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Identifying the Drivers of Conflict in the Sahel

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When asking about the root cause of the insurgencies plaguing the Sahel region of West Africa, and specifically Mali and Burkina Faso, one will hear multiple answers. Nevertheless, as with other spots of crises around the world, each explanation has an element of truth.

The most apparent explanation is Muhammar al-Gadaffi's removal from power and Libya's subsequent collapse. It is widely recognized that there is Libyan influence on regional events that continues to this day. One key example under Gadaffi was his and the Tuaregs in Mali. Gaddafi often acted as a mediator when fighting erupted against the Malian government. Various groups have sought haven in Libya, taking advantage of the civil war that shows no sign of ending at this time.

The second possible root cause one hears about is that the region is the desired base of operations for the Islamic State. Shortly before his death in 2019 –during a raid by the U.S. Military– the leader of the group, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, issued a video calling for attacks against Crusader France and its allies in the region. Within days their operations began in earnest, with one of the earliest targets being a Catholic Church in Dolbel, Niger. In Burkina Faso dozens of Christians have been killed in a series of attacks that analysts consider to be inspired by the remarks of Al-Baghdadi. It is clear that the French and their allies present an obstacle to their vision of how West Africa should be governed.

Recently the United States appointed a Special Envoy to deal with the crisis in the Sahel region. During some remarks to religious freedom advocates the envoy posed an interesting question: "What role does the concept of militant secularism have in the inability of these governments to address these insurgencies?"

First of all, how is militant secularism defined in this context? Secularists want to maintain a separation between religion and state, which means there is no official state religion. However, some actors have championed this intending to ensure those who practice religion no longer have a voice and are excluded from public life. Could this create issues where extremists will now seek to exploit this desired aim for their own political agenda?

When considering the constitutions of the three nations that are most affected by militants, it is clear that each of them values religious freedom to some extent. The Constitution of Niger prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, consistent with public order, social peace and national unity. However, it does ban religious political parties. It also prohibits open-air

proselytization events and the wearing of burqas. Such actions and policies could lead to actors who feel disenfranchised and who will respond by lashing out against the government.

The Constitution of Burkina Faso states that it is a secular state. Both the constitution and other laws provide for the right of the individual to choose and change their religion and to practice their religion of choice. In a country whose population is equally divided between Christians and Muslims this is an especially unusual distinction. Nevertheless, this has failed to prevent the violence that was encouraged by the Al-Baghdadi's remarks.

Finally, Mali is where violence erupted in the region back in 2012. The Constitution of Mali prohibits religious discrimination and grants its individuals freedom of religion as it conforms with the existing law. Unlike its neighbors, Mali criminalizes abuse against religious freedom. In 2018 the country adopted a CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) program that included interfaith efforts and promoted religious tolerance. This program was to be administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to promote religious tolerance and coordinate national religious activities.

Unfortunately, these efforts have failed to prevent domestic terrorist groups from attacking security forces, peacekeepers, civilians, and others whom they perceive as non-adherents to their interpretation of Islam. Not only have they attacked their fellow Muslims, but Christians and worshipers of traditional religion have also found themselves targeted for being heretics.
It can be argued that some of the militants are lashing out in response to what they perceive to be their government acting under the influence of "Crusaders" (notably France and to some extent the United States), keeping them from properly practicing their version of Islam. Therefore, they justify these attacks as pushing back against their oppressors, yet violence only serves to increase government restrictions and perpetuate a cycle of violence and instability.

There has been some legitimate criticism about governance issues within the region that have been levied by analysts. Often these criticisms are not viewed through the context of religious freedom, nor with consideration to the legacy of French influence in how these nations are governed. It appears the inequalities which remain are being exploited by those whose voices are going unheard. It is an interesting state of affairs as officials and societies seek to address these underlying issues.

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