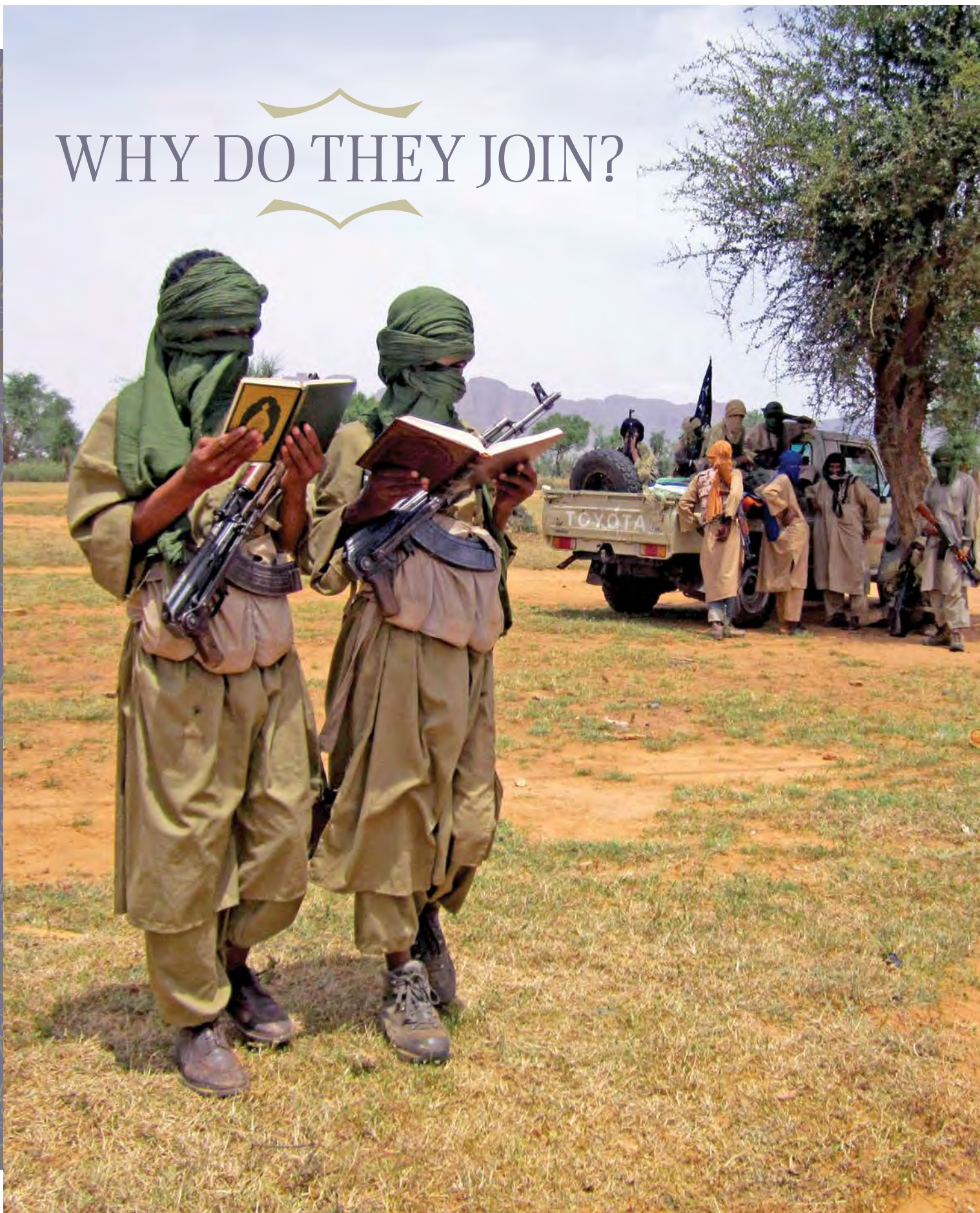


WHY DO THEY JOIN?





UNDERSTANDING ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT IN AFRICA

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PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

His name was Seifeddine Rezqui, a 23-year-old engineering student from the rather ordinary town of Gaafour, 80 kilometers from Tunisia's capital, Tunis. He had a passion for football and was a Real Madrid supporter. Rezqui also had a penchant for rap music and participated in break-dance competitions. Yet Rezqui went under another name — Abu Yahya al-Qayrawani — and ISIS labeled him a “Soldier of the Caliphate.” On June 26, 2015, he hid his AK-47 in an umbrella and proceeded to mow down tourists at a beach resort in Sousse, Tunisia. Thirty-eight were killed — mostly British — and scores more were injured. In the days that followed, investigators uncovered a trail of evidence pointing to the fact that Rezqui was radicalized online by ISIS social media propaganda.

For many commentators, a key to ISIS' ability to spread radical ideology is its savvy approach to social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. By June 2015, ISIS had 90,000 Twitter accounts. The use of rap music in its recruitment videos is especially appealing to young alienated youths and is a far cry from the staid videos in which the older generation of al-Qaida jihadis such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri delivered long sermons. To give an idea of the scale of ISIS' social media outreach, consider this: In a single week in 2015, ISIS produced 123 media releases in six languages. Of that total, 24 were videos.

The penetration of ISIS ideology even in far-away South Africa is evident in the writing of an 18-year-old from Johannesburg. Using the pseudonym of Abu Huraya

al-Afriki, he wrote: “I joined the Islamic State because their aim is to establish the word of Allah (There is no God, but Allah) as the highest, and the word of Kufr (disbelief) as lowest, and this is what Allah tells us in the Quran to do. So it is a compulsory duty upon all the Muslims around the world to join the jihad.” The power of ISIS social media also is evident in Nigeria, where 24,000 young people were stopped from leaving the country between January 2014 and March 2015. The majority of them, authorities feared, planned to join ISIS.

Over the past couple of years, ISIS has spawned local franchises across Africa. In Algeria, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) commander Grouri Abdelmalik announced that he and his men were breaking away from AQIM, which, he stated, had “deviated from the true path.” He sought to position his group as the Jund al-Khilafah, or Soldiers of the Caliphate, and made clear they were aligned with ISIS. In Tunisia, the Uqba ibn Nafi Brigade also split from AQIM and has pledged its allegiance to ISIS. In strife-torn Libya, meanwhile, returning ISIS members from Syria established the ISIS-aligned al-Battar Brigade. With its military successes, as witnessed with the capture of Sirte, the hometown of former Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi, this group has grown increasingly confident and has renamed itself the Islamic State of Libya (ISL). Nigeria's Boko Haram, which casts its shadow across West Africa, has aligned itself with ISIS, and there are disagreements within Somalia's al-Qaida-aligned al-Shabaab as to whether it should be part of the ISIS franchise.

This raises an intriguing question: What accounts for the spread of the radical Wahhabist-Salafist ideology of ISIS, with its emphasis on hatred for other religions and forms of Islam, while the majority of African Muslims are actually Sufi in orientation?

Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa* in Arabic) stress the need to bridge the gap between God and man through love and knowledge of the true inner self. This form of the Islamic faith is more personal and more emotional, stressing the love of God as opposed to the fear of God. Moreover, Sufi Islam has long coexisted with the richness of pre-Islamic folk customs, which, of course, added to its popularity.

The answer is that, for years, charities operating in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been funding Islamist extremism in Africa and eroding the appeal of Sufism. Consider the thousands of students who have traveled over the years to further their Islamic studies at such institutions of higher learning as Al-Azhar in Egypt, Al-Uzai in Lebanon, the University of Damascus in Syria and scores of such institutions in Saudi Arabia. It has been noted that most of these students upon their return to their respective countries are more radical than those who remained behind. Indeed, according to John Yoh in his book *Reflections on Afro-Arab Relations: An African Perspective*: “Most of the students from Africa who studied in the Middle East are accused of being behind the religious conflicts that have been going on in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. ... It is this group of students that is considered to be the source of the Islamic radicalism in Africa. Some of these groups are said to be connected with Islamic organizations operating in Africa under the guise of religious agencies.”

Students, however, are not the only conduit for radical thought entering Africa. The annual pilgrimage that sees tens of thousands of Africans going to Mecca can serve as a conduit for the spread of radical Islam. In West Africa, the introduction of Wahhabi classics such as *An Explanation of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Kitab al Tawhid* (The Book about the Oneness of God) by Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi had such a profound impact on al-Qaida-aligned extremists in Mali that they took inspiration from the title of this book to name themselves the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. Under the circumstances, should we be surprised when groups like Boko Haram rant against secular states, or the extremists of Ansar al-Dine and al-Shabaab violently tear down Sufi shrines in Mali and Somalia? The recent penetration of ISIS ideology into Africa is a logical outgrowth of these developments.

Islamic extremists have exploited the deteriorating economic and political conditions in African countries to expand their reach among the disaffected. Because of their superior organization (relative to the ineptitude and corruption of many government bureaucracies), their use of volunteers, and their access to funds from the Gulf states, Salafists have been able to step in and assist desperate communities across Africa. In Mali, for instance, extreme Islamists and their grassroots economic development have been able to establish mosques, modern schools, clinics, pharmacies and

cultural centers since the 1980s. In the process they have won the loyalty of citizens in these areas.

A good example of a group exploiting economic conditions can be seen in the emergence of the Lebanese terrorist movement and Iranian-funded Hezbollah (Party of God) on the African continent. As U.S. Army Maj. James Love notes in his incisive *Hezbollah: Social Services as a Source of Power* (2010), Hezbollah's tried and tested modus operandi is used on the African continent to great effect. Fledgling Hezbollah cells use subtle infiltration techniques to gain access to an area without drawing attention. They gain the trust of the local populace by conducting charity fundraising activities and other social welfare programs. This resonates with Africa's poor, whose own politicians seem unresponsive to the needs of their citizens and are more concerned with accumulating wealth. Having gained the trust of the locals, the Hezbollah cell commences to recruit from the local population, allowing the cell to begin operations. Cells can operate only after they have built a popular support base.

Another factor undermining tolerant Sufism and bolstering the appeal of radical Islam is the close cooperation between Sufi orders and the respective authorities, with many Sufi leaders receiving financial benefits from government. The proximity of Sufi leaders to generally corrupt and authoritarian governments caused them to lose credibility and popularity in the eyes of ordinary citizens and formed the basis of vehement attacks on them by hardline Islamists. Consequently, moderate Sufi Islam could not serve as a bulwark to radical Islam because the Sufi leadership was perceived to be an extension of a corrupt state.

In similar fashion, other Muslim organizations aiming to foster peace and tolerance between faiths were tarnished on account of their proximity to an often predatory and authoritarian state. In Nigeria in the 1980s, an Advisory Committee of Religious Affairs representing Muslims and Christians was established to mitigate religious tensions. Similar structures came into being across the continent: the Supreme Council of Muslims in Tanzania, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, the Rwandan Muslim Association and the Muslim Association of Malawi. Few of these have been able to mitigate sectarian strife. Because of their perceived ties to regimes viewed as illegitimate, those Muslims who participate in these structures were viewed as co-opted. The fact that these Muslims often defended the incumbent governments merely served to reinforce this perception. With moderate Muslims discredited, it left the door open for extremists to spread their message of hate.

Looking forward, what can be done to reduce radicalization and recruitment of Africans into the fold of militant Islam? First, more can be done to disrupt ISIS' social media outreach by bringing down

An armed man from the group Ansar al-Dine issues instructions over a bullhorn in the central square of Timbuktu, Mali, before a public lashing.



Twitter accounts and taking off their gruesome YouTube videos, as well as robust efforts at counter-messaging. Although efforts are underway to do this, it needs to be more aggressive. Second, more pressure needs to be placed on Gulf countries to stop funding Wahhabist and Salafist forms of Islam on the continent. It is disconcerting that countries in which extremist ideology is allowed to flourish, including Saudi Arabia, continue to receive support from Western countries.

In addition, more needs to be done on the part of African states to strengthen moderate, tolerant Sufi Islam so it can serve as a bulwark to the Salafist juggernaut. However, a Sufi Islam uncritical of the West and serving as praise singers for incumbent governments will only serve to undermine Sufism further and reinforce radical viewpoints. What is needed is a Sufi Islam that articulates the concerns of ordinary Muslims even

when those concerns mean criticizing incumbent governments. Where moderate Muslims prop up corrupt governments, it will only serve to further delegitimize moderate forces.

Extremism also spreads on the continent in the context of rapacious state elites who are more concerned about their own personal wealth than about the lot of ordinary citizens. In this context, Islamic extremist groups provide a number of short-term solutions to increase the security of citizens — clinics, schools, food and money. In the process, they gain support for their cause. As the international community aims to assist African governments with training their security forces and providing military equipment to fight the likes of al-Shabaab, so too must it use that assistance to pressure African governments to be more responsive to ordinary citizens' needs, thereby denying extremists the grievances they exploit for their own nefarious ends. □