

CASE STUDY

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE TOOLS TO ADDRESS RADICALISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NIGER

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BACKGROUND

Niger is a West African country with a population of 24.4 million spanning an area of 1,267,000 square kilometers.¹ Globally, it is one of the poorest countries and has recently been rocked by political instability resulting from a series of coups d'état.² It is a landlocked country with seven borders:³ Libya to the northeast, Chad to the east, Nigeria to the south, Benin and Burkina Faso to the southwest, Mali to the west, and Algeria to the northwest. This places the country within the Sahel region—a vast, semiarid region of Africa separating the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical savannas to the south.⁴ The count of deaths from terrorism in this region in 2022 exceeded the total number of deaths in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Additionally, according to statistics, these deaths in the Sahel region made up 43% of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2022, compared with just 1% in 2007.⁵

Violent extremism in the form of terrorism began effectively taking root in Niger in the early 2010s. Amnesty International traces this gradual evolution⁶; in January 2011, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) abducted two

French citizens in the capital, Niamey. In a failed rescue attempt, these hostages were killed. Then in October 2014, armed groups simultaneously attacked a security post at the Mangaizé camp for Malian refugees, the Ouallam prison, and a military patrol at Bani Bangou, all in the Tillabéry region near the border with Mali.⁷ In 2015, Boko Haram attacks escalated the intensity of violent extremism in Niger. That February, the village of Bosso in southeast Niger on the border with Chad, and the city of Diffa, in the far east of Niger on the Nigerian border, were attacked.⁸ In April, the Isle de Karamga was also attacked, resulting in the deaths of 46 soldiers and 28 civilians. Again, in June, the villages of Lamana and Ngounao, in the region of Diffa, were attacked, killing 38 persons, including ten children.⁹ By 2019, more than ten extremist groups were operating across Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.¹⁰

This eruption of violence in 2015 marked the beginning of an overtly militaristic response by the state to address radicalism and violent extremism. Almost a decade later, the country is yet to be free of this scourge. Furthermore, several coups d'état have been orchestrated under the guise of the insecurity plaguing the country.¹¹ The army believes it is best suited to manage the country in such periods. This is leading to an ever-increasing military approach. However, despite the army taking over power in July 2023, there has been a multiplication of extremist attacks.¹² It is on this premise that this study, relying on desktop research, interviews, and observation, highlights the limitations of the overtly military response of the state and proposes the transitional justice tools as an effective response to address radicalism and violent extremism in Niger.

MAPPING THE FORMS OF EXTREMISM

Eraliev finds a link between religious fanaticism and religious extremism. The former denotes a meticulous adherence to the strict interpretation of religion, while the latter goes further by including violent action to ensure this adherence.¹³ Hexham identifies jihad as a form of religious extremism.¹⁴ This has recently been the most prevalent form of radicalism and violent extremism in Niger. Jihadist groups justify the use of violence based on their interpretation of religious texts and principles. Iannacone and Berman surmise that jihadists “are willing to murder because they embrace theologies that sanction violence in the service of God. They

The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim-centered, collaborative, and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged 801 local civil society organizations; 78 countries; 43 publications; collection of over 8,000 narratives of human rights violations; and supported 588 civil society organizations dealing with human rights violations.

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have no sympathy for their victims, because they view them as enemies of God. As such, they readily sacrifice their own lives because they expect huge and immediate afterlife rewards in return for their martyrdom.”¹⁵ The main groups active in Niger are the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), Boko Haram, ISIS-West Africa, and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).¹⁶ JNIM is an amalgamation of the Saharan branch of AQIM, al-Murabitoun, Ansar al-Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front.¹⁷ This form of extremism comprises mainly suicide attacks, kidnappings, and assaults targeting both military and civilian populations.

Also, self-defense groups constitute another manifestation of violent extremism. With the frequent herder and farmer conflicts that often end in violent skirmishes, communities create armed groups to defend themselves or attack other communities that threaten their livelihood. In fact, since 2010, there have been over 15,000 deaths linked to farmer-herder violence in West and Central Africa, and half of those have occurred since 2018.¹⁸

DRIVERS CONTRIBUTING TO RADICALIZATION

NATIONAL AND LOCAL DRIVERS

Economic exclusion, unemployment, and limited opportunities for upward mobility leading to alienation or frustration are the primary drivers of radicalization leading to violent extremism in Niger. This is according to the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa (UNDP) report *Journey to Extremism*.¹⁹ Putting this into context, Niger is the third poorest country in the world.²⁰ Furthermore, the UNDP estimates Niger’s Multidimensional Poverty Index to be at 91%,²¹ while the World Bank notes that 44.1% of the population lives in extreme poverty.²² Extremist groups exploit this predicament by providing income opportunities to persons who join them. For instance, the resulting bounty for kidnappings presents some sort of profitable employment/economic activity. Also, these groups offer financial rewards to civilians who spy on military positions, thereby facilitating attacks.

Much of the poverty driving radicalism and violent extremism is driven by bad governance. Transparency International ranks Niger as the 123rd most corrupt country in the world out of 180.²³ Corruption is one of the most crucial factors accounting for radicalism and violent extremism in Niger. Many hold that state officials use their ill-gotten money to abuse and subdue vulnerable citizens.²⁴ This corruption, in addition to depriving the country from the effective use of much-needed financial resources, also serves as a source of disenfranchisement of the citizens with the state.

Furthermore, religion is also a crucial driver of radicalism and violent extremism in the country. Extremist groups active in Niger like Boko Haram and JNIM preach radical interpretations of Islam and the Qur'an, which justify the use of violence. They are driven by the need to create an Islamist State operating under "true" Islamic law.²⁵ Such groups are seen as "Islamic millenarianist sect[s], inspired by...heretical but charismatic preacher[s]."²⁶ Under this context, many Nigeriens are radicalized into violent extremism in the form of jihadism. In closely related vein, public anger toward the West is rapidly growing, providing an opportunity for extremist preachers to radicalize many into extremist groups. Recently there have been several manifestations held in Niger calling for the expulsion of French troops and the French embassy from the country.²⁷

There also exists a parallel relationship between climate change and farmer-herder tensions as drivers of radicalism and violent extremism in Niger. Climate change has pushed nomadic Fulani herders of the Sahel farther south, where they rival for access to land and water with settled Zarma farmers. On a local level, sporadic ethnic conflict has occurred, resulting in fatalities.²⁸ These communities often resort to creating self-defense groups that constitute drivers of radicalism and violent extremism. Raineri further adds another dimension to this driver, acknowledging the impacts of the rhythms of the rainy seasons, the rise and fall of the waters of the River Niger, and the rotations of transhumant herd movements in leading to farmer-herder conflicts. However, he contends that this category of conflict erupts mostly "due to shortcomings in governance systems and failings of conflict resolution mechanisms meant to regulate access to natural resources."²⁹

FOREIGN DRIVERS

Furthermore, most of the insecurity seen in Niger today can be traced to the aftermath of the removal of Muammar Ghaddafi as Libyan president in 2011. Libya delved into chaos with devastating socioeconomic consequences for the Sahel. Eljarh aptly captions the Nigerien reality in the post-Ghaddafi era when he asserts:

Libya's neighboring countries...in the Sahel region had to contend with the influx of hundreds of thousands of traumatized and impoverished returnees as well as the inflow of unspecified and unquantifiable numbers of arms and ammunition from the Libyan arsenal... the influx clearly has the potential to further exacerbate an already precarious and tenuous situation in these countries.³⁰

From this assertion two implications emerge. First, Niger, as in the other countries in the Sahel, was dealt a heavy economic blow as the unemployment rate increased, and foreign remittances from Libya decreased, creating opportunities for extremist groups to exploit. Secondly, given the chaotic state of Libya, extremist groups found it easy to spread their activities in the south, toward the neighboring Sahel, coupled with a newfound ease of moving weapons to support their activities.

PROFILE OF COMMUNITIES AT RISK

All the communities in Niger's seven borders are at risk of radicalism and violent extremism.³¹ This basically encompasses the whole of Niger. Moreover, it is the only country in the world with an ISIS-affiliated presence on three borders.³² Koepf notes that “the goal of the terrorists— that operate across borders—is to destabilize local governments and target Western interests in an asymmetrical way.”³³ The Agadez region in northern Niger shares a border with Libya and is also a risk area. On May 23, 2013, a suicide bomb attack at a military installation in Agadez killed 34 people, including 24 armed forces personnel.³⁴ On the same day, another suicide attack was carried out, targeting a uranium site run by the French nuclear company Areva in the city of Arlit.³⁵ The terrorist organization Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa claimed responsibility for the attacks. They were one of three Salafi jihadist factions that seized control of northern Mali following the March 2012 military coup in Bamako.³⁶ It is worth noting that these attacks were planned and implemented from Southern Libya.³⁷

The Tahoua region in Southern Niger represents a risk profile. A total of 177 civilians were killed on March 21, 2020, in a terrorist attack in the villages of Akifakif, Bakorat, and Intazayene in the district of Tillia.³⁸ Also, on December 9, 2019, extremists attacked a military camp, resulting in the deaths of three soldiers.³⁹ The communities in the south of Niger have been targets of relentless jihadist attacks. The armed forces have particularly borne the brunt of the attacks. Four soldiers and two police officers were killed when terrorists assaulted a government military base in the town of Abala on May 31, 2017.⁴⁰ On July 2, 2017, suspected Boko Haram insurgents raided the village of Kablewa in southern Niger, killing at least nine people.⁴¹

To the east, the Diffa region has been particularly vulnerable to the machinations of Boko Haram since 2015.⁴² On December 13, 2020, Boko Haram terrorists attacked the village of Toumour in the Diffa Region, killing 30 villagers and destroying an estimated 800 homes and several vehicles.⁴³ A gendered dimension of risk is also noticed in this region, which shares a border with Nigeria. Women are a community at serious risk. There have been numerous large-scale kidnappings of women by jihadists. The first of such was on July 2, 2017, when jihadists raided the village of Nguéléwa, Diffa, resulting in the killings of nine teenagers and 33 women and the abduction of six children.⁴⁴ This phenomenon intensified between 2019 and 2020. Some released women were sometimes pregnant and revealed that they were abducted primarily to provide material support to male fighters and to serve in domestic roles, cooking and caring for them.⁴⁵

Western Niger is another risk area, as jihadist militants have carried out attacks in these communities, especially in the Tillabéri and Dosso regions. For instance, on February 21, 2021, seven members of Niger's electoral commission were killed when their vehicle hit a landmine.⁴⁶ Furthermore, on May 10, 2020, militants of ISIS-GS attacked two villages, killing approximately 20 villagers and stealing cattle.⁴⁷ The year 2021 saw an increase in the intensity of attacks.⁴⁸ On January 21, 101 civilians were killed when terrorists attacked two villages in the district of Tondikiwindi.⁴⁹ On March 16, 64 civilians were killed when terrorists attacked the villages of Banibangou, Chinagodrar, and Darey Dey.⁵⁰ Also on May 4, 200 terrorists attacked a military outpost near Banibangou, killing over 15 soldiers. In a second attack on the same day, terrorists

also killed 20 persons in Chinagodrar.⁵¹ Again, 69 civilians were killed on November 2 when ISIS-GS attacked the village of Banibango.⁵² The military is particularly at risk in these communities. The deadliest assault on them was recorded in the Battle of Chinagodrar on January 9, 2020, when ISIS-GS attacked a military base, killing at least 89 soldiers.⁵³ This came a month after the neighboring town of Inates was hit by ISIS-GS, resulting in the death of 71 soldiers.⁵⁴ This area is also vulnerable to violent clashes between farmers and Fulani herdsmen. In 2005, in the village of Amota, one such clash led to the deaths of 11 persons.⁵⁵

ANALYSIS OF THE MILITARY RESPONSE

The initial response to the threat of violent extremism and radicalism in Mali was a military one. As the security situation in neighboring Mali began to deteriorate in the early 2010s, the Nigerien government reacted by stepping up their security presence in the north, in anticipation of a potential extremist threat.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the threat was ultimately realized and embedded itself in society. Since then, there has been a significant increase of military activities supported by substantial foreign subventions, yet radicalism and violent extremism have not been vanquished.

The militarized response spans from declarations of state of emergencies to full-blown combat operations. On February 16, 2014, Niger joined the G-5 Sahel to counter Boko Haram.⁵⁷ Niger's Parliament on February 10, 2015, unanimously approved sending troops to join the regional offensive targeting Boko Haram.⁵⁸ In addition, on November 1, 2017, Niger requested that the US deploy armed drones to combat extremists in Niger. The government also extended the state of emergency in the Diffa region for three months on December 18, 2017.⁵⁹ Then, on January 10, 2018, the Italian parliament authorized the deployment of an extra 470 troops to Niger. On November 11, 2018, Germany also sent about 900 troops to the Sahel region, including 40 soldiers deployed in Niger. Furthermore, until October 2023, some 1,500 French troops had been deployed in Niger, training its military and conducting joint operations targeting jihadists.⁶⁰

STRENGTHS

The military response has recorded some notable successes. It has reduced the capacity of the extremists in Niger. For instance, on October 10, 2014, French troops destroyed an Al-Qaeda convoy in Niger that was transporting troops from Libya to Mali.⁶¹ Also, on September 14, 2016, Nigerien armed forces killed 30 Boko Haram militants near the village of Toumour in the southeastern Diffa region.⁶² On May 11, 2020, soldiers killed 25 Boko Haram insurgents in Diffa,⁶³ and in August 2021, 50 insurgents were also killed in Diffa, at the cost of 16 soldiers' lives.⁶⁴ These operations help to build citizen trust in the state. It is clear that the militaristic response has had some successes but at a considerable cost in human lives. Moreover, these jihadists groups continue to operate to this day, years after intense and numerous military operations. It is clear that this approach does not address the root causes of radicalism and violent extremism.

WEAKNESSES

The most profound limitation of the military response is that after almost a decade of fighting, it is yet to bring an end to radicalism and violent extremism in Niger. It has also come at a great cost in lives. Over the course of military operations, several soldiers have been killed in the line of duty. Furthermore, the increased military approach has been accompanied by a rise in human rights violations. On numerous occasions, persons have been illegally detained and tortured by the armed forces because they were suspected to have had links with extremist groups.⁶⁵ This can increase the likelihood of radicalization of these individuals. In addition, an increase in a militaristic approach requires an increase in government expenditure. Niger is already one of the poorest countries in the world, and resources that could be used to provide more essential services are now diverted to military approaches that do not effectively address radicalism and violent extremism. This plunges the country deeper into poverty.

THE DEGREE TO WHICH RESPONSES TO DATE HAVE BEEN FRAMED AS TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND EXISTING EXPERIENCES TO BE ENHANCED

Before the military coup in July 2023, some of the government's responses could be framed as transitional justice. In a sort of reconciliation move, the government of Niger in 2016 called for the voluntary surrender and amnesty of Boko Haram militants in the Diffa region. On February 4, 2019, an official reception center for Boko Haram insurgents who voluntarily surrendered was established in Goudoumaria by Order of the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralization, Customary and Religious Affairs.⁶⁶ By 2019, over 375 former Boko Haram affiliates, including 30 women, had already benefited from the center's socioeconomic rehabilitation program.⁶⁷ Moreover, in 2022, the government had recognized the need to engage in dialogue with jihadist leadership in Tillabéri.⁶⁸ This approach, which complemented a military approach with transitional justice mechanisms, was in stark contrast to the regional approach. This explains why the intensity of radicalism and violent extremism in Niger was less than what neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso experienced.

Many local dialogues were held with various actors (traditional and civil society), and community mediation efforts were valorized. This led to the signing of a peace agreement between the Fulani and Zarma communities in Banibangou on January 21, 2023.⁶⁹ This was key because these farmer-herder conflicts were key drivers of radicalism and violent extremism. International partners like UNICEF and UNHCR provided critical assistance to the government in strengthening such communal approaches that address radicalism and violent extremism. More than 350 "Dimitra Clubs" were created in 60 villages with over 10,000 members to address community challenges and support women in adopting leadership positions in conflict prevention and resolution.⁷⁰ This proved particularly effective in risk communities like the town of Fabidji in the Dosso region, which often experienced farmer-herder conflicts.⁷¹

Also, the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace, hosted within the presidency, and the National Coordination Unit for Stabilization and Disengagement Programs, supervised by the Interior Ministry, were created. This institutional reform was essential in successfully managing successive Tuareg rebellions.⁷² Improperly managed, they had the propensity to create opportunities that allowed the rise of radicalism and violent extremism. This could also be exploited by jihadist groups. Before the coup, Niger's responses were to some extent conscious of transitional justice tools, including communal approaches. The country was effectively addressing radicalism and violent extremism, and these existing responses should be enhanced for their value in addressing the root cause of this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Niger had been more successful than its neighbors in addressing radicalism and violent extremism. The government had realized the need to incorporate a transitional justice approach. This was proving successful until the July 2023 coup d'état. This reflects a common theme that the military uses to justify its actions—that it is best suited to manage the state⁷³ because of its perceived organization structure, discipline, and cohesiveness, qualities that, it claims, make it capable of effectively dealing with an extremist crisis.⁷⁴ However, coups have the potential to disrupt transitional justice processes.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, based on this study, the following recommendations are made to the government and relevant stakeholder (local and international):

- Enhance local infrastructure and community mechanisms to prevent and manage conflicts that could lead to extremist violence.
- Involve women, young people, and local communities in violence prevention initiatives.
- Prioritize unarmed civil protection in the prevention of violent extremism.
- Strengthen the capacities of the defense and security forces to limit abuses and frustrations by introducing human rights trainings.
- Encourage reconciliation mechanisms between conflicting communities to limit indiscriminate revenge.
- Mainstream culture, citizenship, and education in measures to prevent violent extremism.
- Foster dialogue with nonstate armed groups.
- Encourage ex-fighters to return to their respective communities and create the conditions for community-wide forgiveness.

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