

# Do violent extremists govern?

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## **Morten Bøås, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, explores if violent extremists govern, including a look at jihadi insurgents' strategies**

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This may seem like a naïve question as groups inspired by the extremist versions of Salafi Islamic theology of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are most often presented as ruthless, violently brutal actors that only rule through fear and coercion. However, as time has moved on and more analyses have come to the fore, a more nuanced picture has emerged. These findings need to be taken seriously because while al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's power and appeal may be waning in the Middle East, elsewhere, groups inspired by them have grown stronger.

One case is the Sahel, and the challenge that groups like the al-Qaeda-inspired Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) represent to international order should not be underestimated. They have gained ground in Mali and Burkina Faso and are also starting to threaten West Atlantic states with important harbours for global trade, such as Benin, Ghana and Togo.

It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that we understand what these groups are. While their leaders may adhere to violent extremist interpretations of religion and use force and violence, they are also smart, wise, and know how to plan and strategise, and have developed skilful tactics for dealing with civilian populations that come under their influence.

### **Questions policymakers and intelligence services should ask**

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The question that policymakers and their respective intelligence services should ask is, therefore, how do jihadi insurgents rule and govern populations and territories under their control or influence? What are the positive and negative sanctions that they employ? These are the critical questions that Europe needs to come to terms with to avoid even more states in Sahel and West Africa falling prey to the same poisonous cocktail as Mali and Burkina Faso.

As the last decade from this part of the world has shown, our attempts to assist national armies in defeating Jihadi insurgencies have failed. They have just grown stronger, and the population has turned against the West. This suggests that the strategy needs to be recalibrated towards a social understanding of why these groups gain strength.

Then we need to focus on governance, governance failures, and how they have been utilised by Jihadi insurgents in the Sahel. It is not that they govern so good, but that they have proven to fill governance gaps left by corrupted and dysfunctional local state

authorities. Anything better than what people have experienced, therefore, tends to be welcomed.

## **Jihadi insurgents research**

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Research by the author and colleagues indicates that while certain aspects of how jihadi insurgents attempt to govern change over time, there is also a remarkable consistency in their preferred strategy of rule and how they seek to gain social traction over specific populations.

Furthermore, while context is everything and local variations constitute the main rule, the general picture is that while there are numerous ways in which jihadists govern, there are also distinct and important similarities over time. Indeed, our fieldwork data confirm the established view that Jihadi insurgents threaten to use force; they use it, kill and loot; they impose veils on women and beards on men and cut pants above the ankle; they prohibit music and smoking, and close schools; they employ embargos, regulate mobility and access to the rivers beds, fields, and roads; and may burn the fields of the local population. This clearly happens as fear and coercion are an integral part of their operational manual.

However, they also utilise other strategies, including more positive measures. Key to understanding how they have gained ground is not to focus solely on their, at times, indiscriminate use of force, but on how skilfully they have become at appropriating local grievances. As state power decayed, corrupted, and lost the ability to regulate the distribution of natural resources as land and water grievances between various local population groups increased and the Jihadi insurgents have taken advantage of this by taking the side in local rights-based conflicts over access to land, water, and trading routes.

## **Courts run by the Jihadi insurgents**

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This has been followed by the establishment of courts run by the Jihadi insurgents. This has not been systematically applied. It is more scattered and haphazard, but in part of the Mopti region of Central Mali, they have been in existence for several years, and are quite popular with the local population. The justice that they meter out is harsh and brutal, but to most locals, it is preferable to the corrupt judicial system of the state that they used to have.

The Jihadists' mobile courts are harsh, but they have some advantages over the courts that the state offered them: They are transparent, quick, cheap, and cannot be bought. It is not about money or connections that will give you the preferred verdict; it is what the Islamic judges rule, and their rulings will be implemented without much delay as people know that messing with these people will be dangerous.

Thus, if we compare this to what people had of justice before the Jihadists arrived, it is not so strange that one phrase we repeatedly heard when we interviewed people about their experiences with the mobile courts of the Jihadi insurgents, was that 'it is just like the

state, but it works'. What this suggests is a craving for a state that works for people locally, and European countries that aspire to return to the Sahel as key stakeholders should take this message seriously.

## **Closing remarks: Does violent extremism govern?**

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While we most likely cannot defeat the jihadi forces militarily, we may have a chance to outmanoeuvre them regarding governance. This necessitates, however, that we take the groups that we define as violent extremists seriously, not only as deadly enemies in combat but also as contenders in a game of who can offer the best practical solutions to the governance gap that local populations in the Sahel and elsewhere experience daily.

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