



## Interview with Bakary Sambe

Regional Director of the Timbuktu Institute\*

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*Sambe’s current work focuses on endogenous strategies, cross-border dynamics and experimenting with agile approaches in crisis zones. An expert working with the United Nations, European Union, African Union, etc., he has notably designed and led advocacy for the establishment of the regional group for the prevention and fight against radicalization of the G5 Sahel (CELLARD), assisted in the process of developing national strategies in Niger, Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic, and produced the first manual of good resilience practices.*

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### **1. What are the main interests and areas of work of the Timbuktu Institute?**

The Timbuktu Institute is the offshoot of the Observatory of Religious Radicalism and Conflicts in Africa, which was founded in 2012 in response to the destruction of several mausoleums in Timbuktu. It was felt that certain movements that could develop radical ideologies were taking root in Sub-Saharan

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

Africa – a region previously considered to be on the outskirts of the changes taking place within the Muslim world. The observatory operated until 2016, when the Timbuktu Institute was created as a place where knowledge could be produced and put into practice. It was a way to provide the region with local structures run by local people and to generate regional knowledge of our situation and views from our perspective to improve the analysis of them. The two main aims were to ensure that the Sahel had a credible voice that could speak out on all major global and regional issues and to change the conflicting perception that our international partners have of the conflicts in our region, thereby narrowing the gap between the international perception of the crises in the region, on the one hand, and local issues and perceptions, on the other.

While it is true that the Institute was created in response to the violent extremism in our region, much of our work focuses on conflict prevention, which we call preventive diplomacy, and on mediation, placing emphasis on educational aspects and, above all, on the need for inclusive dialogue. Our work is based on the idea that, in the history of humanity, a Kalashnikov has never eliminated an ideology and that education is the linchpin holding everything together. We focus on preventive work and, as part of this, have changed our name from the Timbuktu African Institute for Security Studies to the Timbuktu African Institute for Peace Studies. This is a really important distinction for us. We want to shift the focus away from military-only strategies, which have never been successful in resolving a conflict definitively.

## ***2. How would you analyse the dynamics of the current violence in the Sahel?***

I think you have to analyse the violence from a long-term perspective. We can only really understand what is happening in the Sahel now if we look at the socio-political situation dating back to the 1970s. In the late 1970s, the Sahel underwent a deep-rooted change that was not acknowledged by our Western partners. At the time, the Sahel was experiencing severe drought, but our partners in North America and Western Europe were unable to come to our aid because they were themselves in the midst of an oil and financial crisis. The countries that could help were the ones that controlled the oil supply, while Europe and the United States plunged into recession. The Gulf States therefore stepped in. Their intentions may have been good, but their approach had two dimensions: what we refer to as *dawah*, which is the call for people to embrace Islam, and *ighātha*, which is the Arabic word for relief. In other words, they used their humanitarian work to spread their religious message. At the time, African Islam was more traditional, tolerant and in harmony with local cultures. But when new ideologies were brought in by funded Islamic movements that preached their message through social work, the structure of and relationship between religion and society was altered.

In the 1970s, these organizations found a way to anchor themselves in our societies, shifting the dynamics between society and religion. Islam, which until then had provided structure and cohesion, became a way of dismantling views of the

world and pre-established religious practices, particularly with the arrival of Wahhabism and the Salafi movement.

Then in the 1980s and 1990s, the international community, not realizing that the situation had changed, made things worse. Sahel countries were required to implement structural adjustment programmes. They were told they had to invest as little as possible in welfare, health and education, the idea being that it was important to have a small yet strong State. Our countries were sold a model of liberal democracy, free markets and privatization, with the promise that democracy – even the appearance of democracy – would bring development. In the end, it brought neither development nor stability. During this time, the key component of society – the State – was weakened, stripped of its sovereign powers and often left with a deficit.

These same religious organizations that had already planted their seeds in the 1970s came back in full force in the form of large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that gained stature by building schools and social centres, digging wells, delivering aid and providing people with the things that the State – weakened by the demands of the Bretton Woods institutions – was no longer capable of providing. The State was in crisis and rival entities emerged to take its place. The multi-party system, considered a basic indicator of democracy, became a political tool for promoting ethnic identities. So, when other destabilizing factors, such as the crisis in Libya and the arrival of terrorist movements from Algeria, were added to the mix, the ground was fertile. What drives violent extremism and terrorism is not the arrival of terrorists in a given place but the local incubators they find when they get there – the people who, because of such things as their grievances, their rejection of the State and poor governance, are more accepting of these terrorists than they are of the State, to the point that they are willing to take those terrorists in. It is up to the State to ensure that the terrorists cannot find the incubators they need. But even before the war on terrorism, the State had lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

After that, the situation only worsened. From the outset, the focus was on military-only strategies, such as Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane. This created a conundrum, since these military interventions failed to achieve what they had set out to do, which was to get rid of the terrorist groups. Instead, those groups multiplied. This generated a complex security situation, as the States – already weakened by the structural adjustment programmes and by the surprise arrival of these terrorist groups – sought out other ways of managing security, setting up self-defence militia and even delegating security to other defence groups. This happened in Burkina Faso, with the Koglweogo self-defence groups, and in Mali, with militia such as the Ganda Koy and Ganda Izo groups. The situation worsened, creating a form of distrust between communities in the Sahel. In addition to the purely terrorist violence, there have also been outbreaks of communal violence. This type of violence is driven by the injustice people have experienced, by their frustration and by all the grievances caused by poor public governance and security management, especially since security is often delegated

to the communities themselves. This has created a cycle of violence that is a long way from being broken.

***3. Most of the countries in the region are experiencing poverty, youth unemployment, a collapse in ethnic relations and increasingly fierce competition for natural resources. Is this difficult socio-economic situation the main factor driving members of some communities to join these non-State armed groups?***

There are two types of factors that lead to radicalization: attracting factors and incentivizing factors. Incentivizing factors include grievances, frustrations, poor governance and poverty. Attracting factors are the pseudo answers to people's lost hopes, such as finding paradise, achieving justice and building a better life. When a young member of MOJWA<sup>1</sup> tells you, "I joined MOJWA because I believe in their system of justice", this is a perfect illustration of how the local justice system has failed.

I tend to group those who have been radicalized into two categories: some are looking for opportunity, while others are looking for meaning. Those who are looking for opportunity are driven by their social deprivation and extreme poverty. An example would be a young man who has no future prospects who joins Boko Haram because he has been promised a motorbike and 300,000 CFA francs. But I do not think that radicalization is about poverty alone. Otherwise, we would not have seen young westerners from middle-class backgrounds joining the Islamic State group in Syria. Those individuals were looking for meaning. This is a global phenomenon that Africa has not escaped from. I call it the "globalization of beliefs". Another global phenomenon is that Islam has become the cause that unites the lost souls of our planet. In the 1970s, those who wanted to stand up and fight against the neoliberal world and its way of working turned to left-leaning ideologies such as Communism and Trotskyism. But these ideologies have waned, and Islam has taken their place. I think this is a cross-cutting trend affecting both Sahel and Western societies, which are far from resolving this quest for meaning.

I think it is also important to look at how these global phenomena play out locally. The phenomena themselves may appear similar but the reasons behind them can be quite different, in Oudalan Province or Soum Province in Burkina Faso or in central Mali, for instance. And while similarities can always be found, it's important to analyse the situation based on the local expressions of these phenomena. Violent radicalization is born where there are socio-political grievances and frustrations generated by States' limited capacity to include certain communities and where there are also non-State armed groups able to take advantage of that situation.

***4. International partners were heavily involved, at various levels, in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel and the countries in the Lake Chad basin. We know that the security situation has deteriorated rapidly in these areas, so did their involvement produce the desired results?***

1 Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

These international partners very quickly focused on fighting terrorism, which is different from preventing violent extremism. The fight against terrorism focuses on erasing the effect, which is terrorism, and entails eliminating targets that can be replaced. Preventing violent extremism, however, focuses on the structural causes. It involves non-military approaches, which means it requires time and has a broader target that covers education, awareness-raising and meeting basic needs. Both our international partners and our governments are less active in this area, which takes longer, is less visible and would perhaps require many more concessions. Instead, their approach quickly became military-only, until recently, that is, when attempts have been made to set out specific strategies for the Sahel region.

Yet these strategies are marred by coordination problems. Until very recently, international efforts were too dispersed. There were at least 20 different Sahel strategies, each drawn up outside the Sahel and without taking into account local perceptions. It is only recently that there has been a shift towards what is known as the Sahel Alliance. I think the international community has put in a lot of wasted effort along the way, through a lack of coordination. This has had two main impacts: work on the ground has been inefficient because of duplication, and the lack of coordination means that responsibility for these operations has been spread across organizations – the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), for instance, has to some extent had its role in fighting terrorism reduced, with the G5 Sahel taking on this task instead. Excluding the Sahel from ECOWAS was also an error. This lack of international coordination has destabilized these regional groups. Also, Sahel countries no longer know which humanitarian player to turn to.

On top of that, the situation on the ground was never factored in. Instead, plans were drawn up elsewhere and impressed upon the Sahel without taking the local situation into consideration. This is what I call the conflicting perceptions of the Sahel conflict, that is, the difference between the international idea of the conflict and its dynamics, on the one hand, and local perceptions, on the other. As a result of this, countries that have paid heavily in terms of their military intervention and loss of life among their soldiers left only a mixed impression on local communities. This is because of a lack of communication with local players. Let me tell you a story that illustrates this well. In Diffa, in Niger's Lake Chad basin, people told me about a project they called the "dust project". I asked them why they called it that and they said, "We don't understand anything. But every morning we see a horde of four-by-fours with European flags. They say they're investing massively, but we don't know what they're doing. We've just got used to seeing them raising the dust each morning, so we call it the 'dust project'."

I think there needs to be more communication through traditional channels and with legitimate representatives who have credibility and are trusted by local communities. This has been missing from these interactions. Despite all the efforts made, all the money spent and all the resources used, the operations on the grounds have fallen short in terms of their efficiency and efficacy because they have not met people's actual needs and have failed to get local communities

onboard. I often say that the ideal way of carrying out humanitarian and cooperation work is to make the "beneficiary" a real co-operator, ensuring that local groups are involved in and onboard with the operations, from the design phase right through to implementation. This should be done as part of a strategy that takes into account local resources and people's real needs. By building strategies jointly, we will be able to find a way out of this crisis.

**5. Violence has become increasingly driven by communal tensions in many countries in the Sahel and West Africa, so what role does religion now play in regional dynamics?**

In the early stages, religion was perhaps overestimated or at least heavily weighted in these analyses. This is reflected in the terminology – the term most often used was "radicalization". However, we are increasingly referring to violent extremism instead. I'm not saying that religion is no longer a factor, although there is a developmentalist, economism-driven trend that completely casts aside religion and focuses on socio-economic factors instead. But I think that even though social and economic grievances are usually much more influential, both based on quantitative responses and in statistical terms, religion is still a contributing factor. As the Communists used to say in the 1970s, "We don't count but we carry weight." So even if, statistically speaking, religion is not a major factor, it still carries weight because of the meaning and imagination it can spur in people.

The issue of community has become more relevant, and that is reflected in the new strategies adopted by these groups. Knowing that they can no longer rely on large-scale coordination, as they did during the times of Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, they have developed new strategies that seek to trigger and revive ethnic tensions, which there is no shortage of, and present them as religious issues. This religious coating prompts military interventions by foreign powers, which, in turn, leads to more radicalization. These groups therefore do not need to recruit. This is why I am concerned that some countries in the Gulf of Guinea<sup>2</sup> have now adopted this military-only approach, with targeted search-and-sweep operations which, owing to the errors made and the stigma they bring, are sowing the seeds of future communal conflicts, much to the delight of the terrorist groups.

**6. Some people<sup>3</sup> have started to speak out, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, and call for dialogue with the non-State armed groups. Could this bring long-lasting solutions that engage religious non-State armed groups (such as Nusrat al-Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) in a political peacebuilding process to bring an end to their violence?**

- 2 See Bakary Sambe, "Les pays côtiers face à la menace terroriste : comment éviter les 'erreurs' du Sahel ?", Timbuktu Institute, 7 December 2021, available at: <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/531-les-pays-cotiers-face-a-la-menace-terroriste-comment-eviter-les-erreurs-du-sahel> (all internet references were accessed in March 2022).
- 3 International Crisis Group, "The Niger–Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy", Report No. 261, 12 June 2018, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/261-frontiere-niger-mali-mettre-loutil-militaire-au-service-dune-approche-politique>.

Firstly, this is a strange debate because we are talking about something that has always been practised – there has always been both official and unofficial dialogue. Secondly, no war in the history of humanity has ever ended on the battlefield. Thirdly, in Mali, which is the country I know best, dialogue was one of the recommendations that came out of the consultations known as the "national inclusive dialogue". There is a social demand for dialogue – people see the members of the non-State armed groups as children of Mali, so we still need to talk with them even if they have lost their way. Let me give you some examples from other contexts: Spain fostered a dialogue with ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna); France is not at all-out war with Corsican separatists; and in Northern Ireland and other regions there was no fully fledged war. Instead, depending on the balance of power, one of two paths was taken: there was a move towards dialogue in order to bring an end to the fighting and hostilities or alternative processes were sought out.

It is true that there is some fear about where this dialogue might lead – could it give the terrorist groups too much power and cause them to multiply? All experiences of dialogue in the region have shown that once the process is underway, everyone wants a seat at the table. So, could that mean that there will be too many interlocutors?

There is also the issue of what the dialogue should cover. This is a fundamental issue that is currently a topic of discussion within Mali's political class. Should the dialogue be about the State's republican form? Should it be about justice? Should platforms be created at the local level, as the Algiers Agreement<sup>4</sup> attempted to do, although implementation has been slow? All of these questions are being asked about the dialogue. Nevertheless, examples from history justify the principle of dialogue. On top of that, it is the wish of the people of Mali for there to be an inclusive dialogue with all the children of Mali, even the ones who have lost their way. Anyway, I do not see how Mali could credibly oppose dialogue with the country's terrorist groups when it recently sent representatives to meet the Taliban in Doha out of diplomatic pragmatism.

***7. It is often said that nomadic communities, which were previously on the fringes of the changes taking place within the State, have used the violence in the Sahel to express their frustrations and address their grievances against governments. Is this premise founded? According to Boubacar Ba, a researcher at the centre for the analysis of governance and security in the Sahel, "The Fulani community finally stood up against its marginalization from production systems, governance and access to justice. Their anger was not just aimed at the State, in terms of justice and political representation. It was also aimed at some aristocratic Fulani families, that in complicity with the State, used their position to weaken the herders and undermine their social status."***<sup>5</sup>

4 The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (Algiers Agreement) was signed in Bamako on 15 May and 20 June 2015 by the Republic of Mali and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA).

5 Nathalie Prevost, "Les accords se multiplient entre les Djihadistes peuls 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/>.



Throughout history, nomadic and sedentary groups have always been pitted against each other. Also, the same dynamics can be found in communal conflicts, particularly when it comes to resources, livestock breeders and farmers. The State now needs to look at how it can develop and rebuild in a viable way while also accepting the specificities of certain communities. Is it only nomadic communities that feel discriminated against and marginalized? Or will other types of grievances emerge as well? As you can see, this requires a central State whose viability is based on that centrality and its prerogative to govern but also on its ability to manage specificities within communities. I think points of convergence can be found, with regard to both nomadic communities and all other groups with cultural specificities that need to be respected.

The fundamental question at the moment is that of the Fulani community, and it is one that has remained extremely taboo and that is not spoken about enough. When I've travelled across the Sahel, Fulani communities in both Burkina Faso and Mali often tell me that they are not treated in the same way as certain other groups, such as the Tuaregs. Some Fulani communities think that the Tuaregs were given a chance at dialogue, that spaces were created for them to express their views, that they had the Algiers Agreements, etc. It would seem, according to some people I spoke to, that the Fulani community has inherited a reputation from colonial times: there is this idea that the Fulani community wants to resist the State and mirror the way that Seku Amadu and other historical Fulani figures went to war against the French colonial empire. Modern States have inherited this unfavourable view of the Fulani people, which has created stigma.

Opening the door to nomadic communities can be a useful approach if it is a generic one. The door must be opened not just to Tuaregs but also to other communities that have certain frustrations that could be eased if their cultural specificities were recognized. This must be achieved while also ensuring the unity of the nation and integrating these communities into the State as a whole. Unlike the Dawsahak people and other communities, massive numbers of young Fulani joined the Islamic State group in the Tillabéri Region, a sign of their accumulated frustrations.

***8. What, in your opinion, are the ongoing impacts of the situation in Libya on the violence in the Sahel?***

The instability in Libya is still seen as a factor that could cause disruption in the Sahel, especially in neighbouring Chad, which has experienced political instability recently, and in Niger. The widespread instability in the Sahel can be traced back to Libya. Particular attention should be paid to this, because we cannot hope to stabilize the Sahel until Libya is stabilized. Today, we have to make sure that there is not a second wave of crisis-inducing factors from Libya that could cause instability in neighbouring countries.



**9. What are the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of impartial and neutral humanitarian action in the Sahel? Do you think that States and armed groups are committed to humanitarian principles, including the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement? Have you observed any changes in the humanitarian work carried out in the Sahel in recent years?**

Since 2015, I have noticed that certain humanitarian organizations are much more willing to better integrate local cultural resources into their work and to gain a better understanding of local dynamics. Humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality, are all the more important in a context where there is widespread distrust between political players, between communities and between States and the international community. Humanitarian operations are useful, provided that, based on this principle of objective neutrality, aid can be delivered in a way that is distanced from other players and those involved in the conflict. But I think – and maybe humanitarian workers will tell me that it is not their role – that humanitarian organizations should be involved in providing solutions, given their deep knowledge of the contexts and the wealth of information that they gather in the field on a daily basis (unlike other NGOs). By that, I don't mean that they should share confidential information, but rather that they should help to inform political decision-making. There would be less distrust between some States and humanitarian organizations if they worked together, with each one drawing on their strengths while also exchanging information, provided this is in the interests of the population, of course. In this way, humanitarian organizations would have a better grasp of the structural needs of the population rather than trying to address fundamental issues and needs in a localized and fragmented manner. Also, States would be able to better take into account local dynamics, as recorded and analysed by these humanitarian organizations, who are on the front line and at the heart of the action.

**10. Given how the geopolitical situation is evolving in the Sahel, how do you think things will stand in 10 years' time? What guidance would you give to local, national and international decision-makers based on that?**

When you look at the dynamics in the Sahel, there are some signs of hope. But a cold, hard look at the situation also sparks fear about other factors that could soon bring about further crises. In addition to armed groups, self-defence militia and terrorist groups generating instability both within countries and across the region, the Sahel has now become the arena for a larger game between superpowers. These superpowers have carried out uncoordinated operations on the ground and are now also competing against each other. It is not another cold war in the strictest sense of the term, but they are competing on deployment. This has two quite negative effects: it makes the fight against terrorism less credible in the eyes of local communities, and it adds more layers to the crisis in the Sahel – States are trying to resolve the initial crisis, but other layers are being added as international powers seek to strengthen their positions and vie with

each other in terms of deployment. This does not bode well for a quick end to the crisis in the Sahel. This war of influence will lead to more inconsistencies in the West's position. Fears of increased Chinese and Russian influence will push Western powers to take an increasingly pragmatic approach to diplomacy. The sacred principles that set Western powers apart from what are known as the "authoritarian donors" will increasingly be set aside in favour of immediate strategic interests. And that's a real shame.

On a more positive note, local players are now increasingly taking their problems and situations into their own hands. The younger generation—using the power of digital technologies—has managed to narrow the gap relative to Western countries, mainly thanks to the unprecedented democratization of knowledge access that the digital era has brought and to the increased awareness that this access has brought within civil society.

In addition, what I find somewhat reassuring about the dynamics of the current power struggle is that those stronger countries care greatly about their interests and image, and that has actually empowered weaker groups. As such, a new international civil society has emerged. Another potentially positive aspect is that we have (unfortunately) all become in some way part of the same international community—the international community of the vulnerable. This international community no longer looks solely to the five most powerful members of the United Nations Security Council. Our shared vulnerability and equal exposure to terrorism—be it in Bamako, Gao, Berlin, Paris or London—might make people realize that we need to build solutions together. We are bound by the lasting constraints of collective security.