

REVIEWS

Thurston, Alexander. 2020. *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 349 pp. ISBN 9781108771160.

Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., carried out by al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001, jihadism has been perceived by the international community as a major threat to global security and stability. Subsequent wars in Afghanistan (2001–2021), Iraq (2003–2011), and the ongoing conflict in Syria (since 2011) have heightened Western engagement with certain jihadist groups, some of which even have targeted Western territories. Numerous analyses, scientific articles, and books have been published on these topics, and courses on Islamic terrorism have become integral components of university curricula, not only in security studies but also in international relations, political science, area studies, and related disciplines. However, much of the attention from Western politicians, media, and academia remains focused on the ideologies, agendas, and activities of major jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Boko Haram.¹

Even though the attention of the international community was, at least for a while, focused on Mali, especially due to French involvement in the civil war in Mali in 2013 and the subsequent United Nations mission, an academic examination of not only the international response to the Mali civil war but also a comprehensive analysis of the entire troubled region would be highly beneficial. Thus far, few books have been published in English on jihadism in North Africa and the Sahel, which underscores the significance of Alexander Thurston's contribution. Thurston, an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Cincinnati, addresses this gap with his book divided into seven chapters that delve into the territorial and political aspects of jihadist groups operating in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Mauritania. While this is a new project, it builds upon the author's previous research on Boko Haram (Thurston, 2018) and Salafism in Nigeria (Thurston, 2016). Similar to his prior academic endeavours, Thurston demonstrates a significant commitment to fieldwork and a deep understanding of local circumstances, which renders his work not only compelling but also uniquely insightful from both African and international perspectives.

Chapter 1, "Algeria: The GIA from Incorporation to Tyranny" examines the activities and evolution of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an abbreviation

1 See for example Byman (2015); Mohanty (2018); Solomon and Hentz (2017).

derived from the French name *Groupe Islamique Armé*. During the 1990s, the GIA emerged as one of the most prominent jihadist organisations in the North Africa and Sahel region, playing a significant role in Algeria's civil war and extending its operations into French territory. Thurston's analysis not only delves into the ideological underpinnings of the organisation and its zenith of influence but also places emphasis on the internal conflicts among its leadership, which ultimately led to its fragmentation and decline.

The second chapter of the book, "The GSPC/AQIM: Schism, Coup, and a Broken Triangle in the Sahara," focuses primarily on Algeria, with a central emphasis on Salafist groups operating in the region, often transnationally. This environment facilitated the emergence of al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. It has been responsible for various violent attacks across Algeria, Chad, Libya, Mali, and Tunisia, and remains a significant security threat in the area.

In the third chapter, "Northern Mali: Dialectics of Local Support," the author closely examines the dynamics in northern Mali, particularly the formation of coalitions and alliances among different groups. Concrete case studies from this region have demonstrated that despite seemingly uncompromising Islamist ideologies, pragmatic considerations often compel Islamist leadership to engage in non-fanatical negotiations with local authorities, thereby facilitating the dissemination of jihadism among the population.

On the contrary, the fourth chapter, "Central Mali: The Possibilities and Limits of Incorporation," demonstrates that within the same country, the situation can vary significantly from region to region. While in Northern Mali, jihadists were able to form pragmatic coalitions despite differing ethnic and tribal backgrounds, this was not the case in Central Mali, where jihadism has exacerbated the ethnicisation of the ongoing conflict. The author addresses these differences in detail, with special emphasis on the concepts of "jihadism from above" versus "jihadism from below."

Chapter 5 on "The Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso Borderlands: Incorporation and Accommodation at the Peripheries" provides an in-depth insight into the troubled border region where jihadism takes advantage of operating in a no-man's land, given the ambiguous control exerted by the three aforementioned countries in this area. These peripheral regions often serve as arenas for the black market, smuggling warlords, and hereditary rulers. It also illustrates that under these circumstances, jihadist organisations not only vie for power but also inevitably engage in economic activities and administer the territories under their control.

Libya has been in the spotlight of the international media since the onset of the so-called Arab Spring in the early 2010s, when the decades-long regime of Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown, triggering the ongoing civil war. The chapter on “Libya: Fratricide in Derna” focuses on the situation in the city of Derna, located in the northeast part of the country. In 2014, Derna was captured by combatants affiliated with the Islamic State, who were eventually defeated by the Shura Council of Mujahideen, a local Islamic militia inspired by the ideology of al-Qaeda. This example illustrates that despite their shared emphasis on jihadism, these groups may sometimes engage in fratricidal conflicts against each other. This phenomenon is not unique to Derna but is indicative of the situation across a significant portion of Libyan territory since the onset of the civil war in 2011.

The final chapter, “Mauritania: Post-Jihadism?” provides a case study analysing the peace agreement between a local jihadist group and the national state. The authors identify key milestones in the process that led to the settlement of post-jihadism and discuss the motivations of individual leaders for engaging in the peace process. Unfortunately, it appears that this model may not be easily applied to other territories in North Africa and the Sahel. However, it offers some hope for the future of this troubled region.

The author poses relevant questions: “Who is a threat? Who is a terrorist? Who is a bandit?” (Thurston, 2020). The distinction between terrorism, banditry, and radical nationalism is often ambiguous, particularly in regions where ethnic, religious, and tribal identities span across individual state borders. Thurston's book provides an in-depth examination of the structures, agendas, developments, activities, and internally complex relationships of jihadist groups operating in North Africa and the Sahel. Some of these groups possess sophisticated internal structures, while others are rooted in tribal or local backgrounds. Additionally, while some maintain direct connections with globally recognised jihadist organisations such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS, others serve merely as sources of inspiration. Moreover, the impacts on local populations, characterised by ethnic and religious diversity, further exacerbate an already tense situation.

Focusing on a relatively large region encompassing multiple countries and diverse tribes, the author was able to identify various case studies covering a wide range of examples and situations involving jihadist groups. These groups are engaged in ongoing conflicts with national states, sometimes controlling large territories, at other times operating as guerrilla movements. Additionally, the author examines groups that have undergone voluntary or involuntary post-conflict settlements. Collectively, these case studies paint a clear picture of the diverse array of jihadist groups from various perspectives. Thurston's work offers a vivid portrayal of

all these features, often complemented by direct quotes from interviews with jihadists, their supporters, local authorities, and ordinary individuals from the region, lending authenticity to his narrative.

His extensive fieldwork in this challenging area underscores his expertise, making Thurston a leading expert in the field. While the book is rich in detail and provides an analytical framework, additional historical and general insights into the political and social environment of North Africa and the Sahel would enhance its utility, particularly for university students and professionals from various organisations involved in missions in the region. The reader is expected to have a basic understanding and certain details may not be widely known. Given the fragmented nature of the political and social aspects of the region, with numerous actors involved, an introductory chapter would undoubtedly aid in providing a broader orientation on the topic at hand. Thurston's work remains a valuable resource for anyone interested in the complex dynamics of North Africa and the Sahel region seeking to deepen their understanding of jihadist groups and ideologies.

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