Structural Integrity:
Liminality, Hegemony, and Stateness In-Between

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Chapter 1. Introduction: Conflict, Liminality and African Experience

A furious Mohammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, delivered what would be his last message before his arrest and murder by the Borno police. This 2009 message was a declaration of war against the Nigerian state. Speaking for his thousands of followers, he declared “We will not follow your land’s law. We will not follow it. So, continue on your shooting spree.”¹ This assertive and defiant statement reflected the organization’s ferocious opposition to the Nigerian state and what it represented. Further on, Yusuf raged that “They did not build the government of Nigeria to guarantee justice… They built it to fight Islam and kill the Muslims.”² This speech was the immediate catalyst for Boko Haram’s complete commitment to terrorism with a distinct enemy in mind – the Nigerian state. Indeed, one aspect that characterized the movement in its first years of insurgency was its national focus, rather than the internationalized version of terrorism that characterized jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda at this time.³ While Boko Haram did eventually join up with international jihad networks, their singular focus on the Nigerian state in their early years urges us to similarly narrow our focus. Why did the post-colonial Nigerian state evoke–and provoke–such an intense, violent backlash from Boko Haram? How should their relationship be understood?

The relationship between the state and its discontents has been the subject of extensive study and influences this thesis. Focusing on Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Algerian Civil War,

² Ibid. 181
I argue that violent extremism represents a symptom, not a cause of the postcolonial state’s inadequacy. Rooting my analysis within the anthropological concept of liminality, I argue that the state’s inability to control insurgent groups such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria and Boko Haram in Nigeria represents a failure to control the liminal elements of the territory they govern. The state seeks to be the guardian and sole creator of structure; what the GIA and Boko Haram reveal is that, in the post-colonial African state, anti-structure and opposing structures can emerge from elsewhere in spite of the state’s established hegemony. Liminality serves as a powerful analytic framework to illuminate this struggle between the state and what I define as its vestigial organs, elements of society that are incongruous with the nation-state’s hegemony.

The concept of liminality, the brainchild of the French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, and expanded by Victor Turner in relation to ritual processes, becomes central to understanding the post-colony, the militarization of political groups, and the (un)making of state structures. The chosen cases of Algeria and Nigeria illustrate this process well. In both cases, the groups in question, the GIA and Boko Haram, end up in a state of “reiterated” liminality where groups are simultaneously unable to achieve their political aims or be completely defeated. This results in routinized disorder, where often-violent chaos becomes the norm, and the dangerous liminal condition endures regularly for years or decades. Liminality provides a frame of reference for explaining conflicts such as these that appear endless and unstructured.

At its core, liminality refers to how humans either individually or collectively deal with change. This is something that is “very simple and universal: the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally.”⁴ Reckoning with this

departure from the mundane can be challenging, and liminality’s core theoretical value lies in its ability to structure experiences that do not quite make sense. Employing a phase-based approach, liminal theory engages with situations and societies that are at the limit. This is dangerous; scholar Arpad Szakolczai described it as “a genuine Alice-in-Wonderland experience, a situation where almost anything can happen.”

While this was originally conceptualized in relation to individual experience, the study of liminality has been expanded to include longer processes and rites/experiences for multiple people and even whole societies. Within this tableau of experience, liminality stresses the importance of the master of ceremonies, a central character in the ritual process who oversees the stages of a rite with complete control. Beyond masters of ceremonies, another archetypal liminal figure is the trickster whose “real interest often lies in perpetuating, rather than resolving, conditions of confusion and ambivalence.” The influence of a trickster can be dangerous, especially in the uncertainty that comes with a liminal process. This can be a factor in the reiteration of a liminal process, resulting in a state of schismogenesis. A final crucial concept in analyzing liminal situations, schismogenesis emerged from the fieldwork of anthropologist Gregory Bateson and represents a situation where a community becomes trapped in a liminal process – on the limen itself – with potentially devastating consequences. All of these concepts guide later theoretical discussion and help to create a framework for understanding the violent insurgencies discussed in the presented case studies.

Since its inception, scholars have applied liminality and its related concepts to a wide range of disciplines. Originally sourced from anthropological fieldwork, the concept has been expanded to explain political phenomena, sociological realities, and the nature of experience in

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6 Thomassen, “Thinking with Liminality: To the Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept,” 53.
psychology. Liminality provides a framework for conceptualizing both individual and collective experience, and its structuring power has been leveraged by all of these disciplines. My contribution integrates security studies and international relations into this set of disciplines, considering crucial questions of state stability and insecurity with a critical lens. I focus on the collective nature of experience during moments of state rupture such as coups, revolutions, and insurgencies; the stage-based model of liminality I leverage incorporates elements of all of these disciplines to help us understand the unraveling and reiteration of conflict. Despite the interdisciplinary approach, my work is primarily grounded in anthropology; in many ways, I’m conducting an ethnography of the liminal, analyzing the set of experiences it catalyzes even as I engage with the other disciplines that have shaped the concept.

While liminality has been widely used by scholars in many fields, it remains essential to recognize the colonial origins of this concept. In Africa, we find liminality’s origins; modern conceptions of liminality and the liminal process would have been impossible without Turner’s observations of the Ndembu in modern Zambia and van Gennep’s extensive references to rites of passage across the continent including his own fieldwork in Madagascar. The insights into process and rites of passage were extracted from the lived experiences of African subjects. This extraction was in turn only made possible through the colonial encounter which allowed scholars like Van Gennep to conduct fieldwork in Africa in the first place. In the traditional conception of an ethnography, the cultures in question were often used as testing grounds for the theories that informed the Western epistemological tradition. This includes liminality; African experience was the raw material from which the theory was extracted, with African rites serving as the data against which conceptions of the liminal were first understood.
Nevertheless, despite the colonial roots of the concept, liminality can be used *post facto* to destabilize ideas of the savage by embracing a rupture between the subject and object of an ethnographic text. Fighting against my own embedded tendencies towards reiterating anthropology’s mistakes has been a difficult task in formulating the thesis – how am I contributing to the de- and/or re-construction of anthropology in a field slouching its way through the 21st century? What does a ‘decolonized’ liminality look like? The concepts that emerged from the colonial encounter, such as liminality, will not be abandoned–we cannot be “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” Yet, they must be refashioned to fit the needs of a *decolonizing* anthropology, one that rejects the coloniality of the anthropological encounter through the recognition of its impact on the ethnography, the subject and indeed me. Seeking structure within disorder, as liminality does, contributes to destabilizing colonial beliefs about order as being foreign to the continent. By focusing on these natural processes, the inherent structure of indigenous socio-political expression is revealed, thus undermining this dominant perception of Africa as the site of chaos and random violence.

These are the core issues to grapple with as this thesis moves into the cases, both of which represent modern intrastate conflict in Africa. First, scholars of the Algerian Civil War have largely understood it as a case of “jihadist excess,” doomed by coalitional disunity. Driven by deep frustration with the Algerian state, members of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) political party militarized and turned to an armed insurgency against the government following an aborted attempt at liberalization in 1992 followed by a coup. The popular response to this

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coup soon led to the formation of the GIA to fight the military regime. This group struggled to unite a diverse ideological coalition and pose a legitimate challenge to the Algerian state. Following pressure from the government and the elevation of poor leaders, who I characterize as liminal tricksters, the group’s coalition collapsed, and they were largely defeated by 1999. However, some elements of the GIA were able to reform into various other terrorist groups that continue to operate within Algeria and North Africa as a whole. This reiteration of the conflict following the GIA’s technical defeat reflects how the organization became stranded in a liminal process, unable to be completely defeated. Yet, in response to the challenge of the GIA and their successor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the Algerian state was able to adapt and strengthen its hegemonic control over its territory. While the state was unable to resurrect all of the pre-war structures, the state’s response eventually led to new iterations of hegemony. The re-establishment of state control was incomplete, but it was enough to force an exit from the liminal condition. The result and lingering implications of this will be analyzed further in this chapter.

Fifteen years later, a similar set of pre-existing structures fueled frustration that led to a massively destabilizing conflict in Nigeria. Boko Haram emerged from Nigeria’s periphery, the site of long-standing political, social, and cultural marginalization. Endemic corruption, few economic opportunities, and the state’s inability to provide basic services in these regions made Boko Haram’s promise of religious and political change appealing, or, at the very least, worth a shot. From this initial appeal, the group eventually turned to armed insurgency following a misguided crackdown by the Borno state police. From there, the security situation spiraled out of

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10 Ibid.
control, and Boko Haram eventually controlled extensive territory in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states in northeastern Nigeria. Yet, once this control was established, the group was unable to capitalize on its success in the field; the areas they controlled were functionally in a state of anarchy. As we have already noted, Boko Haram was a profoundly local organization, focusing on Nigerian–and more specifically Borno’s–issues. The group began to receive more international attention following the 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from a government school in Chibok, sparking the global #bringbackourgirls campaign. This local-international dynamic urges us to focus on the state and its efforts to defeat the group in pursuit of complete hegemony.

To that end, Nigeria received billions in military aid to aid in the fight against Boko Haram and the military budget increased tenfold. The state was able to establish nominal control of almost all of the northeast, but crucially, Boko Haram could not be completely defeated, and Nigeria continues to deal with the reiterations of Boko Haram’s initial uprising – a state of normalized insecurity. Fundamentally, Boko Haram’s rise and relative fall represent a liminal process sparking a period that revealed and continues to reveal deep flaws within the Nigerian state. Boko Haram challenged the state’s flawed hegemony and, for a period of time, was successful in usurping its authority. Boko Haram challenges us to understand the Nigerian state differently as its emergence and popularity cannot be separated from the environment from which it arose. Additionally, this case also is far more modern; new structures have yet to be solidified in response to the challenge of Boko Haram’s militant liminality. We will analyze the implications of this for Nigeria moving forward, complementing the historical approach used with the Algerian case.

14 Nwankpa & Kassim, The Boko Haram Reader, 205-6
The source of the materials analyzed includes literature from secondary sources that analyze the conflicts, generally in popular media as well as academic publications that have been published relating to the events in question. Additionally, I leverage primary sources, both immediate news reports published during the conflicts, as well as the output of the groups themselves. The extensive primary source compilation *The Boko Haram Reader*, translated by Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa is especially useful in the Nigerian chapter, as we seek to understand the grievances and evolution of Boko Haram in their words and on their terms.\(^{15}\) While less primary source material is readily accessible for the GIA, their publications and communiqués still inform the discussion of the Algerian case. From a theoretical perspective, much of the scholarship is drawn from core scholars of liminality including van Gennep and Turner as well as prominent modern theorists such as Arpad Szakolczai, Bjorn Thomasson, and Agnes Horvath. Beyond these scholars of the liminal, my theory section considers African and diasporic critical scholars that engage with the African postcolonial state and its relationship to its populace.

Liminality cannot answer every question nor does it seek to. This thesis is much the same way. The fundamental debates surrounding stateness, order, and structure cannot be resolved in the pages that follow, but through the employment of liminality, I hope to complicate the questions a little further, especially for scholars who seek to understand insecurity holistically. Traditional methods of understanding state weakness and failure are flawed and overemphasize the state and its reactions, rather than the origin and *progression* of non-state actors in the conflict. Liminal processes, undertaken by the state’s vestigial organs, represent a theoretical tool to understand motivation, complication, and reiteration while simultaneously indicating the state for its glaring failures that foreshadow the instability wrought by groups like Boko Haram and

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
the GIA. Within this focus on African conflict, this thesis also seeks to complicate conceptions of the liminal that do not integrate Africa and Islam into their conception.

Following this introduction, the second chapter dives deeper into liminal theory and how it has been applied across disciplines. Once the core tenets of our framework have been established, I then apply the theory to the cases of Algeria followed by Nigeria in chapters three and four. I then conclude, commenting on the implications of our cases and theory on the study of intrastate insecurity and on understanding enduring conflict. This introduction began with Mohammad Yusuf’s declaration of war, and perhaps it’s only fitting to conclude it with his plea which reveals his organization's incongruence with the Nigerian state and push for broad structural change. Responding to the Nigerian government’s provocation, he prays, “O Allah, do not raise [our children] in the condition in which we were raised. O Allah, do not give them love of football or Western education or this democracy, do not put it in their minds.”16

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Chapter 2. Liminality: Roots, Rites, and Reiteration

The first step in understanding a liminal analysis of conflict is to understand liminality itself. By its very nature, liminality is tricky to define as it thrives in in-between spaces and outside of definable structures. Yet, by tracing its roots, theoretical evolution, and applications, this concept becomes digestible and applicable to the cases in question.

This idea of liminality and its ability to classify experience did not emerge in a vacuum; Arnold van Gennep wrote his 1909 book *Les Rites de Passage* when social scientists sought an age where classification was all the rage. In this book, van Gennep fits this trend, seeking to categorize and understand rites of passage, following a positivist approach. Building on his work in Australia and Madagascar, as well as numerous other rituals from across the African continent and the world, van Gennep’s framework would become the basis for the study of liminality, a concept which has grown and shifted since 1909, but still fundamentally refers to how “a person leaves one world behind him and enters a new one.”

The profound implications of studying transition and the crossing of literal or metaphorical thresholds seem central to classifying and understanding human experience, but van Gennep’s work was largely ignored, overshadowed by Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, released three years later. Durkheim, despite discussing many concepts core to liminality and van Gennep’s extensive body of work, did not engage with van Gennep’s work at all.

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18 Thomassen, “Thinking with Liminality: To the Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept,” 44
Van Gennep’s work did not subscribe to the structural functionalism that dominated sociological and anthropological theory at the time and his later, post-\textit{Rites of Passage} critiques of Durkheimian reasoning did not land well. As a result, his work remained obscure until the first English translation of \textit{The Rites of Passage} was published in 1960. Since then, however, the rediscovery of van Gennep has changed the fields of sociology, psychology, and anthropology, all of which reckon with “the perennial problem of modern thought concerning the nature of experience.” ¹⁹ While greater recognition of van Gennep was notable, authors like Claude Lévi-Strauss and E.E. Evans-Pritchard failed to grasp the full implications of van Gennep’s framework. Specifically, the Levi-Straussian method sought “laws of logic” which required neatly-wrapped texts and experiences to form the data behind the theory. Van Gennep’s liminality on the other hand is a living process that must be studied in the moment of occurrence – what van Gennep referred to as “biological sociology.” ²⁰ It was only with Victor Turner’s innovations that liminality was about to shed the limitations of functionalism and structuralism and recenter the processual nature of liminality. ²¹

Turner began to push the boundaries of liminality, reconceptualizing what had been understood as an individual process. He stumbled upon \textit{The Rites of Passage} in a confusing time of personal transition as he moved to the United States from his native United Kingdom. Quite literally stuck in between, he “experientially recognized the importance of van Gennep’s insight.” ²² Building on van Gennep’s model, he used his experiences with the Ndembu of modern Zambia to move beyond his roots in the structuralist tradition to become one of liminality’s foremost theorists. Specifically, his chapter “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Passage in Rites

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience.” 16. 
\textsuperscript{20} Qt\d in Thomasson, “Thinking with Liminality” 45
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 46, emphasis in original}
of Passage” argued for a broad interpretation of rituals and their significance beyond the individual level. Beyond Turner, the mantle has been taken over by various authors who have taken the concept even further, resulting in engaging and interesting work that challenges traditional theories of international relations, psychology, and sociology along with both cultural and political anthropology. My work seeks to contribute to this broad interpretation of rites and their process.

So, what exactly does this process entail and how does it challenge standard conceptions of structure and order? Van Gennep’s conception of rites of passage centers on the process and the inherent, almost undefinable ways in which these rites guide individuals and their communities through uncertain times. Van Gennep subdivided rites of passage into three distinct stages, each of which is stressed to different amounts depending on the rites’ purpose. These three stages are rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. First, rites of separation kick off the process and are especially prominent in funeral ceremonies as they represent the death of what had come before; starting a liminal process means leaving something behind, and these pre-liminal rites are where that metaphorical death occurs. On the collective level, these rites include moments of rupture such as coups, revolutions, democratic transitions, and more. Following this separation, one finds themselves on the limen itself. Crucially, success in this transitional period is not guaranteed; liminal rites are trials that one must pass with the completion of certain ritual acts. This moment is dangerous, a period of radical, almost infinite possibility. If success is achieved, the process moves to the final stage: rites of incorporation. These rites solidify the recreation of a fully-formed being and the reintegration of that individual

25 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 18
to their new status or state of being – a boy is now a man, two people are now married, a soul has departed. In a later contribution, Turner noted that following incorporation, “the ritual subject…is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type.” This standard model has wide applicability to a wide range of experiences and rites and is central to understanding core concepts in anthropology and sociology as well as international relations.

Van Gennep observed this process in his fieldwork, leading to The Rites of Passage. Even in 1909, he recognized liminality’s potential and thought it was crucial to understanding human experience with further development. This further study came with Turner who dove deeper into the liminal process itself and how it was governed. Following van Gennep, Turner saw rituals as “much more than mere reflections of ‘social order,’” as Durkheim believed. Van Gennep noted that “transitional periods… sometimes acquire a certain autonomy” which inspired Turner to dive deeper into how this autonomy is regulated. In his 1967 book The Forest of Symbols, he devoted a chapter to the liminal nature of rites of passage among the Ndembu which is central to understanding liminality’s indefinability and its multifaceted nature. He writes,

[Ndembu neophytes’] condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories. Jacob Boehme… liked to say “In Yea and Nay all things consist.” Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

This passage does well to define the inability to separate structures of society and the community from liminality. Liminality is central to structure’s creation, and its destruction. As a liminal lens is used, it remains crucial to underscore the ability of liminal situations to restructure and form

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26 Turner, The Forest of Symbols, 94
27 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 189
28 Thomasson, “Thinking with Liminality,” 46
29 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 191-192
30 Turner, The Forest of Symbols, 97
these “novel configurations.” Extrapolating from an individual rite to a collective experience, liminality becomes a mechanism through which social change can be achieved.

Commenting further on the relationship between liminality and structure, Turner additionally defines two interconnected concepts that are crucial to understanding the manifestation of liminality on a community level: anti-structure and communitas. For Turner, communitas, simply defined, “is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals” that is generally unstructured, “often speculative and generates imagery and philosophical ideas.” Both concepts help Turner define liminality’s oppositional relationship to structure and its ability to create or empower other methods of social formation as was discussed above. The un-making aspects of liminality are especially crucial to the fostering of communitas; Turner re-framed community formation and social life as a whole as “a multiplicity of processes” that define anti-structure. Following Turner’s example, authors have taken the concept of communitas and applied it to events like political revolutions, which can be “experienced as a collective effervescence and can lead to deeply-felt communitas.” Communitas’s role in inspiring mobilization is crucial to understanding the development of non-state structures in the context of both Algeria and Nigeria.

Turner also noted the figures that emerge in liminal processes, the most important of which is the master of ceremonies. This terminology is not used in The Forest of Symbols but has emerged in the literature to define the person or group of people in charge of the rite itself, guiding the initiates through the stages and, most crucially, off of the limen. For the Ndembu,

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31 Ibid.
33 Turner, The Ritual Process, 139
35 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 18
the elders who guide ceremonies of initiations have absolute authority. To Turner, these masters-of-ceremonies “represent in their persons the total community” and thus demand total obedience.\textsuperscript{36} Given the radical uncertainty of liminal situations, this control is crucial as it provides guidance and avoids either failure or the initiate being trapped on–or even just beyond–the limit.

What happens if this authority breaks down and the liminal process never reaches its satisfying conclusion? Here, we must continue to flesh out the liminal picture by introducing the character of the trickster. This figure appears in mythologies around the world, for example, the Irish leprechaun or the Yoruba Eshu, and generally is an untrustworthy outsider, kept on the margins of society by the community itself. Yet, in situations of profound uncertainty–when the liminal reigns–tricksters can be “mistaken for charismatic leaders” and elevated to positions of authority as their liminal existence allows them to remain calm in extraordinary conditions.\textsuperscript{37} Simply put, this is not a desirable outcome as it can lead to the re-perpetuation of the liminal moment and a total reordering of social values. In her analysis of communist dictator Mátyás Rákosi’s speeches, Hungarian scholar Agnes Horvath understood and applied this concept, arguing that post-war Hungary was perfectly suited to be guided by a liminal trickster, embodied in Rákosi. For Horvath, this led to communism’s “revaluation of values” in the creation of “a grandiose realm of quasi-order” in which the entire community was constructed around being an outsider, driven by “hatred and ressentiment.”\textsuperscript{38} This quasi-order was liminality reiterated and represents the danger of the trickster’s influence.

\textsuperscript{36} Turner, \textit{The Ritual Process}, 100
\textsuperscript{37} Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 26
Prominent liminal scholar Arpad Szakolczai evokes anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s conception of *schismogenesis* to explain this phenomenon of reiterated liminality, arguing that in this unique situation, “societies can be stuck for a long time in a state where, although their previous unity is broken, their schismatic components are forced to stay together.” In his ethnography, *Naven*, Bateson defines schismogenesis as “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals” which seems both benign and unrelated to liminality. However, his specific concept of *symmetrical schismogenesis* has relevance for the reiterated liminality that is central to this thesis. He uses the example of boastful behavior to illustrate this phenomenon; in a situation where two people are interacting, one could respond to another’s boastful behavior by increasing their boastfulness which would lead to more boasting and so on. If boastfulness is replaced by liminality’s back-and-forth, the symmetrical schismogenesis would lead to the repetition of this disorder, a condition that Szakolczai describes as “an unpleasant, violent, harrowing, truly miserable existence.” This existence is reflected in both cases as their previous unity had been deconstructed and replaced by the violent feedback loop of Bateson’s schismogenesis. These groups are left on the *limen*, unable to be entirely defeated or victorious. All they can do is continue to battle the state; only now, they’re rebels of a nearly lost cause.

Turner’s later writings engaged with modernity as a state of permanent liminality with a natural and unavoidable “reversion to crises.” In many ways, this mirrors the ways authors have conceptualized the lingering impact of the colonial encounter on Africa and African bodies. The Congolese philosopher, VY Mudimbe, argued that the invention of Africa required tension

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39 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 26
41 Ibid. 177
42 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 27
between the two cultures leading to a “dichotomizing system” that creates an intermediate space between two extremes – for example, between the traditional and the modern. This space is distinctly liminal and, for Mudimbe, is definitionally marginal.44 Weaving Mudimbe’s contribution with Bateson’s schismogenesis, Africa becomes the perfect site for the liminal to flourish and for schismogenesis to emerge. Turner wrote that humans are “peculiarly festooned with prepositions, with relational and functional connectives.”45 When these connections turn sour through a schismogenetic reiteration, Turner concluded that the best option was to admit that “schism was unavoidable” and “the best that could be done was for the dissident party or parties to split off.”46 The connection that Turner does not make (but Mudimbe deeply understands) is that beyond a micro-community level, such a spatial split is essentially impossible and, both practically and epistemologically, we’re left with the consequences of this fact – “marginal societies, cultures and human beings.”47

Over the last century, piece by piece, a coherent theory of liminality has emerged, guided by van Gennep’s initial stages and their subsequent interpretation by other scholars, most notably Turner. Beyond the ‘tribal’ anthropology of both van Gennep and Turner, anthropologists have chewed on the concept beyond a simple rite of passage, seeing its applicability for a wide range of social conditions, constructions, and changes – and potentially even modernity itself.48 This complex, undefined, in-between that is liminality can provide some clarity to complicated, reiterated conflicts including the chosen cases.

45 Victor Turner, The Anthropology of Performance, 99
46 Victor Turner, The Anthropology of Performance, 104
47 Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa, 17
48 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 35
Applied Liminality: Meaning and the Individual In-Between

Scholars of liminality see the concept as one that is central to existence; as Bjorn Thomasson writes “human existence without liminality is simply not possible.”\(^{49}\) Beyond these bold declarations, the concept can inform an anthropology of revolution and the nature of conflict more broadly. This thesis grapples with the applicability of Turner, van Gennep, Bateson, and others in the most uncertain times of upheaval: revolution and war. Thomasson urges us to move away from the language of cost-benefit or rationality when it comes to discussions of the rupture of revolution, arguing instead that we should recognize the liminal in these moments means that “there are no background structures or certainties against which to weigh such ‘interests.’”\(^{50}\) Despite this, Thomasson stresses the importance of understanding the intensity of a moment. Fundamentally, he argues that intensity should be defined primarily by the degree to which a liminal moment moves away from previous structures. Thomasson also argues for a classification of liminal experiences based on three core criteria: time, space, and nature of the subject.\(^{51}\) For time, Thomasson subdivides liminal experiences into those that are contained to a specific moment, a specific period, or what he calls an “epoch” which can last decades. For spatial classification, he noted that liminality can apply to specific thresholds like a doorway, areas like airports that epitomize the concept of a liminal space or larger regions and even continents. Finally, he divides liminal experiences based on who the experience is happening to – whether it’s an individual, a group, or a whole society.\(^{52}\)

Another core aspect of classification considers the origin of the liminal experience and whether it was devised or spontaneous. Social psychologist Paul Stenner distinguishes between

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\(^{49}\) Thomasson, “Thinking with Liminality,” 40  
\(^{50}\) Thomasson, “Notes Towards an Anthropology,” 699  
\(^{51}\) Thomasson, “Thinking with Liminality,” 48  
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
spontaneous and devised liminal experiences, noting that the spontaneous “is embedded in practical reality and follows from what happens to us despite our actions, in the irreversible time of ‘outrageous fortune’.”\(^{53}\) While Stenner considers exclusively the individual level, the distinction between spontaneous and devised continues to be significant at the group or societal level, affecting the genesis and initial facts of a liminal experience. Stenner’s contribution builds out the classification of liminal experiences, but it is important to note that this classification is definitionally arbitrary. Despite its usefulness in understanding the parameters of a liminal experience, this sorting of experience fails to capture the entirety of the liminal which, in many ways, is characterized by its undefinability and ability to adapt beyond its initial parameters.

While understanding its limitations, Thomasson’s framework helps to contextualize the diverse approaches to using the liminal in scholarship. Traditionally, the earliest work considered specific experiences and their impact on the original. In *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner considered the specific transformation of Ndembu neophytes, and van Gennep’s initial interpretation only focused on “ceremonial life,” centering rites of passage for the individual or certain individuals.\(^{54}\) Both inspired the use of the liminal framework in other ethnographic texts considering people, places, and groups at, on, or beyond a threshold. However, for the most part, ethnographic analyses on the subject of liminality have been limited to specific rites and their processes. Similarly, social psychologists and sociologists such as Stenner use liminality to understand human interaction and disciplines such as “play, religion and art,” rather than keeping the ethnographic aspects of the anthropologists integrating the liminal.\(^{55}\) This work follows in the tradition of van Gennep as well as modern scholars like Arpad Szakolczai, Thomasson, and

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\(^{54}\) Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 193

\(^{55}\) Stenner, “Theorizing Liminality,” 34
others by using liminality to understand the process of specific conflicts, while simultaneously examining liminality itself using the chosen cases, thus in many ways conducting an ethnography of the liminal itself.

Beyond the academic work surrounding liminality, the concept has recently gone mainstream through the concept of a liminal space. Drawing on sociological concepts, media articles note the dangers of an individual passing through a time of transition, either physically or psychologically, and give suggestions for how to respond. This, while certainly simplified, is a reasonable interpretation of the concept; in contrast, a gaming news site put out an article ranking the “10 Best Liminal Space Horror Games” describing a liminal space as a “space that doesn’t feel quite real,” fundamentally moving away from what the liminal has signified to anthropologists and scholars.56 Beyond the use in horror games, a recent Atlantic article jumped to defend liminal spaces, arguing that they are crucial to making sense of a modern and changing world. The author then went on to perfectly describe the popular conception of liminality, writing “today, though, liminality is a vibe: a strong feeling with loose definitions.”57 In many ways, this conception of liminality as a vibe reflects Turner’s later work further built upon by Thomasson that argues that modernity can be understood as the “permanentization of liminality.”58 This condition is exacerbated by the constant condition of war and insecurity, best reflected by the now-former American presence in Afghanistan, where the world and specifically the US was “stuck in the in-between zone of war and peace,” universalizing the condition of permanent liminality.59 This permanent liminal insecurity becomes normalized. For example, ethnographic

58 Thomasson, “Thinking with Liminality,” 54
work out of the Central African Republic has noted that “the disruption of normalcy is the new normal.” This reality leads to adaptation; both state and non-state actors form “new relationships and entanglements.”\(^{60}\) The universalization of liminality is a topic that merits further investigation beyond the limited pages I have here. What’s crucial, however, is to note that within this universalized liminality, there’s still the possibility of localized or quasi-localized liminal processes, such as those that occur in the chosen case studies.

Beyond the relationship between modernity and liminality, scholars have also applied the concept to historical and modern phenomena such as terrorism or revolutions. Much of the critical liminal scholarship, most notably Arpad Szakolczai and Agnes Horvath, emerged from behind the Iron Curtain. As such, liminality was leveraged to understand the phenomenon of Soviet-style communism. We’ve briefly discussed Horvath’s analysis of Hungarian dictator Mátýás Rákosi’s speeches and her interpretation of trickster, but more broadly, her analysis accords with the idea of Soviet-style communism as affixed liminality, frozen in “a regime in which the Second World War never ended.”\(^{61}\) This represents reiteration, as the circumstances of the immediate post-war environment endure. Szakolczai compares Bolshevism’s post-World War II ideological formulation as comparable to the journey of Odysseus as recounted by Homer and interpreted by Joyce in *Ulysses*. The war was over, but the players – be it Hungarians in the 1950s or Odysseus’s crew – were still wandering, “worn out by the duty of permanent performance” of their roles in a concluded, but not closed, liminal process.\(^{62}\) This represents the danger of reiterated liminality; societies were comfortable in the in-between, and what was once a radical and negative departure from the status quo established itself as the new normal.

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62 Ibid. 214
Outside of that very specific Eastern European context, aborted and perpetuated liminality has begun to influence certain anthropological and sociological scholarship on revolutionary moments as Thomasson urged in his 2012 article “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions.” For example, scholars have used liminality to explain the genesis and outcome of “unfinished revolutions,” seeing it as allowing us to analyze moments that are neither revolutions nor uprisings that lack set scripts. Historian Rosario Forlenza cites the example of brief peasant, Communist republics that emerged in Southern Italy between 1943-45 as an example of this phenomenon as they refuse easy classification despite their revolutionary nature. They represent Turnerian social dramas in which uncertainty reigns, where “structures are loosened and meanings are open to scrutiny and negotiation.”

Similar pieces have addressed this concept with other revolutions, for instance, Egypt’s 2011 Tahrir Square uprising and, more traditionally, the French and Russian revolutions. The Egyptian case merits closer study as it appears to be one of few cases that leverages the lens of liminality in an African context. Critically, the liminal allows us to understand the desire for anti-structure shown by the protestors, turning to tricksters or attempting to re-ignite the initial glory of the first days of the revolution. Seeing Tahrir as a symbol, scholar Mark Allen Peterson argued that the initial Tahrir Square movement almost perfectly fits with Turner’s model, culminating in President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation. Soon after, however, the uprising continued and the revolutionary zeal did not die away, leading Peterson to wonder “When is


there enough revolution? When is the disruption of the structures of everyday life too frightening and dangerous?" I would add a related question: when does the disruption become reiterated and thus normalized? The imbalance of a liminal situation means a delicate mix of assumed risk and slight hope and, with the assumption of Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt is an excellent example of how coherence and structure can be alluring to those who find themselves caught in a liminal centrifuge. There’s a definite allure to normalcy; while going through liminal situations is a distinctly human characteristic, so too is the desire to exit them.

Beyond the Egyptian revolution, however, scholars have largely not considered the influence of liminality in the African context. Reflecting the colonial roots of liminality, the departure from the initial understanding of the liminal in Africa to its broader application in the modern, Western world reflects a re-sloting of the field. According to critical anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the field of anthropology was created to understand and diagnose savagery in contrast to the forward-moving utopian West. The West was the site of order, reason, and structure. Within this epistemological division, liminality did not quite fit with Africa and ethnography as a discipline. Thus, liminality moved from anthropology, a field that dealt with this so-called “savage slot,” to psychology, philosophy, and sociology, disciplines that belonged to the ordered, Western intellectual tradition. This transition reflects the power of liminality as a mechanism that sheds light on order and helps us understand structures as they exist, even if that order and those structures are found in the “slot” to which they do not belong in the traditional classification system. Thus, while liminality remains a concept that emerged from the observation of anthropology’s assigned savages, its applicability beyond this observation helps to destabilize and deconstruct the preconception of Africa in the field of anthropology. Trouillot

66 Peterson, “In Search of Antistructure,” 178
urges us to find “new points of reentry by questioning the symbolic world upon which
‘nativeness’ is premised.” Liminality is only one component of anthropology’s
self-deconstruction, but taking applied liminality and returning it to the African context from
which it emerged helps to reveal the order in perceived disorder. As such, integrating the
Algerian Civil War and the Boko Haram insurgency builds a more nuanced understanding of
liminality and how it is applied.

**Islam, Liminality and the Creation of the *Umma***

Moving beyond Western conceptions of the liminal includes separating the liminal from
the Christian tradition that has governed existing interpretations of the concept. Van Gennep
understood the centrality of religion to the conception of rites of passage; he addressed the divide
between the sacred and the profane on the very first page of *The Rites of Passage*. Yet, even
with this in mind, the connection between most religions and liminality has gone largely
unexplored despite the crucial role religion plays in shaping community structures. While Turner
and others focused on pilgrimage as a liminal experience, understanding the formation of
religious communities as a liminal experience informs our study of liminality beyond the
theoretical realm. In both Northern Nigeria and the mosques of Algiers, Islam was used as a
method of conceptualizing communal existence outside of the hegemony of secular or
quasi-secular states. As such, it becomes important to recognize the liminal roots of Islam and
how the emulation of this liminal process has affected Islam’s political history and the creation of
*communitas* for communities.

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68 Ibid. 28
69 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 1
To recast the origins of Islam as a liminal process, we must first understand the creation of the *umma*, the Islamic community. Following the revelation, the Prophet Muhammad’s goal had been the creation of a Muslim community, distinct from the tribal structures that characterized 7th-century Arabia. This was a radical departure and thus the community needed to form a distinct identity – leaving behind what it had been previously and reforming into the *umma*. The formation of the community is very closely tied to the nascent community’s escape from Mecca to Medina, known as the *hijra*. In Medina, the community was built around a core set of religio-political values, codified in the constitution of Medina. Following this, the community made its return to Mecca, emerging victorious in the 624 AD Battle of Badr vanquishing a numerically superior force to establish themselves as the premier power on the Arabian Peninsula. The *hijra* represents a liminal process, and that model of departure, followed by community formation and then a triumphant return has been emulated by various leaders since the original *hijra*. The liminality of this departure is reflected in the modern definition of *hijra* which can mean “the breaking of old ties,” which reflects a rite of separation. Additionally, the date of the *hijra* signifies the Islamic New Year and where the calendar begins; since 624, years are classified as AH or after *hijra*.

With the liminal lens in mind, let’s retrace the steps of Muhammad and his *muhajirun* from Mecca to Medina and back again. First, Muhammad’s departure from Mecca came after years of proselytizing in which he had converted many prominent Meccans at the expense of the Meccan polytheist elite. For these converts, Muhammed had encouraged emigration to Medina from Mecca as the situation in Mecca worsened leading up to his own departure in 620 AD after

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71 Ibid.
foiling an attempted assassination by the assembled clans, threatened by the rapid rate of conversion.74 Escaping to the desert, the Prophet hid in a cave, pursued by Mecca’s best trackers. These men arrived at the cave, only to find that a spider had woven its web across the mouth, leading the trackers to conclude there was no way for Muhammed to be hidden there. This minor act of divine intervention cleared the path for Muhammed to travel through the desert, joining his community of believers that had begun to form in what would become Medina.75

In Medina, this community, while united in their belief, struggled to unite politically as the tribes from which they emerged had little tradition of stateness. As such, the formation of the umma as a coherent political unit required the complete authority of the Prophet himself, thus making him the all-important master of ceremonies.76 Here, it’s notable that the muhajirun had left something behind. In Mecca, they had their tribal identities and their affiliation with the city. Leaving the city behind meant they were somewhere beyond – no longer Meccans, but not quite yet the religio-political community of the umma. What they were, definitively, was a community on the limen. In Medina, Muhammad and his followers formally conceptualized themselves as a united community, a conceptualization that was codified in the Constitution of Medina. This document represented a “covenant of unity,” opening with a declaration that “this is a document written by Muhammad the Prophet between the faithful covenants [under God's security]... They constitute a single community apart from other people.”77

The Constitution, considered to be a core text in the early history of Islam, represents a crucial step in solidifying the unity of the early Islamic community. Being muhajirun was a signifier of commitment to the umma, and, even after the Prophet’s death, converts were

75 Ibid. 119-120
77 Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina,” 562
encouraged to perform a personal hijra, joining the *dar al-hijra* that had emerged in Medina.\(^78\)

Yet, there was still a very practical threat to the *umma* – the armies of the Quraysh that were assembled against them. The two forces met at the Battle of Badr, a crucial victory that strengthened the Islamic position. The *muhajirun* and the Medinan allies met the numerically-superior Meccan force and defeated them with, according to the Quran, divine intervention, thus “rendering the believers a great favor.”\(^79\) The combination of divine intervention and the material result of the victory itself signified the coalescence of the Islamic community. Upon the 629 capture of Mecca, the *Umma* had won, thus affirming their community’s unity and divine blessing; they had successfully crossed the *limen*.

The process detailed above of departure, the strengthening of—in Turnerian terms—their *communitas*, and triumphant return helped solidify the Islamic community which would go on to conquer much of the world, including modern Morocco. There, in the twelfth century, we see a successful attempt to emulate the Prophet’s liminal passage by a reform-minded, dissatisfied member of the *ulama*, Muhamed Ibn Tumart. The ruling Almoravid Empire expelled Tumart from their capital of Marrakesh for his radical preaching and opposition to the empire. Yet, he saw this as an opportunity, however, to frame his exile as a *hijra*; Ibn Tumart hid out in a cave and actively created his own *dar al-hijra* in the High Atlas.\(^80\) As his movement grew, certain actions like his strict adherence to Islamic law and a purge of disloyal followers were unpopular and “probably made palatable only by the evocation of the Prophet’s example.”\(^81\) While the vision of an Almohad-ruled Morocco never came to pass in Ibn Tumart’s lifetime, the

\(^{78}\) Athamina, “A’rāb and Muhājirūn,” 9

\(^{79}\) Quran 8:7-18


\(^{81}\) Ibid.
communitas he had fostered in his dar al-hijra helped ensure his movement stayed united even following his death.

A few centuries later and fifteen hundred miles south, a new Islamic movement would emerge among the Hausa kingdoms of Northern Nigeria. These kingdoms were nominally Muslim but lacked the strict doctrinal adherence that many scholars desired. These scholars included a Fulani preacher, alim, and philosopher named Usman dan Fodio. He would take this frustration with heretical kings and declare a jihad against the Hausa kingdoms in pursuit of religious purity. He would then go on to become the first Shehu of the Sokoto Caliphate.\(^{82}\) The origins of his movement reflect a similar pattern to that of the Prophet and Ibn Tumart. His hijra was from the Hausa kingdom of Gobir with whom the Muslim community of dan Fodio had long sparred. Following an attempted assassination (much like Muhammad) and consistent political provocation, dan Fodio fled Gobir which was “the hijra that preceded jihād, following the pattern of the Prophet Muhammad’s original jihād.”\(^{83}\) This jihad was followed by a Badresque victory against a numerical superior Hausa force at the Battle of Tabkin Kwoto, thus solidifying the transformation of dan Fodio’s community of scholars and students into mujahidun, warriors committed to establishing what would later become Sokoto, the most powerful Islamic state in the Western Sudan.\(^{84}\)

The observed liminal process of Muhammad, replicated throughout Islamic history, including in Africa feeds a modern desire for a community-driven, sharia-rooted, ritualized emulation of the Prophet’s model. We see this desire in modern Islamic movements, including the chosen cases of the GIA and Boko Haram. Thus, even if the liminality goes unnamed,

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\(^{83}\) Ibid.

community formation and community militarization in the Islamic tradition are very closely tied to the liminal mechanism of separation, transition, and reincorporation that reflects the process through which Prophet Muhammad’s formation of the umma. Studies of terrorism have shown that symbols and ritualized processes are central to the underlying logic behind suicide attacks, as well as a potent theological justification for even political acts of terrorism.85 Within this array of symbols, Muhammad’s hijra and the Battle of Badr both have core roles in structuring the tumultuous nature of state and community building and thus must be incorporated into our liminal analysis of Islamic extremist groups.

**Stateness In-Between: The Post-Colonial State as the Hegemonic Liminal**

The previous section began to consider the religious specificity of the cases chosen. Now, we must consider the specific geographic and historical realities that inform the application of the liminal condition to the chosen cases; we must grapple with the African post-colonial state and its relationship to liminality.

The creation of Africa’s nation-states represented a liminal process, as leaders sought to guide the community through the transitional period of immediate political independence. The liminality of the moment of independence stands, regardless of the level of violence during the transition. Simply put, the former colonies were in-between statuses, a transition that had to be navigated and negotiated, including in Algeria and Nigeria. Beyond these states, a core pattern can be observed following the liminal processes of independence; the post-colonial states were generally weak, disunited, and vulnerable to ruptures such as coups and revolutions due to

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insignificant *communitas* on the national level. These states were infused with the scars of the colonial experience which impacted the formation of post-colonial subjects within their neo-colonial states and a “postmodernist mood” that is “primarily Western.”\(^{86}\) In Fanonian terms, the parties of independence have been unmasked, revealing that their “only role” is “to immobilize the people.”\(^{87}\) For Fanon, the party had become an arm of the bourgeoisie, overly focused on materialism, and, in many ways, led post-colonial states into “the pitfalls of independence.”\(^{88}\) Peter Ekeh goes further, arguing that in most cases, independence was a battle between two distinct bourgeois over who would rule the new state with no liberatory aims to begin with.\(^{89}\) These pitfalls emerged from the liminal process of independence, leaving Africa and its countries in a complicated and dangerous state of unfulfilled liminality.

Understanding division and unmaking is central to this thesis, and Ekeh’s naming of the two publics as a source of tension in post-colonial Africa remains valuable in framing our discussion of insurgency and instability. Ekeh’s analysis centers us within the state and its structures; juggling the conflicting rights and duties of citizenship presupposes access to the benefits of participation.\(^{90}\) The liminal best serves as a frame of reference for geographic areas and people who exist beyond the political realm. These groups can coalesce around a variety of factors, but crucially, their very existence is incongruous with the state itself. They exist within its borders but postulate a radically different vision of the state—if they accept its existence at all. The two groups at the heart of my cases, Boko Haram and the GIA, both represent these vestigial organs of the post-colonial state, not accepting the state’s mandate or its attempts at control. I choose the analogy of a vestigial organ because these groups represent the vestige of the state’s

\(^{86}\) Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Anthropology and the Savage Slot,” 12
\(^{87}\) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 116
\(^{88}\) Ibid. 121
\(^{90}\) Ibid. 100-101
failure to consolidate its authority and provide for its population. These groups do not necessarily pose a threat, but with a flare-up, the consequences can be deadly.

The vestigial organs help to feed the instability of the African post-colonial state. Secessionist movements, coups, and terrorism fundamentally result from discontent, and a continued inability to be incorporated effectively into the state can fuel unrest. Here, Fanon contributes valuably by noting the colonizer’s infusion of violence among the colonized. In his “On Violence,” he discusses “the violence rippling under the skin” that fosters instability during and after direct colonialism. This violence, stemming from the colonial encounter, can reach a “point of no return” in which “sweeping revolution” becomes the logical next step for a population. Fundamentally, this arrangement of liberation is liminal; the point of no return represents the liminal threshold after which pacification becomes nearly impossible. While Fanon discusses wars of colonial liberation, the concept of a movement going beyond a threshold—a point of no return—represents the heart of the liminal process in the Algerian Civil War and Boko Haram’s insurgency. What happens when this threshold is breached, but there is no “notion of common cause, national destiny, and collective history”? We’re left in Mbembe’s postcolony, where “the future horizon is apparently closed, while the horizon of the past has apparently receded.” Instability reigns, tricksters emerge, and the state is in profound danger.

These conflicts help to reveal the state’s complicated relationship with liminality. Emerging from a bumpy liminal process, state control rests on the elimination of liminal actors, groups, and processes from the state itself. Definitionally, the state sees itself as having a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” and the sole source of structure in a society.

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91 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 31
92 Ibid. 47
93 Ibid. 51
94 Achille Mbembe, On the Postcolonial, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2001), 17
The emergence of opposing structures represents a threat to the state’s treasured hegemony, and the state’s vestigial organs are thus perceived as a threat. The state should and often does fear a moment of no return where some incongruous element seeks to break away from state control. This fear is warranted, because structure is notoriously difficult to maintain, especially within the context of post-colonial Africa. Additionally, structure is even more difficult to restore, as is revealed by both Algeria and Nigeria. As such, the state is in direct opposition to liminality and seeks to limit liminality’s ability to impact fragile state structures.

One of the state’s primary goals is to establish its hegemony over the public sphere. Yet, within disunited states with insufficient communitas, the foundation of this hegemony can be shaken; cracks form easily, driven by those outside of the center. Combined with weaponized discontent, the post-colonial state cannot be assured of stability as it essentially operates within a permanent liminal condition due to its history and formation; the liminal cannot be sufficiently dominated. This simple fact supports the assertion of many political scientists that stateness in the post-colonial African context is generally a juridical reality, not an empirical one.96 Within the African context, we’ve already discussed Mudimbe’s observation of an in-between space between “the so-called African tradition and the projected modernity of colonialism.”97 For Mudimbe, this intermediate, liminal space, a “locus of paradoxes,” defines the African encounter with modernity.98 This encounter is profoundly liminal and has informed state creation, unrest, and disintegration on the continent.

Within this broad liminal encounter, liminal processes continue to occur at the sub-group level. These processes, exemplified by the GIA and Boko Haram, are at the heart of this thesis.

97 Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa, 18
98 Ibid.
What they represent is a different type of liminality, one that seeks to capitalize upon the radical possibility of a liminal process to re-order their societies. This militant liminality opposes state structure in efforts to establish a new version of sovereignty and structure. A prerequisite to establishing new structures is destabilizing the old ones, an effort that evokes the creation of African states. This militancy can be interpreted in several ways, the first of which represents the tired construction of Otherness. In Mbembe’s description, “the continent, a great, soft, fantastic body, is seen as powerless, engaged in rampant self destruction. Human action there is seen as stupid and mad, always proceeding from anything but rational calculation.”

My interpretation incorporates the structuring power of liminality to find rationality in what has been considered irrational; militant liminality has an intrinsic purpose that goes beyond catalyzing chaos and, instead, responds to the subjugation of the postcolonial state, a state whose creation has left it acutely vulnerable to rupture.

Centrally, I argue that groups such as Boko Haram and the GIA reject the structural constraints of the hegemonic state in an attempt to recapture some elements of self-determination and sovereignty. The modern state emerging from the Westphalian order reflects a conception of political authority and international law that is “essentially Eurocentric.” In this environment, claims to sovereignty are filtered through Western conceptions of rights, reason, and order; this realm cannot grasp the militant, liberatory nature of certain movements. Yet, these movements’ tendencies to defy structure rarely lead to the abolition of oppressive structures. Instead, they’re either reiterated or defined solely in the negative sense – that is to say, anarchy. These results are predicated on the ability of these movements to defy the state and achieve their radical goals. If they’re not successful in breaking down the state’s fragile hegemony and constructing new

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99 Mbembe, On the Postcolony, 8
100 Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 41.
structures to take their place, the state is able to reestablish new structures that revitalize the state’s hegemony. Algeria’s post-Civil War autocracy will illustrate how liminal movements can only lead to the ossification of oppressive structures when hegemony is shaken, not shattered.

**Conclusion**

Liminality represents a valuable theoretical contribution to the study of Africa, Islam, and revolution. Liminality’s ability to structure seemingly unstructured experiences poses a challenge to traditional conceptions of disorder, especially in the so-called “Savage Slot.” The concept’s development and application have come a long way since van Gennep, yet continued work is necessary to understand the concept’s relationship to the colonial encounter from which it emerged. This includes broadening the religious applications of the concept and reconstructing the concept based on African political theory and critical anthropology.

From Turner, van Gennep, and others, we have compiled an analytical framework that will govern the forthcoming discussion of the Algerian Civil War and the Boko Haram insurgency. Rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation all are deeply relevant for a holistic understanding of how these conflicts should be analyzed. While this simple process is modified by the state’s (supposed) hegemonic authority, tricksters, and schismogenesis, the tripartite processual argument remains the fundamental mechanism through which I will be discussing these conflicts. As the state and various communities pass through uncertain times, the liminal reigns and impacts both structure and collective experience. Yet, this does not remove the danger of being on the *limen*, which remains extremely dangerous, especially if the process remains incomplete for an extended period leading to the feedback loop of symmetrical schismogenesis and reiteration.
In this chapter, I’ve outlined the struggle between the hegemonic state and the vestigial organs from which dissent emerges using the liminal framework as developed by van Gennep and Turner. This tension informs the origins of conflict and becomes crucial to understanding the pre-existing conditions that push a group towards Fanon’s point of no return, a threshold that, once crossed and left unsatisfied, can lead to schismogenetic reiteration and an inability to exit the liminal condition. This is dangerous for individuals, communities, and the state, especially in times of crisis such as the Algerian Civil War and the Nigerian government’s struggle against Boko Haram.
Chapter 3. The State’s Revenge: The Algerian Civil War, Hegemony, and Punctuated Disorder

Tangiers radio got the news first along with Agence France Presse; the Algerian Civil War had claimed seven more victims. The communiqué was read: “We have slit the throats of the seven monks.”

The seven Trappist monks in question were kidnapped by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and put to death under the leadership of the radical Djamel Zitouni. Two months later, Zitouni was assassinated, likely by members of a rival Islamist faction. Wracked by in-fighting and facing a crisis of leadership, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) nevertheless puffed out its chest and dug in; a defiant statement promised “no truce, no dialogue and no conciliation with the apostates.”

This group, founded in 1992, sought to establish an Islamic state in Algeria and to overthrow the military regime–the apostates–that had seized power following an aborted election in 1992. They were strict Salafists who believed that the only legitimate form of governance was an Islamic state according to their strict interpretation of Islam. Combined with significant frustration with an unequal, underdeveloped Algeria state, the group was able to challenge the Algerian state during the Algerian Civil War: eight years of conflict between the

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GIA and the Algeria government that killed up to 200,000 and profoundly destabilized the Algeria state.

In many ways, the passage of Algerian Islamists from peaceful political action to a violent insurgency reflects a liminal process, traceable in the three stages defined in the chapter above. The process of conceptualizing the conflict as such reveals the path to insurgency and the failures of consolidation that eventually led to the capture of the GIA’s last emir in 2005.103 Notably, the GIA’s successors, the GSPC and AQIM, stem from this same liminal process, representing the reiteration of the original liminal condition. Despite the reiteration, the state met the challenge posed by the GIA, eventually ending the civil war and restoring the state’s hegemony under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who was able to solidify state control during his twenty-year presidency. By employing a liminal framework, this analysis seeks to discover the coherent processes involved in a war that is generally characterized by its unstructured, excessive, and senseless violence. By centering the war’s impact on structure, my analysis moves beyond a state-focused, counter-insurgency model. The liminal lens also shows how the state enforces hegemony at the expense of local communitas, solidarity, and non-state affiliated structures.

Pre-Liminal Condition: The Colonial Experience and Post-Colonial Stumbles

Spontaneous liminal experience “is embedded in practical reality and follows from what happens to us despite our actions, in the irreversible time of ‘outrageous fortune’.”104 Yet, to understand these seemingly spontaneous experiences, we must first understand the complex

104 Paul Stenner, “‘Theorising Liminality,’” 17
realities from which they emerged. In Algeria, this story starts with the colonial experience and the war of liberation. Following the 1830 invasion of Algiers, the French colonial authorities maintained a multi-faceted and complicated relationship with the Muslim intellectual elite, the ulama. Certain elements were co-opted by the colonial authorities, paid off to maintain and expand a French-led order throughout the initial conquest and colonial period as a whole. On the other hand, elements of the ulama were able to maintain their independence, existing outside of the colonial hierarchy and providing a dueling source of legitimate authority. When bubbling nationalist sentiment began to boil in the mid-1950s, nationalist leaders used a shared connection to Islam as a rallying point in the construction of a distinct, Algerian identity which then became a central mobilizing factor in the struggle for independence under the banner of the National Liberation Front (FLN). The FLN’s resistance and resilience were an inspiration to anti-colonial movements around the world; following independence, they were supposed to shape a national consciousness that unified the Algerian people irrespective of their identity.

The decades that followed Algeria’s 1962 independence complicated and undermined this consciousness. The FLN became uniquely intertwined with Algeria’s independence; a distinctly Algerian political identity was defined in opposition to continued French colonial rule, a movement dominated by the FLN. As such, in independent Algeria, to be opposed to the FLN meant treason. In a one-party state, there were few outlets for dissent or political expression, including for the country’s Muslim majority that did not feel represented by the FLN’s ideology and policy. This political identity crisis has its roots in the liminal process surrounding

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independence. Beyond the party faithful, the FLN was unable to cultivate *communitas* during the transitory period of war which then undermined their post-independence political unity and legitimacy. While greater representation would not have been sufficient, near-hegemonic control of the political sphere undermined the long-run acceptance of the Algerian state as a construction. As the liminal framing reveals, the consequences of this unfulfilled transition reverberated throughout the 20th century, eventually influencing the start of the civil war.

Beyond the political realm, the FLN sought to maintain many of the French institutions of education that did not represent sufficient re-Arabization to large sectors of the Muslim population. Even as the FLN professed an Islamic variant of socialism, their attempts to control Quranic education and to enact a Marxist-Leninist project that definitionally favored the secular almost immediately led to resistance from many educated Muslim leaders, especially those who had already embraced Salafism.\(^{109}\) Essentially, both during the Algerian War and the FLN-dominated independent state, the party saw religious movements as useful for mobilizing the population, but “inadequate as a template for governance.”\(^{110}\) Even beyond this incongruity, the attempts to merge Islamism with socialism were overshadowed by the aspects of pure, military-influenced dictatorship that characterized Algeria following a 1965 coup.\(^{111}\) The tension between a secular ‘modernizing’ project and the Salafist elements of the *ulama* was a key catalyst of the riots throughout the 1980s which began to set the scene for the civil war.

These decades of ideological frustration were combined with acute economic distress. Algeria’s massive oil reserves were crucial to funding the operations of the government. Yet, as in many petro-states, the 1986 price shock massively weakened government revenues and thus

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the economy as a whole. In response to this crisis, Algeria submitted to a set of IMF structural adjustment programs in the 1980s that devalued the currency, leading to lower wages, increased prices, and higher unemployment. In addition, leading up to 1988, drought throughout the country combined with plagues of locusts caused an acute food crisis. In 1988, as the elite grew richer while the rest of the population starved, disaffected youth in Algiers started to riot, attacking and destroying government buildings and causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage. These rioters, mostly teenage men, were fed up with their situations and saw no option but to take to the streets. These riots killed around two hundred people and fundamentally shook the FLN-dominated Algerian state, as the military’s intervention to quell the tension further undermined the FLN’s symbolic status as the party of the people and liberation.

Local Islamic leaders were heavily involved in moderating the violence of the riots. One civilian told the New York Times, “‘the imam told us we should wait and see what the Government plans to do about our problems, so we will wait a little while.’” The role of the mosques in the immediate aftermath of the riots reflects their potential for organizing a political movement. When the government began to liberalize in response to widespread pressure, the mosques were able to mobilize their congregations; their superior organization was a key factor in the emergence of an Islamist political party that was able to contest elections on a national scale. In fact, the socio-political networks formed by the mosques can be considered an “incipient counter-order” from which resistance would naturally emerge.

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115 Delaney, “Toll Is Put at 200 in Algerian Riots.”
116 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 31
117 Ibid. 39
implications of this counter-order are clear: Islamist organizations were a clear source of
structure in an uncertain time for Algeria that both existed outside of and challenged the state’s
hegemony; the battle between the state-led order and this religiously-oriented, Turnerial
anti-structure was a core driver of the civil war. For a moment, it looked like the state blinked; in
response to these widespread protests, the government liberalized, writing a new constitution that
allowed for the existence of non-FLN parties including a communist party and an Islamist party –
the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Additionally, the FLN did not cease to exist and continued to
play a role in the electoral landscape.118 These were the first multiparty elections since
independence and the multiple emergent political actors reflect the possibility of this liminal
moment.

As the GIA largely emerged from the FIS’s political platform, it is essential to understand
the FIS’s internal dynamics. These dynamics reflected the multi-faceted nature of opposition to
the FLN/military regime, an issue that will re-emerge in the GIA. Essentially, the group was torn
between its radical elements and its more institutionalized political wing. These two poles were
represented by the FIS’s two leaders, the establishment Abbas Madani and radical Ali Belhadj.119
Madani had a doctorate from a British university and represented the older generation of
Algerian Islamists. In contrast, Belhadj was the imam of a radical mosque outside of Algiers and
an experienced jihadist dating back to the 1980s. Within the FIS, Belhadj’s strict commitment to
Salafism represents the more militant ideology of the unemployed masses.120 Yet, despite the two
leaders’ functionally contradictory world views, the FIS was poised for success in the looming
December 1991 general elections, following their electoral success during local elections in

120 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 32
1990. These elections would ignite the civil war as the military’s heavy-handed intervention would empower the most strident anti-state elements of the FIS, eventually leading to the formation of the GIA and the shift to violent opposition against the Algerian government.

**Genesis of a Moment: Elections and the Transition to Conflict**

As Algeria prepared for its first multiparty elections since independence, the state was forced to respond to a period of “radical indeterminacy” where previous forms of power were shed—a “massive discorporation of structures of power.” Initially, signs were promising, as I’ve noted – the Algeria state allowed the formation of multiple parties, and the population was engaging in a contentious discussion about the future of the state itself. The 1991 general elections were the culminating event of this liberalizing experience and resulted in Algeria being thrust onto the limen.

The first round of elections was scheduled for December 26, 1991. The FLN used their power to weaken the FIS through measures such as delaying the elections, preventing campaigning in mosques, and engaging in gerrymandering. Misreading the situation, the FLN believed that the electorate was not supportive of the Islamist parties; they believed voters would ‘come home’ to the FLN despite their flaws. When the first round took place, it was clear that this was not the case. The FIS won a decisive victory, secured many seats in the first round, and were poised to secure the majority in the second round, held in January. Yet, there would not be a second round. The military made sure of that, staging a bloodless coup, forcing President Chadli

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121 Heristchi, “The Islamist Discourse of the FIS and the Democratic Experiment in Algeria,” 117
123 Takeyh, “Islamism in Algeria: A Struggle between Hope and Agony,” 66
125 Heristchi, “The Islamist Discourse of the FIS and the Democratic Experiment in Algeria,” 116
Bendjedid to dissolve the National Assembly and resign, thus ending the Algerian dalliance with democracy.\textsuperscript{126} This result was something that the West and the United State were certainly comfortable with; American Assistant Secretary of State Edward Djerejian feared that a FIS victory would be “one person, one vote, one time” and thus were largely supportive of the coup. Both the West and the Algerian military favored the status quo and the maintenance of pre-existing structures and the state as the militant liminality of the Islamists posed a significant challenge to these structures.\textsuperscript{127}

With the military regime in control in Algiers, the FIS and the Algerian public were in an extraordinary situation where the future was profoundly uncertain. This immediate post-election environment was distinctly liminal with Bendjedid’s new constitution setting off a period of change; Algeria was supposed to be starting over with a \textit{tabula rasa}, blessed by the voice of the people despite the uncertainty of the pre-election period. Yet, the military regime’s immediate reaction to the election meant they were committed to maintaining control and quashing the opposition posed by the Islamists; restructuring society was no longer a political possibility. The Islamist vision, while widely popular, did not fit into the global and FLN/military vision of the Algerian state. As such, they can be classified as a vestigial organ, and the GIA’s looming insurgency reflected their resistance to the military’s insistence on total hegemony. As the state sought to maintain this hegemony, the FIS was immediately banned, and many of its leaders and supporters were arrested. In fact, so many FIS sympathizers were arrested that the military government was forced to open special camps for political prisoners in the Sahara.\textsuperscript{128} The

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid. 117
\textsuperscript{127} Justin Curtis, “Reevaluating Islamist Electoral Success and Participation in Government,” \textit{Digest of Middle East Studies} 31, no. 3 (August 1, 2022): 171.
Islamist leaders that remained were left with an enormous question: how would they respond to the military’s provocation? In this extraordinary moment, the members of the now-illegal FIS were left with a choice. They could acquiesce to FLN-dominated military rule or strike while the iron was hot and attempt to claim the political power they felt they had legitimately won based on the results of the first round of elections. Many leaders chose the latter, turning to newly-formed, more radical, and violent groups such as the GIA. This was often framed as a natural response to the government’s authoritarianism; violence was both religiously and morally justifiable in the pursuit of reincorporation into the state.\footnote{Wiktorowicz, “Centrifugal Tendencies in the Algerian Civil War,” 66}

The military’s miscalculation pushed Algeria past Fanon’s point of no return, into a liminal state characterized by sweeping revolution. The members of the FIS had left behind their previous political identification and were in the process of reforming and reconceptualizing what it meant to be Algerian. This collective transformation—a rite of separation—sets off the liminal process. As the community moved onto the limen, the members of the GIA saw a chance to restructure the broader Algerian society around their interpretation of Islam. As we’ve noted, liminal situations are the ideal moments for creating a new social order as liminality sheds light on situations that “involve the dissolution of order but are also formative of institutions and structures.”\footnote{Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 34} Implicitly, the GIA sought to leverage the liminal condition to move Algeria away from decades of dictatorship and secularism. The state’s response to this form of militant, weaponized liminality in defense of the military’s hegemony defined the conflict and the progression of the GIA’s liminal process.

As the next stage of the war began, the divisions of the FIS were reflected in the GIA; coalitions were uncertain and constantly shifting. At the start, however, there were three main
components to their group. The first group was veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan whose military experience and ideological familiarity with jihad were greatly beneficial at the start of the conflict. Beyond these veterans, there were the survivors of a failed anti-Algerian government jihad in the 1980s. Similarly, this group had localized military experience and credibility. These two elements of the coalition were generally compatible as their worldviews were shaped by similar events and ideologies. The third group had less formal education and was less indoctrinated into global jihadist networks represented by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These fighters, mostly young men, emerged from radical mosques in Algiers and were far more in touch with the grassroots of the GIA as they had “been on the ground continuously the critical period of 1988-1992, without being overseas or in prison.” An inability to reconcile the differences between these three groups undermined the jihadist coalition and weakened their ability to form a united front capable of actually challenging the military regime; even a common enemy was not enough to keep these disparate groups together for long.

A contributing factor to this disunity was the lack of a clear master of ceremonies who would have been able to foster necessary cohesion. As I’ve discussed, in Turnerian terms, the role of master of ceremonies is a critical one as a group or individual seeks to complete their liminal process. For example, Tunisian Islamists were able to unite around Sheikh Rachid al Ghannouchi who guided the movement for decades, leading to the Islamist electoral success in 2011. The lack of a leader able to unite the disparate factions helped fuel the GIA’s violence even when it became clear that the Algerian government would not be overthrown, a condition that led to the reiterated liminality that characterized the later stages of the conflict.

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132 Ibid. 40
On the limen

While the GIA was the main force opposing the Algerian government, the landscape of armed groups was very crowded in the early days of the war. Local leaders, national figures, and pre-1992 organizations all had movements of their own, distinguished by their tactical and ideological differences. Tactically, some focused on finding a political solution to the conflict, seeing the turn to violence as a necessary response to the military’s crackdown. Others sought the establishment of an Islamic state or, more radically, saw the state as a secondary enemy and prioritized imposing ‘proper’ Islamic practice in the areas they controlled. The Algerian opposition can thus be characterized as “a polycephalous movement with autonomous and often contradictory elements.” Yet, due to the desire for any coherent Islamist alternative to the military regime, many of these groups were able to survive, unify and fight on; as the GIA put it, the groups felt that “power is within the range of our Kalashnikovs.”

As the war began, the government responded with force. We’ve already noted their internment of thousands of FIS leaders and party members, but, additionally, the government carried out indiscriminate violence to undermine the entire opposition, leveraging “a panoply of state institutions” to undermine all dissent and limit militant liminality’s radical potential as much as possible. At the start of the conflict, the government’s initial actions to undermine the FIS leadership proved valuable, especially as they continued to infiltrate the GIA hierarchy. In conceptions of terrorist leadership, consistent and inspirational leaders serve to inspire both commitment and zealotry to the cause, both of which are crucial to building a sustainable

135 Ibid.
136 Wiktorowicz, “Centrifugal Tendencies in the Algerian Civil War,” 65
137 Takeyh, “Islamism in Algeria: A Struggle between Hope and Agony,” 69
movement. In the case of the GIA, leaders did not last; in the GIA’s 12-year existence, it was run by eleven different emirs, eight of whom were killed either by the government or by rival factions within the movement. The inconsistent (and generally ineffective) leadership of the group helped weaken their positioning and limited their ability to capitalize on their popular support.

The lack of a competent leader – a master of ceremonies – was a challenge for the group, especially given its diverse coalition. The closest they came to establishing a coherent ideological alignment was under the leadership of Cherif Gousmi. He was only in charge of the group for six months in 1994, but his efforts managed to broaden the GIA’s coalition to create an army capable of holding its own against the government’s forces and controlling territory. Most notably, two armed movements led by prominent former FIS members rallied to the GIA, offering them resources, credibility, and manpower at a crucial moment in the conflict. Yet, when the government killed Gousmi in September 1994, the delicate coalition split along ideological lines, reiterating the moderate/radical divide that plagued the FIS.

The leaders that emerged from the post-Gousmi chaos were liminal tricksters. These figures, Djamel Zitouni and Antar Zouabri, sought to “institute a lasting reversal of roles and values,” by shifting the GIA into a new phase of the conflict. By destroying Gousmi’s coalition and the communitas he so delicately fostered, Zitouni and Zouabri were a “political disaster” during a pivotal moment of expansion for the GIA. While an inability to unite around one leader is not unique to the GIA or Algeria, both figures deserve closer examination. First, Djamel

139 Michael Freeman, “A Theory of Terrorist Leadership (and Its Consequences for Leadership Targeting),” Terrorism and Political Violence 26, no. 4 (September 1, 2014): 668.
140 Ibid. 677
141 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 40-42
142 International Crisis Group, “Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page.” 11
143 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 40-42
144 Szakoleczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 26
145 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 42-43
Zitouni was a radical chicken vendor who was a key part of the strict Salafist wing of the party. He became *emir* after a contentious internal dispute over the GIA’s future that was fought between blocs that favored drastically different strategies. This ideological battle reflected the GIA’s momentum and inability to manage its expansion; due to rapid leadership turnover, every element of the GIA was able to contest the position of *emir* which widened divides based on ideology, geography, and the pre-war networks to which prospective *emirs* belonged. Zitouni emerged as *emir* following this struggle, largely thanks to his field success and grassroots credentials.146

Zitouni’s field experience and calmness in the extraordinary early days of the war propelled him to leadership. Once he achieved that position, his actions reflected a desire to remain in the conditions of war. This preference for crisis and uncertainty is a core characteristic of liminal tricksters as they thrive during a liminal departure from normalcy. First, Zitouni weaponized the ideological aspects of the leadership struggle and used them as justification for a massive purge of five hundred moderates in the GIA, including former FIS leaders that Gousmi had brought into the GIA’s coalition just months before. This purge reflects Zitouni’s insecurity in his role; he sought to “homogenize [the GIA’s coalition] through violence” even at the expense of the group’s campaign against the military regime.147 Additionally, Zitouni began implementing more radical elements of his ideology including declaring the Algerian government and much of Algerian society to be *takfir* and thus legitimate targets for the GIA. This applied to the territory the GIA controlled as well; Zitouni “imposed a ‘re-Islamisation’ of society and punished with death civilians who defied its injunctions.”148 This reflected a fundamental shift in the

146 Ibid.
movement’s strategy. As one analyst wrote, “the movement that acclaimed piety and professed to create a virtuous order had turned into a violent street gang, provoking an orgy of violence.”

The terror on the domestic scale was matched by the conflict’s growing internationalization. Under Zitouni, the GIA carried out a series of bombings in France, in response to their support for the military regime and their history of colonialism in Algeria and the greater Muslim world. While the justification is generally coherent, these bombings reveal Zitouni’s impact on the GIA. Prior to Zitouni’s ascension, the disparate factions of the GIA’s coalition all had a similar enemy and a similar goal—defeating the military regime and governing Algeria. The move to internationalize and shift tactics represents a choice by the Zitouni wing of the GIA to move even further away from the political arena of the FIS. In a liminal moment of near-infinite possibilities, the empowering of the GIA’s most radical faction under the leadership of tricksters fundamentally redefined the conflict; victory, already a long shot, became functionally impossible.

The trend of extremism continued following Zitouni’s 1996 murder by the Algerian military. Zitouni’s successor Antar Zouabri similarly was another controversial choice for leadership. He only joined the GIA because of his brother, but, following the purges and leadership turnover of the Zitouni years, he became emir. Zouabri was ideologically formed in the same radical mosques as Zitouni and thus had an equally firm commitment to his predecessor’s extremism. Under Zouabri, the atrocities of the GIA continued and worsened, including the widely-condemned Guelb el-Kebir massacre, which was the murder of fifty-three

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149 Takeyh, “Islamism in Algeria: A Struggle between Hope and Agony,” 70
civilians, mostly women and children south of Algiers in 1997. Zouabri’s uncompromising interpretation of *takfir* meant that even practicing Muslim civilians were targets. This ideological extremism of the GIA isolated them from other international jihadist groups; even Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda saw the group as too extreme and misguided.

Under Zouabri, the GIA began to crumble. Fierce in-fighting combined with mass atrocities had alienated even their closest ideological allies and weakened their coalition. During both Zitouni and Zouabri’s tenure as emir, field commanders began to recognize that the GIA’s central leadership was doomed to fall apart; they began to break away as early as 1995. Despite Zitouni and Zouabri’s strategic misjudgments and rigid ideology, they were still able to inspire and justify extreme levels of violence during their emirships with their ideological and personal appeal even if the greater coalition was collapsing. As liminal tricksters, they can “conjure up a cunning and calculative—thus formally “rational”—strategy by which to hook people.” This is an effective strategy of leadership, especially in extraordinary times, when a community in crisis sees value in turning to tricksters. Yet, at the same time, Zitouni and Zouabri were unable to capitalize on the momentum of the GIA through 1994. Even as the GIA collapsed under Zitouni and Zouabri, an inability to resolve the war’s initial conditions had left the Algerian state stranded on the *limen*; the Islamist movement was unable to be defeated and, even as one group fell away, another arose to take its place.

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156 Ibid. 48-50
157 Szakolczai, “Liminality and Experience,” 26
Reiteration: GSPC, AQIM, and the State’s Fragile Self-Reconstruction

This break-away group was the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) which emerged from an alliance of former field commanders of the GIA. They claimed the ideological mantle of the GIA in the early days and were once more able to tap into international terrorist networks, including Al-Qaeda, to whom they would pledge loyalty in 2003. The GIA’s coalition was further undermined by the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1998. His platform included an appeal for reconciliation and an end to the Civil War. This policy, known as the Civil Concord, included an amnesty program for former fighters who gave up their arms as well as releasing some Islamist prisoners. While some 8,000 former GIA and other insurgent groups took advantage of this program, it was generally considered to be unsuccessful due to the lack of buy-in from the main Islamist groups, including the remnants of the GIA and the GSPC that continued to fight. As the emir of one FIS-affiliated group described it, Bouteflika’s Civil Concord was “an imposed law, imposed by the victor on the vanquished” and “not a true call for national reconciliation.”

Outside of the state’s attempts to restore its hegemony, the GSPC sought to refresh the jihadist movement with a (relatively) pragmatic ideology, capable of continuing the fight against Bouteflika and the ‘unbelievers’ running the Algerian state. As the GIA collapsed under its own weight and other movements essentially surrendered to the government, the GSPC was able to rapidly gain fighters and prepare itself for a continued war of attrition against the Algerian

158 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 53-54
160 Ibid.
161 Qtd. in Ibid. 9
government. Additionally, as we’ve already noted, they worked to reintegrate the Algerian jihadist movement into international networks while maintaining their local credibility and authority. This culminated in their 2006 pledge of loyalty to Al-Qaeda and their subsequent rebranding as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Their emergence stems from the same pre-existing conditions that led to the civil war as well as the government’s half-victory, sealed by Bouteflika’s Civil Concord.

The GSPC represents the conflict’s reiteration. The war was over, but the fighting endured. The state’s de jure victory meant that they could legitimately claim to have ended the war as the terms were defined in 1992. The military regime survived, and the FIS became only a marginal player in the post-war political landscape. Yet, despite this victory, the reiterated nature of the conflict meant that the violence it wrought had not ceased, only been modified. This is symmetric schismogenesis: neither ideological side in the war had changed their posture and thus the violence couldn’t be defused, only escalated. Instead, the polarization of the war continued and was reiterated in the form of the GSPC. The previous mirage of Algerian national unity had been fundamentally shattered by the debut of the liminal process; at the turn of the century, neither the Islamists nor the state had been able to offer an acceptable conception of ‘Algerian-ness’ that would satisfy the nation as a whole. Following the actions of Zitouni, Zouabri, and others, Algerian society has not been able to exit the cycle of routinized disorder. Instead, Algeria became trapped on the limen in a seemingly endless schismogenetic conflict.

Yet, as the Bouteflika administration left behind the immediate postwar moment, they were slowly able to re-establish the state’s hegemony. Following pressure from Algerian Security

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Forces, AQIM moved most of their resources into Northern Mali by 2010 and into Southern Libya following Operation Serval and the fall of Gaddafi which served to largely externalize the group’s violence.\textsuperscript{165} Additionally, increased cooperation between the United States and Algeria has only increased the state’s already impressive intelligence capacities as well as their technical capacity.\textsuperscript{166} Domestically, the postwar Algerian state recognized the threat of mosque-based organizing and has since assumed much more control over the religious sphere, establishing a form of “state-owned Islam” and thus eliminating the unique form of anti-structure that helped fuel the FIS and the GIA.\textsuperscript{167} While this did not solve the core issue of the state’s incongruence with Islamist politics, the imposition of state institutions over local mosques successfully weakened the hubs of radicalism and political mobilization that were crucial to the development of the GIA. Separately, state regulation of mosques contributed to the decline of AQIM within Algeria. Leveraging its capacity, the state managed to hold onto and even strengthen its hegemony following—and indeed, in spite of—the Civil Concord and the immediate efforts at reconciliation through strict control.

The culmination of two decades of Algeria’s efforts to defeat Islamic extremism came in June 2020 when French Special Forces killed Abdelmalek Droukdel who had been the \textit{emir} of the GSPC-AQIM since 2004. The Droukdel assassination was carried out on the Malian side of the Algeria-Mali border with the support of Algerian intelligence.\textsuperscript{168} Droukdel was a veteran of the anti-Soviet Afghanistan jihad, the GIA’s initial force and, then, of course, the longtime leader of the GSPC-AQIM. His assassination was a victory for the Algerian state, but more than that, it

\textsuperscript{165} Adib Bencherif, “From Resilience to Fragmentation,” 104
represents how far the state has come in silencing dissent and marginalizing political Islam and jihad. With Droukdel’s death, there was hope that this was the fundamental end of terrorism within Algeria’s borders. As one analyst wrote, “salafi jihadi groups no longer have a sustained presence in Algeria.”\(^\text{169}\) The same analysis declared that:

> What is clear, though, is that AQIM in Algeria is over. It has been 26 years since the formation of the Armée islamique du salut (AIS) and then the Groupe islamique armé (GIA) and the Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC), and finally AQIM. And now it’s over. \textit{Takbir}.\(^\text{170}\)

While this declaration is certainly bold, since Droukdel’s death, the State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism for Algeria for both 2020 and 2021 have recorded zero terrorist attacks in Algeria since February 2020, prior to Droukdel’s death.\(^\text{171}\) Despite almost three decades of schismogenesis and reiterated liminality, the state had won; its vestigial organs had been largely contained and excised.

**Conclusion**

The swan song of the Algerian Civil War’s reiteration may have been Droukdel’s death. Yet, almost thirty years of instability along with continued, spontaneous protest movements against the Algerian establishment reflects the significance of this conflict for understanding the dynamics of modern Algeria and the region as a whole. The initial ideological battleground of the war was distinctly tied to the nature of the state itself: could the Islamist movement be


\(^{170}\) Ibid.

represented in the government of post-colonial Algeria? The military’s answer to that question and the response from the Islamist majority defined the civil war’s ideological dimension.

The final answer to this core question emerged from the Bouteflika regime. The government’s re-establishment of its hegemony through the Civil Concord, security actions, and increased state control represented an ossification of many of the same structures that led to the war itself. Yet, this time, the state was far more aware of sources of opposition and sought to limit its ability to challenge statal hegemony due to its profound fear of another liminal process. While the state itself certainly does not frame the war using the lens of liminality, its actions post-war reflect a desire to contain the radical possibility that emerges from the indeterminacy of a liminal, in-between period. In fact, under Bouteflika, the government has been able to justify limitations on freedom of expression and the continuation of Bouteflika’s presidency for decades using the threat of terrorism and insecurity stemming from the so-called ‘Black Decade’ of the 1990s.\footnote{Daniel Samet, “In Algeria, an Islamist Threat Still Looms over Domestic Politics,” Freedom House, August 22, 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/article/algeria-islamist-threat-still-looms-over-domestic-politics.} Today we see the post-colonial characteristics of the post-war Algerian state; the abortion of possibility reflects the reductionist social engineering that is essential to the construction of the post-colonial state and its subjects.\footnote{Mbembe, \textit{On the Postcolony}, 7}

The GIA’s history reflects the dangers of liminal situations for states even if they were ultimately unsuccessful. As the GIA gained momentum, the elevation of Zitouni and Zouabri fundamentally altered the group’s direction and made it far more difficult for them to challenge the state’s hegemony. This self-sabotage by tricksters left the GIA and Algeria as a whole stranded on the \textit{limen} for years with brutal consequences for the population. The violence and disorder generally began by following the pattern of a liminal process. The FIS attempted to restructure the social order; to do so, they needed to leave behind what the state had been
previously. They made it that far – the state was forced to respond to their claims of self-determination. Yet, the GIA, due to the elevation of tricksters as well as a failure to foster sufficient Turnerian *communitas*, failed. They were defeated and the state reestablished itself as the hegemon, able to *generally* dictate the liminal, marginal elements of their society following Bouteflika’s consolidation of authority.

The core implications of this case are numerous, but the fundamental purpose of this section is to recontextualize this war by centering the relationship between the militant groups and the state itself. The Algerian state (and states writ large) were and are fundamentally unable to recognize a broad conceptualization of political identity and national consciousness that enables and involves incongruous elements of the territory itself. The Algerian state’s reformation following the war reflects this failure. Instead of accommodating some level of opposing structure, the state chose to strictly adhere to a policy of total control over the population and especially its potentially dangerous vestigial organs; achieving a monopoly on violence through the regular employment of violence itself. This strategy fundamentally misunderstands the inherent liminality infused into the relationship between the state and its population and, despite periods of stability, leaves the door open for future groups to capitalize on this latent liminality.

Algerian history post-Civil War has featured several moments that reflect the state’s inability to fully close off liminal possibilities such as a brutally-repressed Amazigh protest movement in 2001 and a week of anti-regime protests during the Arab Spring that never reached the intensity of its counterparts across the Arab world. Yet, finally, the 2019 *Hirak* movement seemed to be the re-emergence of inevitable, liminal dissent against the hegemon. Millions marched against the military-entrenched bureaucracy alliance that was supporting Bouteflika for

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a fifth term. This movement forced Bouteflika’s resignation and the holding of new elections, but a combination of counter-Hirak repression and the state strengthening itself meant that the lasting change demanded by the protestors did not come to fruition. With the election of Abdelmadjid Teb boune, Algeria essentially returned to the status quo.\textsuperscript{175} The Hirak movement was characterized as a “massive and unexpected demand for change” but the employment of liminality helps to explain its emergence and potency as it was able to take advantage of anti-state tendencies that date back to the civil war.\textsuperscript{176} Recontextualizing the various post-war movements as the re-emergence of marginalized discontent signifies the power of liminality in the African context; demands for self-determination and a potential structural counterweight to the state cannot be shut down and are potent provocateurs of instability in the pursuit of structural change and a social re-ordering.

The future of Algeria is still undetermined. While the Hirak protests, the Arab Spring protests, the Amazigh uprising, and the FIS/GIA may not have achieved the restructuring of the social order they desired, they represent communities leveraging frustration with the state to fuel demands for change. In fact, the pre-independence FLN and others have done so within the Algerian context for decades, forcing a response from the ruling power. What’s clear, however, is that the militant liminality of the FIS and GIA and its processual (if not ideological) successor movements do not seem likely to be subdued. In Algeria, recognizing liminality exposes the chronic fragility of the state’s hegemony, even if the state appears to have exited the initial liminal condition of the civil war itself.


\textsuperscript{176} Frédéric Volpi, “Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy,” 155
Chapter 4. Boko Haram: State Neglect and Structural Destruction

While the Algerian Civil War began with a bang—a widely-covered election—Boko Haram’s insurgency against the Nigerian state began with a whimper—a simple traffic stop gone awry in Maiduguri, Borno State. The members of Boko Haram were participating in a funeral procession and were driving motorbikes without wearing the required helmets. Stories are conflicted on who shot first but the bodies of several members of the procession reveal the consequences. From this provocation along with other state actions, Boko Haram transitioned from a generally peaceful community religious organization to a religio-political insurgency that had captured large swathes of territory in Northern Nigeria, killed thousands, displaced millions, and regularly held the dubious honor of the world’s deadliest terror organization.

Understanding the development of the group through the employment of liminality helps illustrate the complicated relationship between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state. Specifically, Boko Haram’s popularity and emergence stems from a history of marginalization that left the population of Northern Nigeria searching for another option to the state that had enabled and fostered this marginalization.

Boko Haram represented this option, but throughout the reiteration of their initial liminal process, they were left stranded on the limen, unable to defeat the Nigerian government nor be completely defeated themselves. Their combination of grievance-based local politics with a

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177 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
spiritually-appealing brand of Islam fed both their local appeal and their meteoric rise. Yet, following their initial organizing as a religious group, their transition to an armed insurgency movement reflected some of the core issues faced by the GIA and other anti-structural, anti-state movements such as poor, radical leadership and factionalization. The state’s response to the challenge of Boko Haram is comparable to the Algerian case; attempts to usurp hegemony were foiled by state action, and the re-establishment of this hegemony was later marred by an inability to close off liminal possibilities in their entirety thus leaving a continued vulnerability.

In the years immediately following its foundation, Boko Haram emerged as a structuring force within their community and a counterweight to the Nigerian state’s heavy-handed and oppressive presence in the region. This specific aspect of their organization reveals their frustration with the state’s structures. Following this initial period of growth and community formation, the turn to political violence and the martyrdom of founder Mohammed Yusuf undermined the group’s ability to restructure their society on their terms. Additionally, their internationalization, much like their ideological allies, the GIA, undermined their cause and weakened their ability to actualize their acutely local religio-political project. Finally, after achieving a certain level of military success in their insurgency, the group’s inability to capitalize on its territorial gains and momentum led to the reformation of the same state failures they were rebelling against. Boko Haram’s insurgency has been traditionally viewed through a state-focused lens, critiquing the Nigerian government for its lack of preparedness and capacity to defeat the organization. Yet, beyond that certainly accurate analysis, understanding the dynamics of Boko Haram itself can be filtered through the lens of reiterated liminality to provide a richer view of the conflict as a whole. This analysis indicts the state not for its inability to firmly establish its hegemony, but rather for the rigidity of that hegemony itself that led to Boko
Haram’s emergence and leaves the state profoundly vulnerable even if Boko Haram and its successors can be subdued.

**Pre-Liminal Condition: Compounding Marginalization and the State’s Failure**

Boko Haram emerged from a very specific set of historical and cultural circumstances that fed discontent with the Nigerian state and the desire for a group like Boko Haram that promised change. Boko Haram was founded in 2002 but speaks to a much longer tradition of Islamic reform in the region that dates back centuries that informs the group’s grievances and motivations.

Boko Haram was founded in Borno, the furthest northeast of Nigeria’s states. Nigeria’s north represents a region on the periphery of post-colonial Nigeria, a legacy that emerges from the specific Nigerian experience with colonialism. At the debut of the colonial period, the British authorities had to deal with the powerful Sokoto caliphate that controlled much of Northern Nigeria. The campaigns against Sokoto went well for the British and the caliph submitted to British primacy in 1903. Lord Lugard, the notorious colonial governor, informed Sokoto’s leaders that they “have by defeat lost their rule which has come into the hands of the British.”

With this seized claim to governance, the British implemented their system of indirect rule, allowing for most local governing structures to endure under *emirs* that had pledged to serve the British. Only rarely did the high commissioner and his representatives override the *emirs’* decisions. Even if they wanted to, there were only seventy-five British officers for a territory

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of seven million people.\textsuperscript{181} This model of governance had a tenuous relationship with Islam; the structure it provided local communities was valued by the British, but they remained acutely aware of its motivating potential, especially following the Mahdist Satiru Rebellion in 1904.\textsuperscript{182} During the colonial period, the British sought to preserve Islam’s ability to structure a society that could be controlled from the top down without allowing for the manifestation of political Islamism that would challenge British authority.

The British tolerated Islam; they allowed for the traditional systems of Islamic education to continue, even restricting Christian missionaries and the schools they founded to the South. However, throughout the colonial period, missionary schools and Christianity slowly began to move north from the Christianized South. North of the Nigerian Middle Belt, Western education was seen as a cultural imposition that was aimed at tearing down existing structures of Islamic education. These perceptions led to a strong cultural tradition of opposition to Western education even after independence that endures in Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{183} Yet, despite the slow creep North of Christianity, the lack of Western educational institutions in the North upon independence weakened the North’s economic, political, and social influence on the new nation. The North’s reluctance toward accepting Western-style education left them with fewer citizens ready to govern the new state, leading to a \textit{de facto} domination of the state by Southerners.\textsuperscript{184} This was compounded by the fact that the British developed southern Nigeria further as it was home to the key port of Lagos as well as other central places in the development of an export-focused economy. Thus, at independence, the South had more educational institutions and a higher

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid. 45
\item Ibid. 55
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literacy rate, a discrepancy that has continued through the present day with detrimental social and economic consequences for the region.\textsuperscript{185}

Yet, even beyond the traditional North/South divide, the region that was the heart of Boko Haram’s insurgency was the Northeast. Even within the North, traditional Islamic religio-political authority has been centered in the former Sokoto Caliphate. Traditionally, this authority has been held by the Hausa/Fulani people, including Sokoto’s caliphs themselves, primarily in the Northwest. In Borno State, Boko Haram’s stronghold, they were not part of the Caliphate and they are primarily not Hausa, rather the state is dominated by the Kanuri ethnic group. These layers of compounding marginalization in politics, religion, infrastructure, and society all result in the North and more specifically the Northeast being pushed to the periphery and feeling excluded from the post-colonial Nigerian state.\textsuperscript{186} This region was thus primed for the emergence of anti-state tendencies and attempts at reform that would manifest in Boko Haram.

The post-colonial state itself did not ameliorate the conditions that left Northern Nigeria vulnerable. Widespread corruption, unequal economic development, and authoritarianism only fueled further dissatisfaction. Much like in Algeria, the government relied on rents from petroleum to maintain stability. Controlling oil revenue was the core political concern rather than political or economic development or even building out state capacity. Leveraging oil revenue for patronage allowed Nigerian leaders to finance a minimum coalition necessary to maintain their control with little need for any more extensive political project; oil rents were sufficient.\textsuperscript{187}

As oil reserves, and thus oil patronage, were concentrated in the South, this only fed the


pre-existing dynamics of inequality between the North and the South. While the North certainly benefited from oil exploitation and the subsequent redistribution, the impacts were far greater in the South. Beyond this oil-specific corruption, quotidian corruption fuels discontent with the state and serves as “a key referent around which extremists can frame antisecular ideology and radicalization.” In the Boko Haram example, members of the sect were particularly frustrated by police corruption; officers regularly demanded bribes and harassed those who refused. Nigeria’s widespread culture of corruption is particularly applicable to this institution whose fundamental modus operandi is infused with corruption. Widespread corruption damages the social contract, undermining the obligations of the state and thus fueling discontent that can be capitalized by purifying, anti-state actors such as Boko Haram.

Even prior to Boko Haram’s emergence, there existed a tradition of Islamic reform in Northern Nigeria. Dating back centuries, this tradition emerged in the 1804 jihad of Usman dan Fodio through a joint critique of the overreach of the Hausa kings along with their religious impurity. Jihad was justified, obligatory, and centered on Islamic reform. The colonial period complicated this tradition, leading to a further solidification of ethnoreligious divides and the establishment of a specific, ruling Hausa-Fulani elite that dominated the traditional Islamic elite in the region, largely due to the power accorded to them by the British. Both Dan Fodio’s Sokoto Caliphate and this intellectual and cultural elite did not include the population of what would become Borno state in Nigeria, further marginalizing them even within their own region.

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189 Onuoha, “Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?” 7
191 Olufemi Vaughn, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*, 17
192 Ibid. 66-68
Even following Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the push for Islamic reform and organization outside of the state’s control continued. The push for reform was both targeted at ridding the community of the influence of southern Christians and/or focused on Salafism at the expense of the Sufi orders that traditionally dominated the Islamic landscape of the region. For example, in the Nigerian example, the Salafist reformist group Yan Izala emerged in the late 1970s in response to the socio-religious development of post-colonial Nigeria. This Salafist group opposed Sufi orders’ conception of the religion and broadly advocated for Islamic reform, albeit still within the confines of the state. Yet, they still advocated for significant social separation and much of their opposition to Sufism stemmed from the Sufi orders’ relationship with the state government; under an “abusive and neglectful government,” any connection to the state was enough “to taint the Sufi establishment.”

Yet, Yan Izala was not the only group operating in the region. Instead, various other groups claimed certain aspects of the reform agenda, framing their opposition as both theological and political; Yan Izala was not achieving the reform it sought, and its partial co-option by Nigerian military regimes frustrated more radical elements of the group’s coalition. Despite the problematic nature of their push for reform, the legacy of Yan Izala and other religious reform organizations reappeared in the post-1999 push within a newly re-democratized Nigeria to implement sharia law on the state level. Reflecting the Islamist position, this reflects the overlap between the secular and the religious sphere as well as the influence of Salafism in regional politics. It was also an effort to improve the state’s relationship with the Muslim population;

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194 Ibid. 161-65
“shari’a was seen as a new option where all others had failed.” Notably, here, there was tension between the implementation of this legal system and the secular foundation of the Nigerian state including whether it was even permissible. Notwithstanding its dubious constitutionality, the implementation of sharia led to even greater polarization in the North as some Salafists saw it as not going far enough while non-Muslim northerners felt unrepresented by their state governments. The former category included Boko Haram’s founder Mohammad Yusuf who was involved in the implementation of sharia in several Northern states; the reform’s lack of radicalism fed his calls for “an authentic Islamist revolution,” later manifested in Boko Haram.

The implementation of sharia in the late 1990s and early 2000s is only one piece of a fundamental debate surrounding what it meant to belong to the Nigerian state. From an ethnic, religious, and social perspective, the years and decades leading up to the emergence of Boko Haram were tumultuous for the Nigerian state. Within the North, debates over Muslim identity and identification continued—a debate that Boko Haram forcefully contributed to. Additional debates over “Nigerian-ness” continued as the nation struggled to overcome decades of division.

Writing on the emergence of Boko Haram, analyst Jideofor Adibe argued that,

For many young people, a way of resolving the consequent sense of alienation is to retreat from the “Nigeria project”—the idea of fashioning a nation out of the disparate nationalities that make up the country—and instead construct meanings in primordial identities, often with the Nigerian state as the enemy.

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197 Ibid. 183
199 Loimeier, Islamic Reform, 186-87
201 Adibe, “Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram.”
The anti-state tendencies of Boko Haram reflect this resentment, as does their initial focus on local concerns and local reform. They understood the undercurrent of apathy and animosity towards the government and were able to exploit it to their advantage drawing on a history of Islamic reform.

**Genesis of a Moment: Martyrdom, Boko Haram’s Rise, and Armed Insurgency**

Boko Haram, whose formal name is *Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad* (Sunni Community for the Propagation for the Prophet’s Teaching and Jihad), emerged from this specific socio-cultural milieu of marginalization. Distinct discontent with the ordering of the Nigerian state helped the group with its initial recruitment and undergirded its fundamental appeal. They provided a religiously rooted form of structure that rejected the Nigerian state and sought to exit its rule. This departure led to the group’s insurgency and can be traced as a liminal process that resulted in reiteration.

The group is generally considered to be founded in 2002, with ideological roots dating back to the 1990s. This ideology was heavily influenced by “socio-revolutionary Islam” including Uthman dan Fodio’s *jihad* to establish the Sokoto Caliphate within the Nigerian context and the 1979 Iranian Revolution’s establishment of an Islamic State. Fitting with these inspirations, the group sought to construct “a social reality or vision that claims conformity to fundamental Islamic principles” and rejected the Nigerian state’s secularism. This mission is

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distinctly political and, following the state’s provocation, informs their shift from religious organizing to violent extremism.

First, however, it’s important to establish the relationship between the Borno State government and Boko Haram immediately following the founding of the group. It is alleged that the Borno state governor Ali Modu Sheriff cut a deal with Yusuf in 2002, worried about his own election. This widely-held theory states that Sheriff was responsible for much of Boko Haram’s funding and saw their youthful coalition as key to his eventual electoral victory in 2003. Following this electoral success, Yusuf soon grew furious with the state’s lack of progress and the fragile alliance between Yusuf/Boko Haram and the state government crumbled much like the implementation of sharia in the 1990s. This culminated in Yusuf issuing public denunciations of Sheriff, calling him “an impious man, an oppressor, and an apostate who does not rule with Allah’s laws.” Following the disintegration of this alleged alliance, the Borno state police began targeting Boko Haram members which further increased tensions, setting the scene for the major 2009 crackdown and subsequent riots. While there was a political aspect to this crackdown, there was also a practical one; by the end of 2008, “the group was operating like a state within a state; it had its own institutions, including a shura council to make decisions and a religious police force to enforce discipline.” As such, Borno State, Sheriff, and Nigeria’s central government were simply unable to accept this level of order outside of their control, especially since it existed in explicit opposition to the very existence of the state itself. This state-within-a-state is a site of militant liminal possibility, and, much like in Algeria, the state was prepared to defend its hegemony. In Yusuf’s words, “Nigeria is not the house of anybody’s

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203 International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II),” 12
205 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
father. Borno is not anybody’s land, it is the land of Allah, and we will stay in it and worship Allah.”

This language—and the fact that it was a successful recruiting tool—meant that Boko Haram was a threat to the state’s hegemony that had to be contained.

In 2009, a seemingly-insignificant policy change ended up being the straw that broke the camel’s back, catalyzing a liminal process that would plunge Northeastern Nigeria into chaos. This new law sought to force motorcyclists to wear helmets; instead, the law was leveraged by the police for extortion and indiscriminate brutality. In Borno State, this was enforced by the infamous Operation Flush, a special police unit aimed at combating “political thugs,” a euphemism for those opposed to Governor Sheriff. This opposition now included Boko Haram. Operation Flush was characterized by its corruption and its political biases that led to the still-peaceful Boko Haram being targeted, further increasing the sect’s frustration with the state. On February 20th, 2009, a large funeral procession of Boko Haram members was stopped because they were not wearing the necessary helmets. The following dispute grew heated, and, eventually, shots were fired, resulting in the deaths of several Boko Haram members. It remains unclear who shot first, but Yusuf interpreted the incident as a clear provocation and escalation by the Borno government.

Yusuf responded with several sermons that were widely circulated and explicitly violent, including the declaration of war that opened this thesis. In response to this escalation, in July 2009, the Bauchi state government took over the group’s compound, arresting seven hundred sect members. In Maiduguri, the group’s intellectual and cultural heart–Ibn Taimiyyah

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207 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
209 Ibid.
210 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
Masjid--was surrounded by police. The group had been preparing for the inevitable crackdown since the incident in February and responded by breaking through the police cordon, terrorizing the city, and killing police and civilians on sight.211 Four days later, the police were able to re-establish control of the city and captured Yusuf along with hundreds of other Boko Haram leaders and suspected Boko Haram sympathizers.212 Following Yusuf’s arrest and a brief interrogation, the police killed Yusuf, justified by a far-fetched claim of an escape attempt. Unsurprisingly, Yusuf became an immediate martyr, and what remained of Boko Haram sought revenge.213

This represented a profound shift in the direction of the group. Previously, the group primarily sought to re-order their community around their interpretation of Islam while avoiding direct confrontation with the state authorities. Yet, with the 2009 crackdown and subsequent revolt, the die had been cast. Boko Haram was no longer the group it had been previously. Their initial attempts to separate themselves from the state and re-form as their own community, represented by the compound in Bauchi and at Ibn Taimiyyah in Maiduguri, were deeply incongruous with the Nigerian state’s hegemonic construction of itself. Boko Haram thus represents a vestigial organ, and the result of the 2009 crisis reflects the very real dangers of vestigial organs to states, especially low-capacity states such as Nigeria. Yusuf’s death and subsequent martyrdom represented a rite of separation and thus, following the July 2009 uprising, Boko Haram firmly found itself thrust onto the limen. Their previous collective identity was shaken by the crackdown, and their insurgency represented an effort to reconceptualize themselves while implementing the structural change they sought for Nigeria.

212 Ibid.
213 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
On the limen

With the death of Mohammad Yusuf and the group being forced underground, the remaining members of Boko Haram chose to regroup, planning their revenge on the state that had destroyed their community, thematically emulating the Prophet’s *hijra*. For just over a year, the group’s remaining leadership was in hiding as new *emir* Abubakar Shekau consolidated his control and recruited for *jihad*. In Shekau’s words, following the 2009 crisis, “bloodshed is now a celebration for us” as open revolution now reflected the group’s goals: the establishment of a purified Islamic state and revenge. The period between the crackdown and the group’s re-emergence in 2010 follows a similar pattern to the Prophet Muhammad’s *hijra*; the group fled Borno with the clear intention to return, hopefully with a Badr-esque victory which would enable the construction of their Islamic state and an exit from the liminal condition with a fully-realized religiopolitical community. While this outcome was not likely, the liminality of this situation meant that success was a distinct possibility. Upon their return in 2010, the group carried out several high-profile assassinations and attacks throughout the country including a 2011 bombing in Abuja and the capturing of several local government areas in the Northeast.

In this period, the separation from the state was total and final. This communal rite of separation left the sect on the limen, facing the trials inherent to this liminal period. A core part of these trials was the group grappling with its collective identity. Their identity was formed in opposition to the Nigerian state, and, as they fully divested from co-existing with that state, Shekau and his fighters faced an identity crisis – what would their Islamic state look like and

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how would they get there? During this period, Shekau’s sermons and recorded messages show him reassuring the group’s supporters that the group has a clear direction, urging them “to remain steadfast on the path of the truth. This is the path! This is the path!”217 His tendency to murder disloyal members of the group also sparked greater loyalty; following the time underground, Shekau had put together a core group of trained, ruthless militants, ready to execute his vision.218

Shekau’s efforts to consolidate his authority represent his ascendance as the master of ceremonies for Boko Haram; Boko Haram became defined in relation to him. As such, he must be understood. He was a traditionally-educated Islamic scholar from Yobe state who met Yusuf while they were in school in Maiduguri and eventually helped form Boko Haram. Following 2009, Shekau reoriented the group toward his even more radical interpretation of Islam which was leveraged to justify their extreme levels of violence through the early 2010s.219 Despite Shekau’s ideological and personal appeal, Boko Haram suffered from a lack of sustainable success. This reveals having consistent leadership is not enough on its own to overcome the state’s hegemony and will to subjugate militant liminality.

Despite the state having the advantage of an army and far greater resources, the Nigerian government’s crisis of legitimacy was reflected in its inability to match Boko Haram militarily through the first few years of the conflict. The military, weakened by corruption and a lack of resources, was unable to defeat a motivated, organized guerilla force. There was also a problem of scale; the military was simply not able to arm, train and deploy to the North fast enough to quell the growing insurgency.220 As such, large civilian militias formed, often funded by the state

government. These militias were locally-organized responses to state failure, but their abuses are numerous and reflect the state’s failure to fulfill the expectations of its juridical hegemony. This complicated security situation was an opportunity for Boko Haram, and they took full advantage.

Yet, through the group’s rise, there was tension between the Yusufian focus on Borno’s local issues and a more internationalized vision of the group’s jihadist purpose. Before 2009, the group’s membership and sources of support were almost exclusively Nigerian and their messaging primarily focused on Nigeria-specific issues. Yet, following the martyrdom of Yusuf, the group started to identify more with other Sahelian jihadist groups as well as Al-Qaeda. As we will see, this process will culminate in Boko Haram’s 2015 pledge to ISIS, eventually becoming the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP). Additionally, Yusuf’s third-in-command, the Cameroonian Mamman Nur, sought a more regionalized focus for the group beyond the borders of Nigeria. With his influence, the group began operating in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger and increasing its interactions with actors across the Islamic world such as AQIM, al-Shabaab, and Malian jihadists. At this point, Boko Haram was caught between its generally universalist ideology and its strategic need to focus on its appeal and control on the local level. This debate helped widen internal division within the group; ideological differences and opposition to Shekau’s personalist control eventually led to a splinter


Ibid. 88

Jacob Zenn, “Leadership Analysis,” 23

Thurston, “‘The Disease Is Unbelief,’” 22-23
group breaking away in 2012. This group, *Jama’atu Ansaril Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan*, popularly known as Ansaru, sought to pitch itself as a “‘humane’ alternative” to Boko Haram, attempting to reclaim the initial appeal of the group. Ansaru’s split undermined the group’s unity, thus leaving them less able to capitalize on their momentum during the first years of their liminal insurgency even as their regionalization broadened the scope of their organization.

Yet, following the Ansaru-Boko Haram split, Boko Haram still managed extensive territorial gains and tactical success. This included the most infamous incident in the group’s history: the April 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from the government school for girls in Chibok, a remote town in Borno state. This attack gave the group notoriety, attracting attention from prominent figures around the world. These girls were the face of an international crisis and became a bargaining chip for the organization. The leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, made this quite clear, saying “We will not release them until you release our brothers.” In the same message, he taunts the Nigerian, American, and French presidents for their inability to rescue the girls. This reflects the group’s focus on the international aspect of their mission as the Chibok kidnapping was a chance for the group to establish their credibility in international jihadist circles. Yet, this was a double-edged sword; greater attention brought greater resources and support to the Nigerian government which did eventually help turn the tide against the group even if the majority of the Chibok girls were never brought back. The intensity of the response provoked by the Chibok kidnapping eventually undermined the group as they remained on the *limen* without the consolidation and military successes necessary to exit this liminal condition.

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226 Jacob Zenn, “Leadership Analysis,” 26
Around the Chibok kidnapping, the group had reached its peak. The initial insurgent cadre reformed itself into a capable force, able to capture and hold territory. At this peak, the group successfully held up to 70% of Borno State along with smaller portions of both Yobe and Adamawa states. This period included lengthy sieges of Maiduguri as well as terror attacks throughout the region even in territory that was nominally held by the government. This represents a challenge to the state’s hegemony on multiple levels. First, they had lost control of much of their territory – an area roughly the size of Belgium. Secondly, neither of the two groups that were primarily contesting the territory represented the Nigerian state’s interests; battles between the aforementioned civilian militias and Islamic separatists are a stark symbol of the government’s failure to provide even a basic level of security. Yet, the group’s radical preaching and ideological positioning failed to grapple with how to reformulate structure outside of the Nigerian state. This would eventually undermine their governance as their ‘state’ no longer served those who lived within it.

Central to Boko Haram’s initial appeal was the promise of improvement; Nigerians and especially poor, Northern, Muslim youth saw the group as another option over a state that was continually failing them. Yet, following their ascendance, Boko Haram failed to capitalize on the chance they were given. By primarily focusing on the jihad itself, Their initial attempt at a social re-ordering did not live up to expectations as the group could not build any structures to replace the oppressive ones they had destroyed. As Boko Haram analysts Abdulbassit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa write:

230 Walker, “Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram.”
231 Felbab-Brown, “Militias (and militancy) in Nigeria’s North-East,” 75-76
233 Nwankpa, “Boko Haram: Whose Islamic State?”
By abdicating its role in positive state-building during the period of its dominance, Boko Haram forced the people of the northeastern states to choose between its nihilism and destruction and the (admittedly problematic) Nigerian state, with all its corruption and inefficiency. It is not difficult to see what would seem preferable to any rational human being.235

The abdication Kassim and Nwankpa described is represented by the destruction that Boko Haram wrought in the areas it controls. Their standard practice after capturing a village was to either bribe or kill its imams and traditional leaders while imprisoning the population and potentially forcing its young men to join the organization’s ranks and its young women to marry Boko Haram soldiers. The group’s sole focus was on expansion and continued bloodshed with no attention given to the state-building necessary for their insurgency and its goals of structural change to continue.236

Liminal situations provoke discomfort specifically due to their shedding of past structures, a prerequisite for the creation of any new order. Within this moment of radical possibility, there is always the possibility that a specific society will be able to reject previous structures without the creation of any replacement. If these structures are rejected, this can create a schismogenetic feedback loop where chaos only begets more chaos. Much like the GIA, Boko Haram was unable to capitalize while at their maximum strength, and their impassioned and ideologically grounded push for a new form of governance devolved into a state of reiterated liminality and schismogenesis. The weak state structures crumbled under pressure from Boko Haram without any structure to take their place, leaving the re-establishment of state structure as the rational choice.237

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235 Nwankpa and Kassim, *The Boko Haram Reader*, 401
236 Felbab-Brown, “Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria’s North-East” 72-73
237 The situation in North-Eastern Nigeria evokes scholar Mark Allen Peterson’s discussion on the Tahrir Square Protests and anti-structure that I explore on page 25.
Reiteration: ISWAP, Shekau’s Death, and an Uncertain Future

Following the peak in 2014, the greater resources in the post-Chibok fight against Boko Haram along with the election of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigeria’s president contributed to the group losing much of its territory. Additionally, as I’ve noted, the population’s exhaustion with the Boko Haram experiment’s nihilism undermined the group locally as the government turned up the pressure externally.238 Their inability to form *communitas* in the territory they held led to the conflict’s reiteration and, eventually, broader division within the group. Boko Haram, once seen as an existential threat to the Nigerian state, has been reduced to a peripheral nuisance.

While Borno remains in a state of relatively stable instability, the Nigerian state’s hegemony did manage to survive this challenge. Yet, while Boko Haram and ISWAP’s reputations have become toxic, the latent liminal condition that led to their rise in the first place remains, thus exposing the weakness of the state and its hegemony.

The first crack in the group’s coalition emerged with the break between the core leadership represented by Shekau and more moderate aspects of the coalition who broke away, forming Ansaru in 2012. Yet, as I’ve noted, the group was able to overcome this faction’s departure as there was not much fighting between the two groups and both carried out attacks against the government.239 Further challenges emerged after Boko Haram’s 2015 pledge to ISIS. This pledge reflected ideological alignment along with an effort to re-establish momentum in light of the government regaining territory from Boko Haram.240 Yet, the policy restrictions imposed by the ISIS central leadership in Syria grated against Shekau’s previous complete control over the group. After Shekau ignored some of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s ‘rules’ for being

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238 Thurston, “‘The Disease Is Unbelief,’” 24
239 Jacob Zenn, “Leadership Analysis,”
240 Thurston, “‘The Disease Is Unbelief,’” 24
an ISIS affiliate, other leadership “tattle-tailed” to the main group, setting off a series of events that led to Shekau’s subsequent demotion and his reformation of a non-ISIS-affiliated Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{241} His unflinching radicalism was not shaken; in declaring his new group, he avowed that “We are here upon Allah’s path in the Islamic caliphate implementing the laws of Islam. We will continue to work for Allah’s cause.”\textsuperscript{242} For Shekau, ISWAP became an enemy that was theologically and tactically justifiable to target which led to both groups prioritizing in-fighting over battling the government.\textsuperscript{243} These events culminated in the 2021 Battle of Sambisa Forest. ISWAP militants had pushed Shekau’s faction back deep into their historical stronghold of the Sambisa Forest in an isolated corner of Borno State. As ISWAP closed in on Shekau’s base, he blew himself up, committing suicide rather than surrendering.\textsuperscript{244}

While some elements of Boko Haram were able to survive and regroup near Lake Chad, the group formally known as Boko Haram has largely lost the prominence it once held. Similarly, in the complicated landscapes of armed groups operating within Nigeria, Boko Haram is no longer the primary threat it once was. Despite this, it is difficult for the government to feel good about the result of the conflict as ISWAP remains prominent and widespread insecurity continues throughout the country.\textsuperscript{245} The government settled for this victory, repeatedly claiming the group had been defeated. Yet, the legacies of the initial 2009 uprising endure, and it would be incorrect

\textsuperscript{244} Jacob Zenn, “Killing of Boko Haram Leader Abubakar Shekau Boosts Islamic State In Nigeria,” The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor 19, no. 10 (May 24, 2021): 1–2.
to state that the group has been defeated, both ideologically and practically.²⁴⁶ The liminal condition has not been resolved even if the conflict has stabilized. In light of the state’s continued weakness and vulnerability, schismogenesis endures.

**Conclusion**

The initial roots of Boko Haram’s appeal have not disappeared and the state continues to grapple with how to interpret Boko Haram’s rise and success, a core issue as the state seeks to sustainably re-establish its hegemony over its peripheral vestigial organs. This is best revealed by two conspiracy theories that were popular around the time of Boko Haram’s peak. The first theory, popular among Northern Muslims, believed that the insurgency was sponsored by Nigerian President Jonathan to dilute and undermine the political power of the North; powerful individuals, including multiple Northern state governors, openly subscribed to this theory.²⁴⁷ This conspiracy theory was mirrored by one popular in the South which argued that Northern elites sponsored Boko Haram in an attempt to undermine the Jonathan government and elect a northern Muslim as president in 2015.²⁴⁸ Neither of these theories holds up to scrutiny, but they reveal the level of division that characterized the fight to defeat Boko Haram as well as the radically different interpretations of the conflict’s significance.

Boko Haram’s rise, fall, and reiteration reveal the complicated, evolving nature of liminal processes as well as, crucially, the dangers of this process’s incompleteness. The emergence of Boko Haram fits perfectly with Northern Nigeria’s history of Islamic reform as well as the tension between this region and the state’s core. In post-colonial Nigeria, the state was acutely

²⁴⁷ Adibe, “Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram.”
²⁴⁸ Thurston, “‘The Disease Is Unbelief’”
vulnerable to schismogenesis as the state fostered practically no *communitas*, no distinct sense of ‘Nigerian-ness.’ Given the historical, religious, and ethnic barriers to composing a national identity, there was an opportunity for a Boko Haram-esq organization to emerge. In the case of Boko Haram, their (initially) local focus reflects an understanding of this reality as the source of their strength. To return to Turner’s theoretical contribution, if the set of relationships linking a community and its state’s hegemony has soured, the logical choice is to seek to break away.\(^{249}\) Boko Haram sought this break as evidenced by their physical and communal separation from the state even before their insurgency.

This liminal logic informs the debut of Boko Haram’s insurgency. Yet, once the process began, the group was unable to institute the widespread reorganization it desired largely due to the state’s response; even a fragile hegemony prioritizes the maintenance of territorial integrity. Despite this, however, the group weakened itself by replicating many of its mistakes on the local level once they actually proclaimed their caliphate. The abuse of local populations, lack of order, and deep economic woes mirror the very factors that drove support for the organization in the first place; in fact, much like in Yusuf’s preaching, theological critiques were a powerful factor that sapped the group’s support even by committed jihadists like the members of Ansaru.\(^{250}\) This undermined their ability to foster communitas during a critical period of transition. While Boko Haram’s ‘state’ was certainly formed under duress, their reiteration of the state’s failure lays bare the difficulty of improving structures at any level, especially within an overarching liminal context.

As Boko Haram reveals, dismantling structure is a far easier task, especially in the systemic weakness of a post-colonial state with already fragile institutions. If the relationships

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\(^{249}\) Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 104  
\(^{250}\) Nwankpa and Kassim, *The Boko Haram Reader*, 400-402
between the state government and the nascent sect could have been maintained, there is a distinct possibility that the total shift to violence would not have occurred. While proving this counterfactual is impossible, the state’s deliberate provocation of an actor with significant religio-political authority remains a baffling mistake, comparable to the Algerian military’s decision to call off the second round of elections in 1992. In both cases, the response from anti-state actors hardened actors’ ideological positioning and sparked years of conflict. As this section notes, this moment—the rite of separation—is represented by the martyrdom of Mohammed Yusuf. Following this separation, de-escalation proves to be nearly impossible, and the consequences can be significant. In the case of Boko Haram, their peak represented their ability to deconstruct the state’s composition of the social order. Yet, crucially, internal and external constraints limited their ability to construct replacement structures that responded to war’s catalyzing grievances. As such, the communities in question were left in the limbo of symmetric schismogenesis where insecurity, terror, and extreme disorder became normalized, fueling a desire for the return of the state’s flawed hegemony.

Crucially, the weak post-war reconstruction of state hegemony that emerged in Algeria is overshadowed by the shaky hegemony of the Nigerian state, especially in the Northeast. Moving forward, it remains profoundly unlikely that Nigeria will be able to improve its chronic insecurity without significant structural change. While the state will never be able to satisfy radical ideologues like Shekau and his most devoted followers, the state must recognize that Boko Haram’s attempt to provide a new order to their community signifies that the state’s “Nigeria Project” has failed. In light of this failure, the re-establishment of Nigeria’s hegemony and an end to the reiterative liminal process would require a structural reevaluation of the state itself and its many interconnected relationships with the liminal elements of its population.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

The Nigerian state’s continued fight against Boko Haram represents the danger of liminality militarized in opposition to the state; when weak structures are faced with anti-state challenges imbued with religio-political significance, they collapse. Both of the cases considered here reveal liminality’s antagonistic relationship to the hegemonic state and indict this state for its failure to create a unified national identity that allows for the religious, cultural, and social expression of non-state forms of order.

Within these contexts, the employment of liminality’s process-based approach permits us to trace the development of anti-state groups such as the GIA and Boko Haram without exclusively emphasizing the counterinsurgency efforts of the government. The concepts of liminality – the phase-based approach, the *limen*, reiteration, tricksters, and schismogenesis – all inform this analysis. By their deployment, we approach an anthropology of political revolutions as liminality is uniquely situated to interpret transitory situations. Through the use of liminality, the discipline can study “actual political revolutionary events as ethnographic cases.”

Crucially, this analysis exists within a postmodern mood that is distinctly liminal in nature. This mood reveals the marginal, in-between space at the heart of the construction of the international order that leaves behind vestigial organs such as Algerian Islamists and the Salafist population of Northeastern Nigeria. Backed by the religiously-sanctioned emulation of a liminal process, these groups saw their own emergence as mirroring the liminal process at the heart of the establishment of the *umma*. By combining religious justification with distinct marginalization, the current international context leads to logical dissent and conflict as the members of these

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251 Thomasson, “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions,” 681-82, emphasis in original
vestigial organs seek to change the order that has condemned them to this marginal position, specifically within the context of a post-colonial state. As these groups seek to reorder their societies, their dissent and subsequent action can be characterized as a liminal process in which previous structures are theoretically shed in pursuit of a new and improved order.

From this context emerged the GIA. The Islamist coalition appeared positioned to take control of the Algerian state in 1992. Yet, the military’s miscalculation forced the Islamists outside of the political system and into armed resistance. During the war, the group’s ideological rigidity and elevation of tricksters to the position of emir undermined their coalition and left them stranded on the limen, eventually able to be defeated by the government. Yet, despite this defeat, their successor organizations and movements, both ideological and processual, carried on in opposition to the state’s hegemony. While the state’s frail hegemony was re-established after the war, this liminal period revealed cracks in the foundation of the post-colonial Algerian state. In the twenty-five years since the war’s nominal end, these cracks have not disappeared, representing a continued issue for the state.

Similarly, for Boko Haram in Nigeria, the initial conflict continues to be reiterated, leaving the state in a period of routinized insecurity where the state cannot create an acceptable version of hegemony that incorporates and appeases numerous actors, including Boko Haram and ISWAP. Boko Haram has been able to facilitate the destruction of the previous social order and its structures, but their tactical successes have been unable to translate into continued political success; Boko Haram was unable to establish itself as an acceptable alternative to the quite problematic Nigerian state. Both Boko Haram and Nigeria’s continued struggles reveal the difficulty of creating structure. Within a liminal process, achieving the final state of reaggregation is not simple and the dangers of schismogenensis and reiteration are always present.
These dangers are not unique to these two conflicts, nor simply conflicts within the post-colonial African state. The framework of liminality sheds light on the process that leads to long-lasting internal conflicts that traditionally elude the discipline of international relations’ concept of conflict as occurring between distinct blocs over distinct, definable issues. Liminality recognizes the “ambiguities, frustrations, and uncertainties” of a constructed international reality outside of a singular focus on state action. This reality recognizes that groups can be caught on the limen, where they are blocked from the cathartic reaggregation that would conclude a liminal process. Yet, these groups have already left behind the previous order which leaves them stranded, unable to be completely defeated while simultaneously quite far from establishing an acceptable counter-structure that could rival the state’s hegemony.

The two cases under study reveal the commitment of the state to a particular conception of its hegemony. The Nigerian state’s crackdown on the quasi-state system that Boko Haram had established recognized the threat it posed to the state’s specific construction of fragile hegemony. Similarly, the Algerian military’s seizure of power following the 1991 elections reflected the incompatibility of the FIS with the Algerian state’s vision of itself and its hegemony. Yet, both of these cases reveal the inability of states to fully close off liminal possibility. Despite extensive arrests and crackdowns in both cases, the organizations were able to bounce back and emerge as threats to the state’s hegemony. With this in mind, from a policy perspective, the accommodation of non-state structures appears to be a mutually beneficial choice. Yet, as the cases of Nigeria and Algeria reveal, making this choice is difficult and requires a critical re-examination of national consciousness and identity.

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252 Mälksoo, “The Challenge of Liminality,” 239
253 See, for example, the case of Mauritania; Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 264-310
The employment of liminality cannot modify the international order nor can it alter fundamental debates about the nature of dissent and statehood that are at the heart of political anthropology and international relations. Yet, the emergence and endurance of conflicts around the world force us to consider the employment of new lenses to understand the nature of movements that seek to alter and abolish existing structures, often violently. It also encourages us to focus on the allure of non-state options, a pattern in both Algeria and Nigeria that reflects back on the continued failure of these states to sell themselves as a superior method of social organization. With this context, I return to The Rites of Passage. Van Gennep saw his work as only “a rough sketch of an immense picture, whose every detail merits careful study.” This work has a similar purpose, fleshing out an understanding of liminality and the examined cases while being cognizant of its inability to capture every aspect of liminality’s multifaceted nature. Further research should seek to fill in van Gennep’s entire picture; liminality remains criminally underexplored and underleveraged, particularly in understanding insecurity. For the examined cases, it remains unclear how these liminal situations can reach a sustainable conclusion and a return to some form of normalcy. Until then, the cases in question are left in a state of permanent liminality with whole communities being stuck everywhere, nowhere, and somewhere in between.

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254 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 189
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