



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

## Reports

### **The Paradox of Modern Jihadi surgencies:** The Case of the Sahel and Maghreb

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[Gety]

The international conference “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East: Regional Actors, Global Powers, and Middle East Strategy”, co-hosted by Aljazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) and John Hopkins University (JHU) in Washington June 12, has triggered wider debate about the nature and the promise of any emerging balance of power. Several questions are raised about how any new balance can be different from the traditional U.S.-Soviet politics of bipolarity and rival proxies, the impact of new players, the power of militant groups and other non-state actors, and whether any emerging balance of power can be sustainable in the future. For instance, the Gulf and the Middle East are suffering a paroxysm of conflict involving virtually all the regional states as well as the US and Russia and many different non-state actors. What dynamics are driving this chaos? What can be done to contain or reverse the damage? How might a new balance of power emerge?

As part of a special series of papers “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East”, AJCS welcomes the insights of one speaker on the third panel “Non-state Actors and Shadow Politics”, Dr. Anouar Boukhars who probes in this paper into how jihadi rebels are slated to remain the dominant challengers to existing regimes in the Maghreb and Sahel.

## Introduction

One of the nagging questions about the persistent wave of insurgencies in the Maghreb Sahel region is that they continue to be characterized and defined by extremist ideologies. After violent jihadists discredited Algeria’s insurgency in the late 1990’s, the assumption was that dissident rebels may want to avoid the adoption of extremist ideology, as it alienates the majority of local populations, fragment the ranks of rebels, and scare away

external supporters. Given such negative marginal returns, it is puzzling that transnational and local Salafi jihadism remains the insurgent repertoire in the Maghreb-Sahel crises. More perplexing is that this extremist ideology has become the tool of war par excellence as well as the ideological focal point that rallies the support of different kinds of aggrieved populations. Since Algerian terror groups relocated to Northern Mali in the early 2000's, rebel leaders evolving in the Sahel have become more inclined towards adopting Salafi jihadism as a means to survive, recruit and outcompete other contending armed actors.

This is a strategic choice, which is more informed by strategic conditions on the ground than by automatic commitments to a core set of extreme beliefs. In other words, rebel entrepreneurs and their rank-and-file supporters and sympathizers do not have to be die-hard ideologues, or violent religious extremists, to lead or buy into transnational or local groups defined by a radical ideological platform. They just need to think that their choice would yield dividends in contexts of deeply polarized societies that are run by illegitimate, abusive states. As such, this article focuses mostly on the benefits that insurgents and their supporters calculate they may accrue from adopting Salafi jihadism as a tool of insurgency in the Sahel-Maghreb crises. In so doing, it illustrates how jihadi rebels are slated to remain the dominant challengers to existing regimes in the region even if ironically their chances of achieving lasting victories is slim.

### **The Jihadi Paradox**

Salafi-jihadi movements have become a major staple of modern day insurgencies waged in countries where Muslims constitute either a majority or minority population. Some scholars attribute this prominence to the ideological characteristics of these groups and their transnational revolutionary networks. (1) Others point more convincingly to the strategic incentives for embracing extremist ideologies.(2) The core assumption is that the adoption of a radical revolutionary identity provides a critical competitive advantage in attracting the most dedicated first-movers' fighters necessary to build a well-funded, robust network that can outcompete rival rebel groups and shape the dynamic and outcomes of conflict.

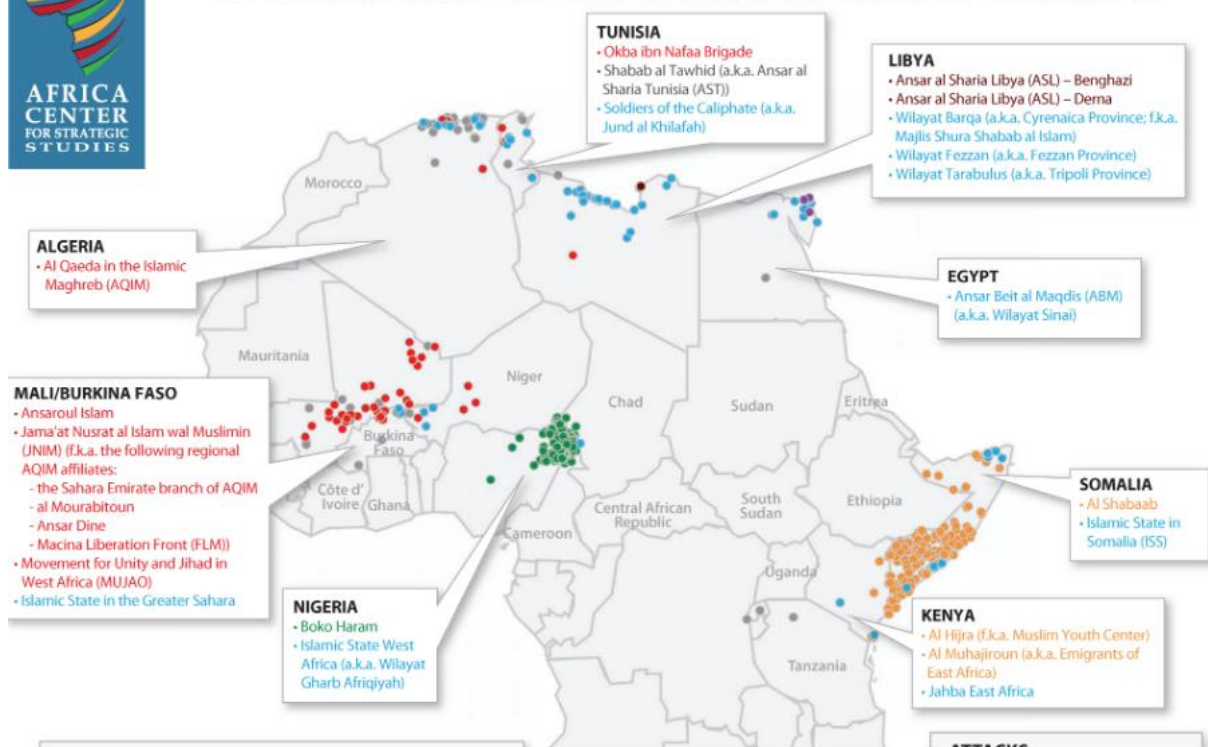
In contexts of political uncertainty, rampant corruption, ethnic and sectarian competition, or shifts in economic distribution, the presence of a credible fighting force that promises physical protection and a transformative socio-political project can capture the loyalty, sympathy or at least acquiescence of aggrieved local populations. In other words, the adoption of Salafi jihadism by both insurgent leaders and their rank-file supporters is a strategic choice aimed at gaining perceived competitive advantages.(3)

The downside of adopting such extreme revolutionary identity, however, is that when taken to extremes it can provoke popular resentment and eventually counter-mobilization as al-Qaeda experienced first hand in Iraq when its excesses led the Sunni tribes that had

once perceived it as a protector to help defeat it in 2008.(4) A decade earlier, the same fate befell the jihadi insurgency in Algeria when the brutality of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) alienated its sympathizers and supporters.(5) Jihadi insurgent actors also tend to invite U.S drone strikes and regional and foreign military interventions, the most notable is the international coalition that drove the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) out of Iraq and Syria and the French-led military campaign in Mali, which ousted jihadi extremists in 2013 from the territories they controlled. Ironically, the factors that contributed to the prominence of jihadi rebels as warriors, protectors and purveyors of harsh justice eventually led to their defeat.

This is the major paradox of modern jihadi insurgencies. Jihadi insurgents continue to thrive even when they have failed to translate the advantages they have into lasting positive outcomes for their followers. Though it is tempting to attribute this prominence to Islam's presumed core teachings and the natural inclination of the most pious for a violent reading of religious texts, in several conflict-affected areas, the adoption of jihadism as a tool of war continues to be viewed as a rationalist choice to violently contest the status quo. Yes, these groups are composed partly of a highly dedicated core and invest a great deal of time and energy on indoctrinating their recruits. However, it is also not rare to see the occasional softening of ideological constraints or tweaks in ideological messages to fit the dictates of particular circumstances. In some contexts, religious ideology intermixes with ethnicity, opportunism and shady criminal activities. It is therefore more analytically sound to analyze jihadi groups such as ISIS as revolutionary actors that happen to be religious. As political scientist Stathis Kalyvas rightly stated, this is "a much more promising avenue of interpretation than seeing it as either simply an Islamist actor or a sectarian one."(6)

# AFRICA'S ACTIVE MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS



Whatever the case, Salafi-jihadism remains the only available form of radical revolt on the market. To use Olivier Roy's famous expression, this "Islamization of radicalism" forces us to rethink why the discontented, marginalized and repressed have found in jihadi ideology the right paradigm to guide their rebellion against the system.<sup>(7)</sup> But unlike Roy's assertion that contemporary jihadists are motivated only by the nihilistic destruction of the status quo, this article argues that rebels adopt Salafi jihadism because it offers the promise of imagining alternatives to a political and social system that is deeply corrupt and unjust. As the case of the Sahel and Maghreb demonstrates, in environments pervaded by bad governance and intense inter and intra-group tensions, individuals and communities tend to embrace any group that can offer assurances of survival and when possible profit as well. In other words, people join groups and alliances based on relative power calculations.

This does not mean that shared identity does not factor in individuals' considerations. The fact that it does is one reason why jihadi ideology intersects with the ethnic, sectarian and social status configuration of society.<sup>(8)</sup> For example, both Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) emphasize radical Islam as the main founding block of their groups, but when it suits their purposes they don't hesitate to appeal to race and ethnicity to recruit. In the case of MUJAO, the group initially tried to distinguish itself from other armed groups whose sociological make-up is Arab by styling itself as defender of black African identity. When the group ended up being itself a constellation of mostly Arab tribes, it quickly repositioned itself as a capable protector against "untrustworthy" ethnic others' such as the Tuareg.<sup>(9)</sup>

The key is the emphasis on protection and capability as MUJAO and other extremist groups know full well that alliances are not primarily driven by a shared repertoire of religious beliefs and community identifications. An appreciable number of the rank and file cadres of jihadi groups base their choice of alliances first and foremost on tactical necessities driven by security considerations (fear) and opportunism (greed). The cases from the Sahel and Maghreb lend credence to this thesis, which argues that there is a strategic logic behind the alignment and ideological choices that insurgent leaders and their followers make.

## **The Instrumental Value of Jihadi Ideology**

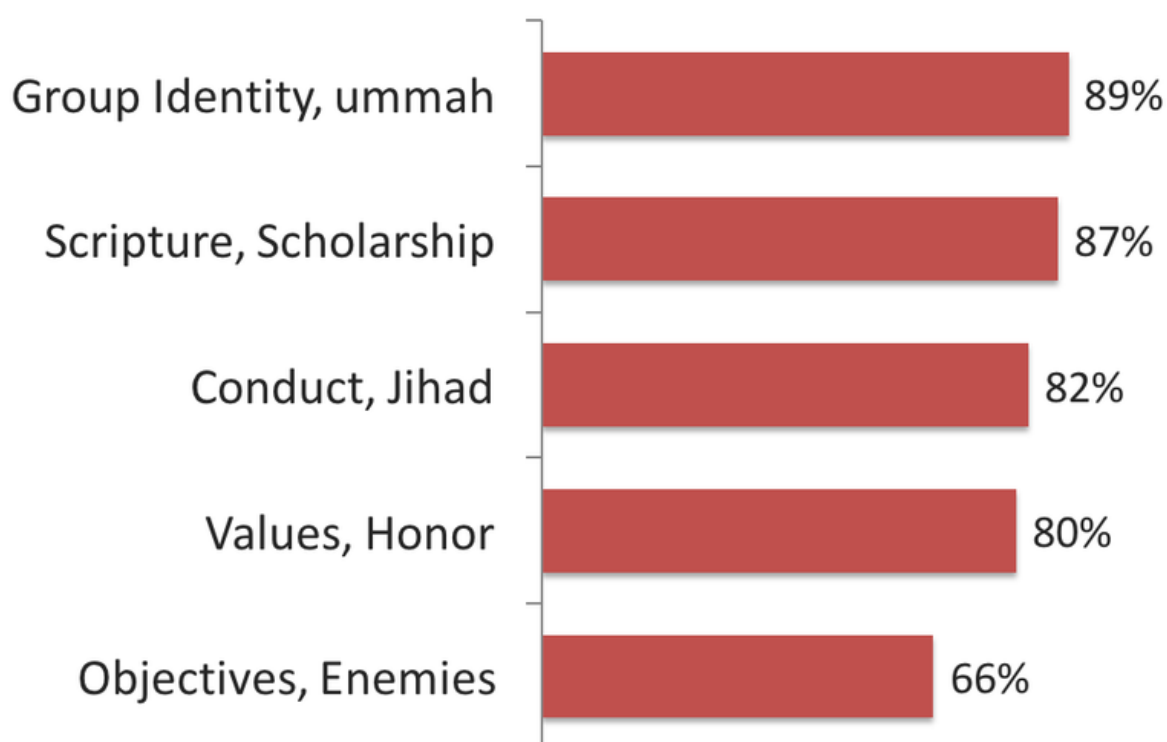
This section highlights the strategic incentives that drive armed groups in particular circumstances to adopt jihadi ideology for instrumental reasons. In contexts of competing warring groups, ethnic or religious fractionalization, and a history of state misrule, the basic challenge of rebel mobilization is the collective action problem because individuals' natural inclination is to free ride conflicts, especially given the high risks and costs of participation. Although scholars such as Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher challenged this free riding assumption, arguing instead that the costs of non-participation or neutrality in a conflict may indeed be equal or even surpass taking part in insurgent collective action,(10) rebel leaders still struggle to persuade individuals to join the fight to advance their cause. Insurgent groups try to mitigate this collective action dilemma by providing selective material benefits (protection, money, social services) in return for becoming a supporter or fighter. Extremist groups have the added advantage of using ideology wrapped in religious ideas to motivate, coordinate and retain recruits. Indeed, several scholars have shown how armed jihadi groups instrumentally emphasize the virtues of faith and self-sacrifice in redeeming the suffering and humiliation of targeted communities.(11)

Extremist ideology helps rebel leaders kill two birds with one stone. As Barbara Walter showed in the context of the Middle East, violent extremism helps draw the most devoted recruits on the cheap, minimizing both the collective action problem and the principle-agent problem, the latter often arises because rebel leaders struggle to control the behavior of their soldiers on the ground.(12) The assumption is that the most dedicated recruits are usually the most loyal fighters. This is extremely important in contexts of intense rebel competition where switching sides and realignment of alliances is more the norm than the exception. In such fractured environments, extremist groups can also become appealing to moderate individuals, as they appear as the only group able to fight and follow through on their commitments to reshape state-society relationships. This is critical in the early phases of conflict as recruits tend to flock to groups that have the potential to win and a fearsome reputation for enforcing law and order.

It is not a coincidence that an essential theme in the discourse of jihadi groups is morality, honor and justice—Islamic commodities that repressed, exploited and discriminated against individuals and communities desperate crave. For example, in analyzing the trove of unearthed ISIS documents, New York Times correspondent Rukmini Callimachi revealed how the group used a rough and ready dispensation of justice to win over the population it controlled, including those that it abused. “In a terrorist version of the “broken window” school of policing,” she wrote, “the Islamic State aggressively prosecuted minor crimes in the communities it took over, winning points with residents who were used to having to pay bribes to secure police help.” ISIS also distinguished itself by its willingness to hold its own fighters to account. “Harsh and rigid as the Islamic State was,” said Callimachi, “it did provide certain rights to citizens — and they were willing to prosecute their own.”(13)

## Motivational Themes Present in Jihadi Propaganda Sources

*(by % in which they appear)*



Data: *INSIDE THE JIHADI MIND: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda*, Centre on Religion & Geopolitics .

Chart: The Weekly Number, Brian J. Grim, Oct. 13, 2015

This reputation for ideological purity and justice also comes in handy in contexts where armed groups have tenuous connection to local communities. The following testimony collected in a village in central Mali is revealing in this regard: “The jihadists did not force

the people of our community. They left us without hurting anyone. It was bandits who took advantage of their presence to cause harm to innocents. These jihadists are of different nationalities: Pakistani, Algerian, Saharawi, etc. We didn't notice any difference between them and the other Muslim leaders. They took care of people in danger, assisted the needy and preached Islam as it should be. Everything in their behavior showed that they were good Muslims.”(14)

In contexts rife with competing factions aiming to recruit from the same population, religious ideology and reputation for law and order is also crucial to lure the most fervent believers and risk-acceptant fighters. As stated earlier, the first-movers are usually high quality rebels who create the impression that their armed struggle has a good shot at bringing about radical political change. Regardless of how extreme the ideology might be, the future prospect of radical political transformation, buttressed by the promise of immediate access to guns, protection, money, ends up luring more moderate individuals into the orbit of jihadi groups.

The downside of extremist jihadi ideology, however, is that it tends to be too overbearing and intrusive. In areas where they succeeded in carving out territory, jihadists' rule proved to be too harsh and interventionist even for religiously conservative populations. This tends to lead “to the emergence of grassroots dissident activity that can easily be harnessed by counterinsurgents to devastating effect,” writes Stathis Kalyvas who compares Jihadi practices to those of Marxist rebels.(15)

In both cases, revolutionary beliefs that were “intensely ideological, internationalist, and expansive,” became a double-edged sword.(16) In the case of Jihadi rebels, their proclaimed transnational extreme ideology has another drawback. Unlike Marxist rebels who enjoyed the patronage of powerful states, jihadi rebels struggle to attract the support of any state, even if their revolutionary project might align with their interests. This “absence of external state sponsorship,” writes Kalyvas, “could well turn out to be the greatest weakness of jihadi rebel groups.”( 17)

## **The Advantage of Jihadists in the Sahel**

The case of the Sahel and Maghreb reveal the paradox at the heart of Salafi-jihadism. Jihadi groups have not won any of their insurgencies yet they remain the most adaptive and resilient of all insurgent groups. Anşar ad-Din, al-Murabiţun and the Sahara branch of AQIM have shown remarkable staying power, defying predictions that their military rout in 2013 in Northern Mali would be a crippling blow. This resilience however is only partly due to their nimbleness and adaptivity. As in the past, state abuse, discrimination and stigmatization remain the main influential factors that drive young men into the orbit of violent extremist organizations. Field case studies, including the author's own research in the Maghreb's border areas,(18) have documented how in contexts of socio-political

instability, the temptation for aggrieved individuals and communities to join armed groups that can defend them is high.(19) Surveys of young Fulani people in the conflict-affected areas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso reveal how toxic the state and its defense and security services (DSF) have become.(20) Majorities associate DSF with a threat to the security of their communities and assert the necessity to arm themselves as protection from state abuse and stigmatization. For an appreciable number of young men, jihadi groups appear as logical allies in environments teeming with myriad armed groups, some of whom are believed to be supported by the same abusive security services.(21)

In line with the main argument advanced in this paper, the decision to join ideological groups is primarily driven by relative power considerations.(22) In the case of young Fulanis, jihadi groups offer the promise that their armed struggle might yield an alternative socio-political model inspired by the ideals and principles of Islamic law.(23) In the more immediate term, jihadi groups are appealing because they tend to possess enough fighting power to help Fulanis defend themselves as well as compete in the struggle over access to natural resources with rival factions such as the Bambara and Dogon farmers in central Mali and the Daoussakh herders in northwest Niger.

Stories abound about how jihadists' appeal stem from their ability to provide security and dispense harsh rule of law. As put by Amirou Boulíkessi, the head of the Dewral Pulaaku association—a group established in 2014 to presumably defend the interests of the Fulani but in whose midst exists young men who joined MUJAO in 2012—the recourse to armed jihadi groups was done in search of military training and protection from the excesses of the largely undisciplined Tuareg fighters of the MNLA, as well as marauding gangs that stole their herds and harassed them in rural areas. "When the MNLA occupied the area, the Tuareg made us suffer," he said. "They denied us grazing rights and access to our fields, and they killed one of my cousins while raping his wife... This motivated me to recruit able-bodied men of good fighting age in my area and send them to train in the MUJAO camps in Gao," proclaimed Boulíkessi all the while insisting that his alliance with jihadist groups was not directed against the state and its institutions.

The last statement is not accurate or at least it no longer holds, as the return of the Malian security services into liberated territories was accompanied by ethnic-based abuse and stigmatization. In Mopti, some members of the security forces who suspected the Fulani community of complicity with the armed group MUJAO subjected them to acts of vindictive abuse and summary punishment. The fact that such acts go largely uninvestigated and unpunished have contributed to mounting feelings of fear, anger and indignation that armed jihadi groups like MUJAO have been all too happy to tap into.

Several recent studies and recent reports warn that unchecked state abuse best exemplified by the toxic culture of impunity that pervades the security services is directly driving young men into the orbit of violent extremist organizations. In Tunisia, part of the

lure of militant ideologies and violent extremist groups lie in their anti-systemic rhetoric and their ability to tap into anti-establishment anger. In the Sahel, states Marco Simonetti of International Alert, “the appeal of global jihad carries much less weight than the unlawful detention of a loved one, the struggle for access to grazing areas or the desire for recognition within the village.” Jihadi armed groups are successful precisely because they pose as the only credible alternative to an unsalvageable status quo.

It is this revolutionary character—buttressed by a moralizing and revolutionary discourse—that build the credibility and reputation of jihadists as enforcers of order and purveyors of security. If several scholars, NGO’s and journalists highlight the brutality and harshness of such enforcement, even if such cruel application is inconsistent, interviews with those who lived under jihadists’ rule reveal a more nuanced assessment of their tenure. This helps explain why a non-negligible number of people still turn to the Jihadists for swift justice and protection. Some, even long for the days when AQIM controlled Timbuktu and cracked down on criminality (theft of cattle, motorbikes) and moral failures (prostitution, Alcohol) and enforced an equitable justice.(24)

### **Radicalism as a Branding Strategy**

Armed jihadi groups have quickly learnt that ideological purity and religious zeal can act as a useful branding strategy to differentiate themselves from rival groups. The case of Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine and a Machiavellian fixture of Tuareg insurrections in Mali, is revealing in this regard. According to several observers, Ghali’s embrace of extreme ideology was determined by the fast-moving events that led to the January 2012 uprising launched by the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).

Ag Ghali, who comes from the Ifoghas clan, the noblest tribe in the Tuareg caste system, wanted to be the movement’s secretary general but was rebuffed in November 2011, leading to his marginalization during the crucial preparatory stages of the rebellion. It is a matter of conjecture whether ag Ghali’s radical trajectory would have been the same if he had been allowed to once again lead the revolt against the Malian state. Regardless what one might think about his 2012 reinvention as a firebrand radical intent on imposing an extreme form of Islamic law, the adoption of a radical jihadi posture allowed this “lion of the desert,” as members of his Ifoghas tribe endearingly call him, to differentiate himself from the MNLA while at the same time benefiting from the critical material support of AQIM where his cousin, Abdelkrim Targui, was the emir of the militant unit Katiba al-Ansar, “The Battalion of the Victors.”(25) The result is that few months after the military campaign began in early 2012, the charismatic ag Ghali emerged as the master of the desert, absorbing “MNLA leaders and fighters into his movement.”(26)

Some of those who joined ag Ghali did not share the radical ideology he set for his organization. Alghabass Ag Intallah, the son of the hereditary chief of the Ifoghas, who

first joined the MNLA, acknowledged that his defection to Ansar dine was based on the group's power and better organization. Alghabass also reportedly mocked the conversion of ag Ghali into radical Islam. Ahmed Ag Bibi, another Tuareg notable who is today a parliamentarian, supported the idea of a "soft sharia" at the beginning of the conflict. In fact, some recruits believed that Ansar Dine's Islamist project immunized the region from the more radical and for some Arab designs of AQIM, an organization still run and controlled by Algerians. Ansar Dine cleverly played on this point, highlighting the ethnicity of its leader when promising an Islamic Emirate in Kidal controlled by ag Ghali, an Ifoghas Tuareg.(27)

MUJAO has an even deeper ambivalent relationship to religion, as a non-negligible part of its members is constituted of drug traffickers not known for radical religiosity. Their primary objective is to secure their position in the bitter competition over access to trafficking revenue and control over trafficking routes, "without any particular regard to the harsh religious dogma held by the organization they lead," writes Mathieu Pellerin.(28) MUJAO's embrace of radical ideology seems therefore to be driven more by strategic imperative than religious purity.

In an environment marked by intense fear, uncertainty, and competition among insurgent factions, the leaders of MUJAO understood that the embrace of radical ideology could quickly yield an early critical advantage in attracting the most dedicated fighters necessary to build a winning force that can overtime entice the support and acquiescence of the majority of the targeted population, who are often religiously moderate. As in the case of ISIS where religious zealots intermingled with aggrieved Arab Sunnis, including officers from Saddam Hussein's secular army, MUJAO's ranks saw a non-ideological wing intermix with a hard-core religious one, exemplified by its former head of the Islamic police, Aliou Cisse.(29) This cohabitation helps explain why MUJAO's application of harsh law was so inconsistent.

In contexts infested with widespread corruption and predation, religious values and beliefs, no matter how extreme, provide a recruiting advantage; or in the words of one Nigerien political analyst, the "call for armed jihad is nothing but a simple cover to play to the crowd,"(30) which longs to liberate itself from the suffocating customary norms, social hierarchies, and compromised local religious authorities and elite that are perceived to be complicit in their plight.

## **Conclusion: Morality and Power**

The main argument advanced in this paper is that the importance of radical ideology in the Sahel and Maghreb stems from its instrumental value and normative commitments. For rebel leaders, radical ideology helps their groups recruit and stand out from the rest of the pack. For aggrieved communities, there are situational incentives to joining a

winning coalition. As Osama Bin Laden once said, "when people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse." In this view, it is not the presumed religious radicalism of young men that determines alignment choices. Rather, it is the strategic gains that leaders and their rank-and-file members aspire to gain that determine what armed groups individuals or communities opt to join or support. This only confirms that jihadi armed groups find a niche market in areas where state institutions, including religious ones, are fundamentally illegitimate.

In this context, viewing Islamic fundamentalism as the main driver of modern insurgencies misdiagnoses the problem. A growing body of research is showing that the endurance and proliferation of Salafi jihadi groups in the Sahel is not due to increasing levels of religiosity or even to global dynamics. Rather, the most determining factors are local in nature, foremost amongst them are abusive dysfunctional governments. Unless the international community and local governments acknowledge the conditions that make Salafi jihadi groups resilient, the challenges to state authority will continue to be characterized and dominated by extremist ideologies.

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