

# DEFYING THE ODDS? NIGERIEN RESPONSES TO FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC SECURITY CHALLENGES

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# DEFYING THE ODDS? NIGERIEN RESPONSES TO FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC SECURITY CHALLENGES

This paper has been prepared by

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## WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to identify the manifold security threats confronting the Republic of Niger. It examines if and how various domestic and external actors may exploit Niger's adverse structural conditions to their benefit and derives possible future scenarios and recommendations for policymakers. Foreign-based jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram will continue to threaten Niger's domestic stability. However, these groups are unlikely to make further inroads into Nigerien territory. The Tuareg community and conservative Sunni groups are unlikely to rise up against the state as both are well integrated into the political and societal landscape. The most viable threat to Niger's stability is the continued inability of the current administration to translate macroeconomic gains and donor support into pro-poor growth and social inclusion. The increasing use of authoritarian measures against citizens and journalists has the potential to escalate further and to undermine the legitimacy of the government in the long-term.

Keywords: security, jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Niger, West Africa  
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## NOTE TO READERS

This note is published as part of the partnership between SWAC/OECD and the Sahel Research Group of the University of Florida. The collaboration aims to: 1. Reinforce ties between research and policies for sustainable development that can help better anticipate changes within the Sahel and West Africa Region; 2. Promote West African expertise by reinforcing the links with African researchers and research centres through the Sahel Research Group network.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the volatile central Sahel, the Republic of Niger has remained comparatively stable. This is remarkable for three reasons. First, Niger is surrounded by countries suffering from severe security crises; Libya, Mali and Nigeria are at risk of partial or total disintegration. Due to porous borders and transnational linkages, events in these three countries have inevitable implications for Niger. Second, Niger suffers from the same or very similar long-standing structural disadvantages that are at the heart of security crises elsewhere. Third, Niger is no stranger to instability; since 1993, the country has lived under five different constitutions, seen two Tuareg rebellions and experienced three military juntas in power.

This paper examines the extent to which Niger's stability is at risk and what its future trajectory is likely to look like. It first identifies foreign and domestic actors with the capacity to exploit the country's weaknesses. Foreign challengers include jihadist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and other organisations which operate alongside the borders with Mali and Nigeria. Domestic challengers include Niger's Tuareg community, conservative Sunni communities and aggrieved street protestors. The paper then assesses the extent to which each actor or set of actors threatens the country's trajectory, arguing that, to date, the Nigerien state has been mostly successful in containing these threats.

Jihadist terrorism will continue to pose a serious threat to human life. However, it seems unlikely that these groups will destabilise the country. Close co-operation with the security forces of France, the European Union, the United States and several neighbouring countries, have enabled the Issoufou administration to protect border areas and to contain Boko Haram within the Diffa region. In addition, Nigerien armed forces appear more cohesive and disciplined than their neighbours.

Closer analysis of the Tuareg situation and developments show little indication that Niger might face a renewed Tuareg uprising or the rise of domestic jihadism. The current administration has publicly acknowledged the dire economic situation in northern Niger and allocated additional financial resources to the region. In addition, the decentralisation process has brought many Tuareg into important administrative positions in the north. Perhaps most important of all, the government has appointed prominent former rebels into high-ranking government positions. Since 1993, when the first multi-candidate presidential elections took place, all governments have sought cordial relations and regular exchanges with religious representatives.

Simultaneously, the Nigerien state has intervened in religious affairs whenever it perceives clerics as a threat to order. Instead of isolating conservative Sunni communities, it has integrated several clerics within the diplomatic service or other bureaucratic positions.

Despite these successes, the current administration has remained unable to translate its macroeconomic gains and donor support into pro-poor growth that benefits ordinary Nigeriens. Equally, there has been little progress in the fight against corruption. Confronted with growing street protests, the administration has resorted to autocratic measures and cracked down on demonstrators, opposition leaders and the media. While this situation is unlikely to destabilise the government in the short to medium-term, the standoff with opposition supporters has the potential to escalate domestic protests and to undermine the government's legitimacy.

Given the inherent variability of developments taking place within the Sahel, any forecast about Niger's future trajectory is very difficult. Based on the available evidence, however, it can be assumed that Niger will remain stable and maintain the current status quo in the near future. If, however, President Issoufou were to ignore his two-term limit in 2021, it could provoke a period of grave uncertainty. The international community should continue to support the Nigerien government in its efforts to protect its national integrity against jihadist terrorist groups. Simultaneously, it should pressurise the government to engage with protestors and the opposition in a constructive and mutually reassuring manner.

## INTRODUCTION: UNPACKING THE NIGERIEN PARADOX

The Sahel's borders are porous and most citizens share national as well as transnational identities. Events in one country thus inevitably shape events elsewhere. In recent years, the central Sahel has become a volatile region. Libya, Mali and Nigeria experienced severe domestic upheaval and turmoil. Surrounded by these three countries (Map 1), Niger has suffered from the fallout of these crises while displaying the very same conditions that led to the disintegration of state authority elsewhere in the region. Yet, there is little that indicates that Niger might follow in the footsteps of Libya, Mali or Nigeria as some fear (International Crisis Group, 2015b; Cooke and Sanderson, 2016).

Map 1

Niger and its neighbours



Cartography: Olivier Walther, 2017

In early 2012, Mali experienced a Tuareg uprising and the subsequent occupation of its northern territory by Tuareg and jihadist fighters. Despite France's military intervention in January 2013, jihadist and other violent groups continue to operate across Malian territory (International Crisis Group, 2015a). As a result, Niger's border region with Mali has seen several incursions by jihadist fighters in the last five years. In addition, since 2015 the Nigerien armed forces have been involved in a deadly military conflict with Boko Haram (International Crisis Group, 2017; Van Den Hoek, 2017). The conflict has transformed Niger's Diffa region into a humanitarian disaster zone. The security crises in Mali and Nigeria led to an influx of 57 405 Malian and 108 470 Nigerian refugees. The fighting inside Niger has produced 129 015 internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2017). The violent overthrow of the Gadhafi regime in October 2011 and the subsequent civil war in Libya led to the expulsion of Nigerien Tuareg on unprecedented scale and caused an influx of small firearms (Marsh, 2017).



It is important to interpret these upheavals vis-à-vis Niger's historical trajectory as well as within the context of its domestic challenges. Niger is no stranger to instability and upheaval. Since the return of multi-party competition in 1993, its citizens experienced three military juntas (1996, 1999, 2010), have lived through five different constitutions (1993, 1996, 1999/2000, 2009, 2010), and have witnessed two Tuareg rebellions (1990-1995; 2007-2009). Niger's northern communities in general and Niger's Tuareg community in particular, feel politically and economically marginalised. The Islamic landscape has undergone significant changes. A growing number of Muslims have turned away from Sufi Islam to conservative and literal interpretations of the Koran. Most of these groups, such as the Izala movement, adhere to the Salafi school of thought (Elischer, 2015a; Kang, 2015; Sounaye, 2016). Although Salafism is a diverse movement and most Salafis do not resort to violence, many observers fear that Niger's Salafi community could undergo similar processes of radicalisation as in Mali or Nigeria.

The recently re-elected government struggles with long-standing economic and political challenges. The annual Human Development Index (HDI) regularly ranks Niger as one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 2017). Outside of the capital Niamey and a few other cities, administrative state structures are lacking. Most Nigerien citizens do not have access to a functioning bureaucracy, security services or the legal system. Many had hoped that the election of President Issoufou in 2011 would transform Niger into a more prosperous and just society. These hopes have not materialised and there is little indication that they will any time soon. Despite solid annual economic growth rates, low inflation and ongoing support by the donor community, most Nigeriens continue to live in stark poverty. Ongoing protests against the government, serious questions about the conduct of the 2016 presidential election, the arrests of opposition leaders under dubious circumstances and violent crackdowns against protestors and journalists, are undermining the legitimacy of the president and his administration.

The next sections examine Niger's current security predicament in greater detail, outlining the immediate and latent security risks both outside and within its territory. The analysis shifts to how the Nigerien state has contained these threats, arguing that most of these strategies have been successful. The paper further argues that Niger's most pressing issue is the continued failure of the government to generate growth that benefits ordinary Nigeriens, reinforcing the potential to escalate domestic protests and to undermine the legitimacy of the government. The note thus outlines future scenarios and policies that the international community could pursue in order to foster stability and democracy in the country.

## EXTERNAL THREATS: THE MALIAN AND NIGERIAN IMBROGLIOS

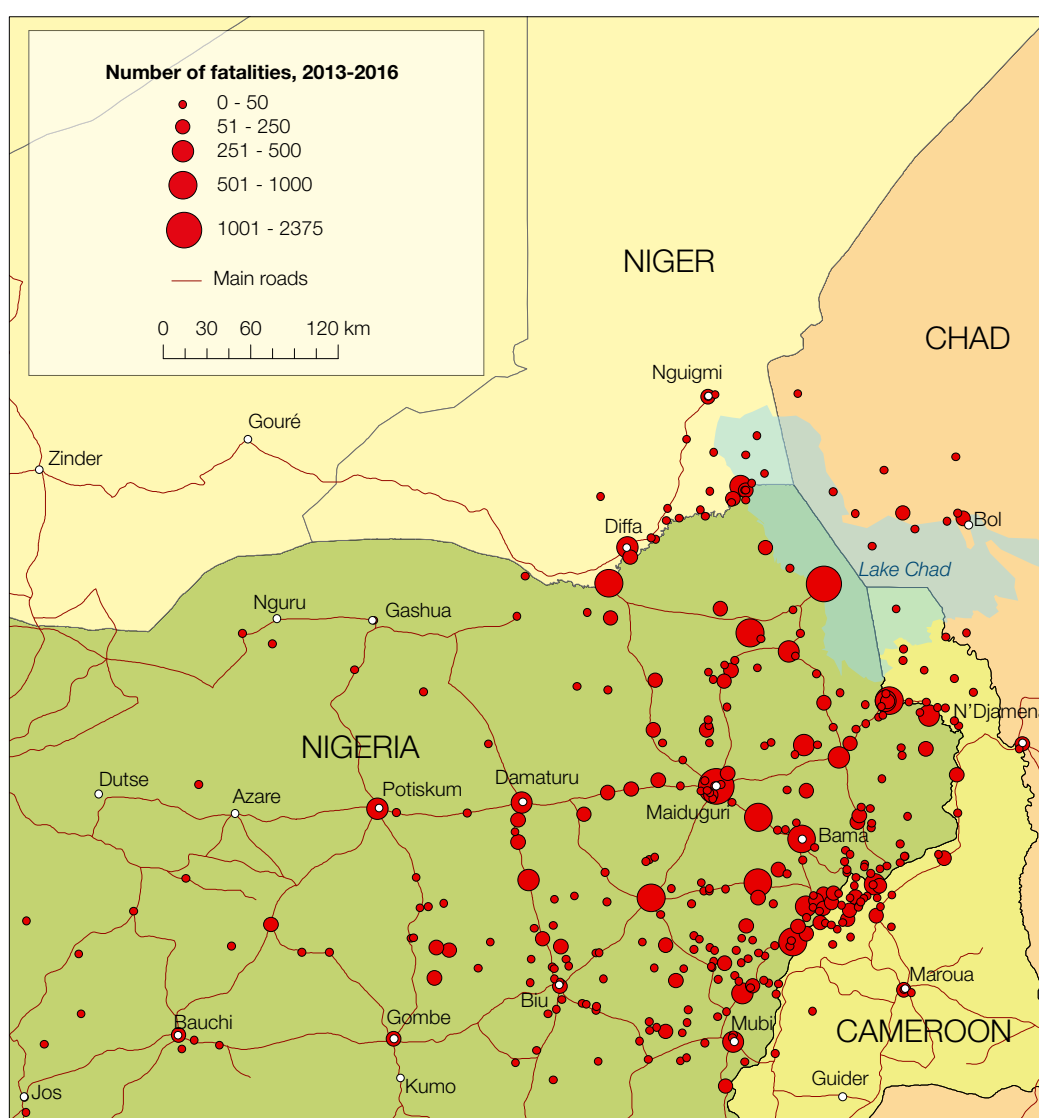
**D**espite extensive domestic and international efforts to re-establish the authority of the Malian state, jihadist and other groups remain a deadly force. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Al-Mourabitoun and others operate along the Malian-Nigerien border (Walther and Miles, 2018; Walther, 2017; Warner, 2017). Several of these groups have managed to stage attacks on Nigerien territory. Prominent examples include the 2013 AQIM attacks on the Areva uranium mine in Arlit and a Nigerien military outpost in Agadez. The attack on the Areva mine was particularly worrisome, as it constitutes one of the economic lifelines of Niger's uranium-based economy. In 2016, AQIM conducted two further attacks. In the spring of 2017, the GSIM kidnapped a Nigerien-based American aid worker. In October 2017, four US army special operations commandos and four Nigerien soldiers were killed near the Nigerien town of Tongo Tongo while patrolling the border area. The precise circumstances of the attack remain unknown. The border region with Mali has also seen attacks that cannot be attributed to a specific group or organisation. For example, in late October 2017, the Tillabéri region saw an attack on a police station killing ten police officers.

The situation on the Nigerian border is even more concerning. Confronted with the growing presence of Boko Haram sympathisers in Diffa province, the Nigerien government moved a significant part of their armed forces into the region in 2014 and have been fighting Boko Haram in the province since 2015 (International Crisis Group, 2017). The campaign against the jihadist group – the largest military campaign in Nigerien history – has created a huge financial burden. According to local media, around ten percent of Niger’s annual budget goes to the armed forces – a fivefold increase from the period prior to 2014.

Boko Haram attacks between 2013 and 2016 in Niger’s Diffa region as well as across neighbouring Nigeria and Chad (Map 2) show that, while Niger has been badly affected by terrorist activity, the fatalities have mainly occurred along the border with Nigeria. Between 2015 and 2017, Boko Haram killed over 180 civilians as illustrated by the breakdown of the absolute number of fatalities in Niger (Table 1). It is important to note that the graph does not include the fatalities attributed to unknown groups. Although the situation in the region remains extremely volatile, the data provides some room for cautious optimism as the number of annual fatalities appears to be on the decline.

Map 2

Fatalities due to Boko Haram around Lake Chad, 2013-16



Source: ACLED, 2017; Cartography: Olivier Walther, 2017

Table 1

Civilian fatalities related to Boko Haram in the Diffa Region, 2015-17

Years	Fatalities	Events
2015	143	16
2016	27	6
2017	14	5
Total	184	27

Source: ACLED, 2017

A second breakdown shows the absolute number of clashes between the Nigerien armed forces and Boko Haram from 2013 to 2017 (Table 2). The data reveal 56 clashes resulting in over 1 150 deaths on both sides. Although data for 2017 is incomplete, there is some reason to believe that the number of incidences and fatalities has recently decreased. The incursions by Boko Haram and the responses by the armed forces have taken a dramatic toll on local businesses, educational institutions and humanitarian infrastructure. Economic activity in the region has come to a virtual standstill. Educational institutions have closed in order to safeguard the lives of children. The Nigerien media reported that around 700 villages have been abandoned. Over 7 000 Nigeriens have escaped to Chad. At the same time Niger has taken in a total of 165 876 refugees from Mali and Nigeria (UNHCR, 2017).

Table 2

Clashes between Nigerien forces and Boko Haram in the Diffa Region, 2013-17

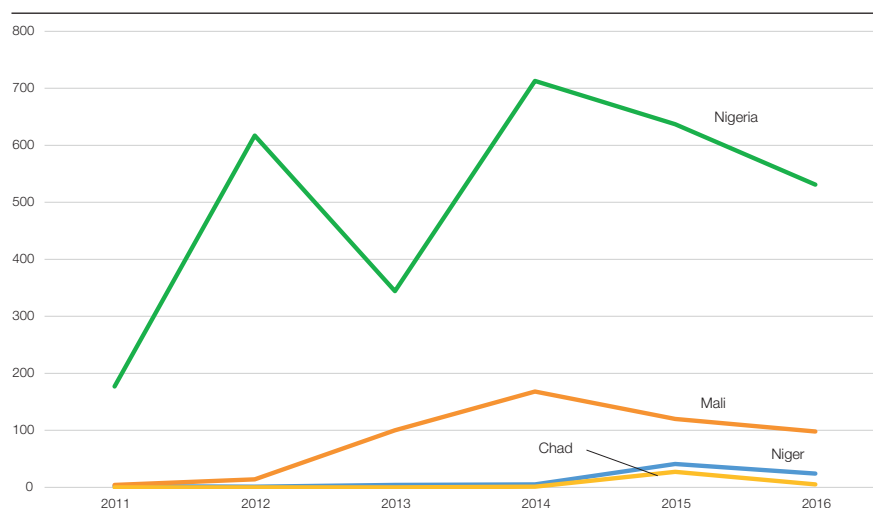
Years	Fatalities	Events
2013	3	1
2014	0	1
2015	780	29
2016	264	18
2017	116	7
Total	1 163	56

Source: ACLED, 2017

One must not downplay the loss of human life and chaos Boko Haram and others terrorist groups have caused. At the same time, however, it is noteworthy that Niger has remained less exposed to terrorist violence than its neighbouring countries. As can be seen on Graph 1, although the number of terrorist attacks in Niger have increased in recent years, they remain considerably lower than in Nigeria and Mali.

Graph 1

Number of terrorist incidents across the Sahel, 2011-16



Source: Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

## DOMESTIC THREATS AND CHALLENGES

Any analysis of Nigerien domestic politics must acknowledge the adverse socio-economic conditions of its citizens. Despite encouraging annual growth rates (2011: 2.3%, 2012:11.8%, 2013: 5.3%, 2014: 7.1%, 2015:3.6%, 2016: 5.0%, according to the World Bank), the majority of the population live in extreme poverty. Despite its participation in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC), it failed to reach any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Malnutrition is widespread. At 87%, Niger's illiteracy rate is one of the highest in the world. After its inauguration in 2011, the Issoufou government issued a number of developmental plans that were designed to tackle chronic food shortages and general poor living conditions. Overall, there has been little progress. The government expressed support for the Agenda 2030 without making any significant proposals to lift its citizens out of poverty. According to Afrobarometer data, 55% of Nigeriens feel the government manages the economy very badly or badly; 53% think that the government handles the living standard of the poor badly or very badly. In addition, 51% of the respondents identify food shortages as the most pressing economic issue.

Since his election, Issoufou has promised to fight corruption which has long undermined Nigerien bureaucracy and economic investment. The national anti-corruption agency – *Haute Autorité de Lutte contre la Corruption et Infractions Assimilées* (HACLA) – was established by the interim military junta just prior to Issoufou's 2011 electoral win. While HACLA started out as an active and publically visible body, it has turned into a dormant entity. In November 2017, Niger withdrew from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), a body that outlines basic standards for the transparent governance of the oil, gas and mineral industries. The move was somewhat unsurprising; for many years EITI criticised Niger for not making sufficient progress in implementing their standards (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 2017).

The 2016 elections damaged the presidency's image as a democratic reformer. Issoufou's main opponent, Hama Amadou was forced to contest the elections from prison. Like Issoufou, Amadou belongs to a small circle of elite politicians, who found themselves in and out of power several times since 1991. Issoufou won the 2011 election after Amadou supported him in the presidential run-off. In return, he became speaker of the National Assembly with Issoufou's backing. Amadou was widely seen as the main challenger to Issoufou's aspirations to win a second term in 2016. In 2014, accusations emerged that Amadou had been involved in the trafficking of babies from Nigeria. It is impossible to verify these accusations as different courts arrived at different verdicts. The affair forced Amadou into exile in Burkina Faso and subsequently France. He returned to Niger in November 2015 to contest the 2016 presidential elections. After his arrival, he was arrested at the airport in Niamey. Despite these circumstances Issoufou failed to secure a first-round electoral victory, which indicates that public support for him was lower than international observers might have assumed (Thurston, 2017a). In March 2016, a few days before the second round of the presidential elections, Amadou was flown to Paris because of a rapid decline in his health and has since remained in France. He faces one year prison sentence should he return to Niger.

The most recent Tuareg uprising in Mali and the ongoing economic malaise in Niger – and especially in northern Niger – gave rise to speculations that the conflict would migrate east (Elischer, 2013). It would not be the first time. The Nigerien Tuareg insurgency between 1990 and 1995 – known as the second Tuareg uprising – occurred in tandem with the Tuareg uprising in Mali. Despite a peace accord in 1995, the Nigerien Tuareg launched another insurgency in 2007 against the Nigerien state. This indicated that many of the issues that led to the uprising in 1990 remained unresolved. Some of the key demands of the rebels included the decentralisation of political authority in the north and a greater share in the extraction of northern resources.

The Nigerien religious landscape has undergone significant changes as well. Islamic revivalism has left its mark on Niger as much as in the rest of the Sahel. Whereas Sufi Islam dominated the religious landscape until the early 1990s, a number of Salafi and other conservative Islamic traditions have proliferated in the last two decades. The most prominent example is the Izala movement, which originated in Nigeria and gradually gained a foothold in Zinder from where it spread to other regions (Sounaye, 2016; Masquelier, 2009). Local studies estimate that approximately one-third of the Muslim faithful adhere to the Salafi school (Hassane, Diarra, and Makama, 2006). The growth of Salafism has given rise to fears that the Islamic landscape may experience processes of radicalisation similar to those in Mali and Nigeria. The geographical proximity of terrorist groups across the Sahel has amplified that fear (Tromifov, 2016).

## STATE RESPONSES TO FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC THREATS

In order to protect its borders and its internal security, Niger has sought close co-operation with France and the United States. Historically France has been Niger's main economic and security partner. Niger receives support under the "Justice and Security in the Sahel-Sahara Region" priority solidarity fund project. The project aims to strengthen state capacities in terms of internal security, the justice system, and customs in the fight against terrorism and organised crime. As part of Operation Barkhane, France has an air force detachment in Niamey and a military base in Madama, near the Libyan border. Official figures on the number of French troops in Niger are unavailable.

The American presence has increased significantly since 2013 when President Obama announced the deployment of about 100 military personnel to Niger for regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations (Arieff, 2017). Today, Niger hosts one of the largest concentrations of US troops in Africa. According to the White House, around 645 US military personnel are stationed in Niger to support counter-terrorism operations and news reports frequently cite 800 personnel. Since 2012, Niger has also received support from the European Union Common Security and Defense Policy. Around 80 European security experts are involved in the training and professionalisation of Niger's security forces (European Union External Action, 2017). It is difficult to assess the precise impact of the deployment of foreign troops and experts. However, with the exception of the Diffa region, external security challengers have made little inroads into the country. Even within Diffa province, Boko Haram has made no substantial progress.

These "successes" suggest that the Nigerien armed forces display a higher degree of internal cohesion and discipline than their Malian counterparts did in 2012. The presence of external military forces has clearly helped to stabilise the status quo. The government has sought closer co-operation with its regional partners in the security field. Niger is also a founding member of the "G5 du Sahel" launched in February 2014. The organisation's goal is to strengthen co-operation on development and security in the Sahel region. Other members include Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania. The ultimate aim is to create a standing force of 5 000 troops, although the future of the standing force is uncertain due to a lack of funding. The Nigerien government has, in the past, relied on the help of outside troops. In 2016, at the height of the military confrontation with Boko Haram, Chad had 2 000 troops on Nigerien territory (Thurston, 2017b; Balima and Farge, 2017). Given its own military capacity and its willingness to co-operate closely with international and regional partners, little suggests that any of the outside challengers will be in a position to destabilise Niger in the near future.

During the 2012 Tuareg uprising in Mali, President Issoufou mentioned the possibility that the Nigerien Tuareg might follow the example of their Malian co-ethnics and take up arms against the state. Thus, early on he publicly recognised the existence of a latent security risk in the north. The government subsequently dispatched several aid packages to

northern Niger.<sup>1</sup> In recent months, the government has intensified its collaborative efforts with the European Union. The EU officially recognises Niger as a partner in its efforts to decrease the number of refugees who are crossing the Sahara to reach Europe (Elischer, 2015b). As part of these efforts, the EU is providing financial resources to the area around the city of Agadez. Details about national and European aid to the north are not available.

However, there is evidence to suggest that much of the north remains detached from the state (Tinti and Westcott, 2016). While the Western media frequently hail the nomination of Brigi Rafini as Prime Minister as an important milestone for the political integration of the Tuareg, the reality is that he belongs to the administrative elite of the Nigerien state and has not had much involvement in Tuareg politics. The Tuareg people stand to benefit from Niger's reformed mining code which includes a provision stating that 15% of the income from uranium mining must go back to the local economy. Niger does not, however, provide a transparent annual budget and it is impossible for outsiders to verify whether the affected communities in fact do benefit from the export of uranium.

The absence of a renewed Tuareg rebellion is more likely the result of a number of other factors. Since the end of the 2007-09 rebellion, the Nigerien state has included the rebellion's leading figureheads. Rhissa ag Boula, the former leader of the Front for the Liberation of Air and Azaouak (FLAA), one of the main groups of the rebellion in the early 1990s, has served in several cabinets. He currently acts as special advisor to the president. Mohamed Anako, a figurehead of the Tuareg rebellion of the early 1990s, now serves as the president of the regional council in Agadez. Mohamed Akotey, the former leader of the Co-ordination of the Armed Resistance, another former rebel group now serves on the Areva management board. Thanks to ongoing efforts to decentralise, many Tuareg now occupy important administrative positions in the north. By including them in the state bureaucracy, they serve as both representatives of their community but also as representatives of the state. In addition, since 1995 the *Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix* (HACP) has tried to work toward peace and stability in the north. The institution is headed by a minister with access to the National Security Council. The employees of the HACP are on the government's payroll and focus on three regions in particular: northern Tillabéri, northern Tahoua, and Agadez. The work of the HACP is supported by Denmark, the European Union, Switzerland, the United Nations and the United States.

Finally, close co-operation with French and American security services has enabled the Nigerien armed forces to conduct reconnaissance missions in the north. Drone surveillance operations have helped the government to identify potential threats early on. Sources inside the Nigerien armed forces indicate that this is a major reason why the expulsion of Nigerien Tuareg from Libya did not result in violence along the border with Libya. The Nigerien state was able to disarm the groups in question.<sup>2</sup> In recent months, Germany has increased its military aid to the Nigerien army and intends to open its own military base. Taking all of these factors together, it seems unlikely that Niger will experience a Tuareg uprising any time soon.

To avoid the rise of religious extremism, various post-1993 governments have sought close co-operation with leading Sufi and Salafi clerics. With the help of donor funding, civil society organisations and the Catholic Church, the government initiated regular meetings with religious clerics. These meetings take place at the local and national levels. The government consults very closely with existing religious associations about the origins and the theological orientations of associations which seek permission to build Friday prayer mosques. This provides the government with closer insight into changes within the Islamic sphere in general and Salafi-dominated mosques in particular.

Various post-1993 governments stated that they would not tolerate the politicisation or the radicalisation of religion. In the early 2000s, Ansar Dine, a Salafi association which had grown out of the Izala movement, openly challenged the authority of the state. In the run-up to a fashion festival in Zinder in November 2000, Ansar Dine and several smaller

Islamic associations staged an unauthorised protest march, which escalated into riots. The government dissolved all associations involved in the planning of the march and arrested the association's leading clerics.

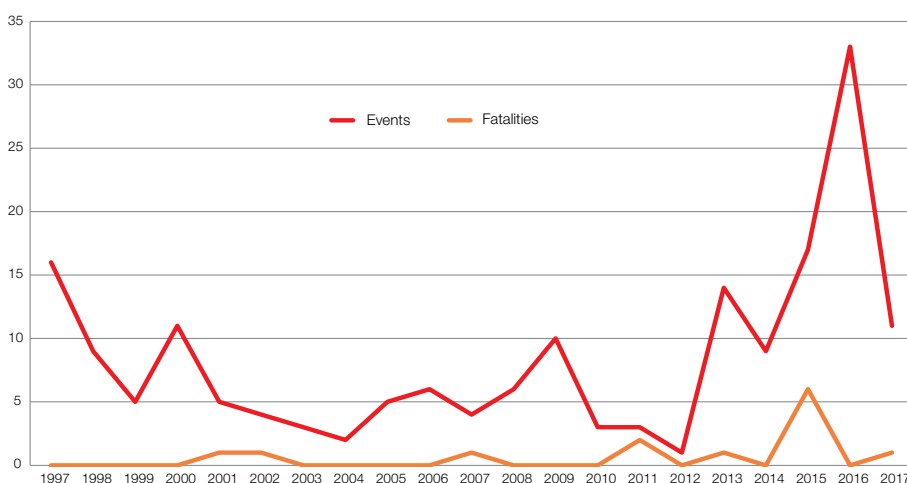
Finally and very much in line with its approach toward the Tuareg in the north, the government has integrated conservative Sunni clerics into important positions. Rather than isolating Salafi clerics, it has offered them positions in the diplomatic service and other branches of the government (Elischer, 2015a). This mixture of regulation and inclusion appears to be working. Almost all Islamic terrorist attacks on Nigerien territory have since been conducted by outside jihadist groups. Attempts by outside groups to recruit followers in Niger have largely failed (Mueller, 2016; Lebovich, 2013a and b).

In January 2015, Niger's Christian community experienced a wave of violence, which was part of a wider movement of protest against the publication of a cartoon of Muhammad The Prophet on the cover of Charlie Hebdo magazine. The riots caused ten deaths, left many more injured, damaged a total of 45 churches and burned at least two churches to the ground. Local analysts were quick to assume that the attacks on the Christian churches indicated the growing influence of Boko Haram and hence a growing support for jihadist discourse (Olivier de Sardan, 2015). There is, however, little to no evidence that this is the case. Other observers point to the fact that Nigerien Muslims were generally frustrated by the cartoons and the Nigerien government's display of support for the magazine and that the attacks should be interpreted in that light (Schritt, 2015). Therefore, with the exception of Diffa province, there is no indication that jihadist discourse has managed to build viable support within Niger.

As successful as the government has been in its efforts to achieve stability, it has been equally unsuccessful in maintaining popular support. The aftermath of the fairly contentious 2016 elections has seen the further deterioration of the political climate. The failure of the Issoufou government to generate pro-poor growth, to fight corruption and to offer better opportunities to the country's youth as well as widespread frustration with the generally high costs of living have caused an increase in the number of protests against the government. Graph 2 outlines the number of protests against the government in the last twenty years. The year 2009 is an interesting reference point. During that year, the former President Tandja tried to abolish the two-term presidential term limit, which provoked widespread popular protest. President Issoufou was elected in 2011. The data shows a steady increase in popular protests, which peak in 2016. The protests are concentrated in Niamey (71%).

#### Graph 2

Number of protests, riots and fatalities in Niger, 1997-2017



Source: ACLED, 2017

Protests are no longer confined solely to demands for improved living conditions. Recently, protestors have called for the closure of American and French military bases in Niger and an end to military co-operation with Germany. These new demands deserves closer attention as they might indicate a shift in public support for security collaboration with Western powers. More important, the reaction of the government is likely to provoke the already tense situation. Since the run-up to the 2016 elections, the Nigerien government has resorted to authoritarian responses, which are reminiscent of the final days of the Tandja regime (in power between 2000-10). Journalists and media critical of the government have suffered at the hands of security forces. Reporters Without Borders describes the government's approach as a "witch hunt" and laments the steady decline of the freedom of the Nigerien media to operate independently. Since President Issoufou has come to power, ten individuals have died at the hands of security forces. During the student protests in the spring of 2017, security forces shot 1 student and injured over 100. In June 2017, Amadou Djibou, the leader of the parliamentary opposition, was accused of attempting to overthrow the government and sentenced to three months in prison.

A further increase in the number of protests is, however, unlikely to destabilise the government in the short-term as it enjoys a sturdy parliamentary majority. Issoufou's *Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme* (PNDS) holds 75 parliamentary seats and his coalition partner the *Mouvement National pour la Société du Développement* (MNSD) holds 43 seats, out of a total of 171 seats in the Nigerien National Assembly. In early 2017, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) awarded Niger with another extended credit facility for an amount of USD 134.04 million (International Monetary Fund, 2017). The total amount of foreign aid continues to hover around USD 900 million annually (OECD, 2017). Decision makers in major Western capitals still regard Issoufou as a model for democratisation and a major ally in attempts to curb immigration as well as a key player in the struggle against terrorism in the Sahel. Through continuous and sometimes uncritical donor support, the government is able to maintain its ability to both include and repress opponents. Some already compare the current situation with the last years of the Tandja era (Elischer, 2016). If Issoufou decides to follow the example of Tandja and seek an unconstitutional third term in 2021, he might lose the support of important domestic and international allies. A failed coup attempt in December 2015 suggests that sections of the armed forces are deeply unhappy with the current political set-up. The further deterioration of relations between the government and civil society might have the potential to provoke the armed forces to intervene. While military coups are notoriously difficult to predict, such a scenario cannot be excluded in the medium to long-term.

## FUTURE SCENARIOS

**B**ased on Niger's trajectory, several scenarios are theoretically feasible. The first one is "disintegration". It describes a situation in which the government is unable to maintain the current level of stability in the country. The second one is "democratic stabilisation". It describes a situation in which the Nigerien government pushes back Boko Haram and remains in firm control over its boundaries. Simultaneously, the government respects democratic principles and human rights; President Issoufou respects the two-term limit, and the 2021 elections results in the first peaceful hand-over of power from one elected president to the next. The third scenario is one of stability at the expense of democratic norms. The Nigerien state is able to maintain the current status quo. It manages to secure its borders and the current level of domestic stability. However, the government maintains its authoritarian approach toward citizen protests, falling short of the democratic norms enshrined in the constitution. Based on the evidence provided in this note, the "stability" scenario is currently the most likely one.



- **Disintegration:** The Nigerien army fails to contain the influx of Boko Haram fighters in the Diffa region. Boko Haram attacks but also jihadist ideology spreads across southern Niger. Simultaneously AQIM and other groups operating from Mali increase their attacks in western Mali. France, the European Union and the United States fail to react to these developments due to a lack of will or funding. Niger increasingly resembles the dynamics of northern Mali and northeastern Nigeria. The world market price for uranium might drop further thereby seriously undermining the macroeconomic success of the previous five years. This might encourage the praetorian elements within the Nigerien armed forces to return the army to power and/or young Tuareg leaders to take up arms against the central government. Alternatively, it might provide the current administration with a pretext to restrict civil and political liberties even further and to respond to street protests in a more repressive manner. This scenario is currently very unlikely. As outlined in the analysis, the current administration is aware of many of these challenges and has managed to contain them in recent years.
- **Democratic stabilisation:** AQIM and other groups based in northern Mali remain unable to gain any traction within Niger. The Nigerien army forces Boko Haram back into Nigerian territory. The donor community pushes the Issoufou administration to engage with the parliamentary opposition and civil society representatives in a constructive and reassuring manner. This deescalates the current standoff between the government and street protestors. Although the government remains unable to transform the Nigerien economy, the run-up to the 2021 elections is peaceful. The 2021 elections result in the first peaceful and democratic handover of power from one civilian government to the next. There is little which indicates that the current administration is willing to follow this model. There is also little that indicates that Western donors see the need and are willing to pressurise the government into talks with opposition forces.
- **Stability:** The Nigerien army secures the borders with Mali and contains the spread of Boko Haram. The current political dynamics remain in place. Due to the financial and military support of the donor community, the government asserts its authority. The government coalition between the PNDS and MNSD remains intact. Street protests continue but lack sufficient strength to bring about change. There is little progress in the fight against corruption. The living conditions of ordinary citizens do not improve. The government continues to pursue authoritarian strategies. It achieves stability at the expense of democratic norms and procedures.

To strengthen security and democratic procedures the international community should continue to co-operate with Nigerien security services in order to protect the country's borders and secure its territorial integrity. Niger's international and regional security partners need to be aware of the political dynamics in the localities in which they are operating. In addition, the international community should communicate the purpose of its military presence in a coherent and accessible manner to the wider population.

International donors could also consult with Nigerien opposition forces both within parliament and civil society about the future political trajectory, using their leverage to push for meaningful economic reform and the creation of educational and economic opportunities for ordinary Nigerien citizens, and calling for more effective measures to fight corruption and increase transparency in the public sector.

## NOTES

1. This was widely covered by the Nigerien media at the time.
2. This information is based on confidential interviews with Nigerien military personnel.

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