recent decades, but a major intensification of this violence took place after the launch of Operation Linda Nchi, in which Kenya sent military forces into Somalia. In the decade preceding the October 2011 incursion, violent Islamist events occurred in Kenya at a rate of .19 per month, and at a rate of .75 per month in the twelve months immediately preceding the incursion. Since October 2011, violent Islamist events have occurred in Kenya at a rate of approximately 5.2 per month, with a concomitant escalation in the rates of fatalities associated with this violence.

The campaign has had two related effects on Islamist violence within Kenya. The first is in the mobilising effect it has had on portions of the Kenyan Muslim population who felt solidarity with Muslims in Somalia (even among those who were not of Somali ethnicity within Kenya). In May 2014, the Al Shabaab Emir, Ahmed Godane, called on Muslims in Kenya to rise up against the state, and warned the Kenyan government that it had made an historic mistake by attacking Al Shabaab in Somalia, warning that the government should not do 'a second stupid thing' by further targeting Muslims in Somalia, because 'The Westgate Operation is not far off from you,' (quoted in Mubarak 2014). Drawing on the same logic, an alleged Kenyan former Al Shabaab fighter explained his motivation for joining Al Shabaab, thusly 'Kenyan soldiers, Ugandan soldiers, they're killing people in Somalia […] It's said in the Koran if you fight jihad, you'll go to heaven. For me it's not a jihad, it's like a retaliation.' (Lowen, 2014)

The second way in which it has influenced grievances and mobilisation among Islamist militants is that it has also been accompanied by an intensification of repressive tactics used against Muslim and ethnically Somali populations within Kenya. This occurred first under the auspices of attempts to relocate Somali refugees resident in Nairobi to Dadaab refugee camp in the north-east of the country in 2012 (BBC News, 2012c), the announcement of plans to repatriate Somali refugees resident in Kenya (BBC News, 2013), and then by the expansion of security sweeps and ethnically profiled arrests under Operation Usalama Watch

in 2014 (Amnesty International, 2014a; Botha, 2014). While these campaigns have primarily (though not exclusively) targeted ethnically Somali Kenyans, Muslim populations in Coastal Kenya have also witnessed an intensification of repressive responses by the state to increased Islamist violence in Kenya, including raids, arrests and abuse in custody of Muslim suspects (MUHURI, 2013). The assassination of several Muslim clerics (*Ibid.*, 2013), which many believe to have been perpetrated by the paramilitary Anti-Terrorism Police Unit, has further escalated tensions and been directly linked to subsequent rioting and unrest in Mombasa. Survey results from Al Shabaab members in Kenya appear to confirm the centrality of perceptions of violent government and collective punishment of Muslims as motivating factors for joining the organisation: 65% referred to the government's counter-terrorism strategy, while others pointed to the assassination of Muslim leaders and extra-judicial killings of Muslims (Botha, 2014, p. 20).

Escalation in Nigeria also surrounds a critical event: the April 2011 general elections. Although the group emerged prior to this period, and engaged in clashes with security forces in 2009, the frequency of the group's activity intensified in the run-up to and following the general elections. Between January 2009 and November 2010 (six months prior to the elections), Boko Haram activity averaged around 1.6 events per month; this increased to an average of 10 events per month in the six month periods surrounding the elections; and just under 30 events per month from December 2011 onwards.[18]

The election was significant for a number of reasons, chief among them was the declaration by incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan that he would run as a candidate, with Jonathan's victory effectively ending the informal system of rotation of presidency between southern Christians and northern Muslims. The effect of this development was to create an opportunity for elite sponsors to use the nascent Islamist militant organisation as a militia to push for greater northern political inclusion and representation (*Africa Confidential*, 2012).

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[18] Source: ACLED, Version 5.

During the electoral period itself, at least some of the group's violence was explicitly focused on the election process: Boko Haram engaged in deliberate acts of violence against campaign events, rallies, polling stations and electoral offices (Thurston, 2011). There are persistent allegations that Boko Haram is funded by disgruntled politicians seeking to shift the balance of power in favour of northern elites (IRIN, 2011), further reinforcing the central role of the elections and contests for power in the evolution of the group. In the subsequent years, the campaign of violence by Boko Haram has expanded far beyond serving as a militia that initially primarily targeted security forces in the north (Dowd, 2013) and has become increasingly associated with violence against civilians. However, a critical juncture in the escalation of the group's activity can be identified in the period surrounding the election of 2011.

In Mali, the trigger for the 2012 coup, which subsequently created the opportunity for the large-scale campaign of violence by Islamists, was withdrawal of national military forces from parts of the north following a wave of violence there, speaking to both the limited capacity of the state's forces, and the region-specific challenges it faced in the north. The strategic choices made by Islamist militants to integrate themselves into particularly marginalised communities in northern Mali highlights the ways in which the recurring cycle of ethno-regional rebellions was interrupted by a transformation of this conflict into one mobilised around Islamist ideology and goals. Having established themselves as key providers of security and public goods in the region, Islamist groups then forged strategic relationships with key local elites with a history of mobilising and leading violence against the state.

Together, these cases point to a third necessary condition for the emergence of widespread Islamist violence. Building on the prevalence of grievances among Muslim populations and legacies of violent conflict in all three regions, the expansion of exclusionary practices that

further entrench marginalisation and further limit peaceful modes of affecting change, were key to the dramatic escalation of Islamist violence subsequently witnessed in all three cases.

5.6.3 Sub-national Variation

The accounts above reveal that marginalisation of Muslim communities; histories of violence; and key triggering events have played pivotal roles in the emergence and escalation of Islamist violence in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. Examining sub-national variation in these factors also helps explain the absence or lower levels of violence within and across the same countries.

The absence of grievances can in part explain the absence of Islamist violence in areas with otherwise similar demographic characteristics. For example, parts of North-West Nigeria, such as Sokoto and Zamfara, which have experienced relatively limited, also reported relatively limited grievances, nor are there consistently high rates of grievances in regions of Mali such as Ségou and Mopti. The same is true in parts of Kenya in which there are sizeable Muslim populations, such as Machackos and Siaya.

The historical experience of conflict also shapes the geography of subsequent violence. The northern Nigerian states of Jigawa and Kebbi, the Malian regions of Kayes and Koulikouro, and the Kenyan county of Kilifi, all have comparably high levels of reported grievances among Muslim populations. However, with very low rates of historical violence in each of these locations, the opportunities for violent Islamists to mobilise support are more limited, reflected in the extremely limited scope Islamist violence.

A small number of sub-national units appear to have both a high level of grievances and a history of previous violence, but do not currently witness high levels of Islamist violence. The most prominent of these cases is Marsabit County, Kenya, where both grievances and

historical violence are high. Significantly, however, these areas are invariably high-violence, although they have yet to experience high rates of Islamist violence. This exception suggests there is an alternative privileging of identity, likely around contests over power locally. If the theory outlined in this paper holds, Marsabit may be vulnerable to the reconfiguration of existing conflict into Islamist violence in the near future.

5.7   Conclusion

This article highlighted key similarities and common features across otherwise diverse religious, ethnic, political and geographic contexts in which Islamist violence has occurred. The analysis indicates that Islamist violence occurs in areas with the following three characteristics: high levels of economic, political and institutional grievances among Muslim populations; a history of pre-existing violent conflict in other forms in the area; and the expansion or intensification of this marginalisation through key triggering events in each country.

These findings underscore a new approach to Islamist violence based on local experiences and perceptions of governance, inclusion and marginalisation. In contrast to narratives emphasising the unique nature of Islamist violence, evidence indicates that tenets within Islam cannot explain the sub-national variation in locations and levels of Islamist violence: in other words, even within the same countries, members of the same religious groups may experience marginalisation differently, and may be susceptible to the transformation of existing conflict, in ways which predict the locations and intensity of violence in these sub-national spaces.

The analysis highlights the limitations of relying on conventional theories of Islamist violence, including theories of religious violence, and the diffusion of militants, as convincing explanations for its emergence. Neither theory can explain the specific locations

in which Islamist violence emergences, nor does either integrate considerations of the political, economic and institutional relations of these sub-national spaces to interrogate why communities in these areas might mobilise under this mantle. In spite of a tendency to emphasise the uniqueness of Islamist violence, this form of conflict can be understood by applying and expanding grievance-based theories of violence.

While marginalisation may be a necessary condition for the emergence of Islamist violence, it is not sufficient, and the history and legacy of both state relations, and the collective mobilisation of opposition groups in sub-national spaces are central factors in explaining the mechanism connecting these two conditions. Specifically, the history of violence in subsequently Islamist-affected areas points to the value of conceptualising Islamist violence not as a global phenomenon which disrupts otherwise peaceful political processes and relations, but as a function of those relations themselves. The ways in which states marginalise and privilege different areas and identity groups in turn becomes the basis on which opposition is mobilised: where religion serves as a condition for exclusion, marginalisation and unfair treatment, it can in turn be manipulated by conflict entrepreneurs to serve as a principle around opposition is organised.

Effectively, exclusionary and marginalising state engagement with religious communities creates opportunities for the exploitation of the grievances it produces. This understanding has implications beyond theorising the emergence of violence, but also in the responses to it: where state actions have further reinforced and entrenched the exclusion and marginalisation of Muslim populations through religious and ethno-religious profiling, this is likely to only underscore the perceived legitimacy of these identity groups as grounds for collective action.

6   Fragmentation, Conflict and Competition: Islamist Anti-Civilian Violence in sub-Saharan Africa

6.1   Abstract

In spite of the shared high profile of recent Islamist attacks on civilians in Sub-Saharan Africa, patterns of anti-civilian violence differ across and within violent Islamist groups, and the countries in which they are active. This research seeks to understand this variation by situating Islamist violence within the sub-national spaces in which such groups operate, and the wider conflict environment in which they choose to use, or limit the use of, anti-civilian violence. Drawing on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset, the research finds that violent Islamist groups are more likely to target civilians where they are the most active conflict agent, even when other conflict agents are active in the same spaces; but less likely to do so when they are relatively weak and in competition with other non-state armed groups. Anti-civilian violence is thus found to be deployed strategically by violent Islamist groups, while its function as a signalling or policing tool depends on the relative strength of groups in relation to actors in the wider conflict arena.

6.2　　　　**Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed a sharp escalation in both the frequency and intensity of Islamist violence in countries as diverse as Kenya, Nigeria and Mali. High-profile Islamist attacks on civilians such as mass killings by Al Shabaab in Kenya, and the recent intensification of anti-civilian violence by *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad* (commonly, and hereafter, referred to as Boko Haram) in Nigeria, both speak to recent dramatic shifts in the dynamics of violence by such groups.

In spite of their shared high profile, patterns of anti-civilian violence differ across and within violent Islamist groups, and countries in which they are active. Between 2009 and 2015, just under half (48.8%) of all violence attributed to Boko Haram involved the targeting of civilians, while 80% of the events attributed to Boko Haram's splinter faction, Ansaru, have targeted civilians. In nearby Mali, by contrast, violent Islamist groups have engaged in comparably lower levels of violence against civilians before, during and after the insurgency in which they seized territory. Anti-civilian violence by Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) constitutes less than a quarter of all violent events attributed to these groups (data source: ACLED, Version 6).

The same organisations also differ in their patterns of violence within a single country: in North-Eastern Kenya, Al Shabaab has engaged in extensive violence against civilians in mass attacks (BBC News 2014a). In the former Coast Province, anti-civilian violence, by contrast, has been a relatively limited feature of Al Shabaab and affiliated groups' violence, with militants targeting state forces to a greater extent. In Wajir and Garissa Counties, two in every five (40%) violent events attributed to Al Shabaab involved the targeting of civilians; compared to less than half this level (20%) in Mombasa. Similarly, the use of anti-civilian violence varies over time: violence attributed to Al Shabaab in Kenya in 2010 and 2011 primarily targeted security forces or other armed groups – anti-civilian violence made up

less than 30% of all recorded events. By 2014, this share increased to just under half (45.5%) (data source: ACLED, Version 6). What explains this variation in tactics within and across diverse countries and violent Islamist groups?

This research seeks to understand this variation by situating Islamist violence within the subnational spaces in which groups operate, and the political economy of conflict in which they choose to use, or limit the use of, anti-civilian violence. The analysis focuses attention on the multifaceted interactions between violent Islamist groups and other conflict actors in a conflict environment. The activity of violent Islamist groups is conceptualised as part of dynamic and fluid conflict environments, the contours of which are shaped by the presence, number, and relative activity levels of other conflict actors competing for popular support, wider political relevance, and/or strategic advantage.

In addition to displaying diverging profiles of anti-civilian violence, violent Islamist groups also operate in diverse conflict environments: these range from contexts such as Cameroon's Extreme North province, where in 2013 Boko Haram was the only recorded politically violent non-state actor; to Mali's Kidal region, where in the same year, there were no fewer than 11 discrete non-state violent actors (data source: ACLED, Version 6). I propose that the constellation of non-state violent groups active in a conflict environment, and their relative activity levels, influence the decision of violent Islamist groups to use or limit anti-civilian violence, through mechanisms of signalling, competition and retribution. These mechanisms are not unique to violent Islamist groups, but they are particularly significant in light of the fact that Islamist violence typically occurs in locations with a pre-existing history of violent conflict. In these contexts, religious, and specifically Islamist, mobilisation may be a relatively recent phenomenon compared to other long-standing and politically salient mobilisation bases such as ethnic and regional identities, which may shape the decisions to target civilians and/or vie for their support.

The focus on violent Islamist groups in this paper is justified for two reasons: first, as discussed above, both Islamist violence, and Islamist anti-civilian violence in particular, are prevalent and growing phenomena in Africa, with serious implications for the safety and security of populations; the economic and political development of states; and the political stability, resilience and fragility of conflict-affected states. This presents an urgent case for understanding the conditions in which this form of violence proliferates, the conditions that shape particular strategies of violent conflict, and the relationship between violent Islamist groups and other non-Islamist counterparts in affected areas. Second, violent Islamist groups present a test case for a theory of anti-civilian violence as a strategy of relatively novel forms of violent collective agent. There is an extensive literature on the use of anti-civilian violence by ethnically mobilised groups (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012; Lilja and Hultman, 2011) largely speaking to dominant conceptualisations of African politics and conflict in terms of ethno-regional cleavages. Extending analysis to a sub-set of violent actors who do not coalesce along these familiar faultlines, but nevertheless engage in extensive civilian targeting, presents an opportunity to explore how collective mobilisation along an alternative faultline interacts with existing conflict dynamics and agents to create conditions for anti-civilian violence. The research, therefore, does not assume that violent Islamist groups inherently behave differently to other violent actors, but rather that their emergence as an alternative form of conflict mobilisation presents an opportunity to explore hypotheses at the intersection of collective mobilisation, group competition, and anti-civilian violence.

The paper makes three original contributions. First, it finds that levels of anti-civilian violence are conditioned by the conflict environments in which violent Islamist groups operate. In environments where violent Islamist groups are the *Most Violent Actor* (MVA), they are more likely to target civilians. I argue that anti-civilian violence in these environments serves a signalling function, providing information about a group's geographic reach, relative strength and operational capacity, to other conflict actors including the state

(Boyle, 2009; Raleigh, 2012). Consequently, the research illustrates that violent Islamist groups are not a homogenous entity: their activity is shaped by the political economy of violence in their operating contexts, and anti-civilian violence is deployed strategically within these environments. Variations both across and within groups, and across and within countries, suggest that ideological or group-based explanations of anti-civilian violence which attribute civilian targeting by violent Islamist groups to ideological or religious motivations (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Bolanos, 2012; Ranstorp, 1996) are insufficient explanations of both overall violence, and the variation exhibited within it.

Second, drawing on existing literature on the fragmentation and proliferation of agents in a conflict environment (Pearlman and Cunningham, 2012; Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012; Driscoll, 2012), the research finds that while overall levels of anti-civilian violence are positively correlated to the number of discrete non-state armed groups active within a space, the relationship between Islamist violence and the number of non-state armed groups is more complex, and shaped by the relative activity levels of actors. In environments where violent Islamist groups are not the MVA, the presence of other non-state armed groups *reduces* both the share of overall anti-civilian violence, and the share of Islamist violence targeted at civilians. In environments where violent Islamist groups are the MVA, the presence of other non-state armed groups corresponds to both higher levels of total anti-civilian violence as a share of all violence, and the share of Islamist violence that targets civilians. In other words, violent Islamist groups adapt their strategies of anti-civilian violence according to the number and relative activity levels of other armed actors. I argue that this reflects a strategy of limiting anti-civilian violence in cases where violent Islamist groups are weaker, nascent actors seeking to mobilise on the basis of a relatively new form of collective action. By contrast, in locations where they are MVA, these groups are less constrained by the need to appeal to civilian populations for support. These findings further underscore the strategic use of anti-civilian violence, and offer insights into the complex ways in which groups seek to situate themselves within a population at various stages of their development.

Third, the research speaks more broadly to the literature on anti-civilian violence in Africa, finding that explanations of this phenomenon that suggest it serves a signalling function (Boyle, 2009; Raleigh, 2012), or that it is deployed as retribution (Kalyvas, 2006; Wickham-Crowley, 1990), are not mutually exclusive. Rather, both may explain the phenomenon of anti-civilian violence in different environments: which theory best explains the targeting of civilians depends on the relative strength and configurations of armed actors. Therefore, understanding of anti-civilian violence is improved when it takes account of the wider conflict environment, its constellation of actors, and their relative activity levels. The research has implications beyond Islamist violence alone, to a potentially wider universe of actors who engage in innovate mobilisation along new or nascent forms of identity, for which the activity of violent Islamist groups in Africa provides an initial test.

The research draws on empirical data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010). First, I demonstrate the conditions that shape variation in anti-civilian violence through a quantitative, cross-country, sub-national model of Islamist violence in Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Tanzania. I then illustrate these patterns through a focus on dynamics of Islamist anti-civilian violence in key cases. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 outlines existing theories of Islamist violence and targeting of civilians in conflict, and an alternative theory of this escalation embedded in the fragmentation and cohesion of conflict environments within which these groups operate; Section 2 outlines a research design and test of this theory; before detailed discussion of selected groups in Section 3, and conclusion in Section 4.

6.3   Islamist Anti-Civilian Violence

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Islamist' refers to political or social activity by groups that promote or enforce Islamic ideologies, laws, policies or customs in the state

and/or society (Esposito, 2003; ICG, 2005; Dowd, 2015a).[19] Islamism is associated with multiple disciplines and traditions within Islam, reflected in a wide range of political, social and religious activity (ICG, 2005). To classify groups for this study, qualitative research into their stated goals, objectives and ideologies was undertaken, and groups were only included if they were found to explicitly espouse an agenda which meets these conditions. Importantly, the groups classified as Islamist in this study self-identify as Islamist if not through direct use of this label, then through their use of Islamic tropes to characterise and frame themselves and their agendas of action. The term 'violent' is used as a qualifier to 'Islamist,' to narrowly to refer only to those groups which employ physical force against other people in pursuit of that agenda.

Anti-civilian violence is conceptualised as the deliberate, one-sided targeting of non-combatants by armed groups. While the intentionality of clandestine groups is difficult to determine robustly, I follow previous quantitative research on anti-civilian violence in taking recorded instances of attacks on civilians as evidence of this phenomenon (Asal, Brown and Schulzke, 2015). Following other research, events in which civilians are killed in crossfire or otherwise unintentionally in clashes between armed actors are not coded as anti-civilian violence (although they are counted in levels of overall violence), in order to focus exclusively on those deliberate attacks targeting unarmed civilians (Hultman, 2008).

The phenomenon of Islamist targeting of civilians in conflict has been explored in several studies. One set of existing theories focuses on the ideological motivations of violent Islamist groups, contending that religious violence is uniquely violent, lethal or intractable because religious violence is imbued with other-worldly referents, and is 'particularly savage and lethal' as a result of the placement of 'religious images of divine struggle – cosmic war – in the service of worldly political battles.'(Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 149-150).

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[19] The term 'Islamist' is preferred over more normatively associated terms such as 'extremist,' 'fundamentalist,' or 'radical,' and over more doctrinally-specific terms such as 'Salafi,' 'Jihadist,' and similar. For a full discussion of the debates surrounding the use of these terms, *see* Hegghammer (2009) and Kramer (2003).

Other theories propose that perpetrators frame religious violence in sweeping cultural-identifying terms: the enemies of religious militants are all members of another society, culture, religion, or group, not just official, political representatives (Enders and Sandler, 2000, p. 311). This 'dehumanization of "the other"' facilitates the broad-sweeping labelling of legitimate targets (Bolanos, 2012, p. 31) and 'may loosen the moral constraints,' (Ranstorp, 1996, p. 54) which usually limit the scope and targeting of violent acts. By this logic, for groups '[m]otivated by religious ideology, the line that separates civilians from "legitimate" targets is blurred.' (Asal, Brown and Schulzke, 2015, p. 6). On the specificity of Islamist violence, some scholars contend that the role of martyrdom, and its association in some belief systems with purification, lends religiously motivated militancy its particularly violent dimension. As Enders and Sandler state, 'religious terrorist groups act out of a desire to satisfy their own goals (e.g., ascend to heaven) rather than win favour with an external constituency.' By this logic, violence itself 'may be viewed as a purifying act.' (Enders and Sandler, 2000, p. 311).

This theoretical and case study-focused literature has prompted a range of quantitative analyses. Some researchers have found support for these theories: Enders and Sandler present data on the basis of which they argue that 'the growth of religious terrorism appears to account for the increased severity of terrorist attacks since the last quarter of 1991.' (Enders and Sandler, 2000, p. 307). Elsewhere, however, quantitative analyses have challenged theories emphasising the uniqueness of religious and Islamist violence. Piazza contends that the role of organisational linkages is a significant determinant of lethality: although Islamist terrorist groups have a higher casualty rate than other violent ideological groups, this effect disappears when affiliation to Al-Qaeda is controlled for, in which case such groups function similarly to secular counterparts with universal or abstract goals (Piazza, 2009). In a related vein, de Soysa and Nordås analyse data on political terror to determine whether Muslim-dominated societies experience higher levels of violent state repression than others; and conclude that the share of the Muslim population and

Membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference actually predict lower levels of political terror (de Soysa and Nordås, 2007). These studies do not deny the fact that religion has been mobilised for violent means, across all major religions over the course of history (Rapoport, 1984), but illustrate rather that its role as a motivator of violent action – as opposed to merely a means of organising it – and as a determinant of particular modalities, forms or intensities of violence, remain contested.

As noted above, however, violent Islamist groups vary in the targeting of civilians, across organisations, and over space and time. I propose that the explanation for this variation lies in the discrete contours of the conflict environment within which these groups operate, rather than in ideological or doctrinal accounts of a tendency towards particular violent methods.

6.3.1 Anti-civilian Violence as Strategy

Beyond the literature on religious and Islamist violence specifically, theories of anti-civilian violence more broadly have conceptualised the targeting of non-combatants as a deliberate strategy, used to create new frontiers of conflict (Raleigh, 2012), improve bargaining position relative to the state or impose political and military costs on the state (Hultman, 2007, 2008), and communicate the ability and determination of groups to achieve their objectives (Hoffman and McCormick, 2004). This literature argues that violence has a strategic function, and has parallels in the sub-literature on decision-making by terrorist and other non-state actors (*see* McCormick, 2003). For violent groups, anti-civilian violence serves to extract political concessions by increasing the political relevance of the perpetrating group. Political relevance can be increased in several ways: through resources, violence, or popular support, with the expansion or limitation of violence serving to bolster support, challenge the state, or control territory (de Waal, 2014).

In extending the theory of the strategic use of violence, a growing literature explores the consequences of non-state actor fragmentation, splintering and proliferation, including its implications for the duration, intensity, outcomes and resolution of conflicts (Cunningham, 2006; Kydd and Walter, 2006; Johnston, 2007; Nilsson, 2008; Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2009; Cunningham, 2013; Findley and Rudloff, 2012). One approach focuses on the process of 'outbidding' whereby multiple groups compete for public support, and anti-civilian violence serves to 'persuade the enemy that the group is strong enough and resolute enough to inflict serious costs, so that the enemy yields to the terrorists' demands.' (Kydd and Walter, 2006, p. 51). Similarly, outbidding as a function of the proliferation of armed groups has been found to intensify suicide bombings as 'the litmus test of militancy,'(Bloom, 2004, p. 116). By this logic, groups seek to 'outflank' one another in bargaining for positions using violence (Boyle, 2009, p. 262), and 'maneuver for primacy,' in a 'shared political market' characterised by 'a competitive dynamic.' (Bacon, 2014, p. 7). Other research has specified that it is not only the number of groups, but fluctuations in these numbers, reflected in the entry of new groups to a conflict; alongside direct clashes between different factions, that drive competition and, consequently, civilian targeting (Wood and Kathman, 2015). Finally, weaker groups are also reported to rely more on anti-civilian violence because of the limited alternative resources at their disposal to influence populations (Wood, 2010). In other words, anti-civilian is employed to influence outside observers – either the state, or the population from which a group might draw support – with implications for the conferral of legitimacy and political relevance onto perpetrating groups.

The existing literature is primarily concerned, however, with the fragmentation of a single political movement, for example, self-determination movements all pursuing a single objective (secession), while some take even non-violent political parties and groups into account in measures of fragmentation (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012). This model of conflict assumes that while actors may not be unitary, and group divisions may not

be dyadic, the ultimate cleavage that shapes conflict behaviour is binary, with non-state actors all pursuing similar objectives, and competing with one another to represent those shared objectives in negotiation with the state. Consequently, conflicts are understood through a 'dual contest' framework, by which individual factions are engaged in two simultaneous conflicts:

> 'First, self-determination challengers engage the state to achieve their collective policy aims. This competition generally centers on how much political control groups will have over their own affairs […] Second, separatist challengers also compete with factions within the same ethnic group (i.e., co-ethnic factions) to maintain or increase their political relevance in the competition with the state.' (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, pp. 69, 72).

Research based on this conceptualisation of conflict finds that the proliferation of armed groups corresponds to higher levels of anti-civilian violence, or particular forms of violence, such as suicide bombing (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012; Bloom, 2004).

However, this approach typically takes as case studies those conflicts in which only one type contest – for instance, a self-determination struggle – in which only one cleavage (that of independence) is a basis for mobilization. While actors involved in these conflicts are conceptualized as fragmented, the contests themselves typically coalesce along a single cleavage. However, complex contests may see violent actors engaged in multifaceted, cross-cutting conflicts, drawing on overlapping bases of mobilization, such as religion and/or ethnicity in multi-religious and multi-ethnic contexts. By reducing conflict to a dual contest – in which there is only the state and the opposition movement being represented, however fragmented that movement may be – scholars may risk replicating the same 'groupism' they seek to redress in other research.

This is particularly relevant to the conceptualization of Islamist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. One characteristic feature of Islamist conflicts in Africa is their emergence in areas in which other social and cultural cleavages – among the most salient, ethnic and regional

identities – are powerful bases of mobilisation and historical conflict (Dowd, 2015b). While the emergence of Islamist violence is not an exclusively recent phenomenon in all country cases – with Nigeria, in particular, exhibiting a longer history of violent conflict along these lines (Last, 2008) – the recent wave of violence by Islamist groups nevertheless represents a distinct shift in previous violence patterns, with a particularly sharp increase in violence from 2009 onwards across the continent (Dowd, 2013). This mobilisation, therefore, constitutes a relatively recent and innovative form of collectivising violence, which contrasts with more established and salient forms of mobilisation. The example of the reconfiguration of Mali's northern secessionist conflict – historically, primarily ethno-regional in its bases and claims – is one illustration of this rebranding.

In these contexts, the logic of anti-civilian violence might diverge from that documented in existing literature, as violent Islamist groups are engaged in a *triple* contest: first, against the state; second, against other non-state actors *vis-a-vis* their political relevance to the state; and third, against other non-state actors *vis-a-vis* their appeal to civilians. This may alter the logic and fronts of violent contest. Violent Islamist groups thereby challenge the state; signal to other groups and the state their significance and relevance; but given the multiple bases on which civilians can identify themselves, they also need to elicit support from civilians, particularly in the early or weaker stages of their operations. As such, they may limit their use of anti-civilian violence when they need to compete with other potential rivals and/or forge alliances. I expect that the extent to which violent Islamist groups limit or expand their use of anti-civilian violence will be shaped by their relative activity levels when compared with other non-state armed actors. In contexts where violent Islamist groups are competing with other prominent non-state armed actors for support and relevance (and are, therefore, not the MVA), anti-civilian violence will be more limited.

Hypothesis 1: Locations in which violent Islamist groups are not the most violent actor and face competition from other non-state armed groups will experience lower levels of anti-civilian violence.

6.3.2 Anti-civilian Violence as Retribution

Anti-civilian violence has also been conceptualised as a form of retributive policing of populations, often in response to perceived opposition. Some theories place this retributive role at the centre of the logic of anti-civilian violence. In the context of non-state armed actors, rebels might prey upon rural populations among which they have no support, if their original base is primarily urban, or as a way of securing compliance from the wider population and punishing population defections to the enemy's side (Mkandawire, 2002; Wickham-Crowley, 1990; Kalyvas, 2006).

Other research has explored interactions between different armed groups and levels of anti-civilian violence, arguing that these vary together. Weintraub maintains that competition between groups seeking to control territory 'breeds accountability' and suppresses anti-civilian violence; while competition between territory-seeking groups and a group which does not seek territory, and therefore does not rely to the same degree on civilian support, results in higher anti-civilian violence by both sides. This is a consequence of territory-seeking groups' attempts to 'stamp out anti-rebel mobilizations and signal to other communities the danger of resisting insurgents.' (Weintraub, 2013, p. 1).

Few of these theories, however, can explain variation in anti-civilian violence over time and space, within and across groups with similar ideologies. The need for violent Islamist groups to enforce compliance among a population is likely to be relatively consistent, at least within relatively small geographic units, and should expand commensurate to the territory in which

they operate. In other words, if compliance and retribution alone dictated the level and intensity of anti-civilian violence, we should expect it to be relatively consistent across time and within groups. However, empirical evidence suggests that these vary considerably, even within the same group, suggesting that factors such as policing cannot alone explain this variation. A theory of anti-civilian violence must therefore be dynamic, to reflect the changing nature of conflict environments, and the adaptive strategies employed by armed groups.

Combining this strand of research with findings on the interactions between armed groups suggests a role for retributive violence against civilians in certain circumstances only. While the proliferation of other actors suppresses anti-civilian violence through greater competition for civilian support, and violent Islamist group strength drives higher levels of violence against civilians as the group increasingly uses it to signal to the state and other contenders, this relationship is not entirely linear. Challenges to the MVA's dominance from nascent or weaker actors may again alter the calculation by which groups estimate the need for and benefits of anti-civilian violence. I hypothesise that the emergence of challengers in contexts where violent Islamist groups are already the MVA drives a further increase in violence against civilians. This is a function of the MVA seeking to maintain dominance, and taking additional repressive or violent measures to dissuade contenders and punish defectors. This is an evolution of the calculation by which violent Islamist groups abide when they are weaker actors among a larger pool of pretenders to political relevance.

Hypothesis 2: Locations in which violent Islamist groups are the most violent actor and face competition from other non-state armed groups will experience higher levels of anti-civilian violence.

6.4   Research Design

I test these hypotheses using disaggregated violent event data of recorded violence attributed to Islamist and non-Islamist violent groups. In this research, counts of recorded violent activity are operationalised as a proxy for groups' presence and relative strength *vis-a-vis* other actors: whether or not a violent Islamist group is the MVA is determined by whether or not they have the highest recorded levels of violence among non-state actors in that territory. Recorded incidents of violence reflect a physical presence, with high levels of violence indicating that groups are likely to have considerable organisational and operating capacity within a space. This provides one measure of estimating the relative strength and position of violent groups, as I assume that in general, the most active conflict agent (the MVA) is more dominant in a conflict environment than less active counterparts.

This approach has some limitations, including obscuring contexts in which groups who are dominant in a conflict are *not* the most active agent precisely because of their unrivalled control over a space. Alternative measures of group capability in conflict might instead rely on estimates of troop size, resource base, or control over territory. However, these approaches also suffer some several drawbacks, including limited disaggregated and temporally dynamic information, with wide-ranging estimates of troop size or resource base often a) determined from a snapshot assessment of a single group at a given time, b) lacking detail on variation over sub-national space, and c) providing limited scope for inter-group comparability. In light of these disadvantages, I argue that recorded group violence levels remain a relevant lens through which to estimate group strength, as they demonstrate the intensity and scope of a group's violence, and, importantly, the extent to which a group presents a viable security threat.

The hypotheses are tested using a panel dataset drawing on conflict event data from ACLED, where conflict event counts are aggregated by date and location (Raleigh *et al*., 2010). The unit of analysis is the sub-national Administrative Level 1 (ADM1) unit by year. The dataset

includes observations from 154 sub-national administrative units from seven countries in Africa affected by Islamist violence (Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Tanzania). These countries were selected because of the emergence of high levels violent Islamist actors within them in recent years, and the presence of other, overlapping and crosscutting violent conflict actors, against which to test the theories outlined above.[20] The sub-national level of analysis is particularly appropriate in contexts where a specific form or agent of violence is geographically concentrated, rather than uniformly distributed across the country, as national-level theories assume; and in countries with multiple, overlapping conflicts (Rustad *et al*, 2011; Buhaug and Lujala, 2005). The countries in question also represent a range of contexts, including diverse religious and demographic profiles, varied conflict dynamics, and regional variation with representative cases in East and West Africa, which allows for the findings to be more widely generalizable. Data is drawn from the period 1997 to 2015, producing 2,926 ADM1-year observations.

6.4.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variables are the percentage of all non-state armed actor violence which targets civilians by ADM1, by year (*All ACV Events Percent*); the percentage of all anti-civilian violence attributed to violent Islamist groups by ADM1, by year (*Islamist Percent of All ACV Events*); and the percentage of all Islamist violence which targets civilians by ADM1, by year (*Islamist ACV Events Percent*). Robustness tests also include the same percentages calculated based on reported fatalities. These three measures are chosen because they capture related, but distinct features of the conflict environment: the first two measures capture the wider context in which anti-civilian violence is deployed by all non-state violent actors; while the third, captures the use of this strategy by violent Islamists exclusively.

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[20] The sample excludes several potential case studies in the wider African region: North African countries are excluded because of the divergent historical legacies and contemporary dynamics of Islamist violence in the region, in contrast to its relatively recent emergence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Somalia is excluded because of insufficient temporally specific control data at the sub-national geographic level for much of the period under review.

While the third variable most directly reflects the strategic decision of violent Islamist groups to expend energy and resources targeting civilians relative to other violent strategies and tactics, it is plausible that the wider conflict environment – including whether anti-civilian violence is a common or rare tactic in that context – may also shape this decision. For example, where anti-civilian violence is a frequently used tactic, then the measure of the share of this perpetrated by violent Islamists is important.

The percentage of anti-civilian events, as opposed to an absolute count of the same incidents, is preferred for two reasons. First, this research seeks to directly test the effect of other actors, and the wider conflict environment, on strategies deployed by violent Islamist groups: the percentage share of anti-civilian violence, and that attributed to violent Islamist groups specifically, provides a relative measure of the degree of violence that is targeted against civilians. Second, because absolute measures of anti-civilian violence may be biased by high-activity areas, in which highly active groups engage in overall higher levels of civilian targeting. However, the degree to which less active groups target civilians remains relevant: while groups with greater resources or higher capacity (both of which are difficult to measure in absolute and comparative terms) may have a greater ability to target civilians, the choice of less active groups to dedicate resources, time and energy to the expansion, or limitation, of civilian targeting, remains an important factor in civilian vulnerability. For example, in absolute terms, AQIM, engages in higher levels of anti-civilian violence than the average for violent Islamist groups on the continent (with 91 recorded discrete events), but proportionally, this constitutes only 14% of all recorded activity, well below the average of violent Islamist counterparts (39.8%). By contrast, numerous groups have engaged in only limited, sporadic incidents of anti-civilian violence, but these constitute a disproportionate share of their overall recorded activity. Calculating the percentage share of violence dedicated to civilian targeting offers an understanding of the strategic decision to target civilians, irrespective of sometimes limited resources, regardless of operating capacity more broadly.

Anti-civilian violence includes events in which civilians are directly targeted in proximate attacks by armed groups, such as raids and killings (events categorised as Violence against Civilians in the ACLED dataset), and remote attacks against civilian targets, such as bombings (events categorised as Remote Violence in ACLED, in which civilians are coded as the primary target). Events in the dataset are attributed to specific perpetrating actors, and included in counts of Islamist or other actors' violence based on whether the perpetrating group meets the definition of Islamist referred to earlier. For example, all violent events involving Boko Haram in Nigeria are categorised as Islamist events, in light of the group's stated agenda, regardless of whether or not a specific violent act was carried out with the direct intention or effect of furthering an Islamist-framed ideology.

Event counts exclude all non-violent events such as protests or troop movements, and all events attributed to unidentified actors and state or inter-governmental forces. Unattributed events are excluded because the category of unidentified armed groups likely masks a diversity of actors, and cannot be confidently assumed to represent a single actor, thereby artificially biasing measures of actor proliferation downwards.

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table I.

6.4.2 Independent Variable

The number of actors in an environment is calculated by a count of all discrete, non-state, non-Islamist violent groups active in the ADM1, by year (*CNTD NonIslamist*). As with calculations of event counts, unidentified groups are excluded from the count to avoid aggregating multiple actors under a single category.

To explore the relationship between agent activity levels, competition, and anti-civilian violence, I create a categorical measure (*MVA Category*) is used to disaggregate the ADM1 years by conflict environment. It is calculated by comparing the number of non-civilian targeted events attributed to each distinct group in the ADM1 by year: whether or not a violent Islamist group is the MVA is determined by whether or not they have the highest recorded levels of violence among non-state actors in that territory. Events involving anti-civilian violence are excluded from the calculation because I hypothesise that this is an outcome conditioned by relative strength, rather than a component of it. In this variable, a measure of 1 indicates that violent Islamist groups are the MVA; a measure of .5 indicates that a violent Islamist groups is active in that ADM1 that year, but not the MVA; and a measure of 0 indicates that violent Islamist groups are not active in the administrative unit that year.

Control variables include data on relative size of the Muslim population at the sub-national level, drawn from religious demography data from the World Religions Database (WRD, Johnson and Grimm, 2013). The variable is sub-national, but owing to the construction of the religious data from a range of sources over time, it is static over the course of the dataset. I also include a logged population measure (*LogPop*), to control for large population size distorting high event counts. This variable is sub-national, and dynamic. A national-level and dynamic logged GDP measure (*LogGDP*) controls for the potential influence of higher or lower wealth levels. To control for the possible effects of poverty on violence levels, a proxy scalar measure of infant mortality rates (*IMR*) is included (CIESIN, 2000). Models include a control for the targeting of violence in seats of political power through the inclusion of a dummy variable for the administrative units of capital cities (*Capital*).

All models include controls for lagged events from the previous year in the same administrative unit, to control for dependence in violence over time. Following Raleigh and de Bruijne, a sum of corresponding anti-civilian violence events in adjacent geographic units

has also been created for each violence type, to control for potential spillover effects of violence, and groups active across both sub-national and national borders (Raleigh and de Bruijne, 2015). Although the countries are not included in the study, the neighbouring violence variable includes counts of violence levels in Algeria and Somalia border areas, which may have an effect on the physical diffusion of Islamist violence into the sample countries.

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table II.

6.4.3 Results

Tables III, IV and V outline model specifics. Models 1-3 test whether anti-civilian violence increases with competition between violent Islamist groups and other non-state groups, and offer strong support for both Hypothesis 1 and 2 in the context of overall levels of anti-civilian violence. Model 1 demonstrates that the general prediction of existing literature that anti-civilian violence will increase in highly fragmented conflict environments, holds in the case of non-Islamist violence. Where violent Islamist groups are entirely absent, there is a strong, positive correlation between the number of discrete non-state armed actors and the share of total non-state armed violence that targets civilians. These results contrast with the outcome of Models 2 and 3. Where violent Islamist groups are active, but not the MVA, there is a statistically significant, and negative, relationship between the number of discrete non-state armed groups, and the share of violence that targets civilians. By contrast, where violent Islamist groups are the MVA, a higher number of non-state armed actors corresponds to an increase in the share of civilian targeting.

Hypothesis 1 is tested in Models 4 and 6, and likewise, finds strong support. Model 4 tests whether the share of anti-civilian violence in an area attributed to violent Islamist groups decreases with a larger number of other groups, and finds a strong and significant, negative relationship. This indicates that violent Islamist groups' share of anti-civilian violence declines when they face competition. While this may be a consequence of the larger number of groups active in a region (the greater the number of non-state actors operating in the same location, the less likely it is that violent Islamist groups will be disproportionately responsible for a high share of anti-civilian violence), Model 6 provides a further test. It examines whether the share of all Islamist violence which is dedicated to targeting civilians is affected by the number of other groups, and finds the same results: where violent Islamist groups are active, but not the MVA, the number of groups is significantly and negatively associated with the total share of Islamist violence in which civilians are targeted. The findings thus suggest that where violent Islamist groups are forced to compete with other non-state groups – i.e., in cases where they are not the MVA, and where other groups vie with them for civilian support and relevance – they are less likely to employ strategies of anti-civilian violence.

Hypothesis 2 is tested in Models 5 and 7. Where violent Islamist groups are the MVA, a higher number of non-state armed groups is positively correlated with both the share of all civilian targeting attributed to violent Islamists, and the share of all Islamist activity dedicated to anti-civilian violence. In other words, the more distinct groups there are present in an area of high Islamist activity levels, the more likely it is these groups will expend energy targeting civilians over other violent actors. The findings are somewhat counter-intuitive: in contexts where other non-state armed groups proliferate, we may expect violent Islamist groups to challenge other non-state armed actors. In fact, their position as the most active group means they are more likely to expend resources and energy targeting civilians as part of a strategy of retribution and punishment.

Predictive margins show the predicted share of Islamist violence that targets civilians varies alongside the relative activity level of violent Islamists, and the number of other discrete non-state actors, holding control variables at their mean. In Models 6 and 7, results show that the predicted share of Islamist violence that targets civilians moves in different directions in relation to the discrete number of groups, depending on whether violent Islamists are the MVA. Where they are the MVA, and there are no other groups, the predicted share of Islamist violence which targets civilians is .328; this rises to .426 when there are two other groups; and .524 when there are four other groups active in the same space (*see* Figure 5). By contrast, the predicted share of Islamist violence targeting civilians declines in relation to the discrete number of other groups: when violent Islamists are active but are not the MVA, and there are two other groups active, the predicted share of Islamist violence targeting civilians is .546; this falls to .411 when there are four other groups active; and .276 when there are six other groups active (*see* Figure 6). In substantive terms, this corresponds to a declining probability of targeting of civilians of almost half.
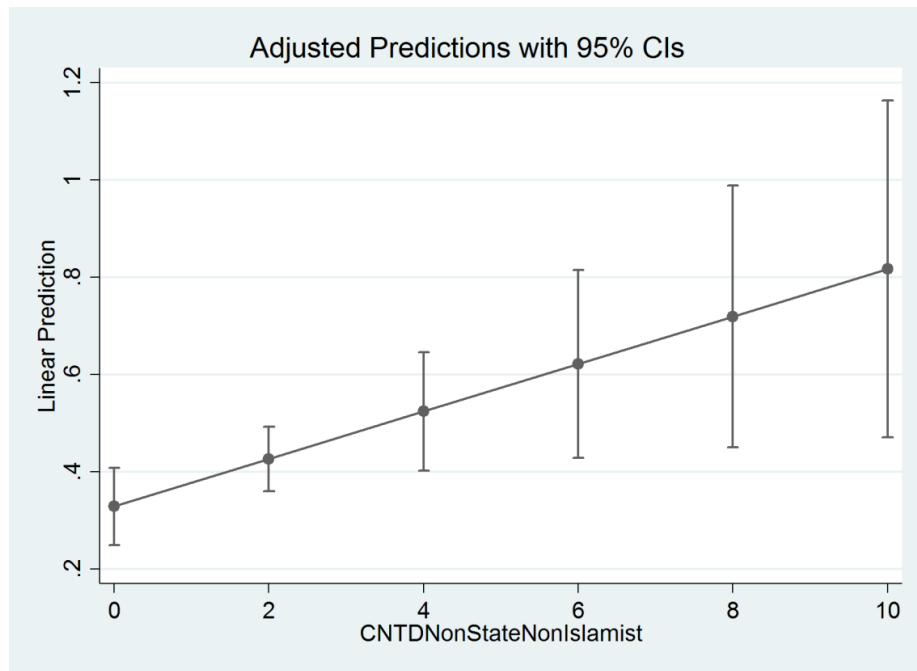
Figure 5: Predicted percentage of Islamist violence that targets civilians, when Islamist groups are the MVA, by number of discrete non-state non-Islamist violent groups.
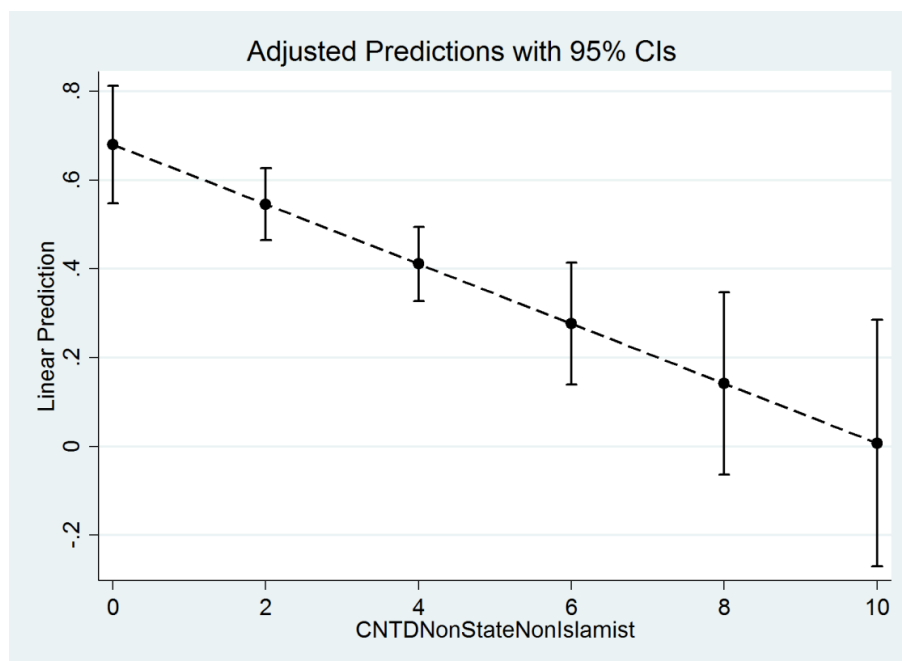

Figure 6: Predicted percentage of Islamist violence that targets civilians, when Islamist groups are not the MVA, by number of discrete non-state non-Islamist violent groups.

6.4.4 Robustness Tests

A series of sensitivity analyses assess the robustness of these findings. In the first test, the observations from sub-samples in which violent Islamists are absent, active but not the MVA, and the MVA, are combined in a single model. I then interact the proportion of all non-state violence attributed to violent Islamists, with the discrete count of non-Islamist non-state actors. The resulting measure is highest where both the share of all non-state violence attributed to Islamists is high, *and* the number of other non-state armed groups is also high; and it is lowest in the reverse case. Interacting these terms increases the observations in the sample, and facilitates a test on the interaction between these two variables. The results hold: where violent Islamist groups are both dominant, and face multiple challenges, they are more likely to dedicate resources to targeting civilians.

In a second test, event counts are replaced with fatality counts. A single conflict event can vary widely from a low- to an extremely high-intensity incident. Substituting events for fatality counts also indirectly provides a control for the varying modalities of anti-civilian violence, ranging from low-intensity, targeted attacks, to the mass atrocities that have characterised recent violence in North-Eastern Nigeria (Mark, 2015). Tests were re-run with reported fatalities grouped by all anti-civilian violence and Islamist anti-civilian violence specifically as the dependent variables, with corresponding temporal and geographic controls. The results hold across all models, attesting to the robustness of the relationships across different measures of conflict frequency and intensity.

Third, in order to test whether direct conflict with other non-state armed groups influences strategy, as Wood and Kathman (2015) suggest, the models are re-run with controls for the number of discrete conflict events in which violent Islamists clash with other non-state armed groups, typically including vigilante and communal militias. The results hold and retain their statistical significance in all models: where violent Islamists are active, but in a

weaker position relative to a larger number of non-state counterparts, they are less likely to target civilians, across all measures of anti-civilian violence. The variable measuring clashes between Islamist and non-Islamist groups, however, does not reach statistical significance in any model. This suggests that open violence between discrete armed groups does not necessarily dictate the degree of anti-civilian violence: it may be sufficient for other armed groups to be operating in a shared environment, and thus creating competition between different organisations, without direct violent engagement between them. These results may differ from Wood and Kathman's because they focus exclusively on one sub-set of violent actor – violent Islamists – in contrast to all rebel groups. As outlined above, the logic of violent competition between this relatively novel category of violent actor may differ in fundamental ways from that of rebel groups mobilising along more conventional faultlines of ethnicity or region, for example, thus rendering weaker violent Islamist organisations more susceptible to competitive logics, and therefore more sensitive to its effects on civilian relations, than counterparts.

Fourth, while the focus of this research is on the relationship between non-state actors and their strategic targeting of civilians, state violence may also influence these choices. Where Islamist groups suffer losses in contests with the state, or the state pushes groups out of territory, this may drive them to prey upon civilian populations (Hultman, 2008; Mkandawire, 2002). To control for this, the models are re-run including a measure of violent clashes between state forces and violent Islamist groups. The overall results hold: when violent Islamists are the MVA, this remains positively correlated to anti-civilian violence, while state violence involving Islamist groups is insignificant in almost all models. In addition, higher numbers of discrete non-state groups in areas where violent Islamist groups are not the MVA remains negatively correlated with anti-civilian violence; while higher numbers of discrete non-state groups in areas where Islamist groups are the MVA agent remains positively correlated to anti-civilian violence. State violence is only statistically significant in models measuring the share of all Islamist violence that targets civilians,

where it is negatively related to levels of anti-civilian violence. This result is understandable, as a higher number of clashes between violent Islamists and state forces will necessarily reduce the proportion of violence that is dedicated to anti-civilian attacks. It remains insignificant in other models.

A final robustness test sought to verify the findings by substituting ACLED data with event counts coded from an alternative dataset, UCDP-GEDP (Sundberg, Lindgren and Padskocimaite, 2010; Melander and Sundberg, 2011). The results did not hold: Models 1-3 returned insignificant results for independent variables, while Models 4-10 were not replicable due to the smaller number of observations available through the UCDP-GED dataset. This divergence may be attributed to differences in the period of coverage and variations in coding procedures by both datasets. The UCDP-GED dataset does not contain records for the countries in question beyond the year 2010, excluding four years in which the vast majority (92.7%) of Islamist violence in the countries under review is recorded in ACLED. This time period excludes the period of intensification of Boko Haram activity in Northern Nigeria from 2011, the Islamist-led insurgency in northern Mali in 2012, and the escalation of Al Shabaab and affiliate activity in Kenya from late 2011. In addition to excluding key periods of intensification, the UCDP-GED dataset also excludes significant variation in the key subject of this study, anti-civilian violence: the dataset contains 31 records of Boko Haram activity in Nigeria, all of which is coded as state-based violence, and none of which involves the targeting of civilians. These variations may explain the lack of comparability in results.

6.5 Discussion

The findings above highlight broad, comparative trends that hold across a wide range of contexts in which violent Islamist groups are active in Sub-Saharan Africa. They also have

strong support in a closer analysis of the dynamics of individual conflict contexts and actors. In Kenya, for example, there is evidence of dynamics of anti-civilian violence in areas of Islamist dominance. Al Shabaab has claimed responsibility for large-scale attacks on civilians in Lamu, deliberately targeting 'Christian settlers' in an apparent bid to provoke conflict between Muslim and Christian communities in a context of highly politicised ethnic land relations (BBC News, 2014b). In spite of this history of tension and pre-existing conflict, Lamu is also a location in which Al Shabaab militants are the most active conflict agent, with very few other non-state violent actors present to generate competition or deter anti-civilian violence. Similarly, the recent attacks on civilians in Garissa also took place in a context in which Al Shabaab is the MVA (BBC News, 2015). However, in Garissa, a location in which there are high levels of inter-communal violence, Al Shabaab's violence may be seen as an attempt to more directly punish civilian populations and deter violence from other groups. Both contexts reflect the hypothesised relationships detailed above.

Illustrating the variation in strategies both within groups, and within the same country, there is also evidence in Kenya of the limited use of anti-civilian violence in contexts of greater non-state actor competition. Anti-civilian violence by Al Shabaab in Kenya's southern coastal County of Mombasa has been more limited, in a context where Al Shabaab has typically not been the most active agent, or MVA. Mombasa is an extremely diverse county, and host to a range of other groups, seeking to mobilise collective action along diverse different identity bases, including ethnic grounds among communal militias, and on the basis of a regional 'Coasterian' identity, as evidenced by the Mombasa Republic Council (MRC). Although there is no comparison in terms of scale and intensity of violence attributed the MRC or other lower-activity violent groups, such as the *Sungu-Sungu* communal militias, their presence, and particularly their attempts to generate public support on the grounds of competing identity bases, may influence the way in which Al Shabaab engages with civilian populations, and limits its use of civilian violence.

Among interviewees drawn from religious leadership, youth groups and NGOs active in peacebuilding and countering religious violence in Kenya, one interviewee maintained that militants,

> '[D]o not tend to target civilians where there are mixed [armed] groups. It is because they want to annihilate that other group and become the point of reference. Once they have done that, the next target is civilians […] Only after they emerge as the senior group that fights, do they revert to their agenda.'[21]

There have also been documented clashes between armed groups and suspected Al Shabaab militants in Mombasa: in 2013, a suspected Al Shabaab member was killed by unknown assailants in the Majengo area of the city, suggesting the militant group may face violent opposition in the location (*The Star*, 2013). As one informant commented, in a conflict environment with multiple armed groups, 'you have to win not by killing innocent civilians, but by eliminating the other group. If you want to become a political leader, you have to finish the other militias.'[22]

In Northern Mali, similar competitive dynamics also appear to have constrained extensive anti-civilian violence, in an environment characterised by the presence of a large number of ethno-regional rebel groups and militias, such as the secessionist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The MNLA had an historic basis in the region, and drew on primarily ethnic bases of mobilisation among Tuareg populations for recruitment and support (Harmon, 2014). In 2012, the MNLA and violent Islamist groups fought alongside one another against the state, although differences in aims and objectives of both groups made for an uneasy coalition. This, in turn, affected the strategic deployment of violence by Islamist actors, specifically in relation to the limited use of violence after Islamist groups took control of key cities. A document recovered in a building occupied by Islamist fighters in Timbuktu, reportedly written by Abdel-malek Droukdel, emir of AQIM, laid out the case for the need to build alliances across the diverse range of militant groups:

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[21] Interview with conflict researcher, Nairobi, March 24 2015.
[22] Interview with human rights activists, Mombasa, March 20 2015.

'This is an important opportunity to build bridges, between all factions of the Azawadi community […] The aim of building these bridges is to make it so that our Mujahideen are no longer isolated in society, and to integrate them with the different factions, including the big tribes and the main rebel movement and tribal chiefs.' (Droukdel, *undated*, p. 4).

In a subsequent section of the document, Droukdel condemns the violence between Islamist militants and the MNLA, specifically citing the need to work with other factions within the wider society and conflict:

'The decision to go to war with the Azawad Liberation Movement after becoming close and almost completing a deal with them, which we thought would be positive, is a major mistake, in our assessment, which we could have overcome and dealt with in a circumscribed way instead of going into full-on war. And with all the reasons our brother gave via their statements through the media […] are not good enough to declare a war on a very important wing of the society which we should have made sure to work with in order to reach a deal.' (Droukdel, *undated*, p. 8).

The same document urges militants to exercise restraint in the application of religious punishment against the civilian population, noting that 'applying Shariah this way, without taking the environment into consideration will lead to people rejecting the religion, and engender hatred toward the Mujahideen.' (Droukdel, *undated*, p. 5).

In Nigeria, by contrast, there is evidence not only of the expansive use of anti-civilian violence in the context of high Islamist violence, but also of a logic of retribution influencing anti-civilian violence. Since 2009, Boko Haram has been the MVA in Borno State and surrounding areas, gradually expanding the scope and intensity of anti-civilian violence in a context of limited rivalry. However, a clear escalation in the frequency and intensity of anti-civilian violence is apparent from early 2014 onwards. This overlaps with a series of challenges by local vigilante units, referred to as the Civilian JTF, which have engaged Boko Haram forces in clashes in group strongholds. While these vigilante units have their roots in the inefficacy of the Nigerian military's response to the Boko Haram threat, and the need of communities to defend themselves in the face of predatory attacks,

this paper's findings suggest their activity may have longer-term negative consequences for civilian vulnerability. Specifically, while the Nigerian government appeared to support the units (Odomovo, 2014), the dynamics revealed here suggest vigilantism may increase civilian vulnerability to retributive attacks in cases where Boko Haram had established itself as the most powerful actor.

Qualitative research conducted with victims of Boko Haram violence attest to this dynamic: witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch report that in attacks carried out by Boko Haram militants, the organisation singled out victims for execution because of their perceived support for the Civilian JTF:

> 'While lying there, I saw them kill 10 men...they walked behind a small house with them, then I heard them in Hausa saying, "Uh huh…you've left us, you are Civilian JTF, you have chosen your side," meaning the government.' (HRW, 2013).

The findings above present a quantitative test of the wider generalisability of this observed dynamic.

Together, these overviews highlight the strategic logic of employing and limiting anti-civilian violence in contexts of comparable strength, competition and challenges. The condemnation of decisions that contradict this logic – such as the breakdown of the relationship between the MNLA and AQIM, and the meting out of harsh religious punishments – indicates that agents may not always adhere to this logic. Imperfect information, miscalculations of relative strength and position, and differences across and within militant groups may contribute to variations in the extent to which these strategies are followed in practice, but the available evidence suggests a strong indication of their guiding influence and relevance.

6.6   Conclusion

This paper has sought to explain variation in levels of anti-civilian violence by violent Islamist groups across and within groups, and country cases. The findings provide an explanation for this variation, rooted in the impact of competition and relative activity levels of violent Islamist groups compared to other non-state violent actors. In doing so, the paper has made three contributions that inform the understanding of violent Islamist groups, as well as offering theoretical advancements in the conceptualisation of anti-civilian violence generally in Africa.

First, I find that levels of anti-civilian violence are conditioned by the context in which violent Islamist groups operate. In areas where violent Islamist groups are the most active conflict agent, they are more likely to target civilians. While this finding may initially suggest that there is a basis to claims that Islamist ideologies are inherently linked to greater levels of anti-civilian violence, the findings are qualified by the fact that the degree to which Islamist violence targets civilians is affected by the group's overall activity levels. This finding holds even when we take into account the number of events in which a strong violent Islamist actor – such as Boko Haram – may be engaged militarily in clashes with state. In other words, violent Islamist groups are less likely to target civilians when they are weaker, and more likely to target civilians when they are stronger, even holding pressure from the state constant. Evidence of this strategic adaptation presents a challenge to general claims that weaker violent actors are more likely to target civilians than stronger ones; or that religiously mobilised groups, and violent Islamist groups in particular, are automatically predisposed towards greater levels of anti-civilian violence than secular counterparts.

Second, I find that the relationship between Islamist violence and the number of non-state armed groups is shaped by the relative activity levels of these actors. In locations where violent Islamist groups are the most active conflict agent, the presence of other non-state armed groups is positively correlated to both higher levels of anti-civilian violence as a share

of all violence, and to the share of Islamist violence that targets civilians. By contrast, in locations where violent Islamist groups are not the most active conflict agent, the presence of other non-state armed groups corresponds to a reduction in the share of overall anti-civilian violence, and the share of Islamist violence targeting civilians. In short, violent Islamist groups adapt their strategies of anti-civilian violence according to the number and relative activity levels of other non-state armed actors. This adaptation speaks to the complex ways in which violent Islamist groups position themselves *vis-a-vis* civilian populations. In seeking to understand the emergence of this form of violence and its durability in certain contexts, it is important to understand the strategies and processes by which violent groups mobilise public support (by limiting anti-civilian violence), or suppress opposition and challenges (by deploying it).

These findings have implications for the immediate policy environment in which these groups are active. Importantly, it suggests that policies which support or sponsor nascent or weaker militant groups in contexts where violent Islamist groups are very active may increase civilian vulnerability, rather than mitigate it. In Nigeria, government support of the Civilian JTF has been criticised by human rights organisations who, drawing on qualitative research, have argued that this exacerbates punitive violence against non-combatants. This research has provided a comparative, cross-national test of this relationship and found strong evidence for its existence.

Third, the research speaks more broadly to the literature on anti-civilian violence in Africa, finding that explanations of this phenomenon that suggest it serves a signalling function, or that it is deployed as a retributive strategy, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they may both explain the phenomenon of anti-civilian violence, but the conditions in which one or the other applies are shaped by the relative activity and configurations of actors. In other words, the understanding of anti-civilian violence is improved when it takes account of the wider conflict environment, its constellation of actors, and their relative position *vis-a-vis* one

another. The findings need not be limited to Islamist violence alone: it is possible that other groups, engaging in a relatively new form of mobilisation or mobilisation along cleavages (such as religion) which have not historically formed a basis for collective action, will also choose to employ or limit anti-civilian violence based on a similar logic. The question of whether the same dynamics characterise the strategies of other innovative entrants to the conflict environment beyond that of violent Islamist groups warrants further research.

7   The Transnational Nature of Islamist Violence in Africa

7.1   Abstract

This paper explores the features and consequences of transnational Islamist violence in Africa. It does so by distinguishing between multiple forms of transnational activity and international alliances that characterise a transnational geography of Islamist violence. Most violent Islamist groups active in Africa exhibit some form of transnationalism, but its effects on observed violence, and the processes of physical and geographical transnationalisation remain under-explored. This paper seeks to address this question through the use of violent event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset, combined with process-tracing of individual groups, their characteristics and conflict profiles over time, to better understand the transnational nature of violent Islamism, and its consequences for conflict among this sub-set of actors. The findings have implications not only for the study of these specified groups, whose ongoing activity in Africa has immediate security and policy implications, but also for the implications of potential future partnerships (with emerging networks in North Africa of particular concern), and for the advancement of a geographical understanding of violent group activity more generally.

7.2   Introduction

Islamist violence in Africa has transformed in recent years from a relatively contained phenomenon, present in a small number of countries and characterised by sporadic, if sometimes spectacular, violence; to widespread conflict affecting millions of people, emerging in new locations, and with renewed intensity across the continent. However,

Islamist violence has not emerged indiscriminately across all countries in Africa, nor even in all Muslim-majority contexts equally (Dowd, 2015a). Some locations have experienced higher levels of Islamist violence than others, while some, even neighbouring areas, have remained largely unaffected.

In spite of a general narrative of a highly interconnected, global, radical Islamist movement, violent Islamist groups in Africa are primarily active in their own countries of origin (Dowd and Raleigh, 2013). This illustrates that while borders do not provide an automatic container for violence, violence within the domestic, national sphere is the rule, rather than the exception, in the case of Islamist violence on the continent. This provides important qualifications to a dominant discourse of global connectivity between violent Islamist groups, but does not negate the fact that some degree of transnationalism occurs, both in the extra-territorial alliances formed by groups, and in the cross-border geography of Islamist violence. However, the precise dynamics of these forms of transnationalism remain under-explored and their features under-specified.

The Nigerian Islamist group, Boko Haram, Somalia's Al Shabaab, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), serve as case studies of groups with both a transnational violent presence, and formal alliances with extra-continental violent Islamist groups (the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, respectively). This paper seeks to explore these interrelated dimensions of transnational violence, by asking first, how transnational alliances affect the nature of violence in which these groups engage; and second, how they affect the geography of that violence.

Previous research indicates that organisational linkages affect the nature, intensity, and geographic scope of violence in which groups engage. This literature typically predicts that

alliances between violent organisations will increase the intensity of a group's violence (Bacon, 2014; Piazza, 2009; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Cragin *et al.*, 2007); and alter the geography of that violence, increasing its geographic range, and bolstering group access to previously inaccessible territory (Bacon, 2014; Pham, 2012; Farrall, 2011).

While existing research has made important contributions to our understanding of violent Islamist groups and their activity, it remains marked by several gaps that warrant further investigation. These include a tendency to focus on 'terrorism' or violence involving terror tactics, over and above the wider universe of violence in which these groups engage; a gap between cross-national, comparative and quantitatively-informed studies, which fail to trace evolution in group strategy over time, and in-depth case studies which may neglect to incorporate empirical data on strategic transformations; and a focus on alliance formation as a single, temporal moment, without corresponding attention to the potential pre- and post-alliance transfigurations which may characterise coalition partners' violence.

I argue that the nature and patterns of violence in which violent Islamist groups engage are affected by transnational linkages in several ways. First, in spite of a substantial literature predicting the intensification of violence as a consequence of alliance formation across groups, I illustrate a medium- to longer-term decline in violence frequency and intensity over time in each of these groups following alliance formation. The implication of this is not that alliances *cause* a decline in activity, but rather that groups ally at a point of weakness and face increased pressure following alliance formation from state security forces. Consequently, in contrast to an interpretation which sees emerging alliances across a network of actors as a sign of strength and growing capacity, alliance formation is insufficient to bolster junior partners' operational capacity in the way existing research predicts.

This pattern of declining capacity is also reflected in the geographic scope of activity: while the number of countries in which a group is active is positively correlated to alliance formation, and suggests an increased international presence, the number of sub-national spaces is negatively correlated. In other words, while violence occurs in a larger number of countries, it is not occurring in a larger number of spaces within those countries, with conflict relocating, rather than escalating and expanding, in its overall scope. This suggests that allied groups struggle to maintain operational capacity in sub-national spaces of activity, and prioritise international presence over and above sustained presence at the sub-national level.

In exploring these dynamics, this paper makes several contributions to the literature on violent Islamist groups, alliance formation across violent actors, and the geography of political violence. First, the paper contends that the timing, and temporal dynamics, of alliance formation matter. Partnerships are best conceptualised not as a single, temporal moment, but as a transformative process over time, which can be traced through patterns of violence. Second, the paper combines insights from literature on organisational dynamics with recent advances in the conceptualisation of geographic profiles of violence, to better understand the precise nature and processes of geographic diffusion and transnationalism among this specific set of actors. The findings have implications not only for the study of these specified groups, whose ongoing activity in Africa has immediate security and policy implications, but also for the implications of potential future partnerships (with emerging networks in North Africa of particular concern), and for the advancement of a geographical understanding of violent group activity more generally.

The paper draws on a mixed methods approach, utilising data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh *et al*., 2010) to trace recorded patterns of violence among AQIM, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 outlines existing literature on transnational alliances and the geography of violence, and outlines the divergent patterns of violence of each of the groups under consideration, suggesting a novel explanation for observed dynamics, articulated in a set of testable hypotheses; Section 2 develops a model for testing these relationships cross-nationally; before a discussion of results Section 3; and concluding in Section 4 with a discussion of implications for future research.

7.3   Organisational Linkages between Violent Islamist Groups

There is a growing literature on alliances and the drivers and consequences of partnerships between armed groups. Existing research differs in the degree of formalisation required to meet the criteria of alliance, defined variously as 'relationships of security cooperation between terrorist groups that involve mutual expectations of coordination or consultation in the future,' (Bacon, 2014, p. 6); 'in-depth collaboration.' (Karmon, 2005, pp. 24-25); 'joint or complementary action for the same (intermediate) purposes,' including 'activity at the rhetorical, material or operational levels.' (Asal *et al*., 2015, p. 11), and a definition of alliances that 'requires meaningful interaction as opposed to mere verbal support or ideological affinity.' (Horowitz and Potter, 2014, p. 201)

Informal alliances and ties between armed groups are certainly significant: there is strong evidence emerging from studies of specific attacks and groups that formal affiliation is not a prerequisite for the coordination and execution of high-profile attacks, with many analysts tracing an increased number of ideologically affiliated, but organisationally discrete and diffuse, armed actors carrying out attacks broadly in the name of a global Islamist movement

(Hellmich, 2011; Sageman, 2008; Burke, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, however, I focus exclusively on formally declared alliances between a senior partner and a local branch in Africa. This focus is justified for two reasons: first, there are numerous challenges associated with delineating and specifying the precise nature, extent and depth of informal cooperation and alliances among clandestine groups that would reduce the consistency and comparability of relationships across cases, if they were included. Second, the research assumes that the declaration of a formal alliance itself has significance. Given the evidence that formal alliances are established and cemented over a long period of vetting and negotiation (Farrall, 2011; Harmon, 2014), we should expect that official alliances are particularly significant for groups concerned, and that this significance is at least in part reflected in the performative declaration of alliances, typically accompanied by considerable publicity. Africa provides three examples of formal alliances: AQIM, formerly, the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, (GSPC) in the Sahel, Al Shabaab in Somalia, and Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Groups' reasons for allying are multiple and well-documented. They include increased access to financial resources (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008, p. 439); exchange of technical expertise and knowledge (Cragin *et al*. 2007; Horowitz and Potter, 2014), where capacity is boosted by aggregating capabilities (Horowitz and Potter, 2014, p. 204); improved access to restricted places (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008, p. 439) and the creation or facilitated access to safe havens (Horowitz and Potter, 2014). Cooperation, particularly with transnational actors, may be more likely in cases where domestic actors face a particularly powerful state, thereby welcoming the resources external actors may bring to the partnership (Bakke, 2013), facilitating a form of 'bandwagoning' when a weaker, junior partner hopes to increase its capabilities through association (Asal *et al*., 2015, p. 14).

Violent Islamist groups are not unique in the creation of alliances and coordination across militant actors, but they differ in several significant ways, thereby warranting a closer analysis of these groups in isolation. First, the alliances under consideration are extra-territorial: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are both groups whose primary area of activity falls outside Africa, and their ability to operate within Africa is dependent on the co-option of local armed groups in alliances. This partnership pattern differs from groups who share an operational space and may cooperate in joint armed activity, while simultaneously maintaining an independent profile, in shared spaces. In contrast to groups which can physically and immediately offer material, logistical and operational support to one another in a shared environment, or use their own geographic reach to bolster that of partners and provide them with access to new spaces under their own control, extra-territorial alliances should exhibit different patterns. The transfer of knowledge, skills and technology to bolster capacity should be less direct than in cases where groups can immediately and physically interact in joint training or operations. Likewise, the effect on the geography of violence will not be influenced by the control of senior partners on neighbouring or inaccessible locations (because they have no significant physical presence on the continent), but should be less directly a result of increased strength.

Second, the three alliances under consideration were all declared formally and publicly: this differs significantly from implicit, informal or logistical cooperation among groups operating in shared spaces or with similar goals. The declaration of a formal alliance in a public way is deliberately coordinated for strategic impact, to bolster the profile of both groups, and feed perceptions of a widening global reach of senior partners in particular, and violent Islamist networks more generally. Essentially, the publicity that accompanies the declaration of a formal alliance serves as a performance of transnationalism in itself. For this reason, the impact of such alliances on both the nature and geography of subsequent violence warrants particular attention, in order to interrogate the extent to which this

performance of a global violent Islamist reach is matched by the *reality* of Islamist violence in Africa.

The consequences of alliances can be unpacked in several hypotheses, explored below, including its impact on the intensity and geography of violence.

7.3.1   Intensity of Violence

Extensive existing research proposes that alliance formation will increase the intensity of violence by allied partners. Asal and Rethemeyer (2008, p. 443) find that organisational lethality is positively correlated to the number of organisational connections a group has. Bacon (2014, p. 5) contends that, 'terrorist groups with allies conduct more deadly attacks, resulting in a higher average number of fatalities and injuries to both victims and attackers alike.' This increased intensity results from an exchange of knowledge and development of 'best practices' (Cragin *et al*., 2007, p. 3). By contrast, however, Horowitz and Potter (2014) find that a simple count of alliances is not a significant determinant of terrorist group lethality, and may in fact depress lethality in a measure of fatalities per attack. By contrast, they find a strong and positive relationship between their measure of alliance depth and lethality.

While this body of literature has made several important contributions to our understanding of violent Islamist group activity, it remains marked by several gaps, chief among these is the fact that existing studies have tended to consider 'terrorist' attacks in isolation: only those actions designated as 'terrorist' are included in some statistical models (Asal *et al*., 2015; Horowitz and Potter, 2014; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008) and regarded as a separate form of political violence, excluding from analyses the wider contexts within which groups

engage in violence. This literature therefore fails to connect to other strands of conflict research, which have focused on alliances and coalitions in other conflict contexts (Christia, 2012; Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, 2012; Wayland, 2004). This is in spite of the fact that much of the activity of violent Islamist groups in Africa today incorporates both typical terrorist attacks, and violence in a more conventional, dyadic contest (for example, historic AQIM violence in Algeria; and contemporary conflict involving both Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia). For this reason, this paper seeks to expand on these studies by incorporating a wider range of violent events – including dyadic conflict and more conventional warfare events – in its conceptualisation of violence.

Moreover, there are several reasons to assume that the declaration of a formal alliance may in fact correspond to *reduced* capacity on the part of these groups. First, groups that declare a formal alliance with a high-profile senior partner such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State are likely to face a redoubled security effort in the wake of such a declaration. The emergence of a new Al-Qaeda or Islamic State affiliate is likely to be met with in an intensified effort on the part of state security forces to tackle affiliated groups, because of the greater strategic significance internationally: increased counter-terrorism support for tackling a violent Islamist group allied with a group perceived to pose a global threat to security is likely to follow the announcement of a merger with a local group in Africa, to a greater extent than if that movement were to remain wholly domestic. The reconfiguration of previously communally mobilised conflict actors in Mali under a new mantle of Islamist mobilisation, following decades of cyclical conflict in the Northern region illustrates this: international attention to the conflict in 2012-2013 far outweighed that paid to previous bouts of violence in the country. Similarly, the presence of an Al-Qaeda-linked movement in Kenya is far more significant to international donors and interests than a wholly domestic violent movement. Additional support for countering these violent groups may come in the form of funding support for countering violent extremism, such as training of security forces to

bolster their own internal capacity to challenge the group, as has been clearly documented in the case of Kenya (HRW, 2014; Anderson and McKnight, 2014; Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010) and Algeria (Lecocq and Shriver, 2007), or the contribution of regional forces to tackling the group's presence, as in the case of the regionalised effort of states such as Cameroon and Chad to challenge Nigeria's Boko Haram. Together, these renewed efforts may contribute to a subsequent decline in the group's capacity to operate, resulting in a reduced intensity of violence.

Second, the declaration of a formal alliance may be an attempt to bolster a group at a time when it is already strategically weakened. While any analysis of the internal processes of negotiation and vetting of partners in an alliance is limited by a lack of public information on the nature of these communications, the attempt to formalise an alliance by a junior partner may be strategically sought at a time when the junior partner is under pressure, and would most benefit from the publicity and higher profile provided by affiliation. While it is unlikely that senior partners actively seek out weakened groups for partnership, an analysis of the context in which each group formalised its alliance with a senior partner suggests that the alliance can serve an important function in renewing a group that is under pressure from security forces.

In the case of AQIM, the group declared its formal merger in September 2006, a year after a relatively successful amnesty was announced in Algeria, seeking to bring to an end years of conflict between the state and violent Islamist groups there (Grant, 2005). Following several declarations by Algerian state officials that the group's collapse was imminent (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007), AQIM nevertheless subsequently benefited from renewed attention to its cause following its high-profile announcement of an official merger with Al-Qaeda. Similarly, Al Shabaab allied with Al-Qaeda in 2012 (BBC News, 2012b) at a point of intense pressure on the group's control over territory in South-Central Somalia, with the

onset of a concerted campaign by both Kenyan and Ethiopian forces, alongside the African Union forces, from which the group has been significantly weakened (Williams, 2014). Likewise, Boko Haram's alliance was formally announced following its unsuccessful attempts to hold territory throughout much of Northern Nigeria (CNN, 2015), and during a period in which it was reportedly suffering extensive losses (*Premium Times*, 2015; *Radio France Internationale*, 2015). Consequently, it appears these groups seek to formalise alliances as a means of bolstering their capacity and profile precisely at a point at which they face concerted opposition. While an alliance may provide a short-term boost in terms of capacity and publicity (Østebø, 2015a), it may be insufficient to stem the tide of losses.

Finally, although we have limited information on the demands placed upon junior partners when they enter into an alliance with a group such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, it is feasible that the latter may prioritise high-profile and strategically significant violence over and above the perpetuation of high-frequency but more low-impact conflict. Given that the declaration of a formal alliance is typically accompanied by extensive publicity, and that groups seek to vet potential partners to ensure a degree of cohesion in their network, the profile of violence may change in the wake of an alliance to prioritise the targeting of higher-profile attacks that require greater coordination.

A preliminary review of descriptive statistics on each group's activity also appear to confirm this: a historical analysis of both Al Shabaab and AQIM reveals that, contrary to the predicted increase in capacity and activity following alliance formation, both groups exhibit a longer-run decline in violence, following an initial spike in activity surrounding affiliation. AQIM violence levels peaked in June 2007, but have since seen a long-term decline: the group's average rate of violent events per month in the period July 2007-June 2015 represents just over one-fifth (22%) of its June 2007 peak. In a comparable pattern, Al Shabaab violence levels peaked in July 2014, but in the subsequent eleven month period to

June 2015, the average rates of violent activity per month were just over three-quarters (77%) of its July peak, with particularly sharp declines in 2015. While Boko Haram's merger is more recent, initial patterns suggest a similar decline is under way: following a peak in February 2015, one month prior to announcing its official merger with the Islamic state, violence levels have steadily declined in all but one subsequent month (June 2015 representing an escalation over previous months, but still well below its height earlier that year). As one analysis suggested in the context of Boko Haram's alliance with ISIS, alliance formation may contribute to 'an initial public relations bump' for partners, but have no long-term significance for group activity (Østebø, 2015a).

This does not necessarily indicate that alliance formation is the *cause* of a decline in violent activity levels, but at the very least, that the supposed benefits of entering into such a partnership may not be sufficient to sustain groups' activity levels in the face of mounting challenges domestically.

H1: Groups that enter into an alliance will see a decline in activity levels and intensity following alliance formation.

7.3.2   Geography of Violence

Several studies have posited that organisational affiliation results in a shift in the geography of a group's violence. Bacon (2014, p. 4) maintains that 'AQIM's post-alliance transformation' provided opportunities to bolster its 'range,' and facilitate 'access to previously denied areas or more secure routes where they currently transit.' (Bacon, 2014, p. 7) Moreover, multiple studies of Islamist violence assume the growing regionalisation of violence is closely linked to ties between organisations operating across different spaces,

producing an 'infectious regional threat,' (Karmon, 2014, p. 74); and a phenomenon of 'terrorism without borders,' (Agbiboa, 2014). The existing literature therefore expects that alliance formation should result in a spreading geographic presence across the continent.

However, the extent to which Islamist violence represents a truly transnational phenomenon in Africa varies significantly across groups. The Nigerian militant group, "Boko Haram," has only since 2014 exhibited significant trans-national activity, becoming increasingly active in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This cross-border activity notwithstanding, even in 2015, the vast majority (76%) of Boko Haram violence took place within Nigeria itself. Similarly, the Somali-based Al Shabaab, has increasingly garnered international attention for its involvement in high-profile attacks in Kenya. While violence in Kenya, and in 2010, in Uganda, is notable, and has resulted in devastating loss of life in both countries, the group remains primarily concentrated in Somalia, where to date, over 95% of its violence is concentrated. These patterns can be meaningfully contrasted with a group such as AQIM, which has, over time, transformed from a group primarily active in Algeria (where 99% of its recorded activity took place in 2007); to one more evenly split between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, in 2011; to a concentration of activity in Mali as of 2015.[23]

A comprehensive understanding of the precise nature of transnationalism, however, demands a conceptualisation not only of the occurrence of transnational violence, but the ways in which groups operationalise transnational mobility and presence. Specifically, several studies have proposed important differences between the transnationalisation of conflict through the *escalation / expansion*, *relocation*, and *flashpoints*. In the case of *escalation* and *expansion* of violence into neighbouring regions, armed groups remain activity in their original locations and simultaneously expand. In contrast, *relocation* of violence requires that violence diffuse without remaining a constant in original locations

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[23] Source: ACLED, Version 6.

(Schutte and Weidmann, 2011). Finally, *flashpoints* of violence involve its emergence in geographically non-contiguous spaces (Baudains, Johnson and Braithwaite, 2013). In the case of Islamist violence specifically, research suggests that violent groups may hold territory constantly, and retain operational capacity within those zones, while simultaneously expanding their reach outwards through escalation. Alternatively, they may leverage country borders in order to evade capture by security forces (Walther and Leuprecht, 2015), in a process of relocation. Finally, they may be active in discrete, non-contiguous spaces through which flashpoints of violence emerge.

The dynamics of Islamist violence undoubtedly demonstrate the diffusion of conflict transnationally, but this observation does not shed light on the precise transnational features of this conflict. The existing literature proposes that alliance formation correlates to increased capacity, lethality and scope, all of which should result in an observed pattern of escalation and expansion, instead of relocation. This may be particularly apparent at the country level, where alliance formation coincides with a greater focus on the 'far enemy,' (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007; Hansen, 2013) and thus an increased international presence outside countries of origin, or where alliances facilitate group access to particular areas, or transit routes or safe havens (Bacon, 2014).

Drawing on this research, I hypothesise that:

H2: Alliance formation results in increased international presence in discrete countries.

Increased international presence, however, need not correspond automatically to escalation at every level: as illustrated in the example of evading capture across borders, movement across and between countries can reflect the flight of groups from an armed opponent (such

as the state), whereby groups are pushed out of one country through a concerted military campaign. The diffusion of AQIM into the southern Algeria and towards its border with neighbouring Sahel states illustrates this (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007, p. 408), as does Boko Haram's increased use of safe havens in neighbouring Cameroon throughout 2014 and 2015. As one senior defence official characterised the mobility of the Islamic State, 'ISIL is very much like a balloon […] When you squeeze it, it moves elsewhere. They've shown that in Iraq, to some degree, where they live to fight another day,' (quoted in Moody, 2015, p. 8). This strategic leveraging of borders may be particularly pronounced for groups who have recently allied with a high-profile international partner, as this declaration clearly establishes them as a high-priority for national regimes and international stakeholders: the stakes of an Islamist insurgency aligned with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State are much higher than those of a more localised and domestic nature.

Descriptive statistics appear to bear out this dynamic: Boko Haram significantly expanded its presence within Nigeria in 2012, with a wave of violence emanating outwards from the far North-East and peaking at recorded activity in no fewer than 20 different Nigerian states. By contrast, 2013 and 2014 both witnessed a contraction from this peak; and 2015, the year of its formal alliance with the Islamic State, witnessed the clearest concentration yet in Nigeria, with activity recorded in only 12 states to date. Similarly, AQIM expanded outwards in the period 2004, prior to affiliation, to 2009, just two years afterwards, peaking at activity in 32 different Admin1 units (regions / provinces). This can be compared to recorded activity in just 8 administrative regions so far in 2015. In 2012, Al Shabaab had a presence in 16 different administrative regions within Somalia, a figure that has fallen and stabilised at 13 in the past two years. While these groups may be increasing their international presence, the descriptive statistics reflect a process of relocation, rather than expansion, as data indicates they are unable to simultaneously retain a presence in both their original areas of operation and expand into new territory.

For these reasons, I propose to test the geography of transnational activity at not only the national, but also the sub-national levels, in order to determine the degree to which transnationalism truly reflects a process of expansion and escalation, or one of relocation and evasion.

H3: Alliance formation results in decreased sub-national presence in discrete administrative units and locations.

7.3.3   Timing of Alliances

A relatively under-explored and under-theorised component of alliance formation is the temporally dynamic effect of alliance negotiation and formalisation on violence levels over time. Comparative research on alliances has tended to see collaboration as a single temporal moment, represented by a measure of the beginning or end of an affiliation between groups, limited by the absence of time series data (Horowitz and Potter, 2014, pp. 204-209). Qualitative process-tracing research, while more cognizant of the post-alliance environment, also largely neglects the pre-alliance formation context: Bakke (2013, p. 37) maintains that, in order to robustly trace the effect of transnational insurgents on a domestic conflict movement, any observed effect must be evident only *after* insurgents enter the struggle, reiterating that 'timing is key here.' This approach suggests that the effect of transnational linkages is apparent only after a connection with transnational militants is established to such an extent that militants are physically present in the struggle, or, if extrapolated to the wider question of alliance formation more generally, only after a formal alliance has been established.

However, qualitative research on alliance formation suggests that partnerships are forged not at a single moment in time, but over a lengthy period of negotiation and vetting. Farrall (2011, p. 133) notes that alliance negotiations with Al-Qaeda tended to be 'drawn out because it proved difficult to agree on the parameters of operational autonomy.' Similarly, Harmon (2014) notes that Al-Qaeda vetting of the GSPC (later AQIM) began in June 2005, over a year prior to a formal declaration of an alliance. However, even the 2005 vetting process reportedly began several years after early reports of links between the GSPC and Al-Qaeda, amounting to international militants being present in Algeria in 2003 (*Agence France Presse*, 2003) and several reports of linkages between the two organisations even earlier (*Le Matin*, 2002).

Al Shabaab and Al-Qaeda's merger in 2012 was also not a shock development: an in-depth study of Al Shabaab in Somalia traces connections between Al-Qaeda and subsequent Al Shabaab leaders back as far as the early 1990s alongside intermittent activity Al-Qaeda activity in the country throughout that decade, and maintains that Al Shabaab had a strong international component and ties to Al-Qaeda, from its inception (Hansen, 2013, pp. 21, 24, 139). In overt displays of close ties, as early as September 2009, Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane issued a message pledging that the group was 'at the service of jihad under the stewardship of Bin Laden,' who responded with a statement of support for 'the cause of jihad' in Somalia (Aynte, 2012). Subsequent years saw extensive referencing of Al-Qaeda in Al Shabaab communications (Hansen, 2013, p. 108), and reported collaboration between the two groups in attacking both federal and international forces in Somalia (Aynte, 2012). A recovered letter written in August 2010 between bin Laden and Godane on the subject of an official merger between the two groups sheds further light on these links: bin Laden opposes declaring an official merger on the basis that it would make it easier for enemies of Al Shabaab to mobilise against them (Myren, 2015).

Boko Haram is the most recent group to ally to an international violent Islamist group, but also has a longer history of affiliation and collaboration. While it recently declared a formal alliance with the Islamic State, earlier reports indicated collaboration and potential for an alliance with Al-Qaeda (*Agence France Presse*, 2012; *Panapress*, 2011), suggesting the group considered more than one potential partner in its search for an alliance. Even Boko Haram's recent merger with the Islamic State was reportedly a relatively long-term process. In July 2014, a full eight months before any formal alliance was announced, Boko Haram began integrating Islamic State symbolism and imagery into its communications; and Islamic State officials reportedly travelled to Nigeria in February 2015, to negotiate a relationship between the two organisations (Almukhtar, 2015; Zenn, 2015).

Consequently, groups seeking alliances may alter their behaviour *before* forging a formal alliance, as part of the bargaining process (carrying out more dramatic attacks to demonstrate capacity or relevance) precisely in order to secure an alliance. They may adjust their behaviour once negotiations are underway either for the same reason, or in anticipation of an alliance. Likewise, they may alter their activity once an alliance has been established. Moreover, the nature, number and quality of alliances may change over time, but temporally aggregated studies (Walther and Leuprecht, 2015; Asal *et al*., 2015) do not allow for sufficiently refined analysis of these evolving dynamics.

These long-term practices of collaboration, coordination and vetting suggest there may be a change in tactics *before* an official merger or alliance is announced, as potential organisational linkages incentivise performative violence.

H4: Violence patterns of allied groups will exhibit changes in the pre-alliance phase.

7.4   **Methodology**

Existing quantitative research considers implications of alliances in large, cross-national multi-group models (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Horowitz and Potter, 2014), but largely fail to trace the evolution or shifts in groups themselves following a change in their organisational structure. Case studies, by contrast, typically fail to draw on extensive comparative cases, or available empirical data (Agbiboa, 2014; Harmon, 2014) to support claims that violence intensifies or becomes more frequent in the wake of strategic or organisational partnerships. To address this, the paper takes data from ACLED (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010) and analyses patterns of violence by three Islamist groups at a fine level of spatial and temporal disaggregation, to trace the effect of alliance formation on the intensity, nature, and geography of violence over time.

The unit of analysis is the group country month, with all active months in which AQIM, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram are active across Africa. The research follows previous studies (Piazza, 2009; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Asal *et al.*, 2015) in counting only active time periods, excluding any non-active country months from the dataset. This results in a dataset with 491 records, covering all recorded activity by the three groups in question by month from January 1999 to June 2015 (with gaps corresponding to months of inactivity). Results are clustered at the country level, to control for effects of specific countries' profiles and trajectories of violence. Because they are not relevant to the research question at hand, all non-violent events (including troop movement and riots/protests) attributed to the three groups are excluded from the analysis.

Although sub-national level analysis has revealed several important dynamics in violence patterns, the country-level is chosen here to better capture the change in dynamics of violence by an entire organisation. I assume that while an organisation is comprised of

multiple units or cells, the effect of organisational affiliation with an external partner will be felt across the organisation, and is less likely to have a demonstrable effect on the sub-national spaces of violence specifically.

7.4.1 Dependent Variables

Several dependent variables are used to test Hypotheses 1-4. These include *GroupEvents*, a total count of all violent events attributed to the groups in question, by country and month; and *GroupFatalities*, a total count of all reported fatalities arising from events involving the groups in question, by country and month. In order to analyse the geographic distribution of violence, *DistinctCountCountry* measures the total number of discrete countries in which a group is active by month; *DisctinctCountAdmin1* measures the total number of discrete Admin1 units (typically, states or provinces) in which a group is active by month per country; *DistinctCountAdmin2* measures the total number of discrete Admin2 units (typically, LGAs or districts) in which a group is active by month per country; and *DistinctCountLocation* measures the total number of discrete named locations (typically, towns or villages) in which a group is active by month per country. All geographic information is drawn from the geocoding in the ACLED dataset.

7.4.2 Independent Variables

Independent variables include several measures to test the effect of affiliation with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State over time. These include *Affiliated*, a simple binary measure coded 1 for affiliation and 0 for no affiliation, beginning the month in which the declaration of formal alliance was made; and several indicators of the pre-affiliation phases, designed to capture the dynamics of performative violence perpetrated by groups in anticipation of an alliance; and the effect of increased coordination and information exchange prior to an official

alliance is announced. These latter measures include *Affiliated6MonthsPre*, a binary measure beginning six months prior to the month in which the declaration of formal alliance was made; *Affiliated12MonthsPre*, a binary measure beginning 12months prior to the month in which the declaration of formal alliance was made; and *Affiliated18MonthsPre*, a binary measure beginning 18months prior to the month in which the declaration of formal alliance was made.

Control variables at the country level draw on previous research, integrating findings from meta-analysis on the most significant factors in shaping conflict onset and intensity (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006) and include logs of the annual population size, *LogTotalPop*, and national annual GDP in current USD, *LogGDP*, drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2015); and a binary indicator of whether or not the country received a score of four or above in the PolityIV index for that year, *PolityIV4* (Marshall and Gurr, 2014). Because the research concerns the dynamics of Islamist violence, the likelihood of which is partially shaped by the presence of Muslim populations in the country, a control is also introduced for the estimated percentage of the population which are Muslim in that year (*MuslimPer*) (Pew Forum, 2011). Because control data was not available for each year of the dataset, floating averages based on five-year averages, were created using available data to fill in gaps where they arose. To control for temporal dependence in violence patterns over time, a lag by month is created for all dependent variables.

Descriptive statistics are summarised in Table II.

7.5   Results

Results are summarised in Tables III-V. Hypothesis 1 is tested in Models 1-8, and finds strong support in the data. Contrary to expectations of increased activity and lethality levels, the findings suggest that affiliation is correlated to a decrease in both the frequency and intensity of violence by the three groups in question in subsequent months. Results are significant at the *Affiliation* and six month pre-affiliation stages for violent events per month[24], and up to 12months prior to affiliation for reported fatalities. The results indicate that there is a recorded decline in activity and lethality levels several months prior to the announcement of a formal alliance, and that this is not reversed in the alliance stage. This offers support for the theory that violent groups ally at points of weakness, which is not wholly compensated for through the benefits of alliance formation. It may also be the case that affiliation does not increase frequency or lethality because partnered organisations become more selective in their targeting following alliance formation, and are tasked with the pursuit of violence against specific (for example, international) targets.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are tested in models 9-12, and once more, find strong support, albeit of two divergent geographic patterns. First, Model 9 demonstrates that affiliation is strongly and positively associated with a higher number of discrete countries of activity. This suggests that the international profile of a group is positively associated with aligning with a group such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. In additional models, the effect of pre-affiliation phases (at six, 12 and 18months) is also tested, and finds a similarly strong relationship. Because of this consistency over a long time period, we may infer from this that while formal affiliation is strongly associated with a greater international presence, this may also be a factor which draws senior partners to potential allies. Rather than transform or alter this dynamic of international presence, potential partners may instead reinforce it. When coupled with the findings that overall activity levels typically decline in the alliance stage,

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[24] As the dataset is constructed using active country months only, the findings cannot speak to patterns in overall frequency (including an increased number of active months in a year, for example), but only to frequency within active months. An alternative model specification is explored in the sub-section on robustness tests, below.

the findings are even more significant: in spite of a general reduction in violence and intensity levels, groups continue to retain a strong international presence in spite of this overall drop in activity levels, suggesting a strong strategic preference for an international presence over and above high activity levels alone.

Second, Models 10-12 show evidence of a declining presence sub-nationally: at the Admin1, Admin2 levels and individual location levels, evidence points to a declining number of areas in which groups are active, following affiliation. Significantly, when tested in the longer-term pre-affiliation phases, there is no significant relationship between sub-national activity levels and pre-alliance phases, suggesting that sub-national contraction is a feature of the alliance stage specifically. This may be accounted for by the fact that in the formal affiliation stage, groups may either be directed by senior partners to concentrate their energies on transnational activity specifically, corresponding to flashpoint and relocation dynamics. An alternative explanation is that following affiliation, groups may find themselves increasingly under pressure by state forces precisely because they have formally aligned with a high-profile international organisation, and thus – in a process endogenous to the dynamics of conflict itself – they become higher-value targets for state forces seeking to rout them from their territory. These dynamics need not be mutually exclusive: although we have limited information on the exchanges, demands and transactions between local and senior alliance partners, it is possible that an international relocation, coupled with sub-national contraction, meets both partners' discrete strategic goals, for a) the appearance of an increased global presence; and b) the ability to evade security forces and leverage mobility for survival.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 finds support in the data: in terms of both the frequency and intensity of attacks, there is evidence of a shift in violence in pre-affiliation. By contrast, the clearer relationship between affiliation specifically and the geography of violence provides evidence of a specific transformation in the geography of group violence following alliance formation.

7.5.1   Robustness Tests

A series of sensitivity analyses test the robustness of these findings. First, in an alternative specification of the model, I construct a dataset that also includes months of inactivity, to control for the potential effect of selecting active country months only. The alternative dataset is constructed as a panel dataset with activity levels per month in each country since the first month of recorded activity in that country (for example, beginning in July 1999 in Algeria for AQIM, but July 2003 in Mali for the same group). The overall results hold, with the exception of the results of Model 1, for which activity levels remain negatively correlated, but in this instance, fail to reach statistical significance at the $p < .1$ level.

Second, I substitute the binary measures indicating the period of affiliation and pre-affiliation stages six, 12 and 18months prior to alliance formation, with a scalar measure of the number of months since affiliation for each recorded active month for each group. This alternative measure is more sensitive to the long-run effects of affiliation post-alliance formation. In all models, the results hold: recorded events and reported fatalities exhibit a statistically significant decline, as do the number of discrete sub-national spaces of activity (Admin1, Admin2 and locations); while the discrete number of countries is positively correlated to the measure.

Finally, I create an alternative measure of the geographic reach of groups to test the robustness of Models 9-12. In place of the count of discrete countries or sub-national spaces in which each group is active, I introduce a measure of the monthly average geodesic distance between sequential events attributed to each group. The measure captures the shortest linear distance between sequential events, in order to capture a group's (near)

simultaneous presence in multiple locations. It is calculated by sorting the data on group name, event date, and event location (to avoid biasing the data in instances where a group is active in the same location on the same day in multiple events), and then calculating the distance between the geocoded longitudinal and latitudinal points of each sequential event. Non-violent events, and events coded with a GeoPrecision of 3 (those for which there is a higher degree of uncertainty as to their precise location) are excluded, and the average monthly distance between events for each group calculated.

In this alternative specification of Models 9-12, the results show a strong positive and statistically significant relationship with affiliation: in other words, affiliation corresponds to a larger distance between sequential events, while the actual number of sub-national spaces of activity is contracting. In reality, this is reflected in the large distance between AQIM's activity in two discrete fronts of violence: a) northern Algeria, and b) southern Algeria and further south into the Sahel; in Al Shabaab's activity in as far south as coastal Kenya and Tanzania, and in Kampala in 2010; and in Boko Haram's engagement in an increasing number of regional neighbouring countries. Significantly, in descriptive statistics, there is a statistically significant negative trend in geodesic distance *within* groups' countries of origin for both Boko Haram (Nigeria) and Al Shabaab (Somalia), reflecting the simultaneous contraction of these groups' presence and operational capacity within these environments, while their ability to relocate violence, and create flashpoints of conflict in neighbouring or even further afield regional countries, continues to expand.[25] Together, the findings offer further support for the conclusion that affiliation corresponds to a contraction of geographic scope sub-nationally, but an increased transnational presence and the prioritisation of regional conflict over and above sustained activity levels in countries of origin.

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[25] AQIM's geographic reach exhibits a contrasting trend of *expanding* geodesic distance between sequential attacks within Algeria, driven in large part by the relatively independent fronts of operation in northern and southern Algeria.

7.6   Discussion

The findings illustrate general patterns across all three groups under consideration. Declining activity levels suggest, at the very least, that alliance formation is insufficient to bolster the strength and capacity of allying groups. In spite of the technological and capabilities transfer assumed to take place in partnerships (Cragin *et al*., 2007), violent Islamist groups in Africa still exhibit a pattern of declining activity following the declaration of a formal alliance. The findings may also illuminate strategic preferences and demands made by senior partners in alliances: the pattern may be interpreted to indicate that senior partners, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, do not prioritise the frequency and intensity of attacks by allying groups, but may instead privilege other features of violence, such as attacks on high-value targets. Underlying this pattern is the fact that groups typically come under increased military pressure when they declare an allegiance to a high-profile, international militant group. In this way, alliance formation is endogenous to the conflict cycle itself, in that it raises the stakes of an insurgency, creates greater political incentives for national and international interests to rout local militants who have allied with a senior partner, and itself shapes more intense campaigns against junior partners.

Second, the findings also appear to confirm that local groups ally at a point of weakness, not strength, meaning that a long-run decline in violence levels may be part of the reason an organisation seeks to ally with a stronger partner in the first place. The cycle of violence of AQIM clearly demonstrates a long-run drop in conflict activity, corresponding to reduced capacity and operating capability within Algeria itself. In spite of a number of relatively recent, high-profile attacks, the typical profile of AQIM violence has been one of declining activity; suggesting alliance with Al-Qaeda has not automatically translated into increased capabilities. Similarly, Al Shabaab's alliance with Al-Qaeda preceded a decline in activity, associated with the group being pushed out of the major urban areas it was controlling in

late-2011, and into a defensive position in much of South-Central Somalia. Its subsequent activity, although high-profile, has been primarily defensive and conducted from a weakened position, in what one analyst characterised as the 'lashing out of a wounded leopard.' (Rotberg, 2013) Importantly, this weakened position does not mean groups cannot still have a profoundly destabilising effect on areas of operation, with significant consequences for civilian protection and vulnerability, in particular. As Menkhaus (2014, p. 4) summarised in a review of Al Shabaab capabilities following its attack on the Westgate shopping complex in Nairobi, the group 'is simultaneously weaker and, at least in the short term, more dangerous in Kenya and Somalia.' Similarly, Boko Haram's activity peaked in February 2015, with associated reported fatalities peaking a month earlier in January, and both have been declining since, reflecting its own reduced capacity in the face of a concerted, regional military campaign against it. It, too, sought an alliance when it occupied a precarious position between expansion and facing a redoubled military offensive by Nigeria and regional allies, and has continued to witness a fall in activity since this initial peak.

The findings also provide strong evidence for two divergent patterns of geographic diffusion. First, both before and following formal affiliation, the distinct number of countries in which a group is active is positively correlated to alliance formation. Because this relationship is significant as far back as 18months prior to formal affiliation, this may reflect a selection bias on the part of partnering organisations, who may deliberately seek to ally with local groups who have a geographic reach. Internal dissent within Islamist organisations on whether to focus on the 'near' or 'far' enemy (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007), and the extent to which groups direct energy towards a truly transnational agenda (Hansen, 2013) notwithstanding, these groups already had some kind of transnational presence in advance of their alliances. Boko Haram began transnational activity in Cameroon in 2012, through the creation of a network of sympathetic preachers, before beginning military activity in Cameroon in 2013 (Zenn, 2015), both several years before the establishment of a formal

alliance. By 2015, violent events attributed to Boko Haram were recorded in four countries (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria). Similarly, Al Shabaab's cross-border activity in Kenya can be dated back to 2009, while its predecessors have a long history of activity in Ethiopia and Djibouti: 2015 saw recorded Al Shabaab violence in Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania. AQIM also had a regional presence as the GSPC, with recorded violence in Nigeria, Chad, Mali and Niger in 2004, but 2014 witnessed a peak in the number of discrete countries in which it is active, with violence attributed to the group in Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and Tunisia.

Nevertheless, the geographic dynamics we see also exhibit a countervailing trend: a reduction in the number of sub-national spaces in which a group is active. In other words, while affiliation is correlated to an increased international presence, sub-nationally, groups are typically contracting, rather than expanding their scope of activity following affiliation. This corresponds to a pattern of affiliation resulting in increasing 'flashpoint' violence, where groups attack locations in which they were previously inactive (for example, Al Shabaab's 2010 attack in Kampala), and relocation violence, where groups shift their scope of activity, typically under military pressure (for example, AQIM's move south-ward into the Sahel). These stand in stark contrast to a hypothesised geography of expansion or escalation, whereby a group simultaneously holds space and increases its presence in other areas at the same time.

7.7 Conclusion

Together, these findings point to significant ways of nuancing and advancing our understanding of the violence of transnational actors and violent Islamist groups in particular. In spite of a dominant narrative which sees such groups as part of a globally interconnected, homogenous and undifferentiated whole, an over-emphasis on transnational, global

dimension of such groups both obscures local conditions; and under-specifies precise nature of the transnationalism underway. Alliances across militant groups do affect the dynamics and geography of subsequent violence, but less directly than often assumed. In place of a bolstered and strengthened, international threat, we see a reduced intensity of violence, and declining subnational geographic scope. Continued transnational activity and increasing international presence should therefore not be read as a sign of increasing strength, but a function of the strategic branding and performance of transnationalism by such groups.

Combined with the finding that affiliation correlates to a decline in the monthly frequency and intensity of attacks, these patterns of geographic concentration suggest that rather than bolstering group's capacity and geographic scope, alliances may be forged instead at points of weakness in a group's conflict cycle. AQIM, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram all formalised alliances when they were in a defensive position, facing a renewed and newly coherent military campaign against them. They subsequently appear to have benefited from an initial, short-lived spike in activity levels and renewed capacity, but the longer-term evidence demonstrates both a decline in activity levels and a reduction in their geographic territory, at least in so far as sub-national spaces are concerned. Where alliance formation appears to make a significant impact is in the international scope of a group's reach, potentially opening up access to new areas, facilitating safer transit routes, and encouraging or supporting flashpoint violence in new spaces and a larger number of discrete countries.

In addition to these substantive findings, the paper makes two theoretical contributions to existing research. First, the paper demonstrates that the timing, and temporal dynamics, of alliance formation matter: partnerships are best conceptualised (and statistically operationalised) not as a single, temporal moment, but as a transformation over time, which can be traced through the patterns of violence we witness, and broadly categorised as groups

performing for potential partners prior to affiliation, transforming in the period of partnership creation, and reforming strategies of conflict in the wake of linkages.

Second, the paper combines insights from literature on organisational dynamics with approaches from geography to better illustrate and analyse the geographic profiles of violence, to better understand the precise nature and processes of geographic diffusion and transnationalism among this specific set of actors. The impression of a globally interlinked and increasingly powerful Islamist network active and expanding across the world is one that needs to be nuanced with insights from the study of geography and conflict: if conflict is increasingly transnational, in what precise ways is this occurring, at what scale, and by which processes? Further research is warranted into the precise mechanisms by which conflict diffuses across transnational spaces, through processes such as emulation, learning and coercion (Wood, 2013), alongside the more familiar explanation of migration in analyses of Islamist violence.

These findings have implications beyond the three groups in question: as the Islamic State and, to a lesser extent, Al-Qaeda, continue to coordinate and ally with national affiliates and branches, understanding the dynamics of violence and predicting their patterns will remain imperative to a clear analysis of the conflict processes at play. Elsewhere in Africa, recent alliances have been forged in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia (Moody, 2015; Abukar, 2014), whose outcomes and dynamics deserve further scholarly attention as they evolve and shift; and comparative research is warranted to explore whether further expansion of alliance networks in Asia and beyond mirror patterns evident in Africa.

Critically, this study has only explored one dimension of the transnational connectivity of these groups: formalised connections to a central organisation. However, there is emerging

evidence, and a strong narrative in policy and media discourse, of interconnectivity between these groups, bypassing a centralised command structure, as connections between Al Shabaab, Boko Haram and AQIM appear to reflect (Hansen, 2013, p. 136). However, this paper has highlighted nuances in the impact of transnational connectivity in one part of these networks. Future research is warranted to explore the precise nature, dynamics and implications of connections across and within allied groups, franchises and localised branches.

8   Conclusion

Contemporary Islamist violence across Africa represents a serious and persistent security concern, not least for the human security and protection of vulnerable civilians, with wider implications for the political, economic development and international contexts in which they operate. In the context of this growing crisis, and the failure of existing research to explain this phenomenon, a detailed and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of Islamist violence is important. This research project has sought to contribute to this understanding in several ways. This final chapter will summarise the main findings of this research project, and outline implications for future research and policy.

The research project was motivated by the fact that the recent escalation and emergence of Islamist violence across sub-Saharan Africa presents a puzzle for those seeking to understand the dynamics of violent conflict, group relations, and identity in the contemporary world. Specifically, the primary research question guiding this project is, why do groups emerge and act under a specific identity mantle, in complex, multi-identity environments? Relatedly, what shapes group choices to brand themselves under an Islamist mantle, and how are emergence and subsequent conflict strategies shaped by the identity choices they, and the wider populations in which they operate, make? The decision to mobilise collectively under a specific identity brand is neither automatic, in complex contexts in which multiple identities can be drawn upon for salience, meaning and collective action; nor is it mechanistically linked to structural conditions which are often fixed and unchanging.

The theoretical approach in this research project is based on the understanding that the manifestations of violence – including the mantle under which it is collectively mobilised, and the dynamics of that violence (its intensification, targeting, and geography) – can be

understood as strategic choices in complex, multi-actor and multi-identity conflict environments.

8.1 Main Findings

Chapters 4-7 presented the findings of the four substantive enquiries that comprise this thesis. In addition to chapter-specific findings, several common findings emerge across the body of research.

8.1.1 Comparability to Other Groups

Violent Islamist groups are comparable to other groups, and can be understood using some of the same theoretical frameworks and explanations that have proved effective in understanding and explaining other forms of non-state violence. The comparability of Islamist violence to other violent groups is explored in several chapters, applying theories of political exclusion and marginalisation, and local conflict conditions to explain the emergence of specific forms of political violence. This comparability not only presents a challenge to theories positing the uniqueness or specificity of violent Islamists, but also suggests the transferability of the theories and arguments presented herein. Violent Islamist groups provide a test case for theories of the mobilisation of violent collective action under a strategic identity mantle, but the same theories could equally apply to other identity-based or collectively mobilised conflicts. In other words, these theories are tested in the case of a prevalent and pressing security concern, but their applicability beyond the range of specific actors explored herein, to a potentially wider universe of violent groups mobilising under a diverse range of ethnically, communally, regionally or religiously defined faultlines, presents an opportunity for further research.

8.1.2   Local Context

The local context matters: in spite of a common narrative that typically emphasises the transnational connectivity, global reach, and post-national mobilisation bases of violent Islamist groups, the research project has presented strong evidence for the explanatory power of the local context in shaping the emergence and dynamics of this form of conflict.

Violent Islamist groups emerging in sub-Saharan Africa are primarily products of a local, domestic and national political environment, before they are a node, spoke or hub in a global movement. Their emergence is condition by local factors such as political, economic, and social marginalisation (Chapter 4); the specific geographic profiles of violence map onto the distribution of aggrieved communities facing ethnic collective action challenges, and correlate to temporal developments in the extension and expansion of exclusionary practices (Chapter 5); and the characteristics of the conflict environment and its multiple other actors impact on the strategies of violence groups employ (Chapter 6). Finally, even where transnational organisational linkages effectively foster extra-territorial connectivity across groups, local conditions still shape and dictate the efficacy, capacity and activity of violent Islamist organisations in diverse contexts across the continent (Chapter 7).

8.1.3   Marginalisation

Highly localised experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, spatialized and clustered at the sub-national level, help explain the salience and emergence of violent Islamist narratives of mobilisation, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 explores these dynamics of marginalisation and exclusion from central government power in a large-n, cross-national research model. Chapter 5 develops these findings further in a case study-focused exploration of three high-Islamist violence countries – Kenya, Mali and Nigeria.

Both chapters emphasise the significance of historical patterns of conflict in Islamist-affected areas: in contrast to frameworks that understand the emergence of Islamist violence as a critical juncture and dramatic break from historical modes of collective organisation, the findings illustrate the significance of historical experiences and modalities of violence in shaping contemporary patterns and dynamics. This finding goes beyond emphasising, simply, that past violence predicts future violence, although the temporal dependence of past experiences has a role to play in conditioning populations, groups and the political arena to the use and acceptability of violence as a means of politics and negotiation. More significantly, the historical experiences of violence directly shape the logic of mobilisation, rhetorical devices, and framing that violent Islamist groups utilise in seeking to develop popular support, recruit new members, and situate their activity in the context of historical struggles. This is explicitly clear in the case of Mali, where northern, previously ethno-communally mobilised groups, reconfigured their actions under an Islamist mantle and drastically changed the nature of their engagement and negotiation with the Malian state and international community. It is equally apparent in the deft exploitation of historical narratives of mobilisation used by Al Shabaab in Kenya, who actively sought to tailor rhetoric and framing to past experiences of conflict and disenfranchisement that have shaped the relationships between Northern, Coastal and wider Muslim communities, with the Kenyan state.

The distribution of those experiences of marginalisation within and across groups, also contributes to the salience and effectiveness of this particular form of mobilisation. Concentration among geographically clustered groups, whose bases of mobilisation are otherwise limited (due to the marginalisation of ethnic or other communal categories), can draw instead on an alternative identity category which transcends marginalised ethnic groups and presents opportunities for 'cultural entrepreneurship' (Willis and Gona, 2013, p. 451).

8.1.4   Fragmentation and Competition

In addition to the findings on marginalisation, the research project also finds that local dynamics of the conflict environment itself, shaped by the presence, relative activity levels, and strategies of other non-state violent actors in the same conflict spaces, shapes the strategies of violence, including the use and limitation of anti-civilian violence, employed. Chapter 6 analyses the effect of local competition between violent Islamist and other non-Islamist non-state armed actors, and finds that the presence and number of other non-state armed actors dampens the likelihood of anti-civilian violence in most cases. However, where non-Islamist, non-state armed groups emerge in locations where violent Islamist groups are already highly active, levels of anti-civilian violence typically increase. These seemingly counter-veiling tendencies reflect the divers logics which govern the use of this strategy of violence: in contexts of high competition between Islamist and non-Islamist non-state armed groups, anti-civilian violence is limited in an attempt to build wider popular support; by contrast, in contexts where violent Islamist groups are well-established and highly active, nascent challengers to that position of dominance result in greater anti-civilian violence in a logic of punishing civilian populations for defection and lack of support.

8.1.5   Transnational Linkages

Transnationalism does affect the emergence and nature of Islamist violence, but in ways that are less pronounced than typically suggested, and in ways other than those proposed by existing research. Specifically, transnational linkages do not override local conditions or pre-existing group capacity, reflected in the violence levels and geographic dynamics of partnered groups. In spite of a substantial literature predicting the intensification of violence as a consequence of alliance formation across groups, I illustrate a medium- to longer-term decline in violence frequency and intensity over time in each of these groups following

alliance formation. The implication of this is not that alliances *cause* a decline in activity, but rather that groups ally at a point of weakness and face increased pressure following alliance formation from state security forces. Consequently, in contrast to an interpretation that sees emerging alliances across a network of actors as a sign of strength and growing capacity, alliance formation is insufficient to bolster junior partners' operational capacity in the way existing research predicts.

This pattern of declining capacity is also reflected in the geographic scope of activity: while the number of countries in which a group is active is positively correlated to alliance formation, and suggests an increased international presence, the number of sub-national spaces is negatively correlated. In other words, while violence occurs in a larger number of countries, it is not occurring in a larger number of spaces within those countries, with conflict relocating, rather than escalating and expanding, in its overall scope. This suggests that allied groups struggle to maintain operational capacity in sub-national spaces of activity, and prioritise international presence over and above sustained presence at the sub-national level.

8.2   Implications for Future Research

Ongoing research can benefit in several ways from the findings of this research project. First, attempts to understand violent Islamist groups should re-orient attention away from an emphasis on the specificity or uniqueness of such groups, and towards a comparative, and where appropriate, historical, framework, which situates this activity within the wider context of violent political competition, negotiation and engagement in these countries. Chapters 4-6 each illustrate that violent Islamist groups do not typically emerge in spaces devoid of other forms of violent political contestation. In contrast, they actively seek to situate their activity within these pre-existing, violent repertoires, reconfiguring active

conflict agents, drawing on established mobilising rhetoric, and adjusting their strategies of violence and civilian relations in accordance with these complex interactions. An approach that continues to treat violent Islamist groups in isolation, or only in comparative terms of other violent Islamist agents, obscures the degree to which the actions of these groups reflect a continuation, rather than a distinct rupture, of well-established violent politics in these contexts. Greater attention should be paid to the comparative and historical continuities between violent Islamist groups and other agents of political violence, including the state, in order to pave the way for the truly specific or unique features of this violence to be identified once commonalities have been recognised and accounted for.

This re-orientation has equally significant consequences for conflict reduction and peacebuilding policies. Policy responses often focus primarily on the *mode* under which conflict emerges, through programmes which emphasise the importance of religious leaders as nodes of (de-)radicalisation, or which seek to co-opt and engage with religious communities. In doing so, programming may neglect the extent to which the modality of violence is a function of strategic opportunities, but its emergence, and likely persistence, is shaped by underlying and often unaddressed conditions of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination. The transformation of ethno-communal violence under the relatively novel mantle of Islamist violence attests to the mutability and fluidity of conflict mobilisation, adapting to strategic opportunities. In many ways, ongoing violence between communal militias and paramilitary forces in Mali, and in parts of south-central Somalia, following the almost total defeat of violent Islamist forces there, illustrates a dangerous path out of Islamist violence, and into ongoing, internecine violence in the country. In other words, without adequate attention to the drivers of collective political violence *generally*, then where Islamist violence *specifically* declines or is contained through security responses, other forms of violence are likely to emerge in its place.

Another area for further research concerns the application of some of these theories to other, non-Islamist, identity-mobilised armed groups. The comparability of violent Islamist groups to other non-state armed actors has been a key finding of this research project, emphasising the usefulness of applying some existing theories of violent mobilisation in contexts of marginalisation and exclusion in explaining the emergence of Islamist violence. However, the extent to which violent Islamist groups differ or mirror the activity of other specifically identity-mobilised non-state armed groups has not been treated in full in the course of this research project, and warrants further research. The research in Chapter 6 suggests that violent Islamist groups are a suitable test case for the logic that dictates the emergence of relatively novel forms of collective, violent mobilisation. This may indicate that other groups which rely on the reconfiguration of conflict under relatively new mantles (for example, novel configurations of ethno-regional identities, other religious identities, party political, or urban-rural mantles) may exhibit similar patterns in their engagement with populations and other non-state armed groups. The extent to which this is the case warrants a more detailed comparison between violent Islamist groups and other groups which reconfigure and transform collective action and violence across Africa and beyond.

Additionally, this research project has focused exclusively on the African context, and primarily on sub-Saharan African case studies, in order to explore the emergence of violent Islamist activity in relatively new and novel configurations in this region. This focus has been justified for several reasons. First, there has been a sudden and dramatic intensification of Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa since 2009, reflecting a genuine security crisis, and contributing to a pressing political, development and humanitarian crisis in a growing number of areas. Second, the focus is justified in light of the particular puzzle presented by the emergence of violent Islamist groups in these contexts, owing to the more conventional theoretical and hypothesised understandings of politics and collective mobilisation in Africa as largely ethnically and regionally determined. Third, the greater availability of disaggregated conflict data for this part of the world over any other region has justified this

focus in light of the opportunities this presents to conduct granular and disaggregated analysis of dynamics, agents and local contexts of conflict. These conditions notwithstanding, this research project has not considered the comparative cases of other non-African violent Islamist groups, and the extent to which the findings of this project are transferable to other violent Islamist groups. In this way, it is not possible to determine conclusively whether the dynamics highlighted in this research project are common to all violent Islamist groups, or to violent non-state armed actors within Africa alone, a question that warrants further research.

Finally, it is important to consider that while the relatively recent (re-)emergence of Islamist violence on the continent presents a particular puzzle for theorising its specific temporal and contextual drivers, the relative 'newness' of this form of mobilisation in recent years may also condition this project's findings. Nascent, emerging and relatively recently established violent groups and mobilisation mantles may operate in ways that differ from longer-running groups and principles. Organisational age, learning over time, and evolving relationships with civilian populations and political elites, may condition and shape different strategic choices over time. Recent research points to a 'generational' difference between long-established groups that seek to embed themselves more thoroughly in local communities, in contrast to newer violent agents who may rely on alternative mobilising strategies and fewer local linkages, with consequences for civil and political relationships, and strategies of violence (Kendall, *forthcoming*). This research project has sought to trace the pre-histories and historical continuities between Islamist violence and earlier and simultaneous forms of violent, political mobilisation in Africa, but in seeking to understand its future trajectory, analysts and researchers should be attentive to the potential for organisational and political evolution and change in these highly dynamic organisations.

In essence, this research project has sought to demonstrate the heterogeneity of violent Islamist actors and their rootedness in local contexts and agendas for action, in contrast to

dominant narratives of a globally integrated and homogenous network of armed groups. In doing so, it has adopted a comparative approach, which has resulted in the identification of several commonalities across these agents active in Africa. Future research should continue to bridge the gap between case study-focused research that can obscure generalisations within and across conflict actors, and comparative work that may under-emphasise the shared local contexts shaping their emergence and activity. A greater understanding of both the specific, local, and the general political, contexts and conditions within which these groups emerge, operate, and adapt, would contribute to advancing understanding and knowledge of conflicts and conflict vulnerability across the region and beyond.

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9.2 Interviews

A. Kenyan Muslim youth leader, Nairobi, 11.03.2015.

B. Kenyan Muslim leader, Nairobi, 12.03.2015.

C. Diaspora civil society activist from Borno, 3.11.2014.

D. Conflict researcher, Nairobi, 03.24.2015.

E. Human rights activists, Mombasa, 03.20.2015.

10   Appendices

10.1   Chapter 4 (Cultural and Religious Demography) Appendix

Table I. Descriptive Statistics of Conflict Events and Fatalities by Type

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Islamist Events	11328	.221	2.587	0	164
Islamist Fatalities	11328	1.324	18.415	0	756
Other Events	11328	5.878	25.953	0	922
Other Fatalities	11328	75.088	1986.589	0	129389
Total Events	11328	6.113	26.251	0	922
Total Fatalities	11328	76.634	1986.724	0	129389

Table II. Descriptive Statistics of Estimation Sample

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Muslim_per	11325	44.572	39.306	0	99.95
Dom_Muslim	11325	.442	.497	0	1
Dummy Diverse	11325	.147	.354	0	1
Distinct Count of Ethno Group	11325	5.581	8.035	1	67
EPR Dom	11325	.313	.585	0	3
EPR Outpower	11325	.455	.498	0	1
LogPop	11225	4.993	1.879	-.051	10.832
LogGDP	11256	22.778	1.516	19.041	25.997
Democracy 5	10620	.234	.423	0	1
North Africa	11325	.210	.408	0	1
Higher Poverty ADM	11325	.639	.480	0	1

TABLE III. Cultural Demography and Violent Islamist Conflict Events, Africa, 1997 – 2012

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*
Muslim Percent	.056***	.054***	.056***	.056***
	(.008)	(.007)	(.008)	9.008)
Distinct Count of Ethno Group		.023	.019	.005
		(.02)	(.016)	(.016)
Religious Diverse		-.987		
		(.612)		
EPR Dominance			-.623***	
			(.231)	
Dummy_EPR Outpower				.775**
				(.39)
North Africa	-2.855***	-2.56***	-2.146***	-2.394***
	(.533)	(.553)	(.603)	(.722)
Higher Poverty_ADM	-.206	-.235	-.243	-.148
	(.634)	(.617)	(.612)	(.565)
Log(Pop)	.056	.054	.09	.072
	(.113)	(.117)	(.115)	(.103)
Log(GDP)	.954***	.893***	.864***	.939***
	(.145)	(.142)	(.154)	(.165)
Democracy_5	1.009*	.963*	1.018*	1.126*
	(.567)	(.575)	(.56)	(.582)
Capital	1.491***	1.539***	1.546***	1.641***
	(.379)	(.37)	(.386)	(.333)
Lag Islamist Events	.005	.005	.006	.005
	(.004)	(.004)	(.005)	(.004)
Sum Islamist Events	.023***	.022***	.024***	.022***
	(.007)	(.007)	(.007)	(.007)
Constant	-29.399***	-27.912***	-27.662***	-29.695***
	(3.214)	(3.006)	(.3.382)	(3.842)
Log-likelihood	-1808.722	-1801.885	-1799.099	-1793.367
Observations	9789	9789	9789	9789

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE IV. Cultural Demography and Other Conflict Events, Africa, 1997 – 2012

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*
Muslim Percent	.003	.003	.003	.002
	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)
Distinct Count of Ethno Group		.037**	.036**	.032*
		(.018)	(.018)	(.017)
Religious Diverse		-.579**		
		(.237)		
EPR Dominance			.086	
			(.194)	
Dummy_EPR Outpower				.142
				(.231)
North Africa	-1.283***	-1.021**	-.991**	-.895**
	(.449)	(.422)	(.446)	(.429)
Higher Poverty_ADM	-.222	-.3	-.301	0.293
	(.223)	(.21)	(.218)	(.213)
Log(Pop)	.012	-.018	-.013	-.009
	(.062)	(.058)	(.06)	(.06)
Log(GDP)	.077	.022	.028	.025
	(.079)	(.076)	(.081)	(.075)
Democracy_5	.156	.12	.202	.22
	(.228)	(.242)	(.239)	(.239)
Capital	1.429***	1.508***	1.52***	1.522***
	(.178)	(.194)	(.198)	(.185)
Lag Other Events	.001**	.0008*	.0009*	.0009**
	(.0005)	(.0004)	(.0005)	(.0005)
Sum Other Events	.007***	.007***	.007***	.007***
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Constant	-1.769	-.478	-.754	-.721
	(1.933)	(1.85)	(2.02)	(1.837)
Log-likelihood	-17078.617	-17000.572	-17028.695	-17027.057
Observations	9789	9789	9789	9789

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE V. Cultural Demography and Total Conflict Events, Africa, 1997 – 2012

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*
Muslim Percent	.003	.003	.003	.003
	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)
Distinct Count of Ethno Group		.0365**	.036**	.032*
		(.017)	(.017)	(.017)
Religious Diverse		-.567**		
		(.236)		
EPR Dominance			.077	
			(.201)	
Dummy_EPR Outpower				.102
				(.224)
North Africa	-1.349***	-1.061***	-1.036**	-.952**
	(.435)	(.414)	(.434)	(.422)
Higher Poverty_ADM	-.175	-.249	-.253	-.248
	(.211)	(.202)	(.209)	(.205)
Log(Pop)	.014	-.015	-.011	-.008
	(.061)	(.057)	(.059)	(.06)
Log(GDP)	.081	.026	0.312	.027
	(.078)	(.075)	(.08)	(.074)
Democracy_5	.144	.111	.189	.201
	(.226)	(.236)	(.235)	(.233)
Capital	1.441***	1.517***	1.53***	1.53***
	(.175)	9.19)	(.195)	(.183)
Lag Total Events	.001**	0.0008**	.0009**	.0009**
	(.0005)	(.0003)	(.0004)	(.0004)
Sum Total Events	.007***	.006***	.006***	.006***
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Constant	-1.858	-.5679	-.83	-.761
	(1.907)	(1.84)	(2.005)	(1.816)
Log-likelihood	-17492.171	-17414.434	-17442.007	-17441.667
Observations	9789	9789	9789	9789

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Appendix I: List of Violent Islamist Groups and Number of Violent Events

Actor Name	Number of violent events
Al-Itihad Al-Islamia	3
Al Jihad	1
Al Qaeda	9
Al Shabaab	85
Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya	38
Al-Salafiya Al Jihadia	1
Al-Sunna wal Jamma Militia	16
Al-Takfir wal Hijrah	2
Ansar al-Sharia	1
Ansar Dine	31
Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	597
Army of Palestine Militia	1
Boko Haram	536
Islamic Salvation Front	2
Armed Islamic Group	464
Free Salafist Group	2
Salafist Group for Call and Combat	281
Hizbul Islam	1
Islamic Emirate of Barqa	1
Islamist Militia (Algeria)	281
Islamist Militia (Egypt)	15
Islamist Militia (Kenya)	2
Islamist Militia (Libya)	4
Islamist Militia (Morocco)	1
Islamist Militia (Niger)	2
Islamist Militia (Sudan)	1
Islamist Militia (Tanzania)	1
LIDD: The Islamic League for Preaching and Holy Struggle	10
Men Around the Prophet	2
Mouride Brotherhood Militia	2
Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa	24
Muslim Brotherhood	4
National Congress Party	6
Rioters (Egypt)	10
Salafist Militia (Egypt)	2
Salafist Militia (Libya)	3
Salafist Militia (Tunisia)	23
Shiite Islamist Militia (Mali)	2
Shiite Islamist Militia (Nigeria)	10
Sunni Islamist Militia (Egypt)	3
Sunni Islamist Militia (Ghana)	4
Sunni Islamist Militia (Mali)	1
Sunni Islamist Militia (Nigeria)	12
Ummah Liberation Army	7

10.2   Chapter 5 (Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence) Appendix

Table I. Grievances among Muslim populations by category and administrative unit, Kenya, Mali and Nigeria

Country	Admin1	High Economic Grievances	High Political Grievances	High Institutional Grievances (Treated Unfairly by Government)	High Institutional Grievances (Treated Unequally under Law)
Kenya	Garissa	X	X	X	X
	Kwale	X	X	X	X
	Mombasa		X		X
	Nairobi				
	Wajir	X	X	X	X
Nigeria	Bauchi	X	X	X	
	Borno	X	X	X	X
	Kaduna	X			X
	Kano	X		X	X
	Yobe		X	X	
Mali	Gao			X	X
	Kidal				
	Tombouctou		X		X

Source: Afrobarometer Round 4, 2008.

10.3 Chapter 6 (Fragmentation, Conflict and Competition) Appendix

Table I. Descriptive Statistics of Conflict Events by Actor Type

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
All ACV Events Percent	2926	.115	.255	0	1
Islamist Percent of All ACV Events	2926	.035	.162	0	1
Islamist ACV Events Percent	2926	.026	.136	0	1

Table II. Descriptive Statistics of Estimation Sample

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
MVA Category	2926	.059	.219	0	1
MVA Islamist	2926	.043	.204	0	1
CNTD NonIslamist	2926	1.004	1.618	0	11
Capital	2926	.046	.208	0	1
Muslim_per	2926	41.263	36.811	.3	99.3
LogPop	2926	7.243	.784	4.93	8.252
LogGDP	2926	10.357	.606	9.112	11.755
IMR	2926	101.526	31.705	44	203.076

TABLE III. Islamist Dominance, Competition and All Anti-Civilian Violence (*All ACV Events Percent*)

	Model 1 Islamist Absent	Model 2 Islamist Active but not MVA	Model 3 Islamist MVA
CNTD NonIslamist	.043***	-.033**	.022**
	(.003)	(.013)	(.011)
Muslim Per	-.000	-.000	.000
	(.000)	(.002)	(.001)
Capital	-.046**	-.149	.035
	(.024)	(.131)	(.099)
IMR	-.000*	.003	-.001
	(.000)	(.003)	(.001)
LogPop	-.002	-.235	.065
	(.008)	(.249)	(.047)
LogGDP	.006	.146	.076*
	(.011)	(.176)	(.043)
Lag All ACV Events Percent	.081***	-.107	.047
	(.019)	(.098)	(.069)
Neighbouring All ACV Events	.004***	.003**	.001**
	(.001)	(.001)	(.000)
R-sq	.132	.135	.404
Constant	.039	.427	-1.086***
	(.103)	(.909)	(.356)
Observations	2552	94	52

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE IV. Islamist Dominance, Competition and Islamist Anti-Civilian Violence
(*Islamist Percent of All ACV Events*).

	Model 4 Islamist Active but not MVA	Model 5 Islamist MVA
CNTD NonIslamist	-.067***	.049**
	(.019)	(.02)
Muslim Per	-.000	.002
	(.002)	(.002)
Capital	.007	.081
	(.115)	(.179)
IMR	-.002	.000
	(.002)	(.002)
LogPop	-.384	.077
	(.269)	(.084)
LogGDP	.171	.109
	(.181)	(.077)
Lag Islamist Percentage of All ACV Events	.116	.158*
	(.109)	(.089)
Neighbouring Islamist ACV Events	.003	.003***
	(.002)	(.001)
R-sq	.266	.416
Constant	1.929**	-1.664***
	(.818)	(.624)
Observations	94	52

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE V. Islamist Dominance, Competition and Islamist Anti-Civilian Violence
(*Islamist ACV Events Percent*).

	Model 6	Model 7
	Islamist Active but not MVA	Islamist MVA
CNTD NonIslamist	-.034*	.021*
	(.021)	(.011)
Muslim Per	-.004*	.001
	(.002)	(.001)
Capital	-.131	.039
	(.166)	(.096)
IMR	.002	-.001
	(.003)	(.001)
LogPop	.114	.031
	(.338)	(.045)
LogGDP	-.091	.094**
	(.233)	(.041)
Lag Percentage of Islamist Events	-.074	.127**
ACV	(.126)	(.066)
Neighbouring Islamist ACV Events	.001	.001***
	(.002)	(.000)
R-sq	.081	.446
Constant	.779	-1.143***
	(1.143)	(.328)
Observations	94	52

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

10.4   **Chapter 7 (Transnational Nature of Islamist Violence) Appendix**

Table I: Descriptive statistics of independent variables.

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
GroupEvents	491	15.707	25.141	1	125
GroupFatalities	491	80.972	210.734	0	3054
DistinctCountCountry	491	1.811	.815	1	4
DisctinctCountAdmin1	491	3.688	3.053	1	13
DistinctCountAdmin2	491	6.261	7.128	1	45
DistinctCountLocation	491	9.529	14.013	1	84

Table II: Descriptive statistics of dependent and control variables.

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Affiliated	491	.544	.499	0	1
Affiliated6MonthsPre	491	.605	.489	0	1
Affiliated12MonthsPre	491	.662	.474	0	1
Affiliated18MonthsPre	491	.719	.449	0	1
LogTotalPop	491	4.432	.418	2.954	5.264
LogGDP	491	11.046	1.253	9.029	13.719
PolityIV4	491	.432	.496	0	1
MuslimPer	491	.772	.333	.06	.998

TABLE III. Violent Events by Group and Affiliation Stage

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*
Affiliated	-.472**			
	(.222)			
Affiliated6MonthsPre		-.214*		
		(.13)		
Affiliated12MonthsPre			-.063	
			(.069)	
Affiliated18MonthsPre				-.098
				(.09)
MuslimPer	.151	-.013	-.048	-.057
	(.22)	(.247)	(.276)	(.273)
LogTotalPop	.808***	.977***	1.076***	1.063***
	(.242)	(.196)	(.177)	(.18)
LogGDP	-.148*	-.193**	-.223***	-.219**
	(.078)	(.085)	(.084)	(.87)
PolityIV4	-.165	-.293**	-.339**	-.339**
	(.188)	(.145)	(.141)	(.136)
LagEvents	.045***	.047***	.048***	.048***
	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)
Constant	-.352	-.561	-.717	-.668
	(1.073)	(1.365)	(1.487)	(1.477)
Log-Likelihood	-1464.16	-1477.11	-1480.07	-1479.74
Observations	475	475	475	475

Standard errors in parentheses *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

TABLE IV. Reported Fatalities by Group and Affiliation Stage

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Affiliated	-.865***			
	(.336)			
Affiliated6MonthsPre		-.441**		
		(.189)		
Affiliated12MonthsPre			-.38*	
			(.218)	
Affiliated18MonthsPre				-.334
				(.228)
MuslimPer	.718*	.417	.341	.333
	(.412)	(.549)	(.585)	(.587)
LogTotalPop	-.343	-.235	-.221	-.167
	(.336)	(.283)	(.275)	(.329)
LogGDP	.205	.139	.128	.104
	(.142)	(.155)	(.165)	(.159)
PolityIV4	.676*	.445	.396	.379
	(.397)	(.361)	(.378)	(.383)
LagFatalities	.006*	.007**	.007***	.007***
	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)
Constant	2.135	2.483	2.609	2.619
	(2.13)	(2.481)	(2.511)	(2.535)
Log-Likelihood	-2184.08	-2195.49	-2196.79	-2197.48
Observations	475	475	475	475

Standard errors in parentheses *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

TABLE V. Geography of Violence (Country, Admin1, Admin2 and Location) by Affiliation

	Countries Model 9	Admin1 Model 10	Admin2 Model 11	Location Model 12
Affiliated	.149**	-.175**	-.241*	-.351**
	(.077)	(.079)	(.128)	(.178)
MuslimPer	-.261**	.62***	.455*	.18
	(.109)	(.21)	(.26)	(.238)
LogTotalPop	-.31***	.239*	.484***	.644***
	(.076)	(.132)	(.173)	(.239)
LogGDP	.061**	-.013	-.081	-.126**
	(.028)	(.024)	(.053)	(.061)
PolityIV4	.057	.139	-.015	-.18
	(.042)	(.149)	(.216)	(.231)
LagDistinctCountofCountry	.195***			
	(.039)			
LagDistinctCountofAdmin1		.159***		
		(.023)		
LagDistinctCountofAdmin2			.106***	
			(.014)	
LagDistinctCountofLocation				.071***
				(.008)
Constant	1.003***	-.807	-.624	-.279
	(.387)	(.559)	(.63)	(.898)
Log-Likelihood	-626.155	-910.601	-1127.57	-1264.182
Observations	475	475	475	475

Standard errors in parentheses *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.