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Humanitarian
Dialogue



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Resilient nations.*

Radicalization, violence and (in)security

What 800 Sahelians have to say

Executive Summary

***Perception study on the drivers of insecurity and violent extremism
in the border regions of the Sahel***

This research project has been carried out by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence.

Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation. For more information:

www.hdcentre.org

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Burkina Faso - 6 interviews
1'500 km – 5 days

60 interviews
Villages around 6 towns
Languages: Fulfulde

Cameroon - 6 interviews
1'500 km – 8 days

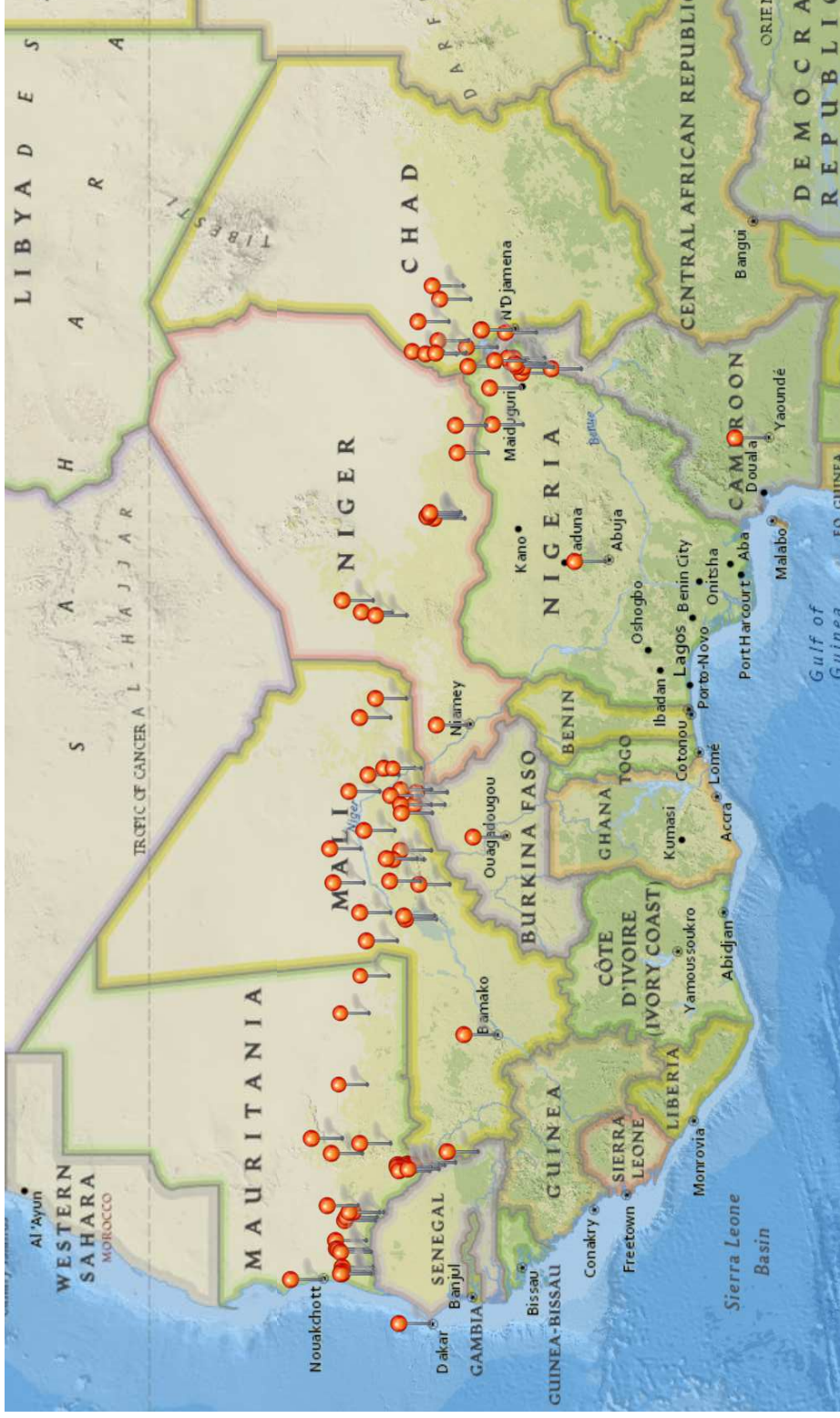
38 interviews
Villages around 6 towns
Languages: Mandara, Fulfulde, Chad Arabic, Kotoko, Kanuri, Gamargu, Podoko, Matal, Mafa &Kapsiki

Mali - 9 interviews
8'000 km – 12 days

147 interviews
Villages around 15 towns
Languages: Fulfulde, Tamasheq, Hassaniya Arabic

Mauritania - 6 interviews
2'500 km – 7 days

88 interviews
Villages around 16 towns
Languages: Pulaar, Hassaniya Arabic, Wolof



Niger - 9 interviews
4'000 km – 6 days

100 interviews
Villages around 12 towns
Languages: Hausa, Tamasheq, Fulfulde

Nigeria - 9 interviews
1'600 km – 7 days

120 interviews
Villages around 8 towns
Languages: English, Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo

Senegal – 6 interviews
2'800 km – 6 days

74 interviews
20 villages
Languages : Wolof, Français

Chad - 8 interviews
2'000 km – 6 days

71 interviews
Villages around towns
Languages: Chad Arabic, Kanembu, Buduma

8 capital cities
8 focus groups

80 community leaders

Perception study on the drivers of insecurity and violent extremism in the border regions of the Sahel

Executive Summary

Rationale and objectives

“Be the voice of the voiceless”¹

In September 2014, months before terrorist attacks hit Paris, N’djamen, Bamako, Abidjan and Brussels among others, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commissioned the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) to carry out the present research. Although HD is primarily a mediation and conflict resolution organization, we were concerned about a generalized lack of understanding of the rise of political Islam and jihadism in Africa. Despite the fact that the recent string of attacks were largely perpetrated by assailants originating from the Sahel belt, the ever-growing community of terrorism experts nonetheless seem to lack in-depth knowledge of the dynamics of religious extremism in Africa.

Along with UNDP and the eight concerned members of the Community of Sahel-Saharan states, we share the conviction that any political approach to so-called violent extremism must be founded upon sound understanding of the grievances and motivations of its protagonists – however pragmatic or dogmatic they may be. And this understanding must start by listening to the voices of the affected communities themselves.

The objective of the research as formulated by UNDP was to evaluate through a common methodology how drivers of radicalization, insecurity and violent extremism are perceived by communities living in border regions of eight Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal). The study was meant to serve as a basis for identifying practical approaches to reinforce the capacity of governments and border regions communities in dealing with the underlying causes of radicalization, insecurity and violent extremism in the Sahel. This study is the first ever of this kind with a scope extending to the most remote areas of the Sahel countries with a shared methodology allowing a direct comparison of data throughout the region.

¹ A participant of a focus group talk in Yaounde, July 2nd – 3rd 2015.

Methodology

To this end, HD recruited 16 local anthropologists and sociologists – two per reviewed country – and 52 investigators, led by a leading scholar of the sociology of Islam, Reda Benkirane, Research Associate at Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding (CCDP) in Geneva. Over the course of eight days², the investigators traversed nearly 24,000 km consulting a total of 698 randomly selected individuals. Investigators surveyed perspectives on security and insecurity, perceptions of the State and citizenship, links between religion and radicalism, and strategies for preventing the rise of jihadism - particularly among women and youth. Investigators also convened ten in-depth discussions for community leaders as well as sympathizers and repented jihadi groups militants, amounting to 100 more respondents. Those discussions focused more specifically on the process of radicalization.

In order to add analytical depth to the research, academic experts were commissioned to conduct six thematic studies on “de-radicalization”, the role of women in the expansion of jihadism, borders and security, governance models in the region, the relevance of transitional justice in the Sahel and clandestine migration. These studies were integrated in Reda Benkirane's *International Report*, a historical, cultural and sociological reading of the field research, representing a significant contribution to the discourse on the rise of jihadism. Together with the eight country reports, this research yielded more than 450 pages of data and analysis.

Semantics and statistics

Perhaps the most striking attribute of this research is that it prioritizes African voices, providing a platform to the 800 respondents and the 68 social scientists to articulate their perceptions of today's troubled world. In order to be faithful to their voice, the methodology of the research was designed with care. One of the main challenges was semantics starting with the difficulty of translating abstract terms in 21 local languages. In the Sahel, terms such as *security* and its corollary *insecurity* hold broad conceptual significance, extending to the sense of being protected from, or vulnerable to, dangers that could affect the community - be they physical dangers or threats to livelihoods. In other words, the meaning of these terms in the Sahel is akin to the concept humanitarians refer to as “human security”. The definition of *violent extremism* was also the subject of lengthy debates as the term has no equivalent in the languages spoken in the border regions of the Sahel, and carries no inherent association with radical Islam or terrorism. “Jihad” is constitutive of the Muslim faith in expressing the constant moral struggle of believers, and most respondents were deeply hurt by its negative connotation by Western media and

² The field research was carried out simultaneously in the eight countries of the Sahel during the month of June 2015.

politicians³. For the sake of clarity we have used “radicalization⁴” for the gradual process that may - under certain conditions - end up with religious extremism, and “jihadism / jihadists” for its violent extension⁵. In short, this study indicates that semantics matter and a successful “CVE⁶” enterprise must be framed with vocabulary that will be understood by, and resonate with, the target audience.

Statistics proved similarly controversial among our researchers, primarily because the number of respondents per country ranged from 38 (Cameroon) to 147 (Mali), with a total of 698 within a population of approximately 294 million⁷ – a ratio that falls short of what statisticians would consider a representative sample. Even if this research is mainly qualitative⁸ we decided to publish the statistics for the sake of transparency. We have quoted statistics only when they indicated a clear trend. Nonetheless, our figures should be read with the *caveat* that our study is not a poll, but rather a compilation of scientific, sociological, and anthropological research.

It's the economy, stupid⁹

When asked to identify the main driver of insecurity, 88.1% of our respondents invoked economic hardship – and only 1.9% cited religious radicalism. Even direct consequences of jihadism, including influxes of refugees, incursions by armed groups, and closures of borders, were primarily perceived as a disruption to business opportunities. Indeed border ecosystems are fragile, and the communities based there are entirely depended on the cross-border mobility of people, goods and services. To those communities, protectionism, along with campaigns against smuggling and counter-terrorism operations, are perceived as threats. One respondent from Niger poetically summarized their predicament: *“The border is like a tree. When you're under it, you enjoy its shade, its leaves, its bark, its dry branches and its fruit. But when it dies, one becomes an orphan, sad”*. Accordingly, respondents consistently identified petty criminality as the primary source of insecurity, because it not only exacerbates competition for resources but also fuels

³ Respondents expressed equal anger at the appropriation of the notion of Jihad by armed groups such as AQMI, Mujaho and Boko Haram.

⁴ The Arab language has a whole spectrum of terms describing the process that may lead to religious radicalization, from *mutadayin* for pious believer, to *multazim* who feel under a religious commitment, *ikhwani* for member of Muslim brotherhood, *islahi* for reformist, *uçuli* for fundamentalist and *Salafi* for follower of the conservative reform movement, *Wahabi* for follower of the Saudi theological doctrine, and eventually *mutatarif* for extremist and *jihadi* for combatant.

⁵ This choice of words does not bear any judgment as to the authenticity of the faith of so-called “radicals” and “jihadists”.

⁶ Countering Violent Extremism

⁷ Population breakdown (million): Burkina Faso 18 m, Cameroon 23 m, Chad 14 m, Mali 18 m, Mauritania 4 m, Niger 20 m, Nigeria 182 m, Senegal 15 m. Source: UN/DESA, 2015.

⁸ The questionnaire consisted of 72 substantive questions, half open and half multiple choice.

⁹ “It's the economy, stupid” is one of the three slogans that James Carville had coined as a campaign strategist of Bill Clinton's successful 1992 presidential campaign against sitting president George H. W. Bush, along with “Change vs. more of the same” and “Don't forget healthcare”.

community tensions and disputes between nomadic and settled populations. It is these *coupeurs de route* and cattle thieves that constitute a major threat, not jihadists.

And the winner is...

Our research suggests that States fare the best in the current dynamic. Border areas of the Sahel are far from “ungoverned spaces” - they are co-governed by both the central government and informal rules established by local leaders, which are more or less accepted by State institutions. Despite their distant relationship with their State government, citizens of border areas continue to look to them for security: for instance, a vast majority of respondents (between 65.8% in Cameroon and 97.2% in Chad) perceive the presence of armed forces as reassuring. However, and this is where the problem lies, a good half of the respondents across the eight countries indicate that their States are not able to guarantee their security. More concerningly, attempts by States to compensate for their lack of military capacity by subcontracting security roles to militias are widely perceived as negative. Often community based as in Mali or Niger, or predominantly Christian as in Northern Cameroon, these militia generate more insecurity than they resolve. In some instances respondents reported that security forces have been perceived as drivers of radicalization. Indeed when the deployment of troops is coupled with extortion and violence against civilians, or entire communities such as the Fulani in Mali, the Kanuri in Cameroon or the Buduma in Chad are targeted on suspicion of harboring jihadists, the temptation to join armed groups or seek protection from them increases. Put simply, respondents not only acknowledged a need for more State engagement, but for *better* State engagement.

Je ne suis pas Charlie¹⁰

Nevertheless, the unexpected faith in State institutions stops where it collides with religious precepts. For many Muslims interviewed, Islam is constitutive of citizenship, even in Cameroon and Nigeria whose populations are mostly Christian. As one Mauritanian put it “*Islam is the cement of the nation, it is what remains when everything goes*”. But to the exception of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, most Sahelian States have been built on the secular governance model of their former colonial powers – with which the research’s respondents do not necessarily identify. Worse, liberal laws adopted under pressure from the West are often perceived as tools of oppression of Islam. As one Malian respondent put it “*The most striking*

¹⁰ “*Je suis Charlie*” is a slogan adopted in the wake of the attack against the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo on January 7th, 2015. The ensuing “Republican march” led by President Hollande that gathered 40 world leaders and up to two million people in defence of freedom of the press and secularism was quoted by several respondents of our research as a symbol of the culture clash between the West and the Sahel.

example is the Family Code, which, in all its parts, is against Islam and its principles". Each State gets around the dogma of secularism more or less successfully, with Burkina Faso and Senegal standing out thanks to an active management of religious cohabitation for the former and the institutionalized influence on State affairs of the *Mouride* brotherhood in the latter. But respondents sometimes expressed forcefully and often emotionally their frustration towards the impossibility of debating publicly secularism – ironically perceived as a taboo. When asked which justice they trusted most, half of our respondents¹¹ opted for traditional or religious courts instead of national courts. Beyond the issues of radicalization and jihadism, reconciling citizenship and Islam - or articulating secularism and sociological Islam - appears like a major challenge in strengthening the rule of law in the Sahel.

Tabula rasa

In the minds of many of our respondents, religious radicalization and violence should be decoupled: only 1.9% consider radicalization a source of insecurity. Radicalization is understood through the lens of its original meaning: going back to the roots, clearing out an obsolete order – a purification process not unlike what the Born Again Christians offer to their disciples. Such an ideology is particularly appealing to youth—a demographic that comprises half of the Sahel population and is largely deprived of economic opportunities and proper education. It is also an ideology that is actively encouraged by the kingdoms of the Arabic peninsula. Indeed 77.5% of respondents perceive radicalization as being driven by socio-economic forces while only 14.8% see it as a religious phenomenon. Radicalization turns violent in situations of injustice and marginalization where jihadist groups promise an equalitarian society, an impartial justice, revenge against humiliation and domination by the traditional elites, but also redemption and the opportunity to attain respectability in a society where social mobility is frozen. In the remote areas of the Sahel, radicalization is not always perceived as a regression, but as a revolution¹².

Self-proclaimed jihadists

Even while radicalization is gaining momentum, self-proclaimed jihadists are not popular in the Sahel: 78.7% of the respondents believe that armed groups instrumentalize Islam to spread violence, and 83.8% consider their members as “bandits” or “illuminated” while their modus operandi is considered “terrorism” by a 78.5% majority. In Senegal, our interlocutors go as far as declaring “Jihadists is us,

¹¹ 47,1% preferred national justice, 18,9% traditional justice, 15,3 Islamic courts and 9,5% international justice.

¹² Reda Benkirane considers that the Sahel is currently going through a process of Salafi reislamisation comparable to the reislamisation somehow carried out by the Sufi brotherhoods during the 19th and 20th centuries.

not them” – a comment illustrative of the above mentioned terminological battle which animated many of our discussions in the field. When asked to identify the main drivers of jihadism, our respondents provided different explanations but all agreed on one point: they have nothing to do with it. Multiple exogenous causes were identified: Arab monarchies are blamed for exporting “another Islam”, conspiracy theorists see the hand of America, while others refer to the Palestinian cause. The January 2015 republican march in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo incidents and the magazine’s insulting cartoons were consistently cited as mobilizing factors for future jihadists. And the neighbor is always to blame: Mali for Mauritians, Nigeria for Chadians and so on – everyone making clear that jihadism wasn’t bred in *their* backyard. *A contrario*, our research indicates broad support for “*l’Islam tranquille*”¹³ of the Sahel and the values of tolerance associated with it – a finding to which policy makers should pay particular attention.

Residual sympathy

This being said it would be wrong to assume that all is well in the Sahel: 8,5% of respondents expressed a positive opinion of jihadist groups. Brought to a population of 294 million¹⁴, this is a matter of concern even if a fraction of this percentage was statistically representative. In Mali, about 10% of respondents qualify jihadist armed groups of “*resistants*”¹⁵. More worrying, some of our interlocutors in Chad consider that these groups make a legitimate use of violence when targeting non-Muslim, a trend also observed in Cameroon. If the West drives jihadism, then Westerners must bear the consequences.

*Timeo hominem unius libri*¹⁶

An alternative narrative to counter the revolutionary appeal of the Jihadist ideology is lacking, as are different, dignified paths for its followers. Islam is not only absent of most governance models of the Sahel States, but also absent of the secular curriculum of public schools¹⁷. In parallel, private madrassas should be compelled to provide a general education to their students. As it stands, a generation of Arab-educated youth has a monopoly on theological interpretation, while a cohort of youth poorly educated in French or English have little knowledge of Islam’s teachings. The former bear the prestige of Koranic knowledge but their lack of other forms of education has left them excluded from professional life. The latter group’s

¹³ Quiet Islam in English

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁵ « Resistance fighters », in reference to WWII French nationalists fighting the German occupation.

¹⁶ « I fear the man of one book » is a phrase attributed to St Thomas Aquinas

¹⁷ The religious teaching of Koranic schools in the border regions of the Sahel, including itinerant schools, ought to be monitored against ideological rifts.

ignorance of Islam leaves them vulnerable to the teachings of the former group. Both of these youth cohorts are prey to jihadist armed groups.

Our research reveals a correlation between religious education and resilience towards jihadism: in Senegal, over 75% of those who followed a religious curriculum or belong to a religious brotherhood perceived jihadist groups as instrumentalizing Islam for political purposes. Respondents in Mauritania and Chad, however, observed that those educated in Salafi madrassas in Nigeria or in the Arabian Peninsula are prone to being coopted by the higher spheres of jihadist groups, or recruited to their ranks as youth, impressed by the revolutionary ideology they embody.

The importance of including women and girls in efforts to use theological education to ward away radicalization was often cited. Our respondents highlighted the role of women as protectors against radicalization, yet mothers often expressed their helplessness in the face of inflammatory speeches by their sons and daughters, unable to articulate counter arguments. Our research reveals that the appeal of Islamic radicalization is not limited to a single demographic group; it is universal – touching young men and young women with equal force.

Generational divide

The generational gap existing between children and their parents is equally universal. Just as the 1950's Nasser generation of parents was shocked by their children's display of miniskirts while the Egyptian President was publicly mocking the Muslim Brotherhood's insistence that women bear the veil, today's parents of the Sahel find their children's conservatism disconcerting. Their children, in turn often see their parents as morally corrupt. As one young Mauritanian respondent put it, *"the difference between my father and me is that he votes for the ruling party out of opportunism, while I vote for the Tawassul party out of conviction. Is it not better? Is this not democracy?"* But the depth of the fracture – the exclusion of the youth from decision making processes and the lack of inter-generational dialogue – is a cause for concern across the Sahel. This should prompt policy reforms aimed at supporting youth, even if attempting to counter the "Jihadi cool" fashion is vain, and shouldn't be a matter of exaggerate concern.

*Chto delat'?*¹⁸

In 1902, Vladimir Lenin published "What is to be done?" a political pamphlet in which he argues for the radicalization of the socialist movement. It filled a void in

¹⁸ "What is to be done? Burning questions of our movement" is a political pamphlet written by Vladimir Lenin in 1901 under the title "Chto delat'".

what was perceived as an ocean of inequalities, corrupt elites and a frozen social order. Following the demise of Pan-Arabism, Marxism-Leninism and other liberation movements, Jihad may play a similar role as “the only cause available on the market¹⁹”. Evangelism, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism all produce their own brand of radicalization, but radical Islam is by far the most globalized and best marketed ideological movement offered to today’s youth.

At the surface our research led us to obvious conclusions: the greatest threat to Jihadist armed groups in the Sahel is not drones, but rather States that guarantee human security, protect their weak, and offer opportunities to all youth within their territory, within a cultural and religious matrix they feel to be legitimate. This won’t happen overnight, and in the meantime more and more youth will embrace radical forms of Islam. But this perception study has more to offer.

Paradoxically, the source of, and remedy for, radicalization and jihadism may lie in the same place: Islam. The impact of programs aimed at preventing or countering violent extremism, as well as de-radicalizing Salafi, should be weighted against the impact of policies aimed at supporting traditional Islam. Should efforts be concentrated on the vast majority of pacific Muslims portrayed in our research, or against a small minority of jihadists? How far is the pursuit for secular democracy and human rights by the West preventing or encouraging radicalization?

Listen to the voiceless

Eight hundred Sahelian respondents have expressed their malaise towards copy-paste forms of governance imported from their former metropolis, their feelings of helplessness towards Salafi scholars who know more about Islam than they do, but also their anger towards a social order that refuses to engage them in dialogue, and a world order they see antagonistic to Islam. Our study tends to suggest that the “CVE” narrative may even fuel conspiracy theories in the Sahel. The observations and themes for reflection of our study, however, need to be explored with greater depth and across more contexts. As a first step, replicating a similar exercise across the Eastern end of the Sahel belt to Somalia, as well as in the Maghreb and the Mashreq would help consolidate understanding of the phenomenon.

Days after the bloody November 13th, 2015 attacks in Paris, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared:

“I am tired of those who permanently seek cultural or sociological excuses or explanations for what happened²⁰.” He later added *“For these enemies who turn on their compatriots, who tear up the contract that unites us, there can be no*

¹⁹ Olivier Roy, «Le jihad est aujourd'hui la seule cause sur le marché», interview in Libération, October 3rd, 2014.

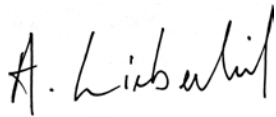
²⁰ French Senate question time, November 26th, 2015.

worthwhile explanation, for to explain means wanting to excuse a little²¹.”

While the anger of the French Prime Minister in the aftermath of the Paris attacks is understandable, our study takes an opposite position. On the basis of our research, any successful strategy preventing the rise of violent radicalization must be informed by local, popular perceptions of the phenomenon, and adapted to the sensitivities of each region. What works in Timbuktu may be ineffective in Moelenbek or Aleppo.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the courageous researchers who carried out this enquiry, those who conceptualized and wrote it, the UNDP and the Government of Japan for making it possible.

Nairobi, 27 April 2016



Alexandre Liebeskind
Regional Director,
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

²¹ Speech to the French Jewish Council, January 9th 2016.

Perception Study – Contents

The Perception Study has resulted in 9 reports as follows:

1. **International Research Report.**
Radicalization, violence et (in)security. What 800 Sahelians have to say.
2. **Burkina Faso:** the rise of cross-border insecurity.
3. **Cameroon:** the political economy of violence in the Far North.
4. **Chad:** balancing needs and insecurity.
5. **Mali:** local conflict and the call for justice.
6. **Mauritania:** radicalization and citizenship.
7. **Niger:** instrumentalizing religion: the economy of insecurity.
8. **Nigeria:** nationhood Crisis and Violent Extremism as a Poverty Issue.
9. **Senegal:** citizenship on the alert.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Project Management – Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD)

Head of project, Scientific Director

Reda BENKIRANE, sociologist, associate researcher at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID, Geneva), at Centre Jacques Berque (CNRS USR 3136, Rabat, Morocco) and member of IrPhil [l'Institut de Recherches Philosophiques] in Lyon (IrPhil, University of Lyon).

Deputy Head of project, Operations Coordinator

Soline AUBÉ

Regional Director

Alexandre LIEBESKIND

Regional Coordinator, Francophone Africa

Constance VIDEMENT

National teams

Raguidissida Emile ZIDA, Research Manager, national report - Burkina Faso

Jacob YARABATIOULA, Research Manager, field survey - Burkina Faso

Nadine MACHIKOU, Research Manager, national report - Cameroon

Claude LINJUOM MBOWOU, Research Manager, field survey - Cameroon

Isaie DOUGNON, Research Manager, national report - Mali

Boukary SANGARÉ, Research Manager, field survey - Mali

Mariem BABA AHMED, Research Manager, national report - Mauritania

Mamadou LAM, Research Manager, field survey - Mauritania

Amadou OUMAROU, Research Manager, national report - Niger

Kadidia ALI GAZIBO, Research Manager, field survey - Niger

Efem N. UBI, Research Manager, national report - Nigeria

Sharkdam WAPMUK, Research Manager, field survey - Nigeria

Abdourahmane SECK, Research Manager, national report - Senegal

Rachid Id YASSINE, Research Manager, field survey - Senegal

Remadji HOINATHY, Research Manager, national report - Chad

Djimé SELI, Research Manager, field survey - Chad

Thematic international experts

Jean-François BAYART, Professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva) and Director of the Chair for Comparative African Studies (UM6P, Rabat)

Hervé GONSOLIN, HD Special Adviser on peace and security

Ibrahima GUISSÉ, Senior Researcher, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Geneva

Pierre HAZAN, HD Special Adviser on transitional justice

Rachid ID YASSINE, Statistics Expert, Gaston Berger University, Saint-Louis, Senegal

Pierre-Michel JOANA, Security Expert, CIVIPOL

Zidane MÉRIBOUTE, HD Special Adviser on religious dialogue

Gwenola POSSÉMÉ-RAGEAU, HD Special Adviser on gender and civil society

Burkina Faso

Interviewers

Fatimata TAMBOURA
Saïdou DIALLO
Abdoulaziz DIALLO
Sambo Emmanuel OUÉDRAOGO
Frederick Ndoubabe ASNGAR

Thematic Experts

Baba HAMA
Sibiri BADOUN
Inès ZOUNGRANA

Cameroon

5 Interviewers

6 Thematic Experts

Mali

Interviewers

Lucie BELLO
Nana Alassane TOURE
Alkassoum BARKA
Modibo Galy CISSÉ
Ousmane AHIMIDOU
Mohamed M. ABDOULAYE
Bala KONÉ
Hamidou Tiécoura MARIKO

Thematic Experts

Boureima KANSAYE
Ousmane KORNIO

Mauritania

Interviewers

Khally DIALLO
Ilo Idriss SOW
Oumar Mamadou LAM
Mariem NDIAYE
Mariam LY

Thematic Experts

Jemal OUMAR
Baye Tidiane DIAGANA

Niger

Interviewers

Idi SANOUSI
Mohamed MOUSSA
Manou NABARA HAMIDOU
Amadou BOUBACAR
Yacoudima TCHIROMA
Maina GREMA SANI
Maman TASSIOU

Watakane MOHAMED

Thematic Experts

Dr. Moulaye HASSANE
Dr. Issoufou YAHAYA
Moussa MOHAMED

Nigeria

Interviewers

Musa Aliyu MAMPAA
Anthony RUFUS
Jonathan Bayih DANGWARAN
Usman Ibrahim GASHUA
Raji Rafiu BOYE
Yakaka ABUBAKAR
Saidu.T UMAR
Samuel OBADIAH
Mohammed UMAR

Thematic Experts

Professor Haruna DANTORO DLAKWA
Professor Fred AJA AGWU
Elder Timothy MSHELIA JP
Dr. Aliyu AHMED-HAMEED

Senegal

Interviewers

Khadidiatou DIA
Muhammad BA
Mandiaye SAMBOU
Fatou SALL
Cheikh Tidiane MBOW

Thematic Experts

Me Boubine TOURE
Khadidiatou DIA
Blondin CISSÉ
Muhamad BA
Cheikh NDIAYE

Chad

Interviewers

Félix KAGUENANG
Allah-Kauis NENECK
Adam NETCHO
Ousmane MOUMINE
Fatimé NGARADOUM
Oumar Moussa MAITCHAIRI
Mahamat Moussa BOUGAR

Thematic Experts

Madjiasra NAKO
Bakary SALLI
Ousmane MOUMINE

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the People of Japan



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