

Islamic Insurgency and Socio-religious and Political Processes in the Sahel (1990-2012): A comparative perspective between Mali Mauritania and Niger

## **Introduction**

The Islamic insurgency in the Sahel originated from the spillover of the Algerian civil war into the Saharan desert. During the early 2000s, the Algerian military successes over the *Salafist Group for Predication and Combat* (GSPC in French) pushed many jihadists to South Algeria towards the Malian and Nigerien borders. Later, the GSPC, which became Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, found in northern Mali a safe haven where it progressively established its new bases alongside the Tuareg separatist rebels and other groups of smugglers. From its sanctuary in northern Mali AQIM launched sporadic attacks against military barracks, and conducted suicide bombings, and kidnapping across the Sahel—by which I mean Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Furthermore, AQIM worked with extremists indigenous elites to establish local cells of jihadists. This strategy succeeded in Mali and Mauritania but failed in Niger. As a result, the experience of the Islamic insurgency by these three countries varied significantly: in Mali a powerful Islamic insurgency emerged and lead to the collapse of the state whereas in Mauritania the state was able to defeat the insurgency, and in Niger no cells of Islamic insurgents emerged at all. This variation of trajectories and outcomes constitutes the puzzle of this paper. I ask the question: what explains the collapse of Mali, the success of Mauritania in overcoming the jihadist threat, and the stability of Niger?

Insurgencies, rebellions and civil wars are well-researched phenomena and there is a wealth of knowledge and theories that explain their different aspects. Yet, the existing theories have largely focused on addressing separately particular snapshots of the phenomena, including, root causes, onset, outcomes, and ends, rather than approaching it holistically. In this paper, I

attempt to fill this gap by approaching the phenomenon of Islamic insurgency from a political process theory perspective, meaning examining the entire process, starting from its root causes throughout its outcomes enumerating on the way the causal mechanisms and sequences that punctuate its trajectory. I narrow down the scope of the paper by focusing only on those factors and causal mechanisms that explain variations across the three cases. By doing so I spare efforts and time from addressing many of the factors that are identified as relevant explanatory variables of insurgency but that are commonly shared by Mali, Mauritania, and Niger and that are not helpful in terms of understanding variations. Such factors as poverty, rough terrain, and colonial history will not receive much of attention. Also, the study focuses on the period of 1990 through 2012. This excludes the pre-democratic era, even-though I often refer to some historical events to give context to the period of interest. It also excludes what is sometimes referred to—quite inaccurately—as the *post-Islamic insurgency* period, notably the French intervention in Mali and the reconstruction period.

The central argument of the paper is summarized as follow: the Islamic insurgency in the Sahel must be understood as a process that originated from the sociopolitical and religious transformations that punctuated the democratic transition in the Sahel. The persistence of bad governance, and economic destitution after twenty years of democratization has generated a growing discontent vis-à-vis the state and the secular and democratic political system, particularly among the subalterns. This discontent combined with a rising religiosity and ethno-racial tensions created a fertile ground for the incidence of Islamic insurgency in all of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Yet, even though this is a shared context across the three countries, Islamic insurgency emerged only in Mali and Mauritania where greater political and strategic opportunities incentivized jihadist leaders to create insurgent movements and mobilize support

for it, using a discourse that collectivized the grievance of the masses. The insurgency succeeded only in Mali where, as opposed to Mauritania, it received a significant popular support and faced a weak state repressive capacity.

I divide the paper into three sections: the first section gives an overview of the Islamic insurgency in the Sahel, the second set up my theoretical framework, and the third section applies that theoretical framework to the cases in order to explain why each of them had the trajectories and outcomes that they did.

### **Section One: The Islamic Insurgency in the Sahel**

In early 2000s, after a decades of civil war, the Algerian military succeeded in weakening the jihadist insurgents and splitting them into factions. In 2003, a faction of the GSPC led by Abdelrazak El Para conducted a major kidnapping operation, captured a group of 32 foreign tourists and escaped with more than a half of them to the region of Kidal in northern Mali. This event inaugurated the beginning of the establishment of jihadists in the Sahel. The same year, minor clashes began between the national armies of Niger and Mali with the jihadists. But the first major attack occurred in 2005, when the GSPC attacked an isolated military garrison in Leimghity, a Mauritanian town near the border with Algeria. Sporadic attacks against military barracks, suicide bombings, and kidnapping for ransoms continued throughout 2014, plunging the three countries—Mali Mauritania and Niger—in a cycle of violence that was unprecedented in the region's history.

The GSPC which became Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007, operated in Sahel through three *katibas* (combat units): katibat Al-Moulathamine, led by Belmokhtar, Katibat Tariq Ben Ziyad, commanded by the now defunct Abu Zeid, and Katibat Al-Furqan led by Abul Hammam. As the insurgency continued, numerous other local jihadist groups were established

with direct support of AQIM. These local groups include the Movement for Unicity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO in French), Ansar al Dine, and Ansarullah Almurabitun. While there are evidences of tensions between the jihadist groups, no evidence suggests any significant differences in terms of ideology, objectives, or operational strategies. The insurgents came from different countries in the region, and allegedly from different regions of the world, in addition to jihadists from the three frontline countries. In various statements the groups claimed that they pursued the goal of toppling the “apostate” secular and democratic states in North Africa and the Sahel region and replacing them with the Islamic caliphate where sharia will be rule.

Mauritania, Mali and Niger are the three Sahelian countries that are on the frontline of the crisis. Despite similar socio-economic, political and religious configuration, they all followed different trajectories and had different experience and outcomes.

In Mali, despite its strong presence in the north throughout the 2000s, AQIM avoided direct confrontation with the Malian army. The insurgency started in January 2012 after a prominent Tuareg leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, created a group called *Ansar al Dine*, and declared jihad against the Malian state. The insurgency quickly grew stronger, building on kin and tribal relationship as well as on existing networks of separatist Tuareg rebels, illicit traffickers and returning combatants from Libya after Kaddafi’s defeat. Tensions within the jihadists led to the proliferation of insurgent groups including MUJAO, Al-Mulathamine, and Al-Muwaqqi-una biddam. After three months of combat, the insurgents defeated the Malian army, occupied two thirds of the Malian territory, and established sharia rule in the occupied regions. The crisis generated protests in Bamako, the capital city, leading to a military coup. The confusion that ensued degenerated into the collapse of state authority to the extent that protestors could reach out to the presidential palace and beat up the interim president Dioncounda Traore. Nine months after their initial success, and taking advantage

of the delinquency of the state in Mali amidst the indecision of the international community, the jihadist decided to advance toward Bamako. On the request of the Malian interim government, France suddenly decided to intervene through what has been named *Operation Serval*. The French military intervention was followed by the deployment of the African-led international Support Mission to Mali (MISMA in French). Together these two military operations defeated the jihadists and liberated the occupied regions in January 2013.

In Mauritania the course of event was quite different. The insurgency started in 2005 with the Leimghity attack, making Mauritania the first Sahelian country to suffer a major attack by the then nascent Islamic insurgency. The initial attacks were perpetrated by AQIM, but starting from 2007, a group called *Ansarullah Almurabitun* lead by Khadim Semane started operating in Nouakchott, the capital city on Mauritania. This was the unique case of urban Islamic insurgency in the region. Between 2007 and 2011 the group officially perpetrated 13 attacks on Mauritanian soil. The number of casualties is not well-established, but it is estimated under 200, to which should be added several kidnappings. But contrary to the case of Mali, the group failed to mobilize any significant support within the Mauritanian societies. Islamic insurgency coincided with a period of political instability with a military coup against the long-term dictator, Maaouiyah Ould Taya in 2005 followed sequentially by a military transition, democratic elections, and then another military coup followed by a transition and elections. Yet despite this apparent weakness, the successive Mauritania authorities reacted promptly and vigorously against the jihadists, combining military, political and religious strategies. By the end of 2011 dozens of jihadists including the leader Khadim Semane, were arrested and many other fled to Mali and Libya where they could pursue their Jihadist enterprise more successfully. Since December 2011 until now there has been no jihadist attack in Mauritania.

Niger has suffered many attacks and kidnappings perpetrated by groups operating on its borders, notably AQIM and MUJAO. Yet, contrary to its Sahelian neighbors, Niger has so far avoided the emergence of indigenous cells of jihadists, thus preventing the occupation of its territory by such groups. AQIM's attempt to recruit a leader among the Tuareg community in Niger to start an insurgency has so far failed. I will argue that this failure is not due to the lack of charismatic leaders in Niger, but to the lack of opportunity, or the condition that could make the insurgency feasible.

This variation of trajectory and outcomes is puzzling given the similarities of the social, political, and economic configurations of the three countries. In what follows I will discuss the theoretical framework that will help explain this complex phenomenon.

## **Section two: Theoretical approaches of Islamic insurgency**

Add discussions of the theories after each of the categories.

The term insurgency in this paper is used to refer to, paraphrasing Cline (1999: 8), a low intensity organized armed conflict that is conducted by internal groups and that is based on political issues and/or politicized social and economic issues against an indigenous government.”<sup>1</sup> This definition emphasizes five fundamental aspects of an insurgency: 1) It is a low intensity armed conflict to be differentiated from large scale civil wars; 2) it is an armed conflict as opposed to other peaceful expressions of political discontent; 3) it has to be conducted by an internal and organized group, excluding riots, individual crimes, and transnational insurgencies such as AQIM activism; 4) it has to be motivated by political issues as opposed to banditry; and finally, 5) it has to be directed against the government, excluding communal violence. An insurgency is Islamic when the motivation of its leader, and its mobilizing discourse are based on Islamic religion. Insurgencies as well as other forms of civil conflicts have been subject of intense scrutiny, and

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<sup>1</sup> Cline E. Lawrence, *Islamic Insurgency: A comparative Study* A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of State University of New York at Buffalo, December 1999.

scholars have discovered important insights into understanding different aspects of these phenomena. In what follow, I will discuss some of the insights, provide a critique, and then elaborate on my theoretical approach that I call the political process theory of Islamic insurgency.

*Theories of insurgencies and civil conflicts*

Theories of civil conflict can be categorized into two: motivation and opportunity. The motivation approach emphasizes structural background conditions and historical grievances that motivate masses to rebel against the state (Horowitz 1985; Huntington 1995; Reynal-Querol 2003; Posen 1993). The central claim of this approach is that “rebellion occurs when grievances are sufficiently acute that people want to engage in violent protest.” (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004: 564) A set of literature that follow this argument focuses on: 1) ethnicity, arguing that insurgency comes as a result of such grievances as “ethnic antipathy” (Horowitz, 1985), ethno-nationalist struggles for political hegemony (Darden, 2009. Aspinal 2007 Cederman 2010), exclusion of the ethnic minority group from state power (Laitin 2001; Jenne 2004; Khrychikov 2002), the security dilemma between rival ethnic groups (Kaufman 2006; Posen 1993). Another set of literature claims that exclusionary political institutions (Lijphart, 1984; Reynal Querol 2003), or the weakness of government institutions (Fearon and Laintin, 2003; Hegre 2001; Goodwin 2001) are at the root cause of civil conflicts. Other arguments advance cultural and religious antipathy to explain civil war (Huntington 1996; Reynal-Querol 2003). And finally, 4) poverty and income inequality are also emphasized as factors that are at the origin of civil conflicts (Blattman 2010: 14).

Motivation literature came under two important challenges: first, grievance tends to be universal, whereas civil conflict happen only in exceptional occasions; this leaves unexplained the majority non-war cases, or grievances in which no wars occur. Second, by focusing on the cause

of war in the grievances, motivation literature romanticizes and legitimizes rebellion, portraying it as a reaction to oppression, which is an ahistorical claim, at the least. This two criticisms opened the door to the emergence of the opportunity literature approach, which focus on factors that make the insurgency feasible, or in other terms, the “atypical” circumstances in which rebellion becomes viable (Collier and Hoeffler 2000, 2004, 2009).

Collier and Hoeffler (1998, 2000, 2009) suggests an analytical framework that distinguishes between grievance and greed, as well as between motivation and feasibility. They emphasized the importance of greed over grievance and feasibility over motivation. The opportunity literature that developed on the basis of this argument focuses on the “conditions that favor insurgency.” These conditions include financial and military resources (Collier and Hoeffler, 2009); the ability to hide from government as well as the economic opportunity that facilitates recruitments (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Others theories emphasize the strategic interaction (Fearon 1998, Laitin 2001) or bargaining strategy (Jenne 2004) that associate between the nationalizing state, the rebellious ethnic minority, and the national homeland of the ethnic minority.

While motivation and opportunity theories may appear as contradictory, I contend that they are in reality complementary. They address two different moments in the process of incidence of an insurgency—the context that legitimizes insurgency, and the resolution of the collective action dilemma— and two different level of analysis, namely: elites versus masses.

First, if we consider the incident of civil war as an outcome of a political process, then motivation and opportunity become two different moments in the trajectory. While opportunity factors give birth to the insurgency, grievances and motivations stand for the gestation process, or the underlying dynamics that made those opportunity factors relevant in the first place. Second, the opportunity literature focuses on explaining why the leaders lead, the material and strategic



resources that enters into the leaders' strategic decision, while de-emphasizing the motive of the masses. The motivation literature, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of the motives that mobilize the masses to engage in rebellion, but gives less attention to elites' strategic decision-making. I argue that a comprehensive explanation of insurgency must take into account both these aspects. It requires, in Lawrence's terms "wedding static factors that may facilitate rebellion, such as poverty and colonial injustice, to particular triggers." (2010: 96-7) Furthermore, it must take into account not only the actions of one single actor, but the interaction between elites and masses in producing civil war. Such comprehensive approach should effectively address the question: Why leaders lead and why followers follow. The approach that I think is able to effectively address these two concerns inspires from the political process theory.

#### *Political Process Theory of Islamic insurgency*

**Tilly<sup>2</sup> "the strong effects of large-scale change on conflict run through the structure of power, especially by shaping the organizational means and resources available to different possible contenders for power" I SAY "while the structural change in the Sahel in 1990a created the conditions of the emergence of Islamic insurgency it also created the conditions for the weakness of the state (particularly the civil-military relations)**

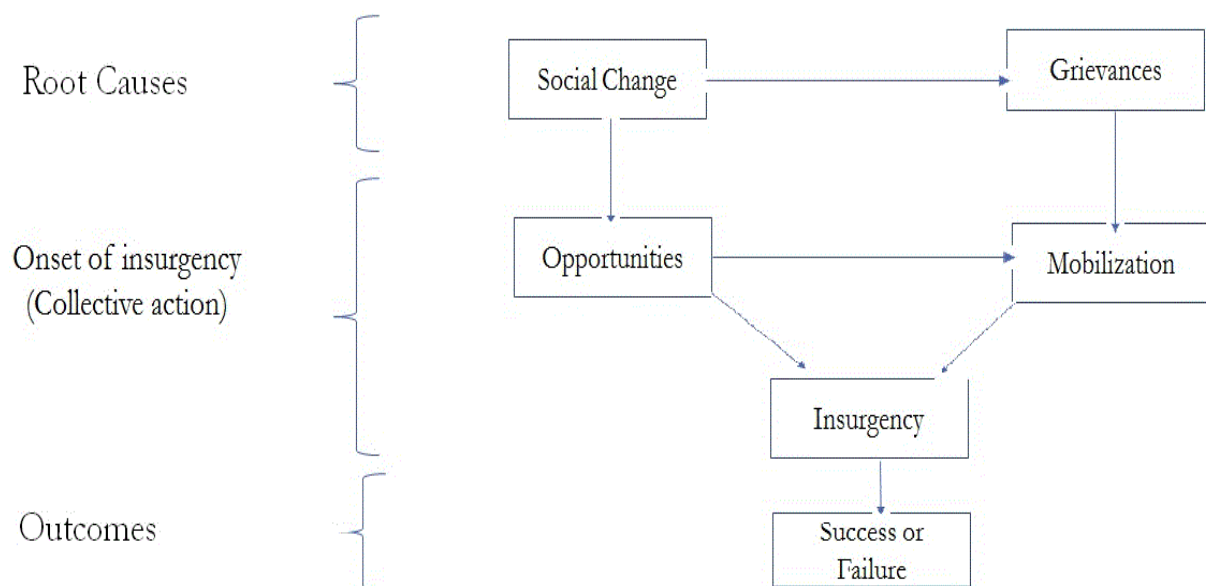
According to Tilly & al (2001: 11) "to explain contentious politics is to identify its recurrent causal mechanisms, the ways they combine, in what sequences they recur, and why different combinations and sequences, starting from different initial conditions, produce varying effects on the large scale." My aim in this paper is to trace down causal mechanisms between three sequences of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel—origins, trajectories, and outcomes—that explain the varying fates of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Figure one summarizes this theory.

*Origin.* The root causes of Islamic insurgency can be traced down in a social change that produces structural strains or grievances that could be, but not limited to, ethnic antipathy, exclusionary

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<sup>2</sup> Tilly, Does Modernization Breed Revolution

institutions, or exclusionary practices by the majority against the minority, poverty and income inequality. These practices generate discontent, a psychological discomfort that is susceptible to leading to contentious action. Yet individual discontents do not lead *ifso facto* to insurgency until they are collectivized and channeled through purposive and politically organized movements. As the case of Niger will show, in places where grievances fail to be harnessed for the purpose of creating an insurgency no violence occurs. The question then become—paraphrasing Wiktorowitz—what are the intermediary variables that translate individualized discontent into organized contention? This leads us to the second stage of insurgency: the onset.



*Onset.* An insurgency occurs once the aggrieved actors succeed in solving the collective action dilemma. This depends on two set of factors: opportunity and mobilization. Social change also produces the institutions setting that determines whether opportunities occurs or not. Opportunity is a necessary conditions for the decision of a leader to create an insurgency. I assume that leaders exist everywhere, but no leader will rationally engage in an insurgency unless she is convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the condition of feasibility are met and the likelihood of success is

high. Factors of opportunities necessarily include the weakness of state capacities, the availability of financial and military resources, and to a lesser degree of necessity, a favorable environment and an existing network of recruitment. Once the opportunity conditions are met and the leaders had made the decision to rebel, the next step will be the mobilization of combatants and popular support. Mobilization consists in framing a discourse that resonates with potential participants as well as the broader segments of the society. A successful mobilizing discourse should draw upon local identities, culture, and grievances. In brief, the decision of the leader to lead together with the acceptance of the masses to follow give birth to an insurgency. I caveat this argument by emphasizing that the decision of a social entrepreneur to start an insurgency as well as his framing of the discourse is based on his perception of opportunity and the most possible mobilizing discourse, but it does not necessarily correspond to the reality. A social entrepreneur may start an insurgency assuming that the state repressive capacity is weak, but realize later that the assessment was wrong. As he can frame a discourse that ends up ineffective in terms of mobilization. In other term the conditions that determined the decision to engage do not necessarily explain the outcomes.

Table 1:

		Countries		
Process	Factors	Mali	Mauritania	Niger
Social changes (1990 – 2012): democratization	Discontent vis-à-vis the state	✓	✓	✓
	Religious radicalism	✓	✓	✓
	Ethno-racial tensions	✓	✓	✓
Onset of Insurgency: collective action	<b>Opportunity:</b> Leader's decision to lead	✓	✓	X
	1- Perception of state weakness	✓	✓	X
	2- Financial and military resources	✓	✓	X
	3- Network of recruitment	✓	✓	✓

	<b>Mobilization:</b> Masses' decision to follow	✓	✓	X
	1- Sharia vs democracy (Political)			X
	2- Obligation of jihad (Religious)	✓	✓	X
	3- Separatism (Ethnicity)	✓	✓	X
		✓	X	
Success of the insurgency	Popular support	✓	X	X
	Weak state repressive capacity	✓	X	X

*Outcomes.* After its creation, whether an insurgency succeed or fail depends on the popular support that it ended up receiving and the actual state repressive capacity that it met throughout the period of fighting. (Flesh out this section by two variable: End of previous conflicts (See the literature on the end of civil war – total victory versus negotiations), and the intervention of the international community. Horowitz<sup>3</sup> (1981: 167) says “whether a secessionist movement will emerge at all is determined by domestic politics, by the relations of groups and regions within the state. Whether a secessionist movement will achieve its aims, however, is determined largely by international politics, by the balance of interests and forces that extend beyond the state.”

#### *Understanding the root causes of the Islamic insurgency in the Sahel*

There are many factors that are at the origin of the Islamic insurgency in the Sahel, but as I mentioned above, I only focus on those factors that explained variations. I enumerate three such causes: discontent vis-à-vis the state, the rising religious radicalism and demand for sharia, and finally the ethno-racial tensions. Even though I consider root causes as commonly shared across the three cases, those enumerated here are particularly important in terms of explaining the onset mechanism as well as the outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> Horowitz Donald, 1981, “Pattern of Ethnic Separatism” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (April): 165 – 195.

*Discontent vis-à-vis the State.* Toward the end of the 1980s, the sociopolitical and economic indicators of most Sahelian countries were set to red: enduring military dictatorships, deprivation of freedom and civil liberties, deep economic crises, recurrent famines, lingering rebellions and other ethno-racial tensions. These crises generated a popular discontent vis-à-vis the military dictatorships. The bowing context coincided with the end of the Cold War and the new wave of democratization in Eastern Europe. Inspired by the world's changing dynamics, social movements in the Sahel radicalized their demand for democracy, which they consider as the only solution to social, political and economic crisis of the time. As a result of these demands, military dictatorships in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger were forced to accept change, and all three countries engaged in the process of democratic transition starting from the early nineties.

The process of democratic transition raised hope among the majority of the Sahelian populations for a better system of governance, economic prosperity, socio-political stability, freedoms and civil liberties. But twenty years of transition to democracy has not resulted in any significant change. The same alarming social, political and economic indicators persist and in some cases they have exacerbated. Economically, the Sahelian countries count among the poorest in the world, with Niger occupying the position of the last countries in the world in term of human development index 187<sup>th</sup> over 187 countries, followed by Mali, and then Mauritania (ranking respectively at 176<sup>th</sup> and 161<sup>st</sup>).<sup>4</sup> They likewise rank low in terms of rule of law, government effectiveness, control of corruption, safety and political stability. In fact, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Index of African Governance of 2014 ranks them all below the median index of governance in Africa at respectively 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and 39<sup>th</sup>. Aside from bad governance, and perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> See the United Nation Development Program, Human Development Report 2014, The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World. Available at: <https://data.undp.org/dataset/HDI-Indicators-By-Country-2014/5tuc-d2a9>

as a result of it, the international financial institutions imposed a drastic program of structural adjustment that forced the states to drastically reduce their public investment, and social welfare program (Foster, 2011: 33). This contributed to the states' failure to meet the expectation of their citizens in terms of education, health care, security, clean water provision, etc. At the same time the populations have increased by more than 150% between 1990 and 2000 in all these three countries, adding new generations of youth poorly educated, desperate about the prospect of future, and frustrated about what they consider ineffective and corrupt governments.

The feelings of discontent, disenchantment and dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the states, are overwhelming across the Sahel. It is easily perceptible in public debates, in the media, and in different social networks. Depending on their background, some groups attribute the responsibility of the failure to the political elites while others accuse the secular democratic system and call for a radical shift toward sharia. This tendency is gaining ground owing to the rising phenomenon of religious radicalism that is discussed next.

*Rising Religious Radicalism.* Prior to the democratic reform of the 1990s, the military dictatorship imposed a tight control over associational life and religious actors. But soon after the political liberalization, new religious currents and religious organizations were introduced to the Sahelian public. Reformist movements, including Salafi, Tabligh started gaining ground and strongly challenging the existing Sufi and Sunni-Maliki traditions. A vivid religious debate between different Islamic schools marked the two-decade period of democratization. Owing to this lively debate and perhaps to rising poverty and personal insecurity, religion became progressively at the center of life. A Gallup poll on the importance of religion on people's life show that more than 95% of the Sahelian population (precisely 99% Nigeriens, 98% Mauritians and 95% Malians) declared that religion constitutes an important part in their daily

life. There is in all these countries an increasing tendency toward strict observance of religious rituals and practices and a prominent use of religious symbols and language in daily social interactions. Religion has also a strong presence in the public space as evidenced by the proliferation of mosques in the streets, government buildings, as well as in universities campuses. Religious broadcasting acquire more and more time in audiovisual media, public as well as private.

The rise in religiosity increases demand for a political system that takes into account the Islamic values and norms in public affairs, including the exclusion of the term laic from the constitution, the refusal of the family code inspired from positive law, etc. A survey by Afrobarometer (January 2014) in Niger show 7 out 10 Nigeriens are favorable to the adoption of sharia. While this is a quite generalized pattern in the region, there is however neither consensus on the content of sharia, nor on the process of implementing it. Salafist in general advocate for a literal implementation of the religious text but disagree on how to implement it. Mainstream Salafists, the most politically engaged advocate for a process of education and changing people's mentality that will gradually prepare the ground for the implementation of sharia whereas Salafist jihadist support a violent form of political change. While only a minority of Sahelians support this ideology, their number is still sufficient to create an insurgency. Until recently, Salafists jihadist in the Sahel were not concerned with domestic politics as much as they are with international politics. What mobilized them was less the motive of establishing sharia in their respective countries, but rather attacking the Western interest in the region. This situation has changed with the case of Mali as I will show. This rising religiosity explain why an Insurgency on behalf of Islam has become an option whereas it would have been unthinkable only two

decades ago. It also explain why the framing of the insurgency discourse emphasizes extensively on sharia and jihad.

*Ethno-racial tension.* The transition to democracy occurred in a period of ethno racial turmoil in all three Sahelian countries. The Sahel region, geographically located at the crossroads between sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, brings together populations of black Africans and white Arabs and Berbers. In Mali and Niger, ethno-racial politics favor black Africans who are accused of marginalizing the white minorities (around 10% of the population in both countries). In Mauritania, to the contrary, White Moors minorities control much of the political and economic resources of the country to the detriment of the majority black, Afro-Mauritanians and the Haratine (together 70% of the population). Although ethno-racial struggle existed for centuries, its recent political significance comes from the context of the early 1990s (Y.Ibrahimb, 2014: 4) . In both Mali and Niger, the history of Tuareg rebellion that started from the colonial era, has left grievances in a segment of the Tuareg population. These grievances outbreak into rebellions every time that they find triggers. Since the early 1990s, Tuareg insurgencies in Niger and Mali break out and end almost simultaneously, except for the case of 2012 rebellion that turned into an Islamic insurgency. While the claim of Tuareg rebels are always focused on the political and economic integration, in Mali the claim progressively evolved from demand for integration to separatism. As I argue later, this variation has to do with the different ways in which the two countries handled the rebellion, ways that also explain the variation of trajectory and outcomes of the Islamic insurgency. On the other hand, the Mauritanian society is also divided across racial and ethnic lines. The White Moors who represent 30% of the population hold almost completely the political and economic power. They have historically enslaved the Black Moors, also called the Haratine, who represent 40% of the population, and considered as the lowest strata of the society. And the



Afro-Mauritanians of sub-Saharan origins have been victim of racism by both White Moors and the Haratines. The worst case of racial discrimination against the Afro-Mauritanians happened in 1990 when hundreds of them were killed and around 70,000 expelled to Senegal and Mali. I argue that this ethno-racial divides have an important bearing in the degree of popular support that Islamic insurgent groups mobilized in Mali and fail to mobilize in Mauritania.

### **Section Three: the Cases**

In this section I examine the determinants of the variations across the three cases: onset failure in Niger, the defeat of the insurgency in Mauritania, and the success of the insurgency in Mali. I argue that in Niger the lack of opportunity due to the deterring capacities of Niger's armed forces and a limited financial and military resources des-incentivized potential leaders to come out and declare an insurgency. In Mauritania and Mali, to the contrary, greater opportunities facilitate to Khadime Semane, and Iyad Ag Ghali to declare an insurgency and frame mobilizing discourses susceptible to garner popular support. In Mauritania the decisive reaction of the government, and the failure of the jihadists' discourse to resonate with any significant segment of the society led to their defeat. In Mali, massive popular support by the Tuareg and Arab communities in the North contrasted with a weak and disorganized army, leading to the success of the insurgency.

#### *Niger's precarious stability: the onset failure*

The process of democratization in Niger has produced a social, economic, political and religious context that is equally favorable to the incidence of an Islamic insurgency as compared to Mali and Mauritania: rising discontent vis-à-vis the state, religious radicalism, and ethno-racial tensions. Yet, contrary to it Sahelian pairs, no insurgency has emerged in Niger. The International Crisis Group (2014: 43) reported that AQIM has tried to establish a cell in Niger similar to those in Mali and Mauritania, but the problem is that, AQIM failed "to find another Iyad Ag Ghali in

Niger.” This paper argues that the onset failure of an Islamic insurgency in Niger is due to the shortcoming of material and strategic opportunities, notably, the perception of weak state capacity and the availability of military and financial resources. In what follow, I elaborate on the relative strength of Niger’s military, focusing on the civil-military relation, the handling of the 2007 Tuareg rebellion and the Libyan crisis.

My argument inspire from Hendrix (2010) who claims that the most important determinant of the onset of civil war is the degree to which state disposes of enough capacity to project power in the periphery. It is noteworthy to emphasize that the capacity of the Sahelian states is extraordinarily insufficient for the task of controlling their immense territories. Yet, despite this common weakness, it I also true that some countries have military institutions that are better organized, disciplined, and apt to performs the task of protecting the country better than others. I claim that the strength or weakness of the military institution to be reflective of the type of civil-military relations that prevailed throughout the era of democratization. **The weakness of civilian authority after the transition led to the type of civil-military relationship that we see in all three Sahelian countries**

Niger has a distinctive civil- military relations. Since the first military coup in 1974, the Nigerien army has become a powerful institution that auto-assigned the role of protecting state institutions against what they consider the immaturity and deceitfulness of the political elites. Although the military lost most of its political power after the democratic transition, they continued intervening in politics intermittently through military coups. This position of power enjoyed by the military institution gives it a certain leverage in the conduct of its own affairs, preventing its over-politicization as it is the case in Mali. Contrary to Mali where the political elites coopted the military, in Niger the relationship remained rather that of rivalry and disdain, in which the military institution enjoyed a relative autonomy and even claimed a level of authority over certain decisions

of the state. For instance during the Tuareg rebellions, the military enjoyed a great level of autonomy in organizing the defense of the territory and were associated to all the negotiations of the peace agreement. Their intransigence during the negotiation and the implementation of the agreements prevented Niger government from accepting such compromises as the demilitarization of the rebel zones or the recruitments of rebels in the national army. In Mali these two compromises revealed ultimately damaging to the Malian security. In brief, Niger's balanced civil-military relation was to a large extent the factor behind its security policy, particularly the carrots and stick policy when it comes to handling Tuareg rebellions. Two such rebellions happened in Niger's recent history: one that occurred between 1990 and 1998, and the second in 2007 through 2009. I will focus on the latter, because it happened right at the time when the Islamic insurgents were gaining ground in both Mali and Mauritania.

The 2007 Tuareg rebellion started when a group of armed Tuareg attacked a military garrison in the far north, near the Nigerien and Algerian border, killing 3 Nigeriens officers. Soon after the attack, Aghali Alambo, a former Tuareg rebel announced the creation of the National Movement for Justice (MNJ in French) and declared the start of a new rebellion almost a decade after the signature of the last peace agreement that ended the previous rebellion. The grievances advanced by Alambo to justify the new rebellion relate, in fact, to the non-respect by the government of those peace agreements, notably the implementation of the decentralization process, the non-allocation of the dividend of uranium income to the Tuareg region of Agadez, and the non-recruitment of Tuareg in the Administration (Yahaya I., 2014). The rebels' new claim was the renegotiation of those agreement. Niger President Tandja Mamadou, a former military officer who fought against the Tuareg rebels in early 1990s, refused to recognize the rebellion *a fortiori*, (much less?) open negotiations with them. His government decided that the

only way to deal with what it qualified with, “bandits and drug traffickers” was the use of force. Consequently, the government declared a state of emergency in the northern region and deployed the Nigerien military with the firm mission to crackdown on the rebellion. At the same time, the government tried to address some of grievances that motivated the rebellion. The military intervention revealed successful in dismantling the rebellion. Many rebel leaders fled to the neighboring Libya and sought the mediation of Qaddafi to end the war. Negotiations for cease fire started in Libya in March 2009 and reached to an agreement but without the signature of any new protocol (Y. Ibrahim 2014)

Niger armed forces (FAN in French) came out victorious from this last experience of Tuareg rebellion and this victory increased the deterring capacity, while giving it more experience and confidence in controlling the vast Saharan desert. From the perspective of Tuareg combatant the “2007 rebellion [w]as the worst rebellion experience. Aside from the high number of casualties—civilians as well as rebels—that it occasioned, it also badly hurt the tourism industry, which constitutes Agadez’s most important source of income. And it ended with no gains or compromises from the government. It also revealed the corruption of the rebel leaders who were accused of stealing the funds paid by Qaddafi in exchange for peace.” (Y.Ibrahim, 2014: 9)

Another dis-incentivizing factor is the shortage of military and financial resources. Islamic insurgent groups in the Sahel are believed to raise substantial income and obtain weapons from the illicit trafficking in the Saharan desert. But the deployment of Niger’s military in the desert to fight the rebellion, played a significant role in reducing that trafficking too. Since 2008 many clashes have opposed the army and groups of smugglers, as well as many seizure of drugs, and weapons, rendering the Nigeriens routes for smuggling less safe as compared to Mali.

The Islamic insurgency in the Sahel also benefited from the civil war in Libya. The looting of the Libyan arsenal after the fall of Qaddafi in 2011 occasioned an unprecedented influx of weapon and mercenaries in the Sahel region. About 1500 young Nigeriens were recruited by Qaddafi's mercenaries to fight in Libya. After the defeat of Qaddafi these young fighters returned back to Niger with heavy weapons, but the government denied them reentry unless they accept to give up their weapons at the border. Some of the returnees accepted and surrender their weapons, and those who refused continued their way to Mali where the government received with open hands. All this resulted in a fewer influx of weapons in Niger and fewer financial resources that are two strategic factors entering into the calculation of a prospective leader of an insurgency.

Consistent with my argument is that at the very moment when Islamic insurgency was progressing in both Mali and Mauritania taking advantage of the weak repressive capacities, the ability of Niger to show strength in dealing with the Tuareg insurgency served as an effective deterrent. No rational leader would look at the fiasco of the Tuareg insurgency and still be incentivized to start a new one, be it on behalf of Islam, for the simple reason that its feasibility and chance of success would be very limited. This explains why AQIM failed to find "another Iyad Ag Ghali" in Niger. Moreover, Tuareg leaders in Niger issued a statement saying "We Tuareg of Niger reject totally and energetically the statement of Independence of the Malian Azawad. We say no to this drift and we call on our brothers in Mali to seek a political solution within a unified Mali." (Y.Ibrahim, 2014:17)

### **Mauritania: defeat of the insurgency**

Mauritania was the first sahelien country that developed local indigenous cells of jihadists. Between 2005 and 2011, at least 14 deadly attacks committed by AQIM and its affiliates in Mauritania occasioned around 200 casualties. But after six years of counterinsurgency, the

Mauritanian state succeeded in defeating the jihadists, arrested dozens of them while hundred others fled to the neighboring Mali where they joined other jihadists groups. Today, Mauritians play an important role within the jihadists groups operating in the Sahel. They occupy leading positions, and are suspected to outnumber any other sahelien nationalities within the jihadists groups. In this section, I will discuss the factors that contributed to both the onset and the defeat of the Mauritanian insurgency. I argue that strategic and material opportunities in mid-2000s incentivized jihadist leaders to create an insurgency. But the failure to mobilize popular support combined with the state's vigorous reaction permitted the defeat of the insurgency.

*Opportunity of insurgency in Mauritania.* The creation of an Islamic insurgency in Mauritania was favored by two factors: the perception of state weakness, and the strong presence of AQIM's network. State weakness was function of the civil-military, leading to a political instability that started in mid-2000s, only few months before the Leimghity attacks, and continue until 2008, and on the other hand, the jihadist's perception of the situation of the Mauritanian army.

Mauritania has been effectively governed by military and retired military since 1978, except for the 18-months civilian-democracy between 2007 and 2008. The 1991 democratic reform was more of a makeup intended to legitimize the military dictatorship, than a real desire to reform the political system. Throughout the 1990s, Ould Taya's regime persecuted and exiled all credible opponents to his regime and the president's party always won elections with a landslide victory. This locking of the political system made regime change through democratic elections impossible. As a result, the regime faced recurrent coups attempts that it survived, until 2005 when by fear of losing power, Ould Taya's own collaborators deposed him in a peaceful coup. A military transition ensued, and a democratic government was elected in the first free and fair elections that Mauritania organized since 1978. But this democratic experience was to be short-lived. Only eighteen month

after the re-establishment of democracy a new military coup intervened. General Ould Abdel Aziz, a member of the former junta took over. He later resigned from the military and was elected president in an election that he organized.

The fact that the military had the monopoly of power in Mauritania did not make the Mauritanian army a stronger institution. To the contrary, the constant risk of coups, brought the regime to segregate between Presidential Guard, called BASEP, which had the best units, the best equipment and the best training, and the bulk of the army which was marginalized and closely monitored. Furthermore, Mauritania's security services suffer of the same social rifts that characterized the Mauritanian society. White Moor have a quasi-complete domination over the army and discriminative practices hold Afro-Mauritanians and Haratine at the level of "enlisted men." and sometimes reduced to a subservient role (Foster, 2011: 67). Another problem of the Mauritanian army is related to the living conditions of the officers which are considered low comparatively to other segments of the society. With Mauritania's extended family, officers' salary could not suffice "to maintain a socially acceptable standard of living." (Ibid.)

During the two years that preceded the Leimghity attack, the image of the Mauritanian army in the society crumbled as a result of information about recurring coups attempts, constant rumors of coup plots, as well as the perception of soldiers' living conditions the prestige of the Mauritanian army in the eye of the Mauritanians. In an interview commenting the Leimghity attacks, Khadime Semane says "the military forces should have enough material resources in order for it to be a real army. But the Mauritanian soldier is dying of hunger, soldiers, gendarmes, police are dying of hunger in Mauritania. They treat themselves when they are sick, they feed themselves, and pay their transportation; they are miserable; whereas the high ranking officers enjoy good life

and stealing public money. The life condition of the poor and miserable soldier hasn't improved despite the military rule in Mauritania.”

It is clear from his statements, that Khadime Semane was incentivized to create the group Ansarullah Al-Murabitun, given his perception of the weakness of Mauritania's state capacity as very. The second incentive came from Belmokhtar, the Emir of AQIM in the Sahel who mandated Semane to start the insurgency and provided him with the military and financial supports that he needed for the start of the insurgency.

*Mobilizing discourse.* The discourse of the Islamic insurgency in Mauritania focused of the global jihadist discourse, the fight between Islam and the West. In an interview on Aljazeera, Khadime Semane, made it clear that their jihad is not directed against Mauritania, but rather against Western interests in Mauritania. He says, “We used to act peacefully, calling people to follow the Kuran and Sunnah ...as recommended by Allah; then came the Israeli-Jewish Embassy to Mauritania, the land of Shinqit! That is what triggered the struggle between Islam and secularism, [us] against the Jews' puppets.” Then he added, “We teach Muslims to not stay in the comfort of their homes while the homes of their Muslims brothers are being destroyed everywhere in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Chechnya; and Muslim women are being violated...” The analysis of Semane's interviews shows that he is strategically framing the discourse of the insurgency to attract a growing number of young radicalized Mauritians whose holy dream is to travel to Iraq or Afghanistan for Jihad. Mauritians have in fact a long history of involvement in Jihad, including in Algeria since the early 1990s, and in Afghanistan where five Mauritians counted among Ben Laden's inner circle. Yet, despite this historical propensity to jihad, young Mauritians never committed attack at home on Mauritanian soil prior to 2005. This suggests that Mauritians jihadists privilege foreign target, particularly Westerns rather than jihad at home. They seem to be



interested more in the global discourse of jihadism as opposed to the more localized discourse of sharia.

*The Outcomes: Defeat of the insurgency*

The Islamic insurgency in Mauritania remained small in terms of the number of attacks as well as the number of combatants. They became from the beginning an isolated group of villains that nobody supported. This reaction of the Mauritanian public contrasted with the above-mentioned propensity of Mauritians to jihadism abroad. One reason for that is they lacked support neither from the powerful clerical community nor from any ethnic or tribal group. The failure to rally the former may be due to the fact that as the heirs of one the biggest hub of Islamic education in the world, Mauritanian clerics have always advocate for tolerance, and peaceful coexistence of different Islamic interpretations and currents. Regarding the latter, the Islamic insurgency in Mauritania is largely a white-moor phenomenon with three out every four jihadists coming from the White Moor community. Given the dominance of the country by White Moors, their ability to compete for the support of their community against the authority was quasi-nil. From the perspective of the Afro-Mauritians and the haratines, the insurgency was viewed as a fratricide conflict within their White Moor rivals. Consequently, the insurgency only mobilized a few dozen of radicals.

Meanwhile, despite the political instability, successive Mauritanian governments reacted strongly against the jihadist combining military, political and religious strategies. Regarding the military the government invested massively in equipping the armed forces, and increasing their salary, and established close alliance with France and the United States who sent troops to Mauritania. President Ould Abdel Aziz declared that his government increased the logistic capacity of the army by 300 to 400 since he came to power in 2008 (Y.Ibrahim, 2014: 19) in

addition to reinforcing the repressive capacity of the state, engaged in other policies aiming to cut popular support to the group, including legitimizing a moderate Islamist political party. All these efforts permitted the defeat of the insurgency both militarily and ideologically.

### *Mali: the collapse of the state*

Mali was the Sahelian country the most vulnerable to Islamic insurgency. For the last decade, Northern Mali served as a sanctuary for the jihadists of AQIM, in which they established their bases and training camps and from where they launched attacks in the neighboring Niger and Mauritania. Yet despite this presence, attacks by AQIM in Mali were minimal, until in January 2011, when Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg notable created a group called Ansar-al-Dine and declared Jihad against the Malian state. Iyad Ag Ghali mobilized support first within the Kel Ifoghas Tuareg group tapping into kin and tribal relationships. Eventually, Ansar al Dine allied with the Tuareg separatist movement MNLA to conquer Northern Mali. I argue that the onset of the Islamic insurgency in Northern Mali came as a result of two sets of factors: factors of opportunity and factors of a successful framing of the discourse. The success of the insurgency was determined by the massive popular support and the weakness of state repressive capacities.

### Onset of Islamic Insurgency

Mali appeared initially as the most successful transition to democracy in the Sahel. From 1992 until 2012, Mali had organized regular democratic elections. The first democratically elected president, Alpha Omar Konare spent two terms of 5 years each (1992-2002), and passed on power to the second democratically elected President, Amadou Toumani Toure in a quite rare scenario in African politics. This peaceful and democratic transition of power earned Mali the reputation of an “exemplary model of democracy.” President Toure exercised two terms until just two months before the end of his second terms the repercussion of the Islamic insurgency in the north

precipitated his overthrow, by angry military officers. The coup was largely viewed as an unfortunate fate of the Malian democracy which for the last twenty years has convinced many observers of its enduring robustness. Yet, contrary to the two other countries of interest the twenty years of civilian rule allowed for civilian political elites to dominate the realm of politics and extend control over the military. This balance of power prevailed even after the coup as the military were forced to turn over power to civilian soon after the coup. Diagnostics of the Malian political system revealed that what was so far considered an exemplar model democracy, was in fact nothing but an empty shell. Pluralist elections were only a façade of a political system that was riddled with corruption, neo-patrimonialism, and bad governance in general.

*Opportunity.* After the collapse of Mali, the Malian army came under intense scrutiny. How it happened that an organized state army that benefitted from millions of dollars of budget every year and a constant support in training and equipment from foreign partners, fail to stop a relatively small and heterogeneous group of insurgents? The weakness of the state repressive capacities in Mali comes as a result of the over politicization of the Malian military institution and the handling of the Tuareg rebellions in the North.

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The examination of the management of the Malian army provides a case in point. Promotion is usually based not on merit, but rather on political acquaintances. Between 2002 and 2012, the President Toure nominated 45 generals most of them motivated by the desire to ensure their loyalty to his regime. The Malian states specifies around 13% of its budget to the defense ministry but a significant part of it goes to contract that benefited the military hierarchy, rather the addressing the real need of the military institutions. Clientelism and nepotism characterize the recruitment of soldiers, many of who have to pay bribes in order to be recruited. At the onset of the Islamic insurgency no records existed of the exact number of the Malian army, the number oscillating between 7000 and 14000. The soldiers are malnourished, ill equipped and ill trained. As I argue later in this paper, the over-politicization and mismanagement of the Malian army greatly contributed to its easy defeat by the jihadists.

Second the handling of Tuareg rebellions. Startling differences distinguish between Niger and Mauritania when it comes to handling Tuareg rebellions. First, contrary to Niger where claims for rebellion are about political and economic integration, in Mali the main claim of the rebellion was the separatism. Second, the Malian government privileged handling the Tuareg rebellions using the policy of carrots without sticks. This policy consisted of the promptness to negotiate with the rebels and to accept compromises on their claim. This willingness of the Malian government to give incremental concessions sent a signal of state weakness to the rebels and incentivized them

to ask more. From the initial claim for economic and political integration, rebels' demands evolved to advanced decentralization during the negotiation, and then to the demilitarization of the northern region, and finally to the claim for independence. The partial demilitarization of the north by the Malian authority as the result of peace agreements transformed the northern regions into a no-man's land where jihadists, drug traffickers, and smugglers flourished their illicit activities. It also resulted into the proliferation of militias that filled the void of security, providing protection to their communities and the smugglers. In this context of quasi-absence of state authority a potential jihadist leader would be encourage to start an insurgency.

Third, the Islamic insurgency in Mali benefited financially from the illicit trafficking in the Sahara as well as from the ransoms paid to liberate Western hostages. Although AQIM managed directly the kidnapping business, Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine was at the center of the negotiations. According to Wolfram (2012: 9) "Extrapolating from available information, the income derived by AQIM, MUJAO, and associated mediators from kidnappings is likely to have totaled between \$40 million and \$65 million since 2008, paid mostly by Western governments." Militarily, the insurgency benefited from the circulation of weapons that is part of the trafficking business. But the most recent dispersal of weapon in the region came as the result of the Libyan civil war, and the looting of the Libyan arsenal after the defeat of Qaddafi forces. Returning Malian mercenaries who were received by the Malian government with open handed ultimately joined the jihadists. Their skills and the Libyan weapons that they brought with them played a significant role in the insurgents' ability to outgun the Malian army.

*Mobilization.* The group Ansar Dine mobilized first among existing social networks, particularly kin and tribal relationship. At the early stage of the insurgency Iyad Ag Ghali mobilized combatants among his Tuareg tribe: the Kel Ifoghas. As former Tuareg separatist leader and a

converted jihadist. Ag Ghali framed his discourse at the intersection between Islam and Tuareg nationalism. This appears clear in most of his propaganda video. One these video starts by reminding the viewers about the glorious history of the Azawad region—which is the mythical land of the Tuareg origin. The attachment of the Tuareg community to Islamic religion, and the rule by sharia. And then colonization came and changed everything. Tuareg resisted colonization and kept battling for their independence and for Islam. Now it is time for us to continue the fight until we liberate ourselves from the still enduring colonial structures by which he means the state of Mali.

The success of the Islamic insurgency in Mali is due to the combination of a successful mobilization of popular support among Tuareg and Arab, but also among radical Islamist from Mali as well as from neighboring regions based on ethnic and religious discourse on the one hand, and the weakness of the state which even prior to the insurgency had already partially demilitarized certain region.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has made 3 major claims: first, the root causes of the Islamic insurgency in the Sahel can be traced in the sociopolitical and religious transformations that resulted from the democratization process (1990-2012). Second, after 20 years of democratization, the growing discontent vis-à-vis the state combined with a rising religiosity and ethno-racial tensions created a fertile ground for the incidence of Islamic insurgency in all of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Yet Islamic insurgency emerged only in Mali and Mauritania where greater political and strategic opportunities incentivized jihadist leaders to frame a discourse that collectivized the grievance of the masses. Success of the insurgency in Mali and its failure in Mauritania were determined by the level of popular support and the state repressive capacity in each of those two countries.

Third, state capacity, particularly repressive capacity, is to a greater extent the determinant of the onset as well as the success of an Islamic insurgency;

Social change produces grievances, but grievances alone do not translate into an insurgency unless they are collectivized by a social entrepreneur who will then frame a discourse based on these grievance in order to mobilize the support of the masses and enter into collective action. The dilemma of the collective action is solved through two mechanisms: 1) the leader's decision to create and lead the insurgency: Once a leader is convinced beyond reasonable doubt that an insurgency is materially and strategically feasible and perhaps successful; and 2) since an insurgency is a group action, the leader has to rally the support of masses by framing a mobilizing discourse that appeal to the aggrieved persons particularly. While the onset insurgency does not depend on massive popular support, insurgency is yet a group action. Therefore, the decision of the leader to lead and the decision of the insurgents to follow determine the onset of an Insurgency. Finally, the outcome of the insurgency will be determine by the success or failure of the mobilization and the state repressive capacities.

The argument made in this paper explaining the current state of affairs and does make claim about the future. While Niger still hold its stability because of the relative strength of its military institution, nothing predict that it will hold stability neither in the near future nor in the long term.

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