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Self-defense Militia Groups in Niger: Risking a Time Bomb

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With the encroachment of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) on areas along Niger's western borders, the Bazoum government in Niger was witnessing the birth of self-defense militia in the regions of Tahoua and Tillabéri. Although the pre-coup Nigerien government had taken steps to manage the Tahoua *garde nomade* through a system of control, co-optation, and integration into the security forces, it was not doing the same with the *zankai* in Tillabéri, who are operating autonomously, and who now represent a heavy legacy for the new transition government to deal with. This was due to the government's lack of relations with *zankai* leadership, the latter's decentralized nature, and the perception that they appear to pose less of a political and military threat than the Tuareg militia. However, experiences in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso show how, if not properly managed, the formation of ethnic militia presents the risk of a rapid escalation of violence along communal lines. European policymakers should have a granular understanding of these dynamics to ensure that – should they choose to support the transition government in the future – they are aware of the implications regarding self-defense groups. On the other hand, the Nigerien transition government should learn from the previous administration's co-optation strategy with the *garde nomade* and apply it to other self-defense groups if it wants to avoid losing control over militia groups such as the *zankai*.

To deal with the escalating attacks by the ISGS and JNIM in areas along Niger's borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, the government of President Mohamed Bazoum, until its demise in July 2023,[1] had been pursuing a multi-pronged strategy that goes beyond military force. A series of initiatives pertaining to the reintegration of former combatants – coupled with dialogue and mediation strategies – were being hailed as profoundly innovative. More controversially, however, the pre-coup government had also begun to rely on self-defense groups as a way to counter JNIM and the ISGS in two regions: the Tahoua *garde nomade* and the Tillabéri *zankai*. Following the military coup in July 2023, the new transition government has inherited the "self-defence groups dossier" and must find ways to maintain positive relations with the *garde nomade* and build *ex-novo* relations with the *zankai*. Although these two groups are often put in the same "self-defense group" basket by country experts in Niamey,[2] their relations with the previous administration were in fact starkly different. In the case of the *garde nomade*, the Bazoum government had kept a tight grip over their actions

[1] "Coup d'État au Niger". *Jeune Afrique*, accessed Sep 15, 2023.
[2] Interview, Niamey, March 2023.

by retaining control through family ties in Niamey and having promised (and maintained the promise) of integration into *garde nationale* ranks. As for the *zankai* in Tillabéri, the Bazoum administration had preferred to ignore them, or treat them with contempt in public by calling them simply "militia."[3] This was reflected in a recent *Jeune Afrique* interview,[4] in which Bazoum openly criticized reliance on self-defense groups in other countries, such as Burkina Faso.

The government's strategies, although very successful in Tahoua with the *garde nomade,* present worrisome elements in Tillabéri, where the *zankai* are neither controlled nor managed and whose behavior could lead to spiraling ethnic violence, especially now that the transition government led by General Tchiani is redesigning its security policies in Tahoua and Tillabéri. This Policy Brief presents an analysis of the dynamics behind both groups, and the Bazoum government's reactions to them, based on interviews with pre-coup government officials and members of both groups in Niamey in 2022 and in the first part of 2023.

The experiences of neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso show just how risky experiments with self-defense groups are. In both countries, the concomitant rise of jihadists and vigilante groups – Dan Na Ambassagou in Mali and the Koglweogo and Volontaires pour la Defense de la Patrie in Burkina Faso, both of which recruit on an ethnic basis – has led to a vicious cycle of intercommunal killings.[5]

Compared to its neighbors, Niger had until recently been wary of giving free reign to self-defense groups, although it had in the past cooperated with two Mali-based armed groups.[6] Niger also differed from Mali in its policies toward the integration of Tuareg insurgents. This helps to explain the Nigerien government's diverging approaches toward the Tuareg *garde nomade* in Tahoua and the Zarma *zankai* in Tillabéri. Previous Nigerien governments sought to integrate Tuareg insurgents into state structures to co-opt their influence and bring all their desires for rebellion to an end. This worked: Nigerien administrative structures are now also managed by Tuareg representatives in a system that is not formally based on quotas, but which shows that members of the Tuareg ethnic group can hold positions of power and ultimately influence decision-making. One visible development to showcase the interest of the Niger government in achieving peace with the Tuareg was the nomination of Prime Minister Brigi Rafini, a Tuareg from Iferouane, by the Issoufou government in 2011. In addition to this, decentralization – that is, a process aimed at allowing more autonomy through the creation of municipal councils in Niger[7] – strongly favored regions that were geographically distant from Niamey, such as Agadez and northern Tahoua. Overall, Niamey has been able to manage Tuareg irredentism more successfully than Bamako, which is arguably still suffering from its poor reintegration policies of the early 2000s. At the same time, this history of integration of Tuareg fighters, as well as the government's fear that these fighters could mobilize again and turn against it, help explain why it has chosen to co-opt the *garde nomade* in Tahoua.

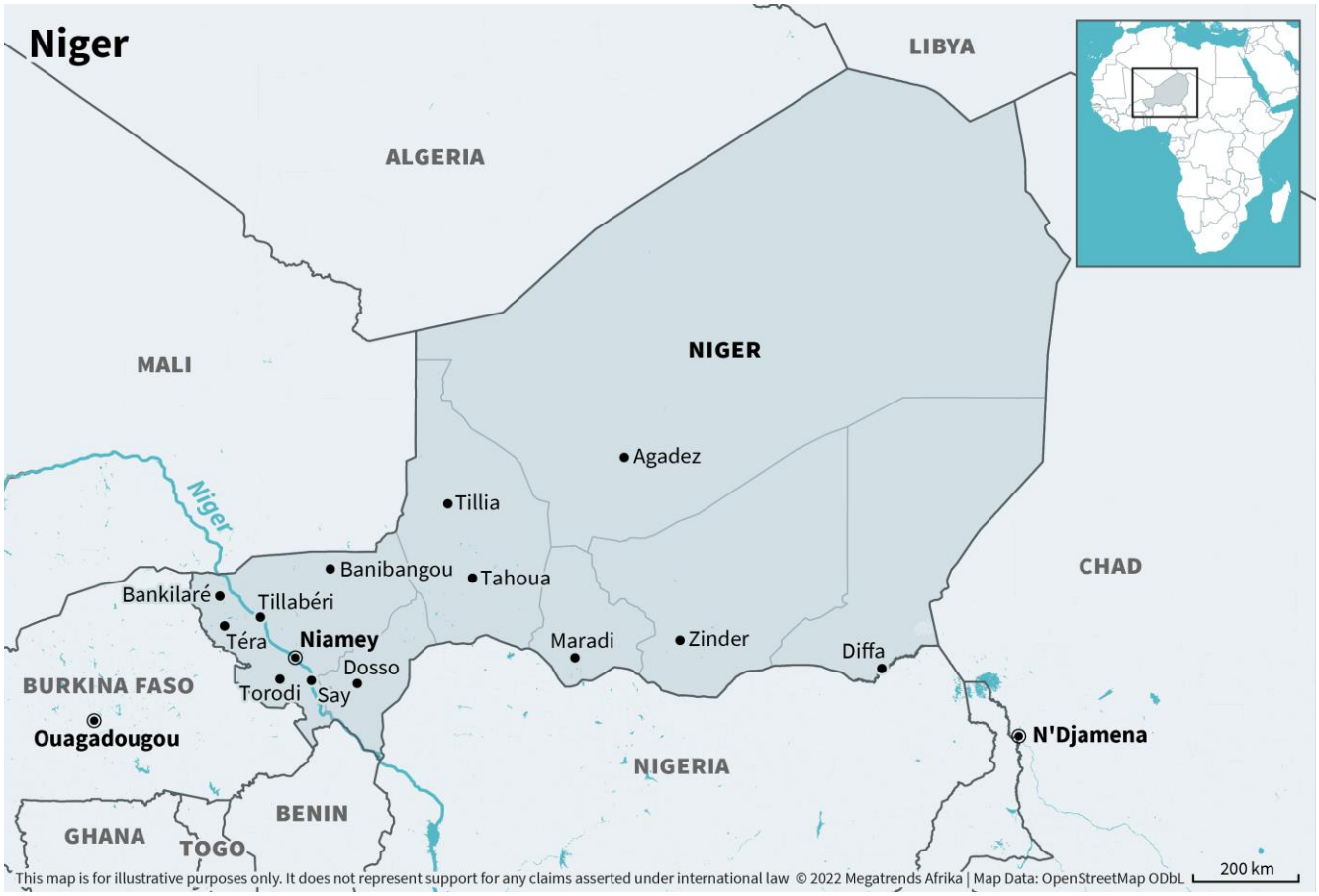
[3] "…the what? The Zarma in Tillaberi? Bon, it is a militia group, but they are just… all over the place, too disorganized"; Interview, official at the Présidence de la République, Niamey, March 2023.
[4] "Mohamed Bazoum : Mali, Burkina, Wagner, terrorisme… L'entretien exclusif". *Jeune Afrique*, accessed May 26, 2023.
[5] Crisis Group, Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali (Brussels: Crisis Group, 2020), Africa Report N°293, accessed Jul 5, 2023; and Crisis Group, Burkina Faso: sortir de la spirale des violences (Brussels: Crisis Group, 2020), Africa Report N°287, accessed Jul 5, 2023.
[6] These were the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and the Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defence Groups (GATIA). Even when not directly involved in operations, the Nigerien government, at the time led by Issoufou, allowed for attacks to be conducted on Nigerien territory. Crisis Group, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabéry* (Brussels: Crisis Group, 2020), Africa Report N°289, accessed Jun 16, 2023.
[7] Abdoulaye Mohamadou, "Decentralisation and Local Power in Niger", *IIED*, Jun, 2009, accessed Jun 16, 2023.

Promises of integration: The *garde nomade* experience in Tahoua

Tahoua is one of the eight regions of Niger and borders some of the most conflict-affected areas in the wider West Africa region, such as Sokoto state in Nigeria,[8] Gao and Kidal in Mali, and the Nigerien Tillabéri region. The first steps for the creation of the *garde nomade* – the name the fighters gave themselves – in the region were made in 2021, when mostly Tuareg fighters, who had at their disposal weapons collected in Libya, decided to make their way back to the villages they originally came from in the Tahoua region, and those who were already in the villages decided to defend themselves from ISGS attacks near the Malian border. After attacks such as those in Bakorat, Intezayene, and Wistane in March 2021,[9] which resulted in 137 victims,[10] the "Nigerien Armed Forces (FAN) wall fell down"[11] and there was no army to protect the people anymore. Villagers managed to chase the armed groups away. But as the threat was only a few kilometers away, in neighboring Mali, they began to sell off their animals to equip themselves with weapons and 4x4s, and they called on family members elsewhere to support them.[12] This immediately led the Nigerien government to make a concerted effort to legitimize and support their existence. This effort was carried out by those Tuaregs who worked within state structures, who in some cases had family ties with the fighters. "About half of the fighters didn't really care about integration at all…they just wanted to protect their own, and in some cases take revenge for the killing of members of their family," one interviewee close to the *garde nomade* clarified.[13] The Bazoum government was not just interested in seeing where their mobilization would lead in terms of violence containment, but it was also concerned that not making any promises to a large group of armed Tuareg could lead to yet another rebellion, or more ambitious demands for autonomy further down the line. This explains the government's interest in controlling and eventually co-opting the *garde nomade,* which consisted of about 500 Tuareg fighters back in 2021, and having them join the formal ranks of the *garde nationale*. Most of the work of the *garde nomade* currently consists of demanding that people in villages next to Mali move away from where there is suspicion of an imminent attack on the part of armed groups: "The other day we asked people in Mihan to come closer to Abala, leave their homes, take their families and beasts and come closer to a place where we can control them, while cleaning up their village from terrorist infiltrations," one interviewee mentioned.[14] "Clean up" often means arresting those who have not left the village and who appear to be either "on the side of the terrorists" or threatened by them, in which case they are accompanied to the nearest larger town.

The people most suspected by the *garde nomade* to be in league with the ISGS are Peuhl civilians, which shows the ethnic dimension of the conflict in Tahoua. In this context, *garde nomade* leaders risk insubordination from their men due to persistent ethnic tensions, but their intricate ties with the government encourage them to avoid abuses – not least since Tuareg representatives in Niamey risk losing their posts should violence against civilians occur in Tahoua.[15] "When we see new furniture in a home, we understand that these people have direct access to terrorist groups…that's when it becomes hard to stop my men from

[8] Crisis Group, Tracking Conflict Worldwide, (Brussels: Crisis Group, 2023), Crisis Watch, accessed Aug 23, 2023.
[9] "Surging Atrocities by Islamist Armed Groups", *reliefweb*, Aug 11, 2021, accessed Jun 16, 2023.
[10] "Gunmen on motorbikes raid Niger villages, kill at least 137", *Al Jazeera*, Mar 22, 2021, accessed Jun 16, 2023.
[11] Interview, Niamey, March 2023
[12] Interview, Niamey, February 2023.
[13] Interview, Niamey, March 2023.
[14] Interview, Niamey, March 2023.
[15] Series of interviews, Niamey, January, February, and March 2023.



killing them on the spot," one commander in Tilia clarified, adding "…my job is to avoid that, but have them arrested instead."[16] But allegations persist that Tuareg fighters committed violence against Peuhl herders in Tahoua, especially during the formation of the *garde nomade* in March and April 2021. According to Peuhl interviewees, their families were banned from traditional grazing grounds, cattle were stolen, and, in some cases, adult men were killed for possessing a motorcycle, or motorcycle replacement parts, or a weapon – none of which should be grounds for incrimination, let alone assassinations. There have been no judicial consequences for those who executed suspected Peuhls, only, in some cases, bans from working alongside the *garde*.[17] Cases of abuse and exaction mostly stopped after Bazoum paid a visit to Tilia at the beginning of 2022, and promised both integration to the Tuareg and protection to Peuhl community leaders. Thus, members of the *garde nomade*, who are now part of the Nigerien Armed Forces, quickly learned that abuses would mean a lack of support from the government.

Government support for the *garde* comes in two forms. On the one hand, the government promises potential new recruits integration into state structures. This is done through the Tuareg government representatives based in Niamey, who then inform fighters in Tahoua, who then report back to these representatives on progress being made in the battlefield and about any incidents that might have occurred. This strengthened an informal link between the fighters and their supporters in Niamey as well as the executive. On the other hand, the government has mandated the *garde nationale* to provide equipment to the *garde nomade*: "We have not been given any money or any military ranking for now, but the *garde nationale* gives us everything…AK47, M80, 4x4, I mean even uniforms!"[18] In March

[16] Interview, Niamey, February 2023.
[17] Series of interviews, Niamey, January 2023.
[18] Interview, Niamey, December 2022.

2022, the first batch of *garde nomade* fighters (about 500 men) became part of the *garde nationale* and started receiving a salary and ID badges, which means that they did approximately one year of "partially recognized self-defense."[19]

Risking a time bomb: The case of the Zarma militia in Tillabéri

Tillabéri is the region that hosts the capital, Niamey, but its northern and western parts border Mali and Burkina Faso, which experienced spikes in violence between 2018 and 2021, followed more recently by declining violence in the north.[20] Following two brutal attacks on the security forces in Inatés and Chinagodrar in 2019 and 2020, the army withdrew from several key border outposts, and authorities have been reluctant to redeploy the full number of forces that were previously present along the border. ISGS has exerted constant pressure on villages in the northernmost part of Tillabéri, assassinating or kidnapping those who refuse to comply with their orders or those suspected of being state informants.

In November 2019, ISGS executed the Zarma chief of Tchomabangou village for allegedly refusing to pay *zakat*. This was one of the many violent episodes that led to a 2020 document created by the *Comité union Tillabéri pour la paix, la sécurité et la cohésion sociale*, a Zarma association, which invoked the creation of a self-defense group led by retired military officials.[21] In January of the following year – in retaliation for the creation of this group (and also to see for themselves whether the group presented a potential menace) – tens of insurgents attacked civilians in the Tchomabangou et Zaroumdareye in the Tondikiwindi commune, killing more than 100 people, mostly from the Zarma ethnic group.[22] Tit-for-tat actions followed, leading civilians to look for protection from armed groups.[23]

Zarma self-defense groups in Tillabéri differ starkly from the *garde nomade*. First of all, there are too many to precisely know who does what and where they do it, and despite being rather well organized (most groups have a president, a vice-president, a treasurer, and a military chief), not even the prefects have a clear understanding of who is who: "All in all, anyone who has a gun can declare themselves allegiance to a self-defense group, but they tend to always have some hierarchy, even small groups in small villages."[24] It is a loose galaxy of combatants, all belonging to one ethnic group. Secondly, unlike former rebels in Tahoua, they have no military experience, but they train each other in basic military tactics. What is truly exceptional, however, is the discrepancy between the level of legitimacy they have in the villages they protect, as opposed to the legitimacy of the regional and national administration. Although the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP), the Bazoum government in Niamey, and also the local government and prefecture call them "militia groups," smaller local authorities such as village chiefs prefer the more neutral "vigilante committees," and people in the villages where they are based call them "*zankai*" (our youths).[25] This is telling of the relationship that Zarma self-defense groups have with people

[19] Interview, Niamey, January 2023.
[20] Hannah Rae Armstrong, "Comprendre l'accalmie : une reprise en main du Nord-Tillabéri au Niger*", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)*, Apr 14, 2023, accessed Jun 17, 2023.
[21] Crisis Group, *Niger: éviter l'aggravation des violences contre les civils à Tillabéri* (Dakar/Niamey/Nairobi/Brussels: Crisis Group, 2021), Africa Briefing N°172, accessed Jun 16, 2023.
[22] See UNICEF, *Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on Attacks against Villages in Niger*, (UNICEF, Jan 4, 2021), accessed Jun 23, 2023.
[23] Lisa Tschörner, "Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts: Examining Non-State Violent Orders in Tillabéri, Niger", Megatrends Afrika, Megatrends Working Paper 6 (2023).
[24] Interview, Niamey, February 2023.
[25] Series of interviews, Niamey, February and March 2023.

in their communities, who see them as protectors, and Niamey, whose officials do not adopt the same co-optation mechanism they are using with Tuareg self-defense groups. This is due to officials' weaker ties with the *zankai* and their perception that these groups pose a lesser threat. Establishing stronger ties may be costly, not just in terms of time, but also in terms of public backlash, as this would mean endorsing militias. The recent peace deal between communities in Banibangou confirms the hypocrisy of the Nigerien government concerning all armed factions in northern Tillabéri, especially regarding such militia.[26] Hailed as a success, the deal is believed by many observers in Niamey and the town of Tillabéri to be just publicity, as most Zarma militia did not hand in their weapons, contrary to what the accord stipulated – and the government took no steps to ensure such disarmament.[27] Unlike with the *garde nomade*, no steps have been taken to bring this militia under state control. Allegations of abuses perpetrated by the Zarma militia are commonplace, and yet there is no admission on the part of the executive of these alleged cases.[28] Not controlling this Zarma militia may lead to unforeseen consequences, the first of which being an exacerbation of ethnic tensions in Tillabéri. The Tchiani transition government must be aware of such dynamics and the nature of the *zankai* militia and devise a way to bring them under state control.

Conclusions

There are several reasons why the Bazoum administration was behaving differently toward these two groups. In the case of the *zankai*, government representatives in Niamey do not have the same tools for control that they have with the *garde nomade*, that is, family relations within their own state structures. At the same time, they do not believe the *zankai*, with their loose organization, would be as effective as the Tahoua self-defense groups from a military point of view. Thus, they do not want to compensate them with posts within security and defense forces. This, in turn, means that, unlike Tuareg fighters, they do not see them as a threat to state power, as the *zankai* are not imagined of being as capable of questioning state authority as much as the *garde nomade* could be.

However, the experiences in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso show how quickly such an approach can spiral out of control. Violence perpetrated by ethnic militias can rapidly become self-perpetuating, as each incident pushes more civilians to join an armed group in order to obtain protection. Allowing the Zarma militia to operate uncontrolled therefore risks worsening already difficult inter-ethnic and inter-communal relations. The terrain on which the transition government treads is particularly shaky: If state officials only appear within these communities to exact taxes or imprison people, then having a state presence may be worse than not having it.

The Nigerien government should not underestimate the *zankai* and invest more resources in seeking to bring the militia group under some sort of state control. Creating a program that makes the *zankai* accountable for their actions – and that could support a future professionalization of such a militia – would allow for more control on the part of Niamey, but it would also mean admitting that such an ethnic-based group exists. Although this public admission of the presence of an ethnic militia would not present a good image of Nigerien management of violence in Tillabéri – both internally and with outside donors – there is an

[26] Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, *HD brokers peace agreement by communities from Banibangou in Niger's Tillabery region* (Niger: Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2023), accessed May 4, 2023.
[27] Series of interviews, Niamey, March 2023.
[28] Series of interviews, Niamey, February 2023.

urgent need for the transition government to put an end to such strategic ignorance and ultimately face the reality that conflict in Niger also happens on an ethnic basis. While the Bazoum administration did an effective job of cooptation within the ranks of the *garde nomade*, it left a heavy legacy with respect to the *zankai.*

If Niamey cannot currently get rid of ethnic militia altogether due to insufficient regular forces, the transition government should strengthen its control over such groups. The *garde nomade* experience provides an interesting example of how to oversee an armed group and make sure they can be held accountable if they attack civilians of members of another ethnic group. A similar level of scrutiny should be applied to the Zarma militia, first of all to understand how many there are and where they are located, and then by striking deals with Zarma military officials, who may have ties with the *zankai*, in order to retain a certain level of control over their actions. This could be done – much like with the *garde nomade* – through informal channels, as the new executive will not have a particular appetite for parading the use of self-defense militia. However, the transition government has the tools and the contacts to be able to control such militia and bring them under its umbrella, especially since many members of the Nigerien Armed Forces are known to be in contact with the Zarma militia.[29] Formal integration might be an inappropriate solution, given that the Nigerien Armed Forces are already mostly from the Zarma ethnic group, but demanding that higher echelons of the army help to contain abuses and violent incidents perpetrated by the *zankai* would be a step in the right direction.

Similarly, European policymakers should accord greater scrutiny to a self-defense militia landscape that is too often presented by the Nigerien state as either non-existent or risk-free. A close understanding of the new government's approach to self-defense militia is a necessary condition for any European military and financial assistance in Tillabéri and Tahoua, even in post-coup Niger. Supporting the Nigerien state financially to recruit new security and defense forces without having integrated some self-defense militia within their ranks – or at least retaining control over these militia – would be a mistake, as it would be promoting programs in areas controlled by ethnic militia without being aware of the context and how to manage it.

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[29] Interview, Niamey, February 2023.

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