



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*

---



---

## *Local Trends and Global Dynamics of Religious Terrorism in Africa*

**Tiziano Li Piani**

Structural Engineer and PhD Candidate at Delft University of Technology

The asymmetry level of terrorist threats affecting the different cities of Europe urges the development of sophisticated interpretative tools. Such tools are meant to encode complex hazards in engineering models of reality.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, an antiterrorism project was developed to define operative guidelines of intervention devoted to the prevention of disastrous consequences for human life and built heritage in case of a religiously motivated terrorist attack, perpetrated in an urban church of Italy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the “*I.T.A.W.*” database was created with the purpose of collecting significant information in parametrised form, concerning more than 100 terrorist attacks against Christian places of worship in the world, between 2001 and 2015. The database was used to quantitatively assess the terrorist threats for different spatial configurations of a specific church in the city. The regression analyses have indeed revealed that the operative strategies of the attacks analysed were strongly connoted by the weapon type adopted to carry out them. These attacks caused damages within a portion of the urban fabric outside the Church, resulting from the spatial-social dynamics established with the structural elements of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the database is also able to provide analytical basis for sociological and geopolitical comments and interpretations. From the analysis of the spatial and temporal variables contained in the first seven of the thirty columns of the database, some interesting outcomes emerge: almost 55% of religious attacks against churches over the last twenty years are located in the African continent (Figure.1). They started in 2010 and then intensified in frequency, as confirmed by more general

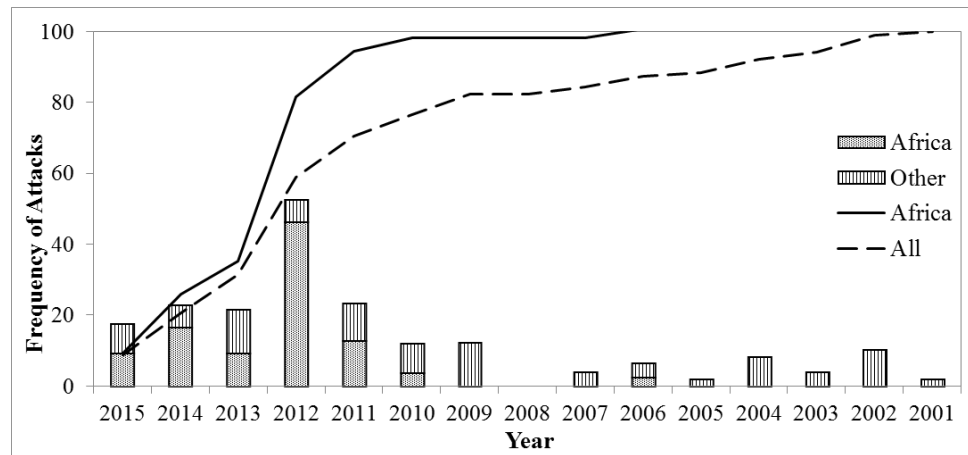
---

<sup>1</sup> In T. Li Piani, J. Weerheijm, L. Koene, L. J. Sluys, The Adobe Delta Damage Model: A locally regularized rate-dependent model for the static assessment of soil masonry bricks and mortar, *Engineering Fracture Mechanics*, 206(1), 114-130, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In T. Li Piani, “Operative Guidelines for Protection of Places of Worship, a new approach toward security design of sensitive buildings”, *Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASSP)*, pp 70, ISBN: 97888940373-2-6, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> In T. Li Piani, “Structural design and social function of space as vulnerability factor and solution strategy to urban terrorism (Italian)”, *Security, Terrorism, Society*, Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies, 8 (2), 7-17, 2018.

trends which certify a dramatic escalation of radical Islamic terrorism in the African continent over the last decade<sup>4</sup>.



*Figure 1: Relative frequency (histograms) and cumulative frequency (lines) of the yearly geographical distribution of the terrorist attacks on Christian places of worship from the ITAW database*

A peak of intensity in the graph of Figure 1 is recognisable by year 2012, where 90% of the almost 30 attacks were located in Africa. In the same year, Boko Haram was officially recognised as the perpetrator of most of the 21 attacks to churches in Nigeria while Al Shabaab was behind three others in Kenya (Figure. 2). Before 2010 Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria were focussed on military or other strategic targets as symbols of Western economic interests and political interferences, whereas public opinion was relatively concerned about local terrorism.

<sup>4</sup> In "Global Terrorism Index: measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism", *Institute for Economics and Peace*, 2016.

Many African countries are nowadays characterized by growing social and religious tensions. As for the latter, the African Christian population increased almost 70 times while Muslims increased 20 times in less than a century. Nigeria, for instance, is split in two, having half the population of Christian beliefs and half Islamic. Therefore, Boko Haram as other local groups holds extreme religious ideologies and radicalizes the population in the midst of religious tensions of opposite theological drives.<sup>5</sup> Still, sympathy and affiliation to local terrorist groups arise mainly from phenomena such as unemployment, poverty and marginalization caused by the inefficiency, negligence, violence or corruption of the formal organs of the States who deny their citizens dignity and reasonable life aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

Boko Haram, as well as other groups, has lately started aiming at soft targets, including public places of aggregations like churches. The goal is to maximise disruption and produce broader international media impact, having no consideration for the lives of the many civilians of different beliefs involved. This trait is common to many other groups in the nearby territories, which are largely represented in the database and particularly interested at Christian targets, such as Al-Shabaab.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that the explosive devices recently employed by Boko Haram stemmed from the training received from Al-Shabaab.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> In S. Brzuszkiewicz, “Trends di radicalizzazione in Africa subsahariana”, *Enrico Mattei Foundation*, pp. 22, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> In A. O. Adelaja et al. “Public opinion on the root causes of terrorism and objectives of terrorists: a Boko Haram case study”, *Perspectives on Terrorism (PT)*, Leiden University, 12(3), 35-50, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> In A. Mbiyozo, “How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people”, *Institute for Security Studies*, pp. 100, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> In “Trends di radicalizzazione in Africa subsahariana” and “Global Terrorism Index”.

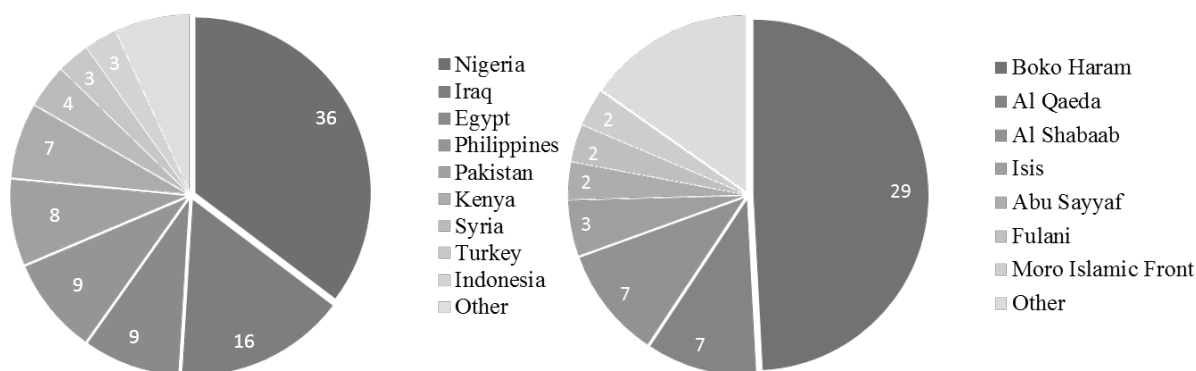


Figure 2: Most targeted countries (left) and terrorist entities officially recognized behind attacks (right) on Christian places of worship from ITAW database

Given local dynamics and territorial ambitions, groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shaabaab share the same Wahhabi global mission, including the inherent terrorist operative strategies. Both groups are affiliated to more notorious organizations operating in the Middle East: Boko Haram has recently pledged alliance to the Islamic State (IS) while Al-Shaabaab is closer to Al Qaeda. Significant flows of foreign fighters from several African countries (including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Libya) to Syria and Iraq have been observed, especially between 2012 and 2016. Furthermore, aspiring travelling terrorists can represent a threat also for European countries with specific concern to returnees.<sup>9</sup>

The illegal and religiously forbidden financing sources of terrorist groups, operating in different countries, are similar and often inter-connected also with criminal groups and activities. These revenues have been fostered by the introduction and spread of internet in Africa. Both Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab benefitted from IT developments in the African continent. Al-Shabaab uses internet

<sup>9</sup> In L. Watanabe, "The Next Steps of North Africa's Foreign Fighters", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, p. 4, 2018.

for funding but also recruitment and propaganda purposes. The originally poor online strategy of Boko Haram has significantly improved over the last years after pledging alliance to IS, which still has the most sophisticated media strategy.

In addition to radicalization purposes, social media such as Telegram and WhatsApp have been recently adopted for the training and planning of terrorist attacks, including indoctrination of potential lone wolves abroad.<sup>10</sup> From the analysis of the *ITAW* database, a significant aspect emerges: the possible existence of a global online terrorist network, capable of training terrorist candidates and teaching them operational and strategic modalities for an attack. The multivariate statistical analyses on the thirty dataset variables revealed indeed definite patterns in terms of strategy, day of the week and time of the day. Furthermore damages and casualties of the attack are exclusively related to the type of weapon used by the attacker, regardless for his/her affiliation and country of origin.<sup>11</sup> These trends have been unfortunately reflected in the first religiously motivated terrorist attack perpetrated against a church in Europe: namely the one of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray in Normandy (suburb of Rouen, France), on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2016. According to the category “side-arm attack” encoded from database analysis, the typical scenario foresees 1-3 attackers entering a church on a weekday during the morning Mass, armed with knives or axes. They stab preferably the officiating priest and the attending persons. As a result, on average about one person dies and three are injured per attack. The depicted scenario is close to what happened in the little church of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray, where two attackers entered the building on a Tuesday morning Mass, slit the priest’s throat, leaving seriously wounded one worshipper and slightly injured three others

---

<sup>10</sup> In K. Cox et al., “Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development”, *United Nations Development Programme*, pp. 91, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> In “Operative Guidelines for Protection of Places of Worship, a new approach toward security design of sensitive buildings”.

afterwards.<sup>12</sup> In this regards, it is worth noticing that the French native Richard Kassim recruited the involved terrorists in Normandy via the Telegram channel “*Sabre de Lumiere*” (Sword of Light, a symbol for the sword of truth, whose shine eliminates falsehood just like light wipes away darkness, note of the Editor).<sup>13</sup>

Local governments in Africa have generally underestimated the escalation of the terrorist threat and its effects on local society, including the assessment and counter-strategy of the phenomenon of returning foreign fighters. Only recently, suspected radicalized subjects have been heavily monitored and legally prosecuted while military intervention against terrorists in the field has been oftentimes authorized. However, justice infrastructures affected by undercapacity problems accelerate and enhance radicalisation processes that easily spread in equally undercapacity jails. Furthermore, observed violations of human rights determined by the indiscriminate use of coercion and brutality against civilians exacerbate the social distance between society and state, inhibiting the de-radicalization processes.

Instead, local and spontaneous societal responses are often more effective, especially in pockets of severe poverty characterized by religious conflicts. Several groups, forming around Christian and Muslim leaders are acting in the everyday life, promoting tolerance, integration, cooperation and defusing religious and social conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Many of these organizations, such as the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos and the Interfaith Mediation Center of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue in

---

<sup>12</sup> Comparison presented in the intervention by T. Li Piani at the Italian Parliament in Rome (Aula dei gruppi parlamentari) on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2017.

<sup>13</sup> In “Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development”.

<sup>14</sup> R. A. Dowd, “Violent religious Extremism and US-Africa policy”, *The review of Faith and International affairs*, 14(2), 92-100, 2016;

Kaduna, have been developed in the cities traditionally most targeted by attacks against places of worship (ITAW database, figure. 3).

The creation and development of a community represents the first requirement inherent every governmental intervention and international cooperation. Collaborations with international agencies and/or foreign countries (aimed necessarily at improving justice, military and intelligence sectors against adversarial violence) must be accompanied by the promotion of far-sighted strategies and effective tools, aimed at limiting and eliminating the causes of the insurgency. Cooperation should consist of a set of interventions within a comprehensive approach aimed at the local development in the sectors of knowledge and education (leveraging also a wise use of internet, as powerful multiplier), health and public bodies in order to ensure the human development and the political progress via the economic and social growth.

The possibility to encode numerically human behaviour during a terrorist attack represents a relevant and useful tool to understand and contrast the modus operandi of terrorist groups, which should be wisely implemented by all the countries affected by such a threat. It is not a substitute to understand the deeper political and psychological mobiles of these groups, whose individuals, as seen from other researches, seek at different levels political meaning, personal recognition, collective identity, friendship and/or personal gain.

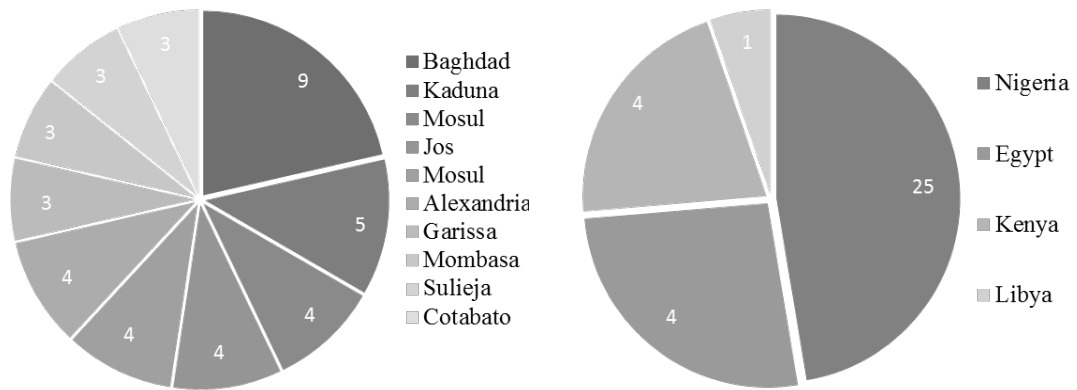


Figure 3: Cities targeted more than twice (left) and number of different cities (right) targeted in the first four African countries by attacks on Christian places of worship from ITAW database.





**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*

---