

In a Neighborhood on Fire:

'Security Governance' in Niger

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A Neighborhood on Fire

In 2012-2013, the Republic of Mali was nearly destroyed in a crisis that quickly gained the name '*guerre du Mali*'—the 'Mali War.' The Mali War was a direct consequence of the Libyan Civil War of 2011, since it was detonated by the return to Mali of armed Tuareg men who had been working in Col. Khadafi's various military and paramilitary organizations. Some of those men formed an insurrectionary ethnic organization intent on 'liberating' northern Mali (which they baptized with the name of the fossil valley, Azawad), while others chose to create a jihadist armed group with the objective of transforming Mali into an 'Islamic state.' Both of these currents subsequently struck an alliance with a network of North African jihadists (mostly Algerian and Mauritanian, with a smattering of Tunisians) who had been present in the area for over a decade—and they proceeded to launch an attack on the Malian state. Mali's response was the worst that could be imagined. Not only was the army roundly defeated—leading to the cold-blooded massacre of 85 soldiers and gendarmes by Tuareg rebels at Aguelhok in January 2012—but the state collapsed following a coup that replaced an incompetent government with inept military. While in the north of the country the jihadists gained the upper hand over the ethnicists, the south found itself mired in crisis and growing anarchy. Mali soon became divided into a nascent theocratic state in the so-called Azawad and incipient statelessness in the rest of the country.

While this was happening in Mali, southern Libya was slipping out of the control of the new NATO-enthroned government of the country, despite heavy fighting in the Fezzan over much of late 2011 and early 2012. Given the brutal context of tribal infighting which developed on the Mediterranean seaboard, the tottering Libyan government could not impose order in an area of the country which had always been hard to control. Just like the northern regions of Niger and Mali and the southern region of Algeria, this is part of the heartland of the Sahara—an immense, forbidding, and sparsely populated area that forms an asset for mobile and unruly groups. Among those groups—and in addition to native Tuareg and Tubu communities—were "deterritorialized" North African jihadists as well as alliances of convenience of people from all of those groups working in the drug trafficking networks that run through the Sahara on a double southwest-northeast/south-northeast axis.

Some time before all of those events, in the spring of 2009, the Nigerian security forces mounted an operation to 'root out' a violently radical Islamist movement widely known as 'Boko Haram' (i.e., 'No to secular training'). The effort soon escalated into murderous clashes occurring in several of the northeastern states of the country. Finally, in late July 2009, the police executed the main leader of the movement, firebrand preacher Muhammad Yusuf, and allowed photos and videos of his bullet-ridden corpse to circulate on the internet, apparently to put an end to doubts as to his death. These actions—in which uncounted bystanders also lost their lives—proved to be not the end of 'Boko Haram,' but the beginning of a much more violent phase of the conflict that opposes it to the Nigerian state. In the heated ambiance, radicalized attitudes became ubiquitous and in many of the northern states of Nigeria groups with similarly autistic Islamist agendas emerged to fight enemies that included the state, Christians, Westerners, Sufi Muslims, and any other category of people of whom they disapproved.

These three crises have no epilogues as of mid-2014. The one in Mali was partly resolved when the French organized a military operation to stop jihadists from invading the temptingly stateless south in January 2013. While this has removed the more pressing jihadist threat, the French chose to allow the ethnicist movement of the Tuareg rebels to secure the northeastern region of Kidal as their stronghold. This ensured that Kidal would remain an ungoverned area, which dispersed groups of jihadists now use to organize new attacks in Mali—but also in neighboring Niger.¹ Moreover, both the special status given by French diplomacy to the Tuareg rebels and the bad blood left among other northern Malian communities from their short-lived domination in 2012, contribute to maintaining simmering communal tensions in the area to date.

In Libya, government instability has only deepened on the Mediterranean seaboard, while lawlessness in the South has become chronic. In fact, the Libyan government frets that a coalition of disgruntled Tubu and pro-Khadafi armed groups might be forming there to prepare for a ‘recapture’ of the (largely vanished) state. Based on intelligence from its Saharan networks, the government of Niger also believes that the murderous suicide attacks on Agadez and Arlit, on 23 May 2013, were orchestrated from southern Libya. It is very likely from there, too, that came the bloody four-day terrorist seizure of the Algerian gas plant of In Amenas (at the border with Libya), in January of that year.

In Northern Nigeria, the government is currently following a strategy of attempting to ‘contain’ Boko Haram in the northeastern state of Borno, which has become its epicenter. The strategy of containment would be accompanied by a softer strategy of ‘de-radicalization,’ which, at this stage, is still only at the level of a project. Containment being largely based on violent repression, the situation in Borno has become a war in all but name, with refugees periodically streaming across the border into the far-eastern Diffa region of Niger, which borders Borno.

Thus, situated in the exact middle of northern Mali, southern Libya and northern Nigeria, Niger is now in the very eye of the cyclone—a zone of eerie quiet at the center of turbulence. Hence the natural question: “Why is it that no comparable violence has happened/happens in Niger?” And there is also the underlying concern that something bad might happen there in the near future. This paper is about both the question and the concern. I will first propose some of the key reasons why, at this point, Niger has gone neither the way of Mali nor that of northern Nigeria. And following an evaluation of these reasons, I will reflect on causes for concern.

In the North: Ore and Arms

Given the many situational similarities between Niger and Mali (and also the fact that Niger—unlike Mali—actually borders Libya), many in Niger believe that the country escaped the fate of Mali more by luck than by pluck. There are important justifications for this belief, which I will revisit at the end of this section. However, it was not just luck that saved Niger from Mali’s fate in 2012; it was also some amount of pluck. But above all it was a general context inherited from a recent history that is very different from that of Mali. First, there is the key difference between northern Mali and northern Niger that the latter harbors substantial mineral resources (uranium and coal especially)

¹In Niger, this concerns one event, the Niamey prison break of June 2013. An earlier event, the abduction of two Frenchmen in January 2011, was organized from the earlier Malian bases of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

which play a critical role in Nigerien² politics and policy. Secondly, there is the specific legacy of the Nigerien Tuareg rebellion of 2007-2009.

Not always a curse...

Extractive resources are often seen as a ‘curse’ in poor countries. For instance, a widespread interpretation of Niger’s Tuareg rebellions of the early 1990s and mid-2000s ties them to uranium exploitation in the northern region of the country. In this case, however, the empirical data do not support the notion. The élan of the first Tuareg rebellion came from the Azaouagh fossil valley area (in the region of Tahoua)—Niger’s version of Mali’s Azawad—and not from the Air, which is the area adjacent to the uranium mines. In addition, there was no talk of uranium in that period, since the ore was only minimally exploited due to a major slump in international markets, accruing only trifling income to Niger’s then sinking state revenue. The second rebellion used the uranium theme, but mostly for propaganda purposes and with some level of French involvement/manipulation. In fact, recent developments rather indicate that as far as the objectives of the Nigerien state are concerned—namely maintaining territorial integrity—uranium, coal and other natural resources in the North have been a blessing, not a curse.

On first appearance, both northern Niger and northern Mali verge on being Sahelian versions of the *Bilad al-Siba*, the ‘ungoverned’ (ungovernable?) Berber south adjoining the *Bilad al-Makhzan* in old Morocco. This notion is also not entirely borne out by the facts. To be sure, these are vast areas (600,000 sq. km or 232,000 sq. miles for northern Niger) with small populations (below 500,000 people in northern Niger in 2005). While surprisingly large portions of these regions are in fact agriculturally viable—with abundant aquifers in oases and characteristic conflicts between colonizing agriculturalists and beleaguered herders—most of them are forbidding expanses of sand desert. Typically, such environments—immense, difficult and sparsely populated—are less governed than other parts of a territory. High costs of access are a deterrent and the thin demographic densities discourage expenditures that would tend to be larger in proportion to the smallness of the population. Unless they are involved in large commercial flows, regions like this are bound to be less developed, and certainly less economically vibrant, than other more populated and more hospitable areas. Taking all of this into account, the potential *Bilads al-Siba* of Mali and Niger enjoyed, as it turns out, comparatively favorable conditions before the present crisis.

Both northern Mali and northern Niger developed successful tourist industries, to the extent that an international airport in Agadez became the only viable airport in Niger outside of Niamey. There are smaller airports in the Malian localities of Kidal and Tessalit, all also made viable by tourism. In Mali, the Niger River runs through the region, supporting, besides Tuareg and Fulani nomads, the riverine Songhay people and kindred groups with strong economic and social ties with the rest of the country. Although the heavily populated South naturally enjoyed a more vibrant economy, the North had developed a special economy of its own, which was being increasingly integrated into a Saharan commercial space dominated by Algerian and Libyan capital

² We adopt here the spelling convention of the adjective “Nigerien” to refer to Niger, to be distinguished from “Nigerian” for Nigeria.

and goods.³ This situation, of course, also obtained in northern Niger. There, the development of so-called counter-season agriculture and the new uranium boom of the early 2000s, combined with tourism, made the region of Agadez the most economically dynamic one in the country after Niamey. This can be measured by the fact that the city of Agadez became the second internal migration destination in the country, second only to the capital. In the ten-year period between 1996 (end of the first rebellion) and 2007 (beginning of the second rebellion), the population of that city and of Arlit doubled or trebled depending on estimates used, while the Air region also became part of the newly profitable trade in onions on a year-round basis. In short, despite the odds, these two regions were no economic backwaters in their own contexts—even though, especially for the pastoral economy, they remained acutely vulnerable to climatic vagaries.

This said, both regions suffered from three underlying ills—and it is here that a real difference between Niger and Mali developed, largely based on the fact of Niger’s lucrative natural resources in the region. First, there was a hangover from the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, referred to as ‘residual insecurity’ in official communications. Part of this was basically highway robbery and sporadic attacks on isolated gendarmerie posts carried out by disgruntled ex-rebels (a number of whom felt they had not profited from the negotiated settlements of 1995). Secondly, there was the development of drug trafficking, especially in northern Mali. And thirdly, North African jihadist groups started to settle in the area.

Both Niger and Mali treated the ‘residual insecurity’ lightly, considering it as only an annoying form of desert thuggery by restless Tuareg youths. (In Mali, the peace agreements with the earlier rebellion in the 1990s also committed the army to reducing its presence in the North, which would have impeded any investment in a security policy there.) The difference in attitude between the two countries came with the more external problems: drug trafficking and the jihadists. For a variety of reasons—including geographical proximity with the main port of entry of the drug flows into West Africa, Guinea Bissau—the Malian state was much more deeply corrupted by the trafficking than was the Nigerien. Nigerien officials were more systematically hostile to the illicit trade, not just because they profited less by it, but also because of the strong feeling that it endangered exploitation of the resources in the North. Drug trafficking was seen as a security problem because the analysis in Niger was that it was the key reason why Saharan (mostly Tuareg) banditry was not dying down fast enough. A good deal of the ‘residual insecurity’ was certainly an effort, by Saharan outlaws, to secure drugs routes against government forces. For Niger, this was unacceptable because it interfered with the safety of mining (especially in terms of transportation of personnel, supplies, and the trade economy around the mines). At the same time, Niger’s security policy, essentially geared to protect mining, had the unintended effect of discouraging jihadist groups from trying to settle in the country. This point needs some further elaboration.

³This trade economy has been studied in the late 1980s-1990s by Emmanuel Grégoire (“Sahara Nigérien: terre d’échanges,” *Autrepart*, 6, 1998, pp. 91-104; and some chapters in his *Touaregs du Niger: le destin d’un mythe*) and by the late economic anthropologist Pascal Labazée (the results of the latter’s research work have been published only in working papers for ORSTOM (currently known as IRD)). Since then, it has become more complex and remains today an important component of economic conditions especially in northern Niger. The security dimensions of this economic zone are also significant, insofar as jihadist groups, flush with ransom money, now control large parts of it. Of course, for this very reason, it has become more difficult to study it than in the early 1990s.

After losing the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, Algerian jihadists, mostly gathered in a group known as the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), had tried to find a home in the Sahara, including in the northern parts of Mali, Niger and Chad.⁴ While southern Algeria was its main target at the time, the GSPC found it militarily difficult to establish its base of operations there. It therefore looked for options in the Sahelian countries, and found Mali to be the more obvious places to settle. Unlike Mauritania and Chad, it was directly adjacent to southern Algeria, and unlike Niger, it did not have any real security infrastructure in the region. In 2004, the GSPC attempted to penetrate into Chad, and in the process, its six-vehicle expedition crossed through northern Niger, coming from Mali. This was part of a strategy to peg jihadist efforts onto the ethnic rebellions that regularly emerge among the natives of the Sahara (Tuareg and Tubu). In that specific incident, the GSPC was intent on joining forces with the Mouvement pour la Justice et la Démocratie au Tchad (MDJT), a Libya-supported Tubu rebellion led by Youssef Togoïmi. The expedition was defeated by the Chadian army, but it might in fact have failed in the end anyway, just like similar efforts made during that period to enroll Niger and Mali's Tuareg rebels into a jihadist force.⁵ At this stage, there were tactical collusions between jihadist and Tuareg groups, but nothing similar to the strategic convergence that will be exemplified by the founding of Iyad ag Ghaly's *Ansar Dine* in Mali, in 2012.

In this fluid and simmering context, Niger had the advantage over Mali of maintaining some security infrastructure for the protection of mining interests in the North. Because of this, (1) drug trafficking exercised significantly less corrupting influence on Niger's security forces and officialdom, and (2) the jihadists found it a better option to settle in northern Mali.

Seasoned and Rewarded...

In 2007, a new Tuareg rebellion erupted in northern Niger, this time principally in the region of Agadez—led by the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ). Leaving the gendarmes alone, the new rebels boldly attacked the army, to whom they inflicted heavy losses in a series of surprise attacks. The shorter warfare that set in was more geographically concentrated. It was mostly confined to the Aïr area. The key difference from the 1990s was that the new rebels were more heavily armed and came with dozens of landmines, both anti-tank and anti-personnel, which they planted throughout the region and as far south as Tahoua and Maradi. It is not clear where they got those weapons, with some accusing Libya and others blaming drugs traffickers. In any case, in addition to causing civilian casualties, landmines thoroughly demoralized the army, which responded much more fiercely than in the 1990s. The situation was very dangerous, because a greater militarization of the war meant it might turn into a high intensity conflict with more noncombatant casualties and greater political fallout. In the end, and unlike in the 1990s, the solution was military. Because of the landmines, the government purchased and used military helicopters capable of firing and dropping bombs, with immediate results on the ground. Soon the conflict was restricted to

⁴Founded in 1998 by Hassan Hattab (with nom de guerre Abou Hamza), the GSPC became in 2006 an affiliate of Al Qaeda under the name Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (In the process, Abou Hamza lost its leadership to the current chief of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, with nom de guerre Abou Mossâab)

⁵In this regard, it must be noted that Tuareg and Tubu rebellions had an ethnic, not a religious essence, and they were also all supported by Col. Khadafi of Libya, who was opposed to the Salafi orientation of the jihadists.

mountain areas, as rebels no longer felt free to range the desert and the army wanted to minimize risks of landmine explosions. This was essentially a defeat for the rebels, and a face-saving process was organized by Libya in the summer of 2009 to end the stalemate.

The events were interpreted in the international media as a 'failure' of the peace accords of 1995-96, and Niger was at the time unfavorably compared to Mali, which was praised for having preserved the peace with the volatile and 'maligned' Tuareg. Within Niger, the events triggered a process of reforming the position of the army in the state. Until then, the Nigerien army was seen essentially (and not without reason) as a coup d'état engine, and efforts were now geared toward transforming it into an '*armée républicaine*,' respectful of laws and democracy. Indeed, between 2007-2009 it started to be considered by the rulers as a true defense asset. Public opinion about the war was not initially supportive of the government, which was divided between hardliners (following President Tandja) and diplomats (following Prime Minister Amadou). The name 'Nigeriens for Justice' taken by the rebels gave the general impression that this was not another ethnic insurgency in the Sahara, but a wholesome radical critique of the ruling regime. In early 2008, however, the MNJ suffered a propaganda defeat when its website posted a flag of an independent Tuareg republic, and the opposition to the hardliners subsequently frayed. There was no triumphalism after the war was won, but the take-home lesson for the government was that the army had managed to achieve this success thanks to equipment bought to support its actions and boost its morale. The perception of the army in government circles started to shift in measurable ways. Thus far, like many African governments, the Nigerien rulers had tended to be stingy on military expenditures, not just for fiscal reasons, but also because there was a perception of the army as a threat to their power. After 2009, military expenditures started to grow, and have not stopped doing so ever since, with every new budget increasing their portion and funding it through stable internal revenue.

This created an important difference in Niger's response to the Libyan crisis of 2011. It has been noted that while Niger insisted on disarming returning Tuareg militia at the border, Mali allowed them into the country bag and baggage—addressing the potential danger only with the offer of a financial support plan to returnees. The difference was perhaps not so much one of political will as of practicality. Niger's security forces, reinforced in their equipment, their bases in the North and their morale (including pay raises), could simply be relied on to perform such a mission. Indeed, as the collapse of the Malian army in 2012 shows, these factors were essential in the performance of military duties, including a simple operation of policing such as the one entrusted to Niger's army in the dangerous period of late 2011 (the well-coordinated 'Opération Malibéro'⁶). This achievement—which, however, should not be overestimated⁷—was clearly a result of what happened to the army following the war of 2007-2009.

⁶This operation of the Nigerien army shows the direct links between Niger's reaction and the mining sector, since Opération Malibéro has later developed a strong mining protection component that synced with the operations plan of 'special forces' sent by France.

⁷In that period especially, the Nigerien army lacked the means to fully control the desert borders—which would have implied aerial equipment. It is this strategic weakness that is behind Niger's eagerness to accommodate American drones.

In the South: Parameters of Containment

Unlike the North African jihadists and their Sahelian allies, 'Boko Haram' and the constellation of other violently radical Islamist groups around it do not appear to have international objectives. The state of Niger is therefore not a direct target of their actions. Moreover, perhaps as a result of the policy of containment followed by the Nigerian government, 'Boko Haram' has tended to remain confined in Borno state as its key turf. This regional dimension, with a strong Kanuri ethnic component, has somewhat stunted its influence through northern Nigeria, and, by repercussion, through the Hausa-populated central section of Niger. Thus, with regard to 'Boko Haram,' it looks like the metaphor of the fire is an apposite one. The conflagration smolders in Borno state, but the heat is felt in decreasing degrees in neighboring parts of Northern Nigeria, up to Kano and Katsina, and in Niger—especially the region of Diffa, with embers in Zinder and Maradi.

Measuring this by reported violent events—bombings, killings, abductions and clashes with security forces—'Boko Haram' remains a purely Nigerian phenomenon. Measuring it, however, by influence, it is *also* a Nigerien phenomenon. Like any clandestine organization of this nature, 'Boko Haram' has active and dormant cells, and some of the latter are present on Nigerien territory, especially in the regions of Diffa, Zinder and Maradi. Besides cells, 'Boko Haram' has many sympathizers in Niger, who, while they do not represent a direct security threat to the state, do propagandize on behalf of the movement and work therefore to spread its influence in the country. However, the ethno-regional variable has so far worked in favor of the Nigerien government's own policy of containment, an indirect result of the actions of the Nigerian government. In effect, it is likely as a result of these actions that the influence of 'Boko Haram' remains strongest among the Kanuri of Borno state. And in Niger, the Kanuri represent only a small minority group with its ethnic homeland in an isolated region over 1,300 km away from the capital. The adjacent regions of Zinder and Maradi are certainly among the most important and populated in Niger, but in the context of a centralist state, they lack the autonomy of governance which Nigerian states such as Katsina and Kano enjoy, and which has been a significant hurdle in the coordination and organizing of a coherent federal security policy there.

Lastly, it should be noted that while historically Nigeria has always exported its radical non-violent Islamist ideologies into Niger, the violent brands of these ideologies have never successfully crossed the border. This is in part a result of the differing social and political contexts in the two countries,⁸ but also of actions taken by successive Nigerien governments, which rest on a doctrine of broadly defined containment relative to what Nigerien officialdoms often perceive as a continuous chaos in Nigeria.

Assessment

I return now to the central question, "why has Niger not experienced the violence of its neighbors? To sum up the answer proposed above:

⁸These are analyzed in the final section of the paper 'Paradoxes of Security and Fragility.'

In the North, Niger has escaped the build-up of jihadist forces that happened in Mali because its mining-related policing and security measures had made Mali a better option for settlement for North African jihadists over the course of the 2000s; the MNJ war of 2007-2009 created incentives in Niger's officialdom to improve the working conditions of the army, and this in turn proved useful when it came to controlling and deterring Tuareg militia returning from a collapsing Libya. Thus, the lethal convergence of jihadists and ethnicists which set upon an unkempt Malian army in early 2012 could not happen in Niger.

These are, however, circumstantial factors. If northern Niger did not harbor valued natural resources, and if the working conditions of the army had been left as they were before 2007, it is easy to imagine that Niger could have been just another sitting duck alongside Mali for both the jihadists and the ethnicists. The Nigerien government did take actions that created a virtuous circle from its point a view—and here lies pluck; but it did so for contingent reasons, not in view of structural reform—and here we have luck. In other words, Niger is not significantly more robust, structurally speaking, than Mali, but it enjoyed marginally better circumstances at all the right points in time. This was, ironically, thanks to decisions that were widely criticized at the time, such as the one to militarily confront the MNJ in 2007.

The South presents a different picture. 'Boko Haram,' just as the 'Maitatsine' movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, has an overriding interest in gaining some sort of supremacy in Nigeria,⁹ which makes of Niger a sideshow at best. Here too, structural social and political differences undergird the security options of the government and have thus far worked to limit the influence of Nigerian militant groups to a few perennially dormant cells and perhaps larger numbers of sympathizers. In my view, this situation can be fully understood only through a focused comparison between the Nigerien and Nigerian contexts.

In any case, Nigeriens are acutely aware that circumstances and other contingent factors have played an important role in saving their country from being another Mali. Moreover, many feel that the 'Boko Haram' fire may at any moment produce graver repercussions in Niger than has been the case so far. Such views and feelings have considerably shaped the Nigerien government's response to the various crises in terms of setting up a 'security policy.' Before concluding on how exactly to characterize the situation in Niger, let us say a few words on that security policy.

'Security Governance'

After the crisis in Mali, the phrase 'security governance' and the issues it implies have become fashionable throughout the region. Here, I will examine the underlying doctrine of security that informs the actions of the Nigerien government and some of the tools it has at its disposal.

⁹Muhammad Marwa, the founder of 'Maitatsine,' was a Cameroonian from the northern town of Maroua: but Nigeria, with its large Muslim population in a vibrant urbanized setting, was a more fertile ground for his objectives than northern Cameroon. 'Maitatsine,' which is today primarily known as 'Kalo Kato' in Niger, has dwindled to the state of an unobtrusive minority movement in the region. Yet, between 1980 and 1985, it waged a veritable war against the Nigerian state, with several risings in different places and thousands of casualties.

In a speech on 7 April 2014 celebrating the third year of his term, President Issoufou paid tribute to the army, saying that “a democratic state must have a strong spine. That spine is its army, and more generally, its defense and security forces.” And he proceeded to announce that increased resources will be allocated to the military to “recruit, train, drill, arm the men, boost their morale, notably through higher pay rates.” He concluded on this theme by adding that “we intend to create new military bases, to distribute them adequately across our territory, so that, in the end, any enemy will know what it will cost him to attack us.” In an epilogue to the speech, Issoufou stressed the connections between ‘security’ and ‘development,’ but as the general tenor of his statements shows, the military dimension is primary in Niger’s current security policy.

As indicated in a previous section, Niger’s defense budget started to grow slowly but steadily during and after the MNJ war. In 2010, it was of US \$46 million. It grew to \$50 million the following year. In 2012, however, following the Mali war, defense allocations jumped to \$72 million, with \$37 million more added in May 2013, to finance Niger’s participation in the French-led intervention in northern Mali. For 2014, the defense sector is receiving about \$200 million—an enormous sum for a national budget of about \$3.8 billion. This is set in a general framework where Niger has also sought the support of international hegemons—France and the US—starting as early as 2010, and also through the passing of an anti-terrorist law in 2011 (with the attendant creation of a civilian-military ‘*cellule antiterroriste*’). Cooperation with the two Western powers has only deepened as a result of the French intervention in Mali and its aftermath.

In 2012, Niger also set up an executive secretariat for a defense and security strategy in the Sahel-Sahara (SDS Sahel Niger), with the mission to coordinate security and development projects in the northern region of Agadez and the northern portions of all the southern regions (with the exception of Dosso). Unlike the defense policy, however, SDS Sahel Niger is not directly funded by the state. It is, rather, a fundraising initiative, with its operational resources provided by the state but the bulk of the field budget to be raised through international cooperation. Moreover, the policy statement of the program also highlights defense and security as the primary goal, with ‘development’ being seen ambiguously as something that supports security and is also a consequence of security. SDS Sahel Niger has obviously been set up to tap into Niger’s newfound international prestige as the eye in the Sahelian cyclone, while also channeling state patronage to the country’s restive areas (characteristically, SDS Sahel Niger is part of the office of the prime minister, an experienced Tuareg politician). The program is in fact only the latest element in a policy network that includes the High Authority for Peace Consolidation, an institution whose pedigree goes back to the peace accords of 1995, which is directly tied to the presidency, and which has moved from being a patronage program controlled by former Saharan rebels to being a security outfit headed by a military officer. Niger’s security policy is therefore—and perhaps unsurprisingly—essentially based on variations of military force. This is shown by the growth of the defense budget (directly at the expense of education and health, which had been announced in 2011 as the top priorities of the newly-anointed PNDS government); the potentially very unpopular military alliances with France and the United States; and the ramping up of the security policy network. Moreover, the regions of Agadez and Diffa are run by military governors, which is tantamount to a low level state of emergency.

The results are difficult to assess. While two suicide attacks in Agadez and Arlit in May 2013, followed the next month by a prison break in Niamey, were clear setbacks for Niger's security forces, there have also been some successes. The main escapee from the Niamey prison, Malian murderer and terrorist plotter Cheibani Ould Hama, was soon recaptured in the region of Kidal by French forces following Nigerien intelligence (November 2013). A Nigerien national, Beidari Moulid, was arrested in the same period after having reconnoitered potential attack targets in Niamey. In the South, reports from Nigerien security forces show an uneasy situation, where arrests have been made several times, allegedly to avoid imminent attacks. As early as February 2012, 15 persons were apprehended in the region of Diffa and found in possession of artisanal grenades. Some time in 2013, a number of other alleged 'Boko Haram' affiliates (nationality undisclosed) were arrested while crossing from Mali—where they would have received training—in order to go 'lie low' in the town of Madaoua (central Niger). In February 2014, 20 men (all of Nigerian nationality according to Nigerien intelligence) were picked up after a raid organized by the 'anti-terrorist cell' of Niger's military. They were reportedly preparing to attack markets in the city of Diffa.

What all of this shows is the reemergence, in the crucibles of terrorist threat, of a Nigerien security state, which had disappeared in the period following the death of military ruler Seyni Kountché in 1987. The apparatus that is being set up appears especially strong on intelligence collection, which means an unknown degree of surveillance and monitoring that is especially felt in places like Diffa or Agadez. In short, despite official rhetoric, the government response is not based on 'security and development'; rather, it is all about security, and therefore about the strengthening of the military base of the state. In this fashion, Niger's response is no different from the one observed in the West—a fact which goes a long way toward showing the extent to which all states are truly of the same species.

However, Niger as a country is neither France, nor the US. How then does this play out in the specific social and political context of the place?

Paradoxes of Security and Fragility

I will consider here two critical sets of structural features characterizing Niger's social and political context. On the social level, poverty and religion; and on the political level, the political system and the neoliberalized state. On both scores, I will compare Niger's situation with that of Mali and Nigeria.

With a total population of 17 million (2012), Niger is a low-income country (current GDP: 6.7 billion USD) with 59.5% of the population below the poverty line. In comparison, Mali, with a population of 14.8 million (2012), has a GDP of 10.3 billion USD and a population below the poverty line of 43.6%; and Nigeria, with a population of 168.8 million (2012), has a GDP of 262.6 billion and a population below the poverty line of 46%.¹⁰ Niger is much the poorer country, but Nigeria is spectacularly the more unequal—inequality being consistently a greater factor of violent instability than poverty. The difference between Niger and Mali in terms of poverty is probably due to geographic location and the differentials in population pressure, since the two countries

¹⁰World Bank data.

have roughly the same levels of economic development and generally very comparable socio-economic structures. Niger is more “Sahelian” than Mali in that the bulk of its territory is situated more to the north, with therefore less croplands and lower precipitation levels. Niger has nearly 0% permanent croplands and average precipitation of 151 mm/year, against 0.1% permanent croplands in Mali and average 282 mm/year of precipitation (same figures are 3.3% of permanent croplands in Nigeria and 1150 mm/year of precipitation). In places so dependent on climate, soil conditions and natural cycles, with the bulk of the population working in agriculture (80% of the labor force in Mali and 90% in Niger), such factors have critical impacts. The geographic differences between Niger and Mali carry another important implication: the South/North divide is less marked in Niger (which is mostly a Sahelo-Saharan country in terms of ecosystems and attendant lifestyle and economy) than in Mali, where the South is in fact mostly Sudanic—corresponding more to Northern Nigeria than to southern Niger. Again, given that these are non-industrialized countries where economic variations are closely linked with ecological resources, these are no trifling differences. Another important social indicator is the rate of urbanization, which is of only 17.8 % in Niger, against 34.9 % in Mali and 49.6% in Nigeria. What do these data tell us?

Niger is broadly speaking a mostly rural country, very poor, with moderate inequality.¹¹ Data are similar in Mali, which is, however, marginally less rural, less poor and more unequal. Nigeria, on the other hand, is much less rural, much less poor and much more unequal. Such parameter differentials obviously will have an impact on the religious (Islamic) scene in each country, especially allowing for the specificities of Northern Nigeria within the Nigerian federation. Here, as elsewhere, the religious scene is livelier in urban centers than in rural areas—since the infrastructure supporting religious activities and activism (schools and preaching stages, bookstores and CD shops, mosques and *markaz*, outside connections) are more developed in cities and towns, and the leisure necessary for religious commitments is more affordable there too. There is, thus, an ipso facto argument to be made that the religious scene will be inherently more vibrant in Nigeria than in the other two places—and slightly more in Mali than in Niger. Structurally, Niger and Mali appear therefore less prone to religious agitation or fermentation than Nigeria. This does not mean that they would lack strong undercurrent of radical (and even, violently radical) Islamist opinions—but that such opinions will find here a more difficult field of expression and agitation than in Nigeria. Hence, though Niger’s poverty is a point of fragility from a developmental perspective, it is not one in the context of a security policy targeting radical and violent religious movements. Of course, it should be stressed that it is not just poverty that would (paradoxically) be strengthening security, but the lower level of inequality as well.

In terms of the political system and the state, Niger and Mali are more comparable than Nigeria. Since the early 1990s, Niger and Mali have maintained a version of the French-style mixed-regime (semi-presidential) system with a stable political class. Yet a closer look easily catches differences that have a superficial (but not entirely negligible) scope. After a major crisis in 1993, the Nigerien political process has gone through a series of hiccups (two military and one constitutional coups) while Mali has remained stable on that level. But in fact—hence the apparently euphemistic term ‘hiccup’—there was no

¹¹The Gini coefficient of Niger is in the 32.0-36.4 bracket, similar to that of moderately equal countries such as France or Canada. That of Mali is higher (more unequal at 36.5-40.0) and that of Nigeria, predictably highest in this group (45.5-49.9 bracket).

‘regime-change’ in Niger, nor any makeover of the political class, still dominated in mid-2014 by much the same figures as in the early 1990s. The real difference at this level is that the Nigerien system remained highly competitive (hence the various ‘political crises’), while the Malian, after 2002, was numbed by the soft consensus adroitly created by President Toumani Touré to protect his power. Hypothetically, and in the same paradoxical way as poverty, this may be count as an asset for the Nigerien system. The sudden collapse of the Malian regime after the Sanogo coup of March 2012, and the bitter infighting that developed afterward, can be interpreted as a release of hostile energies that had been repressed under the decade-long ‘consensus system.’ In Niger, by contrast, the habit of vigorous opposition did not preclude the formation of a multi-partisan support for the government’s security policy.

The real issue for Niger and Mali lies in the very weak capacities of their state. After severe retrenchment through the 1990s (but starting in the 1980s, with the early anti-state adjustment programs of the IMF), these are no longer ‘developmental’ states—meaning that they lack the organizational and regulatory means to initiate, develop and implement large-scale development ventures, as used to be the case in the past. This, in particular, has physically removed or impeded some critical state functions (direct administration, social services and rule of law) in remote regions. At the beginning of this essay, I insisted that northern Mali and Niger are not, in normal times (i.e., absent Saharan rebellions) economically marginalized regions, as is tirelessly (and lazily, shall we say) claimed by study after study. But the improvement of their circumstances, which originates in the late 1980s and took a sharp turn up after 1995, no longer results from state policy or financing, since the state has by now deprived itself of the means of having such an impact.¹² Except for now-defunct tourism, the labor market tied to mining, and some trade, the newer evolutions belong primarily in an unregulated private economic sector very open to all manners of trafficking, including by state agents and enemies of the state. In remote areas of the regions of Agadez and Diffa, the state has either receded, or discontinued any efforts at becoming present, except in its fiscal and policing functions—which are also the most susceptible to serious abuse.

The level of poverty is not, in this view, the ‘cause’ of trouble in these areas—which are not necessarily poorer than other parts of the countries.¹³ Rather, the fundamental political weakness comes from the nature of the state post-structural-adjustment, which, from the point of the view of the populace, lowers its capacities for ‘good’ (development projects, social services) while increasing its abilities at being ‘bad’ (predation and corruption). Inasmuch as this impairs the social contract and undermines the legitimacy of the state, this is arguably the most serious structural weakness in both Mali and Niger. It also leads us to question the ability of Niger to pursue—as its leadership aims to—a strategy of ‘development’ as a response to security dilemmas. However, on this score, the country has been receiving increased development aid and investment, with the security crisis in the Sahel being a major factor of international solicitude.

¹²In the 1980s, the Nigerien state—which still had some developmental capacities—used COPRO-Niger (a state trading organization wiped out since by structural adjustment) to foster the development of trade economy especially among the Arab communities of the region of Agadez. Counter-season agriculture, now a mainstay of the region’s rural economy, was initiated by the Second Republic’s ruler Ali Saibou (1987-1991).

¹³Allowance must be always made, of course, for the dependence of these countries to evolutions in the ecosystem, as well as to the notion that those in their northern areas are more vulnerable than those in the South: but even here, it is characteristic that the “Niger famine” of 2005 was much more devastating in the regions of Maradi and Zinder than in the North, given the complexity of factors involved in such crises.

Conclusion

Circumstantial and more structural factors have worked—sometimes in unexpected ways—to save Niger from the combustion in the Sahel. Although the situation remains dangerous, since southern Libya remains chaotic, northeastern Nigeria at war, and northeastern Mali exposed, the prospects for security in Niger appear to have considerably improved since the outbreak of the Malian crisis. The government has been given the time to build a response that is broadly supported by public opinion, and the international climate is favorable to its actions—which has not been the case in the past with regard to fights with Tuareg rebels. Terrorist hits and attacks remain highly possible, but an extension of the ‘fires’ of the Sahelian neighborhood into the Nigerien house is highly unlikely.