Niger

A Bulwark against Further Instability in West Africa

By Daniel Mahanty and William Meeker

THE ISSUE

A troubling increase in violent attacks in Niger suggests that conflict could be spilling further into the interior of the country, placing a challenge before a Nigerien government under domestic and international pressure to respond, and putting stress on a military that is already stretched to its limits. As the government in Niamey along with international partners in Washington and Paris formulate strategies to contend with the violence, they would be well served to ensure that additional investments in military capacity are carefully balanced with an emphasis on accountability and governance, civilian protection, and finding appropriate channels to address conflict through localized political processes.

Niger sits at a crossroads between North Africa, the Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin. To its benefit and its detriment, it provides the connective tissue between these vast geographies—a busy but relatively peaceful thoroughfare, surrounded by a set of intensifying conflicts in neighboring countries. But over the last year, violence within Niger, in particular attacks against civilians along its extensive border with Mali and Burkina Faso, has been increasing. The Armed Conflict Local Events Database (ACLED) reported that from November 2018 to March 2019, armed clashes led to 452 deaths, which represents a 1,574 percent rise over the same period last year, ACLED data also show.

On May 14, 2019, Islamic State (IS) claimed credit for a high-profile attack against Nigerien security forces that resulted in an estimated 28 deaths in Tonga Tonga, the same area where Nigerien and U.S. soldiers were tragically killed in October 2017. Despite the worrying trends, Niger has performed better than its neighbors in managing the interlocking conflicts, and the government and its people possess resiliencies which can, and should, be built upon. As the Nigerien government and its international partners—particularly France and the United States—search for ways to stem the violence, they would be well served to avoid mistakes that have been made by others around the globe—heavy militarization absent accountability and a focus on mitigating harm to civilians.

A CHALLENGING NEIGHBORHOOD

Over the last seven years, the Nigerien State has managed to ensure that conflict in its border regions and neighboring countries—the western Tillabéri region, the eastern Diffa region, and the northern Agadez region—did not spillover into the center. However, the situation on the border with Mali continues to worsen. To Niger’s west, Mali has endured a protracted situation of armed conflict since 2012, which has included the direct involvement of French air and ground forces (Operation Barkhane) and a UN peacekeeping operation (MINUSMA) that has suffered more casualties than any other in the world. For its part, Libya, to Niger’s northeast, has seen a tug of war (and at times, real war) between rival governing coalitions and armed militias, each backed by competing sponsors. Nigeria, to the south and east, has struggled to maintain control of its territory from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).
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Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-jihad, which are among the deadliest violent extremist organizations in the world. In Niger, although it has its own legacy of internal political crises, the central government in Niamey has more or less avoided the fate of its neighbors through delicate approaches to ethnic inclusion such as the incorporation of ethnic Tuaregs into the civilian government and security forces—despite governing a territory nearly twice the size of Texas and conducting near simultaneous, and consistent, military operations on three fronts. Despite these commitments, Niger also provides support to multilateral security operations in the region, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Multinational Joint Task Force operating in the Lake Chad Basin, and MINUSMA.

But there are troubling signs that recent spillover from conflicts in neighboring countries, and manifestations of those conflicts within Niger’s borders, are eating away at the government’s buffer, could plausibly threaten the interior of the country in the not-too-distant future, and place additional stress on an already over-stretched military.

Dangers to civilians living in Niger are escalating, according to contacts we engaged on the ground,—including the use of IEDs hitherto only seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, the first openly reported international airstrike which has since been followed by others, and a new front of the Sahel conflict developing between Niger and Burkina Faso. Unfortunately, the trend continues and there are worrying signs that the dynamics between the region’s two most deadly conflicts—Sahel and Lake Chad Basin—could become more intertwined, with Niger a potential bridge between the two. Meanwhile, tactics used by the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) —active in Niger’s Tillabéri region—and ISWAP—active in Diffa, Niger, and northeast Nigeria—have become troublingly similar, indicating stronger connections and possibly even coordination. As is the case with most contemporary conflicts, civilians will bear the brunt of the increased lethality and violence.

**STEMMING THE ESCALATION? A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD...**

The Nigerien government’s response to these longer-term trends and more recent developments seems rational when considering the challenges involved with projecting force across 3,600 miles of border and in three different operational areas. The president has undertaken a relatively unprecedented plan to grow the army through an increase amounting to roughly 17 percent of the country’s national budget. In November of last year, the government extended its state of emergency to areas bordering Burkina Faso, and in February, renewed the state of emergency in Northern Tillabéri and Diffa. For their part, the U.S. and European governments provide assistance by means of training and equipment, advising, intelligence sharing, air support, joint operations, and overhead surveillance through unmanned aerial vehicles and satellites. As part of a longer-term solution to stem violence, Niger’s, and its partners’, focus on security responses is perhaps reasonable, but absent continued investments in accountability and non-security efforts, these actions could also exacerbate instability.
First, while the presence of legitimate security forces can help forestall attacks or other symptoms of conflict, relying on the military to stem the violence at its source could backfire. Any military—not only Niger’s—will tend to see problems through the lens of near-term security (e.g., imminent attack), which often leads to adversary-centric strategies rather than holistic approaches to address the local drivers of conflict. In addition, while Niger has managed to avoid the high-profile cases of abuse that its neighbors have been implicated in, during our visit, we heard of profiling and episodes of harassment by security forces of individuals and within communities rumored to be in collusion with various armed groups. This kind of conduct, even if irregular or infrequent, can stigmatize certain groups, aggravate pre-existing tensions among communities that are already suspicious of one another, and lead to grievances which armed groups can leverage to recruit members. Even in cases where militaries do not aggravate existing tensions, military tools are often ill-suited for addressing complex inter-communal conflicts which require extensive engagement with civilians. Over the longer-term, the heavy investment in the military, largely incentivized by donors and at the expense of other government services and programs, could result in the kind of institutional imbalance that is difficult, and often dangerous, to correct.

Second, the Nigerien Government’s state of emergency was designed to inhibit the movement of armed groups, but have undeniably, and disproportionately, impacted civilians by interrupting commerce and making movement more difficult. Motorbike travel, the most common form of transportation in Niger, has been outlawed under the provisions of the state of emergency, making access to markets more difficult. Civilians and representatives from local and international NGOs note the detrimental effects of the state of emergency. There have been few positive examples of local leaders relaxing provisions pertaining to market days where civilians can attain food and trade goods, and most citizens live under the full force of the policy. The longer the state of emergency is in place without concessions to local needs, and the more places it affects, the more severe the impact, and the more unpopular it will become.

Third, given the complexity of local demographics and geography—and the incredibly dangerous environment—militaries could be tempted to align or partner with non-state armed groups that are equipped with local knowledge and access. French and Malian governments have chosen this course of action and partnered with the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA); Niger used to do so as well, but contacts on the ground reported that the government is no longer actively partnering with these groups as part of military operations. Partnerships with these groups, which according to some have yielded short-term counter-terrorism gains, risk perpetuating a vicious cycle of inter-ethnic clashes and reprisals.¹

Finally, as the violence increases and the military presence grows, there may be an associated increase in ground and air operations by Nigerien or international forces, increasing the risk of harm to civilians during operations. To this end, the effects of the death of four U.S. Special Forces personnel in Tonga Tonga in October 2017 are yet to be completely understood. On the one hand, a rumored reduction in U.S. forces or missions involving U.S. forces (which may not be accurate given an unconfirmed report of Nigerien-French-U.S. partnered operation that followed the incident), could reduce the risk of harm to civilians in expressive U.S. counterterrorism operations. On the other hand, the risk to civilians could actually increase—either as a result of a shift to aerial operations and strikes, or as a result of Nigerien ground

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forces operating at increased tempos. Meanwhile, new and untested units, confronted by the threat of highly lethal and effective adversaries, or beset by casualties or losses, could feel pressure to respond aggressively or to further single out communities suspected of providing support.

**TOWARD A BETTER FUTURE**

For as many challenges posed by the environment, Niger’s strengths offer many reasons for optimism—as long as the government, its citizens, and its international partners can get, and stay, ahead of the curve and learn lessons from the past. Critically, and in the near-term, the Nigerien government and its foreign partners should pay close heed to maintaining a relatively good track record on human rights, as well as protecting civilians from the consequences of counterterrorism operations, and should do so now while there is still time to prevent any major incidents. Reports of military-perpetrated abuses have been modest (if not entirely absent) relative to Niger’s neighbors. Niger should seek to grow and develop its security forces in a manner that ensures that they are subject to appropriate levels of public oversight and accountability, and that new recruits are inculcated with the importance of protecting civilians at the point of recruitment and during training. The government should also be sure to develop policies (and the tactics and procedures that flow from them) that emphasize the importance of preventing, mitigating, and responding to civilians who are harmed during the conduct of operation. They should maintain public transparency and acknowledge cases where harm to civilians occurs. And countries like the U.S. and France should ensure that partnerd operations, whether interpreted as advise and assist, or even as the use of force for offense or defense, incorporate a joint plan for preventing, mitigating, and responding to any civilian harm that occurs as a result.

More vexing, but equally important, is the Nigerien government’s longer-term challenge of diagnosing and addressing the sources of violence in communities in some of the most inaccessible parts of the country. The government does have options at its disposal to be responsive. For instance, it can revisit the state of emergency and take steps to remediate the policy’s impact on civilians, their communities, and their livelihoods. The government, and other international actors, should look for options to address localized sources of conflict with political solutions that make sense, and ensure that channels exist for communities to communicate with the government, and one another, about their concerns and needs. Where appropriate, the government should ensure that it can respond to legitimate security concerns at least in part by increasing investments in civilian-military coordination (CIMIC) and in the ability of the government to protect civilians using a range of tactics and techniques (not all of which require the use of force, and some of which may actually require some distance).

In conclusion, Niger is situated as a bulwark—perhaps the last—against the further spread of violence in the region. Its stability is critical to preventing a more operational and detrimental geographic connection between armed groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin; its security is fundamental to stemming the flow of human beings and illicit matériel to North Africa. But paradoxically, the most ineffective strategy for bolstering Niger is continued militarization of the conflict without accompanying investments in mitigating the impact of the conflict on civilians and putting in place associated political measures. It is time to recognize that the best strategy for ensuring that Niger supports stability in the Sahel is doing what is best for the people of Niger, those who daily suffer the consequences of the conflicts.

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ENDNOTES


