

# Comprehending the lull : Recovering Niger's north Tillabery

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**What's new:** Niger's North Tillabery, for years one of the Sahel's deadliest zones as battles between Nigerien defense and security forces and the Islamic State Sahel Province tugged border communities into tit-for-tat hostilities, has experienced significantly lower levels of violence over the past year.

**Why it's relevant:** An evolving combination of security and dialogue measures from Nigerien authorities has made real advances here, weakening ISS' grip, strengthening border security, reducing intercommunal tensions, and helping internally displaced persons return. As rural clashes drag central Sahel states deeper into conflict, Niger's approach in North Tillabery could present a vital new paradigm.

# INTRODUCTION

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Between 2018 and 2021, Niger's North Tillabery was one of the central Sahel's deadliest zones, ensnared in an escalatory cycle of violence. The Sahelian Islamic State chapter, deftly exploiting local tensions and tapping into rural marginalization and neglect, put down roots there and ramped up recruitment.<sup>1</sup> State efforts to arrest the group's advance performed feebly: dialogue efforts stalled, military campaigns backfired, and communities took up arms to defend themselves. Hundreds were killed and more than 100,000 displaced.

And then, in 2022, rare signs of recovery emerged. As attacks on civilians and defense and security forces (FDS) plummeted, defense forces seemed to perform better at protecting civilians without relying on communal proxies, and talks with insurgents began to bear fruit. In rural communes Banibangou and Inates, improved security conditions brought new hopes and efforts for IDPs to return home. As similarly embattled zones in the central Sahel mostly slide deeper into disorder, the apparent stabilization of North Tillabery, while still in early stages, merits a close, careful look. By analyzing the factors that have helped slow or arrest cycles of violence, this policy brief aims to illuminate pathways for preserving and consolidating real gains. Lessons learned could provide valuable guidance for authorities in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso as well as for foreign partners, as these seek to stabilize zones trapped in similar cycles.

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1 In March 2022, the Islamic State central organization declared the Islamic State Sahel Province, active primarily in the Liptako-Gourma area and along the Mali-Niger border, separate from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This group will be referred to as IS or IS Sahel throughout this report.

## a) Why Crisis Escalated in North Tillabery

North Tillabery lies along the Mali border zone, just south of Mali's Menaka region, stretching from Ayorou commune east of the Niger River to Abala commune west of Tahoua, and hosts multiple farming and herding communities, including the Djerma, Peul, Tuareg, and Daosahak. In recent decades, tensions have risen between these groups, as population growth and expansion of chiefly Djerma farming communities intensified competition with nomadic pastoralists over land and water rights. When Sahelian Islamic State fighters tapped into these tensions between 2015 and 2018, Nigerien political authorities and security forces struggled to formulate an appropriate response.

In 2016, then-Interior Minister Mohamed Bazoum dispatched emissaries to open talks with the leadership of the local Islamic State chapter. As this effort faltered, Niger opted for a more hardline approach. Niger authorized and lent logistical support to Malian Daosahak- and Tuareg-community armed groups the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and Self-Defense Group for Imghad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA) to carry out joint offensives with air support from French military forces on its side of the border.<sup>2</sup>

Aiming to curb militants' reach, these border zone offensives, which continued until a disastrous October 2018 strike

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2 R. Carayol, "A la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l'alliance coupable de l'armée française", *Mediapart*, 29 Nov 2018.

on a Peul baptism killed three women and a four-month-old, inadvertently drove a surge in their numbers. Strikes disproportionately targeted Peul civilians, intensifying communal tensions and driving up recruitment for the Islamic State, which offered weapons, training, and protection to young men from border-based communities that were increasingly under attack.<sup>3</sup>

New recruitment not only boosted the overall number of IS fighters; it also allowed IS, which since 2015 had built inroads chiefly among Toleebe and Djelgobe (Peul) recruits from North Tillabery, to build networks within the Daosahak, Tuareg, and Djerma communities. In rural communes such as Tingara, for instance, ISS, which draws effectively on local grievances including mounting land and political pressures on pastoralists and scissions between communities with competing land claims, was able to diversify its leadership by effectively exploiting a longstanding dispute between villages to recruit more Djerma.

In this way, the militant group anchored itself within North Tillabery, developing a sophisticated rural intelligence network that allowed it to erode state authority in the troubled area. Fighters hacked away at the fragile links between the state and rural residents, intimidating or murdering local leaders who collaborated with the state, challenging outdated political, communal, and economic hierarchies, and applying heavy pressure to Nigerien

security forces.<sup>4</sup> Throughout 2019, although community leaders and the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) led local dialogue initiatives aiming to unravel and address some of the political and communal grievances driving up militancy, these struggled to make gains.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict continued to scale up. In December 2019 and January 2020, IS waged its most sophisticated attacks yet on Nigerien military targets in North Tillabery, killing an estimated 200 stationed in Inates and Cinegodrar. Security forces responded with violent attacks against civilians, executing at least 71 unarmed civilians in Inates between March and April of 2020 and burying them in six mass graves.<sup>6</sup> By 2021, as the country's attention turned towards a high-stakes, contentious round of presidential and legislative elections, rural communities were more exposed than ever and under attack on all sides.

The next phase in the conflict was the deadliest yet. As the state lost ground, with state security forces retreating from key border outposts in the wake of the killings in Inates and Cinegodrar, terrified residents fled. From 2019 to 2021, the number of internally displaced persons

3 "Sidelineing the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery", *Crisis Group Africa Report No. 289*, 03 June 2020.

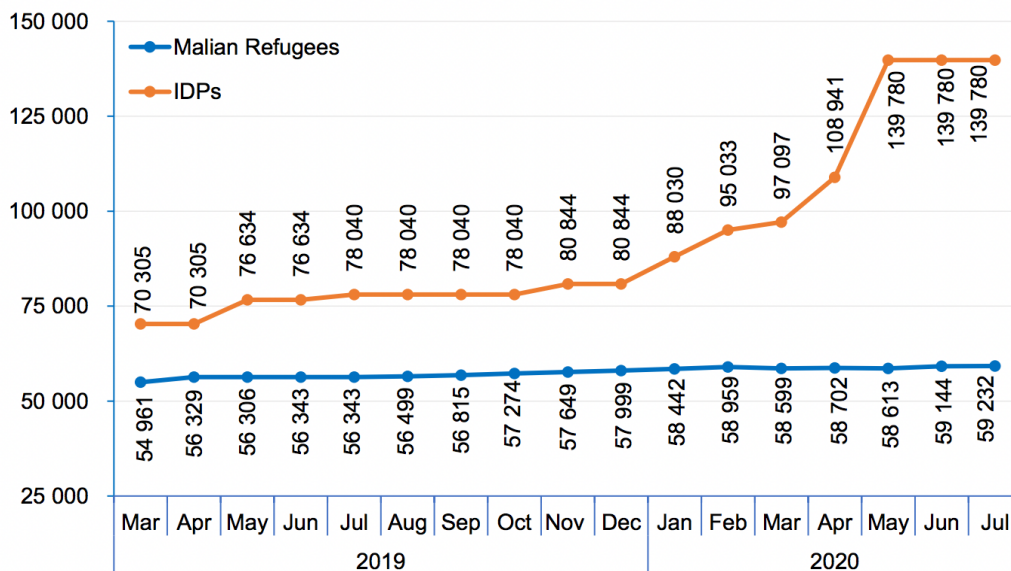
4 R. Idrissa & B. McGann, "Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border", *RESOLVE Network*, April 2021.

5 These included a 2019 forum in Banibangou hosted by the HACP intended to address Peul grievances, including with a special recruitment, and an initiative led by local authorities to broker peace between Daosahak and Peul communities in Abala.

6 "Sahel: End Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations", *Human Rights Watch*, 13 Feb 2021.

in Tillabery rose from 79,412 to 100,486.<sup>7</sup> Others tried their hand at self-defense. At a time when Mali and Burkina Faso were increasingly relying on communal militias as security proxies, Niger opted for restraint, having learned from the MSA/GATIA raids that short-term solutions can carry heavy long-term costs. State authorities could hardly prevent exposed villagers from defending themselves, but they did try to effectively integrate locals into the national security response. The HACP launched special recruitment programs to bring young men from the border zone into the National Guard. With time, it was hoped, this would address marginalization grievances among the Peul minority and improve intelligence, communications, and community relations between the FDS and border communities.<sup>8</sup>

In late 2020, multiple communes witnessed the rise of fledgling movements to arm and train local youths with hunting rifles, bows, and machetes. On January 2, 2021, Islamic State militants raided the villages of Tchomabangou and Zaroumdareye (Tondikiwindi), hunting down and killing 102 people, nearly all of them Djerma men and boys.<sup>9</sup> According to residents, those villagers' coalescing self-defense efforts, which included refusing to pay zakat, organizing into armed groups, and attacking a Peul herder, were the main factors precipitating the attacks. Similar attacks soon followed in Banibangou and Tilia (Tahoua Region), both sites where communal militias were emergent.



Credit: HCR

7 "Niger - Maradi, Tahoua, Tillaberi - Evaluation de villages 1 (3 avril - 31 mai 2021)", IOM Global Data Institute Displacement Tracking Matrix, <https://rb.gy/a33qe6>.

8 Author interviews, Niamey, 2019.

9 "Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's Emerging Communal Crisis", Crisis Group Africa Report No. 172, 28 May 2021.

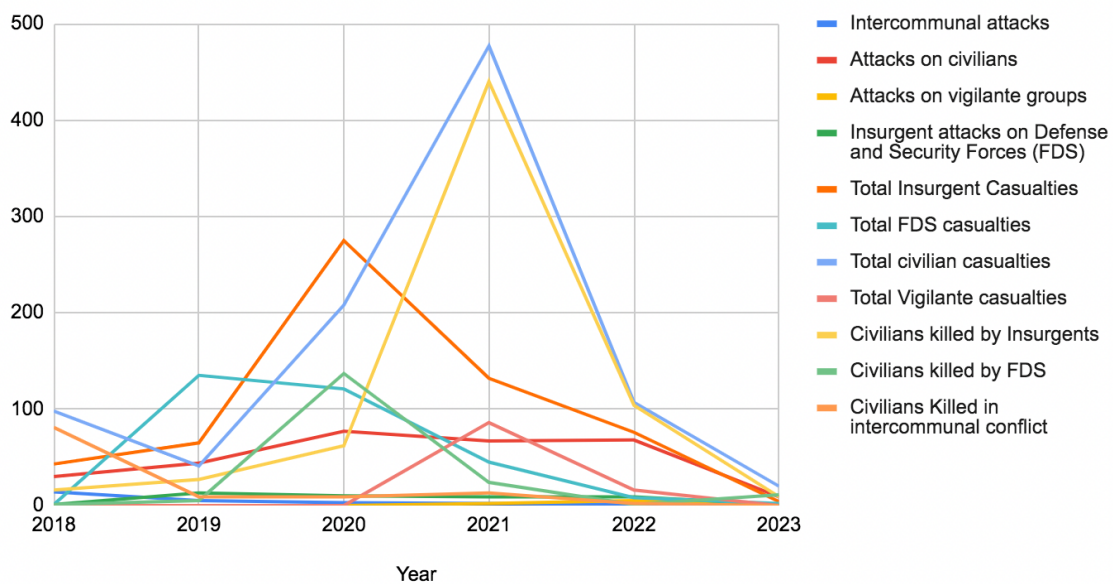
## b) Comprehending the Lull

Given the rapid, sweeping deterioration of the conflict between 2018 and 2021, an apparent reversal observable in data charted over the course of 2022 merits a closer look. A relative lull has set in since then, lowering violence levels against military, civilian, and communal targets. This has in turn raised cautious hopes for recovery, amid outreach involving inter-communal mediation and dialogue efforts with jihadist groups, improving relations between security forces and residents of North Tillabery, and the return of some displaced populations, notably including Peul pastoralists.

From 2021 to 2022, violence against civilians in North Tillabery dropped by nearly 80 per cent, plummeting from a 2021 spike of 477 casualties (most of them killed by insurgents) to 107 in 2022. Fighting between FDS and ISS tapered off in 2021; as ISS Focused more on striking local vigilante groups, the number of FDS killed in North Tillabery dropped down from an average of 100 FDS killed in North Tillabery per year in 2019, 2020, and 2021, to just 8 in 2022.

According to community leaders and residents, this apparent respite from fighting between ISS and the Nigerian FDS amounts to a rare glimmer of relief for North Tillabery's border communities, who have been caught in the crossfires of Niger's Western-backed battle with extremists.<sup>10</sup>

Overview of violence in Northern Tillabery from 2018 to 2023



Credit : Emma Ciccarella

10 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

It is too early, and there are too many variables, to judge whether this lull may be - as the term implies - a temporary improvement, or whether it could serve as a foundation for real progress towards mending the torn social fabric of North Tillabery. Some factors behind de-escalation have relieved some of the pressure on Niger by chance, including opportune circumstances relating to the Islamic State's shifting structure and attentions. Other factors are the fruits of careful efforts and coordination between state and local authorities, and political and security approaches, including an early round of dividends on investments in local and national security and dialogue initiatives. Understanding the role of these strategic choices in providing real, if as yet relatively untested, respite for this embattled border zone is paramount for approaching conflict resolution in the central Sahel.

## I. DEFENDING NORTH TILLABERY

Over the course of 2022, the Sahelian Islamic State chapter operating along the Mali-Niger border experienced significant transitions. When France redeployed troops Mali-based troops to Niger, an emerging security vacuum in Mali's Menaka region attracted militants' attention to new opportunities there; meanwhile, targeted assassinations and strikes on both sides of the border took out top foreign and local leaders. Nigerien security forces, benefiting from foreign support and a strengthened regional

security posture, worked to professionalize their security response and improve relations with locals.

As French forces left Mali in the first half of 2022, ISS shifted its attentions towards the Malian side of the shared border.<sup>11</sup> By July 2022, 300 soldiers from Operation Barkhane had redeployed to a military base in Ouallam, the centre of counter-terrorist operations in North Tillabery. Bruised by losses incurred under their leadership of counter-terrorism efforts in Mali and their abrupt expulsion from that country, French forces vowed to play a more discreet, supporting role for Nigerien Armed Forces in joint operations.<sup>12</sup> Nigerien security sources there say French air support and joint ground-air campaigns have significantly fortified Nigerien defensive capabilities against ISS.<sup>13</sup>

Niger further strengthened its defensive posture in North Tillabery during this period with measures to refine security operations and work better with residents. Security sources cited improvements in equipment, training, and tactical preparedness, including the deployment of armored vehicles among certain patrol units that had previously lacked them, and the integration of new methods for guarding patrols against ISS's sophisticated tactics such as IED ambushes.<sup>14</sup>

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11 W. Nasr, "How the Wagner Group is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel", *CTC Sentinel*, Nov/Dec 2022, Vol. 15, Issue 11.

12 "Après son retrait total du Mali, l'armée française se redéploie au Niger," *TF1*, 16 August 2022.

13 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

14 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

In addition, following an attempted coup d'état in March 2021 ahead of President Bazoum's inauguration, a purge of the military hierarchy rebalanced relations between political and military elites.<sup>15</sup> The new hierarchy introduced more political oversight of military operations in North Tillabery, according to local authorities and Peul community leaders, who praised an awareness-raising campaign led by the Presidency and Military High Command that they said had helped reduce incidents of violence by security forces against civilians and improve relations between FDS and rural residents.<sup>16</sup> In Tahoua and Tilia, increased cooperation between state authorities, local informants, and armed groups helped break up ISS intelligence networks and further weaken its grasp on the eastern flank.

Nevertheless, in at least one area in North Tillabery, as well as in neighboring Tahoua region to the east, complex security challenges remained, relating to residents' organizing into self-defense groups.<sup>17</sup> While Niger does not officially support or cooperate with communal militias, yet in practice, authorities have at times simply turned a blind eye. In 2021, Oumarou Bobo, Mayor of Banibangou, the majority-Djerma town and rural commune in northern Ouallam, himself a retired National Guard, organized Djerma villagers into a "vigilante committee", equipping

willing men with light arms and training.<sup>18</sup> The group's targeted harassment of Peul herders and villagers pushed these out of the commune. In November 2021, as Bobo led his men in an offensive to root out militants, they fell into an ambush at Dabdab. He was killed in combat along with more than 60 of his men. The group remains armed.

In 2022, self-defense groups grounded in Tuareg communities were also active in Tilia and Tahoua. These groups collaborate with local and state officials and share intelligence, even as their communal affiliations prolong and enflame inter-communal tensions.<sup>19</sup> This can jeopardize dialogue efforts, pitting the objectives of national policies banning communal militias and prioritizing dialogue with jihadists against the realities of local practices.

Following the 2021 political transition hailed as "Niger's first-ever peaceful and democratic transfer of power since independence", Niger refined its security posture in North Tillabery.<sup>20</sup> At this time, ISS was also repositioning, pushing deeper westward into the Malian interior with a new offensive, leaving its rear base along the border with Niger more exposed.

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15 Upwards of 60 military officers, including three generals, were purged from the armed forces. KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

16 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

17 The expansion of these groups is aggravating conditions of insecurity in the central Sahel. M. Pellerin, "Les groupes d'auto-défense, pompiers pyromanes du Sahel", *IFRI*, Dec 2022.

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18 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023. In the 1990s, Bobo occupied an administrative post and headed disarmament efforts for the Peul militia being deactivated at that time. Since then, Peul communities have perceived him as prejudiced and determined to eliminate them from the commune.

19 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

20 "Ensuring the sustainability of democratic achievements throughout the political transition in Niger", *Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF)*, 26 Sept 2022.



By the time French forces completed their withdrawal from Mali in August 2022, ISS was threatening or had already occupied posts in the vast northeastern regions of Gao and Menaka. There, following a clash with the Daosahak Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA-D) group, the group and its affiliates attacked dozens of villages and massacred scores of civilians, mainly targeting Tuareg and Daosahak groups.<sup>21</sup> This opened a new phase of contestation between ISS and its jihadist rival, the Sahelian al-Qaeda branch Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), in which ISS inflicted heavy losses on JNIM and returned to areas it had been pushing out of by JNIM in previous fighting in 2020.<sup>22</sup> The fighting would wear down both rivals, although the speed and success of the ISS offensive came as a surprise to some observers who habitually underestimate the organization and capacities of ISS.

Energized by new gains, but with its attentions increasingly focused on Mali and a powerful new opposing coalition, ISS was in the throes of a profound transition of leadership. In 2021, the group lost its two most prominent foreign ideological directors, ISS founder and chief Abou Walid al-Sahraoui (killed in a French strike August 2021) and Abdelhakim al-Sahraoui (killed in unconfirmed circumstances in May 2021). Throughout 2022, as ISS fought on two fronts, the group sustained heavy losses of local, operational commanders - many of them Peul natives of North Tillabery. These included Ousmane Illiasou

Djibou (Petit Chapori), who was reported killed in November 2022, along with Moussa Moumouni, and leaders known as Ba Oudi and Tchoungel.<sup>23</sup> A handful of surviving Peul commanders from North Tillabery went into hiding in Mali, according to Nigerien security sources.<sup>24</sup>

## II. "OUTSTRETCHED HAND": THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE STRATEGIES IN RECOVERY

Improvements to Nigerien defense capabilities along the Malian border and the good fortune of ISS opting to direct its attentions towards the Malian side of the border are significant developments, but only partially explain the recovery in North Tillabery. In conjunction, state and local policies have worked to build a framework for conflict resolution, notably around initiating talks with jihadist insurgents and community reconciliation.

### a) National dialogue strategy

In the first half of 2022, President Bazoum visited conflict-hit and displaced communities in the triborder area, vowing with an "outstretched hand" policy to reintegrate militants who renounced violence.<sup>25</sup> Behind the scenes, national organs were launching multiple dialogue

21 "Mali: Coordinated Massacres by Islamist Armed Groups", *HRW*, 27 Oct 2022.

22 "Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province", *ACLED*, 13 Jan 2023.

23 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

24 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

25 «S'ils renoncent au terrorisme, s'ils renoncent à la violence (...) ils vont être réinsérés dans la société, ils vont l'être économiquement aussi. Voilà l'offre que je leur ai faite depuis longtemps sur laquelle je reste et je souhaite qu'ils m'entendent,» the head of state vowed in a meeting with communities in the triborder area. "Niger: Mohamed Bazoum 'tend la main' aux chefs djihadistes", *TV5 Monde*, 3 June 2022.

tracks to make good on this promise. A certain strategic ambiguity around Niger's aims in entering into these talks, the substance of which (authorities hint) ranges from renditions to more substantial reform-oriented negotiations, has provided cover for Nigerien mediators to explore different paths and a screen against scrutiny from foreign actors accustomed to redlining negotiations with terrorists.<sup>26</sup> Whereas France repeatedly ruled out talks with jihadists in Mali, it has opted for more of a backseat role in terms of not interfering with Nigerien strategies for pursuing dialogue.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, according to actors spearheading different dialogue tracks, a ceasefire between Niger and ISS has helped build an environment more propitious for negotiations.<sup>28</sup> Security improvements in defending the Nigerien side of the shared border have played a crucial role in demonstrating Niger's preparedness to uphold this agreement with force as necessary, as ISS fighters that do make incursions are more likely to be met with airstrikes and aggressive pursuit.

An HACP-led initiative, with support from foreign partners, has focused on winning back defectors, partly inspired by similar efforts with Boko Haram defectors in Diffa region.<sup>29</sup> The offer, spread in direct talks and via militants' communities and family

members, is geared towards convincing local commanders to return with their fighters, as well as appealing to rank-and-file members. Defectors are debriefed by intelligence officers and then housed with their families, including wives and children. Some go on to redeploy against the group, while others are given employment permits and assistance. Officials say the initiative quickly yielded positive results, particularly among a younger generation of local commanders who only joined ISS in the 2018 recruitment surge.<sup>30</sup>

The defector program is being touted as a key axis of the national outreach. In addition to pulling fighters off the battlefield, the defector program helpfully also offers a shortcut for accelerating justice processes for hundreds of detainees who are held without charges and could have their files cleared in front of communities, helping to build trust and reconcile communities in the longer term and building trust in the justice system.<sup>31</sup> But some community leaders and mediators are skeptical of the program's claims. Many with close knowledge of the group questioned how these defectors were vetted, and suspected many to be opportunist fabrications rather than hardcore ISS fighters, or even supporters.<sup>32</sup>

In a separate yet parallel dialogue track, since 2021, a special Committee of largely Peul emissaries under the leadership of the Interior Minister has concentrated on outreach, mainly to local Peul commanders. Talks are ongoing and

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26 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

27 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

28 Multiple dialogue actors made reference to the existence of a ceasefire. Some dated this ceasefire to January 2020, when the last significant ISS attack on Nigerien security forces occurred, while others traced it back to July 2021, when ISS sent a delegation of local commanders to speak with Nigerien authorities. KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

29 For more on these efforts, see J. Ella Abatan & R. Hoinathy, "Reussir Goudoumaria : les ex-associés de Boko Haram se réintègrent-ils?" *ISS*, 8 Dec 2021.

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30 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

31 KAS phone interview, Jan 2023.

32 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

emissaries claim that, while they have high-level access on both sides, it is far too soon to claim success and point to concrete results.<sup>33</sup> Early indicators suggest there is a positive environment for such talks. First, emissaries have the high-level support of political officials who tend to frame militants' goals not as a radical 'forever war' terrorist agenda, but rather as achievable, political objectives.<sup>34</sup> These include freeing Peul prisoners who have been arbitrarily arrested, improving conditions for Peul communities, disarming communal militias, and spearheading land management and administrative reforms in contested areas. As for militants, Niger's apparent willingness to enter into negotiations on these issues suggests good faith, as does its resistance to arming and supporting communal militias; however, talks have faltered before, and trust-building measures are needed.

To that effect, in the early months of 2022, Niger released a group of prisoners held on terrorism charges at the high-security prison at Koutikala. These included, according to varying accounts, between three and eight local ISS chiefs and at least a dozen other men who had been arbitrarily arrested in over-zealous counter-terror sweeps and denunciations that tended to target rural residents and Peul in particular.<sup>35</sup> Their release came as a confidence-building measure to boost a new round of talks led by the newly designated Committee emissaries, dispatched to reach out to community

33 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

34 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

35 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

leaders in Abala, Ayorou, Torodi, and Tera. Beyond that, several of the detainees, pledging to serve as mediators with ISS upon their release, were perceived as useful assets within the overall strategy of outreach to ISS command.

This measure has yielded uneven, sometimes risky, results. ISS killed one detainee who attempted to serve as an intermediary between Nigerien authorities and ISS shortly after his release, demonstrating the ongoing risks mediators face and signaling to Niger that the group was not yet ready to negotiate. Furthermore, most of the freed detainees were held on suspicion, false information, and denunciations, with no legal basis to bring charges against them.<sup>36</sup> The arbitrary nature of these arrests undermines the purported good faith and generosity of such releases.

Efforts to reconcile communities have comprised a final, and no less vital, component of dialogue strategies to stabilize North Tillabery. In January 2023, Peul and Djerma communities in Banibangou department signed a local peace agreement, hailed as the first large-scale intercommunal forum in North Tillabery in recent memory.<sup>37</sup> Local

36 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

37 While the signature took place in the context of the national outreach strategy, it was the fruit of a mediation process first facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in May 2021. Community and religious leaders as well as representatives of women, youth, and self-defense groups all contributed to the process. Signatory parties pledged to work together to put an end to livestock theft and to restore seized livestock to their rightful owners, to stop associating communities with armed groups, to prevent reprisal attacks against civilians in the vent of attacks by armed groups, to support free circulation of individuals and

agreements like this one, and similar communal peace deals negotiated by local authorities in Abala in recent years between Peul and Daosahak communities, have a key role to play in advancing national dialogue strategies. In particular, such processes provide a cover and a forum for hashing out sensitive issues such as disarming communal armed groups and addressing core frustrations, which relate not only to insecurity but also to a lack of infrastructure and schooling, biased justice systems, and harassment and marginalization of communities, in the presence of high-ranking state officials such as the Interior Minister.<sup>38</sup> Disarming the Banibangou militia remains a high priority for Peul participants and international observers.

More immediately, local agreements can help stabilize local economies. In the case of Banibangou, fighting between Djerma and Peul communities had taken a serious economic toll on the whole department: farmers could not harvest crops for two years, while herders were prevented from carrying out customary transhumance and selling cattle in local markets.<sup>39</sup> In anticipation of the signature of the agreement, Peul herders had already begun to return to Banibangou in January 2023, albeit warily and to more populous

areas: many were reluctant to return to camps for fear of being targeted by FDS or the Djerma militia.<sup>40</sup> In March 2023, at an HACP-hosted forum in Ayerou, authorities assured IDPs from Inatès that authorities are close to securing the conditions for their safe and definitive return.

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access to weekly markets for all communities within the specified zone, and to help displaced villagers' peaceful return. "Accord de paix entre communautés du département de Banibangou," Banibangou, 21 Jan 2023.

38 While ISS was not officially a part of the deal, signatories say it could only have progressed to fruition with the tacit agreement of the group, while local authorities' signatures and in the case of the Banibangou forum, the attendance of the Interior Minister, showcase formal support from the state.

39 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

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40 One community leader even suggested what was being hailed as a "return" may be more related to annual patterns for pastoralists who traditionally return to the Nigerien side of the border from November through July. KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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As Mali and Burkina Faso double down on counter-terror campaigns with disastrous results, outsourcing operations to foreign mercenaries and communal militias, President Bazoum's outreach strategy represents a rare exception to troubling regional trends. Niger's strategy merits recognition for helping to de-escalate and begin to unravel the factors driving violence in North Tillabery. Regional security actors, including the military rulers in Mali and Burkina as well as foreign partners such as France, the European Union and member states, and the United States, would be well-advised to study this approach and heed the efficient use of non-military means in pursuing peace.

Nigerien authorities are working to refine a careful combination of security measures aimed at protecting civilians and dialogue initiatives addressed to local ISS commanders as well as rank-and-file. These come within the framework of a national outreach strategy backed by real political capital. The region remains extremely fragile, however, and could easily tip back into volatility. Maintaining and continuing to refine these measures could mean the difference between losing North Tillabery to a worse spiral of violence in the event of a new flare-up and shielding it from a new outbreak.

On February 10, militants attacked a Nigerien military unit patrolling the Malian border in northwest Banibangou near Intagamey (Ouallam department), killing at least 17 soldiers, according to the Nigerien Defense Ministry, and injuring 13 more. Images distributed by ISS, which claimed responsibility for the attack, showed

soldiers captured alive and summarily executed, while the group claimed a much higher death toll of 35. The attack demonstrates how high the threat remains along the Malian border, and shows the FDS' renewed dedication to securing the border, after pulling back in recent years under heavy pressure from militants. Coming weeks after the signature of the Banibangou agreement, which was broadly understood to have buy-in from ISS, the attack could indicate dissent within the ranks of ISS over some factions' openness to pursuing negotiations and local ceasefires, and may represent an effort to sabotage such steps.

The next steps are crucial. Security and dialogue officials should stay the course. In this highly charged atmosphere, trust-building measures are more important than ever. Multi-track dialogue processes are progressing, albeit slowly, unevenly, and without a high degree of coordination. Furthermore, while outreach initiatives proliferated in the first half of 2022, there seemed to be a drop in momentum in the second half.<sup>41</sup> Building on these soon is essential to safeguarding gains. For Nigerien ISS commanders, the reported deaths of Petit Chafori and other operational local leaders could represent an opening for agreeing a ceasefire and eventually entering into talks. But they could just as easily use this time to reorganize and come back stronger, and may wage a new offensive once internal matters of structure and leadership have been settled.

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41 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

To avert this outcome, the HACP and special Committee should continue to facilitate discussions and eventual negotiations with local ISS commanders. Local community dialogue efforts like the Banibangou process can support this by encouraging more specific, political formulations of demands. Disarming the Banibangou militia remains a high priority for Peul participants as well as for international partners. It will also be crucial for guaranteeing the security of displaced communities who are otherwise ready to return home. But deeper conversations also need to be held about representation, inclusion, resources, development, justice, and minority rights. The sooner both sides can explore pathways to transition towards political negotiations, the better. Improving coordination between multiple dialogue tracks might help actors move towards this goal. Recent administrative reforms have sought to increase coordination between and among different dialogue tracks and intelligence agencies, including a weekly meeting of mediators.<sup>42</sup> While some suggest cooperation has improved between the four intelligence agencies, nevertheless, there is a lack of coordination between different dialogue track leaders, who are often in competition, and regard one another with mistrust. Closer cooperation between the HACP and Interior Ministry, who are working towards the same goals, would be a key way to ensure that this project does not lose momentum.

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42 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

# SOUTHWEST TILLABERY

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*Increased violence in Niger's southwest Tillabery, along the Burkina Faso border, is damaging the state's grip on a fragile region and displacing tens of thousands.*

Since 2021, the jihadist coalition Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) has increased pressure on rural residents, Nigerien defence and security forces, and gold mining targets in southwest Tillabery. The progressive southwards expansion of JNIM towards West Africa's coastal states has made it an appealing corridor for militants keen to ramp up recruitment and link up operations stretching all the way from northern Mali to the Park W in northern Benin. In Say department, especially in Tamou and Samira, informal gold mining activities have attracted armed groups, becoming a key financing resource for militants, and furnishing complicated challenges to state forces who must find ways to manage a rare resource without further alienating key rural communities. Moreover, in the wake of two coups d'état within nine months in Burkina Faso, disrupted security provision on the Burkinabe side of the border has left the border with Niger more exposed.

Niger faces complex challenges along this increasingly contested border zone. It should maintain a firm security presence without putting too much strain on relations with the frontline communities who live there. Authorities should also carefully manage disputes to avoid their escalating into inter-communal fighting.

JNIM's implantation along the Niger-Burkina Faso border has provided it with numerous new resources. There, militants

lure in new recruits with offers of payment and motos, shelter in the wooded zone by the Park W, evading aërian surveillance, and expand their financial base by taxing artisanal gold miners, especially in Tamou (Say Department) and Samira (Tera Department). Mining sites may also function as training grounds for insurgents, offering explosives training and furnishing ammonium nitrate, a dual-use element that is the main ingredient in IEDs.

JNIM-affiliated militants have also increasingly sought to regulate villagers' affairs. This includes setting dowry rates and extracting *zakat* from Peul herders and Djarma farming villages.<sup>43</sup> Local officials, residents, and community leaders describe militants' comportment as relatively disciplined, probably to appeal to recruits and facilitate acceptance by locals, extracting modest taxes and controlling the levels of violence by containing raids against livestock and directing attacks against FDS and those who collaborate with the state, rather than against civilians.<sup>44</sup> In the rural commune of Gotheye (Tera department), residents say JNIM informants are present in most villages. Local authorities, often aware of who they are, do not turn them in for fear of reprisals.

The rural commune of Dargol (Tera department) witnessed several recent attacks, including a February 21, 2021 IED attack on a vehicle carrying a CENI delegation during the second round of presidential elections that killed seven, and a June 2022 attack that killed eight

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<sup>43</sup> KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

<sup>44</sup> KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.

gendarmes and wounded 33 more. Armed men also reportedly kidnapped authorities from the Dargol Mayor's Office in 2022.

Although markets remain open in Gotheye and Dargol, nearly all the rural schools are closed due to threats and insecurity, while a ban on motorbikes has limited economic activities and opportunities, especially for young men. Residents fear the motorbike ban and school closures could end up enhancing recruitment for armed groups by eliminating other opportunities for social and economic advancement.

Faced with new fears, uncertainties, and threats, large-scale displacement has precipitated a regional food crisis. In Tera department, for instance, since 2021, 93 out of a total of 182 villages have been unable to harvest their crops due to insecurity and displacement, while many herders who fled were forced to sell their cows.<sup>45</sup> Tera is under pressure on three sides. To the east, residents in Kokorou and Diagorou locals have taken up arms and embraced banditry; to the north, arms and tensions are flowing south from the contested triborder areas Gouroual and Bankilare<sup>46</sup>; and to the west, militants are increasingly active on the Burkinabe side of the border.

Niger's efforts to contain conflict along the Burkina border have included security measures along with efforts to manage social and communal tensions. As elsewhere, increased securitization has at

times enflamed tensions, meaning very careful attention is needed to strike the right balance between these two goals.

In April 2021, a G5 Sahel Joint Force unit deployed in Tera was removed following an investigation into three cases of reported rapes, including one of an 11-year-old girl.<sup>47</sup> Since then, Tera residents say they have been more satisfied with security deployments, especially the Haw Hillikoy force, an elite, American-trained force that gained counter-insurgency experience in Diffa before being redeployed to Tera. Tera residents from multiple communities said this force had helped reinforce stability and push back militants without sparking tensions with local communities.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, local authorities helped prevent spillover into intercommunal fighting by working on outreach with rural communities. For instance, the Tera municipal council suspended the market tax it traditionally collects at border markets, reducing tensions around markets and keeping vital economic and social lifelines operational. At the same time, traditional chiefs and community leaders were reaching out to the families of armed groups active along the Burkina-Niger border, urging disarmament and maintaining corridors of communication with JNIM. In addition, local authorities say conflict resolution mechanisms such as regional property committees (COFOBs) allowed them to address disputes between communities over shared resources before

45 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

46 "Déclaration des ressortissants des communes du Goroual et de Bankilare relative à l'insécurité", 30 Jan 2023.

47 "Force conjointe du G5-Sahel - Communiqué de presse", 3 April 2021.

48 KAS interviews, Niamey, Jan 2023.



these could escalate.<sup>49</sup> Insecurity and upheaval in Burkina have hindered some of these efforts. Since 2016, organizations of border municipalities have routinely met to coordinate exchanges between local authorities along the tri-border area. The second coup in Burkina Faso led to a strain on these cross-border exchanges after the junta dissolved the elected municipal councils and replaced them with appointed administrators that possess less local legitimacy.<sup>50</sup>

South of Tera, in Say department, a series of escalating attacks ultimately pit security forces against civilians. It began with a late October attack by militants on a forest ranger post. Forest rangers in the area, contravening the government's shutdown of artisanal gold mines, were taxing miners who continued working, drawing the ire of miners and militants who were exploiting the mines.<sup>51</sup> On October 24, militants then killed two National Guards in Mbanga gold mining site (Gotheye), and the following morning, two more police officers at a checkpoint in Tamou (Say department). Nigerien security forces responded with an extreme show of force, reportedly using helicopters and drones in a ground and air offensive against the artisanal gold mine at Tamou that set fire to the site, killing between dozens and hundreds of civilian miners, according to witnesses and local population. Official statements, recalling that the mines had been condemned for months, claimed the assault killed seven "terrorists", but civil society has warned of

a massacre that could have left many more artisanal miners dead. On 23 January, authorities arrested the leader of an investigation into the attack.<sup>52</sup>

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49 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

50 KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

51 "The bandits first came and fired on the forest rangers because these were taxing the gold miners," a local deputy said. KAS interview, Niamey, Jan 2023.

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52 "Niger: détention arbitraire d'Abdoulaye Seydou", *FIDH*, 3 Feb 2023.



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