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POLICY BRIEF

Religious dialogues, community resilience and peacebuilding in the Sahel

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Projet ETRA-ID "Engaging Traditional and Religious Authorities in the Sahel: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue"

1. Questioning religious dialogues in the Sahel

Over the past decades, the Sahel region has experienced a multiplicity of interlocked crises – political, economic, security, health, environmental. In this context, religious leaders and groups appear to have become essential focal points for their societies, actors around whom pressing demands for identity, order and justice gather. The religious field thus provides a valuable entry point for the international community to engage with Sahelian societies. Its neglect runs the risk of overlooking key drivers of social transformation and needs' articulation. At the same time, the peculiar specificity and growing complexity of the religious field do require a cautious and balanced approach, that studiously avoids misleading interpretations and manipulations.

Aiming to balance opportunities and risks, "dialogue" has emerged as the main tool to harness the transformative potential of the revival of religious features – identities, organizations, leaders – pursuant the strengthening of peaceful and resilient communities in the face of disruptive changes. This approach draws from the multiple experiences and lessons learnt from across the world (Driessen 2023). However, its implementation in the Sahel, while progressively consolidating, remains to date scattered and somewhat unmethodical. The meanings and aims of "religious dialogues" in the region tend to be viewed differently by different actors. Practices, too, often diverge quite sharply.

This policy brief thus aims to provide a succinct mapping of religious dialogues and their uses in the Sahel. Short of the ambition of offering a systematic and comparative study of all the numerous cases of religious dialogues that have taken place in the region, it draws on the interpretivist distinction between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts (Geertz 1974) in order to point out some key analytical features that can arguably contribute to elucidating the main conceptions, as well as highlighting some misconceptions, about religious dialogues in the Sahel. This effort is guided by the key questions that underpin the ETRA-ID project,[1] of which this policy brief is part, i.e. whether and how instances of dialogue involving religious authorities and issues can help promote peacebuilding and community resilience, most notably in a context of growing inter- and intra-religious rivalries, ethnic tensions and political polarizations, such as the Sahel's.

The policy brief builds on the data collected in the framework of ETRA-ID project: between May 2023 and February 2024 we have conducted some 50 interviews and 2 focus groups with key stakeholders – mainly religious leaders, civil society, scholars and journalists – in Nouakchott (Mauritania) and Niamey (Niger), as well as 2 small-scale surveys targeting a purposefully designed sample of some 200 local respondents overall. It also draws on the background knowledge developed over almost a decade of research engagement with the Sahel region by the project team members. With a view to stimulating evidence-based yet policy-oriented reflections, the complexity of the matter is herein condensed in a schematic tripartite structure, highlighting 3 phases, 3 misconceptions, 3 conceptions and 3 recommendations about religious dialogue in the Sahel.

[1] Engaging Traditional and Religious Authorities in the Sahel: the role of Inter-religious Dialogue (ETRA-ID) is a research-action project, sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and implemented between December 2022 and March 2024 by a team of researchers at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies of Pisa, under the direction of Professor Francesco Strazzari.

2. Three phases of religious dialogues

2.1 Liberalization

Since the 1990s, Sahelian countries have experienced a noticeable process of political liberalization. Pressured by the demands of domestic constituencies and international partners, the granting of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of association and speech, has underpinned a major diversification of Sahelian societies in all domains – politics, economy, and religion too. At the same time, the boosting of transnational flows of capitals and ideas, including in the religious field, have encountered domestic demands of alternative socialization patterns (Villalon and Idrissa 2020). As a result, a clearly discernible trend of pluralization has unsettled the apparent unity of the Sahel's religious landscape over the past decades. Next to more traditionally established expressions of Islamic jurisprudence – such as Malikism – and spirituality – such as Sufism and Sufi orders, (different forms of) Salafism and even Shiism have gained followers and institutional rooting in most Sahelian countries. In the same vein Christianity, while remaining a minority religion in the Sahel, is no longer limited to Catholicism and its missionaries, as new Protestant and charismatic churches – evangelical, apostolical, Baptist, episcopalian, etc. – have sprung up and gained traction.

This process has not been met with unchallenged enthusiasm. The majority of the respondents to our survey – 45% in Mauritania and 96% in Niger – appear to contend that religious diversity is less a source of cultural richness, than of confusion, if not of outright conflict. Concerned civil society and religious groups have promoted the creation of more or less structured dialogue opportunities and platforms to foster mutual understanding. Yet rivalries have also emerged among different spiritual agencies ultimately competing for the same followers. And while peaceful coexistence has generally prevailed, relationships have sometimes soured, and escalations of violence have occasionally been observed.

2.2 Polarization

During the decade of the 2010s, the Sahel region has proved to be an extremely fertile ground for the rooting and expansion of armed insurgencies featuring a jihadist rhetoric. Jihadist cells have been known to operate in the region since the mid-2000s, when the remnants of Algeria's Islamist armed groups embraced a transnationalist agenda and morphed into the Al-Qaeda network. Early small-scale yet highly disruptive operations, predominantly targeting Algeria and Mauritania, have progressively given place to larger-scale insurrection-like forms of military-political contention. These have gained an increasing traction over the years, destabilizing considerable portions of the territories of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and increasingly threatening Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast and Senegal. As a result, the Sahel today harbors some of the most powerful formations of the global jihadist franchises Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, such as, respectively, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), as well as the Islamic State provinces in West Africa (ISWAP) and in the Sahel (ISSP).

Research focusing on the drivers of jihadist group's capacity of mobilization in the Sahel concluded that ideological persuasion and religious motivation only play a secondary role, compared to what

appear to be more meaningful pathways of recruitment such as socio-political marginalization, communal polarization and demands for protection (UNDP 2023). Nevertheless, the authority of (some) religious leaders has been found valuable in exploring avenues for dialogue with jihadist groups, with a view to fostering deconfliction and disengagement. This approach is far from unanimously supported, though, and has sometimes stirred the strong rejection by some of Sahel's international partners or domestic constituencies (ICG 2021).

2.3 Politicization?

Since 2020, liberal achievements in the Sahel have been called into question. Military-led authoritarian governments have seized power across the region, freedom of speech and association are being curtailed, regional integration is backpedaling, and the call to national(ist) unity is replacing the push towards the recognition of social and political pluralism. While these trends are broadly apparent in the political, economic and social domains, the religious field arguably stands out as an exception. Not only the multiplication and institutionalisation of diverse religious groups does not show signs of decline in the Sahel; but also, it is noteworthy that religious leaders and groups seem to be consolidating their political sway across the region: in Mauritania, for instance, where the regime of the Islamic Republic is religiously legitimized; but also in Mali, where the charismatic Imam Mahmoud Dicko was a key leader of the protests that precipitated the military coup d'état in 2020; as well as in Niger and Burkina Faso, where religious leaders of various obedience are becoming the driving force of the grassroots movements that both countries' new military rulers court in exchange for legitimacy and support.

These developments arguably do not (yet) amount to a structural alliance between "the barracks and the mosques" (Musso 2016) across the Sahel. The dialectic between military and religious leaders remains lively, and existing convergences might be more opportunistic than strategic. Irrespectively of contingent power dynamics, though, the increasing political salience of religious actors and issues is a worth-noticing trend that has the potential to survive the ongoing "transitions" in many Sahelian countries, and might therefore pave the way to further political changes. This is likely to affect the prospects, aims and stakes of religious dialogues in the Sahel for the years to come.

The detection of broad trends, however, needs to be combined with a fine-grained analysis capable of grasping local specificities and avoiding undue generalizations. In Niger, a diverse array of Muslim leaders is contributing to propping up the (not so firmly established) legitimacy of the new military authorities by partnering with the sovereigntist ideologues of the regime in presenting the state "*laïcité*" as a neocolonial legacy, and therefore their own endeavor against it as part of a national liberation struggle. In Burkina Faso, where there's a greater religious pluralism, it is predominantly Salafist religious leaders who are laying emphasis on the person of the ruler and his Islamic faith as an asset against the Christians especially, but also the traditional Sufi orders, in the path towards emancipation. In Mali, by contrast, the military rulers fear that the popularity of religious leaders, and namely the chief Salafi preacher Imam Mahmoud Dicko, might represent a counter-power, and therefore insist that the *laïcité* is a non-negotiable pillar of Mali's new fundamental law; however, they seem to lend support – reciprocated – to the Sufi Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara – former head of Mali's High Islamic Council, and leader of the popular religious movement Ansar Dine (not to be

confused with the homonymous terrorist organization): the latter in fact favors the preservation of the laïcité" as a means to prevent the overlap between religion and politics, and therefore to protect religion from politicization and corruption – a stance that sits well with Mali's military authorities yearning for both unchallenged power and religious legitimation.

3. Three misconceptions about the religious field of practices in the Sahel

The analytical framework put forward by the scholarship on security practices can help unearth some possible misconceptions about religious dialogues in the Sahel.

Religious dialogue can be viewed as a field of practices (Bigo 2011), in which diverse arrays of actors position each other based on their competence claims, interest aims and resource endowments. In this framework, their interactions are typically shaped less by explicit rational deliberation than by habits and practices, i.e. tacit knowledge acquired through the experience of the field. Practices and meanings, however, are context-dependent, while (at least some) actors can be transnational, i.e. spanning across different fields and contexts. The nonchalant import of practices from one field to another, and from one context to another, can lead to incompetent behaviors undermining the harmony among practitioners, whereby misunderstandings and tensions may generate a situation of so-called dystonia.

The practice of religious dialogues in the Sahel is not exempt from this risk. Foreign actors may intervene in this field bringing values and ideas they take for granted, which instead might collide with knowledge, practices and experiences about religious dialogues in the Sahelian context. This arguably contributes to explaining why endogenous initiatives of religious dialogue often feature better results than those benefiting from international sponsorship, no matter how professional and well-intentioned the latter are. In particular, some recurrent misconceptions appear to frequently jeopardize Europeans' and Americans' understandings of religious dialogue in the Sahel and its contentious field. They can be schematically articulated in the following dichotomies:

3.1 State vs. non-State

The religious field arguably represents a powerful expression of the Sahel's civil society. And while the latter remains analytically distinct from the local states, assuming that a sharp divide separates religious institutions and state apparatuses in the Sahel could be misleading. Indeed, the web of connections between the religious and the political spheres is arguably thicker than in Western standards, prompting a frequent conflation between the Weberain ideal-types of religious charisma and bureaucratic rationality.

The institutional setup prevailing in most Sahelian countries is such that, instead of growing apart, the two domains are imbricated with one another, so as to control and influence one another. It goes

both ways. In one way, perhaps unsurprisingly, religious leaders of various Islamic currents tend to exercise a considerable – and arguably growing – influence in the political field. Examples of this abound in the Sahel: the Mourides are a powerful actor to reckon with in Senegal's politics; Malian most popular religious leaders, both Sufis and Salafist alike, have long been influential king-makers in Mali's presidential elections; and the pronouncements of Niger's Islamic organizations have contributed to determining the outcome of Niger's parliamentary votes more than once. But the opposite implication is also true: state control over the religious field has grown considerably in the Sahel over the past decade. Fearing the rise of radicalization and violent extremism, Sahelian countries such as Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso have adopted a variety of policy tools in order to improve states' capacities to monitor the content of religious discourses, textbooks, preaches and sermons (including online); regulate (and restrain) religious associations and groups; and assign sanctions and benefits depending on the religious actors' loyalty to the state (and sometimes the party).

By targeting the societal fields of leverage (Reno 2011) of potentially subversive drifts, these measures have arguably contributed to curtailing the risk of abuses of religious freedoms of association and speech. At the same time, though, the subjection of religious field to state control and approval in the name of preventing and countering radicalization has yielded ambivalent results: a loss of autonomy for mainstream religious actors, who thus risk being perceived as akin to civil servants, with all the usual trail of suspicions of corruption and partisanship that this entails; and a potential gain of legitimacy for dissident religious actors, including radical ones, who are viewed as resisting the lure of state cooption.

3.2 Moderate vs radical Islam

The partitioning of the field of Islam in different currents is not only a matter of genuine theological disputes; it is also the result of power dynamics whose categorizations reflect security goals of normalization and exclusion. A case in point is the oft-repeated distinction between a "moderate" Islam – tolerant, open to modernity, and amenable to integration within a liberal order – and a "radical" Islam – allegedly intolerant, bigoted, resistant to liberal norms, inherently conspirative and flirting with violence. While the former is considered as an expression of one's freedom which liberal regimes must protect, the latter is often presented as a dangerous form of obscurantism antithetical to liberalism, which therefore must be combated.

It is noteworthy that the empirical referents of these placeholders in the Sahel have conspicuously changed across time: in the early days of colonialism, Sufi orders such as the Tidjaniya and most notably the Sanussiya were often described as radical "sects" conspiring against the colonial project of modernization (Iocchi 2023). In the late days of colonialism, however, the dividing line changed and tended to overlap with a racial partitioning of the continent: Sufi orders were then ascribed to a genuine manifestation of "black African" Islam, whose syncretism with non- or pre-Islamic practices was presented as a mark of tolerance combining pristine African traditions and remarkably liberal attitudes. Such "tradition" was viewed as dialectically opposed to a "white African" Islam, considered as a late import from the "Arab world", whose alleged dogmatism and fanaticism were described as incongruent with the "African traditions" (Amselle 2017).

The legacy of this dichotomy persists to date in the Sahel. Malikism and Sufism tend to be viewed as more easily soluble in liberal political formulas of modernity, and therefore they are lined up in the "moderate" camp. The "radical" camp instead typically includes the Salafists (which may take different names in the Sahel, whether Wahhabis, Reformists, Sunni, or else), portrayed as a foreign import promoting rigorism and intolerance. Building on this view, policy-makers in the Sahel and their international partners have endeavored to prop-up Malikism and Sufism in order to counter the spread of Salafist currents in the region. As part of this policy, for instance, the EU has sponsored the training of "moderate" Malian imams in Morocco, considered the cradle of Malikism and (some) Sufi orders.

This dichotomy, however, might prove to be more politically expedient than analytically accurate. One might in fact raise doubts regarding the alleged "moderation" and liberal compatibility of Sahel's "traditional" (i.e., non-Salafist) Islam. Several examples justify this skeptical attitude: in Mauritania, the resort to (some interpretations of) traditional Malikism has long been mobilized to legitimize slavery and racism (Thurston 2022); in Senegal, Mouride followers have used violence to silence the Salafists' criticism; and in Mali and Niger, Sufi traditions are sometimes viewed as upholding a rigid patriarchal order, while Salafism's individualism can be considered after all emancipatory, including by women (Berlingozzi and Raineri 2023).

3.3 Sufi quietism vs Salafi activism

The persistent dichotomy between Sufism and Salafism is not only normative, but also political. From a normative perspective, as outlined above, it categorizes the field of Islam in the Sahel along a spectrum that goes from Sufism's alleged "moderation" and tolerance, to Salafism's purported "radicalism", fanaticism and intolerance. From a political perspective, Islamic beliefs and practices are ranked according to their degree of eagerness to meddle in governmental affairs. In this light, Sufism tends to be presented as a quietist approach to Islam, one that is focused more on morals and does not tend to interfere with politics (as long as politics does not interfere with religious practices). On the other hand, Salafism's alleged intolerance is often assumed to span the political domain, too, pushing Salafist to intervene proactively in politics, intrude in law-making, and flirt with violent extremist fringes with a view to ultimately replacing liberal regimes with Islamist political orders ruled by sharia.

This categorization, too, is overly rigid and tends to obscure that actual dynamics are more complex and blurred. In Mauritania, for instance, both Sufis and Salafists can be either politically acquiescent or proactively critical vis-à-vis the existing political order, depending less on doctrinal affiliations than on individual inclinations. In Mali, Muslim leaders from both Sufi and Salafi communities often share very similar views on the role of Islam in public life and governmental policies (Lebovich 2019): for instance, religious authorities of both currents, including the Salafi leader imam Mahmoud Dicko, and the Sufi Chérif de Nioro, have jointly opposed legislative proposals promoting equality between men and women in 2009, as well as jointly supported the same presidential candidate in 2013 – only to part ways in the subsequent elections of 2018.

4. Three conceptions of religious dialogues in the Sahel

When asked about religious dialogue and its merits, relevant stakeholders in the Sahel tend to refer – more or less explicitly – to different practices and experiences. This variety reflects the richness of the "religious dialogues" having taken place in the region, but it may also become a source of confusion. Following the trails of the concepts which are near to the practitioners' experience, this section therefore provides a schematic mapping of the main connotations of "religious dialogue" in the Sahel, highlighting the main opportunities and challenges inherent to each of them.

4.1 Inter-religious dialogues

Religion permeates the Sahel. Islam largely predominates, particularly in Mauritania, Mali and Niger, while in Burkina Faso, Chad and Senegal other religions including Christianity are more represented, yet still in the minority. The coexistence of different religions and faiths, and namely the relationship between Muslims and Christians (including different currents and denominations thereof), has not been viewed as an issue for a long time, to the point that, from a *longue-durée* perspective, the Sahel was often presented as a cradle of multiculturalism and a model of peaceful inter-religious cohabitation (Lydon 2015).

It is mainly with the rise of violent extremism in the region that the religious field became progressively more contentious and polarized. This trend first emerged in Nigeria, where the cleavage between Muslims and Christians had long been politicized. Boko Haram's strategic resort to violence, and namely the deliberate targeting of Christian communities, prompted a crystallization of identities and a progressive securitization of religious diversity, pushing Christians and Muslims to see each other threatened. This drift, however, has only marginally affected the Central and Western Sahel. In spite of the rampant upsurge of violent extremism in these regions, just a few attacks have appeared to explicitly target Christians as such, including a handful of aggressions against churches – all of them in Burkina Faso – and three reported cases of kidnappings of Christian missionaries – all of them foreigners and whites, which suggests that the targeting might have depended less on their faith than on their passports. In addition, one needs to recall that violence against Christian symbols and communities – with significant material damage yet no fatalities – flared up in Niger in 2015 to protest against Charlie Hebdo's satirical cartoons of the Prophet; however, that former President Issoufou joined the Paris rally commemorating the victims of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack while protests broke out in the opposition's strongholds suggests that political rivalries, too, should account for the sudden eruption of violence.

These episodes notwithstanding, the overall impact of inter-religious polarization in Central and Western Sahel has been limited. Inter-religious divides appear less relevant than other societal cleavages – such as ethnicity and hierarchy – in explaining the drivers of violent extremism across the region. If anything, *intra*-religious rifts look more significant, as jihadist groups have proved more focused on targeting Muslim communities and leaders who resisted their strict interpretation of the just Islamic order (Guichaoua and Bouhlel 2023).

One may wonder to what extent existing practices of religious dialogue contribute to explaining this outcome. In fact, Committees for Inter- and Intra- Religious Dialogue (CDIR) have been existing for more than 20 years across the Sahel. Building on the lessons learnt from neighboring Nigeria, the CDIR was first established in 2003 in Diffa (Niger), with a view to providing a platform for the promotion of mutual understanding, capacity-building, as well as mediation and management of local conflicts. The success of this grassroots initiative attracted the support of local and national authorities, as well as international partners, whose sponsorship enabled the replication and diffusion of CDIRs across the rest of Niger, and subsequently to neighboring West African countries.

While these initiatives may have been successful in assuaging local conflicts and preventing the escalation of religious polarization, however, local observers contend that a level playing field of religious dialogue practices is yet to materialize in the Sahel. Minority voices – such as Christians and Shiites – often feel marginalized. Rising currents such as the Salafists, instead, tend to refrain from engaging in dialogues which may challenge their rigorist views. Lastly, in countries such as Mauritania, Islam is considered the glue of a national identity otherwise challenged by racial and tribal divides: national authorities therefore tend to discourage such dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, which are feared to uphold recognition claims, entrench existing cleavages, and ultimately contribute to further fragmenting a fragile social fabric.

4.2 Reconciliation dialogues with jihadist defectors

Another understanding of "dialogues" involving religious actors and issues in the Sahel has to do with the practices developed by regional states to ensure the disengagement and rehabilitation of former jihadist combatants who decide to repent, defect and reintegrate the society. While in fact ideology and religious beliefs might not be the primary drivers of jihadist recruitment and mobilization, they are often absorbed through socialization and trainings, prompting the need to accompany the reintegration of former combatants with an adequate process of ideological and religious re-orientation, called de-radicalization. Building on a quickly developing field of practices with regional (Ashour 2008) and global (Gunaratna *et al*. 2011) ramifications, Sahelian countries such as Mauritania and Niger have over the years developed and implemented sophisticated programmes of disengagement, repentance and reconciliation targeting jihadist defectors, whether in detention or self-referred.

In this framework, a dialogue between (former) jihadists and religious leaders is often viewed as an indispensable tool to ensure the legitimacy, sustainability and effectiveness of the process of deradicalization. Religious dialogues may in this context address a variety of topics, including the "correct" interpretation and contextualization of the notion of jihad and the conditions for its legitimate resort, as well as the overall compatibility between individual religious duties, Islam's view of a just order, and the prevailing political order at international and domestic level. Available studies however suggest that the practice of religious dialogues for deradicalization varies considerably across the region: in Mauritania it takes the shape an open-ended discussion, while in Niger it looks more like a unilateral lecturing; in Mauritania, the religious leaders involved are jointly selected by deradicalization beneficiaries and state authorities, sometimes leading to the mobilization of controversial preachers widely viewed as radicals yet considered legitimate by (former) jihadists; in

Niger, religious leaders involved in dialogues are unilaterally appointed by the state, and often hail from mainstream currents. These differences depend on Mauritania's interpretation of jihadism as ideologically driven, whereas Niger's approach is premised on equating jihadist insurgencies to common rebellions with just a shallow ideological veneer.

At the same time, the outcomes of practicing religious dialogues for deradicalization in Mauritania and Niger appear to combine limited recidivism yet also limited levels of fully successful social reintegration. Mauritanian authorities tend to present these results as an overall mark of success, and proudly boast with international partners about a "Mauritanian model" to be replicated and exported to the rest of the Sahel. By contrast, Nigerien authorities have proved much more reluctant to publicly discuss the features and outcomes of their own deradicalization strategy. The ambivalences of domestic constituencies and international partners in this regard arguably contributes to explaining this hesitation (ICG 2020). Corroborating this, one needs to highlight the peculiar ambiguity of the military authorities that seized power in Niger following a coup d'état in July 2023: while ostensibly condemning all sorts of dialogue with jihadist groups as a disreputable concession to terrorism, they reportedly ended up acknowledging the utility of the programmes of disengagement and reintegration of jihadist defectors, and without much fanfare tacitly continue to implement them away from public scrutiny.

Overall, Mauritania's and Niger's practices of religious dialogues pursuant jihadists' disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration suggest how deradicalization amounts to a lengthy and open-ended process. In this context, the sponsorship of international partners may end up being problematic, since: a) the variety of individual pathways to de-radicalization can hardly be squeezed into the managerial modes and timing of project management; b) the requirement of transparency might contradict context and conflict sensitivities; and c) the urge to demonstrate results might end up blurring the lines and eventually conflating deradicalizations that are genuine and those that may be merely instrumental.

4.3 Religious-political dialogues for de-confliction

The armed confrontations between Sahelian states and jihadist groups have been ongoing for almost two decades. Facing the rise and expansion of jihadist groups in the region, purely military responses have appeared to result less in decisive victories than in a destabilizing escalation. The skyrocketing trends of displacement and civilian fatalities have prompted from many quarters the demand to explore alternative approaches to confront Sahelian jihadists, including dialogues.

The topic's political sensitivity adversely affects a sound scientific treatment, though: records are poor, data are in short supply, and unconfirmed rumours abound. Nevertheless, based on the available reports and qualitative data, it seems safe to argue that there have been several attempts at dialogue for de-confliction, if only locally and temporarily, between state authorities and jihadist groups in the Sahel. Mauritania (Thurston 2020), Mali (ICG 2021) and Niger are all cases in point. And in each of them, religious leaders seem to have played a decisive role, possibly owing to their credibility as mediators trusted by both parties, but also to their expertise in navigating the intricacies of theological-political arguments.

The content of these dialogues has arguably varied, ranging from humanitarian truces and access to besieged villages, to trust-building measures such as prisoners' swaps and the implementation of provisional de-confliction zones, with a view to possibly laying the foundations for more far-reaching agreements. In the case of Mauritania, for instance, many observers believe that the dialogues with jihadists defectors in prison may have also served to pave the way for a more momentous political understanding with the al-Qaeda leadership entailing a mutual non-aggression agreement (*mutaraka*), if only tacit and informal, between the latter and the Mauritanian state, in which the mediation of religious leaders was key. It is also reported that Mali's jihadist leader Iyad ag Ghali had sought the assistance of prominent Islamic scholars to assess the challenges and opportunities of implementing sharia in (part of) Mali in exchange for an appeasement with Bamako. In Niger, too, emerging evidence suggests that President Bazoum had mobilized grassroot networks including local religious and traditional authorities to explore dialogue opportunities with jihadist groups in the country. And if the initiative reportedly stalled with regard to the Islamic State, because of the group's lack of willingness (or capacity) to formulate clear demands, it seemed instead to progress in the case of JNIM, with talks concerning the cessation of hostilities, the provision of basic services to local communities, as well as the rehabilitation of education facilities and telecommunication infrastructures. The 2023 coup d'état that toppled Bazoum's regime, however, abruptly put an end to these talks: the new military leadership appears to refuse to engage in the way of political dialogues preferring a more martial approach. This may by the way contribute to explaining the surge in conflict events and terrorist attacks observed in Niger since July 2023.

The inceptions, dynamics and outcomes of this peculiar sort of religious dialogues are substantially conditioned by political constraints at both domestic and international levels. Yet the variations of their mutual articulations prevent from coming up with a one-size-fits-all recipe. For instance, international partners' attitudes vis-à-vis religious-political dialogues for de-confliction between jihadist groups and Sahelian states have ranged from virtual neglect in Mauritania, to stark opposition in Mali, to benign indulgence, if not implicit support, in Niger. Looking instead at relevant domestic constituencies, these dialogue attempts have been met with proactive support by most religious leaders and national (military) authorities in Mauritania; strong endorsement by Mali's civil society, yet hesitating cautiousness by the country's civilian rulers and outright rejection by their military successors; and in Niger, proactive engagement by civilian authorities, ambivalence by the civil society, and again rejection by the military putschists.

In light of the observable outcomes, one may be tempted to conclude that Mauritania offers the most successful case of religious-political dialogues with jihadist groups in the region. Although state authorities never officially confirmed that such dialogues actually took place, the existence of an informal non-aggression agreement would help explain, today, the otherwise surprising absence of tangible threats and the stability of a country that was the first target of violent extremism in the Sahel. The support of relevant domestic stakeholders and the non-interference of international partners would therefore amount to factors enabling the success of such an initiative. In addition, from the point of view of jihadist groups dialogues and negotiations would arguably be easier with an Islamic republic – such as Mauritania – than with a regime committed to a French-styled tradition of *laïcité* – such as Mali or Niger. Lastly, if Mauritania's stability is (also) to be attributed to some sort of negotiated settlement with jihadist groups, it is worth questioning whether this might have occurred to the expenses of Mauritania's neighbours' stability.

5. Three recommendations about religious dialogues in the Sahel

The observations above suggest that religious dialogues in the Sahel amount to a complex and multifaceted field of practice, which may indeed contribute to peacebuilding and community resilience in the region, but also fuel misunderstandings and tensions if handled with incompetence and carelessness. With a view to maximising the chances for the former outcome to prevail, policy-makers and practitioners of religious dialogues focusing on the Sahel are recommended to:

5.1 Make of religious dialogue a transformative process

Religious dialogues could be more than mere platforms for the expression of (religious) diversity and the management of conflicts. By engaging in a process of mutual understanding, religious dialogue can help avoid the reification of identities and the crystallization of entrenched divides. One should not leave untapped the full potential of religious dialogues to opening up a social space for conflict transformation, and even identity transformation.

5.2 Abstain from undue interferences

In the Sahel, initiatives of religious dialogues endogenously driven by domestic actors have generally proved the most successful. Instead, as the cases discussed above illustrate, the international partners' support, albeit well-intentioned, has proved problematic in more than one case. Cultural and religious susceptibilities should prompt a higher-than-usual consideration for the standard context- and conflict-sensitivity caveats. Overall, in the case of religious dialogue the baseline recommendation of doing no harm should lead external interveners and foreign partners to reflect twice whether it is worth intervening at all.

5.3 Leverage religious dialogues to imagine more just societies

Sahelian societies are in high demand for justice. As the growing legitimacy and political appeal of religious leaders demonstrate, religious groups in the region are viewed as particularly relevant actors to meet the pressing social need for more just societies. One could therefore capitalize the outcomes of religious dialogue to stimulate an inclusive social discussion on how to strengthen the capacity of Sahelian states to deliver justice in multicultural settings, while recognising diversity and promoting integrity in public affairs.

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