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Exploring the
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Between
Ethnicity and
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Introduction.

There are 3,315 ethnic groups on the African continent. These have been forced into Africa's 54 "nation-states". In recent years we have witnessed an upsurge of secessionist movements which has already seen the dismemberment of Ethiopia as well as Sudan and calls for secession across the length and breadth of Africa as certain groups feel marginalized from the largesse of the state whilst others are deemed to be appropriating more than their fair share. This perception arises from the fact that those monopolizing political power (and therefore state resources) often belong to a particular ethnic, racial or religious identity. Those opposing and seeking to replace them, meanwhile, also mobilize along identity lines. In the process the post-colonial African state has singularly failed to create an overarching national identity and a common citizenship for all those within its territorial boundaries. This tension between the state and various sub-state identities has been exploited by Islamist groupings in Africa and can clearly be witnessed in Mali and Nigeria.

Mali and Nigeria: A Case of Reinforcing Identities.

One reason for the crisis-prone nature of the African state is the nature of the historical processes which led to its formation. The call for a separate Tuareg homeland – Azawad, as the Tuaregs identify northern Mali – is not new and can be traced back to the 15th century when the Tuaregs were dislodged by the encroaching Songhai empire. Indeed, the current wave of Tuareg nationalism has its origins in the latter part of the nineteenth century and has to do with the way in which ethnic Tuaregs were later incorporated into the Malian state by French colonialists. On 28 December 1893, French troops entered Timbuktu and claimed this desert town as a French possession, prompting resistance by the indigenous Tuaregs that continued until 1917, when Tuareg chiefs reluctantly surrendered to French rule following a series of bloody defeats.

These Tuaregs were eventually incorporated into the state of Mali, which achieved independence from France in 1960. However, the Malian Tuaregs resented their separation from their Tuareg kin in countries like Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Libya and Mauritania. More importantly, the Tuaregs saw themselves as being different from – and superior to other Malians, viewing themselves as Arab and not African, and believing their nomadic way of life was superior to the sedentary way of life of the townsfolk, crop farmers and settled villagers in the south. The Tuaregs' attitude towards their fellow citizens in the south of the country is best reflected in a statement by a Tuareg chief following Malian independence in 1960: 'What can blacks rule over when they are only good to be slaves?'

Such negative stereotypes existed on both sides of the north-south divide. Many Malians in the south viewed the Tuaregs as '...a bunch of white, feudal, racist, pro-slavery, bellicose and lazy savage nomads,' pointing to a widely held perception of the Tuaregs as a backward people. Given this clash of cultures, it is not surprising that the Tuaregs never viewed the government in Bamako as legitimate from the beginning. Tuaregs were also aggrieved by the policies of modernisation and sedentarisation pursued by successive post-independent governments in Bamako.

In Africa's Leviathan – Nigeria – with its 160 million people divided into 350 ethnic groups, speaking 400 languages and where 50 percent of the population is Muslim, 40 percent

Christian and a further 10 percent adhering to various indigenous faith traditions , the legitimacy of the state is also in question due to its history. To understand Nigeria's federal system we need to understand British colonial rule which began in 1852 and ended with independence in October 1960. Under the British, religious and ethnic divisions were reinforced as the British imposed differentiation in how they governed the North, West and East of the country . Differential governance systems reinforced existing ethnic, cultural, economic, and religious divides. Small wonder then, that since independence, Nigeria has been beset with the problem of secession.

To compound matters further, Nigeria has been cursed with a leadership who in the words of Wole Soyinka have '... no idea of Nigeria and no notion of Nigeria as a spatial and structural instrument of the construction, expansion and popularisation of egalitarian social life' . Far from attempting to overcome these divides, Nigeria's political (and military) mandarins have cynically exploited the country's fault lines – whether regional, religious or ethnic – for personal advantage. Islamist fundamentalist vigilante gangs in northern Nigeria have at various stages been co-opted by politicians in numerous instances for political profit and material gain . There is evidence, too, that northern political elites exploited Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf in 1999 as a cynical response to the population's desire to curb spiralling crime levels by the introduction of shari'a law. Having used shari'a law and Yusuf's support as a vote-catching device, these politicians then discarded Yusuf . Feeling used, an embittered Yusuf went on to form Boko Haram in 2002.

In the cases of both Mali and Nigeria we witness ethnic identity being reinforced by regional and religious identities – a situation scarcely conducive for nation-building. This, however, is worsened by the issue of relative deprivation. In Mali, for instance, whilst the poverty rate averaged 64 percent in 2004, the figure was much higher in the Tuareg-dominated north: Timbuktu had a poverty rate of 77 percent, while for Gao the figure was 78.7 and in Kidal it was a staggering 92 percent . It is under these circumstances that radical ideologies find fertile ground in conditions of poverty and despair. Whilst the world's GDP per capita is US \$10,000, Mali, which is amongst the world's twenty-five poorest countries, today, has a GDP per capita of US \$700 – the figure for Afghanistan is US \$600 and for Somalia it is a mere US \$100 . In similar vein it is no coincidence that northern Nigeria, which happens to be the poorest part of the country, has been more prone to radical Islamist uprisings than elsewhere. Whilst 27 percent of the population in the south live in poverty, the figure jumps to 72 percent for those living in the north . Small wonder then, that Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, first attracted supporters following his railing against deteriorating living standards in the north and state corruption . Iyad Ag Ghali the leader of Mali's Islamist Ansar Dine also mobilized his constituency on the basis of growing impoverishment of the north in the midst of plenty . Islamists, therefore, have exploited this growing polarization and added radical Islamism to an already volatile ethnic, racial and regional mix.

Given the economic divide between North and South in both countries, reinforcing the sectarian divides, the North has rebelled against their respective capital several times. In Nigeria, for instance, the current ferment in the Hausa-Fulani north has been replicated several times in the recent past. The Islamist Yan Tatsine Millenarian Movement of December 1980, for instance, led by Mohammed Marawa has been described as "...an overt critique of materialism and inequality that has accompanied the petroleum boom in Nigeria" . Much of this movement's rhetoric is visible in the pronouncements and statements emanating from Boko Haram.

In Mali, too, a similar dynamic was being played out with the Tuaregs. Given the deteriorating living standards in northern Mali and faced with an uncaring government, Tuaregs rebelled in 1963-1964, 1990-1996, 2006-2009 and since January 2012. In each of these rebellions, the causes and grievances were of a decidedly local nature: issues of economic marginalization, policies pertaining to sedentarization pursued by Bamako and very importantly broken promises on the part of the Malian government towards the Tuaregs. For instance, the Toure regime further alienated Tuaregs in the north – which, as mentioned earlier, is the region most severely affected by poverty – by not keeping promises made at the end of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s to develop northern Mali. Although an agency was established with donor money to oversee this development, it disbursed little funding and was primarily used by President Toure as a vehicle through which to co-opt northern political elites. The bulk of the Tuaregs did not benefit from the creation of this developmental agency. Consequently, with the passing of time we witnessed growing militancy and radicalization amongst Tuaregs. This radicalization was greatly assisted in the case of both Mali and Nigeria by the presence of Islamist preachers from Pakistan (Dawa al-Tabligh) and Saudi Arabia (Wahhabis) who have been making tremendous inroads amongst the local population at least since the 1990s and which have displaced more moderate Sufi Islamic scholars and preachers. As a consequence, grievances have taken on an increasingly international bent: occupation of Muslim lands (Afghanistan and Iraq), support for Israel, and drone strikes in Pakistan.

Implications for Counter-Terrorism

As the Obama Administration enters its second term, policy makers need to adopt a more sophisticated perspective on the nature of the terrorist threat posed – clearly distinguishing between sub-state, largely driven by local grievances, and international terrorism and doing all they can to ensure that sub-state terrorism does not morph into international terrorism. The best way this can be achieved is by focusing on the root causes driving terrorism as opposed to focusing on the symptoms. Increasingly the men in uniform are coming to similar conclusions. Rear Admiral Richard Hunt, a former commander of the US Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CTJF-HOA) stated, ‘We feel the best way to counter-terrorism is to go after the conditions that foster terrorism’.

If these root causes include under-development, poverty, poor governance and the dearth of justice, as was clearly evident in the cases of Nigeria and Mali then we might well ask why the overwhelming emphasis on the military in the African context? Clearly more funding needs to go to the US State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) since these institutions are better suited to respond to the challenge posed by nation and state building. This does not mean that the military should not be used; rather its use should be more the exception than the norm and should form part of a broader more holistic strategy with an emphasis on the political, diplomatic and economic dimensions of engagement. This holistic perspective was also alluded to by the RAND Corporation’s Project Air Force which urges policy makers to adopt a long-term perspective seeking to eradicate the conditions which give rise to terrorism or extremist elements. RAND’s Senior Policy Analyst, Angel Rabasa, eloquently argues, ‘This will occur only if hard security measures are linked with a broader array of policies designed to promote political, social and economic stability. Otherwise, there is little chance that counter-terrorism will work’.

Such an approach at addressing root causes will need to grasp the implications of dysfunctional African states from a holistic counter-terrorism perspective. This would imply,

Washington adopting a much more critical engagement strategy in their actions with African political elites – a strategy which would be designed to get them to create more democratic and ultimately more inclusive polities – states which actively unite the different ethnic and religious ground under the common flag of equal citizenship for all.

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