



Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's Emerging Communal Crisis

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°172

Dakar/Niamey/Nairobi/Brussels, 28 May 2021

What's new? Recent massacres of villagers in Niger's northern Tillabery region could mark a change in a conflict previously characterised mainly by fighting between jihadists and security forces. Authorities fear the growth of anti-jihadist vigilante groups could fuel more attacks on civilians.

Why does it matter? Tensions between jihadists and vigilantes, which often pit communities against one another, could lead to clashes that imperil civilians and pose new challenges for the state, as seen in neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso. Such clashes could fuel local grievances and provide the Islamic State with additional recruits.

What should be done? Niamey should discourage vigilante group formation, which has spurred violence, and mediate communal disputes that fuel armed group recruitment. It should also explore adding locals to the security forces' ranks, directing them to focus on protecting villagers from banditry, and seek ceasefires with militants.

I. Overview

Niger's border region of North Tillabery, reeling from jihadist attacks on security forces, is now at risk of sustained communal violence. On three recent occasions, ethnic Djerma have been massacred, sparking fears of retribution spiralling out of control. An Islamic State affiliate has claimed two of the assaults. Djerma villagers talk of arming themselves against jihadists, who are locally perceived as mostly ethnic Peul and seen as primarily responsible for a surge in crime. As they weigh how to respond, Nigerien authorities should learn from neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, both of which have tolerated the emergence of communal militias, only to see the ensuing turmoil drive more civilians into the hands of either jihadists or self-defence groups. Niamey should continue to discourage the formation of militias, step up efforts to protect villages while defusing intercommunal tensions, and keep the door open to dialogue with local militant commanders. It should also address factors underlying the crisis, including land disputes and political rivalries due to decentralisation.

Recent events suggest that the Mali-Niger border area of Niger's Tillabery region is headed for increasingly troubled waters. In the last two years, a local Islamic State

branch, known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has staged major attacks on security forces and bases along the Mali border to consolidate its grip on the area and its residents. Now, in the aftermath of shocking 2 January massacres in Tchomabangou and Zaroundareye, two villages close to the border, and a 15 March attack on people returning from a trade fair in Banibangou, in the same area, the risk that civilians are drawn into the conflict is growing. Both attacks came after villagers in North Tillabery, mostly ethnic Djerma, began organising as vigilantes to resist armed groups' predation and extortion.

Niamey fears that more such attacks could whip up communal tensions. Already, communities from the two groups – the Djerma, who are mainly sedentary farmers, and the Peul, who are mostly semi-nomadic herders – frequently oppose one another in increasing competition over access to land and resources as intercommunal relations have deteriorated amid decades of farmers' expansion toward the Malian border. After the 2 January massacres, some Djerma accused Peul ISGS members of attacking the villages to settle ethnic scores. Authorities have been keen to play down the fault line between Djerma and Peul, stressing that the leader of one attack was himself reportedly Djerma. But the potential for an escalation in ethnic violence remains. Although the jihadist group has been making inroads among Djerma as it seeks to broaden its reach, it relies primarily on semi-nomadic communities, mostly Peul but also Tuareg and Daosahak, as recruits.

The state has limited options for dealing with these problems. Its overstretched security forces seem unable to secure vast areas of Tillabery. Troops have partly retreated from the border after taking beatings from militants in attacks on military posts at Inatès and Chinegodrar, near the Malian border, in December 2019 and January 2020. They are accused of serious abuses against civilians, which has made some communities fearful of their presence.

Still, the answer to Tillabery's problems is not for Niamey to encourage the vigilantes who are already mobilising in reaction to jihadist violence. In Mali and Burkina Faso, the security forces' alliances with such militias have only spurred more killing. The formation of such groups in Niger seems to have led local jihadists to lash out with attacks on civilians. Beyond considering whether new troop deployments to help secure the region are feasible or – given rising abuses against civilians – even desirable, the government's best option will be to pursue a strategy that seeks to calm communal tensions, better protect villagers from surging banditry and once again test prospects for dialogue with militants. In particular:

- ❑ The government should step up efforts to defuse ethnic tensions, including through local messaging that plays to the idea that embracing inclusion and diversity has historically been one of Niger's distinctive strengths.
- ❑ Niamey should also expand on existing efforts to ease disputes over land rights, natural resources and local politics, which sharpen communal friction and heighten the risk of violence in the region.
- ❑ Police and gendarmes, who have been pulled into the anti-jihadist fight, should help convince communities that they need not arm themselves by resuming their traditional role of upholding public safety, focusing on curtailing armed banditry.

- State authorities should consider reaching out to local ISGS commanders to negotiate local ceasefires, in the hope that over the medium to long term success on this front could help coax them away from the group and even draw senior leaders to the table. Although the recent massacres could complicate dialogue efforts, the election as president of Mohamed Bazoum, one of few government officials to push for dialogue when he served as interior minister, may offer new impetus to start such talks.

II. Jihadists, Vigilantes, Mass Murder

The security and governance crisis in North Tillabery, an important base for ISGS, has taken an ominous turn.¹ On 2 January, scores of ISGS militants on motorbikes stormed the villages of Tchomabangou and Zaroumdareye in the Tondikiwindi commune bordering Mali. According to official estimates, they killed more than a hundred people, most of them Djerma.² On 15 March, masked gunmen stopped several vehicles returning from a trade fair in Banibangou, also near the Malian border, and killed an estimated 58 male Djerma passengers.³ Days later, on 21 March, militants killed more than a hundred people in an attack on civilians in Tilia, a rural commune in the Tahoua region just east of Tillabery.⁴ In May, ISGS, which has been making inroads into the area since 2015, claimed credit for the attacks in Tchomabangou, Zaroumdareye and Tilia.⁵ Repeated murders on this scale have raised fears that the crisis in Tillabery could be entering a new phase, with civilians at greater risk.⁶

¹ While this group is often called the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or ISGS, and this report refers to it as such, the Islamic State's own messaging refers to it as the Islamic State in West Africa Province, lumping it together with another group that operates in the Lake Chad basin. See also Crisis Group Africa Commentary, "The Islamic State Franchise in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", 29 October 2020.

² Crisis Group interviews, local and national officials, January 2021. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported ten boys and seven girls among the victims. "Niger : plus de 10,000 personnes ont fui de récentes violences dans la zone des 'trois frontières'", UN News, 7 January 2021. See also "Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on Attacks against Villages in Niger", UNICEF, 4 January 2021. The two villages are about 10km apart. "Carte de référence: Région de Tillabéri, Département de Ouallam", Reach, n.d.

³ Crisis Group interviews, nationals from Banibangou and Abala departments, Niamey, March 2021.

⁴ While killings in Tahoua bear some connection to the escalating violence in North Tillabery, they involve different communities that have developed a different relationship to armed self-defence groups. Hence, this briefing will not address them in detail.

⁵ See *al-Naba*, no. 287, 20 May 2021, p. 6. While all sources interviewed by Crisis Group held ISGS responsible for the Tondikiwindi attack, there is more uncertainty around the Banibangou massacres. Some sources suggest that armed bandits loosely affiliated with the ISGS decided to punish the village of Darey-Daye for previously killing or torturing Peul herders.

⁶ New attacks in May confirmed the rising risk to civilians, while highlighting the dangers to security forces. A 4 May attack on Intoussane (Banibangou) by ISGS militants killed at least sixteen soldiers and four civilians. See *al-Naba*, op. cit., p. 5. On 9 May, militants raided several villages in Anzourou, killing at least twenty civilians, stealing animals and giving residents three days to leave the region or be killed. Over the next few days, more than 10,000 villagers fled the zone. See "Niger, rapport de situation", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 17 May 2021.

When they first began operating in Tillabery, local Islamist militants, including ISGS, which has become the leading jihadist organisation in the border area, focused on attacking security forces, largely (though not entirely) sparing civilians as they attempted to woo them to their cause.⁷ These groups recruited in particular from among Peul pastoralists, whose grievances against the state and neighbouring ethnic groups had been deepening for decades. Militants' acts of violence against civilians were at first sporadic, but they increased as jihadists began targeting local leaders in an effort to compel their acquiescence. Throughout the border zone, ISGS has applied steady pressure upon these leaders, assassinating or abducting those who refused to comply with its dictates or whom it suspects of being state informants.⁸ For instance, in November 2019, its fighters executed the Djerma village chief of Tchomabangou because he allegedly refused to pay *zakat* (an Islamic tax).⁹

By early 2020, ISGS had imposed itself as the dominant force in the border area after inflicting heavy losses on the Nigerien army with large-scale attacks on the Inatès and Chinegodrar barracks at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020.¹⁰

Over the course of 2020, however, the situation changed. Fighting with rival jihadists and French airstrikes significantly weakened ISGS. In central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, ISGS lost ground and fighters to an al-Qaeda-aligned outfit, Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). During the year, an estimated 400-500 of its total fighters were killed by French strikes and in fighting with JNIM.¹¹ Despite those losses, however, none of the three Sahelian states redeployed substantial forces to areas previously under ISGS control.

The Mali-Niger border thus remains the group's stronghold but, even there, it seems worried about losing its grip. Whereas ISGS once sought to cultivate good relations with locals, its efforts to extract *zakat* from residents have become increasingly undisciplined, aggressive and chaotic.¹² With armed bandits also increasingly shaking down locals, the toll on civilians is growing. It could be that a weakened ISGS

⁷ In recent years, ISGS has developed the capacity to mount large-scale operations against Nigerien security forces. In December 2019 and January 2020, militants staged the deadliest attacks ever on those forces, killing over 150 soldiers in the two incidents combined. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°289, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020; and Hannah Armstrong, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Inatès", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 December 2019.

⁸ On rare occasions, ISGS targeted civilians as well during this period. Notably, the group killed eighteen people in Tillabery's Anzourou district in May 2020. See Moussa Aksar, "Region de Tillabery/Commune d'Anzourou : 18 civils tués dans une attaque armée", *L'Evenement Niger*, 10 May 2020. See also Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

⁹ Accounts differ as to the number of village chiefs killed in Tondikiwindi in November 2019. According to the Armed Conflict & Event Data Project (ACLED), militants killed three village chiefs and abducted two others on 22 November 2019. Some local sources told Crisis Group that militants killed the village chiefs of Tchomabangou and Zaroumdaray that day, but other reports received by Crisis Group suggest that the two villages had a single chief. Crisis Group interviews, local officials, January 2021.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

¹¹ Héni Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 3 March 2021.

¹² The tax collection has aggrieved pastoralists and farmers alike. One Fulani herder said three different militants had levied *zakat* from him in one year. Two were rival commanders competing for influence over the same zone and the third claimed to work for a commander who later denied having sent this collector. Crisis Group interview, Tondikiwindi resident, Niamey, February 2021.

is eager to gather more resources to relaunch its activities.¹³ Local commanders may also be taking advantage of the lull in oversight to take matters into their own hands.¹⁴

Whatever the reason behind it, *zakat*, now being extracted at higher rates and several times throughout the year, has fuelled local resentment. This predation, along with the sense that ISGS may be weakening, has pushed more villagers toward organised resistance. According to local sources, by the end of 2020, rural communities increasingly sought to protect themselves by setting up vigilante groups.¹⁵ In late 2020, the Comité Union Tillabéri pour la Paix, la Sécurité et la Cohésion Sociale, a Djerma-dominated organisation, included a call to develop self-defence groups under the command of retired military officials in a document listing eighteen recommendations for stabilising the Tillabery region.¹⁶

Villagers in Tchomabangou answered the call, gathering men from various neighbouring settlements to form a community defence group, allegedly with the assistance of a successful trader who also mobilised and armed young gold miners (known as *orpailleurs*) from the Téra area.¹⁷ On 15 December 2020, local sources say, these vigilantes killed two, or by some accounts three, ISGS representatives who had come to the village to levy taxes, steal cattle or buy supplies.¹⁸ Villagers then refused to cooperate with an ISGS delegation investigating the deaths. The militants responded first by kidnapping the village's new chief and declaring Tchomabangou an enemy settlement. The assailants on motorbikes arrived a few days later, perpetrating the mass murder of 2 January.¹⁹ While their initial target was the loosely armed militia in training, the attackers also shot villagers dead. An Islamic State communication claimed the attack aimed to put an end to villagers' organisation into state-sponsored self-defence groups.²⁰

In the case of the Banibangou massacre, locals' accounts diverge as to what triggered the killing, but most who spoke to Crisis Group mentioned a fledgling resistance

¹³ The weakening of ISGS appears relative or temporary. Indeed, in May the group seemed to be leading a new offensive against state forces, claiming two attacks that killed at least 40 Nigerien soldiers and national guardsmen. See *al-Naba*, op. cit.

¹⁴ In the Tondikiwindi commune, for example, local commanders appeared to increasingly compete with one another to levy *zakat*. Crisis Group interview, February 2020.

¹⁵ In addition to the group that formed in Tchomabangou, discussed immediately below, in Garbey (about 100km east of Tchomabangou), a Djerma trader had started funding a vigilante group before he was murdered by alleged ISGS militants on 27 November 2020. In retaliation, armed villagers ambushed and killed six to seven jihadists, alternatively described as Peul herders by a member of a pastoralist group in Niamey. In Mogodiougou (more than 50km east of Tchomabangou), villagers killed two ISGS militants who came to levy *zakat* on 8 December. A few days later, militants fought with armed villagers, killing about eight and losing an unknown number of their own combatants. ACLED database. Crisis Group interviews, Tondikiwindi commune resident, February 2020; Tondikiwindi resident, February 2021.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, leader of the Comité Union Tillabéri, Niamey, March 2021. "Suggestions du Comité Union Tillabéri pour le retour de la Paix", document consulted by Crisis Group.

¹⁷ According to other local sources, the vigilante group was organised after the killing of the village chief. Crisis Group interview, villager from Tchomabangou, February 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, villagers from Tchomabangou, local officials, Niamey, February 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local sources from Tondikiwindi, January and February 2021. The presence of young *orpailleurs*-turned-militiamen in the two villages could explain the unusually high number of people killed in the 2 January attack.

²⁰ See *al-Naba*, op. cit., p. 6.

movement in villages around Chinegodrar and Darey-Daye.²¹ After village chiefs and religious leaders encouraged young Djerma villagers to arm themselves with bows or guns, militants set out to punish the village of Darey-Daye, killing seven people in the process. Forced to retreat in the face of armed resistance, the militants subsequently ambushed several vehicles transporting passengers back from a trade fair to Chinegodrar and Darey-Daye, singling out Djerma men for execution.

The escalating violence in North Tillabery contrasts with trends in neighbouring Mali's Macina area, where the jihadist Katiba Macina insurgency has managed to impose its rule and curb levels of violence against civilians. In North Tillabery, however, ISGS does not presently have the capacity and may not even have the ambition to govern the region and its population. Instead, the group may have decided that excessive violence is the best tool to suppress burgeoning opposition and thus retain its position as the dominant armed group in the area.²²

III. Violence Takes an Ethnic Turn

Like the conflicts in Mali and Burkina Faso, the crisis in North Tillabery is increasingly fraught with ethnic undertones. While the massacres in the communes of Tondikiwindi and Banibangou appear to be the result of a jihadist bid to quell resistance among villagers and assert control, the presence of the militants is aggravating inter-communal tensions. These tensions, in turn, risk fuelling a worrying cycle of retaliatory attacks and ethnic strife.

The risk of escalation is fuelled by at least two longstanding sources of friction among the region's ethnic groups. First, population growth among farming communities has intensified their competition with nomadic pastoralists over resources in an area where land rights are already precarious for many because they were often established in parallel with the recent creation of villages, and therefore unevenly enforced and often contested. Secondly, decentralisation efforts such as the 2004 creation of rural communes, which the government rolled out to provide villagers with more rights and resources, have aggravated existing political rivalries, as chiefs now have to contend with elected officials and new demands from stigmatised classes.²³ Relations among communities then deteriorated in the wake of Mali's 2012

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, members of pastoralist associations, former ISGS sympathiser, resident of Banibangou and former elected representative from Banibangou, Niamey, March-April 2021.

²² According to a former ISGS supporter, at the end of 2020, the organisation's central command issued an order to quell any and all resistance. Interestingly, some commanders initially resisted this order. In Banibangou, a Peul commander refrained from punishing villages who refused to pay the *zakat*, allegedly because he grew up among Djerma villagers. He was later killed in a fight with Daosahak militiamen in March, shortly before the killing of Djerma passengers in the Banibangou area. He may have been replaced by commanders who are less hesitant to use force against Djerma villagers. Crisis Group interview, former ISGS supporter, Niamey, March 2021.

²³ See Rahmane Idrissa and Bethany McGann, "Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Inter-communal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border", Resolve Network, April 2021.

rebellion, which prompted various groups in Tillabery to take up arms. Most hailed from semi-nomadic communities, and many mobilised along ethnic lines.²⁴

The infiltration of jihadists made things worse. Before their entry into the region, communities and authorities were able to calm periodic flare-ups, albeit without offering long-term solutions to local disputes.²⁵ Since 2015, the presence of militants, as well as counter-terrorism operations locally perceived as targeting particular ethnic groups, have sharpened existing tensions and powered far more lethal forms of violence.

Social media messaging risks further widening divides. After the Tchomabangou attack, anonymous messages on social media networks blamed Peul for the killing, and called upon Djerma to take revenge.²⁶ While many interpreted the massacre as an ISGS attempt to discourage armed resistance from villagers who balk at tax collection, others blamed Peul members specifically, viewing Peul land disputes with Djerma as a driver of violence.²⁷ In the Banibangou incident, ISGS most probably sought to punish villages that had started to mobilise resistance and to spare those who did not join self-defence groups.²⁸ Still, what most Nigeriens noticed and shared on social media was the fact that the militants killed the Djerma passengers, but not the others.

Officials now fear that Niger could follow in the footsteps of neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali, where the rise of jihadist and vigilante groups, often both recruiting on an ethnic basis, has led to a vicious spiral of intercommunal killings. The violence is self-perpetuating, as each incident pushes more locals to join an armed group for protection.²⁹ In central Mali, the epicentre of that country's conflict, fighting between Peul herders and Dogon farmers has killed thousands since 2016. It has been fuelled partly by the enlistment of numerous Peul in JNIM and Dogon in the Dana Ambassagou vigilante group.³⁰ In northern Burkina Faso, the emergence of Koglweogo, vigilante groups created in the 2010s mostly by ethnic Mossi as well as Gourmantche,

²⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°261, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018.

²⁵ The most serious episodes opposed ethnic Djerma and Peul mostly in the Banibangou and Ouallam departments in 2008-2009, resulting in dozens killed. See Gandou Zakara et al., "Les Violations Collectives des Droits Humains Fondamentaux : Cas des Régions de Tillabéri et Dosso Niger", International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2011.

²⁶ Audio message on file with Crisis Group, 5 January 2021.

²⁷ In late 2020, the village's Djerma vigilante group allegedly killed Peul herders and stole their cattle, aggravating local tensions and setting the stage for conflict. Crisis Group interview, villager from Tchomabangou, February 2021.

²⁸ Several village chiefs, fearing ISGS retaliation, declined to join. Crisis Group interviews, resident of Banibangou and former ISGS supporter, Niamey, March 2021. According to one unconfirmed account, some village chiefs wrote a letter to ISGS command to make clear that they would not join the resistance movement.

²⁹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°293, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*, 5 November 2020; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°287, *Burkina Faso : sortir de la spirale des violences*, 24 February 2020.

³⁰ In March 2019, a chiefly Dogon self-defence group murdered over 150 Peul villagers in the Ogosagou village in central Mali. The attackers accused the villagers of having ties to jihadists. Jean-Hervé Jézéquel, "Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 March 2019. A similar massacre of 35 Peul by Dogon militiamen took place in Ogossagou on 14 February 2020. See "Mali: Army, UN Fail to Stop Massacre", Human Rights Watch, 18 March 2020.

Bisa and Foulse, has resulted in more intercommunal killings amid a concurrent rise in jihadist activity.³¹

In Niger, state officials are reluctant to talk publicly about ethnic tensions, an extremely contentious issue. The Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP), a council mandated by the Nigerien government to tackle the roots of instability in Tillabery, has done well to play down the role of communal animosities in fuelling the recent killings.³² On 9 January, the HACP's president, General Mahamadou Abou Tarka, gave a speech near Tondikiwindi, stressing that ISGS leaders in Tillabery, while initially all Peul, now include several Djerma commanders, such as Hamidou Hama, who authorities say led the assailants in Tchomabangou and Zaroundareye.³³ The fighting was not primarily intercommunal, he implied.

Nevertheless, many perceive ISGS as dominated by Peul, and most known commanders are Peul. The organisation's recruitment among the Djerma – by far the largest ethnic group in the Tillabery region – is still fairly limited.³⁴

The widely accepted assertion that a Djerma led the killings in Tchomabangou and Zaroundareye, however, does suggest that ISGS has become adept at recruiting across communal lines in Tillabery and at exploiting intra-ethnic splits. For example, Hamidou, also known as "Maitouwo", joined ISGS amid violent tensions between two rival Djerma communities. From November 2018 to January 2019, as a decades-long dispute over agricultural rights heated up, members of Hamidou's community, known as Tingara 1, clashed with their neighbours in Tingara 2, resulting in several deaths and displacement of civilians.³⁵ Hamidou had by that point reportedly developed business links with ISGS, but made the jump to active militancy after Tingara 2

³¹ Koglweogo killed scores of Peul villagers in Yirgou, northern Burkina Faso, in January 2019, accusing them of harbouring Islamists who had allegedly killed a Mossi chief. In a March 2020 attack, a Koglweogo self-defence group killed at least 43 Peul civilians when it opened fire on another village in northern Burkina Faso. See "Burkina Faso: Witness Testimony Confirms Armed Group Perpetrated Mass Killings", Amnesty International, 20 March 2020; and "Burkina Faso: New Massacres by Islamist Armed Groups", Human Rights Watch, 23 April 2020.

³² The HACP, first named the High Authority for Restoring Peace, is a council founded in 1995 by the Nigerien government to ensure implementation of the peace deal ending the Tuareg rebellion in 1995. The institution was successful in securing representation for Tuareg leaders as well as in disarming and reintegrating former rebels. In the 2000s, the HACP's mission gradually turned toward tackling the roots of insecurity in several regions including Tillabery. In 2018, it conducted negotiations with prominent Peul leaders in this region in an effort to curb the Islamic State's influence, though with limited success. The HACP notably receives funding from the UN and European Union, among other donors. Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

³³ Général Mahamadou Abou Tarka, "Allocution du Président de la Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix, Forum de dialogue Administration-Population de Ouallam", Ouallam, 9 January 2021. Abu Tarka named nine Djerma ISGS commanders and six Peul. He made sure to specify each commander's ethnicity. See also "'They came to kill everyone': Niger massacre survivors tell of horror", AFP, 11 January 2021; and "Déclaration du Général Abou Tarka: la polémique enfle sur les réseaux sociaux; où est la part de vérité?", Niamey Info, 11 January 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tondikiwindi resident, February 2021. Djerma accounted for almost 64 per cent of the population in Tillabery, while Peul accounted for about 13 per cent, according to the most recent data, which nevertheless dates from 2001. "Répartition de la population résidente de nationalité nigérienne, selon l'ethnie et la région, en 2001", *Annuaire statistique des cinquante ans d'indépendance du Niger*, INS, 2010.

³⁵ At least six people died in or near Tingara from November 2018 to January 2019. ACLED data.

villagers allegedly denounced his ties to the jihadists and security forces attempted to arrest him.³⁶ From 2019 to 2021, he rose as a commander in the jihadist movement, entrusted with overseeing its recruitment and taxation efforts in Djerma areas.³⁷

The absorption of Djerma into ISGS ranks signals a strategy for expanding influence by drawing in recruits from across communal lines.³⁸ For example, the group has exploited conflicts among Peul, Tuareg and Daosahak nomads to bring disaffected members of all three groups into the fold.³⁹ But while recruitment of nomads has helped the organisation in controlling the sparsely populated Mali-Niger border zone, the inclusion of more Djerma could give the group greater reach into more densely populated areas of central Niger. Although communal tensions sometimes reverberate among the jihadists themselves, for the time being ISGS has managed to keep them in check through internal diplomacy.⁴⁰

IV. The Authorities' Track Record

Rising violence in and around Tondikiwindi and Banibangou since late 2020 is a stark illustration of the twin crises faced by the Nigerien authorities, who seek to counter ISGS and protect civilians while also managing the deterioration of communal relations in North Tillabery.

At present, state security forces are simply not able to protect every part of this remote area. They have retreated from several key border outposts following the devastating attacks on the Inatès and Chinegodrar barracks in December 2019 and January 2020, and authorities remain reluctant to redeploy fully along the border.⁴¹ A local official described the entire northern stretch of Tondikiwindi, which is home to pastoralists and farmers, as “unreachable” due to the danger posed by ISGS militancy.⁴² Security personnel who do patrol this area restrict their visits to far-flung villages to a few days or even hours. The 2 January massacre came just one day after

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, villager and local sources, January 2021. Crisis Group interviews, local and national officials, January 2021. Crisis Group has previously urged Nigerien authorities and NGO partners to redouble efforts to make peace between the two Tingara villages as a means of weakening jihadists' ability to exploit local grievances and demonstrating the state's usefulness as an ally. See Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local official, villager, January 2021.

³⁸ Recruiting among non-pastoralist groups seems more advanced in the northern Zarmaganda area, which coincides with the western-central part of the border with Mali. On the eastern border (toward Abala and Ikarfane), all local commanders are either Peul or Tuareg/Daosahak, but sources also mention the presence of renowned Djerma and Hausa *junoud* (Arabic for soldiers) in the unit. Crisis Group interview, resident of Abala, Niamey, March 2021.

³⁹ Armstrong, “Behind the Jihadist Attack in Inatès”, op. cit.

⁴⁰ For example, there are a few accounts of tensions between Peul and Djerma ISGS commanders over control of taxes, particularly in villages where both Peul and Djerma live. Crisis Group interview, Tingara resident, January 2002.

⁴¹ See Armstrong, “Behind the Jihadist Attack in Inatès”, op. cit., for details of the Islamic State attack on Inatès in December 2019. In January 2020, Islamic State militants killed scores of military personnel in an attack at Chinegodrar. See “Death toll in Niger army base ‘rises to 89’”, Al Jazeera, 12 January 2020.

⁴² This area is infamous as the site of the Islamic State attack that killed five Nigerien soldiers and four U.S. special forces personnel in October 2017.

a Nigerien army unit patrolling the surrounding area withdrew, suggesting that jihadists monitor military movements and time their attacks accordingly.⁴³

To address the security vacuum in North Tillabery, the national guard last year recruited 500 young men from various local communities for deployment to their own regions as part of mixed units.⁴⁴ The state is also trying to better separate the duties of the military and police, which would free up the internal security forces to tackle banditry rather than fight the insurgency. President Mohamed Bazoum seems sensitive to the need for this change; in his 2 April inauguration speech, he stressed the need to better enforce the distinction between the two forces.⁴⁵ But these measures will take time to bear fruit. Attempts to improve recruitment and training of internal security forces may yield mixed results as long as they remain under military command in North Tillabery, which limits their operational capacity.⁴⁶

Moreover, even when the Sahelian states have been able to mount military action, it has sometimes come with disastrous consequences for civilians. Sometimes problems have arisen because security forces outsourced their work to ethnic-based armed groups.⁴⁷ In 2017 and 2018, Nigerien authorities authorised Malian ethnic militias, mainly Tuareg and Daosahak, to take on ISGS on the Nigerien side of the border. These militias in turn unleashed indiscriminate violence against Peul, driving many Peul to seek alliances with ISGS.⁴⁸

Nigerien state forces are suspected of abuses as well. Anti-jihadist operations following the December 2019 and January 2020 attacks resulted in the killing or disappearance of 102 civilians, allegedly at the security forces' hands.⁴⁹ Fear and low morale among the country's overstretched, under-resourced security forces, who have suffered their own great losses in this zone, may make them increasingly prone to

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, local leader, January 2021. See "Rapport de la mission conjointe dans la zone de Ouallam", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 5 January 2021.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, President-elect Mohamed Bazoum, Niamey, April 2021.

⁴⁵ In his inauguration speech, President Bazoum stated: "Tirant les leçons de ce combat que nous menons depuis bientôt 10 ans, je mettrai un accent particulier sur la rationalisation de notre action qui doit résulter d'une distinction intelligente entre les missions de l'armée et celle des forces de sécurité intérieure". Presidency of the Republic of Niger, 2 April 2021.

⁴⁶ This is the case for Operation Almahahou, the main military operation in North Tillabery. Crisis Group interview, security forces officer, Niamey, March 2021.

⁴⁷ Such militias are increasingly active in Burkina Faso and in Mali. Dana Ambassagou militiamen have fought jihadist groups in central Mali's Mopti region. On 16 September 2020, they reportedly repelled a JNIM attack on the village of Niangabo (Bandiagara *cercle*). (A *cercle* is an administrative unit.) Two months later, Dana Ambassagou militiamen routed JNIM fighters attempting to raid the village of Guimini on 14 November (Bandiagara *cercle*). Likewise, Koglweogo members have also notched a few victories over jihadist groups operating in Burkina Faso. On 9 February 2019, they repelled presumed JNIM or ISGS militants from the village of Wondo (Arbinda district, Soum province, Sahel region), after those gunmen attacked the local chief's residence. On 20 March 2020, Koglweogo militiamen reportedly defeated a group of suspected ISGS or JNIM militants present in Pobe Mengao (Pobe Mengao district, Soum province, Sahel region).

⁴⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ At least 71 bodies were found in six mass graves. Many of the dead were last seen being arrested by security forces. Others who were arrested remain missing. Most of the victims were reportedly Tuareg and Daosahak. See "Mission d'Enquête, d'Investigation, de Vérification et d'Établissement des Faits en cas de Violation des Droits Humains dans la Commune Rurale d'Inatès, Département d'Ayorou, Région de Tillabéri", CNDH-Niger, 2020.

using heavy-handed tactics. In the early hours of 30 April, Nigerien soldiers killed more than twenty ethnic Daosahak detainees they had arrested near Chinegodrar. The defence ministry claimed they were planning a new attack on Banibangou and died trying to escape detention.⁵⁰ A Daosahak community group, however, said they were ordinary citizens and called for an investigation, listing the victims' names.⁵¹

The state's political efforts to calm tensions have also faced problems. Previous government-led forums aiming to address grievances and build trust between locals and security forces have not stemmed the violence in the Tondikiwindi commune or elsewhere in Tillabery. A late 2019 forum intended to reconcile the two Tingara villages was disrupted by the fresh fighting between jihadists and security forces that followed the Inatès and Chinegodrar attacks. An emphasis on defeating jihadists militarily has often meant that local mediation and dialogue initiatives lag behind in terms of the authorities' attention. Many such initiatives, including those attempting to find or implement consensual solutions for the management and allocation of natural resources, have suffered from a lack of consistent investment by the state.⁵²

Authorities are aware that the Tillabery crisis requires political engagement, but their attempts so far have fallen short. On 4 January, two days after the Tondikiwindi massacre, senior officials in Niger's national security council met, vowing to better protect the border zone and support residents who lost food supplies in fires set by jihadists. On 9 January, the HACP hosted a forum involving a wide range of community leaders and elected officials in Ouallam, the capital of the Ouallam department that includes Tondikiwindi, to address the risk of intercommunal conflict. The forum seemed more focused on preventing immediate violence than on resolving underlying disputes, however. While these efforts are a step in the right direction, more concrete follow-up is needed.

V. Options for Calming the Crisis

Given the challenges of defeating the local Islamic State branch militarily, at least as long as the jihadists can dart across the border into Mali, authorities will have to look to a diversified set of strategies for containing its spread, protecting civilians and stabilising Tillabery. Different sources of violence become dangerously entangled – from banditry and land disputes to jihadist activities. Most worryingly, recent events are showing that violence is taking an ethnic turn, with civilians increasingly at risk of slaughter on the basis of belonging to a particular ethnic group or village.

To address the growing risk of ethnic violence and prevent it from developing further, one thing Niamey should do is discourage the creation of new self-defence groups that are forming in response to jihadist, bandit and communal violence. Such groups would likely make the already fraught situation in Tillabery even worse. A number of local politicians, village chiefs and businessmen are pushing for the creation of these groups with or without state support. But for Nigerien authorities to sanction this approach would be to ignore the hard-won lessons of neighbouring states. Col-

⁵⁰ "Niger : une vingtaine de terroristes présumés tués dans l'ouest du pays (officiel)", Xinhua, 3 May 2021.

⁵¹ "Niger : une tuerie, deux versions sur l'identité des victimes", *Dakar Actu*, 3 May 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°154, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, 24 April 2020.

laboration between the state and Dana Ambassagou and Koglweogo vigilantes in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, respectively, has accelerated ethnic violence against civilians in these areas.⁵³ Moreover, the recent massacres in North Tillabery suggest that the creation of self-defence groups can wind up putting Djerma civilians in even greater peril. In Tchomabangou and Darey-Daye, villages were punished precisely for launching self-defence groups.

Thus far, except for its above-referenced alliance with Mali-based groups in 2017 and 2018, Niamey has wisely resisted the temptation to rely on ethnic militias to play a role in securing North Tillabery, aware that they can feed wider communal violence. It should continue to discourage the formation of these groups by dissuading communities from mobilising to arm themselves.⁵⁴ It should also, in an effort to prevent ethnic tensions from spiralling out of control, build on recent HACP messaging to formulate a persuasive state narrative condemning communal violence. Ethnic diversity and inclusivity have traditionally been central to Niger's national identity, and many Nigeriens view them as something that sets the country apart from its neighbours. Now, however, social media posts propagating an ethnic interpretation of recent killings are fuelling hostility among communities. To counteract this effect, state authorities should look for ways to stress the need for reconciliation between communities and offer a more nuanced narrative of the spiralling violence in North Tillabery.

At the same time, if the government wishes to persuade villagers not to arm themselves in self-defence, they will need to pursue a mix of short- and long-term efforts to demonstrate that the state can protect them. Military authorities could, for example, consider reassigning troops to border posts, including Inatès and Ikarfane, and conducting counter-terror operations along the Malian border. Should they choose this option, they should exercise careful oversight given the now-known risks of soldiers committing abuses against civilians in this area. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has played a key role in investigating and publicising military abuses against civilians in the last year. It should continue to shine a light on abuses and push for accountability.

Meanwhile, Niamey should direct the police, gendarmes and national guard to become far more active in countering rising banditry, especially when it comes to arresting criminals and returning stolen cattle or goods. Doing so would not only go some way toward rebuilding trust between security forces and rural communities, but also demonstrate the state's readiness to protect rural dwellers, provide other basic services they value and help stem escalating communal frictions.

In the longer term, Nigerien authorities should take advantage of ISGS's apparent weakening to carry out security reforms. One such reform might involve disentangling the military and internal security forces, which have different missions but are under a single military command patrolling the border. Civil and military authori-

⁵³ See Crisis Group Reports, *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali and Burkina Faso : sortir de la spirale des violences*, both op. cit.

⁵⁴ In June 2020, during a meeting at the prime minister's office, some leaders of northern Tillabery sedentary communities, mostly Djerma, voiced their distress regarding rising insecurity in their area and urged the government to protect them or allow communities to protect themselves. Similar calls were voiced during the Ouallam forum in January following the Tchomabangou attacks. Crisis Group interviews, meeting participants, Niamey, February 2021.

ties should also continue working together to make the security forces more locally representative, which could help reduce friction with locals over the long term. State security forces will continue to be the primary protection that these communities have, however imperfect. A force that relies more heavily on local recruits might find it easier to win residents' trust, would likely have valuable knowledge of the terrain and could for these reasons be better positioned than it is now to deliver on promises of civilian protection. While, as Crisis Group has previously noted, this approach would involve risks that would have to be managed, it remains a better option than relying solely on security forces from elsewhere.⁵⁵

Pursuing local ceasefires through dialogue is a further measure that Niamey could consider to shield civilians from the violence. President Bazoum could – publicly or privately – designate a special office, attached to the presidency, to reach out to local jihadist commanders and start conversations appealing to their community-based and socio-economic interests. Authorities would most likely need to offer a range of incentives similar to what was offered to Niger's Tuareg rebels in the 1990s, such as commitments to integrate fighters into security forces, bring rebel leaders into regional positions of influence, protect vulnerable minorities and invest in regional development. The ceasefire should include an end to *zakat* extraction at gunpoint for those living in the affected areas.

Such discussions will create risks for those involved and it will be important for state authorities to allay militants' potential fears that the state and its foreign partners are using mediators to track and kill them.⁵⁶ To improve coordination between military and political efforts, and prevent a scenario where the two act against one another's interests, President Bazoum should give this office the authority to rein in military operations in parts of the border zone should they need a lull to move forward with negotiations, and should a non-aggression pact become reality.⁵⁷

While it is almost certainly premature to try to bring the ISGS commander, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, to the table, that would be the ultimate goal of a dialogue-focused strategy.⁵⁸ If Niamey can begin to peel border zone commanders away from ISGS, and reverse some of the group's momentum, then perhaps Sahraoui's calculations will change. He did, after all, begin negotiations with senior officials in 2017 before they were derailed.⁵⁹ If Sahraoui is willing to resume talking, authorities could consider offering the non-aggression pact they discussed with him in 2017.⁶⁰

The timing may seem terrible for dialogue with ISGS militants, coming so close on the heels of horrific massacres. Niger's most important foreign partner, France, remains steadfastly opposed to such dialogue. At a 15 February summit in the Chadian

⁵⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, op. cit. As noted in this report, amid rising intercommunal tensions, some new recruits might seek to pursue local agendas wearing government uniforms. Additionally, if some communities are left out of the recruitment drive, they may perceive the state as biased against them. If the authorities choose to pursue this option, they should be careful to recruit from among all local ethnic groups, form mixed units and take the time to properly train, equip and deploy them.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., for more on the coordination issue.

⁵⁸ Ibid., for more on luring Sahraoui to the table.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

capital N'Djamena, President Emmanuel Macron, a strong proponent of French military intervention in the Sahel, reiterated this opposition.⁶¹ The notion of talking to militants likewise remains controversial in other Sahelian states.

Nevertheless, in Burkina Faso, where Prime Minister Christophe Dabiré publicly ruled out dialogue, covert meetings between senior officials and jihadists beginning October 2020 produced a makeshift ceasefire that considerably slowed violence in the months that followed.⁶² In Mali, public support is coalescing around efforts to strike a deal with jihadists after years of destructive fighting between insurgents and self-defence groups.⁶³ Niger, the first Sahelian state to explore the dialogue option when Bazoum was interior minister in 2016-2017, should not lag behind. Now that he is president, Bazoum has the authority to pursue dialogue with jihadists as part of efforts to stop intercommunal violence in Tillabery from escalating further.

Finally, authorities should also place a higher priority on measures to resolve disputes within and between communities, over resources in particular, to address drivers of violence and show that the state has a useful role to play in governance. The HACP, for example, could, with support from foreign partners or NGOs, put a more systematic effort into peacebuilding endeavours to address and ease tensions, whether over land use grievances or among local authorities, villages or communities, starting with villages where tensions are high and where jihadists have already started to actively recruit fighters.

VI. Conclusion

Niger is at serious risk of seeing more mass killings like those that have traumatised neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso. As jihadists continue to recruit from and prey upon local communities, forming self-defence groups may seem like a solution for the civilians who live there, but forming such militias risks triggering new cycles of violence that may ultimately strengthen ISGS. While Niger's authorities, struggling to overcome the jihadists militarily, have thus far set a positive example in the central Sahel by avoiding the use of proxy homegrown militias for counter-terror operations at the border with Mali, they are under pressure to protect their people. Niamey does not have any easily actionable solution at hand. Yet, through a mix of calibrated security measures, messaging to calm ethnic tensions, efforts at dialogue with militant groups and initiatives to manage community-level disputes, Niger's authorities will be best able to move toward their security goals and stop a trend of terrible violence against civilians from getting yet worse.

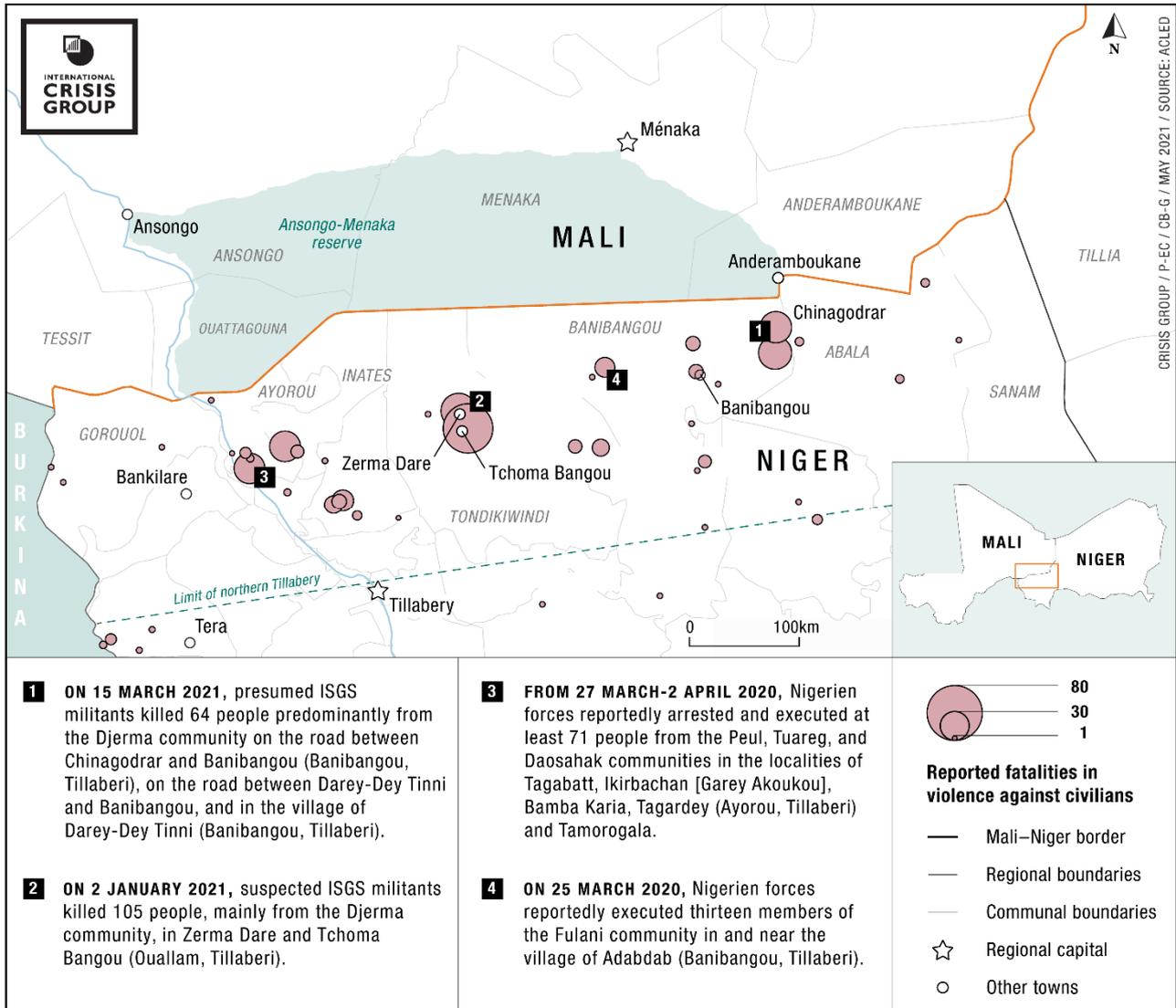
Dakar/Niamey/Nairobi/Brussels, 28 May 2021

⁶¹ In a press statement at the N'Djamena summit, Macron said: "Concrètement, nous avons ces dernières semaines consolidé une convergence avec nos interlocuteurs du G5 Sahel pour considérer que Iyad Ag Ghaly et Amadou Koufa sont des ennemis et en aucun cas des interlocuteurs". "Afrique : conférence de presse d'Emmanuel Macron au terme du Sommet du G5 Sahel", Universal TV, 15 February 2021.

⁶² "Burkina Faso : les autorités prêtes à négocier avec les groupes jihadistes?", RFI, 5 February 2021.

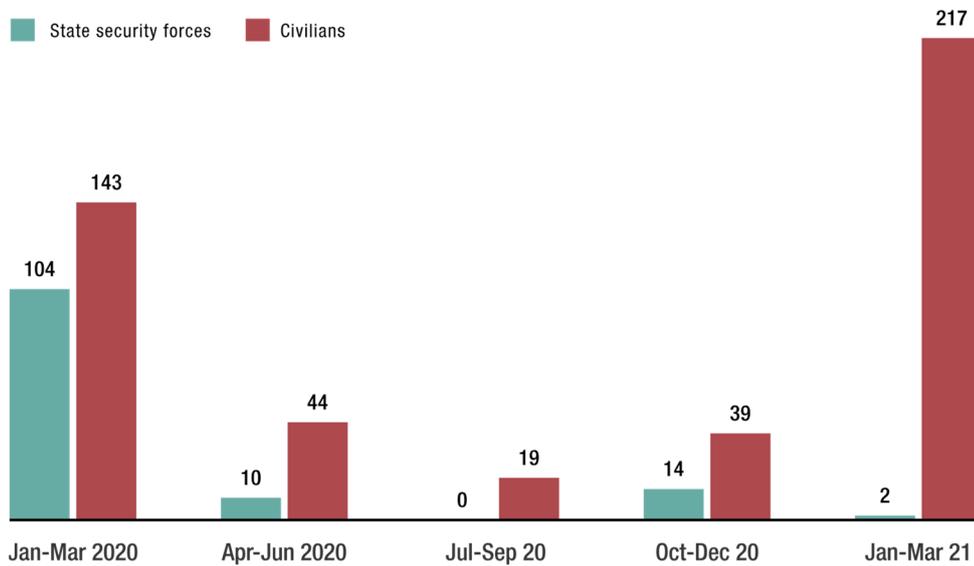
⁶³ "Moctar Ouane, 1er ministre du Mali : dialogue avec les jihadistes 'en cours' en 'prolongement de l'action militaire'", RFI, 20 December 2020.

**Appendix A: Map of the Deadliest Attacks on Civilians,
 March 2020-March 2021**



CRISIS GROUP / P-EC / CB-G / MAY 2021 / SOURCE: ACLED

Appendix B: Security Forces and Civilians Killed in Tillabery Between January 2020 and March 2021



As the number of security forces killed declined during this period, the number of civilians killed rose dramatically.

Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict & Event Data Project), as of 3 April 2021. Reported fatalities are as defined by the ACLED codebook.

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2018

Special Reports and Briefings

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

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Running Out of Options in Burundi, Africa Report N°278, 20 June 2019 (also available in French).

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Réduire les tensions électorales en République centrafricaine, Africa Report N°296, 10 December 2020 (only available in French).

New Challenges for Chad's Army, Africa Report N°298, 22 janvier 2021 (only available in French).

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After Kenya's Leaders Reconcile, a Tough Path Ahead, Africa Briefing N°136, 13 March 2018.

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