

Full Length Research Paper

Understanding the drivers of violent extremism in the African Sahel: A historical perspective

Emile Sunjo* and Francios Ndzi Nyadi

Department of International Relations and Conflict Resolution, University of Buea, Cameroon.

Received 20 February, 2024; Accepted 12 April, 2024

This article analyzes the historical drivers of violent extremism in the African Sahel, with a focus on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. It examines how historical factors have evolved to nurture a plethora of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) operating in the region, making it the epicenter of violent extremism in 2023. These historical factors include the influence of religion, Tuareg rebellions (1963, 1990, and 2012) in Mali, the spillover effects of the Algerian Civil War of 1992, the impact of the Libyan crisis in 2011, and the Fulani crisis in Central Mali. The study argues that historical drivers of violent extremism in the African Sahel have remained dormant for decades but were recently reignited by contemporary factors such as governance failures. The article is based on in-depth Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and the analysis of secondary sources. The findings of the study reveal that historical drivers of violent extremism in the African Sahel have persisted due to oral tradition and the use of information and communication technology (ICT), which has perpetuated extremist ideologies across generations. Therefore, strategies to counter violent extremism in the region must prioritize mainstreaming de-radicalization with alternate narratives, education, good governance, and economic development, rather than relying solely on a military combat-dominated approach.

Key words: Violent extremism, historical factors, violent extremist organisations, and African Sahel.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism has emerged as a significant global concern in the post-Cold War era. The escalation of violent extremism in Mali in 2012 and its subsequent spread into neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso is deeply rooted in historical factors. Over time, a convergence of multidimensional elements such as religious fanaticism, Tuareg rebellions, the repercussions of the 1992 Algerian Civil War, the fallout from the Libyan crisis, and the Fulani crisis in Central Mali have contributed to this phenomenon. Some of these factors have been progressively escalating since the 1960s and

continue to unfold in 2024. This historical evolution has led to the proliferation of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) operating in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, making the Sahel region a focal point of violence.

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2023:2), violent extremism in the African Sahel resulted in more deaths in 2022 than in Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) combined. Moreover, fatalities in the Sahel accounted for a staggering 43% of the global total in 2022, contrasting sharply with the mere one percent reported in 2007 (IEP,

*Corresponding author. E-mail: emile.sunjo@ubuea.cm.

2023:2). While numerous scholars have examined various aspects of this complex phenomenon, gaps and unanswered questions persist, necessitating further research. While some studies have explored the causes and consequences of violent extremism in a broader context, there is a crucial need for a historical perspective on the drivers of violent extremism in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

To comprehend this trend, this study delves into the historical dynamics that have contributed to the radicalization of these groups in the region. This article holds significance for other researchers, the countries under study, policymakers, as well as sub-regional and regional inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. It offers new insights into violent extremism in the African Sahel, contributes to academic discourse, and enriches the existing literature on the subject. For the countries under study, this research amplifies the voices of grassroots communities through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), thereby informing the formulation of context-specific policies. Similarly, the findings from this study underscore the imperative for robust and comprehensive regional security architecture to effectively address the threat of violent extremism.

According to Villalón (2022:16), the Sahel is characterized as a space where borders are porous and fluid, identities are multiple and flexible, and the past and present engage in dialogue, while political and economic systems undergo constant evolution and transformation. Dieng (2022:765) notes that the African Sahel is inhabited by a diverse population of approximately 150 million people, comprising ethnic groups such as the Fulani, Tuareg, Hausa, Kanuri, Songhai, Bambara, Zarma, Mossi, Dogon, and Arab communities. Each ethnic group possesses its indigenous language, tradition, and livelihood practices, including nomadic herding, agriculture, and trade, contributing to the region's rich cultural heritage.

The population and ethnicity of the African Sahel reflect its diverse historical, cultural, and geographic influences. However, this diversity, along with livelihood practices and governance, has been targeted by violent extremism since 2012. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2011:2), violent extremism involves advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, and political objectives. VEOs aim to dismantle existing political and cultural institutions and replace them with alternative governance structures aligned with totalitarian and intolerant ideologies (Bak et al., 2019: 8), emphasizing ideological underpinnings and the use of violence to achieve specific goals.

The diversity of violent extremism in the Sahel has been shaped, to some extent, by the actions of VEOs in the region. These activities can be traced back to two jihadists. Since the early 1960s, Tuaregs have expressed

grievances about marginalization by the central government and have advocated for an independent state of Azawad in Northern Mali, encompassing regions such as Ménaka, Kidal, Tessalit, Taoudenni, Gao, Tombouctou, and parts of Mopti (Samaké, 2023). The Tuareg separatist movement has evolved since 1963, with various armed factions emerging, some of which have aligned with Islamic jihadists.

The Islamic jihadists comprise the second group of non-ethnic VEOs that emerged in Northern Mali after the Algerian Civil War from 1992 to 2002 (Daoudi, 2020). During the war, VEOs such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC) took advantage of the porous borders between Northern Mali and Southern Algeria to constantly cross over to Malian territory to recruit new fighters and regroup. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (2019), the SGPC was established in 1998 and officially pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2006, becoming Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in early 2007.

After the war, the surviving jihadists crossed over to Northern Mali in the mid-2000s. In the years that followed, many Islamic VEOs emerged, such as the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), Katiba Macina, Ansarul Islam, Al-Morabitoum, and Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), founded by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Malian Tuareg who participated in the Algerian Civil War. These groups initially allied with the Tuareg VEOs to capture the Northern regions of Mali in 2012 and briefly established an Islamic State in the area before being pushed back by a joint operation of Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) and the French Forces in Operation SERVAL and Barkhane in 2013 and 2014. This weakened the structure of the VEOs in the area, allowing them to retreat and regroup.

To strengthen their tactical and operational position, these Islamists merged and formed the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in 2017 with Iyad Ag Ghali as the leader (Jared, 2021). In addition to JNIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) equally emerged in 2015 as a splinter from the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa, and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2016. According to the ECFR (2019), ISGS operated first in western Niger and Ménaka, in North-Eastern Mali, while also conducting several attacks on the Burkina Faso-Mali border. They attacked a high-security prison near Niamey, the capital of Niger in October 2016.

The motivations for these violent extremist organizations (VEOs) vary but are all rooted in historical contexts. For example, Al Mourabitoum seeks to revive a medieval version of Islam, while Katiba Macina aims to restore the ancient Macina Empire for Fulanis in the Liptako-Gourma region. Other groups strive to replace the Maliki version of Islam with Wahhabism and Salafism. The Maliki version of Islam, historically congruent with the cultures of the region, allowed for a generous margin of

coexistence with traditional religious practices, as noted by Lamin (2016:5). However, violent extremists seek to establish a pure and literal form of Islam by establishing Islamic states in the areas they control.

These VEOs in the Sahel are typically led by either Tuaregs or Fulanis and often operate along porous borders. Originating from the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where they have established footholds, they advance southward along the borders towards the littoral states of West Africa. They have expanded their activities along the border between Eastern Burkina Faso and Western Niger into Northern Benin and Togo, creating a new hotbed for violent extremism. Similarly, they have extended their reach along the borders between North-Western Burkina Faso and South-Eastern Mali into Northern Cote d'Ivoire, where they have launched a series of attacks. Remarkably, Ghana remains the only littoral state along the West African coastline that has not experienced attacks.

Historical drivers have culminated to make the African Sahel a focal point of violent extremism in 2024. These factors, dormant for decades, have been activated by contemporary events such as governance failures. According to a key informant from the Malian government, Fatoumata (2023), the roots of the situation in the African Sahel can be traced back to the early years of independence, when regional governments struggled to consolidate national unity and address the economic hardships and divisions inherited from the colonial era. Consequently, these factors are multidimensional and interconnected. Understanding the complexities of the current security challenges in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger requires tracing the historical roots of violent extremism in the region. After the introduction and context, other sections covered in this article include methodology and drivers of violent extremism in the African Sahel, such as the Tuareg rebellion, influence of religion, spillover effects of the Algerian Civil War, impact of the Libyan crisis, and the Fulani crisis in central Mali.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to describe, analyze, and draw deductions from the historical factors driving violent extremism in the African Sahel. Primary data collection involved conducting key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Twelve KIIs were conducted in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, comprising two security officers and ten civilians. These oral interviews were conducted onsite in various locations across the study countries. Civilian interviewees included government personnel, community leaders, civil society organization leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, and a researcher, providing multiple perspectives on the complex nature of violent extremism in the region. Additionally, three FGDs, one per country, involved community members with no leadership roles. The discussions were conducted face-to-face, with each group consisting of seven to ten participants, targeting men in Niger, women in Burkina Faso, and youth in Mali.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify respondents, who were selected based on their knowledge about violent extremism in the region. Saturation was achieved when no new information emerged from the interviews. Both KIIs and FGDs utilized a seventeen-question interview guide. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the data collection, analysis, and presentation processes. Anonymization was employed to conceal the identities of respondents, with pseudonyms used in the article to ensure anonymity and protect their identities. Secondary sources, including published and unpublished works such as books, articles, dissertations, theses, and scientific journal articles, obtained from online and offline libraries complemented the primary data. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze, interpret, present, and discuss the findings in a combined manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Tuareg rebellion

The Tuareg rebellion, which began in 1963, only three years after Mali gained independence from France, is a crucial historical factor that cannot be overlooked when studying the drivers of violent extremism in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Tuareg separatists initiated the rebellion, accusing the Malian government of marginalization and advocating for the creation of a Tuareg state in Northern Mali known as Azawad (Atallah, 2013:68). This sense of exclusion and neglect from the Malian government provided fertile ground for violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to thrive.

The Tuaregs, a Berber ethno-linguistic group, have a long and illustrious history in the African Sahel. According to Atallah (2013: 68), their origins trace back to the ancient Berber peoples who inhabited Southern Algeria, Libya, parts of Central and Northern Mali, Northern Burkina Faso, and North and Western Niger. As primarily nomadic pastoralists and traders, the Tuaregs have traversed the Sahara Desert for centuries, engaging in trade with various ethnic groups from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. Over time, they adapted to the desert environment, developing a unique way of life and playing a pivotal role in trans-Saharan trade as intermediaries between North Africa, West Africa, and the Mediterranean.

Their strategic location in the heart of the African Sahel brought them wealth and influence, allowing them to establish powerful confederations such as the Ifoghas and Kel Ahaggar, as noted by Keenan (2001: 4). However, the Tuaregs faced challenges from French colonial authorities and successive post-colonial governments. After resisting colonial conquest and pacification between 1893 and 1917, the Tuaregs signed a peace agreement with the French colonial authorities, who allowed them to maintain control over their territories as long as they did not challenge colonial rule (Lecocq, 2004: 89).

In the post-colonial period, efforts to consolidate national unity disrupted the local governance structure in

Northern Mali, leading to tensions and resistance from the Tuaregs, who sought to maintain their autonomy and control over their traditional lands (Atallah, 2013:68). The Malian government's divide-and-rule tactics further exacerbated the situation, perpetuating a sense of marginalization among the Tuaregs and fueling their desire to escape domination akin to the colonial era (Camara, 2019:16). President Modibo Keita's attempts to preserve national unity by strengthening administrative and military presence in the Northern region of the country conflicted with the aspirations of Tuareg local leaders, ultimately ending their privileges (Grégoire, 2013:8).

The brewing tension between the Tuaregs and the Malian government escalated into an armed rebellion in 1963 when Tuareg violent extremists attacked a FAMA post at Ménaka (Fatoumata, 2023). Lecocq (2004:89) contends that the integration efforts by the Malian government involved forced sedentarization, taxation, conscription, and suppression of Tuareg cultural and linguistic identity, sparking the rebellion. The uprising was brutally crushed by the FAMA, with assistance from French military advisers and air force, forcing many Tuareg fighters into exile. However, the desire for self-determination and autonomy persisted, leading to subsequent Tuareg uprisings in Mali.

In 1990, under the banner of political and armed groups, the Tuaregs launched another rebellion. Camara (2019:23) argues that this rebellion was fueled by inadequate development policies that failed to accommodate the return of young Tuaregs who fled the country after the brutal military response to the 1963 rebellion. Some of these young Tuaregs served Libya during the 1978-1987 war between Libya and Chad. After Libya's defeat in 1987, frustrated Tuaregs, reluctant to return, launched attacks on Malian military positions in the Northern region, demanding better political representation, an end to marginalization, and respect for their cultural identity (Berman and Florquin, 2005:49).

The 1990 rebellion lasted for six months before both parties agreed to dialogue. The Malian government engaged with Tuareg rebels, including groups like the Arab Islamic Front of Azawad (AIFA), the Revolutionary Army of Liberation of Azawad (RALA), Unified Movements and Fronts of Azawad (UMFA), and the main group representing Tuareg interests, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Azawad (PFLA), led by Iyad Ag Ghali. Peace agreements were signed, including the "Tamanrasset agreement" in the Algerian city of Tamanrasset, supplemented by the 1992 National Pact (Lecocq, 2010: 258). The terms included a ceasefire, prisoner exchange, and withdrawal of insurgent forces to cantonments, reduction of army presence in the North, integration of combatants into FAMA, administrative decentralization, and infrastructure funding allocation. However, the peace deal was poorly implemented, and mutual distrust persisted, leading to the violation of the

ceasefire and incomplete representation of Tuareg combatants (Keita, 1998:17).

In 1991, then-President Moussa Traoré was ousted in a coup d'état. Both the junta and Tuareg separatists affirmed the provisions of the Tamanrasset Agreement. Further consultations with various segments of society led to the signing of the National Pact in Bamako, the capital of Mali, on April 11, 1992 (Konaté, 2012:17). The pact addressed several issues, including the integration of former combatants into the FAMA and government, the establishment of a hierarchy of local and regional councils with genuine power devolution, resource allocation for national development, and the creation of commissions to oversee the pact's implementation. Keita (2019:17) argued that the National Pact was a meticulously crafted agreement resulting from genuine national debate and consensus.

Despite these initial efforts, the peace agreements failed to fully address the underlying causes of the conflict. This failure became evident with the resurgence of armed rebellions in the 2000s, as the Tuareg community felt that the Malian government had not fulfilled its commitments. Following the peace agreements of the early 1990s, the Malian government pledged greater inclusivity and development in the Northern region. However, these promises largely went unfulfilled, and Tuareg grievances remained unaddressed. In this context, Lecocq and Schrijver (2007: 142) argue that the failure of the peace processes led to a resurgence of armed rebellion and the emergence of several violent extremist organizations such as the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), the Arab Movement of Azawad (AMA), the Coalition of the People for Azawad (CPA), and the Patriotic Resistance Movements and Forces (PRMF). These VEOs demanded the creation of an independent state of Azawad, comprising parts of Central and Northern Mali. It was against this backdrop that the 2012 rebellion was launched, opening the floodgates to multiple VEOs with differing agendas. Since then, these VEOs have continuously carried out attacks in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, advancing southward toward the coastal states of West Africa such as Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire.

The influence of religion

Religion has indeed played a significant role in driving violent extremism in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. According to Soares (2021:554), Islamist violent extremist organizations (VEOs) operating in the African Sahel has often misinterpreted Islam to justify their violent actions, recruit followers, and mobilize resources. These groups are frequently influenced by external actors and ideologies such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State to further their interests. However, it's crucial to distinguish

between authentic religious teachings and the distorted interpretations utilized by these extremist factions. As highlighted by Malian religious leader Aboubacar in 2023, Islam has deeply influenced the social fabric of the region, shaping cultural norms and values.

Most of the people adhere to a moderate and peaceful interpretation of Islam. According to Sanneh (2016:4), Islam was part of the cultural landscape in the African Sahel by 950 AD when the Maliki version made its way into the region through North Africa. This version of Islam allows for the religion to coexist with the cultural practices of the people. However, the Islamist VEOs such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) and affiliates want this to stop. They aim to implement the Middle Ages version of Islam by creating an Islamic State in the territories they control. The Middle Ages Islam encouraged the pursuit of knowledge and the application of reason, especially in the fields of law and science. According to Lassner and Bonner (2010:122), Islamic law, or Sharia, was derived from the sources of the Qur'an, the Sunna, the consensus, and the analogy, and was interpreted and codified by different schools of jurisprudence, such as the Hanafi, the Maliki, the Shafi'i, and the Hanbali. Islamic law covers various aspects of personal, social, and political life, such as worship, family, inheritance, commerce, crime, and governance (Lassner and Bonner, 2010:128). Based on this, religious identity has been weaponised by violent extremists to garner support and recruit fighters from disillusioned people in the region. The rise of Salafist and Sharia law teachings in these countries influenced the surge and persistence of violent extremism.

Salafism, as a trend of Islamic revivalism, advocates for a return to the "pure" form of Islam and rejects later innovations or interpretations seen as deviating from the original message (Kane, 2021: 323). Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the MENA region, Salafism was influenced by figures such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. It spread to the Sahel and other parts of the Muslim world through migration, education, and transnational networks (Kane, 2021: 324). Salafism in the African Sahel is a diverse phenomenon encompassing various orientations, including activism and jihadism, and competing with other Islamic trends like Sufism (Kane, 2021: 4).

In recent decades, Salafism has gained popularity and visibility in the African Sahel, especially among youth and urban dwellers, due to factors such as the search for religious authenticity, dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation, exposure to global influences, and the availability of new media and communication technologies (Kane, 2021: 4). Salafism in the African Sahel has grown in popularity and visibility in recent decades, especially among the youth and the urban

dwellers, due to various factors, such as the search for religious authenticity and identity, the dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation, the exposure to global influences and discourses, and the availability of new media and communication technologies. Violent extremism has been used by numerous VEOs like Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*-affiliated groups to spread Salafism in the African Sahel. These jihadists have carried out attacks against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, the VEOs allied with the Tuareg fighters to capture Northern Mali, where they briefly established an Islamic State before being defeated by a joint operation of FAMA and French Forces. Similarly, they have captured swathes of territory in the Liptako-Gourma area bordering Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger where they have based their operations. However, Kane (2021: 327), argues that Salafism in the African Sahel is not necessarily synonymous with jihadism, and most Salafis in the region do not endorse or participate in violence.

Spill over effects of the Algerian civil war

The Algerian civil war is a key historical event that prompted the emergence and spread of violent extremism in the Sahel. The war took place from 1992 to 2002 stemmed from a political crisis when the Algerian government cancelled an election in 1992. According to Daoudi (2020: 2), in January 1992, the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF) overwhelmingly won the municipal elections, to the detriment of the ruling National Liberation Front (NLF). However, instead of accepting the Islamists' victory, the military promptly stepped in and cancelled parliamentary elections, banned the ISF, and arrested its leaders. This led to widespread disappointment and discontent among the Algerian population, sparking protests and eventually armed conflict. The civil war primarily pitted the Algerian defence and security forces on the one hand and the Armed Islamic Group (AIG), the Islamic Salvation Army (ISA) and affiliated VEOs such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC), later renamed Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), on the other hand. The conflict in neighbouring Mali and the ensuing chaos served as a conducive training ground for Algerian Islamist militants. A Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali who was a leading figure in the 1990 rebellion in Mali joined the fight in support of Islamist groups in Algeria. The cross-border movement was eased by the porous borders between Northern Mali and Southern Algeria. The vast region is largely ungoverned and home to longstanding illicit trafficking networks Buchanan-Clarke and Sibusiso (2021: 2). This free movement of individuals and weapons enabled the Algerian Islamist groups to seek refuge and regroup in Northern Mali. In 2002, after ten years of the civil war, the government of

Abdelaziz Bouteflika signed a peace deal with the Islamist groups and granted amnesty to the ex-combatants. However, not all the armed groups agreed to the peace deal. One such group was the SGPC, formed in 1998. The SGPC crossed over to the Malian side of the border and in 2006, it officially pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in early 2007 (ECFR, 2019).

One of the prominent figures to emerge from the Algerian Civil War was Iyad Ag Ghaly, a member of the Tuareg ethnic group. The Tuaregs had longstanding grievances of marginalization in Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Ag Ghaly initially fought in the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s and later joined Algerian Islamists in their armed struggle against the Algerian government. After the conflict ended, he returned to Mali. In Mali, Ag Ghaly established Ansar Dine, forging strong connections with local Tuareg rebel groups, particularly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA), which sought greater autonomy and recognition of Tuareg rights in Mali (Lebovich, 2013: 4).

These connections and alliances in Northern Mali enabled Ag Ghaly to establish Ansar Dine, which, along with AQIM, influenced and shaped the trajectory of the Tuareg rebellion in Mali. This paved the way for the emergence of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) such as the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa, Katiba Macina, Al-Mourabitoum, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

These VEOs gained control and influence in Northern Mali following the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, aiming to create an Islamic State and implement Sharia Law (Olawunmi, 2023:6). According to Koïta (2023), a Malian community leader, the Tuareg rebellion was initially driven by ethnic and political grievances, but the involvement of Islamist VEOs introduced a new dimension of ideology and religious extremism. These jihadists sought to impose their radical interpretations of Islam and establish Islamic law (Sharia) in the region, posing a security threat not only to Mali but also to international security.

The rise of Islamist VEOs further complicated and intensified tensions within the rebellion. The combined forces of Tuareg rebels and Islamists swiftly gained control over Northern Malian towns such as Kidal, Ménaka, and Timbuktu in March-April 2012, taking advantage of weak governance, porous borders, and the limited presence of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA). In an interview with Samaké (2023), a youth leader based in Timbuktu, he recounted (Appendix Table 1):

In April 2012, according to Sissoko three Islamist organizations—AQIM, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa—established their presence in the volatile Northern Mali with the aim of implementing Sharia (Islamic law). With the local authorities and administration

absent, including the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), violent extremists terrorized the population, forcibly marrying young people, publicly executing individuals, and imposing draconian punishments for perceived infractions of Islamic law, such as smoking or playing non-Islamic music. The oppressive actions of these groups drove thousands of people, particularly from the Tuareg and Arab communities, to flee their homes in fear.

Initially aligned with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA), the Islamist groups quickly asserted dominance over the Tuareg rebels within two months of capturing Northern Mali, expelling them from key cities like Gao and consolidating control over the region. This marked a significant shift, as the Islamist VEOs swiftly transitioned from operating in desert hideouts to governing urban centers, utilizing former administrative buildings, including properties once owned by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the late Libyan leader (Lebovich, 2013:4).

The success of the Islamist VEOs can be attributed to their more coherent command structures, superior equipment, greater financial resources, and support from certain local communities disenchanted with the NMLA's secularism. By June 2012, these groups effectively sidelined the MNLA and seized control of most of Northern Mali. To finance their extremist agendas, AQIM and the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa engaged in drug trafficking and kidnapping, targeting Western nationals. Ransoms paid by various governments, including Canada and numerous European nations, totaled between forty and sixty-five million U.S. dollars from 2008 to 2012 (Lacher, 2013:7).

While the Algerian civil war played a role in the rise of VEOs in Northern Mali, it is just one of many historical factors contributing to the complex dynamics of extremism in the Sahel. The recruitment and return of Tuareg fighters from Libya further fueled the conflict, exacerbating longstanding grievances and leading to a significant escalation in violence.

Impact of the Libyan crisis

The Libyan crisis, culminating in the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, had profound implications in the African Sahel. Gaddafi had long supported non-state armed groups across Africa, including Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in Northern Mali. Recognizing the Tuaregs' military prowess, Gaddafi closely aligned with them to enhance his regional influence. According to a key informant from the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), Aqqasen (2023),

Tuareg expertise in desert warfare stems from their deep understanding of the Sahara Desert, military tradition, and ability to adapt to the challenging conditions of arid landscapes. This perspective was echoed during a focus group discussion (FGD) with Nigerien men, who emphasized the Tuaregs' exceptional skills in guerrilla warfare, mobility, tracking, and survival, making them formidable in desert environments. The Libyan government actively recruited Tuaregs into Libyan military forces, capitalizing on their unrivaled knowledge and skills.

According to Adebajo (2011:1), Gaddafi switched from Pan-Arabism to Pan-Africanism in the 1990s in pursuit of his vision of a United States of Africa with a single military and currency. Before this time, he recruited and trained thousands of Tuareg fighters from Mali and Niger since the 1970s. He initially used the fighters as proxies in his regional interventions in Chad, Sudan, and Lebanon as argued by a Nigerien military key informant, Subané (2023). To take a step further, he aimed to establish a unified African military force and saw the inclusion of Tuaregs and other ethnic groups from neighbouring countries as a step towards achieving this goal. To accomplish his vision, Gaddafi sought to gain regional influence in the African Sahel including in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. He understood the strategic advantage of earning the loyalty of the Tuaregs, given their geographical location and their long-standing aspirations for self-determination (Adebajo, 2011:1). In this vein, Gaddafi saw the Tuaregs as a valuable proxy force that could spearhead his influence in the region and provided them with military training, equipment, and financial resources. Gaddafi's partnership with the Tuaregs helped him extend his influence deep into the Central Sahel and strengthened his regional power base. To this end, he recruited many Tuareg fighters into the Libyan army and increased the numbers in the wake of the Libyan crisis of 2011. Akinola and Ramontja (2023:2) argue that the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 unleashed unforeseen consequences such as protracted conflict in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

When this happened, Tuareg fighters who had left Mali to fight in Gaddafi's army looted weapons and returned to Northern Mali and Western Niger. Similarly, Carbone and Casola (2022:15) argue that the chaos in Libya led to a massive influx of an estimated ten to twenty thousand small arms looted from Libyan arsenals into Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This means that weaponry previously under Gaddafi's control now found its way into the hands of violent extremists. This influx of weaponry further escalated existing conflicts and enabled VEOs to acquire more firepower and influence. The most prominent VEOs to take advantage of the Libyan crisis were Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, Ansar Dine, and other allied extremist groups, which had long been active in the region but saw an

opportunity to expand their reach thanks to the tumultuous situation (Carbone and Casola, 2022:14).

The violent extremists capitalized on the porous borders and influx of weapons to strengthen their combat position and broaden their recruitment base. They exploited grievances among marginalized populations, where poverty, governance failures, and ethnic tensions were already prevalent (Krings, 1995: 58). Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa took advantage of this discontent that emerged within the Tuareg communities and radicalized young people into their ranks. The influx of fighters from Libya bolstered VEOs in Mali, with a rapid increase in attacks and the seizure of territory in the North. In the captured territories, VEOs implemented strict Islamic law. They targeted government installations, FAMa, and civil society organizations. The violence spilled over into neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso, as the VEOs expanded their operations beyond Mali's borders. According Hanun in 2023, a Nigerien civil society key informant, Niger was already grappling with security challenges, which the Libyan crisis escalated in the Tahua, Tillabéri, and Diffa regions. The country's vast and porous borders facilitated the movement of arms and fighters across the region, particularly the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region, where the VEOs gained footholds.

Similarly, Burkina Faso experienced a surge in violent extremism following the Libyan crisis. The increased availability of arms and the cross-border movement of fighters allowed Ansarul Islam and *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* to establish their presence in the country. According to a Burkinabe government official Atinouké in 2023.

The escalation of violent extremism in Burkina Faso since 2015 has resulted in nothing but desolation, causing enormous social, economic, and human consequences. On the social level, Burkina Faso is no longer perceived as a dream destination due to the activities of violent extremists, which has also instilled fear among residents. Burkinabe soldiers are mentally affected, and thousands of schools have been forced to shut down, leaving many children at home. Some children are exposed to the sound of gunfire daily, which may have long-term implications for their well-being, with some already exhibiting violent behaviour at a young age. Additionally, some minors below the age of 18 are forcefully recruited by violent extremist organizations as combatants. Economically, agriculture has stalled in certain areas because they are under the control of violent extremist organizations.

Attacks against defense and security forces (DSF), religious communities, and educational institutions have become more frequent. This surge in attacks has

displaced thousands of people and undermined stability not only in Burkina Faso but also in other countries in the region. A Burkinabe youth key informant, Bahadio (2023), recounts how the escalation of violent extremism in the country affected him and others in his region of origin, Sahel:

"The escalation of the conflict from Mali into Northern Burkina Faso brought untold suffering to many of us in the Sahel region. I was forced to leave my hometown and move to Ouagadougou, far from my family because the extremists targeted young men for forced recruitment into their ranks. I quit my job but felt obliged to send money to my family, which I left behind. It was a problem because even the banks were robbed and closed, so it was impossible to transfer money. Communication networks were all cut off, making it difficult to communicate with them and other relatives, who lived in fear and thought of death every day."

The Libya crisis had a cascading effect on the security dynamics of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The influx of weapons and fighters from Libya, coupled with governance failures and economic challenges in these countries, created fertile ground for violent extremist organizations to thrive.

Fulani crisis in central mali

The Fulani are a pastoralist and nomadic group found throughout West Africa. In Central Mali, the Fulani have a long history dating back to the ancient empires of Mali, Songhai, and Macina (Cissé, 2020:1). Over time, the Fulani, who constitute the fourth largest ethnic group with nine percent of the Malian population, have experienced numerous socio-political and economic changes. The fall of the Macina Empire played a role in the rise of violent extremism in the Liptako Gourma region, bordering Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. To understand this influence, it is important to consider the historical context and the grievances that have fueled the radicalization of Fulani communities.

The Fulani in Central Mali have traditionally engaged in cattle herding and transhumance, moving their livestock across vast areas in search of grazing lands (McGregor, 2017:28). This itinerant way of life allowed the Fulani to establish relationships with different communities along their migration routes. However, political shifts in the region, such as the rise and fall of empires, colonialism, and post-independence nation-building, altered their socio-economic standing. These events led to a sense of marginalization and discontent among the Fulani. During the colonial period, many Fulani pastoralists lost access to their traditional grazing lands due to policies that favoured sedentary farming communities (Cissé, 2020:2).

This loss of resources intensified competition for land and water resources, leading to increased tensions between the Fulani and other ethnic groups. Feeling marginalized and neglected, they began to harbor grievances against both the colonial authorities and the successive post-colonial governments.

The Liptako-Gourma region is predominantly inhabited by the Fulani population, also known as the Peuhl in the French language. During the existence of ancient empires, such as Mali, Songhai, and Macina, these entities provided a level of stability and protection for various ethnic groups in the region, including the Fulani. However, following the decline of these empires, the Fulani were left vulnerable without the protective umbrella they once enjoyed. This loss of support and stability has been a significant motivating factor behind the formation of the pro-Fulani Katiba Macina.

According to Diagana in 2023, a key informant from Mali, the aim of Katiba Macina is to establish a state reminiscent of the ancient Macina Fulani Empire. The collapse of traditional power structures created a vacuum that was exploited by other ethnic groups and armed factions in post-colonial Mali. Consequently, Fulani communities faced heightened insecurity and often found themselves targeted in inter-ethnic conflicts, such as the recurrent clashes with the Dogon people in the Liptako-Gourma region.

According to Diarra in 2023, a key informant, when the conflict between the Dogon and Fulani erupted in the Mopti region, the local population found themselves largely left to fend for themselves. With FAMa preoccupied in the Northern region dealing with the reclaiming of land seized by violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and local government administrators showing minimal effort to address the conflict, communities resorted to forming self-defence groups along ethnic lines. This situation provided an opportunity for Islamist elements to infiltrate, targeting the Fulani as potential recruits. The International Crisis Group (2020:1) asserts that the pressure on natural resources, particularly land, coupled with the failure of post-colonial governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to offer effective solutions to these challenges, exacerbated tensions. These tensions have created fertile ground for the proliferation of both Islamist and armed self-defence groups. The ethnic dimension of the conflict has been further heightened by the emergence of VEOs, which often recruit along ethnic lines. As inter-ethnic violence escalated, violent extremists expanded their operations into new territories in Central Mali, as well as the Northern and Eastern regions of Burkina Faso.

Boukhars and Pilgram (2023:6) contend that revenge seekers constituted a new contingent of recruits for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which emerged in 2015, and al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of Islamist armed

groups formed in 2017. These jihadists exploited the grievances of the Fulani community and presented themselves as defenders of their rights and interests. Their arrival further escalated inter-ethnic tensions in the region with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara being the most brutal VEOs in terms of attacks against civilians. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data project (ACLED, 2023), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin has carried out 180 attacks, scoring 33% of all the attacks between January and September 2023, while Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has carried out 160 attacks, amounting to 29% of attacks within the same period. It is important to note that not all Fulani communities have been radicalised or are supportive of violence.

The Dogon and Fulani constitute the two major ethnic groups in the Mopti region, comprising approximately 6 and 9% of Mali's population respectively (International Crisis Group, 2020:1). While the Dogon primarily engage in farming, the Fulani are predominantly herders. Decades-long political and economic tensions, particularly related to access to natural resources, have perpetuated discord between these two groups. The erosion of government control and the proliferation of small arms in the region have provided fertile ground for the emergence of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs).

Facing persistent marginalization and intermittent conflicts with other ethnic communities, some Fulani individuals have turned to VEOs as a means of addressing their perceived grievances.

Among these extremist groups operating in the Mopti region of Central Mali, along the Northern borders with Burkina Faso, is the Katiba Macina. Led by Amadou Koufa, this organization has played a pivotal role in propagating violent extremism in the tri-border (Liptako-Gourma) region spanning Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (International Crisis Group, 2020: 1).

Amadou Koufa emerged as a prominent figure within the Fulani community in Central Mali, particularly in the Mopti region, where the Fulani had long-standing grievances stemming from both colonial and post-colonial governance according to Diarra in 2023. Koufa capitalized on this discontent and his radicalization is attributed to personal experiences of marginalization, external extremist ideologies, and the broader socio-political context in the region. This provided fertile ground for Koufa to form the Katiba Macina.

In the Liptako-Gourma region, the Jowros, or noble Fulani (rimbé) pastoralists, who traditionally managed the movement of herds and access to pastures, faced resentment from some nomadic herders for practices perceived as predatory. Boukhars and Pilgram (2023: 8) suggest that the Jowros collaborated with local authorities and FAMa to restrict herders' mobility and access to pastoral resources, imposing exorbitant access taxes (Tolo) and transferring pastoral lands to farmers.

The emergence of Katiba Macina in 2015 promised to address these grievances and prohibited the commercialization of access to pastures. Koufa leveraged his position as a preacher and religious authority to attract followers and propagate a radical interpretation of Islam, quickly gaining popularity among disillusioned members of the Fulani community, who viewed Katiba Macina as a platform for asserting their identity and defending their communities.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis underscores the profound historical roots underlying the rise of violent extremism in the African Sahel. Extending across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, this phenomenon has been shaped by historical trends that have accumulated over time. This historical trajectory has given rise to a multitude of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) operating in the region, rendering the African Sahel the epicenter of violent extremism. While their motivations vary, they are all deeply intertwined with historical narratives.

For instance, Katiba Macina seeks to revive the ancient Macina Empire to empower Fulanis in the Liptako-Gourma region. Similarly, Al Mourabitoum aims to reintroduce Wahabist and Salafist versions of Islam from the Middle Ages, supplanting the Maliki tradition that has prevailed in the area since the latter half of the 10th century AD, a goal supported by allied extremist groups. The Maliki tradition, rooted in the cultural fabric of the region, traces its lineage back to the ancient empires of Ghana and Mali.

In light of these historical dynamics, the African Sahel has become a crucible of violent extremism, with its influence now extending southward towards the coastal West African states. These historical factors have lain dormant for decades, accumulating until contemporary events activated them. This underscores the complexity of addressing ideologically motivated violence, as radicalized individuals pass these ideologies to successive generations through oral tradition and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Consequently, strategies to counter violent extremism in the African Sahel must encompass a multifaceted approach, incorporating de-radicalization efforts, education initiatives, good governance reforms, and economic development programs, alongside kinetic measures.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Adebajo A (2011). Gaddafi: The Man Who Would Be King of Africa. The

- Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/26/gaddafi-legacy-meddling-africa>
- Akinola A, Ramontja N (2023). Violent Conflict in the Sahel: Causes, Dynamics, and Actors. In: Contemporary Issues on Governance, Conflict and Security in Africa. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 125-146.
- Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project (ACLED). (2023). Regional Overview, Africa. <https://acleddata.com/2023/09/21/fact-sheet-attacks-on-civilians-spike-in-mali-as-security-deteriorates-across-the-sahel/>
- Atallah R (2013). The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup. *Air and Space Power Journal – Africa and Francophonie* 4(1):66-79.
- Berman EG, Florquin N (2005). A growing and persistent threat to security. *ARMED AND AIMLESS* 385.
- Boukhars A, Pilgram C (2023). In Disorder, They Thrive: How Rural Distress Fuels Militancy and Banditry in Central Sahel. *Middle East Institute*. In Disorder, They Thrive: How Rural Distress Fuels Militancy and Banditry in the Central Sahel | Middle East Institute (mei.edu)
- Buchanan-Clarke S, Sibusiso N (2021). Violent Extremism in Africa: Citizen Perspectives from the Sahel Epicenter and Periphery. *Afrobarometer Policy Paper* (74):1-17.
- Camara Y (2019). The Political Foundations of the Tuareg Insurgency in Mali (Doctoral dissertation, Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School).
- Carbone G, Casola C (Eds). (2022). Sahel: 10 Years of Instability. Local, Regional and International Dynamics. Milan: Ledizioni LedPublishing.
- Cissé MG (2020). Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies.
- Daoudi A (2020). Algerian Civil War: Testimonies against Amnesia and for an Alternative History. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dieng A (2022). The Sahel: challenges and opportunities. *International Review of the Red Cross* 103(918):765-779.
- European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (2019). Mapping Armed Groups in the Sahel. https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/aqim#:~:text=AQIM%20began%20as%20an%20outgrowth,against%20military%20and%20government%20targets
- Bak M, Tarp KN, Liang CS (2019). Defining the Concept of 'Violent Extremism. Geneva Paper 24:19.
- Grégoire E (2013). Islamistes et rebelles touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités et ruptures. *EchoGéo*.
- Institute for Economics and Peace (IPE) (2023). Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World. *Vision of Humanity Report* No. 15. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/report/global-peace-index-2023/>
- International Crisis Group (2020). Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence. *Africa Report* No. 293.
- Jared T (2021). Examining Extremism: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin. Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin>
- Kane O (2021). Islam and Muslim Societies in the Contemporary Sahel. In: *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keenan J (2001). *The Tuareg: People of Ahaggar*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Keita K (1998). Conflict and conflict resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg insurgency in Mali. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 9(3):102-128
- Konaté DL (2012). La Crise au Mali: Recueil de Contributions. Société Malienne des Sciences Appliquées.
- Krings T (1995). Marginalisation and Revolt among the Tuareg in Mali and Niger. *GeoJournal* 36:57-63.
- Lacher W (2013). Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel. *WACD Background Paper* (41):1-16.
- Lamin S (2016). *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lassner J, Bonner M (2010). *Islam in the Middle Ages: The Origins and Shaping of Classical Islamic Civilisation*. Connecticut: Praeger.
- Lebovich A (2013). The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali. *Combating Terrorism Centre Sentinel* 6(6):4-9.
- Lecocq B (2004). Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The Teshumara Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society. *International Review of Social History* 49(12):87-109.
- Lecocq B (2010). Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali. Leiden: BRILL.
- Lecocq B Schrijver P (2007). The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25(1):141-166.
- McGregor A (2017). The Fulani crisis: Communal violence and radicalization in the Sahel. *CTC Sentinel* 10(2):34-40.
- Olawunmi K (2023). The Movement for The Liberation of Azawad. *The Defence Horizon Journal*. <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/liberation-terror-azawad/>
- Sanneh LO (2016). *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*. Oxford University Press.
- Soares B (2021). Islam and Muslim Societies in the Contemporary Sahel. In: *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2011). Policy on Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency. <https://www.usaid.gov/conflict-prevention-stabilization/document/development-response-violent-extremism-and-insurgency>
- Villalón L (Ed.) (2022). *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Interviews.

Name	Status	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
Aboubacar Issa (pseudonym)	Religious Leader	57	August 4 th 2023	Bamako, Mali
Cessille Diarra (pseudonym)	Researcher	33	July 25 th 2023	Bamako, Mali
Cheik Koïta (pseudonym)	Community Leader	61	August 11 th 2023	Bamako, Mali
Fatoumata Cissé (pseudonym)	Government Official	51	July 23 rd 2023	Bamako, Mali
Habibatou Diagana (pseudonym)	Women Leader	54	August 3 rd 2023	Kambila, Mali
Hanun Aïsha (pseudonym)	Civil Society Leader	35	July 20 th 2023	Niamey, Niger
Khalidou Bahadio (pseudonym)	Youth Leader	33	July 19 th 2023	Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
Maïmounata Atinouké (pseudonym)	Government Official (Burkina Faso)	42	May 13 th 2023	Accra, Ghana
Samaké Moussa (pseudonym)	Youth Leader	34	July 22 nd 2023	Bamako, Mali
Sissoko Konare (pseudonym)	Government Official (Mali)	49	May 14 th 2023	Accra, Ghana
Subané Nouradine (pseudonym)	Military (Niger)	36	May 10 th 2023	Accra, Ghana
Tamu Aqqasen (pseudonym)	Military (Mali)	37	May 13 th 2023	Accra, Ghana