

The University of Florida *Islam in Africa Working Group*
and
The Sahel Research Group & International Crisis Group Policy-Scholars Annual Forum

Present a joint symposium on:

Taking Stock of the Sahelian Jihads: Motivations, Impacts, Responses

Long a peaceful—if poor and underdeveloped—region, the Sahel has tragically become the epicenter of militant Islamist activity in Africa since the collapse of Mali in 2012. In the crucible of a facilitating international environment and domestic state weakness, violent extremist groups have proliferated, splintered, and spread, seeking affiliations and support from elsewhere in the Muslim world. As a result, there is an often-confusing array of groups and names at any given moments, at times making common cause but also fighting among themselves. The two main jihadi branches in the Sahel are largely local affiliates of Al-Qaeda and of the Islamic State, respectively—the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (*Jama'at Nusrat l-Islam wal-Muslimin*, JNIM), and the *Islamic State, West Africa Province (ISWAP)*—although the permutations and relations among these are shaped by local contexts.

Now in their second decade, there are still many more questions than answers about the drivers of the Sahelian jihads. As Luca Raineri has noted, “While jihadism appears to be on the rise in Africa, the explanations of violent extremist groups’ capacity to foment jihadi insurgencies and mobilize recruits remain poorly understood.” Centrally, the relative importance of identities and of ideologies remains poorly understood. How do considerations of ethnicity or of social hierarchy play into the dynamics of jihadi groups? Are these groups sometimes in effect “ethnic militias”? What is the relative importance of material and secular grievances versus religious ideologies in motivating people to join and participate in jihadi activity? How voluntary is such adhesion? What is the role of coercion or force as motivators for joining? What is the relationship between jihadi groups and criminal networks of drug trafficking or smuggling? What explains the varying relations among jihadi groups with local populations? When and why are jihadis seen as the best alternative (or as the lesser of two evils) by locals? In the context of these uncertainties, the impacts of Jihadism remain fluid and poorly understood, and responses have often been uncoordinated.

This joint symposium of the Islam in Africa Working Group and the annual “Scholars-Policy Forum” of the Sahel Research Group and the International Crisis Group, will bring together a diverse set of experts with deep knowledge and experience in the Sahel to explore the highly timely topic of the evolution of the Sahelian jihads. What do we know about these movements? How do we explain their expansion? How has jihadism impacted states and societies in the region? How have states and other actors responded?

***This event is sponsored by the UF Center for African Studies
with support from the Department of Political Science, the UF Office of Research, the UF
International Center, and the International Crisis Group***

SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM

Friday 4 April 2025

11:45 AM – 12:50 PM: Sahel Seminar: Informal discussion on theme of:
“France and *la rupture souverainiste* au Sahel” (SRG Office - 109 Rolfs Hall)

3:30-5:00 PM. Center for African Studies Baraza Lecture: (404 Grinter)

Ibrahim Yahya Ibrahim - International Crisis Group, Dakar, Senegal
“*In Whose Name? Exploring the Multifaceted Jihad in the Sahel*”

Saturday 5 April 2025

Matthews Suite, Reitz Union Level Four (use the blue elevator to access the room)

8:30 – 8:45: Coffee & Registration

8:45-9:00: Welcome and introduction: Leonardo Villalón

9:00 – 10:30 Panel I: Ideologies and Identities
Chair: Leonardo Villalón

Alexander Thurston - *University of Cincinnati*
“*Identity and Narrative in the September 2024 Bamako Attacks*”

Vincent Foucher - *National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), Paris, France*
“*Pathway(s) into jihad? Quranic education and the career of Lake Chad Basin jihadist militants*”

10:30-11:00 Coffee Break

11:00 – 12:30 Panel II: Expansion and Diffusion
Chair: Cory Satter

Jean-Hervé Jezequel - *International Crisis Group and Université de Bordeaux*
“*To grow or not to grow? Questioning Jihadists' incentives to expand towards the West African coast.*”

Olivier Walther and David Russell – *University of Florida*
“*Strategies and patterns of Jihadi Diffusion*”

12:30: 1:30 (Lunch Break)

1:30 – 3:00 Panel III: Impacts
Chair: Azizou Garba

Baba Adou – University of Florida

“Appropriating the sacred: How jihadi insurgencies are reshaping state-religion relation in the Sahel”

Halimatou Hima – Brookings Institution

“The Impact of Insecurity on Learning and Education in the Sahel”

3:15 – 5:00 Panel IV: Responding

Chair: Oumar Ba

Ibrahim Maïga - International Crisis Group

“Military Regimes Tested by Jihadist Groups: Challenges and Dilemmas”

Amb. Alexander Laskaris - US Dept of State (ret)

“USG responses to the policy challenges of non-state armed groups in the Sahel”

Participants

Leonardo A. Villalón is Professor of Political Science and African Studies and founder and coordinator of the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. He is a specialist on the countries of the African Sahel, where he has carried out research on the role of religion in politics, democratization, electoral issues, education, and political stability.

Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim is the Deputy Director of the Sahel Project at the International Crisis Group. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Florida, where his research focused on Islam and political contestation in the Sahel. He also earned degrees in sociology and Islamic jurisprudence from the Islamic University of Say and Abdou Moumouni University.

Alexander Thurston is an Associate Professor at the University of Cincinnati. His research focuses on Islam and politics in West and North Africa. He has authored three significant books on Salafism and jihadism in North and West Africa. Dr. Thurston holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Northwestern University and an M.A. in Arab Studies from Georgetown University.

Azizou Garba served as Deputy Director of Niger’s National Center for Strategic and Security Studies (CNESS) and special advisor to President Bazoum until the coup in July 2023. He was also a Technical Advisor to Niger’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2013 to 2016. He is currently a PhD candidate at Université Catholique de Louvain. His research focuses on the effects of terrorism on state-building in the Sahel.

Cory Satter is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida. His current project focuses on the political ecology of urban flooding in the Sahel. He is also interested in existentialist dynamics of violence. He holds a B.S. in Political Science at Arizona State

University and M.A. in International Cooperation on Human Rights at the University of Bologna in Italy.

Oumar Ba is a retired UN official with a long experience in Mali and Central African Republic. In his last position, he served as Head of Office in Gao, Mali between 2017 and 2020. He holds a master's degree of International Public Law from the Geneva Graduate Institute and a Doctorate from the International Relations Institute of Cameroon.

Vincent Foucher is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France and a prominent expert on Boko Haram. He is also a researcher at Sciences Po Bordeaux, affiliated with the research unit Les Afriques dans le Monde (LAM). Dr. Foucher earned his PhD in political studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

Jean-Hervé Jezequel is the International Crisis Group's Project Director for the Sahel, based in Dakar since 2013. He is responsible for conducting extensive research and advocacy on the prevailing political and security issues in the central Sahel region. He is also an adjunct researcher at the Laboratoire les Afriques dans le Monde (LAM, CNRS-Sciences-po Bordeaux)."

Olivier Walther is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and a core member of the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida. His research and teaching have focused on terrorism and cross-border trade and cooperation in the Sahel and elsewhere in West Africa. His current research project studies the spatial evolution of conflict in North and West Africa.

David Russell is a PhD student in Geography at the University of Florida. David has worked as a geographer of political violence in the Middle East and North and West Africa with various organizations including Princeton University, the Middle East Institute, the University of Idaho, and the OECD. His current research focuses on the diffusion of political violence in Africa.

Baba Adou is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida. He is a research assistant at the Center for Global Islamic Studies and a research associate with the Sahel Research Group. Baba's dissertation project examines the evolving relationship between the state and religion in the African Sahel, particularly in the context of regional insecurity

Halimatou Hima is the Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) Country Coordinator for the Gulf of Guinea countries at the World Bank Group. Her research with the Brookings Institution explores the impact of insecurity on educational systems in the Sahel. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge and a master's degree from Harvard University.

Ibrahim Maïga is Senior Adviser for the International Crisis Group's Sahel Project. He previously served as the Sahel Regional Representative at the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. He has also served as special advisor to the prime minister of Mali. From 2015 to 2020, he held various positions at ISS regional office for West Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

Amb. Alexander Laskaris retired from the US Dept of State in February 2025 after a long and distinguished diplomatic career largely in Africa and the Middle East. He has served as ambassador to the Republic of Chad since 2022, and previously as ambassador to Guinea-Conakry. From 2015 to 2019 he was Deputy to the Commander of the US Africa Command. He has also taught at the National War College.