

Pious Voices Unheard: Religion, Peacebuilding, and the Conflict in Mali

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Map of the Sahel



Fig. 1 Geopolitical Hotspot – The Sahel. Image from *Geographical* (April 2020).

Preface

This paper will explore the question as to why, in a conflict highlighted by religious extremism, religion is overlooked as a possible solution in peacekeeping efforts. Additionally, it will examine why religious actors are ignored and marginalized in discussions surrounding security measures and state-building. My research suggests that the absence of religion and religious actors as viable options for easing the ongoing militant crisis displays deep-seated Western biases that fixates on militant Islam. In addition to this, foreign influence from wealthy Gulf states, like Saudi Arabia, have effectively undermined and stifled the pluralistic Islamic tradition in West Africa. Finally, the contemporary model for peacekeeping places an emphasis on the secular nation-state, which serves to confine religion to the private realm.

Throughout this work, I rely extensively upon primary literature in the form of security reports, official government publications, and historical documents. In addition, I conducted interviews with peacekeepers and professionals concerned with addressing the ongoing crisis plaguing Mali. Their perspectives and insights are incredibly valuable in gaining an authentic understanding of what is transpiring on the ground at a grassroots level.

Because of the complexity of this crisis, the size of the Sahel, and the constraints of time and space, this research paper will only focus on the crisis as it pertains to Mali. The conflict in Burkina Faso should be viewed as semi-continuous with Mali, due to the porous nature of the shared border, and the fact that most of the Salafi-Jihadist attacks are concentrated in the country's northern territories.

The project begins with an introduction into the current crisis, and a brief discussion on the history of Mali. The paper will then analyze the contemporary peacekeeping situation in

Mali, highlighting various programs and measures taken to combat this ongoing Islamist threat. The paper then highlights the current state of religion in Mali before analyzing the historical record of Islam in West Africa, highlighting an abundance of pluralistic traditions. In the final sections of the paper, I hypothesize several key factors that might be attributed to the West's veiling of religion in its approach to West Africa. These factors are the implicit biases in Western models of peacekeeping and secularism, the influx of Saudi Arabian money, negative Western perceptions of Salafism, and the promulgation of a single narrative due to the high transmissibility of Salafism.

A Brief History of Mali

Mali's genesis occurred along the upper areas of the Niger River as a small Malinke kingdom.¹ However, its rise to prominence in the precolonial era occurred from the 13th to 17th centuries, during which the Mali Empire was established by King Sundiata Keita.² During this period, the Kingdom became prosperous due to its luxurious position located South of the Sahara Desert. Through Trans-Saharan trade and its sizable salt and gold mines, Mali served as the intermediary between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, "Mali also developed into a hub for the Islamic faith before poor leadership led to the empire's ultimate decline in power and influence."³

¹ Virginia Department of Education. "History." VDOE: Mali – History. Accessed November 10, 2021. <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/history/mali/history/index.shtml>.

² National Geographic Society. "The Mali Empire." National Geographic Society, August 19, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/mali-empire/>.

³ IBID.

By the end of the 1800s, Mali fell under the colonial rule of the French, and became part of the larger colonial possession known as French Sudan.⁴ French Sudan effectively supplied laborers to French colonial possessions on Africa's West Coast.

Yet the end of World War II and the wave of decolonization brought drastic changes to the region of West Africa:

In 1958 the renamed Sudanese Republic obtained complete internal autonomy and joined the French Community. In early 1959, the Sudanese Republic and Senegal formed the Federation of Mali, which gained full independence from France as part of the French Community on June 20, 1960. Following the withdrawal of Senegal from the federation in August 1960, the Sudanese Republic became the independent nation of Mali on September 22, 1960, with Modibo Keita as president.⁵

Since securing independence in 1960, Mali's political history has been turbulent, with numerous coups d'état occurring, and the government oscillating between civilian and military rule. The instability is further enhanced by isolated stretches of territory in the north inhabited by various ethnic groups like the Tuaregs, that have long aspired for regional autonomy.⁶ Today, these problems persist, with the central-state authority maintaining little legitimacy, and poverty present throughout most of the country. However, the country is experiencing a new trend in recent years that is cause for concern: Islamist militancy.

Definition of Key Terms

Several key terms will constantly be used. Particularly, when dealing with religious conflict and various value-based groups, precision of language is of the utmost importance. As

⁴ Library of Congress – Federal Research Division. "Mali: Country Profile." January 2005, p. 2.

⁵ IBID.

⁶ The roots of Mali's Conflict. Accessed November 10, 2021.

https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/1_the_failed_path_to_national_unity/.

such, I will briefly define the following terms to provide the reader with a basic understanding of how I will be employing them throughout this work. The terms are *Islamist*, *Salafi*, *Salafi-Jihadist*, *Sufi*, *peacebuilding*, *peacekeeping*, and *plurality*.

In this paper, the term *Islamist* references the “modern political movements advocating the ‘Islamicization’ of state and society,” and the belief that the state is a viable option to advance Islamic values and beliefs.⁷ The term *Salafi* denotes “a neo-orthodox brand of Islamic reformism, originating in the late 19th century and centered on Egypt, aiming to regenerate Islam by a return to the tradition represented by the ‘pious forefathers.’”⁸ The term *Salafi-Jihadist* invokes the adherents and practitioners of Salafism that advocate and promote their religious and political agenda through violent means. Finally, *Sufism* in this work refers to “the most popular and important tradition of Islamic spirituality, esoterism, and mysticism in West Africa, which is typically structured around orders governed by master-disciple relationships and chains of initiation going back to the founder of the order and from him to the Prophet Muhammad.”⁹

Additionally, I refer to peacebuilding as the process of actively pursuing measures to generate an active cessation of violence. This is different from the term that I am calling peacekeeping, which I use to refer to the active maintenance of peace and the continued absence of violence. On the one hand, achieving peace is the goal of peacebuilding. On the other hand,

⁷ Ogunnaike, Oludamini. Intro to Islam. August 26, 2021. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA. Lecture.

⁸ Shinar, P. and Ende, W., “Salafiyya”, in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 29 September 2021 <http://dx.doi.org.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/10.1163/1573-3911_islam_COM-0982>

⁹ Ogunnaike, Oludamini. “Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and Education in West Africa.” *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 2020, 2.

peacekeeping assumes a preexistent state of peace. Finally, I refer to pluralism as the presence of a multitude of different opinions, beliefs, practices, and values.

It is important to note that this paper does not assign values of “good” and “bad” to any of these terms. This research contends that religion is neither “good” nor “bad” and should not be approached with the binary lens that is so-often employed in the Western academy. Rather, this paper points to the overwhelming evidence that suggests the focus of the existing research on religious violence in Mali and West Africa has focused solely on religion’s negative effects, while suggesting that this thinking is overlooking potential opportunities for religion in a constructive manner.

The Ubiquity of Religion

In recent years, the West Africa has emerged as a new front for militant Islamist jihadists attempting to wage their *jihad*. Why is it that Western peacekeeping efforts, when confronting violent extremism, often overlook and dismiss religion as a resource for constructive peacebuilding? Should religion be considered an impediment to peace, or should it be accounted for as the potential for engagement in both the civic and military sense?

Beginning in 2011, the Arab Spring sent shockwaves around the Muslim world. As a result of the NATO-backed revolt in Libya, the nomadic Tuareg ethnic group that inhabits Mali's northern territory received weapons and training while aiding the Muammar Gaddafi regime.¹⁰ Following the death of Gaddafi, these militants returned to Mali and launched a separatist revolt against the central government in Bamako.

Like similar terror tactics that proved to be successful in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, al-Qa'ida's North Africa cell effectively embedded itself into the rebellion and seized control of over half of the country.¹¹ Frustrated by the rapid territorial gains of the Tuaregs and terror organizations, junior soldiers in the Malian capital of Bamako orchestrated a coup overthrowing the President Amadou Toumani Touré. While the coup offered hope for many Malians, it proved to be problematic for the ongoing crisis in the central and northern parts of the country.

With the domestic crisis further complicating the situation in Mali and French economic interests at risk, the French military was ordered to intervene. The move to take military action

¹⁰ "Tuaregs: 5 Things You Need to Know." The World from PRX. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-10-29/tuaregs-5-things-you-need-know>.

¹¹ Chivvis, Christopher S. *The French War on Al Qa'ida in Africa*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 3.

proved to be a surprise to many in the international community, especially “given the campaign promises [François] Hollande had made to avoid a return to France’s neocolonial role in Africa – often referred to pejoratively as *Françafrique*.”¹²

The pivot to an interventionist approach in Mali occurred amidst the interplay several other complex factors. Recent terrorist attacks in France, perceived retrenchment by the United States in relation to Europe, and the repercussions of the French decision to opt out of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 all played key roles in influencing Holland’s decision.¹³

Overall, the French strategy in West Africa, known as *Operation Serval* and *Operation Barkhane*, proved to be effective in its repulsion of the insurrection. Chivvis discusses this extensively and notes, “The French thus returned Mali to its territorial integrity, thereby permitting national elections, themselves a necessary precursor for progress on other much-needed reconstruction tasks.”¹⁴ In addition to this, the French made a significant effort to avoid the errors made by the international community in dealing with the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Rather than ignoring the monumental task of post-conflict consolidation, the French meticulously left behind a post-conflict stabilization force to ensure that the initial successes of the 2013 intervention would not be lost. Additionally, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 unanimously agreed to create a 12,600-member peacekeeping force to support the transitional government and aid in the stabilization of the country.¹⁵

¹² Chivvis, 8.

¹³ Chivvis, 9-12.

¹⁴ Chivvis, 12.

¹⁵ “Security Council Establishes Peacekeeping Force for Mali Effective 1 July, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2100 (2013) | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” United Nations. United Nations. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2013.sc10987.doc.htm>.

In sum, *Operations Serval* and *Barkhane* were a success in its halting of the Islamist advance. The Islamists in the northern and central regions of Mali were repelled, and an invasion of the south was prevented. Moreover, the continued French presence sought to avoid previous interventionist mistakes and focus on improving the capacity of the state and bolstering institutions.

However, the case Salafi-Jihadist militancy is not solely confined to Mali. The increase in violent jihadism is a continuing trend across a large swath of territory known as the Sahel. The Sahel region of Africa is found south of the Sahara Desert and stretches from the continent's easternmost point of Eritrea to the West African countries of Senegal and Mauritania.¹⁶ Overall, the region is a semi-arid climate, with large numbers of Muslim inhabitants. As such, the presence of the central state authority in the region is nonexistent, while the region is plagued by conflicts amongst the various semi-nomadic goat and cattle herders in the region.¹⁷

In addition to agricultural problems due to climate change, weak states, and a food crisis, the region is also facing an increased threat from Islamist militants. Beginning in 2009, Boko Haram emerged in Nigeria's northern territories.¹⁸ From kidnappings, razing villages, and other acts of violence, the group became a significant threat to peace and stability in the region. In

¹⁶ "The Sahel: Land of Opportunities | Africa Renewal." Accessed November 27, 2020. <https://www.un.org.africarenewal/sahel>.

¹⁷ "Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Coexistence." United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, August 2018. Accessed November 26, 2020.

¹⁸ Abide, Jideofor, "Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram." Brookings. Brookings, July 9, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/Africa-in-focus/2014/05/06/explaining-the-emergence-of-boko-haram/>.

2015, the group received wider recognition following their alliance to the Islamic State and the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹

Today, various militant groups plague the Sahel region at-large. As previously mentioned, when food is scarce, poverty is rampant, and there is a general absence of the central government, the breeding ground is ripe for the emergence of terrorist activities. Despite the presence of French and NGO peacekeeping forces, a UN security presence, and international recognition, the crisis has only increased in severity. With Mali serving as a major cog that drives regional instability, the jihadist threat eventually spread into parts of northern Burkina Faso, which also began to experience the aftershocks of political upheaval and turmoil.

Following the removal of former Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré in 2014, terrorism spread from isolated areas in Mali to across the Burkina Faso border. While the Compaoré regime was effective at promoting economic development and liberalization, it was also characterized by high levels of repression to combat regional instability.²⁰

Compaoré effectively managed to isolate terrorism outside of Burkina Faso's borders. From the mid-2000s-2012, The regime consistently struck deals with various Salafi-Jihadist

¹⁹ "Nigeria's Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State." BBC News. BBC, March 7, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538>.

²⁰ Nsaibia, Henri and Caleb Weiss. "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 11 no. 3 (2018): 22. <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/03/CTC-Sentinel-Vol11Iss3.pdf>.

groups, “providing them with logistical support in exchange for their neutrality.”²¹ While this was effective initially, this changed as the situation in Mali continued to deteriorate.

While Compaoré remained relatively unpopular domestically, his commitment to combating insurgencies in Mali proved to be beneficial. As the crisis in Mali continued to spiral out of control, Blaise Compaoré served as the chief mediator on behalf of the Economic Community of West African States.²² In addition to his role as chief mediator, Compaoré also proved to be hawkish regarding military force in Mali. Not only did Compaoré support French intervention in Mali, but he also contributed a considerable number of troops to the African-led International Support Mission in Mali.²³ Following the 2012 crisis, Burkina Faso committed 650 troops to combat insurgency in Mali, as well as deploying 1000 troops to the Malian border.²⁴ The irony of this concerted effort is that it effectively drove the conflict and insurgency further south towards Burkina Faso’s border.

However, this continuation of political leadership ended in October of 2014, as Compaoré was forced to resign amid growing social unrest throughout both urban and rural areas. As Lila Chouli notes, “Blaise Compaoré had flung open the doors of the country to French and US special forces, making Burkina Faso a linchpin in the ‘fight against terrorism’ in the

²¹ “Burkina Faso’s Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence.” Crisis Group, March 08, 2018. Accessed November 30, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-fasos-alarming-escalation-jihadist-violence>.

²² Pulitzercenter. “Burkina Faso: A Small West African Country Struggles to Bring Peace to Mali.” Pulitzer Center. December 19, 2017. Accessed November 30, 2020. <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/burkina-faso-small-west-african-country-struggles-bring-peace-mali>.

²³ “Security Council Authorizes Deployment of African-Led International Support Mission in Mali for Initial Year-Long Period | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” United Nations. Accessed August 10, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10870.doc.htm>.

²⁴ Crisis Group. March 08, 2018.

Sahel. But the length of time the regime was in power, and the increasing number of demonstrations placed the country in limbo, exacerbating an instability detrimental to the interests of those powers.”²⁵

While many people celebrated the ousting of the long-time president, the political and social unrest undeniably cast further doubt upon regional security in an already fragile area. Since Blaise Compaoré’s departure, the army has become far less organized. In addition, Burkina Faso’s special forces unit, the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP) disbanded.²⁶ These limited, decentralized, and disorganized security forces, paired with weak intelligence gathering has allowed the conflict in Mali to shift to parts of northern Burkina Faso. Without the hawkish Compaoré serving as the African “watch dog” in an unstable region, the large stretches of arid desert area in the Sahel region have been inhabited by Malian militants, as well as new grassroots Burkinabe Salafi-Jihadists.

Every year, the number of terror attacks in both Mali and Burkina Faso increases steadily, with the problem appearing to have no viable solution in the eyes of Western peacekeepers.²⁷ While the French and United Nations have maintained a continued security presence in the

²⁵ Chouli, Lila. “The Popular Uprising in Burkina Faso and the Transition.” *Review of African Political Economy* 42, no. 144 (2015): 331. Doi: 10.1080/03056244/2015.1026196.

²⁶ Crisis Group. March 08, 2018.

²⁷ Marc, Alexandre. “20 Years after 9/11, Jihadi Terrorism Rises in Africa.” Brookings. Brookings, August 30, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/30/20-years-after-9-11-jihadi-terrorism-rises-in-africa/>.

region, frustration is growing following additional coups d'état in Mali in the years of 2020 and 2021.²⁸

²⁸ “West Africa and the Sahel, July 2021 Monthly Forecast.” Security Council Report. Accessed August 31, 2021. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2021-07/west-africa-and-the-sahel-6.php>.

The Contemporary Peacekeeping Situation

In order to fully comprehend the absence of serious discussion surrounding religion as a viable element of, and/or analytic factor in peacebuilding, it is important to first understand current Western-led approaches and understandings to the crisis in Mali. Although not comprehensive, this section attempts to illustrate the case of the non-data point with which I am attempting to explain: Why is there barely any evidence in the literature regarding religion as, at least an analytical factor, and perhaps, at most, a potentially positive force for conflict mitigation and peacebuilding? With Salafi jihadist militants promoting a specific version of Islam, it is plausible to assume that religion would be considered in the pervasive literature surrounding this issue. However, the opposite appears to be true.

The Outsider's Perspective

The initial response by the United Nations and the European Union was to support a French intervention amidst the Islamist crisis in Mali in 2013. François Heisbourg notes

With the territorial integrity of Mali openly threatened, the UN Security Council found it unusually easy to agree on a set of unanimous resolutions, which first allowed for the planning of the return of Mali's 'sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity', and, in December 2012, for the deployment of an African-led international mission to support Mali under chapter VII of the UN Charter (UNSCR 2085). The countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) were to contribute to the force, called *Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali* (MISMA). The working assumption was that the force would be set up gradually during 2013 and trained by an EU mission.²⁹

The 2013 unilateral military intervention proved to be a success for the military, as the Islamist advance on the capital of Bamako was thwarted, and the seemingly inevitable collapse

²⁹ Heisbourg, François. "A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali." *Survival*, 55:2, 7-18, doi: 10.1080/00397338.2013.784458.

of Mali was prevented.³⁰ In addition to these achievements, the extensive smuggling networks used to shuttle drugs, cigarettes, and weapons across the Sahara and into West African countries was disrupted.³¹

Attempting to transfer security measures to African states, France, Germany, and other European Union states launched the G5 Sahel Alliance in 2017. With the Islamist threat serving as the primary concern, G5 member states Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad have been attempting “to improve security along their shared borders, through improved cooperation and deployment of joint patrols to interdict the flow of terror groups and traffickers that currently cross these porous national boundaries with ease.”³²

Realizing that long-term and lasting security transcended combatting the pressing Islamist threat, the stated goals of the G5 Sahel Alliance included training African soldiers in order to better manage security operations, confronting organized cross border crime, and targeted human trafficking. Additionally, the French Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères wrote of the G5 undertaking: As part of its mandate to support the development and continuity of regional security activities, the G5 Sahel drew up a Priority Investment Programme (PIP) in 2014. This programme features 40 regional projects, for a total cost of €2.4 billion. Most PIP projects target Sahel border areas, and reflect the solidarity and cooperation between these countries, which have opted for a regional response to shared crises. Many initiatives concern infrastructure projects to open up the region (through roads, bridges, air links and extended telephone coverage), facilitate access to resources (through agro-hydraulic projects and electrification) and improve governance (through the inclusion of women and support for justice). The programme also includes an emergency stabilization programme, which will be immediately rolled out in the most vulnerable areas. On 6 December 2018, an international donor conference took place in Nouakchott to fund the PIP programme.

³⁰ Allison, Simon. “THINK Again: Did France’s INTERVENTION Work In Mali?” ISS Africa, July 1, 2014. <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/think-again-did-france-intervention-work-in-mali>.

³¹ Haugegaard, R., Sharia as ‘Desert Business’: Understanding the Links between Criminal Networks and Jihadism in Northern Mali. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 6(1), doi: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.494>.

³² “Understanding the g5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security?” | Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 6, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>.

France announced that it would contribute €220 million towards regional development, including €90 million for the emergency stabilization programme.³³

Today, peace operations in Mali are occurring in areas with difficult terrain, paired with little to no infrastructure to access largely scattered, semi-nomadic populations.³⁴ This presents severe logistical challenges for providing basic aid like food and water. In order to combat these difficulties, peacekeeping and security operations have had to adopt new methods of both intelligence collection, and robust military measures involving extensive patrolling and community engagement.

Another major goal of the current peacekeeping situation is to establish the rule of law, public safety, and justice in areas that have been plagued by instability and violence. The United States Institute for Peace's 2015 report on Sahelian peacekeeping notes that the role of the United Nations in this realm is far more active now than it has been in previous years. In contrast to former years, "Today UN Police have three primary missions: interim policing and law enforcement; operational support, that is, maintaining public order, riot control, and citizen protection; and reform, reconstruction, and rebuilding entire police services."³⁵

In addition to these measures, Western governments and international organizations have been committed to promoting free and fair elections. The acting U.S. Representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Council noted in a December 2019 statement to the United Nations that they "have been encouraged by a number developments over the past year –

³³ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance." France Diplomacy – Ministry for European and Foreign Affairs. Accessed August 31, 2021. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/crises-and-conflicts/g5-sahel-joint-force-and-the-sahel-alliance/>.

³⁴ Perito, Robert M. Report. US Institute of Peace, (2015): 5. Accessed August 31, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12521>.

³⁵ Perito, 10.

including a number of presidential and parliamentary elections, where the people freely and fairly chose their preferred candidates in an environment in which violence was limited.”³⁶ However, recent developments in Mali, such as the 2021 coup d’état and violence surrounding parliamentary elections have caused Freedom House’s rating of Mali to shift from Partly Free to Not Free.³⁷ Despite these developments, foreign powers like France and the United Nations continue to focus on improving the structural capacity of the Malian state in order to fully implement free and fair elections.

The final element of peacekeeping revolves around the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Beginning in the 1970s and increasing with the current crisis, NGOs have been operating in the West African Sahel. In 2012, the former Senegalese and French Presidents Abdou Diouf and Jacques Chirac used the French newspaper *le Monde* as a call for a “new Marshall Plan” in the Sahel.³⁸ As Gregory Mann notes, “Implicit in their language was a widespread idea.... that the Sahel was an object of governance within the framework of a shared humanity.”³⁹ Many of these NGOs operating within the current Malian landscape are dealing with health and infrastructure concerns, like the Mali Health Organizing Project. Other groups, like the Ouelessebougou Alliance, are funding projects to encourage education initiatives.

³⁶ United States Mission to the United Nations | 4 December 2019 | “Statement at A Peacebuilding Commission Session on the SAHEL, Lake Chad Basin, and MANU River Union.” United States Mission to the United Nations, February 18, 2021. <https://usun.usmission.gov/statement-at-a-peacebuilding-commission-session-on-the-sahel-lake-chad-basin-and-manu-river-union/>.

³⁷ “Mali: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report.” Freedom House. Accessed September 2, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mali/freedom-world/2021>.

³⁸ Diouf and Chirac, “Urgence à Tombouctou,” *le Monde* July 13, 2012.

³⁹ Mann, Gregory. *From Empires to NOGs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 4.

Yet some of these NGOs are affiliated with religious groups and attempt to promote potential solutions to the humanitarian crisis from this perspective. For example, the Union of African Muslim Scholars attempts to strengthen the role of scholars and preachers in an area plagued by Islamist violence.⁴⁰ Additionally, the well-known organization Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides the U.S. Government with key policy recommendations with how to approach the conflict. While many of these policy recommendations closely mirror the peacekeeping measures articulated above, CRS also recommends increasing “public trust in religious institutions and leaders through interfaith programming.”⁴¹

In summary, contemporary peacekeeping efforts in the region have primarily focused on addressing the structural problems plaguing Mali and the Sahel, while efforts focusing on religion, religious institutions, and religious actors have been mostly confined to that of a handful of select NGOs. As the following chapters will demonstrate, this is more puzzling given the robust history of religion in Mali, paired with a secular reality that sees religion constantly influence everyday society.

The absence of religion from Western-proposed solutions, which will be extensively discussed later in the paper, stem from Western fascination with Salafi-jihadism, money from Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, the amplification of a single narrative, the transmissibility of Salafism, and embedded biases in Western peacekeeping. As a result of these factors, religion is buried and isolated when solutions to the ongoing conflict are considered. When religion is

⁴⁰ Introduction | Union of African Muslim scholars. Accessed September 2, 2021. <http://aricanulama.org/en/introduction/>.

⁴¹ “Peace in the Sahel: Policy Recommendations for the U.S. Government.” CRS, August 18, 2021. <https://www.crs.org/get-involved/advocate-poor/public-policy/peace-sahel-policy-recommendations-us-government>.

discarded and overlooked, other actors and forces are keen to broadcast and transmit their interpretations and messages, leading to a silencing of alternative religious voices that once flooded throughout the region.

The Malian Religious Reality

Analyzing and comprehending Mali's contemporary relationship with Islam and society further helps to illuminate the irony of religion's omission from the peacekeeping realm. With Muslims composing approximately 92% of the population, it is not surprising to see the ways in which Islam permeates throughout society.⁴²

An Afrobarometer survey notes that after 1991, Islam filled a void in socioeconomic and political leadership. 33% believed that Islam should become the official religion of Mali, while 24% strongly disagreed. In addition to this, 26% strongly agreed that Mali should apply Sharia Law while 35% strongly disagreed.⁴³ The findings indicate that many people are highly polarized over the issue of the involvement of Islam in society and politics.

Massa Coulibaly and Anne Hatløy conducted a similar survey to measure public perceptions surrounding Islam. In the survey, they discovered that 84% contend that Islam should not be mixed with politics, but 58% of respondents also stated that Islam should be the national religion of Mali.⁴⁴

With a largely religious population in an officially secular society, the overlap of religion and public life is considerable and robust. Understanding the contemporary landscape of Malian religious and public life displays the centrality of religion and its importance in civil society.

⁴² "Table: Muslim Population by Country." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, December 31, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/>.

⁴³ Isbell, Thomas & Haïdara Fadimata. "Maliens Split on Role of Islam in Country, but Majority Feel Politicians Use Religion to Rule." *Afrobarometer* (2018): 1-2.

⁴⁴ Coulibaly, Massa and Anne Hatløy. "Religious Issues and Ethnicity in Southern Mali." *Fafo Report* (2015): 23.

Malian Laïcité Versus the Secular Reality

In the contemporary Malian state, the French concept of *laïcité*, or secularism, is officially enshrined in the constitution. Interestingly, the verbiage and wording used to describe this phenomenon is almost entirely like that of the French Fourth Republic. However, Andrew Lebovich notes that this concept is oftentimes miscomprehended:

Mali's constitution, like those of several other former French colonies, is formally secular. Nonetheless, the French-inspired concept of *laïcité* remains widely misunderstood. Rather than a strict separation of church and state, this concept, as adopted into law in France in 1905, defines the state as strictly neutral on religious matters.⁴⁵

This form of secularism is mentioned multiple times in the Malian constitution, established in 1992. For example, the preamble notes that Malian citizens are required “to defend the republican and secular form of the state” and that “Mali shall be an independent, sovereign, indivisible, democratic, secular and social Republic.”⁴⁶

Despite the principle of secularism and its enshrinement in the 1992 Constitution, religion constantly exerts its influence on politics and everyday life in Mali. Jeffrey Haynes argues in “Islam, State, and Regime in Mali” that politicians have drastically failed to build on a culture that is supportive of democracy and accordingly preside over a weak and hollow political framework. To bolster the lack of legitimacy, Haynes points to Mali's post-colonial history of collecting various Islamic leaders to create a channel of interaction and dialogue among religious

⁴⁵ Lebovich, Andrew, Anthony Dworkin, et al. “Sacred Struggles: How Islam Shapes Politics in Mali.” Accessed November 29, 2020, 13.

⁴⁶ “Mali 1992 Constitution.” Constitute. Accessed September 2, 2021.
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mali_1992?lang=en.

leaders and government officials.⁴⁷ Despite being an overtly secular country, history proves that Islam can have a formidable effect on the government without being directly involved.

Ultimately, this feature is what makes Islam in Mali so unique. Boubacar Samake contends that “The most important feature of political Islam in Mali is the fact that religious society quickly came not only to accept the idea of democratization, but also to learn to play the democratic game.”⁴⁸ The International Crisis Group argues that religious leaders play a crucial part in social regulation, and thus, stability, highlighting a potential opportunity for peacebuilding efforts in the future.⁴⁹

Mali’s Charismatic Actors: Imam Dicko and Chérif Haïdera

With a normalized “mixing” of religion and politics in contemporary society, Mali is also noted for having two charismatic and widely popular religious leaders: Imam Mahmoud Dicko and Chérif Ousmane Haïdera. As noted by numerous contemporary academics, Muslim leaders in sub-Saharan Africa enjoy remarkably high levels of trust and support, while secular authority tends to lack broad legitimacy.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the widespread appeal of these two men transcends the lackluster legitimacy of the central state apparatus. While these two men are not the only key religious actors in the country, they represent the ongoing discussions surrounding the Salafi-Sufi debates and their respective influences on politics.

⁴⁷ Haynes, Jeffrey. “Islam, State, and Regime in Mali.” European Consortium for Political Science Research. Accessed November 27, 2020, 1-3.

⁴⁸ Samake, Boubacar. “Islam and Politics in Mali: What Stakes?” *Open Journal of Political Science*, 9, 2019, 541. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2019.93031>.

⁴⁹ “Islam et politique au Mali: entre réalité et fiction.” *Rapport Afrique*, International Crisis Group, 2017, 21.

⁵⁰ Villalón, Leonardo. “Cautious Democrats: Religious Actors and Democratization in Senegal.” *Politics and Religion* 2015, 8 (2): 305-333.

Imam Dicko was born in Tonka and is the descendent of well-known Muslim leaders. Lebovitch points out that his introduction to Salafism occurred outside of Mali, where he “studied in Mauritania and Saudi Arabia...he increasingly adopted Salafist practice, before returning to Mali in the early 1980s.”⁵¹ He also worked in and quickly rose through the ranks of the Association Malienne pour l’Unité et le Progrès de l’Islam (AMUPI), which was created in 1981. This state-sponsored Islamic organization was implemented to manage Islamic affairs while also “reconciling Mali’s major Islamic factions – particularly Sufis and Sunnites, between whom there had been tension and mutual distrust since the outbreak of violent anti-Sunni riots in the late 1950s.”⁵² He eventually joined AMUPI’s organizational successor created in January of 2002, the *Haut conseil islamique malien* (HCI), and served as its president six years later.⁵³

Chérif Haïdara was born in 1955 and studied in Koranic and French schools. Lebovich writes of his upbringing, “Although his father was affiliated with the Tijaniyya, Haïdara is not a Sufi – even if he has many traits often associated with Sufi leaders, such as strong charisma, an attitude of saintliness that has helped fuel his popularity.”⁵⁴ Often outspoken against state authorities and a staunch advocate of reform, he founded the movement Ançar Dine (supporters of Religion) in 1991.⁵⁵ Ançar Dine is ultimately a reformist movement, due its aspirations of

⁵¹ Lebovich, 5.

⁵² IBID.

⁵³ Elischer, Sebastian. *Salafism and Political Order in Africa*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 127-128.

⁵⁴ Lebovich, 5.

⁵⁵ Holder, Gilles. “Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara and the Islamic Movement Ansar Dine: A Popular Malian Reformism in Search of State Autonomy.” *Cahiers d’études africaines* (2012) 206-207, 389-425. <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.17056>.

creating a new civil society.⁵⁶ During Dicko's tenure as President of the HCI, Haïdara served as his Vice President before assuming the role of President in 2019.⁵⁷

While these influential figures have exerted their influence on Malian politics in various ways over the years, most visibly in their public stance antagonizing former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK). While both Dicko and Haïdara were outspoken against the shortcomings of the Malian state, Imam Dicko was responsible for organizing mass civilian demonstrations protesting corruption, a constant foreign presence by the French military, and what is deemed immorality promoted by the greater Malian society.⁵⁸ With Muslim populist leaders like Dicko and Haïdara generating massive support in opposition to the central government, the Keïta regime was finally deposed following IBK's resignation in August 2020 following yet another coup d'état.⁵⁹ The widespread appeal of these figures represent the vacuum of legitimacy created by the shortcomings of the ruling class and the brokenness of the central state apparatus.

Yet the international community, especially France, has oftentimes been wary of the sizable influence of the religious dimension of these individuals' involvement. For example,

⁵⁶ Schulz, Dorothea E. "Charisma and Brotherhood" Revisited: Mass-Mediated of Spirituality in Urban Mali." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 160.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1581653>.

⁵⁷ "Mali: Cherif HAIDARA, NOUVEAU PRÉSIDENT Du HAUT Conseil ISLAMIQUE MALIEN." Anadolu Ajansi. Accessed September 2, 2021.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/mali-cherif-haidara-nouveau-pr%C3%A9sident-du-haut-conseil-islamique-malien/1459197>.

⁵⁸ Melly, Paul. "Mahmoud Dicko: Mali Imam Challenges President Keïta." BBC News. BBC, June 27, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53176083>.

⁵⁹ "Mali, October 2020 Monthly Forecast." Security Council Report. Accessed November 27, 2020. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-10/mali-11.php>.

Deutsche Welle published an article in 2020 highlighting some of the problematic aspects of the Imam's public statements:

But there is also another side to Dicko — one that attracts a great deal of trepidation, especially from abroad. In recent years, the imam made headlines with some of his reactionary statements, declaring terrorist attacks as "God's punishment" for alcohol consumption and homosexuality. It is these kinds of statements that cast a different light on Dicko, Mali's self-proclaimed moral authority.⁶⁰

What the above passage highlights is a fundamental disconnect between the international community and ethical considerations in Mali. The statements made by Dicko display a different matrix of ethical thinking that is unlikely to be comprehended by the West. Rather than listening to Dicko in his Malian context, Western leaders are quick to discredit him as an illegitimate, bigoted, and fundamentalist Muslim leader. But these statements offer insight into some of the considerations and thought processes prevalent in Mali that the West refuses to listen to.

Following yet another coup d'état in 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron threatened to withdraw French troops from Mali if the country veers towards "radical Islamization." When presented with this by a reporter, Dicko expressed animosity towards the presence of foreign troops and Western discontent at Islam's influence in society. He stated, "Mali is a 98% Muslim country, its Islamisation is simply a fact. As for the supposed radicalisation that is taking place, I believe that he has misread the situation."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Kane, Mahamadou. "Mahmoud Dicko – Mali's Controversial Guardian of Faith: DW: 14.07.2020." *Deutsche Welle*. Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/mahmoud-dicko-malis-controversial-guardian-of-faith/a-54170986>.

⁶¹ Diallo, Fatoumata and Manon Laplace. "'France Has No Right to Impose Its Solutions In Mali,' Says Imam Mahmoud Dicko." *The Africa Report.com* The Africa Report, June 16, 2021. <https://www.theafricareport.com/98097/france-has-no-right-to-impose-its-solutions-in-mali-says-imam-mahmoud-dicko/>.

With yet another transitional government being implemented following another coup d'état, these religious figures in Mali will continue to serve as formidable influencers of both public opinion and the political trajectory of the country. But despite their considerable influence on political processes, the West has been seemingly reluctant to engage with these leaders in a meaningful and constructive way. However, the continued instability and shortcomings of the state could prove to be a tipping point for a reproachment between the West and these actors in the state-building process.

Mali's 2009 Family Code Reform

With the increase in religiosity and religious activity in Mali, many are concerned about the threat this poses to liberalism and *laïcité* more specifically. Benjamin Soares notes the tension between liberalism and a majority Muslim society. Immediately following Mali's transition to democracy, many Muslim leaders began to openly comment that almost everything is permissible in Malian society now.⁶² Muslim backlash against liberal openness is further demonstrated by threats of violence against a Bamako cinema that began airing pornographic material.⁶³ Similar discontent exists amongst the religious in Mali towards gambling centers and other promoters of "fetishism."⁶⁴

The most glaring example of the tension between Islam and western-inspired liberalism is the outcry over the reform of the family code and campaigns by western NGOs to end female genital mutilation (FGM). In 2001, the government attempted to raise the age for girls to marry,

⁶² Soares, Benjamin F. "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era." *African Affairs* 105, no. 418 (2006): 86. Accessed November 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518789>.

⁶³ Soares, 87.

⁶⁴ IBID.

reworking the law to make men and women equal in marriage, equality in inheritance, and the banning of FGM.⁶⁵ Additionally, then-President Alpha Oumar Kanoré presented legislation to Mali's national legislation that would further drastically change Mali's family code. However, this move angered the likes of clerics like Mahmoud Dicko, who ultimately pressured the draft to be removed.⁶⁶

With the religious community angered over the creeping immorality in Malian society, the government eventually caved to their influence in 2009 and approved of a Family Code drafted and endorsed by the High Islamic Council.⁶⁷ However, the lead-up to the passing of this new Family Code was highly contentious. In early 2009, President Amadou Touré attempted to once again reform the family law following the ministry of justice's authorized revival of the 2002 draft legislation.⁶⁸ However, the HCIM loudly voiced its disapproval for the legislation once again:

It opposed penalties for newly married couples, whose religious ceremony took place prior to the civil one; questioned the right of females to inherit their father's property; and rejected divorces based on a man's unwillingness to provide for his family. Finally, and most important to Dicko, the HCIM leadership wanted women to have the right to marry at the age of sixteen.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Soares, 92.

⁶⁶ Elischer, 129.

⁶⁷ Soares, Benjamin F. "The Attempt to Reform Family Law in Mali." *Die Welt Des Islams*, New Series, 49, no. 3/4 (2009): 398-428. Accessed November 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27798322>.

⁶⁸ Elischer, 131.

⁶⁹ IBID.

Despite these objections, the proposed legislation was almost universally supported amongst legislators, and passed into law on August 4, 2009.⁷⁰ Displeased with the lack of accommodation, Mahmoud Dicko criticized the law in front of a large crowd and called the bill “anti-Islamic.”⁷¹ Feeling the pressure exerted by the religious community, Touré used his veto powers as president, while also introducing a new bill that permitted women to marry at sixteen years of age.⁷²

What this extended debate highlights are the power and influence religious leaders in Mali exert on politics and public officials. This paper previously acknowledged how political leaders in Africa suffer from a lack of legitimacy, while religious leaders remain widely popular. Despite widespread legislative support of the initial Family Code proposed by Touré, the opposition by key Muslim leaders and the HCIM was enough to force the President to change his stance.

⁷⁰ Dembelé, Mamadou. “L’islam au pouvoir au Mali du moyen-âge à nos jours: entre apothéose, marginalization et renaissance.” *Revue africaine de science politique et sociale*, 2014, 2 (1): 1-34.

⁷¹ Wing, Susanna. “Women’s Rights and Family Law Reform in Francophone Africa.” In *Governing Africa’s Changing Societies: Dynamics of Reform*, edited by Ellen Lust and Stephen Ndegwa, (2012): 145-176. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

⁷² Elischer, 131-132.

The *Longue Durée* of West African History

The *longue durée* of Islam in West Africa and Mali is one that has experienced a seismic shift in the years following independence. I have traced the beginnings of Islam in West Africa through regulating trans-Saharan trade, followed by highlighting the emergence of clerical authority and Sufism. Prior to the colonial encounter, Islam in West Africa was highly pluralistic, inclusive, and uniquely West African in many ways. However, the disruptive nature of colonialism proved to drastically change the landscape of Islam in Africa, followed by the rise and promulgation of Salafism by the postcolonial state.

With the contemporary structure of Islam and society in Mali articulated above, it is important to probe through the historical record of Islam in West Africa to attempt to answer the question as to why religion is absent from Western models of peacekeeping in Mali and the Sahel.

The average individual will likely argue that the historical origins of Islam in West Africa is one of violence, *jihad*, and forced conversions. However, this chapter suggests that this stereotype could not be farther from the truth. On the contrary, Islam gained a footing in West Africa through peaceful contact and exchange amongst scholars, traders, rulers, and eventually the average individual. While there are periods marked by violence, most notably via the *jihads* of the revolutionary era, these are historical moments that fail to encapsulate the overarching trajectory of the long history of Islam in Africa.

West Africa has (and still) nurtures its own unique forms of Islam. Yet with the introduction of Saudi Arabia's programs to export Salafism to Africa as part of its vision for global Islam, the collective memory has become obstructed and fixated upon this single

narrative. As I contend, the obstruction and promulgation of the narrative has proved to be problematic years later for Western approaches to peacekeeping.

Trans-Saharan Trails

The contemporary view tends to argue that the Sahara Desert, which encompasses large swathes of Mali's northern territory, functions as a barrier to movement and cultural diffusion. However, the historical record suggests that the opposite is true. David Robinson argues, "The desert was more of an obstacle than the Indian Ocean, but it could be crossed, and it did connect the Sahel to the Mediterranean world."⁷³ Because of the arduous nature of trans-Saharan trade and travel, the advent of the camel proved to be a significant development for cultural diffusion and exchange. While the origin of the camel and camel travel remains disputed amongst historians, most scholars agree that the camel did not emerge on Africa's Mediterranean coast before the dawn of the first century BCE.⁷⁴

The advent of camels in the region proved to be a profoundly transformative event. Lydon notes that "The adoption of the 'ship of the desert' revolutionized the nature of long-distance transportation in terms of organization, endurance, and volume while stimulating nomadic and pastoral lifestyles in the region."⁷⁵

The allure of distant markets served as significant driving factors to encourage merchants and traders to undertake the crossing of the Sahara. As rationalistic actors reacting to market

⁷³ Robinson, David. *Muslim Societies in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 38.

⁷⁴ Austen, Ralph A. *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 17.

⁷⁵ Lydon, Ghislaine. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 9.

incentives, the opportunity to earn a sizable profit attracted audacious traders and merchants. Moreover, only those who were willing to go to the farthest reaches of the continent were the ones to reap the economic benefits. As the esteemed Islamic historian and traveler Ibn Khaldūn articulates:

It is more profitable and more advantageous [for the trader]...to export his products to a distant land and take a dangerous route. In this way, the distance and the risk incurred will give a rare quality to his merchandise, and thereby increase its value...This is why the wealthiest and most prosperous merchants are those who dare to go to the Sudan.⁷⁶

While the advent of camel trading was a monumental development for trans-Saharan trade, the emergence and subsequent spread of Islam during the eighth century also had a profound influence. As a result, “adherence to Islam and its code of law favored the development of both scholarly and commercial networks that linked Muslims across the desert to the world beyond.”⁷⁷ The advent of Islam encouraged literacy and led to the production of written records in the Arabic language, and the transliteration into African languages.

But perhaps most importantly, Islam served as a means of structuring and ordering trans-Saharan trade. The literacy of Muslim traders was heavily relied upon for correspondence, legal agreements in adherence to Islamic law, and administrative purposes.⁷⁸ Without Islam serving as the organizational impetus, the “paper economy” that rendered trans-Saharan interconnectivity more efficient would have likely never emerged.

As a result of this cultural diffusion and connectivity, the British historian E. W. Bovill notes, “The trans-Saharan trade wove ties of blood and culture between the peoples north and

⁷⁶ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqqadimah*, 809.

⁷⁷ Lydon, 9.

⁷⁸ Lydon, 11.

south of the desert.”⁷⁹ With Islam providing the organizational structure of business, trade, and commerce, it gradually began to gain a secure foothold south of the Sahara Desert.

This served to lead to what the historian David A. Robinson calls the islamization and Africanization of the faith. He states that islamization refers to the extension of Islam into the continent, while Africanization refers to the “rooting” of the faith in Africa.⁸⁰ These processes are articulated as occurring in three distinct stages. The first stage emanates from the “cultural diaspora” discussed above due to trans-Saharan trade. During this period, Muslims primarily lived in explicitly labeled Islamic towns or quarters as minorities within pagan societies.⁸¹ The second phase “features the adaption of Islam by the rulers and members of the ruling classes of states, in addition to the merchants.”⁸² Finally, the third phase is often deemed the “majority” phase, as this is where the faith spread to the countryside and became the primary religious practice of the region. With the passage of time, Islam continued to consolidate and expand in terms of influence and significance.

Clerics and Pacifism

When discussing the emergence and Africanization of Islam, Lamin Sanneh notes how the religion took hold without *jihad* and violence, while also becoming distinct and unique in its own geographic context, writing:

Essential to the study of the Muslim pacifist practice is the clerical vocation promoted by religious masters, who set themselves apart from the warrior class and the political class. The clerics formed a distinct religious community by specializing in educational,

⁷⁹ Bovill, E. W. *Caravans of the Old Sahara: An Introduction to the History of the Western Sudan*, preface. London: International Institute of African Languages and Cultures and Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1933.

⁸⁰ Robinson, 27.

⁸¹ Robinson, 28.

⁸² IBID.

religious, and legal scholarship. With the support of the wider religious network of clerical settlements, this scholarship enabled them to appropriate and promote Islam's heritage of peaceful persuasion – work that came to define the clerical identity. In time, the clerics emerged as a recognized source of stability and transmission of religion in the midst of political changes and cultural shifts. They opposed the spread of radicalism, choosing the “greater jihad: of moral and spiritual discipline over the “lesser jihad” of armed combat.⁸³

The emergence of these religious clerics is a key distinctive feature of West African Islam and the plurality of Sufi traditions that subsequently emerged. While the religious cleric in West Africa might comment to political, economic, or social problems, it was done so in a religious manner. Thus, “Islam's success in Mali results not so much from its exclusive superiority as a religion as its readiness to fill gaps in traditional religion...Islam did not invent a new eschatology of supernatural intervention; it simply and validated” preexisting local practices.⁸⁴

With the emergence of these clerics and their influence on society, a natural relationship began between the public and the private sphere. As Sanneh notes, “Most Western societies draw a distinction between the public sphere and the private. This distinction is absent in much of Muslim society in Africa.”⁸⁵ *Halál* and *harám*, or that which is lawful and forbidden, are applied to both the sacred and the secular.⁸⁶ Sanneh contends that “*halál* and *harám* illustrate how the religious code spreads to all spheres of life...The adaptable Islam of the clerics came about in part through this fluid, incorporative understanding of religion.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Sanneh, Lamin O. *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*. New York. NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, 1-2.

⁸⁴ Sanneh, 58.

⁸⁵ Sanneh, 7.

⁸⁶ Sanneh, 8.

⁸⁷ IBID.

Embodied Knowledge and Epistemology in West Africa

Central to religious development and education in this region historically emerges from Qur'an schooling. In these schools, "children memorize and recite the Holy Book of Islam and learn to read and write the Arabic script."⁸⁸ Not only has Qur'an schooling proved to be essential in Muslim societies in West Africa, but it also provides insight into Islamic epistemology and knowledge. While traveling to West Africa, Ibn Battuta witnessed the methods of instruction occurring at a Qur'an school. While he was no doubt impressed with the commitment of the teachers to their pupils, there were other aspects of the experience that left him unsettled:

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Qur'an by heart. They put their children in chains if they show any backwardness in memorizing it, and they are not set free until they have it by heart. I visited the qādī in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you let them loose?" He replied, "I will not do so until they learn the Qur'an by heart."⁸⁹

This experience highlights the deep commitment to the rigorous study, teaching, and observance of Islam in West African society. However, it also speaks to the West African understanding of knowledge as embodied. As Rudolph T. Ware contends, the purpose of the Qur'an school is to create physical "Walking Qur'ans" that carry on the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and the ideal mode of Islamic ethical behavior. The understanding of knowledge as an embodiment is a major key towards understanding Islam in West Africa. Ware notes, "Knowledge in Islam does not abide in texts; it lives in people...Those who internalize the

⁸⁸ Ware III, Rudolph T. *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*. Chapel Hill (N.C.): University of North Carolina Press, 2014, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Africa and Asia, 1325-1354*, translated and edited by H. A. R. Gibb (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), 330.

Qur'an carry and safeguard the Revelation inside their very being.”⁹⁰ With this conception of embodied knowledge in mind, the response to the crisis of colonialism becomes understandable from the context of West African Muslims.

The French Colonial Encounter

No force proved to be as disruptive or destabilizing to preexisting cultures than the colonial encounter. The colonial enterprise in Africa for France began in 1637 at the mouth of the Senegal River.⁹¹ Although not as significant of a factor as its European rivals, the trans-Atlantic slave trade proved to incentivize a further involvement in the region, paired with other raw materials like peanuts.⁹² With continued European presence in the region, “The French goal of increasing their stake in West Africa was influenced by similar policies undertaken by their fellow Europeans ...Industrialization and economic conditions in Europe influenced the expansion of European interests in West Africa from the nineteenth century on.”⁹³

Ultimately, the presence of the French proved to have a significant influence on the existing structures of Islam and Islamic practice in the region. As France’s colonial claims continued to expand, ultimately resulting in the creation of the Federation of French West Africa, it became evident to colonial officials that a deeper understanding of Islamic practices was required. As a result, the years 1887-1888 saw the mission of Alfred Le Chatelier to study West

⁹⁰ Ware, 8.

⁹¹ Harris, Norman Dwight. “French Colonial Expansion in West Africa, The Sudan, and The Sahara.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Aug., 1911): 353.

⁹² French In West Africa. University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center. Accessed September 9, 2021. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/K-12/French_16178.html.

⁹³ IBID.

Africa's Muslim brotherhoods. Le Chatelier's study led him to become convinced of the hostility by the Sufi order known as the Tijaniyya.⁹⁴ David Robinson contends:

At the end of the nineteenth century, the French administration in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone had a well-established practice, if not always a clear policy, toward Muslim societies. The core principles were straightforward. The French opposed Islamic states or movements which threatened to create them, especially when the leadership was Tijaniyya and Tokolor, and in areas where they had key interests, such as the river valley and peanut basin. They sought out, in contrast, Muslim teachers and leaders who rejected jihad and state-building. These Muslims were often Mauritanian and members of the Qadiriyya Sufi order, and this was consistent with the French belief in the superiority of *bidan* over "blacks." Finally, the French maintained the Muslim institutions of St. Louis, institutions which encouraged Muslims to accept the compatibility of foreign rule and Islamic culture.⁹⁵

The French found themselves needing to accommodate and account for Islamic practices and schools of thought in order to effectively govern their colonies in French West Africa. The French colonists found themselves in a far more skeptical position of Islam. This skepticism is perhaps best explained by Sanneh's quote, "Clericalism's pervasive nature, the French argued, enabled subterfuge for conspiracy, and its humble profile was craftily designed to disguise evil intent."⁹⁶ As a result, they found themselves actively discouraging Sufi orders that advocated for jihad and reformist movements, while appealing to other key groups of Muslims to effectively legitimize their colonial presence.

In the minds of French colonial officials, "Islam attracted to itself irrational and unstable elements of primal Africa and, as such, constituted an unacceptable challenge to France's *mission civilisatrice*."⁹⁷ Thus, France adopted a policy of accommodation and surveillance of their Muslim subjects. With the creation of the Service of Muslim Affairs in 1912, various

⁹⁴ Robinson, David. "France as a Muslim Power in West Africa." *Africa Today* 46, no. 3/4 (1999): 114.

⁹⁵ Robinson, 115.

⁹⁶ Sanneh, 15.

⁹⁷ IBID.

surveillance techniques were used: checks on Muslim courts, the monitoring of school systems, and intelligence reports.⁹⁸ During this time that the colonial agent Paul Marty codified the dichotomy of Islam in French West Africa. These dichotomies consisted of *Islam noir*, which is articulated as Murid innovations in Muslim practice, as well as other ethnic group influence.⁹⁹ This category primarily was employed in the Sudan or other “black” areas of West Africa. This categorization accounted heavily for syncretic practices of Islam with indigenous African religions. The other policy was referred to as *Islam maure*, which corresponded roughly with traditional Middle Eastern Islamic orthodoxy.¹⁰⁰

The codified practices of *Islam maure* and *Islam noir* solidified French racial thinking in the Federation of French West Africa. Moreover, “it provided a convenient set of stereotypes for the actions of colonial administrators.”¹⁰¹ Defining Islam through a racialized frame proved to have a lasting impact on colonial rule and West Africa at-large.

Salafism and Independence

Although Salafism undeniably increased in the years following decolonization, Mali had an influential and vibrant community of Salafis during the colonial years, with Julia Leininger noting that Malian students from Egyptian universities began to spread Salafi theology as early as 1945.¹⁰² Because of the centuries old trade relations with the Middle East and North Africa, Salafi preachers’ message was received amongst the merchant community of Mali. The

⁹⁸ Robinson, 121.

⁹⁹ Robinson, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, Chris. *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1988).

¹⁰¹ Robinson, 122.

¹⁰² Leininger, Julia. “It’s Institutions, Not Theology! Muslim Actors’ Influence on Democratization in Mali.” *Politics and Religion* 9 no. 4 (2016): 815-842.

interconnectivity of the Middle East with Africa through Trans-Saharan trade exposed merchants and traders to the Salafi message. One of the earliest known accounts of Salafi activity in Mali states that merchants “became the true national bourgeoisie with a wide commercial network...and with enormous purchasing power.”¹⁰³

In the wake of decolonization, many enthusiasts began to emerge that advocated for an African-Arab solidarity, citing the potential for economic improvements and political cooperation. During the 1970s, this culminated in a meeting in Cairo in 1977 with various African and Arab heads of state.¹⁰⁴ While the meeting was occurring, Saudi Arabia and a collection of additional Arab states emerged as the primary promoters of the Salafi creed in West Africa.¹⁰⁵

In accordance with other parts of the world, an increase in the promulgation and circulation of fundamentalist texts has been occurring across West Africa since the 1970s.¹⁰⁶ One of the major reasons for this stems from the fact that many African clerics who received their Islamic training in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states returned home having been influenced by Salafi scholars.¹⁰⁷ However, the influence of Saudi Arabian imams does not articulate the entirety of the story behind why Salafism spiked in West Africa during the 1970s. Elischer contends that:

Many African Muslims felt drawn to Arab-trained scholars, as they regarded these individuals as possessing a more advanced level of religious training than their Sufi peers. From the mid-1970s onward, Saudi Arabia and several other nations in the Middle

¹⁰³ Kaba, Lansiné. *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 274.

¹⁰⁴ Dunstan, Wai M. “African-Arab Relations: Interdependence or Misplaced Optimism?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 21, No. 2 (1983): 187.

¹⁰⁵ Elischer, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Kepel, Gilles. *The Revenge of God: Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*. New York: Polity Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁷ Elischer, 25.

East and Asia began to support the Salafi project in Africa. Over time, Salafi clerics created close-knit and well-organized networks, providing their followers with a variety of well-funded social services and employment opportunities.¹⁰⁸

In addition to these networks, animosity and negative feelings towards Sufi leaders also contributed to the increase in popularity of Salafism. During the time of decolonization, Mali's then-President Modibo Keita left the French-led CFA currency and introduced the Malian Franc.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, "this triggered a decline in Mali's trade volume" and forced the government to "seek economic cooperation with France."¹¹⁰ As a result of this, the Salafi community began to stop supporting the Keita administration.

Following a 1968 coup d'état that overthrew Modibo Keita, and established Moussa Traoré as president.¹¹¹ With the economic situation worsening, Traoré made a concerted effort to seek the Salafi community's support in order to bolster his fledgling legitimacy. One of the first examples of this was the junta's approval of a 1957 Salafi request to construct a Friday prayer mosque that had been pending for years. Moreover, clerics that were trained in the Middle East began to secure employment in the new bureaucracy, ultimately rising to top positions in many ministries by the 1970s.¹¹²

As Elischer notes, "The Malian state thus actively supported the Salafi cause."¹¹³ Daniel Sutter claims that the actors involved in the coup attempt in democracies face a collective action

¹⁰⁸ IBID.

¹⁰⁹ Elischer, 77.

¹¹⁰ IBID.

¹¹¹ Gazeley, Joe. "President Keita Falls to a Coup in Mali: 1968 Is Here Again." Democracy in Africa | A Resource for the Study of Democracy in Africa, August 20, 2020. https://democracyinafrica.org/mali_coup/.

¹¹² Elischer, 78.

¹¹³ IBID.

problem and are oftentimes viewed as illegitimate by the citizens.¹¹⁴ Echoing a similar line of thought, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler note that a coup d'état tends to destroy the new regimes legitimacy and undermine its credibility with the populace.¹¹⁵ With Traoré experiencing a fledgling economy, widespread discontent amongst the population, and the ever-present problem of legitimacy for new regimes following a coup d'état, the Salafi population proved to be one of the only areas in which he could bolster the legitimacy of his struggling regime. In the postcolonial years, the state made numerous concessions to Salafists, which ultimately led to the growth and spread of Salafi doctrine. All of these variables occurred while the state continued to display a bias and preference for Salafism over alternative forms of Islam, even though they were "a small minority within Mali's Islamic sphere."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Sutter, Daniel. "Legitimacy and Military Intervention in a Democracy: Civilian Government as a Public Good." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 58, no. 1 (1999): 129. Accessed April 13, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3487881>.

¹¹⁵ Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler. "Coups Traps: Why Does Africa Have so Many Coups d'État?" (2005): 3.

¹¹⁶ Elischer, 79.

Pious Voices Unheard

Historically, Islam in Mali and West Africa is dynamic and pluralistic. Moreover, this paper has articulated how Islam plays an important role in contemporary civil society and the *longue durée* of history. Why then, is religion almost nowhere to be found in contemporary peacekeeping efforts aimed at combatting the Salafi jihadist violence in the Sahel? As the title of this chapter suggests, I contend that one of the major reasons for the oversight is because of a general inability or unwillingness to listen to the traditions of the past, as well as voices that differ from the contemporary narrative of conflict.

To highlight this example, I point to the life of the 20th century African mystic and spiritual teacher named Tierno Bokar. Living during the era of colonial rule and heightened sectarian differences (as previously noted), Tierno Bokar made it his personal quest to share his teachings and understandings of God. But dispute the major socio-political upheavals that were occurring, “we find no trace of sectarian divisiveness, but instead we sense a pervasive peace and calm, love and charity, a clearly communicated and accessible spiritual wisdom, and a saintly tolerance towards others.”¹¹⁷

Perhaps one of the best examples of this message of tolerance and acceptance of people of various faiths comes from his comparison of other religions to the colors of the rainbow:

The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colors. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers that rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God, Who alone can be Unique. We bitterly deplore the scorn that certain religious people heap on the form of divine things, a scorn that often leads them to reject their neighbor’s hymn because it contrasts with theirs. To fight against this tendency, brother in God, whatever be the religion or the congregation to which you are affiliated, meditate at length on this verse: “The creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and of your colors are many wonders

¹¹⁷ Bâ, Amadou Hapaté, and Roger Gaetani. *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008, vii.

for those who reflect (Koran 30:22). There is something here for everyone to meditate upon.¹¹⁸

What is perhaps most striking about this teaching, as that it is just one out of many teachings and belief systems that promotes religious tolerance, coexistence, and an aversion to violence. Another teaching of Tierno Bokar articulates Muslim relations with other religions in claiming, “Avoid confrontations. When something in some religion or belief shocks you, instead seek to understand it.”¹¹⁹ Why then, have Western peacekeeping efforts largely ignored the potential for religion as a means of securing peace in this ongoing conflict, particularly when violent-averse teachings are readily available? As will be shown, the answers are multifaceted and multidimensional. This section will answer and expand upon the absence of religion in the peacekeeping realm in Mali.

Laïcité and Biases in Western Peacekeeping

The primary explanation for the absence of religion from the realm of peacekeeping stems from biases in Western peacekeeping models and an emphasis on French *laïcité*. In Jack Snyder’s book titled *Religion and International Relations Theory*, Timothy Samuel Shah and Daniel Philpott argue that international relations theory “reflects the profoundly secularizing historical transformation that established modern international relations itself.”¹²⁰

Ultimately, the authors point to the end of the Thirty Years’ War and the Peace of Westphalia that ushered in what the book calls “The Westphalian Synthesis” in which religion

¹¹⁸ Bâ, 126.

¹¹⁹ Bâ, 129.

¹²⁰ Snyder, Jack L. *Religion and International Relations Theory*. New York: Colombia University Press, 2011, 29.

was subordinated to the state and popular identity began to emerge.¹²¹ From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the seeds of The Westphalian Synthesis would continue to grow and develop into contemporary secularism. During this period, the belief that “the state should actively subordinate religious authority to political authority, religious institutions to political institutions, and religious claims to political claims” emerged with the rise of liberalism.¹²²

While I have not extensively traced the origins of secularism in international relations, I have briefly conveyed the structural qualities of the contemporary global system that actively sought to subordinate religion to the state while isolating it from the realm of public life into a far more personal realm. Not only does this almost entirely remove religion from the realm of peacekeeping and international relations, but in some instances, it serves to vilify it.

The French concept of *laïcité* further explains the absence of religion as a possible solution to the conflict in Mali. Embedded in the 1958 Constitution is the line “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic, guaranteeing that all citizens regardless of their origin, race or religion are treated as equals before the law and respecting all religious beliefs.”¹²³ Since 1905, the freedom to practice religion has been upheld due to the passage of the Law on the Separation of the Church and the State (*la loi sur la separation de l'Église et de l'État*).¹²⁴

¹²¹ Snyder, 31-33.

¹²² Snyder, 37.

¹²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “Constitution of October 4, 1958.” Refworld. Accessed September 23, 2021. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b594b.html>.

¹²⁴ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. “Secularism and Religious Freedom in France.” France Diplomacy – Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Accessed September 23, 2021. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france>.

Thus, with the contemporary global system structured and ordered by the nation-state, paired with French *laïcité*, few people in the peacekeeping field are willing to consider the possibility to consider religion. With the very structure of the global system banishing religion to the private realm, little opportunity exists to take religious experience in Mali into consideration. Moreover, the effects of colonization and France's active hand in Malian affairs has witnessed the French state's attempt to replicate their concept of *laïcité* into Mali's various constitutions, despite staunchly different historical conditions and circumstances.

Western Fascination with Salafi Jihadism

For the West, the attacks of September 11, 2001, proved to be a catalyst for new ways of understanding the religion of Islam and its relationship with the West. But these events and the commencement of the United States' global war on terror led to a fascination and obsession with Salafi jihadism and militant Islam. The *Islamophobia Studies Journal* recently published an article that articulated this phenomenon in media portrayals of Islam in the United States, claiming "Studies of Western news media's framing of Islam show two prevalent themes: terrorism and the oppression of women...the media's portrayal of these two themes in its framing of Islam has led to the widespread conviction that Islam is primarily defined by violence and misogyny."¹²⁵

Yet, these biases are certainly not new, despite their surge in media attention as a result of the attacks on September 11. In short, the Western fascination with militant Islam stems from the colonial encounter. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the French concept of *Islam noir* and

¹²⁵ Karipek, Asena. "Portrayals of Jihad: A Cause of Islamophobia." *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020): 215. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/islastudj.5.2.0210>.

Islam maure in West Africa. In David Robinson's *Muslim Societies in African History*, he argues:

From the perspective of the West and the Mediterranean, Africa is "black" and coincides with the part of the continent below the Sahara Desert – Sub-Saharan Africa. Outside of the continent most scholars, students, and otherwise-informed people do not think of Africa and Africans, under these definitions, as being Muslim or, if Muslim, as only recently converted to the faith, not very orthodox, and not very important to the history of Islam.¹²⁶

As a result of these biases, Western powers have shown a tendency to treat Islam in Africa as a distinct, inauthentic offshoot of Islam in the Middle East. For the French and their colonial government, *Islam arabe* "was the enemy of imperial power and must be checked and disarmed at every turn."¹²⁷ On the other hand, *Islam noir*, or the Islam of Africa, was tended to be viewed with skepticism by colonial authorities. However, the French were not as concerned with this "version" of Islam. Rather, they believed that it needed monitoring so that it would not steer African adherents towards violence against the colonial state.

Samuel Huntington's 1996 text titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* argues that the Islamic tradition is politically powerful and assertive, and that it can prove to be antagonistic to the West.¹²⁸ Huntington's book highlights the overarching narrative that has dominated the Western tradition for years. The dominant narrative and trajectory of Islam is one that is inherently oppositional to the West, while Africa and African Muslims are disregarded as irrelevant and insignificant.

¹²⁶ Robinson, xvii.

¹²⁷ Sanneh, 12.

¹²⁸ Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. London: Penguin, 2014.

Dr. John Azumah notes that this promulgation of jihadi texts is also partially the fault of the West. He states that “The West made an effort to translate jihadi texts to French and English, which ended up accidentally facilitating the expansion of jihadi ideology.”¹²⁹ As such, the fixation upon the Salafi-jihadist narrative is one that is almost entirely the creation of the West. Due to these translation efforts, other manifestations of the Islamic tradition are underappreciated and understudied by Western scholars and peacemakers.

Overall, these features of Western understandings and interpretation of Islam highlight why the West is partially reluctant to accept religion and Islam as a potential in peacebuilding operations. With a system embedded with colonial-era biases paired with a tendency to take a reductionist and singular view of the Islamic faith, it is easy to see why Western peacemakers are keen to avoid or overlook the tradition. What these sentiments and reactions display is a narrow-minded misunderstanding of the Islamic faith, and more specifically, the Islamic faith specific to its West African context.

Reckoning with the Gulf State's Money

Another major reason for the absence of religion in the peacekeeping discussions is due to the large amounts of money flowing into the region of West Africa from the Gulf States. As a result of this influx of Middle Eastern capital, Salafi doctrine was promulgated, which was already viewed with skepticism by the West. Thus, the West overstated and overperceived this influence, further discarding the role of religion as a potential tool in peacekeeping. Not only has the large influx of Middle Eastern capital proved to be influential in West Africa, but it has also served to amplify and promote the Salafist strain of Islam throughout the region. As a result of

¹²⁹ Dr. John Azumah, Interview by Holden D. Lipscomb, August 10, 2021.

the large influx of capital, the incredibly pluralistic tradition of Islam that was previously highlighted and explored has become dominated by Saudi-promoted Salafism.¹³⁰

While the previously chapter highlighted the unique relationship that Saudi Arabia and West African states created in the 1970s, the contemporary relationship today continues with a similar trajectory. However, it is interesting to note that this influence is strikingly different than the economic-investment centered approach of China. As the French Institute of International Relations points out, Saudi economic investment in the region is still somewhat limited. However, “Some state giants, like the chemical company SABIC – which is 70% owned by the state via Saudi Amarco – have been opening offices or subsidiaries in Morocco, Tunisia and in South Africa for a decade with results that are still difficult to assess.”¹³¹

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States also have proven themselves to be highly influential with international organizations. One of the most impactful ways through which this influence is exerted is through the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). Currently, projects are “targeting a variety of sectors from electricity to roads, water supply, education, healthcare, etc. – the SFD has spent 4.2 billion euros in Africa. Out of this amount, more than 60% involves the Maghreb.”¹³²

In addition to the influence of the SFD, Saudi Arabia is also highly influential in the Jeddah-headquartered Islamic Development Bank (IsDB). Although this international organization now has 57 members, Saudi Arabia holds a large influence because they hold

¹³⁰ Østebø, Terje. “African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity.” *Islamic Africa* 6, no. 1-2 (2015): 1-29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90017375>.

¹³¹ “Saudi Basic Industries Corp”, *Maghreb Confidentiel*, No. 950, December 2010.

¹³² Augé, Benjamin, and Carole Mathieu. “Saudi Arabia’s Policy in Africa : Vectors and Objectives.” Afficher la page d’accueil du site. Accessed September 20, 2021. https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/editoriaux-de-lifri/lafrique-questions/saudi-arabias-policy-africa-vectors-and-0#_edn5.

23.5% of the IsDB's capital.¹³³ In 2019, Africa received 23% of the funds granted by the IsDB, further illustrating the ways in which Saudi Arabia and other major Gulf States influence and pressure the continent through funding.¹³⁴ It also is worth mentioning the tremendous amount of influence these countries exert through the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In recent years, more African countries have been trying to join OPEC in the hopes of attracting Saudi funds to their faltering economies.

What the prevalence of Saudi and other Gulf States' money highlights is the tremendous amount of influence that they exert in the region. In the economic realm alone, the influx of Saudi money forces the struggling economies of West Africa to yield to their influence. The result of this is a disproportionate amount of influence from the Gulf States, that serves to favor Middle Eastern nations' preferences and priorities.

The Amplification of a Single Narrative

Perhaps one of the biggest results of Saudi-led partnerships in Africa is the promulgation of a single tradition of Islam that favors Salafism in West Africa and Mali. While this may seem to be innocuous at first, this has ultimately served to stifle and restrict the rich pluralistic tradition in Mali that was highlighted earlier in this paper. For example, in an interview conducted with Dr. John Azumah at The Sannah Institute, he notes that scholars that are trying to publish in the pacifist tradition are being ignored and overlooked by Saudi publishing

¹³³ IBID.

¹³⁴ Figures available on the "Islamic Development Bank ('IsDB') Investor Presentation", Islamic Development Bank, November 2019, available at www.isdb.org.

companies. He states, “For example, we had a well-respected scholar in the pacifist tradition who could not have his work published, because the Saudi publishers did not want to work with.”¹³⁵

This example by Dr. Azumah occurs on a very basic level within West Africa, but it highlights the ways in which Saudi influence affects Islam from a variety of levels. With the major pilgrimage sites of Mecca and Medina located in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi state not only receives the \$8 billion economic advantage from the yearly hajj, but also maintains an advantageous political and religious position in the Muslim world.¹³⁶ With the ability to set specific quotas to various countries around the world, the tendency to use visas as a means of pressuring certain countries to its diplomatic agenda has emerged.¹³⁷ Because of this specific advantage, Saudi Arabia is able to exert its pressure to promote its own policies and agendas.

Another major way in which Saudi Arabia exerts its influence in Mali and West Africa is through the training of Imams at universities of Islamic studies. Benjamin Augé and Carloe Mathieu contend:

The Islamic University of Medina, the Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, and Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh have been training thousands of imams and ulamas through scholarships since the 1970s. The latter, once they have returned home, not only practice Wahhabi Islam in mosques that are often built with money from Riyadh, but also have a strong attachment to the Kingdom that trained them. Nowadays, this clergy that has been molded for three decades in these universities, occupies the highest religious positions in Africa and has some influence over their country’s political authorities.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Dr. John Azumah, Interview by Holden D. Lipscomb, August 10, 2021.

¹³⁶ “The Economics of the Hajj.” ACCA Global. Accessed September 21, 2021. <https://www.accaglobal.com/an/en/member/member/accounting-business/2018/07/insights/economics-hajj.html>.

¹³⁷ Augé, Benjamin. “Quand L’arabie Saudite Somme L’Afrique de Lâcher Le Qatar.” *Le Monde.fr*. *Le Monde*, June 12, 2017. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/06/12/quand-l-arabie-sauodite-somme-l-afrique-de-lacher-le-qatar_5143209_3212.html.

¹³⁸ Augé, Benjamin, and Carole Mathieu.

The unique position enjoyed by Saudi Arabia as guardians of the two holiest sites in Islam provide the Kingdom with a unique degree of authority that further extends its influence into the region. Saudi money paired with its religious legitimacy has proven to elevate the Salafi tradition in West Africa and overlook the pluralism demonstrated throughout years of history.

The Transmissibility of Salafism

While the unique position enjoyed by Saudi Arabia lends itself towards a degree of religious credibility, the difference in epistemology between Salafism and Sufism allows for the Salafist message to be easily broadcast and promoted to wide-ranging audiences. These differences in gaining knowledge, understanding of Islamic principles, and truth have allowed for the Salafist narrative to exert a tremendous amount of influence in West Africa.

Oludamini Ogunnaike notes that “Sufi epistemology in West Africa (as elsewhere) revolves around the discussion and acquisition of *ma‘rifa*, a direct, existential, experiential knowledge of the Divine Reality and the self that is indubitable and transformative.”¹³⁹ Furthermore, he contends that this specific epistemology is not constructed or generated through rigorous study, “but is rather unveiled, inspired, transmitted, or granted by God through the intermediary men of spiritual-ethical-psychological exercises.”¹⁴⁰

To contrast these understandings of knowledge and transmission, the Salafi community staunchly criticized the elitism of Sufi establishments, contending that individuals could interpret the Qur’an for themselves in a rationalistic manner, without the need for Sufi masters or

¹³⁹ Ogunnaike, 8.

¹⁴⁰ IBID.

scholarly experts.¹⁴¹ With individualism serving as the basic interpretation of knowledge for the Salafi community, the 20th and 21st centuries witnessed a convergence of Salafi movements:

Who despite their many differences, have tended to adopt a similar epistemological paradigm in which the *zāhir* (outward or apparent) meaning of the Qur'an and Sunna—understood as being accessible to anyone with the necessary linguistic skills—has sole authority in matters of Islamic doctrine and practice and in which traditional notions of suprarational knowledge are rejected (and thus Sufism and the esoteric sciences based upon this knowledge are also rejected). An important concomitant of this position is the rejection of the initiatic hierarchies of Sufism and the sanad paradigm more generally, leading to the egalitarian conception that all knowledge is potentially accessible to anyone. For this reason, Salafi reformers who sought to transform their societies were quick to adopt the technologies of mass media and colonial mass education, whose implicit epistemological orientation was very similar.¹⁴²

Because of the emphasis of Salafism on scripture over centuries of teaching and interpretation, the message of Salafism is easier to summarize and transmit for a large audience. While I am not suggesting that Salafism is less intellectual or developed than Sufism, I do contend that the specific epistemology of Salafism positions itself in a far greater position to manipulate and employ social media and technology to its advantage. Moreover, the large sums of money from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States have led “numerous satellite, TV channels, and video and audio recordings” to permeate throughout West African society.¹⁴³

With these differences in knowledge and education, the Salafi message is once again promoted and broadcasted to a far greater extent than that of Sufism and other teachings of Islam in West Africa. The result is an enhanced fixation on a single tradition, rather than a holistic acknowledgement of the plurality that exists and thrives in West Africa and Mali.

¹⁴¹ Ogunnaike, 23.

¹⁴² Ogunnaike, 24.

¹⁴³ Ogunnaike, 25.

Conclusion

This project has attempted to highlight the irony of the absence of religion from contemporary peacekeeping undertakings in West Africa. Consistent with the *longue durée* view of history, the existing research shows an incredibly rich and storied tradition of pacifist Islam. Additionally, the historical record displays that until recent years, Islam existed alongside the state apparatus.

Yet recent events, both globally and in West Africa, have served to skew the perception of Islam and its potential role in the peace process. Rather than acknowledging the depth and nuance in these traditions, Western policymakers and peacekeepers have continuously demonized and vilified religion and religious actors. Perhaps acknowledging this overlooked aspect of peacekeeping would be a good place to start.

In an interview with The Heritage Foundation's Senior Policy Analyst for Africa and the Middle East, Josh Meservey notes that there is a "Spectrum of Islamists" varying from conservatives, to fundamentalists, to pacifists, etc.¹⁴⁴ This could suggest that certain religious actors have the potential to be both receptive and actively involved in peacebuilding. Whether this is through a formalized involvement in the peace process or influencing civil society from the periphery remains to be seen. However, the "Spectrum of Islamists" displays the complexity and nuance that is either overlooked or ignored by the West.

In developmental economics, recent themes have emerged contending that one of the major reasons that the West gets economic development so wrong is because of the "Outsider's

¹⁴⁴ Mr. Josh Meservey Interview by Holden D. Lipscomb, July 28, 2021.

Dilemma.” What this dilemma suggests is that the top-down, one-size-fits-all model for peacekeeping is ill-equipped to deal with the complexities associated with local contexts and situations.¹⁴⁵ While this situation is used almost exclusively for Western-led global development efforts, my analysis of peacekeeping in Mali suggests that this “dilemma” also appears to be applicable in this context.

Mr. Travis Gartner, who has spent much of his career working for USAID in the West African countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, notes that in West Africa, “There is a tendency to look towards religious leaders for solutions. However, this is not occurring.”¹⁴⁶ Not only are Western peacekeepers overlooking specific local contexts for solutions, but the presence of the “outsider” might be doing more harm than good. As Gartner notes, “Some of the problems in West Africa may have been self-inflicted because of a heavy U.S. presence. For example, were we looking for terror threats or did we create them?”¹⁴⁷

This paper is not intended to prescribe specific policy recommendations for how to best conduct peacekeeping operations in Mali and West Africa at-large. Instead, this project attempts to highlight a key gap and oversight by Western-policy makers that ignored the local context of religion. Rather than offering a prescription for future endeavors in Mali, this paper hopes to inspire future research into the realm of peacekeeping, as well as a reassessment of the way in which peace operations are conducted. Without taking local religious dynamics into serious

¹⁴⁵ Warner, Matt. “Overcoming the Outsider’s Dilemma: Can Philanthropists Help the Developing World?” Atlas Network, August 24, 2021.
<https://www.atlasnetwork.org/articles/overcoming-the-outsiders-dilemma-can-philanthropists-help-the-developing-world>.

¹⁴⁶ Mr. Travis Gartner Interview by Holden D. Lipscomb, August 26, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ IBID.

consideration in this ongoing conflict, then the region risks becoming what French author Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos calls, “*une guerre perdue*.”¹⁴⁸

Some readers may wonder if religion is not the primary driver of this conflict. Some have even contended that employing an “Islamist narrative” was intentionally done by the French to invoke paranoia and wide-spread support for a military intervention.¹⁴⁹ Julia Leininger also contends that structural factors are the primary hinderance of formalized Islamic political involvement. In her piece titled “It’s Institutions, Not Theology,” Leininger argues that organizational and institutional factors outweigh political theology or theory.¹⁵⁰

Again, this paper acknowledges that merely recognizing and considering religion in this context will not solve the problems of food scarcity, climate change, poverty, poor governance, or the other challenges facing the Sahel region. However, the paper contends that ignoring religion in this conflict limits potential options for peacekeeping, while also ignoring key value-based drivers of violence. Even though religious considerations might account for a small minority of these problems, they are crucial towards achieving a durable, long-lasting solution.

The 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of religion as a major factor in the contemporary geopolitical landscape. While most people in the 20th century anticipated religion to gradually fade in terms of prevalence, these new trends suggest that this anticipation was misled. As such, U.S. and other Western policymakers must come to terms with the reality that

¹⁴⁸ Montclos Marc-Antoine Pérouse de. *Une Guerre Perdue: La France Au Sahel*. Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, Dillon R. “Realpolitik and the Deceptive Use of Islamist Narrative in Armed Struggles: the Case of Northern Mali Conflict.” (2016).

¹⁵⁰ Leininger, 816.

religion is and will likely continue to be a significant factor for both war and peace. Rather than ignoring religion altogether, a reproachment is needed to better grapple with these enduring problems that continue to plague places like Mali and the Sahel.

Religion is neither inherently “good” nor “bad.” Rather, it is a unique individual and social phenomenon that has the power to transform societies and political actors. Without a basic appreciation and recognition, these transformative powers risk being lost, ultimately leading to lost traditions and pious voices unheard.

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