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Sahel Platform on Peace Promotion: 2014 Meeting

1 - 3 September 2014

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sahel Peace Promotion Workshop was held in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on 1-3 September 2014 within the scope of NAWAT (North Africa and West of Asia in Transformation) Programme of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.[1] The meeting was the fourth element of a multi-phase Sahel project which consisted in the production of a research paper on tension lines in the Sahel region, an experts' meeting that took place in Geneva on 29-30 January 2014, , and four field missions to Mauritania, Niger, and Chad in 2013-2014. Based on the recommendation of those activities this workshop convened 19 participants from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad in order to a) identify experts, deepen understanding and analyses of conflicts with religious dimension, b) establish a platform of experts and actors with a focus on conflicts with a religious dimension; and c) identify potential entry points for peace promotion initiatives.
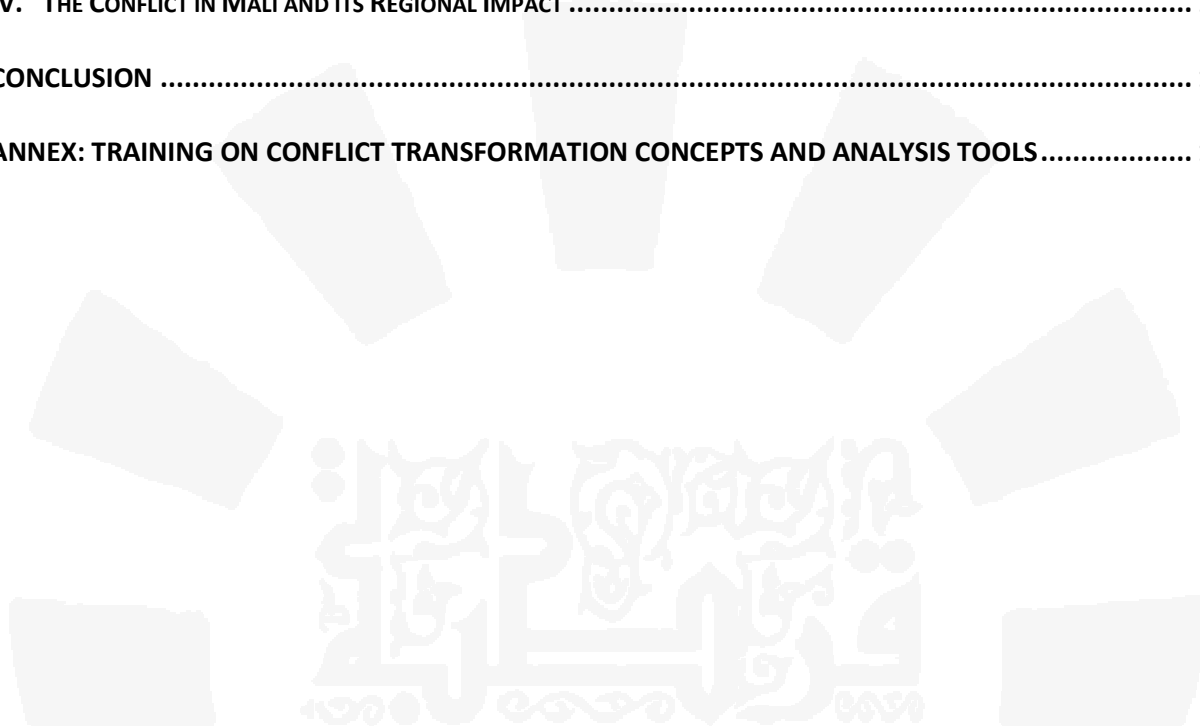
The discussions focused on prevention of violence and dealing with youth religious extremism with a case study of the Mauritanian dialogue initiative of 2010; the Izala Movement within the religious landscape in Niger and its ties to north Nigeria; and the conflict in Mali and its regional Impact. Furthermore, participants received training on conflict transformation concepts and analysis tools. The outcome and recommendations of the workshop could be summarized as follows.

1. Mali: participants recommended the need to continue exchange in order to launch inter-community dialogue through religious scholars and the High Islamic Council.
2. Mauritania: Given the pressing nature of racial tensions and the threats to national unity, participants advised launching a dialogue space among Mauritanian stakeholders to address the issue of diversity and citizenship.
3. A cross-regional Sahel workshop focusing on understanding the Boko Haram movement was recommended. A participant thought that given its Islamic jurisprudence scholarly assets Mauritania is best positioned to launch a dialogue on doctrinal issues among scholars of the region and beyond for violence prevention.
4. In order to address the inter-Islamic groups tensions (Salafi/Sufi, etc.), participants suggested country-specific training workshops and dialogue spaces that would conclude with a cross-region conference of scholars for peace promotion.

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[1] North Africa and West Asia in Transformation (NAWAT) is a programme of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva that seeks to develop collectively shared understanding and conflict transformation initiatives. It focuses on the dynamics that arise at the crossroads of social, political and religious processes, primarily in North Africa and the Middle East and/or involving Muslims in the West. The overall goal of NAWAT is to reinforce the locally owned capacity and mechanisms, including the support of local initiatives, for transforming violent, or potentially violent, political conflicts with a religious dimension and to herewith contribute to (1) Peaceful transformations in the NAWA region; and (2) Peaceful coexistence in regions affected by the "Arab Spring" (e.g. Sahel).

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INTRODUCTION

The uprisings that spread in the Arab world since the end of 2010 had a significant impact on the Sahel region, especially after the conflict in Libya. One of the striking by-products of the Libyan conflict was the movement of fighters and weapons from this country to the Sahel region, causing a challenge to stability in the north of Mali, and to a lesser extent in the north of Niger. The human and materiel consequences of the Libyan crisis have greatly exacerbated many problems, which the Sahel has been facing for a long time. The impact goes also in the other direction, as the stability of the neighboring North Africans countries is affected by the tensions in the Sahel; Europe is affected indirectly. Thus, the interest of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva and its partner the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs arose from the awareness that the interface between North Africa and the Sahel is reciprocal.

The program focuses on reinforcing the capacity and mechanisms for transforming violent, or potentially violent, political conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East and/or involving Muslims in the West. Its objectives are to develop a collectively shared understanding of what is at stake, who are the relevant actors and how to address identified problems, to contribute to enhancing the capacity of relevant conflict transformation actors, to coordinate a network acting as a "mediation space" and to contribute to conflict transformation initiatives that address specific conflicts and enhance citizenship.

The workshop aimed at achieving the following concrete objectives: a) Identify experts, collect and improve the state of knowledge and analysis of conflicts with a religious dimension, consolidate hypotheses and concepts; b) Establish a platform of experts and actors with a focus on conflicts with a religious dimension; c) Identify potential entry points for peace promotion initiatives.

The workshop gathered 19 participants from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. The sessions proceeded under the Chatham House rule, and focused essentially on the followings themes: 1) violent religious extremism among Salafi youth at a national and regional level; 2) regional and transversal aspect of the Mali crisis; 3) dynamics of the religious landscape in the south of Niger, especially the Izala movement and its connection with the situation in northern Nigeria; and 4) intra-Islamic relations in Chad and in the region.

I. INTER-ISLAMIC TENSION IN CHAD

The political change in Chad in 1990, which established political pluralisms, was also reflected in the religious landscape and led to the diversification of the Islamic spectrum. Since then, the Islamic landscape in Chad has featured diverse groups and organisations with different doctrinal affiliations. The Tijaniyya Sufi current is the largest in the country and dominates the official structures representing Muslims in Chad. However, there exists other Islamic currents and groups which include Ansar Al Sunna Al Muhamadiyya, and Da'wa wa Al-Tabligh group, and the Sennusi Sufi group, present mainly in the north of the country. The Qadiriya Sufi group exists as well, but is relatively small. With the return of Chadian students who studied in Iran, following the signature of a cultural agreement of cooperation between the two countries, a new small Shi'a community started to establish itself in Chad, visible through cultural and educational centres.

In 1993 inter-Islamic tensions between the Tijaniyya Sufi current and the Ansar Al Sunna group reached an unprecedented level, following which a charter for the peaceful co-existence of Islamic groups was approved by President Idriss Déby. The issue of the representation of Chad's Muslims by the various groups has been one of the main reasons for the tensions. A Mauritanian participant opined that dialogue between technocrats and institutions does not solve religious-based differences; but rather dialogue among religious references can address tensions. A scholar from Niger explained that the monopoly of the representation of Islam is a common issue throughout the Sahel: how to address this issue poses legal challenges. Another Mauritanian Sahel affairs expert indicated that despite the adoption of political

pluralism and democracy by some Sahel states, that pluralism has remained confined to the political sphere and does not encompass the religious sphere, which should have elected institutions, elected heads of supreme religious councils and limited terms and mandates.

Regional and geopolitical factors affected negatively the state of intra-Islamic group relations. In 1996, a number of Islamic organisations were banned due to suspicion that a new Islamic party supported by the nearby Sudanese government was about to be formed in Chad. The aftermath of 9/11 cast a shadow of doubt and suspicion on a large number of Islamic NGOs, Chadian and Arab, and led to their banning and blacklisting. These regional and global developments strained inter-Islamic group relations, especially the relation with the High Islamic Council, the official body representing Islam in the country. This reality has had an impact on Christian-Muslim relations as well. A Chadian participant recalled how those tensions affected efforts for a Muslim-Christian dialogue; and led to the cancelling of a conference on the place of Chad in the Arab/ Muslim world. The Chadian participant explained that given the tensions the Church in Chad "cannot deal with Muslim associations other than the Islamic Council."

Tensions among churches in Chad affect relations with Muslims as well. A participant explained that Evangelical positions toward Muslims have strained Christian-Muslim relations, which is why the Catholic Church took the initiative to create a dialogue space between the two communities in order to promote tolerance, not only among the faiths but also toward the non-monotheists. It was in this spirit that that a Chadian centre undertook a number of educational, and community services initiatives. At the

intellectual level, a conference on Arabic and French in Chad was held, and those discussions resulted in the publication of a book. Besides, a course on Islam was introduced in the training curriculum of priests, while a group of Catholic priests was sent to Egypt to learn Arabic. A Chadian participant that explained the Church Union of Christian Cadre of Chad encourages the creation of a similar framework for Muslims in Chad in order to promote dialogue among intellectuals of the two faiths. As far as inter-community interaction was concerned, the faith centre adopted a diapraxis approach in that it aimed to promote a life of co-existence and the common good between the two Muslim and Christian communities by the joint implementation of water supply projects, among others. In the light of the sectarian conflict in central Africa and the Boko Haram threat in Nigeria, the Chadian faith centre has taken pro-active action in order to consolidate inter-community peace in Chad. An early warning rapid response project was launched in order to set up a peace workers community group comprising Muslims and Christians. A group of Peace Leaders received training on conflict transformation approaches and tools in September 2014, in order to set this project in motion.

II. PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AND DEALING WITH YOUTH RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: *The 2010 Prison Dialogue Initiative in Mauritania*

The Mauritanian experience in the prevention of violence was discussed with two of the main scholars who led the 2010 dialogue initiative with Salafi prisoners. The two scholars explained that the discourse of the global war on terror in the wake of 9/11was translated by the regimes in the Sahel region by a campaign of repression and persecution of Salafi youth. In Mauritania, the imprisonment of figures and scholars of the Salafi current in the aftermath of the 2005 coup removed a key element of the safety net that the Salafi figures had put in place since 2002 to counter armed groups recruitment of Mauritanian youth. A Mauritanian expert on the affairs of armed groups in the Sahel confirmed that there is a correlation between the imprisonment of the Salafi scholars in 2005 and the increase in the number of Mauritanian Salafi recruits in armed groups in neighbouring Mali and Algeria.

After the 2008 coup the crackdown on Salafis' activity was relaxed, which set the ground for a government-sponsored dialogue initiative with Salafi prisoners in 2010. It was in this context that the Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz government convened a delegation of Mauritanian religious scholars, including Salafi ones that were released after two years of prison, to conduct a series of debates with the Salafi prisoners. The two scholars who took part in the dialogue initiative explained that after the initial PR setting (televised session, large delegation of scholars, large media coverage, etc.) in which the government publicised the initiative, the government was brought to understand that for such a dialogue to bear fruit a much more modest approach should be adopted.

The dialogue was then resumed with a very much smaller group of three scholars who are credible among Salafi Jihadis, not only in Mauritania, but also throughout the Sahel and MENA regions. Reflecting on the lessons learned from the 2010 dialogue initiative that led to the release of around 50 Salafi prisoners, the two scholars attending the meeting emphasised the following:

- Local scholars who are both credible in the eyes of the Jihadi groups and very versed in the doctrinal arguments that

the armed groups use to justify violence should conduct the dialogue.

- Scholars who lead the dialogue should approve the views held by Salafi prisoners which they themselves (the scholars) agree with, even if they are considered extreme or terrorist views by the government.

- The importance of follow-up measures in order to ensure the legal, social and economic integration framework for the prisoners released.

- Government guarantees.

- Encouraging political participation of Salafi groups has served as a means for some released Salafi prisoners to contribute to the construction of society through peaceful political means.

The success of the 2010 dialogue initiative in Mauritania had a marked impact on stability in Mauritanian. "There has been a marked halt in attacks on government targets and tourists, as well as Salafi Mauritanian youth joining armed groups in Mali after 2010, until the Serval French military intervention in 2013", observed an expert.

The 2010 dialogue is not without criticism, however. While there is no denial that the dialogue achieved a great deal in terms of violence prevention a participant considered that the debates /revisions in the prison did not reach the depth of the doctrinal justification for violence as a means of change. Another Mauritanian participant raised the issue of political participation by the Salafi current and questioned whether Participative Mauritanian Salafis have reconciled their position vis-à-vis democracy.

On the issue of whether the Mauritanian 2010 dialogue model could be replicated elsewhere, a Malian affairs specialist thought that the context should be taken into consideration: in Mali, for example, it is historical grievances rather than religious ones that underpin the violence. "While Islam was at the centre of the debate and set the agenda in 2012/13, the debate on Islam in north Mali has been silent in 2014," deplored this expert. There is urgent need to launch a dialogue space in north Mali, the expert advised.

The discussions then focused on ways to prevent violence in the Sahel region. Participants emphasized that no single approach could remedy violent extremism, and that a comprehensive approach should take the doctrinal religious debate on the legitimacy and effectiveness of violence, cultural setting, development, and national politics into consideration. A participant from Niger opined that attention should be given to the training of the cadre that manages the institutions that oversee the religious affairs such as the supreme Islamic councils in the countries of the region. A Chadian expert stressed the importance of the role of civil society in the construction of diversity and pluralism in the Sahel societies. Given the significant role women play in the social dynamics in the Sahel social fabric women leaders should be integrated in peace promotion strategies. A Mauritanian expert on comparative theology studies stressed that a vast intellectual work remains to be launched on the doctrinal justifications for the use of violence. "Is the nature of the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims peace or animosity?", is one of the topics that require careful study by religious scholars, the theology expert added. For him, "peace starts first in minds". Another Mauritanian participant raised the issue of the political legitimacy of the regimes in the region, and how perceived lack of legitimacy serves as a justification for the violent change and recruitment among the disfranchised youth. This reality, participants thought, would limit

the development projects of some local, regional, or Western bodies. There was consensus among participants that the security-driven approach that underpins some "de-radicalisation" initiatives is counter-productive.

The aim of this session was to deepen understanding of the place of the Izala movement within the religious landscape in Niger and north Nigeria. Three participants including two who are very close to the Izala Movement gave an inside insight about the origin, expansion and current interaction of the movement with other Islamic movements in Niger. Izala is a puritan Salafi religious movement that aims at "purifying the faith" and combating all forms of rituals that they blame the Sufi groups for adding to the practice of Islam. Izala as a movement was founded by Abu Bakar Mahmoud Agoumi, in north Nigeria in the 1970s. Contrary to what is believed Sheikh Agoumi did not study in Saudi Arabia nor in Sudan. A number of his students moved after few years to Zinder, Tahoua, Niamey, and Maradi in south Niger. In Zinder, Izala engaged in confrontations with Tijaniyya, Qadiriya, and Bahá'í Sufi groups. After studying in sheikh Agoumi's circles in Nigeria, Ismail Idriss Ben Zakaria, the founder of Izala in Niger, in 1978 managed to establish his movement in south Niger thanks to the homogenous ethnic composition on the communities along to border of the two countries when the Fula people and Hausa communites live.

Following the political opening and the adoption of a new constitution in early 1990s new religious NGOs were founded including the Nigerien Association for Spreading of Islam (NASI) in 1993. Malam Yahia Mohamed, who was one of the students of sheikh Agoumi, founded NASI. Due to intellectual divergences, NASI split into two associations: Ihiya Al Sunna (Revival of Sunna) led by MalaM Mohamed, (who was replaced by Sidi Shaib, after his death); and Alkitab wa Al Sunna (The Book and the Sunna) led by Omar Suleiman.

Having focused on preaching in the previous years both groups started in 2013 to get involved in charity work. The two groups tended to avoid confrontation with the government except in rare cases such as when the 2010 constitution amendment was passed with Article 3 stipulating the secular nature of the state, and Article 75 as a safeguard that protects Article 3 in any future revision of the constitution. There was also violent protest by Izala when the government imposed laws against early marriage for women and prohibited polygamy. It should be noted that on these constitutional and women's issues Izala cooperated with Sufi groups who largely have the same position on the matter. Another development in the interaction between Izala and Sufis is that since the former turned to charity work, the confrontation with the Sufis almost disappeared. The doctrinal and physical confrontation between the Salafi Izala and Sufis, however, revived among younger generation followers in both camps. A participant close to the Izala group said that it should be noted that it is the graduates of Islamic studies who studied in Egypt who are more confrontational with Sufis than the Izala graduates who studied in Saudi Arabia. This renewed clash prompted Sufis to found the Association of the Youth of Islam, led by Boubakar Koukri, in order to face up to Izala.

Izala faces a challenge from the growing Shia group in Niger and northern Nigeria as well. A branch of Izala in Maradia, south Niger, became Shiite after Ibrahim Yucob Zikzeki,

the leader of the group there turned to Shiism. A participant close to Izala thought that dialogue with the Shia group in Nigeria and Maradi is "very difficult" because the Shia started killing some Sunni scholars. Another participant highlighted the role of Iran in fuelling polarisation in Niger through its humanitarian aid that is coupled with Shiite preaching. For a Mauritanian expert of religiously inspired armed groups in the Sahel, the Zikzeki Shiism crisis inside Izala had far-reaching consequences. The Maradi crisis led to a split within Izala and to the emergence of an extremist wing that left Zikzeki's group and sought to confront what they believed to be a Shiite infiltration of Sunni lands.

The narratives on what happened next to the anti-Zikzeki group differ. Some experts think that Mohamed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, joined this branch of Izala before leaving it to form the Al Sunna Group for Preaching and Jihad, in Nigeria, in 2002. In the aftermath of the Nigerian government's bloody crackdown on Yusuf's Preaching and Jihad group in 2009, the group became radicalised and became known as Boko Haram. Other experts think that Yusuf was never a member of Izala.

IV. THE CONFLICT IN MALI AND ITS REGIONAL IMPACT

The discussion on the conflict in Mali reflected the diverse backgrounds and affiliations of participants. For one Malian participant three main factors led to the current crisis in Mail. First, there is disagreement on the interpretation of the peace accords following past rebellions in the northern region. Second, there is the entry of radical armed groups and vast logistics they established thanks to the ransoms they were paid. Third, there was the "unjustified war against Qaddafi." This participant thought

that the MNLA was a "pure creation of France;" and that the latter encouraged Tuareg soldiers in Qaddafi's brigades to return to northern Mali "in exchange for self-rule." This narrative was contrasted by the analysis of a Mauritanian Sahel affairs expert who thought that the conflict in Mali, between Bamako and the Azawad / north Mali armed groups in the north, should not be reduced to foreign intervention (religious extremist groups and France), but there are domestic factors that played a greater if not determinant role in the Malian armed conflict. For this Sahel expert, the Azawad / north Mali question dates back to the early 1960s. Besides, the undeniable marginalisation of the Azawad / north Mali territory in terms of development policies, power and wealth sharing are the result of local and geopolitical choices at the birth of the post-colonial state. In order to demonstrate the extent of underdevelopment in the Azawad / north Mali the Sahel expert explained that the Chadian troops who participated in the French Serval Operation found upon arrival in northern Mali that they should dig water wells to set up camp before they could even start their mission. According to the Mauritanian expert, those Azawad / north Mali historical claims, the legacy of rebellions, and underdevelopment intersected with the arrival of armed religious groups from the early 1990s following the coup in Algeria.

The discussion among participants then moved to the challenges facing initiatives to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. A Malian participant said that there are three challenges facing the negotiations in Algiers. First, civil society groups were or are side-lined from the negotiations process. Second, the crisis in Mali has become tribal, which poses a challenge for representation at the negotiation table. Third, there is the challenge of dealing with the disarmament,

demobilisation and re-integration (DDR) of armed youth. For another Malian affairs expert, "2012/13 was the year where the place of Islam in Mali was discussed. But in 2014 debate on Islam in north Mali has been silenced." The expert thought that was the main challenge at the heart of the current Malian crisis. "Even those in the south who reached out to the north are silenced and intimidated for having been close to armed groups of the north in 2012/13," concluded the expert.

The role of religious scholars and institutions in launching dialogue between Bamako and the north was mentioned by most participants. A Mauritanian expert highlighted the fact that the High Islamic Council in Mali undertook a successful mediation that resulted in the release of around 300 Malian prisoners of war held by the Azawad / north Mali armed groups in Gao and Timbuktu. For this expert the religious armed groups in the Azawad / north Mali recognise the doctrinal legitimacy of the HIC to the extent that they adopted the Council's sighting of the Ramadan crescent to start the fasting month. Another expert mentioned that the HIC did attempt a dialogue between the north and south but pressure on religious scholars to take sides and political positions at the peak of the crisis and the run-up to the military intervention had undermined their efforts. A Chadian scholar underscored the positive role the HIC could play in a peace initiative but advised that the Council's membership be enlarged to other Islamic doctrines to ensure a successful exchange with the faith-based armed groups in the north. A Malian participant insisted, "without the support of the government it is difficult for the HIC to deepen the dialogue."

The discussion then turned to exploring the HIC dialogue initiative. For a Malian affairs expert, there is need for a south/south exchange before arriving at a north/south dialogue. The dialogue should tackle three main issues: the role of scholars and madrassas; religious doctrinal revisions (*murajaat fiqhiya*) regarding the validity of violence; and the political status of armed groups in the post-conflict period. The expert thought that the issue of refugees (human rights violations) and the regional dimension of the conflict should be pondered for the future of reconciliation. On this last issue, another Chadian participant thought that there are lessons to be learned from the Chadian civil war. Experts agreed at the end that the lack of a settlement of the conflict in Mali on a solid basis (justice and reconciliation, etc.) would have a direct impact on radicalisation in the Sahel region.

Given the ethnic distribution of the Tuareg tribes in the Sahel region the conflict in Mali is a real concern in Niger as well. Two participants from Niger explained that Niger is the poorest country of the Sahel and Africa; and north Niger suffers from the same bad governance challenges of marginalisation, underdevelopment, and repression. The return of Tuareg combatants from Libya in 2011 prompted the government in Niamey to introduce hasty measures to prevent a Malian scenario. Those measures included the co-optation of potential leaders of the returnee combatants, and promises for development projects in Tuareg regions rich in oil and uranium such as in Azawagh and Ayorou. Both Tuareg participants advised that there is urgent need for a national unity strategy to be devised and implemented for the sake of sustainable stability. The strategy should address the issues of development and education, citizenship, justice and equality, recognition of ethnic cultural identities in an amended constitution.

CONCLUSION

The main objectives set for this workshop were firstly, to deepen knowledge and exchange analyses of lines of tension and conflicts in the Sahel region. Secondly, establishment of a platform of Sahel experts and actors in order to produce collectively shared understanding of the nature of tensions and conflicts in the Sahel region; as well as the identification of entry points for potential peace promotion initiatives. The workshop offered a useful space to identify potential members for the Sahel platform of experts. A number of entry points and potential peace initiatives were suggested, either country-specific or cross-regionally.

1. Mali: participants recommended the need to continue exchange in order to launch inter-community dialogue through religious scholars and the High Islamic Council.

2. Mauritania: Given the pressing nature of racial tensions and the threats to national unity, participants advised launching a dialogue space among Mauritanian stakeholders to address the issue of diversity and citizenship.

3. A cross-regional Sahel workshop focusing on understanding the Boko Haram movement was recommended. A participant thought that given its Islamic jurisprudence scholarly assets Mauritania is best positioned to launch a dialogue on doctrinal issues among scholars of the region and beyond for violence prevention.

4. In order to address the inter-Islamic group tensions (Salafi/Sufi, etc.), participants suggested country-specific training workshops and dialogue spaces that would conclude with a cross-regional conference of scholars for peace promotion.

ANNEX: TRAINING ON CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION CONCEPTS AND ANALYSIS TOOLS

In order to provide participants with the basics of conflict analysis and conflict transformation: a comprehensive presentation was delivered on the evolution of the theory of conflict and peace.

The presentation drew on both western literature and Muslim world tradition in matters of conflict and peace. This introductory part showed that Western theories of conflict and peace that had their origins and practice after the WWII and the Cold War can be mirrored in the Islamic tradition and the works of Muslim scholars as concepts are common but reflected through terminologies that are compatible with the cultural framework of each context. Most faith-based groups and actors believe peace promotion is a work of goodness and therefore, a moral and religious duty. This point was emphasized with references made to the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed's sayings. A third part on approaches to conflict transformation gave an inventory of the main and most approaches used by peace practitioners. The UN responses to conflict (peace-making, peace-enforcement, peace-keeping, and peace-building) were also discussed.

The presentation concluded with the reminder that the success of any intervention in any conflict is conditioned by a good analysis. Thus, two basic conflict analysis tools were presented: Conflict Tree and Conflict Mapping. Participants were then divided into two groups and assigned two conflict cases to work on.