

# Niger in the face of the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency

## Precarious Stability in a Troubled Neighborhood

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**Sahel Research Group Working Paper No. 004**  
**Paper Series: The Stakes of the Malian Crisis in the Sahel**

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The Sahel Research Group, of the University of Florida's Center for African Studies, is a collaborative effort to understand the political, social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the countries which comprise the West African Sahel. It focuses primarily on the six Francophone countries of the region—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—but also on in developments in neighboring countries, to the north and south, whose dynamics frequently intersect with those of the Sahel. The Sahel Research Group brings together faculty and graduate students from various disciplines at the University of Florida, in collaboration with colleagues from the region.

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## **Paper Series: The Stakes of the Malian Crisis in the Sahel**

In January 2012, Tuareg separatists launched a rebellion against the government of Mali in a bid to gain independence for the northern regions of the country. They were quickly joined by groups of Islamist militants seeking to establish control of the region, and dealing significant setbacks to the Malian military in a series of engagements. Following these defeats, on 22 March 2012 frustrated junior officers in the Malian military led a coup d'état which ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré from power. Subsequently, the Islamist groups in the north were able to sideline the Tuareg separatists and take control of the provincial capitals in the northern regions of Mali—Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. The military coup in Mali and de facto partition of the country were shocking events in a particularly fragile region, and quickly captured the attention of scholars and policy-makers around the world.

While significant interest emerged regarding the Malian crisis and the unfolding events in the country, there has been relatively little discussion of the effects of the crisis and their implications for surrounding countries in the Sahel. Recognizing the lack of information available on the reverberations of the crisis in neighboring countries, the Sahel Research Group set out to write five discussion papers on the responses and reactions of Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad to the events in Mali.

Fieldwork for these papers was conducted in sets of the countries by three different graduate student researchers during the summer of 2013. After conducting the initial research for these papers they were presented at the African Studies Association's 2013 Annual Meeting and revised with the additional comments of participants from the Sahel Seminar. These discussion papers were written with generous support from the Minerva Initiative Grant to the University of Florida.

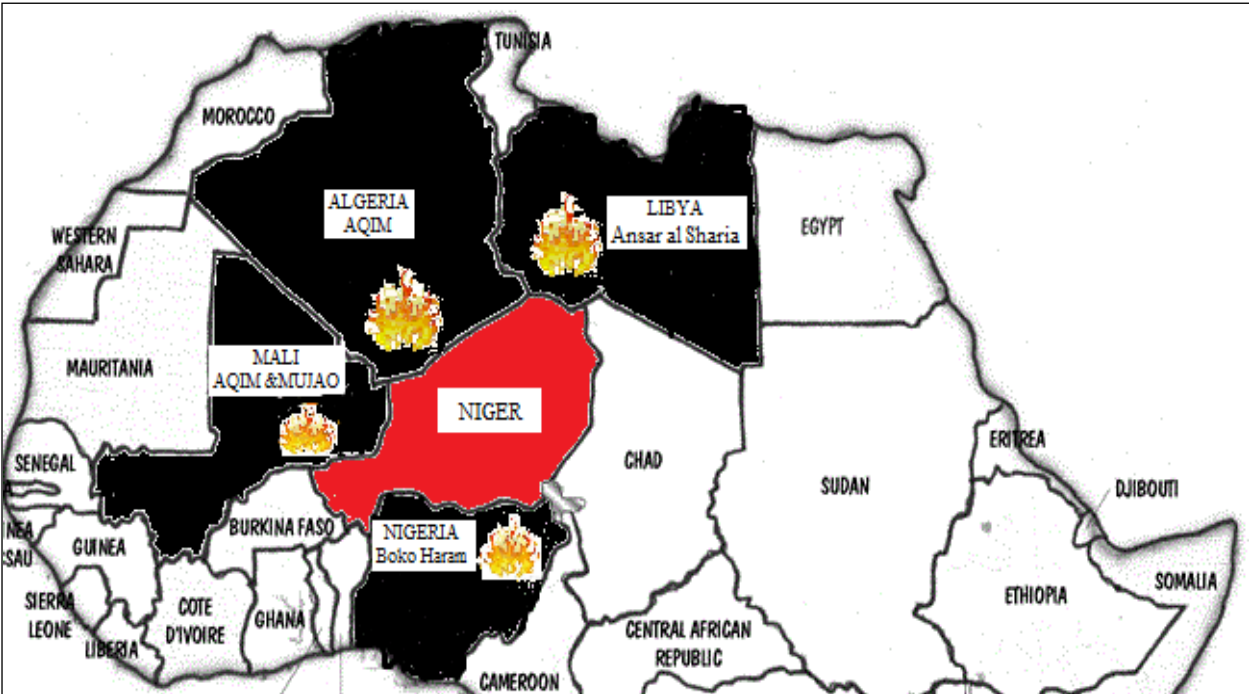


## **Abstract:**

The wave of recent Islamic insurgencies in Nigeria, Mali, Algeria, and Libya has embroiled the Sahel region in an unprecedented crisis. Encircled by these crises on its borders, and afflicted by structural weaknesses including continuous political and institutional instability, deep economic distress, and a recurring Tuareg rebellion, Niger has unexpectedly succeeded in maintaining some degree of stability. As opposed to the other countries on the frontlines of the crisis, Niger has not developed indigenous cells of jihadists or lost control of its territory to the jihadists. The impacts of the crisis on Niger are limited to kidnapping, sporadic attacks, and heightened political debates between the government, the political parties, the civil society, and the religious leaders. Niger's resilience could be explained by a long history of de-politicization of religion, the experience of dealing with previous Tuareg insurgencies, and an operational and fairly organized army. While Niger has been resilient so far, multiple threats still challenge its stability, including the spread of Boko Haram's ideology among Nigerien youths, the return of Nigerien fighters from Mali and Libya, and the overall deterioration of security in the region.

## **About the Author:**

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Source: Compiled by author.

## On the Frontlines

Niger is often considered an “island of stability” in the middle of a troubled neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> On its southeastern frontier, Niger shares a border with northeastern Nigeria—the region recognized as the heart of the jihadist group called Boko Haram. On Niger’s northern frontier, the group “Al-Qaeda in the countries of the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM) and its affiliates have been operating in the Sahara for almost two decades. More recently, many groups emerged as a direct consequence of the 2011 Libyan Spring; these include Ansar al-Sharia in Libya in 2011 (on Niger’s northern border) and Ansar Dine and MUJOA in Mali in 2012 (on Niger’s western border). Despite being encircled by these conflicts, Niger has managed to maintain what should be called a precarious stability. Although these groups occasionally operate within Niger’s territory through sporadic attacks and kidnapping westerners, they have failed to establish local indigenous cells with permanent bases as they have in neighboring countries. More strikingly, Niger has managed to avoid the domino effect of the Tuareg rebellion in Mali, which for the last two decades had happened in both countries simultaneously.

Niger’s resilience is a matter of surprise given that it exhibits all the characteristics of a highly vulnerable country: it is plagued by long-term political instability, multiple socioeconomic challenges (including recurrent food crises and hopeless youths that turn increasingly to banditry), and a legacy of Tuareg rebellions. Although the Sahelo-Saharan crisis of Islamic insurgency has increased the level of insecurity, heightened political debates, and triggered changes in the security and development policies, its impact on Niger is still minimal compared to other frontline Sahelian countries.

This paper seeks to address the following points: first, how Niger deals with the Sahelo-Saharan crisis of Islamic insurgency; second, how the crisis impacts Niger; and third, what explains Niger’s resilience from collapsing or from developing indigenous jihadi cells. Accordingly, the paper is divided into four sections. The first section describes Niger’s political and socioeconomic background, emphasizing the structural weaknesses that make it highly vulnerable. Section two presents the Sahelo-Saharan crisis of Islamic insurgency, elaborating on the groups that operate on or near Niger’s borders. Section three analyzes

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<sup>1</sup> The term *ilot de stabilité*, often translated in English as “island of stability,” appears prominently in speeches by Nigerien officials, and in academic and newspaper articles. See the official website of the Presidency of Niger, <http://www.presidence.ne/index.php/le-niger>. Last visited on 30 July 2014; *International Crisis Group*, « Niger: un autre maillon faible dans le sahel ? » Rapport Afrique No. 208, 19 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-de-louest/niger/208-niger-another-weak-link-in-the-sahel.aspx>. Last visited on 30 July 2014; Pierre Boisselet, « Niger : Démocratie an 1 », *Jeune Afrique* online, 2 May 2012. Available at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/JA2674p082-083.xml0/petrole-president-corruption-fminiger-democratie-an-i.html>. Last visited on 30 July 2014.

the impacts of the insurgency crisis on Niger. And finally, section four examines the factors of resilience that may explain Niger's current stability.

### **Political and Socioeconomic Background: Niger's Structural Weaknesses**

*Political Instability.* After gaining independence, Niger was a relatively stable country compared with many of its neighbors. Diori Hamani led Niger's First Republic for 14 years (1960-1974). His regime lasted longer than any of its post-independence contemporaries in neighboring countries. Like many of its peers, Hamani's regime started as a pluralist democracy, but regressed over time to become a single-party and then authoritarian regime. The outbreak of a large-scale famine in 1973 gave the military a reason to intervene. In April 1974, a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountche ousted Diori Hamani, thereby inaugurating a period of military involvement in politics. Seyni Kountche established a state of exception during which there was no constitution and state laws were adopted by presidential decrees. Kountche's regime lasted until his death in 1987. His regime was known to be the most austere and repressive in Niger's history. His successor, Ali Seybou, eased political tensions by freeing political prisoners and adopting the constitution of the Second Republic, which formally established a single-party regime. It was, however, a short-lived republic. Only one year later, increasingly difficult economic conditions and international pressures in favor of democratization triggered popular demands for liberalization and democracy. The government's repressive reaction to student protests in 1990 and the outbreak of a Tuareg rebellion in the northern part of the country prompted the fall of the single-party regime and the advent of an era of liberalization.

The National Conference, held from July to November 1991, led to the adoption of a new liberal constitution in December 1992. Many political parties and associations were created between 1990 and 1993. The first democratic elections with universal suffrage were held in 1993 and yielded the victory of the Alliance of the Forces of Change (AFC), a coalition of political parties led by CDS Rahama and PNDS Tarayya. The elected president, Mahanman Ousmane, took power in a precarious political and economic environment that was defined by a volatile political coalition, a hostile social front, a deadly Tuareg rebellion, and the devaluation of the Franc CFA. These challenges were aggravated by an internal rivalry between President Mahamane Ousmane and his Prime Minister Issoufou Mahamadou, which eventually led to the implosion of the coalition in 1995. Issoufou Mahamadou guided his party out of the coalition and joined the opposition parties to create a new majority in the National Assembly. The new majority forced the President to appoint Hama Amadou (from the opposition) as Prime Minister, thereby installing the "cohabitation" system.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> The "cohabitation" system occurs in semi-presidential governments and refers to a situation in which the President is from a different political party than the majority of the members of the parliament. In this case, the president is

move ultimately resulted in a tumultuous power struggle at the top of the Executive between the president and prime minister. The country once again plunged into a new political crisis that paralyzed its institutions and gave the military an impetus to intervene.

In January 1996, Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara took power in a bloodless coup. Mainassara organized a referendum for the adoption of a fourth constitution. In July 1996, he organized presidential elections, which he fraudulently won. Political parties and civil society formed a unified front against Mainassara and engaged in continuous protests. In April 1999, a coup led by Daouda Malam Wanke resulted in Mainassara's death. The junta initiated a military transition of nine months, during which they adopted the constitution of the Fifth Republic and organized elections. Tandja Mamadou, a member of the former junta (1974 – 1989) and president of the former single party, MNSD Nassara, was elected president.

Tandja inherited a very delicate situation marked by the cessation of all foreign aid, heavy debt, the accumulation of several months of unpaid public employees' wages, and an agitated civil society (which includes labor unions and various group of interests). Yet his regime enjoyed an institutional stability and legitimacy that no previous regime benefited from. Gradually, Tandja's government succeeded in reestablishing a relationship with foreign donors, regularizing the payment of wages, and negotiating with civil society movements. After his first term, Tandja ran for reelection in 2004 and won 65.5% of the votes. Tandja's second term was marked by his political split with Prime Minister Hama Amadou (his long-time political companion), the revision of mining policies, and the emergence of the Tuareg Rebellion of 2007. His successful handling of the latter earned him a great deal of popularity on the countryside. At the end of his second term, Tandja decided to change the constitution in order to provide himself with three more years in office. Despite strong opposition from both national and international actors, Tandja persevered and organized a referendum in August 2009 to adopt the sixth constitution and approve all the reforms he needed in order to maintain power. Being on the lookout for politicians' missteps, the military rose to the occasion. In February 2010, Commander Salou Djibo led a coup, arrested Tandja and his close collaborators, and dissolved the Sixth Republic. A new constitution was once again adopted by referendum in October 2010 and presidential elections were organized for January 2011. The leader of the opposition party, Issoufou Mahamadou, won the presidency and was inaugurated in April 2011. Issoufou came to power at a time when the region was facing the aftershocks of the Arab Spring. Security became his priority as the collapse of Libya and the growing activism of Boko Haram placed Niger in a vulnerable position.

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forced to appoint a prime minister from the majority, creating a duality in the executive. Cohabitation often leads to stalemate because of competition between the President and the prime minister.



*Socio-economic Challenges.* The economic indicators of Niger are no less troublesome than the political ones. Niger has become infamous for its socioeconomic failures: it currently occupies the position of the poorest country in the world in terms of Human Development Indices, and it constantly draws the attention of the international media, which come to cover recurrent malnutrition and food crises.<sup>3</sup> Niger has, in addition, one of the world's highest demographic growth rates (3.9%), which inhibits the efficacy of the government's policies and its ability to deliver adequate social services, as well as increasing the number of young jobseekers to a greater extent than the economy can sustain.

Around two-thirds of Niger's population are considered "poor" and one-third "extremely poor". The threshold of poverty in the Nigerien context is measured by the ability of the individual to acquire enough food to sustain a normal livelihood.<sup>4</sup> Infant malnutrition and severe food crisis are endemic in Niger. Prior to the 1980s, Niger faced an average of one food crisis each decade, but that number gradually increased to an average of one food crisis every 4 years. Now, every year, there are at least some parts of the country that face food crisis conditions. Acute malnutrition touches 16.7% of children under five, which is a figure well above the emergency threshold of 15%.<sup>5</sup>

Poverty and food crisis are two sides of the same coin. They are repercussions of the coincident demographic boom and agricultural crisis. Around one-fifth of Niger's 17 million people live in rural areas and rely largely on agricultural production. But agriculture has faced enormous challenges due to extensive desertification and demographic growth. Of Niger's 1.3 km<sup>2</sup> territory, only 15% is arable. The desert boundaries in the North have been moving southward, thus reducing the amount of arable land and increasing the frequency of droughts. Unfortunately, Nigerien agriculture is conducted with quite rudimentary tools and depends a great deal upon rainfall. Desertification therefore exerts a constant pressure on agricultural production. Population growth in Niger, coupled with the aforementioned agricultural decline, has provoked a Malthusian shock that is expressed through recurrent food crises.

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<sup>3</sup> The last three annual UNDP reports (2012-2014) rank Niger as the last country in the world in terms of human development. See *United Nations Development Program*, "Human Development Reports," 2014. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi-table>. Last visited on 30 July 2014.

<sup>4</sup> In order to sustain a normal livelihood in Niger, an average person needs 2,100 calories per day. Based on this rule, the National Survey on Budget and Households' Consumption (ENBCIII) estimates the poverty threshold at a minimum annual spending of 150,933 CFA (\$302) in urban areas and 110,348 (\$221) in rural areas. This corresponds to a daily income of respectively 397 FCFA (\$0.79) and 290 FCFA (\$0.58). This is far below the World Bank's scale, which has established the threshold of extreme poverty to \$1 corresponding to 500 FCFA. In brief, this simply means that 2/3 of Nigeriens are unable to provide enough for themselves.

<sup>5</sup> *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*, "Case Study: Tackling Malnutrition in Niger," 2011. Available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/113731/Tackling%20malnutrition%20in%20Niger-EN.pdf>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

Given Niger's population growth and mortality indicators, an estimated 580,000 Nigeriens join the job market every year.<sup>6</sup> But their chances of finding a decent job are increasingly low. Unemployment or under-employment affect four out of every five Nigeriens. Agriculture is already in crisis and thus does not represent a viable employment option for youths. The manufacturing sector in Niger, moreover, is very under-developed. The country's mineral resources—which include uranium, oil, gold, and phosphate—contribute little to the economy due to corruption, market fluctuations, and imbalanced contracts (some of which were signed under the influence of the colonial system). The entire manufacturing sector, including industry, mining, and construction, contributes only 12.6% to the national GDP and formally employs less than 20,000 workers. The service sector, including public administration, transportation, telecommunication, and banking, constitutes 40.7% of the GDP. Most of this contribution comes from the government, which with around 35,000 workers is the largest employer in Niger. In brief, the formal economy in Niger employs less than a hundred thousand workers on a permanent basis. The informal economy employs a significant part of the population, but it also is becoming over-saturated. Some young Nigeriens have resorted to migration, but many others remain unemployed.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of all these challenges, there is a general public sentiment of apathy and disenchantment vis-à-vis the state and politics.<sup>8</sup> This sentiment translates, in many cases, into anti-statism. In Zinder, young men, students, and unemployed bystanders are often up in arms against the state, clashing constantly with the police and attacking such symbols of the state as flags, government buildings, and police stations. Drug consumption, gangster culture, and urban crime are reaching unprecedented levels. On the other hand, there is

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<sup>6</sup> This number corresponds to the estimated number of children who survive the risk of infant and child mortality. It is based on the calculation of the estimated number of new-borns according to the population growth rate (3.9%) minus the estimated number of children who die before the adult age, based on the infant and child mortality rate (127%). These rates come from the National Institute of Statistics. See *Institut National de la Statistique*, « le Niger En Chiffre 2013, » November 2013. Available at: [http://www.stat-niger.org/statistique/file/Affiches\\_Depliants/Nigerenchiffres2013\\_versi.pdf](http://www.stat-niger.org/statistique/file/Affiches_Depliants/Nigerenchiffres2013_versi.pdf). Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Migration is an old practice that was developed as a survival strategy against famines and as a source of cash revenue. A study of the phenomenon of migration in three regions in Niger found that the phenomenon affects an average of 82% of the households in the surveyed areas. The destinations are Libya, Nigeria, and Cote d'Ivoire. Migration has been a practice reserved usually to young males, and that because of the hardships and risky conditions linked to it. But lately, a new form of migration has emerged, involving women and children who cross the Sahara toward Algeria (many of them dying on the way). During the civil war in Libya, hundreds of thousands of Nigerien migrants came back to Niger—fleeing combat—and many of them went back despite the anti-migrant sentiment in Libya. See *USAID and FEWS NET*, « La migration au Niger, » Rapport Spécial, June 2011. Available at : [http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Niger\\_SRMigration\\_2011\\_07\\_fr\\_final.pdf](http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Niger_SRMigration_2011_07_fr_final.pdf). Last visited on 31 July 2014; *Jeune Afrique*, « Niger : Deuil National apres la mort de 92 migrants, femme, et enfant pour la plupart, » 11 January 2013. Available at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20131101152128/>. Last visited on 31 July 2014.

<sup>8</sup> This is perceptible from discussing with people in the *fadas*, the *palais*, and through numerous other formal and informal discussions. “Fada” and “palais” (meaning “palace” in Hausa and French, respectively) are terms used to refer to youth clubs, where young men meet regularly to socialize, listen to music, and play card games.

also an emerging Islamic revival that appears through greater religious piety and a growing observance of Islamic ascetic cultural practices in daily life. It appears as if the immense obstacles blocking the attainment of a materially successful life have turned people toward spirituality and the quest for salvation in the afterlife. While this revival is peaceful and common to many Muslim societies around the world, in Niger it runs the risk of merging with other forms of more disruptive contention, such as that practiced by Islamic militant groups.

*Niger's Security Context and the Tuareg Rebellions.* The Tuareg rebellion in Niger has a long history that goes back to the period of colonial invasion. In the early 1900s when the French colonizers penetrated Aïr (the home of the Tuaregs in Niger), Tagama (the Sultan of Agadez) accepted their presence and declared the loyalty of the Tuareg confederations to the colonial authority. But as soon as the French settled in Agadez, Kaocen, the chief of one of the Tuareg confederations, began a rebellion in Aïr. Kaocen was a combatant of the Senusiyya sufi order, which had previously engaged in a jihad against the Italian invasion in Libya. After the defeat of the Senusiyya resistance, Kaocen came back to Agadez and prepared his army to fight against the French colonialists. He received the support of many Tuareg leaders including Tagama. In December 1916, he attacked Agadez, conquered part of the city and put the other part under siege. He inflicted several military defeats to the French colonial army but was ultimately unable to conquer the tower. In March 1917, troops coming from Zinder reinforced the French position leading to the defeat of Kaocen and his army. He was finally captured and hanged in 1919.<sup>9</sup>

The Kaocen Revolt set a precedent for the relationship between the Tuaregs and the Nigerien state, which came to inherit the French colonial apparatus. Although no Tuareg rebellion took place for more than sixty years after Kaocen's era, it is clear that his revolt has a vivid legacy in the collective memory of the Tuaregs in general. This was particularly the case in the discourse of the second rebellion in the 1990s.

The second rebellion emerged in the context of the sociopolitical and economic transformation of the postcolonial era. The droughts of the 1960-70s and the increasing monetization of the local economy pushed young Tuaregs of Aïr into exile in Libya and Algeria. Some of these young Tuareg migrants, called Ishumars (from the French *chômeur* meaning unemployed), were recruited, trained in military camps in southern Libya, and enrolled in militias used by Qaddafi's regime for different military missions in Africa and the Middle East (particularly Lebanon and Palestine).<sup>10</sup> Domestically, this phenomenon coincided with the severely repressed coup attempts that involved Tuareg officers against the regime of Kountche in 1976 and 1983. As a result, old tensions between the Tuaregs

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<sup>9</sup> Frédéric Deycard, « Les Rebellions Touaregues Du Niger : Combattants, Mobilisations Et Culture Politique », Thèse Pour Le Doctorat En Science Politique, *CEAN, Université de Bordeaux*, 2011. p81.

<sup>10</sup> Deycard, Frederic, *Ibid.* p171.

and the state surfaced again. In 1985, some of the returning Ishumars created a political movement called Popular Front for the Liberation of Niger (FPLN), sparking rumors of the start of a new rebellion. In May 1990, a riot related to a food distribution in Tchinta-Baradene—a Tuareg town in Tahoua—turned into an insurrection instigated by Ishumars. The Nigerien army intervened and killed several Tuareg insurgents as well as civilians.<sup>11</sup> The massacre initiated a new rebellion with formal political grievances related to the marginalization of the Tuaregs in governmental administrations and the lack of development projects in Tuareg-dominated regions.<sup>12</sup> The grievances appeared justified, given that all the uranium mines were located in Tuareg areas and no dividends were allocated to those areas. The Nigerien government opted first for a military solution in dealing with the rebels. The army deployed in the Agadez region, and the rebels responded by adopting a guerilla strategy. Though only a few direct confrontations took place between the rebels and the military, civilian populations suffered many casualties and economic losses due to rebel attacks on civilian buses and trucks. The rebellion ended officially after peace agreements were signed in 1995 and 1998.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the peace agreement, sporadic attacks against civilians and commercial goods continued throughout the 2000s. The government attributed these attacks to the growing banditry and drug trafficking in the Sahara. In February 2007, a major attack on an isolated military post near Arlit killed three soldiers. The National Movement for Justice (MNJ) led by Aghali Lambo claimed responsibility for the attack and justified it as an expression of its dissatisfaction with the government's implementation of the peace agreements of 1995-1998. The MNJ was particularly critical of the government's handling of the decentralization process, the failure to allocate dividends of uranium income to the Tuareg region of Agadez, and the non-recruitment of Tuaregs to government posts.<sup>14</sup> The rebel platform was based upon the renegotiation of those agreements. The regime of Tandja refused to open negotiations or to even recognize the rebels. Instead, the government labeled them "bandits and drug traffickers," and opted to use coercion to deal with them. A state of emergency was declared in the region of Agadez, and the army cracked down the rebellion. By the end of 2008, the Nigerien military has succeeded in weakening the rebels and splitting them into multiple small groups. Some of the rebel leaders fled to Libya and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p183.

<sup>12</sup> Greagoire Emmanuel, *Touaregs du Niger: Le Destin d'un Mythe*, Paris: Karthala, 1999, p58.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of Toureg rebellions, see Frédéric Deycard, « Les Rebellions Touaregues Du Niger : Combattants, Mobilisations Et Culture Politique », Thèse Pour Le Doctorat En Science Politique, *CEAN, Université de Bordeaux*, 2011. Available at: [http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/55/66/39/PDF/these\\_Deycard.pdf](http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/55/66/39/PDF/these_Deycard.pdf). Last visited on 17 August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Guichaoua, Yvan, "Circumstantial Alliances and Loose Loyalties in Rebellion Making: The Case of Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger (2007-2009)," *MICROCON Research Working Paper No. 20*, 9 November 2009, pp15-17; Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice. « Programme des Revendications du Mouvement des Nigeriens pour Justice, » 2007. Available on the website of IPACC at [http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ\\_Niger\\_manifesto\\_5\\_07%281%29.pdf](http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ_Niger_manifesto_5_07%281%29.pdf). Last visited on 1 August 2014.

called for the mediation of Qaddafi to end the conflict. Negotiations between the Nigerien government and the rebels were held between March and June 2009, under Qaddafi's mediation. A cease-fire was reached without the signature of any new peace agreement.<sup>15</sup>

Tuareg combatants regard the 2007 rebellion as the worst rebellion experience. Aside from the high number of casualties—civilians as well as rebels—that it occasioned, it also badly hurt the tourism industry, which constitutes Agadez's most important source of income. And it ended with no gains or compromises from the government. It also revealed the corruption of the rebel leaders who were accused of stealing the funds paid by Qaddafi in exchange for peace.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in the Sahel: Crises on Niger's Borders**

Already enfeebled by the above-mentioned structural weaknesses, Niger had to face the growing crises of Islamic insurgency that emerged in four of its seven neighboring countries. These crises are different from what Niger has experienced so far: they are regional in their scope, deadlier in terms of casualties and their religiously-inspired discourse appeals to a large number of frustrated youth regardless of ethnic or national background. This section gives an overview of the current insurgent groups that threaten Niger's stability.

*Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria.* Boko Haram is the common name attributed to the jihadist movement "The Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad" created in 2001 in the northeastern Nigerian state of Borno. The group fights against the "Westernization" of Muslim culture and seeks to establish its particular interpretation of sharia law in the Muslim-dominated states of Northern Nigeria. The movement has become infamous for attacking schools, churches, UN missions, police stations, abducting hundreds of schoolgirls, and assassinating members of Islamic establishments that oppose their views.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Priscilla Sadatchy, « Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ) – Fiche Documentaire », *Note d'Analyse du GRIP*, 3 November 2011. Available at: [http://archive.grip.org/en/siteweb/images/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2011/NA\\_2011-11-03\\_FR\\_P-SADATCHY.pdf](http://archive.grip.org/en/siteweb/images/NOTES_ANALYSE/2011/NA_2011-11-03_FR_P-SADATCHY.pdf). Last visited on 2 August 2014.

<sup>16</sup> The previous rebellions of the 1990s ended with massive recruitments of Tuareg combatants to the army and the state bureaucracy. And the government compromised to decentralize authority, offering more autonomy to the regions. But the rebellion of 2007 ended with none of these. The only apparent gain was the appointment of a few rebel leaders as advisers of some members of the government in Niamey. This rendered them "corrupted" leaders in the eyes of the combatants who were left back in the deserts to mourn.

<sup>17</sup> Boko Haram drew international attention when its members abducted more than 200 secondary school girls, on the night of 14-15 April 2014, in Chibok, a village in Borno State. A few days after the kidnapping, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau announced in a video that he would enslave and sell the girls. The social media campaign "Bring Back our Girls" was created to raise awareness and push the international community to help Nigeria find the girls and bring them back to their families. See Bringbackourgirls Cause, available on Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/bringbackourgirl>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

Boko Haram emerged in a context marked by a high politicization of religion. For the last five centuries Islam has, in fact, played a significant role in Northern Nigerian politics and sharia has been implemented throughout this period.<sup>18</sup> The increasing politicization of religion combined with the rapid deterioration of living conditions in the 1960s and 1970s led to the emergence of many radical movements that asked for full enforcement of sharia law in order to moralize politics and alleviate corruption. Boko Haram is yet another movement that continues the legacy of those radical movements.<sup>19</sup> The return of pluralist democracy in 1999 allowed the fulfillment of the old agenda to re-establish sharia law in Northern Nigeria. Following the elections, nine out of the twelve northern states implemented both civil and criminal Islamic law while the three other states implemented sharia partly.<sup>20</sup> The hope of alleviating corruption and creating prosperity, however, soon faded and led to the emergence of more radical ideologies that recommended drastic changes. If sharia was not conclusive in changing governance, Boko Haram activists believe that it was because the state apparatus and the ruling elite were not appropriate for the task. Hence, the adoption of the radical ideology of Takfir wal-Hijra, the rejection of western education, and the establishment of state-like organizations that would embody the change.<sup>21</sup> Even though the phenomenon of Boko Haram is primarily a Nigerian problem

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<sup>18</sup> The trend toward the politicization of Islam could be traced back to the early period of Islamization of Northern Nigeria in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During that period, the Hausa kings of Kano, Katsina, and Borno established sharia rule in their kingdoms with the guidance of an Algerian cleric called Muhammad Al-Maghili. Although the adoption of sharia rule was not followed by significant Islamization of the native population, it nevertheless allowed Islam to syncretize with local cultures and institutions. The Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century expanded Islam and purified its practices while subjugating the whole region to the Sokoto Caliphate. When the British colonizers came in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they found in place a relatively coherent and centralized politico-religious system of governance. They therefore adopted a system of indirect rule that avoided disrupting the well-established institutions of the Sokoto Caliphate and allowed the politico-religious system to perpetuate itself. After independence in 1960, the ethnic and regional tensions as well as the controversy around the adoption of a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal increased identity politics and reinforced the role of Islam in the definition of the northern identity. Starting from the late 1970s, many heretical movements, such as the Izala movement, Maitatsine riots, and the Al-Zakzaky shia movement, emerged asking for the enforcement of sharia rule in order to moralize politics and alleviate corruption. See Ostien Philip, Nasir M. Jamila, Kogelmann Franz, eds. *Comparative Perspectives on Shari'ah in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2005, p565.

<sup>19</sup> Murray Last, "The Pattern of Dissent: Boko Haram in Nigeria 2009," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, Issue No. 10, 2008-2009, pp7-11.

<sup>20</sup> As mentioned above, sharia has been implemented in Northern Nigeria since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But during colonialism, the British colonial authority abolished the criminal code and allowed the sharia civil code to continue. Since then, the re-establishment of the criminal code has been one of the major objectives of the Northern Nigerian clerics. With the advent of democratization in 1999, nine out of twelve Northern Nigerian states re-instituted the sharia criminal code.

<sup>21</sup> Takfir Wal-Hijra literally means excommunication and exile. It is a radical ideology that originated from the writing of the Egyptian Islamic thinker Sayyid Qutb. Advocates of this ideology think that a Muslim who does not follow their interpretation of Islam becomes an infidel and can be targeted with jihad. They consider Muslim societies that do not follow their views as societies of infidels and therefore believe it is their duty to separate from these societies until the time when they are militarily strong enough to conquer and re-Islamize them. They consider this as the replication of the Prophet Mohamed's practice when he exiled from Mecca to Medina, and then came back later to re-conquer Mecca. In early 2000s, the then "Nigerian Taliban"—and now Boko Haram—withdraw from Maiduguri to an exile near the border with Niger where they created a separatist community. See, Andrew

rooted in Nigeria's specific history, its effects carry a heavy resonance in Niger. This is not surprising given the sociocultural and economic relationships that exist between the societies across the two borders.

*Al-Qaeda in the Countries of the Islamic Maghreb.* The group AQIM was officially created in January 2007 as a result of the allegiance of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) to Al-Qaeda, transforming itself from a nationalist Islamic insurgency to a regional terrorist organization. The central authority of AQIM resides in the Kabile region in Algeria. The group's activism, however, has gradually shifted southward into the Sahel region where it draws most of its financial resources through kidnapping and involvement in illicit drug trafficking. Prior to the occupation of northern Mali, AQIM intervened in the Sahel through three katibas (battalions): Katibat Al-Moulathamine, led by Belmokhtar, Katibat Tariq Ben Ziyad, commanded by the now defunct Abu Zeid, and Al-Furqan, led by Abul Hamman.<sup>22</sup> After the occupation of northern Mali, numerous other jihadist groups proliferated—MUJOA, Ansar Dine, Al Mouaquiouna Bid-Dam, Almourabitun, etc. —raising questions about possible internal divisions within the group. While evidence suggests tension between the leaders, nourished particularly by the struggle for power and ethno-racial discrimination, there is no evidence of fundamental differences between the factions in terms of ideology, objectives, or operational strategies.

AQIM's ideology is the jihadist salafism, which has as its objective the revival of the Islamic caliphate and the establishment of sharia rule through changing the "apostate" and secular states in North Africa and the Sahel region. AQIM's operational strategy consists of guerilla-type warfare, which includes occupying territories, perpetrating sporadic terrorist attacks, kidnapping for ransoms, and participating in illicit trafficking. The implantation of elements of the GSPC into the Sahel dates back to early 2003 when, following the Algerian military's crackdown against the group, many leaders fled to southern Algeria and northern Mali.<sup>23</sup> Although AQIM does not have a permanent military presence in Niger, it has been carrying out numerous kidnappings, bombings, and attacks on military barracks. In addition, AQIM has been actively recruiting young Nigeriens for its jihad.

*Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.* MUJOA is a dissident group of AQIM that is composed mostly of Hassaniyya-speaking Arabs from Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. It was led by a group of white Moors from Mali and Mauritania: Hammada Ould Mohamed Khayr,

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Walker, "What is Boko Haram," *United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 308*, 2012, pp1-15. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR308.pdf>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Soir d'Algerie*, « Al-Qaeda dans la Region du Sahel: Radiographie d'une Nebuleuse, » 20 January 2013. Available at: <http://www.lesoirdalgerie.com/articles/2013/01/20/article.php?sid=144187&cid=2>, Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Djallil Lounnas «Al-Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique et la Crise Malienne, » *Sécurité Globale, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales*, July 2012, p44-56. Available at: <http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/Al-Qaida.pdf>. Last visited 13 May 2012.

Sultan Badia, and Omar Ould Hamaha.<sup>24</sup> The creation of this group seems to have been motivated by ethnic tensions within the leadership of AQIM. As an initially Algeria-based movement, AQIM was essentially controlled by Algerians who hold all the essential positions of power within the group. In fact, not only all the katibas (battalions) are commanded by Algerians, but the Seriyayas (the small combat units that constitute the katibas) also are controlled by them—with the exception of one Seriyya in the Katiba Tariq Ben Ziyad, led by Abdel Karim Targui, a Malian Tuareg close to Abu Zeid.<sup>25</sup> The Moors—from both Mauritania and Mali—represent probably the second largest national group in AQIM, but are relegated to the role of spiritual and religious guides of the group while other blacks are considered followers.<sup>26</sup> This attitude on the part of the Algerians sparked frustration particularly among certain Moors and dark-skinned mujahedeen, leading to the creation of MUJOA.<sup>27</sup>

During the jihadist occupation of northern Mali, MUJOA occupied the city of Gao and succeeded in rallying many young jihadists from Sub-Saharan Africa, including hundreds of young Nigeriens. It was the first jihadist organization that nominated a black sub-Saharan African as head of a katiba, which was the Usman Dan Fodio Katiba commanded by Nigerien jihadist Bilal Hicham.<sup>28</sup> Hicham resigned and fled to Niger right before the French intervention, accusing the group of racism, drug smuggling, rape, theft, and the killing of innocents.<sup>29</sup>

*Ansar-al-Sharia in Libya.* The term Ansar al-Sharia is a title claimed by a variety of jihadist groups. There are groups called Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, and (more recently) Mali and Mauritania, but these groups often have little to nothing in common except their jihadist ideology. The Libyan Ansar al-Sharia arose from the Libyan Spring in 2011. The movement participated in the rebellion against Qaddafi and rose to prominence after the end of the civil war. They made their first appearance during a rally in June 2012, during which they carried banners that said, “democracy is a western system and is not Islamic”, “democracy is atheistic,” and “we will

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<sup>24</sup> The term “Moor” denotes an ethnic group that speaks the Hassaniyya Arabic dialect. They are composed of both white Moors, who are of Arab and Berber origins, and black Moors (or the Haratine), who have dark skin and were historically enslaved by the white Moors. The Moorish population inhabits the Sahara, particularly Mauritania, and parts of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, and Niger.

<sup>25</sup> Ould Oumeir, « Quand le Mali perd le Nord, » *La Tribune N°590*, 8 April 2012. Available at: <http://oumeir.blogspot.com/p/enquete.html>. Last visited on 13 May 2014; Robert Fowler, *A Season In Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al-Qaeda*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ould Oumeir, *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Fowler Robert, *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Serge Daniel, « Bilal Hicham, rebelle du nord du Mali, » Audio podcast, *RFI*. 4 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20120804-mali-bilal-hicham>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Bakary Gueye, “MUJOA commander quits Mali terror group,” *Magharebia*, 12 November 2012. Available at: [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/11/12/feature-02](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/11/12/feature-02). Last visited on 13 May 2014.



not accept a government that doesn't govern in accordance with God's will".<sup>30</sup> Similar to many other jihadist groups, Ansar al-Sharia believes in the salafist jihadist ideology, which calls for fighting secularism and western ideologies by jihad. Ansar al-Sharia has been accused of the assassination of the American diplomats in Benghazi, although the group's officials have constantly rejected such charges.<sup>31</sup>

Ansar al-Sharia operates only in Libya and in the post-revolutionary context, where the proliferation of weapons, the socio-ethnic divide, and the overall climate of insecurity seem to encourage the multiplication of militias. Its activism is concentrated in Derna and Benghazi, but it is suspected to have relationships with the other jihadist movements in the region. According to regional security sources, Al-Qaeda linked jihadists have a significant presence in southern Libya, running three camps south of Sabha. Jihadists who previously operated in northern Mali, including Moktar Belmokhtar (the Algerian leader of a Saharan Al-Qaeda affiliate), are believed to now be present in the triangle border region "Salvador Pass," which falls between Libya, Algeria, and Niger.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Impacts of the Sahelo-Saharan Crisis of Islamic Insurgency on Niger**

*Attacks and Kidnappings: The Spread of Insecurity.* Contrary to the other countries impacted by the Sahelo-Saharan crisis—Algeria, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Nigeria—Niger has not developed indigenous cells of Islamic insurgency within its territory. It has nonetheless suffered serious impacts from the crises on its borders in various ways; in particular, AQIM and MUJOA have conducted several kidnapping operations and attacks that severely challenged the security of the country. The first clash between the army and the Islamic insurgents of the GSPC dates back to 2003. Yet it was not until 2008 that AQIM started posing significant threats to the country, first by kidnapping western diplomats and tourists and later by attacking armed forces and western interests. The table "chronology of the attacks" summarizes all the attacks endured by Niger from 2008 to the present.

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<sup>30</sup> Maha Ellawati, "Benghazi Islamist rally angers locals," *Libya Herald*, 18 January 2013. Available at: <http://archive.today/dAsU4>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>31</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, Suliman Ali Zway, and Kareem Fahim "Attack by Fringe Group Highlights the Problem of Libya's Militias," *New York Times*, 12 September 2012. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/world/middleeast/attack-by-fringe-group-highlights-the-problem-of-libya-militias.html?\\_r=3&hp&pagewanted=all&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/world/middleeast/attack-by-fringe-group-highlights-the-problem-of-libya-militias.html?_r=3&hp&pagewanted=all&). Last visited on 13 May 2014; Ahmed Maher, "Meeting Mohammad Ali al-Zahawi of Libyan Ansar al-Sharia," *BBC Africa News*, 18 September 2012. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19638582>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Cruickshank and Nic Robertson, "Analysis: Pro Al-Qaeda Militants Seen As Lead Suspects in American Teacher's Death," *CNN Security Clearance*, 5 December 2013. Available at: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/12/05/analysis-pro-al-qaeda-militants-seen-as-lead-suspects-in-american-teachers-death/>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

Table: Chronology of Jihadists' Attacks in Niger				
	Date	Place	Target	Casualties
1	December 14 <sup>th</sup> 2008	Niamey	Kidnapping of two Canadian diplomats, Robert Fowler and Louis Guay, at 30 km northwest of Niamey	They were released in April 2009 after spending 130 days in captivity in Northern Mali, and apparently on payment of ransom
2	January 22 <sup>nd</sup> 2009	Niger–Mali border	Kidnapping of four European tourists: Two Swiss, one German and one British	The British—Edwin Dyer—was killed while the three others were released for ransom
3	December 27 <sup>th</sup> 2009	Tillabery	Attack against a convey of Saudi tourists	Four Saudis were killed and two others wounded
4	April 20 <sup>th</sup> 2010	Agadez	Kidnapping of a French humanitarian, Michel Germaneau	Germaneau was killed by AQIM after a failed rescue attempt by French and Mauritanian forces in Mali
5	September 26 <sup>th</sup> 2010	Agadez	Kidnapping of five French, one Togolese and one Malagasy working in Uranium mine in Arlit	The hostages were liberated after the payment of a ransom estimated at \$110 million
6	January 7 <sup>th</sup> 2011	Niamey city	Kidnapping of two French: Vincent Delory and Antoine de lecour	The two hostages were killed during a rescue operation by French and Nigerien forces on the Malian border
7	Mars 8 <sup>th</sup> 2011	Tillabery	Suicide attack against the military garrison of Tilwa in Tillabery	25 military killed and many others wounded, according to AQIM; 3 jihadists were also killed in the attack
8	June 13 <sup>th</sup> 2011	Agadez	Clash between jihadists and Nigerien armed forces outside of Arlit in Agadez	Two casualties in both sides; and drugs and money were seized by the Nigerien military
9	October 14 <sup>th</sup> 2012	Maradi	Kidnapping of five Nigerien and one Chadian working for a humanitarian organization in Dakoro	The Chadian was killed and the five Nigerien released after 18 days in custody
10	May 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2013	Agadez	Two simultaneous attacks: one against SOMAIR, the Uranium mining company in Arlit, and the other one against Agadez military garrison	24 military were killed along with 10 jihadists and 1 mineworker. Several other people were wounded
11	July 1 <sup>st</sup> 2013	Niamey	A prison break was organized to liberate the jihadists incarcerated in the civil jail of Niamey	3 officers were killed and 22 prisoners escaped, some of whom were later re-captured.

Source: Compiled by author.

*The Mali Collapse Viewed from Niger.* The jihadist takeover in northern Mali drew unanimous condemnation from political and religious actors in Niger. The shared experience of Tuareg rebellions as well as the proximity of the new threat seems to have greatly influenced this criticism. However, the French military intervention in northern Mali and the deployment of American drones and French Special Forces in Niger broke the consensus and revived debates about imperialism and a “western conspiracy.” While the government has remained consistent in its pro-war position against the insurgents groups, the positions of both the ruling coalition and opposition political parties evolved from firm support for the government’s position to a cautious appeal for dialogue by the majority coalition Movement for the Renaissance of Niger (MRN) and allegations of mismanagement of the crisis by the opposition coalition Alliance for National Reconciliation (ARN). Civil society was divided between pro and anti-government, while Islamic leaders condemned the jihadists but also the foreign intervention.

The government’s position can be summarized into three main points. First, the Malian crisis is a matter of National Security for Niger. Thus, Niger’s military involvement was not a mere question of solidarity, but of survival.<sup>33</sup> Second, the recovery of the entire territory of Mali from the jihadists and the Tuareg rebels of MNLA was non-negotiable. Third, military intervention must be privileged over negotiations in dealing with the jihadists as well as the separatists of MNLA. Since the beginning of the crisis, President Issoufou has been a key actor in the management of the Malian crisis, first within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and later in close consultation with French President Francois Holland. Issoufou had been outspoken in advocating for the use of military action in dealing with the crisis. This position was clearly expressed by the Nigerien Minister of Foreign Affairs in an interview broadcasted on RFI, in which he claimed that “military action is the only option when it comes to fighting against AQIM and all its associates.”<sup>34</sup>

Before the French intervention, Issoufou’s pro-military position was marginalized by his colleagues in ECOWAS, who favored the Burkinabe president’s move to negotiate with the rebels of MNLA and the jihadists. The balance shifted, however, after French intervention started in January 2013. Issoufou welcomed the involvement of France and declared: “The French intervention was necessary and legitimate. If France did not intervene, the jihadists would have been in Bamako by now. They would have transformed Mali into a terrorist

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<sup>33</sup> ISAM, « Envoi d’une Troupe Nigérienne au Mali : La Mauvaise Foi de l’ARN, » *Le Canard Déchainé* No. 569, 21 January 2013. Available at: <http://www.tamtaminfo.com/envoi-dune-troupe-nigerienne-au-mali-la-mauvaise-foi-de-larn>. Last visited on 13 May 2014.

<sup>34</sup> ICG, Ibid, p33; Lamine et O. Issa, « Intervention Militaire Pour l’Unification Du Mali : Le Processus pour l’Envoi du Contingent Nigérien Bouclé, » *Le Républicain (Weekly, Niamey)*, 18 January 2013. Available at: [http://archive.com/page/3171551/2013-11-17/http://www.republicain-niger.com/index.asp?affiche=News\\_Display.asp&ArticleID=5176](http://archive.com/page/3171551/2013-11-17/http://www.republicain-niger.com/index.asp?affiche=News_Display.asp&ArticleID=5176). Last visited on 14 May 2014.

state.”<sup>35</sup> Niger committed 680 military forces to the combat. After the liberation of Gao and Timbuktu Issoufou pushed for further operations in Kidal, which was occupied by the Tuareg rebels of MNLA. He argued that, because the MNLA is not representative of the majority of the Tuaregs and because northern Mali is home to people who are not Tuareg, the MNLA must undergo the same fate as the jihadists.<sup>36</sup>

Nigerien political parties maintain a more ambivalent position. At the beginning of the crisis, they unanimously condemned the invasion of northern Mali by the jihadists and the MNLA. When the government decided to send Nigerien troops to Mali, the resolution won unanimous support from all the political coalitions at the National Assembly. Only 4 out of 113 representatives opposed the resolution.<sup>37</sup> This consensus eroded following the ups and downs of the crisis. The ruling coalition, the Movement for the Renaissance of Niger (MRN), reiterated its support for the government based on the same “threat-next-door” argument used by the regime. The coalition said in a statement that “the engagement of the Nigerien army in the [African-led International Support Mission to Mali] MISMA on the side of the French, the Chadian, and the Malian forces should be considered not as a fight for the sake of Mali but also as a fight for the preservation of Nigerien territorial integrity. Nigeriens should keep in mind that Niger constitutes the next target of the terrorists after Mali.”<sup>38</sup>

The opposition coalition, however, criticized the va-t-en-guerre (pro-war) attitude of the Nigerien authorities. The Alliance for National Reconciliation (ARN) justified its support of Nigerien military involvement, framing it as simply Niger’s compliance with its legal obligation vis-à-vis ECOWAS.<sup>39</sup> Yet ARN mentioned that “Niger’s commitment with respect to the crisis in Mali must first focus on dialogue rather than a military solution in order to preserve the territorial integrity of Mali along with its national unity, peace, and democracy.” The MNSD Nassara, the former ruling party, is more critical. It accused the government of mismanaging the crisis of Islamic insurgency in Niger, and more importantly pointed to the potential complicity of certain government agents with the jihadists.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *TV5 Monde*, « Le Président de la République du Niger Mahamadou Issoufou sur la Situation au Mali, » Video available on *Youtube* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHlpIBrTi6Q> Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>36</sup> *TV5 Monde*, *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ISAM*, *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Le Sahel* (daily, Niamey) « Déclaration de la Mouvance pour la Renaissance du Niger (MRN) : Démenti catégorique des rumeurs faisant état de dissensions au sein de la mouvance. » Available at: <http://www.lesahel.org/index.php/societe/item/2650-d%C3%A9claration-de-la-mouvance-pour-la-renaissance-du-niger-mrn--d%C3%A9menti-cat%C3%A9gorique-des-rumeurs-faisant-%C3%A9tat-de-dissensions-au-sein-de-la-mouvance> last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>39</sup> *ISAM*, *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Interview with A.S, a board member of MNSD Nassara, in Niamey, June 2013 ; Bureau Politique National MNSD NASSARA, « Déclaration du Bureau Politique National du MNSD NASSARA, » *Nigerdiaspora*. 19 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.nigerdiaspora.info/index.php/les-infos-du-pays/politique-niger/politique->

The secular civil society—including labor unions, various grassroots organizations, and social movements—was divided with respect to its opinion on the government’s policy toward Mali. During jihadist invasions, most civil society activists also condemned the jihadists. Demonstrations were organized to urge Niger and the other states of ECOWAS to intervene. The French intervention, however, altered this consensus. On one hand, the co-opted segments of civil society devoted unconditional support to the government’s positions and made arguments mimicking those of the regime. They justified their support of the French intervention by the failure of the Malian state and the ECOWAS army to effectively stop the advance of the jihadists toward Bamako. Moreover, they emphasized that if the jihadists succeeded in taking the Malian capital, Niger would have been their next target.<sup>41</sup> The former rebel leader, Rhissa Ag Boula, issued a statement on behalf of the Nigerien Tuareg community in which he said, “We Tuaregs of Niger reject totally and energetically the statement of Independence of the Malian Azawad. We say no to this drift and we call on our brothers in Mali to seek a political solution within a unified Mali.”<sup>42</sup>

On the other side, some civil society movements maintained a critical stance toward the government. A declaration signed by 14 civil society movements states:

“[we] deplore the use of weapons and violence as a means for the treatment and resolution of conflicts; [we] launch a strong appeal for dialogue and understanding towards all parties in conflict; and [we] ask the highest authorities of the country to advocate for dialogue and negotiation and to renounce the provocative and bellicose statements that could only inflame, rather than solve the situation.”<sup>43</sup>

These movements viewed the French intervention as a new facet of imperialism.<sup>44</sup> Nouhou Arzika, the leader of the Movement for the Promotion of Responsible Citizenship, said in an interview on the Voice of America that “people argue that there is a security issue that

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[niger/item/64307-d%C3%A9claration-du-bureau-politique-du-mouvement-national-pour-la-soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9-de-d%C3%A9veloppement-mnsd-nassara--l%E2%80%99opposition-monte-au-cr%C3%A9neau](http://www.nigerdiaspora.net/index.php/les-infos-du-pays/politique-niger/politique-niger/item/6279-des-responsables-touareg-du-niger-condamnent-lind%C3%A9pendance-du-nord-mali) Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Seydou Allakaye « Déclaration De L’intersyndicale Des Travailleurs Du Niger Inquiétude Sur La Crise Alimentaire Et Les Incendies Des Marchés, » *Le Républicain*, 24 April 2012. Available at : [http://www.republicain-niger.com/Index.asp?affiche=News\\_Display.asp&articleid=4863&rub=%C3%89tat+et+Soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9](http://www.republicain-niger.com/Index.asp?affiche=News_Display.asp&articleid=4863&rub=%C3%89tat+et+Soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9), Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>42</sup> *Nigerdiaspora*, « Des Responsables Touareg du Niger condamnent l’Indépendance du Nord-Mali, » 7 April 2012. Available at: <http://www.nigerdiaspora.net/index.php/les-infos-du-pays/politique-niger/politique-niger/item/6279-des-responsables-touareg-du-niger-condamnent-lind%C3%A9pendance-du-nord-mali>, Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Alternative Espaces Citoyen, « Déclaration des Organisations de la Société Civile sur la Situation au Mali, » *Alternative*, 24 August 2012 (Translated from French by author). Available at: <http://www.alternativeniger.org/spip.php?article580>. Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>44</sup> A.B.D L’Enquêteur, « Ibrahim Diori, Journaliste et Activiste Nigérien : ‘LA CEDEAO Est Une ONG Française,’ » *Aniamey.com*, 13 April 2013. Available at: <http://news.aninamey.com/h/954.html>. Last visited on 14 May 2014.

justifies the foreign intervention [in Mali]... in fact, that security issue is entirely provoked; it is the result of a gigantic manipulation aiming to justify the occupation of territories.”<sup>45</sup>

The view of religious actors was also divided. The Islamic Association of Niger (AIN), which is the official body representing “Nigerien Islam,” condemned the jihadists in an official statement. The Imam of the Mosque of the University of Niamey, Cheikh Boureima Daouda, published another statement on his web page (issued by the newly created Union of African Scholars, an organization of African Islamic clerics) that said “the union condemns the assault on civilians and the destructions of places of worship by jihadists. It also rejects the use of the term ‘jihad’ to qualify the activities of the groups. The union, finally, supports the Malian government in its effort to recover its territory.”<sup>46</sup>

Other imams addressed the issue in their Friday sermons and through broadcasted preaching in the media, qualifying the Islamic insurgency as a fitnah (strife) that affects Muslim communities and which they suspect has been plotted by western countries as part of their “crusade against Islam.”<sup>47</sup> Although they themselves support the application of the sharia, they disavow the harsh way in which jihadists in northern Mali implemented it.

The Islamic actors largely condemned the French intervention as well. This condemnation is justified with two arguments. First, there is a widespread sentiment among Muslim societies in Niger as well as elsewhere that western countries are engaged in a global campaign against Islam under the guise of a “war on terror.” According to these Islamic actors, the French intervention in Mali is yet another manifestation of this campaign. Second, a recent fatwa issued by 36 Mauritanian clerics, which prohibited all Muslims from supporting the French military intervention, carried influence in certain religious circles in Niger. Again, the fatwa was perhaps primarily based on the notion of an anti-Islamic “western conspiracy,” but it also embraced the principle that a Muslim must not join forces with infidels to fight against his Muslim brothers.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Voice of America*, « Drones Américains au Niger... la Société Civile Réagit, » 29 January 2014. Audio podcast available at: <http://www.lavoixdelamerique.com/content/les-nigeriens-reagissent-au-futur-deploiement-de-drones-americaains-au-niger/1593334.html>. Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Union of African Scholars, “بيان اتحاد علماء أفريقيا حول اندلاع الحرب في مالي”, 19 January 2013. Available at: <http://www.africanulama.org/Details.aspx?Sub1Id=4916&Sub2Id=16646>. Last visited on 14 May 2014. (Author’s translation from Arabic into English language).

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with Islamic activists in Maradi and Zinder, July, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> While Islamic actors’ opinions are overwhelmingly against the French intervention, it is noteworthy to mention that there is a marginal position in favor of the intervention expressed in debates among African students educated in Arabic and Islamic universities on a Facebook page. In fact, as the crisis was unfolding in Mali, it was debated by the African students who are educated in Arabic and Islamic Universities all over the world on the Facebook page named “Forum of African Students Studying in Arabic” (ملتقى دارسي العربية من أفريقيا). The page counts more 12,000 members, and most of the posts are in Arabic. Debates about the Malian crisis were sometimes tense. Three major positions can be identified: (1) There are those who supported the Malian state and the French intervention; (2) There are some who supported the jihadists and the MNLA against the Malian state; and finally (3) there are those who support the Malian army but oppose the French intervention. Each of these positions uses a combination of

This description shows that among all the countries that are on the frontline of the Islamic insurgency, Niger is the least affected by the crisis. Despite being encircled by crisis, Niger has managed to prevent the outbreak of any insurgency within Nigerien territory. But security is not the only concern raised by the Islamic insurgency crisis in Niger. There are additional concerns about the impact of the crisis on Niger's fragile political system and the way in which the main political, social, and religious actors reacted to the crisis.

### **The Factors behind Niger's Stability**

*Secularized Islam in Niger versus Politicized Islam in Northern Nigeria.* The context matters in the emergence of Islamic insurgencies. As mentioned above, the increasing politicization of Islam in Northern Nigeria, before and after independence, created a fertile ground for radical groups like Boko Haram and, before it, Maitatsine, Alzakzaki, and Kala Kato riots to emerge and prosper. In Niger, by contrast, the de-politicization of Islam that was initiated by the French colonial authority and pursued by the ruling elites after independence seems to have created a context less amenable for the emergence of radical movements. One of the core doctrines of French direct rule is the notion of laïcité (separation of state from religion). The French colonial authorities had consistently maintained a relationship of distrust vis-à-vis the Muslim community. They perceived the Muslim clerics as instigators of revolts against the colonial administration, and therefore as a source of contention that needed to be neutralized. The colonizers engaged in an effort to de-politicize Islam by keeping clerics at a distance from the political realm and tightening control over their activities.<sup>49</sup>

After independence, the local ruling elite that took over continued with the same politics of secularism initiated by the French colonizers. They adopted a secular constitution and precluded the creation of political parties on the basis of religion and ethnicity.<sup>50</sup> They also strived to maintain tight control over the clerics through the creation of the state-directed Cultural and Islamic Association of Niger (ACIN), a unified official body that represents Islamic communities. The era of liberalization in the early nineties relaxed the constraints imposed upon the clerics and allowed the emergence of many Islamic associations, which today constitute a kind of Islamic civil society. These organizations have been politically engaged, but only in issues related to religion. There are still no political parties based on

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theological and rational arguments to justify their respective stance. Most of the debaters are Malian and Burkinabe, but there are a few Nigeriens that participated as well.

See, ملتقى دارسي العربية من أفريقيا, on Facebook page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/zankanaba/>. Last visited on 1 August 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Zakari Maikorema, *L'islam dans l'espace nigérien: Des origines, VIIe siècle à 1960*, Paris : l'Harmattan 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Niger's constitution states: "The political parties with an ethnic, regionalist, or religious character are prohibited. No party may be knowingly created with the purpose of promoting an ethnic group, a region, or a religion, under penalty of the sanctions provided by the law" (Niger's 2010 Constitution, Article 9). Available at: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Niger\\_2010.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Niger_2010.pdf).

religious affiliation, and the mainstream religious establishment remains apolitical. Politics is viewed as corrupted and it is socially unacceptable for a cleric to be involved in a corrupted activity. This long tradition of secularism has weakened the ability of Nigerien clerics to organize people around politico-religious movements capable of threatening state stability.

*An Operational Military.* The Nigerien military offers one asset in combatting growing insecurity issues in the Sahel. Niger's military counts among the most structured, disciplined, and operational in the region. Recently it has had successes in combat against the Tuareg rebellion and terrorists and smugglers in northern Niger.<sup>51</sup> The lack of a new rebellion and relative slowdown of illicit trafficking is in fact credited to the force of the Nigerien military as a deterrent.<sup>52</sup> A French army source in Mali confirms that Niger has a "completely operational army."<sup>53</sup> It was, indeed, "the only operational African contingent within the MISMA."<sup>54</sup>

Contrary to Mali, Niger has never accepted the demilitarization of any part of its territory. Although Tuareg rebels have long called for greater autonomy in the country's northern regions, this was to be achieved through decentralization of political authority rather than demilitarization.<sup>55</sup> At the time when Mali was reducing military presence in its northern territory, Niger's army was increasing its control over the north and fighting against the MNJ Tuareg rebels. Furthermore, in Mali, negotiations and peace agreements which led to demilitarization were unilaterally decided by A.T. Toure's government. In Niger, because of the particular position of power that the military has enjoyed in the political arena, the government has had to include them in all steps of negotiations, and their opinion weighs heavily on the decisions that are finally made.<sup>56</sup>

After the fall of northern Mali to the jihadists, the Nigerien government deployed a force of 5,000 military along the Niger-Mali border. This army increased patrols in the north and

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<sup>51</sup> *Jeune Afrique*, « Niger le coup de griffe de l'armée contre AQMI, » 16 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20110616120636/algerie-niger-libye-mali-niger-niger-le-coup-de-griffe-de-l-armee-contre-aqmi.html>. Last visited on 2 August 2014 ; *RFI*, « Niger: combats entre l'armée et des narcotrafiquants dans le Ténéré, » 6 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130906-niger-combats-entre-armee-narcotrafiquants-passe-salvador>. Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with M.A, an official at the Niger Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Niamey, July 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Charlotte Bozonnet, "Niger remains wary of Mali crisis on its doorstep: Niger assisted its neighbor during uprising but has worked hard to shield itself from recent north and west African turmoil," *The Guardian*, 5 March 2013. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/05/niger-conflict-mali-army>. Last visited on 2 August 2014.

<sup>54</sup> International Crisis Group, Niger : un autre maillon faible dans le sahel ? Rapport Afrique No. 208, 19 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-de-louest/niger/208-niger-another-weak-link-in-the-sahel.aspx>. Last visited on 30 July 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice, « Programme des Revendications du Mouvement des Nigériens pour Justice, » 2007. Available on the website of IPACC at [http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ\\_Niger\\_manifesto\\_5\\_07%281%29.pdf](http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ_Niger_manifesto_5_07%281%29.pdf). Last visited on 1 August 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with M.A, an official at the Niger Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Niamey, July 2013.



disarmed militias entering from Libya. There were several clashes between the Nigerien army and heavily armed Tuaregs. As early as August 2011, the military had seized approximately 60 vehicles and a dismantled helicopter smuggled out of Libya. On the southern front, the government also engaged in a joint military patrol with the Nigerian Army to counter the expansion of Boko Haram into its territory.

This performance is, however, hindered by limited human and logistical resources. Niger's Security Forces (FDS) are composed of an estimated 12,000 military and 5,400 gendarmes. The paramilitary—National Guard and the police—are estimated at around 8,000 members.<sup>57</sup> This force is undersized for the task of protecting a territory that spans 1.3 million square kilometers (almost two times the size of Texas) and faces multiple security threats. Moreover, according to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Niger has had the smallest military expenditure in the Sahel region for more than a decade.<sup>58</sup> The government has recently started to address this situation. In 2004, Niger's defense budget was estimated at \$66 million.<sup>59</sup> By 2013, the defense and security budget had increased by 154%, reaching an estimated \$168 million.<sup>60</sup> President Issoufou declared that the formation, training, and arming of Nigerien soldiers is at the center of the government's priorities. From 2012 to 2013, the Nigerien national budget has been amended at least twice in order to increase military spending. The government recently acquired two fighter jets (type Su25) from Ukraine, three combat helicopters delivered by the French government, and many other logistical supports from the United States.<sup>61</sup> The land and air forces were provided with equipment and logistics while troop morale has been enhanced (at least theoretically) by an increase in their salaries.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to reinforcing the Nigerien military, Issoufou also allowed for the installation of foreign military bases within Niger. In January 2013, the government of Niger authorized the deployment of a US drone base in Niamey and a French military base in Agadez. The

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<sup>57</sup> ICG, *Ibid.* p21.

<sup>58</sup> *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, "Military Expenditure Database," 2012. Available at: <http://portal.sipri.org/publications/pages/expenditures/download-database> Last visited 2 August 2014.

<sup>59</sup> This value is calculated at the estimated exchange rate of 500FCA per US dollar. See Abdourahmane, B. Issa, "Niger," in Bryden Alan et al, eds. *Challenge of Security Sector Governance in West Africa*, Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2008. Available at: <http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Gouvernance-du-secteur-de-la-securite-en-Afrique-de-l-Ouest-francophone-bilan-et-perspectives>. Last visited on 2 August 2014.

<sup>60</sup> République du Niger Projet de Loi de Finance pour l'Année Budgétaire 2013, Institut National de la Statistique. Available at: <http://www.stat-niger.org/statistique/file/MF/Loidesfinances2013.pdf> Last visited on 05/14/2014.

<sup>61</sup> La Roue de L'Histoire, « L'armée nigérienne dispose désormais de ses premiers avions de chasse, » *La Roue de l'Histoire No. 657*, 2 April 2013. Available at : <http://www.tamtaminfo.com/larmee-nigerienne-dispose-desormais-de-ses-premiers-avions-de-chasse>. Last visited 14 May 2014; Bozonnet Charlotte, *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> See « Message A La Nation De Son Excellence Mahamadou Issoufou Président De La République, A L'occasion Du 2ème Anniversaire De Son Investiture, » on the official website of the Presidency of Niger April 7th 2013, Available at <http://www.presidence.ne/index.php/les-conseils-des-ministres/1-hymne-national-la-nigerienne/les-discours-du-president-an-33/les-discours-du-president-an/329-message-a-la-nation-de-son-excellence-mahamadou-issoufou-president-de-la-republique-a-l-occasion-du-2eme-anniversaire-de-son-investiture>. Last visited on 2 August 2014.

purpose of the former is to provide the government with intelligence regarding the movements of the jihadists in the Sahara, while the latter serves to protect uranium mines from terrorist attacks similar to those of In-Amenas in Algeria.

*The Management of the 2007-2009 Tuareg Rebellion.* There are two important points of comparison regarding the 2007 Tuareg rebellion in Niger and Mali that could explain the failure of the 2012 Malian rebellion to spill over into Niger. These points are: (1) the nature of the grievances that motivate the rebels to engage in violence; and (2) the Nigerien government's implementation of a "carrot and stick" policy to handle the 2007-2009 rebellion.

First, when the 2007 Rebellion started, the MNJ movement issued a document entitled "Claims Program of the Nigerien Movement for Justice" ("Programme de Revendication du Mouvement Nigerien pour la Justice").<sup>63</sup> The document detailed grievances vis-à-vis the government, which can be summarized in four points: (1) the non-application of the peace treaties of 1995-1998; (2) the lack of minority and indigenous representation in issues of governance at local, regional, and national levels; (3) the neglect of the indigenous population in mining policies; and (4) the absence of development projects in the northern regions, particularly Agadez, Tahoua, and Tillabery.

Although some of the grievances refer implicitly to issues affecting the Tuareg community, the authors of the document avoid identifying with one single community or region. Moreover, even though the movement claims that government corruption and centralization of power constitutes the essence of their grievances, it envisages solutions within, not outside, the framework of a unified Niger. This is an important difference from the Tuareg rebellion in Mali, where since the 1990s the major claim of the Malian rebels was the self-determination of the northern regions.<sup>64</sup> More importantly, Niger's government handled the crisis by following a so-to-speak "carrot and stick" policy, which proved to be quite effective in alleviating the crisis.

The first reaction of the government when the rebellions broke out—representing the "stick" —was to refuse to recognize the rebels and instead label them "bandits" and "drug traffickers" that can only be treated with the use of coercion. Accordingly, the government then declared a state of emergency in the Agadez region and authorized the military to crack down on the rebels until they surrendered. There is no record of the number of casualties resulting from the intervention, but many NGOs described it as a "massacre."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice, « Programme des Revendications du Mouvement des Nigeriens pour Justice,» 2007. Available on the website of IPACC at [http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ\\_Niger\\_manifesto\\_5\\_07%281%29.pdf](http://www.ipacc.org.za/uploads/docs/MNJ_Niger_manifesto_5_07%281%29.pdf). Last visited on 1 August 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with M.S, a civil society activist in Niamey, July, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> See Un-authored blogpost, "Massacre in the North of Niger," *Newsgroup nordniger*, 24 October 2007. Available at: <http://english-newsgroup-nordniger.blogspot.com/2007/10/massacre-in-north-of-niger.html> Last visit 05/14/2014

The rebels capitulated after several months of fighting and sought Qaddafi's mediation to end the rebellion without a signature of any peace agreement.

While fighting the rebels, the government simultaneously tried to address the grievances, in what can be seen as the "carrot" aspect of its policy toward the rebels. First, regarding decentralization, the Nigerien government issued a 2002 reform whereby 265 communes were created and preparations were made for local elections in 2004. Further reforms aiming at consolidating the process of decentralization were adopted in 2010 and implemented during the elections of 2011. While Niger had made significant progress in the decentralization process, Mali represented the model country that set the example for Francophone West Africa.<sup>66</sup> Despite the apparently high-level performance of Mali, however, the decentralization process in Niger was more consequential in terms of curtailing potential uprisings. In fact, Niger's process allowed for many rebel leaders to convert into local politicians, and many of them competed in the 2011 elections and were elected in their districts. Two examples of this phenomenon are Mohamed Anako, one of the leaders of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, who was elected the President of the Regional Assembly of Agadez, and Rhissa Feltou, a rebel leader and relative of the historic rebel figure Mano Dayak, who was elected mayor of Agadez. These former rebel leaders became legitimate authorities in their district. They have been instrumental in persuading young Tuaregs not to resort to violence in the form of rebellion or jihad, but rather to seek solutions to their grievances through political engagement.<sup>67</sup>

Second, the issue of Tuareg representation in the government was also addressed. Niger's government has increased the hiring of minorities—particularly Tuaregs—to high ranking positions in the administration. Tuaregs have occupied positions of prime minister, including the current Prime Minister Brigi Rafini, ministers, governors, and so on. President Issoufou himself is rumored to be of Tuareg descent, on his mother's side. Tuaregs and Arabs in Niger have a strong stake in Niger's economy, particularly in the transport, tourism, retail, and industry sectors.<sup>68</sup> In order to address the lack of distribution of dividends from uranium incomes and the lack of development projects, the government assigned 15% of the revenue from uranium to the region of Agadez and currently encourages mining industries to privilege locals in their hiring. In addition, after the crisis in northern Mali, the Nigerien government created a development plan called SDS (Strategy for Social Development) that aims to spend \$2.5 billion on development projects in the northern regions. This is considered to be a pro-active measure to prevent angry, unemployed youth from following in the violent footsteps of their peers in Mali.

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<sup>66</sup> Westerfield, Brian S. "Decentralization, counterinsurgency and conflict recurrence: a study of the Tuareg Uprisings in Mali and Niger," *Naval Postgraduate School*, Monterey, CA, December 2012, p19.

<sup>67</sup> ICG, *Ibid*, 31-32.

<sup>68</sup> Tuaregs and Arabs have large holdings on the transportation, manufacturing, and retail sectors. This has been repeatedly emphasized in my interviews.

Finally, the handling of the border following the Libyan crisis was also considered significant in helping Niger maintain its stability. During the Libyan Spring, an estimated 1,500 young Tuaregs were recruited in Niger to fight for Qaddafi. Some of them were promised up to \$6,500 payment in advance, as well as Libyan nationality, in the event of victory.<sup>69</sup> After the defeat of Qaddafi's army, these fighters fled back to Niger with heavy weapons. The Nigerien government closed its borders and multiplied military patrol in the area to prevent the infiltration of the returning fighters with their weapons. Reentry was granted on the condition of disarmament. Some fighters accepted the terms and gave up their weapons. Those who refused to surrender decided either to force their way into Niger's territory or continued to Mali where the government welcomed them without prior conditions. Many clashes between the Nigerien army and the Tuareg fighters returning from Libya were reported between June and December 2011. As a result of its firm stance, Niger government significantly reduced the influx of combatants and arms to Niger as compared to what was seen in Mali.

In brief, Niger exhibits several factors of resilience that have so far helped it to maintain its stability. Those factors are: (1) a long history of secularized Islam that reduces the chance of the emergence of an indigenous radical movements like Boko Haram (2) a fairly structured and operational military that has proven effective in various combat zones in Niger as well as outside of Niger, and (3) a relatively successful handling of the Tuareg rebellions by the use of a stick and carrot policy. While these factors of resilience have proven so far effective in maintaining Niger's stability, it is worthwhile to mention that Niger is far from being immune to the outbreak of Islamic insurgency inside its territories. In the following section, I point to the level of vulnerability posed by the threats surrounding Niger.

## **Vulnerability**

*The Threat Posed by Boko Haram.* The populations of southern Niger share many of the same sociocultural characteristics with those of Northern Nigeria. Throughout history, the flow of ideas—particularly religious currents from Northern Nigeria—has shaped the religious configuration of southern Niger. But, while religious currents in southern Niger, such as Qabalu, Izala, Kala Kato, and more recently Boko Haram's ideology, originated from Northern Nigeria, Niger has avoided the violent aspects of most of these movements. In 2005, mosques in Diffa and Maradi propagated Boko Haram's ideology. But these mosques disappeared after the bad press that the group received, and following the tightening of security measures against the burgeoning groups in Niger. While formal mosques, groups, or cells seem to not exist in Niger, the group is still present through the spread of its

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<sup>69</sup> AFP, « Libye : témoignages de "mercenaires" Touaregs de Kaddafi rentrés au Niger, » *Jeune Afrique*, 9 September 2011. Available at : <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/DEPAFP20110904211545>. Last visited on 14 May 2014.

ideology, the infiltration of its combatants into Niger's territory, and the recruitment of many Nigeriens to fight in Nigeria.

Boko Haram's ideology spreads via the use of new technologies. The preachings of Muhamad Yusuf are digitized and made accessible in the form of DVDs, CDs, and cassette tapes.<sup>70</sup> Young people also download them on YouTube and share them with one another via cellphone and Bluetooth. Niger's authorities have made it illegal to sell Boko Haram's preaching, particularly in the southern part of the country. In Zinder, police officers regularly patrol public places, check people's cellphones, and arrest those found with Boko Haram preaching.<sup>71</sup>

Debates about Boko Haram, however, are far from taboo. Issues related to Boko Haram are rather frequently and passionately discussed in public spaces: in the *fadas* or *palais* where young people socialize while drinking tea, in mosques, religious schools, and on local radios daily broadcasts. While the majority opposes Boko Haram and its extremist and violent ideology, there exists a small number of people who are sympathetic to the group. Those who oppose the group argue against its use of violence and reject their argument that modern schooling is religiously prohibited (*haram*). The sympathizers, however, deny the claim that Boko Haram prohibits the entire modern school system. They argue that the group only condemns practices and teachings in the modern school system that contradict the teachings of the Islamic religion (such as mixing boys and girls, or teaching the theory of evolution). They criticize the tendency to overemphasize the controversy over modern schooling practices; this, they argue, overshadows the fundamental objective of Boko Haram, which is overthrowing the corrupt and oppressive secular state system and substituting it for sharia rule. This is a powerful argument that echoes favorably in the ears of unemployed youth who spend a significant amount of their time under the shadows of trees, drinking tea and condemning the government for its inaction in combatting unemployment. Many youths wholly reject the state government. The supporters of Boko Haram tend to be young—in their twenties and thirties—and educated in the traditional Koranic school called *makaranta*. The tension between this segment of the population and the modern elite educated in French schools has historical roots. It goes back to the colonial era, when colonizers established new schools that supplanted the traditional *makaranta*. The graduates of these schools were the pre-colonial elites who never accepted their continuous marginalization in favor of the Francophone elites that came with colonialism and continued under the post-colonial state system. Movements like Boko Haram offer

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<sup>70</sup> Muhamad Yusuf is the founding father and spiritual leader of Boko Haram. He was killed in 2009 during a clash between his group and the Nigerian army. His preachings, recorded in Hausa language are widespread in Niger and Northern Nigeria.

<sup>71</sup> Focus group with members of a *fada* in Zinder, June, 2013.

graduates of traditional makaranta school a new opportunity to regain the power and privileges that they lost a century ago thanks to colonialism.<sup>72</sup>

*The Threat Posed by AQIM.* Most of the analyses on the security threat in Niger suggest that if AQIM were to invade Niger, a situation similar to that of Mali would unfold. The assumption is that if local cells of the Sahelien jihadi groups are established in Niger, they would likely emerge out of the networks established by previous rebellions or be created by former Tuareg rebels, and would very likely settle in the mountains of Aïr. There is little doubt that Islamic insurgency may break out at any time in northern Niger. Nevertheless, the likelihood that it receives strong support among the Tuareg communities in Niger is small for three reasons: first, in general terms, Tuareg communities are less infiltrated by salafist ideas compared to the other communities in Niger. Contrary to northern Mali, where many Tuaregs in the north were radicalized through the Tabligh movement, there has not been any phenomenon of radicalization among the Tuareg communities in Niger. Second, the negative experience of the MNLA with the jihadists in northern Mali, the destructiveness of the military intervention, and the negative campaign against jihadism and radicalization have significantly reduced the chance that an Islamic insurgency would be able to gain widespread support among the Tuareg communities. Third, the continued efforts of the Nigerien government to address most of the grievances that motivate rebellions—though with only relative success—discourage belligerent discourse while encouraging political expression and the peaceful settlement of discontents.

Of course, it is important to also mention that Islamic insurgency cells do not necessarily rely on widespread support for their emergence. There is only need for a few radicalized people and a charismatic leader to constitute a jihadist cell that would be effective in perpetrating attacks. The survival and development of such cells, however, would depend on how well integrated it is in the local community.

AQIM constitutes a major security threat to Niger as evidenced by the above-described attacks and kidnappings. It has also recruited Nigeriens into its militia. Abdourahmane Al-Nigeri, whose martial name is Abu Dujana, is one such Nigerien. He commanded the group that perpetrated the attack of In-Amenas in Algeria.<sup>73</sup> AQIM has also collaborated with bandits in the kidnapping of westerners in Niger and in disposing weapons caches in the Sahara desert. According to the International Crisis Group, AQIM has tried unsuccessfully—so far—to recruit a charismatic leader that will establish the cell.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Focus group with members of a *fada* in Zinder June, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Bill Roggio, “Nigerien Jihadist identified as commander of Algerian hostage operation,” *The Long War Journal*, 18 January 2013. Available at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/nigerien\\_jihadist\\_id.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/nigerien_jihadist_id.php). Last visited on 14 May 2014.

<sup>74</sup> ICG, *Ibid.* p40.

*The Threat Posed by MUJOA.* The jihadist group MUJOA has been a constant threat to Niger for two major reasons. First, its base, Gao, is very close to major cities in Niger. Gao is in fact three times closer to Niamey than to Bamako. Second, because of the group's inclusive strategy of recruitment that appeals to both black and white ethnic groups in the Sahel, MUJOA has attracted many Nigeriens since the early days of its creation. In addition to individuals like Bilal Hicham who joined the movement on their own, hundreds of young Fulani from the Tillabery region (on the border with Mali) also pledged allegiance to the movement.<sup>75</sup> While a few of these young men may have joined the movement due to their belief in the jihadist ideology, the majority belong to local self-defense militias that allied with the movement in order to comply with pre-existing tribal alliances and covenants of protection and security.<sup>76</sup> In many cases, the decision to join MUJOA was not an individual decision but a collective decision, made by notables of the Fulani community who sought protection from the growing influence of their Tuareg rivals (whom they accused of assault and theft of cattle).<sup>77</sup> After the military intervention, these young fighters crossed the border and joined their families in northern Tillabery. There is a fear that they may constitute a dormant cell of MUJOA that could be activated in order to stage attacks in Niger. Beyond the mere threat of insurrection, MUJOA has been involved in each of the three recent attacks perpetrated on Nigerien soil: the suicide attack against a military barracks in Agadez, the attack against the uranium mining company in Arlit—both in May 2013—and the June 2013 prison break in Niamey.

## **Conclusion**

Niger is afflicted by structural weaknesses that produce a continuous political and institutional instability. This instability ultimately results in everything from military coups, deep socioeconomic distress that translates into chronic food insecurity, unemployment, political contention, and recurrent Tuareg rebellions that perpetuate a climate of insecurity in the northern part of the country. This context of vulnerability became exacerbated with the outbreak of Islamic insurgencies in Nigeria, Libya, Algeria, and Mali, where Boko Haram, Ansar al-Sharia, AQIM, and MUJOA operate, respectively. Yet despite its structural weaknesses and the spread of violence along its borders, Niger appears unexpectedly resilient. Contrary to the other frontline countries, Niger has, in fact, avoided the emergence of indigenous cells of jihadist groups within its territory, and

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<sup>75</sup> The region of Tillabery is constantly shaken by communitarian conflicts. One of these conflicts opposes the transhumant pastoralists—in majority Fulani—on the one hand, and sedentary farmers—in majority Songhai—on the other hand, regarding the right of the former to graze animals in the latter's land. Another conflict opposes Fulani herders to young Tuareg whom the former accuse of theft of cattle. These are century-long conflicts that flare up quite regularly and they have generated alliances that feed into the current crisis. For instance, many Nigerien Fulani are suspected to have joined MUJOA out of fear of the consequence of their Tuareg rival's rising power (Interview with M.A, an official at the Niger Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Niamey, July 2013).

<sup>76</sup> Interview with a M.S., a civil society activist, in Niamey July, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with M.A, an official at the Niger Ministry of Foreign Affaire in Niamey, July 2013.

prevented the occupation of its territory by such groups. The impact of the crisis on Niger security is limited to sporadic attacks and kidnapping for ransom, while politically, the occupation of northern Mali by the jihadists has resulted in tense debates between the government, political parties, civil society groups, and Islamic leaders. This paper has argued that Niger's unexpected performance should be credited to the country's secularized Islam, its fairly operational and organized military, and the experience of handling Tuareg insurgencies, which allowed Niger's government to maintain tight control over the northern regions.

While there are good reasons to celebrate Niger's resilience in the face of the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic insurgency, it is also important to point to the enormous and diverse security challenges that continue to face Niger today. They include (1) the threat of an outbreak of Islamic insurgencies either in the southern and southeastern regions of Zinder, Maradi, and Diffa, which are very influenced by the activism of Boko Haram, or in the western and northern regions, namely Tillabery, Tahoua, and Agadez, where both MUJOA and AQIM operate and maintain alliance with the local tribes; (2) the illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons, cigarettes, and migrants that is flourishing in the Sahara and that involves both powerful businessmen and young adventurous traffickers, particularly among the Arab, Tuareg, and Toubou communities; (3) a growing anti-government sentiment particularly among youths that is fueled by the failure of the state to deliver adequate social services and create job opportunities; and (4) a noticeable Islamic revival that appears through increasingly pious behavior, the appearance of an active Islamic civil society, and the call for the establishment of the sharia, particularly by salafist groups. These challenges are rooted structurally in the political, economic, and cultural background of the country.

And finally, while the security threat is real and pressing in Niger, it should not be overrated, or stressed above some of the more structural challenges surveyed above. The threat of spillover of the Islamic insurgency is, in fact, a matter of concern in Niger insofar as it affects a population that is already weakened by a fragile socioeconomic and political context.