



The Sahel: Rising Islamic militancy and persecution of Christians

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1. Introduction

For the last four decades Islamic militancy has become a major driver of Christian persecution in various parts of the world. This trend seems to have accelerated particularly in the past decade and half. This paper analyzes the rise of Islamic militancy and extremism in the Sahel and the impact this development is having on Christians in the region. The first part of the paper provides background information about the Sahel. The second part provides an overview of the prevalence of Islamic militancy in the region, and a third section discusses how this phenomena is affecting Christians in that part of the world. The fourth part of the paper discusses the situation in Niger and Mali as an illustration of the trend that can be seen throughout the region. The final part of the paper provides a conclusion of the analysis with some general recommendations.

2. Background

The Sahel is a designation that is used to describe the ecological and geographic region that is found between the Sahara desert and the humid and fertile Savannah belt that is found north of the tropical rainforest of Africa.¹ This zone extends across Africa from Senegal to western Sudan.² The Sahel includes Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan. This semi-arid region is sparsely populated and is becoming increasingly arid.³ As the Sahara desert extends southwards, the Sahel is the region that is most directly affected and threatened by the desertification process. In this hostile environment most of the population is nomadic or semi-nomadic and relies heavily on animal husbandry.⁴ Pastoral communities in this region seasonally move from the north to the south in search of pasture for their herds.

Although historically this part of Africa has given rise to some of the ancient empires and states such as the Mali Empire that existed between the 13th and 17th century, the political boundaries that exist in the Sahel today are of recent development and legacies of European colonialism.⁵ As is the case for most African nations, the postcolonial states in the Sahel region, have political boundaries that are incongruent with patterns of ethnic settlement and communal movements. Therefore the affinity of the various ethnic groups to the states they find themselves in is often very weak and tenuous. Another common feature is the prevalence of extreme poverty. The semi-arid climate of the region, as well as the increasing frequency of droughts as a result of the southward expansion of the Sahara desert, means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the population to survive on animal husbandry. Although oil has been discovered in countries like Chad and Niger, the region has otherwise very few natural resources and is a hostile environment for human existence. Even in the countries where oil has been discovered, due to recurrent conflict and corruption this resource has hardly made a dent on the widespread poverty that exists in the region. As a result, the states that exist in this region are all very fragile,

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/place/Sahel>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Nicholson, S.E., Compton J. Tucker, C.J., Ba, M.B.: Desertification, drought, and surface vegetation: An example from the West African Sahel, in: *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 79, no. 5 (1998): 815.

⁴ Niamir-Fuller, M.: The resilience of pastoral herding in Sahelian Africa, in: *Linking social and ecological systems: Management practices and social mechanisms for building resilience* (1998): 250-284.

⁵ See Levtzion, N.: The thirteenth-and fourteenth-century kings of Mali in: *The Journal of African History* 4, No. 3 (1963): 341-353; see also Chafer, T.: *The End of Empire in French West Africa - France's successful decolonization*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002.

the main causes being a mixture of environmental, demographic, economic and political factors.⁶

3. Growing Islamic militancy

Within the context of state fragility that characterizes the region, there is a growing incidence of Islamic militancy.⁷ The population of the whole region has been predominantly Muslim for centuries. Since the Islamic conquest of northern Africa in the eighth century the influence of Islam has been felt in the Sahel⁸ and has spread through trade, missionary activity and armed conflict.⁹ The major cities along the trans-Sahara trade route and the various Islamic orders that emerged, especially those belonging to the Sufi tradition, have played an important role in the spread of Islam in the Sahel from the eighth to the sixteenth century.¹⁰ In a manner that reflects recent developments in the rest of the world, more puritanical and militant versions of Islam are taking root in the region. Particularly Salafi/Wahhabi versions of Islam are gaining prominence with the support of Wahhabi missionaries and NGOs operating in the region,¹¹ funded by oil rich Gulf States like Saudi Arabia.¹² The poverty in the region as well as the weak governments characterizing most of the countries in the region makes it easier for radical Islamic groups to spread their influence.¹³ In a poverty-stricken region where corruption is rampant and state failure is quite evident, the message of puritanical groups promising a new political order free from corruption is very appealing to the population, especially when it is accompanied by the provision of goods and services which the state has failed to provide.¹⁴ The rampant unemployment in the countries of the Sahel and the limited prospects which the youth face also increase the latter's susceptibility to the message of radical Islam.¹⁵ The vast and sparsely populated expanse of the Sahel where the states in question have only nominal sovereignty is also an ideal environment for groups like al-Qaeda to establish their bases.¹⁶ The socio-economic, political and geographic environment of the region very much resembles the situation

⁶ See Zoubir, Y.H.: The Sahara-Sahel quagmire - regional and international ramifications, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 17, No. 3 (2012): 452-458.

⁷ Laremont, R.R.: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb - Terrorism and counterterrorism in the Sahel, In: *African Security* 4, No. 4 (2011): 242-268.

⁸ Clarke, P.B.: *West Africa and Islam - A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century*, 1982.

⁹ See Hill, M.: *The Spread of Islam in West Africa - Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century*, in: *SPICE Digest* (2009).

¹⁰ Brenner, L.: *West African Sufi: the religious heritage and spiritual search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal*, University of California Press, 1984; see also Hunwick, J.O.: *Religion and state in the Songhay empire, 1464-1591, and (1966): 296-315.*

¹¹ See Kaba, L.: *The Wahhabiyya - Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa*, (1974); see also Laremont, R. and Hrach G.: *Political Islam in West Africa and the Sahel*, in: *Military Review* 86, No. 1 (2006): 27.

¹² Sambe, B.: *From Religious Radicalism to Terrorism in the Sahel & Sahara*, Reginal Center for Strategic Studies Cairo (RCSS), available at: <http://www.rcssmideast.org/en/Article/119/From-Religious-Radicalism-to-Terrorism-in-the-Sahel--Sahara#.VzYvqPkrKiM>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

¹³ *The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm*, Africa Report N°227/25 June 2015, International Crisis Group, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/227-the-central-sahel-a-perfect-sandstorm.pdf>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See RCSS article by Sambe B. in footnote 12 above; see also Leigh, K.: *North Africa's Sahel - The Next Terrorism Hot Spot?*, *Time*, 12 September 2011, available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2092687,00.html>.

in Afghanistan and Somalia; it is therefore not surprising that various militant Islamic groups are viewing this area as a safe haven.¹⁷

The post-Arab Spring collapse of law and order in Libya has also facilitated the rise of Islamic militancy in the region. The chaos and instability in Libya, the easy access to weapons of all sorts following the fall of Gaddafi and the increasing presence of foreign fighters and jihadists in Libya has had a spillover effect in the Sahel.¹⁸ The most dramatic example of this occurred in northern Mali in 2012 when Islamic militants and foreign fighters made common cause with Tuareg rebels and managed to take over a large portion of northern Mali.¹⁹ Had it not been for the intervention of French troops supporting the Malian government, the jihadist group Ansar Dine could well have taken control of most of Mali. In addition to Ansar Dine, other militant groups active in the Sahel region include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram and Islamic State (IS).²⁰ These groups raise funds by taking hostages for ransom, by conducting human-trafficking activities and by receiving assistance from foreign sources.²¹ As a result, they are well armed, highly mobile and motivated. In addition to launching terrorist attacks against civilians and military targets, they have also shown a capability to hold and administer territory.²² The weakness of the states in the region amplifies the strength of these militant groups. Most of the states in the region are autocratic and not ethnically inclusive, although there is a great deal of ethnic diversity in each country.²³ Furthermore, due to lack of resources as well as the misallocation of resources through corruption, these states provide little by way of goods and services for their citizens. These factors undermine the legitimacy of the states in the region and diminish their capacity to mobilize the population in the fight against the rising Islamic militancy.²⁴ Therefore, an increasing number of these states are relying on the military support of France to withstand the threat they face from Islamic militant groups.²⁵ In addition to France, the US and the UN are also active in the Sahel and provide troops in an attempt to stabilize the security situation of the region.²⁶ There is also a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) made up

¹⁷ See Laremont, note 7.

¹⁸ Douthat, R.: Libya's Unintended Consequences, New York Times, 7 July 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/opinion/sunday/libyas-unintended-consequences.html?_r=0, last accessed 13 May 2016.

¹⁹ Graham, D.A., Mali's Tangled Mix of Jihad and Civil War, The Atlantic, 20 November 2015, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/mali-hotel-hostage-crisis/417021/>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²⁰ See Keenan, J.H.: Instability and Terrorism in Africa's Sahel - A Primer, Just Security, 26 January 2016, available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/28972/instability-terrorism-africas-sahel-primer/>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²¹ See for example, BBC News: Mali attack - Special forces storm hotel to free hostages, 20 November 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34877069>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²² BBC News: Mali Tuareg rebels declare independence in the north, 6 April 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17635437>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Boukhars, A.: Corridors of Militancy - the Sahel-Sahara Border Regions, FRIDE Policy Brief N° 206, July 2015, available at http://fride.org/download/PB206_Corridors_of_Militancy.pdf, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²⁵ See Wing, S.D.: French intervention in Mali - strategic alliances, long-term regional presence in Small Wars & Insurgencies 27, No. 1 (2016): 59-80.

²⁶ See MINUSMA: United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali, available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml>, last accessed 13 May 2016; see also Obi Anyadike, O.: Briefing - The new Jihadist strategy in the Sahel, IRIN News, 4 February 2016, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2016/02/04/briefing-new-jihadist-strategy-sahel>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria which is mandated to fight Boko Haram.²⁷

The rise of Islamic militancy in the Sahel should also be seen as part of a global trend. The ease of communication and flow of information made possible by modern technology has made it easier for the ideas and practices of Islamic militant groups from other parts of the world to reach radical elements in the Sahel. Hence groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban and IS which have gained prominence in various parts of Asia can inspire copycat activities in the other parts of the world. Thus, due to a combination of factors, the ideology and practices of militant Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda are becoming more and more prominent in the Sahel.

4. Implications for Christians in the region

The rise of Islamic militancy in the Sahel region has many adverse implications especially when seen from the perspective of the freedom of religion of Christians. Islamic militant groups in the region are naturally very hostile to Christianity,²⁸ which is often expressed through violent acts. These groups are not even willing to tolerate Muslims that adhere to a differing version of Islam.²⁹ Violence and terror are the preferred modus operandi of these groups, so any rise in the number of Islamic militants and the ideology they espouse would mean that Christians in these parts of the world would face a more hostile environment and would be subjected to violent persecution. The instability and fear these groups create as well as the ideology they propagate are in considerable conflict with such human rights as freedom of religion. Even if these groups do not succeed in violently imposing Sharia law at a national level and establishing an Islamic caliphate, they contribute to the overall radicalization of the population and the spread of an extremist and intolerant version of Islam. This leads to an increase in the incidence of persecution of Christians and creates an environment in which any evangelistic activity as well as the very existence of the Church in the region will face violent resistance.³⁰

Another dangerous implication of the rise of Islamic militancy in the Sahel is the threat it poses further south where the religious composition of the population is different. The militancy and extremism of jihadists groups in the Sahel spills over to the south and gives rise to terrorist attacks in predominantly Christian parts of West Africa as well. In the long term, unless these groups are defeated, it is very likely that they would aim to launch a campaign of terrorism and violence in southern Nigeria and Ivory Coast. This trend has already been witnessed and unless militant groups like the Boko Haram are defeated, such trends will continue.³¹ The longer groups

²⁷ See Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention: A Regional Multinational Joint Task Force To Combat Boko Haram, available at <http://pncp.net/news/regional-multinational-joint-task-force-combat-boko-haram>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²⁸ See for example: Al-Qaeda Takes Responsibility for Abduction of Swiss Missionary, Open Doors USA, 20 February 2016, available at <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/tag-prayer-updates-post/al-qaeda-takes-responsibility-for-abduction-of-swiss-missionary/>, last accessed 13 May 2016.

²⁹ Zenn, J.: Boko Haram - The Islamic State of West Africa?, Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 23 September 2014, available at <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/boko-haram-islamic-state-west-africa>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

³⁰ See note 26.

³¹ See for example Miller, M.E.: Horror at the beach - 22 dead in terrorist attack on Ivory Coast resorts, The Washington Post, 14 March 2016, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/03/14/horror-at-the-beach-22-dead-in-terrorist-attack-on-ivory-coast-resorts/>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

like Ansar Dine, AQIM, Boko Haram and IS continue to operate in the Sahel, the greater the risk that they will intensify their campaign of terror and exploit already existing ethnic and regional fault lines to provoke and escalate conflicts. This scenario has been seen to a certain extent in countries like Nigeria, Ivory Coast and the Central African Republic. The fragility of most of the states in the region would make them easy prey for anyone seeking to provoke conflict along ethnic and religious lines.

5. Case studies

5.1 Mali

Mali is a landlocked West African country that can be considered a typical state in the Sahel. Droughts are a recurring phenomenon and desertification and the lack of potable water are serious problems.³² Furthermore, only 5.6% of the territory of Mali is considered to be arable.³³ Mali is a multiethnic country in which there are at least six distinct major ethnic groups and where no single ethnic group constitutes a majority.³⁴ Mali is ranked 179 out of 188 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index with an adult literacy rate of 33.6% and with 50.6% of the population living below the income poverty line which is \$1.25.³⁵ Until 2012, Mali was reputed to have a better democratic record than most African countries due to the regular and fair elections and due to the fact that more than one president respected the constitutional term limits of office and handed over power to a democratically elected opponent.³⁶ However, ethnic groups in northern Mali had expressed their discontent with the national government for decades.³⁷ The Malian government had tried to address these grievances through negotiations which had at times seemed to have borne fruit. However, with the region awash with weapons and jihadi fighters in the aftermath of the Libyan civil war, Tuareg rebels overran northern Mali in 2012 in collaboration with various Islamic militant groups.³⁸ Instability and insecurity has marked Mali ever since and although an international military intervention did bring some improvement, the situation is still precarious.

The implication of these developments has been very adverse for Christians in Mali. For example, on 17 December 2015, three people were killed when an unidentified gunman opened fire outside a Christian radio station in Timbuktu.³⁹ Commenting on this incident, Dr Yattara,

³² Mali, CIA World Fact Book, last updated 6 May 2016, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See Human Development Report 2015, Work for Human development, UNDP, 2015, available at <http://report.hdr.undp.org/>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

³⁶ See Wing, S.D.: Constructing democracy in transitioning societies of Africa - constitutionalism and deliberation in Mali, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; see also Smith, Z.K.: Mali's decade of democracy, in: Journal of Democracy 12, No. 3 (2001): 73-79.

³⁷ See Keita, K., Conflict and conflict resolution in the Sahel - The Tuareg insurgency in Mali, in: Small Wars & Insurgencies 9, No. 3 (1998): 102-128; see also Lecocq, B. and Georg Klute, G.: "Tuareg separatism in Mali." International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis 68, No. 3 (2013): 424-434.

³⁸ See Morgan, A.: What do the Tuareg want?, al-Jazeera, 9 January 2014, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/what-do-tuareg-want-20141913923498438.html>, last accessed 14 May 2016; see also Penney, J.: Mali PM warns of Islamist threat within Tuareg rebels, Reuters, 10 June 2014 available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-primeminister-rebels-idUSKBNOEL1Y920140610>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

³⁹ Mali - Three Killed outside Christian Radio Station, Open Doors UK, 21 December 2015, available at http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/mali_151221.php, last accessed 14 May 2016.

President of the Baptist Church in Mali, said: "Insecurity is everywhere in Mali, the situation is very frail."⁴⁰ Recounting the situation in 2012-13 when the rebels were taking control of town after town in northern Mali, an Open Doors report states:

"The church has experienced a sharp increase in hostilities since March 2012, when Tuareg separatist rebels and extremist Islamist fighters captured the north of Mali and instituted an extreme form of Sharia (Islamic Law). The insurgents destroyed churches and other Christian buildings in Timbuktu and Gao, with the aim of eradicating all traces of Christianity in the region. They also were very hard on more moderate Muslims, killing people, amputating limbs and destroying Sufi sanctuaries. The harsh conditions prompted thousands to flee."⁴¹

When fighting resumed in 2014 and the Tuareg rebels started taking back towns they had been pushed out from, Christians in Mali were once again forced to live in fear and anxiety.⁴² There were also reports of Christian missionaries being kidnapped by jihadist groups not only to get money through ransoms but also to scare Christian workers away from the region.⁴³ Open Doors USA, for instance, reported the kidnapping of the Swiss missionary, Beatrice Stockly.⁴⁴ In a video released by AQIM to claim responsibility for the kidnapping, a representative of AQIM stated: "Beatrice Stockly is a Swiss nun who declared war against Islam in her attempt to Christianize Muslims".⁴⁵

5.2 Niger

Like Mali, Niger is also a landlocked West African country in the Sahel. It is one of the hottest countries in the world and four-fifths of the country is desert; only about 12% of the country's territory is arable.⁴⁶ The Hausa who constitute 53.1% of the total population are the majority while the Zarma/Songhai (21.2%), the Tuareg (11 %), the Fulani (Peul) (6.5%) and the Kanuri (5.9%) are among the other major ethnic groups in the country.⁴⁷ As in Mali, Islam is the religion of the majority.⁴⁸ Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world and is ranked lowest of the 188 states listed in the UN Human Development Index.⁴⁹ Niger's adult literacy rate is just 15.5%, and 40.8% of the population lives below the income poverty line of \$1.25.⁵⁰ Niger's political history has been as turbulent as that of Mali. Military coups have been a recurrent phenomenon, the most recent one occurring in 2010 when the then President Mamadou Tandja tried to

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mali - Christians Living in Fear, Open Doors UK, 15 January 2013, available at http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/mali_130115.php, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁴² Mali - Renewed Fighting Revives Christian Anxieties, Open Doors UK, 30 May 2014, available at http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/mali_140602.php, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁴³ See note 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Niger, CIA World Fact Book, last updated 10 May 2016, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Human Development Report 2015, see above footnote 35.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

circumvent the constitutional limit on his term of office and triggered a constitutional crisis as a result.⁵¹

Niger has also been beset by ethnic rebellion and civil war just like Mali⁵² and its considerable mineral resources have also fueled conflict.⁵³ Just like the rest of the Sahel region Niger has been affected by a rise in militancy and this development has had a very adverse effect on the freedom of religion of Christians in the country. For instance, in a wave of arson attacks that took place on 16 and 17 January 2015, Islamic militants burned down 70 churches together with a number of Christian orphanages, schools and homes.⁵⁴ Despite the fact that the rampage against the churches was allegedly triggered by Niger's president joining other world leaders in showing solidarity with the French people after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, the scale of the destruction shows that these were not mere spontaneous attacks. In a report about the rise of Islamic militancy in Niger, the Washington Post quoted a pastor in Niger as saying: "They are planning day by day to attack us...They need just one day to remove Christians in Niger....They hate Christians. They hate us".⁵⁵

6. Conclusion

The situation for Christians in the Sahel is precarious. The region is becoming a major new hotspot for Islamic militant groups that are partially homegrown and also part of international terror franchises like IS and Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, due to continued and long-term financial support from Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, very radical and intolerant versions of Islam have become more prominent in the region. The instability that has characterized northern Africa as a whole since the Arab Spring of 2011, has also had a spillover effect in the region. Fallout from the revolutions and civil wars in the Maghreb is being felt in the Sahel and Christians are bearing the brunt. This is a critical time for the future of Christianity in the region. If the instability gets out of control and the militant groups have their way, Christians will be killed and exiled out of the entire region. A similar fate would await not just Christians but also Muslims who do not subscribe to the ideology of the militant Islamic groups. Therefore, it is very important that the countries in the region strengthen their cooperation against these militant groups and receive assistance where necessary from outside the region. However, it is also important not to adopt a one-dimensional (purely military) approach in solving the problem of Islamic militancy in the Sahel. The socio-economic and political realities in the region (which the militant groups are adeptly taking advantage of) also need to be transformed. It is only when these underlying

⁵¹ See Baudais, V. and Chauzal, G.: The 2010 coup d'état in Niger - A praetorian regulation of politics?. African Affairs (2011): adr017.

⁵² See: Rebels in Niger Threaten More Attacks, VOA, 1 November 2009, available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2007-08-21-voa37/406086.html>, last accessed 14 May 2016; see also BBC News: Rebels attack army base in Niger, 22 June 2007, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6232390.stm>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁵³ See IRIN report: Uranium - blessing or curse?, 10 October 2007, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/74738/niger-uranium-blessing-or-curse>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁵⁴ Monica Cantilero, M.: Christians in Niger struggle to rebuild 70 churches destroyed by Islamic militants, Christianity Today, 27 July 2015, available at <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/christians.in.niger.struggle.to.rebuild.70.churches.destroyed.by.islamic.militants/60160.htm>, last accessed 14 May 2016.

⁵⁵ Raghavan, S.: Niger struggles against militant Islam, The Washington Post, 6 August 2012,, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/niger-struggles-against-militant-islam/2012/08/16/9b712956-d7f4-11e1-98c0-31f6f55bdc4a_story.html, last accessed 14 May 2016.

realities are improved that Christians and non-Christians will be able to enjoy security and freedom in the region.