Chapter 5

Chasing Shadows in the Dunes: Islamist Practice and Counterterrorist Policy in West Africa’s Sahara–Sahel Zone

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The situation in the West African Sahara–Sahel region today resembles that of post Second World War Vienna depicted in *The Third Man*.¹ The zone is criss-crossed by invisible but real lines demarcating Algerian, American, French, and Libyan zones of influence, which often trump national sovereignties. In this murky zone, the desert region’s Tuareg inhabitants mix with black Africans from southern Mali, Niger and Chad, American Special Forces troops, Algerian Arab jihadis,² South Asian missionaries, Algerian spies, Western journalists and academics, and European adventure travelers who sometimes come in for more and rougher adventure than they expected. Many of these actors are attracted to the Sahara’s harsh isolation, where state authority is informalized, if not absent. In this context, a variety of illegal and illicit activities, from cigarette smuggling to carjacking to human trafficking, have become the lifeblood of the region.

In the period after September 11 2001, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is said to have told the Generals overseeing American military operations in different parts of the world to “go out and find terrorists.”³ General Charles Wald, the number two commander at the United States military’s European Command (EUCOM), which also had responsibility for monitoring most of the African continent, did claim to find jihadis in the southern Sahara. In the period from 2003 to 2005, Wald was the most vocal and most insistent voice to identify a terrorist threat in the Sahel–Sahara region. EUCOM’s activities began with the 2003–2004 Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), a $6.25 million program through which United States Special Forces or Marines spent two months each in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad, training 100–300 troops in each country in basic infantry, map reading, and desert surveillance techniques.

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¹ *The Third Man* (British Lion Films, 1949), Carol Reed dir.
² In this chapter, the term “jihadi” refers to the minority of Muslim reformists who espouse the use of violence to spread the form of religious and political practice they consider correct.
The 2005 version of Operation Flintlock, a United States semi-annual overseas military exercise was held in Dakar, Senegal, bringing some 1,000 U.S. military personnel to the four original PSI countries plus Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Nigeria for a three-week-long anti-terrorist exercise. Flintlock 2005 initiated the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI), the successor training program to the PSI, including the nine countries involved in Flintlock and with a vastly increased budget of some $500 million over five years. By 2007, the program’s name had changed once again to the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Roughly half of the expanded budget of the TSCTP was initially slated to be administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for development programming, but it appears that most of this money remained under the control of the Department of Defense, which is administering its own programs of building schools, health clinics and wells through its public advocacy division.

While figures like General Wald claimed that the Sahelian terror threat was imminent, others have been equally adamant that there have been no jihadi attacks in the Sahara–Sahel zone. Anthropologist and tour operator Jeremy Keenan has claimed that all those reported up to April 2007 have been fabricated by the United States and Algerian governments, with an eye to controlling the region’s petroleum resources. Both of these black-and-white depictions misrepresent the complex web of regional competitions, criminal economic activity, and attempts by marginalized communities to “blackmail” governments into paying more attention to them. The situation, as two regional experts put it, resembles the confusion of a Saharan sandstorm far more than the clarity portrayed in the two opposed versions presented by EUCOM and its critics.

4 The “war game” enacted the pursuit of terrorists across several countries, emphasizing coordination among the militaries of the region, and between them and the U.S. military.

5 See: Jeremy Keenan, The Sahara: Past, Present and Future (London: Routledge, 2007); and Kennan, The Dark Sahara: America’s War on Terror in Africa (London: MacMillan, 2009). Keenan is an anthropologist who has conducted research amongst the southern Algerian Tuareg since the 1960s. He has published an earlier series of articles on the kidnappings of European tourists, the politics of the region, and cultural tourism under his own name and the pseudonym of Mustafa Barth. He has written that even a 2006 flare-up of the Tuareg rebellion was a theater piece staged by the Algerian and American secret services. Baz Lecocq, an expert on the northern Malian Tuareg populations at the center of the 1960s and 1990s rebellions, disputes Keenan’s version, explaining the local political dynamics involved. See: Baz Lecocq, “This Country is Your Country: Territory, Borders, and Decentralisation in Tuareg Politics,” Itinerario, 27, 1 (2003), 58–78; and Baz Lecocq and Paul Schrijver, “The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front,” Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 25, 1 (January 2007), 141–66.

This chapter lays out the most salient variables in this complex equation, including the significance of changing religious practice, of illicit economic activity, and of local micropolitical realities. The overall estimation of this author is that the threat of violent jihadi activity in the Mauritanian, Malian, Nigerian, and Chadian Sahel region is very small though not inexistent. The grievances from which (proto-) insurgent movements originate in this region are highly localized, although disgust with American adventurism in the Middle East amongst West African Muslims does create the conditions of possibility for small localized movements to find common cause and potentially even make operational linkages.

The fact that the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) has changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) may be a mostly rhetorical flourish. To say it is rhetorical is not, however, to say that it is insignificant. The competition between the international jihadi movement and the United States and its allies in the “Global War on Terror” is a semiotic as well as a military war, fought on the Internet, through communiqués, press conferences, and audio and video tapes.

As recently as 2004, the GSPC was a strictly national organization whose best-known operations included the kidnapping of European tourists in the desert (for whom the German government reportedly paid a ransom of 5 million euros). With the assassination of leader Nabil Sahraoui, the first GSPC leader to claim allegiance to al-Qaeda’s international jihadi strategy, Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud became the organization’s leader, and changed its name. Since then, AQIM has pursued a policy of wider recruitment, increasing media sophistication, and forging links with other small North African jihadi groups. Most recently, AQIM carried out two successful suicide bombings in Algiers on April 11 2007, killing over 30 and injuring over 100 people. One of the attacks took place outside the Algerian prime minister’s offices.

Al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, both acknowledged and encouraged the AQIM link in a September 2006 videotape, and al-Qaeda strategic documents like Abu Bakr Naji’s The Management of Savagery explicitly mention both the Maghreb and Nigeria as two of the six “priority regions” for international jihadi activity. More importantly, it is clear that as the American subject in 2004–2005.

Many non-Muslims with anti-imperialist political commitments are equally opposed to the American war in Iraq, though for slightly different reasons.


The Maghreb, or “West” in Arabic, includes Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

The other four are Jordan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (Naji, The Management of Savagery 37). Somalia, Afghanistan and southeast Asia are absent from Naji’s list.
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have dragged on, anti-American and more broadly anti-Western sentiments have grown, and a small number of West Africans and quite a large number of Maghrebin citizens have become active participants in jihadi fighting. Some of these fighters appear to be returning to their home countries now and the level of violence they undertake may be on the rise in the coming years. If it is not credible that claims of a terrorist threat are fabricated, it is also clear that the recent growth of north African jihadi activity is largely the result of the American war in Iraq. Moreover, it is still not clear that countries such as Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad are directly implicated in these developments. The American government’s decision to treat the issue as a strategic-military one and its insistence on funneling even development aid through the military would appear, under the circumstances, to be counterproductive.

West African Faith Movements and Islamic NGOs

Given the heightened rhetorical context of talk about the threat of terrorism in the Sahel, the most productive way forward is through the presentation of detailed ethnographic and historical research in the region. In seeking a more nuanced explanation, one frequently runs into stereotyped distinctions between “good” and “bad” forms of Islam. In this template, “traditional” West African Islam is Sufi, tolerant and inclusive. This is presented as being at great risk of being overrun by “bad” fundamentalists. Such a Manichaean view misrepresents the history of Sufi Islam in West Africa, which has often been peaceful, but sometimes been both politicized and violent. It also misrepresents the history of salafist or reformist movements in the region, which have a 70-year-long and mostly peaceful

13 Having traveled in the region with a British BBC producer to put together two World Service programs on this subject, I saw first hand that to both our surprise, both her native U.K and my native U.S. were treated as equally culpable of anti-Muslim policies in the eyes of a number of the West Africans we met. As detailed below, in other contexts, West African Islamists see the allegedly permissive and amoral legacy of French secularism as even more distasteful than what they see as the theocratic leanings of the Bush administration.

14 Far greater detail is contained in ICG, Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel; and Lecoq and Schrijver, The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust, Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror (New York: Random House, 2004).

15 Virtually all Muslims in the Sahelian region are Sunni. Most practice a series of interrelated traditions emanating from the Malakite legal branch of Sunni Islam. While there are many Muslims in the region who do not belong to a Sufi tariqa (“path” or brotherhood), most subscribe to one of three predominant branches: Qadiriyya, Mouridiyya, or Tijaniyya. While the Qadiriyya have the longest history in the region, and the Mouridiyya are a prominent brotherhood in Senegal (but much less present outside Senegal), the Tijaniyya are the most widely represented group across West Africa. See: Louis Brenner, West African Sufi (London: Hurst, 1984).
While West African reformist Muslims have sometimes been involved in violence, it has taken place between Muslims of differing traditions at the village or neighborhood level. They have not fixed their sights on Western targets.

Benjamin Soares has argued that such anxieties reveal much more about West African Islam’s interpreters than about their object of study, which becomes a kind of mirror for others’ concerns. West African Sufi Islam has been a strong stabilizing force in some ways, but it is probably not helpful to imagine that the Sufi brotherhoods, or any other aspect of Sahelian Islam, are frozen in time, unchanging, and that they will always play the same role they have played in the past. Indeed, it is necessary to nuance the picture of Sufi Islam’s history in the region. The stereotype of peace-loving Sufi Muslims who continue to mix a bit of traditional African religious practice with Islam, as opposed to unreasonable, inflexible Islamists bent on introducing Shari’a law, is simply not supported by the historical record. In fact, the Sahelian region has a well-developed tradition of precolonial Islamic states, several of which spread Islam, or their preferred form of Islam, into neighboring regions by force.

The Faith Movements: Wahabbiyya, Takfiris and Tablighi Jama’at

This chapter uses the terms “salafist” and “reformist” interchangeably to refer to Sahelian Muslims striving to return to what they consider a purer form of religion based on the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions. While the Tablighi Jama’at is also salafist in this strict theological sense, their explicit rejection of any involvement in politics means that self-styled salafists sometimes distinguish themselves from the Tablighi. I thus use the term “faith movements” to cover the entire range of reformist movements from those that explicitly reject involvement in politics to Islamists who aim to enter the realm of democratic struggles to control a neighborhood or village mosque.

In this chapter, the terms “salafist,” “reformist,” and “Islamist” are used mostly interchangeably. The link between them is first a doctrine of return to the pure and correct practices of the prophet, and the original practitioners of Islam; and second the rejection of the notion that Church and State should be separate. A central tenet of Islamist ideology is that everything necessary to ordering society is contained in the religion’s sacred texts, thus the common Salafi retort: ‘The Qur’an is my constitution.’

This dynamic exists in many West African countries, often in the context of struggles to control a neighborhood or village mosque.


One example of this dynamic was El Haj Umar Tal, the man most responsible for spreading the Tijani brotherhood across the Sahelian region. See David Robinson, The Holy Way of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-nineteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

As the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has shown, movements may change their positions on these questions over time.
politics so as to introduce some elements of Shari’a law to those like the GSPC, who justify the use of violence to achieve the same end.

The three most important reformist currents in the Sahel region are the Saudi-linked Wahhabiyya, the Takfiri movements inspired by Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (which has only touched the Sahel indirectly through the presence of the GSPC/AQIM), and the South Asian Tablighi Jama’at, a reformist missionary society sometimes compared to the Mormons. These three movements come under the broad category of Salafiyya, or Salafists—those Muslims who work toward a return to the salaf—the true or pure form of Islam. In all cases, their vision of the changes necessary to achieve this renewal is based on a literalist reading of the Koran and the Hadiths, or the volumes documenting the words and actions of the prophet Mohammed and his closest associates. Like Christian and Jewish fundamentalist movements, the Salafist movements identify the problems of the contemporary world with the diversion from the correct path delineated in the holy scriptures.

Consequently, they describe their activities as a struggle against bid’a, or innovations, and shirk, or heresy. Sahelian salafists blame such impurities on Sufi sects, who have cultivated cults of saints, use of protective amulets, and the important role of the Marabout religious intermediary. Beyond this, however, there are more differences than similarities among various types of religious salafists, and any analysis that mixes them indiscriminately risks serious misunderstanding. One distinction is between the Salafiyya ilmiyya, or “scholarly Salafists”, and the Salafiyya jihadiyya, or “fighting salafists.” Many of the latter are those who have fought in the interconnected series of armed struggles beginning in Afghanistan and extending to Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria, and Iraq. Over the course of the 1990s in countries like Algeria, they were often known as “the Afghans.”

The form of Wahhabism that came to West Africa arrived in the 1930s, via West African clerics who had studied in the holy cities of Medina and Mecca and at the Egyptian religious university, Al-Azhar. Their religious practice and political, particularly anticolonial, commitments were intertwined in the period from the 1940s onward. These reformers sought to eradicate what they perceived as the shirk of the predominant Sufi tariqa. The saints, marabouts, and initiation into the Prophet Mohammed and his closest associates.

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22 “Salaf” literally means ancestor or predecessor, and from this meaning comes the figurative sense of purity. Many Salafists consciously try to copy the dress and behavior of the Prophet Mohammed and his closest associates.  
24 West African Wahhabis are often called “Les bras croisés,” referring to their manner of praying with their arms crossed over their chests, as opposed to hanging at their sides. See: Lansine Kaba, The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa (Evanston I.I.: Northwestern University Press, 1974).  
25 The term refers to West African ritual specialists who often specialized in creating amulets to cure ills, protect against mystical attack, or ensure good fortune. They often became both economically and politically powerful.
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esoteric rites common to these Sufi sects are all unacceptable and blasphemous to Wahhabis. According to Lansine Kaba they argued that:

[Sufi] Mysticism thus becomes synonymous with shrewd mystification and exploitation. … Given that religion had turned into a business and religiosity into a profession, it was inevitable, they argued, that ignorance and superstition were promoted as norms and that the masses gave their souls and wealth to mystics-turned-charlatans, soothsayers, and charm makers. The Wahhabi felt it necessary, consequently, to demystify those who were committing wrongs and making profit in the name of Islam.

Many of the early converts were businessmen, and many of them were from lower status families. Wahhabist doctrine, which argues for the equality of all humans before God, is thus attractive to members of some West African societies with rigid social hierarchies.

Qutbist doctrine, which has spread across North Africa under the various takfiri movements that have appeared particularly in the slums of such cities as Casablanca, has not made major inroads to the south of the desert. It is significant only inasmuch as it was instrumental in the formation of the GSPC in the first instance. The GSPC broke with the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) in September 1998 because the GIA subscribed to the doctrine of takfir al-mujtama’, inspired by Sayyid Qutb, one of the leading intellectual figures of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. Following Qutb, the GIA accused all of Algerian society (excepting their active supporters) of apostasy, and classified them as legitimate military targets. Preferring to target only the state, its institutions and personnel, the GSPC under the leadership of Hassan Hattab originally steered away from attacks on civilians.

The Tablighi Jama’at, known in the Sahelian countries simply as the Da’wa, (“preaching,” or the “call,”) is the world’s biggest Muslim missionary society. Its annual conference is surpassed only by the Hajj as the largest congregation of Muslims in the world. Founded by Muhammed Ilyas in 1926 in Mewat province, India, the group soon spread worldwide. The Tablighi are explicitly apolitical, but call Muslims back to renew their faith through Islamic practice modeled on

26  Kaba, The Wahhabiyya.
28  Selma Belala, “Misère et djihad au Maroc,” In Le Monde Diplomatique (November 2004); and ICG, Understanding Islamism (Brussels: ICG, 2005).
29  Qutb joined the Muslim brothers in 1951, and was jailed by the Nasser government from 1954 to 1964, released and arrested again less than a year later. He was hanged in 1966. As a result of the brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Qutb developed an interpretation of the Arab nationalist state that classified it as an example of jahiliyya, or barbarous ignorance, that should necessarily be opposed by force.
that of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions and through proselytization, known as khuruj.30 An increasing number of ethnographic accounts of Tablighi practice are coming out in print.31 They point to the variety of Tablighi practices within a coherent system that imposes order through its straightforward six-point theological foundation and the habitus of Tablighi proselytization missions, which can last from three days up to one year.32

As far as the internal situation in the Sahel is concerned, what is most striking is not theological enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, but the internal divisions amongst Muslims themselves, including between differing groups of Salafists. Several Malians noted that the Tablighis consider Wahhabis to be too Western because they are engaged with the world of politics. The Wahabbis accuse the Tablighis in turn of being “imperialist” because they are against violence and overt involvement in politics. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Sahelian Sufi Muslims take note of the various arguments on offer, sometimes experimenting with one or another, often drifting back to their original affiliation after some time.33

Moreover, it is not only the reformist groups that present such an attraction. There are, as there have always been, various charismatic movements on offer, just as there are for Christians. Over the past few years, the “pieds nus” (bare feet) movement in Mali has attracted many young people. Founded by Cheick Ibrahim Khalil Kanouté, described by one Malian as a high school student who failed his baccalaureate exam, the pieds nus refuse shoes, Western clothing (wearing only African hand-loomed cotton fabric), and any other trace of Western culture.34 Similarly, in Senegal, the movement of General Kara has organized many young Muslims take note of the various arguments on offer, sometimes experimenting with one or another, often drifting back to their original affiliation after some time.

32 For more on the Tablighi Jama’at worldwide, see Masud, ed. Travellers in Faith.
33 For more on the Tablighi in the Sahel see ICG, Understanding Islamism, and Lecoq and Schrijver, The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust.
34 One commentator observed that this is especially apparent in periods of crisis, for instance when a believer or loved one becomes seriously ill. It is at this moment that many return to the Sufi practices they know best, and trust to bring relief in time of need. Author’s interview, Dakar, September 8 2004.
35 After he presided over the 1998 murder of a Malian judge who had banned the group in the region of Dioila, Kanouté and two followers were sentenced to death, though Mali, which has not carried out an execution since 1980, has not executed them. See Amnesty International Report 2001, ‘Mali’ (AI index Pol 10/001/2001). The group has occasionally been involved in other violent confrontations with Malian administrative and security forces since then. See G.A. Dicko, “Fait divers: Des ‘pieds-nus’ font couler le sang à Kassela,” l’Essor, 15805 (October 11 2006).
unemployed people in a quasi-militarized branch of the Mouride brotherhood. These youths perform military-style calisthenics on some of the beaches of Dakar, and march in regimented formations. These effervescent movements often die out after a few years.

The Political Economy of an Informalized Zone

“The Arabs [GSPC], when they come southward into the desert, do they know how to find their way around?”

“Not at all.”

“Do they seek out Tuareg guides or drivers to help them?”

“Of course.”

“Do Tuareg work for or with them?”

“Some do.”

“What would happen to them if they didn’t have any help from the Tuaregs in the desert?”

“What would happen to a man who knows not how to swim, if he were dropped in the middle of the ocean?”

One presumption regarding the Sahel region that probably obscures more than it clarifies is that there are direct links between poverty and religiously oriented violence. Shifts that might lead to violence, such as the GSPC/AQIM presence in northern Mali, are more likely the result of highly localized political and economic factors that only draw on the international rhetoric of a common Islamist agenda at a relatively late stage. While it is true that West African Islamists may benefit from

35 Moudou Kara Mbacke is a charismatic leader who has founded his own political party, the Parti de la Verité du Dieu (Party of God’s Truth), and has recruited his followers mainly from Dakar’s underclass of unemployed youth. The movement is generally considered to be an offshoot of the Baye Fall, a subgroup of the Mouridiyya recognizable by their colorful patchwork clothes and dreadlocks.

36 Author’s conversation with a cigarette smuggler, Bamako, July, 2005.

37 This position is summarized in the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) article “Famine not Fanaticism Poses Greatest Terror Threat in Sahel,” IRIN, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 14 (October 2004).
money pumped into the region by Gulf States, there is little evidence to link them
with violent or even oppositional politics in the Sahel region. Conversely, while
those who may become linked to groups like the GSPC/AQIM are undoubtedly
poor, so are the vast majority of their neighbors and relatives who never become
involved in such movements. The notion that economic “fragilization” is the
primary cause of a turn toward either religious fundamentalism or violence, is not
credible. If it were, West Africa would have long been the world center of Islamist
politics and terror, given the severe poverty of most countries in the region.
Informal economic networks often flourish in the poorest regions of the world.
The Sahara–Sahel, whose Tuareg inhabitants have been impoverished by droughts
that killed their livestock, and who have maintained troubled relations with the
Malian and Nigerian states, is one of those zones. A walk through the market in
Kidal shows that most of the consumer goods there—from soap to pasta to consumer
electronics—come from Algeria. The same is true of gasoline. Because many of these
products are subsidized by the Algerian government and there are no trade agreements between Algeria and Mali, these products are officially contraband. Because products traveling the length of Mali from an already-landlocked capital cost two to three times as much, it is no exaggeration to say that communities like Kidal, could not survive without smuggling.

The more lucrative aspects of this grey economy, however, have been the smuggling of cigarettes, and the illegal trafficking of people, weapons and other goods, allegedly including drugs. The Saharan cigarette trade has been estimated at \$1 billion per year, and the networks behind it are international, allegedly including Lebanese businessmen on the West African coast and the Italian Mafia along the Mediterranean. Cigarettes, some of which allegedly come directly from North Carolina, and others of which arrive in European ports but are never offloaded, arrive in Mauritania, Togo, and other points along the coast of West Africa. From these ports of entry they begin their journey across the Sahara to North Africa, and from there across the Mediterranean to Europe where they are sold tax-free. Some of these flows have already been curtailed, particularly the trans-Saharan migrant routes that ran across Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Since 2005, the European Union countries stepped up pressure on Morocco, Algeria, and Libya to intercept sub-Saharan Africans and prevent them from attempting to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. This has significantly diminished, if not totally stopped the uses of the trans-Saharan routes, as evidenced by the rapid growth of sea passage to the Canary Islands as the route of choice amongst would-be migrants.

Cigarettes are another story, and while the smuggling trade is illegal, it is certainly not as deleterious to human lives as trafficking drugs, weapons, or humans. This is the term used in French by many in Mali and Niger to describe the attraction of the Salafist movement for some Tuareg communities. The human traffickers were renowned for cheating their clients, either by taking their money and disappearing or by purportedly leaving migrants in the middle of the desert to die.
with much other illegal and illicit economic activity in West Africa, the real stakes are more subtle than the rank profiteering portrayed in films about gun runners and the like: It is states that are cheated, as goods are re-routed through poorly policed zones in order to evade customs duties and taxes, and to launder illegally earned money. This activity is an important part of the international economic strategy of crime syndicates like the Mafia, and allegedly for Islamist groups whose operations do not necessarily involve West Africa or the Sahara. However, it is essential to bear in mind that to take away all such illicit sources of income at once would immediately plunge Malian and Nigerian Tuareg populations into almost total poverty. This might very well have the opposite effect to that intended, namely of alienating and radicalizing at least some Tuareg.

There are many actors involved in the trans-Saharan cigarette trade, and it appears that the GSPC/AQIM is one of them. Two of its operational leaders in the Algerian desert, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar and Abderazzak El Para, appear to have been smugglers first and jihadis second, if at all. The GSPC, as noted previously, was an offshoot of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), one of the groups that adopted violent means to oppose the government formed by the military in Algeria after the annulment of the 1991 elections. To this date, the GSPC is the only organized violent Islamist group that can be said to have operated in the West African Sahel. As the Algerian Islamist insurgency lost much of its momentum in 2001 and 2002, part of the GSPC was pushed by Algerian security forces first from northern Algeria (their base) into the southern desert and from there into northern Mali. After a period of apparent downturn in 2004–2005, during which several hundred GSPC members accepted the Algerian government’s amnesty offer, there seems to have been a resurgence of the group, now calling itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, with Aiman al-Zawahiri’s September 2006 statement that al-Qaeda and AQIM would be joining forces against “crusader” American and French presence in north Africa, and recent clashes with Tunisian security forces in December 2006 and January 2007. However, in 2005 and 2006, French counterterrorism officials repeatedly identified GSPC cells in France as posing the likeliest threat of an attack like that carried out on July 7 2005 in London, and reports from Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya describe increasing pan-Maghrebin coordination in recruitment and training of jihadi insurgents. While AQIM does seem to be internationalizing its activities in terms of both targets and recruitment, the second round of these elections appeared certain to be won by Islamists.

Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels indicate a rapid increase in the number of North African insurgents fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, an estimated 20 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq in 2007 estimated to come from the Maghreb, and all known al-Qaeda field commanders in Afghanistan being Libyan nationals. See: Steinberg and Werenfels, “Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: Just a New Name or Indeed a New Threat?” In SWP Comments (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2007).

Tunisian security forces who killed Tunisian, Algerian, and Mauritanian GSPC/AQM members claimed they discovered plans to attack the British and American embassies in Tunis.
this is taking place along the Mediterranean coast, and it is not clear that it has much relevance to the Sahel region.

The United States government has claimed that it is precisely the inability of the Mauritanian, Malian, Nigerien, and Chadian governments to control their own territory that allows illegal activity to flourish, and that it is both the lack of surveillance and the efflorescence of illicit economic activity that could make such a place—like Somalia or Afghanistan—attractive to terrorists. As many have pointed out, United States’ interest in the security of this region is hardly altruistic. The anti-terrorism attention of the United States government has been turned on the West African region at the same time that a United States intelligence estimate suggested that by 2015, 25 percent of American oil would come from Africa. Given the current problems with the Niger Delta’s low-level insurgency and Nigeria’s recent elections, which were denounced by most observers, it is not at all clear that such a prediction will hold. Moreover, it is important to keep questions of scale firmly in mind: Mauritania is currently producing 75,000 barrels of crude oil each day (BPD), Angola produces 1.6 million BPD, and Nigeria 2.45 million BPD. Moreover, Mauritania’s proven reserves will be depleted within 10 years. Similarly, Chad’s production, at 225,000 BPD, is quite significant for Chad, but not necessarily for the world oil market. The real action, and the vast majority of African oil production, is and will for the foreseeable future be limited to three countries: Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and Angola.

To the extent that the United States combines oil interests and security concerns, it is not so much in the Sahel as in Nigeria. The combination of significant oil reserves and significant political problems has meant that United States securocrats have seen the country as one that needed to be contained. In this way, it is probably most useful to see the various counterterrorism programs as attempts to place a “cordon sanitaire” between Nigeria and any possibility of Islamist jihadi activity coming from the north. Whether such fears are reasonable is open to question. I was told by Niger Delta militants in Port Harcourt in April 2006 that they had been approached by Islamists who wanted to share deadly technology with them. These levels are still small compared with Iran’s 4 million BPD and Saudi Arabia’s 9.5 million BPD.

Indeed, while the general perception is that there is a new spate of oil exploration and a new “scramble for Africa” that entails major political as well as economic consequences, most of the oil fields in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad were already discovered in the 1960s. However, it is only the combination of dramatically inflated oil prices and new technologies that make these relatively small and technically difficult fields economically viable.

The earliest and still one of the best academic analyses of U.S. counterterrorism interest in the Sahelian region, which suggested exactly this motive, was Stephen Ellis, “Briefing: The Pan-Sahel Initiative,” *African Affairs* 103, 412 (2004): 459–64.
insisted that they had turned down the offer but were proud that they had been so approached.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{The Importance of Micropolitics}

While to some, such signs appear ominous and to others they are exaggerated, it is important to note that the grievances driving such attacks are not international but local in nature. This section proposes just three brief vignettes in order to show how important local politics is in the way that insurgencies play out.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{Tablighi Conversion, Tuareg Rebellion and the Politics of Gender}

In a superb article on the politics of northern Mali, Baz Lecocq and Paul Schrijver explain one of the facts that has been most disturbing to Western counterterrorism specialists: the intersection in the region of Kidal of the leadership of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, successful proselytization by the Tablighi al Jama’at, and the presence of GSPC elements, pushed southward by the Algerian security forces. Tablighi converts in Kidal included the leader of the 1990s rebellion, Iyad, as well as several of his family members (from the ruling Ifoghas clan), including the mayor of Kidal and the traditional leader of the region, Inta’la. The context of the conversion had everything to do with local political struggles, and little to do with extremist ideology. The arrival of Tablighi missionaries in Kidal coincided with a hard-fought campaign for mayor of the town. The leading candidate was a member of the minority Idnan clan, a woman called Doe. Amongst matrilineal Tuareg, women’s involvement in public life is common, but the Ifoghas elite of Kidal, seeing that they might lose political power, willingly adopted the patriarchal rhetoric of the Tablighi in order to disqualify their female opponent, and to argue that pious Muslims would never vote for a woman.\textsuperscript{48} The strategy was successful, and over the following years, many Ifoghas converts appear to have drifted back toward their former, less doctrinaire religious practices.

The instrumental use of conversion is not particular to Mali, and even within Mali, it is not particular to Tablighi conversion. Those Malian Salafist converts in

\textsuperscript{46} Several days later, they detonated a car bomb inside a military camp using a remote device based on a cellular phone. Militants in the region at that time expressed significant pride in this new technical ability.


\textsuperscript{48} Lecocq and Schrijver, \textit{The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust}, 149.
the 1930s and 1940s who were called Wahabbis were largely businessmen who tapped into an emergent regional network of Wahabbi merchants who operated in Mali, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire. As noted above, many contemporary converts to the Saudi-sponsored ("Wahabbi") form of reformist Islam are men of servile social status. Their appropriation of their own denigrated “slave” status as newly minted "slaves of God" is a move toward their own social equalization not unlike the Protestant Reformation’s rejection of the hierarchy of the Catholic clergy. In Senegal, converts to the Saudi style of reformist Islam are even known as “Ibadous,” or “Ibadous Rahman” from the Arabic phrase “Ibadu ar-Rahman,” or “slaves of the Merciful.” Some Senegalese women use salafist injunctions to study the Qur’an and the Hadiths as an argument for greater female public presence than is normally encouraged within the sufi tariqa. Thus, even the gender politics of conversion to reformist Islam can move in different directions, according to the setting.

An Alibi for Delinquents? Would Be Jihadis in Mauritania

The example of Mauritania shows that the indiscriminate suppression of Islamists can quickly backfire. Under President Ould Taya (deposed by coup in August 2005) the Mauritanian government lost its credibility with much of its own population, having used the “Islamist = Terrorist” equation simply to purge its adversaries. One of the first acts of the military transitional government was to release Islamist leaders Mokhtar el Hacen Ould Dedew and Mohamed Jemil Ould Mansour. Under Ould Taya, if the government was to uncover real terrorist plans, many Mauritanians and most Islamists in Mauritania and the region would probably dismiss the claim out of hand.

Mohammed Fall Ould Oumere is the editor of the weekly paper La Tribune, a paper that was highly critical of Ould Taya. When I met him in July 2005, the coup d’état that would unseat Ould Taya was just one month away. Although Ould Oumere bitterly criticized the then-president from every angle, he did offer an interesting piece of information: Although the well-known political Islamists were not jihadis, as the government had claimed, a group of seven young men arrested for training to go join the jihadi fight in Iraq were doing just that. Ould Oumere went on to say that he knew the young men personally— they were from his home village—and that they were typical, troubled youths, involved in petty crime, and looking for outlets for their aggression. The Islamist cause, he said, gave them the perfect excuse to act on their antisocial impulses, and then to justify their acts as being undertaken in the name of a noble cause. While he did feel they deserved some form of punishment, he hardly seemed to consider them very dangerous.


50 On June 5 2007, 24 defendants in a terrorism trial were acquitted because their testimony was obtained through torture. Fourteen others went on trial in late June, just as
1 In this regard, jihadi commitment in the Sahel countries could be just as attractive to some troubled young men as involvement in violent militias like the pro-
government Young Patriots in Côte d’Ivoire or the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria.

5 Chadian Conversations on Religion, Morality and the Family

7 Many prominent Islamists in N’Djamena are fluent in French as well as Arabic, some with degrees from French universities, and some former government officials. Although the headlines regarding Chad refer to the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring Darfur and various rebel incursions from Sudan and the Central African Republic, discussions in N’Djamena are rather more focused on the difficulties of raising families in a changing world.

9 In the city’s cyber cafés, there are no filters for pornography; satellite television can bring Arabic-language stations such as Al Jazeera, or even Al Manar, but also the all manner of prurient music videos and films. In conversations with Chadian Islamists, the central point of contention that emerged again and again was their opposition to the adoption of a French-style family code.

12 Similar issues have arisen in neighboring countries, as in the case of protests in northern Mali against the Miss Universe pageant being held in the country, and March 2005 riots in Bamako after the national football team lost to Togo, during which time crowds, allegedly led by Islamist converts, pillaged restaurants alleged to have brothels attached to them and bars. Similar attacks on young women wearing short skirts in Conakry in 2007 were attributed by some to Guinean Islamist youths. The significant point is that West Africans, like residents of most countries, are ambivalent about the almost completely unregulated flow of images and information that accompany contemporary globalization. While some would characterize this as freedom, others see it as the tainting influence of an amoral or immoral system driven by the desire to see profits rather than what is right for building strong families and societies. In December 2006, shortly after the United States’ elections that were purportedly swayed in part by controversies over gay marriage, several Islamists said to me (expecting a sympathetic audience), “the government is asking us to accept this family code which is just an importation from French culture. They want us to legalize homosexual marriage!”


52 See also Soares’ “Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era” for discussion of similar anxieties regarding gambling, prostitution, bars open during the holy month of Ramadan, and a rumored “convention of homosexuals” in Mali in the period 1999–2000.
Conclusion: U.S. Counterterrorism Policy, Africa, and the Military as an Instrument of Social Engineering

Much discussion of the “Global War on Terror” today revolves around the question of how to win the battle for “hearts and minds.” This term, used throughout the Malayan and Vietnamese insurgency wars against the British and Americans, respectively, has come to be a central term of the counterinsurgency lexicon. Its use in the Sahel context is significant, because it implicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of relatively broad community-based grievances that can and should be addressed in non-military terms. This represents a subtle but important shift from the rhetoric surrounding “terrorism,” which implicitly denies both the legitimacy and the rationality of political violence characterized as such. Despite the fact that the name of the United States program engaging the region has changed from the relatively neutral “Pan Sahel Initiative” to the more militaristic “Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative,” American military thinking about the region seems to be following a counterinsurgency rather than a counterterrorism model. This shift is warranted inasmuch as the West African Sahel simply is not a hotbed of terrorist activity. To the extent that there are any terrorists or would-be terrorists in the region, they most likely aspire to leaving West Africa as quickly as possible, and arriving “where the action is,” in the Middle East and West Asia. An enlightened “hearts and minds” campaign would also be justified in the sense that anti-American sentiment in many Muslim-majority West African countries is on the rise. For many of those expatriates who have lived in the region over the last 20 years, the shift is palpable and at times striking. When I arrived in Guinea in the late 1980s Guineans and other West Africans seemed to classify Americans as powerful, and thus potentially dangerous, actors, but as having the decided advantage of not having been a colonial power. Whether this characterization was right or wrong, it is now history. Though many in West Africa surely retain great affection for specific American citizens, the general view of the United States in the region has degraded significantly. The perception that the United States was anti-Muslim and prepared to use force to satisfy its unlimited greed for oil was probably quite marginal in West Africa through the 1980s. This began to change during the first Gulf War, and has been multiplied many times over by the second war in Iraq. Today, inhabitants of even tiny Sahelian villages can see media broadcasts of the ravages of that war as long as some entrepreneur manages to bring a television, a satellite dish and a generator together in the same place. This sets into motion two opposed dynamics: On one hand, American actions in other parts of the world really have, in this author’s estimation, created varying degrees of anti-American sentiment in West Africa. This can and does merge in unpredictable and conjunctural fashion in the lives of particular individuals like the young Mauritanian delinquents mentioned above. On the other hand, the American approach to this problem, while oriented toward diminishing future threats, is wrong-headedly channeled through the military. Such an approach will
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1 only be read negatively in confirmed anti-American circles, and it will render 1
2 otherwise welcome development assistance bittersweet in others. Some analysts 2
3 have read the American military’s prominence in the Sahelian counterterrorism 3
4 initiatives as the sinister first step in a master plan to assert a militaristic hegemony 4
5 over the entire region. Recent announcements of a plan for a United States military 5
6 Africa Command, based on African soil, and that would operate independently 6
7 from EUCOM, point to the military’s recognition that Africa does have strategic 7
8 importance. This importance is presumably linked to the coexistence of Islamist 8
9 currents (however limited) and mineral resources that the United States government 9
10 considers of strategic importance.

11 It is important, however, not to get caught up too much in one’s own rhetoric of 11
12 conspiracy. It has been explicit United States government policy since the 1970s 12
13 that it would go to war to protect its “strategic interests” (access to oil) in the 13
14 Middle East. African reserves are not nearly as important as those in the Middle 14
15 East, and many will be depleted much faster. Moreover, the biggest threats to 15
16 profitable exploitation of African oil have little to do with religion, as demonstrated 16
17 recently in the Niger Delta. Just as the United States government seems to rightly 17
18 identify growing anti-American sentiment but do all the wrong things to allay it, 18
19 the more conspiracy-minded observers correctly identify the American blunders 19
20 while wrongly denying that the perception of anti-American or indeed anti-Western 20
21 sentiment has any basis in fact.

22 The reasons for the military preeminence in Sahel-related matters since 22
23 September 11 2001 are, I argue, much more mundane, and in a sense sadder than 23
24 a grand conspiracy to control the region: Both the White House and the United 24
25 States Congress in their Democratic and Republican-dominated forms, have shown 25
26 themselves too cheap, too small-minded, and too focused on the politics of their 26
27 own electoral cycles to be willing to dedicate serious attention or serious money to 27
28 Africa. This has led to a gestural politics of the Bush administration’s President’s 28
29 Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and emergency aid for refugees and 29
30 for famines that is in the end far more expensive than sensible, proactive diplomatic 30
31 and development activities. In this context, the only institution with the authority 31
32 to break through the veil of short-sightedness and racism is the military. By using 32
33 the “T-word.” General Wald was able to generate interest, money, and bureaucratic 33
34 advantage for himself and for a EUCOM that was quickly being overshadowed 34
35 the United States military’s Central Command, which was running the Iraq war 35
36 and overseeing counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and the Horn of 36
37 Africa.

38 While the liabilities of having uniformed United States military personnel 38
39 undertake school-building or well-digging projects are fairly obvious, there is 39
40 another problem with them that is less frequently highlighted. “Hearts and minds” 40
41 work, like development work, is invariably tied up in processes of transformation 41
42 akin to social engineering. Whether such undertakings are justifiable at all is a 42
43
44
1 pertinent question that has been raised by anthropologists and others.\textsuperscript{53} Even
2 if such misgivings are tabled, as they certainly are in the case of the Western
3 governments who are heavily involved in development and cultural exchange
4 programming, it is important to take seriously the fact that most programs of this
5 kind aim not just to put the donor countries in a better light. They aim at more
6 profound transformations that will change recipients into the kinds of people who
7 would be predisposed to “read” the actions and intentions of the donor government
8 charitably. Because these projects are actually attempts to transform types of
9 personhood,\textsuperscript{54} or the ways that people relate to one another and the world around
10 them, military institutions are particularly ill-suited to this sort of work.
11
12 Militaries have their own techniques for transforming personhood. In the
13 United States, it is called “boot camp.” During this time, young recruits are
14 purposely pushed to the point of physical and mental collapse, and then “built”
15 back up in the image of the institution of which they are becoming a part. As many
16 failed attempts have shown, while this technique may work on individuals in very
17 particular circumstances, it does not work with entire societies.\textsuperscript{55} I have talked with
18 United States military personnel in West Africa who have portrayed the political
19 stakes in the Sahel region in starkly competitive terms. In this calculus, whoever
20 sinks more wells and builds more schools—the United States military, or Saudi-
21 based Islamic NGOs—will win the competition for hearts and minds. Such an
22 approach ignores the fact that West Africans are sophisticated consumers of such
23 “charitable” undertakings. Whether under colonialism, or even when attempting
24 to navigate the perilous centuries when the Atlantic slave trade fuelled internecine
25 wars or, more recently during the cold war, West Africans have had to interpret
26 the acts of outsiders with a critical eye. It is quite possible that a village would
27 happily accept the schools and the wells from both sides, without ever being
28 swung to one side or the other. Moreover, there is the real possibility that sinking
29 wells in a Sahelian or desert region, where complex social networks of rights and
30 responsibilities have grown up around access to water, will create conflict, rather
31 than diminish it.
32
33 The military attitude to “development” may be efficient in its focus on concrete
34 results, but it often ignores the micropolitical dynamics that can be overwhelmingly
35 important in the local context. As the merchant networks connected to early
36 Wahhabi conversion and the gender politics of Tablighi conversion in the Kidal
37 setting show, people living in the Sahara–Sahel have reasons of their own for
38 negotiating particular intersections between religion and politics. Both the United
39 States military and some of their fiercest critics have shown a singular lack of
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41 \textsuperscript{53} James Ferguson, \textit{The Anti-politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization and
43 \textsuperscript{54} Ivan Karp, “Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral
46 \textsuperscript{55} Scott, \textit{Seeing like a State}.  

\textsuperscript{53} James Ferguson, \textit{The Anti-politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization and
\textsuperscript{54} Ivan Karp, “Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral
\textit{(Bloomington I.N.: Indiana University Press, 2002)}.
\textsuperscript{55} Scott, \textit{Seeing like a State}.
interest in such local particularities. The proper response to this shallow approach might echo the words of Anna Schmidt, the lover of The Third Man’s enigmatic smuggler, Harry Lime: “Oh please, for heaven’s sake, stop making him in your own image!”