

2 RELIGIOUS RADICALISM AND SECURITY THREATS IN THE SAHEL

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INTRODUCTION

Islam has a complex history in sub-Saharan Africa. New Islamic actors emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in Africa. In a colonial context, they focused on defence of the rights of Muslims and the management of the pilgrimage to Mecca. From the 1930s, they focused on laying the foundations for a reformed Islamic education throughout the Sahelian strip. But in the 1960s, as an extension of the policy initiated by the old colonial powers, the new independent African states, with a Muslim majority, dismissed representatives and heirs of this reformist movement and tried to structure religious life around large maraboutic families, whose members were generally trained in the Arab Gulf countries. Thus, from the 1980s, we see three major religious groups sharing the public space.

The first group is constituted by brotherhood or Sufi Islam. This heterogeneous group is anchored on brotherhoods that are well-established locally, the most important of which are the Tidjaniyya and the Qadiriyya. The role and action of brotherhoods are essentially linked to the nature of local, regional and international networks, which they maintain beyond the borders established by colonisation. The strength of this first group lies in the ability of the brotherhoods to mobilise their members in large numbers and their ability to adapt to the spiritual demands of their followers.

The second group comes from Wahhabi-inspired fundamentalist Islam and encompasses several subgroups, the largest of which in sub-Saharan Africa are the Izala.² The word "Izala" comes from the Islamic expression "*Izālatu al-bid'awaiqamatu as-sunna*", literally "eradication of heresy and establishment of tradition". Originally, it was a religious reform movement inspired by the Wahhabi doctrine that appeared in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth century under the leadership of a Saudi theologian, Mohammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703–1792). He castigated Sufi practices, which he considered a blameworthy innovation, even a shameful heresy (*bid'a*), and called for ridding Islam of the superstitions that Sufism had introduced over the centuries. Among his main adherents were theology students in Kaduna (Nigeria) who followed the teachings of the famous religious leader Abubakar

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2 PERILA. 2013. "Rapport de synthèse: PERILA N-N évaluation des risques au Niger et sur l'axe Niger-Nigéria" [Synthesis report: PERILA N-N risk assessment in Niger and on the Niger-Nigeria axis], IFRA, July, 16-31. Online at: <https://www.csfrs.fr/recherche/projets-realises/PERILA>

Gumi, ideologist of the Hambalite movement “*yan Izala*”, and those of the Islamic University of Say (Niger), who also participated in the emergence of the Izala movement. All of the Wahhabist groups called for a return to orthodox Islam, with strict observance of the Quran and the prophetic tradition *sunnah*.

The third group is constituted by the Salafist movement and manifests itself, in sub-Saharan Africa, in two important branches: the “Salafist preacher”, with a regional vocation, and the “Salafist jihadist”, with an international one. Both are highly dependent on missionary networks established within the “*da’wa*” movement and the “*Markaz*” institutions. The internationalisation of the *da’wa* movement has played a leading role in the evolution of preaching actions throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It has forged a close link between desert Islam and the Islam of the city and allowed interconnection between local and global forms of religiosity. This preaching is based on analogical thinking that systematically brings together the current situations of the believer with past accounts of the pious ancestors.

Regardless of the group considered, the 1990s marked a turning point in African Islam, with the emergence of Islamist groups more demanding of the place to be reserved for political Islam. In all sub-Saharan states, religion is gradually becoming the primary reference for political mobilisation and social control. Despite the emergence of a civil society structured around an associative fabric, political Islam reinforces its visibility in the public space and strengthens its control of social structures. It also exerts an ideological pressure that encourages African governments to redefine the nature of public debates and adapt their discourses according to the new socio-cultural context that is being formed. Various religious movements seek to promote their leaders as political figures and to reinforce their presence in the public space. We are talking here about a certain radicalisation of Islam that is observed in the practices and behaviours of believers.³ But also a specific Islamisation of the radicality of community groups and others.⁴

The Sahelian space has experienced chronic instability in the past decade due to transnational insecurity. The jihadist terrorism of Boko Haram, officially called the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP), that of Al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and other clandestine movements participate through their violent actions in the perpetuation of insecurity in the Sahel. The Sahelian space is crossed by transnational jihadist groups. Specifically, these are AQIM, *Djamatuahli Sunna li da’watwa-l-djihad* (otherwise known as Boko Haram or ISWAP), Ansaru (dissenters from Boko Haram formally known as Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Lands or Al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel), Ansar Dine, Ansar Al-Sharia and Al-Murabitoun.

3 Kepel G. 2000. *Jihad. Expansion et déclin de l’islamisme* [Jihad: expansion and decline of Islamism]. Paris: Gallimard, Paris, 454.

4 Roy O. 2016. *Le djihad et la mort* [Jihad and death]. Paris: Seuil, 155.

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To conduct this study, we used two types of method: qualitative method and quantitative method. The reason for the use of these two methods is justified by their complementarity. Documentary research allowed us to deepen our knowledge of the phenomenon. Quantitatively, the work is based on the results of a study carried out in 2017 on suspected jihadist detainees incarcerated in the prisons of Niger. During this study, 100 suspected jihadist detainees were interviewed first individually and then in focus groups. The people we interviewed were accused of criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist group. The research team also heard from prison officials, NGO staff who intervene with detainees, as well as experts and researchers who are specialists in the field. These interviews allowed us to go into depth in our study. Islam is a religion, Islamism is an ideology, and terrorism is a mode of action. This work begins with the definition of the concept of Salafism considered as being the Islamist indeed jihadist ideological “matrix”; then we will try to present the process of radicalisation as well as the places of radicalisation in the West African context and analyse the profiles through the factors that lead individuals to radicalise. Finally, we will propose a radiography of the jihadist groups that are wreaking havoc in West Africa and more particularly in the Sahel.

SALAFISM?

Salafism is an ideology of conservatism and religious extremism that preaches a return to the purified faith of the *salaf* (ancestors), a return to the canonical norms and normative rules of the first century of Islam. It is useful to distinguish between pietist, reformist and jihadist salafisms. Salafism is undergirded by the transnationalisation of terrorism and its multiple consequences: decline of the nation-state, erasure of borders, intensification of transnational flows, networking, etc. Salafism is therefore the ideological matrix of Islamist radicalisation. Salafist discourse is not limited to the religious domain alone. It also comprises the political sphere and includes both religion and politics. Salafism and Islam are two realities, not only distinct and dissimilar, but above all antithetical. Islam is a religion, a spirituality and a form of worship; Salafism is an ideology whose purpose is the creation of an Islamic State and the restoration of the Caliphate.⁵

Spontaneous Salafism is the expression of this Islam of the rural and urban popular masses, who can use its resources in oral tradition and its logic in the community order and family or ethnic solidarities. Modernist Salafism is precisely the ideological and cultural expression of the dislocation of these ancient social and community structures. As for radical Salafism, it dominates among youths on the margins of urban centres and in the declining middle classes and in the mass of individuals involved in the informal sector.

Salafism is an ideology whose purpose is the creation of an “Islamic State”; a state based on the strict application of *sharia* law. Islam as faith and law (*aqidawa sharia*),

5 Guidère M. *Le retour du Califat* [The return of the Caliphate]. Paris: Gallimard, 166.

as religion and state (*dīnwadawla*) and as a system of values of spiritual and temporal order (*dīnwadunya*) are incessantly recurring themes in Salafist discourses.

In Salafist organisations, religion asserts itself for one reason or another, as the main field for the production of meaning. There is then a shift in the implications of the religious, which is essentially summarised in these three transformations:

- The religious referent becomes the exclusive explanatory framework of the phenomena of nature and the events of social and political life;
- Meanings and religious expressions are incorporated into the experience as markers of identity (how to pray, to dress and eat, to speak and to act), and
- Religious meaning is only valid when it legitimises the protest action which takes on a normative aspect in the manner of a militant morality. This religiosity reflects a feeling of individual and collective insertion in the quest for a new political and social order, under the banner of faith.

THE RADICALISATION PROCESS

Radicalisation is defined as a process by which an individual develops radical or extreme beliefs that are in conflict with the established order and values of the society in which the individual lives. The notion of radicalisation, as a whole, goes far beyond the issue of jihadist terrorism and touches on any type of extremist ideology, whether its content is political, social or religious. The radicalised individual maintains an unconditional relationship with his thought system and comes to regard the use of violent action as a means. Radicalism is protean: it is renewed and adapted to each new context by attempting to weaken the states at every opportunity. Its political project is the creation of Islamic State and the establishment of *sharia* law. Salafism is the ideological matrix of radicalisation.

The process of radicalisation

The process of radicalisation is multifaceted and adapts to the person in his milieu and socio-economic environment. Radicalisation can take place quickly or it can take place slowly over time. Among the signals are:

- Ideological dependence, which serves to form and shape the youth in Salafist ideology by presenting Salafism as the only alternative;
- Victimisation vis-à-vis society, the state, etc.;
- Hatred of the West and ancestral traditions;
- Culture of companionship through the institution of *da'wa* (itinerant preaching) by arguing that a Muslim has no brother except for another Muslim, and
- Isolation, manipulation, cult of martyrdom.

The engagement of young people in Islamist movements is not only ideological. It is also a means to receive income that will help a whole family survive. Among the factors that push young people to engage in these currents that flow through

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Islamic associations are dropping out of school, unemployment, poverty and the inactivity of youth. These youths can be trained in many forms of social violence.

Places of radicalisation

Radicalisation is not only produced in the global society, it can also happen within organisations and institutions like prisons, schools, hospitals and the army. But, as of today, no massive phenomenon has yet been observed in institutions such as schools, hospitals and the army. Prison, on the other hand, remains the most exposed institution, insofar as there are cohabiting individuals who are awaiting trial or sentencing, who have a strained relationship with society and who suffer from social frustration, economic exclusion or stigmatisation. In the wider society, there are also mosques, Islamic associations, Islamic centres, Islamic schools, internet, social networks, Sheikh Google and other networks.

Degree of radicalisation of an individual

There are a number of factors that can indicate the degree of radicalisation in a particular individual. These include:

- Abusive use of the concepts of *shirk* (idolatry), *bid'a* (innovation) and *takfir* (excommunicate);
- The disproportionate practice of religious obligations;
- Criticism of traditional, maraboutic and political powers;
- Intolerant behaviour towards other believers;
- Dress;
- Intolerant remarks about other believers;
- Refusal to follow teachings related to the human body (SVT);
- Abandonment of sports, and
- Refusal of local cultures and traditional practices.

Combinations of these factors have been widely found to correlate with religious radicalisation and extremism.

Diversity of respondents' profiles

In a study conducted among suspected jihadist detainees in Niger,⁶ a diversification of profiles can be observed. The age of the respondents ranges from 15 to 70 years of which 8% are women. Women and minors are often the children and wives of alleged jihadists, who have accompanied or joined their husbands, sometimes accompanied by their children. The phenomenon of engagement affects families with the departure to *jihad* of entire families. With regard to the alleged jihadist detainees, the data in the collected reports reflects a lack of a typical profile:

6 Guidère, *Le retour du Califat*, 166; Moumouni S. 2017. "Prévention à la radicalisation au Niger: Etude réalisée auprès des détenus présumés Jihadistes" [Prevention of radicalisation in Niger: Study of suspected Jihadist detainees], Etudes de l'IRSH, February.

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- 25% under 18;
- in the case of minors 98% concern young boys;
- 8% concern women, and
- in the case of adults, 46% are between 18 and 35 years old.

However, these figures should be interpreted with caution, since they only concern the cases of defendants imprisoned for acts related to jihadist terrorism.

Among those accused of criminal conspiracy in connection with terrorist groups are recruits from several countries: Nigeria, Chad, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Morocco and Sudan, many of whom declare themselves to be Nigerian nationals. They include members of several armed jihadist groups: Boko Haram, AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar Dine and Al-Murabitoun. A large number of recruits are accused of being in contact with Boko Haram. The majority of respondents have a basic level of education and have attended Quranic schools often after failure in a secular school. The level of Quranic study is between three to ten chapters (*hizb*). The majority of recruits are bilingual, fluent mostly in two languages, Kanuri and Hausa or Hausa and Arabic. The other languages: Fulfulde, Tamasheq, Songhay, Arabic, English, French are also spoken by some.

These people indicated that they had engaged in a range of activities and professions before prison, the great majority having been farmers, breeders, fishermen, traders, butchers, drivers, tailors, marabouts and beggars. There are no precise figures on the income of each inmate before his or her arrest. Most of this income goes to meet the daily needs of the family. Most of these people are rural, and many are from a poor background in which they practised several activities such as agriculture, livestock and fishing. This is a vulnerable population likely to be tempted by the tempting financial proposals of jihadist groups. But since the beginning of the war against Boko Haram, there has been an influx of young people from all regions and different social classes. This initiatory journey in areas where *jihād* is rife is a new phenomenon in the Sahelian religious landscape.

Female radicalism

Engagement in jihadist activities includes both men and women. The involvement of young women in Islamic movements has become increasingly important in recent years. They have caught up with men in the creation of associations, schools and Islamic clubs. Some of them claim the status of *malama* (learned woman, educator or Muslim leader) in religious science. Muslim women's structures are very active in protest movements. Women claim to be victims of jihadists and not members of these groups. According to them, it is women who suffer the most from this situation. According to the jihadists, the sisters, even if they are not engaged in the field, play an important role and contribute to the war effort through information, food supplies, logistics and moral and multiform support.

Radicalisation factors

Analysis of the profiles and information gathered from the people encountered in this study shows that the factors of engagement and radicalisation vary according to the groups to which they belong. Disappointment, frustration, lack of employment, precariousness of the basic socio-educational system, feelings of abandonment that animate them vis-à-vis the State and the administrative authorities, and even the customary authorities. For jihadist groups such as AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun, engagement factors are most often linked to belonging to international jihadist networks with the ideology of global *jihad* to defend “the land of Islam” and establish the Islamic Caliphate. For locally rooted jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, MUJAO, Ansar Dine and others the engagement factors can be economic, communal, familial, religious, identity, political, professional, security, social and other factors. Jihadist organisations recruit young people from several Sahelian countries. But the engagement of young people in jihadist movements is not exclusively ideological. It is also away to have substantial income that will support the whole family. Factors that push young people to engage in jihadist movements include: school dropout, unemployment and poverty. In fact, young people enlisted in jihadist groups sometimes receive wages that are higher than the national minimum wage. The commitment of these young people, who are often minors in the *katiba* (jihadist cells),⁷ is encouraged by poverty and the deterioration of the standard of living. There is no typical profile of the jihadist terrorist: all social environments, ages, origins and social strata are more or less affected. Jihadist groups are more rampant and recruit more in rural areas than in urban areas, but this does not mean that there are no recruits in urban areas, especially among schoolchildren.

JIHADIST GROUPS AND TERRORISM

If terrorism is a global phenomenon, the Sahel region has the particularity of being more vulnerable because of its geographical location, which positions it at the confluence of three of the deadliest terrorist threats in the world. The first, the oldest, is represented by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose numbers, dispersed during Operation Serval,⁸ seem to be reorganised as evidenced by the recent deadly terrorist attacks perpetrated in Mali, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire. The second is embodied by Boko Haram, whose original area of activity in Nigeria has spread to other countries in the Lake Chad Basin, including Niger, Cameroon and Chad. The third corresponds to the organisation of the Islamic State, still active in Libya, and whose affinities with Boko Haram, and more recently with the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS), could make the Sahel a zone of withdrawal for foreign fighters currently in Libya, but also in Iraq and Syria.

7 Originally, a *katiba* was a unit of combatants corresponding to a light company (about 100 men) or a section (about 30 men).

8 This was a military operation carried out in Mali by the French army. Launched in 2013, it was completed in July 2014.

As for AQIM, it was born in Algeria and is linked to Al-Qaeda by an umbilical cord through *katiba* settled in the Sahel. Since 2003, AQIM's activity has manifested itself primarily in kidnappings of Westerners. Its men operate in the Sahel-Saharan space, where they have to abducted approximately forty hostages, of which a dozen were on Nigerien territory.⁹ The geographical situation of the Sahelian countries places them in a special position in the hub of trafficking and exchanges between the populations of West Africa and those of North Africa. The Sahara Desert occupies more than two thirds of the Sahelian space. In this space, jihadists and traffickers of all kinds are on their preferred terrain. They are masters of space and undermine the constituted states. The Sahel is a key space on the African geopolitical chessboard and a "connecting ground" between Salafist jihadist groups in Libya, Algeria, Mali and Nigeria. Analysis of the violent actions carried out by the jihadist groups in the countries of the Sahel reveals a disturbing progression and shows that it constitutes for these groups a strategic space of tactical retreat, supplying weapons, food, logistical materials and the recruitment of new jihadists.

In fact, as early as 2006, Boko Haram settled in the border regions of Chad, Cameroon and Niger through the creation of *katiba* tactical withdrawal bases and dormant networks. The magnitude of this threat is exacerbated by the particularly volatile situation since the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's Libyan regime (1969–2011); while Libya is facing a resurgence of terrorist actions, the post-conflict situation in Mali and Libya illustrates the annoying capacity of jihadist groups such as AQIM, MUJAO and Ansaru. Their targets are: the population, defence and security forces, state officials, Western expatriates, prisons, places of worship, markets, bars, hotels and more. In addition to the danger represented by the sporadic and violent attacks carried out by the jihadist organisations, there is the risk of the destabilisation of states and the contagion of this phenomenon in the Sahelo-Saharan space.

Alliances between organisations are formed according to circumstances. Just as the groups reconfigured after Operation Serval in Mali. The setbacks of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) led the jihadist organisations to fold their cards by retreating into vast territories such as the Sahel. The rallying of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Al-Mourabitoun group to AQIM in 2015 and those of the main Sahelian jihadist groups under the leadership of Ansar Dine's leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, and the appearance in 2017 of a new terrorist group in the region namely the group Ansarul-Islam. These mergers show that the jihadist groups in the Sahel are seeking to join forces to remain masters of the Sahelian space and even of Africa. This tactical choice is reflected in the name with which the organisation signs its communiqués: "Al-Mourabitoun – Al-Qaeda for Jihad in Africa."¹⁰ The goal is to create an African-wide movement that brings together all the jihadists in Africa. Like Al-Qaeda, Al-Murabitoun has resorted to suicide attacks, hostage-taking and targeted killings

9 Daniel S. 2012. *AQMI: l'industrie de l'enlèvement* [AQIM: the kidnapping industry]. Paris: Fayard, 299.

10 Mémier M. 2017. "AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: le djihad sahélien réuni?" [AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun: Sahelian jihad reunited?]. Paris: IFRI, 6 January.

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against Western interests in the region. The military arsenal of jihadist groups comes partly from the weapons recovered in Libya following the outbreak of the civil war in the country in 2011 and the stocks of the national armies of the Sahel states through the attack of patrols, convoys, barracks or by the fact of corruption. In March 2015, the group attacked the Malian capital. Then in August of the same year, Al-Mourabitoun claimed the attack on the Byblos Hotel in Sévaré where MINUSMA staff resided. The group Al-Mourabitoun – Al-Qaeda for Jihad in Africa has tested its capabilities through three attacks signed Al-Mourabitoun – AQIM in three West African capitals: Bamako in November 2015, Ouagadougou in January 2016 and Abidjan in March 2016. Each of these attacks was supported by a similar *modus operandi*, with the aim of weakening and destabilising the Saharo-Sahelian states in order to gain political control and establish Islamic states.

CONCLUSION

Jihadism, combined with threats represented by organised crime networks, armed groups involved in internal political conflicts in Libya and Mali, as well as the large number of weapons in circulation in the countries of the Sahel region, constitutes at the moment the greatest threat to the security of states in the region. Radicalisation has become, in particular, a very serious recent threat. The mosque and the prison are the spaces in which the jihadists are reinforcing. To fight the jihadist threat, the Sahel states at the regional level, a mixed multinational force composed of the countries of the Lake Chad Basin (Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon), was set up to lead the war against Boko Haram. This multinational force with limited means conducted raking operations along the borders of neighboring states with Nigeria and sometimes excursions within Nigeria. Conscious of the importance of the threats to the region, the ministers in charge of the security of the G5 Sahel states, as early as May 2014, had decided to create a regional mechanism for police cooperation under the name Security Cooperation Platform (PCMS). The aim is to provide, through this mechanism, an organised response to this threat, as a global threat, but also as a confederated threat within the framework of a regional structure and a coordinated and shared responsibility among the five states of the region.

To combat this phenomenon, a strategy entirely focused on security and the military option has been advocated by the states and their partners. The G5 of the Sahel is formed by the poorest countries on the planet where in reality, and in particular among the populations, security problems are below a list of other priorities (including food, nutrition, education, health, access to water, etc.). There are several exit mechanisms from radicalism developed by countries affected by this phenomenon. The countries of the Sahel must have their own strategic plan of counterradicalisation. However, the actions we observe here and there are not up to the challenge. Jihadist ideology and terrorist propaganda are based on a number of arguments to indoctrinate young people. In the Sahel, this propagandist discourse deals among other things with social injustice, corruption, social exclusion, the irresponsibility of leaders, victimisation and related issues. The deconstruction of

jihadist ideology and propaganda passes not only through education and culture but also through good governance. The solution to this scourge also necessarily involves concrete actions in the short and long term. The experts are unanimous that the answer to this problem of radicalisation and violent extremism includes education (classical and religious), culture and employment. Education and culture are the foundation for giving children critical thinking skills, so that they can criticise what is taught to them in school or even at the level of Quranic schools. The experts are unanimous that the situation of insecurity in the Sahel is totally different from other situations in the rest of the world and therefore war cannot continue to be the only answer to this scourge.