

Birth and Expansion of Jihadism in the Sahel: Impressions and Feelings of a Filmmaker

Thomas Fisch¹

ABSTRACT

AQIM, ISGS, GSIM, ISWAP... so many acronyms for so many different ideologies and political programs. The only thing they have in common is that they wage holy war in the name of a rigorous and intolerant Islam. These groups have gathered and then renamed themselves, but there are mainly three, united according to ethnic and historical criteria.

Keywords: Jihadism, Culture, Ideology, Poverty, Conflict, Globalization

Nacimiento y expansión del yihadismo en el Sahel: impresiones y sentimientos de un cineasta

RESUMEN

AQIM, ISGS, GSIM, ISWAP... tantos acrónimos para tantas ideologías y programas políticos diferentes. Lo único que tienen en común es que hacen la guerra santa en nombre de un islam riguroso e intolerante. Estos grupos se han reunido y luego se han renombrado, pero son principalmente tres, unidos según criterios étnicos e históricos.

Palabras clave: Yihadismo, Cultura, Ideología, Pobreza, Conflicto, Globalización

1 After studying cinema in Paris, Thomas Fisch discovered the African continent with a first trip to Cameroon. There he observed the initiation rituals of secret societies and animist cults. A little later, he discovered the great spaces of the Sahel and met the nomads. For more than 15 years now, his documentary films have taken him from southern Algeria to Niger, passing through Mali and Mauritania. But it is in the study of the Wodaabe Fulani of Niger that he has specialized, living among them on regular field trips.

萨赫勒地区圣战主义的诞生与扩张： 一个电影制作人的印象与感受

摘要

AQIM、ISGS、GSIM、ISWAP等诸多首字母缩略词被用于描述众多不同的意识形态和政治计划。其唯一的共同点是以严格和不容忍的伊斯兰教的名义发动圣战。这些集团聚集在一起，然后重新命名，但根据族群和历史标准进行联合的集团主要有三个。

关键词：圣战主义，文化，意识形态，贫困，冲突，全球化

Not a week goes by without the press reporting a terrorist attack in Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger—a geographical area that specialists call the Sahel-Saharan strip.

The public still remembers the murder of six French aid workers in Niger while they were visiting the giraffe reserve of Kouré, 60 kilometers south-east of the capital Niamey. This was in August 2020. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State.

A year earlier, on the 1st of July 2019, armed gangs from neighboring Mali attacked the Inates barracks in the Tillabéry region, west of Niamey. Officially, the authorities counted 18 dead among the Nigerian armed forces.

This event had deeply shocked Nigerian opinion. That country seemed to finally realize how serious the jihadist threat was, as it was getting dangerously close to the capital and was no longer contained to the country's margins.

Under the term “armed gangs” or “armed terrorist groups” (ATG in military parlance), a multitude of individuals with the most diverse motivations are hidden. Adept at marketing terror, they each have their own label, their own brand of affiliation:

AQIM, ISGS, GSIM, ISWAP ... so many acronyms for so many different ideologies and political programs. The only thing they have in common is that they wage holy war in the name of a rigorous and intolerant Islam. These groups have gathered and then renamed themselves, but there are mainly three, united according to ethnic and historical criteria.

- Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Since Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of AQIM was killed by the French army in June 2020, Iyad Ag Ali has taken over. AQIM is now composed mainly of Tuaregs.

- The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, led by Amadou Kouffa, of the Fulani ethnic group.
- And finally, the Islamic State in the Great Sahara or DAESH, composed of Arabs from Mali and led by Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui.

Among these three leaders who dominate the jihadist scene, some want to expand the jihad beyond regional borders to establish a Caliphate. Others want to limit themselves to a local or national level.

They are now engaged in a fierce struggle for control of these territories and to establish their spheres of influence.

While the attacks have so far been of a military nature in Mali, they are targeting civilians more in Burkina Faso and Niger. Consequences of this lack of security straddles these three countries—in 2019, 4,000 people have been killed, and half a million people have had to leave their place of dwelling according to the UN, making this part of Africa an uncontrollable powder keg.

Under the banner of Islam and this armed struggle are gathered Tuaregs, Fulani, Arabs, Berabiches, Algerians, Burkinabes, Malians, Nigériens, Saharawis—actors with such diverse ethnic, cultural, and political profiles that it is complicated to understand the situation deeply.

Of course, it is easy to find articles on the subject in the press and on the Internet. Some offer the ultimate equation to explain the increase in terrorist attacks and the motivations of those who commit them. I do not question the knowledge of the authors of these articles. However, I think I can offer an additional point of view based on my observations in the field, as I have been travelling in the Sahel-Saharan strip for more than fifteen years.

Indeed, I am a documentary filmmaker. For the needs of my films, I have travelled through Mali, Mauritania, the Great South of Algeria, Chad, and especially Niger.² I made several films on the culture of the Wodaabe Fulani, one of the last nomadic peoples to live in the bush. Then I became interested in the informal cross-border economies, commonly called “trafficking,” and how the fall of Muammar Gaddafi would transform the exchanges in this region.³

For more than fifteen years, I have seen these African societies change, their fault lines becoming blurred as if by a heat haze clouding the horizon. I regularly hear stories of terrorism and jihadism from my African friends. And what they tell me sheds new light on one way of understanding the rise of this phenomenon in the Sahel.

2 *Le Monde est un Cheval* (2005) and *La saison des Non-Pluies* (2007), films by Thomas Fisch. Broadcast by TV5 Monde and RTBF.

3 *Rifles and Amulets* (2012), film by Thomas Fisch. Broadcasting at the Namur Festival.

Indeed, Jihadism cannot be explained solely through a Manichean Western reading grid, in the sole light of ethnology, economics, or ecology. It is the intersection of several movements, identity-based, political, and historical, which cause violence.

Jihadism is not new in Africa. For centuries, it has been waved as a counter-attack against the colonial oppressor or against any government deemed corrupt. In the 19th century, the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria and part of Cameroon and the Peul Empire of Macina in Mali showed the unifying role of this Koranic holy war. What torments us now are the Jihadists who claim to be part of this new Muslim Internationalism, or Pan-Islamism. One of its most representative and well-known factions is AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

To explain its expansion, we need to consider several factors that intersect over decades.

In the 1960s, the former French colonial empire in Africa was dismembered. New countries appeared on the map: Algeria (1962), Mali (1960), Niger (1960), Upper Volta (1960), etc.

In Mali and Niger, the management of the country was transferred to the sedentary black populations, already educated by the former guardian power. During the colonial era, it was easier for the French administration to educate and train populations that were attached to a village or a circumscribed area. The power is thus left to the Bambaras, Songhaïs, Haoussas, Zarmas, and others, many of whom were the former slaves of the Tuaregs, nomadic populations of the North.

For these groups of farmers or merchants, it is a revenge offered on a platter after centuries of servitude, as well as a reversal of values and society. The newly formed centralized state deliberately left the Tuareg and the North to fend for themselves. The former lords of the desert were marginalized, left without stable access to health care, education, water, et cetera. In the 1970s and 1980s, several episodes of drought decimated their herds and reduced their former prestige to dust. The young people will have no other choice than to go into exile or to join Gaddafi's army in Libya. They would later return, armed with military experience that would help them launch protests and rebellions—from 1990 to 1996 in Mali and Niger, in 2006 in Mali, then from 2007 to 2009 in Mali and Niger, and finally in 2012 again in Mali.

Each time, peace agreements have been signed, and the situation has been stabilized. The Tuaregs have been integrated into civil society, into the administrative bodies, and sometimes to the top of the democratic institutions. Saharan tourism has developed since 2006. The Dakar Rally was the high point, bringing the cities of Agadez, Timbuktu and Gao, former caravan stops, out of oblivion. The locals would call this period the golden age of Saharan tourism, a source of foreign currency for their families and a way to move up the social ladder.

At the same time, in the north of the Sahara, in the 1990s, Algerians who had left to fight in Afghanistan alongside the Mujahideen returned to their country, bathed in Wahhabi ideology, notably through contact with Bin Laden, totally convinced of the greatness of their fight against the *kouffars* and apostasy. Here again, the experience of arms has been put to good use with the foundation of the AIG and later the GSPC.

Bin Laden sent one of his ideologues to establish contacts with different groups of Muslim fighters in Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Mali. The armed struggle advocated by Al Qaeda is spreading to conquer Africa. The GSPC and the AIG are the 'proto-cells' of the Jihadist groups that we know today. Their real rise dates from 2007, when the GSPC changed its name to AL Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.⁴

During all this time, the Tuaregs of Mali have not forgotten their autonomous aspirations, and even the impossible dream of independence that remained in the papers of Jacques Foccart, General de Gaulle's Mr. Françafrique. A proverb says, "Who wants to dine with the Devil uses a long spoon." To find the financial and military means necessary for their fight, it is simple to ally themselves with the former Algerian armed groups and to espouse the Jihadist cause. But the Tuareg front has since split along clan and ideological lines into former jihadists, moderates, and radicals.

In the early 2000s, structural adjustments imposed by international donors led to the liberalization and privatization of public services, including education. Free primary schooling almost disappeared, leaving the *madrasas* or Koranic schools with a free hand.⁵

In my early travels in Niger, the streets of Niamey were filled with itinerant preachers from neighboring Nigeria. Only a bunch of ragged kids would listen to them, laugh at them, and throw rocks or rotten fruit at them. Then, stealthily, a poison infiltrated their minds. Women put on clothes to cover their hair and hide their forms. The open-air bars where one could listen to music and flirt closed, one after the other. Mosques replaced them, financed by businessmen anxious to redeem themselves as good Muslims. The preaching of the *imams* has also changed. Wahhabi Islam, imported from the Middle East, ousted Maliki Islam, which had been established here for centuries and had until then been guaranteed a certain tolerance.

In 2009, I arrived in Mali. Bamako was then one of the most festive and dynamic capitals on the continent. Culture, music, and fashion were all happening there every night. Since then, the music has died down; the loudspeakers have

4 Jérôme Lacroix Leclair and Pierre Pahlavi, *L'institutionnalisation d'AQMI dans la nébuleuse Al-Qaïda*, Les Champs de Mars review n°24.

5 Aminata Traoré, *L'Afrique humiliée*, published by Fayard.

been taken down, except for those in the mosques. There too, their number increased exponentially until there were no more bars, discos, or places to enjoy life. The followers of Wahhabism have imposed their obscurantist silence on the city.

Faced with a failing state that no longer fulfils its role of protecting the most disadvantaged, nor the continuity of public services, the religious community donates a contribution that is seen as valuable, even precious, for society. It is an aggregator of resentment and a vector of social peace for poor populations that are permeable to his message.

Jihadism feeds on poverty. It recruits its soldiers there.

Since the end of the caravan rent, the destruction of the cotton industry in Mali, and a massive rural exodus, the main source of income has been a subsistence economy and small jobs in the informal sector. The main source of income is a subsistence economy of small jobs in the informal sector, such as selling cigarettes by the piece, ambush tailoring, shoe-shining, stealing motorcycles, and panning for gold.

There is gold all over the Sahelian strip. Often, the gold panning sites are illegal or just tolerated by the authorities. Thousands of people find themselves digging for their fortune. In 2018, the government of Niger shut down these mines and put a bunch of gold miners out of work. Under pressure from the European Union, on the pretext that these places were a crossing point for illegal migrants who then continued across the Sahara and the Mediterranean.

So, what can you do but go back to your old criminal activity, stay unemployed or join the ranks of the Islamist fighters? Because with the promise of \$100 a month, a Kalashnikov, a motorcycle, and a tank of gas, you are ready to join any cause. The rhetoric of Jihadism fills an existential, religious, and economic void among the younger generation.

Another basis of the economy is cross-border trade: smuggling cigarettes, gasoline, and weapons. In 2012, I went to film small arms dealers in southern Niger, on the borders of Chad and Nigeria. They were mostly Fulani herders, nomads. They told me three things. The first was that their need for weapons was motivated by ethnic tensions with other groups, sedentary ones, and against cattle rustlers. Second, the fall of Gaddafi in Libya six months earlier had disrupted traditional trafficking routes and automatic weapons were beginning to flood the black market. Thirdly, because of climate change and the increasing scarcity of pastures and wells, competition with the sedentary population was fierce. This led to conflicts between different ethnic groups over increasingly limited resources.

Playing on porous borders over a vast territory that is impossible to control completely by failing governments, Jihadism has built its local base on this trafficking. It levies a tax on each convoy. Cigarettes, petrol, drugs, foodstuffs and everyone benefits from this, from certain Tuareg groups to corrupt state officials.

Mokhtar Benmokhtar, a historical figure of the AIG and then of AQIM, got rich thanks to smuggling (hence his nickname of Mister Marlboro) and then in hostage-taking for ransom. As a refugee in Mali, he married a woman from the powerful Berabiche tribe. Thus, he secured their unwavering support and their interest in his trafficking.

In Timbuktu, in 2009, friends were telling me the story of “Air Cocaine.” A Boeing 727 had landed with a cargo of cocaine at the Sinkrèbaka site, in the middle of the desert, 200 kilometers north of Gao. The case made headlines. The plane had been rented in Venezuela, registered in Saudi Arabia, and was flying with a license from Guinea Bissau. The cargo was emptied onto trucks, some of them escorted by men in uniform, and it then headed for the Mediterranean coast before arriving in Europe. Of course, the armed jihadist groups had taken a commission on the way.

The investigation was suppressed by the Malian state—some high-ranking politicians were involved. It was known that several flights had taken place between Colombia and Mali.

This is also what globalization is all about: the growing consumption of cocaine in Europe has allowed the creation of new supply routes through Africa and the enrichment of numerous intermediaries, including jihadist cells.

Since then, the types of trafficking have diversified. The most lucrative ones are still hostages and clandestine half-grants. Each link in the chain takes its commission. And the negotiators for the release of prisoners do not act only out of the goodness of their hearts. In 2010, AQIM’s fortune was estimated at 150 million Euros, thanks to ransoms paid, among other things—a fortune that allows the purchase of weapons and buys the silence of many people.

The foreign policies of our governments, the injunctions of international donors, globalization, poor governance of local elected officials, global warming, the scarcity of resources for herders and farmers and community rivalries are all breeding grounds for Jihadism in the Sahel.

It makes use of these factors. It offers a comfortable illusion to people who no longer expect anything from a centralized state that has abandoned them. It offers a semblance of order and the transcendental experience of belonging to the Ummah, the Muslim community.

Engaged in asymmetric warfare against the militaries of several national armies, feeding on anti-imperialist resentments, relying on small criminal groups, and exploiting inter-ethnic tensions, it will surely expand. Bin Laden had insisted on the need to win hearts and minds to his cause.

But in my opinion, it will not succeed in unifying the different ethnic groups of Mali, Burkina, Nigeria, or Niger.

The Malian Amadou Kouffa and his Macina Liberation Front were said to rally all the Fulani in the sub-region to him. I have my doubts.

Amadou Kouffa, whose real name is Amadou Dialo, defends only the interests of his community, the Peul herders of Mali. Even if he has an image of a vigilante among them, he is not in favor of the expansion of Jihad and the destruction of the Malian state.

Since his first preaching, which was recorded on cassettes and passed on under the mantle, he has brought back to him the nomadic breeders who were oppressed by the militias of the sedentary farmers. With them, he founded the Macina Liberation Front, in homage to the Macina Peul Empire of the 19th century. Then, as his power of nuisance grew, he renamed it the Group of Support for Islam and Muslims to gain more visibility.

Amadou Kouffa did try to send emissaries to Niger, particularly to the town of Ingall, to enlist the Fulani in the region—in vain. The security forces intercepted them.

The theocratic political system desired by these jihadists will sooner or later come up against the impossibility of exercising absolute control over nomadic groups. Always quick to move in search of new pastures for their animals, the nomads often disregarded religions that were too restrictive. As Ibn Khaldun describes,⁶ the city is the empire of constraint, and the city dwellers are more subject to power and its institutions. It is a delimited space that is easy to regulate, a place where the police of morals, an Islamic police force, can be exercised.

Nomads live without walls or gates. Because of their mobility, they escape a “policed” society with absolute control over the individual.⁷ Whether they are Foulbé Fulani from the south of Niger or Woddabe Fulani from the north, I have not seen any of them embrace Wahhabi Islam. They keep the habit of pre-Islamic ceremonies like the Guéréwol, for some, the Soro for others. Singing and dancing are part of their identity. And there is not even one of them who would want to give it up.

Tuaregs or Peuls, nomads want to avoid the dispersion of family property by preserving its direct transmission, even if it means admitting it through women. Their societies are matrilineal. Women have a privileged place in them, which is in contradiction with the Charia model.⁸

So, what does the future hold for jihadism in West Africa? The Covid crisis has certainly slowed its expansion somewhat. I hypothesize that the finances of armed terrorists have been impacted by the global economic crisis and the slowdown in the movement of goods and people.

First, kidnappings of Westerners for ransom are less profitable, simply because there are fewer potential targets to kidnap.

6 Ibn Khaldun, *the Prolegomena*.

7 Wadi Bouzar, *Saisons Nomades*, ed. L'Harmattan.

8 Edmond Bernus, *Touaregs Nigériens*, ed. L'Harmattan.

Secondly, drug routes are more closely monitored, and convoys are intercepted. However, there are still taxes levied on the passage of migrants.

Then, with the drop in oil prices linked to a drop in world demand, the funds coming from the Gulf countries, whether private or institutional, will dry up.

Recent clashes on the borders of Côte d'Ivoire and Benin, and an attempt to infiltrate eastern Senegal, show the jihadists' desire to externalize the conflict beyond the Sahel-Saharan strip. This push is coming down from Mali and Burkina Faso towards the coastal regions of the southwest. It aims to seek access to the sea, to cargo ports like Cotonou, and to piracy in the oil and gas-rich Gulf of Guinea, like Daesh in Syria, which lives off oil trafficking with Turkey.

The Sahelian jihadist nebula has suffered some military setbacks against the Barkhane and Takouba forces. To continue its struggle and its supply of weapons and communications equipment, it must now diversify its sources of income.

Of course, this is all guesswork at this point. Let's leave the future alone. Let's focus on the present and a little on the past.

The imposition of a caliphate would be a new form of colonialism since it is a reported Islam. It would be a cause of social, economic, and cultural regression, as well as a factor of depersonalization. And the urban youth of Bamako, Ouagadougou, or Niamey, accustomed to mobile phones, the Internet, social networks, and freedom, will not let themselves be dominated.

History has shown that the Sokoto Caliphate and the Macina Fulani Empire, built on the Jihad in the 19th century, collapsed after 50 years of existence, victims of internal tensions, rivalries, and the refusal of the conquered populations to live under an overly strict religion.⁹

No empire lasts, no matter how theocratic. The bad days will end.

9 Amadou Ampaté Ba, *L'Empire du Macina*, published by Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines.