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Reiteration or reinvention? Jihadi governance and gender practices in the Sahel

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ABSTRACT
Can focusing on gender help us to better understand the mobilization capacity of jihadi insurgent groups and their social roots in the Sahel? A growing literature has explored the factors that motivate people to join such groups in Africa. The Sahel provides a salient case, but the prevalent focus on agent-based explanations has tended to overlook the role of gender relations and constructions. This article explores the potential of practice theory to shed light on intersubjective rules, roles, and meanings and whether and how gender influences jihadi mobilization in the Sahel. The study contributes to the feminist security studies literature by looking at gender relations and investigating whether it is the reassertion (practice homology) or emerging misalignment (practice hysteresis) of Fulani gender practices that best characterizes the acceptance and/or rejection of jihadi governance by men and women in the Sahel. The article discusses empirical evidence collected during extensive fieldwork in Mali and Niger. We suggest that in strategically choosing to either reproduce or reshape traditional gender practices, jihadi insurgencies linked to Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Fulani milieu of the central Sahel gain popular support.

RÉSUMÉ
Le genre peut-il aider à mieux comprendre la capacité de mobilisation et enracinement social des groupes djihadistes au Sahel? Une littérature croissante a exploré les facteurs qui motivent les acteurs à rejoindre les groupes djihadistes en Afrique. Le Sahel représente un cas emblématique à cette fin, mais l'accent prédominant sur les explications basées sur les agents a eu tendance à négliger le rôle des relations et constructions de genre. L'article examine ainsi comment la théorie des pratiques peut éclaircir les règles intersubjectives, les rôles et les significations, et comprendre si et comment le genre a influencé la mobilisation djihadiste au Sahel. L'étude souhaite contribuer à la littérature féministe en matière d'études de sécurité en examinant les relations de genre et en cherchant à savoir si c'est la réaffirmation (homologie des pratiques) ou l'émergence d'un désalignement (hystérésis des pratiques) des pratiques de genre qui permet de mieux

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expliquer l'acceptation et/ou le rejet de la gouvernance djihadiste par les hommes et les femmes des communautés Peules du Sahel. Ainsi, l'étude examine les données empiriques recueillies au cours de longs travaux de terrain au Mali et au Niger et suggère qu'en choisissant stratégiquement de reproduire ou de remodeler les pratiques traditionnelles de genre, les insurrections djihadistes liées à l'État islamique et à al-Qaïda dans le milieu Peul du Sahel central contribuent à renforcer stratégiquement le soutien de la population.

Introduction: jihadi mobilization and gender in the Sahel – a practice perspective

Jihadi insurgencies in Africa are on the rise. Armed groups espousing jihadi rhetoric are associated with an unprecedented number of victims in Africa (ACLED 2021), prompting analysts to declare Sub-Saharan Africa as the emerging epicenter of global jihadism (Institute for Economics & Peace 2022). The Sahel region is at the heart of these dynamics. Here, the ability of fragile states to provide security and governance is challenged by two of the deadliest branches of al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) worldwide, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), respectively.

Puzzled by the rapid transformation of the Sahel into a hotbed of jihadi militantism, researchers have conducted numerous studies over the last few years in an effort to gain a better understanding of the factors that motivate local populations to support jihadi armed groups and insurgencies. Scholars have placed emphasis on the sources of the fragility of Sahelian and African polities, including widespread poverty and grievances about socio-economic deprivation (Ayegba 2015); limited access to social mobility and democratic accountability owing to the grip of patronage politics (Iyekekpolo 2020); the transnationalization of jihad (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022); inter- and intra-ethnic competition that enables the recasting of communal clashes and localized insurgencies in the framework of a millenarian struggle (Bøås, Wakhab Cissé, and Mahamane 2020; Sangaré 2016); opportunities for greedy (extremist) entrepreneurs to conceal criminal and predatory activities behind a pious legitimizing narrative (Bouquet 2013; Chelin 2020); and the brutality of law enforcement and counterterrorism efforts by African governments, prompting a demand for protection against state abuses (ISS 2016; Raineri 2022).

These factors are seen as the source of widespread grievances that jihadi organizations seize on and strategically manipulate to mobilize support by

promising local populations improved conditions, be that in terms of security, justice, social mobility, or otherwise. In spite of their diversity of focus, these explanations tend to share a similar epistemological standpoint, which is common to much of the early research on "radicalization" (Kundnani 2012) and "rebellion" (Gurr 1970). That is, they adopt an atomistic theory of social action focused on agent-based interest maximization, stemming from the analysis of individual preference structures and opportunities. However, this approach struggles to capture the role of intersubjective dynamics – including intra- and inter-community rules, roles, and practices – in explaining the mobilization dynamics of jihadi groups.

This is particularly evident when it comes to exploring the complex relationship between gender and jihadi mobilization. While most scholarship on such mobilization in the Sahel has treated gender as a factor of little relevance, the few existing studies on the topic (Possémé-Ragneau 2013; Raineri 2020; Rupesinghe and Diall 2019) have highlighted that women might end up lending support to jihadi groups. However, an overemphasis on individual interests fails to provide a convincing explanation of such an outcome. This is because gender is an inherently relational construct that defines – and is defined by – social roles, rules, and practices. Empirically, it may also be hard to assess women's agency and preferences in contexts such as the Sahel, where widespread patriarchy inhibits their expression of individual intentions, and harsh repression by jihadi organizations prevents the genuine manifestation of preferences.

With a view to overcoming these obstacles, this article embraces a focus on practice in exploring whether and how gender influences men's and women's mobilization in, and acceptance of, jihadi armed groups in the region. Building on feminist literature that looks at women's involvement in violent extremism (Brown 2020; Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2020; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2011), the article brings together the feminist security studies scholarship on gender dynamics in jihadi mobilization (Brown 2018; Parashar 2011; Pearson and Nagarajan 2020) with a practice-oriented analysis (Bigo 2011a, 2011b; Pouliot 2010) and takes the central Sahel as a case study.

Several features support the suitability of this approach. By relying on a more comprehensive ontology, an analytical framework attuned to practices can provide a more exhaustive explanation of social dynamics, inasmuch as it helps to transcend artificial, reductionist dichotomies that underpin alternative theories of action (Adler and Pouliot 2015; Bigo 2011a). This makes a practice perspective better suited to grasping the agency of rural subjects in conservative Sahelian societies – an agency that bears little resemblance to the ideal types of utility maximization, rational choice deliberation, or mere irrationality, and instead more often amounts to the creative application of a repertoire of action learned through interactions and experience

(that is, "in practice"). As Lauren Wilcox (2017) points out, it is mainly through lived experiences and practices that gendered social relations are structured and reproduced.

Studying practices also has the potential to shed light on an under-explored pattern of causality, focusing on the conditions of possibility inherent in existing dispositions (Pouliot 2010). In the case at hand, that means looking at women less as passive targets of jihadi propaganda and mobilization efforts than as active players in a dynamic field of struggle (Brown 2020). This makes it especially relevant to inspect how and under what circumstances practices may induce change, adaptation, or resistance vis-à-vis the evolutions of the "social universes" in which "practices emerge, persist, and constrain actors" (Bigo 2011b, 123). The reshaping of Sahelian societies due to the outbreak of jihadism arguably provides a valuable case through which to consider this issue.

Finally, its sensitivity to hidden resistances, which are assumed to permeate every field, makes the practice perspective helpful in assessing the combined effects of concomitant yet opposed vectors that arguably shape adherence to jihadi rule – that is, voluntary mobilization, on the one hand, and authoritarianism and intimidation, on the other.

In operationalizing a practice perspective, we adopt (and adapt) Vincent Pouliot's (2010) methodological approach. This consists of three steps – description, interpretation, and historicization – which are addressed in the empirical sections of the article.

Regarding the first step, we provide a thick description of the main rules, interests, and meanings that shape the field of practices of gender relations in the Sahel. Since practices pertain to, arise from, and are shaped by concrete social interactions, case studies need to be strongly anchored in empirics. The article focuses, in particular, on the gender and social habits of the Fulani milieu of Liptako-Gourma, a region of the central Sahel straddling the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Liptako-Gourma is one of the very few areas in the Sahel, and in Africa in general, where jihadi formations linked to al-Qaeda and IS coexist and compete for the same territory and the same constituency, thereby enabling comparability and nuanced interpretations (Baldaro and Diall 2020). We specifically focus on the Fulani milieu of Liptako-Gourma due to its oft-noted association with the history of past and present jihad in the region (Lovejoy 2016).

As a second step, we examine the extent to which the customary gender habits and practices of Sahelian Fulani contrast with or conform to those imposed by jihadi groups. To this end, we rely on the notion of jihadi governance (Lia 2015) and on the broader literature on rebel governance (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015), understood as the capacity to project and enforce rule compliance even in the absence of full territorial control. Interestingly, the (im)balance of forces between strongly rooted jihadi movements

and weak states makes Liptako-Gourma a valuable site for observing the implementation of forms of jihadi governance and their influence on local communities (Bøås, Wakhab Cissé, and Mahamane 2020).

The third step of the analysis takes a diachronic perspective and seeks to understand whether continuity with or rupture from existing gender habits helps to explain why men and women embrace jihadism in the Sahel. It does so by leveraging Pouliot's categories of "practice homology" and "practice hysteresis" – that is, the accordance or discrepancy, respectively, between a practitioner's habits and their field or, put otherwise, between dispositions and positions. Our intention is thereby to address persisting disagreements in the relevant literature as to whether it is the enduring relevance and reassertion (homology) or, alternatively, the emerging misalignment and rejection (hysteresis) of prevailing gender practices that is more helpful in explaining how gender influences jihadi mobilization.

In keeping with a practice methodology, the analysis builds on an ethnographic immersion in the sphere of social life and action of the case examined. Empirical data was gathered via several fieldwork missions in the Sahel between October 2019 and July 2022. The reliance on complementary methodologies has helped to facilitate triangulation, reinforce the robustness of observations, and ensure context-sensitive interpretations. The article draws on a large set of over 100 semi-structured interviews[1] and 12 focus groups[2] with relevant stakeholders, both men and women, including Liptako-Gourma's customary authorities and religious leaders; representatives of women's organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the local, regional, national, and international level; communities and individuals close to jihadi groups; security experts; and practitioners.

Interviewees and focus group participants were identified on the basis of previous research, as well as referrals from other experts in the field and through snowball sampling. We carried out qualitative data collection either ourselves or with the help of local research assistants[3] in the localities where access, immersion, and participation were not possible as a result of security, ethical, and logistic constraints. The adoption of gender-sensitive[4] data collection protocols[5] mitigated potential data access constraints and biases, while the support of local research assistants supplied the necessary balance between reflexive distance and native proximity to overcome the so-called "Mauss problem" that is so common in practice-oriented research.[6] The research focused particularly on Fulani communities and/or villages exposed to the governance of jihadi groups, either at the time of the research (in the zone of influence of a jihadi cell) or in the past (a village that had previously been occupied or a community that, as a result of violence, had fled to a camp for internally displaced people). Complementary background data comes from several less structured interviews with a variety of local

stakeholders carried out since 2013 in Mali and Niger in the framework of previous research projects.

Continuity or change? Feminist approaches to jihadi mobilization

Jihadi groups appear to make considerable effort, both in discourse and in practice, to control and discipline women in line with their strict gender ideology (Parashar 2011; Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2020). As a result, there is now a growing literature that seeks to address the role of gender dynamics in jihadi mobilization. However, this has tended to focus predominantly on IS in Iraq and Syria (Brown 2018; Eggert 2015; Pearson and Winterbotham 2017), on Boko Haram in Nigeria (Matfess 2017, 2020; Oriola 2017; Zenn and Pearson 2014), or on al-Shabaab in East Africa (Badurdeen 2018; ICG 2019a). IS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadi insurgencies in the Sahel have been less extensively addressed, thereby pointing to a research gap that this article aims to fill.

Feminist security scholarship has increasingly devoted attention to unraveling gendered assumptions about women's intrinsic vulnerability and peacefulness in order to challenge misleading conceptualizations of women's and men's engagement in political violence (Alison 2009; Cook 2020; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011). In the context of political violence, whereby jihadi insurgent groups in the Sahel increasingly position themselves as governance providers, it is the different social contexts and practices through which they operate that affect how men's and women's participation is conceived and legitimized (Auchter 2012). The groups' ability to integrate a religious narrative into everyday life is key to gaining power (Brown 2018).

Some scholars argue that women's engagement reflects society being imbued with masculinist norms and habits. From this perspective, women's involvement can be seen as consistent with existing social norms and practices; women are considered to be trapped in their social roles and are manipulated into participating in violence by male lovers or male relatives (Ness 2005). Jihadi violence is accordingly associated with a social repertoire of practices found in patriarchal Muslim-majority societies (Bouachrine 2014; Moghadam 2001). In line with this conceptualization, David Jacobson and Natalie Deckard (2012, 2) argue that it is within tribal environments that jihadi movements are best nurtured, claiming that "tribal-patriarchal concepts – such as honor, gender and grievance – [are turned] into ideological rather than kinship-based concerns."

Building on the above, one may hypothesize that jihadi insurgent groups, which are the product of local social dynamics, endorse patriarchal practices that are to some extent in accordance with existing social practices and habits and that become most visible in the context of territorial

control and governance over the population. Translated into the lexicon of practice theory, that would indicate that jihadi mobilization and governance benefit from an enduring homology with customary gender habits in a given field.

Previous feminist scholarship has highlighted that in most cases women engage with jihadi organizations in auxiliary roles related to the family environment that reproduce traditional habits and social expectations linked to gender (Mazurana and Proctor 2013). From this perspective, women are supposed to help to educate, support, and encourage men engaged in jihad (Von Knop 2007). For instance, women in Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) support their fighting husbands, take care of raising a new generation of jihadi fighters – the "lion cubs" of the so-called "Caliphate" – and actively engage in online propaganda to persuade others (especially women) to support jihad (Cook 2020; Cook and Vale 2018). In al-Qaeda, both Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri emphasized the importance of the non-violent roles of women who do heroic work monitoring the homes and children of the mujahideen (Lahoud 2014). Hence, traditional repertoires of action rooted in existing gender practices can provide jihadi militants with valuable community entry points into establishing social roots, as they manipulate masculinity and femininity (Duriesmith 2017) to gain traction in communities (Mazurana and Proctor 2013).

Conversely, other scholars argue that supporting and joining jihadi groups can be understood as motivated by a desire to *escape* conservative gender ideologies (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2011), which are seen as lagging behind the evolution of the field and increasingly misaligned with women's positions and interests. In this framework, the appeal of jihadism lies in the additional resources that it provides to challenge customary – yet declining – roles and habits related to gender, the questioning of which highlights an emerging hysteresis in the field of gender relations. Illustrating this, in the case of the ISIS Caliphate, scholars have noted that local jihadi governance contrasts sharply with prevailing patriarchal habits and gender practices (Lia 2017). ISIS manipulates and transforms gender expectations by promising jihadi brides and grooms the attainment of "true" manhood and womanhood (Van Leuven, Mazurana, and Gordon 2016), while Boko Haram women are able to seize opportunities for empowerment for themselves (Pearson and Nagarajan 2020). On this view, joining a jihadi organization is an act of disruption and not the fulfillment of traditional gender-defined duties.

In this sense, the study of gender practices in a given field can greatly help to untangle how jihadi groups can be successful in establishing themselves as legitimate political actors and appeal to constituents based on their gender.

The field of gender relations among the Fulani in the central Sahel

This section presents the data from fieldwork and explores the thick network of rules, interests, and meanings of the Fulani communities of the central Sahel, as a basis for understanding how jihadi insurgent groups (try to) become entrenched. While media and policy reports have sometimes evoked the strict gender ideology enforced by such groups, including in the Sahel, existing gender habits, rooted in customary practices, have been much less explored. In this sense, it is crucial to highlight the importance of patriarchy as a socio-political organizing hierarchy (Gentry 2020). In this line, we seek to explore the stigmatization of insurgent groups' "obscurantism" vis-à-vis women's rights and traditional roles, while acknowledging that oppressive gender regimes have long existed in the Sahel.

Recent attempts by Sahelian governments to promote greater gender equality – especially with respect to access to education, inheritance rights, and the fight against child marriage – have been met by strong resistance. Illustrating how habits resist change (Bigo 2011b), radical religious leaders in the Sahel successfully harness popular support against norms that are portrayed as an expression of Western cultural imperialism (Idrissa 2018; Lebovich 2019). In addition, as Sahelian societies are characterized by a strong legal pluralism, one finds a notable discrepancy between formal laws and customary norms. The latter are considerably misaligned vis-à-vis international and regional standards of gender equality, yet they are often much more cogent in shaping people's everyday lives and conduct, especially in rural settings (Berlingozzi 2022). Aiming to grasp the rules, roles, and meanings defining the field of gender relations among the Fulani of Liptako-Gourma, this section complements existing sociological and anthropological scholarship with qualitative fieldwork data to provide updated and more nuanced interpretations.

In the Fulani society, the differentiation of gender roles and status is typically a priority and is more compelling than the pursuit of equal rights. Traditionally, girls are brought up, educated, and socialized differently from boys (Tounkara 2015): "Culturally, power is masculine. Femininity is measured by a woman's degree of submission, and her acceptability and respectability in society depend on the degree to which she respects social norms."[7] Thus, the ideals of femininity and masculinity, and the attendant social expectations, habits, and practices, provide a valuable entry point into the study of gender roles and positions in the field of Liptako-Gourma Fulani society.

All power in Fulani society – decision-making, economic, customary, and religious – is firmly in the hands of men. Men's status is linked to the role of head of the family, and while rigid hierarchies and historical legacies define the worthiness of one's family, the number of wives and children is a source of social prestige (Whitehouse 2018). In turn, women are viewed

(and often view themselves) more as dependents than as equal partners. Women are not supposed to challenge men's social role; instead, they are valued for their ability to support and follow men: "It would be a mistake to think that it [subservience] is because of religion as Islam provides equality for women. [Women's] subjugation is a cultural issue that has been constructed and substantiated through practice."[8] As a result, while men bear the responsibility for ensuring (and defining) women's well-being, Fulani women are expected to conform to a gender role that prescribes obedience and submissiveness vis-à-vis men: "Women are always under someone's authority. First the father, then the husband, and even the children. If your husband dies, the first-born male becomes the head of the family."[9]

As the (male) head of the family is responsible for the moral conduct of both his children and his wives, women are socially infantilized figures whose parents are simply replaced by their husbands. The role models provided for girls as they grow up are intended to equip them with the discipline and dedication needed to fulfill their obligations: "Little girls are brought up with different social values from men. The wife is expected to be docile, respect her father and her husband, and carry out her husband's orders without hesitation."[10] As Fulani women are "trained" for docility and acquiescence, submission to men could be perceived as an achievement, including by women, and as generating social esteem and respectability.

In the Fulani context, marriage is considered a primary goal, essential for maintaining harmony within households, creating social cohesion, and fulfilling a religious obligation: "As one married girl in Tillabéri put it, 'They [girls] know that it is destiny, that marriage is like death [unavoidable]; that it has a definite moment'" (Saul et al. 2020, 277). Social expectations mold the relevant tactics of meaningful action; unmarried girls are stigmatized and impose an additional economic burden on their parents, who need to ensure their sustenance until their husbands take over. In a context in which patriarchy and birthright define social hierarchies, marriage strategies are the preserve of the parents – that is, of the father – and girls have very little power to decide differently (Alidou and Hima 2021). Arranged marriages are the norm; girls are often promised from babyhood, typically to a member of the extended family, and often without the couple even being aware. Early marriages are thus, in fact, forced marriages (Saul et al. 2020). Parental authority is not the only limit to freedom of marriage among the Fulani; to ensure the reproduction of the social order, inter-caste marriage is discouraged (Wilson-Fall 2021).

The payment of the dowry, too, may represent a considerable obstacle. Previously symbolic, the price of a bride has risen progressively and can now reach up to 1 million CFA francs (around 1,500 euros), a figure that often exceeds the annual income of a young Fulani from the rural Sahel.[11] The most highly prized girls, then, often end up being taken as second or third wives by wealthy older men who are able to marshal the necessary

resources. This generates considerable frustration and disenfranchisement among the youth, whose inability to get married and start a family prevents access to adulthood and inhibits their social recognition: "It takes money to make a home. If you are old and unmarried [whether man or woman], your friends make fun of you."[12] At the same time, the substantial investment represented by the dowry shapes reciprocal expectations, contributing to the power imbalance and to the further objectification of women.

Fearing that promiscuity in schools and dormitories may disrupt marriage strategies, Fulani families tend to withdraw girls from school as soon as they reach puberty and before their marriage prospects are damaged by the risk of encounters with their male peers and their advancing age. It is, therefore, very unusual for Fulani girls to attain higher levels of education, especially if they come from rural backgrounds. Sahelian countries thus have the world's highest rates of child marriage, reaching 76 percent in Niger.[13] Fulani girls from rural areas of the central Sahel often get married at 13 or 14 years old.[14]

Local sources – men and women alike – largely concur with the view that the place of women in Fulani society is at home. Here, traditional repertoires of action converge with widely held social norms. That these appear to be taken for granted, rather than consciously and explicitly deliberated upon, underlines the value of a practice perspective to grasping the underlying logic of action. Married women are expected to be in charge of the household. While household tasks are deemed appropriate and even rewarding for a respectable woman, work outside the home can be seen as onerous, annoying, and inappropriate. Work in the fields, for instance, is often considered coarse and menial labor that should be done by men. The customary ethic of the Fulani aristocracy translates into the masculine concern that a man's pride is to provide for his family's needs while allowing his wife to be "treated like a queen"[15] – that is, protected from the arduous need to work and therefore free to rule over her mansion. As "household queens," women have the power to educate their children and take care of the family.[16]

Local sources, including women, argue that "the man must go out and look for a way to earn for his family and leave his wife at home."[17] However, the extreme deprivation of many Fulani households in the Sahel often means that women have to contribute to the family's subsistence through various income-generating activities. In most cases, these should be seen more as women's efforts to fulfill their duties vis-à-vis their husbands and children than as indicative of any ambition for individual emancipation. This is also because, in a society in which livelihoods largely depend on work in the fields, customary social norms prevent women from owning, or even inheriting, land: "All expenses are borne by the husband. He must lodge, feed, and take care of his wife and children. If she works, it is completely voluntary, but she is not obliged to do so; it is the man who must provide for the needs of the family."[18] Albeit widespread in less affluent communities,

women's labor – in the markets or in the fields – may still amount to a source of embarrassment for their husbands, an admission of social impotence that inhibits the possibility of appearing as "a real man." Masculinities and social status shape social perceptions. Men who cannot find a source of livelihood cannot start a family, and thus suffer a great deal of humiliation: "He's like a broken branch of a tree; if he's not a real man, he's useless."[19]

Social practices around dress codes are consistent with this overall world-view. Outside the home, women are urged to demonstrate modesty and humility. Wearing the veil is a traditional practice for Fulani women in the central Sahel. It is recommended by various religious leaders, including the more "moderate" Sufi marabouts.[20] Several local sources, both male and female, find the full veil preferable.[21] The full veil is, in fact, not only a mark of women's religiosity, but also of social status because it is practical attire for women who are in a position to not have to work.

The objectification of women rooted in gender habits partly explains the high prevalence of domestic violence among the Fulani of the central Sahel. Social taboos make it hard to document and quantify the phenom-enon, yet reports by local actors suggest that domestic violence is regular and habitual rather than abnormal and problematic:

> Hitting your wife is a normal practice that everyone accepts, even the wife's parents.[22]

> Men raping subordinate women … is deeply rooted in the traditional way of life.[23]

> For US, rape within the home is an everyday occurrence, so much so that is not described as rape. If you go out and say your husband raped you, the commu-nity will lynch you: "What good are you if not for this?"[24]

While domestic violence appears widespread and normalized, violence and rape outside the household are largely considered unacceptable and stigmatizing, not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator and for the victim's tutor.[25] According to Fulani gender norms, a man's worth is strongly associated with his capacity to protect his dependents and loved ones. Men's performance in the field implies a specific duty to protect women, whose vulnerability and passivity are taken for granted. Both men and women appear to share this view. As an illustration of this, while pacifist and gentle attitudes generally prevail among the Fulani, a resort to violence and armed revenge is largely considered legitimate when it is a matter of avenging major wrongs or humiliations suffered by a female rela-tive, including arbitrary arrest, rape, abduction, or murder. Existing reports suggest that the (alleged) abuses perpetrated by state security and defense forces and pro-governmental militias prove especially humiliating for Fulani men of the central Sahel, who feel that they have failed to fulfill their duty of protection (Raineri 2020).

Further compounding gendered social hierarchies, men's readiness to exhibit martial skills without showing hesitation or fear resonates with the Fulani aristocratic ethic and may therefore be interpreted as a sign of nobility. These ideas also operate in opposition to the stereotypical female paradigm. In the face of the generalized violence affecting communities in the central Sahel, avoiding fighting or, worse, fleeing can be viewed as "[a] sign of cowardice; the men of today have turned into women."[26] Accordingly, men who demonstrate their courage by taking a stand as protectors of their community, and especially of women, can become models of masculinity and nobility who arouse admiration in both women and men. In line with previous scholarship on gendered jihadi practices (Brown 2018), the next section explores how the mobilization of support by jihadi groups in the Sahel involves the manipulation of traditional gender habits and practices linked to the roles of femininity and masculinity.

Jihadi governance and gender relations

Across much of the central Sahel, jihadi organizations do not necessarily hold permanent territorial control; rather, they operate through "sporadic governance" (Bøås and Strazzari 2020). From their remote hideouts in the bush, jihadi insurgents strive to – in the parlance of Michel Foucault (1994, 582) – "steer conduct" in nearby villages by establishing rules and institutions to discipline communities in accordance with their own ideology. Recent reports confirm that women play important roles in the production and reproduction of jihadi governance in Liptako-Gourma (ICG 2019b; ISS 2021). Jihadi governance is not only wielded in matters of life and death but also over everyday practices and behaviors (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). As a result, women are, at the same time, targets of violence and governance by jihadi insurgent groups. As previous scholarship has maintained, crafting and imposing rules to govern women's lives and bodies in both the private and the public spheres is not an organic process; rather, these interventions need to deal constantly with instability (Brown 2018). Thus, we argue that certain practices show "ephemeral stickiness" or "lasting thickness" depending on strategic calculations.

As this section shows, a strongly gendered approach to jihadi governance manifests through the imposition of measures that include the reconfiguration of marital relationships, the banning of celebrations, the enforcement of strict dress codes (especially in relation to female modesty), the restriction of women's mobility, and the segregation of men and women in public spaces. Despite the fact that the imposition of this new order is accompanied by many examples of brutality, it is not entirely rejected by local communities, including women. In a context in which conflict and violence put Fulani values, emotions, and social cohesion to the test, jihadi groups in the central Sahel,

in fact, prove adept at exploiting both existing gendered practices and aspirations for change – that is, both homology and hysteresis with respect to customary habits – to establish social roots and mobilize support.

Traditionally, the most important roles that women play in Fulani societies are as wives and mothers. As a result, jihadi insurgents devote particular attention to rules regarding marriage, skillfully exploiting existing practices to consolidate governance. While, on the one hand, the jihadi governance of the central Sahel promotes austerity and curbs celebrations, on the other, it also calls into question the customary restrictions and prohibitions pertaining to marriage that are not in line with Sharia prescriptions.

Practice hysteresis is exemplified in the open support by jihadi leaders for inter-caste marriages[27] – an emerging practice that is welcomed by young women from lower castes[28] – and in the related questioning of the exclusive authority of fathers to arrange their daughters' marriages. In fact, in the areas of Liptako-Gourma where jihadi groups project a shadow of governance, it is increasingly common for women to manifest their agency by making their own marriage choices, including going against the wishes of their parents – that is, their fathers. Furthermore, the condemnation of ostentation and lavish celebration has prompted jihadi insurgents to reinvent other practices connected to marriage. For instance, they have imposed a reduction and a cap on the dowry so that marriage becomes more affordable for young men, who can pay in cash or also in heads of cattle or sheep. In the areas of Liptako-Gourma subject to jihadi governance, "[h]igh bride prices are now prohibited; they have to be reasonable."[29] Sometimes, fellow jihadists may even "give resources" to young Fulani men to help them to find a wife.[30] This tactic helps to promote mobilization and recruitment, as it provides young men from less well-off backgrounds with a relatively easy means of fulfilling the masculine role of establishing a household.[31] Thus, jihadists exploit the misalignment of emerging practices with traditional norms to facilitate access to marriage as a way to establish social roots.

However, the household is only one domain subject to the broader gender segregation ideology enforced by jihadi insurgents in the Sahel. Building on the prohibition of *inkhilat* – the illegal mixing of sexes – women should ideally avoid leaving the house of their guardian, father, or husband. When traveling, women must always be accompanied by a male guardian (Rupesinghe and Diall 2019), and they are generally required to avoid going to crowded places (such as markets) and leaving their households after sunset (Raineri 2020). The implementation of these limitations on women's freedom of movement prevents them from carrying out their customary practical tasks, such as collecting water and wood, trading in the local markets, and selling milk door to door. In an attempt to make the break with customary practices more palatable, domestic segregation is presented as an enviable situation of peace and quiet in contrast to the worries and concerns of the outside world.

As noted, the exemption from work also echoes the practices of the Fulani noblewoman and is highly appealing for women in Fulani rural society. It is therefore portrayed by the jihadists as a royal privilege, which may translate into local women feeling relieved under Sharia: "Women don't have to work until they are exhausted. They stay home and cherish the children."[32]

Whenever they go out in public, however, women are compelled under jihadi governance to wear a hijab. Women are not required to wear a full black niqab, but those who do not conform to the rule on veil wearing are severely sanctioned: "If you don't wear the veil, you'll be beaten. They give you three warnings, and then they beat you."[33] Overall, the imposition of stricter rules regarding dress code[34] is perhaps the most visible expression of the emerging jihadi governance in the central Sahel. Nevertheless, the imposition of the veil does not, in itself, represent a significant break from existing clothing habits; it builds on the continuity (homology) with a practice that was already very common before the establishment of jihadi governance.

Jihadi groups in the central Sahel also focus on persecuting teachers and shutting down schools, which are based on the secular French model and thus contrary to their ideology. While there are a few examples of Koranic schools established in the Mopti area (Raineri 2020), these do not meet the local demand for better access to education or the aspiration of Islamist reformers to equip women with an understanding of religious precepts adequate to educate their children properly. Overall, being deprived of the right to education is resented by Fulani women in the central Sahel (Tounkara 2015).

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the quality and accessibility of the area's previously existing state-run schooling were very poor. In addition to structural deficiencies, existing practices also hamper girls' education. Thus, in the case of school closures, jihadi governance can be regarded as another instance of continuity (homology) as it does not disrupt women's lives any more than traditional practices and patriarchal socio-cultural norms that define the structures of systemic gender marginalization, discrimination, and neglect.

Moreover, looking at the victimization trends under jihadi governance, the allegations of the widespread and systematic use of rape and gender-based violence (GBV) by jihadi insurgents are poorly substantiated by the available evidence (Sandor 2020). In fact, jihadi insurgents in the Sahel seem to generally uphold the prohibition of extra-conjugal GBV and the punishment of perpetrators, possibly also as a matter of ideological compliance. Though episodes of GBV clearly occur, cases of murders, attacks, and torture explicitly targeting women are relatively rare. Further, in most cases, the perpetrators appear to be not jihadi insurgents but members of state security and defense forces or non-state self-defense militias (Dufka 2020; ISS 2019). Similarly, the abduction of women for the purposes of propaganda, ransom, intimidation, or recruitment, which has long formed part of the repertoire of violent

extremist groups in the area around Lake Chad (Berlingozzi and Stoddard 2020; Bloom and Matfess 2016), is rare in the central Sahel.

While women are rarely the intended targets of violent attacks by jihadi organizations in the Sahel, they may nevertheless end up being the indirect victims of a situation in which violence has become widespread and normalized. This happens, for instance, when men leave behind women and children to join armed groups or go into hiding for fear of reprisal by jihadi insurgents or state security and defense forces. In these cases, the loss of a guardian may leave women vulnerable to various forms of GBV, including rape, sexual violence, and harassment. It is worth noting that state security and defense forces and armed self-defense groups are often accused of perpetrating abuses against women. According to local observers, "[t]oday the main threats to the security of the village or the community come from bandits and Dozo hunting groups," and "the Malian security forces are also a threat to community safety because they think 'Fulani' is the same thing as people from the bush."[35] These observations help to explain why, in some Sahelian areas, jihadi insurgents could be perceived more as a source of protection than as a threat, especially among women.

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that getting married to jihadi insurgents has become an appealing option for women, as they are seen as capable of providing a livelihood and granting physical protection. It would be inaccurate to presume that this is only an option of last resort due to the exceptional circumstances of a conflict environment. Marriage strategies are in accordance with customary practices through which women (and men) achieve recognition and upgrade their social statuses, therefore leveraging a homology of practices between the existing field and jihadi governance. At the same time, both men and women appear to acknowledge the appeal of armed jihadists. In comparison with other older suitors, jihadi insurgents may well be seen as partners who are a closer match to the hegemonic standard of masculinity: "Lots of women who are in the villages … don't like men apart from jihadists. By 'nature,' women like combatants. Today you have to be a jihadist to have an easy marriage."[36]

The demand for protection incentivizes not only women's support for jihadi insurgent groups but also men's mobilization. On the one hand, young Fulani men may approach jihadi formations driven by the hope of obtaining the resources – prestige, status, and income – that will facilitate their access to women, marriage, and adulthood; engaging with a jihadi group as a potential bulwark against a corrupt regime can provide men with an invaluable opportunity to adhere to the expectations and duties attached to the socially upheld standards of masculinity. On the other hand, failing to do so exposes young Fulani men to the risk of stigmatization, contempt, and social sanction. The public speeches, accolades, exhortations, and celebrations that Fulani women reportedly address to men who take up weapons to protect the community, including on behalf of jihadi groups,

represent a subtle but effective form of moral persuasion, whereby social expectations help to cement gendered practices (Raineri 2020).

The observations above highlight the significant patterns of adherence to, support for, and proximity to jihadi organizations demonstrated by Fulani women in the central Sahel. The conclusion elaborates on whether this outcome is best explained by invoking a homology between Fulani gender habits and jihadi governance practices, or a hysteresis inherent to the field of Fulani gender relations that is exploited by savvy jihadists to entrench themselves in the Sahel and mobilize followers, especially women.

Conclusion: the power of practices

In the Sahel, jihadi insurgents skillfully promote forms of governance that align with men's and women's existing dispositions with respect to gender relations and deliver opportunities to meet social expectations and secure coveted positions. This approach arguably contributes to the social entrenchment and legitimacy building of jihadi insurgencies in the Sahel, vis-à-vis both men and women. By leveraging the reassurance of continuity and the aspirations for change, the imposition of jihadi governance based on (the strict interpretation of) Sharia may, in fact, be favorably perceived. On the one hand, it conforms to customary habits of gender relations in the field; on the other, it removes the practice restrictions that no longer enjoy widespread support, especially in relation to marriage.

This article has shown that the practices and beliefs advanced by jihadi groups in the Sahel do not necessarily break radically with the existing social order and the habits that it has forged over time; on the contrary, they resonate with the everyday life of rural communities and with deeply rooted social practices that help jihadists to gain acceptance among men and women. Practices such as wearing the veil, marginalizing women in decision-making processes, devaluing women's work, excluding women from the education system, and obligating women to obey their husbands are systematized and rigidly enforced by the jihadi insurgents. While such practices certainly undermine the individual emancipation of Fulani women, they nevertheless exhibit a remarkable continuity with traditional gender habits in Fulani societies, especially in rural areas; this may explain why they are not fully rejected by women.

In most cases, women who support jihadi insurgencies do not experience any sort of radical existential break but rather replicate the social roles and practices that they would have performed in their everyday lives in the absence of jihadi governance; they stay at home, where they receive their husbands when they return from the frontline and offer them shelter, care, and consolation. In this way, women ensure the groups' functioning, existence, and reproduction by engaging in traditional activities such as cooking, nursing, giving birth, and educating

the next generation of potential fighters, which may be viewed as offering invaluable logistical support to jihadi insurgencies. Emphasizing the importance of practice homology in explaining jihadi mobilization, Sahel's jihadi insurgencies appear to (strive to) gain acceptance and legitimacy in the field of Fulani societies by drawing on patriarchal habits and reproducing existing gendered practices.

In some other cases, however, the consolidation of remote governance coupled with the imposition of a Sharia-based code of conduct brings about a rupture of the Fulani way of life, prompting the reshaping of customary practices. Illustrations of this, as discussed above, include the reconfiguration of marriage customs, the disciplining of household chores, the imposition of strict dress codes, and constraints on the freedom of movement and celebration. Nevertheless, some of these new rules resonate with the interests, aspirations, and implicit agendas of women and men belonging to rural communities. The rise of jihadi rules and governance provides unexpected opportunities to challenge waning power relations marked by the extreme patriarchy and hierarchy that permeate the social field of Fulani communities. In this framework, the analysis suggests that local women and men may take a pragmatic approach, looking favorably on certain measures of jihadi governance that have progressive implications in terms of gender, without wholly sharing the ideology of the extremist groups. In particular, the jihadists' strategic challenge of non-Islamic marriage norms – that is, a ban on forced marriages, favoring inter-caste marriages, and a reduction of the dowry – resonates with the aspirations of many young people (both men and women) to challenge now discredited habits inherited from the past.

From this perspective, jihadi governance makes apparent the growing misalignment between the positions (interests) and dispositions (habits) of actors in the field of Fulani rural societies. This is indicative of a practice hysteresis, whereby the habitus generated by and through history – in this case, regarding gender roles and rules – diverges from history as a result of social change (Pouliot 2010). Like underground tensions that build up over centuries until they culminate in an earthquake, the outbreak of jihadism in the central Sahel upsets not only the positions of actors in the field but the field itself, the rules of which are no longer taken for granted.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated how leveraging the field of gender relations by either strategically reproducing or breaking away from prevailing gender habits can foster engagement and mobilization in support of jihadi insurgencies. There is no shortage of arguments to explain jihadi mobilization as an outcome of both practice homology (continuity) and hysteresis (change) in the field of gender relations. Irrespective of *how* gender dynamics influence jihadi mobilization, however, there is little doubt about the former's impact on the latter. Sahel's jihadi insurgents appear acutely aware of the need to relate to gender practices that are widely held by the population living under jihadi governance. This

observation suggests that practice theory provides a heuristically powerful theory of action to help us to understand and interpret jihadi groups' entrenchment in the Sahel and, most notably, their capacity to mobilize support by leveraging gender divides.

Notes

1. Such a large and diverse sample helps to provide a holistic understanding of Fulani gender practices. We carried out interviews in French or English, mostly in Niamey (Niger) and Bamako (Mali). While our positionality as white Global North researchers might have introduced unintentional biases in the exchanges with key informants, our familiarity with the field may have nevertheless anticipated and mitigated those biases.
2. The focus groups were conducted in six target communities in the Liptako-Gourma region, specifically in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso), and Tillabéri (Niger). Further details are withheld for security and ethical reasons.
3. We relied on two local researchers (one man and one woman) per country with longstanding research expertise in the region. We carefully evaluated jointly the risks that they would encounter while going into the field, and we took a reflexive approach to our own positionality as Global North researchers so as to minimize the risk of inadvertently "forcing" them to accept excessive risks.
4. Most of the interviews and focus groups were conducted jointly by one male and one female researcher. When necessary, specific informants were approached by female (or male) researchers only, as appropriate.
5. In accordance with ethical research criteria, all participants provided informed consent to take part in the research and be quoted anonymously. The interviews were conducted in safe places, and no recordings were made at any time.
6. The "Mauss problem", as described by Stephen Turner (1994), is the challenge that social scientists encounter when studying practices. It arises from the tendency to focus on the aspects of a culture that appear most different from the observer's own culture, potentially overlooking the shared characteristics and complex dynamics within the culture being studied.
7. Interview with university professor of sociology, Bamako (Mali), November 2019.
8. Interview with university professor of anthropology, Bamako (Mali), December 2019.
9. Interview with local security expert #1, Bamako (Mali), December 2019.
10. Interview with local NGO official #1, Bamako (Mali), December 2019.
11. Interviews with Fulani men and women from the Sahel region (Burkina Faso), December 2019.
12. Interview with Fulani civil society actor, Niamey (Niger), January 2020.
13. See https://data.unicef.org.
14. View confirmed in several focus groups with men and with women in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Tillabéri (Niger), and Sahel (Burkina Faso), December 2019.
15. Interview with traditional authority in the region of Tillabéri (Niger), June 2022.
16. Interview with university professor of sociology, Niamey (Niger), March 2020.
17. Focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
18. Interview with local NGO official #2, Bamako (Mali), December 2019.
19. Interview with university professor of sociology, Niamey (Niger), March 2020.
20. Interviews with religious leaders in the region of Mopti (Mali) and a focus group in the region of Tillabéri (Niger), December 2019.

21. Focus groups with men in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso) and a focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
22. Interview with Malian expert on gender issues (female), Bamako (Mali), November 2019.
23. Interview with Malian human rights expert (male), Bamako (Mali), November 2019.
24. Interview with Burkinabe expert on gender issues (female), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), December 2019.
25. A woman's tutor is the person who is responsible for her conduct: her husband or, if she is not married, her father, or, if she is widowed, her first-born son.
26. Interview with traditional leader (male), Arbinda (Burkina Faso). It should be noted that male interviewees from northern Burkina Faso tended to acknowledge that fleeing was a necessity in the face of growing danger but also a threat to their male dignity.
27. Interview with local researcher, Bamako (Mali), December 2019.
28. Focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
29. Focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
30. Focus group with men in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
31. Marriage strategies have long been part of the repertoire of jihadi organizations aiming to establish social roots in other parts of Africa, too, as the cases of north Mali (Sandor and Campana 2019) and Lake Chad (Matfess 2017) aptly illustrate.
32. Focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
33. Focus group with women in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019.
34. While most of these rules focus on women, some also target men. Men are encouraged to let their beards grow and are forbidden from wearing ankle-length trousers.
35. Interview with public figure (male) in the region of Mopti (Mali), December 2019. "People from the bush" is a nickname for jihadists.
36. Focus group with men in the region of Tillabéri (Niger), December 2019.

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