Report

Understanding trajectories of radicalisation in Agadez

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Cover photo: Historic city centre in Agadez, Niger © Aoife McCullough, 2016

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Acronyms

AIN	Association Islamique du Niger
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CVE	Countering violent extremism
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
MLF	Macina Liberation Front
MRJN	Mouvement pour la Réconciliation et la Justice du Niger
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
NCCI	Niger Community Cohesion Initiative
OTI	Office of Transition Initiatives
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive summary

This research aimed to examine how trajectories of radicalisation happen in Niger. The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is implementing the Niger Community Cohesion Initiative (NCCI) in three areas in Niger: Agadez, Tillaberi and Diffa. An integral component of this programme involves identifying and working with youth 'at risk' of radicalisation and extremism.

When thinking about a 'trajectory of radicalisation', an assessment of risk commonly plays a prominent part. This is because the most common image of radicalisation is that of linear progression. According to this perspective, certain risk factors make people vulnerable to ever-narrowing and increasingly extreme beliefs and ideologies, which then leads to support for or participation in violent extremism.

Scholarship on radicalisation indicates that linearity may not be a useful way to understand trajectories of radicalisation. The literature shows that following radical ideologies does not necessarily mean that someone supports violence. Despite the lack of evidence supporting the idea that people who adopt extreme beliefs and ideologies are **more** likely to participate in violent extremism, the notion of the inevitable and linear progression from certain beliefs to violence remains strong.

To understand progressions in beliefs, which actions actors are prepared to take to support their beliefs, and how OTI's strategy ought to respond, research was carried out in Agadez in northern Niger in October 2016. In this study, radicalisation was imagined as a dynamic process where individual and structural factors interact to produce the potential for radicalisation and violent extremism. 'Structural factors' are defined as systems of socioeconomic stratification (that is, how wealth and power are distributed), and other patterns in the relations between groups, such as how citizens relate to the state. Relations between large social groups are constantly changing, but narratives about the 'other' can establish a particular dynamic. For this reason, we examined not only the relationships between different social groups in the Agadez region but also the narratives that are produced and consumed to understand how these dynamics may evolve.

To test the possibility that individual factors can predispose people to adopting radical beliefs and supporting violent extremism, we examined individual factors commonly assumed by Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programmes in Niger to be associated with vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism. These factors included age (youth), ethnicity, (un)employment, education level, degree of debt, and degree of exposure to other societies. As this is a qualitative, rather than a representative study, we can speak only about the links or their absence among the people we interviewed.

To identify interviewees, researchers followed networks of influence in groups that were thought to include people who would be sympathetic to, or support, radical causes. Using such a network-based approach is useful in seeking to understand how members of defined networks influence what each believes and what type of thinking is disseminated. The networks were selected based on consultation with CVE actors and researchers in Niger and included Touareg ex-rebels, a Salafist movement (*Izala*), traffickers/transporters of migrants, traders (particularly those trading with Libya), youth groups (*fadas*) with unemployed members, civil society activists and prisoners. A Sufist network was also followed to enable comparisons with the Salafist network. We also explored what local people understood as 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism'.

Scholarship on the link between violence and beliefs is rapidly developing. For example, the perception that one's culture is under threat can narrow beliefs towards more extreme viewpoints. In the Sahel, contrasts are often drawn between what are seen as Western/secular/democratic and Islamic systems of government, with many perceiving the Western system as dominant. In the Agadez region, we sought to understand different viewpoints in relation to the concept of a 'just society', Western governance system in comparison with an Islamic system of governance and whether certain beliefs were associated with more extreme viewpoints.

In the Agadez region, as in any society, there are movements that challenge the status quo by offering an alternative vision of an ideal society. Such movements could thus be called radical. Currently, the best-organized and most proactive radical movement in Agadez is the *Izala* religious movement, which seeks to avoid innovation in the practice of Islam and promotes a vision of society based on *sharia*. *Izala* stands for *Jama'at Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat al Sunna* (the Group for the Removal of Heresy and Enforcement of *Sunna*).[1]

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1. *Sunna* means people who follow the Prophet Mohammed

Radical, however, is a context-specific word. In many places in the world, support for *sharia* is not a radical position as *sharia* law is either applied or heavily influences governance values. In Niger, the *Izala* vision for how society should be governed currently departs from the mainstream. In this research, support for the adoption of *sharia* is thus understood as a 'radical' position in the sense that it challenges existing systems. While we explore whether there are links between support for the adoption of *sharia* and support for violent extremism, we start with the premise that radicalisation in the form of support for *sharia* is distinct from violent extremism.

Key findings

There is no consensus among authorities and civil society activists on how to define radicalisation and violent extremism.

The two concepts were regularly used interchangeably. Violent extremism was most often equated with criminal activity—in particular arms and drugs trafficking as well as money laundering.

The dominant vision of a 'just society' was not specifically connected to Islamic ideals.

Most interviewees described the features of a 'just society' as the opportunity to work, having a source of income, and access to basic services such as water and electricity. When asked "Is there another society that is more just than yours", the most popular answer was Libya before the fall of Gaddafi. When asked what made Gaddafi's Libya just, people described the job opportunities and services that were available there. The majority of interviewees, even those who had not yet been born, cited Kountché's reign (1974–87) as the most just period in Niger's history. People associate a meritocracy, a lack of corruption and rule of law and order with the Kountché years.

There is widespread preference for *sharia* over a Western system as a system of governance.

This is in line with a 2013 Afrobarometer survey that found that 67 per cent of Nigeriens would like to see *sharia* adopted in the constitution. Respondents described democracy as a system that can be easily corrupted and that is too lenient on those who break the law. The Nigerien state was also widely perceived as controlled by Western powers. For many, *sharia* represented the solution to the multiple problems that were identified with the current system. It was often understood as a complete system that would result in a more moral, just and orderly society including more honest politics, less corruption, discrimination and injustice, fairer distribution of resources, less interference by Western powers, employment and respect for the rights of poor people.

There were no clear links found between individual factors and support for the adoption of *sharia*.

This means that factors such as age or economic status cannot be used to predict support for the adoption of *sharia*. While respondents under the age of 35 were more likely to support *sharia* than older people, ethnicity, a history of having borrowed money, or time spent in Libya did not predict support for *sharia*. Local people rarely named individual factors as the causes of radicalisation and extremism but rather stressed that structural factors such as poverty based on unfair distribution of resources and rising materialism are reasons why young people join extremist groups.

Potential trajectories of radicalisation in Agadez region

We could identify several structural dynamics that are influencing trajectories of radicalisation at the macro level in the Agadez region. One is growing support for the adoption of *sharia*. While Nigeriens can access *sharia* law to resolve family cases through for example, settling their disputes through the Association Islamique du Niger (AIN) or through having a Kadi, or Islamic judge, preside over their case, the Nigerien state is secular.

The most active group in promoting the wider adoption of *sharia* beyond family law is the *Izala* Salafist movement, which is gaining in popularity not only in the major towns around Agadez, but also in rural areas. The *Izala* promote an ascetic way of life and discourage superstitions, particularly payment for prayers and amulets. This approach is attractive for many who struggle with the increasing materialism of the modern world and pressures to pay for extravagant weddings or baptisms. A core idea in the Salafist movement is that *bidaa* (innovation in Islamic practices) is dangerous and has the power to dilute and destroy the *Sunna* (those who follow the Prophet Mohammed). This belief can feed into narratives about the need to prevent *bidaa* to enable the *Sunna* to live as the Prophet intended, thus promoting intolerance of those who do not follow Salafism.

Members of the *Izala* movement are often accused of being extremist and of allowing violent extremists to preach and recruit from their mosques. We found no evidence during this research of links between the *Izala* movement and violent extremist groups. There was evidence of tensions between the Sufist and Salafist movements. As the *Izala* move into an area and start to encourage people to pray at their mosques and follow their manner of praying, there is often a backlash from the pre-existing Sufist brotherhood. These clashes have been happening across Niger since the 1990s when the *Izala* first became active.

There are two risks that could influence the trajectory that the *Izala* are currently taking. The first is that if the

backlash against the *Izala* in Niger grows and prevents them from influencing the morality of social and political life in Niger, this may encourage *Izala* members to use more aggressive tactics to achieve their aims.

The second risk is that violent extremist groups that operate in northern Mali, southern Algeria and Libya succeed in aligning with the *Izala* movement to achieve the adoption of *sharia*. Currently this seems unlikely as most *Izala* adherents believe that the adoption of *sharia* can be successful only if it is done incrementally. The *Izala* originated in northern Nigeria and it is useful to note that they distanced themselves from violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram. There is, however, a key difference between the *Izala* in Nigeria and in Niger. In certain northern states in Nigeria, the *Izala* hold much political power and have succeeded in implementing *sharia* law. Due to their political power, there was no incentive for the *Izala* to align with a group such as Boko Haram. In Niger, it can be argued that the *Izala* are gaining political influence but they do not have representatives in key decision-making positions at the highest levels. If they are blocked from influencing social and political life, there may be a greater incentive to align with a violent extremist group.

At the local level, if there is no positive change in levels of corruption, rates of crime and inequality, there is a risk that those hungry for change will turn to groups who seem to offer an immediate solution to these problems in the form of forceful implantation of *sharia*.

A final structural dynamic that is likely to affect trajectories of radicalisation is a significant increase in the trafficking of drugs, arms and migrants across the north of Niger since the fall of Gaddafi. The trafficking route goes to Libya in the case of migrants and to Chad and Libya in the case of arms and drugs. With dwindling opportunities for youth in Agadez, the possibility to earn a significant income through criminal activity is a powerful draw. Much has been written about the links between al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the drugs and arms trade in the Sahel. While we found that people in Agadez tend to equate violent extremism with drug and arms trafficking, there was no evidence of widespread recruitment by violent extremist groups in the Agadez region. Yet respondents regularly talked about young people becoming involved in criminal activity. There is a potential risk that if more people become involved in criminal activities, stronger links between violent extremists and such people might develop.

Implications for the design of CVE programmes in Niger

The lack of consensus on what constitutes radicalisation and violent extremism will make it difficult to establish an 'Early Warning System' that relies on people reporting incidents of radicalisation and violent extremism. In particular, if local definitions mean that radicalisation is colloquially equated with banditry and looting, this might mean that CVE programmes end up picking up information on security challenges, rather than on increasing intolerance or growing support for a stricter vision of society based on *sharia* law. This is particularly so if such programmes rely on local reporting of 'radicalisation'.

The finding that people's vision of a just society is not necessarily infused with Islamic values offers CVE programmes in Niger an important entry point. Although CVE programmes are unlikely to tackle increasing unemployment, provide services and improve rule of law, CVE actors could help in raising awareness among government and the international community of the need to address these problems in the Agadez region.

The widespread support for the adoption of *sharia* indicates a demand for change in the way society is governed. Contestation is part of every functioning society and seeking to suppress it is likely to produce more extreme narratives. Engaging with the narratives spread by influential groups will be key to influencing trajectories of radicalisation in the Agadez region. This involves collaborating with groups active in promoting *sharia*, such as the *Izala*. Programmes working with religious actors in other contexts have been more successful when programmes address issues of concern to religious actors. In the Agadez region, the *Izala* were concerned about rising corruption and inequality. Any work with the *Izala* will need to be conflict-sensitive to ensure that *Izala* members do not perceive an association between the *Izala* and CVE actors as selling out.

CVE actors also need to find ways to engage with the widespread perception of the negative influence of the West, and in particular the harmful presence of foreign militaries. Suspicions about the purpose of any foreign military presence will feed into extremist narratives and build support for violent resistance.

Rather than seeking to identify 'at risk' individuals, international actors might focus on factors that could feed into narratives supporting the violent implementation of *sharia* in the Agadez region. Identified risk factors are growing corruption, rising crime, the lack of rule of law, increasing inequality and the perception of unjust treatment of locals by foreign military forces. It is recommended that international actors work with groups who experience the impacts of these factors most acutely.

1.Introduction: Questioning the idea of radicalisation as a linear trajectory

The most common image of radicalisation is of linear progression. According to this perspective, certain risk factors make people vulnerable to ever narrowing, more extreme beliefs and ideologies. If a peer group or factors in the social environment support the adoption of more extreme ideologies, it is widely believed that this accelerates intolerance and may push people towards an ideology that supports and condones violence.

Scholarship has, however, debunked the notion of a linear process of radicalisation.[2] The adherence to radical ideologies does not necessarily result in support for violence (for a more detailed discussion, see the literature review produced to accompany this research). Despite the lack of evidence supporting the idea that people who adopt extreme beliefs and ideologies are **more** likely to participate in violent extremism, it continues to be a powerful belief.

In this research we made no assumption of a linear trajectory of radicalisation. We imagined radicalisation as a dynamic process rather than a linear one with discrete stages. In this dynamic process, individual and structural factors interact to produce the potential for radicalisation and violent extremism. Structural factors are defined as systems of socioeconomic stratification (i.e. how wealth and power are distributed), and other patterns in the relations between groups, such as how citizens relate to the state. Relations between large social groups are constantly changing but narratives about the 'other' can establish a particular dynamic. For this reason, we examine not only the relationships between different social groups in the Agadez region but also the narratives that are produced and consumed to understand how these dynamics may evolve.

Another belief commonly associated with understanding radicalisation as a linear process is that individual factors can predispose people to adopting radical beliefs and supporting violent extremism. To test this possibility, we examined the degree to which individual factors predicted radicalisation, selecting those commonly assumed by CVE programmes in Niger to be associated with vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism and included age, ethnicity, employment, education level, degree of debt, and degree of exposure to other societies. As this was not a representative study, we can speak only about the links or their absence in the networks we examined. There is a developing scholarship on the link between violence and beliefs. For example, the perception that one's culture is under threat can narrow beliefs towards more extreme viewpoints.[3]

In the Sahel, as in other parts of the world, contrasts are drawn between what are seen as Western/secular/democratic and Islamic systems of government, with many perceiving the Western system as dominant. In the Agadez region, we sought to understand different viewpoints in relation to the concept of a 'just society', Western governance system in comparison with an Islamic system of governance and whether certain beliefs were associated with more extreme viewpoints.

1.1.   How we define 'radicalisation'

Although one of our research questions addresses how radicalisation is defined at the local level, we needed a working definition of radicalisation to help shape our analysis. A key problem with the concept of radicalisation is that it tends to merge a number of meanings – disaffection, youth alienation, radical dissent, religious fundamentalism, propensity to violence – that ought to be kept analytically distinct.[4] Furthermore, radicalisation is often focused on the individual and the individual's social group and fails to afford the same attention to political,

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2. McCauley and Moskalenko (2011).

3. USAID 2011. "The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy." In Putting principles into practice, 1-23

4. Kundnani (2015).

social and economic circumstances. This conveys an image of radicalisation as an individual, even apolitical, process.[5]

We therefore chose the following definitions to avoid falling into the same conceptual traps. The word 'radical' refers to a body of thought or action that diverges from and challenges the mainstream. A radical movement represents change. Radical change has not always been considered negative. As Jackson argues, a 'radical' was simply 'a revolutionary who wanted to change society fundamentally. This change could be achieved through nonviolent and democratic means, or through violent and nondemocratic means'.[6] The definition of 'radical' is thus context-specific. Other scholarship supports a view of radicalisation as an outcome of periods of contentious politics.[7]

In the Agadez region, as in any society, there are movements that challenge the status quo and offer an alternative vision of an ideal society and can thus be called radical. Currently, the best organized and most proactive radical movement in Agadez is the *Izala* religious movement, which promotes avoidance of innovation in the practice of Islam and a vision of society based on *sharia* law. *Izala* stands for *Jama'at Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat al Sunna* (the Group for the Removal of Heresy and Enforcement of Sunna[8]).

The *Izala* are also active in northern Nigeria, but since they hold political power in certain states they do not represent a radical movement there, despite the fact that their influence has supported the implementation of *sharia*. This is in contrast to Niger, where the *Izala* vision for how society should be governed currently departs from the mainstream. In the Agadez region, the *Izala's* support for the adoption of *sharia* thus is considered a radical political position.

In the literature review undertaken for this research, radicalisation was defined as the process that precedes, but does not always lead to, terrorism and violent extremism. Although we assume that most members of the *Izala* movement do not support violent extremism, we investigated the possibility that the radicalism promoted by the *Izala* leads to participation in or support for violent extremism. This is based on alleged connections between the *Izala* and violent extremist groups.

We would, however, caution against equating the radicalism represented by the *Izala* movement in Niger with the *Izala* movement in general or indeed with Salafism. Salafism is a global movement, but it is loosely organized. Saudi Arabia is a stronghold of Salafism, but Saudi Arabian leaders and scholars do not control everything that other Salafists do.[9] A (highly visible) minority of Salafists are 'Salafi-*jihadis*' who embrace *jihadism* and try to impose Salafism by force. Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, Ansar Dine, the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO), and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), in Mali, and Daesh/ISIL and al-Qaeda are Salafi-*jihadis*.

1.2. Report structure

Section 2 outlines the research methods, and sections 3–6 describe our key findings. In section 7, we introduce the key actors who shape narratives and counter-narratives about how society should be governed, why change is happening and what is right for Niger. We also provide a brief description of their interpretation of radicalisation and violent extremism. In section 8, we describe the influence of the international community. Our insights into how people think change can happen in Agadez are presented in section 9. Finally, we offer a brief description of some the findings from the analysis of networks of influence.

5. Sedgwick (2010: 480).

6. Jackson (2016).

7. Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner (2014).

8. 'Sunna' means people who follow the Prophet Mohammed.

9. http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2017/01/27/salafism-in-northern-nigeria-beyond-boko-haram/

2. Research methods

The principal research method was qualitative semi-structured interviews. The sampling strategy is premised on following networks of influence in groups that were thought to include people who would be sympathetic to, or support, radical causes. These groups included Touareg ex-rebels, a Salafist movement, a Sufist brotherhood, traffickers/transporters, traders, youth groups (*fadas*), civil society activists and prisoners. These groups were identified through consultations with the team during a workshop on the research design (see Table 1 for a spread of number of interviews conducted in each network).

We sought to understand how members of a network influence each other and thus asked each person who was most influential for them. We then sought to interview that person. This enabled the team to follow networks of influence within specific groups of people.

To bolster the data we collected through this network approach, researchers identified the relevant authority figures (spiritual, traditional and state representatives) in each of the locations visited. We interviewed these authorities to get a broad perspective on how radicalisation and violent extremism was defined.

Table 1: Number of interviews by network

Network	Number of individual interviews
Sufist network	18
Salafist network	14
Ex-rebel	19
Prisoner	6
Fada	6
Transporters	5
Traders	4
Civil society activists	3
Total	**75**

2.1. Data collection

We collected data in the Agadez region in two rounds between September and November 2016, including Agadez town and five villages (Gougaram, Iferouane Mayatt, Tadag and Goffat). In total, eight researchers (six Nigerien and two international) were involved to varying degrees in the data collection.

Table 2: Number of interviews by location

Location	Number of interviews
Agadez	44
Goffat	3
Gougaram	6
Iferouane	5
Mayatt	9
Tadag	6
Niamey	2
Total	**75**

We chose network members as interviewees based on one of two criteria: either because they were identified as a representative of a particular group to which we wanted access or because an interviewee had identified them as someone who had been influential in their lives. The sample is thus not representative.

Each network member was asked to name two people who had influenced their thinking about a just society. Interviewees often named influential people who were older than themselves. To ensure that we interviewed both young and older people, we asked the interviewee to nominate one influential person from their own age group.

There were many overlaps within each network, for example some of the ex-rebels also belonged to a Sufist or Salafist network. We categorized interviewees according to how they were initially introduced to the interviewer.

In addition to interviews with members of networks, we carried out interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with authorities and key informants. The interviews with authorities were focused on understanding their perspective on the meaning and causes of radicalisation and violent extremism. We held FGDs in areas where the research aroused greater suspicion or that had been identified by CVE actors working in Agadez as vulnerable to radicalisation, for example Pays Bas and Tadress *Quartiers* in Agadez.

In total we interviewed 75 network members, 15 authorities (from both the traditional and state systems), conducted five FGDs and held four discussions with key informants (see Table 3).

Table 3: Types of interview conducted

Type of interviews conducted	Network members	Authorities	Total
Individual semi-structured interviews	75	15	90
Focus Group Discussions	5	0	5
Discussions with key informants	4	0	4

Of the 75 interviewees with individual network members, 55 were male and 20 were female. 52% were with young people between 15 and 35 years of age. The median age of the sample from the networks was 35 years. 66% of those interviewed from networks were Touareg. The rest of the sample comprised people of mixed ethnicity (10%), Hausa (8%), Toubou (4%), BeriBeri (4%), Zarma (3%) and Arab (1%).

For interviews with network members we used an interview guide that the research team developed collaboratively. While developing this guide, we discussed how to translate certain concepts into different languages. Interviewers were encouraged to pursue certain topics with follow-up questions where they deemed it appropriate.

By asking interviewees to name two people who were influential in shaping their ideas of a just society, it was possible to follow influence in the ex-rebel network in Iferouane and Gofatt, a trader network in Agadez, an *Izala* network in Agadez, and *Tijania* and *Izala* networks in both Mayatt and Tadag. A network was considered a 'network of influence' only if at least four interviewees were connected to each other by different degrees of influence. In Pays Bas and Tadress Quartiers in Agadez town, people were quite suspicious of the researchers, which made it was difficult to follow a network. When we tried to follow a network of female *Tijania* students of a very influential *Sheikh* in Agadez, the women were very reluctant to talk. We did not ask prisoners to provide details of someone in their lives who had been influential, but explained the research concept to them and if they offered to give us details of an influential person in their lives, we then followed that link. One of the prisoners interviewed offered the name of an influential person who was based in Niamey.

2.2.   Data analysis

During all interviews, interviewers took written notes in the language used during the interview. Daily meetings were held with team members to discuss interviewees' responses and to share experiences of how to pursue certain sensitive topics in greater depth. Interview notes were transcribed into French, using some verbatim quotes and some initial framing and analysis.

All interviews were then coded in the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA. We applied 101 codes to a total of 1,368 text segments. The coded segments allowed us to focus analysis on the themes that were most frequently articulated during interviews. Individual

variables - such as age, gender, ethnicity, experience of migration, degree of debt, among others - allowed us to seek patterns linking individual factors to beliefs expressed. These individual factors were identified by CVE actors in Niger as factors that would be useful to test for links with radicalisation.

We then examined the spread of particular perceptions and narratives to see if there were any patterns within networks or demographic groups. If a particular perception was expressed more than twice, this was noted as 'some'. If a perception was expressed more than five times, it was noted as 'several', but if a perception was expressed only once but was interesting or illuminating, we highlighted this in our analysis.

In relation to support for *sharia*, we used basic descriptive statistical analysis to understand whether the demographic characteristics measured were useful in predicting it.

2.3.   How are the most important words translated?

In developing the interview guide, the research team agreed on French terms for the most salient concepts, which native speakers translated into the relevant local languages.

The concept of a 'just society' was used to elicit people's articulations of an ideal society. This was useful in opening up conversations about the features of a society that matter to people and to get beyond the narratives that are often presented to Westerners or people working for Western organisations in Niger. 'Just society' is also a key concept in Islam and we thought that different articulations of what this means would help place where interviewees stood in terms of their support for a stricter vision of society based on Islamic law.

In the initial piloting of the survey, we used the term 'secular state' as an antithesis to 'islamic state' but most respondents had trouble articulating their views about secularism. We found that 'Western system' carried much more salience for people and worked as an antithesis for 'islamic system'. For many Nigeriens, 'Western system' combines the concepts of secularism and democracy, systems that are perceived as emanating from and supported by Western countries such as the United States and European countries. As 'Western' was used in the interviews, it is used throughout this report as perceptions of a 'Western' system and perceived influenced of 'Westerners' are analyzed. We acknowledge that this term is problematic and conflates differences between Western countries and Westerners. However, as indicated by the translations of 'Western system' into Tamashek and Haussa, in everyday language used in Niger, the 'Western system' is understood as the system of 'white people'. Equally the use of the term 'Islamic system' conflates differences and nuances. However for the purposes of understanding respondents' perceptions of systems of governance, societal ills and the attraction of *sharia*, these terms were useful.

Table 4: Words used in interviews

Language	Concept	Words used	Literal translation
Hausa	Société juste	rayuwa ta adalci	Right life
	Société occidentale	rayuwa nasara	White life
	Système islamique	Sharia	Sharia
	Laïcité	kowa yayi addinin shi	Everyone can practise their religion
	Utilisation de la force	Aiki da karfi	Use of power
Tamashek	Société juste	Toumouksourt ta tizzilaghat/tagadala	Right social life
	Société occidentale	Sari wan koufar	System of the unbelievers
	Système islamique	Sari wan an neslam/ tarreyte tan niddin wa islim	Islamic system/The way of Islam religion
	Laïcité	Tagharan n'ilghoukoum wour naha'idin	Country management which excludes religion
	Utilisation de la force	Igin nissaghat	Use of power

Touareg motorcyclist © Aoife McCullough, 2016

3. Finding 1: There is no consensus on the meaning of radicalisation or violent extremism

Those working on countering violent extremism in the Agadez region sometimes receive reports of radicalised villages and youths at risk of violent extremism. During this research it was thus important to establish whether there is a broad consensus on the meaning of radicalisation among authorities and civil society actors and whether what was being described as 'radicalised' is understood in the same way by those working on CVE programmes in Niger.

We asked local authorities (traditional chiefs, representatives of the state, and civil society leaders) what they understood as 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism'. In interviews with network members, we did not broach radicalisation directly to avoid biasing their answers in relation to their preference for *sharia*. When network members mentioned radicalisation and violent extremism, we asked how they understood both concepts.

3.1. Interpretations of radicalisation in Agadez

Many interviewees equated radicalisation with violence, particularly banditry and looting. A few respondents also connected it directly with drug traffickers. For a couple of interviewees, radicalisation was a vague destabilizing force that could destroy society. One civil society actor described it as a 'plot against Islam'[10].

Interviewees rarely framed vulnerability to radicalisation as being rooted in personal characteristics, but were more likely to understand it through the lens of politics and poverty. Several interviewees described radicalisation as a response to the lack of options to earn a living. For them, if a radical group offers a poor or unemployed person CFA50,000 (approximately €76), it represents an opportunity.[11] Others described radicalisation as a response to poor governance, or the government's failure to distribute resources to the local level: 'The problem of radicalisation is related to the failure of the state to transfer resources and allow municipalities to develop their own plans for local government'.[12] Radicalisation was also seen as the result of disrespectful treatment of people, which results in them wanting to get revenge.[13] An authority figure closely aligned with the government described radicalisation as 'a way of reacting',[14] which highlights that the word is used to describe confrontation or disagreement. Another respondent explained that people who had experience in Libya had, on their return, encouraged others to take up arms to destabilize a system that does not protect their rights.[15]

Some connected radicalisation with Islam but were clear that it was not a source of radicalisation but rather a narrow interpretation or misunderstanding of Islam. A civil society activist felt that the question was misplaced for the Nigerien context. He thought that the concept of radicalisation, and its close association in the Western

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10. Translated from Haussa. Interview with civil society actor, Agadez.

11. Interview with authority, Gougaram.

12. Translated from Tamashek. Interview with ex-rebel and ex-mayor, Agadez.

13. Interview with young woman, Pays Bas *Quartier*, Agadez.

14. 'Une façcon de réagir', L'Observatoire Religieux Agadez.

15. 'They say we in Libya we take arms against the State and that's enabled us to have cars.' (Translated from Tamashek. Interview with Traditional Authority, Gougaram.

world with Islam, was a hostile construct.[16] This was highlighted in a definition of radicalisation that emphasized that strong opinions and a strong vision for society – both considered radical – were also a positive thing for a society that needs such vision.[17] This was not equated with a narrowing of options or violence.

3.2. Interpretations of violent extremism in Agadez

Notions of radicalisation, extremism or violent extremism were often interlaced, so that violent extremism was sometimes understood using the same lenses of poverty and politics that were used to explain radicalisation. More often than not, violent extremism was just regarded as violence or as a way to protect valuable resources, for example drugs and arms. One trafficker argued:

> … *violent extremism is the act of taking up arms to defend one's goods and passengers. You are obliged to take arms to defend yourself because the road is very not good. Everyone is armed. The route from Libya to Agadez is very insecure and because of that we are armed. Since the fall of Gaddafi, a lot of us have had opportunities in trafficking arms at the border.*[18]

Mirroring this viewpoint, a youth group in Agadez referred to criminals, particularly traffickers or scammers, as violent extremists.[19]

A few respondents connected violent extremism with Islamist groups such as Boko Haram, ISIL and MUJAO.

For some, violent extremism was a symptom of deeper social changes. For one civil society actor, it represented a decline in tolerance that results in acts of vandalism and the destruction of public buildings. He argued that this was because young people are losing their traditional identity and culture and are caught 'between two different worlds'.[20] For another civil society activist, violent extremism represented a way to push the limits, to think of doing things that are banned in society, to adore something so much as to ignore social limits.

Some religious leaders thought that violent extremism was linked to certain interpretations of Islam, but it was also pointed out that this was not a very useful or even accurate interpretation since there are other types of political or cultural extremism.[21] Still others argued that Islam was a way to pull people back from pursuing crime and violence, thus offering a way out from violent extremism.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

One approach currently being considered by CVE actors in Niger is to set up an 'Early Warning System; whereby local actors and authorities would monitor signs for radicalisation and violent extremism and report them to organisations working on CVE programmes.

Such varied interpretations of radicalisation and violent extremism make it difficult to establish such 'Early Warning Systems'. In particular, the equation of radicalisation with banditry and looting means that CVE programmes with Early Warning Systems may end up picking up information on security challenges rather than on rising intolerance or increasing support for a stricter vision of society based on *sharia*. By increasing the capacity of local authorities, the understanding of violent extremism and radicalisation may become more standardized. The risk of using an Early Warning System based on reports from authorities, however, is that these are seen as colluding with the international community and that support for radical change or violent extremism therefore goes underground.

16. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

17. Interview with female Qadiriyya adherent who participated in a peace camp organized by NCCI.

18. Translated from Tamashek. FGD with Fada of Toubou fraudsters, Agadez.

19. FGD with male Fada, Pays Bas *Quartier*, Agadez.

20. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

21. Interview with *L'Observatoire Religieux* Agadez.

4. Finding 2: People's vision of a 'just society' features jobs, access to basic services and law and order

Before doing the research, the team thought that asking people to articulate their understanding of a 'just society' would allow us to place interviewees in terms of their adherence to Islamic ideals. This assumption was based on discussions with team members and with Professor Maikorema, a specialist in the history of Islam at the University of Niamey. In fact, the dominant vision of a just society was not specifically connected to Islamic ideals, and most interviewees described its features as the opportunity to work, a source of income, and access to basic services such as water and electricity. Libya before the fall of Gaddafi was the 'just society' most cited. When asked what made Gaddafi's Libya just, people described the job opportunities and services that were available there. The majority of interviewees, even those who had not yet been born, cited Kountché's reign (1974–87) as the most just period in Niger's history. This highlights how nostalgically this period of authoritarianism is remembered. People associate a meritocracy, a lack of corruption and rule of law and order with the Kountché years.

The vision of a just society expressed by interviewees also corresponds with the social ills that were most commonly identified – unemployment, corruption, poverty, crime and degradation in social values, such as disrespect for elders and greater acceptance of promiscuity. Unemployment was the most cited social problem in Agadez. While our sample is in no way representative, it is interesting to note that only 9% of interviewees described themselves as 'unemployed'.[22] This indicates that most people are working but do not perhaps earn a steady income as they would in a salaried job. This also highlights the difference between the kind of unemployment people lament in relation to the situation in Agadez (presumed to mean a salaried job in government, NGO or industry)

and the reality of employment, which is a mixture of entrepreneurialism, flexible project-based work or, possibly, the definition of illicit or illegal activity as employment.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

Respondents did not define a 'just' society in terms of a particular legal system informed by a set of moral values, but more broadly and in terms more associated with development.

The finding that people's vision of a just society is not necessarily infused with Islamic values gives CVE programmes in Niger an important entry point. Although there is widespread preference for an Islamic over a Western system (see next section), this preference may be largely based on people's current experience of society as unjust. They experience Niger as a society where there are few job opportunities, inadequate basic services and a lack of rule of law.

Although CVE programmes are unlikely to tackle unemployment, provision of services and improvement in rule of law, CVE actors could help in raising awareness of the need for substantive programmes to address these problems in the Agadez region. It should be noted that supporting rule of law does not mean simply strengthening state presence by increasing the number of police, soldiers or court officials. Rather, a broader approach might imply identifying how and why the current system is perceived to be unjust and working to address these injustices. CVE actors might inform the design and implementation of such programmes to ensure that all different religious actors benefit.

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22. While this rate of unemployment seems low for Niger, the official figure provided by the International Labour Organization for 2014 is 5.1%

5. Finding 3: There is a widespread preference for *sharia* over a Western system

In the interviews conducted with members of networks, we explored people's thoughts and attitudes towards the Western system (*système occidentale*) and an Islamic system (translated as '*sharia*'). We asked interviewees about the positive and negative aspects of each system and whether they thought either could help resolve the problems in the Agadez region. Where people distinguished between the secular state and a Western system, their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of a secular state was also explored.

While most people thought it would be better to maintain the current system (which is widely understood as a Western system), 45% preferred *sharia*. In fact, the majority of people interviewed thought that *sharia* was a force for good, even though some who viewed *sharia* positively also thought that there would be problems in implementing it. In these cases, we categorized these interviewees as 'not supporting *sharia*' even though they were generally positive about the idea of *sharia*. It should be noted that Nigeriens already have access to *sharia* law in relation to family matters—citizens can bring their cases to the Association Islamique du Niger or can elect to have a Kadi, or Islamic judge preside over their case in court. During interviews, interviewees were asked about whether *sharia* could address all the problems facing society in Agadez, not just in relation to family matters.

The key problem perceived with the Western system (meaning a secular state and democracy) was the ease with which it could be corrupted. In Niger, vote buying is common during elections while access to the government bureaucracy is controlled through a network of connected groups.[23] There is a widespread perception that the increased corruption in the public sector and in politics has occurred since the advent of multiparty politics in the

1990s. Democracy is directly associated with corruption, while the military reign of Kountché (1974–87) is remembered as a time when the civil service and law were free from corruption.

Interviewees perceived the democratic system as allowing freedom, but often argued that this freedom brings negative consequences. Freedom of speech is abused, for example, and because people can do what they like, they can disrespect others with impunity.

For many, the fundamental problem with secularism and democracy was that these governance systems do not offer a clear moral compass to guide leaders and people in positions of responsibility in their decision-making. This is perceived to result in leaders taking immoral decisions and contributing to the creation of a society that is not in accordance with Islamic norms. Ex-rebels' experience of being attacked by the state feeds into an image of the state as immoral.

There was also a perception that the laws made by a secular state are designed to protect the rich and powerful. Some interviewees expressed a fear that the secular state would take possession of their land. It is interesting to note the parallels between the critique offered by the left in the West and that produced by Islam. While the left locates the problems in capitalism, many Nigeriens interviewed for this research located the same problems in democracy and secularism.

Sharia on the other hand represented morality, justice, and order. Fundamentally, many believed that *sharia* represented the truth and the way of God, so as a system of values that informs governance it would be more difficult to corrupt. Many interviewees thought that under *sharia*, leaders would become more responsible as they would be accountable to God. The implications of this view are

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23. For more details on the political economy of voters' engagement, and the education sector, see a series of briefings produced by ODI for USAID in 2015: https://www.odi.org/projects/2823-niger-political-economy-action-research

profound, since it means that *sharia* is associated with more honest politics, less discrimination and injustice, better distribution of resources, less interference by Western powers, better employment opportunities and respect for the rights of poor people.

Sharia was also expected to increase law and order. In the Western system, many viewed the punishment for crimes – incarceration – as too lenient. Punishment under *sharia* was understood as harsh but necessary to produce order. Interviewees expected that the strict laws on behaviour and dress that *sharia* would bring would produce positive social changes, including the disappearance of prostitution, adultery and indecent clothing. In short, many respondents imagined *sharia* as a system that would address the problems experienced in Agadez.

While some thought that the implementation of *sharia* would cause conflict (as has happened in Mali and northern Nigeria), for others it represented a way to unite people. Many people understood their religion as a force for peace, tolerance and patience; thus implementing *sharia* was portrayed as a way to benefit from those aspects of Islam.

Although many interviewees said that development projects could improve some aspects of life in Agadez, particularly in the area of education, few expected that Western systems would be able to resolve the problems facing the Agadez region. This was because, it was argued, there is so much corruption at all levels of government that it cannot be reformed. Another reason given was that as long as white people control the highest levels of power, Niger can never evolve.[24] This lack of faith in the possibilities of the current system – modelled to incorporate principles of secularism and democratic governance – to improve their lot is significant. It contrasts with the hope and idealism that is invested in the vision of an Islamic system. As one female *Izala* student in Agadez described it, 'If *sharia* was implemented in our country, we would not see all these problems, the poor would not be wronged'.[25] Indeed, in response to the question about the problems that an Islamic system could bring, many argued there would be none.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

The widespread support for *sharia* reflects what a 2013 Afrobarometer survey found, which was that 67% of Nigeriens said they support the adoption of *sharia* in the constitution.[26] Many commentators in Niger dismiss the support for *sharia* found in surveys as an answer that people give because, as Muslims, they perceive it is the 'right' one. The nuanced reflections by interviewees on the advantages and disadvantages of implementing *sharia* collected during this research indicates, however, that not all support for *sharia* can be dismissed as simply a socially acceptable answer.

Is this level of support for *sharia* something with which CVE programmes need to engage? Based on this research and insights gained from other contexts, increasing support for *sharia* needs to be understood as a contestation over how to govern society in the face of growing disillusionment and perceived failings with the Western liberal democratic system. Contestation over governance needs to happen in every functioning society. Working to suppress it will produce more extreme narratives.

In northern Nigeria, widespread support for *sharia* and political activism by the *Izala* resulted in its implementation in several states. Some states implemented full *sharia*, including criminal law; others only introduced it to deal only with issues of personal status. In the latter states, Boko Haram has been most active, and a popular narrative promoted by Boko Haram is that the *sharia* implemented in northern Nigeria does not represent true Islam.

The level of support for *sharia* found by the Afrobarometer survey and reflected by this research in the Agadez region indicates that there is a demand for change in the way society is governed. The risk is that if there is no change in near future to the current system, those longing for it will turn to groups who offer immediate implementation of *sharia*, as Salafi-*jihadi* groups such as ISIL or Boko Haram do. This is one reason why local populations are sometimes willing to accept the violence associated with these groups.

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24. Interview with *Izala* member in Mayatt. Translated from Tamashek.

25. Interview with female *Izala* student, Agadez.

26. For a useful discussion of this result, see Tidjani Alou and Moumouni Adamou (2015).

6. Finding 4: Individual factors are not useful for identifying 'at risk' groups

A key aim of this research was to identify individual and structural factors that expose people to the risk of radicalisation. By individual factors we mean age, ethnicity, employment, education level, degree of debt, and degree of exposure to other societies and cultures. We identified these individual factors because CVE programmes in Niger tend to be designed on the assumption that these factors create vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism. By structural factors we mean the system of socioeconomic stratification (how wealth and power are distributed) and other patterns in the relations between groups, for example in how citizens relate to the state. The focus on structural factors as a possible cause of radicalisation is based on the literature reviewed for this study.

In the Agadez region, we found little evidence of widespread recruitment of young people into extremist groups. For this reason, it was difficult to identify individuals who had been or who knew of people who had been recruited. Interviewees expressed widespread support for *sharia*, which represents a radical position in relation to the current mainstream political agenda in Niger.

In this qualitative research design, descriptions of numeric patterns in the data are only indicative and not in any way representative. Since we specifically focused on networks that are said to have members who may be radicalised, this data set is heavily biased. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine the data at the individual level to see if any patterns emerge.

There is a general perception that youth are more likely to support the implementation of *sharia*. Our data broadly aligns with this perception: 59% of those who support *sharia* were younger than 35, compared with 46% among those who did not support the implementation of *sharia*. However, we need to be careful not to ascribe support for *sharia* to youthful impulsiveness. The median age of those who supported *sharia* was 35 years compared to 38 years among those who did not. This indicates that the age range in both groups was quite similar. In an Afrobarometer

study carried out in Niger in 2013, the highest levels of support for *sharia* were found in the 18–35 age group and those aged 56 and above.

We also examined the spread of ethnicity between those who support *sharia* and those who do not. Both groups are dominated by Touareg, which contradicts the commonly cited idea that the Touareg are particularly resistant to the implementation of a stricter form of Islam. Hausa interviewees supported *sharia*, but since we interviewed only five Hausa, we are particularly cautious about reading anything into this. Among the Touareg who supported *sharia*, the Kel Tedele clan was particularly strongly represented. Again, we are cautious about inferring anything from this since we specifically chose two villages that are home to Kel Tedele and that also had an active *Izala* group.

Members of religious networks dominated the category of those supporting *sharia*. However, proportionally more *Izalas* supported *sharia* than members of the *Tijania/Qadiriyya* brotherhoods.

Among those interviewees who identified themselves as unemployed, there were proportionally fewer who supported *sharia* compared to those who described themselves as employed. However, the total number of people interviewed who described themselves as unemployed was low (n=7) so it is difficult to conclude anything from this observation. Additional data from other locations might provide more insights into a possible link between unemployment and support for radical change.

We cannot deduce links between education type or level and support for *sharia* based on the data collected thus far because there are not enough data points to make conclusive statements. We can, however, make some observations, which may be strengthened with additional data from other regions. In line with the Afrobarometer survey, we found higher support for *sharia* among those who attended *Koranic* school[27] than formal schools. Among those who had attended Koranic schools only,

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27. *Koranic* schools are common across Niger. Sufist schools tend to be attended only by boys and focus on teaching students to learn the *Koran* by heart. Salafist *Koranic* schools are open to both sexes and teach pupils Arabic so that they can read the *Koran* themselves.

56% preferred *sharia* compared with 42% among those who attended formal schools only.

It is widely assumed by CVE actors that having a history of debt can make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremism as leaders of radical groups can offer money in exchange for adherence to their belief system. We did not find strong evidence that having a history of debt predicted support for radical change.

Finally, spending time in Libya was not a good indicator for whether someone was likely to support *sharia*. Among those who supported its implementation, 24% had been to Libya for work or study compared with 34% who did not support *sharia*.

6.1. Who do people living in the Agadez region identify as 'at risk'?

In addition to measuring links between individual factors and support for *sharia*, we also asked interviewees what made people 'at risk' of radicalisation and violent extremism. They offered a vast range of possible factors.

Some interviewees linked radicalisation to illiteracy or interpretations of Islam that had been influenced by periods abroad. In most of these cases, interviewees were describing the adoption of Salafism and equated it with radicalisation.

Respondents more often cited poverty not just as the major challenge in life, but also as a source of disappointment, disillusionment, and the need to find paths out of it in a state that offered little. Exposure to criminal opportunities – by observing how others made money by being engaged in illicit activity locally or across the border in Libya – was often cited as a risk factor for violent extremism. Respondents argued that young people were attracted to being part of the growing arms-smuggling network.[28] One interviewee said that theoretically Agadez might be a fertile place for Boko Haram, due to unemployment.[29]

As discussed in section 3, most interviewees tended to equate radicalisation and violent extremism with criminal activity. For this reason, much of their analysis of who is 'at risk' of radicalisation and violent extremism is actually an analysis of what drives people to criminal activities.

Living up to family pressures and cultural expectations was regarded as challenging for boys, who are expected to provide for the family, even at a young age – including covering the family's medical expenses.[30] In times of financial need families were willing to turn a blind eye to how exactly their sons had managed to get money, explained one respondent.

High levels of poverty combined with increased materialism – pressure to own smartphones or celebrate big weddings – seem to leave two choices: to engage in illicit activity or to subscribe to religious teachings that urge material restraint and stress that material humility is preferable. The *Izala* movement, for example, rejects the need for lavish wedding celebration, which can pose a major financial strain.

None of the interviewees reported experiencing pressure from debt collectors but several described others who had experienced difficulties that caused them to take extreme measures such as getting into criminal activity,[31] leaving the country or giving their daughter away in marriage.[32] Nobody mentioned examples of people joining extremist groups to enable them to repay their debts.

The Pays Bas *Quartier* – where *jihadists* were reported to have stayed in 2013 before launching an attack on the military barracks – was described by respondents not so much as a hotbed of extremism, but rather of poverty and associated crime. One respondent did say that women were lured into prostitution to make a living from outsiders who wanted to gain information about the neighbourhood. The information was then fed back to a gang leader – often thought to be located outside Niger – to allow them to better prey on people, for example by robbery.[33] In a group discussion with women in Pays Bas, the women were quick to point out that the risk of radicalisation was not unique to young people. The experience of unfair imprisonment was mentioned as a factor that also turned older people against the state.[34]

Some of the structural factors respondents mentioned as factors that drive young people towards violent extremism represent the opposite of what people described in their vision of a 'just society'. In other words, the features of an unjust society were also cited as reasons why people participated in violent extremism.

28. Interview with Toubou transporter, Agadez.

29. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

30. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

31. Interview with ex-rebel, Iferouane.

32. Interview with *Izala* Imam, Agadez.

33. Interview with authority, Agadez

34. FGD with female *Fada*, Pays Bas, Agadez.

6.2. Are those who support the implementation of *sharia* more likely to support violent extremism?

Although violent extremist groups promote the implementation of *sharia*, there was no evidence that the respondents who supported *sharia* were likely to support the use of force to implement *sharia*. In the second round of data collection carried out in the villages of Mayatt and Tadag and in the Pays Bas neighbourhood, all except one respondent argued against the use of force to engender adherence to *sharia* if it was implemented. The one exception was an 80-year-old woman who followed the *Tijania* tradition and recommended using force in response to non-adherence to *sharia*.

Some interviewees expressed a suspicion that the *Izala* have links to extremist groups and that they allow members of extremist groups to preach and recruit at their mosques. It is difficult to disentangle this allegation. In Mayatt and Tadag, *Izala* interviewees did not report that outsiders were coming to preach in their mosque. In Mayatt, one interviewee talked about an outside preacher, but this turned out to be the Malian *Tijania* imam who had come to Mayatt 12 years ago. In Tadag, the *Izala* movement has tried to recruit an imam from outside the community with little success so far. A Ghanaian imam came to Tadag in 2015, but left after three months. In Agadez, a town that is overflowing with strangers, it is hardly surprising to find them joining prayers in different mosques. The accusation of certain groups accepting the presence of strangers is also two-way street –CVE programme staff can also be experienced as strangers who arrive in villages and tend to (currently) talk only to representatives of the *Tijania* and *Qadiriyya* networks.

None of the interviewed *Izala* network members supported the use of force to implement *sharia*. Many of the influential actors within the *Izala* networks we found argued adamantly against doing so since they believe that force contradicts Islam and many criticized the use of violence by Boko Haram. Some preferred to use political methods, such as a referendum, to make a decision about whether to implement *sharia*, saying, for example:

> *In Islam, the use of violence is banned. But it is through education that we can establish a system, and not by force. To implement this system, we need to bring together everyone (women, men, imams, chiefs, the [religious] associations) and then hold a referendum. If the majority agree, then we can apply [sharia]. The only force that can be used is through study. The people must be educated to put in place a system. It was the lack of education that was the cause of the rebellions.[35]*

This sentiment was echoed by other respondents from the *Izala* community, but needs to be understood in context. The *Izalas* who expressed this perspective were keen to refute the perception of their movement as jihadist and thus were willing to spend time explaining the movement to a team of researchers connected to a US agency. None of the *Izala* members interviewed for this study expressed jihadist views, but one prominent *Izala* member acknowledged that some *Izalas* were more antagonistic. The *Izala* movement is not homogenous and has already split several times since it first emerged in the 1990s. The *Izala* are known to be sometimes belligerent in debates on religious movements and have been accused of using violence to protect their prayer space in their mosques in Dogondoutchi, Dosso Region.[36]

The prominent *Izala* member interviewed for this research described the possibility that associations within the *Izala* movement might become impatient if there was little progress in implementing *sharia* in the coming years. A core concept in the Salafist movement is the idea that *bidaa* (innovation in Islamic practices) is dangerous and has the power to dilute and destroy the *Sunna* (those who follow the Prophet Mohammed). This belief can feed into narratives about the need to prevent *bidaa* in order to enable the *Sunna* to live as the Prophet Mohammed intended, thus promoting intolerance of those who do not follow Salafism.

The imam at the largest *Izala* mosque in Agadez was very clear about the need for a long-term approach to implementing *sharia* and thought it could be introduced incrementally within ten years.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

One pressing challenge for counter-radicalisation programmes is to find the best way to identify communities or individuals 'at risk' and to decide on measures to stem that risk. How does one best define risk and then measure the extent to which a person is 'at risk'?

Poverty is often correlated with increased support for radical ideologies. Using this starting point, a poor person may be identified as being at greater risk to developing radical beliefs. However, since a multitude of development programmes address poverty, counter-radicalisation programmes aimed at a group categorized as 'at risk' are usually focused on countering radical messages, rather than addressing the factor which made that group vulnerable to radicalisation. The second challenge with this approach is that since we know that poverty is not a direct cause of extremism, using it as a measure of risk obstructs what is needed to conduct the more complicated search for a cause.

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35. Influential male *Izala* member, Mayatt.

36. Masquelier (2009).

The findings from this research indicate that individual factors may not be useful in identifying 'at risk' groups. The analysis of individual factors and support for *sharia* showed huge variation in the types of people who support it, although support is more concentrated among youth and among religious networks, particularly the *Izala* network. In the analysis of local perceptions of what makes people at risk of radicalisation and extremism, people were more likely to identify structural rather than individual factors.

This finding is supported by the latest scholarship on radicalisation. Using Australian counter-radicalisation policies as a case study, Aly argues that 'vulnerability to radicalisation' cannot be predetermined.[37] Despite this, the policy response in Australia continues to be framed by a combination of flawed assumptions about individual and community vulnerability, rather than focusing on the contexts and settings within which radicalisation occurs. Furthermore, Aly writes that the use of risk indicators has produced:

> … *a policy response that allows for the identification of suspect individuals and groups as the basis for the development of programmes designed to counter violent extremism. Thus programmes become dominated by a focus on groups (Muslims, Somali, Afghan, CALD, ethnic, multicultural, refugee, etc.) rather than on defusing the contexts, situations and opportunities that present as possible supportive settings and the mechanisms by which these settings arise.*[38]

This might be a crucial insight for CVE programmes that work primarily at the community level. In the context of Niger, this might mean that programmes should be designed in a way that acknowledges that radicalisation cannot be prevented by targeting groups, but is in fact a much broader development endeavour that takes into account the structural factors.

It is also crucial to examine possible underlying motivations for those who are categorized as being at risk. The term is often used to pathologize groups or individuals that are politically inconvenient. Thus whenever the label is used it might need to be questioned. From what perspective is someone declared as being at risk? To what extent is being identified as 'at risk' used to label people who express criticism of the government or the current socioeconomic order?

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37. Aly (2015).

38. Aly (2015).

7. Key actors shaping narratives and counter-narratives

7.1.   Representatives of the state

Representatives of the state include civil servants, members of the Nigerien military forces and elected representatives. Representatives of the state are widely perceived as corrupt, particularly those with access to resources at municipal, departmental and national levels. Patronage systems are, however, currently broad enough to allow influential people to benefit to varying degrees. Nigeriens understand this system as morally corrupt but in most cases, economic circumstances mean that they participate in it.[39]

Representatives of the state often described Salafist movements as a threat that emanated from outside Niger. Returnees from Libya and those who had studied in Saudi Arabia were described as introducing foreign ways of practising Islam. For example, a representative of the state in Iferouane said: 'We cannot accept that the returning migrants inculcate us with their ideas. We even banned praying at 1pm.'[40][41]

Many representatives of the state thought that the solution was to strengthen rule of law and welcomed the increased presence of Nigerien and foreign military forces.

7.2.   Traditional authorities

Traditional authorities include village or *Quartier* chiefs, elders and the sultan. Chiefs are formally part of the administration, paid by the Ministry of Interior, but are understood as part of a separate hierarchy that exists alongside state hierarchy. *La Chefferie* remains a hereditary system and, as the Touareg have historically been the dominant ethnic group in Agadez, they continue to dominate traditional authority.[42] The hereditary system often overlaps with the administration, with members of the chief's families holding local administrative posts in many areas.[43] Most chiefs are aligned to a political party and work to influence the presidential and municipal elections.[44]

Many traditional authorities also described radicalisation and violent extremism as an outside influence that is having an impact on young people. While all traditional authorities who were interviewed for this research were members of a Sufist brotherhood, some traditional authorities understood the appeal of Salafism and admitted that they had changed their lifestyle as a result of the influence of *Izala* members.

7.3.   Sufist imams

The dominant religious movements in Agadez region are the *Tijania* and *Qadiriyya* Sufist brotherhoods and most traditional *marabouts* – Sufist imams or religious leaders – adhere to one of these traditions.[45] The *Qadiriyya* brotherhood has strong historic links with the state. It controls the Association Islamique du Niger (AIN), which was established by Kountché in the 1970s, ostensibly to promote culture and ideology. However, it also allowed Kountché to ensure that influential *marabouts* supported

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39. McCullough, Harouna et al. (2016).

40. Translated from Tamashek. Interview with authority in Iferouane.   The practice of conducting afternoon prayer at 1pm rather than at 2pm is promoted by the *Izala* and has proved to be a divisive point for some. Fights have broken out between *Izalas* and Sufists across Niger over this issue.

41. Authority in Iferouane.

42. In Toubou and Peulh communities, the chief will be of that ethnic group but as the Touareg form the majority in Agadez region, most chiefs are Touareg.

43. McCullough, Harouna et al. (2016).

44. Younoussi, (2015); Issaley and Olivier de Sardan (2015); McCullough, Harouna et al. (2016).

45. The term *marabout* is used throughout West Africa, usually to describe a Sufist imam, but can also refer to a religious leader or scholar.

the state.[46] The composition of the *Observatoire Religieux*, itself a part of AIN in Agadez, reflects the dominance of the *Qadiriyya*. The president and secretary-general of the *Observatoire Religieux* are both *Qadiriyya*.

Traditional *marabouts* are closely linked to traditional authorities. In many of the networks that we accessed for this research, village and *quartier* chiefs described the local *marabout* as influential and vice versa. The traditional *marabout* system is also hereditary, with members of a *marabout* family often travelling between regions or countries to take up posts. *Marabouts* are frequently aligned to a political party and provide support to a candidate through performing *fatihas*[47] to open or close a political meeting for a candidate, for example.

The Sufist brotherhoods have positioned themselves as the form of Islam that is 'traditional' in Niger, and that promotes moderation. They describe Salafist movements as being 'foreign' to Niger. As discussed in the literature review, the dominance of the *Tijania* and *Qadiriyya* brotherhoods in Niger is a relatively recent phenomenon. The two movements emerged in the 19th century but only became widely adopted in Niger in the 1950s and 1960s. Until the early 2000s, there were tensions between the *Tijania* and *Qadiriyya* brotherhoods in Agadez. Thus their positioning as a traditional form of Islam could be interpreted as a political act.

7.4.   Salafist Imams

The *Izala* are the most active Salafist religious movement in the Agadez region. They first started activities in Agadez in the mid-1990s and have slowly built up their presence both in Agadez town and in villages across the region. There are now four distinct *Izala* associations in Agadez town, of which *Al Sunnite Wal Ja Ma'ah* is the most active, running the major *Izala* mosque and *Koranic* school in Agadez with currently 1,200 pupils. *Al Sunnite Wal Ja Ma'ah* also provides outreach and support to *Izala* communities in the Agadez region. While their power and influence is certainly increasing, they do not have the same links or indeed representation in the traditional and state structures as either the *Tijania* or *Qadiriyya* movements.

The *Izala* movement is perhaps the most active in promoting the idea of society based on *sharia*. In doing so the *Izala* challenge the status quo. Not only do the ideas promoted by the *Izala* challenge current political and economic structures, but also their activities directly threaten defenders of the status quo in several ways.

First, *Izala* imams directly attack the Sufist brotherhoods, claiming that their practice is un-Islamic and based on superstitious thinking. The movement ridicules the traditional *malam* (Hausa version of the Arabic word '*moalem*' for teacher) or *marabouts* as ignorant of Arabic and of using Islam to exploit the people.[48] The movement breaks with the hereditary tradition of Sufist brotherhoods whereby only members of *marabouts'* families can become imams. Among the *Izala*, the criterion for becoming an imam is based on academic qualifications in Islamic studies, with a particular value placed on qualifications from Saudi Arabia.

Second, the movement critiques the Nigerien state as corrupt, un-Islamic and controlled by Western powers. Among the *Izala*, political affiliations are not permitted, which allows *Izala* imams more political space to criticize political representatives at the local level.

Third, the movement offers those who have studied in Saudi Arabia teaching opportunities in preference to scholars who have been trained in state universities that are influenced by Western educational models.

There are several accounts of conflict between the *Izala* and Sufist brotherhoods in the Agadez region. For example, one of the peace-building activities that the *Observatoire Religieux* organized in Agadez was a sermon where all associations were invited to pray together to promote unity. The *Izalas* prefer not to pray with Sufist *marabouts* as they believe that they do not follow the correct procedures in ablution and thus abstained from the sermon. In response, the *Observatoire Religieux* encouraged Sufi adherents to go into *Izala* mosques and colonize them.

Several Touareg authorities asserted that the Touareg would not accept the *Izala* movement as they have their own traditions and ways of practising Islam. The evidence gathered in this research indicates otherwise. While Hausa traders initially dominated the *Izala* movement in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was clear that the *Izala* were also popular in Touareg neighbourhoods in Agadez town. In rural areas, the *Izala* have gained popularity among certain Touareg clans.

7.5.   Ethno-nationalist groups

In 2007–2008, the Touareg groups north of Agadez challenged the way politics were done in the Agadez region, demanding a redistribution of resources. The Touareg rebellion was particularly significant to the youth north of Agadez, with USAID documents estimating that 75% of the Tourag combatants were young men from Gougaram and Iferouane.[49]

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46. Sounaye (2007).

47. *Surah al-Fatihah* is the first chapter (surah) of the *Koran*. It is often used to open prayers or special functions in Islamic life.

48. This is based on Sounaye (2015); Masquelier (2009); and key informant interviews carried out in Agadez.

49. USAID (2014).

The rebellion ultimately resulted in a peace agreement whereby a small group of Touareg fighters was offered high-level government positions, including those of the prime minister, head of the foreign ministry, and high commissioner for the consolidation of peace. Although little has changed in the daily life of most ex-rebels, there is a perception that the Prime Minister, who is from Iferouane, is working to protect Touareg interests at the highest levels. Many ex-rebels interviewed for this research described the rebellion as having been hugely costly but producing few tangible benefits. One of the *Izalas* in Tadag, who was also an ex-rebel, commented that Salafism has shown them that Islam is the only way to achieve a more just society and that revolutions achieve nothing.[50]

With increased Touareg access to power structures, there has been some recent agitation among Toubou communities, particularly among the Tibesti Toubou people who live in northeast Niger and in Agadez. The recent Toubou migrants to Agadez remain tightly linked with the Toubou community in Libya where their leaders and chiefs are based.[51] The Toubou dominate the transport economy in Agadez, including the sale of cars (which some allege are stolen) from Libya and the transport of international and Nigerien migrants both to the Libyan border and to gold sites. There have been some tensions between Touareg and Toubou communities in Agadez over access to routes and a lack of respect for women shown by members of the Toubou community.[52]

More serious is the establishment of *Mouvement pour la Réconciliation et la Justice du Niger* (MRJN), which claims to fight for economic justice for the Toubou people. However, several interviewees thought that the movement would not have any significant political influence as there are not many Toubou in Niger. This may well change as security worsens in Libya and more Toubou people migrate to the Agadez area.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

As the *Izala* are challenging the status quo not only in the Agadez region, but also across Niger, there are going to be tensions for the foreseeable future. The tensions are most acute between the *Izala* and the Sufist brotherhoods but there is also potential for tensions between traditional authorities and state representatives and the *Izala*.

CVE actors might find it difficult to navigate this tension. As most CVE programmes, particularly those funded by the United States and European countries, generally pursue a political interest in maintaining the current system of democracy and secularism, the implementers are not neutral actors. While there is a need to work with the *Izala*, CVE programme staff do not want inadvertently to increase their influence.

Seeking to limit *Izala* influence by strengthening government actors might, however, prove dangerously counterproductive. Scholars have long argued that radicalism emerges in climates of state repression. Thus programmes that strengthen the state may backfire.[53] The most promising anti-radicalisation or anti-terrorism measure might be to allow the political voice of those who hold what are considered more radical views to be heard. This approach reduces the value of using violence to garner attention. Edwards argues, for example, that the best way to counter extremism and radicalisation is to support non-violent Islamist activism, thus robbing violence of its attraction.[54]

Current approaches to the *Izala* movement emphasize keeping a distance. In areas where NCCI-funded activities have been implemented and where there are known *Izala* followers – such as in Arlit, Agadez and in the village of Eroug – it is not clear that the *Izala* are considered when it comes to choosing beneficiaries. In Agadez, the *Observatoire Religieux*, which is supposed to represent all religious traditions, has not involved the *Izala* in peace-building activities. This is because, according to the *Observatoire Religieux*, the *Izala* associations refused to participate. However, representatives from the Izala association *Al Sunnite Wal Ja Ma'ah* in Agadez alleged that the activities that the *Observatoire Religieux* organizes are not addressing the real problems.[55] This failure to integrate the *Izala* into peace-building activities potentially further marginalizes them as a religious movement.

In practice, it may be difficult to bring the different religious movements together given that they openly criticize each other. Activities that may appear neutral, such as sport or music, may not be the best way to bring people together as the *Izala* tend to view such activities as frivolous. It might be easier to build bridges by addressing issues that both sides of the divide feel should be changed, for example drug abuse or crime. While corruption is a key issue for the *Izala*, it could be a sensitive subject to bring the different movements together, as some (Sufist) *marabouts* are perceived as part of the corrupt political system that needs to be reformed. Indeed, several interviewees described the *Observatoire Religieux* itself as
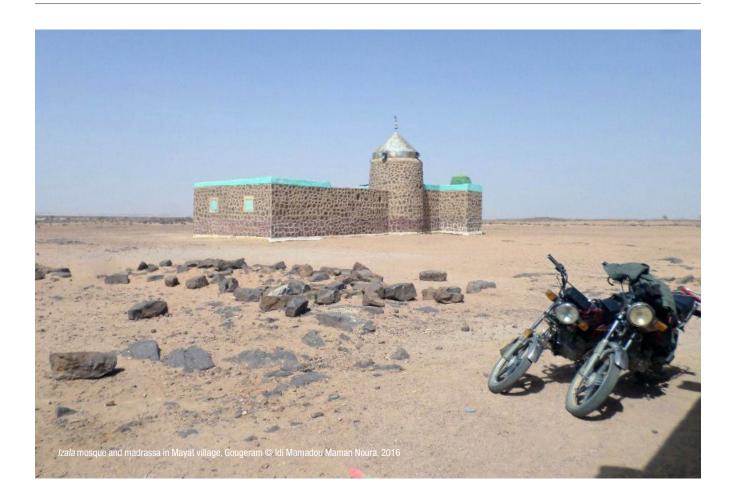
50. Interview with *Izala* member, Tadag.

51. FGD with Toubou fraudsters in Agadez.

52. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

53. Lindekilde (2014).

54. Edwards (2015).

55. Interview with *Izala* members, Agadez.

Izala mosque and madrassa in Mayat village, Gougeram © Idi Mamadou Maman Noura, 2016

corrupt and as political activists who are interested only in obtaining funding.[56]

In some situations, there may be relatively open relations between members of the *Izala* movement and the Sufist brotherhoods. For example, in Mayat, the imam from the *Qadiriyya* brotherhood was influenced by the director of the *Izala* school and vice versa (see section 10). In these situations, OTI may have more freedom in the types of activities it funds to bring the two movements together.

Experimentation will be needed since what may work in one village may not be appropriate in another. OTI is well placed to use experimental and adaptive approaches to its programming as its funding is not tied to detailed long-term plans or log frames. This permits OTI significant flexibility in how it approaches the challenge of including the *Izala*.

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56. Three interviewees from different networks described the *Observatoire Religieux* as corrupt, using terms such as 'conglo d'escrocs" and 'ils sont trop attachés au matériel'.

8. The influence of the international community

Research on radicalisation in Agadez means dealing with a contradiction. While the implicit assumption of government and international actors working with it is that radicalisation is a locally grown process, the role of outsiders features very prominently in how people experience their changing society. In Agadez, there was a widely shared belief that external forces are creating many of the problems the region experiences. While it is tempting to dismiss this as trying to blame outsiders, a closer look at how external influences change internal dynamics is warranted. Definitions of outside interference range from the threat of extremist groups from Mali and Nigeria (and the counter-threat that stems from fighting them), the influence of returnees from Libya and the Gulf States, and American and European interference.

This section explores how residents of Agadez experience outside influence on their lives and how they interpret it. It examines the narratives that 'strangers' are coming to Agadez to recruit for extremist groups, the influence of the West on Nigerien culture and way of life, and how Western military presence is understood and why it is particularly threatening to those who feel that the current government does not want to accommodate religious diversity.

8.1. Influence from the Western world

The interview guide used for this study included a question on what are the positive and negative aspects of the 'Western system'. This question elicited many opinions about *les blancs* – a term often used to refer to the French, but also to describe Western people in general. Some respondents thought that Niger needs 'white people' for their knowledge, technology and ideas. But negative opinions were more widespread, particularly in relation to the influence of white people on politics, religion and culture.

There were a number of recurring themes: exploitation, political interference, and that Western beliefs were bringing cultural degradation to Niger. The term *essighmar nakal* (a term in Tamashek translating roughly as 'having brought shame to the country') was used: 'The Western system is *essighmar nakal*, it's a system for controlling the resources of a country', argued a respondent who was a follower of the *Izala* movement.[57] Others argued that *les blancs* were purposely trying to hold Niger back: 'The problem with the Western system is that the whites always want to control us. They don't want us to evolve. They don't want us to develop, they prefer that we stay in misery and war so that they can better control us.'[58]

Some of the frustration expressed was connected with the recent closure of the uranium mines. There was a general perception that the French had come and extracted uranium, and polluted the environment, but that local residents had seen no improvement in their living conditions. For others, the French and US military bases were quite threatening and evidence of neo-colonialism: 'Take the example of the military bases installed in Agadez: That is the system of the whites. They want to colonise us again. They are here to exploit our resources', argued a member of a youth *fada*.[59] He further argued that it was the use of Nigerien resources that allowed France and the US to flourish.

A perception that white people are controlling power at the highest levels in Niger was expressed across all networks: 'It's them [the whites] that are at the base of the decisions relating to the state and our leaders. This system has created divisions among us. [The whites] decide who will be president. If a candidate has the support of the whites, he will be elected', an ex-rebel in Iferouane argued.[60] A prominent member of the *Izala* movement said that politicians who were critical of Western influence tended to be quickly dismissed.[61] A female respondent who follows *Qadiriyya* and also participated in a peace camp organized by NCCI, expressed the complex relationship

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57. Interview with *Izala* member and livestock breeder, Mayatt.

58. Interview with *Fada* member, Touareg, unemployed, Agadez.

59. Interview with *Fada* member, Tadress *Quartier*, Agadez.

60. Interview with ex-rebel, Iferouane.

61. Interview with *Izala* Imam, Agadez.

between political views, Western influence, and how the government seemed to work in collaboration with Western governments to oppress parts of the population: 'If we had *sharia* in Niger, the whites who use us will not have that. They exploit us with the complicity of our leaders.'[62] This perception of outside interference in political processes serves to delegitimize the current political structure, including democracy.

Interviewees also perceived a negative influence of white people on Nigerien culture and morality, as Nigeriens copy Western culture without questioning it. This Western culture was unsurprisingly viewed as being far removed from the teachings of the prophet: 'All these problems are from the Western system. Because whites bring new things that we don't know. Our brothers and sisters copy this. The problem with the whites is that they don't know that God exists and that his prophet Mohammed is a reality sent to all the world but they chose to ignore this', explained a female *Izala* student.[63] A senior member of the *Izala* movement also argued that the education system was too oriented towards Western values and thus was not helpful.[64]

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

The suspicions held by some Nigeriens about the negative influence of white people indicates that CVE actors need to be cautious about visibility. It may also suggest that certain actors lose credibility in communities due to their known association with Western donors. In some cases, it is perhaps futile for Westerners or Western-funded programmes to undertake certain activities, for example efforts to change social norms.

8.2.   A Western military presence – a threat to Niger's peace?

While we were conducting interviews in Agadez, the USA announced the planned construction of a new military base just outside Agadez, particularly for drone operations. The projected cost is reported differently: *Newsweek* puts

it at USD 50 million while the investigative defence and security website, *The Intercept,* suggests the budget is USD 100 million.[65] *Newsweek* describes the base as 'a hub for counterterrorism operations against a plethora of Islamist groups in the region'.[66]

Even prior to this announcement, residents of the Agadez region have felt Western military presence, namely the US and French armies. There is also widespread knowledge that Germany is using Niamey as a military base to support its troops in Mali. In particular, those travelling regularly to the Libyan border talked about direct encounters with French or US forces – even if at times only by spotting air surveillance. Most respondents said that they did not understand why the French and US armies were present. This was creating suspicion and fear, as a political activist explained:

Here in Agadez, these bases don't reassure the population because people don't know why these bases are being built. There are Americans close to the airport. Nobody in Agadez knows what they are doing. Nobody approaches us. And there is a French base in Madama and them also, we don't know what they are doing. These are the things that make the population afraid.[67]

These negative perceptions were reflected in a recent article on the Niger Diaspora website.[68]

Authorities and those in position of mainstream power were more likely to recognize the benefits of Western military presence and the need for their resources and expertise – which might also reflect that they have been much more exposed to a security discourse: 'We need the presence of the American and French armies for their technology. To assure development, security is needed. Without the French intervention, there would not be a Malian state', argued a lawyer in Niamey who had been named by an interviewee in Agadez as an influential person.[69] The opinion of a *chef de quartier* in one of the suburbs of Agadez was that the French and US presence was worrying people. But he also thought that if they only helped to provide security without seeking cultural
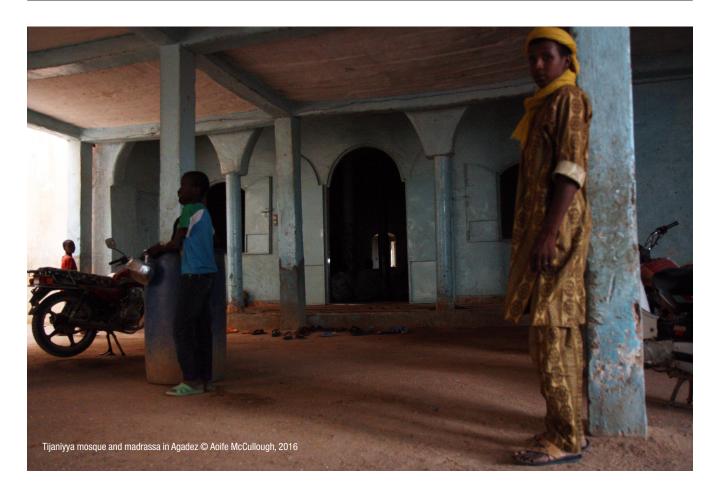
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62. 'Si au Niger, c'est la charia, les blancs qui nous utilisent ne vont avoir. Ils nous exploitent avec la complicité de nos dirigeants.' Translated from Haussa. Interview with female *Qadiriyya* member who participated in a peace camp organized by NCCI.

63. 'Tous ces problèmes sont du système occidental. Parce que les blancs nous apportent des choses nouvelles qu'on ne connaît pas. Et nos frères et sœurs les copient. Le plus grand problème des blancs est qu'ils [ne] savent [pas] que Dieu existe, que son prophète Mohamed est une réalité envoyé à tout le monde mais ils ignorent par volonté.' Interview with *Izala* female student.

64. Interview with influential male member of *Izala* movement, Agadez.

65. Turse 29 September 2016; Gaffey 30 September 2016.

66. Gaffey 30 September 2016.

67. Translated from Haussa. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

68. http://www.nigerdiaspora.net/les-infos-du-pays/politique-niger/politique-niger/item/76405-installation-d%E2%80%99une-base-de-drone-%C3%A0-agadez-que-cherche-l%E2%80%99arm%C3%A9e-am%C3%A9ricaine-au-niger.html

69. 'On a besoin de la présence des armées américains et français pour leur technologie. Pour assurer le développement, il faut la sécurité. Sans l'intervention française, il n'y aura pas l'état Malien.' Interview with lawyer, Niamey.

Tijaniyya mosque and madrassa in Agadez © Aoife McCullough, 2016

influence, the better standards of US and French forces would be helpful.[70]

Currently, the mandate of the US and French military in Niger is to provide support to the Nigerien army in controlling its borders and should, in theory, be a stabilizing force. However, with widespread negative perceptions of Western influence, the presence of Western militaries may be experienced as destabilizing. The US announcement of the new drone base was followed shortly by an announcement, following Chancellor Merkel's state visit, that Germany would also provide military aid and advice to the Nigerien army.[71]

The increased military involvement comes with two caveats. It establishes an increasingly militarized environment for the residents of Agadez, a process that is viewed with suspicion. Crucially, the close collaboration between Western forces and a government that many see as too accommodating of a Western agenda – and in doing so is alienating its population – is potentially feeding into people's rejection of government. It is important to note that, according to *Newsweek*, 'Niger is the only country in the region willing to host MQ-9 Reaper drones', which

highlights both the closeness of the Nigerien government to the USA, but also the potential to become alienated from its neighbours.[72]

Support to the Nigerien army, which respondents in Agadez said is often involved in harassment of or violence against civilians, is likely to increase opposition to the government and to Western groups even further. Already the relationship between the army and the Touareg population is tense as a result of the rebellion. In the Agadez NCCI strategy developed in 2014, it is noted that the Touareg feel stigmatized by the military and have difficulty accepting its presence.[73]

Any real or perceived maltreatment of Nigeriens by US, French or German military forces, even if perpetrated by proxy by Western-trained Nigerien forces, will feed into narratives of humiliation at the hands of Western powers. It is likely that there will be minimal interaction between the Western militaries and Nigeriens, but witnessing drones or in some cases surveillance helicopters flying overhead has already raised suspicions about what information, particularly the US military, is collecting. If Westerners are perceived as controlling power at the very highest levels in

70. Interview with *Quartier* Chief in the suburbs of Agadez.

71. Binnie 12 October 2016.

72. Gaffey 30 September 2016.

73. USAID (2014).

Niger, the fact that they are suspected of gathering detailed information about certain people's movements could be experienced as a frightening development.

Interviewees often cited Niger as the 'most just society' because it enjoys peace.[74] Presumably, in comparison with surrounding countries, Niger's relative peace is attractive. Even interviewees who suggested that *sharia* was a force for good argued that its implementation would cause conflict in their peaceful society. Nigeriens' current perception of Niger as a peaceful society is threatened by military cooperation at the highest government levels, through using military to stem migration flows – which people perceive as one of few livelihood options – and through surveillance. If perceptions of Niger as a peaceful society change, a different type of society that takes power away from the forces that are making Niger less peaceful, such as *sharia*, may come to be seen as a less risky option.

In this report, the trajectories of radicalisation are examined at both individual and community levels. At the community level, radicalisation takes place in a web of reactions and counter-reactions. This means that the presence of the military as a reaction to the problems of migration could produce a strong unintended counter-reaction among Nigeriens in the form of fear and suspicion. Producers of radical narratives may use such feelings to build support for radical visions of an alternative political order.

Implications and reflections for CVE programming in Agadez

Negative perceptions of Western influence are worrying in a country that is being positioned as a key Western ally in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. The association of Westerners with *essighmar nakal* is particularly dangerous, as it has been found elsewhere that experiences of humiliation are linked with radicalisation. Perceptions of Western control are also a potential risk. Studies from Ghana, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia show that areas which lack widespread legitimate authority are vulnerable to radicalisation.[75]

Although changing the narrative on the US military is not part of OTI's mandate, it is clear that the military presence is a key risk factor for the development of anti-Western narratives. Furthermore, it will be difficult for NCCI staff to completely disassociate themselves from the US military as people are aware of the source of NCCI funding.

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74. Eleven interviewees cited Niger as the most just society, of whom eight attributed the 'justness' to the peace that Niger enjoys.

75. Pargeter (2009).
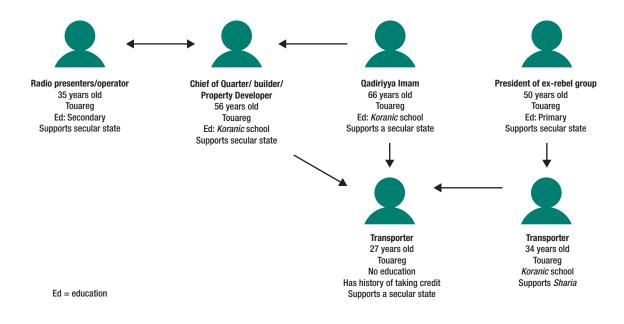
9. The influence of social relationships

There are several observations to make about how influence happens in the different networks that we accessed.

First, **the *Izala* network is much more proactive about educating and debating concepts such as 'just society' and the Islamic versus the Western system.** Many of the female *Izala* students we interviewed in Agadez gave considered answers in relation to critiques of Western systems. In contrast, some of the *Tijania* women whom we interviewed struggled to express their thoughts on these topics. It was also clear that there is emphasis on talking and counselling as a way to spread ideas about their interpretation of Islam. In response to the question about what to do if someone in your family or community disagreed with *sharia*, the *Izala* were clear that advice and discussion are crucial. The *Tijania* interviewed gave more diverse answers, and some even argued for the use of force to support positive views of *sharia*. The *Izala* imams we interviewed were also much more active in organizing Friday prayers and preaching compared to the *Tijania* imams with whom we spoke.

Second, **the links between the traditional authorities and the traditional *marabouts* were confirmed** by the network analysis. For example, in Iferouane, the imam influenced the *Quartier* chief (see Figure 1).

Third, **within networks there is much disagreement about the type of society (the Western as opposed to the Islamic system) that is best for Niger.** Across all the networks of influence we tracked, there was a mix of people who supported and who did not support *sharia*. This point is important. In a social network analysis carried out for OTI in Mali, it was assumed that the dense ego networks (i.e. networks where everyone in one person's network is connected) found around Gao meant that there is limited opportunity for outside information to infiltrate the network.[76] The networks of influence followed in this study indicate that people also occupy the same social space as in Mali but hold different ideas about how Niger should be governed. The variability in opinions about whether *sharia* is a good thing or not for Niger demonstrates how difficult it is to identify a community at risk of radicalisation.

Figure 1: Network of influence in village in Agadez, starting with an ex-rebel

Radio presenters/operator
35 years old
Touareg
Ed: Secondary
Supports secular state

Chief of Quarter/ builder/ Property Developer
56 years old
Touareg
Ed: *Koranic* school
Supports secular state

Qadiriyya Imam
66 years old
Touareg
Ed: *Koranic* school
Supports a secular state

President of ex-rebel group
50 years old
Touareg
Ed: Primary
Supports secular state

Transporter
27 years old
Touareg
No education
Has history of taking credit
Supports a secular state

Transporter
34 years old
Touareg
Koranic school
Supports *Sharia*

Ed = education

76. Cramer, J (2015).

Figure 2: Network of influence in Agadez quarter, starting with a trader

Sultan of Agadez
Touareg but considered neutral
Supports secular state

Izala movement influenced
Chief indirectly

Chief of Agadez Quarter
52 years
Livestock breeder
Ed: Technical school in Niamey
Supports a secular state

Elders in Quarter

Trader
34 years old
Tuareg
Ed: Primary level
Has travelled to Libya and Algeria
Supports *Sharia*

Security guard
44 years old
Touareg
Ed: Secondary
Supports a secular state

Brick Layer
41 years old
Touareg
Ed: Secondary
Supports *Sharia*

3 villages in Quarter

→ = familial relationship

Ed = education

It also identifies a possible entry point for CVE. With such diversity of views within networks of influence, debate on this topic that promotes critical thinking about the current and alternative systems is likely to be welcomed. Even more surprisingly, in at least one of our networks of influence, an influential *Tijania* member named the director of the *Izala* school as his most influential person (see Figure 3). This underlines the extent to which *Izala* and Sufist followers are part of the same community. The *Izala* community should not necessarily be understood as the marginalized fanatics of whom Sufists are always suspicious. In some situations, relations between the two are amicable. It is also interesting that in the network of influence among the *Tijania* in Mayatt, the imam is originally from Mali, so in this case a stranger is in an influential position (See Figure 3). Above all, the analysis of networks of influence shows just how multi-layered they are.

Intergenerational tensions?

It is often said in casual conversation that there are tensions between children and parents, or that one reason why Nigerien youth are radicalizing is lack of respect for their elders. Such assumed lack of respect is then identified as a factor that puts youth at risk of more dangerous influences.
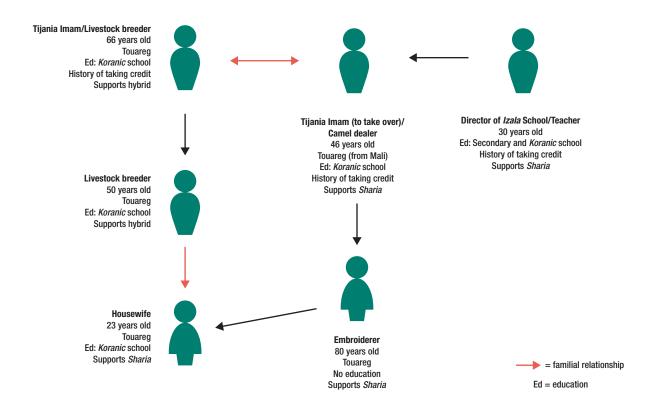
This is a simplified view and the interests of those lamenting the lack of respect need to be examined. What does it mean if intergenerational differences are presented as a malfunction, rather than as development? While some respondents – namely authority figures who benefited from being considered a respected elder or leader – lamented a more general loss of respect for the parents' generation,[77] others saw this in a more nuanced fashion.

Some respondents argued very strongly that children were disconnected from their parents but the nature of this disconnect was understood very differently. One respondent – who had participated in the Touareg rebellion – described youth as 'overwhelmed by modern life.'[78] Another highlighted one main intergenerational difference, arguing that since the Nigerien state had so little to offer

77. FGD with female *Fada*, Pays Bas, Agadez.

78. Translated from Tamashek. Interview with ex-rebel, Iferouane.

Figure 3: Network of influence in village in Agadez starting with a member of the _Tijania_ movement

Tijania Imam/Livestock breeder
66 years old
Touareg
Ed: _Koranic_ school
History of taking credit
Supports hybrid

Tijania Imam (to take over)/
Camel dealer
46 years old
Touareg (from Mali)
Ed: _Koranic_ school
History of taking credit
Supports _Sharia_

Director of _Izala_ School/Teacher
30 years old
Ed: Secondary and _Koranic_ school
History of taking credit
Supports _Sharia_

Livestock breeder
50 years old
Touareg
Ed: _Koranic_ school
Supports hybrid

Housewife
23 years old
Touareg
Ed: _Koranic_ school
Supports _Sharia_

Embroiderer
80 years old
Touareg
No education
Supports _Sharia_

= familial relationship

Ed = education

young people, the youth had lost the notion of a valued homeland or even nation.[79]

A senior _Izala_ leader, however, saw nothing unusual in disagreement between generations. He pointed out that it is a good thing that fathers now speak a lot more with their children than they did in the past. More interaction would naturally create more disagreement. He himself had disagreed with his seniors and that was simply part of generations interacting.[80] A Peul woman argued that the emphasis of the older generation on tradition and on keeping on the same path was counterproductive and would not help to develop the community: 'The elders tell us to follow the customs, our culture. Whereas if we remain faithful to customs we will not advance. So our opinions differ.'[81]

Finally, some respondents argued that they felt betrayed by a parental generation that was not thinking about the future in a responsible way. One gave the example of environmental protection. He had asked his parents to stop chopping down trees for firewood, but they did not understand his concerns about climate change.[82] A civil society activist, who had demonstrated against the government, noted that he received more support from the older generation than from young people, who seemed much more resigned to trying to work around a disappointing government than to stand up against it.[83]

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79. Interview with prisoner, Agadez.

80. Interview with _Izala_ Imam, Agadez.

81. Translated from Haussa. Interview with Female Peul from Ingall in Agadez.

82. Interview with ex-rebel, Goffatt.

83. Interview with political activist, Agadez.

10. How do people perceive change can happen?

Interviewees proposed a range of measures to tackle the problems facing residents of Agadez. Although respondents were more likely to perceive *sharia* as more effective than the current system, they also acknowledged the difficulties associated with implementing a different system, particularly in the absence of widespread agreement on what the right one should be. In this section, three broad categories of measures that people recommended are presented.

Political debate on the type of state that is most suitable for Niger

This debate has been ongoing in Niger since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1992. Yet the measures interviewees identified and that are not already in place include a referendum on the implementation of *sharia*, and political debate on the types of changes that people would like to see. Both would enable the state to reflect on people's values. The *Izala* members were especially well versed in the importance of talking to people to convince them of the advantages of *sharia*.

A hybrid system combining elements of a secular state and an Islamic state

This was suggested across all networks, including by members of the *Izala* network. For example, one interviewee suggested that more liberal policies regarding small business could be combined with *sharia* law, which places emphasis on charity, known as *zakkat*.[84] This would allow small businesses to develop while also ensuring that some of the benefits from economic growth arising from liberalization would benefit the poor.

There was a sense that because Niger has been a secular state since the 1960s, and has been partly controlled by France – which promotes secularism – it would be difficult to implement *sharia*. However, there was also a sense that as the vast majority of the population are Muslim, the state system needed to reflect more Islamic values.

Progressive change towards a more Islamic state with the goal of full implementation of *sharia* law

This measure was not proposed by many of the interviewees but was articulated by two influential *Izala* leaders. In their vision, the Islamic system, including *sharia* law and business ethics, is the only one that can address the underdevelopment and corruption in Niger. As this system is complex and requires changes in behaviour, it can only be adopted incrementally. They estimated that it would take ten years to implement in Niger.

The *Izala* imam was not alone in his opinion that to avoid growing popular frustration, there needs to be a move towards a more Islamic form of governance. This view was also expressed by *fada* members in Agadez suburbs and by prisoners, although not in as much detail as the *Izala* leader.

In the second round of data collection in Mayatt, Tadag and in Pays Bas, interviewees were asked how they would deal with someone who disagreed with *sharia* and was either a member of their family or of their community. Interviewees proposed three main approaches: to speak to the member of the family/community to convince them of the value of Islam, to leave them alone, or to chase them out. Whichever approach was proposed, interviewees applied the same one to members of their family and of their community. All male *Izala* members interviewed recommended advising the person who does not agree. In one case, a *Tijania* imam noted that if the whole community was against *sharia,* he would move away.
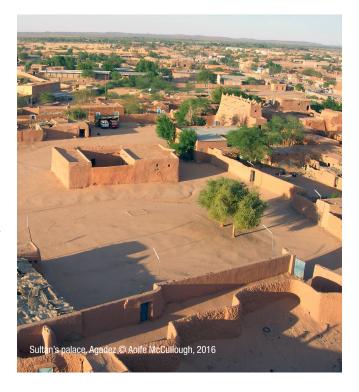
The use of force to protect the current system

When asked about the use of force to protect the current system in Niger, many interviewees thought that because Niger was a democracy, the use of force was unacceptable. Several interviewees emphasized the need to negotiate with leaders or with the population in a democracy. But some

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84. *Zakkat* is the compulsory giving of a set proportion of one's wealth to charity, and is the third Pillar of Islam.

recognized the value of the monopoly of force that the state enjoys and that, they argued, helped avoid conflict between religions. Still others thought that the state abuses this power and used unjust force. These contradictory opinions were expressed both in the ex-rebel and in the Salafist networks, highlighting the level of disagreement among people about the right or ability of the Nigerien state to use violence in an ethical way.

While most respondents opposed the idea of using force to maintain the current system, many regarded it as being too lenient on criminals. Thus 'force' was understood as something used by the military and as broadly negative while physical punishment for crimes was often understood as positive.

There were also different opinions on whether conflict is necessary to achieve change. Many people supported the implementation of *sharia* in theory but recognized that change is conflictual. Currently, most of those who linked the implementation of *sharia* to conflict were not willing to sacrifice peace for this change. Their experience of state force during the Touareg rebellions makes them acutely aware of the destruction that conflict can wreak. Others did not associate the implementation of *sharia* with conflict. For them, everyone agrees with Islam, so there would be no need to use force to implement it.[85]

Sultan's palace, Agadez © Aoife McCullough, 2016

85. Interview with ex-rebel in Agadez.

11. Conclusion

In this research report, we treat trajectories of radicalisation as a dynamic concept, rather than a linear process. This was our approach in the design of the research, but in the course of gathering and analysing the data, it proved useful to move away from regarding radicalisation as a largely personal process and to pay greater attention to structural factors and group relationships. We also understood 'radical' views to be those that challenge the status quo, which means that what is or is not construed as radical is largely dependent on the context.

In the Agadez region, the narratives that emerge when visible change mixes with the experience of structural deprivation, international presence and contestation regarding the best way to govern Niger are crucial. We found several dynamics that are particularly important for development programmes that seek to prevent extremism.

First, there is the growing support for the implementation of *sharia*, most prominently, but not exclusively, among the members of Sufist and Salafist networks. For many respondents, *sharia* represented a way to solve the chronic problems of governance in the Agadez region and in Niger more generally. Respondents imagined that the implementation of *sharia* would produce more honest politics, increased rule of law, less corruption, reduced inequality and respect for poor people's rights. In contrast, the Western systems of democracy and secularism were understood to be lenient, prone to corruption and not aligned with the local culture.

The *Izala* Salafist movement, which is gaining popularity in the Agadez region, is most active in supporting the move towards *sharia*. The *Izala* pair their support for *sharia* with promoting a lifestyle that counters Niger's move towards an increasingly secular society in which development is equated with material development. Since this goes against the status quo, the label 'extremists' is often applied to the *Izala*. However, in the Agadez region there is no evidence that the *Izala* support violent extremist groups or preach anything that is particularly hateful.

This does not mean that in other areas – or in the future in Agadez – violent extremists might not seek to align themselves with the *Izala*, as both are seemingly pursuing similar goals to establish *sharia* in Niger. However, the *Izala* currently believe that a more just, Muslim society

can be achieved in Niger only through the incremental introduction of *sharia*. Only a gradual social process towards *sharia* is seen as being able to establish it in a meaningful way. This approach goes hand in hand with the *Izalas'* attempt in Nigeria to distance themselves from violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram. Since, however, in northern Nigeria, the *Izala* hold significant political power and were able to implement *sharia* to various degrees in different states, they did not need more extreme or violent allies to progress their cause. In Niger, despite the growing influence of the *Izala*, the political dynamics are different.

Notably, the *Izala* in Niger have faced a powerful backlash from the Sufist brotherhoods and other parts of the establishment. Unless the different groups find a way to contest their visions of society without suppression, there is a risk that groups like the *Izala*, who do not see tangible changes in the way society is governed, will seek more extreme measures.

Another structural dynamic which could influence trajectories of radicalisation in the Agadez region is the significant increase in criminal activity, such trafficking of drugs, arms and people. In an area where there are few salaried jobs, getting involved in such activities might be attractive to young people and expose them to criminal (and violent) networks.

In sum, it is in these broader narratives and social and economic developments that programmes to counter extremism ought to be rooted. Rather than focusing on identifying individuals at risk based on an assumed demographic profile of who is most likely to support extremist groups, programmes need to engage with the more structural factors, including the difficult and often contradictory challenge of being seen as foreigners in an environment where they are treated with suspicion.

An ideal CVE programme in the Agadez region might thus need to address two types of challenge. The first is to influence a situation that is experienced by local residents as unfair and offering little hope of improvement. And second, programmes should seek to engage with the emerging narratives regarding Western influence and military presence. Considering the importance of such narratives, it is up to CVE actors to understand them and then shape them in more constructive ways.

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