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Islamic NGOs in Niger and Nigeria

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Under the false pretence of redistributing alms (*zakat*) to the poor, armed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas have used charity as a facade to establish their legitimacy, expand their social base, and source foreign currency or, sometimes, weapons. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda initially started as a charity and aid organization for *mujahideen* fighting against the Soviet Red Army, with the military and terrorist ramifications that we know.¹ In Sub-Saharan Africa, the question quickly arose as to whether the most radical Islamist movements had also resorted to 'humanitarian' NGOs to spread their ideology, indoctrinate the poor, and find financing abroad.

The debate is not closed. Some researchers are worried about the proliferation of Islamic NGOs, accused of being the economic, political, and diplomatic arms of a Saudi-inspired global jihad or, in its Sahelian version, a Sudanese-inspired one.² On the other hand, other observers emphasize that, far from being a threat, the modernization of a fundamentalist contestation into a formal associative framework demonstrates a level of institutionalization of religious protests through channels of dialogue likely to offer an alternative to the armed struggle.³ For example, in the case of Niger, Islamic NGOs work to prevent and manage social conflicts, and three-quarters of these NGOs act as mediators in cases that essentially oppose divergent currents of thought.⁴ What about Nigeria? Its inhabitants are reputed to be very religious, and many follow the prescriptions of their religion to help the poor. According to polls from the Pew Research Center, 80% of Muslims and 83% of Christians say they donate to charity through their mosque or church.⁵ However, the country has few development NGOs or emergency aid organizations for its size.⁶ In comparison, Niger is much better endowed, especially since the drought of the early 1970s. In 1975, there were already 14 NGOs, including 12 international ones, and we count about

¹ Al Qaeda strategists advise jihadists to set up NGOs to live their faith to the fullest by avoiding the corruption of public institutions in impious states. As-Suri, Abu Mus'ab (2004), *The Jihadi Ideology and Constitution of the Global Islamic Resistance Call*, n.d, art.18.

² Mohamed Salih, MA (2004), 'Islamic NGOs in Africa'. In: Alex de Waal, ed., *Islamism and Its Enemies In The Horn Of Africa*, London, Hurst, pp.146-81.

³ Perouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (2011), 'Islamic Humanitarian NGOs in Africa: a threat or a blessing?', *Global Security* 16: 9-19.

⁴ Hassane, Moulaye, Marthe Doka & Oumarou Makama Bawa (2006), 'Study on Islam Practices in Niger', Niamey, DANIDA, p. 84.

⁵ Lugo, Luis et al. (2010) *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington DC, Pew Research Center, 324p.

⁶ Perouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (2005), 'Bad governance and NGOs: The Nigerian exception', *Autrepart* 35: 127-42.

a hundred today according to online directories.⁷ In 2005, it was estimated that Niger had 54 Islamic associations, 44 of which duly registered. Islamic-charities in Nigeria are more difficult to quantify in this regard. Historically, the region has had few foundations (called *waqf* or *hubus*), because – unlike territories within the Ottoman Empire – the royalty at the head of pastoral or mercantile societies rewarded their vassals with tax exemptions or military service exemptions rather than with land concessions.⁸ It is also necessary to distinguish local NGOs from branches of larger organizations coming from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Sudan, Libya ... or Europe: the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami, founded in 1962 in Mecca), the Organization for the Call of Islam (al-Dawa al-Islamiyya, founded in 1972 in Tripoli), or specialized agencies – in education, scientific cooperation, development, or banking – of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (launched in Rabat by the Saudi king in 1969).

Among foreign organizations, the only one whose name is indirectly related to the history of Boko Haram is a British foundation: the Muntada Islamic Trust (al-Muntadah al-Islamiyya), which was established in London in 1986 and has for a time funded mosques in Nigeria, before being banned by the authorities in 2004 and having handed over its activities to a local association, al-Furqan.⁹ Located in Kano, the NGO quickly worried the leaders of Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, who demanded its expulsion in September 2002. The Sudanese director of the Muntada Islamic Trust branch in Maiduguri, Muhyiddin Abdullah, was arrested in February 2004 and accused of funding the Taliban rebels in Yobe. Before being murdered in April 2007, probably by Boko Haram, one of the leaders of the most conservative current of Izala, Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, was himself about to report to the authorities the activities of extremists who, funded by the NGO, had tried to use its Kano mosque to recruit and train terrorists, believed to have been involved in his assassination. In the years that followed, the governments of Kenya, Chad, and Mozambique also expelled representatives of the Muntada Islamic Trust. However, a parliamentary inquiry conducted in the United Kingdom in 2012 was unable to prove the direct involvement of this NGO in terrorist networks.

In fact, there is no evidence of an operational link between foreign Islamic charities and the sect founded by Mohammed Yusuf and now known as Boko Haram. Actually, even fundamentalist sheikhs criticize the proliferation of Islamic associations, which are accused of sowing discord (*fitna*) within the community of believers (*umma*).¹⁰ In many cases, it is rather the Muslim establishment that opted to institutionalize, register and legalize charities. Connected to the Society for the Victory of Islam (Jama'atu Nasr Islam, launched by the Qadiriyya in 1964) and chaired by the Sultan of Sokoto, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) thus deals with helping widows and orphans and granting micro-credit to peasants.

Historically, Sufi brotherhoods were the first to develop NGO networks. In 1963, for example, the Kano-based Tijaniyya established an 'avant-garde' called the Heroes of Islam (*Fityan al-Islam*). In competition with Sokoto's Qadiriyya, it then set up a first-aid service in 1978, the same year as the launching of a rival and Wahhabi-inspired organization, the Society for the Eradication of blameworthy Innovations and the implementation of the Sunnah (Jama'at Izalat al-Bida wa Iqamat al-Sunnah). The latter did not lag behind for long and started developing social actions to expand its influence by establishing branches across the country, mainly in the north, where it has opened health clinics for the poor. For their part, the Heroes of Islam have initiated awareness programmes on pre-marital AIDS testing, a position that may have triggered the split of a

⁷ <http://www.portail-humanitaire.org/annuaire/pays/afrique/niger/>

⁸ Fisher, Humphrey (1975), 'The Central Sahara and Sudan'. In: Richard Ray, ed., *The Cambridge History of Africa, vol. 1: From the Earliest Times to c. 500 BC*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 59.

⁹ Its Syrian-born founder Muhammad Surur Ibn Nayif Zayn al-'Abidin had first led in Saudi Arabia a Salafist movement, Sahwa, criticizing the 'laxity' of the ruling Wahhabis in Riyadh; his position had resulted in his being expelled from the country in 1974 and seeking refuge in the United Kingdom.

¹⁰ This is the case, for example, of Mallam Mai Zabura in Maradi. See Sounaye Abdoulaye (2010), *Muslim Critics of Secularism. Ulama and Democratisation in Niger*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, p. 35.

dissenting group in 1995, called the Young Heroes of Islam (Munazzamat *Fityan al-Islam*). Finally, both the Izala and the Tijaniyya set up self-help groups (*yan agaji*) to provide security for their religious gatherings and relief in cases of emergency.

Opposed to Sufi brotherhoods and to the Izala 'eradicators' at the same time, the 'Shia' movement is undoubtedly the one which has sought most to institutionalize its social actions in the form of NGOs. Its founder, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, started his political career as an activist of an organisation, the MSS (Muslim Students Society), whose Center for Islamic Thought was to participate in AIDS prevention programmes. Since then, the so-called 'Yan Shi'a' have created many NGOs, including a security arm (Harisawa), a fund for the needy (Zahra), a doctors' charity named ISMMA (Islamic Movement Medical Association) and, on the Iranian model, a martyrs' foundation (Shuada) to care for the families of members killed by the Nigerian security forces. Social actions have been particularly developed in the field of health, with sanitation programmes and pre-positioned ambulances in Zaria, Katsina, Kano, and Sokoto for emergency services. On occasion, ISMMA volunteers have even made up for the lack of doctors during strikes in hospitals.¹¹

¹¹ Alkali, Muhammad Nur, Monguno, Abubakar Kawu & Mustafa, Ballama Shettima (2012), *An Overview of Islamic Actors in Northeastern Nigeria*, Oxford, Nigeria Research Network Working Paper No. 2.

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