

POLITICAL CONTESTATION AND ISLAMIC DISCOURSE IN THE SAHEL

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My dissertation research focuses on political contestation and Islamic discourse in the Sahel region.

The recent decades have witnessed an expansion of political contestations in which actors defend Islamic values and or use Islamic discourse and symbols to justify and mobilize support for contentious actions. This is a major dynamic of high interest not only in the Sahel but in the contemporary Muslim world in general. While the use of Islamic discourse has been the common denominator of these movements, the type of collective actions that they use to express dissent have varied significantly, ranging from jihadist insurgency to violent riots and peaceful protests. All these dynamics raise some important questions: why and how have political contestations on behalf of Islam proliferated in the Muslim world? Why have these contestations taken different forms: jihadist insurgencies, violent riots, and peaceful protests? What

role do structural and ideological factors play in determining their occurrence and their dynamics? And what explains the apparent increased willingness of Sahelian populations to participate in these contestations?

The dissertation will address these questions by focusing on specific episodes of political contestations in Muslim majority countries of the Sahelian region of West Africa. More specifically, the research focuses on three cases: the jihadist insurgency by the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) in Gao (Mali), the anti-Charlie Hebdo riots in Zinder (Niger) and the anti-slavery protests in Nouakchott by the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (Mauritania). These cases provide a representative sample of the contentious issues as well as the varied form of collective actions that are at play in the Sahel region.

Over the course of the summer 2015 and the spring and summer of 2016, I conducted extensive field research in each

of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger where I interviewed a variety of actors, including political elites, civil society activists, jihadists, scholars, military officers, etc. I conducted archival research, focus groups, and participant observations as well. I tried to understand the context in which Islamist political contestations emerged, the ideological underpinning of the discourse that the actors have used, and the personal motivation of individuals who participated in them. I capitalized on a network of informants and facilitators that I started building during my previous fieldwork in the summer of 2013. In addition to these qualitative data, I also collected other quantitative data from different sources, including Afrobarometer, Freedom House, Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project (ACLED), Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD).

I am currently working on formulating the dissertation argument, which I expect will examine the way in which macro level factors—such as the state and society dynamics—interact with factors at meso level—such as group ideology—and micro level factors—individual identity, to explain the emergence and varied forms of Islamist political contestation.

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