

1 Chapter 5 1
2 Chasing Shadows in the Dunes: 2
3 Islamist Practice and Counterterrorist 3
4 Policy in West Africa’s Sahara–Sahel Zone 4
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8 Mike McGovern 8
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13 13
14 The situation in the West African Sahara–Sahel region today resembles that of post 14
15 Second World War Vienna depicted in *The Third Man*.¹ The zone is criss-crossed 15
16 by invisible but real lines demarcating Algerian, American, French, and Libyan 16
17 zones of influence, which often trump national sovereignties. In this murky zone, 17
18 the desert region’s Tuareg inhabitants mix with black Africans from southern 18
19 Mali, Niger and Chad, American Special Forces troops, Algerian Arab jihadis,² 19
20 South Asian missionaries, Algerian spies, Western journalists and academics, 20
21 and European adventure travelers who sometimes come in for more and rougher 21
22 adventure than they expected. Many of these actors are attracted to the Sahara’s 22
23 harsh isolation, where state authority is informalized, if not absent. In this context, 23
24 a variety of illegal and illicit activities, from cigarette smuggling to carjacking to 24
25 human trafficking, have become the lifeblood of the region. 25

26 In the period after September 11 2001, then Secretary of Defense Donald 26
27 Rumsfeld is said to have told the Generals overseeing American military operations 27
28 in different parts of the world to “go out and find terrorists.”³ General Charles Wald, 28
29 the number two commander at the United States military’s European Command 29
30 (EUCOM), which also had responsibility for monitoring most of the African 30
31 continent, did claim to find jihadis in the southern Sahara. In the period from 2003 31
32 to 2005, Wald was the most vocal and most insistent voice to identify a terrorist 32
33 threat in the Sahel–Sahara region. EUCOM’s activities began with the 2003–2004 33
34 Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), a \$6.25 million program through which United States 34
35 Special Forces or Marines spent two months each in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and 35
36 Chad, training 100–300 troops in each country in basic infantry, map reading, and 36
37 desert surveillance techniques. 37

38 38
39 39
40 1 *The Third Man* (British Lion Films, 1949), Carol Reed dir. 40
41 2 In this chapter, the term “jihadi” refers to the minority of Muslim reformists who 41
42 espouse the use of violence to spread the form of religious and political practice they 42
43 consider correct. 43
44 3 International Crisis Group [hereafter ICG], *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or* 43
44 *Fiction March 2005* (Brussels: ICG, 2005). 44

1 The 2005 version of Operation Flintlock, a United States semi-annual overseas 1
2 military exercise was held in Dakar, Senegal, bringing some 1,000 U.S. military 2
3 personnel to the four original PSI countries plus Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, 3
4 Tunisia, and Nigeria for a three-week-long anti-terrorist exercise.⁴ Flintlock 2005 4
5 initiated the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI), the successor 5
6 training program to the PSI, including the nine countries involved in Flintlock and 6
7 with a vastly increased budget of some \$500 million over five years. By 2007, the 7
8 program's name had changed once again to the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism 8
9 Partnership (TSCTP). Roughly half of the expanded budget of the TSCTP was 9
10 initially slated to be administered by the United States Agency for International 10
11 Development (USAID) for development programming, but it appears that most 11
12 of this money remained under the control of the Department of Defense, which 12
13 is administering its own programs of building schools, health clinics and wells 13
14 through its public advocacy division. 14

15 While figures like General Wald claimed that the Sahelian terrorist threat was 15
16 imminent, others have been equally adamant that there have been no jihadi attacks 16
17 in the Sahara-Sahel zone. Anthropologist and tour operator Jeremy Keenan has 17
18 claimed that all those reported up to April 2007 have been fabricated by the 18
19 United States and Algerian governments, with an eye to controlling the region's 19
20 petroleum resources.⁵ Both of these black-and-white depictions misrepresent the 20
21 complex web of regional competitions, criminal economic activity, and attempts by 21
22 marginalized communities to "blackmail" governments into paying more attention 22
23 to them. The situation, as two regional experts put it,⁶ resembles the confusion of a 23
24 Saharan sandstorm far more than the clarity portrayed in the two opposed versions 24
25 presented by EUCOM and its critics. 25

26 _____ 26
27 _____ 27
28 4 The "war game" enacted the pursuit of terrorists across several countries, 28
29 emphasizing coordination among the militaries of the region, and between them and the 29
30 U.S. military. 30

31 5 See: Jeremy Keenan, *The Sahara: Past, Present and Future* (London: Routledge, 31
32 2007); and Kennan, *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa* (London: 32
33 MacMillan, 2009). Keenan is an anthropologist who has conducted research amongst the 33
34 southern Algerian Tuareg since the 1960s. He has published an earlier series of articles on 34
35 the kidnappings of European tourists, the politics of the region, and cultural tourism under 35
36 his own name and the pseudonym of Mustafa Barth. He has written that even a 2006 flare- 36
37 up of the Tuareg rebellion was a theater piece staged by the Algerian and American secret 37
38 services. Baz Lecocq, an expert on the northern Malian Tuareg populations at the center 38
39 of the 1960s and 1990s rebellions, disputes Keenan's version, explaining the local political 39
40 dynamics involved. See: Baz Lecocq, "This Country is Your Country: Territory, Borders, 40
41 and Decentralisation in Tuareg Politics," *Itinerario*, 27, 1 (2003), 58–78; and Baz Lecocq 41
42 and Paul Schrijver, "The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the 42
43 Saharan Front," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25, 1 (January 2007), 141–66. 43

44 6 Baz Lecocq and Paul Schrijver, "The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes 44
45 and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25, 1 (2007), 45
46 141–66. 46

1 This chapter lays out the most salient variables in this complex equation, 1
 2 including the significance of changing religious practice, of illicit economic 2
 3 activity, and of local micropolitical realities. The overall estimation of this author 3
 4 is that the threat of violent jihadi activity in the Mauritanian, Malian, Nigerian, and 4
 5 Chadian Sahel region is very small though not inexistent.⁷ The grievances from 5
 6 which (proto-) insurgent movements originate in this region are highly localized, 6
 7 although disgust with American adventurism in the Middle East amongst West 7
 8 African Muslims⁸ does create the conditions of possibility for small localized 8
 9 movements to find common cause and potentially even make operational linkages. 9
 10 The fact that the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) 10
 11 ⁹ has changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) may be a 11
 12 mostly rhetorical flourish. To say it is rhetorical is not, however, to say that it is 12
 13 insignificant. The competition between the international jihadi movement and the 13
 14 United States and its allies in the “Global War on Terror” is a semiotic as well as 14
 15 a military war, fought on the Internet, through communiqués, press conferences, 15
 16 and audio and video tapes. 16

17 As recently as 2004, the GSPC was a strictly national organization whose 17
 18 best-known operations included the kidnapping of European tourists in the desert 18
 19 (for whom the German government reportedly paid a ransom of 5 million euros). 19
 20 With the assassination of leader Nabil Sahraoui, the first GSPC leader to claim 20
 21 allegiance to al-Qaeda’s international jihadi strategy, Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud 21
 22 became the organization’s leader, and changed its name. Since then, AQIM has 22
 23 pursued a policy of wider recruitment, increasing media sophistication, and forging 23
 24 links with other small North African jihadi groups. Most recently, AQIM carried 24
 25 out two successful suicide bombings in Algiers on April 11 2007, killing over 30 25
 26 and injuring over 100 people. One of the attacks took place outside the Algerian 26
 27 prime minister’s offices. 27

28 Al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, both acknowledged and 28
 29 encouraged the AQIM link in a September 2006 videotape, and al-Qaeda strategic 29
 30 documents like Abu Bakr Naji’s *The Management of Savagery*¹⁰ explicitly 30
 31 mention both the Maghreb¹¹ and Nigeria as two of the six “priority regions” for 31
 32 international jihadi activity.¹² More importantly, it is clear that as the American 32
 33 _____ 33

34 7 This chapter focuses on those four countries, where I conducted research on this 34
 35 subject in 2004–2005. 35

36 8 Many non-Muslims with anti-imperialist political commitments are equally opposed 36
 37 to the American war in Iraq, though for slightly different reasons. 37

38 9 Salafist [reformist] Group for Preaching and Combat. 38

39 10 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through* 39
 40 *Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. William McCants (Cambridge M.A.: John M. Olin 40
 41 Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, May 23 2006). 41

42 11 The Maghreb, or “West” in Arabic, includes Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. 41

42 12 The other four are Jordan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (Naji, *The* 42
 43 *Management of Savagery* 37). Somalia, Afghanistan and southeast Asia are absent from 43
 44 Naji’s list. 44

1 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have dragged on, anti-American and more broadly 1
 2 anti-Western¹³ sentiments have grown, and a small number of West Africans 2
 3 and quite a large number of Maghrebini citizens have become active participants 3
 4 in jihadi fighting. Some of these fighters appear to be returning to their home 4
 5 countries now and the level of violence they undertake may be on the rise in the 5
 6 coming years. If it is not credible that claims of a terrorist threat are fabricated, it is 6
 7 also clear that the recent growth of north African jihadi activity is largely the result 7
 8 of the American war in Iraq. Moreover, it is still not clear that countries such as 8
 9 Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad are directly implicated in these developments. 9
 10 The American government's decision to treat the issue as a strategic-military one 10
 11 and its insistence on funneling even development aid through the military would 11
 12 appear, under the circumstances, to be counterproductive. 12

13

14

15 **West African Faith Movements and Islamic NGOs** 15

16

17 Given the heightened rhetorical context of talk about the threat of terrorism in the 17
 18 Sahel, the most productive way forward is through the presentation of detailed 18
 19 ethnographic and historical research in the region.¹⁴ In seeking a more nuanced 19
 20 explanation, one frequently runs into stereotyped distinctions between "good" and 20
 21 "bad" forms of Islam.¹⁵ In this template, "traditional" West African Islam is Sufi, 21
 22 tolerant and inclusive.¹⁶ This is presented as being at great risk of being overrun 22
 23 by "bad" fundamentalists. Such a Manichaean view misrepresents the history of 23
 24 Sufi Islam in West Africa, which has often been peaceful, but sometimes been both 24
 25 politicized and violent. It also misrepresents the history of salafist or reformist 25
 26 movements in the region, which have a 70-year-long and mostly peaceful 26

27

28 _____ 28
 29 13 Having traveled in the region with a British BBC producer to put together two World 29
 30 Service programs on this subject, I saw first hand that to both our surprise, both her native 30
 31 U.K and my native U.S. were treated as equally culpable of anti-Muslim policies in the eyes 31
 32 of a number of the West Africans we met. As detailed below, in other contexts, West African 32
 33 Islamists see the allegedly permissive and amoral legacy of French secularism as even more 33
 34 distasteful than what they see as the theocratic leanings of the Bush administration. 33

34 14 Far greater detail is contained in ICG, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel*; and Lecoq 34
 35 and Schrijver, *The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust*, 35

36 15 Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the* 36
 37 *Roots of Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004). 37

38 16 Virtually all Muslims in the Sahelian region are Sunni. Most practice a series of 38
 39 interrelated traditions emanating from the Malakite legal branch of Sunni Islam. While there 39
 40 are many Muslims in the region who do not belong to a Sufi *tariqa* ("path" or brotherhood), 40
 41 most subscribe to one of three predominant branches: Qadiriyya, Mouridiyya, or Tijaniyya. 41
 42 While the Qadiriyya have the longest history in the region, and the Mouridiyya are a 42
 43 prominent brotherhood in Senegal (but much less present outside Senegal), the Tijaniyya 43
 44 are the most widely represented group across West Africa. See: Louis Brenner, *West African* 44
 45 *Sufi* (London: Hurst, 1984).

1 history.¹⁷ While West African reformist Muslims have sometimes been involved in 1
2 violence, it has taken place between Muslims of differing traditions at the village 2
3 or neighborhood level.¹⁸ They have not fixed their sights on Western targets. 3

4 Benjamin Soares has argued that such anxieties reveal much more about West 4
5 African Islam's interpreters than about their object of study, which becomes a 5
6 kind of mirror for others' concerns.¹⁹ West African Sufi Islam has been a strong 6
7 stabilizing force in some ways, but it is probably not helpful to imagine that the 7
8 Sufi brotherhoods, or any other aspect of Sahelian Islam, are frozen in time, 8
9 unchanging, and that they will always play the same role they have played in the 9
10 past. Indeed, it is necessary to nuance the picture of Sufi Islam's history in the 10
11 region. The stereotype of peace-loving Sufi Muslims who continue to mix a bit 11
12 of traditional African religious practice with Islam, as opposed to unreasonable, 12
13 inflexible Islamists bent on introducing Shari'a law, is simply not supported by 13
14 the historical record. In fact, the Sahelian region has a well-developed tradition of 14
15 precolonial Islamic states, several of which spread Islam, or their preferred form 15
16 of Islam, into neighboring regions by force.²⁰ 16

17 17

18 18

19 **The Faith Movements: Wahabbiyya, Takfiris and Tablighi Jama'at** 19

20 20

21 This chapter uses the terms "salafist" and "reformist" interchangeably to refer to 21
22 Sahelian Muslims striving to return to what they consider a purer form of religion 22
23 based on the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions. While the 23
24 Tablighi al Jama'at is also salafist in this strict theological sense, their explicit 24
25 rejection of any involvement in politics means that self-styled salafists sometimes 25
26 distinguish themselves from the Tablighi. I thus use the term "faith movements"²¹ 26
27 to cover the entire range of reformist movements from those that explicitly reject 27
28 involvement in politics to Islamists who aim to enter the realm of democratic 28

29 29

30 _____ 30
31 17 In this chapter, the terms "salafist," "reformist," and "Islamist" are used mostly 31
32 interchangeably. The link between them is first a doctrine of return to the pure and correct 32
33 practices of the prophet, and the original practitioners of Islam; and second the rejection of 32
34 the notion that Church and State should be separate. A central tenet of Islamist ideology is 33
35 that everything necessary to ordering society is contained in the religion's sacred texts, thus 34
36 the common Salafi retort: 'The Qur'an is my constitution.' 35

36 18 This dynamic exists in many West African countries, often in the context of 36
37 struggles to control a neighborhood or village mosque. 37

38 19 See Benjamin F. Soares, "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era," *African Affairs*, 38
39 105, 418 (December 2005), 77–95. 39

40 20 One example of this dynamic was El Haj Umar Tal, the man most responsible for 40
41 spreading the Tijani brotherhood across the Sahelian region. See David Robinson, *The Holy* 41
42 *Way of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon 42
43 Press, 1985). 43

44 21 As the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has shown, movements may 43
44 change their positions on these questions over time. 44

1 politics so as to introduce some elements of Shari'a law to those like the GSPC, 1
2 who justify the use of violence to achieve the same end. 2

3 The three most important reformist currents in the Sahel region are the Saudi- 3
4 linked Wahabbiyya, the Takfiri movements inspired by Egyptian Sayyid Qutb 4
5 (which has only touched the Sahel indirectly through the presence of the GSPC/ 5
6 AQIM), and the South Asian Tablighi Jama'at, a reformist missionary society 6
7 sometimes compared to the Mormons. These three movements come under the 7
8 broad category of Salafiyya, or Salafists—those Muslims who work toward a 8
9 return to the salaf—the true or pure form of Islam.²² In all cases, their vision of 9
10 the changes necessary to achieve this renewal is based on a literalist reading of 10
11 the Koran and the Hadiths, or the volumes documenting the words and actions 11
12 of the prophet Mohammed and his closest associates. Like Christian and Jewish 12
13 fundamentalist movements, the Salafist movements identify the problems of the 13
14 contemporary world with the diversion from the correct path delineated in the holy 14
15 scriptures. 15

16 Consequently, they describe their activities as a struggle against *bid'a*, or 16
17 innovations, and *shirk*, or heresy. Sahelian salafists blame such impurities on 17
18 Sufi sects, who have cultivated cults of saints, use of protective amulets, and the 18
19 important role of the Marabout religious intermediary. Beyond this, however, there 19
20 are more differences than similarities among various types of religious salafists, 20
21 and any analysis that mixes them indiscriminately risks serious misunderstanding. 21
22 One distinction is between the *Salafiyya ilmiyya*, or “scholarly Salafists”, and the 22
23 *Salafiyya jihadiyya*, or “fighting salafists.”²³ Many of the latter are those who have 23
24 fought in the interconnected series of armed struggles beginning in Afghanistan 24
25 and extending to Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria, and Iraq. Over the course of the 25
26 1990s in countries like Algeria, they were often known as “the Afghans.” 26

27 The form of Wahhabism that came to West Africa arrived in the 1930s, via West 27
28 African clerics who had studied in the holy cities of Medina and Mecca and at the 28
29 Egyptian religious university, Al-Azhar.²⁴ Their religious practice and political, 29
30 particularly anticolonial, commitments were intertwined in the period from the 30
31 1940s onward. These reformers sought to eradicate what they perceived as the 31
32 *shirk* of the predominant Sufi tariqa. The saints, marabouts,²⁵ and initiation into 32
33 33

34 34

35 22 “Salaf” literally means ancestor or predecessor, and from this meaning comes the 35
36 figurative sense of purity. Many Salafists consciously try to copy the dress and behavior of 36
37 the Prophet Mohammed and his closest associates. 37

38 23 ICG, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History* (Brussels: ICG, 2004). 38

39 24 West African Wahhabis are often called “*Les bras croisés*,” referring to their 39
40 manner of praying with their arms crossed over their chests, as opposed to hanging at their 40
41 sides. See: Lansine Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West* 41
42 *Africa* (Evanston I.L.: Northwestern University Press, 1974). 41

42 25 The term refers to West African ritual specialists who often specialized in creating 42
43 amulets to cure ills, protect against mystical attack, or ensure good fortune. They often 43
44 became both economically and politically powerful. 44

1 esoteric rites common to these Sufi sects are all unacceptable and blasphemous to 1
 2 Wahhabis. According to Lansine Kaba they argued that: 2
 3 3
 4 [Sufi] Mysticism thus becomes synonymous with shrewd mystification and 4
 5 exploitation. ... Given that religion had turned into a business and religiosity 5
 6 into a profession, it was inevitable, they argued, that ignorance and superstition 6
 7 were promoted as norms and that the masses gave their souls and wealth to 7
 8 mystics-turned-charlatans, soothsayers, and charm makers. The Wahhabi felt it 8
 9 necessary, consequently, to demystify those who were committing wrongs and 9
 10 making profit in the name of Islam.²⁶ 10
 11 11
 12 Many of the early converts were businessmen, and many of them were from 12
 13 lower status families.²⁷ Wahhabist doctrine, which argues for the equality of all 13
 14 humans before God, is thus attractive to members of some West African societies 14
 15 with rigid social hierarchies. 15
 16 Qutbist doctrine, which has spread across North Africa under the various 16
 17 takfiri movements that have appeared particularly in the slums of such cities 17
 18 as Casablanca,²⁸ has not made major inroads to the south of the desert. It is 18
 19 significant only inasmuch as it was instrumental in the formation of the GSPC 19
 20 in the first instance. The GSPC broke with the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) in 20
 21 September 1998 because the GIA subscribed to the doctrine of *takfir al-mujtama'*, 21
 22 inspired by Sayyid Qutb, one of the leading intellectual figures of Egypt's Muslim 22
 23 Brotherhood.²⁹ Following Qutb, the GIA accused all of Algerian society (excepting 23
 24 their active supporters) of apostasy, and classified them as legitimate military 24
 25 targets. Preferring to target only the state, its institutions and personnel, the GSPC 25
 26 under the leadership of Hassan Hattab originally steered away from attacks on 26
 27 civilians. 27
 28 The Tablighi Jama'at, known in the Sahelian countries simply as the *Da'wa*, 28
 29 ("preaching," or the "call,") is the world's biggest Muslim missionary society. 29
 30 Its annual conference is surpassed only by the Hajj as the largest congregation of 30
 31 Muslims in the world. Founded by Muhammed Ilyas in 1926 in Mewat province, 31
 32 India, the group soon spread worldwide. The Tablighi are explicitly apolitical, 32
 33 but call Muslims back to renew their faith through Islamic practice modeled on 33
 34 34
 35 35
 36 26 Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya*. 36
 37 27 Jean-Loup Amselle, "Le Wahabisme à Bamako," *Canadian Journal of African* 37
 38 *Studies*, 19, 2 (1985), 345–57. 38
 39 28 Selma Belaala, "Misère et djihad au Maroc," In *Le Monde Diplomatique* 39
 40 (November 2004); and ICG, *Understanding Islamism* (Brussels: ICG, 2005). 40
 41 29 Qutb joined the Muslim brothers in 1951, and was jailed by the Nasser government 41
 42 from 1954 to 1964, released and arrested again less than a year later. He was hanged in 42
 43 1966. As a result of the brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Qutb 42
 44 developed an interpretation of the Arab nationalist state that classified it as an example of 43
 44 *jahiliyya*, or barbarous ignorance, that should necessarily be opposed by force. 44

1 that of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions and through proselytization, 1
 2 known as khuruj.³⁰ An increasing number of ethnographic accounts of Tablighi 2
 3 practice are coming out in print.³¹ They point to the variety of Tablighi practices 3
 4 within a coherent system that imposes order through its straightforward six-point 4
 5 theological foundation and the habitus of Tablighi proselytization missions, which 5
 6 can last from three days up to one year.³² 6

7 As far as the internal situation in the Sahel is concerned, what is most striking 7
 8 is not theological enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, but the internal 8
 9 divisions amongst Muslims themselves, including between differing groups of 9
 10 Salafists. Several Malians noted that the Tablighis consider Wahhabis to be too 10
 11 Western because they are engaged with the world of politics. The Wahhabis accuse 11
 12 the Tablighis in turn of being “imperialist” because they are against violence and 12
 13 overt involvement in politics. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Sahelian Sufi 13
 14 Muslims take note of the various arguments on offer, sometimes experimenting 14
 15 with one or another, often drifting back to their original affiliation after some 15
 16 time.³³ 16

17 Moreover, it is not only the reformist groups that present such an attraction. 17
 18 There are, as there have always been, various charismatic movements on offer, 18
 19 just as there are for Christians. Over the past few years, the “*pieds nus*” (bare feet) 19
 20 movement in Mali has attracted many young people. Founded by Cheick Ibrahim 20
 21 Khalil Kanouté, described by one Malian as a high school student who failed his 21
 22 baccalaureate exam, the *pieds nus* refuse shoes, Western clothing (wearing only 22
 23 African hand-loomed cotton fabric), and any other trace of Western culture.³⁴ 23
 24 Similarly, in Senegal, the movement of General Kara has organized many young 24

25 _____ 25
 26 _____ 26
 27 30 Muhammed Khalid Masud, ed., *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at* 27
 28 *as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). 28

29 31 Marloes Janson, “The Prophet’s Path: Tablighi Jamaat in the Gambia,” *ISIM* 29
 30 *Review*, 17 (Spring 2006), 44; Gilles Kepel, *Les banlieues de l’Islam* (Paris: Edition de 30
 31 Seuil, 1987); Masud, ed. *Travellers in Faith*; and Marieke Winkelmann, “Informal Links: A 31
 32 Girls Madrassa and Tablighi Jama’at,” *ISIM Review*, 17 (Spring 2007): 46–7. 32

33 32 For more on the Tablighi Jama’at worldwide, see Masud, ed. *Travellers in Faith*. 32
 33 For more on the Tablighi in the Sahel see ICG, *Understanding Islamism*, and Lecoq and 33
 34 Schrijver, *The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust*. 34

35 33 One commentator observed that this is especially apparent in periods of crisis, for 35
 36 instance when a believer or loved one becomes seriously ill. It is at this moment that many 36
 37 return to the Sufi practices they know best, and trust to bring relief in time of need. Author’s 37
 38 interview, Dakar, September 8 2004. 38

39 34 After he presided over the 1998 murder of a Malian judge who had banned the 39
 40 group in the region of Dioila, Kanouté and two followers were sentenced to death, though 40
 41 Mali, which has not carried out an execution since 1980, has not executed them. See 41
 42 *Amnesty International Report 2001*, ‘Mali’ (AI index Pol 10/001/2001). The group has 42
 43 occasionally been involved in other violent confrontations with Malian administrative and 43
 44 security forces since then. See G.A. Dicko, “Fait divers: Des ‘pieds-nus’ font couler le sang 44
 à Kassela,” *l’Essor*, 15805 (October 11 2006). 44

1 unemployed people in a quasi-militarized branch of the Mouride brotherhood. ³⁵	1
2 These youths perform military-style calisthenics on some of the beaches of Dakar,	2
3 and march in regimented formations. These effervescent movements often die out	3
4 after a few years.	4
5	5
6	6
7 The Political Economy of an Informalized Zone	7
8	8
9	9
10 “The Arabs [GSPC], when they come southward into the desert, do they know	10
11 how to find their way around?”	11
12	12
13 “Not at all.”	13
14	14
15 “Do they seek out Tuareg guides or drivers to help them?”	15
16	16
17 “Of course.”	17
18	18
19 “Do Tuareg work for or with them?”	19
20	20
21 “Some do.”	21
22	22
23 “What would happen to them if they didn’t have any help from the Tuaregs in	23
24 the desert?”	24
25	25
26 “What would happen to a man who knows not how to swim, if he were dropped	26
27 in the middle of the ocean?” ³⁶	27
28	28
29 One presumption regarding the Sahel region that probably obscures more than	29
30 it clarifies is that there are direct links between poverty and religiously oriented	30
31 violence. ³⁷ Shifts that might lead to violence, such as the GSPC/AQIM presence in	31
32 northern Mali, are more likely the result of highly localized political and economic	32
33 factors that only draw on the international rhetoric of a common Islamist agenda at	33
34 a relatively late stage. While it is true that West African Islamists may benefit from	34
35	35
36	36
37 35 Moudou Kara Mbacke is a charismatic leader who has founded his own political	37
38 party, the Parti de la Verité du Dieu (Party of God’s Truth), and has recruited his followers	38
39 mainly from Dakar’s underclass of unemployed youth. The movement is generally	39
40 considered to be an offshoot of the Baye Fall, a subgroup of the Mouridiyya recognizable	40
41 by their colorful patchwork clothes and dreadlocks.	41
42 36 Author’s conversation with a cigarette smuggler, Bamako, July, 2005.	42
43 37 This position is summarized in the Integrated Regional Information Network	43
44 (IRIN) article “Famine not Fanaticism Poses Greatest Terror Threat in Sahel,” <i>IRIN</i> , UN	44
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,,14 (October 2004).	44

1 money pumped into the region by Gulf States, there is little evidence to link them 1
 2 with violent or even oppositional politics in the Sahel region. Conversely, while 2
 3 those who may become linked to groups like the GSPC/AQIM are undoubtedly 3
 4 poor, so are the vast majority of their neighbors and relatives who never become 4
 5 involved in such movements. The notion that economic “fragilization”³⁸ is the 5
 6 primary cause of a turn toward either religious fundamentalism or violence, is not 6
 7 credible. If it were, West Africa would have long been the world center of Islamist 7
 8 politics and terror, given the severe poverty of most countries in the region. 8

9 Informal economic networks often flourish in the poorest regions of the world. 9
 10 The Sahara–Sahel, whose Tuareg inhabitants have been impoverished by droughts 10
 11 that killed their livestock, and who have maintained troubled relations with the 11
 12 Malian and Nigerian states, is one of those zones. A walk through the market in 12
 13 Kidal shows that most of the consumer goods there—from soap to pasta to consumer 13
 14 electronics—come from Algeria. The same is true of gasoline. Because many of 14
 15 these products are subsidized by the Algerian government and there are no trade 15
 16 agreements between Algeria and Mali, these products are officially contraband. 16
 17 Because products traveling the length of Mali from an already-landlocked capital 17
 18 cost two to three times as much, it is no exaggeration to say that communities like 18
 19 Kidal, could not survive without smuggling. 19

20 The more lucrative aspects of this grey economy, however, have been the 20
 21 smuggling of cigarettes, and the illegal trafficking of people, weapons and other 21
 22 goods, allegedly including drugs. The Saharan cigarette trade has been estimated at 22
 23 \$1 billion per year, and the networks behind it are international, allegedly including 23
 24 Lebanese businessmen on the West African coast and the Italian Mafia along the 24
 25 Mediterranean. Cigarettes, some of which allegedly come directly from North 25
 26 Carolina, and others of which arrive in European ports but are never offloaded, 26
 27 arrive in Mauritania, Togo, and other points along the coast of West Africa. From 27
 28 these ports of entry they begin their journey across the Sahara to North Africa, and 28
 29 from there across the Mediterranean to Europe where they are sold tax-free. 29

30 Some of these flows have already been curtailed, particularly the trans-Saharan 30
 31 migrant routes that ran across Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Since 2005, the 31
 32 European Union countries stepped up pressure on Morocco, Algeria, and Libya to 32
 33 interdict sub-Saharan Africans and prevent them from attempting to reach Europe 33
 34 by crossing the Mediterranean. This has significantly diminished, if not totally 34
 35 stopped the uses of the trans-Saharan routes, as evidenced by the rapid growth 35
 36 of sea passage to the Canary Islands as the route of choice amongst would-be 36
 37 migrants. 37

38 Cigarettes are another story, and while the smuggling trade is illegal, it is certainly 38
 39 not as deleterious to human lives as trafficking drugs, weapons, or humans.³⁹ As 39

40
 41 _____ 41
 42 38 This is the term used in French by many in Mali and Niger to describe the attraction 42
 43 of the Salafist movement for some Tuareg communities. 42

43 39 The human traffickers were renowned for cheating their clients, either by taking their 43
 44 money and disappearing or by purportedly leaving migrants in the middle of the desert to die. 44

1 with much other illegal and illicit economic activity in West Africa, the real stakes 1
 2 are more subtle than the rank profiteering portrayed in films about gun runners and 2
 3 the like: It is states that are cheated, as goods are re-routed through poorly policed 3
 4 zones in order to evade customs duties and taxes, and to launder illegally earned 4
 5 money. This activity is an important part of the international economic strategy of 5
 6 crime syndicates like the Mafia, and allegedly for Islamist groups whose operations 6
 7 do not necessarily involve West Africa or the Sahara. However, it is essential to 7
 8 bear in mind that to take away all such illicit sources of income at once would 8
 9 immediately plunge Malian and Nigerian Tuareg populations into almost total 9
 10 poverty. This might very well have the opposite effect to that intended, namely of 10
 11 alienating and radicalizing at least some Tuareg. 11

12 There are many actors involved in the trans-Saharan cigarette trade, and it 12
 13 appears that the GSPC/AQIM is one of them. Two of its operational leaders in the 13
 14 Algerian desert, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar and Abderazzak El Para, appear to have 14
 15 been smugglers first and jihadis second, if at all. The GSPC, as noted previously, 15
 16 was an offshoot of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), one of the groups that adopted 16
 17 violent means to oppose the government formed by the military in Algeria after 17
 18 the annulment of the 1991 elections.⁴⁰ To this date, the GSPC is the only organized 18
 19 violent Islamist group that can be said to have operated in the West African Sahel. 19
 20 As the Algerian Islamist insurgency lost much of its momentum in 2001 and 20
 21 2002, part of the GSPC was pushed by Algerian security forces first from northern 21
 22 Algeria (their base) into the southern desert and from there into northern Mali. 22

23 After a period of apparent downturn in 2004–2005, during which several 23
 24 hundred GSPC members accepted the Algerian government’s amnesty offer, 24
 25 there seems to have been a resurgence of the group, now calling itself al-Qaeda 25
 26 in the Islamic Maghreb, with Aiman al-Zawahiri’s September 2006 statement 26
 27 that al-Qaeda and AQIM would be joining forces against “crusader” American 27
 28 and French presence in north Africa, and recent clashes with Tunisian security 28
 29 forces in December 2006 and January 2007. However, in 2005 and 2006, French 29
 30 counterterrorism officials repeatedly identified GSPC cells in France as posing 30
 31 the likeliest threat of an attack like that carried out on July 7 2005 in London, 31
 32 and reports from Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya describe increasing pan-Maghrebin 32
 33 coordination in recruitment and training of jihadi insurgents.⁴¹ While AQIM does 33
 34 seem to be internationalizing its activities in terms of both targets and recruitment,⁴² 34
 35 35

36 _____ 36
 37 40 The second round of these elections appeared certain to be won by Islamists. 37

38 41 Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels indicate a rapid increase in the number of 38
 39 North African insurgents fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, an estimated 20 percent of foreign 39
 40 fighters in Iraq in 2007 estimated to come from the Maghreb, and all known al-Qaeda field 40
 41 commanders in Afghanistan being Libyan nationals. See: Steinberg and Werenfels, “Al 41
 42 Qaida in the Maghreb: Just a New Name or Indeed a New Threat?” In *SWP Comments* 42
 43 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2007). 43

44 42 Tunisian security forces who killed Tunisian, Algerian, and Mauritanian GSPC/AQM 44
 44 members claimed they discovered plans to attack the British and American embassies in Tunis. 44

1 this is taking place along the Mediterranean coast, and it is not clear that it has 1
2 much relevance to the Sahel region. 2

3 The United States government has claimed that it is precisely the inability 3
4 of the Mauritanian, Malian, Nigerien, and Chadian governments to control their 4
5 own territory that allows illegal activity to flourish, and that it is both the lack 5
6 of surveillance and the efflorescence of illicit economic activity that could make 6
7 such a place—like Somalia or Afghanistan—attractive to terrorists. As many 7
8 have pointed out, United States' interest in the security of this region is hardly 8
9 altruistic. The anti-terrorism attention of the United States government has been 9
10 turned on the West African region at the same time that a United States intelligence 10
11 estimate suggested that by 2015, 25 percent of American oil would come from 11
12 Africa. Given the current problems with the Niger Delta's low-level insurgency 12
13 and Nigeria's recent elections, which were denounced by most observers, it is 13
14 not at all clear that such a prediction will hold. Moreover, it is important to keep 14
15 questions of scale firmly in mind: Mauritania is currently producing 75,000 barrels 15
16 of crude oil each day (BPD). Angola produces 1.6 million BPD, and Nigeria 2.45 16
17 million BPD.⁴³ Moreover, Mauritania's proven reserves will be depleted within 10 17
18 years. Similarly, Chad's production, at 225,000 BPD, is quite significant for Chad, 18
19 but not necessarily for the world oil market.⁴⁴ The real action, and the vast majority 19
20 of African oil production, is and will for the foreseeable future be limited to three 20
21 countries: Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and Angola. 21

22 To the extent that the United States combines oil interests and security concerns, 22
23 it is not so much in the Sahel as in Nigeria. The combination of significant oil 23
24 reserves and significant political problems has meant that United States securocrats 24
25 have seen the country as one that needed to be contained. In this way, it is probably 25
26 most useful to see the various counterterrorism programs as attempts to place a 26
27 "cordon sanitaire" between Nigeria and any possibility of Islamist jihadi activity 27
28 coming from the north.⁴⁵ Whether such fears are reasonable is open to question. I 28
29 was told by Niger Delta militants in Port Harcourt in April 2006 that they had been 29
30 approached by Islamists who wanted to share deadly technology with them. They 30

31 31

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35 43 These levels are still small compared with Iran's 4 million BPD and Saudi Arabia's 35
36 9.5 million BPD. 36

37 44 Indeed, while the general perception is that there is a new spate of oil exploration and 37
38 a new "scramble for Africa" that entails major political as well as economic consequences, 38
39 most of the oil fields in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad were already discovered in the 39
40 1960s. However, it is only the combination of dramatically inflated oil prices and new 40
41 technologies that make these relatively small and technically difficult fields economically 41
42 viable. 42

43 45 The earliest and still one of the best academic analyses of U.S. counterterrorism 42
43 interest in the Sahelian region, which suggested exactly this motive, was Stephen Ellis, 43
44 "Briefing: The Pan-Sahel Initiative," *African Affairs* 103, 412 (2004): 459–64. 44

1 insisted that they had turned down the offer but were proud that they had been so 1
2 approached.⁴⁶ 2

3 3

4 4

5 **The Importance of Micropolitics** 5

6 6

7 While to some, such signs appear ominous and to others they are exaggerated, it 7
8 is important to note that the grievances driving such attacks are not international 8
9 but local in nature. This section proposes just three brief vignettes in order to show 9
10 how important local politics is in the way that insurgencies play out.⁴⁷ 10

11 11

12 *Tablighi Conversion, Tuareg Rebellion and the Politics of Gender* 12

13 13

14 In a superb article on the politics of northern Mali, Baz Lecocq and Paul Schrijver 14
15 explain one of the facts that has been most disturbing to Western counterterrorism 15
16 specialists: the intersection in the region of Kidal of the leadership of the 1990s 16
17 Tuareg rebellion, successful proselytization by the Tablighi al Jama'at, and the 17
18 presence of GSPC elements, pushed southward by the Algerian security forces. 18
19 Tablighi converts in Kidal included the leader of the 1990s rebellion, Iyad, as 19
20 well as several of his family members (from the ruling Ifoghas clan), including 20
21 the mayor of Kidal and the traditional leader of the region, Inta'la. The context of 21
22 the conversion had everything to do with local political struggles, and little to do 22
23 with extremist ideology. The arrival of Tablighi missionaries in Kidal coincided 23
24 with a hard-fought campaign for mayor of the town. The leading candidate was 24
25 a member of the minority Idnan clan, a woman called Doe. Amongst matrilineal 25
26 Tuareg, women's involvement in public life is common, but the Ifoghas elite of 26
27 Kidal, seeing that they might lose political power, willingly adopted the patriarchal 27
28 rhetoric of the Tablighi in order to disqualify their female opponent, and to argue 28
29 that pious Muslims would never vote for a woman.⁴⁸ The strategy was successful, 29
30 and over the following years, many Ifoghas converts appear to have drifted back 30
31 toward their former, less doctrinaire religious practices. 31

32 The instrumental use of conversion is not particular to Mali, and even within 32
33 Mali, it is not particular to Tablighi conversion. Those Malian Salafist converts in 33

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35 35

36 46 Several days later, they detonated a car bomb inside a military camp using a remote 36
37 device based on a cellular phone. Militants in the region at that time expressed significant 37
38 pride in this new technical ability. 38

39 47 More such examples are presented at greater length in ICG, *Islamist Terrorism in* 39
40 *the Sahel*; 'Secrets in the Sand,' BBC World Service Documentary produced by Catherine 40
41 Fellows (first broadcast in August 2005), <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/documentary_archive/4138200.stm)
42 [documentary_archive/4138200.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/documentary_archive/4138200.stm)>; Benjamin F Soares, "Islam in Mali in Neoliberal 41
42 Era," *African Affairs*, 105 (2006), 77–5, and Lecocq and Schrijver, *The War on Terror in* 42
43 *a Haze of Dust*. 43

44 48 Lecocq and Schrijver, *The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust*, 149. 44

1 the 1930s and 1940s who were called Wahabbis were largely businessmen who 1
 2 tapped into an emergent regional network of Wahabbi merchants who operated in 2
 3 Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. As noted above, many contemporary converts to 3
 4 the Saudi-sponsored ("Wahabbi") form of reformist Islam are men of servile social 4
 5 status. Their appropriation of their own denigrated "slave" status as newly minted 5
 6 "slaves of God" is a move toward social equalization not unlike the Protestant 6
 7 Reformation's rejection of the hierarchy of the Catholic clergy. In Senegal, 7
 8 converts to the Saudi style of reformist Islam are even known as "Ibadous," or 8
 9 "Ibadous Rahman" from the Arabic phrase "Ibadu ar-Rahman," or "slaves of the 9
 10 Merciful." Some Senegalese women use salafist injunctions to study the Qur'an 10
 11 and the Hadiths as an argument for greater female public presence than is normally 11
 12 encouraged within the sufi tariqa.⁴⁹ Thus, even the gender politics of conversion to 12
 13 reformist Islam can move in different directions, according to the setting. 13

14
 15 *An Alibi for Delinquents? Would Be Jihadis in Mauritania* 15
 16 16

17 The example of Mauritania shows that the indiscriminate suppression of Islamists 17
 18 can quickly backfire. Under President Ould Taya (deposed by coup in August 2005) 18
 19 the Mauritanian government lost its credibility with much of its own population, 19
 20 having used the "Islamist = Terrorist" equation simply to purge its adversaries. 20
 21 One of the first acts of the military transitional government was to release Islamist 21
 22 leaders Mokhtar el Hacem Ould Dedew and Mohamed Jemil Ould Mansour. 22
 23 Under Ould Taya, if the government was to uncover real terrorist plans, many 23
 24 Mauritians and most Islamists in Mauritania and the region would probably 24
 25 dismiss the claim out of hand. 25

26 Mohammed Fall Ould Oumere is the editor of the weekly paper *La Tribune*, 26
 27 a paper that was highly critical of Ould Taya. When I met him in July 2005, the 27
 28 *coup d'état* that would unseat Ould Taya was just one month away. Although Ould 28
 29 Oumere bitterly criticized the then-president from every angle, he did offer an 29
 30 interesting piece of information: Although the well-known political Islamists were 30
 31 not jihadis, as the government had claimed, a group of seven young men arrested 31
 32 for training to go join the jihadi fight in Iraq were doing just that. Ould Oumere 32
 33 went on to say that he knew the young men personally—they were from his home 33
 34 village—and that they were typical, troubled youths, involved in petty crime, and 34
 35 looking for outlets for their aggression. The Islamist cause, he said, gave them the 35
 36 perfect excuse to act on their antisocial impulses, and then to justify their acts as 36
 37 being undertaken in the name of a noble cause. While he did feel they deserved 37
 38 some form of punishment, he hardly seemed to consider them very dangerous.⁵⁰ 38
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 41 49 Cleo Cantone, "Women Claiming Space in Mosques," *International Institute for* 40
 42 *the Study of Islam and the Modern World [ISIM] Newsletter* (November 2002), 29, <[http://](http://www.isim.nl/) 41
 43 www.isim.nl/>. 42

43 50 On June 5 2007, 24 defendants in a terrorism trial were acquitted because their 43
 44 testimony was obtained through torture. Fourteen others went on trial in late June, just as 44

1 In this regard, jihadi commitment in the Sahel countries could be just as attractive 1
 2 to some troubled young men as involvement in violent militias like the pro- 2
 3 government Young Patriots in Côte d'Ivoire or the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria. 3

4 4
 5 *Chadian Conversations on Religion, Morality and the Family* 5

6 6

7 Many prominent Islamists in N'Djamena are fluent in French as well as Arabic, 7
 8 some with degrees from French universities, and some former government 8
 9 officials. Although the headlines regarding Chad refer to the presence of hundreds 9
 10 of thousands of refugees from neighboring Darfur and various rebel incursions 10
 11 from Sudan and the Central African Republic, discussions in N'Djamena are 11
 12 rather more focused on the difficulties of raising families in a changing world. 12
 13 In the city's cyber cafés, there are no filters for pornography; satellite television 13
 14 can bring Arabic-language stations such as Al Jazeera, or even Al Manar, but also 14
 15 the all manner of prurient music videos and films. In conversations with Chadian 15
 16 Islamists, the central point of contention that emerged again and again was their 16
 17 opposition to the adoption of a French-style family code. 17

18 Similar issues have arisen in neighboring countries, as in the case of protests 18
 19 in northern Mali against the Miss Universe pageant being held in the country, and 19
 20 March 2005 riots in Bamako after the national football team lost to Togo, during 20
 21 which time crowds, allegedly led by Islamist converts, pillaged restaurants alleged 21
 22 to have brothels attached to them and bars. Similar attacks on young women 22
 23 wearing short skirts in Conakry in 2007 were attributed by some to Guinean 23
 24 Islamist youths.⁵¹ The significant point is that West Africans, like residents of most 24
 25 countries, are ambivalent about the almost completely unregulated flow of images 25
 26 and information that accompany contemporary globalization. While some would 26
 27 characterize this as freedom, others see it as the tainting influence of an amoral 27
 28 or immoral system driven by the desire to see profits rather than what is right for 28
 29 building strong families and societies. In December 2006, shortly after the United 29
 30 States' elections that were purportedly swayed in part by controversies over gay 30
 31 marriage, several Islamists said to me (expecting a sympathetic audience), "the 31
 32 government is asking us to accept this family code which is just an importation 32
 33 from French culture. They want us to legalize homosexual marriage!"⁵² 33

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38 six others—three Moroccans and three Mauritians—were arrested in three Nouakchott 38
 39 Internet cafés on charges of terrorist activity. See Associated Press, "Six arrested in 39
 40 Mauritania on suspicion of terrorism" (AP, June 28 2007). 40

41 51 Alhassan Sillah, "Guinea's Dirty Dancing Backlash," BBC News/Africa Online 41
 42 (Conakry, May 1 2007). 42

43 52 See also Soares' "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era" for discussion of similar 42
 43 anxieties regarding gambling, prostitution, bars open during the holy month of Ramadan, 43
 44 and a rumored "convention of homosexuals" in Mali in the period 1999–2000. 44

1 Conclusion: U.S. Counterterrorism Policy, Africa, and the Military as an	1
2 Instrument of Social Engineering	2
3	3
4 Much discussion of the “Global War on Terror” today revolves around the question	4
5 of how to win the battle for “hearts and minds.” This term, used throughout the	5
6 Malayan and Vietnamese insurgency wars against the British and Americans,	6
7 respectively, has come to be a central term of the counterinsurgency lexicon. Its	7
8 use in the Sahel context is significant, because it implicitly acknowledges the	8
9 legitimacy of relatively broad community-based grievances that can and should be	9
10 addressed in non-military terms. This represents a subtle but important shift from	10
11 the rhetoric surrounding “terrorism,” which implicitly denies both the legitimacy	11
12 and the rationality of political violence characterized as such. Despite the fact that	12
13 the name of the United States program engaging the region has changed from the	13
14 relatively neutral “Pan Sahel Initiative” to the more militaristic “Trans-Saharan	14
15 Counter Terrorism Initiative,” American military thinking about the region seems	15
16 to be following a counterinsurgency rather than a counterterrorism model.	16
17 This shift is warranted inasmuch as the West African Sahel simply is not a	17
18 hotbed of terrorist activity. To the extent that there are any terrorists or would-be	18
19 terrorists in the region, they most likely aspire to leaving West Africa as quickly	19
20 as possible, and arriving “where the action is,” in the Middle East and West Asia.	20
21 An enlightened “hearts and minds” campaign would also be justified in the sense	21
22 that anti-American sentiment in many Muslim-majority West African countries is	22
23 on the rise. For many of those expatriates who have lived in the region over the	23
24 last 20 years, the shift is palpable and at times striking. When I arrived in Guinea	24
25 in the late 1980s Guineans and other West Africans seemed to classify Americans	25
26 as powerful, and thus potentially dangerous, actors, but as having the decided	26
27 advantage of not having been a colonial power.	27
28 Whether this characterization was right or wrong, it is now history. Though	28
29 many in West Africa surely retain great affection for specific American citizens,	29
30 the general view of the United States in the region has degraded significantly.	30
31 The perception that the United States was anti-Muslim and prepared to use force	31
32 to satisfy its unlimited greed for oil was probably quite marginal in West Africa	32
33 through the 1980s. This began to change during the first Gulf War, and has been	33
34 multiplied many times over by the second war in Iraq. Today, inhabitants of even	34
35 tiny Sahelian villages can see media broadcasts of the ravages of that war as long	35
36 as some entrepreneur manages to bring a television, a satellite dish and a generator	36
37 together in the same place.	37
38 This sets into motion two opposed dynamics: On one hand, American actions	38
39 in other parts of the world really have, in this author’s estimation, created varying	39
40 degrees of anti-American sentiment in West Africa. This can and does merge	40
41 in unpredictable and conjunctural fashion in the lives of particular individuals	41
42 like the young Mauritanian delinquents mentioned above. On the other hand, the	42
43 American approach to this problem, while oriented toward diminishing future	43
44 threats, is wrong-headedly channeled through the military. Such an approach will	44

1 only be read negatively in confirmed anti-American circles, and it will render 1
2 otherwise welcome development assistance bittersweet in others. Some analysts 2
3 have read the American military's prominence in the Sahelian counterterrorism 3
4 initiatives as the sinister first step in a master plan to assert a militaristic hegemony 4
5 over the entire region. Recent announcements of a plan for a United States military 5
6 Africa Command, based on African soil, and that would operate independently 6
7 from EUCOM, point to the military's recognition that Africa does have strategic 7
8 importance. This importance is presumably linked to the coexistence of Islamist 8
9 currents (however limited) and mineral resources that the United States government 9
10 considers of strategic importance. 10

11 It is important, however, not to get caught up too much in one's own rhetoric of 11
12 conspiracy. It has been explicit United States government policy since the 1970s 12
13 that it would go to war to protect its "strategic interests" (access to oil) in the 13
14 Middle East. African reserves are not nearly as important as those in the Middle 14
15 East, and many will be depleted much faster. Moreover, the biggest threats to 15
16 profitable exploitation of African oil have little to do with religion, as demonstrated 16
17 recently in the Niger Delta. Just as the United States government seems to rightly 17
18 identify growing anti-American sentiment but do all the wrong things to allay it, 18
19 the more conspiracy-minded observers correctly identify the American blunders 19
20 while wrongly denying that the perception of anti-American or indeed anti-Western 20
21 sentiment has any basis in fact. 21

22 The reasons for the military preeminence in Sahel-related matters since 22
23 September 11 2001 are, I argue, much more mundane, and in a sense sadder than 23
24 a grand conspiracy to control the region: Both the White House and the United 24
25 States Congress in their Democratic and Republican-dominated forms, have shown 25
26 themselves too cheap, too small-minded, and too focused on the politics of their 26
27 own electoral cycles to be willing to dedicate serious attention or serious money to 27
28 Africa. This has led to a gestural politics of the Bush administration's President's 28
29 Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and emergency aid for refugees and 29
30 for famines that is in the end far more expensive than sensible, proactive diplomatic 30
31 and development activities. In this context, the only institution with the authority 31
32 to break through the veil of short-sightedness and racism is the military. By using 32
33 the "T-word," General Wald was able to generate interest, money, and bureaucratic 33
34 advantage for himself and for a EUCOM that was quickly being overshadowed 34
35 the United States military's Central Command, which was running the Iraq war 35
36 and overseeing counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and the Horn of 36
37 Africa. 37

38 While the liabilities of having uniformed United States military personnel 38
39 undertake school-building or well-digging projects are fairly obvious, there is 39
40 another problem with them that is less frequently highlighted. "Hearts and minds" 40
41 work, like development work, is invariably tied up in processes of transformation 41
42 akin to social engineering. Whether such undertakings are justifiable at all is a 42
43 43
44 44

1 pertinent question that has been raised by anthropologists and others.⁵³ Even 1
 2 if such misgivings are tabled, as they certainly are in the case of the Western 2
 3 governments who are heavily involved in development and cultural exchange 3
 4 programming, it is important to take seriously the fact that most programs of this 4
 5 kind aim not just to put the donor countries in a better light. They aim at more 5
 6 profound transformations that will change recipients into the kinds of people who 6
 7 would be predisposed to “read” the actions and intentions of the donor government 7
 8 charitably. Because these projects are actually attempts to transform types of 8
 9 personhood,⁵⁴ or the ways that people relate to one another and the world around 9
 10 them, military institutions are particularly ill-suited to this sort of work. 10

11 Militaries have their own techniques for transforming personhood. In the 11
 12 United States, it is called “boot camp.” During this time, young recruits are 12
 13 purposely pushed to the point of physical and mental collapse, and then “built” 13
 14 back up in the image of the institution of which they are becoming a part. As many 14
 15 failed attempts have shown, while this technique may work on individuals in very 15
 16 particular circumstances, it does not work with entire societies.⁵⁵ I have talked with 16
 17 United States military personnel in West Africa who have portrayed the political 17
 18 stakes in the Sahel region in starkly competitive terms. In this calculus, whoever 18
 19 sinks more wells and builds more schools—the United States military, or Saudi- 19
 20 based Islamic NGOs—will win the competition for hearts and minds. Such an 20
 21 approach ignores the fact that West Africans are sophisticated consumers of such 21
 22 “charitable” undertakings. Whether under colonialism, or even when attempting 22
 23 to navigate the perilous centuries when the Atlantic slave trade fuelled internecine 23
 24 wars or, more recently during the cold war, West Africans have had to interpret 24
 25 the acts of outsiders with a critical eye. It is quite possible that a village would 25
 26 happily accept the schools and the wells from both sides, without ever being 26
 27 swung to one side or the other. Moreover, there is the real possibility that sinking 27
 28 wells in a Sahelian or desert region, where complex social networks of rights and 28
 29 responsibilities have grown up around access to water, will create conflict, rather 29
 30 than diminish it. 30

31 The military attitude to “development” may be efficient in its focus on concrete 31
 32 results, but it often ignores the micropolitical dynamics that can be overwhelmingly 32
 33 important in the local context. As the merchant networks connected to early 33
 34 Wahabbi conversion and the gender politics of Tablighi conversion in the Kidal 34
 35 setting show, people living in the Sahara–Sahel have reasons of their own for 35
 36 negotiating particular intersections between religion and politics. Both the United 36
 37 States military and some of their fiercest critics have shown a singular lack of 37
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39 _____ 39
 40 53 James Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization and* 40
Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho (Minneapolis M.N.: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). 40

41 54 Ivan Karp, “Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral 41
 42 Discourse,” in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Bruce Knauft 42
 43 (Bloomington I.N.: Indiana University Press, 2002). 43

44 55 Scott, *Seeing like a State*. 44

1 interest in such local particularities. The proper response to this shallow approach 1
2 might echo the words of Anna Schmidt, the lover of *The Third Man*'s enigmatic 2
3 smuggler, Harry Lime: "Oh please, for heaven's sake, stop making him in your 3
4 own image!" 4
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