

**EVALUATION & ANALYTICAL SERVICES (EAS) PROJECT FOR  
THE REGIONAL PEACE AND GOVERNANCE PROGRAMS  
ASSESSMENT OF THE RISK OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN  
NIGER**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AEC	Alternative Espace Citoyen
AEMUN	Association des Etudiants Musulmanes Universitaires du Niger
AFN	Association des Femmes Nigériennes
AIN	Association Islamique du Niger
AJM	Association des Jeunes Musulmanes
ANASI	Association Nigérienne Pour l'Appel à la Solidarité Islamique
AQ	Al Qaeda
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ARCI	Association Pour le Rayonnement de la Culture Islamique
BH	Boko Haram
CAC	Community Action Committee
CADDH	Cadre d'Actions pour la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme
CASPA	Cabinet d'Analyses et d'Action pour la Sécurité et la Paix
CDP	Communal Development Plan
CLUSA	Cooperative League of the United States of America
CDS	Convention Démocratique et Sociale
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CEPPS	Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
CVIE	Countering Violent Islamist Extremism
CROISADE	Comité de Réflexion et d'Orientation Pour La Sauvegarde des Libertés Acquisées
CIN	Conseil Islamique du Niger
CASIN	Collectif des Associations Islamiques du Niger
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EERN	Églises Évangélique de la République du Niger
EU	European Union
FAN	Forces Armées Nigériennes
FARS	Forces Armées Révolutionnaires de Sahara
FNIS	Forces Nationales des Interventions et de Sécurité
GON	Government of Niger
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat
HDI	Human Development Index

IRSH	Institut de Recherches des Sciences Humaines
MAA	Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad
MCC	Millenium Challenge Corporation
MINUSMA	Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation du Mali
MISMA	Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali
MNJ	Mouvement Nigerien Pour la Justice
MNLA	Mouvement National de la Libération de l'Azawad
MNSD	Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement
MUJAO	Mouvement pour Uicité et Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OIM	Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations
PDEV	Peace through Development Project
PNDS	Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme
POAS	Plans d'Occupation et d'Affectation des Sols
RFI	Radio France International
TMG	The Mitchell Group
TSCTI	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USAID/WA	United States Agency for International Development/West Africa
USG	United States Government
USN	Union des Scolaires Nigériens
VE	Violent Extremism
VIE	Violent Islamist Extremism
VIEs	Violent Islamist Extremists
USAID/WA	USAID/West Africa Regional Mission

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report updates a 2009 CVE assessment which concluded that there was a very low risk of Violent Extremism (VE) affecting Niger in the short and medium term.

The Mitchell Group, Inc. (TMG) in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development/West Africa (USAID/WA) and relevant USAID/Washington stakeholders, developed the scope of work (SOW). The SOW mandates the assessment team to apply the analytical principles found in three USAID documents to identify drivers of violence and the types of programs needed to counter violent extremism (CVE). This assessment should provide a sound analytical foundation for future CVE programming in Niger, not only for USAID, but also for other U.S. Government (USG) agencies, international donors and the Government of Niger (GON).

While identifying political, socio-economic and cultural drivers facilitating diverse forms of Violent Extremism (VE), this assessment focuses on the measures that can be taken to prevent the spread of immediate VE threats and reinforce resilience factors needed to resist VE and other forms of conflict in the longer term.

The assessment interviewed GON officials, political leaders, representatives of civil society and the media, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, Islamic scholars, local government officials, customary chiefs, USAID and embassy officials, donor representatives, NGOs, and PDEV II project staff. The team also held more than a dozen focus groups in Agadez and Diffa, two high-risk regions that included local youth, women, refugees, ex-combatants, religious leaders, herders and farmers, and ethnic minorities.

The assessment examined changes in the external environment that increased the potential for VE to emerge in Niger. The assessment team drew the following conclusions concerning the impact of events and developments in Mali, Libya, and Nigeria:

- Lack of political will and/or capacity to effectively combat VE, corrupt and divided government, a weak army, and sanctuaries in ungoverned or poorly governed

territories provide excellent opportunities for well-armed radical and organized Islamist forces to expand the scope of their activities (Mali).

- While the vast Sahara desert serves as a sanctuary, rear base, and launching pad for radical groups, it also isolates and keeps them far away from major population centers.
- Having been used and betrayed by radical Islamist groups, Malian Tuaregs are unlikely to develop alliances with AQIM and MUJAO in the future.
- Boko Haram (BH) poses an immediate danger to Niger because of its proximity to the country and there are strong kinship ties between BH militants with families on the Nigerien side of the border.
- The collapse of the Gaddafi regime was accompanied by the seizure of advanced weaponry by Islamist groups that used these weapons to defeat the poorly equipped Malian army and by the Toubou community who used these weapons to control southern Libya and the Trans-Saharan trade routes and fight Libyan Islamists.
- The war in Mali brought Niger into the Western anti-terrorism coalition which in turn provided Mali with western military support and large increases in financial aid to the GON and the Nigerien military, resources needed to shore up the current administration.
- On the other hand, Niger's sending of troops to Mali and membership in the western anti-terrorist coalition exposed them to reprisals by AQIM, MUJAO, and BH.

Second, the assessment team also looked at the evolution of Niger's physical, socio-economic and political environment.

Higher population and urbanization growth rates have increased the youth bulge and made it more difficult for the GON to keep up with the public demand for public services. Population pressures have stretched the carrying capacity of Niger's farm lands and grazing areas to its limits which in turn has sparked increases in violent conflicts between farmers and herders because of growing competition over access to land, water, and grazing areas.

The growing inability of male heads of households to keep their children in school, provide them with resources to get married, and offer them land and livestock as part of their inheritance has contributed to the breakdown of family solidarity and parental authority. Drug use among youth is increasing and crime has become a major source of income and employment for youth.

Niger went through a period of political turbulence between 2009 and 2011 that started with the end of the Tuareg rebellion, Mamadou Tandja's efforts to seek a third term as president and his removal through a military coup. The military regime organized a referendum to approve a new constitution in 2010 and then kept its promise to restore civilian rule by organizing national presidential, legislative and regional elections in 2010 and 2011.

The Issoufou regime joined the western anti-terrorism alliance, promised to make reforms to reduce corruption and launched an ambitious "Renaissance" development program designed to reduce food insecurity and improve public services and infrastructure. Issoufou reduced the risk of a resumption of the Tuareg rebellion by offering older Tuareg leaders of the 1990s insurgency major government positions and control over regional and local government institutions in Agadez. This was perceived by many Nigerien youth as rewarding insurgency, further creating an atmosphere of lack of rule of law.

After three years in power, the Issoufou regime has lost credibility because of its failure to implement its reform and development programs and to provide tangible results in improving living conditions, public services, and economic opportunities for Nigeriens. Niger's political class still believes in political power as the road to riches and maintains a neo-patrimonial approach to governance.

The current political division has been precipitated by the dissolution of Issoufou's alliance with the President of the National Assembly and rival candidate for the Presidency in the 2016 elections, Hama Amadou. Issoufou's effort to oust him from his position has, since August 2014, at least temporarily been lessened with Amadou's flight to France to avoid arrest on charges of participating in a baby trafficking scandal. Amadou has claimed that this is simply a politically motivated maneuver such as has occurred before when former President Tandja imprisoned him on corruption charges. He also claims that he is likely to return at some point. Even with Amadou absent from the political scene, the country remains divided politically among the supporters and clients of the leading political personalities. The prospects for regime change through violence, however, are low in the short term. If widespread violence should break out, the military might again intervene to restore order. At the present time, this is unlikely.

While the Islamic landscape in Niger is often described primarily in terms of Izala/Wahhabi versus traditional Sufi Islamic splits, the reality is much more complex

with a great deal of regional variety within the country. Though Izala is advancing in Niamey, Maradi, and Zinder, the majority of Nigeriens still follow an Islamic religious culture that incorporates elements of sharia, Sufi mysticism, and customary religious rites. In several regions, high level customary leaders deriving their authority from Niger's pre-colonial past, such as the Sultans of Agadez and Katsina continue to maintain a good deal of legitimacy and influence. Local Muslim religious authorities, especially in rural areas, insist upon their freedom to practice Islam as they see fit and see their version of Islam as authentic.

Some of the major features of the religious environment that affect prospects for the emergence of VE:

- The preservation of religious and ethnic tolerance as a major element of Nigerien society;
- Persistence of religious tolerance and coexistence between Muslims and Christians;
- A slight decline in violent confrontations between Izala and Sufi adherents;
- The emergence of a younger generation of Muslim urban preachers who work closely with youth and are more open to western culture and dialogue;
- The politicization of Islam as reflected in religious groups becoming more involved in politics as a voting bloc;
- The Islamization of politics as reflected in politicians loosening their commitment to a secular state and separation of state and religion as well as using references to Islamic sources in their political discourses;
- Efforts of Izala to place their followers in key government institutions;
- The great differences in perspectives between western human rights and Islamic law;
- The resistance of religious authorities to efforts by the government to introduce laws that are considered to contradict and violate Islamic law, especially those concerning the family code, changes in the status of women, and family planning birth control programs;
- The anti-western sentiments caused by donor pressure and propaganda to push the GON to pass these programs;
- The development of Muslim Women's associations which are generally more open to change and "Islamic Feminism" which champions respect for women; and

- A greater emphasis on sending girls to Koranic schools for religious education by Sufi and Izala religious authorities.

The assessment then revisited approaches to identifying those causes and drivers of VE deemed most pertinent to the assessment.

Resistance to westernization and perceptions that the West is against Islam is a major cultural driver in Niger. Western insensitivity to Islamic cultural norms provides ammunition to those preaching that the West is against Islam and contributes to creating an atmosphere that condones VE directed against the West as justified. Birth control and the mass dissemination of contraceptives are hot issues in the religiously conservative Nigerien society. USAID programs designed to fight violent extremism in Niger have not addressed negative perceptions and misconceptions concerning the United States and the West.

The assessment identified the two main political drivers of VE as: 1) endemic corruption and impunity; and 2) discredited government and missing or co-opted legal oppositions.

The perception of corruption and impunity is wide-spread in Niger. In 2011, Transparency International ranked Niger as 134 out of 175 countries on corruption, and although this improved to 106 out of 175 countries in 2013, there is still a strong culture of corruption. Nigeriens regard the conspicuous consumption by Niger's political elite and the favoritism shown to their friends, families, and supporters in allocating state resources as sure signs of corruption. There appear to be few differences between government coalitions and opposition parties in terms of the seriousness with which they approach political and economic reforms. A disconnect between the government and the people seems to be growing as promises of reform, improving government services, and providing more employment opportunities, have not materialized. This has led to a loss of governmental legitimacy.

The deterioration of environmental conditions is a major environmental driver that has exacerbated conflicts between herders and agriculturalists, Herder-farmer conflicts are increasing all over the country as competition for access to farm and grazing lands have become more intense and a matter of survival for the parties concerned.

Youth unemployment is a major VE driver in Niger.

Recruits to radical groups generally come from young people who migrated to war and high conflict zones and returned to Niger; Tuareg ex-combatants or younger siblings of ex-combatants with relatively low levels of formal education; angry Fulani herders living close to the Malian borders where AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine have been operating; and youth from the Diffa region who have strong kinship ties with families connected or sympathetic to BH in Nigeria. They are motivated primarily by economic gain and adventure.

Youth unemployment and growing drug use have increased Nigerien youth's proclivity to engage in various forms of violent and criminal activities. This phenomenon is now prevalent in rural as well as in urban areas. Participation in election campaigns, sports events and political and social protests are also major arenas for youth violence to take place.

Based largely on work in the field, the assessment identified Diffa and Agadez, as two of the regions most vulnerable to VE.

Diffa is the most vulnerable region because of its proximity to BH strongholds; the influx of refugees from Nigeria, including BH militants; the presence of a significant number of BH militants planning terrorist activities, and the fear of local residents to identify and report Boko Haram militants to the local authorities. High youth unemployment, distribution and use of drugs by youth, the breakdown in parental authority, widespread corruption, and central government neglect of the region reinforce the potential for VE.

The situation in Agadez is less critical. The populations are generally liberal and tolerant and have little sympathy for VE. The 2007 Tuareg rebellion, combined with government repression, killed tourism which was a major source of income and employment. The major danger is that of another rebellion involving younger generation Tuaregs influenced by the leaders of the MNJ insurgency. Given the absence of employment opportunities, many Tuaregs see participation in criminal networks related to trans-Saharan trade routes as a desirable alternative to unemployment. Cattle rustling and pastoralist- agriculturalist disputes also facilitate high levels of violence.

As the capita Niamey is the center of political activity and protests. These protests could easily degenerate and lead to increasingly violent confrontations between opposing parties and demonstrators and the government. High youth unemployment has also fostered greater drug use and street crime. Niamey also has a greater potential to counteract VE than other areas in Niger.

The assessment concludes with five major programmatic recommendations designed to prevent VE, and mitigate drivers leading to conflict, violence, and VE which are discussed in greater detail in the body of the paper:

1. Develop a coordinated regional strategy and program to address VE.
2. Improve communications to reduce anti-Western sentiments and design programs to win support of religious leaders.
3. Provide targeted assistance in Diffa and Agadez, two of the regions most vulnerable to VE.
4. Revise decentralization programs to increase citizen participation in decision-making.
5. Reorient youth programs to reach more vulnerable urban and rural youth sectors.

The assessment concludes that the risk for the development of VE within the country in the short and medium term is very low with the possible exception of Diffa region. Niger's long traditions of religious and ethnic tolerance are a major factor explaining why VE has made such little headway in Niger. The main dangers of VE come from external forces from Mali and northeastern Nigeria. There is little likelihood of Niger becoming a failed state in the near future. However violent conflicts between herders and farmers, drug and crime-induced violence, and political and social protests are likely to increase in the short run.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2009 assessment of the risk of violent extremism in Niger concluded that there was a very low risk of Violent Extremism (VE)<sup>1</sup> emerging in Niger in the short and medium term.<sup>2</sup> Since then major changes have taken place in the Sahelian region and within Niger itself that call for a reappraisal of the situation and the impact of these changes on the potential for VE in the region spreading to Niger.

The Mitchell Group, Inc. (TMG), in collaboration with USAID/WA and relevant USAID/Washington stakeholders developed the Scope of Work (SOW). The SOW mandates the assessment team to apply the analytical principles found in three USAID documents to identify drivers of violence and the types of programs needed to counter violent extremism (CVE). This assessment should provide a sound analytical foundation for future CVE programming in Niger, not only for USAID, but also for other USG agencies, international donors and the GON.

The CVE Assessment Team was led by Stephanie Garvey, USAID/ WA, Director of the Regional Peace and Governance Office. TMG assessment team members included Sheldon Gellar, Senior Analyst and lead writer, and two Nigerien experts, Issouf Bayard, and Issoufou Yahaya. Robbie Harris, a transition advisor with USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, and Hassane Abdourahmane, a Senior Development Assistance Specialist with the USAID/Niger Office, were also members of the assessment team.

The team began its fieldwork in Niger on Monday, February 3, 2014 and spent two full weeks interviewing a wide range of GON officials, political leaders, representatives of civil society and the media, Muslim religious leaders, Islamic scholars, USAID and embassy officials, donor representatives, NGOs, and PDEV II staff. The team travelled to

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction should be made between the use of "Islamic" and "Islamist movements." The former seek to reform Muslim social and religious practices while the latter seek to capture political power and establish a state based on the rule of God based on Sharia. Thus, Izala is an Islamic reform movement while AQIM is an Islamist movement. For more details about the distinction between Izala and the radical Islamist movements in northern Nigeria, see Ousmane Kane, *Modernity in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>, Sheldon Gellar with Angela Martin and Moussoukoro Kane, *Niger Counter Extremism Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: USAID/Management Systems International, April 2009). For earlier assessments coming to a similar conclusion see International Crisis Group, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?* Africa Report, No. 92 (March 31, 2005), 1-41 and William F.S. Miles, "Islamism in West Africa: Internal Dynamics and American Response," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Volume 32, No. 2 (Summer, 2008), 9-13.

Balayara, Filingué, Agadez, Konni, Maradi, and Diffa where it held more than a dozen focus groups with local youth, women, refugees, ex-combatants, religious leaders, herders and farmers, and ethnic minorities and interviewed local government officials, religious leaders, security personnel, radio personnel, motor-taxi operators, and community leaders.<sup>3</sup>

The assessment looks at a broad range of factors generating and sustaining Violent Extremism (VE) in Niger. It uses the drivers of violence methodology developed by USAID to identify the causes of VE and to elaborate policies and programs to prevent and mitigate VE.<sup>4</sup> While identifying political, socio-economic and cultural drivers facilitating diverse forms of VE in Niger, this assessment focuses primarily on drivers leading to the emergence and spread of Violent Extremism (VE) and those that undermine Niger's political, social, and economic stability and capacity to prevent and mitigate broader VE threats. To attempt to define terminology, VE addresses forms of conflict that create conditions that could facilitate the rise of VE such as failed states, ungovernable areas, lack of national and societal cohesion, rejection of democracy, and the creation of a Hobbesian environment pitting individuals against each other.

## **CHANGES IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

### THE ADVANCE OF RADICAL MOVEMENTS ON NIGER'S BORDERS AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE GADDAFI REGIME IN LIBYA

#### RADICAL MOVEMENTS OPERATING IN MALI

The three main radical Islamic movements operating in Mali are Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the *Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO)

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<sup>3</sup> For a list of persons interviewed and types of focus groups held, see Appendix 2

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the concepts and methodology concerning drivers of violent extremism, see USAID, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: USAID/Management Systems International), February, 2009; Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter, *Development Assistance and Counter-Extremism: A Guide to Programming* (Washington, D.C.: USAID/Management Systems International, October 2009; and USAID, *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, September 2011. For an earlier approach orienting American programs to fight VE in the Sahel, see Sharon Bean and Murl Baker, *Trans-Sahel Counter Terrorism Partnership Program and Scope of Work* (Washington, DC: USAID, June 22, 2007).

and Ansar Dine. Although sharing the common objective of establishing Islamic states and Sharia, they have different origins, interests, and ethnic composition.<sup>5</sup>

AQIM and MUJAO have carried out attacks and kidnappings in Niger and have strong links with BH which has a presence in Niger.<sup>6</sup> Although Ansar Dine has not yet been involved in terrorist activities in Niger, it has the potential for linking up with and influencing Tuareg dissidents in Niger.

AQIM was formerly the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC) which originally began as an armed Islamic resistance group to the secular Algerian state following the refusal of the Algerian government to accept the results of the 1992 national elections won by the Islamists. In 2006, the GSPC formally aligned itself with Al Qaeda (AQ), changed its name to AQIM and became part of a global Jihadist network. At first, AQIM showed little interest in operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, confining its activities mostly to kidnapping for ransoms and terrorist attacks in Algeria against military and police targets.

MUJAO was organized in 2011 when dissidents broke away from AQIM. Its membership and leaders have a larger Sahelian component (Mauritanians and Malians) than AQIM and closer ties with Sahelian society. Its major zone of influence is in Gao.

Ansar Dine is composed primarily of Tuaregs, Berabiche Arabs, and other local ethnic groups inhabiting the Sahara. Although claiming no direct institutional links to AQIM and AQ, Ansar Dine facilitated AQIM activities in Mali and was committed to establishing a Tuareg Islamic state in Northern Mali.

Ansar Dine joined forces with the *Mouvement Nationale de Liberation de l'Azawad* (MNLA) in January 2012 when the Tuaregs launched their drive for an independent state

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<sup>5</sup> For a description of these groups and their origins, see “Making sense of Mali’s armed groups” <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/2013313113952281...>

<sup>6</sup> For Boko Haram’s ties with AQIM, see International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency* (Africa Report, 3 April 2014), 22. AQIM provided training and equipment for Boko Haram in Mali. Boko Haram’s presence in southeast Niger was confirmed in interviews with mayors and other government officials in the Diffa region and interviews with residents and people fleeing to Niger from Boko Haram strongholds by Issouf Bayard during field trip to Diffa February 13-17, 2014.

in northern Mali.<sup>7</sup> AQIM and MUJAO joined the battle on the side of the MNLA. Unlike their Islamist allies, the secular MNLA had no intention of establishing an Islamic state based on Sharia law.

The inability of the Malian army to stop the MNLA and its allies led to a *coup d'état* on March 19, 2012 by army officers who overthrew the civilian regime headed by Amadou Toumani Touré whom they accused of not providing the army with adequate means to defend Mali's territorial integrity. In April 2012, the new regime gave orders to the army to stop fighting. This created an opening for the MNLA to proclaim an independent state in Northern Mali that encompassed more than half the country's territory which threatened the stability of its neighboring states, including Niger.

Armed with superior weapons coming from Libya following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in October 2011, AQIM and MUJAO broke its unnatural alliance with the MNLA and with its ally, Ansar Dine, pushed the MNLA out of Gao, Timbuktu, and other important towns in Northern Mali. The Sharia-based regime that they imposed on the local populations was cruel and repressive. It banned smoking, music, dancing, and sports, and ordered women to wear the veil. Populations were forced to watch public executions, amputations, and other forms of corporal punishment in Timbuktu, they destroyed the tombs of venerated Muslim saints, destroyed ancient Islamic texts, and showed disdain for the city's rich Islamic traditions.

When the Jihadists launched an offensive towards Mopti in January 2013, France intervened militarily. The French forces swiftly liberated the northern towns and forced AQIM and MUJAO to retreat to desert strongholds further north. In June, 2013, the Tuareg rebels signed a peace agreement with the Malian government which was followed by presidential elections in July and August and led to the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita as president and the return to civilian rule.

The presence of Nigerien troops in Mali exposed Niger to retaliation by the Islamist forces. MUJAO carried out suicide bombings on May 23, 2013 at Areva's uranium mining

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<sup>7</sup> This was the fifth Tuareg rebellion since Mali became independent in 1960. For a detailed analysis of Tuareg alliance with the Jihadist groups, see Emmanuel Grégoire, "Islamistes et rebelles Touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités, et ruptures," *EchoGéo* July 3, 2013. <http://echogeo.revues.org/13466:DOI13466>.

facilities in Arlit (Somair uranium mine) and a Nigerien military camp in Agadez.<sup>8</sup> The attack demonstrated Niger's vulnerability to terrorist attacks and the capacity of radical Islamist groups like MUJAO to plan and carry out deadly attacks against key targets as punishment for siding with the West.

#### BOKO HARAM ON NIGER'S SOUTHEASTERN BORDERS WITH NIGERIA

Since the death of its leader in 2009, BH has become increasingly violent in combating western influences and the Nigerian government.<sup>9</sup> BH is currently the most radical violent Islamist extremist group in Nigeria and surrounding states. It operates primarily in northeastern Nigeria where it has demonstrated its capacity to carry out major attacks on its key targets—e.g., public schools, police and military installations, Christian communities, and establishment Islamic clerics. BH totally rejects western culture and schooling, opposes Sufi brotherhoods for violating pure Islamic norms, and regards Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as enemies.

BH's policy of assassinating individuals and attacking communities criticizing BH or offering information concerning its membership and movements in the area to government authorities have made individuals and local communities reluctant to speak out against it.

The indiscriminate killing of large numbers of civilians during Nigerian military and police raids on BH strongholds, widespread corruption at all levels of government, lack of employment opportunities and growing impoverishment of the region have undermined efforts to enlist the local populations in the battle against BH. Local communities have expressed the views that the government should give greater priority to providing public services and developing the region than to stamping out BH. The current situation leaves the local populations caught in the crossfire between an indiscriminate repressive military and a fanatical terrorist group.

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<sup>8</sup> For an account of these events, see Adam Nossitor, "Suicide Bombers Kill Dozens in Dual Strike," *New York Times*, May 24, 2013, For the response of the Nigerien government, see, Roger Roges, M. Bazoum, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères : Plus de Détermination," RFI Afrique, May 23, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of the rise of Boko Haram and exploration of its multiple identities, see Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram et le Terrorisme Islamiste au Nigeria: Insurrection religieuse, contestation politique ou protestation sociale?* (Paris: Centre d'études et de recherches internationales Sciences Po, Questions de Recherche, No. 40 (Juin 2012).

The proximity to southeastern Niger, porous borders, and close family ties between those on both sides of the border make it easier for BH militants to enter Niger. Thus far, BH has not been able to launch large-scale operations in Niger. Instead, it is organizing sleeper cells and using the Diffa region as a safe haven from attacks by the Nigerian military which has been stepping up its operations.<sup>10</sup> It also has contacts with radical Islamist groups operating in Mali and has recently extended its activities to Cameroon and Chad.<sup>11</sup>

People on the Nigerian side of the border are fleeing BH terror while BH fighters are fleeing crackdowns on the organization. This combination has increased the number of Nigerians taking shelter in Niger. Between 2012 and September 2013, 37,000 refugees fled to the Diffa region.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE COLLAPSE OF THE GADDAFI REGIME IN LIBYA

In October 2011, following a bloody civil war that began in February of that year, the Gaddafi regime fell. This had major consequences for Sahelian countries bordering with Algeria and Libya and the development of violent Islamist movements operating in the Sahel.

The chaos in Libya enabled large quantities of heavy and light weapons previously controlled by the regime to be carried off by different groups. In Mali, AQIM's access to heavy weapons from Libya was a major factor in its success in defeating the Malian army. An estimated twenty thousand Sahelians, mostly Tuareg mercenaries from Niger recruited by Gaddafi fled the country following Gaddafi's downfall, bringing with them a large quantity of weapons.<sup>13</sup> Many returned to Niger. On the other hand, the marginalized Toubou populations of Libya who had been treated as a second class population under Gaddafi joined the successful rebellion and seized control of heavy weaponry and key oases in the south. They quickly became the dominant power in

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with government officials in Diffa region (February 13-17, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Moka Edwin Kinzaka, "Cameroon, Chad Deploy to Fight Boko Haram," Voice of America, May 26, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Irin News, "Displaced by Boko Haram, Nigerians Risk Invisibility in Niger", January 30, 2014.  
<http://www.irinnews.org/printeereport.aspx?reportid=99558>.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Niger security officials and focus groups in Agadez region, February 8-10, 2010.

southern Libya, a position they still hold and use to control a flourishing trans-Saharan trade.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of the Gaddafi regime and the closing of the Algerian border have been accompanied by armed conflicts between Arab Libyan Islamists and the Toubou over control of Southern Libya and diverted more trans-Saharan trade towards Libya. In fighting the radical Islamist forces in Libya, the Toubou are contributing to countering VIE in that country. The Toubou in Niger have strong ties with the Libyan Toubou community and share its anti-Islamist orientation. Nigerien Toubou leaders have expressed the desire to gain the same status and recognition from the Nigerien government offered to Nigerien Tuaregs. If granted, the Nigerien Toubou community could also become a significant force in countering VE in Niger.<sup>15</sup>

The closing of the Algerian border in 2012 to keep AQIM forces from returning to Algeria forced AQIM to remain in the Sahara and increased the strategic importance of Libya as a sanctuary for AQIM and Islamist leaders like Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar<sup>16</sup> (reputedly the organizer of the May 23, 2013 terrorist attacks in Niger) in the southern Libyan Desert.

#### INCREASED SUPPORT TO CHECK VE

France's decision to send a military force to staunch the progress of AQIM and its allies and overturn the Islamist rule that was imposed by force in 2012 marked a major step towards stopping the momentum of radical Islamist groups operating in the Sahara. In the past two years, the United States has developed closer security ties with the GON, increased regional intelligence collection and sharing operations based out of Niger, and provided equipment and special training programs for the Nigerien and Nigerian

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<sup>14</sup> For the rise of the Toubou in Libya, see Christophe, Boisbouvier, "Libye: quand les Toubous se reveille," *Jeune Afrique*, May 16, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> This paragraph is based on interviews with leaders of Toubou community in Niamey and focus group with Toubou community in Agadez region, February 9, 2014. For background of Toubou community and demands, see Ressortissants Toubou-Teda du Niger, *Note d'Information sur la Communauté Toubou-TEDA du Niger* (Niamey: mai, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Ben Mokhtar broke away from AQIM and formed *Signataires de sang* which worked closely with MUJAO in organizing the May 23 attacks.

military forces.<sup>17</sup> The European Union is contributing by providing training and equipment to the Nigerien *gendarmerie* and technical assistance to strengthen the justice system while the UNDP is training Tuareg ex-combatants for jobs as community policemen in Agadez.<sup>18</sup> USAID's PDEV program provided reinsertion assistance to Libyan returnees in 2012.

The international donor community has also organized conferences to discuss and articulate strategies to counter VE.<sup>19</sup> Counterterrorism strategies have also included development programs like PDEV I and II, that sought to prevent and mitigate factors contributing to VE such as religious intolerance, high youth unemployment, failed school systems, and lack of citizen participation in public affairs.<sup>20</sup> Since 2006, USAID has developed a broad portfolio of projects to enhance community resilience to shocks which include food security and humanitarian assistance, maternal and child health, and expansion of primary school education. USAID Democracy and Governance programs seek to promote greater citizen participation at the community level and increase the capacity of the National Assembly and civil society to regulate the oil and uranium sectors.<sup>21</sup> The MCC is now financing a major project to fight corruption in the central government by supporting a wide range of regulatory commissions.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE SAHARA DESERT: AN OPENING OR BARRIER TO THE SPREAD OF VE IN NIGER?

The vastness of the Sahara desert, which is found in Libya, Algeria, Mali, and Niger, and its status as a poorly governed or "ungoverned space" has provided a sanctuary and rear base for AQIM, MUJAO and other radical Islamist groups. This section examines the extent to which the Sahara also constitutes a barrier that makes it difficult for these

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see Eric Schmitt, "US Takes Training Role in Africa as Threats Grow and Budgets Shrink," *New York Times*, March 5, 2014. In the past two years, the USG has budgeted \$33 million dollars to support Niger's security forces.

<sup>18</sup> The European Union, Denmark, and the UNDP are contributing to programs supporting the fight against VIE in northern Niger.

<sup>19</sup> For example, a major workshop, 2013 co-sponsored by Burkina Faso and Denmark, on Countering Violent Extremism in West Africa and the Sahel took place in Ouagadougou on April 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> For details on the functioning of PDEV II, see USAID/WA, *Process Evaluation of the Peace through Development Phase II (PDEV II) Project* (Washington, DC: The Mitchell Group/USAID/WA, July 2013).

<sup>21</sup> For details about these programs, see USAID Fact Sheet for Niger, November 2013.

<sup>22</sup> For more details, see *MCC Congressional Budget Justification, FY2015*, [www.mcc.gov/docs/pub-full/cbj-fy2015](http://www.mcc.gov/docs/pub-full/cbj-fy2015).

groups to gain supporters, expand its numbers and carry-out large-scale activities in Sahelian countries like Niger.<sup>23</sup>

The Islamist extremist groups have relatively small numbers, are heterogeneous in composition, and often compete with each other in their ambitions to exert their pre-eminence over other Islamist groups. While it may be difficult to track these groups down in the vast Saharan desert, the desert also distances and isolates them from major population centers and forces them to disperse rather than concentrate their forces, especially when pursued by better-equipped military forces that have drones and airpower at their disposal and the means to quickly dispatch hundreds of soldiers to trouble spots.<sup>24</sup>

Religious extremism has little appeal to the Tuareg (1.5 million) and Toubou (700,000) communities who comprise more than 85% of the total population in the Sahara Desert. Tuaregs and Toubous are Muslims who practice very liberal forms of Islam, which places them in opposition to radical Islamist teachings. Treasuring their freedom, autonomy, and control over lucrative Saharan trade routes, they are highly likely to resist efforts to put them under the authority of an Islamic state. Renewal of the alliance that brought Tuareg separatists together with the MNLA, AQIM, MUJAO, and other radical Islamist groups, who then facilitated the overrunning of northern Mali, is highly improbable given the vast differences in worldviews and interests.

## **CHANGING INTERNAL CONDITIONS WITHIN NIGER**

### DEMOGRAPHIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For an excellent analysis of the forces at play in the Sahara and how geography limits the possibilities of the Jihadists groups to progress in the Sahel, see Skander Ben Mami, “*Des Populations Nomades face à Un Espace Sahariens en Mutation*” (Paris: Institut des Relations Internationales, Septembre 2013). The population figures are from this study.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of American and French support for Nigerian anti-terrorist activities, see International Crisis Group, *Niger: un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel?* Africa Report, ICG, No. 208, (19 Septembre 2013), 46-49.

<sup>25</sup> A recent Niger risk assessment cited demographic pressures and environmental deterioration as two of the major factors threatening stability in that country. See Christopher Millar, Joelle Nadeau, and Marion Guy-Arcand, *Republic of Niger Risk assessment Report* (Ottawa: Carleton University, October 8, 2013). Most of the figures found in this section are based on statistics from the World Bank Data Bank and World Development Indicators for Niger cited in this study (October 8, 2013). General trends presented cited in the following paragraphs have been cited in above references and confirmed by respondents in focus groups discussions, interviews with donor and government

A recent Niger risk assessment report listed demographic pressures and environmental deterioration as undermining political, social, and economic stability.

#### POPULATION, YOUTH BULGE, AND URBANIZATION

Niger has one of the world's highest population growth rates averaging 3.8 percent between 2009 and 2012. Declines in infant mortality rates and increases in life expectancy since independence in 1960 have actually contributed to accelerating population growth because of remarkably high fertility rates. Nigerien women average more than 7.5 children per household. The fierce opposition of many of Niger's religious authorities to birth control is a major factor contributing to the maintenance of high fertility rates. However in Niamey some Muslim authorities and groups have been more receptive to family planning activities.<sup>26</sup> Some of these well respected religious leaders have been supportive of population control efforts and UNFPA family planning activities in Niger for many years.

Half of Niger's population (now over 17 million) is under 15 years creating a youth bulge that comprises fifty percent of the population. This makes it more difficult for the economy to generate employment opportunities for young people entering the job market.

Urbanization is increasing at 5% a year due to a rural exodus resulting from a lack of economic opportunities in the rural areas. Although providing greater access to public services, urban areas have not been able to reduce the high rate of youth unemployment.

#### DETERIORATING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

With a population of approximately 3 million inhabitants at independence, Niger had adequate arable and pasture land to accommodate its population even at low levels of productivity. This situation has changed radically. With Niger's population now more

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officials, and Nigerien specialists. Issouf Bayard, a member of the team has expertise in herder-farmer relationships, and agricultural and environmental/natural resource trends in Niger.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the *Groupement des Associations Islamiques pour les Activités en Matière de Planification Familiale et de la Promotion de la Femme en Islam au Niger* was created in 1997 to discuss family planning issues and has supported birth control. It should also be noted that Iran has supported family planning and has one of the lowest population growth rates in the Muslim world.

than five times as large, the carrying capacity of Niger's farming and pastoral lands has been stretched to its limits and has led to environmental degradation in several areas:

- Growing shortage of pastoral lands for herders and declining access to water and fodder for livestock due to desertification and taking over grazing areas by farmers for agricultural use.
- Agricultural land shortages and disappearance of fallow land.
- Soil fertility adversely affected by improper use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- Deterioration in potable water supplies in rural areas which can't keep up with the growing population.
- Deforestation to meet the energy needs of rural populations and urban poor has reduced Niger's forest cover, increased damage caused by flooding, and lowered capacity of soils to retain water. This has resulted in a reduction of arable land which creates food shortages and a lack of economic opportunity for rural populations.

Rapid and chaotic patterns of urbanization have contributed to an unhealthy and unsafe environment as reflected in the following examples:

- Unsafe neighborhoods due to lack of public lighting, adequate police force, and street crime.
- Insufficient sanitation facilities to collect and dispose of accumulation of human and animal waste and other forms of garbage.
- Insufficient drainage facilities to deal with flooding during the rainy season.

The dumping of waste products from uranium mining and oil production has polluted water supplies and grazing land in areas in which they are operating. One of the major complaints of Nigerien residents living close to the uranium mines and oil production centers has been the absence of policies and measures to protect the environment.

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

There are a number of significant changes that have taken place over the past five years that can be considered potential drivers of violence or, on the other hand, opportunities to constrain the rise of VE.

### DETERIORATING PURCHASING POWER AND GROWING DIFFICULTIES MAKING ENDS MEET

Despite macro-economic statistics showing higher growth rates and higher per capita incomes, there is little evidence to indicate that living conditions are improving significantly for ordinary Nigerien citizens.<sup>27</sup> Focus groups conducted by the assessment team recorded frequent complaints about the rising costs of food, urban housing, sending children to school, and access to health facilities. Many also complained about the fact that gasoline and electricity costs remained very high despite the fact that the country was now producing increasingly larger amounts of oil.

Rural Nigeriens who comprise over 80% of the population have not fully recovered from lost income and assets resulting from the 2012 drought and 2013 floods. Agricultural family incomes have declined with fragmentation of land holdings. More and more people have less and less land to grow food and no money to invest in improving productivity. Food for livestock is becoming more difficult for herders to find and raising their production costs.

For urban Nigeriens, the rising cost of living over the past five years has not been accompanied by rising incomes or the development of a modern and competitive manufacturing sector that can offer jobs to the unemployed.

### INCREASE IN PASTORALIST- AGRICULTURALIST CONFLICTS DUE TO COMPETITION OVER ACCESS TO NATURAL RESOURCES

The growing scarcity of arable farm land, grazing areas, and water has broken down traditional patterns of collaboration between agriculturalists and herders. In the past, herders kept their livestock away from farm land during the rainy season until after the harvest. For their part, farmers would harvest their crops of millet, sorghum and maize and leave the stalks for fodder for the animals. Farmers would seize animals that had

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<sup>27</sup> The economy is very volatile due to periodic droughts and flooding, and uneven production in the mining sector, which has been the main motor of economic growth. Access to sanitation remains low. Improvements in public services are increasing slowly. Only 4% of the rural population and 34% of urban population have access to sanitation. Primary school attendance has not met targets and secondary school attendance has fallen. See statistics cited by Christopher Millar et al, *Republic of Niger Risk assessment Report*, 3-10.

destroyed parts or all of their crops and not return them until compensated for their losses. Herders would often try and get back their cattle by force. In the past, conflicts were generally resolved peacefully through direct negotiations between the two parties "*à l'amiable*" and mediated by local customary authorities.

This system broke down when land shortages drove farmers to cultivate former cattle paths and grazing lands. These actions made the movement of livestock more difficult and reduced grazing areas needed by the herders. Instead of leaving fodder for the herder's animals after the harvesting of their crops, farmers stripped the land and sold the fodder, leaving nothing for the animals to eat. The herders were clearly the losers in this new arrangement and insisted that they were being discriminated against when they clashed with farmers over access to traditional cattle paths and grazing areas and argued over responsibility and compensation for damaging crops.

#### BREAKDOWN OF FAMILY SOLIDARITY AND RESPECT FOR PARENTAL AUTHORITY

In the urban areas, high youth unemployment and the inability of many male household heads to support their families have created tensions within the family and between generations. More women seek work outside the home to supplement inadequate family incomes. Male heads of households are selling off family property and other assets to meet immediate needs rather than passing these on to their children. These trends undermine family solidarity and traditional patterns of family division of labor and allocation of resources. The number of children leaving their families to go out on their own is increasing and also contributing to a decline in the authority of the family over their children and to a diminishing rural labor force.

In the rural areas, similar patterns are occurring as family heads sell land and livestock, thus depriving their children of the assets needed to earn a livelihood. Historically, one of the major bonds tying male children to their fathers and reinforcing parental authority was the fact that the children would receive family land and/or livestock after they married and share the family assets after the death of the father. These bonds are breaking down.

#### A RAPID GROWTH IN DRUG USE BY YOUTH

Drug consumption among urban and rural youth has become endemic in Niger.<sup>28</sup> Nigeriens attribute the causes to high unemployment rates, growing distaste for

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<sup>28</sup> Nigerien youth can't afford hard drugs like cocaine and heroin. Instead they tend to use amphetamines and marijuana.

agricultural and livestock occupations and manual labor as sources of livelihoods, and the decline of parental authority.

Participants in focus groups often said that youth unemployment, idleness, and boredom led youth to start taking drugs which in turn led them to engage in stealing and more aggressive behavior.

#### CRIME AS MAJOR ECONOMIC MOTOR AND SOURCE OF EMPLOYMENT

Since 2011, organized crime has increased considerably in the region because of several factors: (1) the escalating conflicts in Libya, Mali, and northern Nigeria; (2) the dependence of AQIM, BH and other Jihadist movements on criminal activities as major sources of financing their operations; (2) a shift in Latin American drug lord strategy to use Trans-Saharan trade route to smuggle drugs into Europe; and (4) the collapse of tourism in the Agadez region and the absence of alternative lucrative employment opportunities in the region.<sup>29</sup>

#### GROWING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE

The assessment team noted that many Nigerien citizens are complaining about the acceleration of the economic gap between the Nigerien elite and the rest of the population. This can be seen in the spending patterns of the political and economic elite who are investing heavily in housing and luxury consumer goods.

Economic distress has forced many farmers and herders to sell land and livestock to members of the wealthy elite in order to make ends meet. In urban areas, the wealthy are buying up plots of land and pushing up housing costs for the poor.

Many Nigeriens see the growing economic gap between the political and economic elite as unjust and attribute this to discrimination against the poor, corruption, and nepotism and a general decline in morality.

#### POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES: 2009-2014<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See USAID/MSI, *Niger: Conflict and Crime Assessment* (Washington D.C.: USAID/MSI, February 10, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> For details on this period, see the International Crisis Group Report, *Niger: Un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel?* 12-21.

Niger went through a period of political turbulence between 2009 and 2011 that started with the end of the Tuareg rebellion, Tandja's efforts to seek a third term as president and his removal through a military coup. The military regime organized a referendum to approve a new constitution in 2010 and then kept its promise to restore civilian rule by organizing national presidential and legislative elections in 2011. Mahamadou Issoufou's party won the most votes in the 2011 national legislative elections but did not win a majority of seats in the National Assembly. Issoufou won the 2011 presidential elections and formed a broad governing coalition.

The Issoufou regime joined the western anti-terrorist alliance, promised to make reforms to reduce corruption and launched an ambitious "Renaissance" development program designed to reduce food insecurity and improve public services and infrastructure. Its policies have reduced the risk of a resumption of the Tuareg rebellion by offering Tuareg leaders major government positions and control over regional and local government institutions in Agadez.

#### NIGER POLITICS: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES UNDER THE SEVENTH REPUBLIC<sup>31</sup>

Regime change was not accompanied by major changes in the composition of the political class and their behavior. The four candidates -- Mahamadou Issoufou, Hama Amadou, Oumarou Seyni, and Mahamane Ousmane-- who gained the most votes in the 2011 presidential elections have been prominent national political leaders since the 1990s. Tandja, the deposed former president whose political roots go back to the 1970s was trying to make a political comeback in 2014 by positioning himself as a critic of government corruption. Little effort has been made by the major political parties to renew their leaders. As in the past, those in power are using the state's resources to

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<sup>31</sup> For discussion of politics under the Issoufou regime and major developments, see International Crisis Group, pp. 17-24.

enrich themselves, their families, and their political clients while opposition politicians attack the government as corrupt, incompetent, and anti-democratic.<sup>32</sup>

The Issoufou regime has allied itself with former rivals and co-opted prominent opposition politicians as well as leaders of civil society organizations formerly known for their commitment to democracy, human rights, decentralization, and freedom of the press.<sup>33</sup> When Hama Amadou, the President of the National Assembly quit the government coalition in August 2013, six ministers in his party refused to join him because they wanted to hold on to their posts. Frequent shifting of political alliances by individuals and political parties is a common feature of Nigerien politics.

After nearly three years in power, the Issoufou regime has made little progress in implementing political and economic reforms and its ambitious development programs. The announced 6.2 billion CFA Renaissance program which was to have added 50,000 new jobs a year for unemployed youth has not yet been fully funded due to donor conditions not being met and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Drought and flooding in several regions also damaged efforts to reduce Niger's chronic food shortages and food insecurity, a major objective of the 3 N (*les Nigériens Nourissent les Nigériens*) program.

Decentralization has not progressed very far. Most local government units have no investment budgets. The announced transfer of more state resources to the communes has not taken place because of the GON's reluctance to give up its control over financial resources.<sup>34</sup> Few mechanisms exist to give citizens a real voice in local government. When in place, USAID's PDEV II initiated CACs have been at best consultative bodies with limited decision-making powers and dependent on donor financing for implementation of projects.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> During the 1990s, the political opposition criticized the government. When it took power it operated the same way while the former parties in power then criticized their successors for having the same vices. See Robert Charlick et al, Democratic Governance Assessment (Washington DC: USAID/1994).

<sup>33</sup> Nigerien civil society does not currently constitute a strong counterweight to government abuse of power. Many are fronts for politicians and those seeking to use their organizations as a base for launching political careers in the future. For example, when Amadou Marou, the former head of CROISADE (a prominent democracy NGO) and a sharp critic of the Tandja regime for its undemocratic behavior in silencing the press, became a government minister, he arrested journalists who had been critical of the Issoufou regime.

<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon is a common one in many francophone states which have adopted decentralizing codes and legislation without following up by transferring necessary financial and human resources to local government.

<sup>35</sup> Numerous focus groups participants in Agadez, Maradi,,Diffa, Balayara have complained that decentralization is not working and that most local elected authorities rarely consult or listen to their constituents and distribute the meagre resources that exist to friends, family, and party allies.

Rather than reassuring Nigerien citizens, the Issoufou government's highlighting increases in foreign aid levels attributed to donor confidence in the regime and statistics showing a rise in per capita income has angered many Nigeriens who have seen no improvements in public services or living standards. These kinds of statements also reinforced popular perceptions of widespread corruption and beliefs that rising state revenues are going into the pockets of the politicians.<sup>36</sup>

#### DEVELOPMENTS IN NIGER'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE THAT MAY REDUCE THE RISK OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

Three major political developments took place after the 2010 coup: (1) Niger's alignment with the West in fighting terrorism; (2) the emergence of the *Forces armées nigériennes* (FAN) as a significant regional player in the fight against VE; and (3) the integration of leaders of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion into the political system.

The alliance between the Issoufou regime and the West in fighting VE in the Sahel improved Niger's image with the United States and other western powers as did the introduction of new institutions to fight corruption and to regulate the oil and uranium mining sectors. It also provided increased levels of foreign aid to help finance the Issoufou's regime's economic development program. The alliance has been a positive factor in reducing the risk of political instability and reducing the immediate danger from radical Islamist forces.

The popularity of the military was enhanced by its quick turnover to civilian rule and its role in improving security along Niger's borders. It has benefited from increases in the national defense budget and direct support and collaboration from the USG and France. The 2012 defense budget called for an additional 40 billion CFA and housing subsidies for military personnel.<sup>37</sup> Units from FAN went to Mali to fight the Islamist forces.<sup>38</sup> More security personnel were placed on Niger's Malian and Nigerian borders. Both France and

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<sup>36</sup> This sentiment was expressed frequently in focus groups and interviews with civil society organizations.

<sup>37</sup> The FAN has 12,000 troops and 5400 gendarmes under the authority of the Ministry of Defense. The police and National Guard under the control of the Minister of the Interior has approximately 8,000 personnel. The pre-eminence of Djerma officers in the military began under colonial rule and continued after independence. Their determination to maintain their dominant presence explains why it has been difficult to increase the number of Tuareg officers in the military to fulfill government promises made to end the MLN Tuareg rebellion.

<sup>38</sup> This was done under the auspices of MISMA (*Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali*) Niger now contributes troops to MINUSMA (*Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali*) in continuing the battle against VEs.

the United States stepped up their physical presence in Niger and developed closer ties with Nigeria's security forces fighting BH.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, Nigerien public opinion has been divided as to how far the Nigerien military should be in the forefront of the fight against Islamist Jihadists because of fears that Niger's involvement might result in reprisals in the form of terrorist attacks on Nigerien soil. Islamic leaders also had some doubts about Niger's alliance with the United States and the West.<sup>40</sup>

In another development, the Issoufou regime moved to end the marginalization of Tuaregs in the political system. As a sign of his willingness to share power and give Tuaregs a bigger stake in the political system, he named Brigi Rafini, a Tuareg, as Prime Minister and offered Tuaregs other high government posts as ministers and advisors to the president. Leaders of the 1990s rebellion assumed control of the Regional Council and the larger cities in the Agadez region.

The older generation of leaders like Mohammad Anacko, president of the Regional Council of Agadez, must produce some concrete achievements to show the younger leaders of the MNJ-led rebellion that making peace was worthwhile. Failure to do so will increase tensions between the older and younger generation leaders. The memory of the repressive measures taken by the Tandja regime to crush the MNJ rebellion coupled with the resistance of the FAN to open up more officer posts to Tuaregs in the FAN are also sources of discontent that need to be addressed.

#### CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

The fact that none of Niger's political parties over the past twenty years has had a majority in the National Assembly has led to unstable governing coalitions incorporating opposition political coalitions based on sharing the spoils. As a result, ideological affinities were unimportant while political coalitions touched off political crises whenever these alliances broke down.

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<sup>39</sup> See ICG, *Niger: un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel*, 2008, 19 Septembre, 2013, pp.46-49.

<sup>40</sup> Islamic leaders saw the West's wars against Muslim countries like Iraq and VE as a war against Islam. These perceptions were reinforced by western campaigns and donor pressure to impose programs and values perceived as being against Islamic law and traditions. (Stephen Kull, *Feeling Betrayed: The Roots of Muslim Anger at America*, (Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 2011)

The decision of Hama Amadou, former Prime Minister and President of the National Assembly, to leave the government coalition in August 2013 set the ground for a new political crisis because it left the government without a majority in the National Assembly. Until August 2014 Issoufou felt threatened by Hama Amadou, a former ally who split with the President's coalition in August 2013 and himself a leading candidate for the President in the 2016 elections. For the past year, Issoufou attempted to oust Hama as President of the National Assembly. This threat was at least temporarily resolved when in August 2014, Amadou fled to France to escape arrest for alleged involvement in a baby trafficking scandal.<sup>41</sup> Amadou has claimed that this is simply a politically motivated maneuver such as has occurred before when former President Tandja imprisoned Amadou on corruption charges. Even with Amadou absent from the political scene the country remains divided politically among the supporters and clients of the leading political personalities. In February 2014, a coalition of civil society organizations held a press conference to alert the public to the growing danger of violent confrontations between supporters of the governing coalition and those in the opposition. Demonstrations and strikes also reflect rising social tensions and pressures placed on government and the private sector.<sup>42</sup>

The combination of volatile protest demonstrations against the regime coupled with growing violence between rival political parties and political factions threatens Niger's political stability. However, the prospects for regime change through political violence remain low because Nigerien politicians prefer negotiations to violent confrontations. However, if the social situation continues to deteriorate and protests sparking widespread violence increase, the military might again intervene to restore order and be tempted to take power in the name of preserving political stability and as an acceptable alternative to an unpopular political regime.

## CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

The 2009 *Niger Counter Extremism Assessment* was concerned about the potential for Izala to become a radical violent extremist movement in Niger and for interreligious conflicts between Izala and the Sufi Brotherhoods to lead to violent confrontations. In

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<sup>41</sup> BBC, August 28, 2014. Agence France Press, August 23, 2014, "Niger Detains Minister over Suspected Child Trafficking."

<sup>42</sup> Recent strikes by high school students, trade unionists, conflict and professional organizations, and growing anger with the oil and uranium companies are heating up the atmosphere. See Niger Diaspora, March 16, 2014, "Montée du Front Social: Le gouvernement sous pression," [www.nigerdiaspora.net/index.php/les-infos-du-pays/poliques](http://www.nigerdiaspora.net/index.php/les-infos-du-pays/poliques).

the end, the assessment concluded that Izala was not a major potential source of VE. This section offers a more detailed assessment of the diversity of Niger's religious environment and the development of Islamic civil society.

#### DIVERSITY AND DYNAMICS OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

While the Islamic landscape in Niger is often described primarily in terms of Izala/Wahhabi versus traditional Sufi Islamic splits, the reality is much more complex with a great deal of regional variety within the country.<sup>43</sup> While Sufi Brotherhoods affiliated with the Niassene Tidjanis<sup>44</sup> and the Wahhabi-influenced Izala are gaining influence in Niger, the majority of Nigeriens still follow an Islamic religious culture that incorporates elements of sharia, Sufi mysticism, and customary religious rites.<sup>45</sup> Niger also has Muslim Shiite communities that insist on an even stricter interpretation and application of sharia than Izala.

Local Muslim religious authorities, especially in rural areas, insist upon their freedom to practice Islam as they see fit and see their version of Islam as authentic. For example, some villages in the Maradi region delayed celebrating a major religious holiday for several days because no one in their villages had actually seen the New Moon which officially marks the beginning of the holiday.<sup>46</sup> Many Islamic communities whose Islamic roots go back several centuries feel no need to follow the example of Izala or Tidjani Sufi orders in their religious practices.

High-level customary leaders deriving their authority from Niger's pre-colonial past, such as the Sultans of Agadez and Katsina continue to maintain a good deal of legitimacy and influence. With the support of the territorial administration, they often intervene to resolve intra-religious conflicts and use their power to expel "troublemakers" from their region. In Maradi and Diffa, they are admonishing their local representatives to watch out for extremist elements coming from outside of Niger.

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<sup>43</sup> For a broad analysis of Sufi and Wahabi relationships and conflicts, See David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosanda, *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999)

<sup>44</sup> The Niassene branch of the Tidjani Brotherhood originated in the Kaolack region of Senegal. Under the leadership of Ibrahima Niassé, it expanded its influence to Northern Nigeria and Niger during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where it now has several million adherents.

<sup>45</sup> See Barbara Cooper, "Secular States, Muslim Law and Islamic Religious Culture: Gender Implications of Legal Struggles in Hybrid Legal Systems in Contemporary West Africa," *Droit et Cultures*, No. 59(1982), 97-120.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Tidjani religious leader in Maradi, February 9, 2014.

Izala is currently expanding more rapidly than the Tidjani brotherhoods and attracting urban youth in Niamey, Maradi, and Zinder.<sup>47</sup> They preach a purification of Islam based on better knowledge and stricter application of sharia and denounce Sufi practices of visiting the tombs of religious leaders and celebrating the birthday of the Prophet as non-Islamic innovations.<sup>48</sup> Izala's opposition to high bride prices and expensive religious ceremonies appeal to young people who find it increasingly difficult to meet their traditional religious and social obligations.

Wealthy Hausa merchants have been largely responsible for financing the construction of Izala mosques which are generally larger, better equipped, and more comfortable than the competition. Izala offers models of economic success and provides social services and credit to their new adherents.<sup>49</sup>

Izala communities tend to stick together, pray in their own mosques, and adhere to a dress code that distinguishes them from other Muslim communities. Charity is directed more to individuals as an investment rather than to the poor and vulnerable categories of the populations. These traits separate Izala from non-Izala Sufi and traditional Muslims who are generally more tolerant, less aggressive and resentful of Izala claims that they are not good Muslims. Izala adherents are also less likely to openly criticize AQIM and VE and to engage in interreligious dialogue with non-Muslims.

Most Nigeriens agree that Christians, who comprise only 2% of the population in Niger, do not suffer from religious intolerance and that Christians and Muslims get along very well together. Interreligious conflict, unlike the case in Nigeria, is not a serious problem. Protestant ministers in Niger preach a gospel of love and service to all and avoid

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<sup>47</sup> For details concerning the rise of Izala in Niger, see Maikoréma Zakara, "La Naissance et le Développement du Mouvement Izala au Niger," in Moulaye Hassane and Xavier Moulet (eds.) *Islams, Sociétés et Politique en Afrique Subsaharienne* Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2007), 51-74.

<sup>48</sup> For an analysis of orthodox Islamic movements as reformist and having similarities with Protestants in stressing individual interpretation of scripture, emphasis on scripture as the main source of religious authority, and providing religious education for the masses, see Roman Loimeier, "Patterns and Peculiarities of Religious Reform in Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 33, No.3(2003), 237-262.

<sup>49</sup> For an analysis of Izala's attractiveness as an economic model for young people and its emphasis on economic motivation and capitalist orientation, see Robert Charlick, "Niger: Islamist Identity and the Politics of Globalization," in William S. Miles (ed.) *Political Islam in West Africa: State-Society Relations Transformed* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).

criticizing Islam.<sup>50</sup> While open to Muslims, Catholic schools make no effort to indoctrinate their Muslim students and Catholic NGOs like Caritas are very much appreciated.

During the 1980s, when Izala came to Niger from Northern Nigeria, there were often violent confrontations between the traditional Sufi religious authorities and their critics from Izala who attacked traditional Sufi practices as Islamic innovations. Sufis reacted by burning down Izala mosques.

Violence between Izala and Sufis subsided in the 1990s and has been more sporadic since the beginning of the new millennium. The decline in open conflict between Wahhabi-oriented Muslims and Sufis in West African countries like Niger, Senegal, Mali, and Burkina Faso where Sufi traditions have been dominant has evolved for some of the following reasons: <sup>51</sup>

- Sufi Brotherhoods have become more orthodox in religious practices and supportive of sharia law.
- Like Izala and other Wahhabi movements, Tidjani Sufi brotherhoods are emphasizing the importance of Islamic education and encouraging their followers to study sacred Islamic texts.
- Izala is spending more time and energy in establishing their networks of schools and social services than in preaching sermons attacking Sufis as bad Muslims than in the past.
- Orthodox Wahhabi movements do not want their militancy to arouse public opinion and non-Izala Muslim leaders against them in recognition of the fact that the majority of Nigerien Muslims remain more comfortable with Sufi religious practices and see Wahhabi-style Islam as imported from the Arab world and influenced by Nigerian clerics.
- The resistance of the political elite in Sahelian countries to establishing sharia as the law of the land places constraints on Wahhabi militancy.

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<sup>50</sup> Based on interviews with Nigerien Protestant ministers belonging to *Eglises Evangeliques de la Republique Du Niger* (EERN) in Maradi and Niamey. Both Catholics and Protestants asserted that they tended to get along well with Muslims.

<sup>51</sup> For example, see Leonardo Villàlon, "The Moral and Political in African Democratization: The *Code de la Famille* in Niger's Troubled Transition," *Democratization*, Vol. III, No. 2(1996), 41-68.

All of these factors, in varying degrees, are contributing to mitigate of the rise of Islamic extremism in Niger.

Unlike Nigeria, where Izala pressed for the imposition of sharia law in the predominantly Muslim northern states of the Nigerian federation, Izala supporters in Niger have thus far been satisfied with opposing efforts by the Nigerien government to impose secular legislation that contradicts or violates Islamic law.

One of the major developments in the past five years has been the emergence of a class of young Islamic preachers who work with urban youth in Niamey.<sup>52</sup> Unlike many Izala and Sufi religious leaders, they have not studied in Islamic institutions in Saudi Arabia, North Africa, Nigeria, and other African countries. Muslim clerics often criticize them for not having more formal Islamic learning.

Many of these new preachers have attended university as well as Koranic school and *madrasas* and are attuned to western influences and youth culture. Although many are Izala, they represent diverse strands within Islam and are open to religious dialogue, intra-religious coexistence, and praying together. They write primarily in French rather than in Arabic. They give sermons and lectures on Islam on the radio and produce DVDs and tapes. They work with university and high school students, neighborhood youth groups (*fadas*) and other youth groups. They spend many evenings circulating in different urban neighborhoods. They play basketball and soccer and are comfortable working in the secular world. This group has the potential to constitute a major barrier to the development of VE in Niger and perhaps more significantly a force to get urban youth to become more involved in reforming Nigerien politics and promoting peaceful rather than violent protests.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Abdoulaye Sounaye, Islamic specialist currently researching this phenomenon, February 12, 2014 in Niamey.

## ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SECULAR STATE: POLITICIZATION OF ISLAM AND ISLAMIZATION OF POLITICS

At independence, the political elite in Niger embraced the French secular state's traditions in asserting the authority of the state over religious institutions.<sup>53</sup> With the Islamization of Nigerien society, the degree of commitment to maintaining a strong secular state and state hegemony over religious institutions has steadily eroded. Besides fostering the creation of multi-party politics, democratization in the early 1990s also led to the proliferation of Islamic Associations and the emergence of an Islamic civil society.

Over the past few years, Nigerien politicians are increasingly using references to Islamic sources in their political discourses and courting the support of Islamic religious authorities and associations. It is becoming more commonplace for politicians or their wives to attend and even preside over the opening of a new mosque or religious facility.

Islamic associations are increasingly organizing public marches around religious events or protests to assert their political clout. Nigerien politicians have felt the need to back down from passing western-inspired human rights legislation perceived by religious authorities and Islamic civil society as violating or contradicting Islamic law and cultural norms. Organized demonstrations against these measures succeeded in stopping the government from actually passing laws on three occasions when the government withdrew legislation in the following areas:

- The introduction of a Family Code giving women equal rights with men in inheritance and other matters. Efforts to introduce legislative reforms concerning women's rights in the family began as early as 1976. But the Niger National Assembly has not passed legislation contradicting Sharia law in family matters.
- Ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1998 and ratification of CEDAW

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<sup>53</sup> The Hamani Diori regime (1960-1974) created the *Association Culturelle Islamique du Niger* (ACIN) as an integral part of its one-party system. The Kountché military regime (1974- 1988) dissolved the ACIN and created the *Association Islamique du Niger* (AIN). These were the only national-level associations allowed to function and remained under the control of the state. The 1991 National Conference endorsed the principle of freedom of religion and freedom to form religious associations. On the other hand, the National Conference and subsequent constitutions did not permit the establishment of religiously, regionally, or ethnically –based political parties. For more on evolving attitudes toward state and religion relationships, see Abdoulaye Sounaye, "Ambiguous Secularism: Islam, *Laïcité* and the State in Niger," *Civilisations*, Vol. LVII, No. 2 (2009), 41-57.

protocols in 2004. But no concrete laws have been passed to apply women's rights provisions.

- The introduction of a law mandating that girls remain in school until high school. Even if passed, it is unlikely that the government would actively intervene to enforce such a law or that the government currently has the capacity to provide such a service.

Another major area of conflict between Islamic civil society and the government concerns government policies seeking to promote family planning and birth control which is seen by many Muslims as violating the command to be fruitful and multiply. It has also been more extremely considered by some as part of a plot to promote genocide against Muslims<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, opposition to family planning is not universal in the Muslim community, even in religiously orthodox countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, Iran has supported family planning and has the lowest population growth rates in the Muslim world.

Izala is not averse to becoming more actively involved in Nigerien politics. In Nigeria, Abdoulaye Gumi, the spiritual guide of Izala, until his death in 1992, for years urged his followers, including women, to vote massively in national elections to prevent a Christian from becoming president. Izala is now seeking to place its followers in important posts in the government and in the state bureaucracy to enhance its influence.

While orthodoxy seems to be gaining ground in Niger, the diversity and pluralism of Islamic civil society and Niger's strong traditions of religious tolerance constitute impressive barriers to the development of VE.

## **REVISITING APPROACHES TO IDENTIFYING CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

Despite the emergence of AQIM, MUJAO, and BH in neighboring countries over the past few years, Niger has not yet experienced the rise of radical Islamic groups using violence to pursue their ends. Though our findings indicate that the risk of VE developing in the

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<sup>54</sup> See Barbara Cooper, "De quoi la crise démographique est-elle le nom?," *Politique africaine*, No. 130, (2013).

near future is still relatively low, they also point to the potential for violent conflicts intensifying in other forms.

USAID documents over the past five years have placed much less emphasis on poverty as a major driver of violence.<sup>55</sup> Niger provides a good example as why this approach is justified.

Niger consistently ranks as the one of the poorest, if not the poorest, countries in the world in terms of per capita income and people below the poverty line.<sup>56</sup> However, despite periodic Tuareg rebellions and *coup d'états*, Niger has experienced relatively low levels of political, ethnic, and religious violence when compared with other Sub-Saharan African countries like the Congo, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan and North African countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Libya.

The current USAID approach places greater emphasis on political, cultural, and socio-economic factors as the main drivers creating conditions favoring the rise and spread of violent extremism. At the same time, greater attention has been given to the “pull” factors which lead individuals to become radicalized and to join extremist groups. This section will focus primarily on the push factors while also identifying some of the most likely groups in Nigerien society likely to engage in violence.

## CULTURAL DRIVERS: RESISTANCE TO WESTERNIZATION AND PERCEPTIONS THAT THE WEST IS AGAINST ISLAM

This section focuses on one of the major active and passive cultural drivers leading to increases in anti-western sentiments and both active and passive support for radical Islamist groups and possibly to VE.

Muslim religious leaders in Niger generally do not have a favorable opinion of the West for several reasons:

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<sup>55</sup> See Denoeux with Lynne Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, October 2009 and USAID, *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice*, September 2011.

<sup>56</sup> The United Nations 2013 Human Development Index places Niger at the very bottom.

- The United States and its western allies are seen as Islamophobic and waging wars against Muslim countries all over the world.
- The West is seen as demonizing all Muslims because of the violent activities of a small group of Muslim extremists.
- The West is seen as morally decadent and fostering immoral behavior. This can be seen in immodest dress, tolerating sexual promiscuity and homosexuality, high alcohol and drug consumption, and violent crime as major features of western societies.
- Western aid programs and conditions are seen as instruments for imposing values and practices on their society that contradict Islam.
- Religious leaders have very little knowledge of western religious practices and examples of respectful relationships between non-Muslim and Muslim communities in the west.
- Westerners also seem to have little knowledge of Islamic and traditional African religious customs and norms.<sup>57</sup>

The identification of anti-terrorism programs with Islam and the emphasis on Islamic groups and countries as the main enemy and source of violence has led many Nigeriens and Nigerien Islamic religious leaders to feel that the United States is waging a war against Islam.

This sentiment is reinforced by USAID programs that promote family planning and gender equality -- behaviors that some Nigerien religious leaders, particularly in rural areas, consider to be in conflict with their interpretation of Islamic values. For example, they see USAID's new 2013 family planning project designed to increase access to and use of quality family-planning services in Niger as trying to impose Western values. The emphasis on these programs in a conservative Muslim society like Niger can create in the minds of some of Niger's Islamic leaders a lack of trust and reinforces their negative stereotypes about Western culture and intentions. In its extreme form, they can even elicit fears that the Western powers are trying to assert the dominance of their culture by reducing the Muslim population; thus, providing a justification for more conservative

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<sup>57</sup> For criticism of America's lack of knowledge of Islam and Islamophobia see Steven Kull, *Feeling Betrayed: The Roots of Muslim Anger at America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

Islamic leaders to embrace the concept of violent Islamic extremism and for radical preachers to support violence as a legitimate response.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand in Niamey, Agadez, and other highly urbanized areas there is less resistance to these programs and USAID's health and educational sector programs have succeeded in promoting family planning, improving maternal and child health, and increasing the number of girls going to and staying in school.

It appears that USAID's program designs and implementation in the health sector have been insufficiently aware of or sensitive to the values and norms that at least some of Niger's Islamic community hold. Nor have USAID programs been able to adequately take into account and effectively counter long-standing negative perceptions and misconceptions concerning the United States and the West. Conversely, Nigerien Muslims have little knowledge about the strong role of religion in American society, the number of Muslims in America, and the religious freedom that has allowed Muslim communities to grow and be accepted.

The analysis in this section highlights the need to improve communications with Muslim religious authorities to reduce anti-western sentiments and support of VIE.

## POLITICAL DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The 2009 *Guide to the Drivers of Violence* listed seven political drivers of VE

- State Sponsorship of Violent Extremist Groups
- Denial of Political Rights and Liberties
- Government Repression and Gross Violation of Human Rights
- Protracted Violent Local Conflicts
- Poorly Governed or Ungoverned Areas
- Endemic Corruption and Impunity
- Discredited Government and Missing or Co-opted Legal Oppositions

The assessment sees the last two drivers as most significant and also adds and examines political and social exclusion and marginalization as a major driver of VE in Niger

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<sup>58</sup> Based on interviews with Tidjani and traditional Islamic religious authorities in Maradi on Feb. 8-9, 2014 .

Today, there is little evidence of *state sponsorship of violent extremist groups*. On the contrary, the current regime has taken a strong stand against AQIM, MUJAO, and BH. Government officials and institutions have become targets of the Jihadist groups for government's collaboration with the West.

While the current government has harassed journalists and other critics of the regime, there has been no large-scale *denial of political rights and liberties*.<sup>59</sup> The 2011 national presidential and legislative elections were open. Niger has a free press, freedom of association, and a multiparty system in which parties operate freely.

*Government repression and violation of human rights* were as prevalent in the last years of the Tandja regime. The FAN was accused of using excessive force and repression in putting down the MLN-led Tuareg rebellion. Tandja arrested journalists, jailed his chief competitor for the presidency, Hama Amadou on corruption charges, and clamped down on critics of his bid for a third term. The transition from military regime to civilian rule has been accompanied by a decline in repression and fewer human rights violations which reduces the risk of VE in the political sphere. Violent repression of peaceful public protests and state violence against regime critics and opposition critics often trigger more violence. This has not happened in Niger.

Protracted violent local conflicts as reflected in the Tuareg rebellions eventually terminated in peace agreements with the government and greater integration of the Tuaregs. Violent conflict could resume if MLN Tuareg leaders do not get the jobs and resources promised in the peace agreement.

Although Niger's *poorly governed or ungoverned areas* in the Sahara brought AQIM, and MUJAO closer to Niger and facilitated occasional attacks and kidnapping by these groups, so far their proximity has not stimulated Nigerien VE. On the other hand, the ungoverned areas have provided a largely uncontrolled area of operations for a wide range of criminal activities—e.g. drug and arms trade, human trafficking, and smuggling which has increased the level of violence in the region due to access to heavy weapons, fighting over control of trading routes and the huge profits generated by illicit activities.

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<sup>59</sup> For example, the Reporters without Borders 2013 Press Freedom Index noted a deterioration of press freedom as indicated in a sharp drop in ratings which moved Niger down from 29<sup>th</sup> to 43<sup>rd</sup> place. In January 2014, Freedom House which ranks Niger as partly free denounced the detention of four Nigerien journalists and demanded their immediate release.

*Failing Government Legitimacy and Missing or Co-opted Legal Opposition* are political drivers that diminish interest in supporting government. There appear to be few differences between government coalitions and opposition parties in terms of the seriousness with which they approach political and economic reforms. Government officials and political leaders point to rising enrollments in educational systems, increases in uranium and oil production, foreign aid, and per capita income as signs of accomplishments. Many citizens see few concrete improvements since 2011 as disillusionment with the regime grows. A disconnect between the government and the people seems to be growing and undermining the legitimacy of the government as promises to reform the system, improve government services, and provide more employment opportunities have not yet materialized. This trend undermines trust in the government and its legitimacy.

*Endemic corruption and impunity for well-connected elites* is more likely to become a major political driver of violence than the other drivers discussed above. The perception of corruption and impunity is widespread in Niger.<sup>60</sup> Religious and customary authorities and older citizens see it as the result of a general decline in morality and abandoning of traditional cultural and religious values. Nigeriens regard the conspicuous consumption of Niger's political elite and favoritism shown to their friends, families, and supporters in allocating state resources as a sure sign of corruption.

The lack of transparency in the government's dealings with AREVA and the Chinese-dominated oil sector;<sup>61</sup> the failure of the government to use state revenues to improve public services and infrastructure; and broken promises to create new employment opportunities, further fuel perceptions of government corruption. Many believe that some government and army officials are on the take and complicit in turning a blind eye on drug and other illegal activities and that they and others enjoy impunity.<sup>62</sup> Nigerian military officials involved in extra-legal executions have not been brought to justice.

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<sup>60</sup> This perception persists despite improvements in the corruption indexes of the World Bank and Transparency International

<sup>61</sup> USAID has recently addressed this issue through programming implemented by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). For more details, see Edward McMahon et al, *An Evaluation of the CEPPS National Democratic Institute/IFES National Resource Management Strengthening Program in Niger*, Washington, DC: The Mitchell Group/USAID, February 2014.

<sup>62</sup> USAID has been successful in helping establish advocacy groups to lobby the oil and mining sector corporations and in promoting interest and competence in Niger's legislative body to regular these sectors. See Edward McMahon et al., *An Evaluation of the CEPPS National Democratic Institute/IFES Natural Resource Management Strengthening Program in Niger*. Despite the passage of legislation in this area, little improvements have been seen

Political, economic, and social exclusion and marginalization are also major drivers of violence. Participants in nearly all of the focus groups that met with the team complained about discrimination and marginalization as expressed in various forms:

- Inadequate and unfair regional distribution of government resources and jobs.
- Exclusion of Tuareg ex-combatants aspiring to rise in the army and security services.
- Neglect of and discrimination against minority groups like the Toubou, Fulani and Tuareg.
- Discrimination against the poor as reflected in rising economic inequality between the political and economic elites and the people accompanied by a growing sense of being victims of economic injustice.
- Lack of consultation of political authorities with citizens at both the national and local levels.

Public dissatisfaction with government corruption, incompetence, and discrimination if not addressed, could fuel political protest that could turn violent.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DRIVERS: DECLINING QUALITY AND ACCESS TO NATURAL RESOURCES

Despite improvements in rainfall patterns over the past twenty years, Niger continues to suffer from periodic drought and most recently from flooding. Flooding was particularly disastrous in the Diffa region where its main cash crop (red peppers) was wiped out.<sup>63</sup> Agricultural production is concentrated in the southern part of Niger which contains most of the population.

## PASTORALIST-AGRICULTURALIST CONFLICTS

The deterioration of environmental conditions exacerbating conflicts between herders and agriculturalists has been described earlier in the paper—e.g., not enough arable

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by the populations in the regions in which these sectors operate (Focus Groups in Agadez and Diffa, February 2014).

<sup>63</sup> This was the major concern of populations expressed by Diffa residents during interviews conducted by Issouf Bayard in the Diffa region, February 10-11, 2014.

land for farmers and corridors for cattle. These conflicts are likely to intensify in the future and lead to higher levels of violence. For example, in the Tillaberi region, conflicts between herders and farmers, especially in areas close to the Malian border, have become more frequent and violent because of the lack of security in rural areas; the influx and wide dissemination of small arms; cattle rustling by non-Nigeriens; and violent reprisals by nationals who often blame Fulani herders for the raids. Fulani herders are increasingly complaining about ethnic discrimination on the part of the authorities who are seen as favoring agriculturalists.

Herder-farmer conflicts are increasing all over the country as competition for access to farm and grazing lands have become more intense and a matter of survival for the parties concerned. They have become even more violent in Northern Nigerian rural areas south of the Diffa region where an attack by Fula herders on a village in March 2014 led to 69 deaths.

#### GROWING CONFLICTS OVER ALLOCATION AND SALE OF LAND IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

In the major urban areas, land speculation has driven up the cost of housing. In Maradi, the rapid sale of public land, though providing revenues for the municipal budget, has deprived farmers and herders of access to large tracts of agricultural and grazing land within the boundaries of the city. Large towns like Maradi still have a significant percentage of its population earning their living as farmers and herders. Urban youth also complain that not enough public land is allocated for soccer fields, playgrounds, and other recreational activities.<sup>64</sup>

In rural areas, demographic pressures have led to fragmentation of land holdings over the years as land has been constantly divided and sub-divided. In many instances, the male household head has sold off land and animals that ordinarily would have been handed down to his children to meet immediate expenses and pay off debts, thus making it even more difficult for his children to make a living in the future. Land shortages and fragmentation in rural areas have also reduced access of women to farm family land. This deprives them of the opportunity to earn money to pay for their

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<sup>64</sup> Interviews with President of CAC, Commune III and religious authorities in Maradi, February 2014

children's education and other family needs. Land shortages have undermined family solidarity and authority structures. More and more young people are obliged to leave their families and go elsewhere to survive.

#### GROWING CONFLICTS BETWEEN LOCAL RESIDENTS AND MINING AND OIL COMPANIES

Pastoralists and agriculturalists living in the vicinity of the AREVA Uranium mining concession and oil exploration and exploitation areas have complained about environmental damage that has poisoned grasslands and polluted water sources.<sup>65</sup> These developments have made conditions for herders more difficult and reduced access to potable water by the people of the region. The anger of local residents against the mining and oil companies, fueled also by discrimination in employment and unwillingness to transfer more resources to develop the regions in which they operate, has become a major flashpoint for violence which is likely to increase in the future.

#### YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND VE

Despite the high levels of youth unemployment, only a miniscule number of Nigerien youth have been recruited by violent Islamist extremist groups thus far.<sup>66</sup> New recruits come primarily from the following categories.

- Young people that have migrated to war and high conflict zones and returned to Niger.
- Young Tuareg ex-combatants or younger siblings of ex-combatants with relatively low levels of formal education and angry Fulani herders living close to the Malian borders where AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine have been operating.
- Youth from the Diffa region who have strong kinship ties with families connected or sympathetic to BH in Nigeria.
- Muslim students returning from radical Islamist *Madrasas* in North Africa, the Middle East, and Nigeria.

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<sup>65</sup> The analysis is based on focus group meetings and interviews in Agadez and Diffa regions in February 2014.

<sup>66</sup> For more on unemployed youth as an at-risk category, see Lynn Carter and Guillain Denooux, *Youth and Extremism Module* (Washington, DC: Management Systems International, October 2008).

Adventure and economic opportunities seem to be the main attractions for joining AQIM, MUJAO, and BH rather than ideological fervor.<sup>67</sup>

Other individuals and groups vulnerable to recruitment by extremist religious groups could include the following:

- Koranic school beggars
- Street children
- School-drop-outs with little ties to their parents living on their own—e.g. toughs hanging out in *Auto-Gares*, members of youth gangs, rural youth seeking work in Nigeria and Mali.

What these groups all have in common is their being cut off from parental authority and having little hope for the future.

#### YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT, DRUG USE, AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES,

Youth unemployment and growing drug use have increased Nigerien youth's proclivity to engage in various forms of violent and criminal activities. This phenomenon is prevalent in rural as well as in urban areas.

Nigeriens attribute the growing use of drugs by young people to their lack of employment. This refers not only to their not having remunerative work, but also their having little to do that is constructive in their leisure time. Their situation has pushed young people to use drugs for excitement. To pay for the drugs, they often turn to crime.

Youth responses to unemployment differ considerably. In Zinder and Maradi, for example, unemployed young people have organized youth gangs (*palais*) that engage in petty crime, extortion, harassment and rape of young women, and gang fights over turf.<sup>68</sup> Thus, far the youth gangs have remained apolitical and not actively involved in drug trafficking, despite their use of drugs. Their members are often school drop-outs and recruited from the poorer classes. Most big cities in Niger have one or more

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<sup>67</sup> For example, a young returnee from Libya participating in a focus group in Filingué said that he didn't share their ideology but that he would join them if the economic incentives were there.

<sup>68</sup> See *Niger Crime and Conflict*, pp. 13-15.

neighborhoods run by young toughs and where law enforcement agents are reluctant to enter.

One of the major consequences of youth unemployment is the difficulty young men have in finding wives and then starting and supporting their own families because they and their families can't meet traditional social obligations. Young single men are generally more prone to engage in violent and criminal activities, especially when their economic future is bleak and prospects for leading a "normal" family life are limited.

In the Agadez region, unemployed youth have many opportunities to join criminal networks operating in the Sahara. These are high risk activities because they often lead to armed conflict with rival criminal networks.

In many rural areas young people no longer see their future in farming and livestock activities. Some leave home to seek their fortune in Niger's larger towns, Nigeria, neighboring countries, and North Africa. Many who stay in their villages pop pills, smoke hash and break into neighbors' houses to obtain money to buy drugs.

Prostitution has also been growing. Young unmarried girls and women returning to Niger after spending years abroad have few employment opportunities and are at risk.<sup>69</sup>

#### TRIGGERS OF VIOLENCE FOR UNEMPLOYED YOUTH

Participation of unemployed youth in violent activities could be triggered by: (a) elections; (b) sports events; and (c) protests.<sup>70</sup>

During *election* campaigns in Africa, political parties in Africa often recruit youth to intimidate critics and political opponents, break-up rallies and marches, and to protect political leaders and party headquarters against attacks by their opponents. Nigeriens have expressed the concern that elections could trigger violent confrontations and that

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<sup>69</sup> This statement was widely supported by interviews in Niamey with civil society organizations and religious authorities as well as by focus groups and interviews in Agadez, Maradi, and Diffa regions held between February 4-11, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> *Niger Crime and Conflict*, pp. 24-25

criminal elements could become involved in recruiting youth and financing different forms of electoral violence.

*Sports events*, especially soccer matches, are one of the major triggers of violence for Nigerien youth. Violence can break out over exchanges of insults between supporters of rival teams, “bad” calls by the referees, and losses by the home team. Given the strong interest of youth in sports, it is surprising that more effort has not been made to expand and improve sports facilities, encourage youth to participate in organized sports, and to recruit popular sports figures to advocate good sportsmanship and codes of behavior. Sports can provide a constructive outlet to restless youth.

*Protests* motivated by anger at the breakdown of public services like water and electricity, failure of mining companies to employ local youth, and deaths following attempts by the police and security forces to breakup demonstrations, constitute another major trigger of youth violence.

## **REGIONAL VULNERABILITY TO VE**

The Assessment Team relied heavily upon direct contact with a wide range of people at the grassroots level through interviews and focus groups to get a better understanding of what was happening on the ground and how ordinary Nigeriens perceived their situation. The analysis here depended heavily on interviews and focus groups organized by TMG in November and December 2013<sup>71</sup> and those organized by the CVE Assessment team in February, 2014.

One of the interesting findings was that participants in the focus groups usually painted a picture of their situation and problems that was far more negative than that portrayed by local and national level government officials. Participants in focus groups also displayed negative attitudes towards the government and the oil and uranium mining sectors.

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<sup>71</sup> A total of nine focus groups were organized in Agadez, Tabelt, Alhassas and Azel, Tahoua, Tillaberi, Balayara, Maradi, Zinder, and Niamey (CVE assessment and PDEV II qualitative evaluation.)

After analyzing the results of their field visits, the team identified the regions and areas which are most at risk to VE.

## THE DIFFA REGION: SANCTUARY AND POINT OF ENTRY FOR BOKO HARAM

Diffa is the region most vulnerable to VE in general and to BH in particular because of the following factors:

- The proximity of its main urban centers to the Nigerian border and BH strongholds.
- The close kinship relationships between families on both sides of the border that link Diffa region families with BH members.
- The willingness of their kin in the Diffa region to shelter and protect BH fighters.
- A sharp increase in the influx of refugees coming from Nigeria over the past six months.
- An unknown but significant number of BH militants fleeing Nigerian army repression, as well as the presence of at least 110 BH activists trained in MUJAO camps. These activists fought together with AQIM in Mali.
- The arrest and disarming of BH militants returning from Mali is also causing BH backlash.<sup>72</sup>
- An atmosphere of fear that intimidates Nigeriens from identifying known BH fighters and supporters to the local authorities and openly criticizing Jihadists.
- Growing tensions between traditional Muslim authorities, Izala, and more extremist groups.
- A relatively weak presence of Tidjani Sufis in the region who are more critical of VE and vigilant in monitoring extremist groups like BH than Izala, which has a strong and growing presence there.
- The unpopularity of the Nigerian government due to its neglect of Northeast Nigeria and the killing of many innocent civilians in its battle against BH.
- The Nigerian government's inability to crush BH and re-establish order in the Region.
- The spread of a culture of violence and banditry coming from Nigeria.

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Diffa region officials on February 12, 2014.

Diffa also suffers from being the poorest and most isolated and neglected region in Niger. Roads are poor; schools are overcrowded; housing is scarce and expensive; urbanization is chaotic; and crime levels are high. Despite the presence of the oil companies, employment opportunities are few. Morale is low; rural youth are abandoning agriculture; and prospects for employment are poor. Flood and parasites have destroyed Diffa's main cash crop (red peppers). Food shortages are endemic. Parental authority is breaking down; and drug use is growing with, hard drugs more available. A new phenomenon is that Arabs are controlling the hard drug trade. Violence in the schools is increasing; young women are turning more and more to prostitution to earn a living. Corruption is widespread while clientelism determines the allocation of jobs and resources and favors people coming from the capital. There are rumors that the Toubou in the region are close to rebelling.<sup>73</sup>

Many of the same social and economic conditions that facilitated the rise of BH in northeastern Nigeria are also present in the Diffa region. Fortunately, unlike northeastern Nigeria, Diffa has no similar history of harboring violent extremist movements going back to the late 1970s.<sup>74</sup> Further deterioration of living conditions, continued feelings of abandonment and discrimination by the central government, and growing numbers of BH fighters and sympathizers entering the Diffa region provide favorable conditions for the development of VE. Kinship solidarity with BH Haram militants is a strong pull factor for Diffa youth.

#### REGIONS ON THE MALIAN BORDER (AGADEZ, TAHOUA, AND TILLABERI): CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND DANGER OF ANOTHER TUAREG INSURGENCY

The populations in Nigerien regions bordering with Mali and the region of Agadez have little sympathy for AQIM, MUJAO, and BH and their jihadist ideologies. There is little likelihood that these groups will gain a strong foothold in these regions.

On the other hand, economic incentives might motivate unemployed youth, particularly those having recently returned from Libya to collaborate with Jihadist groups. Having no

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<sup>73</sup> Interviews with local government officials in Diffa and natives of Diffa residing in Niamey

<sup>74</sup> For example, the Maitatsine millenarian movement led by Muhammed Mara in the early 1980s and the Shiite movement led by Ibrahim Zakzady were extremely violent and resulted in the loss of thousands of lives. Unlike Niger, interreligious conflicts between Muslims and Christians in federal states often turned violent,

economic prospects at home, some might join Jihadist groups outside of Niger or help these groups to infiltrate and organize terrorist attacks and kidnappings inside Niger.

While security has improved in the larger towns, thanks to the beefing up of the presence of FAN and other security forces, insecurity, violent conflicts, and crime are increasing in the countryside. Nigeriens in regions like Tillaberi and Tahoua are fearful of Malian refugees as potential Jihadist infiltrators and complain about the increase in armed bandits and rustlers crossing the border from Mali to steal livestock and hold-up travelers.

Despite many complaints by Tuaregs in Agadez that the government has not lived up to its promises following the end of the MJN rebellion, there is little evidence that another Tuareg insurgency is imminent for several reasons:

- The older generation of Tuareg rebel leaders who control the main local government institutions in the region still retain the respect of their communities.
- The leaders of the MJN rebellion were partly discredited by their involvement in the drug trade and thought by many to be using the rebellion to help their personal advancement.
- Participation in crime networks provides young Tuaregs with an alternative to rebellion and insurgency.
- The Issoufou regime has recognized the need to give Tuaregs more autonomy at home and shown willingness to share power at the national level.
- The government has made promises to allocate more resources to developing the region and making it more secure.

The Issoufou regime's reaching out to the Tuaregs provides a window of opportunity for mitigating some of the factors that led to past Tuareg rebellions—i.e., feelings of exclusion and discrimination. However, the government's failure to deliver on its promises if it persists could plant the seeds for another insurgency in the future.

Tuaregs are generally fiercely opposed to Islamist extremist ideologies and should be regarded as potential allies in the fight against Jihadist forces operating in the Sahel. The Tuareg community has been Muslim for many centuries and influenced by a combination of Sufi and traditional tribal customs including allowing great freedom to women. The Tuareg capital of Timbuktu was also once a great center of Islamic

scholarship. The Tuareg generally see the Jihadists as aliens who have distorted views of Islam.

#### NIAMEY: CHECKS AND BALANCES ON THE RISE OF VE IN NIGER'S CAPITAL

Niamey is a cosmopolitan city which compared to the rest of the country has a large concentration of religious and civil society associations. Islamic civil society is the major counter-weight to government power and has become increasingly influential over the past thirty years. This does not mean that Niger is moving irrevocably towards becoming an Islamic state or a stronghold of VE. The diversity of Islamic civil society and its associational life coupled with Niger's strong traditions of religious and ethnic tolerance provide major obstacles to the rise of VE.<sup>75</sup>

Though Izala has made major gains since being introduced from Nigeria, especially with the young, several factors have thus far prevented Izala from becoming the dominant Islamic force in Niamey:

- More Muslims in Niamey still belong to Islamic associations identifying with Malikite and Sufi traditions.
- Izala's intolerant attitudes towards Sufi and other non-Wahhabi Muslims turn many Nigeriens off.
- The Nigerian and Hausa origins of many Izala religious leaders and the predominance of Arab countries and Hausa merchants in financing the movement's activities make it more difficult for Nigeriens to regard Izala as a national movement appealing to all Nigerien Muslims.
- Izala's appeal to the economic concerns of youth and their need to escape the social obligations and expenditures preventing them from getting and advancing economically targets middle class urban youth over youth from poorer and less educated groups in society.

Niamey has a large number of independent Islamic associations representing different religious currents—e.g. Tidjaniya, Qadiriyyah, Izala, Malikite, Shiite, Muslim Brothers, Jamaat Tablighh, and Ahmadiyya Islamic associations also include charitable, proselytizing, developmental, and educational institutions and bring together members of different groups—e.g. university and high school students, women, and youth. Most

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<sup>75</sup> For a detailed description of the rapid expansion of Islamic associations and their diversity since the early 1990s, see Moulaye Hassane et al., *Etudes sur les Pratiques de l'Islam au Niger, op.cit. 2006.*

of these Islamic associations are moderate and less militant than Izala. Members of the *Association des Femmes Musulmanes du Niger (AFMN)* are relatively well-educated. The *Groupement des Associations Islamiques pour les activités en Matière de Planification Familiale et de la Promotion de la Femme en Islam au Niger*, one of the rare Islamic associations to promote family planning and advocate birth control, is often solicited by USAID and other donors that support birth control. Muslims and religious authorities in Niamey are generally more open to family planning than those outside the capital.

The growing reluctance of the government to monitor and ban incendiary sermons and failure of political parties and civil society to criticize radical Islamic preachers because of fears of being labeled as anti-Islamic have increased opportunities for communicating support of jihadist movements and criticism of attempts to fight AQIM, MUJAO, BH, and VE as wars against Islam.

Although some Nigeriens see Izala as seeking to establish an Islamic state and would use violence under certain conditions to achieve this objective, Izala is currently presenting itself and acting as a moderate mainstream orthodox Islamic movement. This stance is unlikely to change in the near and mid-term.

Other factors checking the rise of VE in the capital are the Issoufou regime's commitment to joining the Western anti-terrorism alliance, the strengthening of Niger's intelligence agencies' capacity to monitor terrorist activities, and the expanding role of FAN and Niger's security services in defending the country against terrorism.

Given the relative degree of religious moderation in Niamey, the main trigger of violence in the capital is most likely to come from political parties fighting their rivals or from anti-government protests articulating popular discontent over poor conditions in the university, the high cost of living, the failure to provide electricity, water, and other basic urban services, widespread corruption and the failure to punish those responsible. Youth are becoming more radicalized and more likely to engage in violent demonstrations. Confrontations leading to numerous deaths might trigger mass demonstrations and more violence. These events could possibly lead to the resignation of the government, the creation of a national unity government, or a *coup d'état* by the military to restore order. However, this level of violence is not likely to happen in the short run since the government has more resources to distribute if pushed, pressure by donors to make reforms, and the politicians' desire to be re-elected.

## MARADI AND ZINDER: IZALA URBAN STRONGHOLDS AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

The cities of Maradi and Zinder have close connections with Hausa-speaking communities and merchants in Nigeria. Wealthy Hausa merchants control commerce there which is based primarily on trade between the two countries. Izala is very strong in Maradi and is pushing the city towards greater orthodoxy in exerting pressure on women to follow stricter dress codes and cracking down on bars and alcohol consumption. Although tensions between Izala and Sufi leaders persist, these have not led to any recent violent confrontations. Tidjani religious leaders assert that Izala attracts young people “through their money.”

Though still a tiny minority, the Shiite community in Maradi has risen considerably in the past two years and is organized by Muslim clerics from Nigeria.

Zinder is a more ethnically mixed city with some industry. The Izala presence is not as strong as in Maradi. Youth gangs, drugs, and crime are more developed in Zinder which is known for its *palais* youth gangs. The Zinder region is also not benefiting from the oil exploration taking place in the region.

Izala seems to have little influence with the rural populations in the hinterlands north of Maradi and Zinder. These communities seem content with their traditional Islamic practices and suspicious of outsiders questioning their status as good Muslims.

The Sultan of Katsina has intervened on several occasions to mediate intra-religious disputes and instructed his representatives to monitor suspicious foreigners coming into the region. Thus far, there is little evidence that BH, AQIM, or MUJAO fighters are taking advantage of the two region’s porous borders with Nigeria to infiltrate in significant numbers without being observed.

## **POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### DEVELOP A COORDINATED REGIONAL STRATEGY AND PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS VE

This assessment has pointed to the low risk of VE developing *within* Niger in the short (2-3 years) and medium-term (3-5 years). The main strongholds of extremist groups are located in bordering countries. At this time, the main risk is infiltration by external

extremist groups. Niger's porous borders render it vulnerable to outside forces infiltrating and perpetuating attacks inside the country. A regional approach is needed to prevent VE gaining a foothold in Niger and to build synergy between programs in Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali and would entail the following:

- Make a greater effort to solicit the input of African governments, experts, religious leaders, civil society, and local populations in identifying priorities and designing and evaluating policies and programs.
- Elaborate sound development programs on both sides of the border in areas most vulnerable to VE.
- Strengthen African research institutions in these countries, create regional networks of scholars and practitioners, build regional data bases, and facilitate exchange of views with other African, Western, and Islamic World research institutions.
- Develop regional communication strategies that would present information and messages more likely to change perceptions that facilitate the development of VE.

## IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS AND DESIGN PROGRAMS TO ENHANCE DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION WITH RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

Development programs promoting religious tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict in Niger and other Sahelian countries targeted by violent extremists provide communities with valuable support for maintaining their traditions of religious and ethnic tolerance. However, these programs often do not address the cultural and religious sensitivities around issues concerning family codes, women's role and rights, and family planning which impact people's views of the West.

These challenges are often most apparent in programs that use language and promote policies that may appear to contradict Muslim law and traditions as practiced in Niger. The impression of a lack of in-depth understanding of Muslim religious worldviews can undermine trust and reinforce negative stereotypes about Western culture and intentions among Muslims. For example, programs promoting birth control and gender equality may appear to violate traditional Islamic norms and could contribute to generating sentiments that the West, in general, and the USG, in particular, is anti-Islam and attempting to impose their values on predominantly Muslim societies.

To counter views of the West as anti-Islam, improve communications and trust between donors and religious authorities, and foster greater collaboration between donors and religious authorities in the pursuit of shared objectives, aid programs should continuously monitor programmatic approaches for cultural appropriateness. Development partners should ensure that language and programs demonstrate sensitivity and understanding of the differences, conflicts, and compatibility of western human rights standards, Islamic law and other religious and cultural traditions, especially in matters related to family codes, family planning, and the status of women, and public and private morality.

### PROVIDE TARGETED ASSISTANCE IN REGIONS MOST VULNERABLE TO VE

The assessment recommends providing targeted USAID resources in Diffa and Agadez, two of the regions most at risk of VE. These measures would support and complement current programs promoting community coherence, religious tolerance, and peace-building which could also be reinforced.

#### For Diffa, recommendations would include the following measures:

- (Urgent) Initiate a large-scale humanitarian aid multi-donor program to provide support to the growing influx of refugees coming from the Nigerian side of the border. Programs might include conflict mediation and arbitration, establishment of representative community councils, and community-level advisory bodies for humanitarian programs.
- Initiate a system of monitoring people coming across the border that could help identify BH supporters coming into the region and ascertain their numbers.
- Finance labor intensive public works program that would, for example, use large numbers of unemployed youth to repair roads damaged by flooding and build access roads to connect rural areas to towns and major roads.
- Expand food security programs in the region and ensure timely delivery of agricultural inputs.
- Encourage private sector companies, for example oil companies, to hire more local people, coordinate and work with local NGOs, CSOs and local governments, and contribute to relief programs.
- Reduce the number of refugees through measures taken on the Nigerian side of the border, such as:
  - Provide emergency relief for the population.
  - Provide protection for villages from BH attacks.

- Reduce use of excessive force which may have unintended consequences of killing civilians and alienating the population.
- Provide amnesty programs for BH members surrendering arms and renouncing violence.

Recommendations for Agadez region include:

- Explore the feasibility of establishing a large-scale development program for the region based on irrigated agriculture to provide employment and produce food surplus that would:
  - Tap underground water resources;
  - Develop 5,000-10,000 hectares of agricultural land;
  - Use solar energy technology for irrigation pumps, schools, health centers, and administrative buildings, in the region;
  - Provide training programs to unemployed youth in solar energy technology which could provide employment for them not only in Agadez but in other regions, and;
  - Allocate land plots to unemployed youth and ex-combatants and provide them with training in agricultural techniques, and equally as important, tools and credit.
  
- Finance training, tools, and credit to women engaged in vegetable garden farming.
- Support establishment of mobile primary schools and teachers for children of herders.
- Monitor Swiss-financed project implemented by CASPA (*Cabinet d'Activités et d'Action pour la Sécurité et la Paix*), as a possible model to scale up, designed to build community solidarity and eventually to encourage collaboration with Tuareg communities on the Malian side of the border.

## INCREASE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING AS PART OF DECENTRALIZATION PROGRAMS

A key component of decentralization programming often focuses on informing citizens of how local government institutions are supposed to work and on establishing advisory councils with individuals (chosen from different categories of society) who are selected to liaise with these local government institutions. The effectiveness of this approach has

been limited because most local government institutions (with the exception of a handful of municipal councils in the big cities, which control local government resources) have limited resources and little decision-making authority. To date, the various mechanisms to engage citizens have not been very representative. Citizens in focus groups claimed that local authorities don't listen to them and favor their own families and political allies in allocating resources.

Until the communal institutions become more operational and functional, greater efforts should be devoted to organizing and empowering local civil society to work together with government officials to identify priority problems recognized by the people and mobilize national and local resources to resolve them.

Recommendations for enhancing decentralization efforts in the short run would include the following:

- Strengthen local associations and civil society organizations and establish a federation (civic union)<sup>76</sup> of associations within each commune that would work with local government officials in the following areas:
  - Formulation of a local communal development plan based on the priorities expressed by the community, available resources, and community willingness to mobilize local resources.
  - Increase citizen participation and input through town meetings, testimony at government hearings on specific topics, membership on local government committees, and attending budgetary sessions.

Focus on resolving conflicts between farmers and herders in rural areas through the formulation of a land-use plan approved by all the major parties<sup>77</sup> and the establishment of procedures guaranteeing transparency in selling land and issuing property titles in urban communes. Strengthen capacity of local and national civil

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<sup>76</sup> See the USAID-sponsored CLUSA (Cooperative League of the United States of America) model in Ghana as implemented in its GAIT Government Accountability Improves Trust (GAIT) I and II Projects which emphasized creating federations of local community-based associations to work with local government to improve delivery of public services.

<sup>77</sup> For example, see Senegalese programs to get communities to elaborate Land Use and Land Allocation Plans (Plans d'Occupation et d'Affectation des Sols (POAS)) in sylvo-pastoral areas in the Senegal River Valley where farmers and herders complement each other.

society to lobby for transfer of more resources and powers to communal government institutions.<sup>78</sup>

- Consult customary authorities and seek their input and support for decentralization programs and projects.

## REORIENTING PROGRAMS AND MESSAGES FOR UNEMPLOYED YOUTH

Programs for unemployed youth which emphasize training in vocational and leadership skills are concentrated primarily in urban and semi-urban areas. Vocational training programs usually stress mechanical skills valued in urban areas while leadership training programs recruit candidates primarily from middle-class, urban youth still in school. The following recommendations complement existing programs and are geared to reach larger numbers of poorer, more vulnerable urban and rural youth and to make greater use of sports and music to fight VE and to promote civic values and greater participation in public affairs:

- Use sports and music as a vehicle for mobilizing and organizing youth by financing sports facilities, organizing leagues and clubs, providing trainers, and sponsoring major sports events. In addition to soccer and basketball, one could also focus on boxing, wrestling, and martial arts which are very popular. Team sports require discipline and solidarity. Nigerien sports heroes could be recruited to serve as models and promote good sportsmanship and good citizenship. Supporters of rival teams could be recruited to keep the peace during sports matches. In other African countries, rap groups and individual rappers, reggae singers, other popular musicians have used music to transmit messages promoting democracy, good citizenship, and peace while attacking political corruption, violence, and drug abuse. Programs could bring famous Nigerien and African singers and groups from neighboring countries.
- Provide more vocational training for farmers and herders including training in organizing producer groups. A number of participants in focus groups expressed the view that the government does little to train farmers and herders to improve their skills and help them organize cooperatives, which could be used for pooling their resources and working together to farm land and manage herds. Training would include a realistic assessment of the potential in their village or district for

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<sup>78</sup> There is a need to strengthen communication between the diverse advocacy groups at different levels, grassroots populations, and local authorities.

earning a living through farming or livestock activities. Credit mechanisms could be created to finance the purchase of inputs.

- Organize programs to work with specific at risk youth groups—e.g., youth gangs and those hanging out in *auto-gares*, neighborhood *fadas*, and street children.
- Explore the possibility of working with different religious youth groups and religious leaders to promote common objectives. Pay particular attention to the young generation of religious leaders in Niamey who know how to relate to both pious and more secular-oriented youth.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The assessment concludes that the risk of VE developing organically within the country in the short and medium term is low with the possible exception of the Diffa region. Niger's long traditions of religious and ethnic tolerance are major factors in explaining why VE has made such little headway in that country. The main dangers of VE come from external forces from Mali and northeastern Nigeria. The proximity of violent Islamist extremist groups like AQIM, MUJAO, and BH has exposed Niger to isolated attacks and kidnappings and a certain degree of insecurity on its Mali and Nigerian borders.
- Although Izala has expanded its influence in Niger, especially with urban middle class youth, it does not pose a threat at this time to Nigerien stability. It is currently a moderate orthodox Islamic group which has not called for the creation of an Islamic state. Izala's criticism of Sufi and traditional Islamic forms of religion continues. However, this has not led to major violent intra-religious conflicts. Nigerien Muslims get along well with their Christian minority. Religion is not a major driver of violence in Niger.
- Weak and divided government based on personal power rivalries has contributed to sustained and periodic crises and the ineffectiveness of the regime to address its major challenges. This has eroded the population's sense of its legitimacy and limited popular support. The departure of Presidential Hama Amadou from the political scene (at least temporary) does nothing to correct these issues.
- Nigeriens appear to be losing confidence in the regime and people are upset with the government's inability to improve the living standards of its people and increasingly see the regime as corrupt and disconnected from the people.

Political protest could lead to violence and possibly a regime change, although this is unlikely in the short-term.

- Another possible source of political violence would come with a new Tuareg-led rebellion. The Nigerien Toubou community might join forces with a Tuareg insurgency if their own aspirations are not satisfied. A Tuareg insurgency, however, is unlikely in the short-term because of the government's efforts to share power with the Tuaregs and recognize their need for greater autonomy. A similar policy extended to the Toubou community would greatly reduce the risk of VE in Niger.
- Commitment of the Nigerien political elite to the French version of the secular state has weakened with the Islamization of society. At the same time, Islamic leaders are becoming more politicized and engaged in electoral politics.
- Environmental changes have evolved into a major driver of conflict as population pressures on a diminishing natural resource base has intensified conflict between farmers and herders, loosened parental authority and family solidarity, and made the struggle for survival increasingly difficult, and prospects for the future bleak.
- High levels of youth unemployment have led to greater drug use, a decline in parental authority, and more aggressive and criminal behavior rather than to VE.
- Niger's long traditions of religious and ethnic tolerance, relatively non-repressive though flawed style of democracy and political leadership, survival instincts of its people, and development of its mineral wealth offer hope that that the country can move forward without descending into extreme forms of political, religious, and ethnic violence. But unless the government can begin to seriously tackle the country's problems Niger's challenges will continue to increase.

## **ANNEXES**

Annex I: References

Annex II: Persons and Groups Contacted

## ANNEX I: REFERENCES

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## ANNEX II: LIST OF PERSONS AND GROUPS CONTACTED

<b>LIST OF INTERVIEWS</b>	
<b>Name</b>	<b>Position and Organization</b>
<b>NIAMEY</b>	
<b>USAID and U.S. Embassy</b>	
Richard Bell	Chargé d'Affaires
Sean Osner	USAID/Niger Office Development Counselor
<b>UNDP</b>	
Martine Thire	Deputy Director
Moussokoro Kane	Democracy and Governance Officer
Salvador Nkurunziza	Crisis Prevention Officer
<b>GON</b>	
Abdourahmane Ousmane	Abdourahmane Ousmane, President of the Conseil National de la Communication
N/A	Officer from Anti-Terrorist Services of Ministère de la Défense
N/A	President de la Haute Autorité à la consolidation de la paix
<b>PDev II</b>	
Eduardo P. Déprez	Country Director, PDEV II
Habibou Ousmane	PDEV II Team Leader, SO1 (youth development)
Sahirou Tchida Moussa	PDEV II Team Leader, SO 3 (civil society strengthening)
Midou Amitou	PDEV II Country Coordinator, PDEV II
<b>Political Parties,Civil Society and Media</b>	
Ousseini Salatou	Spokesperson for the opposition party coalition
Abdoulaye Sounaye	Islam Scholar, Young Muslim Preachers working with youth
Moulaye Hassane	Islam scholar, specialist in Arabic Islamic manuscripts.
Seynou Moumouni	IRSH Islamic history scholar
Moussa Tchangari	Secretary-General, Alternative Espace Citoyen (AEC) Niger
Albert Chaibou	Director of Alternative newspaper publication
A. Alfazazou	National Coordinator, SOS-Civisme
Salissou Abba Rabe	Financial Secretary, SOS-Civisme
Nassirou Lawall	Lawyer and Secretary- General, Cadre d'Actions pour la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (CADDH)
Hassane Moussa Ibrahima	Decentralization specialist
Kader Idi	Equal Assess, radio programming and training, PDEV II
Adji Souley	Journalist and civil society activist
Ousmane Abdoul Moumouni	Executive Director, CASPA
N/A	Doctor, customary chief, Mainé Soroa commune
Aba Mamane	Toubou notable and advisor to GON
Moustapha Aiche	Toubou notable and advisor to GON

N/A	Two Refugees from Garshaka, a Nigerian village, six kilometers south of Diffa, that was attacked by BH in February, 2014
Anassa Dibрила	Union des Scolaires Nigériens (USN)
Ali Muhammad	Hotel Manager
<b>BALAYARA</b>	
N/A	Youth including one returnee from Libya: 7 persons
N/A	Men: 8 persons
N/A	Women: 6 women
<b>FILINGUE</b>	
N/A	Herders and Farmers: 10 persons
N/A	Returning Nigeriens, mostly from Libya: 10 persons
<b>AGADEZ</b>	
N/A	Migrants expelled from Algeria and Libya: 8 persons
N/A	Religious Leaders: 5 persons
N/A	Vegetable Gardeners: 4 persons
N/A	Young Women: 5 persons
N/A	Toubou Community: 4 persons
N/A	Ex-Rebels (2007 rebellion): 5 persons
N/A	Political Leaders (Governing Coalition and Opposition): 5 persons
N/A	Police Commissioners
N/A	Traditional Toubou cadres
Ali Souleymane	Traditional cadre
N/A	Leader of Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations (OIM)
<b>KONNI (Small town Nigeria border between Niamey and Maradi)</b>	
Aboul Kader Issa	Taxi-Moto Association Leader
Ibrahim Mohamed Lamine	Member of Taxi-Moto Driver Association
<b>MARADI</b>	
<b>PDev II</b>	
Soba Fodi	Coordinator PDEV II, Maradi region
Ibrahima Maider	AARC and Youth development Officer, PDEV II, Maradi
<b>Local Government Officials and CAC Representatives</b>	
Laouali Sabiou	Mayor, Commune III
Illea Abdou	President of CAC, Commune III
Boukari Abdoul	President of Maradi City Youth Council and Commune III Youth Council

<b>Religious Leaders</b>	
Dan Taxi	Tidjani marabut and radio preacher
Imam Almou Moussa Atouma	President d'Honneur, Cadre de Concertation Interreligieuse and representative of Sultan of Katsina
Pastor Idrissa Saley	EERN (Evangelical Protestant Churches)
<b>Media</b>	
Ali Abdoul	Director of Radio Garkuwa
Salissou Issa	Radio Garkuwa
<b>DIFFA</b>	
<b>PDev II</b>	
Fati Amadou	Regional Coordinator
N/A	PDEV II Diffa region team members
<b>Local Government Officials and Representatives</b>	
N/A	Secretary-General, of Diffa Regional Gouvernor's Office
N/A	Mayor of Diffa (city)
N/A	Mayor of Mainé Soroa Commune
N/A	Mayor of Gueskérou Rural Commune
N/A	President of Diffa CAC
N/A	Religious Leader representative to CAC
<b>Civil Society and Media</b>	
N/A	Religious and Civil Society Leader
N/A	Regional representative, Alternative
N/A	Trainers, Centre des Métiers,
N/A	Radio Community Reporter,
N/A	Club des Radio programmers, Radio Anfani,
<b>Diffa Youth Focus Group (10 individuals)</b>	
N/A	Members from Fada Nazari, Club des Jeunes Musulmans, Participatory Theater Troop, Enfance en Difficulté, Mobile Cinema Team, Cadre de Concertation des Jeunes, Groupement Culturel Miroir, Fédération Niya, Jeunes Sans Emploi

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