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Salafist Online Messaging and Digital Strategies in Senegal

Assessment and Recommendations for Counter-Narratives

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One of the greatest challenges when designing counter-narratives to extremism is measuring impact. It is easy to determine how many people saw a YouTube video or visited a website, but how does one know if these activities led to a decreased inclination towards radicalism? To put the question another way, if success is the lack of something occurring, how does one measure the contrapositive? Without reliable monitoring of message potency, it is difficult to know which narratives are useful in dissuading extremism. As a result, counter-narratives often become generic, unfocused, and potentially even counterproductive (Ferguson, 2016). This study posits that one solution is to identify which messages are effectively turning people towards extremism and then narrowly tailor counter-narratives to address these modalities of thinking. Extremist groups already possess well-honed techniques to recruit for their cause; perhaps, their own strategies can be used against them.

This study evaluated the online presence of five Senegalese Salafist groups to identify the main themes in their messaging and digital strategies. By evaluating their websites, videos, and through a literature review, the author uncovered their recruitment tactics. In response to recruitment themes identified, the study offers avenues for messaging strategies in the hopes of enriching the counter-narrative discourse actively underway in Senegal.

I. Background: Senegal, Sufism, and Salafism

Salafism is the most rapidly growing branch of Islam on the African continent (Elischer, 2015). Although certain Salafists eschew violence, the ideology underpins many of the world's deadliest terrorist groups, from Boko Haram to al-Qaeda. There is an alarming trend towards support for extremism in Senegal. In a 2016 study of youth in the suburbs of Dakar, 10% of respondents indicated that they would be open to joining a violent movement if directed by a religious leader (Timbuktu Institute, 2016). Although Senegal remains immune to the terrorist attacks that plague nearly all of its neighbors, recent arrests of extremist-linked individuals illustrate that this trend may not continue (Sakho, 2017). Senegal, hailed as the last bastion of stability in West Africa, now asks itself not if but when will the first attack occur (Bayo, 2017). A widely credited driving factor to this rise in extremism is the power of Salafists, including their exploitation of online platforms.

Known as the land of *téranga* (hospitality), Senegal is often synonymous with the Sufi brotherhoods. This tolerant denomination of Islam is thought of as a shield against extremism, but acceptance of its teachings on religious coexistence and secular government are not universally shared. Salafists seek to portray Sufi leaders as compliant with the political elite and disconnected from the interests of the common man (Sambe, 2016). Today, Senegalese youth often feel at odds with the perceived archaic teachings of Sufism: they thirst for new, challenging ideas and look beyond the brotherhoods for fulfillment (Jolys, 2017). To meet this opportunity, Saudi Arabia and other gulf states actively fund organizations, NGOs, and mosques to promote Salafism in West Africa, turning an ideological conflict into one of resources and control (Cocks & Sharafedin, 2017).

Is Salafism Dangerous?

At the most basic level, Salafists practice Islam through puritanical adherence to the Quran and Sunna. Salafists reject human subjectivity, which they believe interferes with the truth of God's commandments. A significant number of scholars subscribe to the trifold classification of Salafism. This includes purists (or "quietists"), who reject all involvement with the state; "politicos," who encourage only political involvement to actualize their teachings; and Jihadists, who use violence as a means of social change. Although only one faction of many, the Salafi-Jihadis eclipse the notoriety of their fellow adherents. For this denomination, violence is not only permitted, it is indispensable: the "contemporary Salafi-Jihadi movement regards physical struggle in the cause of God as the pinnacle of Islam, its zenith and apex. It is the "vehicle by which the religion is both defended and raised" (Maher, 2016, p. 32).

The differences between these factions are not ideological and it is possible – even common – to transition from one classification to another. Although deviations in the application of teachings exist, all Salafists are tied to the same fundamental systems and ideologies:

They [Salafists] typically learn from the same teachers, sit in the same study circles, and attend the same schools...The most influential and well-known Salafi scholars produce students, followings, and groups representing the entire spectrum of Salafi activism, ranging from pacifists to the extremes of Al Qaeda. (Wiktorowicz, 2006)

As a result, some scholars denounce the idea that any form of Salafism is truly docile. Indeed, recent history is replete with instances of quietist Salafists transitioning into an active, even violent, role. Examples include Egypt, when hundreds of thousands of quietists became politically involved during the Arab Spring, and Syria, when self-declared non-violent Salafists led battalions in the civil war (Olidort, 2015).

In Senegal, there is evidence to suggest that prominent Salafists are hiding the extreme components of their ideology, likely in order to avoid arrest. Dr. Bakary Sambe, Director of the Timbuktu Institute, conducted a series of interviews with leading Senegalese Salafist actors and Salafi-affiliated NGOs between 1999 and 2001. Their rhetoric, in comparison to today, is remarkably different. In the words of one religious leader:

We believe that the Senegalese people, in general, are under severe domination and are not responsible for their fate. The state does not take into account their aspirations. All this is the consequence of colonization...Our duty is to fight to regain this Islamic identity and to establish Sharia. It is only in this way that we can align Senegal with the Muslim Arab [world].(Sarr, 1999)

Whether Salafism is always dangerous is not a simple debate, but clearly this movement merits careful study, especially within the Senegalese context where there is evidence that more nefarious beliefs might be hidden.

¹ The Sunna represents the body of literature describing the actions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad and his early followers. It includes the Hadith, recordings of the lifestyle practices of the people of Medina in first three generations of Islam (known as the pious predecessors), and the biography of the Prophet.

² The debate is by no means one-sided: others argue that quietist forms of Salafism should be tolerated, even encouraged, because these actors might be the only ones with sufficient religious credibility to turn followers away from violence.

II. Methodology

The precision with which Salafists use the internet is remarkable considering their veneration of an age without electricity. In the words of one Salafist group, “the Internet is growing in our countries in a dazzling way, and as its use becomes more and more commonplace, we must position ourselves well within this form of communication” (Degdine, 2013). In addition to access and security concerns, online communication was selected as the primary area of research in this study because of the prominence it plays in self-declared Salafist recruitment strategies.

How Messages were Selected

Five notable online Senegalese Salafist media platforms were selected for review under this study. To choose these groups, the author first completed a literature review to identify the major players within the landscape of Senegalese Salafism. The initial list was verified by a leading expert on religion in sub-Saharan Africa. See Annex 1 for a list of the website information of the groups reviewed. The websites, marketing materials, and other online documents of these groups were considered, however, videos offered by far the most detailed accounts of messaging, outreach, and strategies. To that end, a comprehensive review of Salafist sermons, propaganda, interviews, and other material posted online in video format comprised the bulk of this study.

Due to the large quantity of material available, the author identified the most popular videos through YouTube’s embedded filters and did not review videos with less than 2,000 views. In certain cases, not all popular videos were able to be translated and others were not considered because of technical issues or deemed irrelevant for various reasons. In total, 56 videos were considered in the scope of this report.

Limitations

The majority of the Senegalese Salafists’ online presence is in Wolof. The author relied on translations of Wolof into French and from Arabic into French. Resources that were not originally in Wolof, French, or Arabic were not able to be translated even if they fit other criteria for consideration in this study.

The average video duration was 51 minutes. Due to the lengthy nature of these videos and the limited resources available for translation, in certain cases videos were scanned to determine key themes and not regarded in their entirety.

This study does not endeavor to be a quantitative analysis of Salafist groups’ online presence. Although a graphical representation of the breakdown of themes identified is provided in Annex 2 to offer visual context to the research, the study did not capture a large enough sample size to provide statistically relevant results.

III. Themes Identified

The following section concerns the major themes were identified in the digital messages reviewed during the course of this study.

Religious Teachings Dominate

Above all, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of videos concerned the theme of religious teachings and offered specific messages pertaining to the application of the Quran and the Sunnah in daily life. In particular, discussion of Satan, sin, and judgment day were popular topics of discussion. There was significant time dedicated to discussing the punishments for sin and the workings of Satan, including the traps set for failure in everyday life. There was also significant attention given to the history of Islam, especially as it related to how Islam spread to Africa, and other specifics of religious doctrine.

Tawhid, or the oneness of God, is a cornerstone of Salafist ideology. A famous eighteenth-century Salafist scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab revolutionized thought on the concept of Tawhid by arguing that to accept the supremacy of God and to worship only God, legislation cannot be made by man. Instead, every aspect of one's life must be regulated by the teachings of Islam. Within the videos and web material reviewed, the concept of Tawhid was hailed as bringing Muslims around the world together and uniting Islam across cultures (Tawhid pour Débutants; Degdine.net). In keeping with al-Wahhab's teachings, online messages questioned the authority of the secular Senegalese government and advocate instead for government based on Islamic principles. On this basis, they also challenged the lack of a universal religious school system. Many messages called for the Senegalese government to unify Muslims and say that the current system divides people across sects (L'équilibre entre les valeurs spirituelles et matérielles, 2012; Les Lois Positives et Leurs Impacts, 2013).

Lifestyle and Personal Behavior

In online messaging, religious jurisprudence is a focal point, but not the entire story. Through their digital presence, Salafist leaders market a way of life, not just an ideology: how you dress, what you eat, how you practice religion, and who you associate with are all topics of deep discussion and highly popular. Indeed, many Salafist scholars seem rise to prominence by promoting a "lifestyle brand." Perhaps the clearest example of this blending of religious ideology with every-day life was the fact that the most popular of all the videos reviewed concerned, not dogma, but traditional medicine and the healing properties of corossol fruit (also known as soursop). The acclaimed scholar who posted this video also created numerous other messages about the intricacies of Salafist religious practices; in his online messaging, he seamlessly blended the domains of religious preaching and instructing on every-day concerns.

³ Of note, Salafists are frequently referred to as Wahhabis in reference to the teaching of this influential scholar. Largely, this term is utilized to harken back to the Saudi Arabian origins of the teaching and to illustrate the ideology's foreignness: "in this manner, opponents of Salafism inject nationalism into religious discourse by raising the specter of foreign influence" (Wiktorowicz, 2006). Individuals and associated religious organizations rarely, if ever, self-describe as Wahhabis.

There were also a large number of interviews and sermons discussing cultural practices and personal lifestyles. One example that mixed lifestyle and religious teachings was the prohibition of music. According to Salafist theologians, listening to or producing music is forbidden because it can lead to fornication and distracts people from worship (*Le danger d'écouter de la musique*, 2016). Another example was the criticism of many cultural practices deemed to be against Islam, such as fortune telling and the wearing of gris-gris (traditional amulets worn to ward off bad luck).

The daily comportment of women in a Salafist society was also discussed extensively, often leading to a narrow interpretation of their role. According to the jurisprudential judgments of Dr. Ahmad Lo, a prominent Salafist leader in Senegal, women are not allowed to raise their voice. Therefore, while they can work, it would be difficult for them in a profession such as journalism, where reporters are required to speak up (*Fataawa- Dr. Lo*, 2011). In other cases, the role of women was (relatively) more liberal. For example, one scholar advocated that there is no general prohibition on women working and couples are encouraged to marry for love (*Le Mariage et sa compréhension en Islam*, 2016). Messaging on the respective roles of men and women in marriage and society is certainly not unique to Salafism, but does illustrate a broader strategy of seeking to inform all aspects of the lives of its adherents.

Opposition to Sufism is Vicious

Salafists are trying to directly win recruits by discrediting Sufism. They seek to portray Sufis as greedy and an obstacle to a global Islamic movement. In the words of Dr. Ahmad Lo, the Sufi brotherhoods simultaneously divide Muslims and consume social resources without moderation (*Le Soufisme par le Cheikh Ahmad Lo*, 2012). Indeed, a recurring theme amongst the messages reviewed was how Sufism represents only the government and the sociopolitical elite. In Dr. Lo's view, Sufis are obsessed with materialism and pervert dogma by innovating in religion (*ibid.*). Other Salafist thinkers accuse the brotherhoods of labeling their movement as terrorism, while Sufis themselves remain impure and fail to talk about the important social issues of the age (*Pourquoi ahlul sunna gêne au Sénégal*, 2016). Further, Salafists claim that the majority of Senegalese people (who are overwhelmingly Sufi) worship in an un-Islamic fashion; they practice without knowing the significance behind what they are doing (*La foi authentique*, 2016).

Criticizing Sufism as a means to recruit appears to be working. Researchers for the Economic Community of West African States found that those who seek out Salafist teachings are often actively moving away from a Sufi movement that they believe appeases foreign powers, including by cooperating with colonial authorities in the prior decades (*Institute for Security Studies*, 2013).

Things Left Unsaid

Based on the literature concerning of global Salafist messaging strategies, it was surprising that within the context of Senegal limited content directly discussed international relations. The most blatant video on this subject concerned the crisis in Burma and claimed that Islam was disrespected throughout the world (Burma being merely the latest example). Indeed, according to prominent Senegalese Salafist theologian Oumar Sall, Muslim countries are the "trashcans" of the world because the community is fractured and cannot stand up to oppression (*Le génocide de nos frères en Birmanie*, 2017). He adds that the West, in particular the United States and United Nations, do nothing to prevent the killing of Muslims; and when a Muslim defends himself he is labeled a terrorist, even though Muslims are the ones in danger (*ibid.*). This video went on to criticize the government of Senegal and the Sufi brotherhoods for their failure to draw attention to the crisis in Burma.

Interestingly, what could easily be considered the most bellicose of all the messages reviewed in this study was also not particularly popular. The video on Burma received only 16,500 views. To put that in perspective, a sermon on the danger of watching pornography received three times that number. The topic of retaliation, Jihad, or any other form of violence was completely absent – neither advocating for nor against – from all other videos and web materials reviewed.

There are many explanations for why themes that are noted in Salafist messaging globally were missing the Senegalese context. First, one can assume that Senegalese Salafists prescribe to the quietist classification and simply do not advocate violence. Based exclusively on the content reviewed, this is a legitimate conclusion, however it is noteworthy that violence is not denounced, which is normally a characteristic of the quietist movement. Considering the nature of discourse surrounding violence in the region, it seems odd that truly quietist Salafists would not have denounced it. Another explanation could be that Salafists are more inclined to draw followers in by discussion of social issues and daily life than extreme rhetoric. Finally, perhaps it is possible that these more polarizing, extreme messages are not put on-line for fear of government crackdown, which has been effective in Senegal.

IV. Recommendations for Counter Messaging and Conclusions

The following section offers proposed themes for counter-narratives that could be used to respond to Salafist online messaging.

Religion Should Remain Central

Based on the wide-spread popularity of videos pertaining to the specifics of religion, it seems likely that viewers are seeking answers to their existential questions about life, sin, and the afterlife. The fact that so many people were drawn to the religious doctrine component of online Salafist narratives indicates that counter-messages need to do more than just tell people what not to do; they need to offer an alternative that can contend with the jurisprudential interpretations that Salafist preachers promote. Another important factor to consider is that only something as broad and encompassing as religion is likely going to be able to rival with the “lifestyle” teachings that Salafists offer. It seems unlikely that people who are drawn to this ideology will be interested in a “lite” option; they want something that will offer meaning to their life and guide their actions. Certain practitioners have categorized this as a need for alternative narratives, or the need to stand for something, as opposed to counter-narratives, which are often associated with standing against something.

The religious messages espoused on Salafist sites are controversial within the body of Islamic thought. They are also riddled with contradictions: lecturers preach for a return to the age immediately following the death of the Prophet while reading off their laptop. They claim that all critical thinking in relation to religious teaching is forbidden while themselves making interpretations and judgments about Islamic law. The combination of their threadbare theological grounding and contradictions in application shows that Salafism is ripe to be defeated by credible religious authorities. Using religion as a tool to address extremist rhetoric is a proven strategy. According to a recent United Nations Study, religion is a major motivator for joining extremist organizations, but 57% of participants in the study “admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts. Indeed, higher than average years of religious schooling appears to have been a source of resilience” (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). One of the prevailing objectives in counter-messaging should be to highlight moderate religious voices who can address with credibility the discrepancies in Salafist ideology.

Address Daily Concerns

It is telling that some of the most popular messages championed through the online recruitment content were indirect: they did not hit people over the head with their theme of adherence to Salafist principles. They sought to establish a network of social ties and reliance on the information source for advice that was not directly nor evidentially related to religion or radicalization, such as eating fruit to prevent cancer. Although the research was inconclusive in this regard, it is likely that these groups understand that the goal of their organization should be to establish networks and relationships. Whether these relationships will be leveraged in the future for more nefarious ends remains to be seen, but has played out in this fashion in other contexts. Counter-narratives could benefit from taking the same approach; not obliquely championing messages of peace and nonviolence, but instead building networks and social communities that can be activated when there is a need to activate against aggression. A common trap that messages of non-violence often fall victim to is that they are one dimensional; repeating the same messages that perhaps do not offer a lot of excitement and diversity to the audience. One solution has been to increase the plurality of voices involved, such as by bringing in religious authorities and engaging youth to talk in their own voices about these challenges. Perhaps an additional solution could be to diversify the content of the messaging as well to increase viewership and create loyal followers who will be more willing to accept messages of non-violence later down the track.

Another useful strategy might be to follow the lead of Salafist actors by mixing online and in-person events. According to a recent UN study, a significant portion of recruitment towards extremist organizations occurs in person (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). While Salafists are clearly using digital platforms for recruitment, it is notable that many of their videos were recordings of in-person events. Further, many videos can be interpreted as means of driving people to participate in in-person events. Although this study focuses largely on on-line messaging, it is important to remember the role that personal networks play as barriers to recruitment, especially as it pertains to creating a social sense of belonging.

Concluding Remarks

In the field of counter-narratives, there is a dearth of robust measurement of impact. In part, this is due to the overwhelming challenge of how to measure the challenging question of whether proclivity towards religious radicalism is decreasing. Save for wide-spectrum social perception surveys, which are costly and generally only useful for projects of a very large scope, it is difficult to know if small-scale counter-narrative initiatives make a difference. This paper postulated strategies to help target messaging but it is not a substitute for sustained monitoring and evaluation of counter-narrative activities.

By reviewing the messages motivating people towards extremism, the author endeavored to highlight key messages promoted by Salafist actors in Senegal. Through analyzing commonalities amongst the videos and other digital media of these groups, it became clear that there was a focus on: religious doctrine, lifestyle practices, and opposition to Sufism. Of note, themes that were identified in the literature review, such as jihad and international relations, received scant attention. From these themes, the author derived suggestions for potentially useful counter-narratives, chief of which was to involve religious authorities and address daily, practical concerns. The response needs to be deep, involving many facets of community, and it needs to content with the magnitude of what Salafist ideology is offering: answers to life's largest questions.

Supporting the messaging of Sufi religious leaders or other prominent figures who can champion peaceful, measured messages that still grapple with the larger questions about Islamic faith is paramount. Senegal faces a threat from Salafist factions growing in power and prominence within its borders. The continuation of effective, well targeted counter-messages is essential if Senegal's history of peace is to continue.

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Annex 1: Salafist Groups Reviewed

1. www.Degdine.net
2. www.Xamsadine.net
3. Message de Islam Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxYBOvarGljPxGSmxVjcdig>
4. www.oumarsall-th.com
5. <http://alfalah-sn.org>

Annex 2: Themes in Salafist Messaging by Percentage



