AUTOCRATIC LEGACIES AND STATE MANAGEMENT OF ISLAMIC ACTIVISM IN NIGER

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to similar organizations in its neighbouring countries, Niger’s domestic Salafi associations have remained peaceful and apolitical. Drawing on historical institutionalist scholarship and on recent conceptualizations of the state as a religious actor, this article examines how the Nigerien state has tried to regulate religious practices since Seyni Kountché’s military coup in 1974. It argues that the institutional regulation of religious practices is one important variable that accounts for Niger’s deviant trajectory. During Niger’s autocratic period (1974-91), the government established the Association islamique du Niger (AIN) as the sole legal authority regulating access to Niger’s Friday prayer mosques. Committed to peaceful and apolitical interpretations of the Koran, the AIN confined access to Niger’s religious sphere to local clerics and Sufi brotherhoods. After the breakdown of autocratic rule in 1991, the AIN served as a religious advisory body. Salafi associations could assemble freely but had to abide by certain criteria. Confronted with the prospect of Islamic violence in 2000, the Nigerien state intervened in Niger’s religious sphere in several ways. Among other initiatives, the government began to resurrect a more rigorous system of religious supervision in order to monitor religious practices on an ongoing basis.

Increasingly in recent years, the sahel region has become the site of large-scale Salafi violence. Algeria experienced a long and deadly conflict between its state forces and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which later transformed into Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, a trans-Sahel jihadi group.¹ In Nigeria, the emergence of the Yan Izala movement provided the theological grounds for the spread of Boko Haram.² Most

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recently, Mali was overrun by Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb and its
North Malian counterpart, Ansar Dine.3

By contrast, Salafi associations in the Republic of Niger have been peaceful
and apolitical.4 In this article I examine Niger’s unusual trajectory. I argue
that from 1974 onwards the Nigerien state emerged as a religious actor sup­
porting the work of local and Sufi clerics while restricting foreign preachers’
access to Niger’s Friday prayer mosques. Drawing on historical-institutional
scholarship and the research technique of episode analysis, I illustrate
how the Nigerien state has tried to manage its religious sphere with the help
of an organizational entity ‘from Niger’s autocratic period (1974-91), the
Association islamique du Niger (AIN). Between 1974 and 1991, the autocratic
Kountché government established the AIN as Niger’s sole legal Islamic asso­
ciation. Its mandate was to confine attendance at Friday prayer mosques to
Sufi and local clerics. The integration of the AIN into the institutional struc­
ture of the autocratic Niger state made it almost impossible for Salafi clerics
to establish a viable presence prior to 1991. This laid the ideational founda­
tion for the consolidation of peaceful Salafism in subsequent periods.

Since 1991 the AIN has operated under a modified mandate. Its main
function has been to advise Niger’s Ministry of the Interior on whether pro­
spective Islamic associations should receive state recognition or not. On the
advice of the AIN, the Ministry of the Interior has barred several foreign or
foreign-led Islamic associations from entering Niger. However, several
Nigerien-led Salafi associations have received state recognition on the con­
dition that they refrain from propagating a political or violent agenda. In
November 2000 early signs of radicalization prompted the Niger govern­
ment to engage in a number of initiatives designed to quell potentially
violent Salafi elements within society. Among other things, the Nigerien
government re-established an effective religious regulatory body; the AIN
served as a model for this organization.

I argue that state intervention in and state regulation of Niger’s religious
sphere contributed to the consolidation of the purist Salafi strand. The
article adds to a line of research examining the role and effect of the state as
a religious actor. According to this research, the state fulfils the role of a reli­
gious actor when government regulation limits religious liberty.5 Empirical

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4. The terrorist attacks that took place in Niger were conducted by outside jihadi groups such as Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram. The latter is said to be also responsible for the January 2015 attacks on Niger’s Catholic churches.
research from several world regions demonstrates that state regulation of the religious sphere affects religious practice. These recent studies were conducted in countries where the state yields significant organizational capacity. By contrast, statehood in sub-Saharan Africa is considerably impaired. Nevertheless, recent research has found that Africa’s low aggregate level of statehood tells us little about the provision of individual state functions. In countries where state capacity is generally low, governments frequently rely on functional equivalents to fulfill specific governmental ‘functions’. This article outlines how the Nigerien state created the Sufi-run AIN in order to regulate access to Friday prayer mosques. The AIN thus acted as a functional equivalent to a state-run supervisory agency.

The article draws on several premises of historical institutionalist scholarship, according to which institutions and organizations have their origins in past political struggles and represent the vested interests of the ruling elite. In order to assess a particular outcome, historical institutionalism pays great attention to the temporal aspect of institutional creation. Once in place, institutions and organizations perpetuate the elites’ chosen mode(s) of allocating power resources; these bodies are resistant to change and reproduce themselves over time. The emphasis on path dependency should not distract from the fact that during critical junctures political actors have the opportunity to abolish old institutions and to create new ones. Yet, even though countries might be undergoing periods of extensive institutional innovation - for example, democratic


transitions - the institutional or organizational legacies of autocratic rule do not merely disintegrate and disappear; indeed, at times they may adjust to new political environments. These legacies can further serve as cognitive templates for the subsequent establishment of new institutions and organizations.  

My intention is to account for the factors that triggered the establishment of the AIN in 1974, to outline the processes within which it operated between 1974 and 1991, and to identify the ideational and personal forces that adjusted the AIN’s modus operandi to Niger’s post-1991 political environment. I further illustrate that the AIN served as an organizational template for the creation of a new body tasked with religious regulation in the country after 2000. In line with recent empirical applications of historical institutionalism, I focus on those moments in which organizational creation or reform was the result of decisions taken during critical junctures. I examine the motives and actions of those political and administrative actors who were involved in the creation (1974), reform (1991), and resurrection (2001 onwards) of state supervision of Islam.

Given that comparatively little research has been undertaken on Niger, this study of the relationship between the Nigerien state and Islam lends itself to exploratory and historically informed research. As the relationship between the Nigerien state and its various religious communities is a sensitive issue and shrouded in secrecy, the article draws on ethnographic research methods including archival research, grey literature, and semi-structured interviews with clerics, Nigerien academics, politicians, and civil servants. The informants listed agreed to see their names published. Data collection took place during three lengthy research stays in Niamey and Niger’s southern areas in 2009, 2010, and 2013. Given the lack of prior research on the role of the African state as a religious actor and the causal limitations of an exploratory case study, I do not claim that the consolidation of purist Salafism is exclusively due to state regulation. The findings of this study serve rather as a hypothesis for future comparative studies on the modus operandi of Salafism in areas of limited statehood.

Salafism and the state: definitions, concepts and methods

There is often confusion about the origins and meanings of Salafism.\textsuperscript{17} I refer to Salafism as a theological group whose origins and theological convictions are equated with clerics such as Ibn Taymiyya (\textit{d}. 1328) and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92). This definition associates Salafism with Wahhabism, the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Salafism, however, has a longer history than Wahhabism and is adaptable to the particular societal and political context in which its followers find themselves.\textsuperscript{18}

Salaris’ textual interpretation of the Koran and their outright rejection of local rites as un-Islamic innovations \textit{(bida)} are at the heart of the Sufi-Salafi divide.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, Salafism challenges the influential position of Sufi clerics. The Salafi creed rejects the hierarchical structure of Sufi brotherhoods \textit{(tariqa)} as idolatry \textit{(shirk)}. For Salaris, living according to Islamic principles does not require local or contemporary interpretations of the Koran. Salafi clerics also denounce the Sufi practice of exchanging donations for religious blessings.\textsuperscript{20} In West Africa, Salafism derives its financial and spiritual support from a variety of different sources. Islamic welfare associations from the Arabian Peninsula provide the lion’s share of funding for the construction of mosques and the distribution of Salafi writings.\textsuperscript{21} Traders and wealthy functionaries have become crucial constituencies for the diffusion of Salafi ideas.\textsuperscript{22} A third constituency of supporters is made up of economically marginalized people.\textsuperscript{23}

Although all Salaris support a literal interpretation of the Koran, there are deep internal divisions within their community. Scholars frequently distinguish between three Salafi strands: purists, political activists, and \textit{jihadis}.\textsuperscript{24}

Purists engage in Islamic missionary and educational activities; they refuse to become entangled in politics and are fervent advocates of non-violence. Political activists engage with the political system in order to bring politics and state policies into line with the Koran. Such political engagement can take many forms: Salafis either form political parties themselves or throw their electoral support behind an already existing one.\(^{25}\) Jihadis, meanwhile, aspire to create a religious state by violent means. Despite these internal differences, ‘Salafism is a slippery phenomenon’:\(^{26}\) Salafi groups can move from quietist to any other strand and back.\(^{27}\) Table 1 summarizes the ultimate goal, means, and effects of each of these three strands.

Since the onset of democratization in 1991, Niger has experienced a rapid increase in Salafi activity. In a country where 98 percent of the population is Muslim, Salafi clerics now control approximately one-third of Niger’s mosques.\(^{28}\) Despite some initial anxiety, intra-Islamic relations are generally peaceful.\(^{29}\) On television and over the radio, representatives of both traditions lead believers through joint prayer sessions. Throughout Niger’s densely populated southern region, Salafi and Sufi clerics regularly come together and engage in intra-Islamic dialogue - thereby exchanging information about potential local sources of conflict.\(^{30}\) The relationship between the various Salafi associations and the secular state is a more ambivalent one, though. Niger’s Salafi community has campaigned for the abolition of the secular state on several different occasions.\(^{31}\) In the past Salafi clerics have also lobbied against a number of government initiatives designed to improve the legal status of women.\(^{32}\) To date, however, Niger’s


\(^{26}\) Meijer, ‘Salafism: Doctrine, diversity and practice’, p. 44.


\(^{29}\) Robert Charlick, ‘Niger: Islamist identity and the politics of globalization’, in William Miles (ed.), *Political Islam in West Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2007), pp. 19—42. All interview partners confirmed that purist Salafism has emerged as the dominant strand of Salafism in Niger.

\(^{30}\) Moulaye Hassane, ‘La situation au sahel et le risque d’instrumentalisation du fait religieux: Quelles perspectives pour le dialogue?’ (Conférence internationale pour le dialogue des cultures et des religions, Fès, Morocco, 2013).


Salafi associations have neither supported nor lobbied for any existing political party in the country, nor have they formed one of their own.33 These dynamics are remarkable for two reasons. First, Niger’s religious sphere has historically been susceptible to outside influences, particularly those emanating from its southern neighbour, Nigeria.34 There, the spread of fundamentalist Islam has provided the theological premise for the formation of Boko Haram and other such jihadi fundamentalist groups.35 Despite its geographical and ideational proximity to Nigerian clerics, Niger’s Salafi community has refrained from inflicting deadly violence on its Sufi majority.36 Second, the evolution of the relationship between Salafi and Sufi congregations on the one hand, and Salafi clerics and the secular state on the other, has not always appeared to point towards peaceful coexistence. The first decade after Niger’s democratic transition (1991–2000) did not escape intra-Islamic tensions. In November 2000, various Islamic associations protested against the holding of a women’s fashion festival in northern Niger. The protests transformed into riots in several southern cities.37 Yet these early signs of religious tension never actually escalated into full-blown extremist violence.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Salafism gradually gained a greater foothold in West Africa. The colonial powers and their African successors watched these unfolding dynamics with concern, as Salafi clerics became vocal critiques of the nascent secular political elites.38 Niger was no exception to these developments.39 Its first government under Hamani Diori (1960-74) owed its position of power to French manipulation of Niger’s pre-independence electoral contests, and consequently lacked wider legitimacy among Niger’s population.40 Keen to avoid the spread of growing Islamist influence, the Nigerien state established the Association Culturelle Islamique du Niger (ACIN). Institutionally frail, the ACIN was led by imams loyal to the regime. Its mandate was to ensure that all clerics accepted the secular nature of the post-independent state and refrained from openly criticizing government conduct.41

The destabilizing potential of Islamist ideology vis-à-vis Niger’s nascent domestic order became evident after the Diori government signed several cooperation agreements with Gaddafi’s Libya. Libyan aid was tied to various cultural cooperation agreements. These envisaged Arabic language classes in public schools, religious education programmes for Nigerien clerics and the establishment of an Arabic radio station.42 Libya’s Islamic missionary society Al-da’wa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Call) was in charge of the cultural aspect of Libyan aid. Led by the grand mufti of Tripoli, it pursued an anti-secular agenda - one that was at odds with the Islam practised by Niger’s local imams and by the country’s Sufi brotherhoods.43 Libya’s Islamization programmes triggered widespread protests by Niger’s student unions and the civil service. Deeply socialized in the secular tradition of French colonialism, both groups were key constituencies of an otherwise unpopular regime.44 In 1972, and again in 1974, Niger experienced several demonstrations and strikes against the perceived Arabization of the

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country. These protests contributed significantly to the social unrest that provoked the military coup of 15 April 1974.45

Immediately after claiming power, Niger’s new military ruler, Seyni Kountché, denounced the ACIN for having failed to stem the rise of Arabic versions of Islam and dissolved the body.46 Barely four months into his tenure, Kountché established the AIN in its place. At its founding congress Kountché highlighted the association’s main task: to ensure conformity between ‘national traditions and Islamic practices’.47 Emphasizing the differences between the Arab origins of Islam and the religious needs of the Nigerien people became the leitmotif of Kountché’s approach to Islamic issues. His discourse about Niger’s interpretation and practice of Islam borrowed from the pre-colonial French administration’s dichotomous distinction between African and Arabic Islam.48 While Islam provided the spiritual link to the Arab world, the latter’s religious doctrines were not to find their way into Niger.49 Kountché’s emphasis on Niger’s version of Islam became embedded in a nationalist discourse through which the government tried to create a clear national identity.50 During the course of the 1970s, Kountché renegotiated the terms of Niger’s cultural treaties with Libya. The new agreement highlighted the importance of national sovereignty, and the Voice of Islam radio station was taken off air.51

The government filled the AIN leadership with imams from Niger’s most prestigious clerical families. The association’s president, Elhaj Alfa Oumarou Ismaël, came from a long line of local marabouts in Say, where most Nigerien clerics continue to receive their training. He remained in charge of the AIN from 1974 until 2010. All other leadership positions went either to members of established clerical families or to local Sufi leaders.52 The daily practice of Islam was now regulated by the state, with the AIN acting as gatekeeper to Niger’s religious sphere. Between 1974 and 1991 all imams wanting to conduct Friday prayers had to apply to the Ministry of the Interior for a prayer licence. In order to become authorized preachers, clerics had to go through several hearings in which AIN clerics

52. Interview, Moulaye Hassane, University of Niamey, Niamey, 11 November 2009 and 2 August 2013.
tested candidates’ interpretations of the Koran. The cleric in question had to provide evidence that his practice of Islam was in line with the AIN doctrine of a politically passive and moderate Islam. Imams demonstrating a predilection for the fusion of politics and religion were blacklisted. The Ministry of the Interior could revoke prayer licences at any time. Contemporary Nigerien clerics and politicians have affirmed that, from the mid-1970s onwards, clerics’ access to Friday prayer mosques became contingent on a set of government criteria.

Soon after its creation, the AIN established a close-knit, nationwide network of mosques across Niger. The timing of the construction of these mosques was key to the AIN’s organizational effectiveness. Given the country’s sparse population, Niger had had very few Friday prayer mosques prior to the organization’s establishment. The lack of alternative sites for mass worship combined with the rapid spread of state-controlled mosques made the government’s efforts to establish religious control over its territory easier. By 1976 the AIN had offices in all the urban areas of the country. By the early 1980s, the AIN had penetrated the hinterlands, including the Tuareg north.

The rapid spread of AIN offices was accomplished by incorporating the AIN into the new political-administrative structure of the Nigerien state, Kountché’s National Development Society. Starting in March 1980, the military regime established administrative councils (so-called ‘development councils’) at the village, district, regional, departmental, and national levels. Figure 1 outlines the institutional composition of the National Development Society and all of its councils.

Participation in all of the councils was fixed, and was open to those groups and associations that were Kountché’s core constituencies. On the one hand, the plethora of administrative units functioned as a surveillance tool that allowed the military to detect signs of potential opposition. On the other, the development councils constituted places of deliberation about the administrative and technological needs of the country’s largely rural and illiterate population. In the absence of state structures, the National

55. Interviews, Mohamed Bazoum, leader of the PNDS and current foreign minister; Ben Sallah, former minister of religious affairs; Cheikh Ab ass, Sufi Imam; Issoufou Bachard, honorary president of AN ASI and former member of various Salafi associations. All interviews conducted during different research stays between November 2009 and August 2013.
57. Interviews, leadership of the AIN, Niamey, 5 July 2013.
Development Society provided a forum for state officials and pre-selected representatives of the population to discuss their day-to-day concerns. In one of the rare in-depth articles on Nigerien politics, Pearl Robinson demonstrates how the National Development Society structured politics in several rural areas and turned Niger into a corporatist state. Leading Nigerien politicians, civil servants, and local analysts have highlighted the important role the Society played in structuring social-political life at the time.

The AIN participated at all administrative levels, and thus constituted a core part of the National Development Society. Its full integration into the autocratic-administrative structure of the secular state enabled the AIN to monitor Nigerien religious life successfully. Sufi clerics still refer to the Kountché period as an era of social stability due to the ‘lack of foreign influences’ in the religious sphere. Salafi clerics see the control of imams by the AIN in the 1970s and 1980s as a heavy infringement of the state on...
religious liberty, which meant that Niger’s religious space remained almost inaccessible to the Salafi creed. AIN control over state-owned Friday prayer mosques made it impossible to establish an official presence and difficult to establish a viable one. According to local analysts, the Salafi presence in Niger was confined to clandestine mosques in Maradi, which served as the only place of Salafi worship.

The circumstances that led to the creation of the AIN confirm the view of ‘institutions and organizations as the political legacies of concrete historical struggles’. Such entities champion the interests of those who emerged victorious from previous conflicts. With the establishment of the AIN, Niger’s secular military elite and the representatives of Sufi Islam managed to gain the upper hand in the struggle for access to Niger’s mosques. At the time of the AIN’s formation, large parts of the population were still animists. The pre-eminent position of the AIN allowed the Sufi orders and local clerics gradually to convert these animists to Islam without any meaningful competition from Salafi clerics.

Organizational adaptation: religions control between 1991 and 2000

After a decade of economic crises and the death of Kountché in 1987, Niger’s autocratic system collapsed during the course of 1990. Law 91-06 of 20 May 1991 established the right to freedom of association and ended the AIN’s reign as the sole representative of Islam in Niger. Bereft of its privileged status, the AIN entered the post-autocratic period as an organization widely discredited. Due to its previous proximity to the Kountché regime, large sections of the population regarded the AIN as highly corrupt and oppressive.

Although the democratic transition shook its foundations, the AIN did not disintegrate. Rather, Niger’s political-administrative elite adjusted the AIN’s modus operandi to fit the new political environment. According to the new freedom laws, all Islamic associations intending to build Friday prayer mosques now needed to register first with the Ministry of the Interior and apply for state recognition. Prospective Islamic associations

65. Interview, Salafi Sheikh Boureima, Niamey, 3 August 2013; Interview, Ben Sallah, former Minister of Religious Affairs, Niamey, 10 July 2013.
needed to submit a reference (témoignage) from the AIN, which assessed whether the applicant association’s ideology was in line with the principles of peaceful and apolitical Islam.70

There are several mutually reinforcing reasons why Niger’s administrative and political elites did not dismantle the AIN. First, the civil service had been socialized in the tradition of French secularism and had remained committed to the separation of religion and the state.71 Second, the end of autocratic rule had led to the demise of the National Development Society. The numerous administrative entities that together had made up the Society were never replaced by an alternative governance structure, owing to Niger’s severe financial constraints after the end of the uranium boom in the mid-1980s.72 Civil servants in the Ministry of the Interior were painfully aware of their institutional incapacity to safeguard the country against the seeping in of radical Islamic ideology. Civil servants also lacked the religious training necessary to evaluate what the intentions of any new Islamic associations were.73 In contrast, the AIN still presided over a dense network of local clerics, who traditionally had relied more on side payments from their followers than on the money they received from the government for their participation in the National Development Society.74 Thus, the AIN remained the only organizational structure that was institutionally and intellectually capable of monitoring Niger’s religious landscape.

Third, in addition to its primary function as a religious watchdog, the AIN had also provided legal aid to citizens who were party to low-level legal disputes (divorces or petty theft) and who were interested in mediation rather than a court verdict. Whenever the AIN’s mediation efforts failed, it would forward the case to the Ministry of the Interior. Thus, additional institutional linkages between these two bodies existed, which further discouraged many high-ranking civil servants from dismantling the AIN post-1990.75

Fourth, and maybe most importantly of all, Niger’s new political elite was recruited either from the secular civil service or from the inner circle of

70. Interview, Sheikh Jabir Omar Ismael, president of the AIN, Niamey, 7 July 2013; Interview, Ben Sallah, former Minister of Religious Affairs, Niamey, 8 July 2013; Interview, Abdou Yahaya, director of the Office for Religious Affairs, Niamey, 5 August 2013.
74. Interview, Ben Sallah, former Minister of Religious Affairs, Niamey, 8 July 2013.
75. Interview, Abdou Yahaya, director of the Office for Religious Affairs, Niamey, 5 August 2013.
the Kountché regime. Between 1993 and 1995, Niger was governed by a coalition of the Convention démocratique et sociale (CDS) and the Parti nigérien pour la démocratie et le socialism (PNDS). Both parties recruited their leadership almost exclusively from within the civil service. The PNDS returned to power in 2010. In 1996, Niger experienced a military coup and prolonged military rule (1996-9) under General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara, who had served as Kountché’s personal assistant for twenty-five years. In 2000, the Mouvement national pour la société du développement (MNSD) won power through the ballot box. It remained in government until 2010. As its name indicated, the MNSD united the former supporters of General Kountché. President Tandja and Prime Minister Hama Amadou shared a close personal proximity with Kountché: Tandja had served as Kountché’s Minister of the Interior in the 1980s; Amadou had served as Kountché’s cabinet director during the 1980s. Consequently, with regard to the relationship between the state and religion, Niger’s political elite displayed the mindset previously demonstrated by the civil service and the former regime. Furthermore, all members of the new political elite had experienced some institutional or personal proximity with the AIN in the past.

The strong personal, institutional, and ideational links between the AIN on the one side and Niger’s political and administrative elites on the other constituted the transmission mechanisms that ensured the AIN’s organizational survival. While previously it had supervised the allocation of prayer licences, in 1991 the AIN became a mere advisory body to the Ministry of the Interior.

The AIN advised against granting state recognition to any association whose leadership included foreign nationals or whose background indicated that it stood for the fusion of religious aims and political means. On the recommendation of the AIN, the Ministry of the Interior refused to recognize Tablighi Jamaat, an Indian missionary movement, Shiite organizations such as Chabab al Islam or Jamaat Ahmadiya, several foreign-led Salafi

80. Grzymala-Busse, Redeeming the communist past.
81. Interview, Sheikh Jabir Omar Ismael, president of the AIN, Niamey, 28 July 2013.
associations, and several groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The failure of these associations to gain state recognition made it very difficult for them to establish an influential presence in Niger. Their lack of legal status meant that they were unable to construct official mosques and to engage openly in missionary activities.

Although the AIN generally advised against granting state recognition to national Salafi associations, the Ministry of the Interior nevertheless did so on several occasions. The two most influential associations to have received state recognition in this way are the Association nigérienne pour l’appel et la solidarité islamique (ANASI) and the Association pour la diffusion de l’islam au Niger (ADINI-Islam). ANASI’s mission is to educate Niger’s secular civil service about all branches of Islam. Its leadership unites Salafi and Sufi clerics. ADINI-Islam is a carbon copy of the Nigerian Yan Izala movement. Its founders translated the statutes of Yan Izala and passed them off as their own.

In addition to the AIN’s continued supervisory function after 1991, clerics highlighted the long-term effect of the AIN on the evolution of Niger’s religious sphere prior to 1991. Newly emerging Salafi clerics during that time had to refrain from political or violent interpretations of the Koran if they wanted to gain wider popular support. The state-sponsored pre-eminence of local and Sufi Islam meant that new strands of Islam had to adjust to the manner in which Islam had been practised prior to the partial liberalization of Niger’s religious sphere. While the purist strand was compatible with these demands, political and jihadi Salafism was not.

The leaders of a number of current-day Salafi associations confirmed that, after the onset of Algeria’s civil war, representatives of the armed wing of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) found their way to Niger. The FIS offered to arm Niger’s nascent Salafi community. Accordingly, all clerics declined to establish any kind of relationship with the FIS as this

84. Interviews, various civil society representatives, Niamey, November 2009, July 2010, and July 2013.
85. Interviews, Nigerien police officers, Niamey, August 2013.
86. Interview, Issoufou Bachard, honorary president ANASI, Niamey, 3 August 2013.
90. Interview, Salafi Sheikh Boureima, Niamey, 3 August 2013.
would have been irreconcilable with the manner in which Niger’s faithful had been socialized. While the claims that Nigerien Salaris refused to engage in any form of collaboration cannot be verified, they nevertheless provide some insights into the long-term effects of the AIN on Niger’s faithful.

The prospect of Islamic violence and the resurrection of religions regulation, 2000 and 2013

After the breakdown of autocratic rule, the AIN’s new mandate was confined to an a priori assessment of prospective religious associations. This section demonstrates the negative implications of the emasculation of the AIN for stability in Niger. It further outlines how the Nigerien state reacted to early signs of Islamic conflict. One noteworthy reaction was the resurrection of effective religious control through the establishment of a new supervisory body, the Conseil islamique du Niger (CIN). The AIN served as the cognitive template for the institutional design of the CIN. Several developments between 1991 and 2000 gave rise to the perception that the ongoing diversification of Niger’s religious landscape had the potential to trigger large-scale Islamic violence. First, several Salafi imams used Friday prayer meetings and radio broadcasts as platforms to denounce Sufi practices as sinful, evil, and alien to the Muslim faith. Growing polarization between local Salafi and Sufi communities led to a number of violent confrontations in the cities of Maradi, Zinder, and Tillabéri.

Second, Muslim clerics became more actively involved in political debates. ADINI-Islam leader Yahaya Mohammed rapidly became known for his media appearances, in which he demanded the full implementation of the Shari’a. His appeals were particularly dramatic whenever the Nigerien government tried to create a legally recognized equality between men and women. In 1998, Mohammed claimed that a government draft proposal for a new family code was attracting the wrath of Allah. The following year Mohammed burnt the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the streets of Niamey. These are just a few prominent examples of a wider array of polarizing statements.

92. Interview, secretary-general of the Conseil superior de communication, 7 July 2010 and 15 July 2013.
Islamic demands to put an end to the secular nature of the state during the various constitutional drafting processes posed a growing challenge to the principle of secular governance.96

Finally, increasing competition for influence in Niger’s religious marketplace left its mark on the AIN. While it remained highly averse to the Salafi creed, the AIN began to echo some of the views promoted by ADINI-Islam. Most notably, it advocated bringing an end to constitutionally prescribed secularism.97 In November 2000, several Islamic associations protested against the holding of the African Fashion Festival in northern Niger, despite a government ban on all demonstrations in the immediate run-up to the event. As previously noted, in several southern cities the demonstrations escalated into riots. In Niamey, protesters damaged the UN building and beat women in the streets. In Maradi and Zinder, several bars were burnt to the ground. ADINI-Islam was a central player in the organization and orchestration of these riots.98 For many domestic observers and politicians alike, the November riots confirmed their fear that Niger was destined to follow the same violent trajectory as other Muslim nations.99 The Nigerien media echoed this sentiment and was vocal about the fact that the transition to democracy had led to a loss of governmental control over religious life - an impression the government was keen to avoid giving.100

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, the government arrested ADINI-Islam’s leadership and banned ADINI-Islam and eight smaller Islamic associations indefinitely.102 Only days after the violence had ended, the Tandja government (2000-10) also initiated a roundtable meeting with representatives from all authorized Salafi and Sufi associations and from the Catholic Church. The purpose of the roundtable was to gather ideas about how to avoid future religious violence in the country. Funded by the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Danish Development Agency, the Nigerien NGO SOS Civisme became the main driver of these meetings. Prime Minister Hama Amadou attended most meetings, as did all major Salafi and Sufi clerics.103 All of the roundtable participants

99. Confidential interviews with parliamentarians from the MNSD, PNDS, and CDS, Niamey, August 2010 and July 2013.
101. Confidential interviews with Western diplomats, Niamey, November 2009 and July 2013.
denounced religious violence and declared that Islam had to be peaceful, apolitical, and tolerant of other beliefs and views. They also agreed that this required a return to a more effective system of religious surveillance in Niger. The most tangible result of these roundtables was the aforementioned creation of a new religious body, the CIN.

Decree 2003-313/RRN/MIG established this body. The CIN’s explicit purpose was and is to enforce ‘Islam in line with the national culture of Niger’. Prime Minister Hama Amadou echoed this leitmotif in a number of public appearances. Accordingly, the CIN was tasked with guarding Niger against foreign interpretations of Islam. It is further responsible for making sure that Islam is practised in line with Niger’s ‘peaceful and non-confrontational national culture’. The decree also determined the composition of the national council of the CIN. Ten of its twenty members are representatives of the executive; the remaining ten seats are held by clerics, who are appointed by the executive. Five of these latter positions are currently filled by members of the AIN, two are allocated to the Tijanyya order, and the remaining three are held by clerics with no clearly identifiable organizational affiliation. The president of the AIN also serves as the president of the CIN.

In 2013, the Nigerien government announced that all AIN-affiliated clerics, mosques, and buildings would be taken over by the CIN. In addition, the government initiated a process of reintroducing a prayer licence. The CIN was to be responsible for formulating the criteria that need to be fulfilled in order to obtain such a licence, as well as for issuing and revoking these prayer licences.

The resurrection of religious control through the CIN was a long-term strategy. In order to contain potential jihadi Salafi elements, the Nigerien government undertook a number of additional initiatives. First, it asked Niger’s national association of chiefs to appraise and to report on the content of the Friday prayer in all mosques. In doing so, the Tandja government sought to re-establish government supervision of the daily practice of Islam in the country.

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108. Interview, Hendrik Westerby, Danish embassy, Niamey, 3 August 2013.
109. Interview, secretary-general of the Conseil superieur de communication, Niamey, 15 July 2013. Interview, members of Niger’s national association of chiefs, Niamey, 17 July 2010 and 3 August 2013. Diplomatic wires released by WikiLeaks provide evidence of this initiative, which was never publicly announced.
radical Islamic elements in the urban areas of Niger’s south.\textsuperscript{110} Third, the registration of new Islamic associations was heavily restricted. Since 2003 the government has not recognized any new Salafi associations.\textsuperscript{111}

Simultaneously, the Issoufou administration has reached out to quietist Salafi clerics and sought their consultation on a number of different social issues. Between 2002 and 2007, for example, the government asked leading Salafi clerics to help draft a new family code.\textsuperscript{112} President Issoufou’s appointment of Sheikh Boureima, Niger’s most prominent Salafi cleric, as his adviser on religious affairs in April 2011 sent a strong signal to Niger’s faithful: while violent religious conduct would not be tolerated, the government would acknowledge purist Salafism as an integral part of Nigerien Islam.\textsuperscript{113}

\textit{Conclusion}

This article has made three contributions to the discussion about Islam in the Sahel. First, it has shown that from 1974 onwards the Nigerien state functioned as a religious actor trying to restrict access to Friday prayer mosques. This was achieved with the help of the AIN, a state-sponsored and Sufi-led Muslim umbrella body. Second, drawing on key premises of historical institutionalist scholarship, the article demonstrates that the role of the state as a religious actor has been path-dependent. Although Niger’s autocratic system of government disintegrated in 1991, the AIN continued to operate under a modified mandate. After the riots of November 2000, the Nigerien government felt that social peace in Niger was under threat. By establishing a new regulatory religious body around the pre-1991 mandate of the AIN, it highlighted its determination to regulate the religious sphere, thereby ensuring the dominance of the Sufi brotherhoods and long-established clerical families. This confirms the assumption that institutions are the outcome of previous political struggles and serve the interests of those in and close to power.

Third, based on ethnographic methods, the article illustrates that the Nigerien state has been able to influence religious practices. Prior to 1991 there was no influential Salafi presence in Niger, as the AIN controlled access to all official Friday prayer mosques. Between 1991 and 2000, state recognition of new Islamic communities was contingent on certain criteria.

\textsuperscript{110} Reported in the US Department of State’s annual human rights reports between 2003 and 2008.
\textsuperscript{111} Interview, Abdou Yahaya, director of the Office for Religious Affairs, Niamey, 5 August 2013.
\textsuperscript{112} Interview, Salafi Sheikh Boureima, Niamey, 5 August 2013. The draft is with the author.
\textsuperscript{113} Interview, leadership of SOS Civisme, Niamey, 5 August 2013; Interview, Keïta Keïta, spokesperson for the Nigerien prime minister, 2 August 2013.
During this period the state softened religious regulation. Consequently, Salafi communities emerged and grew rapidly. Most focused on missionary activities; some engaged in abusive religious rhetoric; a few showed violent tendencies. As a result, the state engaged in a variety of initiatives to regain tighter control over the religious sphere. The analysis of the impact of state regulation on religious practise in Niger presented here represents an important contribution to the existing literature on Moslem politics in Africa. Previous studies have already shown that the practice of Islam in West Africa is shaped by local conditions. Yet none of these previous studies has looked in detail at the role of the state or how African states historically have tried to restrict access to Friday prayer mosques. The article therefore seeks to demonstrate the emergence of the African state as an important agent in the sphere of religious practice.

The article does not contend that the consolidation of purist Salafism is exclusively due to state regulation. A number of alternative explanations exist. Some scholars may argue that the lack of Islamic violence in Niger is the result of the Nigerien army’s capacity to control the influx of weapons, whereas armies in neighbouring countries have failed to so do. Others might point to the comparatively slow urbanization of Niger’s south as well as Niger’s low population density, which has meant that radicalized preachers had less of a chance to spread their ideas to a critical mass of people. Anthropologists working on Islam might highlight the importance of religious training; the answer to why Niger has developed differently would then highlight the role of particular Salafi clerics from whom the Nigerien clerics received their religious instruction. Important as these variables may be, the purpose of the article was to see whether state regulation of Islam in areas of limited statehood has any effect on religious practice. The article does not claim that any one factor is a sufficient condition for the consolidation of peaceful Salafism.

Accordingly, the article does not argue that the regulation of religious practices by the Nigerien state is sufficiently strong on its own to safeguard the country from Islamic unrest. In January 2015, Niger experienced religious riots on an unprecedented scale after the government and leading AIN representatives participated in the international rally in support of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Local analysts have highlighted the influence of Boko Haram in clandestine mosques, as domestic Salafi leaders had asked

their followers not to demonstrate against the government. On the one hand, these developments confirm the findings of this article: Niger’s domestic Salaris must be seen as a force for social peace. On the other hand, the riots illustrate that state control is not enough to completely protect the country against mor & jihadi influences. At the same time evidence from other West African states shows that state regulation is not always a necessary condition for peaceful coexistence between the Salaris, the state, and the Sufi brotherhoods. The often-cited example of Senegal indicates that the strong and influential presence of the hierarchically organized Mouride Sufi brotherhood (rather than the loosely organized Tidjaniya brotherhood) can be an equally effective tool against the spread of jihadi violence.

The findings of this study call for more comparative research about whether and how African states regulate religion and whether these regulatory mechanisms have an actual effect on religious practice. Such research could start by looking at umbrella Muslim associations similar to the AIN. If these bodies are partly controlled by the state and have the mandate to foster a particular interpretation of the Koran, then such African states must be considered religious actors. Suitable comparative cases could be countries where jihadi Salafism has emerged, including Mali and Nigeria. A structured comparison between Niger and these countries would provide more robust evidence of whether the regulation of the religious sphere matters in the emergence of a dominant form of Salafism. Although the literature on violent Islam in Africa is growing, there has been remarkably little research about the extent to which African states try to manage Islamic activity. As outlined previously, scholars working on other world regions have compiled an impressive body of work on this topic. By examining the role of the state and formal state institutions in religious regulation, scholars of African politics could make an important contribution to the global study of Salafism and its relationship with the state.