

ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL: FACT OR FICTION?

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ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL: FACT OR FICTION?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sahel, a vast region bordering the Sahara Desert and including the countries of Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, is increasingly referred to by the U.S. military as "the new front in the war on terrorism". There are enough indications, from a security perspective, to justify caution and greater Western involvement. However, the Sahel is not a hotbed of terrorist activity. A misconceived and heavy handed approach could tip the scale the wrong way; serious, balanced, and long-term engagement with the four countries should keep the region peaceful. An effective counter-terrorism policy there needs to address the threat in the broadest terms, with more development than military aid and greater U.S.-European collaboration.

There are disparate strands of information out of which a number of observers, including the U.S. military, have read the potential threat of violent Islamist activity in the four Sahelian countries covered by the Americans' Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI). There is some danger in this, but in this region, few things are exactly what they seem at first glance. Mauritania, which calls itself an Islamic republic, harshly suppresses Islamist activities of any kind, while Mali, a star pupil of 1990s neo-liberal democratisation, runs the greatest risk of any West African country other than Nigeria of violent Islamist activity. Those who believe poverty breeds religious fanaticism will be disappointed in Niger, the world's second poorest country, whose government has maintained its tradition of tolerant Sufi Islam by holding to an unambiguous line on separation of religion and the state.

The prospects for growth in Islamist activity in the region -- up to and including terrorism -- are delicately balanced. Muslim populations in West Africa, as elsewhere, express increasing opposition to Western, especially U.S., policy in the Middle East, and there has been a parallel increase in fundamentalist proselytisation. However, these developments should not be overestimated. Fundamentalist Islam has been present in the Sahel for over 60 years without being linked to anti-Western violence. The Algerian Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which lost 43 militants in a battle with Chad's army in 2004 after being chased across borders by PSI-trained troops, has been seriously weakened in Algeria

and Mali by the combined efforts of Algerian and Sahelian armed forces.

The U.S. military is a new factor in this delicate balance. Its operations in the four countries are orchestrated by the European Command (EUCOM) headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. In the absence of Congressional willingness to fund a serious engagement by other parts of the government, the Pentagon has become a major player by emphasising the prospect of terrorism, though military planners themselves recognise the inherent dangers in a purely military counter-terrorism program.

With the U.S. heavily committed in other parts of the world, however, Washington is unlikely to devote substantial non-military resources to the Sahel soon, even though Africa is slowly gaining recognition -- not least due to West Africa's oil -- as an area of strategic interest to the West. The resultant equation is laden with risks, including turning the small number of arrested clerics and militants into martyrs, thus giving ammunition to local anti-American or anti-Western figures who claim the PSI (and the proposed, expanded Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) still under consideration in the U.S. government) is part of a larger plan to render Muslim populations servile; and cutting off smuggling networks that have become the economic lifeblood of Saharan peoples whose livestock was devastated by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, without offering economic alternatives. To avoid creating the kinds of problems the PSI is meant to solve, it needs to be folded into a more balanced approach to the region, one also in which Europeans and Americans work more closely together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the U.S. Government:

1. Establish a healthier balance between military and civilian programs in the Sahel, including by:
 - (a) opening USAID offices in the capitals of Mauritania, Niger and Chad;

- (b) tailoring significant development programs to nomadic populations in northern Mali, with emphasis on roads and livestock infrastructure (wells and regional slaughterhouses); and
 - (c) promoting tourist infrastructure in such historic places of interest as Timbuktu, and Agadez, helping to diminish smuggling by offering Tuareg populations viable economic alternatives.
2. Continue to provide training and equipment to improve customs and immigration surveillance at all airports in the region, both national and international.
 3. Seek cooperative diplomatic and developmental assistance relationships with the Europeans in order to take advantage of their experience in the Sahelian region.
 4. Coordinate its own military capacity-building training with NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and France's RECAMP program, in order to multiply effectiveness and diminish perceptions of an American-only venture.

To Donors:

5. Treat development and counter-terrorism as interlinked issues in the Sahelian region, rewarding governments for showing courage on religious policy (as in Niger) and making up the difference if already extremely limited social services are further reduced by cuts in Islamic NGO funding.

To NATO:

6. Consider making military capacity-building more multilateral by extending the Mediterranean Dialogue beyond Mauritania to Mali, Niger, and Chad.

To the EU:

7. Share regional expertise more actively with the U.S. and coordinate both military capacity-building and development assistance programs with it.

To the Government of Mali:

8. Begin negotiations with Tuareg communities where military posts were closed in order to reinstate government presence, possibly using a majority of Tuareg troops to do so.
9. Focus development aid in the north on two sectors, -- livestock and tourism -- both of which need

significant investments in infrastructure, beginning with roads, to become viable.

Dakar/Brussels, 31 March 2005

ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL: FACT OR FICTION?

I. INTRODUCTION

On 9 March 2004, members of the Algeria-based *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC)¹ fought a gun battle with troops from Niger and Chad, supported by U.S. Special Forces, just inside Chad. At the end, 43 Salafi fighters from several West and North African countries lay dead.² The American Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) had barely begun, and yet operations in this "new front in the war on terror"³ had already garnered more attention than Washington's much larger East Africa Counter Terrorism Initiative.⁴ The GSPC, an offshoot of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), is one of the only groups in Africa to have stated its allegiance to the goals and tactics of al Qaeda.⁵

This band of GSPC militants had captured 32 tourists travelling across the Sahara⁶ and held them hostage for

several months. After receiving a purported €5 million ransom paid by the German government, GSPC released the fourteen remaining hostages on 19 August, 2003. In the seven months leading up to the battle in Chad, they lived mostly in northern Mali, from where they were eventually chased eastward across northern Niger and into Chad.⁷ The band's leader and the GSPC's overall number two, Amari Saïfi, escaped from the deadly battle but was soon captured by the Chadian rebel group, *Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice Tchadien* (MDJT).⁸ In November 2004, he was handed over to the Libyan government, which sent him to be tried in Algeria.⁹

Parallel to these events, the U.S. military began the PSI training program in the four Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad with a \$6.5 million¹⁰ budget that is miniscule for the Pentagon but a significant sum for poor countries. A team of 25 Marines trained one company (120-150 men) each in Niger and Chad in basic infantry skills, marksmanship, first aid, and navigation.¹¹ Similar numbers of U.S. Special Forces trained one company of Mauritians and three of Malians.

The stated goal of this training has been to help each country better control its own territory and porous borders. A quick look at the map of this vast desert and

¹ Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat.

² The group included nationals of Algeria, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. Crisis Group interviews, Niger, Chad, September to December, 2004.

³ R. Carroll, S. Goldenberg, "U.S. Opens New Front in War on Terror By Beefing Up Border Controls in Sahara", *The Guardian*, 14 January 2004.

⁴ While the PSI had a budget of some \$6.2 million, its East Africa sister program's budget was \$100 million.

⁵ That the hostages were not killed or used as political bargaining counters, suggests that the GSPC's declared link to al Qaeda means little. If the GSPC were al Qaeda linked, it would probably have been quicker to kill European hostages. By all accounts, it treated them well and released them when Germany paid a ransom of some €5 million. See Crisis Group Middle East Report No° 29, *Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, 30 July 2004. Recent indications suggest that at least the bulk of the GSPC may be prepared to give up the armed struggle in Algeria and accept the government's reconciliation initiative. Georges Rassi, "End of Insurgency", *al-Mustaqbal*, as reported in *MidEast Mirror*, 24 March 2005.

⁶ The German, Dutch, Swiss and Austrian hostages were captured in groups of one to eight on six different occasions between 22 February and 12 May 2003, though mostly in March. On 13 May 2003, nine GSPC fighters were killed in a gun battle in southern Algeria and seventeen hostages released. The remaining fighters, with

fifteen hostages, fled toward northern Mali. One hostage is reported to have died of heat exhaustion in July.

⁷ The GSPC militants were tracked, with the help of American satellites, by the Algerian army, which attacked the group on 7 February 2004, killing some 30, and chasing the others eastward. Crisis Group interview, 7 February 2004.

⁸ Movement for Chadian Democracy and Justice. Amari Saïfi's nom de guerre is Abderrazak El Para, because he was a paratrooper in Algeria's army.

⁹ A few months before, the Algerian army killed Nabil Sahraoui, the GSPC head. Sahraoui had announced GSPC allegiance to al Qaeda in September 2003 after taking over from the group's founder, Hassan Hattab. C. Smith, "Militant Slain in Algeria; Ties to al Qaeda Are Reported", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2004.

¹⁰ All figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

¹¹ Navigation training ranged from basic map-reading to use of Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology. The PSI has provided the four militaries with non-lethal equipment including uniforms, Toyota Land Cruiser pickups and GPS devices.

semi-arid zone shows that this is a goal that could not be achieved by ten times the number of troops trained. The U.S. is considering renaming the PSI, however, as the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI), enlarging it to include Senegal and Morocco with Algeria, Tunisia and Nigeria as observers, and vastly increasing its budget to some \$120-\$132 million for 2005 and \$350-400 million over the next five years. Thus it is possible that more troops, more vehicles, and more GPS devices could ultimately lead to at least minimal surveillance and control.

While some have treated "the new front in the war on terror" rhetoric with scepticism, the clash with the GSPC seemed to lend it support. The question is whether the band was an isolated group without possibilities of reconstituting itself or expanding or whether it was symptomatic of a more general dynamic. The level of threat in each of the four countries is the result of two factors: the internal political situation, including the population's frustration, and its possible targeting by violent Islamists, including recruitment for terrorist activity.¹² On the first score, Niger and Mali each have a democratisation process and are relatively solid. Mali has a particularly good record for freedom of the press, and Niger has taken an advanced position of freedom of

religious practice and strict separation of religion and politics. The situation in Chad is significantly more fragile. Chadians are unhappy with what they consider a corrupt government dominated by one ethnic group, and the Darfur crisis has brought in 200,000 refugees. The worst internal situation is probably in Mauritania, where the government has turned to repression in order to cling to power.

It is clear some interest has been shown in all four countries at least by both Islamist missionaries and Islamist NGOs.¹³ While this interest is diffuse in Mauritania and Niger, it seems somewhat more constant in Chad, originating mainly in Islamist circles in Sudan. Numerous Chadian sources expressed worries about large number of foreigners travelling with false identity documents, and several explicitly pointed to the threat of "infiltration" by Sudanese Islamist networks.

Mali, however, appears to be the most clearly targeted by external Islamist elements. Why it may be of such interest, and whether the diverse groups involved have any coordinated plan are questions Crisis Group cannot answer, even after eleven months of research in the four countries, as well as in Stuttgart, Germany (the headquarters of the U.S. military's European Command, EUCOM), Paris, Brussels and Washington. However, it is indisputable that a broad range of groups -- some politicised, others apolitical, some armed, others not -- have moved into the northern region in relatively large numbers. Algeria has been the primary conduit for armed GSPC elements, but others have arrived from South Asia and the Middle East.

A degree of anti-American sentiment has developed in much of the region that most describe as unprecedented. This seems to have emerged from West African reaction to U.S. foreign policy (primarily in the Middle East), but does not necessarily have anything to do with Islamism, let alone terrorism. It is also apparent that actors on the ground in these four countries are poised to use American fears of an Islamist threat to benefit financially and/or politically in ways that recall the manipulation of Cold War politics by many African governments.

This could have extremely negative consequences. In Mauritania, the fragile and unpopular Ould Taya government has adopted the rhetoric of Islamist threat to purge its few remaining opponents and claims to be protecting the nation against religious extremists.¹⁴ Western powers have given some assistance to Ould Taya

¹² Crisis Group has reported frequently on Islamists and Islamism and their relationship to a wide variety of political situations in the Middle East and North Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan, South Asia and South East Asia. We treat Islamism as synonymous with "Islamic activism", the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character: see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report No° 37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005. Earlier Crisis Group reporting generally defined Islamism more narrowly, as "Islam in political mode". But two problems became apparent with that definition. First, it presupposed that Islam per se is not political, whereas insofar as Islam is inherently interested in matters of governance, in fact it is. Secondly, it presupposed that all forms of Islamism are equally political, whereas in fact, there are significant distinctions in this regard between those forms that privilege political activism, missionary activity or violence. This report is concerned with the extent to which the Islamism that is undoubtedly present in the Sahel includes a significant tendency to or potential for violence. For additional reporting relevant to Islamism, see in particular Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefings, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004; *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°29, *Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, 30 July 2004; also, Crisis Group Asia Report N°83, *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix*, 13 September 2004, and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°31, *Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who Are the Islamists?*, 21 September 2004.

¹³ As noted, there has also been some activity in part of the region by an armed and violent group, the GSPC.

¹⁴ See Section III A below. Crisis Group will soon publish a report on Mauritania.

(including the PSI training) even while taking note of his government's poor human rights record. In other cases, talking about an Islamist threat may be the only way these countries can draw attention to themselves. Three of the four are classed by the United Nations Human Development Index as among the ten poorest on earth.¹⁵ Mauritania is not much better: 152 out of 177. Literacy rates in Mali and Niger are 19 and 17 per cent respectively.¹⁶ Life expectancy in Mali, Niger and Chad is well under 50 years, in Mauritania 52. All four countries have a Gender Development Index in the bottom twenty out of 144 countries, and Chad, Niger and Mali rank in the bottom ten.¹⁷ Despite this, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has only one office -- in Bamako -- for the four-country region. "Using the 'T' word is sometimes the only way to get people's attention in Washington", an officer noted.¹⁸

II. A WEST AFRICAN ISLAMIST PRIMER

Two aspects of the analysis of Sahelian Islamism have tended to obscure more than they reveal. One is the presumption that there are direct links between poverty and religiously-oriented violence.¹⁹ Crisis Group research suggests that violence such as the GSPC provoked in northern Mali more likely results from highly localised political and economic factors and that the rhetoric of a common Islamist agenda appears at a relatively late stage, if at all. While it is true that Islamists in the four countries covered by this report may benefit from money pumped in by Gulf states, so do many others who have nothing to do with violent or even oppositional politics. Conversely, while those who may become linked to groups like the GSPC are undoubtedly poor, so are the vast majority of their neighbours and relatives who never become involved in such movements. If economic "*fragilisation*"²⁰ were the primary cause of a turn toward either religious fundamentalism or violence, West Africa would have long been the world centre of Islamist politics and terror, given its unequalled levels of poverty.

An analyst seeking a more nuanced explanation, in which economic factors are one among several key variables, frequently encounters another unhelpful explanation. It rests upon clear distinctions between "good" and "bad" Muslims/forms of Islam. In this stereotype, "traditional" West African Islam is Sufi, tolerant and inclusive. Depending upon the speaker's point of view, either this is an important barrier to advances by "bad" Islam, or it is at great risk of being overrun by "bad" fundamentalists. Not only does this misrepresent the history of Maliki, often Sufi, Islam in the region (which has often been peaceful, but sometimes been both politicised and violent), but it also misrepresents fundamentalism there, which has a relatively long and mostly peaceful history. While Muslim fundamentalists have sometimes been involved, violence has taken place between Muslims of differing traditions at the village or neighbourhood level.²¹ They have not fixed their sights on Western targets.

¹⁵ Of 177 countries, Chad is 167th, Mali 174th, and Niger 176th. UN Development Program, "Human Development Index Report, 2003".

¹⁶ Only Burkina Faso is lower, with a 13 per cent rate.

¹⁷ UNDP Human Development Report, Gender Development Index, 2003. Women are almost absent from the formal political structures. World Bank statistics (World Bank Development Goals Data 2002) reveal that women in the Sahel hold between 1 per cent (Niger) and 10 per cent (Mali) of the total seats in parliaments. The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education does, however, exceed 50 per cent in each country (ranging between Chad at 52 per cent and Mauritania at 92 per cent). There are similar rates for literacy (ranging between Niger at 44 per cent and Chad at 83 per cent). These numbers indicate that women will soon comprise more than half of the educated and literate population, increasing the importance of ensuring their participation in governance and the formal economy.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Stuttgart, 25 February 2004.

¹⁹ This position is summarised in the title of a recent article: "Famine not Fanaticism Poses Greatest Terror Threat in Sahel", IRIN, 14 October 2004.

²⁰ This French word is used by many in Mali and Niger to help describe the attraction of the Salafiyya movement for some Tuareg communities.

²¹ Crisis Groups researchers have found this dynamic in each of the four countries, often in the context of struggles to control a neighbourhood or village mosque.

A. WEST AFRICAN SUFI ISLAM

Virtually all Muslims in the Sahelian region are Sunni.²² Most practise a series of interrelated traditions emanating from the Maliki legal branch of Sunni Islam.²³ While many Muslims in the region do not belong to a Sufi *tariqa* (brotherhood),²⁴ most subscribe to one of three predominant brotherhoods: Qadiriyya, Mouridiyya, or Tijaniyya. The Qadiriyya have the longest history in the region; the Mouridiyya are the predominant brotherhood in Senegal (but much less present elsewhere); the Tijaniyya are the most widely represented group across Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad.

Many clerics, politicians and scholars of religion emphasise the peaceful, inclusive nature of Sahelian Islam, pointing to the role that the Sufi brotherhoods have played in forming the regional culture of tolerance. Such descriptions often take place in the context of a comparison to Salafi movements of Islamic renewal described in the next two sections that impose much stricter rules of conduct on their adherents and also tend toward weakening or erasing the boundary between the religious and political realms, leading in their most fully-developed form toward the introduction of Sharia law.

It should also be borne in mind that many who speak for African Islam, including imams and intellectuals, are experienced at interpreting their religion for outsiders in terms that emphasise its non-threatening nature to the state. French colonial policy in all four countries was often explicitly anti-Muslim and at first sought to mobilise "pagan" populations against the Muslim leaders and states that resisted conquest.²⁵ In order to negotiate a working relationship with colonial regimes, religious leaders had to acknowledge strict separation between religion and the state. The Sufi brotherhoods have often steered clear

of overt involvement in politics but they have also exerted a strong influence on it behind the scenes.²⁶

Although it applies to all the countries of the Sahel discussed here, Senegal is the clearest example of a system in which Sufi brotherhoods are both the institutions that organise most people's religious lives and also the most important element of civil society. Many political figures and religious figures made exactly the same argument about these countries.²⁷ According to one author:

[R]eligion has been at the source of Senegal's political exceptionalism because, in the Sufi version of Islam which has developed in the country, religious structures and ideology have facilitated and encouraged a system of social organisation outside the state and a range of possible responses to the actions of that state which have served as an effective counterbalance to its weight.²⁸

Thus Sufi Islam can be a strong stabilising force in the Sahel. It is not helpful, however, to imagine that the Sufi brotherhoods, or any other aspect of Sahelian Islam, are frozen in time, unchanging, and will always play the same role as in the past. Indeed, it is necessary to add nuance to the history. The stereotype of peace-loving Sufi Muslims who continue to mix a bit of traditional African religious practice with Islam as opposed to unreasonable, inflexible Islamists bent on introducing *Shari' a* is simply not supported by the record. In fact, the Sahelian region has a well-developed tradition of pre-colonial Islamic states, several of which spread the religion, or their preferred form of it, into neighbouring regions by force.

One example was El Haji Umar Tal, the man most responsible for spreading the Tijaniyya brotherhood across the Sahelian region.²⁹ Tal is one of the most prominent religious and political figures in West African history. His empire covered large parts of present-day Guinea, Senegal and Mali. A charismatic mystic, he made the Haj from 1828 to 1830, shortly after being

²² Between 85 and 90 per cent of Muslims worldwide are Sunni, most of the remainder Shia. With the exception of Lebanese who have settled along the West African coast, there are few Shia in the region.

²³ The four main legal traditions in Sunni Islam are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the large majority of Muslims practise within the Maliki tradition, with the notable exception of the adherents of several Salafi strains described below, who fall within the Hanbali tradition most fully developed on the Arabian Peninsula.

²⁴ *Tariqa* (literally "path" or "way") refers indirectly to the various means of achieving the Sufi ideal of union with God. "Sufis can be seen as Muslims who seek to acquire a personal and subjective experience of their relationship to God and thereby understand more deeply their submission to Him". L. Brenner, *West African Sufi* (London, 1984).

²⁵ J.L. Amselle, *Mestizo Logics*. Stanford, 1998.

²⁶ See D. Cruise O'Brien and C. Coulon, *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (Oxford, 1989).

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad, August to December, 2004.

²⁸ L. Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal: Disciples and Citizens in Fatick, Senegal* (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁹ He is not, however, the only one. Another important vector of Tijaniyya thought and proselytisation is the Hamaliyyah brotherhood, a subset of the Tijaniyya with spiritual centres in Tlemcen, Algeria, and Niuro, Mali.

won over to the Tijaniyya³⁰ order of Sufism. On his overland journey to Mecca, he visited recently established Islamic theocracies in present-day Mali and Nigeria. He spent three years studying scriptures and Islamic interpretation with the leading representative of the Tijaniyya order in Medina and Cairo. During his ten-year trip home, he proselytised the Tijaniyya *tariqa*.

Upon his return to the Sahel, Tal conceived and carried out a *jihadi*³¹ movement which lasted from 1851 to his death in 1864. It was first directed against the "pagan" states of the area where present-day Mali, Senegal and Guinea meet, then extended eastward into present-day Mali. In 1862, two years before his death, Tal attacked the neighbouring Muslim state of Masina.³² His attempt to bring Tijaniyya Islam -- by force if necessary -- to the wider region is one of several examples of the history of Sufi *jihad* in the Sahel.³³ Different forms of Islam there have spread via traders and itinerant clerics, but sometimes by force. As Tal's *jihad* also shows, religious violence in the Sahel has most often been directed by Muslims at other Muslims, not at foreigners. Tal's personal odyssey is also exemplary of the interconnections between the Sahel and the Middle East.³⁴

³⁰ The Tijaniyya brotherhood was founded by Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1815) in Algeria and started to influence sub-Saharan African Muslims shortly after 1800.

³¹ "Jihad" (literally "struggle") is a term with multiple meanings. Its primary one is an internal struggle for self knowledge and purification. Only in specific circumstances would it indicate armed struggle. Tal's jihad was the second kind. For more on changes in use of the term, see F. Noor, "The Evolution of 'Jihad' in Islamist Political Discourse: How a Plastic Concept Became Harder", in *Understanding September 11*, C. Calhoun et al., eds. (New York, 2002).

³² Muslims are enjoined in the Qur'an not to wage jihad (of the sword) against other Muslims. Umar's rhetoric thus had to shift to an accusation that Masina practised an illegitimate form of Islam in need of purification. This was hard to justify in the case of Masina, which had been the site of a major regional jihad 40 years before. Umar's argument was that the Tijaniyya brotherhood was the only correct form of Islam. Was he sincere or justifying a land grab with flimsy theology? It is not possible to tell from the evidence in David Robinson, *The holy war of Umar Tal: the western Sudan in the mid-nineteenth century* (Oxford, 1985), although it is clear there was an old dislike between Umar and the Masina caliph. Umar's jihad had many victims, and his large army, which did not cultivate its own food, had to be fed from local stocks that were already reduced by the fighting, thus leading to a major famine in the region.

³³ The other famous example is that of Almamy Samory Touré, whose empire in the 1880s and 1890s covered much of present-day Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and northern Ghana.

³⁴ See C. B. Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims: The Role of Pilgrimage in the Lives of West African Muslims in Sudan*

The series of *jihads* that spanned the Sahelian region throughout the nineteenth century marked a shift in the region's politics. Religion became one of the bases for political struggle and legitimacy, much as noble descent had been. Those who could show their form of Islam was superior gained legitimacy, though the contests for political control might be more military than theological. The Islamic injunction to convert polytheists (by force if necessary) and the tradition of *jihad* and movements of renewal within Islam's history lent themselves to the forms of political Islam that emerged in the Sahel during the nineteenth century. There are echoes of this struggle in today's debates between Islamists and the secular state, even though Sufi Muslims most often find themselves as "moderates" aligned with the state against Islamists.

B. THE SALAFIYYA: WAHHABIYYA AND THE GSPC

The Salafiyya is a movement of those Muslims who promote a return to the original beliefs and practices of the *salaf* -- the "founding fathers" of Islam -- that is, the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors.³⁵ In all cases, their vision of the changes necessary to achieve this renewal is based on a literalist reading of the Koran and the Hadiths, or the volumes documenting the words and actions of the prophet Mohammed and his closest associates. Like Christian and Jewish fundamentalist movements, the Salafiyya movement identifies the problems of the contemporary world with the diversion from the correct path delineated in the holy scriptures.

Consequently, Salafis describe their activities as a struggle against *bid'a*, or innovations, and *shirk*, or heresy. Both are usually understood to have been introduced into local Muslim practice by Sufi orders, who have cultivated cults of saints, use of protective amulets, and the important role of the Marabout³⁶ as religious intermediaries. Beyond this, however, there are more differences than similarities among different types of religious Salafis, and any analysis that mixes them

(Washington, 1995) for a description of West Africans who walked or rode camels across the Sahel, often stopping to work, on their way to Mecca. Many never arrived, staying instead along the way, including in Sudan, where they made new lives.

³⁵ Salaf literally means ancestor or predecessor. The Islam of *al-Salaf al-salih* ("the venerable ancestors") is regarded as the purest form of the faith. Many Salafis consciously try to copy the dress and behaviour of the Prophet Mohammed and his closest associates.

³⁶ The Marabout is a holy man serving a priest-like function of teacher, translator and intermediary between his frequently illiterate followers and God.

indiscriminately risks serious policy miscalculations. As described in a recent Crisis Group Briefing, there is a serious distinction between the *Salafiyya 'ilmiyya*, or "scholarly Salafis", and the *Salafiyya jihadiyya*, or "fighting Salafis".³⁷ Adepts of the latter are those who have fought in the interconnected series of armed struggles beginning in Afghanistan in the 1980's and extending to Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria, Kashmir and now Iraq -- and form the core of *jihadi* networks in various parts of Africa, where they are often known as "the Afghans".

Many Salafis are quite radical in their calls for a return to an authentic original form of Muslim practise without being at all oriented toward political activity, whether peaceful or violent. This is also the case of a distinct fundamentalist movement, the *Jama'at al-Tabligh*, described in the next section. What they share with the *jihadi* Salafis is the sense that such a radical renewal is necessary by one means or another, and should organize society, politics, economics and personal life. A still broader category of Islamists exists that would like to see some form of Islamic practice instituted by government. These debates come out especially clearly in discussions of state secularism in the four countries, as described in the section below on Chad.

1. The Wahhabiyya

Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab founded the Wahhabi form of Islam around 1744 in the region that is now Saudi Arabia. Its original goal was to revive an Islamic practice that had been degraded, in his eyes, by the *bid'a* (innovations) introduced by Sufi sects. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's supporter, Muhammed Ibn Saud, ancestor of the Saudi royal family, conquered most of the Arabian peninsula and promulgated this form of ascetic Islam.³⁸

Wahhabism came to West Africa in the 1930s, via local clerics who had studied at the Egyptian religious university, Al-Azhar.³⁹ Their religious practice and political (anti-colonial) commitment were intertwined from the 1940's onward. They sought to eradicate what they perceived as the *shirk* (heresies) of the predominant forms of Islam in the region -- Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya and Mouridiyya -- all Sufi. The saints, marabouts, and initiation into esoteric rites common to these Sufi orders are all considered heretical by Wahhabis. In many

respects, the Wahhabi challenge to Sufism resembles that of the Protestant Reformation, which attempted to return to "true" Christianity by stripping Catholicism of its worldly accretions. Both renewal movements abhor icons, saints and shrines, which they consider polytheistic.

As with Umar Tal and Samory Touré, the Wahhabis' notions about the necessity for religious reform coincided with political changes in the region that charged such theological arguments with greater significance. The Wahhabiyya attempt to renew Islam came at the moment when francophone West Africans were debating decolonisation:

Given the importance of cultural issues in nationalism, one could see how Islam, the religion of the majority in Guinea and Soudan,⁴⁰ could be used for cultural nationalism and political mobilisation. The similarity between the clothing style of the Wahhabi and that of the PDG⁴¹ supporters in Kankan and the analogy between the language of the Wahhabiyya and that of the same party were intended to express the symbolic return to Africanity and to a non-Western universalism.⁴²

At the intersection of Wahhabi and anti-colonial critiques is distress with a cultural landscape dominated by the values of the colonial society. The cultural politics of Islamic renewal played out according to local strategies. Most important was the way that Wahhabism became a form of youth politics, particularly through its Subbanu movement.

The Subbanu, or educational wing of the Wahhabi organisation, was based in Bamako and derived its name from Arabic for "youth" (*al shubban*). It was inspired by the Egyptian group *Jamiyat al-Shubban al-Muslimin*, which the West Africans encountered during their studies in Egypt.⁴³ In 1949, they opened an Islamic school in Bamako. Most of the young clerics who had made the Hajj and studied at Al Azhar were fluent in French, a prerequisite for the bilingual education insisted upon by the colonial authorities.⁴⁴ The Subbanu school was approved only

³⁷ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I*, op. cit.

³⁸ Salafi forms of Islam have emerged in Saudi Arabia, the Maghreb, Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

³⁹ West African Wahhabis are known as "*Les bras croisés*", referring to their manner of praying with arms crossed over their chests. See L. Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston, 1974).

⁴⁰ Soudan and Western Sudan were colonial names for the territory that became the Republic of Mali.

⁴¹ The PDG was the party then promoting decolonisation from the French.

⁴² Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

⁴³ Ibid, p.140.

⁴⁴ The French felt they could negotiate with (if not co-opt) the Sufi brotherhoods in the region but were anxious about "pan-Islamism". In the 1940's and 1950's, they paid particular attention to links between the subjects of their West African colonies and the forces behind emerging anti-

briefly, then shut down. In spite of official repression, its teachers gave evening seminars in the large, walled, family compounds of Bamako as well as Bouake, Côte d'Ivoire and Kankan, Guinea (a historical centre of Islamic scholarship in the region), drawing ever-larger crowds.

The Subbanu espoused many of the views the French colonial administrators suspected, referring, for example, to many older Sufi imams and marabouts as "colonialist lackeys". They argued that:

[Sufi] Mysticism thus becomes synonymous with shrewd mystification and exploitation... Given that religion had turned into a business and religiosity into a profession, it was inevitable, they argued, that ignorance and superstition were promoted as norms and that the masses gave their souls and wealth to mystics-turned-charlatans, soothsayers, and charm makers. The Wahhabis felt it necessary, consequently, to demystify those who were committing wrongs and making profit in the name of Islam.⁴⁵

As already noted, there are similarities between the Salafiyya movements of renewal and the Protestant Reformation. In both cases, the critique of a clerical hierarchy lent itself to the critique of other types of hierarchical relations. Wahhabi converts articulated a critique of colonialism that went well beyond the intellectual class, but the movement has had even more local resonance. Many early converts were businessmen, often from lower status families. Wahhabi doctrine, which argues for the equality of all before God, is thus highly attractive to members of some West African societies with rigid social hierarchies.

Such hierarchies can be based on race, as described below in the case of Mauritania, or on descent from noble, servile, or artisan groups, as in Mali and Niger. Among many groups, including the Bamana of Mali, the Fulbe of Mauritania, Mali and Niger, or the Tuareg of Mali and Niger, strict restrictions remain on intermarriage. Descendants of blacksmiths, for instance, or musician-praise singers, are expected to marry only within their own group; non-conforming marriages are still frowned upon by many, especially outside capital cities.

However, since the colonial period, members of these groups have had access to Western-style education, the

colonial politics in the Middle East. The French colonial *Archives d'Outre-Mer*, in Aix-en-Provence, contain massive dossiers documenting colonial espionage, analysis and fretting over pan-Islamism.

⁴⁵ Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya*, op. cit.

professions, civil service, and business to become economically and politically powerful. In most Sahelian countries, Wahhabi converts may refer to themselves as "slaves", often stating that "we are all the slaves of God". By this means, they erase the inherited distinctions between high and low status birth. The Fulbe communities are even known for encouraging "taboo" marriages between those of servile and noble status.⁴⁶

2. The GSPC

It is the breakaway from the GIA mentioned above -- the GSPC -- that has made its presence most strongly felt in the Sahel, after units originating in northern Algeria (the GSPC's main base) made forays into the Sahara and were then pushed by Algerian security forces into the southern desert, and from there into northern Mali. The GSPC is the only organised, violent Islamist group that can be said to have operated in the four Sahelian countries covered by the Pan-Sahel Initiative. After the Algerian GIA entered a particularly violent period in 1996 and 1997, killing civilians in large numbers, the movement broke apart. The GSPC formed in September 1998⁴⁷ and was one of the two main fractions to continue armed struggle against the Algerian state, under the leadership of Hassan Hattab.

Although GSPC "emirs" have pledged their allegiance to al Qaeda, it is not clear that such statements have operational significance. The treatment of the European hostages by Amari Saïfi's group seemed more oriented toward gaining a ransom than political benefits like the release of Islamist prisoners or the departure of Western troops from Muslim countries.⁴⁸ Although their activities appear closely linked to economic interests, they are undoubtedly committed to a Qutbist form of Salafism that justifies violence. Emad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan, a Yemeni accused of involvement in the al Qaeda attack on the U.S. naval vessel the Cole, was said to be planning an attack on the U.S. embassy in Bamako when he was killed in September 2002.⁴⁹ He was allegedly affiliated with the GSPC at this time, which may point to

⁴⁶ R. Furth, "Slaves and Brothers: Historical Transition, National Politics and Contested Fulbe Identity in the Futa Jallon, Guinea", presented at African Studies Association meetings, Boston, November 2003.

⁴⁷ A major factor in the GSPC's split from the GIA was its rejection of the GIA's indiscriminate attacks on civilians based on the extreme version of *takfir* as applying to society as a whole; see Crisis Group Report, *Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ For a fuller interpretation of the development of the GSPC and its current orientation, see *ibid*.

⁴⁹ See *ibid* and C. Smith, "U.S. Looks to Sahara as Front in Terror War", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2004.

more direct, though probably fleeting, connections between the two groups.

C. THE JAMA'AT AL-TABLIGH

The other stream of Islamic fundamentalist revivalism practice is strictly non-political, and has never been linked directly to violence. The *Jama'at al-Tabligh* goes by several other names, including "*foi et pratique*" (faith and practice) in France, and the *Da'wa al-Tabligh*, or more often, simply the *Da'wa* (call or more broadly, preaching), in the Sahel. Founded by Muhammad Ilyas in 1926 in Mewat Province, India, the *Jama'at al-Tabligh* (literally, community that propagates the faith) has been compared to the Jehovah's Witnesses because it requires members to travel both around and beyond their own countries, preaching door-to-door. Present in more than 100 countries, the *Jama'at al-Tabligh* is the biggest Muslim missionary society in the world, claiming over three million adherents.

It has been said of Tablighi converts in France, "For those who suffer the greatest loss of identity...the Tabligh movement offers a framework for life and thought, a spiritual sense, that gives one's existence a direction entirely oriented toward salvation".⁵⁰ Ilyas himself stressed that deepening Muslim faith was the unshakable source of a dignity held to be constantly under attack in the context of colonial India. This may help to explain why the Tablighi movement has made significant strides over the past 25 years in European Muslim communities.

The *Da'wa* is present in all four Sahelian countries, though only slightly in Niger and Chad. Its presence is important in both Mauritania and Mali and a source of some controversy in the latter. According to Malian clerics, the *Da'wa* came to the country via France, where Malian immigrants converted to the Tablighi movement. Their main mosque in France is Al-Rahma in Saint-Denis, and in the Sahelian countries where they operate, they have built mosque complexes they call *markez* (the centre). Several commentators in Mali described their mission as being one of bringing "*la bonne parole*" (the good word), to other Muslims who presumably practised a less pure form of Islam.

Tablighi practice and preaching worldwide are oriented around six stated points:⁵¹

- belief in the oneness of God;
- prayer;
- acquiring knowledge and remembrance of Allah;
- respect for others;
- purity of intention; and
- the use of one's time for preaching.

One practice that distinguishes Tablighis is their insistence on the importance of prayer in the presence of other Muslims. As a Tablighi said, "One must consecrate 40 days a year, three days a month, two afternoons a week and two hours a day to this association".⁵² Tablighis describe the technique as one of turning the adept into a "praying machine".⁵³

However, such explanations do little to help us understand the appeal of such a movement in a country that is more than 90 per cent Muslim, such as Mali or Mauritania. Tablighi practice is certainly not just the product of the resentment or alienation of Muslims living in majority-Christian countries. Part of the appeal of the movement is undoubtedly its strong sense of communal identity and mutual support. As one author argues:

Participation thus gave meaning and purpose to everyday life. It is important to see that participation in such a movement, often explained as a response to the failure of the corrupt, underdeveloped, or alienating societies in which Muslims perhaps find themselves, in fact offered a positive, modern solution to people who were geographically and socially mobile. Participants in principle made a "lifestyle" choice; they found a

⁵¹ There is obvious parallelism between Tablighi founder Ilyas's "six points" and the "five pillars" of religious practice recognised by most Muslims: profession of faith, daily prayer, fasting during Ramadan, alms, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

⁵² X. Ternisien, "Le Tabligh, un mouvement missionnaire soupçonné d'être un 'sas' vers l'Islam radical", *Le Monde*, 26 September 2001. This involved five prayers a day as well as *dhikr* (repetition of the name of Allah), which is a common element of Sufi practice. Some scholars have argued that it is characteristic of South Asian Islam that it has found ways to combine elements of Sufi practice with elements of fundamentalist movements of renewal. This may be the reason for the Tablighi *Da'wa*'s popularity in Sahelian countries such as Mali, as opposed to the more stringent forms of Salafism originating in the Arabian Peninsula. See R. Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (Bloomington, 2002).

⁵³ Keppel, op. cit.

⁵⁰ G. Kepel, "Foi et Pratique", *Les banlieues de l'Islam* (Paris, 1991).

stance of cultural dignity; they opted for a highly disciplined life of sacrifice; they found a moral community of mutual acceptance and purpose.⁵⁴

Malians, ranging from Islamic scholars through members of the High Islamic Council to ordinary people, appreciated the seriousness and piety implied in this passage, which was widely noted in Crisis Group interviews with both Tablighis and non-Tablighis who had observed the growth of the movement in Mali.⁵⁵ They appreciated the Tablighis' respectful demeanour, especially toward Marabouts and other elders, clearly a reflection of the Tablighis' fourth principle, the respect of others.

As noted above, the Tablighis are best known for their proselytising, organised around retreats.⁵⁶ It is here that worries emerge. The *Jama'at al-Tabligh* itself is staunchly apolitical. No source interviewed by Crisis Group could specify an instance of Tablighis breaking the law or engaging in specifically political activity in any of the four countries.⁵⁷ A Malian scholar of Islam spent 50 days of itinerant preaching with the *Da'wa*, and noted no deviation from their apolitical stance.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, both Western and African intelligence services consider them a significant potential threat.

The evidence on which such assessments are based is purely circumstantial, but it is not inconsequential. A number of Tablighi converts in the U.S. moved quickly from the apolitical form of Tablighi fundamentalist practice to links with al Qaeda and its affiliates. Among the most famous is Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber";⁵⁹ Jose Padilla, an American convert to Islam currently being held as an "enemy combatant" and accused of trying to buy materials to make a "dirty bomb"; the "Lackawanna six", a group of Yemeni-Americans from northern New York State who participated in al Qaeda training in Afghanistan after travelling to Pakistan under the auspices of the *Jama'at al-Tabligh*; and John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban".⁶⁰ Like all Tablighis,

Lindh's path into the group began with a weekend retreat. His retreat to a San Francisco area fairgrounds site caused his mother to call police, reporting him as missing and suspected of having been kidnapped by a cult.⁶¹

Indeed several sources pointed to the cult-like aspects of the *Jama'at al-Tabligh*. One Malian compared it to brainwashing: "They take them off to some retreat, and they keep them awake, praying and chanting until they are completely brainwashed. That is the first, short retreat. Then they get longer and longer -- a week, a month, six months, even a year".⁶² An American specialist on the region noted, "they do not try to convert just any Muslims.⁶³ They are like cults in that they look for those who are socially and psychologically at sea, those who do not know their religion well, and who might thus be susceptible to a dramatic conversion".⁶⁴

Several commentators in Mali pointed out the geography of Tablighi proselytisation: they had little success in places with long traditions of Islamic faith and scholarship. They did much better with those only nominally Muslim, or recently converted. Gilles Kepel, in his account of Tablighi proselytisation in France, emphasises the focus on unemployed men.⁶⁵

In Mali, they have concentrated on Tuareg men, and even more specifically on the former leadership of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion in Mali.⁶⁶ Because most of the proselytisers are Pakistanis, or nationals of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Egypt, their presence has raised alarm for many. An official in the north of Niger stated, "Numerous foreign [Tablighi] preachers have tried to install themselves here. We thank them for coming and accompany them without delay back to the [Malian] border. I have myself escorted twenty or so since I assumed this post".⁶⁷ Malian officials have also expelled an unspecified number of South Asian proselytisers, some with false identity papers.⁶⁸

⁵⁴ B. Metcalf, "'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deobandis, Tablighis, and Talibs", In *Understanding September 11*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, Gao, Kidal, August 2004.

⁵⁶ Known in Arabic as "*khuruji*" and in French as "*sorties*".

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews with scholars, clerics, military and intelligence sources, Bamako, Niamey, Washington, August to November 2004.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bamako, 26 August 2004.

⁵⁹ Reid tried to light a bomb hidden in his shoe on a Paris-Boston flight, but was wrestled to the ground. BBC News, "Shoe bomb suspect 'did not act alone'", 25 January 2002.

⁶⁰ Another well known Tablighi turned al Qaeda militant is Abdallah Tabarak, a Moroccan who entered the Tabligh in Casablanca in 1977 and turned toward armed jihad during a Tablighi retreat in Pakistan in 1990. Joining bin Laden in the

early 1990's, he became his assistant, and is credited with helping him escape from American forces in late 2001.

⁶¹ J. Pritchard, "Lindh Sought Knowledge in Mosques", Associated Press, 20 December, 2001.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Bamako 27 August 2004.

⁶³ Members of the *Jama'at al-Tabligh* do not try to convert non-Muslims, only to lead "wayward" Muslims onto the right path.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Washington 8 November 2004.

⁶⁵ Kepel, op. cit. p. 200.

⁶⁶ See section III B below for more on this targeted proselytisation.

⁶⁷ C. Holzbauer "Les inquiétants émirs du Sahel", *L'Express*, 28 November 2002.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews with diplomatic and intelligence sources, Bamako, August 2004. See also Holzbauer, op. cit.

While such circumstantial links have been considered suspicious by many, there is no unanimity on whether Tablighis, by themselves, pose any security threat. An expert testifying to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States stated that, "Not all Muslim fundamentalists are the same. Just as European socialists acted as a bulwark against Soviet communism last century, peaceful fundamentalist groups such as the Tablighi Jama'at may help to promote a peaceful message and repudiate terrorist violence".⁶⁹ Many analysts agree that a turn toward Tablighi fundamentalism is sometimes a first step toward a career in violent Islamist militancy⁷⁰ but this is by far the exception.

The Tablighis do have a particular link to the Pakistani state and the trajectory that South Asian fundamentalism has taken, especially within the Pakistani army and the ISI, the intelligence service. Tablighis are theologically more or less identical to Deobandis, the Pakistani fundamentalist group which runs many of the madrassas of Peshawar, and whose teachings underlay the philosophy of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Where they differ is on emphasis and approach, with the Deobandis participating actively in politics, and the Tablighis rejecting that world to focus on proselytisation. Neither group had much influence politically in Pakistan until after General Zia ul-Haq's 1977 coup, when support for religion, and especially for fundamentalist Deobandi and Tablighi forms of Islam, became semi-official policy.⁷¹ This link becomes more significant in looking at the unusual presence of some Pakistanis in northern Mali over the past years.

As far as the internal situation in the Sahel is concerned, what is most striking is not theological enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, but the internal divisions among Muslims themselves, including between differing groups of Salafis. Several Malians noted that the Tablighis consider Wahhabis too Western because they are engaged with politics. The Wahhabis accuse the Tablighis of being "imperialist" because they are against violence and overt involvement in politics. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Sahelian Sufi Muslims take note of the arguments on offer, sometimes experimenting with one or another, often drifting back to their original affiliation.⁷²

Moreover, it is not only the fundamentalist groups that present such an attraction. There are, as always, various charismatic movements. In Mali, over the past few years, the "*pieds nus*" (bare feet) movement has attracted many young people. Founded by a young man described by a Malian as a high school student who failed his baccalaureate exam, they refuse shoes, Western clothing (wearing only African hand-loomed cotton fabric), and any other trace of Western culture. Similarly, in Senegal, the movement of General Kara has organised many young unemployed people in a quasi-militarised branch of the Mouride brotherhood, which performs military-style callisthenics on Dakar beaches and marches in formation. These effervescent movements often die out after a few years, though not always: the Mouride brotherhood itself began as a charismatic movement around the figure of Cheick Amadou Bamba at the turn of the last century and is now the dominant Sufi brotherhood in Senegal.

D. ISLAMIC NGOS

Islamic humanitarian work in the Sahel is facilitated by two central tenets of Islam: a strong sense of the unity of the community (*umma*) of Muslims worldwide, and the injunction to give alms (*zakat*), one of Islam's five essential "pillars", which makes charity an essential duty of every practising Muslim's life. In the past fifteen years, Islamic NGOs worldwide have become more ambitious, in both programming and fundraising. Many appeared for the first time in Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad during the 1990s, a period that also saw significant funding for construction of mosques and Islamic schools (*medersahs* or *madrassas*). The majority of both the NGOs and the construction projects were funded by Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia.

⁶⁹ Testimony of Marc Sageman to the Commission, 9 July 2003.

⁷⁰ In Kepel's words, echoed by several other commentators, "The movement is a kind of strainer or sieve: once re-islamised by the Tabligh, those who wish to become something other than a 'praying machine' distance themselves and seek out activities more intellectually or politically satisfying". Kepel, *op cit.*, p. 208.

⁷¹ This is the same period during which both Saudi and covert American money began pouring into the region, most passing through the Zia government, and particularly its secret service, the ISI, and then onward to anti-Soviet mujahideen in Afghanistan. During this period ISI was said to have taken on many young officers oriented to fundamentalist and politicised forms of religion. It is a matter of considerable debate now whether they are aligned more with Pakistan's official pro-American stance in the "War on Terrorism" or with the deposed Taliban they helped to put in power. The Khan dossier raises these questions again, as it is highly unlikely he could have transferred nuclear secrets from the state laboratory where he worked to countries as distant as Libya and North Korea without the ISI and other arms of government knowing.

⁷² One commentator observed that this is especially apparent in periods of crisis, for instance when a believer or loved one becomes seriously ill. It is at this moment that many return to the Sufi practices they know best and trust to bring relief. Crisis Group interview, Dakar, 8 September 2004.

At the last census of such groups (in 2000), there were 106 Islamic NGOs in Mali, compared to six before the political opening in 1991. Of these, eleven were international NGOs, including the major ones also operating in Niger and Chad:

- ❑ World Islamic Call Society, based in Libya, which focuses on education and also distributes medicines and food, especially during Ramadan;
- ❑ African Muslims Agency, based in Kuwait, which focuses on education and builds mosques;
- ❑ Islamic Relief, based in the UK;
- ❑ Human Appeal International, based in the United Arab Emirates (closed in Mauritania in May 2003);
- ❑ Al Mountada, based in the UK and Saudi Arabia;
- ❑ World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), based in Saudi Arabia;
- ❑ International Islamic Relief Organisation, the humanitarian arm of the Muslim World League (and often called by that name), based in Saudi Arabia;
- ❑ Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Agency for Assistance, based in Saudi Arabia (closed in Chad in 2004);
- ❑ Islamic African Relief Agency, based in Sudan; and
- ❑ a Croatian Muslim NGO operating in northern Mali.⁷³

Western intelligence services have been investigating the operations of Islamic charities since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S. The 22 March 2002 raid on the Sarajevo offices of Benevolence International Foundation yielded documents pertaining to the founding of al Qaeda, and a list of the "Golden Chain", allegedly the twenty most significant donors to al Qaeda, including two officials of the Muslim World League and the deputy director of WAMY.⁷⁴ Benevolence International has been closed in the U.S. for funding terrorist organisations, a charge it denies.

More recently, the Islamic American Relief Agency (IARA)⁷⁵ has also been closed in the U.S., had its assets frozen in the U.S., and seen several of its administrators arrested. In a press release, the U.S. Treasury Department accused IARA, which received \$4 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1999 to undertake child survival programs in Mali, of a wide range of infractions. Most related to funnelling money to Osama bin Laden and his organisation, Maktab al-Khidamat,⁷⁶ but some specifically involved the Sahelian region. The release stated that "an IARA leader was involved in discussions to help relocate Osama bin Laden to secure safe harbour for him...In addition, a Sudanese individual travelled to Mali and stayed with an IARA director while assessing whether Mali could serve as a safe harbour for Osama bin Laden".⁷⁷

Representatives of Islamic NGOs say they have been treated unfairly, and U.S. "witch hunts" have caused immeasurable suffering for vulnerable people in the countries where they work. The closure of orphanages was a primary reproach by Islamic NGO directors in Chad, Mauritania and Mali.⁷⁸

Like some Christian NGOs, many Islamic NGOs combine their activities with some degree of *dawa* (preaching). The IARA and its parent NGO, the *Da'wa Islamiya*,

...legitimate their intervention in the humanitarian field through a double register, one that becomes clear through a comparison of their brochures in Arabic and English (and marginally in French): a register of "Islamic" legitimization of humanitarian action to seek funds among Muslims, and a register of "humanitarian" justification of Islamist activity seeking support among humanitarians. The two registers are interconnected: The Islamic humanitarian organisations profit from the global scale of a humanitarianism without frontiers that justifies the frontier-less nature of their Islamist activity.⁷⁹

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Gao, 29 August 2004.

⁷⁴ "Schumer: U.S. Must Show 9/11 Families the Blueprints of Saudi Support for al Qaeda", Press Release, office of U.S. Senator Charles Schumer (Democrat, New York). Schumer has supported families of those killed in the attacks on the World Trade Centre in lawsuits against Saudi citizens and the Saudi government allegedly knowing of funding of terrorist organisations. Though the U.S. government has argued that the twenty names on the list must be kept confidential for reasons of national security, Schumer's release names at least ten of those said to be on it.

⁷⁵ IARA is known as Islamic American Relief Agency in the U.S., and Islamic African Relief Agency in Africa. They are associated but have separate legal identities.

⁷⁶ The name means "Services Bureau".

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Global Network, Senior Officials of IARA for Supporting bin-Laden, Others", 13 October 2004.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, August to December 2004.

⁷⁹ J. Bellion-Jourdan "L'humanitaire et l'islamisme soudanais: les organisations Da'wa Islamiya et Islamic African Relief Agency", *Politique Africaine*, No. 66, June 1997.

This difference between the messages transmitted in European languages and Arabic amounts to a "strategy of differentiated marketing according to the chosen target audience".⁸⁰ There is also a difference in philosophy, by which secular NGOs, especially those based in Europe, find it unethical to combine humanitarian assistance and missionary work. Not only do they object to practices that appear to them to be taking advantage of vulnerable populations' need for help simultaneously to "bring them into the fold", but they also object to the policy of some Islamic NGOs to focus their aid only on Muslim populations in need or those populations plus those who might be potential converts.⁸¹

On the other hand, there are Christian NGOs, many based in the U.S., whose outlook is almost identical. While they provide medical services, food for refugees, and other services, they are also involved, either openly or more subtly, in promoting their religion. Representatives of Islamic NGOs clearly feel themselves to be in competition with this latter group, and several times commented on the hypocrisy of those who criticised their religious commitment. As one said, "Of course, I would like everyone to become Muslim, just as Christians would like everyone to become Christian".⁸²

This dynamic, in which both Christian and Islamic NGOs compete for the souls of what secular NGOs have increasingly come to call "clients", is most pronounced in southern Sudan. However, it carries over into other Sahelian countries, especially Chad, Sudan's neighbour and the only one of the four countries with a sizeable Christian population. The same NGO representative who assumed that Christians were bent on converting everyone to their religion noted that almost 3,000 Chadian had been converted from Islam to Christianity between 1999 and 2004. Despite his consternation, he mentioned that Muslims had converted significantly more Christians during the same period.⁸³

While staff of secular European NGOs in many parts of West Africa object to the mixing of religion and humanitarianism by some American NGOs (as well as the large amounts of money given to them by the U.S. government),⁸⁴ members of the Islamic NGO community tend to group all non-Islamic NGOs together. The implication is that some are more open than others, but all

are involved in the same project of instilling Western values that are fundamentally derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This critique is articulated with great eloquence by many Islamist intellectuals in the four countries, especially in Mali and Chad.⁸⁵ The perceived competition between Western and Islamic NGOs is said to be a continuation of the tension between colonialism and African resistance. According to this argument, modern Western NGOs are working at the behest of and in conjunction with Western governments whose aim is to maintain political and economic control of their countries (in Chad, the large French military base was the key evidence offered as proof). Promoting Western -- implicitly Christian -- culture is considered part of this project and explains the underlying motivations of those who call themselves humanitarians.

As much as this view might dismay secular humanitarian workers, whether from the UN or secular NGOs, it is important to take the criticism seriously, as it may represent the attitude of much of the population of these four countries. In such a tense situation, the EU and major bilateral donors including France, Germany and the U.S. should make special efforts to avoid funding overtly Christian NGOs in this region, and to ensure that programming is oriented toward participatory projects in which community input will help to ensure that they are not perceived as importing Western biases through the back door.

Part of the reason why Islamic NGO staff make the assumption that all "Western" humanitarian aid is motivated by a missionary impulse is that their own activity -- for instance in Chad -- combines implicit or explicit proselytisation with work in refugee camps, construction of schools, hospitals, wells, and the distribution of medicine.⁸⁶ Since 11 September 2001, they have also experienced a significant loss in financial support, caused by U.S. attention to Islamic NGO funding and its alleged ties to terrorism. In Chad, this has resulted in a significant scaling-down of Islamic NGO activity.⁸⁷ An NGO director estimated that all Islamic NGOs had witnessed a 50 to 75 per cent decrease since early 2002, attributed directly to U.S. pressure, especially on Saudi Arabia.

⁸⁰ Ibid. See also A.R. Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire: Enquête sur les ONG islamiques* (Paris, 2002).

⁸¹ Ibid, Bellion-Jourdan, op. cit., Crisis Group interviews, Dakar, 27 January 2005.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 3 December 2004.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 3 December 2004.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Senegal, Chad, March-December 2004.

⁸⁵ See also Section III D below.

⁸⁶ In 2003 WAMY distributed twelve tons of medicine in Chad. Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 3 December 2004.

⁸⁷ The Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Agency for Assistance and the Al Haramin Foundation have closed; the Al Biir Agency (Benevolence International Agency) is closing, and WAMY has had to close regional sub-offices in Bangui, Yaounde and Bamako, which had been run from N'Djamena. Al Haramin has closed worldwide.

The question, raised above, of the extent to which and conditions under which such charities may have funded terrorism remains a point of debate. Some accusations are overly broad and amalgamate charitable donations, the Salafist (Wahhabi) form of Islam predominant in Saudi Arabia, and terrorist acts as in the following quote: "Shinn targeted charities -- primarily based in the Gulf States, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- as being primary supporters and exporters of a fundamentalist Sunni form of Islam called Wahhabism, adding that this type of religious ideology contributed to the creation of al Qaeda".⁸⁸ In other instances, U.S. officials have emphasised that they do not believe either the Saudi government or most of the charities based in the Gulf States have knowingly funded violence, but that there have been problems of "leakage".⁸⁹

What appears indisputable is that although individuals in particular Islamic NGOs have been accused of specific infractions, other offices of the same NGOs have evidently done nothing of the kind. It is also clear that even organisations known to most Americans purely as terrorist groups, like Hizbollah or Hamas, use a large part of their funds to provide social services, which is a major reason why they continue to enjoy popular support from the populations they serve. Such services are especially welcome in settings like Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad where government does not come close to meeting the needs, and foreign aid is minimal.

Precision is of the utmost importance. Some specific accusations, such as those against IARA administrators in Mali, link individuals employed by Islamic NGOs, and thus to some extent the NGOs in question, directly to terrorist activities. If they can be proven, then the government of Mali should shut down their operations in full knowledge of the fact that the NGO might well be providing important humanitarian assistance to communities in need, but that this assistance could be a smokescreen for activities that would ultimately harm the population.

At the same time, foreign governments, and especially the U.S., need to be both detail-oriented and pragmatic. There is little chance that anything the U.S. government does in these four countries is going to change the intentions of hard-core Islamist militants. However, these militants (small in number in the first place) simply cannot operate for any period of time in any of the four without at least the passive collusion of local populations.

Indiscriminately closing down Islamic NGOs at U.S. request that are seen to be doing good work for Muslims in need would likely only create anti-American sentiment. If the case is there to be made against individuals and organisations, it should be made publicly, and the Malian government (like the other three governments) should have the courage to do this itself. The example of Mauritania shows that the indiscriminate suppression of Islamists can quickly backfire.⁹⁰ The government there now has little credibility with many of its Muslim citizens, because it is seen as having used the Islamist-equals-terrorist equation simply to purge its adversaries. If it were to uncover real terrorist plans now, many Mauritians and most Islamists in the country and the region would probably dismiss the claim out of hand.

The U.S. government, and especially the Congress, need to understand that these NGOs are stepping into a vacuum partly created by under-funded foreign assistance. The U.S. along with other donors has responded to humanitarian crises but the donor community as a whole has not put in place major development assistance programs for the individual countries that comprise the Sahel region even though Mali, Niger and Chad are three of the ten poorest countries in the world. For example, the total U.S. bilateral aid package offered in 2003 to this four-country region, a land mass of over 4.8 million square kilometres (slightly more than one-half the surface of the U.S.) with a combined population of 36 million people, was some \$96 million.⁹¹ In these circumstances, all providers of assistance will be welcome, and attempts by Washington to block aid are likely to be strongly resented.

Any attempts to shut down Islamic NGOs in the Sahelian region should be made publicly, with a strong public education component, identifying the terrorist rationale. Furthermore, Western donors should take into account the fact that closure will entail privation for the local population and specifically plan ahead of time how to replace those funds from their own assistance programs or other sources.

⁸⁸ B. Greenberg, "Combating Terrorism in Africa Makes America More Secure: Military and Diplomatic Experts See Engagement in Africa as Key", *Washington File*, 20 April 2004.

⁸⁹ D. Jehl, "Holy War Lured Saudis as Rulers Looked Away", *The New York Times*, 27 December 2001.

⁹⁰ For more on this, see Section III A below.

⁹¹ "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants [Greenbook]", U.S. Agency for International Development, at www.usaid.gov/. This figure does not include contributions through multilateral mechanisms such as the World Food Program.

III. POLITICAL SPECIFICITIES

A. MAURITANIA: A PERMANENT PLOT?

Straddling North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania is often described as a place apart. The successive governments since independence from France in 1960 have not been fully able to forge a sense of common identity and destiny for its 2.7 million inhabitants beyond ethnic, racial and tribal differences.⁹² Conflicts between "white" Moors, "black" Moors, and non-Moorish black Africans, focusing on language, land tenure, political representation and other issues, are a permanent challenge to national unity.⁹³ The highly stratified caste system in the traditional Moor society still influences the relationship between the white Moors and the "Haratine" or black Moors who are mostly descendants of slaves. The possible continuation of slavery in the country remains highly sensitive.⁹⁴ In this context, the Mauritanian government may have exaggerated an Islamist threat in order to divert attention from its pressing internal problems.

The political and economic marginalisation of black Africans is another contentious issue. The first president, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, gave precedence to Arabic over French in the education system and public administration. The francophone Black-Africans appear to have considered that the objective of these reforms was to make them second-class citizens. When the incumbent president, Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, seized power in 1984, the question of the marginalisation of about a third of the population reached a new dimension. In 1986, a group of black African intellectuals who published a manifesto denouncing state-sponsored discrimination against their community were jailed. One

year later, a coup attempt was fomented by black African Army officers. The main conspirators were executed. In 1989, a dispute between Moorish herdsmen and Senegalese farmers in the border area degenerated into pogroms in both Mauritania and Senegal, prompting massive displacements of populations. Approximately 70,000 black Mauritians, along with Senegalese living in Mauritania, fled or were expelled in the following months.

These events were followed by a "*période d'exception*" in 1990-1991 during which more than 3,000 Black-Africans were dismissed from the army and public administration and jailed, of whom 500 were never heard of again. Two years after the decision of Ould Taya to turn to multi-party democracy in 1991, the government passed an amnesty law to protect the members of the security forces involved in these human rights abuses. Resentment of these abuses is still widespread among black Mauritians. Black African intellectuals told Crisis Group they still felt marginalised and were watching with interest the mounting divisions within the Moorish clans.⁹⁵

In the last decade, with the assistance of foreign partners, the Ould Taya government conducted economic reforms with some success.⁹⁶ However, these advances have been tarnished by the pervasive perception among Mauritians and foreign observers of spectacular corruption. The competition to gain access to the state coffers exacerbated the tensions within the Moor community, between clans favoured by the regime and the others. The stability of the country could be threatened by the corruption and the frustration it generates both among impoverished people and, perhaps more dangerously, among those in the security forces who think they are not getting their share.⁹⁷ Some observers interpret the failed coup of 8 June 2003 as a manifestation of this discontent:

⁹² A diplomat commented: "Mauritania has not yet tackled the key question of its identity". Crisis Group interview with diplomatic source, Nouakchott, 18 November 2004.

⁹³ "White" Moors (Beydanes) are estimated to represent about 30 per cent of the population, "black Moors" (Haratine) 40 per cent, and Black-Africans (Haalpulaar, Soninke and Wolof) 30 per cent. The ethnic composition of the country and its evolution is a sensitive issue. The government's failure to give detailed statistics has been criticized by the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The last government report to this committee just mentions that "In its demographic structure, the Mauritanian people is made of an Arab majority, composed by Whites and Blacks, and non-Arab-speaking communities: Haalpulaar, Soninke and Wolof". See: "Le comité pour l'élimination de la discrimination raciale examine le rapport de la Mauritanie", 9 Août 2004, UN Press Release.

⁹⁴ Slavery was abolished by the law in 1981.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews with journalists and NGO workers, Nouakchott, 17-19 November 2004.

⁹⁶ According to the World Bank, the incidence of poverty fell from 56.6 to 46.3 per cent between 1990 and 2000 while the primary school enrolment rates increased from 49 per cent in 1987 to 88 per cent in 2001.

⁹⁷ This feeling of a staggering degree of personal enrichment at the higher level of the state is pervasive in Nouakchott. There is a dramatic contrast between the mushrooming beautiful houses belonging mostly to civil servants and politically-influential businessmen and the appalling living conditions in the shanty towns. A diplomatic source suggested the percentage of misappropriated public funds might be as high as 20 to 25 per cent of the government budget. The beginning of oil production in 2005 may compound the problem. Crisis Group interview, Nouakchott, 18 November 2004.

The government wanted to present the coup attempt as evidence of international terrorism threatening Mauritania. My view is that it was just a sign of the battle between rival clans for power. Ould Taya has been ruling the country for about twenty years. Virtually all the main revenue-generating positions in the public administration are held by the president's relatives. Other people and clans, including in the security sector, are frustrated and want their share of power and resources.⁹⁸

While Crisis Group interlocutors think the Islamist threat publicised by the government is overstated, most admit that the conjunction of a corrupt political class, widespread poverty and the long-lasting marginalisation of some segments of society may facilitate the development of Islamism.⁹⁹ The denunciation of corruption, bad governance and autocratic rule is a permanent feature of the Islamist message in Arab countries. In Mauritania, the Haratine living in the poor suburbs of Nouakchott are said to be particularly responsive to the egalitarian and anti-traditionalist stance of Islamist preaching.

Mauritanian Islamists have successfully adopted the role of victims of ostracism and persecution by a supposedly Muslim government. This strategy is appealing in Mauritania, which is paradoxically both the only non-secular republic among the four Sahelian countries reviewed in this report, and the most repressive towards Islamist movements. It is officially an Islamic Republic even if it has little in common with a country like Iran. The religious rhetoric has been used by all governments since independence to legitimise their power in a deeply divided country. The Islamic denomination of the state was also a way to secure the support of oil-rich Gulf States, eager to finance mosques, Islamic schools and charities. Meanwhile, governments have always been keen on protecting "tolerant Mauritanian Islam" against external influences by sponsoring an official Islam.¹⁰⁰ When multi-party democracy was introduced in 1991,

Ould Taya's government identified the risk of an irruption of Islamists into the political space. A law was passed to ban any party based on religion. All attempts by leaders perceived as Islamists to create political parties have been opposed by the government, even when they fulfilled all the criteria prescribed by the law.

After a first wave of repression in October 1994, marked by the arrest of Islamist militants and the dismantling of small clandestine organisations, the diplomatic u-turn of Ould Taya's government at the end of the 1990's offered fresh arguments for the campaign of the new Islamists. Formerly one of Saddam Hussein's closest allies, Ould Taya turned away from the Iraqi strongman and embraced the U.S. The dramatic shift went further with inauguration of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999.¹⁰¹ This bold foreign policy in an Islamic country was an additional source of popular discontent that Islamists turned to their advantage. The government reacted with a new wave of repression in May 2003.¹⁰² A law on the organisation of mosques was passed on 30 June 2003 allowing only Maliki Islam (the traditional practise in Mauritania) and prohibiting political activity of any kind in mosques.

The coup attempt of 8 June 2003 and the coup plots it claimed it foiled in August and September 2004 offered the regime the opportunity to settle scores with the opposition, Islamists and non-Islamists alike. Three Islamist leaders were targeted again in October 2004 by a judiciary whose independence is questioned by many. After more than three months in prison, however, they were released on 13 February 2005. Mauritians consider this move, as well as the relative clemency of the verdict ten days earlier regarding the coup plotters, to be political decisions and believe they may mark a softening of the government's position.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview with a diplomat, Nouakchott, 18 November 2004. On 8 June 2003, a bloody coup was attempted by acting and former army officers. After a 36-hour battle in Nouakchott, loyal forces prevailed, and the ringleaders fled the country. Their leader, ex-Commandant Saleh Ould Hennena, was arrested on 9 October 2004, after the government announced it had foiled two plots in August and September 2004. Following a trial that involved 195 defendants, he was sentenced to life in prison on 3 February 2005. The verdict was somewhat surprising, as the trial had been described as a parody of justice by most observers, and the prosecutor had requested a death penalty.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Nouakchott, 17-20 November 2004.

¹⁰⁰ There is a Ministry of Islamic Orientation and a High Islamic Council composed of government-appointed religious figures.

¹⁰¹ A ceremony marking inauguration of diplomatic relations between Mauritania and Israel took place on 28 October 1999 at the U.S. State Department in Washington.

¹⁰² Two leaders, Mokhtar el Hacen Ould Dedew and Mohamed Jemil Ould Mansour, and some imams and preachers in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou were accused of subversive actions and having connections with foreign Islamist and terrorist networks. Several Islamic NGOs suspected of encouraging extremism were also shut down.

¹⁰³ Three main leaders of the political opposition -- former president and Ould Taya's challenger in the November 2003 elections Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, Ahmed Ould Daddah, and Cheick Ould Horma -- were charged in October 2004 with financial support for coup plots. Libya and Burkina-Faso were also accused of backing the attempts to overthrow Ould Taya's government. At first, the three were questioned on their relations with young Islamists allegedly being trained in northern Côte d'Ivoire, under rebel control, to carry out terrorist

"The government struggles to present Mauritania as a breeding ground for Islamism and terrorism. But there has never been a single act of terrorism in this country. All this agitation aims at raising the interest of the United States", asserted an observer.¹⁰⁴ There is a strong belief in Nouakchott that Ould Taya's government plays up the threat of Islamist terrorism in his country in order to secure the political and financial support of the West, especially the U.S. The tactic seems to be effective. Relations are "excellent" in spite of a human rights record described as "poor" and democratic institutions judged "rudimentary" in official U.S. documents.¹⁰⁵ In the framework of the NATO-Mediterranean Dialogue, Mauritania's government has been hailed as an important strategic partner in the fight against terrorism, clandestine immigration and drugs and arms trafficking.¹⁰⁶ Even if the necessity of better control of the borders and the need to keep an eye on Islamist circles is recognised, the Ould Taya government's anti-terrorist rhetoric accompanied by repressive actions appears to be primarily a convenient

actions in Mauritania. As no evidence was provided and after photographs of detainees allegedly tortured by the police in Nouakchott -- denounced as fakes by the government -- were carried on the internet and Arab satellite television networks, new charges of "subversion" were brought in November 2004. These developments gave some publicity to the Islamist movement. "I could not give the name of one Islamist figure before these events, now they are making the headlines of the newspapers", said an NGO worker. Crisis Group interviews, Nouakchott, 18-19 November 2004. For the 3 February 2005 verdict on ex-Commandant Saleh Ould Henna and others charged with coup plotting, see fn. 98 above. For the optimistic interpretation of Mauritians on these developments, see "Signes encourageants d'une détente politique en Mauritanie", *Le Monde*, 14 March 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview with a lawyer, Nouakchott, 19 November 2004.

¹⁰⁵ See the U.S. State Department's "Background Note on Mauritania", November 2004, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004, Mauritania, issued February 2005, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41615.htm>, and "Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2003-2004", available at www.state.gov. Outlining the U.S. human rights and democracy strategy in Mauritania, the latter states that "The United States throughout 2003 and early 2004 raised human rights and democracy [issues] on a high level with the [Mauritanian] government", and "The United States reviewed human rights records of members of military and security forces who participated in training conducted by U.S. civilian or military personnel".

¹⁰⁶ Along with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel, Mauritania is part of the "Mediterranean Dialogue" with NATO. Senior NATO political and military officials visited in 2004. Mauritania's strategic importance was underlined during the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Tenth Mediterranean Seminar, in Nouakchott, 17-18 October 2004.

device for not tackling acute political problems, and ultimately counterproductive.

B. MALI: THE THREAT FROM THE NORTH

In talking with American and foreign government officials and military officers on the front lines fighting terrorists today, we asked them: If you were a terrorist leader today, where would you locate your base? Some of the same places come up again and again on their lists: West Africa, including Nigeria and Mali. In the twentieth century, strategists focused on the world's great industrial heartlands. In the twenty-first, the focus is in the opposite direction, toward remote regions and failing states.¹⁰⁷

Most diplomats and security experts consider Mali to be at greatest risk of terrorist activity of the four countries studied here. Paradoxically, it is one of the most thriving democracies in Africa. Many in its government chafe at the notion that the country might be anything but a haven of tolerance and dialogue. Recent claims by the U.S. Treasury Department that al Qaeda operatives may have explored the possibility of using Mali as a safe haven for Osama bin Laden, an upsurge in proselytisation by Pakistani fundamentalists in the last seven years, and construction of a luxury hotel in the north by the Pakistani scientist who sold nuclear secrets to North Korea, Iran and Libya have not been proved to be related, but in conjunction with the presence in the north of the one Algerian fundamentalist group to have stated allegiance to al Qaeda, they have both Western and Malian military and intelligence analysts nervous.

The possibility of Islamist attacks in Mali involves three separate domains: the GSPC's presence in the north, the dramatic upturn in Tablighi missionary activity, and smuggling networks that transit Mali on their way to North Africa. All these intersect in the north, specifically in Kidal, the headquarters of the Tuareg rebellion, a movement many describe as more dormant than dead.

1. The Tablighi *Da'wa*

Kidal was the seat of Tuareg revolts in both the 1960s and the 1990s, the latter of which was led by its ruling Tuareg fraction, the Ifoghas. The Tuareg of this area are less inter-mixed with Arabs than those of the Timbuktu region and have been much more recently converted to

¹⁰⁷ The 9/11 Commission, "Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States", 2004, p. 366.

Islam.¹⁰⁸ Several sources noted that Tablighi preachers had relatively little success in Timbuktu or other areas with a deep history of Islamic scholarship and practice.¹⁰⁹

The Tablighi have been visibly proselytising in Mali since about 1992. Most of their early preaching was in Bamako and seems to have been an outgrowth of the interest of Malians living in France in the Tablighi form of Islam. There is a centre (*markaz*) in the Manyanbugu quarter of Bamako. The number of Tablighi faithful fluctuates between 400 and 2,000 and includes Pakistanis, Gulf Arabs, Egyptians, and Chadians.¹¹⁰

From late 1997, much Tablighi activity has focused on Kidal and the Ifoghas leadership of the 1990's rebellion.¹¹¹ The Ifoghas faction that rules Kidal has almost entirely converted to the Tablighi "way", known locally as the *Da'wa*. Kidal's Mayor is Tablighi, as is its traditional leader, Inta'la. The former head of the Tuareg rebellion, Iyad, has become the spiritual leader of Mali's Tablighis and spent six months in 2004 in Pakistan on a Tablighi retreat.¹¹²

Western as well as Malian intelligence services are convinced the Tablighi have specifically targeted former cadres of the rebellion and the political hierarchy of Kidal.¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews consistently supported this claim,¹¹⁴ and several sources described persistent and intensive pressure on the former rebel leadership to convert. Inta'la was the subject of two years of steady attempts before he converted, though he was described as a "tepid" convert at best.¹¹⁵

Given that the Tablighi proselytisers claim to be apolitical, it is difficult to explain why they should so actively target both the former leadership of the rebellion and the current political figures in Kidal (not necessarily the same people). Still, there may be other explanations. As mentioned above, several commentators noted that the Tablighi typically concentrate on those with a relatively

superficial knowledge of Islam, and if it is true, as some suggested, that Kidal's Tuareg Muslims fit that description, this could be reason in itself. Others mention that internal power struggles within the Ifoghas fraction of the Tuareg caused some individuals to try to use Tablighi status as "better" Muslims to outflank their political adversaries.¹¹⁶ One person suggested that, "around 1998, Iyad turned to religion just at the moment that the rebellion's rank-and-file was beginning to clamour for some kind of benefit from their involvement. He was not in a position to deliver anything, and at that moment he retreated into religion, saying that God would provide for everyone".¹¹⁷

The Malian government is concerned about the use of false Malian identity documents and is attempting to stamp out the abuse, which is said to be common among arriving Pakistani preachers. The Malian authorities are beginning to deny visas to Pakistanis, under pressure, some Malians say, from the U.S. government.¹¹⁸

C. THE QUESTION OF DR. KHAN

A seemingly unrelated fact raises another question about Tablighi presence in the region. This relates to the activity of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the metallurgist who oversaw Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and is known as the "father" of its nuclear bomb. A memoir published in Islamabad by Abdul Mahbood Siddiqui,¹¹⁹ a friend of Khan's, recounts three trips to Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan, as well as Nigeria, in February, 1998, February 1999, and February 2000. Associated Press reporters, examining the guest book of the Hotel Hendrina Khan in Timbuktu -- named after Khan's wife and owned by him -- noted another visit by Khan and specialists from the nuclear lab he headed in February 2002.¹²⁰

Most analysts have suggested that Khan's presence may have had to do with attempts to obtain uranium either for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program or for one of his black-market clients, since there is active exploitation of uranium in the region (in northern Niger). However, there is also speculation of a connection with the fundamentalist Tablighi missionaries, likewise Pakistani, who began arriving in large numbers in northern Mali

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, Gao, Kidal, 24-30 August, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, Gao, Dakar, August to September, 2004.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview with religious figure, Bamako, 27 August 2004.

¹¹¹ One source estimated that 80 per cent of the Ifoghas had espoused the Tablighi dawa.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, Gao, Kidal, August 2004.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako and Washington, August to November, 2004.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, Kidal, August 2004.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gao, 29 August 2004. Several interlocutors suggested that with everyone around him converted, he converted in order to survive politically.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview with academic source, Gainesville, Florida (U.S.), 18 March 2005.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bamako, 27 August 2004.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, August 2004.

¹¹⁹ Siddiqui's son, Abu, was convicted in 2001 in the UK for buying material linked to nuclear programs for Khan. See E. Harris, "Head of Pakistan's Nuclear Ring Made Repeated Visits to Uranium-Rich Africa with Lab Entourage, Suppliers", Associated Press, 18 April 2004.

¹²⁰ E. Harris, op cit.

around 1997-1998. When speaking about the Tablighi in northern Mali, one interlocutor referred to "a rich Pakistani da'i [missionary] who had bought a hotel in Timbuktu".¹²¹ A Timbuktu native, when asked about the Hotel Hendrina Khan, referred to it as "that hotel built with al Qaeda money" and said that the only people who stayed there were "Saudis passing through".¹²²

Khan's religious proclivity does appear to be oriented towards the Deobandi/Tablighi/Arab Islam, which has been the official brand in Pakistan for the past many decades. Crisis Group research in Pakistan, however, suggests Khan's affiliations are not solely religious. While the Tablighi Jama'at may have been one of many Arabised-religious outfits he supported financially and used to spread the message of Islam, especially in post-Soviet Central Asia and China's Sinkiang province (distribution of copies of the Koran, providing prayer mats, disseminating Islamic literature, etc.), the evidence is scanty. He also knew the value of using religion to promote himself and project his image as a hero of Islam.¹²³

But whether motivated by religious fervour, political strategy, or even personal greed, Khan's presence in Timbuktu (where he and those around him appear to be considered by some as Tablighis and by others as linked to al Qaeda) is intriguing.

D. THE GSPC

Tablighi interest in the Tuareg region becomes more complicated still when one considers the presence of the GSPC in the same areas. In 2003-2004, the GSPC was active in Mali as far south as the region near Léré, by the right-angle of the border with Mauritania, to the extent that the route of the 2004 Paris-Dakar rally had to be changed.¹²⁴ Several sources noted that some GSPC leaders had intermarried with Tuareg women. Other Algerian Salafis are seen from time to time, often when

they come to water points. One local person emphasised that they looked like "sad, old bearded men" and did not seem to pose a major security threat.¹²⁵

The most suggestive link between the GSPC and the Tablighi may be related to the rather mysterious Tablighi leader in Kidal. Although a number of Tablighi adherents talked with Crisis Group analysts, they were unwilling to discuss or even name their leader, describing him simply as "a young man who circulates unnoticed" and "someone who has the ability to take decisions". Some local non-Tablighis believe there is no leader.¹²⁶ However, a well-informed source suggested this individual typified the "dangers of the Tablighi in Kidal" and hinted at links to armed groups.¹²⁷

The ability of the GSPC to survive in the inhospitable southern Algerian/northern Malian region requires some degree of acquiescence from the local population, but it also requires money. This comes from both the hostage ransom they received and from GSPC links to smuggling. Cigarette-smuggling is the biggest traffic in the region. Cigarettes come from Zerouate in Mauritania in big trucks, even in containers, to Kidal. There they are split into smaller lots and taken into Algeria in fast Toyota Land Cruiser pick-ups.¹²⁸ According to one estimate, a pack of Marlboro cigarettes (the main brand in the trans-Saharan trade) sells for 250 CFA francs in Burkina Faso, 650 in Mali, and the equivalent of 850 in Algeria.¹²⁹ These cigarettes ultimately cross the Mediterranean to Europe, where by entering untaxed through Italy, they are still cheaper than those that are legally imported, even after many middlemen have taken cuts during the long journey from North Carolina in the U.S.

Much controversy surrounds Mokhtar bin Mokhtar, an Algerian national and smuggling kingpin in the region. Once involved in the fight against the Algerian government, several sources indicated that he is now most likely focused on his business interests. Nevertheless,

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Mali, August 2004.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, 27 January 2005. A diplomat who recently stayed there, however, commented that it has become the U.S. Embassy's recommended hotel in Timbuktu and that both Qur'ans and Gideon Bibles are available in every room. Crisis Group correspondence, 24 March 2005.

¹²³ A diplomat in Pakistan stated: "He spent millions of dollars building an aura as the country's greatest hero. That's a pretty good insurance policy". See D. Walsh, "'Dr. Khan Isn't Taking Calls Today': Disgraced Father of Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal Is Kept under Guard after Selling Nuclear Secrets Abroad", *The Guardian*, 20 November 2004.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview with diplomats, Dakar and Bamako, June to August 2004.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mali, August 2004.

¹²⁶ This is a point of dispute in academic literature on the Tablighi, with some observers asserting the organisation is highly structured and hierarchical and others that it is egalitarian. An interlocutor in Mali claimed, "they cannot even change the curtains in one of their mosques unless they have official approval from their headquarters in Pakistan". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, 27 August, 2004. This uncertainty is most likely due to Tablighi efforts to do nothing to advertise or describe either activities or organisation. Written materials are not produced, and business is conducted face-to-face.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Mali, August 2004.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group analysts met some likely smugglers on the road in northern Mali in such a pick-up; each had a latest model satellite phone.

¹²⁹ About \$.40, \$1.25 and \$1.60 respectively.

"there are now so many rumours and stories about him that almost everything is laid at his doorstep".¹³⁰ He has been seen frequently in northern Mali (including Kidal) since 1997 but has not been seen there for about one year.¹³¹ One source claimed to have seen him on the Niger-Algeria border in August 2004. Although bin Mokhtar has been said to be linked to al Qaeda, many who know the region well find this fanciful and insist he instead is its most powerful bandit/smuggler. His dealings with groups like the GSPC, in this view, would be merely like those he has with anyone else. Sources in Kidal stated that GSPC members in the area were not themselves important smugglers but they taxed the cigarette smugglers as they passed from Mali into Algeria.

People-smuggling in northern Mali is also big, with Gao being an important point along the route for Nigerians, Cameroonians, Congolese, Ghanaians and Liberians among others,¹³² who go there to be picked up at the ferry by Malian businesspeople, who demand some 50,000 CFA francs¹³³ for a Sahara crossing. The intermediary takes 70 per cent and gives the rest to a driver, who takes the would-be migrants to Algeria. Many die en route, for example when trucks break down or lose their way. It is also possible to smuggle other goods, such as drugs and weapons, by such means. There are three main routes for human smuggling; one through Mauritania, Western Sahara, and Morocco to Spain, a second through Mali, Algeria and Tunisia to Italy/Malta, and a third, "middle route", through Gao into Algeria.¹³⁴

The issue of smuggling is complex, as are its possible links to the GSPC. As much as 80 per cent of goods for sale in Kidal reportedly come from Algeria.¹³⁵ All diesel fuel comes from there and costs between 250 and 400 CFA francs per litre, depending on the season. As there are no customs posts along the borders, all

this economic activity is technically smuggling. A large part of the reason there is no Malian state presence along the Algerian border is that the government's military posts throughout the north were eliminated as part of the peace agreement that ended the 1990's rebellion.

Several Tuareg specified that this policy, which had once been seen as liberating, was increasingly regarded as contributing to lawlessness.¹³⁶ They suggested that most Tuareg communities would be willing to renegotiate this part of the peace deal to accept the return of some posts, especially now that a significant number of Tuareg had been incorporated into the army and could staff them. The Malian government should negotiate with Tuareg communities in order to begin reinstating a presence in the north.

The region is also awash in small arms. Every head of family throughout the Kidal area is said to have an automatic weapon, hardly surprising given that many participated in the rebellion and most still participate to some extent in nomadic herding, where the threats of theft of livestock or attack by wild animals are ever-present. Several officers at the Malian army garrison were punished in 2003 when commanders from Bamako discovered that most of its armoury had been sold.

Despite the factors just described, it would be difficult to support the strongest version of the claim for links among smugglers, Tablighis, Tuareg ex-rebels and the GSPC as expressed in an internal U.S. government document:

With reported links between the *Da'wa* and the GSPC and a further connection between the GSPC and al Qaeda, the importation of new interpretations of Islam not only threatens to transform northern Mali towards more fundamentalist tendencies, it also serves as a vehicle for indoctrination and recruitment of followers for a terrorist agenda.¹³⁷

This is because, as noted in the section on the Wahhabiyya, the "importation of new interpretations of Islam" has been going on for some 70 years in Mali, with

¹³⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, 7 February 2004.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Gao, Kidal, August 2004.

¹³² In fact, the trans-Saharan route increasingly serves not only sub-Saharan African immigrants but also those from Asia and Latin America. Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, 26 August 2004, Paris, 15 and 17 November 2004. It is likely that this recent evolution in flow of immigrants makes use of some of the Western African routes that are also important for movement of Latin American cocaine destined for Europe and Asian heroin headed especially toward North America.

¹³³ About \$90.

¹³⁴ A fourth, in Niger, runs through Dirkou to Libya. However, under EU pressure, President Khaddafi is evidently clamping down on this one. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, 3 September 2004.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Kidal, 31 August 2004.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako and Kidal, August 2004. Local populations asked for the return of these bases for security reasons but also because all state services, from teaching to health, were provided by military personnel, who were the only ones willing to live in the desert outposts.

¹³⁷ "USAID Assessment: Northern Mali", Management Systems International, July 2004.

no resulting problems of terrorist recruitment over that time. Furthermore, as suggested above, any links to al Qaeda may be more nominal than operational. Nevertheless, the convergence of Tablighi proselytisation specifically targeting political figures, GSPC activity, and smuggling in the heartland of the former Tuareg rebellion appears to justify increased attention.

Many Tuareg suggested the issue was purely economic, that poverty opened the region to potential recruitment by GSPC and other extremists. The GSPC is said to have "sprinkled" a portion of its estimated €5 million tourist ransom around in northern Mali,¹³⁸ using it to buy not only weapons but also good will. Numerous sources agreed the GSPC recruits young Tuareg men, and there is a *laissez-faire* attitude among the local population that allows it to use the region as a rear base unmolested.

Tuareg in the Kidal area say that "nothing is being done in/for the north",¹³⁹ but it is clear that numerous schools, latrines, and administrative buildings have been built by the state and its development partners. According to residents, until 1992, there was virtually nothing in Kidal except for a prison and a military outpost. When asked where the new construction had come from if there had really been nothing done, several Tuareg shifted their explanations slightly to complain that there had been no development that was "consequential" or "appropriate" to the needs of the north.

This is obviously true to the extent that the two major Tuareg towns in Mali, Timbuktu and Kidal, are virtually inaccessible. Both need paved roads to serve them and their populations if development is to move beyond a few schools and health centres. It is also clear that much development planning is based upon models developed in the agricultural, sedentary south. Most economic activity in the north is oriented toward one of three sectors: raising livestock, tourism, or smuggling.

The present policy supported by the U.S. and Algerian militaries and intelligence services focuses on shutting down circulation of both GSPC elements and smuggling networks. As a stand alone policy that does not offer alternative livelihoods to Tuareg populations, this is certain to lead to desperation. Those who know the region say an upsurge in banditry (already visible in Niger) is well underway that might culminate in a new Tuareg rebellion.¹⁴⁰ A Tuareg intellectual even suggested

that the welcoming of the GSPC may have been a kind of "cry for help", intended to attract attention and eventually more development aid. This aid does indeed need to be "consequential" in the sense that it should give Tuareg people, and especially young men, alternatives to illegal ways of making a living. This means, for instance, supporting livestock herding with deep wells and making the export of their "free range" meat viable by constructing several modern abattoirs.

Improving road and air access to the north would make exportation of meat more economically viable and also help the tourist sector. Eliminating the threat of outside Islamist interference that might include kidnapping and murder of tourists is clearly part of this equation. However, all the tourists recently kidnapped were in the Sahara after having refused the services of local guides. Western governments should impress upon their citizens that for hundreds of years, the fate of outsiders caught travelling unguided in the Sahara has typically been much more gruesome than what the 32 Europeans taken hostage by the GSPC experienced, and that they should not count upon rescue or ransom if they ignore advice and elect to proceed without guides.¹⁴¹

Tourism can provide a serious alternative to smuggling, even if it does carry its own problems and risks. Several diplomats who know the Sahelian region well have suggested to Crisis Group that the best thing the donors could do in the region would be to invest a modest amount of money in Timbuktu, Kidal, Tamanrasset (Algeria) and Agadez (Niger) in order to improve the tourist infrastructure at the same time that security is being improved. If tourism is benefiting Tuareg guides, hoteliers and the population in general, they will have every reason to ensure that banditry and kidnapping, as well as other threats that might affect their business -- like a GSPC presence -- are eliminated.¹⁴² However, if tourist development and profits rest in the hands of elites based in Bamako, Algiers and Niamey, especially those from

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview with Malian political figure, Addis Ababa, June 2004.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Kidal, 30 August 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Dakar, Bamako, Kidal, Niamey, June to September 2004.

¹⁴¹ Some unguided tourists have been accused of involvement in the theft of ancient Saharan rock paintings. Five Germans were arrested on this charge in Algeria. See J. Keenan, "Tourism, Development and Conservation: A Saharan Perspective", Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Environment and Human Behaviour Program document, available at <http://www.psi.org.uk/ehb/docs/keenan-tourism-200302.pdf>; also "Sahara Tourists Jailed for Theft", BBC, 30 November 2004. According to the BBC report, the three men and two women had "given their guide the slip" and were found with 130 looted objects from southern Algeria's Tassali National Park, a World Heritage Site.

¹⁴² Tuareg, who know the area, are likely to be more efficient than soldiers trained in surveillance and border control.

other ethnic groups perceived as interlopers or even oppressors, they will not achieve the desired effect.

E. NIGER: THE THREAT FROM THE SOUTH

In Niger, Islamism comes primarily from Nigeria, to the south. This fact can be obscured by the continuation of banditry in the north of the country, and even claims by some Tuareg that they will start a new rebellion. However, diplomatic, governmental and military sources agree that most of the violent activity in the north in 2004 was perpetrated by those close to Rhisa Ag Boula, former leader of Niger's Tuareg rebellion and later minister of tourism, who has been imprisoned on charges of complicity to commit murder.

While policies toward political Islam in Mauritania have combined suppression and attempts at cooptation, and in Mali and Chad have been ambivalent, in Niger, the message has been clear: Muslims of all types are welcome to worship in the way that seems best to them. However, the state does not permit any crossing of a clear line between the religious and the political that might lead to civil disturbance or other harm to Niger's citizens. This is probably why the threats of Islamist violence appear lowest in Niger of any of the four countries covered by the PSI.

A clear example of the government's approach involved polio vaccinations. During the period when Imams in northern Nigeria's majority Hausa cities were telling Muslim communities not to vaccinate their children because imported polio vaccines were covert plots to sterilise Muslims, several Imams in southern Niger's Hausa cities began to make the same claims. President Mamadou Tanja gave a speech in Hausa on behalf of polio vaccinations at Maradi, a major southern city. Government authorities put the Imams who continued preaching against vaccination in jail overnight, releasing them the next day after telling them that they were posing a public health threat with their preaching, and the government would actively prosecute them for causing Nigeriens to refuse the polio vaccination. That finished the problem.¹⁴³

Though this approach may have been somewhat heavy-handed, it is clear that the government's quick and decisive action stopped a "Nigerian" dynamic from emerging. Moreover, this lack of ambiguity appears to have characterised the government's approach to the issue in general and to have had positive results. Secularism,

discussed below, is much-debated both within Islamist circles and the wider public in Sahelian countries. The greatest risk emerging from this dynamic is a kind of religious "blackmail" that challenges politicians in the following terms: "are you a good, pious person? If so, why are you allowing (or imposing) these unacceptable and imported television shows/monogamy/Christian calendar/indiscriminate mixing of men and women in public places on the rest of us. You are obviously just corrupt, Westernised unbelievers".

This form of political-religious pressure is not unique to Sahelian politics but it has been very powerful in the region, especially as it focuses popular dissatisfaction with political elites through two forms of rhetoric that resonate with many people regardless of their religious beliefs: notions of cultural authenticity (where, in this case, authentic Malian or Nigerien culture is portrayed as Islamic) and notions of basic decency and family values. Islamists in Chad frequently described the government's secular family code as "promoting homosexual marriage", exaggerating the "immoral" nature of the laws proposed, and emphasising their imported origins.

It requires considerable courage for politicians in Niger to take the strong stand they have against religious fundamentalism, and European and U.S. diplomats should recognise that it involves using up considerable political capital. President Tanja, though riding a new wave of legitimacy after what was universally recognised as a free and fair election in December 2004, and a surprise election to the Presidency of ECOWAS in January 2005, is in a position of relative strength. However, he and his successors will be challenged on this point and some will accuse the Nigerien government of selling out the interests of its people to please Western powers.

These risks need to be taken into account, not least in the size of donor aid, if Western governments hope to see such policies continue. The international community's annual aid package of approximately \$150 million is too small to advance the kinds of education, infrastructure and health programs that would give the government a significant "legitimacy boost" in a country where 60 per cent of the population lives on less than \$1 per day, there is an infant mortality rate of 155 per 1,000 and a maternal mortality rate that is one of the highest in the world.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview with diplomat, Niamey, 2 September 2004.

¹⁴⁴ "Global Health Atlas," Global Health Council, available at http://atlas.globalhealth.org/indicator_detail.cfm?IndicatorID=98&Country=NE.

The fact that the Nigerien government has taken a clear line on secularism does not mean that the country is without problems. The north is relatively rich, with trade, tourism and possibly oil. The Hausa-speaking south is the poorest region, and it is where Izala, or Azali Salafis Muslims, are most present. There are Izala villages where the women do no agricultural work because they are restricted from leaving their family compounds unless accompanied by a male relative.

There is much smuggling, which helps to replace other forms of livelihood like herding livestock but also lends itself to alliances with various criminal networks. The big trade routes include Cotonou-Gaya-Agadez-Sirte (Libya). Some 200 lorries with containers take this route northwards each month. The containers are not opened in Cotonou and are declared to contain cigarettes. Entering into Niger, they pay 15 per cent duty. But no one knows what is really in them. They are often owned by Arab traders from the north, said to have powerful friends in the Nigerien government.¹⁴⁵ The Algerian army attacks trucks it suspects of smuggling cigarettes, even using helicopters. Libya is also beginning to crack down on this trade, as well as on the people-smuggling routes that lead to Tripoli.

Several people from Maiduguri, just across the border in Northern Nigeria, were arrested in connection with the GSPC group of El Para in March 2004. A movement of fundamentalist students in Maiduguri who styled themselves as a Nigerian "Taliban" attempted an uprising in December 2003, capturing weapons from a police station before being chased into Niger and then back into Nigeria.¹⁴⁶

The Nigerien army clashed with the GSPC in March 2004 (a big battle on the border with Chad) and in April 2004 (when it killed some traffickers working with the GSPC near Tintiboriden, by the Malian border). In August 2004, it chased three Tuareg bandits unconnected to the GSPC and captured them inside Mali. The June-October 2004 wave of Tuareg banditry was linked by most observers to the arrest of Rhisa Ag Boula, the former leader of the *Organisation de la Résistance Armée*, detained since December 2003 on a charge of complicity to murder.

The banditry is attributed by some to Rhisa's brother or cousin.¹⁴⁷

Because in Niger as in Mali, many problems in the north originate from the fact that the Tuareg rebellions were never fully resolved, they may continue. Again, development aid should help to offer young Tuareg men alternatives to banditry, which not only troubles Nigerien citizens, but also reduces tourism, a main source of income, especially in Agadez.

F. CHAD: THE QUESTION OF SECULARISM

Government officials, diplomats and experts point to many of the same problems in Chad as in the other three countries, including poorly-policed borders, customs control at borders and airports that is both incompetent and corrupt, and circulation of foreign nationals, many of whom appear to be using false identity papers.¹⁴⁸ Added to this are the problems posed by proximity to Sudan, including the Darfur crisis. President Idris Deby, who comes from the Sudan border area, is caught between competing interests in the Darfur crisis. He is from an ethnic group closely-affiliated to the Zaghawa,¹⁴⁹ one of the main targets of the attacks by Sudanese government-supported Janjaweed militias but that government was one of his main supporters when his *Mouvement Patriotique du Salut* (MPS) took power in the December 1990 coup. As a result of that support and his government's rapid closure of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) office and logistical bases in Chad, relations were cordial between N'Djamena and Khartoum for some time.

Today, the Deby government, made up predominantly of Zaghawa, fears the threat of Chadian Islamists, and President Bashir, his one-time friend and head of the ruling Islamist party in Khartoum casts a shadow over the country. Both diplomats and government officials mentioned fears of "infiltration" from Sudan.¹⁵⁰ Much as in Mauritania, the fragile Chadian government fears Islamist leaders not so much for religious reasons but for political ones. The criticisms of the Islamists go straight to the heart of the question of "*salut*", or salvation, mentioned in the name of Deby's political party. Islamists in Chad criticise the government for being insufficiently pious, and consequently corrupt and unjust. This is an adaptation of the language of good

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, 3 September 2004.

¹⁴⁶ See "Nigeria: Islamic militants kill three policemen, take 12 hostage", IRIN, 11 October 2004. This group is also called the Muharijun.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews with diplomats, journalists, Niamey, 5 September 2004

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, N'Djamena, December 2004.

¹⁴⁹ Most Chadians consider him Zaghawa.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, 3, 6 December 2004.

governance common in all four of the Sahelian countries covered in this report, and one that may well resonate with average Chadians (or Mauritians or Malians) more than the Western version, phrased in terms of transparency and accountability of elected leaders to their electorates (rather than to God).

Such discussions in Chad take on a pointed quality since it is the only one of the four countries in which being Muslim is not a taken-for-granted fact. Only 52 or 53 per cent of Chadians are said to be Muslim, and they are locked in a struggle for influence and control of the state with non-Muslims.¹⁵¹ Tensions have revolved around questions including official state languages¹⁵² and secularism.¹⁵³ In this context, the French language and the secular state take on a dual significance. They are seen to be the inheritance of a colonial legacy, not just imported but imposed, but they have also come to be largely embraced by the population of the south. The alternative arabophone culture is thus in a position to phrase its position in terms of an authentic African alternative to an artificial colonial legacy.

This division arises again within civil society. The civil society most visible and familiar to European eyes -- the press, human rights groups, organisations working for the equal rights of women -- are predominantly, though not exclusively, composed of southerners.¹⁵⁴ However, alongside this series of structures, often receiving funds from European embassies and NGOs for their work, there is the world of Islamic NGOs and Islamist intellectuals, many of whom are fluent in French, have studied in Europe, and navigate easily between the francophone and arabophone worlds. This group is often funded through the parallel network of Islamic NGOs and sources for the propagation of Islam, mostly emanating in the Middle East.

Arabophone Muslim intellectuals in Chad describe secularism in two ways: at times, as implicitly Judeo-Christian in orientation, at other times, as "atheistic" or

anti-religious. The second description is probably closer to the intentions that inspired the French version of secularism, more extreme and anti-clerical in its intentions than the American.¹⁵⁵ As a Chadian intellectual said, "In the United States, the President is sworn in with his hand on the Bible. We could never swear in a Chadian President with his hand on the Koran. Why not? Because of the French heritage".¹⁵⁶

The issue of the more radical version of Francophone secularism has become more sensitive over the past few years as debates about secularism and assimilation in France have intersected. The entire debate is crystallised in the eyes of many Chadian Islamists in the "headscarf law". The law, banning any form of dress in schools that indicates religious affiliation -- including Catholic rosaries and Jewish yarmulkes, but most notably Muslim girls' headscarves -- was constantly dissected and interpreted by Chadian Muslim intellectuals in conversations about "*laïcité*" (secularism).

More than anything else, this French law was offered as "proof" of the links between secularism's anti-religious and its specifically anti-Muslim thrusts.¹⁵⁷ As a result, secularism was presented as implicitly privileging the Judeo-Christian tradition, while giving French administrators the tools with which to attack Muslim identity in France. Islamists in Chad claimed the right to ensure that the same abuses are avoided in Muslim Africa.

This way of reading the headscarf debate, however, makes Chadian Christians very nervous. For them, secularism is a means not of imposing an implicitly Christian, francophone culture on African populations, but of maintaining a firewall between Christianity or Islam and the policies of the state. A Western diplomat, emphasising that the Chadian state did not privilege one religion over another, still mentioned that it underwrote pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, though not to Rome or elsewhere, and that land bought to build a mosque was tax-free, while

¹⁵¹ The commonly-used figures indicate that approximately 30 per cent of Chadians are Christian and 20 per cent practise African religions. Both groups are concentrated in the narrow, densely populated south. The fact that Muslims and non-Muslims were sometimes opposed during the long civil war suggests the potential violence of the competition.

¹⁵² See *Contentieux linguistique arabe-français*, Centre Al-Mouna, N'Djamena, 1998.

¹⁵³ See *Quelle laïcité pour un Tchad pluriel?*, Centre Al-Mouna, N'Djamena, 2000.

¹⁵⁴ Some organisations, like the Centre Al-Mouna, an interfaith research and cultural centre founded by the Catholic Church in 1986, have actively worked against such a stereotyped division. Nevertheless, for the average Chadian, the contrast probably holds.

¹⁵⁵ French secularism emerged from the Dreyfus affair, in which a Jewish army officer was wrongly accused of treason. His accusers were backed by the Catholic Church and generally by the more conservative Catholic-royalist elements of society, who were marginalised by the 1905 law separating Church and State in France and erasing any trace of Catholicism from the educational, legal and political systems. This was the same moment when France was establishing administrative control over its African colonies.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 7 December 2004. In an attempt to increase the legitimacy of its judiciary, Niger recently required magistrates to swear their oath of office with a hand on the Koran. "Les magistrats prêteront désormais serment sur le Coran", *Le Soleil*, 4 February 2005.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Chad, December 2004.

land bought to build a church was not. For Chadian Christians, these are subtle but telling differences.

The controversy over secularism comes to the surface in Chadian politics in relation to the family code. This is not only a point of controversy in Chad, but in many African countries with a Muslim majority. Attempts to introduce a family code that gives women more equal rights have been blocked not only in Chad, but also in Mali and Guinea. These family codes would give women the right to divorce their husbands, give them more equal rights in inheriting property, and might ban a husband's "right" to punish his wife and children with beatings. Some would discourage polygamy. This debate has two sides from the point of view of practising African Muslims. Although such proposals have been contested wherever they have been proposed, most Senegalese Muslims, who live under such a code -- very close to the French one -- continue their lives as practising Muslims. At the same time, the perception that these changes are part of a "package" of imposed Western reforms ranging from structural adjustment to the introduction of democracy by force is real.

Chadian Islamists eloquently express their resentment of such impositions. In doing so, they often claim to speak for the Muslim majority, giving a unified argument against the imposition of Western values, but in reality, there are diverse constituencies, each of which signs on for one part of the critique but may feel ambivalent about others. Women are an example: a Malian Islamist told Crisis Group researchers about the work of the National Union of Muslim Women. They had taken on the task, he said, "of defending Muslim women in the context of secularism, considered as a risk of irreligiosity".¹⁵⁸ When giving more details, he began by describing their opposition to a revision of the family code, but ended up by saying their greatest concern was the attempt by the state to make excision illegal. This is a practice that particular groups of older women are often much more eager to defend than either younger women or most men.¹⁵⁹ It places them among those who object to some aspects of the "modern" family code, based on a broadly European model. However, it does not mean that these same older women are opposed to changing the laws regarding inheritance, which systematically dispossess widows.

The example can be multiplied many times over, and points to the need for fine-grained analysis. A Crisis Group researcher asked two young Islamists in N'Djamena

how they referred to themselves, noting that many Salafist Muslims reject the appellation "Wahhabi". They casually suggested they preferred to be called "*Ansar al Sunna*", the name of an insurgent group in Iraq, but also roughly translatable as "defenders of the traditions".¹⁶⁰ Though these young men were fundamentalists and religiously conservative, they were clearly not terrorists. As they described their spiritual paths, one via Northern Nigeria and the other via Egypt, they told of their deepening knowledge of Islamic texts and their conviction that there were no fundamental differences between themselves and other Chadians, but that their luck in being able to study their religion more thoroughly had given them the opportunity to distinguish the traditional "core" practices of Islam from the African or other accretions that many other Chadian Muslims mixed in.

Though one diplomat described the Chadian state as "ferociously secular",¹⁶¹ many Chadians described President Deby himself and some of those around him as ambivalent when faced with a small but vocal and articulate Islamist minority. Many Chadian Christian intellectuals still strongly associate Deby with Sudan, for them representing the "Islamist threat". The Union of Muslim Civil Servants played an active role in blocking the new family code, using "family values" rhetoric, emphasising the fear that the state was attempting to abolish a man's right to marry up to four wives, and claiming that the new laws would promote promiscuity and dissolute, Western lifestyles.¹⁶² Because this rhetoric touches on different subjects dear to particular groups, it has broad enough support to paralyse many government initiatives.

The Islamist critique points simultaneously to accusations of government corruption, perceptions of Western attempts to destroy Muslim societies and traditions, and the unemployment and lack of infrastructure in Chad, which are blamed on Western-imposed structural adjustment. It unifies these critiques through a moral interpretation that offers a logical alternative: Islam, which unifies religion, society and state in a coherent and ethical manner under Sharia (religious law).

¹⁶⁰ *Ansar al Sunna* is also the name of a Chadian religious association involved in preaching and re-education, which gets its funding from members and donors in Sudan and Saudi Arabia. The phrase "Ansar al Sunna" is generally used by Chadians to refer to more reformist branches within Chadian Islam.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 6 December 2004.

¹⁶² As described above, several Chadian Islamists insisted to a Crisis Group researcher that the new laws aimed to legalise marriage between two men or two women. Issues related to sexuality arose frequently in these discussions. Crisis Group interviews, Chad, December 2004.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bamako, 26 August 2004.

¹⁵⁹ Some older women derive considerable influence and power from their oversight of this practice and the ceremonies that accompany it.

Worries over corruption have in fact been multiplied by the oil money now pouring into a Citibank escrow account in London. Although the World Bank and others set up the Chadian oil program with as many protections as possible, trying to ensure that the money would come back to the people, many Chadians are pessimistic that it will reach those who most need it. Until Chadian Muslims see more transparency in the Deby Government's management of the state, and as long as Chadians continue to perceive many events in the Middle East as an American-led war against Muslims, the Islamist critique will continue to gain adherents. The Deby government should be encouraged by the EU, France and the U.S. to become increasingly transparent, use oil money for the health, education and infrastructure programs it is meant for, and take a clear stand on secularism. These donors should significantly step up development assistance to Chad as reward for moving in this direction.

IV. U.S. ANALYSIS AND POLICY

Although much of the press has portrayed the PSI/TSCTI programs as attempts by the U.S. government to chase down terrorists in the desert, this is only one facet of a complex program. Two other aspects of PSI must be taken into account: first, the series of programs for training African militaries that goes back to the Clinton administration and is the direct predecessor to the PSI and second, the bureaucratic imperatives that often drive programming and funding decisions within the U.S. government.

Press coverage of the PSI appears to have resulted from reading the African situation through Iraq-coloured glasses. General Charles Wald, Deputy Commander of the U.S. European Command (EUCOM), who oversees PSI from Stuttgart, has skilfully used the press corps as a kind of public relations machine to convey the impression of his \$1.6 million per country (on average) program as a massive project sweeping across the desert.¹⁶³ This section will try to provide a view of the American perception of threats in the Sahel, the concrete steps the U.S. government is taking to address these perceived threats, and the factors in domestic politics that have pushed and pulled policies in various directions.

A. GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS: OIL AND ISLAMISM

It used to be a kind of cruel joke twenty years ago when some of us tried to pretend Africa might rise to the level of a strategic interest, but thanks to the oil deposits we're finding every day in and near Africa, I can say with a straight face 30 per cent of our oil will come from there, and I promise you it is a strategic interest.

-- Acting Assistant Secretary of State
for African Affairs Charles Snyder.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ It is striking in press coverage of the PSI that both journalists who are supportive and those who portray the program as a sinister attempt to occupy the Sahel uniformly exaggerate its size and scope. Along with the clash that killed 43 Salafists early in the training cycle, this has helped create a high profile for General Wald, who is himself talented at cultivating the press. According to some insiders, commanders of the 1,400 strong Djibouti-based U.S. counter-terrorism team in the Horn of Africa, which faces a more significant terrorism threat, have been nonplussed at the attention paid to the relatively modest PSI mission.

¹⁶⁴ Snyder made these comments on 13 April 2004 in Washington at a conference on U.S. National Security Interests

American strategic interests in Africa, as the above quote suggests, are greater than they have ever been. The specific interest in oil focuses on the West African coast, especially the Gulf of Guinea, a geographic area of elastic definition that in Washington has come to mean the coastal region¹⁶⁵ from Nigeria to Angola, including Equatorial Guinea. These three countries are the top African oil producers, and numerous analysts have proposed that strategic planning in the energy sector should anticipate 25 per cent of U.S. oil coming from Africa by 2015.¹⁶⁶

At the same time, the Sahel has been called the "new front in the war on terror".¹⁶⁷ The existence of the GSPC in the desert, the belief that the 11 March 2004 Madrid bombings were planned in Morocco (included in the expanded TSCTI), the fact that 25 per cent of those accused by the U.S. of being "unlawful combatants" and held in Guantanamo Bay are from East Africa all contribute to the general uneasiness about Africa among American counter-terrorism specialists. As already noted, much of this activity is taking place to the north, east and even south of the Sahelian region, but various seemingly unrelated events discussed above suggest a possibility that the Sahel could become a site of terrorist organisation, training or even operations. The recent emergence of a self-styled "Taliban" movement in northern Nigeria¹⁶⁸ may be even more disquieting to those who foresee West Africa, and especially that country, providing an increasing percentage of American oil.

in Africa. "U.S. Promotes Development and Governance in Africa to Counter Terrorism -- State Dept. official outlines key programs that bind continent to America", U.S. State Department Press Release, 16 April 2004.

¹⁶⁵ This region also extends inland to Chad, via the Chad-Cameroon pipeline.

¹⁶⁶ The 25 per cent figure most often cited in Washington comes from a National Intelligence Council (NIC) estimate. While Snyder suggests an eventual 30 per cent, David Goldwyn and Robert Ebel cite 20 per cent. Michael Klare cites Department of Energy estimates that African oil's share will rise from 10 per cent of global oil production in 2000 to 25 per cent in 2020. See, Goldwyn and Ebel, "Crafting a U.S. Energy Policy for Africa", in W. Kansteiner and J.S. Morrison, eds, *Rising U.S. Stakes in Africa: Seven Proposals to Strengthen U.S.-Africa Policy*, (May 2004 Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies); M. Klare, "U.S.: Procuring the World's Oil", *Asia Times Online*, 27 April 2004, and African Oil Policy Initiative Group (AOPIG), "African Oil: A Priority for U.S. National Security and African Development", 2002.

¹⁶⁷ The chairman of the House of Representatives Africa Subcommittee, Ed Royce referred to Africa as the "soft underbelly" of the war on terrorism. B. Greenberg, "Combating Terrorism in Africa Makes America More Secure", op. cit.

¹⁶⁸ See discussion and fn. 146 above.

The challenges to extracting more oil are great, and in many ways the risk of Islamist terrorism is one of the relatively small ones. Piracy and bunkering, or the theft of oil out of pipelines, are estimated to drain \$1 billion to \$4 billion annually¹⁶⁹ from West African oil production. An estimated 25 per cent of Cameroon's oil is stolen. U.S. energy companies have invested some \$45 billion into extracting African oil reserves, and plan to invest another \$50 billion. This is estimated to be between two thirds and three quarters of all U.S. foreign direct investment on the African continent.¹⁷⁰ Given the growing stakes, investors and governments are worried about multiple security issues surrounding this resource.

For the U.S. government, oil and potential terrorism are distinct interests that sometimes intersect, most obviously in the Middle East. There are, however, several other intersecting axes of interest in the West African equation. One is a general concern with criminality. While criminal networks of various kinds participate in everything from human trafficking to the arms and drug trades, one of the greatest concerns for American intelligence and diplomacy is the money that funds Islamist politics, often from a distance.¹⁷¹ Journalist Douglas Farah has described how in the year before the attacks in New York and Washington, al Qaeda laundered large sums of money in the failed states of Sierra Leone and Liberia by buying diamonds above market price.¹⁷² Farah and others have suggested that the Lebanese communities along the West African coast have long funded Hizbollah, the Lebanese-based Shia group on the U.S. list of terrorist organisations. The U.S. coordinator for counter terrorism, Ambassador Cofer Black, has said, "Terrorists often raise funds in one country, plan and train in another, and conduct operations in a third -- all the while communicating, recruiting, and travelling across borders".¹⁷³

While many U.S. specialists agree that Africa should be the focus of more concerted interest, there are numerous hurdles to the type of overarching approach that is required. Two American experts have written:

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Washington, 9 November 2004.

¹⁷⁰ African Oil Policy Initiative Group, op. cit., p.4.

¹⁷¹ In remarks to the Africa Society Forum, General Carlton Fulford, former deputy commander of EUCOM, stated that "this nexus between organised crime and terrorism is real", 7 April 2004.

¹⁷² See D. Farah, *Blood from Stones: The Secret Financial Network of Terror* (New York, 2004).

¹⁷³ C. Corey "United States Helping Africa Win its fight against Terrorism", *Washington File*, 21 October 2004.

Counter-terrorism programs for the region are consistently underfinanced, responsibilities are divided along archaic bureaucratic lines, there is no U.S. diplomatic presence in several strategic locations, and long-term imperatives are consistently allowed to be eclipsed by short-term humanitarian demands.¹⁷⁴

The major problem is that U.S. policy toward Africa since the end of the Cold War has been piecemeal, and counter-terrorism measures have been no exception. When asked whether the intelligence community might be bringing a set of (often inapplicable) Middle Eastern assumptions about the intersection of oil and Islamism to West Africa, an Africa specialist said, "there are probably some people who do that, but many question the need to even think about Africa. The result is an ad hoc policy".¹⁷⁵

Ironically, a sophisticated and forward-looking counter-terrorism strategy could unify much U.S. activity on the continent. The U.S. military establishment has long sought to train and equip African forces so that they could assume more peacekeeping duties. The present PSI training accomplishes some of that. Combined with serious, long-term diplomatic and development engagement, including the use of the Millennium Challenge Account, U.S. policy should seek to address the entire range of direct and indirect causes of terrorist sympathy and recruitment.

B. MILITARY TRAINING IN WEST AFRICA

As noted, the Pan-Sahel Initiative is an outgrowth of other training programs. This section reviews the U.S. initiatives since 1996 that have aimed at building the capacities of African militaries: most have been oriented toward peacekeeping, and all but Operation Focus Relief have provided logistics and communications equipment, but no weapons. It ends with a summary of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), which, although having nothing to do with military training, has been explicitly identified by both State Department and Pentagon representatives as part of an overarching anti-terrorism policy.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, many U.S. officials who watch trends in terrorism take a holistic approach. General Carlton Fulford, head of the African Centre for Strategic Studies

and former EUCOM deputy commander, has insisted on "emphasizing the holistic nature of counter terrorism, by addressing such things as security sector reform, democratic accountability, development of public consensus, professionalism of military forces, and respect for human rights and the rule of law", suggesting that "where there is no hope for the future, terrorism will flourish".¹⁷⁷

1. Africa Crisis Response Force (ACRF)

In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, influential leaders on the continent and in the wider international community sought ways to increase the capacity of African governments to tackle African security problems with less outside assistance. The Clinton administration proposed in September 1996 creation of ACRF as a deployable African military force, to be trained and equipped with the help of the U.S. military. ACRF was not well received by most African nations, and the U.S. formed a working group in early 1997 to consider how to overcome the objections. The result was ACRI.¹⁷⁸

2. African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI)

This was a State Department-managed, Defence Department-supported training initiative,¹⁷⁹ the goal of which was to enhance the capacity of selected African countries to respond quickly and effectively to peacekeeping and humanitarian relief contingencies. The facelift given to the original ACRF concept was successful, and by mid-1997 Senegal, Uganda, Malawi, Mali, Ghana, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire had signed up for eight battalions to be trained under the responsibility of EUCOM. The training program covered a full range of UN Charter Chapter VI peacekeeping activities including convoy escorts, logistics, protection of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and negotiations. The U.S. intended it both to make an impact on existing conflicts and to build long-term capacity for future crises.¹⁸⁰

U.S. military and contractor personnel trained nearly 9,000 troops from eight nations (Kenya joined the initial seven). During the program's five-year history, ACRI-

¹⁷⁴ P. Lyman and J.S. Morrison, "The Terrorist Threat in Africa". *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, issue 1, 2004.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview with diplomat, November 2004.

¹⁷⁶ For example, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Snyder has said, "the Millennium Challenge Account is, in fact, part of the global war on terrorism", "Africa 'Clearly Strategic' for the United States", *All Africa*, 19 April 2004.

¹⁷⁷ Remarks to the Africa Society Forum, 7 April 2004.

¹⁷⁸ "Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance: Developing Training Partnerships for the Future of Africa", U.S. government press release, 4 September 2003.

¹⁷⁹ Certain training aspects were sub-contracted through Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI) and Logicon, the information technology sector of Northrop Grumman.

¹⁸⁰ ACRI was criticised over its achievements with respect to future capacity. See the discussion of ACOTA below.

trained soldiers participated in at least nine peacekeeping operations, including: in Sierra Leone as part of the ECOWAS force (Mali and Ghana); in Guinea-Bissau (Benin); and in the UN mission in the Central African Republic (Senegal).¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, there was some criticism that the program did not include training and equipment for participation in combat operations of the sort that might be appropriate to peace enforcement missions under UN Charter Chapter VII.

3. Operation Focus Relief (OFR)

OFR -- an \$84 million train-and-equip program to improve the counter-insurgency capabilities of selected African nations -- was established in 2000 by the Clinton administration as a State Department response to the ongoing insurgency in Sierra Leone.¹⁸² U.S. Special Forces¹⁸³ instructed Nigerian, Ghanaian and Senegalese soldiers in the tactics and techniques of combat operations that ACRI was not mandated to deal with. Many of those troops were deployed to Sierra Leone with OFR-provided materiel, in three stages between August 2000 and December 2001.¹⁸⁴ Some were also later used in Côte d'Ivoire.

4. African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA)

This successor program to ACRI was created in May 2002 by the Bush administration¹⁸⁵ and sought to correct three shortcomings of its predecessor: lack of appropriately tailored packages; the perishable nature of the training; and the absence of peace-enforcement training.¹⁸⁶ The courses have been adjusted to meet the

individual requirements of each military, to include weapons training geared to more robust peace-enforcement,¹⁸⁷ and to focus more on training officers who will return to their units and train in turn their own troops.¹⁸⁸ South Africa has indicated an intention to request ACOTA training.¹⁸⁹

5. Coastal Security Program

Charles Snyder, acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African affairs, recently spoke of reviving an older African Coastal Security Program (CSP) and described improving African states' capacities to monitor their coastlines and protect their newly discovered offshore oil as a critical part of U.S. strategy in the region.¹⁹⁰ Funds to initiate that effort are contained in the appropriations bill passed in late 2004. It appears that the new CSP will be an integral part of a larger Gulf of Guinea initiative. Presumably fighting oil bunkering along the Niger Delta will be the first objective, followed by cutting down on armed piracy in that region. A spin-off effect is meant to be improved ability of the coastal states to protect their territorial waters against illegal fishing. Another apparent component of the initiative is the planned hand-over of four cutters by the U.S. Coast Guard to Sierra Leone in June or July 2005.¹⁹¹

6. Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI)

Approved in April 2004 by the Bush administration and announced at the Sea Island G-8 Summit in June 2004, this initiative, which seeks to build on ACOTA, involves a U.S. commitment of about \$660 million over five years to train, equip and provide logistical support to forces in nations willing to participate in peacekeeping operations. Funding is to be through both Pentagon and State Department budgets. The appropriations bill approved in

¹⁸¹ "Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance", 10 August 2003, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/acri.htm>.

¹⁸² "U.S. Defence Official Places Nigeria in Forefront of African Militaries", *All Africa*, 28 March 2004.

¹⁸³ "U.S. assists Nigerian Air Force with spare parts", Panafri News Agency, 8 December 2003

¹⁸⁴ "Operation focus relief: 3rd SF group builds relations in Western Africa", *Special Warfare*, 1 June 2002. "...six of the seven OFR-trained battalions served with distinction in UNAMSIL, with the seventh failing to deploy for reasons outside that country's control". See also E. Berman "Recent Developments in U.S. Peacekeeping Policy and Assistance to Africa", *African Security Review*, 13(2), 2004.

¹⁸⁵ "House Committee On International Relations: Subcommittee On Africa Holds A Hearing On U.S. Policy Toward Liberia", political transcripts, Federal Document Clearing House, 2 October 2003.

¹⁸⁶ "Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance: Developing Training Partnerships for the Future of Africa", U.S. government press release, 4 September 2003.

¹⁸⁷ "Official Comments on Liberia, U.S., Africa Peacekeeping Partnership", U.S. State Department press release, 3 July 2003

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ "African Militaries Partnering with U.S. to Combat Terror, Keep the Peace", U.S. State Department press release, 9 March 2004.

¹⁹⁰ Snyder was speaking to a conference on U.S. national security interests in Africa, on 13 April 2004. "U.S. National Security Interests in Africa Outlined", *AllAfrica.com*, 19 April 2004. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld has proposed the program for Djibouti and Eritrea. In a separate, but perhaps related move, the Pentagon will provide three cutters to Sierra Leone for coastal patrols (the stated reason for this is to help Sierra Leone secure its fishing rights and gain a new source of foreign exchange). See "Pentagon/Horn of Africa Press Release" Voice of America, 10 February 2003.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview with military source, Freetown, 18 August 2004.

December 2004 included the first tranche of funding for the effort. It is aimed largely at Africa militaries (although Asia, Latin America and Europe are included) and is meant to improve the capacity of recipients to serve in such operations anywhere in the world. The initiative is an effort to respond to a chronic shortage of troops for peacekeeping missions. Discussions are underway with potential partner countries to contribute trainers and additional resources, with a goal of training about 75,000 potential peacekeepers, who could be deployed on short notice.¹⁹² There is a further notion that training of African troops under this program could be usefully combined with related NATO and European capacity-building programs like the French RECAMP¹⁹³ in order to improve Sahelian nations' ability also to control their own territories.

7. The Millennium Challenge Account (MCA)

While this development fund linked to governance, human rights and economic benchmarks has nothing to do with military training, it exemplifies a holistic approach to development which also applies to this report's recommendations for how best to structure a counter-terrorism policy. On 23 January 2004 President Bush signed a law creating the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and authorising it to administer the MCA initiative. Congress approved \$1 billion in initial funding for FY04, and the president has pledged to increase funding to \$5 billion a year starting in FY06. The MCC is overseen by a board composed of cabinet officials, is chaired by the Secretary of State and has a staff of roughly 100 on limited-term appointments.

The MCA -- part of a strategic-diplomatic effort to tie development aid to policy objectives -- is designed to offer assistance to developing countries which have begun to adopt significant economic and political policy reforms. A part of the rationale is to demonstrate that greater development improves people's lives and may hinder the rise of violent forms of Islamist activity. The initiative recognises that issues of justice are often directly related to whether and where such violent movements arise. A senior State Department official described the MCA as follows:

While these are short-term strategies [PSI and a coastal security program], the foundation of an effective long-term strategy is not security

assistance by itself, but rather programs that promote justice and the rule of law, encourage agricultural production, and foster lasting economic development. With that in mind, the Millennium Challenge Account, which the president announced two years ago, represents a creative new approach to foreign assistance. It will form a critical part of our long-range counter-terrorism strategy.¹⁹⁴

In the first two years, only countries with per capita incomes below \$1,435, the internationally recognised "low-income" threshold, may apply. In the third year the pool will expand to include countries with incomes up to \$2,975, which is the World Bank cut-off for lower-middle-income countries. All PSI countries fall below the \$1,435 bar. Selection of recipients is based on sixteen indicators grouped in three broad areas: governing justly, investing in people and economic performance. Of the sixteen countries that have been determined to be eligible under these criteria, eight are in Africa: Benin, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique and Senegal. Only Mali is a PSI country, but Senegal and Morocco are in the expanded TSCTI group. A further group of countries belong to a "threshold program" for those that do not fully qualify under the criteria but are moving in that direction but none of these are part of the PSI initiative.¹⁹⁵

The MCA, by rewarding rule of law, respect for human and civil rights and good governance with development assistance, has the potential to erode the platform for extremist politics. As mentioned above, the government of Niger has taken significant political risks by holding a consistent line on issues of secularism. This should be taken strongly into account in determining whether the country qualifies at least to join the "threshold program" and so gain prospect of Millennium funds that might be used to stimulate the economy and encourage a further political opening. While problems of governance and civil rights appear to put Mauritania and Chad clearly outside the circle of eligibility for now, U.S. diplomats should make clear to their governments that movement in the right direction will be rewarded, for example with the opening of a USAID office or sub-office in their capitals.

¹⁹² For more detail see "Bush Aims to Build Foreign Forces to Handle Peacekeeping Missions -- Initiative to Train Armies, Largely in Africa, May Cut Burden on U.S. Military", *Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 2004.

¹⁹³ Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix (Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities).

¹⁹⁴ Charles Snyder, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, at a conference on U.S. National Security Interests in Africa, U.S. State Department Press Release, *op. cit.*

¹⁹⁵ Cape Verde was dropped from the list of those presently eligible because it has become too rich. The six further African nations that are part of the "threshold program" include Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. See Press Release, Millennium Challenge Corporation, "Reducing Poverty Through Growth", 8 November 2004.

C. THE PAN-SAHEL INITIATIVE

The U.S. developed its Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) after identifying the region as its number two War on Terrorism concern in Africa (the Horn of Africa remains number one). The initial focus has been on Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger but this would expand under the proposed new Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) to include Senegal and Algeria, with Morocco and Tunisia as observers along with Nigeria. Its expressed objective is to enhance the capacity of each participating state to control the full expanse of its own territory, importantly including its borders, through exposing its military to U.S. training, under the responsibility of EUCOM.¹⁹⁶ Units are to be trained and equipped to conduct rapid-reaction operations to stem the flow of illicit arms, goods and people across borders and to preclude terrorists and terrorist organisations from seeking or establishing sanctuaries in the Sahel.

These goals are ambitious but the day-to-day activities are often rather mundane. Each two-month PSI session has involved training 130 to 150 soldiers and been built around three four-day long modules: 1) marksmanship; 2) communications and teamwork; and 3) first aid.¹⁹⁷ In addition to basic infantry tactics, described by the commander of a training team as derived from Marine basic training in "shooting, moving, communicating",¹⁹⁸ much of the remaining focus has been on map reading and use of Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment provided to the units along with uniforms, boots and Land Cruiser pickup trucks. The best marksmen have been chosen for further training in reconnaissance and sniper fire, and the training has concluded with a two-week field exercise in the desert for each group.

Although some observers ask whether PSI and related training might be forming units that could someday stage coups, it appears that the two months are just enough to give most trainees the rudiments of basic infantry tactics. According to one PSI trainer, 70 per cent of casualties in the armies they were training typically resulted from "friendly fire".¹⁹⁹ Chadian

soldiers were said to have only eight rounds of live ammunition apiece during basic training. Though the Chadians were universally praised by trainers for their keenness and are said to constitute the most respected army (estimated at 25,000) in the Sahelian region, financial constraints mean their training is minimal.

In terms of related agreements, Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Algeria signed an agreement in early July 2003 on cooperation and joint operations for counter terrorism and law enforcement; Mali and Algeria have agreed in principle to coordinate their counter-terrorism efforts along their shared borders; Mali and Niger have agreed to conduct joint border patrols; and Mali is working with Mauritania at the tactical level to counter terrorism along their borders.²⁰⁰

The U.S. Congress approved \$6.25 million for the PSI in FY04 to be executed by the Defence Department with State Department oversight.²⁰¹ Country allocations were Mali -- \$3.5 million; Niger -- \$1.7 million; Mauritania -- \$500,000; and Chad -- \$500,000.

Though Congress has yet to approve the TSCTI, its concept is based on a continuation of PSI training, with, as noted, the scope extended to include Senegal and Algeria (and Morocco, Tunisia and Nigeria as observers), and more coordination among the national forces. A EUCOM spokesperson said, "What we want to do is build on the training. We want to give them more radios. We want to give them more vehicles".²⁰² However, recognition that a holistic approach is required has also been built in. The State Department's acting Coordinator for Counter Terrorism recently testified: "The TSCTI concept would look beyond simply the provision of training and equipment for counter-terrorism units, but also would consider development assistance, expanded public diplomacy campaigns and other elements as part of an overall CT [counter-terrorism] strategy".²⁰³ Recent plans indicate that about 40 per cent of TSCTI money

¹⁹⁶ EUCOM, based in Stuttgart, Germany, covers all Europe and Africa excluding Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti. Central Command (CENTCOM), whose headquarters are in Florida, covers those Horn of Africa countries and the Middle East.

¹⁹⁷ Training in Mali consisted of three units in Bamako, Gao and Timbuktu. Three of the 25 U.S. soldiers in the group that worked with the Chad and Niger companies were Navy medics. The rest consisted of 21 Marine troopers and a Marine commander.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Niger, 6 September 2004.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Niger, 6 September.

²⁰⁰ These agreements are in principle to be unified by the new TSCTI.

²⁰¹ The breakdown was \$1.05 million to EUCOM to conduct assessments and training; \$4.3 million to a contractor to obtain, transport, install and train on equipment; and \$900,000 to the Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) for aircraft maintenance. See EUCOM briefing by Col. C. D. Smith, Jr., available at <http://www.up.ac.za/academic/cips/Publications/Col%20CD%20Smith%20Jr.ppt#1>.

²⁰² "Africa-Based Terrorism appears to be Growing", Voice of America, 11 May 2004.

²⁰³ Statement of William P. Pope, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, before the Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Non-proliferation and Human Rights, of the U.S. House of Representatives, 10 March 2005.

would go to USAID for education, health, community radios, community councils and centres, and other economic and social development. In addition to the development component, the Treasury Department, Department of Justice and international narcotics and law enforcement agencies would also participate.²⁰⁴

The PSI appears as a kind of organic outgrowth of prior American training activities. However, in the context of the War on Terrorism, it, and even more so the TSCTI, take on a heightened significance. As the strategic importance of Africa for the U.S. grows, Washington's stance on the continent is paradoxical. The specialists from the State Department, the Pentagon, USAID and Congressional staffs have committed many years to understanding African politics and economies, usually without any expectation that it could be a professional fast track. The pool of expertise is thus reasonably deep. At the same time, however, it remains difficult to persuade members of Congress that Africa is more than a humanitarian concern.²⁰⁵

The easiest way for government experts to negotiate this paradox is from the security angle, by raising the cry of terrorism. Now that Afghanistan has documented the attractiveness of failed states for criminal networks including (but not limited to) terrorist ones, it becomes easier to argue by analogy that Africa, the continent with the most failed states, is a security concern a priori. According to some observers, this explains much of EUCOM's quick success in bringing PSI into the spotlight, especially after the successful hot pursuit of GSPC fighters across Niger into Chad.

The U.S. Military is quick to admit that it does not have much Africa expertise,²⁰⁶ and many observers in Europe as well as other parts of the U.S. government are nervous about EUCOM taking the lead. There is also some nervousness about General Wald's tendency to analyse the terrorist threat in the Sahel both frankly and publicly. Several U.S. government officials told Crisis Group they agree with his overall reading of the situation but wish he would exercise greater self-censorship.²⁰⁷ Others express deeper misgivings about the quality of intelligence analysis. Given the well-publicised mistakes of analysis and judgement that were made regarding intelligence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (which extended

famously to Niger), even those who are disturbed by the presence of a set of "dots" in places like northern Mali can be very hesitant to connect them.

It is crucially important that US counter-terrorism policy in the Sahelian region proceed with great care. Despite an increase in anti-American sentiment, the region is still generally well-disposed to Americans, if not to U.S. government policies. The political climate in Washington is such that it rewards bold claims. An analyst who follows the West African dossier went so far as to say, "After 9/11, Rummy told all his commanders to go out and find terrorists. So Wald went out and found some in the Sahara".²⁰⁸

This does not mean that General Wald's interpretations are incorrect, but rather that the bureaucratic and political imperatives within the U.S. government at the moment do not necessarily lend themselves to cautious, diplomatic analysis. When the analysis is suitably nuanced and it is about Africa, it tends to lose out on funding. What General Wald and the modestly-funded PSI have done is to raise the profile of these four countries as places where terrorism could possibly thrive. That possibility remains unlikely for the most part, but to keep it that way, the approach should be 80 per cent development and diplomatic engagement, 20 per cent military assistance.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Washington 15 March 2005.

²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, until the Bush administration actually requests funding for the TSCTI, Congress has no basis to act one way or the other.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Stuttgart, 28-29 February 2004.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, July, November 2004.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, New Orleans, 12 November 2004.

V. RESPONSES AND PERCEPTIONS

A. EUROPE

U.S. apprehensions about Islamist terrorism are shared by the former colonial powers and European institutions, which, as longstanding partners of Africa are also actively committed to enhancing its crisis management capabilities. The U.S. desire to track goods and people coming and going in the Sahel and prevent the region from offering safe havens to criminals -- from traffickers to illegal immigrants -- has been well received across the Atlantic. Despite its own close military relations with Sahelian states, France²⁰⁹ acknowledges the necessity of such a program and that it is best implemented by the U.S., whose expertise in counter terrorism France respects. A French security source told Crisis Group:

This is a genuine action to fight against terrorism that responds to a need. The threat is consistent. This part of the world is not under surveillance, and the Americans don't have a clear idea of what is going on over there; nor does anyone. This program will help enhance security in the sub-region. They can afford to do it whereas we can't. Why not let them do it? We'll cooperate with the U.S. through an exchange of information, and we're glad to do it.²¹⁰

Paris also appears relaxed about the proposed extension of the PSI initiative into North Africa through TSCTI, as well as the developing U.S.-Algerian bilateral security relationship:

If they want to establish a military base (in Algeria), why not? There is a real need to do so, and there would be no inconvenience for France. Don't believe the rumors, we are cooperating with

²⁰⁹ According to French Ministry of Defence statistics, more than 9,000 French troops are deployed in Africa, not including UN blue helmets, available at http://www.defense.gouv.fr/portal_repository/1001965835_0004/fichier/getData. Shortly after they gained independence in 1960, the four Sahelian states reviewed in this report developed close cooperative military relations with France. Chad hosts two French military bases, including about 1,200 troops stationed in N'Djamena. Their presence has been formalised by a 1986 military and technical cooperation agreement, "Operation Epervier". Military cooperation was renewed with Mali under the framework of the RECAMP program that led to the creation of a Centre of Peacekeeping in Koulikoro. Niger signed a military and technical assistance agreement in 1977 and Mauritania a military training convention in 1976.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews with security sources, Paris, 4, 15 and 17 November 2004; Brussels, 30 November 2004.

the U.S. and in fact we already share the Djibouti base.²¹¹

Indeed, since September 2001, Algeria has come to occupy an important place in U.S. counter-terrorism efforts.²¹² Several sources have indicated there is an agreement between the two governments for U.S. use of the air base at Tamanrasset in the Algerian Sahara, though details are sketchy.²¹³

Nevertheless, the majority of European security officials interviewed by Crisis Group -- at both the national and EU level -- expressed scepticism over PSI's contents and framework. They argued that while it would likely address African security-related issues in the short term, it far from meets the minimum requirements for sustainable stability.

European security analysts question the nature of the Islamist threat within the Sahel, which they judge as overstated by the Americans. French military circles, for instance, are doubtful that American decision-makers have the necessary resources to assess the situation in its totality. They question what they consider to be a naïve and narrow approach based on the global war on terrorism and doubt that Salafism and Jihad could unite Sahelian populations and push them to identify with an al Qaeda type terrorism:

We should be careful not to "globalise" the terrorist threat. The Sahel is not Afghanistan. If you look at the situation in Iraq, I'm not really sure that the U.S. has a clear picture of what they would fight in the Sahel. Circumstances in

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview with French security source, 15 November 2004. The same source added: "You know, Paris and Washington have never competed on Maghrebian security-related matters. On these issues, we have never had a disagreement, our relationship has always been balanced and we have always worked in harmony with our American colleagues".

²¹² The U.S. has responded favourably to requests from Algeria for drones, observation satellites and night-time reconnaissance equipment (Crisis Group interview with academic, 20 February 2005). Cofer Black, the State Department's coordinator for counter terrorism, has promised that the U.S. would help fund the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (CAERT) recently opened in Algiers, under the auspices of the African Union. See Zine Cherfaoui, "Cofer Black et la lutte anti-terroriste", *El Watan*, 16 October 2004.

²¹³ Crisis Group interview, Gao, 29 September 2004. The Americans also are said to be using the air base at Tessalit (built by the French to use against the FLN maquis) for sending drones over the desert. Crisis Group interview, Dakar, 3 February 2005. A diplomatic source insisted to Crisis Group that Americans responsible for training specialised anti-terrorist units were already based in Algeria.

this part of the world are different from those in Pakistan or Afghanistan. There is no Taliban regime in the Sahel region. The core issue is security rather than Islamism, and I would say that the Islamist threat is more strongly felt in the Horn of Africa.²¹⁴

An EU official picked up the same theme:

I was attending a meeting with a British expert recently, and she made a very very interesting comment on this. She said that fighting terrorism was definitely not a top priority in Africa and we do agree with this. We have to deal with the root causes of failing states that, if not addressed, will collapse sooner or later... You have very deep problems like small arms smuggling, good governance, development, rule of law. They [the Americans] are aware, but they don't really care.²¹⁵

That the U.S. is paying too little attention to these root causes is a prevailing view among European security analysts interviewed by Crisis Group. They warn that if not addressed more consequentially poverty, illiteracy and widespread corruption will become time bombs. European security sources generally recommend acting with more caution. They fear that any future high visibility of U.S. troops in the region could generate a "magnet effect" and "create many more issues than those they are supposed to address".²¹⁶ However, the Europeans are not eager to address African structural problems themselves. They so far have taken an approach that might be described as coy, and there is need for them to be more proactive. Their fears that U.S. interventions may be compromised by lack of detailed knowledge of the history, culture, and sociology of the Sahelian region are well-founded, especially as far as military intervention is concerned. But if things go badly there, the consequences will likely be more serious for Europe than for the U.S., at least in the short to medium terms. The best way to head off such problems is to pursue actively a coordinated counter-terrorism policy.

This requires more than just sharing intelligence. Coordination needs to take place along two axes: first, military capacity-building should be complemented by development aid and diplomatic pressure to encourage good governance, respect of civil and human rights, as well as responsible police and customs policies. European policies are already working along these lines, but more

aid and more political attention to the region are needed.²¹⁷ Secondly, there should be explicit long-term coordination between Europe and the U.S. This would mean coordination rather than competition in development assistance and also coordination of the various capacity-building programs, like NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, France's RECAMP, and the U.S. PSI/TSCTI. France, Britain and the U.S. have begun working together to increase the capacities of the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, and this should serve as a model for a coordinated Sahelian policy.

B. SAHELIAN MILITARIES

Because the PSI program has been oriented toward military solutions, security forces in the region seem well-disposed toward them. Most strikingly, Mali's military appears to take a position almost identical to EUCOM's and rather different from that of the civilian government. The Cold War-like dynamics of the war on terrorism lend themselves to two related kinds of abuse by security forces. First, there is the logic of "my enemy's enemy is my friend", which can lead to unfounded accusations. This happens among civilians too, as when a delegation from a group of Arabs involved in a local feud north of Gao, Mali came to a European embassy, claiming to have information that their adversaries were Islamist radicals. The claim turned out to be unfounded.²¹⁸

Secondly, governments may exaggerate the terrorist threat in order to get support or at least toleration for dealing as they wish with political adversaries. American diplomats are aware this is something to be guarded against in a counter-terrorism program.²¹⁹ Numerous sources suggested, for example, that in order to obtain equipment it wanted from either the French or the U.S., the Algerian military might exaggerate the terrorist threat in the Algerian-Malian desert.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview with French security source, 17 November 2004.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview with security source, Brussels, 30 November 2004.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interview with security source, Paris, 4 November 2004.

²¹⁷ There is a risk, especially in Africa's francophone countries, that economic and political support could actually decline. In the aftermath of the November 2004 events in Côte d'Ivoire, a gradual French disengagement from francophone Africa, including the four countries covered by this report, is likely to accelerate. If this happens, it would be essential that the EU pick up the slack. If it did not, and acted *as if* France were continuing its traditional role -- the resultant security vacuum would make the Sahelian region even more attractive to various criminal networks.

²¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, 25 September 2004.

²¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, Stuttgart, Dakar, N'Djamena, February-December, 2004.

The situation in the south of Algeria is crucially important for the Sahelian region. Tuareg and Arab families on all sides of the Algerian-Malian-Nigerien-Libyan Sahara have regularly intermarried with no particular notice taken of borders. The elimination of Malian border posts and other military garrisons has meant that the Mali-Algeria frontier exists more as an idea than reality. At the same time, the region's porous and uncontrolled borders allow a kind of regional and largely ad hoc policing. Because of its vastly superior military and intelligence capabilities, Algeria is the major player.

Backed by its cooperation agreement with the U.S. military, Algeria has reportedly become much more assertive, especially in the southern Algeria-northern Mali region. Several sources mentioned aerial bombardments of smuggling convoys moving from Mali or Niger into Algeria. Pursuit of the GSPC hostage-takers seems to have involved Algerian military moving into Mali, possibly without permission from Bamako.²²⁰ There is a perception among many, from Tuareg populations in the Sahel to European security experts, that the Algerian security and intelligence forces will push their partnership with the Americans as far as possible in order to establish even greater regional control over this multinational zone.²²¹

C. SAHELIAN GOVERNMENTS

As described in Section III, the governments of the four countries covered here have taken different approaches to the questions surrounding the intersection of religion and politics. Mauritania has tried to coopt an Islamic (but not Islamist) stance, Arabising the educational system, instituting a Muslim rather than Christian work week and introducing elements of Sharia into the legal code.

These policies are unexceptional in themselves but should be read within their wider context. Arabisation of the state is part of a long-term policy of marginalising Mauritania's Black African population, a tendency exemplified by the 1989 massacres and ensuing purges of the army and civil service. The use of Islamic rhetoric and policies seems to be largely tactical, primarily an attempt to shore up the government's legitimacy with the public. Although it calls Mauritania an Islamic republic, the government has viciously suppressed Islamists, particularly when they have been perceived as political opponents.

²²⁰ Nigerien security forces also followed Tuareg bandits in hot pursuit into Mali as recently as August 2004. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, 4 September 2004.

²²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Dakar, Paris, Brussels, Bamako, Kidal, March to November, 2004. For more, see Section IV D below.

Niger's position is close to the mirror image of Mauritania's. While protecting freedom of religious practice and allowing various types of Salafist groups (Azali/Wahhabiyya, Tablighis) to worship, preach, build mosques, and circulate freely, it has unambiguously defined the line that divides religion from politics.

The positions of Mali and Chad fall between these poles. Both appear to protect religious freedom but Chadian officials were considerably more concerned about an Islamist presence. Great historical and cultural pride colours every aspect of daily life in Mali. The suggestion that possibly violent strains of Islamism are present is not taken seriously by many Malian intellectuals, including government officials Crisis Group interviewed.²²² This skepticism is partly the result of the long-standing Wahhabi presence, which has sparked violence among Malian Muslims, but never between Wahhabis and non-Muslims. There is also a national mantra of "tolerant Islam", which makes it difficult for Malians to believe violent Islamism could exist in the country, even if exported from elsewhere, though there is some division in the attitude of Mali's military and its civilian officials. Taken too far, optimism and pride can turn into denial, which entails its own set of risks.

D. SAHELIAN POPULATIONS

Counter-terrorism specialists pay close attention to the details that distinguish potential terrorists from the surrounding population. However, potential terrorists do not and cannot live separate from others who may not share their views, or who share them only partially. One analyst of the risks of Islamist terrorism in the Sahel described a generic relationship in situations where terrorism exists of concentric circles of interest and complicity leading in toward those who are or might be actual terrorists. He distinguished between those who are opposed, apathetic, or ambivalent, those who gleefully watch from the sidelines, those who contribute money, know someone involved or are otherwise close to the active participants, and those who are actively involved.

However small that percentage of active participants at the centre (perhaps only a fraction of 1 per cent), multiplier effects can make them potent. First, they draw on all the forms of passive and active complicity offered by the rest of the population. Secondly, they leverage the power of the internet, modern communications, and transport, much of which was unavailable just twenty years ago. The same analyst argued that substantial parts of the population must share a major complaint with the

²²² Crisis Group interviews, Bamako, August 2004.

would-be terrorists if those multiplier effects are to come into play. In the Sahel, as in much of the Muslim world, U.S. Middle East policy has been that complaint.

As an Islamist in Chad stated, "No matter how cordial they seem on the surface, every Chadian, from government ministers down to the man in the street, there is a real hatred of what America is doing".²²³ Even if this is a considerable exaggeration, the dynamic is real. There is great variety both within and between the four countries of the region²²⁴ but anti-American sentiment has grown significantly in the last years. A counter-terrorism policy that targets only the small percentage of active participants is flawed. A policy likely to work in the Sahel must take into account the large majority that offers varying degrees of support or toleration to groups like the GSPC in northern Mali. It requires more time, money, people and attention than is presently dedicated to the problem.

U.S. military planners should recognise that Sahelian Africans are relatively well informed about events in the rest of the world. Even in hinterland villages, many people have strong opinions about the war in Iraq and Israel-Palestine. American soldiers need to be aware that they have very little margin of acceptable bad behaviour.²²⁵

One rumour circulating in Mali is that the U.S. wants to control Gao and Tessalit in the east because they lie on the meridian line (zero degrees).²²⁶ The story goes that, "whoever controls that line controls the whole world, because he can either move to the right or to the left".²²⁷ While such a folk theory bears no relation to reality or military planning, it reveals that Sahelian populations are mistrustful and expect that military interventions are designed not for their benefit, but for the benefit of those who intervene. Such a view is the result of numerous factors and will not evaporate from a single act. However, bringing real development to Sahelian villages could go a long way toward softening the mistrust.

VI. CONCLUSION

The countries of the Sahel face enormous development challenges and are among the poorest in the world, with weak institutional structures and Islamic populations which have natural ties to co-religionists in the Middle East and beyond. In an era in which weak states constitute attractive targets for terrorist and criminal organisations, even the limited evidence of possible entry points for some of those groups merits concern. The initial response from the U.S. in the PSI was aimed almost exclusively at bolstering military capacity. If that approach is the only international response, and particularly if it remains solely American in origin, there are real dangers. Fortunately the Bush administration has approved a much broader, integrated concept, the TSCTI, which is half economic, social and political, and there is some indication it is talking more with Europeans about partnerships. The concept has also been expanded to incorporate five neighbouring countries.

The immediate question is whether an integrated financing package is introduced in time for the Congress to act during the current budget cycle. The U.S. Congress then should consider the Sahel not merely as four countries in need but as a region where failure to act could have serious consequences for U.S. interests and perhaps U.S. security as well.

The U.S. and EU partners should cooperate and coordinate more than they do on their counter-terrorism and military capacity-building work in the Sahel. Their goal should be to help all four countries professionalise their armed forces and extend state control over their full territories. All training should consequently include a strong rule of law component. Control, however, is at most half the equation. The Sahelian states need help in bringing services to the inhabitants of their distant desert regions. This requires more development aid.

Islam in the Sahel has been, as many scholars and local dignitaries argue, tolerant and peaceful, often mixing pre-Islamic African religious practices with Muslim doctrine. However, this should not lull observers to sleep. Islam in the Sahel is a living religion, constantly changing and evolving. Widespread antipathy to U.S. Middle East policies has opened the door for extremist doctrines to win an audience for the first time. Moreover, the very perception that West Africa is a zone of "good Islam" may exert a certain pull on terrorists. As an intelligence expert put it: "A terrorist attack in the Sahelian region would be a way for violent Islamists to say, 'Even where Islam is supposed to be moderate, we are here'".

Dakar/Brussels, 31 March 2005

²²³ Crisis Group interview, N'Djamena, 6 December 2004.

²²⁴ Such sentiment seems considerably less present in Niger for instance.

²²⁵ An incident was described to Crisis Group in which U.S. Special Forces trainers in the centre of Gao, Mali, pantomimed cutting off the beards of local men. The population reportedly reacted angrily and demanded that the soldiers leave and not return. Crisis Group interviews, Gao, 29 August 2004.

²²⁶ Gao does lie on the line; Tessalit is slightly to the east.

²²⁷ Crisis Group interview with journalist, Bamako, 25 August 2004.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SAHEL REGION



APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACOTA	African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance.
ACRF	Africa Crisis Response Force.
ACRI	African Crisis Response Initiative.
AOPIG	African Oil Policy Initiative Group.
CAERT	African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism.
CENTCOM	United States Central Command.
CSP	Coastal Security Program.
DSCA	U.S. Department of Defence Security Cooperation Agency.
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States.
EUCOM	United States European Command.
GIA	<i>Groupe Islamiste Armé</i> (Armed Islamic Group).
GPOI	Global Peace Operations Initiative.
GPS	Global Positioning System.
GSPC	<i>Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat</i> (Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat).
IARA	Islamic African Relief Agency.
MCA	Millennium Challenge Account.
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation.
MDJT	<i>Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice Tchadien</i> (Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad).
MPRI	Military Professional Resources Incorporated.
MPS	<i>Mouvement Patriotique du Salut</i> (Patriotic Salvation Movement).
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OFR	Operation Focus Relief
PDG	<i>Parti Démocratique de Guinée</i> (Democratic Party of Guinea).
PSI	Pan-Sahel Initiative.
RECAMP	<i>Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix</i> (Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities).
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement.
TSCTI	Trans-Sahel Counter Terrorism Initiative.
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone.
USAID	United States Agency for International Development.
WAMY	World Association of Muslim Youth.