“In the eye of the beholder: provocation, promise and prayer in the Sahara-Sahel”

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‘In the eye of the beholder…’

Are there terrorists in the Sahara?
Is there really a war on terror being executed in the Sahara?
Where does the money come from? Where does it go?
What has Islam got to do with anything?
Is this another Middle East in the Making?

It depends upon who you ask. It also depends very much upon perspective and location. The papers presented here reflect disciplinary perspectives ranging through history, ethnography, anthropology, sociology and political science. They derive from geographical case studies covering the key players in the so-called ‘war on terror’: Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Chad. They address the war and the terror directly in some cases, indirectly in others: for many both war and terror are constructs but nonetheless contexts shaping these questions. The articles were conceptualized and researched totally independently – which makes the extent to which they intersect with each other, reinforce many of each other’s findings and identify each others ‘issues’ as critical aspects of the contemporary situation, rather frightening. Put another way, while there are certainly some questions that emerge

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1 We are missing a chapter dealing specifically with Niger; however, Taguem Fah’s, Keenan’s and Lecocq & Schrijver’s pieces below touch on the Nigerien Sahara with respect to both so-called terrorist activity and oil and gas potential.

2 Gutelius, Jourde and Keenan (‘Who thought rock art was about archaeology?’) presented first drafts of these contributions at the Canadian Association of African Studies meeting in Montreal, May 2005. Keenan also screened his film “The political economy of the discovery and looting of Central Saharan Rock art: the case of the Henri Lhote expedition to the Tassili-n-Ajjer in 1957-58” in a special session in which Victoria Waldock (Stanford University and a filmmaker herself) set the rock art political economy in a larger African context. The two sets of presentations, organized by McDougall, were extremely well
from differing ‘takes’ on specific issues, this collectivity of analyses paints a picture that is far clearer than one might expect, given the nature of the subject matter and the diffuse nature research underlying it. What follows is without question ‘more than the sum of its parts’. What follows raises a specter of war and terror that has little to do with Islam per se and everything to do with Western interests in destabilizing and re-colonizing the African Sahara-Sahel. The unspoken agenda? Oil.

**Provocation:**

*Are there terrorists in the Sahara?* Our authors are not totally agreed on this rather fundamental question. For Jeremy Keenan, the answer is an unequivocal: no. The oft-cited *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC) with its Algerian roots and current Sahelian ‘offshoots’, is little more than a tool of the Algerian government being used to generate the impression of chaos and ‘terrorism’ (the ‘Salafist’ connection, see below) for purposes that suit both Algeria and the United States. Its most infamous leader “el-Para” was a former parachutist in the Algerian army (the government connection). The story that captured world headlines in 2003 about kidnapped German tourists, millions of Euro dollars in ransom and a chase across the Sahara into the Malian and Nigerien sahel, the end of which brought about his dramatic capture in the Chadian desert – was in the manner of the best spy novels, a ‘set up’, live theatre played to a gullible Western audience. Similarly, the GSPC alleged involvement with a ‘terrorist’ attach on a Mauritanian army outpost was orchestrated to give legitimacy to American military involvement (the Pan Sahel Initiative or PSI) in

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received and Amal Ghazal (Dalhousie University) suggested that a single panel focusing on the War on Terror aspect of Keenan’s work, and Gutelius and Jourde’s papers would make an excellent ‘special session’ for the joint Middle East Studies Association and African Studies Association meeting in Washington, November 2006. At that time Ghazal chaired and McDougall discussed. In the interim, Roger Southall ‘recruited’ the papers for this special edition: McDougall offered her own contributions and confirmed the additional papers by Gilbert Taguem Fah and Baz Lecocq & Paul Schrijver. So although the original contributors did hear initial presentations by each other, there was no ‘collective’ work taking place here.

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3 Unless otherwise indicated, references to Keenan here are references to his “The banana theory of terrorism” (below).
West Africa. Apart from pointing out that Algeria’s southern desert territories had been the safest part of the country during Islamist political insurgency in the north during the 1990s, Keenan argues that the Algerian government fingered a well-known bandit and smuggler, Mokhtar bin Mokhtar (MBM as he is known, Mukhtar Bilmukhtar in Lecocq and Schrijver, below) as one of the ‘terrorists’ involved in the kidnappings – incontrovertible proof, at least in the eyes of local Tuareg, that the Government itself was heavily involved in events. In a chapter reflective of the epithet ‘truth is stranger than fiction’ – but worthy of a fictional genre itself -- he follows all the ‘clues’ that argue the terrorists were role-playing a scripted piece of theatre.

From a very different perspective, Cédric Jourde working with the idea ‘terror’ as it has been interpreted in Mauritania, nevertheless would agree⁴. The ‘terrorists’ that have been periodically detained and occasionally brought to trial are equally creations of the Mauritanian government. He traces the origins of these phantom terrorists to well before September 11, 2001, noting that already in 1994, “the Mauritanian government staged the arrests, confessions, and releases of alleged ‘Islamist plotters.’” Repentant “terrorists” were seen on national television, making confessions, and Radio Mauritania broadcast both nationally and internationally that: “a desperate attempt to undermine the foundations of our society by means of setting up networks engaging in secret action to dope weak minds, spread deception and give rise to sedition” is underway. A decade later, from 2003 onwards, new waves of arrests repeated the pattern, complete with the rhetoric about ‘extremists’ with international networking connections, acting against the interests and security of the state. The most recent (June 2006) were associated with threatened bombings of ‘Western’ targets in the nation’s capital Nouakchott. Jourde is equally sceptical about the alleged terrorist attack in north-

⁴ References to Cédric Jourde are to his article in this volume “Constructing Representations of the ‘Global War on Terror’ in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania”.

east Mauritania, in no large part because rumours identifying the GSPC as the aggressor were joined by an equal number suggesting that a new Mauritanian group, the *Jama`at al-Muritaniyya lil Da`awat wa al-Jihad* (Mauritanian Organization for Preaching and Jihad) might also have been responsible. What seemed important was to identify a ‘radical’ and potentially threatening group.

In Chad, according to Gilbert Taguem Fah “‘terrorists’ are all those who try to overthrow the President or most recently, all foreign rebels crossing over from Sudan”\(^5\) His point is that those in charge of locating so-called terrorists have no idea who they might be and interpret their ‘orders’ in a way that is most politically convenient for them. Whether or not Taguem Fah actually believes ‘terrorists’ to be present is not clear.

The view from Mali as illuminated by Baz Lecocq and Paul Schrijver sees ‘terrorists’ and the GSPC in a somewhat different light; yet, ultimately they too would be hard pressed to locate the targets of the war on terror in the Sahara-Sahel\(^6\). They actually examine the GSPC as it has ‘evoloved’ in the desert and desert-edge regions of Mali. And they note that while its current leader has “pledged allegiance” to al-Qaeda, “this does not automatically mean that the GSPC forms an operational unit in the commando structure of al-Qaeda. If one focuses more on the actions of the GSPC than on its rhetoric and ideology, it becomes clear that the GSPC has its own agenda – to date, the armoured fights against the Algerian state -- and not the global *jihad* against the West”. In the process of looking closely at different ‘factions’ of the GSPC, Lecocq and Schrijver confirm their belief that clearly identifiable GSPC leaders were indeed in charge of both the kidnappings (“el-Para”) and the

\(^5\) References to Taguem Fah are to his article in this volume “The War on Teror, the Chad-Cameroon Pipeline and the New identity of the Lake Chad Basin”.

\(^6\) References to Baz Lecocq and Paul Shcrijver are to their article in this volume “The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls in the Saharan Front"
Mauritanian army base attack (Mukhtar Bilmukhtar – Keenan’s Mokhtar bin Mokhtar or MBM). Both events were ‘genuine’ GSPC activities, not staged theatrics as Keenan argues. And like Taguem Fah, they recount el-Para’s capture in Chad as being ‘the real thing’. But, terrorist activities? No. In fact their argument intersects in an interesting way with Keenan’s, in that they suggest both were more about criminal than political activity: from the kidnappings came some 5 million Euros in ransom, from the army base arms, ammunition and six army vehicles. And they too point to MBM’s reputation as a “powerful and successful smuggler”, underscoring the suspicion that this was theft (that may in part be justified by Tuareg notions of ‘rights to resources’ and the illegality of those who would use the desert’s resources without the permission of its ‘Tuareg lords’) not terrorism.

We will return to the American definition of ‘terrorist’ that would have us associate it with ‘Islamist’, below. What is interesting here is the thread that runs through Keenan’s and Lecocq and Schrijver’s essays in particular, but also David Gutelius’,7 Jourde’s and Taguem Fah’s about smuggling and smugglers. And the relationship of both to Saharan terrorism. Taguem Fah takes a rather straightforward view that the association of terrorism and smuggling is legitimate: “[The] borders in the Lake Chad basin region are porous, and routes across the Sahara are difficult to police; they are used regularly by smugglers and others who wish to avoid official attention. In particular, they present free passage for terrorists, equipment, provisions and especially money transfers.” It is unclear from his presentation whether he claims this is the reality of what is happening or the potential of what could happen, a distinction Gutelius is careful to make with respect to Mali. Lecocq and Schrijver trace smuggling back to at least the nineteenth century and point out that some of the

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7 References to David Gutelius’ are to his article in this volume, “Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror.”
same families who once traded illegally in slaves, tobacco and arms are the same who are today still involved in the illicit transporting of tobacco (in particular), people (to a much smaller extent) and small arms destined for well-known desert black markets. Their argument, however, is that most are not the likes of MBM – indeed, they reveal the smugglers themselves (including those who would be operating in the Chadian Sahara) as mere transporters, paid \textit{per} successful trip with a part of the profit, the rest of which goes to Nigerian, Libyan or Lebanese financial backers. They argue that “since the 1990s, most of the Saharan networks have been assimilated into larger transnational networks” and participation in them requires significant capital investment not available to everyone. These are first and foremost economic – not political, let alone ‘terrorist’ – ventures. But as both Jourde and Keenan point out, this is not how they are being portrayed to an external audience. Jourde cites the US Department of Defence’s Director for West Africa explaining why al-Qaeda should be interested in the Sahara-Sahel: “If you drive them [al-Qaida and its “affiliates”] out of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and you drive them out of Iraq, where do they go? Large, ungoverned kinds of space, kind of Arabic, kind of Muslim – that would be there. \textit{With sympathetic terrorist organizations already there, potentially? Or the ability to transit through, without anybody noticing? Or the ability through the smuggler networks to buy things?...}” Keenan detects in this association of ‘terrorist’ and ‘smuggler’ a dangerous shift in American definitions – dangerous that is for the local people involved (a point I will return to below). He concludes that Washington is “now busy defining trafficking as a ‘terrorist activity’ and classifying these innocent victims of US foreign policy as putative ‘terrorists’. The absurdity of this approach, which stems largely from the fact that there \textit{was no terrorism in the Sahara-Sahel}, is that an ever-increasing proportion of the region’s inhabitants will soon be able to call themselves ‘terrorists’!” [my emphasis]
Is there really a war on terror being executed in the Sahara? Strange as it may seem, the issues of whether there actually are terrorists (however defined) in the Sahara, and of whether there really is a war being executed against said terrorists are independent of one another. This, perhaps more than any other single aspect of the following analyses, elicits very different interpretations. In part, this is a reflection of some genuine disagreement between some of our authors; in part, a reflection of how the concept has been approached by them – that is, as a subject of direct questioning with various pieces of ‘evidence’ being weighed and compared, or as an assumed ‘context’ in which the consequences of the alleged war are foreshadowed more than its components.

Keenan’s ‘war on terror’ is a complete fabrication, a construction created by deliberate policies of ‘misinformation’ generated by both the Algerian authorities and the American state department. In his analysis only the ‘fact’ that the kidnappings of German tourists took place and the ‘fact’ that PSI was launched have any ‘truth’ associated with them. The rest is pure fantasy. He argues in fact that the voices of skeptical local Tuareg and an Algerian regime fearful of its dependency on its American ally are beginning to tear at the ‘veil of deceit’ that has so far been successful in channeling millions of dollars into the Sahara-Sahel (and much directly into Algeria). The theatrics discussed above were, according to him, necessary to justify not only the ‘terrorism’ (the kidnappings, the attack) but the ‘war’ itself (the staged desert chases, the capture of el-Para, the latter’s trial-in-absentia – was it even el-Para who was captured in Chad?). He suggests that this ‘front’ against terror is in danger of collapsing – hence the need to re-invent the terrorists as ‘smugglers’ and trans-Saharan black-market commerce as ‘terrorism’. Without targets, there can be no war.
Lecocq and Schrijver disagree. Their war is a real one – just one that is being fought incompetently. They argue that the hunt for the ‘bin Ladan of the Desert’ (el-Para) was a real one, one that took so long and was ultimately a failure for American elite government forces – it was the local Chadian rebel movement who finally captured him – because the Americans depended upon technology and personnel not ‘local’ to the situation. Local knowledge and information, they argue, are what enable local Tuareg to be useful in any ‘war’ that needs to be fought. They point out that the aim of the ‘war’ is prevention and how can one prevent ‘the enemy’ from accomplishing a goal if you do not know the terrain, understand the cultural ‘read’ of a given situation or have any local allies for on-the-ground support? They argue, contrary to Keenan, that the failure to ‘see the GSPC coming’ in the Mauritanian situation – literally three days before a major PSI training initiative was about to begin – was just that, a failure of their equipment and/or personnel to properly interpret the data their surveillance delivered.

The other authors tend, for the most part, to accept the presence of such a war in some form but either ‘see’ it through the effects it is having on local constituencies (Gutelius, Taguem Fah) or ‘represent’ it through the self-image its discourse has produced (Jourde). All question, to some extent, the centrality of ‘terror’ to the aims of the ‘war’ (a point I will return to, below), emotive jargon notwithstanding. All take as the main process by which the war is being executed the two programmes that have pumped men (military advisors, trainers of ‘rapid reaction units’ intended to plug up notoriously porous borders); military equipment (GPS-systems, unmanned reconnaissance planes) and money (cash) into the region. The PSI, originally encompassing Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad, was implemented in 2002 and the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) that followed in 2005, extended its reach to Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal and Nigeria. Where
the former had a budget of some 6 million USD, the latter has been given 500 million USD over five years. While some development aid money was dispersed alongside PSI, the TSCTI has a budgetary allocation specifically for ‘aid’; USAID, for example is directly involved. According to Gutelius, what began as an intelligence gathering operation, a monitoring of ‘activity’ in and around the Sahara became, with the establishment of the PSI and its successor, a ‘campaign’ to quash what is still referred to as ‘Al Qaeda in Africa’. Taguem Fah argues that it was the PSI that made possible the capture of el-Para (though both Keenan and Baz and Schrijver for different reasons would probably disagree). In Mali, where “poverty, and more specifically unequal access to resources, remains a fundamental issue in social dynamics”, Gutelius writes, “the way that the American and Malian governments have chosen to rhetoricize and prosecute the war on terror” has had unintended results, especially in the Saharan-Sahelian northern regions. Taguem Fah similarly looks at the war through the lens of local poverty: “Why is it that more than 500 million US Dollars are put in the hands of the US Institutions in Africa to fight terrorism while local Africans are dying from malaria, hunger and day-to-day violence? Does it not recall the oft-posed question, in this situation, just ‘who is the real terrorist’?” And he argues even further that the aims of war are no more understood locally than the instructions on how to use the weapons of war – that soldiers are being ‘trained’, handed up-to-date equipment, then being permitted to turn their talents to protecting the current political power. In the case of Chad, these soldiers belong to the same ethnic group, if not personal clan, as the incumbent leader. Jourde reports a comparable situation in Mauritania (prior to the 2005 coup) where the US equipped and trained 1st Battalion of Commando Parachutists (1er BCP) was a key pillar of the twenty-old dictatorship of ould Taya – its commander and key officers were from the president’s own extended family.
It is interesting that Gutelius mentions repeatedly the ‘rhetoric’ of the war, as well as its prosecution, not only by America but by Mali itself. For this is the point that Jourde makes from the perspective of Mauritania in arguing that it is the discourse of war that is having as much influence as the so-called war itself. He shows how America has literally re-imagined Mauritania in its rhetoric over time to ‘fit’ with its own changing military objectives – and in turn, how Mauritania has responded with actual activities (the periodic arrests of ‘Islamists’, its recent rapprochement with Isreal) in order to become America’s imagined ally. Jourde’s scepticism about the army–base attack (discussed above) is also linked to this argument, to the idea that Mauritania needs to be seen as being at war in order to play its expected role as ‘vulnerable state under siege’ from forces greater than itself.

Promise:
Where does the money come from? Where does it go? Ostensibly, this war – that would be the one with an annual budget of 100 billion USD – is meant to protect the targeted states from the penetration of ‘terrorist’ networks, to shore up their borders against the importation of illegal arms and to ‘capacity build’ in the area of military training and surveillance forces. It is America’s ‘second front’ of Operation Enduring Freedom in Africa (the ‘first’ one being in the Horn region) and its ultimate aim, apart from the motivational ‘fight for freedom’, is to bring security, stability and (by extension and with ‘development aid’ assistance) prosperity to otherwise poor, weak often war-torn Saharan-Sahelian nations. But between them, these authors raise serious questions both about where all the money actually being spent on this operation comes from and about where it is actually going. Can the ‘second front’ really deliver on its promises? On any of its promises?
Most damning are the findings of Keenan in his fascinating “Who thought rock-art was about archaeology?” article\(^8\). If it’s Algeria, it must be intrigue -- in this case, a small matter of accountability for some $22 million USD officially budgeted for the UNESCO World Heritage Site in Algeria’s Tassili National Park and the adjoining Ahaggar National Park. Working through a number of hypotheses ranging from analyses of ‘normal’ government practices, to Tuareg ‘on-the-ground’ observations, Keenan points to the strong likelihood that both the terrorists and the war that Algeria has been fabricating have in fact been financed through a skimming off of these international heritage-protection funds. As he argues, state funded terrorism is not something you want appearing on the national budget. Credence is given to the seriousness of the accusation by the fact that Tuareg from the region lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations Development Project about the fraud and embezzlement they suspected – and why they suspected it was happening. If it’s Chad, it must be oil – in this case the siphoning off of revenues (in spite of a so-called ‘transparency’ agreement) to buy weapons ostensibly used to fight ‘terrorists’ but in fact being directed at those who would keep the current regime in power. Taguem Fah recounts that it took several reports accusing the president, personally, of fiscal mismanagement before he finally confirmed that 4.5 million USD had indeed been used to arm newly trained troops to quell rebel (**Mouvement pour la Democratie et la Justice**) activities in the name of ‘terrorism’.

In Mali the source of funding seems more straight forward – the northern region attracted about half the original PSI budget. Gutelius argues that this money and associated aid programs have acted “to widen the perceived gulfs between north and south, as well as between northern nomadic and sedentary populations.” The millions of aid dollars funneled to the Malian government since 2001

\(^8\) Jeremy Keenan, “Who thought rock-art was about archaeology? The role of prehistory in Algeria’s terror.”, in this volume.
that were in principle to have been equitably distributed through a new, decentralizing government structure remained solidly within the hands of the southern-dominated government. Or so Northerners complain. The PSI program aid and that of its successor have become politicized symbols of a contest for power in the North. Taguem Fah warns of a similar potential in war-torn Chad, as new resources mean new access to arms and men for both northern Muslims and southern Christians.

In short, whether speaking of the funds openly earmarked or covertly channeled into the war on terror (including those who would argue for its fabrication) or of those being covertly channeled out of the operation per se (and into local authoritarian rule), authors agree that the stated aims of the war rhetoric are not being met. Not only are they not being met – the problems of the local situations are worsening as a direct consequence. Regional conflicts over meager resources in Mali and Chad are being escalated in the face of new opportunities, not to mention new arms. Lecocq and Schrijver speak of an ‘uneasy balance’ that could easily erupt into extended violence. And Gutelius draws attention to the particular new ‘face’ of the war that targets pseudo-terrorits – namely the local smugglers. In the face of northern Mali’s real and perceived unequal development, “trying to kill off the entire regional informal economy without viable short- and long-term livelihood alternatives …[will] likely have the opposite effect to what most American strategists and Bamako politicians intend: that is, it [will] …increase political instability in the north and ire against the government of Mali”. And Keenan’s broad sweep of Tuareg territory from southern Algeria through Mali, Niger and Chad concludes that, “what we are now witnessing is the transformation of much of the Sahel into a state of extreme political instability and insecurity and what some Tuareg leaders now describe as ‘being close to an incipient state of near-permanent rebellion’”. Perhaps most worrying of all is his
closing statement that, “These same leaders believe that this is a state of affairs which the US and Algeria, for their own respective imperialist and sub-imperialist designs, would like to maintain.”

Promises perceived to have been broken are dangerous policies for all concerned.

**Prayer:**

*What has Islam got to do with anything?* It is interesting that we can arrive at this point in the discussion without having engaged to any significant extent with the question of Islam. Yet it can be argued that at every turn we have been talking about nothing else. Like their analyses of ‘terrorists’ and ‘war’, the authors’ understanding of the role of Islam in the situation varies according to perspective and concern. On-the-ground observation of so-called fundamentalist groups and responses to them by ‘local’ communities invariably complicates analysis of the official rhetoric.

Keenan fully acknowledges the centrality of ‘Islam’ and the fear of ‘Islamists’ in the Algerian context. Ironically, here, the reality of a decade of conflict between government forces and Islamists in the northern areas gives all the more credence to the association between Islam and extremism. The self-declared ‘Salafism’ of the GSPC resonates all the more because of that widely known history. But as Keenan points out, that was the north: in the southern Saharan regions, local Muslims of Sufi orientation largely rejected the doctrine. Perhaps more salient, the southerners resented the interference with their ‘trading’ activities the presence of such Islamists generated. And they also understood what this ‘attention’ would mean for tourism – the central livelihood for many. Keenan’s perspective on the role of Islam reflects more of its consequences than its actual unfolding. He notes, for example that because of American ‘fear’ of Islamist activity in Algeria, the US cut back on weapons supplies, leaving the Algerian government scrambling to ‘please’ in order to keep up the
arms it needed to fight its own war against political opposition.

Interestingly, the work of Lecocq and Schrijver raises a question about the assumption that Sufi Muslims are not attracted by the ‘jihadist’ path. In the course of examining American ‘expert’ analyses, they note that actual experience belies this theoretical assumption and that Sufi Muslims in many areas have been drawn up in movements such as the Salafists – and the potential in Africa is particularly rich. That said in general terms, the insight we gain into two key group, the GSPC who we meet in mid-desert chases and attacks, and the Tablighi Jama’at who are door-to-door salesmen of redemption is rich indeed. They argue that: “The jihadi variation of Salafism rejects the existing political order and champions challenging it vigorously by means of armed jihad. The GSPC is an exponent of Jihadi Salafism. The Tablighi Jama’at, on the other hand, does not adhere to the Salafi tradition at all, but is a conservative piety movement primarily focused on converting individuals who are already Muslim. The Tablighi Jama’at is explicitly apolitical and condemns violence. Its philosophy holds that “if all people are formed to be good Muslims, violence and politics will no longer be necessary.” But they go on to point out that even within Salafism, there are radically different views on the nature of ‘jihad’ to be followed; the GSPC may be ‘radical’ but it openly rejects the concept of political/global ‘jihad’ in favour of opposition to the local state. The idea that the GSPC can easily be part of the world-wide ‘terrorist’ network is therefore suspect at best and the notion that the Tablighi Jama’at is part of the ‘stepping stone to terrorism’ is equally absurd given its apolitical stance. But… and the qualifier is important in the northern Malian situation, once a brotherhood or da’wa (‘preaching’) takes root, it becomes an integral part of the local cultural and political ‘scene’. At this point it is not its religious heritage of ‘salafism’ or jihadism that is relevant –
it is the local social, economic and political situation that will shape its role as catalyst to revolt or revolution – or not.

Contrary to the presentation of the subject in the American ‘war on terror’ rhetoric, ‘Islamism’ is not an imported threat: it is home grown. The authors mean this in the same sense that the US ‘war’ is increasingly about ‘aid’– that is, that the acceptance or lack thereof of some of these ‘radical’ or ‘fundamentalist’ Islamic ideas is equally tied to the financing that comes with them. And that competition between these Islamic groups is fierce: northern Malians (and more specifically Tuareg, though others are involved) have learned to play one off against another in good colonial fashion, while simultaneously furthering their own political aspirations. In keeping with this analysis, one town might be totally seduced by particular Islamic movements, such as those coming from the Middle East and Pakistan – while others literally chase them out of the region, their own ulema or clergy having decided there was no need for ‘foreign’ Islam. But as Lecocq and Shrivjer point out, Americans do not actually see the situation from this perspective, and tend to characterize both movements and responses in terms of ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad’ – thereby totally missing the actual dynamics in play. Were Jourde reviewing this particular article, he would point out the irony of the rhetoric – or rather, the danger, in that this is an unconscious (and therefore unthinking, uninformed) echo of French colonial discourse dating back more than half a century! And the French paid dearly for their misunderstanding.

Taguem Fah’s observations about how Islam is being understood and adapted in Chad-Cameroon in the context of the ‘war on terror’ are on the one hand provocative and tentative; on the other, especially read in the context of the two pieces on Mali, predictable and frightening. Taguem Fah and
Gutelius are observing the same phenomena with respect to economic and social issues. This is telling enough in terms of the near future for the Lake Chad basin, but Taguem Fah’s ‘case study’ adds the inflammatory factor of oil, already in production. It also introduces to the analysis an international project to bring that oil to the world market, namely the Chad-Cameroonian Pipeline. It has already fundamentally changed the political economy of the region. He speaks of the various Islamic groups that ‘frighten’ those who are watching the political scene: those who had once been seen as ‘allies’, with both eastern (traditional) Islamic training and Western (modern) secular education who have now turned to Arab culture and tradition as their ‘new citizenship’; those who were always ‘alien’ because of their exclusively traditional Islamic training that was multi-national in context who are now overly represented among the unemployable of the modern work force; and those young Muslims who identify themselves largely with the ‘traditionalists’ because of their economic alienation from society and concerns about what ‘globalization’ means for their future. They have all had contacts with groups like the Tablighi Jama’at, which has made itself very much at home in the region. What is so exciting about Taguem Fah’s work is that one has the feeling he has entered the ‘dynamic’ at an earlier phase than we now see in Mauritania or Mali, for example, so we can benefit from hindsight to ask questions about class, age and gender in this process. And we can, as Taguem Fah is doing, ask about the emergent ‘public profile’ of Islam in these communities – especially as it manifests itself in local, informal economies. He speaks of the proliferation of inexpensive cassettes of sermons, local-language translations of religious tracts, video performances of ‘preachers’ -- all of which have the potential to reach much wider audiences than traditional madressa (Islamic school) and mosque venues. Gutelius observed the same phenomenon in northern Mali where he notes that these vulgarizations have shown an increasingly sharp rhetoric since the late 1990s, lashing out against ‘ungodly government officials as lackeys of the West’, criticizing
companies destroying local communities and spreading loose morals, and defining what proper behavior was for good Muslims. He notes they often use such pamphlets to attack other Muslim figures – bringing the competition over authority and orthodoxy into the domain of the general populace where it has the most currency. And the most potential to bring about change. As Taguem Fah puts it, taken in the context of the many competing voices of Islam being heard today, the impact of this genre of religious literature on the overall ‘Islamization’ of the region, is likely to be significant. Unpredictable, but definitely significant.

So, ‘what does Islam have to do with anything’? Clearly, a lot. But not necessarily in the terms the US administration or its war on terror is portraying. ‘Fundamentalism’ is not a monolithic concept. The GSPC may be Salafist in orientation but each of its ‘regional’ leaders seems to have different goals, and Keenan would go so far as to question whether any are truly interested in global jihad. The leader of the Tuareg 2006 rebellion has personally committed to the Tablighi Jama’at and therefore suddenly northern Malian ‘resistance’ is equivalent to ‘radical Islamism’ and to GSPC Salafism. But Lecocq and Shrijver point out that the demands made most recently by the Tuareg of the Malian government were no different from those they have been making since before independence – there is nothing ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘radical’ or ‘Islamic’ about them. Moreover, they have explicitly distanced themselves from the perceived goals of the GSPC in public announcements and internet postings. They present the da’wa as having arrived at the ‘right moment’ to help the Tuareg return to their proper traditions; they describe it as ‘tolerant and knowledgeable’ and attempts to link it to GSPC Salafism as ‘dangerous and truly evil’. Local people have their own perspectives on what ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ means, whether it be Mali or Chad, and their responses to different Islamic voices are conditioned by a range of factors, most important of which appear to be perceptions of
social and economic inequities. The responses are less about ideology and more about aid – the additional resources groups like the Tablighi Jama’at bring with them. As Taguem Fah’s work illustrates, there is definitely an intersection between beliefs and experience, ideology and practice, but even exposure to religious beliefs is itself a product of socio-economic situation. Rather than approach the issue from the perspective the US currently adopts – identify the ‘Islamic radicals’, assume they’re terrorists or potential terrorists and ‘eliminate’ them, this research suggests the war itself is creating both the conditions in which such ‘radical’ beliefs will take root and the ‘radicals’ who will proceed to plant them will emerge. As Lecocq and Shrijver argue, just because rival Islamic authorities are today constraining the growth of particular Salafist or ‘other’ fundamentalist beliefs by their own competitions and conflicts, do not suppose that this indicates support for American policies. The dichotomies within which the war on terror has been launched – ‘good Islam or bad Islam’, ‘friend or foe’, ‘tolerant or terrorist’ – exist only in the minds of policy makers. For the people living in the Sahara and Sahel, life – and Islam -- is a lot more complicated.

*Is this another Middle East in the Making?* We ask this question in connection with what many of these authors identify as the real *raison d’etre* of the war on terror – namely, oil. Keenan points out in ‘Who thought rock-art…?’ that there is a history to this kind of duplicity, as he links French policy during the Algerian War and the (in)famous Lhote expedition, to the discoveries of oil and gas in the Sahara. It is his contention that the French government’s enormous support for an expedition that in reality did nothing more than copy some rock art for a much-touted exhibition in Paris (and indeed, did much ‘less’ in that it damaged many of the original paintings), was about applying a ‘cultural fig leaf’ to its ambitions to hold on to a Sahara *Francais* even as the northern part of Algeria moved
inexorably towards independence. Indeed, he argues the prosecution of that war was shaped with this aim in mind.

In the contemporary context, oil interests have less need for fig-leaves: as several of the authors point out, America has openly (in the Cheney report of 2001) acknowledged its ‘oil dependency’ and its expectations that at least 25% of its oil and gas imports by 2015 will be from Africa. The immediate effect of this report, Keenan underscores, was to highlight the immense strategic importance of Africa to the USA, so much so that the Bush Administration immediately defined African oil as a “strategic national interest”, defendable by military intervention if necessary. Hence, we see the execution of a ‘war on terror’ in a region with enormous potential for fulfilling that 25% (and more) of energy imports.

Jourde clearly makes this connection: even in a ‘constructed’ war, Mauritania’s position on its frontlines is largely due to the fact that oil drilling and—as of February 2006, oil production, are new features of Mauritania’s political economy. No American oil companies are yet involved in production, but the region must become ‘secure’ and dependent on American assistance now to be able to assure that access in the future. Moreover, American interests are clearly articulated further east in Mali, Niger and Chad – as ‘one’ Sahara-Sahel, what happens in one corner has ‘ripple effects’ thousands of kilometres away. Lecocq and Shrivjer also connect terror to oil. They note that because from a local perspective, there does not appear to be an ‘urgent’ terrorist threat, there is considerable speculation about the sudden upsurge in American military activity in the region: many have come to believe that it is not terrorists but the potential presence of lucrative quantities of oil that motivates these actions. From another perspective, the authors tell the story of Hunt Oil Company in the 1990s.
Its exploration into Niger (from the same geological basin found in northern Mali) also affected areas lying within Libya. Qaddafi expressed his anger at this encroachment by arming a rebel Tuareg group whose activities, in turn, upset the tenuous peace in the region and sparked a rebellion that lasted until 1998. Lecocq and Shrijver observe that, “The current situations involving oilfields on the borders of Mauretania and Mali and of Chad and Niger and Libya set the scene for similar kinds of conflict -- but this time American interpretations will have Muslim fundamentalist terrorists playing the role of villains…”.

In the Chad-Cameroonian context, Taguem Fah refers to the American ‘addiction’ to oil being ‘hidden’ in what he unequivocally refers to as the ‘pretext’ of the war on terror. Setting his analysis in the context of US failed oil-policies in the Middle East and new Asian competition for known resources, he argues that the once isolated periphery of the Lake Chad Basin has become the ‘target of choice’ for America. Just the potential of the region for future oil and gas discoveries has generated the largest single, private investment in sub-saharan Africa, the 3.7 billion USD Chad-Cameroon pipeline. The war recently launched is intended to protect that investment. And added value is being given by among other agencies, USAID who will be in charge of educating local military forces and governments and the State Department who will take care of security at airports by training local police and customer services in new techniques. “This overt and active American presence on Muslim African soil” Taguem Fah concludes, “clearly marks this part of Africa as a segment of America’s geo-political network revolving around oil production and exploration.”

**Between Construction and Context: “post-war” Sahara-Sahel**

Whether one believes in terrorists traversing the Sahara’s inhospitable terrain and in a so-called ‘war’
aimed at preventing said terrorists from destabilizing the region or not – whether this issue is about targeted construction or perceived context – the consequences for the peoples and nations of this region are very real indeed. Without exception, all the authors point to an already present tendency to entrench authoritarian governments (the patina of democracy in places like Mauritania and Mali notwithstanding) and to exacerbate regional and clan inequities (in terms of political power, social status and economic resources). All predict that in terms of ‘radical Islam’, the war on terror is more likely to generate than to prevent religious-based resistance and rebellion. Even Keenan in all his skepticism, concludes that while current ‘incidents’ of unrest can by no leap of the imagination be construed as ‘terrorist’, there is “a distinct possibility that they will inspire terrorism or draw more radical elements, including Islamists, into the region”.

Keenan reckons that this ‘second front’ on the war on terror is winding down for a combination of reasons he addresses. The view from the Sahel (especially as presented by Gutelius, Taguem Fah and Lecocq/Shrijver) is not quite so promising. In fact, if we shift position slightly into a Sahelian region we have not yet discussed, namely northern Nigeria, it looks downright ominous. Nigeria is as much on the US radar in terms of oil production as the Saharan regions examined here, and its northern Sahelian territories have been attracting global attention as they have ‘fallen’, domino style, to ‘fundamentalism’ and sharia law. Or so it appears. Recent American analyses of this situation echo our observations here with chilling clarity.

In May 2004, the conservative Heritage Foundation published a report on Nigeria linking economic problems and the ‘Islamist Terrorist Threat’. It pointed to attempts by a home-grown Islamist group ‘to establish “a Taliban-style Muslim state” in the north
and noted that despite its Nigerian origins, “foreign radical Islamists may be supporting the group”. And just to add to the fear-mongering: “Osama bin Laden has apparently announced that he has targeted Nigeria for ‘liberation’”. It went on to iterate insights that could just as easily have originated in several parts of the Sahara-Sahel: “Poverty, political corruption, an absence of the rule of law, and a fractious society (250 ethnic groups and a population split between Christians and Muslims) make Nigeria ripe for exploitation by radical Islamists…The growth of radical Islam in Nigeria and its potential impact on regional and energy security should be viewed in the context of increased global terrorist threats and a breakdown in governance systems. Government mismanagement, interventionist economic policies, and inadequate law enforcement hinder Nigeria's economic growth and oil production and have heightened Nigeria's vulnerability to Islamist radicalism. Addressing the Islamist threat in Nigeria requires strategies that strengthen Nigeria's ability to counter foreign terrorist activity and fix the country's underlying economic and security problems.9

That was two years ago. But an evocatively entitled “Worse than Iraq?” that appeared more recently in the April 2006 Atlantic Monthly carries on the battle. In it, Jeffery Tayler invokes upfront the possibility (or more accurately, the inevitability, given the current Nigerian regime) of military intervention in order to hold the country together and assure continued access to its Delta oil and gas deposits. The analysis is crudely clear and frighteningly familiar:

One particularly ominous scenario looms [today]: rebels may succeed in halting oil extraction in the delta, drying up the revenues on which the northern elites depend. If, in response, a northern Muslim general were to oust the president and seize power, the United States would find itself facing an Islamic population almost five times Saudi Arabia's, radicalized and in control of the abundant oil reserves that America has vowed to protect. Should that day come, it could herald a military intervention far more massive than the Iraqi campaign.” He too refers to the bin Laden threat, pointing to the fact that the al-Qaeda leader had identified Nigeria as “ripe for liberation”\(^\text{10}\).

The dangers posed by the war on terror in the Sahara are clearly not limited by time or space: the rhetoric, the (willful?) miss-reading of events on the ground, the demonizing of all Muslims (including simple smugglers and local rebels seeking social justice) as ‘terrorists’, travel well. What we are seeing here, and what is revealed in the following papers, is a remarkably versatile package that can be opened and closed at will, and that is impervious to local realities and local truths. It has flourished in the mysterious Saharan emptiness that has long been known as a home to Islamic fanaticism and cruelty\(^\text{11}\). The billions of US dollars feeding it over the past decade have produced stubborn resiliency and deep roots. Today, the war on terror is capable of reproducing itself. Indefinitely. The prognosis for Africa – especially its Muslim, oil-rich regions -- is not good.


\(^{11}\) E Ann McDougall, “Constructing Emptiness: Islam, violence and terror in the historical making of the Sahara” article in current volume.