Tillabéri Region, Niger: Concerning Cycle of Atrocities

By Rida Lyammouri

Abstract

Tillabéri region of Niger is witnessing unprecedented level of ethnic-based violence. The January 2 massacre caught the national and international actors' attention, however; the event was preventable. Accessing communities through ethnically charged and other exploitative language has proved to be a game changer for the expansion of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) expansion since 2012. The failure of national and international actors to recognize the seriousness of the situation and to react by seeking to ease tensions, to resolve disputes, to protect civilians, and to hold individuals engaging in violence accountable, allowed this tragic event to occur.

INTRODUCTION

On January 2, 2021, the deadliest atrocity ever committed against civilians in Niger occurred when gunmen stormed two villages in Tillabéri region, killing at least 100 people[1,2]. The incident shook the Nigerien people and attracted regional, national, and international attention for multiple reasons: because the number of victims was unprecedented, because of the ethnic characteristic of the violence[3], and because the Islamic State's regional branch, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), is the main suspect for carrying out the attack. And then it happened again. On March 15, 2021, 58 civilians of Djerma ethnicity from two villages were killed when armed gunmen, presumably linked to a violent extremist organization (VEO), attacked their vehicles while they

1. France24, 03 January 2021, "Scores killed in suspected militant attacks in Niger," https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210103-at-least-70-killed-in-attacks-on-two-niger-villages-security-source

2. AFP, 11 January 2021, "'They came to kill everyone': Niger massacre survivors tell of horror," https://news.yahoo.com/came-kill-everyone-niger-massacre-160305950.html

3. Studio Kalangou, 15 January 2021, "Tillabéri; Installation d'un climat de terreur dans la region," https://www.studiokalangou.org/index.php/articles/13834-tillabery-installation-climat-terreur-region#:~:text=Tout%20comme%20la%20r%C3%A9gion%20de,au%20sein%20de%20la%20population.

were traveling home from a market[4,5].

The Nigerien government and its international partners should have anticipated and intervened to avoid these entirely predictable tragedies. Since 2016, Tillabéri region has increasingly become an ISGS stronghold, and ISGS along the Ménaka, Mali-Tillabéri border recruits fighters largely from within Fulani communities[6]. Al-Qaeda also maintains a presence through its regional branch Jama't Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). In the weeks prior to the January 2 incident, there were visible tensions in Tillabéri between at least two ethnic communities—the Djerma and the Fulani. Even going back one month, on December 8, 2020, ISGS members collecting taxes—referred to as Zakat—injured a village resident and that same day, villagers attacked and killed the two ISGS members. Incidents of forced taxation by non-state armed groups have become the most prevalent form of insecurity in Tillabéri; in January and February alone, 39 separate incidents were recorded[7]. Many of these incidents have been attributed to suspected ISGS members.

The tragedies of January 2 and March 15 were a shock, but also serve to further underline the fragility of Tillabéri region and its exposure to unprecedented community violence. This level of violence will most certainly reoccur unless sources of fragility are addressed and eliminated. In Tillabéri region, such sources have been visible for at least a decade, and local affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have exploited these vulnerabilities to establish themselves in the area. Furthermore, a series of violent, ethnically-aligned incidents led up to the January 2 massacre; however, the issues at the core of these events were not adequately addressed on time, despite national and international peace and security efforts in the region.

This policy paper is mostly based on my nine years of incident monitoring and research on the rise of violent extremist organizations in Tillabéri region in particular, and the wider Sahel region more broadly. The paper briefly describes the main trends that made Tillabéri region into a conflict zone, and how VEOs have established themselves in the area. It then explains how the January 2 massacre was predictable. In the final section, the paper provides recommendations for national and international actors engaged in the area.

A BRIEF LOOK BACK

The region of Tillabéri has been a clear target for VEO activity since at least 2012. Although it is not a key operational base, the region is an ideal target for VEO recruitment and expansion because of its social and economic ties with Gao and Ménaka regions in Mali, which were occupied by VEOs for most of 2012 and maintain a significant VEO presence to date (see 2020 maps of VEOs' violent activities in Mali and Niger)[8,9]. These ties play a key role in VEOs' regional, cross-border survival despite aggressive counterterrorism efforts that began in January 2013. Counterterrorism offenses became more difficult after extrajudicial killings[10] of civilians by security forces, who targeted specific ethnic groups based on rumors and suspicions of ethnic-based linkages to VEOs. The rise of ethnic-based militias correlated with counterterrorism activities allowed them [militias] to carry out acts of violence targeting rivals[11]. Such events contributed to eroding trust in security forces and in the state's legitimacy, and have also furthered inter- and intra-communal tensions.

4. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 17 March 2021, "Daily Noon Briefing Highlights: Niger – Yemen," https://www.unocha.org/story/daily-noon-briefing-highlights-niger-yemen

5. Al Jazeera, 16 March 2021, "Gunmen kill at least 58 civilians in attack on Niger convoy," https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/16/gunmen-kill-at-least-58-civilians-in-attack-on-niger-convoy

6. Pellerin, Mathieu, December 2019, "Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are we Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?" https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/armed-violence-sahara-are-we-moving-jihadism-insurgency

7. UNHCR, February 2021. "Rapport mensuel d'analyse des données de monitoring de protection, Régions de Tillabéri et Tahoua (Niger), Février 2021."
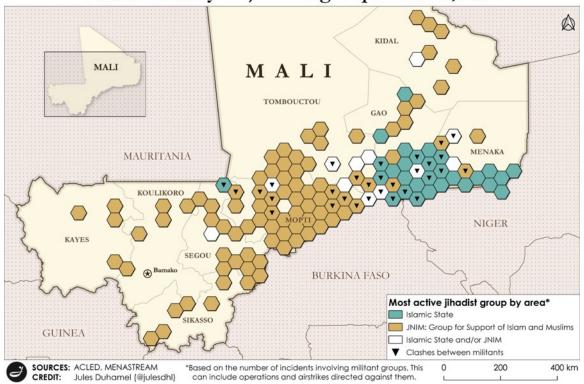
8. Duhamel, Jules, March 2021, "Maps of Security Incidents in Niger and Mali 2020," https://julesduhamel.wordpress.com/

9. United Nations, 11 January 2021, "Militants Continue to Stage Deadly Attacks as Insecurity Expands into Previously 'Safe' Zones in West Africa, Sahel, Top Official Tells Security Council," https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14406.doc.htm
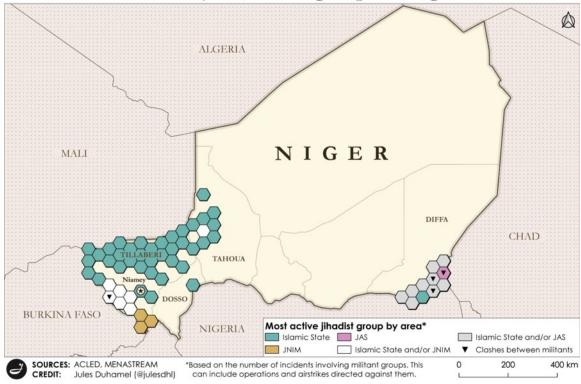
10. Commission Nationale des Droits Humains (CNDH), July 2020, "Rapport de Mission d'Enquete et d'Investigation sur la Disparition de 102 Personnes dans le Departement d'Ayorou, Region de Tillabéri," https://www.cndh-niger.org/images/pdf/Rapport_Final_Mission_Investigation_Inates_Ayorou_2020-CNDH-REPPAD-Last%20(2)_2.pdf

11. Carayol, Rémi, 30 November 2018, "A la Frontière Entre le Niger et le Mali, l'Alliance Coupable de l'Armée Française," mediapart.fr

Violent activity of jihadist groups in Mali, 2020

Most active jihadist group by area*
- Islamic State
- JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims
- Islamic State and/or JNIM
- ▼ Clashes between militants

SOURCES: ACLED, MENASTREAM
CREDIT: Jules Duhamel (@julesdhl)
*Based on the number of incidents involving militant groups. This can include operations and airstrikes directed against them.

0   200   400 km

Violent activity of jihadist groups in Niger, 2020

Most active jihadist group by area*
- Islamic State
- JNIM
- JAS
- Islamic State and/or JNIM
- Islamic State and/or JAS
- ▼ Clashes between militants

SOURCES: ACLED, MENASTREAM
CREDIT: Jules Duhamel (@julesdhl)
*Based on the number of incidents involving militant groups. This can include operations and airstrikes directed against them.

0   200   400 km

While religion plays some role in gaining local sympathies, violent extremist ideologies are not supported by local communities, and nor do these ideologies drive VEO survival or expansion into Tillabéri region. Instead, VEOs find their greatest support within communities that suffer from armed banditry, perceived unfair treatment by the state and security forces, and other armed-group activities. Other drivers to join, to support, and to sympathize with VEOs in Tillabéri region and in the wider West African Sahel include economic incentives, security provision, inequality based on ethnicity, and stigmatization by political and community leaders[12]. Reasons to join VEOs differ and vary from one individual to another. However, in Tillabéri, research has found the provision of financial and security benefits is an effective recruitment tool that VEOs have used as a part of their adaptable approach for Tillabéri region[13]. To gain support and sympathy, three key methods for VEOs in Tillabéri are: providing financial incentives for recruitment of fighters, showing kindness toward populations, and providing security and demonstrations of loyalty toward VEO members—as the January 2 incident in response to aggression against ISGS members demonstrated.

For the past decade, these three VEO methods for gaining prominence within Tillabéri communities have been rooted in narratives around ethnic tensions and divisions[14]. Ethnically-driven rhetoric has dominated discussions around the tactics, techniques, and practices for recruitment used by VEOs, as well as to generate community support and sympathy. Beyond Tillabéri, the same rhetoric has been effective across the Mali-Niger border in the Gao, Ménaka, Mopti, and Ségou regions of Mali. More recently, since 2015 or possibly earlier, VEOs have been exploiting the same ethnic tensions to gain support and to recruit in Burkina Faso—making their

strategy both locally and regionally effective[15,16].

Accessing communities through ethnically charged and other exploitative language has proved to be a game changer for expansion. Initial engagement by VEOs in Tillabéri focused on face-to-face engagement and dialogue. Armed groups that aligned with al-Qaeda or with the Islamic State listened to community concerns, showed sympathy towards the plight of local populations, and followed up with actions including resolution of disputes and provision of security. These interactions are almost exclusively conducted in-person. Because the access of national and international actors to these populations is limited by political and security constraints, VEOs have been allowed unmatched access to populations often considered by national and international actors as 'vulnerable' to extremist influence.

The inability of conflict and violence-prevention actors to gain the same level of access to communities as VEOs continues to be a major block in programming. As the security situation has continued to deteriorate each year since 2015, this access has only worsened, and many government representatives and local leaders have fled because of direct threats against them by VEOs. These individuals, who are often considered by humanitarian and security actors as key entry points into communities, are now suddenly absent from the areas they are responsible for governing. The lack of governance means large swaths of Tillabéri region have increasingly become inaccessible to the central Nigerien government and its international partners engaged in community stabilization and social cohesion. The longer state representation remains invisible, the less legitimate the state has become to civilians exposed to VEOs. However, the attacks on ISGS members on December 8, 2020, and also on January 2, 2021, demonstrate that local communities, at least the Djerma community, despite the high risk and lack of protection, are not necessarily

12. Unpublished research about VEOs recruitment in Mopti region, Mali and Tillabéri region, Niger (2015-2016).

13. Unpublished research about VEOs recruitment in Mopti region, Mali and Tillabéri region, Niger (2015-2016).

14. Pellerin, Mathieu, "Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are we Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?" December 2019, https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/armed-violence-sahara-are-we-moving-jihadism-insurgency

15. For instance, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) initially presented itself as a pan-ethnic group to attract recruits from different communities. MUJAO's Shurah Council repeated accusations of discrimination by Tuareg and Arab communities against 'Black Africans', helping MUJAO gain popularity amongst aggrieved Fulani and Songhai populations, first in Gao and Ménaka regions in Mali, and later in Tillabéri. Key leaders of the group later pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015 and established its Sahelian branch ISGS.

16. The Macina Brigade, which was in 2017 incorporated into JNIM, in central Mali, and Ansaroul Islam in northern Burkina Faso, heavily focused on recruiting from black Muslim Fulani communities. Both al-Qaeda affiliated branches rely on Fulani narratives of marginalization and inequality. The popularity of the Macina Brigade and its founder, Amadou Koufa, grew in Tillabéri region in Niger in 2015-2016 through his audio messages, which circulated among local population via messaging applications.

willing to passively accept violent treatment of their community members by VEOs—ISGS in this case. This trend most likely encourages the creation of small armed militias under the pretext of protecting their community.

BOTTOM LINE: THE MASSACRE WAS PREDICTABLE

The January 2 massacre was foreseeable, and the Nigerien government and its international partners failed to prevent it by failing to recognize and react to the warning signs. Worrying conditions for ethnically-driven atrocities by ISGS or other VEOs were visible. The killing and targeting of leaders and members of rival communities occurs almost daily in Tillabéri region[17]. In December 2020 alone, members of the Djerma ethnic group committed several acts of violence against Fulani families, all in Djerma-dominant Ouallam department of Tillabéri region— the same area where the January 2 massacre took place. In tandem with the violence, suspected Fulani ISGS members stole and destroyed goods belonging to Djerma communities. Box 1 details a series of violent acts that occurred not only in the weeks prior to the January 2 massacre, but going back two months in Ouallam department alone. These acts include abductions, armed robberies, and targeted assassinations[18].

These incidents illustrate a months-long trend of continuing security challenges and an emerging trend of increased, boiling tensions between the Djerma and Fulani communities in Tillabéri. The steady community-level violence in the absence of a government or security response to conflict indicates that communities have started acting independently of the state by relying on armed actors to protect, defend, or seek revenge on their behalf, instead of waiting for the state to intervene. The failure of national and international actors to recognize the seriousness of the situation and to react by seeking to ease tensions, to resolve disputes, to protect civilians, and to hold individuals engaging in violence accountable, allowed this tragic event to occur, for the March 15 massacre to occur, and if unaddressed, for future atrocities to occur.

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17. My own security incident monitoring for ongoing consultancy with Clingendael Institute and International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT); See also Jules Duhamel, "Maps of Security Incidents in Niger," December 2020, https://julesduhamel.wordpress.com/

18. Ibid.

Chronology of Security Events in Ouallam Department Ahead of the January 2 Massacre

- **November 15**: Unidentified gunmen erected an informal checkpoint near Goula village and collected taxes from drivers.
- **November 16**: Suspected ISGS members kidnapped a religious leader in Fandou Kaina village.
- **November 25**: Suspected ISGS members abducted the village chief of Gakoukou.
- **December 8**: Suspected ISGS members injured a Mogodyougou village resident during a tax collection operation. In response, local residents beat to death two ISGS members.
- **December 14**: Suspected ISGS members attacked Mogodyougou village, killing eight people and burning grain silos, in response to the December 8 killings of two suspected ISGS members.
- **December 21**: Suspected ISGS members kidnapped the brother of a deceased village chief in Tchoma Bangou.
- **December 22**: Suspected ISGS members destroyed a political election campaign vehicle in Makani Dogo Kouara village.
- **December 23**: Djermas killed a Fulani near Tchoma Bangou.
- **December 24**: Djermas killed three Fulanis (one women and her two children) in Tchoma Bangou.
- **December 30**: Djermas killed five Fulani pastoralists in Zerma Dare.

Source: Personal security incident monitoring for ongoing consultancy with Clingendael Institute and International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT); See also Jules Duhamel, "Maps of Security Incidents in Niger," December 2020, https://julesduhamel.wordpress.com/

The January 2 massacre took place in Tchoma Bangou and Zerma Dare villages. The massacre occurred after Djerma villagers retaliated against the suspected members of

ISGS[19]. On December 8, 2020, two Fulani ISGS members arrived in Mogodyougou village and demanded the local population to pay taxes. Villagers refused and ultimately killed the two men. Then, between December 23-30, three incidents of Djermas killing Fulanis occurred in Tchoma Bangou and Zerma Dare—raising tensions even higher. In an act of uncontrolled violence, suspected ISGS gunmen responded by massacring 105 civilians in Tchoma Bangou and Zerma Dare[20]. One survivor said that the armed assailants spoke Fulani, while other witnesses said they were Djerma and were even led by a Djerma ISGS leader[21]. The conflicting reports confirm that the pervasiveness of ethnically-based narratives—including in narratives of this particular act of violence—cannot be ignored.

The attack was also a clear message that any refusal to submit—in this case to tax collectors—and any retaliation would result in deadly violence and community destruction. The January 2 massacre showed the two-pronged nature of VEOs' hold within the area: first, that rival ethnic communities are easily targeted for violence, and second, that supporters can expect the group to retaliate on their behalf.

Despite steadily worsening incident counts over the past decade, it is only since 2017's exponential growth in regional violence that national and international actors have noticed the precariousness of the region. Unfortunately, the roots of the violence go back more than a decade, to a time when violent incidents were fewer, but better opportunities existed to prevent what is now happening. Instead, actors are now scrambling to respond. Nigerien security forces and their international partners have increased their patrols and other security activities, but their irregular presence has created a gap in the processes of monitoring and addressing conflicts and disputes that generate inter- and intra-communal tensions. For instance, though counterterrorism efforts might have interrupted ISGS and JNIM operations against security forces, Tillabéri region continues to witness almost daily acts of armed banditry and targeted assassinations against those perceived by VEOs as a threat or a rival. The irregular, inconsistent presence of

19. AFP, 11 January 2021, "'They came to kill everyone': Niger massacre survivors tell of horror," https://news.yahoo.com/came-kill-everyone-niger-massacre-160305950.html

20. RFI, 13 January 2021, "10,000 Nigerien civilians still afraid to return home after attack," https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20210113-10-000-nigerien-civilians-still-afraid-to-return-home-after-jihadist-attack-unhcr-niger

21. AFP, 11 January 2021, "'They came to kill everyone': Niger massacre survivors tell of horror," https://news.yahoo.com/came-kill-everyone-niger-massacre-160305950.html

security forces impacts their ability to provide adequate, responsible protection to local communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND COUNTERING VEO RECRUITMENT IN TILLABÉRI REGION

Security will continue to be the priority in Tillabéri region and across the borders in Mali and Burkina Faso, but there are also opportunities for non-security conflict prevention. VEOs will continue to challenge attempts to implement prevention and development projects. National and international actors working in Niger, and specifically in Tillabéri region, should consider the following recommendations to address peace and security:

• There is either a lack of recognition, a lack of response, or both by national and international actors to the ongoing deadly violence in Tillabéri. Actors engaged in the region must recognize their responsibility to respond to conditions in which ethnically motivated violence might arise. In line with the principles enshrined by the Responsibility to Protect, national and international actors must improve their incident monitoring and analysis to better understand the potential for long-standing ethnic tensions to evolve into ethnic-based violence. Recognition is the first step in preventative responses, and investing in multi-source data collection and analysis of the incidents and also the root causes of the violence is a key component of any policies or steps toward seriously addressing sensitive, ethnic-, and extremism-linked contexts.

• VEOs are not present or influential throughout all of Tillabéri region. Communities and villages that have demonstrated resistance to VEOs and armed groups could be considered entry points for national and international actors to learn from and to engage with at-risk communities. These communities represent an opportunity to seek greater knowledge and lessons learned from existing community-based resilience practices, to engage in social-cohesion activities aiming to resist destabilization, and to take publicly visible measures to demonstrate the legitimacy of government and security forces to protect those civilians who are most vulnerable to atrocities, such as the January 2 and March 15 attacks.

- VEOs have enjoyed nearly unfettered access to Tillabéri populations—in part because of the lack of a sustained presence on the part of government or security forces. This makes it easier for VEOs to recruit residents, notably young people, who join because they do not see alternatives for safety and protection, employment and income opportunities, or equitable representation. The negative perceptions of the government stemming from its absence from the region must be addressed by creating conditions that promote state authorities return free of the current overwhelming risk of being VEO targets. This is the security-driven component. Alongside the security components necessary to improve physical access, stabilization and social cohesion activities should be implemented to strengthen the hold of government, and to improve economic and social development. Given the lack of government presence, and the perceived inequalities and marginalization of ethnic communities in Tillabéri, community-driven approaches to stabilization and social cohesion activities should be prioritized. Communities should be included in the program-design process—leading processes to determine their own pressing needs, and sharing their experiences of engaging in resilience.
- The role of women in social cohesion and resilience is under studied. For instance, while men from rival communities might engage in violence, it's unclear if men are communicating their roles, if any, in a violent conflict, to female relatives or other women in their communities. It's also unclear if women are participating in conflict. The role of women in ongoing tensions in Tillabéri region remains unclear, and their agency in deciding their roles is equally unclear, and should be examined to determine the contextual opportunities for women's inclusion in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

CONCLUSION

Niger and its allies have made significant security and development efforts to counter al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-affiliated groups. However, January 2 demonstrated their failure to effectively prevent what data shows to have been a foreseeable atrocity that might have been preventable. Additionally, VEO activity in the region is far from being suppressed, and continues to tap into inter-communal conflicts to strengthen itself. The January 2 mass killing of civilians in Tillabéri region was followed by the March 15 atrocity. And although witnesses to the January 2 violence gave conflicting accounts about the perpetrators, the details of the March 15 attack are clear: assailants speaking Fulani specifically targeted Djermas from villages accused of injuring a Fulani[22]. These incidents indicate that given the volatile environment, further instability—further violent atrocities with ethnic characteristics—will continue, if policies and practices remain at the current stalemate.

Stability in Tillabéri depends on intercommunity relations, but also relations between local communities and the Nigerien government. It also depends on stabilizing surrounding regions, which are experiencing similar forms of violence and instability. Tensions between communities stem from the deep-rooted perceptions of discrimination and state-led marginalization that are shared by many ethnic groups across the Mali-Niger border. To advance their agendas, VEOs have been particularly effective in exploiting these tensions and gaining the support of ethnic groups. While the Nigerien government seeks to reinforce its legitimacy among local communities in conflict areas of Tillabéri region, occurrences of similar violence against civilians would further undermine the steps the government is taking, threatening a situation of cyclical tit-for-tat violence and distrust.

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22. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 17 March 2021, "Daily Noon Briefing Highlights: Niger – Yemen," https://www.unocha.org/story/daily-noon-briefing-highlights-niger-yemen

Mahinka Village, Tillabéri Region

Source: The Author

Tinaferan Village, Tillabéri Region

Source: The Author

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The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.