



South-western Niger: Preventing a New Insurrection

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Principal Findings

What's new? Under the influence of armed groups operating from Nigeria, organised banditry is spreading to south-western Niger, along a border strip between the towns of Maradi and Dogondoutchi. This phenomenon reinforces mistrust between ethnic groups, paving the way for the emergence of armed insurrection.

Why does it matter? Jihadist groups – which are already present in this border zone – often exploit communal violence to enlist new fighters. As they take root, they could open a new front against the Nigerien state and threaten to encircle Niamey, the capital.

What should be done? Niger's authorities should complement their current security efforts with preventive measures aimed primarily at: remedying the injustices experienced by communities living off livestock; initiating intercommunal dialogue; and better supervising fledgling self-defence groups.

Executive Summary

Under the influence of gangs operating out of Nigeria, banditry is spreading in south-western Niger. Along a border strip stretching between the Nigerien towns of Maradi and Dogondoutchi (or Doutchi), armed bandits have stolen entire herds and kidnapped hundreds of villagers. Many of the marauders are driven by greed, but others – in particular nomads whose pastoral livelihoods are imperilled by farmland expansion – take up arms to defend their families and property or to avenge injustices. In reaction, sedentary border zone residents have been forming fledgling self-defence groups. The insecurity risks creating the conditions for an insurrection that jihadists could exploit. The Nigerien authorities are mobilising their security apparatus to respond to the new threats. They should also redress grievances of herders impoverished by the pastoral crisis, reducing their incentive to take up arms, while pursuing intercommunal dialogue, monitoring self-defence groups and disarming bandits who pose a particular danger.

Cross-border banditry is not new along the strip linking Maradi to Dogondoutchi. For decades, it has fuelled organised criminal networks that transformed in the early 2010s due to external dynamics, primarily the war in Libya. Since 2011, the Libyan war economy has revolved around trafficking, which has facilitated illicit flows (notably of drugs and fuel) from Nigeria through Niger. Flowing in the opposite direction, weapons from Qaddafi-era stocks are supplying criminals in countries to the south. Concentrated in Nigeria's northern states in the 2010s, these gangs have become specialised in cattle rustling, kidnapping and targeted killing. Starting in the middle of the decade, they exported their violence to the Nigerien side of the border: to Maradi from 2016, and then to Tahoua in 2019. The bandits have ties to the cross-border trafficking networks, and they recruit from all the ethnic groups in the region (Hausa, Tuareg and Fulani).

The new banditry is giving birth to new forms of violence, as the pastoral crisis hits the regions of Tahoua, Maradi and Dosso. The expansion of agricultural land greatly reduces the space available for livestock to graze, leading to pastoralists' progressive impoverishment and sparking conflict between them and other land users, especially crop farmers. Many herders have come to see joining the bandits as a way of saving their livelihoods and protecting themselves from cattle rustling, as well as sometimes reaching a position of power. This trend was already significant in Nigeria and is now spreading into Niger. Some bandits remain simple criminals, but others, notably among the Fulani, have become public figures respected as defenders of the community.

The communal aspect of banditry threatens social cohesion in south-western Niger, as it does in north-western Nigeria. Sedentary border zone residents have come to associate banditry with the Fulani, who make up the majority of the area's nomadic population. To protect themselves from bandits, villagers in the Maradi region are forming self-defence groups that are predominantly Hausa. These groups exclude pastoralists – and especially Fulani – due to prejudice linking them to bandits, even though they may be victims of rustling and kidnapping themselves. The Fulani are thus driven toward bandit groups to seek protection.

An armed insurrection against the state is becoming a real danger amid the communal violence, as the region is increasingly arousing the interest of jihadist groups from the Sahel and north-eastern Nigeria. The close link between jihadists and bandits is already evident elsewhere in the Sahel. The border strip extending from Dogondoutchi to Birni N’Konni (or Konni) is already a supply corridor for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, which has anchored itself here since 2018, even attempting to collect a protection tax. Jihadists could take shelter in the scattered woods along the border from Maradi to Dogondoutchi, which already serve as a refuge for bandits. Finally, from north-eastern Nigeria, Jama’u Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS), more commonly known as Boko Haram, and Ansaru, a JAS dissident group, are trying to move into Nigeria’s north west and closer to the south west of bordering Niger.

Niger reacted very early to the deteriorating situation along the border strip. The authorities have strengthened security measures, but these remain insufficient. Nigerien forces are deployed on many fronts across the country and are generally stretched thin. The effectiveness of their response to cross-border banditry depends on cooperation with Nigeria, which is longstanding but needs improvement. The two countries have strengthened cooperation amid the recent escalation of violence, but they are still doing too little to stop people from falling into banditry or an insurrection from emerging. Compared to other regions of Niger facing insurgencies, such as Tillabery and Diffa, this border strip has seen little investment from either the state or its partners.

To prevent an insurrection in this zone, it is essential to reduce the injustices experienced by pastoralists and to preserve social cohesion. The new president of Niger should thus make ranching a major policy area. Pastoralists should be better represented in land commissions and have access to more intermediaries to defend their rights. Such measures would encourage them to resort to law rather than force. The state should strictly supervise self-defence groups and establish communal dialogues as it has done elsewhere in Niger. Finally, the state must step up security efforts to prevent an epidemic of violence, in particular by strengthening cooperation with bordering states, though it should not rule out negotiations to demobilise certain bandit groups. For their part, Niger’s partners should take an interest in these areas before they face destabilisation, possibly funding a prevention program that Nigerien authorities would design and run.

Niamey/Brussels, 29 April 2021

South-western Niger: Preventing a New Insurrection

I. Introduction

The southern parts of Maradi and Tahoua regions, some of the most heavily populated areas of Niger, suffer almost daily attacks from bandits operating from across the border in Nigeria.¹ These attacks have attracted little public attention, but their impact is severe: since 2017, bandits have stolen tens of thousands of animals, kidnapped several hundred people and killed many; nearly 70,000 Nigerians have taken refuge in Maradi and 20,000 Nigeriens have been internally displaced.² While the banditry is not new, its scale and violence are unprecedented. Long considered a Nigerian problem, this banditry is increasingly hurting Niger as well, damaging its economy, which relies heavily on agropastoral activities and cross-border trade with Nigeria, both curtailed by the insecurity.

This report analyses the development of banditry and warns of the potentially disastrous consequences for south-western Niger should it continue to mutate. It examines the dynamics that could transform bandits into insurgents and draw them closer to the jihadists who are already present in the border zone. The zone under study covers a 400km strip of land stretching from the department of Dogondoutchi (or Doutchi), in the region of Dosso, to the departments of Guidan-Roundji and Madarounfa in the region of Maradi (see map in Appendix A).³ This zone also includes the departments of Birni N’Konni (or Konni) and Madaoua, in the south of Tahoua region.

The report draws on fieldwork carried out in Niamey and Maradi, mostly in October 2020, as well as on online exchanges conducted between then and March 2021. It also relies on previous Crisis Group research both in this zone and in north-western Nigeria. Among those interviewed were representatives of local and national governments, defence and security forces, traditional authorities, civil society actors and victims of attacks, including residents of Konni and Doutchi. The report complements the analysis carried out by Crisis Group across the border, in north-western Nigeria, in early 2020.⁴

¹ In Maradi, the departments of Madarounfa (129 inhabitants/sq km) and Guidan-Roundji (115 inhabitants/sq km) have two of the three highest population densities in Niger. In Tahoua, Konni (94 inhabitants/sq km) and Madaoua (91 inhabitants/sq km) are the most densely populated departments. In Doutchi, the population density is 57 inhabitants/sq km.

² “Maradi Factsheets”, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, December 2020.

³ Dogondoutchi and Madarounfa sit, respectively, at the western and eastern limits of the border area most affected by banditry from northern Nigeria. Dogondoutchi is also a stronghold of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in south-western Niger. The department of Torodi, farther west, could have been included, but events there reflect different dynamics with links to Burkina Faso. The ISGS is also present there, but its units answer to a different chain of command based in Burkina Faso.

⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020.

II. The Escalation of Cross-border Banditry

In south-western Niger, along the strip connecting the departments of Douthi and Madarounfa, cross-border banditry is a decades-old phenomenon. But in recent years, it has become more organised and much more violent. This development is largely attributable to several factors: the 2011 Libyan crisis; deteriorating security in the border states of north-western Nigeria; and the influence of this neighbouring zone on south-western Niger.

This agropastoral region has long maintained licit and illicit economic exchanges with Nigeria, some of which are linked to the rustling and black-market sale of live-stock.⁵ For example, the municipality of Guidan-Roundji (Maradi region) was originally a village that lived off the slaughter of cattle stolen from Nigeria, an enterprise involving organised networks of butchers selling stolen cattle.⁶ Likewise, since the 1980s, cattle rustled in northern Mali are exported to Nigeria via a corridor passing through Tahoua, in Niger, then through Sokoto state, in northern Nigeria.⁷ This channel is also used for other contraband. Since the 1983-1984 drought, the smuggling of Nigerian fuel has notably emerged as a substitute activity for many herders. It has become an essential segment of the economy in the Maradi and Tahoua regions.⁸ Vast criminal networks operating between the Sahara Desert and the Niger-Nigeria border have gradually appeared.

The nature of this banditry began to change in the early 2010s due to external factors. Most important was the Libyan crisis of 2011. Trafficking became central to the Libyan war economy, facilitating the illicit flows from Nigeria: people (migrants, including some destined to work as prostitutes) and narcotics (Tramadol and Indian hemp). These flows are moving north, via Niger and Libya, to supply the Middle Eastern and European markets. Basic necessities and fuel smuggled from Nigeria also fill part of the Sahelian market's needs.

At the same time, since 2011, weapons of war from stocks accumulated during the Qaddafi era have been making their way down from Libya to satisfy part of the sub-regional demand for arms, notably from Nigerien and Nigerian criminal groups, although the latter also obtain supplies from Nigeria. The regions of Tahoua and Maradi have thus become trafficking corridors for Libyan small arms and ammunition destined for Nigeria.⁹

The western part of the Niger-Nigeria border was simultaneously affected by a deteriorating security situation in several northern Nigerian states in the 2010s.

⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, op. cit. In general, the largely Nigerien networks that operate in Niger are little researched, unlike in Nigeria where the phenomenon is better known. See Murtala Ahmed Rufai, "Cattle Rustling and Armed Banditry along Nigeria-Niger Borderlands", *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2018).

⁶ Aghali Abdoukader, "Le 'bien' sécurité dans trois communes", Lasdel, 2013.

⁷ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°261: *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018.

⁸ See Vincent Caupin, "Les flux d'hydrocarbures entre le Niger et le Nigéria", Orstom, 1997.

⁹ In recent years, traffickers have been arrested and arms seized. On the flows between Libya and the states of Katsina and Zamfara, for example, see "Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Conflict", Conflict Armament Research, 2020.

Mounting violence in Zamfara state, particularly after 2013, resulted in the formation of better-organised bandit groups equipped with arms sent from Libya, but also from the Lake Chad basin.¹⁰ Since 2016, this insecurity has spilled over the border, primarily affecting the Nigerien region of Maradi, next to Zamfara state. Attacks there multiplied, replicating forms of crime already seen in Nigeria: theft of entire herds of cattle and kidnappings for ransom.¹¹

In 2019, the attacks spread to Nigerian states neighbouring Zamfara, including Katsina and Sokoto.¹² In turn, the west of Niger's Maradi region (bordering Sokoto) was hit by insecurity, in particular the departments of Madaoua, Konni and Douthi. Nigerian territory remains the rear base for bandit groups operating on both sides of the border. They benefit from being able to retreat easily into extensive wooded areas such as Baban Raffi, straddling Nigeria and the Nigerien departments of Madarounfa and Guidan-Roundji, and the long forest zone of Gandou (Nigeria), bordering the Nigerien departments of Douthi and Konni.

Bandits come from different ethnic groups in the region (Hausa, Tuareg and Fulani) and have often been involved in cross-border criminal networks. Several bandit leaders are known to have begun their activities in the 1990s, smuggling fuel, selling stolen cattle or trafficking weapons, and some continue to do so.¹³ In 2019, President Muhammadu Buhari's government decided to close the Nigerian border, an initiative which reportedly had the impact of driving more people into the criminal economy.¹⁴

Banditry also thrives off local tensions. Many attacks are the result of scores being settled between people from the same families, villages or communities. These often involve longstanding, unresolved conflicts, jealousies and experiences of injustice. But the herding crisis is undoubtedly the single most important and most worrying factor reshaping cross-border banditry today.¹⁵

¹⁰ In 2013, the governor of Zamfara's decision to organise militias contributed to the rise in violence. See Crisis Group Report, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, op. cit.

¹¹ Cases of cattle rustling began to increase in late 2016. See "Le nord du Nigéria aux mains des voleurs de bétail", RFI, 10 November 2016.

¹² The agreements between Zamfara's governor and certain bandit groups led the latter to pursue their activities in neighbouring states.

¹³ "After the Storm: Organized Crime across the Sahel-Sahara Following Upheaval in Libya and Mali", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019. Crisis Group interview, defence and security forces officials, Maradi, 12 October 2020.

¹⁴ The border was closed in order to limit imports and support Nigerian production. The smuggling economy was stimulated by the rising prices of basic necessities and fuel. See "Buhari explique pourquoi il a décidé de fermer temporairement des postes-frontières avec le Bénin et le Niger", *La Tribune*, 30 August 2019.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, village chief, Nigerien security forces leader and victims of banditry, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

III. Toward New Forms of Violence?

Not only is banditry spreading, but the violence is increasing in scale: animal rustling now involves entire herds, kidnappings are becoming common and targeted killings – infrequent until 2019 – are on the rise. The violence is partly fuelled by a crisis of pastoralism. This crisis, which affects the border strip between Douthi and Maradi like other Sahelian areas, stirs up tensions between ethnic groups and lays the groundwork for the emergence of insurgencies.

A. *The Crisis of Pastoralism and Its Repercussions*

The crisis of pastoralism affecting the Sahel is hitting herders hard in the regions of Tahoua, Maradi and Dosso. Here, more than elsewhere, the expansion of agriculture, combined with increased demographic pressure, is reducing the space dedicated to livestock.¹⁶ The whittling away of grazing areas and transhumance corridors complicates the migration routes of nomadic pastoralists.¹⁷

The growing difficulty in practising mobile livestock raising – including transhumance – is contributing to the gradual impoverishment of pastoralists. It results in the loss, sale or theft of animals. The reduction of cattle farming areas is leading to conflicts with other land users, especially crop farmers.¹⁸ Changing migration routes force herders to take itineraries that are less secure or with fewer watering points, at the risk of losing part of their herds.

More broadly, the evolution of agropastoral relations is making the situation worse. To diversify their activities or to accumulate savings, crop farmers are becoming owners of livestock and are in turn seeking land for pasture. Land pressure is thus accentuated, causing the once reciprocal relations between pastoralists and crop farmers to suffer.¹⁹ Finally, cattle rustling on both sides of the border is a major threat for pastoralists in the area.

The Nigerien state is trying to regulate and protect the pastoral sector. Niger is in fact a pioneer in the Sahel for its rural code and conflict resolution mechanisms. But the regulatory effort varies in effectiveness from one region to another. One relative success story is Maradi, where the state intervened after a 1991 massacre of Fulani pastoralists by Hausa farmers in Toda (Guidan-Roundji department) shook the re-

¹⁶ The regions of Maradi and Dosso have the highest rates of agricultural coverage in the country, with 36 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. “Analyse des facteurs de conflits au Niger”, UN Development Program, November 2014. In Maradi, between 2004 and 2013, crop areas increased by 217 per cent for cowpea, 235 per cent for groundnut, 272 per cent for sesame and 160 per cent for nutsedge. See the Maradi Regional Development Plan, 2016-2020.

¹⁷ This report uses the term “pastoralists” rather than “herders” because, while nomadic pastoralists are the main victims of the crisis, it also affects sedentary pastoralists. Crisis Group interviews, cattle farmers in Maradi, Madaoua and Konni, Maradi and Niamey, May 2019 and October 2020.

¹⁸ These conflicts often result from rural damage due to cattle trampling crops, or from non-compliance with the dates for clearing fields agreed upon by crop farmers and herders.

¹⁹ This reciprocity was based, for example, on the loan of draft oxen to plough fields. Another cooperative arrangement was manure contracts: herders were allowed to feed crop remnants to their herds, in exchange for the manure, which farmers then used as fertiliser.

gion.²⁰ Following this incident, with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the state set up land commissions intended to regulate conflicts over land use. The region has not experienced another conflict as deadly since then, though the situation remains tense. Dosso, however, has continued to see lethal incidents despite regulation. Tahoua has been a more difficult case still.²¹ All three regions are drawing up land development plans, but it is too early to predict what effect these will have on conflict mitigation.

In the zone under study, pastoralists are predominantly Fulani and sometimes Tuareg, while crop farmers are predominantly Hausa or Zarma. When limited land resources create a tense climate, the overlap between occupation and ethnic affiliation increases the risk of violence. In Tahoua, communal relations were greatly affected by a conflict that arose in November 2016 in the locality of Bangui (Madaoua department), where Hausa villagers killed 22 Fulani with the probable involvement of traditional Hausa authorities.²² More recently, in May 2019, crop farmers killed five herders in Allela (Konni department) before the authorities' rapid intervention prevented the conflict from escalating.

Even when violent conflicts are avoided, it is often at the cost of nomadic pastoralists, who suffer various injustices. Village chiefs, most of whom are sedentary, often set excessive and arbitrary fines, some of which they apply in defiance of official regulations.²³ In addition, water and forest management officials and gendarmes regularly demand bribes from herders seeking to reach cattle markets or pasture in certain protected areas. Other rackets stem from the impounding of stray cattle, a legal provision that state representatives and local elected officials abuse.²⁴ These injustices undermine confidence in the authorities and are detrimental to peaceful coexistence between communities.²⁵ Indeed, rural populations as a whole suffer from a lack of access to justice, whether because they are geographically distant from courts,

²⁰ In reaction to rural damage, Hausa farmers killed 104 Fulani with the approval of traditional authorities. Crisis Group interview, civil society actor, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

²¹ Dosso, in particular the department of Boboye, has experienced numerous deadly conflicts between farmers and herders. See Gandou Zakara, Arzika Sani, Harouna Abarchi and Adam Kadri, "Les violations collectives des droits humains fondamentaux", IWGIA/AREN, 2011.

²² The conflict in Bangui resulted from rural damage that was rightly or wrongly attributed to Fulani herders. Against the backdrop of pre-existing communal tensions, the damage seemingly served as a pretext for a series of violent acts serving the political interests of a local Hausa official. He coveted the village mayorship, which was held by a Fulani, and armed young Hausa to kill or drive out the Fulani. The individual was prosecuted and the case is still under investigation. The case of Bangui illustrates the importance of controlling local power for securing access to resources. Each ethnic group bemoans its difficulty in getting access to land and water when someone from another group holds the mayorship. Crisis Group interviews, researcher in Tahoua, villagers and local authorities from Bangui, Niamey and Maradi, 2019-2020.

²³ These regulations require that a joint commission representing the interests of each party meet to reach a consensus on the amount of compensation to be paid.

²⁴ Several cases of illegal impounding of animals have been recorded in recent years in Dosso and Tahoua, for example. Crisis Group interview, herders' association head, Niamey, 13 October 2020.

²⁵ In Maradi, Tahoua and Doutchi, many pastoralists claim to be victims of injustice and decry what they describe as official favouritism toward crop farmers. Crisis Group interviews, herders in these areas, Niamey and Maradi, October 2020.

unaware of their legal recourse, or too poor to pay for legal services. The paralegal networks that serve rural Mali are still insufficiently developed in Niger.²⁶

Most Fulani pastoralists are no longer able to live off livestock alone, and some adopt an agropastoral way of life if they can. Some Fulani are becoming more or less sedentary. Others are abandoning the pastoral world altogether. Yet they are poorly prepared for vocational retraining, and their professional prospects are limited, as they have less schooling than sedentary people. As the alternatives are few, a small number of pastoralists fall into banditry.

B. *Communal Banditry?*

For many Fulani herders in this region, joining the bandits is simply a way of dealing with the herding crisis, protecting themselves from cattle theft and sometimes attaining a position of power. This trend was already significant in Nigeria and is now spreading into Niger. It leads, in turn, to the stigmatisation of Fulani pastoralists and strains communal relations.

Particularly in north-western Nigeria, bandits are often seen as successful men: in a few months or years, formerly impoverished herders who took up banditry have become owners of several hundred or even thousand head of livestock. With the power granted by weapons and money, they set the rules for using local lands. In north-western Nigeria, it can be necessary for herders to join the bandits simply to ensure their own safety and to protect their herds. “In Nigeria, the bandits laugh at herders who have not joined their ranks and call them weak”, notes a cross-border herder.²⁷

In Niger, similar behaviours are developing. While most Fulani bandits remain simple criminals, others pose as defenders of the community and have become respected local figures. In the aftermath of the above-mentioned Bangui conflict, a Fulani bandit leader, originally from that locality and operating in Niger, contacted several Fulani notables living nearby to offer them his protection services.²⁸ Fulani bandits tend to target Hausa and spare fellow Fulani.²⁹ In the Maradi areas of Guidan-Roundji and Madarounfa, the bandits attacked the Hausa villages, while leaving the Fulani hamlets and encampments be. Those Fulani whom the bandits do target are often those who refuse to join their ranks or are suspected of giving information to the authorities.³⁰ Fulani villages reportedly protect themselves from attack by providing recruits to the local bandits.³¹

²⁶ Paralegals are civilians trained in law who provide legal assistance to populations that otherwise lack it. They must be familiar with local sociological realities to gain the residents' acceptance. They are quite well organised in Mali, though less so in other Sahel states. “Besoins et satisfaction en matière de justice au Mali”, The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law, 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Madaoua-based herder, Maradi, 11 October 2020.

²⁸ They refused, aware that settling would not be to their advantage considering Bangui's majority Hausa population and the presence of defence and security forces. Crisis Group interviews, Bangui massacre victims, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

²⁹ In some cases, Fulani public figures, some of whom are bandits, intervened to secure the release of kidnapped Fulani, proving that banditry does not break communal ties.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hausa and Fulani public figures of high standing, Maradi, 10-12 October 2020.

³¹ Ibid.

The Hausa have come to perceive banditry as particularly widespread among the Fulani, especially in Maradi, the most affected region to date. Communal relations, which were previously healthy, as evidenced by numerous mixed marriages, are deteriorating. Fear is setting in: while some Fulani are leaving their hamlets, others no longer frequent Hausa villages.³²

C. *The Formation of Self-defence Groups*

In north-western Nigeria, the recent wave of murderous banditry has led to the formation of numerous self-defence groups and armed militias.³³ The phenomenon is especially noticeable in sedentary communities of Hausa farmers. Some of these groups were formed very recently, either on a voluntary basis or with the encouragement of local authorities who recruited and armed village-based self-defence units.³⁴ Others are rooted in the hunting and other brotherhoods of traditional society. Since the 1950s at least, the latter have been tasked with protecting people and property.³⁵ Confronted with the extreme violence of bandits operating in north-western Nigeria, they have gradually become militarised and now stand accused of various abuses.³⁶

Following the Nigerian example, communal self-defence groups appear to be forming in south-western Niger. Indeed, the Nigerien side has recently witnessed the birth of self-defence groups tasked with combating banditry. Still at a fledgling stage, most do not have a specific name. They exist in almost every village in Gabi municipality (Madarounfa department), because banditry has hit this area hard and the state has been unable to protect its inhabitants. In some villages in Tibiri and Safo municipalities (Guidan-Roundji department), which have been similarly affected by the attacks, self-defence groups equipped with traditional rifles have also reportedly emerged.³⁷

For the time being, local authorities and the armed forces appreciate these groups' help. They receive support from local elected officials, who contribute to the purchase of artisanal weapons costing 5,000 CFA francs (or €7.6).³⁸ Nigerien defence and security forces showed them recognition after they repelled several bandit attacks and managed to recover some stolen livestock.³⁹ Yet the rate of bandit attacks has not dropped in these municipalities.⁴⁰

³² Ibid.

³³ See Crisis Group Report, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, op. cit.

³⁴ "Zamfara to recruit 8,500 youth as JTF members", *Premium Times*, 1 November 2018.

³⁵ See Miroc Göpfert, "Security in Niamey: An Anthropological Perspective on Policing and an Act of Terrorism in Niger", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2012).

³⁶ Aghali, "Le 'bien' sécurité dans trois communes", op. cit.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, NGO official, defence and security forces, Maradi, 10-11 October 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, public figures of high standing from Madarounfa, Maradi, 10-11 October 2020.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Between June and November 2020, nineteen attacks were recorded in Tibiri and fifteen in Gabi; since August, ten attacks have occurred in Safo. Other municipalities are targeted to a lesser extent, notably Dan Issa, but also Toda, Dan Abdallah and Sarkin Yamma, as well as other municipalities in Madarounfa and Guidan-Roundji departments.

The self-defence groups provide real services to local populations, but they threaten social cohesion when their actions target particular ethnic groups. On the Nigerian side of the border, the formation of Hausa self-defence groups prompted the Fulani to approach bandit groups for protection, initiating a cycle of violence that has lasted several years.⁴¹ In Maradi, these fledgling groups are entirely Hausa; the Fulani are systematically excluded due to the stigma attached to them. The risk of ethnically charged confrontations is therefore high.⁴² Clashes between the self-defence groups and bandits could easily multiply and inflame communal relations.

The formation of communal self-defence groups generates tensions that, in central Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, have fostered or fuelled cycles of severe ethnic violence.⁴³ Traditionally, these groups have enjoyed close ties to the authorities. They recruit among sedentary populations, which also form the majority of state representatives.⁴⁴ In addition, they maintain forms of collaboration with security services in their common fight against bandits.

Conversely, because pastoralists (and especially Fulani) are often excluded from the self-defence groups and suspected by them of being at the root of violence, they tend to be driven toward bandit groups in the hope of finding a form of protection. This trend further alienates the pastoralists from the state and its security forces, with whom relations are already strained.⁴⁵ Pastoralists are generally under-represented in state institutions, as well as political parties, largely as a result of their low level of education. As a result, policymakers seldom take their interests into account.

The risk of an insurgency – the outbreak of open hostilities against the state and its allies – is growing, all the more so because the region is increasingly arousing the interest of jihadist groups based in neighbouring zones.

⁴¹ The killing of a Fulani associative leader in Dansadau (Sokoto) in 2011 by Hausa self-defence groups (*yan banga*) led to a series of reprisals that motivated each community to equip itself with weapons of war. In Zamfara, self-defence groups (*yan sa kai* or voluntary guards), supported by the authorities, have stepped up violence against herders (including cattle rustling), forcing many of them to seek protection by joining Fulani bandits as auxiliaries or combatants. Crisis Group online interviews, civil society actor in Zamfara, September 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, community radio journalist, Maradi, 11 October 2020.

⁴³ See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°287, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 24 February 2020; and N°293, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence*, 9 November 2020.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, Maradi, 10-12 October 2020.

⁴⁵ In August 2020, in the Nigerian municipality of Garin Fadji bordering Bangui (Niger), herders were attacked by the local *yan banga*. The herders called on local bandits for aid. The bandits then attacked the villagers in retaliation. Crisis Group interviews, Bangui residents, Maradi, 12 October 2020.

IV. Toward a Third Jihadist Hub in Niger?

Two recent events in south-western Niger have drawn attention to the expanding activities of armed jihadist groups in this region. In August 2020, eight civilians, including six French tourists, were killed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Kouré, 60km east of Niamey, illustrating the rapid advance of jihadists toward Niger's south west.⁴⁶ In October 2020, a U.S. citizen, Philip Walton, was kidnapped from a village in the Konni department by bandits specialised in kidnappings and probably acting on behalf of a jihadist group, thus reflecting the risk of close ties developing between these actors.⁴⁷

At the border that separates south-western Niger from north-western Nigeria, there is a growing presence of jihadist groups, although it is too early to say whether it will endure. In addition to the activity of the ISGS in this region, two other groups have claimed responsibility for attacks in north-western Nigeria: the People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad (JAS) – a group led by Abubakar Shekau and more commonly known as Boko Haram – and Ansaru, a JAS dissident group since 2012 and now affiliated with al-Qaeda.⁴⁸ Both groups are thus getting dangerously close to Niger.

A. *Jihadist Influences from the Sahara*

The ISGS has long used the 140km-long strip stretching from Douchi to Konni as a supply corridor, and soon could make it an area of operations as well. The ISGS obtains most of its supplies from northern Nigeria; its main zone of activity in Niger is northern Tillabery, an area bordering Mali located north west of Konni. The group reaches it by the so-called highway connecting Konni to Sanam and Abala. There is almost no human or security presence along this axis.⁴⁹

The ISGS has facilitated access to the border area between Sokoto and Konni because a significant number of its local recruits belong to a Fulani sub-group, the

⁴⁶ ISGS is the acronym used by many observers to designate the Sahelo-Saharan branch of the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). This report uses the acronym for convenience, even though the Islamic State does not officially recognise the group, considering it a constituent part of ISWAP, whose main base is the Lake Chad basin. Although links do exist between them, these two branches are not integrated with each other. They obey separate chains of command. On the Kouré attack, see "Niger : le groupe État islamique revendique l'attaque de Kouré", RFI, 18 September 2020.

⁴⁷ The intervention of U.S. Navy Seals led to Walton's release before he was sold off. "US forces rescue American kidnapped in Niger", Al Jazeera, 31 October 2020.

⁴⁸ Ansaru has resurfaced since September 2019 after a three-year lull that followed the 2016 arrest of its leader, Khalid Al Barnawi, by the Nigerian military. On the links between Ansaru and al-Qaeda, see Jacob Zenn, "The Return of al-Qaeda's Faction in Nigeria: What's Going on in Zamfara?", Jamestown Foundation, 25 March 2019. In January and August 2020, Ansaru notably claimed responsibility for attacks in Kaduna state, bordering Zamfara and Katsina states. Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda-linked group claims attack in north-western Nigeria", *Long War Journal*, 8 August 2020. Through two videos broadcast on 15 June and 7 July 2020, JAS announced its presence in the states of Zamfara and Niger, bordering the states of Kaduna, Kebbi and Zamfara.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local civilians and Nigerien security officials, Niamey and Maradi, 6-13 October 2020.

Tolebe, who claim to hail from Sokoto and have family and economic ties there.⁵⁰ For several years, columns of combatants and supporters have been travelling to this region on two-wheelers from Abala to bring back food, contraband medicine, motorcycles and fuel. They often exchange stolen cattle or weapons for these products.⁵¹ In addition to these historical ties, the ISGS has trade relations with networks of cross-border smugglers, allowing them to move around without too much trouble.

Since 2018, it appears, the ISGS is no longer merely using the zone for its supplies but is also seeking to develop its operations there. In June 2018, ISGS religious leaders gave sermons a few kilometres from the Nigerian border, in Jima Jimi (a village in the Konni department). That November, the Nigerien authorities identified an ISGS training camp in the same village, which they finally dismantled in February 2019.⁵² In early 2021, a jihadist leader from the northern part of Tillabery is said to have died following clashes on the Nigerian side of the border, south of Konni.⁵³

Locals also call upon ISGS jihadists for protection from bandits. Thus, in early 2019, prominent public figures from Sokoto (Nigeria) and Konni (Niger), concerned about attacks by bandits from Zamfara (Nigeria), asked ISGS jihadists to drive them away, which they succeeded in doing.⁵⁴ The jihadists returned stolen cattle and ransom money to their owners, while pressuring some of the bandits to join the ISGS.⁵⁵ In September 2019, another armed incident in Dogon Kiria (Doutchi department) testifies to the movement of ISGS elements. On their way back from Muntseka (Konni department), a jihadist column foiled an ambush by the National Guard, killing one guard.

Since then, the ISGS has sunk roots in many villages in south-western Niger, for instance by encouraging its members to marry locally, recruiting villagers as fighters and placing more arms caches in these settlements.⁵⁶ As of June 2020, the ISGS has been reinforcing its presence in the northern parts of the departments of Doutchi and Konni, where it is trying to exercise a form of territorial control rivalling that of the state. In keeping with its operations in the north of Tillabery and Tahoua, the group collects a tax there, the nature of which is not clear: some villagers say it represents the *zakat* (Islamic tax), while others perceive it as a contribution to the group's

⁵⁰ They claim to have left Sokoto at the end of the 19th century and borrowed this transhumance corridor to settle in the north of Tillabery as well as in Madaoua and Dosso.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials, Maradi, 11 October 2020.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials and civil society actors in Konni, Maradi, 10-12 October 2020. See also "Découverte d'une base de djihadistes en gestation dans le village de Jima-Jimi", Studio Kalangou, 7 December 2018.

⁵³ The protagonists in this clash could not be precisely identified. Crisis Group interviews, individual with previously close ties to the ISGS and civil society figure, Niamey, March 2021.

⁵⁴ A prominent public figure from Balle (Sokoto) involved in summoning the jihadists later fell under suspicion of collaboration. The jihadists executed him in May 2019. In Niger, another prominent person from Konni (related to the former from Balle) was accused of complicity and imprisoned for several months before being released on bail. Crisis Group interviews, public figures of high standing from Doutchi and Konni, Nigerien authorities, Niamey, 2019-2021.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, resident of Doutchi, Niamey, March 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security forces and prominent figures from Konni, Maradi, 11 October 2020.

war effort and its guarantees of protection.⁵⁷ This presence involves recruiting collaborators and sympathisers from villages where the ISGS organises sermons.⁵⁸ The jihadists also circulate in certain grazing zones in this region, such as the Yani area, where herders have tried in vain to evade paying the tax.⁵⁹

The ISGS may struggle, however, to advance farther south and establish a sanctuary in north-western Nigeria. First, the movement grants significant autonomy to its commanders and maintains a rather loose chain of command. It will therefore have trouble connecting the various cells scattered over such a vast territory. Secondly, it seems to be lacking a relay in north-western Nigeria for the time being, and particularly in Sokoto state, even if some of its recruits are from the area, as previously mentioned. In north-western Nigeria, the ISGS also faces competition from other Nigerian jihadist groups whose incursions and activities are described below. The fact remains that the group occupies several zones around Niamey in what could be a strategy to encircle the capital.⁶⁰

The other major Sahelo-Saharan jihadist group, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), affiliated with al-Qaeda, appears to be less present in the cross-border area between Niger and Nigeria. GSIM has extended its operations to Niger, west into the Torodi area, and to Burkina Faso, from the Yagha region to the East region, two zones where it has coexisted uneasily with the ISGS. This space, where the GSIM's presence has grown steadily since 2018, is both a sanctuary and a platform for the group to expand its actions toward the north of Benin and the border with Nigeria, in to Kebbi state. This expansion strategy opens up the possibility of links forming between GSIM and Ansaru, if the latter is still affiliated with al-Qaeda.⁶¹ A stronger presence of GSIM and Ansaru in the Nigerian states of Kebbi and Sokoto would increase jihadist pressure in Niger's Dosso region.

B. *Jihadist Influences in Nigeria*

Two Nigerian groups from the country's north east, the JAS and Ansaru, are now encroaching upon its north west.⁶² Since its creation, Ansaru has called for restoration of the Sokoto caliphate and therefore – at least through its rhetoric – it embodies a particular threat in the north west.⁶³ On 11 December 2020, the JAS claimed the kid-

⁵⁷ Operations to collect this tax have taken place in at least 30 villages in the municipalities of Tebaram, Bagaroua, Soucoucoutane, Kourfey, Matankari, Dogon Kiria and southern Sanam. Crisis Group interviews, civilians from these areas, humanitarian workers and security officers, Niamey and Maradi, October 2020.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Douchi and Konni residents, Niamey and Maradi, October 2020.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, researcher specialising in the Tahoua area, Niamey, 8 October 2020.

⁶⁰ In January 2020, casings of mortar shells probably fired in the direction of the capital were found near Niamey, suggesting an imminent terrorist threat. Crisis Group interview, Nigerien officer, Niamey, 7 October 2020.

⁶¹ Ansaru's current affiliation is uncertain. In 2015, some Ansaru members indeed joined ISWAP. "Boko Haram Faction Releases Book on History and Ideology", Council on Foreign Relations, 9 August 2018. See also "The Return of al-Qaeda's Faction in Nigeria: What's Going on in Zamfara?", *op. cit.*

⁶² In 2014, for example, the JAS claimed responsibility for an attack on the Kano mosque (Kaduna state). "Attentat meurtrier au Nigéria dans la grande mosquée de Kano", *Le Monde*, 28 November 2014.

⁶³ Ansaru perpetrated several kidnappings between 2011 and 2013 in Kebbi, Bauchi and Katsina states.

napping of 334 high-school students in Kankara, a locality of Katsina state, 220km south of Maradi, its first large-scale operation in north-western Nigeria since 2014. Nevertheless, the incident could illustrate the group's occasional collaboration with local bandits rather than aspirations to a permanent presence outside its north-eastern stronghold.⁶⁴

Recent border attacks against Nigerien and Nigerian defence and security forces suggest growing ties between border gangs and Nigerian jihadist groups. No statements have been made, but the tactics and heavy weaponry used in the attacks bespeak a jihadist influence, as the militants can generally muster greater firepower than simple bandits. Thus, the use of M80 rocket launchers, highly prized by jihadists, in the attack on the Mobile Border Control Company in Maradi on 1 December 2019, suggests possible logistical links with the jihadists. On 18 July 2020, a few kilometres from the border with Maradi, in Jibia (Nigeria), "bandits" ambushed the Nigerian army for the first time, killing 23 soldiers. Their leader, one of the main bandits operating in Maradi, appears to be stepping up relations with jihadist groups.⁶⁵

The geography of the border strip is also conducive to the development of sanctuaries for armed groups, including jihadists. The wooded areas scattered along the border from Maradi to Douthi are already frequented by bandits but could also serve as a refuge for jihadists.⁶⁶ Gandou forest, located on the border between Douthi and Konni, is said to shelter so many armed men, both bandits and possible jihadists, that local residents call it "Sambisa 2", after the forest that the JAS uses as a base in north-eastern Nigeria. It was in this forest that the U.S. hostage was detained in October 2020. In 2017, in the forest of Baban Rafi (Maradi), the Nigerien authorities discovered a weapons cache that one of the arrested combatants helped identify as belonging to ISWAP.⁶⁷

The widespread violence in north-western Nigeria could spill over into Niger. It is still difficult to predict whether the banditry in the region will remain as it is, simple crime without a clear political motive, or whether it will evolve toward more organised insurgency. The latter scenario could develop even without the support of jihadist groups; but since 2012, most insurgencies in the Sahel have been facilitated by jihadist groups exploiting local divisions. The jihadisation of banditry is a consistent trend in these insurrections and presents a growing risk in the region.⁶⁸ On the Nigerian side, the JAS has announced its intention to recruit from bandit groups operating in north-western Nigeria, which Ansaru seems to already be doing.⁶⁹ Among

⁶⁴ "Nigéria : avec l'enlèvement des lycéens de Kankara, la nouvelle expansion de Boko Haram", RFI, 16 December 2020.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials, Maradi, 11-12 October 2020.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials, Maradi, 12 October 2020.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ In Torodi, for example, some of the jihadists were previously local bandits who had been defeated by self-defence groups. From 2018, with the jihadists' support, they "took their revenge" upon these groups. Crisis Group interview, elected official from Torodi, Niamey, 7 October 2020.

⁶⁹ Ansaru has reportedly already recruited one of the most important leaders of the Zamfara bandits. It appears that he mobilises herders, promising them security as long as their actions conform with the jihad, and thus prohibits, among other things, cattle rustling and kidnapping of civilians. Crisis Group online interview, Zamfara-based journalist, 10 September 2020. In addition, the ban-

these bandits are Nigerians and Nigeriens who harbour resentment against the state, notably pastoralists deprived of their means of subsistence.⁷⁰ Other Nigerien bandits could follow this trajectory and produce a Nigerien or even transnational hotbed of insurgency, which would challenge the authorities of both countries.

The penetration of jihadist groups in the region could, however, face resistance. The bandits can certainly supply experienced local recruits, but they can also slow down the jihadists' encroachment if the militants interfere with their economic interests, for example, by setting new rules for sharing loot. Moreover, the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolchildren since December 2020 first highlighted the ties between local criminals and the JAS, but their release once the criminals negotiated amnesties shows that the interests of the two groups do not always converge.⁷¹ The conflicts in Sokoto between the ISGS and bandits could recur.

On the other hand, the growing state military pressure on these criminal groups risks pushing bandits and jihadists closer together. As this pressure increases, bandits are pushed to accept, or even seek, jihadist support for their own protection. For Niger, the growing involvement of its armed forces in the fight along the border could heighten the threat by further exposing Nigerien territory to reprisals from these groups, as in the Diffa region (Niger) after 2015.⁷²

ditions are said to frequently refer to Islam and jihad. See Crisis Group Report, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, op. cit.

⁷⁰ A Tuareg originally from Niger, Halilu Mairakumi, previously a receiver of stolen camels who organises kidnappings and cattle rustling in Zamfara state, is suspected of being linked to Ansaru in north-western Nigeria. See the tweets by Ahmad Salkida, @A_Salkida, journalist, 5:21pm, 11 March 2019.

⁷¹ "Nigéria : le chef d'un des gangs ayant kidnappé plus de 300 écoliers rend les armes", RFI, 10 February 2021.

⁷² The launch of Nigerien military operations against Boko Haram motivated the retaliatory attacks in the Diffa region. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°245, *Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency*, 27 February 2017.

V. Security without Stabilisation

Niger reacted very early on to the deteriorating situation along the border strip, but mainly with reinforced security measures.⁷³ Since 2018, the authorities have deployed an army battalion to Madarounfa (Maradi department), which has training support from the Belgian army and outposts in Dan Kano, Baban Rafi and Shirgu.⁷⁴ Concurrently, the first Mobile Border Control Company, with 400 police officers, has been deployed in Maradi since May 2017 with U.S. support. It is now focused on combating banditry, having moved away from its original mission of controlling migratory flows.⁷⁵ The second mobile unit, with 252 police officers, was deployed in November 2019 in Konni (Tahoua). It was equipped and trained by EUCAP Niger, the European Union Capacity Building Mission which gives support to local security forces in Niger.

The results are generally positive. The Maradi mobile unit piloted the operation to dismantle the first jihadist camp of Jima Jimi in early 2019. The jihadists reportedly suffered few losses during this operation but were forced to retreat to northern Tillabery. In Maradi, there is unanimous recognition of the unit's usefulness, although since the attack it suffered on 1 December 2019 (see Section IV.B) it has seemingly cut back its mobility, one of its main strengths on the ground. As for the Konni mobile unit, Nigerien security actors criticise this second company and its command for making less use of its advantages of mobility than the Maradi company.⁷⁶

Security measures remain insufficient, however, while violence is increasing along this border strip in south-western Niger. Nigerien forces are simultaneously present on multiple fronts across the country and are often understaffed. Thus, the Maradi mobile unit was recently redeployed to Filingué, and several hundred Nigerien soldiers based in Maradi were sent to the eastern front, in the Diffa region.⁷⁷ The security measures in place around Doutchi and Konni are weak, and several local authorities and security forces are calling for better control of border crossings there.⁷⁸

The effectiveness of the response to this cross-border insecurity also depends on the country's cooperation with its Nigerian neighbour, which is longstanding but remains to be improved.⁷⁹ For many years, authorities on either side of the border

⁷³ Some important bandits have been eliminated, such as Souleymane Labo, who was killed in 2014, but others have been operating in the Maradi region since the mid-2000s, like one of the main leaders of the recent attacks in Maradi, who was arrested and then released in 2017. "Maradi: Arrestation du gangster le plus dangereux du Niger", TamTaminfo, 24 August 2014. Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

⁷⁴ "Le Niger renforce la sécurité sur sa frontière avec le Nigéria", Xinhua, 15 October 2018.

⁷⁵ The Mobile Border Control Companies were officially created in 2016. Their initial mandate to combat migratory flows stems from the commitment made by the Nigerien president to the European Union in particular to fight this phenomenon.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien security officials, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid. The state is reportedly considering the imminent creation of new units to respond to this need.

⁷⁹ In 2012, a defence agreement was signed between Niger and Nigeria covering the entire border of the two countries, but it is above all intended to counter the Boko Haram insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria. "Nigeria seeks Niger's military support against Boko Haram", Reuters, 21 May 2013.

had different approaches. Nigeria considered that banditry in its north-western regions was not a priority and that it did not justify closer cooperation with Niger.⁸⁰

The recent escalation of violence has been a game changer and progress has been made in terms of cross-border cooperation. In October 2018, a major joint military operation between Niger and Nigeria was carried out in the border areas of Maradi, notably in Gabi and Dan Kano, where at least 30 bandits were officially neutralised.⁸¹ The authorities should have systematised such operations to make them more effective over the long term. The progress should largely be credited to a rapprochement between the governors of the border areas of Maradi and Tahoua. In late 2019, a meeting in Maradi between the governor and his counterparts from the three Nigerian border states made it possible to set up mixed patrols (with vehicles offered by these states to the Maradi Regional Security Committee) and to give Niger the right of pursuit on Nigerian territory despite the official border closure.⁸² This same exemption was not successfully negotiated in Tahoua, preventing cooperation there from being as effective as in Maradi.

The authorities and their partners are essentially active on the security front, but few measures have been taken to prevent the population from taking up banditry or to redress the grievances that might fuel an insurrection. The state and international partners continue to under-invest in the livestock sector. With the exception of Switzerland, no outside backer has been substantially involved in the border strip area.⁸³ Moreover, a repressive approach takes precedence over the options of fostering dialogue and demobilising armed actors. Unlike Nigeria, in 2019 Niger explicitly refused to grant amnesty on the grounds that: “We do not dialogue with bandits”.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien authorities, Maradi and Niamey, October 2020.

⁸¹ “Au moins 30 ‘bandits’ tués lors des opérations conjointes des armées des Niger et Nigéria”, VOA Afrique, 16 October 2018.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Maradi state official, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

⁸³ Germany and the European Union have funded two programs – unrelated to the current violence – aimed at preventing irregular migration and facilitating returns.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Maradi state official, Maradi, 10 October 2020.

VI. Preventing the Spread

Beyond the security measures, which are essential but insufficient, Niger should develop preventive actions to slow down the spread of violence and avoid an insurrectionary situation. The livestock sector deserves special attention from the new president, Mohamed Bazoum, elected in March 2021, and increased investment to address the crisis it is experiencing. The Nigerien authorities should also be concerned with preserving social cohesion in the border strip to prevent the stigmatisation of certain communities and to supervise the development of self-defence groups before they get out of hand. Finally, the state should step up security efforts to avert an epidemic of violence, without ruling out negotiations to demobilise certain bandit groups.

A. *Mitigating Factors of Insurgency among Herders*

Livestock farming should become a priority policy area for the Nigerien authorities, both in the south west and elsewhere in Niger, so as to reduce the injustices faced by pastoralists that drive some of them to take up arms.

In the short term, the land commissions, intended to prevent and resolve conflicts related to natural resources, should better represent the interests of herders. Authorities should revise their composition (not the charters but the practices) to ensure that herders are represented and that joint commissions are systematised. The latter are provided for by the Rural Code of 1993; they are charged with mediating disputes between land users and therefore also assessing the damage in the event of conflicts, especially those involving crop farmers.⁸⁵

Pastoralists should also have more intermediaries who can defend their rights, whether technical and financial partners of cattle farmers' associations, such as the Association for the Revitalisation of Livestock in Niger, or associative networks of paralegals.⁸⁶ If herders had access to better counsel, they might well choose to resort to law rather than force.

Paralegals should be recruited by the Nigerien state or its partners on the basis of their roots in herding communities, and specially trained in pastoral land legislation, since the populations concerned notably suffer injustices in this area. Niger's partners could finance training programs for paralegals to make up for the insufficient number of these court officers in Niger. They could also encourage sharing experiences with states where this system is more developed, such as Canada or, in the sub-region, Mali.⁸⁷ These provisions would help curb the racketeering economy by allowing herders to oppose these practices by legal means. The presence of court-appointed coun-

⁸⁵ In January 2013, a decree laying out the operating procedures of the joint commissions was adopted. In practice, these procedures are rarely observed. The damage caused is calculated according to the number of hectares of field destroyed and the equivalent in lost crops.

⁸⁶ This association, created in 1991, is the main Nigerien group supporting livestock farming. It has launched actions aimed at better defending pastoral land rights and fighting injustices. There are very few paralegals in Niger (individuals from local communities – pastoral in this case – who are trained in defending their rights).

⁸⁷ See "Rapport général de la conférence sur le parajuridisme au Mali", USAID/DEMESO, June 2019. The Canadian Association of Paralegals is among the main organisations specialising in this field.

sel – paralegals empowered to defend litigants instead of lawyers under certain conditions – should also be encouraged by the state and its partners.

At the same time, Niger and its partners must support herders, whose livelihoods are in crisis, by protecting the mobility of nomadic pastoralists and by facilitating paths toward retraining or diversification of economic activity for those who so wish. For instance, the state can promote promising sectors (such as milk production, for example) and help people make a career change by providing support for vocational training and the purchase of equipment. Activities that involve restoring herds and fattening livestock can be developed. This type of support exists in certain regions of Niger, such as Diffa and Tillabery, where international backers have turned their attention, but remains limited in the Doutchi-Maradi strip due to lack of investment.

In the longer term, the state would benefit from making livestock farming a priority focus at the national level, particularly in the regions of Maradi, Tahoua and Dosso, in order to secure access to grazing areas and transhumance corridors. Backers, much like the Nigerien state, should develop preventive measures in high-risk regions such as these, rather than focus their support solely on regions in crisis. Nigerien authorities could also revise the rules for access to listed forests and development of grazing areas so that herders could benefit from partial, conditional or seasonal use of these protected spaces.

B. Preventing the Degradation of Communal Relations

To prevent communal violence, the approaches developed by the authorities in other regions of Niger should be extended to the border zone. For example, the High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP), which has been tasked with the mission, should rapidly launch dialogue forums between Hausa and Fulani in the areas most exposed to banditry (Guidan-Roundji and Madarounfa) or communal conflict (Bangui and Allela). Self-defence groups must take part if the creeping communal violence is to be halted. These dialogues or mediation measures, which flourish once conflicts have begun, would be much more effective if they were carried out preventively, before violence can create a wedge between communities. International partners could provide both financial and technical support to these efforts.

The authorities should also seek to more closely supervise the self-defence groups cropping up in the Maradi region since 2020. These groups are still at a sufficiently early stage to be effectively controlled. Their function is to secure rural areas when the state lacks the resources to do so, but their role must be strictly defined, including from a legal standpoint.

Crucially, these groups must be placed under the effective control of authorities, who must punish any abuses, notably to reduce the risks of communal violence. Local authorities should set up committees representing every community in a locality and headed by the mayor or prefect. This step would make it possible to limit the risk of these groups becoming locked in ethno-sectarian logic. The interior ministry must exercise strict oversight over weapons, based on background checks, excluding individuals previously involved in violence from carrying guns. The ministry should also enforce a stringent ban on possessing weapons of war. The authorities should task

the self-defence groups solely with protection of and intelligence gathering in villages to avoid any punitive operations.⁸⁸

C. *Securing the Territory and Demobilising Bandits*

The efforts already undertaken to secure the border strip must be maintained and extended to other high-risk areas such as the Douthi-Konni border section. At the same time, the authorities of both countries must strengthen their cooperation, in particular between the governors of Nigerian states and Nigerien regions. They must also bolster their intelligence-sharing efforts and step up joint operations to limit the possibility of bandits taking refuge in border areas. The authorities of Sokoto state and the Tahoua region must increase their cooperation, which is paralysed by the border closure.⁸⁹ The more the authorities of the two countries can mobilise and display efficiency, the less communities will be tempted to arm themselves.

Defence and security forces must respect human rights while conducting their operations against armed men; they could otherwise prove counterproductive and fuel insurrection, as has occurred elsewhere. In particular, the Nigerien forces must avoid being associated with the abuses committed by Nigeria's army.⁹⁰

A security approach should not prevent the authorities from simultaneously initiating measures to demobilise bandits. The main leaders are well known. Some may be willing to surrender following negotiations, something the HACP has already achieved in Tillabery and Tahoua, for example.⁹¹ Although they have not publicly proclaimed their grievances with the state, angles of negotiation could still be found. Men often take up arms due to frustration, a sense of injustice or when faced with an economic impasse, to which the state can provide answers. If the gulf between bandits and the authorities widens even more, certain armed men, whether militiamen or bandits, could cross over into jihadist insurgency, a scenario already observed in northern Tillabery.

⁸⁸ In Uganda, the state defined the missions and limited the areas of activity of the Arrow Boys of Teso, a group formed to fight the Lord's Resistance Army rebellion, which helped limit atrocities and facilitated their demobilisation. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°251, *Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies*, 7 September 2017.

⁸⁹ The Nigerian president officially reopened the borders on 16 December 2020. "Nigeria President Buhari orders immediate reopening of land borders", BBC, 16 December 2020.

⁹⁰ "War Crimes by Nigeria's Military", Amnesty International, 12 January 2018.

⁹¹ In 2018, the HACP succeeded in demobilising highway bandits operating in this border area of Mali through income-generating actions. Crisis Group interview, HACP official, Niamey, May 2019.

VII. Conclusion

On the border between Niger and Nigeria, organised crime is intensifying and transforming in an alarming way, foreshadowing insurrections that could benefit jihadist groups in search of new territories. Niger can still limit the spread of banditry by supplementing its security approach with preventive measures, notably to mitigate feelings of injustice experienced by herders and to strengthen the increasingly weak ties between communities. For their part, Niger's partners must take an interest in these areas before they face destabilisation. They could for instance fund a prevention program designed and run by the Nigerien authorities.

Niamey/Brussels, 29 April 2021

Appendix A: Map of the South-western Niger Border Zone



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

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Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

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