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TURKISH ISLAMIC ACTORS IN AFRICA THE CASE STUDY OF HAYRAT VAKFI IN NIGER

Abdoulaye, Ibrahim Bachir, 2024

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African Studies
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TURKISH ISLAMIC ACTORS IN AFRICA

THE CASE STUDY OF HAYRAT VAKFI IN NIGER



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Abstract

In the last two decades, Turkish Islamic movements have extended their influence to Niger, a predominantly Muslim state. Diverse Turkish Islamic movements, such as the Nur Cemaati, Süleymancı Cemaati, and Erenköy Cemaati, are actively engaging in Islamic education through Qur'anic schools and education centers in Niger. This paper, specifically, delves into the activities of the Hayrat Vakfi (Hayrat Foundation), a branch of the Nur Cemaati (Nur movement). The central thesis of this paper asserts that the presence of Turkish Islamic actors has initiated a "silent transformation" within Niger's Islamic landscape. To comprehend this phenomenon, the paper addresses three key inquiries: (a) The internal socio-political and economic dynamics of Turkey that drove Turkish Islamic movements toward internationalization, (b) The expansion strategies employed by Hayrat Vakfi for the dissemination of its Islamic teachings, and (c) The implications of its presence in the transformation of Niger's Islamic landscape. Methodologically, this research employs a single case study approach with ethnographic and historical analysis. Existing scholarship on Turkish actors in Africa has predominantly focused on topics such as humanitarian aid, trade, and diplomacy. Therefore, this study aims to expand the scope of scholarly exploration to encompass other dimensions of Turkish presence in the African continent.

Keywords: Islam, Niger, Hayrat Vakfi, Nur movement, Turkey

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les mouvements Islamiques turcs ont étendu leur influence au Niger, un pays majoritairement musulman. Divers mouvements Islamiques turcs, tels que les Nur Cemaati, Süleymanci Cemaati et Erenköy Cemaati, s'engagent activement dans l'éducation Islamique par le biais d'écoles coraniques et de centres d'éducation au Niger. Cet article se penche plus particulièrement sur les activités de la Hayrat Vakfi (Fondation Hayrat), une branche du mouvement Nur (Nur Cemaati). La thèse centrale de cet article affirme que la présence d'acteurs Islamiques turcs a initié une « transformation silencieuse » dans le paysage Islamique du Niger. Pour comprendre ce phénomène, l'article aborde trois questions clés : (a) les dynamiques sociopolitiques et économiques internes de la Turquie qui ont poussé les mouvements Islamiques turcs à s'internationaliser, (b) les stratégies d'expansion employées par Hayrat Vakfi pour la diffusion de ses enseignements islamiques, et (c) les implications de sa présence dans la transformation du paysage Islamique nigérien. D'un point de vue méthodologique, cette recherche utilise une approche d'étude de cas unique avec une analyse ethnographique et historique. Les études existantes sur les acteurs turcs en Afrique se sont principalement concentrées sur des sujets tels que l'aide humanitaire, le commerce et la diplomatie. Par conséquent, cette étude vise à élargir le champ de l'exploration scientifique pour englober d'autres dimensions de la présence turque sur le continent africain.

Mots-clés: Islam, Niger, Hayrat Vakfi, Mouvement Nur, Turquie

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TURKISH ISLAMIC ACTORS IN AFRICA

THE CASE STUDY OF HAYRAT VAKFI IN NIGER

Abdoulaye, Ibrahim Bachir, 2024

1 Introduction

This paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of one of the Turkish Islamic movements active on the African continent. The paper provides a better understanding of the growing presence of Turkish Islamic actors in Africa beyond humanitarian interventions. The main objective of this study is to analyse the involvement of Turkish Islamic actors in education sector in Niger. The article analyses a specific case of Hayrat Vakfi which is active in the education field through its education center in Niamey. Hayrat Vakfi (Hayrat Foundation) is part of the Nur Cemaati (Nur movement), which is composed of several independent groups. One of the biggest groups of the Nur Cemaati is called *Yazıcılar* (writers)¹. The group has officially operated under the name Hayrat Vakfi since the 1980s. Hayrat Vakfi is financed by the group's members and sympathizers, and carries out its activities inside and outside Turkey in accordance with its objectives and religious orientations. In this paper I use the name Hayrat Vakfi instead of *Yazıcılar*, to avoid confusing the readers.

¹ The group is called *Yazıcılar*, which means writers in Turkish, due to its attachment to the original Risale-i Nur texts in Ottoman Turkish. The group opposed the translation and dissemination of the Risale-i Nur into modern Turkish, i.e. in the Latin alphabet, after the death of Said Nursi, the author of the Risale-i Nur Collection. The group is known for its promotion of and attachment to the Ottoman language, which is one of the focal points of Hayrat Vakfi's educational activities in Turkey.

This paper is organized into five sections. The first section provides a historical background. The second section articulates the state-Islamic movements relations. The third section examines the transformation of the Islamic sphere in Niger. The fourth section is the case study of operations of the Turkish religious actors in Niger. The last section is the conclusion.

To understand the presence of Turkish Islamic actors in Africa, it is necessary to have a thorough comprehension, not only of their practices, ideologies and historical background, but also of the national and international dynamics and context from which they have emerged. In recent years, several researches have been published on Turkish presence in Africa in general and Turkish humanitarian activities actions in particular (Tepeciklioğlu, 2021; Akgun & Ozkan, 2020; Bayar & Arpa, 2020; Binaté, 2019; Aras & Mohammed, 2019; Donelli, 2018, 2017; Langan, 2017; Angey-Sentuc & Molho, 2015; Siradag, 2015; Angey, 2014; Rudincová, 2014; Wheeler, 2011). Beyond humanitarianism, however, there are other activities of Turkish Islamic organizations which need attention (Angey, 2015; Guner, 2021). This attention is necessary partly because some of these actors have a long history dating back to the early days of the Turkish republic or even the Ottoman

Era while much of the research focuses on the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) era. These studies do not allow for a thorough understanding of the mentioned actors' presence in Africa, a presence that is likely to go beyond Turkish foreign policy under the AKP era. Rather, they give more credence to the AKP's foreign policy and reduce these actors to the government's soft power, without paying much attention to their practices on the ground and their own agendas. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of Islamic actors in Turkish foreign policy and their relationships with the Turkish state, it is crucial to adopt a broader historical perspective. This perspective should encompass the evolving dynamics between the Turkish state, religious institutions, and government interactions with Islamic actors, both within Turkey and on the international stage. Such an approach not only sheds light on the current involvement of Islamic actors in Turkish foreign policy but also illuminates their domestic and international agendas. Undoubtedly, there is a relationship between Turkish foreign policy under the AKP and the expansion of Turkish Islamic movements in Africa. The fact that NGOs and foundations linked to these movements cooperate with governmental organisations abroad in many projects demonstrates this relationship. But it does not necessarily mean that they all share the same agenda or the same objectives. The links between the Turkish state and these movements abroad may vary for each movement, depending on their respective relationships in the domestic context. In other words, it is the relationship at a national level that determines the relationship between the state and Islamic movements at an international level.

The presence of Turkish Islamic actors in Niger has a recent history. Literature on the history of Turkish presence in the country is still lacking. According to information gathered during my fieldwork in Turkey and Niger,² these actors arrived in Niger in the early 2000s. It is reported that

² I have conducted fieldwork for a period of 4 months in Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara and Bursa) and Niger (Niamey, Dosso, Tillabery and Agadez) from April to July 2021.

the Gülen movement³ and the Süleymancı Cemaati⁴ were among the first to settle in Niamey with the opening of their schools around 2005. Since the opening of the Turkish diplomatic mission in Niger, followed by the official visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister at the time, in 2013, relations between the two countries have intensified. Today, several small and large Turkish companies are actively present in Niger in several fields like construction, agriculture, industry, restaurants, import-export, and so on. In the humanitarian field, several Turkish NGOs have opened local branches in Niger, while others are periodically active in the country. In the field of education, the Turkish government and Turkish NGOs have been offering scholarships to Nigerien students for nearly 15 years. Today, a good number of Nigeriens who have graduated from Turkey or who have learned the language work as interpreters, administrators and so on in Turkish companies and organisations active in Niger like Summa company, Maarif Foundation and so on. Some Turkish actors focus more on education. For example, the Turkish government, through its Maarif Foundation, has schools in Niamey from primary to secondary level. Aziz Mahmud Hudayi Vakfi, affiliated with Erenköy Cemaati, has also opened a school, and Hayrat Vakfi and Süleymancı Cemaati have education centers. They all contribute in spreading the Turkish language even if they do not work in coordination on the ground.

2 The Trajectories of Islamic Movements in Turkey: From Confrontation to Alliance

Transitioning from a conflictual to a collaborative relationship with the state, Turkish Islamic movements have gained influence at a national level which has helped their international expansion. Historically, the relationship between Islamic movements and the state goes back to the early era of the republic, when the father of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, adopted a secular policy that banned religious activities or put them under the control of the state. The secular policy of the early republic era created frustration and resistance among Islamic actors. This situation changed with the arrival of the Demokrat Parti (Democrat Party [DP]) to power in 1950 after the first democratic elections. DP allowed Islamic movements to become visible and operate legally. It was during this time that Islamists also became involved in politics in Turkey for the first time (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008).

But this process of opening up was interrupted by the 1960 coup d'état, which led to a crackdown. During this period, further restrictions were imposed in the Islamic sphere. For example, only graduates of official Imam Hatip high schools and theology (ilahiyat) faculties of state universities could be employed in the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a measure that fractured some of the Islamic movements that had been filling this void since the DP had come to power. After the

³ The Gülen movement is an Islamic network that became internationalized after the 1990s with the support of the Turkish state. Founded by Fethullah Gülen in the late 1960s, the movement had numerous schools around the world, including in African countries such as Niger. After being accused of being behind the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, the movement was declared a terrorist organization by the Turkish state.

⁴ The Süleymancı Cemaati takes its name from its founder, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959). It focuses on spreading its founder's teachings throughout the world. It is active in Europe among the Turkish diaspora, and has classical Islamic schools, notably in Central Asia and Africa.

army's intervention in 1971, all Quranic schools opened by such Islamic movements were transferred to the Diyanet (Çakır, 2017).

In the midst of a political crisis and a period of violence arising from the ideological conflict between socialists, leftists, Islamists, ultranationalists, and so on, the army intervened again in 1980. The military regime installed after the coup d'état introduced several reforms, especially in the relations between the state and religion and between the state and Islamic movements. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis – *Türk-İslam Sentezi*⁵ – (Oprea, 2014) was adopted by the military junta as a policy of the state toward religion. This shift in state policy towards religion can be interpreted as an effort by the state to reform its Kemalist ideology. But some measures like the *Kamuda Kılık Kıyafet Yönetmeliği* (Public Dress Code Regulation) taken by the military regime, banning the wearing of headscarves (*başörtü*) in public administrations, which aroused great anger and a feeling of marginalisation and injustice in conservative people.

From 1960 to 1983, the relationship between Islamic movements and the state could be considered as a conflictual one because of the restrictions imposed on these movements and the different kinds of repression they faced. The situation changed when Turgut Özal won the elections organised by the military regime in 1983. Özal had an open policy regarding Islamic movements and adopted a liberal approach that helped them gain public visibility and economic power. They became involved in civil society, education, media and business sectors. With the support of the policy makers, some movements started expanding their influence abroad. The Gülen movement is one of these movements that took advantage of this support to expand its movement beyond Turkey's borders (Angey-Sentuc, 2015).

But it was with the arrival of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) to power in 2002 that a golden age opened up for the Islamic movements, which gained more influence in the country and expanded their networks abroad. The AKP offers political protection and economic opportunities to these Islamic movements in exchange for public and electoral support. This policy of the AKP, which has a globalist vision, described as neo-Ottoman, intends to repair the errors of the past by putting an end to prohibitions such as the wearing of headscarves, and by supporting and opening up the public space to Islamic movements. Because the state is no longer the main adversary, the Islamic movements are looking outward to extend their reach into other Muslim societies. At the same time, the Turkish state, which is looking for new markets for its emerging companies, sees these movements as an efficient and less costly way to support its policy of opening up its economy to the so-called "third world" and to extend Turkey's political and cultural influence in the long term.

Today, much of Turkey's humanitarian aid comes from NGOs and foundations affiliated with the Islamic movements that dominate this sector in Turkey. These movements follow their own agendas which do not necessarily align with the state's foreign policy. But there is no doubt about their contribution directly or indirectly to the expansion of Turkey's influence. Often, the state tries to keep these Islamic movements under control, and this can sometimes create conflict of

⁵ Turkish-Islamic synthesis is a mixture of Sunni Islam and Turkish nationalism I would rather describe it as a political programme or doctrine, claiming that there is a close connection between Turkish national identity and Islam.

interest between the two. The Islamic movements also use their strength to influence the state in their favor through political arrangements and lobbying or by infiltrating state institutions (placing their disciples or sympathisers in key positions to favour them or protect their interests). This creates a kind of competition between the movements themselves in the race to influence the state. The conflict between the Gülen movement and the Turkish state illustrated the nature of the relationship that the state has with Islamic movements. The Gülen movement, which had enjoyed the support of the AKP, was declared a terrorist group by the latter after being accused of being responsible for the 2016 coup attempt. The state closed or recovered 35 private hospitals, 109 student residences, 104 foundations, 1125 associations, 15 private universities and 19 trade unions affiliated with the Gülen movement (Karacaoğlu & Saydam, 2016). The Turkish government is still trying to reclaim the schools affiliated with the movement in several countries through its Maarif Foundation (Angey, 2018). This situation, which has significantly weakened the Gülen movement, has created new opportunities for some Islamic movements that are rushing to fill the void left by the Gülen movement.

In sum, the opening of Islamic movements to the world marks, in a way, the end of the internal ideological conflict between the profoundly secular state and Islamic movements. Furthermore, the support of the former Prime Ministers Adnan Menderes, Turgut Özal and Necmettin Erbakan, and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for Islamic movements has contributed greatly to the transformation of state-Islamic movements relations. It was under the rule of these leaders that Islamic movements gained the political, economic, and social strength that pushed them toward globalist ambitions. Since then, Islamic movements have gradually become allies of the state, especially in foreign policy. Leaving aside their expansion into the Turkish diaspora in Europe, which began in the late 1960s, the transformation of Turkish Islamic movements from local to international movements began in the early 1990s, just after the end of the Soviet Union. They first focused on the new Turkish republics of Central Asia and the Balkans with the support of the state. In the 2000s, they began to focus on Africa, this time also with state support.

3 A Silent Transformation in the Islamic Sphere in Niger

In Niger the Qadiriyya dominated the Islamic sphere before the Tijaniyyah took over at the end of the 19th century. But the particularity of these two Sufi orders is that they are all of Maliki obedience (madhhab). This facilitated cohabitation and avoided any fundamental theological confrontation. From the 1990s, the Salafi-Wahhabi trend (locally called Izala) began to challenge the Sufi orders' authority that had been dominant until then. Despite the heated debates and some social unrest that the arrival of Salafism initially caused, it is now an integral part of the Nigerien society (Sounaye, 2016). Nonetheless, the theological struggle is still going on between the Sufi orders and the Salafi movements through preaching in public spaces, mosques and media such as radio and television. This suggests that the establishment of Turkish Islamic actors, rooted in the Sufi tradition, in Niger will probably face criticism from Salafist movements. But for now, Turkish actors involved in Islamic education have not yet attracted attention or criticism, neither they are a subject of discussion in the public space.

Various Turkish Islamic movements present in Niger in the field of Islamic education invest financial and human resources to teach an "Islam" (here, I mean different religious practices and different madhab and aqida) that is relatively new to Nigerien society in terms of certain practices

as well as madhhab and aqida. Today, despite the rise of the salafist movement, Nigerien society is still strongly rooted in the Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyya traditions based on the Maliki madhhab and Ash'ari school. The Islamic doctrines of these Turkish Islamic movements (mostly affiliated or influenced by Nakshbandiyya), which are of Hanafi obedience and Maturidi school are little known in Nigerien society. Although they focus more on Islamic education, these actors are seen by many Nigeriens as humanitarian NGOs because of their humanitarian activities during Tabaski/Kurbani (Eid al-Adha/Feast of Sacrifice) or Ramadan. Also, due to the growing number of Turkish NGOs, people don't make a distinction and simply identify them as Turkish humanitarian NGOs. These factors camouflage the focus on Islamic education by many of these actors. This is what has sparked the focus of this work, which attempts to understand and analyse the religious-educational activities of some of these actors.

In this article, I argue that a "silent transformation" is taking place in the Nigerien Islamic domain with the introduction of new Islamic interpretations and doctrines through various forms of Islamic education applied by Turkish Islamic actors. I call it a "silent transformation" because of its discrete and non-confrontational character, avoiding any confrontation, and also because it has not yet provoked much reaction from the Nigerien society. This silent transformation is a form of "religious engineering" (Spies & Schrode, 2020). In this perspective, Turkish Islamic actors are "religious engineers" who intend to transform Nigerien society through their religious-educational projects, which they believe are beneficial for a positive transformation of a society.

In the following paragraphs, I discuss what is the possible impact of Turkish Islamic movements in Niger from a social transformation perspective? What methods and strategies do these movements adopt to spread their Islamic teaching? How do Turkish Islamic movements attempt to shape the Islamic field in Niger?

To answer these questions, I have taken a historical and contextual approach, drawing on empirical data collected during my fieldwork in Niger and Turkey from April to July 2021. Accessing and identifying individuals affiliated with Hayrat Vakfi in Niger was challenging for me for various reasons. One reason is that Hayrat Vakfi is still not well-known in Niger because it is composed of a small circle of friends and acquaintances who do not identify themselves publically as members of Hayrat Vakfi or the Nur movement. But I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with a former local representative of the movement in Niger. In addition to this interview, I also drew on my own observations during my stay in Niger and Turkey for fieldwork in 2021.

4 Case Study: Spreading Risale-i Nur in Niger

4.1 Hayrat Vakfi

As I mentioned earlier in this article, I focus on Hayrat Vakfi which is one of the biggest groups of the Nur movement. There are three reasons for this choice: The first reason is that Hayrat Vakfi is one of the most active and well-established Turkish Islamic movements in Africa. The second reason is Hayrat Vakfi's involvement in educational activities that aim to spread the Risale-i Nur

Collection⁶ in Africa. The third reason is the group's proximity to the AKP government, which illustrates the relationship between the state and Islamic actors in Turkey today. Hayrat Vakfi officially supports the AKP during elections in Turkey. In the last elections in 2019, Hayrat Vakfi published an announcement on its official website calling all the "Risale-i Nur Talebeleri" ("students of Risale-i Nur") to vote for AKP and its coalition.⁷ Hayrat Vakfi benefits from government support, especially in the field of education. For example, a protocol agreement has been signed between Hayrat Vakfi and the Turkish Ministry of Education for the teaching of the Ottoman language (Osmanlıca) in public schools in Turkey.⁸

In the following, the focus is particularly on the educational activities of Hayrat Vakfi in Niger.

Hayrat Vakfi arrived in Niger around 2010 from Sudan, where the group was established in the early 2000s. Their activities are centered on sohbet/ders⁹ in dersane (study centers) which are places generally open to all categories of people of the same gender without any age consideration. Yet, a strict and disciplined program is applied for the young students who live in the dersane. This program aims at the intellectual, spiritual and moral training of the young people along with their academic studies. It is hoped that these students become familiar with Nisale-i Nur Collection and also learn about Said Nursi, the author of Risale-i Nur Collection as an example and model. Hayrat Vakfi is not interested in establishing formal schools or large public training centers. Its main goal is spread the Risale-i Nur Collection that they translated into many languages. Believing in the power of attraction and relevance of Risale-i Nur, for Hayrat Vakfi as well as other groups, all a disciple or follower has to do is to invite people to read Risale-i Nur in a dersane or at home or to share Risale-i Nur books with interested people. The disciples of the Nur movement are involved in proselytizing through this method. Creating new friendships by inviting people for dinner or tea are among the applied strategies to attract potential readers. Apart from the associations that aim to facilitate the activities of the movement, there is no formal membership system to become a disciple (Risale-i Nur Talebesi/Risale-i Nur student) of the movement. It is sufficient to be a regular sohbet participant and to follow the spiritual guidelines of Risale-i Nur.

According to my investigation, there are a few dersane in Niger in the city of Niamey belonging to the Nur movement groups. It is difficult to identify their number and the group to which they are affiliated due to the nature of their activities. Their reading activities are generally kept private from the public eye. The group of Hayrat Vakfi that I identified in Niamey is represented by a group

⁶ The Risale-i Nur collection consists of religious books written by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), a Turkish Islamic scholar and founder of the Nur movement.

⁷ "31 Mart Beka Seçiminde Ak Parti'yi Ve Cumhur İttifakını Destekliyoruz". Available online: <https://hayratvakfi.org/31-mart-beka-seciminde-ak-partiyi-ve-cumhur-ittifakini-destekliyoruz/> (accessed on 05 November 2022).

⁸ "Genel Müdürlüğümüz ile Hayrat Vakfı Arasında Eğitimde İş Birliği Protokolü İmzalandı". Available online: <https://ogm.meb.gov.tr/www/genel-mudurlugumuz-ile-hayrat-vakfi-arasinda-egitimde-is-birligi-protokolu-imzalandi/icerik/693> (accessed on 5 November 2022).

⁹ Sohbet literally means conversation or discussion in the Turkish language. But traditionally, many Islamic groups in Turkey use the term in the sense of preaching or reading meetings. The term ders, which means teaching, lesson, or lecture, is also used as a synonym for sohbet.

of young Nigeriens who studied in Sudan where they frequented the movement during their studies. One of them, who was trained in Turkey, returned to Niger to lead the first dersbane funded by Hayrat Vakfi. He selected a dozen students from middle school to high school who live in the dersbane to follow the Nur movement's model and teaching.

4.2 The Struggle of the Nur Movement in Niger

Ali¹⁰, a Nigerien young man, is the founding member of Al-Nur, a local NGO which works in partnership with Hayrat Vakfi in Niger. Ali said that he first met Hayrat Vakfi around 2006 when he was a student at the International University of Africa in Sudan. He got to know Turkish students during his first year at the university. They invited him to their home several times but their relationship strengthened when the Turkish Students' Association (supported by Hayrat Vakfi) started supporting the activities of the African Students' Association. Ali explained that at that time Turkey was not well-known but people had sympathy towards the country because of its economic emergence which is seen as a model in the Muslim world. He said that at the beginning he was a bit skeptical about the Hayrat Vakfi because he did not understand their *manhaj* and *aqida* (doctrine and belief). It was after he had met some Sudanese people that he already knew in Dersbane, reading Risale-i Nur, that he became interested, too. That is how he started to frequent the dersbane regularly until they proposed that he stayed there with them. He lived in the dersbane for one year before going to Turkey for training on the recommendation of the movement. Once in Turkey, Ali, who already had his master's degree in Islamic studies, intended to continue his doctorate studies but he changed his mind for private reasons to return to Niger after less than a year of stay in Istanbul. During his stay, he had learned Turkish and the Ottoman language and became familiar with the Risale-i Nur and the Nur movement's system. After returning to Niger, the members of Hayrat Vakfi invited him to collaborate with the movement by organising Risale-i Nur reading activities. Before that, one of his friends, who also did his studies in Sudan, had started organizing reading programs of Risale-i Nur in Niger, but he gave up because of some problems he faced with the movement. The movement expected Ali to resume these activities. Ali accepted, but under some conditions, without giving further details. Ali told me that he explained to them his fears about the differences between the cultural and Islamic practices and the reactions this might provoke among his fellow Nigeriens.

Ali used to send pictures of the reading activities he organised to the Hayrat Vakfi with whom he accepted to collaborate and represent. It was after the visit of one of the Hayrat Vakfi members to Niger that the decision to open a dersbane in Niamey was taken. Ali, who was appointed as the head of the newly opened dersbane, tried to apply the same system of dersbane he had learnt in Turkey. After Ali had set up the dersbane, the movement sent a Turkish national, who had lived in Sudan before, to supervise the dersbane program in Niamey for more than a year before leaving for another African country. Dozens of high school students are selected to live in this dersbane after their parents have signed a consent document that contains all the conditions and rules applied in the dersbane. Students are provided with free food and lodging, but they do not receive any allowances, except for occasional assistance. Their parents pay their school fees.

¹⁰ The name has been changed for anonymity.

The students who live in the dersbane get up early in the morning for the Fajir prayer, and right after the prayer they make *tasbih* and *azkar*¹¹ which takes about 30 minutes according to the method of the Nur movement. During the day, the students are at school. When they come back, they memorise the Quran and *azkar* after the Asr prayer. The collective reading of Risale-i Nur is done between the Magrip and Isha prayers. The students start reviewing their school lessons only after the Isha prayer. Ali explained that he encountered discipline problems among the students. Some students who cannot handle the expected discipline leave the dersbane, but this is not common. Ali added that they have a small number of students who do not live in the dersbane but participate regularly in their program, nevertheless.

Ali has also gathered mostly young people who have studied in Sudan and have frequented or already knew the Nur Movement from Sudan. They regularly organise *sohbet/ders* in the dersbane where they read and discuss the Risale-i Nur usually in the Arabic translation. They also organise activities like conference of Risale-i Nur on the occasion of the death anniversary of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi or the founder of the Hayrat Vakfi, Ahmet Husrev Altınbaşak, in some private schools in Niamey. Husrev Altınbaşak is considered by his followers as the '*vekil*' (representative/replacant) of Said Nursi. But Ali specified that:

"We do not approach certain schools close to Salafism. They will never accept that we organise this kind of event in their universities. They only accept Salafi people like them. It is schools close to Sufi communities or Muslim brothers who are open to everyone. They openly accept us."

In 2017, Ali and his group of Risale-i Nur readers organised a conference in collaboration with Elhadj Mahmoud Kaat International University in Niamey on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of Said Nursi.¹²

After four years of activities, Ali decided to leave the movement. But he is still in charge of the NGO Al-Nur which organises humanitarian activities usually twice a year, during the feast of Tabaski/Kurban (Eid al-Adha/Feast of Sacrifice) and the month of Ramadan, both financed by Hayrat Vakfi. Ali, who later got married and has children, said that he has more responsibilities now, just as his other comrades. This is why they do not have time like before to follow the program of the Nur movement as their partner Hayrat Vakfi would like. The dersbane that Ali opened is still active but he is not involved in dersbane management anymore. Ali, who was coordinating all the activities, entrusted the management of the dersbane to one of his friends with the agreement of the Hayrat Vakfi. According to Ali, however, the fact that his friend has not been trained in Turkey and does not speak Turkish is a handicap that negatively affects the smooth running of the dersbane program.

¹¹ Tasbih and azkar are spiritual practices (duas) that Muslim believers do after the prayer or at specific times.

¹² "Hayrat Vakfi". Available online: <https://hayratvakfi.org/nijerde-bediuzzaman-sempozyumu/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).

Ali said that he always had some disagreements with the Nur movement because of the *madhhab* and *aqida* (*fiqh* and *itiquad*) difference.¹³ But he said that he can tolerate that. He also explained that he does not share the idea of reading only Risale-i Nur as the disciples of the Nur movement do. For him, knowledge is vast and cannot be limited to the books of one scholar. But he still admires Risale-i Nur in these words: "I was very impressed by Risale-i Nur. It is very informative, very beautiful and very attractive. There is a lot of very beneficial knowledge. As far as 'akida' is concerned, there was nothing contrary to our akida."

Ali explained his motivation to teach people Risale-i Nur in Niger: "If people learn Risale-i Nur, their ideas and world view will change. Their social relationship, their knowledge will improve and they will be more diligent." But he added that in spite of all these positive aspects, he still feels that there are some aspects about the Nur movement he does not know yet, especially regarding the idea of "*keramet*" (A person who performs miracles because of his closeness to God. "Keramet" does actually not stand for a person, but is to be translated with "miracle") performed by Said Nursi or the sanctity that Nur movement's followers attribute to Said Nursi and Risale-i Nur. Ali explained that he had this impression when he was in Turkey but was never able to confirm it. He emphasized that venerating too much Said Nursi conflicts with his own religious ideas.

Ali, who encountered difficulties at the beginning of his activities, mentioned that he faced criticism from some local people who, according to him, did not understand his activities. For example, he said: "Some people were suspicious about us because they thought we had brought a new 'akida' (belief) to Niger." He explained that:

The fact that we pray at home (in the *dershane*), people criticized us because we don't go to the mosque. Some people have even accused us of belonging to certain groups that are very misguided in society. We have closed our eyes because we are sure of ourselves and we have nothing to blame ourselves for. We know what we are doing and there is nothing contrary to Islam. Islam does not forbid praying in group at home.

Ali told me that he remembered one day during one of their conferences in a university, a participant criticised them because of the picture of Said Nursi they used. The person accused them by not giving value to local scholars like Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio¹⁴. Ali said that he reacted by explaining that: "For us it is the ideas that are important and not the people or their origins." Adding to this answer, Ali explained: "I never had the feeling of being used in these activities. I have tried to transmit the knowledge that I believe to be beneficial and relevant to my people. Where it comes from and what people say about it doesn't matter to me." Insisting that he values his freedom, Ali said he does not blindly follow the Nur movement and does not consider himself a disciple of the latter because for him, it is necessary to keep his freedom.

¹³ Ali says that he knew from the beginning that they are Hanafi (a Sunni madhhab) but it is from his research that he found out later that Nur movement is from Maturidiyya (a Sunni school of Islamic theology) which is different from Ash'ari, a dominant Sunni school of Islamic theology in Niger.

¹⁴ Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817) was an Islamic scholar and the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa which spanned parts of present-day Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon.

I have always considered what I do as activities, nothing else. When I was a student, I was passionate about organising activities. I was active in student associations at the university. That's how I see these activities, too. For me the freedom to do what I want is very important. Even here, in Niger, I have never been a disciple of *Tijaniyyah* or *Izala*. I take their positive side and reject their negative side. Ali said.

Regarding the future of the Nur movement in Niger, Ali is not optimistic. Stressing that Hayrat Vakfi wants to spread *Risale-i Nur* around the world, he believes that new Islamic movements do not have much chance of taking root in Niger because young people are no longer interested in Islamic partisanship. "It is difficult for new Islamic movements to take root in Niger because the times have changed. Already, people are moving away from tariqas and Islamic groups. That's why I think the new Islamic movements are late in Niger" he added.

5 Conclusion

For several decades, the Nigerien Islamic field has known many new Islamic movements coming from different horizons, mainly from Arab countries (such as the Salafi movement). In recent years, Islamic movements from Turkey have also shown interest in Niger. Hayrat Vakfi is one of these movements that opened an education centre to spread the Risale-i Nur Collection (its main Islamic education books). Sudan, where Hayrat Vakfi has established itself, has been the gateway to Africa from where it has expanded its network through African students coming from different countries to study in Sudanese universities, especially the International University of Africa, which hosts thousands of African students. Despite the fact that it enjoys the political support of the Turkish ruling party, Hayrat Vakfi has its own agenda which is the basis of its creation. This agenda is the expansion dissemination of Risale-i Nur which has been translated into several languages such as Arabic, French and English. In Niger, the Risale-i Nur book series is read in Arabic because the movement is led by Nigerien students who graduated in Sudan and whose first language of study is Arabic. This has ensured that the movement always has an Arabic-speaking audience. In this context, the mission that Hayrat Vakfi had given to Ali was to establish the dersbane system as it is practised in Turkey. The students of the colleges and high schools who live in the dersbane follow an Islamic training program according to the teachings of Nur movement. These students are mostly from poor families and parents/guardians who want their children to succeed in school for a better future. In a country where many people live on less than a dollar a day, having this kind of support may attract many families to entrust their children to Islamic movements without caring about their identity or the content of the Islamic training taught to their children.

In the case of Ali's dersbane, the parents sign a document giving their consent for their children to stay in the dersbane even though it is difficult for most of them to know about Hayrat Vakfi and its Islamic orientations. But for most parents, it is enough to simply know that they are Muslims. Furthermore, the fact that the dersbane is managed by Nigeriens facilitates contact with parents.

Given all the initiatives taken by Hayrat Vakfi in Niger, it is clear that its long-term agenda is to establish local branches of the movement led by local people. Since education is one of the means of social transformation, the dersbane system can be interpreted as a mechanism to contribute to social change as a long-term process. In Niger, where plenty of Islamic movements and currents are competing for ground, the arrival of the Nur movement adds to this competition, even if its presence is very limited and does not yet attract the attention of the general public. But this does not mean that the movement's efforts to establish itself are not worth considering. With this movement, a silent transformation is taking place in the Nigerien Islamic sphere. By silent transformation, I mean a process of transformation that does not attract much attention or public debate. It is a process of any effort that consciously aims at the social transformation of a community or society but using a softer approach by avoiding all kind of confrontation.

The introduction of Risale-i Nur in Niger, which is now regularly read by a group of young people following the teaching method of the Nur Movement, marks a new process of religious engineering (Spies & Schrode, 2020) in the country. Even if for the moment these young people do not identify themselves as "*Risale-i Nur Talebeleri*" (students of the Risale-i Nur), the students of middle

schools and high schools that they train in the dersshane are maybe hoped to become future "Risale-i Nur Talebeleri" or at least more influenced by Risale-i Nur than their elders.

Despite Ali's initial reluctance and his assertions to leave the movement, it should be noted that he continues to cooperate with the movement in the humanitarian field through his NGO, under whose name he opened the dersshane in Niamey. This suggests a strategic approach on the part of the movement to retain individuals like Ali, even when there is no complete ideological alignment. The envisioned religious engineering process is a long-term process that might take years, even generations. But it will depend a lot on the determination and commitment of the movement to continue and invest more in its expansion project. The Turkish government's diplomatic, bureaucratic, political, and economic support for these actors has contributed greatly to this expansion. From this perspective, any change in Turkish state policy toward Islamic actors can affect the presence of these actors abroad.

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