ISLAM AND POLITICAL CONTESTATION IN THE SAHEL: PROTESTS, RIOTS, AND JIHADIST INSURGENCIES IN MAURITANIA, NIGER, AND MALI

By

IBRAHIM YAHAYA IBRAHIM

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2018
To my Mom, Oumou Halilou and my Dad, Yahaya Ibrahim
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed to this research either directly or indirectly. My deepest
grateful goes to my parents, who invested in my education from young age and supported me
every step of the way. I also benefited from a warm social and intellectual environment at
Madrasatu Sabiloul Houda in Zinder. My sincere appreciation to its founder, Cheikh Chouaibou
Abdullah Saleh, who has shown me a quasi-parental level of support.

I could not have attended the University of Florida’s Graduate School without the help
and generous mentorship of Leonardo A. Villalòn. It has been the greatest honor of my life to be
his student. Leonardo A. Villalòn has advised me, assisted me, inspired me, and encouraged me
throughout my doctoral journey in ways that words could hardly describe. Certainly, this
dissertation could not have been written without his guidance. I will be forever grateful for his
immense generosity, kindness, and unyielding support.

Over the last six years, I have been fortunate enough to be part of the Sahel Research
Group and to regularly attend the Sahel Seminar meetings. I have enjoyed the collegial and
stimulating intellectual atmosphere in these settings. This dissertation would not have looked the
same without the valuable insights that I gleaned from various conversations that I had with
friends and colleagues at the University of Florida. I thank, in particular, Mamadou Bodian,
Daniel Eizenga, Sheldon Wardwell, Fiona Mclaughlin, Amanda Edgell, Abdoulaye Kane,
Renata Serra, Alioune Sow, Sarah Mckune, Olivier Walther, Benjamin Burgen, Marjatta Eilitta,
and John Hames.

I wish to also thank all the members of my dissertation committee for their valuable
inputs: Aida Hozic, Paul Lubeck, Benjamin Soares, Sebastian Elischer, and Benjamin Smith. I
have benefitted tremendously from being able to discuss my work with a number of other
colleagues that include Rahamne Idrissa, Zekeria Ould Ahmad Salem, Alex Thurston, Pierre Englebert, Boukary Sangare, Jaimie Bleck, Abdou Samad Yahaya, Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Vincent Foucher, and Mollie Zapata.

My dissertation field research was made possible through a funding awarded by the Minerva Initiative as a part of a larger research project to study institutional reform, social change, and stability in the Sahel region. This Minerva project partly supported my doctoral studies. I also benefited from several fellowships and awards, including the Fulbright scholarship, which funded my master’s degree, the University of Florida Graduate School Doctoral Dissertation Award, and several other grants generously awarded by the University of Florida’s Center for African Studies and the Center for Leadership. I extend my sincere appreciation to all these institutions.

I was welcomed and assisted by many people during my field research. I wish to extend my heart-felt gratitude to Ibrahim Laouali, Salif Ibrahim Maiga, Mahamane Ibrahim, Oubeid Imijine, Gueladio Diabira, Meyine Mouhamedoun, Aboubacar Maiga, Hamidou Magassa, and Moulaye Brahimi. I interviewed too many people to be able to list each and every one of them. I thank them all for their valuable insights. Other people helped me in various ways and deserve special acknowledgement: Firdaoussi Issa Mano, Salissou Rabo, Maman Mousbahou Yahaya, Ashley Leinweber, and Soumana Cisse.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... 4

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. 9

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .................................................................................................... 10

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. 12

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION: CONTESTING ON BEHALF OF ISLAM IN THE SAHEL ............... 14

Islamic Contestation on the Rise ......................................................................................... 17
The Question ......................................................................................................................... 20
The Theoretical Argument .................................................................................................... 22
Definitions of Some Key Concepts ....................................................................................... 29
  Islamic Ideology ................................................................................................................. 29
  Insurgency, Riot, and Protest ............................................................................................. 30
Research Design and Methodology ...................................................................................... 32
  Case Selection: Why Mali, Mauritania, and Niger? ........................................................ 32
  Motivation Method and Data Collection ......................................................................... 35
Structure of the Dissertation ............................................................................................... 37

2 ISLAMIC POLITICAL CONTESTATION: GLOBAL PATTERNS AND LOCAL VARIATIONS ............................................................................................................. 42

Culturalist and Structuralist Approaches to Islamic Contestation ..................................... 43
“Ideas Matter”: Global Islamic Ideologies and Islamic Contestation .................................. 50
  Objectification and the Quest for A New Framework for Interpreting Islam ................. 51
  Typology and Attribute of Islamic Ideologies ................................................................. 55
Hermeneutical Approaches to Islamic Doctrine: Innovation through Maqasid al-Sharia ............................................................................................................................. 61
  The Role of Islamic Political Ideologies in Political Contestation .................................. 65
“All Politics is Local”: Local Context and the Emergence of Islamic Entrepreneurs .......... 68
  Social Movement Theories ............................................................................................... 70
Variations in the Structures of Local Contexts .................................................................. 73
  Interaction between Ideology and Local Context and the Construction of Collective Action ......................................................................................................................... 75
Participation of Individuals in Contestation ....................................................................... 78
  Determinants of Individuals’ Participation in Islamic Contestation ............................... 79
  Tentative Profiles of Participants in Different Form of Islamic Contestation ................ 82
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 84
3 THE NATURE OF THE STATE AND PROCESSES OF ISLAMIZATION IN THE SAHEL .................................................................................................................................86

The Nature of the State in the Sahel: Neither “Sahelian” nor “State” ..............................................88
   Trajectories of the Sahelian State: Juxtaposition of Formal, Informal, and Hybrid Institutions ...89
   Democratization and Divergent Outcome: Inter-State Variations ............................................94
The Dynamics of Islam in the Sahel ..................................................................................................97
   Process of Islamization in the Sahel ..........................................................................................98
   Democratization and Re-Islamization .......................................................................................102
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................107

4 THE CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS OF ISLAM AND THE STATE IN THE SAHEL ..................................................................................................................109

A Brief History of Islamic Political Contestation in the Contemporary Sahel .........................111
Local Contexts and Patterns of Contestation in the Sahel ............................................................114
   Sahelian Capital Cities and the Participatory Context of Political Contestation .............116
   Sahelian Rural Periphery and The Insurrectional Context of Political Contestation ....120
   Sahelian Secondary Cities and the “Compliant Context” of Political Contestation ....123
Expressions of Different Islamic Ideologies in the Sahelian Public Sphere ..........................126
   Pietist Muslim Activists in the Sahel .......................................................................................128
   Islamist Activists in the Sahel ................................................................................................132
   Jihadism in the Sahel ..............................................................................................................135
The Interaction between Islamic Ideologies and Local Contexts ...........................................137
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................141

5 PROTESTING IN ISLAMIC TERMS: ISLAMISM AND ABOLITIONIST ACTIVISM IN MAURITANIA .......................................................................................................143

Slavery, Islam, and Abolitionist Activism in Mauritania ............................................................147
   Justification of Slavery in Islamic Jurisprudence ...................................................................149
   The Islamization of Abolitionist Activism in Mauritania ......................................................153
Nouakchott: A Context of Consolidated Statehood ...................................................................157
Dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott: the Rise of Islamism and IRA Activism ............................161
   Dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott .........................................................................................163
   The Rise of a New Haratine Elite ..........................................................................................167
Democratization, the Islamization of the Political Sphere, and the Haratine’s Electoral Significance ..................................................................................................................169
Haratine Identity and Participation in Abolitionist Activism ....................................................172
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................175

6 RIOTS UNDER THE BANNER OF RELGION: THE ANTI-CHARLIE HEBDO RIOTS IN ZINDER ...........................................................................................................178

Rioting as a Form of Islamic Political Contestation: The Case of the Anti-Charlie Hebdo Riot in Zinder ........................................................................................................182
Patterns of Political Contestation in Zinder: Governance and Mobilization in a Sahelian Secondary City .............................................................. 187
Patterns of Governance and Authority in Zinder .................................. 189
Social Mobilization in Zinder ................................................................. 194
The Religious Landscape of Zinder .......................................................... 197
Changing Religious Dynamics in Zinder .................................................... 199
Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Vulnerability as to Islamic Identity ..................... 204
Assertive Management of the Religious Affairs: Enforcing Pietism, and the Reaction to It ................................................................. 207
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 211

7 JIHADIST INSURGENCY: MUJAO AND THE OCCUPATION OF GAO ............. 214

Jihadist Insurgency in Gao: The Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa ......... 216
The Challenge of Governing the Sahel’s Periphery: The Case of Gao ................. 222
Gao: The Characteristics of a Sahelian Peripheral Region ................................ 224
Decentralization, Rebellion, and Smuggling: The Making of an Insurrectional Context in Gao ................................................................................. 229
The dynamics of Islam in Gao and the Rise of Jihadist Ideology ..................... 234
The Emergence of Heretic Movements in Gao’s Unregulated Islamic Sphere .... 236
The Jihadist Implantation in Northern Mali and the Creation of MUJAO ................ 239
Individual Motivation to Participate in Jihadism .......................................... 245
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 249

8 CONCLUSION: VARIATION OF ISLAMIC POLITICAL CONTESTATION IN THE SAHEL, FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS ............................................. 252

LIST OF REFERENCES .................................................................................. 265

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ............................................................................ 290
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>Trend of Islamic Political Contestation, 1997 – 2015. Source: ACLED dataset, compiled by author</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Prevalence of Type of Political Contestation in the Sahel. Source: ACLED dataset, compiled by author</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Political contestation in Mali between 1997 – 2017. Source: ACLED dataset, compiled by author</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEC</td>
<td>Alternative Espace Citoyen (Alternative Citizens’ Space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIN</td>
<td>Association Islamique du Niger (Islamic Association of Niger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMUPI</td>
<td>Association Malienne pour l’Unicité et le Progrès (Malian Association for Unity and the Progress of Islam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQIM</td>
<td>Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIA</td>
<td>Groupe Islamique Armé (Armed Islamic Group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GREAT</td>
<td>Groupe de Recherche en Economie Appliquée et Théorique (Research Group in Applied and Theoretical Economics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCIM</td>
<td>Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (High Islamic Council of Mali. Remember to use a tab between the abbreviations and the definitions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMRAP</td>
<td>Institut Malien de Recherche-Action pour la Paix (Malian Institute for Research-Action for Peace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRA</td>
<td>Initiative pour la Resurgence du mouvement Abolitioniste (Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISERI</td>
<td>Institut Supérieur des Études et Recherches Islamiques (Institute of Islamic Research and Study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISGS</td>
<td>Islamic State in the Greater Sahara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNIM</td>
<td>Jama’atu Nusratul Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LASDEL</td>
<td>Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (Laboratory of studies and research on social dynamics and local development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNLA</td>
<td>Mouvement National pour Libération de l’Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPCR</td>
<td>Mouvement Patriotique pour une Citoyenneté Responsable (Patriotic Movement for Responsible Citizenship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUJAO</td>
<td>Mouvement pour l’Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RNDD</td>
<td>Rassemblement National pour la Réforme et le Développement, Tawassoul (National Rally for Reform and Development, Tawassoul)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the last quarter century, the Sahel region has experienced a surge in episodes of Islamic political contestation. Sahelian Muslim activists have been increasingly assertive in defending Islamic values and promoting an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. Yet, while the use of Islamic discourse has been a shared characteristic of Islamic political contestation, the form of expression that this contestation has taken has varied greatly, ranging from peaceful protests, to violent riots, and jihadist insurgencies. This dissertation attempts to explain the factors and processes behind this variation in the forms of Islamic political contestation.

Scholarly efforts to explain the rise of Islamic political contestation have largely followed two distinct approaches: a culturalist approach, emphasizing the role Islam plays or certain interpretations of the Islamic doctrine, and a structuralist approach, which treats Islam as epiphenomenal, and focuses instead on the context and structures of the place where contestation arises. Relying on three case studies, including the anti-slavery protests in Mauritania, the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Niger, and the jihadist insurgency by the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa in northern Mali, this dissertation argues that the form that Islamic political contestation takes is a function of the interaction between global Islamic ideologies, the
structures of the local context, and the factors shaping the motivations of individuals to take part in the contestation.

Three types of Islamic political ideologies are identified, including Pietism, Islamism, and Jihadism. The structures of the local context, notably the political opportunity, pattern of mobilization, and grievance frame, also vary from capital cities, to secondary cities, and rural periphery, in what I have identified as “participatory,” “compliant,” and “insurrectional” contexts. The social and political dynamics in these contexts provides a fertile ground for the politicization of a particular ideology. Islamic protest occurs mainly in a participatory context, which may foster the politicization of the Islamist ideology. An insurrectional context, however, incentivizes adherents to the jihadist ideology to pass from mere belief to political action. Finally, the congruence between pietism and a compliant context may result in a lack of contestation or in sporadic rioting.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: CONTESTING ON BEHALF OF ISLAM IN THE SAHEL

The Muslim world has recently experienced an expansion of political contestation, including Islamic political contestation, meaning episodes in which Muslim activists employ Islamic discourse and symbols to justify and/or mobilize support for contentious collective action.¹ Over the last few decades, Muslims activists, from the Maghreb to the Mashreq and from Southeast Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, have shown increasing willingness to promote Islamic agenda and Islamic values in the public sphere. Islam, as a result, is a source of inspiration and motivation for political activism in contemporary Muslim societies. Yet, while the use of Islamic discourse has been a shared characteristic of Islamic political contestations, the form of expression that this contestation has taken has varied greatly and changed over time.

The Sahel region is one of least known areas of the Muslim world, but it is certainly not on the margins of the global dynamics of Islam. On the contrary, major happenings affecting Muslim societies worldwide, as well as the various theological and ideological debates between canonical Muslim activists and scholars, exert strong influence on the social and political dynamics in the Sahel. In fact, just like in other parts of the Muslim world, and contrary to the theoretical assumptions that predicted a decrease in the role of religion in modernizing societies, the Sahel region has experienced an increasingly assertive presence of Islam both in the private

---

¹ The topic of Islamic political contestation has been addressed directly or indirectly in numerous studies on Islam and politics and under diverse themes, such as “Muslim politics,” “political Islam,” “Islamic activism” (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004; Soares and Otayek 2007; Roy 1994; Wiktorowicz 2004, Volpi 2010). These themes cover an array of phenomena related to Muslim activists attempt to defend Islamic values and promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere, including through the creation of political parties and participation in electoral politics, civil society activism, contributions in public debates, political lobbying, and through such disruptive events as revolutions, and jihadist uprisings. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on the part of Islamic activism that emphasizes political contestation, by which I mean episodes or events in which Muslim activists engage in contentious collective action for the sake of defending Islamic values and promoting an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. In that regards, the dissertation covers episodes of protests, riots, and jihadist insurgency. It excludes the part of Islamic activism that emphasizes party politics or argumentative debates.
and the public spheres (Villalón 2012; Soares 2005 and 2009; Idrissa 2017). People in the region appear to be more and more attached to religion. Survey data from the Afrobarometer surveys show that in Niger, 92 percent of the population respond that religion plays an important role in their lives, whereas in Mali and Senegal, 83 percent and 86 percent of the population, respectively, report that they perform religious practices regularly, more than once every day. Four out of every five Malian Muslims say that they pray all the five daily prayers (Pew Research Institute, 2008-2009). Across the Sahel, there is a tendency toward a more rigorous practice of Islam.

Islam not only plays an important role in people’s daily life, but the presence of Islam in the public sphere has been increasingly assertive. People are more and more supportive of the idea that sharia should be the official law in their countries. According to the Pew World Muslims’ survey on religion, politics, and society, popular support for sharia as official law amounts to 86 percent in Niger, 63 percent in Mali, and 55 percent in Senegal. A majority of Malians Muslims (52 percent) think that religious leaders should interfere in politics and express their views on political matters, and over 85 percent think that it is important that their political leaders have strong religious beliefs (Pew Research Institute, 2008-2009). These numbers show clearly that there is a popular demand for Islam to play a greater role in the public sphere in the Sahel. There is, however, no consensus either on one single interpretation of the sharia law, nor on what role it should play. While 82 percent of Nigeriens are in favor of giving religious leaders the power to decide over family and property disputes, for example, only 30 percent favor the application of the death penalty for apostasy, something, which many Muslim scholars view as a core component of the sharia law.
The growing influence of Islam is not limited to the laymen but concerns the elite class as well. On university campuses in the region, for instance, there is a noticeable growth of Muslim student associations that increasingly assert their presence in an arena that was until recently dominated by leftist student associations. During the last quarter century, an emerging Muslim elite, inspired by varied Islamic discourses, have pushed forward an Islamic agenda into the public sphere, challenging the dominant secular elites and secular discourses (Villalón 2010; Soares 2009; Elischer 2015). The public sphere in most Sahelian countries has become more and more “confessional.” The legitimacy of social and political orders that have hitherto been based on secular universal values, has been challenged and forced to compete with a new form of legitimacy based on conformity to the doctrine of Islam (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013).

Although Islam has taken a strong hold across Sahelian societies, and Islamic symbols have become pervasive in the public sphere, it is important to mention that this increasing Islamic influence is not necessarily at the expense of Westernization, but parallel to it. Elements of Western and Non-Muslim cultures, in general, are also pervasive. Liberal ideas of feminism, human right, and democracy, as well as American rap music, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, Western style clothing, and other symbol of identifying with aspects of the West have strong appeal to many Sahelian populations. The phenomena of “re-Islamization” of Sahelian society—as Idrissa (2017) labels it—and Westernization are not zero-sum. In fact, it is often in reaction to the phenomenon of Westernization and the persistence of what Muslim activists perceive as un-Islamic behaviors, that some of these activists justify their increasing intrusion in the public sphere. Soares (2005, 79) and Otayek and Soares (2007, 17) refer to aspects of this phenomenon as “juxtaposition” and “Islam mondain,” respectively.
Islamic Contestation on the Rise

As part of the broader global dynamics of Islam, politics, and the public sphere, the Sahelian region has more recently experienced an unprecedented surge of Islamic political contestations in its modern history. Figure 1 shows the occurrence of episodes of Islamic political contestation nearly over the last two decades (1997 to 2015) in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. From this data it appears clear that Islamic political contestation was an ongoing, though less prevalent, phenomenon in the late 1990s. It started gaining momentum around 2008 and reached its peak in 2012 with about 250 episodes in that year alone. Niger appears to be the hub of Islamic political contestation in the late 1990s. It was replaced by Mauritania in the 2000s. And beginning in 2010, episodes of Islamic political contestation became more frequent in all three countries, particularly in Mali, which experienced over four hundred episodes between 2012 and 2013 alone. Not only has the occurrence of Islamic political contestation increased, but their forms of expression have varied significantly, ranging from jihadist insurgencies, to violent riots, to peaceful protests. The recent outbreak of jihadist insurgencies in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahelo-Saharan region, as well as the random episodes of rioting by Muslim groups—such as the rioting that occurred in Niger in reaction to cartoons or movies portraying the Prophet Muhammad—and the proliferation of protests organized by Islamic associations throughout the region or by Tawassoul, an Islamist political party in Mauritania, are some of the most salient manifestations of this new phenomenon.
Although all these episodes share in common the reference to Islam as justification for political contestation, they differ significantly in their magnitude and in their objectives. While some episodes of Islamic activism portray massive jihadist attacks that have resulted in invasion and occupation of an entire territory, other episodes portray rather small protests such as those

---

2 The figure is based on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) dataset. The ACLED dataset provides information about all episodes of political contestation that occurred in Africa and Southeast Asia. Although the dataset does not classify contestation events on the basis of religion, for each episode it provides information on the actors involved, a summary of the event, and a reference for additional information about the event. I used these information and consulted additional sources to code the religious aspect of the events. The episodes that I projected in this graph correspond to events that match up my definition of Islamic political contestation, meaning interactions in which actors make claims to defend Islamic values or use Islamic discourse and symbols to mobilize participants in order to make a claim that bears directly or indirectly on the government.
that take place over the construction of a mosque in a neighborhood of Nouakchott or Bamako. Islamic political contestation often occurs in response to events that certain Muslims deem offensive to Islam. Reactions to the same event, however, may be different in different places. For example, the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in some Western media generated angry reactions all across the Sahel. But while Islamic associations in Nouakchott and Bamako successfully channeled this anger through peaceful protests, in Niger the reaction was rather violent, leading to attacks against Christians and the destruction of dozens of churches (Idrissa 2015; Sounaye, Issaley, and Bako 2016). Furthermore, Islamic political contestation can be organized in response—or as a counter-movement—to another episode of Islamic activism. The recent intensification of jihadist attacks in both Niger and Mali, for instance, generated multiple reactions, including by Muslim associations, which organized peaceful protests to condemn the jihadists and to express support for the state and the national armies in their struggle against the jihadists.

Political Science scholars have generally considered political activism and civic engagement positively, and even necessary for the growth and consolidation of democracy (Tocqueville 2004; Almond and Verba 1989; Putnam 1993). But when it comes to Islamic activism, the views tend to be rather negative (Hassan 2009; Jamal 2007). Three reasons may explain observers’ skepticism. First, Islamic activism is viewed as “un-civic” and fundamentally threatening to secularism and democracy (Hassan 2009; Gellner 1992). The rise of Islamic associations in many democratizing countries in the Muslim world, and their opposition to liberal reforms, led many scholars and secular elites to raise red flags and warn against the dangers of fundamentalism as a threat to the efforts for democratization (Tamimi and Esposito 2000; An-Na’im 2008; Harnishfeger 2008; Holder and Sow 2013). Even though Muslim activists have now
established themselves as major actors in the public arena in many Muslim countries, they are yet to be fully accepted as legitimate actors with constructive agendas. Second, Islamic activism is frequently viewed as inherently violent or potentially leading to violence. Peaceful Islamic activism is often considered merely a stage in the gradual process of radicalization. Many scholars explain jihadist violence as an advance stage of radicalization, which, supposedly, evolves from peaceful to violent activism (Zimmerman 2004; Charter 2007). Such suspicion of Islamic activism only grew stronger after the 9/11, when the media’s over-emphasis on jihadist violence overshadowed reports on more peaceful expressions of Islamic activism. Third, there is a conceptual confusion between Islamism and Jihadism (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2). The concept of “Islamism” has often been used to refer interchangeably to jihadist activism, which is revolutionary and violent, as well as to the more reformist and peaceful activism.

**The Question**

This dissertation focuses specifically on the variation of forms of expression that Islamic contestation has taken, which range from peaceful protests to violent riots and to jihadist insurgencies. Protests tend to occur in capital cities more frequently than in provincial cities and rural/peripheral areas, whereas insurgencies tend to be more prevalent in the rural peripheries as compared to cities. A significant number of riot episodes have occurred in provincial cities. Although there is a growing body of recent literature on Islamic activism in the Sahel—mostly focused on its violent aspects—the variety of forms that such activism has taken has not yet receive enough scholarly attention. This dissertation aims to begin to fill this gap in the literature by addressing one specific question: Why has Islamic political contestation in the Sahel taken different forms: jihadist insurgencies, violent riots, and peaceful protests? In order to attempt an explanation and provide an answer to this question, I focus this study on three cases of Islamic contestation, occurring in three Sahelian countries: First, the jihadist insurgency by the
Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Movement pour l’Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest, MUJAO in French) which operated in the Gao region of Mali between 2012 and 2013. Secondly, the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots which took place in the city of Zinder in Niger in 2015; and finally, the anti-slavery activism based in the capital city of Nouakchott in Mauritania in the period between 2008 and 2017. These cases are selected for reasons to be discussed below.

Many scholars have scrutinized the contemporary revival of Islamic activism. The resulting literature can be categorized into two major approaches: On the one hand, there is a culturalist approach to Islamic activism that suggests that Islam as a set of ideas, beliefs, and culture is the determinant factors of Islamic activism (Lewis 2002; Huntington 1996; Juergensmeyer 2003; Appleby 2000). On the other hand, a structuralist approach puts more emphasis on economic, social, and political factors (Wiktorowitz 2004; Roy 2004; Kippenberg 2011). In general, there is a lack of theoretical grounding for understanding the particular ways in which Islamic movements engage in political contestation. Scholars tend to view them either as irrational and dangerous movements or, by contrast, as just normal social movements that function in the same way as secular movements. Taken alone, neither the culturalist nor the structuralist approach provides adequate explanations for why Islamic activists tend to engage in peaceful protests, violent riots, or jihadist insurgencies more frequently in capital cities, provincial cities, or rural periphery, respectively. Considered separately, as they most frequently are in the literature, neither Islam in itself, nor social and political structures can explain the varied forms of expression in the three Sahelian countries of interest.

Thus, rather than examining the role of religious ideas and social and political structures separately, this dissertation focuses on analyzing the interaction between these two factors. The major goal of the dissertation is to contribute an attempt to sharpen the concepts that scholars
have used to analyze Islamic political contestation, and Islamic activism in general. The
dissertation, first, emphasizes the important role that ideas play in Islamic activism. But these
ideas are not to be confused with Islam as identity or culture, nor with specific Islamic theologies
such as Sufism or Salafism. The ideas that matter are those concerned with Islamic political
ideologies. Secondly, while important, ideas alone do not translate into contestation. There has to
be a structural context that is amenable to political contestation. The determinant factors of the
structural context are to be found at the very local district level not the national level as previous
research has emphasized. Thirdly, individuals’ motivation to take part in Islamic political
contestation is neither unique nor uniform. Participants in such action are motivated by a number
of factors that are often complementary. Overall, the dissertation attempts to theorize the ways in
which Islamic ideology, the structure of the local structures, and individual motivations interact
together to produce particular forms of Islamic political contestation.

**The Theoretical Argument**

Religious movements are different from secular movements in the sense that religious
belief has particular influence on preferences and grievances. Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005)
note that “[r]eligion adds both a transcendent and immanent supernatural dimension to identity,
norms, and boundaries.” However, Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005, 140) also note that in
order for religious ideas to translate into action, “three conditions must be satisfied. Religious
groups must come to consider political action as a sacred obligation, draw on various internal
resources to prosecute that action, and confront a political environment that may hinder such
efforts.” In other words, while religious movements draw on idioms that are different from the
ones that inspire their secular counterparts, the process of translating these idioms into political
action is similar to the process followed by secular movements. Given this similarity, Wald,
Silverman, and Fridy (2005, 121) suggest that “scholars should approach religiously engaged
movements with the same theoretical frameworks used to understand secular political forces.” In particular, they suggest using social movement theories, which emphasize the interplay of motive, means, and opportunity in explaining the emergence and development of social movements. In this dissertation, I apply the argument developed by Wald, Silverman, and Fridy to the study of Islamic political contestation. I argue that the specific form that Islamic political contestation takes in any given case is the result of interaction between Islamic ideology and the structure of the local context, including political opportunity, the capacity for mobilizing resources, and the framing of grievance. Furthermore, I take this approach forward to argue that there are different Islamic ideologies that include pietism, Islamism, and jihadism, and that the structures of the local context also vary from one place to another in what can be categorized as compliant, participatory, and insurrectional. Each one of these local contextual structures provides a fertile ground for the politicization of a particular ideology. A participatory context offers a better opportunity for Muslim activists who adhere to the Islamist ideology to act on their ideological beliefs, whereas an insurrectional context incentivizes adherents to the jihadist ideology to pass from mere belief to political action. Collectively, Islamic ideology, the structures of the local context, and individual motivations play determinant roles in shaping the specific forms of Islamic contestations which emerge in any given case.

Ideas matter in Islamic political contestation. Supporting the contrary would equate denying the role of Enlightenment ideas in the French Revolution (1789 – 1799), or the role of Marxism in the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) or the Chinese Revolution (1927 – 1949). While scholars of Islam and politics may not contest the premise that ideas matter, many are still

As I explain further in Chapter 2, these concepts are heuristic devices that I use to make sense of the complex reality of the interaction between religious discourse and socio-political context.
skeptical about which ideas matter, and about how, when, and where they matter. What is the importance of ideas in comparison to other social, political, and economic factors? I take these concerns seriously in my attempt to conceptualize what I call Islamic political ideologies and their role in shaping the form that Islamic contestation takes. I build on a long-standing discussions among scholars of Islam and politics on the necessity to distinguish between theology and ideology (Geertz 1971; Roy 1994; Volpi 2010). Theology is associated with religious practices, whereas ideology refers to religious ideas as they inform political preferences and behaviors. Islamic ideologies are developed by Islamic clerics and activists in reaction to massive social and political changes that have recently confronted Muslim societies worldwide. As Muslim societies have modernized rapidly, affected by multiple global trends, new phenomena and new questions have arisen, pushing Muslim scholars to struggle to provide answers (al-Qaradawi 2013; Bin Bayya 2013; al-Maqadisi 1997). The intense debates that have ensued among Muslim scholars contributed to the development of ideologies that can be usefully classified into three: Pietism, Islamism, and Jihadism. These ideologies provide different and competing frameworks for interpreting and understanding the world and the challenges facing Muslim societies, and provide different solutions for how to address these challenges. Islamic ideologies play a central role in shaping Islamic activism through three mechanisms: Diagnostic of the problems affecting Muslim societies, prognostic of solutions to those problems and framing collective action to address them. As Strauss (2016, 59) argues “Ideology shapes the interpretation of events and the choice of response… [It] helps to explain how elites frame threats, in terms of whom they are protecting and whom they are fighting.” Believing in one of these ideologies predisposes an individual or a group to perceive things in a certain way and to act in certain ways. Ideology notably dictates Muslim entrepreneurs’ choice of the appropriate
form of political contestation (As I will argue further in Chapter 2). The jihadist ideology posits insurgency as the only legitimate form of political contestation, whereas the Islamist ideology usually recommends peaceful protest as the most effective way of expressing political dissent. Pietism rejects all forms of political contestation, leading pietist followers to resort to unchecked spontaneous outburst of violence when grievance reaches a certain level.

Ideology provides entrepreneurs with a set of idioms (Skocpol 1985) and a tool-kit (Swidler 1986) for the elaboration and articulation of collective action frames (Snow 2004, 385). Sahelian Muslim activists appropriate these ideologies and use them to tap on local grievances and mobilize people to engage in political contestation. These “entrepreneurs” construct discourses that combine ideological argumentation with local grievances. Such discourse is articulated in a language that uses local symbols, idioms, and images for the purpose of maximizing its resonance and appeal among the local population. Yet, it is important to mention that Muslim activists are religious as much as they are rational actors. While they take religion seriously in crafting their discourse and rationalizing their actions, they are also social entrepreneurs who have social, political, and economic interests. Their attachment to religious ideology does not diminish their pursuit of various other interests. On the contrary the two can be mutually reinforcing.

Though necessary, ideology is not a sufficient condition for Islamic contestation. For any collective action to be possible there has to be a context of political opportunity that makes its organization possible and its success likely (Sedgwick 2007, 16). Just like any collective action—secular as well as religious—Islamic contestation occurs in a context of political

---

4 I use the term “Muslim entrepreneurs” as an alternative to Muslim scholars. While many Muslim entrepreneurs who engage in the struggle to defend and promote Islam are religious scholars, there are others who have strong interest in promoting Islam without being necessarily knowledgeable of the Islamic theology.
opportunity that prompt “social entrepreneurs” or “first movers” to organize a collective action, frame a discourse, and then mobilize popular support for it. The structure of the local context determines the possibility, or not, for “entrepreneurs” to pass from ideas to action.

Social movement theories examine the interplay of three structural factors in determining whether or not collective action is possible: First, political opportunity theory emphasizes the role of the political environment in allowing—or not—for the emergence and development of collective political contestation. In particular, this approach focuses on examining whether the state has the ability or not to obstruct the organization of political contestation as well as the way in which the political environment “shapes, checks, and absorbs the challenges confronting it” (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009, 26). Second, resource mobilization theory suggests that the possibility for engaging in political contestation depends on the material and human resources that social entrepreneurs can marshal and invest in collective action (McCarthy 1996). Third, framing process theory stresses the importance of discourse, identity, and culture in the construction of grievance frames. As McAdam (2004, 204) argues, “at a minimum people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem.” The ways in which local contexts structure political opportunity, the capacity for mobilizing resources, and grievance frames vary from one place to another, particularly in “weak” countries that are far from the ideal Weberian concept of a strong state.

The Sahelian countries are the prototype of weak non-Weberian states. They are postcolonial states that have inherited two major weaknesses from their colonial past: First, they inherited weak state institutions that are characterized by the juxtaposition of modern or formal institutions, traditional or informal institutions, and syncretic or hybrid institutions. Second, Sahelian countries have also inherited a particularly challenging political geography,
characterized by vast territories, most of which are unhospitable and sparsely populated. This combination of weak institutional structures and challenging political geography have produced states that are particularly weak and vulnerable to all sorts of political contestation. Neither fully modern, nor fully traditional, the Sahelian states appears rather as a continuum of statehood, going from areas of largely consolidated statehood, such as capital cities, to areas of more limited statehood in the rural and peripheral areas. In capital cities, the state looks more like a modern nation-state with fairly functioning state administration, a fairly “detribalized” society organized according to social class and using the language of civil society. However, the more one moves from the capital cities toward the rural-periphery, the more traditional institutions of chieftaincy, customary laws, and rural economy tend to prevail over the formal state institutions. In this setting, society tends to be organized along tribal and ethnic lines. Kinship systems and social hierarchy are strong. Communities are likely to rely on self-defense militias to provide for their own security. I argue that capital cities in the Sahel offer different political opportunities, capacity for mobilizing resources, and grievance frames than Sahelian secondary cities or rural peripheries in the Sahel. As a result of these variations of local structures, the patterns of political contestations also vary significantly. The structures of the local context constrain Muslim entrepreneurs’ choices by raising and lowering the cost and benefits of enacting particular ideologies.

Finally, the motivation for Muslim entrepreneurs to initiate collective political contestation are not necessarily the same as for the rank-and-file participants. While the interaction between ideology and the local context structures weighs high in determining Muslim entrepreneurs’ decision to engage in political contestation, the background and motivation of the individuals who participate in these contestations appears more diverse. Drawing on social
psychology literature on participation in collective action, I argue that participation in Islamic political contestation is a function of four major factors: the resonance of the ideological discourse, network relationships, collective identity, and material incentives.

The overall argument of the dissertation is that the form that Islamic political contestation takes is a result of interaction between factors at three levels: global, local, and individual. At the global level, there are Islamic ideologies that some authoritative Muslim activists and scholars have conceptualized—and disseminated through books, audio and video documents, and the media—based on particular interpretations of Islam and in response to challenges facing Muslim societies. These ideologies have been at times appropriated by local Muslim activists in the Sahel who have used them to formulate discourses that justify engagement in contestatory collective actions. At the local level, the structural context, including the state’s ability or not to project authority, the patterns of social mobilization, and social and political grievances, determine which ideology is likely to be politicized and put to action. Certain contexts are more suitable for the development of certain Islamic ideologies: An insurrectional context in which the state is characterized by limited statehood—that is by limited state capacity to project authority—communities organized along tribal and ethnic loyalties rely on themselves for governance, and where the feeling of political marginalization is high and state legitimacy is low, provides a fertile ground for politicizing and enacting the jihadist ideology. On the contrary, a participatory context characterized by democracy and consolidated statehood, where the state is able to enforce the rule of law, social groups are organized in forms of modern civil society, and grievances are corporatist, or related to government policies or the legitimacy of a particular regime—as opposed to state legitimacy—provides more opportunity for Islamism to pass from ideas to action. Finally, at the individual level, episodes of Islamic contestation have mobilized
individuals from different social and economic backgrounds and motivated by a variety of factors, including collective identity, resonance of the religious discourse, as well as other situational and strategic incentives.

My argument is not deterministic. I do not mean to suggest that an ideology cannot be enacted in an unfavorable field. Rather, I want to argue that given the costs and benefits imposed by local structural factors, those actors who believe in a particular ideology might find it more rewarding or possible to pass from mere belief to action. The fact that the context of limited statehood in a rural periphery provides a fertile ground for jihadists does not exclude the possibility of jihadists attempting an insurgency in capital cities where the state has a more consolidated statehood. The case of the Boko Haram insurgency in Maiduguri and Ansarullah al-Murabitun in Nouakchott are cases in point. Both attempts, however, came at some high costs. Eventually, Ansarullah was easily contained by the Mauritanian government, and Boko Haram had to withdraw to rural areas for the insurgency to succeed. Given these structural constrains, entrepreneurs may well adhere to the jihadist ideology, but they are unlikely to act on it in a context where the cost is high and the benefits uncertain.

Definitions of Some Key Concepts

Islamic Ideology

The concept of ideology has been defined in many different ways, to the extent that some definitions are clearly at odds with others (Gerring 1997, 957). My aim is not to add a new definition. Rather, I draw on Gerring (1997), to identify three attributes of the concept of ideology that distinguish it from neighboring concepts, including—and of particular importance for my argument—the concept of theology. First, ideology is “a system of belief, held in common by the members of a collectivity” (Gerring 1997, 971). They are dogmatic, and obstinate in the face of facts and counterarguments and they repress and silence other beliefs in
order to remain the only truth. “A value, belief, or attitude is ideological only with reference to something else which is not, or which is differently ideological” (Gerring 1997, 974). From this perspective, ideology is similar to theological doctrine. However, while both are dogmatic, theology applies to religious practice whereas ideology applies to political behavior. Ideology provides a lens through which people see and interpret the world. It guides and influences political preferences and behavior. The field of ideology is politics, not thought. As Gerring (1997, 967) puts it, when it comes to ideology, “behavioral patterns are politically and socially more relevant than patterns of thought.” Ideological phenomena must not be studied as purely ideational. Moreover, as Gerring argues ideologies are action oriented. “They seek not merely to describe the world but also to mold it” (Gerring 1997, 972). Ideology is “prescriptive,” or “programmatic” in the sense that “the holder of the ideology is enjoined by his or her ideology to act. McClosky suggests that “ideologies furnish guides for action” (quoted in Gerring 1997, 972).

Based on these three attributes—belief system, interpretation of world affairs, and action—I define *Islamic ideologies* as a set of ideas and beliefs that some Muslim scholars-cum-activists have conceptualized over time, based on their particular interpretation of Islam and of the challenges facing Muslim societies, for the sake of explaining those challenges and suggesting solutions and actions on how to address them. Islamic ideologies exist at the global level. They are disseminated around the world through books, audio and video documents, and the media. They constitute the lens through which a variety of Muslim activists view the world, interpret their conditions, and project their actions.

**Insurgency, Riot, and Protest**

Drawing on Cline (2000, 8), I define *insurgency* as a low intensity organized armed conflict that is conducted by internal (domestic) groups and that is based on political issues
and/or politicized social and economic demands against the government.” This definition emphasizes five fundamental aspects of an insurgency: 1) It is a low intensity armed conflict, to be differentiated from large scale civil wars; 2) it is an armed conflict as opposed to other peaceful expressions of political discontent such as protest; 3) it is conducted by an internal and organized group, thus excluding riots, individual crimes, and transnational violent activism; 4) it is motivated by political issues as opposed to banditry; and finally, 5) it is directed against the government, excluding communal violence. An insurgency is Islamic when the motivation of its leaders, and its mobilizing discourse, are based on the Islamic religion or when it aims at the promotion of religious beliefs, boundaries, institutions, traditions, or values, and is expressed in religious symbols and slogans (Sidel 2006, 7).

Riot is defined as an intense and sudden—although not necessarily unplanned—outburst of violence by one group of civilians against another group or the state. Rioters usually attack symbols, loot, steal, and destroy property of the targeted population (Marx 1970). Riot is often a mere emotional, relatively spontaneous and destructive reaction to an undesirable state of affair. Those who riot do not necessarily aim at changing policy or challenging an existing social order. They do not necessarily believe that violence is likely to bring about the needed change (Horowitz 2001). Riot can be divided into two categories: one that evolves out of a peaceful protest that turns violent, often mostly in reaction to police brutality; and another that starts with a deliberate perpetration of violence against a targeted group of civilians. In this dissertation, I am only concerned with the latter category of riot.

Protest, by definition is an organized non-violent resistance that aims at challenging policies or conditions from within the state system (Lipsky 1968, 1145). Although protestors engage in disruptive political actions to challenge state policies, they do it while recognizing the
state’s legitimacy and through participation within the framework of state structures. These
fundamental characteristics of protest—namely, peaceful, organized, and in recognition of state’s
legitimacy—distinguish it from other form of political contestation, including riot, which is
known to be un-organized and violent and insurgency, which delegitimizes the state and aims for
change from outside the state system. Typically, activists request an official authorization from
the local government prior to organizing a protest. Failure to secure the official authorization
often result in violent clashes with police.

Research Design and Methodology

Case Selection: Why Mali, Mauritania, and Niger?

This dissertation focuses on political contestation in the Sahel, a geographic region that
straddles North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Sahel region stretches from the cost of the
Atlantic Ocean to the West to the Indian Ocean to the East, and from the edge of the Saharan
desert to the North to the savannah in the south. From West to East, the Sahel covers part of
Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria, Cameroun, Chad,
Sudan, and South Sudan. Although the phenomena discussed in this dissertation apply primarily
to the six “Francophone” countries in the west of this region (which are most commonly referred
to as the Sahel today), I will focus particularly on three: Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The
Sahelian populations are composed of racially and ethnically diverse communities, including
light-skinned Arab and Berber communities living predominantly in the Sahara, and the majority
dark-skinned ethnic groups, including Fulani, Hausa, Songhai, Bambara, Dogon, Soninke, and
others, living predominantly in the central and southern areas of the Sahel. These countries were
all colonized by France and the French has an official status in each, though Bambara, Hassaniyya, Hausa, Zarma, and other languages function as widespread lingua franca.5

Besides sharing a common geographic space, Mali, Mauritania and Niger share many socioeconomic and political similarities. First, they are all overwhelmingly Muslim. The percentages of Muslim populations vary from 100 percent in Mauritania to around 98 percent in Niger and 95 percent in Mali. Second, they have weak state institutions characterized by a juxtaposition of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions. Third, they have particularly difficult geographies, characterized by a few densely populated areas, particularly their capital cities, and vast sparsely populated hinterlands with relatively few secondary cities as other urban centers. And fourth, they are among the poorest countries in terms of human development in the world, all ranking regularly in the bottom tier of the UNDP’s annual Human Development Index (HDI). All these characteristics make the Sahelian states among the weakest Muslim majority countries in the world.

Long largely ignored, the Sahel has moved to the center of the world’s attention as it has become the hotbed of jihadi groups and a major transit zone for Africans who aim to migrate to Europe. Lagging behind in most indicators of economic and human development, and in state capacity to control territory, the Sahelian countries feature the prototypes of fragile and weak state that many analysts view as potential incubators or sanctuaries for criminal organizations that threaten world stability. Given these shared characteristics, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger present a potentially rich set of countries in which to conduct a cross-national comparative study of forms of Islamic activism. My initial hypothesis was that national-level differences between these three countries explained variations of form of political contestation. Over the course of the

5 French is the only official language in Mali and Niger, but the second official language in Mauritania.
field research, however, I came to realize that although there are some national-level differences between the three countries, sub-national differences, specifically between capital cities, secondary cities, and rural-periphery are more relevant in accounting for the variations in forms of political contestation.

The three countries present cases that are representative of the variety of Islamic contestation that has recently occurred across the Sahel region, both in terms of the specific types of contentious issues and in the forms of collective action. Regarding the former, the selected cases represent the following issues: 1) Jihadist insurgency and the struggle to impose a certain interpretation of sharia upon the Sahelian societies; 2) slavery and the debate around who decides over what constitutes a legitimate Islamic orthodoxy and morality; and 3) the blasphemous nature of caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. These issues are certainly representative of the types of major sources of Islamic political contention that mark the contemporary Sahel region. Regarding the form of collective action, as I have suggested above, Islamic political contestation can be categorized into three ideal types. The first type is protest, which I define, paraphrasing Lipsky (1968), as a non-violent form of political action that is oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions. What distinguishes protest from other forms of political contestation is its non-violent character, and the fact that it is organized by a formally identifiable group such as student union, labor union, and Islamic association. In many cases protest is even subject to government authorization (Siméant 2014). A typical episode of Islamic political contestation that epitomizes protest was the burning of religious texts by IRA, the anti-slavery movement in Mauritania. A second type of Islamic contestation is in the form of riot, which refers to a violent collective action by loosely organized, more often leaderless, groups. Its main characteristics are the lack of organization, and the use of violence (Sidel 2006). A typical
example of riot as a form of Islamic political contestation was the violent demonstrations that took place in the city of Zinder in southeastern Niger in reaction to the publication of cartoons portraying the prophet Muhammad by the French satirical paper Charlie Hebdo. Finally, a third type of Islamic political contestation is insurgency, which refers to a low intensity organized armed conflict that is conducted by internal groups (Cline 2000, 8). Insurgency is distinguished from protest by the use of greater levels of violence, and from riots by the level of organization and coordination of the collective action. The insurgency by the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa—best known by its French acronym, MUJAO—in the Gao region of Mali provides a good example of this type of Islamic political contestation.

**Motivation Method and Data Collection**

My motivation to conduct this research is both personal and academic. I grew up in the town of Zinder in the Republic of Niger, in a family that largely practiced Sufi Islam. I received my primary, secondary, and high school education in Francophone schools. But concomitantly, I also grew up attending a Salafi Madrasa (religious school), where I received an Islamic education and learned Arabic. This dual background allowed me to pursue two bachelor degrees, in two different languages, at two different Universities: one in Sharia and Islamic jurisprudence in Arabic at the Islamic University of Say, and the other in Sociology, in French at the University of Niamey. From a young age, I witnessed tensions between adherents to different Islamic traditions, such as tensions between followers of Tijjaniyya and Qadriyya sufi orders, and those opposing Sufis in general to Salafis. I participated in several episodes of political contestation organized by both secular and Islamic movements. Yet, certainly, nothing in my experience has been as dramatic as the more recent development of Islamic political contestation. The outbreak of jihadist insurgencies across the region or such event as the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder, have given religious contestation an unprecedented and dangerous proportion. For the last few
years, I have lived with the constant fear that people I know personally could find themselves on either side of these violence: as victims or as perpetrators. The growing realization of the importance of this phenomenon on my community, and country and its importance in shaping the future on the Sahel region and the world at large has fueled my commitment to attempt to understand these dynamics.

My personal background and experiences have provided me with valuable assets that helped me conduct this research successfully. First, my Nigerien nationality and my deep understanding—built on my childhood and early education in Zinder—have facilitated immersion into local communities and, given me a level of understanding of the local culture. It has also enabled me to travel throughout the region, including in conflict zones, and gaining access to certain actors, including jihadists, whom it would have otherwise been difficult to reach. Secondly, the fact that I speak five languages that are among the most spoken in the region, including Hausa, Zarma/Songhai, French, Arabic, and English, has allowed me to directly interview a variety of actors, and to draw from multiple sources. My formal education has been in three languages—Arabic, French, and English—and I am comfortable with reading, writing and speaking in all three. Finally, my interdisciplinary training, in Sociology and Islamic Jurisprudence as well as Political Science, has been valuable in providing me with a variety of methodological and thematic tools to understand major social, religious, and political dynamics in the region.

While my background and experiences could be beneficial for this research, I recognize that they may also be detrimental. Such a strong immersion and personal attachment could in fact be a source of bias, unless tempered with an equally strong commitment to academic research. In order to make sure that the research is systematic and scientific, I relied on extensive field
research in each country to collect empirical data. This dissertation is based on extensive qualitative data that I gathered during fifteen months of field research between 2013 and 2017 in Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. The data were collected through interviews with elites and ordinary people, ethnographic research, archives and media. I conducted over a hundred interviews, consulted hundreds of news articles and did ethnographic research in various locales, including: Bamako, Segou, and Gao in Mali; Niamey, Maradi and Zinder in Niger; and Nouakchott, Rosso and Ayoun El-Arouss in Mauritania. In addition to these qualitative data, I also use quantitative data, particularly from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project dataset (ACLED), the Afrobarometer dataset, and the Pew World Muslim Survey data. The ACLED project provides useful information on all the episodes of political contestation that have occurred in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger Africa, whereas the Afrobarometer and the Pew world Muslim survey provide useful survey data about people’s opinion on religion and politics. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data provide strong evidences in support of the argument developed in this dissertation. Throughout this dissertation, I quoted material written in Arabic and French. All translations from French to English or from Arabic to English are my own.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, “Introduction: Contesting on behalf of Islam in the Sahel” has discussed the rise of the phenomenon of Islamic political contestation and its scope in the Sahel, elaborated on the question that the dissertation attempts to answer, and provided a summary of the central argument. It also has also discussed aspects related to the research design, motivation, and methodology.

Chapter 2 “Islamic political contestations: global ideologies, local contexts, and political motivation” lays out the theoretical framework for the dissertation. It provides a detailed overview of the literature on Islamic activism, distinguishing between culturalist approaches,
which stress the role of Islam, ideology, and belief, and structuralist approaches, which emphasizes the role of local structural factors. I discuss the shortcoming of this dichotomous approach to Islamic activism and its deficiencies in terms of explaining the variations of Islamic political contestation in the Sahel. Finally, I suggest a new approach that focuses on interaction between global Islamic ideologies, local contexts, and individual motivation. I discuss each of these factors in detail, drawing on a variety of theoretical sources, including Islamic studies, social movement theories, and theories in social psychology.

Chapter 3, “the nature of the state and processes of Islamization in the Sahel,” gives a historical overview of the two determinant factors of Islamic political contestation in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger: the nature of the state and the dynamic of Islam. First, I argue that the Sahelian countries inherited two important characteristics from their colonial experience: a weak institutional structure characterized by the juxtaposition of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions, and a very difficult political geography. Secondly, I discuss the process of Islamization in the longue-durée, arguing that the public sphere in the Sahel has become more and more confessional. The goal of this chapter is to attempt to capture key historical dynamics of relevance for my argument.

Chapter 4, “the contemporary dynamics of Islam and the state in the Sahel”, applies the theoretical framework defined in chapter 2 to explain varied forms of Islamic political contestation across the Sahel. I examine the pattern of Islamic political contestations at varying local contexts within the three countries, notably in the capital cities, secondary cities, and rural periphery. In line with the overall argument of the dissertation, this chapter shows how global Islamic ideologies have spread throughout the Sahel region, and how local level dynamics have facilitated the appropriation and enactment of these ideologies and created patterns of Islamic
political contestation. The chapter discusses the varying context of local socio-political structures between capital cities, secondary cities, and rural peripheries. It then focuses on the current dynamics in which Sahelian Muslim activists appropriate global Islamic political ideologies. The analyses on the ideological discourses is based on the study of contemporary figures of Islamic activism in Sahelian, including jihadist, Islamists, and pietists. Finally, the chapter shows how the structural contexts in capital cities, secondary cities, and the rural periphery provide fertile grounds for these Islamist, pietist, or jihadist entrepreneurs, respectively, to engage in political contestation.

Chapter 5, “protesting in Islamic terms: Islamism and abolitionist activism in Mauritania,” examines the case of anti-slavery protests expressed in Islamic terms in Nouakchott. The chapter argues that three major processes contributed to the rise of the Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionist Activism, IRA-Mauritania: First, the context of democratic transition that started following the 2005 military coup opened the door for civil society movements and political parties to participate freely in the public sphere. Second, the legalization of the Islamist party Tawassoul, laid the groundwork for an increasing Islamization of the Mauritanian political sphere and a competition among political parties and civil societies to win over moral and religious legitimacy. And, third, the electoral significance of the Haratine (descendants of slaves) community—which given its demographic size has become a precious constituency coveted by all the political forces—in return led to further politicization of the debate about slavery. Together, these factors created a fertile ground for an emerging Haratine elite educated in Arabic and/or French to use their language skills and religious knowledge to frame an innovative abolitionist discourse that has successfully mobilized the masses.
Chapter 6, “riots under the banner of religion: the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder,” attempts to explain the rioting episode in Zinder by focusing on the interaction between two factors: First is the internal contradiction of pietism—the dominant Islamic political ideology in Zinder—which declares political contestation un-Islamic despite a context of deep-seated political and religious grievances vis-à-vis government and the Christians minority. Second, there is a local context characterized by the weakness of civil society and other social groups, which translates in their incapacity to organize and channel local grievances through institutionalized mechanisms of contestation. I argue that the anti-Charlie Hebdo riot in Zinder came about as a result of heightened anxiety and vulnerability about religious identity among the masses in Zinder, an anxiety that religious institutions dominated by the pietist ideology have failed to capture and channel through organized and institutionalized mechanisms of claim-making. In the context of disenchantment vis-à-vis the government, the pietist reactionary and pro-government stance appears to be at odds with the popular grievances and demand for more role of Islam in politics.

Chapter 7, “jihadist insurgency: MUJAO and the occupation of Gao,” zooms in on the specific case of the jihadist insurgency in Gao. I argue that the MUJAO jihadist insurgency arose from the interaction between jihadist ideology, the structure of the local context in Gao, and a number of motives that pushed individuals to enroll in the jihadist movement. I show how the jihadist ideology made inroads in northern Mali as result of spillover from the Algerian crisis. Starting in the early 2000s, many leaders in the region came to adhere to the jihadist ideology. However, they did not act on it until the local context was ripe for insurgency. The context of social and political disorder that followed the fall of Qaddafi in Libya prompted a number of movements and actors motivated by diverse ideologies and interests to vie for political and
territorial influence. It was in this insurrectional context that MUJAO jihadists decided to pass from ideas to action on behalf of jihad. While some jihadists appeared clearly not interested in religion, many of them took religion seriously and acted on the belief that jihad is an Islamic duty. MUJAO was successful in mobilizing large number of fighters from different social and economic backgrounds, and beyond the traditional ethnic and tribal cleavages that have often characterized most insurgencies.

Chapter 8, “variation of Islamic political contestation in the Sahel: findings and contributions,” concludes the dissertation. In light of the data presented in the empirical case studies, it returns to the core argument that understanding contemporary Islamic political contestation requires that we consider the way in which different Islamic ideologies find a fertile ground to translate from ideas to action. This argument applies most strongly to the phenomenon of Islamic political contestation in the contemporary Sahel, from 1960 to the present. While I strongly suspect that important elements of my framework may help to understand dynamics elsewhere in the Muslim world, I do not make a claim for the generalizability of my argument beyond the case of the Sahel without further research and the contribution of scholars of other regions. Based on my own work, however, I do contend that my framework can help to shed some light on the patterns of Islamic political contestation that have occurred in the Sahel region going as a far back as the 14th century.
CHAPTER 2
ISLAMIC POLITICAL CONTESTATION: GLOBAL PATTERNS AND LOCAL VARIATIONS

Despite the strong scholarly interest in Islam and politics and Islamic activism in recent years, there is still a striking lack of theoretical grounding for understanding the specific ways in which Islamic movements engage in political contestation. Islamic movements are viewed alternately as either irrational and dangerous, or as normal social movements that are identical to other secular movements. This dichotomous approach is not helpful and warrants new efforts to uncover the intricacies of the ever-evolving ways in which Islam interacts with politics. This dissertation is intended as a contribution to such efforts.

Scholars of Islam and politics have debated, often bitterly, the extent to which Islam matters in Islamic activism. This chapter discusses the different theoretical approaches to Islamic activism. It provides a detailed overview of the two major approaches to Islamic activism, which I refer to as culturalist and structuralist approaches, and elaborates on their shortcomings when it comes to explaining the variation in Islamic political contestation in the Sahel. The chapter also demonstrates the need for a comprehensive approach that takes into account the interaction between global Islamic political ideologies, the structures of the local context, and the determinants of individual motivations. Each of these three factors is examined in detail below.

This chapter focuses on theory. It is intended to set the overall theoretical framework of the dissertation. In elaborating this framework, I draw on theoretical tools from multiple sources, including Islamic studies, social movement theories, and social psychology. My goal is to identify factors related to Islamic ideologies, the structures of local context, and individual motivations that are relevant to explaining the varied forms of political contestation, as well as to disentangle and analyze the interaction between these factors. I elaborate on the backgrounds and typologies of Islamic political ideologies based on authoritative Islamic figures who represent
these ideologies. I discuss the role of Islamic ideologies in political contestation. Secondly, I borrow from social movement theories to set a framework for understanding the structures of the local context, their variation, and their role in politicizing ideologies. Finally, I draw on recent social-psychology literature on participation in collective actions to identify the determining factors that motivate individuals to take part in Islamic political contestation.

The first section of the chapter discusses the different theoretical approaches to Islamic activism, emphasizing the contentious debates between culturalist and structuralist approaches. The second section elaborates on global Islamic ideologies, their typology and role in shaping the form of contestation. The third section examines the structures of the local context and their role in incentivizing or dis-incentivizing the use of certain forms of collective action. And finally, section four of the chapter discusses the determinant of individual motivations, including collective identity, network relations, resonance of the collective action frame. This section also offers a tentative analysis of the characteristics of individuals who are likely to participate in particular form of Islamic contestatory actions.

**Culturalist and Structuralist Approaches to Islamic Contestation**

The contemporary revival of Islamic activism has received intense academic scrutiny. Studies have focused on analyzing the relative role that the religion of Islam and socio-political factors play in the emergence and dynamics of Islamic activism. Scholars have tried to understand whether Muslim activists are primarily motivated by religion or rather by political ambitions and economic incentives (Volpi 2010; Roy 1994; 2004; Wiktorowocz 2004). The approaches differ, and the literature can be categorized into two major approaches: On the one hand, a culturalist approach suggests that Islam as a set of ideas, beliefs, and culture is the determinant factor in Islamic activism (Lewis 2002, Huntington 1996; Thurston 2016; Juergensmeyer 2003; Appleby 2000), On the other hand, a structuralist approach puts more
emphasis on economic, social, and political factors (Wiktorowicz 2003; Roy 2004; Kippenberg 2011). At the extreme of the culturalist approach are the so-called orientalist scholars—best epitomized by Bernard Lewis (1988 and 2002)—who view the religion of Islam as the fundamental explanatory variable for social, political, and economic phenomena in Muslim societies, including political and religious violence, lack of economic development, and persistence of dictatorship in the Muslim world (Lewis 2009; Huntington 1996). Orientalists have an essentialist approach to Islam. They argue that in order to understand Muslim societies, it is necessary to account for Islamic theology, which constitutes the matrix of values and meaning for all Muslims (Volpi 2010; Halliday 1995). This approach considers violence to be endogenous to Islam, and the rise of Islamic activism—violent activism, in particularly—is viewed as merely revealing the ‘true’ character of Muslim identity, culture, and society as large (Halliday 1995, 401).

The orientalist approach has come under severe criticism for its numerous shortcomings.¹ A number of scholars argue that it is not the belief system as much as structural factors, including socio-political and economic factors that are determinant in explaining Islamic activism. Esposito (2004 and 1998) views Islamic “reform” and “resurgence” as a reaction by Muslim modernist movements to modernization and Western imperialism and domination over the Muslim world. Villalón (2010) views the rise of Islamic activism in the Sahel as an outcome of the liberalization of the political sphere that followed the transition of Sahelian countries to democracy. Furthermore, Hafez and Wiktorowicz (2004, 79) explain the outbreak of violent

---

¹ Using Islam as an explanatory variable fails to help explain commonalities between Muslim and Non-Muslim societies on a host of issues that the orientalist literature attributes to Islam, including dictatorship, violence, and lack of entrepreneurship. It also fails to explain the significant variation between Muslim majority countries in terms of regime types, economic development, and social and political organization. And Islam itself is not a fixed monolithic category, as interpretations of Islam are numerous, and change according to time and space.
Islamic activism in Algeria as a reaction to exclusion from “institutional politics” and “indiscriminate state repression” in Muslim countries. Some of these scholars are also known as “contingencist” in reference to their view that the Islamic belief system changes according to the changing social, political and economic contexts of Muslim societies (Halliday 1993, 156). From the perspective of the structuralist approach, Islamic activism is not any different from other activisms that use secular discourses. They argue that the factors of Islamic activism are exogenous to Islam. Some contingencists, in fact, prefer to study Islamic activism through the prism of social movement theories to emphasize the similarity between Islamic and secular movements (Wiktorowicz 2004). They claim that “in contradistinction to popular perceptions of radical Islamic groups as irrational, ‘crazy,’ or deviant, these groups frequently follow a particular dynamic that mirrors the rational calculus of other non-Islamic social movement actors who have used violence as part of their repertoire of contention.” (Wiktorowicz 2004, 20)

Taking into account the contingencist criticism, other culturalist scholars have departed from the essentialist argument while still emphasizing the central role that certain interpretations of Islam, particularly Salafism—or Wahhabism—play in generating Islamic activism (Delong-Bas 2004; Thurston 2016). After the 9/11 attacks, Salafism came under scrutiny, specifically through the prism of security studies, as many observers equated it with violence (Meijer 2014, Commins 2006; Lacroix and Hegghammer 2004). Salafism as an explanatory category of Islamic activism was further refined and divided into three categories, including “quietist,” “political,” and “jihadist,” with the last two categories associated respectively with peaceful and violent activism (Wiktorowicz 2006). However, while this sub-categorization of Salafism has significantly advanced theories of Islamic activism, it has nonetheless also been subject to criticism, some of which raise concerns over the blurry boundaries between the three categories
and the possibility of hybridization between them depending on context (Brigaglia 2015).

Indeed, the use of Salafism to explain violent Islamic activism confuses more than it elucidates. Hegghammer (2013) identifies Salafism as a “theological” not an “ideological” category. Theology focuses on religious practices and does not apply to the field of political activism. Ideology, however, focuses on political preference and behavior. Thus, according to Hegghammer (2013) it is Islamic ideology—not theology—that helps explain Islamic activism. While Hegghammer’s point about the distinction between theology and ideology is relevant, his categorization of Islamic ideology into ten different categories complicates his analyses (2013, 259). He appears to attempt to provide an exhaustive list of Islamist political behavior, but in the end, I find this effort quite unsuccessful given that political behavior by nature changes according to change in the context.

Recent debates about Islamic political contestation are more nuanced, as scholars have come to recognize the role played by both Islam and the structural context, while still disagreeing over which one is the most determinant factor. As Roy (2004, 71) puts it, “saying Islam is not a factor” does not mean that doctrine does not play a part, it “means that politics prevails over religion.” The debate that has opposed the well-known French scholars Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel on violent Islamic contestation in the European inner cities, epitomizes this nuanced approach. According to Kepel, the new wave of violent Islamic militancy comes as result of the “radicalization of Islam.” He argues that violence on behalf of Islam arises from indoctrination, which transforms young Muslims in the inner cities into jihadists. Kepel gives ideology a central role in Islamic political contestation. His book Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam starts with a chapter where he argues that Islamism started as a “cultural revolution” before it turned into a social and a political one (2002, 24). Combining a Weberian approach to sociology and a
Marxist approach to class alliances, Kepel highlights the important role that Muslim scholars—including Sayyid Qutb, Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, and Rouhollah Khomeini—played in framing and disseminating an ideology that latter benefited from Saudi and Iranian investments, and has emerged to the forefront of the Islamic religious debate (Kepel 2002). While taking ideology seriously, Kepel does not overlook the importance of structural factors. He argues that the success of Islamism in the 1970s and 1980s lied in the alliance between the poor urban class and the devout middle class (Kepel 2002).

Roy, on the other hand, associates the phenomenon of violent Islamic contestation with what he calls the “Islamization of radicals.” He thinks that jihadists are disillusioned revolutionaries who turn to Islam and personal piety to find justification for their engagement in violence (Roy 2004, 46). Coming from a post-structuralist perspective, Roy (2004, 47) argues that jihadism is closer to Marxism then to the Qur’an. Addressing the emerging violent Islamic activism in the European inner cities, Roy (2004, 46) argues that violence in this “space of social exclusion exists even when there is no religious dimension.” For Roy, what is described as the rise of Islamism or jihadism in European inner cities today is another iteration of a phenomenon of contestation that has historically occurred in these places, regardless of the ideological connotation that it may take at a particular time. He posits that these inner-city movements mobilize among the same social categories, hold the same grievances against “bourgeois values,” have the same targets, use the same methods and all “claim to be internationalist.” Although Roy contends that “Islam as such is never a strategic factor,” he nonetheless recognizes that Islam is not totally devoid of influence. He contends that Islam has only a “post hoc importance” in the sense that its serves as a discourse of rationalization and/or justification. It “attracts the more radical elements among uprooted Muslims who are in search of an internationalist, anti-
imperialist structure but cannot find any leftist radical organization, or are disappointed by existing ones.” (Roy 2004, 47)

Other scholars have tried to explain the variations between peaceful and violent Islamic activism. Pearlman (2011) argues that the level of cohesion within the movement itself explains the variation between peaceful and violent movements. Islamic movements that enjoy greater level of cohesion are more likely to use peaceful protest, whereas movements that suffer from fragmentation are likely to drift into violence. This argument, however, fails to account for such important insurgent groups as MUJAO, AQIM, and Ansar Dine in Mali, which are well-organized but still use violence as a mean to express dissent. Sidel (2006) claims that religious violence in Indonesia comes as the reaction to the anxiety and uncertainty about maintaining authentic Islamic identity in a society that is dragged in rapid globalization, as well as the threat posed not only by those considered external enemies of Islam, and internal tensions within the Islamic communities. Sidel (2006, 13) thus dismisses the role of religion, saying:

instances of religious violence can no longer be understood to reflect the strength and intensity of religious identities held by individuals and groups as they promote their ideas and pursue their interests. Religious violence, instead, erupts amid heightened states of uncertainty and anxiety as to religious identities and their boundaries, and attendant efforts towards the (re)definition of the self and the (re)articulation of claims of authority.

In sum, the existing approaches to Islamic activism fall short of providing a comprehensive and adequate explanation for the variation in Islamic contestatory activism. By focusing only on the role of ideas, the culturalist approaches fail to account for the important role that structural context plays in the making of Islamic contestation. It notably fails to explain why certain forms of Islamic contestation tend to develop in certain countries and places more so than in others. On the other side, by focusing on political and economic structures alone, structuralist approaches fail to answer important questions as to why—despite important structural
commonalities between Sahelien countries and societies—Muslim activists act differently in their attempt to face the same political grievances and economic hardship that are pervasive in the Sahel, and why some Muslims activists choose to engage in peaceful contestation while others prefer to engage into violent ones. Figure 2 shows that although each of these forms of expression of Islamic political contestation has been used in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, some forms tend to occur in certain countries, areas, and times more frequently than in others.

Mauritania for instance, has had a strong prevalence of protests, whereas Niger has experienced more riots, particularly in the 2000s, and Mali has recently suffered many episodes of insurgency.

Figure 2-1. Prevalence of Type of Political Contestation in the Sahel. Source: ACLED dataset, compiled by author
Taken alone, neither the culturalist nor the structuralist approach can adequately explain why Islamic activists tend to engage in peaceful protests, violent riots, and jihadist insurgencies more frequently in capital cities, provincial cities, and rural periphery, respectively. This dissertation attempts to fill this gap by emphasizing the role that global ideology, the structure of the local context, and individual motivations play in shaping the form that Islamic activism takes. The dissertation attempts to theorize the ways in which these three factors interact together to produce particular forms of Islamic political contestation.

“Ideas Matter”: Global Islamic Ideologies and Islamic Contestation

While many scholars of Islam and politics may not contest the premise that ideas matter, some are yet skeptical about which ideas matter, and how, when, and where they matter. What is the importance of ideas in comparison to other social, political, and economic factors? I take these concerns seriously in my attempt to conceptualize what I call Islamic political ideologies and their role in shaping the form that Islamic contestation takes. Islam plays an important role in determining the forms that Islamic political contestation takes. But, it is neither Islam as a religion, identity or culture, nor specific Islamic theologies that explain this outcome. It is rather Islamic political ideologies that shape the forms that Islamic contestation takes. The difference between theology and ideology is that the former focuses essentially on religious creed and ritual practices whereas the later refers to political doctrine, preferences, and behaviors (Hegghammer 2010, 4-5).

Sufism and Salafism are theological doctrines that suggest different jurisprudential approach to Islamic scriptures and different way of practicing Islamic rituals. They do not articulate clear political priorities. As it appears clear from Wiktorowicz’s analysis, for instance, though most Salafi scholars agree that the implementation of sharia rule is a fundamental feature of the Islamic creed, they disagree on the process that must lead to such implementation: Some
Salafis argue that sharia must be achieved through a bottom-up approach by promoting Islamic education and piety within society, while others suggest a top-down approach where Muslim elite participate in political struggle in a democratic setting and then implement sharia when they come to power. Yet others suggest that sharia is to be achieved through violent uprising and the overthrow of the existing un-Islamic regimes (Wiktorowicz 2006). Islamic political ideologies, rather, are sets of ideas that are conceptualized and disseminated by canonical Muslim scholars and activists, and that provide competing frameworks for interpreting and analyzing social and political challenges affecting Muslim societies, and suggest ways of addressing them. In this section, I discuss the emergence of Islamic ideologies, elaborate on a typology, and discuss their roles.

**Objectification and the Quest for A New Framework for Interpreting Islam**

The history of Islam, just as the history of all religions, is marked by continuous attempts at invention and re-invention of new traditions and discourses. Eickelman and Piscatory (2004, 38) calls this phenomenon “objectification,” by which they mean the process that brings basic questions to the fore in the consciousness of large numbers of believers: “What is my religion?” “Why is it important to my life?” “How do my beliefs guide my conduct?” (Quoted in Kane 2003, 7). This is a constant and continuous process of adaptation that intensifies particularly at times of massive social changes, when existing frameworks for interpreting religion become obsolete and thus unable to provide answers to new issues and phenomena. Rapid change in an increasingly globalized world have generated new phenomena to which existing frameworks of interpreting Islam and understanding Muslim conditions seem incapable of providing adequate answers. In Eickelman and Piscatori’s word, a new cycle of “objectification” and re-adaptation appears to be underway. Affected by multiple global trends, including rapid development of information technology, and increased interaction between people, ideas, and culture,
contemporary Muslim societies have come in closer and more permanent contact with non-Muslim cultures, values, and ideas than ever before. In this context of assertive interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim societies, questions related to identity, relationship with non-Muslims, and attitudes vis-à-vis the global world order have once again come to the forefront with instant urgency and acuity: What does it mean to be a Muslim in the 21st century? Who is Muslim and who is not? Can Muslim societies appropriate Western modernity, the nation-state system, secularism, and democracy? What is the position of Muslims in the current world order? Are they actors or victims of the world order? And how to address the overall weakness of the Muslim world in relation to the West? While some of these questions are old, global interconnectedness has given them a different dimension that poses some challenges to the traditional methods of interpreting Islamic doctrine, thus pressing Muslim scholars to reform their hermeneutical tools and methods (Ramadan 2009, al-Qaradawi 2004).

Three Muslim figures can serve as reference to elucidating the ways in which Muslim scholars have struggled to respond to the challenge of interpretation and re-adaptation of Islamic texts to fit the current context. Abdullah bin Bayyah (b.1935), Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b.1959)—among many other scholars—epitomize the 21st century Islamic scholars-cum-activists who are at the forefront of these efforts toward creating new frameworks of interpreting Islam that address the pressing issues of our times.² Drawing on markedly different hermeneutical approaches—as I discuss later in this section—these scholars have hotly debated numerous social and political topics, including the legality of contesting

---

² It is important to note that these three scholars are not the only ideologues who have theorized the above-mentioned Islamic ideologies. Many other scholars have contributed to these efforts in varied ways. I use these three as examples, and because they are all well-known figures who have achieved a level of notoriety in promoting these ideologies.
government in Islam; the nature of the state, state institutions, and democracy; the boundary between Muslim and non-Muslim identity, and the relation to non-Muslims. Their analyses, and interpretations of the issues as well as the prescription that they suggest, have varied equally significantly. They provide competing frameworks for understanding—and behaving in—the modern globalized world. In other words, these efforts to provide answers to social and political challenges that are facing contemporary Muslim societies amount to the elaboration of what I call *Islamic political ideologies*. By Islamic political ideology I mean a set of ideas that are conceptualized by authoritative Muslim scholars-cum-activists, based on a certain interpretation of Islam, and that provides a framework for understanding and addressing the challenges that have faced Muslim societies. As I argue in the next section, we can identify three ideal-typical categories of Islamic political ideologies: pietism, Islamism, and jihadism. These ideologies are not focused on explaining religious practices and performances, but rather on providing views on political issues.

The disagreement between Muslim scholars is not about the theological sources themselves. There is little contention over the authenticity and legal merits of the verses, hadiths, or jurisprudential principles used in the argumentation. They, however, disagree on the interpretation side, at two stages: the understanding of the current affairs and the determination of the texts that ought to apply to the affair at hand. The disagreement therefore is much less about the texts but more about how the texts relate to the scholars’ reading and understanding of current world affairs. For example, during the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt (2010), Muslim scholars debated the lawfulness of revolution in Islam. Abdullah Bin Bayyah declared the revolution unlawful. He based his argument on well-established Islamic rulings that stipulate the obligation to “obey the ruler” (*wujub ta’at waliyyi al-amr*), and the prohibition on “rebelling
against the ruler (tahrim al-khuruj ‘ala al-hakim” (Bin Bayyah 2013, 105-107). Yusuf al-Qaradawi on the other hand, supported the revolution. He was even known in the media as al-imam al-tha’ir (the revolutionary imam) for his active support and physical participation in the revolution in Cairo. Al-Qaradawi agrees that Islam prohibits rebellion and commands obedience to the ruler, but he caveats this argument saying that if the ruler’s behavior goes against the greater good and spreads evil, then it is commendable for Muslims to disavow him. Disavowal, however, must be conducted peacefully.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi bases his argument on another well-establish principle in Islam that stipulates the obligation upon all Muslims to “command good and forbid evil,” (wujub al amr bil ma’aruf wa al-nahyi ‘an al-munkar). Note that neither Bin Bayyah nor al-Qaradawi disagree on the principles themselves. They rather disagreed on the legitimacy of Hosni Mubarak’s regime. Bin Bayyah considered Mubarak’s regimes legitimate on Islamic terms, and thus upheld the obligation to obey—and the prohibition to rebel against—it. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, however, considered Mubarak’s regime illegitimate and evil, because of its failure to implement sharia and for its authoritarian repression. He thus prioritizes the principle of forbidding evil. Finally, Abu Muhammad al-Maqadisi views political regimes in the Muslim world as the incarnation of Taghout (tyrannical and un-Islamic political rule) and excludes them from the realm of belief (dar al-Islam) and consigns them to the domain of un-believe (dar al-kufr). For him the appropriate Islamic principle that applies to the current rulers of the Muslim societies is that of “al-wala wal bara (loyalty and disavowal). Therefore, he advocates for radical changes in rulers, state structures, and the world order. Such radical change, as he suggests, is only possible through violent uprisings.
Typology and Attribute of Islamic Ideologies

These intense discussions among Muslim scholars in response to the disruptive global political context contributed to the formation of three ideal types of Islamic political ideologies: pietism, Islamism, and jihadism. These ideologies are disseminated globally in print, via electronic means, TV and radio broadcasts, and by social media. They provide competing worldviews and lenses for understanding the challenges facing Muslim societies today, and suggest different courses of action in order to address them. The ideologies exist as sets of idioms available to Muslim activists who can take inspiration from them to frame discourses of collective action. To further describe and explain each of these ideologies, I rely on one key Islamic figure among the most influential. In what follows, I attempt to shed light on these competing ideological approaches, by using the Muslim scholars’ approach on the issue of contestation in Islam.

The first ideology is pietism, which firmly opposes contestation against the state and encourages Muslims to live peacefully while avoiding challenging their governments or the Western world. In his book *fiqh al waqi’ wa al-tawaqqu’* (contextualized jurisprudence and anticipation), Abdullah Bin Bayyah (2013, 108) contends that Islam prohibits rebellion against the ruler because of the potential for such rebellion to incite violence. Rebellion is only allowed in the case where the ruler renounces Islam or commits an “unequivocal act of unbelief” (*kufurun bawwah*). He, however, sets the threshold of the notion of *kufurun bawwah* quite high, making it difficult—almost impossible—to justify contestation against a Muslim ruler. According to Bin Bayyah, for instance, the ruler’s failure to implement sharia does not qualify as an act of unbelief (2013, 88). He argues that if the implementation of sharia is likely to do harm—such as generating hostile reactions from the international community—then the ruler is not bound to implementing sharia. Failure to rule according to sharia does not nullify people’s
obligation to obey their rulers or the prohibition to contest him. Bin Bayyah criticizes Islamic scholars who encouraged people to participate in political contestation saying that the mission of Islamic scholars is to unify, educate, and reconcile people, not to divide them (2013, 93). Pietists suggest a peaceful way for addressing the challenges that are facing Muslims today, including through religious education, the promotion of spirituality and piety.

Contrary to most Islamists and jihadists, pietists maintain close ties with secular governments and often assume the position of official clerics or as the religious establishment. They endorse a more accommodationist stance vis-à-vis state institutions, and avoid meddling into electoral politics. As odd as it may appear, their definition of the Islamic state is quite secular in itself. In Bin Bayyah’s view “the state in Islam … is not a theocratic state but a republican state… It is a state in which Islam plays an important role, even though that role remains to be defined… Such a state is not governed by religious clerics but by civilians who come to power through varied but legitimate means” (2013, 99). Pietists consider sharia rule to be ideal for Muslim societies as long as implementing sharia will serve the greater good of the society. If implementing sharia is likely to do harm, then abandoning sharia and adopting secularism would be acceptable.

On Muslims relations with non-Muslims and the world system, pietists scholars do not see any contradictions in terms of being a Muslim and living in a world that is dominated by Western powers. To the contrary, they generally view the current condition of Muslim societies positively. They in fact reject the simplified separation between Dar al-Islam (the abode of

---

3 This is my translation of the original quote, which is in Arabic. Throughout the dissertation I quote materials in French and Arab. All translations from Arabic to English or from French to English are my own.
Islam) and *Dar al-kafr* (the abode of disbelief) that is central to jihadist ideology. Bin Bayyah (2013) encourages Muslim to take ownership of progress achieved by modernity and to promote dialog and mutual understanding with other non-Muslims communities for the sake of achieving the greater good of both communities. Although pietists accept modernity, they are quite conservative in their attitudes toward issues related to human right and gender equality. Controversially, some of them hold an ambivalent position regarding the Islamic legitimacy of slavery (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation).

Contrary to jihadists, pietist scholars refrain from pronouncing *takfir* (pronouncement that someone is unbeliever) on Muslims (Bin Bayyah 2013, 88 -101). They restrict the application of takfir to those Muslims who exit Islam out of conviction as opposed to those who commit minor sins or exit Islam by mistake (Bin Bayyah 2007, 139). They consider takfir to be a risky verdict that needs to be pronounced cautiously. In fact, they reserve the decision for the pronouncement of unbelief and the implementation of the appropriate legal rulings that derive from such pronouncement to the religious and political authorities alone, not to ordinary people.

*Islamism* is the second Islamic ideology. It is an ideology that was pioneered by the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The distinguishing features of Islamism is the embrace of electoral politics, acceptance of the nation-state system, rejection of secularism, and commitment to promoting changes through peaceful participation from within—not without—the current state structures. They encourage Muslim activists to take part in the political struggle in their countries in order to promote the Islamic agenda in the public sphere, and eventually to win elections and thus implement sharia rule. The Islamist ideology is the product of an effort “to reconcile pre-modern Islamic law with the modern nation-state” (Hamid and Dar 2016). They try to modernize Muslim societies by “Islamizing modernity” (Thurston 2016, 53; Hamid 2016,
Islamist consider that Islam has its own modernity that is different from Western modernity: Islam has its own political system, its economy, its legislation. Although there are different tendencies within the Islamist ideology, the work of Yusuf al-Qaradawi is emblematic. One of al-Qaradawi’s books (1985) is entitled, *The Problem of Poverty and How Islam Addresses It* (*Mushkilatu al-faqr wa kaifa alajah al-Islam*). Islamists like al Qaradawi view political action as the most effective way to Islamize society.

Islamist scholars consider the current condition of Muslim societies ruled by un-Islamic governments and dominated by Western powers as unsatisfactory. Thus al-Qaradawi rejects secularism and considers it to be in contradiction with the Islamic sharia in his book (1997) *Al-Islam wa al-‘Ilamaniyya Wajhan li Wahjin* (Islam and secularism face to face). Islamists consider changing the current political regimes in Muslim countries and replacing them with Islamic regimes as a religious duty and a necessary pathway toward achieving a fully Islamic society, moralizing the public sphere and achieving prosperity (al-Qaradawi 1997; Roy 1994). While Islamists believe that change in the current political systems in Muslim societies is necessary, they insist on the fact that change must come through peaceful engagement in the political sphere. They believe that personal involvement of Islamic actors’ in political affairs is the best way to achieve the implementation of sharia. They believe in their ability to change the secular system by participating in electoral politics and acting in the domain of civil society organization. They notably use protests as the mean to advance their political agenda. Between 2011 and 2013, al-Qaradawi issued numerous fatwas, and multiplied media appearances where
he asserted the right for Muslims to revolt against an authoritarian ruler.\textsuperscript{4} Al-Qaradawi argues that,

if [protests] are used to achieve a legitimate end, such as calling for the implementation of the Sharia, or freeing those imprisoned without legitimate grounds, or halting military trials of civilians, or cancelling a state of emergency which gives the ruler absolute power, or achieving people’s general aims like making available bread, oil, gas, or other aims whose legitimacy admits of no doubt—in things like these, legal scholars do not doubt the permissibility [of demonstration] (Quoted in Warren 2014, 13).

Scholars who adhere to the Islamist ideology draw from what I called the legalist approach to interpreting Islamic texts. While they often voice criticism vis-à-vis the West, their attitude to non-Muslims in generally is not confrontational. Islamist ideologues separate between minor unbelief (\textit{kufur al-asghar}) from which no major consequences derive (\textit{kufurun duna kufr}) and major unbelief (\textit{kufur al-akbar}) which leads to exiting the boundaries of Islam (\textit{khuruj min al-milla}). Roy (1994, 37) observes that

The Islamist reproach the ulamas for two things: One is their servility to the powers in place, which lead them to accept secular government and laws that do not conform to the sharia. The other is their compromise with Western modernity: the ulamas have accepted modernity where the Islamists reject it (acceptance of the separation of religion and politics, which necessarily leads to secularization) and maintain the tradition where the Islamist reject it (indifference to modern science, rigid and casuistic teaching, rejection of political and social actions).

Finally, \textit{jihadism} centers around three core ideological beliefs: First, Islam is at war with the West—and its local allies in Muslim societies—both militarily as in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, and culturally through what they view as a relentless effort to “Westernize” Muslim societies. They consider jihad, in the form of armed struggle to defend and

\textsuperscript{4} Al-Qaradawi’s treatment of the theme of revolution in Islam, also called the Islamic Jurisprudence of Revolution (\textit{Fiqh al-thawra}), are assembled into a book entitled 25 Yanayir 2011, Thawrat al-Sha‘ab (The 25 January 2011 Revolution of the People) published in 2012 in Cairo by Maktabat Wahba. The book is composed of declarations, sermons, and fatwas issued by Yusuf al-Qaradawi as well as press articles, and pictures about the revolution.
protect Islam, as a “religious obligation” (fard ‘ayn) upon all Muslims. Second, for jihadist modern state institutions and the democratic system of governance are un-Islamic and must be abolished and replaced with the system of Caliphate and the Sharia law, as they interpret it. Third, Muslims can be declared “apostates” or “unbelievers” if they commit certain sins, and as result, they can be legitimate targets of jihad violence. Muslim societies’ rulers, in particular, are considered taghout (infidels) and must be overthrown through violent jihad. These core principles constitute the quintessence of jihadism, a global ideology that has motivated and justified jihadist insurrections around the world.

Jihadists view the condition of Muslim societies in the current world order completely negatively and call for a radical change through jihad. In his book Thamarat al-jihad, al-Maqadisi (2007, 78) argues that “The world today is entirely a ‘Land of Disbelief,’ including Mecca and Medina. Muslims today are weak, he argues, and their countries are controlled by foreign infidels or their local allies—internal infidels. In this context jihad is a defensive struggle.” Jihadists advocate military struggle against the West. They consider Islam to be at war with the West and it is a duty for Muslims to engage in a defensive jihad against the Western aggressors and their allies within Muslim societies.

One of the distinguishing features of jihadism is a rejection of state boundaries, given their view of Muslim societies worldwide as constituting one unique community, the umma. They reject the nation-state system and aim to replace it with the caliphate, which is a political system that is supposed to unify the umma under one single rule. They aim to achieve that through military means. They consider the core institutions of the modern state, including the constitution and the three branches of government, as un-Islamic, and the rulers of today’s Muslim societies as infidels who need to be overthrown. Contrary to Islamists, jihadists view
democracy as ungodly, and the human rights campaign as yet another manipulation to try to Westernize Muslim societies.

Jihadism, however, is not monolithic. Different interpretations of its core concepts have led to different approaches to jihad. Jihadist movements define their “legitimate targets” based on their interpretation of the notion of takfir. Depending on their approach to takfir, they determine who is Muslim and who is not, and set the boundary between Dar al-Islam which is to be protected, and Dar al-Kufr, which can be a legitimate target of jihad. The debate about takfir is perhaps the most important ideological contention between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the two major competing global jihadist organizations. Al-Qaeda limits the scope of implementation of takfir to non-Muslim populations, Muslim rulers, and individual Muslims who participate in or collaborate with counterterrorist forces. ISIS, however, considers Muslim civilians who do not support them as “kuffar” (infidels, sing. kaafir), thus equally legitimate targets of jihad (Al-Maqlaat 2016). Other mainstream theorists of jihad, including Al-Maqadisi, have restricted the application of takfir. In his book al-Rissala al-Thalathiniyya fi al-Tahdhir Min al-Guluw fi al-Takfir (thirteenth messages to warn against extremism in Takfir). He even refused the application of takfir on Shi’a Muslims (Kazimi 2005).

How did scholars come to these positions? In what follows I show that these three ulama (Muslim clerics) follow different models of interpretation of Islamic doctrine, and that this leads them to draw different conclusions regarding their views of political regimes in the Arab and Muslim countries.

**Hermeneutical Approaches to Islamic Doctrine: Innovation through Maqasid al-Sharia**

Bin Bayyah, al-Qaradawi, and al-Maqadisi’s respective ideological positions derive from their hermeneutical approach to Islamic law. Given that Islamic scriptures are fixed, and the real-world contexts of Muslim societies changes constantly, the role of the ulama in each Muslim
society has been to reinterpret these scriptures and adapt them to their societies’ specific contexts. In Islamic jurisprudence, such effort of interpretation and adaptation is achieved through what is called *ijtihad* (Hallaq 1984). In Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*), *ijtihad* means the efforts at “finding the rulings decreed by God” for “newly arisen problems” that are not precisely covered in the Qur’an, the hadith, or through *ijma* (analogies) (Hallaq 1984, 4-5). But while there is a broad consensus among Muslim scholars over the necessity of practicing *ijtihad*, the method of conducting it has been a matter of strong controversy throughout Islamic history (Hallaq 1984; al-Qaradawi 2013). Some scholars emphasize the importance of context over text and make constant efforts to re-interpret the texts to respond to the exigencies of changing life conditions. On the other hand, other scholars give preeminence to religious texts over context, and think that it is the society that needs to change its behaviors so that they are in line with the original texts (Hallaq 1984). Recently, in reaction to the rise of the phenomenon of jihadism, many Muslim scholars have joined voices to call for reforming Islam, by adopting an innovative approach to *ijtihad* (Ramadan 2009, al-Qaradawi 2004; al Rass 2016; Abu al-Majd and Harith 2011). Scholars have expressed a renewed interest in approaching Islamic texts through the lens of what is known in Islamic jurisprudence as *maqasid al-sharia* (the purposes of sharia), which emphasizes the importance of taking into account the purpose and norms of the sharia in making legal rulings, as opposed to relying solely on the literal meaning of the religious texts (Duderija, 2014; Ramadan 2009; al-Qaradawi 2008; Bin Bayyah 2013).

*Maqasid al-sharia* suggest a normative approach to the interpretation of Islamic dogma, based on the idea that the sharia has an ultimate purpose for Muslim societies, which is promoting the good and alleviating evil (*jalabu al-masalih wa dar’ al-mafasid*). As Ibn Qayyim says
At the foundation of the sharia are wisdom and protection of people’s interest in their subsistence and afterlife. The sharia is all about justice, mercy benefits, and wisdom. Any law that deviates from justice to injustice, from mercy to cruelty, from good to evil, from wisdom to recklessness, that would not be sharia!! (Quoted in al-Qaradawi 2008, 78)

Al-Qaradawi (2008, 78-9) adds “sharia [must] be based on promoting the public interest. Whenever the context changes and the existing interpretation appears to go against people’s interest, then interpretation must be changed.” However, while there is a consensus about applying the principle of maqasid al-sharia on every legal ruling, Islamic scholars disagree on the definitions of this maqasid, its scope of implementation, and on who should be in charge of implementation.

The hermeneutical approaches to Islamic dogma can be divided into three schools: First there are what I call normativist scholars, that is those who prioritize maqasid al-sharia and give it preeminence over Islamic laws. These scholars believe that Islamic law serves a purpose, which is to promote the public interest (jalab al-masalih) and to alleviate evil (dar’ al-mafasid). They enjoin Muslim scholars to make sure that their legal rulings serve the purpose of promoting good—or public interest—and alleviating evil. For normativist scholars, the norms of sharia take precedence over the laws (Bin Bayyah, 2013; Duderija, 2014, 5). A general rule in the normativist approach is that “Whatever serves Muslims’ public interest, that is God’s law” (Haithu tujadu al-maslaha fa thamma shar’ Allah) (al-Qaradawi, 2008, 115) Abdulllah Bin Bayyah is one of the contemporary scholars who emphasizes the preeminence of maqasid al-sharia over law. His book, fiqh al-waqi wa al-Taqwaqqu’ lays out his innovative hermeneutic approach where he emphasizes the importance of approaching sharia through its norms and purposes as opposed to the laws or literal texts. Bin Bayyah’s normativist approach brings him to one of his famous and controversial legal ruling on the obligation of implementing sharia, which—as I mentioned
above—stipulates that if implementing sharia rule today is likely to go against the public interest then Muslim rulers are not bound to implement it (Bin Bayyah 2013, 88).

Second, other scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, adhere to what I call a legalist school to interpreting Islam. While these scholars admit the importance of taking maqasid al-sharia into account, they limit its scope to cases where there is legal vacuum. If there is a clear categorical law in the Qur’an or the hadith that rules over a particular case, then the law takes precedence over the principle (al-Qaradawi, 2008). Criticizing the normativist approach, al-Qaradawi claims that it is impossible that implementing Islamic law goes against the greater good or produces evil. For him, “Any categorical law that is revealed in the Qur’an can only serve the public interest, whether Muslims in a particular context are aware of it or not” (2008, 101-102). The legalists’ general rule is that “Whatever God legalizes, there you find the public interest” (Haithu yujadu shar’ Allah fa thamma maslahatu al-ibad). Given this approach to interpretation, legalist scholars find no loopholes that exempt a Muslim ruler from implementing sharia, because clear laws in the Qur’an and hadith enjoin them to do so. They view the ruler’s failure to implement sharia as a major sin, and an evil that Muslims must alleviate, though only through peaceful means.

Finally, there are the literalists who minimize the importance of maqasid al-sharia and prefer to draw directly from the texts. Literalist scholars give preeminence to the sacred texts over the real-world context. They try to force real world phenomena to fit into the scriptures’ narratives. They also aim to bring contemporary Muslim societies to look as closely as possible to the ideal Muslim society, that is the society of the early believers, the pious predecessors (Salaf al-salih). Literalists have less drastic rules for ijtihad, and they reject hierarchies. Their approach rendered ijtihad more eclectic and almost accessible to anyone who can read and
understand the Qur’an and the hadith, leading to what al-Bakaye Abdel Malik—A Mauritanian Muslim thinker—calls the “Anarchic ijtihad.”\(^5\) Abu Muhammad al-Maqadisi is a proponent of the literalist interpretation of Islamic doctrine. His understanding of the pious predecessors’ way of life as the ideal, if not the only acceptable way of life, makes him view the current world very negatively. In his book, *Thamarat al-Jihad*, he argues that “[t]he world today is entirely a ‘Land of Disbelief,’ including Makkah and Medina. Muslims today are weak; their countries are controlled by foreign infidels or their local allies—internal infidels. In this context jihad is a defensive struggle” (al-Maqadisi 2007, 78).

### The Role of Islamic Political Ideologies in Political Contestation

Islamic ideologies play a central role in shaping Islamic activism. Ideology provides entrepreneurs with a set of idioms (Skocpol 1985) and a tool-kit (Swidler 1986) for the elaboration and articulation of collective action frames (Snow 2004, 385). Ideology is the lens through which people see the world, understand their condition, and project their actions. They notably shape Muslim activists’ world view and political behavior, provide a framework for interpreting other groups’ actions, set in-group and out-group boundaries, and influence the choice of repertoire of action. Believing in any of the abovementioned Islamic ideologies predisposes an individual or a group to perceive things in a certain way and to act in accordance. Ideology shapes political contestation through three mechanisms: the diagnostic of the problem, the prognostic of solutions to the problem, and framing collective action.

First, ideology provides the lens through which people diagnose and analyze their social and political situations. The diagnosis “involves the identification of a problem and the attribution of blame” (Snow and Benford 1988, 200). Scholars often attribute collective action to

\(^5\) Interview with Dr. al-Bekaye Abdel Malik, Nouakchott, August 2016.
the feeling of grievance, deprivation or the condition of injustice vis-à-vis a state of affairs that necessitates corrective action (Snow 2004; Horowitz 1985) But grievance is discursive and “subject to differential interpretation.” That is, a state of affairs that some people may perceived as “just” may appear totally “unjust” for other people (Snow 2004, 383). The determination of what constitutes grievance and what does not is influenced by ideology. For instance, the Islamists’ strong commitment to democratic pluralism might make them more sensitive to, and aggrieved by, authoritarian rule than are jihadists who reject the entire nation-state system and state institutions. Once a group adopts an ideology, their identity, interest, and relation to other groups become influenced by that ideology. Gerring (1997, 974) says “the idea of internal coherence implies a degree of contrast between the ideology in question and surrounding ideologies (or general political culture).” He also says, ideology “not only expresses but also represses” (Gerring 1997, 971). Ideology provides a framework for interpreting the actions of other groups, sets in-group and out-group boundaries, influences the choice of repertoire of action (targets and mode of attacks), and in some cases motivates behaviors. It also helps mobilize certain segments of the society and facilitates alliances. Ideology goes beyond theological interpretation of Islamic scriptures in that it defines a worldview sets and political preferences.

Second, after the diagnostic, ideology helps to determine what is to be done about the problem. The *prognostic* is about suggesting solutions to the problem identified, but also suggesting “strategies, tactics, and targets” (Snow and Benford 1988, 200). An ideology recommends a chain of actions in order to address challenges. Depending on the particular ideology to which a Muslim entrepreneur adheres, he may find it rational or even necessary to engage in protest, or insurgency, or promoting spirituality in order to bring about the desire
change. For instance, when faced with the question of "how should Muslims establish the desired government?" the three Islamic ideologies suggest different courses of action. *Pietists* entrepreneurs recommend religious education and the promotion of piety and spirituality as the pathway to achieving sharia. *Islamists*, however, consider participation in electoral politics, advocacy, and lobbying government to adopt laws that promotes an Islamic agenda in the public sphere as the best strategy for action. And *jihadists* consider a radical change in the world system and the local political system through violent means to be necessary before the establishment of real sharia rule.

Third, drawing on the diagnostic and the prognostic, entrepreneurs frame a collective action frame that helps to mobilize individuals for action. Once Muslim activists decide on engaging in political activism, they frame an appropriate discourse. The discourse is usually a combination of ideological argumentation that is backed up with symbols and images drawn from the “cultural stock of the larger society” (Zald 1997, 266). Muslim entrepreneurs take inspiration from one of the three existing Islamic ideologies to construct collective action frames designed to mobilize constituents and potential adherents, garner the support of bystanders, and demobilize antagonists (Snow 2004, 385). Ideology also provides a specific language for framing those grievances. For instance, jihadists everywhere use a similar language and style of argumentation that is markedly different from *Islamists* or *pietists*. For instance, Muslim activists who adhere to the Islamist political ideology have prominently used peaceful protest to challenge policies or advance an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. This contrasts with the pietist approach, which views protest as unlawful and un-Islamic. Pietists argue that any contestation of the state or the established authority is an “act of rebellion” against the ruler, and rebellion is forbidden in Islam no matter how authoritarian the ruler is. Jihadist ideology on the other hand,
contrasts with both Islamism and Pietism, as jihadist consider all rulers who do not implement a specific view about sharia as un-Islamic—a *tagout*—that needs to be removed forcefully. Finally, while ideology provides the “tool kit” to construct these “strategies for action,” it also helps mobilize certain segment of society, and facilitate alliances with others.

Yet although important, in and of itself, ideology is not sufficient to prompt people to action. Ideology is a set of idioms of contestation. For these idioms to translate into action there must be an infrastructure for political mobilization. This infrastructure is exogenous to the ideologies themselves and is found in the local social and political contexts. The conditions under which social entrepreneurs emerge and appropriate the ideology as well as the ability to mobilize followers are all sine qua non conditions for collective action to take place. How this ideology comes to be appropriated by social entrepreneurs or “first movers,” and which segment of the society becomes mobilized, are all largely determined by the structural context in which the contestation emerged. But the passage from belief to action requires the local environment—both socio-economic and political—to be favorable. Certain environments are favorable to certain ideologies, while others are not. In the next section, I elaborate on how the structure of the local context facilitates the appropriation of a particular ideology. I argue that the congruence between ideology and the structure of the local context together determine the form that Islamic contestation takes.

“All Politics is Local”: Local Context and the Emergence of Islamic Entrepreneurs

Ideology is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for Islamic contestation. Though adherence to an ideology may direct Islamic entrepreneurs to engage in political contestations, they are likely to in fact engage only if the conditions on the ground are amenable for collective action. Islamic movements are social movements that are inspired by Islamic ideologies to justify their activism. Though their ideological inspiration is different from their secular counterparts,
the processes leading to their emergence is quite similar (Wald, Silverman, and Fridy 2005). Even more, Muslim activists usually learn to organize and conduct their activism by taking inspiration from other social groups operating in the same context. They draw upon preexisting “templates of organization,” including recruitment and communication strategies as well as technological skills that are developed and made available by existing social and political groups. They also employ the same repertoire of action that other social groups use. In light of this similarity, scholars have often used social movements theories, such as political opportunity, framing process, and resources mobilization theories, to study Islamic movements (Wiktorowitz 2004). Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005, 124) say “scholars of religion and politics need to understand motive, means, and opportunity: the motive that draw religious groups into political action, the means that enable the religious to participate effectively, and the opportunities that facilitate their entry into the political system. These are precisely the domains addressed by social movement theories.”

This section examines the role of the local context in determining the form that Islamic contestation takes. The structure of the local context determines the possibility or likelihood for the emergence of an “entrepreneur” who appropriates the ideology, uses it to frame a discourse and then mobilizes popular support (Snow 2004). I take the argument a step forward to suggest that the structures of the local context, particularly in weak countries, vary significantly from one area to another. This variation impacts the forms that political contestation takes. The structures of these different local contexts, including the level of statehood, the sociological configuration of societies, and sociopolitical and economic grievances, vary significantly in a way that constrains Muslim elites’ ability to organize collective political contestation.
Social Movement Theories

Scholars of social movement theories emphasize the role that three factors play in the emergence and development of political contestation: the framing of grievances, resource mobilization, and political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Classical social movement theories focus on the role of grievances in explaining political contestation (LeBon 1895). Their approach is based on the structural functionalist assumption that a society functions as a stable and cohesive system in which different parts work together to insure equilibrium across the whole. They view social unrest as a result of the disruption of this equilibrium, due to exogenous structural strains that produce new grievances for which the system does not have solutions (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009). The causal mechanism goes as follow, “some structural strain (be it industrialization, urbanization, unemployment) produces subjective tension and therefore the psychological disposition to engage in extreme behaviors such as panics, mobs etc. to escape from those tension” (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009, 21). Other scholars theorized such psychological discomfort differently; Gurr (1970) calls it “relative deprivation,” while Johnson (1966) theorizes it as “value system disequilibrium.”

These early theories came under severe criticism. The fact that grievances are ubiquitous in every society while social unrest is quite rare poses the first challenge to the grievance literature. As Snow (2004, 383) argues, “Conditions like economic deprivation or unemployment are themselves subject to differential interpretation and therefore do not automatically constitute or generate mobilizing grievances.” In other words, grievance is not “out there,” but rather constructed. What constitutes a grievance for one person or community may not necessarily be the same for another. Instead of studying the grievance itself, Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2004) rather focus on the process of framing, assigning meaning to these grievances. Snow and Benford (quoted in McAdam 1996, 339) define framing as “the conscious strategic efforts by
group of people to fashion shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.” The framing process takes into account the way in which identity and culture shape grievances.

Based on these criticisms, a new approach called “resource mobilization theory” emerged, with the aim to break with the grievance-based approach and to emphasize the mobilization processes, or more precisely, the organizational infrastructure that allows for mobilization (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 3-4). Building on a rationalist logic of collective action, McCarthy and Zald (1977), argue that protest depends on material, ideological and personnel resources that activists can marshal to invest in collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977). According to resource mobilization theory, people protest because they are able to mobilize resources. Far from alienated, irrational, or psychologically deprived actors, protesters are well organized, professional, and eager to solve social problems (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Resource mobilization theories emphasize the importance of the organizational aspect of mobilization, that is the collective settings in which mobilization develops and the resources that render its occurrence possible. Resource mobilization theory came under criticism for its overemphasis on formal and professional institutions and de-emphasis of informal grassroots and indigenous mobilization.

Finally, the political opportunity theories emphasize the political environment in which social movement emerge. They argue that the political environment either imposes constrains or offer opportunities for the social movements. Political contestation is only made possible if the environment has made the social and political order vulnerable. Tarrow (1994, 85) defines political opportunity as those “dimensions of the political environment that provides incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.”
McAdam (1996, 27) identifies four dimensions of political opportunity, including “the relative openness and closure of the institutionalized political system, [t]he stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, [t]he presence or absence of elite allies, [and t]he state’s capacity and propensity for repression.”

While social movement scholars initially elaborated these theories as alternative explanations of how movements emerge and develop, subsequent efforts have tried to merge between the theories in a complementary way. McAdam (1996, 8) argues that political contestation is “set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenge. Such an opening or political opportunity, however, is “not likely to be seized” in the absence of the organization and resources necessary for successful collective action. Finally, even in the case of open political opportunity and available resources and mobilizing structures, collective political contestation occurs only when social entrepreneurs elaborate grievance frames that tap into local demand, identity and culture. Thus, instead of posing these factors as alternative explanations, social movement theories emphasize the complementarity of the three factors as necessary ingredients for the emergence and development of collective political contestation.

The structure of the local context varies from one place to another. Social movement scholars have done cross-national comparative studies of movements to explore how variations of social and political context from one country to another affect social movements themselves (Kriesi 1996). However, social movement theories are conceptualized based on the study of cases predominantly in Europe and North America. While the theories can apply broadly, including to non-Western countries, some nuances must be in order, particularly when applied to cases in so-called “fragile,” “failed,” or “weak” states. These are generally countries that fall
short from achieving the standard Weberian definition of the state as “a human community that
(successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a govern
territory.” (Weber 1991, 78). What has not yet received attention is how sub-national variations
affect social movements. Sub-national level comparison is particularly important for
understanding social movements in weak countries, which may be characterized by varying
levels of statehood across different parts of the national territory. Among many of these
countries, variability of local social and political contexts is as pronounced at the sub-national
levels as at the national level. Political opportunity, resources mobilization, and grievance frames
may thus vary from urban to rural areas.

**Variations in the Structures of Local Contexts**

In weaker countries, the structures of the local context—political opportunity, mobilizing
resources, and grievance frames—vary significantly from areas where the state has a
consolidated statehood to areas where the state has only a limited statehood. First, in areas of
consolidated statehood the state has a greater capacity to enforce law and order, and an effective
administration to regulate social behavior and implement policies. Society tends to be ethnically
diverse, and tribal communitarian linkages are weak. Social groups are well-organized, based on
class, profession, and political affiliation. In this context, social and political activism are
prominent and tend to be peaceful and participatory. Labor unions, civil society organizations,
and political parties often take to the streets to express grievances, contest government policies,
and/or ask for reforms. But they do that through well-regulated and institutionalized method of
collective action, such as protest, sit-ins, and strikes, and often after receiving a formal
authorization from the government. I call this type of local context a *participatory field*. This is
characteristic of the social and political structures mostly found in metropolitan cities in weak
democratic or democratizing countries.
By contrast, in areas of limited statehood, where the state has only a limited presence, social groups organized along communitarian lines are strong, and customary laws and traditional norms and values apply to many aspects of life, including conflict and dispute resolutions. Civil society organizations may be present, but they also tend to be organized along tribal and ethnic lines. In these contexts, communities tend to rely on such things as self-defense militias to provide for their own security. Although most areas of limited statehood remain stable thanks to the effectiveness of informal traditional norms and neighborly cooperation—as Ellickson (1991) puts it—in the case of political contestation, social groups in these areas tend to use violent uprising as a mean to express dissent. I call this type of context an *insurrectional field*. This field characterizes peripheral areas that are remote from the capital cities, and where the state presence is minimal. Rarely do social groups in areas of limited statehood organize protests, sit-ins or strike as a mean of collective action.

Finally, in areas that lie between consolidated and limited statehood, corresponding to places where the state has a fair capacity to project authority and the administration is somewhat effective, and where society is sufficiently urbanized that traditional ethnic bonds have weakened but “modern” social groups are burgeoning and yet to be developed and sufficiently organized, social mobilization tends to be minimal. Small regional cities are typical of this kind of context, which I will refer to as secondary cities. In most cases, social organizations have their headquarters in capital cities and keep only small offices for representation purposes in such locales. These local offices rarely take it upon themselves to engage in social mobilization to address local or national issues, unless they receive a mandate from their headquarters in the capital cities. As a result, we see very few social mobilizations for claim making in the secondary cities. And when social mobilizations happen, they tend to come as a sudden outburst of anger.
that is un-organized and leaderless because of the lack of an institutionalized body to organize and channel the crowd. Given the ability of the state to enforce the rule of law, and to use traditional elites (chiefs, religious leaders, and others) to calm social tensions and resolve conflicts, the weakness of civil society makes it harder to organize contestation. I call this local context a **compliant field**.

The varying structures of the local context in a *participatory, insurrectional*, or *compliant* field constrain social entrepreneurs given the repertoires of collective action available, and standardize claim-making practices. They do this by shaping what grievances become more salient and subject to claims; what means and resources are available to entrepreneurs, and what opportunity there is for claim-making, and hence what type of collective action can succeed given the overall political environment and the obstructive capabilities of the state (Klandermans 1997, 10). By raising and lowering the costs and benefits of certain forms of collective action, they incentivize and/or dis-incentivize certain social entrepreneurs to engage in collective political contestation. For instance, the context of consolidate statehood lowers the costs—and raise the benefits—of engaging in peaceful claim-making. By contrast, such contexts would raise the cost—and lower the benefits—of violent claim-making. These constraints and opportunities influence social entrepreneurs’ decision to initiate (or not) a given form of collective political contestation.

**Interaction between Ideology and Local Context and the Construction of Collective Action**

So far, I have used social movement theories to identify the structures of the local context that influence the emergence and forms of political contestation. I have also analyzed how these structures vary at the subnational level, particularly in weak non-Weberian states. My argument is that certain ideological discourses “fit” better within a particular local context than in others. In what follows, I examine the interaction between the structures of the local context and Islamic
ideologies. I focus on how different local contexts facilitate the politicization of different ideologies, and lead to the emergence of particular “Muslim entrepreneurs”—pietist, Islamist, or jihadist—thus shaping the forms of Islamic contestation.

Not all ideologies can be enacted in every context. “Ideology,” as Swidler (1986, 277) argues, “operates as a tool kit for constructing strategies for action”. Just as certain tools fit well in certain context and are “unfit” in other, certain ideologies are better equipped to perform effectively in certain situations than in others. The ability of social entrepreneurs to act on a particular ideology depends largely on the structure of the local context in which they operate. A particular context may lower the costs and raise the benefits of enacting a specific ideology, thus incentivizing “social entrepreneurs” who adhere to that particular ideology to act on it. The same context, however, might dis-incentivize the enactment of a different ideology. For instance, a context of social and political disorder, where social groups use violence to express grievances or vie for social and political control, may lower the cost of embracing the jihadist ideology by making resources available for the organization of a jihadist insurgency. Such contexts are also likely to raise the benefits of using the jihadist discourse, due to the latter’s powerful moral justification for violence in contradiction to ethnic or factional discourse. On the contrary, a context where law and order is prevalent, and where social groups use peaceful means to express dissent, encourages Islamist Muslim entrepreneurs to act on their ideology.

A democratic participatory field is likely to facilitate the enactment of the Islamist ideology. Muslim entrepreneurs who adhere to Islamism here find a fertile environment to engage in the form of activism that they deem necessary and most efficient to advance Islam in the public sphere, including bargaining with secular elites, organizing protests to demand changes in government policies, and political lobbying. Islamist discourse is framed to resonate
well with urban masses. They advocate for education, development, freedom, and other such causes, while respecting Islamic values and identity. As Roy (1994, 52) observes “Islamism is the sharia plus electricity.” The Islamist discourse blame Westernized elites and Western values and practices for the problems facing Muslim societies today. They claim that economic underdevelopment, unemployment, corruption and embezzlement of public funds are all to be blamed on moral decay and on the effort to Westernize Muslim culture. “The argument,” as Wiktorowicz (2004, 16-17) puts it, “is that the true path to development and success is outlined in the sources of Islam. So long as Muslim follow this straight path, they will be rewarded for their faithfulness.” Islamists often use Islamic NGOs to advance their claims concerning development and education. Islamist benefited from the decline of liberal and socialist ideologies that historically mobilized the urban masses. A participatory field provides Islamists with the right environment to thrive. Islamists are better equipped to engage with the other actors in that particular organizational field than the other Muslim groups.

On the other hand, an insurrectional context provides ample opportunities for jihadist entrepreneurs to organize insurgency, including the absence of a capable state army and the availability of weapons. The jihadist ideology provides a compelling narrative that speaks to the grievances of marginalized communities that feel neglected by the state, and that consider the state as an extractive and exploitative entity rather than a protector and welfare provider. It is easier to convince members of communities with very limited presence of the state to oppose the state. The use of the jihadist ideology in such contexts is strategically rewarding as a legitimizing and mobilizing discourse to challenge the state. It provides fighters with a symbolically greater and nobler cause to fight for, allows for the creation of a larger coalition that bridges the tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages, and opens the door for foreign jihadists to enter in support of the
group. In a war zone where groups with different ideologies fight each other, jihadists can easily emerge as a major voice, to the detriment of Islamists and pietists. On the other hand, the ability of the jihadist discourse to mobilize people in capital cities tends to be very limited. An individual who believes in the jihadist ideology is unlikely to start a jihadist insurgency in a capital city, given that the conditions are not amenable to insurgency. Such a person can either live with his or her belief without acting on it or commit a terrorist attack as a “lone wolf,” or move to a place where insurgency is possible.

Finally, in a compliant field religious identity is strong, organized around the religious clergy or a spiritual leader. In secondary cities, the weakening of ethnic ties, and the still rudimentary level of class formation have strengthened affiliation and identification with religion and spiritual leaders more than in either rural or metropolitan areas. The state, though limited, is still the most important power-broker and is able to coopt traditional chiefs and religious leaders. The state is strong enough to at least be capable of imposing the rule of law. The state also has the ability to mobilize both traditional elites and religious leaders to deter political dissenters. This combination of fairly strong state presence and weak social and political activism are favorable neither to jihadists nor to Islamists, but sweets well the pietists. The mutually beneficial relationship between the state and the pietists empowers both while at the same time alienates the masses and their demands. In many cases the context of Sahelian secondary cities is characterized by rising social demands that lack appropriate channels for their expression, often leading to spontaneous outburst of violence.

**Participation of Individuals in Contestation**

Though the emergence of Muslim entrepreneurs and the elaboration of discourses of mobilization mark the beginning of activism, ultimately it is the aggregation of individual decisions to participate that makes collective action possible. Understanding the process of this
individual decision-making, the factors and mechanisms that influence people’s decision to participate or not, is thus crucial to a complete analysis of Islamic contestation. It is important to note first that the motivation that prompts a Muslim entrepreneur to promote an act of political contestation is not necessarily the same as the motives behind the participation by other individuals in the collective action. Islamic contestations mobilize individuals from very different social and economic backgrounds.

The motivation of individuals to take part in contestatory collective action have been the subject on numerous studies (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Klandermans 1997; Diani 2004). These studies have tended to conclude that people participate in Islamic contestation, just like any other form of collective action, because they “believe that they can change their political environment to their advantage.” (Klandermans 2004, 363). Muslim activists have mobilized participants with multiple backgrounds. The participants are largely representative of the society at large. They may be motivated by multiple and varied reasons. As Smith (2004) argues in the case of Islamic movement in Iran, same people who participate in collective action led by Islamic actors often also participate in secular activism and vice-versa. Investigating the reasons behind Muslim immigrants’ decision to participate or not in collective action, Klandermans, van der Toorn, and Stekelenburg (2008, 993) find that “the social psychological mechanisms that are known to steer collective action participation among average citizens work among Muslim immigrants as well.” In what follows, I discuss the determinant of Individuals’ participation in the Islamic contestation.

Determinants of Individuals’ Participation in Islamic Contestation

At the outset, “a demand for change begins with dissatisfaction” (Klandermans 2004, 362). This dissatisfaction can be “the experience of illegitimate inequality, feeling of relative deprivation, feelings of injustice, moral indignation about some state of affairs, or a suddenly
imposed grievance” and believe that they can do that at affordable cost” (Klandermans 2004, 362). Grievance alone, however, is not sufficient to determine individual’s decision to participation. In fact, as Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, 888) put it, the question “is not so much whether people who engage in protest are aggrieved, but whether aggrieved people engage in protest.” That is to say in addition to being aggrieved, individuals make the decision to take part in collective action based on a number of other factors. Drawing on recent research, particularly in social psychology, I argue that participation in Islamic contestation is a function of four factors: collective identity, network relationship, discourse resonance, and instrumental motives. These factors are not specific to Islamic contestation, but to all forms of collective actions. A combination of multiple motives increases the chance that an individual participates.

The first determinant factor of participation in collective action is collective identity, for the simple reason that individuals who come together to engage into a collective action must first of all share, and then want to protect or advance, the interests of a collective identity (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013, 889-890). In the words of Wright (2001, 413), “It is simply obvious that in order to engage in collective action the individual must recognize his or her membership in the relevant collective.” People participate in collective actions because they “want to act as members of their groups” (Klandermans 2004, 361). But given that people simultaneously hold several identities—they can be Muslims, students, former slaves, unemployed youth, or more—the more consolidated a collective identity is, the more inclined individual members are to engage on its behalf (Klandermans 2004, 364). A strong identification with a group makes participation in collective political action on behalf of that group more likely. For example, as we shall see in the case of Mauritania, identification with slave or former slave identity makes participation in an anti-slavery protests more likely.
Second, network relationship has been emphasized as another determinant factor in the individuals’ decision to take part in episodes of contestation. Enrollment in a particular social movement or engagement in collective action is often “embedded in dense relational settings” (Diani 2004, 339). Strong interpersonal linkages, such as kinship and friendship ties with leaders or influential members within the group, facilitate recruitment and long-standing membership in the group (Diani 2004, 341). Network relations influence participation by facilitating the circulation of information, creating and reproducing bonds of solidarity, and enforcing social approval through reward and sanction mechanism. Not only does embeddedness in social networks facilitate recruitment into a group, but it also discourages leaving the group (Diani 2004, 342). Different networks matter in different context. Networks relations are particularly important in individuals’ decision to participate in dangerous collective actions. Individuals may take high risk to participate in an act of contestation if the intensity of ties that link him or her to the leadership or key members of the organization are great (Diani 2004, 342).

Third, many people participate in collective action not because they identify with a particular community, or have personal relationship with the activists, but just because they agree with the message and the cause. That is, individual’s participation depends also on the degree of resonance of the collective action frame. The collective action frame provides a motivational impetus for participation (Snow and Benford, 1988, 199). The more the grievance frame resonates with the individual’s personal conditions, the more willing that individual will be to participate. The question, as Snow and Benford (1988, 198) rightly ask, is under what conditions do collective action frame “strike a responsive chord or resonate with the targets of mobilization?” Numerous studies have attempted to unveil the factors behind the collective framing effort’s success or failure to mobilize. These findings are summarized by Johnston and
Noake (2005, 13) who argue that the resonance of a collective action frame depends on three sets of factors: First, the credibility of the entrepreneur who frames the discourse, including the entrepreneur’s organizational and professional credentials as well as charismatic leadership; second, the target population’s ideological, attitudinal, and moral orientations; and finally, the frames’ quality in terms of its coherence, consistency, and compatibility with local culture, and its relevance, that is whether that target audience finds it convincing.

And finally, individuals participate in political contestation because of instrumental, situational, and strategic motives. Participation in Islamic political contestation is often viewed as solely motivated by religious motives. This view has been challenged as scholars have found motivations to participate in Islamic movements to be diverse (Smith 2004). Besides, ideology, other instrumental motives such as economic incentives and the pursuit of political influence play a central role as well. Adherence to Islamic contestation is often dictated by situational and contingent factors, circumstantial reasons, or interest-based coalitions. For instance, the dynamics of conflict and the situation of generalized insecurity in northern Mali have forced some communities in quest of protection to pledge allegiance to jihadist movements. Other individuals have joined jihadist movements for financial incentives, including salaries, the distribution of booty, and, for young men, also for the opportunity to get married, inexpensively, to abducted women or female jihadists.

**Tentative Profiles of Participants in Different Form of Islamic Contestation**

Different forms of contestation involve different motivational dynamics: each collective action frame tends to appeal to individuals from particular sociological background. Thus, the Islamist collective action frame has attracted urbanized masses that are products of modern society. These include devout Muslims from the middle class, university students, educated women, and the urban working class (Roy 1994, 53). On university campuses for example,
Islamist groups today compete with leftist groups (Camara and Bodian 2016). They also mobilize among the working class. Islamists have been particular successful in recruiting women, whose participation in the movement allows them to militate, study, and work in professional settings. Roy (1994, 58) notes that,

The Islamists consider women’s role to be essential to education and the society. They see women as people, and no longer as mere instrument of pleasure or reproduction. They are opposed to excessive dowries and divorces of convenience. Islamist organizations include entire women’s sections, the “sisters,” the first of which was created in Egypt in 1944 (al-akhwat al-muslima, ‘the Muslim sisters’).

The jihadist collective action, by contrast, has a particular appeal to individuals coming from three groups of people: First, jihadist discourse resonates well with communities that inhabit territories at the state’s periphery. These are communities who have been at the margin of the state and have not been sufficiently penetrated by or captured into the state system. Individuals in these communities often have strong feeling of political and economic marginalization that jihadis tap into to mobilize their support (UNDP 2017; Crisis Group 2016). Second, jihadis have been particularly successful in recruiting adherents from certain religious sects in comparison to others. For example, many members of the Tabligh jama’at, and more Salafis than Sufis, arguably due to the proximity in the system of belief that creates a sort of religious predisposition to enroll in these movements (Lecocq and Schrijver 2007: ). Third, jihadis have particularly appealed to individuals associated with networks of illicit trafficking and other criminal activity (Scheele 2012; Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Kinship networks also

---

6 The fact that jihadism draws on a Salafi epistemology and methodology and ijtihad, makes the jihadist discourse resonate more with Salafis than Sufis whose doctrine has little in common with jihadist ideology. Similarly, while the Tabligh Jama’at is reputed to be apolitical and quietist, the fact that Tabligh has a strong emphasis on the idea of umma, as a unified global Muslim society, as well as its strong opposition to Westernization and the necessity to protect Muslim society from it, increase the resonance of that aspect of the jihadist discourse within the Tabligh communities.
play a significant role in determining who enrolls in jihadist movements. Jihadists entrepreneurs are most often successful in recruiting supporters from within their immediate family, clans and ethnic group before expanding to other networks. Not only do family and tribal ties facilitate recruitment, but also in a context of widespread insecurity family and tribes are a valuable source of protection against rival communities.

Finally, the pietist discourse resonates well with the religious establishment, Westernized elites, and adherents to Sufi congregations. Such discourse resonates with graduates from religious schools—makaranta or mahadara—usually uneducated urban dwellers and most rural dwellers.

**Conclusion**

The cases of Islamic political contestation to be discussed in this dissertation will be analyzed through the prism of the theoretical framework I have laid out above. I have argued that variations in the forms of Islamic contestation are a function of the interaction between Islamic ideologies, the structures of the local context, and factors determining individual motivations. They are thus shaped by factors at the global, the local, and the individual level.

At the global level, Islamic ideologies as sets of ideas and beliefs that are conceptualized by canonical Muslim activists based on varying interpretations of Islam, provide contrasting frameworks for understanding and addressing the challenges that have faced Muslim societies. Islamic ideologies can be divided into three categories: pietism, Islamism, and jihadism. I argue that Islamic ideologies play a central role in shaping Islamic activism. At the local level, Muslim entrepreneurs use these idioms and combine them with symbols and images from their specific local context to formulate contestatory discourses that tap into local grievances and mobilize popular support for collective action.
However, not all local contexts are likely to stimulate any given kind of collective action. The structure of the local context heavily influences whether a Muslim entrepreneur finds it rewarding to promote a particular contestatory collective action, and what kind of action is likely to succeed, thus determining his or her decision to publicly advocate it. The decision by the entrepreneur to encourage a contestatory collective action, however, does not guarantee wide participation. To understand that likelihood we must look at individual motivations. Those who participate do not necessarily have the same motives as the entrepreneurs themselves. Some individuals may participate because the collective action frame resonates well with their conditions, while others may be dragged in through networks of interpersonal relations with the activists, or due to material or situational incentives.

These considerations, I believe, provide a comprehensive approach for understanding the variation in forms of Islamic political contestation in Sahel. The chapter has attempted to theorize the variation of forms that Islamic contestations have taken by disentangling the processes and mechanisms that relate global ideologies to local contexts and individual motivation. Although they appear separate, these different levels are interconnected by multiple interactions. Subsequent chapters focused on empirical cases of contestation will attempt to apply this theoretical framework to specific cases in the Sahel region.
CHAPTER 3
THE NATURE OF THE STATE AND PROCESSES OF ISLAMIZATION IN THE SAHEL

The Sahel region has recently occupied the world’s attention as it has become a hotbed of jihadi groups, and a major transit zone for Africans who aim to migrate to Europe. Lagging behind in most indicators of economic and human development, Sahelian countries represent the prototype of weak states that many analysts view as potential incubators or sanctuaries to criminal organizations that threaten the world’s stability. Beside their shared geographic proximity, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger also have many other characteristics in common. They all have weak state structures, that are characterized by a juxtaposition of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions, and these are distributed across a particularly difficult political geography, with a few densely populated areas and vast sparsely-populated hinterlands. Their populations are overwhelmingly Muslim, with percentages of Muslim populations varying from 100 percent in Mauritania to around 98 percent in Niger and 95 percent in Mali. These characteristics make the Sahelian states among the weakest Muslim majority countries in the world. This chapter examines the empirical terrain of this study, focusing in particular on the two dynamics that are relevant to my argument: the dynamics of the state and the dynamics of Islam. First, I attempt to explain why the Sahelian countries are weak, and how this weakness affects the distribution of authority across their territories. Second, I provide an explanation as to why Sahelian societies are so deeply Islamized. I trace out the factors of state weakness and the processes of Islamization in the deep history of the region, taking into account pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial dynamics.

It is important to note that the Sahel region is a large geographic zone that is inhabited by diverse communities. Each one of these communities has its own history and its particularities in terms of social and political configurations. It is impossible to do justice to all the complexity of
these societies in this chapter. What I attempt to do here is to provide a concise—even simplified overview—of some of the major historical trajectories and broadly shared characteristics that can help make sense of the current social, political, and religious context.

At the outset, the Sahelian countries appear to function as modern states. They have designated territories with well-defined borders. They have established modern state institutions, including the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. They enjoy international legal sovereignty and participate in international meetings. Yet, in their daily functioning, the Sahelian states are highly ineffective. They face significant challenges in terms of establishing “domestic sovereignty,” meaning “the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polities” (Krasner 1999, 4). Scholars of African politics have characterized African states in general as weak and lacking legitimacy (Hyden 2011; Young 2012; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Nugent 2012); unable to project power over their sovereign territories (Herbst 2000) poor, poorly managed, and aid dependent (Hyden 2011; Bates 2014; Schatzberg 2001). In brief, many have argued, the state in Africa is “in crisis.” Young (2012, 82) captures the nature of this crisis: “The crises of the state in postcolonial Africa and post-Soviet Eurasia are a crisis of stateness itself. They revolve around the capacity of public institutions to rule effectively, to create security within their orbit of territorial sovereignty.” Within this continental context of weak states, the Sahelian countries are arguably among the weakest, and this weakness has been exacerbated as states have confronted new and daunting challenges especially since 2012. The weakness of the Sahelian state is a critical factor in explaining political contestation.

The Sahelian public sphere has also become more and more “confessional” over the last quarter century as Sahelian Muslim activists have attempted to shift the basis of legitimacy for
social and political order from secular universal values to conformity with Islamic values (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013). But given the lack of consensus among Muslims on a single Islamic doctrine, what we have witnessed has been a battle of arguments among different religious actors, to justify their positions by drawing on different theological and jurisprudential sources (Villalón 2010). Many Muslims in the Sahel, including those who adhere to a secular ideology, would agree that Islam has a role to play in the public sphere, or in politics, but they would strongly disagree on what that role should be. Islamic political contestation is only one manifestation of the broader dynamics of interrelations between Islam and the public sphere. While secular activists have taken part in this argumentation and have been often obliged to justify their positions using religious arguments, these debates have, for the most part, opposed different Muslim actors, most notably the religious establishment and their new challengers motivated by alternative Islamic ideological currents. Islamic contentious politics, therefore, is not only a contestation against the state or the government but also a claim against the legitimacy of the established religious authorities (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013; Holder 2009).

In what follows I will set the contextual stage for the case studies. I first analyze the nature of the state in the Sahel, before turning to a discussion of the religious dynamics, emphasizing the dynamics of Islamization, or of re-Islamization.

**The Nature of the State in the Sahel: Neither “Sahelian” nor “State”**

The Sahelian countries are frequently described as “fragile,” “weak” or “ungoverned” states. These concepts are often used interchangeably to characterize the countries’ failure to meet the standard definition of the state in the Weberian sense, which is “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a governed territory” (Weber 1991, 78). However, this characterization of the Sahelian states is misleading. First, the Weberian definition of the state is “normative” and biased toward the Western model of
state, which applies only to a restricted number of countries in Europe and North America, leaving out the majority of countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia (Krasner and Risse 2014, 548). Second, even weaker states have the ability to project authority on certain important portions of their territories—in most cases their capital cities—while areas that escape full government control are also governed, albeit by non-state actors (Risse 2012).

In this section, I make three arguments: First, paraphrasing Englebert (1997, 767), I argue that the Sahelian states are neither “Sahelian” in their nature given that the traditional political structures that existed in the pre-colonial era were transformed during colonization, nor are they fully “states” given that the new modern state structures that replaced the traditional ones are yet to be fully established. The contemporary state in the Sahel is rather a messy juxtaposition of modern, traditional, and hybrid institutions. Second, I argue that the prevalence of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions varies from capital cities, where formal institutions and modern social organization takes precedence, to the rural periphery, where the informal institutions and traditional social organizations prevail. And third, I argue that these different structures of the local context constrain the choices of “social entrepreneurs” when it comes to the decision to organize collective action. Different structures of the local context provide different political opportunity, resources, and grievance frameworks, and hence different incentives for organizing collective action.

**Trajectories of the Sahelian State: Juxtaposition of Formal, Informal, and Hybrid Institutions**

The Sahel region is inhabited by racially and ethnically diverse societies. Light-skinned Moorish and Tuareg ethnic groups inhabit the desert areas of the northern Sahel and Sahara, whereas “black” communities, including Fulani, Mande, Hausa, Songhai and many other ethnic groups are found further to the south. The social and political organization of these societies is
also diverse and hardly fits any single categorization. Yes, there are some broadly shared characteristics and historical trajectories that scholars have observed among some of the major ethnic groups, notwithstanding significant variations (Marchesin 2010; De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2005; Grémont 2010; Lecocq 2010; Rossi 2015). Prior to colonization, most Sahelian populations lived in more or less small communities where kinship constituted the basis for social and political systems. Community had an overriding power over its individual members. Kinship system supposedly predetermined the individual’s social and political status as well as professional activity. The imperatives of nomadic way of living and extensive agriculture influenced the adoption of a particular social configuration that tend toward social hierarchy, particularly among Moorish, Tuareg, Fulani, and Songhay (Marchesin 2010; De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2005; Grémont 2010; Rossi 2015). At the top of the hierarchy are lineages of warriors and religious clergy who are considered nobles, then comes the lineage of “dependents or tributaries” who are non-nobles but free, and finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy comes the lineage of slaves and former slaves.¹

Family and lineage constituted the main political units as well. And political leadership derived from hereditary social and religious statuses, which also constituted the basis for political legitimacy. Kings and chiefs, typically, came from noble lineages, which attempted to dominate the non-nobles and the slaves. For instance, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the lineages of Ardo’en, Imajeghan, and Bani Hassan respectively assumed the political leadership of the

¹ For example, in Mali these hierarchies are roughly identical among the Tuareg, the Arabs, the Fulani, and the Songhay. The aristocracy is represented by the clan of Ifoghas and Iwillemmedan among the Tuareg, the Kounta among the Arabs, the Ardo’en among the Fulani, and the Maiga among the Songhay. The lineages of vassals or tributaries are roughly represented by the Tuareg Imghad, the Arab Lamhar, the Peul Jallube, and the Sorko and Kourtey among the Songhay. At the bottom of the scale comes the lineages of craftsman and the slaves. These hierarchies often change according to historical circumstances. For instance, prior to colonial conquest, the Ifoghas were considered a vassal clan that fell under the authority of the Iwillemmeden. Colonial authorities promoted them to the position of nobility.
Fulani, Tuareg, and Moorish societies. The hierarchical order is also justified to the fact that aristocratic lineages provided security to subalterm groups, which in exchange pay tributes to the leading lineages. For example, the Ifoghas assumed the leadership of the Tuareg of the Adagh region, starting in the early 20th century based on their background of warriors and religious clerics, turning a number of lineages into “Imghad,” meaning tributaries (Lecocq 2010). The history of the Sahel, however, just like the history of most hierarchical societies, is that of a constant political struggle within the aristocratic lineages themselves and between them and the subaltern classes. (Marchesin 2010; De Bruijn and van Dijk 2005; Grémont 2010). Although large political entities existed at different times in the Sahel’s history, including the empires Ghana (700 - 1240), Kanem Bornou (700 - 1380), Mali (1235 - 1670), Songhai (1464 - 1591), Sokoto Caliphate (1804 - 1903) the Macina (1820 - 1862) and the Futanke (1848 - 1893), the form of governance remained decentralized as local chiefs essentially governed their communities and paid tributes to the central state. Given the absence of centralized authority, local communities performed crucial governance tasks, including education, health provision, and religious rituals. From these governance practices emerged a repertoire of customary laws that were used to regulate family relations such as marriage, birth, inheritance, and mechanisms to litigate, mediate, and arbitrate disputes.

In most areas of the Sahel, French colonial rule started in the early 20th century. For nearly sixty years, the French colonial authorities, engaged in reordering the Sahelian political space. They attempted to transform the existing social and political structures that they found in place while trying to establish modern state structures. Despite the relatively short period of time—“a mere moment in historical time” as Young (1994, 9) puts it—colonization was a critical juncture, in the sense that it undermined the existing social and political institutions and
introduced new, “modern” institutions. Yet, the impact of colonization in many parts of the Sahel region was disruptive more so than transformational. Located in the periphery of the French West Africa and considered economically non-viable, most Sahelian territories were of secondary importance to the colonial power (Idrissa 2001). They remained administratively at the margins of the colonial state. As a result, colonial authorities introduced modern institutions without fully establishing them, and they pushed the traditional institutions into the background without totally eliminating them. These traditional institutions were often dramatically transformed in interaction with colonial power. Meanwhile, the introduction of modern institutions was followed by a process of adaptation whereby local actors struggled to inscribe local meanings onto the newly established institutions (Galvan 2004). Through this process of adaptation, these local actors drew on their local values and culture to transform the new institutions and re-appropriate them to serve their interest. These syncretic—also called hybrid—institutions are neither typically modern nor traditional, but a messy mixture of both.²

One important consequence of this disruption is that the post-colonial offspring of the colonial state inherited a Janus-faced social and political system that comprises, on the one hand, “modern” social and political institutions usually referred to as *formal*, including government structures inherited from the colonial system, a justice system that implement positive law and, on the other hand, the “traditional” institutions—often labeled *informal*—that include the chieftaincy, tribal and hierarchical organization of the society, and customary laws. In addition to the formal and informal institutions, other syncretic institutions emerge out of people’s struggle

---

² For lack of better terms, I use “traditional institutions” to refer to political institutions that existed before colonization and “modern institutions” to refer to current state institutions introduced during colonization. I do not attach any value judgement to these particular notions. Also, for the very reasons that I mentioned above, it goes without saying that the notion of “modern” and “traditional” institutions are very complex, and the boundaries between them are blurred.
to adapt to, and navigate between, the formal and informal institutions. Today the social, political, and economic configurations of the Sahelian countries is characterized by the juxtaposition of these three institutional structures—formal, informal, and hybrid—which taken together are poorly integrated and function quite ineffectively. For example, the judicial system is composed of formal courts that implement positive law, and informal courts that implement customary laws. The educational system offers another example of the persisting duality of institutional organization where traditional Qur’anic schools known variously as makaranta or mahadara or other local terms, co-exist with Francophone schools and a syncretic “Franco-Arabic” school system (Villalón, Idrissa, and Bodian 2012). The prevalence of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions, however, varies according to geographic space: formal institutions tend to prevail in urban areas, whereas informal institutions are stronger in rural areas.

Another challenge that Sahelian states inherited from colonization is their political geography. The colonial partition of the Saharan and Sahelian region left the contemporary states with large and sparsely populated territories. They are among the physically largest countries in Africa with territories that span over a million square-kilometers each. This political geography dramatically elevates the cost of establishing formal state institutions, including maintaining effective military control, deploying administrative structures, building infrastructures, and providing welfare. With rapid urbanization since independence, the concentration of the population is high around the capital cities of Niamey, Bamako, and Nouakchott, and medium in secondary cities, notably Zinder and Maradi (Niger), Segou and Sikasso (Mali) or Nouadhibou and Rosso (Mauritania). The remaining territories are vast hinterlands of very low population density, particularly in the desert areas. As Herbst (2000, 152) argues convincingly, the size and population distribution of the Sahelian state make them “almost impossible to govern” or at least
As a result of the Sahelian states’ difficult political geography, and partly due to the limitation of financial resources, Sahelian political elites have made the choice to invest more in controlling “their political cores” and have cared less about their rural and peripheral areas, resulting in a “highly differentiated control over outlying areas” (Herbst 2000, 143). Thus, the Sahelian territories represent a sort of continuum of statehood, where in the capital cities the state looks more like a modern nation-state with fairly functioning state administration, a less ethnically-based social organization of society as social group increasingly organize along professional and class-based categories and use the language of civil society. However, the more one moves from the capital cities toward the rural periphery, the more traditional institutions of chieftaincy and customary laws tend to prevail over the formal state institutions.

Democratization and Divergent Outcome: Inter-State Variations

In the mid-2000, as the Algerian jihadist insurgency (arguably a civil war) that began with the annulled elections of 1991 started to spill over into the Sahel region, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger found themselves on the frontline of the jihadist threat. Many observers, then, voiced concerns over these fragile countries’ ability to handle the jihadist threat (Crisis Group 2005a; Lecocq 2007). Niger appeared the most vulnerable of the three countries due to its long history of political instability, a recurrent Tuareg rebellion, and its overall weak economy and state capacity. Mauritania also displayed significant signs of weakness as the then-twenty-year old praetorian dictatorship faced recurrent coups attempts organized by factions within the military, before the presidential guard overthrew President Ould Taya in 2005 (Foster 2011). Mali, however, was widely considered to show signs of institutional strength, due to twenty years of regular elections and a peaceful transition to power. Yet unexpectedly, in 2012, Mali collapsed and lost control of two-thirds of its territory to jihadist insurgent groups, while Mauritania found
its way out of jihadist attacks in 2011 after six years (2005–2011) of insurgency. Niger, quite unexpectedly, has proven resilient. Despite numerous jihadist attacks and attempts to encroach on its territory, Niger has so far been successful in defending its territory from jihadist invasion. This example intriguingly shows the varied levels of resiliency in countries that otherwise share most relevant social, religious, and economic characteristics.

Although the Sahelian countries followed similar precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial trajectories, and share in common weak institutional structure and difficult political geography, their trajectories diverged starting in the early 1990s, as they embarked in the worldwide democratization process of the “Third Wave.” In the interval, some countries have performed better than others in terms of their effectiveness to control society and establish law and regulations and their resilience in the face of external challenges. I argue that the elite decisions during the critical juncture of democratic transition varied significantly, leading to varying outcomes of democratic experiments (Villalón and VonDoepp 2005).

The efforts by Sahelian states to democratize under the condition of weak state structures unsettled the existing state institutions and fundamentally altered state and society dynamics, allowing for new institutions to be installed and new elites to take over. The decisions that these elite made during the critical juncture of democratic transition and in its aftermath produced different outcomes: In Mali where the transition process led to the collapse of the praetorian regime, and the social groups overtake of state power, efforts to “democratize” eventually resulted in the deinstitutionalization of the state (Baudais 2006; Chazal 2011). This included on the one hand, the civilian politicians’ effort to sabotage the military institution, through limitation of funding and politicization of military officers, and on the other hand, the adoption of “consensus democracy” which relied more on personal clientelistic and patronage networks at
the expense of state institutions (Wing 2013). In Niger, where the incumbent praetorian regime supervised the transition and then yielded power to civilian politicians, the structures of the incumbent praetorian regime, including the military institution and the former single party, remained strong and competed with the new incoming political parties, leading to recurrent political instability and military coups (Idrissa 2001; 2008). Finally, in Mauritania where the transition was spearheaded by the praetorian regime just as an attempt to legitimate its authoritarian rule, the regime remained authoritarian reducing social groups’ expression to a strict minimum (Foster 2011) and allowing only a minimal legitimation of its rule.

Leading to the third wave democratization phenomenon—and under both domestic and international pressures—the praetorian regimes in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger either broke down or were forced to undertake significant reforms in favor of political liberalization and democratization in the early 1990s (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Young 2012, 63). Already by 1994, Bratton and Van de Walle assessed Mauritania’s transition as “Flawed” while they view Niger and Mali as “successful’ democratic transition.” About a decade later, revisiting the outcome of the democratic experiments, Villalón and Idrissa (2005a) noted the changing trajectories of the Sahelian countries. By 2005, Niger’s democracy had faced a “repetitive breakdown,” while Mali’s successful transition had faced “tribulations” (Villalón and Idrissa 2005b). Yet today, after a quarter-century of democratization efforts, the situation of these three Sahelian countries has evolved in an even more unpredictable fashion: Rather than breakdown, Niger’s repetitive coups appears to be a sign of resilience of its democratic experiments, a “mode of regulations” of political turmoil, a “corrective” mechanism of institutional blockade (Kimba 2008; Chazal 2011). What was once considered a successful democratic experiment in Mali—after twenty years of un-interrupted electoral democracy—has now broke down. Retrospectively,
scholars now described Mali’s democracy as “fragile,” “shallow,” and “precarious” after the 2012 state collapse under the crisis of jihadist insurgency (Wing 2013). Finally, Mauritania’s flawed transition is today considered a non-transition given that the praetorian regime has managed to maintain power, through flawed elections (Foster 2011).

The Dynamics of Islam in the Sahel

Islam’s presence in the Sahel is nearly as old as the religion itself. Islam reached the present-day Sahel already in the 7th century C.E., when the first Arab conquerors made an incursion into the Kawar region in present-day Niger (Idrissa 2017; Hamani 2007). The Islamization process can be characterized in three phases: The early phase of Islamization corresponds to the period between the 9th and 16th century, when the religion was primarily the domain of an elite, essentially an “Islamic bourgeoisie.” The second phase, from the 16th to the 20th century is the period of “Islamisation en masse” (Islamization of the masses) due partly to the emergence of Sufi congregations starting in the 16th century. Most importantly, the disruptions of the French colonial conquest precipitated significant expansion of Islam across both urban and rural societies in the Sahel (Launay and Soares 1999; Peterson 2011). Finally, what might be considered the third phase of Islamization started in the second half of the 20th century when, due to the global trend of Islamic revivalism and the phenomenon of democratization, multiple Islamic currents emerged and contributed to the deepening of Islamization—or what Idrissa (2017) calls “re-Islamization.” In addition to its religious and cultural dimensions, this phenomenon has been marked by both political and economic dimensions. In what follows, I elaborate on these three phases of Islamization of Sahelian societies.
Process of Islamization in the Sahel

During the second-half of the seventh century—roughly a quarter century after the death of the prophet Muhammad—Arab conquerors from the Hijaz invaded the Maghreb and established the political dominance of Islam across North Africa (Fournel 1875-1881, 170-173). Islam became the religion of commerce, and through the trans-Saharan trade, Islam was introduced into the Sahel region (Launay and Soares 1999, 499-500). Merchants and political elites gradually embraced it but for a long time, Islam remained a religion of the elite (Traoré 1979, 157). The Islamization of the Sahel at this early stage also remained superficial. Islam was more of “a social status rather than a public religion” (Idrissa 2017, 107). In fact, given the kinship-based division of labor, specific lineages within society controlled the teaching of Islam—including the Zawaya among the Moorish, the Ineslmen among the Tuareg, and the Torodbe among the Fulani/Toucouleur. Other lineages, including warriors, blacksmith, and slaves were deemed to not be entitled to Islam. However, because Islam was the religion of elite, it was soon to become the religion of the state as well. Askia Muhammad (1443 – 1538), the founder of the Askia dynasty in the Songhay Empire, requested the advice of an Algerian cleric called Al-Maghili (1425 – 1505) on his views to transform the government of the Songhay Empire along the lines of Sunni orthodoxy. During that period, Al-Maghili developed a body of work under the title *On The Obligations of Princes* that he addressed to the Songhay sovereign and the kings of the Hausa states of Kano and Katsina (Idrissa 2009, 38; Hunwick 1985). Thus, as early as the 16th century, some state leaders in the Sahel adopted the sharia as their governing law, allowing for Islam to permeate the existing customary laws, particularly on issues related to family, marriage, inheritance, divorce, and governance. Al-Maghili was also among the first to introduce the Qadiriyya Sufi order, starting in Mauritania in the 16th century, before Sufism expanded further south in the Sudan (Ould Abdullah 2015).
The introduction of Sufism, notably the Shadhiliyya, Qadiriyya, and Tijaniyya sects, inaugurated a new phase in the Islamization process, focused on the propagation of Islam more broadly. At first, Sufi clerics engaged in proselytizing missions to propagate the *wirld* (the distinctive ritual prayers of Sufi orders) and to enlist new adherents. Somewhat later, in the second half of the 17th century, a Moorish Sufi cleric named Nasr al-Dine (d. 1674) claimed that God has invested him with a mission to create an Islamic state (Ould Abdullah 2015). He successfully mobilized a strong following, particularly among Torodbe—a Fulani clerical lineage—and engaged in jihad against the Moorish emirates in present-day Mauritania. Although Nasr al-Dine’s jihadist campaign was short-lived—he was defeated in 1764 by a coalition of Bani-Hassan in what is known as the Charr Boubba War (1644 – 1974)—his Torodbe allies carried on the jihadist revolution that he pioneered and expanded it throughout West Africa. From the late 17th century until late 19th, the so-called “Fulani jihads” conquered a significant part of West Africa where they established theocratic states, including Fuuta Bundu in 1690s, Fuuta Jalon in 1727-28, Fuuta Toro in 1775, the Sokoto Caliphate after 1804, the Macina in 1817, and the Futanke kingdom in 1848 (Loverjoy, 2016: 12; Ould Abdullah 2015, 97-99). These Fulani jihad revolutions only came to an end with the onset of the French and British colonial encounters.

By the time the French colonial enterprise began in West Africa in the late nineteenth century, the Sahel region was dominated by the Fulani jihadi states and a significant part of the Sahelian population had embraced Islam. Official statistics elaborated by the colonial authorities between 1917 and 1921 estimated the percentages of Muslim populations in West Africa at around 45 percent, with particularly high proportions in the territories of Mauritania (around 95 percent), Niger (84 percent), but only around 33 percent in the French Sudan or Mali (Delafosse
The success of this early Islamization is often attributed to Sufism’s flexibility, which allowed for syncretism between Islam and animist traditions, resulting in what colonial authority called “l’Islam noir” (Launay and Soares 1999, 503).

Colonization accelerated the pace of Islamization in the Sahel. As Gouilly (1952) puts it “The indirect consequence of the European annexation of West Africa has been the disruption of the balance, patiently elaborated and maintained, between Allah and the fetishes, a disruption which has profited Islam” (Quoted in Launay and Soares 1999: 497). Three mechanisms help explain this outcome: First, during the precolonial era, hierarchical social categories were the most salient markers of individuals’ identity, and the learning and practice of Islam were associated with certain social categories. Colonialism produced a shift in the saliency of local identities, by promoting ethnic and racial identity to the detriment of hierarchical status, thus breaking the clerical groups’ monopoly over Islamic learning and practice. Individuals became eligible to convert to Islam regardless of their social status (Launay and Soares 1999, 506).

Second, the creation of new commercial centers by the colonial authorities, that were early captured by Muslims dealers, also favored Islamization; for those seeking opportunities in this sector, conversion to Islam was “virtually obligatory” for entry (Launay and Soares 1999, 506).

Third, the abolition of slavery, colonial military conscription, and migration also played an important role in the dissemination of Islam in the rural areas. The many emancipated slaves, colonial soldiers, and migrant workers who embraced Islam during their journey away from home, returned home with the “prayer” (Peterson 2011). The French colonizers came to perceive this rapid expansion of the Islamic sphere, and particularly the rise of Salafism, as a potential menace to their authority. In response, they attempted to manage this menace through policies of assertive secularism and via control of clerical activism. Despite these efforts, however, by the
end of the colonial era, Islamization had advanced both quantitatively and qualitatively. Not only had the Sahelian population overwhelmingly embraced Islam, but the learning and practices of the religion had improved and diversified as well.

When the colonies of French West Africa became independent in 1960, then, the populations of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger were all majority Muslim. The independence leaders—Modibo Keita, Mohamed Ould Daddah, and Diori Hamani—were also all themselves Muslims. Their approach to state-building, however, was rather modernist; their primary concern was to build “modern” nation-states. At this stage of state-building the leaders’ approach to Islam varied significantly. Mauritania became an “Islamic Republic,” declaring Islam as the religion of its population. The label “Islamic,” however, was less a reference to a theocratic state, than an attempt to highlight the unity of an otherwise racially and ethnically divided population scattered over a vast territory. In Mali, though Modibo Keita did not declare Islam as the “opium of the people” as his “strong adherence to Marxism-Leninism would command him,” he nevertheless “harbored no sympathies for religious organizations” (Idrissa 2017, 168). In Niger, the state’s attitude vis-à-vis Islam was neither Islamic nor sharply modernist, but rather that of a “balancing act” where “Islam was strengthened within society though state policy, and the state drew legitimacy from the support of religious leaders” while still maintaining a clear boundary between the two (Idrissa 2017, 85).

Despite these differences in approach, for all the three countries, Islam appeared as an important factor of unity against a background of divided, multiethnic populations, scattered over vast territories. Islam also appeared as a powerful diplomatic means that the leaders of the new Sahelian nations could use to promote relations with the Arab and Muslim countries. Thus, for the new political elites, controlling Islam and subordinating and instrumentalizing Islamic clerics
became a crucial governance strategy. As Hefner (2007, 32) suggests, “post-colonial nation-building only ushered in new struggles to control the commanding heights of public ethics and culture.” For the Islamic clerics who saw decolonization as a liberation from “infidel’s rule” cooperation with the new leaders was considered as an opportunity, particularly given that state elites pledged to respect and preserve the clerics authority over religious matters, and judicial privilege to rule over family and personal matters (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 57).

The Military junta that eventually took over after the first postcolonial regime adopted a more Islam-friendly attitude, while still pursuing the previous regime’s policy of tightening control over Islamic leaders. Thus, the current president of the Haut Conseil Islamique in Mali, Mahmoud Dicko, one of the most prominent but also controversial religious figures in Mali describes the military Junta’s attitude toward Islam, saying

The military came to power with no agenda, (sans projet de société). In order to give themselves some legitimacy, they instrumentalized Islam by demonstrating a certain openness and adhesion to Islamic values that contrasted with the previous regime. In Mali, Moussa Traoré would go to the mosque every Friday in presidential motorcade to pray in public. His regime also intensified Mali’s diplomatic relations with the Arab and Muslim World. As result of these diplomatic relations, his regime obtained scholarships for Malian students to go and study in the Arab countries. But only students from non-elite families were given these scholarships. Students from elite families received scholarships to study in francophone Universities. This practice led to a system of social and political reproduction. Elite children became elites themselves, whereas non-elite children become Arabophone (Arabisants) and religious clerics.³

**Democratization and Re-Islamization**

Important socio-political and religious transformations that started in the 1990s were to lead to the further deepening of Islamization, and the increasingly assertive presence of Islam in the public sphere, including in the political, economic, and cultural fields. Politically, the process

---

³ Interview with Mahmoud Dicko, Bamako, June 2015.
of democratization and political liberalization that started in 1990s created a permissive environment that allowed Muslim activists to engage in the public sphere in new ways (Villalón 2010). The new generation of Muslim activists was composed of Muslim elites who came from two distinct backgrounds: On the one hand, there were “Arabophone” Muslim intellectuals who graduated from Islamic Universities around the world, including Al Azhar in Egypt, University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic University of Say in Niger, and who were strong in terms of Islamic theology but weak in terms of capacity for political organization. On the other hand, there was a newly invigorated class of Francophone Muslim intellectuals who had graduated from secular schools of higher education, including those that evolved to become the University of Niamey (1971), the University of Nouakchott (1981), and the University of Bamako (1993). Though these Francophone intellectuals were not well educated in traditional Islamic studies, they had strong interests in promoting Islamic values on campus. Many of them were involved in Islamic students’ Associations in high schools and universities, and therefore had experience in cultural and political organization. Both the Arabophone and Francophone intellectuals questioned established religious authorities, who were more tied to political elites. They came together in the early 1990s to create a coalition of Muslim activists that led to the emergence of the first Islamist movements throughout the Sahel.

Muslim activists benefited twice from the democratization process. Not only did they seize the opportunity of political liberalization to create Islamic associations, but the liberal reforms that secular elites initiated on the wake of the democratic transition offered them an opportunity to call out the secular elite and propelled themselves to the forefront of the public sphere. Such was the case, for example, with the intense debates about family law which took place across the Sahelian countries. Dicko—who might be described as an Islamist, according to
my typology of Islamic ideologies—describes those liberal reforms as “a storm against Muslim traditions and culture. He contends,

Democracy came with an overdose of liberal reforms aiming to change certain core values and the culture of Malian society, including the creation of a youth parliament that authorized kids to challenge their parents and express disagreements vis-à-vis their parents in a way that goes against the Malian culture. There were also other imported reforms such as the family code and the debate about legalizing homosexuality, etc. People perceived all these reforms as threats to them. They saw it as an expression of the clash of civilizations. It appeared to people as if the government was precipitating them into a sort of modernity that is in contradiction with their core values. As a result, people gradually disengaged from the democratic process and returned to religion, where they feel more secured. Later they decided to react to what they considered an aggression.

Muslim activists also profited from the dialectic between democracy and the principle of secularism. Secularism, on the one hand, aims at confining religion to the private realm, while democracy promotes religious expression in the public sphere, notably by politicizing such private issues as marriage, divorce, parental relation and making them matters of political debates (Weck, Hasan, and Abubacar 2011). On the other hand, the principle of laïcité, understood as a complete separation between religion and the state, has put Sahelian governments in an ambivalent position regarding their approach to managing and regulating the religious sphere. As religious leaders continued to consolidate their presence in the public sphere, state’s management of religion became less assertive, leading to a certain laissez faire that profited Muslim activists who ceased the opportunity to strengthen their position and establish inclusive and well-organized social movements. During the same period, the presence of Islamic NGOs increased dramatically. These NGOs, mostly funded by the Gulf countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—focused their activities on

---

4 The dynamics I describe here are very “francophone” and are part of the colonial heritage. Secularism here refers to the French style laïcité, which is a specific variant of “secularism.”
promoting the faith of Sahelian Muslims through the construction of mosques, distribution of Qur’ans, and missionary work. These NGOs were also largely captured by Salafi groups who used them to advance a rigorous Salafi agenda throughout the region.

In the cultural field, there is today a pervasive presence of Islamic symbols and signs of religiosity and public piety. This is accompanied by a growing tendency toward religious conformism in line with the Salafi rigorous interpretation of Islam, and the hardening of positions vis-à-vis liberal reforms, including intolerance of “un-Islamic” behavior such as homosexuality and blasphemous acts. Recently, Muslim clerics’ increased use of communication technology, including electronics, mass media and social media, has revolutionize religious outreach and deepened the interconnectedness between Sahelian Muslims and others at the local, regional, and global levels. Similar to what Weck, Hasan, and Abubacar (2011, 4) describe in their study of contemporary religious expressions in Indonesia, in the Sahel as well, Islamic expression in the public sphere has gained from advances in information technology.

As social media—Facebook and WhatsApp, in particular—revolutionize social relations across the Sahel, Muslim groups have appropriated these technologies and invested them for the sake of proselytizing. A Facebook forum entitled “Multaqa darisi al-Lugha al-Arabiya wa al-Sharia al-Islamiyya min Ifriqiyya” ("The Forum of Arabic language and Shari'a scholars from Africa"), for example, has over 35,000 members, including Muslims from across the continent, who use it to discuss a variety of issues including topics related to Islamic practices, and Islam and politics.5 This increased connectivity of Sahelian Muslims on social media has strengthened and deepened interrelations with the global Muslim world and concretized more than ever before

5 The forum can be found on Facebook following this link: https://www.facebook.com/groups/486270221403373/ Accessed on July 14, 2018. I have been member of this Forum since 2012 and have drawn from the discussions in my research.
the idea of the *umma* as an “imagined community” of Muslims worldwide. Instant images of violence in Burma, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, are widely shared and debated in Facebook and Whatsapp forums such as the one mentioned above, shaping local debates about Islamic identity and politics. For example, following the Anti-Charlie Hebdo violence in Zinder, when Churches and Christians were attacked, one commentator on Facebook posted, “We have avenged the massacre of our brothers by Christians in the Central African Republic.” Both Salafi and Sufi groups have taken advantage of this media revolution, but Salafi groups are more media savvy than the traditional ulama, giving them an important comparative advantage in spreading their views and shaping religious debate particularly among the younger generations.

In the economic field, the flourishing and diverse “Islamic economy” and the widening of economic opportunity for graduates from Islamic universities is another important dimension of the re-Islamization process. Historically Islamic University graduates—also called “arabisants”—had very little job opportunities. But today, given the new environment, new opportunities for arabisant have been created, to the extent that in places like Niger, graduates with degrees in Sharia and Islamic studies or Arabic literature may at time have more employment opportunities than graduates from francophones schools, marking a complete reversal of historical marginalization of such groups. In addition to what Sounaye (2013) and Soares (1996) respectively named the “preaching economy” and “prayer economy,” there is what should be called the “Hajj economy” and the “Islamic NGO economy.” The organization of Hajj and ‘Umrah is a multi-million business that religious leaders have captured in these countries. In
Niger, the Hajj and Umrah business amounts to over a hundred million dollars every year.\(^6\) Hundreds of Hajj and Umrah agencies, run predominantly by religious leaders, capture this business, and it is a source of employment and revenue for many graduates from Islamic Universities. Islamic NGOs and Islamic banks, Franco-Arabic schools, and Medersas also constitute important sources of employment and income for Islamic University graduates.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has given a brief and broad overview of the nature of the state and the dynamics of Islam in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This condensed discussion of the region attempts only to capture the key dynamics of relevance for my argument of a history which is of course complex and nuanced. In sum, I have argued that Sahelian countries inherited two important characteristics from their colonial experience: a weak institutional structure characterized by the juxtaposition of formal, informal, and hybrid institutions, and a very difficult political geography. The structures of these different local contexts, including the level of statehood, the sociological configuration of societies, and sociopolitical and economic grievances, vary significantly in the ways that they constrain the ability of Muslim elites to organize collective political contestation. State weakness itself is not necessarily a sufficient determinant for political contestation. Rather the likelihood of this is shaped by the ways in which it affects dynamics at the very district level, and local equilibrium.

Although the Sahelian countries followed similar pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial trajectories, and share in common weak institutional structure and difficult political geographies, their trajectories diverged in the 1990s as they embarked on the democratization process. Elite

---

decisions during the critical juncture of democratic transition varied significantly, leading to varying outcomes of democratic experiments. But although the national level context is important and helps differentiate pattern of contestation and activism between countries, in the end, political contestations and activism emerges in more localized, district-level context and is largely determined by local dynamics. In fact, as we shall see throughout this dissertation, even within the national level, varying local contexts politicize certain ideologies, making certain form of Islamic political contestation frequent in certain spaces more than others.

I have also argued that in the Sahel, the public sphere has become more and more “confessional” as the referents of the legitimacy of the social and political order have progressively shifted from the realm of universal liberal values to the realm of Islamic values. In other words, the legitimacy of social and political order has come to depend more on its conformity to Islamic orthodoxy than to secular liberal values. But since there is also no consensus among Muslims on a single Islamic orthodoxy, what one sees instead is a battle of arguments between different actors to justify their positions, drawing on different theological and jurisprudential sources (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013). While secular activists have had no choice but to take part in this argumentation, finding themselves obliged to justify their positions using religious arguments, these debates have, for the most part, opposed different trends of Islam, notably the religious establishment and their new challengers. Islamic contentious politics, therefore, is not only a contestation against the state or the government but, most often, it is also a claim against the legitimacy of the established religious authorities.
CHAPTER 4
THE CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS OF ISLAM AND THE STATE IN THE SAHEL

Over the last quarter century, Muslim elites across the Sahel have increasingly manifested a willingness to defend Islamic values and promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. As part of this dynamic, Sahelian countries have experienced an unprecedented surge of Islamic contestation. Muslim activists have at times used Islamic discourse to engage in peaceful contestation, while in other circumstances they have used jihadist discourse to engage in violent contestation. Although the history of Islamic political contestation can be traced as far back as the pre-colonial era, this chapter focuses on the postcolonial era. More specifically, the chapter examines the different forms of Islamic political contestation, including peaceful protests, violent riots, and jihadist insurgencies in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger from 1960 to 2016. Throughout this survey, I attempt to answer the question of why contestation on behalf of Islam in the Sahel has taken these different forms. When is Islamic discourse used in support of violent contestation and when is it used to promote peaceful protest? I argue that we must look to the interaction between Islamic political ideology and the local context in the Sahel to explain the form that Islamic activism has taken.

In this chapter I apply the theoretical framework elaborated in Chapter 2 to explain the patterns of Islamic political contestation across the entire Sahel region. Subsequent chapters will focus in more detail on the three case studies so as to trace the processes and dynamics which produce one outcome or the other in given contexts. In line with the overall argument of the dissertation, this chapter examines how global Islamic ideologies have spread throughout the Sahel region, and how local level dynamics have facilitated the appropriation and enactment of these ideologies and created varying patterns of Islamic political contestation. The chapter discusses at length the varying contexts of local socio-political structures between capital cities,
secondary cities, and rural peripheries. It also discusses how contemporary Sahelian Muslim activists’ have appropriated the dominant contemporary global Islamic political ideologies: pietism, Islamism, and jihadism. Finally, the chapter shows how the structural contexts in capital cities, secondary cities, and the rural periphery provide fertile grounds for pietist, Islamist, or jihadist entrepreneurs, respectively, to engage in political contestation.

I argue that since democratization processes started in the early 1990s, Muslim activists’ ambition to promote Islamic values in the public sphere has become more assertive as they have been given an opening to do so. Sahelian Muslim activists, however, do not all share the same view on what constitutes the Islamic agenda to be promoted, or how to go about promoting it. Different Islamic political ideologies inform their views on what constitutes a “true” Islamic social and political order, as well as the best way to achieve the desired Islamic agenda. Such issues as sharia, the state, secularism, democracy, human rights, or gender relations, are matters of often sharp disagreement among these Muslim activists. However, while adherents to a full range of Islamic ideologies can be found everywhere in the Sahel, they are only able to act and to mobilize followers in support of their ideology in particular local social and political contexts.

Stated most directly: I argue that social and political dynamics in Sahelian capital cities create a favorable context for the enactment of an Islamist ideology and for the use of protest as the best mechanism to advance Islamic values in the public sphere. The context of capital cities, thus, incentivizes Islamist activists to frame a discourse inspired by their ideology, while tapping on local grievances to mobilize in support of political contestation. On the contrary, the dynamics in rural and peripheral areas facilitate the enactment of the jihadist ideology, thus incentivizing jihadist activists to frame a discourse that resonates with local demands to mobilize support for jihadist insurgency. In places where neither the Islamists nor jihadists hold sway,
pietist activists remain dominant. But given their pro-government stance and non-confrontational attitude, pietists fail to offer appropriate channels for their followers to express grievances. This failure translates most often into spontaneous and unorganized episodes of riot.

The chapter is divided into 4 sections: The first section provides a brief history of Islamic political contestation in the Sahel region from 1960 to the present day. The second section discusses the determinants and variation of the local contexts in the Sahel, focusing particularly on the varying social and political dynamics in capital cities, secondary cities, and the rural periphery. The third section discusses the religious dynamics, emphasizing the influence of global Islamic ideologies on Sahelian Muslim activists. Section four analyzes the interaction between local context and ideology, enumerating the congruence between the structures of the local context in capital cities, secondary cities, and rural periphery with Islamism, pietism, and jihadism, respectively.

**A Brief History of Islamic Political Contestation in the Contemporary Sahel**

The history of Islamic political contestation in the Sahel can be divided into three phases. The first phase, from independence in 1960 to the 1990s, corresponds to the period of non-confrontational Islamic activism. During this phase, Muslim clerics in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger adopted a largely accommodationist attitude vis-à-vis their governments, overwhelmingly non-democratic in this period. Islamic contestation was limited to occasional criticism of government practices and policies, delivered in preaching, public statements, and, to a lesser extent, petitions. Though tensions between different religious currents—such as those that opposed the Qadriyya and Tijaniyya Sufi congregations in some contexts, or the tensions between Sufi and Salafists groups in others—occasioned some clashes during that period, these tensions remained sectarian, and did not amount to collective political contestation directed
against the government. In brief, Islamic political contestation started only after these countries engaged in the process of democratization.

The second phase corresponds to the beginning of confrontational Islamic activism in the early 1990s when some new Muslim elites created Islamic associations with the goal of defending Islamic values and advancing an Islamic agenda in the newly liberalized public sphere (Villalón 2013 and 2010; Soares 2005). These new Muslim activists challenged the hitherto dominant liberal agenda promoted by secular elites, benefiting from a new-found capacity to mobilize and to organize protests to contest laws and policies.

Three sets of contentious issues, in particular, motivated Muslim elites to engage in political contestation. First was a reaction to the wave of liberal reforms that followed democratic transition. During this period, debates over the nature of the state—whether it should be “laïque” or “Islamic”—as well as the liberal elites’ attempts to adopt liberal family code reforms prompted Muslim elites to organize public demonstrations (Villalón 2013 and 2010). In all three countries, attempts at reforming the family code occasioned several episodes of Islamic contestation, including the 1992 riots in Zinder, the 2009 protest in Bamako, and a more recent public outcry by Muslim activists against a gender violence law in Mauritania (Villalón 1996, Alio 2009; Kang 2015; Soares 2011; Mueller 2018). Second, the perceived deprivation of Islamic values and public morality have also generated contestation. Islamic activists have thus organized collective actions to denounce prostitution, gambling, beauty pageant competitions, the projection of pornographic movies in theaters, as well as the opening of bars and broadcasting of romantic movies during the month of Ramadan. For the new activists, all of these events and behaviors are considered un-Islamic, and therefore must be banned from the public sphere. Third, international events such as the publication of caricatures of the prophet
Muhammad, or the wars in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan or other Muslim majority countries also generated episodes of Islamic contestation. While common and widespread, such episodes were largely organized and peaceful, and for the most part they occurred in capital cities. In some cases, however, uncoordinated mobs of angry Muslims have engaged in spontaneous and violent rioting that have resulted in casualties and property destruction. This was notably the case in the so-called “anti-Charlie Hebdo” riots in Niger, and the riots following rumors of the desecration of the Qur’an or the publication of alleged blasphemous Facebook posts in Mauritania.

The third phase of Islamic contestation in the Sahel corresponds to the outbreak of the jihadist insurgency, starting in the mid-2000s when widespread media coverage of the 9/11 attacks and the so-called “Global War on Terror” helped disseminate and popularize the jihadist discourse among Sahelian Muslims. The passionate debates across the Muslim world that followed these events contributed to the heightening of Sahelian Muslims’ consciousness regarding their identity as a part of a global Muslim community, and added to feelings of grievance not only vis-à-vis the West but also vis-à-vis local political leaders. In some context and circumstances, a new elite was able to capture this jihadist discourse, and use it to promote violent insurgencies in the name of Islam. The jihadist discourse offered a framework and a language for people who, for the most part, had been at the margins of modern politics, allowing them to express their grievances and to engage in politics by other means. In the Sahel, two groups of Muslim militants appropriated the jihadist discourse and engaged in jihad locally almost simultaneously, though quite independently from each other: Boko Haram around the Lake Chad Basin, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates in the central Sahelo-Saharan region. The stated intention of these new jihadist groups is to overthrow ruling
governments and replace existing state institutions with the system of the Caliphate, governed according to the sharia rule as they interpret it. In the last decade, then, jihadist groups have conducted numerous attacks targeting government forces, state institutions, as well as civilian populations. Notably, and contrasting with Islamic protests, jihadist insurgency has been a largely rural phenomenon. Although the conditions leading to insurgency may arise in the cities, jihadist insurgencies have in fact been successful only in the rural and peripheral areas.

As I will argue in the following sections, this variation in the forms Islamic contestation takes should be understood as largely determined by the interaction between Islamic political ideologies and the structures of the specific local contexts in which Muslim activists operate. Social and political structures in capital cities provide a better opportunity for Muslim activists inspire by an *Islamist* ideology to promote their Islamic agenda through participation from within—not without—the framework of state institutions, whereas the local structures in the rural and peripheral areas offer a fertile ground for *jihadist* activists to challenge the state through violent confrontation.

**Local Contexts and Patterns of Contestation in the Sahel**

Beall and Goodfellow (2014) observe that contemporary African cities have experienced a rise in “civic conflict”—by which they mean protests and riots—in contrast to the civil conflicts that have often been waged in rural areas. They contend that “increased urban malaise in the twenty-first century seems to be leading not to renewed political violence in the form of rural-based civil war but more commonly to urban-based violent civic conflict” (Beall and Goodfellow 2014, 25). An analysis of available data on episodes of both religious and secular political contestation in the Sahel appears to corroborate this argument. Data on political contestation in Mali (see Figure 3) from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) show that 67 percent of episodes of political contestation in the capital city of Bamako
were peaceful, whereas 94 percent of political contestation in Mali’s rural and peripheral were violent. Mali’s secondary cities have experienced fewer episodes of contestation as compared to capital cities and the rural periphery, with three quarters of episodes identified as violent. I argue that the reasons behind the variation in patterns between the capital city, secondary cities, and the rural periphery lie in the nature of the variations in state structures in these local contexts.

As I have argued earlier, Sahelian states occupy an intermediate ground in their degree of statehood; they are neither consolidated states, nor completely failed states. They are rather characterized by significant variations across their sub-national local contexts, in particular from their capital cities to secondary cities, and to the rural periphery. These variations can be observed on three dimensions: state capacity, social mobilization, and grievances.

First, regarding state capacity, Sahelian countries exhibit varied levels of statehood across their national territories. These include areas that might be considered consolidate statehood, where the state has the capacity to enforce security and provide social welfare; as well as areas of limited statehood where the state lacks such capacities. In these latter contexts communities often have to rely on themselves to provide for their own security and welfare. Second, in terms of the capacity and likelihood of social mobilization, in capital cities the imprint of ethnic linkages are weak, and social groups tend to be organized in the form of class or issue-based civil society. By contrast, in rural and peripheral areas society still remains largely influenced by kinship linkages. Third, the salient sociopolitical and economic grievances in capital cities are mainly related to “urban malaise,” unemployment, wages, corruption, as well as violations of human and citizenship rights. In rural and peripheral areas, ethnic tensions, disputes over access to natural resources, political marginalization, and social exclusion, are the factors that increasingly generate conflict, often along ethnic lines.
I argue that different local contexts in Sahelian capital cities, secondary cities, and rural peripheries provide different structures of political opportunity, of potential for mobilizing resources, and for framing grievances that, collectively, will favor the emergence of one form of political contestation at the expense of another.

Figure 4-1. Political contestation in Mali between 1997 – 2017. Source: ACLED dataset, compiled by author.

**Sahelian Capital Cities and the Participatory Context of Political Contestation**

Bamako, Nouakchott, and Niamey - respectively the capital cities of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger - are today urban agglomerations of over one million inhabitants each. In general,
these cities are distinguished from secondary cities and rural towns by the concentration of state institutions—including central government institutions, state bureaucracy, and military command centers—but also by the presence of diplomatic representations and the headquarters of international organizations (Walther 2007, 107 and 111). Sahelian capital cities are places where formal state institutions and laws tend to take precedence over traditional ones. Despite their overall weaknesses, the Sahelian states have invested in establishing control and authority over their capital cities, including investments in infrastructure and the provision of public service, including education, health, electricity, water, and roads. This dynamic reflects the “urban bias” in development that Bates (2014) observed long ago. And it confirms Cheeseman’s more recent observation that African leaders “have tended to focus their limited resources on fortifying their regimes around the seat of power. This form of state development generated a center-periphery divide in which the coercive capacity of states was uneven—high in the capital cities (the center) but declining with every step into the rural hinterland (the periphery)” (2015: 17). Confirming this argument, a Nigerien politician once said that in democratic Niger, “One might well win power in the provinces, but one can lose that power in Niamey,” by which he meant that winning the popular vote without having effective control over the capital city does not guarantee the capacity to exercise political power. This way of reasoning has incentivized Sahelian political elites to concentrate a significant share of state resources in creating the conditions that allow them to exercise control over their capital cities, by developing a fairly functioning administration, security forces, and infrastructures. In the capitals, the state is able to resolve disputes and conflicts through formal administrative procedures. In brief, given that government

---

forces have greater presence and control, the Sahelian capital cities offer a limited opportunity for violent uprising and a greater opportunity for peaceful contestation. They are often space of relative security, where violent conflicts rarely occur.

These Sahelian capital cities are also relatively new cities, established in the colonial period for administrative purposes. As a consequence, none of these cities has an established system of traditional chieftaincy. Although there are neighborhood chiefs (*chefs de quartier* in French) and/or autochthonous notables that play the role of traditional authority in certain domains, their influence in the management of local affairs is very limited. Motcho (2005) describes how neighborhood chiefs in Niamey are overshadowed by formal district government, making their role in local governance quite insignificant. In addition, and compared to the rural areas, ethnic identities are relatively weak and tend to be less relevant in the cities as compared to rural areas. The majority of the inhabitants of capital cities are people who migrated from the provinces, and who are consequently from different ethnic and tribal backgrounds. When Nouakchott was designated the capital of Mauritania in 1958, it was a small fishing village of fewer than six thousand inhabitants. Today Nouakchott counts a population of over a million, representing a microcosm of Mauritania’s diverse society. Rather than identity-based groups, social groups organized in the form of civil society, such as labor unions, student unions, human right organizations, and feminist associations have considerable political influence. Similarly, as an Afrobarometer survey has shown, urban populations in Mali are only half as likely to participate in communitarian organizations—associations or any community-based group—as compared to rural populations (GREAT, 2015).

Finally, social and political demands in capital cities often differ from the main concerns of rural dwellers. The rapid pace of urbanization in Sahelian capital cities has exceeded the
abilities of governments to implement policies capable of coping with the ever-rising needs of the new urban dwellers, such as the provision of adequate housing, employment, and services. The consequence of this failure has exacerbated the “urban malaise” (Beall and Goodfellow 2014, 21-25). Afrobarometer surveys in Mali and Niger show that unemployment, education, health, and water constitute the major demands in urban areas, whereas in the rural areas, concern about famine, ethnic tensions, and support for agriculture rank higher (GREAT 2015; LASDEL 2016) Other grievances vis-à-vis the state related to democratic freedoms, asserting citizenship rights, and corruption score high in capital cities as compared to rural periphery. Over 90 percent of Malian urban populations think that at least part of the country’s leaders—including the president, congressmen, police, and judges—are corrupt (GREAT 2015). These grievances are mostly captured by civil society organization, which then channel them through organized, institutionalized and regulated mechanisms of contestation.

For all these reasons, peaceful protests have become the most effective form of political contestation in capital cities. The state’s ability to enforce law and order deters attempts at violent uprising, while allowing for peaceful expression of political dissent. The presence of well-established civil society organizations that are capable of harnessing political grievances and channeling them through legal and institutionalized mechanisms of claim-making render peaceful protests, strikes, and sit-ins all the more practical. Well-organized and dynamic civil society organizations, including human rights organization, feminist movements, labor unions, student unions, and consumer protection organizations, have mobilized people to fight for more freedom, to demand increases in wages and allowances, to advocate for gender equality and women rights, and to challenge the government to provide public goods and services and to create employment opportunities. An important difference between civil society activism in
capital cities and ethnic militias and rebel group that operate mostly in rural periphery is that civil society tends to demand for “more state” presence rather than “less state.” Though civil society organizations may challenge the legality of certain laws and policies or even the legitimacy of a particular political regime, they do not question the legitimacy of the state itself.

As I argue below, Sahelian Muslim activists who adhere to an Islamist ideology have found fertile ground in this capital city context to engage in their activism, trying to influence policy-making toward more consideration of Islamic values and agenda. In their struggles, they have also often engaged secular civil society organizations in framing the debate over what constitute good policies. Jihadist, on the contrary, have very largely failed to organize successful insurgency in this urban context.

**Sahelian Rural Periphery and The Insurrectional Context of Political Contestation**

Sahelian rural and peripheral areas are typically characterized by small settlements of low population density located in the countryside or borders zones, particularly those that are remote from capital cities. Most Sahelian rural and peripheral zones are consequently also areas of limited statehood, meaning that the state lacks the ability to effectively enforce the rule of law, to provide goods and services, or to regulate social behavior. Although the state institutions may be present, in many cases they perform poorly. Yet, the weak state presence in these areas does not necessarily result in the breakdown of social order. Despite the absence of a capable state, local communities are, in most cases, able to govern themselves through the implementation of customary laws and norms. In these areas, some of the functions that have traditionally been associated with the state have been assumed by local actors, including, traditional chiefs,

---

2 There is of course much variation across the Sahelian rural periphery. Most of these areas are peaceful. For the sake of my argument, the characteristics that I describe here apply more strongly to areas that have been affected by conflict.
religious leaders, and ethnic militias, though often in collaboration with some state actors. Traditional chiefs play a significant role in maintaining order. They notably perform the task of reconciliation and securing peace and safety within and between communities, and can serve as the interface between the local population and the state. In rural areas, traditional norms and customs tend to take precedence over modern laws, and rural dwellers resort more frequently to traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution instead of settling disputes in courts of law, even in cases where a state court system is available. A 2000 survey by Afrobarometer demonstrated that Malians are “more likely to take their problems to local traditional or religious leaders than to public officials” (Bratton, Coulibaly, and Machado 2000). People also tend to rely on their communities to protect them in case of violence. As we shall see in chapter five, rural Malians, particularly in the northern and central regions, have entrusted their security and the protection of their businesses to their closest community—family, clan, and ethnic groups—rather than to the state.

In comparison to capital cities, the state in the rural periphery appears more “traditional” than “modern” given the limited social penetration of formal state institutions. Especially in those areas that are plagued with insecurity, people’s loyalty goes first and foremost to their community as opposed to the state. The state failure to bring goods and service to isolated peripheral communities has prevented their full integration into the state system, and hence stifled the emergence of any attachment to the state. On the contrary, while peripheral communities are deprived of state welfare spending, they are often subjected to significant forms of taxation on the border with neighboring countries. This is the case of the Peul Tolobe community on the Niger-Mali-Burkina border, as well as of the Kanuri population living in and
around Lake Chad. Largely uneducated, marginalized, and poorly represented at the central state level, these peripheral communities have become the hotbed of jihadism (Crisis Group 2016b). In the context of a vacuum of state authority, the strong reliance on communities as social safety networks triggered inter-communal tensions over leadership and control of natural resources, gradually creating a generalized context of insecurity. Given that social groups are deeply divided along ethnic and tribal lines, the pattern of contestation tends to be violent and insurrectional.

The dynamics of capital cities thus contrast with the rural periphery, where the condition of limited statehood, the increasing reliance on community and traditional institutions, and the rising tensions over natural resources as well as the proliferation of weapons have transformed parts of the Sahelian rural periphery into powder kegs. In some rural peripheries, the use of violent insurgency has become more frequent. As Beall and Goodfellow (2014, 23) have noted, the theatre of rebellion and civil war in Africa is often the countryside. In recent years, three major changes in the Sahelian rural periphery have further undermined traditional systems of social order, and triggered new dynamics of inter-communal violence. First, democratization and decentralization reforms have undermined the authority of traditional chiefs in many areas. In the context of elections and decentralized institutions, new local politicians claiming popular—as opposed to hereditary—legitimacy have emerged and have often challenged the authority and leadership of traditional chiefs. These tensions over leadership at the local level has become a major source of conflict as new actors, including local politicians, traditional chiefs, and

---

3 The Peul Tolobe is a pastoralist Fulani sub-group that inhabits the border area between Niger and Mali. Because of their nomadic lifestyle that makes them move between the border back-and-forth, members of this community have frequently been victim of abusive taxation and mis-treatment by local government and security forces on both sides of the borders.
smugglers, compete for filling the vacuum of authority left by the state. This competition often leads to clashes that quickly turn inter-communal. Second, the increased populations of both human and livestock combined with the effects of desertification and climate change have resulted in increased pressure and tensions over natural resources, in particular between farmers and herders. Tensions over natural resources in the Sahel are far from new, but intercommunal violence has historically been small in scale, and more easily negotiated through community dialogue and reconciliation. In addition, the proliferation of firearms has transformed the nature of conflicts. The 1990s Tuareg rebellions, and more recently the Libyan crisis and the plundering of military barracks in Mali and Niger and Burkina Faso by insurgent groups have produced a massive proliferation of weapons in the region. As more and more communities becoming armed with Kalashnikovs, inter-communal violence has become more frequent, more lethal, and deadlier.

**Sahelian Secondary Cities and the “Compliant Context” of Political Contestation**

There is no agreed-upon definition of secondary cities, but most accounts point to those mid-sized cities that are less urbanized and populated than metropolitan cities, but bigger than rural villages and towns. In the Sahel, secondary cities correspond to regional poles such as Zinder, Dosso, and Maradi in Niger; Segou, Mopti, and Sikasso in Mali; and Nouadhibou, Rosso, and Kaedi in Mauritania. These cities play the role of commercial and administrative hubs in the provincial areas that surround them (Walther 2007, 111). In 2010, West Africa counted over 170 cities that have an average population size of 110,000 (Prieto, Heinrigs, and Heo 2017). Secondary cities are intermediate spaces between areas of consolidated statehood and areas of limited statehood. Formal state institutions are present, and fairly effective in terms of enforcing the rule of law and providing welfare services, but customary institutions have also a considerable presence. Formal laws and customary laws are used often complementarily in
conflict and dispute resolution, more so than in capital cities or rural and periphery where formal or customary law tends to prevail, respectively. The pattern of authority is in most case characterized by syncretism or hybridity between state and customary institutions.

The justice system and the mechanisms of conflict resolution in the central Malian city of Mopti provides a good example of this hybridity. Competition over natural resources generates numerous disputes between pastoralists and agriculturalists in the area. There are two resolution mechanisms for disputes related to natural resources in Mopti: One traditional that is based on customary norms of reconciliation and implemented by traditional authorities, and a modern one that is based on positive law and implemented in the formal court system. The first is widely accepted as legitimate though it is not formally legal, while the second is legal but popularly viewed as less legitimate (IMRAP and Interface 2017). The state has attempted to merge these two systems of conflict resolution in a complementary way, creating a hybrid justice system that.\footnote{Given the recurrence of conflicts over land tenure in the region of Mopti and the complexity of the cases, which often oppose two different systems of land appropriation, one based on customary laws and practices and the other based on a modern system of business transaction, the Malian state has created land commissions that associates customary actors and state actors to settle those particular disputes. When the commission reaches to a settlement, the decision is reported to a positive law judge who then ratifies it to give it a legal character.}

A similar system exists in Zinder, in Niger, where the modern court system has found mechanisms for working with associated traditional judges, who implement customary laws on issues related to land, family, marriage, and divorces.\footnote{Interview with a Cadi (traditional judge), Zinder, March 2015.}

Many Sahelian secondary cities were either historically renowned religious centers or capitals of pre-colonial states. They thus often had existing traditional structures that preexisted colonization. In many cases, these structures survived colonial reforms and still remain strong today, although over a century of interaction with modern state institutions has resulted in
various forms of hybridity of social and political institutions and often symbiotic functioning of traditional and modern institutions. In secondary cities, the relevance of traditional authorities is stronger than in capital cities, and reliance on customary law is also stronger than in urban areas. Both chieftaincy and customary law, however, are placed under the tutelage of modern state institutions. Ethnicity is not always the most salient, defining identity. Urbanization has brought enough diversity to loosen up indigenous ties without totally eliminating them. Society is relatively diverse, though ethnic linkages may still remain robust, as people remain in close and permanent contact with their villages and communities. Modern civil society group have only a limited impact, given that in most cases civil society organization have their headquarters in the capital cities and only keep small offices (at best) in secondary cities. As regional economic and political poles, forms of regionalism often appear as the most salient identity.

One of the major problems in Sahelian secondary cities today is rapid urbanization due to massive immigration from the surrounding rural areas. Rapid urbanization raises some new issues and strains notably those related to ownership and use of urban land, access to food, and water supply. Similar to capital cities, the growth of Sahelian secondary cities is rapidly outpacing the government’s ability to develop urban infrastructure—such as water, electricity, and road—to accommodate the new housing (Walther 2007, 141-142). Sahelian governments are facing increasing demands to manage urban areas, but so far, their handling of these spaces is not effective. Access to essential services remains better in capital cities than in secondary cities (Kessides 2006, 17). In her research on secondary cities in Africa, Kessides (2006, 47) finds that “secondary and tertiary urban settlements tend to be the most rapid growing, and managing expansion alone is demanding.” This lack of adequate housing, water supply, or sanitation is an important source of grievance and contestation in Sahelian secondary cities. For instance,
shortage of drinking water has frequently caused uprisings in Zinder. These grievances however, are rarely channeled and expressed through protest, or violent insurgency. Urban crime such as the Palais phenomenon in Zinder and violent riots are becoming a form of political contestation. As Kessides (2006, 8) puts it “[t]he general problems of poverty and social exclusion within urban areas, extreme weaknesses of national police and justice systems, and absence of trust between communities and local government compound the issue [of criminality].”

Finally, increased urbanization in the Sahel has led to increased numbers of urban poor, constituting an additional challenge to social order. Secondary cities are increasingly marked by a dynamic of rising criminality. Political contestation is less frequent, and when it does occur, it takes the form of rioting. Given that the state often has a fairly effective presence and is able to coopt local traditional and religious authorities while civil society remains less organized and effective, local grievances—mainly arising from urban malaise—remained “un-channeled.” As the major power broker, the state retains an ability to intervene through both state and customary institutions to deter dissenters. The lack of well-organized civil society organizations that could mobilize the grievances and channel them through institutionalized form of political contestation have led aggrieved populations to resort to individual expression of dissent, or to launch more spontaneous and non-organized forms of collective action.

Expressions of Different Islamic Ideologies in the Sahelian Public Sphere

In his book Tarikh al-Harakat al-Islamiyya fi Mali (“History of Islamic Movements in Mali”) Sheikh Thiam discusses the controversy that occurred in the early nineties between Malian Muslim clerics over whether it is appropriate for them to get involved in politics. He says,

Not long ago, politics was viewed as a no-go zone for imams, preachers, and respected clerics in Mali. They are not supposed to enroll in political parties or to even meet with politicians, except when politicians come to them asking for
prayers. Discussing political matters in mosques or in preaching was ill received … Many Muslims boycotted mosques just because the imam dared to address political topics [in his sermons] … How often have we heard people complaining after a Friday sermon, ‘we came here to pray not to do politics??! Whoever wants to do politics must go to the parliament.’ Such behavior was not surprising given the horrible treatment that politicians inflicted on religious leaders in the past … However, I challenge these [apolitical] clerics: Have you considered the consequence of giving up on politics on your religion, your families, and your country?! You withdrew from the political field and left your country and family at the mercy of the most mediocre people! Now they are in charge! They pass laws that are incompatible with Islamic values and teaching. Tell me who is better: Those who pass the laws or those who have to obey them? (Thiam 2012 6-8,).

Two observations arise from Shiekh Thiam’s quote: First, despite the permissive environment for political participation during the democratic transition in Mali, not all Muslim clerics thought it was appropriate for religious leaders to meddle in politics. Sheikh Thiam represents the voice of politically ambitious elites who challenged and criticized the clerical establishment for distancing themselves from political engagement. The second observation is that Sheikh Thiam is a Sufi leader and president of the National Federal Council of Adepts of the Tariqa Tijaniyya (COFENAT in the French acronym), which is an important Tijaniyya network. His passionate advocacy in favor of Muslim clerics’ engagement in politics goes against the widespread view of Sufi clerics as pietist and Salafis as Islamists. In fact, the distinguishing factors between pietists and Islamists is not theological but ideological. Though the Sufism versus Salafism theological differences are important, in terms of political or contestatory engagement, what has emerged as a breaking point between Muslim elites is their ideological views on what they consider to be the best “strategy for action” to defend Islam and/or to advance an Islamic agenda in the public sphere.

In their approach to Islamic activism, Sahelian Muslim activists take inspiration from global Islamic ideologies to frame their discourse. As explained in Chapter 2, these Islamic ideologies are conceptualized and disseminated by canonical Muslim activists and scholars
around the world based on different interpretations of Islamic scriptures in relation to particular
understandings of current political affairs. Three major ideological orientations can be identified
among Sahelian Muslim elites: The so-called religious establishment who are inspired by the
pietist ideology that is promoted by establishment institutions and Islamic figures such as the
Egyptian Leagues of Ulama in Al-Azhar, the Saudi al-Mufti al-Am, or such Islamic figures as
the Mauritanian cleric and former Vice-Chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars,
Abdullah bin Bayyah. Secondly, Muslim activists like Sheikh Thiam are inspired by the Islamist
ideology that is pioneered by the Movement of Muslim brothers in Egypt and promoted by
prominent scholars such as the Chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, Yusuf
al-Qaradawi. Finally, Sahelian jihadist activists draw on the jihadist ideology that controversial
scholars, including Abu Muhammad al-Maqadisi, helped conceptualize, and are inspired by Al-
Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In what follows, I give an overview of these
different ideological currents as they operate in the Sahel, focusing on the leaders that best
incarnate them.

Pietist Muslim Activists in the Sahel

Prior to the democratic transitions, almost all Sahelian Muslim clerics adopted an
accomodationist stance vis-à-vis the state. They recognized the authority of the state over all
political matters, and avoided meddling into politics. In exchange, the state recognized the
clerics’ authority over religious matters. After the democratic transitions, even though some of
these clerics seized the opportunity to engage in political activism, many of them maintained
their position of avoiding explicit politicization of Islam. I call these Muslim clerics “pietist,” not
because they use this concept to describe themselves, but because of their strong emphasis on
promoting piety, spirituality, and preserving Islamic culture and identity, as opposed to engaging
in political and contestatory collective action. The defining characteristics of pietist activists—or
the adherents of what others have called “cultural Islam,” “traditional Islam,” or “missionary activism”—is that they “eschew explicit political activism, neither seek political power nor describe themselves as parties, but concentrate on the missionary activity of preaching in order to reinforce or revive faith—al-iman—and preserve the cohesion of the community of believers—al umma—by upholding the moral order which underpins it” (Crisis Group 2005a, 3-4; Weck, Hasan, and Abubacar 2011). When asked about his position to the Malian government, Cheikh Ousmane Madani Haidara a leading figure of pietist Islam in Mali responds:

It is difficult for me to comment on the management of the country, [because] this is the prerogative of politicians and I am a religious scholar. However, as a general observation, [I realize that] we are witnessing a mixing of politics and Islam in this country. In other words, we are witnessing the Islamization of politics in our country, encouraged and blessed by some religious leaders. It is very dangerous. Everywhere I preach, I ask religious leaders to withdraw from the political arena and focus instead on their role of referee (Le Journal du Mali 2016).

Pietist clerics accept the nation-state system and the concept of secularism. Haidara considers sharia as an important Islamic principle, yet he does not see the necessity to establish an Islamic state or to formalize the implementation of sharia rule in Mali. For him, what is important is a state that allows Muslims to practice their religion freely. He suggests that sharia is only applicable in an Islamic republic, and it concerns Muslims only. But he notes that, "Mali is a secular republic. Muslims, Christians and unbelievers live in harmony with us: this is the will of God. Islam has always advocated dialogue and not war to install sharia” (quoted in Kaba Diakité 2012). Muslim clerics who adhere to pietism endorse a compliant and acquiescent stance vis-à-vis the state and the political system. They often maintain close ties with the government and display loyalty to whatever regime is in place. Hamden Ould Tah (b. 1933), a prominent cleric in Mauritania, epitomizes those pietist clerics who are often called, quite derogatorily, “Ulama’ al-Sulta” (Government clerics) for their strong advocacy in favor of a
“blind obedience to rulers” (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 93). In an interview, Ould Tah, proudly defends his pietist view, saying:

I have learned since the young age to never challenge the ruler in accordance with the hadith of Ubadat Bin Samit. I have obeyed all the regimes that governed this country…I supported regimes before Ma‘awiya, I supported Ma‘awiya, and today I am with Ma‘awiya’s successors, and I will be with those who will come after. My position will never change. This is neither a political nor Ijtihad-based. It is a position gleaned from the hadith of Ubadat (Al-Akhbar 2011).

Pietists encourage Muslims to engage in constructive dialogue with non-Muslims. They emphasize Islamic identity and culture, which they consider to be in harmony with national identity. In Niger, Cheikh Boureima Daouda, Imam of the University of Niamey mosque and special advisor to the Prime Minister of Niger preaches a tolerant Islam that advocates for interfaith dialogue and cooperation with other religions, particularly Christianity. He collaborates with Christian congregations to the extent that he accepts to participate in training sessions for Christian missionaries, proudly saying “Christians have invited me to give talks at their events and to even train their preachers” (Boisbouvier 2015). Pietism is concerned with preserving Muslim culture and identity. They often vocally criticize government positions that they deem in contradiction with Muslim identity and culture, such as the Family Code reforms, the organization of fashion shows in Niger, and the regulation of religious schools (Mahadaras) in Mauritania. Yet, they often refuse to engage in struggles that are more political than cultural such as the political lobbying by Sabati 2012—a religiously based group that operate in Mali—the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder, or the abolitionist activism in Mauritania. Not only has

---

6 Hamdan Ould Tah is one of the most emblematic Islamic figures in Mauritania. He is a known as a Faqih (an exegete) and is a frequent presence in media sources that are close to the government. He was the former Minister of Religious Affairs, Member of the High Council of Fatwa, and the Secretary of the Association of Mauritanian Ulama (Rabitat Ulama al-Mauritaniiyyine).

7 Cheikh Boureima Daouda is also President of the League of Ulemas, Preachers and Imams of the Sahel Countries. He is well-known for his preaching and publications in the French language.
Cheikh Daouda always avoided addressing political topics in his sermons and publications, he has often reacted strongly to other imams who criticize the government. His sermons emphasize the corruption of Islamic values, the spread of ignorance of Islam, the dwindling of faith as the major issues facing Muslim societies. His publications cover such topics as Marriage in Islam (2002), The way of happiness through the knowledge of the levels of Islam (2004) the notion of “Youth” in Islam (1998).

Pietist Muslims reject all forms of political contestation on the ground that “contestation is un-Islamic.” A Salafi Imam who leads Friday prayer at the Governorate’s mosque in Zinder, argues that “Islam forbids protesting or rebelling, or any form of disobedience against state authorities.” He draws on a fatwa by Nassiru Dine al-Bani, a canonical Salafi scholar, to justify his position. He notes that “Al-Bani in his Fatwa regarding the 1990s political contestations and insurgencies in Algeria, Afghanistan, and Egypt recuses disobedience vis-à-vis authority and emphasizes the necessity of spreading Islam through teaching and preaching as opposed to contestation and political violence.”

Pietism has in many ways been dominant historically, and as the discussion above suggests it retains significant influence as an ideology across the Sahel, including in the three cases on which I focus. Recently, however, one could argue that pietism has lost ground to the more politicized discourse of the Islamist, if not the revolutionary discourse of the jihadist.

---

8 According to the Malam Yahaya, leader of the Nigerien Islamic association ADINI-Islam (Quoted in Idrissa 2009) “demonstrations are not normal Islamic practice. Whenever a Muslim notices that there is something wrong afoot, he must preach. (…) But to go out on the street, to demonstrate, that is not something that either the hadith or the traditions of our predecessors condone.”

9 Interview with a Salafi imam in Zinder, May 2016.
Islamist Activists in the Sahel

Islamism—or what others have called political Islamism—is an ideology that “gives priority to political actions over religious proselytism, seeks power by political rather than violent means, and [whose adherents] characteristically organize themselves as political parties” (Crisis Group 2005b, 3; see also Roy 1994; Hamid 2016). Muslim activists who adhere to Islamism consider the religion of Islam as a complete and comprehensive system of life incorporating its own conception of modernity that is distinct from Western notions of modernity. They have coined such notions as “Islamic governance,” “Islamic economy,” “Islamic banking,” and “Islamic feminism” as alternatives to equivalent concepts in Western modernity. For Islamists, the establishment of the Islamic state is necessary in order to fulfill the “Muslim-ness” of Islamic societies. They attempt to inscribe Islamic contents and values unto the state and its democratic system by participating in the secular state system, including participation in electoral politics. They criticize the failure of governance, social injustice, and the moral decay among secular politicians and promote the need to develop new policies inspired by Islam. Islamists advocate for Islamizing and moralizing the public sphere via political engagement. Sahelian Islamists have participated in debates and negotiations with secular groups to define the “form and substance” of the state, democracy, human rights, and family codes (Villalón 2010).

Islamist advocate for reformist rather than revolutionary action to promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. They thus often and most distinctively seek to attain political power through participation in democratic elections. The former leader of the Mauritanian Islamist party Tawassoul, Jemil Ould Mansour describes how their party struggles to justify protesting in Islamic terms,
Until recently protesting the government by an Islamic movement was unknown in Mauritania. When Tawassoul started organizing protests, a controversy arose within clerical circles: On the one hand, the religious establishment opposed the protests claiming that it is a form of “rebellion against the ruler” (khuruj ala al-hakim) which is prohibited in Islam. On the other hand, Islamist scholars supported the protests arguing that peacefully protesting an illegitimate government (hukuma ghayra shar‘iya) is lawful in Islam. As people become more aware of our religious and political arguments, we become more capable of mobilizing protesters. Today, it is easier for us to mobilize people to take part in protests that address religious matters more than in protests that address political and economic matters. We often struggle to frame political and economic grievances in religious terms in order to facilitate mobilization.10

Ould Mansour views the Islamist position as a centrist approach that lies in between the secularist position—that denies a role for religion in politics—and the jihadist position—that imposes Islam by force. He advocates for what he calls this centrist position that takes religion into account, but only peacefully.

In Mali, where the secular nature of the state explicitly prohibits the creation of an Islamist political party, Islamist activists have nevertheless begun to find ways to engage more directly in the political arena. This, in the wake of the Malian crisis and collapse and as elections were organized to attempt to return the country to some normalcy, a group of Muslim activists created Sabati 2012, a lobbying group defined as a “a grass-root movement in support of the electoral process, the rule of law and the development of Mali through a mobilization around religious and societal values and issues of national interest.” Sabati 2012 is a group of political activists that is less than a formal political party but more than a normal civil society organization. Its goal is to promote an Islamic agenda in the Malian public sphere, particularly by participating in and influencing legislative and presidential elections (Touré 2005). In 2013, the group put together a memorandum that summarizes its agenda, which included the increase

10 Interview with Jemil Ould Mansour, Nouakchott January 2016.
of public funding for religious institutions, the creation of a training center for imams and preachers, and the regulation of bars, brothels, and the media in a way that is compatible with Malian culture and religious values (Laiba Info 2013). Many members of the group ran for legislative seats as independent candidates in the 2013 legislative elections. While the group did not present a candidate for the presidential elections, they lobbied presidential candidates from other political parties. They proposed to campaign in favor of candidates who committed to promoting their Islamic agenda. They ultimately supported the candidacy of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, and actively participated in his campaign (Bozonnet 2013). Their support was widely viewed as highly instrumental in securing Keita’s victory in the 2013 presidential elections.

Among all the Islamic political ideologies, Islamism has developed a particular focus on women, framing what some have called “Islamic Feminism,” as a conscious alternative to Western feminism. In Niger, where the debates on gender relations, birth control, age of marriage, and girls’ education have raged over the last quarter century, Islamist activists have been on the frontline, defending “the position of Islam” regarding these matters. Thus Malama Houda, a female scholar of Egyptian origin (she is married to a Nigerien and has lived in Niger for many years), has emerged as an influential public figure (Bozonnet 2013). Houda focuses her activism on promoting women’s rights from an Islamic perspective and in opposition to secular feminism. In her preaching, Houda highlights the history of female figures in Islam. She argues that “Islam grants women full rights at all levels” and that there is no difference between men and women except in piety, devotion, and usefulness to humanity (EMS 2008).

---

11 Malama Houda, is a teacher of the Arabic language at a high school in Niamey. Together with other Muslim women activists, Malama Houda created l’Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Niger, an association inspired by a well-developed literature on Islamic feminism, largely developed in Egypt by scholars affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood movement.
Houda has opposed many bills that attempted to reform the family code and girls’ education in Niger. She contends that all these bills are but attempts by Western powers to Westernize Muslim culture and values and to reduce Niger’s high birth rate: “Westerners want to reduce the number of births in Niger. The bill [for girls’ education] came from France. It is in opposition to our custom, which is Islamic” (Kaci 2012). She urges the government to not pass the bill and warns that doing so would be a deviation from Islamic law and would potentially bring people to rise up against the government. In 2006, the Collective of Muslim Women, a coalition of feminine Islamic associations in which Malama Houda’s *Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Niger* played a central role, organized a protest in Niamey to denounce government’s attempt to adopt the bill on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women (CEDEF in French acronym) as “an excessive Westernization whose purpose is to globalize all cultures including the most noble, that is to say that which emanates from the religion of Allah.” The Muslim feminists rejected the bill arguing that it "Royally tramples on Muslims’ ethics and identity in almost every field" (Sallaou Ismael 2006).

**Jihadism in the Sahel**

Most jihadist movements share in common some core ideological beliefs that give them their distinctive character and differentiate them from other non-jihadist movements. First, they believe that Islam is at war with the West - and its local allies in Muslim societies - both militarily, as in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, and culturally through what they view as a relentless effort to “Westernize” Muslim societies. They consider jihad, in the form of armed struggle to defend and protect Islam, as a religious obligation (*fard ‘ayn* in Arabic) upon all Muslims. Second, jihadist consider the modern state institutions and a democratic system of governance as un-Islamic and argue that they must be abolished and replaced with the system of Caliphate and the Sharia law, as they interpret it. Third, for jihadis, Muslims can be declared
“apostates” or “unbelievers” if they commit certain sins, and as result, Muslims can in fact be legitimate targets of jihad violence. The rulers of contemporary Muslim societies’, in particular, are considered taghout (infidels), and must be overthrown through violent jihad. Although there are variations and internal debates, these core principles constitute the quintessence of jihadism, a global ideology that has motivated and justified jihadist insurgencies around the world.

In contrast to the portrayals of the Sahel as peripheral to such ideologies, and of jihadism as an imported notion in the region, Sahelian jihadist ideologues have themselves made significant contributions to the global jihadist literature. Two Mauritanian scholars-cum-activists deserve a particular mention: One is Muhammad Salim al-Majlisi, a jihadist ideologue who has published books, papers, and commentaries in minbar al-jihad, as well as in the Mauritanian media. His paper Al-Islam al-dimokrati badil al-Ameriki (The Democratic Islam: An American Choice) published in 2006, appears as an important contribution in jihadists’ rebuttal of the idea of Islamizing democracy (Al-Majlisi 2006). Another Mauritanian, Mahfouz Ould Walid (b. 1967) a former companion of Usama Ben Laden and renowned mufti of al-Qaeda, continues to be influential within global jihadist circles, mostly through commentary in the traditional media and via social media (Ould M. Salem 2018). Ould Walid advocates for defensive jihad against what he calls “Western aggression against Islam and Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan,” although he argues that jihad in Muslim lands and against civilian Westerners are both Islamically unlawful. He thinks that in Muslim lands, jihad should rather be focused on Da’awa, or Islamic preaching.\textsuperscript{12}

Iyad Ag Ghali the leading figure of jihadist in the Sahelo-Saharan region, and currently the leader of Jama’atu Nusratul Islam wa al-Muslim, a consortium of jihadist organizations that

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, Nouakchott, August 2016.
operates predominantly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, describes who they consider their enemies:

Our enemies are those who antagonize Muslims: the Jews and Christians. But at this particular stage, France, the historical adversary of Muslims in this part of the Muslim world is our enemy; then all the Western [powers] that allied with France, including America, Germany, Holland, Sweden, etc.; then the West African countries that joined the coalition, including Chad, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Niger; and finally, all local individuals who have sold their souls to Satan and joined them (Abu Feras 2017, 4).

Jihadists reject the modern state system and democracy as un-Islamic, and suggest the need for reviving the “Islamic Caliphate.” In his manifesto Hadhihi Aqidatuna wa Manhaj Da’awatina, Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram’s ideologue, takes the argument a step further to condemn not only state institutions but also all those who accept to work for these institutions, including the police, army, and government administration. He argues that accepting to work for these institutions is synonymous to accepting their legitimacy, which would equate to apostasy (Yusuf, 2008). Yusuf also endorses a similar position on attending modern educational institutions, which from his perspective could also lead to apostasy.

Sahelian jihadist movement have tended to affiliate themselves to global jihadi movements. There is clearly a growing tendency within the African jihadi movements to identify either with the global Al-Qaeda network or with the Islamic State. Though Muslim entrepreneurs are inspired by global Islamic ideologies, their aim is not to address global grievances. They are rather focused, first and foremost, on addressing local grievances.

**The Interaction between Islamic Ideologies and Local Contexts**

Ideology offers an idiom to frame contestation, but for these idioms to translate into action there must be an infrastructure for political mobilization. This infrastructure is exogenous to the ideology. It is found in the local social and political context. In order to mobilize people for action, Muslim activists must frame a coherent discourse that resonates effectively with local
social and political demands. They thus tend to draw on local culture and symbols to highlight the problems of the existing social order, and to suggest appropriate solutions to fix it (Zald 1997, 267). To be effective, these ideologies need to provide the right tool kit for a better “strategy for action” in specific local contexts. When successful it is because they provide compelling narratives that speak to the grievances of particular communities. The ability of social entrepreneurs to act on a particular ideology depends largely on the structures of the local context in which they operate. Local structures may lower the costs and raise the benefits of enacting some ideologies, thus incentivizing entrepreneurs who believe in that ideology to act on it. The same context, however, might disincentivize the enactment of a different ideology. Congruence between an Islamic ideology and the structures of the local context provides a greater incentive for Muslim “entrepreneurs” to emerge and initiate contestatory collective action. In general, the context of capital cities, where democratic participation and social and political activism are vibrant, incentivizes Islamist entrepreneurs to engage in collective action, while dis-incentivizing jihadist activism. On the contrary, the context of social and political disorder in the rural periphery incentivizes jihadist entrepreneurs to mobilize people to pass from ideas to action. Finally, the largely compliant context in secondary cities is fertile ground for pietism, but given the lack of outlet for other forms of Islamic contestation, it can produce periodic spontaneous rioting under particular circumstances.

Pietism dominated the Sahelian Islamic sphere from colonization until 1990. Postcolonial governments in the Sahel, partly following on the footsteps of their colonial predecessors, perceived Islam and Muslim elites both as potential threats, but also as diplomatic tools that could be used to reinforce relationships with the Muslim world. All across the Sahel Muslim elites adopted an attitude of accommodation and collaboration with the state authority, inspired
in their attitude by religious establishments in leading Muslim countries such as Egypt, Turkey—particularly following the demise of the Ottoman Empire—and Saudi Arabia. The context of authoritarianism proved to be congruent with pietists’ attitude of accommodation and collaboration with the government, and they thus found space to flourish. The repression of political activism under authoritarian rule rendered the emergence of Islamist activists quasi-impossible.

Although Islamist activists—inspired by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood—had made an appearance since the 1950s in Mali, notably in the Subbanu movement, and in the 1970s they emerged in Mauritania, they were not able to translate their ideological beliefs into political activism in either country. In addition to the political restrictions, the social and religious contexts marked by a high level of illiteracy—both in French and Arabic—did not make Islamic activism appealing. However, following the democratic transitions and taking advantage of the political liberalization of the early 1990s, Islamists activists started to gain ground. They were inspired by the vast international Islamist literature to weigh in the debates that arose during the transitional period, notably those concerning secularism, women rights, poverty, and public morality. They thus began to challenge the state and the secular elites on laws and policies, providing an alternative view to the views advanced by the Westernized elites. Although Islamists used multiple mediums to advance their Islamic agenda, including when allowed creating political parties, and political lobby groups, protest was one of their most prominent means for political contestation.

The context of “consolidated statehood” in capital cities—meaning the strong ability by the state to enforce law and order and to regulate social behavior—provides greater opportunities for “Islamist entrepreneurs” who are committed to legal, peaceful, and institutionalized form of
activism over others. Given the state’s ability to crack down on violent insurgency, capital cities disincentivize jihadist entrepreneurs to engage in collective action. Second, Islamists have the most adapted discourse to tap into grievances that tend to arise in the Sahelian capital cities. The disenchantment vis-à-vis the promises of democracy, particularly the failure of the secular francophone elite to create the conditions for economic development and job opportunities, especially for educated youth, has undermined the credibility of traditional Islamic authorities in favor of the Islamists. Furthermore, strong demographic growth in the Sahel has generated rapid urbanization, further exacerbating “urban malaise,” including difficult access to housing, services, and jobs. These conditions give an advantage to Islamist discourses, whose political agenda focuses an alternative system of governance that promise to address corruption, economic inequality and un-equal opportunity through the moralization of politics and of public finances, and the development of an Islamic economy and Islamic banking. Third, patterns of social mobilization in capital cities—namely the historic capacity to organize mass demonstrations and protests—provide Islamists with important resources that they can mobilize and invest in their activism. Muslim activists are newcomers in the field of political contestation, which is in most cases was historically dominated by secular movements, including civil society organizations and political parties.

Jihadist groups in the Sahel have exploited contexts of state weakness in rural and peripheral areas, particularly in places that have previously experienced social and political disorder (Jezequel and Foucher 2017). Most rural and peripheral areas in the Sahel have been and remain largely peaceful and stable, due notably to the effectiveness of customary laws, traditional leadership, and established norms and mechanisms of conflict resolution. However, rural peripheries in the Sahel have been increasingly marked by conflict, a fact that must be
largely attributed to the ever-growing tensions over natural resources, and rivalries over political leadership in the context of decentralization. The contexts of the rural periphery thus provide fertile ground for jihadist insurgencies to emerge, for three reasons. First the rural peripheries are replete with means and resources that jihadist groups can marshal and invest for the success of their insurgency. These include weapons, space for military training, a flourishing illicit economy, and loot-able resources, all of which collectively provide ample opportunities for jihadist entrepreneurs to organize insurgencies. Second, the fact of highly limited statehood in the rural-periphery provides an open opportunity for insurgencies, as the state’s inability to enforce law and order creates a vacuum of authority, and opens the door for different non-state actors, including jihadist, to try to fill it by using violence. And finally, the jihadist ideology provides a compelling narrative that speaks to the grievances of marginalized communities that feel neglected by the state, and that consider the state as an extractive and exploitative entity rather than a protector and welfare provider. In conflict zones where groups fight each other, jihadists discourse has emerged as unifying, allowing for the creation of a larger coalition that bridges the tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages.

**Conclusion**

Via a focus on the post-independence era this chapter has attempted to provide a comparative review of the broad history of Islamic activism in the three countries and across three periods of time: during authoritarian regimes (1960 – 1990), the period of democratization (1991 – 2011), and in the post-9/11 period of “weakened states in the age of terror” (Villalón 2013, 388-390). It shows how Islamic discourse and Islamic activism evolved during these periods, largely determined by the national and local level contexts. Finally, the chapter has examined the pattern of Islamic political contestations at varying local contexts within the three countries: in the capital cities, provincial cities, and the rural periphery. Reinforcing the main
argument of the dissertation, I have attempted to explain in this chapter how global Islamic ideologies have spread throughout the Sahel region, and how local/district level dynamics have facilitated the appropriation and enactment of these ideologies and created patterns of Islamic political contestation.

In this chapter I have offered a discussion of how my core argument—that the forms that Islamic political contestation take is a function of the congruence between different Islamic political ideologies and local contexts—has been manifest in the Sahel region. Political liberalization in the Sahel in the 1990s created a permissive environment that allowed Muslim elites to organize themselves into powerful organizations capable of mobilizing the masses for political purposes. Sahelian Muslim activists inspired by three different Islamic ideologies—pietism, Islamism and jihadism—have used these to frame discourses that challenge secular elites and propose alternative solutions to the problems of governance. The structures of the local context, notably the condition of statehood, local grievances and demands, and the local socio-economic configuration then shape a political opportunity structure, the framing of collective action discourse, and the prospects for mobilization.
CHAPTER 5
PROTESTING IN ISLAMIC TERMS: ISLAMISM AND ABOLITIONIST ACTIVISM IN MAURITANIA

Political contestation has increased in Mauritania since the recent transition to democracy in 2007. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of episodes of political contestation increased eight times in comparison to previous decade 1997 - 2006 (ACLED 2017). A significant number of these episodes are associated with Islam. Such important episodes of contestation as the 2012 series of protests in relation to the burning of religious texts by the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritanie or simply IRA); the 2014 riots in reaction to rumors about the desecration of the Qur’an in Nouakchott; or the more recent protests and riots against alleged blasphemous blog posts targeting the prophet Mohamed epitomize this phenomenon of Islamic political contestation. Episodes of Islamic contestation have often generated a level of mobilization and fervor that has hardly been seen in Mauritanian secular political contestation. Furthermore, social and political movements that have previously relied on secular discourse to mobilize for collective action have increasingly modified their discourse, adding some Islamic content to it. The political activism by the Islamist party, the National Rally for Reform and Development Tawassoul (Rassemblement National pour la Réforme et le Développement, RNDD Tawassoul in French) as well as the resurgence of the anti-slavery activism by the IRA, account for a significant portion of the recent surge of Islamic political contestation in Mauritania.¹

¹ Mauritania is the only country in the Sahel that authorizes the creation of a political party that clearly and unequivocally claim its adherence to the Islamist ideology and draws inspiration from Islam to formulate its political program. This is in part a product of the liberalization period I described in Chapter 4, where different Islamic ideologies entered the Sahelian public sphere.
Slavery or practices associated with enslavement have existed in the Muslim world in various forms. While hotly contested, many observers claim that they still persist today in various places, including Mauritania. The question of whether slavery exists or not in Mauritania is a subject of a strong controversy. On the one hand, anti-slavery organizations claim the persistence of the phenomenon based on multiple cases of enslavement that they have discovered and brought to court, including recent cases discovered in 2018. The government, on the other hand, denies the existence of slavery in its classic form, but recognizes the persistence of its sequels, which includes the poor living conditions of former slaves and their descendants, the lack of education, and the practice of “unpaid labor.” The controversy is based in part on diverging points of view over the definition of slavery. Many of the practices that the government considered as sequels of slavery are, in fact, the same that the anti-slavery activists consider proof of continued enslavement. Second, and more importantly, the controversy relates to the discrepancy between the legal status of slaves, which the state officially abolished in 1981, and the resistance of the overwhelmingly traditional society to comply with the law banning slavery (which has been known, quite ironically, as “Haidallah’s Freedom,” in reference to the president who adopted it). Until recently, many people in Mauritania believed that slaves remain as such until their master accepts to write their “act of manumission.” Except for minor changes, many aspects associated to the subaltern status of the slaves have remained largely prevalent in social relations, particularly in the countryside.

It is clear in any case that multiple efforts by the state and civil society organizations have failed to completely eradicate the phenomenon. This failure must be largely attributed to a major inconsistency between the discourse that legitimizes the practice of slavery by drawing on Islamic law, and the abolitionist efforts that until recently had largely focused on adopting new
state laws and raising human rights concerns. In a society that is deeply conservative and religious, the abolitionist laws of the state and the human right discourse of international and non-governmental organizations carry much less weight than does Islamic law. The failure to delegitimize the religious foundations of the servile ideology has thus contributed to the persistence of the phenomenon. However, since the mid-2000s the situation has changed quite dramatically. The creation of the IRA movement in 2007 has managed to produce a shift in the abolitionist discourse. IRA activists have focused their struggle on debunking the Islamic basis of the servile discourse, using multiple tactics that include protests, debates in classic media and social media, sermons in mosques, and dramatic public events such as the symbolic burning of religious books. These actions have breathed a new—Islamic—life into the anti-slavery activism in the country.

The resurgence of the abolitionist activism culminated in 2012, when IRA organized a protest during which activists collectively carried out the communal Friday prayers before engaging in a public burning of some canonical books of Maliki jurisprudence. These books include Mukhtasar al Khalil, Hashiyatu al-Dasuqi, Al Moudawwana al-koubra, Mawahibul Jalil fi sharhi al-Khalil, and others. These are highly regarded textbooks, frequently used in region. According to IRA activists, these books justify and “sacralize” the practice of slavery and constitute the main reason behind the persistence of practices associated with enslavement. Some IRA activists presented themselves as “Islamic reformers” whose goal behind the book burning was to rid Islam of bad and unprogressive interpretations.

---

2 The Maliki school is one of the four most important schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It is the dominant school in northwest Africa.
The book burning episode (*hadithatul mahraq* in Arabic) broke the taboo regarding the public discussion of the legal status of Mauritanian slavery in Islam. It catalyzed a major shift in the debate, forcing political and religious actors to express their views on the matter. Although several actors condemned the burning, many others supported it. Also, as a result of this shift, the anti-slavery activism in Mauritania has registered an unprecedented grassroots mobilization. In the years following the burning, the IRA has organized frequent and regular protests during which activists condemn the Mauritanian government and the religious establishment for their—supposed—responsibility in the persistence of slavery and its sequels. The book burning boosted IRA’s activism, particularly in the capital city of Nouakchott where the movement’s discourse attracted young educated people of slave origin, known as Haratine, graduates from universities and college institutes, local Haratine imams, middle class and urban poor Haratine. Growing in popularity, the leader of IRA, Biram Dah Abeid ran for president in 2014, and won over 12% of the total votes.

In this chapter, I first examine the factors and processes behind the Islamization of the abolitionist activism in Nouakchott—that is why a long-standing movement that had previously been expressed overwhelmingly in secular human rights terms has now been framed in religious terms. I then attempt to explain the reasons why this socio-political mobilization has largely taken the form of peaceful protest. I argue that the Islamization of anti-slavery contestation can only be understood in the broader structural and ideological context of Nouakchott.

Three major processes contributed to the rise of the IRA’s new abolitionist activism. First, the liberalization that began with the new context of democratic transition that started in 2005 opened the door for civil society movements and political parties to engage in the public sphere. Second, the legalization of the Islamist party Tawassoul in 2007 in the context
“democratization,” laid the groundwork for an increasing Islamization of the political sphere and an increased competition among political parties and civil societies to win over moral and religious legitimacy. Third, the electoral significance of the Haratine community—which given its demographic size has become an important constituency coveted by all political forces in the context of elections—has in turn led to further politicization of the debate about slavery. Together, these factors created fertile ground for an emerging Haratine elite educated in Arabic and/or French to use their language skills and religious knowledge to frame an innovative Islamic abolitionist discourse that has successfully mobilized the masses.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the debate about slavery and Islam in the Mauritanian context and sketches out the trajectory of the abolitionist activism. The second and third sections examine, respectively, the structural context and the dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott. The fourth section elaborates on the impact of democratization reforms in laying the groundwork for the resurgence and Islamization of the abolitionist activism. And finally, the fifth section analyzes the controversy over Haratine identity and how this controversy impacts participation in IRA’s activism.

**Slavery, Islam, and Abolitionist Activism in Mauritania**

Slavery use to be a common practice across most all of the societies of the Sahel. Although it has been formally abolished by the Sahelian states, many observers particularly within human rights organizations believe that slavery still exists in the region. Others, principally within the government circles, admit the persistence of “residues” and “sequels” as opposed to actual descent-based slavery. Whether actual practice or residues and sequels, the phenomenon is more prevalent among certain communities—notably the Tuareg, Moors, Peul/Haalpulaar, and the Soninke—than others. While the practice is widespread, debates about slavery have been more politicized in Mauritania in contrast to other Sahelian countries. In fact,
slavery was a common practice in Mauritania until the 1980s. The Mauritanian state has issued three laws—in 1959-1961, in 1981, and again in 2007—that gradually and formally abolished slavery, but without fully eradicating the phenomenon. Although the practice concerns also the so-called “Afro-Mauritanian” societies—that is black non-Arabic speaking communities, including Haalpulaar, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara—slavery among the Moorish society is more notable due to racial difference between the masters, who are mostly light-skinned Arabo-Berbers, and the servile populations, who are in general darker-skinned. The resilience of servile practices within Moorish society historically has been due to its scale, the lack of political will to end it, and more importantly its association with Islam.

The practice of slavery is deeply tied to religion in Mauritania. Many classical Muslim scholars argue that slavery is a legitimate practice in Islam. The relationship between slaves and their masters is codified in authoritative books of Maliki jurisprudence, which constitutes the major source of Islamic law as well as the reference for social norms and religious practices across most of northwest Africa. This legitimation and codification of slavery in Maliki jurisprudence has bestowed legitimacy to the servile institution, strengthened spiritual and emotional ties between slaves and their masters, rationalized discrimination against servile communities in the court system, and consequently resulted in limited success in the government’s attempt to abolish its practice. Until recently this religious legitimation of slavery has remained unchallenged. Although abolitionist activism started in the 1970s, early activism focused more on addressing Haratine’s political marginalization, promoting social justice, equality, and improving Haratine’s living condition as opposed to addressing the religious foundation of the servile institution. In this section, I analyze the legitimation of slavery in Islam in the Mauritanian context, and the evolution of abolitionist activism. I argue that the failure of
the previous abolitionist activism to assertively combat the Islamic justification of slavery contributed to the persistence of the phenomenon.

**Justification of Slavery in Islamic Jurisprudence**

There is a strong body of historical research with a focus on West Africa on the debates about Islam and slavery (Lovejoy 2004; Willis 2013; Clarence-Smith 2006; Hall 2011). Here I only summarize these debates as they have occurred in Mauritania, where clerical positions over the legality of the practice of slavery range along a continuum between two extreme positions: On the one hand, there are clerics who consider the practice of slavery un-Islamic. They argue that there is no evidence in the Qur’an that encourages the practice of slavery. Rather, they argue, “Islam came to free the slaves.” They claim that Islam found slavery deeply entrenched in local pre-Islamic societies, and that Muhammad’s religion elaborated a number of measures that disallowed Muslims from enslaving other people—except for very specific circumstances such as that of infidels captured in the context of “holy war.” At the same time, in this view, Islam developed other measures that favored the liberation of existing slaves. In brief, they argue that Islam put Muslim society on a path toward a gradual abolition of slavery (Ould Mohamedou 2012, 94).

Thus, in Mauritania, Mohamed Fall, an Imam of Haratine status, claims that slavery in any of its form is not legal in Islam. He says, “There is no Islamic slavery, because Allah says ‘we have dignified mankind…’ How could Allah dignify mankind and at the same time allows that they be enslaved!” In line with this view, the practice of slavery in Mauritania is not legal

---

3 They argue that even in the context when a war meets all the conditions of a “holy war”, prisoners of war are not systematically reduced to slavery. Depending on the context, Muslim commanders have the options to either release them with or without ransom, kill them or enslave them.

4 Interview with Mohamed Fall, Nouakchott, December 2015.
from the Islamic perspective. Scholars like Mohamed Fall suggest that the persistent of slavery in Mauritania is the result of the influence of local culture and the social configuration of Moorish society, not to Islam. They further argue that the populations that were enslaved in Mauritania were neither captured during a “holy war,” nor were they proved to be infidels at the time of their enslavement. On the contrary, historical evidences show that many enslaved populations were Muslims captured during raids. While this point of view is the one that members of the IRA have fully endorsed, until recently this position had remained very marginal within clerical circles in Mauritania.

The second position, which was largely endorsed by the Zawaya clerical class of Moorish society, claims that the practice of slavery is in fact legal in Islam. They argue that slavery is a practice recognized in the Qur’an and the Sunnah, as evidenced by the many verses and hadiths that make reference to slaves, as well as by its pervasive presence within Muslim societies, including during the time of the prophet Mohamed. Some of these scholars have gone so far as to declare that whoever denies the legality of slavery in Islam is himself an infidel (Ould Mohamedou 2012, 107; Ould Mahmoud 2011). Scholars in this category use a number of arguments to justify the Islamic legality of the practice of slavery, including two major ones: First, they argue that enslaved populations in Mauritania were in fact infidels captured during the Almoravid jihad between the 11th and 13th century, and the jihad of Nasr al-Dine and the Torodo between 17th and 19th centuries. Second, they also argue that the sharia law recognizes slavery as a legal practice. In fact, the sharia distinguishes between Islamic legal rulings that apply to freeborn as opposed to those that apply to slaves, and vice-versa. As Yahya Ould Addoud says, “there is almost no legal ruling in Islamic jurisprudence that does not take into account the distinction between freeborn and slaves.” (Quoted in Ould Mohamedou 2012, 107)
Implicit in this debate is a deeper epistemological contention between Muslim scholars who rely on Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) as the major sources of sharia law, and those who prefer to draw directly on the Qur’an and hadith. The Haratine Imam Mohamed Fall who I have quoted above reflects this divide in his arguments stressing the primacy of Qur’an and hadith over fiqh. He says that “when the Qur’an or a hadith contradict the Islamic jurisprudence, the former is prioritized, because Qur’an and hadith stand for “categorical proof” (dalil qata‘i) while jurisprudence often relies on an “argumentative proof” (dalil dhani). Most traditional scholars in Mauritanian rely on the Maliki legal school as their source of Islamic law, not the Qur’an or the hadith directly. Authoritative sources of the Maliki jurisprudence, such as Mukhtassar al Khalil, Hashiyat al-Dasuqi, and al-Risala constitute their major sources of laws. Mukhtassar al-Khalil, in particular occupies a mythical place within the Moorish cultural and religious matrix. An axiom that Moorish clerics like to repeat says it all, “We are people who follow al-Khalil. If al-Khalil is misled, then we are misled.”

These books are the ones that recognize slavery as a legal practice and provide a detailed codification of the relationship between slaves and their masters. Their recognition of slavery as a legal practice and their codification of the slave-master relationship has bestowed legitimacy to the practice of slavery and provided the basis for the servile ideology in Mauritania. Ould Ahmad Salem (2013, 191) summarizes some of the most contentious rulings in these books that legitimize slavery. The books, he notes, recognize that:

the slaves are personal property that can be exploited, sold, taken and ceded. [Slaves] have no right to marry freely, to own property, to inherit, claim their children, or even to testify in court. Sexual exploitation, forced labor in agriculture or livestock sale, donation of a slave were all part of a system perceived as natural and religiously legitimate… Freedom and enfranchisement are valid and legal only

---

5 This is a phrase attributed to the 15th century Egyptian scholar Nasr al-Dine al-Laqqani. I heard it several times during interview with Muslim intellectuals in Mauritania.
when duly granted by the masters in a gracious manner either for the sake of redeeming sins or more rarely in exchange of payment.

Maliki Islamic jurisprudence has played a significant role in the perpetuation of slavery and/or its sequels in Mauritania in several ways.

First, the influence of Maliki jurisprudence on slavery appears directly in the Mauritanian legal system. Mauritania officially uses a dual judicial system that combines positive law and Islamic law. There are two types of judges, positive law judges who graduated from “modern” law schools, and Islamic judges, expert in the Maliki fiqh, who are usually graduates of traditional Islamic schools or Mahadara. The latter are usually assigned cases related to family, marriage, inheritance, and land tenure. Court rulings issued by these judges drawing on the Maliki sources have for a long time raised controversy, particularly in the rural areas, when they have been considered discriminatory.

Second, while Mauritanian state has officially abolished slavery since 1981, in practice, the conservative segment of Mauritanian society, comprised largely of free Moorish elites, has been able to resist implementation and even ignore the law, often using religious argumentation. In the Maliki jurisprudence, a slave becomes free only when his or her master deliberately decides to sign a “freedom act,” which few masters accepted to do. Many slave masters simply refused to comply with the 1981 law, sarcastically referring to it as “Haidallah’s Freedom,” in reference to the President who adopted it. This does not mean that the 1981 law did not have any impact, but its impact was rather limited.

Third, while slavery finds its origin in violence, its contemporary manifestation—whether in the form of sequels or actual enslavement—is due not so much to violence but to a system that combines alienation, indoctrination and economic dependency. Alienation refers to the separation of slaves and former slaves from their original tribal ties, and their de facto
incorporation into their masters’ tribes, even if they always occupy a subaltern position. Indoctrination consists of using religious arguments to persuade the slaves to graciously accept their condition as a matter of fate or of God’s will, that will be compensated equally graciously in the afterlife, and that salvation in the afterlife is conditioned on the slave’s obedience to his or her master. And finally, economic dependency refers to the Haratine’s reliance on their masters for access to land and revenue, which often makes them de facto slaves despite their legal status of free men and women.

The religious foundations of the servile institution constitute a major obstacle to the efforts toward the abolition of the phenomenon and its sequels. Thus, abolitionist activism has existed since the 1970s, but it success has been limited as it has failed to address the religious side of the debate of slavery. It is in this new context that an emerging Haratine elite, Arabized and well-versed in Islamic studies, has launched the campaign to fight what they call the “vestiges of slavery.” IRA activists have come to view Maliki jurisprudence—which they call the “servile Islamic code” (fiqh al-nakhassa)—as the major obstacle that has obstructed abolition efforts. They argue that previous abolitionist movements failed to challenge this religious sanctuary of slavery in Mauritania. Such anti-slavery movements as “El Hor” and “SOS-Escaves,” for instance, drew their discourse from secular ideologies, moving progressively from leftist to nationalist and then liberal ideologies. They thus proposed a secular solution to a fundamentally religious problem. This secular choice was reflective of the personal background of the leaders of these movements, as well as the organizational context in which they operated, which was characterized by the dominance of secular discourses.

The Islamization of Abolitionist Activism in Mauritania

The trajectory of the abolitionist movement in Mauritania can be divided into three phases. First, the creation of the El Hor movement launched the first phase of the abolitionist
activism. El Hor was created in 1978 by twelve Haratine from the then still small circle of Haratine intellectuals, mostly “francophone,” meaning their education had been in French. The movement’s ideological and organizational framework was inspired by the leftist intellectual and political movement, Kadihin, and the Afro-Mauritanian movements militating for greater equality for that community. The major goals of El Hor were to end slavery and the political marginalization of the Haratine community, as well as to promote social justice and equality. El Hor went through a series of ideological shifts, all reflecting the transformations that marked social and political activism in post-colonial Mauritania. From a clandestine movement inspired by a leftist ideology, El Hor evolved to become a “nationalist” movement influenced by the dominant nationalist ideologies of the 1980s, including Nasserism, Baathism and pan-Africanism. Although El Hor made some references to the problem of the Islamic legitimation of slavery, its efforts in that regard were very muted (Ould Ahmad Salem 2013, 194). Following the first democratic opening of the late 1980s and early 1990s the movement evolved progressively into a political party. Since then, its leader, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir has become an influential political figure in Mauritania. Ould Boulkheir later declared that El Hor was an organization created for underground activism in the context of dictatorship. He argues that after the democratic reform of the early 1990s, when it became possible to create political parties, secretive activism became unnecessary, and El Hor was thus no longer needed.

The second phase in the trajectory of the Mauritanian abolitionist movement started with the creation of a civil society organization called SOS-Esclaves in the mid-1990s. A former member of El Hor, Boubacar Messaoud, created the organization in order to pursue the anti-slavery struggle as El Hor lost momentum. SOS-Esclaves focused its efforts on identifying cases of slavery and on bringing them to court. The organization provides legal assistance to alleged
victims of slavery and associated practices. Although the creation of SOS-Esclaves gave a new dynamism to the abolitionist activism, it faced problem of efficacy, particularly in term of alleviating the root causes of the phenomenon. As one of SOS-Esclaves’ critics argues:

When SOS-Esclaves finds a slave, all they do is to prepare legal paperwork and send the cases to the Court. But the problem is that those courts are dominated by Bidan [“white” Moors] who do not apply the law as they should. Most cases of slavery fail to lead to conviction. The judges often discard the slavery charge and treat the case as “child labor,” “unpaid labor,” or a family dispute. Typically, the slaves lose the case and the masters are released.6

SOS-Esclaves publishes annual reports enumerating all the cases of slavery and/or associated practices that it discovered and treated. In its 2012 annual report the organization listed 120 names of individuals that it claimed were victims of slavery.7 This persistence of slavery practices despite thirty years of abolitionist activism clearly showed the failure, or at least the significant limits, of SOS-Esclaves’ approach. In 2007, this limitation led eight young Haratine activists, under the leadership of the then-Secretary General of SOS-Esclaves, Biram Dah Abeid, to create a new movement that would come to adopt a radical abolitionist approach.

The third phase is that of the creation of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement, or IRA-Mauritanie. IRA’s activism departed from the so-called classic abolitionist movements—El Hor and SOS-Esclaves — in two significant ways. First, while El Hor focused on improving Haratine’s political representation and SOS-Esclaves on denouncing cases of slavery in court, IRA focuses its activism on a direct effort to discredit the social and religious roots of slavery in Mauritania, namely those rooted in Maliki Islamic jurisprudence and

6 Interview with an abolitionist activist, Nouakchott, January 2016.

7 There were some cases of success in this regard. During my fieldwork in Nouakchott, the director of SOS-Esclaves presented me to a Haratine family that was allegedly victim of slavery and was awaiting the trial of their masters. In March 2018, a court in the city of Nouadhibou made an unprecedented decision by sentencing two persons to 10 and 20 years in prison after the court found them guilty of practicing slavery on Haratine families. Both cases were advised and supported by SOS-Esclaves.
the subaltern position of the Haratine within Moorish society. It emphasizes specifically the necessity of delegitimizing the books of the Maliki jurisprudence, and of challenging historical “Moorish” identity by separating the Haratine identity from that of the Bidan. While the classic movements were elitist-led, animated by Francophone Haratine intellectuals, IRA is a mass movement that is driven by both Francophone and Arabophone Haratine, and that includes Haratine imams who are deeply knowledgeable of Islam and thus capable of engaging the Bidan clerics on religious grounds.

During its early years, IRA developed close ties with the Islamist party, Tawassoul. The abolitionist activists tried to convince their Islamist allies to issue a statement that delegitimized the Islamic foundation of slavery. They also solicited the well-respected Islamic affiliated to Tawassoul, Mohamed al-Hacen Ould Dedew, to issue a fatwa in that sense. Though the official goal of the book burning episode was, to “desacralize” these religious documents, the burning came as a direct consequence of the IRA leadership’s disappointment vis-à-vis the ambivalent position of the leaders of Tawassoul—particularly Ould Dedew—who refused to issue a clear fatwa delegitimizing slavery in Mauritania. The burning episode catalyzed a shift in the debate about slavery from the human rights discourse that dominated early activism, to a debate centered on the legal status of slavery in Islam. And, in part as a result of this shift, the anti-slavery activism registered an unprecedented grassroots mobilization.

Since 2007 IRA has continued its struggle to end slavery in Mauritania. Despite government refusal to officially recognize IRA, the movement has maintained its choice of peaceful protest as a unique form of political contestation. The movement’s Vice President Diop says,

We are a peaceful organization. When our leaders were arrested, we protested their arrest by organizing a sit-in every Wednesday and a march every Monday for eight
months, which in total amount to seventy-six events. Never have we hit a single policeman, thrown a single rock, much less burn a bus! Our marches are, most often, repressed in blood but we never fought back with violence. All police officers can attest to it (Diop 2016).

This choice of peaceful activism and rejection of violence is justified by a fear of government repression, but also by the belief that a solution to the problem of slavery and its sequels is possible through participation in democratic elections. According to one of IRA’s leaders:

The rationale behind the non-violence strategy is that Haratine constitute the majority of the population. We have everything to lose in case of violence, because Haratine will be the most vulnerable, and everything to gain in peaceful struggle within a democratic context. We believe that electoral victory will come soon; therefore, there is no need for violence.  

In other words, they seek a solution to the issue of slavery within the framework of a unified and democratic Mauritanian nation.

**Nouakchott: A Context of Consolidated Statehood**

The state in Mauritania, just like in the other Sahelian countries, is weak. Yet, despite this weakness, successive Mauritanian governments have invested heavily in security, infrastructure, and social services in the capital city, Nouakchott. In 2007, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb created a jihadist cell in Nouakchott known as *Ansarullah al-Murabitun fi Bilad Shinguit*, with the goal of kidnaping Westerners and conducting terrorist attacks against embassies and other government targets. The group’s leader Khadim Ould Semane recruited dozens of members and started conducting operations. But after only two attacks in the course of a year, the Mauritanian security forces uncovered the group’s existence and arrested the members. Explaining how the Mauritanian government managed to overcome this jihadist threat, a high official in Mauritania’s

---

8 Interview with the leader of IRA’s Nouakchott branch, Nouakcott, January 2015.
administration told me that the government’s strength lies in its intelligence services. “We spend a lot in our secret service. Our government has a tight control over things,” he proudly said.⁹ Although the government may not have tight control over the entire Mauritanian territory, as this official pretends, it does have good control over Nouakchott. When the IRA activists insisted on the necessity to pursue their abolitionist struggle through peaceful means, they might well have had in mind the risk that government forces could crack down on them as easily as they had dealt with the jihadists of Ansarullah.

The history of Nouakchott is inextricably linked to the creation of the Mauritanian state. Choplin (2010) captures this fact succinctly when she says, “Mauritania was born and with that Nouakchott emerged from the sands.” In 1903 the French colonial administration established an administrative post in the area where the capital is now located. The post remained a small settlement until 1957, when the decision to build a capital city for the nascent state was made. From the time of its creation until today, the city of Nouakchott has experienced a steady demographic growth that makes it one of the most rapidly growing cities in the Sahel. In 1960, the population of Nouakchott was only 5,807. It reached 55,000 in 1972, 590,532 in 1988, and 958,399 in 2013 (Ould Chiekh 2006; République Islamique de la Mauritanie. ONS 2017, 5).

Today, nearly a third of Mauritania’s total population of 3.9 million live in Nouakchott.

Urbanization in Mauritania is thus concentrated in the city of Nouakchott and only to a much lesser extent in the port city of Nouadhibou. The size of the few other secondary cities, such as Kiffa, Kaedi, and Rosso has remained relatively small. Nouakchott has attracted migrants from all regions of the country because of its concentration of all the major public services and activities. It offers job opportunities both in the formal and informal economies, and in diverse

⁹ Interview with a former governor of Nouakchott, August 2016.
sectors, including state administration, private companies, transport, fishing, and petty commerce (Choplin 2009, 119-120). With more than 40 private industrial units—mostly operating in the food industry sector—the capital offers some job opportunities in the industrial sector as well (Choplin, 2009, 122). Nouakchott also contrasts with the rest of the country in terms of availability of public services such as healthcare and education. As Choplin (2009, 120) notes, “Nouakchott has become a privileged destination for ‘reasons of health’: the national hospital—the only one in the country—attracts patients from all parts of the country. Currently, the city has 22 health posts, 17 health centers, and over ten private clinics.” The capital city also attracts rural migrants because of the availability of modern schools - both public and private - as well as the presence of the University of Nouakchott, the only real university in the country. Nouakchott is the center of power where all the major ministries and state institutions are located.

At independence Mauritania, like other African countries, started with a democratic regime. Ould Daddah, the first Mauritanian president, held elections regularly until he was ousted by the military in 1978. Since then, Mauritania has been effectively ruled by military or retired military, with the exception of the 17 months of civilian rule between April 2007 and August 2008. For over three decades, Mauritania has been governed by the so-called “hegemonic bloc,” which refers to a small group of elites from specific Moorish “tribes”—including the Smassid, Awlad Busba’, and Idaw’ali—who have extended control over political, military, and economic power (Marchesin 2010; Ciavolella and Fresia 2009). The political system that some have characterized as “Oligopolistic” is not representative of the larger population. The non-Arabophone Afro-Mauritanians ethnic groups from the south of the country, the Haratine, and even many disadvantaged Bidan are politically and socially marginalized. As the center of power, Nouakchott is one place over which the ruling elite, largely perceived as illegitimate,
needs to control. The Mauritanian state has made significant effort to increase surveillance through the police and secret services in the city. Choplin (2009, 127) describes the security apparatus of the city:

The police representatives invade the smallest interstices, and in the first place the roundabouts: night and day, policemen and soldiers question the cars and ask the drivers to pay some hundred ouguiyas. The deployment of police officers at strategic crossroads, frequent patrols and controls, particularly in the city’s southern neighborhoods, speaks volumes about the importance of this urban space.

Nouakchott constitutes a microcosm of the Mauritanian population, which is roughly divided into three major groups: White Moors or Bidan, Black Moors or Haratine, and Afro-Mauritanians, including Haalpulaar, Wolof, Bambara, and Soninke. Mauritanian populations are deeply divided along multiple cleavages, including ethnic, racial, and linguistic. Significant tensions between the Moorish and the Afro-Mauritanians revolve around the official identity and language of the Mauritanian state; the former attempt to assert the country’s Arab identity while the latter proclaim its African identity. This question of identity has been at the center of the social and political struggles that have characterized post-colonial Mauritania. Major debates in the political, economic, and social domains are often framed through the prism of race and language. These racial and linguistic cleavages are historically rooted, and they are constantly exacerbated by questions related to slavery and the Arabization of the educational system. The tensions culminated in large scale violence in 1989, which has left grievances that still remain intense today (N’Diaye 2012; Leservoisier 1994). The legacy of these cleavages is ingrained in Nouakchott’s particular configuration, where a mixture of resentment, fear, and economic inequality push communities to live in largely segregated neighborhoods (Choplin 2009, 151).

---

There is no official statistics on the significance of each ethnic group but estimates by CIA Factbook presents the Bidan as representing 30 percent of the population, Haratine 40 percent, and the Afro-Mauritanians 30 percent.
Rich residential neighborhoods are inhabited by a majority Bidan, while most Afro-Mauritanians inhabit popular neighborhoods. At the bottom of the economic spectrum are the Haratine, most of whom inhabit slum-like suburban neighborhoods call “kebbe” (Ould Cheikh 2006; Choplin 2010). The recent wave of abolitionist contestation originates in these suburban areas.

Cities are often defined by their particular sociology characterized by “the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentation of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory” (Wirth 1938, 1). Capital cities are characterized by high level of social and political activism organized by civil society organization to address grievances related to urban malaise, inequality, and others. In Nouakchott, the emergence of a relatively strong civil society—trade union, human rights organizations, women movements, student associations—goes hand in hand with the persistence of tribal solidarity (Ciavolella and Fresia 2009). Nouakchott, however, defies this definition in the sense that the city exhibits a peculiar mixture of both the characteristics of a modern city and a strong presence of rural nomadic traditions. The imprint of the nomadic way of life remains strong. This is manifested in persistence of a culture of “Asabiyya” (agnatic solidarity) and social grouping on the base of tribal linkages, the strong presence of social hierarchies, and even clothing styles and eating habits (Ould Cheikh 2006). However, despite this persistence of a nomadic way of living in the capital, the city has also witnessed the emergence of a civil society. This civil society provides a basis for political mobilization.

**Dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott: the Rise of Islamism and IRA Activism**

Contrary to jihad, which is mentioned several times—and is even codified—in the Qur’an and hadiths, the notion of protest as a form of collective action is not mentioned in the scriptures. Thus, when protest became a prominent method of political contestation in Muslim countries, scholars started to debate the religious dimensions of it, asking whether peacefully
protesting the government through public demonstrations, strikes, or sit-ins is “Islamic” or “un-Islamic” (Warren 2014). Pietist scholars tend to reject all forms of political contestation against the rulers, whereas jihadists consider violent uprising the only way to achieve the agenda of overthrowing political regimes in Muslim countries and of reversing the world order. Only Islamists have come to accept protest as a viable means of political contestation. Muslim activists who adhere to the Islamist political ideology have prominently used peaceful protest to challenge policies or advance the Islamic agenda in the public sphere. In Mauritania, the Islamist party Tawassoul has organized public protests at numerous occasions and engaged in public debates to justify the appropriateness of using this form of political contestation in Islam. IRA, however, is not an Islamist movement, though some IRA activists claim to be “Muslim reformers.” On several occasion IRA has, in fact, distanced itself from Tawassoul, and harshly criticized the Islamist party for not being forthcoming in condemning slavery and delegitimizing the religious justification of servile practices in Mauritania. Yet IRA’s trajectory and the trajectory of the Islamists have become imbricated, and many IRA activists are influenced by Islamist thinking.

In this section, I give an overview of the dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott, elaborating on the dominant Islamic discourses, including the pietist discourse that is promoted by the religious establishment - notably the Zawaya clerics - the Islamist discourse promoted by Tawassoul, and the jihadist discourse advocated by Ansarullah. I show how the state’s assertive management of the religious sphere has attempted to promote the pietist agenda and to weaken the Islamist and jihadist agendas, with mixed success. While the state was successful in seriously undermining the jihadists, the democratization process of the 2007 and the legalization of Tawassoul empowered the Islamist discourse.
Dynamics of Islam in Nouakchott

The population of Mauritania is 100 percent Muslim. The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic Republic and decrees Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. The label “Islamic,” however, was less a reference to a theocratic state as much as an attempt “to highlight the unity of an otherwise racially and ethnically divided population, scattered over a vast territory” (Ould Ahmad Salem 2013, 55). Although the state has adopted sharia as its source of law, the implementation of Islamic law has in fact been limited mainly to issues related to the family code. The vast majority of Mauritanians practices Sunni Islam. Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Qadriyya and the Tidjaniyya have historically tended to be dominant, and only recently has Salafism gained significant ground. In Nouakchott the public expression of Islam is pervasive. Almost every aspect of the daily life is permeated by Islam. The rapid proliferation of mosques, radios and TVs specially dedicated for broadcasting religious programs, as well as the shouting of Islamic slogans and sacred phrases as a marketing strategy in the streets, all bear witness to the central role that Islam plays in the city’s daily life. A study commissioned by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs shows a staggering proliferation of mosques in the city over the last fifty years. While Nouakchott counted only 2 mosques in 1962, the number of mosques increased to reach 46 in 1989, and 617 in 2002. By 2009 the capital counts over 990 mosques (Ould. M. Moustapha 2014, 53; Ould Ahmad Salem 2007, 40).

For centuries, the so-called “Bilad-el-Shingu” as the region that now makes up Mauritania has been known, was considered one of the most important centers of Islamic learning in West Africa. The reputation of Mauritanian clerics is recognized internationally. Clerical figures such as Abdallah Bin Bayyah and Mohamed al-Hacen Ould Dedew are major Islamic figures who occupy leading positions in Islamic institutions around the world. The reputation of Mauritania’s religious schools, “Mahadhir” (sing. Mahadara) has crossed
continents. These “desert universities” have attracted students from different parts of the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, Europe, and North America (Ould Ahmad Salem 2001, 101). Islamic teaching and learning were historically controlled by the Zawaya, a Moorish subgroup, who are considered as the depositories of Islamic knowledge.

As direct descendants of the Almoravids, the Zawaya practiced an Islam that follows the Maliki jurisprudence, an Ash’ari theology, the Warsh form of recitation of the Qur’an, and Sufi mysticism. While this version of Islam is often viewed as inherently peaceful, not all Zawaya were pietists. At different times in history, some Zawaya clerics have engaged in Islamic militancy, as exemplified by the jihad of Nasr al-Dine (d. 1674) in the 17th century, and the resistance to French colonization by Ma’al Ainine (d. 1910). In fact, the pacification of the Zawaya owes first to their defeat during the so-called Charr Boubba War (1644-1674) by the Bani Hassane,11 and second to the colonial authority’s crackdown on the anti-colonial resistance by Ma’al Ainine in 1934. After the colonial authorities established control, pietists scholars who collaborated with French colonizers dominated the religious sphere. These Muslim scholars adopted an attitude of “accommodation” vis-à-vis colonial authorities by distancing themselves from meddling into political matters, in exchange for which the colonial authorities granted them some autonomy in the management of religious and other social matters (Traoré 1979). This relationship between the traditional clerical class and the state has continued throughout the post-independence era.

11 The political history of the Moorish society is largely shaped by the struggle between the warrior and aristocratic tribes of Bani-Hassan and the Zawaya clerical tribes. This struggled was settled in 1674 during the so-called Charr Boubba War, which opposed the two communities and ended with the victory of Bani-Hassan over Zawaya. Since then the Bani Hassan took control over political and military matters, while the Zawaya took charge of religious and spiritual matters. While this traditional configuration of the Moorish society is believed to have some ramifications in the present-day Mauritanian politics, the current political system is more complicated and the relationship between the two leading groups more fluid.
Pietist Zawaya clerics dominated the Islamic sphere in Mauritania until the post-colonial era. However, starting in the 1970s a number of factors, including the return of Mauritanian students from the Middle East, the work of Islamic NGOs, and the impact of expatriate teachers who were recruited to help with the Arabization program contributed to the emergence of new Islamic currents such as Salafism, the Tabligh Jama’at, and the Muslim Brotherhood. This period also marked the birth of political Islam (Crisis Group 2005). In fact, from these currents emerged the first activists who endorsed the Islamist political agenda.

The first Islamist movement, called “Jemaa Islamiyya” was created in 1974, and was composed of students who graduated from universities in Tunisia and Egypt, and who were heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Crisis Group 2005, 15). The Jemaa Islamiyya later split into two tendencies, one called “al-Harakat al-Islamiyya fi Mauritania” focused more on political activism and participation in government, and the other called “al-Da’awa” was more interested in religious activism such as preaching. The latter played a significant role in “denouncing social and religious hierarchies as well as criticizing pietist Islamic scholars for their obedience to government (Crisis Group 2005, 16). At this early stage, the Islamist movement was very fragmented. It was composed of “Salafist traditionalists, jihadists, Muslim brothers, Turabists, and bureaucratic imams. The only common denominator between these various discourses is their adherence to the Islamists’ principle that stipulates a complementarity between spiritual and temporal life, politics and religion, [and] the need to reform society by Islam” (Ould Ahmad Salem 2001, 9). Some among these young Muslim activists embraced the jihadist ideology. In fact, in comparison with the other Sahelian countries, Mauritanians have a long history of involvement in jihad activism around the world, including in Algeria since the 1990s, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and more recently in Mali. It was exactly the
network of recruitments of jihadists that are destined to fight abroad that was used to create local cells of jihadists.

Given the rise of these movements, successive Mauritanian governments have taken the management of the religious sphere seriously. Governments have intervened through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to enforce policies that aimed at empowering the religious establishment who endorse a pietist agenda, while at the same time trying to contain and undermining the growth of Islamism and jihadism. Thus, since the early 1990s, when the Islamists attempted to seize the first democratic opening to take part in elections, the government engaged in an assertive control of their activities. In both 1994 and 2003, the government operated crackdowns in Islamist circles, arresting and jailing dozens of activists. In the context of this repression and denial of recognition for decades, it is telling that the Islamists were finally accepted as legitimate political actors and their political party “Tawassoul” recognized in 2007, during the period of democratic rule.

The Islamists and the abolitionist Haratine elite shared some common interests. They are both opposed to the religious establishment and after the end of the brief democratic interlude in 2009 and the return of a form of military rule, they both opposed the government of President Ould Abdel Aziz in power since 2008. The Islamist criticize the pietists attitude of the religious establishment, while IRA activists opposed to the religious establishment for their role in legitimizing slavery. The Islamists have a relatively progressive view on the issue of slavery. After some prevarications, they came out to publicly to declare the practice of slavery in Mauritania un-Islamic and disapproved the justification of slavery through Islamic jurisprudence wrong. Many of their influential ideologues supported IRA activists following the book burning
episode. Many Haratine occupy leading position within the Tawassoul. According to Ould Ahmad Salem (2013, 223):

There is no doubt that at least since the 1980s, the hratin tend to be attracted by the ideas, networks, and discourse of reformist Islam. More precisely, the hratin’s struggle for emancipation coincided with the period when the neo-fundamentalists discourse spread across the country during the decades 1980 and 1990. In fact, there might have been a connection between the Islamist offer of religious emancipation, on the one hand, and the demand for social and religious integration of the enslaved groups, on the other hand.

The Rise of a New Haratine Elite

One of the major differences between the classic and the new abolitionist activisms lies in the background of their leadership. The leaders of the classic movements were francophone Haratine who did not have a strong religious education. Some of them, like the leader of SOS-Esclaves, Boubacar Messaoud, do not even speak standard Arabic, though they might be fluent in the Hassaniyya dialect. The new abolitionist activists, however, have a more diverse background. They are composed of a mixture of well-educated francophone Haratine who have been influenced by human right discourse, an Arabized Haratine elite that benefited from the Arabization reforms and studied at the University of Nouakchott and the Institute of Islamic Research and Study (Institut Superieur des Etudes et Recherches Islamiques, ISERI in French) and a new generation of Haratine clerics who are well versed in Islamic studies. These three groups of Haratine elite are responsible for the recent resurgence and Islamization of the abolitionist activism. The emergence of these elites is largely the product of urbanization, Arabization reforms, and the rise of Islamist and Da’awa movements.

Urbanization played a significant role in the emergence of this new generation of Haratine elite. Until the 1970s, there were only a few educated Haratine who attended schools. Recalling the conditions under which he was registered in school, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir (b. 1943)—the leader of El Hor and pioneer of the abolitionist activism—notes that “during colonial
times and even after, most Moorish populations perceived Western education negatively and refused to register their children in schools. The colonial authorities made enrolling children in school mandatory. But in order to avoid the conscription of their loved ones, the Bidan hid the children far away and registered Haratine children instead.\textsuperscript{12} The fact that many Haratine left the rural areas following the drought of the 1960s and 1970s and established themselves in urban centers was instrumental in changing their mentality. For many of them, leaving the condition of slavery and being exposed to a different way of living opened their eyes to the potential for changing their conditions. Most of the current activists received education after their parents left the condition of rural slavery and moved to the cities where they survived on petty economic activities while allowing their children to receive education in modern schools.

The historical persistence of slavery and servile practices is closely tied to the Bidan’s control over Islamic knowledge and the widespread ignorance among the Haratine. According to Ruf (1999, 262-3) “Rather than spread religious learning, as they should have done to obey the precept of Islam among all, and especially among their slaves, many bizan [Bidan] did withhold their knowledge, and did not even let the sudan [blacks, i.e. Haratines] know the meaning of the prayers.” Acquiring religious learning thus became an important mean for Haratine to claim social recognition and equality with the Bidan. Many Haratine took advantage of the growth of Salafi and Da’awa movements—which, contrary to the traditional clerics, have a liberal conception of religious learning and practice—in terms of allowing access to religious education and even allowing Haratine to become imams. Today there are dozens of Haratine Imams who lead prayer in Friday mosques. The participation of these imams in the abolitionist struggle has been influential.

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, Nouakchott, December 2015.
The Arabization reform is another key factor that contributed to the emergence of the new Haratine elite. Since the mid-1960s, the Mauritanian government initiated a program of “Arabizing” the administration and the educational system.\footnote{This reform contributed to the marginalization of the Afro-Mauritanians who had had more of a francophone education. The Arabization reform also exacerbated the cleavage between the Afro-Mauritanians and the Moorish, leading to a large-scale conflict in 1989. This cleavage dominated Mauritanian social and political context and kept the Bidan/Haratine cleavage secondary.} The goal of the reform was to reassert the Arabic identity of Mauritania, but also to create opportunities for those who studied in traditional Arabic and Quranic schools called Mahadaras. Many Haratine, who were already fluent in the Moorish language of Hassaniyya – an Arabic dialect with significant Berber influence – took advantage of these reforms and pursued education in standard Arabic up to the university level, notably at the University of Nouakchott—created in 1981—and the Institute of Islamic Research and Study. The opportunity to acquire higher education and master standard Arabic and Islamic knowledge positioned young Haratine to confront the religious establishment in the prestige language of classic Arabic, and using the kinds of religious arguments which they valued. Ould Ahmad Salem (2013, 218) notes the importance of these new interactions,

the new generation of largely Arabized activists is operating in a political climate where the Arabic language has become the medium of debate. IRA speaks to a public that master no foreign languages and [in a context] where the Islamist movement in general has [acquired] a certain credibility. This is certainly what makes the confrontation between the clerical elite and anti-slavery activists more intense than it could have been in the 1980s. In fact, it is because both the Haratin militants and the clerical class belong to the same intellectual and linguistic milieu that they confront each other more ferociously.

**Democratization, the Islamization of the Political Sphere, and the Haratine’s Electoral Significance**

The new return to efforts at democratization, which started with the coup of 2005 and the elections of 2007, triggered new processes that facilitated the resurgence and Islamization of the
abolitionist activism. First, the democratic reforms softened the tight control imposed by the previous military regimes while it increased awareness among social groups that have stayed on the margins, namely the Haratine, to engage in political contestation (Leservoisier 2009). As early as 2005, the year when the new democratic transition began, some Haratine-dominated neighborhood in Nouakchott started to experiment with localized contestation as local populations began to oppose land expropriation by the government (Choplin 2009). These contestations grew to take the form of social and political mobilization, and became increasingly political. The liberalization of the political sphere allowed the Haratine elite to engage in political activism. But most importantly, the democratic opening boosted the confidence of the Haratine elites that they could engage in democratic competition and successfully mobilize their bases for electoral victory. Despite their frequent criticisms of Mauritanian democracy, there is a widespread belief among the Haratine activists that it is possible to alleviate the problem of slavery and its sequels and to make positive changes in their society by participating in democratic competition. In fact, it was only after the democratic opening of 2007 that the founders of IRA were able to successfully launch the movement. Although IRA has not been officially recognized as a formal and legal organization, the government has often closed its eyes on its activism to the extent that its president Biram Dah Abeid was allowed to run for president in 2014.

Second, the legalization of the Islamist party Tawassoul accelerated the Islamization of the political sphere, further making Islam the main reference for social and political order and leading to an inflation of Islamic references in political discourse. Islam itself thus came to the center of the political battlefield. Each political party since then has been obliged to show its attachment to Islam and the defense of Islamic culture and values. Commenting on the impact
that Tawassoul had on the political sphere in Mauritania, a ranking member of the ruling party told me:

When Tawassoul was legalized, the Islamists barely had a political base. But they had strong social and religious capital due to their humanitarian work and their cooptation of high profile religious figures. Their political strategy focused on presenting themselves as the defenders of Islam while castigating the other political parties as secular and anti-religion. In Mauritania where people are deeply religious, no politician could accept to be presented as secularist or anti-religion. No political party could afford to let religion be taken over by another political party, not even the leftists. Thus, in response to the Islamists’ attempt to monopolize the religious discourse, all politicians started to stress their attachment to Islam.\(^{14}\)

Even the government started to compete with the Islamists for religious legitimacy. Since the regime of President Ould Abdel Aziz came to power, the government has multiplied actions of high symbolic values through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. These actions include the publication of a new edition of the Qur’an written in original Mauritanian calligraphy; the creation of radio Qur’an and TV El-Mahadara, which broadcast religious programs 24 hours a day and seven days a week; the creation of an Islamic University in Aioun; the creation of new Mahadhir and constructions of mosques; and the recruitment of hundreds of imams. The target beneficiaries of these program are the so-called “most-vulnerable populations,” which in most cases refers to the Haratine. At the same time that the government has been working on boosting its religious legitimacy, it has also attempted to obstruct the Islamists’ religious and humanitarian activities by closing some Mahadhir and mosques funded by the Islamists, as well as by imposing surveillance on mosques controlled by the Islamists. As the saliency of the secular discourse fades in favor of religious ones, an emerging Haratine elite that combines both Islamic

\(^{14}\) Interview with a member of the Political Bureau of the UPR party, Nouakchott, January 2016.
and modern schooling, mostly in Arabic has re-appropriated the abolitionist discourse as an entry into the political field.

Third, while hotly contested, estimates of the ethnic composition of the Mauritanian population show that the Haratine may well constitute the largest group in Mauritania, representing around 40 percent of the population. The new context of democracy has thus pushed the Haratine to the center of political contest between different political forces. Rivalry between the ruling party and the Islamist party Tawassoul, in particular, was exacerbated during the 2013 legislative and district elections. The Islamists who did not have a political base in the Haratine-dominated villages (Adwaba - plu. Adabay) attempted to capitalize instead on their humanitarian activities to attract this vote. The ruling party, by contrast, relied on tribal patronage to mobilize Haratine votes. Ethnic voting is strong in Mauritania, and candidate selection as well as voting instructions are often decisions made within the tribe. While the Haratine—particularity those in rural areas—do vote for the candidate selected by the tribe, the chance for a Haratine to be selected as candidates to represent their tribe is very low. Due to this discrimination, IRA has tried hard to end the social relationship with the Bidan. They argue that unless Haratine are liberated from this relationship, the Bidan will always have control of the economy and the political power.

**Haratine Identity and Participation in Abolitionist Activism**

IRA activism has attracted a large number of participants, mostly from the Haratine community, including—though not limited to—young educated Haratine, graduates from universities and college institutes, middle class as well as urban poor Haratine and, to a lesser extent, Afro-Mauritanians. Identification with the Haratine community is a strong determinant of participation in the IRA’s collective action. However, the Haratine identity is not homogenous, but rather disputed by three major tendencies.
The first tendency considers the Haratine to be part of the Moorish society, that is they consider the Haratine to be Arabs. IRA frames its activism as a struggle to liberate the Haratine community from the Bidan, arguing that the only link between the two communities is that of slavery, and as long as the Haratine remain as part of the Moorish identity, they will occupy a subaltern position and slavery and servile practice are likely to continue. This category is often called *Al Haratine al Musta’ribine* (Arabized Haratine) emphasizes the cultural, linguistics, and tribal background over skin color. The argument is that the Arab identity is not limited to those who are originally from the Bani Hassane tribes. To the extent that Berber ethnic groups were completely assimilated into the Arab identity, Haratine can also find their place within the Arab identity. The second tendency views the Haratine as Black Africans, emphasizing the origins of the Haratin - before their enslavement - among black African populations to the south, and the skin color over tribal and cultural backgrounds. Advocates of this view—called quite pejoratively *Al Haratine al-Mutazinjin* (negrofied Haratine)—argue that the only link between Haratine and Bidan is that of slavery and domination, and that as long as the Haratine remain as part of the Moorish community, they will continue to occupy a subaltern position. A third tendency claim an independent identity, arguing that Haratine are neither black Africans, nor Arab/Moors, but just Haratine.

Regionalism is one of the factors that influenced this division. Haratines who lived in the southern regions of Mauritania are more likely to be influenced by the neighboring Afro-Mauritanians of the Senegal River Valley than are Haratines who come from the northern regions, where the influence of the Arab culture and tribal ties to the masters is strong. Other factors influencing these tendencies are related to economic conditions. Haratine who belong to rich families and who get benefits from their masters tend to associate themselves to the tribe
more than Haratine who do not get any benefits from their former masters.\textsuperscript{15} Also Haratine who belong to the clerical families (Zawaya) tend to be more emotionally attached to their masters, no doubt due to the stronger adherence to traditional religious interpretations, than are Haratine who belong to non-clerical families (Bani Hassan for example). Finally, Haratine who live in tents serving their masters in their households are inclined to be closer to their masters than Haratine families who live in Adabay, villages.\textsuperscript{16}

A former IRA activist summarizes the evolution of the debate about Haratine identity and the trajectory of the Haratine abolitionist activism as follows:

The debate about Haratine identity went through three phases: The first Haratine activists identified themselves as black Africans. They associated themselves with the Afro-Mauritanians. Such activist as Messaoud Ould Boulkheir changed their names to Messaou Fall to highlight this shift in the identity. But during Ould Taya’s regime, state patronage was distributed along tribal affiliations. Each tribe receives its share of government positions and then nominated their members to occupy them. Therefore, only faithful members of their tribes had access to those privileges. This and other factors such as the violence of 1989 that opposed Moorish - including Haratine - and Afro-Mauritanians, contributed to the fading of the Haratine’s Afro identity in favor of the Moorish identity. Recently, however, the resurgence of the abolitionist activism raised the question of the Haratine’s identity. Initially IRA endorsed the idea of Haratine nationalism, which consider the Haratine as an independent identity. But today, IRA’s position is closer to the Afro identity.\textsuperscript{17}

While IRA initially mobilized across this identity cleavage, today a number of activists who identify with the Moorish identity have left the group. A tense debate on social media has raged between the so-called “Arabized” and “Negrofied” Haratine al-Haratine. Another former activist explained the motive that led him to leave the IRA, saying,

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with a civil society activist, member of SOS-Esclaves, Nouakchott, December 2015.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with a female Haratine and parliamentarian, Nouakchott, December 2015.

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with a former member of IRA’S Board of Director, Nouakchott, January 2015.
Biram [Dah Abeid] wants Haratine to completely break ties with the Bidan. Biram believes that as long as the Haratine remain attached to the Moorish identity, slavery will continue under the cover of kinship. But the problem is that Haratine and Bidan share the same language, religion, and other cultural values. Haratine do not have any alternative culture, or language on which they can create a new identity. They cannot be Haalpulaar, Soninke, or Wolof. Breaking ties with the Moorish identity will only devoid Haratine of all identity. 18

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the factors behind these new dynamics in the anti-slavery activism in Mauritania by focusing specifically on the impact of three major processes. First, the legalization of the Islamist party Tawassoul in the context of democratic liberalization, which contributed to an increasing Islamization of the political sphere and a competition between political parties and civil societies to win over moral and religious legitimacy. Second, the rising demographic stakes represented by the Haratine community, which given its electoral significance has become a matter of political rivalry between different political forces. And finally, the emergence a Haratine elite educated in Arabic and in Islam that had been excluded from the Francophone-dominated activism of the 1970 – 2000s, but that has now found the opportunity to use their language skills and religious knowledge to fully engage into the new activism.

The Maliki Islamic Jurisprudence historically played a significant role in the perpetuation of slavery and its sequels in Mauritania, including by providing an alternative referent that challenges the state’s abolition laws, by providing religious justifications for the social, political, and economic systems that allow for the practice to continue, and finally, by serving as the official source of law that regulate such important things as family matters and land tenure.

18 Interview with a former IRA activist, Nouakchott, December 2015. Later in the interview, it surfaced that this activist is now a government employee, and he owes his position to a Bidan relative who is well-positioned in the government.
Today, however, a new Haratine elite, have emerged to contest the practice of slavery, attacking what they call the last ideological pillar supporting slavery in Mauritania, by which they mean certain canonical books of Maliki jurisprudence, including the historically widely respected Mukhtasar al-Khalil.

Muslim activists who adhere to the Islamist political ideology have prominently used peaceful protest to challenge policies or advance an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. In fact, Islamists advocate for participation within the secular state system, including participation in electoral politics. Their effort is neither to challenge the state system nor democracy, but to inscribe Islamic contents and values to both the state and democracy. Islamists participate in debates and negotiations with secular groups about defining the “form and substance” of such concepts as the state, democracy, human rights, and family code (Villalón, 2010). Although Mauritania initiated some sort of democratization process in the 1980s under the military regime of Maaouïya Ould Taya (1984 – 2005), it quickly drifted back into authoritarian rule. It wasn’t until 2005, following a military coup that toppled Ould Taya’s regime that a new process of democratic transition started. A new government was elected democratically in 2007 only to be overthrown again in 2008 by another military coup led by the current President Ould Abdel Aziz. Since 2009, president Ould Abdel Aziz has legitimized his rule through democratic elections that were boycotted by the major opposition parties. Yet, despite these tribulations, since 2005, there has been is some political opening that has allowed civil society organizations, and political parties to mobilize for political contestation and participation in the public sphere.

In Nouakchott, this context of political opening combined with the state ability to project authority and enforce law and order have offered an opportunity for movement such as IRA and the Islamist party Tawassoul to mobilize among increasingly politicized urban masses and
engage in peaceful political contestation. The structural context in Nouakchott, including capable state administration, burgeoning civil society organizations, and social, political, and economic marginalization affecting Haratine communities more severely than others, has provided favorable political opportunity and resources for IRA to tap into Haratine’s grievance and successful mobilize for peaceful political contestation. On the contrary, such context has been unfavorable for the jihadist group Ansarullah al-Murabitoun fi Bilad Shinquit which has tried to engage in insurgency, only to be defeated and disbanded in the course of a year.
CHAPTER 6
RIOTS UNDER THE BANNER OF RELIGION: THE ANTI-CHARLIE HEBDO RIOTS IN ZINDER

On January 16, 2015, a mob of angry protesters in the city of Zinder—located some 900 km east of Niger’s capital city, Niamey—left the mosques after accomplishing the Friday prayer and headed toward the city center shouting “Allahu Akbar.” They were reacting to the caricatures of the prophet Muhammad published in a French satirical magazine called Charlie Hebdo. On that day they were also mobilized by anger vis-à-vis the President of Niger who, following a terrorist attack that targeted the magazine’s headquarters in Paris, had travelled to France to participate in a gathering that aimed to show sympathy to the magazine and to condemn terrorism. The police intervened with tear gas to attempt to disperse the crowd, but the violence quickly escalated instead. Several groups of young and agitated protesters dispersed throughout the city, burning churches, bars, a French cultural center, and the ruling party’s headquarters. In total, three people were killed, 45 others injured, and several churches and houses of Christian families burned. While rioting of this kind is not uncommon in Zinder—similar episodes targeting churches, bars, and “maisons de passe” (houses of prostitution) had occurred in the 1990s and early 2010s—the so-called anti-Charlie Hebdo riot was quite unique in terms of the level and extent of violence that it generated.

The anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder epitomizes yet another form of Islamic political contestation that has taken place across the Sahel region. Mobs of angry Muslims assaulting public and private properties in expressions of collective discontent have occurred multiple times throughout the region. In fact, only one day after the riot in Zinder, a similar eruption of violence occurred in several other cities in Niger, including the capital city Niamey, resulting in several
casualties and burned properties. Similarly, in Mali, the 2012 jihadist occupation of the northern regions generated episodes of riots in the capital city Bamako, where angry demonstrators assaulted Arab and Tuareg families and their properties, accusing them of complicity with the jihadists and separatist rebel groups who occupied the north. The scene has also become familiar in Mauritania where on several occasions angry rioters clashed with the police, including instances where rioters accused the government of not taking sufficiently strong actions to deal with “acts of blasphemy” against the Qur’an, the prophet Muhammad, or other sacred books of the Maliki jurisprudence. In this chapter, I turn to an analysis of rioting as a form of Islamic political contestation. I address the question: Why and how are Muslims in the Sahel sometimes mobilized to engage in spontaneous and momentary acts of violence targeting civilians and/or public and private properties on behalf of Islam? I will analyze the case of the 2015 anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder to suggest answers to the factors shaping the emergence and process of this form of Islamic contestation.

Scholars have tried to explain why political contestation in Muslim societies takes the form of peaceful protest at times and violent riots at other times. In his study of religious violence in Indonesia, Sidel (2006) argues that religious violence, including riots, pogroms, and jihad come as a reaction by Muslim communities to a heightened context of anxiety and uncertainty about maintaining their identity in a society that is being dragged into rapid globalization. Pearlman (2011), on the other side, argues that the variation between peaceful and violent protests in the context of Palestine is function of the level of cohesion within the

---

1 Unlike in Zinder, the riot in Niamey was supposed to be an organized protest. A number of Islamic associations wanted to organize a protest to condemn Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures. They applied for a protest permit, but the district authorities of Niamey refused to allow the protest to take place. The organizers decided to overlook the authorities’ decision and went ahead with their call for protest. The riot degenerated after the police intervened to disperse the crowd.
movement itself. Movements that enjoy greater levels of cohesion are more likely to use peaceful protest whereas movements that are not organized or suffer from fragmentation are likely to drift into violence. These two approaches offer different though complementary explanations of variation between protest and riot. The first emphasizes the motives and grievances that push people to resort to violent or peaceful protest, while the second approach emphasizes the importance of the organizational capacity of the movement that is arranging the collective action. Building on these arguments and in line with the theoretical framework I presented in Chapter 2, I argue that the anti-Charlie Hebdo riot in Zinder came about as a result of heightened anxiety and vulnerability about religious identity among the masses in Zinder, an anxiety that religious institutions dominated by the pietist ideology have failed to capture and channel through organized and institutionalized mechanisms of claim-making.\(^2\) To say it in the theoretical language that I used in Chapter 2, the 2015 riot in Zinder arose from intense grievances that lacked mobilizing structures for their channeling and a favorable context of political opportunity for their expression.

I break this argument down into three parts: First, I argue that there is a growing feeling of anxiety and uncertainty about religious identity among many people in Zinder. Over the last quarter century, the religious landscape in Zinder has changed significantly, resulting in the promotion of a rigorous practice of Islam and a heightened consciousness among many believers about the supposed threat that the West poses to Islamic identity and culture. This threat is perceived through the phenomenon of Westernization, the increased activism of Christian

\(^2\) It is important to mention that the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots is not only a religiously-motivated contestation. The burning of the ruling party’s regional headquarters suggests that in addition to religion, political motives and other reasons may have been at play. But in this chapter, I will focus only on explaining the religious aspect of the event.
churches and NGOs, as well as the international context marked by the so-called “war on terror.” It is reflected concretely in incidents such as the publication of caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, which many Muslims consider an assault on their religion.

Secondly, I argue that this anxiety and uncertainty, just like many other local grievances in Zinder, have not been properly harnessed for collective claim-making. Zinder’s local context, characterized by a symbiotic mode of governance that brings together customary and state institutions in the exercise of public authority, has proven effective in deterring public dissent and in attempting to calm down tensions when they arise. At the same time, the only rudimentary presence of organized civil society groups in Zinder has undermined their ability to capture local grievances, and to channel them through institutionalized mechanisms of claim-making. Thus, the state’s ability to stifle social and political tensions through the exercise of the moral authority of the Sultan of Zinder (the most important traditional authority in the region), combined with the weakness of civil society have resulted in a very few episodes of organized political contestation, despite the city’s reputation as rebellious and contestatory. When contestations do occur, they rather tend to take the form of spontaneous and un-organized riots.

And thirdly, this local context has also facilitated the enforcement of the government of Niger’s assertive control over the religious sphere, which has focused on promoting pietism at the expense of other Islamic ideologies, namely Islamism or jihadism. Pietism remains the dominant Islamic political ideology in Zinder, yet pietist Muslim activists are mired in an internal contradiction. On the one hand, their religious activism over the years has promoted the idea that Islam is under attack, both locally and globally, contributing to the feeling of anxiety about religious identity. Yet at the same time, by declaring political contestation un-Islamic, they deprive believers of the means to express the very feelings of anxiety that they have themselves
contributed to exacerbate. I argue that the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder developed from intense grievances that the dominant pietist leaders had failed to capture and channel through peaceful contestation.

The chapter is divided into three sections: I first summarizes the anti-Charlie Hebdo riot event; I then discuss the structures of the local context in Zinder, including the syncretic governance style and the patterns of mobilization. Finally, I discuss the dynamics of the religious landscape in Zinder.

Rioting as a Form of Islamic Political Contestation: The Case of the Anti-Charlie Hebdo Riot in Zinder

On January 7th, 2015, two gunmen stormed the headquarters of the satirical French weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris and killed eleven people, including five cartoonists who worked for the magazine. After executing the cartoonists, the assailants declared, “We have avenged the prophet Muhammad,” “We have killed Charlie Hebdo!” “Allahu Akbar!!” (BBC 2015). The satirical weekly had published caricatures portraying the prophet Muhammad in a way that many Muslim deemed offensive, enraging millions and generating public outcry in Muslim countries around the word. The anti-Charlie Hebdo attacks—as the January jihadist attacked came to be known—also generated passionate reactions, some supporting the newspaper’s right to free speech and condemning the attack, while others denouncing the provocative cartoons and holding the newspaper responsible. Yet, many others condemned both the caricatures and the jihadist attack. Shortly after the event, the slogan “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) emerged in social media as an expression of solidarity with the magazine, only to be

---

3 One of the cartoons portrays the prophet Muhammad being filmed naked and in a demeaning position asking the cameraman behind him “And my butt? Do you like my butt?” In another cartoon, the prophet Muhammad is crying saying “It is hard to be loved by jerks!” (See the caricatures in Raymond, Gregory 2012.)
followed by another counter-slogan “Je ne suis pas Charlie” (I am not Charlie). In the two days that followed the attack the debate raged on social media, where on Twitter alone, hashtags referring to the above-mentioned slogans and counter-slogan were used over five million times, making the debate about anti-Charlie Hebdo attacks “one of the most popular topics in Twitter’s history.” (Giglietto and Lee 2015).

Demonstrations were organized around the world to condemn the attack. In France, the government organized a demonstration in Paris called “La Marche Républicaine,” to pay tribute to the victims and to condemn terrorism. Over 40 head-of-states and other notables from around the world participated. Issoufou Mahamadou, the president of Niger, travelled to Paris, accompanied by the chairman of the High Islamic Council of Niger and the Archbishop of Niamey, to take part in the demonstration. On Monday January 12, while still in Paris, president Issoufou gave an interview broadcasted on Radio France Internationale (RFI), where he strongly condemned the attack against Charlie Hebdo and declared, “We are all Charlie!,” re-appropriating the slogan that was widely used to express support for the satirical magazine (RFI 2015). Issoufou’s statement created a strong backlash throughout Niger, particularly on Facebook forums where people harshly criticized the President’s statement, and opposed the counter slogan “I am not Charlie” (Idrissa 2015, 2).

In the city of Zinder, people reacted to the president’s statement both on social media and through anonymous text messages. Most of the posts and text messages condemned the president and called on people to shame him. One of the text messages say “Shame on President Issoufou, who attended the demonstration that was held in Paris because the enemies of Mhamd (S.A.W.) had been killed. Please share this message with Muslim citizens” (Schritt 2015, 52). Other text messages were more political, calling people to sanction president Issoufou in the next
presidential elections. “I will not vote for Issoufou Mahamadou in 2016 because he is Charlie,” read one text, “Please share this message with your friends” (Schritt 2015, 52). While the indignation was still simmering, Charlie Hebdo magazine published a new caricature portraying the prophet Muhammad with a tear in his eye and holding a sign that read “Je suis Charlie” under the headline “All is forgiven.” The same day, in Zinder, new anonymous text messages started to circulate reporting the news, saying “Dear brother in ISLAM, charli héبدو again caricatured our PROPHET (S.A.W.) to insult ISLAM. Pray to ALLAH to protect ISLAM and to curse France, charli héبدو and all the presidents of the world who supported them. GOD is the strongest ‘ALLAH ya issa’. Please circulate this SMS” (Schritt 2015, 52). Reactions on Facebook forum also raged anew, almost unanimously condemning the magazine and again criticizing President Issoufou, who was nicknamed “Issoufou Charlie.”

The same day that Charlie Hebdo published the second caricature, rumors about holding a protest started to circulate via anonymous text messages, which called on people to come out on Friday after the weekly prayer to protest and to show their love and support for the prophet. Similar messages were printed and posted in many neighborhoods. On Thursday January 15, the eve of the rioting episode, as discussions about the caricatures and the protests intensified throughout the city, Christians started to receive open threats often from their own their neighbors. The Sultan of Zinder—the highest traditional authority—summoned the city’s “malamay,” Islamic scholars (sing. Malami, Hausa) to his palace and asked them to try to calm the rising tensions. He suggested that they must preach non-violence in their Friday sermons the next day and call on people to avoid protesting. For his part the Sultan committed to convening

4 Interview with many Christians in Zinder who confirmed that they received such threats, Zinder, February, June 2016.
people to a public prayer at a later date, in order to condemn Charlie Hebdo. The *malamay*, including the Salafi scholars who are often viewed as stubborn and defiant to the authorities, accepted the sultan’s instructions. A number of Salafi imams held a meeting that evening to harmonize their positions. They decided to focus their Friday sermon on explaining the proper way to express love for the prophet, and to argue that it is only through worship, not protest or violence, that a Muslim can express such love.

On Friday many people came to the mosque with the intention of participating in the protest, and the imams’ sermons did little to change their minds. In most Sufi mosques, because the imams read their sermons in Arabic, before they arrive at the mosque their assistants translate the sermon into Hausa, the dominant local language. In some cases, people confronted those assistants who translated the sermon. One of those assistants describes to me his encounter with the worshippers on that Friday,

The sermon that day was about the importance for Muslims to preserve peace and avoid engaging in acts of “sedition” (*fitna* in Arabic). Essentially, the message was that although Islam enjoins Muslim to love the prophet Muhammad, it is not their duty to protect the prophet. It is God who protects his prophet. But people did not listen. By that time, those who had made up their mind that they would participate in the protest viewed the imams who preached non-violence as ‘traitors,’ ‘sell-outs,’ or ‘pro-government.’ People looked me in the face and said, ‘how could you possibly prevent people to react against those who attacked the prophet!’

---

5 Interview with a Muslim scholar who took part in the meeting between the Sultan of Zinder and the malamay, Zinder, April 2016.

6 There was one Salafi scholar who was not among those convened to the meeting and who during his evening preaching in a local radio clearly justified the terrorist attacks in Paris and supported the idea of public demonstration.

7 Interview with a Salafi Imam who participated in the meeting, Zinder May, 2016.

8 Interview with a Sufi imam assistant, Zinder, May, 2016.
As soon as the prayers ended, people started shouting “Allahu Akbar,” inviting others to join the protest. Large crowds left almost every Friday mosque in the city and headed toward the city center. Initially, people of diverse backgrounds and from different generations joined the crowd. But after the police intervened with tear gas, the violence escalated, and the more mature participants withdrew, leaving the youth, including many underage young men, to pursue the violence. Several groups of agitated protesters dispersed throughout the city and started burning tires and attacking public and private properties. The tiny Christian minority in Zinder (less than 0.01 percent of the population) were the primary targets of the violence. Churches were systematically attacked and burned, and some Christian families were targeted door to door, although given their long presence and integration in the city, in most cases neighbors intervened to protect Christian families and their properties. Other targets include the French cultural center, the headquarters of the ruling party, PNDS Tarayya, and the police stations. In the end, three people were killed, 45 injured, and several churches and other public buildings were burned. Although riots had become a standard form of political contestation in Zinder over the years, no collective action in the city’s contemporary history has generated this level of violence.

After the event, the debate continued on social media. Most commentators condemned the violence and expressed their sympathy to the Christians victims. But there were a few cases where other commentators expressed satisfaction and/or justification, including one who posted on Facebook, “We have avenged the massacre of our brothers by Christians in Central African Republic.”

The reaction of the elite, both Muslims and Christians, were unanimous.

---

9 Reference to this comment is no longer available. The government used information on Facebook to identify the persons involved in the violence, leading many to delete their comments in relation to the event. The violence that struck the Central African Republic somewhat before these events had taken on a religious coloration in which Muslims were the main victims.
condemnation of the violence. Worthy of mentioning are the strong words of the imam of the
University of Niamey mosque, Cheikh Boureima Daouda, who said,

I reiterate my condemnation of the profaning caricatures of our holy and beloved
prophet Mohammed… I also take the opportunity to deplore and condemn the
violent demonstrations that took place in Niger following the latest caricatures of
the Prophet, demonstrations that led to the death of several people, the burning of
churches and [other] public and private damages…These violent demonstrations
are something we condemn because it is a transgression against Islam in relation to
innocent people. Islam recommends that when problems like this occur, Muslims
must refer to the religious authority for guidance to the best attitude to adopt,
instead of engaging in violent demonstrations” (Boisbouvier 2015).

The anti-Charlie Hebdo riot in Zinder was leaderless and spontaneous. Despite
investigations and much speculation there is no evidence that any group or individual was
responsible for organizing it. No Islamic association, other formal organization, or even any
known Islamic leader contributed to the organization of the event. Though some people pointed
to the flag of Boko Haram which was spotted during the riots, arguing that the protest might have
been organized by people affiliated with Boko Haram. Local observers reject this argument,
however, saying that the person who raised the Boko Haram flag was only a student in a local
high school, not affiliated with the jihadist organization. Several interviews confirmed this observation, including one with a local representative of an Islamic association who was involved in reconciliations meetings in the aftermath of the riot, Zinder, March 2016.

Patterns of Political Contestation in Zinder: Governance and Mobilization in a Sahelian
Secondary City

Secondary cities in the Sahel have not received enough scholarly attention in general,
virtually none from political scientists. They are neither the center of political power nor are
they, like the rural areas that have attracted more attention, at the very periphery of the state. In

10 The only exception is the Salafi imam who, as I mentioned in a footnote above, delivered a sermon in which he
justified the attack in Paris and supported the idea of protest in Zinder. Beyond expressing that support, there is no
evidence that he participated in the organization of the event.

11 Several interviews confirmed this observation, including one with a local representative of an Islamic association
who was involved in reconciliations meetings in the aftermath of the riot, Zinder, March 2016.
general, neither civil society nor ethnic and tribal groups find a foothold in these places. Secondary cities tend to epitomize those places where the hybrid nature of the social and political systems in the Sahel is the most pronounced. In terms of political contestation, secondary cities tend to experience many fewer episodes of protests compared to capital cities, and much less violent insurgency compared to many areas in the Sahel’s rural periphery. For instance, the city of Zinder, which represents a typical Sahelian secondary city, has the reputation of being Niger’s most “rebellious city,” “the stronghold of the opposition pole,” or “the capital of systematic contestation of political power in Niamey” (Ibrahim 1994; Danda 2004). Yet, while this characterization may be valid symbolically, Zinder’s rebellious attitude has rarely translated into contestatory collective action. There have been only a very few episodes of political contestation compared to Niamey, and on the rare occasions when contestation occurs it has mostly taken the form of rioting.

Between 1997 and 2016, the ACLED dataset enumerates only 20 episodes of political contestation in the city of Zinder. Twelve of these episodes were in the form of riots, and five episodes were related to military mutiny. Only three were episodes of peaceful protest, of which two were actually sponsored by the government in an effort to mobilize public support for the fight against Boko Haram. Zinder did not experience any episode of violent conflict in this period. In comparison, during the same period Niamey registered 132 episodes of political contestation. About half of these episodes were peaceful protests and fewer than a third were riots, most of which were student protests that turned violent after police repression. Niamey suffered a few episodes of violent conflict, including an interethnic clash in late 1998 as well as the episodes of military coups in 1999 and 2010. This contrast between Zinder’s reputation as a
pole of contestation and the relative lack of contentious collective action raises a puzzle as to why we see so few acts of collective dissent in a context of deep social and political grievances?

In this section, I make two arguments: first, the fact that authority in the city of Zinder is exercised symbiotically by government and local customary institutions has proven effective in terms of maintaining control as well as in calming down tensions when they arise. Second, the rudimentary presence of organized civil society groups has undermined their ability to capture local grievances and to channel them through peaceful and institutionalized mechanisms of claim-making, leaving local populations to resort to violent riots when grievances reach a certain level. In what follow I elaborate on these arguments, discussing the syncretic mode of governance and the pattern of social mobilization in Zinder.

**Patterns of Governance and Authority in Zinder**

In Zinder, the exercise of public authority is not the monopoly of formal government institutions alone (Lund 2001 and 2009). It is rather a domain where customary institutions and government institutions intertwine quite symbiotically and complementarily. Contrary to most Sahelian countries, which abolished chieftaincy, post-colonial governments in Niger instead maintained the institution of chieftaincy, reformed it, and integrated it as part of the state institutions (Olivier de Sardan 2009; Abba 1990). In Tidjani Alou’s word, the integration of chieftaincy in state institutions has made the Nigerien administration “profoundly syncretic” (2009, 2-3). Continuing a tradition established by the French colonizers, successive post-independence Nigerien governments have worked closely with traditional chiefs whom they considered as administrative assistants (auxilliaires de l’administration) (Abba 1990; Tidjani Alou 2009). Although these governments have at times attempted to weaken the power of chieftaincy, notably by limiting their authority and placing them under the control of formal state institutions, they have also involved them in the management of local affairs. Traditional chiefs
are considered the guardians of customs and traditions and, in that capacity, they served as the
interface between the state and local populations. This syncretic relationship is very pronounced
in Zinder, where there is a strong and centuries-old chieftaincy tradition.

Some two hundred years ago the then small chieftaincy of Damagaram established its
capital city in a hamlet called Zinder (Salifou 1971; Dunbar 1971). The sultanate of Damagaram
started as a vassal state of the Bornu Empire, but it developed throughout the 19th century to
become a major kingdom of its own, notably by taking advantage of the weakening of the Borno
Empire and by “offsetting” the Fulani jihadi forces of the Sokoto caliphate (Charlick 1991;
Dunbar 1971). Toward the end of the 19th century, Damagaram was the single most important
Hausa political entity in the eastern Sahel, with Zinder as its capital city (Dunbar 1971). Thus, at
the time when French colonizers arrived in Zinder, the kingdom opposed strong resistance,
resisting the first French colonial mission in 1898 before it finally succumbed to a second one in
1899 (Dunbar 1971; Salifou 1971). However, despite this resistance to colonization and despite
the French colonial authority’s “idealistic doctrines of direct rule and ‘assimilation,’” the French
maintained the chieftaincy—though they would later reform it—and relied on the Sultan and his
customary institutions in administering local affairs (Dunbar 1971; Charlick 1991). Colonial
officials treated the chiefs alternatively as allies or subordinates, but mostly as auxiliaries to the
administration. Although the authority of the sultanate of Damagaram was severely weakened as
result of colonization, it nonetheless maintained a great deal of leeway in terms of managing
certain affairs at the local level.

After independence, the post-colonial regimes pursued the policy of working with
traditional chiefs to exercise control over the country’s vast hinterland in a context of weak state
capacity. Although not as important as Niamey politically, Zinder is considered the most
important city in the south and eastern Niger. Giving the location of the capital city in the far west, controlling Zinder became crucial in order for the central government to be able to extend its control over Niger’s vast hinterland, and Zinder is often thus called the second capital of the country. Yet, conscious of their limited presence and inability to wield control and influence in the provinces, but also in order to attempt to glean some popular legitimacy, post-independence regimes in Niger have opted to work closely with traditional chiefs. As Abba (1990, 55) notes speaking of Niger’s first president (1960-74) “the traditional aristocracy occupied a prominent position in the state apparatus during the entire period in which Hamani Diori held power.”

Traditional chiefs played a significant role in bridging the gap between the state and local populations and performed the important task of reconciliation and securing peace and safety within and between communities. In general, traditional chiefs have enjoyed some level of popular legitimacy without much political authority, while, on the contrary, the state institutions have enjoyed authority but suffered from a deficit of legitimacy. Successive government have distributed patronage to the traditional chiefs, in exchange for their active support. One close collaborator of the current Sultan of Zinder describes this patronage relationship:

During Kountche’s tenure, the government increased collaboration with the traditional chiefs. Kountche used to send money every year to the Sultan of Zinder and ask for prayers so that God brings a fruitful rainy season and ensures stability. The sultan then distributes the money to the malamay and asks them to organize ‘Salat Istisqa’ (prayer for rain). The sultan also asks them to focus their preaching and prayer on the country’s political stability. The malamay used to emphasize the hadith in Sahih al-Muslim that enjoins Muslims to obey their rulers, which says “you [must] listen to the Amir [the ruler] and carry out his orders; even if your back is flogged and your wealth is snatched, you should listen and obey.”

Beyond the patronage relationship, the sultan plays a significant role in managing the city’s affairs on a daily basis. Paralleled to the state bureaucracy, there are customary institutions

---

12 Interview with a notable at the sultan’s palace, Zinder, May 2016.
affiliated to the sultanate that also exercise some state-related functions, including social reconciliation, supervision of religious affairs, provision of justice through the implementation of customary laws on issues related to family such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as well as on land tenure. During the 1990s, when the democratic transition and subsequent political instability seriously weakened state institutions, the sultan even intervened to create a vigilante group called “Yan Banga” to provide policing services in the city (Lund 2001).\textsuperscript{13} One of the major roles that the chieftaincy in Zinder plays is the control made possible by its direct contact with the population. As another notable says “The role of the chieftaincy is exercising direct control (“un control de proximité”). The government rules over people who they don’t really know. The sultan, however, through the institutions that he controls [village chiefs, neighborhood chiefs, canton chiefs, imams and other religious scholars] knows each and every family in Zinder.”\textsuperscript{14}

The sultan also represents the highest moral authority in the city, and frequently intervenes to diffuse social and political tensions. One example relevant to this argument was his intervention to diffuse tensions following the 2006 publication of caricatures of the prophet Muhammad by a Danish newspaper. At that earlier episode, the sultan intervened quickly and effectively to calm people’s anger and provide them with an alternative way to express themselves. An Islamic scholar who remembered the event, states

In 2006, when a Danish newspaper published derogatory cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, the reaction was peaceful because it was fully organized by Islamic associations in collaboration with the sultan. The sultan called on people to gather at the Eid Mosque to pray and to issue a statement condemning the caricature. He successfully defused the crisis. This time in 2015, the sultan reacted too late. By the

\textsuperscript{13} The word ‘Yan Banga “is a Hausa adoption of the English word “vanguard” Lund (2001, 860).

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with a notable at the sultan’s palace, Zinder, May 2016.
time he attempted to calm down the tension, the mood in the city and the
mobilization had already reached a situation of return.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the sultan has been effective in diffusing tensions in many instances, there are
also times when people disregarded his intercession. In 1992, reacting to a number of debates
related to the family code, secularism, and women’s rights, a number of Islamic associations
decided to organize a protest in Zinder, following the lead of Islamic associations in Niamey.
The sultan attempted unsuccessfully to prevent the organization of the protest, and partly as a
result of his intervention it was transformed into a violent riot which became known as the
“Bouje Bouje” riot.\textsuperscript{16} An Islamic scholar who witnessed the events, recounts how people
disavowed the sultan: “People insulted the sultan himself, accusing him of collusion with the
government. The crowd went on the street and burned the bars, prostitution houses, the
headquarters of the women’s association, and attacked women who wore skirts.”\textsuperscript{17}

In brief, the state is able to exercise control and broadcast authority through a fairly
effective symbiosis of formal and informal institutions. This shared exercise of political
authority, however, is not without tension. The relationship between the chieftaincy and the state
institutions has been ambivalent. At the local level, there is a constant struggle between state
representatives and local traditional chiefs. As Lund (2001, 866) observes “In a variety of ways,
public authority in Zinder seems to manifest itself in an ambiguous process of being and
opposing the state. If we see the state as an ensemble of institutions exercising public authority,

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with a Sufi imam, member of the Association Islamique du Niger, Zinder, April 2016.

\textsuperscript{16} The world “Bouje” in Hausa means skirt. “Bouje Bouje” was a slogan initially used by Muslim clerics to
condemn women’s “indecent clothing.” The cleric used to call people to take strong actions to prevent women from
wearing skirts, arguing that God punishes a society that allows such indecent clothing with calamities such as the
droughts that hit the region in the early 1990s. The slogan was later appropriated by the public in the backlash that
followed the 1992 debate about the family code and gender rights.

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with an Islamic Scholar, Zinder March 2016.
we should … be prepared to meet institutions which are part of this ensemble but claim to be its opposite.”

**Social Mobilization in Zinder**

The context of social mobilization in Zinder is characterized by deep-seated social, economic, and political grievances, with only a rudimentary presence of organized civil society. Zinder represents a prototype of a provincial city, where, as I argue in Chapter 2, the state-society relation is characterized by a significant presence of the state and its administration, but weak presence of civil society. In fact, most civil society organizations have their headquarters in Niamey. While some of them have offices in Zinder, those local offices rarely take the initiative or have the capacity to themselves engage in social mobilization on local issues. They usually mobilize only for national matters, and only then when they receive a mandate from their headquarters. Some of the big civil society organizations, including the Mouvement Patriotique pour une Citoyénété Responsible (MPCR) and Alternative Espace Citoyen (AEC) have relatively small offices in Zinder, but these offices have rarely organized demonstrations. As a local sociologist observes, “in Zinder it is difficult for civil society to organize demonstrations because the headquarters in Niamey rarely authorize it. The headquarters prioritize national level issues as opposed to local or regional matters.”

Organizing protest in Zinder is also a risky enterprise. Most public demonstrations occur at the city center near the bus station and not far from the central market. These are places where many dangerous criminals lurk. These criminals often take advantage of demonstrations to create chaos and loot the shops around. According to the MPCR representative, the risk of infiltration by bandits and criminal is one of the reasons why they avoid organizing protests in Zinder.

---

18 Interview with a sociologist, expert on social and political dynamics in Zinder, Zinder, April, 2016.
We avoid organizing protests in Zinder because there is a risk of infiltration by bandits and criminals who seek to produce chaos and violence. Before organizing protests, the law requires us to apply for a protest permit at the mayor’s office. Three people have to sign on the application and commit to respect the law and order. They are responsible to oversee the protesters and make sure that there is no violence. If violence happens the government will hold those signatories accountable before the court. The signatories may end up in jail. In fact, even the mayor’s office in Zinder rarely authorizes any protest by civil society or the student unions, knowing the risk of violence that protest entails. That’s why instead of protest we prefer to organize non-contestatory activities such as sit-ins, public seminars, or issuing press statements.19

The MPCR is one of a few civil society organizations that are active in mobilization for claim-making. Although starting in the 1990s, many social, political, and professional organizations registered in the region of Zinder, surprisingly only a relatively small number of these organizations are based in Zinder city. In 1996, the region of Zinder counted 567 registered organizations, but only 14 percent were based in the city of Zinder while the remaining were based in the region’s other districts (Danda 2004, 274). Most of these organization are clubs or cultural associations that did not engage in claim-making. There are about two dozen Islamic Associations that have active representatives in Zinder. Most of these Islamic associations, however, are headquartered in Niamey and are represented in Zinder by some of the city’s prominent malamay. It is difficult to evaluate the popular base of these associations. In 1992, a few Islamic associations in Zinder attempted to organize the protest in reaction to national debates about the family code and secularism. As noted above, the protest turned violent, leading to the government’s decision to dissolve the associations responsible of the violence. Since then, Islamic associations have avoided getting directly involved in organizing political contestation in Zinder.

19 Interview with a local representative of the Mouvement Patriotique pour une Citoyénété Responsible (MPCR), Zinder, April 2016.
In the late 1990s, the phenomenon of “Fada” (youth clubs) started to gain ground in Zinder (Lund 2009). The Fada constituted a new form of associative life where youth meet regularly to socialize and even engage in various civic activities (Lund 2009; Masquelier 2013). While vibrant in the late 1990s and 2000s, the Fadas avoided meddling into politics or engaging in contestation (Amadou 2014, Souley 2012). Finally, over the last few years, a new form of youth social groupings called “Palais” has marked Zinder’s associative life. Viewed as an aberration of the peaceful Fada phenomenon, the Palais refers to specific group of youths who have adopted a distinctive street culture that mimics, in many ways, the American gang culture, notably in terms of clothing style, musical tastes, drug consumption, and street violence (Amadou 2014; Souley 2012). Contrary to the Fadas, the Palais have been involved in political contestation. Their contestation, however, are rarely peaceful or organized. In fact, the Palais are largely viewed as responsible for infiltrating peaceful protests and turning them into violent riots.

This rudimentary capacity of civil society organizations to mobilize local populations for claim-making contrasts with Zinder’s social and political context which is marked by deep-seated grievances. Zinder was a cosmopolitan city from the early years of its foundation. It is located at an area of confluence of three major ethnic groups: the Hausa to the south and southwest, the Kanuri to the east, and the Tuareg to the north. In addition to these ethnic groups that constitute the majority of the city’s population, a number of other ethnic groups, including Arab merchants, Fulani and Tubus settled in the city over the years. Regardless of ethnic background, however, Hausa is the language spoken in the city. Over the years, intermarriage has become common, leading ethnic group to blend with other. As a result, contrary to many places in the Sahel, ethnicity is not a salient identity in Zinder. The most salient identity, as Danda argues, is neither “ethno-regionalist” nor “ethno-religious” but rather “territorial.” An
inhabitant of Zinder city is first and foremost “Zinderois,” in contra-distinction to people from other part of Niger, who are often looked down-upon.

In 1911, the city of Zinder was designated the first capital city of the colonial territory of Niger. In 1926, however, the colonial authorities decided to shift the capital city to Niamey (Ibrahim 1994, Danda 2004, Charlick 1991). Frustration regarding the shifting of the capital city to Niamey has laid the base for a historic rivalry between Zinder and Niamey. This rivalry was exacerbated by a strong feeling of political marginalization, particularly during the first years after independence. In fact, Niger’s post-colonization politics was marked by the political dominance of Zarma politicians (Ibrahim 1994; Charlick 1991).20 Throughout this period, Zinder became notorious “as the center of divisive Hausa nationalism in Niger” (Ibrahim 1994, 20).

Zinder’s politicians have adopted a contestatory political discourse that is distinguished by its heavy rhetoric around “Zinderois” identity, a micro-nationalism that departs from the nationalist discourse more prominent in other parts of the country (Danda 2004). With the exception of the period from 1993-1996, when a native of Zinder assumed the Presidency of Niger, the city of Zinder has been of the strongest hold of the political opposition.21

The Religious Landscape of Zinder

Over the last quarter century, the religious landscape of Zinder has experienced some significant changes, resulting in a more rigorous practice of Islam according to the Salafi interpretation of Islam and a heightened consciousness among believers regarding their identity as part of the *umma*, the “imagined community” of Muslims worldwide. There is also a growing

---

20 The Zarma is the second biggest ethnic group after the Hausa. Zarma are found in the Western regions of Niger, contrary to Hausa ethnic groups who are found more to central and southern regions of Niger.

21 Mahamane Ousmane, first democratically elected president of the Third Republic, following the transition of the early 1990s. the Third Republic proved politically quite instable and ended with a coup in 1996.
anxiety as regards to the supposed threat that the “West” poses to Islam, and to Muslim identity and culture both at the local level, as perceived through the phenomenon of Westernization and the increased activism of Christian churches and NGOs. There is also keen awareness of what is perceived as a global threat, in reference to the so-called “global war on terror” that has affected many Muslim majority countries, or as we have seen by reports of publication of caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in far-away places. A number of Muslim activists, most notably within Salafi circles, have devoted a lot of energy to raising awareness about these perceived threats. They have capitalized on the development of communication technologies in the city, including the proliferation of private radio and TV channels as well as the more recent expansion of social media, to spread their message widely and intensely. Ostensibly, these activists appear to have succeeded in getting their message across. The city has witnessed, in fact, a growing tendency toward religious conformism in line with the Salafi rigorous interpretation of Islam, as well as a growing intolerance vis-a-vis “un-Islamic” behaviors, and a hardening of anti-Christsians and anti-West attitudes.

However, while seemingly successful in reshaping local culture and attitude, these Muslim activists have failed to propose a clear political or contestatory agenda—other than preaching and prayer—in order to address these threats. On the contrary, and perhaps due to the state’s assertive control over Zinder’s religious sphere via the sultan, these Salafi activists have adopted the ideology of pietism. They have warned against any attempt by Muslim believers to engage in political contestation. Thus, although they constantly criticize the governments for supporting—or at least for failing to address the threat of—Westernization, they have yet considered protesting against the government as something that is “un-Islamic.” One of the
Muslim activists who is also a Salafi imam told me that “public protest is not an Islamic way,” and that jihad is not permissible—at least not in the context of Zinder.22

In this section, I argue that this internal contradiction that has characterized Islamic activism in Zinder, which consists of raising alarms about the vulnerability of Islam and Islamic identity to both local and global threats while at the same time closing the venues for the public expression of this anxiety, is what leads people to resort to spontaneous, un-organized, and leaderless outbursts of violence. The anti-Charlie Hebdo rioting is one of the most striking recent manifestations of this internal contradiction. In what follows, I give an overview of the changing religious dynamics in Zinder, then I elaborate on the anxiety and vulnerability as to religious identity, and finally I examine the internal contradiction of pietism.

**Changing Religious Dynamics in Zinder**

The presence of Islam in the city of Zinder is as old as the city itself. The founder of the Sultanate of Damagaram, Malam Yunus (d. around 1776) was a Muslim cleric, and his successors were Muslims as well, at least nominally. The sultanate was officially proclaimed an Islamic state in 1840. Yet, Islam “was only tenuously practiced” and mostly by the elite (Dunbar 1971, 30). As in much of the Sahel at the time, the majority of the population practiced animism. The early ruling elite did not encourage the Islamization of the populace. One of the reasons, as reported by Laize (1919, 178) and Dunbar (1971, 30), was that slave raiding was a precious source of income for the sultanate during its early years and given that Islam forbade the enslavement of Muslims, the ruling elite did not make the spread of Islam a priority, in order not to deprive themselves of a crucial source of income. Until the 1850s, there were no elaborate mosques in the city and the practice of Islam and animism went hand in hand. Indeed, the

---

22 Interview with a Salafi Imam, Zinder, May 2016.
Muslim elites themselves indulged in pagan practices. It was only during the second half of the 19th century, under the rule of a devout king, Sarki Tanimun (1854 – 1884) that Islam started to make inroads into the masses (Idrissa 2017, 77). From that time on, Islam increasingly permeated local identity and culture. Today, an overwhelming majority of the city’s population—376,000 inhabitants—label themselves Muslims, including those who continue to practice animism. As Glew (2001, 100) observes “many people in Zinder refer to their town as ‘the heart of Islam in Niger.’” Although in decline, the practice of animism has persisted, and such animist practices as the production of amulets for protection and the consultation of spirits have continued to infuse Islamic practice. The tiny Christian population is estimated at somewhere between 500 and 1000 individuals, representing less than 0.01 percent of the overall population.23

Sufism has dominated the practice of Islam in Zinder. The two major Sufi congregations are the Qadriyya and the Tijaniyya, although historically other Sufi congregations, including the Sanusiyya and Shadhiliyya have had some presence (Zakari 2009, 115-118). Using the local terminology, Islamic scholars in Zinder can be classified into three categories: The first group is the “Malaman Zaure” (literally, vestibule clerics). They are often associated with the Qadriyya, though many of them refuse any labels and rather prefer to describe themselves simply as “Sunni.” Malaman Zaure represent the religious establishment and are largely viewed as the most influential religious group in the city. The second group is the ’Yan Qabalu or the followers of the Tijaniyya Sufi order. They gained momentum, particularly in the 1950s, following the visit of the Senegalese Sheikh Ibrahim Nyasse, a major spiritual leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi

23 There are no official statistics available on religious groups. Many members of the Christian communities estimate the number of the Christians in the city to be somewhere between 500 and 1000.
order in West Africa (Zakari 2009). In general, both the Malaman Zaure and the ’Yan Qabal and the ’Yan Galgajiya (traditionalists in Hausa), partly in reference to their involvement in providing spiritual and mystical services based on their Islamic knowledge, though in a way that is hardly different from the animist tradition (Glew 2001). The third group is the Salafi, who label themselves “Ahlus Sunna” (Adherents to the Sunnah), and are locally known as ’Yan Izala, in reference to the name of the Salafi association in Nigeria, the Jama’atu Izalatul bid’a wa Iqamatul Sunnah (Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Re-establishment of the Sunna). Izala was introduced in Zinder in the 1980s. The Izala are known for their strict and rigorous practice of Islam, and for their rejection of many aspects of the Sufi traditions, including the veneration of saints and the provision of amulets, all of which they consider to be “bid’a” (unlawful religious innovation). The Izala revolutionized preaching practices and adopted a more politicized discourse that rejects secularism and advocates for the implementation of sharia.

Starting in the 1980s, Zinder entered a period of Islamic revival, partly credited to Izala’s activism. The number of mosques and Islamic schools increased dramatically, and Islamic symbols and signs of religiosity and public piety become pervasive. And throughout there has been a growing tendency toward religious conformism in line with the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Izala activists in Zinder appear to be well-organized and use a number of strategies to spread their message. First, they have created a number of Islamic schools called “Islamiyya,” where in addition to the Qur’an, students learn the Arabic language and other Islamic studies. Second, they have intensified preaching sessions, such as weekly revolving outdoor preaching in different neighborhoods, preaching sessions at special occasions such as baptisms or wedding
ceremonies, and the ‘Wa’azing Kasa,” (National Preaching) an annual rotating gathering of Salafi clerics that brings participants from around West Africa (Sounaye 2009).

But it was particularly in the media that Izala scored some of its major successes. The proliferation of private radio stations provided them with new ways to propagate their message. Until 1996, there was only one local radio station and one TV channel in Zinder, both of which belonged to the government. Although these media broadcasted preaching programs, they systematically censored preaching by Izala, whose criticism of laïcité and insistence on the implementation of sharia were certainly not welcomed by the government. Starting in 1997, however, private radio stations—and now private TV channels—started to proliferate, offering the possibility for all religious groups, including the Izala, to buy airtime and to spread their message. Rich adherents to Izala invested heavily in buying airtime for their favorite scholars to preach live in those private radio and TV outlets. More recently, Izala activists have become increasingly savvy in using modern technology. They have increased their activism on social media in particular, leading the Salafi movement to get its message across and gain significant momentum. Although the Malaman Zaure and ‘Yan Qabalu have also created Islamiyya schools and stepped up their preaching and communication practices, the Izala has clearly outperformed them in those fields. As part of these dynamics, religious practices and discourse and, in fact the entire local culture, have increasingly shifted in line with the more rigorous interpretation of Islam prescribed by Izala doctrine. These dynamics have also pushed public opinions to become more conservative, particularly on such issues as the definition of local norms, behaviors and debates, including on what are acceptable behaviors in society and what is deviant? How should Muslims behave vis-à-vis non-Muslims? Or what is the appropriate attitude vis-à-vis the West.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{24}\) Interview with a researcher, specialist of Islam in Niger, Niamey, June 2016.
In their analyses of the anti-Charlie Hebdo violence in Niger, Idrissa (2015) and Olivier de Sardan (2015) associate the targeting of Christians during the demonstrations with the impact of Izala’s activism, which as Idrissa puts it focused on “demoniz[ing] Christians routinely and rabidly, something that was distinctly absent from the public speech of ‘traditional Islam’ and Tijaniya” (Idrissa 2015, 6). Although the argument about the “Izala effect” on hardening the discourse vis-à-vis Christians is largely valid, some nuances are in order. The position of most “mainstream” Izala scholars on the relationship between Muslims and Christians is not an abject rejection of the latter, but rather an ambivalent position that attempts to strike a balance between two antithetical positions: On the one hand, the rejection of Christianity as a religion, and a call to strengthen the bonds of religious solidarity among Muslims, and on the other hand a plea for treating Christians with respect, kindness, and justice. A controversial aspect in the Salafi preaching when defining the relationship between Muslim and Christian is their emphasis on the Islamic principle of al wala’ wal bara’, which means exclusive loyalty to the Muslim community and disavowal to non-Muslims. Sheikh Ja’far Mahmud Adam (c.1961–2007), an influential Salafi scholar from Northern Nigeria whose preaching in Hausa are still frequently broadcast over local radio and TV channels in Zinder, epitomizes this nuanced approach. Sheikh Adam approaches the Muslim-Christian relationship through the prism of al wala’ wal bara’. He criticizes non-Muslims for forming what he views as an “anti-Islam” coalition that has relentlessly attacked Islam for the sake of destroying it, and he calls on Muslims to be aware of this conspiracy and to strengthen the bonds of solidarity among themselves. Yet, at the same time, he instructs Muslims to be kind and just vis-à-vis non-Muslims. He contends,

A Muslim must strengthen relationship with his fellow Muslims and prioritizes religion-based relationship over kinship, ethnicity, or race-based linkages… This is what the principle of al-wala’ wal bara teaches us… But Islam also commands Muslims to show kindness and to deal justly with non-Muslim neighbors,
colleagues, and fellow citizens. A Muslim must excel is portraying good behavior (Adam 2001).

Although nuanced, the depiction of Muslim-Christian relations through the prism of al-wala wal bara’ is in itself innovative. Contrary to Ahlus Sunnah, Malaman Zaure have rarely addressed the Muslims and Christians relation. And in the context of proliferation of interreligious conflicts, often involving Muslims and Christians, such as in Nigeria and in the Central African Republic, as well as the international context marked by ‘the war on terror,’ this nuanced position is increasingly overlooked in favor of a more extremist anti-Christian position.

**Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Vulnerability as to Islamic Identity**

As a result of the religious effervescence in Zinder over the last quarter century, there is a growing anxiety and vulnerability about Islamic identity and culture locally, but also globally. Given the shifting norms regarding what constitutes acceptable or deviant behavior in society, a number of behaviors—including alcohol consumption, prostitution, and even homosexuality—that used to be somewhat tolerated, though frowned upon, are increasingly rejected and cast as grave social deviances, promoted by the West as part of a broader conspiracy to Westernize Muslim populations and to destroy Islamic identity and culture. During a focus group interview with the members of a Fada in Zinder, a young man elaborated on the fear regarding the “changing behavior,” saying,

There is a culture of social deviance that is developing among youth in Zinder. Alcohol consumption is increasing. Today many Fadas and Palais are drenched in alcohol and young men are giving more and more into drugs and criminality. Adultery has also increased. Before, prostitution was something practiced only by coastal migrants [Gwarawa in Hausa, usually non-Muslims from neighboring countries]. Today there are a lot of young Zinderoise girls who drink, smoke, and commit adultery. Not long ago, they even found two lesbian girls having sex in one of the high schools. Zinder is no longer the deeply Islamic city that it used to be. This is problematic because nothing good comes to a society where alcohol,
adultery, and homosexuality are accepted. Behaviors like these is what pushed Muslims elsewhere to take up weapons and try to establish sharia.\textsuperscript{25}

During the same interview, other young men talked about how Christians are gaining ground in Zinder, mentioning the increase in the number of churches and linking it to a large conspiracy by the West to weaken Islam and to Christianize Muslim communities. This feeling is fueled by a perceived increase in Christian activism in the city. In fact, despite their small congregations, Christian churches are very active in the domain of education. The Catholic Church, for instance, owns two primary schools which are among the best in the city. Christian NGOs intervene in the domain of development as well. Recently, there has been a proliferation of churches and preaching in local radios and television channels. In fact, while Muslims have frequently invited preachers from Nigeria or used recorded preaching from Nigeria to broadcast on local radio and TVs, recently Christians have done the same. In both case these preachers tend to use inflammatory rhetoric, importing the conflictual interreligious debates in Nigeria into the Zinder’s religious sphere. In any case, this seeming increased Christian activism in Zinder despite their tiny constituency—fewer than a thousand believers—has raised suspicion among a certain segment of Zinder’s society and fueled rumors that Christians are actively trying to convert Muslims. There are rumors that Christians have forced Muslim children in their schools to pray in front of a crucifix and of the statute of Mary, accusations that the Christians strongly reject.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Focus group with members of a Fada in Zinder, March 2016.

\textsuperscript{26} A Catholic pastor told me that the Catholic Church in Zinder was established in 1940. However, after more than 70 years of presence and service, he only knows one family in Zinder that converted to Catholicism. According to him, this shows how converting Muslims is not their priority. Yet he acknowledges that other Christian Churches have focused on proselytism more than the Catholic Church.
In 2012, a major controversy arose in Zinder after a rumor spread that a primary school affiliated with the Catholic church had adopted a uniform for its students—who are Muslims in the majority—which included the symbol of a cross. The controversy led to a riot targeting churches in a similar fashion to the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots, albeit at a more limited scale. Behind the increased Christian activism, there are some people who see the invisible hand of the West trying to undermine Muslim identity and religion. Christians are associated with Westerners and often viewed as the non-sword arm of the West in its supposed war against Islam and Muslims. According to a sociologist in Zinder,

There is a confusion of Christians and the West in Zinder. Most people do not realize that there are all sorts of people in the West, Christians and Non-Christians, religious and atheists. The anti-Charlie Hebdo riot was an anger vis-à-vis the West that was directed against Christians. People attacked Christians not because of their religion but because of their assimilation with the West, the real enemy.27

As a consequence of the development of communication technology and the use of electronics, mass media as well as social media have revolutionized religious outreach, and deepened the interconnectedness between local Muslims and other regional and global Muslim communities. Debates and events that occur elsewhere easily find their way into the local arena, shaping local discussions, relationships, and behaviors. Instant images of violence in conflict zones in Mali, Nigeria, Libya, Palestine, or information about the perceived interreligious conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Central African Republic or about the violence against the Rohingya Muslim communities in Burma are all widely shared and discussed via social media, Facebook and WhatsApp. Discussions about these events are often influenced by such theories as the "clash of civilizations.” These ideas are quite entrenched into the local representation and interpretation of the relationship between Islam and the West. During my

---

27 Interview with a sociologist, expert of social and political dynamics in Zinder, Zinder, April, 2016.
fieldwork in Zinder I often heard about the Western conspiracy against Islam. Many people firmly believed such things as that Bill Gates financed Boko Haram, or that campaigns for contraception or the distribution of anti-polio vaccines were a Western conspiracy to reduce Muslim populations. Beliefs about the Western conspiracy against local populations are not new. Previously, France was blamed for conspiring to exploit Niger’s riches and expand its political influence over the country’s leadership. Now the conspiracy is largely tied to religion and the blame is directed mostly toward the United States.

Muslim scholars and activists have made significant efforts to raise awareness about these threats, and ostensibly they have succeeded in getting their message across. One important manifestation of this success is that despite the overwhelming dominance of Muslims in the city, there is still a strong feeling of threat and vulnerability as regards to the effects of Westernization and the growing Christian activism, but also anxiety about the potential effects of Western conspiracy against Islam on the future of Islam and Muslim identity at the global level. This Muslim activism, however, is mired in contradiction. While local Islamic scholars have raised awareness about the supposed threats, beyond preaching and prayer, they have not proposed any ways of addressing these threats or expressing the anxiety that they have generated. On the contrary, they have instead disapproved of any form of confrontational contestation, including even peaceful protest. Although they constantly criticize the governments for supporting—or at least for failing to address the threat of—Westernization, they have not yet advocated protesting the government as “un-Islamic.” I now turn to discussing this ambivalence of Islamic activism in Zinder.

**Assertive Management of the Religious Affairs: Enforcing Pietism, and the Reaction to It**

The majority of Muslim activists in Zinder have adopted what I have called pietism throughout this work, the Islamic political ideology that rejects all forms of confrontational
political contestation. The Malaman Zaure have a lasting reputation for pietist attitude. When the
’Yan Qabalu along with the ’Yan Izala participated in the so-called “Bouje-Bouje” contestations
in the 1990s, it led to the government’s decision to dissolve their respective associations. Thus
recently, most of the Muslim activists and scholars have rejected political contestation as “un-
Islamic.” An Izala activist states unequivocally that,

Islam forbids protesting. Ahlus Sunna have never participated in a protest, except
for the statement that they issued to condemn the publication of prophet
Muhammad’s caricatures by a Danish magazine in 2006. Making a statement is not
the same as protesting on the street. The position of Ahlus Sunnah has always been
clear and straight: No protesting, and no disobedience vis-à-vis authority because
these are not part of the Islamic way.28

Contrary to the traditionalist Malaman Zaure, ’Yan Izala’s pietist stance may come as a
surprise. Salafi group have always been portrayed in the image of troublemakers, not only in
Zinder but in Niger at large, and even beyond. However, while Zinder’s Izala activists have been
vocal in criticizing laïcité, and advocating for the implementation of sharia, they claim that the
have never engaged in political contestation. The same Izala activist quoted above clarifies this
position, saying:

The Ahlus Sunna have acquired the reputation of being radical and critical of the
state. This is only because they have been outspoken in denouncing—though
without violence—certain practices by the state or political actors. This makes
them appear as anti-state, particularly in comparison to Malaman Zaure who are
more compromising because of some benefits that they get from politicians. But as
malamay, we must avoid meddling into politics as we know it. Everything political
is by essence partisan, whereas the guiding principle of malamay must be
constancy in telling the truth no matter what.

28 Interview with a Salafi Imam, Zinder, May 2016. This activist denies that ‘Yan Izala’ took part in the 1990s
contestations.
This strong stance against meddling into politics and engaging in political contestation must be understood within the context of an assertive control over Zinder’s religious field, which is exercised concomitantly by government administration and the sultan.

Elischer (2015) rightly observes that the Nigerien government has adopted a coercive and centralized approach to the management of the religious sphere, which largely consists of empowering the so-called “Nigerien Islam” to the detriment of the supposedly imported Islam, meaning Salafism. Elischer (2015, 578) contends that the Nigerien state has exercised this management “with the help of an organizational entity from Niger’s autocratic period (1974-91), the Association Islamique du Niger (AIN).” While the AIN had played an important role during the autocratic period, its influence waned significantly following the liberalization of the political sphere in the early 1990s when the creation of Islamic associations ended AIN’s monopoly in the Nigerien religious sphere. More importantly, the AIN’s ability to exercise control over the Islamic sphere was greater in Niamey than in the provinces, where by virtue of law, traditional chiefs were charged with controlling and regulating the religious sphere. The law defining the status of traditional chiefs assigns them the guardianship of traditions and customs and puts them in charge of “ensuring the respect of religious tolerance” (République du Niger. ACT 2015).

Today the management of the religious sphere in Niger is exercised through the traditional chiefs, the Islamic Council of Niger, and the Direction of Religious Affairs within the Ministry of the Interior.29

In Zinder in particular, the sultan works hand-in-hand with the governor’s office to address major religious issues that arise in the city. Administratively, there seems to be an unspoken division of labor between the two institutions. The governor’s office manages issues

29 Interview with an official at the Ministry of Interior, Niamey. May 2016.
related to Islamic associations, whereas the sultan manages the imams and the mosques. A notable in the sultan’s palace describes how the sultan intervenes in exercising control over the mosques and the imams,

According to the law, the sultan is the ‘guardian’ of customs and traditions, which includes religion… No one is allowed to open a Friday mosque without the sultan’s permission. In fact, if there is a new mosque, the sultan or his representative must attend the inauguration for the mosque to be “authorized.” Also, the Sultan has the authority to appoint the imams. Every imam that the sultan appoints [or approves] becomes automatically the sultan’s advisors. That imam has to inform the sultan on everything that is happening on a timely basis.\(^3\)

Although these procedures may not be always implemented as designed, there is no doubt that the sultan exercises a great deal of authority over the imams and the *malamay* in general. The sultan has a variety means to enforce such authority. A Salafi scholar described to me how the sultan excluded them from important meetings that are held at his palace because of their criticism of the countries’ political authorities. At some point, the Izala leadership had to negotiate their way back into those meetings. On several occasions the state has used force to crack down on religious activists who refuse to comply with state policies. In 2009, a group of religious leaders in Zinder decided to celebrate the *Eid* prayer on a different day than decreed by the government, leading to a violent repression of their gathering.\(^4\)

This combination of the close control and dialogue exercised by the sultan with repression in the cases of deviation from government policy has pushed most Muslim activists in Zinder to adopt a pietist ideology of non-confrontation vis-à-vis the government. However, In Zinder’s context where the feelings of anxiety and vulnerability about Islam and Muslim identity

\(^3\) Interview with a notable at the sultan’s palace, Zinder, May 2016.

\(^4\) Debates about the religious calendar and the timing of holy days are frequent across the region, often symbolically used by different groups to demarcate themselves from others. The government in Niger, like other in the region, has attempted to regulate this by assigning the authority to declare religious days to specific groups
is high, and criticism vis-à-vis the current political regimes is strong, the Muslim elites’ adherence to pietism has often produced a popular backlash by the believers against their own Muslim leaders. Periodic riots have been the result. Pietists activist have often paid the price of their compliant attitude vis-à-vis the state and the political authorities. Political contestation such as “Bouje Bouje” and anti-Charlie Hebdo riots occurs despite—or even in reaction to—Muslim leaders’ efforts to calm the believers and to prevent contestation. In both cases, there are believers who threatened their own imams accusing them of corruption and calling them “malaman gomnati” (government’s puppet clerics).

Conclusion

The anti-Charlie Hebdo riot in Zinder can only be understood in the broader social and political context of the city. The city of Zinder has the reputation of being a rebellious city, yet it has experienced only a limited number of episodes of political contestation. This is due to the structural context, which is characterized, on the one hand, by the state’s relatively strong capacity to exercise public authority through a fairly effective symbiotic mode of governance that brings together government administrative institution and Zinder’s strong customary institutions. This syncretic system of governance has proven effective in projecting authority and calming down tensions when they arise, thus limiting the opportunity for political contestation. On the other hand, this strong state presence contrasts with the weak mobilizational capacity of civil society organizations, and their inability to channel local grievances through institutionalized mechanisms of political contestation. As a consequence of both the limited opportunity for political contestation and the weakness of the mobilizing structures, local populations have often resorted to spontaneous and un-organized riots to express grievances.

The religious dynamics in Zinder have been influenced by this structural context in very significant ways. Over the last quarter century, the city of Zinder has experienced a sort of
Islamic revival, largely due to increased activism by Salafi scholars who have appropriated new technologies of communication, including radio broadcasts, TV channels, and social media to spread the message quite effectively. This Islamic revival has translated, most notably, into a more rigorous practice of Islam, and a shift in public opinions and debates more in line with the Salafi doctrine. Muslim activists have raised awareness over the threats that increased Westernization, Christian activism, and the perceived hostility of the West vis-à-vis Islam together pose to Islam and to Muslim identity and culture both locally and globally.

Yet despite endorsing and promoting these rather controversial views, and certainly due to the strong control that government institutions and the Sultan of Zinder exercise over the religious sphere, Muslim activists in Zinder have expressed strong adherence to pietism, the Islamic political ideology that advocates for obedience vis-à-vis political authorities, and rejects confrontational political contestation. While through their discourse, Muslim activists have generated a feeling of anxiety, uncertainty, and vulnerability among believers, they have not suggested ways for expressing these grievances other than preaching and prayer. On the contrary they have dismissed all forms of confrontational political contestation as “un-Islamic.” This internal contradiction has brought believers to often harshly criticize their religious authorities and to call them “puppets of the government.” In a few occasions, Muslim believers have taken it upon themselves to express grievances in a spontaneous and unorganized way, as in the case of the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots.

To recap this argument in the language that I used in my theoretical argument: Zinder’s structural context is what I call compliant, that is, first, the state’s ability to project authority is fairly strong, limiting the political opportunity for insurrectional contestation; second, social groups, whether in the form of civil society or based on ethnic and tribal loyalties, are weak and
incapable of mobilizing for political contestation; and third, people’s grievances are strong but un-channeled. I have argued that this context provides a favorable terrain for the dominance of the pietist Islamic ideology. Zinder’s structural context is not favorable for jihadist insurgency given the state’s ability to project authority and deterrence, and in light of the lack resources that potential jihadist entrepreneurs could marshal locally to invest in insurgency. In fact, it is quite striking that despite the fact that Zinder is located at the confluence of the zone of influence of multiple jihadist groups—Boko Haram in the region of Lake Chad, ISIS in Libya, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates in the Sahara—no active cells of jihadists have ever emerged. This fact is all the more striking given that the jihadist ideology is present and widespread in Zinder. Boko Haram’s discourse are downloaded and readily shared via Bluetooth and social media. Indeed, police officers used to storm public places in the city to check people’s cellphones and arrest those that were found with Boko Haram preaching on their phones. Debates about Boko Haram occur regularly during social gatherings in the Fadas and Palais. In my fieldwork I personally witnessed several times such debates in which Boko Haram sympathizers and opponents confronted their ideas. Yet, at least so far, Zinder has proven resilient to the jihadist enterprise. I attribute this resilience to the state’s ability to mobilize both government institutions and customary institutions in exercising public authority and control. In fact, When the Boko Haram crisis intensified in Nigeria, the government mobilized traditional chiefs to exercise control in the neighborhoods, to denounce suspicious people or strangers to the police.
CHAPTER 7
JIHADIST INSURGENCY: MUJAO AND THE OCCUPATION OF GAO

The movie “Timbuktu” by Abderrahmane Sissako describes life under jihadist rule in the so-called “City of 333 Saints.” Through a striking balance of fiction and reality, Sissako’s movie captures the vicissitude of life conditions in Timbuktu during the jihadist takeover. A New York Times reviewer summarizes the scenes as follow:

In the course of the film, a couple accused of adultery are stoned to death. Members of the Islamic Police storm a house where music is being played, and one of the musicians (a woman, of course) is publicly whipped for the crime. When a jihadist’s offer of marriage is refused, he vows to take his would-be bride by force. When he does, the commanders inform the local imam that their interpretation of Muslim law is, by definition, the correct one. Might makes right, and the righteousness of the strong is an excuse for all kinds of indulgence (Scott 2015).

During the last decade, these scenes have become familiar to millions of people across the Sahel who live in the many places that have fallen under jihadist occupation. Two major movements that emerged in the early 2000s are responsible for the vast majority of jihadist violence in the Sahel: Boko Haram in the areas around the Lake Chad Basin and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates in the Sahelo-Saharan region. All countries of the Francophone Sahel, with the exception of Senegal, have suffered jihadist attacks, ranging from sporadic assaults on military barracks, to kidnapping and abduction of civilians, suicide bombings in marketplaces, mosques, and churches, and invasion of territory. The scope and impact of these attacks, however, is not the same across the Sahel. Mali, in particular, has suffered more from the rise of these groups than have the other countries of the Francophone Sahel. Between 2012 and 2013, jihadist groups temporarily conquered large swathes of territory in northern Mali, including the regions of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. For nine months, these jihadist groups implemented a harsh interpretation of the sharia rule, the result of which led to the types of violence so vividly depicted in Sissako’s film.
In this chapter I examine the specific case of the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l’Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest, MUJAO in French), which occupied Gao from April 2012 to January 2013. My account attempts to offer an explanation for how Mali, which was known for the peaceful character of its religious beliefs and practices, ended up developing such radical jihadi movements. In so doing, I address a number of questions about this case as they relate to the theoretical framework I have proposed in this dissertation: What role did ideology play in the emergence of MUJAO? Why did this major jihadist insurgency emerge in the largely rural and peripheral Gao region of eastern Mali, far from the capital city? What explains MUJAO’s success in mobilizing large numbers of followers from diverse ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds?

I argue that jihadist insurgency in Gao emerged out of an interplay between jihadist ideology, which had made significant inroads in northern Mali, and the context of social and political disorder in northern Mali. Specifically, I show how a number of elites who had adopted the ideology of jihad during the mid-2000s exploited the insurrectional context of 2011-12 to create MUJAO and launch the jihad. The vacuum of state authority in northern Mali opened the door for a variety of movements and actors motivated by diverse ideologies and interests to vie for political influence and control over trafficking routes. Rebellions against the Malian state and military confrontation between multiple armed groups became standardized forms of contestation and activism in this period. This context prompted and provided an opportunity for certain activists who had adopted the jihadist ideology during the previous decade to act on their ideology, using it as a legitimizing and mobilizing discourse to attack the state of Mali as well as other armed groups. As I shall show, the use of the jihadist ideology was to prove strategically rewarding; it provided fighters with a symbolically greater and nobler cause for which to fight,
allowed for the creation of a larger coalition that bridged tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages, and it opened the door for foreign jihadists to come in support of their group. The strategic use of ideology, however, should not obscure its motivational aspects. While the religious dimension was clearly of less interest to some of the MUJAO jihadists, many of them took religion seriously and acted on the belief that jihad is an Islamic duty.

Importantly, the motivations of jihadist entrepreneurs to initiate an insurgency may not be the same as the rank-and-file jihadists who join it. MUJAO has been successful in mobilizing large number of fighters from different social and economic backgrounds, and beyond the traditional ethnic and tribal cleavages that have often characterized most insurgencies, often for different reasons. It has mobilized groups like the pastoralist Peul who have been at the margins of the state, as well as adherents of certain theological tendencies such as the Tabligh Jama’at and the Wahariji in Gao. This diversity of backgrounds has frustrated attempts to draw a profile of a “typical Jihadist.” As we shall see, jihadist recruits have different motivations for adhering to such movements; these may be religious, situational, or strategic. And these different motivations are not mutually exclusive, but rather may be complementary.

Jihadist Insurgency in Gao: The Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

The wave of jihadist insurgency in the Sahel is a recent phenomenon that started in the early 2000s, following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent so-called “Global War on Terror.” Widespread media coverage of these events generated passionate debates among Muslims throughout the world, and helped disseminate and popularize jihadist discourse. This was equally true of the Sahel, where Muslim scholars hotly debated the jihadist enterprise, and the conditions under which it might be considered licit. Some scholars, particularly within Salafi circles, argued in favor of jihad, and went so far as to organize public prayers in support of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and Iraq. These debates contributed to the heightening of Muslims’ consciousness
More importantly, jihadist discourse offered a new language and framework to some Muslim activists to express local grievances vis-à-vis political authorities. We thus quickly saw such grievances as the dissatisfaction with local governance and sharia implementation in northern Nigeria, or government repression of Muslim activists in Mauritania, emerge as motives and justifications for a handful of militants to engage in jihad locally in those contexts. Two jihadist movements appeared in the Sahel region almost simultaneously in this period, though quite independently of each other: The so-called Nigerian Taliban in northern Nigeria, and the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafist pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC in French) in northern Mali.¹ These two movements eventually evolved to become, respectively, Jama’atu Ahlus Sunna lil da’awati wal jihad—best known as Boko Haram—and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Boko Haram and AQIM interacted with one another throughout their development, and AQIM later inspired or instigated the creation of other jihadist movements, including MUJOA. The trajectory of MUJOA can be summarized in discussing five phases of its evolution.

¹ The GSPC was an Algerian militant movement that was created in 1991, following the Islamists’ electoral victory in the first democratic elections in Algeria and a military coup that denied them power. A number of Islamic forces that supported the Islamist party came together to create a unified insurgent movement called the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA). The GIA declared jihad against the military junta leading to a long and deadly civil war. Although by the end of the 1990s most of the GIA insurgents had laid down their weapons, one faction, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafist pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC in French), decided to pursue the struggle in Algeria. However, increased military pressure pushed many militants to settle in the desert areas of southern Algeria near the border with Mali and Niger. Progressively, the so-called Saharan Emirate expanded its activities to the neighboring countries. In 2003, the GSPC kidnapped 32 Europeans in southern Algeria and escaped with them in the mountainous areas of Northern Mali where they stayed until the liberation of the hostages in exchange for ransoms. This event inaugurated the spillover of the Algerian jihadist violence into the Sahel-Saharan region.
The first period, between 2003 and 2004, corresponds to the early implantation of the jihadist movement in northern Mali. Fleeing military pressures in southern Algeria, GSPC jihadists established camps in northern Mali in this period. The Algerian jihadists initially transformed northern Mali into a safe refuge that protected them from the Algerian military, as well as a rear base from where they could expand their operations throughout the region. However, in 2004, dozens of GSPC militants, including their leader, Amari Saifi known as Abderrazak el Para (b. 1956) were arrested in Chad and transferred to Algeria, where they received prison sentences. Yet the movement was far from being totally eliminated. Surviving militants re-emerge only a few months later, with a new strategy that aimed for their long-term establishment and expansion in the region.

In the second phase, between 2004 and 2009, the GSPC established training camps and actively worked to spread the jihadist ideology throughout northern Mali and to recruit followers among the local population. Beginning in 2004, surviving GSPC militants used the strategy of attempting to embed themselves within the local communities. They used charity, trade, and proselytizing to seduce local populations, spread their ideology, and recruit followers (Bøås 2015; Abu al-Ma’ali 2014). Shared cultural and linguistic affinities with some local Arab communities facilitated early contacts.\(^2\) The jihadists encouraged their members to marry local women and to treat communities with respect. They notably banned divorce—except in exceptional cases—emphasizing the importance of treating women with respect. This attitude helped them to mark a sharp moral and ethical contrast with local men, whose propensity to divorce is high (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014). In addition, the Algerian jihadists also engaged in intense

\(^2\) These includes some Berabiche and Kunta goups in northern Timbuktu and Kidal. Arab communities in northern Mali constitute relatively small minorities and live in the region along with other Berber and black communities.
proselytizing missions throughout villages and nomadic camps in the Malian Sahara, promoting the idea of jihad by tapping on the established popularity of Usama Ben Laden among the local communities. The GSPC jihadists were also successful in integrating the local trade economy and establishing partnerships with interest groups, including traffickers and rebels. They were particularly successful in coopting powerful members of the Tuareg aristocratic group of the Ifoghas, including by using the power of symbolism such as referring to the Ifoghas as “al-Ansar” (the helpers) and the Algerian jihadists “al-Muhajereen” (the migrants) in reference to the history of the early Muslim society when Muslims in Medina welcomed the migrants from Mecca (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014).

The GSPC attracted recruits not only from northern Mali, but also from different countries in the region. The group notably attracted young Mauritanians who had fled government repression of religious circles. During this period, there are indications that some members of the Nigerian Taliban might also have joined the GSPC training camps in Northern Mali (Abdul Hamid 2009). In 2007, the GSPC pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and shifted its strategy from an Algerian insurgency to a jihad movement that aimed to expand jihad across the Sahelo-Saharan region.

The third phase was inaugurated with the fragmentation of AQIM and the creation of MUJAO in 2011. As the Algerian Jihadists grew in number and their social bases diversified, internal divisions started to emerge. These divisions were related to a struggle for leadership and the identity of the group, as well as some minor disagreements over strategy and ideology. First,

---

3 In 2003, following Ould Taya’s repression campaign against Islamic activists in Mauritania, dozens of young Mauritanians fled their country. Many of them ended up joining the GSPC jihadists in the Sahara.

4 A letter from a former leader of the branch of AQIM that operates in the Sahara (Imarat as-Sahara), Abdul Hamid Abu Zayd to AQIM’s leader Abu Mus'ab, demonstrates that the GSPC had trained members of Boko Haram in their camps. The letter was found in Ben Laden’s archive.
the Algerians themselves had disagreements over the leadership of the group. Personal rivalry between two major leaders—Mokhtar Bel-Mokhtar (b. 1972) and Abdul Hamid Abu Zayd (1965-2013)—over the leadership of the Saharan Emirate became increasingly pronounced, eventually leading to the firing of Bel-Mokhtar from his position as the leader of one of AQIM’s military unit called “Katiba al-Mulathamine” (Masked Men Battalion). At the same time, another rivalry based on ethnicity and nationality emerged between Algerians and Moorish combatants from Mali, Mauritania, and Western Sahara. The Moors accused the Algerians of monopolizing the political and military leadership of the Katibas (battalions) and the Sirriyas (military units), leaving other members with only secondary positions. Many Mauritanians, for instance, held positions as religious and spiritual guides (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014). Furthermore, in the context of the significant regional commerce of drugs across the Sahara to serve European markets, the debate over the legality of drug trafficking in Islam, and whether drug income could be used to fund jihad may have been another source of disagreement. Some AQIM leaders viewed drug trafficking as unlawful in Islam, while other recruits who were already involved in the network of illicit trafficking sought to pursue their business and use the funds to finance jihad.\(^5\) As a result of these divisions and cleavages within AQIM, some groups decided to leave and create their own organizations. Bel-Mokhtar created a new group which he called Al-“Muwaqqi’un bid dam” (Those Who Sign in Blood) while part of the so-called “narco-jihadists” splintered to create MUJAO in late 2011. The two later merged together to create Al-Murabitun in 2013 (Abu al-Ma’al 2014, 135-6).

The insurgency and occupation of Gao in 2012 – 2013 marks the fourth phase in MUJAO’s trajectory. The 2010-11 Libyan civil war and the fall of Qaddafi’s regime (1969 –

\(^5\) Interview with former MUJAO recruit, Gao, July 2015.
2011) triggered new dynamics that facilitated the outbreak of full-pledged jihadist insurgencies in the Sahelian regions. The disbursement of weapons from the Libyan stockpiles as well as the return of Tuareg fighters who had served in Qaddafi’s army unsettled power dynamics in northern Mali, creating the conditions for a new insurgency. Different armed groups, including separatists and jihadists, coalesced together and waged war on the Malian state. They quickly defeated the Malian army and occupied the regions of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu. In Gao, MUJAO, and the separatist and Tuareg-dominated National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National pour Libération de l’Azawad, MNLA in French) took control over the city in late March 2012. But rivalry between the two groups quickly emerged, leading to the expulsion of the MNLA combatants from the city. Between June 2012 and January 2013, the jihadist group thus extended its control over the region of Gao, implementing a harsh interpretation of sharia’ rule, including whipping unveiled women, chopping off the hands of thieves, and stoning to death for certain crimes. In January 2013, comforted in their position of power in the face of a collapsing state and an indecisive international community, the jihadists decided to further expand their occupation towards the capital city Bamako. The move precipitated an international military intervention led by France, followed by the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force. The jihadists were subsequently ousted from the major cities of northern Mali, although they continued to pursue their struggle with guerrilla tactics, bombs, and attacks on both military and civilian targets.

The fifth phase, from 2015 to the present, corresponds to the period of counterterrorism and guerilla warfare. Following the French-led military intervention, MUJAO was disbanded and many of its members were either killed or arrested. Some of those who escaped the intervention later joined other jihadist movements. They have thus re-organized themselves and adopted a
guerilla strategy, well-adapted for pursuing the struggle in rural and border areas. The dynamics of global jihad, particularly the division between ISIS and Al-Qaeda, echoed in northern Mali and reshaped the local jihadist dynamics. Local jihadist groups split into pro-Al-Qaeda groups, represented by the coalition Jama’atu Nusratul Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) led by Iyad ag Ghaly, and pro-ISIS movements, notably, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These two movements have absorbed most the jihadists from MUJAO.

The MUJAO jihadist insurgency generated reactions both locally, at the community level, and internationally. At the local level, jihadist insurgency occurred against the backdrop of longstanding inter-communal tensions over control of natural resources and political leadership. Some communities enrolled in jihadist movements for strategic reasons, namely to protect themselves against rival communities. Patterns of recruitment often followed these preexisting inter-communal rivalries in the sense that when a community declares allegiance to a particular jihadist group, rival communities are likely to join other armed movements or create self-protection militia and vigilante groups in response (Yahaya Ibrahim and Zapata 2018). As result, the rise of jihadist insurgency has led to a proliferation of varied armed groups and self-protection militias, further complicating and exacerbating the conflicts. Internationally, the rise of jihadist movements drew the world’s attention to the presumed potential danger that the Sahel poses to international stability.

The Challenge of Governing the Sahel’s Periphery: The Case of Gao

Jihadist insurgency in the Sahel is a rural phenomenon. Most jihadist movements have emerged in rural and peripheral areas. AQIM and its affiliates established their bases first in the Tigharghar Mountains near the border between Algeria, Mali, and Niger, before they expanded their presence throughout the desert areas in northern Mali. MUJAO, al-Murabitun, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansarul Muslimin all emerged in rural and peripheral
areas in northern Mali and near the border between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Starting in 2015, the Katiba Macina also arose in rural areas of the inner Niger delta in central Mali. Jihadist movements that emerged in urban cities eventually had to move to rural areas in order to sustain their insurgency. In fact, while Boko Haram started as an urban insurgency in the city of Maiduguri, it was only after the group moved to rural areas in the Sambiza forest, the Mandara Mountains, and the Lake Chad Basin that the insurgency gained momentum. Other jihadist movements that have attempted to pursue an insurgency in the urban areas have been easily overcome by government forces. This is the case of Ansarullah al-Murabitun fi Bilad Shinguit, which attempted to wage an insurgency in Nouakchott, but was easily overcome by the Mauritanian forces in the course of a year. Today almost all jihadist movements in the Sahel are based in rural areas, where they often operate quite successfully. They may occasionally be able to conduct terrorist attacks in urban cities but then only by maintaining their bases in rural and peripheral areas.

Not all of the Sahel’s rural periphery—which would describe the vast majority of the region—is prone to violence. In fact, the majority is not. However, after decades of relative stability, a number of structural factors have increasingly transformed the Sahelian rural periphery into conflict-laden zones. First, the increasing difficulties of states to establish effective administration and control over these areas, resulting in a vacuum of authority. Second, the need for local communities to increasingly rely upon themselves for protection, which has often resulted in inter-communal tensions along ethnic, racial, and factional lines. And third, rapid demographic growth of both human and animal populations, which has increased pressure on natural resources and tensions between farmers and herders. While these structural factors characterized most places in the Sahel’s rural periphery, they are even more exacerbated in areas
near the Saharan zones, where semi-nomadic and semi-sedentary communities cohabit together. During the last quarter century, other precipitating factors in Gao and the surrounding regions, including the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, decentralization reforms, and the intensification of illicit trafficking, escalated the effects of the structural factors and resulted in the breakdown of social and political order as well as the outbreak of a multi-dimensional conflict. The jihadists of MUJAO exploited these dynamics in the context of Gao to launch their insurgency. In this section, I examine both the structural and precipitating dynamics in the context of Gao region.

**Gao: The Characteristics of a Sahelian Peripheral Region**

Gao is a typical Sahelian town. It is located on the desert’s edge, near the areas where the Niger River takes an arc-shape southward turn after reaching its northern tipping point (also called the Niger Bend or la Boucle du Niger in French). The climate in the region varies from arid zones north of the river, where annual rainfall rarely goes beyond 250 mm, to a semi-arid zone in the south, which receives an average of 750 mm of rain per year (Hunwick 1999). Vegetation in this area is made up principally of “short spreading bushes, suitable for goats and camel” herding (Hunwick 1999). These physical characteristics shape the economic activities in the region, which include agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing. Gao was initially a village on the river occupied by fishermen, until increasing drought and desiccation of the Sahara pushed nomadic populations to migrate southward and establish semi-permanent settlements near the Niger River bend. The nomads take their livestock near the river during the dry season when pasture and water are scarce is the Sahara. The struggle to control these dwindling natural resources has been one of the major sources of conflict in the area.

---

6 Gao has some of the characteristics of a secondary city. It is a small urban center, administrative capital of the region of Gao. However, given its remoteness from the capital city Bamako, and its location in the peripheral and desert areas, the structures of the local context—notably the state’s capacity to project authority, pattern of social mobilization, and grievances—are closer to the context of rural areas than secondary cities.
There are many ethnic groups in the Gao region, including Songhay (55% of the population), Tuareg (27%), Moors and Arabs (5.3%), Bambara (2.8) and Peul (2%) (République du Mali. INS 2011, 448). Shared language, cultural values, and a loose sense of common ancestry primarily distinguish ethnic groups from one another, but each one of these ethnic groups is itself divided into multiple sub-groups, clans or factions. There is no central authority structure that rules over any of these ethnic groups. In general, each subgroup has a leader whose authority is limited to members of his clan. None of the clan leaders can claim the leadership of his entire ethnic group, let alone any leadership of all the ethnic groups combined. In addition, multiple other cleavages related to social hierarchies, race, and lifestyle divide the communities. A system of social hierarchy divides each of these communities roughly into three lineage groups: nobles, non-nobles but free people, and people of slave status. Racially, the communities are divided into light skinned communities, notably the majority of Tuareg and Arabs, and darker skinned Songhay and Peul. Finally, livelihood and economic activity distinguishes sedentary and nomadic communities. For centuries, periodic tensions over political leadership and control of territory and natural resources have politicized these social cleavages and led to conflict between communities. The social status cleavage appears to be historically the most contentious. Though inter-ethnic conflicts occur, they are quite rare in comparison to intra-ethnic struggles opposing aristocratic lineages to vassal groups who attempt to challenge the

---

7 The Moors or Arabs are divided into tribes (qabila in Arabic). Each tribe has a “Sheikh al-Qabila” (or the tribe’s chief). The Tuareg communities are divided into multiple clans or fractions, each one headed by a “chef de fraction.” The Songhay community is divided into two major groups: the Armas and the Songhoi. In Gao, the two are represented by their respective traditional chiefs, the Gao Alkaydo and the Songhoi customary chief.

8 These hierarchies are roughly identical across groups. The clans of Ifoghas and Iwillemmedan, the Kunta, the Ardo, and the Maiga, respectively, represent the aristocracy within the Tuareg, the Arabs, the Peul and the Songhay. In the second position comes the lineages of vassals or tributaries who are considered free but non-noble. Roughly, these correspond to the Tuareg Imghad, the Arab Lamhar, the Peul Jallube, and Sorko and Kourtey among the Songhay. At the bottom of the scale come the lineages of craftsman and the slaves.
hierarchy. In sum, these local inter-communal struggles are at the core of the conflicts that have struck the region historically. At different times, communities use different strategies, different discourses, and exploit different means to essentially invest themselves in these local struggles. Most often, contemporary conflicts in the region are only new iterations of the old ones, and in cases where new conflicts emerge they are quickly captured within and shaped by these same historical cleavages.

Both historical and archeological evidence show that Gao is one of the oldest cities in the Sahel. Established around the 7th century, Gao evolved to become a cosmopolitan market, a passage-point for the trans-Saharan caravans, and a major urban center (Insoll 1997; Lange 1991 and 1994; Hunwick 1994, 1999). Gao is located in an area of historical political turmoil, characterized by the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms. Between the 9th and the 19th century, the region fell successively under the control of the Mali Empire (1235 - 1464), the Songhay Empire (1464 - 1591), the rule of Moroccan Pachas and their successors (1591 - 1741), and the reign of the Iwillemmedan (1741 - 1896). Brought under French colonial control in 1904, Gao was ruled as part of French Soudan and became a region of the Mali Republic upon independence in 1960. Since then, a number of secessionist movements led by Tuareg have demanded the independence—or autonomy—of the Azawad region, of which Gao represent an important center.

Governing nomadic populations has always posed a challenge for established states everywhere in the world (Kasaba 2011; De Bruijn and Van Djik 1995). In the Gao region, establishing a governance system that manages both nomadic and sedentary populations has raised challenges to all the states that have controlled the region at different times in history. Pre-colonial states adopted a decentralized system of governance where local chiefs essentially
governed their communities and paid tributes to the central state. During colonization, administering the Saharan territories of the Sahel posed an acute challenge. French colonial authorities faced a dilemma: On the one hand, given the semi-nomadic nature of the society, the colonial authorities’ ambition to establish formal state institutions and directly rule the local communities appeared unrealistic. On the other hand, the option of “indirect rule”—which consist of governing through traditional chiefs—was more viable, but ran the risk of further legitimizing the system of social hierarchy and slavery on which the chieftaincy relied. The French thus adopted a dual administrative system, with French officials as head of administrative units and traditional chiefs as “auxiliaries” of the administration, helping to levy taxes and exercising a proximity control over local populations on behalf of the colonial authorities. But in the end, colonial authorities empowered traditional chieftaincy at the expense of modernization (Fremeaux 1993, 26).

After independence, Modibo Keita’s regime (1960 – 1968) faced the same dilemma, although in the end his strong adherence to socialism meant that this government embraced the option of modernization at the expense of chieftaincy. In fact, Keita’s regime officially abolished traditional chieftaincy, slavery and all forms of social hierarchy, at least formally in the early 1960 (Lecocq 2010). Throughout the decades of independence, however, the impact of formal state authority in Gao has been minimal. The Malian state has certainly been able to deploy an official administration and bureaucracy in Gao, notably via the regional decentralized offices of the major ministries and state institutions in the city of Gao. However, these regional and local

---

9 The French historian of colonialism, Jacques Frémeaux captures this struggle by the colonial administration, nicely “Commanding, or even administering [these territory] becomes less important. Even change seemed so undesirable that we sought above all to maintain the social hierarchies. Our role above all was a role of arbitration, of influence” (1993, 26).
administrations function quite ineffectively, often due to shortage of human and financial resources. While ineffectiveness of state administration is a general problem in Mali, Gao and the other remote regions of the north, far from the capital and with difficult communications and transportation infrastructures, have historically suffered the most. Given insecurity, remoteness, and difficult climates, public officials are often not incentivized to work in those regions, and indeed often view their transfer to those regions as an act of punishment. Many accept those positions only because they offer a higher opportunity for corruption and extraction of resources from the local population with impunity. The northern regions of Mali are known to be the “Eldorado of officials” (Thiam 2017, 15).

It is important to note, however, that the ineffectiveness of the Malian state did not translate into an “ungoverned space, as many observers have suggested (Raleigh and Dowd 2013). Given the weakness of the state institutions, customary institutions have gained more influence as individuals have tended to rely on them to solve their problems. A survey by Afrobarometer finds that Malians are “more likely to take their problems to local traditional or religious leaders than to public officials” (Bratton, Coulibaly, and Machado 2000). This strong loyalty and reliance on community as opposed to the state has generated competition between multiple local actors and exacerbated inter-communal tensions over political leadership and control of natural resources, creating a generalized context of insecurity. In the context of insecurity, population prefer to rather entrust their security and protection of their business to their closest community: family, clan, and ethnic groups. As this cycle reinforces itself, each community has tended to establish its own self-defense militia and vigilante group to protect their own.
Decentralization, Rebellion, and Smuggling: The Making of an Insurrectional Context in Gao

The decreasing influence and authority of traditional chiefs in local affairs created a power vacuum that new actors—including local politicians, rebel leaders, smugglers, and more recently jihadists—have struggled to occupy. In recent years, three factors have escalated this struggle: the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, the decentralization reforms, and the intensification of illicit trafficking.

First, the 1990s rebellion triggered a number of dynamics that reshaped social and political dynamics in northern Mali. The rebellion produced an unprecedented influx of weapons into the region. Previously, inter-communal violence was small in scale as belligerents fought primarily with sticks and machetes. Following the 1990s rebellion, however, firearms widely replaced cold weapons, rendering conflict more lethal and deadlier. The rebellion also exacerbated inter-communal tensions. It increased tensions between communal militias that fought on opposing sides during conflicts. The first violence between the Ifoghas and the Imghad Tuareg groups, for example, occurred in 1991 as a result of disagreement between leaders of the rebellion over the signing of a peace agreement to end the rebellion with the Malian state.

Furthermore, the rebellion prompted the emergence of a new elite, “the rebel leaders,” who became important actors at the local level. Thus, Iyad ag Ghaly, who was to become a central actor in the era of jihadism, first came to prominence because of his leading role in the 1990s rebellion. Finally, the Malian government’s handling of the rebellion weakened the Malian army, and undermined in particular its ability to exercise control over northern regions. The regime of President Alpha Omar Konaré adopted a largely pacifist position vis-à-vis the rebellion, repeatedly describing the rebels as legitimate forces whose grievances need to be taken into account in the framework of a democratizing Mali. Konaré rejected the use of repression as
characteristic of non-democratic regimes, and his government signed a peace agreement with the rebels, which consisted essentially of enrolling the demobilized rebels in the administration as well as in the Malian defense and security forces. Those who preferred to engage in business were offered customs and tax exemptions. Many Tuareg and Arab traders took advantages of these privileges to boost their business.

Konaré’s defense policy also contributed to the weakening of the Malian army. Indeed, he went as far as to question the importance for Mali and the other African states to have a national army. He reportedly said that there was no need for defense forces in a democratic and globalized world; what is needed instead is security forces. Explaining the weakness of the Malian army, a high-ranking officer in the Malian army points to policies going back to Konaré’s era:

President Konaré came to power in 1992 after a military coup deposed Traoré. Tensions within the army was still high and Konaré feared that some military could attempt a coup. He tried to control the army. And, perhaps unintentionally, he also weakened it. He politicized the army, distributing grades and administrative nomination based on loyalty, not merit. He cut the military budget to the extent that the military was unable to acquire new equipment or to maintain existing ones, including crucial materials needed for training. The budget cuts drastically reduced the operational capacity of the army. After Konaré, Amadou Toumani Touré pursued, and even exacerbated, Konaré’s politicization of the army. Though contrary to Alpha, ATT invested in the army. He created the PSPDN project which contributed to the creation of new military barracks and provided the army with some new equipment.10

The recruitment of former rebels into the army, the concessions to the rebel groups as well as government’s defense policy all collectively disorganized the army and created a vicious circle trap for the Malian state. On the one hand, the withdrawal of the army from the north and the integration of formal rebels in the security forces undermined its structure and ability to

---

10 Interview with an officer in the Malian Army, November 2017.
conduct operations, while the political and economic gains made by former rebels thanks to these policies incentivized a new generation of rebels to raise up and claim similar benefits. A former administrative official in the Malian government notes that “since the signing of the 1995 agreement between the Malian government and the rebel groups, for many young Tuareg, rebellion has become a shortcut for upward social mobility.” In order to counter the resurgence of rebellion in northern Mali, the government opted for a divide and rule approach that consisted of coopting and arming rival factions to fighting against the rebellious ones. This policy in turn resulted in the flow of patronage to local actors. Taken together these policies resulted in weakening the Malian army, which became increasingly incapable of securing the northern territories, while at the same government patronage and divide and rule policy has brought to prominence new local patrons who have challenged the authority of the traditional aristocracy.

Second, following the democratic transition and in response to the Tuareg rebels’ demands for autonomy, the Malian government engaged in an extensive process of decentralization, with the strong encouragement and support of Western donors. The Malian territory was eventually divided into 703 districts, each one to be governed by a local council elected via universal suffrage. The decentralization reform brought a major change in the administration of local affairs, which until then had been controlled by the central government in de facto collaboration with traditional chiefs. After its implementation, chieftaincy appeared on the losing side, as the reforms did not establish a clear institutional mechanism to protect and regulate their role in the new system.

In response, many traditional chiefs and members of their family decided to engage in electoral politics, seeking to maintain and reinforce their power by associating democratic legitimacy to their traditional authority. Some of them joined existing political parties while other run for elective seats as independent candidates. Most notable cases are the leaders of the two Tuareg confederation in northern Mali, the Amenokal of the Ifoghas Mohamed ag Intalla and the Amenokal of the Iwillemmeden Bajan ag Hamatou who are both elected parliamentarians, one on behalf of the ruling party, the “Rassemblement pour le Mali,” and the other as an independent. This engagement in partisan electoral politics compromises the legitimacy of traditional chiefs and exposes them and the institution of chieftaincy to partisan criticism. Furthermore, the reform offered the opportunity for a new political elite that had been in the margins to compete with the traditional chiefs for electoral seats. Many of these new local politicians, who for the most part originated from lower social stratus in the local social hierarchy, won the elections over their chiefly competitors. Several cases like this have resulted in violence. District elections thus changed the landscape of political authority and exacerbated tensions between rival ethnic and tribal groups.\(^{12}\) The politicization of chieftaincy severely undermined its legitimacy, and reinforced allegiance to communities.

A related third factor that has intensified the struggle for power in Gao is that the stake of district elections has become even higher due to the opportunity that local elected positions provide to control trafficking routes. Northern Mali has been for centuries an area of intense

\(^{12}\) In one telling example, Ibrahim ag Bahanga’s rebellion started first in 1999 when he requested that the Malian government create a new district within the region of Kidal and relocate his town into that new district. In order to make the claim, ag Bahanga kidnapped members of the election committee. When the government refused his request, he escalated the demand by attacking a military patrol, killing one officer and taken four hostages. The episode ended with the government accepting to create the district in exchange for the release of the hostages. Bahanga would repeatedly use this same tactics to make claims via-a-vis the Malian state.
trafficking (Scheele 2012). The long history of trans-Saharan caravans show that the Saharan desert has never been a barrier, but a space through which businesses from the Mediterranean coasts were transported to sub-Saharan Africa. This trade has continued in the contemporary era in the form of cross-border smuggling of a variety of goods, both legal merchandises—such as food, fuels, and clothes—and illicit products such as cigarettes, weapons, and counterfeit medicine. It has offered employment opportunities in an area where such opportunities were drastically lacking. Over the last decade, smuggling business has become even more lucrative due to the introduction of narcotic products. Since the mid-2000s, smugglers have used the same trafficking routes to transport drugs—including cocaine, heroin, and cannabis—via the Saharan desert to the Mediterranean coast, and from there to Europe. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that drug smuggling through West Africa to Europe reached a peak in 2008. In that year alone an estimated 47 tons of cocaine transited to Europe via West Africa. A significant part of this cocaine was transported via land through the Saharan desert (UNODC 2013). In northern Mali, drug dealers took advantage of the vacuum of state authority to expend their business. The introduction of drugs in the smuggling business raised the potential profits, and hence the stakes of trafficking routes and passage points. Districts such as Tarkint in the region of Gao is known as an important passage point of drug and cigarette cargos. Winning elections in those districts has become crucial for the opportunity to control passages points. Drug dealers subcontract the transportation of drug cargos to ethnic militias, further exacerbating inter-communal conflict. The involvement of these ethnic militia in the drug business provide them

13 In 2009, an airplane carrying an estimated 11 tons of cocaine landed in northern Mali. The drug was unloaded and shipped in trucks (See Freeman 2013).

14 Interviews in Gao, with a formal rebel leader in the Tuareg separatist group, MNLA, July 2016.
with income to buy weapons, vehicles, and pay combatants’ salaries, all elements that are necessary for maintaining the climate of insecurity. Often behind the claim of community protection what is really at stake is the protection of smuggling interests.

The impact of the 1990s rebellion, the weakening of the Malian army, the decentralization reform, and the intensification of illicit trafficking all further undermined local authority structures, and led to competition between multiple elites who struggled to fill the vacuum. Weapons became the most effective means for political struggle. Multiple armed groups emerged, including ethnic militias, organized criminals, separatist rebels, and jihadists. Throughout the 2000s, banditry, criminality, and insurgency plagued the region, creating a context of insecurity. Bôås (2015, 302) succinctly describes the context as follow,

‘big men’ vie for the role of nodal points in different networks of informal governance: some mainly profit-driven, others combining income-generating strategies with social and political objectives (secular and religious), yet others simply aiming to cope (and hopefully thrive in the future)…The outcome is a narrative-driven space of coexistence, collusion, and conflict in which the conflation of different actors’ interests, ideas, and action will only lead to confusion and misguided policies and not analytical clarity.

These dynamic also altered social relations—in particular the hierarchical system that has long been the basis for social and political order and legitimacy—and exacerbated both inter and intra-ethnic tensions. The most famous case was the tension between two Tuareg clans mentioned above: the Ifoghas aristocrats and their vassal groups, the Imghad. A similar conflict took place within the Arab ethnic group between the aristocrat Kunta tribe and their tributaries, the Lamhar. In both cases, the aristocracy attempted to enforce the system of social hierarchy, while the vassal group struggled to end the domination.

**The dynamics of Islam in Gao and the Rise of Jihadist Ideology**

During the first three decades of single party and military dictatorship, the Islamic sphere in Gao region, as in most of the Sahel, was dominated by pietist Islam. Although Salafism gained
a significant influence starting in the 1970s, both Sufi and Salafi religious clerics adopted a compliant stance vis-à-vis the state. Regimes in Bamako have historically attempted to control and regulate the practice of Islam through the creation of Islamic associations controlled by the government, such as Association Malienne pour l’Unité et le Progrès de l’Islam (AMUPI) created in 1980 during the military dictatorship and the Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (HCIM) created in 2002, in the context of democracy. However, headquartered far away in Bamako, these Islamic associations have only minimal presence in peripheral regions, such as Gao. Similarly, when the transition to democracy and the liberalization of the political sphere in the early 1990s allowed for the proliferation of independent Islamic associations in Bamako, these new associations had very little impact or influence in Gao. Rather, the dynamics of Islam in Gao has been characterized by the rise of what might be considered “heretical” Islamic movements, including the Wahariji, the so-called “Pieds-Nu,” the Tabligh Jama’a’t, and Al-Qaeda itself. The internal dynamics of Islam in Gao—in particular, a division within the local Salafi movement—as well as external influence from neighboring countries and the Muslim world have contributed to this dynamic. The state’s laxity and reticence to manage the religious sphere in Gao allowed these non-orthodox movements to establish themselves and operate freely for years, planting the seeds of today’s militancy. The Malian government’s attempt to regulate the Islamic sphere has had only a limited success, particularly in terms of preventing the emergence and growth of “unorthodox” Islamic movements. The government’s lack of vision and policy regarding the management of the religious sphere combined with the lack funding and logistical means for such institutions as the HCIM to carry out their missions beyond Bamako, has left the religious sphere in places like Gao, essentially unmanaged, leading to the emergence of well-organized and relatively cohesive and inclusive movements.
The Emergence of Heretic Movements in Gao’s Unregulated Islamic Sphere

The introduction of Salafism in the Gao region goes back to the 1930s. After colonial authorities established control over the region, many clerical families decided to migrate eastward toward Sudan, Mecca, and Medina instead of living under the “infidels’ rule” (Ahmed 2015). Some of these pilgrims contributed to the rise and spread of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia as well as in West Africa. A key figure was Muhammad Abdallah b. Mahmud al-Madani, a Tuareg cleric from Gao who migrated to Saudi Arabia in 1903 and had a distinguished clerical career within Wahhabi circles in Medina, before he returned back to Gao in 1938, where he established Islamic schools. Al-Madani contributed to the spread of Salafism in Gao and in villages along the Niger river (Ahmed 2015, 28-29). Yet, it was only around the 1970s, that Salafism penetrated Gao’s rural areas, due to seasonal migration of young men from the Gao region to Ghana (Niezen 1990, 404-405). These migrants, who for the most part stayed in cities like Kumasi and Accra, were exposed to Salafi ideas in the Muslim-dominated neighborhoods called “Zongos” where religious debates between different Islamic discourses were prominent (Niezen 1990; Kobo, 2012). The Ghanaian government’s anti-immigration policies of the late 1960s, and the deportation of 200,000 migrants in 1969 forced many Songhay migrants, including those who had embraced Salafism, to return home to Gao. In their villages these returning migrants engaged in proselytizing activities, accelerating the establishment of Salafism in these rural areas.

The expansion of Salafism in the region, however, also led to its fractionalization. In the early 1970s, a dispute between one of the clerics returning from Ghana and mainstream Salafi clerics in a village near Gao called Kadji led to the emergence of a radical Salafi sect locally
known as the Wahariji. The dispute started with disagreement over some legal rulings on issues related to marriage, meat consumption, land ownership, and “takfir,” but then translated into competition over the leadership of the Salafi movement. The Wahariji adopted the radical ideology of “Takfir wal Hijra” (Excommunication and Exodus). They declared all the villagers who did not agree with them to be “infidels,” and migrated to a new village that they created, emulating prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina. They called their new village “Dar as-Salam” in contradistinction to the previous village, which they called “Dar-al-Kufr.”

The Khawarij of Dar-al Salam lived in isolation since that time, implementing the sharia code within their community and limiting their interaction with the larger society. They avoided to marry, eat food, or pray outside of their community. In 1975, the movement clashed with the police. Many of its leaders were arrested and sentenced to 5 years in prison. The movement proliferated and recruited thousands of adherents, particularly among the sedentary communities—Songhai and Peul—in the villages along the Niger River. The Waharij were able to maintain their system unchallenged by coopting local politicians through bribes and votes, in exchange for which local authorities turned a blind eye on their activities. Although the Wahariji

---

15 The name Wahariji is a local transliteration of the Arab word Khawarij, which in Islam refers to a radical sect that emerged in the 7th century and that considers all Muslim who do not agree with their view of Islam as infidels. Khawarij are also known for their disinterest in learning and knowledge and their zealous devotion in the practice of Islam. The use of the world Khawarij is derogatory. Mainstream Salafi clerics in Gao used the name Khawarij to identify the defectors of Dar as-Salam. In reaction, Dar as-Salam people called adherents of the mainstream Salafi group, “Mushrikin” (polytheists). Interview with a Salafi imam who used to preach in the village of Kadji, Gao, July 2015.

16 Initially the dispute revolved around the name that should be assigned to the leader of the Salafi Association. Some members suggested that the leader must be called “Amir-al-mu’minin” (the commander of believers) while others suggested the soberer appellation of President of the Association. The opposition escalated to the point where the two communities separated. The Wahariji leadership imposed a system of social control over the members of the community through travel restrictions, and marriage. For example, if one of the members left the community, his wife was forced to divorce him and to marry another member of the congregation. They implemented a harsh version of the sharia rule including the implementation of the penal code. They imposed strict dress codes on both women and men, respectively full-covered hijab and burka, and a “pantalon sauté” (short trousers) and a beard. Interview with a Salafi imam who used to preach in the village of Kadji, Gao, July 2015.
did not engage in jihad locally, their ideology shared a lot in common with modern day jihadism. In fact, they were among the first to join MUJAO upon the jihadists’ occupation of Gao in 2012. They played a significant role, particularly within the moral police (shurtat al-amr bil ma’aruf wa al-nahyi ’anil munkar), which was responsible for most of the violence perpetrated against civilians.17

The Tabligh Jama’at was another religious movement that started making inroads into northern Mali regions in the mid-1990s and had a resounding success particularly among the Ifoghas, the Tuareg ruling clan in Kidal.18 During its heyday in Kidal, the Tabligh may have mobilized people from up to 80 percent of the households, though this keen interest quickly declined after a few years (Bouhlel 2011). In Gao, the Tabligh, has a center called “Markaz,” where international itinerant missionaries, including from Pakistan, France, and the Arab countries, used to stop by in the course of their missionary trip called “khuruj”. Local people who adhered to the movement also participate in “khuruj” locally or internationally, depending on their financial ability. The Tabligh Jama’at is an officially apolitical movement that preaches a peaceful practice of Islam. Its doctrine claims that piety—not violence—is the solution to the problems facing Muslim society. All Tabligh’s major sources unequivocally reject violence. In Gao, the leader of the Tabligh clearly condemned the jihadist uprising and warned their members against enrolling in jihadist movements. However, many Tabligh adherents disregarded this warning and enrolled in MUJAO. In fact, many of the jihadist entrepreneurs in Mali, including

17 Interview with an elected councilor in the rural district where Kadji is located, Gao, June 2015.
18 The Tabligh Jama’at is a Sunni Islamic movement that originated in India in the 1920s, and expanded throughout the world. The movement focuses on promoting Sunni Islam worldwide, and emphasizes the ideas that the umma as constituting one global Muslim community. The Tabligh doctrine encourages missionaries to travel everywhere in the world and spread the message of Islam. As a movement the Tabligh jama’at is largely considered apolitical. However, adherents to the movement have engaged in electoral politics as well as in jihad.
Iyad ag Ghaly, Hamadoun Kouffa, and Omar ag Hamaha, were prominent members of the Tabligh jama’at before embarking on their jihadist enterprise.

The Jihadist Implantation in Northern Mali and the Creation of MUJAO

As I have noted above, in the early 2000s, Algerian jihadist from the Salafi Group for Predication and Combat crossed the border and establish camps in the desert and mountainous areas of northern Mali. Continuous deterioration of the security climate allowed the Algerian jihadists to establish themselves and operate freely. They employed different strategies, including charity, trade, marriage, and proselytism to embed themselves within the local population, spread their ideology, and recruit followers. In their discourse, jihadists reject ethnic and racial identities as “Assabiyya” (particularism), which they claimed is a characteristic of “Jahiliyya” (pre-Islamic societies). They highlight the claim that Islam has united all Muslims under the banner of one religion and one identity. They frequently evoke the hadith that says ‘[t]here is no privilege for an Arab over a foreigner, nor for a foreigner over an Arab, and neither for white skin over black skin, nor for black skin over white skin, except by righteousness.”

This unifying and egalitarian discourse broadened the recruitment field, allowing them to recruit widely among all northern Mali communities and in the neighboring countries.

However, this apparent inclusiveness did not make AQIM a homogenous movement. To the contrary, beyond the façade of unity and inclusiveness, AQIM was a loose coalition of groups, divided along the same ethnic and racial cleavages that the group had tried to overcome and which, as I mentioned above, have historically shaped conflicts in northern Mali. All

19 A propaganda video published by the jihadi group Ansar Dine featured its leaders Iyad ag Ghaly, Amadou Kouffa, and an Arab cleric to make the point that racial and ethnic differences do not matter, and that all ethnic and racial groups should unite in fighting the Malian state and the “crusaders.” The fact that the video shows three leaders from different ethnic groups—Tuareg, Peul, and Arab respectively—is a powerful message in favor of the unity that they want to portray (See ImazighenLibyaTV 2013).
indications are that local populations appropriated the jihadist ideology only to invest it into their existing struggles against the Malian state, as well as in their local struggles between different communities. The creation of MUJAO, in fact, came about as a result of these tensions within AQIM between the Algerians and the Moorish Arabs from Mali, Mauritania, and Western Sahara. The later accused the former of hijacking all of the positions of leadership within AQIM, and of double standard in the treatment of Tuareg and Arab jihadists. These accusations were used to justify Malian Arabs’ decision to split from AQIM, and to create MUJAO. Abul Ma’ali summarizes the disagreement between AQIM leadership and their Moorish recruits:

In October 2012, Abu Ali and Ahmad al-Tilemsi requested from Al-Qaeda the authorization to create a Katiba or Sirriyya specific to the Arab combatants from the Azawad – similar to their Tuareg colleagues for whom the organization created Sirriyyat al-Ansar, specific to Tuareg [combatants]… But Al-Qaeda rejected the request, considering that dividing the Katibas and Sirriyas on ethnic and tribal bases poses a serious danger to loyalty to the organization, and its ideology, while reinforcing the ethnic particularism to the detriment of loyalty to the organization and its ideology. Following the rejection of their request, the two men – Abu Ali and Ahmad al-Tilemsi – decided to split [from the organization] and engaged in the process of creating a new organization… They considered [Al-Qaeda’s rejection of their request] as a sign of ‘contempt vis-à-vis the Arab of Azawad’s presence in the field of jihad (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014, 136-137).

Soon after its creation, dozens of combatants from the Arab tribes in the Azawad joined the movement, along with AQIM members who disapproved of the Algerien leadership of the group, viewing it as a form of dictatorship that marginalizend the local populations. MUJAO also “attracted dozens of Saharaouine, Mauritians, Nigeriens, and Malians, as it also attracted combatants from local black communities, including Songhay, Fulani, and Hausa” (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014, 140)

MUJAO is often described as a mere criminal organization that attempts to cover drug smuggling, and thus deemed less ideological than other jihadist movements (Lebovich 2012). But the study of the profiles of MUJAO’s leadership shows that MUJAO is a complex group that
brings together a variety of actors, including true jihadist ideologues, the so-called “narco-
 jihadists,” and self-interested smugglers. Founders of MUJAO included Sultan Ould Bady,
 Ahmad Tilemsi, and Hammada Ould Mohammed al-Khairy. All these three members are from
 the Lamhar Moorish sub-group. They had all enrolled in AQIM years before the outbreak of the
 insurgency in 2012. MUJAO’s leadership is composed of a mosaic of actors, including
 traffickers who smuggled goods through the Sahara, hardcore jihadist ideologues whose interest
 is to establish the sharia and combats infidels, and self-defense militiamen who provide security
 for their communities in a context of generalized insecurity. However, despite their diverse
 background, they all approve of framing their struggle in terms of jihad, and actively contributed
 to the jihadist uprising. Using the jihadist ideology proves to be rewarding for them all, though
 they might pursue other interest as well. Being a jihadist, a militiaman, or a smuggler are not
 mutually exclusive, and can in fact be mutually reinforcing. The brief profiles below highlight
 this varied nature of the MUJAO leadership.

 1- Hammada Ould M. al-Khairy (b. 1970) is a young Mauritanian cleric, who grew up
 in a village located some 50 km east of Nouakchott where he attended Islamic school—
 Madhara—and acquired considerable religious knowledge. He is one of many young
 Mauritanians who joined the GSPC camps in 2003-2004, following increased prosecution of the
 Islamic circles by the Mauritanian government. Identified by the Mauritanian secret service, he
 was arrested upon his return to Nouakchott in April 2005 along with 6 others jihadist activists. A
 year later, in April 2006, Ould M. al-Khairy was able to escape from prison (Abu al-Ma’ali
 2014: 139). He travelled to the United Arab Emirates, and then came back to the Sahara, only to

20 Information used in the jihadists’ profiles below is extracted for the most part from the work of Abu Ma’ali
(2014), which confirmed and completed some of my interview notes. I also used other sources, including newspaper
articles.
be arrested once again in 2008 in Timbuktu. AQIM requested his liberation as part of a negotiations deal to free hostages taken by the organization in 2009. Ould M. al-Khairy, finally settled in an AQIM camp where he became a combatant, a poet, and a preacher, achieving notoriety within AQIM due to his strong commitment to jihadist ideology, his broad knowledge of Islam, and his poetry. Disagreements however arose between him and the Algerian leadership of the group, leading Ould M. al-Khairy to distance himself from the organization, eventually becoming among the early members of MUJAO. During the MUJAO occupation and rule of Gao, he presided over the judicial commission that was responsible for the implementation of the interpretation of the sharia code. His commission pronounced several harsh sentences, including cutting off of hands, whipping and others. After the defeat of MUJAO in 2013, Ould M. al-Khairy declared allegiance to ISIS, though not without distancing himself from the group’s excess on takfir (Ould M. al-Khairy, 2014).

2- Ahmad al-Tilemsi (d. 2013) his real name is Ahmad Ould al-Amir) is a Malian Arab originally from the northeastern Gao region in the Tilemsi Valley. He belongs to the Lamhar Moorish tribe, which as mentioned above is considered a vassal group to the Kunta. Al-Tilemsi was part of the Lamhar militia and became famous due to his bravery during the intra-Arab conflict between the Kunta and Lamhar in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He later joined the business of smuggling goods throughout the region where he started collaborating with the Algerian jihadists in the early 2000s, first as a smuggler and a business partner, delivering goods and executing missions on behalf of the jihadists in exchange for financial income. He officially enrolled in Al-Qaeda in 2007 and participated in numerous attacks and kidnapping operations in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. Al-Tilemsi was reportedly involved in drug trafficking while he was a member of AQIM. However, he was also seemingly highly influenced by the jihadist
ideology and his discourse was strongly ideological. In one of the rare interviews that he gave, he declared that he wanted to wage jihad all over the Sahel region: “the Sahelian states are apostate states” he said. “We are required by the [Islamic] law to fight them for their refusal to implement God’s law … They are servants of Christians in their fight against Sharia. The Mujahedine will make the closer enemy a top priority” (Al-Akhbar 2012). Al-Tilemsi thus appears to represent some of those jihadist entrepreneurs who believe that money from illicit activities can be legitimately used to wage jihad against infidels; being involved in drug trafficking goes hand in hand with the jihadist enterprise in this view. Al-Tilemsi died in 2013 during the French intervention that ended the jihadist occupation of northern Mali.

3- Sultan Ould Bady (Also known as Abu Ali) is a renowned smuggler, just like al-Tilemsi. A rich and respected notable within the Lamhar community in Gao, Ould Bady joined AQIM in 2009, apparently after working with the organization for several years as a business partner. His name was mentioned in some of the kidnapping of Westerners for ransom. People who knew both Ould Bady and Ahmad Tilemsi describe the first as someone whose personal characteristics tends more toward rationality and moderation, whereas the latter held more radical views and tended to be adventurous (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014, 143). While they both came from a similar background and followed similar trajectories, their experience as jihadists influenced them in different ways. Ahmad Al-Tilemsi’s worldview appears to be more ideological, while Ould Bady appears more pragmatic. Upon the creation of MUJAO, Ould Bady’s vision was to brand the organization as a Salafi movement that would serve as an interface movement that represents the social, economic, and political interest of the Arab tribes of Azawad, in a way similar to the Tuareg-led Ansar Dine before the French intervention. He wanted the movement to be moderate, to cooperate with neighboring countries, and eventually to
participate in peace negotiations with the Malian government and the international community.
But the more ideologically driven leaders of the organization, like Ould M. al-Khairey, and Al-
Tilemsi took the movement in a different direction. They declared jihad against what they called
the apostate regimes in the region and opened the organization to jihadists from all of West
Africa and beyond. Ould Bady criticized this shift in the movement’s vision. He thought that the
other co-founders “subverted the organization and diverted it from its initial goal as a local
Islamic movement to an extremist organization that confronted [not only Mali] but also its
neighboring countries and the whole world” (Abu al-Ma’ali 2014: 142). Ould Bady left MUJAO
in late 2012, before the international military intervention led by French expelled the movement
outside of the city of Gao.

These three profiles are indicative of the diversity of background among MUJAO’s
jihadist entrepreneurs. Although they all share in common a commitment to the jihadist ideology,
it appears clear that their level of commitment varied significantly, and that other considerations
such as ethnicity, business incentive, and political leadership influenced their decisions often,
outweighing their commitment to the jihadist ideology. Ould M. al-Khairy is a jihadist ideologue
whose broad knowledge of Islam facilitated his ascension to the position of leadership in AQIM,
and later in MUJAO. He is a committed jihadist who has adamantly pursued the cause of jihad in
his country of Mauritania and abroad despite a number of setbacks. He was quick to start
implementing the sharia law as soon as MUJAO took control over Gao, and despite pushback
from other jihadist who suggested a gradual implementation of the law. Among the three
founders, Ould M. al-Khairy appears to be the most ideologically committed. Ahmad al-Tilemsi
was first an Arab militiamen and smuggler who appeared to have espoused the jihadist ideology
in the course of his business relationships with the Algerian jihadist. But despite his strong
commitment to the ideology of jihad, his attempt to create a jihadist Katiba specific to the Moorish ethnic group shows his strong attachment to ethnicity. In fact, his decision to split from AQIM and create MUJAO suggests that his attachment to his Lamhar ethnic group outweighed his commitment to the jihadist cause, which strongly rejects ethnic particularism and advocates for unity around the creed of jihad. Finally, Sultan Ould Bady, appears to be the less ideologically committed. His partnership with the jihadists appears to be business driven. There is no record of him being personally engaged in risky jihadist missions. His participation in the creation of MUJAO appears to be driven by the potential to participate in diplomatic negotiations on behalf of the Lamhar community. He opposed his co-founders’ decision to open the organization to foreign national and to declare war on neighboring country and the international community.

MUJAO’s jihadist entrepreneurs exploit the context of political disorder in Gao, they marshal resources made available by the situation of conflict, including weapons and well-trained militiamen, and mobilized local populations, in particular from the Arab Lamhar and the Peul communities. While ideology and the structure of the local contexts appear to be high determinants of jihadist entrepreneurs’ decisions to engage in insurgency, the background and motivation of the individuals who join the insurgency appears more diverse and difficult to theorize, as I will discuss below.

**Individual Motivation to Participate in Jihadism**

Jihadist movements in the Sahel have recruited a large number of followers from diverse social and economic backgrounds, both among educated and non-educated, employed and non-employed, graduates from secular universities and from Islamic schools, and school dropouts (Mercy Corps 2016). The analysis of the motivations of these rank-and-file jihadists are inconclusive. A recent study of jihadist motivation finds that 40 percent of African jihadists
mention religious ideas as the driving force behind their engagement in jihadist movements; 13 percent joined for employment opportunities, 10 percent because of friend or family connections, 5 percent for ethnic reasons, and only 1 percent mention political marginalization or social exclusion (UNDP 2017). The diversity of backgrounds and motives has confounded all attempts to identify the profile of a “typical jihadist.” Drawing on recent research on participation in collective political contestations, I argue that participation in jihadist insurgency is a function of four major factors, including resonance of jihadist discourse, collective identity, network relationships, and material incentives.

Religious belief is an important motive in an individual’s decision to join a jihadist movement. Many people participate in collective action because they agree with the message and the cause. Snow and Benford (1988, 199) note that the collective action frame provides a motivational impetus for participation. The degree of resonance of the collective action frame varies from one individual to another. Jihadist discourse appears to resonate more with adherents of certain religious groups than others. In Gao, the jihadist discourse tended to resonate well with members of two Islamic congregations: the Wahariji, and the Tabligh jama’at. The first joined the group only a few days after the jihadist took over the town. The decision was made by the leaders of the congregation to join.

Only three days after the fall of Gao, MUJAO entered in contact with the Khawarij community in Kadji. The reason was they both shared a similar ideology, which is the Khawarij doctrine. The leader of Khawarij held a meeting and agreed to support MUJAO by supplying them with men and money. The Khawarij interest in this alliance was the opportunity to reinforce their ideology and their power in the region. The leaders then called all the followers in the villages to send men and money to MUJAO. Contributions varied, some villages sent up 10 people, some even more. In response, MUJAO appointed them in the security sector, some of
them were given cars and power. Many of them were massacred in the fight with MNLA in Menaka.”

It would be overly simplistic to associate any Islamic sects—Sufism, Salafism or Tabligh Jama’at—with jihadist ideology. Mainstream leaders of all of these sects have unambiguously distanced themselves from jihadist ideology. In Mali, Tabligh Jama’at is overwhelmingly peaceful and apolitical, and its leaders are outspoken critics of jihadist violence. Yet, dozens of individual members of the sect were among the first to join the call for jihad in Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. In northeastern Nigeria, the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’a is a Salafi sect that has strongly advocated for the implementation of sharia and lobbied politicians to achieve this goal peacefully. Yet, the “Nigerian Taliban” initially emerged out of the Ahlus Sunnah, and Muhammad Yusuf started as a preacher within the same Salafi sect before his radical position led him out. Mainstream Ahlus Sunnah scholars have criticized Boko Haram’s radical positions and are on the frontline in fighting the movements theologically. More research is needed to clarify the contours of the relationship between Salafism, the Tabligh Jama’at, and jihadist ideology. One probable explanation would be that the three share common doctrinal beliefs that create a certain proximity. The fact that jihadism draws on a Salafi methodology, and the Tabligh’s strong emphasis on the idea of umma as a unified global Muslim community, as well as both sects’ strong opposition to Westernization and the necessity to protect Muslim society from its effects may increase the resonance of the jihadist discourse on their members, more so than with other sects that have much less emphasis on these aspects.

Some people participate in jihadist movements not so much because of personal ideological conviction, but because they belong to a community that pledged allegiance to a

---

21 Interview with a Salafi imam who used to preach in the village of Kadji, Gao, July 2015.
jihadist movement. People engage in collective action because they share a collective identity and because they want to protect and advance collective interests (Klandermans, 2004, 361). The decision to join a jihadist movement is often made by community leaders, who strike an alliance with jihadist groups for the sake of protection against rival communities, and they subsequently encourage their young men to join the movements. Fulani pastoralists in northern and central Mali thus struck alliances with jihadist movements not because they necessarily advocated their ideology, but for the sake of getting military training and weapons to counter the rising influence of their Tuareg rivals (Sangare 2016). The fact that communities have supported and have encouraged youths to join these movements made recruitment attractive. Many youth combatants in northern Mali claim to have joined armed groups out of a sense of duty to, and solidarity with, their community and because they thought fighting on behalf of their community would increase their respectability (Mercy Corps 2017).

Enrollment in a particular social movement is often “embedded in dense relational setting” (Diani 2004: 339) Strong interpersonal linkages, such as kinship and friendship ties with leaders or influential members within the group, facilitate recruitment and membership in the group (Diani 2004: 341). Network relations have influenced participation by facilitating the circulation of information, creating and reproducing bonds of solidarity, and enforcing social approval through a reward and sanction mechanism. Jihadists have appealed particularly to individuals associated with networks of illicit trafficking and other criminal activity (Crisis Group, 2013). Kinship networks have also played a significant role in determining who joins jihadist movements. Jihadist entrepreneurs are most often successful in recruiting supporters from within their immediate families, clans, and ethnic groups before expanding to other networks. Not only do family and tribal ties facilitate recruitment, but also in a context of
widespread insecurity family and tribes are valuable sources of protection against rival communities.

Other individuals have joined jihadist movements for financial incentives, including salaries and the distribution of booty, and the opportunity for young men to get married inexpensively to abducted women or female jihadists is also an important factor. A combination of multiple motives increases the chance of an individual’s decision to participate: collective identity or membership in an organization, as well as personal ties with the leadership and other members of the organization, increase the chances an individual will participate in collective action organize by that organization.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview and analysis of MUJAO, a jihadist movement that participated in the occupation of northern Mali between 2012 and 2013. The chapter has addressed MUJAO’s trajectory from its beginning in the early 2000s to the current period. It has also examined the role of ideology and the dynamics of Gao’s local context have played in the outbreak of the jihadist insurgency, as well as the determinant of individuals’ decision to join the insurgency.

My argument is that MUJAO leaders who have embraced the jihadist ideology in the 2000s, exploited the 2012 context of social and political disorder in northern Mali to launch their jihadist insurgency. They capitalized, first, on a context of political opportunity that is marked by the vacuum of state authority in the northern regions, second, on a social mobilization context characterized by continuous intercommunal violence, and third, by a deep-seated grievance of political marginalization among a significant part of the local population that is directed against the Malian government based in Bamako. The weakening of state authority in northern region that exacerbated starting in the mid-2000s created a vacuum of authority that numerous non-state
actors, including rebel groups, local politicians, traditional chiefs, jihadists, smugglers, and drug dealers, attempted to fill in. This context created a wide-open opportunity for insurgency. However, the vacuum of state authority as well as the struggle by different actors to fill it, is the norm in the Sahel’s rural periphery and in most cases such struggle occurs peacefully. In northern Mali, the struggle has been violent due to long standing tensions over political leadership and control of the region’s scarce natural resources. These tensions have aggravated divisions along racial cleavages, ethnicity, lifestyle (pastoralist, semi-pastoralist, and sedentary) and social hierarchy. Social mobilization largely follows kinship linkages and individuals’ loyalty goes first to their closer community, family, lineage, and ethnic group. Constant intercommunal tensions simmered for years until 2012, when the return of combatants and influx of weapons from Libya catalyzed the outbreak of a large-scale insurgency by both separatist rebel groups and jihadist groups. MUJAO found ample opportunities to conduct insurgencies, and widespread availability of resources to mobilize including weapons and recruits ample resources for mobilizing, for ensuring the success of their insurgencies.

While these social and political dynamics in Gao are crucial in terms of explaining MUJAO’s insurgency, it important to emphasize that ideology also mattered a great deal. MUJAO jihadist entrepreneurs have demonstrated a strong commitment to the jihadist ideology. Their discourse was heavily ideological, and they rationalize their actions through religious argumentation. They rarely make reference to socio-economic and political grievances. Both their sayings and doings testify to the fact that they took ideas seriously. This ideological commitment, however, does not diminish the fact that these jihadist entrepreneurs are also political activists who pursue social, political, and economic interests. Whether their decisions to start a jihadist movement is motivated by ideological commitment or other various interests and
incentives is difficult—perhaps impossible—to determine. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they can be complementary.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION: VARIATION OF ISLAMIC POLITICAL CONTESTATION IN THE SAHEL, FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The central question that this dissertation has attempted to answer is why Islamic political contestation in the Sahel has taken different forms. I asked this question based on two empirical observations: First, over the last quarter century, Islamic political contestation has been on the rise across the countries of the Sahel; and second, this contestation has been expressed differently in different contexts: sometimes in the form of organized and peaceful protests, at others times as un-organized spontaneous riots, and with rare but troubling frequency, as deadly insurgencies.

The democratization and liberalization processes that started in the early 1990s in many Sahelian countries, including my three cases of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, opened up the political sphere, thus allowing social and political forces, which previous authoritarian regimes had banned, to start to operate. Across the region, Muslim activists seized the opportunity to create Islamic associations, through which they have attempted to promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere, often organizing protests to contest laws and policies. While early episodes of Islamic contestation where conducted in the form of peaceful protests and riots, starting in the mid-2000, jihadist ideologies began to spread in the Sahel. While in most contexts these ideologies have not been able to mobilize people into violent conflict, in some specific contexts they have led to the creation of jihadist movements that have waged violent insurgencies throughout the region. Jihadist violence escalated in the 2010s as insurgents were able to capture and occupy large swath of territories, most notably in Mali.

In this dissertation I have attempted to examine this variation through close study of three specific cases: the anti-slavery protest in Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania; the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in the city of Zinder in Niger, and the jihadist insurgency by MUJAO in Gao.
in northern Mali. I have argued that the form that Islamic political contestation takes—whether peaceful protest, violent riots or insurgency—is a function of the interaction between Islamic ideologies, the structures of the local context, and factors shaping the motivations of individual to participate in contestation. The selection of case studies was designed to help shed light on the diversity of factors motivating Muslim activists who have engaged in political contestation as inspired by different Islamic discourses, and to situate them within the “silent majority” of pietist Muslim scholars who have avoided such mobilization. In this conclusion, I summarize the findings of the dissertation, and then discuss what I believe these findings contribute to the contemporary literature on Islam and politics. I also point to some of the limitations of this study, and suggest areas for further research.

My central argument in this dissertation could be summarized as follows: The variations in Islamic political contestation that we have witnessed in the Sahel are the outcome of complicated processes shaped by factors at the global, local, and individual levels in any given context. At the global level, there has been the emergence of competing Islamic ideologies, elaborated by Islamic scholars in the interpretation and reinterpretation of historical Islamic political and social thought in the modern context, and disseminated globally via print, electronic materials, TV and radio broadcast, and social media. For purposes of my analysis, these ideologies that can be usefully classified into three types—pietism, Islamism, and jihadism. Each of these provides an alternative worldview and and a lens for individual Muslims to understand the challenges facing Muslim societies today, and each suggests a different course of action on how best to address these challenges. Pietism rejects all form of confrontational contestation against government, whereas Islamism prescribes peaceful political contestation, and jihadism recommends violent contestation. Three prominent Islamic scholar-cum-activists, including the
Mauritanian Abdullah Bin Bayyah, the Egyptian Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and the Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqadisi respectively epitomize typical pietist, Islamist, and jihadist ideologues. Islamic political ideologies exist as sets of idioms available for Muslim activists to take inspiration from, and to frame discourses for, collective action.

However, while necessary, ideology is not a sufficient condition for Islamic activism. Action requires not only a motive, but also the means and the opportunity for mobilization. In any given context then, activism will occur when Muslim entrepreneurs inspired by these ideologies are able to combine their idiom with symbols and images from the local culture to formulate contestatory discourses that tap on concrete local grievances to mobilize people for collective action. Muslim entrepreneurs, however, are constrained by the structures of the local context in which they operate, including the political environment, the availability of resources, and the resonance of the grievance frame. Collectively these factors may or may not make the organization of a particular form of political contestation in any given case possible and/or its success likely. Thus not all local contexts are equally stimulating for any given kind of collective action.

The structures of the local context heavily influence whether a Muslim entrepreneur finds it rewarding to engage in a contestatory collective action, as well as shape what kind of action is likely to succeed. I draw on social movement theories, including the concepts of political opportunity, the mobilization of resources, and grievance frames to analyze how the structures of a particular local context may or may not incentivize Muslim entrepreneurs to act on their ideological beliefs. Finally, at the individual level, the decision by the “entrepreneur” to attempt to mobilize a contestatory collective action does not guarantee participation of the masses. The individuals who participate may not necessarily have the same motives as the Muslim
entrepreneurs. Some individuals may participate because the collective action framework resonates well with their conditions; others may be dragged in through networks of interpersonal relations with the activists, and still others may be motivated primarily for material or situational incentives.

The nature of the state in the Sahel is a fundamental element of the context for our case studies. Sahelian states, as I have argued, are globally characterized by weak institutional structures that combine formal state institutions, informal customary institutions, and hybrid institutions. Their particularly challenging political geography has produced significant sub-national variations in the nature of these structures within each country. Most notably, the state’s ability to project authority, the existing patterns of social mobilization, as well as the framing of grievances in these countries vary from capital cities, to secondary cities, and to rural peripheries. This variation significantly influences the patterns of political contestation in each of those types of contexts.

In capital cities, where the state has a relatively stronger capacity to enforce the rule of law and where civil society groups are well-organized and have the means to harness local grievances and channel them through institutionalized mechanism of claim making, the pattern of political contestation has tended to be peaceful protest within the parameters of political clashes. This context provides Islamist entrepreneurs with strong incentives to engage in political contestation using protest as the most effective form of claim-making. Jihadist entrepreneurs, while they may be present, have found it difficult to organize successful insurgencies in capital cities, no doubt due to the state’s ability to easily crackdown on such insurgency. In Nouakchott, for instance, the structural context characterized by the 2007 political opening, the state’s ability to project authority and enforce law and order, the burgeoning civil society organizations, and
the social, political, and economic marginalization affecting Haratine communities more severely than others, has provided a favorable political opportunity as well as resources for the abolitionist movement IRA to tap into Haratine’s grievance and successfully mobilize for peaceful political contestation.

In secondary cities, where states have tended to rely on a syncretic mode of governance that brings together formal state institutions and customary institutions in the exercise of political authority, and where social groups—either in the form of civil society or ethnic and kinship-based social groupings—are weak and unable to mobilize local populations for claim-making, political contestation has been rare, and when it does occur, it tends to take the form of spontaneous and non-organized rioting. In such settings, Islamic scholars have largely adopted pietism as the dominant Islamic ideology. The pietists’ pro-government stance and rejection of all form of confrontational contestation, however, tends to provide few outlets for expression and hence increase frustration. Under particular circumstances, this situation has generated backlash among Muslim believers who then resort to rioting to express their grievances. In Zinder, the state has been able to impose pietism as the dominant Islamic ideology through a symbiotic exercise of political authority between government institutions and the chieftaincy, as embodied in particular in the role of the Sultan of Zinder. Muslim believers have often harshly criticized their pietist religious authorities, calling them “puppets of the government.” And on a few occasions these believers have managed to mobilize significant numbers to express their grievances in a spontaneous and unorganized way, as in the case of the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots.

Finally, the context of the rural periphery, where the state has a limited presence and social groups tend to be organized along kinship and ethnic lines, as well as where the feeling of political marginalization is strong, when Islamic activism has emerged the dominant pattern of
political contestation has been insurrectional. In this context, jihadist entrepreneurs have found it possible to draw on their ideology and to mobilize others for violent political contestation. In Gao, MUJAO leaders who had embraced the jihadist ideology in the 2000s, exploited the 2012 context of social and political disorder in northern Mali to launch their jihadist insurgency. They capitalized on various factors: First, a context of political opportunity that is marked by the vacuum of state authority in the northern regions; second, on a social mobilization context characterized by continuous intercommunal violence; and third, by deep-seated grievances built on feelings of political marginalization among a significant part of the local population and directed against the Malian government based in Bamako.

Overall, then, I postulate that the variation in forms of Islamic political contestation is mainly determined by the structure of the local context. Ideologies appear to be omnipresent. In any given context in the Sahel, people are increasingly exposed to and engage with the pietist, jihadist, and Islamist ideologies, and adhere to them to varying degrees. But would-be Islamist or jihadist entrepreneurs are likely to emerge only when the structures of the local context—notably the context of political opportunity, mobilizing resources, and grievance frames—are likely to guaranty the success of their activism. Thus, for example, the Islamist ideology has had a core of adherents in Mali—notably in the subbanu movement—since the 1950s, but given that the authoritarian context of that time did not allow for political participation or contestation, these Islamist activists refrained from acting on their ideology. Over time they either came to endorse a version of pietism, or slipped out of the public sphere until the early 1990s when democratic reform and liberalization of the political arena rendered social and political activism possible, thus opening new opportunities to undertaking action based on their ideology. Similarly, many people in different places throughout the Sahel may be persuaded by jihadist ideologies, but they
are only able to successfully act on their ideology in the specific context of state weakness and social and political disorder. Thus Boko Haram sympathizers in Zinder may well debate the jihadist group’s opponents in conversational settings, but we have not seen any action based on their ideology given that the structures of the local context in Zinder do not incentivize insurgency. In brief, Muslim entrepreneurs may well be inspired by one or another of the three Islamic ideologies but chose not to act given a calculation of the costs of doing so.

However, while the local structure may be the most determinant factor in explaining the emergence of specific forms of Islamic political contestation, ideology plays a central role in shaping Islamic political contestation. Ideology notably shapes Muslim activists’ world view, it provides a framework for interpreting other groups’ actions, it sets in-group and out-group boundaries, and it influences the understanding of the available repertoire for action. Ideology determines which grievances become salient and the subject of claim making, and it provides the idioms and a “toolkit” for the organization of a strategy for action. The state can be weak and plagued by political disorder, but unless there are people who have come to believe in the jihadist ideology, jihadist insurgency is unlikely to happen. Previously, before the jihadist ideology made significant inroads in the Sahel, driven by the local and regional context of the Sahara, the weakness of the state and the context of social and political disorder in northern Mali and Niger led to uprisings and forms of insurgencies among local, mainly Tuareg populations (e.g. from 1990 – 1995), but these did not amount to jihadist insurgencies, and the form of violent action they engaged differed significantly from the violence of the jihadi movements. It the congruence of both ideology and local context that produce the outcome.
The argument that I have developed in this dissertation draws critically on a broad body of literature on Islamic activism, and I have attempted to contribute to this scholarly effort. Almost forty years ago, the Iranian revolution triggered an unprecedented academic interest in the study of Islam and politics, generating an important body of literature (see, for example, Hussain 1984; Hunter 1988; Piscatori 1986; Esposito 1992; Esposito 1997; Roy 1990 and 1994; Lewis 1993; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Lubeck 1979; 1998; Burke and Lubeck 1987). Since then, academic interest has remained strong, and in fact has expanded both thematically and empirically. The so-called “Third Wave” of democratization that affected many Muslim majority countries, including all of the countries of the Sahel region, further fueled this interest, focusing the research more specifically on the study of the relationship between Islam and democracy in Muslim societies (Villalón 1995; Esposito and Voll 1996; Hefner 2000). In another vein, and notably following the 9/11 attacks, scholars have devoted more efforts to scrutinize the religion of Islam itself in terms of its hypothesized relation to violence in the context of globalization (Roy 2004; Mandaville 2007 and 2014; Kepel 2004).

This academic interest has produced many seminal works—some of which I have mentioned here—that have collectively advanced our understanding of the varied ways in which Islam interacts with politics. The specific topic of Islamic political contestation has been addressed under diverse themes, such as “Muslim politics,” “political Islam,” and “Islamic activism.” These themes cover an array of phenomena related to Muslim activists’ attempt to defend Islamic values and to promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere, including through the creation of political parties and participation in electoral politics, civil society activism, contributions to public debates, political lobbying on behalf of Islam, as well as via more disruptive events such as protests, riots, and jihadist insurrections. What I call “Islamic political
contestation” refers specifically to episodes or events in which Muslim activists engage in contentious collective action for the sake of defending Islamic values and promoting an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. As such, the episodes of Islamic political contestation that I deal with here represent a sub-category of “Islamic activism” that concerns specifically episodes of protests, riots, and insurgency conducted on behalf of Islam. I exclude from this sub-category the part of Islamic activism that emphasizes party politics or argumentative debates.

Three issues that have been largely discussed in the literature have informed my argument. First, Muslims have engaged in politics in varied and complicated ways, and more importantly in ways that are hardly differed from non-Muslims. Second, there is no consensus among Muslims on how to engage in politics. Some Muslims have embraced secularism and rejected all attempts to mix religion with politics, while others have embraced Islamic activism, trying vigorously to promote an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. But even within this latter group, there is no consensus either on what constitutes the appropriate Islamic agenda to be promoted or on how to go about promoting it. Third, scholars have also addressed the question of what determines Muslim activists’ engagement in politics; there are what I call culturalists scholars, who emphasize the role of religious beliefs in explaining Islamic activism, and structuralist scholars, who argue instead that social and political context determines Muslim activists’ decision to engage in the political field. Overall, while these debates have greatly advanced our understanding of Islamic activism, there is little doubt that more work is needed to refine the concepts and theories used to analyze the intricate and ever-evolving dynamics of Islamic activism across the diverse and complex societies in the Muslim world.

When attempting to apply the theoretical frameworks developed in the literature on Islam and politics to the specific cases of Islamic political contestation that have occurred in Mali,
Mauritania, and Niger three shortcomings appear. First, the largely dichotomous ways of explaining Islamic activism as determined either by Islam, Muslim culture, or particular interpretations of Islam—such as Salafism and its many conceptual sub-categories, including political Salafism, Salafi-jihadism—on the one hand, or by structural factors—institutional, economic, or social—is unhelpful for making sense of the phenomenon. Second, even those who have attempted to nuance their analysis by considering Islamic activism as the result of an interaction between factors related to Islam and to the local context have yet to come up with a theory that explains how this interaction operates, and how it determines outcome. In the context of the Sahel, where the state is particularly weak, varying context structures interact differently with varying Islamic ideologies. Finally, there is a conceptual confusion when it comes to the study of Islam and politics. A plethora of concepts is used in the analysis, with little clarity. This is notably the case with the concept of “Islamism” which is used to refer alternatively to political Islam generally or to violent uprisings on behalf of Islam. Other terms such as “Islamic fundamentalism,” or “Islamic radicalism” confuse more than they elucidate.

Building on my empirical analysis of the complex play of forces in three varied cases, I have attempted to address these theoretical shortcomings in the literature of Islamic activism. Through this argument, I have tried to make two contributions. First, I have tried to theorize the ways in which different Islamic ideologies interact with varying local structural contexts to produce different forms of Islamic activism. Second, I have attempted to sharpen the concepts that are used in analyzing the phenomenon of Islamic activism. I argued that Islamic discourse matters in explaining Islamic activism. Yet, it is neither Islam as religion, identity or culture, nor Islamic theology—as a certain literature has suggested—that are relevant. What matters instead are Islamic political ideologies. There is a crucial distinction to be made between “Islamic
theology,” which refers to different interpretation of the Islamic dogma as it relates to ritual and worship practices, and “Islamic ideology,” which refers to political preferences and behaviors inspired by Islamic doctrine. In less abstract terms, I want to emphasize the point that theological categories such as “Sufism” or “Salafism” are not helpful in terms of explaining Islamic activism. What is relevant, rather, is “Islamic political ideologies.” I have elaborated on the typology, attributions, and role of these conceptual categories of Islamic political ideologies in Chapter 2. I have also attempted to refine the analysis of the local context structure. When analyzing structural context, previous analyses mostly emphasize the national level context at the expense of the very local context. Thus, much discussion of Islamic activism in the current Sahel has attempted to compare countries based on national government action and policies. In my comparative analysis of Mali, Mauritania and Niger, it has appeared clear that patterns of political contestation do not vary from one country to another as much as they vary internally from one sub-national context to another. Thus, instead of cross-national comparison, I suggest a more localized analysis of sub-national contexts, which I have categorized into three major types: capital cities, secondary cities, and rural peripheries.

The argument that I have developed in this dissertation applies most strongly to the phenomenon of Islamic political contestation in the contemporary Sahel, from 1960 to the present. While I strongly suspect that important elements of my framework may help to understand dynamics elsewhere in the Muslim world, I do not make a claim for the generalizability of my argument beyond the case of the Sahel without further research and the contribution of scholars of other regions. Based on my own work, however, I do contend that my framework can help to shed some light on the patterns of Islamic political contestation that have occurred in the Sahel region going as a far back as the 14th century.
Studying the history of the relationship between Muslim clerics and political authorities in West Africa between the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, Levtzion (1994) distinguishes two groups of Islamic scholars in terms of their relationship with political authorities: on the one hand, there were clerics who accommodated the social and political system of the state, served the chiefs and acted as judges in courts, and on the other hand, there were militant Islamic scholars who emphasized the necessity of implementing the sharia and the adoption of a rigorous Islamic model in line with the ideal Muslim society. Levtzion claim that what he labels the \textit{accommodationists}—whom I have referred to as pietist—drew on the milder position of such Islamic clerics as the Egyptian scholar al-Suyuti (1445 – 1505), while the \textit{militants}—who would most likely correspond to the jihadists in my terminology—were inspired by al-Maghili (1440 – 1505), a prominent Islamic scholar who lived in the area of the present-day Algeria. Levtzion argues that between the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries, accommodationist clerics dominated the Islamic field. Militant Islamic scholars either surrendered to the rulers, becoming accommodationist themselves or withdrew from the political field altogether, isolating themselves into religious teaching and practices. A limited number of militant Islamic scholars who dared to criticize the rulers’ shortcoming in term of the implementation of sharia were “persecuted and muffled” (1994, 99). He argues that militant Islamic scholars had to wait until the changed structural contexts of the the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century to fulfill their project of Islamic revolution. This was the case of the so-called Fulani jihads that started in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, and which gained momentum in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

While Levtzion does not propose a clear theoretical explanation of this shift in the region’s Islamic dynamic, he suggests four hypotheses that he thinks could have produced the outcome (1994, 102-3). First, he suggests that the shift could have been the result of the spillover
of the 17th century Islamic militancy that had developed in the southern Sahara, or the impact of the more militant Saharan Islam in western Sudan. He also suggests that the shift could have resulted from the ethnic mobilization of pastoralist communities in the region, or a change of emphasis in West Africa from urban to rural Islam. In brief, Levtzion (1994) attributes the emergence of the 18th and 19th century jihads in West Africa to external ideological influences from neighboring communities, ethnic mobilization from the Fulani, or the rising influence of rural Islam, claiming that “none of the leaders of the jihad movements came from either a commercial town or a political capital” (Levtzion 1994,103). Levtzion’s discussion of this history, then, in many ways echoes the arguments I have made in this work. While his work is not explicitly theoretical, it suggests the importance of the changing political context in the region, notably the political turmoil that plagued the region following the Moroccan invasion in 17th century, and which might have created a fertile ground for the militant Islamic scholars to act on their ideologies. In my terms, I would suggest that pietist scholars dominated the Islamic field between the 14th and 16th century at the time when the Mali and Songhay empires established a relative political stability in the region. And I would further suggest that the 17th and 19th century jihads arose during the period of anarchy and political disorder that followed the Moroccan invasion of the Songhay Empire given the specific political opportunities that this provided in determined locales across the region. The specific manifestations of contemporary Islamic political activism are of course shaped by technology, globalization and modern social and political institutions, but this brief consideration of the historical record suggests, I believe, that my analytic framework may capture more universal dynamics of religion and politics in human societies.


Giglietto, Fabio and Yenn Lee. 2015. “To be or not to be Charlie: Twitter Hashtag as a Discourse and Counter-Discourse in the Aftermath of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo Shooting in France.” Selected Papers of the Internet Research 16: The 15th Annual Meeting the Association of Internet Researchers Phoenix, AZ, USA, 21-24 October.


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, eds. 1996. *Comparative Perspective on Social Movement: Political Opportunity, Mobilizing Structures, Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, eds. 1996. *Comparative Perspective on Social Movement: Political Opportunity, Mobilizing Structures, Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim is a PhD in Political Science and a research associate with the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. He is also a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. His research interests relate to Islam, democracy, stability, and international development in the Sahelian countries (with particular focus on Mali, Niger, and Mauritania). He has background in sociology, Islamic jurisprudence, and management, with degrees from Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey (2010) and the Islamic University of Say (2006). Ibrahim is also an alumnus of the Fulbright Program (2011-2013). He worked for four years with Islamic NGOs in Niger, including two years as the Executive Director of the Niger-office of Albasar International Foundation. He speaks French, English, Arabic, Hausa, and Zarma.