

Corridors of Militancy: the Sahel-Sahara Border Regions

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>> The Sahel-Sahara faces a cluster of security challenges. The upsurge in ethnic radicalisation and its growing overlap with violent militancy are only the most visible signs of the troubles hanging over this vast region. This locus of insecurities mushrooms at the periphery of national boundaries where government writ rarely runs. The permeability of borders, and proliferation of zones of political vacuums and economic marginalization in the hinterlands, fuel irredentism and enable the geographical expansion of violent extremists and their networking in excluded border communities. Violence spilling over from neighbouring conflicts often expedites the gradual transformation of such border communities into malignant epicentres of radicalized ethnic claims, cross-border militancy, and organized crime.

Understanding this deadly interplay of political grievances, social exclusion, and hinterland neglect is necessary for tackling the underlying causes of militancy in the Sahel/Saharan border regions. Mapping the dynamics that prompt radicalisation and drive individuals into the orbit of violent extremist networks also requires a keen understanding of the pull of social networks, ideology, and human agency. Conflicts in the Sahel-Sahara show that while an abundance of structural factors such as weak governance, social exclusion and state repression creates enabling environments for radicalisation, they remain insufficient to pulling individuals into violent extremism in the absence of the pull exercised by extremist networks, inspirational ideologues, or political entrepre-

HIGHLIGHTS

- An appreciable number of criminal networks, violent extremists and armed groups are concentrated in the Sahel/Saharan border regions.
- Structural factors like dispossession, region-specific exclusion, and group discrimination create grievances and contribute to radicalisation.
- The presence of charismatic ideologues or extremist organisations that frame grievances in religious terms and channel them into violent actions is crucial in moulding young extremists.

»»»»» neurs. The spread of external fundamentalist ideas, the appeal of charismatic recruiters, and the material and emotional benefits generated from affiliation with radical social networks play a critical role in producing violent extremism.

MILITANT ENTRENCHMENT IN THE PERIPHERY

An appreciable number of criminal networks, violent extremists and armed groups are concentrated in the Sahel/Saharan border regions. Transnational extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – whose roots go back to Algeria’s 1990s civil strife – have generally found it easier to operate in desert hinterlands that are widely traversed and historically tied to major trade routes and trafficking networks. An amalgamation of institutional weakness, high levels of corruption, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic divisions and hinterland neglect has given succour to extremists’ goals of entrenching themselves at the local tribal and ethnic structure.

For example, despite their militant agenda and internal divisions, AQIM and its affiliates managed to gain the sympathy of clan power brokers and support of tribal hosts. Through local marriages and business ventures, they built networks of solidarity and skilfully exploited the maelstrom of Saharan tribal and ethnic rivalries to implant themselves in the porous societies of Saharan peripheral territories. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter of AQIM that emerged in 2011, quickly blended with southern Saharans. Its leader, Abou Walid Al Sahrawi, a military strategist who hails from the Reguibat, the largest of the Sahrawi tribal confederations, proved quite successful in appealing to Arab Mauritians, Sahrawis, Malian nationals of Songhay ethnicity and Arab tribes of Lamhar Tilemsi.

Drawing on ethnicity and religion, Al Sahrawi and like-minded terrorists try to provide an alternative to failing secular, ethno-nationalism and a response to state shortcomings in the hinterlands. To be sure, contextual factors drive some Sahelian

Arabs and Tuaregs craving a sense of belonging, personal empowerment, social status, or material resources to rally behind violent extremist organizations that are flush with cash from ransom payments and heavily armed with weapons emanating from Libya’s vast arms bazaar. At times of heightened inter-group rivalries and intra-factional struggles over socio-economic gains, political entrepreneurs or charismatic leaders become appealing to their tribal and ethnic sub-groups because they promise the installation of an Islamic order that delivers competitive advantages and political stability.

For example, after their decisive loss of political authority in the 2009 local elections, an appreciable number of young Ifoghas Tuareg in Northern Mali, fearful of the dramatic upsetting of the traditional hierarchies of power, threw their support or at least acquiescence behind the radical Tuareg group Ansar Dine. Iyad ag-Ghali, a historic figure of Tuareg rebellions and a founder of Ansar Dine, capitalized on intra-Tuareg tensions to portray himself as the preeminent defender of Ifoghas’ ethno-religious interests. In this case, ethnic self-protection trumped ag-Ghali’s association with regional terrorist groups like AQIM and criminal organizations (see Ivan Briscoe, *Crime after Jihad: Armed groups, the state, and illicit business in post-conflict Mali*, Clingendael, May 2014).

Violent Islamist militancy in other theatres of conflict has also an ethno-religious character. Radical Islamist groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia uses nationalist and religious slogans to mobilize support that transcends clan divisions, and dovetails with perceptions of cultural and sectarian threats emanating from Christian-majority neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia and Kenya. Appeals to religious nationalism and ethnic or clan identification help forge collective identity among some of the aggrieved Somalis and Muslim Ethiopian and Kenyan nationals.

Local violent insurgent groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria employ the same tactics by tapping into popular legitimate grievances, manipulating contentious sectarian identities, and providing a

default form of salvation from relative deprivation, dispossession and fragmentation of social relations. Like the extremist Tuareg group of Ansar Dine in northern Mali, Boko Haram's surge in Nigeria's marginalized north-east is fed by corrupt and feckless politics. The group might offer little to the ethnic constituencies it claims to represent, but its aggressive tactics, uncompromising sectarian ethno-nationalism and relentless certainty make it appear as unswervingly resolute and supremely confident.

THE PULL OF IDEOLOGY

Ideology is also an important driver of violent extremism. Most violent extremist movements are rooted in radical Salafi movements that first emerged in the 1970s. "The very fact that these movements define themselves in religious terms," writes Terje Østeb (in *Islamic Militancy in Africa*, Africa Security Brief, 2012), "makes it imperative

to recognize their ideological content". Boko Haram, for example, draws inspiration from a Nigerian Wahhabi movement created in 1978 under the name *Izala* or 'eradication of heresies'. "Its model of revolution," writes Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos,

"was the jihad of Usman dan Fodio and the Sokoto caliphate established in 1804". The military successes of the caliphal system and the endurance of its political machinery in much of Muslim West Africa are major referents for those dreaming of recreating a powerful Islamic regional polity (Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis*, Chatham House, September 2014).

In northern Mali, the penetration of Wahhabi ideas appears to have shaken the tradition of religious tolerance in the country. Imported radical

religious ideas justifying the recourse to armed struggle have also contributed to the radicalization of religious discourse and rising intra and inter-communal tensions. Radical strains of Islam can be socially attractive in countries still weighed down by caste hierarchies and the vestiges of old slavery. Indeed, embracing doctrines that are intent on combating the "heterodox" practices of the more traditional Sufi orders can easily become a means for some inferior-status clans and tribes to challenge stratified social structures.

For the politically disgruntled and socially dislocated groups, 'purified' Islam holds out the promise of decisive answers to modern society's social ills and inequities. Indeed, in the 1990's, Islam, argues Jean-François Bayart in an interview with French journalist Catherine Gouset, became the last refuge of populations devastated by the adjustment programmes prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Islamic institutions, some bankrolled by Arab Gulf largesse, became a source of comfort to the afflicted. Unlike the 'false' prophets of austerity, Saudi charities and schools seemed to put their money into the most neglected and blighted areas. The diffusion of Wahhabism and the growing popularity of Pakistani preachers in the 1990s are also attributed to their projected construction of Islamic law as a real counterweight to judicial corruption and the arbitrariness of the state. Shariah law is appealing in northern Nigeria precisely because it is seen as able to rein in the excesses of the security services and gross violations of legal rights and fundamental freedoms. In 2012, parts of the population of northern Mali welcomed the arrival of radical Islamist groups like Ansar Dine and MUJAO. To be sure, this welcome quickly wore thin as extremist groups violated their ground rules and subjected the territories under their control to brutal forms of (in)justice.

This growing influence of Salafism coincided with a general surge in the visibility of religion. The irrepressible advance of Pentecostal Christianity has, for example, transformed the religious landscape across the African continent. This

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»»»»» particular strain of Christianity has moved from a peripheral position vis-a-vis the Catholic Church to one of assertive influence in both private lives and the public realm. Like Salafism, Pentecostalism seems to better respond to the social grievances and cultural concerns of Africans. This is clearly evident in Nigeria where both Pentecostalism and Salafism have been aggressively seeking to reshape the orientations of Nigerian Christianity and Islam. It is important to note that neither movement represents a homogenous global movement (Catherine Goueset, 'Pourquoi l'islam et le djihadisme s'étendent en Afrique', *L'Express*, February 25, 2013). Salafism, for example, comes in shapes and forms other than violent jihad. Most Salafists are quiet advocates of doctrinal purity. The most vocal and visible though are radical revolutionaries or Salafi-jihadists who are spearheading a mutiny against traditional forms of religion and failing state secularism.

In Mali, the new social positioning and rising political mobilisation of Salafism can be seen in the increasing influence of the Wahhabi strain of Islam within the Islamic High Council of Mali (HCI), an influential umbrella organization representing the most important Muslim organizations. To be sure, HCI and its affiliated organizations can't be reduced to mere Saudi Salafi doctrines. Though different from traditional West African Sufi Islam, socio-political faith movements like HCI practice, to use the words of Jean-François Bayart, a 'reinvented' Islam that exists in a symbiotic relationship that is certainly moulded by both Saudi Salafi scholars and the particularity of local traditions. This amalgamation of local and imported cultural mores and religious interpretations can be seen in the HCI's growing conservatism and concomitant firm rejection of violence and terrorism. Mahmoud Dicko, leader of the HCI, for example, denounced the jihadis' brutal rule and strongly supported the January 2013 French military intervention in northern Mali. The implementation of Islamic principles, argues Dicko, must be based on concord through persuasion and compromise-seeking.

RADICALISATION AND TERRORIST RECRUITMENT

Experience suggests that the drivers of violent extremism are multilayered and have many overlapping causes. This makes it hard to determine which push factors (bad governance, government repression, social fragmentation, political and economic marginalisation of peripheral areas, cultural threat perceptions) or pull factors (appeal of a radical guru, extremist networks, personal bonds, etc.) drive individuals or groups to support radical ideas or join violent extremist organizations. Usually, it is a combination of both. Contextual conditions such as poverty, relative deprivation, endemic corruption, and historical abuse influence trajectories to violent extremism. But these factors alone are not enough to produce violent extremism. Otherwise, most of the states of West Africa and the Sahel, which consistently rank at the bottom of the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, would have been infected by violent extremism. The fact that most countries have not suffered the same fate that has befallen Mali and Nigeria is partly due to the weak pull of factors resulting from the presence of charismatic recruiters, violence spilling over from neighbouring conflicts or external influences.

The 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia for example acted as both a push and pull factor, galvanizing resistance to the occupation and contributing to the emergence and violent radicalization of al-Shabaab. This catalytic event facilitated al-Shabaab's goal of creating a powerful narrative of victimization that blended memories of past injustices with present wrongs. The greater the perception that a culture is under siege, the greater the propensity that some individuals might join social movements or violent extremist networks. The craving for a sense of belonging and purpose at times of existential crisis and the prospect of glory fighting a common enemy lured a number of disaffected young Somalis, at home and from the diaspora, into al-Shabaab's net.

The most successful radical groups are those that offer young men the chance of becoming a part of something larger than themselves. Radicalisation therefore becomes a sociological phenomenon driven by moral outrage, identity, group dynamics, peer pressure, and search for a sense of meaning. A most common denominator of recruits is age, alienation and exposure to radical, charismatic leaders. The presence of a charismatic ideologue or extremist organisations that can frame grievances in religious terms and channel them into violent actions is crucial in moulding young extremists.

Structural factors like dispossession, region-specific exclusion, and group discrimination create grievances and contribute to radicalisation. But according to a USAID 2009 report, titled *Counter Extremism and Development in Mali*, it is social networks and radical institutions or charismatic gurus that draw individuals into the orbit of violent extremist groups. The strong pull of human agency helps explain why for example Boko Haram sprang up in particular locations and not in others known for their extreme poverty or past association with religious radicalism or violence. Rather, writes Pérouse de Montclos, it is circumstantial factors linked to the movement's charismatic founder Mohamed Yusuf, and political collusion or manipulation by local politicians that prompted recruitment into the group.

The security forces' brutal crackdown on Boko Haram at Maiduguri in 2009 and the execution of its founder while in police custody accelerated the movement's radicalisation and transition into terrorism. The repression also hastened the fragmentation of the group and the ascendancy of its militant wing. Indeed, the survivors of the military's assault went into hiding before popping up one year later consumed by a thirst for vengeance. Under the new leadership of Abubakar Shekau, whose ruthlessness seems to make up for his lack of charisma, Boko Haram has become more decentralized and daring in its raids on mosques, churches and schools. Recently, it jumped on the bandwagon of Daesh (also known as Islamic State) while dissenting militant groups like

Ansaru, created in 2012, have become more ideologically aligned with Al-Qaeda.

This evolution of Boko Haram and its autonomous cells is not necessarily tantamount to the internationalisation of the movement's violent insurgency. The emphasis on the international dimension of Boko Haram's activities and linkage with Daesh is therefore misguided. Boko Haram is still a local phenomenon and defeating it requires more than regional coordination and international military assistance. As Pérouse de Montclos aptly put it, the solution lies with "the performance of critical state institutions, in particular with regard to local government, policing and criminal justice, and the armed forces".

CONCLUSION: MITIGATING RADICALISATION

There are specific remedies that governments and the international community can undertake to alleviate specific push and pull factors of radicalization. Some are developmental in nature and require a governance oriented response, along with a determined effort to invest in neglected geographic areas and ensure equal access to economic opportunity of aggrieved subpopulations. In northern Mali, very little progress has been registered in improving governance and promoting economic development. Current strategies to contain conflict and mitigate radicalism are doomed to fail unless they are accompanied by a serious and sustained effort to address the political, socio-economic and identity-based grievances that roil the north of Mali. In addressing these sources of grievance, the Malian government and the international community must take great care that their engagement in the north does not worsen group rivalries nor imperil the very fragile social and political equilibrium of ethnic activities in the region.

The same applies in the north of Nigeria where the state's strategies to 'drain the swamp' of violent extremism are in urgent need of revamping. Former president Goodluck Jonathan failed to

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»»»»» understand that the implementation of emergency rule and brutal counter-terrorism tactics would end up leading to the expansion and radicalisation of Boko Haram, intensification of violence, alienation of local communities and demoralisation of his security forces. The use of force can be crucial in fighting insurgencies like those in Nigeria, Somalia or Mali. But it must be targeted, proportional and consistent with the rule of law. In training the region's armed forces and law enforcement, the United States and European governments must focus not only on improving fighting skills, intelligence gathering and security coordination. Such programmes also need to enhance civil-military relations and respect for human rights.

In cases where governments are overwhelmed by militant groups, outside military intervention is needed. But such military action needs to be legal and have local support. It must also be buttressed by sustained political and economic engagement that helps address the root causes of the violence. Only inclusive political and economic institutions can lead to peace and stability. In Sahelian countries where the international community has leverage, it must press local governments to reduce endemic corruption, improve poor governance, and engage credible civil society actors and religious leaders. Mitigating violent extremism involves the empowerment of socio-cultural institutions of tolerance and support for local media

outlets that emphasize an effective counter-narrative against extremism. Rehabilitation of radicalised prisoners is also crucial. Mauritania for example has designed a relatively successful programme of de-radicalisation aimed at reforming detainees convicted of terrorist crimes. In sum, finding a solution to the mounting insecurities in the border regions of the Sahara-Sahel requires the adoption of a full spectrum approach that balances kinetic engagement of violent extremists with non-kinetic activities such as governance-enhancement, justice and security sector reform, and rehabilitation programmes for former fighters.

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