

Preventing violent extremism, North Africa and the Sahel

D6.2 Working Paper on enabling environments, drivers, and occurrence/non- occurrence of violent extremism



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Abstract

Why does violent extremism *not* occur in enabling environments? Based on recent field work in the Sahel and the Maghreb region this is the main question we seek to understand in this working paper. To understand non-occurrence and thereby the foundations of social and individual resilience, we also need to understand the drivers of violent extremism and why they gain traction among some populations while others show much higher degrees of resilience. To achieve this, we will zoom in on cases in Mali, Niger, Tunisia and Morocco, showcasing different trajectories of occurrence and non-occurrence.

1. Introduction

Violent extremist ideas and ideologies are supposed to thrive in places of social and economic marginalisation, combined with various forms of insecurity. This is what PREVEX defines as enabling environments – and people who live in such places often have very good reasons for being angry. However, even in places as extreme as Central Mali and the district of Mopti, most people do *not* join armed movements based on extremist ideas. They remain peaceful and just try to get on with their lives, while some also resist, openly or in more subtle ways. Thus, while it may not be too difficult to explain why violent extremism and the actors behind these ideas gain traction in such environments, it is more difficult to understand and explain why people do not join and what constitutes the basis for social and individual resilience to violent extremism.¹

What this working paper seeks to explore is therefore, what can explain the difference between for example Agadez and Tillabéri in Niger? Here, people are experiencing quite similar grievances, inhabiting an enabling environment that includes poverty, limited state capacity and marginalisation. However, while in Tillabéri, several people have become radicalised and joined violent extremist groups, in Agadez, there are few, if any known cases of this. Similarly, in Mali, how can we explain the relative non-occurrence in Segou seen in relation to the manifest occurrence of violent extremism in Mopti, when people in both places are confronted with the same known potential drivers of violent extremism? One explanation for this could be that someone has intervened to strengthen societal resilience. Another explanation could be that those cases of non-occurrence inhabit stronger community resilience in the first place.

Most research on violent extremism focuses on the cases where it occurs and seeks to understand why people join extremist groups.² Hence, there are only a few scattered studies of

¹ We understand ‘resilience’ as encompassing both an individual and a community perspective, associated with strengths rather than deficits. Furthermore, while this implies an agency for individuals, we also stress structural challenges that inflict on the level of agency. For a discussion of this, see William Stephens, Stijn Sieckelinck and Hans Boutellier (2021) ‘Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 44, no.4: 346-361.

² See, for example, Magnus Ranstorp (2007) ‘Introduction: mapping terrorism research – challenges and priorities’, in Magnus Ranstorp (ed.) *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, London: Routledge, 1–28; Clark McCauley & Sophia Moskalenko (2008) ‘Mechanisms of political radicalization: pathways toward terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 20 no. 3: 415-433; Silke Andrew (Ed.) (2018) *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, London: Routledge, pp. 694; Elena Pokalova (2019) ‘Driving factors behind foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 9: 798-818; Bart Schuurman (2019) ‘Topics in terrorism research: reviewing trends and gaps, 2007-2016’, *Critical*



why people do not join,³ which after all constitute most of the population. Understanding non-occurrence of violent extremism is the focus of our EU-funded research project PREVEX, but to understand non-occurrence and thereby the foundations of social and individual resilience, we also need to understand the drivers of violent extremism and why they gain traction among some populations while others show much higher degrees of resilience. To achieve this, we will in this report frontload Mali and Niger as cases of occurrence and non-occurrence, while we will use the case of Morocco to illustrate parts of the occurrence argument on grievances and access to extremist networks. Regarding non-occurrence in Morocco, we showcase the combined role of regime strength and traditional authority. In the case of Tunisia, we exemplify the combined effects of regime transition and the foreign fighter ‘export’ to highlight both cases of occurrence and non-occurrence.

The puzzle of non-occurrence is an important one, and not only from an academic point of view but also because it has important policy implications. If most resources are spent on understanding those few who become so radicalised that they join violent extremist groups, one risks in fact that more people become radicalised because one moves resources away from most of the population that might be in dire need of support, given the challenges in the enabling environment they live in.

In this working paper we will proceed according to the following structure: In section two, we present the methodology and research design, including a discussion of relevant ethical dilemmas. In section three, we zoom in on our cases, identifying the enabling environment including drivers of violent extremism, as well as competing authorities. In the fourth section, we dig deeper into the cases from the Sahel first, Niger and Mali, before we in section five turn to the convoluted case studies of Morocco and Tunisia and particular aspects of the situation of violent extremism and the reasons for its occurrence and non-occurrence in these two cases. We bookend the working paper with a sixth section where we provide a summary of our findings as well as policy recommendations on preventative measures and how to strengthen national and community resilience towards violent extremism.

2. Methodology and research design

There have been two research teams contributing to this study, one on the Sahel focusing on Mali and Niger and the other focusing on Morocco and Tunisia.⁴ Their respective methods and research design are explained below.

Studies on Terrorism, vol. 12, no 3: 463-480; Efraim Benmelech & Esteban F. Klor (2020) ‘What explains the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS?’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 32, no. 7: 1458-1481; Matteo Vergani, Muhammad Iqbal, Ekin Ilbahar & Greg Barton (2020) ‘The three Ps of radicalization: push, pull and personal: a systematic scoping review of the scientific evidence about radicalization into violent extremism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 43, no. 10: 854.

³ See Kim R. Cragin (2014) ‘Resisting violent extremism: a conceptual model for non-radicalization’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 26 no. 2: 337-353; Sigrid Raets (2017) ‘That We in Me: Considering Terrorist Desistance from a Social Identity Perspective’, *Journal for Deradicalization*, vol. 13: 1–28; Sahla Aroussi, Michaelina Jakala, Fathima A. Badurdeen & Xavier Verhoest (2020) *Body Maps of Resistance: Understanding Everyday Resistance to Violent Extremism in Kenya*, Leeds: University of Leeds.

⁴ The research team for the Sahel comprised of Morten Bøås, Abdoul Cissé, Viljar Haavik, Alessio Iocchi, Laouali Mahamane, Kari Osland and Luca Raineri. Laya Kounché Arama, Modibo Yacouba Diarra, Yéhya



2.1 Mali and Niger

Method

Research in Mali and Niger makes use of a bottom-up approach with in-depth studies of cases of occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism. This is done to elucidate the drivers of violent extremism as well as the factors shaping resilience to the phenomenon. Through this approach, we can discern the different pathways to violent extremism and map the intersection of different factors (their absence or presence) explaining the outcome as there is no singular framework.

In Mali and Niger, the field research was based on a mixed-methods approach utilising surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a targeted survey conducted through a lab-in-field respondent driven sampling (RDS) experiment among international displaced persons (IDPs) in Bamako (Mali).⁵ Field research teams conducted surveys with individual questionnaires in selected localities of occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism in Mali (Mopti and Segou) and Niger (Tillabéri). In these localities, the teams also conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide with traditional chiefs, religious leaders and civil society actors to gather their perceptions on the issue of violent extremism in their respective regions in Mali and Niger.

Maïga and Sejla Pehlivanovic provided research assistance. The research team for Morocco and Tunisia consisted of Akram Benmrahar and Djalill Lounnas.

⁵ RDS is a methodology for producing and analysing data of rare and elusive populations. Although it is a methodology that produces relatively 'soft' data, it holds several advantages over convenience sampling or ordinary snowball sampling that has dominated this field so far (see Guri Tyldum & Lisa G. Johnston (2014) *Applying Respondent Driven Sampling to Migrant Populations: Lessons from the field*, New York: Springer).



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Survey sample overview, Mali (Segou and Mopti) – 174 respondents

		Count			Count	
Gender	Male	108	Level of education	Never been to any school	13	
	Female	66		A few years of first cycle	24	
Age	18-25	38		First cycle completed	16	
	26-39	91		Some second cycle	14	
	40-60	41		Second cycle completed	26	
	60+	4		Some university	16	
				University completed	41	
What is your religion	Muslim	146		Koranic school	20	
	Christian Protestant	12		Franco-Arabic school	4	
	Christian Catholic	14		Can you read a letter or newspaper	Yes, easily	99
	Christian Orthodox	0			Yes, but with difficulties	34
	No religion	2			No	35
	To what ethnic group do you belong	Traditional		0	DK	0
		DK	0	NA	6	
NA		0	How are you financially speaking	Very poor	29	
Peul		40		Under the median	45	
Dogon		35		Median	82	
Bamanan		33		More than the median	12	
Bwa		9	Very well	4		
Bozos		10	DK	1		
Samos		4	NA	1		
Mossis		5	How many meals do you have daily	One daily	15	
Zarma		1		Two daily	23	
Hausa		0		Three daily	122	
Kanouri		0		More than three	11	
Touareg		6		DK	1	
Arab	0	NA	2			
Sonhrai	9					
Others	22					
DK	0					



Survey sample overview, Tillabéri, Niger – 101 respondents

		Count
Gender	Male	58
	Female	43
Age	18-25	11
	26-39	30
	40-60	48
	60+	12
What is your religion	Muslim	101
	Christian Protestant	0
	Christian Catholic	0
	Christian Orthodox	0
	No religion	0
	Traditional	0
	DK	0
To what ethnic group do you belong	Peul	4
	Dogon	0
	Bamanan	0
	Bwa	0
	Bozos	0
	Samos	0
	Mosis	0
	Zarma	84
	Hausa	0
	Kanouri	0
	Touareg	8
	Arab	0
	Sonhrai	5
	Others	0
DK	0	

		Count
Level of education	Never been to any school	25
	A few years of first cycle	8
	First cycle completed	14
	Some second cycle	5
	Second cycle completed	2
	Some university	1
	University completed	1
	Koranic school	45
DK	0	
Can you read a letter or newspaper	Yes, easily	12
	Yes, but with difficulties	24
	No	39
	DK	24
	NA	2
How are you financially speaking	Very poor	21
	Under the median	29
	Median	50
	More than the median	0
	Very well	0
	DK	1
	NA	0
How many meals do you have daily	One daily	1
	Two daily	67
	Three daily	32
	More than three	1
	DK	0
	NA	0

Sampling

At each site, community leaders and village chiefs were approached to explain the reasons for the study, gain trust, and clarify the diversity of the survey targets (men, women, youth, etc.). This was done in all areas that we worked irrespectively of what methods that were used. The qualitative selection of the sample was based on the availability and trust of the respondents. The environment is characterised by strong suspicion, which led to going back and forth to gain the trust of respondents and interview them. The period of fieldwork coincided with the harvest period of local communities and the availability of respondents could not be guaranteed. We were aware of this, but as Covid-19 regulations had prevented us from doing the fieldwork when it originally was planned and we feared a fourth wave of Covid-19 that once more could have derailed our fieldwork, we decided that we just had to work with these limitations. With hindsight, we believe that we made the right decision as the new Omicron variant of Covid-19 that currently is spreading fast would have prevented fieldwork if we had not done the bulk of



it from August to November 2021. The survey sample was based on lists of households in the villages where we conducted the survey that was matched by sketch maps the interviewer made of the village and its household dwellings. Respondents were drawn based on this and if respondents were unable an approach of call-back was attempted. This was successful in some cases, in others not because interviewers had to leave the area in the evening due our security protocol. In such cases, these respondents were dropped from the sample and not replaced with others that were available. This was done to avoid convenience sampling.

To capture the effect that violent extremism has on women, having their voice on how violent extremism impact their lives was crucial. At most of the sites where we worked female respondents were willing to talk and share their distress, especially widows whose husbands had been killed by jihadists. For example, at the Tadress fieldwork site (Tillabéri, Niger), women ended up constituting a large portion of the sample. This stands in contrast to the Tilla Kaina fieldwork site (Tillabéri, Niger) where the reluctance of husbands limited women's participation. Cases like this is of course unfortunate, but we must accept that we conduct fieldwork in socially conservative communities, and we need to be sensitive to this. However, in total our survey sample is representative across gender, age, and ethnicity for the areas we worked.

Research ethics

At the outset of the surveys, the reason for the study was explained to the respondents. To avoid exposing respondents, they were not grouped together for interviewing. The questionnaires were administered at people's homes, in their concession or at their place of work, and all respondents were fully anonymised. The involvement of village leaders facilitated the survey and ensured that respondents were not exposed to risk. In Tilla Kaina, for example, specifying that the questionnaire was anonymous helped to overcome the obstacle of reluctance.

The interviews were therefore conducted as discreetly as possible, but we had to inform the respective mayors and the presidents of the various regional councils about our mission and our presence in their areas of authority. Also, the team avoided working at night because these areas are under a state of emergency.

Research design and case selection

In North Africa and the Sahel, PREVEX have carefully selected the cases of Mali and Niger that illustrate the challenges of violent extremism in the region. Micro-studies with fieldwork have been conducted as part of a country-analysis, which forms the backbone of the comparative country analysis in each region. These will later contribute to inter-regional comparisons. Mali and Niger are two privileged sites for the observation of dynamics of violent extremism, as in both countries PREVEX has registered cases of occurrence and non-occurrence. We have chosen them as they represent some of the most evident examples of how violent extremism can be ignited and how conflicts might escalate; but also because they represent instances in which violent extremism, despite affecting directly or indirectly, does not



mobilise large portions of the population but rather lead to the development of different forms of resilience.

Mali and Niger not only share a long border, but over the years the conflict dynamics happening in Gao, Mopti and Kidal have gradually spilled over on the other side of the border, in Niger's Tillabéri Region. This area of Niger presents similar features to what occurs in different parts of Central Mali, however the situation in the two countries is also highly different. Mali has been embroiled in a political and security crisis since the outbreak of the separatist-turned-jihadi conflict in Northern Mali in 2012.⁶ While the military interventions from France and other European partners, and the United Nations may have saved Mali from falling completely apart, the security situation on the ground is much worse in 2021 than it was in 2013 when these interventions were implemented. In particular, the French-led Operation Barkhane has become contested and has faced several popular protests in Bamako. The region of Tillabéri apart, Niger has shown much more resilience than Mali to violent extremism while at the same time building a solid reputation as a reliable counter-terrorism fighter. Differently from Mali, Niger presents more solid institutions and a better record in terms of military activity. While presenting structural similarities with Mali also in terms of geography and history, Niger has better navigated through various cycles of rebellions in the North and seems now prone to take a major role in the asymmetric wars against violent extremists ravaging the Sahel. In sum, while Mali seems on the verge of breakdown and increasingly unable to counter violent extremism in its territory, Niger is still expressing resilience to external and internal factors threatening its stability.

2.2 Morocco and Tunisia

Method

For Morocco, no case of local violence was recorded in the past ten years except for two isolated incidents, in 2011 and 2019. Morocco was essentially in the past decade an area of departure of foreign fighters. To understand this phenomenon, two areas of occurrences and non-occurrences was identified by the research team: Casablanca and Ifrane. Fieldwork was conducted during the summer of 2021. However, due to the upsurge of Covid-19 and subsequent measures taken (curfews, restrictions of movements, tight security, etc.), the ability to conduct efficiently field research was severely constrained. The sensitivity of the topic also made access to data difficult. Therefore, methods had to evolve according to the situation, including conducting interviews via mobile and telephone communication. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a certain amount of flexibility in terms of follow-up questions so to facilitate the acquisition of more accurate data especially since many respondents in the interviewed sample were not used to being interviewed, an element which may affect the quality of the data collected due to their potential discomfort.

⁶ See Morten Bøås & Liv E. Torheim (2013) 'The international intervention in Mali: desert blues or a new beginning?', *International Journal*, 68(3), 417-423; Morten Bøås (2015) 'Crime, coping, and resistance in the Mali-Sahel periphery', *African Security*, vol. 8, no. 4; 299-319; Morten Bøås (2019) *The Sahel crisis and the need for international support*, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.



Tunisia for its part constitutes a rare case in the Arab world for major local cases of violent extremism with the presence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jund Al Khilafa (ISIS affiliate) combined with massive departure of youth for conflict zones, i.e. Syria-Iraq and Libya. The Covid-19 situation significantly impacted the fieldwork as borders were at risk to be closed. Thus, while the original plan was to focus on areas of non-occurrence and occurrence, the decision was made to focus on the areas of occurrences only. The semi-urban areas of Tunis were chosen given that many the Tunisian foreign fighters originate from there, while Western Tunisia was identified as an origin area for many foreign fighters but also because AQIM and Jund Al Khalifa had a strong presence there. The method used included semi-structured interviews, field observation and the collection and consultation of various documents related to the phenomenon. Field work was also conducted in the city of Ben Guerdane as it offers important insight also into societal resilience and non-occurrence of violent extremism.

Sampling

In Morocco, the fact that the research took place mostly in the summer constituted a noteworthy hurdle in availability since many potential interviewees were away from their office where they have records. Therefore, the survey prepared initially for the project could not be administered and availability constituted an important variable in the selection of interviewees. Besides, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, the sample selection was based predominantly on networks and connections. Given all those constraints, the sampling involved intellectuals, NGOs, religious organisations, professors and citizens and actors who were involved with issues of violent extremism.

In Tunisia as well, the above-mentioned complexity of the situation constrained field sampling. Interviews were conducted with a wide variety of actors involved in dealing with violent extremism: from civil society, former officials involved in countering violent extremism (CVE), lawyers, intellectuals and relatives of people involved in such occurrences. A snowball sampling led to several discussions in the semi-urban areas of Tunis governorate with citizens who witnessed the events of 2011-2013 in the stronghold of Ansar Al Sharia.

Ethical protocol

Given the nature of the topic, in both Morocco and Tunisia, all the people interviewed were explained the scope and goals of the research. In almost all cases, strict anonymity was required and guaranteed. Before accepting the interview, to facilitate transparency over discussions, respondents were provided with a verbal disclaimer promising that their identities will not be revealed in the research.

Research design and case selection

Morocco and Tunisia represent two interesting cases for the analysis of how dynamics of violent extremism might occur or not. Despite presenting structural factors that we have identified as 'enabling environments', the role of state governance as well as societal or cultural factors play



a major role in de-escalating or in preventing the escalation of violent extremism. In the case of these two Maghreb countries, the occurrence of violent extremist discourses and of extremist mobilisation has led only to a relatively limited output in terms of violence and spreading of insecurity. Both countries have faced (in two different periods, Morocco in 2003 and 2007, Tunisia in 2015) two early waves of jihadi related bombings and the rise of violent extremist discourses. However, both have initiated different paths towards de-escalation that have prevented violent extremism from being endemic and/or escalate into a full-blown conflict.

Morocco has relied on the strong symbolic and traditional power of the Sharifian Kingdom to exercise pro-active forms of governance and manage the menace of violent extremism. Since its postcolonial history, the King and his Royal Councillors (collectively known as the makhzen) have progressively worked to calibrate a Moroccan nationalist discourse with a religious one, centred around Sufi practices and Sufi membership. Such discursive practice has in fact intensified in the post-9/11 scenario and especially after the 2003 and 2007 Casablanca terrorist attacks. The growth of an alternative more extremist discourse on Islam in Morocco was always matched by a critical stance against the King and the Kingdom. For such reason, the efforts to eradicate violent extremist discourses and violent extremism in general have over the years relied extensively on the symbolic power of the King as a unifying figure. In the Kingdom, while state-led counter-terror initiatives dismantled networks and groups, the political power also showed a forgiving face, which aimed to moderate and delegitimize the positions of former proponents of violent extremism discourses. While the growth of extremist mobilisation continues in the country—and especially in semi-urban peripheral areas—Morocco does not present any viable strategic choice for extremists to turn to larger-scale organised violence in the country. However, Morocco is also the country of origin of a high number of foreign fighters. Thereby, while violent extremists' discourses occur in the Moroccan society, violent practices have not often emerged within its territory.

Tunisia, on the other hand presents similar outcomes but with different patterns. While in the highly uneven transition from the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali to liberal democracy, following the so-called Arab Springs, Tunisia's political space saw the rise of two Islamist organizations (Ennahda and Ansar al-Sharia). Both organisations share an agenda of progressive Islamisation of public life and institutions in Tunisia, but they differ on the modalities. Ennahda has progressively moderated its stance by joining the government in 2011 and remaining in party coalitions since then. Ansar al-Sharia, on the other hand, has always overtly predicated violent extremism before facing internal dissension and the progressive withdrawal from violent extremism with the renouncing of turning Tunisia into a 'land of jihad'. Facing such strategical stalemate—between the Tunisia counter-terrorist efforts and Ansar al-Sharia's renunciation of armed violence—many individuals engaged in violent extremism as foreign fighters, joining either the Islamic State in Syria or the Ansar al-Sharia in Libya.

3. Introducing the enabling environment

We define the 'enabling environment' as an area in which the combination of various factors creates a conducive situation where expressions of violent extremism are likely. These factors



or drivers can be poverty, marginalisation, alienation, religious or ideological indoctrination, heavy-handed state responses, precarious masculinities, appropriation of right-based grievances, and other related factors.

This analytical framework rests on three main features: cases of occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism; decisive moments; and the effect of preventive measures (if any). In addition, drivers of violent extremism, competing authorities and violent entrepreneurs, as well as local-global connections are central concepts to be used.

As for *occurrence and non-occurrence*: We pay attention to cases of non-occurrence of violent extremism in ‘enabling environments’, and ask, why do some communities display much greater resilience to violent extremist ideologies than others? What role do local community leaders, including religious leaders, play? An understanding of why violence does not occur is often more relevant for strengthening resilience and designing preventive measures, than understanding why it occurs.

3.1 Possible drivers of violent extremism

Violent extremism rarely emerges in a vacuum, and in the regions that this study is concerned with most of the usual factors attributed to facilitate violent extremism is present. Poverty is wide-spread and many communities experience economic and political marginalisation. This may lead people to feel a sense of alienation from a state that never has cared much for their well-being. Relevant literatures tell us that youth and *young men* are particularly prone to perceived and real marginalisation that could set them on a path to alienation, which may make them more inclined to extremist religious-ideological indoctrination.⁷ We also know from our previous studies that the chances that this will happen increases with the presence of two other factors: rights-based grievances that if expressed at times are met with very heavy-handed state response.⁸

3.2 Competing authorities and violent entrepreneurs

Under such circumstances, *competing authorities* may emerge. This happens most commonly in fragile states, with governments lacking the capacity or willingness to care for and protect their citizens, whom view the state not as benevolent, but dysfunctional and corrupt. This leads to grievances against the state that are exploited and appropriated by competing authorities to the state, including proponents of extremist discourses. The competing authorities that we mostly are concerned with in this study is therefore those we define as ‘violent entrepreneurs’. These are non-state actors possessing some kind of political agenda, implemented in tandem with different types of income-generating activities. They rule by force and violence, but they

⁷ See, for example, Rositsa Dzhekova, Mila Mancheva, Dia Anagnostou & Nadya Stoyanova (2016) ‘Theoretical framework and concepts of radicalisation’, in O. Shentov & B. Todorov (eds) *Understanding Radicalisation. Review of Literature*. Sofia: Centre for the Study of Democracy.

⁸ See Morten Bøås (2015) ‘Crime, coping, and resistance in the Mali-Sahel periphery’, *African Security*, vol. 8, no 4.: 299-319; Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé & Laouali Mahamane (2020) ‘Explaining violence in Tillabéri: insurgent appropriation of local grievances?’, *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4: 118-132., *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4: 118-132.



also distribute resources, provide some level of order, and offer protection to (at least parts of) the population in the areas they control, or attempt to control. Their presence in many communities in the Sahel, such as Mopti and Segou in Mali and Tillabéri in Niger, is often stronger than that of international community actors and their national allies.⁹ In the cases of Morocco and Tunisia the presence of violent entrepreneurs is generally much less, but even here we find them in certain territories or in specific urban settings.

3.3 Local-global connections

These violent entrepreneurs will mostly, but not exclusively be local in origin, but they may also have *local-global connections*.¹⁰ By this we mean that the form of violent extremism that we mostly are confronted with in the two regions studied here is local, but with global connections. We, therefore, need to distinguish between local-global connections where groups deliberately, purposefully, and strategically navigate to become an active operational brand in larger global networks of extremist ideology (for example, al-Qaeda or Daesh), and those that mainly employ such strategies as a branding exercise, to look more powerful, global, and omnipotent than they are.¹¹ In the cases of Mali and Niger there is little doubt that the most important non-state armed groups are inspired by the religious doctrines of either al-Qaeda or Daesh, but this does not mean that they have become operational branches in global jihadi networks. Their struggle is exclusively local and regional, and while it exists an ideologically convinced core leadership, the evidence we present later in this working paper suggest that the majority of those that join these groups are recruited less on the basis of religious ideology but based on grievances with regard to lack of employment, education and social mobility.

3.4 Decisive moments

When all these factors are present in a given place, we may be confronted with what we call the *decisive moments*. These are the particular moments when extremist ideas are transformed into violence and violent acts. While it is crucial to understand these moments in which an idea is transformed into violence, it is equally if not more important to understand why a situation does not reach its decisive moment even in an enabling environment where all the factors discussed above are present. Therefore, we give due attention to the cases of non-occurrence as these may very well tell us much more about how violent extremism can be prevented than focusing only on why it occurs post-factual.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Morten Bøås & Kevin C. Dunn (eds.) (2017) *Africa's Insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

¹¹ Ibid.; Morten Bøås, Kari M. Osland & Henriette U. Erstad (2019) *Islamic Insurgents in the MENA Region: Global Threat or Regional Menace?* Oslo: NUPI (Working Paper No. 884).



4. Cases of occurrence and non-occurrence in the Sahel – Mali and Niger

4.1 Mali

Background

Despite an unprecedented level of international assistance and external force contributions to Central Sahel, such efforts have had a very limited impact in terms of day-to-day security.¹² Central Mali, and the region of Mopti in particular, is currently gripped by high levels of insecurity. The region of Mopti is situated at the crossroads between the North and South of Mali. It is a melting pot of different ethnic groups with all major ethnic groups of Mali present. The region is densely populated and much of it consists of fertile land for farming and herding made possible by the confluence of the inner Niger Delta. While most of those who live here are Muslims, we also find small pockets of Animism and Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism). The region is not only ethnically diverse, but also consists of different socio-economic categories: pastoralist (Fulani, Tuareg), sedentary farmers (Dogon, Bambara, Songhay, Malinke) and fishermen (Bozo). The Delta is an important food basket, dominated by three productive systems: live-stock rearing, seasonal agricultures (cereals, rice) and fishing.¹³

The role that the region can play as potential food basket is important and offers opportunities if peace can be secured. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that what the Inner Delta brings together is three different types of livelihoods – herders, farmers and fishermen – with significantly different interests in how to use the scarce resources of water and land. These are resources that these groups have fundamentally different functional interests in how to utilise, and this is a fact of life in the Inner Delta that never is easily reconciled and even less so in a period when population pressure increases, traditional authority has waned, and state authority increasingly is experienced as dysfunctional and corrupted.¹⁴ These resources are not only seen by the different groups as essential for their current livelihoods, but also as the means to secure future survival. Hence, one's right to access them must be defended with all necessary means.

The vulnerability of the pastoral productive system (e.g., herding) has increased during the last years, after cycles of droughts and shrinking of water resources in combination with expanding farming areas encroaching on pastoral corridors. Faced with plummeting livestock prices across West Africa, pastoral communities in Mali were confronted with a major challenge in the aftermath of the 2012 coup d'état. In 2013, the reinstatement of the civilian government in Bamako was followed by a clampdown on Fulani pastoralist. This happened in connection with the moving southward of militant Islamist groups like the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which had come to be present in parts of Mopti. The main consequence of this was a heavy-handed state response in the form of state security forces that started increasingly to profile young Fulani herdsmen as 'jihadis'. This event facilitated the emergence of the Katiba Macina, a mostly Fulani-based militant jihadi group.

¹² Kari M. Osland & Henriette U. Erstad (2020) 'The fragility dilemma and divergent security complexes in the Sahel', *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no 4: 18-36.

¹³ See Natasja Rupesinghe & Morten Bøås (2019) *Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali*, Addis Ababa: UNDP.

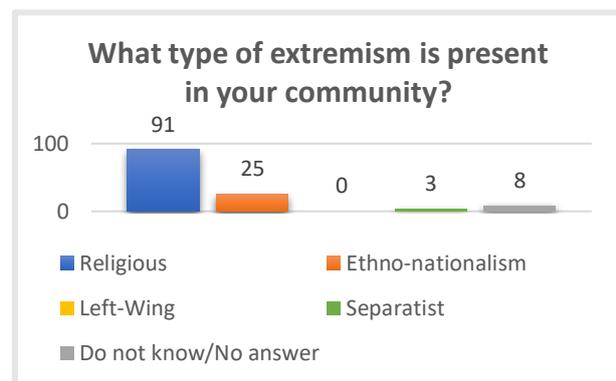
¹⁴ Ibid.



Hamadoun Koufa, its leader, had rallied with the MUJAO before moving to Mopti in the aftermath of the French military intervention in the North. Most of the Katiba recruits hail from the Fulani community. Thus, while the Malian state and its international partners were focused on stabilising the North, in the Mopti region, violent extremist mobilisation and intra-communal tensions started to overlap.

Mopti: Factors facilitating the occurrence of violent extremism

In recent years, Mopti has become a hotbed of violent extremism. Most communities are confronted with religious extremism while a minority of the respondents characterised the violent extremism as ethno-nationalist. The reason why we do not only see religious extremism is the presence of a wide diversity of non-state armed groups. The most frequently cited non-state armed groups being hunting groups, jihadist groups affiliated with the Katiba Macina,¹⁵ AQIM,¹⁶ self-defence groups such as GATIA¹⁷, Dana Amassagou,¹⁸ and other militias and self-defence groups such as the dozos/donzo.¹⁹ In the qualitative interviews, respondents also reported on the objectives of these different militant groups. The most frequently cited objectives of these different types of violent entrepreneurs were the desire of some to apply Sharia law, for others to protect their local community, and to defend Dogon identity and culture,²⁰ and finally, there are also groups that sow terror and take advantage of it to raid the population of resources (theft of livestock and other local resources).



In this cocktail of different armed groups that combines jihadi insurgents and various self-defence groups and militias, relations between local communities that used to be at least cordial, if not always exactly friendly, has fragmented and polarised. In the current situation,

¹⁵ Katiba Macina is a jihadist group mainly operating in Central Mali under the leadership of Hamadoun Koufa. The group is part of the umbrella jihadist group, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

¹⁶ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an originally Algerian terrorist group with roots in the Algerian civil war in the 90s. The group, on the defensive, started to integrate in Northern Mali.

¹⁷ Malian self-defence group

¹⁸ The Dana Amassagou is a self-defence among the Dogon ethnic group in the Mopti area.

¹⁹ The Dozo or Donza in the Bambara language are groups of traditional hunters that exists in Northern Côte d'Ivoire, and parts of Mali and Burkina Faso. They are organised in co-fraternities of initiated hunters and their sons. They stem from local communities and fights to protect their local communities and their livelihoods.

²⁰ The Dogon is an ethnic group in Mali and whose communities have actively opposed the influence of jihadist groups.



through our fieldwork, we often found that the Donzos and the Dana are widely understood by the Fulani community as being driven by the aim of expelling and killing every Fulani in the area to claim their land. As one local Fulani leader expressed himself:

Their goal is to create disorder so to seize and steal the properties of the inhabitants of our locality (mostly Fulani). Once we have left the area and abandoned our hamlets, they will take all our properties. Their goal is to exterminate every Fulani and take our land.²¹

For the Dogon and Songhay populations, on the other hand, they see these groups as mostly driven by the objective ‘to securitise travellers and the area’ or ‘defend the Dogon and Songhay cultures’, while they claim that the Katiba Macina bands, that mainly consists of fighters of Fulani origin, are aimed at imposing their sharia ideology on them.²² To these communities, the Katiba Macina represents a new and unknown danger that hides in forest bases and roam the area on motor bikes. The Donzos and Dana are known to them as they have bases in Dogon and Songhay village quarters or at the margins of the villages in order to prevent attacks coming from the forest.

Most of the Donzo and Dana militias have been provided with some weapons and ammunition by the Malian army. These militias communicate using cell phones and are continuously provided with intelligence about the area by a network of informants and collaborators. While there is some level of collaboration between these various bands of proclaimed self-defence militias, there is no higher authority or lines of command and control by the Malian army that has armed them. Each of these groups tend to be organised in accordance with its own local hierarchy. Their sources of income are usually derived by self-taxation of the communities from which they originate, but it is also clear that they have been involved in raids of robbery against other local communities perceived as enemies, mostly Fulani communities. As Fulani and Dogon communities seemingly therefore increasingly stand on opposite side in the conflict, it is easy to conclude that an ethnic element has been added to an already complex situation. However, both Fulani and Dogon respondents reacted to this and said, ‘this is not a conflict between the Dogon and the Fulani’, but an ‘economic conflict caused by bad governance’, thus suggesting that root causes are not necessarily extremist ideology or religious views, but a conflict over scarce resources that has exploded into violence due to desperation and fear.²³ If this is the case, preventive measures should target access to natural resources and not necessarily de-radicalisation *per se*.

Drivers of violent extremism

In Mopti, as presented above, a variety of drivers that create a conducive situation in which violent extremism occur are present. While dissatisfaction with the support that local communities receive from the Malian government and its international partners only being one of them, the answers we received from the survey are telling of a situation where feelings of

²¹ Interview local Fulani community leader, September 17, 2021.

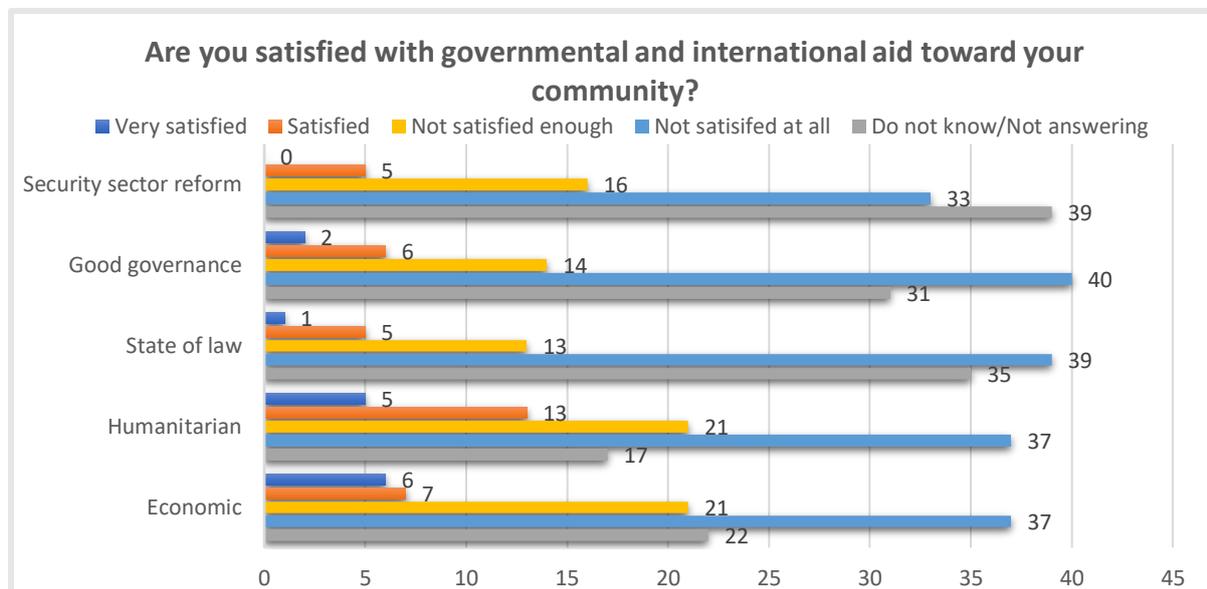
²² Conversations in Dogon and Songhay communities in September and October 2021.

²³ Conversations in Dogon, Fulani and Songhay communities in September and October 2021.



marginalisation are very present in local communities. This is clearly illustrated by the chart below.

The results show that an overwhelming majority of our respondents were not satisfied with governmental and international aid towards their community across multiple sectors.²⁴ It is



indicative of the lack of trust in state institutions and international agents' capabilities of improving people's lives and ensure basic necessities such as security, justice and humanitarian aid. As explained by an interviewee:

In central Mali, there are several causes of violent extremism. Poverty and injustice that cause many groups to emerge like Hamadoun Koufa's group, the population's distrust of local authorities and the state because they do not trust local authorities enough; poor governance; populations who feel abandoned by the state, mismanagement of resources.²⁵

What emerged from our research is people's perception of insufficient state presence and institutions that are not perceived as being in the service of the population. This perception of the state's neglect of the population, the injustice and abuse, unmanaged inter and intra-community conflicts, have obliterated what little trust existed in the state. Thus, parts of the population in Mopti have sought the justice, security and consideration that violent extremists can offer them.

This means that main drivers of violent extremism in Mopti are poverty, economic marginalisation and the alienation from the state that this easily may lead to – that is if it continues unabated and no peaceful alternatives of life or resistance seem possible. As one of our local respondents elaborated:

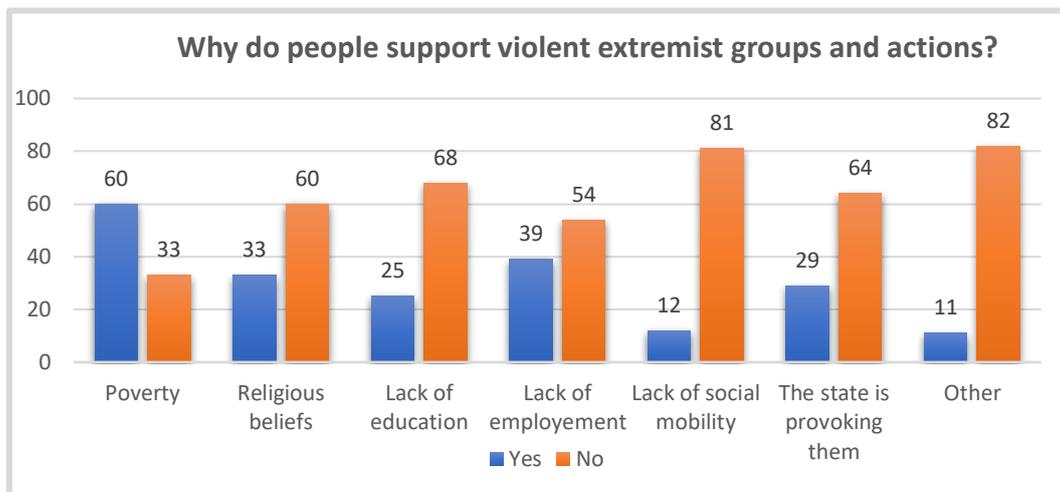
²⁴ Economic; humanitarian; state of law; good governance; security sector reform.

²⁵ Interview with local farmer in Mopti region, September 23, 2021.



The factors that push people towards violent extremism are the frustrations, the discontent of certain communities, ethnic groups, victims of injustice. Poverty encourages violent extremism; if, for example, a farmer has difficulty paying for water and agricultural inputs and the extremists offer him 300,000 CFA francs per month, he will inevitably accept.²⁶

Our interview-findings are also supported by our surveys: When asked about why people support violent extremist groups and actions, the answers suggest that the inability of the state to provide decent living conditions for its people who face lack of employment and other life options is one of the driving forces behind the decision of young people to resort to jihad.



Indeed, young people join radical groups due to economic and social marginalisation. However, among the main drivers for joining, or endorsing armed groups, we can also count feelings of unsafety, or general insecurity. Respondents in the qualitative interviews reported different cases where individuals, notably youth but also entire communities decided to positively respond to the call for violent extremism. Feelings of fear and physical insecurity play a major role in determining the frequency and intensity of endorsement for armed groups, specifically young males.

Why are young males more prone to join? According to our findings they represent a ‘double-edged sword’: they are a potential threat for jihadists, since they might oppose their authority and actions; but, on the other hand, they also represent a recruitment basin for the jihadi groups. For such reasons, young males are the first ones targeted by jihadi propaganda or jihadi recruitment efforts, and the most liable to violent threats. For some respondents, such threats might constitute sufficient reasons to endorse violent extremism.

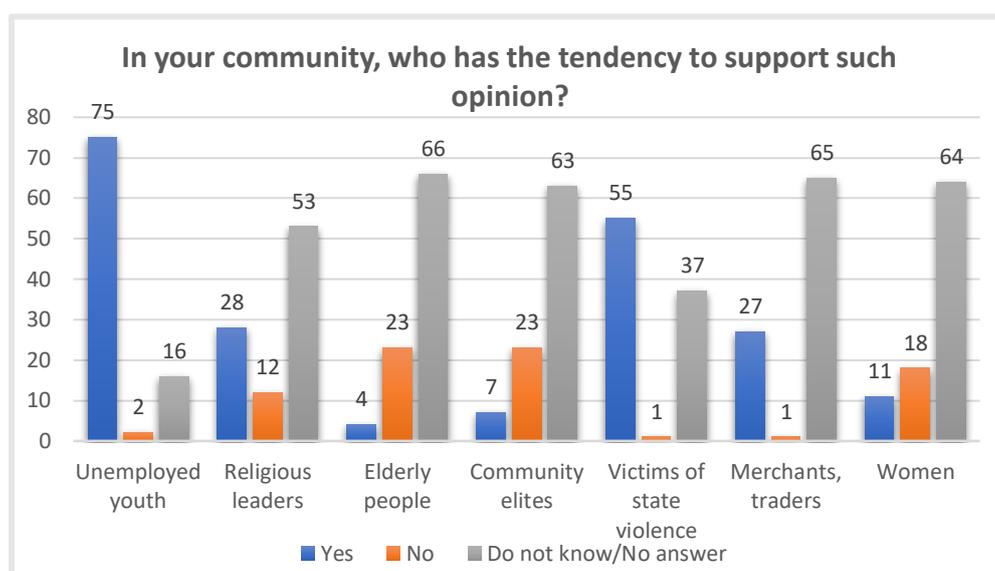
Threats and feelings of unsafety seem often to be combined with feelings of disenfranchisement: A condition of unemployment, or unsecure working conditions, in combination with jihadi efforts to recruit might create the conditions for youngsters to join. Either through propaganda, economic incentives or physical threat, jihadi groups foster intra-

²⁶ Interview with local community leader, Mopti region October 4, 2021.



communal divisions and push young males to take side. In such an equation, fears of physical harm, of course, play a major role. As put by one young man from Bandiagara commune, ‘lack of brotherly spirit’ can push young men to adhere to violent extremist ideologies.²⁷

Land issues can also be considered drivers for the rise of violent extremism as they are closely connected to people’s livelihoods. Previous research in Mali and Niger point to competition between farmers and herders over lands to explain the intensification of violent extremism.²⁸ In Central Mali, respondents have mentioned two kinds of phenomena connected to the overarching issues of access to land: contentions over traditional chieftaincies and party competition during local (municipal) elections.



The findings from the survey presented in the chart above resonates with narratives from our qualitative interviews. For example, a respondent from the Hombori commune stated that

Certain village inhabitants have decided to join the movement [Katiba Macina] since the village chief was chased away by the extremists in complicity with the deputy of the village chief.²⁹

In fact, the deputy made use of the opportunity presented by the Katiba to oust the village chief from his position and physically remove him from the area. In such a way, the deputy seized power and became a key ally of the extremists in the area. The leader of the armed men struck a deal with the deputy and turned the village into a sort of base of operations: jihadists controlled not only the village but also parts of the circle and the village’s neighbouring areas.

²⁷ Interview with a youth from Bandiagara, October 2021.

²⁸ See Tor A. Benjaminsen & Boubacar Ba (2019) ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1: 1-20; Bøås, Cissé & Mahamane, ‘Explaining violence in Tillabéri’.

²⁹ Interview with a Songhay youth leader, Hombori, October 2021.



In another case, a respondent from the Bandiagara commune related how inter-community quarrels over rights of access and use of resources can drive certain communities to cooperate with jihadists.³⁰ This was the case for two villages, one in Bandiagara and one in Koro. The outcome of the 2016 municipal elections in these communes provoked some resentments and fears of marginalisation. In Bandiagara, a village who had massively voted for some candidates that lost (of the ADEMA-PASJ party), feared having lost its voice in the local Assembly to discuss land issues, as *no seats meant losing* [the possibility of advancing] *claims to land*. In the aftermath, two prominent local figures brokered a deal with jihadists in the hope of gaining by force what they lost in the elections. Thereby, using the village as base for its operations, the Katiba Macina started to attack neighbouring villages to take control over the land. In Koro, a similar dynamic took place in 2020: representatives from a village who had voted for losing candidates approached the Katiba Macina to strike an alliance of protection. Farming communities in the circle were attacked, and herding groups gained access to grazing lands while businessmen from the jihadi-allied village benefitted from the elimination of competitors.

The findings presented above dovetails with previous studies published by members of this research team. For example, Bøås, Cissé & Laouali advances the argument that a key strategy of Jihadi-inspired Sahel insurgencies is to appropriate local conflicts, usually related to land usage, in order to integrate locally.³¹ However, in the cases outlined above; we also see that the opposite can be the case: how local opportunists may exploit the presence of armed men in the area to reverse local power configurations. Poorly managed conflicts cultivate the spirit of revenge; many ethnic groups have turned to extremists' groups to take revenge, to protect themselves and their property, this is not only the case of some Fulani communities, it also happens in Dogon, Bambara and other ethnic communities.

The interviewees are not unanimous about the different manifestations of violent extremism and made clear that the use of terms such as radicalism, terrorism and extremism causes a lot of confusion.³² Some noted that people adopt the extremist attitude without being violent; they cut the link with the family, the community, the society. Others noted that one can be perceived as an extremist without being violent if one opposes the principles of a group, ethnicity or community. It starts with deviating from the family, from the community; the person thinks that others have bad habits. Yet others noted that one can be an extremist or radicalised without being a Muslim. And finally, it was noted that a person becomes a violent extremist when he/she does an act of violence. This act can include robberies, insults, violence. It is a process in which the person will take advantage of his extremist behaviour to carry out the act of violence.

The interviews focused on the question of the decisive moments during which actors switch to extremism. The complexity of the issues at stake are difficult to assess and the identification of decisive moments depends on the viewpoint and experiences of the respondent. Hence,

³⁰ Interview with a youth from Bandiagara, October 2021.

³¹ Bøås, Cissé & Mahamane, 'Explaining violence in Tillabéri'.

³² Interviews in different communities in Mali, including in Bamako, in September-October 2021.



respondents struggle to provide clear-cut answers. However, some interviews allowed us to identify moments and the following answers were given by different respondents:³³

- the moment when the state abandoned the locality,
- these are moments when they distance themselves from others, change their behaviour and speech,
- the moments when they deviate, do not respect the pre-established norms, have strange discourses,
- moments when they begin to isolate themselves, no longer share commonly established values, change their behaviour,
- these are moments when they oppose the common ideology, their behaviour becomes deviant,
- the moment when these people decided to engage is when the state abandoned the population,
- because the state was absent and left the communities to their fate.

It is interesting to note that the feeling of being abandoned by the state is reported as a key decisive moment by several. This is important because it suggests that when extremist ideas and groups become manifest in local communities in Mopti this should not be seen as a sign of an anti-state rebellion, but rather a craving for a state that works also for them.

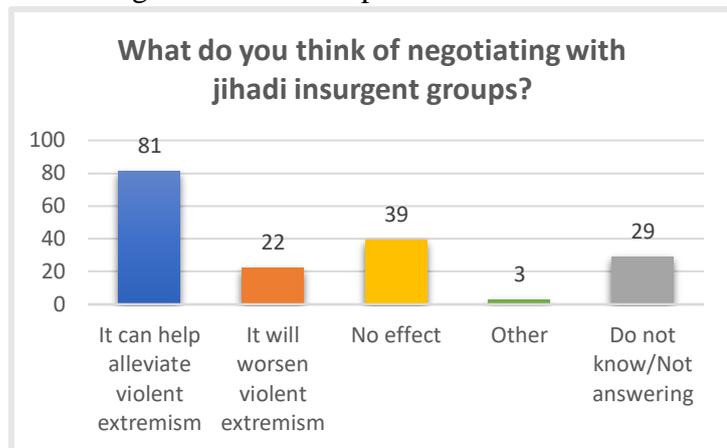
Other respondents pointed to individual behaviour. When a jihadi group delivers a threat to a village, young males are forced to take sides—leave, join or resist. The ensuing choices are decisive because they will determine whether they will be targeted by jihadi groups for refusing to join or for having decided to flee, or else if they will be perpetrators. The mere presence can be a trigger for violence; however, it might not be enough: the offer of economic incentives—with all the related social mobility aspects—can smooth the decisional process. Regarding the individual choice of joining, resisting, or leaving, the following should be taken into consideration: When individuals are provided the opportunity to exercise their agency, even as an act of violence against someone else, he/she is presented with two choices: join or refuse. These decisions may be tactical or strategic, depending on the contextual and situational reasons.

There is no doubt that several factors are drivers of violent extremism in Mopti. However, if we are to point to some key factors based on the result of our research, it seems reasonable to suggest that poverty, marginalisation and the lack of economic opportunities at the margins of the Malian state are most commonly referred to. Both our interviews and survey data show this. This suggests that at least initially, those that join are more concerned with material factors and less with religious ideology. We believe that this is an important reason why there is an overwhelming support among our respondents for negotiated solutions to the current conflict (see the charts below).

³³ Bøås, Cissé & Mahamane, ‘Explaining violence in Tillabéri’.

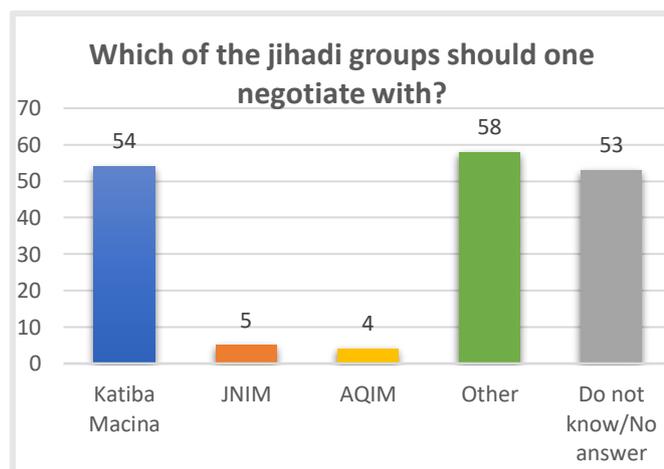


This means that people who live in the midst of the conflict-affected areas believe both that it is possible to negotiate, and that negotiation can improve the situation in their communities. They believe this because they know that most of those that have joined these movements have not joined out of being persuaded by an extremist religious ideology, but out of social and economic desperation. They want education that can give them employment and opportunities for social mobility. They have not become anti-state; they simply crave for a state that can work also for them. If these are the main drivers of violent extremism, stakeholders concerned with preventing violent extremism in Mali should take note of this. They should also be less concerned with anti-radicalisation projects and focus more on development and education.



The problem is that this is not possible in an area of ongoing violent conflict. And as there is little evidence that suggest that the Malian army and its international allies will win a decisive victory on the battlefield anytime soon, stakeholders should take the voice of local communities in favour of negotiations seriously. This will undoubtedly be difficult, but the alternative is to allow the current situation to continue unabated with what this will mean both for the population in Mopti, but also with probability that even larger areas will come under the influence of the armed extremist groups.

Not only are people clear about wanting negotiations, but they also express clearly who they want to negotiate with. It is the local groups – Katiba Macina and in the ‘other’ category we find the local self-defence militias. This also suggest that the respondents do not see the conflict in Mopti as a part of a larger ‘global war on terror’, but as a local conflict that should be solved through negotiations between local armed groups.



This is positive because it is a potential way out of the current situation. It is also positive that local talks have been going on for quite some time. Some are of the opportunistic nature we have showcased above, but many also go about as local communities negotiate with armed group on issues concerning access (including access for humanitarian relief), return of people who have been chased away, roadblock conditions and several other local issues. Sometimes they succeed in



improving their situation, other times not, but the problem is that local communities in such negotiations inevitably always will negotiate from a position of weakness. This also means that even when they succeed, for example in negotiating access of humanitarian relief or the return of community members, they will have to pay a price, and that price is to accept the way of life according to the religious doctrine of the insurgents. Similarly, while such agreements can help local populations for a while, they do not tend to last very long.

However, even with all this in mind, people are still overwhelmingly in favour of negotiations, and this means that the solution to the dilemma of negotiations that we describe here must be to scale them up to the national level. This will create other types of dilemmas, including what liberal rights one is willing to negotiate over, the organisation of the state and the role of religion, impunity, and a number of other difficult issues. However, the alternative is worse: it will most likely not only continue the conflict but also spill over and expand to new areas, as the chance that the Malian army and its external stakeholders will solve this conflict on the battlefield seems very low.

Segou: Factors shaping the non-occurrence of violent extremism

We have already mentioned that one reason why Segou has shown more resilience to violent extremism can be related to geographical proximity to Bamako. In 2012, the conflict started in the North before it spread to Central Mali and Mopti, and from Mopti it has further spread towards Segou as the Jihadi-inspired rebels has gained influence and sense of control there. This means that the current resilience that we see among several local communities in Segou cannot be taken for granted as local communities also here have few other alternatives than either accepting to come under control of extremist jihadi-inspired groups or resist through establishing their own self-defence militias. This would turn the situation in Segou into a replica of what is happening in Mopti, and our respondents are aware of this as we will explore below.

However, our respondents from interviews both in Segou and from the lab-in-field RDS we conducted among IDPs in Bamako, also talks about other issues. According to several of the respondents, the relative non-occurrence of violent extremism in Segou can be explained by a historical stronger social coherence in this region compared to Mopti. This could be valid as Segou has historically seen less of the access-based conflicts between farmers and herders than Mopti. This suggest that traditional authority may have become less undermined by such kind of local competition and facilitated the maintenance of strong social values that reduces causes of conflict both within and between local communities.

The region of Segou, in fact, seems to have been exposed to a lesser extent to the dynamics of contestation over land and resources as other Malian regions—or, at least, it has been exposed to different kind of land dynamics. Since the 1930s, the Segou region has been the stage of a wide-scale development plan enacted under the Office du Niger to transform the area in an export-oriented agricultural production site: millet, niébé, sorghum, peanut, maize and cotton have been produced from then and onwards. Especially the area of Southern Segou, which has traditionally enjoyed the benefits of irrigation agriculture, is an area where



agriculture is undergoing a strong mechanisation effort.³⁴ This has gradually created an environment prone to investments and to a different entrepreneurial mindset in which the liberation semantics conveyed by violent extremist groups under the guise of ‘Islam’ and ‘jihad’ gain less attraction.

Land exploitation dynamics in the Segou region are less concerned by the crisis in pastoralism given the higher concentration of land use in either agriculture or urban expansion, which gives less space to herders. The kind of dynamics over land-usage in the Segou region appears different than, for instance, in neighbouring Mopti where the limits of Malian land reforms (2000 and 2017) are evident. While in the latter, the competition between multiple actors (traditional and state) over land management combines with increased fiscal pressure over grazing land and pastoral groups, in Segou land tenure and rural livelihoods are rather experiencing a transition from intensive farming—under the Office du Niger model—to non-intensive forms, which are less production-oriented, also because rain variability makes the endeavour harder and less successful, as seen in the so-called ‘cotton zone’ of Mali.³⁵ In the Segou region, a competition between pastoral groups and agricultural producers appears less pronounced vis-à-vis other neighbouring regions like Mopti, which are more exposed to violent extremism. This suggests that traditional authority may have become less undermined by such kind of local competition between herders and farmers and facilitated the maintenance of strong social values that reduces causes of conflict both within and between local communities. This is important as we know that the appropriation of local conflict is one of the key strategies of the jihadi insurgents, and less conflict in and among local communities is therefore key in keeping them out.

Some respondents also explained the relative non-occurrence of violent extremism in Segou with a population that has more knowledge of Islam and therefore would be less likely to be convinced by the religious rants of the insurgents. Segou being historically an important centre for Sufism and Islamic learning, in the course of the last thirty years has known the revitalisation of traditional praxis thanks to the development of new Sufi figures at the crossroads between charismatic leadership and new emerging stylistic trends associated to youth movements.³⁶ The most important figures in the Segou area are Cheick Soufi Bilal and Soufi Lassana, two religious entrepreneurs that have developed large audiences, especially in urbanised youth, following the example set by Cherif Ousmane Maidani Haidara, a prominent Sufi that through his association Ansar Dine has renovated the public expression of Islamic praxis in Mali and battled against the project of ‘Sunni reform’ of the secular Malian state

³⁴ K. de la Croix, J. Marie, L. Ferry & F. Landy (2011) ‘De nouvelles dynamiques de mécanisation agricole : commerce, usages et spatialisation au sein de la région de Ségou (Mali)’, *Annales de géographie*, 678: 174-192. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ag.678.0174>

³⁵ Tor Arve Benjaminsen and Espen Sjaastad (2002) ‘Race for the prize: land transactions and rent appropriation in the Malian cotton zone’. *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 14 , no 2: 129-152.

³⁶ Benjamin F. Soares (2010) ‘Rasta, Sufis and Muslim youth culture in Mali’, in Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera (eds) *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 241-258.



pushed forward by Wahhabi forces.³⁷ The following gathered by Haidara, Bilal and Lassana throughout the years has hugely benefitted from a strategy of mediatisation of Sufi discourses and preaches, which has granted wide popularity to forms of popular and traditional Islam explicitly moving against Salafi-leaning forms of extremism.

The diffusion of Sufi-leaning practices and discourses in the Segou area is also closely connected to the tight relationship between so-called ‘Islam confrérique’ (Sufi Islam) and traditional authority. For instance, the Tall family still has considerable importance in the political and economic affairs of the Segou region. These are the last descendants of al-hajj ‘Umar Tall, leader of the Tijjaniya brotherhood and of the short-lived Toucouleur Empire (1848-93) which has its capital in Segou.³⁸ Tall established different outposts around Segou and up to Bandiagara, although the core of the family authority remained in Segou, where the patriarch currently acts as a sought-after adviser for matters of political and socio-economic issues, spreading a Tijjani-aligned vision of jihad which is fundamentally pacific and stresses the avoidance of violence.³⁹

The Segou region, therefore, seems for the moment relatively less exposed to dynamics of violent extremism, although tensions over land management are present. On the other hand, the historical role of the region in the spread of a certain non-violent Sufi-oriented Islam must be taken into account to understand the relatively less attraction of individuals towards violent forms of extremism.

Thus, as one therefore should expect, our Dogon IDP respondents in the RDS conducted in Bamako also pointed to the strong social coherence among their communities: To oppose the influence of jihadist groups, Dogon communities have settled for a deal among and between communities which forbids anyone from the community to join extremists. These respondents proclaimed that it was only when jihadi insurgents realised that the Dogon could not easily be manipulated that they decided to kill them and chase them away from their lands. In response, the Dogon communities established community self-defence militias to protect their villages. While people will try to defend themselves if they do not believe that anybody else will come to their rescue, we also see from Mopti what this leads to – violent conflict with large scale massacres between different ethnic communities. This means that the relative resilience currently still evident on the ground in Segou cannot be taken for granted.

What does this tell us about local resilience in Mali?

The data collected in the areas of occurrence and non-occurrence testify to the existence of popular modes of building resilience to the phenomenon of violent extremism. Let us recall that the research question is based on the concept of an environment favourable to the emergence of violent extremism. The environment is said to be favourable when it meets certain

³⁷ Gilles Holder (2012) ‘Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara et l’association islamique Ançar Dine’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, no. 206-207: 389-425.

³⁸ David Robinson (1988) *La Guerre sainte d’Al-Hajj Umar: le Soudan occidental au milieu du XIXe siècle*, Paris: Karthala.

³⁹ Soufian Al Karjousli (2016) *Facteurs de paix et islam sahélien*, Rapport d’étude pour l’AFD (Agence Française de développement) sous la direction de Sophie Caratini, p. 43.



characteristics such as increased poverty, untrained and idle youth, a notorious absence of basic social services and an absence of the state or the presence of the state in its predatory form (coercive tax collection, monopolisation of natural resources - water, forests, land, etc.), the existence of a ‘pious’ rhetoric carried by local groups proposing a new mode of governance of salvation goods and public goods.

In such an environment, some villages have found themselves in the pattern of occurrence, while others have managed to escape it. Some owe their resilience to armed resistance to jihadist groups. This resistance is sometimes organised locally by the community, which manages to mobilise its youth component to fight on its behalf. Others have developed resilience simply because they did not have the resources coveted by jihadist groups. Other communities have managed to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the groups.

The absence of local conflict is important. The role and legitimacy of traditional authority matters, and the level of social coherence within and between local communities. However, in an ongoing war as the one currently in Mali there is not that much local communities or concerned stakeholders can do. What needs to be done is to create a conducive space for education, job opportunities and giving young people a chance at least for social mobility. This means development and education that caters for the job market, but if the conflict continues to spread to new areas, this will not be possible. However, if this is the antidote to extremism and violent radicalisation in Mali it also means that if peace can be secured either through military means or as we see it more likely through negotiations, concerned stakeholders must act quickly to help build up what our data suggests will reduce the opportunity structure of violent extremism in Mali and that is poverty, marginalisation, abandonment by the state, and the presence of local conflict in and among local communities.

4.2 Niger

In Niger, the Tillabéri region, in close vicinity to the capital Niamey, has become embroiled in the jihadist conflict that originated in Mali, with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) as the dominant extremist group in the area. Interestingly, the former rebellious and peripheral region of Agadez in northern Niger facing a similar enabling environment as Tillabéri, has hardly seen any cases of people becoming radicalised and joining violent extremist groups. Thus, what explains the difference between Agadez and Tillabéri?

In Agadez and in Tillabéri we have found the same diffusion of radical religious beliefs, however, the outcome in terms of concrete acts is profoundly different. Such difference can be explained by referring to structural factors, but contingent variables appear as more workable elements to explain this different outcome. The presence of the state also matters: Tillabéri’s geographical proximity to state institutions has not translated into concrete political dividends. Agadez, on the other hand, due to its remoteness and history of revolting, has progressively integrated into state institutions tying centre and periphery in a co-dependent relation. On the one hand, in Tillabéri, mounting pressure on scarce resources combined with socio-economic marginalisation of youth and the encroachment of farmer-herder competition has led to the progressive hijacking of such grievances by violent extremist groups. On the other hand, in



Agadez the attractive for extremist discourses has been moderated and antagonised by the affirmative action of both local political representatives and traditional chiefs, in addition to a lack of ‘jihadist recruiters’ or violent entrepreneurs willing to tap into existing grievances.

This part of our study draws upon survey and interview data collected in the field in Tillabéri, and interview data from Agadez and from the capital, Niamey. We have sought to understand the drivers of violent extremism and the decisive moments in which people turn to violence in order to make a comparison with case of non-occurrence with a similar presence of such drivers.

Background

The Tillabéri region is an environment in which living conditions have always been precarious. However, since 2008, life in the region has become particularly difficult. As in Mopti in Mali, Tillabéri brings together three productive systems – agriculture, raising livestock and fishing – each with its own needs and interests in utilising scarce resources. The continuous expansion of needs, linked to the strong population growth that the country is experiencing, is leading to an overexploitation of natural resources that are limited (land, water, pasture, forests and other elements of biodiversity) and to their strong degradation at an alarming rate. In addition, pastoral communities in the Fulani and Tuareg ethnic groups have been marginalised due to state-led agricultural policies leading to further encroachment on grazing lands. In 2008, a drought was ensued by communal conflicts between farmers and herders creating a climate of distrust and insecurity. The proliferation of light-weapons after the fall of Gaddafi and the outbreak of conflict in Northern Mali exacerbated the degrading security situation in Tillabéri. Due to the conflict in Mali, Fulani and Tuareg communities were affected on both sides of the Mali-Niger. Young men from Tillabéri had participated in the MUJAO-rebellion in Gao in northern Mali and later returned after the French military intervention. Also, state-backed Malian militias participated in the harsh Nigerien military campaign in 2017-18 and exploited the opportunity to engage in illicit activities such as cattle-rustling which affected Fulani and Tuareg communities. As Nigerien security forces turned a blind eye to the injustices carried out towards pastoral communities, Tillabéri became increasingly a conducive environment for the occurrence of violent extremism on which violent entrepreneurs have capitalised.⁴⁰ Since 2017, the jihadist group ISGS has sought to influence the local population and force out Nigerien state authorities.

Compared to Tillabéri, the peripheral region and town of Agadez has played a significant role in Niger’s volatile political history as the centre for several northern rebellions led by the Tuareg minority. The region shares significant commonalities with the neighbouring regions of northern Mali, and in particular the region of Kidal, to the point that a most-similar case research design can be said to apply to the two areas.⁴¹ Both regions are physically and politically isolated from their respective national capitals, located thousands of kilometres to

⁴⁰ See also Bøås, Cissé and Mahamane, ‘Explaining violence in Tillabéri’.

⁴¹ Luca Raineri & Francesco Strazzari (2021) ‘Drug smuggling and the stability of fragile states: the diverging trajectories of Mali and Niger’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, DOI: 10.1080/17502977.2021.1896207.



the south and without functioning paved road connections. Both regions are home to a majority of ethnic Tuaregs (who in turn represent a minority in all the other regions and therefore in Niger and Mali as a whole), whose (feeling of) marginalisation has fuelled sectarian, nationalist and secessionist revolts in the past. Interestingly, the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s and 2000s featured a considerable level of coordination across Mali and Niger. A combination of socio-political isolation and inhospitable environment – furthermore exposed to continued degradation – have undermined local livelihoods, fuelling large-scale youth unemployment. Paradoxically, the economic downturn has been even harsher in the region of Agadez, owing to the crisis of the uranium mining sector and the clampdown on irregular migration and related informal activities. Having befallen upon Agadez populations as a result of European concerns, such dynamics have fuelled a palpable local resentment vis-à-vis the EU and its member states.⁴² Furthermore, both the regions of Agadez and Kidal are affected by major trafficking flows, including of drugs, gold and weapons, which in turn fuel massive corruption, banditry and insecurity.⁴³

Tillabéri: Factors facilitating the occurrence of violent extremism

Despite the supposed dominance of moderate Sufism in Niger, manifestations of religious extremism are increasingly visible throughout the country, particularly in urban centres, connected to the rise in popularity of local Salafi preachers, called Izala. The emergence during last years of an increasingly polarized religious discourse in Niger has been spreading thanks to the popularity of Salafi-leaning organizations, known as Izala, Kitab wa Sunna and Sunnance. These groups, at different levels and degrees, present an agenda of progressive Islamisation of the public sphere (Izala, Kitab wa Sunna) and of the private self (Sunnance). Such practices have led to different levels of absorption by communities, in urban and rural settings. Sermons, Quranic interpretations (*tafsīr*) and preaching on current matters have gained wide diffusion through Bluetooth and, later, via social networks in the entirety of the country. Such mediated messages vehiculate a ‘blame-game’, which is the reflection of the lack of constructive dialogue between and among religious groups. State efforts to moderate these stances calling for a more marked Islamisation of the public space have often turned into practices of co-optation of extremist public voices, but also in a progressive isolation of those preachers and teachers not willing to reach a dialogue with institutions.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the proliferation of groups providing similar interpretation on the key sources of Islam (Sunna, Hadiths) has led to confusion and disorientation among the audience of followers. Such confusion is at times employed by religious leaders to polarise audiences and foster discriminating attitudes, if not violent extremist discourses.

⁴² Fransje Molenaar, Anca-Elena Ursu, Bachirou Ayouba Tinni, Anette Hoffmann & Jos Meester (2017) *A Line in the Sand Roadmap for Sustainable Migration Management in Agadez*, The Hague: Clingendael.

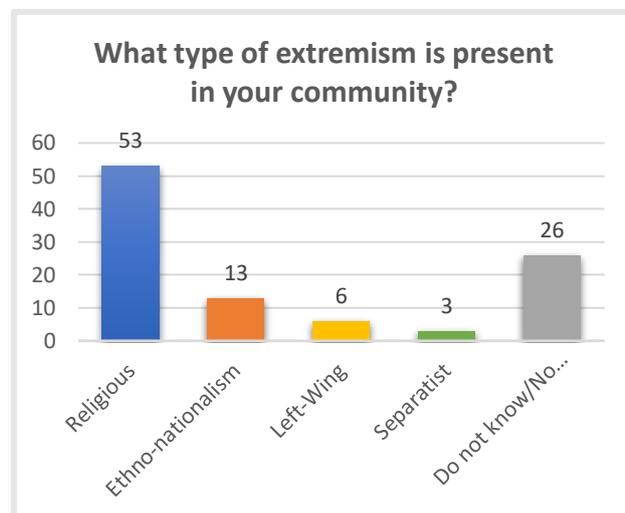
⁴³ Savannah de Tessières (2018) *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

⁴⁴ Rahmane Idrissa (2018) ‘Les trajectoires du salafisme politique au Sahel. Le cas du Niger’, *Politique Africaine*, vol. 149: 43-65.



The manifestations of these extremist discourses take a variety of forms, but always with violence as a backdrop. Aggressive preaching questioning the non-denominational form of the state has been on the rise during last years. This kind of discourse insists on the inadequacy of secular governance and the fact that it does not alleviate injustice and poverty, but enriches the elites (political authorities, Sufi brotherhoods, traditional Islamic teachers). The traditional chieftaincy, representatives of the state (parties, teachers, civil servants), defence and security forces (police, gendarmerie) are often considered as accomplices in the plundering of the population and responsible for bad governance, corruption, social injustice and discrimination of all kinds. The rise of such extremist discourses in Niger have coincided with deadly attacks on villages and defence and security force positions in the Liptako-Gourma, a transnational area that encompasses Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. The department of Tillabéri represents one of the most evident cases of occurrence of violent extremism. According to ACLED, since the violence escalated in 2018, jihadist groups – mainly ISGS but also JNIM – have been linked to 364 violent events resulting in more than 1,600 fatalities.⁴⁵ The recurrence of such attacks ignites a series of consequences, such as food insecurity, forced displacement, joining armed groups or fear of persecution, or targeting. Such phenomena constitute a fertile ground for the transformation of tensions into open confrontations.

Our survey data collected in the areas of Tadress, Tilla Kaina and Kabia⁴⁶ among Muslim communities with diverse linguistic background (Zerma, Fulani, Tuareg, Songhay) confirm that all the participants in the survey have been confronted with violence. In this region of Niger, the occurrence of violent extremist discourses has been growing in combination with the promotion of an extremist religious discourse, which the majority (53/101) of interviewees claim to be at the base of violence in the region. This does not mean that adherents to extremist discourses become violent extremists simply because of their radical religious beliefs. Instead, the respondents' answers are linked to the fact that it is groups associated with religious extremism that are the main perpetrators of violent extremist acts in the region. The respondents identify other drivers than religious beliefs as the source of support to violent extremist groups and acts. Also, the discussion of non-occurrence in Agadez will show that although religious extremist discourses can be a first step towards violent extremism, many proponents of radical beliefs themselves, such as Salafist imams, actively oppose the use of violence. What this means is that the rise of extremist religious discourse as a driver of violent



⁴⁵ Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre & Joakim Karlsen (2010) 'Introducing ACLED: an armed conflict location and event dataset: special data feature' *Journal of peace research*, vol. 47, no 5: 651-660.

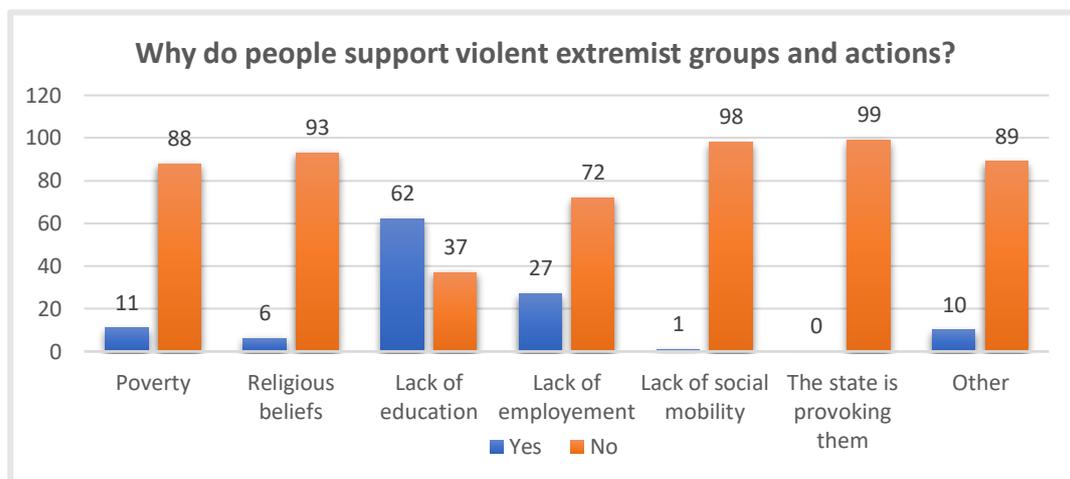
⁴⁶ A fourth locality was selected for the survey; however, the site was not recommended because of too much insecurity.



extremism is not sufficient. Other drivers have been necessary to propel the rise of violent extremism in Tillabéri.

As in Mopti, geography also matters in Tillabéri. The conflict that originated in Northern Mali has had spill-over effects to the region related to ISGS' search for refuge. In addition, while Tillabéri is in close vicinity to the state authorities in the capital, the same cannot be said for its Malian and Burkinabé counterparts in the tri-border area. These are peripheral and marginalised regions in which people have felt abandoned by state authorities.⁴⁷ While this has created difficulties for the Nigerien state to protect itself from conflict spill-over in porous border areas, geography only partly explains the occurrence of violent extremism in Tillabéri as violent entrepreneurs have managed to integrate themselves among parts of the local population.⁴⁸

The field research in Tillabéri showed that the main factors shaping occurrence of violent extremism are a combination of structural factors and deep-seated grievances. As in the Mopti region, poverty, alienation and marginalisation can be identified as recurring drivers for violent extremism. This is in line with previous research, which has shown that economic recession, unemployment and low or declining levels of public education have enabled deep-seated grievances to emerge and be vocally and contentiously used as means to escape from a bleak reality.⁴⁹ Such processes provide the entry points for extremist discourses that are mostly aimed at disenfranchised individuals in the community, i.e. those who feel deprived, marginalised and have benefitted less from public education.



The survey (seen in the chart above) portrayed a consensus about 'lack of education' being one if not the main reason for why people support violent extremism⁵⁰ Interestingly, the

⁴⁷ See Sten Hagberg (2018) 'Beyond regional radars: Security from below and the rule of law in the Sahel', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1: 21-37; and Morten Bøås & Liv Elin Torheim (2013) 'The trouble in Mali—corruption, collusion, resistance', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1: 1279-1292.

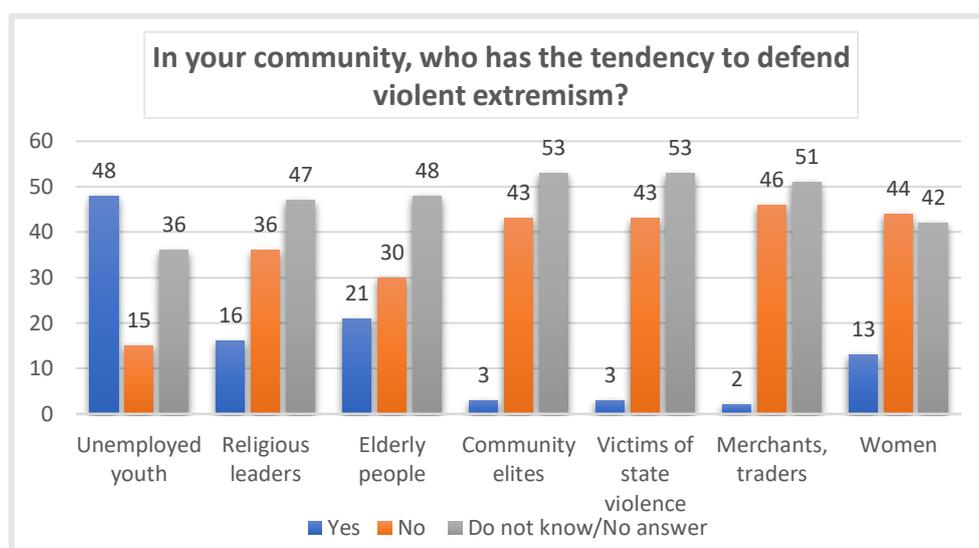
⁴⁸ Bøås, Cissé & Mahamane, 'Explaining violence in Tillabéri'.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ By education here we mean public state-funded education and not the traditional Quranic itinerant schooling which is still prevalent in the region.



overwhelming majority of the respondents ruled out poverty, religious beliefs, lack of social mobility and state abuses as drivers of violent extremism, which differs markedly from the results in Mopti. However, related to education, a quarter of the respondents identified ‘lack of employment’ as a reason for why people support violent extremist groups and actions. While it is not much, these results indicate that a general lack of opportunities for acquiring a decent livelihood is a factor contributing to violent extremism in Tillabéri. This suggests that socio-economic marginalisation is an important driver of violent extremism. This notion is significantly strengthened by the survey-results on who has the tendency to defend violent extremism as seen in the chart below.



About half of the respondents (48/101) pointed to unemployed youth as the main defenders of extremist discourses, with few pointed to religious leaders, elderly people and women. Socio-economic marginalisation of youth is connected to the challenging environmental conditions and population growth putting enormous pressure on scarce resources, which are making livelihoods fragile, and especially so for disenfranchised youth. Such processes have exacerbated a growing climate of distrust and insecurity between local communities associated with different productive systems. Real or perceived inequalities between and within different socio-economic categories (for instance, farmers, herders, traders) often coincide with identity-based cleavages producing deep-seated grievances which serves as an entry point for violent entrepreneurs able to appropriate such cleavages.⁵¹

Decisive moments

The survey focused on different questions regarding the drivers of violent extremism and the kind of push factors that have led to the growth of violence. Such questions have allowed us to understand some decisive moments in which extremism turned violent. What is the decisive

⁵¹ Gudrun Østby (2008) ‘Polarization, horizontal inequalities and violent civil conflict’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 45, no. 2: 143-162.



moment in which cognitive radicalisation *turns into* behavioural violent extremism? What is, so to say, the breaking point in which a radical belief or mindset assumes a concrete shape?

In Tillabéri, as in Mopti, we find many key situations leading to violence: we found that state presence, despite relative proximity to the capital city, has been traditionally low, and limited to farming communities, who constituted key electorates. This means that semi-nomad herding groups were historically neglected by local and central state authorities. Therefore, the presence of the state can be considered weak, albeit always present. The main consequence is that the state is unable to face and quell armed confrontation locally when this arises, therefore, as observable throughout the Sahel, the limited state personnel is either forced to abandon or is targeted militarily.

In line with this, respondents have summed up their perception about the decisive moment in which people has leaned towards violent extremism: this happened when state and security forces have been forced to abandon rural areas and retreat, thus leaving unprotected entire pockets of territory. Left to their own fate, youth is obliged to make choices that will determine his or her own engagement with violent extremism. When entire communities are (or feel) abandoned by state defence forces, the need to rely on sources of protection becomes unavoidable. Such feeling of insecurity can be identified by mostly young males as a turning point in their trajectory towards violent extremism. This can be summed up as joining of armed groups, more or less organised, such as jihadi organisations (ISGS) or self-defence militias. Those who do not join are usually forced to flee. Such situations, lead to a feeling of ‘betrayal’ by the state, which is nurtured by the incapability to deliver protection on the ground in rural areas.

On the individual behavioural level, such decisive moments happen in combination with internal changes. Behaviour and speeches, for instance, indicate that an individual is receding from socially sanctioned behaviours and norms. Such deviation from commonly established values might not be the necessary condition for extremism to turn into violence. However, these outside signs have been identified by respondents as potential marks of a process of radicalisation. The decisive moment is when the identification of an enemy—in our cases, the state and defence forces that have abandoned rural communities—turns into armed and violent opposition to this enemy.

Agadez: Factors shaping the non-occurrence of violent extremism

The Nigerien town of Agadez and its region provide an interesting case for the exploration of violent extremism’s drivers of radicalisation and patterns of mobilisation in the Sahel. On the one hand, the Agadez region features many striking similarities and common characteristics with surrounding regions that have been significantly affected by violent extremist dynamics. *Prima facie*, then, one would expect the region of Agadez, too, to provide a fertile ground for violent extremism. On the other hand, however, the region of Agadez appears to be a case of non-occurrence, as there are no clear manifestations of violent extremism taking root there. This interesting mismatch between expectations and observations provides a valuable case to in-depth investigate whether A) radicalisation and violent extremism are in fact present in the



region of Agadez, but just less apparent; or B) the actual lack of violent extremist dynamics contributes to specifying and restricting the scope-conditions for the applicability of more general theories about the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism.

Structural characteristics such as socio-political isolation, environmental degradation, lack of employment, trafficking flows and insecurity have often been considered as key enabling factors of ongoing dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism in north Mali. The relevant causal mechanisms put forward by social theorists refer to demands for protection,⁵² crime-terror nexus,⁵³ horizontal inequalities,⁵⁴ and limited state capacity;⁵⁵ to mention but the most frequently evoked. Surprisingly, though, in the region of Agadez such mechanisms do not appear to lead to the same outcome. Unlike the north of Mali, the region of Agadez does not seem to be affected by significant phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism. The last terrorist attack in the region dates to 2013 and was performed by an al-Qaeda commando coming from abroad. Terrorist kidnappings-for-ransoms, which used to be rampant around 2010, have now largely discontinued. Overall, the region of Agadez looks surprisingly peaceful, apart from minor inter-ethnic clashes, which did not escalate nor appeared to feature any connection to jihadism. And even reports of people from Agadez joining jihadist organisations abroad, whether in Mali, Libya, Algeria or Nigeria, are scant, and often poorly substantiated.⁵⁶ Security officers deployed in the region, whether Nigerien, European or American, confirm that banditry, and not violent extremism, is the main source of security concerns in the region of Agadez,⁵⁷ to the point that local and international programmes of P/CVE have been interrupted, and relocated to other regions in Niger.⁵⁸

Puzzled by this mismatch, scholars have investigated the factors that may explain the apparent greater stability of the region of Agadez vis-à-vis neighbouring regions. Prominent explanations tend to focus on the peculiar approach by Nigerien state authorities to peripheral⁵⁹ and informal powerbrokers in Agadez,⁶⁰ which differs markedly from what one observes in the north of Mali. Local peace-building institutions, such as the Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP) and the Comité de Paix d'Agadez, have managed to cater national and international support, including by the EU, to foster prevention policies whereby the co-optation

⁵² See Mathieu Pellerin (2017) *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel*, Paris: IFRI.

⁵³ Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari (2015) 'State, secession, and jihad: the micropolitical economy of conflict in Northern Mali', *African Security*, vol. 8, no. 4: 249–271.

⁵⁴ Judith Scheele (2012) *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁵ Stig J. Hansen (2019) *Horn, Sahel and Rift. Fault-lines of the African Jihad*, London: Hurst.

⁵⁶ See Aaron Y. Zelin (2018) *The Others. Foreign Fighters in Libya*, Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Policy note no. 45). Rumour reiterated by additional sources, including international scholar, interviewed in Tunis, September 2019, and Agadez leaders, interviewed in Agadez, October 2021.

⁵⁷ Interviews with Nigerien, EU and US security officers based in the Agadez region, done in Agadez and Niamey, October 2021.

⁵⁸ Interviews with Nigerien CSOs and US NGO worker working on P/CVE, done in Agadez and Niamey, October 2021.

⁵⁹ Yvan Guichaoua & Mathieu Pellerin (2017) *Faire la paix et construire l'État : Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries sahéliennes au Niger et au Mali*, Paris: IRSEM.

⁶⁰ Raineri & Strazzari, 'Drug smuggling and the stability of fragile states: the diverging trajectories of Mali and Niger'.



of local leaders strengthens state capacities of oversight, and reduces the physical and social space that jihadist groups may exploit. At the same time, the lack of overt manifestations of violent extremism, whose behaviouralist expressions could be sensed, does not exclude that less explicit processes of radicalisation take place at cognitive level.⁶¹

Traditional authorities in Agadez tend to dismiss the idea that radical religious views can take root in Agadez. This is reportedly because, on the one hand, social and religious traditional norms retain a widespread legitimacy, binding people to local Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qadiriyya. On the other hand, the local Observatoire des Religions casts a bridge between religious associations and the Ministry of Interior, helping the latter oversee religious discourses (preaches, radio communiqués, etc.) and remove ‘inflammatory content’ from public spaces, such as mosques and the media.⁶² The alleged success of this approach has led Niger state authorities to extend the model of the Observatoire des Religions beyond the region of Agadez to the entirety of the country in 2018.

Ethnographic research suggests nuancing these claims. Like elsewhere in the Sahel,⁶³ radical religious views such as Salafism and Wahabism (locally called Sunna) appear to be on the rise in Agadez. Salafist mosques are mushrooming in the town and its hinterland, and a few thousand students are reportedly enrolled in Salafist-leaning Quranic schools. While accurate figures are hard to obtain, this arguably represents between 10 and 25 percent of the number of pupils enrolled in Sufi-leaning Quranic schools:⁶⁴ that is not the majority but a significant and growing share. Salafism appears to be more prominent among disenfranchised social groups who are not – or less – socialised into Agadez customary religious norms: the youth in general, and particularly non-ethnic Tuareg Nigeriens, who have settled in Agadez after migrating from the south of the country, including Hausa and Kanouri living in the sprawling outskirts of the town.⁶⁵ Most of the Salafist imams and preachers in Agadez tend to be themselves ethnic Hausas coming from south Niger or north Nigeria, and some of them are reportedly members of Izala, the radical Salafist group from which originated the founder of Boko Haram Mohamed Yusuf. Other radical religious leaders are Nigerien imams formed in Libya in the early 2000s, especially in the areas of Ajdabiya to the East and Zawiya to the West. These areas are known to have turned into hotspots of religious radicalism and violence since the fall of the Gaddafi regime.⁶⁶

Access constraints and limited evidence make it more difficult to assess the penetration of Salafism beyond the town, and in the vast hinterland of the Agadez region. Overall, local sources tend to concur that Salafism is less present in the countryside and villages, as it is mainly

⁶¹ See Donatella Della Porta & Daniel Lafree (2012) ‘Guest editorial: processes of radicalization and de-Radicalization’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, vol. 6, no 1: 4-10.

⁶² Interview with a member of the Observatoire des Religions, Agadez, October 2021.

⁶³ Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim (2017) *The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations*, Paris: OECD (West Africa Papers).

⁶⁴ Interviews with different religious leaders in Agadez, October 2021.

⁶⁵ Interviews with various youth from Agadez, Agadez, October 2021.

⁶⁶ Virginie Collombier (2020) *Salafi Politics: ‘Political’ and ‘Quietist’ Salafis in the Struggle for the Libyan State*, Florence: MED/NUPI.



an urban phenomenon.⁶⁷ The Agadez region in particular has been poorly targeted by religious cooperation initiatives coming from the Gulf, thereby limiting the opportunities for Salafism to take root. This is in contrast with the neighbouring region of Tahoua, where proselytist initiatives from the Gulf are widespread – possibly as a result of stronger connections with local ethnic Arabs. Further and more targeted research would be needed to explore whether such initiatives translate into processes of cognitive, religious and/or political radicalisation in the region of Tahoua.

Even the alleged linkage between cognitive radicalisation of religious beliefs and behavioural expressions of violent extremism – or, to put it bluntly, between Salafist doctrines and jihadist practices – remains highly controversial. On the one hand, ethnographic evidence from Agadez suggests that radical indoctrination can represent a first step towards violent extremism. A local youth claimed that the exposure to radical Salafist doctrines by an Izala preacher coming from Nigeria prompted his determination to change his life and take action, making him actively look for jihadist propaganda videos online. He claimed that he would be ready to join jihadist militants in north Mali, had not his family, friends and teachers dissuaded him, and that such feelings are widespread among Agadez youth.⁶⁸ Agadez religious leaders, and Salafist imams most notably, confirm that they often meet frustrated local youth who ask for moral and practical guidance to act and fight the evil state of disbelievers. On the other hand, the same religious leaders claim that they spare no effort in trying to dissuade the most frantic youth and soothe looming tensions.⁶⁹ This suggests that ‘radical’ religious leaders, too, can provide a valuable contribution to prevent and counter violent extremism, just as any other religious and social leader, and possibly even more so because of their perceived legitimacy, moral probity, and political independence vis-à-vis the state. Data limitations make it hard to conclude whether the above represents mere anecdotal evidence or an indicator of a more general trend. Nevertheless, it lends credibility to the idea that processes of cognitive radicalisation do take place in the region of Agadez, drawing (at least part of) the local youth ideologically and politically closer to the jihadist movements proliferating in the region.

If this is the case, however, the argument begs the question of why such processes of cognitive radicalisation do not translate into action, given that the evidence of Agadez militants joining jihadist groups remains scant. The research conducted for this paper does not allow a conclusive answer to this question. Nevertheless, concurring reports from various sources permit a tentative hypothesis: while there may well be a (strong) demand by local youth to join jihadist groups, the supply of concrete opportunities is constrained by the absence of jihadist recruiters who are actively targeting the region of Agadez.⁷⁰ This may be the result of law enforcement effectiveness, or social cohesion, or lack of interest by jihadist groups themselves, or a combination of these. One may also conjecture that a tacit agreement exists between jihadist groups and local authorities, precisely as a result of the social connections existing between them, whereby jihadist groups accept to spare the Agadez region from attacks and mobilisation

⁶⁷ Interviews with several religious leaders and intellectuals, Agadez and Niamey, October 2021.

⁶⁸ Interview with radical youth, Agadez, October 2021.

⁶⁹ Interview with religious leaders, Agadez, October 2021.

⁷⁰ Interview with Agadez political, religious and tribal leaders, Agadez, October 2021.



attempts, and Agadez regional authorities avoid interfering with jihadist activities across the border.⁷¹ The haste with which the Tuareg leaders of Agadez rushed to assuage tensions between Niamey and Kidal lends credibility to this hypothesis. After all, one may argue that such agreements have been successfully implemented in Mauritania.

Further research is required to substantiate this conjecture. Nevertheless, the mismatch between high expectations and scant observations of violent extremist dynamics in the region of Agadez invites to better specify the scope-conditions for jihadist mobilization theories to hold. Focusing on the complex interactions between demand for mobilisation and supply of recruitment opportunities provides a promising path for further theory-building.

What does this tell us about local resilience?

Overall, available ethnographic evidence confirms that, despite denials by local and national authorities, Salafism is on the rise in Agadez. While Salafist doctrines are arguably more ‘radical’ than traditional Sufism conveyed by local brotherhoods, the overall radicalisation of religious discourses does not appear to undermine political stability. Quarrels among Muslim denominations do exist, but they tend to remain limited in scope, focused on theological aspects, and disinclined to escalate. Salafists in Agadez do not appear, nor are perceived, to fundamentally question the political status quo. In sum, the case of Agadez demonstrates the resilience of local religious institutions despite the growth in popularity of Salafi-leaning preaching and the attractiveness of violent extremist discourses—a resilience which might also derive from a mutual non-interference pact between local Tuareg and jihadi leaderships.

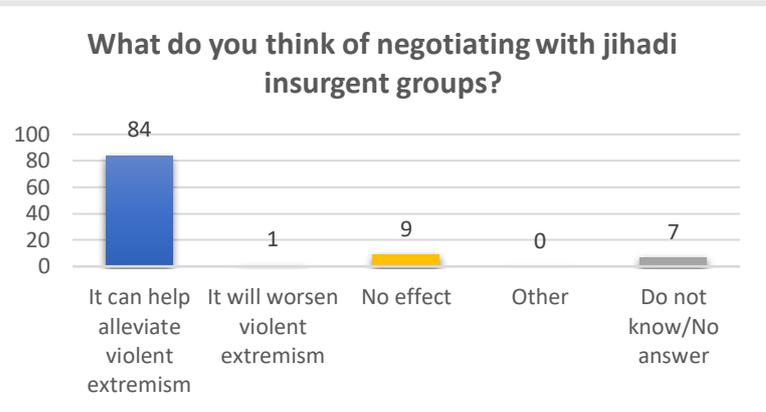
In any case, the data collected in the areas of occurrence and non-occurrence testify to the existence of popular modes of building resilience to the phenomenon of violent extremism. Let us recall that the research question is based on the concept of an environment favourable to the emergence of violent extremism. The environment is said to be favourable when it meets certain characteristics such as increased poverty, untrained and idle youth, a notorious absence of basic social services and an absence of the state or the presence of the state in its predatory form (coercive tax collection, monopolization of natural resources - water, forests, land, etc.), the existence of a ‘pious’ rhetoric carried by local groups proposing a new mode of governance of salvation goods and public goods.

Tillabéri is one of the most hard-hit spaces in terms of violent extremism, suffering from the spill-over of violence from neighbouring Mali and enmeshed of retaliatory violence at the hands of ethnic-based militias. In Tillabéri, for instance, local communities have been exposed to resilience-building initiatives developed by state actors and CSO. The existence, and importance, of programs to prevent violent extremism (PVE) in the area has been acknowledged and stressed by most respondents in the Tillabéri region (55/101). However, they also underlined how such initiatives were undertaken usually by local governmental organisations and, in the wide majority, by NGOs. Such experiences show that PVE programs should be further sustained and brought into a coordinated frame so to have a more robust outcome in strengthening resilience.

⁷¹ Interviews with several Tuareg leaders, Agadez, November 2019 and October 2021.

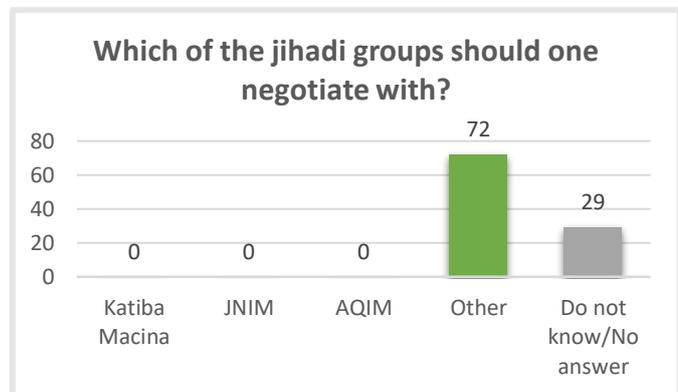


When armed resistance seems not viable, resilience of local communities affected by violent extremism can come also through different forms of bargain or negotiation. It is the case of the many communities which have decided to prevent the violent outcomes of extremism by entering negotiations with violent extremists. The number of constraints to which communities are subjected in Tillabéri makes the choice of entering negotiations a forced one. However, strategically speaking, such a choice is also dictated by the lack of any other viable options, as many communities choose to engage in negotiations often after having already experienced devastation and looting at the hand of violent extremists. In the case of Tillabéri, the pressure and violence to which communities have been exposed at the hand of the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) has left them few rooms of negotiations, and some had to accept a relationship of ‘control’ and the human costs of having male and female youth being forcibly taken from the village.



Still, the survey results from Tillabéri are the same as those from Mopti. An overwhelming majority of the respondents are in favour of negotiating with the jihadi insurgent groups, and behind the other category here, we find the ISGS (see chart below).

As much as people in local communities see negotiations as a way to end the conflict, and perhaps also the only way, in Tillabéri as elsewhere in the region people are faced with the following dilemma: They believe this option could improve their current situation. However, as we argued in the case of Mali, the challenge remains the same. Right now, the Jihadi insurgents



will almost always have the upper hand because they negotiate from a position of strength with fragile and poor local communities. Thus, while local negotiations may bring a breather for local communities in exchange for accepting adherence to religious doctrine, these locally brokered agreements tend not to last for very long. The challenge is therefore how to scale them up to national level negotiations when both the state and particularly some of the state’s external allies see negotiation with Jihadi rebels as red line they are not willing to cross.



5. Cases of occurrence and non-occurrence in the Maghreb – Morocco and Tunisia

5.1 Morocco

Background

In Morocco, a traditionally Muslim Sufi country, the monarchy is not only the most powerful political institution but also the most influential one, centred around the figure of the King which is also the amir al-Mu'minin (prince of the Believers). Claiming Prophetic descent, the King in Morocco is endowed with not only political power (to dissolve the parliament, appoint prime ministers, etc.) but most importantly of great spiritual and symbolic power. The presence of the King as Prince of the Believers functioned as a symbol to dissuade Moroccan citizens to engage directly in violent extremism. The state-organised promotion of Sufism, especially, as a core value not only of Moroccan society but also of the Kingdom itself relies on the assumption that Sufism is an inherently apolitical spiritual movement. However, when examining the Kingdom's history, political legitimisation for rulers in Morocco came through affiliation or proximity to Sufi shuyuks. Hence, the entanglement between monarchs, dar al-makhzen (Sultan's Land or Palace) and Sufi leadership in Morocco is at the core of political life and governance devices. In the country, key Sharifian Sufi families have strong ties with the monarchy and have shown support, directly or indirectly, for the rulers, proving to be veritable assets in infusing society with order and discipline. During colonial and post-colonial times, the Sufi leadership aptly adapted to shifting discourses from the Umma (larger Muslim global community) to a more nationalistic and Morocco-based audience, strengthening the ties with the Sharifian throne. When Mohammed VI succeeded his father Hassan II in 1999, the relatively young king appointed Ahmad Tawfiq as Minister for Religious Affairs, a noted shaykh of the Boutchichiyya Sufi brotherhood, an order popular among middle and upper-class Moroccans.

The promotion of a reformist Sufi-infused discourse in the public space had the goal to reinforce the presence of Sufi brotherhoods among disenfranchised people—especially youth—in peripheral and impoverished areas of the country's main cities and counter the growing popularity of Salafi-leaning organisations that did not only pose a threat as mobilizers of discourses on violent extremism but also as service-delivery promoters in spaces that are poorly served in terms of educational and health facilities.

Historical Developments

Historically, Morocco was known for being a country from which few foreign fighter Jihadists originated compared to Algeria or Libya in the 1980s. Nonetheless, Jihadi organisations have targeted Morocco in the past such as in the 1994 Marrakech attack and during the suicide bombings of May 2003, which remain to date the worse terrorist incident to have taken place. Moreover, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) tried to establish networks in Morocco in the 2000's and targeted the country during the failed April 2007 suicide attacks of Casablanca.⁷²

⁷²See Kei Nakagawa, El Mostafa Rezrazi and Shoji Matsumoto (2016) *Morocco's War on Terrorism: The case*



Starting from 2011, and with the rise of the civil war in Syria, The Bureau Central d'Investigation Judiciaire (BCIJ), a special police unit, was created to combat terrorism. Since then, the BCIJ has dismantled many terrorist cells while no major terrorist incident has been reported.⁷³ Concerning law reforms in this regard, 'the Moroccan government promulgated a new antiterrorism law that toughened penalties to include a minimum sentence of ten years' imprisonment for active involvement in terrorism, life imprisonment if the terrorist acts cause serious bodily injury to others, and the death penalty if they result in fatalities'.⁷⁴ The national authorities, which have developed a recognized expertise, see these small terrorist cells overall as of little threat. On the other hand, the rise of powerful Jihadi organizations in the Middle East especially Al Nusra Front linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) led to a major upsurge of Moroccan Foreign fighters departing for the Middle East. This was a major change compared to previous years. Thus, around 1600 and 2000 Moroccans joined radical organizations between the years 2011 and 2016, one of the highest rates in the world.⁷⁵ Worse, in 2013, the Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria created their own organisation, Harakat Sham Al Islam (HSI), very close to Al Nusra, which played a major role in several key battles against Syrian troops before eventually disappearing in 2016 by which time, its founder has died and its fighters either defected to IS or joined other Jihadi groups.⁷⁶

The evolution of Morocco's Foreign Fighters phenomenon in a historical perspective

Our research shows that there is an evolutionary pattern of the phenomenon of foreign fighters from the 1980's with the Moroccan Afghans, their number have grown larger in 'new jihad':

The first wave of foreign fighters was the ones who went to fight in Afghanistan after 1979. Labelled as 'Moroccan Afghans'⁷⁷ by the press, they were mostly driven by emotional motives of either standing against moral injustices, socio-cultural willingness of being part of religious or ideological rebel movements willing to defend their 'Afghan brothers'. These people were especially youth from universities as various university professors and intellectuals testified observing.⁷⁸ While not many in terms of numbers, the Moroccan Afghans did create the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (MIFG), led by Abdelkrim Mejjati.⁷⁹ The MIFG, linked to Al Qaeda, was suspected of being involved in the 2003 Casablanca attacks as well as the

for Security Cooperation Today, United Kingdom: Gilmarsh Publishing.

⁷³ Two incidents took place including the 2011 terrorist bombing in Marrakech and the assassination of two Danish tourists in 2019. One must note that these local cells are mostly homegrown terrorists pledging allegiance to ISIS. However, they are often isolated cells and unconnected organically to transitional terrorist organizations as such.

⁷⁴ J. Peter Pham (2013) *Morocco's Vital Role in Northwest Africa's Security and Development*, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, p. 4.

⁷⁵ See Mohammed Masbah (2019) 'Transnational security challenges in North Africa: Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria 2012–2016', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol 55, no. 2: 182–199.

⁷⁶ See Mohammed Masbah (2015) 'Moroccan foreign fighters: evolution of a phenomenon, promotive factors, and the limits of hardline policies', *SWP Comments* 46 (October): 5-6.

⁷⁷ Masbah, 'Transnational security challenges in North Africa', p. 183.

⁷⁸ Interview with Soumaya Naamane Guessous, Sociologist and professor in Hassan II University (August 2021) and with Khalid Mouna, Sociologist and professor at Moulay Ismael university, Meknes (September 2021).

⁷⁹ See Mathieu Guidere (2007) *Al Qaida a la Conquete du Maghreb: Le terrorisme aux portes de l'Europe*; Paris: Ediction du Rocher, pp. 188-197.



2004 Madrid Attacks. Mejjati eventually joined Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula and was killed in Saudi Arabia in 2005.

As for the second wave, it was mostly in the 1990's as well as the beginning of the 2000's, to Bosnia, Chechenia and above all to Iraq after the 2003 US invasion. This period saw the emergence of channels such as Al Jazeera, Iqraa and Al Resala that instrumentalised the Palestine-Israel Conflict as well as the 9/11 events to demonstrate that Islam and the Muslim world were under attack. Those channels used direct narratives of the ongoing events and violence in those countries, promoted traditional Islamic thoughts and principles through shows about Islam lifestyle that were very popular among Muslim households. The narratives in such channels and broadcasted leaders' speeches were aimed at an Arab Muslim mass that suffered from illiteracy and naivety, and thus penetrated their psychologies. This played an important role in convincing those masses that the Arab world was targeted and the need to go for Jihad to defend their religion.

While this 2nd wave, especially the Iraqi Jihad of the 2000's, was known to be the beginning of the process that eventually led to the rise of numerous extremist networks which played a pivotal role after 2011, it is important to note that in the case of Morocco, the State was able to absorb this wave of fighters. One of the most important reasons for this, contrary to other Arab countries, local popular religious organisations opposed this phenomenon. For instance, *Jamaat Al Adl Wa Al Ihssane* (Justice and Charity), the most popular Islamic movement/organisation in Morocco since the 1970's, isolated itself from the principles of Salafiya Al Jihadiya. According to the testimony of a prominent figure in the institution, Al Adl Wa Al Ihssane always opposed Moroccans going for Jihad and becoming foreign fighters. Instead, the *Adl wal Ihssane* believed in the principle of *Jihad Annafs* (Spiritual Jihad) meaning the one striving to keep his/her soul pure and free of hate and anger that drive people to crime and to violence.⁸⁰ As its leaders were respected and popular among the poorer part of the population, *Adl wal Ihssane* networks played a role in deflecting the attraction of Jihadism in many cases. Also, the role of Sufism and the multiple religious brotherhoods (*Zaouiyat*) in Morocco contributed massively to the absorption of violent extremism in Morocco during that period.

The third wave, which took place after the Arab Spring in 2011 is considered certainly as the largest, as over 1600 Moroccan youth joined Syria-Iraq areas. Initially, a variety of old political prisoners as well as radicalised detainees were part of this wave since numerous struggled in prison and did not go through an adequate reintegration program, which did not exist back then; hence, making many detainees more radicalised in prisons.⁸¹ Additionally, our interviews with some former jihadists that left during this initial wave show that they had a feeling of belonging not so much to the Muslim Nation (Umma) as the Arab one and thus, nourished with Al Jazeera images of massacres and injustices and killings in Syria and Iraq, felt the need to defend an Arab nation i.e. Pan Arabism (*Qawmi*). In this case, our interviews show

⁸⁰ Interview with a prominent leader of Al Adl wal Ihssane, September 2021.

⁸¹ Interview with former Jihadist, August 2021.



that these normally were persons that felt the need to find themselves in something bigger.⁸² The combination of these contextual elements has made this third wave to be known as the biggest in Morocco's history of foreign fighters.

Most of the foreign fighters that went to Syria-Iraq came from the rural or semi-rural northern parts of Morocco, which is very conservative in terms of values. Most of those fighters came from lower middle-classes. Finally, and historically speaking, violent extremism in Morocco was essentially externally driven, i.e., foreign fighters going abroad rather than at carrying out attacks within the country. This is contrary to Algeria, Tunisia and Libya that witnessed both occurrences (domestic violent extremism and high level of foreign fighters).

Factors shaping occurrence and non-occurrence

In the case of Morocco, the research aimed to look at cases of occurrence and non-occurrence to identify what caused or prevented the existence of an environment that could foster violent extremism.

Concerning direct radicalisation through violent extremist networks, some research conducted in semi-urban areas converged with the results of some interviews realized for the present study, showing that those networks spread in sectarian ways and focus on filling people's economic and lifestyle gap, which draw a clear distinction between urban areas and semi-urban areas in Morocco. Elaborating on this, the residents of grey areas i.e. ungoverned areas where there was a lack of state presence (authority, culture, investments) have been seen to be more likely to be radicalised than of urban milieus as Alison Pargeter explains:⁸³ 'It is the fetid shanty towns on the outskirts of these cities, from which the state has been largely absent for decades, that have given rise to a particular propensity to Islamic activism, including that of a militant nature [...] These shanty towns appear to represent a vast no-man's-land. Those forced to live in them have tried to recreate rural structures and value systems in the margins of the urban setting [...] Their inhabitants are neither part of the old society nor integrated into the new, and it is therefore hardly surprising that they may be attracted to a discourse that promotes personal piety and is full of certainties and promise.'

Moreover, violent extremist networks in Morocco have long relied on strategies based on dissemination in such milieus. The fact that such zones are considered grey areas with a semi-absence of the state presence makes this process easier for these networks to deploy themselves whether directly and totally or through some of its members individually. Indeed, and as Rogelio Alonso and Marco Rey argue.⁸⁴ 'these organizations have developed a broad support network for poor families, providing food, clothes, shelter, and medical and educational assistance, thus reinforcing organisational links within communities where religious organizations exert considerable influence.' Interviewed about this same matter, a former Jihadi supports this argument explaining that 'They focus on filling your pocket first before filling

⁸² Interviews with former jihadists, August 2021, Morocco.

⁸³ Alison Pargeter (2009) 'Localism and radicalisation in North Africa: local factors and the development of political Islam in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya', *International Affairs* 85, no. 5: 1031–44, p. 1042.

⁸⁴ Rogelio Alonso and Marcos García Rey (2007) 'The evolution of Jihadist terrorism in Morocco', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 4: 571–92, p. 575.



your psyche. Many people enrolled in extremist groups through the good encounters they had with these Salafi Jihadi merchants as customers but most importantly as partners because most of them help youth who are poor and frustrated. They fill their time and provide them with money through letting them sell with them their merchandise and recruit them to join these organisations. Some of these youngsters are not poor, they just have nothing else to do besides going to the mosque and going back home'.⁸⁵

Therefore, networks spread not only through offering economic advantage but also the notion of opportunity and hope for individuals not necessarily related to financial grievances but rather a journey for personal fulfilment. To illustrate this point, not only should one consider the aforementioned historical drivers of violent extremism in Morocco, but one should also revert to investigating indirect radicalisation processes that are not related to a direct recruitment by such a network, but rather through socio-cultural grievances associated with semi urban clash of ideologies and personal journeys to fulfilment.

When it comes to the occurrence of violent extremism, poverty is usually considered a prime driver that pushes individuals towards radicalisation.⁸⁶ However, such position should be nuanced, as radicalisation typically involves socio-economic inequalities that nourish low-income individuals' resentment against their oppressor (seen as the middle class) making their engagement with a violent extremist movement a must for several reasons. First, poverty may constitute a catalyst to joining a violent extremist movement for individuals to satisfy their lack of belonging. Elaborating, many individuals in semi-urban environments tend to engage in violent extremism activities as a form of revenge against the part of society that oppressed them and that took away their optimism for life. In this regard, this is the testimonial of a member of an NGO operating in Sidi Moumen in Casablanca,⁸⁷ the neighbourhood from which originated most of the May 2003 attack perpetrators, the worst attack to have ever taken place in the country. As this NGO director explains, 'These people do not feel that they belong to anything. They don't feel that they belong to this country. Whatever you say that we have in this country they'll tell you it's not for us. Look at the highways? I don't have a car. Look at the beautiful skyscrapers? I don't have a home. Look at the Clinics? I don't have money [...] When they go from Sidi Moumen to the city, they pass by the fancy shops and the beautiful villas. It's just like they travel to another world that they do not belong to. It's not the same city anymore.'

This same lack of belonging caused by financial inequalities constitutes a gap that is bridged by extremist groups who prey on these individuals and provide them with meaningful incentives that both the state and society could not provide them with. This conclusion leads one to inquire about these very incentives and to find that they are basic needs related to seeking dignity after being marginalised. To explain, the definition of poverty for such individuals is not necessarily related to the traditional sense of the term. While some of them struggle to find a job, most seek the notion of living instead of surviving. Indeed, in many cases, they manage

⁸⁵ Interview with a former Jihadist, August 2021.

⁸⁶ Pargeter, 'Localism and radicalisation in North Africa'.

⁸⁷ Interview with an NGO representative in Casablanca, August 2021.



to have jobs and housing but their life conditions being extremely difficult, render them marginalised. They can ‘survive’ rather than live a fruitful life in dignity.

When one seeks to find a common definition of terminologies, one is confronted by different interpretations from one person to another, but they all share traits of pursuing the privileges of normal life such as having coffee with friends, going out to a restaurant, traveling for pleasure, owning tech products. Thus, when one adopts an intersectional approach, one deduces that poverty and marginalisation are complementary notions that extremist networks manipulate not only through providing financial incentives in their attraction phase, but also through shedding light on these inequalities to fuel the rage of revenge in the individuals they are recruiting for their actions.

As political sociologist Mohamed Masbah⁸⁸ explained to one of the authors of this paper, most of the volunteers were people with little past connection to Jihadism and young, age 18 and 25, recruited either face to face or via social medias such as Facebook and Twitter.⁸⁹ Most of the third wave came from Northern Morocco semi-urban areas. For Masbah, ideology alone does not explain alone the commitment but also altruism (defence of fellow Muslims) as well as achieving a greater social status. Consequently, one may consider the variables of poverty and marginalisation as contextual elements rather than pure drivers of radicalisation in Morocco.

In addition to these factors, one must examine what we may call the global and local networks of radicalisation. One example lies in the dynamics of power that the media portray to local Muslim populations when it comes to the West’s perception of Islam as well as or the presence of hate speech within various media outlets against Muslims or against the West. Through the research conducted in Morocco, several interviewees spoke about the power of visualisation and of representation in media outlets being a trigger for radicalisation and paving the way for violent extremism networks to take control. For example, a former jihadist interviewed spoke about seeing videos of destroyed houses, men crying and weeping over their lost families, and murdered children constitute their boiling point that sparked their interest in going to Syria or Iraq.⁹⁰ Additionally, sociologists interviewed underlined the importance of such images in this process explaining that they play a vital role in facilitating the recruitment process for terrorist networks at the global level. Indeed, most people indoctrinated through this process find themselves an easy prey whether they are attracted by Jihadi recruiters or going on the web by themselves to look for ways to join Jihadist movements.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Masbah is the Director of the Rabat-based Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis and has extensive knowledge about processes of radicalization and de-redicalization among Moroccan Salafis.

⁸⁹ Interview with Mohamed Masbah, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, August 7th, 2021, Rabat, Morocco.

⁹⁰ Interview with a former Jihadist, August 2nd and 3rd, 2021.

⁹¹ Interview with Kathya Kenza Berrada, Senior Manager at the Arab Centre for Research and specialist of Radical groups in Morocco (August 2021) and Interview with Mohammed Masbah, President of the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA) and specialist of violent extremism in Morocco, August 2021.



Factors facilitating non-occurrence

Morocco's large urban slums and semi-urban peripheries represent an interesting case to explore how environments can enable the emergence of violent extremism and which kind of mobilisation patterns can take place. On one hand, Morocco and its diversified society features several similarities with neighbouring countries, either in the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia, Tripolitania in Libya) or in West Africa (Mauritania, Mali), which have known various forms of violent extremism. Sharing many similarities with neighbouring Algeria at the socio-cultural and historical level, Morocco would be expected to follow similar radical mobilisation patterns. However, on the other hand, Morocco presents strikingly different manifestations, being also a prominent case of non-occurrence of violent extremism within its frontiers. How come that expectations drawn from the study of the environment are not matched by actual occurrence of violent dynamics? Violent extremism in Morocco seems to manifest itself at the societal level, but the main outcome of such dynamics is the export of foreign fighters, especially—as we have seen—in the period between 2011 and 2016. Why does that occur?

Since 9/11, the Kingdom of Morocco has been engaged in efforts to counter violent extremism discourses, as a key ally in the Muslim world of the US-led war on terror. Such efforts have been especially intensified in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca bombings. From thereon, the Kingdom has engaged in various programs to reform the public discourse on Islam: state-sponsored TV programming, Quranic radio stations, literacy programs in mosques, the creation of an Islamic authority for women, and more generally the promotion of a discourse on Islam, which emphasises adherence to Maliki Sunni Islam and openly supports Sufi Islam as the correct path.⁹²

After the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the King declared that the 'spiritual security of the Kingdom' was at stake, promptly positioning the Kingdom in the group of US and Western allies. In fact, Mohammed VI and his Palace advisors intensified a discourse on citizenship, Moroccan nationalism and traditionalism that served the purpose to counter discourse on radical Islam and violent extremism in general. Such a move particularly reinforced state security governance sector and the role of traditional Sufi actors and associations, with the country being also able to export reformist educational curricula throughout West African partners (Guinea and Mali, for instance). In the aftermath of the so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings—which also agitated Moroccan politics led by the Mouvement 20 fevrier and others—King Mohammed VI, reigning from 1999, promised to partially liberalize the country's politics and shrink the influence and power of the King himself and his council of advisors (collectively referred to as the makhzen), this remains the most prominent governance device in the Kingdom. The control of Muslim practices and media turned into a massive mass-mediatisation of traditional Sufi practices, re-interpreted as distinctively 'Moroccan', whose call (da'wa) was thus reinforced in opposition to the growing popularity of Wahhabi-inspired and Salafi-leaning doctrines, especially, in the underprivileged contexts of peri-urban areas of Casablanca.

⁹² D. Maghraoui, (2009) 'The strengths and limits of religious reforms in Morocco', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 14, no. 2: 195–211.



Being a top-down state-led approach, the effort to counter violent extremism could rely on several privileged instruments. First of all, the monarchy reduced the role of Islamist parties without banning or demonizing them. Secondly, they enhanced and ‘modernized’ Sufi brotherhoods, trying to bring them in the XXI century and pushing them to endorse the discourse on the progressive modernisation of the country that the King had espoused through different free trade and commercial partnerships with Western and non-Western powers. The Kingdom, moreover, invested strongly in a wide-ranged reform of the education meant in a more Sunni, Sufi and Maliki way.⁹³

Rather than criminalise and outlaw radical Islamist parties, the King reduced the space for the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) in local elections while at the same time making it a crucial pillar of political and governance life in the country, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 and 2016 elections. The PJD discourse for a decisive push in the Islamisation of the public sphere in the Kingdom was, in such a way, gradually domesticated.⁹⁴ At the same time, the Kingdom and the Ministry for Religious Affairs insisted for the popularization, among youth and underprivileged classes, of the Qadiri Sufi brotherhood Boutchichiyya. Undoubtedly, together with the Tijaniyya, the most important Sufi brotherhood of the country, it was hard to dismantle the image of traditionalism and upper-class belonging usually associated to them.

However, the Boutchichiyya could count not only on the support of the King and the makhzen, but also in a long-established tradition of recruitment and activism among youth circles.⁹⁵ The brotherhood since 1983 recruits heavily among high-school and in Faculty of Letters and Islamic Studies, introducing them to a pedagogic path which emphasize interpretation and study of mystical and theological texts.⁹⁶ Despite such efforts, however, the fact that Sufi leadership and the Sharifian throne were deeply interconnected meant that any discourse of political contestation against the Kingdom and the King’s authoritative hand also could also be the vehicle for contestation of the Sufi power. For such reasons, even in deeply Sufi Fès, weapons caches were discovered in 2003 just beside the Marinid-era tombs not so far from the medina, and a high number of violent extremists were arrested. The rise of a strong counter-terrorism discourse and organization in the Kingdom after the 2003 and 2007 Casablanca bombings has led to the discovery of several jihadi cells throughout the country.

The peak of the foreign fighter crisis between 2011 and 2015 corresponded to a reinforcement of the security and counter-terrorism operations which led to the dismantling and arrest of cells on a weekly basis. With most young Muslims in the country being subjected to strong attentions at the hand of the state through the delivery of a Sufi-centred public discourse

⁹³ A.M. Wainscott (2015). ‘Defending Islamic education: war on terror discourse and religious education in twenty-first-century Morocco’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 20 (4): 635-653

⁹⁴ K. Mohsen-Finan & M. Zeghal (2006). ‘Opposition islamiste et pouvoir monarchique au Maroc: Le cas du Parti de la Justice et du Développement’, *Revue française de science politique*, 56, 79-119. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfsp.561.0079>

⁹⁵ K. Bekkaoui & R. R. Larémont (2011) ‘Moroccan Youth Go Sufi’, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 2:1, 31-46, DOI: 10.1080/21520844.2011.565711

⁹⁶ Mohammed Tozy (1990). ‘Le Prince, le Clerc et l’Etat: La restructuration du champ religieux au Maroc’, in Gilles Kepel and Yann Richard (eds) *Intellectuels et militants de l’islam Contemporain*, Paris: Seuil, pp. 85–86.



or through security operations aimed at stopping the diffusion of materials inciting towards violent extremism, the minority pockets of individuals aiming to engage in Jihad had no choice but to embark to Syria and fight abroad.

Examining non-occurrence of violent extremism in Morocco led to the choice of the two cities/regions of Rabat and Ifrane. Big cities with urban and semi-urban areas present features in which traditional radicalisation drivers related not only to socio-economic inequalities and class oppression but also to ideological rebellious movements and clash of lifestyle viewpoints are evident: this is not the case of Rabat. The field research in the city's semi-urban areas, poorly endowed and popular non-bourgeois areas such as Temara, Qamra-Takadom, Al Akkari, Al Qaria and Sidi Moussa showed that these areas contain a strong presence of state governance within them.

Moreover, the first element of this state governance is illustrated through security as one could notice multiple police posts and offices in such areas more than downtown Rabat or other chic or bourgeois neighbourhoods. Additionally, one could point out the strong presence of police wagons roaming the streets by night in the form of nightly patrols to ensure the reign of safety and stability as well as demonstrate a form of state authority presence in these neighbourhoods.

The second element of state governance in such neighbourhoods is exemplified through the presence of mosques with *kottab al koran* (Quranic institutes). The interesting element in this observation is that mosques are considered as powerful state tools in Morocco that belong to the Ministry of Habous and Islamic affairs. These mosques and small koranic institutes within them have grown to become quite influential tools to spread the moderate tolerating Islam that the Ministry advocates, noting the strong presence of most neighbourhood residents in these mosques to do their prayers and especially on the *Jomoâa* (Friday) prayer with its infamous *khotba* (public preaching speech) which is given by the local Imam and that is considered as a very important weekly event for almost all neighbourhood residents. These *khotbas* usually invoke lessons of moderate Islam, everyday actions, dealing with tough subjects such as death, grief, life purpose, kindness etc. with support from the Coran as well as Hadiths from Sunnah and how to overall be a good Muslim citizen within your community and society. Besides the Friday prayers, some mosques organise *dorouss* (lessons) that they can attend and learn either more about the moderate lifestyle of being a good Muslim in society or lessons of *mahw al oumya* (eradicating illiteracy).

The city of Ifrane have similar patterns of strong state presence, with security and administrative services available for the citizens at all levels. In addition to this strong State presence, we observe in Ifrane area a vast network of NGO's and charitable foundations dealing with countering poverty and violence in the society. These provide education and professional trainings for the youth and women to help social and economic integration such as the Azrou Centre among others in the context of a rather booming local economy with the existence many projects (local and international tourism, an international university, agriculture, small shops etc) which reduce unemployment. While poverty and social exclusion do exist and are real, the presence of State apparatus performing its duties supported by local NGO's networks, where



the dignity of the citizens is not harmed, leads the region to have had so far zero case of violent extremism occurrence at any level.

What does this tell us about local resilience?

The examination of both case studies of places of non-occurrence may lead one to wonder about the reason why these counter networks were not as successful in zones of occurrences as they were in these zones of non-occurrence. In the case of Casablanca, the city grew out of its initial urban geography and became the largest city in Morocco with semi-urban areas; thus, leading to a mere difficulty in state governance presence in every inch of it. Ifrane, conversely shows that when a well-handled process of expansion is put in place where all services are provided, resentment of the citizens is less acute and prevent violent extremism

As noted already for the case of Agadez in Niger, in Morocco the role of traditional religious leadership—most notably the Sufi one—has successfully worked to engage youth and disenfranchised individuals into networks that counter the diffusion of violent extremism and predicate for a moderate stance in politics and society. This, however, does not exclude the rise of Salafi-leaning individuals and groups in the country: anyway, given the weight of traditional Sufi Sharifian families, and the power of the King and the security apparatus, it is extremely unlikely that such movements might emerge as powerful actors in the Moroccan landscape. While different Salafi leaders have emerged in Morocco before the 2003 crackdown, people like Mohammed Rafiki Abu Hafis in Fes, Mohammed al-Fizazi in Tangier, Hassan Kettani in Salé, Omar Hadouchi in Tetouan, and Abdelkrim Chadli and Miloudi Zakaria in Casablanca, no longer hold a prominent place in society. This is also explained by the policy pursued by Moroccan authorities not to further radicalize these leading elements in prison. Instead, they were treated as other prisoners—and many even enjoyed a privileged treatment—and also promised an official pardon from the King if they were willing to accept to renounce to their radical ideas. When finally pardoned by the King in the aftermath of the 2011 protests, these leaders chose to radically rewrite their credentials by engaging in regime-allowed movements and practices. For instance, Mohammed al-Fizazi from Tangier, who had been detained in prison with a 30-year long sentence of terrorism, would publicly lead the Friday prayer in Tangier in the presence of Mohammed VI in 2014.⁹⁷ Al-Fizazi, in particular, would attempt to re-engage himself in the public sphere through the means of party politics—in the effort to emulate what done in Tunisia by Ansar al-Sharia—but did not consider the power of the monarchy and the makhzen, that never allowed al-Fizazi’s party to properly emerge in the public competition, as its mere presence would have upset the delicate balance of power that the monarchs try to continuously negotiate.

⁹⁷ Mohammed Masbah (2017) ‘Morocco’s salafi ex-jihadis: co-optation, engagement, and the limits of inclusion. *Middle East Brief*, no. 108: 1-8.



5.2 Tunisia

Background

Historically speaking and, and very much like Morocco, in comparison of Algeria and Libya in 1980's and 1990's, Tunisia was not a country which produced many foreign fighters. Originally, the first cases of violent extremism occurrences took place in the late 1980's after the decision of the then Bin Ali regime to suppress the Islamist party Ennahda. However, it remained marginal when looking at the civil strife that took place in Algeria in the 1990s and the Islamist uprising in Libya between 1995 and 1998. On that regard, a major figure of Tunisian jihadism of the 1990's and 2000's explained that his engagement was primarily motivated by the 'exclusion of Islam from the political field by the regime of Bin Ali.'⁹⁸ Thus, extremism was always present in Tunisia, and already back in the early 80's, a small radical organisation, called *Jamaat Al Jihad* led by a certain Abu Harith, was created which aimed at 'supporting all the Muslims against Hypocrisy and injustice,'⁹⁹ in Arabic *Nusrat al mouslimin* by resorting to the Jihad. As a lawyer of returnees explains, 'in fact, the protection of the Muslims has always been important for Tunisian Islamists along with living in a puritan Islamic State.'¹⁰⁰ An illustration of this, this lawyer explains that, in early 1979, some Tunisian Islamists even went to Iran to support the Islamic Revolution hoping to leave in puritan Islamist regime before realizing that it would be a Shia one.¹⁰¹ Of course, an anecdotic event in itself, it nonetheless shows how far already puritan radical Islamists were ready to go. However, and overall, under Bin Ali, the police were efficient enough to suppress any violent jihadi organisation. Thus, Tunisian jihadists were either forced to fight abroad or else as Habib Sayah puts it, simply would not be involved in violent extremism. As Sayah,¹⁰² explains, the system of surveillance, the institutionalisation of denunciation and repression made it impossible to jihadist groups to deploy themselves in Tunisia itself.

In this context, starting from the late 1980s, it's essentially a phenomenon of foreign fighters that developed itself, with many young Tunisians joining the Jihad in Afghanistan, Chechenia and Bosnia. Gathered around Tarek Maaroufi and Seifallah Ben Hassine, the Tunisian Afghans, who mainly originated from immigration rather than Tunisia itself, created the Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group (TIFG) linked to Al Qaeda which became in the 2000's the main Tunisian jihadi group.¹⁰³ One notable exception was the so-called Suleiman Group, a group of Tunisian jihadists linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who attempted to provoke an Islamist uprising in December 2006-January 2007 but was rapidly dismantled.¹⁰⁴ Overall, despite this, the contribution of the Tunisian jihadists to the global jihad remained very limited. The turn of the tide came however in 2003, after the invasion of Iraq by the United States.

⁹⁸ Interview with a former jihadist leader, Tunis, Tunisia, March 2018.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with a lawyer, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Interview with Habib Sayah, Tunisian expert on violent extremism, March 2018.

¹⁰³ See Guidere, *Al Qaida a la Conquete du Maghreb*, 211-214.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 208-210.



The Sinjar Report, a document discovered in 2006, which includes a non-exhaustive list belonging to Al Qaida in Iraq of 570 Arab foreign fighters who went to Iraq in the 2000s, indicated that only 3 per cent of these were Tunisians while the majority came from Saudi Arabia and Libya.¹⁰⁵ To that extent, one may think that the Tunisian jihadist remained in low numbers as it had been in the 1980s and 1990s. However, a close look shows otherwise. In fact, the mid 2000's jihad in Iraq marks a major upsurge of Jihadism and foreign fighters coming from Tunisia as several hundred went there. These were composed of three distinct categories:¹⁰⁶ (1) those who went to fight along Saddam Hussein during the months prior the invasion of 2003, and who decided to stay after the fall of Baghdad joining jihadi groups. These were essentially (1) Arab nationalists, (2) convinced jihadists (3) young people without a religious-ideological real reason/motivation. While the numbers were lower than the other nationalities, verifiable figures show that 1.7 per cent of foreign fighters killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2005¹⁰⁷ were Tunisians while they composed 3.8 per cent of the fighters held in Camp Bucca in 2008.¹⁰⁸ For its part, the Sinjar report points out to the fact that 41% of the fighters who entered Iraq were marked as volunteers for Suicide Bombings showing their high degree of commitment to both the movement and its ideology.¹⁰⁹ Samir Ben Amor, a lawyer who defended arrested jihadists claims that 600 Tunisians were arrested between 2005 and 2007 attempting to join Iraq.¹¹⁰ In spite of this, Tunisia was at the time not perceived as a country from which many foreign fighters came. It was only after the Arab spring that this image changed when an estimated over 4000 young men went to participate to the Jihad in Syria-Iraq via Turkey or Libya,¹¹¹ while another estimated 1500 went to Libya.¹¹² In addition to this, a local insurgency led by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade (OIN-B) has been ongoing since late 2011 in western Tunisia along with the presence of a Daesh affiliate, in the name of Jund Al Khilafa in Tunisia (JAK-T).¹¹³

According to Colonel Major Ben Nasr,¹¹⁴ former president of the National Commission to Counter Terrorism, today both groups OIN-B and JAK-T, have been considerably weakened and do not represent any major threat after the 2014-2016 period, which was the most critical one. The Tunisian security services have since then been able to regain control of the situation. The OIN-B directly linked to AQIM in Algeria, is still somehow active and present in the

¹⁰⁵ Brian Fishman ed. (2008) *Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleed Out: Al Qaida road in and out of Iraq*, (Centre for Combating Terrorism, Harmony Project), p. 36.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with a person close to this topic, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Aaron Y. Zelin (2020) *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia: Columbia University Press, p. 75.

¹⁰⁸ Fishman, *Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleed Out*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 56.

¹¹⁰ Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service*, 75.

¹¹¹ Interview with a person close to this topic, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹¹² See Aaron Zelin (2018) 'The others: foreign fighters in Libya', (The Washington Institute, *Policy Notes* 45). Online: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

¹¹³ See on the trajectory of AQIM in Tunisia, Fatma Bendhaou (2021) 'Tunisie: Okba Ibn Nafaa, une Katiba à l'ombre d'AQMI', *Analyse Afrique*. Online: <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tunisie-okba-ibn-nafaa-une-katiba-%C3%A0-l-ombre-d-aqmi/2270414>.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Colonel Mokhtar Ben Nasr, former president of the National Commission to Counter Terrorism Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.



borders of Algeria/Tunisia in the Mount Chaambi area while JAK-T is believed to be excessively weakened and incapable of mounting any significant attack.¹¹⁵ The other issue remains the foreign fighters' returnees. An estimate of 1000 has returned but many remain at large in Syria-Iraq and represent a potential threat in future. As we can see, significant changes have thus occurred between the 1990s-2000s and the post-2011 era. The study of VE occurred in two different areas, the semi-urban governorate of Tunis and the western part of Tunisia, which we will examine closer in order to better understand this phenomenon.

Occurrence and non-occurrence: Tunis and Western Tunisia

Islamist Politics in Tunisia and the Rise of Ansar al-Sharia

The key to understand this process was the creation in 2011 of the organisation Ansar Al Sharia in Tunisia (AST). Indeed, Seifallah Ben Hassine aka Abou Iyadh, a former Tunisian afghan and one of the leaders of the TIFG, was released from jail, shortly after the fall of Bin Ali in 2011, along with an estimate of 2000 prisoners who had been involved at various levels in Jihadi activities in the 2000s. According to a former associate of Abu Iyadh, the latter had been strongly influenced by the ideas of a radical preacher Abu Qutada al Filistini, based in London, and thus became even more extremist radical over the years. Thus, and accordingly, Abu Iyadh 'did not believe in politics nor in the political activism as such and had become a radical Hanbali'.¹¹⁶ Abu Iyadh with another two other imams, Abu Ayoub and Al Khatib Al Idrissi founded the organisation Ansar Al Sharia (AST) in the context of a security vacuum which followed Bin Ali's fall.

As Michael Ayeri,¹¹⁷ explains, the purpose behind Abu Iyadh decision to create AST was to unify all the radical currents that had existed in the country, very much like Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria in 1990's. By helping poor marginalized people from popular areas, AST aimed at indoctrinating and mobilizing the people for its Islamic radical project.¹¹⁸ AST was in fact the intersection of two radical schools of thought: radical Salafism-Jihadism and *Maqdisism*.¹¹⁹ Accordingly, AST aimed at mobilising the people for the Jihad without actually "crossing the red line" and versing into violence, as Tunisia was deemed to be by AST a land of preaching (Da'wa) rather than a land of Jihad, following Al Maqdisi teachings.¹²⁰ To that extent, AST canalised the post-2011 revolutionary fever of large segments of the Tunisian youth, which did not find itself in the post-Bin Ali political arrangements especially of the Islamist party Ennahda, which was seen as turning its back the Islamic project by endorsing democracy.¹²¹ Ennahda itself has been often blamed for the rise of AST as it did not act decisively against it between 2011 and 2013 and instead allowed it to develop its network all over Tunisia. It is only after the attack against the US embassy in September 2012 and the

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Interview with a former jihadist leader, Tunis, Tunisia, March 2018.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Michael Ayeri, director of International Crisis Group Tunis, Tunisia, March 2018.

¹¹⁸ Interview with the head of NGO, consultant and specialist of radicalism in Tunisia, October 2021.

¹¹⁹ Derived from the ideas of the radical Jordanian preacher Muhammed Al Maqdissi.

¹²⁰ See Joas Wagemaker (2012) *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology of and Influence of Abu Muhamed al Maqdissi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹²¹ Interview with Habib Sayah, Consultant and specialist of radicalism Tunis, Tunisia, March 2018.



assassination of Tunisian intellectuals in 2013, that eventually the Tunisian state decided to crack down on AST. However, by this time, it was already too late. Thousands of youths had already joined the areas of conflict either in Syria-Iraq or in Libya.

Tunis as case of occurrence: The material grievances

As Michael Ayeri explains, and according to the profile of arrested and jailed youth for terrorist activities, they are mostly young adults' males of less than 35 years old. Between 2013 and 2016, out of 400 people prosecuted for terrorism, 40 per cent had a university diploma or a university level. As Ayeri shows, while the Jihadists came from various social-economic groups as well as from all over Tunisia, a large propension of these came from the Governorate of Tunis and of South-West Tunisia.¹²² Indeed, Tunis was a hotspot of mobilisation for Jihadi groups as an estimated over 36 per cent of the Tunisian Jihadists came from this area, essentially the semi urban popular areas (*zone peri-urbaine*) of Tunis.¹²³

In those areas, for the head of an NGO who conducted extensive studies there, several predominant elements created a favourable environment for radicalisation including unemployment combined with idleness and police repression of the youth. This created a context of extreme vulnerability for the youth aggravated by the fact most came from malfunctioning families and had a feeling of unease (*mal etre*). Hatem Chakroun for his part talks about blocked socialisation in this case with the chain of values destroyed. The youth in those areas became lost without landmarks.¹²⁴ The fact that the religious field had been abandoned by Bin Ali during his rule rendered the youth in those areas without any religious knowledge and made open to radical ideas. It is also significant that according to a psychologist who worked with jailed returnees, many of these had a criminal record and some were even former drug addicts. Joining the Jihad offered them to go from 'zero to heroes, i.e., from without a future to become important people, to do something with their life that was of some value.'¹²⁵ The collapse of Bin Ali and the 'free for all' post-revolutionary situation paved the way for this and specifically for AST in these semi-urban areas.

The fact of the matter was that the State had abandoned those areas for years making them 'weakly, almost ungoverned spaces'. In this context, AST arrived and provided help and economic support for the local poor population. The fact that the young people did not recognize themselves in the State, facilitated this process of brainwashing. AST started by providing the youth with jobs, food, money and hence, became an alternative to the State. The absence of 'the family cell', which would have otherwise protected the youth made the radicalisation process easier. The lack of education in the context of conservatism and poverty amplified by the

¹²² See Michael Ayari (2017) 'Les facteurs favorisant l'extrémisme violent dans la Tunisie des années 2010', *Revue Analytique* (November), p. 15.

¹²³ David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt (2018) 'All jihad is local vol. II: ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula', *New America Policy Paper*. Online: <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-local-volume-ii/>.

¹²⁴ Interview with Hatem Chakroun, researcher at the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Democratique, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹²⁵ Interview with a psychologist who treated jailed foreign fighter returnees, October 2021.



rejection of the State created a permissive environment for AST.¹²⁶ Furthermore, the presence of modern technologies especially the internet, computers, cell phones, transportation vehicles and facilities permitted AST's work of mobilisation and radicalisation. AST got its own website and Facebook page which was accessible by the marginalised urban youth.

In this context, AST started to set up 'predication tents' or *Khayamat al Douawiya*" for the youth to radicalise them. In those tents, AST would use an extremely efficient and strong religious and political discourse addressed to these young people with the aim of psychologically empowering them both politically and religiously. Thus, leaders of AST would address the young people claiming, 'you are today's leaders' (*antoum kadat al yawm*) or 'you are the ones who will revive the Islamic Sharia' (*antoum man satouhiyoum al sharia al islamiya*) thus shortcutting all the State/Religious establishment, institutions anyways already rejected by this youth.¹²⁷ On that regard, a former explains that those tents played an important role in his process of mobilisation and radicalisation. For him, 'in the university, there was no real master-student relation that stimulated me. Finally, I met someone outside, close to the Ulemas, knowledgeable, who created this relation' being drawn then by this individual to the tents and then to radicalism. As a specialist argues AST played an important role in indoctrination and viewed its role as such.¹²⁸

Indeed, as the head of the NGO explains, AST recruiters attempted to respond to those social-economic grievances and this discomfort by creating through those 'Preaching tents', which amounts to almost a one-to-one strategy of recruitment and indoctrination.¹²⁹ Once in those tents, i.e. drawn into radical groups, those youth were gradually isolated from their natural environment, dysfunctional in anyways, and transferred into a new one, a new group which socialised them to extremist ideas. The fact that the education system under Bin Ali produced 'educated unemployed', people without any political awareness, without any commitment to anything, further facilitated this process of radicalisation.

Using propaganda and mobilisation, huge rallies and demonstrations were organised by AST in those semi-urban areas of Tunis such as hay Ettahdamen known then to be an important centre of AST.¹³⁰ One should note here that not all in AST was in favour of jihadi violence. As Georges Fahmi and Hamza Meddeb noted, while AST was linked ideologically to Al Qaeda, it was not in anyways politically nor operationally connected to this organisation.¹³¹ Also, while some members advocated Tunisia to be a land of predication and did not see AST as an organisation to lead the Jihad in Tunisia such Abu Iyadh, others advocated the use of violence and did so such as Boubacar Al Hakim who went on to become one of most important ISIS

¹²⁶ Interview with a psychologist who treated jailed foreign fighter returnees, October 2021.

¹²⁷ Interview with Hatem Chakroun, researcher at the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Democratique, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹²⁸ Interview with an expert on those issues (November 2021).

¹²⁹ Interview the head of an NGO consultant and specialist of radicalism in Tunisia, October 2021.

¹³⁰ See for example this rally organized by AST in May 2012 led by Abu Iyadh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bkYOkLnfSY&t=310s>.

¹³¹ Georges Fahmi and Hamza Medded (2015) 'Market for Jihad: Radicalization in Tunisia', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Online: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/10/15/market-for-jihad-radicalization-in-tunisia-pub-61629>.



leaders in Syria or another one, Ahmed Rouissi who joined ISIS in Libya. Thus, very much like its model the ex-FIS, AST was divided among several currents which eventually brought it to its demise.

At this point, one should note that while AST did play an important role in the recruitment of Jihadists, this was not exclusively the appanage of this. Indeed, while there was an upsurge after 2013, when AST started to disintegrate, the first wave of foreign fighters' departures took place as early as 2011 when AST had just been created. On that regard, and as an expert explains, Ennahda actively supported the war in Syria and thus played an important role in the mobilisation of Tunisian youth in those early days. In fact, for this expert, while the 'Da'wa tents' played the role of radicalisation, the recruitment for the Jihad was not so in the open but rather done more discreetly and the result of the intersection various specific kind of local networks including of AST, Ennahda networks and other organisations which claimed to be for charity and moderate's, while radicalising and recruiting young people and sending them abroad.¹³² Thus, the mobilisation for jihad was the result of both the presence of favourable social-economic conditions and of these networks.

This stage, recruiting for Jihad, not simply radicalising, included showing videos of massacres committed by the Syrian troops against the civilian populations combined with a religious discourse to protect fellow Muslims from oppression, i.e., *nosrat al muslimine*, in order to convince these to go join the Jihad.¹³³ For this expert, the recruiters played heavily on the emotional parts of those youth to convince to cross the line and verse into jihadism, not simply religious radicalism. The security vacuum and *laissez faire* of the authorities when not direct encouragement, did the rest.

By mid-2013, after several acts of violence and assassinations, the government dominated by the Ennahda party finally decided to crack down on AST. Thus, the authorities barred the organization from organizing its congress in May 2013 and accused it of being directly responsible for those attacks without in fact formally proving it. The reaction of AST came directly from Hay Ettadahamoun where its supporters mobilised massively leading to confrontations with the security services. This is when first real violent riots against the government occurred.¹³⁴ The crackdown of 2013 on AST closed the permissive environment which allowed the organisation to recruit and radicalise the young Tunisians, but it was already too late. As Habib Sayah explains, the second and maybe the largest wave of departure to Syria-Iraq occurred after 2013 while the AST leadership went into exile joining either Al Qaeda or ISIS, imitated in this by their supporters. This is when the major upsurge of foreign fighters occurred with most of the volunteers joining IS rather than Al Qaeda. Thus, poor economic conditions but above all the rejection of the State, played important roles combined with those various networks.

¹³² Interview with an expert on those issues, November 2021.

¹³³ Interview with an expert on those issues, November 2021.

¹³⁴ See video on YouTube 'Tunisian police clash with Ansar al-Sharia supporters', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZQxpwCTOEI> and 'Heurts en Tunisie: 1 mort et 200 salafistes arrêtés', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZ_qjhrKa8.



This was confirmed by several testimonies of jihadist in jail which explain their falling into violence because of the 2013 events.¹³⁵ Thus, a former jihadist in jail explained that his commitment the jihadism came first and foremost from the fact that ‘the post revolution State is deeply unjust and unfair’. For another one, his engagement in Jihadism came from ‘as early as the high school period at the time of Bin Ali and continued after. My problem, our problem is with this State that does not want of Islam, our problem is with those who want to impose upon us their way of life’ and Ennahda was no different than Bin Ali on this. A third claimed that ‘I am against a State that governs against the principles of God. The State is unbeliever, unfair, and pushes you not to believe anymore. Ennahda are not Ikhwan *Muslimine* (Muslim Brothers) but rather *Khawana moustaslimine* (submissive traitors)’. This last one went even further explaining that *in fine* the strategy of Da’wa followed by AST was insufficient and what was needed is a strong work establishing Islam (Taassil). Thus, as Hatem Chakroun argues, the poor social-economic conditions in the context of an absent State played an important role in the semi-urban centres, which Hay Ettahdamen was good example of. However, in the semi-rural areas, other factors played an important role.

Western Tunisia as a second case of occurrence

Contrary to the semi-urban centres, the semi-rural areas also witnessed a high level of mobilisation and radicalisation. However here, the drivers were somehow different. As Hatem Chakroun explains,¹³⁶ whereas in the urban centres, the material element was important, in the rural ones, the cultural element was of crucial in addition to the social and economic factors. Indeed, culturally traditional and conservative, Islam plays an important role in people’s everyday lives. Thus, being religious, even rigorous is not necessary negatively seen by them. In Tunisia in general and even more in those semi-rural areas, modernity and modernisation clashed often with traditionalism i.e., Popular Islam. As Chakroun explains,¹³⁷ traditional Islam implied justice, education and religion. Modernisation implemented right after independence, under the Bourguiba years, which continued under Bin Ali, led the education to be secular while the justice system became based on positive law. Political secularisation generally was not necessarily well received either as for many Tunisian conservatives, since it was perceived as pushing away the country from its Islamic identity. This has especially been the case in the rural more traditional areas where this process of modernisation was not well perceived and where also it remained more insulated from it. To that extent, for the head of the NGO, these are very conservative and traditional groups, and those reforms, pushed them towards ultra-conservatism. Thus, he explains,¹³⁸ that things went from being qualified as *3iib* i.e., shameful to *Haram* i.e., religiously illicit. As he underlines, while this was the case in the semi-urban areas, it is even more visible in the semi-rural ones.

¹³⁵ During fieldwork in Tunisia one of the authors got access through a contact to an informal mimeo written by a person close to those issues who interviewed jailed jihadists.

¹³⁶ Interview with Hatem Ben Chakroun, researcher at the Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Democratique, Tunis, Tunisia, October 2021.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Interview with Moez Ali, consultant and specialist of radicalism in Tunisia, October 2021.



Thus, as the psychologist,¹³⁹ who treated the Tunisian's returnees explains, when the youth start going to the mosque in the initial phase of radicalisation, it is often well seen and welcomed by their environment especially family. In this case, we often hear *hdah allah* i.e., 'God guided him to the right path' except that the individual changes and people do not realize it. An illustration of this: a father of a fighter who went to Libya explained that initially, he started going to the mosque, reading the Coran and being stricter in his behaviour, he did not see this negatively. However, later, the son started to try to prevent the family from watching TV, especially his mother making comments on how to dress, he was reading the Coran all the time, he was dressed in Qamis (Muslim clothes). After a first failed attempt, to go to Syria, the son who was presented to the district attorney instead of adopting of low profile openly criticised the police and the society. Eventually, the son disappeared after a second attempt to go abroad most likely to Libya.¹⁴⁰

The material grievances are also heavily present in those semi-rural areas. As the head of the NGO explains, high level of unemployment and poverty played an important role in mobilization.¹⁴¹ An illustration of this is the trajectory of a couple who went to Libya in 2013 and ended up in IS. Both the wife and the husband were well educated, with the wife having a degree in law while the husband being a rather well-off merchant. Somehow conservative and pious without any extremism, they did not show any sign of radicalism according to their closed ones.¹⁴² Their main motivation for departing for Libya was initially employment as the post-revolutionary Tunisia fell in a deep economic crisis, which the government had been unable to address. As a member of the family explains¹⁴³, in this area (western semi-rural areas of Tunisia), economic crisis, and State passivity combined with the AST networks and its preaching tents played an important part. Poverty and unemployment paved the way for radical indoctrination. He further explained that for the people of the area, the State did not play its role back then of providing decent conditions of life. For him, 'dignity (*karama*) of the citizens was not respected. The young people lived with their parents, without work, without a future. How do you want them to stay?' Thus, when AST and other networks came to mobilise them, for the Jihad, the people were more than willing to do so.

Finally, and regarding the joining of OIN-B by locals in western-Tunisia rather than being foreign fighters are related in this case, in addition to the identified drivers, and the proximity of the mountains where AQIM deployed itself from Algeria, i.e. geographic factor. Some preferred to go there instead of being foreign fighters to Syria-Iraq or Libya. To that extent, radicalisation occurs in the context of the combination of two key element. The social-economic marginalisation and State weakness on the one hand, meeting radical networks, which took advantage of this situation, on the other.

¹³⁹ Interview with a psychologist who dealt with Tunisian foreign fighters' returnees, October 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Discussion with the family of a jihadist, October 2021.

¹⁴¹ Interview with the head of an NGO operative who is a consultant and specialist of radicalism in Tunisia, October 2021.

¹⁴² Discussion with the family of a jihadist, October 2021.

¹⁴³ Discussion with the family of a jihadist, October 2021.



Factors shaping the non-occurrence of violent extremism in Tunisia

The Tunisian case shares many similarities with the Kingdom of Morocco with regards to patterns of socialisation towards violent extremism. Like in the Moroccan case, most of the Tunisian youth do not engage in violent extremism: the radicalization of religious beliefs does not match with violent jihadi practices of militance. However, differently from the Moroccan case, in Tunisia Wahhabi and Salafi-leaning discourses enjoy a much further circulation and given the country's uneven yet so far functioning transition from authoritarianism to democracy, Islamist parties have been or are prominent political actors. The case of Ennahda, which represents one of the most evident cases of an Islamist party undergone through a process of moderation, due to external pressures and social changes, or of Ansar al-Sharia, which has undergone through a failed process of institutionalization between 2011 and 2013 before being cracked down in 2013, are good examples of how Salafi-leaning discourses which directly evoke violent extremism enjoy an important role in Tunisian society.¹⁴⁴

Thus, while social and economic problems played an important role in mobilisation, other important factors, mostly the defence of the community being defined either in religious terms (Umma) or in Arab Nationalist terms (Pan Arabism) played very important factors in Morocco. We observe in Tunisia similar patterns but with a more dramatic impact. Indeed, in Morocco, the state was never weakened and eventually agile measures including economic development plans, special programs for returnees, tight security measure and the reinvestment of some spaces which escaped State control turned the tide in 2014-2015 and recruitment dramatically decreased.

In Tunisia, the post-2011 Arab Spring revolutionary situation weakened the state and paved the way for major upsurge of violent extremism, which made Tunisia one of the countries in the world from which the largest number of foreign fighters originated in addition to the deployment of AQIM and IS in the country itself.

Indeed, in the period between 2013 and 2015, the jihadi movement in Tunisia had the ability to deliver several attacks (the Bardo and Souss attacks, for instance), but the prompt and fierce crackdown by the Tunisian security apparatus on the violent extremism networks, and consequently also the Ansar al-Sharia one, obliged members to seek for strategic alternatives. After 2013 and especially 2015, few options were still available for Tunisian extremists: the move to compete internationally, and therefore seek to join the forces of ISIS in Syria or Libya, was driven by the fact that there was no more room for political competition nor for the pursuit of the Jihadi path at home. With the crackdowns and failed process of political institutionalization sought by Ansar al-Sharia, the option to pursue a national jihadi project lost credibility and feasibility. On the other hand, the option proposed by their international jihad of ISIS grew in credibility, explaining the rise of Tunisian foreign fighters. The loss of public spaces for contention and/or political and militant activity in recent years in Tunisia furthermore explains the growth of a more takfiri-minded attitude among Tunisian violent extremists.

¹⁴⁴ Fabio Merone (2017) 'Between social contention and takfirism: the evolution of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Tunisia', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 22, no. 1: 71-90.



Meanwhile, the Tunisian government has practically stepped in to strongly prevent the expansion of violent extremism in the country through the National Strategy for Counterterrorism adopted in 2016. The Tunisian approach, differently from the Moroccan one, is securitised and less ‘soft’ politically and culturally, centred around a counter-discourse. For such reasons while we now assist to a contraction of discourse and practices of violent extremism thanks to the preventive measures and retaliation of security forces, Tunisia may easily face a re-emergence of violent extremist on the rhetorical and cognitive level (if not material) if the government continues to elude the debate about which role should religion play in the Tunisian democracy. After a general impasse which led to the chaotic post-2011 period in which Ansar al-Sharia and other violent extremist actors emerged and imposed their discursive authority, now the Tunis government seems inclined to pursue the same policies already seen with Ben Ali and Bourguiba: the securitisation of the radical Islamist space.

Another important aspect which has countered the diffusion of violent extremism in Tunisia has been the role of civil society organisations. The crackdown on violent extremists gravitating around Salafi-jihadi groups and the re-order of mosques activities under the frame of state authority made clear the need to address the issue of violent extremism. For such reasons, different CSO-programs have been sponsored, such as the FORTE (For a better women engagement in Preventing Violent Extremism) project—specifically aimed at enhancing women’s role in society in peripheral localities (in the North and the South) or the Tunisia CVE Prison Project, conducted by Search for Common Ground—Tunisia.

Maybe the most important demonstration of how resilient Tunisia—and especially Tunisian youth—has been to the call of violent extremism are the events that have taken place in Ben Guerdane, at the Tunisia-Libya border, in 2016.

A medium-sized city at the frontier between Tunisia and Libya, the city of Ben Guerdane is part of the Medenine governorate and has historically suffered from the lack of coordinated state actions, both in terms of economic investments and in terms of basic service delivery. Marginalization, especially since the fall of Bin Ali in 2011, was widely felt by inhabitants in the city. Since the fall of Bin Ali, the city saw the rise in popularity of Ennahda and the increased importance of the frontier as an economic device and income-generator source. The border remains the main asset for many inhabitants, especially youth, which heavily rely on jobs in the smuggling of good between Libya and Tunisia. However, the fall of the Ghaddafi regime and the rise of civil war in the neighbouring country has unleashed a violent power competition between new and old actors in the smuggling business. Jobs generated by the ‘border economy’ have progressively overshadowed those provided by private or public employment during the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁴⁵ This area of Tunisia presents also a very conservative social outlook compared to more advantaged areas of the North (Tunis, Sfax, Sousse). The fear of spill-over of violence from Libya has led to the growth of feelings of insecurity in the country, most notably in connection to the implementation of restrictions to cross-border activities, which were eventually imposed by Tunis. However, the fall of Bin Ali

¹⁴⁵ See World Bank (2014) *The Unfinished revolution Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to all Tunisians*, Washington DC: World Bank (Development Policy Review, Report No. 86179-TN).



also saw the creation of several civil society organisation aimed at revitalising the role of the city with special attention to service-delivery and the role of youth in the labour market.

Increasingly, the public space in Ben Guerdane came to be dominated by movements of protest calling for a state-supported development project (in the long term) and the re-opening of the frontier for business (in the short term). Since 2014, strikes, roadblocks, sit-ins and protests have shaped collective action in the city, with a particular involvement of youth in precarious employment and the unemployed. The cross-border economy allowed the circulation also of networks proposing violent extremism. Violent Salafi-jihadi have started to play more important roles in the cross-border smuggling, especially after the closure of the frontier. Such networks, and their ramifications among local families in Ben Guerdane, proved crucial in staging the March 2016 attack by the Islamic State from neighbouring Zuara in Libya.

Differently from the attacks at the Bardo Museum or in Sousse, this was a violent extremist attacks aimed at overthrowing authorities in the city and capturing the city. In fact, the assailants from Libya and their local allies in Ben Guerdane attacked simultaneously the local army barracks, the headquarters of the National Guard and the city's main police station, while some targeted killings against the police, the Customs and the anti-terrorist unit were operated.

The attack was an attempt by violent extremist to use the rage against authorities, politicians and the state to start a mass revolt in the city. However, Ben Guerdane's inhabitants showed an incredible resilience by rallying with the state security forces when they were deployed in town. They resisted or even sabotaged the propaganda of the Islamic State, asking Ben Guerdane's people to join the revolt, ignoring messages on loudspeakers and even intimidation. They provided intelligence and information to the army in order to find violent extremists and did not cover extremists.

Non-occurrence of violent extremism in Tunisia can be also seen in the areas of Sfax and Sousse, for instance, which have historically benefitted from larger state investments and are qualifiable as the wealthiest regions in Tunisia. While the wide conurbation of Tunis can be considered as an enabling environment for violent extremism, due to its large size, geographical features and widespread inequality, as we have seen for the cases of more peripheral areas (such as Ben Guardane) the lack of state presence and the relative under-development compared to other regions of the country, combined with a bustling trans-frontier economy, can be elements that enable violent extremism to grow. In the coastal areas, such as Sfax or Sousse, a higher concentration of investment at the hand of the post-colonial regime of Bourguiba has prevented the environment from enabling the growth of discontent.

The growth in military spending occurred in recent years, however, has played a major role in disrupting sources of violent extremism, also thanks to the growth of foreign investments in that sector.¹⁴⁶ The need to put under control a high number of youth exposed to the violent extremist preaching of movements like Ansar al-Sharia and, after their arrest and ban, the need to quell Katibat Uqba bin Nafi in the Tunisia-Algeria borderland has boosted the role of security

¹⁴⁶ Hijab Shah & Melissa Dalton (2020) *The Evolution of Tunisia's Military and the Role of Foreign Security Sector Assistance*, Carnegie Middle East Centre (Working Paper).



forces, both internally and in borderlands. Passing from 572\$ million in 2010 to almost the double in 2018 (825\$ million), the rise in expenditure in the security sector has surely brought under control the security space in the country, limiting the engagement that violent extremist can have in Tunisia. However, it has worked to open channels for the enrolment of Tunisians as foreign fighters. Such channels, nonetheless, are more difficult to disrupt. While the military engagement has been ready and effective in countering the spread of violent extremism, the state's lack of a clear and direct policy towards religious debate in the country has showed that the preaching and propaganda of violent extremism are not adequately countered.

What does this tell us about local resilience?

The foiled attack on Ben Guerdane at the Tunisia-Libya border proves as an important case of non-occurrence of violent extremism in the country. Despite the deep infiltration of violent extremist networks in the city, and in the city's booming smuggling economy, most of the population did not only avoid joining violent extremists' networks while these were staging an armed attack but actively resisted it, both in terms of propaganda and of military action. Families and social networks prove to be veritable sources of resistance to violent extremism, although vulnerable to be exploited or manipulated by violent extremist actors, as the Ben Guerdane case demonstrates. Despite the relative estrangement and the discontent that peripheral areas of the country might have vis-à-vis the central government, local authorities or even state symbols, protests and contestation demonstrate a deep attachment of citizens towards the Tunisian state and are meant as instrument to engage institutions in peaceful manners. On the other hand, attempts to overthrow the state and feed a violent extremist attack against state representatives are met with ambiguity and rejected. In particular, the Ben Guerdane case demonstrates how everyday forms of resistance and small-scale subversion can co-exist with regime opposition and regime contestation showing the strength of civic values and the resilience of Ben Guerdane's inhabitants vis-à-vis extremist discourses.¹⁴⁷

The divisive effects of violent extremist discourses propagated by organisations like Ansar al Sharia among Tunisian citizens demonstrate institutional difficulties in handling religious—and specifically Islamic—discourses in the public space but are also eloquent examples of the capacity of Tunisian citizens to resist the easy attractiveness of violent extremist discourses. Such resilience is particularly evident considering the chaotic events of the post-2011 democratic transition in Tunisia, where religious institutions were not able to exercise proper distance towards political forces, thereby resulting as generally dependent on political actors.

6. Concluding remarks

Based on data extracted by multi-methods approaches and comprehensive fieldwork under difficult circumstances, this working paper has analysed the occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism in four case countries: Mali and Niger in the Sahel and Morocco and Tunisia

¹⁴⁷ Guendalina Simoncini (2021) 'Beyond the "Epopée of Ben Guerdane": exploring the plurality of resistance at the South-Eastern Tunisian Border', *Studi Magrebini*, vol. 19, no. 1: 88-109.



in the North Africa region. This means that we have investigated very different cases where violent extremism has emerged under very different regimes and strength of the respective states.

Some, like Mali and Niger are very fragile, although with large differences between them, while Morocco comparatively speaking is a strong state, with Tunisia in the middle position—while obviously stronger than Mali and Niger, the latter is still being caught up in a process of transition after the 2011 regime change. The degree to which violent extremism is present also follows the pattern of the strength of the state, but also the legitimacy of the regime in power. In Mali, which has a very troubled past, insurgents inspired by extremist religious ideology have become dominant in large parts of the country. While the international intervention has come under popular criticism in Mali and there are good reasons for a critical review of current approaches,¹⁴⁸ it is also not unlikely that the Malian state would have collapsed if it had not been for the international military support that this intervention represents. The rapidly deteriorating security situation therefore makes it very difficult to prevent violent extremism. This is also an important reason explaining why local populations are in favour of negotiations with the insurgents. They may not support their ideology, but they see few other options than negotiations to preserve lives and livelihoods. However, while the local support for negotiations that we find both in Mopti in Mali and in Tillabéri in Niger may be driven by desperation, we also find that this tells us something important about root causes of violence.

Looking at the entire landscape of North Africa and the Sahel that our cases represent, there is no doubt that there are several factors that drives violent extremism. Each of these cases also has a contextual logic, including histories of politics, places, people, and violence that must be taken seriously into account if we are to understand what has driven and continues to drive violent extremism. However, if we are to point to a few key factors based on our research, it seems reasonable to suggest that poverty, marginalisation, and the lack of economic opportunities at the margins of the state are key drivers of violent extremism in all four cases. It is clearly unfortunate that people find themselves in such miserable social and economic conditions that their local environment enables the spread of violent extremism. However, there is also a positive angle to this, because it suggests that even if political violence in all four cases is legitimised by extremist religious discourse and doctrine, at least initially, those that join these insurgent groups are more concerned with material factors and much less with religious ideology. We believe that this is another important reason why there is an overwhelming support among our survey respondents in Mali and Niger for negotiated solutions to the current conflicts in their respective countries.

While Mali has never ranked higher on the international agenda, seeing an unprecedented level of international interventions and programming, the security situation has deteriorated. Prior to the international intervention in 2013, the violent conflict was mainly in the Northern parts of the country; today it has engulfed large parts of Central Mali and the

¹⁴⁸ Morten Bøås (2019) *The Sahel Crisis and the Need for International Support*, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.



region of Mopti in particular. Here, violent extremism has overlapped or integrated with communal conflicts as extremist insurgents have taken advantage of the weakness and dysfunctionality of the state to appropriate local conflicts and intra and inter-communal grievances. This has happened to such a large extent that large parts of the Mopti region currently are, if not under firm territorial control, at least heavily under the influence of either extremist insurgents like the Katiba Macina or local self-defence groups established by Bambara, Dogon and Songhay communities. People trying to defend themselves have established self-defence groups, giving local communities a sense of security. However, the consequences have been devastating as they have created a rolling pattern of attacks, counterattacks and massacres in Mopti. This means that although there also are small pockets of other forms of resilience and resistance against violent extremism in Mopti, effective non-violent means of addressing root causes of violent extremism here can only take place when and if the security situation improves. Regarding this, however, concerned stakeholders should take note of the core of our conclusions: key drivers of violent extremism are not religion or ideology, but poverty, marginalisation and alienation from the state. Hence, stakeholders should focus their programming in this direction. This is also the same conclusion that we bring forward from the case of Tillabéri in Niger.

Regarding non-occurrence in an enabling environment, the case of Segou offers some interesting points that need to be taken into consideration. Segou is a region neighbouring Mopti and shares many of the same challenges with regard to poverty, marginalisation, alienation and feelings of economic and social insecurity, however, the area has remained relatively calm in terms of violent extremism's insurgence. How can we explain the relative non-occurrence in Segou seen in relation to the manifest occurrence of violent extremism in Mopti, when people in both places are confronted with so many of the same potential drivers of violent extremism?

As we have argued, the relative non-occurrence that Segou is experiencing cannot be taken for granted. If violent conflict really spreads in full force from Mopti to Segou, local communities will have few other alternatives than either accepting to come under control of extremist jihadi-inspired groups or resist through establishing their own self-defence militias. This could easily turn the situation in Segou into a replica of what is happening in Mopti. Importantly, however, as this dovetails with our findings from Agadez in Niger and also from our case study of Morocco, violent extremism will find less fertile grounds in an environment of less pre-existing communal conflict over resources when this is combined with strong local moderate religious tradition resting in the joint caretaking of traditional and religious authorities. In that way, one may say that the influence of the Tall family in Segou has some striking similarities both with the role of traditional-religious authority in Agadez, but also, with the role of the Kingdom as a politico-religious institution in Morocco. Moderate religious authority that remains legitimate in the eyes of socially conservative populations seems to be a bastion of resilience to violent extremism.

Niger is something of an enigma with regards to the rapid spread of violent extremism in the Sahel. At face value, the country shares many of the same traits as neighbouring Mali.



Both occupy the very bottom ladder of UNDP's Human Development Index and are considered among the most fragile states in the world. However, while Mali has unravelled very quickly, apart from spill-over of violence in the Tillabéri and Diffa regions, Niger shows much more resilience. The town and region of Agadez is an interesting case in this regard. The Tuareg of Agadez have previously rebelled against governments in Niamey, but while the armed jihadi insurgents of Mali could use the Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali in 2012 as a springboard for their own rebellion, the Tuareg elite of Agadez remained loyal to the government of Niamey. Again, the role of traditional politico-religious authority, as an arbitrary institution between various parts of the local Tuareg elite and the national government, may have been crucial.

While Salafism is making an inroad also in Agadez and Salafist doctrines arguably are vectors of a more 'radical' rhetoric than traditional Sufism conveyed by the local brotherhoods, the overall radicalisation of religious discourses does not appear to undermine political stability. Doctrinal disagreements between various Muslim denominations do exist, but they tend to remain limited in scope, focused on theological aspects, and disinclined to escalate. Salafists in Agadez do not appear, nor are perceived, to fundamentally question the political *status quo*. In sum, the case of Agadez demonstrates the resilience of local religious institutions despite some growth in popularity of Salafi-leaning preaching that could lead into a more violent extremist discourse. Traditional authority's legitimacy and political compromises crafted out among local and national elite may be the answer to both the resilience of Agadez and the relative resilience of Niger compared to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali.

Morocco and Tunisia are obviously very different cases than Mali and Niger. Morocco is a strong state compared to most of its North African peers and exists on a completely different scale of state strength than Mali and Niger. Tunisia is still struggling with its post-Arab Spring transition, but it still stands as the only lasting positive outcome of the tumultuous affairs of 2011 in the Arab World. Still, both have had and have their own cases of violent extremism and both countries have been significant contributors of foreign fighters to the extremist battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Remarkably few of those that wanted to fight for an extremist religious ideology from these two countries sought to join brethren in the Sahel, and they rather went eastward towards the core Middle East. The only exception to this in North Africa is the Algerian case of AQIM, seeking shelter in the northern peripheries of Mali, but this was way before Daesh declared the Caliphate.

What Morocco and Tunisia add to our findings is the following: Tunisia shows that amid all the confusion and chaos of an unfulfilled transition, most people remain deeply attached to their state if they can engage meaningfully through legitimate institutions. If this is the case, attempts to overthrow the state through violence based on an extremist ideology will be resisted by most of the population. The Ben Guerdane case demonstrates how everyday forms of resistance and small-scale subversion can co-exist with regime opposition and regime contestation showing the strength of civic values and the resilience of Ben Guerdane's inhabitants.

Morocco shows, together with the case of Agadez in Niger, how the role of traditional religious leadership—most notably the Sufi one—has successfully worked to engage youth and



disenfranchised individuals from entering networks of diffusion of violent extremism. This has not completely excluded the rise of Salafi-leaning individuals and groups in the country. However, given the weight of traditional Sufi Sharifian families, and the power of the King and the security apparatus, it is extremely unlikely that such movements might emerge as powerful actors in the Moroccan landscape.

6.1 Policy implications

Based on the above, we bookend this working paper with the following five broad policy implications.

First, in the cases of deadly violent conflict as we currently are witnessing in Mopti in Mali and Tillabéri in Niger, local calls for negotiations must be taken seriously and listened to. They have their right to their voice and ‘red lines’ drawn by international allies should not be allowed to determine the outcome of such processes. Negotiations are already ongoing, but they are local, do not last very long, and local communities negotiate with armed insurgents based on a position of weakness. If negotiations are to constitute a pathway to peace, they must be lifted up to the national state level.

Second, based on our survey data, local populations that experience violent extremism do not think that people join such movements necessarily due to religious conviction or ideological adherence. The root causes they see are poverty and general marginalisation. This means that stakeholders should direct their interventions to development (and use less resources on de-radicalisation programmes because this not why people join in the first place).

Third, people take up arms and become radical because they have genuine grievances against the state, but this does not mean that they have become anti-state. This is not a rebellion against modernity, but rather because what they crave for is a state that actually works for them. Good governance and legitimate local institutions are keys.

Fourth, in all the non-occurrence cases examined, we found that low levels of pre-existing local intra and inter-communal conflict in combination with legitimate traditional authority can make a potentially enabling environment less enabling. Assisting local conflict resolution before local conflict can be appropriated by violent extremist is therefore crucial in combination with strengthening the powers and resources of legitimate traditional authority.

Fifth, social conservatism is not the same as extremism. The role of politico-religious institutions as bulwarks against violent extremism is crucial but is often taken for granted (Morocco) or not seen (Segou and Agadez) by external stakeholders. Some of these institutions will be so powerful that they need little material support in their own right, whereas others, like the Tall family institution in Segou, is in a much more precarious position. Supporting such local politico-religious structures and institutions is another preventive measure that are anchored and owned locally.



Appendix A: Map of North Africa and the Sahel



Appendix B: Survey questionnaire Mali

This questionnaire is part of the PREVEX research project on the prevention of violent extremism (The interviewer is asked to explain as agreed what we mean by violent extremism). I would like to ask you a few questions about your opinion on the prevalence of violent extremism in Mali or Niger and in your locality or community, as well as on the mitigation measures taken by the state and other actors. Could you please take a few minutes and answer a few questions?

PREVEX			
MO1	Questionnaire number	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	
MO2	Interview Date	_ _ - _ _ - _ _	
MO3	Surveyor Code		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
MO4	interview site	_____	
MO5	Interview start (time)	_ _ : _ _	
MO6	interview end (time)	_ _ : _ _	
Demographic and socioprofessional Profile			
DE1	Gender	M F	1 2
DE2	Age	18-25 26-39 40-60 60+	1 2 3 4
DE3	Citizenship	Malian Nigerien Other DK NA	1 2 3 8 9
DE4	Where do you live ?	Mali Niger DK NA	1 2 8 9



DE5	What is your religion?			Muslim Christian Protestant Christian Catholic Christian Orthodox No religion Traditional DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 8 9	
DE7	To what ethnic group to you belong?			1 Peul 2 Dogon 3 Bamanan 4 Bwa 5 Bozos 6 Samos 7 Mossis 8 Others (specify) 9 DK		
DE8	Level of education?			Never been to any school A few years of first cycle First cycle completed Some second cycle Second cycle completed Some university University completed Koranic school Franco-Arabic school	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	
DE9	Can you read a letter or newspaper?			Yes, easily Yes, but with difficulties No DK NA	1 2 3 8 9	
DE10	Can write a letter and other documents?			Yes, easily Yes, but with difficulties No DK NA	1 2 3 8 9	
DE11	How are you financially speaking?			Very poor Under the median Median More than the median Very well DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 8 9	



DE1 2	How many meals do you have daily?		One/daily Two/daily/daily Three/daily More than three DK NA	1 2 3 4 8 9		
Violent Extremism						
SJ1	Is your community confronted with religious extremism?		Yes No DK NA	1 2 8 9	if 1 à go to SJ2 IF 2, 8, 9 Skip to H1	
SJ2	What type of extremism is present in your community?		Religious Ethno-nationalism Left-wing Separatist DK NA	1 2 3 4 8 9		
SJ3	Is prevailing extremism promoting violence?	<i>1 Yes; 2 No; 8 DK; 9 NAP, If Yes, go to SJ4, if no, skip to P1</i>			1 Yes; 2 No; 8 DK; 9 NA	
SJ4	Why do people support such groups and actions?		Poverty Religious believes Lack of education Lack of employment Lack of social mobility The state is provoking them Other (please specify) DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
SJ5	In your community, who has the tendency to defend such opinions?	1 Yes; 2 No; 8 DK; 9 NA				
		Unemployed youth Religious leaders Elderly people Community elite Victims of state violence Merchants, traders women	1 1 1 1 1 1 1	2 2 2 2 2 2 2	8 8 8 8 8 8 8	9 9 9 9 9 9 9



SJ6	Are you satisfied with governmental and international aid toward your community?	<i>1 Very satisfied; 2 Satisfied; 3 Not satisfied enough; 4 Not satisfied at all; 8 DK; 9 NA</i>						
		Economic	1	2	3	4	8	9
		Humanitarian	1	2	3	4	8	9
		State of law	1	2	3	4	8	9
		Good Governance	1	2	3	4	8	9
		Security Sector Reform	1	2	3	4	8	9

Personal experience with violent extremism prevention policies

PE1	Are aware of programs in your community dedicated to prevent violent extremism?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 8 9	All answers excepted 1 à go to GBV
PE2	Are one of the organizations or countries involved in PVE present in your community?	Government services or local organization EU UN Germany France Other countries (please specify) NGO (please specify) DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	If DK or NA go to GBV
PE3	Do you think that organizations working PVE in your community help to maintain peace and social cohesion?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 8 9	If DK or NA go to GBV
PE4	Based on your personal experience how do you describe the magnitude of this contribution to peace and social cohesion?	Generous Sufficient Very weak DK NA	1 2 3 8 9	If DK or NA go to GBV
PE5	Which of the following descriptions fits better with this contribution?	The right type of assistance Well targeted – to right beneficiaries Wrong targeted - to wrong beneficiaries Wrong type of assistance Made the situation worse Other _____ DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 8 9	

General views on EU commitment in your country



GBV 1	Do you think that EU do understand where assistance and aid should be oriented?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 8 9	
GBV 2	What effect EU intervention do have in your community?	Help to alleviate violent extremism worsening violent extremism Not effect at all Other _____ DK NA	1 2 3 4 8 9	
GBV 3	Do you think that your situation is worse, better, or the same with EU intervention?	<i>1 better; 2 worse; 3 the same; 8 DK; 9 NA</i>		
			1 2 3 8 9	
H1	What do you think of negotiating with jihadi insurgents' groups?	It can help alleviate violent extremism It will worsen violent extremism No effect Other _____ DK NA	1 2 3 4 8 9	
H 2	Ware the jihadi insurgent groups in your environment with whom to negotiate?	Katiba Macina JNIM AQMI Other _____ DK NA	1 2 3 4 8 9	



Appendix C: RDS-questionnaire Mali

Ce questionnaire fait partie du projet de recherche PREVEX sur la prévention de l'extrémisme violent (Il est demandé à l'enquêteur d'expliquer comme convenu ce que nous entendons par extrémisme violent). Je voudrais vous poser quelques questions pour connaître votre opinion sur la prévalence de l'extrémisme violent au Mali et dans votre localité ou communauté, ainsi que sur les mesures d'atténuation prises par l'Etat et les autres acteurs. Pourriez-vous s'il vous plaît prendre quelques minutes et répondre à quelques questions?

PREVEX			
MO 1	Numéro du Questionnaire RDS	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	
MO 2	Date de l'interview	_ _ _ - _ _ _ - _ _ _	
A	Lieu de l'interview	_____	
MO 4	Début de l'interview (heure)	_ _ _ : _ _ _	
MO 5	Fin de l'interview (heure)	_ _ _ : _ _ _	
Profile démographique et socioprofessionnel			
DE1	Genre	M	1
		F	2
DE2	Age	18-25	1
		26-39	2
		40-60	3
		60+	4
DE3	A quel groupe ethnique appartenez-vous?	Peul	1
		Dogon	2
		Bambara	3
		Bwa	4
		Bozos	5
		Tuareg	6
		Arab	7
		Songhay	8
		Autres (préciser)	9
		NSP	10
		NA	
DE4	Combien de repas quotidiens avez-vous ?	un/jour	1
		deux/jour	2
		trois/jour	3
		plus de trois	4
		NSP	8
		NA	9
LE VOYAGE			
B	D'où viens-tu?	Village	
		commune	



		Region		
C	Quand as-tu quitter ton village?			
D	Pourquoi as-tu quitté ton village?			
E	Quand es-tu arrivé à Bamako?			
JO1	Comment avez-vous voyagé pour arriver à Bamako?		Véhicule 1 Moto 2 Bus 3 pirogue 4 Autres 5 NSP 8 NA 9	
F	Peux-tu me parler un peu plus de ton voyage (afin que je puisse mieux comprendre)?			
Extremisme violent				
SJ1	est-ce que ton village a été confronté à l'extrémisme violent?		Oui 1 Non 2 NSP 8 NA 9	Si 1 <input type="checkbox"/> aller à SJ2 si 2, 8, 9 aller à H1
SJ2	Quelle sorte d'extrémisme il y a dans ta communauté?		Religieux 1 Auto-défense 2 Banditisme 3 Causé par l'Etat 4 DK 8 NA 9	
SJ3	Quels sont les groupes qui créent la violence ?		Katiba Macina 1 JNIM 2 EIGS 3 Dana Amasougo 4 Bandits 5 Autres milices (préciser) 6 FAMA 7 NSP 8 NA 9	



G	<p>Quand les hommes armés sont arrivés dans ton village, qu'est-ce qui s'est passé ?</p>			
H	<p>Quand ils sont arrivés, qu'est-ce qu'ils ont fait? (demander des exemples: ont-ils exploité les griefs locaux; ont-ils introduit des tribunaux fondés sur la Sharia, la Zakat etc.)</p>			
I	<p>Comment se sont-ils comportés ? Relancer s'il y a des réponses: a. comment vos voisins ont-ils fait? b. Comment le chef de village, les enseignants, les autorités traditionnelles, les agents de l'Etat, l'infirmier, etc. ont fait ? c. Est-ce qu'ils ont traité les femmes différemment? d. Y-a-t-il autres choses que vous voulez ajouter ?</p>			
SJ4	<p>Pourquoi selon vous, certaines personnes soutiennent les groupes extrémistes et leurs actions ?</p>	<p>Pauvreté 1 Croyances religieuses 2 Manque d'éducation 3 chomage 4 pas changement dans la vie menée 5 l'Etat les provoque 6 autres (merci de préciser) 7 NSP 8 NA 9</p>		



SJ5	Les raisons que tu viens de citer sont-elles présentes dans ton village ?	Pauvreté Croyances religieuses Manque d'éducation Pas de travail Pas de changement dans la vie menée C'est l'Etat qui les provoque Autres (merci de préciser) NSP NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	
J	Est-ce qu'il y a des gens dans ta communauté qui vivent les mêmes problèmes mais qui ne recourent pas à la violence ?			
K	Qu'est-ce qui selon vous différencie de ceux de votre village qui recourent à la violence ?			
SJ6	Selon vous ont-ils été prévenus, avertis?	Oui Non NSP NA	1 2 8 9	
L	Savez-vous à quel moment ceux qui ont recours à la violence dans votre village ont-ils décidé de le faire ?			
SJ7	Dans votre village, qui sont ceux qui ont tendance à défendre le recours à la violence ?	1 Oui ; 2 Non; 8 NSP; 9 NA Les jeunes sans emploi Leaders religieux Les personnes âgées Les cadres du village Victimes de la violence étatique Commerçants et marchands Femmes	1 2 8 9 1 2 8 9	

expérience personnelle avec les politiques de prévention de l'extrémisme violent

PE1	Etes-vous au courant de projets dans votre communauté qui font la prévention contre le recours à la violence ?	oui Non NSP NA	1 2 8 9	toutes les réponses exceptées 1 <input type="checkbox"/> aller à GBV
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PE2	Etes-vous au courant de la présence d'un pays ou d'une ONG faisant la prévention contre le recours à la violence dans ta communauté ?	Services de l'Etat ou organisations locales UE ONU Allemagne France Autres pays (merci de préciser) ONG (merci de préciser) NSP NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	If DK or NA go to GBV
Quelles pistes?				
M	Comment aider les communautés à faire face à ce qu'elles vivent actuellement ?			
WF1	Que pensez-vous de la négociation avec les insurgés djihadistes ?	Ça peut ramener la paix Ça va accentuer le problème N'aura pas d'effet Autres _____ NSP NA	1 2 3 4 8 9	
WF2	Quels sont les groupes djihadistes dans votre zone avec lesquels on peut négocier ?	Katiba Macina JNIM AQMI Autres _____ NSP NA	1 2 3 4 8 9	
N	Avez -vous des propositions à partager pour une solution ?			

