



Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. Niger’s Battle to Contain the Islamic State	3
A. The Rise of the Islamic State in Northern Tillabery.....	4
B. Nigerien Militarism Backfires.....	7
C. Niger Tries Outreach	9
D. Militancy Intensifies	11
III. Steps Toward Sidelining the Islamic State in Tillabery	15
A. Dialogue	15
1. Political dialogue with communities.....	15
2. Dialogue with insurgents.....	18
B. Security Arrangements	20
1. Representative recruitment	20
2. Protecting civilians	22
C. Economic Policy, Development and Reform.....	22
1. Easing up on heavy-handed measures.....	23
2. Development assistance	24
3. Land use reform	24
IV. Conclusion	26
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Niger	27
B. Islamic State-related Violence along Mali-Niger Border.....	28
C. About the International Crisis Group	29
D. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2017.....	30
E. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	33

Principal Findings

What's new? Two years ago, Niger suspended counter-terrorism cooperation with Malian militias in northern Tillabery and began trying to counter the Islamic State through outreach to communities where it is present. Since then, however, militants have killed local leaders and launched even deadlier attacks, and Niger has returned to a military approach.

Why does it matter? The escalation of Islamic State attacks in Niger adds to the central Sahel's security crisis. While Niamey has tried several options to contain the jihadists, from force to persuasion, none has worked. The jihadist group is growing stronger, while Nigerien security forces are increasingly evacuating the border area with Mali.

What should be done? The Islamic State is both a security threat and a governance competitor for the state. Niamey should combine various efforts – military, but also political – seeking to address border community grievances, end intercommunal conflicts and engage in dialogue with militants to explore ways to distance them from jihadism.

Executive Summary

In December 2019 and January 2020, Nigerien security forces suffered their deadliest attacks ever, losing scores of troops in ferocious assaults mounted by the Sahel's Islamic State franchise operating in Mali and Niger's Tillabery border region. The militants struck over a year after Niamey suspended working with Malian ethnopolitical militias, a decision taken after authorities saw how that pact triggered bloodletting among competing nomadic tribes in the area, which in turn drove some of them further into the Islamic State's hands. After that, Niger moved toward outreach to Tillabery residents in a bid to win their loyalty back. But these efforts also failed and, following the recent incidents, Niamey embarked on a new offensive. By focusing primarily on a military strategy, the government risks again enflaming local conflicts that the Islamic State could exploit. It should pursue parallel political efforts to build peace among border communities and develop stronger ties with them. In addition, through dialogue, it should probe ways to peel local youths away from jihadist groups.

Following the lethal attacks at the end of 2019, and an initial retreat, Niamey has attempted to regain ground in brutal counter-terrorism operations with the support of and possibly under pressure from France, which maintains thousands of troops in the region. The new military push has already led to an alarming escalation in alleged killings of civilians by security forces, however, creating a situation that jihadists could exploit to win more recruits. A similar situation occurred in 2017-2018, when Niger partnered with Malian ethnic militias that were considered rivals to certain ethnic communities, particularly the Peul, many of whom allied with the Islamic State as a result. Niamey should not make the same, or similar, mistakes again, especially now that it faces a COVID-19 pandemic that threatens to weaken or even immobilise its government and military while also reducing the capacity of the authorities and monitoring organisations to keep an eye on the behaviour of troops on the ground.

Border communities, which have learned to live by the gun in the last two decades, have become increasingly hostile to the state. Niger's government has recently made attempts to woo them back but failed to achieve key goals. Multiple uncoordinated and overlapping state-led dialogue and disarmament initiatives have led to confusion. State-backed efforts to recruit locals into the security forces have also been compromised by nepotism and corruption, resulting in poor recruitment numbers from some constituencies, notably the Peul. It has thus become harder to persuade border zone residents that the government can offer them more than the jihadists, who increasingly present themselves as the state's competition in governance. Nor have locals convinced many of the Islamic State's rank and file to surrender, as Niamey hoped its outreach would sway them to do.

There are limits to what Niger can do, especially since the Islamic State is present not just in Tillabery but also across the border in Mali – and increasingly in neighbouring Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, Niamey's political management of the crisis in Tillabery will be critical if it is to have a chance of thwarting the Islamic State's ascendancy within Nigerien borders. Authorities should deal with the Islamic State not just as a security threat but also as a governance competitor. Its containment will require

Niger to develop an ambitious and coordinated political response to border communities' alienation. Even then authorities must tread delicately, so as not to expose those people to the Islamic State's retaliation if they cooperate with the government.

Niger can start by identifying and working to resolve conflicts among and within border communities, where the Islamic State finds many of its recruits. It should pursue dialogue with the jihadists themselves to explore what might entice them to leave the Islamic State's ranks. Foreign partners – notably France and the U.S. – should take note that, at times, Niger's efforts to build dialogue with Islamic State commanders may require them to step back from pursuing short-term counter-terrorism objectives that present long-term obstacles. Finally, Niamey should apply itself to addressing the grievances, from under-representation of groups such as the Peul in state security forces to land rights, that have alienated Nigeriens living on the country's border with Mali. Addressing those will not bring an immediate end to conflict, but it may begin to create the conditions for a more peaceful future.

Niamey/Dakar/Brussels, 3 June 2020

Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery

I. Introduction

Following a failed military surge against the Islamic State's Sahelian affiliate from 2017 to mid-2018, and subsequent Nigerien government efforts to pursue dialogue with communities where jihadists have taken root, violence is once again spiking in the Mali-Niger border zone of northern Tillabery.

Since April 2019, attacks claimed by the Islamic State have killed multiple local leaders who performed strategic functions for the state as well more than 200 of the security forces, raising fears that Niger, seen by its foreign partners as more stable than its beleaguered neighbours in the central Sahel, may be the next domino in the region to fall. On 13 January 2020, at a summit in the French city of Pau hosted by President Emmanuel Macron, France, Niger and other Sahelian governments issued a joint statement calling for strengthening military capabilities in the region and agreeing to target the Islamic State in the Sahel as a matter of priority. The communiqué also called for the state's return to conflict-affected territories and increased development assistance.¹

In northern Tillabery, as elsewhere in the Sahel, an excessive focus on counter-terrorism has however resulted in the overuse of military tools for a conflict that is fundamentally driven by inter- and intra-communal competition over rights and resources, which the Islamic State has exploited. Counter-terrorism strategies seeking to weaken jihadist groups are neither illegitimate nor unfounded, but the way they have been conducted in Niger has often enflamed the situations they seek to calm. These strategies have, for example, accelerated the militarisation of border communities and fuelled the stigmatisation of members of the Peul nomadic group, whom other local communities often regard as the Islamic State's closest collaborators on the ground. They have also led to killings of civilians who are accused of being or are mistaken for Islamic State elements. As Niamey mounts a new counter-terrorism push in response to the surging violence along the border, local communities in northern Tillabery are already alleging that military operations have caused scores of civilian deaths.²

Amid this disorder, the Islamic State affiliate will look to gain more ground, having already acquired legitimacy in the eyes of some Tillabery residents as a force better able than the state to protect its local allies and to deliver basic services, including security. Niger is searching for a response that will weaken the Islamic State, but it is struggling to come up with new ideas after a slew of approaches has largely failed.

This report, building on another published in 2018, is part of a series exploring policies aimed at curbing violence and countering the spread of jihadism in the cen-

¹ See "G5 Sahel – Pau Summit – Statement by the Heads of State", French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 13 January 2020.

² See discussion in Section II.D below.

tral Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.³ Research was carried out primarily in June and October 2019 and February 2020 in Niamey, where Crisis Group interviewed senior political and military officials, local and regional elected officials, traditional leaders, mediators, Peul militia leaders, Tillabery civil society leaders, intelligence operatives and diplomats.

³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°261, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018.

II. Niger's Battle to Contain the Islamic State

The Islamic State's Sahel affiliate is at present the most potent security threat in Niger, if not the entire region. Its emir, Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, first swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliph, in 2015.⁴ Born in Western Sahara, Sahraoui emigrated as a student to Algeria, eventually travelling to north-eastern Mali where he became spokesman for the al-Qaeda splinter group Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).⁵ After Sahraoui switched his loyalty to the Islamic State in 2015, his group launched a series of attacks in Niger and Burkina Faso. Thereafter, it expanded its control of territory from the Ménaka region of Mali into the Tillabery region of Niger, where it won global notoriety for the killing of four U.S. Green Berets in 2017, and into the Sahel and East regions of Burkina Faso. Tightening their grip on the tri-border area by building alliances with diverse communities, Sahraoui's fighters have inflicted substantial casualties upon the security forces of all three states in recent months.

The Islamic State's encroachment from Mali into Niger's northern Tillabery region, whose district capital is just 112km from the federal capital, Niamey, has confounded the authorities. After an initial dialogue effort with the militants fell apart, in mid-2017, Niger authorised operations by Malian ethnic armed groups nominally allied with the government in Bamako and close to French military forces.⁶ Sweeps by these groups initially pushed back the Islamic State but aggravated community relations on the ground, with the Tuareg and Daosahak armed groups from Mali often targeting Peul they accused of collaborating with the jihadists, sparking reprisals. Realising that the operations were in fact adding to instability, Niger embarked on a policy from July 2018 onward of outreach to local populations.

This policy has also been less than successful: Islamic State influence continues to spread among not only Peul, but also Tuareg, Djerma and Daosahak communities. Local leaders who collaborate with the Nigerien government have been assassinated. Jihadist attacks have returned and become far deadlier, especially toward the end of 2019.

⁴ Sahraoui's 2015 declaration of fealty to Baghdadi is referred to in Camilo Casola, "Jihad and Instability in the Sahel: The Extent of a Crisis", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 10 May 2019. An audio recording of his *bay'ah*, or oath of allegiance, dated 13 May 2015, is on file with Crisis Group.

⁵ Born and raised in the late 1970s in the Moroccan-controlled Western Saharan Laayoune region, Sahraoui went to Algeria during the civil war between the government and various Islamist insurgencies in the 1990s. Prior to joining MUJAO in 2011, Sahraoui also spent time in the Sahrawi refugee camps at Tindouf, Algeria, run by Polisario, the movement that seeks Western Sahara's independence. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in a previous capacity, Algiers and Tindouf, 2017. For a fuller biography, see Benjamin Roger, "Tracking Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, West Africa's Most Wanted Jihadist", *The Africa Report*, 12 February 2020. Details of Sahraoui's role as MUJAO spokesman can be found in Pauline Le Roux, "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 10 June 2019.

⁶ France's Operation Barkhane developed formal cooperation with these armed groups, probably starting in September 2017. Crisis Group interviews, French military officers and officials, Dakar and Paris, 2018.

A. *The Rise of the Islamic State in Northern Tillabery*

The Islamic State's leadership has proven expert at mobilising local communities to their side, using the border zone between Niger and Mali as an important recruiting ground to bolster their forces. Initially, Sahraoui made inroads with the Peul, whose herders in recent decades have found themselves trapped between the expansion of agriculture into their southerly grazing lands and increased competition with Tuareg and Daosahak nomads in the northern ones.⁷ In 2012, as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad armed young Tuareg and Daosahak fighters and a coalition of jihadist groups took control of Mali's Gao region, some Peul fighters joined the jihadist camp, turning to MUJAO for protection.⁸ As a MUJAO commander, Sahraoui was instrumental in welcoming Peul fighters from northern Tillabery, many of whom had already learned to live by the gun during years of communal conflict.

The Islamic State's alliance with Peul communities was to prove invaluable for Sahraoui's survival and growth as a jihadist leader. When the January 2013 French intervention to expel jihadists from northern Mali's major towns scattered militants, Sahraoui, once MUJAO's governor of Gao city, was forced to flee into hiding.⁹ Peul fighters and nomads facilitated his flight into the Mali-Niger borderlands, where he embedded himself further into their community affairs.¹⁰

As MUJAO set up communication channels for reporting crimes and sought to win the trust of local populations by administering its form of justice and restoring order, some communities also began to perceive jihadist groups not only as protectors but also potentially legitimate rulers of their territories (or in any case enjoying greater legitimacy than rebels or the state).¹¹ As he established himself in the area, Sahraoui declared allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, founding the group that would become popularly known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and naming himself its emir.¹²

Exploiting the Malian state's absence along the border, Islamic State leaders extended their chapter's writ over the vast Mali-Niger frontier, multiplying their numbers of fighters and gaining influence in areas where the al-Qaeda-backed Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Musilmin (JNIM) had also developed networks, without coming

⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

⁸ The alignment of some Nigerien Peul fighters with the Islamic State's Sahel affiliate has been decades in the making. Since the 1990s, cycles of violence linked to rebellion and land disputes have pitted the Peul of Tillabery against other groups, with young Peul men, like their Tuareg and Daosahak neighbours, becoming progressively more specialised in fighting. Overall, the lines between civilians and militants have become increasingly blurred as young men took up arms to protect their communities and belongings. See Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

⁹ See Jean-Hervé Jezequel and Vincent Foucher, "Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural", Crisis Group Commentary, 11 January 2017.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. See also Sahraoui's audio message giving *bay'ah* to Baghdadi, op. cit. The faction seems not to have adopted the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara as a name for itself. It is unclear where this name originated or how it gained currency.

into conflict with them.¹³ The Islamic State also forged new alliances beyond the Peul, targeting factions of the Tuareg, Daosahak and Djerma communities, using intimidation tactics but also providing important services like protection against raids and animal theft.¹⁴

Sahraoui's Islamic State chapter thus went from being one of several jihadist groups based in the border zone to virtually dominating the entire space. Tactically, its implantation across the zone has also delivered important advantages on the battlefield. Rather than needing to occupy particular towns or villages, the Islamic State can call upon diffuse forces across the border region to mobilise, such that, when a call is issued, dozens of fighters on motorbikes can suddenly appear out of nowhere to swarm a target and then melt back quickly into the bush once they have executed their attack. Fighting in this manner maximises the impact and surprise of Islamic State operations and makes it virtually impossible for the authorities and their international allies to target Islamic State fighters with airstrikes.

Though the Islamic State has developed a reputation elsewhere for mass atrocities against heterodox Muslims and non-Muslims, its Sahel affiliate has generally adhered to an approach that appears designed to win the trust and cooperation of northern Tillabery's Sunni Muslims.¹⁵ The group is known to assassinate those who collaborate with the state, especially local chiefs, but it has for the most part eschewed large-scale targeting of civilians in northern Tillabery.¹⁶

Locals also often perceive the Islamic State as a ruling authority competent in resolving land disputes and providing services like protecting livestock against raiders.¹⁷ Cattle rustling is the foremost concern for nomads living along the border, where loss of herds in a raid can devastate a family for decades.¹⁸ Locals say Nigerien security forces do little to prevent raids or recover stolen animals.¹⁹ In return for this

¹³ Precise figures are impossible to get. Some Nigerien and international security sources estimate that the Islamic State affiliate counted fewer than 80 members in 2017 and boasted as many as 400 in 2019. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. See also "Why Niger and Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad", Reuters, 12 November 2017.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. See also "Why Niger and Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad", op. cit. Djerma militants in Tingara in the Ouallam department as well as Tuareg from the Inatès area are now increasingly aligned with Sahraoui or JNIM.

¹⁵ Indeed, it is unclear how much cooperation there really is between the Sahel chapter and the central Islamic State. The Islamic State's central media ignored Sahraoui's 2015 pledge for over a year and then only rarely mentioned his group. In October 2019, *Al-Naba*, the Islamic State's weekly newsletter, released its first output relating to the Sahel chapter and subsequently began highlighting the group more frequently. In doing so, however, it collapsed the group with the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), based in northern Nigeria, and referred to both as one entity. On its end, the Sahel chapter has communicated through third-party outlets like Mauritanian news sites and released its own videos, such as a March 2019 clip in which a Daosahak Islamic State commander chastises Daosahak militiamen for fighting alongside Barkhane and urges them "to repent and return to their religion". See tweet by MENASTREAM, research consultancy, @MENASTREAM, 11:16pm, 30 March 2019. For background on ISWAP, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019.

¹⁶ Notable exceptions nevertheless include reprisal killings of Daosahak and Tuareg civilians in Mali in April 2018, amid militia strikes against the Peul.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

measure of order and protection, civilians tolerate the *zakat* (or taxes) taken by the Islamic State, which they prefer to the *razzia* (or raids) inflicted on them previously.²⁰ The Islamic State has thus won the loyalty of local nomadic warriors, such as Doundoun Cheffou and Petit Chafari. They are both Peul pastoralists who first took up arms to advance their own interests and to protect their livestock from Tuareg and Daosahak raiders, but who now command complex Islamic State attacks against national and foreign targets.²¹

The militant group has also used intimidation to keep communities in check. While building trust with villagers and nomads, Sahraoui's commanders have created networks of informants on the ground who provide intelligence on the movements and strategies of the state and its proxies, such that locals dare not betray the Islamic State.²² Locals have become increasingly reluctant to report on militants' movements for fear of revenge. "When Abou Walid's men come through our area, we do not alert security forces for two reasons", a tribal chief from the border area said. "First, we think the army will not act. Second, we are afraid. Those bandits will kill us if they find out we ratted on them".²³

Life under Islamic State control can be austere, and even bleak, but local communities often believe that the cost to personal freedoms is a price worth paying in return for the security they receive. On the one hand, villagers suffer jihadists' constraints on religious practice and tradition. Music and parties are forbidden, and weddings now feel like funerals, they say, while customs that let women choose partners are taboo, although traditional Tijani Sufi brotherhood preaching is still allowed in some mosques.²⁴ But some Peul in particular see the Islamic State affiliate as a necessary bulwark against a state that has preyed upon them.²⁵ "Many Peul believe that were it not for Sahraoui, they would be dead", said a notable Peul, referring to the protec-

²⁰ "It's like the jihadists replaced the Tuareg raiders who came for years to steal our animals. Jihadists come once a year, and take one of every 60 goats and sheep, plus one of every 30 cows. Before, it was *razzia*, and they would take everything. My father had everything taken and was killed by Imghad in 2002. I have only twenty head of cattle so they haven't taken any from me. There is more security with Abou Walid's men than before but it's the state that should be providing security. Nothing was ever done to look for my father's stolen cattle". Crisis Group interview, northern Tillabery tribal chief, Niamey, October 2019.

²¹ See, for instance, "Why Niger and Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad", op. cit.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, October 2019.

²⁴ Many see the origins of stricter interpretations of Islam in the rise of reformist Izala Salafi ideology, established in northern Nigeria in 1978 to challenge "innovative" practices by Sufi brotherhoods in the region. In some villages, those worshipping at small mudbrick Tijani mosques have viewed the rise of larger Gulf-funded cement mosques with suspicion for years. Izalas, however, do not welcome the presence of jihadist groups. Crisis Group interview, Tijani village chief from Inatès, Niamey, October 2019.

²⁵ "He doesn't close schools, and he doesn't order executions or amputations. Women and children feel safest under him", a local NGO leader said. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2019. In September 2019, a report circulated that as many as 100 schools had been closed for the 2019-2020 academic year. Some schools shut their doors following attacks by Malian militias. Most were closed by the state given the high levels of insecurity and teachers' reluctance to travel to these areas for work. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019.

tion his community received from Sahraoui during the state-sponsored counter-terror campaigns of July 2017 and February 2018, which killed Peul civilians.²⁶

B. *Nigerien Militarism Backfires*

As the influence of jihadist groups at the Malian border grew, Nigerien officials explored opportunities to negotiate with them. But early openings for dialogue gradually shut down as the state and its foreign partners moved toward a more militarised approach. French and Nigerien political and military authorities were often divided among themselves about the merits of dialogue as a way of dealing with the Islamic State.²⁷

In 2016, Nigerien emissaries opened talks with Islamic State representatives to negotiate the liberation of a national guardsman who had been captured in an attack on his post that killed six.²⁸ The guardsman was freed but further negotiations broke down as hardliners in the government and armed forces put a brake on dialogue. France, meanwhile, carried out new airstrikes in the Mali-Niger border zone in February 2017 while these negotiations were ongoing. It also urged the government not to release fighters arrested by its Sahelian counter-terrorism military operation, titled Barkhane, as part of any dialogue process.²⁹ On their side, militants, at that time less unified under Islamic State command than they are today, were unable to formulate the kind of political platform that would have created a basis for negotiations. Talks therefore petered out.

From mid-2017 to mid-2018, Niger and Barkhane allied with Malian militias, namely the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), mostly recruiting among local Daosahak, and the Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defence Group (GATIA). Both groups are members of a coalition of armed groups, known as Plateforme, working with Bamako; GATIA is also a group signatory to the 2015 inter-Malian peace agreement. GATIA and MSA conducted joint operations, mostly in Mali's Ménaka region, but they also were active in northern Tillabery. Even when not directly involved in operations, Niger authorised cross-border strikes by the Malian groups and provided them with fuel.³⁰

While the armed groups had some success against the Islamic State, they also inflicted heavy casualties on the civilian population, aggravating community tensions further and pushing more Peul to ally with the jihadists. During February and May 2018, the alliance killed over two hundred presumed militants and apparently weakened the Islamic State affiliate, but also caused scores of civilian deaths in the border

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

²⁸ See, for instance, Ruth Maclean, "Niger Islamic State hostage: 'They want to kill foreign soldiers'", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2018.

²⁹ According to French military officials, Operation Barkhane informs the government each time an operation will be carried out on Nigerien territory.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

zone.³¹ As this counter-terrorism campaign progressed, it became clear the operations were both falling short of neutralising the Islamic State and leading to an escalation in brutal intercommunal killings. These killings tended to involve rival Peul, Daosahak and Tuareg armed groups affiliated with either the Islamic State or Malian militias.³²

Against this backdrop, what Operation Barkhane considered counter-terrorism operations undertaken in coordination with MSA and GATIA were widely perceived in Tillabery as France and Niger supporting Tuaregs and Daosahak in an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Peul.³³

Faced with a rising civilian death toll, in July 2018, authorities in Niamey quietly stopped operations involving the Malian militias, aware that openly collaborating with them had arguably caused more problems than it had solved.³⁴ In October, Barkhane also went on to reduce substantially its own alliance with militias operating in the border regions.

The decision came after MSA militiamen called in French air support for a raid on ostensible jihadists, which resulted in targeting a baptism ceremony that killed three women and a four-month-old, all from the Peul community.³⁵ Barkhane acknowledged its participation in the strike but took no responsibility for the deaths, saying it was “impossible to identify the source of the shots” that killed the women and infant.³⁶ Although it revoked militias’ authorisation for cross-border operations, Niamey did not cut all ties with them; the government continued to see MSA and GATIA as vital partners on the Malian side of the border, given the absence of Malian state forces there.³⁷

In carrying out raids on civilians, Malian militias had the perverse effect of strengthening the reach and perceived legitimacy of the Islamic State on the ground. Communities, especially among the Peul, saw Niger as complicit in the massacres. According to state officials and civil society figures, MSA and GATIA raids on Nigerian border communities had resulted in the killings of civilians, including women and children, and included attacks on nomad camps.³⁸ Even though groups affiliated with the Islamic State committed similar atrocities against Tuareg and Daosahak civilians in the same timeframe, a new wave of vulnerable-feeling men from the region left to join jihadist or self-defence groups that cooperated with them. For instance, it was

³¹ Estimates differ among sources, with the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database reporting 65 killed and Peul associations putting the number at 99. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2018.

³² During the operations, community groups, media and non-governmental organisations including Crisis Group sounded the alarm with respect to the community-level killings. Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit. The Peul-focused Kisal Observatory provided vital updates on strikes in remote rural areas. See also “Niger : 17 morts lors d’une attaque à Aghay, près de la frontière malienne”, RFI, 19 May 2018.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rémi Carayol, “A la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l’alliance coupable de l’armée française”, *Mediapart*, 29 November 2018.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

³⁸ Ibid.

not until 2018 that a Peul militant group at Ikarafane, in western Niger along the Malian border, accepted assistance from jihadists.³⁹

The fallout therefore directly undermined the Nigerien military's objectives, which focused on weakening the group's presence in northern Tillabery. Indeed, faced with a strong external threat, different borderland groups with informal links to each other integrated and unified under the Islamic State's apparent leadership.⁴⁰

C. *Niger Tries Outreach*

Even though military operations backfired in these ways, they pushed the Islamic State back. By September 2018, the group had temporarily receded from parts of northern Tillabery under heavy military pressure.

Nigerien authorities were keen to welcome back local fighters who had joined the militants but who they assumed would now be more willing to demobilise. Seeking to win them over, the authorities launched a new outreach campaign designed to rebuild trust and persuade insurgents to disarm. Heading this campaign was the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP), a council mandated by the government of President Mahamadou Issoufou with tackling the roots of insecurity in Tillabery. The government's approach would be based largely on offering immunity from prosecution to low-level militants who disarmed and surrendered to their tribal chiefs. Officials had to overcome resistance in parts of the military, where there was more of an appetite for vengeance than amnesty.⁴¹ "We wanted to open a window of opportunity for those who accept to come back to not be harassed", a senior adviser to the government said.⁴²

As part of its demobilisation strategy, the HACP also started a recruitment process, trying to win broader support in Tillabery by promising to enrol more locals in the security forces and working with selected chiefs to channel food aid toward target communities. It hosted a forum at Banibangou in northern Tillabery on 7-8 September 2018, aimed at familiarising communities with the security forces. The forum was attended by officials of a special military operation named Dongo, which was launched in 2017 to fight cross-border Mali-based militants, and representatives from the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a coalition of security forces from Sahel countries.⁴³ The HACP used the occasion to convey that young militiamen could safely return

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. This group of roughly 100-200 mainly Tolebe and Wodaabe militants first organised under the name Korore ("those who have camped") in the early 2000s. In 2018, they allied with the Islamic State against the MSA. In 2019, they reportedly carried out the October attack that killed five elite gendarmes and the December attack that killed seven gendarmes and seven National Guard soldiers escorting a mission of the Independent Electoral Commission to register voters in the Abala department.

⁴⁰ The Arab-led Katiba Salaheddine and a group of Tolebe Fulani (a Peul subgroup originating in the Mali-Niger border area) that defected from the Macina Front, both joined ISGS during this time. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. See also Héni Nsaibia, "Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", ACLED, 21 March 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, October 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2019.

⁴³ Operation Dongo gave way to Operation Almahaou (meaning "whirlwind" in Djerma) after the Chinegodrar attack in January 2020.

with no conditions. It appointed roughly a dozen influential Peul with broad ties to militants throughout the zone as *chargés de mission* and started a process aiming to integrate 200 recruits from northern Tillabery into the armed forces.⁴⁴

The dual objective was to facilitate the surrender of fighters and create more jobs in the security services for excluded border communities, especially the Peul, in order to rebuild their trust in the state, but the results were disappointing. Although the HACP initially claimed that hundreds of fighters surrendered following the forum at Banibangou, community leaders say tribal chiefs inflated the numbers in order to receive food aid; even senior officials admit the real number is much lower, and could be just a handful, if that.⁴⁵

The process of recruiting security forces from within border communities also set off new controversies. During the recruitment drives, many Peul were reluctant to join. Reports also emerged of Peul being rejected for dubious “medical reasons”.⁴⁶ According to senior army officers and community leaders, the process suffered some of the same setbacks army recruitments often face in Niger: posts were awarded under opaque circumstances, favouring some communities and regions over others, creating resentment and fuelling fears.⁴⁷

Finally, the HACP struggled to overcome what its officials began privately referring to as the “Peul problem”.⁴⁸ Peul communities perceived the HACP, headed by a Tuareg general close to President Issoufou, as an ally of the Tuareg and Daosahak militias that had attacked them.⁴⁹ In addition to a trust problem with the Peul, the HACP struggled to connect with relevant community leaders. For, as discussed below, it turned out that the Nigerien authorities had claimed victory too soon, overestimating how much the militias had weakened the Islamic State.⁵⁰ The violence continued, tearing communities apart, while new local leaders linked to regional militants emerged and altered the political landscape on the ground.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, HACP officials, June and October 2019.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Dakar, September 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. Some officials indicated recruitments intended to form a Nigerien border corps composed of Tillabery residents, fuelling fears among the Peul in particular that Niger could be planning an ethnic paramilitary force not unlike Mali's GATIA and MSA.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Peul representative, Niamey, October 2019. Furthermore, as an HACP official noted, “We invited the militias because we saw them as partners who could help us understand these problems and find solutions. The Peul community never liked the relationship between the HACP and these militias but other communities did not have a problem with it”. Crisis Group telephone interview, HACP official, January 2020.

⁵⁰ Televised interview with General Mahamadou Abou Tarka, HACP president, video, YouTube, 9 October 2018.

⁵¹ For more on the risks of politicising Niger's traditional chieftaincies, especially in northern Tillabery, see Abdourahmane Idrissa, “Traditional Authorities in Niger: Politicization and Underrepresentation”, in Fransje Molenaar et al., *The Status Quo Defied*, Clingendael Institute, August 2019, pp. 52-78.

D. *Militancy Intensifies*

With Niamey failing to make progress in either winning the loyalty of local communities or peeling off jihadist-aligned militants, the Islamic State had the opportunity to regroup and mount a renewed insurgency. Its fighters became more skilled at dispersing as Barkhane forces, overstretched, lurched from one hotspot to another, circling especially around the Gourma region along the western bank of the Niger river.⁵²

Starting in April 2019, the region saw a spike in assassinations and abductions, with many local officials fearing that the Islamic State was targeting individuals perceived by the jihadists to be collaborating with the state.⁵³ The violence occurred amid a deterioration in intercommunal relations and a rash of score settling motivated by local grievances. As the killings cleared the ground of many important local community leaders allied with the government, the Islamic State also conducted a series of heavy strikes against military positions.

These assassinations seemed to echo the strategy of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which has systematically targeted civilian collaborators of the state, including Muslims whom the organisation deems “apostates”. Practically, this violence might serve multiple goals, including shocking communities into submission, discouraging cooperation with a state that appears incapable of offering protection, and robbing the state of key nodes in its intelligence apparatus. Some in the government, however, insist that the killings are evidence that jihadists feel threatened because Niamey’s community outreach strategy is working.⁵⁴ Others from the region see the killings not as the Islamic State’s work, but as a result of inter- or intra-communal score settling.⁵⁵

A central incident relating to this trend was the 11 April 2019 abduction of Oumarou “Kiro” Roua, a prominent mediator who had been facilitating dialogue involving the state, Islamic State leaders and Peul armed groups since 2016. His disappearance underscored the challenges for the state, which was attempting to negotiate with jihadists while parts of its security services were still engaged in planning military operations against the Islamic State and its allies on the ground. Local accounts suggest that the mediator was accused of betrayal by jihadist militants who kidnapped him and charged him with complicity in a plot to kill local Islamic State leaders, eventually sentencing him to death.⁵⁶ If accurate, unconfirmed reports of his execution suggest that the Islamic State and its affiliates remain deeply suspicious of state-backed dialogue initiatives, interpreting them as part of a military campaign designed to eliminate jihadist leaders.⁵⁷ For some in the government and security forces, the reports of Kiro’s execution are an additional reason for opposing dialogue.⁵⁸

In northern Tillabery, tensions between and within communities, exacerbated by the wider conflict in the region, have also made the environment ripe for violent score settling among many actors and provided the Islamic State with ways to widen

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

the divides. The commune of Inatès, run by a nomadic administrative unit consisting of 57 tribes, mainly Tuareg but including seven Peul tribes, and comprising 5,000-10,000 people, emerged as a front line for these sorts of dynamics. Inatès has experienced both intra-Tuareg and Tuareg-Peul violence in recent years. By 2019, with the state and security forces on the back foot, communities like Inatès increasingly saw themselves as having two options: submitting to mass displacement or turning to Islamic State militants for protection.

Against this backdrop, communal leaders who chose to remain loyal to the state were often killed off. On 25 April 2019, militants assassinated Arrisal Amdagh, the Tuareg *chef de groupement* of Inatès and also a key state partner.⁵⁹ He was active with the HACP, participating in its regional mediation and recruitment efforts. Rightly or wrongly, some Peul either saw him as complicit in or blamed him for failing to prevent a previous massacre at Aghay just 2km from the Malian border in May 2018, where Tuareg militants, including suspected GATIA members, killed seventeen Peul civilians – among them eleven in a mosque.⁶⁰ The Aghay massacre, which followed the killing of seventeen Tuareg by Peul militants in Mali in the preceding weeks, drove more Peul into the Islamic State's hands and heightened suspicions that Arrisal's killing was planned by aggrieved Peul working with the jihadist group.⁶¹

Arrisal's successor quickly met a similar fate. Almoubacher ag Alamjadi, a Niamey-based national guard veteran rumoured to work for the Nigerien intelligence services and Arrisal's nephew, was assassinated in July, three months after his appointment. The Islamic State claimed credit for both the Arrisal and Almoubacher assassinations, deeming them important enough to mention in *Al-Naba*, its weekly newsletter for its global membership. The publication referred to Almoubacher as "a client of the apostate Nigerien regime and Christian forces in the region" and denounced him for ignoring warnings to desist from recruiting members of his clan to go to army training camps in Niamey.⁶² By the end of that month, an estimated half of the commune's 30,000 residents had fled.⁶³

Since then, the Inatès interim chief has not dared leave Tillabery city (the district capital) to visit the commune over which he presides, severing its political ties to the state.

Many other state allies have resettled in Niamey or Tillabery city, unwilling to circulate in their respective home communes amid a slew of further assassinations and

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019. See also "Niger : 17 morts lors d'une attaque à Aghay, près de la frontière malienne", *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019. Other sources with close knowledge of the region, however, say Arrisal was killed in revenge for turning over a Tuareg jihadist who also had links to the Islamic State and to Iyad ag Ghali, the Malian Tuareg jihadi leader of JNIM, the coalition backed by al-Qaeda. The arrest apparently followed Arrisal's reported denunciation of this Tuareg jihadist lieutenant, which provoked a split between Tuaregs who supported the jihadists and those who backed the state. The killing of Arrisal and his relatives six months later strengthened the side supporting jihadists. Four other members of the Inatès chieftaincy were killed on their way to Arrisal's funeral when their vehicle struck a mine. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019.

⁶² *Al-Naba*, 25 July 2019, p. 6.

⁶³ "Note sur la situation actuelle dans la commune d'Inatès Tillabéri-Niger", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, August 2019.

abductions. For example, on 19 May, armed men on motorbikes kidnapped the Peul *chef de groupement* of Abala, a larger *groupement* than Inatès, who was thought to be providing intelligence to the state.⁶⁴ He is presumed dead.⁶⁵ In the weeks that followed, the son of the *chef de village* of Ezza, a Hausa with close links to Nigerien security forces, narrowly escaped kidnapping. He and his father fled.⁶⁶ In June, a Bankilare village chief was abducted and reported dead.⁶⁷ In September, heavily armed men snatched the brother of the village chief of Banibangou.⁶⁸ In coordinated attacks on 22 November, militants killed two *chefs de village* in Ouallam.⁶⁹

In tandem with whatever role it played in the assassinations, the Islamic State also stepped up its attacks on military targets in Niger beginning in early 2019.⁷⁰ As the year progressed, its militancy intensified. The escalation was in some ways to be expected. Malian militias with strong intelligence networks and intimate knowledge of the terrain were no longer conducting raids there, while Operation Barkhane had shifted its attention to the Malian Gourma region. Less military pressure against jihadists in the Mali-Niger border had left them with time and space to regroup.

In May, militants staged an ambush that killed 28 Nigerien soldiers near Tongo, in the Ouallam district. In June, the Islamic State damaged a U.S. vehicle with a roadside bomb and shot down a French helicopter.⁷¹ Niger's army, supported by French special forces and U.S. aerial surveillance, countered with attacks on both sides of the border, with authorities claiming they killed eighteen jihadists.⁷² In return, Islamic State gunmen stormed a military post near Inatès using two explosive-laden vehicles to gain entry, killing themselves and eighteen soldiers inside on 1 July in one of their most complex attacks on state security forces.⁷³ Five gendarmes from the Nigerien Groupe d'Action Rapide de Surveillance et Intervention (GARSI) were also killed in an ambush near Abarey in October 2019. In November 2019, in Mali, an Islamic State attack on a military post at Indelimane, near the Niger border, killed at least 53 Malian soldiers. This incident led the Malian military to draw down troops from the border in a way that left Nigerien army positions more vulnerable to Islamic State attacks emanating from Mali.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019.

⁶⁵ "Insécurité : enlèvement par des individus armés du chef du groupement peul de Didiga (Tillabéri)", *ActuNiger*, 19 May 2019.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Tillabery leaders, October 2019.

⁶⁷ "Niger/Bankilaré : un chef traditionnel local kidnappé", *Aïr Info*, 14 June 2019.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Tillabery leaders, October 2019.

⁶⁹ "Niger : 2 chefs coutumiers tués et 2 civils enlevés près de la frontière malienne", Anadolu Agency, 22 November 2019.

⁷⁰ In the first six months of 2018, by contrast, Islamic State militants carried out only one attack on Nigerien security forces in Tillabery, killing three gendarmes at a checkpoint. An attack on 1 August killed one soldier south of Inatès. Four soldiers were wounded in an IED explosion on 31 January in the Titahoune area. During this period, the Islamic State was under sustained assault by Malian militias.

⁷¹ A specialist from ISWAP in northern Nigeria reportedly carried out this operation. Crisis Group telephone interview, Dakar, October 2019.

⁷² The Islamic State affiliate's killing of eighteen soldiers at Inatès weeks later may have been in retaliation for this killing.

⁷³ "IS claims Niger attack that killed 18 soldiers", AFP, 4 July 2019. In September 2019, President Issoufou accused Kidal-based Malian rebel groups of having links to this attack. The charge may be related to the alleged collusion between the Tuareg jihadist lieutenant and Iyad ag Ghali.

The attacks seriously called into question the capacity of Niger's armed forces to tackle the threat posed by the Islamic State. In December 2019, a major attack on the Inatès military post crowned months of mounting violence, killing more than 70 soldiers.⁷⁴ Jihadists were able to cut the post's communications before storming it.⁷⁵ Weeks later, an even larger assault on a military post at Chingodrar killed at least 89 soldiers. Following this attack, frightened Nigerien soldiers fled from their camp at Ekrafane, the next military post to the east along the Malian border, and resettled further south in the more populated location of Abala.⁷⁶ The Nigerien government, meanwhile, replaced its military chief of staff and the head of the army.⁷⁷

Since the January Pau summit, Nigerien and French forces have gone back on the offensive. Yet they are grim about their chances of success. A senior political adviser to the government remarked, "We are in an offensive now, but you cannot win an offensive against an enemy you cannot see who is not in your territory".⁷⁸

At the same time, the civilian toll is already reportedly mounting. A document signed on 3 April 2020, stamped by the Inatès mayor's office and seen by Crisis Group, lists the names of 102 male civilians in the Ayorou district who are missing and believed to have been killed by the Nigerien army, most of them Tuareg and Daosahak, according to local sources. According to the document, 48 were arrested around the Ayorou market on 29 March, and 54 others were taken from their camps or near wells. The document cites witness accounts of new mass graves discovered at Tagabatt and Ingoul in the communes of Inatès and Ayorou.⁷⁹ Shortly after these allegations circulated, the defence minister issued a statement in which he commended contingents participating in military operations in northern Tillabery for their professionalism and respect for human rights. He announced that a public investigation would soon clear Niger's security forces of any wrongdoing.⁸⁰

Reports of incidents like these, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic could prevent monitors from Niamey and civil society from reaching the areas where operations are happening, are likely to alienate the civilian population along the border and intensify resentment. The Islamic State would be in a strong position to exploit the ill feeling.

⁷⁴ See Hannah Armstrong, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inatès", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 December 2019.

⁷⁵ See "Niger – Attaque d'Inatès : Au moins 70 militaires tués et des dizaines portés disparus", *L'Événement Niger*, 11 December 2019.

⁷⁶ "Après l'attaque de Chinagoder, le Niger change de hiérarchie militaire", RFI, 14 January 2020.

⁷⁷ These dismissals may also be linked to a major mismanagement scandal at the ministry of Defence or to calculations of patronage during an election year. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, February 2020.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, June 2019.

⁷⁹ "Liste nominative des personnes arrêtés par l'armée nigérienne, recherchées par les communautés", Inatès Mayor's Office, 3 April 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Dakar, April 2020. See also "Sahel : les forces de défense et de sécurité, nouvelle menace pour les populations ?", *Le Point Afrique*, 7 May 2020.

⁸⁰ "Communiqué du Ministre de la Défense Nationale", Nigerien Ministry of Defence, 22 April 2020.

III. Steps Toward Sidelining the Islamic State in Tillabery

The December 2019 and January 2020 attacks that, all told, killed 160 soldiers underscore the seriousness of Niger's security problem on its border with Mali. Once perceived by the authorities as a problem of small-scale banditry affecting mainly a minority of nomadic groups, northern Tillabery is now home to a multidimensional security crisis that the Islamic State is exploiting with ever-increasing deftness.⁸¹

Addressing this crisis has already been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens to further weaken and immobilise Niger's government and military.⁸² The pandemic creates an added challenge for French and Nigerien security forces, who live and work in close quarters under already difficult conditions and, by the same token, could enhance the Islamic State's operational advantages. The latter could seize upon a virus-related weakening of Nigerien and French military positions to stage new attacks on border posts, pushing the state to retreat even further.

How Niamey responds politically to the challenges it is facing in northern Tillabery will be at least as important as security measures to combat militants. As Crisis Group noted in a 2018 report, Niger and its partners, "should adopt an approach that includes military operations – clearly still a critical component of the response – but better subordinates them to a political strategy that includes efforts to calm intercommunal conflicts and engage militants, is defined by Sahelian societies themselves and is more in tune to their needs".⁸³ In crafting an approach along these lines, Niamey will need to make judicious use of the three main policy tools it has at its disposal, namely political dialogue, security arrangements and economic development.

A. Dialogue

1. Political dialogue with communities

Military operations alone will not achieve Niger's objectives in northern Tillabery, particularly if they once again stir the hornet's nest of intercommunal tensions. Dialogue between Niamey and Tillabery communities will thus be indispensable to rebuilding state presence in the countryside. Practically speaking, however, authorities will have to contend with a number of factors that have stymied previous dialogue efforts.

One such factor is a lack of coordination between the state's different institutions when trying to win the loyalty of aggrieved communities. On the one hand, efforts to stabilise northern Tillabery have benefited from the experience and resources of the HACP, a unique institution in the central Sahel, which has worked hard to assuage grievances in communities that feel excluded from state decision-making. As mentioned above, the HACP has played an important role in attempting to facilitate surrenders of insurgents, encouraging security forces and communities to work more

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, February 2020.

⁸² By 2 April, four French soldiers under the aegis of Operation Barkhane had tested positive for the coronavirus. See "Ce que l'on sait des 4 militaires français de l'opération Barkhane touchés par le Covid-19", *L'Express*, 2 April 2020.

⁸³ See Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

closely together, giving border zone dwellers a chance to be recruited into the security forces, and offering immediate-impact development projects. Recognising the importance of a political strategy for dealing with the insurgency, HACP President General Mahamadou Abou Tarka has said:

These aren't simply terrorists – this is an insurgency. They have a political project, political Islam. Does the state have a political offer to present to the communities in return? Political dialogue with communities means realising that a young Peul who attacks Niger is thinking, “What did Niger ever do for us?” Political dialogue with communities means becoming more aware of this exclusion and thinking of ways to overcome it.⁸⁴

On the other hand, the HACP has struggled with a legitimacy problem in northern Tillabery, where (as noted above) it is perceived as lacking neutrality, notably because for many Peul there, the HACP's Tuareg leadership and alleged proximity to Malian militias compromise it.⁸⁵

In addition, uncoordinated processes involving the HACP and other institutional actors have resulted in overlapping and confused dialogue endeavours, undermining efforts to develop clear strategies for engaging with communities. In 2018, for example, Niger's interior minister, Mohamed Bazoum, appointed some fifteen Peul leaders to a committee and encouraged them to work together to structure their demands.⁸⁶ But soon after the committee was launched, a partner NGO working with the HACP suggested, with the interior ministry's agreement, diversifying it to include representatives of other communities.⁸⁷ The committee then doubled in size, with its character fundamentally changing from being a Peul committee to a multi-ethnic body. It was thus a better tool to deal with intercommunal tensions but a worse one to address specific Peul grievances. Multiple mediation initiatives followed, but they lacked coordination; the leaders often seemed to be competing and stepping on one another's toes.⁸⁸

To avoid undermining its own efforts in this way, President Issoufou should demand more coherence and coordination from the state's own decision-making circles, in particular ensuring that the interior ministry and HACP agree fully on the best strategies for approaching border communities. They should focus especially on Peul communities, given the high degree of exclusion and harassment they have faced. To

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2020.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019. For their part, HACP officials say they actually opposed the decision to bring Tuareg and Daosahak militias into northern Tillabery but had to accept this presence after France and authorities in Niamey chose to back it. Crisis Group interviews, HACP officials, Niamey, October 2019, February 2020.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, committee member, Niamey, October 2019.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019. Different governmental and non-governmental actors, sometimes rivals of one another, intervened to facilitate different forms of intra- and inter-communal dialogue, sometimes with positive impact. But they also unwittingly increased tensions within the committee, whose members were also often feuding with one another for positions of power. The overall outcome was a fragmentation of efforts, competition for resources and influence, and weaker central will to bring a strong mediation campaign to this troubled area. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2020.

that end, the government should consider reconstituting the core committee so that it again consists of Peul representatives and focuses on Peul concerns. Committee members should be carefully chosen to represent a diverse range of perspectives from the different Peul subgroups and to enjoy credibility within northern Tillabery. Niger should also separately maintain a multi-ethnic committee such as the one that currently exists in order to facilitate intercommunal dialogue in northern Tillabery.

In addition to the state's efforts to negotiate with specific communities, such as the Peul, the government should also consider doing more to broker direct agreements between and within communities, taking lessons from a 2019 peace agreement in Abala, where Daosahak and Peul rivals found ways to reconcile after a dispute caused the disruption of commercial routes vital to both communities.⁸⁹ Whoever took the initiative in kicking off the talks (some locals say it was the Islamic State, operating from a position of strength after a significant military victory against Malian fighters in the Ménaka region of Mali) the reconciliation of the Abala communities has resulted in a drop in violence.⁹⁰ Months later, residents say there have been no intercommunal incidents since the reconciliation, although some attacks on state representatives have occurred.⁹¹ Some Daosahak communities also seemed to resolve intra-communal tensions during this period.⁹²

The HACP and NGO partners should try to apply the lessons of Abala to other communities. For example, they should seek to make peace between the Djerma agricultural villages of Tingara 1, allied with the Islamic State, and Tingara 2, whose 143 households (nominally allied with the state) fled to Tillabery in December 2018.⁹³ That same month, militants from Tingara 1 killed two residents of Tingara 2 in a dispute over ownership and use of agricultural fields.⁹⁴ A forum held between the two villages in December 2019 seemed to open a pathway for reconciliation, but within weeks, the Inatès and Chinegodrar attacks had brought on an intense atmosphere of fear that impeded further talks.⁹⁵

Notwithstanding the setback, there is still room for progress. In order for talks to move forward, however, it will be important that they address competing land ownership claims at the core of the dispute between the two villages. The state, via the Programme pour la Cohésion Communautaire au Niger, a U.S.-financed and UN-implemented project aimed at reconciling communities, the HACP, NGOs and mediators, should work to reconstitute the talks with this focus as well as the broader

⁸⁹ The agreement was witnessed by the Programme pour la Cohésion Communautaire au Niger, as well as the HACP, although negotiations were led by the communities themselves.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, regional mediator, Niamey, February 2020. In the meantime, in Mali, direct negotiations between MSA militants and Islamic State Peul lieutenants led to the reopening of supply routes from Niger through Banibangou and Abala. Crisis Group interview, regional mediator, Niamey, October 2019.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Abala researcher, October 2019. See "Un accord de paix réunit deux communautés dans le sud-ouest du Niger", International Organization for Migration, 18 September 2019. There have nevertheless been serious incidents in the area, especially attacks on state representatives, schoolteachers and voter registration workers.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Crisis Group, regional mayor, Niamey, February 2020.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

goals of both resolving intercommunal tensions and reestablishing a state presence in and around the Tingaras.

2. Dialogue with insurgents

Policies geared toward dialogue with Islamic State commanders, who have recently inflicted serious casualties on the security services, are a divisive issue in Niger, with different parts of the security establishment favouring different approaches. Niger's interior ministry was previously proactive in reaching out to Islamic State commanders for dialogue. The country's military leaders, however, have broadly opposed this approach. In the February 2017 meeting of Niger's National Security Council, they vetoed attempts by Interior Minister Bazoum to engage in talks with Islamic State militants.⁹⁶ The conflicting agendas have often resulted in mixed messages being sent to militants and their commanders, leaving them less likely to trust state authorities in any future dialogue. Militants may also fear that talks initiated by one arm of government could be used as a way for another arm or one of its partners to identify militants as targets, eg, the military or a foreign ally engaged in counter-terrorism operations like France or the U.S.⁹⁷

That said, given that key local Islamic State commanders are drawn from the border communities and therefore likely joined the jihadist group out of political and economic self-interest, the government should develop policies that aim to address their concerns and seek to coax them away from the group.

If dialogue is to succeed with Nigerien Islamic State commanders, authorities will most likely need to offer a range of incentives to persuade them to defect, similar to what was offered to Niger's Tuareg rebels in the 1990s. These might include commitments to integrate fighters into the security forces, to bring rebel leaders into regional positions of influence in public institutions, to invest in regional development, and to decentralise governance to promote more regional autonomy.

There will also be a need for mediators whom both the government and jihadists trust. The unconfirmed killing of mediator Oumarou "Kiro" Roua, discussed above, suggests a very high risk for state mediators willing to approach jihadist groups in the interest of dialogue. It will be critical for Niamey to allay militants' suspicions that the state and its foreign partners may be using mediators to outwit them, which can only complicate political initiatives and put the lives of key figures that the state will very much need on the line.

As for how to deal with Sahraoui, a jihadist ideologue and a foreigner, it seems unlikely that he would submit to or entertain a deal with the Nigerien authorities while he wields his current level of power.⁹⁸ At present, the view of most senior officials seems to be that killing him is the only option, and that doing so would weaken the group and facilitate the surrender of his Nigerien lieutenants.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nigerien official, Niamey, February 2020.

⁹⁷ For example, in 2017, jihadists released a Nigerien national guard after negotiations with Niamey's emissaries, but on its side, the Nigerien government never kept its promise to release a number of prisoners. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, 2017.

⁹⁸ "Abou Walid is trapped", says one government adviser. "Peace holds nothing for him. All he can do is become as strong as possible and then die". Crisis Group interview, Niamey, October 2019.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

unknown evolutions that would follow from his death may pose greater risks. Whoever takes his place, for instance, could turn the group into a more radical organisation, or the group could splinter into a number of fragments with which it might not be possible to deal collectively.

Niamey should also consider how it might build up to negotiations with Sahraoui over the medium or long term, even if he appears uninterested at present. After all, he showed willingness to engage in talks with Niger in 2016-2017 and controls a unified command structure that would serve efforts to stabilise the region well if a deal could be reached.¹⁰⁰ If he resists coming to the table in the short term, Niamey can instead focus its efforts on eroding his support among border zone residents. Its objective should be to persuade community leaders and Nigerien Islamic State commanders to return to the state, in the ways noted above – such as integrating fighters into the security forces and bringing rebel leaders into regional positions of influence in public institutions. In a situation where he is weakened in Niger, Sahraoui could become more amenable to negotiations. It is a long shot, but probably less risky for Niamey than putting all its eggs in the military options basket, since use of force has proven unsuccessful to date.

To be sure, even if it proves possible to set up talks, any efforts to have a dialogue with Sahraoui or other Islamic State commanders may run up against resistance from Niger's foreign partners, some of whom are still committed to a primarily military approach to countering the jihadists. Indeed, some Nigerien mediators and officials say Paris and Washington have frustrated Niamey's efforts to engage in dialogue with militants in the pursuit of their own objectives.¹⁰¹ These are primarily to defeat or contain jihadist groups militarily and, more generally for France, to contain the rising influence of versions of political Islam perceived as hostile to a Western presence in the Sahel.¹⁰²

For example, in 2016, during a period when Bazoum established a direct channel with Sahraoui, France opposed freeing a number of Peul prisoners who had originally been arrested as part of Operation Barkhane and whose release Sahraoui had sought in exchange for promises to cease attacks on the Nigerien state.¹⁰³ France also carried out new airstrikes in the Mali-Niger border zone in February 2017, creating military pressure, whether deliberately or not, at a time when Niger and the Islamic State were negotiating.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, in October 2019, the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice Program offered \$5 million for information on Sahraoui's whereabouts, leading possible

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019. Some Nigerien officials disagree, maintaining that foreign partners impose no demands that interfere with their dialogue efforts.

¹⁰² Crisis Group, interview, French officials, Paris, April 2019.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June 2019. See, for instance, Maclean, "Niger Islamic State hostage", op. cit. Some Nigerien officials note that France was more open to releasing other militants when it served its own interests. In the midst of negotiations to free French hostages in 2014, France was amenable to freeing Iliassou "Petit Chafari" Djibo, a former MUJAO member who later joined JNIM and then became a top Islamic State commander, from Nigerien prison. Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019.

¹⁰⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

intermediaries to back off from physically contacting the Islamic State leader and his lieutenants, as they worried that contact with such a high-value target might make them more vulnerable to airstrikes or monitoring.¹⁰⁵ Nigerien mediators and policy officials also interpreted this offered reward as a signal not to negotiate with him. Nigerien officials have enquired about the feasibility of removing the reward as it continues to complicate efforts at dialogue with insurgents.¹⁰⁶

Still, if Niger can show that it has a coherent plan for addressing community grievances and building dialogue with Islamic State commanders that would require a ceasefire on the ground, it should ask its foreign partners to refrain from posing extra obstacles. Accordingly, France should stop airstrikes during periods when the Niger government is undertaking negotiations. It should not interfere with prisoner release negotiations and instead look for ways to be supportive if such talks can be used to persuade Islamic State commanders to disarm, or at least stop attacking Nigerien security forces.¹⁰⁷ For its part, the U.S. could quietly withdraw the \$5 million reward for information about Sahraoui's location to encourage mediators to resume contact with him.

The U.S. and France, each carrying out counter-terrorism campaigns in the region, have made an investment in the fight. They have both lost soldiers to the Islamic State. Nevertheless, ultimately, this fight is Niger's, and decades from now, it is Niger that will bear the consequences of what happens today.

B. *Security Arrangements*

1. Representative recruitment

While military pressure should continue to be an important element in countering the Islamic State, Niamey should also focus on how it can use its security forces in a different way, namely, to knit together the communities that have been driven apart by the violence at the border. In particular, as it refines its strategy for the northern Tillabery region, Niger should make a stronger effort to recruit youths from under-represented border communities into the security services.

To be sure, the advantages of recruiting from northern Tillabery, notably the effect it would have in terms of building up confidence in the state among local communities, need to be weighed carefully against the risk that units composed of locally recruited troops from one community could make its rivals feel threatened. There is a real danger that the state could be seen as siding with certain communities over others or giving the appearance that it is once again relying on militias and vigilantes to pursue its security objectives.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, communities or community leaders sending young men to join security forces could be targeted by jihadists for collaborating with the state.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, October 2019. "US offering \$5 million bounty for attackers responsible for deadly Niger ambush that killed 4 soldiers", *Military Times*, 4 October 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien official, Niamey, October 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien official, Niamey, October 2019; French official, Paris, December 2019. See Crisis Group Report, *The Mali-Niger Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°251, *Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies*, 7 September 2017.

If there is very little the state can do in the short term to mitigate the risk of jihadist retribution against local community participation in recruitment, the benefits of creating a more representative security force could still outweigh it in the longer term. That said, the authorities should take care not to create units for deployment into Tillabery that are overwhelmingly representative of one ethnic group, lest other communities perceive these units as a de facto ethnic militia. Any units created should be composed of a mix of border communities but also include soldiers from outside the region. If units created are still dominated by one local community in particular, they should not be deployed into areas where the ethnic group most represented is in conflict with another community when the deployment takes place.

A further challenge is that recruitment of locals may face resistance from the national army. In Niger, the traditional elite officer class, mainly Djerma, are reluctant to absorb more border community representatives into their ranks, perceiving the rise of nomads in the state's political and security ranks as having eroded their own control over Niger's security apparatus.¹⁰⁹ They share concerns that arming, training and equipping fighters from border communities could increase the likelihood of rebellions or coups d'état down the line.¹¹⁰ In addition, after years of fighting with jihadists at the border, some in the army perceive integrating more Peul into the army as tantamount to putting weapons in the hands of Islamic State collaborators.

It will be important for these attitudes to change. Alienating the Peul by making them feel unwanted in the security services – which many see as an organisation where individuals advance through nepotism and members of some communities do better than others – can only cause resentment and increase the kind of tensions that have the potential to provoke rebellious activity down the line.¹¹¹

Against this backdrop, Niger should focus on eliminating discrimination that nomadic Peul and other groups experience within the security services and through their recruitment processes.¹¹² There is much work to be done. Peul officers who are already in the military claim that they face systemic discrimination that prevents them from advancing on account of their ethnicity.¹¹³ In 2019, when the HACP launched a recruitment drive to create opportunities for young men from the region to join the armed forces, it struggled to find Peul to fill 200 available posts.¹¹⁴ Some Peul leaders nevertheless celebrated the fact that their communities were, for the first time, invited to put forward young men.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Niamey, June and October 2019. Reform-minded officials have concerns that ex-rebels from nomadic communities who integrated into the security forces in 1995 will have all retired within a few years. They think that the army, national guard and gendarmerie should find co-ethnic replacements for the ageing officers; otherwise, these communities may be more likely to head into confrontation with the state.

¹¹² Ethnicity is not the only basis for discrimination. Urban elites, regardless of ethnicity, also usually enjoy better access to employment in the security forces than peripheral rural communities.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, October 2019.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, HACP official, June 2019 (relaying that many Peul did not come forward, others were deemed unfit, and there was nepotism in awarding posts).

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, tribal chief who submitted names for recruitment, October 2019.

2. Protecting civilians

In trying to build trust between border communities and Niamey, it will also be important to instil a sense that the state can provide security – especially at a time when renewed military operations against the Islamic State are already resulting in the alleged killings of civilians, amid a COVID-19 outbreak that reduces the authorities' capacity to monitor troops' behaviour on the ground.¹¹⁶ The police and national guard are the primary security units responsible for keeping the intercommunal peace. Niamey should ensure that, as with the army, their ranks include ample representation from border communities.

Moreover, in addition to protecting civilians from intercommunal violence, these units should be tasked with addressing the widespread theft of cattle from pastoralists, discussed further below, which is probably the biggest security concern and source of friction in northern Tillabery.¹¹⁷ Cattle are clearly marked in this region, meaning that authorities can identify stolen cattle and return them to their owners. Recovering stolen livestock would help rebuild much-needed bridges between security forces and nomadic communities.

A new, European Union-funded rapid-response force dedicated to countering terrorism and organised crime might also have a role to play in building such bridges. The first phase rollout of the GARSI elite gendarme unit in Niger consisted of a permanent deployment in Abala, equipped with its own resources in terms of intelligence and judicial police. Senior GARSI officials have suggested that they are open to adapting their mandate to better serve other communities, so they might also look into providing civilian protection services such as tackling livestock theft.¹¹⁸ Donors might furnish special training for tracking and recovering stolen animals, and GARSIS personnel could set up a hotline for villagers to contact them directly.

Finally, one way to enhance a sense of security within border communities would be to renew efforts to provide justice for Tillabery's people. Niger's judicial authorities should reach out to their counterparts in Mali and seek their cooperation in investigating atrocities committed along their mutual border. The UN Mali peacekeeping mission, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), could work with the Malian authorities to help foster this collaboration for cross-border cases, and donors could offer technical and financial support for the effort. Establishing precedents for accountability would demonstrate that the state has a constructive role to play in promoting law and order in the border zone.

C. *Economic Policy, Development and Reform*

As it seeks to push back against the Islamic State, Niger should consider the impact of its economic policies on its efforts to build stronger ties to border communities and look for ways to use the former in the service of the latter. First, it should consider rolling back or softening heavy-handed measures to curb population movements and

¹¹⁶ See the discussion in Section II.D.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue project coordinator, Dakar, 2019. With locals reporting that security forces fail to respond to calls regarding raids on their herds, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue initiatives have sought to tackle animal theft.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, GARSIS commander, Niamey, October 2019.

market activity, which were imposed for security purposes, but which risk further weakening fragile economies in northern Tillabery. Secondly, Niamey should encourage its development partners to channel aid into projects in northern Tillabery that lie far afield from security installations (where much aid currently flows). Thirdly, Niger should develop plans to mitigate conflicts related to land use management, one of the strongest underlying causes of the conflict.

1. Easing up on heavy-handed measures

On 1 January, an unpopular motorbike ban went into effect in the Tillabery region.¹¹⁹ While the security motive was clear – motorbikes are integral to Islamic State operations – they are also the most common mode of transport for the area's residents. At a civil society meeting in Tillabery on 29 February, participants denounced the ban as both unevenly applied and ineffective, pointing to zones where security forces let bandits circulate freely on motorbikes and noting that seven attacks killing more than 100 took place in the weeks after the ban's rollout.¹²⁰ There are other problems. The ban affects security forces, many of whom live kilometres away from their bases and use motorbikes to get to work.¹²¹ It is also extremely disruptive to livelihoods, making it hugely challenging for many in the region to get to work or do their jobs.

If it insists on keeping the ban, the state should consider carrying out ameliorative measures as soon as possible to reduce the friction it is causing between Niamey and border residents. It might consider encouraging business to follow the example set in south-eastern Niger's Diffa region, where motor tricycles – slower but reliable and in no way associated with terrorist attacks – were made available for a low monthly rent after a similar ban on motorbikes there targeted Boko Haram militants.¹²²

The closure of markets that the authorities assess feed Islamic State supply chains is further squeezing the rural economy, without a clear benefit for the counter-insurgency effort. In Abala, seven of the commune's nine markets are shut down.¹²³ In Ayorou, the three-day market was shortened to a half day.¹²⁴

At the same time, by some accounts, such measures may be driving markets more firmly into jihadists' control. The markets officials shut down in Abala commune, for instance, merely moved across to the Malian side of the border, and are now operating under militants' watch.¹²⁵ When the military closed the border, sealing off three commercial routes between Mali and Niger, an immediate spike in youth unemployment fuelled fears that unemployed young traders would join the jihadists. (Local leaders eventually negotiated to keep the third route, from Mali's Anderamboukane

¹¹⁹ The government previously banned motorbikes in a smaller area of northern Tillabery in March 2017, lifting the ban that October due to popular pushback. Another similar ban in the Diffa region in 2015 severely disrupted the local economy, making it especially hard for young people who depend on motorbikes to make a living. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°245, *Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency*, 27 February 2017.

¹²⁰ See the Urgence Tillabéri account of the meeting posted on Facebook, 29 February 2020.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, security official, Niamey, February 2020.

¹²² Crisis Group interviews, regional security analyst, Niamey, February 2020.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Abala mayor, Niamey, February 2020.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Niamey, February 2020.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

to Abala and Baleyara in Niger, partially open.)¹²⁶ Authorities should consider re-opening markets, taking into account how closing them burdens border communities and tends to divert regional trade into commercial networks controlled by the jihadists on the other side of the border.

2. Development assistance

As security measures squeeze rural economies, the practice of earmarking development funds for beefing up infrastructure near military sites – which has been the tendency to date – may be feeding local resentment. Funds from development initiatives such as the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel, created in August 2019, and the Alliance for the Sahel, created in 2017, are being used to increase the capacity of security forces at military installations, with infrastructure, such as health care facilities, that can also be provided to communities from within security forces' camps.¹²⁷ But communities often do not trust security forces and are unlikely to seek out these kinds of services if it means coming close to military installations that they associate with persecution and harassment.¹²⁸

Donors should consider how else they could better work with Niger's authorities to pursue projects for the long term-benefit of Tillabery's population.

3. Land use reform

As noted above, much intercommunal conflict in Niamey's border region is rooted in resource competition, particularly relating to land. For this reason, the state should work with communities and donors to enforce land use legislation already on the books that could mitigate resource conflicts.

Some of these conflicts relate to farmer-herder tensions, which are a source of instability in Niger and elsewhere in the region, such as Nigeria. Between 2008 and 2014, almost 28,500 sq km of pastoralist land throughout Niger were lost to ranchers, extractive industry concessions and illegal land deals.¹²⁹ Nomads in the region are coming under increasing pressure from the encroachment of farmers upon officially allocated grazing lands. While Niamey has developed robust legislation to protect the land rights of nomadic herders, these policies are inadequately enforced, in part due to the state's inability to regulate areas experiencing violent conflict.¹³⁰ Pastoralists are often uninformed about their rights to defend their lands under the laws that exist.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ An earlier donor-funded effort to create development structures anchored to new security centres in northern Mali serves as a cautionary tale. International donors hoped that providing funds to the Special Programme for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali would bring development to northern Mali, in line with the Algiers Agreement of 2006. But locals perceived the initiative as a militarisation of the zone. It was one of the reasons why rebels and jihadists took up arms against the state in 2012. See Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The Roots of Mali's Conflict", Clingendael Institute, March 2015.

¹²⁹ Serge Aubague and Nasser Sani Baaré, "Terres pastorales au Niger : les éleveurs face à la défense de leurs droits", *Grain de Sel*, no. 73, July 2016-June 2017.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

One thing the state can do is step up enforcement of the 2010 Pastoral Code, organising outreach campaigns to inform pastoralists of their rights and plans to improve governance in their zones.¹³² Donor assistance – particularly to the agriculture and livestock ministries in enforcing the code in northern Tillabery (especially as it relates to land use regulation) – could help put these efforts on the best footing to succeed.

¹³² Nearly a decade after the code's ratification, enforcement decrees have yet to appear. "This situation supports the cultural violence of the sedentary having dominance over nomads in Nigerien society, which contributes to producing violence by bias of frustration (political under-representation) and economic subjugation, with no possibility of improving their economy". Herrick Mouafo Djonto and Karine Gatelier, "Nord-Tillabéri : analyse du conflit lié à l'accès aux ressources naturelles", HACP, August 2017, p. 87.

IV. Conclusion

Niger is under pressure both internally and from foreign partners to ramp up military activity and target Islamic State militants following their recent deadly attacks. The past few years, however, have shown that Niamey cannot confront the insurgency in Tillabery through military means alone. What military success it has achieved has often yielded short-term gains at considerable cost to long-term relations with border communities, whose internecine conflicts and difficult relations with Niamey are exploited by jihadist groups that have become expert in recruiting from among residents of the areas where they are fighting. Niamey's decision to collaborate with Malian ethnic militias in 2017 during operations against the Islamic State was damaging to regional security. It is critical that the authorities not make a similar miscalculation now. The state should do what it can to win back the loyalty of the peoples living in the border zone, notably the Peul, using political dialogue, security arrangements and economic tools. Failure to do so would leave Niger's door further ajar for the Islamic State to walk through.

Niamey/Dakar/Brussels, 3 June 2020

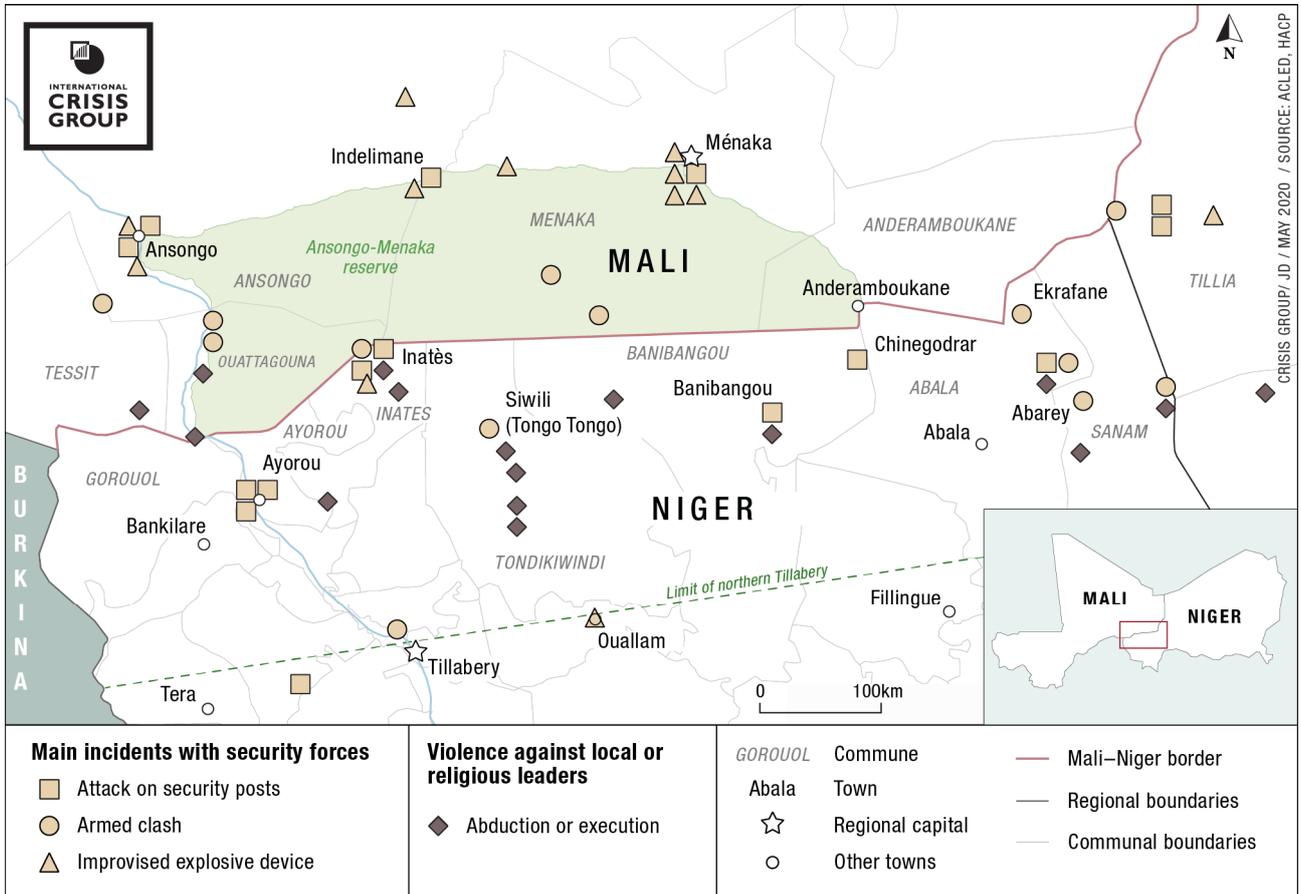
Appendix A: Map of Niger



Map No. 4234 Rev. 1 UNITED NATIONS
January 2018

Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)

Appendix B: Islamic State-related Violence along Mali-Niger Border



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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