

Islamic militias continue spread beyond the Middle East into African nations

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) An Islamist group has gained ground in the northeastern Libyan city of Benghazi, declaring it an Islamic territory and raising fears that radical Islamist militias may spread in the rest of Africa.

The declaration from Libya's Ansar al-Sharia movement mirrors the rise of the Islamic State in northern Iraq and Syria. The two militant movements share similar goals.

The prospect of more fighting and the possible disintegration of Libya, the country where NATO allied forces helped topple strongman Moammar Gadhafi in October 2011, sent chills throughout the nation.

"I think this is a risky way to go," said Sheikh Saliou Mbacke, a Senegalese Muslim leader who is the coordinator of Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa.

"It hinges on the failure of the governments, lack of democracy and poor and unequal distribution of resources," Saliou added.

These latest actions reflect the growing influence of Islamists in Africa, where militants are challenging existing governments.

In the Central African Republic, Seleka Islamic militants want to divide the country into an Islamic north and a Christian south. Boko Haram militants have issued a similar call in Nigeria.

This has put religious leaders in a bind and strained calls for coexistence, said Sheikh Juma Ngao, a Kenyan Muslim leader who is involved in interfaith actions.

So far, Christian leaders in Libya have vowed to stay, even if the country spins out of control.

“I intend to stay even if only one Christian is left,” Roman Catholic Bishop Giovanni Martinelli of Tripoli told the Fides news agency.