

Islamic insurgency in the Sahel as the root of mass displacement in Burkina Faso

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Abstract

The Islamic State's emergence in the Sahel region has triggered violence resulting in a large-scale refugee crisis. This paper focuses on the instability and refugee situation in Burkina Faso, which has received less attention than other Sahel countries such as Mali and Nigeria. In academic debates, IS-instigated terrorism tends to be examined as a multi-layered conflict with non-religious reasons in the background. However, religion is a key factor fueling terrorist activity in the Sahel region and determining its outcome, as the idea of creating an Islamic State or caliphate is inherently religious in nature. Islamic insurgents target all non-compliant community members and Christians in particular.

Keywords terrorism, religion, Sahel, refugees.

1. Introduction

The name "Islamic State" reflects the desire of the organization bearing this name to re-establish a caliphate as a crucial element of their vision of an ideal world. This desire has had a physical expression in Syria, where the name was used to refer to the subdued parts of the country and evolved also to more specific forms like Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Presently, the name is used in two contexts. One of them encompasses the totality of terrorist groups related to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria that are continuing the war in Syria; the other is a more generic title for all similarly minded jihadist groups that share the common goal of reinstating of an Islamic caliphate. This article adopts the broader usage. Following the fall of the physical Islamic State in Syria, IS-minded groups have been seeking another territory where they could establish the caliphate. They have found one in the Sahel region.

Delidji Eric Degila refers to this ISIL-like form of terrorism as a "religious-based mode of violence" (2020:80). Degila attributes its spread in the region to the local upsurge of Islam in the 1970s and to global Islamic expansion. This statement is significant for two reasons: it depicts the territorial form of violent terrorism sweeping

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across Africa's Sahel region as religiously rooted, and it recognizes this local upsurge of terrorism as a part of a global movement. At present, both theses are denigrated or even denied by much of the extensive academic research on IS. Thus, this article seeks to demonstrate that the religious component of IS's vision is the main cause of the outbreak of violence in the Sahel, which has spawned a large-scale refugee crisis.

Whereas the situation in other Sahel countries such as Mali and Nigeria is widely discussed, less attention is devoted to Burkina Faso. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency has displaced about 2 million people, in a nation of 216 million, since 2009. But in Burkina Faso, with a population of just 22 million, almost the same number of people have become internally displaced, making the country most deeply affected by the degradation of peace due to Islamic insurgency.

2. Religious roots of terrorist activity in the Sahel region

2.1 Relations to al-Qaeda

The presence of terrorist organizations in the Sahel has a long-standing history. An analysis of the groups involved and their makeup and mobility provides clear evidence of their inherently religious and global character.

In 2007, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) became recognized as a new terrorist network operating in the North African theatre (Celso 2014). AQIM's creation marked the culmination of previous cooperation between al-Qaeda's central headquarters and Maghreb-based groups. The latter deployed their Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian fighters to participate in the al-Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq (Pham 2011). AQIM, based in Algeria, brought together the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat with al-Qaeda forces (Celso 2014). Facing strong opposition from the Algerian government, AQIM was forced to relocate to the Sahel region. There, it found a much more supportive environment among Tuareg tribes, who offered space for training and financial sponsorship (Celso 2014).

The Arab Spring turmoil of the 2010s further fueled the ranks of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and AQIM, with thousands of Islamic radicals being released from prisons following the dismantling of intelligence and security infrastructure in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (Celso 2014). In late 2011, upon returning from post-Gaddafi Libya to their native northern Mali, heavily armed Tuareg recruits were determined to follow their agenda, including jihadist activity. Their initial local ambitions "metastasized into violence across the vast region linking the Maghreb with Sub-Saharan Africa" (Pham 2021:424; see Celso 2014). Among the groups that formed a terrorist coalition supporting the separatist Tuareg's claim to northern Mali was Ansar Dine, founded in 2012. Linked to this group was the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), which appeared on the scene in 2015. Both constitute a part of the coalition of groups tied to al-Qaeda and called Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) (Institute for Economics & Peace 2021).

2.2 Relations to ISIL

Besides al-Qaeda-affiliated AQIM brigades, the conflict in the Sahel region, spreading systematically to the closest sub-Saharan countries, attracted affiliates of ISIL such as the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), necessitating the French army and UN intervention in Mali (Pham 2021). ISGS was formed in 2015 as a breakaway faction from AQIM-allied Al Mourabitoun. Its activity area encompasses the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020). ISIL recognized ISGS as a regional branch in October 2016 (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020:52). In April 2019, with the growing presence of its affiliates, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially identified the Sahel as a new primary setting for the group's operation, welcoming new branches in Burkina Faso and Mali.

However, despite the evident religious character of the groups involved and their objective of building an Islamic caliphate, religious fervor is rarely highlighted in academic discussions, not even as one of the critical factors contributing to the spread of Islamic insurgency, as explained below.

3. Factors encouraging terrorism in Africa

3.1 Non-religious factors

Funmi Abioye indicates, echoing other authors, that “the factors encouraging terrorism in Africa are complex and multidimensional, and as such cannot be limited to particular facts or events” (2019:9). The most frequently cited factors include the proliferation of used and new arms from World Wars I and II, the more recent conflict in Libya, and the ready availability of foreign arms suppliers and trainers (Mentan 2004, cited in Abioye 2019:9). Abject poverty is another factor, as many people in the Sahel region and neighboring sub-Saharan countries live below the World Bank international poverty line of \$1.90 a day (Blake 2019, cited in Fafore 2019), with minimal access to basic amenities such as good roads, healthcare, and adequate housing, among others. Abject poverty and high unemployment rates are significant factors underlying extremist Islam's popularity in West Africa (Fafore 2019).

Youth appear to be the most vulnerable to extremist appeals. Members between 19 and 35 years old filled the ranks of IS foreign and domestic (i.e., Iraqi and Syrian) fighters. Young people are usually attracted by IS recruiting techniques based on social media outreach (Celso 2015). In Sahel and the closest sub-Saharan societies, the population is predominantly young, with average ages ranging from 15 to 23. Inadequate local education systems and job markets fail to absorb the youth bulge, leading to economic deprivation. The resultant sense of grievance among the youth makes them an easy target of Islamic recruiters (Aniruddha and Jomon 2018). Deprived of education, illiterate youth readily absorb ideological brain-

washing, especially when lured by the prospect of shelter, food, and income. That is one reason why Mali, a country with one of the world's lowest literacy rates, constituted such a fertile ground for al-Qaeda-led Islamic radicalization (Fafore 2019).

According to Funmi Abioye, the roots of terrorism's spread in Africa go beyond the problems of poverty and unemployment. They are also attributable to "usually deep-seated socioeconomic and historical inequalities that lie at the roots of some of the most violent conflicts" (2019:10). Degila distinguishes two types of inequalities as root causes of terrorism in the Sahel region and neighboring Sub-Saharan countries: vertical (between individuals) and horizontal (disproportionate distribution of resources inadequately suited to the group size) (Stewart et al., cited in Degila 2020). Horizontal inequalities might be economic (income, access to land, job opportunities), social (human capital, access to health or housing), political (top-level government positions), or cultural (exclusion of specific cultural traditions by the state) in nature (Degila 2020). States that are corrupt and incapable of good and sovereign governance further intensify the impact of horizontal inequalities and abject poverty on the spread of terrorism. Boko Haram's impact on the Lake Chad basin countries, such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, serves as the best example (Degila 2020).

Incapacitated by corruption, the fragility of judicial institutions, and under-equipped law enforcement and security services, states are unable to properly secure their borders and vast open spaces. Resultant state weakness facilitates the expansion of groups such as ISGS, JNIM, and Boko Haram in the Sahel zone and around the Lake Chad basin (Mentan 2004, cited in Abioye 2019:9; Degila, 2020).

3.2 Religious factors

Despite relative concurrence as to the contribution of non-ideological factors to the expansion of terrorism in the Sahel region and neighboring Sub-Saharan countries, scholars adopt a diverse approach to the role of religious motives. Some recognize them as a leading causative factor in terrorist activity. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2020) found that religious tensions are closely linked to terrorism in nations with underdeveloped economies. The *Mail and Guardian's* staff reporter (2013) linked militant religious groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabab in Somalia, and AQIM in Algeria to religious fundamentalism and extremist ideologies, with their primary objective of transforming the states into Sharia-governed Islamic territories. In the same vein, Eizenga and Williams (2020) present the objectives of FLM leadership as overtly oriented toward the forced spread of Islam, including the killing of local imams and traditional leaders in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso if those figures did not follow the FLM's interpretation of Islam. Aniruddha and Jomon (2018) found a positive correspondence between domestic terrorism and religious fractionalization.

Some authors describe the rhetoric of religious tensions or grievances as the facilitating factor for Islamic terrorist recruitment in Africa (Seequeh 1996:9, cited in Abioye 2019:9). However, more often religious factors are given a secondary role. For example, Gow, Olonishakin and Dijxhorn assert that in Nigeria, “a deep desire on the part of people to defend their religion and beliefs” (2013, cited in Abioye 2019:10) only occasionally inspires terrorist activity and appears on top of the horizontal inequality motives. Religious motives are also described as coupled with ethnic grievances and thus difficult to distinguish from the latter (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020:69).

Huckabey cites reports of rhetoric mixing ethnic and religious causes. Omar Ould Hamaha, in his Timbuktu-based campaign, eloquently played to both religious sentiment and ethnic and racial inequalities: “Our combat is in the name of Islam, it is not Arab or Tuareg or black or white” (Huckabey 2013). This proved to be an effective recruitment technique. A remarkable response ensued as hundreds of youths from Senegal, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast arrived at the training camps. The motives were mixed: some were driven by a sincere commitment to the ideological cause, others by the prospect of monetary gain.

Other scholars question the genuineness of the religious factor and interpret religious discourse utilized by terrorist groups as a mere ideological coverup (Degila 2020). They attribute the real success of jihadist insurgents to their promises to restore socioeconomic well-being, justice, and better governance. “From this point of view, they are therefore not only violent identity actors and can also offer a politico-ideological label,” Degila (2020:81) explains.

Granted, even in the recruitment process, religious drives are coupled with non-religious ones that appeal more directly to the current economic or social needs of prospective fighters. However, one cannot overlook the more general ideological agenda of the jihadist coalition. For the coalition’s leaders, a shared jihad-driven rationale was the key motive behind its formation and activity. This point of view is shared, for instance, by Pauline Le Roux, who suggests that FLM leaders “were likely inspired and mentored by AQIM and Ansar Dine’s fundamentalist theoreticians.” Both FLM’s leader, Amadou Koufa, and Ansar Dine’s leader, Ag Ghaly, joined the Islamic Dawah Movement of Southern Africa (IDM), propagating political Islam, back in the 1990s in Mali, following their exposure to a conservative brand of Islam preached by Gulf-sponsored “humanitarian organizations” (Le Roux 2019).

Presently, the intensity of religious drive may seem not to be evenly manifested across the coalition. Koufa seems to exhibit a more radical approach, which stems from his adoption of more extreme views due to his visits to Afghanistan, India, and Qatar prior to the 2012 Malian war (Zenn 2015). He seeks “to force . . . an extremist version of Islam onto these communities” and thus “may desire to break away from

JNIM's less ideologically motivated contingents" (Eizenga and Williams 2020:5-6). At the same time, Ag Ghali "appears satisfied with increasing his influence over northern Mali" (Eizenga and Williams 2020:5-6). However, this statement takes on a special meaning in relation to his close ties to radical Islamists (Salafist and mafia networks), which were evident and even formed the basis for his expulsion in 2010 from Saudi Arabia, where he served as a Malian consul (Diarra and Sidibe 2015).

The apparent discrepancy between the two sole figureheads of the coalition may be misleading. Without underestimating other drives such as political and socioeconomic concerns, the difference in policies adopted by the two leaders may also result from AQIM's strategy of concealing its real agenda so as to evade the attention of international counterterrorism efforts (Le Roux 2019). Following the 2013 French military intervention in Mali, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel instructed his militants and those of related military groups to "pretend to be a 'domestic' movement has its own causes and concerns" and to avoid "showing that we have an expansionary, jihadist, al Qaeda, or any other sort of project" (Associated Press, 15 February 2013, cited in Zenn 2015:4). Thus, the adoption of liberation rhetoric may be motivated by a desire to downgrade the coalition's connections with global jihadist groups rather than by any actual departure from ideological motives.

Another argument that supports the thesis that the ideological component is inherent to the final objective, even if hidden behind other motives, is the idea of humanitarianism. Islamic sects such as the IDM use it to attract recruits, concealing their jihadist rhetoric at the same time. In the impoverished Sahel region, this approach has ensured the fast spread of the jihadist agenda. The first missionaries of the IDM in Mali (Pakistani preachers) became known to the general public as faithful patrons who invested in mosques and madrasas. In 2000, this Pakistan-originated preaching took shape in Mali by sending emissaries to all the cities in the interior, mainly in the north. Under the guise of humanitarianism, they have succeeded in convincing many of their recruits to leave their families and jobs. The best followers are then sent to religious centers known for radicalism, such as in Pakistan or Qatar, for further indoctrination (Diarra and Sidibe 2015).

4. The case of Burkina Faso

4.1 The push/pull factors and first signs of religious radicalization

While the situation in Mali remained unstable, Burkina Faso stood out as a beacon of religious tolerance and peace. A report from 2014, probing the risk of violent extremism in Burkina Faso, presented it as a country that had "gained a reputation for relative peace and stability" and displayed "remarkable success in avoiding extremist violence and protracted armed conflict" (Loada and Romaniuk 2014:2). This is not to

say that the country had averted its share of problems. The report evidenced the presence of all typical push (local) factors of violent terrorism: both political (corruption and impunity) and socio-economic drivers (rural poverty, the high cost of living, an unwieldy educational system), resulting in unemployment and underemployment of youth, as well as tensions at the local level (the governance of land resources and mining, tensions between Mossi farmers and Fulani herders and also between natives and immigrants). These push factors seem to be permanent in Burkina Faso. They were mentioned in later reports on the humanitarian crisis in this country (International Crisis Group 2020; Institute for Economics and Peace 2020). According to one such report, the creation of the Koglweogo self-defense groups served only to further diminish the capacity of state institutions. They were recruited from among victims of land disputes and highway banditry, mainly Mossi people. This process is seen as “Mossi expansionism” (International Crisis Group 2020:65).

In the context of the threat of terrorism in Burkina Faso, Loada and Romaniuk (2014) also considered cultural factors, including religious ones. They may be both push and pull factors, with a tendency toward the prevalence of the latter. Push factors are mainly categorized as structural and pertain here to the state’s incapacity to supervise religious activity. For instance, the inability to oversee religious schools and their teaching content started to raise concerns in society. Unable to enroll in public schooling, some Fulbe students were left with no other option than to find a place in Koranic schools. Enjoying curricular autonomy, religious schools refused to integrate their curricula with secular school content. Consequently, their students were left unprepared for their professional careers. Thus, identity-based grievances started to arise due to the lack of job opportunities for Islamic school graduates, forcing them to pursue further education in the Persian Gulf. Some cracks in the veneer also started to emerge amidst allegations about societal discrimination against Muslims with regard to religious attire, as some secular schools imposed veil bans. In turn, a Christian element seen in the public square could arouse frustration fueled by a perceived crossing of the boundaries of official secularism. However, despite these local religious factors, the likelihood of religious extremist movements posing a security threat seemed low.

The important conclusion from the 2014 report is that push factors, considered alone, were incapable of producing violent extremism in Burkina Faso. Thus, the possibility of bottom-up radicalization leading to extremism in Burkina Faso appeared distant and possible only with the additional influence of pull (external) factors. “Despite this broad risk, the threat of violent extremism in Burkina Faso is not imminent and remains low by comparison to neighboring states. Burkinabe people tend not to express their grievances in extremist terms” (Loada and Romaniuk 2014:2), the report authors concluded.

The 2014 report revealed mounting pressure toward Islamic radicalization in Burkina Faso, coming particularly from Mali. However, broader regional instability, including the presence of active extremists in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Nigeria, was also identified as a possible point of entrance for violent extremism into Burkina Faso (Loada and Romaniuk 2014:26). At that time, the pressure seemed modest, as the country enjoyed a widely cherished, peaceful interfaith coexistence. Nevertheless, signs of religious radicalization could be noticed in Burkinabe society before 2014. In the western region, well-resourced religious leaders would appear and sermons denigrating other religious communities could be heard. The MUJAO's (a split from AQIM) extremist recruitment practices started to occur, with potential candidates being offered monetary incentives. Foreign religious leaders would occasionally attract locals' attention by preaching extremely conservative religious views or by reproaching them for not following Islam more strictly. Even though the recruitment was generally not successful, there were instances of young Muslim men adopting strict religious dress codes or Muslim women embracing strict Islamic precepts. There were cases of self-mobilization of young Muslims and attempts to engage in acts of violence, with some crossing over to the regions of Mali occupied by armed Muslim groups (Loada and Romaniuk 2014:2).

Eight years later, according to the Global Peace Index 2021, Burkina Faso evidences the single largest deterioration in peacefulness of all indexed countries. The ongoing conflict, obviously fueled by the Islamic insurgency against the state, is said to amount to a low-level civil war. However, contrary to the 2014 report's conclusions, the rhetoric of present reports stresses local push factors rather than external pulls, and it undermines or even excludes the religious factor. "Far from representing a global jihad guided by a religious agenda, jihadist groups in Burkina above all consist of Burkinabe insurgents, and the reason for the shift toward violence has local origins" (International Crisis Group 2020:6). Thus, these authors attribute the source of the armed conflict to a multifaceted internal crisis in Burkina Faso's rural areas, claiming that "The jihadist threat is more the consequence of the country's problems than the cause" (International Crisis Group 2020:9).

In view of this discrepancy, it seems appropriate to pose some questions concerning the role of the religious factor in the developments in Burkina Faso. The first logical question to ask is what pull factors contributed to the developments in the country and whether they were ideological in nature.

4.2 Religion as a strong external pull factor

Instrumental in the spread of Jihadist groups into northern Burkina Faso was Ibrahim Malam Dicko, a radical Fulani preacher. Raised to become an Islamic scholar, he became supportive of the jihadist ideology during his stay in Mali, where he

traveled during the 2012 crisis (Malka 2020:127). He became a protégé of Amadou Koufa, a future founder of the FLM (Belanger et al. 2020; Eizenga and Williams 2020). The confluence of ideological objectives seems not to be coincidental as the FLM strives to restore the Fulani Macina kingdom (Eizenga and Williams 2020; Malka 2020:127), which in the nineteenth century covered an area from central Mali to northern Burkina Faso. This Macina kingdom is also referred to as a Fulani jihad state.

Following his return to Burkina Faso in 2016, Dicko managed to win support among marginalized Remaibé youth and Fulani herdsmen, appealing to their grievances against the more prominent Fulani noble class. Additionally, horizontal inequality affected the Fulani tribe in the northeastern part of the country, which was recognized as separate from the majority Mossi and Foulse tribes (Belanger et al. 2020:7).

Dicko's first attack on a military camp in Noussoumba, in the northern province of Soum, on 15 December 2016, marked the beginning of the terrorist insurgency in Burkina Faso. It led to the formation of the first homegrown Burkinabe militant Islamist group, Ansaroul Islam, a day later (Eizenga and Williams 2020). One factor facilitating its formation was "the influx of jihadi-salafi ideology," a narrative that offered a justification for anti-Christian violence (Malka 2020:131).

In the surge of incursions, targeted killings, and abductions that followed, religious leaders were among those targeted, including imams and priests (Belanger et al. 2020). The attacks were also launched against other representatives of societal structures that benefited from their cooperation with the government and former colonizers, such as educational institutions teaching in French, tribal chiefs, marabouts, suspected informants, and local politicians (Belanger et al. 2020). However, this large spectrum of targets does not necessarily mean that political motivation prevails over the religious one, as one may claim. In fact, a political goal of all jihadist groups, namely the building of a global caliphate, is at the same time strictly religious. If attained, it will bring the domination of Islam over the conquered area, the imposition of Sharia law, and obvious political and societal benefits for the winners.

Apart from shaking the country's stability, Ansaroul Islam proved the government's incapacity to contain the increasing border-zone insurgency, thus encouraging more experienced militant groups pressurized by the French and G-5 Sahel military intervention to relocate to Burkina Faso (Belanger et al. 2020). Following Dicko's death in 2017, his militants either filled the ranks of existing criminal networks along the Niger border or joined FLM as it launched operations in northern and north central Burkina Faso (Eizenga and Williams 2020). Most likely, Ansaroul Islam defectors also integrated with both JNIM and ISGS due to their previously established relationships (Belanger et al. 2020).

By the end of 2019, the attacks had increased in lethality (with an increase in total fatalities of more than 600 percent between 2018 and 2019), and the number of civilian casualties outnumbered military fatalities by 725 to 185 in 2019 (Belanger et al. 2020). Belanger et al. claim that the shift toward village raids may have resulted from the rise in ethnic conflict and may aim at cleansing the area of control. They justify the latter thesis by pointing out the geographic shift of attacks' locations, from the Sahel region to the east and north central regions and then to other provinces, particularly in the north and the Boucle du Mouhoun, that are mainly Mossi-dominated regions (International Crisis Group 2020). Mossi people are said to be targeted because of their privileged position within the government, which translates to favored access to land managed by elected officials. This suggestion seems reasonable; however, one should also take into account that the jihadist groups in Burkina Faso are just spreading the jihad to new areas, and Mossi may be simply a target on their way.

Without question, there is a jihadist uprising in Burkina Faso. Despite the fact that jihadism is religious in nature, several reports have marginalized or even de-fused religion as a causative agent. For instance, the International Crisis Group states, "Religious fervor is not the motivation for most fighters and unit commanders, who are usually Burkinabe and have other priorities" (2020:13). The religious influence of recruiting sermons delivered by preachers such as Malam and Jafar Dicko in Soum is downplayed on the grounds of lack of religious education among Burkinabe jihadist fighters and commanders and the appeal to non-religious recruitment drivers such as land- or mines-related grievances, banditry, or taking revenge on state institutions and Koglweogo self-defense groups. As the report's authors claim, the criteria for target audience selection are mainly deprivation of goods or the ability to carry arms, and are thus non-religious.

Also, it is claimed that the leaders' ambition to impose Sharia law is not shared by the fighters and supporters, whose interests are more locally based (International Crisis Group 2020). Even if the sermons link local grievances with references to the global Islamic agenda, the leaders are "willing to relax their discipline in order to accommodate those who join their ranks for more prosaic reasons." They also allow the fighters to "pick their fights" as long as they "do not directly contravene the jihad's global principles" (International Crisis Group 2020:15).

Another argument concerns the alleged non-uniformity of attacks' motives. As the authors contend, of the two main organizations operating in Burkina (ISGS and JNIM), only the latter targets religious minorities and has authorized attacks against Christian places of worship. Similarly, Moussa Soumahoro rejects the relevance of religious factors, stating that "the causes and trajectories of the phenomena vary from region to region" (2020:5) and constitute only 20 percent and 5 percent of the cases related to radicalization and violent extremism, respectively.

As noted above, prior to the upsurge of jihadism, Burkina Faso was considered a place of peaceful interfaith coexistence. Just as with tribal disputes, the state agents were successful in mitigating religious divisions (Belanger et al. 2020). Apart from instances of land discrimination (in which Christians were offered farmland distant from the village) and expulsions of believers from family homes after their conversion, there were no recorded instances of violence. As we have seen, jihadism in Burkina Faso is a strong pull (external) factor, even if it also benefits from the multifaceted internal crises this country has been facing for a very long time. And this factor finally destroyed this interfaith coexistence, victimizing Christians living in the country.

4.3 Targeting of Christians

4.3.1 Scarcity of reliable data

Although Christians are not the only targets, in numerous cases they are singled out for attacks. Once identified, they are often “killed on the spot” unless they agree to “convert to Islam or abandon their homes” (International Institute for Religious Freedom 2020). As shown above, the role of religious motives as the trigger of violent terrorism in the Sahel region is highly contested by scholars. Unfortunately, scholarly literature rarely considers the victimization of Burkinabe Christians, a potentially decisive consideration, in its analyses.

One reason for this negligence is the scarcity of available data. The Sunday, 28 April 2019 raid on the Church of Sigaldji was widely reported by local and international media (BBC News 2019), but other attacks get far less notice. Local media do not typically cover such issues, and the government and the recently overthrown president, Roch Kabore, officially claimed that the attackers were not religiously motivated. For a few years, they were even not identified as jihadists or terrorists but as so-called HANI (*hommes armés non-encore identifiés*, or armed men not yet identified), the term that the media typically use when an attack is not claimed by any known armed or terrorist group. Another hindrance to the circulation of data has been the modification of the country’s Penal Code, amended 20 June 2019, and signed into law on 31 July 2019 (Title I of Book III of the Penal Code of 2018, Articles 312-13 to 312-16). This regulation imposes a prison sentence and a fine for publishing information not authorized by the state. The law took effect amidst concerns about its potential for violating the media’s freedom of speech.

In some cases, official information about attacks and their victims was not entirely reliable, as it was published only after some delay. The government agency CONASUR regularly publishes reports on casualties of the attacks and numbers of internally displaced persons. It collects information from local officials, who often face difficulties in reaching the survivors because of the general situation of insecurity. Thus, one

cannot expect the CONASUR database to present an accurate number of victims. This is not to say that the government does not acknowledge the religious motives of the attacks. To stop the spread of jihadi violence, it launched two initiatives related to religious activity: the creation of an Office of National Religious Affairs (ONAFAR) to monitor religious activity and an attempt to pass a bill to regulate religious organizations and activities (Malika 2020:132). Moreover, during the last months of 2021 and in early 2022, major cities and towns of Burkina Faso witnessed waves of riots. To avoid the civil war and the putsch, the government banned Internet data on mobile phones, making it impossible to collect data. The only source of information about the present state of affairs was interviews with local partners and field workers.

The next section of the article will present the missing part of the research in other reports – namely, the voice of Burkinabe Christians. The data was collected through interviews with local Christians. For security reasons, most of the interlocutors will be identified by pseudonyms or will remain anonymous.

4.3.2 The voice of Burkinabe Christians

Ézéchiél is a Burkinabe pastor and teacher. Both positions qualified him as a target of jihadist attacks. More than twice, heavily armed jihadists surrounded his workplace and home, searching for him. Fortunately, heavy traffic slowed his return to the office from the capital, giving the villagers enough time to warn him of the danger. In this case, the religious motive was combined with the jihadists' intention to destabilize state institutions. Considered in isolation, the case does not conclusively determine that the religious factor was decisive. However, when it is considered in the context of a jihadist hit list that included all pastors and not necessarily all state officials, it becomes clear that a religious motive was prevalent.

Samuel, an active local church member, was married and a father of five. He enjoyed ordinary Burkinabe life in a village in the northeast part of the country. The family heard about the attacks and insecurity in the north but did not expect it to come to their home. One day, coming back from the field, Samuel and his family witnessed a group of jihadists setting his house on fire. The family went into hiding. Since the other houses remained intact, they considered returning to their village a viable alternative. However, some neighbors informed them that jihadists were intentionally seeking to kill the family. Upon hearing that, Samuel and his family decided to seek refuge in a safer location 100 kilometers from their home. Even though Samuel was not the only Christian in the village, he was singled out for attack as an active member of the church community. The attackers' sole motive appears to have been religious.

Among the tactics terrorist groups have employed to identify Christians and single them out for killing, one involves inquiring about people's religion. A report

of a jihadist attack in a northern village provides a typical illustration. Jihadists appeared early in the morning and gathered all the men in one place. The only question they asked was about the men's religion. While people of other faith traditions were permitted to walk away untouched, those who claimed to be Christians were killed on the spot.

Some interviewed contacts reported that jihadists would also use neutral informants to identify Christians. For instance, prior to an attack, jihadists would send young men to a village to bribe orphans in return for revealing the whereabouts of the local pastor or Christians. Unaware of their motives and encouraged by the offer of a portion of rice or money, the children would typically grant the request. More information of this sort was collected during 100 interviews with local Christians via local partners whose identities cannot be revealed for security reasons. The interviews were conducted in 15 cities, towns, and villages hosting refugees from various parts of the country.

The targeting of Christians is not limited to vicious one-time attacks. Jihadists show up regularly in attacked villages to check whether the Christians have returned home, with the intention to kill the returnees. In some areas, they go a step further toward establishing the desired Islamic caliphate by attempting to impose Sharia law on the local community.

4.4 The refugee crisis

The increasing number of jihadist attacks has resulted in a growing refugee crisis in Burkina Faso (OCHA 2022:33). Survivors of attacks were forced to flee and seek refuge in cities or refugee camps (International Institute for Religious Freedom 2020; Lamarche and Bentley 2022). As reported by the Global Peace Index, "Over 4.6 per cent of the total population are now either refugees or internally displaced" (Institute for Economics and Peace 2021:20).

Christians constitute fewer than one-quarter of internally displaced persons (IDPs), a percentage proportionate to their representation in the overall population of Burkina Faso (23 percent). Religious factors are clearly identified in reports by groups that advocate for religious freedom (Open Doors International 2022; U.S. Department of State 2021) but are not listed among displacement drivers in any of the documents cited in this article (International Crisis Group 2020; Institute for Economics and Peace 2020; Soumahoro 2020). However, occasionally the function of religion is hinted at in international (IDMC 2020) or state reports (CGRA 2019). Looking at the refugee statistics alone, it would be difficult to identify a primary anti-Christian motive behind the attacks. However, the religious aspect emerges as the essential trigger when individual stories are considered. Instances of Christians being singled out for attacks are self-evident. On the other hand, in

some cases all residents of a village, including Muslims, were displaced, because nominal or non-radical Muslims who oppose the imposition of strict Sharia law are also targeted. Whether these Muslims were also targeted or were alarmed to see their Christian neighbors slaughtered, they too decided to flee for their lives.

The refugee crisis continues to evolve. Additional factors are added to the list and evidenced in reports. Some recent reports point to collective punishment for presumed complicity with the government or army, or to economic reasons, as rationales for the attacks (ACLED 2022; CARITAS 2020; UNHCR July 2022). However, the underlying reason for the current refugee crisis in Burkina Faso is rooted in Islamic expansion.

4.5 Lost peace and unity

Burkina Faso has been a model of tolerance in the Sahel. Political and religious authorities and the wider community are doing their best to preserve it, but the country may have been irreparably affected by the insurgency because of its fragility and the security forces' inability to deal with the threat. The interviewees stressed the increased fragmentation of a relatively united Burkinabe society. Prior to the Islamic insurgency, local communities, supported by the regional offices, maintained peaceful coexistence and overcame local linguistic, tribal, or cultural divisions. But recently, previous divisions have started to intensify, and new ones have emerged. The traditional structure of society is being shaken at its foundation. Local communities have been scattered as the crisis forced many to flee from their hometowns. Even some families decided to escape separately to increase the chances that at least some individual members would survive.

In the IDP community, a new structure is taking shape. There is no more "us" and "them." Every IDP has the same goal: to benefit from the scarce aid supply in order to survive. However, even at this stage, religious motives emerge and work to the Christians' disadvantage. At aid distribution locations, some social workers are trying to profit from their position or to prioritize their "brothers in faith." As a result, these staff decline to provide help to Christians solely because they are not Christians. Instead, the Christians are easily identified and sent away empty-handed.

5. Conclusion

Religiously motivated violent terrorism has been plaguing the Sahel region in recent years, resulting in a major refugee crisis. Even Burkina Faso, a country of peaceful interfaith coexistence, has not been spared. The resulting lack of trust and unity, connected with the high level of insecurity, will affect the future generations of Burkinabe. Hopefully, with the ongoing political transitions, unity can be rebuilt there in a more vital form. However, many consequences of the jihadist activity are dif-

ficult or impossible to reverse. The imbalances and community divisions will have a long-term effect on the country's socioeconomic situation.

To provide adequate assistance to Burkinabe Christians, one must be aware of the complexity of the changes taking place. As a WEA Religious Liberty Commission (2019) report states, to effectively curb violence against Christians, one must consider “the larger context of spiraling communal violence, increasing Islamist activity in the region, and a weak security apparatus in the country.”

Many members of the Christian community, including clergy, have been killed or kidnapped, and churches have been burned down or closed for security reasons. Mounting evidence points to a dire need to address the situation of Christians and to highlight the religious agenda underlying the violence perpetrated against them. First, to provide adequate protective measures for Christian churches, “it is critical for the Burkinabe government to recognize the threat to Christian populations” (WEA Religious Liberty Commission 2019). Many times, Christians were forced to flee their communities first, yet for some reason, they were sometimes excluded from government help (which is not openly spoken about). They could count only on the limited resources of local churches.

Second, Christians in the free world should view the present state of affairs in Burkina Faso as a matter of particular concern. Burkinabe Christians' voice is being silenced by the new Penal Code and lack of media access. At the same time, academic research undermines or denies the connections between the attacks and the victims' Christian faith. In the face of this neglect, it is necessary to recognize the religious motives of jihadist attacks and to note that Christians are singled out for violence. That recognition should be followed by an assessment of the needs of internally displaced Christians and by the launching of aid projects. International Christian communities should reach out specifically to Burkinabe Christians with aid, satisfying their urgent needs such as food, drinking water, and education.

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