



Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Nigeria

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Nigeria, a major oil producer, is the most populous African country with around 130 million people, of whom half are Muslim, 40 percent are Christian and 10 percent follow indigenous faiths. Nigeria has a civilian government, but is troubled by widespread corruption and uneven institutional development.

At the end of September 2005, Nigerian oil production was temporarily stopped by threats of violent protest from the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, headed by an adventurer known as Mujahid Dokubo-Asari. Asari, as he is commonly called, is 40; he was born to a Christian family and named Dokubo Melford Goodhead, Jr. Asari is a member of the Ijaw ethnic group, which counts several million people, mainly Catholics and other Christians, although their beliefs also include local spiritual traditions. They represent a majority in the main Nigerian petroleum zone. Asari became Muslim in the 1990s and, after

failing in an attempt to enter the legal profession, embarked on an equally unsuccessful political career. But notwithstanding his Islamic rhetoric and reported devotion to the faith and his militant stance, his goals are separatist, rather than theological or ideological [1].

Furthermore, as a southerner and Ijaw, he is out of touch with the majority of Nigerian Muslims. It is increasingly clear that Nigeria has been a target for aggressive, radical Sunni Muslim agents supported by religious charities and other outreach (da'wa) groups headquartered in Saudi Arabia. In recent times, the main aim of Islamists in Nigeria has been the establishment of extreme Shari'ah, along the lines of the Wahhabi sect, as the exclusive law in the Muslim states of the north.

In addition to penetration across the border with Chad, the activities of Saudi, Sudanese, Syrian, and Palestin-

ian representatives in Nigeria is cause for concern. More important, “scores of Pakistanis” have been arrested in the West African country and charged with inciting violence since September 11, 2001, and early in 2004 a rebellion by a group calling itself “Taliban” broke out in Yobe state, on the northern frontier of Nigeria [2].

A “Taliban” cleric, Alhaji Sharu, told police he had received funds for the Nigerian network from al-Muntada al-Islami [3], an agency headed by Dr. Adil ibn Muhammad al-Saleem and based in Britain, but associated with the official Saudi state charitable and da’wa institutions, the Muslim World League (MWL), World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), and al-Haramain Islamic Foundation. All these groups are alleged by American and international investigators to be terror-financing bodies. Including al-Muntada al-Islami, they are together represented in the U.S. by the “Friends of Charity Association,” with a website at www.foca.net, and by the Washington attorney Wendell Belew.

In a recent statement, Belew disclosed, with no-doubt-unintended humor, “FOCA’s representatives have met with senior Bush administration officials to offer cooperation in the form of exchange of financial, human resource, organizational and other information about our members. Though these offers have been declined by the administration so far, we are actively cooperating in similar efforts with various members and committees of Congress” [4]. Belew also represents Dallah al-Baraka Holding Co., a Saudi business giant.

In turn, Dallah al-Baraka is headed by Saleh Abdullah Kamel, whose name appears in the “Golden Chain,” a roster seized by Bosnian authorities in Sarajevo in March 2002, which records Saudi donors to bin Laden and his associates. Kamel is listed in the “Golden Chain” as a supplier of funds to Adil Abdeljalil Batterjee, founder of the Benevolence International Foundation, also designated a terror-financing entity by the U.S. Treasury Department. Kamel and Batterjee continue to walk the streets of the kingdom unmolested. In the aftermath of the al-Muntada al-Islami scandal in Nigeria—in which Nigerian police charged that “millions of dollars” had been sent from Saudi Arabia to finance local religious conflict—the influential Nigerian branch of the Qadiri Sufi brotherhood held demonstrations calling for the expulsion of Wahhabis [5]. Qadiris are known for their Islamic activism and participation in combat in locations as diverse as Kosovo, Chechnya, and, recently, in Iraq.

Given the status of Nigeria as an ideological arena for radicals, it should perhaps come as no surprise that a prominent cleric from the ranks of the Shi’a Muslim minority in the turbulent northern state of Kaduna, Sheikh Ibraheem el-Zakzaky, recently told the Daily Independent, a major national paper: “Al-Qaeda does not exist, please. It is non-existent. It exists only in the records of the CIA. Otherwise, Al-Qaeda does not exist anywhere in the world. Similarly, bin Laden does not exist. Those sites in the Internet have been traced to Texas in the United States of America.” Asked if he believed bin Laden is alive, sheikh Zakzaky commented, “I don’t know whether he is alive or

not...The United States government, which claims to be the strongest in the world, is fighting someone who does not have a base, no government, no anything, no palace, why can't they go and fight China?" On the topic of the July bombings in London, he declared, "Nobody planted those bombs in London except Tony Blair. The British government is behind it" [6].

Zakzaky summarized the 45-year legacy of Nigerian independence as one of bad leadership because people are bad. But other Islamists in Nigeria have embarked on a campaign against the country's Shi'a minority. Sunni-Shi'a conflict had already broken out in the northern state of Sokoto in May 2005, when Sunni fanatics attempted to prevent Shias from entering a local mosque. A considerable Nigerian immigrant community resides in the U.S. cities of New York and Washington, and Shias among them are perturbed by a late report from the large northern city of Kano, posted on a popular Nigerian Islamic website, www.gamji.com.

The report's author, Mahmoud Mustapha, warns, "Since Malam Ibrahim Shekarau assumed office as the third civilian governor of Kano state on May 29, 2003, Shi'a followers in this Sunni-dominated city have been under threat of attack from bloodthirsty Wahhabis that have taken control of the machinery of government... [T]he government sponsored a systematic and sustained media campaign against Shi'a followers on its radio station, which refers to suicide attacks by Iraqi Wahhabi dissidents against Shias and their places of worship as Jihad. With this campaign they intend to instill in the minds of the people of Kano the desire and the zeal to attack

and kill Shias in the name of Jihad, knowing very well the strong support and respect the Iraqi dissidents enjoy from the majority of the Sunnis in Kano" [7].

The Kano state government allegedly seeks to use 9,000 sharia militiamen or hisbah to harass Shias. The hisbah draw a monthly budget from Kano state of 54 million naira (\$385,714) and now work as traffic officers. But Abdullahi Tanko, head of the state Sharia Commission administering the hisbah, has initiated an effort to label Shias a threat to public order by equating them with the "Maitatsine," a millennialist and militant reform sect with a few thousand adherents, derived from Islam but extremely heterodox. The sect was founded by Al-hajji Muhammadu Marwa, a Cameroun-born figure, and was blamed for bloody clashes in northern Nigeria in 1980 and 1982.

Tanko complained on official Kano state radio in mid-September 2005, "The Shi'a are fast gaining ground in Kano, like wild fire... in every nook and corner of this state, and if we don't act fast and decisively we will be faced with a disaster worse than Maitatsine." Mahmoud Mustapha, writing on these developments, argued, "It is no coincidence that Tanko made this statement a day after Al-Zarqawi, the leader of the terrorists in Iraq from whom the Wahhabis take [their] lead in fighting Shias all over the world, declared a war against the Shi'a in Iraq." Mustapha further predicted, "Once the attacks start in Kano, they will be extended to other 'sharia implementing states' with similar hisbah outfits. Al-Qaeda in Nigeria is born!" [8]

Although such a portrait of the Nigerian situation may seem sensationalized, it is clear that as the dominant power in the entire West African region, the country will remain a major focus of extreme Islamist attention. In addition, Muslim activists in the West African diaspora living in the U.S. insist, in dismay, that Nigeria, which lacks the widespread influence of Su-

fis and other mystics found in the coastal Francophone states such as Senegal, is especially susceptible to radical agitation. Finally, Nigeria is also characterized by polarization of Muslims against Christians. In these conditions, Nigeria must be considered a country at serious risk of becoming a major new front for Islamist terrorism.

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Notes:

1. See www.unitedijawstates.com/articles_abidde.htm
2. Marshall, Paul, "Nigeria: Shari'a in a Fragmented Country," in *Radical Islam's Rules: The Worldwide Spread of Extreme Shari'a Law*, Lanham, Md., Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.
3. See www.almuntada.org.uk/.
4. See www.foca.net/Pr_20050923-Nam.stm
5. Marshall, op. cit.
6. Bakoji, Sukuji, "We've bad leaders because we're bad -Zakzaky," Daily Independent [Lagos], Sept 30, 2005, at www.independentng.com/life/lisep300506.htm.
7. Mustapha, Mahmoud, "Kano Shias Under Wahabi Threat," www.gamji.com/article5000/NEWS5105.htm
8. Ibid.