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Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts: Examining Non-State Violent Orders in Tillabéri, Niger

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About this working paper

With its democratically legitimised government, Niger is considered by Germany and Europe as a bastion of stability in the Sahel. But Niger is also the scene of jihadist violence. Local offshoots of al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS) have gained influence in recent years, especially in the Tillabéri region, on the border with Mali and Burkina Faso. What is more, the jihadist groups do not limit themselves to media-effective attacks against Nigerien security forces and civilians; rather, the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and the al-Qaida loyal Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), have also successfully asserted their claims to control and rule in some areas.

This working paper traces the genesis and local practices of ISSP and JNIM in Niger's Tillabéri region in the context of governance and resource conflicts. The analysis shows that by intervening in local conflict dynamics, both groups were able to generate legitimacy among parts of the population, i.e. a belief in the rightfulness of their use of violence and their claims to rule. Promises of protection in an increasingly violent environment were central to this. Moreover, the emergence of jihadist violence offered marginalised groups the opportunity for social revolt. ISSP and JNIM were thus able to successfully recruit members and establish themselves as an alternative authority in some areas, even without having a permanent stationary presence.

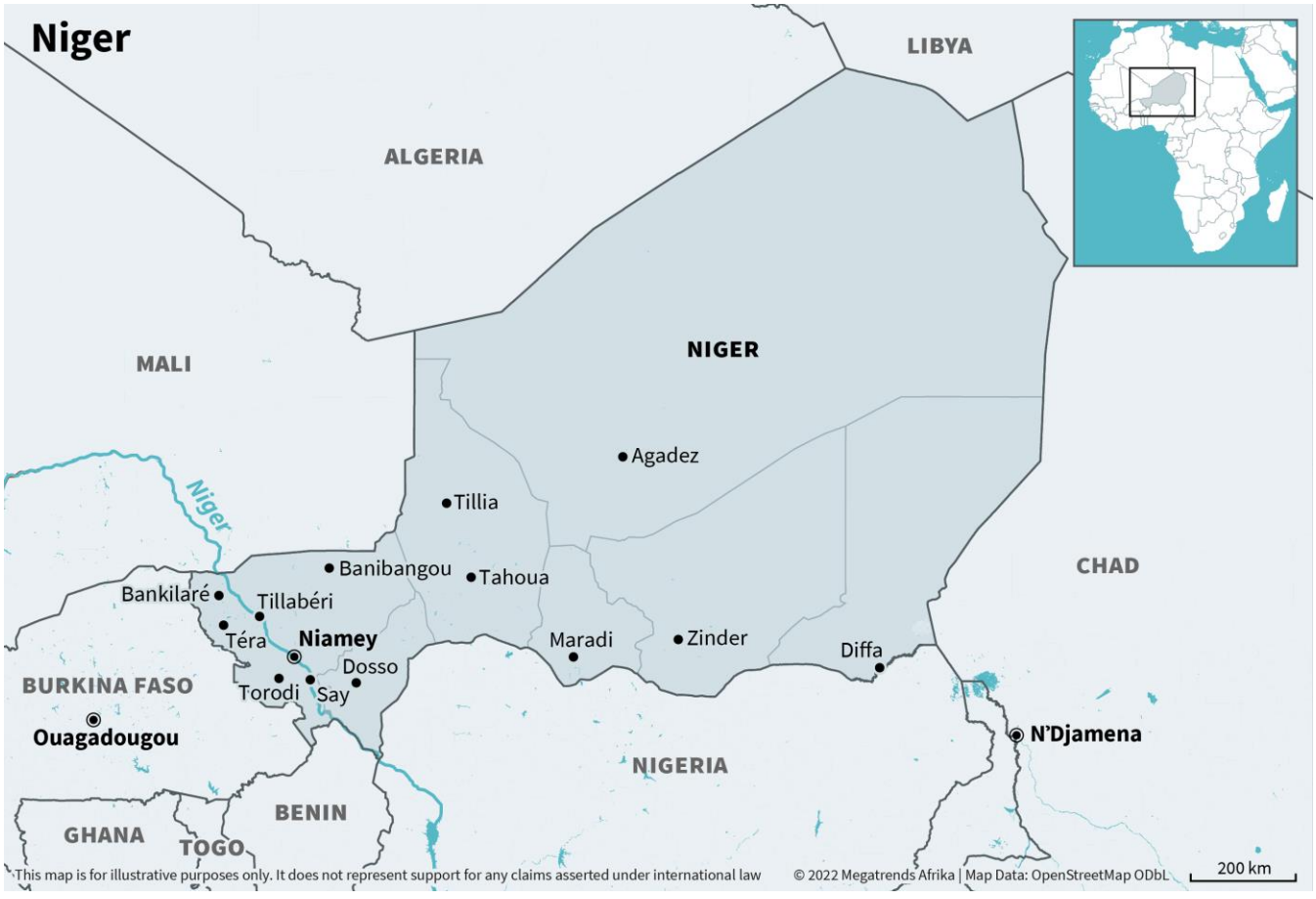
Sustainable stabilisation efforts in Niger should therefore identify and address local grievances and conflicts that facilitate mobilisation by jihadist groups and legitimise their violent orders.

Content

Introduction

Niger, with its democratically legitimised government, is regarded in Germany and Europe as the last bastion of stability in the Sahel region, which is largely affected by political and humanitarian crises. The country has thus become a preferred partner in the fight against terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration. But Niger is also the scene of jihadist violence. Local offshoots of al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS) have gained influence especially in the Tillabéri region, on the border with Mali and Burkina Faso. What is more, the activities of the jihadist groups are not limited to media-effective attacks against Nigerien and international security forces and civilians. In recent years, both the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and the al-Qaida-loyal Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) have been increasingly successful in asserting their claims to control and rule in some areas.

This working paper traces the genesis and everyday practices of ISSP and JNIM in Niger's Tillabéri region in order to explain these developments. The paper is based on the analysis of secondary literature and media reports, interviews with experts and several (research) stays in Tillabéri (October 2009 – December 2012) and Niamey (June and August 2022).[1]



[1] For the preparation of this working paper, the author conducted interviews with villagers, representatives of mobile herders and farmers, political decision-makers, local journalists, security forces, staff of local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations during two research stays in Niamey in June and August 2022. Between 2009 and 2012, the author worked as a civil peace expert in the Tillabéri region, where she conducted analyses of local conflict dynamics.

Governance and Resource Conflicts – a Breeding Ground for Jihadist Mobilisation

Fragile or failed statehood is often seen as the cause of armed violence. In Niger's rural regions, representatives of state institutions have since independence in 1960 been only one of many – partly competing, partly cooperating – groups of actors with claims to power and rule. 'Traditional' chiefs and religious leaders, but also smuggling networks, criminal gangs, armed self-defence militias as well as international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were significantly involved in the day-to-day shaping of the social and political order, especially in peripheral areas such as the border region of Tillabéri.

In these 'hybrid orders'[2] different forms of rule and legal systems overlapped. Conflicts of competence, abuse of power, clientelism and corruption, but also temporary arrangements determined the fragile relationships between the different actors.[3] For example, both the various military regimes and the democratically elected governments have used the 'traditional' chiefs appointed by the French colonial administration as deputies to collect taxes or settle local conflicts through non-codified customs, a practice implemented to this day.[4] Although apolitical by statute, the 'traditional' chiefs have – due to their proximity to the government – been accused by parts of the population of partiality or of exploiting their privileges for their own purposes.[5] Mobile herders of the Peul in northern Tillabéri have also felt inadequately represented in the various bodies and thus discriminated against. For example, some interviewees complained about the systematic exclusion from humanitarian aid distributed by the 'traditional' cantonal chiefs since Niger's independence.

In addition to conflicts over political representation and participation, access to natural and extractive resources is particularly tense in Tillabéri. More than 80% of the population earn a living from agriculture, livestock farming and fishing.[6] Climate change and recurrent droughts, population growth, but also controversial land distribution practices have increasingly limited the availability of natural resources in recent decades, leading to crop failures, depleted livestock and fish stocks, and food insecurity.[7]

The government under Seyni Kountché (1974–1987) hoped to find a way out of the crisis by promoting gold mining in Tillabéri. In the mid-1980s, after a particularly severe drought,

[2] Boege, Volker, M. Anne Brown and Kevin P. Clements. 2009. "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States." Peace Review 21, no. 1: 13–21.
[3] Dicko, Abdou-Rahamane and Issaka Idrissa Mossi. 2020. Rapport des Concertations régionales sur la problématique de la radicalisation et de l'extrémisme violent. Région de Tillabéri. Niamey: Centre National d'Etudes Stratégiques et de Sécurité, 28.
[4] Molenaar, Fransje, Jonathan Tossell, Anna Schmauder, Abdourahmane Idrissa and Rida Lyammouri. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied. The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya.* The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, 53–79.
[5] Idrissa, Rahmane and Bethany McGann. 2022. *Méfiance et déséquilibre. L'effondrement des relations intercommunautaires et la montée de la mobilisation communautaire armée à la frontière Niger-Mali.* Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network.
[6] République du Niger, Région de Tillabéri, Conseil Régional. 2016. *Plan de Développement Régional 2016–2020. Plan d'Action*, 13.
[7] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). 2011. *Niger: North Tillabéri in the Grip of Violence and Drought*; Carayol, Rémi. 2019. *Nord-Tillaberi, Niger. Les éleveurs pris au piège du djihad armé.* Orient XXI.

prospecting began in the region.[8] This eventually led to an uncontrolled proliferation of mining sites,[9] which became a magnet for tens of thousands of gold miners.[10] The result was an increase in crime and inter-communal tensions and conflicts, for example over land rights issues.[11]

In a climate of growing insecurity, conflicts have become increasingly violent – also due to an amplified circulation of illegal small arms since the 1990s. Inter-communal clashes between sedentary farmers and mobile herders have claimed numerous lives in Tillabéri since 2008,[12] although the two socio-economic systems have been seen as complementary in the collective memory of both groups. The increasing scarcity of grazing land has also aggravated disputes among mobile herders along the Niger-Malian border. Nigerien Peul in particular felt marginalised and threatened by systematically organised looting and acts of violence perpetrated under the complicity of state actors.[13]

State efforts to regulate resource conflicts have often failed in their implementation. The Communal and local land rights commissions were established in the course of the decentralisation process that began in 2004. Their capacity to act was however often limited due to the divergent interests and power claims of their members. For example, 'traditional' village chiefs from farmer communities, as heads of the local commissions and owners of agricultural land, would often block mobile cattle herders' access to water points with their sizeable plots.

For a long time, the political elite in Niger's capital Niamey did not consider conflicts in the periphery as a security problem. The common opinion that it was "banditry deep in the bush",[14] disregarded the political dimension of violence and its potential for escalation. Despite periodic Tuareg rebellions, Niger was not considered a crisis country by the international community either.[15]

Yet, local conflicts over political representation and participation, the use of resources and the control of informal mining areas and trade routes all offered transnational jihadist organisations fertile grounds to locally recruit fighters and supporters and thus open up new territories for their claims to power.[16] For actors in Tillabéri, however, the emergence of jihadist groups and the escalation of violence provided the opportunity to assert or defend their own political, economic or social interests by force of arms in a context of increasing insecurity.

[8] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *Gold at the Crossroads Assessment of the Supply Chains of Gold Produced in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*.
[9] In 2015, in addition to one industrially managed mine, a further 69 informally operated mining sites existed, with production estimated by the OECD at 2 tonnes per year (OECD. 2018, 6).
[10] Yonlihinza, Issa Abdou. 2017. "*As More People Flock to Niger's Gold Mines, Economic Boon May Become a New Migration Risk*". *The Conversation*, 15 May 2017; OECD. 2018.
[11] La Libre Afrique. 2017. *Niger: les orpailleurs artisanaux évincés d'un site aurifère*, 18 July 2017; Yonlihinza, Issa Abdou. 2017.
[12] ICRC. 2011.
[13] Guichaoua, Yvan. 2016. "*Mali-Niger : une frontière entre conflits communautaires, rébellion et djihad"*. Le Monde, 20 June 2016.
[14] Lecture Researcher, Abdou Moumouni University, Niamey, 27 June 2022; see also Thurston, Alexander. 2020. Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel. Local Politics and Rebel Groups. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 223.
[15] Ibrahim, Ibrahim Yahaya. 2014. *Niger in the Face of the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency. Precarious Stability in a Troubled Neighborhood*. University of Florida, Sahel Research Group, Working Paper No. 004; Schönegg, Günter and Salifou Noufou. *The Civil Peace Service as an Instrument of Civil Crisis Prevention in Niger*. Civil Peace Service (ZFD), Eirene, German Development Service (DED).
[16] Thurston. 2020, 211; Bøås, Morten, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé and Laouali Mahamane. 2020. "Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?", The International Spectator, 55:4, 124–125.

Struggle for Pasture and Water – the Genesis of ISSP in Northern Tillabéri

ISSP emerged from a series of fusions and splits of militant Salafist-jihadist groups in the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger border region. Until it was recognised as an independent 'province' of the Islamic State in March 2022, ISSP was known as the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[17]

The genesis and success story of ISSP or ISGS in Tillabéri can be traced back to a decades-old cross-border conflict over pasture land and water use between Nigerien Peul from northern Tillabéri and Malian Daoussahak Tuareg, which initially manifested itself in the form of mutual cattle theft.[18] In the course of the Tuareg rebellions that flared up on both sides of the border in the 1990s and the increased circulation of weapons, the clashes became ever bloodier.[19] In 1997, after a massacre by Tuareg on Peul resulting in more than 50 deaths,[20] members of the Peul founded the 'North Tillabéri Self-Defence Militia'. Although the militia was dissolved in 2011 in the course of a reconciliation process between the two groups,[21] neither the demobilised militiamen's demand to be integrated into the Nigerien security forces nor to receive alternative sources of income were met.[22]

When, with the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Malian Tuareg fighters returned from Libya to northern Mali and another Tuareg rebellion broke out in 2012, the old conflict between Tuareg and Peul in the border regions flared up again. The 'al-Qaida in the Maghreb' splinter group 'Jama'at at-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya', founded by the later-to-be ISGS leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in 2011 and known by the French acronym MUJAO,[23] exploited the intercommunal tensions between Tuareg and Peul to recruit former members of the officially demobilised Nigerien Peul militia.[24] In alliance with other Islamist groups, MUJAO then drove the Tuareg militias of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad, MNLA) out of their strongholds in northern Mali. Among the MUJAO recruits were also two Nigeriens, Doundou Chefou and Aboubacar "Petit" Chafori,[25] who in the following years were held responsible as ISGS commanders for many attacks in Niger.[26]

For the mostly young, male cattle herders from northern Tillabéri who joined MUJAO, the jihadist idea was however insignificant: they had neither attended a Koranic school nor had they practised Islamic ritual prayer, which is otherwise firmly anchored in Nigerien society, when on the move with their cattle herds. Rather, they saw their participation in the armed conflict in northern Mali as an opportunity to strengthen their position in the decades-old

[17] ACLED. 2023. *Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province*. 13 January 2023.
[18] Thurston. 2020. 209.
[19] Warner, Jason, Ryan O'Farrell, Héni Nsaibia and Ryan Cummings. 2021. The Islamic State in Africa. The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefront. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 182–83; International Crisis Group. 2018. *A la frontière Niger-Mali, le nécessaire dialogue avec les hommes en armes*, OP-ED Africa, 22 June 2018; Interview with pastoralist, Niamey, 21 June 2022.
[20] Poteaux, David. 2022. *Série (2), le jihad peul dans la zone des "trois frontières"*. Mondafrique, 11 January 2022.
[21] Zandonini, Giacomo and Francesco Bellina. 2019. *Niger, Part 3: Guns Won?'t Win the War*. The New Humanitarian, Special Report, 15 April 2019; Thurston 2020, 209.
[22] Interview with the president of a cattle breeders' association, Niamey, 12 August 2022.
[23] Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest.
[24] However, loyalties were not only defined along ethnic lines. For example, some Peul are said to have joined the MNLA in order to gain access to grazing land in areas controlled by the Tuareg militia (International Crisis Group (ICG). 2018. *frontière Niger-Mali: mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique*. Rapport Afrique N°261, 12 juin 2018).
[25] Also known as Ousmane Illiassou Djibo or Khaled Foulani.
[26] For example, both were allegedly involved in an attack on a Nigerien army patrol accompanied by US soldiers near the village of Tongo Tongo in northern Tillabéri on 4 October 2017 (Fall, Idrissa and Koura Bagassi. 2017. *Villagers Suspected of Luring US Soldiers into Niger Ambush*, Voice of Africa, 23 October 2017).

conflict with Malian Daoussahak Tuareg and to better protect themselves and their families from violent attacks.[27]

When the Islamist groups were driven out of northern Mali by the French military operation Serval in January 2013, MUJAO leader al-Sahrawi retreated from Gao to the areas along the Malian-Nigerien border.[28] In 2015, he declared his armed group's affiliation to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and appointed himself as its emir.[29]

Through his alliance with the former Nigerien Peul militiamen, his organisation, now called ISGS, was able to successfully establish itself as a violent actor in northern Tillabéri.[30]

Gang Crime, Village Militias and the Emergence of JNIM in South Tillabéri

Local conflicts also played an important role in the emergence of JNIM-affiliated groups in Niger. However, it was not so much resource struggles or inter-ethnic tensions that were decisive, but rather disputes between organised criminal gangs who were competing for control of gold mines and trade routes in the border areas between Niger and Burkina Faso, in the south-west of the Tillabéri region, and who were involved in cattle thefts, road blocks and armed robberies with numerous fatalities.[31]

In 2016, in the face of increasing insecurity, villagers in the Torodi department expressed a desire to form self-defence groups similar to the 'Koglweogo'[32] in neighbouring Burkina Faso in order to be able to defend themselves against the violence of the criminal gangs. Their cause was supported by local elites.[33] Even though the self-defence groups in Torodi were never formally authorised, according to Nigerien media reports, Mohamed Bazoum, at the time Niger's interior minister, gave the green light for the establishment of the so-called 'Korogo'[34] in October 2016.[35]

The National Coordination Centre for Security Risks (CNAP), which is affiliated to the prime minister's cabinet, estimates that the 'Korogo' in Torodi recruited in two years over 1,000 members, most of whom were themselves involved in criminal activities. Accordingly, they were "former bandits who tracked down other bandits in the bush".[36]

Within a very short time, numerous arrests were carried out with the help of the 'Korogo', in the course of which, according to the CNAP, human rights violations such as torture were committed.[37]

[27] Interview with the representative of a pastoralist association, Niamey, 12 August 2022; Lacher, Wolfram and Guido Steinberg. 2015. "Transnational Jihadism, Rooted Locally: AQIM and MUJAO in the Sahara." In *Jihadism in Africa. Local Causes, Regional Spread, International Linkages,* SWP Study 7/2015, edited by Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber, 86.
[28] International Crisis Group (ICG). 2020. *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*. Africa Report N°289, 3 June 2020, 4; Bøås et al. 2020, 126.
[29] ICG. 2020, 4; however, al-Sahrawi's oath of allegiance was only recognised by ISIS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi in October 2016 (European Council on Foreign Relations. *Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*).
[30] ICG. 2020, 4; Bøås et al. 2020, 126.
[31] Interview with staff of the Centre National de coordination du mécanisme d'Alerte Précoce et de Réponse aux Risques Sécuritaires (CNAP), Niamey, 27 June 2022; Quidelleur, Tanguy. 2020. *The Local Roots of Violence in Eastern Burkina Faso: Competition over Resources, Weapons and the State*. Noria Research, 28 January 2020.
[32] Frowd, Philippe M. 2022. "The Politics of Non-State Security Provision in Burkina Faso: Koglweogo Self-Defence Groups' Ambiguous Pursuit of Recognition." African Affairs 121, no. 482: 109–30.
[33] Interview with CNAP staff, 8 November 2022.
[34] "Korogo" is a local adaptation of the term "Koglowego", which means "protector of the bush" in Mòoré.
[35] Hamaye, Abderrahmane Ben. 2017. *Tillabéri: Forum sur la sécurité, la prévention des conflits, la coexistence pacifique, le changement des mentalités et le développement à Torodi*. Nigerdiaspora, 29 May 2017.
[36] Internal analysis document of the CNAP.
[37] Interview with CNAP staff, Niamey, 27 June 2022; CNAP internal analysis document.

Although the area calmed down at first, some members of the gangs who managed to avoid the brutal arrests joined jihadist groups in Mali. At the end of 2018, several returned heavily armed to their villages in southwestern Niger to regain their original zones of influence – in the name of JNIM. The members of the 'Korogo' were their first target and in less than a year, all village militias had disbanded.[38]

[38] Ibid.

Legitimacy of Jihadist Violent Orders

Within a few years, ISGS and JNIM had successfully expanded their zones of influence in Niger's Tillabéri region. Their actions were not so much determined by the attempt to take over territories; rather, both groups succeeded in establishing themselves as an alternative force of order in some areas, even without a permanent stationary presence, and thus in bringing the local population under their control.[39]

By mobilising various local conflict actors and intervening in local conflict dynamics, both ISGS and JNIM were able to generate legitimacy among parts of the population, i.e. a belief in the rightfulness of their violence and their claims to authority.[40]

Promises of protection in an increasingly violent environment were of great importance. In addition, the emergence of jihadist violence offered marginalised groups the opportunity for social revolt.[41]

Escalation of Violence and the Promise of Protection

ISGS first gained international attention through high-profile attacks against security forces in northern Tillabéri and Tahoua.[42] One of the bloodiest attacks for which the Islamic State officially claimed responsibility occurred on 10 December 2019 in Inatès in northern Tillabéri and was directed against a military base, which resulted in 71 Nigerien soldiers losing their lives.[43] According to the Ministry of Defence, the attackers comprised several hundred heavily armed and tactically well-organised fighters.[44] Only two years earlier, the number of followers of the organisation was estimated at less than 80.[45]

The initial success of the mobilisation can be explained by the further escalation of violence in the historical conflict between Peul and Tuareg in the Niger-Malian border areas.

For some Peul from northern Tillabéri, the lack of state security guarantees made a liaison with al-Sahrawi appear to be the only way to protect themselves from attacks.[46] Experiences of discrimination in the course of state-led counter-offensives also explain why attacks on state security forces carried out in the name of ISGS found approval.

[39] Bøås et al. 2020.
[40] Schlichte, Klaus and Ulrich Schneckener. 2015. "Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy." Civil Wars 17, no. 4: 409–24.
[41] Legitimacy is not understood here as a normative concept or as a substantive property, but rather, following recent social science research on insurgent rule, as a relational, empirical category (cf. Schlichte and Schneckener 2015; Weigand, Florian. 2017. "Afghanistan's Taliban – Legitimate Jihadists or Coercive Extremists?" Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 11, no. 3: 359–81; Malthaner, Stefan. 2018. "Violence, Control, Legitimacy." Middle Way 36, 27, no. 2: 3–16; Sukanya Podder. 2017. "Understanding the Legitimacy of Armed Groups: A Relational Perspective." Small Wars & Insurgencies, no. 28: 686–708). Accordingly, legitimacy is a mechanism of social control that emerges in everyday processes of perception and interpretation. Acceptance, loyalty and moral orders, but also dependencies and opportunities are central to the formation of legitimacy (Malthaner. 2018, 15). Accordingly, legitimacy does not contradict practices of deterrence, use of force or- threat, which are used by non-state armed groups as a political means to achieve compliance (Podder. 2017, 688).
[42] Thurston. 2020.
[43] Jeuneafrique. 2019. *Niger: l'État islamique revendique l'attaque d'Inates*. 12 December 2019.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Cocks, Tim and David Lewis. 2017. "Why Niger and Mali's Cattle Herders Turned to Jihad." Reuters, 12 November 2017.
[46] ICG. 2018, 9.

A key event in this regard was the attack by armed Tuareg on a Peul village in northern Tillabéri in February 2014, during which state security forces did not intervene despite the villagers' request for help. Only with the support of Peul militiamen who had returned from Mali was it possible to repel the raid. Unilateral arrests of Peul following the fighting strengthened the perception of state repression and justified the decision of some Peul members to use armed force "against the interests of the Nigerien state".[47]

In a subsequent series of retaliatory attacks against Nigerien security forces and prisons, the relationship between al-Sahrawi and the Nigerien Peul militiamen solidified.[48]

Military counter-terrorism operations contributed to a further fragmentation of society and an escalation of violence, which allowed ISGS to assert itself as a regional protection force.[49] Again and again, Peul found themselves stigmatised as potential terrorists or supporters on the basis of their ethnicity and thus exposed to indiscriminate violence.[50] In particular, the collaboration of France and Niger with the Malian Tuareg militias MSA and GATIA in 2017 and 2018 exacerbated social tensions in northern Tillabéri and fuelled the radicalisation and recruitment of Peul into the ranks of jihadist groups.[51] The alliance was interpreted among the Peul as an expression of an internationally supported strategy of "ethnic cleansing"[52] and led to another series of attacks.[53] Meanwhile, military counter-offensives repeatedly claimed numerous civilian victims.[54]

However, the absence of state security guarantees and the experiences of violence and discrimination not only helped ISGS in northern Tillabéri to mobilise combatants and supporters and gain a certain degree of support for attacks against state institutions. Indeed, they also enabled the group to exercise political authority and social control at the local level by promising security to the population on condition of collaboration and an acceptance of certain rules.[55]

An example of this is the well-documented attack by ISGS fighters on a Nigerien military convoy accompanied by US Special Forces on 4 October 2017 near Tongo Tongo, which was allegedly organised with the help of villagers. It highlights the local perception of the legitimacy of these protection arrangements in the absence of state security guarantees. The village chief of Tongo Tongo, who was arrested after the raid, stated:

[47] Ibid.; Among the Peul arrested was the militiaman and MUJAO supporter "Petit Chafori", who was, however, released in December 2014 in the course of negotiations to free the French hostage Serge Lazarevic (interview with cattle herder, Niamey, 21 June 2022; ICG. 2018, 10; ICG. 2020, 19).

[48] ICG. 2018, 8–10; for example, a significant number of detained MUJAO fighters were freed during a simultaneous attack on the security forces of a camp for refugees from Mali in Mangaïzé and a prison in Ouallam on 30 October 2014 (RFI. 2014. "Niger: neuf membres des forces de sécurité tués dans des attaques. » 31 October 2014).

[49] Thurston. 2020, 212–15; ICG. 2020, 8; Bøås et al. 2020, 127.

[50] Interview with the representative of a pastoralist association, Niamey, 12 August 2022; Pellerin, Mathieu. 2019. "Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?", Études de l'Ifri, Ifri, November 2019, 25.

[51] Bouhlel, Ferdaous, Arthur Boutellis, Kamissa Camara, Florent Geel, Yvan Guichaoua, Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Andrew Lebovich, Mathieu Pellerin, Boukary Sangaré, Aurélien Tobie, Gilles Yabi. 2018. "La France doit rompre avec la rhétorique martiale qui prévaut au Sahel." Le Monde, 21 February 2018; Pellerin. 2019, 32–33; ICG 2018, ii and 16; ICG. 2020, 8; Interview with livestock farmer, Niamey, 21 June 2022.

[52] ICG. 2020, 8; Interview with livestock farmer, Niamey, 21 June 2022.

[53] Between February and May 2018 alone, more than 200 alleged ISGS members and numerous civilians were reported to have been killed by Tuareg militias. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) estimates 65 civilians were killed, while Peul associations estimate 99 (ICG. 2020, 8).

[54] In the spring of 2020, the Niger National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) documented the execution of 71 unarmed civilians by Niger security forces in the rural community of Inatès in northern Tillabéri (CNDH-Niger. 2020. report de mission d'enquête, d'investigation, de vérification et d'établissement des faites relatif aux allégations portant sur la disparition de 102 personnes dans le département d'Ayorou, région de Tillabéri. May, June, July 2020, 49).

[55] The enforcement of Sharia-inspired regulatory ideas and the collection of taxes ("Zakat") have determined the approach of ISGS in Niger since 2020.

"The government can't protect us. That's why we collaborate with the jihadists (...) This is a very dangerous place. When we need protection, we call on the jihadists. This is how we survive here".[56]

JNIM, loyal to al-Qaida, also succeeded in recruiting members and mobilising support through promises of protection, thus gaining legitimacy among the population as an alternative force of order. While in 2018, Nigerien combatants were said to have represented only a very small number of former bandits,[57] JNIM recruited in the following years through the two sub-groups Katibat Macina and Katibat Gourma a growing number of followers.[58]

Although the active members are said to be mainly Djalgodji-Peul from South Tillabéri, identity politics were initially not the focus of JNIM's mobilisation strategy. Rather, JNIM succeeded in establishing itself as a guardian of order in the informal and illegal economies in South Tillabéri, which are characterised by competition and conflict, through the "jihadisation of bandits"[59].

For example, since 2018 – the year the gang members expelled by the 'Korogo' returned from Mali –, the presence of jihadists in the Torodi gold mines has been documented.[60]

Similar to neighbouring Burkina Faso, the JNIM-affiliated groups not only generated lucrative income from the gold mines[61] but they also took advantage of the anarchic and conflict-laden organisation of the mines to gain acceptance and legitimacy among workers and traders as new protective power.[62] Today, the Bouloundjounga (Gothey), Mamassey (Torodi) and Tangounga (Makalondi) mines are said to be completely under jihadist control.[63] The informally operated Tamou gold mine, located in the W National Park, became as recently as October 2022 the target of a controversial anti-terrorist operation by the Nigerien army, in which according to official figures 11 civilians lost their lives.[64]

However, not only in the gold mines, but also in the surrounding communities on the western side of the Niger River, JNIM increasingly gained recognition as a new force for order.[65] The actions of the small, decentralised units were initially described as more subtle than those of ISGS. Instead of attracting attention through spectacular attacks, JNIM succeeded in establishing itself in some areas as a legitimate alternative to the Nigerien state not only through intimidation, but also through persuasion and financial and material incentives at the local level.[66] In addition to the propagation of religiously based values and rules, tax collection and Sharia-based jurisprudence also played a central role in the rise of JNIM.

[56] Sahelien.com. 2017. *Niger: Abou Walid Al-Sahraoui soupçonné d'être derrière l'attaque de Tongo Tongo*. 1 November 2017; Raghavan, Sudarsan. 2017. "In the Area where U.S. Soldiers Died in Niger, Islamist Extremists Have Deep Roots." The Washington Post, 20 November 2017.
[57] According to CNAP, as recently as 2018, there were only 11 former bandits who were well known to the Nigerien security authorities (interview with CNAP staff, Niamey, 27 June 2022).
[58] Internal CNAP analysis document; Katibat Gourna is also known as Katibat AAA or Katibat 3A (cf. Weiss, Caleb. 2021. "Al Qaeda Field Commander Reported Killed in Mali." FDD's Long War Journal, 18 October 2021).
[59] International Crisis Group (ICG). 2021. *South-western Niger: Preventing a New Insurrection*. Africa Report N°301, 29 April 2021, 12.
[60] Assanvo, William, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga. 2019. *violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Report 26, December 2019.
[61] Ibid; Quidelleur. 2020; Beevor, Eleanor. 2022. *JNIM in Burkina Faso. A Strategic Criminal Actor*. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime; Interview with staff of an international NGO, Niamey, 22 June 2022.
[62] Assanvo et al. 2019; La Libre Afrique. 2017.
[63] Interview with staff of an international NGO, Niamey, 22 June 2022.
[64] Kaka, Moussa. 2022. *Les autorités nigériennes nient toute bavure lors d'une riposte à une attaque terroriste*. RFI, 26 October 2022; Kaka, Moussa. 2022. *Niger: pas de bavure de l'armée lors de l'attaque de Tamou, conclut l'enquête de la CNDH*. RFI, 28 December 2022.
[65] CNAP, internal analysis document.
[66] Amnesty International. 2021 *"I Have Nothing Left Except Myself": The Worsening Impact on Children of Conflict in the Tillabéri Region of Niger*. London, 13 September 2021, 37–38.

Some parts of the population in South Tillabéri accepted the new authority of JNIM due to an increased sense of security. Since the presence of JNIM, not only has the number of violent criminal offences decreased in the perception of some residents, but so too has the extent of state controls, which residents often interpreted as mere harassment. Interventions by the security forces, on the other hand, were seen as arbitrary and sometimes led to protest. "JNIM asks us to preach while the state kills us," said one villager from Makalondi in South Tillabéri.

Jihadism as a Social Uprising

The spiral of violence increasingly eroded the fragile fabric of the social and political order in Tillabéri, a development that fuelled the outbreak of further, already smouldering conflicts. In addition to protection and order, an alliance with ISGS/ISSP or JNIM offered in this context in particular marginalised groups the opportunity to revolt against social and political exclusion and socio-economic grievances. Jihadist violence thus became a political resource for disadvantaged segments of the population to attack social and political elites, break up rigid social structures and change societal power relations.[67] According to local observers, 'traditional' village chiefs, for example, were repeatedly the victims of violence not only because of their proximity to the state, but also because of their often controversial role in settling local conflicts.

The mobilisation of Peul from northern Tillabéri into the ranks of jihadist organisations was largely determined by the recruits' wish for greater justice. Experiences of unequal treatment by state security forces and motives of revenge legitimised their violent rebellion against the Nigerien state.[68] Captured Nigerien ISGS fighters said they "no longer felt like Nigeriens" because they were denied state protection and political and social participation. "The army's behaviour and lack of justice are pushing the population to revolt," summarised a representative of a pastoralists' association.

However, even more than ISGS or ISSP, JNIM promoted a discourse of social uprising and presented itself to the population as the liberator of the oppressed.

The protest rhetoric of the Malian JNIM leader Amadou Koufa, which was directed not only against political but also traditional and religious elites, also found favour among marginalised Peul in Niger.[69] While Koufa on the one hand denied his jihadist movement an ethnic orientation and his social critique still included the Peul elite in 2017,[70] he pursued a decidedly ethnic-based mobilisation strategy from 2018 onwards. In a video released in November 2018, he called for a Peul uprising in Mali's neighbouring countries as well, to prevent an ethnic extermination campaign allegedly supported by France.[71] According to local observers, his appeal also led to the recruitment of young Peul from Niger's capital Niamey.

Perceptions of social inequality and everyday experiences of discrimination and violence not only drove Peul into the arms of ISGS or ISSP and JNIM. Rather, members of other ethnic groups also saw in the liaison with the jihadist organisations an opportunity for

[67] Antouly, Julien, Bokar Sangaré and Gilles Holder. 2021. *le djihad dans le centre du Mali: lutte de classes, révolte sociale ou révolution du monde peul?* The Conversation, 23 September 2021; Quidelleur. 2020.
[68] ICG 2018, 10; interview with staff of a local NGO, Niamey, 14 December 2022; interview with representative of a pastoralist association, Niamey, 12 August 2022; Pellerin. 2019, 24–26.
[69] Antouly et al. 2021.
[70] Thurston. 2020, 185–87; Roger, Benjamin. 2018. "Mali : Amadou Koufa, le visage peul d'Al-Qaïda." Jeuneafrique, 20 November 2018.
[71] Roger. 2018.

social and political advancement. Today, the membership of Tuareg, Arabs, Djerma/Songhai and Hausa in the ranks of ISSP is considered as confirmed,[72] while JNIM in Niger, according to local sources, has also integrated Tuareg and Djerma/Songhai.

In the area around the rural commune of Bankilaré, for example, young men from the lower castes of the Tuareg are said to have joined jihadist groups to revolt against their perceived enslavement. Heavily armed, they returned to their villages where their violence was directed toward the local aristocracy. In subsequent negotiations, one of the central demands of the insurgents was to occupy key positions in the local administration.[73]

However, joining jihadist organisations in Tillabéri can also be understood as an uprising of the youth. Among young farmers and herders alike, a narrative of disappointment is widespread about intergenerational promises for the future that have not been fulfilled. One driver is the inability to continue traditional masculine role patterns and lifestyles due to increasing demographic pressures and a lack of resources. Prison inmates who were asked about their motives for joining jihadist groups mentioned, for example, lost inheritance disputes over farmland and a lack of alternative income opportunities.

But the radical interpretation of Islam has also made the jihadist groups attractive to young people who had previously stood opposed more moderate values. Especially in the area around Makalondi, younger Peul and Gourmantché have become increasingly radicalised over the last decade due to the influence of external preachers and charitable organisations from the Gulf States, thus fuelling interreligious and intergenerational tensions.[74]

ISGS and JNIM not only offered protection and firepower to the different actors, but both groups were also able to build on the population's violent revolt against political and social elites to legitimise their authority. Particularly in the area of conflict regulation and the administration of justice, the practices of the jihadist organisations often corresponded more to the needs of rural populations than state or traditional mechanisms. Of particular importance was their approach to land disputes, gang crime and organised cattle theft.[75] The jurisdiction of Sharia-based mobile courts was perceived to be impartial and prompt, unlike the state-led judiciary. While local land rights commissions often took years to process a dispute, the establishment of timely, informal decisions and the direct execution of punishments by JNIM and ISGS was welcomed by parts of the population.[76]

[72] ACLED. 2023; With the exception of the Hausa, all other members of ethnic groups are to be under the command of their own local emirs (interview with the representative of a pastoralists' association, Niamey, 12 August 2022).
[73] Interview with local decision-maker, Bankilaré, 13 December 2022; interview with staff member of a local NGO, Niamey, 14 December 2022.
[74] Bode, Sambo. No date. Tentative de caractérisation du lien entre jeunes éleveurs et extrémisme violent, et contributions possibles dans le domaine de la paix pour le ZFD (service civil pour la paix) de la GIZ. Draft de Rapport.
[75] Bøås et al. 2020, 129.
[76] Lyammouri, Rida. 2021. *Literature Paper: Jihadist Armed Governance in Mali*. Policy Center for the New South, Policy Brief PB–21/40, November 2021.

Conclusion

The genesis of ISGS and JNIM-affiliated groups in Niger's Tillabéri region shows the importance of local political, social and economic grievances and conflicts for jihadist mobilisation and the legitimacy of jihadist violence and authority.

Jihadism in Niger, however, is not a uniform phenomenon. Ethnically charged conflicts over access to resources formed the basis of the emergence of ISGS in northern Tillabéri. JNIM, on the other hand, initially benefited for the recruitment of members from the competition between various criminal gangs and their involvement in informal economies in the south of the region.

Despite the different local roots and approaches of the two groups, both ISGS and JNIM were able to successfully establish themselves as a force for protection and order in a social environment that was increasingly marked by violence; and ultimately by enabling the social revolt of marginalised groups.

Military counter-terrorism operations and the armed resistance of local self-defence groups could not stop these dynamics, but rather contributed to the escalation of inter-ethnic conflicts and further radicalisation.

In order to deprive jihadist groups of their social support and counteract an expansion of violence, civil solution approaches should be promoted to a greater extent that identify and address local grievances and work towards a constructive transformation of local conflict dynamics.

The following approaches of the Nigerien government, which build on the demands of civil society in Tillabéri,[77] could be supported and expanded both financially and through the expertise of international partners:

The Promotion of Dialogue and Social Cohesion

Promoting political dialogue both between the government and the communities as well as within the communities can help to identify participatory approaches and formats for local problem situations. Dialogue forums, for example, offer marginalised groups the opportunity for political participation and can strengthen trust between the state and para-state institutions and the population at the community and national level. Social and political tensions and violence that facilitate mobilisation by jihadist groups or the formation of ethnically organised self-defence militias can be reduced in this way. At the same time, dialogue processes enable the demobilisation and social reintegration of members of armed groups.

The state authority for peace consolidation (Haute Autorité à la consolidation de la paix, HACP), founded in 1995, as well as some local and international non-governmental organisations have many years of experience in dialogue promotion and conflict mediation, also in the Tillabéri region.

However, a lack of adequate funding and the time-bound nature of project cycles are currently making it difficult to establish discussion formats on a long-term, nationwide basis. The lack of coordination mechanisms also prevents a strategic orientation of the various initiatives. Conflicts of competence and duplication, the exclusive focus on certain

[77] For concrete demands of civil society, see for example: Les ressortissants. 2023. "Déclaration des Ressortissants des Communes du Gorouol et de Bankilaré relative à l'insécurité." ActuNiger, 30 January 2023; or: République du Niger, Région de Tillabéri, Département de Banibangou. 2023. *Accord de paix entre communautés du département de Banibangou*. January 2023.

groups of actors and the non-alignment with military operations have weakened the credibility and scope of dialogue processes in the past.[78]

Therefore, particular attention should be paid to the coherence, continuity and inclusiveness of measures.

Dealing With Local Causes of Conflict

Dialogue processes can only have a sustainable peacebuilding effect if they lead to a settlement of the causes of conflict that explain the mobilisation success of armed groups. The genesis of ISSP and JNIM in Niger show in this regard the importance of resource conflicts, political and social exclusion, and the lack of state security guarantees.

International partners should therefore support the responsible ministries and communities to better enforce existing land rights laws and to strengthen the work of the decentralised land rights commissions. Internationally funded projects have so far mostly been limited to cooperation with individual regional or local commissions – also because it is perceived by some that there is a lack of political will at the national level. Yet, the formation and procedures of the commissions are often non-transparent and unrepresentative, even at the local level. A lack of financial resources also limits their ability to function.

Local civil society actors are therefore calling for an inclusive process of organisational analysis coordinated at the national level, with the aim of bringing about a democratic renewal of the land rights commissions. International partners could support this process while respecting the principle of conditionality and thus make an important contribution to building participatory local governance structures.

As mobile herders in particular are often unaware of their rights with regard to the use of natural resources, international projects have in the past mainly supported pastoralist civil society organisations in conducting information campaigns and doing advocacy work. However, in the context of escalating violence and the spread of disinformation, this one-sided approach risks contributing to the stigmatisation of mobile herders. Measures to support civil society actors should therefore aim at strengthening the cooperation between different organisations of pastoralists and farmers who advocate for sustainable and inclusive land use practices.

Promoting economic integration through education and the creation of formal income opportunities can also open up prospects for the young rural population beyond the conflict-ridden informal or illegal sectors and traditional socio-economic models.

The Implementation of a Citizen-Centred Security Strategy

Sustainable stabilisation efforts must at the same time guarantee the effective protection of the civilian population who, especially in the zones of influence of the jihadist groups have increasingly become the target of attacks in recent years. ISGS/ISSP and JNIM have repeatedly claimed as justifications for their attacks the cooperation of individuals with state security forces or the formation of self-defence militias.

At the same time, military counter-terrorism operations also repeatedly claim civilian victims and weaken the population's trust in state security forces.

International partners should support the Nigerien security forces in implementing a human-rights based, citizen-oriented security strategy which is in line with the needs of the population. An increased presence of representative, well-trained and well-equipped security forces in rural areas is in this regard just as indispensable as the demobilisation of self-defence militias. Niger has already created the political framework for this with the

[78] ICG. 2020, 19–20.

adoption in April 2022 of the “Stratégie nationale de sécurité de proximité”,[79] which is the result of an inclusive consultation process at the regional level. However, the implementation of the strategy remains a challenge, for which the government relies on the support of external partners. While international interest in funding certain aspects of the strategy is high, other areas remain untouched so far. For example, numerous organisations are working to implement trust-building measures between the population and the security forces in Tillabéri. At the same time, access to the region for security forces remains limited due to a lack of resources and the volatile security situation. Competition for international funding among the involved organisations also hampers a transparent and coordinated approach. In order to expand the presence of security forces throughout the country and to promote their nationwide, citizen-oriented interventions, international partners should better coordinate their measures with national actors and their priorities. The inter-agency commissions established in November 2022 by the decree of the Ministry of Interior for the establishment of mobile units indeed provide a suitable framework for this.

[79] République du Niger. 2022. Stratégie nationale de sécurité de proximité.

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