

A Review of: “Horn, Sahel, and Rift: Fault-lines of the African Jihad” by Stig Jarle Hansen¹

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Stig Jarle Hansen first heard the name “Al-Shabaab” in 2006 while doing research in Mogadishu. Since his acclaimed volume “Al-Shabaab in Somalia”, which appeared in 2013, he has extended his survey of jihadi organisations well beyond eastern Africa. The resulting Horn, Sahel, and Rift is an attempt to build a series of detailed local studies into a comparative analysis (p. vii). In Kilcullen’s terms what Hansen analyses in this volume is takfirism (Kilcullen, 2011, xviii-xix) which Hansen defines as the desire by some Muslims to condemn other Muslims for their beliefs: intra-religious sectarianism. However Kilcullen was not focused on such deep African comparative analysis, rather, pushing the counter-insurgency debate forward. Hansen addresses currents of takfirism as well as anti-modernity at pages 47-48.

In hearing of jihadi setbacks Hansen began to wonder whether there was something about their resilience which the world failed to understand, in terms of their absorbing defeat and transforming themselves to survive (p.2). Hansen argues that jihadi groups are only seldom completely eradicated. Instead of total destruction, he argues, they may relinquish significant territorial control but still survive. In this emphasis on territorial control commonalities with Hansen’s ideas can be seen with theories of revolutionary and guerrilla warfare dating back to Mao Tse-Tung. Importantly the book “explores variations over time in the different organisations rather than searching for a static, timeless ‘essence’” – Hansen’s theorizing is dynamic, rather than static, emphasizing how important context is (p.3).

In Chapter 2 (pp 17-50) Hansen lays out his theory, that changing African jihadi organisms can be organized according to four, growingly more intensive, levels of territorial presence: clandestine, accepted presence; semi-territoriality; and territorial control. The first level, clandestine network, is where Al-Hijra/al-Muhajiroun, a recent formed and somewhat amorphous group in Tanzania, sits. Jihadist groups in these situations are unable to build much more than cell networks because the state is too strong. For the next level up Hansen examines al-Qaeda in Sudan, though beyond Africa al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, or even to some degree the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s saga in Jordan before Black September in 1970 might reward closer comparison. In this single-African-case analysis Hansen argues that in Sudan after Al-Bashir’s 1989 coup, al-Qaeda helped to do three things: to quell the vibrant Southern insurgency recognising Al-Bashir’s limited means; to aid Sudan’s foreign policy and face regional rivals; and to alleviate the distressed economy (p.55). But al-Qaeda’s presence

¹ Jansen, Stig Jarle, *Horn, Sahel, and Rift: Fault-lines of the African Jihad*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2019. ISBN: 9781787382787.

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in Sudan was not always easy, and they were eventually evicted.

The majority of the groups Hansen discusses has what he describes as a ‘semi-territorial’ presence, in which they exercise some level of control over (usually) rural areas where the state or international forces are unable to provide security. These include Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin’ in Mali and beyond, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the Allied Democratic Forces in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Islamic State in Somalia and Boko Haram (both factions) on Nigeria’s periphery. Hansen argues that such bodies do not “need full control of a territory to implement rudimentary forms of governance, contrary to the conclusions of many scholars” (p.28). One does have to wonder at this point if these earlier “many scholars” had critically examined Mao’s theory of revolutionary war (Katzenbach and Hanrahan, 1955) in its first and second stages, with Communist cadres increasing visiting remote villages, providing alternatives to central government services. If they had, they might have revised their scepticism.

Territorial control, the final variant, is also illuminated by only a single case: Harakat al-Shabaab in Somalia. The most widely known examples however are non-African, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the Taliban now again in Afghanistan. These kinds of organisms emerging from the shadows are able to build something ‘resembling a state structure and having a more permanent presence’ (p. 31) This stage of extensive control has been reached three times in Africa, created by the possibilities of civil war (p. 31). When forced back, reverting to a lesser level of territorial control is a survival/resilience strategy that can enable these groups to maintain their position, effectiveness, or status.

This reviewer comes late to reading this book: Horn, Sahel, and Rift was first published in 2019. Since publication at least four separate reviews have appeared (Abdalla 2020; de Monclos 2020; Pflaum 2020; and StJohn 2019) which vary in the depth of their analysis. De Monclos is the best of the four this reviewer has seen. de Monclos argues that Hansen “..underestimates the role of African governments in prolonging conflicts.” (de Montclos, 2020, p. 206) This is a significant potential problem, given Christopher Clapham’s axiom that in analysing African conflicts the best place to start is with the government in power.

Hansen “does not seriously investigate how the abuses, the corruption and the predation of security forces contributed to push some youth” towards African jihadis (de Montclos, 2020, p. 206). With this reviewer’s explicit focus on African armies, some comments on this issue are perhaps where this piece can best drive the debate forward. There are no particular magic tricks to building up the strength, or integrity, of weak states. In Africa state boundaries are effectively fixed, though Eritrea, South Sudan, and Somaliland demonstrate that there can be exceptions and evolutions. Tilly style political evolution through war did not develop. Instead many of the groups that led Africans to independence seized the state as booty for one political or ethnic group over another and then proceeded to both exploit it and try to deny it to other groups (Somerville 2016). In this process effective armies and other security forces, as Howe well explains, often become a threat to personalist African leaders (Howe



2005, p. 35).

The over-normative concept of ‘security sector reform’ conceptualized from 1998³ denies the extent of non-state actors’ power in Africa, over-privileging the state to a very distorting degree. What ‘security sector reform’ does do however at its root is remind us of the power and lure of being able to help make ones’ own political decisions – democracy. Such democratic upheavals upsetting entrenched power structures have however been scant in Sub-Saharan Africa in the last decade. But the only way that more light will shine on abuses, corruption, and predation of security forces are greater democratic freedoms. The spate of recent coups around Africa, and democracy’s, current, relative, retreat more widely do not hold out much immediate hope. In addition, as climate change coupled with population pressure destroys much of the current African way of life in the remainder of this century and beyond (Vince 2019), established political forces, not democratic upwellings, will stand to benefit most. But that does not change the potential power and lure of seizing more participation in ones’ own political affairs, as perhaps the continued resistance to military rule in Sudan shows most clearly.

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³ the original speech (13 May 1998) is visible at https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/_ukgwa/20020824040451/http://www.dfid.gov.uk:80/News/Speeches/files/sp13may.html