AFRICA UNDER FIRE

*Connecting the Islamic dots on the African continent*

Nine people, including four members of the United Nation mission, were killed in an attack on Friday 7 August in the central town of Sevare, Mali after heavily armed gunmen entered a hotel popular with European military officers. Malian troops stormed the Hotel Byblos early Saturday morning and freed four hostages – two Ukrainians, a Russian, and a South African. Four of the attackers were killed, and eight were wounded, the Malian government said.

The following day, Sunday 9 August, gunmen killed 10 people in an attack on the village of Gaberi in northern Mali. No group has taken responsibility for either attack, though Agence France-Presse reported on Monday that Macina Liberation Front, an Al Qaeda-linked group, is suspected of carrying out the attack on the Hotel Byblos.

The two attacks in Mali have raised fears that an uptick in suspected jihadist violence in recent months is spreading across the country and also across the continent.

A GROWING INFLUENCE

Africa is a spiritually divided continent with North Africa being almost completely Muslim and Sub-Sahara Africa being mainly Christian. The growth of Islam in North Africa the past century has been matched by the growth of Christianity in the Sub-Sahara region but the division that followed has created a 'religious wall' of violence and prejudice.
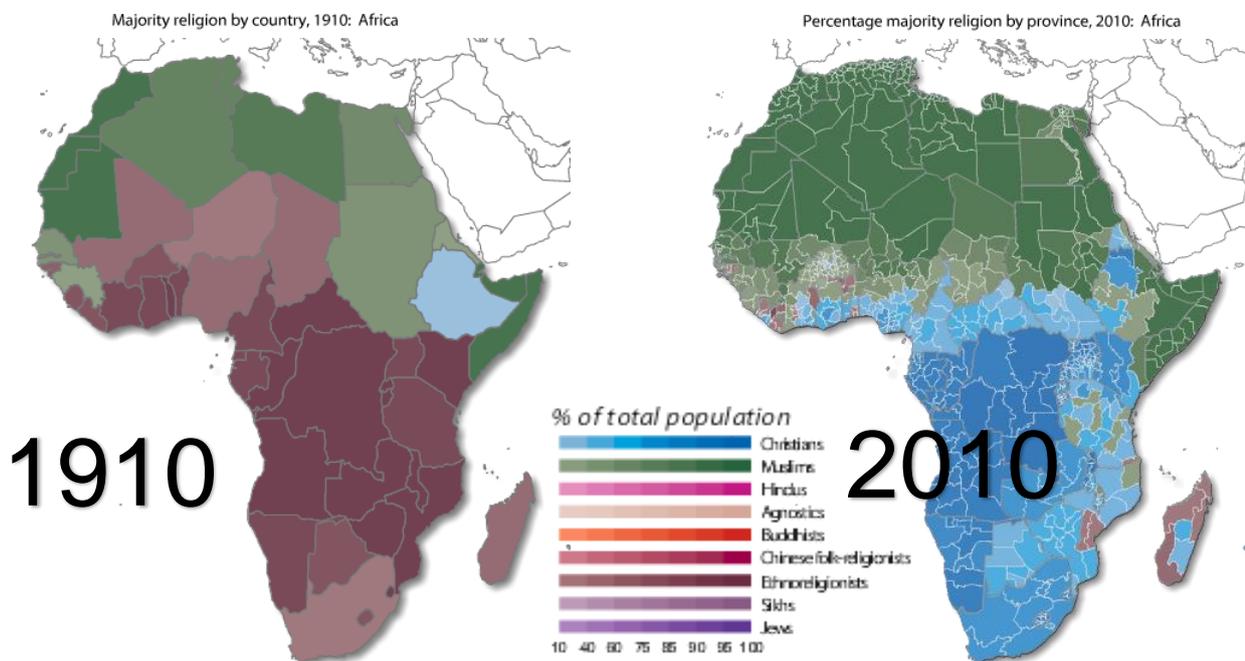
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Conflicting reports often appear in the Christian media relating to the growth of Islam in Africa and, depending on what sources, methods and reporting are used, the conclusions often differ substantially.

David Garrison, in his book *A Wind in the House of Islam* (http://windinthehouse.org/) writes *"that in the decade of the 1990s more than 10,000 Muslims walked away from Islam in North Africa and were baptized as followers of Jesus Christ.*

Today, their numbers have more than tripled. West Africa, Garrison writes*, is witnessing a passion for Jesus Christ that has seen thousands of Muslims turn away from Islam to embrace the Prince of Peace."*

The stories told by Garrison is indeed encouraging and testifies of a regional growth unprecedented in recent history. BUT, even though the growth is significant in percentage points, it is still small in comparative size. Compared to the growth of Islam in numbers, the growth of Christianity is making little inroads in Muslim majority countries in North Africa. When the proverbial 'apples are compared with apples', a slightly lesser optimistic picture emerges.

The following statistics, taken in 2000 and 2015 from the **CIA WORLD FACT BOOK** *(https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html)*, indicates the trends in some of the major countries in Africa. Even though the statistics provided by the CIA may differ from other sources the objective is to use the same source over a period of time to determine a trend. The CIA World Fact Book is generally recognised as a non-biased, trustworthy source.

The Muslims population by country over the past 15 years

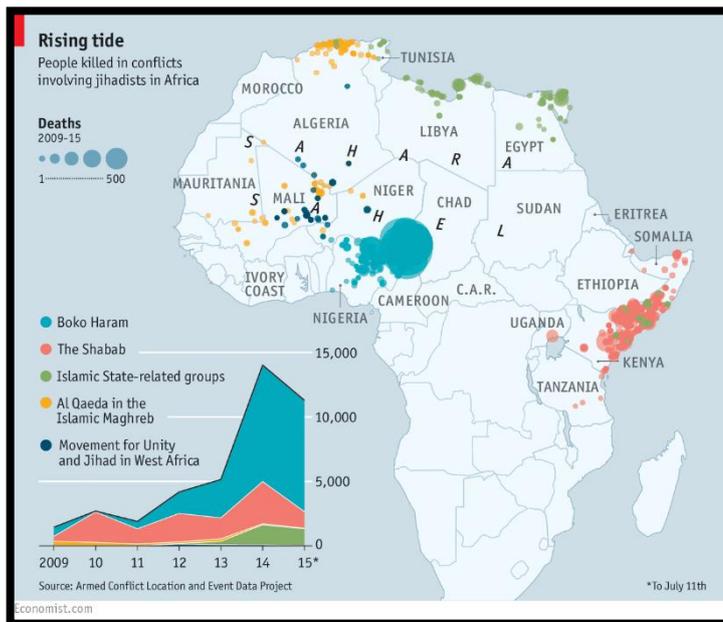| Country	2000	2015	Growth/ Decline
Algeria	99%,	99%	-
Benin	15%,	24%	9%
Burkina Faso	50%,	61%	11%
Chad	50%,	53%	3%
D.R Congo	7%,	10%	3%
Ivory Coast	60%,	39%	-21%
Djibouti	94%,	94%	-
Egypt	86%,	90%	4%
Ethiopia	47%,	34%	-13%
Ghana	30%,	18%	-12%
Kenya	7%,	11%	4%
Libya	97%,	97%	-
Malawi	20%,	13%	-7%
Mali	90%,	95%	5%
Mauritania	99%,	100%	1%
Mozambique	20%,	18%	-2%
Namibia	<1%	<1%	-
Niger	80%,	80%	-
Nigeria	47%,	50%	3%
Senegal	92%,	94%	2%
Somalia	98%,	100%	2%
South Africa	2%,	2%	-
Sudan	70%,	(North Sudan) 99%	
Tanzania	35%,	35%	-
Tunisia	98%,	99%	1%
Uganda	16%	12%	-4%
Zambia	<1%	<1%	-
Zimbabwe	<1%	<1%	-
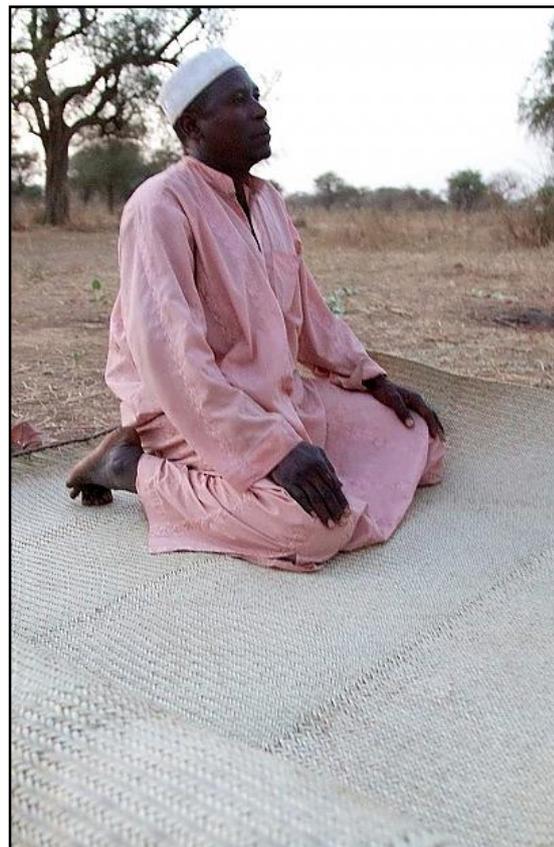
The general trend seems to be a current growth of Islam in North Africa with a decrease of followers in Southern Africa.

The decrease in Southern Africa however is sadly not because of the growth of Christianity but the growth of Atheism. A recent poll conducted by the oldest and the largest network of opinion pollsters, WIN-Gallup International, in 57 countries covering more than 73% of the world's population showed that South Africa has shown the 5th largest increase in Atheism with religiosity decreasing with 19% from 83% to 64%

A RADICAL INFLUENCE

A far more concerning trend however is not only the growth of Islam on the African continent but the growth, and the activities, of radical Islamic groups such as IS (Libya and Tunisia), Boko Haram (Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon) , Al Qaida (Mauritania, Mali), Al Shabaab (Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania) the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt, Libya) and the DAF (DRCongo).

During the past 30 days (10 July 2015 – 10 August 2015) sixty-one terror attacks were launched in eleven African nations (Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Egypt, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia) by Islamic Jihadists. During these attacks more than 600 were killed and more than 800 injured. The attack on the hotel in Mali was probably the most reported incident but was not an isolated event.

Rising tide
People killed in conflicts involving jihadists in Africa

Deaths
2009-15

1 ·········· 500

- Boko Haram
- The Shabab
- Islamic State-related groups
- Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

15,000
10,000
5,000
0

2009 10 11 12 13 14 15*

Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

*To July 11th

Economist.com

But Mali is not unique and will not be the last in dealing with Islamic attacks on the African continent. It seems like a strategic and orchestrated process of Islamising the African content has started and unless the Church addresses the challenge intentionally, the next five years could be decisive.

THE ECONOMIST of 18 July 2015 reported that more nations in sub-Saharan Africa have seen regions turning into no-go zones in recent months than in decades before. Parts of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Niger have seen in increase in attacks and Northern Mali has been off-limits to outsiders (and especially Westerners) since an Islamist-backed uprising in 2012.

Frequent and severe attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Chad have killed hundreds, prompting Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari, to dismiss his military chiefs.

On the Africa's eastern side, violent Islamism has spread as far as Tanzania. Using homemade bombs, handguns and buckets of acid, extremists have attacked Christian leaders and tourists. Tanzania has also become a transit point for European extremists. "Jihadi John", a British member of Islamic State (IS) known for beheading people on camera, passed through Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's biggest city, before heading to Syria.

But equally concerning is the fact that a number of sub-Saharan countries are now dealing with jihadism at home. They include Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. Jihadist attacks in many places are a daily or weekly occurrence. Weapons are widely available, often left over from secular civil wars. Tens of thousands have died.

For the Church, time is running out. To strategically engage in this battle is neither an option nor is it a theory. Unless the urgency is reflected in pro-active engagement the reality of a radical presence could happen sooner than expected. Kenya is a classic example.

Once the dots are connected, a picture emerges that shows a clear connection between the growth of Islam in numbers and the growth of Islam in extremism. The link between growth in followers and growth in attacks is closely linked to one another. The African countries that have seen significant growth in the number of Muslims (Chad:3%, DRC:3%, Egypt:4%, Kenya:4%, Mali:5%, Nigeria:3% and Somalia:2%) over the past 15 years are also the nations that are currently experiencing terror attacks on a national and organised level.

The reason is quite simple. Increasingly what drives African extremism is not just opportunity or firepower but ideology, and this is clearly illustrated by the fact that growth in numbers will ultimately translate into growth in ideology which in turn will draw dissatisfied people together into groups of extremism. The vision of turning Africa into an Islamic continent is a spiritual dream, not a political nor economic ambition. Islam has identified, and is addressing, the ideological needs of Africans and has in a sense become the continent's new **ideology of protest**.

Addressing the daily frustrations of people and tapping into local grievances has always been a fertile ground for extremism. From Mali and Nigeria to Kenya and Tanzania the story is the same: extremists emerge from Muslim populations on a national level who are fed up with decades of corruption, neglect, discrimination and mistreatment by their rulers. Jihadists are able to exploit existing religious tensions and latch on to disgruntled Muslim communities.

THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

In the light of the above it is clear that the future battle for the hearts and souls of Africans will not be fought on the political arena but in places of worship. It is not only what the Church will do that will change the future of the continent but also **what the Church will neglect to do** that will radically influence the growth of Islam and the increase of extremism.

Unless the Church positions herself strategically in addressing the spiritual and social needs of society, the battle will be lost simply by the vacuum created through apathy, ignorance and uninvolvement.

Frederic Ntedika Mvumbi, in a seminar in Ghana, provided four key observations in contemplating strategic influence amongst Muslims:

Firstly, Mvumbi noted that whoever studies Islam as a religion exclusively will not understand the way of life laid down by Muhammad, for such a person ignores the religious, political and social context in which Islam was founded and spread in the world, in this case, in the North, West, East, South, Central of Africa and the Horn of Africa. This context continues to stimulate Muslims in Africa, perhaps more than yesterday.

Secondly, Islam was a singlehanded enterprise at the very beginning but right after the death of Muhammad up-to-date, Islam contains multiple expressions. Islam remains one maybe with the authority of the Qur'an but diverse due to what goes into it and what comes from it. This is the type of Islam that came to Africa. Mvumbi then uses the term *Islams* in plural rather than Islam in singular.

Thirdly, those who write on Islam in Africa should consider the fact that Africa is one and multiple. That is the continent Islam meets. Geographically, culturally, politically and economically, the six African regions are distinct. Thus Islam in Africa, as elsewhere, is influenced not only by the specific characteristics of each region but also by the conditions it encounters. We should therefore expect to have different Islamic features in each part of Africa. 'One shoe' does not fit all.

Fourthly, religion, as an integrated part of daily African life, has always been one of the major expressions of Africans. Unfortunately, religion, which should be a way of life, has become a tool of many individuals, groups and associations, especially these last two decades. Historically speaking, this situation was aggravated not only by the spread of Islam in Africa but also and above all by its revival from the beginning of the 19th century. This truth is confirmed in the history of Sudan, Chad, Ivory Coast and Nigeria where religion has not only become a divisive force and a decisive source of political legitimacy but also a tool for mass appeal and mobilization.

CONCLUSION

There are a multitude of programmes and teachings available that will assist the Church to strategically engage in Muslim Evangelism. This article is not intent on giving more guidelines in this regard. There are however two points that need to take root in the heart of every believer regardless of theology, location or skills.

1. Stop complaining, stop protesting and **START DOING**. It is obvious that the most fertile ground for extremism to prosper is the presence of need. When Christians start meeting the practical, social and spiritual needs of the people around them, extremism will lose its stronghold. This applies to Cape Town as much as it does to Cairo.

2. **INCARNATIONAL LIVING**. Like everyone else Muslims need to be attracted to the radiant goodness, truth and beauty of Jesus Christ. They must see the radical love that Christ offers and compare it to the radical violence their own extremists offer. The Church need to incarnate Christ in all levels of society amongst all peoples of society and from all avenues in society

Ephesians 5:16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

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