



Conservatism in Mali

The State of Islam and Jihad

West & Horn of Africa Programme



[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Mosques_in_Mali#mediaviewer/File:Grande_Mosquée_du_Vendredi_de_Niono_\(Mali\).JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Mosques_in_Mali#mediaviewer/File:Grande_Mosquée_du_Vendredi_de_Niono_(Mali).JPG)

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Abstract:

Although legally a secular state, Mali is at least 90% Muslim. Religious leaders are respected and have historically played a role in influencing political behavior. For better or worse, the use of religion in politics has become part of the 'rules of the game'. Mali has historically been a country with a moderate, Sunni Islam. However, even before 2012, there has been concern over the growth in popularity of conservative, Salafist, or Wahhabist sects of Islam in Mali. In this article, I will question the role of religious conservatism in Malian politics, and whether or not conservative political Islam in Mali is particularly threatening in and of itself. I propose that although the involvement of Islamic leaders and groups may prevent the government from being entirely secular, that aside from jihadists in the North, the most popular Islamic leaders and groups do not advocate violence.

“But is it really true that people's public behavior, specifically their political behavior, can be read from their religion? Could it be that a person who takes his or her religion literally is a potential terrorist? And only someone who thinks of the text as not literal, but as metaphorical or figurative, is better suited to civic life and the tolerance it calls for? How, one may ask, does the literal reading of religious texts translate into hijacking, murder, and terrorism?” – Mahmood Mamdani¹

The prevailing understanding is that Malians have traditionally practiced Islam moderately and with a Sufist element. However, in actuality, the 90% of Malians who are Muslims practice a variety of different interpretations, which are as diverse as Mali's population itself. Statistical data on the demographic divisions regarding how Malians practice Islam are sorely lacking, and IISA hopes to further research in the field over the next two years. On our recent trip to Mali, it was implied by several of our informants that there are internal concerns about the growth of conservatism and Salafism within Mali. Of

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course, this apprehension is focused on Northern Mali's jihadism, but the increasing political role of Islam, particularly more conservative Islam, within Mali has also caused concern.

In this analysis, both the influence of Islamic leaders in the South and the Northern jihadist insurgency will be discussed. As Thurston says, “Even if Malian Salafis share broad theological orientations, their politics and activist styles differ tremendously. These caveats aside, reformist and Salafi organizations have

played particularly strong roles in both the northern Islamist movement and in Islamic political mobilization at the national level.”² Rather than making any deterministic or reductionist claims about the role of Islam in Mali, it is

important to understand that conservative Muslims are rational actors and that historical, political, and economic factors have also influenced conditions in the North and South. These conditions have led to very different outcomes.

The concern over conservative Islamic influence in Mali predates the 2012 outbreak of violence. Much of this concern is due to the increasing Saudi Arabian or

Gulf patronage, donations, and construction efforts. As Henry Jackson Society's Olivier Guitta has argued, in a poor country like Mali, which is often unable to provide services on its own, Saudi investment in education, healthcare, cultural centers, infrastructure, and religious institutions has allowed Saudi conservatism to become very influential indeed.³ In addition, increasing numbers of Malian Islamic leaders are getting religious education in the Gulf. Regardless, non-affiliated Sunni Muslims, Sufists, and other groups outnumber Salafis in Mali.

In regards to the role of women and family law, Malians who value the state's secularism have reason to worry about the role that politically involved Islamic groups hold in influencing the country's governance. As IISA's researcher Louise Matthews has elaborated at length on the family code and role of women in Mali in another IISA analysis piece, I will only briefly discuss the issue here. In 2009, Mali's National Assembly considered legislation that would improve the conditions of women's rights, called the Family Code. According to IRIN,

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the code considered issues such as setting the legal minimum age for marriage at 18, abolishing the death penalty, recognizing only secular marriages, and expanding inheritance rights to girls.⁴ Religious groups, including the Islamic High Council of Mali and others, rejected some aspects of the code, mobilized protests, and as a result, a watered down and religiously approved version of the law was eventually passed.

High Council officials have argued that they are not forcing their will on the people, but rather serve to support and mobilize the people. In regards to the organization's ability to influence politics, one of our contacts described the council as, "the exception to a failing civil society".

Despite the Family Code issue, Southern religious leaders from both ends of the spectrum have denounced Northern Jihadism and several isolated incidents of religious violence in the South. Imam Mahmoud Dicko of the High Islamic Council in Mali (HCIM) has said that jihadists have no right to impose Shariah law or to tell Malians how to practice their religion. Dicko has been educated in Saudi

Arabia and Mauritania. In the current crisis, Dicko initially supported the French intervention against the Northern jihadists⁵ and has tried to create a dialogue between the Northern jihadists and the state, which led to the release of prisoners held in the North.⁶ One of the country's most popular Sufi Islamic groups is Ansar al-Din (not to be confused with the other Ansar Al-Din, a Tuareg led Jihadist group in the North) led by Sheikh Ousmane Haidara, who is also vice president of Mali's High Islamic Council. Haidara has supported the Malian government's secularism. Shortly after the 2012 outbreak of violence, he made a statement in order to differentiate his followers from the Northern Jihadists, "We don't need their Sharia. We have been Muslim here for centuries.... Mali is a secular country.... we live with Christians, we live with Jews, and we live with animists. We are all Malians together here.... We are not in agreement with the Sharia of Iyad [Ag Ghali]. We reject it."⁷ Clearly, the organization, with over one million followers, preaches tolerance. Nonetheless, as Benjamin Souares points out, "In some ways, the current

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situation in Mali is strikingly similar to the French colonial period when colonial administrators attempted to identify good and bad Muslims and no Muslim cleric ever completely escaped suspicion."⁸

Despite the fact that those who support the secularism of the state may feel threatened by Islamic organizations that are playing a role in politics, the groups that may threaten the state's commitment to secular principles are not affiliated with groups that are committing violent acts in the North. Therefore, Southern Mali's Islamic political influencers are not necessarily a threat to national or international security. To lump Islamic civil society together with jihadist groups would not merely be bigoted, it would also be analytically lazy. Religion has played a role in politics, civil society, and governance in many other contexts, and this has not necessarily been as widely regarded as a negative thing. After all, there is an ongoing internal debate about whether or not the United States is a Christian nation, and Christian ideas certainly influence politics.

On the contrary, naming a particular leader or group as 'Islamist' or 'radical' can

be a good way of shutting them down, refusing to work with them, legitimizing action against them, or refusing to recognize that their voice matters. The IISA West and Horn of Africa team has discussed several times our dislike of the term ‘Islamist’. This is because it has vague meaning with a negative connotation of fundamentalism and has been used to refer to anything from political Islam to jihadism. Moreover, the term implies that those with more mainstream views are somehow less Muslim.

Similarly, Mahmood Mamdani has argued that post 9-11 understandings of Islam profess that there is a dichotomy between good, westernized, secular Muslims and bad, fundamentalist, Shariah-imposing Muslims.⁹ Of course, making such a distinction is problematic, and the situation in Mali provides good evidence of this. Islamic conservatism has become interwoven in violent outcomes in the North, but the situation is far from simple. Rather than resorting to blaming the jihadist insurgency on crazy, radical, bad Muslims, I propose that the inclusion of political

economic factors create a better framework for analysis of the conflict.

In the frontier region of the Sahel, the Tuareg and other people of Northern Mali have lived outside the rule of law or a

social contract for some time. Thus, at its origins, the conflict in the North is not originally about Islam. As Thurston writes, “Despite some references

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to Islam by earlier rebel movements including the Arab Islamic Front of Azawad—active in the 1990s—the 2012 conflict marked the first time that Islamic themes dominated the rhetoric of a Tuareg-led rebellion in Mali.”¹⁰ This is because the past outbreaks of Tuareg rebellion have been mobilized by a nationalist rhetoric, fueled by the marginalization and neglect of the North by Mali’s government, as well as other political and economic grievances that were exacerbated by droughts and famine. Northern Mali remains one of the least developed and most impoverished areas in the world. There has also been a history of human rights violations¹¹, leading to an increasingly distrustful relationship between the North and South with each chapter in the history of the rebellions. It is worth noting that the Tuaregs are not particularly

predisposed to conservative interpretations of Islam. For example, in their culture, male to female relationships are much less regulated than in most interpretations of Islam and men wear veils to cover their faces while women typically do not.¹²

However, one thing that the Tuareg and the jihadists indisputably had in common was that the 2012 coup gave each of them the opportunity to make a move against the state. However, the relationship between these two anti-state forces is incredibly complicated and difficult to define. While traveling in Mali, most of our contacts told us that relations between the Tuareg leaders and jihadist groups were merely pragmatic, to be broken at will when convenient. They also told us that fighting groups tend to be fluid, with clan alliance taking importance over whether a militant group is aligned with the Tuaregs or jihadists. In some cases the two motivations, nationalism and Islam, have become intermixed and nearly impossible to distinguish. For example Ansar Al-Din's leader, Iyad Aq Ghaly apparently sought to lead the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), but was

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refused and left to form an Islamic militant group.¹³ Others, such as H el ene Claudot-Hawad, suggest that the threat of jihad has been instrumentalized and overstated. She argues, "The confusion between Tuareg insurgents, Islamists and terrorists, not to mention the other misrepresentations, is a convenient shortcut to eradicate, under the cover of fighting terrorism, any political dissent on the part of the Tuareg and any statement or action that could hamper the interests of political and economic players on the Saharan stage."¹⁴

Furthermore, many of the jihadists in Northern Mali have come from outside of the country, such as members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a formerly anti-Algerian government jihadist organization. AQIM entered the country years after its establishment, is composed of fighters from a mixture of different states and ethnic backgrounds, and it is associated with Al-Qaeda Central and a network of other jihadist groups. Mali's troubles with jihadism do not exist in a vacuum; these problems are interconnected with struggles that have been happening throughout the Islamic world for decades.

In conclusion, it is important to overcome deterministic ideas about good or bad Muslims and the role of Islam in Mali. It is not my intention to pass judgment on the actions or ideology of any of the individuals or groups mentioned in this analysis, or on conservative sects of Islam, or Islam in general. I have rather argued that the influx of conservatism in Mali and the increasingly political role of Islam, although challenging

to the secularity of the state, is not, in and of itself, putting the country on a path to further jihadist violence. Violence in Mali has been determined by an array of political, social, and economic factors, the vast majority of which have nothing at all to do with Islam or religion. Instead it is useful to conceive of religion as tool and as a motivator – for violence, for peace, and for politics.

About Resources, militancy and organised crimes in West and Horn of Africa programme

Brief Background and Scope

Africa's GDP is the most rapidly growing of any continent but corruption, crime, and militancy are rife. Much of this centres on the continent's wealth of natural resources, including petroleum etc. Foreign investment in Africa has grown exponentially over the last decade and will continue to rise. Consequently, foreign & African governments and criminal/militant groups' interests and sphere of influences will clash with increasing intensity over the coming years. These clashes will have direct implications on energy, regional and global security agendas. Furthermore, areas such as the West and Horn of Africa regions are strategically located, which enhances their role in the international trade system through shipping routes and transnational linkages, etc. The creation of AFRICOM reflects the rising global importance of the region, with the exportation of oil only expected to drastically increase from the continent by 2025. Yet with the region still lacking institutions of effective governance and reliable security structures, the levels of violent insurgency have jeopardised economic development in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Mali and Nigeria etc. Different militant groups finance their operations through employment of traditional criminal enterprises, such as smuggling and drug sales. Resources are also exploited

for revenue by both criminal organisation and militant groups. Militant organisations such as Al-Shabab and other Jihadists and nationalist movement operating primarily in Somalia & Sahel – have exploited the security vacuum that exists in the regions. In addition, issues such as piracy continue to effect maritime security whilst increasing costs for counter-piracy measures.

The implications of the above is severe on all three fronts i.e. Energy security, regional security and global security. To address these problems and develop solutions, we must now confront all three facets holistically, with due appreciation of their interrelated attributes.

Programme's Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between resources, militant groups and the dynamics of organised crime in West/horn of Africa.
2. Conflict forecasting and risk analysis of the current and future dynamics of militancy, resources, organised crimes and their repercussions on energy security, regional and global security.
3. Situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels.
5. Creating a useful guide and knowledge base for stakeholders and public for future oil, gas and aid endeavours in West/Horn of Africa.

About Us

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations

and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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