NEWS SITUATION TRACKING – THE GAMBIA

RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN THE GAMBIA FOLLOWING INFLAMMATORY SERMON

Location: THE GAMBIA

Issue: Assessment of inter-religious tensions between Sunni and Mouride communities in The Gambia and potential regional implications.

Date: August – September, 2025

COMMUNITY PROFILING	CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS	INCIDENT PROFILING
Population: The Gambia has a population of over 2.8 million.[1] **Basic Demography and Geography of Hotspots:** The Gambia shares land borders with the Republic of Senegal. The country has 8 Local Government/Administrative Areas. **Ethnicity:** The Gambia has over 10 ethnic groups with Mandinka, Fula, Wolof in the majority. Community Profiling: The Gambia, a predominantly Sunni Muslim nation (about 90%), maintains deep historical, cultural and religious ties with Senegal. Yet, theological differences over the Mouride veneration of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba and the Magal de Touba celebration remain a latent fault	**Direct Actors:** Imam Abdul Karim Kuyateh **Affected Persons:** Gambians Sunni Muslims, Mouride communities in The Gambia and Senegal. **Interested Actors:** The Government of The Gambia, Civil Society Organisations, Sunni Muslims, Sunni Mouride communities in Senegal and The Gambia, The Government of Senegal, Ministry of Lands, Regional Government and Religious Affairs, Supreme Islamic Council and media.	Gambia, a predominantly Sunni Muslim nation (about 90%), maintains deep historical, cultural and religious ties with Senegal. A key divergence is the veneration of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, founder of the Mouride Sufi order, and the celebration of the *Magal de Touba*[3] in Senegal. Many mainstream Gambian Sunni scholars and adherents, while respecting the Mouride brotherhood, maintain a theological position that emphasizes the direct worship of Allah without intermediaries, a core tenet of their Islamic interpretation. This underlying theological difference, often dormant, is a persistent fault line that can be easily activated by inflammatory rhetoric. On August 29, 2025, Imam Abdul Kareem Kuyateh delivered a sermon at the Imam Malick Mosque in Kanifing that inflamed long-standing theological divisions between Sunni and Mouride communities. In his remarks, Imam Kuyateh denounced the Magal de Touba, as "un-Islamic" and declared that attendees "will go to hell"[4], and controversially argued that while the sins of nightclub goers could be forgiven, participation in the Magal de Touba constituted shirk – associating partners with Allah - which he described as an unforgivable act. The sermon circulated widely on social media, amplifying its divisive effect. The incident mobilized Mourides in both The Gambia and Senegal, resulting in protests in key urban centres of Banjul and Serrekunda. Although clashes with counter-protesters and police were minimal, underscored the vulnerability of The Gambia's fragile inter-religious balance. . The mobilization also highlighted the transnational ties of

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[1] Gambia Bureau of Statistics

[3] Grand Magal de Touba/ The Grand Magal in touba: A religious festival of the Mouride Brotherhood of Senegal

[4] Link to the Video. https://youtu.be/04OcWvSajzw Abdul Kareem Kuyateh -who ignited widespread controversy, Magal of Touba is haram.

line. This divide was reignited on August 29, 2025.

In 2019, several Imams, including Imam Abdoulie Fatty, openly criticised other denominations and sects, often using provocative language against Ahmadiyya community, and some occassions, Christains.

The WANEP NEWS documented over five (5) inflammatory incidents in recent years.[2]

Mouride networks and their readiness to defend their religious identity and beliefs across borders.

To mitigate risks, The Gambia Police Force summoned Imam Kuyateh for questioning[5], signalling a firm law-and-order approach. In addition, the Ministry of Lands, Regional Government and Religious Affairs reinforced this approach with a public statement that condemned the inflammatory remarks while emphasizing reconciliation. The ministry confirmed that Imam Kuyateh admitted his mistake, repented, and apologised, and further reassured the Mouride community of its valued role within the broader Muslim Ummah. Meanwhile, the government warned that any future actions threatening public peace would attract strict disciplinary measures, balancing accountability with efforts to restore calm.

The official apology has temporarily de-escalated public protests, but the sermon's digital footprint remains active. Social media continues to fuel heated debates, mutual recriminations, and toxic rhetoric, leaving the situation tense and volatile. The incident poses immediate risks to interfaith harmony, social cohesion, and national stability, while also straining regional relations between The Gambia and Senegal.

RISK ANALYSIS

- The inflammatory sermon exposes strategic fault lines in Gambian society, where religious harmony is central to peace and security. . This incident erodes the trust and informal social contracts that have historically fostered peaceful coexistence, raising the possibility of intra-community violence, targeted attacks on Gambian Mourides, and retaliatory actions against Imam Kuyateh's followers. Such developments could destabilize harmony within mixed communities and undermine intercommunal relations.
- Politically, the government's response is crucial to maintaining legitimacy. A perceived failure— whether through heavy-handed action or ineffective appeasement—could weaken state authority and test its capacity to uphold secular governance while protecting religious minorities. This fragile balance highlights the urgency of adopting inclusive crisis management that combines dialogue, mediation, and regional cooperation.
- The economic and digital dimensions further compound the threat. Escalating tensions would negatively disrupt markets, tourism, and cross-border trade, undermining livelihoods across both The Gambia and Senegal.
- Meanwhile, social media platforms continues to amplify the conflict by spreading misinformation, hate speech, and polarizing narratives, which intensify mobilization and deepen divides. If unaddressed, these dynamics could evolve from an isolated sermon into a multi-layered crisis affecting governance, community resilience, and regional stability. It risks normalizing religious intolerance,

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[2] news.wanepsystems.net

[5] The Standard Newspaper (2025). Imam Kuyateh Gets Massive Solidarity At Police Station. Available at: https://standard.gm/imam-kuyateh-gets-massive-solidarity-at-police-station/ (Accessed September 1, 2025).

destabilizing The Gambia's fragile democracy, and undermining broader ECOWAS peace and security frameworks.

- The porous nature of The Gambia-Senegal border and the fluidity of social and religious identities makes it unlikely that this incident will remain contained within national boundaries. In Senegal, where Mouridism is a central pillar of religious and national identity, the rhetoric is likely to be perceived as a direct provocation, prompting Dakar to exert diplomatic pressure on Banjul for decisive action. At the community level, Senegalese Mourides may feel obliged to defend their Gambian counterparts, heightening the risk of cross-border mobilization. Such dynamics could easily transform a domestic dispute into a transnational conflict with the potential to destabilize both countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government of The Gambia should convene a robust dialogue initiative in collaboration with the Supreme Islamic Council, senior Mouride leadership from both The Gambia and Senegal, and state representatives, to reaffirm the shared religious and cultural bonds between the two nations.

- Public communication campaigns that highlight Gambian-Senegalese brotherhood, through media messaging and cultural activities, can reinforce unity over division. To strengthen this effort, the government, working with civil society and religious leaders, should launch a strategic communication initiative that features respected scholars promoting tolerance and unity. Simultaneously, authorities should engage social media companies to identify, flag, and limit the spread of incendiary content, while safeguarding legitimate freedom of expression.

- Recognizing the cross-border nature of the crisis, The Gambia must engage Senegal through diplomatic channels to reassure Dakar of its commitment to peace and mutual respect. Joint efforts should include coordinated monitoring of potential spillover effects and cooperative strategies to contain them. Additionally, briefing ECOWAS and other regional bodies will help secure political and technical support, demonstrating that The Gambia is managing the crisis responsibly while situating the issue within the broader regional framework of peace and security.

- The Gambian authorities should strengthen oversight of online platforms and community activities for early warning signals of retaliatory rhetoric or mobilization for violence. Enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms between Gambian and Senegalese security agencies would provide a coordinated response to emerging threats, helping both states to mitigate risks before they spiral into conflict. A structured monitoring framework will ensure timely interventions and build public confidence in the government's capacity to maintain stability.

- The Supreme Islamic Council should establish a clear regulatory and vetting mechanism for sermons and religious radio broadcasts to ensure that messages delivered in public spaces promote unity rather than division. Such a framework should emphasize guidance, accountability, and respect for freedom of worship, while encouraging moderation and social cohesion to prevent future incidents of inflammatory rhetoric.