



CRS Report for Congress

Islam in Africa

Hussein D. Hassan
Information Research Specialist
Knowledge Services Group

Summary

The attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, coupled with the rise of militant transnational Islamism, have prompted both the Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress to reassess foreign policy in Africa and to begin to give considerable attention to Africa's Muslim populations and its failed and failing states. Some experts have noted that Africa's failing and failed states may serve as a breeding ground for terrorists.¹ In response to terrorist threats, the United States, in partnership with countries across Africa, has developed a range of strategies to help regional governments face the challenge of terror. Since September 11, 2001, the size of U.S. diplomatic missions in sub-Saharan African countries with large Muslim populations has increased. Presently, there are 45 active embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, including 16 new compounds built since 2001. Most recently, President Bush returned from a five-country visit to Africa, his second trip to the continent. Some observers view these trips as reflective of the Administration's focus, which has seen increasing American engagement with the continent in recent years.² For further information on U.S. policy in Africa, see CRS Report RL34003, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*, by Lauren Ploch; and CRS Report RL31772 *U.S. Trade and Investment Relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa: The African Growth and Opportunity Act and Beyond*, by Danielle Langton.

The attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, coupled with the rise of militant transnational Islamism, have renewed U.S. interest in Africa, particularly of Africa's Muslim population.

Historical Background

The presence of Islam in Africa can be traced to the seventh century when the prophet Muhammad advised a number of his early disciples, who were facing persecution

¹ Brennan M. Kraxberger, "The United States and Africa: Shifting Geopolitics in an Age of Terror," *Africa Today*, fall 2005, pp. 47-68.

² U.S. Department of State, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Todd Moss, "Africa: An Emerging Strategic Partner," press release, March 18, 2008.

by the pre-Islamic inhabitants of the region, to seek refuge across the Red Sea in the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia). In the Muslim tradition, this event is known as the first *Hijrah*, or migration. These first Muslim migrants provided Islam with its first major triumph, and Africa became the first safe haven for Muslims and the first place Islam would be practiced outside of the Arabian Peninsula.

Seven years after the death of Muhammad (in 639 AD), an Arab army invaded Egypt, and within two generations, Islam had expanded across North Africa and all of the Central Maghreb.³ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the consolidation of Muslim trading networks, connected by lineage, trade, and Sufi brotherhoods, had reached a crescendo in West Africa, enabling Muslims to wield tremendous political influence and power. Similarly, from the East African coast, Islam made its way inland. This expansion of Islam in Africa not only led to the formation of new communities, but it also reconfigured existing communities and empires based on Islamic models.

Global Connection

Some argue that African Islam has both local and global dimensions. On the local level, experts assert that Muslims (including African Muslims) operate with considerable autonomy and do not have an international organization that regulates their religious practices. This fact accounts for the differences and varieties in Islamic practices throughout the African continent. On the global level, however, African Muslims belong to the *Umma*, the worldwide Islamic community, and follow global issues and current events that affect the Muslim world with keen interest. With globalization and new initiatives in information technology, African Muslims have developed and maintained close connections with the wider Muslim world.⁴

Muslim Population in Africa

Although there is no specific data on the total Muslim population in Africa, experts believe that there are approximately 300 million African Muslims in the world, which comprises roughly one-third of the African continent's population. However, regardless of the relatively large Muslim population and Islam's historical presence in Africa, African Islam has remained largely neglected in the study of Muslim politics. Academics argue that this neglect was, to a large extent, the result of an academic division of labor based on the assumption that Africa was only superficially Islamized. These scholars argue that many parts of Africa were incorporated into the world of Islam centuries ago and that African Muslims have adhered to and practiced the main pillars of Islam (including the arduous pilgrimage to Mecca required of every Muslims) for more than a millennium.⁵

³ *Maghreb* or *Magrib* is an Arabic term for North Western Africa. It applies to all of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia; in some contexts it also includes Mauritania and Libya.

⁴ Akintunde, E. Akinade, "The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Muslim World*, January 1, 2007, p. 1.

⁵ Ousmane Kane, "Moderate Revivalists: Islamic Inroads in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Harvard International Review* (Cambridge), summer 2007, pp.64-68.

Table 1. Religions in Africa, by Regions

	Indigenous	Muslim	Christian	Other	Total
Eastern Africa	52,114,073	59,091,873	135,194,880	6,058,251	252,459,077
Middle Africa	21,001,056	13,528,373	61,821,241	437,688	96,788,358
Northern Africa	9,020,093	167,131,245	6,410,368	632,920	183,194,626
Southern Africa	14,089,672	871,722	34,202,095	1,087,807	50,251,296
Western Africa	41,617,613	130,835,929	66,685,296	1,601,876	240,740,714
Total	137,842,507	371,459,142	304,313,880	9,818,542	823,434,071
Percent	16.7%	45.1%	36.9%	1.2%	99.9%

Source: Adapted from “Spread of Christianity and Islam in Africa: A Survey and Analysis of the Numbers and Percentages of Christians, Muslims, and Those Who Practice Indigenous Religions,” by Amadu Jackay Kaba, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 29, no.2, 2005, p. 561.

Conflict between Moderate and Fundamentalist Muslims

Analysts argue that African Muslims, like other Muslims in Asia, the Middle East and the rest of the world, seem to be locked into an intense struggle regarding the future direction of Islam. At core of the struggle are questions about the way in which Muslims should practice their faith. The scholars assert that the majority seems to prefer to remain on the moderate, tolerant course that Islam has historically followed. However, a relatively small, but growing group would like to establish a stricter form of the religion, one that informs and controls all aspects of society.⁶

Defining the Character of African Islam

Although the majority of Muslims in Africa are Sunni,⁷ the complexity of Islam in Africa is revealed in the various schools of thought, traditions, and voices that constantly contend for dominance in many African countries. African Islam is not static and is constantly being reshaped by prevalent social, economic, and political conditions. Due to the evolving nature of African Islam, U.S. policy makers may consider greater focus on some of the social and economic changes occurring in these countries.

Shar’ia or Islamic Law⁸

The Shar’ia law broadly influences the legal code in most Islamic countries, but the extent of its impact varies widely. In Africa, most states limit the use of Shar’ia to

⁶ Hal Marcovitz, *Islam in Africa: Africa, Progress and Problems*, Mason Crest Publishers, 2007, p. 91.

⁷ CRS Report RS21745, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*, by Christopher Blanchard.

⁸ Shar’ia, or “the path” is a body of religious law based mainly on the Koran and the Hadith, sayings of Prophet Mohammad.

“personal-status law” for issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody. With the exceptions of Nigeria and Somalia, secularism does not seem to face any serious threat in Africa, even-though the new Islamic revival is having a great impact upon segments of Muslim populations. Cohabitation or coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims remains, for the most part, peaceful.

Nigeria is home to Sub-Saharan Africa’s largest Muslim population.⁹ In 1999, Nigeria’s northern states adopted the Shar’ia penal code, but punishments have been rare. In fact, dozens of women convicted of adultery and sentenced to stoning to death have later been freed.¹⁰ Egypt, one of the largest Muslim states in Africa, claims to have Shar’ia as the main source of its legislation, but has penal and civil codes based largely on French law.

Sufism

Sufism, which focuses on the mystical elements of Islam, has many orders as well as followers in West Africa and Sudan, and, like other orders, strives to know God through meditation and emotion. Sufis may be Sunni or Shi’ite, and their ceremonies may involve chanting, music, dancing, and meditation.

West Africa and Sudan have various Sufi orders regarded skeptically by the more doctrinally strict branches of Islam in the Middle East. Most orders in West Africa emphasize the role of a spiritual guide, marabout or possessing supernatural power, regarded as an Africanization of Islam. In Senegal and Gambia, Mouridism¹¹ Sufis claim to have several million adherents and have drawn criticism for their veneration of Mouridism’s founder Amadou Bamba and his teaching that pilgrimage to the Senegalese city of Touba can replace the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. The Tijani is the most popular Sufi order in West Africa, with a large following in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Gambia.¹²

Saudi-Iran Rivalry for Influence Among Africa’s Muslim Population

For some time, political influence among Africa’s predominantly Muslim sub-Saharan states has been at the center of a struggle between Shia Iran and the conservative Sunni countries of the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, for instance, through various Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as the World Muslim League, the World Assembly for Muslim Youth, the Federation of Mab and Islamic Schools, is attempting

⁹ For more information on Shar’ia Law in Nigeria, see CRS Report RL33964, *Nigeria: Current Issues*, by Lauren Ploch.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.15.

¹¹ Founded by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba (1853-1927), Mouridism is one of four Sufi movements in Senegal, and is one of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary Senegalese social life.

¹² “Islam has Different Branches Around the World,” *Reuters News*, March 11, 2008.

to promote a conservative Wahhabi¹³ Islam that denounces Sufi Islam, the prevailing Islamic order in Africa, as “heterodox” and contrary to the traditional Islam.

NGOs from Saudi Arabia have sponsored the building of mosques and various Islamic centers on the continent many of which are run by Africans of the puritanical Muslims of Wahhabi persuasion who have been trained in the Middle East. Saudi NGOs also distribute fundamentalist literature and offer academic scholarships to further extend their influence.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran’s interest in Africa is not limited to spreading its version of Islam (Shi’ism), but also extends to trade with Africa being Iran’s top export destination. In 2004, The Iran-Africa Cooperation Headquarters was established in Tehran following a cabinet ratification.¹⁴ Trade between Iran and some African countries continues to grow. African clients of Iran’s export goods include Sudan, Libya and Tunisia. Iran also imports industrial raw materials and fertilizers from Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal.¹⁵

This competition for influence has resulted in a shift on the continent from an overwhelmingly Sufi-inspired Islam to greater religious diversity among African Muslims. Although African Islam remains primarily Sunni, Shia Islam has been able to make significant inroads in countries like Nigeria. In addition, fundamentalists inspired by Saudi Wahhabism, a group that was virtually nonexistent when African states first gained independence, are now an integral part of the religious landscape.¹⁶ For more information on Sunnis and Shiites, see CRS Report RS21745, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*, by Christopher Blanchard.

¹³ Wahhabism, founded by Sheikh Mohammed Ibn ‘Abd ul-Wahhab (1703-1792), is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam, practiced in Saudi Arabia. Adherents to this branch call themselves Muwahhidun “Unitarians,” or “unifiers of Islamic practice.”

¹⁴ “Iran Official Voices Regret over Low Level of Trade with Africa,” BBC Monitoring Middle East, January 4, 2005.

¹⁵ “Exploring Trade in Africa,” *Iran Daily*, January 13, 2005, at [<http://www.iran-daily.com/1383/2189/html/focus.htm>].

¹⁶ Ousmane Kane, “Moderate Revivalists: Islamic Inroads in sub-Saharan Africa,” *Harvard International Review* (Cambridge), summer 2007, pp. 64-68.