West Africa: Islam and Islamism in Francophone West Africa (2012)

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Summary

Using the Islamist occupation of Northern Mali as the background and starting point, this overview article looks at Islam in the nine French-speaking countries of West Africa. It reviews how Islam was introduced to the region, how it evolved over the centuries as it came in contact with local cultures and traditions, and the nature of its relations with the states in the region. The article also makes a preliminary assessment of increasing concerns that the activities of the Islamist groups in Northern Mali might spill across West Africa. To this end, it analyzes potential or existing religious and other factors that make the spread of Jihadist Islam likely—or unlikely—in the region.

1. Introduction: Mali becomes jihadist hub

The overthrow of Malian President Amadou Touré on March 22, 2012 created a power vacuum in Northern Mali which was immediately filled by Tuareg separatist rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)—who had stepped up their attacks in the North since January— and by Islamists fighters from Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). On April 6, 2012, the MNLA proclaimed the creation of an independent state of Azawad in Northern Mali. However, the MNLA was soon pushed out of its northern strongholds by the Islamists who were intent on creating an Islamic state in Mali.[1]

The Islamists were acting under the aegis of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has been operating in the Sahel region for nearly a decade now.[2] Originally known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), AQIM emerged from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) which waged a bloody war against the Algerian military regime in the 1990s. In 2006, the GPSPC changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.[3] In the past decade, AQIM has:

- Carried out raids on military and police targets, primarily in Mauritania and Mali;
- Kidnapped or assassinated tourists, diplomats, and private sector workers in these countries;
- Carried out kidnappings in Niger; attacked foreign embassies in Mauritania; and
- Repeatedly clashed with the militaries of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Algeria.[4]

AQIM funds its operations through criminal activities namely drug trafficking, smuggling in fuel and tobacco, and kidnapping for ransom. According to one estimate, AQIM and its affiliates in the Sahel have received between $40 million and $65 million from kidnappings alone since 2008; funds that have allowed it to become a dominant political and military force in the region.[5]

There is widespread concern that Mali is fast becoming a Jihadist hub, "an explosive cocktail of rebellion, terrorism and religious extremism [that] could spill across borders."[6] The question is whether there are historical, religious and political antecedents in the other countries in the region that make them likely—or unlikely— to be ensnared in the Malian Islamist dragnet. How realistic are fears that Islamism has the potential to spread beyond Mali's borders to engulf the West African region? The term *Islamism* is used here to describe "an Islamic political movement or one that utilizes religion to achieve political power in order to create an Islamic state."[7]

To begin to answer these questions, this overview article will focus on nine francophone West African countries—Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Republic of Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger Cote d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo—some with significant Muslim majorities and others with tiny minorities.

Country	Estimated 2010 Muslim Population	% Estimated 2010 Muslim Population
Benin	2,259,000	24.5
Burkina Faso	9,600,000	58.9
Ivory Coast	7,960,000	36.9

Guinea	8,693,000	84.2
Mali	12,316,000	92.4
Mauritania	3,338,000	99.2
Niger	15,627,000	98.3
Senegal	12,333,000	95.9
Togo	827,000	12.2

Culled from "The Future of the Global Muslim Population."[8]

2. Islam in Francophone West Africa

Although Islam was introduced in West Africa as early as the 8th century through the trans-Saharan trade, it wasn't until the 13th century that it began to take root following the emergence of Muslim states in the region such as the Mali empire (which covered most of modern Mali, Senegal, parts of Mauritania and Guinea) and its successor state, the Songhay empire, which adopted Islam as their state religion.[9] Islam remained an elitist religion until the 19th century Jihads which led to its widespread adoption from Senegambia to Northern Cameroon.[10]

2.1 The Sufi brotherhoods

The dominant strand of Islam which emerged in West Africa is a largely moderate and tolerant Sufi-inspired syncretic Islam which draws extensively from local traditions and superstitions. This Africanized Islam was spread throughout West Africa by two main religious brotherhoods, the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. The Qadiriyya brotherhood was introduced to West Africa in the 15th century from Mauritania. Although it was behind most of the Jihads of the early 19th century,[11] the Qadiriyya stressed charity, generosity humility, piety, and the respect of all individuals no matter their religion or social standing. Founded by Algerian-born Ahmed al Tijani in 1781, the Tijaniyya brotherhood is similar to the Qadiriyya but with simpler rituals and more flexible teaching, which explains why it displaced the Quadiriya to become the leading brotherhood in West Africa by the beginning of the 20th century. The two brotherhoods greatly influenced the nature of Islam in the region as the following country-by-country sketch demonstrates.

In Senegal, the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya are the dominant religious orders, alongside the homegrown Murīdiyya, which is the most influential order in the country.[12] The Senegalese brotherhoods stand apart from others in the region because of their centralized and hierarchical organizational structures and leadership, their formal membership procedures, and their immense influence on Senegalese society and politics.

The Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya are also dominant in Mali, however, Malians are generally not formally affiliated to brotherhoods even though brotherhood teachings and practices, such as the veneration of saint, "remain central to what it means to be Muslim for many Malians."[13]

In Guinea where Islam appeared in the 11th century, the brotherhoods have been instrumental in integrating the Muslim community in the country.[14]

In Burkina Faso where Islam first appeared in the 15th century, the majority of Muslims in the west of the country are Tijaniyya, while in the central regions, the majority are Qadiriyya. A third Sufi brotherhood, the Hamaliyya, is present in the north.[15]

In Cote d'Ivoire, Muslims primarily view religion as a personal endeavor, as a result,

> Sufi brotherhoods (tariqa) have only had a peripheral influence on the collective lives of Muslims in the Ivorian region. The Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya have been present since at least the 19th century in the northern savanna but their influence has been confined to the spiritual lives of individual believers, generally learned men of a certain age. None ever had the centralized hierarchy and close-knit community that made them such powerful socioeconomic and political organizations in Senegal or Northern Nigeria.
> Even without tariqas, "traditional" Islam has long been a pervasive influence on Muslims' daily lives, particularly as regards prayers, Ramadan, life cycle ceremonies and children's education. A religion of traders living as minorities in non-Muslim contexts, Dioula Islamic culture in its local variants was generally infused by pragmatism and, until the mid-20th century, evolved away from the theologians' disputes that periodically divided Muslims in Sudano-Sahelian regions. [16]

The Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya were brought to Benin in the 18th and 19th centuries from neighboring Nigeria. Other brotherhoods such as the Nimatulaye and Alawiya have appeared recently, along with the Shia Ahmadiya.[17]

In Niger, where Islam found its footing in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Tijaniyya Ibrahimiyya is the largest and fastest growing Sufi religious order.[18]

In Mauritania, the Qadiriyya is the largest and most influential brotherhood with most Mauritanians belonging to two of its main branches, the Sidiya and the Fadeliya.[19]

There are very few Qadiriyya in Togo. Virtually all Togolese Muslims belong to three different branches of the Tijaniyya.[20]

2.2 Tolerant Islam

The Islam that took hold in West Africa was therefore a moderate, tolerant and pragmatic Islam greatly influenced by the "Suwarian tradition" (also referred to as the "Suwari tradition"). The Suwarian tradition is named after Al-hâjj Salem Suwari, a Muslim scholar/judge of the Maliki law tradition who developed his teachings in the early 16th century in Mali[21].

> This tradition is characterized by a separation of religion and politics. It offers an apolitical interpretation of Islam, legitimizing religious pluralism and non-Islamic rule. Suwari Islam thus unites Muslims to keep their distance from and avoid confronting political power in order to better focus on religious education and spirituality. [22]

The Suwarian tradition was therefore one which "stressed the religious coexistence of Muslims and unbelievers [and] the attendant separation of religion and politics,"[23] and submission to rulers even in a non-Muslim state.[24] "Suwari's notion of Muslim interaction with non-believers came to influence in a profound way the Islamic traditions of West Africa."[25]

Thus, traditional Islam in West Africa was one that was not receptive to, in fact, largely ignorant of, fundamentalist Islam from the Arab world. According to Werner and Steinbach,[26]

> Islam was established almost exclusively in the form of rites and legal regulations that were detached from the Arabian cultural context in which they originated, and even from their basis in religious philosophy. Islam in sub-Saharan African was thus 'translated' into the various social contexts in different ways… it was adopted selectively, adapted to the respective framework conditions, and developed further.

3. An overview of relations between Islam and the State in West Africa

Traditional Islam and the "Suwarian tradition" which preaches distance from the political arena have inevitably had a moderating influence on the relationship between the state and Islam in West Africa.

> The appearance of Islam as a personal religion without direct influence on political life… implies emphasizing the moral principles of Islam and the duty of strict adherence to the ritual commandments at the expense of the role of Islam as a basis for structuring social life.[27]

Thus, in Francophone Africa, Islam has generally not been an instrument for political identity formation. Nonetheless, its influence on politics has varied from country to country.

In Benin where Muslims are less than a quarter of the population, Islam has had a marginal political impact. However, Sufi religious leaders are highly sought after by politicians for their supposed mystical powers. The most notable case is that of Mohamed Ahmadou Cissé, the marabout who was the "spiritual adviser" for the Pentecostal President Mathieu Kérékou.[28] Beninois Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Union of Benin (UIB) or the National Conference of Islamic Associations in Benin (CONAIB-Shoura) have been riddled by internal divisions over the years and have failed to become rallying points for Muslims.[29]

In Burkina Faso where the military have been in power for most of the country's existence as an independent state, Islam has always been subordinated to political authority. This subservience reached its apex during President Thomas Sankara's "democratic and popular revolution" of the 1980s which sought to co-opt the entire civil society into the state. Although this led to an Islamic revival, this revival was aimed primarily at protecting Muslim identity in the face of the state's authoritarian impulses rather than making Muslims key players on the political scene. Neither did it lead to a rejection of the secular state. As Rene Otayek points out, "on the contrary, in certain cases it articulate[d] the desire for inclusion in the center of the revolutionary process."[30]

In Cote d'Ivoire, Muslims have opted for a legalist and republic approach in their interactions with the state whose legitimacy has never been in question. The idea of an Islamic state has never found an audience here, not even during the civil war. As Marie Miran[31] underlines, "since independence, Muslims have adopted a remarkably stable and homogeneous position vis-à-vis the Ivorian State… Whatever their differences and the political circumstances, they all advocated

and practiced accommodation, which can be defined as constructive engagement towards the State, of which Muslims felt an integral part."

She adds that:

> After Houphouët's death, Ivorian Muslims continued to be legalistic, republican and patriotic. Wahhabis and reformists always maintained that good Muslims ought to be good citizens, good workers and good neighbors. The effort to re-Islamize Muslim society was presented as a contribution towards the remoralization of society at large; the drive to unite Muslims was part of the broader nation-building process; the endeavor to reform Islam also meant that Muslims would be better integrated into Côte d'Ivoire's modern political economy; and reformists' insistence on religious tolerance clearly aimed at consolidating the country's social peace. Muslim leaders were never anti-authoritarian or against the State. As a matter of fact, whenever national cohesion and the State's stability appeared threatened, they made public calls for appeasement, often in partnership with their Christian counterparts, as happened in 1995, 2000 and after September 2002… The Ivorian case is one among many showing that Islam, secularism and democracy are no oxymorons. (17-18)

Up until the 1990s, Niger's numerous military regimes clamped down on real and potential sources of dissent or threat. To this end, religious leaders were kept at arm's length and monitored. Before 1990, the Islamic Association of Niger (IAN) was the sole legal representative of the Muslim community, and served as an auxiliary to the military.[32] However, after the liberalization of Niger's associational space in 1991, dozens of Islamic associations emerged. These organizations have been mostly concerned with the perceived erosion of Niger's religious identity by secular democratic state. For example, in 2011, they successfully scuttled plans to adopt a new family law that gave more rights to women. These associations also fight against the supposed pagan practices of the brotherhoods.[33]

In Senegal, there has always been a symbiosis between politics and religion, with political leaders enhancing their political legitimacy with the help of religious leaders, and in return, granting religious leaders access to state rents and other economic benefits. This is what some have labeled the "Senegalese social contract."[34] The political endorsement of religious leaders is highly sought after because it can dramatically change political fortunes. This practice is known as "nidggël."[35]

During the 2012 legislative elections, five Muslim clerics won parliamentary seats for the first time,[36] raising concerns about Senegal's secular tradition.[37] These concerns are overblown. As Dickinson[38] points out,

> Senegal stands as an illustration of the reality that political Islam can be a constructive and regime-stabilizing force. Senegal has found a balance between a modernizing, secular state and the Muslim tradition. Democracy co-exists with a religiously encouraged grassroots social conservatism.

In Mauritania, Islam has played second fiddle to the state which has been under military rule for most of its existence as an independent country. Even though it is officially an "*Islamic Republic,*"

it is no different from the other officially secular states in the region. The Mauritanian state uses the standard political tools to control the Muslim community namely through a Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education, and a High Council of Islam.[39] In 2007, an Islamic political party, the National Rally for Reform and Development (Tawasol), was legalized. The party, which is affiliated with the Mauritanian Muslim Brotherhood, embraces a moderate form of Islam and describes its political vision as being driven by Islamic reference, national belonging and democratic choice.[40] Tawasol seeks political power within the framework of Mauritanian institutions and has thus taken part in a coalition government, and in legislative and presidential elections.[41]

Mali is constitutionally a secular state which proscribes religious political parties, even though 90% of its population is Muslim. Here, religion is 'understood as private and confessional'[42] and generally stays clear of politics. In1980, the government created the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI), as the sole association authorized to speak on behalf of Muslims.[43] AMUPI lost its preeminence following the political liberalization of the 1990s which led to the creation of new Islamic associations.

In 2002, the government created a High Islamic Council (HCI) to be the "official and unique interlocutor of political authorities for all questions relative to the practice of Islam".[44] The HCI has exploited the increasing weakness of the Malian state to become an influential spokesperson for Muslim interests in the country. In 2009, the HCI forced the legislature to suspend a new family law which established equality between men and women on matters of divorce and inheritance. When the final version of the law was adopted in 2011 was stripped of 49 provisions rejected by the HCI which gave greater rights to women. Since the outbreak of the crisis in northern Mali, the HCI has mediated between the Malian government and the Islamists. In return, Malian government has given in to the HCI's demand for a Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is now headed by one of its members.[45]

Guinea's first post-independence government led by President Sekou Toure was very critical of the religious brotherhoods that dominate Guinean Islam, and he kept a respectable distance between religion and his socialist regime.[46] President Toure's attitude changed in the mid-1970s when he used Islam as a springboard to stifle internal opposition and break the Guinea's international isolation and open new channels for foreign aid.[47] He began a charm offensive toward the Arab world[48] and created a National Islamic Council and a Ministry of Islamic Affairs. However, he ensured that Islam remained subservient to the party-state. The relationship between the state and the National Islamic Council was clearly spelled out in the resolutions from the Council's first conference in 1975. They stated that the Council was committed to "making the mosque a sacred place for the manifestation of faith, and for the propagation of the Party-State's watchwords." The resolutions also invited "all believers to mobilize and unite around the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, our comrade Sekou Toure, the man to whom Islam is synonymous with Revolution, liberty brotherhood, democracy, dignity, and independence."[49]

Throughout President Toure's reign and that of his successor, Lansana Conte, the relationship between religion and the state was characterized by a "party-centered and state-controlled regimentation of religious organizations."[50] In 2004, Conte created a Ministry of the National

Islamic League, which was later downgraded to the General Secretariat of the National Islamic League in 2006.[51] In 2007, the league was transformed into a more broad-based Secretariat of Religious Affairs to "promote better relations among religious denominations and ameliorate interethnic tensions."[52]

4. Is Francophone West Africa a fertile ground for Islamism?

Prior to the crisis in Mali, fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam from Saudi Arabia was considered the most significant threat to the moderate Islam in West Africa, and the most likely purveyor of jihadist ideology in the region.[53]

Wahhabism is a branch of Islam founded in the 18th century by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, which preaches a puritan and fundamentalist brand of Islam based on Salafism. Salafism (Salafiyya) is a movement which believes that true Muslims should emulate the lifestyle of the pious forefathers (the Salafs / al-salaf al-salih), namely the first three generations of Muslims considered to be the most knowledgeable about Muslim creed ('aqida). According to Salafis, true Islam is based solely on the Qur'an and the Sunna, that is, the exemplary lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad transmitted through the *hadith* or sayings. Classic Salafism is therefore scripturalist and literalist, requiring Muslims to "behave exactly like the pious forefathers whose deeds and thoughts were found in the sources of the Islam."[54]

Although all Salafis share a common religious creed, they differ in their views on the role of religion in politics and society. Jalloh and Falola[55] make a distinction between *Salafiyya 'ilimiyya* (scholarly Salafis) and *Salafiyya jihadiyya* (fighting Salafis), clarifying that:

> It is the jihadist or fighting Salafis that engage in terrorist attacks, while the scholarly Salafis are more concerned with building model Islamist communities and imposing their rigorous interpretation of Quranic law. However, jihadists are often recruited from scholarly Salafi communities.

Wiktorowicz[56] makes a further—and even more relevant—distinction between purist, political and jihadist strands of Salafi/Wahhabi Islam:

> The different contextual readings have produced three major factions in the community: the purists, the politicos, and the jihadis. The purists emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy. Politicos, in contrast, emphasize application of the Salafi creed to the political arena, which they view as particularly important because it dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate. Jihadis take a more militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution. All three factions share a common creed but offer different explanations of the contemporary world and its concomitant problems and thus propose different solutions.

Wahhabism is based on the classic Salafi doctrine. Its founder, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, believed the following:

Muslims had become ignorant of their religion and lived in a barbaric state of ignorance (jahiliyya), which was at the root of Islam's spiritual and political decline since the golden age. The only way to achieve salvation and retrieve past glory was the re-assertion of absolute monotheism and the belief in the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) as the basis of the Islamic creed (*'aqida*) and a return to the Qur'an and the Sunna. In order to achieve this pristine purity, he condemned the acceptance of intermediaries between man and God, such as the veneration of the tombs of saints, holy trees, astrology and soothsayers. Following classic Salafism, he regarded these practices as giving associates to God (*shirk*), or idolatry and polytheism, the form of religion that prevailed in Mecca before Muhammad started to preach Islam (*jahiliyya*). They were condemned as reprehensible innovations (*bid'a / bida*)... Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was willing to call those who did not adhere to the doctrine of tawhid unbelievers (*kafir/kuffar*) or apostates (*murtaddun*), who can be excommunicated (takfir), which was a precondition for waging jihad against them.[57]

Salafism and Wahhabism are theological conjoined twins which feed off from each other, and which describe virtually the same reality; hence the use of both terms interchangeably by many scholars. Both Salafism and Wahhabism have spurned diverse and sometimes contradictory internal currents that are generally glossed over for purposes of analytical convenience, but which are helpful in understanding the nature of Wahhabism in West Africa and elsewhere. According to Roel,[58]

Wahhabism was pulled into the modern world by more sophisticated, ideologically and culturally diverse independent thinkers and groups who transformed it to confront the modern world. They brought into the equation their own doctrines, interests and issues and backgrounds to create a multifaceted Salafism that is reflected in a diversity of strains, ranging from apolitical, quietist currents, including life-style and identity movement, to political activists movements and violent Jihadi networks. These currents trace their origins to Salafism and share basic doctrines and terms with Wahhabism, but have their own genealogies, developing their own particular interpretation of Salafism based on specific local circumstances and global developments.

This is the case in West Africa where "a broad range of [Wahhabi-inspired] reform movements"[59] have emerged, and are referred to by a variety of names – Izala, Sunnite, Islamist, Wahhabi, etc. For the purposes of this study, we use the term "Wahhabi" to describe all of these Salafi/Wahhabi movements.

Although Wahhabi Islam has made significant inroads in West Africa in the last two decades, it first appeared in the region in the 1950s after the return of the first African Muslims trained in Arab theological universities such as the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt.[60] These early West African Wahhabis denounced Sufi brotherhoods and "Sufi rituals, especially the exuberant adulation of the Prophet Muhammad and holy Muslim men as excessive, bordering on anthropomorphism, or associating others with God."[61] The Wahhabi movement soon spread across Francophone Africa thanks to the Dakar-based Muslim Cultural Union (UCM) whose stated goal was to rid Islam of all corrupt influences and practices by fighting against fanaticism,

superstitions, and the disgraceful exploitation of Muslims by "charlatans."[62] UCM branches were established in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo.[63]

Wahhabi ranks increased after Saudi Arabia established an Islamic university in Medina in 1960 with the specific goal of training preachers who would return to their home countries to preach pure Islam.[64] Saudi support for the Wahhabi movement continued for the next three decades through funding for Islamic centers, schools, and mosques. For example, between 20012 and 2004, the Saudis opened 16 mosques in Timbuktu alone.[65] Other mosques included the King Faisal Mosque and Center in the Republic of Guinea ($21.3 million), the King Faisal Mosque in Chad ($16 million), the Bamako Mosque in Mali ($6.7 million), and the Yaounde Mosque in Cameroon ($5.1 million).[66] An unwritten rule was that the Imams of these mosques had to be selected or approved by the Saudis.

The political liberalization that swept through West Africa in the 1990s was an opportunity for Arab states, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, to pour money into the new Islamic associations and NGOs that emerged from the ashes of the military or single-party dictatorships that once held sway in the region. These associations and NGOs bypassed traditional mosques to become focal points for proselytizing and disseminating fundamentalist Islamic ideology. According to Mayke Kaag,[67]

> By combining material aid with proselytization, [these NGOs] embed their work in ideas about transnational solidarity and the importance of enlarging the *umma*, the global community of the faithful. By disseminating a Salafi form of Islam, they link local believers to other parts of the Muslim world. They thus nourish processes of Islamization and Arabization.

In Benin, the main Wahhabi movement is the *Jama´atu izalatu bid'a wa iqamat al sunna* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition), commonly called Yan Izala, which was founded in Northern Nigeria in 1978.[68] According to Denise Brégand,[69] "with the exception of the members of the Yan Izala, the fundamentalists are not Islamists, those who use Islam for political ends... they do not aim at acquiring power in the name of Islam." He adds that "reformists in Benin, including their extremist fundamentalist branch, have finally shown themselves as devoted to their society and to peace, the local here trumping the global."[70]

In Burkina Faso where they are commonly called Sunnites, the Wahhabis have focused primarily on condemning the supposed deviations of the brotherhoods.[71]

In Cote d'Ivoire, Wahhabi Islam first appeared in the 1950s but never succeeded in gaining a foothold in the country or opening up Ivorian Islam to the Arab world.[72] Also, the movement did not benefit from the usual largesse of Arab states because for most of his 33-year presidency, President Houphouet Boigny barred Ivorian Muslim organizations from receiving funds from Pan-Islamic organizations. It was only in 1993, the last year of his rule, that Cote d'Ivoire established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, and it was the Pentecostal President Laurent Gbagbo who finally allowed the Saudis to open an embassy in the country in 2000. Gbagbo also initiated Cote d'Ivoire's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).[73] Today, there is a smattering of Wahhabis in the country

operating under the banner of the Association of Sunni Muslims in Cote d'Ivoire (AMSCI). They have softened their hostility towards traditional Islam and supported the creation of the National Islamic Council which brings together Ivorian traditionalists and fundamentalists. Like other Ivorian Muslims, the Wahhabis are "legalistic, republican and patriotic."[74]

In Mauritania, Wahhabism is primarily an urban phenomenon embraced by disillusioned youths who view fundamentalist Islam as the response to the failings of the modern state.[75] Wahhabis here are not out to create an Islamic state but generally "want to achieve power through elected office and use the state to enforce Islamic law, promote Islam in public life, and craft a more Islamic foreign policy."[76] They are also critical of AQIM and favor intervention in Northern Mali.[77] Nonetheless, Mauritania has had its own share of jihadists, many of whom fought in Afghanistan, have occupied high ranking positions in al Qaeda and AQIM, and now play frontline roles in the Malian crisis.[78] The most notable example is Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, the founder of Mujwa.[79]

The Wahhabis are a minority in Mali even in the north now under Islamist control. In the southern part of the country, there is growing concern that the leadership of the influential High Islamic Council is sliding towards Wahhabi ideology.[80] Observers, however, argue that the increased visibility of Islam through the HCI should not be interpreted as a move toward Islamism.[81]

In Niger, Wahhabis mostly belong to the Yan Izala movement. Like the Yan Izalas in Nigeria and Benin, the Nigerien Yan Izalas reject Sufi Islam and other un-Islamic practices. The Izalas are noted for their effective grassroots proselytization campaigns across the country.[82] The creation of a National Islamic Council (NIC) in 2003 received widespread support from Sufi leaders who viewed it as a tool to contain the Izalas[83] who have been involved in a number of violent incidents over the years. For example, they led violent protests against the International Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) which took place in Niamey.[84]

Senegal has had numerous Wahhabi-inspired groups, none of which is in any position to challenge the dominance of the brotherhoods. As Gellar points out:[85]

> Given the limited influence of the Islamists, Senegal is not likely to become an Islamic Republic unless the heads of the leading Sufi Brotherhoods throw their support behind such a project. At the present time, the current leaders of the Sufi Brotherhoods, though pressing for the injection of Islamic values in the schools and revisions of the Family Code, are not challenging the authority of the secular state. However, the younger generation of marabouts-- the so-called generation of the grandsons of the founders-- may be tempted to use Islamist slogans and popular discontent to ride to power.

Togo has a small Muslim community and an even smaller Wahhabi community made up primarily of graduates from Arab universities.

4.1 Destabilizing potential?

Although much has been written about the destabilizing potential of Wahhabi Islam in West Africa, with Boko Haram and AQIM serving as the poster boys for Wahhabi/Salafi-inspired

jihadism, the vast majority of Wahhabi or Wahhabi-inspired groups in the countries in this study are similar to the elitist reformist movements of the 1950s and 1960s which primarily sought to rid traditional West African Islam of its "impurities" and take it back to its "pure" Arabian roots. Unlike jihadism which seeks to create Islamic states, Wahhabism in West Africa is a fundamentalist Islam that is comfortable with, or at least resigned to, working within the framework of the modern, and almost often, secular state. As Alex Thurton[86] rightly points out, "'Wahhabism' in West Africa has looked a lot different than its cousin in Arabia".

Wahhabis, particularly the younger generation, are also very comfortable defending and promoting their religious values in the public sphere. In many countries, this has resulted in traditional Islam adopting aspects of Wahhabi ideology – this "mainstreaming" of Wahhabi practices is what Saint-Lary[87] describes as a move from Wahhabi reform to "generic reformism" in West Africa. As Miran has stressed in the case of Cote d'Ivoire,[88]

> In the past 15-20 years, owing in part to reformist influences, Sufi Islam has undergone a renewal process, both in terms of organization with the adoption of modern means of community management and communication, and in terms of membership. New Sufi leaders such as Cheikh Moustapha Sonta, self-proclaimed Khalifa of Tidjanis in Côte d'Ivoire, are behind the return of a significant number of young, educated and executive Muslims to mystical Islam. As in the past though, the trend reveals individual spiritual aspirations for self-improvement rather than collective commitments for action in the public sphere.

Thus, mainstream Islam is incorporating Wahhabi teachings and practices in its bid to appeal to those segments of the Islamic community most inclined to embrace Wahhabism. In a similar vein, Karen Smid[89] has written about young men in Guinea who "befriended reformists, consumed their media, and embraced a number of their ideas, especially those that facilitated criticism of Sufi elders, while still refusing to take [up] 'Wahhabism'."

5. Can Mali jihadists threaten the entire region?

Even though the majority of Malians practice traditional Islam, jihadists were still able to take over Northern Mali, demonstrating that on its own, traditional Islam is not a bulwark to Islamism. Can the Malian scenario occur elsewhere in West Africa where Sufi Islam is dominant? Can the jihadist groups operating in Northern Mali actually take their campaign beyond Mali's borders?

In July 2012, 10 individuals belonging to AQIM and Mujwa were arrested in Northern Senegal.[90] In October 2012, a leaked United Nations report alleged that the pro-Gbagbo opposition in Cote d'Ivoire had met with Ansar Dine leaders to discuss plans to overthrow the Ouattara regime.[91] That same month, 26 Malians with suspected ties to the Islamists were expelled from Guinea for allegedly conspiring to destabilize the Guinean regime.[92] There have been many other reports of Islamists with Malian connections spotted across West Africa.

Although these highly mediatized events have raised the specter of a Jihadist conflagration across West Africa, not all countries in this study face any real threat from the Islamists in Northern Mali. The situation in Mali stems from a confluence of unique factors—a weak and unresponsive central government, an ineffective and demoralized army, a restive Tuareg population, and heavily-armed Islamist and Tuareg rebels. A similar situation does not exist in other countries in the region, except, perhaps in Mauritania[93] and Niger,[94] whose territories have been used by AQIM in the past, and both of which equally have restive and marginalized Tuareg communities. The most likely fallout from the Malian crisis will not be Islamism but regional disruptions caused by the worsening refugee crisis in a region already buckling under the weight of a disastrous food crisis. [95] In early April 2012, for example the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that about 200,000 Malian refugees had already flooded into neighboring countries.[96]

5.1   The "Afghanistan effect" [97]

Although the majority of countries in Francophone West Africa would most likely be spared internal upheavals stemming from events in Mali, there is a possibility that some of these countries may eventually fall prey to the "Afghanistan effect" albeit in varying degrees. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Afghanistan became a jihadist hub as thousands of Mujahedeen from around the world flocked to Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight the Soviet infidels. When these fighters returned home in the 1990s, they established jihadist groups such as the *Abu Sayyaf* group in the Philippines and the *Jamal Islamia* in Indonesia which have been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in Southeast Asia such as the Bali bombings of 2002.

Today, jihadists from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Asia and even Europe are turning up in droves in Northern Mali. In June, 2012, it was alleged that Boko Haram had set up a training camp in Gao.[98] Since then, there have been reports of Afghans and Pakistanis training Islamists in northern Mali;[99] and of fighters from Togo, Benin, Niger, Guinea, Senegal, Algeria, Egypt, Sierra Leone[100]; Western Sahara[101] and Sudan[102] making their way to Mali. What will become of these fighters when they return home? Will they simply fade away or emulate the Afghan mujahedeen? If some of these returning fighters decide to emulate the Afghan mujahedeen, their success—or failure— will largely be determined by key factors such as the ability to mobilize and organize into viable jihadist groups, access to funding, and the political situation in their home countries.

Conclusion

In his often cited but alarmist study of Islamism in Africa,[103] David McCormack argues that:

> Islamism is on the rise throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, transforming a moderate and integrated Muslim population into an ever more extremist one that is isolated from its non-Muslim neighbors. For African Muslims, the Islamist arrangement will entail an erosion of human rights and lead to intra-faith conflict between moderates and extremists. For African governments, Islamism will present a challenge to central

authority and generate increasingly unmanageable inter-communal strife between Muslims and non-Muslims. And for non-Africans, Islamism will mean the continued development – in a region that, ominously, traditionally receives little attention from the Western security community – of a hospitable environment for terrorists with an international agenda.

However, as we have demonstrated in this overview paper, Islamism remains a fringe and sometimes non-existent movement in Francophone West Africa. Traditional Sufi-inspired Islam will remain the dominant form of Islam in the foreseeable future, even as it incorporates elements of fundamentalist Islam to stay relevant, particularly to a younger generation of Muslims. The influence of Wahhabi Islam will continue to grow in the region, however, rather than struggling to establish Sharia-based states, mainstream Wahhabi movements will be primarily concerned with reforming Islam from within, and integrating Islamic policies into national policymaking decisions as much as possible. This does not discount the possibility of elements outside the Wahhabi mainstream embracing jihadism as in the case of Boko Haram, which has publicly and violently distanced itself from the mainstream Wahhabi movement in Nigeria, accusing it of deviating from, and of not being representative of true Islam. In 2010, for example, Boko Haram assassinated Bashir Kashara, a prominent Wahhabi cleric and an outspoken critic of the sect. Boko Haram has also denounced Yan Izala, the most influential Wahhabi group in Nigeria, for its close ties with the Muslim religious establishment, and its reluctance to wage Jihad against the Nigerian state.[104]

Islam in Francophone West Africa will become increasingly diverse and complex, with traditionalists, reformists and fundamentalists vying for the same religious space, and fighting to define what (true) Islam is and what it means to be a Muslim.

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