

BOOK REVIEW

Alexander Thurston. *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 360 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$30.39. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1108726863.

Political scientist Alexander Thurston wrote *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* to address the growing instability and violence across the region. The broader reach of his book is meant to inform Western policymakers and practitioners enamored with playing whack-a-mole (i.e., air strikes, special operations raids, etc.) against these jihadists by providing a new lens in which to identify how pragmatic and politically rational these supposed committed ideologues are. Building on his extensive knowledge of African politics and fieldwork experience studying rebels, insurgents, and terrorists across the African continent, Thurston provides a much-needed revision to a stale civil war literature caught between greed and grievance arguments. He navigates the complexity of what a “rational actor should be” by providing the needed political context for various jihadists across North Africa and the Sahel over three decades by relying on text analysis of jihadist group and commander statements. This approach allows Thurston to center his argument on the role of jihadist field commanders (and clerics) and how each rebel leader circumnavigates the positionality of Islam within localized political actions and the use of violence to send signals and the bureaucratic politics vertically and horizontally across the rebel group.

Thurston tackles the problem of religiously aligned violent non-state actors in North Africa and across the Sahel by focusing on their political behavior and decision-making. Unlike many other studies of extremist Islamist groups, which usually focus on the strategic behaviors or tactical decisions, Thurston focuses on the meso-level actions of these groups, namely the jihadist commanders. Most of these jihadist commanders have to exercise incredible agency without a playbook or guidance, leading them to either become more pragmatic for the purposes of survival or to double-down on the use of violence and ideology because of their understanding and perception of vertical and horizontal politics. Distortions of politics and order come about in this complicated milieu with external interventions or by new and up-and-coming political entrepreneurs disrupting the status quo within the jihadist organization or through a new coalition. Either way, Thurston has successfully simplified the understanding of how to interpret the behavior of radical Islamist groups and their commanders, which have to improvise and typically follow a set pattern of actions given difficult localized conditions.

The sort of jihadist politics brought to the forefront of Thurston’s important book is that jihadist commanders are usually the most important actor in

dictating the success, failure, and longevity of their ideological movement. Thus, the unit of analysis of this book accepts the weakness and fragility of the state—and places most of the agency on these rebel commanders. Hence, these commanders use political violence and negotiate coalitions among formal and informal powerbrokers. While some may assume that Thurston's book on jihadist politics is merely an update to William Reno's *Warlord Politics and African States* (1998), Thurston's book demonstrates how these jihadist commanders are stripping power, patronage, people, and resources away from the state and the communities in which they control. Moreover, the book augments the harsh realities facing many politically unstable states across the African continent: violent ideologues relying on Islam as a motivational factor to garner power and military force and putting this towards building coalitions to fight corrupt regimes and other rebel groups to carve out their own spheres of localized control and/or proto-states.

The greatest value of this book is its empirically rich analysis of jihadist group performance in seven case study chapters chronologically spanning three decades: Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of the Algerian Civil War (1992–2002); Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) across the Sahara; groups such as Ansar al-Din (“Defenders of the Faith”) in Northern Mali; actions of a field commander for Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in Central Mali; groups like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansar al-Islam (“Supporters of Islam”) in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso borderlands; the fratricidal struggle between jihadists and non-jihadists in Derna, Libya; and a positive case of how the Mauritanian government structured the environment and politics to prevent jihadists from thriving. Each of these comparative cases then relies on these terms to define political behaviors of Islamic groups and their commanders: harmony, tyranny, autonomy, broken triangles, coups, schisms, cooperation, rivalry, isolation, incorporation, merger, alliance, collusion, accommodation, domination, and marginalization. These dynamics are employed internally (vertically and horizontally for rebel groups) and externally with other political actors.

Ultimately, there are few weaknesses to the style, approach, and analysis of Thurston's extensive work. One would anticipate *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* becoming a staple reading in any course dedicated to understanding the politics of jihadist groups or a comparative politics course focused on the study of political violence across the African continent. Most importantly, the book provides Western military personnel and strategists an opportunity to better understand what successful counterterrorism operations can look like if one does not delegitimize jihadist commanders and instead considers them as informal powerbrokers that are part of the complicated political process in a weak state.

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