

SESSION 5: ROLE OF ISLAM IN SHAPING AFRICA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

Objectives:

- Provide a broad understanding of the introduction and growth of Islam in East Africa.
- Examine and analyze Muslim demographics (and consequent socio-political dynamics) in East Africa.
- Highlight how religious identity frames and influences intra- and inter-state relations.
- Explore the extent to which Islam within the region is influenced by Islamic actors (state and non-state) acting from outside the region.

Background:

Islam first arrived in East Africa in the eighth century by way of trade and other interactions within the Indian Ocean system, and experts estimate that by the 13th century, it was the majority religion in the littoral regions dominated by Swahili settlements and “city-states.” However, Islam didn't spread to the interior to a meaningful degree until the 18th century. The current demographic distribution of Muslim populations within East Africa reflects this early history, with littoral areas more likely to be majority Muslim or with significant Muslim minorities, while Muslims are typically small minorities in interior regions.

Islam shapes the strategic environment of East Africa via multiple mechanisms. First, at both the domestic and international levels, Islam operates as a politics of identity. Within domestic spaces, Muslims may mobilize jointly for collective (and especially political) action using their religious identity as a mobilization frame. Note that this type of identity politics in no way requires such groups to advocate for the Islamization of the state or society. Within African spaces (including East African), you see Muslim minorities (frequently of diverse ethnic or tribal affiliations) deploy Muslim identity in this way, especially in reaction to elite narratives framing Muslims as “other” or the nature of the state as Christian. This dynamic has been observed in recent years within Côte d'Ivoire and among Muslims living on the Kenyan coast.

At the international level, Muslim identity may be deployed to elicit solidarity, including political and/or humanitarian support. The various humanitarian crises in East Africa in the 1980 and 1990s, for example, saw Muslim identity being deployed to solicit aid from majority-Muslim Middle Eastern countries. These mechanisms help shape how Muslim East Africans view in-groups versus out-groups and allies versus potential opponents. This politics of identity can even operate at the interstate level when governments deploy opposing religious identities. Discourse – and contention – about political Islamization also shapes the strategic environment within the African context. Sharp debates about the role of Islamic law and courts, for example, have emerged as some African states – including Nigeria and Kenya – have gone through democratization. (This debate has also been a central feature of the political discourse in post-Arab Spring states in North Africa.) This discourse and contention is also a feature of militant Islamist movements in the region. And again, the debate about Islamization operates at a domestic level, shaping political alliances and oppositions, but also operates at the transnational level as both proponents and opponents of Islamization connect to and draw on resources (rhetorical and material) from outside the region.

Importantly, both Islam as identity politics and discourse surrounding Islamization may fuel militant movements as well as provide mechanisms for peaceable debate that should

characterize democratic polities, depending on local dynamics and the response to both by domestic governments as well as international actors. This lecture, in addition to outlining the different ways Islam shapes the strategic environment, will encourage discussion surrounding how U.S. actions (and those of partners) can influence resort to violence versus reliance on non-violent forms of contention and debate.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Muslim identity work differently in those countries where Islam is the majority religion versus where it is the minority religion?
2. How do external actors influence/shape Muslim religious practice and Islamic discourse in East Africa?
3. What are ways for Western governments, actors, NGOs, etc. to more constructively engage with Muslim identity politics and discourses around Islamization?

Required Readings

Abdisaid M.Ali (9 August 2016) "Islamist Extremism in East Africa," *Africa Security Brief No. 32*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <https://africacenter.org/publication/islamist-extremism-east-africa/>

Terje Østebø (2010) "Islamism in the Horn of Africa: Assessing Ideology, Actors, and Objectives," Oslo, Norway: International Law and Policy Institute. https://ilpi.org/wp-content/uploads/0202/06/Islamism_in_the_Horn_ILPI_Report-libre.pdf

Recommended Readings

Abdulkader Tayob (2012) "Politics and Islamization in African Public Spheres," *Islamic Africa* 3:2, 139-168.

David Dickson (2005) "Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Need for a New Research and Diplomatic Agenda," Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/05/political-islam-sub-saharan-africa-need-new-research-and-diplomatic-agenda>

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010) "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/>