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Understanding Islamic activism in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel

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The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has triggered renewed attention towards Central Asian countries, including by the European Union. Similarly, the proliferation of coup d'états and the escalating presence of jihadist groups in West Africa and the Sahel have highlighted new security challenges for policymakers. Within these disparate contexts, the perception and understanding of Islamic activism often tends to be oversimplified, equated with extremism or lacking depth and diversity.

This paper brings together insights from these distinct regions, seeking to comprehend the trajectory of Islamic activism within each of them and offering a combined analysis that underscores similarities and differences. The paper aims to present a comprehensive understanding of Islamic activism in the selected Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the West African/Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal.

The paper covers historical and political influences, the significance of gender and digitalisation, and the roles of external actors and foreign funding in shaping Islamic activism. It encompasses the complex interactions between governments, Islamic actors, and violent extremist groups in these regions. The paper also offers policy-relevant insights, recognising for instance the diverse roles of Islamic actors and the importance of engaging with local religious dynamics sensitively. Ultimately, these insights are essential for crafting effective policies, interventions, diplomatic relations, and sustainable development strategies in regions characterised by complex Islamic activism dynamics.

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Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ADFD	Abu Dhabi Fund for Development
AEEMB	Association of Muslim Students of Burkina Faso (translation by author) (Association des élèves et étudiants musulmans du Burkina)
AMS	Association of Muslim Scholars
AMUPI	Malian Association for Unity and the Progress of Islam (Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam)
APIJ	Islamic Preaching Association for Youth
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CERFI	Islamic Studies, Research and Training Centre (translation by author) (Cercle d'études, de recherches et de formation islamiques)
CMBF	Muslim Community of Burkina Faso (Communauté Musulmane du Burkina Faso)
CSIBF	High council of Islam in Burkina Faso (Conseil Supérieur de l'Islam au Burkina Faso)
CSIS	Center for strategic & international studies
CSO	Civil society organisation
CUDIS	Unitary Framework of Islam in Senegal (translation by author) (Cadre Unitaire de l'Islam au Sénégal)
CVE	Countering violent extremism
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EC	European Commission
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
EU	European Union
EUCAM	Europe - Central Asia Monitoring
EUCAP	European Union civilian crisis management mission in Mali
FAIB	Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina Faso (Fédération des associations Islamiques du Burkina)

FOMWAN	Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HCI	Mali's High Islamic Council (Haute Conseil Islamique)
ICCAS	International Conference on Central Asian Studies
IIAS	International Institute for Asian Studies
IHH	Islamic Humanitarian Relief Organisation
IMN	Islamic Movement of Nigeria
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRES	Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies
IS	Islamic State
IsDB	Saudi Islamic Development Bank
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISWAP	Islamic State in the West Africa Province
JAK	Jund al-Khilafah
JNI	Jama'atu Nasril Islam
JNIM	Jamat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MIP	Multi-annual indicative programme
MRCS	Mali Red Crescent Society
NEMA	National Emergency Management Agency
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIREC	Nigerian Inter-Religious Council
NNDP	Nigerian National Democratic Party
NSCIA	Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P/CVE	Preventing/countering violent extremism
PEA	Political economic analysis
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RDA	African Democratic Rally
RDRR	Repatriation, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration
SAMK	Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan
SFD	Saudi fund for development
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCM	Muslim Cultural Union
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEEM	National Union of Malian Youth and Students (Union Nationale des Elèves et Etudiants du Mali)
US	United States
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WAMY	World Assembly of Muslim Youth
ZMO	Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Executive Summary

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Islamic activism in West Africa, Sahel, and Central Asia to enrich policy dialogues. **It investigates 1. historical and political factors influencing Islamic activism's development, 2. the significance of gender and digitalisation, and 3. the roles of external actors and foreign funding.** This comprehensive exploration encompasses the complex interplay between governments, Islamic actors, and violent extremist groups. Additionally, the examination of gender dynamics and digital transformation seeks to shed light on the evolving landscape of Islamic activism. Finally, the role of non-Western external actors and foreign funding is assessed in shaping Islamic activism across the regions (for our framing of the term Islamic Activism, see Box 1).

The objective of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of religious actors and how to potentially engage with them, particularly those within the Islamic context, across West Africa, the Sahel and Central Asia. This objective is rooted in the observation that Western actors have often adopted security-focused perspectives when dealing with radicalisation. These perspectives, characterised as "hard" security approaches, involve frameworks aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), alongside financial initiatives targeting Islamic extremist groups like the Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State (IS). Opportunities to work beyond such approaches are underutilised.

The study centres on West Africa, Sahel, and Central Asia, regions with distinct Islamic activism trends. **Specific countries under focus include Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal in West Africa, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia.** The paper follows a structured approach: starting with the conceptual underpinnings, based on social movement theory, in the introduction. Then, a comprehensive analysis of Islamic activist groups in West Africa, Sahel, and Central Asia is presented in section two. The paper concludes by offering policy-relevant takeaways in the fourth section. For ease of reference, a glossary of key terms used in the paper is provided in the concluding section.

We have chosen to combine findings from two disparate regions in this paper to shed light on a specific rationale. Following the Taliban's resurgence, apprehensions emerged about the potential spread of radical Islam into other Central Asian nations, much like its current expansion in the West Africa/Sahel region. However, these concerns often stemmed from less-informed perspectives. This context formed a pivotal rationale for our decision to present a combined analysis that underscores both commonalities and disparities between the two regions.

Box 1: Framing of Islamic activism

In the context of this paper, we turn to **social movement theory** to describe Islamic activism. This theory suggests that Islamic activism shares similar traits with social movements worldwide (see also Annex 1). Social movement theory identifies three common processes in such movements: mobilising resources, making decisions, and framing. Framing involves the strategic use of specific ideas to gather resources, persuade and garner support from the audience. Viewed through the lens of social movement theory, Islamic activism can be understood as the mobilisation of resources, decision-making, and framing aimed at supporting causes relevant to Muslims (Wiktorowicz 2003). This framing is broad and includes a number of collective activities carried out in the name of Islam, such as "propagation movements, terrorist groups, collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that seek to establish an Islamic State and inward-looking groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts" (Wiktorowicz 2003). In this context, we also consider the use of Islamic social connections and framing strategies to rally resources and people, addressing gaps in public services not fulfilled by the government, spanning domains like social welfare, education and healthcare.

In the scope of this paper, we've chosen to explore the specific topics of state-society relations, gender, digitalisation, and foreign funding because of their high policy relevance. Gender-related issues, including women's activism within an Islamic framework and societal pressures to reassert traditional gender roles, are pivotal in understanding the roles women play within social and religious movements. This aspect links individual beliefs with broader societal contexts, necessitating attention to enhance gender equality through effective policy frameworks.

Simultaneously, digitalisation's impact on information access and online community formation has transformed resource mobilisation and social dynamics for Islamic activist organisations. Despite growing external interest in digitalisation, its intricate connections with the functions of Islamic activism have not been adequately explored. Therefore, an examination of gender and digitalisation is crucial to grasp their roles in shaping contemporary Islamic activism and to inform policies and strategies. Finally, we want to emphasise that several other topics related to Islamic activism, such as human rights or education, are also crucial and deserve more attention in discussions and further research though these have been beyond the scope of what was possible in the context of this work.

Key Points:

1. Historical developments/state-society relations

- **In West Africa and the Sahel, the evolution of Islamic activism is shaped by historical events, colonialism, and political dynamics**. The spread of Islam since the 7th and 8th centuries led to the fusion of Islamic empires and local customs. Colonialism impacted Islamic practices, with British and French colonial rules differing in their approaches. **Sufi brotherhoods like Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya preserved Islam during colonial times, and later, Salafism emerged with its own reforms**. These historical factors contribute to the varied state-society relations in Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal.

- **Central Asia's Islamic activist groups have been shaped by historical shifts, particularly during the Soviet Era.** The region's role in Islamic history and the impact of Marxism-Leninism during the Soviet Era have influenced contemporary Islamic activism. **Recent years have seen Central Asian governments transition from viewing Islam as a security concern to promoting a national version aligned with political structures.** Regulatory frameworks control religious communities, and counter-extremism programs monitor Muslims. Islamic activism varies across the four different countries.

2. The importance of gender and digitalisation

- **In West Africa and the Sahel, gender dynamics and digitalisation intersect within Islamic activism and violent extremism.** The 1990s democratisation wave empowered Muslim women, reshaping norms and enabling public discourse. Women's roles in violent extremist groups are multifaceted, including recruitment and peacebuilding. Digital tools play a vital role in Islamic activism's outreach, while violent extremists exploit social media for propaganda.

- **In Central Asia, Islamic activism involving women has gained prominence offline and online.** Women engage in **quiet activism**, discussing Islam with relatives and highlighting its progressive aspects. Social media democratises religious discourse and reaches wider audiences. Online activism grows and the internet highlights issues like domestic violence and conservative beliefs.

3. The role of external actors and foreign funding

- **Muslim-majority nations like Turkey, Iran, and Gulf states have an impact on West Africa and the Sahel through trade, development projects, and shared religious identity**. These countries fund local Islamic NGOs and support civil society organisations. Gulf countries and Iran use funding for mosques, charities, and madrasas, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar promoting Salafism and Iran spreading Shi'ism. Returnee scholars spread Salafism. Frictions arise due to cultural differences and divergent currents of Islam. Turkey's military, economic and religious influence grows, with funding for security programs, mosque construction and development initiatives.

- Foreign religious actors shaped Central Asia's trajectory after the Soviet Union's collapse. Muslims from various regions impacted the region's religious landscape. **While foreign funding for mosques was prominent in 2000-2010, current foreign actors focus on economic ties.** Saudi Arabia aimed to reinforce ties through mosque construction and scholarships. Iran focused on economic partnerships, and Gulf states pursued influence through economic and development projects. Central Asian governments welcomed economic engagement but were wary of religious interference. They monitor imams and radical practices, and control foreign institutions to safeguard against extremism.

The paper also presents in a non-exhaustive manner, several key similarities and differences with regards to Islamic activism in both regions. Similarities include the historical roots of activism predating external influences, the presence of diverse Islamic activist actors engaged in community-level issues, the localisation of activism and practices and the increasing involvement of women. Conversely, differences encompass issues of state control and stability, with Central Asian countries imposing strict religious policies while West African and Sahelian countries are faced with conflict-driven and difficult territorial control. The decentralisation of Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel are contrasting the more centralised model in Central Asia. Finally, the distinct roles of religious leaders in the political sphere, with a more active role historically in West Africa and the Sahel for these actors compared to Central Asia's more controlled environment. These insights highlight crucial factors to consider when crafting effective policies and collaborative projects in these regions. Further key similarities and differences are developed in the paper.

Policy-relevant takeaways (*more detailed in the paper*):

- **Religious Sensitivity:** Understanding local religious dynamics is crucial for effective forms of cooperation. Engaging with Islamic actors requires appreciating their roles and complexities, avoiding instrumentalisation, and maintaining a "Do-No-Harm Approach."

- **Diverse Roles of Islamic Actors:** Islamic activist groups encompass various entities, such as traditional leaders, NGOs, and imams. These actors can act as intermediaries and partners for external interventions. However, their conservatism must be considered.

- **Avoiding Simplistic Views:** Policymakers must avoid equating Islamic activism with extremism. Contextual analyses, like political economic analysis (PEA), help grasp the nuanced nature of Islamic activist actors and organisations.

- **Digitalisation's Impact:** Digitalisation's role and its impact on Islamic activism cannot be disregarded. Online platforms both spread activism and extremist ideologies. Policymakers should take into consideration these dynamics and support the promotion of digital literacy to counter radical narratives.

- **Gender and Women's Role:** Women significantly influence Islamic activism, affecting social changes from a bottom-up approach, at the micro and meso levels. Gender-inclusive policies acknowledging women's contributions are vital for stability.

- Strengthening Partners' Knowledge: Supporting policymakers' understanding of Islamic activist actors through training and the development of networks including various Islamic activist actors and organisations is essential. In-depth knowledge enhances targeted engagement.

- **OECD DAC Dialogue:** OECD DAC members' engagement with Islamic activism has been limited but can offer valuable lessons. Creating a dialogue forum for exchanging experiences and lessons can enhance effective engagement strategies. Institutional support and tools like training are crucial for this approach.

Understanding the unique dynamics of Islamic activism in these regions is vital to create successful policies and interventions. These takeaways are meant to inform discussions on how to engage with religious actors in these two regions, as well as the possible design and implementation of external cooperation programmes.

Therefore, **policymakers should consider moving beyond simplistic assumptions and build a holistic approach,** value gender contributions, leverage digitalisation positively, and enhance their own knowledge to explore the extent to which an effective engagement can take place with Islamic activist actors and organisations for sustainable development and stability. Finally, these takeaways are also important to take into consideration for diplomatic and cultural relations and exchanges.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of engaging with religious actors, and notably Islamic actors, in West Africa and the Sahel, and Central Asia. This is based on the observation that Western actors' (including the European Union) activities have been heavily marked by "hard" security lenses preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) frameworks and funding to combat Islamic violent extremist groups such as the Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or Boko Haram and the Islamic State (IS).

However, a range of non-extremist Islamic actors and organisations have also gained prominence over the past decades. These include religious leaders and actors, Islamic NGOs, foundations, women's and youth groups, as well as charity groups or voluntary organisations. Yet, these actors are often overlooked when considering international cooperation and support to prevention and countering violent extremism in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel. The failure of external policies in both Central Asia and West Africa when dealing with Islamic violent extremism highlights the relevance to look at a diversity of Islamic activists' actors in these two regions, to understand their nature and functions and draw attention to their similarities and differences in order to better inform policy discussions.

Current interests and external engagement in West Africa and the Sahel and Central Asia

West Africa and the Sahel have areas of longstanding foreign policy interest for Western partners, notably for the European Union (EU) as well for former colonial powers such as France. The region is also of keen interest to China, Russia as well as countries such as Turkey and the Gulf States. The region has been marked by a series of crises across various countries. Since 2010, 20 coups d'états have occurred in the region, most recently in May 2021 in Mali, in January 2022 in Burkina Faso (Suleiman and Onapajo 2022) and in July 2023 in Niger. Further, the region is marked by **a growing presence of violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State (IS) and Boko Haram.** These groups have used Islam to mobilise support but their activities have also led to contention in several countries across the region.

Western partners and others have cooperated with various countries in West Africa and the Sahel to maintain regional security and stability and support counter-terrorist operations and offensives.[1] After more than a decade of involvement and the inability to stop violent groups from operating in the region, Western partners are now faced with **strong anti-Western sentiment and discontent**. Special military operations have been pulled out.[2] In this context, many Western partners have shifted their operations and support, including in the remit of countering violent extremism (CVE) to other countries in the region, notably Niger.

In Central Asia, security and energy are two key aspects that have informed **external geopolitical interest in Central Asia**, including from the EU but also Russia and others. Especially with regards to security, the situation in Afghanistan has helped shape and define external actors' priorities in Central Asian countries. Many European and Western countries have been involved in security issues in Afghanistan, and by extension in Central Asia, since the start of the Global War on Terror in 2001. The Central Asian states became important security partners for the international coalition, with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan hosting air bases that helped with aeroplane refuelling and transportation of goods and troops (Juraev 2014). External actors have closed energy deals with Central Asian states as the latter's desire for energy export matched the need of external partners, notably the EU, to diversify its energy imports (EEAS 2009).

[1] For example, G5 Sahel, but also EU training missions, such as EUCAP Sahel (EEAS N.d.).

[2] Amongst others, this has pushed France, a key player in EU military efforts in the region, to withdraw its last 400 special forces troops from Mali on February 20th, 2023 (see France 24 2023).

The Taliban rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021, and establishment of its Sunni Islamist nationalist government, has led to a renewed attention for Central Asian countries, including by the EU. The discourse has been dominated by a wish **to put a buffer against the Islamic extremist regime in Afghanistan. But experts note that this has also helped embolden the position of authoritarian regimes across the region.** Forming stronger partnerships has also been a way for the EU to balance the influence of other international actors that have strong geopolitical interest in the region (EU 2022), such as Russia, China and the United States.

Objective and scope

With this paper, we would like to contribute to a better understanding of different forms of Islamic activism across West Africa and Central Asia and how it could inform policy discussions, in particular among Western actors. Within the scope of this paper, this will concern three main topics: 1. The historical and political developments that have shaped Islamic activism in the respective focus regions; 2. The importance of gender and digitalisation; and 3. The role of external actors and foreign funding for Islamic activism.

In the first instance, we will present the historical and political factors contributing to the development of Islamic activists' actors in both regions. A key aspect within this discussion is the **current state of state-society relations** between governments and Islamic activist actors and organisations, and where relevant, the role of violent extremist groups.

Second, we will focus on two key factors that are currently shaping Islamic activism in both regions, notably issues related around gender and women's activism with an Islamic idiom (and the social pressure for re-traditionalisation of gender roles) and digitalisation (and the social changes brought by the abrupt expansion of access to information and ability to form online communities), as two distinct issues for social change.[3] These two factors deserve increased attention. With regards to gender roles, women play a distinct role within social movements and within communities, which needs to be understood within a given context, as this will also inform their role in Islamic activist movements and organisations. Gender functions as an important linking issue between the individual level (ideas about religion and society) at the community and family level and wider society. External partners have developed a range of policy frameworks and objectives to strengthen gender equality, and in order to be effective these roles and dynamics merit to be highlighted. A stronger understanding of gender has both policy and content related relevance when looking at the role of faith-based organisation, including Islamic activism organisations. Digitalisation is a development which merits attention given the impact it has had on resource mobilisation for social movements, including Islamic activist organisations, and the social changes brought by the expansion of access to information and the expanded ability to form online communities. Digitalisation has gained increased attention by external partners, but the interlinkages between digitalisation and the role of Islamic activist organisations have not been given ample attention.

Third and finally, we will discuss the role of (non-Western) external actors, including foreign funding and how these have shaped and engaged with Islamic activist actors, movements and organisations in West Africa and the Sahel, and in Central Asia.

[3] In the scope of this paper, these specific topics were selected given their high policy relevance, but several other topics merit due attention when discussing Islamic activism, such as human rights, education, etc. - and would merit further research.

Geographical focus and structure of the paper

For the purpose of this paper, we focus on two key regions, marked by their own distinct developments with regards to Islamic activism. We have chosen to combine findings from these two regions to shed light on a specific rationale. Following the Taliban's resurgence, apprehensions emerged about the potential spread of radical Islam into other Central Asian nations, much like its current expansion in the West Africa/Sahel region. However, these concerns often stemmed from less-informed perspectives. This context formed a pivotal rationale for our decision to present a combined analysis that underscores both commonalities and disparities between the two regions.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on four countries for each region, namely **Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal** for West Africa/Sahel and **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** for Central Asia.

The paper is structured as follows. The remainder of this introduction explains our conceptual underpinnings. Based on social movement theory, we can examine Islamic activism through the lens of a social movement therefore analysing it as a dynamic social phenomenon, shifting the focus beyond a solely ideological dimension. In section 2, we provide an in-depth analysis of different factors that helps us understand Islamic activist groups in West Africa and the Sahel, and Central Asia, respectively. In closing, the fourth section presents a number of policy-relevant takeaways and observations. These takeaways are intended to guide conversations about interacting with religious actors in these regions, as well as the potential planning and execution of external collaboration initiatives. Additionally, they hold significance in shaping diplomatic relations and fostering cultural exchanges. A glossary with key terms used in this paper can also be found following the concluding section.

2. Conceptual underpinnings and key terms

Islamic activism is a key term for this paper. **"Islamic activism" is defined as individuals and groups that engage with their society on various levels with the objective of a societal transformation according to their imagination of an ideal 'Islamic' society**. These forms of engagement can take place at the private and local level with no apparent political agenda, but also in public addressing larger societal groups, 'the nation' or even a transnational 'Muslim community'. It needs to be clearly differentiated from other terms such as Islamisms, political Islam and Islamic extremism. Often these terms are used interchangeably (see Box 1).

Box 2: Key terms and the difference between Islamic activism and Islamism/political Islam

There is no consensus definition of Islamism, which has many varieties and alternative names, and some have objected to the use of the term, either for its being derogatory, or so broad and flexible as to have lost its meaning.

Islamic activism is a broad term that captures how individuals and groups aim to support and shape their Islamic society writ-large. These forms of engagement can go from a rather private and local level with no apparent political agenda, to public addressing larger societal groups, 'the nation' or even a transnational 'Muslim community'.

Political Islam/Islamism should be understood as a religio-political ideology,[4] that seeks to establish Islamic law and governance in Muslim-majority societies (Martin 2014). It seeks to comprehensively reshape various aspects of society, including politics, culture, law, economy, and social structures, based on the interpretation of religious texts such as the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. Islamism views Islam not just as a religious belief system, but as a multifaceted intellectual and political movement that has emerged as a response to the perceived Westernisation of modern regimes and their perceived failure to deliver on the promises of modernisation (Mandaville 2007).

Violent extremism is often associated with Islamism, but differentiating between the two is crucial. Olivier Roy argues against the misleading concept of the "radicalisation of Islam" and proposes considering the "Islamisation of radicalism" instead. This process highlights the transformation of radical ideologies into violent extremism, emphasising that not all forms of Islamism automatically entail radicalism or extremism (Roy 2017).

For the scope of this paper, we rely on **social movement theory to describe Islamic activism**, as according to this theory, Islamic activism shares similar features to social movements around the world (see Annex 1). Social movement theory identifies three common processes in such movements: mobilising resources, making decisions, and framing - which involves using specifically chosen concepts as a means to recruit resources, persuade and gain support from the audience. Considering Islamic activism as a social movement, it can be described as the mobilisation of resources, decision-making and framing in order to support Muslim causes (Wiktorowicz 2003). This definition is broad and includes a number of collective activities carried out in the name of Islam, such as "propagation movements, terrorist groups, collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that seek to establish an Islamic State and inward-looking groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts" (Wiktorowicz 2003). We also include in that understanding the use of **Islamic social ties and framing to mobilise resources and people to fill gaps in public goods** not delivered by the state, from social welfare to education and health care.

[4] There is no consensus definition of Islamism, which has many varieties and alternative names, and some have objected to use of the term, either for its being derogatory, or so broad and flexible as to have lost its meaning.

This description also helps to underline that **Islamic activism is based on Islamic principles**, and rooted in concepts of Islamic morality, which define social order, gender and generational relations, and how a Muslim should (and should not) behave within her/his community. Against this background, the paper presents different Islamic principles such as ***dawah*** (inviting people to Islam and spreading its message),[5] **charity** (*zakat* and *sadaqa*) or more broadly **Islamic community activism**. The latter is a core part of Islamic teachings and daily social practices for many central Asian and West African and the Sahelian communities as Muslims are encouraged to be involved in social activism as an extension of their responsibility to care for social injustices and economic inequality (Eickelman and Pescatori 1996). We will also look at more specific concepts promoted by violent extremist groups, such as ***tafkir*** (excommunication), ***jihad*** (struggle - see Box 2) or ***bid'a*** (innovation) and analyse how they are used by Islamic activist actors for framing, decision making or resource mobilisation.

Box 3: The different types of jihads and their importance for Islamic activism

The term "**jihad**" technically means "**struggle**" or "striving" in the context of God's path or for a noble cause. In broad terms, Islamic tradition refers to two types of jihad: *al-Jihad al-Akbar* (or the greater jihad) which is the combating of the temptation of sin and the following of God's commandments, and *al-Jihad al-Asghar* (or the lesser jihad) which involves fighting the "enemies of God." Generations of Islamic jurists have built upon and elaborated on the types of jihad creating distinctions between different forms of it.

The term can also have different meanings depending on the community. In the Sahel, people may use the term "jihadists" to describe some of the different violent armed groups that operate in their community, including criminal networks and those organised around identity and/or religion. However, these groups have also been referred to as 'men from the bush' and 'terrorists'. From 2015, **as Western interventions increased, the term jihadist has increasingly become the norm to refer to violent groups among political, military and civilian entities across the region**. Communities continue to use 'terrorists' to describe entities such as those Al-Qaeda affiliates Jamat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) or Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Saferworld 2022).

To understand and draw a possible comparison between Islamic activist groups in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel, we need to consider the **predominant schools of Islam within both regions**.[6] These include a majority of Sunni Muslims that follow one of the two *madhabs* (Islamic school of thought), namely the Maliki School for West Africa and the Sahel and the Hanafi School for Central Asia. We also consider the tradition of Sufi brotherhoods (especially in West Africa),[7] and the penetration of the Salafi/Wahhabi ideology. Throughout this paper, Salafi and Wahhabi will be used interchangeably, but for more information on Salafism and Wahhabism, and the difference between the two, see Annex 2).

In particular, we will look at **two types of Islamic activist groups** that subscribe to these main Islamic trends, namely Islamic civil society actors on the one hand, and violent extremist groups (particularly Salafi/Wahhabi)[8] on the other hand.

[5] The term Dawah refers to the effort to propagate and share the teachings of Islam with others. Muslims are encouraged to engage in *dawah* as a means of inviting others to embrace the faith and gain a deeper understanding of its principles. The term is further explained in the Glossary at the end of the paper.

[6] We recognise that other trends exist, such as Shias or Ahmadiyya, but for the scope of this paper, we will focus only on the similar major trends.

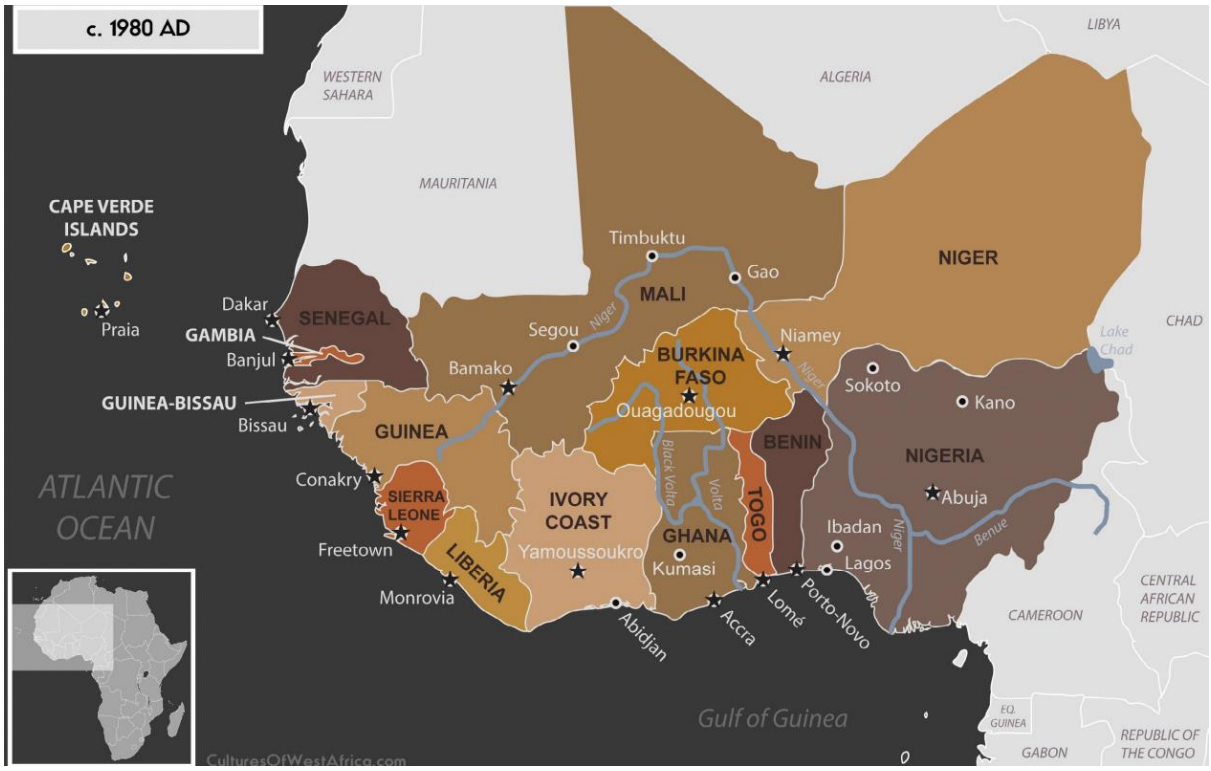
[7] The main Sufi brotherhoods in West Africa are the Tijaniyya, the Qadiriyya, the Mouridiyya, the Layenne, the Ahmadiyya, the Sanusiyya and the Nasraniyya.

[8] The terminology violent extremist groups will be used as a blanket term throughout the paper to refer to all Islamic violent extremist groups that follow the Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

Islamic civil society actors in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel can be found as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations, Islamic political parties, *jamaats* (communities), neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations, online bloggers and influencers, and religious leaders. As part of a larger civil society, Islamic activists respond to societal challenges by addressing political and socio-economic problems. **They are diverse regarding beliefs, target audiences, and work methods**. They differ from non-religious Civil society organisations (CSOs) in legal registration requirements and focus more on morality and ethics. They partner at times with state institutions, local administrations, local communities, with each other, and even other faith groups.

3. Understanding Islamic activism in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel

Figure 1: Focus on West Africa and the Sahel



Source: [Cultures of West Africa 2018]

3.1. West Africa and the Sahel

3.1.1. Key historical developments of Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel

The emergence and evolution of different forms of Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel have been shaped by historical and political factors. In the contemporary context, political events have had a significant impact on state-society relations for civil society activists and violent extremist groups alike. Against this backdrop, Islamic activist actors have developed and adapted to the changing political landscape in the region, with implications for regional security and stability.

Historical development of Islam in West Africa and the Sahel

The earliest forms of Islam in the region date back to the 7th and 8th century. At that time, Islam expanded through Muslim merchants, traders, scholars, missionaries travelling through the trans-Sahelian region and penetrating the sub-Saharan space (Cartwright 2019). Local populations and political leaders gradually converted, and *dawah*[9] was a concept used for this purpose.[10]

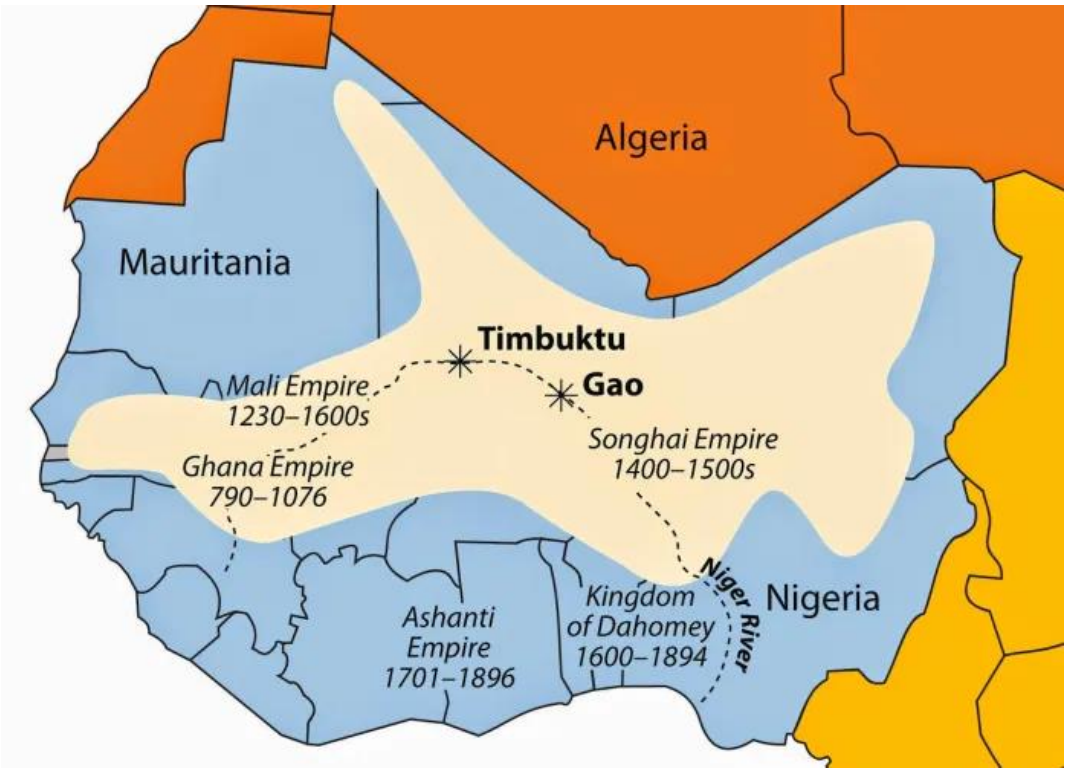
Under the Mali Empire (1240-1645), the Songhay Empire (1460-1591) (Cartwright 2019), and the Sokoto Caliphate (1803-1904) corresponding to the modern-day territories of Niger, Mali, Senegal, Nigeria and Burkina Faso (see Figure 2), **Islam became the official religion**. These empires supported the development of the Maliki Islamic school of thought, which blended with the diversity of traditional practices of West Africa and the Sahel. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, the governing elites built Islamic institutions and schools as well as Islamic legal courts. The economic strength of those empires through salt, gold and camel trades supported the expansion of their territories and consequently of Islam.

The spread of Islam had wider repercussions going beyond religion. After the 18th century, **Islam became an increasingly unifying factor across families, lineages and ethnic ties, and led to the establishment of diplomatic relations, systems of administration and schools, literacy and scholarship, but also trade and architecture** (Cartwright 2019). In this context, Sufism had a notable influence on the development and spread of Islam and Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel. Sufi orders in West Africa and the Sahel that developed during this period are still influential today, such as the Qadiriyya, the Tijaniyya, and the Muridiyya. The Qadiriyya order is largely responsible for Sufism's widespread popularity and advocated for the study of the *tasawwuf*, or the inner-dimensional and mystical aspect of Islam (Huet 2020). The order also emphasised *jihad an nafs* (jihad of the heart), "jihad against the carnal soul" (Huet 2020) and called for Muslims to detach themselves from any excessive desire for the world. This vision opposed with Muslims who emphasised an expansionist and armed 'holy war' (or *jihad bi sayf*) which involves fighting the "enemies of God" (see Box 2, above).

[9] In Islam giving *dawah* with proper training and specialisation is regarded as a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*). That means in every community some people must take the proper *dawah* training and should do this work in a systematic and methodical way on behalf of all other members of the community. If some people do this work, then there is no blame on others, but if no one does it all Muslims of the community are considered sinners.

[10] Interview by Léa Robert on 1 September 2021 and interview with Marie Nathalie LeBlanc (Areion Group 2021).

Figure 2: Pre-colonial **African empires (1230-1864)**



Source: Dastrup 2019

Colonialism and its impact on Islamic activism

The Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903) was the last Islamic empire to exist in West Africa prior to European colonialism (Falola and Heaton 2016). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, **European colonial powers, primarily Great Britain and France, entered the West African and Sahelian region (See Figure 3) and adopted approaches that impacted the development of Islam, and of Islamic activism as we know today.**[11] The British Empire applied the "indirect rule" policy, allowing Muslims in Nigeria to continue practising their faith and social activities such as Islamic education in madrasas, social gatherings like weddings or other celebrations, and cultural gatherings (Adegbija 1994). In contrast, although French officials initially worked with their preferred Muslim leaders, especially in Senegal, **France eventually adopted a policy designed to limit the spread of Islam** as it grew increasingly concerned about Muslim activists and Islam, and aimed at curbing local beliefs and practices to make Africans "évolués" (Achebe 2018).

Despite the different hindering colonial policies, **Islam continued to spread across the region, particularly in urban settings.** One of the unintended consequences of the colonial encounter was the development of Islamic institutions, either by *laissez-faire* (non-involvement) policies or by actively supporting scholars or Muslim leaders colonial rulers co-opted (Saaïdia 2013). However, **colonial secularism, or the delinking of political and religious powers**, sparked a debate in the Muslim community on how to face this new political structure. These developments created deep-rooted grievances that would impact Muslim communities for decades to come (Encyclopedia 2023).

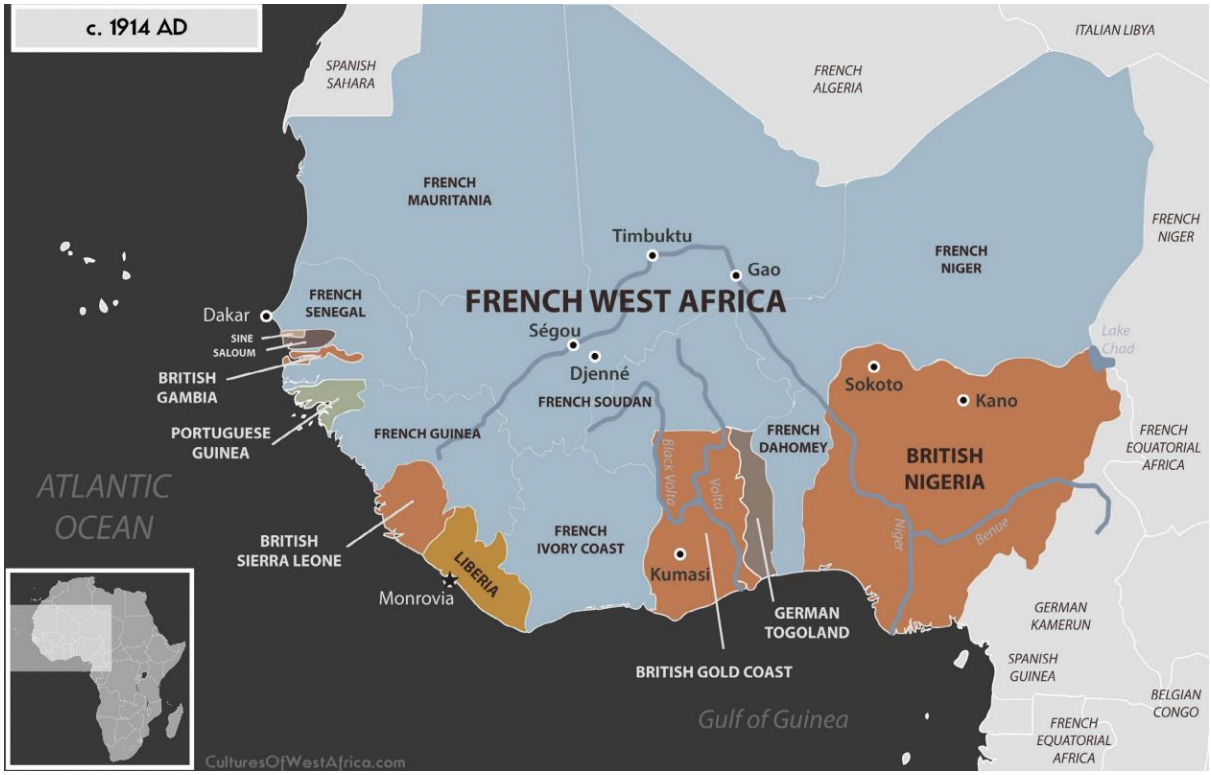
[11] Although the term Islamic activism was not a term used during colonial times.

Box 4: The role of Sufis brotherhoods in West Africa and the Sahel

Sufi brotherhoods played a significant role in the survival of Islamic activism under colonial rules. The Muridiyya gained local support, while the Quadriyya spread to other parts of the region. The Tijaniyya developed a network that linked the rest of West Africa to the Maghreb, notably thanks to their institutional setting (Wright 2020).

Populations also embraced Islam as a form of protest against colonialism because it offered an alternative world view to that of assimilation to colonial rule and culture (Bayart 2009). Islamic political parties also emerged in many countries in West Africa during the colonial period, such as the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) (Falola and Oyeniyi 2001) and the Sudanese Union, which later became the African Democratic Rally (RDA) in Mali (Britannica N.d.). These parties sought to promote Islamic values and mobilise Muslims politically to resist colonialism and achieve independence. Finally, Islam grew through Islamic learning (Quranic education), trade, marriages, and *dawah*, making rapid inroads in the West Africa mainland during the early 20th century (Hill 2009).

Figure 3: West Africa and the Sahel during colonialism - 1914



Source: [Cultures of West Africa 2018]

The penetration of Salafism/Wahhabism in the region from the mid-1940s

From the mid-20th century onwards, **the penetration of Wahhabism/Salafism in West Africa and the Sahel had a significant impact on Islamic activism in the region**. This tradition of Islamic thought and practice is characterised by a strong urge to reform educational and religious practices, spread the teaching of Arabic, and return the Islamic practice to its roots in the *Koran* and the *Sunnah*, the teachings and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions - the *Salaf al-Salih* (pious ancestors). While followers of different traditions, as well as the French colonial authorities, often called them "Wahhabist" (in reference to the religious practice that originated in Saudi

Arabia in the 18th century, under the rule of the Wahhabi family),[12] Muslims adhering to this tradition of Islamic thought in West Africa and the Sahel most often describe themselves as “Sunnite” in French (Ousmane 2016).

Salafists have been particularly active in West Africa and the Sahel. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a Salafi movement, inspired by Saudi Arabia's Salafism emerged in **Mali**, impacting the country's political, social, and religious landscape. **The Malian Salafi movement sought to purify Islam of any local customs and practices that were seen as un-Islamic**. It called for a return to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the pious ancestors, rejecting all forms of Sufi practices, which were seen as innovations (*bid'a*) in the religion. In **Senegal**, the Salafi movement emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, in part as a reaction to the influence of Sufi brotherhoods in the country's politics and society. **The movement has gained support among some young people, particularly in urban areas**, who see it as a way to assert a more "authentic" form of Islam (Villalón and Alou 2001). In **Nigeria**, the Salafi movement has been growing rapidly since the 1970s. This growth has been fuelled by a variety of factors, including the increasing influence of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, the perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of the country's established Sufi brotherhoods, and the rise of political Islam in the wake of the country's transition to civilian rule in 1999. Salafi groups have been active in areas such as Kano and Maiduguri, where they have set up religious schools and community organisations. They have also been involved in political activism, calling for the **implementation of Islamic law and the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria** (Mustapha and Meagher 2020). Violent extremist groups following the Salafi-jihadi ideology, a branch of the Salafi movement, would be discussed separately below, in section 3.1.3 on violent Islamic activists, due to their violent nature.

3.1.2. Islamic activism and current state-society relations

Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel is strongly defined by country-specific dynamics of state-society relations. This part will look particularly at state-society relations from an institutional point of view, as it constitutes an area of focus for policy-makers, and strongly define and influence civil society dynamics and features.[13]

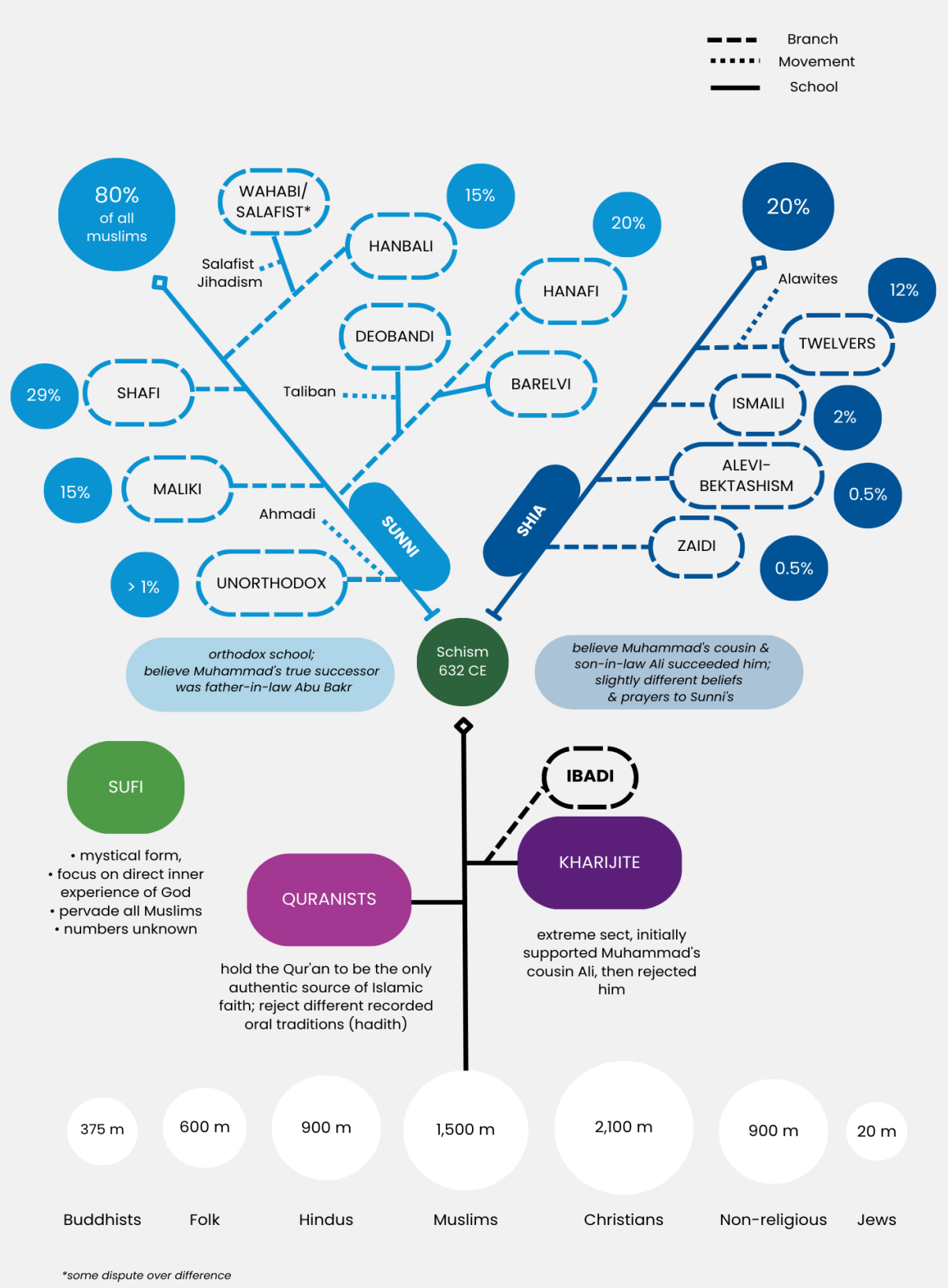
Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal are all considered secular countries. The majority of Muslims in these countries follow the **Maliki school of Islam**, one of the four schools of jurisprudence within the Sunni branch of Islam (See Figure 4 for overview on major schools and branches of Islam) (ATTN 2014). However, there are important differences in the role that Islamic civil society plays in each country, as a result of societal norms and values. In **Senegal**, for example, Sufi brotherhoods operate as an intermediary between Muslims communities and the State, and play a significant role in political and social life, as opposed to the three other countries (Bakary 2010). By comparison, in **Nigeria**, Islamic organisations have a long track record in promoting interfaith dialogue and addressing issues of social justice (Weiss 2020).

In **Burkina Faso**, Islamic organisations have been involved in providing social services and engaging in interfaith dialogue, although the rise of Salafi/Wahhabi movements has led to increasing sectarian tensions (Madore 2018). Finally in **Mali**, traditional Islamic practices coexist alongside more modern interpretations (U.S. Department of State 2022a). Policymakers must consider the nuances of state-society relations in each country when engaging with Islamic activists and promoting peaceful coexistence in the region. In the following sections, we will provide a more detailed discussion of Islamic civil society in these four respective countries.

[12] See Annex 2 for further explanation on Wahhabism and the relationship with Salafism, particularly the Saud-Wahab connection linked to the relationship between the political and religious authority.

[13] Still, it remains important to keep in mind the internal dynamics within civil society, which are important for policy-makers to consider, and which influence state-society relations.

Figure 4: Overview of major schools and branches in Islam



Source: Picture adapted from McCandless 2014

Burkina Faso

Islam is the dominant religion in Burkina Faso, with approximately 63% of the population following it, while Christianity has around 20% and Animism around 9%.[14] Burkina Faso is a secular state, which has been maintained since its independence in 1960, despite the emergence of Wahhabi tendencies in the mid-twentieth century.[15] In March 2022, Burkina Faso established the Ministry of Religious and Customary Affairs to address religious issues in the country, particularly violent extremist attacks. The aim of the Ministry is to encourage collective dialogue and use religious and customs leaders to ensure peace and social cohesion (Catch.ch 2022). **The country has a heterogeneity of Muslim practices and discourses, ranging from liberal to Sufi and Salafist and others**. The main Muslim leaders in Burkina Faso include Cheick Djibril Ba, President of the Islamic Association of Burkina Faso (*Association Islamique du Burkina Faso)*, and Cheick Soufiyanou Ouédraogo, President of the Superior Council of Islam in Burkina Faso *Conseil Supérieur de l'Islam au Burkina Faso* (CSIBF). **These leaders have often acted as intermediaries between the Muslim community and the state, working to promote religious tolerance and dialogue**. In particular, during the two coups d'état that happened in 2022, religious leaders and organisations have actively acted as intermediaries between the military, the government and society to avoid a further escalation (U.S. Department of State N.d.). Nevertheless, despite being statistically a majority, the Muslim community in the country remains a political minority with no proportional political influence (ICG 2016a).

Islamic civil society actors and institutions are well established in Burkina Faso. There are mosques, *madrasas*, and a wide range of Islamic associations, such as the **Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina Faso** (*Fédération des associations Islamiques du Burkina*, FAIB), which is the most prominent Islamic activist organisation (U.S. Department of State 2022a). The FAIB was founded in 2005 and has over 300 Islamic organisations as members (Le Faso 2023). Its purpose is to connect national-level Islamic associations with the state and to enhance the visibility and participation of Muslim leaders in civil society and the political sphere. The FAIB is chaired on a rotating basis by four major groups: the Muslim Community of Burkina Faso (*Communauté Musulmane du Burkina Faso*, CMBF), the Sunni Movement, which represents the Wahabis, the Sufi Tijaniyya Movement, and the Itihad Community (Islam Unity/Sufi) (Le Faso 2023). The FAIB's activities include supervising the work of mosques and madrasas throughout the country and issuing official statements on Islamic holidays like Ramadan and Eid.

The relationship between Islamic civil society and the state in Burkina Faso remains dynamic, as both sides continue to face the ongoing threat of violent extremism and share the need to promote peace and stability in the country. On the one hand, **Islamic CSOs have played an important role in providing social services, education, and community outreach to Muslim communities throughout the country (U.S. Department of State N.d.)**. These organisations have been critical in promoting interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and peacebuilding efforts. On the other hand, **the state has often viewed Islamic CSOs with suspicion, particularly in the wake of increased extremist activity in the country**. Some Islamic organisations have been accused of promoting extremist ideology or of being linked to violent extremist groups (US Department of State N.d.). As a result, **the government has implemented strict regulations on Islamic organisations**, limiting their ability to operate freely and often subjecting them to surveillance and scrutiny (U.S. Department of State N.d.b.).

[14] Burkina: 48.1% of the population of the Southwest practice Animism (official), see AIB 2022.

[15] Wahhabism penetrated Burkina Faso during colonisation, and its followers were a minority at the beginning of Burkina Faso's independence. At the start, they were part of the Muslim community of Burkina Faso, but after a conflict within the community in 1973, the Wahhabis were authorised to create their own association, which they called the *Mouvement Sunnite*. Today, the Mouvement Sunnite has its headquarters in Ouagadougou but has many regional and local branches around Burkina Faso. Lately, they have been gaining influence among the youth (Le Cam 2023).

Mali

Islam is the dominant religion practised by over 90% of the population in Mali (CIA 2021a). The country is also home to significant Christian and Animist communities, and has a long history of religious pluralism (Baker et al. 2023). The Malian government recognises the importance of managing religious diversity and has taken steps to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation, while maintaining a secular state (Fournet-Guérin and Magrin 2018).
Mali has a dynamic Islamic civil society, with many organisations and associations dedicated to actively promoting religious tolerance and engaging in peacebuilding efforts through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, are among the most prominent Islamic organisations in Mali, and play significant roles in the country's life (Seesemann 2009).

One of the first Islamic CSOs is the Muslim Cultural Union (UCM) created in 1953. The organisation focused on educational and cultural activities. The organisation **appealed to the French colonial authorities and then the post-independence government for permission to open schools and increase the role of Islamic prayer and activism in public life**. Mali's first state-sponsored Muslim-organisation, the Malian Association for Unity and the Progress of Islam (*Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam*, AMUPI) created in 1981, adopted in many ways the practices and goals of the UCM. **The organisation helped resolve long-standing disputes between Sufi and Sunnites** and spread a normative version of Islam. The organisation also used the UCM's former offices across the country and its official status, and has regularly mediated local religious and social conflicts. Yet, the control that the state exerted on AMUPI dissatisfied many Muslim leaders, leading to the creation of Mali's High Islamic Council (*Haute Conseil Islamique*, HCI).

Apart from these major organisations, currently **there is a proliferation of Islamic associations in part due to people's dissatisfaction with ruling political parties and organisations** (Jonkers 2011). For example, other prominent Islamic organisations are the National Union of Malian Youth and Students (*Union Nationale des Elèves et Etudiants du Mali*, UNEEM), the League of Imams of Mali (Limama) (RFI 2023), and the Mali Red Crescent Society (MRCS), which provides various social and humanitarian services to communities across Mali.

Religious and muslim leaders also play a key role in Mali's public debate, religious and political life. Notable Muslim leaders in Mali include Mahmoud Dicko, the former president of Mali's High Islamic Council (Melly 2020), and Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, the leader of the Sufi movement Ansar Dine (Watling and Raymond 2015). These leaders have played significant roles in promoting religious tolerance and peacebuilding efforts in the country even if they are contested to some extent. Islamic education also plays a pivotal role in shaping the civil society of Mali by instilling spiritual values and fostering social cohesion (Brenner 2001).

Despite the promotion of religious tolerance and cooperation, **there have been instances of tension and conflict between religious groups in the country**. In recent years, Mali has been facing a serious security crisis caused by the activities of jihadi armed groups linked to violent extremism, particularly in the northern and central regions (more information on these groups in section 3.1.3). As a result, **the government has implemented strict regulations on religious organisations suspected of promoting violent extremist ideologies**, including registration requirements and restrictions on foreign funding for religious activities. These measures aim to prevent the spread of extremist activities and promote stability and security in the country.

Nigeria

Nigeria is a religiously diverse country. Islam is the dominant religion, practised by 53,3% of the population mainly in the North, followed by 45% Christians (mainly in the South) and 1 to 2% of the population following traditional beliefs (CIA 2021). Despite this diversity, Nigeria has maintained its secular status since its independence in 1960. The constitution does not allow the federal or state government to establish a state religion, and promotes tolerance and interfaith cohesion. However, **judicial courts can be based on sharia or custom law, in addition to common law** - but civil courts based on common law have precedence over the others. Sharia courts operate in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, and can pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, which is applicable only to Muslims. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states (U.S. Department of State 2022b). **In recent years, Nigeria has experienced the emergence of extremist (violent) groups like Boko Haram** (more information in Box 5), and interreligious and intercommunal conflict in the North (Klobucista 2018). To promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between different religious groups, including those affected by religious violence, the Nigerian government established the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development in 2020 (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2020).

The interconnection between religion and politics in Nigeria is intricate due to the confluence of historical, cultural, and societal influences, particularly within the context of Islam. Islamic civil society engages in leveraging Islamic values to drive societal and political transformation. Notably, historical contentions between Sufi and Anti-Sufi ideologies have not merely remained confined to religious discussions, but have also intersected with the political domain where different branches align themselves with either Sufi or Anti-Sufi perspectives.

Islamic civil society actors and institutions are well established in Nigeria, with a variety of mosques, Islamic schools, and associations across the country (U.S. State of Department 2021). The **Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)** is the highest Islamic body in the country and serves as the umbrella organisation for all Islamic groups in Nigeria (NSCIA N.d.). The NSCIA works to promote Islamic values, education, and community development. Other prominent Islamic organisations in Nigeria include the **Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI)**, which represents the Sunni Muslims and the **Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN)**, representing Shia Muslims (Al Jazeera 2019).

Islamic CSOs have worked with government agencies such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) (U.S. Department of State 2022b) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to provide relief and support to victims of religious violence and other humanitarian crises (NEMA 2023). For example, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, Islamic organisations in Nigeria played a role in educating their communities about the disease and supporting efforts to contain its spread (Manguvo and Mafuvadze 2015).

However, some Islamic organisations have been accused of promoting extremist ideology or being linked to violent extremist groups like Boko Haram (USIP 2015). To address these challenges, **the Nigerian government has implemented several policies and regulations**. For example, in 2021, the government announced the dissolution of the Board of Trustees of IMN, due to its alleged links to violent extremist activities (U.S. Department of State 2021). Similarly, the government has also implemented policies such as the Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act 2013, which provides for the regulation of terrorist financing and related matters (Al Jazeera 2019). Finally, the government also set us demobilisation and reintegration programs such as the Operation Safe Corridor in 2016 (ICG 2021).

Despite these challenges, Islamic CSOs still engage in works for the promotion of peace, security, and religious tolerance in the country. Leaders like the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, who serves as the President-General of the NSCIA, and Sheikh Ahmad Gumi, a prominent Islamic scholar and peace advocate, have played

important roles in promoting interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria (U.S. Department of State 2022b).

Senegal

Senegal is a predominantly Muslim country, with an estimated 94% of the population following Islam (CIA 2021b). However, the country has a long history of religious pluralism and tolerance, with significant Christian and Animist communities (U.S. Department of State. 2022c). Despite being a secular state, the government of Senegal recognises the role of religion in society and maintains good relations with religious leaders (U.S. Department of State. N.d.c.).

Senegal has a diverse Islamic civil society, with organisations and associations dedicated to providing social services, education, and community outreach to Muslim communities throughout the country. These groups promote religious tolerance and engage in peacebuilding efforts through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. **Sufi brotherhoods play a significant role in political and social life, especially the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood, which is one of the most prominent Islamic organisations in Senegal** (Mbacké 2005).

Notable Muslim leaders in Senegal include Serigne Mountakha Mbacké, the current leader of the Mouridiyya brotherhood (The Muslim 500 N.d.), and Serigne Babacar Sy Mansour, the leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood (Mervin 2011). These leaders play a significant role in promoting religious tolerance and peacebuilding efforts in the country, and have often acted as intermediaries between the Muslim community and the state (U.S. Department of State. N.d.c.).

Prominent organisations include the reformist FNACMS (now known as FAIS), OAI, Wal Fadjri, Al-Djamra, and various brotherhoods, including the Moustarchidines, Mouride students, Tijane students, and the *Cadre Unitaire de l'Islam au Sénégal* (CUDIS). CUDIS is a unique organisation within Senegal's Islamic civil society. It was founded in 1984 by a group of Muslim leaders who sought to create a unified platform for Muslims in the country.[16] As a NGO, CUDIS also aims to promote Islamic education and social development while fostering unity and cooperation among Muslims in Senegal.

3.1.3. Violent Islamic activists: origins, actions and impact

Since the beginning of the 2000s, West Africa and the Sahel has become a **theatre of competition between different violent extremist groups**.[17] These groups differ from the Islamic activist groups discussed above in that **they use violence to pursue their goals**. Their expansion has taken place in a context of **general failure of governments** to provide a functioning governance system, basic services and protection, and/or an effective management of violent insurgency outbreaks. On the one hand, this led to a growing **mistrust between the population and the central and local governments** and authorities. On the other hand, this created conditions and opportunities for violent extremist groups to **replace the authorities in the provision of services** and occupy significant territorial areas in Mali, Burkina Faso or North-East Nigeria.

The installation of violent extremist groups in the Sahel can be traced back to the end of the Algerian civil war (1991-2002) and the creation of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) who later rebranded as **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb** (AQIM) in 2007 (Cherbib 2018). For years, AQIM used the Sahel as a rear base to gather wealth, arms and local recruits (Lacher and Steinberg 2015). **This led jihadist groups to develop on a more Sahelian basis**. However, the main geopolitical factor came in 2012 when armed groups, mostly composed of Malian Tuareg and

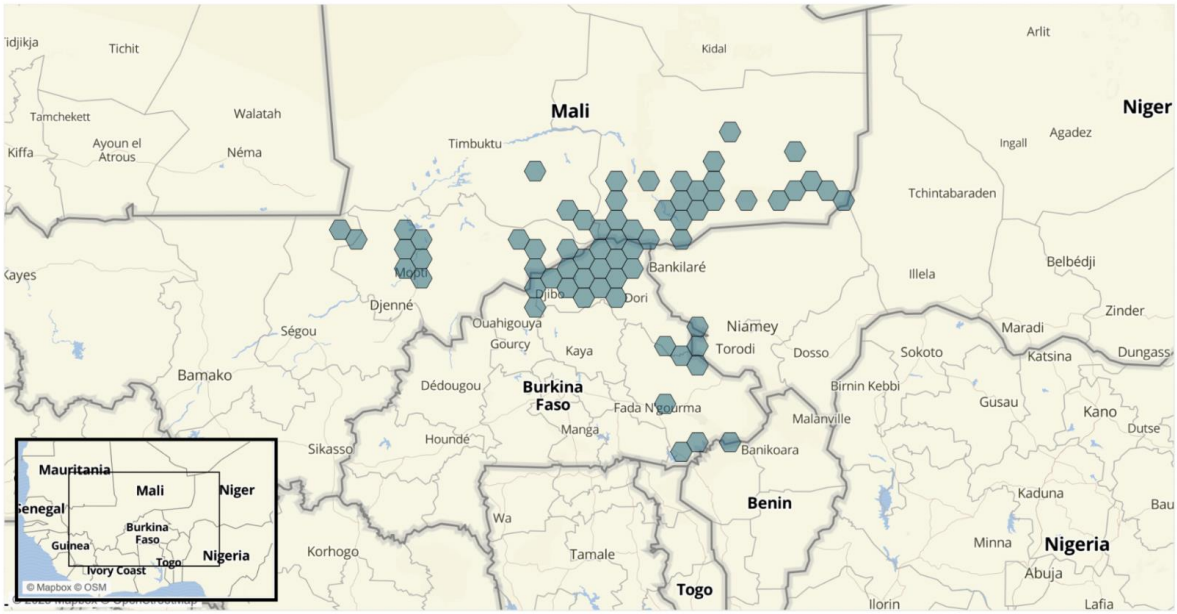
[16] CUDIS: official page: http://www.islamsenegal.org/qui-sommes-nous.

[17] Africa, specifically the Sahel, is emerging as the new epicentre of violent extremism, accounting for almost half of all global terrorism-related deaths (UNDP 2023).

Arab fighters, came back to Mali following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, launching an armed insurgency in January 2012 and won control of the north of Mali (Cherbib 2018).

Today, the main violent extremist actors in the region are the IS-affiliated **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)**, **Al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)**, and IS-affiliated **Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP)** (ACLED 2023). In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to IS and rebranded as ISWAP, which killed the last splinter group's leader and absorbed Boko Haram's territories, taking control of north-eastern Nigeria and parts of Niger (CFR 2023). ISGS was formally integrated into the Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP) before being recognised as an autonomous province of IS in 2022. ISGS and ISWAP have been cooperating in their fight against foreign forces and to gain control of territories, with ISGS mostly active in the Liptako-Gourma region of the Sahel (the border between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) and ISWAP in the vicinity of Lake Chad. Brought together by opponents such as international forces, local government troops, and pro-government militias, ISGS has also cooperated with JNIM for years (ACLED 2023), and lately they have been the most active, launching a series of deadly attacks in 2022 (CFR 2023; France24 2022). However, more recently ISGS and JNIM have clashed repeatedly as a result of the growing ambition of ISGS to counterbalance JNIM's dominance in the region.[18]

Figure 5: Areas of Clashed between IS Sahel and JNIM (July 2019 - December 2022)



Source: Nsaibia, H. and Marco, A. (Nsaibia 2023)

Today, **Sahelian violent extremist groups have adopted a flexible 'glocalist' strategy.** The glocalisation of the group (or glocalist approach) means that the group looks to infuse local issues, such as socio-economic-political grievances, with a Salafi-jihadist agenda.[19] Al-Qaeda and its linked local groups put a particular emphasis on the Salafi-jihadi ideology, using it to frame their actions, justify their decisions and mobilise resources and troops. For example, they mobilise the *ummah* to fight non-believers that corrupted their land and religion in the fight with the sword, *jihad a sif,* against their near enemies (godless regimes and all non-Salafi Muslims) and far enemies (Western states)

[18] To know more about JNIM and ISGS clashes and relations, please see Raafat 2021 and ACLED 2023.

[19] Glocalisation: infusing a local perspective and merging it with transnational ideas.

(Alshech 2014). However, more recently, Al-Qaeda central's[20] new strategy is linked to glocalisation, pushing its local branches to insert themselves in the established social fabric to then connect it to the global network.

Both ISGS and JNIM **adopted their parent organisations' tactics to establish their foothold in the region.** For example, JNIM portrayed itself as a community defender, following Al Qaeda's strategy of gradually rooting itself in the local fabric. Indeed, according to Al Qaeda, an overtly brutal strategy may increase hostility of local Muslims and compromise the jihadist group's consolidation of its rule (Guichaoua and Bouhlel 2023). ISGS presented itself as a hardline replacement to JNIM, just like IS wants to be recognised as leader of the global Salafi-jihadist movement replacing Al Qaeda (Raafat 2021; Harrington and Thompson 2022). **JNIM has been considered as more successful than ISGS**, known for its brutality, particularly **because of its people-centred approach**, which allowed it to gain local support. The relation between the local and regional groups in West Africa and the Sahel with their respective central organisation is discussed in Box 5 below.

Box 5: Local violent extremist groups' relations with their central organisation

Local branches, including ISGS and JNIM, **receive money from the central organisation, but they also impose taxes** (*zakat*) and raise revenues through theft and extortion of local populations to finance their activities.[21] Services such as justice, education, training and protection are ensured to win over the population's support. However, intimidation and violence have also been used as a way of extortion (especially by IS-affiliated groups) (Guichaoua and Bouhlel 2023) and to force locals to join the jihadist groups, even though others joined for practical reasons rather than religious ones, such as easier access to hard weapons to defend their community (Cherbib 2018).

Regional branches are part of the global network. A senior leadership at the higher level of this network directs resources and provides strategic guidance to seize opportunities that arise from local dynamics. Nevertheless, given the **decapitation approach used by the West to weaken violent extremist organisations**, which aims at eliminating the head of the organisation, Al-Qaeda decentralised its structure to limit the impact of leadership disappearance while IS routinely changes its leadership. As a consequence, ties between the senior leadership and regional branches eroded, and **regional branches mainly responded to local (Sahelian) leaders vested of delegated authority to deal with operational planning (Zimmerman and Chesnutt 2022)**. JNIM, for example, has sufficient self-governance and funding to autonomously expand its activities, without necessarily following Al-Qaeda's direction (Harrington and Thompson 2022). On the contrary, based on the social movement theory, swearing allegiance to IS central could be seen as a rational decision for ISGS to assure continuous support of, for example, physical and religious education materials and financial support for their jihadist insurgency. However, the distance means that the local affiliates could pick and choose how to work with IS central, particularly when it comes to theology, considered as too rigid for the Sahel.

By framing their actions through ethnic, nationalist and religious paradigms (Harrington and Thompson 2022), violent extremist groups exploit local frustrations riled with persistent corruption and under-investment. Their messaging appeals especially to the younger generation, because of increased grievances such as deteriorating ecological and socio-economic-political conditions.

[20] Al-Qaeda's central leadership is currently vacant after the drone strike that killed Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022 in Kabul, but based at the Afghan-Pakistani border regions (Harrington and Thompson 2022b).

[21] IS Mozambique, for example, is used as an intermediary between IS central and other branches around Africa, including ISWAP and ISGS. Sources: U.S. Department of State 2022d; U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022.

Beyond violent and military activities, **violent extremist groups in West Africa and the Sahel also carry out other activities**. Currently, their campaigns focus on attracting new members notably with *dawah*, and winning over people through judicial support and the provision of basic security. They also practise resource mobilisation through cattle theft, extortion, and the collection of *zakat* and *sadaqa*.[22]

Box 6: Case Study - Boko Haram, from a political opposition to a violent extremist group

Mohammed Yusuf founded the sect that would later become known as Boko Haram in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of the north-eastern state of Borno (Klobucista 2018). He created a religious centre and school that attracted poor Muslim families from across Nigeria and neighbouring countries, with the political goal of creating an Islamic state (U.S. Department of State 2021). The centre became a recruiting ground for jihadis (Siegle 2021). Boko Haram emerged in a context of religious political mobilisation in northern Nigeria, with religion being used as a source of political legitimacy by local political elites to manipulate and mobilise their population during electoral processes (Onuoha and Oyewole 2018). As such, **religious Islamic groups like Boko Haram gained political relevance as they were the basis for socio-political mobilisation**.[23]

From 2002-2009, the group focused on withdrawing from society into remote north-eastern areas, but still engaged in low-level conflict with local police forces and non-compliant villagers (BBC News 2016). Boko Haram entered Nigerian political life when members of the group were appointed into the Borno State Executive Council. **The group used this political influence to extend its own patronage network, recruit people (mostly young men) into its ranks, and provide them with means of livelihood.** The principal disagreement between the group and other politicians was the refusal of Boko Haram's demand for the introduction of a sharia-based Islamic system (BBC News 2016).

The political alliance between the extremists and state-level politicians collapsed in 2009. In July 2009, Boko Haram members faced allegedly excessive use of force by police and were unable to get an official investigation (Tessières de 2018). After these events, the group launched attacks on police posts and other government installations. The situation escalated, and the police were unable to keep it under control, calling for the army to intervene. The Joint Military Task Force started an operation that left more than 700 Boko Haram members dead and destroyed the group's headquarters (BBC News 2016). On July 30, 2009, Nigerian security forces captured and killed Mohammed Yusuf, in what human rights groups have deemed an extrajudicial killing (HRW 2010). Yusuf's execution was videotaped by soldiers and later broadcast on television (Murdock 2014). The death of Yusuf marked a turning point for Boko Haram.

In 2010, Boko Haram re-emerged radically more violent and determined to **seek vengeance against the Nigerian state for executing its leader.** Under the leadership of Imam Abubakar Shekau, who claimed to have assumed control of the sect following the death of Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram militants carried out violent operations against government targets in the north. The most notable include the targeting of the Nigerian capital city of Abuja and the bombing of the police headquarters and the suicide attack against the Abuja UN headquarters in 2011.

[22] ACLED 2023; To know more about civilian-jihadist relations, please see Guichaoua and Bouhlel 2023.
[23] Ibid.

3.1.4. Gender and digitalisation in West African and Sahelian Islamic activism

After exploring the historical and political development around Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel, in this section we will focus on how and to what extent gender and digitalisation play a role in the functioning and outcomes of Islamic civil society actors and violent extremist groups.

Gender and women in the Islamic public sphere

The wave of democratisation that unfolded in Africa during the 1990s led states to grant forms of liberalisation (political, economic, social) that allowed for a proliferation of associational life. A variety of social groups, especially ethnic and Islamic religious groups, became more present in public debates and protests, and in this framework, **Muslim women began to participate in circles that were previously inaccessible to them (Idrissa 2017; Villalón 2020)**. By taking advantage of the liberalisation process that unfolded in Africa in both the public sphere and the Islamic sphere, women reshaped Muslim practices and societies and became bearers of authority and social influence.[24] In Burkina Faso, for example, women gained importance in the *Association des élèves et étudiants musulmans du Burkina* (AEEMB) and *Cercle d'études, de recherches et de formation islamiques* (CERFI),[25] two of the most prominent Islamic associations that aim to promote Islam in the francophone educational community. AEEMB and CERFI were the first organisations to include activities aimed at women's empowerment and to open up to them. CERFI established a national female cell and has put women leadership as an objective of its 2019-2023 strategic plan (Tiendrebeogo 2022). Muslim women organise activities within existing and well-known Islamic activist organisations, for example, in the FAIB, the main representative of the country's Muslim community in Burkina Faso. Women inside FAIB periodically organise events and seminars to exchange on (Islamic) practices. In January 2023, for example, Muslim women organised a seminar centred on the use of *dawah* by women. Other themes were also touched upon, like the role of Muslim women in society's issues, young women's education by their mothers, tolerance and the role of women at home (Aboul 2023).

Women have offered a perspective of Islam based on equality of genders. Women have been engaged in educating themselves on Islamic teachings, in order to take on more roles as both learners and instructors. This trend has materialised, for example, in Nigeria and Niger, where women are reframing the social discourse around the ideology that confers to them a status of second citizens. Societies in West Africa have minimised the role that women can play in the Islamic (social) sphere, creating a web of social and political norms that hinder the active participation of women in Islam. However, according to Muslim women, such as *Mallama* (female religious actor) Hawa and Zahra from Niger, there is no proof in Islam that women should be limited to the domestic sphere or cannot lead public preaching or hold a public office. What they are doing is therefore providing an alternative framing in which Islamic learnings are depicted not as a luxury for women, but as a necessity that will reinforce their role in their households, in their society and will allow them to follow God's rules. Local female actors also realise that this fight against social customs and political rules should be carried out not only at the local level, but it should be connected to the global system of ideas and institutions that should undergo a de-gendering of Islamic learning (Sounaye 2011).

[24] For a clearer view of how this dynamic played out in Niger, see Sounaye 2011.

[25] AEEMB and CERFI are Islamic militant movements, pragmatic and modernist in their actions, but Salafist by nature. In general, they do not subscribe to the traditional 'popular' Burkinabé Islam nor to Sufi (*Tijaniyya*) Islam. Even if their referential framework is largely salafisised, they do not endorse the Wahhabi's strict dogmatism either. AEEMB and CERFI constitute nowadays the main supporters of French-speaking Muslim intellectuals, and over the last two decades, they have acquired quite some notoriety. However, in terms of real membership and quantitative representativeness of the Muslim population, AEEMB and CERFI are only a small group.

Other organisations have also called for a reinterpretation of Islamic laws, challenging the current patriarchal system. For example, "Yewwu-Yewwi" (meaning "wake up and enlighten" in Wolof) in Senegal aims to support Muslim feminist movements in Senegalese public debate. Its objective is to bring women's rights at the centre of the Senegalese public debate with the aim of reinterpreting Islamic laws which, according to them, had been applied in light of patriarchal interpretations that unfavoured women (Latha 2010).

Muslim organisations use religion as a platform to frame controversial issues, such as reproductive health, sexuality and family planning, but also to promote Muslim women's perspective on national politics, governance and elections, and engage in development projects. For example, the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), an umbrella NGO established in 1985 with more than 80,000 registered members and 500 affiliated groups, employs a multifaceted approach to advance women's position and rights. FOMWAN uses *dawah* to spread Islamic teachings towards the population in Nigeria, but in particular it targets women through educational and training programs aimed at encouraging women to live according to these teachings. The NGO is involved in **civic education with the aim of empowering women to participate in public governance, and undertakes sensitisation campaigns that specifically target women** to raise awareness on the importance of their vote in elections.[26]

Gender and violent extremist groups

A growing body of research looks at the role of **women and how gender norms are used by and within violent extremist groups**. Recent research shows that **women have different and complex roles in these extremist groups**, while remaining an "invisible actor" (Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo 2016). For example, interviews carried out by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) with women associated with Boko Haram and Katiba Macina revealed that women contribute to the recruitment process, the conduct of operations, and facilitate the group's grip on the community (Abatan and Sangaré 2021). Boko Haram has also used women as suicide bombers and has trained them to combat, differently from other groups, like Katiba Macina and JNIM, which instead did not seem to have employed women in combats or suicide operations (ICG 2016b; Abatan 2018; Rupesinghe and Diall 2019). A possible explanation stems from the willingness of JNIM, for example, to align with social norms and expectations attributed to women, depicted as incapable of violence, to win over the local population's support (Abatan 2018). However, a report found that JNIM has also used women for tactical roles, such as food and clothes provision and as informants.

Women associate with (violent) extremist groups for a variety of reasons. Interviews with Boko Haram women highlighted that they:

1. **Voluntarily join the group**, especially if a male family member is already active. Especially in the early days, women voluntarily turned to Boko Haram, viewing it as a way to advance their freedoms. Indeed, while the extremist group called for restrictions in their life following a strict patriarchal interpretation of Islamic law, it offered women protection, economic empowerment, access to Islamic education and the possibility to find a husband. There are also examples of women deciding to pledge allegiance to the group in order to protect their businesses and income-generating activities (Abatan 2018; Barry 2022).
2. **Are coerced by their male family members** (father, brother, husband, children) to join. There have been examples of fathers that gave their daughters and sisters in marriage for a variety of reasons, including protection and devotion (Barry 2022).
3. **Are kidnapped and/or threatened**, therefore forced to take up a role in Boko Haram, such as being informants, supplying food and clothes, marrying off to a member (Barry 2022).

Socially accepted gender norms around women make them less susceptible to security checks, as government authorities tend not to consider them as a threat. As a consequence, they capitalise on some Islamic gendered

[26] FOMWAN Official website.

practices, such as not being physically searched by male police authorities, to hide weapons under their dresses and burqa and smuggle objects, becoming effective spies, messengers and recruiters (ICG 2016b; Abatan 2018).

Women have also been actively involved in peacebuilding processes with violent extremist groups. Their trusted position among violent extremist actors and groups is built over time or comes from family status or history among the community (Koné 2022). In Mali, for example, by exploiting their close relationships with armed extremists, they gained the insurgents' trust and facilitated dialogues between the latter and official authorities.

Box 7: The role of masculinities in recruitment tactics

The **role of masculinities**[27] as a factor in the radicalisation process **is often overlooked** and is not recognised as having an important impact (Kimmel 2018). Extremist groups exploit internalised gender roles to recruit both women and men. **For example, in many West African and Sahel communities, men are expected to fulfil societal norms like being the economic provider of the family.** Poor socioeconomic conditions may hamper individuals to carry out these expectations, driving young men to join (violent) extremist groups' ranks in order to ensure economic remittances. Extremist groups may also offer social relations or bonds to men that have not experienced these bonds within their own families or have been emotionally neglected or dismissed (RAN 2018; UNDP 2023). They give them the **chance to reclaim their manhood**. For example, Boko Haram's abducted women and girls have been used by their members to sexually satisfy themselves, but also to strengthen group cohesion through the provision of women as prizes and to cultivate loyalty in the group following a "marriage" with an abducted woman, which can give the man an enhanced status among his peers (Bloom and Matfess 2016). Despite these more well-known examples, **there is little or nascent research on how masculinities are employed to radicalise or are exploited by different violent extremist groups**. Most counter-violent extremism (CVE) policies or programmes do not consider these dynamics with efforts to mainstream gender mainly focusing on (the role of) women (Dier and Baldwin 2022).

The role of digitalisation for Islamic activists in West Africa and the Sahel

The use of digital tools by Islamic activist actors

Islamic activist organisations, including Muslim women associations, use mass and social media to reach more people. FAIB's Facebook page, for example, has around 60 thousand followers, and it's used to spread information about what the association does and organises. For example, on 7 April 2023, FAIB organised a national prayer to be carried out in all mosques throughout the country to pray for peace and stability of Burkina Faso. It released an official document and a copy was made available on its Facebook page and obtained more than 2 thousand likes. For what concerns FOMWAN, for example, it uses Facebook to spread information on its activities. Its Facebook page was only created on January 9, 2023, but already has more than 5000 followers and its posts can reach up to 7000 likes.[28] The main content of FOMWAN' Facebook page so far focuses on raising awareness on the importance of participating in the 2023 presidential elections, while also promoting gender equality. In particular, hashtags like #SayNoToViolence #SayNoToGBV #VoteWisely #EqualityForAll are used under posts that promote electoral participation, making it clear to its platform that gender issues are also a central topic.

[27] As there exists different, overlapping, and sometimes competing concepts of masculinity, it is more used to talk about masculinities (plural). "Masculinities" are defined as "different notions of what it means to be a man, including patterns of conduct linked to men's place in a given set of gender roles and relations" in EIGE Description of masculinities.

[28] FOMWAN Facebook page accessible here.

In March 2023, Nigeria counted around 37 million Facebook users (16.2% of its population, 42% being women) making it the most used social media platform in the country.[29] In the same month, Instagram counted around 10 million users (4.7% of its population, 45% being women),[30] but even on a smaller platform, it can be considered as a vector used by Muslim Nigerian women and influencers to convey messages to their followers. For example, **Haneefah Adam**[31] has around 37 thousand followers on Instagram, she is a visual artist and activist that became famous for creating the "**Hijarbie**", a Barbie doll wearing the Islamic veil in a number of fashionable ways.[32] Haneefah made clothes and hijabs for barbies to make the brand more inclusive, but in particular to fight and change misconceptions around Muslim women who wear a veil. Through her hijarbies, she wanted to raise awareness on the fact that wearing a veil in most cases is not an oppressive practice for Muslim women, who on the contrary choose to cover their head to express their religion (Busari 2017).

In addition to the use of modern-day social media platforms, more traditional tools, such as the TV or radio, are still used in the region to convey messages and as influence platforms. Muslim women influences throughout the region have used both the TV and radio to launch their programmes where they focus on, for example, women in Islam, household management in line with the Islamic scriptures, and solidarity among women, especially among those educated elites and those un-educated. They also use their authority and call on their network to challenge conventional practices.[33]

The use of digital tools by violent extremist groups

Research has documented the **use of social media tools by violent extremist groups to convey their message and recruit online**. In 2014, IS started running a multilingual social media campaign that included video clips, Islamic chants (*nasheeds*), magazines and images, mainly using Facebook, YouTube, Telegram and Twitter. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda also exploit social media and online propaganda. The Taliban, for example, had a Telegram channel in English called "*Al Emarah* News" that also delivered news and videos in Pashto, Persian and Arabic (Hoffman 2016; Ward 2018). Given the use of violent extremist groups of social media, platforms like Meta (that own Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) and Alphabet (that own YouTube and Google) have **established rules to fight online (violent) extremism**, have created in-house teams to monitor online content and remove non-allowed material, and have partnered with law enforcement agencies and governments, as well as with NGOs and other tech companies to share information and coordinate efforts to counter online terrorism and extremist content (Dang and Paul 2022; Clegg 2022). Despite these efforts, **violent extremist groups' content is still online**, and IS, for example, has shifted to the use of emojis instead of words. Automatic artificial intelligences are used to scan the internet and online groups for keywords, which are then flagged and analysed by experts. However, the same is not yet done for emojis (Scott 2022).

IS propaganda also consists in highlighting attacks in its "provinces" and coordinating media campaigns with its regional branches (Europol 2019). ISWAP has a media team that coordinates with IS central and is dedicated to presenting the extremist group as a successful actor and a credible alternative to the Nigerian state (Hassan 2022). ISWAP media team shares content coming from IS central on WhatsApp or in its Telegram account, Nashir News Agency, reserved to members only (Samuel 2023). However, ISWAP also employs WhatsApp and Telegram to organise and execute criminal activities across West Africa. Boko Haram has also made use of social media platforms

[29] Napoleoncat Stats in collaboration with Statista, Facebook users in Nigeria - March 2023.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Her Instagram account is accessible here. Other examples include Maryam Hassan Bukar, also known as @alhanislam on Instagram, who has more than 460 thousand followers. She is an activist and poet, gender advocate and brand ambassador. Her poetry on Nigeria's realities made her famous online.
[32] The artist also created an Instagram account specifically for her Hijarbie creations, accessible here.
[33] This is for example the case of Mallama Huda from Niger. For more information, please see Sounaye 2011.

to amplify its reach and recruitment range. Some African states, such as Nigeria, have imposed stricter rules to fight online violent extremist content, but extremists have grown around them and, for example, **shifted to smaller platforms to circumvent such controls** that usually target bigger tools like WhatsApp or Facebook (Ogunlana 2019; Sahara Reporters 2022).

Al-Qaeda also coordinates online propaganda with its branches, and is particularly keen on showing unity across its divisions. This is why its videos start with an audio excerpt of former Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, and then show the logos of regional media outlets. *Al-Zallaqa* Media Production Company has been used by JNIM to spread its messages in collaboration with Media AQIM's *al-Andalus* Media Foundation. However, little research exists on the use of social media platforms, like Facebook or WhatsApp, by JNIM.

3.1.5. External factors: foreign funding and influence from Muslim countries

Muslim countries like Turkey, Iran or the Gulf countries, have sought to establish ties with countries in West Africa and the Sahel through trade and development projects, but also by capitalising on their shared religious identity. Influence is projected through more unconventional and under the radar channels, such as funding West African Islamic NGOs or backing their national CSOs to operate in the African region. Transnational ties have also been forged through intergovernmental organisations such as the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation**. This is used as a platform for Muslim countries to safeguard and protect the interests of Muslims worldwide, but it also functions as a bridge between different regions, like West Africa and the Sahel, that share Islam as a common feature.[34] The next sections shed light on the main channel of influence that selected Muslim countries have undertaken.

Gulf countries and Iran's ties with West Africa and the Sahel

Helped by the oil boom of the 1970s, Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran have sought to expand their religious influence in West Africa and the Sahel countries by funding the construction of mosques and creating Islamic charities and *madrasas*. For example, in Senegal, the Islamic Preaching Association for Youth (APIJ) teaches Salafism to Senegalese through its 200 mosques spread across the country.[35] The APIJ receives fundings from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE to counter the expansion of Iran's influence in Senegal. Through a branch of the Al-Mustafa University in Dakar, Iran seeks to teach Farsi, Iranian culture and history, Islamic science and proselytise Shi'ism. The university also delivers food and financial support to students, and those enrolled benefit from free tuition and sometimes material benefits, such as home furniture (Cocks and Sharafedin 2017). The university is based in the Iranian city of Qom and has more than 50 branches worldwide. It provides enough money to pay for the students and their family's visits to Qom campus.

Gulf countries also funded proselytisation across parts of West Africa and the Sahel, seeking to expand Islam's great potential in Africa and to promote a form of Islam that is not polluted by local customs (Kaag 2022).[36] They send *imams* in the mosques they fund to teach a specific strain of Islam, and/or award scholarships to locals to study in the Gulf states. After their studies, returnees become active in West African countries like Senegal, Mali and Nigeria where they help spread Salafism (Hilse 2017). Many locals in the Sahel believe in mystical and spiritual Sufism, which is rejected and labelled as heretical by the Saudis. However, even if Saudi's Islam is different from the locals' religion, many feel obliged to attend sermons of Saudi-backed *imams* and mosques as a form of gratitude, given that often outside of these mosques free meals and beverages are distributed (Hilse 2017).

[34] Official website accessible here.

[35] In Chad, Saudi NGOs opened schools and orphanages where they are teaching religious and moral education in Arabic and where the focus is on the Arab world, rather than on Europe and France. Subjects such as geography and history are rearranged in a way that the Eurocentric perspective resulting from the colonial past is abandoned (Source: Kaag 2022).

[36] For more information on the interaction between local customs and Islam, see Encyclopedia.com 2021 and Yusuf 2013.

In addition to funding schools and mosques, Gulf countries also use other channels of influence, such as financing critical infrastructure and development projects. In Senegal, for example, the Saudi fund for development (SFD) has recently invested 63 million US dollars to finance the Dakar-Saint Louis Coastal Road Project (2023) and 30 million US dollars for the rehabilitation project of Tambacounda-Guederi Road (2022).[37] The Saudi Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) provides funding for a variety of projects, ranging from infrastructure building and renovation (like renovating dams in Nigeria) to health provision (Ebola response programmes that ran in West African countries like Mali, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone).[38] Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia prefers to use **official state channels rather than the private sector or other unofficial channels to invest in the regio**n (Auge 2020).

Other Gulf countries have also sought to increase their presence in West Africa and the Sahel. Isolated at home after the 2017 embargo[39] the tour of Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in West Africa signalled **Qatar's** willingness to engage more in the region through cooperation agreements and by being a peace broker. However, Qatar's attention is mainly directed towards East Africa and the Horn, where it's competing for influence with the UAE, especially in Somalia (Schwikowski 2017; Gillon 2019). The **UAE** and **Kuwait**, similar to Saudi Arabia's SDF, have been investing in West Africa through their public institutions.[40] The UAE is also involved in the fight against Salafism and radicalism through the financing of NGOs that support Islamic education institutions throughout the Sahel (Yahmed 2023).

Despite the Gulf countries' engagement in the region, **frictions between locals and Gulf countries organisations exist**. On the one hand, stereotypes linked to racism and cultural differences increase distrust from the local population, making it more difficult for foreign Islamic NGOs to gain a foothold in the countries. On the other hand, **locals may belong to a different current of Islam and may perceive foreign Islamic actors' proselytism as a threat to their religious balance**. For example, in Nigeria, the population fear an increased polarisation in the Muslim community as a result of the Saudi Salafi proselytism, with possible spillover to other religions and repercussions to societal peace (Kaag 2022). In Senegal, when its Sufi orders, or "brotherhoods", are too weak to maintain the political and religious tolerance that characterise the country, its balance is threatened by foreign Islamic actors' interferences (Cocks and Sharafedin 2017).

Turkey's presence in West Africa and the Sahel

While **Turkey** has been active in the Horn of Africa region for many years, recently its focus shifted towards West Africa and the Sahel. In this region, Ankara projects its influence through military cooperation projects, development support and commerce.[41] According to the International Crisis Group, Turkey is focused on advancing its economic interests by "capitalising on shared religious identity", as the region's population feel they have more in common

[37] According to the SFD, "since 1978, the Fund has provided 27 development loans to help finance 26 development projects and programs worth approximately 447 million US dollars. Additionally, with the support of the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, SFD provided four grants worth over 19 million US dollars to Senegal to help finance development projects and programs in various sectors, including transport and communications, infrastructure, health, housing, energy, education, and water and sanitation." Sources: SFD 2023; and SFD 2022.

[38] IsDB, Combating Ebola Outbreak in West Africa; IsDB, Transforming Lives and Livelihoods: How the Watari Dam Revitalisation is Enhancing Food Security and Alleviating Poverty in Kano, Nigeria, 28 March 2023 (see IsDB N.d.).

[39] To know more about Qatar's isolation and the embargo, please see Wintour 2017; Al Jazeera 2020; Ulrichsen 2021.

[40] Kuwait was the first Arab country to donate to countries in West Africa to combat the spread of the Ebola virus in 2014. The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) financed development projects in West Africa, such as the Minna-Bida Road in Nigeria (45 million US dollars), dams construction and rural electrification in Burkina Faso, infrastructure and agricultural programmes in Mali (294 million US dollars invested since 1978). Sources: KUNA 2014; WAM 2023. More info on each country -projects and money invested- see Abu Dhabi Fund for Development Beneficiary countries.

[41] Compared to France and China's exports to the Sahel, Turkey is still a small actor, but its economic ties have been strengthened over the last decade. For example, in 2003 trade between Mali and Turkey amounted to 5 million US dollars, while in 2019 it was 57 million US dollars. Source: Armstrong 2021.

with Turkey than European countries, Russia or China, also thanks to Islam (Armstrong 2021). Ankara has financed the construction and/or restoration of mosques in Mali, Ghana and Niger, and Turkish NGOs and charities provided for education, healthcare and access to water (Armstrong 2021). The Istanbul-based Islamic NGO Humanitarian Relief Organisation (IHH), for example, donated dry food and new clothes to Niamey and surrounding areas during *Ramadan* (Rakipoglu 2021).

Turkey has also been actively engaging with West African and Sahelian nations through a range of security-related cooperation agreements. These agreements encompass training partnerships for security personnel with Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, targeting various security units like the military, gendarmerie, coast guard, and police. Beyond training, **Turkey's security agreements take a more comprehensive form, including military framework agreements that span training, technical collaboration, and scientific cooperation** (SWP 2022). These agreements involve 30 African states, including Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina, and provide a platform for diverse levels of military and security cooperation facilitated by Turkey's Ministry of Defence, Ministry of the Interior (encompassing police, gendarmerie, and coast guard), and the Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB). This multifaceted engagement fosters multiple avenues for dialogue. Given the Sahel crisis's impact, these countries are seeking effective options to address security risks like terrorism and insurgencies. **Turkey's arms exports have notably risen, offering suitable options in terms of price-performance assessment**. Turkish-made weaponry, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), armoured vehicles, sensor systems, surveillance tools, mine clearance vehicles, and rifles, are finding a market due to their competitive prices and no-strings-attached policy. In 2021, Turkey's defence and aerospace exports to Africa surged to $460.6 million from $82.981 million the previous year, showcasing a five-fold increase in just a year and indicating the rising interest of African countries in this market (SWP 2022).

Ankara's actions in the Sahel also involve the shutting down of Gülenists-associated schools, as part of a broader anti-terrorist campaign led by Turkey. Given that today Turkey considers the **Hizmet movement** (or Gülen movement)[42] a terrorist organisation that wants to overthrow the government (UK Government 2022), President Erdogan has been asking West African countries to shut such schools in exchange for educational cooperation. Senegal, Chad, Nigeria and Guinea Bissau have positively answered, showing the growing influence of Ankara in these countries. However, Turkey also wants to **counterbalance France and the UAE's influence in the region**. The UAE accused Turkey of financing and sponsoring terrorist organisations in the Sahel and West Africa with the aim of seizing control of natural resources and spreading political Islam (EPC 2020).

[42] The Hizmet or Gülen movement is a civic initiative rooted in the spiritual and humanistic tradition of Islam and inspired by the ideas and activism of Mr. Fethullah Gülen. For more information, see What is the Hizmet movement? and Balci 2014.

3.2. Central Asia

Figure 6: Focus on Central Asia

Source: [University of Texas Libraries 2002]

3.2.1. Key historical developments of Islamic activist groups in Central Asia

This section looks into the **pivotal historical developments that have shaped Islamic activist groups in Central Asia**. To provide a comprehensive understanding, our focus will primarily be on **the Soviet Era,** as it bears the most relevance to comprehending contemporary Islamic activism.

Looking in short at the pre-Soviet era, one can note that this period **encompasses a vast expanse of history.** Central Asia has held a significant place within the Islamic world since the 9th century CE. During its golden age, Persian served as the language of law and Islamic scholarship. Notably, Samarkand and Bukhara emerged as centres of early and medieval Islamic knowledge, contributing substantially to fields such as medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Transitioning to the Russian Imperial period, Muslim writers and intellectuals once again played a prominent role, this time at the forefront of emerging anti-imperial and nationalist movements. Many of these figures rallied behind the Soviet cause as a vehicle for national self-determination and a means to counter imperial dominance. Nonetheless, these Islamic activists and intellectuals were soon betrayed by the Soviet government.

By the mid-1920s, the government initiated comprehensive social and legal reforms intended to dismantle the influence of religious groups and networks. This was coupled with a drive to establish the Communist Party as the sole sanctioned platform for social activism. The section that follows explores these historical dynamics in greater detail, shedding light on the intricate evolution of Islamic activism in Central Asia.

Islamic Activism under the Soviet Era

The era of the Soviet Union brought forth a distinct set of challenges for the practice of Islam. The governing ideology of the Soviet Union was rooted in Marxist and Leninist principles, which **positioned religion, including Islam, as an outdated concept that needed to be eliminated**. Religious beliefs were considered contrary to the ideals of scientific progress and rationalism championed by the state. This ideological stance translated into efforts to suppress religious practices through both persuasive means and coercion. From the 1920s onward, a **concerted campaign against religious institutions was launched, targeting mosques, scholars, and religious leaders.** Collectivisation of land in the 1920s and 1930s was coupled with the suppression of traditional Muslim communities, leading to the closure of mosques and the imprisonment or exile of religious figures (Kemper 2009). An example of that is **Shami-damulla, an Uzbek with ultra-conservative views of Islam** and one of the most prominent fundamentalist leaders at the time. He was jailed in 1932, but he left behind scores of disciples who preached his hard-line beliefs in mosques and at underground schools (Erickson 2017). The anti-religious propaganda machinery was employed extensively, which included anti-Islamic posters and publications. **Sufi leaders and brotherhoods** (Cf. Box 7), were particularly targeted due to their influence on communities and traditions.

Box 8: The role of Sufis brotherhoods in Central Asia

In addition to Sunni Islam, **Sufism plays an important role in Central Asia**. Historically, four Sufi orders had a significant presence in the region: the Kubrawiya, Yasawiya, Khwajagan and Naqshbandiya movements, with **the Naqshbandi brotherhood being the most prominent one in Central Asia.** Sufi leaders and organisations in Central Asia played a significant role in the resistance against the Tsars of Russia and later Soviet colonisation, notably for rural and indigenous populations (Alvi 2009). During the imperial Russian conquest and the Soviet period, state authorities considered Sufism a threat and thus an ideology that needed to be controlled and destroyed. In response to armed Sufi resistance movements against state attempts to control and define Islam, the tsars and the Soviets both weakened the influence and public presence of Sufism in Central Asia by directing religious officials to issue fatwas against Sufism, placing Sufis under strict surveillance, and stripping Sufi endowments of their wealth. **The detention, deportation, and execution of a large number of Sufi sheikhs led to a decline in the visibility and quality of Sufi leadership and scholarship** (O'Dell 2016).

Many Sufi leaders were revered by their followers as spiritual guides and community leaders, and they used their position to mobilise local communities against foreign rule. In addition, **Sufi organisations provided a space for political organisation and mobilisation, as well as for the preservation of traditional cultural practices and beliefs such as traditional music, dance, and poetry,** which were important aspects of Central Asian culture but also traditional rituals and practices, such as the annual pilgrimage to holy sites (Voices of Central Asia 2023). While the tsars and Soviets branded Sufis as radical extremists, the independent Central Asian states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 reversed course and embraced the cultural, historical, and spiritual aspects of Sufism and local traditions (in conjunction with Hanafi jurisprudence) as part of their national identities and national security. At the same time, changes in society and politics also brought about shifts in the **practice of Sufism. Its unique social setting, and particularly homosocial milieu, has changed, making it less appealing to newer generations than before** (Gateling 2019).

An intriguing aspect of this period was the will to replace religious practices with state-endorsed ideals, such as nationalism. As a consequence, the present-day national entities within Central Asia are, in large part, products of Soviet constructs. This shift aimed to create a unified identity under the Soviet umbrella. In the Figure 6 below, one can see the Soviet re-organisation of Central Asia in 1922, with Kyrgyzstan ASSR and Turkistan ASSR corresponding respectively to modern-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This division was disestablished two years later in 1924 and shaped into regions which established modern-day Central Asian Nations. The initial

phase was marked by Stalinism, during which the Soviet authorities rigorously controlled religious networks with the intent to eradicate their impact. However, a gradual transformation ensued over time. Islam gradually assumed the status of an official tradition within the later Soviet context. This evolution denoted a nuanced assimilation of Islam into the Soviet framework, encompassing a complex interplay between religious dynamics and the evolving socio-political context (Khalid 2014).

Figure 7: Soviet Central Asia in 1922

Source: Wikipedia 2011

However, it posed a significant challenge to the role of Islam within society, as religious practices and institutions were gradually relegated to the private sphere. **The traditional attire of Muslim women was specifically targeted, with the government promoting unveiling as a symbol of women's liberation, irrespective of individual choices (Cf. section 3.2.4)** Interestingly, while the official public sphere was stripped of religious influence, private settings continued to witness the practice of Islamic rituals and the transmission of religious knowledge. This dichotomy allowed for the persistence of Islam in a more subdued form, maintaining its connection to individuals' lives while being divorced from the public narrative. In the 1940s, Soviet authorities established official representatives of Islam, known as Muftis, across different regions and in October 1943, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) based in Tashkent was established. However, these figures had more of a ceremonial and political role, lacking significant influence over the religious interests of the Muslim population (Kemper 2009).

Islamic Activism during the 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s and 80s brought about a transformative phase for Islamic activism in Central Asia, catalysed by regional and global developments. **The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian Revolution, and the winds of change during the Perestroika era had profound effects on the region's Islamic landscape.** The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 sparked a sense of religious solidarity among Central Asian Muslims. The resistance against the Soviet forces became a rallying point for Islamic activists across borders. Additionally, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 inspired fervent discussions about the role of Islam in governance and societal structures, resonating with segments of Central Asia's population (Kemper 2009).

The 1980s saw the emergence of various Islamic movements advocating for a greater role of religion in society. **As the Soviet Union underwent political and ideological transformation during Perestroika, a window of opportunity opened for these movements to gain traction.** This period also witnessed the rise of local Islamic activists who sought to challenge the state's monopoly on religious discourse. While these historical developments laid the foundation for Islamic activism in Central Asia, the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union and the region's newfound independence brought both opportunities and challenges for the role of Islam in public life.

The legacy of the Soviet era and the interplay between religious and political forces continue to shape the dynamics of Islamic activism in Central Asia to this day.

3.2.2. Islamic activism and current state-society relations[43]

In the past decade, Central Asian governments have experienced a significant change in their official stance on Islam. Initially, they focused on maintaining a secular constitution and treating Islam as a security concern. **However, there has been a change towards promoting a national version of Islam that is presented as non-political and supportive of the existing political and societal structure**. To maintain their authoritarian rule and legitimacy, the ruling elites perceive **alternative and transnational forms of Islam as a threat**. As a result, they have established **regulatory frameworks with the support of state institutions to control and manage religious communities in Central Asia.** Additionally, all Central Asian countries are involved in programs aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE), which originally emerged from the "Global War on Terror " and conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Despite the decline of these conflicts, the CVE efforts persist and are used as a justification for monitoring and controlling ordinary Muslims under the guise of preventing "religious extremism."

Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, according to the 2021 national census, out of a population of 19 million, around **13 million people (68%) follow Islam as their religion**. Christianity is the second most popular religion with over 3 million followers. Besides ethnic Kazakhs, there are also other Muslim groups living in Kazakhstan, like Uzbeks, Uighurs, Turks, Azerbaijanis, Dungans, and Kurds. **The state-society relations are influenced by the global and regional agenda of the "War on Terror.**" Since the mid-2000s, Kazakhstan has increased control over religious institutions, especially after small-scale terrorist attacks in 2011. All aspects of religious activity, such as sermons, religious education, and pilgrimages, are tightly regulated.

The state has created a large bureaucratic infrastructure to combat "religious extremism." This includes various ministries, the National Security Committee, and specialised local centres that handle religious issues and support rehabilitation for individuals charged with extremism. This expansion of infrastructure has led to an increase in

[43] Majority of the information in this section and the following comes from ongoing institutional research done by Aksana Ismailbekova and Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO).

government power and funding. However, this securitisation of religion has resulted in systematic violations of citizens' rights to freedom of religion. **The state and the official clergy have focused on promoting "traditional Islam" while labelling followers of Salafism and other "non-traditional" movements as members of "destructive movements."** This has led to a **"witch hunt"** and the categorisation of non-violent offences as extremism or terrorism-related crimes.

The main religious institution in Kazakhstan is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK). The official clergy, under the influence of the state, has gained significant control over financial, administrative, and informational resources. Competing religious movements have been marginalised. **Islam in Kazakhstan has been highly governmentalised**, with centralised control over mosques and strict regulation of mosque attendants. The state also indirectly funds the official clergy through charitable foundations and their involvement in paid work related to extremism prevention. **There have been tensions between officials and parts of the Muslim community, particularly regarding attempts to standardise religious practices in mosques.**

The fight against "Salafist ideology" is a central task for state agencies, leading Salafists to withdraw from the public sphere and create their own support networks. While imams generally do not seek conflict with attendees, the rigid regulation of religious rites is driven by state bodies. However, the line between "traditional" and "non-traditional" Islam is becoming blurred, and there is a growing sense of belonging to a single ummah (Muslim community).

Islamic activism in Kazakhstan can be categorised **as institutionalised and non-institutionalised. Institutionalised** activism includes charitable foundations, Islamic media platforms, and government-organised pseudo-civil society organisations. Non-institutionalised activism involves initiative groups, individual activists, influencers, and bloggers, who are gaining influence through social media. Muslims in Kazakhstan are increasingly self-organising to defend their rights, and **there is a growing representation of Muslim interests in public discussions.** Activism aims to challenge the current restrictions on religious practices and beliefs imposed by state institutions. **Islamic activism is also pushing for a revision of the existing model of secularity, which is seen as a relic of the Soviet past.** The development of **social networks and the transition of Islamic activism to the online space have weakened the central influence of the state on the religious field.** Even imams associated with the SAMK are now prioritising the needs of their audience over the official ideological course. The online space has allowed for the expansion of pluralism within Islam, despite the government's efforts to combat it.

The "Shapagat" Center for Assistance to Victims of Destructive Religious Movements is dedicated to counteracting violent extremism through a multifaceted approach. The organisation focuses on preventative measures, rehabilitation efforts, and deradicalisation initiatives. By addressing the root causes of destructive religious movements, "Shapagat" aims to create a safer and more resilient society while offering support and recovery for individuals affected by such ideologies.

Kyrgyzstan

Islam is the dominant religion in Kyrgyzstan, with **75% of the population following Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of law.** Orthodox Christianity represents 20% of the population, while smaller minority groups include missionary groups like Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. **Despite its secular identity, the Kyrgyzstani government maintains a cautious approach towards Islam.** The country has undergone a prolonged period of economic and political transition, leading to an ideological void and a lack of shared values among its population. Consequently, Islam has gained significance, with religious leaders assuming greater influence as atheism has declined in popularity. Notably, the younger generation has openly embraced and actively

practised Islam in their daily lives. Islamic activism is visibly expressed through various channels, including the construction of mosques, the growth of the halal industry, the establishment of Islamic education institutes, the presence of local Islamic organisations, and adherence to religious customs such as nikah (marriage) and talak (divorce).

State treatment of religion is more liberal than in other Central Asian countries. While still requiring all faith groups to apply for legal registration, Kyrgyzstan has a more relaxed policy on religion and provides more freedom for all religious communities, including all major Muslim groups. This policy is mainly due to limited state capacity to control and manipulate the religious field and a fragmented political elite that has been unable to formulate a coherent religious policy of the past decades. Muslim organisations in Kyrgyzstan have more opportunities to participate in all kinds of religious activities, charities, and various organisations. They also experience significantly less harassment from the government, which does not interfere in the activities of registered religious organisations. **The country has the largest number of religious organisations in Central Asia, including those that are banned in other Central Asian countries, such as Tablighi Jamaat, Hizmet, Nurjular, and Salafists.** The situation with religious matters improved after 2014 by the initiative of Atambaev and the state started to engage more with religious experts, representatives of religious communities and jointly new religious policy.

The state's legal position towards registered religions and various confessions is neutral, meaning that the law does not favour one religion over others provided they comply with the official state's permission to meet, teach, or distribute materials. However, the state does put forward the model of **so-called "traditional Islam".** This became a part of state policy from 2013-2014 and was justified as a part of the state's effort to counter the spread of "radical ideas" and population's engagement with extremist groups, locally and in the war-zones in Syria and Iraq. The stated goal of favouring one tradition above others is **to protect more "traditional" forms of Islamic beliefs and practises the state identifies as based on the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, against the influence of "foreign" religious beliefs.**

Islamic activism in Kyrgyzstan is seen by many in the society as playing a positive role in society, especially in situations of crisis and during the pandemic, when networks of care and support gain crucial importance. Akimbai Uulu Askarbek is the head of Public Foundation "Adep Bashaty", which was established in 2003 by a group of graduates of Egypt's Cairo and Al-Azhar universities, and today can be considered as one of the most active public foundations. The foundation is dealing exclusively with social activities, working with both religious and secular members of society. Charitable activities include scholarships for gifted students from poor families, humanitarian assistance for older people, charity concerts, and fund-raising for secular kindergartens, schools and rural water supply systems.

Tajikistan

According to surveys, **more than 90 percent of Tajikistan's population identifies as Muslim.** The majority follow the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam, while a small percentage are Nizari Ismaili Shi'a Muslims. There are also other religious communities in the country, such as Russian Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and non-denominational Protestants. **Tajikistan has strict laws that restrict public and private religious practices**, including congregations, education, religious expressions, and proselytism. **The government has developed numerous legal instruments and regulations that control religious activities**, giving state agencies broad powers to regulate religious associations, houses of worship, religious education for children, content of religious literature, and the conduct of religious events.

The government's focus in recent years has been on **countering Islamic extremism.** They view **the Hanafi School as the most effective way to prevent** the spread of radical Islamic trends. The government promotes the Hanafi School as a tolerant and loyal school of Islamic jurisprudence that allows for the peaceful coexistence of different beliefs. The authoritarian regime of Tajikistan's President, Emomali Rahmon, has expanded its restrictive policies, not only in the political domain but also in the religious field. The government uses religious institutions and ideas to legitimise its rule and **marginalises those who do not adhere to its version of state-sponsored Islam.** Independent religious scholars and alternative religious institutions have disappeared or been marginalised, leading to a narrow conception of Islam promoted by the state. The government's policies on radicalisation have contributed to societal alienation and polarisation.

The population is aware of the government's increasing control over Islamic institutions, which they see as **a political act undermining the societal relevance of the Islamic tradition.** There used to be religious scholars who offered progressive ideas on social relations, gender, and other issues. However, they have been marginalised and excluded from official religious institutions. The government's control extends to appointing imams and standardising sermons delivered in mosques. The government has monopolised the religious marketplace by eliminating non-state religious actors who could challenge official religious structures. This includes **the marginalisation of Sufi families and independent scholars.** These actions have limited the space for alternative Islamic perspectives. Overall, the government of Tajikistan has made significant efforts to control and monopolise the religious field, sidelining independent religious authorities and promoting its version of Islam.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is a predominantly Muslim country, with **over 90% of its population practising Islam.** However, Uzbekistan also has a history of religious diversity with significant Christian, Jewish, and other minority communities present. In the 1990s, Islamic leaders gained popularity in Uzbekistan but faced repression under the regime of Islam Karimov. Many Muslims were imprisoned, tortured, and denied employment and education opportunities. Since Karimov's death, there have been some reforms, but **the state still tightly controls religion and limits political competition and religious diversity.** The government presents an ambiguous image of its religious policy, claiming freedom of religion while imposing restrictions on acceptable religious expression. **President Mirziyoyev has promoted Islamic freedom and activism but keeps social discourse and activism under state control.**

The government's policy on religion can be classified into three categories: **promoting Islamic heritage and education, limiting religious freedom and expression, and implementing inconsistent reforms** on issues like the right to wear hijab. Mirziyoyev's style of governance can be described as authoritarian modernisation, where power remains concentrated in Tashkent. Although human rights have improved, political power remains in the hands of the president, as seen in the violent response to protests in Karakalpakstan. Constitutional reforms have been used to maintain authoritarian control under the guise of democratic decision-making. The government has become more open to Islamic symbolism and imagery, **promoting it as part of national identity.** They cooperate with Islamic institutions and allocate funds for preserving Islamic heritage sites. However, they also restrict and persecute independent Sufi groups and international orders. The government controls the content of Friday sermons in central mosques, leaving no room for deviation. While there are no specific dress instructions for imams, the model is centralised and directed by the state. State religious officials provide subjective judgments that lead to arrests and prosecutions under extremism laws. Citizens have been arrested for possessing content deemed "extremist" by state religious officials. Reports of arrests related to the banned movement "Hizbut Tahrir" are frequent. There is an increasing trend of social Islamisation among young, educated professionals, especially in urban areas. **Unlike the past, where religion was more prevalent among rural and older populations, now young, educated people show more devoutness, particularly in major cities.**

Charitable organisations have been allowed to operate as non-profits, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the government has later closed some of the largest charities using legal methods. Non-governmental Islamic charitable organisations in Uzbekistan have an estimated annual turnover of over $20 million. Islamic revivalism and activism are more prominent in urban areas compared to rural areas. **Young, educated professionals are embracing Islamic identity,** and regional disparities exist in the level of activism. Southern regions focus more on personal and family-level practices, while larger cities prioritise textual religious practices and issues of public expression and religious identity.

Yahyo Abdurahmonov is the head of **Vaqf** foundation, imam in Shayh Zayniddin masjid in Tashkent. They are working on construction, reconstruction of buildings of mosques and religious educational institutions, material and social support of professors, researchers, specialists and students of religious educational institutions, and material and moral support of the population in need of social protection, including people with disabilities.

3.2.3. Gender and digitalisation in Central Asian Islamic activism

Gender and women dynamics in Islamic activism

Islamic organisations run by women and women Islamic activism have become increasingly important in the social sphere of Central Asia, shaping society both offline and online. Rather than using open protest, women mostly choose quiet activism, in order to learn Islam and positively influence others in their social circles. They engage in talks with their relatives about Islam and highlight the humanitarian aspect of the religion, which includes, for example, the promotion of respect for the elders. Their mission is to show Islam in a positive light and present a religion that is progressive, modern, stylish, and humanitarian, in order to counter the stereotypes that portray Islam as "backward," "radical," or "foreign". Therefore, **women's activities are focused on bringing progressiveness, style, sport and education to the forefront of Islam**. For example, clothing has been a main topic of discussion among young Muslim women who believe in the importance of making Islamic clothing diverse, colourful, interesting, and stylish to reflect the diversity of Islam.

However, the kind of engagement of Muslim women's associations or Muslim organisations towards women changes from country to country in Central Asia. For example, **Islamic activism in Kazakhstan has an exclusively masculine face**. Although women's movements are gaining momentum throughout the country and women's leadership is becoming a common phenomenon, Muslim women are not represented either in politics or in civil society in the country. Grassroot Muslim women activism is almost non-existent. **The only institutionalised activism is embodied by the Sector of Women and Girls under the SAMK.** This structural subdivision of the Muftiate was created in 2016 as a consequence of women's trips to Syria and with the purpose to train women who could work with the women's *jamaat* (community) (Beyssembaev 2020).

In Kyrgyzstan, women in Islamic organisations have taken a lead in charity and social support activities. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mosques were among the first to open their doors to the sick, and women participated in volunteer work and raised funds to buy medical equipment. Muslim women also organise talks in the mosques, and while they are not religious authorities or well-trained *imams*, they used to be journalists, actresses or singers and have therefore built their own audience. Moreover, there are Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan that use their *madrasas* or religious university education to **exercise authority on religious knowledge**, challenging the patriarchal structure of the society. For example, one of the leaders of the Muslim organisation Mutakallim, **Jamal Frontbek Kyzy**, is against polygamous marriage in Kyrgyzstan, arguing that the way it's practice in Kyrgyzstan does not meet the requirements of Islam (i.e. to permission from the first wife, without supporting children and wives). They also contribute to changing the nature of the traditional family and emphasise how Islam protects women's rights.

Ustaz (master teachers) with specialised religious education and knowledge, and female activists, influencers, and bloggers, support other (Muslim) women on issues such as counselling and mental health/emotional support from a religious point of view, approaches to childcare, and gender equality. Despite some achievements, **Muslim women still face men's resistance to change**. The *imam* of the Murodullo mosque in Osh, in Kyrgyzstan, for example, has stated both in the mosque and on social media that "it is acceptable to beat one's wife if she does not dress up for her husband, does not clean the house, refuses to have sex with her husband, does not perform ablutions, and leaves the house without her husband's permission or she refuses to sleep with her husband."[44] His comments sparked a public discussion, and were viewed by at least 100,000 people, with almost 1,000 reposts in a single day.

In **Uzbekistan**, separate prayer rooms for women have been established in a few large mosques (Minor, Sheikh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, Khoja Ahror Vali, Abu Sakhi, Khoja Alambardar, Termizi mosques in Tashkent), but most of the mosques are not equipped to accommodate women. This led women to pray at home, or in female study circles, which are led by Islamic female teachers (*Otuns* or *Otunbibis*), giving light to an underground activism, as they organise their meetings in their communities, or *mahallas* (traditional Uzbek neighbourhoods). Usually, these are elderly respected women who have religious training, hence they can read the Quran and other religious scriptures.[45]

The role of digitalisation for Islamic activists in Central Asia

Social media are creating new spaces for the exchange of formal and informal religious resources, contributing to Islamic activism in Central Asia. Online tools allow Islamic activists to reach and connect in a fast way with their subscribers, who can, for example, listen to uploaded sermons and short videos. Today, **social media platforms have mostly replaced TV, newspapers, or magazines**, especially among the new generation, who grew up with the culture of short YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok videos. Islamic scholars use these platforms to spread their knowledge, and some scholars have millions of subscribers. However, social media is used also by new, younger scholars and influencers. In this sense, **social media is making the religious landscape more democratic, inclusive, and less hierarchical**. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, young people engage in competitions to recite the Quran, which used to be a competition only for boys, but more and more girls are also taking part. Young Muslims use social media platforms (including Instagram, *odnoklassniki* group - a Russian social networking service, similar to Facebook that is widely used in other post-Soviet countries) and mobile applications (WhatsApp, Telegram, immo, TikTok) not only to connect with their friends, but also to discuss issues related to religion.

Online activism of Muslim women is growing, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Influencers like Aijan Akylbekova, Anjelika Kairatova, Nurzat Toktosunova, three Islamic activist women in Kyrgyzstan, promote Islamic lifestyles offline and online, as they are popular on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. In Kazakhstan, one of the most famous Muslim influencers, Aynur Tursynbaeva, is a poetess and coach-motivator that on her Instagram page talks about issues with raising children, family relations and psychology in the context of Islam.[46]

In recent years, the Internet and social media have brought increased attention to domestic violence against women in Central Asia, as well as suicides among young married women, early arranged marriages, and the role that conservative religious beliefs play in each of these. **Muslim female psychologists have been consulted, and some became popular online,** such as Marziya Bekaidar, a Kazakh psychologist with 143 thousand followers on Instagram.[47]

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[44] Uzbek Mullah: Permissible to beat a wife under Sharia: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=849927635980116&ref=sharing.

[45] Research conducted by Davronbek Tojialiyev and Hikoyat Salimova in Uzbekistan. Tojialiyev, Davronbek and Salimova, Hikoyat. (2022). Islamic activism in Uzbekistan. Unpublished.

[46] Her Instagram account has more than 4 million subscribers (@ainurzharkhynbekkyzy).

[47] Her Instagram account can be found at @marziya_bekaidar.

3.2.4. External factors: foreign funding and transnational forms of Islamic activism

When Central Asia gained independence from the Soviet Union, foreign religious actors moved in the region with the purpose of influencing its religious trajectory, capitalising on the years-long Russian imposed atheism and the quest of the population to rebound with their Islamic identity. Both Christian and Muslim actors moved in Central Asia, but the largest number of religious foreigners were Muslims with roots in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran and South Asia. Foreign Islamic actors' funding of mosques was prominent between 2000 and 2010. However, today **foreign Islamic actors seem more interested in developing and strengthening their economic ties with Central Asian countries rather than meddling into religious affairs**, especially because of the peculiar relations that Central Asian states have with Islam. In **Kazakhstan**, for example, the government has passed **strict laws on external financing of mosques and any religious activity in the country**.[48] In **Tajikistan**, foreign governments and/or organisations can provide technical assistance and expertise to local religious organisations, **proving that the assistance does not entail proselytism and under government's approval**. The next sections analyse the role of main Muslim countries in Central Asia.

The role of Turkey in Central Asia

Turkey's influence in Central Asia was facilitated by common ethno-linguistic roots, and religious outreach success. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ankara sought to establish stronger cultural and economic connections, leading to the formation of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) in 1991. In 2009, under President Erdoğan's leadership, the Cooperation Council of the Turkic Speaking States was initiated, later becoming the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021. Comprising five member countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan) and two observer states (Hungary and Turkmenistan), the bloc represents approximately 170 million people, boasting a combined GDP nearing 1.5 trillion US dollars and a trade volume at around 16 billion US dollars (Osipova 2023).

The transformation from the Cooperation Council to the Organisation of Turkic States in 2021 signifies more than a formal name change. **This entity, often referred to as a "Turkic-speaking EU", now encompasses shared objectives across various domains, including foreign policy, migration, technology, and religion**. Ankara's promotion of a pan-Turkic identity has increased its soft power and international standing. The inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2019 elevated the OTS, fostering multidimensional engagement, such as trade, tourism, education, and security collaboration (Osipova 2023). In the education sector, Turkey extends its presence through the "Türkiye Scholarships" program, and the creation of several schools, along with two joint universities (Turkish-Kazakh International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University and Turkish-Kyrgyz Manas University) (Republic of Türkiye N.d.). Additionally, **the Hizmet movement created extensive service provision and educational networks with ramifications that reached the rising generation of elites in the region**. It had a substantial economic impact and acted as an arm of the Turkish state, contributing to the rising of Turkey's economic influence in Central Asia. However, in 2013 the NGOs broke with Erdogan's government and has seen its role in the region greatly diminish. As Erdogan was expelling Gülenists from the bureaucracy at home, Ankara asked the Central Asian states to close their schools, even though only Tajikistan complied.

On energy cooperation, President Erdoğan's re-election reaffirmed his policies of augmenting energy supplies from the region, ensuring transit routes, and accessing Asian markets. Central to this approach is the energy-rich partnership with Kazakhstan, as exemplified by the notable 2022 increase in turnover to 6.35 billion dollars, primarily driven by the upsurge in petroleum prices. Turkey, reliant on external energy resources due to domestic production limitations, particularly welcomes Kazakhstan's oil and gas exports. **The disruptions in global energy markets caused**

[48] Legal information system of Regulatory Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, On religious activities and religious associations, 11 October 2011.

by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine led to a 58 percent rise in Turkey's coal imports from Kazakhstan in the same year (Osipova 2023).

Other Turkish Sufi networks, such as the Sufi Naqshbandi[49] groups, founded a number of small *madrasas* in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. **Turkish religious actors were generally welcomed by the Central Asian countries as their elites were encouraged by Western officials to adopt the Turkish model of secularism, democracy and market-oriented economic policies**. Indeed, Western countries, including the US, feared that the spread of Iranian and Saudi influence would ease the path towards Islamic radicalisation, thus they encouraged Turkish groups to take an active role in Central Asia to block Iran and Saudi Arabia's impact (Kramer 1996). There is no evidence that suggests that Turkish Islamic organisations have enabled (or prevented) radicalisation in the region (EER 2019).

While the activity of Turkish groups was relatively open, the activity of Saudi Arabia and Iran actors has been less so. Central Asia has been another chessboard -even though to a lesser extent than the Middle East- where Saudi Arabia wants to boost its influence to limit Iran's political, religious and economic influence. However, while **Iran** has been successful in positioning itself as a key commercial partner for the region by establishing bilateral relations with Central Asian governments, its **religious influence is weak**. The country is considered a minor religious actor in the region, mainly because of its version of Shia Islam that has not permeated Sunni-majority Central Asian countries (Balci 2018; Nijhar 2023). The Gulf states religious outreaches in the region are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Gulf state actors in Central Asia

For what concerns **Saudi Arabia**, while it has been investing in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to try and lure the countries under its influence and away from Iran, it also used different tools to ensure its influence in the region. Saudi Arabia has been using the construction and repair of mosques to promote its geopolitical interests in the region since the 1990s. Foundations and individuals in the Gulf country also welcomed and funded Central Asians to study and teach in their home institutions. However, given the strict policies of Central Asian countries towards foreign influences, Central Asian might have not been allowed to go back to their countries (see section below on *Position of Central Asian governments towards external actors*).[50]

Saudi Arabia participates in the construction of mosques in Central Asia not directly, but through **financial support to various organisations**. For example, the Gulf country funded by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) has supported the construction of a number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan since 2017.[51] Nevertheless, it should be noted that funding mosques' construction does not translate into influence over what is taught inside the mosque, or the ideology adopted. Other organisations that are funded by Saudi Arabia engage in **different social projects, such as building schools and hospitals, helping poor families and orphanages, bringing water for both drinking and irrigation to rural communities**, and organising *iftars* during *Ramadan*. Using Islam as a common ground to win the populations' favour, Saudi Arabia is planning to economically invest more in the region, especially to exploit its renewable energy potential. The Kingdom has already invested in bilateral projects in all four countries, in sectors that include education, healthcare, culture and infrastructure. Talks around space exploration cooperation have also taken place in Kazakhstan (Hameed and Narayanan 2022; 24KG 2022; Saudi Press Agency 2022; Special Eurasia 2023).

The recent summit on July 19th, 2023 in Jeddah, between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Central Asian nations, highlighted efforts to strengthen relations through improved supply chains, transportation, communication, and

[49] For more information on the Naqshbandi order, see Cornell 2015.

[50] Central Asia Islamic activism expert - collaboration with ECDPM, 18 May 2023.

[51] See Ikromov 2020: Exact numbers however are difficult to collect.

security measures. Saudi Arabia is channelling investments in the region, including Uzbekistan, where its investments have amounted to about SR45 billion ($12 billion) in different sectors, with potential for further investment opportunities. Central Asian nations possess untapped resources, including agricultural and natural resources, making them attractive for Saudi investment. The region's potential for tourism and trade with Saudi Arabia is being recognised, urging Saudi businessmen and investment funds to assess market trends and climates for fruitful collaboration (Al-Sulami 2023).

Other Gulf countries, such as **Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)** also play a role in Central Asia, applying the same logic used by Saudi Arabia. For example, **Qatar** has financed the construction of mosques, religious schools and centres in the region. For example, it allocated 70 million US dollars for the construction of the Dushanbe Central Mosque in Tajikistan, the total cost of which was 100 million US dollars. The Qatari government also funded the construction of more than 30 mosques and religious educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan (Ikromov 2020). Qatar has long standing relations with Kazakhstan, dating back to 1999 when the Gulf country funded the construction of "Nur Astana", Kazakhstan capital's Islamic Cultural Center which was completed in 2005. Qatar is primarily interested in the Kazakh energy sector, but they also established ties through various charitable events and by financing projects in a variety of sectors, such as agriculture, economic and finance, sports, education, and culture (Koch 2017).

For what concerns the **UAE**, it seems more interested in reinforcing economic ties rather than focusing on their religious connotation. While Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation, for example, funded the construction of the Shymkent Cathedral Mosque, considered the largest in Southern Kazakhstan, **the UAE refrains from investing directly to influence the religious situation in Central Asia**, rather focusing on development, educational and economic projects.[52]

The UAE's strategic investments in Central Asia focus on key sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and security. The Emirates' engagement in Central Asia also reflects its competition with Turkey and Iran in shaping the Islamic and geopolitical landscape. Through investments, partnerships, and collaborations, the UAE is strategically positioning itself in Central Asia to bolster its economic interests, counter rivals, and secure its role in energy markets. This calculated approach aligns with the UAE's broader geopolitical objectives and cooperative efforts with Russia and China (Karasik 2019).

Kazakhstan is considered as a key investment destination, with strong political ties complementing over 200 Emirati companies operating in the country. UAE investments in various sectors such as energy, mining, infrastructure, logistics, agriculture, and food security are expanding. Notably, the UAE's involvement in Kazakhstan's energy sector has grown, including a significant stake in an offshore field and funding for priority sectors through the Al Falah Fund. The UAE's engagement in Kazakhstan is exemplified by regular visits by Kazakh officials and Dubai's DP World acquisition of special economic zones in the Caspian Sea, aligning with the UAE's global hub vision (Karasik N.d.).

Position of Central Asian governments towards external actors

While Central Asian governments have welcomed economic and diplomatic engagements of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other foreign countries, they have been **quite sceptical about their religious interference and ideologies**.

[52] For example, the UAE has many bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan, and since 2011, the gross inflow of direct investment from the UAE to Kazakhstan has amounted to about 2 billion US dollars. In 2020, the two countries signed a cooperation agreement that included projects around infrastructure, manufacturing and food production for a total budget of 6.1 billion US dollars. In 2022, the UAE also expanded its strategic partnership with Uzbekistan initially signed in 2019. The strategy originally covered government modernisation, but the new agreement includes among others the financial and economic sector, the education sector and food security. Sources: Ikromov 2020; Erubaeva 2020; Zawya 2022; Kazakh Invest 2023.

With the Islamic revival in the region, governments were struggling with the influx of Islamic groups and could not afford to have foreign interference in their religious narrative that could have compromised their control. Therefore, they took steps to counter the spread of Wahhabi and Salafist ideas, which they consider a form of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. They increased crackdowns on radical Islamic practices, on militant websites and Islamic literature. They began monitoring *imams* to make sure they preach the right version of Islam, and did not call for insurrection and violence (Priya 2022). They exercised a strict control over foreign institutions operating in the countries, on the Turkish *Diyanet*'s activities for example,[53] and other NGOs that were seen as vessels of a foreign version of Islam. **Saudi Arabia, for example, withheld from funding local Kazakh Salafi networks, as this was regarded with a great deal of suspicion from the Kazakh government** that makes no difference between the trends within global Salafism (Biard 2019). Transnational ties between local and international Islamic NGOs and institutions have formed, but the control exercised by Central Asian governments over these ties is such that the **transnational dimension of Islam in the region is overestimated and mostly fictitious.**

3.3. Similarities and differences

The preceding chapters discussed the historical development of Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel and in Central Asia respectively. Both regions share a number of key similarities and differences. For example, both regions have seen homegrown developments of specific forms of Islamic activism, impacted clearly by external influences, including notably the experiences of European colonisation and Soviet imperialism. But not-surprisingly, there are also a number of key differences. The section below lists, in a non-exhaustive manner, a number of similarities and differences with regards to Islamic activism in both regions, presented as key factors to take into account when considering policies and cooperation projects/ activities in these regions.

Similarities:

- **At a historical level**, both regions have seen a homegrown development of Islamic activism that predated European and Soviet imperialism. Western and Soviet colonisation then challenged and shaped Islamic activism in both West Africa and Central Asia, impacting the way it operates today.
- **At a political level**, in both regions the countries are all secular with a high proportion of Muslims (an average of 80% of Muslims per country when considering the 8 countries).
- **At a community level**, a diverse field of Islamic activist actors exist that participate in community activism and support their own communities on a range of topics, including health issues (COVID-19), education (*madrasas*), mosque building and funding.
- In both regions, Islamic activism has developed **its own particularism through the localisation of not only the type of activism but also the type of Islamic practices**. Violent extremist groups have also applied a **glocalist strategy** to link the global ideology to local realities.
- In both regions, **women are taking an increasingly important role in Islamic social activism, particularly in women-only spaces or in women-designated spaces.**
- In both regions, the spread of Islamic culture, but also Islamic learning as well as *dawah,* is increasingly **practised in the digital space, through influencers, bloggers and the use of social media platforms**, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook.
- In both regions, **foreign influences are present** through external funding by countries such as Qatar, UAE, Turkey or Saudi Arabia emphasising the transnational component of Islam.

[53] The Diyanet is Ankara's Religious Affairs Directorate which in 1994 created the Eurasian Islamic Council, marking the formal beginning of Turkey's religious outreach in Central Asia. The Council's purpose was to facilitate a dialogue around the role of Islam in society and its ties with the State. If on the one hand it was successful in expanding Turkey's influence, on the other there have been some tensions that made the Council lose its prominence, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan expelled their Turkish religious attachés in 2002 and 2011 respectively (EER 2019).

- **At an economical level**, these countries capitalise on shared religious identity to project influence. They establish ties through trade, development projects, and religious outreach. They also utilise religious and cultural ties to strengthen diplomatic relations. They engage in various forms of cooperation, including security, education, and infrastructure and invest in various sectors, including energy, infrastructure, logistics, and agriculture.

Differences:

- **State control and instability:**
  - In Central Asian countries, the governments have enforced strict policies on religious activities and sanctioned a state-approved form of Islam. The states have a strong control over their territories and consequently, every non-state-sanctioned Islamic activity is closely monitored and/or considered extremist or terrorist.
  - West African and the Sahelian countries have been riddled by conflict and instability, and consequently exercise a weak control over their territories. Islamic activism has filled the service gap left by the state and is very active in communities. However, the same has been done by violent extremist groups, which have exploited grievances and years of war and conflict to present themselves as an alternative to the state in the provision of services. States are also worried of the involvement of civil society activists with violent extremist groups and regulate their involvement in social and political life.
- **Decentralisation vs. Centralisation:**
  - Islamic activism in West Africa and the Sahel tends to be more decentralised, with a variety of religious organisations and actors playing important roles in shaping the religious landscape. In contrast,
  - Islamic activism in Central Asia tends to be more centralised, with state-controlled institutions playing a dominant role in regulating religious practice.
- **Economic Sphere and Foreign Funding:**
  - West Africa/Sahel: The region faces significant poverty, leading to limited economic resources for Islamic activism. This results in a greater reliance on external funding for religious and social projects. Foreign funding from Gulf countries, Iran, and Turkey seek to establish ties and religious influence through the construction of mosques, Islamic charities, and madrasas. They also invest in critical infrastructure and development projects, using Islam as a common ground.
  - Central Asia: The region generally exhibits more economic development compared to West Africa/Sahel allowing for a higher level of endogenous funding for social and Islamic initiatives, potentially reducing the reliance on external funding. Initially, foreign religious actors played a larger role, but now there's a shift towards economic ties and development projects due to the peculiar relations Central Asian states have with Islam and strict government control over foreign influence. Turkey, particularly employs military cooperation, development support, and commerce to strengthen ties with the region.
- **Civil-society space:**
  - In West Africa/Sahel, civil society, including Islam-based organisations, often plays a more prominent role in the region. Despite challenges, there is a relatively larger space for civil society to operate, which allows for a diversity of Islamic activism. This can encompass charity work, education, and community development.
  - While civil society exists in Central Asia, there might be more restrictive government policies that impact the extent to which Islam-based organisations can operate. This could limit their scope and impact on society.
- **Political sphere and religious leaders:**
  - In West Africa/Sahel, religious leaders have historically played a more active role in the political sphere in this region. Their involvement can extend to mediating conflicts, providing guidance to leaders, and even

impacting public policy decisions. The example of influential religious leaders in Mali underscores their role in shaping political developments.
  - For Central Asia, research suggests that there is a more controlled environment in terms of religious leaders' political involvement due to government regulations. Religious figures may have a more limited public role in political affairs compared to their counterparts in West Africa/Sahel.
- **Islamic schools:**
  - West Africa/Sahel: The dominant Islamic school in this region is Sunni Islam, particularly the Maliki branch, but Sufism also has a significant presence. Sufi brotherhoods and orders often contribute to social welfare and community development, which can influence the nature of Islamic activism.
  - Central Asia has a historical affiliation with Sunni Islam, particularly the Hanafi branch, though there are pockets of Shia communities as well. Sufi practices have historically played a role in the region, but they are increasingly losing appeal.
- **Regarding ethnic and religious diversity**, West Africa and the Sahel are characterised by greater ethnic and religious diversity than Central Asia, which has a predominantly Muslim population.

4. Policy-relevant takeaways

While non-Western actors, notably Turkey and the Gulf States openly engage with Islamic activist organisations and Muslim civil society in West Africa and the Sahel, and in Central Asia, Western actors, including the EU, have mostly (though not completely) refrained from directly engaging with such actors. At the same time, actors such as the EU are a key supporter of civil society across its external engagement, as a way to strengthen societal resilience, accountability, human rights and governance.

Building on the main observations in the preceding sections on the region-specific historical development, and the diverse roles and function of Islamic activist organisations in West Africa and the Sahel, and in Central Asia, this section provides a number of take-aways for policy-makers. **These takeaways are meant to inform discussions on how to engage with religious actors in these two regions, as well as the possible design and implementation of external cooperation programmes. They are also important to take into consideration for diplomatic and cultural relations and exchanges.**

➔ **Religious sensitivity: a must for external interventions**

Faith-based and religious actors play pivotal roles across societies in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel. Applying religious sensitivity and understanding the religious dynamics that shape these regions' and countries' societies and governance are key to help external actors develop their interventions that reach larger parts of society, design more comprehensive and inclusive dialogue processes and design better-targeted support programmes, in order to have a better and more tailored impact on the countries.

Islamic activist organisations and actors include a wide range of actors, from religious leadership, to women's organisations and Islamic NGOs, CSOs and charities, each with their own methods, functions and roles within a given society. Islamic actors such as traditional leaders, *imams* and their mosques can act as intermediaries and are key communication partners for external actors. Islamic NGOs, CSOs or charities can bear important vehicles to reach communities and people in need. Their understanding of local dynamics and realities can help external actors to better design support programmes that effectively help tackle challenges. These actors can also offer space for community-level discussions that shape social acceptance. But these actors can also act as vectors of conservative pressures and discourses that may not align with external actors' values and cooperation objectives.

External actors can engage with such religious and Islamic actors on a range of issues such as local economic and social development, digitalisation, countering and preventing violent extremism, women's empowerment, community stabilisation and sustainable development (Lebovich 2019; Rupert 2022). However, prior to engaging with such actors, there is a need for a granular understanding of the social, political and economic role such organisations play, in a way that appreciates the complexity and diversity of religious actors but also sheds light on their values and agendas. Approaches designed to work with Islamic activist actors should also avoid the instrumentalisation of Islamic activist actors, or be built on ill-informed or misplaced expectations of working with such actors. A Do-No-Harm Approach should be instilled in such approaches.

➔ **A granular understanding of the nature of Islamic activist actors and their context is needed to avoid simplistic understandings of Islamic activism**

When formulating policies or designing support programmes and interventions, either related to religious actors and faith-based organisations, or intended to involve such actors as implementing partners, a granular understanding of their nature and role is needed. This understanding should avoid an oversimplification of Islamic activism, for example equating Islamic activism with violent extremism, or confusing Islamic activism with political Islam (or Islamism). Conflating Islamic activism with violent extremism risks resulting in counterproductive measures that can worsen the approach instead of valuing the connections, roles and leverage Islamic activist actors and/or organisations have within their communities. The complexity and diversity of Islamic activism, which vary based on historical, cultural, social, and political contexts, should be taken into consideration. This means that approaches designed for West Africa and the Sahel should not be copied on Central Asia, or vice-versa.

In order to avoid an oversimplification of Islamic Activism, existing context analysis tools, such as political economic analysis (PEA), or context and conflict analysis, should help support an in-depth understanding of Islamic activist actors. This should include their (historical) development and position within society, their (current) nature but also other more operational aspects such as their composition, leadership, expertise and outreach and impact. This refinement is crucial not only to accurately discern the genuine contributors to social and political development but also to identify and counteract organisations that operate under a veneer of legitimacy while pursuing radical agendas. Without a discerning approach, there is a potential peril of inadvertently supporting organisations that exploit the façade of Western values to serve more radical intentions. As we delve deeper into these complexities, striking a balance between an open-minded perspective and a realistic awareness is imperative to examine the potential challenges that could arise, avoiding the pitfalls of oversimplification in our analysis.

➔ **The relevance of digitalisation and digital Islamic activism**

In Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel the impact of digitalisation on Islamic activism is highly relevant and should not be overlooked by policymakers. The rise of online platforms has created new opportunities for the dissemination and growth of Islamic activism, as well as extremist ideologies. To counter the spread of extremist narratives, policymakers should allocate resources to comprehend these dynamics more effectively. This entails thorough surveillance, digital literacy across various online platforms, and an effort to gauge their extent and impact. This approach also seeks to enhance comprehension of their outreach and magnitude, alongside the interplay between online engagements and real-world situations.

Digitalisation has also provided avenues for Islamic civil society actors to engage with communities and promote peaceful interpretations of Islam. Policymakers should prioritise investing in digital literacy programs and supporting the development of online platforms for such Islamic voices. The failure to effectively understand and monitor the

digital dimension of Islamic activism risks the proliferation of extremist ideologies and undermines efforts towards promoting social stability and countering violent extremism in Central Asia and West Africa/Sahel.

➔ **Valuing gender and the distinct role of women in Islamic activism**

When discussing Islamic activism in the context of West Africa and the Sahel and Central Asia, gender is a critical aspect. Policymakers must not overlook or marginalise women's contributions to Islamic activism. Women are active agents and play significant roles in shaping Islamic activism at the micro (local and community level) and meso (national) level, which in turn has repercussions at the macro level. Their involvement in Islamic activism can have far-reaching effects on broader social, political, and economic changes. Ignoring women's contributions in Islamic activism would be detrimental to any policy aimed at promoting stability, peace, and security in regions where Islamic activism is prominent. Hence, policymakers must promote gender-inclusive policies that recognise the potential impact of women's agency and contributions in Islamic activism, as a wider contribution to civil society. Such policies should prioritise the promotion of women's rights, empowerment, and engagement in decision-making processes, and also promote the role of women and girls as agents of change, and highlight their role as mediators and peacemakers. At the same time, there is a need for a broader and deeper understanding on how masculinities are employed to radicalise or are exploited by different violent extremist groups. Investing in existing tools while making sure they are gender-aware, such as gender-aware PEA, can help policymakers understand the gender dynamics that are at play in a specific context and better design responses to P/CVE.

➔ **Strengthening partners' institutional setup**

In order to support a more granular and nuanced understanding of Islamic activist actors and organisations, partner countries should invest time and resources in supporting their policy makers and relevant departments to build up and maintain such knowledge. A strong and up-to-date knowledge base, supported by training and tailored advice can help to guide engagement efforts. This can be helped by a strong network of contacts and communication channels with representatives of Islamic activist actors and organisations.

Developing guidance and practical support on how to assess religion across a range of policy sectors is key. As demonstrated above, Islamic activist actors are far from unidimensional and engage across sectors, from trade and private sector development to education and humanitarian aid. Providing guidance on religious sensitivity, and an institutional knowledge base and network will help create an enabling environment for a more thorough understanding of Islamic activism and its role in West Africa and the Sahel and Central Asia. Creating such an enabling environment for engagement with Islamic activism, can help design support programmes that can help build stronger exchanges and coordination with Islamic activist actors, but also better support their work in the common challenges they face, for example with regards to radicalisation, but also education, the challenges of digitalisation or gender inequality.

➔ **Setting up an OECD DAC dialogue on religious sensitivity**

Recent research on support provided by Western donors, in particular OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members found that between 2011 and 2020 only 2% of the ODA funding went into efforts to prevent violent extremism (in particular peacebuilding and security sector reforms) in Africa. This highlights that the international community responds to the challenge of violent extremism in Africa in a reactive manner, with little investments in prevention (UNDP 2023). However, DAC members can continue to play a critical role in supporting sustainable development and stability in Central Asia and West Africa and the Sahel by engaging with Islamic activism in the region. For the most part, there has not been an extensive engagement with Islamic activist actors by OECD DAC

members in West Africa and the Sahel or in Central Asia - with some limited examples and experiences. These are discussed in the box below.

Box 9: Engagement with Islamic civil society by DAC countries in West Africa and the Sahel and Central Asia

The **United States** is an important geopolitical player in Central Asia. The US has established strategic partnerships with central governments and directly funded Islamic actors and NGOs (mostly affiliated with the Central Asian state institutions) (The Oxus Society 2021). On the other hand, US-based NGOs have been networking and connecting with Islamic NGOs and actors in the region.[54]

The EU has positioned itself as a strong supporter of civil society in Central Asia, for example by creating the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, in the framework of the EU Strategy. Thus far, the EU has not engaged overtly with Islamic civil society (Nem 2022; Urciuolo 2023). In the EU multi-annual indicative programmes (MIPs) of Central Asian countries, religious or faith-based organisations are mentioned sparsely.

The EU's engagement in Kazakhstan is somewhat of an exception. The MIP recognises religious actors as part of a wider civil society or as possible interlocutors. In Kazakhstan, for example, the EU has co-funded (with the UN) counter terrorism programmes involving *imams*. This has included support for rehabilitation centres where religious clerics and imams, together with psychiatrists and counsellors, collaborate with NGOs to reintegrate and rehabilitate former extremists (Babar and Rivzi 2022; UNODC 2022). European-based organisations have started to promote a more religiously sensitive approach. For example, a recent online study of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has pointed out that repatriation, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration (RDRR) programmes targeting violent Islamist extremist offenders can benefit from taking into account the importance of training *imams* and theologues to work in this field, given the importance of religion in P/CVE (RAN 2021).

For Western OECD DAC members there is little to no evidence that they have been closely working with Islamic activist actors. OECD DAC members such as **Italy, Germany and France** have acknowledged the importance of working with local actors in order to support effective development and humanitarian assistance. But a securitised approach, marked by support to counter-terrorism offensives, has marked the overall Western approach to West Africa and the Sahel. In its new Integrated Strategy towards the Sahel, **the EU** has put special emphasis on civil society support in the region. However, on the one hand there have been difficulties from the Sahelian civil society to access EU funds, preferring bilateral fundings from some EU MS or other international organisations (Goxho 2021). On the other hand, there is little to no evidence of support for Islamic civil society (Saferworld 2022) or recurrent dialogue and/or partnerships between the EU and Islamic activist leaders, despite their pivotal roles in countries such as Mali, Senegal, Nigeria and Burkina Faso.

[54] For example, the muftiate in Kyrgyzstan has worked with USAID and Eurasia Foundation. The Hollings Centre fosters dialogue between the US and Muslim-majority population countries, including Central Asia, while Oxus Society bridges researchers, journalists, activists and others from Central Asia with the rest of the world, in particular the US. The Oxus Society official website available here and The Hollings Centre official website available here.

These (limited) experiences presented in the box above, can serve as the basis for building up a repository of examples and experiences from which lessons learned can be deducted. These could stimulate a more systematic dialogue and exchange on engaging with faith-based and religious actors between OECD DAC members. For example, this could include discussions on respective guidance notes, on support provided to civil society or on experience of dialogue with civil society actors. The OECD DAC could also consider the establishment of a forum for direct exchange with Islamic activist actors from these respective regions. This could function as a platform to discuss how religious actors, including Islamic civil society can help implement effective support programmes and inclusive civil society dialogue processes. For the OECD DAC, institutional support measures would need to be set up too, to ensure the building up of an institutionalised knowledge base, with adequate support tools such as training and guidance.

Glossary

All the terms are in Arabic otherwise stated

Aqidah	belief system
Bid'a	innovation
Dawah	Effort to propagate and share the teachings of Islam with others. Muslims are encouraged to engage in *dawah* as a means of inviting others to embrace the faith and gain a deeper understanding of its principles. *Dawah* can take different forms, including engaging in meaningful conversations, distributing literature, debates, and setting a positive example through one's actions and behaviour.
Dars	religious education
Fard kifayah	collective obligation
Hakimiyya	sovereignty
Hanafi Madhab	major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence
Haram/Halal	forbidden/authorised
Iftar	fast-breaking evening meal of Muslims in Ramadan
Ijtihad	legal reasoning (see Box 2)
Imam	head of the Muslim community
Jannah	paradise
Jamaats (Arabic root variations)	communities
Jihad	struggle or fight
Kuffar	non-believers (that have to be fought)
Khutbas	sermons
Lisan	speech (see Box 2)
Madhabs	Islamic school of thought
Madrasa	religious school
Mahallas (Uzb)	Traditional neighbourhoods in Uzbekistan
Maliki Madhab	major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence
Manhaj	Actions or methods that legitimate whether one remains a purist, activist or Salafi-jihadist
Muftiate	the state-funded religious institutions

Nafs	soul (see Box 2)
Nasheeds	Islamic chants
Nikkah	Islamic Marriage
Otuns or Otunbibis (Uzb)	Female teachers
Qalam	pen (see Box 2)
Sadaqa	optional charity
Salaf al-Salih	pious ancestors
Sayf	sword (see Box 2)
Sharia	Islamic law (see Box 1)
Shirk	the sin of idolatry or polytheism
Sunna	traditions and practice of the Islamic community
Tablighi Jamaat	transnational Deobandi Islamic missionary movement
Tafkir	ideology of rejection used by some Salafi groups towards other muslim branches
Tafkir/Kaffir	excommunication/ non-believer
Talak	Islamic divorce
Taqiyya	meaning prudence or fear in Arabic: practice of prudently concealing or denying one's religious beliefs and practices as a precautionary measure.
Tarbiya	education
Tasawwuf	Inner-dimensional and mystical aspect of Islam
Tawheed	indivisible God
Tazkiyya	cleansing
Ulamas	Muslim scholars
Ummah	The nation, or community in Islam
Yad	hand (see Box 2)
Yiman Nuru (Kyr)	Islamic political party (the light of faith) in Kyrgyzstan
Zakat	Mandatory charity
Uztaz (Uzb)	*Master teachers*

Annexes

Annex 1. Social Movement Theory

Since the late 1990s, a number of Islamic movement specialists have begun to bridge the gap between the study of Islamic activism and social science theories of collective action. Given the variety of collective actors that operate in the name of Islam, "one might even make a strong case that Islamic activism is one of the most common examples of a social movement in the world" (Wiktorowicz 2003).

Rather than emphasising the specificity of Islam as a system of meaning, identity, and basis of collective action, scholars of the social theory point to movement commonalities rooted in the three sequential processes of **resource mobilisation, decision-making, and framework** (Wiktorowicz 2003).

➢ Resource mobilisation

Resource mobilisation focuses on **how action is possible**, rather than the specific ideology that drives it. Though ideology can limit the range of resource options by excluding those contrary to movement beliefs, movement finances frequently fluctuate according to human and material resource availability and institutional access (Wiktorowicz 2004a). For both extremist groups and CSOs, **resource mobilisation primarily refers to the ability to effectively use "mosques, study circles, dense social networks (friends and family), Islamic NGOs, political parties, *dars* (religious education), *khutbas* (sermons), professional and student organisations, and trade unions"** (Wiktorowicz 2004b). For violent extremist groups, however, violence can be seen as a tool for resource mobilisation, to achieve political, economic or social goals. All of these resources are used to obtain and organise different types of activities for the movement.

➢ Decision-making

The decision-making component of the social movement theory frames **Islamic activists as actors driven by tactical and strategic assessments of costs and risks**. Their choices reflect a **conscious assessment of whether a specific decision helps achieve goals in the context of opportunities and limitations** (Wiktorowicz 2004b). For radical groups and CSOs, decision-making plays a crucial role in the viability of their organisation. Such approaches tend to avoid the conceptual language of rational choice theory (preference, utility maximisation, etc.) but focus on strategic decision-making. This perspective enables us to distance our analysis from an essentialist perception of Islamic activist actors influenced by the orientalist movement (Wiktorowicz 2004a). For example, violent extremist groups portray decisions such as suicide bombing as ideological decisions, whereas several scholars argue that this tactic is rational in that it helps Islamic (and other) extremists groups achieve their group goals (Wiktorowicz 2004a).

➢ Framing

According to the social movement theory, **movements need to "frame" their arguments to persuade audiences and elicit support and participation**.[55] Framing induces **content to be selected according to its potential persuasive effects rather than solely on the basis of ideology**. Islamist activist groups try to recruit more resources by disseminating specific frames based on Islamic concepts carefully curated to fit their agendas. For CSOs, the ethical principles of *zakat* or *sadaqa* are used to promote the agenda of unity, community building and righteous Muslim, whereas for extremist groups, *takfir*, is convenient to clearly differentiate between those in and those out of the

[55] De-orientalisation refers to the conscious effort to further away from an orientalist perspective of Islam in which writing is based on western Euro-centric prejudicial assessments, deviating from the development of Islamic historical civilisation. On the contrary, The Social Movement Theory allows us to understand Islamic activism through a new lens where its characteristics as a socialism movement are highlighted rather than the uniqueness of Islam as an organising belief system (Wiktorowicz 2003).

group. Frames strongly impact the vision of the world, priorities and idea of morality of the members of an Islamic activist group (Orofino 2020). The framing process defines the core elements of the individual's so-called social identity within the movement (Melucci 1980).

Annex 2. Salafism and Wahhabism: key notions for Islamic activist groups

The Salafi ideology

Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam that believes in following the practices of the first three generations of Muslims after the Prophet Mohammed. The term Salaf means "those who have gone before," referring to the Muslims who were closest in time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad (Hamid and Dar 2016).

The emergence of Salafism is a **complex historical phenomenon.** Salafism emerged in the **late 19th century** as a distinct movement within Sunni Islam. Some scholars argue that Salafism was a response to various social, political, and religious changes taking place in the Muslim world at the time, including **the spread of colonialism, the decline of traditional Islamic institutions, and the increasing influence of non-Muslim ideas and practices.** Others argue that Salafism can be traced back to earlier periods in Islamic history and that its emergence in the late 19th century was **a continuation of a long-standing tradition of Islamic revivalism and reformism.**

Salafists are dogmatic and literalist in relation to the Quran and Sunnah (teachings, deeds and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammed) (Ranstorp N.d.). Therefore, Salafists **reject any subsequent interpretation of the Quran (*bid'a*) and modern Muslim views and practices**. Salafists have a strict view on an indivisible God (*tawheed*) and total submission to God's rule and regulations through a return to a pure past. For Salafists, *hakimiyya* (sovereignty) means that God is the only legislator and that everyone is obliged to follow *sharia* to the letter. **All forms of change, deviation or renewal are deemed sinful and a denial of truth that requires fighting *shirk* (polytheism) and *kuffar* (nonbelievers).**

Salafism is not a homogeneous tradition of interpretation but has several different strains that have emerged historically. Researchers usually refer to three categories of Salafism: purists (or quietists), activists and jihadis (Ranstorp N.d.). In both Central Asia and West Africa we find all three types of Salafis groups.

The **purist/quietist Salafists** avoid "political activism and violence" in the pursuit of building an Islamist State. The puritan Salafists focus on cleansing the religion from renewal or reinterpretation through education (*tarbiya*), cleansing (*tazkiyya*) and *dawah* among other Muslims and promote segregation vis-à-vis non-Muslims (Svenska Dagbladet 2015). In West Africa and Central Asia, the impact of quietist Salafists can be seen in the "cultural salafisation, which applies on a global scale and has a significant impact on religiosity".[56] The term refers to the global standardisation of what it means to be a good Muslim noticeable in the way of dressing or behaving in the public space or the increased use of Arabic terms. The word 'cultural' emphasises that this is not necessarily a political project and that the phenomenon unfolds across social strata in different ways (Areion Group 2021).

Activist Salafists participate actively on local societal issues, they point out un-Islamic behaviour and, at times, try to exercise social control in certain areas. Activist Salafists are often focused on global and local conditions and **take a strong stance against rulers whom they seek to undermine**. They have a strong enemy picture and rhetoric focusing on Western regimes and lobby and campaign for change according to Islamist precepts (Ranstorp N.d.). In Central Asia, Hizb-ur-Turhir is an example of an activist Salafi group which focuses on strategic decision making and framing to position themselves against governments in the region.

[56] Interview by Léa Robert on 1 September 2021 and interview with Marie Nathalie LeBlanc (Areion Group 2021).

Salafi-jihadism views violence as a necessary instrument to **change the present world order.** It rejects liberalism, democracy and the nation state, which have to be fought. There is also an individual duty of every Muslim to involve themselves in an armed struggle against their near enemies (godless regimes and all non-Salafi Muslims) and far enemies (Western states) (Alshech 2014). Militant Salafism considers that armed *jihad* (*qital*) must be waged to expand Islam. For Salafi-jihadists, martyrdom through *jihad* is the ultimate struggle and sacrifice that promises special rewards in paradise (*Jannah*). Violent extremist groups mentioned in this paper fall under this category such as Boko Haram, IS or Al-Qaeda.

The belief system (*aqidah*) for Salafists remains the same across the three different orientations within Salafism. What differentiates these different schools within Salafism is *manhaj* — the actions or methods that legitimate whether one remains a purist, activist or Salafi-jihadist. There is a spectrum between different forms of Salafism which means one can move from one form to another.

The Wahhabi ideology and its difference with Salafism

Wahhabism is an Islamic movement that originated in the 18th century in the region of Najd, in what is today Saudi Arabia. The movement was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose teachings emphasised *tawhid* (absolute monotheism), opposition to *shirk* (association of anyone or anything with God), and direct, individual return to the Qurʾan and Sunnah for interpretation (*ijtihad*). Wahhabism drew on the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali school of thought, and Ibn Taymiyyah, who is often referred to as "the father of Salafism".

While there is some overlap between Salafism and Wahhabism, they are not identical. Wahhabism is a specific interpretation of Salafism that emphasises the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, while Salafism is a broader term that encompasses various interpretations that emphasise following the practices of the first three generations of Muslims.

In short, **all Wahhabis are Salafis but not all Salafis are Wahhabis** (Sudiman and Ali 2016). Wahhabism can be considered as a specific branch of Salafism that particularly follows the teaching of Abd al-Wahhab. However, today Salafi and Wahhabi are used interchangeably because Abd al-Wahhab got inspired by many scholars, and Salafi engagement with Wahhabism infused the movement with many of its precepts. Nevertheless, in certain regions of the Muslim World, calling a Salafi a Wahabi can be derogatory. This happens for example in India, where Wahhabi are directly associated with people who destroy shrines as they strictly forbid the veneration of saints.

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