



## Interview with Dr Gilles Yabi

Founder and president of WATHI\*

*Gilles Yabi is the founder and executive director of West Africa Think Tank (WATHI). He guides and supervises the activities of the think tank, whose permanent team is based in Dakar, Senegal. WATHI is an open platform for the production and dissemination of knowledge and proposals on all issues crucial to the present and future of West Africa and other regions of the continent. Mr Yabi is regularly invited to share his thoughts on political, economic, educational and security issues with various African and international organizations. He also has a long experience of interacting with the media, and has been publishing columns on African political and economic issues for the past fifteen years. He hosts the weekly column “Ça fait débat avec WATHI” on Radio France Internationale.*

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### **What issues does WATHI focus on, and what are its main aims?**

WATHI is a laboratory of ideas with its own position on issues—we consider ourselves a citizen think tank for West Africa. WATHI is based on the idea that, in all countries in the West African region, we need more and more men and women to be aware of the most critical issues, both current and future, for the region. So WATHI is first and foremost a forum for sharing ideas, proposals and analyses on all the dynamics that we consider most important and that are shaping this region’s future. That said, our perspective goes beyond West Africa to recognize the continent’s extreme diversity and the need to promote a form of pan-Africanism that is both realistic and pragmatic.

\* This interview was conducted by Bruno Demeyere, Editor-in-Chief of the *Review*.

One thing that is unique to WATHI is our generalist dimension. Rather than working on issues of politics, security, education or economics in isolation, we consider all of these aspects together, including the ways in which they are connected. The other thing that sets us apart is that we also decided to be a citizen think tank with an activist approach. We don't hide the fact that we want to change the trajectory of countries in this region, knowing of course that this is a long-term undertaking. So we put out proposals in all these areas, animated by the sense of responsibility that we feel as citizens.

***What's your analysis of the current dynamics underpinning the violence in the Sahel?***

The first point I would make is that the current situation is extremely worrying. Just ten years ago, no one in this region would have imagined us being in the situation that we now find ourselves in, and by that I mean the level of risk, the absence of even short-term visibility on the future, but also political instability given the series of coups d'état that have taken place in Mali since 2012, for example. I lived in Mali in 2009 and 2010, and there may have been some hostage-taking and other recurrent security incidents in the north, but no one would have guessed that less than two years later such a complex crisis would emerge. The same could be said of Burkina Faso. Six years ago, no one would have thought that the country would find itself in such a fraught security situation, with repeated and very lethal attacks in regions in the north and east, and 1.5 million displaced people.

But what I'm more worried about is the fact that we cannot look to the future with confidence. When considered separately, each country seems to be bogged down in the crisis-exit process, and it's hard to be optimistic. One last observation: we mustn't just look at what's happening now, but at what that means down the road. That's what's going to enable us to move past this crisis and create the necessary conditions to prevent worse crises from happening in the future. In responding to the risks and the violence, we need to consider the potential consequences from the start, particularly in terms of education: what it means that schools are closed, what it means to have such a challenging humanitarian situation. With these things in mind, we will be able to create the right strategies and undertake the necessary actions.

***Most countries in the region are experiencing poverty, high unemployment among young people, the unravelling of intercommunity relations and growing competition for natural resources. Are these social challenges the main reason why non-State armed groups [NSAGs] are able to recruit members from certain communities?***

When people analyze the reasons why young people join NSAGs, it seems to me that they often make the mistake of attempting to identify two or three factors and separate them from the overall context, thus overlooking the full complexity of

the situation in which armed groups form and grow. I often draw a parallel with the sort of conflict analysis that we used to apply to rebel groups, which existed long before what are now known as jihadi or terrorist groups. Before terrorism took hold in this region, there were major armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, in the 1990s and 2000s.

I always look at three dimensions when analyzing armed conflicts: people, means and context. Analyzing the people involved means forming hypotheses about their motivations, and then distinguishing their motivations from their message – which never fully reveals their real motivations. Then it's necessary to examine the means that they have access to, as this is crucial to understanding how an armed rebellion takes place and how long it lasts. The other important dimension is the political, economic and social context in which a conflict breaks out and evolves. It's in this part of the analysis that we see the impact of such things as poverty level, lack of economic opportunities, and unemployment. Armed rebel groups are more likely to form, and armed conflict is more likely to occur, in certain situations, but circumstances aren't everything. The emergence of an NSAG depends on the presence of a certain number of people with their motivations and interests, the means available to those people, and a propitious context. If we fail to broaden our perspective, we tend to focus on only some of these factors.

What's more, people often forget the importance of means – unemployment and marginalization alone aren't enough for a significant and organized armed group to take shape. Substantial means and a particular set of power relations between the government and non-State entities are also required for such entities to risk taking up arms. This is not to say that factors of marginalization are not important, but you must not think that just because a group is frustrated, this will lead to armed conflict. When an organized armed group reaches a village where the government is absent and there are no security forces capable of fending it off, people don't necessarily need to buy into the group's message in order to find common ground with it.

We need to ascertain the real reasons why young people join armed groups, jihadi or not. Some join because they believe the message delivered by these groups, while others don't have a choice, since it's the only group around and is powerful. The leaders of these groups also know how to use the prevailing circumstances to tailor their message and boost the recruitment of combatants. But I again emphasize the fact that it's a convergence of factors – the fact that groups with the means to cause violence exist, and the fact that governments are absent, incompetent or not looking out for their people – that increases the risk of violence in the region.

***International partners have provided extensive and various forms of support in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel and in countries in the Lake Chad Basin. Has this produced the expected outcome, in view of the rapidly deteriorating security situation in these areas?***

First of all, I would say that you just need to look at the current security situation in its various forms in the Sahel, and you'll clearly see that the involvement of various

international partners has not been enough to restore security since 2012 – and this includes France’s intervention in 2013. When we consider how the situation has evolved, it’s clear that the forms of violence and risk have changed, and the area affected has expanded from Mali’s north towards the centre and then towards neighbouring countries.

Secondly, from an analytical perspective, we must be honest and admit that we cannot simply compare the before and after. We must take into account the idea that we don’t know what would have happened in the absence of this international effort. The situation could very well have got worse without it. We must keep that in mind when discussing the impact of international involvement.

And when it comes to outside intervention – without looking at each instance in detail – it’s important to underscore the fact that a lack of clear objectives combined with the involvement of numerous entities with sometimes diverging agendas adds a layer of difficulty to the challenges facing these countries. Not only is there a need for coordination, but the partners that intervene in the region must come to a very clear agreement on objectives that dovetail with those of the countries of the region and, especially, the people. This sort of political groundwork is key to ensuring that international involvement is not perceived by the people of the Sahel as adding to their problems, but rather is seen as part of the solution. There is much work to be done in this area, to clarify objectives and interests on all sides.

***The violence being committed in various countries of the Sahel and West Africa is increasingly factional in nature. What is the role of religion in this regional dynamic?***

I would reiterate the need to avoid analyses that focus on individual factors while ignoring others, as this obfuscates the link between the situation resulting from medium- and long-term changes on the one hand and short-term triggering factors on the other. The religious factor is important in the Sahel’s political dynamics, but it is not necessarily the most important one and is certainly not the only one. The current situation in the Sahel countries is the result of what was done for twenty, thirty or more years in each of these countries.

What we observe today, particularly in terms of the weakening of States, is a relatively long-term process: governments are not physically present in communities, including those farthest from the capitals, and they have failed to develop educational policies that could cover a larger proportion of the population and enable more people to take part in public policies and politics.

These dynamics have evolved in tandem and under outside influences – including religious ones. If we look at the countries of the Sahel, we are well aware that radical religious currents that diverged from those already present in the region have gained in influence over the past twenty years. Over time, this has led to conflicts between people who practice traditional Islam and the new currents, whose imams are trained differently – in some cases in Gulf countries. The religious factor mustn’t be underestimated, and it plays a role in how Sahel

countries have changed over the past two decades. The success of jihadi groups is linked to what is happening in neighbouring countries, how society has changed, and the weakening of the State. If you don't clearly recognize the fact that the number of religious groups has expanded as the State—and its ability to educate people—has weakened, then you can't fully understand the religious dynamic that has led to the current situation.

Community-related factors and relations between ethnic groups in the Sahel also call for an analysis of the situation on the ground, including long-term changes in how governments function. Countries of the Sahel, like most African countries, are extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture. One of the dimensions of State collapse or, to be more precise, the failure of States to consolidate their strength in recent years can be traced to the failure to build political models that are able to accommodate this diversity and manage it effectively. This has created a lack of both cohesion and support for a vision of government that promotes unity and that respects and values internal diversity. I largely ascribe the changing situation in the region to what was not done at the political level in terms of building governments that are in step with people's needs and able to manage the complexity of Sahel societies.

***The level of violence against civilians appears to have been heightened by the rivalry between the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims [GSIM] and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara [IS-GS], on one side, and Islamic State's West Africa Province [ISWAP] and the group commonly known as Boko Haram, on the other. Is this a sign that violence is now the only possible manifestation of the power relationship between these two sides in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions?***

It's very clear that there is a difference in how these groups operate. There's probably also a difference in their deep-seated motivations—although we can only speculate about those. I think that the ways in which an armed group operates provide key insights into the nature of the group and how we should handle it. Dealing with an armed group that considers it legitimate to attack civilians is very different from dealing with one that believes that only soldiers and government officials should be targeted. Violence is not justified in either case, but the choice of targets and the methods used say something about the people we are dealing with and how we can go about resolving the conflict.

There is a growing number of groups undermining the security situation in the Sahel region and the Lake Chad Basin, and this is adding to the violence. Not only do these groups view the government and its outside partners as adversaries, but we also see that these groups are competing with each other for control over territory, which leads to more violence. The rising number of armed groups, along with their rivalry with each other—particularly GSIM and IS-GS—is only exacerbating the violence and making things harder for civilians. I also think that Boko Haram's splintering is linked to what is now happening in the Lake Chad Basin.

What's more, the fact that ISWAP – which is very well equipped and much better organized than Boko Haram was under Abubakar Shekau – is now ascendant in Nigeria clearly shows the dynamic at work: the strongest armed groups, which are usually those with the most military resources, often win. This brings us back to the question of means and of the importance of maintaining a power advantage over these armed groups, especially those that go after civilians.

Another point, when we discuss violence against civilians, is that in many cases in Burkina Faso and Mali we have seen massacres of civilians perpetrated by community-based militias. This means, once again, that instead of focusing solely on designated terrorist groups, we have to look at every group that subverts the security situation. Regardless of who carries them out, civilian massacres in particular must be met with an extremely firm response, otherwise the message that is sent out encourages further attacks.

***Some people, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, have spoken out in favour of entering into dialogue with NSAGs.<sup>1</sup> Would engaging religious-based NSAGs – GSIM, IS-GS and others – in a peaceful political process that ended their use of violence be a potential long-term solution?***

The question of how to respond to the current risk situation is one of the most difficult ones. I would say that there's a pragmatic dimension first. The fact that people are talking a lot about the dialogue option is because we've seen that the situation has not improved despite the military interventions. The idea is that maybe we should try something else, such as a political approach based on dialogue. In this sense, it's a default option. There is some logic to it, since the security situation in which we find ourselves has a growing cost for civilians and for these governments, especially since the crisis in the Sahel has already dragged on for ten years. And things could very easily continue this way for another ten years. This is why we need alternative approaches.

But whether or not we should enter into a dialogue with non-State entities is not just a question of principle. It's also about how to do it, with whom, and what will be discussed. And the potential for dialogue must not suggest that there will be no parallel military response; to my mind, the two are not mutually exclusive. Yet I would also point to the differences among NSAGs. There is less of a desire to sit down with armed groups that are prepared to massacre civilians than with groups that place certain limits on the use of violence. And even if we talk, we won't necessarily come to an agreement.

Using dialogue doesn't mean that we renounce the use of force, however, so I'm in favour of dialogue as one more option, in addition to those that have been used so far, and even as a necessary option given the precarious security situation, but I think it would be a mistake to think that all these armed groups

1 International Crisis Group, *Frontière Niger-Mali: Mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique*, Africa Report No. 261, Brussels, 12 June 2018, available at: [www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/west-africa/mali/261-frontiere-niger-mali-mettre-loutil-militaire-au-service-dune-approche-politique](http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/west-africa/mali/261-frontiere-niger-mali-mettre-loutil-militaire-au-service-dune-approche-politique) (all internet references were accessed in May 2022).

have only a political agenda and that States which are very weak militarily are in a position to negotiate agreements that will result in lasting peace in the region.

I think that dialogue with armed groups can lead to short-term results, but we mustn't ever forget the medium and long term. So we have to be very careful about what is put on the table when negotiating with armed groups. If it's going to permanently weaken the government or restrict freedoms in part of the country, we need to be very careful about the medium- and long-term effects. The dialogue must take place within a framework, with limits set on what is negotiable and what isn't.

*There is an assumption that nomadic communities, which do not benefit from government programmes, are expressing their frustrations and grievances with governments by participating in the current spate of violence in the Sahel. Is there something to this? Boubacar Ba, a researcher at the Centre for Governance and Security Analysis in the Sahel, notes: "The Peul community finally rebelled against their exclusion from production systems, governance and justice. Their anger was directed not just against the government, for reasons of justice and political representation. They were also focusing their attention on various aristocratic Peul families, which used their position, in collusion with the government, to weaken herders and reduce their status to that of social juniors."<sup>2</sup>*

More broadly, there are a number of communities that, in many countries in the region, have had the feeling of being marginalized. It's true, nomads—the region's livestock breeders—often feel that they are left out, and at times feel humiliated and repressed, particularly by government officials. When there are communities that feel that government officials don't recognize them, don't respect them, and maybe don't consider them full citizens, and when there is no connection between government officials and these communities and individuals, it's clear that violence may be one way of getting revenge and turning the power relationship on its head.

With regard to what's happening in the centre of Mali, researchers have published numerous studies showing the extent to which the frustrations of Peul herders have aided the rise in armed groups whose message stands in stark contrast to the government's practices in the area of justice. It's very clear that the sense of injustice is a very strong incentive pushing people to commit violence—that's true all over the world. Historically, the sense of injustice has been a powerful factor spurring communities to action, even to the point of taking up arms to defend themselves and upend power relations.

Here I would like to refer back to the idea of frustration combined with the means to commit violence. There's a big difference between a community that is

2 Nathalie Prevost, "Les accords se multiplient entre les djihadistes peulhs et les autres ethnies", *Mondafrique*, 29 April 2021, available at: <https://mondafrique.com/les-accords-entre-les-peuls-et-les-djihadistes-pourraient-embraser-le-mali/>.



discontented, frustrated and marginalized, but which doesn't really have access to significant means of violence – maybe they can only get their hands on traditional weapons, as there have indeed always been minor conflicts in the region – and the same type of community equipped with weapons of war. I think that not enough attention is paid to that difference.

When, in a region or country, there's an abundance of weapons of war and armed groups arriving with combatants at a given point in time, existing frustrations are likely to take on a violent dimension simply because now there are substantial means of violence at hand. This also highlights the need to focus more on the proliferation of weapons of war and on ways of reducing armed violence, but also, once again, to be careful not to think that all NSAGs necessarily represent the communities they claim as their own or that they have taken up arms to safeguard these communities' well-being.

***In your view, how is the situation in Libya continuing to affect the spiral of violence in the Sahel?***

Libya has obviously been one of the most important external factors affecting the security situation in the Sahel since the crisis broke out in 2011–12. The events in Libya resulted in that country's political destabilization. The country was under the highly personalized and authoritarian rule of Muammar Gaddafi, although there was some control over the State apparatus, borders and the spread of weapons. Gaddafi's removal by the Western forces of NATO and the demise of his regime, which was not very institutionalized, led to the country's collapse several months later. Then came chaos, during which the country's entire security system was dismantled and its store of weapons was widely plundered – it was a massive inventory, given the country's oil wealth and the fact that Gaddafi spent lavishly on weapons, including the most recent ones.

This initial impact wore on, as the weapons that were removed didn't make their way back. These weapons now circulating in the region only added to those left over from past armed rebellions on the continent and to those that came from the national armies – we mustn't forget that much of the weaponry of NSAGs was acquired during attacks on the regular armed forces and in some cases came from corrupt members of the defence and security forces. The spread of weapons is the most salient impact of the events in Libya.

But there is also a political effect that should not be downplayed. Gaddafi had an important role in managing the political situation in the Sahel – regardless of what one may think of his effectiveness – as he invested huge amounts, had connections with heads of State and was able to influence armed groups one way or the other thanks to his financial resources.

I would also mention the fact that little is said of other possible influences apart from Libya. It's important to look at the map and reflect upon all the countries in the Sahel neighbourhood that play an important role. When Libya stopped wielding influence, the geopolitical landscape in this part of the continent was reshuffled in a way that clearly did not promote stability in the Sahel.



***In what way do the events that took place in Mali since August 2020 and in Chad in spring 2021 represent another factor of destabilization for the Sahel? Could the death of President Idriss Déby herald a change in how the political and military strategies employed in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin are designed and implemented?***

The events in Chad and Mali have changed the security and political scenario to an extent. Mostly, they point to the limits, however obvious, of the personalization of power. Knowing the internal situation in Chad, which has always been very fragile in terms of security, but also in terms of economics, politics and governance, it was very clear from the start that someone like President Déby could not be counted on to play a major role in the Sahel over the long run. A president, who is human like all of us, can suddenly die, and we quickly see the impact on the country, both domestically and in its external relations. Déby's death showed that security responses by a regime dependent on one man are extremely weak.

The coup d'état in Mali highlights the paramount importance of domestic political groundwork. Malian leaders will have to agree on at least a minimum set of issues in order to preserve the country's unity. Mali remains at an impasse to this day, with sharp divisions over fundamental questions within the political class and within society itself. Recurrent instability at the political level obviously makes it impossible to produce sustainable responses to the security situation.

Political developments in Chad and Mali thus add a further layer of uncertainty. Both countries are experiencing a transition, and no one knows how these processes will play out politically, and this translates into uncertainty for the entire region. In the Sahel, if Mali's political situation does not stabilize, the whole region will continue to be extremely vulnerable. So it's very important for the transition in Mali to receive the support needed to ensure it produces a satisfactory result that opens the way to the necessary institutional, political and security-related reforms.

***What are the strengths and weaknesses of neutral and impartial humanitarian work in the Sahel, and what challenges do humanitarian organizations face? Do you think that States and armed groups there support humanitarian principles, including the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement? Have you seen any changes in how humanitarian work is carried out in the Sahel in recent years?***

It's important that the humanitarian principles you mention be absolutely maintained and defended, regardless of the security risks in the region. It's clear that when you're dealing with NSAGs, including groups that use terrorist methods, it's more difficult to get people to comply with these principles. Humanitarian organizations are used to operating in various types of high-risk situations and armed conflicts, but they may have less experience in situations where armed groups employ terrorist methods and where it is impossible, or at

least very difficult, to engage with armed groups and get them to comply with humanitarian principles and allow humanitarian work to be carried out.

As to whether things have changed, humanitarian work has been made more difficult by the presence of a wide range of NSAGs that operate differently and use violence in different ways, such as in their choice of targets. In recent years, many attacks and hostage-taking attempts have been perpetrated directly against humanitarian organizations. This clearly shows that it is even more difficult now than it was before to completely safeguard humanitarian work. These humanitarian organizations must therefore adapt, and they are doing so quite well.

Their humanitarian work is clearly indispensable, given, for example, the large numbers of displaced people today in Burkina Faso. But I would also point out that it's important for the region's citizens and governments to set a goal of making this humanitarian work less and less necessary. Countries in this region need to develop the capacity to respond to situations of humanitarian distress. This means strengthening the region's own humanitarian structures, ensuring that States and regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States assume greater responsibility in the humanitarian realm. Africa's youth also support such an increase in autonomy. And this is an important issue when it comes to moving things forward, so that in ten or fifteen years we're not having the same conversation about increasing humanitarian needs.

***In view of current geopolitical trends in the Sahel, what is your outlook ten years from now, and how does it affect the advice you would give local, national and international decision-makers?***

There are two ways of looking at the Sahel ten years from now. The first is to simply take the current situation and extrapolate. In this case, it's very difficult to be optimistic, since there's very little visibility and a lot of uncertainty, including in the area of security. Despite all the talk of the "double nexus" – security and development, or humanitarian work and development – or the "triple nexus" – security, development and humanitarian work – depending on who is talking, the current security situation is a real obstacle to major economic and social progress and to the redeployment of the State. In Mali, as is true elsewhere in the Sahel, there is a lot of talk about redeploying the State so that it has a greater presence in remote regions. But for this to be more than a slogan, the security situation will have to improve. Otherwise we will never be able to have doctors, teachers, nurses and government officials who stay where they are assigned, if the risks they face are very steep.

The second way of looking ten years down the road is to ask what choices have to be made in view of the current situation, the region's resources and international involvement. For me, these choices must address the need to restore a base level of security; the need to bolster local economies and create opportunities, particularly for young people; and the need to substantially

overhaul political governance in the region. Lastly, and especially, what's most important in the medium term is education.

The response we provide today must also encompass factors that will safeguard the future, especially investment in education, in the broadest sense of that term. That's what's going to define the Sahel in the future, so it's important not to forgo this investment. We will have to be much more innovative so that we can keep passing along our values, knowledge and expertise, including to young people and children who are in unsafe regions or who have fled their region. This will close the gap between the short-term response and the possibility of a better future for the region in the next ten years.

Lastly, the economic aspect is also often overlooked. The Sahel is a region with numerous major gold-producing countries, and we are aware that much of this resource leaves the region illegally. So we really cannot talk about the State, about redeploying the State, about government's ability to deliver education and health care, and so on, unless we talk about the economy and the need to come to grips with the economic system and how it really works, including at the international level. The current system does not always favour local production and value creation, yet these are critical for employing young people. The proper response, when we envision the future, is thus not to look only at the most obvious concerns, like security, but also to look at both education and economics, which supply—and will need to continue supplying—resources to the State and the human societies in question.

***Keeping in mind the citizen dimension of your think tank, how would you suggest that young people respond to these challenges?***

I believe strongly in the importance of knowledge and of investing in culture and education. That's really the core of what we do at WATHI. That's why we publish reports on our website, share our work over social media and organize a growing number of online talks. Young people have an important role to play, but they need to be as well equipped as possible. We need to understand the situation in which we live and act and the extreme complexity and difficulty of the current situation, and, based on that, each of us must choose how we can help improve both individual and the collective well-being. I'm firmly convinced that we need to highlight the common good and explain to young people that working for the common good does not preclude pursuing their individual interests. What young people can do is continue to be curious, to read, to know what's going on and to keep learning in any way possible. That will equip them to serve as engaged citizens at the local, national and regional levels.