DRIVERS OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much international attention has focused on countering violent extremism by military means. The current responses to religious radicalisation have been mostly kinetic, such as the roles played by MINUSMA, G5 Sahel, EUcap Sahel, Barkhane and bilateral operations. However, they have been less effective than had been hoped, due to a variety of aspects including their often negative reception by the local populations as well as a lack of adequate synergy between the organisations involved.

Against this background, this project has identified the main drivers which lead to radicalisation in the Sahel: Ethnic Conflicts, (Perceived) Ethnic Marginalisation, (Perceived) Economic Marginalisation, Pastoral Insecurity, Radical Preaching and Radicalisation in Prisons. Understanding these elements will help predict ongoing patterns of radicalization in the Sahel.

The key findings, based on data gathered from field research, on-line discussions and subsequent in-depth analysis, are:

➢ religion is not as significant a cause for radicalisation as might previously have been believed;

➢ unlike in other regions of the world, radicalisation in the Sahel regularly involves whole communities rather than just individuals;

➢ radicalisation in the Sahel often derives from a lack of opportunities and resources for local citizens, frequently linked to the issue of governance which often leaves large ungoverned areas;

➢ VEOs take advantage of such fertile areas and the dissatisfied communities living there to present themselves as an attractive alternative form of governance, offering economic and other benefits in return;

Therefore, combating radicalisation is not just a question of fighting extremist groups but also reducing perceived marginalisation as well as increasing economic opportunity in rural areas. Unless the drivers referred to in this document are addressed, radicalisation is expected to grow, often incorrectly attributed to religion.

Reframing religious radicalisation as competition for power and resources fought along ethnic lines could help to shift how we think about mitigation strategies to combat radicalisation.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Religious radicalisation is an ever-growing global phenomenon. It is a process which forms through strategy, structure and conjuncture, and involves the adaptation and sustained use of violent means to achieve articulated political goals. The process of radicalisation stems from the adoption of a long-term strategy in combination with short term tactics, each chosen from a variety of violent and non-violent options and in the service of goals which potentially evolve in the course of the process.[1]

A pertinent question is: How is religious radicalisation able to grow and what steps can be taken to limit its impacts in the region? Understanding radicalisation and how it shapes the communities' and governments' varied responses to it can greatly assist a better comprehension of its effects on significant issues such as: economics, education, gender roles, security, judicial reform and land use. The results of research into this topic could prove very useful in investigating new and/or improved Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)[2] measures, at least from the Religious Radicalisation perspective.

Crucially, state and international activities can affect radicalisation and thus limit its impact on society. For example, understanding radicalisation and the complex relationships between it and civilian populations can help the international community "limit civilian casualties, prevent displacement or promote development in war-affected areas"[3]. The legitimacy and success of interventions in reconstruction, reconciliation and reintegration is very often directly related to the level of understanding of the complexity of the entire scenario.

A recurring difficulty is the fact that any research on radicalisation in this region suffers from the scarcity and limited quality of the data. Data provided by state sources can be of varying utility and what is collected is often not available as it is often not open sourced. The published documents from certain states can contain inflated claims and/or suppress problematic aspects for propaganda purposes. Although NGO's also carry out research on radicalisation, for security reasons, limited help from local governments and lack of funding the results are often incomplete or only apply to specific locations.

This paper will broadly examine key elements for and consequences of religious radicalisation and will draw on seminal works in the field, as well as two specific case studies within the Sahel, with the goal of making a context-specific examination of the overarching themes. The first section of this document focuses on expert opinions in the existing literature and will define key elements of religious radicalisation in the Sahel. It will then examine the forms it can take and the main reasons why efforts to eradicate it are not being successful.

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[1] State or state sponsored radicalization will not be the main focus of this project
[2] https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/preventing-countering-violent-extremism-measuringup.pdf
[3] Arjona, A. (2016). Introduction. In Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics, pp. 1-20). Cambridge: Cambridge University

The second section of this research paper investigates religious radicalisation by way of a complex analytical process, examining cases with relevance to Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and Chad in order to assess the most relevant drivers. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are addressed in an appendix, as well as the issue of de-radicalisation, a term which is very often misused. Despite both topics being directly relevant to religious radicalisation, they fall outside the precise scope of this document. It is possible that this present work will act as a bridge to future projects more directly related to these two topics.

KEY ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISATION

'Religious Radicalisation' can be defined in a number of ways. However, this paper has used the working definition set out in the introduction. As with the concept of 'terrorism', there is no universally agreed definition of the term. Somewhat confusingly, the terms can sometimes be employed interchangeably.[4] The diversity of what may constitute 'violent extremism' has, to some extent, been formed by the actions of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram, which use messages of hate and violence as well as religious, cultural and social intolerance.[5] In doing so, groups engaged in violent extremism often misrepresent and misuse religious beliefs, ethnic differences and political ideologies to legitimize their actions as well as to recruit and retain their followers. For this reason, much of the focus of this paper has been on the role of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO) as the significant causes of radicalisation, religious or otherwise.

Radicalisation is influenced by many mechanisms and factors, ranging from changes in opportunity, structure and other macro level factors, to changes in predispositions and motives at the micro level. Historically, most of the academic literature on VEOs has provided simplistic definitions of the term. It had tended to emphasize the armed groups or their militants, ignoring multiple paths in which states determine the occurrence, development and decline of violence. Radicalisation processes take place in the context of the state and typically involve claims to the state. States can respond in many different ways. They can resist changes and concessions demanded by social movements, opposition groups or external contenders. They can also attempt to physically repress these organizations by force, or they can institutionalize the changes and demands, or part of them. To complicate matters further, states can respond in any combination of the aforementioned ways.[6]

How the state responds is simultaneously shaped by multiple factors. However, a central element regarding these factors is the existing interactive relationship between the state and its challengers. As Bosi and Uba write "protest and repression, but also concession and co-operation, are closely inter-related via reciprocal relationships. There are not "magic" responses able to dampen protests. The impact of political and institutional responses should be understood in their context."[7] Any reading on how and when radicalisation develops needs to study the interaction between the state and VEOs.

The question remains as to whether certain types of regimes are more likely than others to experience the radicalisation process. Unfortunately, no clear answer exists. Research suggests

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[4] https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalisation-violent-extremism.html
[5] Cooke, Jennifer, Johnson, Caleb, Sanderson Thomas "Militancy and the Arc of Instability: Violent Extremism in the Sahel" Centre for Strategic and International Studies, September 2016
[6] Ibid
[7] Bosi, L. and k. Uba. "Political and institutional Confrontation in Protest Cultures: A companion", edited by K. Fallenbrach, M Klimke, J. Scharloth (Berghahn Books: Oxford, 2016)

that social-revolutionary violence is more prevalent in the context of regime transitions, while ethno-nationalist violence is found in a broad spectrum of regimes, from democratic to authoritarian, where societies are deeply divided.

Governance

Governance is a paradigm providing a lens through which the key elements for stability in the Sahel can be viewed. Without good governance, there can be no security, no democracy, no human rights protection nor any sustainable development. Without good governance many other issues, for example the empowerment of women, will remain elusive. Governance refers to the way in which power is distributed and shared, and how policies are prioritised, formulated and implemented. The term 'governance' is considered to be more all-encompassing in scope than 'government' as it also involves the role of: state and non-state actors (the private sector, civil society organisations and transnational networks, VEO controlled areas); national, international and sub-national organisations; and formal and informal decision-making processes, such as institutions, norms and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

The Sahel is a region characterised by ease of movement between states. These "open" boarders have always been problematic for centralized political authority. Governments of the Sahelian countries act and react in a context which includes other actors, both non-governmental (international non-governmental organisations [NGOs], local civil society organisations and traditional hierarchies and authorities) and intergovernmental (regional and international organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, development policy partners and so forth). Interventions aiming at reducing risks linked to migration and instability – a method commonly referred to by academics as "securitisation" – have demonstrated distorted impacts on local governance concerning mobility, demography and the effects of climate change.

Many countries in the region are battling structural weaknesses. The distance between citizens and the state, for example, is one of the most pressing root causes of radicalisation and instability. A securitised approach ignores these internal causes of instability which lie in the governance sphere: corruption, unequal access to justice and the absence of the state, to name but a few.

The hybrid model of governance which characterizes the Sahel is based on the personalisation of politics and a strong connection with traditional powers. Although this solution has historically granted a degree of stability, in the past 5 years it seems to be showing signs of strain. To comprehend the complex political dynamics which shape the Sahel area and its responses to VEOs and radicalisation, all the factors listed above need to be fully understood and taken into account.

Security

In recent years, an increased focus on security has caused tension in the Sahel to become even more acute, with a proliferation of initiatives and strategies seeking to control and to restrain unchecked freedom of movement in an effort to curb migrant flows and to forestall the spread of VEOs throughout the region. The principal insurgent activities in the Sahel are attributable to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Ahlas-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (Boko Haram), while instability in Libya sees the proliferation of small and light weapons moving south.[8]

The youth bulge in these ungoverned spaces, where citizens have felt little government impact and where development indices are even lower than the average, has also fed insurgent groups with fighters – a situation which they have leveraged by the use of terror attacks. The fact that governments in the Sahel are among the poorest and the most heavily indebted countries in the world, in addition to the perceived weak state structure and decades of corruption, has hindered national security forces from containing the VEOs. The increasingly violent armed threats necessitated the formation of the G5 Sahel multinational military alliance. In spite of this alliance, insurgency attacks have increased exponentially. Between 2016 and 2019, insurgency attacks have been reported by the UN to have increased fivefold.[9]

Economy

Instability and fragility in the Sahel are driven by numerous issues which negatively impact the economies of the nations, in particular: land pressures from rapid population growth; high demographics; environmental degradation; climate volatility in countries already prone to desertification, drought and flash floods; poor basic infrastructure (power and, more importantly, water); hunger and malnutrition; and a lack of economic opportunity, particularly for young women and men. These factors have created what a World Bank document labelled a 'fragility trap'.[10] Disillusioned and disenfranchised communities who feel excluded and abandoned by the state are sensitive to messages challenging the status quo and offering economic opportunities. Very often, VEOs focus their narratives on the failure of official forms of governance to address economic issues.

VEOs have provided communities with basic services, Sharia-based justice mechanisms and economic opportunities often deliberately doing so in a discriminatory manner to further deepen existing tensions between communities. In some areas in the central Sahel, VEOs have been able to put governance systems in place which communities view as more effective and efficient than those of their own government. Additionally, VEOs have provided mechanisms for communities to

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[8] https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788833652054.pdf

[9] https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1054981

[10] https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/world-bank-group-sahel-and-great-lakes-initiatives

express their grievances. To many members of these communities, VEOs represent structure, in contrast to the government's failure to respond to citizens' needs (economic and other).

Community engagement

Like the topics above, 'community engagement' is an incredibly broad term. Literature on the Sahel, as well as SMEs, consistently argue that for societies to effectively combat radicalism, participants need to reflect the social issue of the community "through the involvement, or rather non-exclusion, of members that are marginalised or discriminated against, such as women, *cadets sociaux*, ethnic tribe members, minorities, refugees, returnees, former slaves, etc."[11] A UN report stated: "…they need to be part of both problem definition and the search for a solution. The only way to avoid reinforcing existing conflicting or tense relationships, injustices and grievances within a community is an in-depth knowledge of existing conflict dynamics, stakeholders and their roles. Context analysis needs to inform the proposed interventions in a manner that it does not clash with the logic of communities' values and practices."[12]

Community members of the Sahel who were interviewed reported living in conditions of compromised safety, with the security forces lacking accountability and transparency. The youth bulge is another major social issue requiring due consideration. An important P/CVE was seen to be the creation of projects which involve the youth during each step, teaching them tools to address and resolve grievances as well as engaging them in activities designed to improve their opportunities. The same seems to be true for other marginalised groups.

Given the limited educational opportunities, and thus seen largely in the context of limited potential for obtaining a sense of worth, a number of academic papers and interviews with SMEs reveal that grievances are often related to the lack of equal access to elementary or religious education, and a general lack of opportunities for livelihood generating skills. The latter was coupled with frustrations about social respect and recognition, usually obtained through employment. For instance, high unemployment rates are considered in some regions as a greater source of insecurity than the threat of VEOs. In other cases, the concept of borders and their closing for security reasons directly clashes with traditional migratory routes for labour.

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[11] http://www.unicri.it/evaluation-pilot-project-countering-violent-extremism-regions-maghreb-and-sahel-preliminary-findings

[12] http://www.unicri.it/evaluation-pilot-project-countering-violent-extremism-regions-maghreb-and-sahel-preliminary-findings

DRIVERS OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISATION IN THE SAHEL

Following the first section and the completion of the detailed research into the existing literature, and bearing in mind the previously mentioned data limitations, this project then went on to determine the most relevant drivers of religious radicalisation in the Sahel by way of an in-depth analysis. This involved the use of qualitative and quantitative research, consulting with SMEs from the region, the completion of questionnaires and a series of webinars which were held to challenge and strengthen the findings. This second section, therefore, provides an overall analysis of radicalisation in the Sahel from 2015 to 2020.

- **Qualitative and Quantitative research**

Comprehensive qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were carried out for this project. The former involved analysing the data with the help of statistics to yield unbiased results. The latter investigated specific experiences, with the intention of describing and exploring meaning through text, narrative or visual-based data, by developing themes exclusive to that set of participants.

- **Subject Matter Experts (SME)**

The SMEs who participated came from a broad background giving the authors an in-depth perspective of the issues of radicalisation in the Sahel. The SMEs from the regions included government officials, academic professors, religious leaders, military personnel, aid organizations, de-radicalised individuals, DfID/FCDO, Afcom, the UN, as well as individuals who lived in areas targeted by VEOs. The findings were paired with similar inputs from SMEs on the Sahel from outside the region.

- **In-depth Analysis**

The panel of selected analysts identified sixteen drivers of religious radicalisation.[13] An in-depth analysis was used to identify their relationship to each other, thereby identifying the most important ones.

- **Questionnaires**

A second methodological approach which involved in-depth questionnaires from two case studies in Chad and Nigeria was then overlaid onto the results. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, we used in-country research experts to carry out two different questionnaires: one on governance and radicalisation and one for de-radicalised individuals.

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[13]   The sixteen drivers identified were: Radicalisation in Prisons, Presence of Foreign Armed Forces, Presence of UN Mission or International Organizations, (Perceived) Economic Marginalisation, (Perceived) Ethnic Marginalisation, Pastoral Insecurity, Ethnic Conflicts, Institutions, Economic Development, Governance, Rule of Law, Gender, Climate Change, Radical Preaching, Demographic Growth, Human Rights Situation

- **Webinars**

From 30 September 2020 to 2 October 2020 a series of webinars were held with SMEs from the Sahel who took part in rigorous debates on our findings.

Once the entire process as described above was complete, **the six drivers explored below emerged as the most relevant**. Since Governance figured so regularly and in relation to each of the other drivers, its effect has been directly incorporated into the analysis of each of the six rather than dealing with it as a single driver.

Ethnic conflicts

There are three factors in common between the countries in the Sahel region which are being studied: The first is political independence from colonialism in the 1960. The second is the military nature of the current political regimes. In most cases, regimes where the military remains a strong factor in political affairs prevail. The third is that, in the half century since the end of colonialism, no government in this region has been overthrown by a religion-based VEO nor has one ever taken power. Insurgents and armed groups are peripheral: insurgents have occupied a region and, at most, have imposed local authorities which are historically temporary. In the Sahel, ethnic relationships underlie much, if not all, political activity. A state's goal is based on the maintenance of a single authority through which access to public and private resources flow. This system often leads to a hybrid structure in which personalized rule coexists with modern bureaucracy, resulting in what many academic papers and nongovernmental reports have labelled as struggling governments. The efficacy of the state may vary but is largely shaped by ethnic identities.

"Ethnic" relates to the presence of a substantial population sharing one or more traits which define ethnicity (an ethnic group) and its concentration in a particular region. Ethnic groups are one of the best units for analysis since ethnic relations underlie significant political activity in the Sahel. As Scarritt and Mozaffer wrote, "ethnicity, relative to other bases of social cleavage is a cost effective strategic resource for organizing collective and political action. Ethnic cleavages, therefore, are the dominant ones in electoral and party opposition". Ethnic groups, although neither permanent nor static, are relatively stable, important social and political units within the Sahel states. Reframing ethnic conflicts as political competitions for power and resources should shift how we think about mitigation strategies to combat radicalisation. Violence in the Sahel has increased in the last half decade; there were roughly 2,600 fatalities related to VEOs in 2019 alone. The role of radicalisation and VEOs stoking intercommunal difficulties has been one of the leading reasons for this growing instability in the region.

Ethnic conflicts, and the VEOs associated with them, are perceived to be the growing reason for religious radicalisation in the Sahel. These preconditions underpin the historical treatment of ethnicity and territory as essential sources of national identity. As Mozaffar and Scaritt write: "In public international law, ethnicity and territory correspond, respectively, to two distinct criteria of

national identification, citizenship by descent and citizenship by birth. Several factors however, complicate the relationship between the two criteria and their straightforward application in devising territorial solutions to ethnic conflict. The first factor concerns the essential territorial basis of the modern state. Members of an ethnic group may occupy an imprecisely defined territory or may predominate in a well-defined one. In either case the territory may not coincide with the boundary of the sovereign state. The problem of course is compounded if members of the same ethnic groups are concentrated in adjoining territories under the jurisdiction of two sovereign states."[14]

Currently, ethnic conflict is intensifying and is increasing the scale and complexity of the instability in the region. VEOs are using ethnic stereotypes to provoke ethnic violence in the Sahel, manipulating the increased insecurity and intercommunal tensions as a tool for radicalisation. For example, although conflict between pastoralists, semi-pastoralists and sedentary populations has always existed, violence caused by it was relatively uncommon. In the past 9 years the rise of VEOs has led to crises and an outpouring of violence between communities. The growing insecurity threatens communities and is also threatening the social fabrics that have traditionally characterized Sahelian society.[15]

Distribution of the Fulani Ethno-Linguistic Group in West Africa
Source: SWAC/OECD
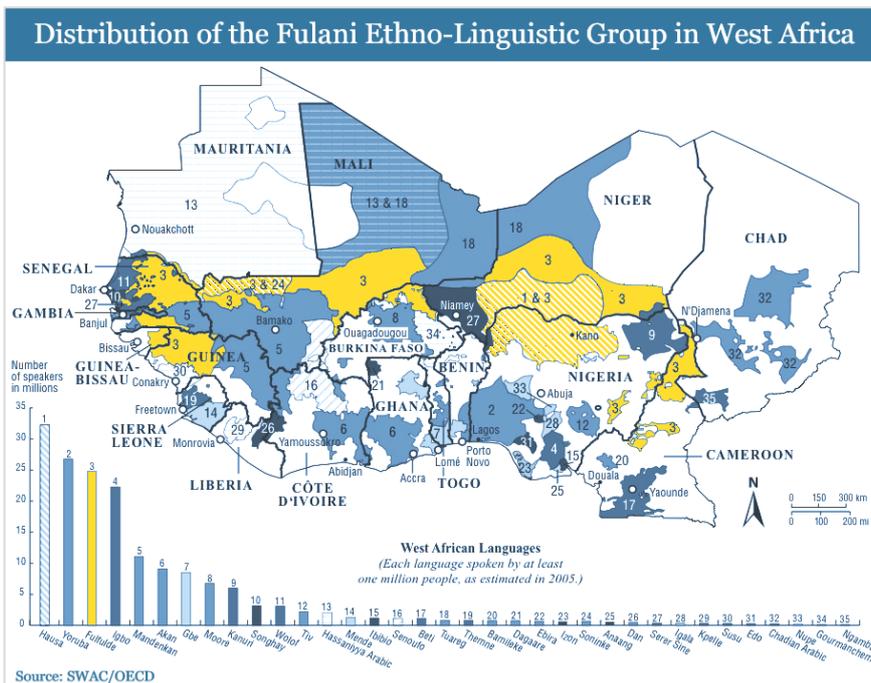
With this growing insecurity in rural regions across the Sahel, many different communities have decided to organize themselves to defend against VEOs, bandits and criminal organizations. These self-defence militias often act outside the boundaries of the state and may seem to be contributing to insecurity. Paradoxically, they are often seen to create additional challenges for the state. The government and international security forces are sometimes perceived to be hostile to the communities which can further reinforce the need in the communities for a militia.

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[14] Mozaffar, Shaheen and Scarrit, James "Territorial autonomy is not a viable option for managing ethnic conflict in African plural societies" p.231

[15] Ammour, Laurence. "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel" African Centre for Strategic Studies, February 2020

Further complicating matters, certain communities, an example being the Fulani, can be perceived as being supportive of the VEOs by members of other communities.[16] For some communities, accepting or tolerating VEOs may sometimes serve as a form of protection. This cooperation undermines security efforts and aggravates tensions between neighbouring communities and ethnic groups. VEOs often operate in the Sahel by causing tensions between ethnic groups. The reason why is relatively straightforward; by triggering ethnic conflict the VEOs can present themselves as a viable entity for protecting and governing that region. As Ammour recently wrote: "By employing identity-based arguments to sharpen rivalries between communities, purposely ethnicizing tensions, violent extremist organizations seek to exacerbate social conflict between community-based armed groups that resist their influence. In this way, militant groups play communities against one another, imposing their laws through persuasion or coercion and promising impoverished youth immediate profits and a prosperous future. They then use religious indoctrination to justify their actions."[17] The VEO attacks and the need to protect communities have led to a proliferation of self-defence militias with an "ethnic" base (Fulani, Bambara, Dogon, Mossi). The UN, academic literature and SMEs have stated that the rise of these ethnic militias, at times, has been advanced by national governments, which have armed and supported them, giving what the African Centre for Strategic Studies calls: "legitimacy to ethnic conflict, which in turn has fuelled radicalisation."[18]

The current instability in certain Sahel states (such as Mali and Burkino Faso) is likely to worsen with the spread of ethnicity based militias and VEOs which will take advantage of the worsening intercommunal relations. If the trajectory does not see significant change in the short to medium term, mass population displacement and an intensification of radicalisation could result.

(Perceived) Ethnic Marginalisation

Recent research has concluded that ethnicity is not the driving force of the Sahel conflicts but a lever used by political actors to mobilize supporters in pursuit of power, wealth and resources.[19] Often in the Sahel it has been stated that there exist "politically relevant" and "politically irrelevant" communities with regards to political decision making in the states. Ethnic communities are not always afforded similar political relevance in national politics. "Politically irrelevant" communities are effectively excluded from the national political agenda within certain Sahel states. Ethnic communities which have been politically excluded from the national debates,

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[16] For more on this see the section of Pastoral Insecurity.

[17] Ammour, Laurence. "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel" African Centre for strategic Studies, February 2020

[18] Ammour, Laurence. "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel" African Centre for strategic Studies, February 2020

[19] Mweyang Aapengnuo, Clement. *Misinterpreting Ethnic Conflict in Africa* Africa Center for Strategic Studies (April 30, 2020)

leading academic literature has argued, have often faced inequalities such as increased risk of communal violence, heightened levels of distress migration and increased poverty and coping strategies during periods of compound disasters.[20] As a result of political exclusion, the latest academic research and reports by NGOs seem to reveal startling evidence of uneven political representation.[21] Marginalisation excludes ethnic groups from having political and economic opportunities such as access to top political, civil service and military positions. A government's recognition and support for local and regional structures can depend on the degree to which it perceives such arrangements as being to its advantage.[22]

Militant groups have begun to penetrate the social fabric of many communities and take advantage of existing tensions between them, other neighbour communities and governments. The founder of the Islamic state in greater Sahara (ISGS), Abu walid al Sahrawy recognized as far back as 2013 that intercommunal tensions present an opportunity to antagonize, thereby creating social discord. He would wait for intercommunal conflicts to break out and then exploit the stigmatization of ethnic minority groups to spur recruitment.[23] By drawing on tensions between marginalised groups, VEOs in the Sahel establish their own governance space and present themselves as the most viable entity capable of providing security and economic opportunities in the region. These VEOs pit these at-risk communities against local and state government institutions, promising economic and cultural prosperity. The militant groups then use religious indoctrination to justify their actions. It has been reported that governments, at times, cannot effectively respond to the community's plight because of limited human, financial, institutional and political will.[24] VEOs use this lack of governmental support, incorporating local grievances to create recruitment narratives centred on perceived marginalisation.

The governments in many Sahel countries have mobilized and increased their security structures. However, the security responses have failed in certain cases to address the issues of marginalisation. Extremist groups such as FLM, Anasaroul Islam and ISGS have targeted security forces, teachers, civil servants and community members who are seen as collaborating with government representatives. The void created by diminished government representatives allows the militant groups more leverage to assert influence in the affected communities. Extremist groups have purposely tried to exploit social divides to encourage instability.

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[20] Raleigh, Clionadh. *Political Marginalisation, Climate change, and conflict in African Sahel States* International Studies Review (2010) 12 P.73

[21] Pelling, Mark. Dill, Kathleen. Natural disasters as catalysts of political actions Briefing paper, London Chatting House (2006)

[22] Many academics have noted the disadvantaged position and low political weight of those living in marginal lands, or with nomadic/pastoral livelihoods.

[23] Le Roux, Pauline. *Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (June 10, 2019)

[24] Le Roux, Pauline. *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel* Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (December 2, 2019)

Many academic and NGO reports state that VEOs exploitation of social divides has in turn led to militarization of many communities where the government cannot or will not protect the citizens.[25] There has been a proliferation of self-defence militias with an "ethnic" base (Fulani, Bambara, Dogon, Mossi to name but a few). Without government support and oversight, some of these militias have assumed law enforcement powers and apply their own justice. At times these militias have carried out extra-judicial executions and massacres.[26] These events bring to the fore the challenges the government has of correctly differentiating between community militias, VEOs, criminal groups and gangs. This confusion allows militant groups to exploit the insecurity of fringe communities.[27] The reigning insecurity in these regions is likely to become further entrenched by the proliferation of marginalised community-based militias and extremist groups who take advantage of worsening intercommunal relations.

(Perceived) Economic Marginalisation

The Sahel is one of the poorest regions in the world. It faces the challenges of extreme poverty, the effects of climate change, frequent food crises, rapid population growth, fragile governance, corruption, unresolved internal tensions as well as the risk of violent extremism and radicalisation.[28] With these extreme challenges, it has been widely reported that a vacuum in the economy has formed, leading to high unemployment and underemployment. Unfair taxation and corrupt state authorities paired with limited job opportunities has led to economic disparity and is one of the key reasons for radicalisation in the Sahel.[29] In surveys carried out with de-radicalised individuals who had been in Boko Haram and ISWAP, they identified economic opportunities as one of the strongest drivers for joining.[30]

Illegal trafficking across the Sahel, which involves goods ranging from cigarettes and stolen cars to drugs, weapons and human beings, has evolved over the decades into an interconnected economy that encompasses almost all of the Sahel.[31] At stake are business interests, alliances and rivalries of state officials, tribes or factions which often do not identify as coming from one specific state, but instead identify with a specific group or region. Competition over this trade has been going on for decades and is seen as a "… long-cherished symbol of autonomy and control

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[25] For one example see http://www.unicri.it/evaluation-pilot-project-countering-violent-extremism-regions-maghreb-and-sahel-preliminary-findings

[26] For one of the latest instances of this see the article *Burkina Faso: Residents' Accounts Point to Mass Executions* Human Rights Watch (July 8, 2020)

[27] Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel (Sahel CVE Research)

[28] European Union External Action Service Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel

[29] https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Mercy%20Corps_Mali_Hope%20and%20Fight_Report_Eng_Sept%202017_0.pdf

[30] Please see the survey results in the appendix of this document.

[31] One individual interviewed for this report said drug use in northern Nigeria is at an epidemic level.

and an important part of both social practices and shifting political alliances."[32] The rise of the central government control over the economy and globalization has encountered great resistance from this traditional trade.

The void created by diminished government and economic independence of communities allows VEOs more leverage to assert influence in the affected areas. Over time, a growing share of these groups' activities has involved violent attacks on civilians. Once VEOs have successfully targeted a state's economy, they seek to establish their own economic space and present themselves as the most viable entity for providing economic options for the region, with varying results. To participate in the economy under the VEO, one would often have to be seen as a member, which obviously encourages radicalisation. The VEOs also use these decade-old systems of trafficking to help fund their acts of terrorism.

Disillusioned and disenfranchised communities who do not have economic opportunities feel excluded and abandoned by the state and are also susceptible to the VEOs message of challenging the status quo and offering new opportunities. Surveys carried out in Chad and Nigeria for this project strongly reflected this. As mentioned, the VEOs have provided communities with services, which usually means access to forms of justice and security, but not necessarily of an economic nature. The VEOs almost always target state institutions and economies, exploiting economic social structures. Often in urban areas, economic capital is the more influential factor. In some regions of rural Sahel, however, a young man's value is determined by the perception of how he can provide for his family and community.[33] Here, it has been reported that male status is more dependent on social values such as honour and courage. Economic factors, however, have become more important as a means of improving or securing their social status. VEOs offer a pathway for the male youth to challenge the social hierarchy and status quo by giving them resources which help them with economic (and other) status building tools, thereby allowing them to secure and/or improve their social status among their peers and the community. It is a short cut, where economic opportunities are otherwise extremely limited, to climb the ladder and project the image of economic and social power.

Pastoral Insecurity

Pastoralism, one of the leading sources of income for rural populations across the Sahel, has increasingly become associated with violent conflict in recent years. Research has shown that pastoralism-related insecurity stems from a confluence of stressors, including climate change, weak governance and regional insecurity. It leads to repeated incidents of intercommunal violence linked with significant security challenges such as civil wars and violent extremism, often

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[32] Jourde, Cedric "Shifting through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel" Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, September 2011

[33] https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b7400c3a.html

with a knock-on effect on international peace and security. Mobile pastoralism is where rural communities migrate alongside their livestock and maintain shared resource-management systems to ensure access to water and land resources.34 Between 30 and 50 percent of the Sahel's population is involved in pastoralism and it is a significant source of economic activity for both rural and urban communities through the production of meat, milk, leather and other secondary products. Despite their large share of the population and their economic importance, most pastoralists receive limited public services in the peripheral areas they inhabit, resulting in low access to education and high rates of malnutrition.35 Conflict between farmers and herders and the various ethnic groups is a long-standing issue going back centuries. However VEOS have been increasingly exacerbating the tensions for their own benefit.

The reported absence of the state in some areas leaves space for VEOs to offer themselves as security to the pastoralists. As one author in Mali wrote: "The perceived arbitrary nature of the state, as manifested through its security forces and the corruption of its judicial system, was contrasted with the effectiveness of Ansar Dine, under whose rule corruption and local banditry was drastically reduced."[36] Rather than ideology, identity-based conflicts are the reasons for radicalisation in the Sahel.[37]

Leading research on pastoral insecurity has concluded that the more a state loses the trust of its citizens, and the more the state presence shrinks in a region, the more Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) take over control.[38] As VEO popular support grows, the role of the increasing number of women in the organization also increases: providing supplies, shelter, goods or supplies, acting as cooks and laundresses and Informants.[39] Women are important influencers in the rural communities in the Sahel: "Elder women are key mobilizers in Sahelian communities and may encourage men to join VEOs".

Radical Preaching

Radicalised preaching is also often considered as both one of the starting points and the driving forces behind the process of radicalisation. It is seen that when an (often young) individual is, step by step, becoming imbued with radical religious ideas, they also become more and more

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[34] For more on this see the UN document on UN Peacekeeping Operations and Pastoralism-Related Insecurity: Adopting a Coordinated Approach for the Sahel https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2007_UN-Peacekeeping-Operations-and-Pastoralism-Related-Insecurity.pdf

[35]   https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2007_UN-Peacekeeping-Operations-and-Pastoralism-Related-Insecurity.pdf

[36] For more on the lack of transparent judiciary please see the chapter on Radicalisation and the prison system

[37] For more on this please see the chapter on Ethnic conflict

[38]   https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2007_UN-Peacekeeping-Operations-and-Pastoralism-Related-Insecurity.pdf

[39] "Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel" USAID, July 2020

radicalised until reaching the "tipping point", where they would take the step 'from talk to action'; from religious ideas to violent action. Radicalised preaching obviously plays a key role.

However, the analysis of the literature and the findings of this project would indicate that, in fact, religion is far less important as a primary driver of radicalisation than previously thought. It tends to come into play only after VEOs have used economic or other factors to convince local populations that they should take advantage of their organisation. Then the religious aspect is used to further cement the decision.

In recent studies, radical religion-inspired terrorism has been seen to be on the rise in the Sahel and North Africa. Radical preaching is playing a leading role in this upsurge. There are many techniques to delivering these religious radicalisation messages that make them very effective. Though radicalised preaching does vary from country to country, broadly speaking, radicalised preachers target people (mostly the youth) to embrace the ideology of violent religion-based VEOs by examining local conditions which they live in and offering simple solutions.

The radicalised ideology often preached by charismatic ideologues through a process of targeted persuasion exposes the individuals to ideas and debates. The preaching is also tied to providing support to the communities. Local religious groups play a significant role in the communities. As stated above, these concepts of religious indoctrination are often tied to humanitarian assistance and social services.

The targeted youth often have poor economic and educational prospects, and their role in society leads them to find the messages being delivered to be very promising. They provide (mostly men) with a sense of belonging, identity and purpose, among other factors. Community and peer pressure is also a strong factor in joining. In some cases, the school systems (such as Madrassas or Almajiri school systems) in rural areas are used for radical preaching. Having a captive population wanting to be educated, fundamentalist clerics have tailored their message for radicalisation with VEOs.

Radical preaching uses a number of modern technologies to get their message across; from social media apps to public radio. Messages convey anti-establishment discourses which are popular throughout the province. These central messages claim to call for greater equality, for brotherhood, and for challenging the prevailing social order; be it local chiefs, government or moderate religious leaders. The often violent solutions are seen as an alternative.

Although the overwhelming majority of the Sahel Muslims have rejected the radicalised preachers, radical religion-inspired terrorism continues to gain traction. The preachers use a series of push and pull factors to indoctrinate their followers. For push factors, they claim to offer solutions for dissatisfaction with authoritarian/unresponsive government systems, youth bulge and high unemployment, corruption/lack of meritocracy, and state collapse. For pull factors, radicalised preachers offer humanitarian and community outreach, influence at educational institutions, media propaganda and the idea of belonging to a larger community.

Radicalisation in Prisons

In many Sahel countries, security and safety in prisons have been a growing concern. Recently, the number of individuals being arrested on charges related to terrorism or belonging to terrorist organizations has been rising. It has emerged that prisons act as incubators where violent extremism can thrive. Radicalisation of inmates is a significant issue.

Prisons across the Sahel are critically overpopulated.[40] They have been reported to have low standards of health for their inmates, and significantly lack infrastructure and resources to keep inmates safe. Additionally, many of the prison systems in recent reports carried out by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime have stated that the Sahel countries have inadequate administrative management and record keeping, and prisoners have limited recourse for filing complaints or making requests.[41]

The inadequate resources and lack of capacity of prisons have had a direct effect on how prisoners are housed. In most cases, prisoners are not completely separated from the general public. The lack of security and surveillance in the prison system restricts the prison staff from having the oversight to offer proper risk assessments on radicalisation.[42] The issues mentioned above obviously increase the risk that VEOs might radicalise other inmates. The systemic lack of resources has been reported to have led to prisoners, especially the youngest, being vulnerable to radical narrative. Often it has been stated that inmates have a very narrow routine to follow (sleeping, eating, praying, washing and in some cases reading) contributing to a gap in the purposefulness of their lives which can be filled by radicalised thoughts and convictions. Prisoners in many of the Sahel countries have called for the opportunity to work or have some sort of vocational training to prepare for life outside the prison but a UN document has stated that because of the limited resources this is not available for the majority of prisoners.

When suspected terrorists, a wide ranging term in the region, are captured, they are often moved into the prison systems with limited information about their charges. Another UN report stated that Prison officials often have little ways of assessing if they are a threat to becoming radicalised, and they are thrown in with the general prison population.[43] Paired with this is a managerial

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[40] Just one example of this is the Mali prison population that has an official capacity for 3000 inmates. A study carried out in late 2018 put the population at 6,250. Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauritania have the highest overcrowding in the world ranging from 120% to 232%. "Traitement des prisonniers, reiertion social et gestion des prison dans le Sahel" United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

[41] Vermeersch, Elise. and Dal Santo, Elana "Violent Extremist Offenders Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Prison: A focus on the challenges and way forward in Mali" United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, June 2020

[42] Vermeersch, Elise. and Dal Santo, Elana "Violent Extremist Offenders Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Prison: A focus on the challenges and way forward in Mali" United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, June 2020

[43] "The Socioeconomic Impact of Pretrial Detention" United Nation Department of Justice, September 2010

problem that up to 60% to 90% of the overall prison population are in pre-trial detention.[44] The system cannot respond to these inmates awaiting trial in a fulsome manner, which tends to lead to a sense of unfair treatment and discrimination. This in turn has led VEO recruiters in prison to have a more willing audience.

Another factor is the scarcity of prisons which are often located near major urban centres. Therefore, prisoners are regularly incarcerated far away from families and other support systems. If family can visit, it is often limited by the prison system to a specific day a week. This means that for families who do not live near the prison it becomes quite challenging to visit. This limiting factor is crucial to radicalisation as it has been studied that families, peers, and communities play a significant role in stopping radicalisation and in aiding rehabilitation.[45]

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[44] "The Socioeconomic Impact of Pretrial Detention" United Nation Department of Justice, September 2010
[45] "Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel" USAID, July 2020

CONCLUSIONS

This report highlights several significant findings. To begin with, the most significant finding is that "Religious Radicalisation" is a label for radicalisation: Religion is in practice a tool that the VEOs use for propaganda and economic reasons having already convinced local populations, by one means or another, to follow them. In other words, the religious aspect of radicalisation is not as important in the Sahel as might previously have been believed.

Of the original 16 drivers which were identified by the in-depth analysis, the most relevant were: Ethnic Conflicts, (Perceived) Ethnic Marginalisation, (Perceived) Economic Marginalisation, Pastoral Insecurity, Radical Preaching and Radicalisation in Prisons.

When assessing the issue of who is most affected, the analysis showed that radicalisation in the Sahel often involves large groups as opposed to individuals which differentiates it from how radicalisation occurs in other areas of the world. In effect, entire rural communities will often become disenfranchised or coerced by VEOs into following them. The presence of ungoverned spaces provides fertile ground for these large recruitment campaigns. It is possible that local economic development and the expansion of regional trade networks to better integrate communities might create alternatives to radicalisation.

Regarding causes, radicalisation is frequently linked to the failure of the government to provide its citizens with security, both physical and economic, leading people to seek safety and opportunities from other sources. Combating radicalisation is therefore not just a question of fighting extremist groups, but also dealing with localised threats based on ethnicity as well as the development of rural areas. It was found that pastoralism-related insecurity has been taken advantage of by VEOs which thrive in the many ungoverned spaces. Additionally, inadequately and poorly managed prisons act as incubators for radicalisation.

Efforts by International organizations to overcome the problem as a whole have so far not been as effective as initially hoped. The current instability in the Sahel is likely to worsen with the spread of VEOs who will take advantage of the poor ethnic relations and the lack of adequate governance, especially in rural and border areas. Reframing *religious* radicalisation as competition for power and resources, fought along ethnic lines, could help to shift how we think about mitigation strategies to combat radicalisation.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Deradicalisation in the Sahel

The lack of clarity and consistency that characterize how we define radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism also extends to the measures taken to counter them. The term "Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism" (P/CVE) is now in regular use, but perhaps one of the most misapplied words in the lexicon of counter-terrorism today must be that of "Deradicalisation". Bjorgo and Horgan captured the problem succinctly: *"…we find the lack of conceptual clarity in the emerging discourse on Deradicalisation striking. Deradicalisation often appears to be understood as any effort aimed at preventing radicalisation from taking place."* This common way of defining deradicalisation presents a logical paradox as the prefix "de" in "deradicalisation" implies it is a process that can only be applied to individuals or groups after radicalisation has occurred. A great deal of effort and resources have been devoted to programs in different countries, both to stop or mitigate the growth of radicalisation as it is actively occurring and to prevent it from developing in the first place. To include these programs under the term "Deradicalisation" is a misnomer, and it can make tackling the problem even more complicated. Another limitation of using the term deradicalisation too broadly is that it gives the impression that there is an overarching single solution—in most cases there is not. For these reasons, the growing use of P/CVE as a term for activities prior to radicalisation is useful (and provides clarity) since it differentiates these efforts from true Deradicalisation, focused on returning victims to societies.

That said, deradicalisation programs in countries across the Sahel are relatively new (many only in the last 6 years). They often share many similarities with European models in terms of design. However, they differ considerably in terms of scale of former combatants (there are a much larger number and significantly fewer resources), challenges to re-integrate them and capacity issues which make recidivism measures more problematic. In most governments, they follow a three pronged strategy: official deradicalisation programs carried out in prisons and other government institutions[46], amnesties being offered[47] and local initiatives and informal efforts to reintegrate former radicalised individuals. As one subject matter expert said in an interview: "Mothers and wives need to be more thoroughly consulted. If they are, they will be able to keep their sons and husbands at home".[48] Meaningful engagement with women in the Sahel is a crucial factor for furthering the growing need for effective P/CVE and deradicalisation programs.

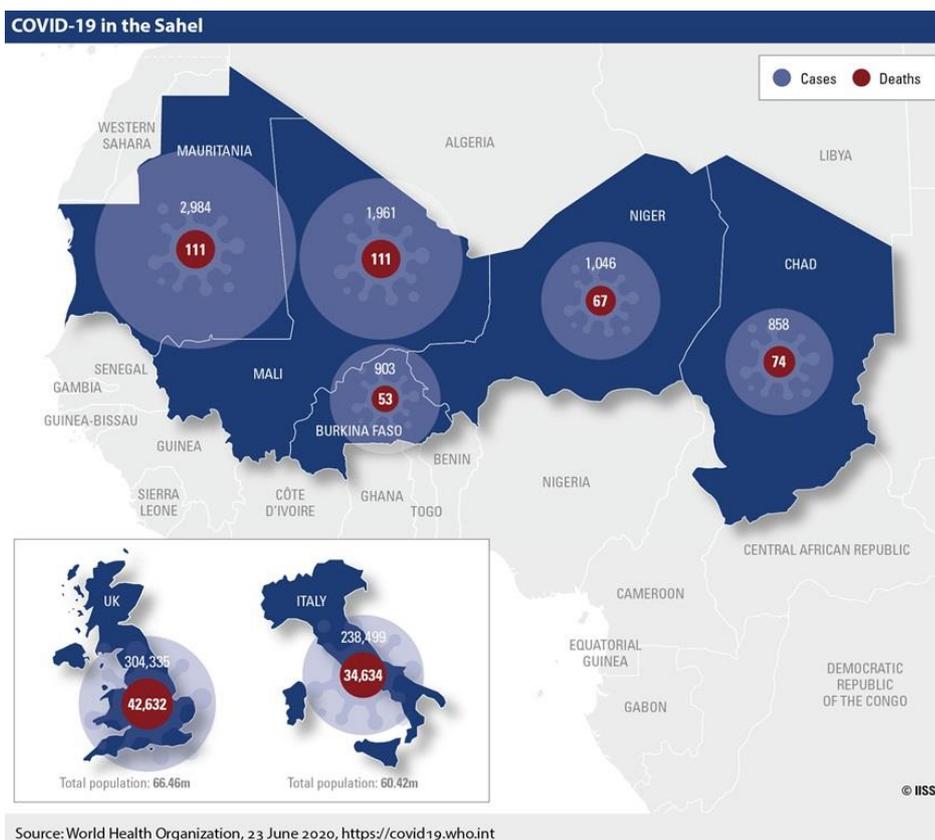[46] See the chapter of Prison Radicalisation for more on this
[47] Such as what the Nigerian government' Operation Safe Corridor introduced in 2015 with Boko Haram
[48] Religious radicalisation Webinar at NATO Hub, September 30-October 2.

Appendix B: Effects of Covid-19

Detailed analysis of the effects of COVID-19 in the Sahel continues to be hindered by limited testing and reporting of cases. There is a wide variance in testing capacity, commitment to testing and reporting of coronavirus cases and deaths. As a result, countries undertaking the most tests or reporting the highest number of cases may not necessarily match those countries most impacted or at risk from the pandemic.[49] COVID-19 adds to an existing combination of poverty, climate change impacts, low human development and conflict.

The effects of Covid-19 in the Sahel have not been fully studied. Short studies as well as individuals operating in the field have reported that the effects of Covid 19 it have increased religious radicalisation. Reports and interviews have said that VEOs are taking advantage of Covid-19 in rural areas and along borders to present themselves as "saviours" against the government's inability to address the economic and health concerns. Religious radicalisation is being propagated with statements such as: "If you join our cause you will not get Covid".[50] With limited travel and the economy being severely hampered, VEOs have also stepped in to offer economic opportunities and deliver humanitarian aid to the populations.[51] This has led to radicalisation of communities who see the VEOs as their only option. Initial reports show that VEOs have been making new gains in this region

Source: World Health Organization, 23 June 2020, https://covid19.who.int

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