Religious movements in the drylands: ethnicity, jihadism, and violent extremism

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9 Religious movements in the drylands

Ethnicity, jihadism, and violent extremism

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Introduction

Over the past decades, extremist violence and jihadism/religious movements have become an important factor in the political and economic developments of drylands. In this chapter, we try to understand what the factors are that contribute to this development. There is a certain parallel with the past, when the drylands were also the stage of jihad and extremism; however, as we will argue in this chapter, we should pay particular attention to the different conditions under which such violence occurs. Our central questions are these: What creates the contemporary violent condition of the drylands? How does this compare with the past, and what is different in the present that can help us to understand the phenomenon? We will take the example of the Sahel as our focus of analysis. But first, we will sketch the general situation in the drylands. One of the main arguments that we put forward in this chapter is that these upsurges in violence and extremism can be understood as local resurrections, which are informed not only by feelings of marginalization and distance from the state, but also as part of new forms of warfare, in which guerrilla tactics and violence have become the principal means of combat.

This evolution has been attributed to a variety of underlying dynamics that are typical for drylands, including increasing scarcity of land and water due to climate change; a growing population; the poor performance and authoritarian character of states; increasing displacements and resettlements related to large-scale investments—for example, in extraction and mining; and progressive marginalization and exclusion of specific social groups. In addition, increasing levels of conflict between population groups have provided a fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups for self-defence and religious purposes, often along ethnic lines, and also to secure access to natural resources. The lack of state capacity to maintain a monopoly on violence and the often partisan management of conflicts by government officials, as well as military interventions by outside actors (private and public), have all further contributed to the deterioration of the security situation. In this chapter, we try to understand the link between these 'violent conditions' (cf. Laurie and Shaw 2018)[1] and the emergence of armed groups, and the rise of

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religious movements, jihadism, and terrorist violence in the drylands of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

One of the narratives about drylands (see Chapter 3, this volume) is that drylands are hotbeds of extremism and terrorist organizations (Andersson 2016). Indeed, several countries in the Middle East, in West, North, and East Africa, and in Central and South Asia have become the home of civil wars and insurrections against the state, intercommunity (and interfaith) warfare, terrorist attacks, and political instability in general. Yet there is no necessary connection between extremism and drylands, and not all drylands have known a chronic situation of political instability. Iraq, Libya, and Syria were stable countries for a long time under strong dictators, until a combination of foreign interventions and local insurgencies led to the (near) collapse of these regimes. Apart from smaller insurgencies of Tuareg desert nomads in Mali and Niger, the western Sahel region was relatively stable for decades. Instability in Chad and Sudan, although almost chronic, was not associated with religious extremism but was the result of political tensions between different parts of the country and population groups and their government.

More recently, we have witnessed the emergence of religious movements inspired by Salafist interpretations of Islam. In a number of countries, insurgencies that label themselves as Muslim jihads and have adopted orthodox versions of the Islamic faith have emerged and built up considerable support and power, often filling up power vacuums left by the state. The most important example is of course the takeover of power (twice) by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Other examples are ISIS's filling of the power vacuum in the west of Iraq and the north of Syria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, a new movement in northern Mozambique, and many others in Libya and several Sahelian countries.

In this chapter, we will explore the emergence of religious extremist groups by looking at the situation in the western Sahel and try to provide a little more background as to why these groups emerge and what they say about the current situation in drylands. As we will argue, the insurgency in the western Sahel is neither an exclusively terrorist movement fielded by extremist jihadist intruders nor a conflict connected to climate change or a Malthusian battle for resources, but to a large extent it is the expression of much deeper social, economic, and political dynamics that have marginalized rural areas (and their youth) and have found expression through an extremist religious movement. Jihadism is thus an expression of a much larger set of issues, rooted in political economy, marginalization of minorities, and economic stagnation in rural areas and is entangled with local struggles for power, malfunctioning and exploitative governance relations, and the failure of the state to provide basic public services.

Extremism and radicalization in drylands: the emergence of 'new wars'

Extremism is primarily regarded as something out of the ordinary, in contrast to a normal way of thinking and behaving. It may be defined as 'actions and

ideological programmes that are boundary breaking that attack convention and rule and which in some way or another defy the status quo' (Loperfido 2021: 1). It is often associated with radicalization, a process in which people adopt new ideas and often also enter a new social environment (de Bruijn 2018: 4). Extremism and radicalization are of all times and of all regions in the world. They may lead people to make a choice for violence and violent behaviour. Extremism and radicalization do not have to lead to violence and terrorism; they can just as well be forms of political mobilization to achieve certain political objectives in a peaceful manner and may emerge in many contexts. In the current context, extremism is also often associated with religion, but extremism, radicalization, and religion do not need to go together (de Bruijn 2018).

Terrorism, in the form of radicalization and extremism, is a social construct. Something that is an act of terror for one person can be a legitimate act of political violence or resistance for another (Turk 2004).[2] Therefore, we define terrorism as a specific form of political violence that is experienced as an act of terror, which means that it does not need to be inspired by religious ideas but can have a secular and political background as well. For example, World War I was triggered by the assassination of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a radical anarchist. Europe and other places in the world have known various episodes of right- and left-wing extremism and terrorism over the past decades, such as the Rote Armée Fraction in Germany, Red Brigades in Italy, Maoist uprisings in Nepal and India, and right-wing terrorism in the United States, and various other countries. At present, the danger seems to come from Muslim extremists, but right-wing extremism is also on the rise—for example, in Western democracies.

Extremism and violent religious movements are therefore not born necessarily from a foreign threat but arise in a particular political and historical context. Why in this particular era we witness violent extremism in drylands may have connections with certain contemporary characteristics of drylands and the geopolitical context in which these drylands find themselves. Many of the drylands where Muslim extremism develops are what were labelled 'remote rural areas' (Goodhand 2003), in general areas that are little connected with the centres of political power, have comparatively low levels of income, experience high levels of food insecurity, and are plagued by violent conflict. Some of these areas are also among the highest in terms of child mortality and fertility (Black et al. 2003; Golding et al. 2017). Yet some countries, such as in the western Sahel, have been relatively calm over the past decades. Why then do we witness the emergence of violent Muslim extremism in this region at present?

The roots of Muslim jihads

Contemporary Muslim extremist movements claim to engage in jihad to install a Muslim caliphate. However, there are important differences between historical and contemporary jihads. Historically, Muslim jihads seem to have a strong connection with drylands. The early jihads after the foundation of Islam were staged in the Arabic peninsula and spread later on in what is now called the

Middle East and the North African Maghreb. Over time, Islam spread over the world through trade routes and, at times, warfare of Muslim emirates with non-Muslim states and rulers, particularly in the era of the Crusades and the rise of the Ottoman empire. Other, more recent examples are the Fulani jihads in Sahelian West Africa in the 19th century (Burnham and Last 1994) and the Mahdi state in Sudan (Dekmejian and Wyszomirski 1972). These jihads were also projects of state-making and empire-building, were characterized by what we could term 'regular warfare' and the following of mainstream Sunni doctrine, and did not show the contemporary link with extremist ideologies and terrorist violence.

Following the hypothesis that contemporary jihadism is primarily an insurgency against dominant powers, why then did these contemporary jihadist movements emerge in the present and not during colonialism, a typical situation of external domination of Muslim populations? In the first place, the colonial authorities usually did not intervene in the way in which the inhabitants of drylands practised religion, but they were on the alert to prevent millenarian movements from emerging and closely watched influential Muslim preachers, in order to prevent unrest (Brenner 1984). The second strategy was to incorporate Muslim emirates and Muslim elites into the colonial administration, such as through indirect rule under the British as in the Sudan and Nigeria (see for example Reynolds 2001), or to give them roles such as tax collectors, as under French colonialism, so that they had access to some of the spoils of the colonial administration (de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995). In the Soviet Union, Islamism played a negligible role in resistance against the Communist regime. Only after the dissolution of the Communist regime and the independence of the Central Asian states did Islam re-emerge as a political and social factor of importance (Akiner 2003; Montgomery and Heathershaw 2016).

A major difference between historical and contemporary jihadists is that the latter break with mainstream Sunni traditions and rules as to how a jihad should be conducted (Thurston 2020: 1)—for example, in the way they deal with adversaries, terrorist attacks, and suicide bombings. Muslims in the colonial era usually adhered to relatively moderate Sunni brotherhoods. Contemporary Muslim extremists primarily derive their ideology from the Wahhabi Salafist thinking that emerged in 18th century Saudi Arabia after Cheick Wahabi, who first formulated the particular doctrine of Salafist thinking (Cook 1992). Its popularity increased with the independence of Saudi Arabia, and it gained real momentum after Saudi Arabia actively started to spread Wahhabi doctrine following the Shi'a revolution in Iran in 1979, to counter the influence of the Shi'a doctrine in countries surrounding Iran (Ghattas 2020). Another factor was the Saudi support for refugees from Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, refugees who were establishing madrassas in northwest Pakistan and whose followers later came to be known as the Taliban. With their enormous wealth from the revenues of oil production, the Saudis were responsible for the vast spread of a Salafi interpretation of the Muslim faith, though they never officially promoted violence (Ghattas 2020).[3]

In contrast to conventional jihads, contemporary Muslim extremists seem to engage in new forms of (asymmetric) warfare and are not primarily focused on

promoting geo-strategic interests such as the expansion of state and empire. They often engage in extreme forms of violence against innocent civilians, which is a deviation from traditional Sunni doctrine. Most movements start as insurrections against state power and foreign military interventions and organize as guerrilla movements. In addition, they engage in all kinds of other activities, such as trade, smuggling, and kidnapping to finance their activities (see for example Bøås 2015). Typically, these movements emerge in areas where state authority is weak, such as in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in remote areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Somalia, and in the Sahara and Sahel of West Africa. Often these areas were labelled as 'ungoverned spaces'—drylands as empty holes in the security system—where state control is absent or ceded to non-state actors and where terrorists can breed and proliferate and organize to overthrow legitimate governments (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010: 17). Yet, these spaces, despite the absence of the state, are not devoid of governance structures and administrative institutions; rather, other actors step in and provide non-state forms of governance and security services (Boege et al. 2009; Clunan and Trinkunas 2010).

In explaining the rise of jihadism in drylands, the preaching of Salafist doctrine is often put forward as an explanation. In part, this explanation provides the ideological fuel to justify a securitizing approach and military interventions and counter-insurgency policies aimed at defeating the movements on the battlefield. The preaching of Salafist thinking, however, can never be the only cause or reason for the emergence of Muslim jihadism. The emergence of the Taliban was as much a popular reaction against the Soviet invasion and later against an unwanted and corrupt regime, as it was an organization that depended on the ideological fuel preached in the madrassas in the frontier areas of Pakistan provided by the Saudis and on the weapons supplied by the US government to help them chase away the Soviets. Likewise, in other areas, there is always a basis of local grievances and issues that contribute to the emergence of extremist groups.

Jihadism is also often associated with the particularities of so-called tribal forms of social and political organization through segmentary lineage systems that defy unitary political systems and are fundamentally opposed to the rule of states. It is true that many of the areas where we find extremist groups and Muslim jihadism are tribal areas ruled by customary law blended with Sharia law.[4] The areas where the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan were tribal in nature, traditionally opposed to the central rule, and never fully controlled by the Afghani government or British colonial power. The areas where ISIS emerged in Syria and western Iraq are also tribal in nature. Somalia, the homeland of Al-Shabaab, though inhabited by a single ethnic group is organized in numerous clans, which can be considered as sub-tribes of the Somali. In West Africa, jihadism is dominated by Tuareg and Fulani who live dispersed over several countries and are also known for their segmentary tribal organization.

Nevertheless, the connection between tribes and extremism and jihadism is not automatic or even logical. Tribal politics is centred on segmentary agnatic lineages, which are centred on themselves and the defence of the resources they need for their survival (Roy 2017). Thus, tribal political dynamics primarily tend

towards fragmentation rather than unification and unified leadership. A case that confirms this reasoning, for example, is the failure of Al-Qaida to take root in Somalia, because Al-Qaida was unable to deal with the segmentary politics of the Somali clans (Menkhaus and Shapiro 2010). We also see that many of the jihadist movements (and rebellions in drylands in general) tend towards fragmentation because of internal political logics.[5]

These examples also show that extremist movements and jihadist insurrections cannot be organized in a top-down manner. Despite the fact that jihadists reject existing political orders, they also have to engage in what Thurston (2020: 9) labels 'shari'a politics', the making of a new political order based on the way in which the jihadists engage with Islamic theology and the degree to which they impose this theology on local populations. They have to engage with the local context and population to survive, and therefore they have to descend from their global universalist theological message and engage in meso- and micro-level politics in order to take root and deliver political goods to the population they appeal to (Thurston 2020). In engaging in shari'a politics, they have to balance internal vertical tensions between the commanders and the combatants, and internal horizontal tensions between different factions at local level. In short, this means that in order to be able to pursue their goals, they need to engage with local societies, eventually becoming involved in other forms of mobilization, such as in ethno-nationalist and economic messages (ibid.).

However, the fragmentary nature of politics in tribal societies is at the same time an explanation for the importance of extremist and jihadist ideology, because this ideology may be the key element that holds these movements together—given that the extremist ideology acts as a moral framework to counter the fragmentary tendencies in tribal political organization (Bøås 2015). Another case to illustrate this point is the Naxalite rebellion in Central India, a rebellion that draws on a plethora of ethnic minorities held together by a Maoist ideology (Kennedy and Purushotham 2012). Salafist ideology also provides jihadists with a global connection.[6] This connection is not only ideological, but can be also very practical because it enables these tribal groups to connect with global partners and networks that can provide them with knowledge, money, weapons, and training facilities (Roy 2017).

Blaming the emergence of Muslim extremism on agitation and preaching by proponents of Salafism is insufficient. Though the jihadist message provides the ideological fuel for people to rise up against the state (and against 'the West'), this message resonates on a bedrock of discontent and food insecurity, and out of the feeling of injustice and neglect. It is significant that most of the jihadist movements have emerged in so-called remote rural areas, areas that have been plagued for decades by a combination of poverty, food insecurity, economic, and political marginalization, and the absence of basic public services such as health care, education, and reliable security services, and also often plagued by violence and political instability labelled 'complex emergencies' (Goodhand 2003; Keen 2008). In these areas, Muslim intellectuals are able to find fertile soil for their message of salvation and their strong appeal for social and political justice.

Therefore, we also cannot understand these wars as conventional wars, because they are asymmetric in character, are often discontinuous or protracted (Richards 2005), and are not only political but can be about other economic and ideological interests (Duffield 2001; Mello 2010). Yet the religious dimension of these so-called new wars has not yet received much attention.

In the following sections, we will first sketch the emergence of Muslim jihadism in the Sahel as a case to illustrate that its emergence is not only about religious ideology but also about local social and political issues. We will explore events in the western Sahel to see how extremist organizations changed from being terrorist movements into rural insurgencies, in their attempts to adapt to the local context and address local political issues. It is outside the scope of this chapter to recount in detail the entire story of jihadism in the western Sahel, its diverse factions, and leadership changes because all parts of the region have their own dynamics and their own peculiarities. For want of space, we will stick to general trends and turning points.

Political instability in the western Sahel and the emergence of Muslim jihadism

The context of the western Sahel

The Western Sahel, defined here as Mauretania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, is one of the poorest areas of the world. On the global map of human development, it is among the most deprived regions of the world.[7] These former French colonies gained independence in 1960 and inherited weak government systems, with a largely illiterate population and poorly developed economies. Positioned within and just south of the Sahara and on very old geological formations, the agricultural potential was extremely limited because of erratic rainfall and poor soils. Still, with a low urbanization rate, 90% of the population depended on agriculture. Most of the population lived below the poverty line. The large majority of the sedentary population subsisted on the cultivation of dryland cereals, such as millet and sorghum, with a substantial minority engaged in nomadic pastoralism.

A decade after independence the region was hard hit by recurring droughts (-1968–1973, 1983–1985), which caused large-scale famine and extensive economic damage. As a result, many people moved from dry areas to more humid parts of the country and even beyond towards the coastal states. Despite large-scale development investments, poverty and food insecurity are still rampant, with 80% of the rural population living below the poverty line. On all other socioeconomic indicators (malnutrition rates, maternal and infant mortality, literacy rates, life expectancy), the countries of the western Sahel, and especially the rural areas, are at the bottom end of the world rankings. Only one indicator is the highest in the world and that is the fertility rate, making the populations of the regions the fastest-growing in the world, despite the dismal living conditions (Hilderink et al. 2012).

The roots of marginalization (1960–1998)

Muslim extremism in the Sahel cannot be isolated from the wider tendencies towards political instability, which were manifest at least a decade before the emergence of Boko Haram and other Muslim extremist groups in the region. In Nigeria, for example, intercommunity violence on an ethnic and religious basis, vigilantes, and organized crime (Meagher 2012) were major factors structuring the political landscape and gradually undermining the social fabric. All over the Sahel, Nigeria included, farmer–herder conflicts were frequent and caused many casualties (Hussein, Sumberg and Seddon 1999; de Bruijn and van Dijk 2005; Soeters et al. 2017). Over time these conflicts increased in severity, as pastoralists moved from the Sahel and Sahara to the greener pastures in the southern Sahel and Sudan zone.[8] Although these population movements started already under colonialism and in the early 1960s, they gained pace after the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2003). However, conflicts in the past remained limited in scope (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2005).

From a national political point of view, the western Sahel has been relatively calm since independence, compared with the Chad Basin, where repeated rebellions and Libyan incursions were a constant source of instability, and the Sudan, which was plagued by long episodes of civil war in the centre, south, and east of the country. Although there were various Tuareg rebellions in the Sahara (-1962–1963, 1990–1996, 2006) and various coup d'états in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, these never touched the core of the state or led to long-term instability or civil war. Instead, in Burkina Faso, President Blaise Compaoré ruled for 23 years after ousting his comrade-in-arms Thomas Sankara, and Mali was known as a beacon of the democratic rule until 2012, after dictator Moussa Traoré was toppled by an army coup in 1991.

However, these Saharan Tuareg rebellions did lead to a political and cultural divide between the southern populations, the state, and the Tuareg, and to a deep cleavage between northern populations of nomadic pastoralists (Arab, Tuareg) and the Fulani pastoralists who were the dominant group in the Sahel zone. The latter were among the prime victims of Tuareg raiding and even organized their militias in collaboration with sedentary populations to oppose the desert nomads. Thus, the pastoral populations of the Malian Sahel were far from united. Although the 1990–1996 Tuareg rebellion was militarily a success, it failed because the united front fell apart into four factions because of rivalry between the Ifoghas, Imrad, Daoussahaq, and Arabs (Lecocq 2010). Opposition against the government among the Fulani never developed, as the Fulani elites always maintained cordial relations with the regime in place and together profited from the exploitation of the poorer sections of society (de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995; Benjaminsen and Ba 2019).

Following the earlier rebellions, the Malian government in particular decided to grant the Tuareg more autonomy in 1992 and decrease its involvement in the north of the country. This move to decentralization, however, did little to improve the position of the poor and subordinate classes in Tuareg society, as the

new wealth and incoming development funds were monopolized by the traditional elites. In addition, this created ample opportunity for all kinds of non-state actors to develop illicit activities and their own forms of authority, with power concentrated in a number of families and clans (Bøås 2015).

Although attempts to spread Salafist thinking also extended to the African continent over time, Salafism never gained much visible influence in the western Sahel during this period, as most Muslims adhered to the teachings of the Sunni brotherhoods and were deeply suspicious of those who chose to adhere to Wahhabi interpretations of Islam brought back from the pilgrimage to Mecca.[9] In Mali, for example, the Saudis supported the building of Wahhabi mosques and Quranic schools and supported Muslim scholars and NGOs in spreading the Salafist doctrine and development interventions (see Amselle 1985). Although the spread of Wahhabi thinking was ongoing since the early 1960s, Salafism never had a massive following among the population. A major turning point was 1979 and the emerging competition with rival Shi'a Iran over control of the Muslim world. Since then, Africa was also regarded as an area of competition and has become a battleground between Salafi and Shi'a networks competing for the hearts and minds of African Muslims, not only in the Sahara and Sahel where Islam has a long history, but also in the coastal states such as Ghana and Nigeria.

Early years and establishment of jihadist movements (1998–2011)

Muslim jihadism, however, did not originate in the Salafist preaching, which was present in mosques in urban centres and small villages, but came from the north. The military roots of the jihadist movements in the Sahara and Sahel are located in Algeria in the civil war that started in the 1990s (Thurston 2020). This insurrection against the government was led by the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé), which lost legitimacy over time because of its excessive violence against the civilian population. In the years 1995–1999, the GIA slowly disintegrated and one of the breakaway groups, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prière et le Combat (GSPC), retreated into the Sahara in the early 2000s, also under military pressure from the Algerian army (Thurston 2020). These groups subsequently drifted into the Malian and Mauritanian parts of the Sahara.

In northern Mali, they found a favourable environment to survive. Since the Tuareg rebellion of 1990–1996, the government had embarked upon a decentralization programme, which meant in practice that the Saharan regions in northern Mali were largely left on their own and enjoyed a kind of self-rule (Bøås 2015; Thurston 2020). The area was deliberately abandoned and military presence was very limited after 2001–2002 (Thurston 2020) when president Amadou Toumani Touré took power. There were few investments in the region, since the government concentrated on the capital and donors preferred to invest in economic activity in the south. As a result, a system of governance emerged that was labelled 'heterarchy' by Hüsken and Klute (2015) to denote parallel systems of governance in which it was easy to establish network connections between traders, smugglers,

jihadists, local leaders, politicians, and even the capital (Bøås 2015; Hüsken and Klute 2015).

In this context, these foreign Muslim jihadist groups managed to thrive and set up local networks, even though they were coming from outside. Their leaders married local women to forge alliances with local groups of Tuareg and Arabs. They also managed to set up their commercial networks and a kidnapping 'industry' connected with the highest government levels to negotiate ransoms with foreign powers. Yet, there was no logical social and political basis for a jihadist movement on a Salafist basis, uniting fighters from all population groups. There were deep divisions within these communities themselves. For example, these hybrid extremist movements were operating in the same environment and in competition with all kinds of Tuareg nationalist movements (which also diverted attention from their presence) that were largely uncontrolled by the government.[10]

Despite the fact that they managed to survive and also achieved success, internal rivalries increased (Thurston 2020). This resulted in an east–west division with one of the commanders, Abu Zayd, taking the western wing and the other, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, commanding the eastern wing. Around 2007, the GSPC rebranded itself (and became even more autonomous) as Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Boeke 2016; Thurston 2020). Again in 2011, another breakaway group was formed, the Movement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), because of internal disagreement over the regional ambitions of AQIM (Thurston 2020: 84–86).

The rise to a proto-state and evolution into a rural insurgency (2011–2015)

This apparent equilibrium changed around 2011 with the fall of Khadafi and the return of numerous Tuareg from his Islamic legion to Mali and Niger, who started a (secular) rebellion under the label of MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad) in Mali in their bid to establish a Tuareg state, called Azawad. Soon, rivalries started between the jihadist movements and the MNLA fighters, and the latter were overrun by the extremist groups, who were much better organized and also attracted a large number of fighters from MNLA. The regular Malian army was too disorganized and weak to prevent the takeover of the entire north and centre of Mali by the victorious jihadists.

At this point in time, the extremist movements were effectively controlling the four northern regions of Mali and began to implant themselves at local level. They soon implemented a host of measures to restructure society and economic life, and their influence was felt down to the lowest levels of society in north and central Mali. After a coup d'état in Mali by discontented army officers, because of the lack of support by the government and the subsequent restoration of civil government, the leadership of AQIM thought it was time to move towards the south. This appeared somewhat overconfident because the provisional government requested a French intervention. From January 2013 onwards, the French army intervened and swept the jihadist movements from the centre and north

to restore order (see Boeke and Schuurman 2015). The extremist movements retreated to the countryside and abandoned the cities (ICG 2013). This led to a (partial) return of state authority in both north and central Mali. However, this return was deeply resented by the population, because state officials fell back into old habits of exploiting the population. In addition, many people were accused of being complicit with the extremists and, even worse, specific population groups (Tuareg, Fulani) were targeted by the authorities and also underwent what has been labelled 'collective punishment' (Thurston 2020). At the same time, many local people were under pressure of the remnants of the extremist movements still present in the countryside.

Although the international community stepped in with a number of initiatives, this did not help to restore order. To maintain peace, the UN fielded a peace-keeping operation (MINUSMA: Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilization au Mali; 13,800 strong), and the five Sahelian countries fielded a joint operational force under the label G-5 Sahel that collaborated with anti-terrorist operations by the French army (Opération Barkhane; 5,100 troops) to execute counter-insurgency operations. Despite all this effort, large areas in the Sahel remained outside the control of the state and were slowly taken over by all kinds of non-state armed groups. Because of the targeting of innocent villagers during these military actions, these counter-insurgency operations only helped to shore up more support for the jihadists and increase the level of violence.

The entire western Sahel affected (2015–present)

A major new development is that for the first time since the colonial conquest and the Independence period, the Fulani become involved in an insurgency against the state. The year 2015 can be regarded as a turning point in the situation in central Mali, because now the conflict moved from the north to the centre of the country, as local Fulani started to organize their own security in the form of youth militias. Initially, they did so in a peaceful manner, even asked the support of MINUSMA officials, and also contacted foreign delegations to ask to be protected. However, these organizations were unable to field sufficient military and civil presence to prevent further deterioration of the security situation.

Fulani herders were targeted by security forces also at the instigation of their political elites, as they accused some of their constituency of having joined MUJAO in the years 2012–2013 (Sangaré 2016). Fulani herders also felt vulnerable vis-à-vis sedentary population groups who felt empowered by the return of the government. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that they had lost already vast areas of grazing to expanding agriculture over the past decades (Gallais 1975; de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995; Thibaud 2006; Nijenhuis 2013) and to chiefs who covertly privatized pasture areas with the help of pasture management interventions initiated by development operations (Gallais 1984); the herders were also victims of abusive practices from their own elites, the authorities in matters of conflicts over water and pastures (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019; Jourde et al. 2019).

In short, disappointed by the lack of attention of the international community and the lack of protection from the national army, MINUSMA, and their own political elites, Fulani herders became an easy prey for recruitment by the jihadist groups that were increasingly present in the countryside (Sangaré 2016). In this context, the preaching of a Fulani cleric, Amadou Koufa,[11] fell into fertile soil among marginalized pastoralists. His sermons also referred to important issues for nomadic pastoralists, such as that pastures are a gift of Allah and should be free for all and not a private property, which is a direct reference to the exploitative practices of Fulani chiefs who were privatizing pastures and asking high fees for access to pastures in the Inner Delta of the Niger (Jourde et al. 2019: 5; Thurston 2020). Amadou Koufa even called for internationalization of these Fulani interests, as they are spread all over the Sahelian zone (Jourde et al. 2019; Thurston 2020: 149–156).

This mixture of jihadist and ethno-nationalist mobilization is taking place all over the western Sahel. When the French chased away the jihadists movements from central Mali in 2013, many of them retreated into northern Burkina Faso, where in due course a separate branch emerged under the leadership of Malam Ibrahim Dicko. In the Inner Delta of the Niger, Fulani started to join proto groups of jihadists organized under the banner of Katiba Macina, in reference to the Muslim-Fulani empire Macina that dominated the region from 1818 to 1862. Towards the east, a group emerged called Katiba Serma, after a large cattle camp on the Seeno plain south of Boni, which was first the site of negotiations between Fulani herders and MINUSMA but subsequently became the centre of resistance and recruitment of young herdsmen by the jihadist groups. In Niger, Fulani were targeted by Tuareg and Daoussahaq militias loyal to the Malian government in an inter-ethnic conflict about pastures. The Fulani subsequently connected with networks of ISIS in the region in an attempt to create security for themselves.

Regular armies proved hardly capable of fending off jihadist attacks and experienced heavy losses over the years 2019–2021. The resulting power vacuum left space for self-defence militias originating in other sedentary ethnic groups—such as the Dogon, Mossi, and Bambara (Hagberg et al. 2019; Benjaminsen and Ba 2021)—to step in, leading to an increase in the level of violence and massacres against innocent civilians and a vicious cycle of violence among jihadists, army, and self-defence militias. In Mali, sedentary ethnic groups increasingly started to mobilize their own traditional hunting groups, the Donsos, officially guardians of the bush and hunting resources but increasingly mobilized for the defence of territory[12] and the protection of villagers against jihadists, as the regular army failed to exert effective control over the countryside. These groups of Donsos increasingly operated as proxies of the army with the consent of the government. As a result, a number of attacks on Fulani villages with innocent civilians were organized that resulted in hundreds of casualties (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021). In neighbouring Burkina Faso, these self-defence militias also emerged (Hagberg et al. 2019). A similar scenario is developing in Niger after bloody jihadist attacks on sedentary villages (ICG 2021).

The French operations targeted mainly jihadist groups and their leaders in an attempt to eliminate the leaders. Despite the fact that they managed to eliminate several leaders and jihadist bases, they have not been successful in reducing the level of violence and increasing control over territory. G5-Sahel forces and regular armies also staged their own counter-insurgency operations, which have encountered widespread criticism because of the human rights violations and summary executions that have taken place. There are also indications that small groups of jihadist fighters are spreading themselves over other areas, more to the south of Mali and Burkina Faso, and may also have infiltrated in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin.

In short, a military solution is out of sight, and what started as small groups of extremists and terrorists in the Sahara has now become a widespread religious insurgency (and non-state armed groups acting as a counter-insurgency) that has its roots in marginal rural areas with discontented populations.

Discussion: the need for different layers of explanation and context

When looking at the question whether drylands are the breeding grounds for extremist groups and jihadism, and taking into account the emergence of jihadism in the western Sahel, it is clear that an extremist ideology in the form of Salafist Islam is only one reason for the emergence of a powerful jihadist movement linked to Al-Qaida.[13] The jihadist uprising (and the rise of ethnicity-based self-defence militias for that matter) has a much more complex background than just agitation by Salafists. Although Salafist ideology has been able to gain ground in an extremely complicated political and economic situation, it had already been present in the region for decades and never gained much popularity among the populations now recruited to jihadist groups. Even in 2015, people forming local self-defence militias did not have much appetite to join jihadist groups (Sangaré 2016). However, over time, as these groups came under pressure by government forces, they increasingly entered into the orbit of the jihadist groups, who in the end joined forces under the banner of JNIM.

As others have also observed (Boeke 2016; Sangaré 2016; Cissé 2018; Thurston 2020), an important factor for the Fulani to join forces with the jihadists and to overcome their traditional enmity with the Saharan Tuareg was the insertion of local issues into the message of preachers such as Amadou Koufa and Malam Ibrahim Dicko, who denounce the predatory practices of government officials and their own elites and evoke the loss of living space and pastures due to the expansion of farming and limitations on movement. These frustrations and grievances were mainly channelled by marginalized youth, but this does not mean that the older generations do not share these grievances. They faced the same set of exploitative practices when they were young (see Gallais 1984; de Bruijn and van Dijk 1999). This message of social and political justice is extremely powerful in a situation where people are pushed to the brink of their existence through a combination of harsh environmental conditions, loss of access to resources, and exploitation by government and elites.

As a result, what started as a jihadist or extremist insurgency, has increasingly developed into a popular insurgency that has a strong basis among rural populations, who see jihadists and their message as a real alternative to the national government. This is not because local people are favourably disposed to extremist Islamism, but because of very complex issues and conflicts related to the management of natural resources, governance relations, and political exclusion (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021)

Lessons for the drylands from the Sahel

What can we learn from the situation in the western Sahel for other situations in drylands, in terms of susceptibility towards a descent into political instability and the emergence of extremist movements?

First of all, many jihadist movements originate in areas that are left on their own by their governments in terms of investments in public services and infrastructure. There are no known extremist insurrections in urban areas that were able to hold out for so long. As Thurston (2020: 194) observed, Sahelian states are focused on capitals while the peripheries are sometimes inaccessible for part of the year.[14] In many cases, these rural peripheries are extremely poor and have high levels of malnutrition and child mortality. This is equally true for the remote areas in Afghanistan, Somalia, and northern Mozambique, which have not seen improvements in public services and living conditions. After 20 years of foreign interventions, the rural peripheries of Afghanistan still do not have access to basic health care, education, and clean water and sanitation.

However, poverty and food insecurity are not necessary conditions for the emergence of extremism. As we see in the case of the Sahel, Salafist thinking is introduced from outside through peaceful means, NGOs, and the training of preachers and others at the bottom level, and through the infiltration of terrorist groups from outside, veterans from the Afghan war, and the Algerian civil war at the top level. In the course of the evolution of these movements, the two levels came together and formed a loose coalition with quasi-independent, almost ethnicity-based decentralized fighting units (Katiba Macina, Katiba Serma) under a central Al-Qaida or ISIS command, combining a unifying ideology with a complementary message with respect to local issues. This combination of Salafist ideology with local issues is particularly powerful, as it carries a message of justice and opposes itself to corrupt secular governments and customary elites who have exploited these populations for decades. Initially, the proto-jihadists were mainly addressing local Fulani leadership issues and state authorities (also by violent means), blaming them for injustice and exploitation.

Another element that promoted the growth of jihadism in this particular area was the presence of a large reservoir of rural youth who do not have good perspectives for their future. These future prospects, however, are not exclusively related to the meagre availability of natural resources in drylands, but perhaps even more to relations of patronage and exploitation (de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995; Jourde et al. 2019) and the skewed distribution of income. As much as the messages of the jihadists appeal to the idea of a pure Muslim emirate, they also call for what

they, as pastoralists, need most: free and unhindered access to pastures and water, as a pastoralist ideal (Cissé 2018).

Therefore, the current responses to extremism in the form of securitization and military interventions are counterproductive and will only serve as a further catalyst for further radicalization of youth and the deterioration of trust between communities and ethnic groups. Instead, productive employment, basic public services, and decent and inclusive government are the keys to providing solutions for violent conflicts and extremist rebellions. In addition, thorny issues with respect to natural resource management regimes and relations between mobile pastoralists and expanding farming communities will have to be addressed as one of the stakes in inter-ethnic violence. These have been on the agenda for decades but have been left unsolved, not only by customary and state authorities—who rather profited from conflicts—but also by civil society and NGOs.

Lastly, specific attention should be given to youth. Deprivation, relative or otherwise, is among the most often cited factors for recruitment to extremist groups. Yet not all recruitment is voluntary, and there are also peer pressure and collective action variables involved. As Debos (2011) argued, membership of armed groups can also be a mode of existence. In the tribal logic, people take up arms to fend for their communities and defend the resources on which these communities depend. At the same time, tribal societies are not democracies either. Often youth are at the bottom end of paternalistic structures in which they are dependent on elders, chiefs, and so on to have access to land, to marry women and start families, and to build their own livelihoods. As Chauveau and Richards (2008) argued, these factors play a prominent role in youth's anger and propensity to join armed groups.

Conclusion: extremism as a rebellion of the rural periphery?

Extremism and jihadism can thrive only when they are connected with local issues and grievances. In order to survive, extremist organizations have to embed locally and make connections with local populations and local political and economic issues. It seems that rural peripheries, such as the Sahel, which have been abandoned by their governments and are characterized by poverty, food insecurity, a young population, and are in general politically marginal, provide fertile breeding grounds for extremism. Extremism therefore can be better understood as a rebellion from the rural periphery against urban dominance, an expression of grievance and a cry for more economic and social justice, rather than as a reactionary turn to fundamentalism and Salafist ideology. These insurgencies should consequently not be treated only as security issues, but also as social, economic, and political issues.

Notes

1 Laurie and Shaw (2018: 8) write: '[V]iolent conditions are not the property of individuals or monolithic structures: they are the existential climates by which localized subjects and worlds condense into being'.

2 The label 'terrorism' or 'terrorist' is these days frequently used to discredit more or less regular political resistance and formulate a 'legitimate' reason to silence opposition.

3 A good introduction to Salafist ideology is the book 'Salafi-Jihadism: The history of an idea' (Maher 2016).
4 Tribal is a contested term, as it originates in the colonial literature. The modern literature refers mainly to ethnicity and ethnic groups. Tribal here refers to a customary social and political organization on the basis of (segmentary) lineages.
5 Examples are the Tuareg insurrection in Mali and Niger from 1990 to 1996, which controlled pretty much of the Saharan parts of these countries, until the movement fell apart in 4 factions. Another example is the fragmentation of the SLA (Sudanese Liberation Army) opposing the Sudanese government in Darfur and the constant shifts in coalitions characterizing rebellions in Chad (Debos 2011).
6 The same would be true of course for the Naxalites and their connection with Maoist ideology.
7 See https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/maps/shdi/ [Accessed 28 February 2022].
8 Southern Mali, Benin, southwest Burkina Faso, northern Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire (Bassett 1994; de Bruijn and van Dijk 2003; Soeters, Weesie and Zoomers 2017).
9 For example, in the early 1990s mosques would not allow Wahhabi Muslims to pray in their own way (arms crossed in front and not hanging at the sides), and they were forced to build their own prayer houses.
10 This is not entirely true, because the Americans were running several security initiatives in the Sahel and Sahara as part of the 'war on terror'. This was the Pan-Sahel initiative, an American effort to assist Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania in detecting and responding to suspicious movement of people and goods across and within their borders through training, equipment, and cooperation (Ellis 2004). This operation was followed in 2005 by the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative, which was better funded and broader in scope. The precise history and impact of these operations still need to be evaluated, and apparently these operations did little to stop the advance of Muslim extremist groups.
11 Amadou Koufa, born in the early 1960s, has had a remarkable career, ranging from Quranic student (*talibé*) to popular singer and moderate preacher, he became a Salafist in the early 2000s—inspired by the Dawa Tabligh (of Pakistani origin)—and declared the jihad in 2012 when he joined Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar Dine movement (Cissé 2018), a sister organization of AQIM (Boeke 2016). Ansar Dine later became part of an umbrella organization JNIM (Jamaat Nusratul Islam wal-Muslimin), uniting the four jihadist movements linked to Al-Qaida in the region.
12 Similar roles of hunting societies have been reported in the civil war in Sierra Leone (see Chauveau and Richards 2008)
13 For want of space, we will not discuss the emergence of ISIS and the internal fighting between ISIS-affiliated groups and Al-Qaida-related groups.
14 As an illustration, for example, there are the decentralized HDI maps, where the Sahelian capitals enjoy significantly higher levels of human development than the rural peripheries.

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