The Management of Salafi Activity in Africa: African State Strategies and their Consequences in the Sahel

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Salafism in Africa

In recent years, policymakers have devoted increasing attention to the rise of violent Salafi groups across Africa. Nigeria and Mali are two prominent cases in point. In Nigeria, the Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram has conducted terrorist attacks against thousands of innocent civilians for many years.[1] In 2012, Mali's north was overrun by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its local offshoots, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and the Defenders of the Islamic Faith (Ansar Dine). Despite the military intervention of the French government in early 2013 and the stationing of United Nations troops thereafter, Mali's north remains a violent theater of conflict.[2]

The spread of the Salafi ideology is not confined to any world region, yet in Africa, Salafism currently is the fastest growing branch of Islam.[3] Many security analysts therefore fear that Islamic violence might become even more widespread across the African continent and that the deployment of Western military aid is a question of *when* rather than *if*. What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that Salafi activity can take many forms. Historically, Salafi clerics have urged their followers to abstain from political activity and to confine their activities to peaceful missionary activities (purist Salafism). In other instances, Salafis engage with the political system (political Salafism). Finally, there are cases where Salafis engage in violent activities (jihadi Salafism).[4] Unfortunately, policymakers and commentators rarely pay attention to countries where Salafi communities coexist peacefully with other Muslim communities (Sufis) as well as with representatives of the secular nation state. Little is also known about how African governments are dealing with the potential challenge of growing Salafi congregations.[5]

Which strain of Salafism (purist/political/jihadi) has come to dominate in a variety of African countries? Do African states influence the emergence and the consolidation of any of the three strains, particularly by regulating the access of Salafi communities to their countries' religious landscape (defined here as access of fundamentalist Muslim communities to Friday prayer mosques, which represent the central institution for religious practice in Muslim societies)? Scholars working on Middle Eastern countries have long acknowledged the importance of state control over mosques as one way of directing Islamic activism in a peaceful and apolitical direction.[6]

Examining the Diversity of Salafism in the Sahel

The Salafi communities in the Sahel countries of Niger and Mali display different trajectories despite sharing important similarities. Both border Algeria and Libya and are thus in close proximity of transnational jihadi influence. They participate in the American-led Pan Sahel Initiative and are equally subjected to Western/American military presence. In the last two and a half decades, they have experienced a turbulent political and economic trajectory; unemployment among young males is very high, and their population growth rates among the highest in the world. Both exhibit a low degree of state capacity (stateness) and porous borders. In short, Niger and Mali display characteristics that are commonly referred to as key

explanatory factors for the emergence of jihadi violence.[7]

Scholars working on the Middle East increasingly refer to a typology (purist/political/jihadi) when examining the nature of Salafi activity.[8] Purists are defined here as Salafi communities who deliberately stay away from the political game and who abstain from violence. Purists engage in educational and missionary activities. Political Salafis are groups who engage with the important political actors of a country on a regular basis. They either throw their collective support behind an already existing political party or form a political party of their own.[9] Jihadi Salafis wish to transform secular society by violent means.

In both Niger and Mali, Salafi communities have chosen different modes of engagement with their social and political environment. The case of Mali shows that Salafism can manifest itself differently in the same country.[10] A comparative examination of the historical evolution of the interaction between Salafism and the state in Niger and Mali shows how different regulatory frameworks affect the formation of a dominant strain of Salafism.

Niger and Mali: Different State Strategies and Their Consequences

Throughout most of its history and as an independent state, the Republic of Niger has dedicated serious attention to the question of who gains access to its religious landscape. Following the military coup of Seyni Kountché in 1974, the Nigerien state began propagating a national version of Islam. Accordingly, "Nigerien Islam" derived its legitimacy from local interpretations of the Koran (Sufi Islam) and refrained from political or violent activity. In response to the growing infiltration of Niger's religious sphere by Libya, the Kountché regime established the *Association Islamique du Niger* (AIN; the Islamic Association of Niger), a state-led organization dedicated to the promotion of Sufi Islam across Niger's territory. Under the supervision of the AIN, religious practices became a heavily regulated affair. In order to be eligible to preach in a Friday prayer mosque, Muslim clerics had to undergo several religious tests in order to receive a prayer license. The AIN was in charge of designing these tests and allocating these licenses. If the AIN found a cleric was acting in breach of the basic principle of the state-sanctioned version of Islam, it banned the cleric from all mosques. By integrating the AIN into the administrative structure of the autocratic secular state at all government levels, the government created a close-knit network of religious supervision. Until the political liberalization process of the early 1990s, Salafi congregations had no legal access to Niger's religious sphere.

Gaining access to Niger's territory remained a difficult enterprise even after the political liberalization processes of the early 1990s. Muslim associations intending to build mosques have to register with the ministry of the interior. The registration of associations under foreign leadership is generally prohibited. Numerous Pakistani-, Iranian-, and Egyptian-led applicants had their applications denied. In order to receive legal recognition from the state, every applicant association has to provide a reference from the AIN. As a result, only Salafi associations under national leadership who commit themselves to respect the apolitical and peaceful nature of Nigerien Islam can legalize their status. These procedures notwithstanding, the 1990s saw local incidences of violence between Salafi and Sufi representatives and a growing politicization of religious officially registered religious actors.

By the early 2000s, it had become obvious that state had lost its previous capacity to regulate religious activity. The Nigerien state reacted to these developments by dissolving Salafi associations involved in the clashes of the 1990s. The state also created a new religious supervisory body, the *Conceil Islamique du Niger* (CIN; the Islamic Council of Niger) whose

mandate is almost identical to that of the AIN prior to the 1990s. Niger is thus a case where the state has undertaken serious steps to regulate Salafi activity. As a result, purism has emerged as the dominant mode of Salafi engagement.

In stark contrast to Niger, the Malian state never made any serious attempt to regulate access to its religious sphere. After independence, both Salafi and Sufi congregations spread across the country. In 1980, the Malian state created the *Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam* (AMUPI; Malien Association for Unity and Progress of Islam). One of the (unofficial) goals of this association was to mediate between Salafi and Sufi clerics. AMUPI neither promoted a national version of Islam, nor had the mandate or the organizational capacity to supervise the religious conduct of its clerics. With financial and personnel support from Saudi Arabia, AMUPI's Salafi wing soon occupied the most influential positions inside the organization.

After the onset of political liberalization, the Malian state continued to refrain from regulating the religious sphere. In 2002, the government encouraged the formation of the *Haut Conseil Islamique* (HCI; High Islamic Council). However, just as its predecessor, the HCI constitutes a mere coordination body uniting representatives of different Islamic tendencies. The registration of new Muslim associations and their mosques occurs without any meaningful scrutiny of these associations by the state. Over the course of the last two decades, this has led to an unchecked influx of radical preachers from the Middle East and Pakistan into Mali's north. There is strong evidence linking these groups to the emergence of Ansar Dine and the 2012 security crisis.[1] Simultaneously, political Salafi clerics have begun to dominate the HCI. Under its Salafi leadership, the HCI has emerged as one of Mali's most powerful political lobby groups. Salafi clerics across the country supported Ibrahim Keita as 2013 presidential candidate and did not shy away from encouraging his election during Friday prayer sessions. In addition, Salafi clerics managed to occupy very influential positions in numerous state bodies, such as the electoral management board or the newly formed ministry of religious affairs. Mali is thus a case where the state failed to regulate access to its religious sphere, which has resulted in the spread of jihadi Salafism in the country's north and political Salafism in the country's south.

Implications for Future Policymaking

The effects of violent Islamic movements are visible throughout Africa. The development community advocates socio-economic solutions for populations that are vulnerable to a potentially violent religious ideology. Although there are good intentions at the heart of such a strategy, the socio-economic output of many African states provides ample evidence that this is a long-term strategy at best. In-depth studies on jihadi groups further show that many of their most influential members come from a very affluent background. Policymakers should not make the mistake of reducing support for Salafism to socio-economic motives.

Security analysts advocate closer military cooperation between states that are vulnerable to Salafi agitation and their Western counterparts. In the Sahel region, the United States of America and France have been particularly active in this regard. So far, it seems fair to say that this strategy has been successful. Yet military engagement more often than not represents a reaction to crises that have already escalated. In other words, military engagement might be successful, but it always occurs after the outbreak of violent Islamic activity. Evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan suggests that long-term Western military engagement always brings with it the possibility of the further radicalization of Islamic communities.

Ideally, policies designed to counter violent Salafi activity should have a strong civilian and preventive component. The creation of institutional supervisory mechanisms for religious conduct and greater involvement of African states in running their religious affairs could be an integral part of such an approach. The presence of a regulatory framework governing access to Niger's religious sphere in conjunction with the willingness of the Nigerien government to counter the potential threat of Salafi violence ensured that Niger did not follow the same tragic trajectory of neighboring Mali or Nigeria. The donor community should try and raise awareness among Muslim recipient nations about the lessons learned from countries such as Niger or other African or Middle Eastern countries where religious supervisory bodies have long been in existence. This could be a first step in a broader strategy of preventing the spread of violent interpretations of the Salafi creed.

Notes

[1] Council on Foreign Relations, "Nigeria Security Tracker," available at <www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>.

[2] RFI, *Nord Du Mali: Le Retour de La Menace Jihadiste?* Available at <www.rfi.fr/emission/20141005-evolution-menace-le-nord-mali>.

[3] Ousmane Kane, "Moderate Revivalists: Islamic Inroads in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Harvard International Review* 29, no. 2 (2007): 64–68.

[4] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 1 (2006): 207–239.

[5] The empirical evidence in this article is based on my field research, the goal of which is to trace the historical trajectory of Salafi communities between independence and today on the basis of archival research, the collection of primary documents, and interviews with state representatives as well as with religious clerics. The German Gerda Henkel Foundation has provided me with the funds to conduct field research in Mali; field research in Niger was financed as part of other research projects I conducted in Niger over the course of the last 4 years.

[6] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

[7] Michael Mazarr, *Unmodern Men in the Modern World: Radical Islam, Terrorism, and the War on Modernity* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

[8] Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement;" Joas Wagemakers, "'Seceders' and 'Postponers'? An Analysis of the 'Khawarij' and 'Murij'a Labels in Polemical Debates Between Quietists and Jihadi-Salafis," in *Contexualizing Jihadi Thought*, ed. Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 145–164.

[9] For an example of this operationalization, see Khalil al-Anani and Maszlee Malik, "Pious Way to Politics: The Rise of Political Salafism in Post-Mubarak Egypt," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 1 (2013): 57–73.

[10] See also Alex Thurston, "Towards an Islamic Republic of Mali?" *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2013): 45–66.

[11] For just one example, see International Crisis Group, *Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013).